

Vinca Petersen: New Experiments in Collectivity

by Alistair Robinson

Vinca Petersen's work is inseparable from her life: it is a lifelong project that is born both of a need to make a way of life public, and a commitment to a set of ethical ideals about how we should, and could, relate to each other.

Though some of her work originates from the need to preserve and celebrate a particular subculture, her body of work has incorporated activism and direct action, leading a self-initiated institution, international aid work, and unorthodox publishing and exhibiting projects. In the twenty-first century there are innumerable artists who position themselves as activists or whose theatre of action goes past the production of objects for the art market. There are far fewer whose work has had a genuine and remarkable impact outside the art world. There are even fewer who have successfully established their own registered charity, and secured support from many of the great and the good to fund its transformative work.

In 2010, Petersen created *Future Youth Project* (FYP), to "take people on physical and emotional journeys" whether close to home, working with children in Thanet, Kent; or internationally, especially in the Ukraine, where provision for children with learning difficulties has been limited. In Petersen's words, the *Future Youth Project* is "a small model for great change": it should be seen, as all of Petersen's work should be, as an experiment in collectivity, in asking what needs to be done. Petersen's work through FYP has shown how lives can be transformed through creative activity. Such types of work far exceed what the mainstream institutions of art can adequately represent, but are central to understanding her practice. Her own ideas have evolved as creative responses to mass social phenomena, and resulted in playful, yet utterly serious projects and forms of action. The question animating her work, is, then how individual creativity can reshape our collectivity – of how, through creativity, we might learn to live together better, and become our 'best selves' more fully.

Before FYP, Petersen persuaded the renowned designer and founder of Maharishi, Hardy Blechman, to design and donate a monumental inflatable that could be taken across Europe and Africa. Driving a truck across both continents, Petersen took this bespoke inflatable castle to orphanages and schools through Europe, Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and later to Romania and Ukraine. In her words, it has offered an "inexhaustible" source of joy to those who most need it. It acts as a temporary meeting place, and a focal point, a spatial device that enables children in particular to come together in uninhibited play and selfless joy (just as music does elsewhere in her work, for adults). Petersen is not a documentarian, nor merely an activist, but a catalyst: an agent for change committed to finding out who we might yet become.

These are, to date, lesser-known areas of Petersen's work; it is her photobooks that have secured her international attention – so far. These have celebrated the subculture she discovered in the 1990s, of self-organised music events, free of corporate commercial imperatives. Characteristically Petersen became immersed in this work, being the only figure on its inside to also photograph the life of the micro-communities who organised parties, and the lives of the enormous gatherings of young people assembled around them. That subculture prompted Petersen to travel across the whole of Europe, meeting thousands of young people across nations, across genders, and ethnicities. But that subculture is seen in her work as both a world-in-itself, and a way into a wider world: a means of rethinking who we might be able to be if we were to reimagine 'freedom'.

No System was made with Steidl in 1999: Petersen remains the youngest female artist ever to work with the legendary publisher Gerhard Steidl – and certainly the only artist to persuade him to release their book below cost price, so that the subjects of her photographs could afford it. Such stories are entirely characteristic of Petersen's project: of enabling the improbable, or seemingly impossible to take place, through inspiring faith in her singular talent, and her exceptional good grace in the world. *No System* is to be re-released in a new edition. In 2019 it was included in one of the first ever displays of photobooks at Tate Modern; Petersen was one of only five UK artists to feature in the entire Tate Modern displays at that time. It is a landmark publication, work from which was immediately acquired by the Victoria & Albert Museum for the UK National Collection of Photography, and which has subsequently been acquired by Martin Parr Foundation.

More recently, the experimental photobook *Future Fantasy* examined her earliest years, being created with radical publisher Ditto, and testing the very limits of what a photobook can be. *Future Fantasy* brings the moment of 'the second summer of love' into vivid life. It portrays the era as, in Petersen's words, "the last moment of genuine freedom" when young people could come together, en masse, to simply be as one, without chasing money or sex. It seems to physically embody a revolutionary, anarchistic spirit in which nothing is beyond us, and everything can be possible; it is impossible not to be reminded of Wordsworth's famous line that "bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven". The 'second summer of love', was a moment when EM Forster's call to "only connect" was adopted by an entire generation, who felt they were reshaping society forever. Forster's imperative runs through all of Petersen's work across the last thirty years: her works are calls to 'connect'. Petersen's commitment to ideals of personal freedom and to spontaneity continue to animate her practice, and to shape new experiments in collectivity.

Deuce and a Quarter, created with IDEA, is an astonishingly evocative photobook presenting a road trip across the American South made with three girlfriends, taking a playful look at the myths of American individualism, and the relationships between young women. Both *Deuce* and *Future Fantasy* take the form of testimonies. They speak about the power of the imagination to shape our worlds. They both remind us that to reach out to others is an act of imaginative empathy; and only this creates a life worth living. Petersen's work is almost Ruskinian in the contrast it draws between the bourgeois imperative to accumulate wealth above all else, with the cultivation of wisdom, joy, and friendship. It gives shape to what we might call a feminist humanism where freedom to shape our own lives, and co-exist, is the highest of values.

In *Deuce* and *No System*, we are thrown into a chaotic, beautiful, carefree world, in which we encounter a vast cast of characters as in a great novel. At the level of what occupies her attention, Petersen's photographs are seldom 'landscapes' or 'still lives', but portraits of genuinely novel kinds. It makes sense to imagine her whole body of photographic work might as a kind of 'expanded portraiture' in which an entire generation finds its own image or its collective identity. Accordingly Petersen's work implies that there is definitely 'such a thing as society'. The implication of her DIY ethos is that society is not merely 'out there', but something we must make ourselves, and make anew, through building new relationships and finding new rituals that can unite us. 'Society' is what we share. The question that Petersen's work asks is this: what is it that we can truly share – that we can take collective ownership of – rather than merely 'own' as private property? In her world, possessions are over-rated; or feature as a means to the ends of self-cultivation, or staging shared experiences.

In youth culture since the 1960s, music has long been the agent of transformation of both our individual selves and of group identities. When young, we start to discover our best selves in music, and the limits of what we might be. We find moments of grace and transcendence, and togetherness. Music possesses a kind of transformative magic that allows us to become another self, and together to become a temporary micro-society. It is no less true because it is a cliché to say that music is a kind of *lingua universalis* – a common tongue is able to reach across national boundaries and unite people. The culture which *No System* monumentalises held its own a particular set of ideals of freedom and unity.

These ideals continue to run through every aspect of her work to this day. It is notable that Petersen has never worked to commission, or created work with commercial imperatives in mind. Since the 1990s, her work has been and remained the voice of the authentic European counterculture, or what remains of it. Freedom, it might be noted, comes at a price, and is far from easy. Her work has often pictured a lifestyle that few of us would aspire to, perhaps, but which provides a model of how a genuinely 'alternative' space can exist outside of enslavement to waged work. The way of life that Petersen presents us with some pastoral idylls, but it involves a degree of commitment that few of us could muster.

Although her work is largely presented as photographic, it is not 'documentary': this is too weak a term to capture her unique way of working. Hers is life as lived with a camera, but her camera is only the servant of a larger agenda. In recent years, the term 'auto-ethnography' has come of age – of people attempting to understand and make visible their own culture. This starts to describe her work whereas 'documentary' has the sting of looking at others as 'Others'. Petersen lived this life to the fullest degree, and knows the participants intimately. *No System* and the series *Raves and Riots* invite us to become part of this strange, magical subculture, and become part of its ethos, rather than merely look at it from outside.

We should see the photographs she presents as artefacts that the culture has left rather than autonomous objects. They are portals into another state of being, rather than 'records' of a subculture – vehicles to become something else, someone else. If there is one thing we become aware of when encountering Petersen's work it is this: there are no 'others' (just as environmental campaigners tell us there is no 'away', no global 'elsewhere').

Her work, now, constitutes both a creative response to breaking barriers between us, and an archive of those attempts to date. As well as archiving many thousands of photographic images, Petersen has attempted to archive a way of life: its flyers, posters, clothes – the Proustian madeleines of the rave generation. They remind me that whilst many of us have a youthful idealism, most, through a process of attrition or of necessity, become inured to what Gerhard Richter called 'capitalist realism': the account of reality produced by belief in money. Petersen's work reminds us that our ideals are not only worth retaining, but should be our very reason for living.