

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

Ten Theses Concerning the Found Image (and its Finder)

I. Found photography presupposes that the found image was lost at a certain moment. The found image is an image harvested from the garbage heap of history, an uprooted image left lying around in cluttered flea markets and dusty attics, in long-forgotten archives, soaked gutters and smelly trash cans, awaiting salvation from oblivion by the sympathetic eye of a passerby. Amnesia is a constant threat to the found image. The finder's rescue operation has something heroic to it: as a valiant knight he claims a place in history for the image. This is perhaps the (terrifying) lesson of the found image: nothing ever really fades away.

II. Only rarely is the found photograph recovered by the person who lost it. The found image is the quintessential forsaken image. Without the distance separating the image from its maker, the finder would never have been able to overcome his scrupulosity and justify the artless violence necessary for claiming the photo. The anonymity of the image is vital: it relieves the finder from all responsibility.

III. The found image is a confusing tangle of intentions and desires. It knows (at least) two originators: its maker and its finder. Of these two 'creators,' the finder is obviously the most important. The found image reveals more about the desires – repressed or not – of its finder than the intentions of its maker. The absence of the material context where the image performed its duty (the sitting room's wall, in the intimacy of the cherished family album, in a well-thumbed book or magazine) facilitates the finder's pillage. As a solitary ingénue, the found image surrenders to every solicitation, no matter how improper (naturally, the found image is of easy virtue).

IV. The found photograph lacks a specific subject, a fixed style, a unique message. It is an 'empty' image in every sense of the term. And yet, this emptiness seems to show so much. One need only invoke the finder's lyrical and oftentimes rambling descriptions, his endless enumeration of striking details, the long-

standing romantic affair with his image. The 'empty' image rapidly reveals itself as an overcrowded stage where unpredictable details topple and tumble like playful acrobats rousing the finder's imagination.

V. The found image seems to have little ambition. She never fusses and always yields willingly to her finder's whims. However, it would be quite premature to conclude from this that the finder has complete power over the image. Quite to the contrary, so it seems: it is not the finder who dominates the image, it is rather the image who disarms the finder with her nonchalant charm. The found image lives off the finder's sentiments: it is precisely for this reason that the found image is simultaneously elegant and vulgar, erratic and predictable, volatile and immutable, always different yet always the same.... The found image is a cliché.

VI. Found photography discloses an essential aspect of the photographic act. The found photo is the residue of an untamed social practice, not the product of the rules and conventions of artistic production. Still, the found image is not an impulsive image: it is uninhibited and docile at the same time. Its form could not care less about reigning canons, while its content fits closely with the prescriptions of social convention (only rarely is the found photograph a shock image). The found image is a closet anarchist.

VII. Found photography exposes the unforgivable weakness of the photographic image. It uncovers the naked vulnerability of the mechanically reproduced image set against the finder's manic hunger for interpretation. In itself, the found image seems nothing, while the tales spun around it mean everything. The found image seems to lack a density of its own: it wants to say everything and nothing. It is both a wan wallflower and an obnoxious blabbermouth. The finder's main duty does not consist in liberating the story lurking underneath the image, but in channelling the surging tidal flows of tales into a disciplined narrative.

VIII. Found photography exists solely by the grace of the word. The finder's spoken or written word is the breath that reanimates the image. It is the finder's narrative that alchemises the discovered stone into a precious diamond. Language is the ring that allows the stone to shine: without the story the image will never appear. The found image teaches us that the photographic image is nothing without language. The found image gives the lie to the fiction of a specific and unique photographic iconography.

IX. Found photography provides priceless insight into the 'true' nature of the photographic image. At first, the found image introduces itself as a timid damsel, only to swiftly metamorphose into a bloodthirsty vampire who drains the finder, and in his wake, the audience. Just like any other photograph, the found image reveals too much – it is a container overflowing with contradictions. Every analysis of the found image ends in the hallucination of the untameable detail. The sole purpose of the finder's story is to file the image, to separate the important from the unimportant – in short, the finder must organise the image. Discourse is the armour that the finder is forced to wear in order to shield himself from this (literally and figuratively) 'inhuman' image.

X. The found photograph is a spectral image. Like a Lazarus just raised from the dead, the found image wanders, desperately scanning the eyes of random passers-by for signs that might illuminate the secret concealed within himself. Every single found image is a supplication for understanding, insight, knowledge. The deluge of narratives surrounding the found image also unveils its inexhaustibility: the found image can never be grasped in one sole concept (except perhaps by the all-encompassing understanding of a Divine Knowledge). As a mercurial ghost, the found image keeps slipping from our grip.

1000 WORDS

1000 words is a project on found photography by Maarten Dings, Joachim Naudts and Egon Van Herreweghe. The exhibition with thirty 'Finders' and their preferred 'Found Image' was on view this April in De Zaal in the Royal Academy of Fine Arts (KASK) Gent. The accompanying book *Een foto zegt meer dan 1000 woorden* (Dutch texts) was published by Tornado Editions, ISBN 978-90-906180. www.1000woorden.be

Valerie Vandecasteele

This photograph was taken on 5 Dec 1983. My fifth birthday. I'm the same height as the door handle. In my arms is my cat 'Rusty'. Very fitting! It is possibly the only photograph that I have on my birthday. At that time it was not very usual for us to give parties with cake and everything.



Deze foto werd genomen op 5 dec 1983. Toen werd ik vijf jaar. Ik kwam al tot de deurelink. En in mijn handen heb ik mijn kat "Roesti". Heel toepasselijk! Het is waarschijnlijk de enige foto die ik heb op mijn verjaardag. Want het was bij ons nog niet gebruikelijk om feestjes met taart enzo te geven.

Robert Devriendt: L'été solitaire d'une adolescente

While rubbing the small photo between thumb and forefinger, like someone probing the smoothness of woven cloth, he realised that the image came from a magazine. The minuscule photograph of a teenage girl was stuck in the fold between pages 23 and 24, where a sentence ended that had continued several pages before. As it turned out, this would be the last line he would ever read by Proust. Perhaps this was also the passage where the last reader had stopped reading, and had stuck this photo as a bookmark between the pages.

The last few days he had already found it hard to focus on a sentence of only one single line. More than once did he have to reread a couple of words. Sometimes he would close his eyes during his reading, to land in a wordless yet comforting space where images and moods would spontaneously wash over him.

The picture of the little girl on the other hand had immediately pierced his retina on its way to his right or left hemisphere. He had no idea how to localise such things – this was food for specialists. And this time too he shifted his gaze back and forth between the image and the darkness underneath his closed eyelids. The image of the little girl grew fuzzy and disseminated like some sweet Lolita scent into a universe stretching out over numerous solar systems – it aroused a slight sensation of vertigo.

He noticed remnants of white paint still left on his thumb. The continual scrubbing out of paint had chapped his hands. Titanium white, quinacridone red, bilious green: more or less the same colours always stuck to his fingers.

Two or three young women in sleek suits bluster into the BAR SALON. Suddenly, the interior takes on a different dimension. The barman presses a little too hard on the wine glass he is wiping; the blood (cadmium dark red) quickly soaks his shirt sleeve with its seventies pattern. The clanging of knives and forks falls silent. A small bottle crashes to the floor and mineral water oozes like a thick layer of varnish over the designer floor.

The women are so absorbed in their conversation they seem oblivious to what is going on around them. Pick-up lines are rehearsed, manly chests are pumped up, hairstyles rearranged. It is still too early to speak of mating rituals, but all signs seem to point that way.

With clear voices they order the day's special. Each word is accompanied with a swish of gleaming hair, like lassos travelling through the air. Yes, absolutely, the same South African wine like last time, what was it called again... Welmoed, yes, a superb dry wine. Just so everyone knows they are dealing with a select club of connoisseurs.

With a painterly eye you could view the bar's arrangement as a dramatic central composition where the small group of women acts as the central axis of all gestures. After connecting the directions of hands and eyes, you would undoubtedly arrive at the small group of young women – the heart of the spider web.

But whereas everyone seamlessly integrates into the game – the dramatic action so to speak – our artist snaps shut the book. He slides down the bar stool and resolutely steps out of the composition. That summer afternoon, nothing had touched him more deeply than the naked glance of a teenage girl.



Johan de Vos: In Defence of Stealing Photographs

I like to keep my writing room free of possible distractions: bare walls, a minimal amount of books, no music, no plants. The basic colour is khaki. I call it 'my military office.' And yet, five small photographs in five small frames decorate the wall. I put them up myself, heaven knows when. Quite some time ago I guess. I can see them when looking up from my computer screen. They're cheap photos: I cut the first out of a TV guide, the other three I took myself, and I stole the fifth. I'd like to talk about the fifth photo. It intruded into my life like the Trojan horse. Its cargo: two little girls.

I am crazy about this photograph and I have my personal reasons. I love women. And because the photograph was taken from a low angle (the height of their laps), they appear larger, while the legs of the lady on the left are highlighted. That's the way I like it. The young women are posing in a private interior. I recognise the intimacy of a living room. The flashlight accentuates the photo's amateurish character. Amateur photos bare more than professional photographs. They take the photographer seriously. Their attitude comes across as a partial submission: they allow themselves to be taken. One woman is holding the other; the lady on the right supports the one on the left. The girl on the left has crossed her naked legs. She is laughing into the camera, and metaphorically laughing me in the face. It's a laugh about nothing in particular. The laugh is a means of posing: to make a sweet face. Both seem emotional, sensitive to what is happening. Their attitude is what makes this moment so important to me, the viewer. The girls have dark skins. They are from another world. I have no clue who they are, not even remotely.

I did not buy this photograph. No one gave it to me. I simply stole it, out of principle. For a number of years I've grown convinced that it is obscene to allow personal photographs to circulate in commercial circuits. Even more so if it occurs outside the sphere of the persons portrayed. In fits of frivolity and ignorance, I would sometimes buy photo albums or boxes of photographs at flea markets or antiquarian bookshops. Until one day I bought a small ziplock bag containing forty-two photos of one and the same person. They showed the phases of her life: from her birth until she turned twenty-one. The year of her

death. The purchase had set me back fifty francs. Only after returning home did I realise what I had just bought, and it was then that it dawned on me: certain things are not for sale, you should never buy or sell things like these, you should burn them maybe, or give them away, or better still, simply leave them behind.

So my hunger for amateur photographs had been sated. I still look at them in the boxes and albums that happen to meet my eyes. It has become somewhat of a professional attitude to allow each photograph one second and a half for it to manifest itself. So year in year out, I look at thousands and thousands of photos as if they were films, one image connected to the next. The same happens when browsing newspapers and magazines, viewing exhibitions and photo books, or just while walking down the street. I can recollect many of them, a number of photos I can even group together and classify, but it rarely ever happens that a photograph overwhelms me utterly. It occurs perhaps once or twice a year, at most. It's precisely what happened with this photograph: it was tucked away between a small stack of colour photographs, and at a single glance I knew what it was: a photograph to die for. It happened in a town in the north of France, I slid the photo under my sleeve. It was mine now.

Stealing is trickier than buying. Especially because a photo of this calibre would rarely be valued at more than one euro. This amount would be an insult to the ladies. Yet I can hardly urge the salesman to be so kind as to up his price. Besides, I wouldn't even allow him a penny for this merchandise. And even a hundred euro would not even come close. Because stealing is harder than buying, I now rarely ever purchase photographs, yet their quality has increased exponentially. I'm no fool.

In the meantime, something else has happened. I've been using that photograph. It's been on my worktable for weeks; I've used it as a bookmark, I've scanned and enlarged it, I've examined it with a magnifying glass and used it at an exhibit at the Market Square in Brussels. For that occasion, I blew up the ladies to almost life-size format and rendered the colours brighter than the original photograph. In their pose, in front of that wallpaper, and with that flash against the wall, my ladies now occupy a place of honour in my visual memory.



The photograph has such complexity that you're always able to discover new facets. I have asked myself innumerable questions about the light effects in the background, and on the tiled flooring. I have estimated the dimensions of the ladies and the precise shape of the room they're posing in. I wondered about the scar on the arm of the girl on the right. I've tried to imagine their fragrance. Actually, this is no longer about the ladies at all. The photograph has detached itself from reality: what it represents is now a part of my life. I have little desire to get to know these young girls, or become familiar with the true story behind the shot. It would only cause confusion, and upset my personal interpretation.

This photograph also has little bearing on my personal memories. To me, it fills a lack, it is an additional, permanent aspect of my life. The photograph is also a thing, it's right up there. It is almost as stable as the house I can see through the window next to the photograph. It is my landscape. Trees, plants and animals will always remain important – that's why so many people buy a house with a view on natural scenery. It is an obvious choice. I, however, have little affinity with nature. In an unguarded moment, I picked out this photo to play an important role in my personal horizon. It's more than welcome to stay.

Don Sars



It is so close.
You'd rather avert your gaze, but then you'd have to meet someone else's eyes.
So you just lower your head, not to owe anything.
Looking up in spite of yourself without having to look up is a thing of beauty.



BLOW-UP...
I must have mislaid it – it had vanished without a trace.
Yet, I knew for sure I had seen it somewhere.
I called my dad to ask him if he knew where it had gone to – he stores all his slides in electronic format on his computer.
He could not find it; he only found a slide of my brother sitting next to my grandpa on the couch, paying more attention to his chocolate Aero bar than to my grandfather.

My grandpa was a handsome man.
Honest, upright and sincere.
The most charming was that he could tell such beautiful stories.

In his chair in the front room.
The front room was reserved for the men.
Mothers, grandmothers and children would sit in the back room.
Though I was a child, I'd sit and lean against my dad so I could hear my granddad tell his stories in the front room.
Tales about the way things used to be, about the war, his job at Philips and all those other stories that made my grandfather the man he was.
I looked up to him.
In my eyes, I could only talk to him when showing my report card, and even then it was not really about me.
But what else could you expect – I was just a child.
Putting grandpa on a pedestal, I did that all by myself; and he is up there, still.
Today, I could have been talking to him. I'd be old enough to sit in the front room with all the other men – but that will never happen.
He's been dead for a couple of years now.



I knew for sure that photo had to be around somewhere.
Me, a little boy, talking to my grandpa, a real tête-à-tête.
A blow-up scene in my head.
He was there as well.
A photograph not just about me and my grandfather, but about my brother's admission into the Cub Scouts.
It had been concealed right there – difficult to retrieve after it had taken up such space in your thoughts.
My grandfather as an ordinary man, who you could share a joke with, at any time.
I'll always look up to him, and now I know why.

Hans Op de Beeck: Easter

Quite some time ago, I discovered this small black and white Polaroid in a long-forgotten cardboard box. I found it amongst the box's chaotic collection of plastic binders, damp and dusty sheets of paper all caked together and a couple of faux sticker albums. Photos from my youth are few and far between. In contrast to so many others, my parents were never into documenting family life. So the visual account of my childhood is highly fragmentary; it's full of time gaps. Such a shame, it occurs to me now.

No one really knows for sure who took this family snapshot at the time, now some thirty-six years ago. The photo shows my two sisters, my twin brother, myself, and our maternal grandparents. The photograph was made shortly after what was then our annual Easter ritual where my brother, my sisters and myself would gather chocolate eggs and put them in a wicker basket, searching my grandparents' narrow town garden fenced-off with concrete plates. Just before, the eggs, covered in their brilliantly coloured tin foil, had been hidden all too obviously by granny and grandpa in the grass and behind the shrubs. After the ritual, the egg harvest ended up on the large table in the living room.

The layout of the small garden patch was rather uninspired: a rectangle of grass of approximately five metres wide and ten metres long; on the right some bulky hydrangea bushes; at the back, a few high and narrow conifers, ugly as sin. In the centre, a straight pathway of mossy concrete tiles ran from front to back. At the back on the left, a little shed leaned against the fence storing a rusty grass roller, a shovel, a rake and some other gardening tools. At home, we had exactly the same sort of garden – the only difference being that we had birches instead of conifers. When, a little later, I was allowed to visit my kindergarten friends, I was astonished to discover gardens without the usual concrete enclosure, and gardens that deviated from the mandatory rectangle, an obligatory shape in our family.

As you can see from this image, there was hardly any daylight in my grandparents' interior. And that's exactly how I remember it: dark rooms with heavy oak furniture, ornate wallpaper, mother-in-law's

tongues at the window, lace curtains and dark green velvet drapes. The house was also filled with a very specific fragrance. Unfortunately, I can no longer describe it, but I would recognise it right away.

You can see my grandfather on the left of the picture. He had been a prisoner of war, and when the poor fellow had returned from Germany – on foot no less – all my grandmother could say was that it was typical that it had taken him so long. That's just how she was: dominant and often belittling, especially to her husband and her two children, my mother and my uncle. She used to lash out at everyone. At the same time, her life was all about keeping up appearances. Years later, when I first saw the TV sitcom of the same name, I had found in the hilarious female protagonist Hyacinth Bucket my grandmother's British twin sister. My grandfather must have suffered under her reign. He was a handsome, reserved man. And a strict teacher too, as I was to find out later. At least at school he would have been able to make himself heard. Here, in the photograph, he is wearing his splendid, old-fashioned glasses, vintage tie and his hair – completely ash grey already – combed backwards.

My little sisters are seated to the right. My youngest sister is staring, somewhat absentmindedly, into the collection of eggs. My elder sister just blinked. My twin brother is seated at the left of the table, a paper fan before his face. And me, I'm held up by my grandmother's arms. I don't look very cheerful. I'm also holding a small paper fan. And a basket.

I'm not even one hundred percent sure if that little boy is really me. It's a gamble. When you're identical twins, you can never be certain about childhood photographs.

Besides its value as a memento, I find the somewhat gloomy, almost surreal atmosphere the image is bathed in fascinating. The uncanny still-life of shiny chocolate eggs against the dark, reflecting tabletop adds to this effect, together with the intriguing, overexposed fan that ruined the family portrait just at the final moment.

