

The face of Everyhuman

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [Oct 28, 2015](#) issue



Brandon Stanton is the photographer behind [Humans of New York](#). [Some rights reserved](#) by [Niyantha](#).

When I was in elementary school, living in an apartment development on the east side of Manhattan, one of my favorite things to do was to wander among the identical redbrick buildings with clipboard and pencil, stop passersby, and ask them to respond to a survey. The questions I dreamed up were various, but they all had something to do with what it means to be a human being; and I must have seemed innocuous enough, for no one refused my request.

Five years ago an unemployed bond trader named Brandon Stanton created a fully realized version of what I was trying naively to accomplish with clipboard and pencil: *Humans of New York*, [a photoblog](#) capturing the faces, fashions, struggles, miseries, and joys of genus Everyhuman, species New York. If, like me and 15 million other people, you follow [HONY on Facebook](#) (the parody site, [Orcs of New York](#), has a mere 20,000 followers), then perhaps you too have been moved to tears by the images and stories, by the endless stream of encouraging comments, and by the empathy-driven crowd-funding projects *HONY* has inspired. You're probably also aware that Stanton has taken his special brand of heart-piercing street portraiture beyond New York to Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Israel, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, Ukraine, India, Nepal, Vietnam, and Mexico. Everyhuman, we discover through Stanton's lens, is everywhere.

As I write, *HUMAN: the movie*, a cinematic collage created from 2,000 interviews with men and women in 60 countries, is premiering at the Venice Film Festival, slated to be shown at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly, and [available for free on YouTube in a three-volume extended edition](#).

HUMAN is the work of aerial photographer and environmental activist Yann Arthus-Bertrand and as such is more spectacular, galvanizing, and ideological in its portrait of a social and natural world in crisis. The future will tell whether it can be as effective as *HONY* in building human solidarity on the ground.

Two other human images have been seen by millions, I suppose, in recent weeks: that of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi washed ashore on a Turkish beach, and that of a fetus exposed on a sterilization tray. Many were inspired by the image of Aylan Kurdi to open borders, homes, and churches to asylum seekers fleeing Syria. Many were appalled by a series of stealthily acquired videos targeting Planned Parenthood. The videos included stock photos of aborted (or in one case, stillborn) fetuses, raising serious concerns about the manipulation of public sentiment. But stock photos are not fake photos—we're not dealing with the Cottingley Fairies—and to see these images was to realize, viscerally, the humanity of the unborn.

The irony is that we have more information than at any time in history about the development of human beings and the conditions that enable them to flourish. If the information fails to move us it may be because we no longer have a shared way of speaking about what makes us human. We've replaced an originally theological vision of the dignity of the human person with an abstract idea of personal autonomy, an idea that is philosophically rootless and at odds with our deepest feelings. But if we've lost our language, we still have our feelings; when we see a toddler washed up on a beach or a fetus washed up on a tray, we can't help sensing that Everyhuman is everywhere, and has a claim on our resources.

Old biological science identified a moment of quickening that turned a clump of cells into a unique human life; abortion could be countenanced, it was widely believed, as long as it took place before this moment occurred. New biological science shows us that a human organism with unique genetic instructions has been present in the womb since conception; and that, unless it miscarries, this same organism will become a fetus capable of pain and an infant who depends wholly on our care. Old political science told us that atrocities in faraway lands needn't concern us; new political science shows us that Everyhuman is a piece of the continent we live on—to

borrow John Donne's conceit—and that every clod washed away, every child washed ashore, diminishes us. We have better science than ever, but because we've lost the theology we fail to register the facts. And so we require images to awaken us, personal stories to bring conviction, empathy to rouse us to seek change.

Of course, empathy is not enough; it needs to be yoked to coherent ethical principles, backed by real data, and embodied in sound policies. Empathy alone won't solve the worst refugee crisis since World War II. Empathy alone won't cure the poverty, violence, and isolation—the manifold cruelties of our progressive society—that have made pregnancy an unbearable burden for many. There are wise policies and foolish policies, unintended consequences and problems so intractable that even the best policy will fail. But if we forget what it means to be a human being, no policy can save us. God willing, we shall not forget the face of Everyhuman now that we've seen it.