

Toward A Photographic Heterotopia Embracing Human Existences

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Deeper into Photography's Essential Dimension

By its very nature, photography inscribes everything in the world to hold infinitely onto itself. Everything captured in a photograph exists equally since no borders are drawn which divide all things depicted in the image. I would like you to ponder on this as the essence of photography in this photo book of Ken Kitano.

Being a light-sensitive medium, photography embraces all that exists within it as traces of light. Photography does not discriminate, which we call as "automatic writing", hence inviting every existence to come into it. This is photography's essential dimension, and Ken Kitano enters directly into it by repeatedly superimposing portraits on a surface formed by a photographic paper. To do so, he divides the total exposure time of a test print equally between the number of portraits he wants to compile, and then prints every image, one after the other, onto a new sheet. Eventually, one image of "our face" appears.

Now, you might say that a photograph is merely a flat piece of paper from an optomechanical device and chemical treatment with no intrinsic purpose. However, when photographers commit their whole existence to the essence of photography, grasping and invigorating its latent possibility, we gain marvelous images of our world. Gaze upon photographs by Roman Vishniac, Garry Winogrand, and Shomei Tomatsu, who stood against the social dynamics that tend to obliterate the things that have existed in our history. These photographers remind us that despite social conditions of despair and confusion, some people do struggle against the difficulties they face. Although here I use "struggle" as a verb suggesting subjective actions, photographers are likely to be moved to struggle with social difficulties by almost involuntarily releasing the shutter when they find themselves accidentally encountering specific states of being. Certainly, we think of Ken Kitano's "our face" series in the same terms as Vishniac, Winogrand, and Tomatsu's marvelous and distinctive struggles.

Landscape for Existences: A Mille Plateau¹⁾

Kitano explains that his urge to produce the "our face" project, the impossible creation of a *single* face from *multiple* existences, arose from his own chance experiences of social and natural disasters. A certain disaster may be merely one moment of the latent violence of accident in our life that is revealed. Bluntly

put, Kitano's photographs captivate and awe us because in them, we perceive our essential desires as human beings. A human life comes into being accidentally, at least from the individual perspective, and with almost always an accidental probability of being born. Then, while living, the life becomes situated in a specific condition, and eventually and finally, dies. Indeed, all existences anticipate the moment when they are fully embraced as beings: people ask us, in silent voices, to hold them. Kitano seems to have realized this sincere desire of human beings fully.

Once born, every existence should be accepted—the only condition for being, existence itself. This is the vision for life that Kitano seeks to realize in "our face." He commits his existence into this project. Even so, his tautological idea of vision, "Once born, every existence should be accepted and exist fully" sounds difficult to attain and very poignant amid the world's distorted conditions. Many easily ignore the pain of others and even the fact that they exist at all. Under such conditions, Kitano first visited places throughout Japan, then traveled abroad from Istanbul in Turkey, the Xinjiang Uighur autonomous region, and Taipei City in Taiwan to Mae Hong Son in Thailand, Dhaka in Bangladesh, and on to Kermanshah in Iran. In these locations, he photographed farmers, military men, children, and a myriad of others. Then, in the darkroom, on the surface of photographic paper, he superimposed face upon face. Through this stunningly painstaking procedure, "our face" emerges, with traces of each being's locality. Through Kitano's photographs, our world appears as a *mille plateau*, locating the myriad intensities and differences of place.

Photography for Existence: A Heterotopia²⁾ or an Image of Another Globalization

Of course, with reference to the differences of the beings represented, you may interpret each "our face" photograph from the viewpoint of social group, that is, as a subject located in a given region and country. By doing so, you may admit religious differences, tension between the rulers and the ruled, and sometimes, the affinity among people captured in his photographs of our face A and our face B. Kitano's "our face" project never rejects a reading of the social dimensions of existences through comparison. However, how on earth can we classify all the distinct localities captured in various groups in the "our face" project? Although "our face" projects the flavor

of locality, it stirs us by proceeding onward to the existential dimension of human beings. In fact, the photographs of “our face” seem to attain vital movement by making it impossible for us to separate and classify the superimposed subjects by ensuring that we can only fail in such an attempt. Indeed, the only human dimension embraced onto Kitano’s “our face” photographs is existence itself.

In Kitano’s photographs, you may perceive the boundaries separating one group of “our face” subjects from another as invalid. You may see the over simplistic, dichotomous view of the world lose its function under the increasingly complex relationships among the myriad “our face” works. For instance, you will find that fixed Muslims–Christian relations loosen amid the photographs where myriad relationships between men and women, the elderly and the young, fishermen and farmers, soldiers and citizens, merchants and shoppers entangle, interact, and resonate. You may notice that a subject’s seemingly privileged position flattens through touching the beings’ differences as represented in a series of photographs. Scrutinize “our face.” Perceive it as an impossible project or this

movement toward embracing all existences equally.

Each photograph seizes the whole, endless project’s ongoing moment. Embracing this impossible vision, Kitano will extend his work from Asia to America, Europe, and Africa. I would like you to perceive this project as one movement as you witness the shimmering appearances of “our face” one after the other. Through the wavering, rippling details of beings captured at an elementary school in Samarkand, in a park in Tokyo’s Tama district, at a bazaar in the suburb of Kashgar, existences represented as “face” will emerge in succession. At Banda Aceh, an area devastated by the Sumatra Island Offshore Earthquake, Kitano invited survivors’ to be photographed. Their thoughts remained with their departed ones, and Kitano envisioned the reunion between the quick and the dead after the tragedy.

During its development, the “our face” project captured another globalization, the opposite of the current globalization widening gap between poverty and prosperity. As you turn the pages of this book, you will find that a photographic place for existences, a heterotopia, appears to you.

Appendix:

1) *Mille plateau*

“Mille plateau” is the concept of “a thousand plateaus” that are formed by the continuous configuration of intensities, that is, differences with no single apex or hierarchy. Gregory Bateson, an American anthropologist and thinker, used this term when he conducted an investigation on Bali in Indonesia. Later, two French philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, renewed its meaning as the definition I have mentioned above.

2) heterotopia

Although located in a real space, “heterotopia” is a counter-hegemonic, different, foreign place that functions to counter-turn and overturn all other real places around it. *Hetero* means different, and *topia* comes from *topos*, meaning place or space. In this context, heterotopia refers to another globalization that will oppose the current unbalanced globalization and embrace existences equally in this world. French thinker Michael Foucault elaborates on this term as the conception of a space or place.