

Overlaying, Connecting

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I have been working on the project, *our face*, since 1999. At first glance, the works may simply appear to show single faces, but they are in fact composite images containing portraits of members of a specific group or demographic, layered on top of one another.

I travel the world, meeting people from all walks of life. The photographs I take of them are then combined on one print. The portraits created through this process are icons of collectives, accumulations of the unique entities of many individuals.

The production process of these prints is remarkably simple. Test prints are made from the negatives showing one person each, and their exposure time¹⁾ divided by the total number of images, are applied on the final photograph. I repeat these steps for every member of the group, each of their representations in film filtering light just for brief moments, but contributing in this way to the portrait that is ultimately generated. Until the paper is in the developer, there are no means of predicting how the unified figure will finally appear. I make a point of visiting my subjects' environments so the light, shadows, and backgrounds from each location manifest themselves shuffled and transposed. The backgrounds and the clothes that constantly shift in form are not superfluous noise, but are singular elements that work together to form a symphony.

I have photographed people from the Asian continent until now, but hope eventually to broaden this project to the Americas, then on to Europe and Africa. The objective of the project²⁾ is to collect group portraits taken from around the world, exhibiting them without hierarchy or judgment.

The subjects of my work can only be described as the various people I have had the chance to encounter. The groups were chosen by themes such as faith, ethnic roots, occupation, age, streets, war or catastrophe, as well as cultures both ancient and new. While it is true that they may be classifiable by any set of labels, lines, and boundaries—our habit of categorization may be in some way a modern-day disease—still, there remains the possibility that something distinctively Asian is formed in these images. That is something I wish to leave to the viewer to decide on his or her own.

The word “globalism” has increased in popular use since the beginning of this project. The idea of globalism effectively operates as a convenient method of perceiving economics, or any other aspect of the world, as a centralized structure. Rephrased, it is a mode of thinking that positions the existence of those who have no intention of accepting or including oneself in this circle as completely irrelevant.

Our world has no center. This project attempts to re-imagine the world as a collection of selves and an assemblage of localities.

Perspectives from 1995

The story begins in early 1995.

In January of that year, Japan experienced the Great Hanshin Earthquake³⁾. Following this in March were the sarin gas attacks⁴⁾ on the Tokyo subway lines. Neither I nor my family members were directly affected by these incidents, yet there was no way I could remain immune to the repercussions of the catastrophes that had occurred so close by.

(March 11, 2011 brought the Tohoku Earthquake and the meltdowns within the nuclear reactor facilities of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant⁵⁾. Post-Tohoku Japan lives under grave circumstances. Unlike the sensation that spread after the disasters of the 90s, it is as if the entire nation has become enveloped entirely by an impenetrable darkness.)

Recalling those days, I realize that I had developed an all-consuming, helpless frustration at my own inability to comprehend and grasp the reality surrounding me.

Although there was the shock and surprise that I received from seeing images of the events as they were broadcasted on television, I could not feel even the slightest of shadows remaining from these horrifying experiences from the world that I witnessed with my own eyes. Were there truly such calamities taking place? Innumerable people were suffering, many having lost their lives. Yet there was no evidence that could be found of this; no traces of such pain and misfortune lingered around me. I could not fathom how this other world could exist just beyond the edge of my own. Walking near the grounds of the Imperial Palace and taking in the scenery, there was little I could do to convince myself of the fact that people's lives had come to an end only several tens of meters below my feet. Even when visiting Osaka two months after the earthquake, it was difficult to realize that just a train ride away from the fully functioning city were entire districts that had been razed to the ground by fires, where countless lives had perished. It was as though someone had meticulously hidden away a whole world from my sight. Was my charmed existence merely fiction in relation to this other reality? Perhaps this was what I wished to believe, as I continued to founder in the weakness of my imagination and the inability of my mind to absorb these dissonances. Physical proximity to the site of these disasters had little to do with my difficulties – there was something more that I was failing to grasp.

I could only half-comprehend these events of extreme significance and the fact, presented to me repeatedly and almost to a numbing extent, that all of these immeasurable lives had been taken.

My anxiety and resentment continued to grow out of this

difficulty as I became over-saturated with information. I began to cultivate the very curious notion that the presence of such things as now, here and I were fading away from within me.

Without the ability to envisage those who had been living so close to me, and without the power to conceptualize these events that had affected so many nearby, I could no longer be certain whether what I sensed through my body in the here and now was indeed the present as it existed. I could no longer be certain even of my own life and the integrity of my *self*. Was my hand really my hand, and was the sky above really blue? There was nothing left inside of me to support a belief in the truth of the world. In 1995, I saw it beginning to disintegrate, and witnessed myself falling away as well.

Facing the murals of Diego Rivera

The catalyst for the change in my work from urban landscapes to portraiture was my frequent visits to Mexico since 1998.

The purpose of these visits was to view the large-scale projects by Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera⁶⁾ and José Clemente Orozco. Mexican muralism took flight as an art movement from the 1920s and evolved through the 1940s. Using public spaces and buildings as platforms for their paintings and thereby liberating art from its history of social exclusivity, these painters created what is now considered one of the origins and prime examples of public art. As a strain of artistic engagement that grew outside of Western Europe, it held widespread influence over the future generations of artists, among them the surrealists, Jackson Pollock⁷⁾ and Taro Okamoto⁸⁾. All of this had occurred many decades past, yet I could not help but feel connected to their legacy in an undeniably concrete manner.

The murals by Diego Rivera that I encountered there often featured seas of faces. Every imaginable individual was painted by his hand, which treated the good and the bad equally. Standing in front of his work is similar to springing open Pandora's Box. Figures from the pre-Columbian era, invaders, rapists, living sacrifices, despots, resistance fighters, children, clergymen, prostitutes, con-artists, merchants, farmers, lovers, wives, scientists, Rivera himself, the other Rivera, the dead, people from dreams, people of the future – all conceivable forms of the Other coexisting in one image, on one surface. I was moved profoundly by this simple truth.

At the same time, Mexico had produced another approach to representation that existed on the opposite side of the spectrum from the kind championed by the muralists. The universe of Frida Kahlo⁹⁾ presented a dramatically different, yet complementary re-contextualization of individuality. During her

lifetime, she dedicated her work to self-portraiture, transforming herself into a multitude of identities – in her paintings, she died, was born, gave birth, and was freed through boundless reincarnations.

Kahlo and the Muralists stood at the extremes of painting, each looking into the vast space where the Self and the Other were negotiated. Together, however, they show us that the two notions may perhaps be interchangeable. I found myself returning to Mexico time and again.

The Other beyond the here and now

It was 1999 when I started faxing my friends, asking them if I could “borrow their faces” at the studio. Combining other people into one single image, or layering them over the shape of my own face to deconstruct and blur its outline – the project was thus begun, with a number of impulsive tests. Initially, I would shoot twenty or so people using one large-format film. The direct multiple exposures registered little, but they were failed attempts from which I could sense further possibilities. After much trial and error, I devised the process of personally visiting the subjects, giving each individual his or her own small negative, and repeatedly exposing the photo-sensitive paper through these numerous pieces of film. I believe there were 43 people involved in the final image the very first time this revised method was applied. The steps that I followed during this first trial still remain vivid in my memory. I make one test print for each person. I then take the optimal exposure time for every face as determined by the test, and divide the number by 43. 43 times, I allow light to leak through for fractions of seconds, taking care to correctly realign the paper against the filtered images. In theory, this process allows for all individuals to be equally present in the final photograph. I remember wondering if this would truly be the outcome, unsure whether the image would appear as I had calculated.

I had been spending an entire day adjusting the 43 negatives and exposing them onto a single sheet of paper. After determining the exposure time for each image, I compiled the results and printed all 43 faces at once. As the paper soaked in the developer under the red darkroom lights, I saw a figure slowly take form. From the unsettling haziness covering the edges of the paper, a lone face managed to materialize. For a moment, I was filled with horror, feeling as if I had seen something that I was not permitted to witness, and that I had given shape to something that should not be represented. What I saw was frightening, but beautiful at the same time. The friction between these two opposing reactions stirred the

energy within me. I also received the impression that I could somehow sense my own presence there in those eerie, blurred outlines. Thinking back, I believe this moment could be called the beginning of the project.

Among the first people I visited were the fishermen in Kamogawa City, Chiba Prefecture. Hoping to receive their approval to be photographed, I showed them several sample images. "So we all show up together on this. That's interesting, go ahead." With their support, I was allowed to photograph them during their busy working hours. When I carried over the final print to them on a later date, one of the men observed intently, "This is our face." I will never know all the meanings that he gave to this word, *our*. They can only be shared with those who risk their lives at sea everyday.

Since then, I have been traveling the world over to visit people, take their portraits, and add them to an ever-growing fabric of diverse, yet connected groups. The suspicion of a fictitious life that had overwhelmed me in the past has never once emerged in the schools of Central Asia or the mountains of Iran. Beyond the innumerable heres and nows, the world is connected. That a vast people exist, that the world is present – these are truths that photography teaches us constantly.

Why is it, then, that every time a new composite portrait begins to take form in the developer, I am prompted to wonder whether I am seeing myself?

Imagining an Other as if oneself

These portraits are created without the intention of measuring the difference between individuals or their relative power. They are an investigation and affirmation of the simple fact that multitudes of single entities such as "selves" exist.

For instance, there are times when I see an old photograph of a child taken by a stranger long ago, and feel unexpectedly moved by the image. When we look into photographs, we gain access into unknown worlds lying beyond our physical reach, with the ability to project our emotions upon people of unfamiliar lands and feel these foreign lives as if they are our own.

It has become my practice to consider the *our face* project from two distinct perspectives. The first involves the names and relationships shared by the people of the chosen groups—the ties that bind and form them.

This approach to the project applies mainly to the world of the living, but sometimes also that of the deceased.

The second perspective involves unnamed, formless, but undoubtedly extant forces that encompass vast bodies of people. Through photography's indiscriminate inclusion of the

dead in its register of the existence of people, I am constantly confronted by the need to confirm these boundless, anonymous, yet somehow indisputable connections.

It is said that until the invention of the camera¹⁰⁾, people had no comprehension of what it meant to see out of focus. Through our highly sophisticated vision, we are automatically and unconsciously provided with focused sight. Photography, however, permits us the opportunity to see the world outside the cleanly defined pinpoints of focus. It prompts us to accept that seeing clearly is not necessarily the equivalent of seeing truthfully. The possibility of witnessing the unknown resides within the camera.

Straining our eyes to see the vague image, Grasping the reality before us through strangers and lands far away, we perceive that the world is here and there, with us and around us.

The Other of the future

Photography reveals and affirms only that which was. Yet it also empowers us with the ability to internally connect and empathize with a vast body of people, from those alive in the present moment, to those who lived centuries ago. In this finite and unmovable limit of the camera, we often find frustration, while other times we seek relief. Having investigated these particularities of photographic image throughout *our face*, I am also encouraged to push its strengths in another direction – that of the future.

If there could be a way of envisaging the various forms of future peoples, to feel their experiences as if they were our own, the issues of a century later would become the issues of our time, and individuals to be born a millennium later would be considered our friends.

Once past their nostalgia, the Others from the future will look at us fondly, extending their palms. At times, I indulge myself with such scenarios while imagining the far reaches to which photography will carry us next.

Appendix:

1) Exposure time

In the darkroom, this is the effective duration of light that reaches the photo-sensitive printing paper.

2) The objective of the project

All works ever produced are combined digitally in a continuously updated archive. The process is not intended to be finalized as a print, as new groups will always remain to be added. I have been sharing the latest version of this accumulation at public shows, the most recent occasion being at MEM during my solo exhibition in November of 2011. Compatibility with presentation methods such as these is another unique characteristic of photography. Photographs allow us to view the faces of family members living far away, as well as those who have passed with a kind of continuity by placing one picture after another. They act in certain ways as linking agents, connecting images together, bridging the distance between them. The development of digital media has greatly underscored the element of continuity within photography. Use of the traditional medium with negatives and prints can be interpreted as gestures of isolation – “capturing” time and existence. Digital data, on the other hand, promotes connection, echoed gestures, and the extrapolation necessary in exploring the unknowns of the future. Between the two approaches, I believe there lies the possibility of the camera teaching us how to empathize with others and the rest of the world outside of our immediate spheres of experience.

3) The Great Hanshin Earthquake

On January 17, 1995, an earthquake of magnitude 7.3 (originating from an epicenter located at the northern tip of Awaji Island) devastated the southern area of Hyogo Prefecture in Japan.

4) The sarin gas attacks

On March 20, 1995, the nerve agent sarin was released into the air at several locations within the Tokyo Metro system, leaving 10 dead and nearly 6000 injured. The cult Aum Shinrikyo was later found to be responsible for the planning of these acts of domestic terrorism.

5) Tohoku Earthquake and the meltdowns within the nuclear reactor facilities of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant

On March 11, 2011, Japan was struck by a magnitude 9 earthquake, the most powerful ever recorded in the country. Approximately 20,000 individuals were reported missing or dead. Several hundred thousand homes were entirely or partially destroyed, leaving behind masses of wreckage where towns and neighborhoods once thrived. Due to the earthquake, the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant facility lost the power necessary to keep coolant water circulating around the reactors. The overheated reactor fuel rods experienced a melt-down, thus triggering the release of radioactive gases. Government agencies and the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) continue clean-up operations within the area, yet full recovery and safety are still left unassured.

6) Diego Rivera

A Mexican painter (1886-1957). Studied in Spain and France, where he was influenced by Cubism. He spearheaded the Muralist movement upon his return to Mexico, later to be celebrated as one of “the big three,” with José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros.

7) Jackson Pollock

An American painter (1912-1956) and pioneer of Action Painting. It is said that his career marked the waning of Modernism and the beginning of Contemporary Art.

8) Taro Okamoto

A Japanese artist (1911-1996). From 1929 to 1940 he lived in France, where he was actively engaged in the Surrealist movement. After his return to Japan, he continued to create works which were recognized for their dynamism and critical insight into society.

9) Frida Kahlo

A Mexican painter (1907-1954). After suffering major wounds from a car accident at the age of 18, her talent was discovered by Diego Rivera. She painted self-portraits during the entire length of her career. Her well-known marriage to Rivera lasted only for a short while, due to his infidelity. Kahlo's work is celebrated internationally by admirers, and her status in Latin America is almost that of a muse.

10) The invention of the camera

Referring to the camera obscura. When a small opening is created on a wall of an otherwise dark chamber, the scene from the exterior of the chamber materializes on the surface opposite to the opening, with the image flipped upside-down and reversed. The areas on this secondary image that are in focus change according to the position of the external source of light, and the size of the opening. The use of the camera obscura as a recording device became a popular practice among painters beginning around the 15th century.