

Tatiana Grigorenko
Zoë Heyn-Jones
The Disappeared



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G44

Centre for
Contemporary
Photography

The Disappeared

by Alison Cooley

How does the body disappear? Perhaps you were taught this way, as I was: Do you have a compost at home? What happens when you put a banana peel in your compost? It breaks into tiny pieces which become the soil. Bacteria, worms, and fungus chew it into smaller and smaller pieces, so that soon it looks just like everything else. We call it decomposition. This is what happens to the body. It goes away, but we remember.

In the work of Tatiana Grigorenko and Zoë Heyn-Jones, the body disappears more insidiously. As the body is made absent, so too is memory: the archive of physical presence is expunged. Grigorenko's photographs deal in pre-photoshop manipulations. Borrowing sections from other parts of the photograph or over-laying paint, Grigorenko excises her own body from an archive of family photographs. Mistrustful of the truth of photography, Grigorenko reflects on the experiences of her family in the USSR, where it felt as though history was a constantly shifting force. While already at work on "The Disappeared," attuned to the conceptual fluidity of truth through the photograph, Grigorenko happened upon a family photograph in which she is an infant—an image which revealed a striking confluence between her artistic practice and lived history. The snapshot pictures Grigorenko in the arms of her grandmother, standing behind her grandfather, and her uncle, next to them, who had Down Syndrome and had lived with his mother his whole life. The artist's grandfather, Petro Grigorenko had been a famous Soviet general and devout communist, but was later imprisoned in a mental hospital. The practice of reinscribing well-known, unfavourable figures who spoke out against Soviet policies as "crazy" was a tactic common to the regime. After his denunciation



Tatiana Grigorenko, *Kremlin*, 16.5 x 11.5 inch archival inkjet print on cotton rag paper and collage, 2010-2012

of Stalin's cult of personality and participation in human rights and dissident activities, Petro Grigorenko's relegation to a mental institution was both a powerful overwriting of his beliefs, and a way for the government to escape international scrutiny. In her grandfather's biography, Grigorenko recognized this same photograph, which had been reproduced in the book, with some unknown hand removing her uncle. Grigorenko's mother also recalls an instance during her school days, where the teacher instructed students to open their encyclopedias and scratch out the name and face of a political figure who had become disesteemed by Soviet rulers. This act of erasure and removal was public, instructional, threatening. It was not some sleek slippage into forgetting, but a tacit complicity in the revision of history.

Embedded deep in the narratives of Grigorenko's family was the understanding that images could be devious, undependable. In "The Disappeared," Grigorenko turns the precarity of images onto her own body. Modifying a series of family snapshots taken by her parents, just after they fled the USSR for the United States in 1978, she removes herself. The grainy, 80s quality of her scanned negatives printed on cotton rag paper attest more fully to the violent erasure. Her absence is not initially seen but felt. Even upon first glance at images such as *Kremlin*, some quality of amiss-ness permeates the photograph: a disjointedness between parts of the image being where they are and should be. On further examination, the ghostly silhouette of a girl, blonde fly-aways not entirely concealed under Grigorenko's manipulation, exerts her absent presence on the miniature Kremlin at Niagara Falls.

Working within the context of the family album, Grigorenko's removals and manipulations take on another connotation: the grasping for personal truths, for intimate histories, and the difficulty of locating them within official histories. Grigorenko evokes the sensitive dependence of political knowledge on private moments. By claiming an unofficial family archive as the site of her photographic intervention, she lays plain the familial and photographic



Zoë Heyn-Jones, *Atitlán 3*, Inkjet print on transparency film, dimensions variable; from scanned Super 8 film stills, 2014

desire to document personal histories, and rearranges the photograph's "truthful" elements to reveal the other histories hidden within even the smallest gestures.

By converse, the body is conspicuously absent from the frame in Zoë Heyn-Jones's *Atitlán*. The 16mm film, blown up from a single reel of hand-processed Super 8, and the accompanying stills, chart the route from Guatemala City

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to Santiago Atitlán, a town situated on Lake Atitlán, in the Guatemalan highlands. The footage, which spurts and jumps in the characteristic manner of small gauge film shot entirely in single frames, does not represent a road stretched out in front of the vehicle, ready for the travel and the taking, but rather small sections of cityscape, roadside stops, trees, mountains, the horizon, hand-painted signs, passing busses and cars. No individual humans, only their work, their space. If they are there, they pass quickly. They are going their own somewhere. They are not the subjects of an ethnographic survey, but act as agents in their own environment, their own narratives, just off camera.



Zoë Heyn-Jones, *Atitlán II*, Inkjet print on transparency film, dimensions variable; from scanned Super 8 film stills, 2014

Santiago Atitlán, the film's culmination point, is home to a significant population of the Tz'utujil Maya people. It is also the site of mass violence during the Guatemalan civil war. In 1990, a year during which Heyn-Jones lived in Guatemala with her family as a young child, Santiago Atitlán experienced a massacre of unarmed civilians by the Guatemalan Army. During the civil war years (1960-1996), hundreds of Maya from Santiago Atitlán were also forcibly disappeared. As part of a growing practice against a civilian population believed by state security forces to be in support of guerrilla warriors, forced disappearance—by way of kidnapping, torture, imprisonment, and murder—wrenched over 45,000 Guatemalan civilians from their homes over the 36-year course of the war. Some bodies have since been recovered, and some officials charged with war crimes. Others have not.

Throughout her film, Heyn-Jones does not engage in revealing Atitlán, unveiling it as a site of genocide and forced removal. Rather, the footage highlights the speed of moving along the route, the sensations of disorientation, the darkness, the barely-catching-sight-ness, the beckoning glint of light on the lake, the embodied notion of the land as a place of intergenerational trauma. She disappears herself in order to channel an experience of the space around her. In Heyn-Jones's still images, we are allowed to examine the sensorially-loaded cityscapes and the open landscape next to each other. The blur of motion, rendered through single-frame shooting—and its arrest of time through photographic printing—skews temporarily. We slow. We remember.

Both Grigorenko and Heyn-Jones excise their own bodies from the photograph. As witnesses to the nameless removal of bodies, they know that in the removal, there is a violence that marks itself indelibly, whether on the photograph or on the land. But in the process of removing themselves from the photograph, the artists allow the viewer to step in, to witness the troubling void in space. To experience the absence made present. It is not the banana peel becoming dirt, it is the passage in the encyclopedia, it is the unmarked and undiscovered graves, it is the posters on the street.

Cover image

Zoë Heyn-Jones,
Atitlán I, Inkjet print
on transparency film,
dimensions variable;
from scanned Super 8
film stills, 2014

Poster image

Tatiana Grigorenko,
Swimming, 16.5 x 11.5 inch
archival inkjet print
on cotton rag paper and
collage, 2010-2012



Tatiana Grigorenko, *Confederate Flag*, 16.5 x 11.5 inch archival inkjet print on cotton rag paper and collage, 2010-2012

Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography is a non-profit artist-run centre committed to photography as a multi-faceted and ever-changing artform. Founded in 1979 to establish a supportive environment for the development of photography, Gallery 44's mandate is to provide a context for reflection and dialogue on contemporary photography and its related practices. Gallery 44 offers exhibition and publication opportunities to national and international artists, award-winning education programs, and affordable production facilities for artists. Through its programs, Gallery 44 is engaged in changing conceptions of the photographic image and its modes of production.

Tatiana Grigorenko was born and grew up in New York City. After a brief stint as a professional ballet dancer, she received her BA in Fine Arts and French in 2003 from Amherst College and her MFA in photography in 2010 from Yale School of Art. Named emerging photographer of 2009 by the Magenta Foundation and Wallpaper Magazine's 2011 New Graduate Talent to Watch, Tatiana Grigorenko's work has been exhibited widely, including at the Queens Museum in New York, Philadelphia Photo Arts, Yale Art Gallery, Paris Photo Los Angeles and the American University of Paris. She lives and works in New York and Paris.

Zoë Heyn-Jones is a Toronto-based researcher and visual artist focusing on ethnography and expanded cinema. Zoë is currently a PhD student in Visual Art at York University. Zoë studied cinema and anthropology at the University of Toronto, and holds an MA in Film Studies from Concordia University and an MFA in Documentary Media from Ryerson University.

Alison Cooley is a writer, curator, and educator based in Toronto. Her work deals with the intersection of natural history and visual culture, socially-engaged artistic practice, craft histories, and experiential modes of art criticism. She is the 2014 co-recipient of the Middlebrook Prize for Young Curators, and her critical writing has recently appeared in FUSE, Canadian Art, and KAPSULA. She is also the host and producer of What It Looks Like, a podcast about art in Canada.

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