PHOTOSOPHY

Reflections on Photography as the Practice of a Form of Wisdom

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Photosophy is a term coined by Polish artist Andrzej Różycki (1943–2021). Różycki was a photographer, filmmaker, art theorist, and lecturer at the Łódź Film School, active in Poland's neo-avant-garde scene from the 1960s onward (he belonged to groups like Zero-61 and the Workshop of the Film Form). Photosophy (Polish: fotozofia) was his own concept — a fusion of photography and philosophy — treating photography as a mystery, where an invisible image latently exists behind the visible information of a photograph. On these terms, the practice of photography becomes a question of wisdom rather than documentation.

WISDOM AS KNOWING WHAT PASSES

Wisdom might be said to begin with a sense of finitude: knowing what endures, what decays, and how to hold that knowledge without denial. A photograph is arguably built out of exactly this. Różycki's concern throughout his career with the physicality of photographs highlighted how photographs age and suffer the maladies particular to paper objects — they deteriorate, and gain in value through that deterioration. A print doesn't just depict time passing; it undergoes it, the same way its subject did. Looking at an old photograph is a small rehearsal of mortality — this is why Roland Barthes, writing about photography, kept returning to the sense that every photo carries a "this will die" alongside its 'this was.' A tradition of literature (Ecclesiastes, Stoic memento mori) has always said that confronting impermanence honestly is where wisdom starts. Photography, uniquely among the arts and in its printed forms, hands you a physical object that performs that confrontation for you.

WISDOM AS ATTENTION NOT INFORMATION

There's a useful distinction between knowledge (facts, accumulation) and wisdom (judgment about what matters, cultivated through sustained attention). A camera can be used purely to gather

information — a passport photo, a inventory shot — but the same machine can be used to slow down and attend to something rather than extract data from it. Wisdom, in this sense, is less about what the photograph shows and more about the quality of looking that produced it — patient, unhurried, willing to sit with what won't fully resolve into meaning. It is this second type of photography that opens itself up to the sustained reflection of a thoughtful viewer.

WISDOM AS HOLDING TWO THINGS AT ONCE

One might take wisdom to mean holding a paradox without collapsing it. Photography is structurally paradoxical in the same way: it is undeniably a representation of light bouncing off the real and yet it is radically partial, framed, silent, frozen — it withholds as much as it reveals. Consequently, a photograph's evidentiary certainty and its essential mystery are not in tension; they're the same fact seen from two sides. Wisdom involves holding on to that paradox.

WISDOM AS COMMUNION WITH THE DEAD

Różycki's FotoAndrzejoZofia (2010), reworked photographs of his late friend Zofia Rydet — a personal and artistic dialogue with a deceased photographer, creating collages from his and her photographs, as a gesture of reviving her memory.

The name 'FotoZofia' is a deliberate double meaning: Zofia is both the name of his late friend, photographer Zofia Rydet, and the Polish/Greek root for "sophia" — wisdom. So FotoZofia reads simultaneously as "Photo-Zofia" (a work dedicated to her) and "Photo-Sophia" (photo-wisdom, i.e. photosophy itself). FotoAndrzejoZofia extends the pun further — Różycki fuses his own first name into it too, so the title becomes "Photo-Andrew-Sophia," collapsing his identity, hers, and the philosophical project into a single compound name. It is less a series title than a small piece of conceptual art in itself.

(Andrzej Różycki, 2010)

(From Sociological Record)

Rydet (1911-97 is one of the towering figures of 20th-century Polish photography, best known for the Sociological Record (1978-97), a documentary project of some 30,000 photographs of rural Polish interiors and their inhabitants. But she also made a much less-known body of surreal photo-collages, The World of Feelings and Imagination (1975-79), built from fragments of her earlier images, and dealing — in her words — with people threatened from birth, loneliness, and the dread of time's passage. Różycki knew her personally and had already made a documentary about her in 1989. Working from her collage aesthetic, rather than her documentary one, was itself a choice to meet her in the mode where she was closest to his own "photosophical" preoccupations.

COLLAGE/DECOLLAGE

Różycki built the series by cutting into and layering his own and Rydet's photographs into collages. Decades later, when the University of Łódź's archive revisited the work with students, they physically reverse-engineered his method — pulling his collages back apart into their original layers, then symbolically recombining them — as a way of studying how he thought, not just what he made. That a scholarly archive treats his collage technique as something to be `decollaged' and reconstructed suggests the method itself, not just the finished images, carried his theoretical content — the labor of layering fragments together was the metaphysical gesture, calling up an image of the dead by reassembling the physical traces they left behind.

(From Rydet, The World of Feelings and Imagination)

Layering his own photographs with those of a dead friend might be considered an act of reviving her memory — echoing Barthes' broader theme of photography as a technology for communing with the dead. It is the clearest embodiment of his idea that a photograph holds an invisible presence inside its visible surface: literally, in this case, Rydet's presence persisting inside images she didn't take, arranged by someone else, after her death.

Several philosophical and spiritual traditions treat the relationship with ancestors and the dead as central to wisdom itself. Różycki's actual practice — reworking Rydet's photographs after her death, treats photography a technology for that kind of communion. A photograph lets someone who has died keep being looked at, keep being in dialogue with the living, in a way almost nothing else does at that scale (writing can too, but not with a face).

One may conclude with the thought that photography, when practiced with enough attention, forces the same philosophical or spiritual confrontations (finitude, partial knowledge, the presence of the

dead, the gap between record and reality). The camera just happens to be a technological way of getting there.