

Essay Translations

Photography is the product of imagination. Most histories of photography do not acknowledge this. Pick up any book on the story of photography, and you're likely to read a stream of events detailing technological inventions, advances in optics and chemistry, improvements in photographic processes, resulting in the daguerreotype, the calotype, and more. These inventions gave us a tool for recording the reality around us, which shocked contemporaries with its mechanical reproduction of the visible world. But this narrative cuts a tight frame from a more interesting view.

Photography was a collective discovery, claimed by the French showman Louis Daguerre almost two centuries ago, but chased by people across the world. As Daguerre conducted his dangerous experiments with mercury and silver iodides, people were setting up their own light-concentrating contraptions and chemical dilution-sequences in a painter's studio in old Andalusian city center, a trade outpost in the Brazilian grasslands, a utopian commune of exiled Württemberg Lutherans in the Indiana wilderness, and at least twenty other places we know of. The people in these places were not driven by the record of things around us; not with the reality of what is, but with the possibility of what could be.

In the years after its discovery, photography firmly attached itself to reality. Within years of Daguerre's presentation, millions of photographs were produced and commercially exploited as portraits, panoramas and postcards, in countries across all continents. And this had a huge impact. Photography "formulated a new sense of what knowledge was and a new estimate of the kinds of knowledge anyone might hope to have", a historian observed. Millions of people vastly expanded their mental reach across the world and into time by looking at photographs.

In light of this, it seems only natural to look back at photography's invention as a race to produce some sort of objectivity machine, entirely devoted to undeniable facts. But this denies the passion, fantasy and curiosity that drove so many proto-photographers, their fascination with the idea that they could witness how light itself – nature itself – would make a drawing; the idea that they could unlock the access to this wonder and obtain such a drawing, fixate it, contemplate it and show it to others. A wonderful dream and therefore worth pursuing, even if the visions that so many of these people produced kept fading, darkening, and being lost forever. A true history of photography's invention would center on those dreams and ambitions, not on technological advance.

If you could describe such dreams and ambitions, perhaps you could the medium of photography itself to that end as well. The question is what that would look like: how you could make a picture of someone's aspiration in such a way that we can recognize and contemplate those ambitions, and relate them to our own, or relate them to yesterdays dreams that we had for today. One answer is given in Sofie Knijff's project *Translations*.

The premise of *Translations* is simple: ask children of around ten years old to pose as what they want to be when they grow up. The visual style is simple as well: the children are photographed at half or full length, often at a slight angle, against a deep black background: a thick piece of cloth that has seen much of the world, stapled, glued and nailed to walls and frames on four continents, and that can be seen fraying at the edges a few years into Knijff's project. The children can dress up and hold attributes if they feel they need them, but they always have to envision themselves being what they hope to be. It is this internalized vision of the future, externalized by these children in their posture and expression, that gives *Translations* its meaning. With the idea in place all you need is perseverance: start travelling the world to find your subjects, work obsessively on it for a few years, and retain your vision and drive for ten years or so.

Sofie Knijff described how one particularly striking portrait was made, one warm spring morning in an Amsterdam park in corona times, an empty stretch of park bench between us to keep our distance. Years of theater school in Paris have left her with many French friends and acquaintances, and she used those contacts to travel with an experienced crew of French documentary film makers to northern Mali. On the road between Bamako and Goa, they stopped in the village of Hobory, not more than a collection of houses and huts and a gas station. The film makers knew the local photographer, who agreed that they could use his studio, a tiny place chock-full of attributes and idyllic backgrounds for portraits. Then Knijff went to the local school, to explain her project and ask for volunteers. Quickly, a hunt was on for glasses and a suit.

‘There was one boy who was adamant that he needed glasses and a blue suit – it could be no other color, it had to be blue’, she said. The boy and his friend raced from hut to hut, asking and searching for their two necessities. Glasses were found: an empty frame without actual lenses in it, but that was irrelevant. Then the suit had to be found, which took some time, until the boys decided on a blue pencil. They drew the suit on his skin in thick blue lines. He had been transformed into a journalist. ‘The moment he stood up to pose for his picture, there was so much determination and purpose in him’, Knijff says. ‘The reality of what he wanted to be translates into the photo’.

To the young journalist, something similar had happened as what happened to Knijff’s nephew, who she had photographed years before, early on in her project. In front of the lense, he performed his future self, which instantly changed his self-presentation and composure. ‘When I photographed him, there was a seriousness about him that made him more than just himself with a helmet. And that has been my baseline in this project: that these photographs are more than the portrait itself. I always told these children: when you stand up in front of that screen, you *are* what you want to be. Sometimes, there was complete chaos outside the frame. But I was pretty strict in this, and the children reacted to it, they took that space.’

Portraits are a photographic genre that always comes back to the question of what keeps people looking at a portrait of someone they don’t know; how to enhance a photograph of someone to be more than their picture. Knijffs answer to this shows in her children: in the Unuit girl who wants to be a shopkeeper, the South African boy aspiring to be a singer, the Icelandic girl aiming to be a stewardess, and the many others.

It is impossible to look at these portraits without having your thoughts drift back to your own childhood dreams: to the intensity of your fantasy and the seriousness of the enterprise of imagining yourself to be your future ambition. There is one photograph of myself that my mother took of me, dressed up as a soldier. When I see that photograph, even if it is just in my mind, I can recall the graveness of the emotion I was trying to communicate, the very solemnness and tragedy that I imagined to be the essence of a soldier’s existence.

There is something striking in children looking serious, in looking adult. From Knijff’s portraits, it is clear that many children imagine seriousness to be an essential part of being older, and there is something in that seriousness that makes us react to it. It is one of the sources where the work of Sally Mann draws its power from: the investigation of children’s contemplative side, and the part of their character that is not easily defined as childish or childlike. Like Mann, Knijff looks longer at children than we do when we snap pictures of their playfulness and are satisfied that they behave in the way to their youth prescribes. Like Mann’s photos, Knijff’s portraits thereby allow us room to look longer at these photos of children, and read more in them, than we would then if they captured children’s playfulness.

But Knijff does something different than Sally Mann. Her portraits do not challenge our assumptions about youth. They show us and remind us of something that is universal in all children: dreams of the future. The fantasy world of children is vast, and their immersion in it is what keeps us looking at these portraits. The point of these fantasies is not their specific content and direction, because they can turn on a dime, and because they are not necessarily interesting in their aspirations. The essence is the immersion in fantasy itself.

By showing this, Knijff's portraits remind us that these fantasies are a fundamental characteristic of young people everywhere. Childhood dreams are not limited to children who will have all the chances in life to fulfill them, and Knijff's photos show that. These dreams are not bound by the limits that we are inclined to apply to them, by connecting them to our reference of the world. Knijff's photos therefore both show the universality of children's ambitions, and confront us with the speed at which we apply our preconceptions to them, to determine whether we assess those dreams as realistic or not. They confront us with our inclination to judge dreams on our estimate of their chance to come true.

Knijff has regularly been asked why she didn't just make her photographs in the Netherlands. That would have made the whole project a lot easier to manage. If the thing that she's photographing is in all children, then why not photograph use the children living down the street to show it? That would have made the whole project a lot cheaper, and much easier to organize. The invisible is the hardest in these portraits: activating networks and acquiring access to these children, which are exponentially more difficult than the simple question of whether they want to pose for their portrait. But the answer to this is obvious: someone seeing these photographs is not confronted with the universality of these dreams if they're not displayed by a diverse, globally dispersed set of children.

In that aspect, Knijff's project is reminiscent of that of August Sander, who 'portrayed' his nation in the 1920s and 1930s. His *Antlitz der Zeit* drew admiration and hostility because of the simple premise that Sander photographed everyone, not limiting himself to an exemplary set of Germans. Of course, everyone at the time knew that the general population also included people that normally would not be on display in popular media, photobooks, and galleries. But actually photographing and displaying them was striking to many, both to people who admired the humanity in this, and to those who condemned it as a political statement. Though the projects of Sander and Knijff differ in many ways, they are similar in their inclusion, and in their statement of equality.

It is strange to realise, but before the 1930s photo series were simply always about people of standing and merit, or of people who embodied a certain category. In the first instance, these were photo series of 'Kings and Princes' or of inventors showing their inventions, and actors performing their star role. Sometimes these series enhanced their exclusive character in their titles, like Mathew Brady's *Gallery of Illustrious Americans* – if you didn't let Brady take your picture, apparently you weren't one. The second type of photo series featured compositions of 'Generals', 'Opera singers', and so forth. The people photographed series in these would always pose holding their attributes and in the outfits that embodied their profession. It is tempting to see Knijff's series of children performing their fantasy as a series along these lines – 'Children'.

It is an interesting reflection on our times that not everywhere, children and communities were as eager have their photograph taken. In Brazilian favelas, Knijff mentions, there was a widespread annoyance with photographers and film makers swooping in from some rich country to use their neighborhood as photogenic backdrop – encapsulating chaos, poverty and hipness in one go – for some fashion shoot, tv-ad, branding drive or feature movie. It would sometimes take some convincing to argue that *Translations* was different. Far from exploiting some stereotype about the Third World, the series show the dignity in children's lives everywhere.

The project has now run for a number of years, and inevitably some of the children in Knijff's photos are now on trajectories that deviate from the dreams they projected into her photos. While some children are being channeled smoothly into the privileged positions that their parents find suitable for them, others are still living in deep poverty. In Mali, she told me, some of the boys that posed for her photos were drafted in rebel militias and became child soldiers. But the photographs are not a commentary on who will succeed, or on the tragedy of dreams that go unfulfilled.

'Of course, many of the children that I photographed will not succeed in their ambitions, while the rich expat children in the series still have all opportunity open before them. But the photographs are not about that', Knijff said. 'They are not about the future or about the social conditions in which children live. I didn't want to provide commentary on the world – I wanted to show something. If photographs are about facts, death rates, war, then the dimension of children's perspectives is lost. I wanted to guard the poetry in my photographs: the fact that they are about how children experience the world.'

That doesn't mean that Knijff's photographs are a merry celebration of unspoiled children's happiness, still untouched by the worries of adulthood. They are not about a dream state, like those early, mid-19th century photographs of nymphs and fauns; they are about the real world, where children know they will not live like children forever, and fantasize their life within the social construct of society that will inevitably settle over them, with all the opportunities and limitations inherent in that. That deepens *Translations*, and adds a darker layer.

When I asked Knijff which art projects she thought of as analogous to her own, one of the art works she mentioned was *End Game* by Samuel Beckett, a play about people who are entirely locked in by their own expectations and outside expectations of them, by social mores and judgements. In the performance she saw, the actors were all confined to the space of their own tone. 'I wanted to make a photo series that would touch on those feelings of entrapment', Knijff said.

In *Translations* that entrapment is not visualized by confinement itself. It is visualized by the act of fantasy, performed by children who know that they will not be children forever. And it is recalled by us, and our recollection of how magnificent it is to be immersed in such fantasies, that can feel overwhelmingly real, and that become so hard to defend against the perspectives of adulthood, and against our own rejection as we grow older. 'I love what Greta Thunberg is doing, her activism for the environment', Knijff said, discussing this. 'But she accuses adults of taking away her dreams. And of course, it is she herself who is taking them away, because she is at the age where you become so impressed with the facts and realities of the world. And you struggle and rebel against them, but you also start to reject your childhood fantasies and become overwhelmed with the reality of things'.

It is such a pleasure to view and contemplate the portraits in *Translations* because they precede this, and the fact that we all know this predatory effect of time enhances their effect. And of course, they also show the immediacy of children's fantasy – how you can *be* that doctor as soon as you put on the suit – and the rawness of being a child: both their clumsiness and their inventiveness in acting out their fantasy.

And therefore we can recognize ourselves in Knijff's portraits. She told me how there's often one particular one that people are drawn to, a child whose composure, background or ambition triggers an emotional recognition, like I had with the aspiring journalist in Mali. 'People tell me: "This is me", not as a metaphor, but as a true connection', Knijff says.

It is a remarkable effect, if you consider that these children are both performing fantasy and something very personal. But it is the authenticity of these fantasies that triggers us as viewers; an authenticity that is often not revealed if you ask people to sit and pose for their picture. 'With many

children', Knijff said, 'it would be as if a mask dropped from their face the moment they crossed over into their fantasy. If you allow people to perform, if you allow fiction, true faces come out.'