

## **PHOTOGRAPHS AND ASSISTED SELF-PORTRAITS**

**Anthony Luvera**

### ***Photographs***

I had never wanted to photograph homeless people before. I'd read the (de)constructive writings by photo critics on 'others', poverty and representation. I knew about the complexities of the find-a-bum school of photography trounced by Martha Rosler. So in December 2001, when it was put to me by a friend to get involved as a photographer at Crisis Open Christmas, the annual event for homeless people in London, the invitation threw me. *"I'd much prefer to see what the people I met would photograph."*

Over the following months, the conversation with my friend about photography and homelessness bounced louder in the back of my head. I became extremely interested in how homeless people have been represented, and in questions about the process of representation itself. To what degree could the apparently fixed proximities between photographer, subject and camera be dismantled and reconfigured? How could a 'subject' become actively involved in the creation of a representation? What use, if any, would all this serve in the meanings offered in the final presentation?

I sourced 1,000 cameras and processing vouchers, and spent every day and many late nights at the following Crisis Open Christmas. It was a confronting experience. The scale of the event was mind-blowing. Like an animation from an Heironymus Bosch painting. 1,200 homeless people provided with rows of bedding, cooked meals and all kinds of support services. Including doctors, dentists, hairdressers, chiropodists, healers, art and music. The stockpiles of clothing and shoes alone were an unforgettable sight – a palpable, indexical symbol for the pile of humanity temporarily housed in the cavernous warehouse for seven nights.

I helped out with serving food, organizing a karaoke session, giving out clothing, towels and toiletries, and when it was appropriate I spoke to the people I met about an idea I had for a photography project. I explained I was going to collate an archive of images made by homeless and ex-homeless people, and that if you wanted to get involved you could come and see me in various places across London, to collect cameras to take away and photograph whatever you liked.

Keeping in mind the unstable housing situations, addiction problems, mental health issues and many other complex and chaotic situations those I met were faced with, I kept my expectations for attendance at the first session low. I hoped at least five or six people might come along. When over 90 people turned up, I was completely overwhelmed. There was a barrage of fair and valid questions: *“What are you doing this for?” “What do you want me to photograph?” “Can I really photograph whatever I want?” “Are you going to make money out of this? What will I get out of this?”*

I answered openly: *“I’m a photographer and I am interested.” “I don’t know what your life is like, how could I attempt to photograph it?” “Photograph absolutely whatever you like. Really.” “I don’t know if I’ll make money out of this.” “You can keep the photographs.” “The photos might get exhibited or published in a book or a magazine.” “You can still have a camera and keep your photos even if you don’t let me use them.”*

Between 25 and 40 people dropped in to each following weekly session. Around a big communal table, we gathered to look at the photos, to show and tell the stories held in the images, and to drink endless cups of tea. The sessions were high-energy, swarming with vibrant personalities. The youngest participant was 19 and the oldest was nearing 90. Different people got involved for different reasons. Some wanted to make snapshots of their special times, favourite places, friends and family. While others had ideas about art and concepts to explore with photography. I explained how to use the cameras and listened to each participant’s ambitions, encouraging everyone to simply go and do it. I

never brought along photography books or showed my own photographs, nor did I tell any of the participants how or what to photograph. When looking at the photographs I asked each participant to pull out their favourites, or the images that best represented what they wanted to show. With permission I took scans of these photographs and held the negatives in a file. Release forms and licenses were provided, written especially for the project by specialist intellectual property copyright lawyers. Permission was not always given, which was always completely respected.

I never asked why anybody was homeless. Though over time stories came out with the photographs. In the four years the sessions have taken place I have worked with over 250 people. Every person I've met has a very different and particular story to tell. Some are entirely abject, while others are remarkable for their ordinariness. All are compelling in their own way. And while there may be commonalities between the experiences of particular individuals, not one situation of any participant could be seen as being broadly representative of the cause or experience of homelessness.

### **Ruben Torosyan**

Ruben Torosyan left Georgia in the late 1980's when the country was still under harsh Soviet rule. Not issued a birth certificate and unable to get a passport, Ruben was determined to get to the capitalist West to create a better life for himself. He spent over five years traveling across Europe attempting to obtain political asylum in over 15 different countries. In every place he was unsuccessful, largely for the same bureaucratic reasons, boiling down to the incredible fact that Ruben has absolutely no official way of proving who he is or where he comes from. In Spain Ruben smuggled himself on to a shipping freight container. Squished in with bottles and bags for his excrement, and packets of biscuits to eat, he travelled for 35 nights in complete darkness to get to New York. After failing to get legal rights to remain there, and escaping detainment, he struggled on the streets of Brooklyn in conditions worse than back home in

Georgia. After two years, determined not to go back to Georgia, Ruben did the same shipping container trip to Ireland to get to London, where shortly after we met.

Ruben came to the sessions with a very clear idea about what he wanted to use the cameras to photograph in making his contribution to the archive; the discrepancy between what he expected London to be and what, in his experience, it actually was. Ruben's depictions of dirty, litter strewn streets (serendipitously replete with the newspaper headline, "I Feel Used"), a naked man with mental health issues running down the road, people begging and a poor woman walking by without shoes, are for him, depictions of the filthy, hostile, brutal and ugly place that is London. Where there is "no mercy and the food is rubbish".

By the end of 2003 the archive had grown substantially and it was clear that there was an interesting body of photographs that should somehow be exhibited publicly. After much discussion with the participants, I wanted to find a way to present the photographs that was as highly public as possible and not restrictively limited to an educated, middle-class gallery audience. I showed the archive to Victoria Jones at the London Underground Platform For Art, who was immediately enthusiastic about the project and offered to display a selection of photographs in advertising sites spread throughout the tube network. This was perfect and between January and April 2005 selected photographs from the archive by 11 participants were exhibited across the London Underground in 12 tube stations in zones 1 and 2, along with an 'Assisted Self-Portrait' of each participant and plain contextual information about the work.

## ***Assisted Self-Portraits***

The reality of the prospect of publicly exhibiting photographs from the archive necessitated that I give careful consideration about the importance of recognizing the individual creators of the images. I did not want to simply put out an unconnected presentation of images attributed to 'homelessness'. I began to think about how to create representations of the contributors to the archive, in a way that would react against the process of a traditional portrait making exercise.

In order to research and determine the production methodology for an Assisted Self-Portrait, I worked with one participant, Phil Robinson, for over a year. To experiment with technical setups, and to closely examine the negotiations played out during in the photographic transaction. We tested ways to use various camera formats, with different lighting systems, film types and ways to physically trigger the exposure of the image. Arriving at a technical arrangement consisting of a large format camera, tripod, handheld flashgun, Polaroid and QuickLoad film stock and a long cable release. These preliminary technical experimentations were crucial in workshopping the instructional aspect of the portrait making. To enable the participant to take control of the process, calling upon me as an assistant to their image making.

An outline of the resolved production process:

We meet in a location chosen by the participant, where I teach the participant how to use the photographic equipment. When comfortable implementing the technical procedures unaided, the participant operates the camera gear with the cable shutter release, while I hold the flash unit, to make several exposures on Polaroid and negative. With each participant this process is repeated on at least four separate meetings over six to eight weeks. To build the participant's technical knowledge and, importantly, to build their confidence in taking the lead in the portrait making. The final image is edited with the participant and the use of the Assisted Self-Portrait is always with their consent.

Each Assisted Self-Portrait is the trace of a process that aimed to blur distinctions between the subject, and myself as the 'photographer', during the photographic sitting. Investing in the participant a more active role in the creation of their portrait representation, than is usually offered in a traditional photographer-subject relationship. In doing so the participant/subject became a co-creator of the image, and I, as the photographer, acted as a facilitator and technical advisor.

## **Continuing**

Currently I am examining the complexities around manifesting the archive, its potential accessibility and availability to others. While also pursuing further opportunities for presentations of the conjoined projects, contextualized either as a consideration of homelessness or within my practice as an artist, or both. Most recently images from *Photographs and Assisted Self-Portraits* were exhibited in a highly trafficked outdoor public square for Fotofreo 2006, the international photography biennale in Fremantle, Western Australia. Forthcoming, one of the *Assisted Self-Portraits* and a small selection from the archive will appear in the exhibition, *1+1=3: Collaboration in Recent British Portraiture* at the Australian Centre for Photography, curated by Susan Bright.

I have also made further work with various participants from the archive. Including the video piece *Prologue to Isha (2005)*, which envelopes my interests in the machinations of the exchange between photographer and subject, through a revealing recording of the preparations for a documentary interview with Isha, a woman living with mental health issues. Considering the implications of assuming the position of a photographer, facilitator or collaborator, the machinations of the construction of representation, and the richness of the relationships formed through the archive, all continue to feed the ongoing development of my practice.

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