

foreword by maria popova

“MY EXPERIENCE IS WHAT I AGREE TO ATTEND TO,” William James wrote at the dawn of modern psychology. And yet however perennial this insight may be, it is only a partial truth. Our experience is shaped as much by what we agree to take in as it is by what we refuse – what we choose to leave out – and both are only partly conscious choices. Our attention filters in a fraction of what goes on around us at any given moment and filters out, thanks to millions of years of evolution, the vast majority of the shimmering simultaneity with which the life of sensation and perception unfolds. This highly subjective, selective, imperfect filtration of reality guarantees that however many parallels two human beings may have between their lives, however much common ground, the paths by which they navigate their respective landscapes of experience will be profoundly divergent.

In their year-long visual correspondence project, Giorgia Lupi, an Italian woman living in New York, and Stefanie Posavec, an American woman living in London, capture the inherent poetry of that subjective selectivity. Each week, they jointly selected one aspect of daily life – from sleep to spending habits to mirror use – and depicted their respective experience of it in a hand-drawn visualization on the back of a postcard, then mailed it to the other. Out of these simple diurnal observations emerges the complexity of the human experience – nonlinear, contradictory, and always filtered through the discriminating yet imperfect lens of attention.

The creative constraint of the unifying themes only amplifies the variousness of possibility within each parameter. Despite the substantial similarities between the two women – both are information designers known for working by hand, both are only children, both have left their respective homeland to move across the Atlantic in pursuit of creative fulfillment, and they are the exact same age – their attentional orientation toward each week’s chosen subject is completely different, both in substance and in style. They deliberately used different visual metaphors and information design techniques for each week’s theme, producing an immensely pleasurable duet of sensibilities – side by side, Posavec’s signature spatial poetics and Lupi’s mastery of shape and colour elevate one another to a higher plane of meaning and delight.

A twenty-first-century testament to Virginia Woolf’s celebration of letter-writing as “the humane art,” the project radiates a lovely countercultural charm. Ours is the golden age of Big Data, where human lives are aggregated into massive data sets in the hope that analysis of the aggregate will yield valid insight into the individual – an approach no more effective than taking an exquisite poem in English, running it through Google Translate to render into Japanese, and then Google-translating it back into English – the result may have the vague contours of the original poem’s meaning, but none of its subtle magic and vibrant granular beauty.

Lupi and Posavec reclaim that poetic granularity of the individual from the homogenizing aggregate-grip of Big Data. What emerges is a case for the beauty of small data and its deliberate interpretation, analog visualization, and slow transmission – a celebration of the infinitesimal, incomplete, imperfect, yet marvelously human details through which we wrest meaning out of the incomprehensible vastness of all possible experience that is life.

MARIA POPOVA is a reader and a writer, and writes about what she reads on Brain Pickings (brainpickings.org), which is included in the Library of Congress archive of culturally valuable materials. She has also written for The New York Times, Wired UK, and The Atlantic, among others, and is an MIT Fellow.