

Anachronism, Theatricality and the Gesture of Photographing in Forget Nostalgia – A Little Theatre of Self by Clarisse d’Arcimoles

"When I was a child, I convinced myself by looking at old photographs that at the time they had been taken, the world was in black-and-white and that colour did not exist yet but appeared later with the progress of technology. Since then I always wished that I could enter into old black-and-white photographs."

- Clarisse d’Arcimoles

I have long been fascinated by the combination of candid playfulness and scientific experimentation that grounds Clarisse d’Arcimoles’ photographic works. *Forget Nostalgia* (2012) strongly echoes her *Un-Possible Retour* project (2009), where she merged set design and photography to ‘revisit the past by restaging it in the present’.

In *Forget Nostalgia*, she takes this process to another level, moving away from the personal snapshots that were the source of *Un-Possible Retour* to anonymous photographic portraits from the early ages of English photography. The result stages a series of seemingly nostalgic self-portraits in Victorian and Edwardian costumes. However, looking at *Forget Nostalgia*’s many pictures, I see photography restaging photography, a gesture that is far from nostalgic and inscribes itself in the complex history of photography as technology and art.

Clarisse found the images behind the *Forget Nostalgia* compositions in her private collection, over the internet and in Tom Phillips and Martin Parr’s postcard collections. These images are digital and printed reproductions of real photographs, produced by a true photographic process rather than photo-mechanically and printed on cards. Initially known as ‘cartes-de-visite’ and ‘cabinet cards’ – depending on their size and orientation – they were standardised for postal distribution as real photo postcards in 1899. The postcards became a very common form in which people received and consumed photographic imagery in the first quarter of the twentieth century. According to Tom Phillips, these postcards, generally sent to relatives and friends, are ‘always in the present, in the newness and actuality of the moment photographed’. They have ‘an uncomfortable directness and unequivocal reality that bar the door against nostalgia’. Real photo postcards testify to a moment in the history of self-representation defined through a given technology. At this time a portrait photographer’s studio was present in every town and village. In the studio customers had a choice of painted scenic backdrops and props, ranging from pastoral and seaside landscapes to the evocation of aristocratic splendour. In larger cities, studios offered theatrical settings and costumes allowing the sitters to indulge in wilder fantasies. With the advent of the car and aeroplane these studios equipped themselves with three-dimensional sketchy simulations to match the aspirations of their customers. By the end of this period ‘not only had everyone become a postcard but almost all had become a photographer’. Through photographic technology ‘people became visible not only to others but also visible to themselves’.

Almost all of Clarisse’s chosen reference images are monochrome black-and-white portrait photographs of an individual or a group of people. The only colour postcard is a hand-tinted card. Some of the images are occasion portraits and others deal with what we would today call virtual reality (fantasy aeroplanes, studio seas and beaches). One postcard celebrates an un-ironic and unembarrassed patriotic fervour. They represent the intersection of social history with individual life. According to Elizabeth Little these postcards belong to ‘the tradition and visual repertoire of imaging the human being, which can be traced back to the emergence of secular portraiture in the fifteenth century... They are a form of projection of a personal and collective ideal’.

Clarisse recreates these postcards scenes, restaging and reenacting them to photograph again. Upon exhibition, none of the source postcards are presented to us. The original tableaux are re-presented through deliberately anachronistic gestures in the artist’s studio. While avoiding artificial light sources to achieve the most authentic physical conditions of early twentieth century photography studios, the scenes are presented with carefully painted grayscale monochrome backdrops, props, accessories and costumes in all shades of grey. Clarisse uses technology that was born long after the time of the postcards – colour film and a 120 mm medium format camera. The negatives were scanned and the images digitally manipulated to perfect the contrast between the grayscale backdrops, props, costumes and colour of the artist’s skin, to allow the duplication of herself in a few of the photographs and to maximise the two-dimensional illusion of the postcard. There is something uncannily out-of-place in the rosy flesh of the artist performing her journey through the past in black-and-white. A paradoxical kind of displacement is taking place. *Forget Nostalgia*’s photographs retain the indexicality of the moment photographed – Barthes’ *noumen*, his ‘That Has Been’ – while proclaiming themselves representations, theatrical fictions through the repetitive photographic capture of the artist acting various roles.

Clarisse's gestures reveal the complexity of the photographic process. Gesture 1: Clarisse reconstructed the black-and-white universe of early photography, reminding us that photographs are theoretical images. In Vilém Flusser's words, they are 'images of concepts arising out of the theory of optics'. Gesture 2: Clarisse, the artist photographer, is the sitter in her compositions. She collaborated with her assistant to set up the camera, manipulating its capabilities in line with her objectives. Clarisse became the 'photographic object' for the camera, merging the intention, cause and meaning of the photograph. This gesture deconstructs what Flusser called the 'photographer/camera's complex', physically separating the photographer from the camera and, revealing the relationship between the camera and its 'functionaries' – another Flusserian term. Gesture 3: The artistic decision of including sections of her studio walls and floor surrounding the staged compositions reminds us that the photograph is not a window but a technical image produced by a complex apparatus. These images are 'surfaces that translate everything into states of things... and entice those receiving them to project this uncoded magic to the world out there'. Gesture 4: The sitter is looking at the camera, turning it into the mechanical audience for her small theatre of the self, drawing us into contemplation of the ballet that takes place between camera, photographer and subject, making us aware of taking another point of view, reminding us of the theatricality of any representation and the constructed character of subjectivity.

'There is no such thing as naïve, non-conceptual photography. Photography is an image of concepts' wrote Vilém Flusser. Clarisse's photographic gestures make visible the relationship between camera, photographer, subject and spectator. Clarisse's photographs are improbable 'informative images' that are the result of systematic manipulation of the possibilities of the camera. These photographs are a translation of the freedom found in playing against the camera and the critical trace of a photography practice akin to a philosophical gesture that questions, once again, the nature of representation and of the art object.

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