

# Assemblage: a toolkit with pictures

*Nicky Bird*

NOW THAT YOU HAVE journeyed from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century through the works of Burke + Norfolk, and looked at the military faces and statuesque poses, watch Simon Norfolk on YouTube.<sup>1</sup> Listen to the ‘if I can have you looking this way’ instructions as the photographer directs each member of the group. Most of them are told to look towards things outside the photographic frame (such as a jeep or an army officer), while one looks into the camera lens. Against the ambient sound of target practice, the practicalities of organising the portrait are complete. Cut to the resulting, silent photograph.

Turn back to the reproduction of this group portrait on page 20 and take a closer look. Perhaps you find yourself moving from Norfolk to Burke, and then back again. Perhaps you find yourself thinking of those other group portraits that lie, historically and culturally speaking, in the ‘in-between’. These are more ubiquitous: school groups, sporting teams, wedding parties spring to mind. They appear commonplace and unambiguous in meaning, even when the sitters’ identities are unknown. They may – in the face of war and global politics – seem inconsequential. There may also be a slippage of terms between ‘group portrait’ (in the sense Norfolk deploys it) and the more utilitarian ‘group photograph’. And yet these vernacular forms remind us of the true purpose of group portraits, and the occasions on which they are made. Some of these mark rites of passage, such as the end of a school year or the beginning of married life. Others say more about team identity, and what trophies can be won through collective effort. Certain obvious elements of such photographs –

the location, the pose of the subjects or the way they are dressed – may invite a specialist reading, with individual faces and other details (medals, blazers, tutus) speaking to some viewers more than others. It is no coincidence, given these characteristics, that the group portrait has been appropriated by various academic disciplines, including anthropology, sociology and the history of fashion.<sup>2</sup> This, however, is rushing to the future when the photograph as artefact has lost its original meaning and context.

Let us for a moment, imagine the scene before a group portrait is taken. The figure of the (often unknown) photographer now comes into play, arranging and directing the sitters, who could number anything between five and fifty people, and may well include the occasional dog. This requires some skill, but it is helped by a shared sense of purpose between photographer and sitters – whether eight or eighteen years old, wearing swim suits, combat uniforms or bunny costumes. In some instances, the question of who stands in the top, middle or front row, or is seated in the centre, is determined by rank and importance; in others, it seems a practical question of height – though if you look closely enough you will see that this is often achieved with the aid of a chair. Before the shutter is released, attention to the last crucial details is given, to enhance posture: arms folded, hands behind backs or in laps. Once this is done, it is time for the ritual ‘Look this way’ at the camera: photographic convention and social expectation meet.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the collective gaze of the vernacular group portrait, in which the subjects look through the camera lens towards future viewers of the photograph. The overriding message is one

of belonging, which encompasses even the momentarily distracted sitter. This notion of belonging brings in turn qualities of confidence, cohesiveness, strength, and on occasion, fun. These can be detected from a first glance at the group portrait.

The significance of the gazes, facial expressions and messages within the group portrait leads us back to Norfolk’s *Afghan police being trained by US marines* page 20. The group may be in a unit but there are disconnections, dislocations; the collective gaze may be directed outwards, but it looks past and away over the viewer. The mood is introspective, uncertain. The expressions on the faces of individual men are pensive, self-contained. We might be reminded of contemporary art photography’s fondness for the lone sitter’s blank expression, and of its critics, who argue that this is the sign of how the photographer limits the sitter’s agency in very particular ways.<sup>3</sup> Or we might think of other art photographers who use the trope of the group portrait, but direct individuals to stand apart with the instruction ‘Don’t look at each other, me or the camera’. The message in these cases is one of alienation – the antithesis of the more commonplace group portrait.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the issue of the future – not least the uncertain future of the participants – looms large, even over those that may be dismissed as banal, boring pictures. Let us consider the photograph of a military unit, probably taken in the late 1940s, that comes at the end of the series of images on the following pages. The exact date, location and name of the unit are unknown. The overall demeanor of the unit members is typically authoritative.

We can speculate that the photograph will be displayed in shared communal spaces, such as an officers’ mess, as well as in the more private context of a family album. By imagining the display and circulation of such an image, we move through public domains, military communities and personal archives. The more recent appearances of present-day platoon photographs in the press have become a familiar signal for tragic news. This points both to the terms on which group portraits enter the public realm and to their connection with death. The fame, or infamy, of an individual may propel some group portraits into the media. More typically, it is the everyday occurrence of distant relatives quietly letting go of materials that no longer have any meaning or interest for them. With no clue on the back of the picture, sometimes a poignant ‘x’ in pencil under the feet of a girl is not enough. Yet unidentified group portraits, especially of children, prompt stories of recognition, identification and – most tellingly – survival. These begin with a question: where are they now? This may then lead to speculations, anecdotes, of the who-didn’t-make-it-in-my-class kind.<sup>5</sup>

Listen to the narratives that the group portrait solicits: the private battles of everyday life, of lives unexpectedly cut short. Return to the military units taken by Norfolk and the unknown photographer: the connotations of novices on one side, with their battles still to come, and, on the other, the veterans of World War II, with their fighting done.

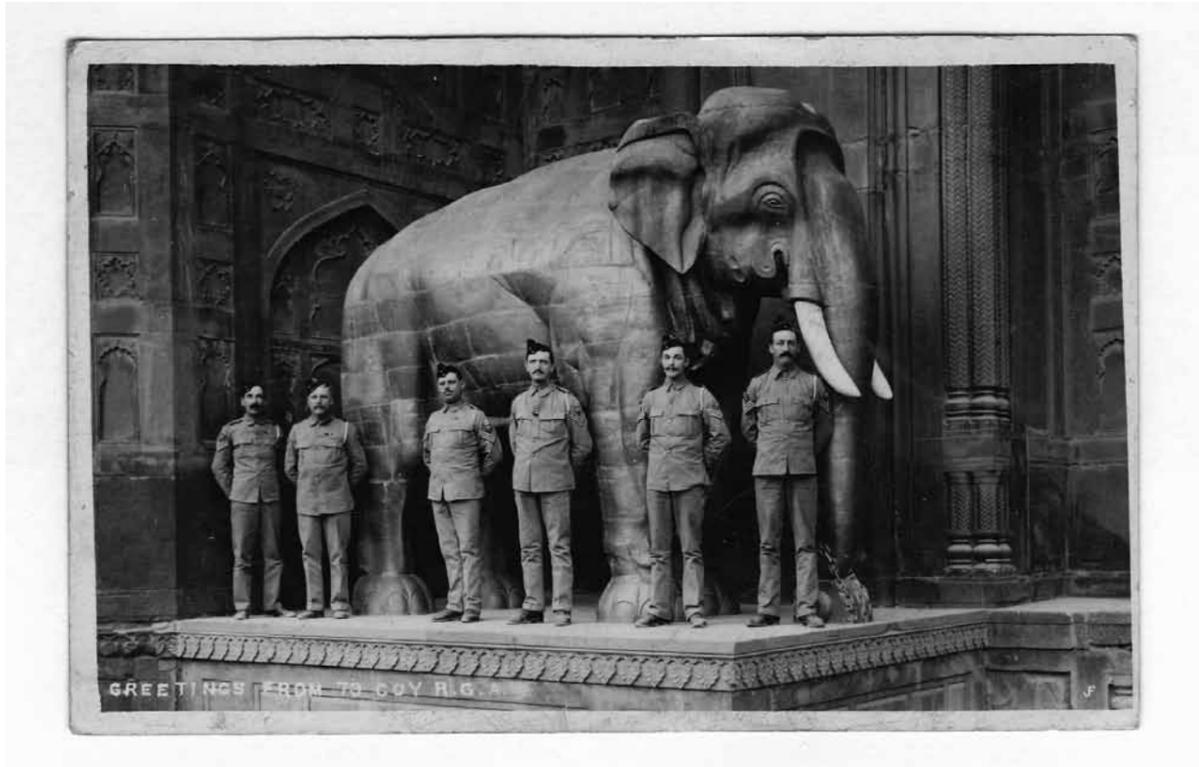
So what do such images – military and otherwise – tell us about the importance of the collective portrait? And can we resist the urge for the discourse of the personal?<sup>6</sup>

Now a toolkit, with pictures ...<sup>7</sup>











'Almost no one today shoots group portraits –  
I wonder why?'

*Simon Norfolk*

'Group photographs are especially complex. In these  
we see the play of the individual against the collective,  
indeed their subject is the performance of the cohesive  
group. However these are never neutral...'

*Elizabeth Edwards*

'They are the colloquial voice in visual form, and carry  
the idiomatic accents of every class and grouping in  
social culture.'

*Tom Normand*

'...they are invested with no more than *studium*. The  
*studium* is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of  
various interest, of inconsequential taste: *I like / I don't  
like*. The *studium* is the order of *liking*, not of *loving*.'

*Roland Barthes*

'...portraiture is more than 'just a picture', it is a place of  
work: a semiotic event for social identity.'

*David Bate*

'When photographers take pictures, they hold mental  
models in their minds; models that are the result of the  
proddings of insight, conditioning, and comprehension  
of the world.'

*Stephen Shore*

'Beauty is, at least in part, always tied to subject matter.'

*Robert Adams*

<sup>1</sup> *Burke + Norfolk: Photographs from the War in Afghanistan* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXrmBhpRG2U> Originally screened as part of the exhibition at Tate Modern, 6 May–10 July 2011.

<sup>2</sup> David Bate, 'Looking at Portraits', *Photography: The Key Concepts* (Oxford: Berg, 2009), pp. 67–86. Elizabeth Edwards, 'Little Theatres of Self: Thinking about the Social', *We Are the People: Postcards from the Collection of Tom Phillips* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2004), pp. 26–37.

<sup>3</sup> Julian Stallabrass, 'What's in a face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography', *October*, no. 122, Fall 2007, pp. 71–90.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Mitra Tabrizian, 'City, London, 2008', photograph in *Portfolio: Contemporary Photography in Britain*, no. 50, November 2009, pp. 12–13.

<sup>5</sup> From two conversations: with Robin Jones, Principal Lecturer, Faculty of Media Arts and Society, Southampton Solent University, 15 July 2011; and with Louie, Buckstone Tiling, Edinburgh, 22 July 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Normand, 'Other Photographies, Different Histories: looking at photographs in Dunfermline', *Studies in Photography*, 2009, pp. 14–20.

<sup>7</sup> Thirteen photographs, various sizes purchased from eBay. The quotations are from: Simon Norfolk, *Burke + Norfolk: Photographs From The War In Afghanistan* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 2011), p. 13; Elizabeth Edwards, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 32; Tom Normand, *op. cit.* (note 6) p. 14; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage, 1982), p. 27; David Bate, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 67; Stephen Shore, *The Nature of Photographs* (London & New York: Phaidon Press, 2007), p. 117; Robert Adams, *Beauty in Photography* (New York: Aperture, 1996), p. 33.