

# standing around, sitting around, lying around: georges seurat's deceptive idylls

**Wilhelm Genazino**

Many of Seurat's pictures show groups of people sitting, lying, and standing close to each other quite unconnectedly, all looking in the same direction. As viewers of the picture, we do not know whether the people know each other or share specific interests. We viewers do not see what the figures depicted can see, either. The event triggering the interest is outside the picture. We do not even know if there is any such event. It may also be chance that the people are all looking the same way—perhaps out of boredom, perhaps for reasons of idleness, perhaps because they need a rest, or perhaps because it's Sunday at last and people need to admit that they don't know how best to kill time, which is exactly where the poetry of wasted time is hidden, unrecognizable to anyone.

Because we can raise all these questions but not answer them, Seurat's pictures exude a mild disquiet. One could say Seurat's pictures arouse a kind of mistrust. We don't believe in the ostensible calm these people exhibit. It's as if someone who wants to take a photo says to people: "Go and relax on the grass and think of nothing." Nobody can do that—plump themselves down on the grass and think of nothing. On the contrary—especially when we wish to relax, we think particularly fiercely about private or semi-private affairs that preoccupy us. Apropos grass, Seurat does not show us people in cities, at their workplaces, or in their domestic environment. We almost always find them in park-like surroundings, often in woods close to the city, which today we refer to as "recreational areas" (or something similar). Often there is a small lake nearby or a provincial port.

People go there in order not to see, at least for half a day, the "ordinary" world where they otherwise spend their time. To that extent, the idyll in urbanized nature is a clear reference to what is not painted—the creeping industrialization, the early recognition of the wastelands of cities, the crowdedness of neighborhoods, people cooped up in apartments, the adverse social climate of people living on top of each other. Those are ideas that inevitably occur to the viewer for the very reason that they are not shown. Surprisingly quickly, we have arrived at the possible heart of the pictures—what could not be shown

**Georges Seurat**  
**Une Baignade, Asnières**  
**(Bathers at Asnières),**  
**detail, 1883–84**  
Oil on canvas, 201 x 300 cm  
The National Gallery, London