RENJA LEINO

Renja Leino is a photographer from Finland with a well established reputation as teacher and artist. She was Head of Photography at the Turku Arts Academy for many years and has exhibited extensively in Finland and Europe, with work in both public and private collections.

Renja arrived to spend two months as a guest of Winchester School of Art in September 2007. The weather was good, the flowers were out and the sun was warm. She loved the English gardens and the south coast, making special trips to the Isle of Wight and Brighton to look at the seaside, the tides and the British at leisure; out and about, in the streets and in places of recreation.

During the residency, she took some 2000 photographs, a large number indicative of the speed and ease of using a mobile phone camera. It was the implications of this commonplace facility for a contemporary photographer which became the subject of her research project. We are grateful to Dr Paul Sweetman for his essay on the following pages, which places these issues in a broader context.

During her residency, Renja also continued her ongoing work, ‘Absent Minds’, again using her mobile, to take portraits of people as they use television and computer screens.

This International Photography Research Fellowship is one of a series managed by Fotonet in liaison with The Northern Photography Centre, Oulu, Finland. The other artists who have taken part are Jari Silomäki, Toby Glanville and David Spero.

Susie Medley
Director, Fotonet
Images proliferate: camera phones are increasingly ubiquitous, and the pictures taken with these and other digital equipment find their way onto Facebook, Flickr, Snapfish and YouTube. Anxieties, similarly, abound: we are not allowed to use our phones at the pool, for fear that we will make use of the camera function, and the media report that young-people are recording images of violence and abuse and subsequently uploading the files. Our movements through urban space are monitored and recorded, innocent or otherwise, while the police resort to photographing protestors and young-people (taking images without the owners’ consent?), leading, perhaps, not so much to the internalised form of self-surveillance anticipated by Michel Foucault, but instead to its reverse: two-fingers or a twirl for the camera in a form of what Dick Hebdige might describe as ‘Hiding in the Light’.

Renja Leino’s pictures speak of these and related concerns: the proliferation of images and their accessibility, the ubiquity of recording devices and the ease with which such images can be shared – not simply by friends, mobile–to–mobile, but by anyone with an internet connection and the inclination to take a glance. We are absorbed in and by the image, transfixed by it and unaware of, unable to prevent, or simply inured to its further proliferation. Who notices the digital shutter, and anyway, who cares? The pictures speak of a tension over what is and isn’t acceptable, as indicated by lines of erasure, themselves like chalk-marks at the scene of a crime, or ghostly halos, through which certain figures are identified, isolated and immobilised, unwitting participants in the narratives we inevitably supply. Like the enlarged images in Antonioni’s Blow Up, the pictures then speak of prospective vanishings, crimes and misdemeanours, deaths and illnesses foretold, acting simultaneously (like all photographs?) as charms.
Leino’s work captures some of the fears, the dangers, and the anxieties surrounding both the capturing of the image and our absorption within it. But certain of these photographs also indicate the possibility of recognition, of an acknowledgement and engagement which is fundamental basic to the notion of personhood and to the giving and saving of face in the most basic of interactions.

Paul Sweetman

Dr Paul Sweetman is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology in the School of Social Sciences, University of Southampton. His research interests centre around issues relating to the body, identity, fashion and consumption, subcultures and visual methods and methodology.

against disappearance, and anticipatory memorials to the sometime dead. The various contexts in which the pictures are taken then raise additional questions over where photography is acceptable and where it isn’t, what does and does not count as a public place.

Social scientists grapple with similar tensions and dilemmas. A knee-jerk response to the use of visual images in sociological and related research is to regard this as necessarily problematic because – where people and other easily identifiable phenomena are concerned – anonymity and confidentiality cannot easily be offered or guaranteed. This is to overlook alternative possibilities, however, not least the way in which images can contribute towards what might be referred to as an ethics of recognition rather than one of protection or concealment. Recognition, which for Axel Honneth, involves a basic acknowledgement of the other as a person rather than a thing, can be seen as a precondition for any form of ethical engagement, and image making can be said to both allow for and encourage such forms of acknowledgement, most notably in the form of portraiture - which necessarily does not typologise - and particularly, perhaps, where a collaborative process is involved. Attempts to conceal identity through blurring or pixellation, on the other hand, whilst allowing for anonymity, simultaneously objectify, and as the marks on Renja Leino’s photographs testify - albeit in a somewhat different way - also set up a particular relationship (perhaps of culpability, concern or suspicion) between the observer and the observed.

One of the key tensions in all of this lies in the distinction between the making and taking of an image, the former allowing for a collaborative production, while the latter is more suggestive of an act of appropriation. There is also a question over what is and isn’t public, what is available for the taking and what is not. Renja Leino’s work captures some of the fears, the dangers, and the anxieties surrounding both the capturing of the image and our absorption within it. But certain of these photographs also indicate the possibility of recognition, of an acknowledgement and engagement which is fundamental basic to the notion of personhood and to the giving and saving of face in the most basic of interactions.

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The mobile phone is a little technological wonder that most of us carry all the time.

I have used its camera function to produce a new body of work, which deals with the fact that we can get photographed anywhere at any time. We can be snapped and stored in files and archives kept by anybody; perhaps to be placed in a new context within seconds after the snapshot and sent to another mobile phone or via e-mail. To take photographs today demands no skills and it costs nothing if you just have a mobile phone - a camera is a normal extra function.

I find myself going back to basics as a photographer to consider my professional ethics, facing the fact that people everywhere take images like never before. I am also questioning motives for using images of other people for artistic purposes. To investigate this, I push myself: where is the ethical limit for me?

The mobile is like an observing eye. It is very quick to capture an image, unnoticed by most people. It can be very innocent - fun to share moments and so on - but I find the phenomenon unpleasant somehow. When I look at the image of a strange face or family on my computer screen, I get a specific feeling that is related to guilt. Photography is complicated. We know that context is everything.

I have also experienced a new feeling of anxiety when making these images. Irrelevant perhaps - or is it a sign that something essential has changed with the new technology? I find myself wondering what does a photograph of a person actually represent and why is it taken? For example, images of children used to be seen as part of a “celebration of life”. Today, when asking permission to take a photograph of a child, I encounter not proud parents, but fear. People are very
aware of the possible misuse of images. I am worried by the fact that a person’s integrity is perhaps permanently lost in a public space. Are mobile images a symbol of the technological invasion of our lives? Have we already lost control?

I use my feeling of guilt as a starting point when deciding which images I consider to be “free” and which images might be “forbidden”. I draw white lines and white marks on those images that I maybe should not have taken or that I should be careful with. I play with self censure.

The mobile that I use is a few years old. The images still have that special digital structure that I find fascinating. They have a visual language of their own which is different from the perfect camera shots produced by new mobiles.

I take snapshots with my mobile. Later I study my images and their details on my computer screen. Just like anybody.

Renja Leino
Just Anybody mobile motive (1853)
digital print, glossy polyester laminate 52cm x 70cm

Just Anybody mobile motive (1911)
digital print, glossy polyester laminate 52cm x 70cm
Just Anybody mobile motive 1395
digitalprint, glossy polyester laminate 4 x 4 cm

Just Anybody mobile motive 1302
digitalprint on woven fabric 2.5 x 3 m
Just Anybody mobile motive (1267)
digital print, glossy polyester laminate 52cm x 70cm

Just Anybody mobile motive (1967)
digital print, glossy polyester laminate 74cm x 100cm
Just Anybody mobile motive (1573)
digital print, glossy polyester laminate 30cm x 40cm

Just Anybody mobile motive (1214)
digital print, glossy polyester laminate 52cm x 70cm
In the home of today, there are open connections to work, by e-mail and by mobile. This is the new norm; we are available to reach at any moment. The private is no longer private; a deliberate decision is required to shut out the digital invasion by closing connections. Computers have become part of the furniture. Children, curious and fearless, regard them as natural. While we are dealing with a new invention, which gives rise to new habits and behaviour, our children take it for granted. Handling this technology is quite demanding for an adult. But children learn by playing. They grow up surrounded by new technology. Playing at the computer is considered good for them, as they learn new skills and will have better chances in a computerised world. But who oversees the content that comes into our living rooms? Children are good customers of computer games; the entertainment industry is huge. Is childhood sacrificed for profit? Digital technology brings war scenes and catastrophes to our homes by television and by computer in real time.

The use of the mobile was the most logical choice for my attempt to study people wherever, spontaneously, or in more controlled circumstances. The content of my work handles the digitised human being, so the latest technology, most convenient for my purpose, emphasised the content of the work. People are staring in my images. They are faces in a foreign landscape, absent minds in front of these pixel boxes. In my imagination their brains are slowly being absorbed by the screen. Where are their minds when the machines so completely capture their concentration?

We see this kind of staring face all around us. It is a new archetype of the human face. It is recognisable, like a sign.

Renja Leino