

Sentiment up in Smoke: Tracing Images of Illusion, Absence and Identity¹

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This paper addresses the (re)creation of the postmodern individual and the notion of belonging in relation to absence, rituals and the photographic image. The portrayal of time through the photograph is most important; both the physical aging of the subject and the deterioration of the image serve to remind the viewer that the subject only remains eternal within the boundaries of the frame. I examine confessions through the Post Secret project, where images become both a tool of expression and a coping mechanism. This is evident in the face of loss and disaster. Yet the loss of the subject can result in deceptive images, prompting a contested remembrance. By assimilating numerous fragmented ‘paper trails’ this paper intends to trace human limitations and the restrictiveness of the photograph as well as expanding the frame to reveal the truth behind the ink. Themes of absence, identity, fragmentation and death will be touched upon when considering the creation of the individual and their longing for self-preservation.

At the heart of history lies a contested relationship which is threefold: the formation of individual identities, which are rooted in the past and projected into the future; a desire for self-preservation; and finally, an acknowledgement of existence. The desire to be remembered, to leave a trace, is the strongest of all. The value of history, then, is tied to

¹ The author would like to thank Frank Warren, Roberto Miaz, and Renato Miaz for their assistance and permitting the inclusion of their images in the following paper.

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remembrance and forgetting; to express oneself, to record and manipulate events, and to be the author of one's own story. Our ability to remember and recall the past is a unique aspect which makes us human, yet 'history' as a subject is a social construct which is created by many and labelled under one prevailing banner. If history is taken in its broadest sense – as an equation of time – then it can be viewed as the commonality which underlies and interlinks all disciplines. It is of no surprise that not all voices are heard – past events can be misremembered, eclipsed, and coloured by the imagination – thus questioning the notion of 'historical truth' and 'secrecy'.

The article serves as a starting point for historians that deal with images on how to use these materials as historical sources and to take into account the unconventional and speculative nature of these sources. A selection of anonymous metanarratives will be brought into focus – snapshots to be precise. The photograph is integral to my argument, it will be read as a text and consulted as an object of historicity and of (in)stability. The image acts as an anchor, a tangible material to which the latter abstract notions can be tied. The camera records the past and preserves it for future generations, when encountered, the distance between the past and present effectively collapses. Time is suspended and the image is open to interpretation. The image encapsulates what I call a 'positive uncertainty' within the borders of its frame, where past moment can be re-read and history is disputed. This is applicable to Frank Warren's Post Secret project, a confessional website which indicates the decline of the spoken confessional and oral testimony. Its very existence questions the rituals of remembrance, communication, and the ownership of history. The ability to retain secrets is yet another aspect which shapes mankind and laces our personal pasts, these whispers are "unrecognized evidence, from forgotten journeys, unknowingly recovered" at the most unexpected times.²

Jean-François Lyotard brought the metanarrative to prominence in 1979, he claimed that the postmodern condition was characterised by a distrust of the grand narrative which was essential to modernity. It is for this reason that I refer to the postmodern as the spirit of an age – a *zeitgeist* – as opposed to a time period subsequent to Modernity. By rejecting the grand narrative, the notion of a modern 'progressive' outlook is also challenged, thus suggesting time is not a linear

² Frank Warren, 'What is the story behind PostSecret?', in *Post Secret Community*, <<http://www.postsecretcommunity.com/news-faq/postsecret-story>> [accessed 8 May 2013]

process.³ In this sense the postcard can be considered a fragment of a narrative. ‘Consider the form of popular sayings, proverbs and maxims’ Lyotard wrote, ‘they are like little splinters of potential narratives, or moulds of old ones, which have continued to circulate on certain levels of the contemporary social edifice. In their prosody can be recognized the mark of that strange temporalization that jars the golden rules of our knowledge: “never forget.”’ Lyotard goes on to explain that these fragmented narratives may belong to the past, ‘but in reality it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation.’ Ultimately, narratives ‘[define] what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do.’⁴ In being sent the postcard serves its purpose, one does not expect a response in return. The same can be said for the sender of secrets.

Warren was prompted by a lucid dream in which he was aware he was dreaming. He opened the drawer of his nightstand and examined the “Little Prince” postcards he had bought in Paris earlier that day. He stated: ‘Each one had been altered with messages on their backs. The first message read: “unrecognized evidence, from forgotten journeys, unknowingly recovered,” the second message was about a “reluctant oracle” postcard art project and the last message I could not understand at the time.’⁵ On awaking, Warren tried to replicate the postcards from his dream. In 2004 Warren started the “reluctant oracle” project. Every Sunday he created and released a new work to be discovered, prompting local, national and international recognition. ‘The last message from the “reluctant oracle” bore the message: “You will find your answers in the secrets of strangers.” The next Sunday the Post Secret began.’⁶ The Post Secret project commenced in November 2004; the distribution of 3000 blank postcards invited America to “send a secret” anonymously. So the floodgates opened, news of Post Secret spread virally, not through the postcards themselves but through word-of-

³ Indeed, Bauman’s notion of ‘fluid modernity’ may be more appropriate. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, (Manchester, 1984), pp. 22-23.

⁵ Warren, ‘What is the story behind PostSecret?’, in *PostSecret Community*, <<http://www.postsecretcommunity.com/news-faq/postsecret-story>> [accessed 8 May 2013]

⁶ *Ibid.*

mouth and via the internet. Warren has collected over half a million secrets which he has bound like bricks and stacked in his home.

Warren believes secrets “can connect us to our deepest humanity;”⁷ yet the viewer can only immediately access them via the computer screen. This lack of physical interaction creates an estrangement between card and audience. All may be well and good for the senders, who distance themselves from their past once the postcard is out of sight in the bottom of the post-box. But themes of absence continue to plague the postcard through subjects that are missing and dead.⁸ The cards are transformed into testaments and confessions, like witnesses to a crime scene. Benjamin questions: ‘Isn’t every square inch of our cities a crime scene? Every passer-by a culprit? Isn’t the task of the photographer – descendent of the augurs and haruspices – to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures?’⁹ Perhaps the truly guilty are positioned behind the camera.

Previous works have focussed on the social movement behind Post Secret¹⁰ which acknowledged the cards as sources of inspiration and healing¹¹ whilst also addressing the collapsed distance between cultural production and the everyday.¹² Using Post Secrets as a central thread, this paper sets out to assimilate the fragments of a paper trail. The first section of this paper, *Secrets of the Virtually Absent*, traces the individual through the production of the postcard. The author is bound in a cycle of (re)creation; where making and sending cards is a continual isolated process. The card acts as a space in which past, present, truth, and fiction are unified,

⁷ Warren, ‘Frank Warren: Half a million secrets’, *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*, <http://www.ted.com/talks/frank_warren_half_a_million_secrets.html> [accessed 10 April 2012]

⁸ I refer to the ‘subject’ as an entity under scrutiny as opposed to an academic forte.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Little History of Photography*, p. 527, <<http://sites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic235120.files/BenjaminPhotography.pdf>> [accessed 24 April 2012]

¹⁰ See, in particular, Maggie MacAulay; Kendra Magnusson; Christopher Schiffmann; Jennifer Hamm; and Arlen Kasdorf, ‘From Souvenir to Social Movement: PostSecret, Art, and Politics’, in *Young Scholars in Writing*, (University of Winnipeg) <<http://cas.umkc.edu/english/publications/youngscholarsinwriting/documents/FromSouvenirtoSocialMovement.pdf>> [accessed 10 April 2012]

¹¹ See Anna Poletti, ‘Intimate Economies: *PostSecret* and the Affect of Confession’, *Biographical Research Center*, 34.1 (2011), pp. 25-36.

¹² See Jean Burgess, ‘Re-mediating Vernacular Creativity: Digital Storytelling’, in *First Person: International Digital Storytelling Conference*, ed. Australian Centre for the Moving Image, (Australia, 2006), pp. 1-4.

reflecting the complexities of identity and everyday life.

Such complexities can be overwhelming; reassurance is sought in the most unlikely of objects. My second section, *The Comfort of Found Objects*, turns away from the individual and addresses the role of the family. Drawing upon the lost family photograph, images come to depict both a trapped time and the fragility of life. In light of collective disasters (like Japan's 2011 tsunami) these personal remnants become increasingly valuable. Not only reflecting a lost time but also providing an area where hypothetical imagining and escapism can wander freely. Taken from its original context the lost photograph assumes a greater flexibility. It is both physically and mentally adaptable, acting as a source of remembrance and comfort.

Yet remembering is ambiguous; images fabricate memory and history, thus tracing the dead subject is not an easy task. Demonstrating this, my third section, *Smoke and Mirrors – The Instability of Images*, addresses the work of the Miaz brothers. Their blurred images are comparable to an out-of-focus camera lens; the subjects are in a process of perpetual becoming.¹³ These distorted images create a 'positive uncertainty' – that mankind has the ability to be anything – yet they are also entities in flux. It seems the only way to stabilise ourselves is to assign our emotions to paper and exile them to another realm. The notion of offerings to other realms is the final exploration of this section, in which I argue the decline of the spoken confessional prompts the development of a hybrid communication. Post Secret's self-assigned sentiment, is contrasted with the Qingming Festival in China, where paper offerings are burnt in an act of closure and to honour the dead. Where the fragments end up is uncertain; the only secure realm is that of the Post Secret destination: Warren's permanent dwelling.

Secrets of the Virtually Absent

If the camera is a defence mechanism and the computer screen an

¹³ Henri Bergson, 'The Cinematographical Mechanism of Thought and the Mechanistic Illusion – A Glance at the History of Systems – Real Becoming and False Evolutionism', Chapter 4 in *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911), pp. 272 – 370.

obstruction to our accessibility, who do the postcards truly serve?¹⁴ Frank Warren is ‘the only identity attached to the blog or to any other media forms associated with the project.’¹⁵ Warren has freely admitted that he is a “collector of secrets” even though the collection seems to have turned into obsession.¹⁶ Burgess argues that the secrets ‘constitute their authenticity as individual life narratives by presenting physical traits of the authors.’¹⁷ So if Warren is the collector of secrets he is also the collector of the metanarratives that compose character. Perhaps the secrets’ physical manifestation provides Warren with a foundation on which to build; to construct a new life or another character entirely. Indeed the success of postsecret.com has no doubt served Warren’s reputation, dubbing him as ‘the most trusted stranger in America.’¹⁸

This newly acquired trust has ‘the capacity to inspire epiphanies in readers regardless of whether or not the authors of each card are confessing a secret they truly hold.’¹⁹ Poletti’s use of ‘epiphanies’ suggests the appearance of a divine manifestation. Thus those on the Post Secret website could resemble a religious community, an affiliation founded on confessions and the redemptive word of a preacher. Warren assumes an omnipotent position selecting and publicising the best confessionals to set an example to his followers. Kennedy believes ‘senders possess a degree of symbolic power over recipients’ as they control what is seen.²⁰ Yet it is Warren `who holds dualistic power over both sender and viewer, by inviting them to confess and regulating what is seen.

¹⁴ My own comparison. The camera has been compared to a gun which shoots its subject, thus defending the photographer. The computer screen distances us from other users across the virtual plane.

¹⁵ Poletti, ‘Intimate Economies’, pp. 25-36.

¹⁶ Warren, ‘Frank Warren: Half a million secrets’, *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*, <http://www.ted.com/talks/frank_warren_half_a_million_secrets.html> [accessed 10 April 2012]

¹⁷ Poletti, ‘Intimate Economies’, p. 31.

¹⁸ Harper Collins Publishers, ‘Frank Warren’, *Harper Collins*, <http://www.harpercollins.com/authors/30756/Frank_Warren/index.aspx> [accessed 13 April 2012]

¹⁹ Poletti, ‘Intimate Economies’, p. 35.

²⁰ Chris Kennedy, “Just Perfect! The Pragmatics of Evaluation in Holiday Postcards”, in *Discourse, Communication and Tourism*, ed. Jaworski, Adam and Annette Pitchard, (Clevedon: Channel Review Publications, 2005), pp. 223-246.

The instructions ‘be brief’ and ‘creative’ ensures that a certain type of secret is produced.²¹ It is clear that negative or scandalous secrets are desired more than those which enforce normality and optimism.²² The only people who do not seem to be controlled or manipulated by Warren’s instructions are the postal workers who observe the secrets first-hand. The fact that Post Secret is spread by hearsay further supports his position of authority. His missionaries dispensed the Secret word while Warren compiled a series of publications; much like a testament of our humanity and an unspoken guidance of self-improvement.

Another striking thing about Poletti’s latter statement is the consideration of the ‘truth’. Turkle states, ‘if people [on PostSecret] are not truthful, these confessions are fiction.’²³ Are we being deceived by believing in something that may or may not be true? Surely this is applicable to every aspect of life, as the dialogues of the everyday are founded upon an ever evolving language. Truth becomes interwoven with fiction, creating a multifaceted social product. Likewise the internet is just another place to create and project an alternative self – a stage set with virtual props, where we can do away with human limitations entirely or bare all and readily admit our shortcomings; both to ourselves and the curious spectators who log on.

Thus the audience adopts the dual persona of voyeur and contributor, while members simultaneously heal themselves and assume others’ secrets which may not be personally applicable to them.²⁴ It is ‘the “I” voice embedded in these narratives [which] encourages audiences to internalize and adopt these secrets as their own.’²⁵ MacAulay is correct, the imposition of language forces subjects to recognise themselves as individuals despite the fact that the ‘I’ can never be attained. The construction of identity is always in reference to the past or the future; it is never present.²⁶

²¹ Frank Warren, ‘What is the story behind PostSecret?’ <<http://www.postsecretcommunity.com/news-faq/postsecret-story>> [accessed 13 April 2012]

²² Poletti, ‘Intimate Economies’, p. 33.

²³ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, (New York, 2011), p. 230.

²⁴ MacAulay et al., ‘From Souvenir to Social Movement’, p. 91.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²⁶ This is the poststructuralist notion that language both defines and constrains mankind. Mankind did not choose their language yet they rely on it in order to express themselves.

What Post Secret has highlighted is that sharing and keeping secrets is no longer a symbol of trust. The postcard no longer states: “wish you were here!” but instead warns us of human weakness. The only way we can learn from and avoid these situations is by becoming collectors ourselves. Consequently secrets become a commodity, an object of fetishisation to be collected.²⁷ Here I draw upon Marx’s commodity fetishism, that the subjective economic value of the postcard is transformed into an objective entity of *real* intrinsic value. Sontag argues that ‘Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire.’²⁸ Collecting the picture postcard is akin to collecting the world. These are objects of desire with self-assigned value. The question of ownership then arises, once the secrets pass over Warren’s threshold all previous possession is abandoned.²⁹ Yet as soon as a secret is shared another is required to fill the void; we collect fragmented secrets to fill the space of the ‘empty I’.³⁰

‘These writers hold up a mirror to our complex times.’³¹ Turkle is correct; to put our trust in those who wish to remain anonymous is unnerving to say the least. One might argue that this online community shares the fragmented secrets and distributes evenly the corresponding emotions printed on the card. But the creators of the cards (and of the secrets) wish to dissociate themselves from their past and from others. The website may act as a showcase of secrets but it is also an effective virtual buffer.³² The postcards are not cries for help; they are simply cries for acknowledgement.

While each card requests attention from those who view the site; the audience is powerless to help due to the creator’s ambiguity.³³ Each secret competes against one another just like the holiday postcard

²⁷The collector carves out a niche in his own shape, filling the void with selective objects which make him feel as though he belongs. These ‘belongings’ shape his mental mind-map and leave other areas blank.

²⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 4.

²⁹ Expanding on this point; I had to ask Warren’s permission to use the images in this paper, not the authors of the postcards themselves.

³⁰ Derek Sayer, ‘Incognito Ergo Sum’, *Theory Culture Society*, 21:6 (2004), (67-89), p. 67.

³¹ Turkle, *Alone Together*, p. 230.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 299. The website directs the viewer’s gaze onto others and estranges their own need for self-reflection.

³³ MacAulay et al., ‘From Souvenir to Social Movement’, p. 92.

whose aim is to impress its readers.³⁴ But if no-one is there to see the viewer's reaction it is debatable whether the card actually holds any significance. Empathy becomes merged and indistinguishable; soon viewers find themselves disengaged and numb as they take on the weight of confessions. This generality demonstrates that there is no universal experience of suffering.³⁵ 'Persons A and B may have nothing in common except for the fact, that both send in postcard narratives describing abuse, for instance.'³⁶ MacAulay indicated that the postcards are grouped thematically and lose their sense of individuality as a result. Yet each postcard represents a fragment of an individual. If we continue to externalise our experiences and emotions what will be left of us? With each postcard we transform ourselves into self-confessing kindling.



Figure 1: 'I take comfort in the fact that we're all alone together.' Courtesy of Frank Warren.

Reliance on confessional sites could all go up in smoke as they 'keep us busy with ways to externalize our problems instead of looking at them.'³⁷ Reclining and reading by the oven light, the

³⁴ Kennedy, "Just Perfect!", p. 233.

³⁵ MacAulay et al., 'From Souvenir to Social Movement', p. 95.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

³⁷ Turkle, *Alone Together*, p. 240.

subject in Figure 1 appears at ease. The viewer's attention is drawn to the computer screen nestled amongst the unwashed dishes. The computer highlights the subject's isolation as the necessity to log on prevails even whilst doing other activities like reading. The caption states: 'I take comfort in the fact that we are all alone together.' One cannot help but wonder whether the subject of the photograph has encountered or is in fact reading Turkle's *Alone Together*, in which she argues that the rise of technology has distanced us as opposed to uniting us, sat behind the computer screen we have never felt so alone. The fact that the card's creator is reassured by this, however, skews the interpretation of the image. She is happy in her isolation and feels equal to those who are not around her. Seclusion assumes its own online niche and projects it into reality, into the home.

Here isolation manifests as all other priorities are put on hold; the subject's attention may be diverted by her reading yet she is still positioned within easy reach of the screen. Turkle believes more and more of us 'fall in love with twenty-first-century pen pals. Often their appeal is that we don't know who they "really" are. So they might be perfect.'³⁸ The search for a non-existent perfection may be the reason why the subject is logged on. This is presuming the subject of the card is also its creator; she may be the physical embodiment of the isolated individual upon whom the photographer is fixated. It gives 'the comfort of strangers' an entirely new meaning.

So the photographer and the subject may be the same person, nevertheless their identities are still unknown. Burgess believes PostSecret offers everyone the chance to be an artist so 'ordinary people [get] opportunities to see themselves and, importantly, *each other* as creative *authors* with a legitimate claim to a space in the cultural public sphere.'³⁹ But by becoming authors of our own stories we risk turning our lives into fabrications; losing touch with whom we are connected and becoming mere products of creativity. This reduces the distance between cultural production and the everyday,⁴⁰ allowing Breton's desire for the beautiful banal to come into being.⁴¹

³⁸ Turkle, *Alone Together*, p. 230.

³⁹ Burgess, 'Re-mediating Vernacular Creativity', pp. 1-4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴¹ André Breton was the founder of the Parisian Surrealist movement in 1924. He sought to unite the unconscious with reality in order to unleash man's creativity and provide a new 'complete' perspective on life. Breton would often collect the everyday objects he encountered in Parisian flea markets and antique

Yet at the same time our art products become standardized. Contrary to Milne's belief, that the postcard appears to be more immediate and spontaneous⁴² than its predecessor the letter, PostSecret lacks impulsiveness. Creators deliberate and relive past events which are restricted to the postcard's boundaries. The only way the product can become autonomous is by transcending the edges of the card or by discovering the real secret the cards conceal: the creators' identity.⁴³

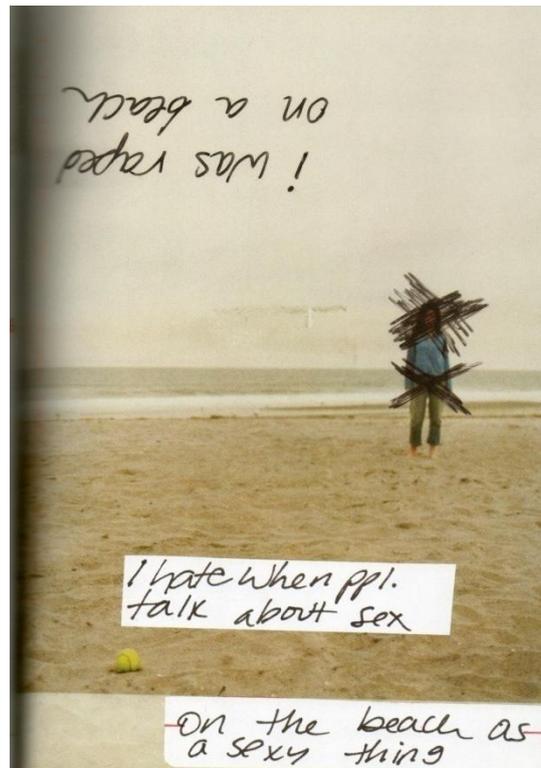


Figure 2: Girl on Beach. Courtesy of Frank Warren, *My Secret*, (London, 2009).

In the words of Cicero: if their name is unobtainable then let us see their face, 'the countenance is the image of the mind, and the eyes are its interpreters.'⁴⁴ Like the latter postcard, the subject's distant presence in Figure 2 and lack of interaction emphasises her isolation.

shops. He assigned them new meanings and used his 'found objects' as sources of inspiration.

⁴² Esther Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Emails: Technologies of Presence*, (London, 2010), p. 110.

⁴³ MacAulay, et al., 'From Souvenir to Social Movement', p. 96.

⁴⁴ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Oratory and Orators*, ed., trans., J. S. Watson, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1875), p. 258.

She is distanced physically in her remote environment and metaphorically, keeping her secret to herself. Black ink ties the double confession to the subject while defilement of her image makes the secret an actuality. The inverted confession implies that the event turned the subject's world upside-down and simultaneously brands her, the victim. The mute tones of the image reflect the pathetic fallacy of the secret while intentional destruction of *her* image indicates a loss of identity and innocence. The creator no longer feels like the girl in the image, instead she becomes the product of rape.

While the audience may assume the subject is vulnerable, her admission suggests otherwise. Perhaps the image is being read incorrectly. Scratching at the surface, the subject may have returned to the scene to face her demons while staging the photograph. This would explain her open stance, looking straight at the camera from behind the pen. She defiantly breaks the social convention to smile. Though the pen crosses suggests negativity they could also stand for protest, the girl on the beach no longer lets the past or her secret define her. The slight glimpse of her face suggests a hope that she will not always suffer.

Benjamin would argue that the original aura of the secret is destroyed.⁴⁵ The subject has returned to the scene and reproduced her experience in an artistic expression. The postcard has since been duplicated on the internet and within Post Secret books, thus successfully acting as a vehicle that transcends language barriers, distance and time. A prime example where past and present converge in one image is in Figure 3. Like a pane of glass between two worlds the transition is within sight but just out of reach. The montage depicts the passing of time in the palm of the subject's hands; this is verified further by the black and white photograph's deterioration. Her physical aging in addition to the wheelchair also plays a supportive role.

We assume the aged subject is the same person in the photograph as the caption: 'It all passed so quickly' suggests (Figure 3). We may question what was so important about this image from her

⁴⁵ Through mechanical reproduction the image loses its uniqueness due to its duplication and increased accessibility. See Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility', in *Selected Writings Volume 4. 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Others, (London, 2003), p. 253.

past? She may have been outside her home or on a holiday. Perhaps her mother took the photograph to display it on the mantelpiece or preserve in the family album. Now faded and unkempt, one can assume the image has gathered dust. Somewhere along the line, both the photograph and the past have been neglected. But her face from the past is still intact. Her verve remains inside the confines of the frame and may be the reason why we do not see her current image. Her secret may not be that time passes too quickly, but that she regrets missed chances and even wishes to deny aging altogether.



Figure 3: 'It all passed so quickly.' Courtesy of Frank Warren, *A Lifetime of Secrets*, (New York, 2007).

By tearing up the past from the present she also separates herself.⁴⁶ The photograph is the metaphorical mirror where the subject locates the self in relation to the past.⁴⁷ In Oliver Wendell Holmes's

⁴⁶ In psychoanalytic theory the ego is the 'I' or self which is in contact with the external world through perception. Although the ego is capable of change throughout the subject's lifetime, splitting the ego entirely could result in a loss of behavioural continuity and control subsequently developing into an inferiority (or even a superiority) complex.

⁴⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (5th edn., London, 2006), p. 2.

words the photograph is a “mirror with a memory.”⁴⁸ The subject’s hands are like a timeline which trace her life, the photograph she holds is just one of many moments and by piecing these together she can construct a detailed self-image.⁴⁹ These fragments may not be in the correct order so in a Deleuzian sense her history can be traced from the centre.⁵⁰ The past can be mentally modified and new memories can be created. History is not always recounted and communicated chronologically as it flits across social, cultural and national boundaries. For this reason, History is a truly postmodern concept. By altering the order of her photographs the subject can change the sequence of events and in turn alter her past. Truth is no longer a necessity.

The Comfort of Found Objects

The dismissal of historical truth is an intimidating and overwhelming notion despite the interpretative freedom it provides. Thus stability is sought in material belongings and the stories that we attach to them. Post Secret is a prime example: strangers from past and present are brought together through shared sentiment, an element which intensifies in the face of collective tragedies. As the subjunctive sweeps over history a sea of change literally devastated the lives in Northern Honshu, Japan. On March 11, 2011, a tsunami was triggered by a magnitude 9 earthquake that struck 130 km off the coast of Northern Japan, destroying all in its path.⁵¹ The National Police Agency confirmed 15,854 deaths, 26,992 injured, and 3,155 people missing.⁵² Like the unpredicted popularity of the Post Secret project,

⁴⁸ Oliver Wendell Holmes, ‘The Steroscope and the Sterograph’, *The Atlantic*, (June 1859), <<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-steroscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>> [accessed: 22/03/2014]

⁴⁹ It could be argued that the lines on the subject’s hands resemble routes on a map which can be retraced. The timeline, like the subject can only go in one direction. But the mind can wander through the map’s interconnected passages.

⁵⁰ Gilles Deleuze; Félix Guattari, *A Thousand plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, (London; New York, 2003), pp. 3-25.

⁵¹ Foreign Policy, ‘Sea Change: Haunting family photos pulled from the wreckage of Japan’s tsunami’ <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/02/27/Sea_Change> [accessed 11 April 2012]

⁵² National Police Agency of Japan, ‘Damage Situation and Police Countermeasures associated with 2011 Tohoku district - off the Pacific Ocean Earthquake’, April 18 2012, <http://www.npa.go.jp/archive/keibi/biki/higaijokyo_e.pdf> [accessed 11 April 2012]

no one expected the tide to deliver thousands of family photographs to the shores a year later.

At first glance one could mistake the photographs as the production of the Pop Art movement. These photographs are distorted and their colours are unnatural and psychedelic; out of context, they could give the photographs an entirely different meaning. The families in the photographs have not only lost their cherished memories but have presumably lost one another as well. This creates a darker undertone which disturbs viewer. The children staring out from behind the decaying paper are trapped in their childlike state whilst disappearing into antiquity. The images become an informal collection for the viewer as opposed to their original owners. These, once highly, personalised images become estranged yet they retain a sense of innocence. These images have not been touched and destroyed by man but by the forces of nature. The elements serve to remind the audience of life's fragility which turns the photograph's inhabitants into phantasmagorical enchantments.⁵³

All photographs are shadows of past times but these images are literally phantoms and illusory appearances⁵⁴ due to the subject's physical absence. One may rewrite history and imagine what the family would be doing if the tsunami had not occurred. Ouellette believes fantasy is necessary to man, that it is as old as history but it will never die.⁵⁵ Fantasy is used as a coping mechanism just like Post Secret, but the viewer will constantly wonder what the next photograph *might have been*. But is fantasy enough to replace reality, or is it everything and more than we could imagine. 'We can never get close enough [to the past] to breathe its air or touch its life ... Our interpretation of past reality, coloured by imagination, becomes a creative act.'⁵⁶ Ouellette is correct; depicting that the past is a creative re-enactment. Yet he dismisses the notion that postcards are objects of

⁵³ 'Phantasmagoric' refers to the haunting of images. Benjamin applied the Phantasmagoric to the Parisian arcades, linking it to Marx's notion of commodification. Benjamin saw Paris as being a Second Empire, a "modern" space with an amalgamation of façades and an excess of meaning and interpretation. See Walter Benjamin 1892-1940, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, (Cambridge; Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999)

⁵⁴ William Ouellette, *Fantasy Postcards*, p. 7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁶ Ouellette, *Fantasy Postcards*, p. 13.

history which reflect the time in which they were created. The photograph may provide escapism but distraction is only brief, especially in the Post Secret world where admission is essential. To unlock our true secrets imagination must cease. This is not an easy task, especially for the next confessor.



Figure 4: ‘I buy antique pictures because it makes me feel like I have family.’
Courtesy of Frank Warren, *A Lifetime of Secrets*, (New York, 2007).

‘I buy antique pictures because it makes me feel like I have family’ (Figure 4). The statement wrenches the heartstrings and is intensified by the portrait’s doe-eyed expression. Milne asks, ‘To what degree does the card stand for the physical presence of the [person]?’⁵⁷ It appears it can replace her even if she never existed. The mute tones of the antique photograph reflect a tainted nostalgia. Purchase of such

⁵⁷ Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Emails*, p. 97.

photographs may bring comfort to the creator but it also highlights their loneliness.

Is it the aesthetics of the photograph or the familial connections and significance which constitutes a ‘good’ family photograph? The sitter is not a product of the imagination as she once existed; however the portrait has less to do with the past as opposed to the sender’s present.⁵⁸ These family mementos would not be kept in an album for that would be too conventional. ‘*Cartes* of friends and famous visitors could be preserved and displayed later ... as evidence of the family’s prestige and connections;’⁵⁹ yet these are not photos you share with others. The thought of being discovered is too high a risk. Maybe they are stored in a shoebox out of sight but within easy reach, or placed under a bed, nestled in a bottom draw. By assigning familial connotations to the young woman in the portrait she assumes a new identity, function and lease of life. Hers is the one photograph which is not defaced. Instead she is preserved and restored; as a result she is free to assume further significance in the future. She is more than modern, “To be modern means to follow the thread of time, to go straight. To be absolutely present.”⁶⁰ Paradoxically she is not present, yet she *continually exists* through the photograph with the aid of imagination. The past image surpasses the moment into the postmodern.

Nevertheless the viewer still wonders as to whom the photograph originally belonged. Perhaps the portrait was given to the sitter’s mother, or to a husband or lover. Maybe both. She could merely be the model on the front of a calling card but for the sender of the secret she is so much more. Like the online Post Secret community, the sender can imagine the antique photographs are the remnants of a perfect family. It allows the sender to choose their own relatives. So why choose to give up this photograph if it held such significance – imagined or otherwise. Does her confession mean she will no longer collect family members? Perhaps Frank Warren should no longer collect secrets and all can face the brave new world feeling alleviated.

⁵⁸ Ouellette, *Fantasy Postcards*, p. 13.

⁵⁹ Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Emails*, p. 101.

⁶⁰ René Denizot quoted in Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Emails*, p. 110.

The flexibility of the latter image challenges Milne's belief that the photographic postcard 'shrinks reality to the moment.'⁶¹ Everyone is free to go beyond the text and interpret the image differently.⁶² While the postcard has once more become a popular part of consumer culture the card itself assumes multiple meanings. Susan Sontag stated that a photograph will 'fiddle with the scale of the world.'⁶³ This is true on both a literal and a metaphorical level, the images we see are rescaled and edited and subsequently makes us view our surroundings differently. We no longer need the postcard to tell us what we are viewing as geography does not define the image's sole significance.

Rescaling the image is particularly interesting as it requires the photographer to be selective when taking the shot. But what is more striking is when the possessor of the photograph resizes the image for their own use. In an interview Warren said: "After several weeks I stopped passing out postcards but secrets kept coming. Homemade postcards made from cardboard, old photographs, wedding invitations, and *other personal items artfully decorated arrived from all over the world.*"⁶⁴ The customisation of photographs and belongings turns the secret into a special memento which reflects the individuality of the creator. The secret becomes a souvenir like the holiday postcard. Warren maintains, "Like fingerprints, no two secrets are identical, but every secret has a story behind it."⁶⁵ The edges of the photograph and the postcard are worth noting, both are restrictive yet senders of the postcard are more aware of this limitation as it affects the content of their written message.⁶⁶ While this may not be the case for Post Secret, the sender's anonymity may reinforce suppression.⁶⁷ But for the holder of the photograph the edges merely frame the image, what exists beyond them is rarely considered.

⁶¹ Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Emails*, p. 111.

⁶² 'Beyond the text' is a reference to Barber and Peniston-Bird, *History Beyond the Text: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, (London, 2009), pp. 1-14.

⁶³ Sontag, *On Photography*, 3rd edn., (New York, 1977), 4.

⁶⁴ Warren, *PostSecret*, p. 1. [My own emphasis].

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁶⁶ Kennedy, "Just Perfect!", p. 226.

⁶⁷ MacAulay et al., 'From Souvenir to Social Movement', p. 97.

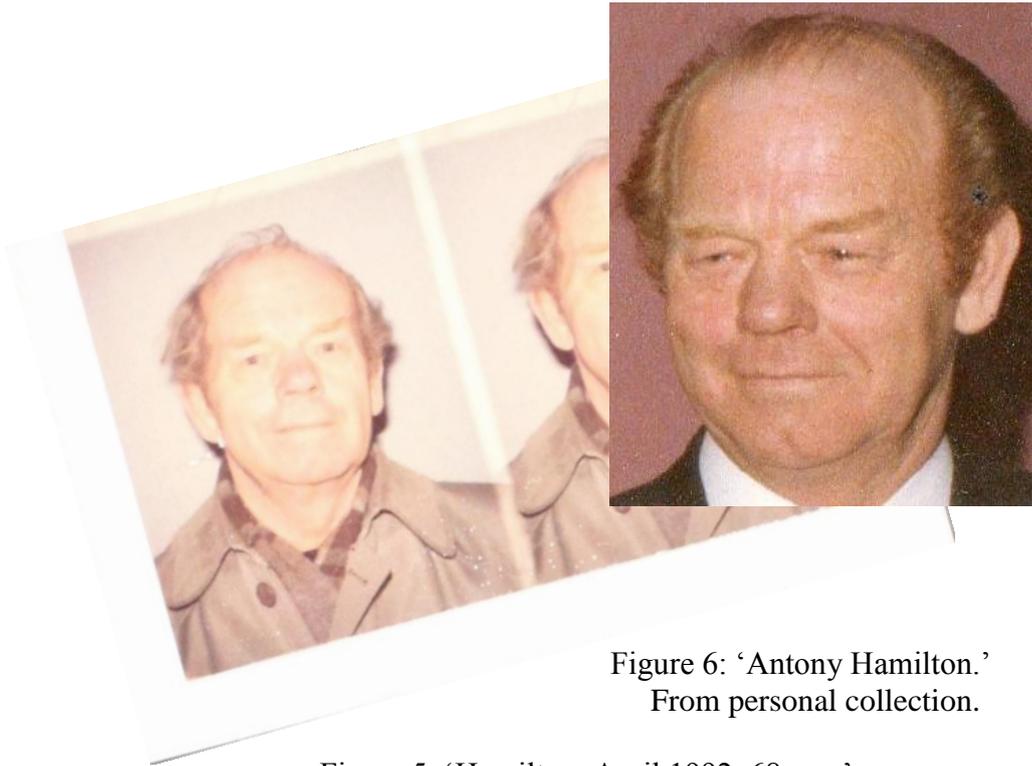


Figure 6: ‘Antony Hamilton.’
From personal collection.

Figure 5: ‘Hamilton, April 1992, 68 age.’
From personal collection.

Personal selection is seen in Figure 6, the back of the photograph states that the image was manufactured by Kodak. However, it is clear that the image was once larger. Although the image is of the size of a passport photograph, its uneven edges suggest it has been cut by hand. The proud and endearing figure resides in my mother’s purse; it is an image of her father attending her first marriage. She informed me that she liked the photograph because he looked healthy, and unlike some others, it was small enough to carry on her person. The rest of the people in the photograph “were not worth keeping.” It may be ironic that the camera did not capture the perfect Kodak moment; nevertheless the image has been put to a positive use. The people in the photograph may not last but the preservation of their image helps enforce their memory. In keeping his image close, the dualistic relationship between the protector and the protected transcends between father and daughter despite the distance in between.

The doubled driving license replicates Hamilton’s identity in the latter years of his life (Figure 5). The viewer can see by his pale

complexion and fragility that he is unwell. It is understandable why his daughter would not want to remember him in this state. His prior self is a more positive projection yet it begs the question: why have the photographs been kept in the first place? One tends to only keep the ‘good’ photographs while the unflattering ones are immediately discarded. Perhaps the destruction of the photograph would eradicate a small piece of the past which had shaped that individual, a notion which gains value in the subject’s absence and intensifies over time. It could be argued that by destroying the image Hamilton’s illness is figuratively defeated. Yet this does not erase the actuality of events. As Barthes said, the photograph reminds the viewer of their eventual demise.⁶⁸ For this reason the preservation of the image is understandable. However its placement in the photo album is not, especially as it is slotted behind another photograph. Maybe the illness is being denied, though the image is kept out of sight and out of mind it still upholds the subject’s position as a family member through its preservation. All of the deceased feature in the album at some point.

Smoke and Mirrors – The Instability of Images



Figure 7: ‘Ghosts’, *Antimatter Series*. Courtesy of the Miaz Brothers

<<http://miazbrothers.com>> [accessed 13 April 2012]⁶⁹

Images of the dead also hang on the walls. Levitating above us, their presence decorates our homes and haunts from behind the glass.

⁶⁸ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*, (London, 1993), p. 79.

⁶⁹ There is no information as to when the photographs of the Miaz brothers’ images were actually taken. The lack of a date adds to the ambiguity of the image and serves to support the notion that reading images as historical sources is a deceptive and often misleading process.

While the self-portrait reflects the individual, images of the departed need to be frequently referred to. Without the photograph there is a risk that the deceased will be forgotten altogether. Their images retain an unspoken authority that force us to remember, thus the dictum ‘a picture speaks a thousand words’ is not far from the truth. Saying this, pictures of the dead tend to assume elements of fabrication. When recounting past events through images one cannot be certain whether the memory accompanies the photograph or whether the image dictates memory. Caution must be taken when reading images as they are inhabited by illusions. Photographs are smoke and mirrors.

The Miaz brothers’ ‘Ghosts’ exemplify the latter as it appears a veil of smoke restricts the viewer’s gaze (Figure 7). The subjects are difficult to make out; the collection of acrylics on canvas captures the essence of the individual like an out of focus camera lens. Roberto and Renato Miaz describe it as *Antimatter*,

Taking their cues from the ‘colour-dot’ technology employed by inkjet printers, they aim to produce paintings that ‘interact with viewers for an indefinite period of time’ while transforming with their surrounding light. As there are no lines whatsoever in their work, it is up to the viewer to perceive their subjects and make images out of them. Thus, with the use of three overlapping primary colours sprayed separately onto canvas, the Miaz brothers in their Antimatter series are able to effectively blur the lines between illusion and reality, and create beautiful, ‘boundless’ experiences.⁷⁰

It seems as though the subject’s souls have been captured in transition, they are neither in this world or the afterlife but somewhere in between. While the canvas projects indefinable persons in limbo the camera tries to establish stability. By photographing the paintings the absent subjects are replicated. It could be argued reproductions expose the complex layers of the individual. Yet the duplicates also fragment the subject further making it impossible to unite the pieces as a whole.

⁷⁰ The Miaz brothers, ‘Unfocussed Portraits’, April 11, 2012, <<http://gatheringmosswhilewandering.com/2012/04/11/unfocused-portraits/>> [accessed 13 April 2012] [Own emphasis].

However uniting the particles would create human limitations. The subjects are already bound within the frames yet the artists' technique creates a free space in which the viewer can read the image. How we perceive the collection is as unique as the images themselves. This creates a 'positive uncertainty' where the viewer can contemplate their own adaptability and on-going development. The Miaz brothers explain,

We have chosen painting as the medium to represent the transitory nature of everything. To represent the fact that we are composed of infinite particles in continuous evolution which interact and change in strong relation with the complex reality that surrounds us. Dematerializing the lines, we gained a substantial in determination of the picture that skips the immediate lecture and forces mnemonic associations ... we look to provide a visual experience that activates our awareness that compels the viewer to recognize, to re-establish the limits of his or her own perception, to regain control of the real. Inviting us to ... take considerable distance to see the whole picture.⁷¹

Distance from ghosts is not seen as a negative factor as the blurred boundaries of the subject enable the viewer to think beyond the frame. Like white noise the photographs are combinations of all that surrounds them, they reflect the complexities of mankind. They are depictions in constant transition of becoming. Their anonymity, like the Post Secret cards, are not hindrances as they support the notion of the intimate public. This is the notion that we are all equal and obscure tied by 'the common experiences [that] *pre-existed* the creation of the public.'⁷² In this sense neither society nor the project are complete, evolution is constant.⁷³

This notion of togetherness and intimacy is what Post Secret tries to enforce. The secrets are the many particles which construct the individual and allow the viewer to assemble a larger sense of society. Whether we should allow these private thoughts to define us is

⁷¹ The Miaz brothers, 'Antimatter series', <<http://miazbrothers.com>> [accessed 13 April 2012]

⁷² Poletti, 'Intimate Economies', p. 28. [Poletti's emphasis].

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

another matter. Foucault proposed that Western society is populated by confessing animals.⁷⁴ Although the ability to speak is known to be a freedom the recipient can choose not to listen. It seems that society diminishes its own privacy in order to come clean, an aspect which originates in man's own narcissism.

Self-absorption is a quality assumed by man alone. "Humans are the only animal that blushes, laughs, has religion, wages war and kisses with lips. So in a way, the more you kiss with lips, the more human you are ... And the more you wage war."⁷⁵ The capacity to love and hate are pasted on the postcard for all to see. MacAulay asserts these are the 'product[s] of the guilt imposed upon artists by social edicts that transform victims into sinners and promise redemption through disclosure.'⁷⁶ But whether self-expression arises purely from man's ability to feel is open to question. As Benjamin stated, "If the theory is correct that feeling is not located in the head, that we sentiently experience a window, a cloud, a tree not in our brains but, rather, in the place where we see it, then we are, in looking at our beloved, too, outside ourselves."⁷⁷ It is that man feels too much and the only way to control these fluctuating emotions is to confine them to cards. Send off your sentiment on the back of the postcard and become less human.

Projecting our emotions to other realms is similar to religious remembrance and worship. In some ways the distribution of Post Secrets resembles the paper offerings at the Qingming Festival in China. During Tomb Sweeping Day, family graves are cleaned and paper replicas of material goods are burnt to honour the dead, thus appeasing them in the afterlife. The notion that a piece of paper can measure individual respect and veneration is astonishing. Yet the Catholic Church sold indulgences as spiritual pardons and Capitalism's circulation of notes continues to retain high value in commodity culture. Post Secret is the reverse as the cards are physically given to Warren for absolution. The only price is the cost of postage and the sender's moral disposition. The sentiment attached

⁷⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Will To Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Part 1*, (London, 1998), p. 60.

⁷⁵ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, (New York, 2006), p.99.

⁷⁶ MacAulay et al., 'From Souvenir to Social Movement', p. 98.

⁷⁷ Benjamin quoted in Michael Taussig, *Walter Benjamin's Grave*, (Chicago, 2006), p. 15.

to the image is largely self-inflicted through the use of language. Words are powerful tools and the photograph's caption often dictates the way it is interpreted. It would be of no surprise if inscription became the most important part of the photograph. In Benjamin's words, the "illiteracy of the future ... will be ignorance not of reading and writing, but of photography."⁷⁸

Sayer believes 'concreteness is established *by and within language alone*.'⁷⁹ By burning offerings the containment of language is destroyed and the living is brought in to contact with the deceased. Burning Post Secrets as a ritual may be most effective as it would purge the confessor's conscience and lay their secrets to rest. Like the paper offerings, the camera brings the insensible and the dead amongst the living. Reality is captured by the camera and is replaced with a false moment, all that contributed to it are converted into the uncanny.

While Post Secret relieves the creator of their innermost thoughts the project also feeds the morbid curiosity of the wider network who log on. The cards highlight society's vast abnormalities and demonstrate how alienated the public have become. A new hybrid communication has been created where facts, fiction, visuals, annotation and digitization all combine in the process of telling secrets and making history. Verbal communication has no say in the matter. The decline in the spoken confessional could be a result of waning religious adherence. Perhaps the internet's obscurity is more appealing as it blurs social constraints, distance, time and gender, making the subject unidentifiable and infinite.⁸⁰ The cards have the ability to cross gender boundaries not only because the Post Secret community is largely faceless, but that the sex of the card's creators are unknown.

⁷⁸ Benjamin, *Little History of Photography*, p. 527.

⁷⁹ Sayer, 'Incognito Ergo Sum', (2004), pp. 84-85. [Sayer's emphasis].

⁸⁰ Language and meaning are inherently unstable due to the constant alteration of language, linguistic meaning and context. Saussure sought to separate the sign from its corresponding reference, while Derrida further separated the signifier from the signified. He indicated that one word can encapsulate numerous meanings depending on their context. For instance, the word 'chair' may refer to an object on which to sit but it could also refer to an occupation or a position of power and supervision ('to hold a chair'). Simply, the *Signifier* + *Signified* = *the Sign*. The Signifier is the entity which gives the word or image meaning, the Signified is what is evoked when encountering the Signifier. When both are combined they create the Sign, the representation of an object which conveys meaning.

See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, (Oxford, 2008), pp. 79-109.

Since language and its assigned meaning is in fluctuation then the significance allocated to gender is void. Thus one can become anything through the production of Post Secrets, while online anonymity means consequence and reprimands are unable to be enforced.

Like the computer screen and the faceless Post Secret community, the photograph also distances the viewer. A captured instance transcends time; it can be read in numerous ways and continues to develop as it changes hands. Despite its static status, the combination of photograph and postcard means the image is free to transcend geographical boundaries. The card's destination is the one constant factor senders can depend on. Redemption from their secrets, however, is not. All images share the ability to surpass time making them intrinsically postmodern as the subject is simultaneously present and absent. One cannot know for sure whether the subject still exists.⁸¹ Yet this fragility is perhaps a comforting notion as uncertainty need not be pessimistic. Like the hazy boundaries of the Miaz bothers' portraits, the imagination is limitless and enables us to see the bigger picture.

⁸¹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96.