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BY JAMES PEPPER KELLY

On Saturday I go to the granite steps of the MCA with several hundred others for Chicago Artists Group Portrait, 2015. The weather's kinda perfect: sunny, with big cadillacs of clouds rolling by every couple minutes to keep us cool. Down front Jason Lazarus, dressed all in white and holding a megaphone, paces, checks the time.

Jason's an artist/educator/proselytizer of collective action, a well-known/liked artist about town. We're all here to become history, to legitimize our self-definitions, to enjoy the picnic weather. Really, we're here because Jason asked us. I take a place standing in the back, on the top step. Lots of smiles, waves. We face out into the city. Backs to the museum doors. The photo will show it differently of course. We'll be tiny individuals framed by the stone architecture around us (supporting us? looming over?). Time will go by, we'll look old-fashioned and Historical and no longer breathing and one day people will zoom in on our eyes and think, "Hey! Those people saw Kanye!"

Jason hopes for more. The final, high-res file will be posted online, copyright free, for anyone to use.[1] Available for perpetual resurrection. It'll be a memento for Jason too, since he'll be leaving Chicago for Florida after so many years. He holds up the megaphone, thanks us for coming. So many people from his time here as a student, as a teacher! He takes a moment to also remember those who aren't with us anymore.

Who are dead. Okay, he says, just a couple more minutes! I suddenly remember Steven King—at a commencement speech in the late '90s he asked us to look around the crowd and imagine it in one hundred years, the seats of those who are no longer with us now empty. Maybe three, four seats still filled. I look around the crowd. Some people are holding sticks with cut-out images of others' heads stuck on top. A way for non-attendees to be there too.

Down front there's some noise about a bird. Which is in front of us, on the plaza? I can't see it from the back. The bird is stubborn! Jason says. It won't leave. "Okay!" Jason says. He tells us to get ready. Then the shutter snaps open, several times in a row. I'd wondered if it would be slow. Like in a story I read about a school portrait in the early 20th century. Every year the girl in the story and her sister would run from one side of the crowd to the other as the panoramic camera turned, so that they'd appear on both sides of the final image. One winter her sister died and in the spring she tried to run for both of them but tripped and didn't make it. Then the final image arrives and her sister's there. Somehow.

We take a break after several shots. Clouds blow by. The crowd chatters. Jason steps up, tells us to get ready for the final shots. And, he says, the bird can stay!

The crowd cheers.

Later I check the event page. A post-mortem. Jason thanks the MCA, his fellow organizers, facilitators, coordinators. All of us. Plus: "thank you to the BIRD for bearing symbolic load and providing comic relief!" I scroll through the comments, enjoying all the well-wishing, down to an exchange at the end of the thread.

"So what happened to the pigeon?"

"a little girl chased it away"

The final version of Chicago Artists Group Portrait will be available online in August. Apologies to Modest Mouse and Roland Barthes.

—James Pepper Kelly

[1] The full text about use, from the Chicago Artists Group Portrait Facebook event page: "The group portrait will be owned by everyone and become part of the public domain! It is my intention to not 'own' this photograph but to put it online for anyone to print, alter, distribute as they see fit (as this seems to happen anyways in our image culture)...in other words, I want to have it in the public domain where I think it belongs and watch it move around, mutate, and engage a greater audience."

(Image at top: Courtesy of the author)

Posted by James Pepper Kelly on 6/24/15

Tags: chicago artists group portrait, Chicago artists, Jason Lazarus, portraiture, MCA Chicago, memory, photography

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