

## **The memory in the photograph**

Sigrún Alba Sigurðardóttir, cultural theorist, examines real and fictional memories in the book *If I had been ...* by Nina Zurier

article by Christian Gudjonsson in DV, Reykjavík, July 17, 2015

Nina's first memory is a dress. She looks, full of admiration, at her mother, a beautiful, serious, dressed-up woman sitting in the living room on Blönduhlíð—this must be New Year's Eve in 1952. The Christmas tree is still up and casts a shadow on the wall. But what she remembers most clearly is the fancy dress of her mother. The fabric crackles when you touch it. Material that you cannot snuggle up to—you cannot soil such a fine dress—so supernaturally beautiful, but untouchable.

This could be a look at the first memory of Nina Zurier if she had been born in Reykjavík instead of Detroit in the early 1950s. The image of the woman in fancy dress on Blönduhlíð is the first image in the photo book *If I had been...* in which Nina imagines how her childhood would have been if she had grown up in Iceland. “This is a unique experiment with imagination and reality,” says cultural theorist Sigrún Alba Sigurðardóttir in the introduction to the book that was recently published by Crymogeia.

## **If I had been ... an Icelander**

Nina Zurier is an American photographer. She was born in Detroit in the 1950s and lives and works in California with her husband, artist John Zurier. “They first came to the country in 2002, and have come regularly since then and have made quite a bit of art in Iceland. Nina told me that when she first came to Iceland, she found it a little as if she had come home,” says Sigrún Alba.

“There was some feeling that came over her in Reykjavík. I do not know if it reminded her of the Detroit of her youth or what. Over several years she spent time at the Reykjavík Photography Museum looking at photo albums and film contact sheets and found the pictures from the 1950s and 1960s had a strong appeal for her. She began to play a little bit with the idea of how her life would have been if

she had been born in Iceland, if it would have been at all different from the life that she lived in the United States and to what extent. From there she went methodically through the archive and began to create stories about a possible life if she had been born in Iceland in the 1950s,” says Sigrún.

### **Fictional memories**

In this way, Nina comes to the nature of memory and the relationship to the imagination. Is it possible to create memories? which leads to another question: are memories perhaps always to some extent fictional?

“French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has written about how we use our imagination to give memories substantive meaning,” says Sigrún. “Imagination is like a dream, this creative power that enables us to deal with reality.”

“You do not remember all that you have experienced, but often it is something that has aroused strong feelings or appeals to people intellectually—because you see that it fits or does not fit one’s own identity. Thus we begin to create a narrative of our own lives and put memories into this story,” she says.

The experience of a particular fact that is repeated in the mind or memory is really incomprehensible if one gives it no meaning; it is memories, not the story that one has created for oneself. Nina goes, however, a step further and creates a story about herself that has no basis in her actual experiences and creates memories for this imaginary self by scrutinizing the photographs.

“She collects photographs based on real events, real life, and real memories of others and finds herself in them—she makes herself the ‘other’. So she lives in the history of an artificial life that still has some basis in reality. Each picture includes a story that could be a story from her life but is in fact a story from the lives of others,” says Sigrún.

### **To read photographs as poetry**

When the photo is looked at, the mind runs to different places and times: both the moment the photo was taken and the analogous life of Nina in the United States—how was our vacation in Detroit? asks a man when you look at the picture of the Icelandic tent campers. “Each picture includes many stories and I think the reader or viewer is allowed to read or view it a bit like poetry, to be allowed to create stories about each picture—she offers the reader a way to do this,” says Sigrún.

But the images also offer the reader the possibility to connect with and review their own memories. “I find it very interesting how the picture taken in Vogaskóli in the 1950s brings up memories for me from Álftamýrarskóla in the 1970s and 1980s. You can call it an “access point” which is a concept of Roland Barthes. I look at these shoes and a feeling comes over me. I connect to playing football in the schoolyard grass in the spring, and this bad smell erupts that comes when the ice is melting down in the grass. When I look at the image, I find this smell—though this is not a reflection of my life. This is not even from the time that I was in school, but it can be the kind of detail in the image—the access point—that somehow speaks directly to people.”

### **Details highlighted**

Small and therefore seemingly inconsequential details often trigger stronger emotions than the overall image and so burn into our memory: the texture of the dress of my mother, how clouds clump over the lake one summer day, facial expressions of friends or a posture. By publishing enlarged views of details alongside each original photograph in the book, Nina directs the reader’s attention towards certain things and certain feelings.

“One example is the image of Aðalstræti from the 1960s. When you see the whole image, you really look more at the houses and signs and the historical context, but because Nina blows up a detail and brings out the woman with a purse who is rushing somewhere, we better perceive what it means to be a woman on the run in the Icelandic weather, in high heels on pavement that is all broken up. This is the feeling that we understand. But both facts and feelings can tell someone the truth about the 1960s in Reykjavík. ”

The photographs are not only a fun authority on how the imaginary childhood land

looked, the style of dress, the design and architecture of the period, but also the physical part: “They are the source of your smile, your gaze, your touch, all these intangible, emotional and mental situations.”

Since Nina sees the photographs through the eyes of a stranger, she opens the eyes of Icelanders more often than not to interesting things that they would otherwise overlook. “She brings out the details that have spoken strongly to her. We may become a little accustomed to seeing similar images—for example, three women sitting on the grass in Hjómskálagardur. But she sees this in a more exotic way and stops at items that could easily go past those who are accustomed to seeing such images.”