

Public Figures (2015)

Point of view, interpretation, and the circumscribed space of collage are at the forefront of my thoughts these days. Inscribed, intended, or normative meanings are never fixed and, when we find our point of view shifted, our notions of the world around us may begin to break down. In *Public Figures*, author Jena Osman uses the gaze of monuments to construct a network of observations that possess the power of transformation. In a mix of writing styles and images, she restages history, redefines violence, repositions the reader, and reveals the complexity of and our complicity in the gaze. Structurally the book weaves together art, journalism, photography, mapping, politics, and poetry. But - truth, hypocrisy, ideology, morality, and memory - are the revelation of Osman's odyssey.

Compelled by the idea of seeing the world through other's eyes, Osman formulates her research project: to photograph the gaze of monuments in her hometown of Philadelphia. She rigs a mop handle with a disposable camera at one end so that she can access the often out of reach eyes of the monument's protagonist. We see photos of the monuments, mostly military statues, juxtaposed to images of what they see. The accompanying text is at first very matter of fact; Osman briefly describes the monument and presents a few details of relevant history. In several instances she makes a specific connection between the gaze and the historical back story. Her first entry – Major John Fulton Reynolds – is gazing at trees. According to Osman's research, although Reynolds was a respected military figure, he fell asleep under a tree and was taken prisoner by the enemy, an embarrassment for Reynolds and the army in which he served. It may be purely coincidental, nonetheless it's poetic that this war hero is positioned to spend his time looking at the object of his humiliation.

Not long into the book, Osman begins to consider specific details: uniform, weapon, bible, inscription, pose. Every detail suddenly seems calculated to support a certain narrative, a particular ideology. This is reflective of not only how the institutional gaze positioned but also how the public's gaze is positioned by the institution. Our perception of history is carefully constructed. Osman admits that the details, and what they signify, are coming into focus only as her project evolves; it's not far-fetched to assume that the public has little regard for the monuments encountered in their daily comings and goings. The text beneath a photo of the author photographing, notes the impact of her actions on passersby as they catch on to what she's up to, "They gasp and laugh." Osman's simple gesture, regardless of the back story or the details, is enough to incite some sense of raised consciousness. Observing Osman paying attention, the public is provoked to pay attention too.

Osman's collage includes a more cryptic text that runs along the bottom of many of the pages. It's not initially clear whose voice is being transcribed in the collections of phrases, printed in a different font. Constantly referring to a "target" and using words like "roger wilco," "weapon," "impact," and "bombs" one is quick to recognize the military lingo. In actuality the military text is excerpts of drone pilot's narration that Osman has appropriated from YouTube videos. Here we see through yet another set of eyes. The language is unemotional and exacting. The voice seems far removed from the destruction and loss of life to which it is inextricably connected. The relevance of the drone pilot's text suddenly becomes clear: the disconnect of the monuments from the real-world consequences they represent, let alone from the truth, parallels the disconnect of the drone pilots from their targets. The action of the drone appears on a screen like a television show, a video game, or a movie. How easy it is to write history from a distance.

As the book progresses, we are primed to ask questions, to read between the lines. This acquired position feels enlightened, privileged even. Amplifying the complexity of her story and our experience, Osman interweaves photographs of actual soldiers engaged in military maneuvers as well as diagrams of the monument's locations in relationship to each other. At a couple of intervals the photographs are omitted and replaced by text. Osman sets up the "story," writes the photographic "image," and provides the "caption." We are, at this point, primed to insert the image using our imagination: engrossed in Osman's storytelling it's a task we happily take on. From text to pictures to maps, there is constant movement. The patinated bronze and solid stone fluctuates between past and present; the public navigates its way around the monuments and through history; the drones stealthily fly, look and act; the soldiers invade, rescue, carry out, and execute; the reader travels from Philadelphia to Venezuela to Ancient Greece to Vietnam to Europe to Iraq. Osman's concise book is unfathomably expansive.

Public Figures wraps up with several pages of transcribed drone pilot narration that subtly, beautifully, transform into poetry. We are left with the final thought:

everything relies on visual confirmation, action no longer
sensation.

Ultimately Osman's photography project, compelling in and of itself, becomes a catalyst for something much deeper, far more complex. We are objects in a constructed, collaged space that encompasses time and place, fact and fiction, ambivalence and action, sight and gaze. Yet, we don't have to exist as romanticized markers in fixed locations. We have the ability to observe, self-reflect, and verify. We are poised to take action and, more importantly, to take responsibility for the consequences of our actions.