

# **Territory, the Humanities, and the Digital Divide in Photography: Some Thoughts on “Being: New Photography 2018”**

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After the “New Photography” exhibition series was suspended in 2014, Quentin Bajac, the new Chief Curator of the Photography Department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, made qualitative changes to the series, which had been running for thirty years. He headed the curation of “Ocean of Images: New Photography 2015,” which directly referenced the new issues that photography is facing in the era of the internet and digital technologies. Even so, this qualitative change seems not to have continued; despite the major technological interventions in art, the twenty-fifth “New Photography” exhibition, which takes “Being” as its theme, attempts to return to the humanities. “At a time when questions about the rights, responsibilities, and dangers inherent in being represented - and in representing others - are being debated around the world, the works in “Being” call attention to assumptions about how individuals are depicted and perceived.”<sup>[1]</sup> In essence, exhibition curator Lucy Gallun has once again engaged with stereotypical Greenbergian characteristics of media.

Since Walker Evans, the “lyric documentary” has become a classic of American photography, through the support of an interpretive community, a group of informed readers sharing similar interpretive values and methods. This classic idea is clearly the core of this exhibition. Matthew Connors made several trips to North Korea to photograph individuals living in a society with a strong collective consciousness. These fourteen carefully - arranged images question the friction between the concept of a nation shaped by the media and its individual citizens. Through a two-channel video and six photographs from her *Deep Springs* series, Sam Contis probes Deep Springs College, an all-male liberal arts college located deep in the desert. Portraits of young men and details of their bodies are juxtaposed with the natural landscape around the college and archival photographs, in an attempt to present the influence that this environment has had on the temperaments of these men. Joanna Piotrowska’s five works from two different series attempt to capture intimate and estranged relationships in the family. All of the people and things in the images are carefully arranged to present a subjective impression of tropical

humidity, stickiness, and exhaustion as a metaphor for the gentleness and antagonism that underpins this sense of intimacy.

These photographers intentionally or unintentionally emphasize the idiosyncrasies of the photographic medium. They do not negate the documentary, and they incorporate the lyric in order to give their work more complex dimensions. For example, they infuse intense subjective emotion into the viewing of subjects such as North Korea, Deep Springs College, and family, and stress the editing and sequencing of the images to construct a distinctive artistic expression. The work of Connors, Contis, and Piotrowska are presented in the same exhibition space, a powerful claim on this territory made by the dominant interpretive community of the American photography world. Sadly, the excessive elaboration of the idiosyncrasies of the photographic medium take the exhibition further from the spirit of the humanities in our times.

Photographic technology divides history in two, then digital technology divides the history of photography in two. How are people considered people? One of the elements most deeply influencing the current definition and understanding of people is digital technology. However, there is only one work in the exhibition that directly addresses this subject. Yazan Khalili's *Hiding Our Faces Like a Dancing Wind* is a seven-and-a-half-minute video presented in a window on a computer screen. The window in the center of the screen records the use of the facial identification function employed by smart phones to take portraits, and at the same time, a series of still photographs of masks from distant antiquity photographed using this same recognition function are gradually opened. In an adjacent text box, someone types a text relating the masks, ancestors, photography, and facial recognition.

In colonial history, photography was once a tool that Westerners, coming from a place of technological strength, would use to objectify Others they considered technologically weaker. Hương Ngô and Hồng-Ân Trương's works *The opposite of looking is not invisibility*. *The opposite of yellow is not gold*. construct a microcosm of the individual immigrant experience within American mainstream ideology. Philippine-born artist Stephanie Syjuco's black and white series *Cargo Cults* revives nineteenth-century ethnographic portrait photography. Obviously, the development of digital technologies has not removed these injustices, because what is more eye-catching than Khalili's work is his identity as a

Palestinian born in Syria. These two war-torn places have given the contemporary art world endless fodder for discussion: the technologically strong group is still searching for novelty among the technologically weak. As Danah Boyd and Kate Crawford have observed, today's Big Data ecosystem has created a new "digital divide" between those with Big Data, and those without.[2] In the logic of information capital, there exists an opposition between the exploiters and the exploited.

In the first half of the twentieth century, technology brought the light of modernization. After World War II, technology was often criticized as a tool in the arms race. The early twenty-first century witnessed another shift, and technological optimism rose again. Art, history, literature, and other disciplines in the humanities embarked upon large-scale digitization projects, which gave birth to the Digital Humanities. Today, any important work of art can be found online in a digital version, whether picture, video, or even multimedia. But when we begin viewing, researching, and consuming digital files, can the data monopolized by a very small number of technologically strong institutions be equivalent to the works themselves and the human value they embody? Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette, and David Golumbia sharply criticize the Digital Humanities as "neoliberal tools." [3] They believe that the worthless digitization projects of the Digital Humanities ignore the essential values and research methods of the humanities. We have already internalized that technological impotence can be faulted at every turn in a "one-dimensional society" as articulated by Herbert Marcuse.

If the previous edition of the exhibition fell into the trap of technological solipsism, then choosing the title "Being" for this edition, which firmly defends the lyric documentary, avoids issues that still require deeply research. Undoubtedly, conservative curatorial strategies such as these intensify the binary opposition between technology and the humanities: you trust the one you always trusted and distrust the one you always distrusted. The rhetoric of helpless introspection and pallid breakthroughs dominates the creation and interpretation of photography, highlighting that reflections on technology are necessary for photography's return to the human spirit. Photography has always deeply entwined the humanities, society, and the natural sciences, and the focus on people is essential for photography and any technological development.

[1]"MoMA's Celebrated New Photography Series Returns on March 18 Exploring Ideas of Personhood and Representation in Contemporary Photography." The Museum of Modern Art. Accessed October 18, 2018.[http://press.moma.org/wp-content/files\\_mf/expandedrelease\\_newphoto2018\\_final78.pdf](http://press.moma.org/wp-content/files_mf/expandedrelease_newphoto2018_final78.pdf).

[2]Boyd, Danah and Kate Crawford. "Critical Questions for Big Data: Provocations for a Cultural, Technological, and Scholarly Phenomenon." *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 662-679.

[3]Allington, Daniel, Sarah Brouillette, and David Golumbia. "Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. May 1, 2016.

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/neoliberal-tools-archives-political-history-digital-humanities/>.