



To Know Someone You Never Knew

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There I was, alone in the apartment where she had died, looking at these pictures of my mother, one by one, under the lamp, gradually moving back in time with her, looking for truth of the face I had loved. And I found it. The photograph was very old ... I studied the little girl and at last rediscovered my mother.

– Roland Barthes¹

Over a recent winter holiday, I found myself in my parents' basement, looking through a handful of boxes of books, in search of a photo album. It's one of those typical pre-digital photo albums, with binder rings, yellowing sticky pages and cellophane overlays that hold the photos in place. The object is dated; its technology woefully anachronistic, unable to react to a scroll, click, or tap. I don't have copies of any of the photos in that album; they are all originals, so to speak. The shabby old album is an impressive mnemonic device; troves of memories appear when its pages are browsed. Meanwhile I have 16,262 images in iPhoto on my laptop. They accumulate with little fanfare. But this does not surprise you.

While writing this, I am looking at a different photo book. This one is bound and printed, a collection of family photos from Norway selected by Fiona Tan. I return to one photo again and again – it beguiles me:

They are seated at a small wood table. It is dinnertime. The window behind them is decorated with frilly curtains with repeating scenes of Santas, evergreens, and hearts. Outside it is pitch black. They are older but not elderly, perhaps in their seventies. The table is full of dishes. His hands hover over his plate, his fork and knife at the ready. But he looks up at the camera, his expression nearly expressionless. It is truly uncanny. She looks to have already started; she is focused on the meal, her eyes focused squarely on the plate in front of her. An almost silly addendum, up in the corner is a pale blue and white paper calendar,



Vox Populi Norway, 2004

tidily framed by the photo. In between the couple sits an empty chair, presumably the seat of the photographer. Who is he or she? A middle-aged bachelor son who refuses to “settle down”? An only child left with the grandparents while the parents are on holiday in Majorca? A kindly neighbor who drops by periodically to check on the older couple, who then insisted on documenting their quaint Christmas dinner? It is almost impossible to guess.

The human engagement with personal images has shifted from a practice of safe-keeping, operating within an archival and genealogical register to one concerning the management of self and privacy. Rather than photo albums, we concern ourselves with reputation monitoring and Google page

ranks. All the while, we are vaguely aware of the immense capacity of dematerialized digital artifacts existing in offshore data centers tied to social media conglomerates whose user agreements and privacy policies we can't be bothered to read. A case in point: the digital application Snapchat based its business model on the erasure of images created and shared within its application, but recently it was revealed that these “erased” images actually remain on the user's phone and can easily be extracted via basic digital forensics techniques.

Clearly, our relationship to images and image making has changed. And so:

“Perhaps one has to redefine the value of the image, or more precisely, to create a new perspective for it. Apart from resolution and exchange value, one might imagine another form of value defined by velocity, intensity, and spread ...

This flattening-out of visual content – the concept-in-becoming of the images – positions them within a general informational turn, within economies of knowledge that tear images and their captions out of context into the swirl of permanent capitalist deterritorialization.²”

Images and language now exist primarily through their indexicalization. Algorithmic logic defines our connectivity to them.

Images – easily compressed and willing to travel on short notice



Vox Populi Tokyo, 2007
Installation view

at little cost – fit well into a neo-liberal schema: “they lose matter and gain speed”.³ They follow the course characteristic of late modernity, toward abstraction and dematerialization. The flimsy paper materiality of money detaches from the metal it was meant to represent, the reference removed. Signs are compared and exchanged with other signs in increasingly abstract transactions and negotiations. And thus, the sign is emancipated from its referential function.⁴ Meanwhile, the worker follows this trend too. The office is replaced by cafes with free wireless internet; the factory is relocated at ever greater remove from its consumers; products and job descriptions sublimate into mobile phone applications and teams of trust engineers managing your social media “experience”.



I return to the books in front of me, perusing the pages; the images somehow appear both familiar and foreign. I am caught on the possibility of images as non-empirical records of human life, despite their seemingly empirical quality. Of course snapshots and selfies most often attempt to show us not so much as who we are, but as how we would like to be seen. But could a collection of strangers brought together through images unexpectedly begin to recognize one another?

The series *Vox Populi* began in 2004 when Fiona Tan was commissioned by the Parliament of Norway to create an artwork for their building. The project was then reproduced in Sydney, Tokyo, Switzerland and London. In each instance Tan worked with local organizations to canvas the community, requesting the loan of family photo albums. Tan then made a selection, and the photos appear as a collection of images on a wall, and in the projects' accompanying books. *Vox Populi* exists in only material form, things you must touch and see, embodied experiences.

Tan has likened the *Vox Populi* series to an unofficial group portrait, offering a subjective cross section of a city or nation, an alternative methodology perhaps to the governmental procedures of statistical collating its subjects. The word *census* is of Latin origin, meaning to assess; its current usage dates from the 18th century. The practice of attempting to systematically gather and record information related to a given population seems however to be a long-held human interest. Records of a Han Dynasty census from 2 CE are still extant, and references to census activities exist from the Maurya Empire in India, the Inca Empire, and the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome, Israel, and Egypt. Though nearly always conducted via sampling, censuses attempt to encapsulate a community, to record life, translating a group of people into empirical and rational data.

“The precarity of life imposes an obligation upon us. We have to ask about the conditions under which it becomes possible to apprehend a life or set of lives as precarious, and those that make it less possible, or indeed impossible.⁵⁷”

Perhaps the closest we can come to some sort of universalism in the human animal is our inexplicable desire to photograph small children while bathing. I am joking, mostly. And yet, flipping through the *Vox Populi* books, every single one has the small-children-

Vox Populi. Installation view



in-bathtubs section. In Tokyo, there are young dads cuddling and posing with newborns in the bath. In Switzerland, there is a young child in a sink. In Norway: a gaggle of four kids in one tub. The little girl poses and smiles pleasantly. She seems to already understand the wiles of the camera. Meanwhile her two male counterparts put their hands up blocking their faces from the prying eye behind the lens. In Sydney: more children in sinks. And in London, two smiling faces, barely visible, completely surrounded by bubbles.

In its recurrences, *Vox Populi* seems to vacillate between intention and happenstance: incorporating publics in the format of both nations and cities. But as Brian Dillon notes in his essay accompanying *Vox Populi London*, the oscillation is important as a means of blurring the very idea of “what exactly constitutes a ‘people’”.⁶ Once on the wall, the photos form a non-linear storyboard for an imaginary film, a narrative created as the eye travels from one

Vox Populi Sydney, 2006



framed image to the next, a refrain of commonalities, contrasts, and triggered memories.

Vox Populi forms a sort of affective census, a lilting taxonomy of human communities in a place and time. Inherently subjective and selective, it stakes no claim to encompassing, or knowing. The images derive from spaces of intimacy, but perhaps paradoxically, when removed of their context they engender abstraction. Devoid of the knowledge of their backstory, the images – in a sense – become generic. Often derided, the generic is cheap, uninteresting, or poorly made. But here, the generic becomes inclusive, opening to a cacophony of meaning, memory and interpretation. The images become examples without becoming exemplary: characteristic, intimate, tied to specificity, and at the same time, they open, they allow, they invite.

“It is as if abstract imagination seeks to allow something lost, or something too big to see at once, to creep into our daily vision. The strange thing is that when this happens successfully – we do more than see differently – we feel differently. We can understand more when looking through the loss that abstraction removes.”⁷

Too big to see at once, in their amassing the photos comprising *Vox Populi* create an excess of imagery. They make no attempt to explain or provide information. Instead they offer a surplus of interpretation and empathy – a hidden reserve.

I return to a photograph from Sydney that has grabbed my attention. It is of a young girl at the beach. Her arms outstretched, her small fists wrapped around the metal bars of a fence. Her eyes are closed; the strong wind blows her skirt against her legs and her hair back from her face. She is smiling. Even though I don’t know her, will never know her, there is something about her that I can apprehend.

This text is dedicated to Antonia, a dear friend and colleague.

- 1 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), 67–69.
- 2 Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2012), 41.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Franco Bifo Berardi, *The Uprising* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), xx.
- 5 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 2.
- 6 Brian Dillon, *Vox Populi London* (London: Book Works, 2012), 121.
- 7 Doug Ashford, “Abstraction and Empathy”, *Writings and Conversations*, (Graz: Mousse Publishing, 2013), 28.