

# Helsinki Photomedia Conference 2024 'Contact of Models'

## Crowd as image, crowd as method

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This paper explores a long-standing interest I have in the idea of the crowd, both as a theoretical object and also as situations I have constructed and then documented as photographs. What a crowd is, what this social form represents, and the question of when a group of people can be said to have become a crowd, have been the guiding questions in the making of the works. In addition, this paper explores the invitation, as an offer to participate and also to view, as central to the photographic process. Leading to considerations of hospitality, strangerhood, and the social spaces housed within these photographic constructions.

The study of crowds presents a series of paradoxical relationships: between self and other; rational and irrational; private space and public space; and image and event. Photographic questions around slippages of meaning between image and event have their parallel to uncertainties surrounding 'crowd'. Or put differently, the undecidability of the crowd itself (what is a crowd?) run alongside artifices and limits in its representations. Crowd here is used as a marker of an open, fleeting state of together-ness. Crowd as having no ultimate shape, unfixed and unstable, either growing or dissipating, always in motion in some way or another.

The photographic works this paper discusses are drawn from my ongoing Crowd Theory project<sup>1</sup>. These works are based on constructing events with large groups of people who are gathered together for the purpose of making a photograph. The event is the making of the photograph, and the photograph is of the event. It is a proposal of 'imagined communities'<sup>2</sup> where the invitation to be in the photograph is made to people who have an ongoing association with a chosen site. The works aim to construct portraits of place, where the invitation to be involved is extended to anyone and everyone who has a demonstrable connection with the site. And in that way explore people's relationship with place, architecture and belonging. The aim is to break with usual bonds of community and belonging, based on various shared identifications, and look at the possibility of counter portraits based on connection to place rather than pre-existing notions of one's group or tribe.

In addition, these constructed situations make explicit a particular performance of self within a body of performers. The photographic process developed in the making of these works becomes a tool to examine the proposal of the emergence of an unconscious group mind that occurs when groups form, whereby the classification of 'group' shifts to become

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<sup>1</sup> Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP) February 2 – 31 March, 2019

<https://ccp.org.au/exhibition/simon-terill-crowd-theory/>

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, B (2006), *Imagined Communities*, London, Verso.

'crowd'. In other words, the photographic process of shot, reload, pause, shot, facilitates what Elias Canetti describes as the 'discharge', the moment when a crowd comes into being<sup>3</sup>. This process is central to the facilitating the open choreography of the works, and what defines their ultimate shape.

A tension between a dis-order within gatherings that are semi-constructed (through planning and invitation) yet unchoreographed, and their documentation that is semi-staged, but in the end chaotic, is what I seek to articulate. The thread running behind these questions is where a fluid instability inherent to crowd can meet a photographic impulse to fix something that is otherwise in motion.

In terms of method, the invitation is central in setting up the terms of the exchange, underpinning the intention to create a 'crowd space'. Roles are set, photographer or host, and participant or guest. What is the reciprocal exchange embedded in the invitation to participate? What is the offer, beyond to be photographed? And how do these roles of host and guest play out? The offer of the Crowd Theory works is not entirely open, the invitation is delimited to people who have a demonstrable association with the sites in question. It is not an unconditional offer of hospitality, although hospitality is central<sup>4</sup>. To be hosted by the project, welcoming strangers into what is part social sculpture and part photographic space. In considering the afterlives of these images, the paper explores suggestions of how a practice based in constructing crowd as image may evolve into working through crowd as method, or process, and what may remain of the photographic residues.

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<sup>3</sup> Canetti, E (2000) *Crowd and Power*, London, Phoenix Press, p 17.

<sup>4</sup> Problematized in Derrida's distinction between conditional and unconditional hospitality, where only an 'unconditional hospitality can give meaning and practical rationality to a concept of hospitality'. Derrida, J. (2005). *Paper Machine* (R. Bowlby, Trans.). Stanford University Press. P84