

The Massive National Archives:

A Biographical Critique

By

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There is something strange about this photograph. It doesn't look 'normal'. It is a massive structure, but somehow the perspective seems unnatural; perhaps surreal.

This image can be analyzed by using formal elements. For example, the difference between the lights and darks adds quite a bit of contrast to this piece and the angles of the columns lead us in to a central point, or radius.



Yes, quite a bit of information can be gleaned by just looking at the formal elements of this piece. However, this photograph cannot be truly understood until it is viewed through a biographical approach. This photograph is entitled *The Massive National Archives* (Speck). It was taken by a man named Scott Speck and is currently on display at Studio Gallery in Washington D.C. (Scott). This paper is an attempt to view *The Massive National Archives* through the lens of Speck's Biography.

Here are some of the basics of Speck's early life: Scott Speck was born on August 17, 1963 in McKeesport, PA. He was raised in West Mifflin, PA, which is a suburb of Pittsburgh. Speck's Father worked for U.S. Steel. His mother was a secretary who later became a homemaker (Speck).

Speck's experience with higher education is vital to understanding his artwork. He was not trained as an artist. Speck received his undergraduate degree from St. Vincent's College in Latrobe, PA. He started out as a philosophy major and was on the path to becoming a monk. Near the end of his first year, he realized that science was his true calling and switched to a double major in physics and math (Speck).

He is currently 3 classes away from a second master's degree from Johns Hopkins University in computer science. He received his first master's degree from Penn State in astrophysics (Speck).

"Astrophysics is the part of astronomy that deals with the physics of stars, stellar systems, and interstellar material. It applies the laws of physics to astronomical bodies in order to help us understand how these bodies formed, how they interact with other bodies, and how they cease to be" (Lochner).

When asked if there was any relationship between the subject matter of his photography and his personal life, Speck replied, "I am moved by power and force, even if that power/force is symbolic (huge rocks, or massive buildings), where force/power are not acting at that moment, but are implied by the existence/shape of the object at hand" (Speck).

The above statement shows the degree to which Speck's education plays a role in the subject matter he chooses to photograph. When Speck states that he is moved by symbolic or implied force/power, he is describing the way he uses artistic metaphor to convey his reverence for the laws of physics in nature. He uses this sort of metaphor often in *The Massive National Archives*.

The medium Speck uses to create *The Massive National Archives* is photography. Speck recalls that his first experience with photography was in the 3rd or 4th grade. At that time, he was given a Hawkeye Instamatic Camera. Over the next few months he took some photos and put together a small picture album (Speck).

Over the years he experimented with many cameras, but his favorite is the pinhole camera. He took *The Massive National Archives* with a Zero 2000 pinhole camera.

“A pinhole camera, also known as camera obscura, or “dark chamber”, is a simple optical imaging device in the shape of a closed box or chamber. In one of its sides is a small hole which, via the rectilinear propagation of light, creates an image of the outside space on the opposite side in the box” (Balihar).

This technique was used frequently in 1500’s to study the solar eclipse as well as to make accurate perspective drawings. These early camera obscuras were just dark rooms with a hole in one side to let in the light. Mathematicians and scientists of the day used the laws of physics to explain how they worked (Balihar).

The pinhole camera that Speck has, Zero 2000, uses the same principles as these early camera obscuras. However, it is smaller and has film at the back to capture the image. It is handmade from teak wood and has a socket for a tripod attachment (Zero).

When asked why he chose pinhole photography, Speck replied, “The first roll of film that Kathleen and I took with the pinhole camera told me that I wanted to explore it intensely. It provides a surreal view of reality – an energized and highly dramatic one, for me, revealing

textures and dimension unlike any other artistic medium that interests me. It's also quiet, and patient, and involves "art" just as much as it does logistics and technicalities of photography" (Speck).

Remember the surreal distortion of the image in *The Massive National Archives*? This is a natural effect of pinhole photography. Because it has no lens, everything is in focus: it has an 'infinite depth of field'. The wide angle plus the clear view of everything in the image is not how our eyes, which have lenses, see. Therefore the image looks distorted. But is the image actually distorted, or is our vision?

Speck relates the pinhole medium to his personal life as follows, "The pinhole appeals to me artistically and scientifically. It's incredibly simple, and is a quiet, slow process, instead of an instantaneous one. There is an elegance to the physics involved, and its characteristics of infinite depth of field enable me to feel small relative to the photo. I feel small next to God (a universal force, not a persona), and the pinhole reveals the power in everything, causing me to feel that power."

Again, Speck relates his art back to physics. He describes the elegance of the physics involved in the process. The very physics involved with the creation of this image allow him to feel small next to God by viewing this image.

All of the information gathered from Speck's biography relates back to *The Massive National Archives*. Now that Speck's relationship to art has been studied, new information can be found in this artwork. Some of the most important points to consider about this work after studying Speck's biography include: a balance between the artistic and the scientific, power &

force, ideas of philosophy, physics, especially ‘elegant physics’, and a feeling of smallness in relation to God as a universal force.

The Massive National Archives does a great job of illustrating a balance between the artistic and scientific. It is clearly artistic: it is beautiful, well crafted, and expertly composed. It is clearly scientific as well: it is made using physics, and chemical processes. It illustrates a merger of the art vs. science duality.



The subject matter of the piece speaks of more than that, it also speaks of philosophy. The building itself is done in neo-classical style with columns that are reminiscent of ancient Greece. Grecian columns are symbols from an ancient time. Seeing them brings to mind the classical philosophers of Ancient Greece such as Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates.

However, the formal aspects of this piece describe something else: power & force. Power & force are found in the strong diagonal lines of the piece. These lines are often used to describe the directional force in a work of art. Power & force are clearly illustrated by these directional force lines that powerfully direct the eye to the focal point.

When formal aspects are combined with knowledge of the medium, it brings us to physics. The surreal nature of the image, when understood as a natural image resulting from the use of a pinhole camera, becomes an illustration of the peculiarities of physics. The way the image is so artfully created, coupled with the knowledge of how it was done bring the thought that, yes, physics can be beautiful, and even elegant. It begs the question, is this image, captured without lenses, distorted? Or is it our vision, which functions with the lenses of our eyes, that is distorted?

Lastly, this artwork illustrates a feeling of smallness in relation to God as a universal force. The focal point is in the roof, and the 'directional force lines' all direct their force right to it. The eye is drawn up to the ceiling of the building, like church architecture might draw your eye up to a rose window, or other symbol of divinity. The way the eye is directed up ward is a symbol for God.

The force lines are also exaggerated by the infinite depth of field that is present when using a pinhole camera. The exaggeration places the viewer close to the floor, while these columns with their directional force lines guide your eyes straight up to the ceiling. All the while, the columns seem to be towering over the viewer. These 'massive' columns exert their directional force toward the focal point. Mass and force are common variables in physics equations. The 'massive' columns with their directional force lines are metaphors for physics. They are directing the eye up to the focal point on the ceiling, which is a metaphor for God, in this case as a universal force.

After analyzing *The Massive National Archives* through the lens of Speck's biography, it all comes together. *The Massive National Archives* is a self portrait of Speck in relation to God as a universal force. It forces the viewer to see the world through Speck's eyes. It is designed to make us ponder our own 'smallness' next to the divine.

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