
Untitled, ¾ View

Her first job out of college was at a media company in New York City, working as a production assistant on short biographical documentary films for a history museum. Her responsibilities included logging and cataloguing scanned images from the archives—a monotonous task which she learned to perform on autopilot. One day, while cataloguing images for a short film about Marc Chagall, she happened across a black-and-white photograph that struck her. It had been taken in Belarus, and featured a group of artists seated in a semi-circle, flanking the central figure of Chagall. Their names were duly recorded on the catalogue card accompanying the file. But there was one person in the photo who was not identified or acknowledged at all: a woman standing behind the group, her presence in the picture made conspicuous by her absence from the record. The image was beautiful, and she was seized by the desire to possess it. She grabbed the file and impulsively dragged it onto her thumb drive. Copying the digital file was so easy—so effortless, immediate, so seemingly without consequence—that it didn't even register as transgression, let alone "theft." It was over so quickly that it seemed almost never to have happened. As she resumed her task, her memories of both image and incident were already fading, any last traces lost to the lulling monotony of logging and cataloging, hour after hour, day after day. A few months passed. She left her job and moved away from the city.

Suddenly, in 2012, Hurricane Sandy hit New York, throwing the city into chaos. The storm flooded the media company's offices and archives, drowning projects, research, and data as the computers that housed them disappeared underwater. Forced to suspend the history museum project, the company reached out to current and former employees in hopes of retrieving what data it could: documents and images inadvertently saved in email chains, on remote servers, backed up on personal storage devices.

Upon receiving this communiqué, she remembered the image, and sought it out. It was still on her thumb drive. She opened the file—a hi-res scan of a photograph of seven seated individuals and one standing woman in three-quarter view. Everyone pictured was identified—except for the standing woman. Yet she seemed to have the most intense and captivating presence of all. She could've reached out to the archive from which the media company obtained the photo in order to identify the woman, but she didn't. She could've sought out history books or biographies in which the photo had been reproduced in order to learn more about her, but she didn't. She could've asked a historian of the period to postulate about the image of the woman in the photograph. She could've done her own research at local or national libraries, or searched online. But she didn't. She could've written an article on the significance of this anonymous woman's presence in that photo, in that place, with those people, in the larger context of 20th-century history. She could've blogged about her obsession with the image and the story of how she found it. She could've gone to an analyst to try to uncover the root of her obsession in some possibly repressed childhood trauma, but she didn't. She could've written a letter to the woman; she could've written her a love poem; she could've fantasized about her or narrated her in a hundred ways to a hundred ends—but she didn't. She could've asked a physiognomist to find identifying clues in the woman's facial features, but she didn't. She could've superimposed the face of the standing woman onto faces of seated figures in the photograph. She could've cropped the woman's face from the photograph and dispensed with her altogether, but she didn't. She could've reproduced her likeness on paper or molded it in clay. She could've generated a 3D model from the photo to pull the woman's face out from its photographic flatness and into her own, vital dimension, but she didn't. She could've restaged the image with friends, posing herself as the anonymous woman, but she didn't. She could've come up with a name for the anonymous woman, but she didn't. She could've tried to become the woman in her own daily life, but she didn't. She could've printed out the picture, but she didn't. She could've deleted the file from her drive, but she didn't.