

**Defeating time
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“The photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.”
Roland Barthes

Collecting pre-existing images culled from mass media sources and archives, Sara Wong and Leung Chi Wo meticulously try to defeat time, resurrecting anonymous men and women spotted among the crowd in images from the past. Considered by the artists as lost in the sea of history, these unidentified persons are brought back to our time and to our attention thanks to new, invented lives and situations. The artists then play with the notion of the “return of the dead” as defined by French philosopher Roland Barthes, a notion in which each photograph tirelessly reproduces what can never be repeated in real life: using this technique, they restore an identity to these individuals by photographing them again, tracing an imaginary and hypothetical line between the past and the present.

In 2010, both artists worked on a community-driven project in Japan commissioned for the Tamagawa Art Line Project. On that occasion, they bought a book of old pictures from the Ota district and started to look carefully at the images from the past. Passing a place seen in these photographs, they decided to reshoot the picture in its contemporary version, featuring Sara Wong as a passer-by. This experience literally opened a breach in their practice, as they discovered they could be in touch with past events and connected to unknown and probably dead persons through the medium of photography. From that time they started to collect images from old magazines, archive documents, souvenir books and pictures from the news. The act of collecting has become a habit and is now part of the artists’ daily life.

All that material gave birth in 2013 to their *Museum of the Lost*, an on-going project that keeps expanding and will probably lead to further development. The term museum reflects the artists’ will to consider these materials as physical objects that can be studied and displayed by means of exhibitions and publications. It gives a new angle from which to perceive the daily images we are bombarded with, as we usually do not consider the physical support of the images we are looking at but focus on the information they convey.

Entering this Museum is like entering the artists’ world and it gives precious keys to apprehend their work process. Here you can see through their eyes how they daily scrutinize everyday images from the news, extracting figures from a global, factual and informational environment. More than archivists or historians, the artists resemble detectives and archaeologists.

The common point of all these images is that they all include anonymous persons who have been photographed accidentally in the background of a specific event and who remain unrecognisable or unidentifiable. The artists usually choose a figure that stands out, either because it is an isolated subject or because his/her attitude is special, often in contrast with the context it belongs to. Some images have been kept for more than one

year before the artists can decide if they will be used or not: the two debate a lot as there is also an important measure of personal taste and irrationality in their choices. What triggers most their curiosity and probably their emotion is that these passers-by will never be recognised by anyone, and will be kept hidden for ever, unidentified. They appear just by chance in these media supports and become involuntarily part of History. For the artists, they are lost, and this loss creates a void that they wish somehow to fix.

Who is this man playing table tennis in the background of an old picture from China's last emperor Pu Yi? What was this protester doing in Syria in the middle of the road?

In a world saturated with images we do not take the time to really look at them: we seize the information we are looking for and forget instantly what we have seen. In the process of collecting and interpreting images, the artists go beyond this simple information and endeavour to read them differently. Once they have selected a subject, they imagine what his or her life could have been and seek to figure out what this person was doing at that particular moment when the photograph was taken. As a tool for their investigation, they use staged photography in order to embody each anonymous figure in a process of re-enactment. Leung stages for instance a French voter as he stepped into the ballot space for the 2012 presidential election, while Wong reincarnates a Japanese housewife walking in the Ota district of Tokyo in the 50's.

Re-enacting implies such performance, as they have to copy the exact attitude of the character they embody. Yet they do not try to embrace an external identity: they repeat a role that does not exist, a role they could constantly renew and invent as it has never been written and will never be. They work more on a physical level, trying to feel inside their own body what would have been the impulse of the character, deconstructing each movement to feel its logic. Technically this process is very complicated. They stage unbalanced attitudes and steps from mysterious choreographies. The pause can last several hours whereas it lasted less than a second when the event occurred. The artists not only replay time, but also extend it.

The dialogue they open seems to be a futile and one-way conversation. They try to engage with these lost figures without expecting any response just like calling out a name in the immensity of space: a face-to-face encounter will never occur. The artists, for their part, offer to the audience the same backs, and the same hidden, unreachable faces, repeating this impossible dialogue as if history were always slipping away from us.

All these anonymous persons are from another dimension, the dimension of a lost time and place. It is a pure exercise of imagination as there is actually no way to rediscover their identity, and therefore the loss occurs a second time. Even through photography, the self keeps hiding itself: we cannot deduct from an image the identity of a person. What the artists can revive are only their own projections of an identity through their imaginative interpretations.

There is a hole in History, which the artists cannot fill.

To the viewer, the images are paradoxically both convincingly real and strangely artificial. They are pure fiction yet they are inspired by facts, so the whole series lies at the edge of reality between documentary and fiction. An eerie stillness pervades the

portraits: the figures are floating in an undefined background, totally isolated from any environment. This is to refrain from the illusion of giving life again to these lost persons. The space constructed by the artists offers an almost sterile environment, a kind of pure coloured void that is totally undefined. The figures become less human, more virtual, half dead and half alive. The precision of the staged figures is then in sharp contrast with this ghostly and indeterminate background. A deep sense of absence stems from them as they probably look more lost than ever. Some portraits look sadder than the others with some really enigmatic figures, while other are actually quite whimsical or even comical. The Young Girl in Blue Jumping Up seems to jump to catch up with time, to stay alive. Many of the selected individuals are in fragile balance. It is both tragic and poetic.

Simultaneously, this series entails the thorny questions of archiving and history. The artists explore history through the mirror of fiction, levelling all forms, figures and events from the past. To them, everything that has passed creates history and the uniqueness of history is clearly a fiction, even a lie.

History usually focuses on important political figures, or media celebrities, and is based on the elimination of the facts and people that do not fit into its linear narrative. Passers-by have no place in such process. Yet they are part of History, which is actually made of a plurality of subjective histories. The artists' creative process supposes an annihilation of such hierarchies and classifications, and highlights the place and role of anonymous passers-by. Paradoxically, once the artists affirm the importance of these passers-by as unidentified citizens, they try to remove these figures from the scene they belonged to, modifying history and challenging its authenticity. Here the artists turn their back and turn their eyes away from this kind of archived and mediated history: they look elsewhere, towards another truth, be it subjective or not, but at least which is a truth they can believe in.

Once chosen by the artists and re-shot, people from the crowd lose their political or social characteristics and become individuals again. They quit their metaphorical spheres for a human and trivial dimension. For one moment, they escape History even though it could be only ephemeral.

In photography, subjects are bound to contingency, as they cannot be distinguished from it. The artists' work process can thus be analysed as an attempt to tear apart this particular subject and his referent, freeing the figure from the historical context where it has been trapped. Yet it is of course impossible as clothes, haircut or even attitude of the figures, even isolated and re-interpreted, continue to root the subjects in his/her own time. This emancipation is doomed to fail. People cannot exist just by themselves or for themselves, detached from everything else: absolute freedom and autonomy is an impossible dream.

We feel that impossibility, very strongly, in front of these floating portraits, still trapped in subjectivity and in a frozen time, doomed to eternal wandering despite the artists' efforts to bring them back.

The whole series addresses the fundamental questions raised by photography as a means of reproducing, reiterating and appropriating reality and materials from the past. It is a process of filling the gap between two periods of time, of crossing bridges

between past and present, reality and fiction. This continuity, although uncertain and fragile, reflects the artists' conception of time: fighting probably against a kind of general amnesia, they look at time as a process, a passing by. This principle of navigation between times and at the edge of reality is very much about the construction of memory and, beyond, about finding one's own identity in a confused world flooded with images and information. Each of us could feature in the archived materials collected by the artists, involuntarily part of a history we daily contribute to creating. Each of us could be identified as a lost figure in the sea of images, lost between a reality we cannot grab anymore and a falsification that continuously manipulates our societies.