

COME AS YOU ARE: Jason Lazarus's Gestures of Inclusion

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“Who first introduced you to the band, Nirvana?” By asking that seemingly simple question, Jason Lazarus expanded his artistic practice beyond the boundaries of a strictly lens-based photographic method and embraced the possibilities that a more inclusive approach could offer.¹ Recognizing that found (or submitted) vernacular photography and text held the potential to open new lines of inquiry into personal archives and memories, Lazarus began incorporating others’ words and images into his practice.² Since initiating *NIRVANA* (2007), Lazarus has embarked on a rigorous exploration of multiple discourses related to photography: archiving, collecting, curating; soliciting participation from contributors; making self-reflexive photos about photography; designing installation-based modes of display; making photograms, videos, and takeaway posters; using text as image; and setting up public situations, in part to collect others’ documentation of the resultant event. Lazarus’s tireless experimentation with a variety of conceptual strategies seems to ensure that his burgeoning body of work will not only continue to propagate but that it will also consistently feel “contemporary.”

With *NIRVANA*, Lazarus began one of his earliest forays into “curating” existing imagery and solicited or found text.³ He retained the importance he had placed on the photographic image in earlier works, while also introducing a textual component. Lazarus invited contributors to submit a photograph of the person who first introduced them to the influential grunge band that skyrocketed to prominence in the early 1990s, a formative period for the artist himself. Each participant

also provided a written narrative about the depicted person, from which Lazarus selected illuminating, and often sobering, portions to handwrite directly on the print.⁴ For example, an underwater image of a young bikini-clad girl with her arms outstretched reads: “My daughter Caitlin introduced me to Nirvana. I took this picture of her in the Caribbean in 1994. In the week after this picture was taken, she broke her back and spent the next six years in rehabilitation. I remember clearly Cobain’s voice as the soundtrack of this time when she lost so much.”

Posing a question steeped in the temporality of pop culture, Lazarus offered an opportunity to reflect on the individual and shared cultural ramifications of seemingly mundane interactions. As editor Stephen Johnstone points out in *The Everyday*, there is “the assumption that the everyday is both authentic and democratic; it is the place where ordinary people creatively use and transform the world they encounter from one day to another.”⁵ Lazarus’s incorporation of a multiplicity of voices through text and snapshots—rather than media imagery of the band—yields an aggregate portrait, not strictly of youth culture with its attendant angst and search for belonging, but also of how music is inextricably linked with our personal memories and cultural histories. And just as the handwritten annotations in Lazarus’s inherited family photograph, *Untitled* (2006) undoubtedly led to his *Recordings* (2007-2009), *NIRVANA* was the demarcation point for Lazarus’s shift toward making participatory work.⁶

Lazarus continued his exploration of inclusive practices with the