

Photography As an Act of Care

Text by Ramona Jingru Wang

On the Lunar New Year's Eve of 2021, I wrote a letter to my grandpa. (the original is in Chinese, see letter attached at the end.)

While I was writing the letter, a photograph kept appearing in my head. It is a photograph I took of my grandma's sink on her balcony. A photograph works as a portal in its ability to capture things that we failed to remember, or were not even able to register into our consciousness. Usually they are trivial things that are not the reason why the photographs were made, but because of these "punctums" (as Barthes might call them), a photograph acts as a fragment from the past that is yet to become our memory; when we look at a picture, we can recreate and experience the past again and again in different ways in the present. I found this balcony photograph, and looked at its every detail, trying to find traces of the past.

Photographs hold a special place in our interactions with memories. Even though we are almost certain about the truth and reality in a photograph, we invent new narratives every time we look at them, just as we revisit memories and discover something new about ourselves. When Benjamin talks about Proust, he says that "in his work Proust did not describe a life as it actually was, but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it."¹ If a photograph is a description of a life as it actually is, then the reimagining of a photograph is a life as it was remembered.

Benjamin also discusses the remaining cult value in photography writing "In photography, exhibition value begins to drive back cult value on all fronts. But cult value does not give way without resistance. It falls back to a last

entrenchment: “the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait is central to early photography. In the cult of remembrance of dead or absent loved ones, the cult value of the images finds its last refuge.”² However, it is not only within portrait photography that we find this cult value. When I am looking at the photograph of my grandma’s sink, or when Barthes grieves over his mother’s winter garden picture, we both are performing a ritual to worship, to mourn and to remember with photographs. This ritualistic aspect of photographs comes with the unique value that the photographs hold for us; they allow us to project our personal meaning and longing onto them, sometimes independent of the referent. As Barthes confesses about the winter garden photograph: “I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the ‘ordinary’.”³

What happens when we look at photographs that are not directly from and about our personal past? Putting down my personal, sentimental photograph of my grandma’s sink, I start to think about the public, social and exhibition value of photography, and, perhaps most importantly: how do we care for each other through photographs?

As viewers ourselves, one way to reimagine photography in a public sphere is to see it as an action rather than an object. Photography is an action that creates social relations between people, and it happens between the person who is being photographed, the person who takes the photo, and the viewers who look at it. In *The Civil Contract of Photography*, after pointing out that the invention of photography is “the invention of a new encounter between people”, Azoulay proposes an idea of “the citizenry of photography”, which she contextualizes by envisaging an alternative politics that can be driven by photography.⁴ Instead of being an object of art, photography becomes a social practice that connects people, and we are able to care for others that are in “the citizenry of photography”. Azoulay describes photography as an

action that does not end with the final outcome of a photograph. Emphasizing a new type of gaze generated from the invention of photography, especially from the power of the spectators in a public sphere, she presents photography as analogues to action defined by Arendt, which “approximates at least the central distinguishing feature of action: it includes the aspect of a new beginning, and its ends are unpredictable.”⁵ When we reimagine a photograph that is not from our memory, we read it in ways that relate to our own background and previous experiences. Photography is an action that leads to unpredictable ends because of the plurality involved in the making and reading of a photograph.

When it comes to what we are able to see when we try to reimagine and reconstruct meanings of a photograph as spectators, simply identifying what has been there in a photograph is not enough. Photography is an encounter between the photographer and the subject, therefore a photograph provokes us to imagine specific situations where the photography takes place. Looking at what has been there when a photograph was made, we are facing other questions such as: What happened when the photograph was taken? Why was the subject worthy of being photographed? What does the person being photographed try to convey? What does the photographer try to convey? What does the photographer try to convey through the person being photographed? What kind of relationship do the photographer and the subject have? It is with this mindful reimagination of photographs that we as spectators are able to care for others through photographs.

When people are involved in a process of making photographs, photography becomes an opportunity for them to give care and look for care from others. To photograph the beauty of the insignificant is as powerful as to expose the shock of a disaster. As much as photography can be exploitative towards the subject being photographed, it can also be a gesture of love. The act of taking a photograph of someone means to carefully carry their trust

and vulnerability on one's shoulders and forming a safe space through the making of the images with them.

To be able to care in the act of photography, we need to draw attention to the intent behind photographs. In the essay "Why Intent Matters", Jay Simple points out that the common photographic practice, in which the photographer is led by instinct and simply captures and explores the world, such as street and landscape photography, is deeply rooted in a colonial mindset.⁶ The instinct that these photographers follow are never neutral, and it is fostered by their cultural ideologies. Agreeing to be photographed means making oneself vulnerable, and to give in to the power of the photographer's and viewer's. We need to care as much about the connections that are formed during the process of photographing as the final images.

To read the message in a photograph is to imagine the making of it when the photographic encounter happens, which is not so much only about the final photograph itself. Because photography is deeply intertwined with our memories, and how we understand ourselves, it is important to examine the process, the intent and purposes behind a photograph. It is through this process that we are able to truly care for others.

Letter:

“Grandpa Happy New Year!

I have never written you a letter, and I’ll probably not send out this one. It was Lunar New Year’s eve last Thursday and mom video called me so that you can see me. She was telling me that you tried to touch me on the screen because you didn’t know it was a video call. I always joke that I have no home because I live on the internet, and I keep forgetting that you and grandma don’t live online.

Three weeks ago I had a dream on my birthday. In my dream, we are in a weird temple, where there are many dragon sculptures. There’s water running through them, and fire coming out of their mouths. I couldn’t tell if it was a traditional Buddhist ritual or a contemporary art installation.

It was a year ago when I last saw you in person. It was Lunar New Year too, and it was one day before the COVID outbreak in China. I was there with you. You could not recognize me anymore, but you still kept telling me about this granddaughter (which is me) that you have to walk to school everyday.

Time doesn’t exist for you anymore. Memory is not always linear. How does it feel to be surrounded by fragments of memory everyday?

I miss you grandpa. I wish we could float around in each other’s existence, like pieces of memories. I wish I could live in your reality.”

Endnotes

1. Walter Benjamin, “The Images of Proust” in *Illuminations*, by Hannah Arendt (Mariner Books, 2019), 150.
2. Walter Benjamin, Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (London: Belknap of Harvard U, 2008), 27.
3. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (Vintage, 1993), 73.
4. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Zone Books, 2014), 97.
5. *Ibid.*, 96.
6. Jay Simple, “Why Intent Matters” *Photographer’s Green Book*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.photogreenbook.com/special-collections/why-intent-matters>.