
A nineteenth century woman is captured mid-air jumping rope; a 1950s male transvestite stands at a bar in an evening gown; a close-up image of two pairs of slippers under a bed, his and hers—these are just a few of the found photographs in Robert Flynn Johnson’s The Face in the Lens: Anonymous Photographs.

Thoughtfully designed, the book contains over 220 mostly black and white richly-reproduced images of familiar events, such as, childhood, marriage, Halloween, and death. They date from the late nineteenth through the twentieth century, and stripped of their original context, it is the images’ familiarity and anonymity that makes them so intriguing. As Johnson states, “apathy is our usual response to the familiar,” but throw in a slightly blurred image or headless wedding Polaroid and we are stopped in our tracks by the odd, otherworldly, or accidental. That chance snapshot or accidental find is often behind anonymous photo collections. Not so here. The majority of the images that Johnson presents here are purposefully made photographs. Some feature fetishes, abnormalities, and the bizarre, and are made even more unusual by their anonymity.

Johnson is the curator emeritus of the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and this is the second publication to celebrate his anonymous photography collection. The earlier publication, Anonymous: Enigmatic Images from Unknown Photographers (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004) includes other genres of photography like landscape and still life and is not limited in scope to images of people as in the current volume. The beautifully-reproduced photographs are arranged into general categories with clever titles, ranging from childhood (“Immaturity”) to death (“Inevitability”). In addition to the images, the book includes two essays, image notes, acknowledgments, and a brief essay by Johnson on collecting anonymous photography. The introduction, “Being Human” is by Alexander McCall Smith, the author of the popular series The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency. Smith provides imaginative make-believe narratives for a number of images. The second essay, “Whole in One” by Johnson, delves into the profound nature of photographs, our responses to them, and the consequence of anonymous photography.

For the last decade the popularity and acceptance of anonymous photography (or more popularly coined ‘found photography’) as art has continued to escalate and has spawned exhibitions at prominent institutions such as the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the National Gallery of Art. Numerous publications have been released as well, from scholarly exhibition catalogs, to general interest works like this one. In this sequel, Johnson once again shares his love of the unexpected and that opportunity awaits those who wish to seek their own found photograph collections. Recommended for libraries with photography collections.

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