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Many of the portraits you've made are of people whom you know. So in a sense they're "non-portraits"—they work directly. When I started with the portraits, it was with an awareness of the primitive mind striving to grasp the meaning from the earth itself, came to the idea of original perception. Do you not retain any hope in photography as a way of understanding personal experience? Did the individual relationships, as manifestations of your own individual knowledge of each person, ever enter into the process? Were the relationships totally incidental, or was the fact that you knew each person a specifically complicating fact that you wanted to see if you could address, avoid, or get around in the series? Thomas Ruff

When I started with the portraits, it was with an awareness that we were living at the end of the twentieth century, in an industrialized Western country. We weren't living by candlelight in caves anymore. We were in surroundings where everything was brightly illuminated—even our parking garages. Surveillance cameras were everywhere, and you were being watched all the time. When I started making the portraits in 1981, my friends and I were very curious about what might happen in 1984. Would his idea come to fruition? They already partly had, because in Germany there were the events surrounding the Red Army Faction, a terrorist group founded by Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, and others. They plotted—and in some cases carried out—the assassinations of politicians and industry leaders, were captured, and then died under suspicious circumstances while in government custody. So the police were very nervous: there were a lot of controls placed on daily life, and we were often required to produce our passports for inspection. My idea for the portraits was to use a very even light in combination with a large-format camera, so that you could see everything about the sitter's face. I didn't want to hide anything. Yet I also didn't want the people I portrayed to show any emotion. I told them to look into the camera with self-confidence, but likewise, that they should be conscious of the fact that they were being photographed, that they were looking into a camera. I wanted to do a kind of official portrait of my generation. I wanted the photographs to look like those in passports, but without any other information, such as the subject's address, religion, profession, or prior convictions. I didn't want the police/viewer to get any information about us. They shouldn't be able to know what we felt at that moment, whether we were happy or sad. So in a sense they're "non-portraits"—they work directly against the most commonly valued aspect of the genre, that it captures some unspoken essence of the person, or more to the point, reveals a hidden truth. You seem to be saying that you actually made the portraits for the opposite reason: as stone walls, as a way of showing everything in order to reveal absolutely nothing. You extend this notion in a vast array of your other series, exploding the idea of original perception. Do you not retain any hope in photography as a way of understanding personal experience? I think it depends on the intention of the sitter, on how much information he or she allows to be shown. I don't think that my sitters build stone walls, but rather that they say to the viewer, "You can come this close, but no further." Maybe my portraits are anachronistic because even though they show every detail of the skin, clothes, and hair of the sitter, they still don't try to show any of his or her feelings. But to your question: Do you not retain any hope in photography as a way of understanding personal experience? What do you think about the portraits Richard Avedon did in the American West, where he asked workers, employers and housewives to stand in front of a white background? They're also stone walls, except that they're wearing their work clothes, or have little accessories to link them to their lived life. Does that information help very much, or isn't it just a cliché in the August Sander mold? There's precisely my point and the challenge: every portrait maker has to face down the soggy temptations handed to us by...
mentalize or exaggerate that struggle. We want to know things, and we also realize that there’s a great barrier in life to that knowledge, but it’s useless to stoop to mourning. Simply giving up is not a viable option. And you haven’t, because you still make pictures. So the question remains, and it’s at the very core of the photographic undertaking, epitomized by portraiture: How do we go about learning anything about experience, about ourselves and each other? Can you be utterly sober, can you speak as plainly as possible in pictures, without submitting to nostalgia or sensationalism or cynical cliché, and still manage some kind of approach within them to—as you put it—our actual, lived lives?

All I can say is that it depends on the codes or clichés you’re trapped by in your own life. And the stripping away of those social and photographic conventions is usually the preliminary reading people have of your series. The first time I saw your portraits, I was inclined to view them strictly in a formal context, as dry and rigorously effective deconstructions of the portrait genre. But now you’ve thrown me for a turn. By invoking a specific and highly personal period in history, your statements here suggest that there is indeed an additional element of direct experience involved in them, and so that for all their sobriety, for all their absolute refusal of allegory and symbolism and sentiment, they’re nonetheless inextricably bound to real lives.

Oddly enough, the same perception occurs even to me. Sometimes I think the portraits of Petra or Martin or whomever else don’t represent the people themselves, but are merely examples of a type of photographic portraiture. And yet because these people sat in front of the camera when I made the exposure, there’s a lot of real life and the actual person in each photograph. Sometimes I think the photographs are schizophrenic: the real people and their reflections spliced together.

My portraits look so Apollonian because the sitters provide a perfect surface onto which the viewer can project anything, bad and good experiences alike. They’re neutral and friendly, like Buddhas. They’re vessels you can fill with all of your wishes and desires. But that openness can double as a form of visual opacity and blockage, and highlights the enduring portrait conundrum. We’re faced with both the fundamental urge to understand our experiences, as well as all of the glaring historical examples of portraits that sentimentally or emotionally void them, and we also realize that there’s a great barrier in life to that knowledge, but it’s useless to stoop to mourning. Simply giving up is not a viable option. And you haven’t, because you still make pictures. So the question remains, and it’s at the very core of the photographic undertaking, epitomized by portraiture: How do we go about learning anything about experience, about ourselves and each other? Can you be utterly sober, can you speak as plainly as possible in pictures, without submitting to nostalgia or sensationalism or cynical cliché, and still manage some kind of approach within them to—as you put it—our actual, lived lives?

Photographers like Sander and Edward Curtis, the excited claims of being able to categorize and familiarize the entire world through images. Your mention of Avedon emphasizes that much of portraiture has been incapable of escaping Curtis’ ghost. Avedon and Diane Arbus are to my mind arch perpetuators of his sentimental tradition. Theirs is a glib, New York version of sentimentality, one that thrills itself with the hysterical belief in antagonism and grit as truth, but that’s sentimentally all the same. Provocative as their pictures may seem to be at first, people love them—perhaps countercultivatively—for that titillating myopia, because they corroborate, rather than challenge, our baser preconceived notions.

They never make the more evolved leap to a form that genuinely tries to create a unique means for people to perceive one another. It’s also probably got something to do with the person in the portrait. In my case, they were people between the ages of twenty-four and thirty-four, and life hadn’t yet left any signs on their faces. They weren’t babies, but they hadn’t had too many bad experiences, either. They were in that state in which everything is still possible. If you make portraits the way Avedon or Arbus did, of people with a long past or a strange life, you can’t escape the Curtis ghost. The same thing happens in photographs of children. All parents want their child’s smile as proof that they’ve done a good job of parenting and that the child is happy. My portraits look so Apollonian because the sitters provide a perfect surface onto which the viewer can project anything, bad and good experiences alike. They’re neutral and friendly, like Buddhas. They’re vessels you can fill with all of your wishes and desires. But that openness can double as a form of visual opacity and blockage, and highlights the enduring portrait conundrum. We’re faced with both the fundamental urge to understand our experiences, as well as all of the glaring historical examples of portraits that sentimentally or emotionally void them, and we also realize that there’s a great barrier in life to that knowledge, but it’s useless to stoop to mourning. Simply giving up is not a viable option. And you haven’t, because you still make pictures. So the question remains, and it’s at the very core of the photographic undertaking, epitomized by portraiture: How do we go about learning anything about experience, about ourselves and each other? Can you be utterly sober, can you speak as plainly as possible in pictures, without submitting to nostalgia or sensationalism or cynical cliché, and still manage some kind of approach within them to—as you put it—our actual, lived lives?
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Sure. These were my friends; these were people I was talking to—we

(1949), are fierce

(1983) is perhaps his most

CLOSE, Chuck

We've seen that kind of device before in portraiture, as in the work of Chuck Close. But

AT THAT TIME, IN THE LATE SIXTIES, THERE WAS A


CHILDS, Lucinda

The choreographer Lucinda Childs (born in

The chorégrapher Lucinda Childs (born in

1940) launched her eponymous dance

CHILDS, Lucinda

1940). After graduating she was a member of

the University of Chicago and Julliard,

Morris's
careers. Greenberg first championed

influenced each other on a continual basis. Phillip Glass and I were helping

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and a profound interest in Eastern music.

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and Robert Wilson.

IN A WAY I WANTED TO BLOT OUT

portraiture, because it mirrors our fractured knowledge, or ignorance, of people as well. Much of your work makes

prominent use of those formal concerns, posing questions about the specific nature of photographs and knowledge. You

reduce experience into a hermetic, even abstract exercise, crushing the images of what we thought knew down into

a parallel non-reality. There's a brutal firmness about this, both devastating and liberating. TB in a way I wanted to blot out

traces or information about the person in front of the camera. I also wanted to indicate that the viewer is not face to

face with a real person, but with a photograph of a person. Quite often people at the exhibitions say, "Oh, that's Heinrich,

that's Peter, that's Priem," because they're looking through the photographs, confusing the medium with reality. By

blowing the portraits up to a colossal scale, I forced the viewer to realize that he is not standing in front of Heinrich, but in front

of a photograph of Heinrich. We've seen that kind of device before in portraiture, as in the work of Chuck Close. But

there are some very important differences, not the least of which is that Close is dealing with paintings, and the

immediate realization a viewer has that there is one looking at exactly that, at "marks of colored dirt smeared on a flat surface." Close

has even asserted that his particular formalist exercise wouldn't work without the photography, because there is no moment of cognitive dissonance with photographs the way there is in painting, when the typical portrait image breaks down and manifests itself as a hand-made object. My point, frankly, isn't just about formalism anyway, because I

think a purely formalist reading of your approach is vastly oversimplified, and nowhere is that more sharply demonstrated

than in the portraits. To be sure, your systematic approach of creating pictures in exhaustive series, combined with tech-

niques like collage, infrared imaging, appropriation, and digital manipulation, does force us to reconsider what we know

of the integrity of photographs. What I'm getting at, though, is that's one thing to do this with inanimate objects like

buildings or with already existing images in your appropriation of newspaper photographs, and entirely another thing to

implicate the direct involvement of live beings into this analytical process as subjects. TB life can be hard and

artists can be brutal. But I must say that this was my particular investment of portraiture, and it was made possible by

the collaboration of my friends. I think I worked so well because all of my subjects possessed a high degree of visual fluency

— they were artists too, and they were capable of dealing with the way I made the portraits of them. I couldn't have

done it with my former school friends I stayed in the same school where I grew up, and are now buskers or bank

employees. Those people would have been lost in my camera. I didn't harm any of my friends. They each received

a print of their portrait, and if they needed a passport photograph, I even gave them a small one for that as well.

Thus chasing the circle with an even more indescribably effective means of exhibition than showing them on a wall. As

one of the most traditionally cherished methods of constructing ideas about each other, does portraiture have any

remaining use at all, in your opinion? Do you keep family albums, for instance? You have a kindred child. How might you

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I’d been told that my portraits were just
I think that historically photographs may have been
And is there possibly something in portraitur e that can serve as
The third motivation was to investigate the dif -
You’ve (which 
¶
Which is 

He hoped to achieve an objective portrait
began pursuing a monumental project he
I’ve never known you to pursue the expedition
But I don’t
personal/political/commercial interests.
you need to be careful, because there is then a ve -
me say you can’t imitate a face. A face is unique.
I had
be manipulated by either the government or the
when he was jailed for arson. Beginning
radical journalist Ulrike Meinhof, who
when he was imprisoned in 1972 along with RAF mem-
in the late sixties, they sought to trigger
But is there anything in a portrait that can serve as
This investigation
whether or not a portrait
be used in a preju-
comparing different seeing con-
forced to react with an artistic work. But I don’t
I’m trying to find a form that’s also
As an idea that you highlighted by dou-
series. How were those pictures generated, and

The German curator and critic Matthias
Initially funded by J. P. Morgan, the proj-
and their followers kidnapped and killed
in 1923) documented figures that
But in any case, being a German
portraits I made very
I decided in response to co-op-
collage of Ayer art: portraits with blue eyes. I
selected six male and six female portraits that
I had already made, and added the ins of a female
portraits that had bright blue eyes. I
printed them at about 45 cm x 30 cm and hung them in a row. Surprisingly, people
didn’t remind me of a style from the 1930s. But
more of discussions we have today—like
genuinely authentic anymore—they have the authentici-
with that sort of models and their iconic images, but I think
a lot of people just aren’t aware of how can be
be manipulated by either the government or the
unpretentious looks that do—or don’t—exist.
and the portraits with the blue eyes, a variation of the eighties. So that’s not
exhaustive dismantling of the integrity of images as we know them?
join my friends, I also thought about how there are sperm banks
where you can choose your genetic material,
also thinking about how there are sperm banks

Go back both mentally and formally. I
timeless, if it was a form that could survive not only a decade but also the mil-
I’m getting overly philosophical. The idea was to create
nonexistent faces, ones that could conceivably exist but don’t. I didn’t want to use a complete face of an actual person, but rather a face of an imaginary
The portraits series have undergone a number of changes over the years. During
had from the start to the realization that my portraits are totally individual and totally
within. With the Andere Porträt series however, you inverted that by pulling
This is a case where a biography based on an image
the nose, eyes, mouth, chin, and forehead that make up 90 percent of a person’s appearance,
would still resemble the person I photographed? I had
to come to the realization that my portraits are totally individual and totally
unique face, one that you cannot mistake. A face is unique. I
I tried this with a machine

“I think that historically photographs may have been made in a naive and honest way, when photographers believed in the ‘pencil of nature’ and recording what was in front of the camera. But photography quickly came to be used in a prejudiced way, losing its innocence and consequently its abili-
your sense to be directed that in the Andere Porträt (Other Portraits) series. How were those pictures generated, and
and what was the motivation behind them? I’ve been told that my portraits are not
individual, and personal portrait in the past. But as a rule of thumb, it shows the ex-
et’s face and nothing more. But I thought my process was reflective of real
personality, that it illustrated how an individual is unique and doesn’t exist a second
time. But I think this is important. In the end, it’s a question of how the person
highlighted by dou-
blurring your own self-portrait, suggesting the ambiguities and schizophrenia that exist
internally. With the Andere Porträt series however, you inverted that by pulling
seasonal identities. To go back both mentally and formally. I
But in any case, being a German
German, and they’re supposed to be different from your stars and buildings,
people are different from your stars and buildings, for instance? There are four
people are as different from your stars and buildings, for instance? That’s the one way that
the fundamental aspect of interpersonal relations? Is this the one way that
developed a series of photographs of portraits that are not portraits at all, but rather
be Tolstoy, ‘Universal Man.’”
the way my friends looked in the eighties, and the way that

So that’s not

at all.

But I think the point is more complex.

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