

**Fleeting Impressions: A Photographic  
Representation of Interactions Between  
Strangers**

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My photographs are the product of a set of systematic manipulations that result in an image that is generated by systems rather than by my own subjective choices. My journey started in the summer of 2014; a summer spent taking photographs of strangers. When I first started taking these photographs, I was nervous. I thought that strangers would be intimidated to talk to me but I quickly realized that it was in fact the opposite: not only was I nervous to speak to them, but I was also worried that I would never get beyond this fear. I felt that because I was in my hometown, a place that was familiar to me, I would be put at ease but in fact that was not the case at all. I was struggling to figure out ways to approach the people I wanted to talk to and realized that in order to make myself more comfortable with the idea of speaking to people, I had to use something as a mediator or a bridge in the conversation. This bridge came in the form of the large format camera. It was through this that I was able to have some sort of excuse for talking to people. Although I knew how to use the camera, I would tell people that I did not know how to and that I needed to take pictures of them for practice. This was extremely effective because not only did people relax when I was “setting up the camera,” but I also was able to get to know the strangers I was speaking to more by taking my time to set up the camera.

As mentioned before, the people in my photographs were complete strangers to me, when I photographed them in my hometown of Chesapeake Beach, Maryland and in St. Mary’s County, Maryland. It wasn’t until I entered into conversation with these strangers that the difference between their outward appearance and inner selves became apparent. I was constantly fascinated by the stories that the people

shared. Some stories stuck out to me as being particularly shocking in terms of how they completely shattered my preconceived notions of the people that I saw. One example of this was when I met an eighty year old woman named Willetta. She was somewhat frail but had excellent posture while sitting at the roll top desk at the front of her antique store, "Willetta's Antiques." While her clothing and her demeanor were mild, the one factor that stood out was her bright red hair. When I began asking her about her life in Chesapeake Beach she told me that she and her husband had lived in the Beach for 50 years and had owned the antique store for about 20 out of those 50 years. When I asked her what she did for the 30 years before that she surprised me in saying she was a professional classical ballet dancer. "Oh honey, that was in the younger days, I learned so much discipline and anything you would ever want to know about keeping your posture straight and your toes pointed. Now although I am older, I still try to keep the same amount of poise. Now let me ask you a question, how old do you think I am?" I answered saying, "Seventy years old, is that close?" She smiled and said with a chuckle, "Well, I'll put it this way, I'm definitely older than seventy, but I won't tell you what my real age is. What I will tell you is that if I look a day over twenty five in the photograph, don't bother sending it!" I laughed and marveled at the fact that this seemingly poised and very upright woman had such an amazing sense of humor.

After I met her, I returned to the boardwalk and continued scanning for people to speak with and take photographs of. This is when I spotted Raquel and his family. Raquel was brooding with his aviator sunglasses, holding a box of puppies that I later found out were for sale. I was a little nervous to approach him as he, and

who I presumed to be his brothers, looked busy trying to keep the puppies and their children from running away on the beach. But the puppies were adorable and I really wanted to know more about him and his family so I decided to strike up a conversation. I am an avid dog lover so the easiest segue into conversation for me was to talk about the dogs. He informed me that they were pit bull puppies and that he was a little nervous that he wasn't going to be able to sell them. When I asked him why he was nervous about selling them he said, "Pit bulls have a bad reputation for being scary and violent but too many people don't recognize that where the pit bulls come from has a lot to do with how they grow up to be. It's just like children or anything else that grows up and has their characteristics shaped by the environment they live in. If they grow up with good parents who instill good values in them and give them a lot of love then you'd hope that they would carry those values into their adult lives. Without that though, it doesn't mean that a person can't be a good person, but it is much harder to judge what's right or wrong and can often lead to more wrong than right. It's the same with pit bulls, if they are raised to not be fighters and just to be loving and caring pets, they too have the potential to be very good beings and members of the community. I would never want anyone to judge me based on my appearance alone and so I would hope that people wouldn't do the same about these little pit bulls. Although they appear gruff and standoffish, they are actually very sweet. I think that's why I chose them as the kind of dog I wanted to sell; they are a lot like me. Sorry I can't talk anymore...we don't have a lot of time to take a picture, and I can't guarantee that my kids and the dogs will sit still, but if you'd like to try taking a portrait that would be great." He was the first person that I

felt myself being shocked by his stories and his philosophies about life. This experience solidified that I wanted to continue to meet these strangers and get to know who they were. It was then that I realized that what I originally perceived about people was often so different than what I found out about them.

Although I was enjoying my time with these strangers I had so many questions about my interactions with them: Why was I so interested in speaking with them; why didn't I want to photograph people that I knew, and how would it feel to not speak to strangers when I photographed them? These were questions that I hoped to answer throughout my exploration of the photography of strangers. Since one of my largest curiosities was to take photographs of strangers anonymously, I switched to a more inconspicuous camera, and decided to go to a place where people weren't as leisurely or interested in talking to people; most importantly though, it was a place where I would not be recognized. For me, this place was Washington, DC. It was at this time that I began to research a famous street photographer, Andre Kertész.

For Kertész, photography was all about seeing the world in a unique way; not just to look at places, people, and objects, but to truly see them on a deeper level: as a reflection of himself as a person. Kertész very strongly embraced what we commonly refer to as the "the decisive moment" in photography—the moment in which all of the elements of a frame come together perfectly (1). He wouldn't always be certain what this right moment was, but he would try his best to photograph on instinct—from his gut. As one to carry his camera with him at every moment, he was always ready to capture a moment that struck him. Once he found a

subject that seemed inspiring but he wasn't sure how to capture it he would take time to think about it or to examine the subject from different points of perspective. Because Kertész strongly embraced this idea of the decisive moment, a point at which all things aligned—light, shadows, this would dictate when he took his pictures. Sometimes if he feared that the moment would pass he would take pictures on the spot, but other times if the moment did not feel right he would wait a while for the right moment to come along. This process in and of itself is what makes these photographs reflections of himself as opposed to mere documentations. Kertész emphasizes this point when he states, “The moment always dictates my work. What I feel, I do... I never calculate or consider; I just walk around, observing the subject from various angles until the picture elements arrange themselves into a composition that pleases my eye...I see a situation and I know that it's right, even if I have to go back to get the proper lighting.” (1)

This idea of the decisive moment and the use of the photograph as a self-portrait is an interesting idea to ponder: if the artist is not visible in the frame, is it still considered to be a self-portrait? Kertész discusses this idea through conversation about many of his photographs, an example being the juxtaposition between the photographs that he took when he first moved to Paris by himself in comparison to those that he took when he was photographing his birthplace and familiar home in Hungary. Photographs from these two bodies of work are very different. These differences are not due to a change in geographical place, but rather changes of Kertész's frame of mind and his relationship to these places. According to friends of Kertész, when Kertész moved to Paris he was not reminiscing all the

time and when he looked to the future he was a lonely man (1). This sense of being alone caused Kertész to also simplify things in his life, a change that was reflected in his pictures. In his Hungarian photographs you can see that his focus was on overt manifestations of human affection, a reflection of the love he felt for the people and the places he interacted with and inhabited. This expression of love and human companionship came from his very intimate and close photographs of the people in Hungary. Contrasting these Hungarian images are ones that are much less ebullient and lighthearted scenes in Paris. According to Kertész, “The joie de vivre that we think of as part of Paris life does not come through in the pictures. I had a melancholy spirit thus my pictures were melancholy.”

As I started to think about my experiences in DC and in my more familiar town of Chesapeake Beach, I realized that my photographs showed very similar signs of change in thought. Because I took photographs on the boardwalk near my home, I already felt an overwhelming sense of familiarity and comfort while walking around to take photographs. I saw many familiar faces and spoke to friends, thus putting me at ease to approach strangers I didn't know. Even when I did approach them, my comfort in the situation and my ability to talk about my experiences in this town that I have called home for almost twenty years also created better conversation flow between myself and the unfamiliar people that I approached. Similar was my set of interactions in Buzzy's country store in St. Mary's county and in my interactions with people that I photographed in Annapolis. It is apparent in my photographs of people from familiar towns that I am comfortable with them and they are comfortable with me.

In DC however, I remained anonymous, shot with a much more inconspicuous film camera and didn't really feel comfortable interacting with people. These people all became objects to me, moving quickly in the blur that is the motion of the city. My photographs reflect this sense of anonymity in the sense that the people themselves are seen in the context of geometric shadows and melt into the architecture around them. There is no context to who they are as people; they are mere individuals in a sea of numbers. On the boardwalk near my house and in these smaller towns in St. Mary's County and Annapolis the photographs seemed more natural and inviting, whereas the photographs from DC were definitely more cold.

This difference in experience made me realize that I wanted to stick to the places that I was familiar with and continue to interact with the strangers on a more personal level. It was at this point though that I realized that I needed to figure out how to extend these ideas behind interacting with strangers into something that would be more reflective. This is where the idea of the system came in.

As a Mathematics major I have always been interested in systems and the amazing ability that a system has to take a completely abstract thought and create a visualization of them. One of the most prominent systematic artists that I was drawn to was Sol Lewitt. It was through researching his work that I could further extend my ideas about systems based work; it allowed me to take his ideas on systems and convert them to my own ideas. Before I created these systems I had to answer the question: what does it mean to place a system on photographs?



In Sol Lewitt's work he focuses on very neutral forms such as color, line, shape, and repetition. He considers the ideas to be works of art. He reiterates this when he states "Ideas can be works of art too. They are in a chain of development that may possibly find some form. All ideas don't need physical form. That's what conceptual art is all about. An idea doesn't have a completely physical form. The thought of some ideas lead to the important creation of other ones. "

The simple forms, tools, and color schemes used by Lewitt are to further solidify the idea that the parts that make up the whole are not objective but they do represent reality. The square and by extension, the grid, offered a framework that seems logical and is ethical. To Lewitt, the line represents nothing, strictly speaking, and Lewitt believes that the pushing of the lines to the extreme creates a disorder that seems unexpected, it essentially is a higher degree of reality (1). The large size of the wall drawings is most importantly for the viewer to feel the presence of the system and to be surrounded by it. Because many of his wall drawings are repetitive, the fact that they cover the entire wall causes the viewer to essentially be encased by these ideas. On each wall where there is a plaque that shows the instructions and a diagram of what the wall diagram should look like. This set of instructions serves as the artists presence to the work and serves as an indication to the viewers to not overthink what is happening, to realize that it is purely objective.

The difference in how the viewer interacts with the pieces is based on the instructions and how they are portrayed in the context of the similarly applied technical aspects. For his work in which the instructions are supposed to be visible, the viewer is expected to span the lengths of the walls and piece the parts of the

work together. Because his work is supposed to be accessible to a large variety of people, the instructions are simple to follow but keep the viewer working to piece together the work itself. This idea of following sets of instructions to piece the work back together is in a similar vein to my SMP project. For my project I am using black and white film, as a way of stripping down expectations or associations that the viewers may have with color, and taking portraits of individuals or groups of people that are complete strangers to me. Once I have these images, I am fragmenting the images by overlaying 10x10 grids overtop of them and then dividing up the image into 100 squares. When piecing the images together on the wall I am removing one square and shifting the image into a 9x11 grid, which makes the image harder to piece together for the viewers. Unlike Lewitt, my photographs are not completed by others, but they are the result of a pre-established set of systematic manipulations that do result in an image that is generated by that system rather than by my own subjective choices. While Lewitt chooses focus his instructions on the organization of neutral forms (line, shapes, colors) I manipulate photographic images of people, thus there is an additional layer of meaning. This additional meaning is implied by my subjection of my portraits of humans to a purely unmotivated mathematical system.

I worked with a multitude of systems, each of which had profoundly different visual effects. Since I was thinking about the photographs in a systematic sense, I began to think of what aspects of photography related most to a system. It was then that I thought of the silver particles that make up the film itself and also thought of the digital version of silver particles: pixels. The fact that we can see pixels if we

zoom in enough is enough to remind us that these photographs in fact are two-dimensional representations of reality. The photograph itself can never embody reality, it is through examination of pixels or realizing the physicality of a printed piece, such as the fact that it is made of paper/plastic that we know that the piece in our hands is just plastic reality.

These systems are ways of disrupting the surface of the people, a way to shift the perception of the viewer that is interacting with the images and a way for the people that are interacting to work harder for the image to be put back together. While experimenting with the visual effects of more or less squares making up the image, as well as the degree at which I used the positioning of these squares—such as rotation by a certain degree, order, size—I realized that the photographs could go in a few different directions. When I decreased the square size, increase the number of squares that made up the image, and then order the squares in a way that abstracted the image read as very mechanized; it was as if the machine was taking in these whole humans, shifting them around, and then spitting them back out in a very new and dehumanized form. This dehumanized form comes from the fact that the shifted photographs looked like intense results of a computer glitch or a mechanized and randomized translator that made these photographs of the people unreadable and very cold. While this was an interesting look at the concept of man versus machine and technological effects on the human race, it was not exactly what I was going for.

It was at this point that I realized that very subtle, but still noticeable, shifts in the image would create a more approachable, less technologically manipulated

look. Since my goal is to represent these fleeting moments that strangers share, it was important that the people in the photographs were still approachable. The subtle shift in the larger image in the gallery of Raquel and his family is enough to stop the viewer, causing them to spend time piecing the image back together, but not so confusing that piecing the image back together is impossible. It was through this exploration of shifting images that I started to think of the role of the photograph, especially the role of the photograph of another person.

Although the portraits are accurate representations of a particular moment in time, they can never be representative of the person as a whole. My divided photographs are my way of expressing this shortcoming of truth that occurs both in a single photographic portrait and in the act of a fleeting impression. It was at this point in thought that I started to study the work of Richard Avedon, specifically his *In the American West* series. To take the photographs for this series, Richard Avedon traveled out to Western America in search of everyday working class subjects such as miners soiled in their work clothes, housewives, farmers, and drifters. Once he found the people he wanted he would take polaroid photographs of them, talk to them for a while, start to understand their situations and how they defined them as people, then start to think about ideas for his portraits. I realized that this way of taking portraits was subjective; although Avedon does know a lot about his sitters, they are still at his mercy when it comes to his representation of them; how they defined themselves as a person, even if made explicitly clear, could be completely different from how Avedon Chooses to portray them. Avedon recognizes this when he states, “[The subject] leaves their power at the door...the

subject cannot deny a photograph—cannot say he was misquoted (as in an interview) or misrepresented (as in a painted portrait)—though in the fact that the photographer can be just as subjective as a print journalist or a painter. Everyone is selective (2).”

This subjectivity vs. accurate representation that I was striving so hard to achieve was an interesting idea to ponder: are there ever really accurate photographs or are they accurate, but never truthful? This was a question that I contemplated about for a while but then came to the realization that most photographs are accurate but none of them are really the truth, what was the “truth” on one day could be completely change the next day just based off of how I was feeling and how my subject was feeling, whether I asked certain questions or not and how they felt like answering them. I also realized that the environment had a lot to do with how the person felt, if the environment was comfortable, in a place that they were familiar with, the people I would talk to seemed more relaxed as opposed to in an environment where they were less familiar. Although I originally was aiming to capture the “essence” of the people I was photographing, I realized that it is impossible to capture this essence in one photograph or even many. An essence is in a constant state of flux and the majority of the time we ourselves can’t understand what this essence is; so after all of this confusion, how can I claim that I can capture the essence in one photograph of a person; I cannot.

My work is not about this idea of capturing essence, it is instead about breaking boundaries in the way that we initially look at people. The life size of the striped photograph on the wall works really well in this context because the piece is

so large that the viewers can experience the people in close to true form. While shifting the image back together, time is provided for the viewer to examine each facet of the people in front of them, especially because the division between the squares which make up the image is obvious. It is through this time spent piecing the image back together that the viewer then gets to know the person in the photograph better, thus shedding the dehumanistic and mechanical assumption and gaining the ability to look at each person as a true human being. It is through this examination that one may form a preconceived notion about the person or group of people but in reading their stories, next to the work itself, they may start to view the strangers, the people that really did function as just another form of a machine around them, as human beings with lives and stories. Just as it is impossible to capture the essence of a person in one photograph, one can never truly know a person after a single interaction. This conversation extends over the course of looking at my work. From the initial stage of viewing the piece as a dehumanizing work, to spending more time with it and starting to build relationships with the people, I believe that each viewer will grasp the people in a different way. While that is important, the act of them spending time with these people and really breaking them down is an act that I believe is even more so important. It is only through conversation that we can stop seeing each other as machines, stop following preconceived notions, and learn about things that would have been impossible.

## Work Cited

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