

# Compilation Portraits

## LOUISE NOGUCHI

Text by Kym Pruesse

### The Aura

My first encounter with Louise Noguchi's **Compilation Portraits** was largely an aesthetic one. I found these woven photographs hauntingly beautiful: two headshots of different people woven together to produce a third compelling image. And upon closer inspection, they were even more seductive. I loved the way they became tactile as they curled and folded within their shadow box frames. Reproductions of the work flatten them into an obvious formulaic process reminiscent of woven construction paper placemats—that compulsory grade school craft. Interestingly, this declarative method of construction obscures the intricacies of the art making, lending the work a lightness, an economy of means. The labour is both transparent and disguised, unburdening the viewer from the weight of ponderous, heavy-handed method. We aren't over concerned about technique. The work is, however, concerned with technology—yet the technology doesn't get in the way, nor is it fetishized. Rather, the technology of photography is explored for both its visual and conceptual limits: what can a photograph do? what is a portrait? how do we fold these things into our lives?

The original photographs, which are rephotographed and blown up to matching size (on average 1.5m x 1m), come from varied sources with the effect that the resulting hybrid images display combined levels of detail and pixilation. A grainy black and white taken from a mass mediated source is tucked into a sharper picture leading us to an array of interesting textures. Even more fascinating are the blurred areas: as the profiles of the different sized heads blend together—along with mismatched jaw lines, lip and cheek edges, sloping eyebrows and the hollow of the eyes—a checkerboard of difference is generated. All the hard lines and edges that characterize an individual face tend to blur, creating an aura effect. A playful wink to Walter Benjamin?<sup>1</sup> But Benjamin's loss is recuperated by Noguchi: the merged differential between the two photographic reproductions becomes the site of something completely new—while at the same time, the size and strength of the resulting aura marks the distinctiveness of the original.

So it is the differences between the photographs that make the image visually compelling. But as I looked at the series as a whole, I slowly started to understand that the similitude between the works is not just the technique, the cohering visual element is, in fact, Noguchi's own image...she has woven herself into these portraits of others. But who are the? the others? They are not named in the titles of the pieces. Do I recognize any of them?

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<sup>1</sup> In "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin mourns the loss of the "aura of the original" when a culture's experience of art is largely through reproduction.

Perhaps these are famous figures from newspaper sources. Fearing that I might be treading on artistically licensed information, I nonetheless plowed through my curtain of restraint and asked her, Louise, who are these people? Oh murderers and serial killers she said (in her very soft, humble, almost apologetic voice).<sup>2</sup> And I was instantly brought to the second level of my viewing experience.

### **The Story**

This level is inscribed in my psyche but also my stomach, my entire body—it is territory I am familiar with: how to understand horror? And, then, why am I so fascinated by things horrific, why do I feel compelled to look, find out? This is such confusing territory for many of us, seductive and confusing. It is perhaps what Oprah and Jerry Springer have tapped into and commodified with such success. Why am I curious about Son of Sam, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Paul Bernardo? Why did I compulsively read horror as a child then gradually move into real crime stories about Jack the Ripper, Lizzie Borden, the torture of ‘witches’ during the Inquisition? Moving from fantasy to real crime made a big impact on me...I could understand the metaphor but not the fact. And my interest in factual horror bothered me.

Early on, I realized that in order to write about this work, I would have to do some of my own research into murderers and serial killers for two reasons. One, to return to the feelings these stories and images conjure in order to ponder them and ask some questions about their affective nature. Noguchi’s images don’t operate in the same way—how do her interventions alter the emotional psychology of the image? And two, to insert myself into the same material that provoked Noguchi’s work in the first place in order to familiarize myself with her process and perhaps come a little closer to understanding the decisions she made in the studio. I spent days upon days weaving my way through official and less official narrations of the lives and predilections of murderers. That old gut-wrenching feeling came back as I found myself compulsively moving through the material. This time however, I was less interested in the gruesome details of their carnage (which I think had been the focus of my pre-adolescent fascination); instead I found myself gravitating to information about their psychological profiles, the patterns, their MO (modus operandi), their early life experiences. What makes someone do such things? What is going on in their minds? How do they see the world? Is it a damaged, hurt, numbed view? Is there such a thing as evil?

Despite the glaring differences in pattern and motivation between a murderer, mass murderer, and a serial killer,<sup>3</sup> there is one thing they share in common: public fascination

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<sup>2</sup> Noguchi periodically uses the images of victims as well. Since the affectiveness of the image of the victim is quite different, I will reserve discussion of these images for later.

<sup>3</sup> Murder, or criminal homicide, is usually distinguished from manslaughter by the element of malice aforethought. The most direct case of malicious intent occurs when the killer is known to have adopted the deliberate intent to commit the homicidal act at some time before it is actually committed. While there are homicidal types, the single murderer is difficult to generalize.

On the other hand, it seems that most mass murderers are male, white, conservative and come from relatively stable, lower-middle-class backgrounds. They are not usually adopted or illegitimate and usually were not institutionalized as children. They tend to be people who aspire to more than they can achieve. They see their

with their crimes and lots of media coverage. A search for media images of a killer, however, rarely results in a large selection. A single head-shot often circulates as the main visual data for the criminal. The sources of these images vary—sometimes a police mug shot or a yearbook photo, perhaps a cropped section of a family portrait or, in more recent cases, a video still. The images also betray varying amounts of mediation—some are half-toned revealing a newspaper or magazine source, others, seem to have been lifted directly out of a photo album. Many of the images I found were familiar to me, having seen them already in the newspaper or on television when the person was being hunted or on trial. But now, long after the event, embedded in horrific accounts of slaughter, rape, or cannibalism, the photo emerges as a sort of counterpoint to the narrative. How could this person be capable of such acts? We peer at the images, trying to pry open the mind, the thinking, the meaning behind the sadism. But the pictures don't speak. They are inert veils. And they become saturated with all our failed attempts to see through them. After the arrest and trial, the images aren't about news anymore...they are about us.

Because they can't inform, the portraits become screens upon which a culture projects its worse fears, fantasies, and latent desires. If I look hard into those pictures, I see reflected there an image of myself; my fears and fantasies unacted are, in those eyes, enacted. How do I use the images? As catharsis? As the limit that seals my action? As a stand-in for the monster I am not but could be? Or do I, from a safe distance, revel in the excessiveness of the story? Our culture has turned these portraits into unintelligible objects, a place to project and transfer our own violent potential, our fear of it, and eroticization of it. Am I complicit? As a culture, we both revile and bow at the alter (the box office, cash register) of violence. Such confusing messages.

### **The Risk**

In searching for the connection between the image and humanity, in an effort to understand the world from the killer's perspective, Noguchi has literally put herself in their place. She has woven herself into their lives, merged with these figures, set her eyes into theirs. And what stares back at us is not the over-familiar portrait of evil, but something else: a composite of killer and artist<sup>4</sup> Noguchi has humanized these images, moved the veil

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ambitions thwarted, and blame other people for keeping them down. They feel excluded from the group that they wish to belong to, and develop an irrational, eventually homicidal, hatred of that group. Invariably, they choose to die in an explosion of violence directed at a group they feel oppresses, threatens, or excludes them.

Serial killers tend to be white, heterosexual males in their twenties and thirties who are sexually dysfunctional and have low self-esteem. Their methodical rampages are almost always sexual in nature. Their killings are usually part of an elaborate fantasy that builds to a climax at the moment of their murderous outburst. Serial killers generally murder strangers with cooling off periods between each crime. Many enjoy cannibalism, necrophilia and keeping trophy-like body parts as mementos of their work. Most serial killers are sadistic in nature. Some return to crime scenes or grave sites of their victims to fantasize about their deeds. Many like to insert themselves in the investigation of their crimes and some enjoy taunting authorities with letters or carefully placed pieces of evidence. 9data collected from various sources, see bibliography)

<sup>4</sup> Is the artist within the killer or the killer within the artist? This is pertinent to questions posed by Noguchi's previous work in which she has posed the artist as hunter and explored the relationship between hunter and prey.

aside slightly to allow us to see something inside the photograph. That she has used her own image makes absolute sense, but when I imagine what it would be like to cut up a large photograph of myself and lose it in a photograph of someone so scary, I feel, uneasy, eerie. Self-portraits are attached to lived experience, snippets of self. In some traditions it is believed that a camera steals part of the soul of the person photographed, the soul fragment becomes trapped in the image.<sup>5</sup> Souls aside, I don't think this act of melding is a very easy thing to do—one's identity is put at risk. Portraits may ultimately be overdetermined points of information, but they are powerful vessels of symbolic exchange in this increasingly visual global culture.

The transformation of the killer is perhaps, for Noguchi, a journey of self exploration—how to deal with these impossible images? how to produce a shift in our cultural fixation with them without denying the seduction, without passing judgement on the phenomena? how to admit to being a part of the fixation yet wanting to shift it, change it because it feels bad? Remarkably, Noguchi has managed to do that, quietly but with intensity.

### **The Hidden**

I have struggled with the revelatory aspect of this writing precisely because it declares knowledge about the images that is not immediately available to the viewer. But I think this non-knowledge (the identity of the photographs) is another aspect of Noguchi's work that warrants attention. Her intention was not to defy or further mystify these figures. Nor did she want her audience to be immediately pulled into the emotional space that many of us enter when encountering images of people who have perpetrated such horrific crimes. As with all strategies of appropriation, one risks reiterating the original dilemma when utilizing the problem itself as raw material for the work. The kind and quality of intervention upon the material is a key factor in determining whether the work moves beyond mere reproduction, beyond intellectual deconstruction, and on to creative reconstruction. When done successfully, I see it as an act of healing.<sup>6</sup>

And like most acts of healing and recovery, the work is dependent on time. Certainly there is the issue of the time buffer when selecting the images. None of the crimes referenced by the **Compilation Portraits** is recent; to do so would be disrespectful of the lives involved—trespassing on individual and cultural mourning. This is particularly poignant when it comes to the images of the victims. Of the twenty-nine compilations in the series, four are victims. While the affective nature of these images is quite different, the healing function of

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<sup>5</sup> In a work entitled *The Hunt*, 1989, Noguchi included the following text: "REFERENCES BECOME TRUTHS" (The natives were close to the truth—the camera will take your soul away)" (*Selected Works 7*)

<sup>6</sup> M Scott Peck speaks of healing in these terms: "The healing of evil—scientifically or otherwise—can be accomplished only by the love of individuals. A willing sacrifice is required. The individual healer must allow his or her own soul to become the battleground. He or she must sacrificially absorb the evil.... I do not know how this occurs. But I know that it does. I know that good people can deliberately allow themselves to be pierced by the evil of others—to be broken thereby yet somehow not broken—to even be killed in some sense and yet still survive and not succumb. Whenever this happens, there is a slight shift in the balance of power in the world." (Peck, np)

the compilation process is equally appropriate. Noguchi's decision to integrate herself into victims' lives is motivated by a desire to comprehend the violence done to them but it is also done in empathy for their suffering.<sup>7</sup>

There is another way that time operates in this series: the length of time the work rests (lounges?) in a 'level one' reading before the viewer enters, if ever, the second level—which is marked by an awareness of the story behind the pictures. The duration between a level one reading of the work and level two is a particular stage of being with the work; it is emotionally generous and formal in its aesthetic. What I call level two takes some effort on the part of the viewer, some questioning some desire to know—or, perchance, a recognition. As time goes on, however, (the series was produced between 1995-1997), there is more writing and discussion about the work—making the story of murderers more available to viewers. In an interesting twist, Noguchi leaves it up to the media (or the catalogue, or the context) to reveal the information that will take us to the more emotionally and politically stage of the work. I don't see this as an essential quality of the work. Not only does it allow the work to exist less aggressively and less didactically in relation to its audience, it permits the process of questioning (who? why?)—questions that are fundamental to the concept of the work—to be initiated and puzzled over by the viewer...perhaps a more innocent parallel to the ominous inflection of those same questions we pose to media images of murderers and serial killers...maybe a gentle foreshadowing, a quiet nudge that relies on and puts into focus our own architecture of desire.

### **The Double Bind**

Which brings me to the last chapter of this narrative: the idea of the hidden. The story of the pictures is hidden within the exhibition, the mind of the killer is hidden behind the photograph, half of the compilation portraits are hidden from the viewer, a cultural seduction remains obscured. Hidden lives, hidden motives, hidden information, hidden desire—why all the hiding? I think it serves two purposes. One, it generates curiosity so we might be inclined to move to a level two reading out of our own volition. Two, it foregrounds the impossibility of full or complete identity **with** is to empathize. Portraits can help us recognize but they can only reveal so much. They are, among other things, portraits of a desire to reconcile the human capacity to live **without** empathy—and to this end they are bound to result in a double bind, perhaps paradox. But paradox is not static. It puts things into motion, it interrupts, pauses, and can, under the right circumstances, effect change. The rest is up to us.

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<sup>7</sup> Most victims of mass or serial murder are chosen because they are a 'type' not a person. Noguchi's family was similarly targeted when the Canadian government seized their belongings and had the family interned during WWII for being of Japanese decent. As is often the case, the trauma of these events was passed on to succeeding generations. As a Japanese Canadian, Noguchi finds herself strangely placed—related both to the interned and the internee. Perhaps this duplicitous position accounts for Noguchi's predilection for dual perspectives and desire for reconciliation.

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