

A visual commentary examining American Culture in the context of a variety of contemporary sociopolitical questions.

You, Them, They, We!

by: Rob J Phillips

Where will we be tomorrow considering the irrepressible tumult stifling the voices of peace? Is social accord an experience that will remain only as fiction, destined to be banned in some totalitarian future America as discordant political rhetoric promotes ideals of exclusion...is this the State of the Union? *Status quo defectis ad nostrum verum est*; the status quo failures are ours to correct. Abject insularity is a keystone ideal facilitating deeper divides in the experiment we call America.

To begin, this work is an introduction to the *Nos Populi* series. “You, Them, They, We!” examines the growing insular character of America. It also investigates how through the gaze we sometimes discover a basis for the exclusion of individuals who appear unfamiliar, or with whom we do not align. Our cultural ideals typically include visual identity and association by appearance or externalized cues. Yet, the project hopes to uncover the idea, though tribalism is apparent and popular, we can nevertheless be inclusive as a super-culture.

Indeed, in contrast to its beginnings, contemporary America has become an extremely robust and mind-boggling complex society of subcultures. With such a complexity of characteristics, our society experiences complementary and contrasting effects which may result in more essential cooperation and/or more substantial conflicts. Those characteristics might be values, beliefs, practices, or learned behaviors; and without critical leadership or other extraordinary guidance, subcultures expand boundaries and ideals begin to diverge even more significantly; we grow to appreciate each other less.

Hence, considering how visual a culture America is, my intent is to facilitate the unusual encounter *vis-à-vis* life-sized photographs of a diverse set of people... The ultimate goal is to represent America, city by city—by confronting viewers with individuals they might not typically encounter or not normally tend to engage. The provocative nature of life-sized imagery engenders thoughts and feelings similar in substance to what might be experienced were the individual personified in actuality. The installation may precipitate, or be a catalyst, inciting the breakdown of boundaries which perpetuate insularity. It is my goal as the artist to stimulate

intrapersonal conversation and the questioning of values that support indifference or the rejection of others' ideals.

"You, Them, They, We!" will grow over years. I intend it to represent the plethora of cultures, and sub-cultures, that is America. As it grows, there will be many cases of the subject persons reminding the viewers of someone whom they might encounter in a day, but hopefully in most cases not so much. Each photograph will become a doorway allowing the subject person to step into the viewer's presence. The subject's gaze then also turns the idea around that the viewer is the only potentially judgmental observer. Effectively, at that moment, the viewer is confronted, though without evident contempt, and greeted with either curiosity or some degree of aloofness.

Lastly, my desire is for this installation to represent an exothermic experience, intending to inject heat of emotion or stimulate visceral reaction. That goal serves as the basis for including, in conjunction with the imagery, an audio component. This audible component explores the co-occurrence of self-directed divergence from inclusion nurturing behaviors. Consider the premise that we experience our values largely in thought well before we express ourselves in actions. These thoughts, on a conscious level, are words that affect our feelings, and our feelings then our actions. The actions, therefore, represent manifestations of underlying beliefs and ideals that represent us. What is the impact of the words that come to mind when we encounter each other? As part of that exploration, this installation will facilitate an ongoing collection of viewer's words (anonymously) for use in future installations.

In our day-to-day existence, do we avoid words as a means for getting through the day with less conflict? As we avoid words that we worry about, are we hiding what we believe, and thereby allowing our beliefs to grow into something unintended? Finally, where does insularity come from; that is the fundamental exploration this artwork represents.