

In The Theatre of Memory:  
The Work of Contemporary  
Art in the Photographic  
Archive

Raqs Media Collective

# In The Theatre of Memory: The Work of Contemporary Art in the Photographic Archive

Raqs Media Collective

## Faces within Faces

In *The Surface of Each Day is a Different Planet*, a video installation that considers, among other things, the dense presences of human beings in archival traces, we find ourselves face to face with a haunting archive of faces in the Francis Galton Collection in the Science Library of the University College of London. That encounter finds its way into the text spoken in the work. The silence of hundreds of faces begins to yield.

‘...Faces light up like coal in a brazier. Ablaze, radiant, pensive, troubled, hungry, calm, assured, insane, inflamed. Piling eye upon eye, ear upon ear, wrinkle upon wrinkle, feature upon feature, smile upon grimace, Francis Galton, mathematician, statistician, polymath and Victorian colossus wants to see his picture of the world when he looks at a crowd of faces. His world is small, his laboratory crowded, his assistants are tired, their calipers are falling apart. They have never measured so many in so little time. When Galton files away thousands of faces or fingerprints into numbered and indexed folios he isn't just creating a repository of physiognomies. He is collecting and classifying the content of souls, turning, he thinks, the keys to the mysteries of the locked cabinet of human character.

But the “ghost” image of a composite of madmen from Bedlam has strangely

gentle eyes. Galton's wager, that if you were to stick the faces of eighty six inmates of the Bedlam asylum on top of each other you would end up looking into the eyes of madness, has gone oddly awry. Criminal composites produce a saintly icon. A quest for the precise index of what Galton thinks is ugliness in a row of sullen East London Jewish schoolboys yields amazing grace.

“The individual photographs were taken with hardly any selection from among the boys in the Jew's Free School, Bell Lane. They were the children of poor parents. As I drove to the school through the adjacent Jewish quarter, the expression of the people that most struck me was their cold, scanning gaze and this was equally characteristic of the schoolboys. The composites were made with a camera that had numerous adjustments for varying the position and scale of the individual portraits with reference to fixed fiduciary lines, But so beautiful the results of these adjustments are, if I were to begin entirely afresh, I should discard them, and should proceed in quite a different way. This cannot be described intelligibly and at the same time briefly.”

The faces and fingerprints whisper a thousand secrets to Galton, but they do not let him in on their greatest mystery. The face of the crowd is a face in the crowd, fleeting, slippery, gone before you blink, always gentle, always calm, always someone you think you can recognise but can never recall.’

### The Absent Time Between Exposures

One of the things that has struck us whenever we have had the opportunity to browse in an archive of early ethnographic and anthropometric photographs, or even portraits, is the time that it would have taken to take an exposure for these images. Daguerrotypes and early glass negatives, which is what a majority of the material that we have looked at are, required the ‘subject’ to sit or stand still for lengths of time that would try our patience today.

The nineteenth century saw an explosion of anthropometric photography. Every ‘race’ was photographed and measured, down to the last fingernail. In some cases, such as the inhabitants of the Andaman Islands, there are now more photographs in archives in different parts of the world, than there are actual living people. The population of images has by now outnumbered that

of bodies.

When looking at these images, we are always struck by the fact that it would have required an elaborate apparatus of coercion and restraint to ensure that, say, an 'Andamanese' would stand still against a grid for a length of time sufficient for an acceptable exposure. In more ways than one, taking such an image is a demand made on the photographed to deliver up a coerced, choreographed passivity. Every photograph in any such archive is a record of the arrested dance of power.

This gets even more interesting when we realise that even several contemporary practices of photography are intimately tied up with the production of legal and illegal presences. Most people have to be photographed in certain ways, for certain purposes. This we know already from the passport photograph, and from forensic photography. Some spaces are prohibited from being photographed (like most public utilities in Delhi, which always exhibit prominent 'Photography Prohibited' signs). In many spaces, like on the metro in Delhi, it is impossible not to be photographed, because of the ubiquity of surveillance cameras. In some spaces, like in an unauthorised or illegal urban settlement in Delhi, the presence of a person with a camera is read as an opening gambit in a manoeuvre of surveying that will ultimately end with the flattening of the neighbourhood.

The surface of the photograph then has to be seen as a contested terrain. Appearing on it or disappearing from it is not a matter of visual whimsy, but an actual index of power and powerlessness. A careful examination of the photographs that bear portraits of 'wanted' and 'missing persons' will reveal the strangely blank, intense lack of intensity in the eyes of those who appear in these images. They are there, in the picture, but they look as if they were not there.

The temperature of truth varies, and sometimes, when it is too hot to handle, you need to cool it down with distance and irony. Sometimes, in order to preserve what is true in a document, we have to surround it with an ambient coolness, an archival temperature, control factors such as humidity, so that the truth endures. Naked truth is fragile, brittle and short lived. Working

with facts is sometimes a prelude to a long process of deliberation about the conditions of its storage. Sometimes these deliberations can take on the character of productive fantasy that is a better antidote to amnesia than is the brittle facticity of the archival idem.

Also, often, when we are dealing with facts, we come to realise that the annotations that produce the 'fact' in the archive are themselves ruses, often designed to paper over a systematic amnesia. The inscriptions in the archive are also instances of overwriting and erasure. When looking at a face in a photograph in an archive we are sensing the ghosts of several other faces as well. These absences and presences constitute a strange, spectral composite.

### The Camera as Witness and Actor

The arts and sciences of memory changed the moment photography entered our consciousness. Until that time, it was possible to dispute whether or not an event had occurred. After photography, the debate is no longer possible to frame in those terms. The question is no longer about whether something did or did not occur. The question is: was there a camera on hand to show us whether or not it did occur? The camera is both witness and actor. Photography, especially in the archive, is a form of theatre.

As in any performative genre, photography occasionally demands a degree of the suspension of disbelief. We are not asked to simply see, but also to believe what we are seeing. The photographic historian and archivist Joan Schwartz writes,

'...Photography was not just a new way of seeing; it was a new way of believing. It was...a "technology of trust"; or what record keepers would consider a "trustworthy information system"... and yet, "...The rhetoric of transparency and truth—or in archival terms, authenticity, reliability and objectivity—that came to surround the photograph raised serious questions about the very nature of truth, particularly in relation to art. At the surface of the problem was the degree to which a mechanical device could produce a truthful picture of reality.'

Following from this, we could say that photographs are not traces of truth

per se because they are themselves implicated in the production of what we have come to know to be true. It is in this vein that John Tagg in his influential book on history and photography, *The Burden of Representation* says, '...Photographs are never 'evidence' of history, they are themselves the historical.' Or, in other words, the 'real' as the philosopher Jacques Rancière would have it, is an 'effect to be produced' rather than a 'fact to be understood'. What makes history is not necessarily what gets historicised. The archival photograph is a two-legged beast, it both makes history, in the sense that it 'constitutes' historical evidence for us, and at the same time it also unmakes history, because it excludes that which falls outside its frame and the time it took to make the exposure that resulted in the photograph. The archival photograph contains both the presence as well as the absence of the historical within its surface. Reading the photograph then is to read into all the things it says, and at least into some of the things it does not say. Listening to its silences is an act of the imagination. It is here that the artist is able to do a few things that the historian is inhibited from doing.

How do we relate this question of the active production of a sense of the real to the practice of contemporary art? Art, as we understand it, does not 'show' reality, it 'produces' truth. The truths produced by art are not necessarily mimetic, nor do they lay claim to comprehensiveness or completeness. But the succour that art brings to the senses have something to do with a sense of the replete-ness of an experience, even when that experience is presented to us elliptically, enigmatically and with an acute awareness of the absence of the empirical datum.

What does a photographic archive do to an artist when she enters the archive? What does the artist make of the accumulation of history that the archive represents? What work can contemporary art do in the archive? In some senses, the question of the performance of the ontological status of the photographic trace in an archive is made most apparent when contemporary art meets the archival photograph.

The art historian and critic T.J. Demos, writing about the paradoxical relationship between truth, evidence and the production of contemporary art says,

‘...To produce the real as an effect means to engage in a process of contemplation and construction, of gradual understanding that brings changes in perception. Poetry as evidence, then suggests a commitment to emancipation via continual experimentation, creative invention and self-transformation. Contemporary art, as both a practice and a discourse, defines a privileged realm in which the complexities of this conclusion, the sometimes paradoxical outcomes and the radical possibility of repositioning evidence as a new poetic paradigm can be animated and addressed.’

To consider the photograph in the archive, then, is to consider not just a problem of history, but also a question of the poetics of the real, of memory and oblivion.

### The Bare Bones of a Picture

The archive shapes facts. It produces the narrative and the story that the facts are made to tell. In other words, the archive, by its sequential, cross-indexed and jussive ordering of notings and data, can also render a figment of the imagination into a fact, or at least blur the borders of fact and fiction. One possible task for the artist in the archive then is to prise the archived fact back into the realm of interpretation, through hermeneutic procedures that privilege the imagination. It is to ask what gets forgotten, or what can be only recovered through fantasy, through speculation, through the oddness, humour and irony, whenever the archive produces its fixity of memory.

The drama of the photograph in the archive consists in this tension between the claim to truth and the ruses necessary to the making and contestation of this claim. This fact has come alive to us most recently while working with a remarkable photograph, ‘Scene at Sikanderbagh’ (or to give the image its proper title: ‘Interior of the Sikanderbagh after the Slaughter of 2,000 Rebels by the 93rd Highlanders and 4th Punjab Regiment. First Attack of Sir Colin Campbell in November 1857, Lucknow, March or April 1858’) currently in the collection of the Alkazi Foundation for Photography. The photograph was taken in 1858 by the itinerant photographer Felice Beato as part of an album of scenes related to the mutiny of 1857. Our quotation of the photograph as artists first took the form of a sustained forensic reflection that constituted a

significant section of the work that we have already referred to, *The Surface of Each Day is a Different Planet*.

Sikanderbagh, or Secundra Bagh, is a relatively small, walled pleasure garden on the eastern outskirts of the North Indian city of Lucknow. During the siege of Lucknow in the war referred to as the 'mutiny' of 1857 in the forces of the British East India Company in India, Sikanderbagh became a site for some of the fiercest fighting.

An image by the itinerant photographer Felice Beato, (who's sojourn in India is bracketed by stints in the Crimean War and the Second Opium War) shows the pavilion within the garden where, as Beato's own note (inscribed on the image) dispassionately recalls for us, 'two thousand Indians were mercilessly slaughtered in November 1857, by the 93rd Highlanders and the 4th Punjab Regiment, in the course of the attack led by Sir Colin Campbell.' This photograph is taken in March 1858, roughly four months after the actual fighting at the site took place.

At first glance the picture suggests a sentimental melancholia, stately nostalgia for a time gone by, or the fleeting resonance of an arrested time—a baroque ruin, men in studied poses, a fine horse. But then, our eyes begin to work and travel. The photograph seems to have been taken in the clear light of day, perhaps at noon. There are no shadows to obscure the fact that the 'scene' is the result of a careful act of arrangement. The skeletons are clean, picked to the bone, white against the dun earth, as they would be in a painterly tableau.

We know something about the relative rate of decomposition of cadavers, and the time it takes for a body to be reduced completely to a bare skeleton between the November and March of a North Indian winter. If the bodies were of the rebels of the mutiny of 1857, they could not have become so clean, so soon. Had they been picked clean by scavenging animals from shallow graves, they would not have remained so well integrated as skeletons. It is possible, in fact highly likely, that they may not be the bones of the dead rebels slaughtered at Sikanderbagh at all, but props, macabre prosthetic additions, 'other people bones' brought in to set the scene because the



originals are ‘missing’ or just not good enough for a decent picture.

The bones (whosoever they may in fact have belonged to) have been placed with thought to symmetry and order, just as the carefully held attitudes of the men suggest the exact degree of forethought necessary to create the illusion of spontaneity.

Who were these four men? Were they involved in arranging the bones, or even in digging them up, carrying them and placing them at the visiting photographer’s bidding? What testimonies do bleached bones and a crowd of disinterred skeletons offer to posterity? What can the bones tell us?

In attempting to ‘listen’ to the drama of this photograph, we have found ourselves drifting from the archive to the theatre. This is partly because this photograph, more than anything else, helped us understand that the archive is a theatre, that the witness is also an actor.

### The Archive of Tomorrow

Today, photographic images come at us not as static presences, but as kinetic elements, as a set of kinetic envelopes; they flicker on to light boxes, television screens, computer terminals and mobile phones. Wherever we look, there are photographs—as fetishes, as memorabilia, as ornaments, as seductions, as instruments of governance, as items of evidence in police reports and newspaper stories—in posters for missing and wanted people stuck to the surface of a wall, in a newspaper or a pulp magazine, or as advertisements on the curving surfaces of a metro station.

The photograph and the photographically inflected object have a very different status from the commemorative or iconic function that they might have had at an earlier time.

Photographs, stored in hard drives, deleted and catalogued repeatedly, scanned, resized, drained or saturated in terms of colour are both the substance and the detritus of our existence. These are the layers that will constitute the photographic archive of tomorrow. Their contingency, their volatility only underscores the question of finding a poetics appropriate and

commensurate to the problem of understanding the archival act. As Sven Spieker argues ‘...in the archive we encounter things we never expected to find; yet the archive is also the condition under which the unexpected, the sudden the contingent can be sudden, unexpected and contingent. Or, differently put, nothing enters the archive that is not in some sense destined to be there from the moment of its inception.’ And yet, ‘...Contingency is not the same as organised, yet its precise morphology can be detected only by accident (literally). The archive does not give access to history: it is, or aims to be, the condition of historicity itself. The archive therefore is not simply a departure, a cipher for the condition of innovation: it gives a name to the way in which the new is also a return, an iteration in the true sense of the word.’

When detritus and substance coincide with an increasing regularity (as we would argue they do in today’s world, where somebody’s urban renewal is the destruction of somebody’s habitat), we come face to face with an interesting dilemma: that of the impossibility of being able to make ‘constitutive’ images that build desired or desirable realities. The images that yield themselves to us do not in themselves create opportunities for redemption, nor do they offer utopian possibilities. Nor is it possible for us to view them as extensions of our subjectivities—a set of personal visions. We find it difficult to make images do the work of manifestos, pamphlets or diaries. What we are able to do is to make images that work as notations that encrypt a set of rebuses. That allow the new to return, and that enable to read the returned as something new. Reading an image in this manner, which is one of the first steps one can take as an artist when confronted with an image retrieved from an archive, is to read into its absences, and (therefore) into its potentialities. Just as a set of notes point to realities larger, more fulsome and complex than the mere act of their listing allows for, so too, reading a photograph that functions as notation involves knowing and understanding that what we see also contains a great deal that is amiss, that has faded, degraded, disappeared or is in a condition of distressed visibility. The less-than-visible elements in an image are just as interesting as the visible. Sometimes, in fact they may be much more arresting.

Walter Benjamin, in his *Short History of Photography* written in 1931, spoke conspiratorially of photographs as indices of ‘scenes of a crime’ saying (prophetically, though he was unaware of his prophecies, made alive

today by mobile phone cameras) that, ‘the camera is getting smaller and smaller, ever readier to capture fleeting and secret moments whose images paralyse the associative mechanisms in the beholder.’ This led in his view to a situation wherein ‘photography turns all life’s relationships into literature’. If we take this view seriously we have to consider photography first of all as the literature of the relationship between visibility and obscurity, and as a commentary on the tension that binds the barely visible to our retinal surfaces.

Working with images today is working with an ever-expanding archive of pictures that grows around us by the second. Some photographs hang on walls. Some become monumental icons. Some get lost in files and folders in filing cabinets. Others are worn as pendants. Some end up on gravestones. Others end up in the garbage. Probably most get sent into photographic digital limbo, when probably a million times each second, the delete button is pressed on a digital camera. Wherever they are found, and howsoever they circulate, the photograph indexes distance and proximity, intimacy and difference, it tells us instantly, stories about comfort and discomfort and whether or not, the presence of the photographer in a given situation was welcomed, challenged, ignored or merely entertained.

Our understanding of the photographic archive of the past and the contemporary practices of photography infect each other. The moment of taking a photograph today, and the moment of looking at a photograph taken in the past produces a similar field of forces that get activated in the interval between the click of a shutter in a camera and the filing of a photograph in a hard drive or an archive.

Between these two instants lies an entire history of the performance of a claim to truth. The photograph is a chronicle of that history, and our role as artists today, is not to repeat that claim but to subject it to an imaginative trial. This is what has made us move from the archive to the theatre, with the photograph as our guide.