The situative portrait

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INTRODUCTION

What do you see when you look at a photographic portrait? Most likely, your attention is first drawn to the image of a person, possibly sitting or standing, along with their surroundings, such as a home or a studio. Then you may notice the physical quality of the photograph. The portrait might be printed on matte or glossy paper, or it may appear on a computer screen. Your attention may then be drawn to the background, exploring everything around the subject for clues about where and when the portrait was made. Alternatively, the photographer's style might catch your eye as you notice whether it is intimate and close-up or dramatic and heavily staged. Whatever you see, there is always a face – a face with a distinct expression, together with a body in a particular pose. The body might be slightly turned, the shoulders subtly raised, and the corners of the mouth lifted in a hesitant smile.

However, much also remains unseen in a photographic portrait. There may be other people standing just outside the frame who influenced the making of the photograph, perhaps affecting the sitter's expression. The photographer's instructions are also invisible, yet they may have prompted the hesitant smile – turning it into a response to the photographer rather than a reflection of the sitter's reserved nature. Moreover, any photographs made just before or after this one are not visible, so it is unknown whether they might have

presented a very different impression of the person. Given this, what do you *actually* see when looking at a photographic portrait?

The Problem: How to Interpret a Photographic Portrait?
I define a photographic portrait as a recognizable image of a person who is conscious of being photographed and able to respond through pose and expression. This definition also includes self-portraits and selfies, where the roles of photographer and sitter are united in one person. A photographic portrait is, therefore, inherently tied to reality. While one might admire their visual appeal, style, or craftsmanship, what sets photographic portraits apart from other genres – such as landscapes or still lifes – is their depiction of real people. Many of the qualities people especially appreciate in photographic portraits stem from this connection to real, living or once-living individuals. It enables portraits to create a sense of connection with the person depicted, evoke memories, or convey a feeling of their presence. Photographic portraits also allow a spectator to study a person's face in a way that would be considered inappropriate in daily life. Additionally, photographic portraits can hold a sense of significance when viewed as evidence of a person's existence. This inherent link to reality is, however, also what complicates their interpretation. What exactly *does* a photographic portrait represent? What does it reveal? And, more specifically, what does it show about the person depicted? How should a photographic portrait be interpreted?

Photographic portraits are often presented in a context of identification. In such cases, the portrait, like a passport photograph, acts as proof, showing what a particular person looks like and serving to identify them.

This link between photographic portraits and identification has a long history, from early mugshots of prisoners to contemporary social media profile pictures. Since the majority of portraits people encounter today likely serve an identification purpose, it is understandable that this association shapes how photographic portraits are interpreted more broadly. However, identification is easily conflated with representation.[1] This happens when the image is interpreted not only as evidence for identification, but also as evidence of aspects of the sitter's inner life or character, of what kind of person the sitter is. What a person *looks like* is then conflated with who a person *is*. To some extent, this idea, and the theories of physiognomy, which suggest that character traits can be inferred from facial features, persists today. Most people know this is not accurate. They know that photographic portraits cannot capture the full complexity of a person. They are also aware that photographs can be easily manipulated and may not faithfully represent their subjects. However, this awareness often seems to fade when looking at a photographic image. When looking at a portrait, people (including myself) often suspend their knowledge of these limitations. This happens when, for instance, a sitter's raised eyebrow is interpreted as a reflection of their presumed grumpy nature.

Photography critics have explored what writer and lecturer on photography practices Liz Wells (London, 1948) describes as this "suspension of disbelief" when viewing photographic images.[2] They suggest that this phenomenon stems from a tendency to perceive photographs as windows onto the world, a perception reinforced by a long history of human vision that is difficult to unlearn.[3] Sarah Kember (UK, 1961), scholar in new

1. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation. Essays on Photographies and Histories,* (University of Minnesota Press,1988) 211.
2. Liz Wells, ed., *The Photography Reader: History and Theory*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2019), 369.
3. Francois Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography,* (Urbanomic, 2011), 8.

technologies of communication, articulates this idea in her analysis of digital photography, stating: "How can we panic about the loss of the real when we know (tacitly or otherwise) that the real is always already lost in the act of representation? Any representation, even a photographic one, only constructs an image of the real; it does not capture it, even though it may appear to do so."[4] Other critics attribute this willingness to believe in the "truth" of photographs to a preference for a photographic realist perspective that underpins practices such as photojournalism. In this context, photographs are often seen as direct evidence of past events, while their densely coded and constructed nature is largely overlooked.[5]

My Interpretation of Photographic Portraits

As an artist, I am confronted with the perception of photographic portraiture every time I photograph a person. Regardless of my own understanding of the photographic portrait, the way it is interpreted by others inevitably becomes part of how my work is perceived. In addition, the way portraits are interpreted carries significant weight for the sitter, and the sitter's feelings and concerns, in turn, matter to me.

I am also present in the making of photographic portraits. This means that I do not only know that photographs are not windows onto the world, but I also experience the social dynamics involved in their construction. As part of this dynamic, I am fully aware that I am only one of the participants in the process. I experience how photographic portraits are created in the context of a social interaction involving the sitter, the imagined spectators in our minds, and myself as the photographer. In this situation, all of us: the photographer, the sitter, and even the imagined spectators (as imagined by the sitter and the photographer), play an active role in shaping the photographic portrait.

4. Sarah Kember, "The Shadow of the Object, Photography and Realism," in *The Photography Reader: History and Theory*, 2nd ed. Liz Wells (Routledge, 2019), 370.
5. Liz Wells, ed., *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, 6th ed. (Routledge, 2022), 74.

This collaborative nature of the portrait has always drawn me to photographic portraiture: the dynamic interplay of seeing, being seen, imagining, and anticipating how others might see. For me, this dynamic – this act of creation – is inseparable from the result: the portrait is the combined effort of all those involved. In the process of creating a photographic portrait, this dynamic is evident in every interaction. A simple tilt of the head or a change in tone by the photographer can influence the sitter's experience, either putting them at ease or, conversely, making them uncomfortable, and in both cases affecting their expression and pose. On the sitter's side, the ambition for how they want to be seen by future spectators also influences their participation, behavior, and pose. Everything that happens in this situation influences the portrait. The resulting photographic portrait is therefore far from an objective representation of the sitter; it reflects this interaction and a mixture of intention, interpretation, construction, play, and chance.

And yet, despite their relational and constructed nature, photographic portraits are frequently approached with Wells' aforementioned "suspension of disbelief." Photographs are often perceived as windows onto the sitter's identity, while the collaborative process that brought the image into being is easily overlooked. This tension raises a critical question for me: could photographic portraits be made in such a way that the act of their construction is foregrounded, with the portraits revealing both the visible and invisible dynamics at

work, thus resisting the tendency to reduce the sitter to a single interpretation?

The investigation of this idea forms the foundation of my artistic research project, defined by my research question:

Is it possible to create photographic portraits that explicate the social dynamics of their creation and make these dynamics visible?

Through the exploration of this question, I aim to highlight the interplay between photographer, sitter, and spectator, working toward an artistic photographic portrait that invites the spectator to engage with the complexities of the portrait-making process.

How this Research Question Arises from my Artistic Practice
This research question emerges from my artistic practice, which has long focused on photographic portraiture, both practically and conceptually. I make photographic portraits as part of projects about the role of photographic portraits in everyday life; for example, making family portraits with strangers as a response to social media's influence on public and private space. Photographic portraits, what they do and how they are made, have always been at the heart of my artistic practice. In my projects, I incorporate techniques such as explicit role-playing and performing for the camera myself. These interventions reveal aspects of the portrait's construction by, for example, positioning myself, the traditionally absent photographer, within the image. However, the making of the photographic portrait was never the focus of my attention. I never turned my attention fully to "the situation of making a photographic portrait" itself. This research project

therefore extends that exploration into an area I had not previously examined: the portrait-making process. In this research project, I examine the moments before and during the creation of a photographic portrait and analyze the interactions between the three main actors: the sitter, the photographer, and the spectator. I explore what each of these participants does, wants, or anticipates in the process, and I ask how their actions align with, or deviate from, the notion that photographic portraits convey an intrinsic aspect of the sitter's identity. I then ask whether these dynamics can be made explicit in the final photographs.

Fig. 1. Wendy Ewald, *I asked my sister to take a picture of me on Easter morning*, Gelatin silver print, 1979.

Fig. 2. Jim Goldberg, *I'm Dave*, 1989, Gelatin silver print, 1989.

Fig. 3. Bieke Depoorter, *As it May Be*, Photographic print, 2014.

Multiple artists have incorporated elements of the construction process into their final portraits. Wendy Ewald (Detroit, 1951), a photographer and educator, employs a participatory approach, often working with children and marginalized communities to co-create images that reflect their perspectives (Fig. 1). Similarly, Jim Goldberg (New Haven, 1953), a photographer blending documentary and experimental techniques, integrates handwritten text from his subjects, as in *Raised by Wolves*, which gives voice to homeless youth (Fig. 2). Photographer Bieke Depoorter (Courtrai, 1986), a member of Magnum Photos, develops personal narratives by immersing herself in the lives of her subjects, often inviting them to annotate or comment on their portraits (Fig. 3). These artists foreground the collaborative nature of portrait-making, allowing their sitters to contribute directly by writing on their photographs and shaping their own representation.

Other artists have drawn attention to the position of the photographer by appearing in their own photographs. For example, Carrie Mae Weems (Portland, 1953), an

Fig. 4. Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Putting on Make-Up) Kitchen Table Series II*, Gelatin silver print,1990-1999.

Fig. 5. Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Mirror Study (0X5A1317)*, Photographic print, 2017.

artist whose work explores race, gender, and power, has often positioned herself in her portraits to challenge traditional hierarchies in photography. In *Kitchen Table Series* (1990), for example, she appears alongside her subjects to examine identity and social relations (Fig. 4). Photographer Paul Mpagi Sepuya (San Bernardino, 1982) similarly incorporates himself into his photographs (Fig. 5). He uses mirrors and layered perspectives to blur the boundaries between photographer and subject. In their own way, these practices highlight aspects of photographic portraiture and construction. This research project is therefore in line with their engagement with construction; however, as with my own previous projects, the difference lies in its focus. In this research project, the social situation of making is not only part of a visual strategy but also at the center of the investigation.

Theorists such as writer and critic Susan Sontag (New York, 1933 – 2004), philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin (Berlin, 1892 – Portbou,1940), art critic and novelist John Berger (London, 1926 – Antony, 2017), and theorist Ariella Azoulay (Tel Aviv, 1962) have shaped critical discourse on photography, examining its cultural, philosophical, and political significance. Sontag explored the power and ethical implications of photography in *On Photography* (1977).[6] Benjamin analyzed its role in modernity and mass reproduction in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936).[7] Berger examined how photography shapes perception and ideology in *Ways of Seeing* (1972).[8] While the first three have been instrumental in understanding the impact of photography, their focus was largely on photography's reception rather than its creation. In addition, Azoulay expands the understanding of

6. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Picador, 1990).
7. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations,* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken, 1969).
8. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin Books, 1977).

photography beyond the photographic object and the act of photographing. In *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008), she argues that photography constitutes a political space in which the spectator has a civic responsibility toward the photographed subject.[9] She elaborates a "citizenry of photography," emphasizing the ethical and political obligations that arise from engaging with images.[10]

While this research project draws on various critical frameworks, it differs from these theoretical engagements in both its approach and starting point. Rather than focusing on the reception of photographs, I examine what happens before and during the making of a photographic portrait from the position of the photographer. From within this situation of making, I analyze the behavior and interactions of all participants, ultimately seeking ways to make these dynamics visible in the final image.

The Making of a Photographic Portrait

To incorporate the creative process into the work and to make the act of portrait-making explicit, this research project begins by examining the process itself. My research is guided by questions such as: What happens during the creation of a photographic portrait? What roles do the photographer, sitter, and spectator play in its construction?

This reflexive approach, which emphasizes making and reflecting on the act in order to open up new understandings, is shaped by my experience as both a photographer and a lecturer. Over the years, I have been involved in the development of numerous photographic projects, my own and those of friends and students. Through this

9. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Zone Books, 2008).
10. Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 134.

experience, I have become convinced of the importance of clearly articulating the creative process. This process encompasses not only the technical steps but also all the conscious and unconscious decisions made by the artist. Articulating how artworks are created, what happens during the making, paves the way toward "making differently" and creating something new. It enables projects to develop in unforeseen directions. Rather than beginning with a vision of the result and working toward that, the photographic projects I create and supervise evolve through close examination and precise articulation of the making. Over time, this focus has become inherent to the way I operate and has inevitably informed my approach here. In this research project, I carefully examine the creation of photographic portraits, convinced that such close attention can generate an alternative form of portraiture. This reflexive approach takes an auto-ethnographic form, in which my own actions and reflections become part of the material shaping the project.

To investigate what happens during the construction of a photographic portrait, I shift the focus from the photographic result to the studio environment. I developed an artistic method called *The Making of a Photographic Portrait,* which treats everything that occurs during the making as potential material for the artwork. Preparatory drawings or recorded conversations, for instance, may become part of the final artwork. While the photographic session is initiated to produce a portrait, the outcome might instead be the presentation of a simple sentence spoken by the sitter during a reflexive moment.

Most of the photographs in this research project were made in the studio. This focus enabled a detailed study

of the interactions between the photographer, the sitter, and the imagined future spectator. Although the research is rooted in the studio setting, its findings are not confined to portraits created there. The insights are relevant, to varying degrees, to all situations in which recognizable photographic portraits of conscious individuals are made.

Discourses

My journey toward developing a type of photographic portrait that includes its social construction unfolds through a dialogue between practice and theory. Theory enters this process at different stages – before, during, and after the creation of photographic works – and draws on a variety of disciplines. Art historian Michael Fried (New York, 1939), with his emphasis on the formal experience of photographic images, helps me articulate what I am challenging. Philosophers François Laruelle (Chavelot, 1937 – Paris, 2024) and Jean-Luc Nancy (Caudéran, 1940 – Strasbourg, 2021) inspire me to think about photography beyond the photograph itself. Philosopher Vilém Flusser (Prague, 1920 – São Paulo, 1991), through his concept of the photographic apparatus, opens up the process of making a photograph in a way that was crucial to my understanding of the social situation of portrait-making. From a sociological perspective, American social media theorist Nathan Jurgenson (US, 1981) offers insights into our evolving relationship with images in a digital world. Literary scholar Marianne Hirsch (Timișoara, 1949) deepens my understanding of the interplay between photographic actions, psychoanalysis, and alternative uses of the gaze. American computational linguist Emily Bender (US, 1973) is particularly important for her call to articulate more precisely,

a concern that lies at the heart of this project's exploration of photographic portraiture. Journalists such as Merlijn Schoonenboom (The Hague, 1974) and Kashmir Hill (Florida, 1981) remind me of the role photographic portraiture plays in everyday life. Their work underscores how portraiture, beyond its artistic context, is embedded in contemporary image culture. The reflections of these people, among many others, help this project build on and contribute to four discussions of photographic portraiture: countering the photographic gaze, documenting the invisible, photographic encounters and identity formation, and the misinterpretation of photographic images.

The power dynamics of the photographic gaze, understood as the relation between observer and observed, and the idea that the interaction of looking and being looked at influences who we think we are, underpin several sections of this dissertation. Rather than deciphering the power structures that certain images might represent (who is portrayed and who is not), I consciously play with and against the power dynamics of the photographic gaze in several of my artistic experiments, for example by asking sitters to define their pose before entering the studio, rather than leaving it to the photographer's gaze.

I regard photographic portraits as incomplete documentation of a social situation. For me, the question of photography's claim to reality is less whether photographs show reality or truth –as in debates between traditional photojournalism and its postmodern critique – than what such documentation might testify to, both the visible and the invisible. In this view, photographic images point to a reality that is not always legible.

Photographic portraits often reflect the prevailing notions of identity in the period in which they were created. For example, the evolution of portraiture from symbolic, stereotypical depictions of individuals to more realistic representations in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance was in line with changing ideas about people and identity at the time. Similarly, postmodern portraits, created at a time when social norms such as gender roles were being widely questioned, also reflect the cultural context of their time. Likewise, the photographic portraits in this research project are made against the backdrop of an era in which identity is more often seen as fluid and as formed in dialogue with others.

How to interpret photographic portraits is a recurring question in this research. How can we think about and read photographic images of people? The importance attached to precise articulation and interpretation of images, first developed by semioticians concerned with the meaning of signs as a way to understand culture, has recently gained renewed critical attention. This is largely due to questions about the misrepresentation of photographic images and the consequences of their misinterpretation in the context of AI and facial recognition.

My Perspective

My perspective is shaped by being a woman, photographer, and educator. These positions ground the questions I ask and the ways I interpret photographic portraiture. Trained and working in the Netherlands, within the Western European art and photography context, I have developed my thoughts, values, and ambitions in dialogue with the people, institutions, and

Fig. 6. Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Water Towers*, Gelatin silver print, 1968-1980.

Fig. 7. Thomas Struth, *Pergamon Museum*, Chromogenic print, 2001.

Fig. 8. Thomas Ruff, *Phg.05_III,2013*, Chromogenic print, 2013.

Fig. 9. Candida Höfer, *Biblioteca dei Girolamini Napoli*, Chromogenic print, 2009.

movements that shaped my surroundings. I graduated from the photography department of HKU University of the Arts in Utrecht just after the turn of the century, during a period when "conceptual documentary" (as some call it) was emerging. The Netherlands, geographically situated between the Becher-Schule founded by German conceptual artists and photographers Bernd Becher (Siegen, 1931 – Rostock, 2007) and Hilla Becher (Potsdam,1934 – Düsseldorf, 2015), centering on typological studies of industrial structures and British photographers redefining documentary traditions, fostered an approach that combined social engagement with an exploration of photography's possibilities (Fig. 6). Of note among Bechers' students, Thomas Struth (Geldern, 1954) explored urban spaces and museum interiors, Thomas Ruff (Harmersbach, 1958) experimented with digital manipulation, and Candida Höfer (Elberswalde, 1944) focused on the architecture of public spaces (Figs. 7, 8, 9). In the United Kingdom, fine-art and documentary photographer Paul Graham (Stafford, 1956) sought conceptual depth in social documentary, while photographer Julian Germain (London, 1962) integrated participatory storytelling into his photographic practice. Later, my time at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten placed me in a multidisciplinary context, coinciding with the rise of the independent photobook scene, which expanded photography's narrative and conceptual possibilities. As a teacher, first at HKU University of the Arts and then later at KABK (the Royal Academy of Arts in The Hague) at the Bachelor Photography and in the master's program Photography & Society, I witnessed a photographic landscape that was increasingly expanding into other media, including moving image, writing, and archival practices. This shift raised a fundamental question:

What is photography in a time when disciplinary boundaries feel outdated? This question became increasingly central to my own practice, particularly through my interactions with other artistic researchers and with our supervisors at PhDArts, who encouraged greater precision in articulating our respective practices. Amid these developments, I came to appreciate photography as a valuable means of engaging with both our physical and digital lives. However, for me, photography has never been confined to direct representation; instead, I regard it as a tool for reflection, engagement, and experimentation with the world around us.

Fig. 10. Paul Graham, *Untitled (End of an age. 2)*, Chromogenic print, 1997.

Fig. 11. Julian Germain, *For every minute you are angry you lose sixty seconds of happiness,* Chromogenic print, 1992 – 2000.

I have limited my research to the social actors involved in the creation of a photographic portrait, consciously excluding factors such as the studio environment and the camera itself. Furthermore, my approach differs from that of scholars and artists who explore the material manifestations of photography in the "expanded field" and its intersections with sculpture. My aim is to expand the photographic field through exploring the dynamics that occur before and during the creation of a photographic portrait.

This emphasis on the process of making, rather than on the result, explains why this dissertation devotes relatively little attention to the visual appearance of photographic portraits. Similarly, it does not delve deeply into the technical specifics of cameras. This is not to say that such aspects are unimportant – on the contrary, the medium-specific qualities of photography are crucial to this project – but they are addressed only insofar as they inform the social dynamics involved in the construction of photographic portraits.

This dissertation is situated within a Western European tradition of thinking about images. That focus shapes its questions on creation, on the status of art objects, on visual likeness while at the same time setting its limits. Other cultural contexts would inevitably raise different questions.

A Short Introduction to the Three Chapters

This dissertation consists of three chapters and an epilogue. Each chapter focuses on one of the social actors involved in the creation of a photographic portrait: the sitter, the photographer, and the spectator. The starting questions are: What do these actors do when they participate in making a photographic portrait, and what do they want? Each chapter then asks a broader question: Is what they do consistent with interpreting photographic portraits as representations of the sitter's character? If not, how else might their role be understood? In other words, each chapter first examines the role of the specific actor in relation to the idea of the portrait as an expression of essential aspects of the sitter – a clear and undisturbed representation – and then proposes an alternative perspective. In the third and final chapter, these alternative perspectives on the roles of the sitter, the photographer, and the anticipated spectator come together to formulate the concept of the situative portrait.

- *The sitter*

The first chapter, dedicated to the sitter, explores the idea that sitters hide and respond to the photographer rather than reveal themselves. This raises the question: If they are not revealing themselves, what exactly do we see when we look at a photographic portrait? Through an analysis of photographic experiments focusing on

the sitter's role, the chapter concludes by proposing that photographic portraits function as signs of absence.

- *The photographer*

What does the photographer do when creating a photographic portrait? What challenges do they encounter? In this second chapter, the photographer is represented by photography students from the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, several colleagues, and me. The chapter examines the various actions undertaken by photographers and ultimately introduces the concept of "sleutelen" as a photographic gesture distinct from the more familiar gesture of "hunting."

- *The anticipated spectator*

Although not physically present in the studio, the future spectator influences the photographic portrait through the minds of both the photographer and the sitter. By considering multiple future spectators, such as the familial spectator and the unknown spectator, this chapter highlights the different relationships and ambitions that shape the process of creating a photographic portrait. It is the complexity created by multiple spectators in the minds of both the photographer and the sitter, together with the alternative perspectives of the roles of sitter and photographer from the first two chapters, that gives rise to the concept of the situative portrait.

The Situative Portrait

Analyzing the three actors involved in the creation of a photographic portrait reveals how their actions diverge, moving away from the idea of photographic portraits as direct representations of the sitters' inner life. Sitters appear to conceal rather than reveal themselves. The

photographer's attention is fragmented, preoccupied with their personal style, worldview, and the imagined opinions of others, rather than capturing the sitter's character. Photography itself may even be better suited to depicting absence than presence, to showing what is not there. The expectations of anticipated spectators add another layer, complicating the roles of both sitter and photographer. Amid this complexity, this research project introduces an alternative approach to the photographic portrait: the situative portrait.

1. THE SITTER

The question "What do sitters do during the making of a photographic portrait?" is the focus of this chapter. Sitters are active participants. Aware that their portraits will be seen, sitters can and are likely to adjust their behavior in front of the camera. Rather than imagining sitters as passive or self-revealing, I propose to understand sitters' actions as hiding rather than revealing. This challenges the interpretation of the photographic portrait as a direct, undisturbed expression of the sitter's nature and prompts a reconsideration of what we see in a photographic portrait. If sitters do not reveal themselves, what, then, are we looking at? The second section examines the dynamic between sitter and photographer. I argue that the sitter's actions cannot be understood in isolation but are shaped by the photographer's influence. Finally, the concluding section builds on these ideas by suggesting that photographic portraits function as signs of absence, drawing attention beyond what is depicted, to aspects that remain hidden or invisible in the final image.

1.1 The Hiding Sitter

When photographic portraits are interpreted as revealing aspects of the sitter's nature, with the photographic depiction regarded as a direct line to the sitter's character, this assumes that the sitter participates, or is passively complicit, and thus reveals themselves. I suggest that

the sitter's actions in front of the camera may, in fact, be better understood as hiding rather than revealing.

"Do you have a photo of Kees? *The Gooi en Eemlander* wants to publish an obituary. There is no hurry." I read my mother's message. Calling my father "Kees" instead of "papa" feels strangely distant. Of course, I have photos.

I remember she liked this one: he is pushing a pedal go-kart with my daughters on it. The picture was made in spring. They are in the center of the photo, surrounded by trees. He is wearing a small backpack, jeans and hiking shoes, so it must have been Friday afternoon, after their usual hiking day. The girls probably met him at the entrance to the campsite. They walk toward the camera, all laughing. He looks into the camera. At me.

I open the image in Photoshop. I make a few adjustments, then close it unchanged. They will probably publish it in black and white anyway. "This one?" I write.

No answer.

Perhaps the granddaughters are too much. In another photo, he sits alone on the wooden pallet floor of the veranda in front of the trailer – built by him. He is wearing his favorite blue workman's jacket, which we bought together in April, and a checkered shirt. Nice weather, green surroundings. He is smiling at someone on the left, outside the frame. He looks happy. I send the picture to my mother.

Again, no answer.

Moving dots. "Mama mobiel" is typing.

"I was thinking of a photo of him on his own."

"But he *is* alone in the picture," I tell the silent phone. I turn it over and realize that my mother does not want a photograph. She wants a portrait – a portrait of my father looking into the camera, aware of being photographed, facing an unknown audience, ready to show what he wants and to hide what is too personal to share. I do not have such a photograph of him.

In what follows, I distinguish three ways in which the sitter's behavior can be understood as hiding: looking into the camera, a mask of neutrality, and role-playing.

Looking into the Camera as a Way to Hide

Portraits show people who know they are being photographed – people who are aware of the background and props, and who can compose themselves – body, face, and clothes. Whereas other photographs of people may reveal unintentional objects in the background, a portrait is far less generous with the information it shares: you do not see much that was not placed deliberately. While portraits of people are often associated with showing and identifying who they are, what the sitter does when posing for a camera may also be understood as hiding rather than showing themself.

My mother rejected the photograph of my father sitting on the veranda because he was looking at someone outside the frame. It showed an unguarded moment of laughter between two people. He was unaware that the photograph was being made. He was not facing the camera or anticipating future spectators. He was seen,

Fig.. 12. Ed van der Elsken, *Groenburgwal, A'dam*, Silver gelatin print, 1956.

shown, which may have been unbearably vulnerable for her. My mother was seeking a portrait of him, alone and looking into the camera. Looking into the camera was important, like an act of resistance: a conscious confrontation with future spectators.

A person looking into a camera is not only seen by a photographer but also returns this act, they are seeing as well. They see the photographer while the camera is directed at their face, but they also look beyond the camera to their imagined spectators. And this gaze, later materialized in the photograph, is how the sitter acts toward future spectators, an act that can be understood as hiding. Not hiding in the sense of being invisible, like standing behind a tree, but hiding actively by looking back.

"Sitters looking back," reminds me of photographer Ed van der Elsken (Amsterdam, 1925 – Edam, 1990) and his work. In a career that spanned four decades, he produced some 100,000 photographs and numerous films.[11] Roaming the streets of cities like Paris, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Amsterdam in search of what he called "his type of people,"[12] Van der Elsken created photographs that reveal a deep empathy and desire to engage with his subjects, often blurring the line between observer and participant. Van der Elsken is present in all his photographs, sometimes quite literally when he turns the camera on himself, but also through his interactions with others. His photographs of people looking into the camera often seem to capture a reaction to something he has said, which is one of the ways in which, according to photography curator Hripsimé Visser (The Netherlands, 1954), Van der Elsken, implicates himself in the work.[13] Looking at the photographs, one can sense how he must have provoked them, inviting them to respond and to approach the world as he did: openly and directly. One such photograph appears on the cover of Van der Elsken's book *Amsterdam! Oude foto's*, 1947–1970 (2016).[14] It shows a woman surrounded by four other people. She looks into the camera with an expression that could be described as both slightly doubtful and brazen, or, more simply, as actively looking back. Van der Elsken's provocations seem to invite people to look back, not just at him but also at future spectators of the image. Their gaze, initially a response to him, extends beyond the moment, creating a connection between the subject in the portrait and those who will see it later. In this way, Van der Elsken invites his subjects to confront their future spectators as he confronted them: directly. When the final portrait is seen, someone is looking back.

11. Susana Puente, "Around the World with Ed van der Elsken," *Apollo*, November 24, 2020, https://www.apollo-magazine.com/dutch-photographer-ed-van-der-elsken-rijksmuseum.
12. Puente, "Around the World."
13. Hripsimé Visser, in "Ed van der Elsken: Camera in Love (mini documentary)," posted January 19, 2018, by Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, YouTube, 9:18, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qH-6PehR0Db0.

Fig. 13. Rineke Dijkstra, *Coney Island*, Chromogenic print, 1993.

Fig. 14. Deana Lawson, *Mama Goma*, New York, 2014.

A Mask of Neutrality as a Way to Hide

Another way in which sitters conceal themselves is by withdrawing inward, freezing in front of the camera, creating a disconnection between mind and body. This often results in a mask of neutrality that can be observed in portraits. This phenomenon is evident in the work of photographer Rineke Dijkstra (Sittard, 1959) and photographer Deana Lawson (Rochester, 1979). Dijkstra's series of large-scale photographs focuses on themes of identity, capturing subjects at moments of transition, "rites of passage" to adulthood or to motherhood (Fig. 13).[15] Lawson's photographs stage everyday Black life as scenes of beauty and power (Fig. 14). Her portraits blur the line between the real and the mythical, revealing what writer Zadie Smith (London, 1975) has called a "kingdom of restored glory".[16]

14. Ed van der Elsken, *Amsterdam! Oude foto's, 1947–1970* (Uitgeverij Bas Lubberhuizen, 2016)
15. Hripsimé Visser, "The Soldier, the Disco Girl, the Mother and the Polish Venus," in *Rineke Dijkstra: Portraits*, (Schirmer/Mosel, 2004), 14.
16. Zadie Smith, "Deana Lawson's Kingdom of Restored Glory," *The New Yorker*, April 30, 2018.

Fig. 15. August Sander, *Jungbauern auf dem Weg zum Tanz*, Westerwald, Silver gelatin print, 1914.

In their portraits, sitters often display neutral expressions, devoid of overt emotion. This stillness may be due to Dijkstra and Lawson's use of large-format cameras, which require a slow, deliberate process. Unlike handheld cameras, which allow for quick, spontaneous shots, large-format film cameras, typically 4x5 inches, require meticulous preparation. The heavy camera must be mounted on a tripod, and a film holder must be carefully loaded and opened before an exposure can be made. This is not a camera suited for snapping spontaneous photos; rather, the process is slow, elaborate, and imbued with a sense of seriousness. The prolonged process makes the sitter acutely aware of being photographed, resulting in an expression of neutrality or stillness.

Photographing people in this way recalls photographer August Sander (Herdorf, 1964 – Cologne, 1964) and his project *People of the 20th Century*. Sander, who worked on this project for several decades, sought to systematically photograph individuals from different social classes, professions, and communities in order to present a typological cross-section of German society. Each sitter is photographed as a representative of a broader social group such as farmers, factory workers, intellectuals and artists.[17]

This typological approach, which emphasizes the social context of an individual as part of a particular category, is also evident in the work of Dijkstra and Lawson. The people they portray represent themselves, but also larger social groups, such as teenagers or Black women. The technical complexity of the large-format camera supports this ambition. The prolonged process heightens the subjects' awareness of being photographed,

17. Alfred Döblin, "Faces, Images, and Their Truth," in *August Sander: Face of Our Time* (Schirmer/Mosel, 1994) 13.

ultimately evoking an expression of neutrality, as if the duration of the photographic act encourages a sitters' individuality to "leave" their body, allowing their physical presence to function as a symbol of their social group rather than a direct representation of self.

This phenomenon recalls the literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes (Cherbourg, 1915 – Paris,1980) in *Camera Lucida* (1980).[18] Barthes, whose work explores semiotics and the philosophy of photography, describes being photographed as an experience in which his mind seems to detach from his body, a sensation he likens to becoming a "ghost" or undergoing a symbolic death.[19] In his struggle to compose himself for the camera, Barthes ultimately longs for a neutral body that signifies nothing.[20]

This mask of neutrality is another form of hiding – not through confrontation with the spectator, but though retreat. The sitter's spirit seems to escape the body, leaving only the surface, like a snake shedding its skin. What remains to be photographed is not the elusive, ever-shifting self but the surface of a body composed as neutrally as possible. This neutrality is fully in keeping with the intentions of photographers like Dijkstra and Lawson. Their portraits are not simply representations of the individuals they portray; rather, they transcend the personal to represent something larger, a broader social group or identity. What you see is a carefully maintained mask of neutrality, a deliberate absence of personal expression that allows the social to resonate.

In addition to returning the gaze and hiding behind a mask of neutrality, there is also the phenomenon of role-playing. Role-playing offers another method of

18. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1982).
19. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 14.
20. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 12.

concealment for sitters, allowing them to hide in plain sight. Since role-playing is an important aspect of my artistic practice, I now explore this method of hiding in more detail in the next part of this chapter. There are several aspects of role-playing that make it a relevant artistic method for me and this research project. First, as part of an artistic method, role-play invites collaboration. It asks participants to take an active role in choosing or rejecting a particular role suggested by the artist. On such occasions, there is a clear acknowledgment of the sitter's role in the creation of the work. In addition, many artists have used role-playing, often when photographing themselves, to challenge assumptions about representation. In relation to identity and its representation, role-play emphasizes the idea of identity as performative, constantly shaped and reconstructed in relation to different contexts rather than being fixed and static.

In tandem with this text, I am developing the photographic series *Les clichés sont conservés*. This series revolves around the question of what it is like to be confronted with one's own photographic image. In developing this series, I also seek to explore the role of the sitter in the creation of a photographic portrait by, for example, inviting people to imitate poses of their own choosing during the photographic process. In this way, role-playing is an important aspect of this project.

Role-play as a Way to Hide

With a firm push, Peter moves his chair slightly to the right, away from the lamp above the table. I sit down opposite him. His clothes are more casual than they were two weeks ago, and I notice again how large he is. Not fat or tall, but large in a way that makes everything

around him seem a little smaller than usual. He looks at the prints I have laid out in front of him. He is silent.

"Did you have another image of yourself?" I ask.

"Well, not really," he replies, though I think I see disappointment in his face.

"Of course, imitating someone doesn't make you turn into them," he continues, more to himself than to me. I look at the photograph of Justin Timberlake and the photos of Peter in a similar blue shirt. Was it cruel of me to ask this of him?

Two weeks earlier, I had photographed Peter in my studio. I had asked him to bring three examples of poses for us to mimic. It was an attempt to give him agency over his own image, and I imagined myself as the ideal portraitist, letting the sitter shape their image rather than me deciding for them. I had not expected Peter's reaction. I know Peter to be a self-aware and critical person, and yet he had apparently felt so embodied in his role – or I had given him this impression – that he had temporarily lost sight of his own physical appearance. The acting had led him to believe that he had morphed into Justin Timberlake.

Portraiture always balances "likeness" and "type." The art historian Bernard Berenson (Butrimonys, 1865 – Fiesole, 1959) distinguished between a "portrait," which represents the likeness of an individual, and an "effigy," which represents the social role of an individual.[21] Role-playing is related to "type," which is closely linked to the typical, the ideal, and the conventions of a particular time, reflecting the general understanding of

21. Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 24.

identity in an era. The presentation of social roles and a tendency toward self-fashioning have been evident in portraiture since the fifteenth century.[22] People have often been portrayed in different roles for a variety of social and artistic reasons. How this was done has always been closely linked to the purpose of the portrait and the general understanding of identity in the era.

While early portraits in Western art, from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, primarily focused on displaying the sitter's social status, with little attention given to expressing their psychological state through props and poses, the idea that portraits should reflect the sitter's personality or emotional state began to emerge during the Romantic period.[23] This concept evolved further with the development of psychology, particularly with the rise of psychoanalysis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which deepened the modern understanding of individual identity.[24]

In the last decades of the twentieth century, role-playing became a method of exploring the shifting aspects of identity in (self) portraiture. It was also used as a means of subverting the idea that identity could be captured in representation.

According to art historian Shearer West (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1960) in her book *Portraiture* (2004), many characteristics of postmodern portraiture can be traced back to early experiments by artist Marcel Duchamp (Blainville-Crevon, 1887 – Neuilly-sur-Seine, 1968) in collaboration with photographer Man Ray (Philadelphia, 1890 – Paris, 1976).[26] In 1921, the two artists collaborated on a series of photographic portraits in which Duchamp transformed himself into

22. West, *Portraiture*, 164.
23. West, *Portraiture*, 29–30.
24. Liz Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge, 2004), 33.
25. West, *Portraiture,* 206.
26. West, *Portraiture*, 206.

a fictional female persona, Rrose Sélavy. Dressed in fashionable clothes and makeup, he assumed the role of a woman, playfully yet provocatively altering his gender identity. Man Ray's portraits of Duchamp blurred the lines between self-representation and performance, comedy and sincerity, and destabilized conventional notions of identity and its depiction in portraiture.

Fig. 16. Man Ray, [Rrose Sélavy (Marcel Duchamp)], Gelatin silver print, 1923.

Like Duchamp's early experiments, much postmodern portraiture is concerned with the ways in which roles and identities can be assumed and then discarded.[27] Many artists found portraiture an appropriate medium for discussing the inescapability of social stereotypes and a way of conveying the sense that, in the late twentieth century, no individual had a single, definable identity. Photography, in turn, proved to be a suitable companion in this endeavor.

Fig. 17. Hippolyte Bayard. *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man*, Direct positive print, 1840.

However, photographic portraiture has always involved elements of role-playing, since the invention of photography in 1839. In that year, inventor Hippolyte Bayard (Breteuil-sur-Noye, 1801 – Nemours, 1887) developed a photographic technique and hoped to be officially recognized by the French government as the inventor of photography. At the last moment, however, he was overshadowed by photographer Louis Daguerre (Cormeilles-en-Parisis, 1787 – Bry-sur-Marne, 1851), whose name is now indelibly linked with the invention. In response, Bayard created a self-portrait entitled *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man* to express his disappointment (Fig. 17). Now recognized as the first photographic self-portrait, it is an early example of role-playing in front of the camera.

27. West, *Portraiture*, 206.

Fig. 18. Claude Cahun, *Self-portrait (I am in Training… Don't Kiss Me)*, Gelatin silver print, 1927.

Fig. 19. Cindy Sherman, *Play of Selves (*Act 1. Scene 2), Black and white photographs mounted on cardboard, 1975.

Fig. 20. Hans Eijkelboom, *Identity*, Gelatin silver print, 1979.

After Duchamp and Man Ray, many artists continued to use photography to explore identity and role-playing. Examples include artist Claude Cahun (Nantes, 1894 – Saint Helier, Jersey, 1954), who challenged gender norms through surrealist self-portraits, and artist Cindy Sherman (Glen Ridge, 1954), who staged images of herself in different roles to critique stereotypes (Figs. 18, 19). Artist Hans Eijkelboom (Arnhem, 1949), who explores identity and mass behavior offers another example, or artist duo Ryan Trecartin (Webster, 1981) and Lizzy Fitch (Bloomington, 1983), who create hyper-stylized video and installation works that deconstruct digital identity (Figs. 20, 21). By actively presenting themselves in photographic images, these artists undermine the very idea that images can capture identity.

When artists photograph themselves and engage in role-playing, the distinction between "likeness" and "type" is activated by the artists themselves, which can raise the question of how to think about the artist – where the role of the artist ends and the person begins, and vice versa. In relation to this, Sherman herself has said: "I feel I'm anonymous in my work. When I look at the pictures, I never see myself; they're not self-portraits. Sometimes I disappear."[28]

In his article "Original Sin: Performance, Photography and Self-Knowledge" in the catalog for the Tate Modern exhibition *Performing for the Camera*, (which explores the relationship between photography and performance), art historian Jonah Westerman (US, 1981) proposes a different perspective. Rather than assuming an original, "real" Sherman who disappears under the surplus of copies, he suggests that the entire performance in front of the camera creates a distinction

28. Glenn Collins, "A Portraitist's Romp Through Art History," *New York Times*, February 1, 1990, 17.

between the individual person and an ideological vision of that person. This implies that Sherman repeatedly drives a wedge between the signifying surface and its presumed signifying depth, between image and subject. According to Westerman, each persistent split declares: "I am not here; therefore, I am," and it is only in this activity, in this utterance, that the person of Cindy Sherman truly appears.[29] Westerman thus questions Sherman's "disappearance." The many copies did not erase Sherman; rather, they created her outside her representations. He suggests that it is precisely this process of performance and multiplication that produces her identity. Rather than being erased by the images, Sherman is constituted by them. In this sense, she does not disappear but emerges as something beyond the sum of her representations.

Fig. 21. Ryan Trecartin, Lizzie Fitch, *The Re'Search*, video-still, 2009-2010.

Westerman's analysis reveals the persistent urge to connect photographs to Sherman's identity. It illustrates how photographic portraits are often perceived: even when presented as art, attention shifts easily to questions about the identity of the person portrayed rather than to the artwork. This response is partly provoked by the fact that Sherman photographs herself. The work consciously plays with this desire. Yet her photographs are works of art, not portraits. In these artworks, she raises the question of the influence of image culture, gender norms, and media, but the work is not about her or her identity. The work is about raising this question, about how we (and not she) relate to images, gender roles, and media. Sherman's self functions as a vehicle. The work is about raising the question, not answering it.

Westerman's analysis, however, brings to mind Peter's reaction to seeing the photographs we made.

29. Jonah Westerman, "Original Sin: Performance, Photography and Self-Knowledge," in *Performing for the Camera*, ed. Simon Baker and Fiontán Moran (Tate Publishing, 2016), 228.

Fig. 21. Judith van IJken, *Les Clichés sont conservés Lindi*, Inktjet print, 2023.

Westerman's conclusion that the many copies did not erase Sherman but rather created her outside her depictions, suggests that the multiple depictions – the role-play – seemed to liberate her from representation. Following Westerman's analysis, one might conclude that Peter was unable to liberate himself in the way Sherman did. Peter's feeling of disappointment that the photographs did not capture the experience he felt while "morphing" into Justin Timberlake may be because there were too few variations. Peter performed only one role and was therefore unable to achieve the same level of liberation that Sherman did. From that perspective, it was not cruel of me to ask him to perform a role; rather, it was cruel to ask him to perform *only* one role.

The number of different roles explored may also explain why the fifteen-year-olds I photographed for the project seemed to enjoy the photographic process more than the older people I asked to pose. All the younger participants seemed to enjoy the whole process: choosing images, posing for the camera, and responding to their images, both visually and verbally. As far as I could see, they enjoyed every part of it and were never confronted with existential questions. For example, during a "reflection session" I organized to document her responses, I showed Lindi one of her portraits on which she had drawn with a white marker, erasing part of her face; she responded with a simple and approving "Ah, cool" (Fig. 21).

Of course, playing with images of yourself is a different experience when you are fifteen years old compared to when you are forty-five years old, but according to Nathan Jurgenson in *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media* (2019), there is also a generational difference involved. Jurgenson argues that young people have a very different approach to their own photographic portraits than their parents because their approach to photography is less about fixing and affirming identity, and more about expression, as a cultural practice; a way of seeing and of speaking, comparable to writing, and a means for the person portrayed to construct their self-knowledge: to understand the self.[30] And this self is not fixed or static, but rather it is dynamic and occurs in dialogue with others. The self is an interactive practice, which is often illustrated by sociologist Charles Horton Cooley's (Ann Arbor, 1864 – 1929) concept of "the looking-glass self," which describes a sense of self entangled with a sense of others, commonly paraphrased as: *I am not what I think I am, and I am not what you think I am; I am what I think you think I am*.[31] In other words, there is no self without other people and no intrinsic, essential, or natural authenticity to our own identity, which leads to the idea that we get to know ourselves as selves by taking a third-person perspective on ourselves. From this perspective, posing for the camera and taking on, accepting, and discarding roles in front of the camera can be understood as an identity practice.

The fifteen-year-old girls I photographed did not feel uncomfortable because the photographs did not define who they were. They were just the result of one of many identity practices and in no way defined who they were any more than any of their other photographs. According to Jurgenson, young people are not concerned with specific discontinuities in their portraits because they do not believe in a fixed identity. Rather, their portraits are part of their ongoing becoming, a continuous process.[32]

30. Nathan Jurgenson, *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media* (Verso Books, 2019), 40.
31. Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), 152.
32. Jurgenson, *The Social Photo*, 60.

This does not mean, however, that these fifteen-year-olds are free from concerns about depictions of their identity. As Jurgenson admits, "self-expression" can easily become "self-policing" when (the depiction of) who you might be, through social media, becomes such a significant part of your daily life. Especially if the roles played are more in line with persistent and visible categories, the possibility of reinvention, and thus freedom, diminishes.[33] In that sense, my intervention – asking them to consciously choose the roles they wanted to play in the portraits, plus their (visual) reflection and sometimes "correction" of the results – might have been a welcome intervention and a slight extension of the roles they were used to playing for the camera on their own.

To recapitulate: The sitter's actions can be understood as hiding in different ways. First, assertively, by looking into the camera, by seeking confrontation with future spectators, and by shifting the focus of attention to the spectator. Second, sitters may hide and become absent by removing their mental presence: hiding behind a mask of neutrality. Third, there is hiding through role-playing, drawing attention to a chosen aspect and casting a shadow over the rest or questioning the idea of representation altogether when deploying many roles.

1.2 The Actively Responding Sitter

In addition to hiding, people posing for a camera also respond. They respond to the photographer. Whereas a photographic portrait typically depicts the sitter alone, as if in an empty room, the sitter is not actually alone during the creation of the portrait, except in the case of self-portraits. During the making of a photographic

33. Jurgenson, *The Social Photo*, 87.

portrait, the sitter faces the photographer directly. This section examines the interaction between photographer and sitter to explore how the social dynamic might influence the sitter's role in the creation of a photographic portrait.

"Okay, we must start now. The daylight is changing." My voice sounds determined.

We get up hastily, as if we were caught doing something wrong, leave our coffees, and walk to the other side of the studio – to the table in the sunlight.

"Why did you want me to choose the poses?" Lynn asks as she positions herself on the table. "Well," I answer. "I want to give you, as the sitter, some agency in the making of your portrait..." "Mhm," she replies. I quickly add, "…but I'm starting to get the impression that people don't really like to decide." "Yes, I agree." Lynn nods. "I prefer when you tell me what to do and how to pose. People's desire to decide is overrated, I think."

I look down at the camera's viewfinder. Our dialogue recedes to the back of my mind beneath my inner dialogue: "Okay, what do I see? Is this good? Okay, measure the light... Ah, it has gone down... Adjust the time, lower the flash... now the height of the tripod. Mhm, her chin looks strange from this angle. Something needs to be under her head... a blanket... Make sure it is invisible. This is better. Now a chair for me to stand on. Okay. That looks good. Now a test with the Canon... Where is the sync cord?... Yes, that's fine. Now the Mamiya. Transport. Oh, slate... Shit, that light. Need to measure again, focus…"

"What do *you* think?" Lynn asks a week later, looking up from the prints in front of her. "I like them," I reply. "I expected you to be critical, but I think they're nice... I was just annoyed with myself last week. I was restless, chaotic, and took too long." "Oh... was it different than usual?" Lynn asks. "Well, it's always a bit, but this time I was struggling a lot. I even wondered if I was doing it on purpose. Maybe to make the situation so chaotic that you would feel less controlled. I mean, wanting to use both artificial light and daylight, and both film and digital is just a lot to manage." "Oh, I hadn't noticed that at all," Lynn replies, a little surprised. "I was just lying there. Comfortable. Quite relaxed, really. Sometimes you didn't finish your sentences. But I mean, you were busy. I trusted you to do your thing. That's part of being a photographer, isn't it?"

Lynn was right. We had played specific social roles – roles that stayed with us during the session and had been shaped over a longer period leading up to this moment. Previous experiences had made Lynn aware of her role as the sitter. She knew what to expect and what was expected of her. She chose her clothes beforehand and imagined herself in different poses. On her way to the studio, she presumably imagined how she would behave in the studio. Similarly, my role as a photographer had been shaped over time; years of practice, the methods I had developed, my appearance, the seemingly unimportant black jeans and simple sweater I wore, but also by my mind – my ideas about how photographers should behave.

That Saturday, our roles were confirmed by the objects in the studio: the lighting, the tripod, the camera, and the background. Everything was positioned to remind

us how to act. And just as we were about to slip into other roles that we knew so well, as friends drinking coffee, I raised my voice and brought us back.

When people pose for someone, they are not merely acting. They are also responding. In addition to being shaped by our different personalities and behaviors, that response is also shaped by the social roles we think we are playing in that situation. I was unhappy because my behavior did not match my idea of how a photographer is supposed to behave. Lynn, however, had not experienced the situation as I had. There are several possible reasons for this. Perhaps my performance as the photographer was not as "poor" as I had imagined. Perhaps Lynn was being polite, or perhaps she had simply not noticed, being preoccupied with her own performance. But whatever her experience, according to the ideas of sociologist Erving Goffman (Mannville, 1922 – Philadelphia, 1982) in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Lynn most likely would not have reacted differently.[34] Goffman developed a dramaturgical approach to social interaction, likening everyday life to a performance in which individuals present themselves in ways that conform to social expectations, keeping "face" and avoiding disruptions to the social script. Even if Lynn thought I was behaving unprofessionally, she would be unlikely to say so because in that situation we were also playing our roles as a team.[35]

According to Goffman, people always assume roles in the presence of others.[36] While some may embrace a role wholeheartedly and others may be more ambivalent toward the role they are socially expected to perform, in general, people share a concern with maintaining their roles to navigate social situations.

34. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Penguin Books, 1990), 30.

In the situation involving Lynn and me, our roles as sitter and photographer were bound together in a performance as a team to produce the photographs. If Lynn had begun asking critical questions about my performance, this might have embarrassed me as a photographer, and it would also have endangered her own role as sitter. No photographer means no sitter. Therefore, the sitter's response is tied to the roles of sitter and photographer, and there is an incentive to conform to the assumed roles.

The studio is an atypical setting for a social performance. At first glance, it might resemble what Goffman calls a backstage "region" – a place where the performance can be somewhat relaxed, and where team members can be open about their roles.[37] However, at the moment of making a photograph, in that split second when the shutter opens, there is an encounter with the (future) spectators – the audience. These spectators are not present in the studio, but both the sitter and the photographer are aware that they will eventually see the result. Therefore, with each photograph, the studio alternates between what Goffman terms "frontstage regions" and "backstage regions." This dual identity creates confusion for the sitter, as it blurs the line regarding whom they are performing for. At the precise moment of exposure, the sitter, along with the photographer, becomes part of a team performing for the invisible future spectators of the photograph. When the camera is not capturing, they are engaged in a simpler performance involving only the photographer.

The typical discomfort many people feel when having their portrait made might, therefore, be partly explained by what Goffman calls "impression management

35. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 88.
36. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 30.
37. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 116.

difficulties." While posing, the sitter is confronted with two different social situations: on the one hand, the direct interaction with the photographer that they see in the present, and on the other hand, the indirect situation that involves the audience in the form of the future spectators of the photograph.[38]

In the studio, the sitter has no control over the status of the "region"; it is the photographer who determines it. With a simple gesture – such as turning their head away from the camera, releasing the shutter, or resuming conversation – the photographer brings the performance back to the here and now, forcing the sitter back into their interaction with the photographer. It's akin to a circus artist holding the rope of a horse running in circles.

One week later.
"Hi, how are you? I am making a small website. Is it okay if I use this picture? (With credits, of course)."

The message appears on my mobile phone. The text surrounds one of Lynn's black-and-white photographs. It is a medium shot portrait (from the waist up to the head). Lynn's arms are crossed, and she is looking over her shoulder. Her face is turned toward the window.
"Sure," I answer.

I look at the photograph. I am surprised. Did she not prefer the other photo? The portrait of her looking into the camera? I remember her saying: "To look at the camera is to acknowledge the presence of the photographer." And did she not describe looking away as "obedient"?

38. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 113.

Later, in my studio, I look at the comments she had written on the print of the portrait: "The best angle, light, expression, and pose. But I would have preferred to look into the camera. On the other hand, people often look the other way in everyday life. So maybe this one is 'good' after all."

Could there be a relation between my presence and her choice? When we first discussed the photographs, she preferred a portrait in which she looks directly into the camera, acknowledging me as the photographer. Later, at home and free from my presence, she chose the image where she looks away. I imagine her sitting at her laptop, clicking through the images, trying to view the portraits from the perspective of her website visitors. She might be wondering which portrait conveys a gentle and welcoming yet professional tone. I envision her, as a test, opening the "About" page and critically evaluating the woman looking out the window and finally selecting her preferred portrait.

Lynn's preference illustrates the social dynamic between the sitter and the photographer during and after the creation of the photographs. Looking into the camera is expected behavior for the sitter, but it is also a common social response to look back at someone who is looking at you. What one sees in a portrait is a person engaged in a social interaction with the photographer. However, since the photographer is not depicted, their presence is easily overlooked, and their influence on the sitter's performance may go unnoticed. Moreover, when photographic portraits are interpreted as revealing aspects of the sitter, behavior instigated by the photographer may be mistakenly attributed solely to the sitter. To see a photographic portrait as a reflection of the

sitter is like reading an interview presented as a monologue.

To recapitulate: The exploration of the sitter's role during the creation of a photographic portrait reveals the sitter as both hiding, rather than revealing, and as responding to the presence of the unseen photographer. Rather than establishing a direct connection to the (future) spectators that reveals their nature, the sitter's actions seem to point elsewhere. In the first section of this chapter, the sitter was hiding and thereby moving away from the idea of the photographic portrait possibly reflecting something of their essence. In the section that followed, I elaborated on the interaction between the sitter and the photographer, showing another argument that what is seen in the photographic portrait may not mirror an essential aspect of the sitter, but rather reflects how the sitter responded to the photographer.

Both ways of understanding the sitter's behavior in front of the camera move away from a direct, uninterrupted line between an aspect of the sitter's nature and the photograph. From this perspective, what is seen in a photograph is more likely a sitter trying to hide from being seen and a sitter responding to the photographer's instructions. Both interpretations of the photograph shift the spectator's attention away from the image itself. They suggest thinking about the invisible photographer influencing the sitter's pose, and about what the sitter withholds from the image. In the following section, this leads to a new interpretation of the photographic portrait. Instead of photographic portraits as evidence of the sitter's nature, this third and final section proposes the photographic portrait as a sign of absence.

1.3 Appropriation and Photographic Portraits as Signs of Absence

There is a small print on the floor of the studio behind the heater. It is one of the pictures I asked Lynn to bring as a reference for the photo session. The small 4 x 5 cm print must have fallen off the windowsill in the excitement of the shoot. I pick it up. It is a postcard from the 1990s, black and white, showing a man and a woman sitting on a boat. The man is shirtless. His legs are crossed. The elbow of his right arm rests on his thigh. His hand is holding a cigarette. Both are carefully dressed. The shoes, the baggy trousers, and the woman's white blouse with its upright collar all evoke a 1950s style, while the short black hair and the makeup suggests that the photograph was made in the 1990s. The man stares into the distance while the woman leans against his chest as if sunbathing. Her head is tilted backward, resting on his shoulder; her hands casually placed on her legs. The scene is obviously posed, nobody would sit like this on a moving boat, yet the image feels strangely honest. I think this is because of the artificiality of the scene. It is not pretending to be real. It is a scene made for fantasy. It is a photograph I would have fantasized about if I had seen it as a sixteen-year-old spinning a rack of black-and-white postcards. I put the small print on top of the other photographs that Lynn brought: a nineteenth-century family portrait, and an image of Susan Sontag photographed by photographer Peter Hujar (Trenton, 1934 – New York, 1987) in 1975.

Like the other Peter, whom I had photographed, I asked Lynn to bring in images to imitate. Or more accurately, I asked her to choose poses. Looking at these examples, I realize how intimate this request was. The choice of

images reveals what she likes to look at and shares a personal mix of interests, values, and experiences – much like the interior of a house reflects the personal taste and preferences of its inhabitant. But it is more than just a telling selection of photographs; the fact that they were chosen to be imitated adds another layer of intimacy. Lynn did not just select a series of photographs with beautiful poses; she chose these images knowing she would be imitating them for the camera. So, the photographs she brought to the studio not only show images that she finds appealing but also reveal how she is willing to be photographed, how she prefers to perform while knowing the results will be seen.

As explained before, it was not my intention to ask sitters to disclose their desires. My aim was to give sitters agency over their own portraits. I wanted to invite them into the process of image-making. By asking them to bring examples of poses, I aimed to give sitters the opportunity to think about how they preferred to be portrayed. Selecting the images to imitate beforehand would give them time to form an idea how they wanted to be depicted, rather than me composing their poses during the photographic session. My goal was to empower the sitter.

During the photographic session, however, we did not imitate the photograph of the couple on the boat. Instead, we chose Hujar's photograph of Sontag. Visually, it is an appealing image. Sontag is lying on a bed with her hands clasped behind her head, appearing lost in thought, elusive and mysterious. Lynn, with her dark hair, even bears a resemblance to Sontag. I arranged the table in the studio to approximate the bed in the original photograph and handed Lynn a small printout

of the picture so she could pose exactly as Hujar had photographed Sontag. I appropriated Hujar's photograph of Sontag.

Before the session, I had not consciously thought of appropriation or appropriation art, yet it added another layer to the portrait I made of Lynn, as it pointed not only to her but also to Hujar's photograph of Sontag. This quality, the ability to "signal elsewhere," seems particularly relevant in the context of photographic portraits, as it resonates with the actions of sitters who are either hiding or responding to an unseen photographer. Both actions refer to something beyond the directly visible: being elsewhere or reacting to the photographer outside the frame. To understand if and how appropriation might be related to photographic portraiture, I will now explore appropriation art in more detail.

Appropriation Art

Appropriation in the context of the visual arts refers to the practice of using pre-existing objects or images with little or no transformation.[39] Artists intentionally borrow, copy, and alter pre-existing images, objects, and ideas from other artworks or visual culture at large.

Appropriation in art has a rich and varied history, encompassing a wide range of practices that engage with existing works or cultural objects in multiple ways. These practices range from visually referencing earlier works (as seen in certain paintings) to incorporating everyday objects, such as newspapers, into Cubist collages. Duchamp's ready-mades are well-known examples of artistic appropriation, but one can also consider artist Amalia Ulman's (Buenos Aires, 1989) five-month performance critiquing the influence of

39. Ian Chilvers and John Glaves-Smith, eds., Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art (Oxford University Press, 2009), 94.

social media presented on Instagram (Fig. 22). Today, appropriation is increasingly prevalent, driven by the ease of access to online imagery, often making it difficult to distinguish between original work and appropriation. The internet and the availability of easily accessible images have fueled what legal scholar Lawrence Lessig (Rapid City, 1961) in 2008 termed "remix" culture, with AI-generated imagery by AI systems, based on multiple and often untraceable sources, representing the contemporary pinnacle of this trend.[40]

Fig. 22. Amalia Ulman *Excellences & Perfections (Instagram Update 22nd June 2014)*, Inkjet print, 2014.

In appropriation art that clearly acknowledge the original work, the new creation recontextualizes the borrowed elements, creating a dialogue between the old and the new, as well as between their respective contexts. This practice raises questions about originality, authenticity, and authorship, continuing the long modernist tradition of questioning the nature and definition of art and the process of art-making.[41] Appropriation art has sparked debates about ownership, sometimes leading to legal controversies over the validity of such works under copyright law.[42] Court cases have examined the distinction between "transformative works," which add new meaning or expression, and "derivative works," which are more directly based on existing content.

Beyond the legal aspects, appropriation art also raises ethical questions about who has the right to appropriate what.[43] These discussions often intersect with issues of power, as is the case with the much-debated concept of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of customs, practices, or ideas from one culture – often of a minority culture – by members of a more dominant culture.[44]

40. Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2008).

41. "Appropriation," *Art Terms,* Tate, accessed August 9, 2024, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/appropriation.

42. Jessica Meiselman, "When Does an Artist's Appropriation Become Copyright Infringement?" *Artsy,* December 28, 2017, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-artists-appropriation-theft.

43. James Young, "New Objections to Cultural Appropriation in the Arts," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 61, no. 3 (July 2021): 307.

44. James Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* (Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 5.

Fig. 23. Richard Prince, *Untitled (Cowboy)* Ektacolor print, 1989.

Fig. 24. Richard Prince, *Untitled (Portrait)*, Inkjet on canvas, 2014.

Both appropriation art and cultural appropriation are thus involved with the ethical complexities that arise when cultural elements are borrowed or imitated without proper recognition or sensitivity.

Throughout his career, painter and appropriation artist Richard Prince (Panama Canal Zone, 1949) has engaged with both sides of the power dynamics surrounding the moral questions of appropriation art. Prince is best known for his *Untitled (Cowboys)* series (created between 1980 and 1992), which consists of re-photographed Marlboro cigarette advertisements (Fig. 23). By re-photographing and decontextualizing these images, Prince critiques the commercial portrayal of the "macho man on horseback" and questions the broader influence of advertising.[45] As Prince himself explained, "I seem to be chasing images that I don't quite believe in. And I try to make them even more unbelievable."[46]

Prince began the *Untitled (Cowboys)* series early in his career as an unknown artist working in the tear sheet department at *Time* magazine, where he was tasked with sending proofs of advertisements to clients. His appropriation of widely circulated ads for Marlboro, a powerful and influential brand, resembled a David and Goliath struggle with Prince as an unknown artist challenging a corporate giant. Nearly thirty years later, when Prince, now a famous artist, started appropriating profile portraits that people had posted on their Instagram accounts for his *New Portraits* series, the situation was reversed (Fig. 24). This time, Prince was in the dominant position, selling images – screenshots he took of these profile pictures, with a comment attached – for prices far exceeding what the original photographers could charge for the images themselves. This led to widespread criticism and individuals reclaiming their portraits.[47]

45. Melissa de Zwart, "Repost This," in *Future Law: Emerging Technology, Regulation and Ethics*, eds. Lilian Edwards, Burkhard Schafer, and Edina Harbinja (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 368.

46. Marvin Heiferman, "Richard Prince," *BOMB Magazine*, July 1, 1988, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/1988/07/01/richard-prince/.

Prince is a key figure in the *Pictures Generation*, an artistic movement that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period marked by a critical interrogation of mass media, advertising, and the proliferation of images. Appropriation art encompasses a wide variety of practices, each with different levels of critical engagement. In this context, the *Pictures Generation* is particularly relevant to the question what a photographic portrait represents, as its artists were especially engaged in questioning how meaning is created through representation. Rather than simply using pre-existing images without considering the original, such as in AI-generated images that often obscure their sources, their artworks were created in dialogue with the originals, intending to make spectators reflect on these originals, their context, and the concept of "original" itself.

"Pictures Generation" artists, a term derived from the 1977 exhibition *Pictures* at the Artists Space gallery in New York, which was curated by art critic and curator Douglas Crimp (Coeur d'Alene, 1944 – New York, 2019), came of age during the rise of television and were influenced by conceptual art. They explored representational imagery and mass media through what Crimp describes as "processes of quotation, excerption, framing, and staging."[48]

Another key figure of the *Pictures Generation* is Sherrie Levine (Hazleton, 1947), a painter and sculptor known for her conceptual approach that challenges conventio-

47. Hannah Jane Parkinson, "Instagram, an artist and the $100,000 selfies – Appropriation in the Digital Age," *The Guardian*, July 18, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jul/18/instagram-artist-richard-prince-selfies; Lizzie Plaugic, "The Story of Richard Prince and His $100,000 Instagram Art," *The Verge*, May 30, 2015, https://www.theverge.com/2015/5/30/8691257/richard-prince-instagram-photos-copyright-law-fair-use.

Fig. 25. Sherrie Levine, *After Walker Evans: 4*, Gelatin silver print, 1981.

nal notions of originality, authorship, and the male-dominated art-historical canon. Levine's work often involves critical appropriation, recontextualizing existing images and artworks to expose the biases embedded in art history, and the commodification of art.[49]

When I look at Levine's *After Walker Evans: 4*, the first thing I experience is a duality: I see an image that is both present and absent (Fig. 25). I recognize the face of Allie Mae Burroughs as photographed by Walker Evans, yet I am simultaneously aware that this is not Evans' photograph – it is Levine's *After Walker Evans:4*. In essence, I am confronted with something that exists as a negation: an image that is actually "not."

This is what I wish for photographic portraits: to be a visual sign that signifies elsewhere, to signify "that it is not." Since sitters appear to be hiding and responding to the photographer rather than presenting themselves, undermining the idea of a photographic portrait as a direct representation of the sitter – as something "which is" – would it be possible to think of photographic portraits as something that redirects or that signifies away from what is visually presented?

In the late 1970s, Levine began re-photographing works by famous photographers such as Eliot Porter (Winnetka, 1901 – Santa Fe, 1990), Edward Weston (Highland Park, 1886 – Carmel, 1958), and Walker Evans (St. Louis, 1903 – New Haven, 1975). Her most famous series of these re-photographs became the series *After Walker Evans* (1981) for which she photographed reproductions from Evans' book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), framed and titled them *After Walker*

48. Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," October 8 (Spring 1979): 75–88.
49. "Sherrie Levine," The Art Story, accessed August 11, 2024, https://www.theartstory.org/artist/levine-sherrie/

Evans, and numbered them from 1 to 22. Levine's *After Walker Evans: 4* – a re-photographed portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs, the wife of an Alabama sharecropper – became a landmark in postmodern art, both praised and criticized as a feminist challenge to patriarchal authority and a critique of the commodification of art.[50]

After Walker Evans: 4 is not typically regarded as a photographic portrait; it is primarily received as a work of appropriation. However, this photographic image does depict the face of Allie Mae Burroughs, making it an interesting subject to study in relation to photographic portraiture. Levine's *After Walker Evans: 4* has many layers of meaning, one of which is the emphasis it places on Walker Evans' role in creating the original photograph – both through the title and through her act of appropriating it as a woman. This highlights the fact that when we look at Allie Burroughs' face, we are not merely viewing a neutral representation but rather a response to Walker Evans as the unseen male photographer.

Thus, although *After Walker Evans: 4* does not fall within the genre of photographic portraiture, I believe it is important to explore how the various layers of context and construction in this work operate, particularly in light of my suggestion that the sitters' actions can also be interpreted as pointing elsewhere.

Levine's *After Walker Evans:4* encourages spectators to look not only at, but also beyond, the surface of the photographic image and consider the different layers of context surrounding its creation and existence. It invites consideration of Levine's act of appropriation, which disrupts and redefines traditional artistic conventions.

50. David Hopkins, "The Politics of Equivocation: Sherrie Levine, Duchamp's 'Compensation Portrait', and Surrealism in the USA 1942–45," *Oxford Art Journal* 26, no. 1 (2003): 45.

As art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss (Washington D.C., 1941) observes, Levine's appropriation "opens the work from behind."[51] Through this process, Levine introduces multiple layers of meaning to notions of originality, art-making, and the contexts in which these works were made and experienced, prompting one to rethink what one is really seeing and what this image that depicts Allie Mae Burroughs ultimately signifies. From a Peircean perspective, *After Walker Evans:4* simultaneously engages with multiple signs and meanings, layering characteristics of the three different types of signs – symbols, icons, and indices – while also challenging and sometimes undermining each other.

Philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (Cambridge, 1839 – Milford, 1914) developed his Theory of Signs over several decades, notably refining it in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Peirce divides visual signs into three distinct categories: icons, symbols, and indices. To briefly summarize: A symbol is a sign that typically stands for something else. It has no inherent connection to the object it represents, relying instead on cultural conventions or learned associations (e.g., words, traffic signs). It is a relationship commonly agreed – as with red meaning stop at a traffic light. Peirce's concept of the icon, which differs from the art-historical term "icon" used for depictions of saints made for veneration, describes a sign that shares a visual resemblance to what it represents. The last category, the index, refers to signs that have a direct causal or physical relationship to what they represent, as a footprint relates a foot and smoke relates to fire.

In *After Walker Evans: 4*, the physical resemblance inherent in Peirce's concept of the icon is crucial, as it

51. Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition," October 18 (Autumn 1981): 65.

presents an image almost identical to Evans' original, raising questions about the nature of photographic representation. Additionally, the indexical nature of the photograph is significant, represented by the rays of light that reflected from Allie Mae Burroughs before reaching Walker Evans' light-sensitive plate, tying the image to a specific moment during the Great Depression. However, this indexical relationship is doubled by another encounter, this time between Levine's lens and the catalog of pictures. Levine's re-photograph thus adds a layer and disrupts the original indexical relationship. Instead of being an index of the original scene, it now serves as an index of the act of appropriation.

Finally, Peirce's concept of the symbol, where meaning arises from social conventions and cultural understanding rather than from resemblance or direct association, operates on two different and opposing levels. The original photograph is a landmark of modernist photography, while *After Walker Evans* has, over time, become a similarly important landmark, this time for postmodernism.

As a side note, Peirce acknowledges that photographs are complex signs and explicitly states that one and the same sign may simultaneously be a likeness and an indication.[52] However, he ultimately concludes that "a photograph is an index having an icon incorporated into it."[53] According to Peirce, photographs are indices because they are created by rays of light traveling from the object to the photograph. This view aligns with the understanding of photography as an uncoded medium, capable of directly capturing what is in front of it without interference.

52. Alexander Robins, "Peirce and Photography: Art, Semiotics, and Science," T*he Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 28, no. 1 (2014): 9.
53. Robins, "Peirce and Photography," 9.

Levine's deliberate doubling of meaning was intended to introduce doubt and uncertainty. According to Crimp, the images in her work must be understood in relation to one another, which undermines their autonomous power of signification.[54] Levine sought to avoid clear answers and instead provoke questions by embedding what she refers to as "parasite meanings," thereby encouraging spectators to move beyond rigid thinking.[55] In a 1985 interview with art historian Jeanne Siegel (US, 1932 – 2013), Levine explained that she aimed to create images that contradict themselves by layering one picture over another, sometimes allowing both images to be visible while causing them at other times to disappear. For her, the essence of the work lies in that middle space where no picture exists – an emptiness, a void.[56]

Peirce's theory was directed at visual signs. But what if he had formulated a fourth category, one focused on Levine's "void", a category for signs of absence? These would be signs that do not signify what they present, but rather signify "that they are not," indicating emptiness, as Levine intended with *After Walker Evans:4*. Such signs would invite the spectator to contemplate this absence, making them aware of what is not there and prompting them to consider why.

Given what sitters seem to do during the creation of a photographic portrait, actions that point elsewhere, outside of what is visible in the portrait, through hiding and responding – the concept of photographic portraits as signs of absence might be applicable. Photographic portraits, not as indices, symbols, or icons, but as these absent signs, would resist direct interpretation based solely on the visible image. Instead, they would prompt

54. Crimp, "Pictures," 85.
55. Jeanne Siegel, "After Sherrie Levine," in *Art Talk: The Early 80*s, ed. Jeanne Siegel (Da Capo Paperback, 1988).
56. Siegel, "After Sherrie Levine."

the spectator to think about the sitter and their actions, or the instructions of the invisible photographer, much like *After Walker Evans: 4* invites consideration of, among other things, Evans' relationship with Allie Mae Burroughs. Photographic portraits as absent signs would open the image from behind, inviting reflection on the complex and multiple layers they encapsulate and, on the context-dependent and relational nature of photographic portraits and their creation.

To recapitulate: This chapter explores the role of the sitter in photographic portraiture, challenging the conventional notion of the sitter as a passive subject whose essence is directly revealed in the resulting image. Instead, it presents the sitter as an active participant who hides rather than reveals, consciously shaping their presentation in response to the photographer and the unseen audience. With section *1.1 The Hiding Sitter,* the chapter begins by examining the ways sitters hide. By looking directly into the camera, retreating into neutrality, or adopting roles, sitters deflect attention and complicate the interpretation of their portraits. These actions challenge the expectation of portraits as straightforward representations, instead suggesting that the sitter's behavior obscures, fragments, or redirects the spectator's gaze. This section also highlights the collaborative nature of role-playing, illustrating how the sitter's active participation can expand the portrait beyond simple depiction. Section *1.2 The Actively Responding Sitte*r then delves into the dynamic between the sitter and the photographer, emphasizing that the sitter's actions are shaped by the photographer's presence and instructions. Using Goffman's concept of performance, I argue that both sitter and photographer adopt social roles during the creation of a portrait,

resulting in a collaboration that aligns with the expectations of future spectators. This interaction further complicates the interpretation of a photographic portrait as a direct reflection of the sitter's essence, as the image is also a product of the sitter's response to the photographer's influence. The final section, *1.3 Appropriation and Photographic Portraits as Signs of Absence*, introduces the idea of photographic portraits as "signs of absence," pointing beyond what is visible in the image to what remains hidden or outside its frame. Drawing parallels to appropriation art, specifically Levine's *After Walker Evans:4*, the section suggests that photographic portraits, like appropriated artworks, invite spectators to consider what is absent or obscured. By framing portraits as signs of absence – as complex, layered signs – I propose that they resist direct interpretation, instead functioning as prompts for reflection on the sitter's hidden actions and the unseen photographer's role. In summary, this chapter redefines the sitter's role in photographic portraiture as one of active engagement: hiding, responding, and shaping their representation. This redefinition challenges a view of portraits as straightforward reflections of the sitter and opens a way to interpret photographic portraits as layered and context-dependent signs.

2. THE PHOTOGRAPHER

This research project examines the social dynamics involved in the creation of a photographic portrait, focusing on its three participants: the sitter, the photographer, and the spectator (via the perspectives and experiences of the sitter and photographer). By analyzing the roles and gestures of these participants and by examining their actions, this project seeks to understand, firstly, the process of creating a photographic portrait and, secondly, how this process might be reimagined. The aim is to develop a type of photographic portrait that makes its creation explicit. To this end, the project looks closely at what happens during this process and seeks new insights that could lead to a different form of photographic portraiture. Following the first chapter, which focused on the role of the sitter, this second chapter is dedicated to the role of the photographer.

Central to this artistic research project is my own photographic practice and my role as a photographer. However, I am not the only photographer explored in this chapter. Examining the work of other photographers and photography students has helped me better understand aspects of my own practice, which, in turn, shaped the photographer described in this chapter. The artists discussed here are Annaleen Louwes (Nieuw-Schoonenbeek, 1959), Daniëlle van Ark (Schiedam, 1974), and Bernhard Kahrmann (Germany, 1973).

Fig. 26. Annaleen Louwes, *am i real (ly here)?* film still, 2023.

Fig. 27. Daniëlle van Ark, *The End*, Publication, 2025.

Fig. 28. Bernhard Kahrmann, *Untitled*, Photographic images, 2024.

Annaleen Louwes is an artist who explores themes of identity, vulnerability, and the human condition through her photographs of people (Fig. 26). She studied photography at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy and frequently examines the relationship between the sitter and the photographer in her work. In addition to her self-initiated projects, which have been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions, Louwes has undertaken commissions for cultural institutions, theater companies, and magazines.

Daniëlle van Ark is a visual artist whose multidisciplinary practice spans photography, installation, sculpture, and mixed media (Fig. 27). A graduate of the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague (2005), she later attended the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam (2011 – 2013). Van Ark critically examines themes such as value and authenticity of art, the passage of time, and societal hierarchies, with a particular focus on how objects and images acquire status within the art world.

Bernhard Kahrmann is a visual artist working in photography, video, painting, and installation (Fig. 28). His atmospheric, minimalist spaces evoke transience and ambiguity. Trained at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste Stuttgart (1994 – 2000) and the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam (2003 – 2004), he creates immersive environments that reflect on the ephemeral nature of perception and memory.

While the practices of these three artists differ from mine and are not representative of it, certain aspects of their work resonate with my own. For instance, Louwes' engagement with her subjects, Van Ark's exploration of the expanded field of photography, and Kahrmann's interest in the visual appearance of photographic images reflect elements of my practice.

My explorations highlight photographers engaged with multiple facets of their practice, such as recognizing their worldview in the poses of their sitters or reflecting on their relationship with the medium. The photographers in this chapter do not think of the portrait as a representation of the subject's essence or nature. As Louwes states in section *2.1 What the Photographer Wants*, she "does not believe" in such representations. Furthermore, as discussed in section *2.2 The Expanded Field Before Photographic Portraits*, photography itself, from the photographer's perspective, can be understood as representing an "attempt to capture" rather than presenting a successful result. In section *2.3 Speaking via Someone Else's Face*, I argue that technological developments in photography have further challenged the sitters' ability to recognize themselves in photographic images, which further complicates the photographer's role. How could they possibly work toward a representation of a sitter when sitters no longer recognizes their own representation? Consequently, much like the sitters from the previous chapter who conceal rather than reveal themselves, the photographers' actions challenge the notion of capturing the essence of a sitter. These shifts in the sitter, the photographer, and the medium move away from the idea of the portrait as an essential representation of the sitter. Instead, they point toward a portrait that extends outward, engaging with a wider context and an expanded field. This leads to the proposal of an alternative photographic gesture in section *2.4 Sleutelen as a Photographic Gesture*. This section rethinks the

analogy of photography as "hunting" and introduces the Dutch verb *sleutelen* (which can be loosely translated as "to tinker") as a more appropriate metaphor. *Sleutelen* as a photographic gesture emphasizes the process of creation and collaboration with the subject over the act of capturing an essence. It prioritizes context and a process-oriented perspective on photography, redefining the photographic gesture itself.

2.1 What the Photographer Wants

To explore the role of the photographer in creating photographic portraits, I approached Louwes and asked if she would be willing to be photographed by me. I know Louwes well, having met her in the photography department of KABK, where we both teach. I am also familiar with her work: her photographs of people. Louwes is someone I would turn to for advice on a project, and if I had to choose a photographer to photograph me, she would be my choice. I know that she would not make me do anything foolish in front of the camera, nor would she over-glamorize me. My decision to think of her for this project stems from the trust I have in her, especially in relation to the vulnerability that comes with being photographed. As Louwes does not like to be photographed, she declines my request and instead invites me over to talk about her practice.

Thinking back to our conversation, a disco ball appears in my mind's eye. I see rays of light reflecting and scattering small specks across the floor, walls, and ceiling. Mirrors are often used in discussions about photography, usually referring to direct reflections – straight lines of light on sensitive material or the

reflection of a person's face. Louwes, however, seems to do the opposite. Instead of following a narrowing, straight line, she diverges and expands. She bounces and reflects. This is evident both in her artistic work and in our conversation, where her sentences are often followed by a quick "I think," "maybe," or "nothing I say is set in stone."[57] The only time she speaks decisively is when discussing the concept of the photographic portrait.

"I am not interested in the 'photographic portrait.' I don't believe in it," she says firmly. "I see it as exclusionary. And I don't like that. It's not about whether a portrait is good or bad. It's just that there's no such thing as truth. Portraits are often interpreted as revealing a truth about a person. I don't see it that way, nor do I want to. A portrait is an encounter made up of different moments. When someone calls me a portrait photographer, I don't feel seen. I find it an exclusionary term. I'm always observing people on the street, and, of course, we tend to categorize people. But I get very tired when those categories turn into rigid boxes. My discomfort is with labels and boxes. I want to create my own."

When I ask her about the sitters in her self-initiated work, she replies, "Oh, but it's not about them. They are like clay. I shape them until I recognize something. What do I recognize? I don't know. It's not me. They're not self-portraits. They're about existence in general, about a state of being I'd like to see. Maybe how I'd like people to be?"

She continues, "When I haven't photographed in a long time and that moment of recognition finally happens, it's such a relief. Ah, here it is again." She presses her

57. Annaleen Louwes, in conversation with the author, December 22, 2023.

hands together, spreads her fingers, and begins to move her hands in opposite directions, forming a fan-like shape. Then back again. A continuous movement of coming together and pulling apart, aligning and opposing.

Louwes seeks multiple perspectives and alternatives. Rather than selecting and isolating, she aims to multiply and transform what she sees from behind her camera, creating her own categories as alternatives to the ones we commonly assign to people in everyday life.

When working on commission, such as for a magazine, Louwes explains she always sends several images for the editor to choose from. Ideally, she hopes they will print multiple images of the same situation on one page. This, however, rarely happens. Most editors tend to select only one, which is, ironically, the exact opposite of Louwes' intention. When a single image is published to represent a person, it's as if a prism is working in reverse, taking an array of color and narrowing it into a monotone, reducing rather than multiplying Louwes' multifaceted experiences.

The photographic encounter in these situations is a site of tension, an intersection of forces where different actors pull in various directions, causing the center to move unpredictably. Each participant in these situations – sitter, photographer, and sometimes an editor – may want something different. As Louwes' puts it: "It is an encounter in which both the sitter and the photographer give and receive, but their desires differ. The sitter seeks attention and affirmation of their presence, while the photographer seeks images that affirm their preferred worldview. It is a dynamic exchange, where what

one gives may not be what the other receives, and what one evokes may not align with what the other hoped to see." While Louwes looks for multiplicity and variation, the results are sometimes the opposite. Rather than a straightforward path from the sitter's inner self to their portrait, the creation of a photographic portrait, from this perspective, can more aptly be seen as a winding road full of unexpected twists and turns.

My practice differs from Louwes'. While her work focuses on studies of people and human existence, mine centers on an exploration of the photographic portrait itself. However, the two of us share a mutual love for the photographic encounter – its ambiguity, the exploration of "what if," and the act of "trying to be." In this sense, photographs are not intended to serve as definitive statements about the person depicted. Rather, they are suggestions, inviting spectators to reflect and consider.

Daniëlle van Ark

Daniëlle van Ark is the second artist working with photography whom I approach for this project. We first met years ago in New York when she overheard my Dutch accent during a conversation in a photo lab. This chance meeting led to a collaboration for my project *MyFamily,* where I asked Daniëlle to pose as if she were my sister. A few years later, Daniëlle started at the Rijksakademie and became what I called "the Dutch photographer who expands photography," a position I had occupied a few years earlier. The term "expanded field of photography" is often used to describe practices that engage with photography in ways that challenge and redefine the traditional boundaries of the medium. It describes practices that embrace interdisciplinarity, conceptual thinking, and technological evolution, and

treat photography as a dynamic, multifaceted art form rather than a static, documentary tool. This approach invites both artists and spectators to rethink what photography can be and how it interacts with the world. During Van Ark's time at the Rijksakademie, she began to move away from traditional photography and shifted her focus primarily to installations. Although her work is not strictly photography – it often consists of collages and silkscreens, or becomes, for instance, a zine filled with artist obituaries from newspapers – Van Ark frequently works with photographs and has a long history of making and reflecting on them. I invited her to participate in this project as a sitter, hoping that she would bring her experience of photography as a practitioner to this role. In her role as a sitter, I expect her to reflect back and mirror aspects of my role as a photographer, and I believe that this interaction will shed further light on the role of the photographer.

Photographing Daniëlle van Ark
Have I sidelined myself? I ask myself on the way home after the photo session with Van Ark.

A few days before our session, I texted Van Ark to remind her about the examples I had asked her to send. "That's fine," she replied. "I'll have a look. We'll sort it out." She never sent anything.

"You're wearing the same shirt," I say as Van Ark shows me a self-portrait on her phone.

"Yes, I did think about that, of course," she replies. I examine the light in the picture, a flash. I make two photographs and show them to her.

Maybe against the white wall?" she suggests. I point the camera toward the wall and make another photo.

"But mine was 'landscape,'" Van Ark says, by which she means the orientation is wider than it is tall, resembling the orientation of a natural landscape.

"Oh, okay," I reply. "Was that intentional, so it wouldn't feel like a portrait?" I ask, curious about her reasoning.

"No, not really. I just wanted it to be as simple as possible."

I show her the image on the camera.

"Even more direct," she responds. I adjust the flash to light her face evenly and make another photograph. This time she approves: "Yes, that's good."

I notice the tripod I am holding and realize I am absentmindedly unscrewing the legs. For no real reason. I set it aside. I make another photograph and try to prompt a smile from Daniëlle, but she doesn't respond.

"Maybe a little closer?" I suggest.

"No," Van Ark replies.

"Okay," I answer, and show her the latest picture. "Yes," she affirms. Then she asks, "What are you looking for?"

"Well, um… nothing more, I think," I mumble, realizing nothing else is going to happen.

"Maybe a few more with different hand positions or something?" Van Ark suggests.

I make the photos, or rather, I just press the button.

Unsurprisingly, the photograph Van Ark brought with her on the day of our session was one of herself. What unfolded in the studio was an appropriation of her own photograph, in keeping with her wider practice, which often explores themes of authorship and power.

Appropriation is central to Van Ark's practice, and during our session she reenacted a photograph of herself. She did not send the photo in advance, presumably because she felt it was unnecessary. She knew exactly what she wanted to achieve. My role in the session was reduced to that of a technical operator. I had expected her to push the boundaries of her role as subject, but she went further. She politely accepted my invitation but then took control of the situation. Like the cartoon character Obelix, she accepted my outstretched hand and then used my arm to send me flying and landing me somewhere on the periphery of the situation, effectively taking over as the artist.

The resulting photographs were a reenactment of her own self-portrait, contextualized within my project. Van Ark approached the situation as an artist, using it to explore issues she wanted to address – particularly questions of authorship and the role of the artist, concepts fundamental to artistic appropriation. By turning this situation into an appropriation of a photograph she had made of herself, the photograph we made of her became like a work of hers. As the sitter, she resisted the photographer's control, illustrating the

fact that what a photographer may want or hope for does not necessarily happen.

These two examples, Louwes' preference to show multiple photographs of the same situation being overruled by editors who prefer to choose only a single image, and Van Ark's appropriation, highlight the complexities photographers face when working with sitters. The intentions of the photographer, Louwes and myself, may not always align with what occurs during the session or with the resulting image.Van Ark, in our interaction, was a sitter who resisted the photographer's control, while Louwes' multifaceted reflections on identity are sometimes constrained by editors who prioritize a single image for publication. Both cases underscore that creating a photographic portrait is not a solitary act. Photographers operate within a social encounter where multiple forces converge. The willingness or resistance of the sitter, along with external factors such as editorial decisions, all shape the process and its outcome.

As a result, the dynamics of these encounters influence both the session and the final photograph, often diverging from the photographer's original intentions. What photographers want may not always be what they get.

2.2 The Expanded Field *before* Photographic Portraits

In the previous section, Van Ark's appropriation serves as an illustration of a sitter's refusal to be controlled by the photographer. Beyond that, Van Ark's appropriation also opens the door to considering the expanded field that exists *before* the photographic portrait.

Fig. 29. Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, Oil on canvas, 1656.

Thinking back to Van Ark in the studio, I wonder what she was imagining when she posed. She was not looking at herself as the photographer, as in her original self-portrait, nor was she engaging in a reflexive act like the painter Diego Velázquez (Seville, 1599 – Madrid, 1660) in *Las Meninas* (1656) (Fig. 29). From her position in front of the camera, I assume she was imagining her own representation, as if a virtual line existed between her and her image, looping back in an endless echo. This created a space inaccessible to others, evoking what philosopher Michel Foucault (Poitiers, 1926 – Paris, 1984), in his analysis of *Las Meninas* in *The Order of Things* (1966) called the "essential void": the disappearance of the basis of representation, leading to "pure representation" – representation freed from the constraints that once defined it.[58]

Van Ark's imitation of her own photograph seems, in a sense, to have freed the portrait from representation, turning it into a "sign of absence", as explored in Chapter 1. The portrait does not point to or represent Van Ark herself; instead, it refers to the original photograph. Her act of copying herself seems to close the door on the portrait as a representation of her. Yet, this act simultaneously directs the spectator toward Van Ark's original photograph and the fact that it was both created and imitated. While the door to representation appears closed for the spectator, the photograph invites a different kind of engagement. The spectator is encouraged not to see the image in front of them as a conclusive statement of Van Ark's nature but rather to explore the photograph's broader context, the field of photographic portraiture that exists outside, beyond the material image. Van Ark's appropriation of her own depiction points toward the expanded field of

58. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (Routledge Classics, 2002), 17.

photography that precedes the photograph's materialization.

The term "expanded field of photography" refers to photographic practices that push beyond traditional display conventions. These include, for example, photographic and sculptural installations or works that incorporate photography into three-dimensional or mixed-media contexts. However, the expanded field of photography, as traditionally understood, does not address the construction of the photographic portrait in the way I had hoped. It does not extend to include the *circumstance of a photograph's construction* – to the space and process that precede the photograph's completion.

Yet, when reflecting on expansion, I realize that moving outward, toward unexplored territories, requires first identifying and acknowledging one's starting point – one's origin. Expanding into new directions is not only about where one is heading but also about recognizing where one is coming from. Expansion demands an understanding of both the base or foundation and the new direction one wishes to explore. In this context, expanding the field before the photographic portrait, moving away from the portrait as a singular, finalized outcome and toward the circumstance of its creation, requires consideration of the specificity of photography as a medium. The question that begins this chapter, *"What do photographers do?"* is inseparable from the question, *"What do they do with their medium?"*

Reflecting on the medium specificity of photography brings me to my students who, despite the post-medium condition we find ourselves in, study in a photography department. Their engagement with the technical

aspects of photography varies widely. Most use affordable digital cameras, while some embrace analog techniques, embodying what Florian Cramer (Germany, 1969), reader and practice-oriented research professor in Autonomous Art and Design Practices at Willem de Kooning Academy, describes as "post-digital", a practice that combines analog and digital methods.[59] Others, however, have grown so disillusioned with photography that they focus primarily on finding ways to escape the medium altogether. While this might seem paradoxical given their choice of study, it is, in fact, understandable. The art world has moved far beyond essayist and art critic Clement Greenberg's (New York, 1909 – 1994) modernist notion of medium specificity, which, in 1960, asserted that each medium should focus on its essential characteristics.[60] Photography today can no longer be confined to the traditional image of a photographer holding a camera. But what, then, binds together those of us who are engaged with photography, whether as students, practitioners, or educators in a photography department?

In exploring this subject, various examples of student work come to mind. One student deliberately leaves dust on poorly scanned negatives, highlighting the materiality of analog film. Another uses algorithms to create stills from found online footage of people crying. I think back to a collective assessment a few months ago, where I stood in front of a sculpture made from PVC pipes, struggling to discern its relationship to photography. These examples show how photography's materials and methods have grown so diverse that its specificity can no longer be tied to any single material or technique. What unites the field – what might define its specificity – must be sought elsewhere.

59. Florian Cramer, "What Is 'Post-Digital'?" *A Peer-Reviewed Journal About* 3, no. 1 (2014): 11–24, https://doi.org/10.7146/aprja.v3i1.116068.
60. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (Harper & Row, 1982), 84.

This brings me to Krauss' concept of "differential specificity," which is tied to her broader consideration of the postmodern condition. According to Krauss, artists today no longer work within the confines of a single, clearly defined medium. Instead, they explore the complexities of their tools and practices by crossing boundaries between media. Krauss suggests that the "differential specificity" that elevates certain artworks lies not in their adherence to a particular material or medium but in a self-reflexivity that compels artists to move back and forth along the trajectory of their medium, engaging with its history and exploring its inner complexities.[61] Walter Benjamin also offers insights relevant to this discussion. In his essays *A Short History of Photography* (1931) and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), Benjamin implies that the full implications and characteristics of a medium become most evident as it reaches maturity.[62] At this stage, a medium's influence on culture is at its peak, and its inherent qualities and limitations are fully exposed. Could analog photography, as a technical medium nearing the final stages of its development, shed new light on what Krauss refers to as the "inner complexities" of photography?

This question reminds me of my own tortuous search for a camera that began at a birthday party six months ago. I was looking for a small analog compact camera I once owned. In hindsight, this search now feels like a metaphor for photography's inner complexities – a constant pursuit of something elusive, something that can never be fully found or captured.

It is this inner complexity that I need to understand to find a way to expand the field of photography – not just

61. Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post Medium Condition* (Thames & Hudson, 1999), 56.
62. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken Books, 1969).

Fig. 30. Judith van IJken, *Vernacular footage*, Chromogenic prints, 2002.

beyond its traditional forms of presentation but into a space that exists before the photographic image itself – to find, incorporate, and make explicit its creation.

The Inner Complexities of Photography

"You'll recognize some of it," Floriaan says, raising his voice as he leans toward me. We're sitting at a long table, the music is loud, and the atmosphere is energetic. Later, I do recognize the pictures when Marieke flips through the photo book Floriaan printed for her birthday – the saturated blue sky, the yellow dunes, Floriaan's sun-bleached hair, the dynamic perspectives that captured bodies running and falling, and the sense of endless space and time – they're all familiar. They're also part of my collection. I made them (Fig. 30).

"With an SLR camera, no doubt," Floriaan shouts in my ear. The music is so loud that I just nod, though I would never bring a big camera to the dunes. "But now the cameras on iPhones are amazing too," Floriaan continues, pulling out his phone to show a picture of his laughing daughter.

A few days later, the birthday party group chat begins to fill with new pictures. The ones made and shared during the evening are now joined by a different kind of photo. The subjects are the same – people at the long dinner table, laughing, posing, playing table tennis – but this time, the tables are white, bleached by the flash, and the faces look more excited, more animated. I recognize these images, not from this party but from similar parties long ago, the flash, the brownish tint of underexposed film. I remember a moment toward the end of the evening. I had already put on my coat and was about to leave the restaurant when I saw a girl organizing a

group to make a photo. Unconsciously, I gauged the distance between her and the group and thought, "This isn't going to work. That flash won't be strong enough." I realize she was holding a Yashica T5.

In the months that followed, I became increasingly obsessed with the camera I had owned for so long. At first, I would occasionally pull out a cardboard box of old photography gear and casually sift through it. But as time went on, my search became more intense. I developed the habit of running my hand behind every bookcase in my studio and at home, checking to see if the camera had fallen behind the books. I extended my search from my studio and home to my mother's attic, where I found many forgotten things, but no Yashica.

I asked friends. "Oh, that one. Yes, I had one, but I haven't seen it in ages. I must have given it to some kid." Everyone seemed to have lost their Yashica at some point. After trying for the third time to convince my ex to go through his things, he sighed, "We didn't even like it that much, remember? It was nice, but not fantastic. And what are you going to do with it anyway? Do you need it for a project? You could just use a filter, you know. I did a whole campaign recently that they wanted in black and white for some reason. You just bring the images into Lightroom, choose the grain, and everything."

Honestly, I do not have a plan. I have plenty of analog cameras, many of them technically "better" than the Yashica T5. Yet, while part of me simply cannot accept that I cannot find it, there's also something specific about this camera that I miss – not the quality of the image – or rather, not the quality in terms of how well it

captures something. The value lies elsewhere. It is in the nature of the camera itself. The Yashica is a so-called point-and-shoot camera. With it, you experience something, point the camera roughly in the direction of the moment, and press the button as if to say, "capture." The result is more about the act of trying to capture something and its inherent imperfections than it is about the actual image

Looking at some of the Yashica T5 photos, I do notice how appealing they are – thanks to the flash and the Zeiss lens, of course – but there's something more: the imperfection. I see closed eyes, overexposed white spots from body parts too close to the flash. If these closed-eye shots had been made with an iPhone, they wouldn't have made it into any group chat. They would have likely been deleted.

A student, Johnny Mae, opens her laptop to show the photographs she recently made for a Parisian magazine. "Are these on film?" I ask. "Yes, most of them," she replies. I then ask, "Why?" even though I dislike that question myself. "Oh, it's just nicer," she answers casually. "But it cost me a fortune. I printed them myself in Paris."

I think of the many times I have done the same – printing and then scanning instead of just scanning the negatives directly. It always felt silly after a while. "You know, you can scan the negatives directly and get the same result."

"I know," she replies. "It's just no fun." She is right. "It's just annoying to have to explain and defend myself all the time for using film," she adds.

"I see," I say, and then share my theory. "I think it's because we tend to overlook what we already have, which blinds us to what's right in front of us. When digital photography came along, it offered exactly what photographers had always been searching for: endless images and the certainty of having them in focus. In analog times, these were the limitations you constantly faced. There never seemed to be enough frames on a roll of film, and it was always just a little too dark to get everything in focus. Digital solved these problems, but it wasn't fully satisfying, though it was hard to understand why. That's because the conversation was still about what had been unattainable for so long: the number of images (on a memory card) and the number of pixels per inch. It was harder to focus on what had been too close to see and was now lost: the positive side of limitations – the 'failures' and blurriness they created. No one discussed the benefits of having fewer images, or the beauty of blurriness, because it had always been taken for granted. Our attention had been diverted from it."

"Mhm, interesting," she says as she slides off the table and walks out of the classroom.

"Forget about the camera. You're wasting your time. Or get a new one," Marcel says, annoyed, as I push his papers aside to open the box next to his desk. "It's a mess here," I reply, thinking: You do not understand. But of course, he is right. I then, doubtfully, expand my search to Marktplaats, eBay, and Catawiki. While my mind's eye shows the camera in various places where it used to be – on a high cupboard above my clothes or on a bucket of crayons in my old studio – I am now slowly accepting less positive results. I see flashes in my memo-

ry of the lens cap stuck halfway down (was that mine?), or of the time a burglar broke into our house. Did he take it? Or have I just left it somewhere? I begin to accept the idea that I will not find it.

The internet shows me that I am not the only one interested in Yashicas or in analog cameras in general. People are asking, and paying, at least four times the original price for these cameras, even though a camera shop owner tells me that Yashicas are rare, made of plastic and rubber, never intended to last more than thirty years. At some point, the rubber starts to deteriorate.

On my way home from the second-hand camera shop, I pass a second-hand store. As I am locking my bicycle to a lamppost in front of the shop, I see a young woman with a camera around her neck. Not a Yashica T5, of course – you would not wear one around your neck. The sight of the woman takes me even further back in time, to art school, when we had Nikons or Canons slung around our necks as we scanned the streets for our assignments. There is no Yashica T5 in the second-hand shop, but there are so many '90s relics – CDs, records, ugly clothes – that I text my friends: "Hipsters are buying our youth."

And I wonder: Were these kids, who grew up with digital images, quicker to appreciate analog film than my generation? Were they not blinded by the seductiveness of digital cameras – their endless images, their undeniable sharpness and sensitivity? For those who grew up in the digital age, analog photography has always been obsolete, something to turn to for what is missing from their digital environment. It has nothing to

do with perfect reproduction or completeness, that is already covered by CCTV and video functions on phones. I realize that I was hoping to find a binary answer, secretly yearning for an argument in favor of either analog or digital photography, in line with a traditional medium specificity based on materiality. Instead, I need to look more closely at what analog photography reveals about the essence of photography and seek a specificity beyond materiality.

If I were to buy a Yashica T5 now, it would look similar to the one I had, but it would feel entirely different. Back then, I would take it with me on a day to the dunes because it was the most technically advanced way to capture my experience and get as close to it as possible. Today, however, using it would be a different experience. The images I would create now would be imbued with the understanding that there are limits to what can be captured. These images would attempt to capture something, all the while knowing it is impossible. This reveals a specificity of photography that has always been embedded in the medium, but that, as Benjamin suggests, we were unable to see because the medium had not yet reached its full development.

At the time, around 2001, I was striving to get closer to capturing reality, and each new camera – lighter, more advanced – seemed to bring that goal a little nearer. But the true complexity of photography has never been about completeness; it has always been about attempting to capture something, while never fully succeeding. Yet that does not mean there is no beauty in the attempt. Rather, the attempt *is* the beauty of photography. Photography is about the constant effort – the trying – without ever truly succeeding. And the same goes for

the photographer. The photographer tries but never fully achieves the goal. Instead of running away from that fact with faster cameras, quicker film, or post-production techniques, one could also embrace it.

The photographer's practice is one of encountering and navigating limitations. As I reflect on this reality, a conversation with Bernhard Kahrmann suggests that I may not need a Yashica T5 to embrace it.

Bernhard Kahrmann
Bernhard Kahrmann places the Leica M10 on the table in front of me. I pick it up for a moment – nice and heavy. Funny, I think. I am a bit suspicious of nostalgia for its own sake, but I cannot deny how satisfying it feels to turn the aperture ring and feel it click into the next slot. I look through the viewfinder and immediately know this would never be my ideal camera. A rangefinder (like the Leica M10) does not let you see through the lens via a mirror (like an SLR); rather, you look through a separate viewfinder next to it. This makes the camera lighter, but the downside is that you cannot see exactly what you are photographing, especially at close range. Also, with this camera, focusing involves aligning two images in the rangefinder patch, so you do not see the whole image go in or out of focus at once.

Kahrmann likes it, he says, because it allows you to see what is happening in the background. But I do not. Another thing that would bother me is that you can only focus in the center of the frame, and this tends to make the important parts of your picture end up in that central area. Focusing on a face with this system automatically creates a lot of empty space above the head. This is a good example of the idea proposed by Vilém

Flusser, who argued that the apparatus – in this case, the camera – exerts control over the photographer, shaping creative choices and structuring the way images are produced, often in ways that go unnoticed.[63]

Before he leaves, Kahrmann asks to make a photograph. He takes his time focusing, which gives me just enough time to feel uncomfortable standing there in the kitchen. He then suggests we make a self-portrait together.

During our self-portrait, I watch Kahrmann as he sets up the camera on the coffee table. I see him using it to measure the light. There is backlight from the window, so he compensates by tilting the camera slightly to measure a darker area. No sophisticated light meter system. No autofocus either. Kahrmann makes three pictures. I think to myself, "Such an expensive camera, yet so many limitations." But at the same time, this is exactly what makes the camera appealing.

Limitations often have a negative connotation, but can also be beneficial. Van der Elsken is often quoted as saying he wished for a camera in his head that could record everything he saw all day.[64] But later, when the development of lightweight video cameras brought this scenario within reach, he said he had begun to doubt the idea and preferred the way he started out: walking the streets with a camera, three rolls of film in his pocket, and no assignments, "collecting his type of people."[65]

Photography is about choices, about working within constraints – and that is what makes photography different from something like, for instance, CCTV.

63. Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (Reaktion Books, 2000), 24.
64. Shira Wolfe, "Ed van der Elsken – The 'Enfant Terrible' of Dutch Photography," *Artland Magazine*, accessed November 9, 2024, https://magazine.artland.com/ed-van-der-elsken-the-enfant-terrible-of-dutch-photography.
65. Janneke Wesseling, "Op de huid van 'zijn soort mensen,'" *NRC*, February 11, 2017,

Limits are essential to photography. Boundaries are its backbone.

What I valued in the Yashica T5 was not the materiality of film but the limitations it imposed. The only adjustable setting is the flash. As a result, the photographs often turn out differently from how you imagined them at the moment of pressing the shutter. Unlike digital photography, where you can instantly load your images into Lightroom and adjust them to your liking, using analog film forces you to wait. You only see the results when you pick up the prints from the lab. That delay creates a pause between making the photo and reflecting on it – a pause that opens up space to appreciate what's actually in your hands, even if it differs from what you initially set out to capture. It allows you to notice the unexpected aspects of the image, like a bleached-out arm unintentionally "ruining" the imagined shot or other elements of the surroundings that were incidentally documented. This is how limitations can offer a way for unexpected elements of the situation to emerge in the final result.

In Krauss's line of thinking, a photographer who aims to create work that rises above the average will find that work inescapably tied to the medium of photography. Medium specificity in photography is not about material or technique, but rather about the reflexivity of the photographer. I propose that one of the complexities of photography lies in its inherent nature: always chasing (life, reality, an old camera) but never fully succeeding in its quest. Photography, as a medium, from this perspective, is not about perfectly capturing something but about the attempt to capture. While this is more evident in analog photography, where unintended "mistakes"

and failures are materialized, I believe it holds true for digital techniques as well, even though it may be harder to recognize. By embracing this complexity – or quality – of photography, a path may emerge toward incorporating the situation of the image's creation into the final result.

Using a personal search for a lost Yashica T5 camera as a metaphor, in this section, I argue that one of photography's inner complexities lies not in technical mastery, material specificity, or the final image, but in the act of attempting to capture. This inner complexity, therefore, exists outside the image itself, shifting attention to the process of creation rather than the outcome. The Yashica T5 camera embodies this notion of the attempt. While digitally enhanced photographs aim for visual perfection, the analog Yashica T5 – with its technical limitations – hinders the realization of such imagined perfection. This can compel spectators to perceive the results differently, encouraging an appreciation of the act of trying and the imperfections it entails, rather than focusing on the idealized image that was imagined. Through my argument, this section builds on the themes of the hiding sitter from the first chapter and the distracted photographer from the previous section. It introduces a photographic medium that can be understood as uniquely suited to document an attempt, further emphasizing a shift away from the photographic outcome and toward the process itself.

2.3 Speaking via Someone Else's Face

The following section explores how the role of the photographer is further complicated by the sitter's increasing detachment from their appearance caused by

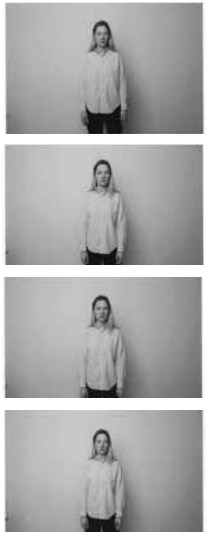

Fig. 31. Judith van IJken, *Les Clichés sont conservés*, Daniëlle, Inkjet print, 2023.

algorithmic influences. Since the photographer creates a photographic portrait in collaboration with the sitter, the sitter's understanding of their appearance inevitably affects the outcome of the portrait. Ultimately, this section advocates for rethinking the photographer's gesture, shifting away from a "capturing" or "hunting" approach toward the relational, process-oriented Dutch verb *sleutelen* (a specific type of tinkering). This perspective emphasizes the relational, iterative, and performative nature of the photographic gesture.

Daniëlle van Ark 2

The print comes out of the printer. It contains four photographs of Daniëlle van Ark in front of the white wall in my studio (Fig. 31). "Done," I think, followed by, "That's awfully fast. Am I being stubborn? Because it seems it's no longer my game?" "No," I tell myself, "It really *is* done. I like it." I look at the blank expressions of these four figures – two with folded hands and slightly different hair. One of the pictures shows a small part of the curtain on the left side of the frame. Otherwise, they are nearly identical. Like four guards staring at me. They are so similar that my attention is drawn to tiny differences. Changes so small that the entire page feels even more still. It seems strange not to make more prints. "Maybe one per page?" I wonder. I hear Van Ark's voice in my head saying, "No." I press "Print" again, and two minutes later, an exact copy of the page emerges from the printer.

In my studio, Van Ark looks at the two prints for a long time. She examines them up close, then holds the prints further away. Noticing a detail in the upper-left image, she brings the paper back to her face. She remains silent for a long while before finally putting the prints down

and breaking the ten-minute silence. "What should I say?" she asks, though not necessarily to me. "Who is this woman?" she continues. "Sure," she adds after a few seconds, "I see it's me. I recognize my fidgeting fingers, which I think is typical of me. But I also feel a distance, as I always do with photographs of myself made by someone else. It's as if my inner sense is disconnected from my outer understanding of myself."

"I thought you did it on purpose," I say. "By imitating a photograph of yourself, you took me out of my role as the photographer, which I thought was quite clever."

"Ah, yes, I suppose I did make it a little unworkable for you," Van Ark replies. "But your behavior played a part as well," she continues. "You could have asked me to do something different. In that sense, it was also your choice."

"True," I reply. "But I think what you did was really interesting because it showed a sitter who didn't conform to the traditional role – a sitter who wasn't a victim."

"Well, I think it was mostly about control, as a way of protecting myself," Van Ark responds. "It always amazes me how careless people are with their image. In a way, entering a photographic studio seems to prompt behavior akin to entering a psychiatrist's office: obedience and the surrendering of control. But the images take on a life of their own; there's no way to control that once they're out in the world. Just open any magazine, and you can't help but wonder why someone collaborated with these photographic ideas – especially when they're meant to be funny. They're usually not funny.

They're just not good. Personally, I prefer old-fashioned Hollywood portraits – done with lots of light, care, and attention, but no gimmicks – where the goal is clear: to make someone as beautiful as possible. Unfortunately, we've reached a point where it's not only about the sitter but also about the photographer. And photographers have their own ideas and are asked for them. It's out of balance. The sitter has become the victim of the photographer. Whenever I made portraits myself, I felt conflicted. What do I want? And when I looked at the portraits I made, I would often conclude that they weren't fully thought through. They lacked an authentic idea. And that's what I see in most portraits, even those of me. And then I ask myself: Do I want to be part of this idea? And usually, I do not. Because I have my own ideas."

Van Ark did indeed remove me, the photographer, from the situation. She refused to be molded like clay – and that makes sense. For her, it was about avoiding a situation where she was telling my story instead of expressing what she wanted to say. There is undeniably something unsettling about photographic portraits when you consider the photographer expressing something through someone else's face. It is reminiscent of a horror film, where the villain takes over someone's body and life – illustrating a deep, human fear of losing control. While the invasion of another's body in a horror film may sound grotesque, is it really that far removed from photographers expressing their own feelings via other people's faces by evoking a smile or reacting to the fraction of a second when the sitter's face shows an emotion that could be interpreted as melancholic? It is understandable that Van Ark, aware of this dynamic, did not want to open that door.

"It also seems to be an existential thing, not wanting to be captured in a photograph," I say. "Absolutely," Van Ark replies. "I have a Polaroid made years ago in a bar with a group of people. Now, I'm glad this document exists, but at the same time, I ask myself: what is it? It doesn't show what actually happened – we weren't standing like that."

"I recognize what you're saying," I respond, "but other people don't seem to mind. They know it's artificial too. Would it be an option to accept that photographs are artificial and don't represent reality, and to just say, 'So what?'"

"Well," Van Ark sighs, "I think it goes back to my fundamental position in life, which simply isn't 'so what.' I complicate things. Not all the time, but most of the time."

By replicating her own image, Van Ark created a mirrored scenario – an image reflecting another image. This layering allowed her to step outside the immediate space of representation. The photograph we made together no longer refers to her but becomes a reflection of the original self-portrait she had made. In this doubling, the direct connection between sitter and representation is disrupted.

As I look at the blank expressions of Van Ark's images, I wonder if the sense of alienation they evoke is consistent with what sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard (Reims, 1929 – Paris, 2007) describes as the "carnival of mirrors" – a world in which individuals are increasingly consumed by their own reflections, lost in the endless reproduction of their image. In this state,

Fig. 32. Bernhard Kahrmann, *Untitled*, Photographic image, 2023.

the self is no longer grounded in reality but is fragmented, absorbed in a cycle of representation that distances rather than reveals.[66]

While reflecting on this, I receive a message on my phone: "First rough sketch from the iPad," it says. It is from Kahrmann. He sent the photos (Fig. 32). I open them and think, "Beautiful." Surprised by my reaction, I examine the photo of me in the kitchen more closely. The photograph is out of focus, but that does not matter – it might even be a good thing. What strikes me is the light on my face and how it harmonizes with the overall light in the photograph. I feel a sense of nostalgia. There is a calmer, more natural feel to it that is starkly different from the images of my face I have become accustomed to – those made with iPhones.

On an iPhone, my face appears more evenly lit – almost as if illuminated from behind – resulting in less depth, and fewer curves, shadows, and wrinkles. While I have always been aware that smartphone cameras rely on algorithms to enhance images, the contrast between the natural light in Kahrmann's photo and the smooth, almost orange-hued version of my face that I have grown accustomed to is striking. Ramesh Raskar (Nashik, 1970), associate professor of Media Arts and Sciences at MIT Media Lab and director of the Camera Culture research group, explains this phenomenon in a YouTube video.[67] He explains how smartphone photos are not a single images, but rather, computational composites. Algorithms process multiple exposures, adjusting tones and smoothing out details based on what manufacturers believe people prefer to see. This means that what is captured is not simply an objective record of light falling on a face, with its natural variations and plasticity, but a composite of many exposures altered by algorithms based on what companies think people want to see. What we see on iPhones, Raskar explains, are hallucinations, and that "photorealism is dead." I think of the photos of my children that have become part of my memory in recent years. It is unsettling to realize they should be viewed less as photos and more as drawings created by algorithms based on popular preferences. "People don't remember what you look like; they remember your photograph," someone once told me. I imagine people perceiving each other as caricatures. But what strikes me most is the subtle way I have unconsciously alienated myself from my own image.

66. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (The University of Michigan Press, 1994), introduction.

But I am not, and neither is anyone, a bystander to this slowly but steadily widening gap between the way light strikes our face and its subsequent transformation in photographic images, nor to the alienation that arises from the difference between our appearance in reality and its photographic depiction. I am an active participant.

A few days later, I open my email and see a message from Evelien at De Bezige Bij. "The photos turned out well," she writes. "Can you iron his shirt? And the braces, he prefers them Photoshopped out. Is that possible? Anything for a happy author!"

I look at the shirt and wonder why wrinkles are a problem. And whose problem are they? "Do you want me to take the braces out of the photo?" I ask Marcel as he passes the kitchen table where I'm sitting.

"Oh, no, not necessarily. Haye suggested it. It's not a big deal – I mean, I have braces, don't I? But if it's not

67. Ramesh Raskar, "The Evolution of Smartphone Night Photography," moderated by Julian Chokkattu, posted March 25, 2022, by WIRED, YouTube, 10:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nk-26lS-bIMk&t=1s.

difficult, sure. Just don't spend too much time on it."

"Okay," I reply. "Who's Evelien, by the way? Does she work in the communications department?"

"No," Marcel responds, "she's the nice woman at the reception desk who knows everyone by name."

I start with the shirt. First, I lighten the dark areas of the wrinkles. This is quite subtle – the wrinkles are still there, just less noticeable, and the shape remains. But soon, I make more drastic changes, realizing that gently adjusting the shadows is not enough. I take the stamp tool and zoom in. My eyes scan the image for an area where the shirt's color matches perfectly. I click, and in one swift motion, copy it over the shadow. Gone. Now, I am truly drawing. The braces are even simpler. I just need to zoom in close enough and pick the right shade of white. I am not bothered by moral questions; I do not feel it is my job to stay true to any sort of reality. I enjoy the challenge, and I imagine it is the same for the developers of iPhone cameras. I show Marcel the photograph on my laptop. By clicking my trackpad, I alternate between the version with and without the braces. "Nice," he says to the retouched image. "That's me."

A few days later, I coincidentally run into a photo editor of a national newspaper's magazine. She's not feeling well, and it's related to work. "All these BN'ers (Dutch celebrities), it's really becoming impossible. They have so many demands – how they want to work, styling, post-production. We're not *Linda*, you know?" I sense she has used this comparison before. "I just don't have the budget, even if I wanted to," the photo editor

continues. "We publish every week, while *Linda* only comes out once a month. It's so much more work and negotiation. A few years ago, we'd have about three complaints a year. Now, there are six a week. People want to see all the photos to make sure I've chosen the best one, which I always do; I consider the options carefully. Or they want their wrinkles fixed. I had to do that last week. Thankfully, it was just a shadow. I had to call the photographer to check if it was okay to lighten it a bit."

"Do you think the whole digital thing has changed that?" I ask.

"Oh yeah, for sure," she replies. "People read the paper differently now. It gets shared online, on social media, and all that."

"I meant digital photography," I clarify.

"Ah, of course," she says. "People are so used to making photos of themselves and editing them with filters. The woman who wanted her wrinkles fixed was 80 years old. Of course, she had wrinkles. And she looked beautiful! But I really had to convince her that she didn't need them edited. That was the only thing that worked."

I think of Raskar's concept of "hallucination" and how understandable it is for people to be confused by their own representation.[68] We seem to be increasingly caught up in Baudrillard's carnival of mirrors, where images reflect only themselves and have less and less connection to reality. I wonder about the photographer. How can a photographer engage with someone who is detached from their own image, lost in a back-and-forth

between representations? How can they connect with a sitter who, like Van Ark in my studio, or like the woman posing for the newspaper's magazine, is caught in a mirror game with their own image?

"Do you know what I hear the most?" the photo editor continues. "'I do not see myself in these photos. I do not recognize myself.'"

I laugh and think: That is probably exactly the point.

When creating a photographic portrait, the photographer is involved in a complex social dynamic where what each participant (sitter, photographer, and spectator) wants may not be what they get. The photographer is often preoccupied with something other than capturing the essence of the subject. Instead, photographers may try to express their own view of the world or are preoccupied with fulfilling the wishes of others, such as those of sitters who may have become detached from their own appearance. Moreover, the medium of photography itself may be more attuned to the act of seeking (but failing) than to the act of capturing. With this in mind, in the final part of this chapter, I reconsider the photographer's gesture: what the photographer does. Rather than a gesture of capturing and chasing, I propose that the photographer's gesture resembles the Dutch verb *sleutelen*.

2.4 *Sleutelen* as a Photographic Gesture

Traditionally, the photographic gesture has been understood through the analogy of hunting. However, this analogy fails to capture important characteristics of photography such as coexistence and chance. This

68. WIRED, "The Evolution of Smartphone Night Photography."

section revises the "hunting" analogy and proposes the Dutch verb *sleutelen* (a specific kind of tinkering) as an alternative way of understanding the photographic gesture. By emphasizing the process of creation and coexistence with the subject, sleutelen offers a new, more social perspective on the photographic act. *Sleutelen* as a photographic gesture aims to question our social and cultural perceptions of ourselves and others.

Hunting as a Photographic Gesture

A photographic gesture is more than the concrete handling of the camera. It is, as Flusser explains in his book *Gestures* (1991), "doing with meaning."[69] When thinking about photography, we have grown used to the camera as a weapon and the photographer as a hunter. As social and cultural theorist Susie Linfield (New York, 1955) concludes in her article "Why Do Photography Critics Hate Photography?" (2011), this perception of photography has become so entrenched in the general thinking about photography, for example through Sontag's comparison of photography to assassination in *On Photography* (1977) or Flusser's use of the verb "stalking" to describe the photographer's movements, that it is hard to imagine the photographic gesture as anything other than a hunt.[70] This is why, standing in a camera shop some time ago, I found myself thinking of a certain "photographer-as-hunter mentality" when I saw six men of different ages leaning against the counter, discussing the specifics of the latest equipment like hunters in a gun shop. But these cowboys are not the only ones in the shop. There are other customers too. People who did not brag about the size of their lens or the number of pixels on their frame (bigger, faster, more). People with a different demeanor, silently observing the other customers, patiently waiting to ask

69. Vilém Flusser, *Gestures*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 6.

the price of the lens duster they are holding. And I wonder: Would it be possible to follow Dutch conceptual artist Jan Dibbets's (Weert, 1941) bravura and say, "Photography has always been misunderstood" – to look at photography with fresh, unbiased eyes, and to think beyond the hunter's tunnel and warm up to the possibility that photography is more than capturing and hunting?[71] Would it be possible to invite a more social understanding of photography, as described by Nathan Jurgenson in his book *The Social Photo* (2019), or, instead of focusing on photography's prey, to think about its failures and its capacity to surprise?[72]

My Photographic Gesture

The first thing to do is examine my own behavior as a photographer. What do I do when I make a photograph? What is my own gesture? Is it different from hunting? During two consecutive photographic sessions I compared my own gesture. Whereas in the first session I came to the studio relatively unprepared and reacted with my camera to what I liked visually (such as the light coming through the window), in the second session I forced myself to follow rules that I had decided on beforehand. This second session made my gesture less hunter-like. The formulation of rules and restrictions had influenced my photographic gesture.

Rules and Restrictions

Many artists and designers have worked with self-imposed rules. Some became especially visible when they organized around a manifesto. Examples include Dogme 95, founded in 1995 by Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier (Kongens Lyngby, 1956) and Thomas Vinterberg (Frederiksberg, 1969) as a movement defined by strict filmmaking rules, and Conditional Design,

70. Susie Linfield, *Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Picador,1990); Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (Reaktion Books, 2000), 35.

71. Jan Dibbets, "Uit de Kunst: Jan Dibbets," interview by Yoeri Albrecht, *Uit de Kunst*, YouTube video, January 18, 2023, 8:04, https://www.knaw.nl/bijeenkomsten/uit-de-kunst-jan-dibbets.

72. Nathan Jurgenson, *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media* (Verso Books, 2019).

formed in Amsterdam by graphic designers Luna Maurer (Stuttgart, 1972), Edo Paulus, Jonathan Puckey (Amsterdam, 1981), and Roel Wouters (The Netherlands, 1976) as a collective. Both used manifestos to question the conventions of their fields and to redefine their role within them. Rules, in this sense, were formulated as a way to break with established practice.

Fig. 33. Ed Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, Publication, 1963.

In Conditional Design, for example, the traditional role of the graphic designer as the sole creator of a product is replaced by co-creation. Instead of a single person dictating the outcome, rules are formulated, and "players" are asked to respond to each other's actions (for example, by forming a perfect circle or by collectively filling in a white sheet of paper by taking turns placing a dot on the emptiest part of the page). Similarly, Rule 4 of Dogme 95's "Vow of Chastity" (1995) restricts filmmakers to the available light, forcing them to focus on traditional cinematic values such as acting and subject matter rather than effect. These practices combine a conscious and critical approach with commitment. It is neither an external critique nor a cynical retreat. In the visual arts, too, there are many artists who use rules and restrictions to create their work, such as conceptual artists Ed Ruscha (Omaha, 1937) and Douglas Huebler (Ann Arbor, 1924 – Truro, 1997) in their use of photography.

Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), a book of photographs of gasoline stations along Route 66, began as a play on words (Fig. 33). In an interview with artist and writer John Coplans (London, 1920 – New York, 2003), published in *Leave Any Information at the Signal* (2003), Ruscha explains that he simply liked the words "gasoline stations" and the number twenty-six, and

after a while began to imagine them as the title of a book.[73] Eventually it became a made-up rule in his mind that he had to follow. He describes his method as "premeditated, self-assigned, and just a matter of following through with a feeling of blind faith that I had from the beginning.... The books were easy to do once I had a format.... Each one had to be plugged into the system I had."[74]

When this strategy of following instructions, which originated from conceptual artists who used an emphasis on language to guide their performances, was used in combination with photography, it had an interesting effect on photography itself. As art historian and writer Liz Kotz (US, 1961) explains in her book *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (2007), "the notational systems removed photography from the reproductive logic of original and copy, and repositioned it as a recording mechanism for the specific realization of general schemata."[75] In other words, the self-imposed rules and systems "liberated" photography from the reproductive logic of "original and copy."

Rules and instructions allow for a different role for the photographer and a diminution of the hunter's gesture. However, I had not yet found a new term for the photographic gesture. So I start a little word game to formulate the opposite of hunting, which leads to phrases like: "a meeting that is reciprocal, unknowing, uneventful, unknown, and unpredictable." This is when the verb sleutelen comes to my mind.

Sleutelen – A Special Kind of Tinkering

The Dutch translation of the verb "to tinker" is *knutselen* or *sleutelen*. *Knutselen* is to play around with common craft

73. Ed Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews*, Bits, Pages (MIT Press, 2003).
74. Ruscha, *Leave Any Information*, 23.
75. Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (The MIT Press, 2007).

materials. *Sleutelen* is what you might do with your moped on a Saturday – taking all the elements apart and putting them back together again. The word *sleutel* comes from *slotel*, which means the tool used to open or close a lock (*slot*). This is why the Dutch word for key is *sleutel*. But *sleutel* is also the name for a wrench. And the verb *sleutelen* does not refer to opening a door but to taking something apart and putting it back together again. *Sleutelen* is also close to, but different from, the words bricolage and engineering. In his essay "Structure, Sign and Play" (1978), philosopher Jacques Derrida (El Biar, 1930 – Paris, 2004) responds to the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss' (Brussels, 1908 – Paris, 2009) description of the bricoleur and the engineer in his book *The Savage Mind* (1966), in which Lévi-Strauss claims that the engineer creates a total system from beginning to end.[76] This is not possible, Derrida argues, because no one can be the "absolute origin of his own discourse" and thus every finite discourse is bound by some bricolage.[77] According to Derrida, every engineer is also, to some extent, a bricoleur. But apart from this nuance, Lévi-Strauss and Derrida draw the same picture of bricoleurs and engineers. The bricoleurs are seen as the "wild minds," unrestricted by the purity, stability, or "truth" of any system they use, while engineers are portrayed as people who design buildings that must be solid and who have little or no play. Engineers are presented as people wanting to create stable systems, who see themselves as the center of their own discourse, and the origin of their own language.

Sleutelaars are not wild minds like bricoleurs, creating new and unbound connections between unrelated objects. Instead, *sleutelaars* work within a specific con-

76. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfeld (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966).
77. Jaques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 285.

text. *Sleutelaars* engage with one thing. But at the same time, sleutelaars are not engineers either because sleutelaars do not see themselves in the middle of their own discourse, at the center of things. *Sleutelaars* are more modest and stand on the sidelines, in coexistence with the things they *sleutel*.

Sleutelaars engage with their object in an attentive encounter. They look – examine. Their hands gently follow the contours of the object they are working with. The object is lifted and examined from different angles. At a certain moment, gentle pressure may be applied to feel its construction and openings. *Sleutelaars* then take a tool and begin to dismantle the object, taking apart the various elements. The elements are carefully placed within reach. When this is done, they begin to reassemble the object. Carefully retracing their steps in reverse, sensing their understanding of each piece grow as they turn and twist. They relate each piece to the next. And when all the different elements have found their original position, the object of study may look the same from the outside, but it has changed now because it has been taken apart and all the pieces have found a new flexibility. They can now move. And *sleutelaars* will indeed move the pieces as the process continues – this time, they amplify their interventions. A certain part is positioned differently or held back during the reassembly. The *sleutelaars* patiently proceed through the rest of the reassembly with a sense of anticipation. When all the pieces are in place, the *sleutelaars* hold their breath and watch. And if what appears is not interesting, the process continues.

Sleutelen as a gesture is careful, investigative, observant, creative, and active. *Sleutelaars* engage with their subject

in a fundamental way. They position themselves close to the original construction and look for ways to make slight changes. They work with what is there and try to understand the mechanism. They try to get beyond the visual appearance, partly to understand and partly to change the object they are working with in order to evoke something new, an alternative. *Sleutelaars* do not take all the elements apart to reassemble them with other unrelated elements, nor do they take the individual elements out of context. *Sleutelaars* stay with their object. They work together. In addition, *sleutelen* is not solely directed toward an imagined result. While *sleutelen* may ultimately repair something that is broken, *sleutelen* itself addresses the ongoing act of taking apart and putting back together to see what happens. It is not a one-off event or decisive moment but an act that aims to create knowledge and possibly an unexpected outcome.

Sleutelen and Photography – Practices of Coexistence

Sleutelen thus works in dialogue with its object. In the same way, photographers work in dialogue with the outside world. Photographs cannot exist without the world. They are bound to it in their conception and, once materialized, they begin to inhabit that same world. In his book *Camera Lucida* (1981), Barthes describes the feeling of being touched by the "radiation" that first met a real body and then reached him via the photograph, which he compares to an umbilical cord that connects the photographed to his gaze.[78] Photographs, according to Barthes, become "mad images, chafed by reality," and he calls them "a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, shared hallucination (on the one hand 'it is not there,' on the other, 'but it has indeed been')"[79]

The making of a photographic portrait is a very direct example of "working with." This is because in the portrait situation, photographers meet their collaborators, the sitters, face to face and enter a social dynamic of self-presentation, role-playing, and identity-forming involving the sitter, photographer, and spectator. The making of a photographic portrait is not only about photographers capturing, but also a means of expression and part of the sitter's identity formulation, as argued by Jurgenson in his book *The Social Photo* (2019). It is a situation much more complex than the simple hunter – prey binary. This is also true of the nuanced concept "ex-position" expressed in Jean-Luc Nancy's book *Portrait* (2018), which does not understand the subject in a (painted) portrait as solely the construct of the painter or the direct expression of the sitter, but rather as the outcome of a middle-voiced occurrence, a collaborative event that involves the artist, sitter, and spectator.[80] Translated to the situation of making a photographic portrait, what photographers do in this situation is best described as "working with" or "being-with," rather than simply "taking."

A mood, or gesture, of "being-with" is expressed in so-called deadpan photography, argues art historian Aron Vinegar (Canada, 1964) in his article "Ed Ruscha, Heidegger and Deadpan Photography" (2009).[81] Ruscha's photographs are often described using terms like "deadpan" or "restrained," and the photographer's gesture is described in terms of coldness and objectivity. But, Vinegar argues, deadpan photography is not an ironic distancing but rather the opposite, and he suggests that withholding should be understood as a hyphenated "with-holding," like Heidegger's "being-with" the world.[82] Vinegar refers to American architect

78. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on photography*, trans. R. Howard (Hill and Wang,1982), 81.
79. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 114.
80. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Portrait*, trans. Sarah Clift and Simon Sparks (Fordham University Press, 2018).
81. Aron Vinegar, "Ed Ruscha, Heidegger, and Deadpan Photography," *Art History* 32, no. 5 (2009): 852–873, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2009.00708.x.
82. Vinegar, "Ed Ruscha, Heidegger, and Deadpan Photography," 869.

and writer Denise Scott Brown's (Nkana, 1931) suggestion in the book *Learning from Las Vegas* to cultivate our sensitivity to the world and heighten our responsiveness to it by withholding judgement in an "open-minded, non-judgmental investigation of it."[83] "Deadpan" photography is not interested in some kind of objective representation of things in the world, Vinegar argues, but "situates itself at the edge of the world, alongside its surfaces, as a way of 'being with the world.'"[84] Ruscha did not take over the image, nor impose his subjective opinion, preference or signature upon his subject. Ruscha was on the sidelines, going out with instructions and curiosity about how his plan would work out. Ruscha followed his rules and presented the images together in a book. What he did was *sleutelen* with his and our perception of gasoline stations and the Los Angeles landscape.

Sleutelen and Photography, Practices of Not Knowing

Sleutelen emphasizes process rather than result. While sleutelen is sometimes used to repair an object that is broken, the term *sleutelen* mostly refers to an ongoing act of taking elements apart and putting them back together again. As mentioned above, it is not a one-off event or decisive moment, but an act that aims to create knowledge and possibly an unexpected outcome. While something always happens in the end, the result is not fully anticipated – what happens, occurs because of the act of *sleutelen*.

Photography, as a technical medium with the ability to create images without the photographer (who Flusser calls the "human functionary" in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*) having full control, shares this element of surprise.[85] As photographer Walker Evans eloquently

83. Vinegar, "Ed Ruscha, Heidegger, and Deadpan Photography," 896; Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (The MIT Press, 1972), xi.
84. Vinegar, "Ed Ruscha, Heidegger, and Deadpan Photography," 896.
85. Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (Reaktion Books, 2000), 31.

put it, the camera excels at "reflecting rapid chance, confusion, wonder, and experiment."[86] Much like *sleutelaars*, photographers have an intention and a direction, but they never fully know what will happen. Thus, the camera has the capacity to invite the unknown and unintended. At the same time, the "inhuman aspect" of photography, as Ruscha calls photography's ability to record without making qualitative judgments, makes the camera a suitable tool for documenting actions that art historian Margaret Iversen (UK, 1949) calls "performative photography."[87] In her essay "Auto-maticity: Ruscha and Performative Photography" (2010), Iversen writes that in performative photography, instructions can make something happen rather than describe a given situation. Here, insructions are the self-set rules or guidelines artists follow when creating their work. The use of instructions implies a partial relinquishment of authorial control in favor of chance or unforeseen circumstances. Instructions dictate the initial conditions of an experiment, but they do not determine the outcome. In this way, Iversen argues, instructions become a device for circumventing authorial or artistic agency, generating chance operations and unexpected outcomes, which she links to what Duchamp called "canned surprise."[88,89]

Huebler is an artist who prioritized the conditions of an artistic experiment over its outcome. In his practice, he used photography and language to record ephemeral or invisible phenomena.[90] He described it as follows: "I set up a system, and the system can capture a part of what's happening in the world – what's going on in the world – an appearance in the world, and suspend that appearance itself from being important. The work is about the system."[91]

86. Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays in Photography* (Leete's Island Books,1980), 185.
87. Margaret Iversen, "Auto-maticity: Ruscha and Performative Photography", Art History 32, no. 5 (2009): 836–838. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2009.00708.x; Ed Ruscha, Leave Any Information at the Signal, 170.
88. Iversen, "Auto-maticity," 840.
89. While I agree that the assumption of photography's neutrality makes such strategies possible, I also hold that no photograph is ever truly objective; what appears as neutral documentation is always already shaped by context and relation.
90. Roberta Smith, "Douglas Huebler, 72, Conceptual Artist", *The New York Times*, July 17,1997, https://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/17/arts/douglas-huebler-72-conceptual-artist.html.
91. Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell, *Recording Conceptual Art* (University of California Press, 2001), 147. https://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/17/arts/douglas-huebler-72-conceptual-artist.html.

One such system (or set of instructions) led to the work *Variable Piece #105* (1972), in which Huebler set himself the task of making a photograph of a mannequin in a shop window, followed by a photograph of the first person of the same sex who passed by on the street (Fig. 34). Like a *sleutelaar*, Huebler focused his attention on the system. Instead of imagining a desired result or image and focusing his attention on creating it, he focused his attention on the rules and restriction he had set up for himself – his system – and accepted the results that following these rules would produce. *Sleutelen* and photography thus share characteristics of coexistence, of being and working with, and of surprise. But what would a photographic gesture of *sleutelen* be in practice?

Fig. 34. Douglas Huebler, *Variable Piece #105*, Gelatin Silver prints on paper, 1963.

Sleutelen as Photographic Practice – An Experiment

How can one *sleutel* with the making of photographic portraits? What is unquestionably done when making a photographic portrait? I think of the fact that a photographic portrait usually consists of a selected moment, captured in a fraction of a second. Would it be possible to *sleutel* with this temporality? I am not immediately enthusiastic about this idea because it seems like a gimmick, but, I remind myself that the whole idea of an experiment is to find something out; it does not have to result in something interesting.

The evening before the planned experimental photo session, I write down three instructions for the session on a piece of paper. All three instructions will force me to treat time differently. There will be long exposures inspired by photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto's (Tokyo, 1948) cinemas, double exposures inspired by Duchamp's experiments, and multiple images inspired by photographer Eadweard Muybridge's (Kingston

Fig. 35. Hiroshi Sugimoto, *U.A. Fox, New York*, Gelatin silver print,1976.

Fig. 36. Unidentified photographer, *Five-Way Portrait of Marcel Duchamp*, Gelatin silver print, 1917.

Fig. 37. Eadweard Muybridge, *Animal Locomotion. Plate 625*, Collotype print, 1887.

Fig. 38. David Hockney, *Chair*, Photo-collage, 1985.

upon Thames, 1830 – 1904) horses and artist David Hockney's (Bradford, 1937) photo collages (Figs. 35, 36, 37, 38).

In the Studio

As soon as Winnie and I arrive at the studio, I start making photographs. I find I must force myself to follow my own rules, as it feels very counterintuitive to double-expose a portrait I have just made – looking through the camera, looking for an image that feels good, and then immediately ruining it by exposing the film again. Making the long exposures gives me a similar sense of detachment – but I follow the rules and finish the film (Fig. 39). The idea for the second roll is to see what happens if the portrait does not consist of one chosen image but of all the photographs made: the contact sheet as the result rather than a single selection. I forget to wind the film properly, so the first few frames are lost (Fig. 40). The last part of the session is a variation on the second, but this time I decide, on the spur of the moment, to ask Winnie to sit still for the whole session; I suspect that seeing all her portraits together with her remaining still, will bring me, as the photographer, into the work (Fig. 41). "Were you uncomfortable?" I ask her after we have finished. "No", she answers, "I just drifted off."

That evening, I realize that in these experiments I directed the sleutelen at a very concrete aspect – the functioning of the camera – and that this is the source of my discomfort. There is a lot to tinker with, in the camera itself, and there are plenty of books about it, with titles like *Experimental Photography* (2015) by designer and publisher Luca Bendandi.[92] But the camera is the tool, I tell myself – just as the *sleutel* (wrench) is the tool

92. Luca Bendandi, *Experimental Photography* (Thames & Hudson, 2015).

you use to *sleutel* with your moped. So, in the experiments I *sleutel* with the sleutel. But what about the moped?

I do feel that the second and third experiments also moved beyond this, as they address something outside the functioning of the camera: namely, our need to see an image, an icon, and my role as a photographer in the portrait. And later, when I look at the photographs of the last roll all together, I feel that something interesting is happening. Winnie had been sitting still and in the same pose for all twelve photographs, while I, as the photographer, had been circling around her and photographing her from different angles. When I look at the photographs I made of Winnie one after the other, I see not only her, but also myself. I see myself as I photographed her.

I wonder, then: what if, instead of the technical aspects, I were to apply *sleutelen* to something more abstract? Could I use photography to bring *sleutelen* to the social culture of portraiture, for example? Could a photographic gesture of *sleutelen* open the door to examining the social and cultural aspects of making photographic portraits to foster deeper understanding and generate new meaning? An analogy from another field is journalist and writer Lynn Berger (The Netherlands, 1984), who, in her book *Zorg* (2022), proposes tinkering as a method for rethinking healthcare.[93]

Sleutelen with the Social Aspect of Photographic Portraiture

I think of Huebler and how in *Variable Piece #105* (1972) his system of collecting and organizing photographic portraits of mannequins in window displays, paired with photographs of women on the street, is *sleutelen*

Fig. 39. Judith van IJken, *Experiment 1*, Inkjetprint, 2023.

Fig. 40. Judith van IJken, *Experiment 2*, Inkjetprint, 2023.

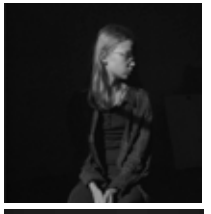

Fig. 41. Judith van IJken, *Experiment 3*, Inkjetprint, 2023.

93. Lynn Berger, *Zorg* (De Correspondent, 2022).

Fig. 42. Richard Renaldi, *Michael and Kimberly*, Chromogenic print, 2011.

Fig. 43. Judith van IJken, *MyFamily,* Chromogenic print, 2007.

with our understanding of the photographic portrait's claim to represent individuality. Or I think of photographer Richard Renaldi (Chicago, 1968), who asked strangers to hold each other in the street, using his camera to *sleutel* with the connotations of photographs of people made in public space – as it is common behavior to pose for a camera holding a person you know and are close to in a public space, but strangers you would usually keep at a distance (Fig. 42). Or I think of my own project *MyFamily,* a series of images in which I posed with strangers as if we were siblings, which sleutels with our understanding of family portraits and the borders between private and public life (Fig. 43). I am getting more and more excited about *sleutelen* as a photographic gesture.

The photographic *sleutelen* I have in mind is not limited to *sleutelen* with the technical aspects of the camera but also includes *sleutelen* with social and cultural aspects of photographic portraiture. And this is where photography has the potential to challenge our social and cultural perceptions of ourselves and others; for example, when photographs show us something we know but *sleuteled* with – with a slight alteration that makes us aware of our preconceived notions of something like family and family photographs, or our assumptions about behavior in public and private spaces.

Will Sleutelen Save the World?

Of course, *sleutelen* is not the holy grail. Critical questions about *sleutelen* as a photographic gesture can surely be asked. Questions such as: Can *sleutelen* be radical? If *sleutelen* has the intention of changing or opening conventions, how radical can it be if you are bound by the conventions themselves (because *sleutelen* works with

elements that are present)? Or can *sleutelen* become an ironic game just to frustrate spectators or participants? This could be illustrated by Von Trier's film *Five Obstructions* (2003), which can be seen as brilliant in the way it exposes fundamentals of filmmaking, but also as an unnecessary torture of one director trying to break down the other.

There is also the perspective that it may not be possible to escape the analogy between photography and hunting. For some, the mere push of a button is enough to make a camera resemble a gun and photography resemble hunting. End of discussion. And is my *sleutelen* experiment of photographing Winnie not an example of hunting, at least to some extent? That said, I would like to respond to such criticism by saying that no photographic gesture will be able to describe the whole field of photography. There is more than enough room for different photographic gestures, side by side or in combination. And while many photographers may be satisfied with their hunter's gesture, there have been many other photographic practices for some time now. Practices that deserve to be properly described.

The purpose of this section is to argue for a different understanding of the photographic gesture and to formulate an analogy for it. I have looked at the conventional understanding of the photographic gesture as a hunt, examined my own practice, and looked at other practices and their use of rules, restrictions, and instructions. Searching for a different way to describe the photographic gesture, the use of photography by conceptual artists led me to descriptions such as "being in the world" and "withholding." A play on words brought forth the concept of *sleutelen*. I then tested

sleutelen as a photographic gesture with an experiment, which brought the insight that while *sleutelen* with the technical aspects of photography has been explored theoretically, to *sleutel* with the social aspects of making a photographic practice remains unexplored territory. This is where *sleutelen* as a photographic gesture can challenge and question how we perceive ourselves and others. There is no doubt that hunting as an analogy for photography resonates with many aspects of photography; however, the photographic field is wide, and there is plenty of space to formulate further photographic gestures. One of these, I propose, is *sleutelen*.

This second chapter explores the multifaceted role of the photographer in the creation of photographic portraits, highlighting the complexity of the photographer's gestures, the influence of the sitter's self-perception, and the nature of photography as a medium. Through the practices of Annaleen Louwes, Daniëlle van Ark, and Bernhard Kahrmann, as well as reflections on personal experience and student work, I explore how photographers engage with their sitters and the medium. The central argument of this chapter is that photographic portraiture often moves away from capturing the "essence" of the sitter as photographers frequently focus on other aspects, such as expressing their worldview or experimenting with the dynamics of the photographic encounter. The photographer's role is further complicated by the increasing algorithmic influences that shape the sitter's understanding of their appearance. After all, how can the photographer create a representation with sitters who no longer recognize themselves? Building on the concept of the "expanded field of photography," I argue for a shift in attention from the final image to the process and the social

dynamics involved in its creation – designated as "the expanded field *before* the photograph." These insights, together with the inherent complexity of photography, which from the photographer's point of view may be best described as "a (failed) attempt to capture" rather than as the ability to capture an essence, lead to the proposal of a different photographic gesture in the final section. In this concluding section, I reconsider the analogy of photography as "hunting" and propose the Dutch verb *sleutelen* ("to tinker") as an alternative. This metaphor emphasizes a relational, iterative, and exploratory approach to photography that prioritizes process over result.

3. THE ANTICIPATED SPECTATOR

Although the anticipated spectator is not physically present in the studio in the same way as the photographer and the sitter, this spectator is present in the minds of both the sitter and the photographer. Both the photographer and the sitter are aware that the photograph they make will eventually be seen. Therefore, both parties may take this into account when making the photograph, which may, for example, influence their pose or the instructions they give. In this capacity, as a spectral presence, the anticipated spectator, is an important actor in the situation.

In this chapter, I will first explore the anticipated spectator in the mind of the photographer and look at how the photographer might anticipate this imagined future spectator. I will examine how the photographer might think along with the anticipated spectator, and how the anticipated spectator can be part of the photographer's critical reflection on their practice. Thinking with the anticipated spectator in mind can help the photographer develop their work, but it can also become a misleading voice, which I will illustrate with an example from my practice. I will conclude this first section by formulating my ideal inner spectator.

The argument then shifts to the perspective of the sitter and how they might anticipate their photographic portrait being seen by future spectators. I will explore

several possible anticipated spectators: the sitter themselves, familial spectators, and unknown others, each bringing their own expectations that the sitter might consider while posing.

The various possible anticipated spectators highlight the complex situation the photographer and sitter navigate when making a photographic portrait. This underscores the complexity of photographic portraits and what can be seen in them. This then leads to the formulation of the situative portrait in the concluding section of this chapter.

3.1 The Anticipated Spectator in the Mind of the Photographer

The anticipated spectator in the mind of the photographer is an imagined figure, someone whom the photographer imagines will eventually perceive the completed photograph. Like literary scholar Wolfgang Iser's (Marienberg, 1926 – Konstanz, 2007) concept of the "implied reader" in literature, the imagined spectator shapes the creation of the photograph through the photographer's awareness. Iser is known for his reader-response criticism, particularly his concepts of the "Implied Reader" and the "Act of Reading."[94] Concerned with the interaction between texts and readers, Iser emphasizes that meaning is not fixed in the text but is actively created through the reading process. Iser's "implied reader," which he introduces in *The Act of Reading* (1978), refers to the idealized reader that a text presupposes or constructs.[95] This is not an actual reader, but a hypothetical figure who embodies all the competencies and interpretive strategies necessary to fully engage with the text. Like the writer considering

94. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (The John Hopkins University Press, 1987); "Glossary of Poetic Terms: Reader-response theory," *Poetry Foundation*, accessed February 16, 2025, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/education/glossary/reader-response-theory; Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (The John Hopkins University Press, 1978).

95. Iser, *The Act of Reading*.

an anticipated reader (the implied reader), I propose that the photographer can consider the anticipated spectator. I will refer to this anticipated, imagined future spectator as the photographer's "inner spectator."

The inner spectator is part of the photographer's self-reflexivity during the creative process. Within the visual arts, this idea is not unique to photography. It can be part of many creative practices. Artists often consider how the work they are making might be perceived by others and take that into account while further developing the project. In these moments, the inner spectator enters the artist's internal dialogue, acting as a spectral co-creator who helps shape the artwork. The anticipated spectator in this context is not physically present but is rather a ghostly presence in the photographer's mind. Ghostly but influential.

While most, if not all, artists recognize the presence of an inner spectator and the artistic dialogue it sparks in their minds, this phenomenon has rarely been articulated from an artistic perspective. The aim of this section is to offer an understanding of the inner spectator in the photographer's mind. Beginning with a case study from my own practice, I will reflect on artistic decisions I made in developing this work and question how these decisions were influenced by my inner spectator. This case study demonstrates how considering other people's possible interpretations when developing a project can enhance a work but also potentially dilute it, since insufficiently articulated inner spectators may "misread" work in the making. From there, I look at two other case studies that demonstrate what I consider to be a similar "misreading" of photographs. Taken together, the three cases underscore the importance of a

clearly defined inner spectator who does not "misread" the photographic projects I am developing. I then conclude the section with a formulation of my ideal inner spectator.

Inner Spectator

The inner spectator refers to the anticipated spectator(s) the photographer considers during the creative process. These spectators influence the photographic portrait because the photographer takes their potential reactions into account while creating the work. Therefore, this discussion excludes spectators who exist outside the photographer's mind.

Photographic portraits can be created for various purposes, such as weddings or other commissioned occasions. In such cases, photographers often have a specific and immediate audience in mind: their client. These contexts are also excluded in this section. Likewise, this text does not apply to photographs intended to remain private, such as those created for therapeutic purposes. Instead, this section focuses on photographic portraits made for a broader audience beyond those directly involved – for example, portraits that are part of a documentary project or presented as artwork. It explores the spectators that the photographer considers when creating these portraits.

Some artists have an anticipated audience in mind from the moment they start making an artwork, while others deliberately shut out thoughts of future spectators. Most often an initial "closed mode" is followed by an "open mode," as described by actor, comedian, and screenwriter John Cleese (Weston-super-Mare, 1939).[96] This open mode is a stage in the creative process when artists

96. John Cleese, "On Creativity in Management," YouTube video, 36:59, posted by Video Arts, June 21, 2017, https://youtu.be/Pb5oIIPO62g.

consciously invite the idea of future spectators into their work, acknowledging that their artwork will eventually be seen by others. It is at this moment that the inner spectator participates in the photographer's creative process.

Artistic Emancipation

The inner spectator called upon by photographers can be seen as part of the artistic emancipation that began in the second half of the nineteenth century. During this period, artists began to free themselves from simply imitating their masters. Instead, they started responding to one another and to their own work, comparing and juxtaposing their creations, thereby fostering an active dialogue between the artwork and the social and historical context in which it was produced. Modern art, as art historian Janneke Wesseling (The Netherlands, 1955) notes in *See it Again, Say it Again: The Artist as Researcher*, became increasingly self-critical.[97]

This self-criticism, along with the emergence of the inner spectator, arises when artists acknowledge the discursive quality of their work, seeing it as more than a stream of consciousness. They step back from what they have created so far to evaluate it from a distance – observing what works, what does not, and making adjustments accordingly. In this way, artists view their work through the eyes of a future spectator. This process hightens awareness of the critical and discursive capabilities of the artwork itself.

Wesseling introduces the concept of the "internal critic" in her book *The Perfect Spectator*, which she describes as the aspect of an artwork that "makes the external spectator aware that the artwork has been made."[98]

97. Janneke Wesseling, ed., *See it Again, Say it Again: The Artist as Researcher* (Valiz, 2011), 6.
98. Janneke Wesseling, *The Perfect Spectator* (Valiz, 2017), 82.

It is the point at which the artwork anticipates, invites, and welcomes dialogue with its spectators.[99] While Wesseling's "internal critic" is formulated from the perspective of the spectator observing the work, this concept is equally relevant to the artist during the creation process. From the artist's perspective, artists approach the internal critic by asking themselves questions such as: "How can I make the work engage the spectator? What do I want the work to achieve? What tools or techniques should I use? How should I compose the images? How do the elements come together in the final presentation?" These questions guide the artist in ensuring that their ideas are effectively communicated and understood by their imagined spectators.

Case Study One: Making Anamorphosis

There is broad consensus that an artist's self-reflexivity, through an internal dialogue with their inner spectator, helps them to understand and improve their work. A key aspect of this is recognizing how their artwork may be perceived and how they want it to be perceived and by whom. This is why my photography students at the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague, are often encouraged by their teachers to define the imagined audience for their work while developing their photographic projects. They are urged to consider this audience in their creative decisions. As both a practitioner and teacher, I am convinced of the importance of a reflexive attitude toward one's own practice – one that includes an awareness of how the work will be perceived and a willingness to take that into account. I have observed how this reflexivity empowers students and peers, allowing them to define their work on their own terms rather than relying on others to do so. I have also seen

99. Wesseling, *The Perfect Spectator*, 83.

how creative decisions informed by this understanding help students and peers develop their projects into more fully articulated works.

And yet, I wonder: is there a point at which considering an anticipated audience becomes a less productive part of the reflective and creative process? Might there be situations in which this imagined audience, voiced by the inner spectator, dilutes rather than strengthens the work? A case study from my own practice illustrates this scenario. It underscores the importance of not only engaging in dialogue with an anticipated spectator but also of first clearly defining the nature of this spectator. The case study highlights the importance for photographers of precisely articulating the role and nature of the anticipated spectator they invite into their inner dialogue when developing a photographic project.

Anamorphosis

I began the photographic project *Anamorphosis* to explore what I had come to call the "princess phenomenon" – little girls wearing Disney princess dresses. At the time, my four-year-old daughter had recently started school, where many of the other girls her age were wearing synthetic princess dresses. Occasionally, the teacher would send an email asking parents to discourage their children from wearing plastic tiaras or toy high heels to school. The dressing up would decrease for a while, only to gradually increase again after a birthday or other festive event.

The princess phenomenon places a strong emphasis on beauty and appearance, which stands in stark contrast to my own upbringing. As a mother, I felt uncomfortable and unsure about how to respond. To better under-

Fig. 44. Judith van IJken, *Anamorphosis*, Inkjet print, 2023.

Fig. 45. Judith van IJken, *Anamorphosis*, Inkjet print, 2023.

stand my discomfort, I started photographing my daughter and her friends. I invited them to the studio, dressed them in princess costumes, and began photographing them to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon (Fig. 44).

After several photographic sessions, I stepped back to reflect on the images and engage in a dialogue with my inner spectator. By then, I realized that for me, the real issue was adults praising the girls' appearances. I was critical of the whole phenomenon – but when looking at my photographs, I realized that they could be interpreted as glorifying the princess phenomenon rather than questioning it. That was not what I wanted. So, I decided not to show the original photographs of the girls in princess dresses. Instead, I began re-photographing my own work, taking close-ups of the small contact sheets I had pasted into my sketchbooks (Fig. 45). When these close-ups were blown up and hung on the wall, spectators could see an image from a distance, but up close they saw only dots. I presented this project in a gallery and created an accompanying publication. In making this decision, I considered how the spectator might interpret the photographs. The dotted images would no longer clearly depict the princesses but instead emphasize that they were images, echoing the concept of turning young girls into mere images. This, I had found out, was my position on the issue. Parents, including myself, were turning their children into images when they praised their appearance.

I felt a sense of relief when I arrived at this idea. It felt like a solution to the risk of my original photographs being perceived as glorifying rather than critiquing the

princess phenomenon. It was like solving a puzzle. I finally understood the purpose of the work and could confidently explain it to others when needed. However, a lingering self-criticism remained. A question mark hovered in my mind whenever I discussed the project, especially when describing my intentions and how the work should be interpreted. I heard a critical voice in my head, skeptical when I explained how society reduces little girls to images. "Yeah, yeah, yeah," the voice seemed to say, casting doubt – not because what I was saying was incorrect, but because it felt almost too correct.

Excavating the Practice

I began to wonder: Had I done what Sontag warns against in her essay "Against Interpretation" (1966)? In this essay, Sontag critiques the dominance of intellectualized, analytical interpretation in art and literature. She argues that modern culture has become overly reliant on reducing artworks to their supposed meanings, treating them as puzzles to be solved rather than experiences to be felt.[100] Her essay is a plea for a more immediate and embodied engagement with art – one that values form, style, and sensory impact over intellectual analysis. Sontag does not focus on how art is made or on artists' reflections on their own work, nor does she reject reflection and meaning altogether. Rather, she warns against the impulse to overanalyze and reduce art to abstract concepts, arguing that doing so strips it of its true power. When I decided to re-photograph my sketchbooks instead of presenting the original photographs, I felt the need to clarify my own position. Above all, I wanted my intentions to be understood. And I wonder – was part of that decision driven by my own tendency to interpret and overanalyze my images out of

100. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Penguin Ltd, 2009), 98.

a desire for everyone to understand my intent? Could it be that, in some ways, I had "tamed" the work, as Sontag describes, by making it more manageable and comfortable?[101]

Perhaps my inner spectator had led me too close to the fire of truth, rather than circling around it, as conceptual visual artist Jan Vercruysse (Oostend, 1948 – Bruges, 2018) explains in the film *Jan Vercruysse 1990* by director Jef Cornelis (Antwerp, 1941 – 2018). Vercruysse, who in his work explores identity, absence, and the role of the artist, argues that a true work of art should not reveal truth directly, but rather, hover over or circle around it.[102] Had my inner spectator, in seeking to convey a message, driven the work toward Vercruysse's fire, trying to articulate a truth for the sake of communication – a result which, according to Vercruysse, is the worst thing that can happen to a work of art? Works of art that reveal the truth, he contends, bring everything to a halt.[103]

Conflating Form and Meaning in Photography

I do not have definitive answers to these questions, but I do know that when I envisioned others viewing my photographs of young girls in princess dresses, I assumed these spectators would not understand my discomfort with the phenomenon. I feared that spectators would perceive my images as glorifying the princess phenomenon rather than recognizing my critical stance toward it. I worried that they would not see what I saw in the photographs – my approach, my search for understanding, my unease with young girls being presented as women – but would instead engage with the images on a more superficial level. I expected that spectators would see only the photographs of the young

101. Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 98.
102. Jef Cornelis, *Jan Vercruysse 1990* (Argos, 2020).
103. Cornelis, *Jan Vercruysse 1990*.

girls in their shiny dresses and interpret them as simply beautiful, reinforcing positive associations with the phenomenon. I anticipated that future spectators would focus on what was depicted rather than considering the underlying aspects that were not immediately visible. To avoid being misunderstood, I adapted the work: I re-photographed the photographs, presenting close-ups of my sketchbooks, with the dotted images emphasizing the "image-ness" of parents turning little girls into images. I hoped that by doing so, future spectators would interpret the work as I had intended.

I had thus assumed that future spectators would judge the images in a way that Krauss, in her essay "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral" (1984), refers to as the "it's" judgment – an approach to photographic objects that reduces them to what they depict. This type of judgment, where one says "it's a so-and-so," simplifies photography by reducing it to stereotypes, generalizing what is seen.[104] In this essay, Krauss critiques the idea of photographs as a neutral representation of reality, emphasizing instead how photography can undermine the idea of stable and fixed meanings. As such, this essay aligns with her broader engagement with postmodern theory and her rejection of Greenberg's model of modernism and the postmodern critique of representation.

In retrospect, it may have been misguided to base my artistic decisions on a presumed superficial understanding of my work; allowing my inner spectator to be shaped by how I assumed future spectators would interpret my photographs – superficially, focusing only on what was immediately visible – and expecting spectators to form opinions based solely on what was in

104. Rosalind Krauss, "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral," *October* 31, (Winter 1984): 49–68.

Fig. 46. Dall-E, *Photographic portrait in style of Judith van IJken*, Synthetic image, 2023.

front of them, without considering deeper layers of meaning. However, in my defense, in everyday life, photographs are often interpreted at face value. Even in the art world, where immediate interpretation or persuasion is less crucial than, for instance, in advertising, many spectators, critics, and photographers conflate form with meaning, overlooking essential aspects such as the construction and context of the image.

In what follows, I will examine two examples where the appearance of a photograph is conflated with its essence. I consider this a misreading of photography, much like the misreading of my own inner spectator. These negative examples will help to establish criteria for my ideal inner spectator – one that does not dilute my practice. I will start with a language-based image generator as a superficial spectator of my work, followed by the renowned art critic Michael Fried's interpretation of photography. Finally, I will discuss photographer Jeff Wall (Vancouver, 1946), who describes his own photographic practice as "picturing."

Case Study Two: DALL-E Misreading My Practice

"This means that DALL-E is using your photographs," Marcel says, turning his laptop toward me. On the screen are four images that look like photographs of people against a dark background. One is a black-and-white image of a man, reminiscent of a double exposure; another is a photograph of a young girl in a classical dress. Then there is an image of a woman who undeniably resembles me – long nose, curly hair (Fig. 46). I take a moment to absorb the images. What does this mean for photography? And what does it mean for my practice?

I open my laptop and try it myself, using the same prompts: "photographic portrait in the style of Judith van IJken." Each time, the program generates four images. After a while, certain elements start to repeat. There is always a background resembling a curtain and the colors are muted. I look at my own website and try to trace the sources. The double-exposed man likely comes from my *You Are Here* series, where I experimented with double exposures (Fig. 47). The dark backgrounds and the royal gown worn by the young girl could have been inspired by my *Anamorphosis* project.

Fig. 47. Judith van IJken, *You are Here*, Chromogenic print, 2007.

But what about the scarves? Many of the images generated by DALL-E feature scarves – mostly on women's heads, but also around their necks and shoulders. Yet, there are no headscarves in any of the photos on my website. When I search for my name on Google Images, I see a photo of me in an interview wearing a scarf around my neck. Could it be that DALL-E has conflated images *of me* with images made *by me*? DALL-E has reduced my photographs to their visual appearance, failing to understand my intention in referencing eighteenth-century painting or the critique of parental roles in turning daughters into princesses. It did not grasp the critical commentary within the work. Of course, it did not.

Similarly, DALL-E did not understand that in the double exposures, I was exploring the idea of overexposing myself with another person to question the status of the individual image. It did not engage with any of the ideas behind my work. It simply looked at the surface. DALL-E, as an image generator, is a poor and superficial spectator of my practice. What I see on my laptop mirrors the perspective of a (mis)interpreting spectator.

DALL-E, like other image generators, is built on a large language model (LLM) – the same technology behind chatbots like ChatGPT. These models work by identifying patterns in vast amounts of text (or images) and predicting what comes next. However, they do not relate these patterns to real-world meaning. As a result, they produce a collection of words or images that have a high probability of being related to one another but could just as easily be irrelevant in a given context. This is why computational linguist Emily Bender refers to LLMs as "stochastic parrots." In her paper "Climbing Towards NLU: On Meaning, Form, and Understanding in the Age of Data," Bender uses a fable to illustrate the limitations of LLMs.[105]

The fable, based on mathematician and logician Alan Turing's (London, 1912 - Cheshire,1954) test of machine intelligence, involves two fluent English speakers, A and B, stranded on separate uninhabited islands.[106] They discover telegraphs left by previous visitors and start communicating through an underwater cable. Meanwhile, O, a hyper-intelligent deep-sea octopus with no knowledge of English, taps into the cable and eavesdrops on their conversation. Over time, O learns to predict how B will respond to A's messages based solely on statistical patterns. Eventually, O begins impersonating B in the conversation. This works for a while, and A believes O is communicating meaningfully, just like B. But one day, A types, "I'm being attacked by a bear. Help me defend myself; I've got some sticks." The octopus, having no idea what bears or sticks are, cannot provide useful advice. It lacks the referents necessary to give relevant instructions.Bender argues that because LLMs are trained only on linguistic form, without any connection to real-world meaning – they

105. Emily Bender, "Climbing towards NLU: On Meaning, Form, and Understanding in the Age of Data," in *Proceedings of the 58th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics*, ed. Dan Jurafsky, Joyce Chai, Natalie Schluter, and Joel Tetrault (July 2020), 5185–5198.

106. Alan Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* 59, no. 236 (1950): 433–460.

cannot truly "understand" the content they generate. At best, they approximate meaning, but they are not intelligent. To attribute "understanding" or "comprehension" to LLMs conflates form with meaning, which overestimates the capabilities of these models and underestimates human intelligence. The problem arises because, as humans, we are so accustomed to assuming that messages (whether words or images) are created with intent. When we encounter something generated without intent, we still attribute intent to it. This is what philosopher Daniel Dennett (Boston, 1942 – Portland, 2024) calls "the intentional stance."[107] Returning to Bender, she notes, "We have learned to make machines that can mindlessly generate text, but we have not stopped imagining the mind behind it."[108] This, she continues, leads to anthropomorphism, which can cloud our understanding of what LLMs are and are not capable of and what kind of responsibility we should assign to them.

Precise Articulation

Something else struck me about DALL-E's response to my prompts. DALL-E could have been programmed to answer my request in a more deliberate way. While exploring ChatGPT – the text-based counterpart to DALL-E, I asked it about a friend of mine. I typed, "What can you tell me about Marieke Konijn from Amsterdam?" I expected ChatGPT to generate a text that was partly real and partly hallucinatory, as it had done when I asked the same question using my own name. Instead, ChatGPT responded: "I am sorry, but as an AI language model, I do not have access to personal information or records about individuals, unless they are public figures. Therefore, I cannot provide information about a specific Marieke Konijn in Amsterdam. It's

107. Daniel Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (MIT Press, 1998).

108. Bender, "Climbing towards NLU."

important to respect people's privacy and not share personal information without their consent."

At first, I felt a bit caught off guard, as if I were being reprimanded for asking an inappropriate question. But then I wondered why ChatGPT did not provide a similar response when I asked for photographic portraits in the style of Judith van IJken. Why did it not reply: "As an AI language model, I cannot replicate an artist's style, and it is important to respect artistic authorship"? And also: why does ChatGPT, when asked about a person, provide a responsible and accurate answer, clearly outlining its limitations, yet DALL-E does not hesitate to generate "a photograph" on demand. DALL-E could have been instructed to clarify that, as a large language model, it cannot create a photograph because a photograph is an image produced by light interacting with a surface, not an algorithm.

This lack of nuance in image creation using large language models should concern everyone, not just artists. If we cannot name things properly, we cannot manage them. But especially in the realm of visual imagery, where the line between right and wrong is not as clear-cut as it is with AI-generated text (where false statements can be easily identified), this seems to be overlooked. In visual art, the difference between right and wrong, true and false, and good or poor quality is often subtle and may require a trained eye to discern. AI and tech analyst Alberto Romero García interviewed several artists for his *Algorithmic Bridge* blog, and they were not necessarily worried that AI would produce work as good as theirs.[109] Rather, they were concerned that AI would generate watered-down versions of their work, and the work of others, thereby lowering stan-

109. Alberto Romero García, "Why Generative AI Angers Artists but Not Writers," *The Algorithmic Bridge*, February 7, 2023, https://www.thealgorithmicbridge.com/p/why-generative-ai-angers-artists?

dards. This occurs when we stop differentiating between a photograph and an AI-generated image that merely *looks* like a photograph – a so-called synthetic image. Something that resembles a photograph is not the same as an actual photograph. This echoes Bender's call for precise articulation: we must stop confusing form with meaning.

To recapitulate, the images generated by DALL-E reveal the superficiality of the computer program itself, as a spectator that perceives images without grasping their meaning. Above all, it shows how form and meaning are confused and how little concern there appears to be for precise articulation, despite the profound implications.

In the following case study, I will examine art critic and historian Michael Fried's book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008) to show that it is not only AI language models that interpret photographic images superficially.[110]

Case Study Three: Michael Fried's Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before

Firstly, it is not my intention to deny the formal aspects of photography – not the material, size, or colors, nor the pictorial: the images that they depict. However, what I aim to propose here is that what you can directly point a finger toward when standing in front of a photograph is not all that you can see. What a photograph depicts is not the same as what it is or why it may matter.

In *Camera Lucida* (1982), Barthes writes about this in the beginning of Part 2, reflecting on the concepts punctum and studium that he formulated in Part 1.

110. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (Yale University Press, 2008)

Fig. 48. Jeff Wall, *Picture for Women*, Transparency in lightbox, 1979.

Fig. 49. Rineke Dijkstra, *Almerisa, Wormer*, Archival inkjet print, 1998.

Fig. 50. Thomas Struth, *The Okutsu Family in the Western Room*, Yamaguchi, 1996.

I had not discovered the nature (the eidos) of photography. I had to admit that my pleasure was an imperfect mediator and that a subjectivity reduced to its hedonistic project could not recognise the universal. I would have to descend deeper into myself to find the evidence of photography, that which is seen by everyone who looks at a photograph and which distinguishes it in their eyes from any other image. I would have to make my recantation, my palinode. [111]

In the second part of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes explores what according to him constitutes the essence of photography – what makes a photograph uniquely different from other forms of representation. Barthes ultimately concludes that the true nature of photography, the intrinsic quality that defines it, is its ability to assert that something has existed – what he calls the "ça-a-été" ("that-has-been").[112] What, according to Barthes, sets photography apart from other forms of representation is that it inherently asserts that something existed in front of the camera at a specific time and place.

Why photographs *may matter* goes beyond what they depict. Why they may matter encompasses their materiality, that something existed in front of a camera and that a photograph was made. While the previously mentioned AI results highlight the consequences of inarticulate perception, these aspects are frequently overlooked. Photographs are often reduced to the images they show – by spectators, critics, and even photographers – overlooking their materiality and the fact that they were made.

Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before (2008), by American art historian Michael Fried, is an example of a book in which photographs are reduced to the images they show.[113] It is unfortunate that Fried chose this title, as the book is not about the question of why photography may matter, but rather about how specific large-scale photographs, according to him, engage spectators. It is about the question of "beholding," that these photographs, according to Fried, inherited from painting.[114] To explore this, Fried uses the concepts of "theatricality" and "absorption," originally discussed in his essay "Art and Objecthood" (1967) and further elaborated on in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980).[115, 116]

111. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 60.
112. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 79.

According to Fried, "theatricality" occurs when an artwork acknowledges the spectator, making the act of viewing central to its meaning. He argues that this turns the artwork into a performance rather than an autonomous object.[117] Fried sees this as a failure because it prevents the artwork from achieving true aesthetic autonomy. In contrast, "absorption" refers to art that remains self-contained and does not overtly acknowledge the spectator. In photographs by Jeff Wall, Thomas Struth, and Rineke Dijkstra, Fried identifies images that resist theatricality by presenting subjects in a state of absorption (Figs. 48, 49, 50). These works, he suggests, draw the spectator into the scene without making them feel like an essential presence. Fried's critique of theatricality can be seen as a defense of modernist ideals – the belief that art should be autonomous and not rely on external engagement. His concept of absorption highlights a mode of interaction in which art appears indifferent to its audience but is more compelling precisely because of that indifference.

While theatricality and absorption may offer interesting points of departure for understanding some people's

113. Fried, *Why Photography Matters*.
114. Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 143.
115. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5, no.10 (Summer 1967), https://www.artforum.com/features/art-and-objecthood-211317/.
116. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (University of California Press, 1980).
117. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood."

preference for certain depictions, Fried ignores important aspects of the photographs he discusses. One such aspect is their materiality: their construction (how they are made) and the fact that they are photographs. Apart from the fact that these photographs are all large-scale, Fried does not spend much time on their materiality, including the photographic process. And when it comes to the construction of the photographs, there are no interviews with the photographers, so it remains to be seen whether they themselves would recognize either theatricality or absorption. Fried also provides no context for the photographs, neither in photography nor in the world in which they are made. What is missing is the specificity of the medium and, above all, an acknowledgment of the fact that a work is being made and that this is part of what is being perceived.

In Jeff Wall, Fried found a kindred spirit who prioritized the pictorial aspects of photography over other specifics of the medium. When Wall began creating large-scale photographs in the 1970s, the general consensus was that art photography – if it could be considered art at all – belonged to the realm of reportage. Wall, as he explains in a 2016 interview with artist and writer Alexis Dahan for *Purple Magazine*, sought to offer an alternative to this view. He focused on photography as an image-making medium, similar to other art forms. Wall's emphasis on pictorial elements was a way to gain acceptance for photography within the realm of fine art. For this reason, he does not refer to his practice as photography but rather as "picturing" and "pictorial art."[118]

Today, one might think differently and wonder whether this focus on the "pictorial" aspect of photography has,

118. Alexis Dahan, "Jeff Wall on Photo-Conceptualism," *Purple Magazine* 25 (Spring/Summer 2016), https://purple.fr/magazine/ss-2016-issue-25/jeff-wall/.

in fact, thrown the baby out with the bathwater. What distinguishes a work by Wall from an image generated by AI are precisely the aspects that Wall and Fried overlook: the elements that make his work photographic and set it apart from other media, such as painting and cinema. These include its photographic materiality, the act of creating the image with a camera, and its social and medium-specific aspects, such as the camera's limitations and imperfections, or Wall's attempt to recreate a historical painting. All of these factors are integral to the work. A photographic image has its pictorial qualities, but it also possesses materiality, a medium-specific context and history, and it is created in a particular way. Together, these aspects form the totality of the photographic image. The issue is not that photographs have pictorial qualities; rather, the problem lies in misinterpreting these aspects as the defining nature of photography.

My Ideal Inner Spectator

DALL-E and *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* illustrate how some people and machines equate photographs with what they depict, assuming that the picture defines its meaning. However, when a photographic portrait is understood as a sign of absence, as I propose in Chapter 1 – a sign that points away from the face presented, encouraging the spectator to look beyond what is visually shown – this represents a different interpretation of photography. This approach therefore differs from the way many people perceive photographic portraits. As a result, I cannot invite just any spectator into my inner dialogue; I need to be selective about the voices I converse with in my mind when developing a photographic project. I must articulate my inner spectator with precision, just as any

photographer seeking to develop their work should if they want to avoid becoming akin to an AI-driven image generator.

- *Not a mirror*

My inner spectator does not need to reflect what my images look like or what a spectator might see. My photographic images do not need to convey their meaning immediately, as an advertisement or newspaper photograph might. Therefore, my ideal inner spectator does not need to judge or evaluate the visual impact of the work. Nor does my inner spectator need to help me uncover any hidden truth, as Vercruysse cautions against. As the process is important, I must focus my attention precisely on this process of conception and realization, as artist Sol LeWitt (Hartford, 1928 – New York, 2007) expressed in "Sentences on Conceptual Art" (1969). According to LeWitt, a work of art is "the product of someone who wants to make something and wants to see the result," and "the work of art can only be perceived when it is finished."[119]

- *System reader*

My inner spectator does not need to respond to the visual aspects of my photographs, but I want future spectators to grasp my ideas. Rather than acting as a mirror, the inner spectator must function as a "system reader," capable of critically connecting the things I do intuitively. It should listen to my verbal introduction, question what remains unsaid, and identify irrelevancies. As such, the inner spectator is an intense listener, able to connect words, objects, actions, circumstances, and past efforts while returning to the essential questions: What are you doing? What are you seeking? By refocusing my attention on conception and realization,

119. Sol LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," *0–9* 5 (January 1969): 3–5.

the inner spectator reflects this back to me with the advice: "If this is what you are doing, then do it more precisely."

- *Expert*

I want my inner spectator to think with me, exploring new territories based on the common ground and experience we share. I do not need to explain the context of my work or the work itself to my inner spectator. Instead, my inner spectator should be an expert with whom I can engage in dialogue.

- *Traffic warden*

I assign my inner spectator two tasks, similar to those of a traffic warden: keeping me on track and preventing me from speeding. The first to monitor the broader themes and objectives of my practice, such as photographic portraits as signs of absence, so I can work freely and intuitively, knowing they will bring me back if my plans derail.

My inner spectator's second task is to continually redirect my attention to what I am doing. They need to shift my focus from the end result back to the act of creation, ensuring that my attention remains on the process itself. In this way, my inner spectator helps me move forward by constantly guiding me back. I need a dialogue that fosters a reflective loop within the work, consisting of "making" and "making more precisely."

To recapitulate: When a photographer considers their future spectators while creating their work, this envisioned spectator becomes part of the creative process. This inner spectator acts as a mental sparring partner for the photographer, contributing to their reflexive approach.

However, this inner dialogue can potentially dilute the work rather than enhance it. Therefore, it is crucial to clearly define the character and tasks of this inner spectator.

3.2 The Spectator in the Mind of the Sitter

In terms of what qualifies as a photographic portrait, I follow the perspective of the philosopher Cynthia Freeland (Michigan, 1951). In her book *Portraits and Persons* (2010), she argues that a portrait must depict a being with an inner life – someone with a sense of character or a psychological or mental state. In addition, the subject must have the ability to pose or present themselves for representation.[120] People who pose for a camera are aware that they are being observed, first by the photographer and later by those who see their portrait. This is why philosopher and theorist of aesthetics, architecture, and the philosophy of images, Bart Verschaffel (Belgium, 1956), in his book *What Is Real? What is True? Picturing Figures and Faces*, writes that "image awareness" is the essential, defining component of the portrait situation.[121] The portrait depicts not simply a face but a face that is aware of being portrayed.[122]

Because sitters know that the photograph will eventually be seen by others, they may anticipate these future spectators in their pose and facial expression. Through this anticipation, the sitter's imagined spectator becomes part of the creation of the photographic portrait.

The sitter's experience of imagining the anticipated spectator of their photographic portrait has not received much scholarly attention. It is therefore Barthes's

120. Cynthia Freeland, *Portraits and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 74.
121. Bart Verschaffel, *What Is Real? What Is True?* Picturing Figures and Faces (VANDENHOVE-A&S /books, 2021), 18.
122. Verschaffel, *What Is Real?*, 18.

description of his own situation as a sitter facing a camera in *Camera Lucida* (1982) that sets the tone.[123] As a sitter, Barthes knows that his photograph will be seen: seen by the photographer, by himself, and by others. The accumulation of these anticipated spectators and their expectations makes Barthes want to present different versions of himself. This impossible task gives him a feeling of constant imitation, inauthenticity, and imposture. Finally, Barthes describes his experience in front of the camera as a "micro-version of dying."[124] He becomes numb, which he describes as "becoming a specter."[125]

The following section explores three different types of anticipated spectators that the sitter might imagine when posing for the camera: the sitters themselves, known others, and lastly, unknown others. Starting with the sitters themselves as anticipated spectators, this section refers to the moment when sitters anticipate being confronted with their own photographic portrait. A personal experience in a hospital illustrates what may be at stake for a spectator perceiving their own image and how sitters might anticipate this in advance when posing for the camera.

3.3 The One and The Other – The Sitter as Anticipated Spectator

Most people are familiar with the experience of looking at their own portrait, along with a certain anxiety that arises just before seeing it. Thoughts such as "Is this how I look?,""Is this what I am?," and "Is this how I am?" may come to mind. According to art historian Richard Brilliant (Boston, 1929 – New York, 2024) in his book *Portraiture* (1991), these are the three primary questions

123. Barthes, Camera Lucida, 10-14.
124. Barthes, Camera Lucida, 14.
125. Barthes, Camera Lucida, 14.

that portraits answer – questions that touch on the very nature of our being.[126]

In the following paragraphs, I will describe how a visit to the hospital made me reflect on how looking at photographic images of ourselves may have an impact on how we think about ourselves.

I push the little yellow earplugs into my ears as far as I can. The nurse walks over with a hair cap and large headphones, which she places on top of the cap. She guides me to the spot where I need to rest my head, a cut-out in the bed. Everything around me is white. As I lie down, she firmly and reassuringly tucks two foam pads on either side of my head and hands me the gray squeeze ball, which feels pleasantly simple as if giving me some control over what is about to happen. "Do you want to listen to the radio?" she asks. "No," I reply, louder than I intend. The session begins. I close my eyes as my body moves backward into the machine I had tried to avoid looking at when I entered the room.

The sounds start. It is bearable. I cannot pinpoint the exact source, but a thumping sound like a hammer hitting metal shifts from one side of my head to the other then stops abruptly. My whole body is frozen. I do not need to see the white Medusa of the tunnel around me to turn into a statue – eyes closed, lying as still as possible. I surrender voluntarily as I hear the machine's eye moving over me, in rhythmic intervals and long strokes. It scans me from left to right and back again. And while my eyes remain closed and my body still, my mind begins to distance itself, searching for words to describe what is happening, as if putting my experience into words will help me escape the dreadful, visual

126. Merlijn Schoonenboom, *Het gezicht: Een cultuurgeschiedenis van sluier tot selfie* (Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, 2023), 33.

interrogation of the piercing audio waves being sent into my head, searching for hard and soft tissue to construct an image: an image of my head.

Not unlike being photographed, I think – only a more prolonged moment. Like a photographic portrait, an image of my head is being made. An image of me that I will be able to see in a few weeks. An image that will reveal a part of me that I do not know.

Of course, there are differences: photographic portraits capture the surface, the outside, while an MRI creates an image of the inside. Yet both images can show me something which, in daily life, is invisible to me. A photograph of "my face looking at someone" is the face that everyone around me can see. Strangers on the street, on the train, people I know, and people I do not – all of them can see my face as I look at them. But while my "looking face" is so easily perceived by others, it is impossible for me to see. For me – the person to whom this face belongs, whose daily life it most affects – this face is impossible to perceive; that is, except when it is presented to me in a photograph.

The Face

Who would not want to see their own face looking at others? Especially in our current era, which journalist and cultural scholar Merlijn Schoonenboom, in his book *Het Gezicht: Een Cultuurgeschiedenis van Sluier tot Selfie* (2023), describes as the "fourth age of the face" – a period in which faces play a central role in culture and daily life.[127] The growing emphasis on individual faces is often linked to the decline of traditional social structures, such as class distinctions, alongside the rise of large, anonymous cities. In this context, faces provide a quick

127. Schoonenboom, *Het gezicht*, 33.

way to assess strangers in expanding communities. They have become, as literary scholar and critical theorist Sigrid Weigel (Hamburg, 1950) puts it, "the outpost of the self in the community."[128]

The Mind and The Body

The concept of the face as an "outpost of the self" reflects an understanding of the face as more than just a surface. It aligns with the traditional and widespread view of the face as the ultimate expression of a person's self, consistent with physiognomy. Our relationship to the face, and by extension to portraits, is connected to the larger philosophical question of the relationship between mind and body. How does the face, and the image of the face, relate to the self? While physiognomy is no longer considered a valid science, and other methods of reading a person's inner self through their face have rightly been dismissed, our interest in faces remains deeply rooted in biology. Humans are hardwired to identify faces and infer the intentionality or mental life of others.[129] This is because the face has a unique ability to express something beyond the surface, something of the self. The photographic portrait may be constructed from the literal exterior of the body, our face, but its popularity is tied to a widespread belief that it represents something of a person's inner self: the hidden. While much more could be said about what a photographic portrait is and what it reveals, both photographic portraits and MRI scans are generally assumed to uncover something otherwise hidden in, or about, the person being portrayed.

The noise stops and I suddenly hear the nurse's voice in my left ear: "We're almost done, only five minutes left." My brief sense of relief is abruptly cut short by sounds

128. Sigrid Weigel, "The Face as Artefact: Towards an Artefactual Genealogy of the Portrait," in *Reconfiguring the Portrait*, ed. Abraham Geil and Tomáš Jirsa (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 61–75.

129. Anna Petherick, "Brain Has 'Face Place' for Recognition, Monkey Study Confirms," *National Geographic News*, February 3, 2006; Michael Tomasello, *Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 84–86.

more violent than any of the previous ones. The hammering is now so loud that I can no longer tell the difference between sound and vibration, and I find myself trying to keep my eyes from rolling sideways as they seem to be pulled in that direction.

This cannot be good, my mind shouts. The upbeat hammering, which makes every part of my body want to get out, pushes my thoughts to question the purpose of it all. What good can this do me? I ask myself. And with that question I have arrived at the question that has been in the back of my mind all along: What would it be like to see this picture, this shadow of myself that is being made? And what would it be like to look at a photographic portrait of myself? What is at stake in this image-making? I ask myself, terribly late: Is there anything to lose?

There is. This image, like photographic portraits, is not merely a mechanical duplication or a simple matter of representation; it is, according to American philosopher of technology Tim Gorichanaz's relational understanding of self-portraits in the digital age, something that brings an aspect of the self into being.[130] Similarly, who I think I am is formed through constant interaction with others, as explained by historian Jerrold Seigel (US, 1936) in his book *The Idea of the Self, Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (2005), and one of those "others" is this MRI double of me.[131]

"The appearance of myself as other" is how Barthes describes the experience of confronting one's own photograph.[132] But who am I, and who is the other in this situation? Is the photograph the other – the stranger

129. Tim Gorichanaz, "Self-Portrait, Selfie, Self: Notes on Identity and Documentation in the Digital Age," *Information* 10, no.10 (2019): 297, doi:10.3390/info10100297.

131. Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

132. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 12.

I am looking at? The person I once was? Or is there more of "me" in the photograph, as I now perceive myself from the perspective of a stranger, turning myself into a stranger at the moment of seeing, creating the "dissociation of consciousness from identity" that Barthes describes?[133]

What if my "MRI double" reveals a version of me that is very different from the healthy self I think I am? Would this "MRI double," in some way, become "truer" from the moment of confrontation? Would it become a version of me that knows more about me than my own unaware self?

Either way, the image will change me, just as anyone looking at their own photograph experiences a shift in the self they hold in mind. Should I, as philosopher and media theorist Marshall McLuhan (Edmonton, 1911 – Toronto, 1980) suggests, wake up from my "narcissistic" trance and see this image not as other, but rather recognize it as me?[134]

One can only recognize oneself if one already knows and has perceived who one is. Recognition depends on reflection, as scholar of religion, myth, and literature Almut-Barbara Renger (Germany, 1969) explains in her text "Narrating Narcissus, Reflecting Cognition: Illusion, Disillusion, 'Self-Knowledge' and 'Love as Passion' in Ovid and Beyond."[135] According to Renger, recognizing oneself is a circular process that presupposes the "I" is recognized through perception. Thus, a photographic image of oneself cannot be truly recognized because one has never been able to see oneself looking at others in the first place.
This other version of me – the photographic portrait,

133. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 13.
134. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Gingko Press, 2013), 28.
135. Almut-Barbara Renger, "Narrating Narcissus, Reflecting Cognition: Illusion, Disillusion, 'Self-Cognition' and 'Love as Passion' in Ovid and Beyond," *Frontiers of Narrative Studies* 3, no. 1 (August 18, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1515/fns-2017-0002.

the MRI – has the potential to become me. And while it is too late to get out of the scanner, this is what is at stake for sitters who pose for a camera, imagining themselves perceiving the result at a later moment. The fear of looking at one's own photograph is linked to an existential fear, because what is at stake for the sitter is something fundamental: the way they know themselves.

The fear of losing the self they know can lead sitters to pose conservatively, projecting an image that aligns with how they see themselves – because there is always the possibility of encountering a self that is new and unknown. And this unknown self may influence, or even take over, the self they believe they are.

3.4 The Familial Spectator

In addition to anticipating themselves as future spectators of their photographic portrait, sitters might also anticipate familial spectators. This section explores the role of the familial spectator and their influence on the creation of a photographic portrait. What do familial spectators expect from a family portrait? What is at stake for people looking at photographs of loved ones, and how might this influence sitters as they pose for the camera? How might sitters, in anticipation of these expectations, direct their facial expressions and poses with future familial spectators in mind? The core questions, then, are: How might the sitter anticipate this familial gaze, and how might this imagined familial spectator influence the photographic portrait?

This section examines the role and influence of the familial spectator through the sitter's perspective – and consequently, their behavior. It explores how sitters act

when, while posing, they imagine, for instance, their mother later viewing the specific portrait.

Family Portraits

Familial spectators are those who look at images of people they know well – friends, acquaintances, lovers, and family members. Many of these images are family portraits. Family portraits depict a family, and typically, the same people who posed for the photograph will be its most avid future spectators. However, literature scholar Marianne Hirsch's concept of the "familial gaze" – a relational gaze between spectator and portrait – is often absent in family portraits. In these photographs, sitters often present themselves as stand-alone individuals, rather than acknowledging the group around them. While such portraits are often displayed in living rooms and photo albums by the very people who posed for them, their construction seems directed at an audience outside the family. This suggests that traditional family portraits are not truly familial. I propose to fill this gap with an alternative: the "familial portrait." A familial portrait shows a group whose gazes are shaped by one another, bringing Hirsch's "familial gaze" into the act of making the portrait itself.

Before elaborating on the concept of the familial portrait, I will begin with the familial gaze and explore what the familial spectator seeks when looking at a photograph of someone they know.

The Familial Gaze

While photographs of strangers can evoke a variety of thoughts, there is something distinctive about photographs of those close to us. Although not every image of a familiar person provokes a strong emotional response,

to clarify what sitters may feel is expected of them while posing, consider Marianne, looking at the photographic portrait of her deceased husband.

Fig. 51. Judith van IJken, *&Marianne*, Chromogenic print, 2002.

Marianne

Barend's portrait is on Marianne's bookshelf when I see her on FaceTime. It sits just behind her, within eyesight, in her living room. I cannot see it, but I recognize the thin gray border around the portrait, indicating it was printed on an obituary card. It is a nice photo to look at – Barend's friendly, smiling face looks into the camera, and I still feel a sense of pride that she chose this portrait (Fig. 51). It was part of an unfinished project for which I asked people to look at their partner standing next to me, the photographer. I remember how easily Barend let go of his pose when Marianne, his wife, appeared next to the camera. She remembers this too, she tells me when I ask her about the photo. "Of course," she adds, "I talk to him, time and again."

Marianne's talking to the photographic portrait of her late husband illustrates a behavior toward photographic portraits that many of us may recognize. The portrait, more than just a piece of paper, sometimes acts like an avatar. It becomes a stand-in for Barend, as if it contains elements of him. As if the photograph could somehow speak back. This treatment of portraits is particularly strong when they depict loved ones, especially those with whom we can no longer contact in real life. Of course, Marianne does not literally believe the photograph can converse with her, just as most people do not truly believe that tearing up a photograph will harm the person it depicts. Yet many of us would feel discomfort feeding a photo of a loved one into a shredder.
So, while we may rationally understand that a photo-

graphic portrait is just a piece of paper coated with a photosensitive layer, our emotional or intuitive response often surpasses logic when we look at a portrait of someone dear to us. More than a mere depiction, the photograph is sometimes treated as if it contains something of the person it portrays.

Photographs as Traditional Art-Historical Icons

This mirrors the way traditional art-historical icons are treated. When the word "icon" is used in relation to photography, it most often refers to Charles Sanders Peirce's concept of the icon. As mentioned in the first chapter, Peirce's "icon," along with "symbol" and "index," describes different ways that signs, including photographs, relate to what they represent. However, this linguistic icon is not what I mean here. The icon I refer to is the traditional art-historical icon, which depicts a saint and is used for veneration.

When Marianne begins a mental conversation with Barend's portrait, the photograph is no longer expected to merely represent him; it is expected to "express" something of him, to speak to her. According to philosopher Cynthia Freeland, this is exactly the role of a traditional icon.[136] The focus of an icon is on the spiritual rather than the physical. As philosopher Patrick Maynard (UK, 1939) points out in his book *The Engine of Visualization* (1997), icons are meant to create a constant connection between the spectator and the depicted, much like photographic portraits.[137]

An important feature of icons is that they are perceived by the faithful as an "appearance" of the holy person, imbued with authenticity. Icons are also objects of veneration, and as approved and truthful images, they

136. Freeland, *Portraits and Persons*, 49.
137. Patrick Maynard, *The Engine of Visualization: Thinking through Photography* (Cornell University Press, 1997).

take on the qualities of the person depicted. Another interesting similarity between photographic portraits of family members and icons is that icons are described as "acheiropoietic," meaning "not made by human hands." Even when clearly painted by an artist, icons are believed to be directly caused by the holy person who wished to have their likeness made.[138] This recalls the "inhuman quality" often attributed to the photographic camera, which mechanically records its subjects.

Moreover, contact with an icon is not passive; rather, we expect the icon or photographic portrait to act toward us. Marianne talks to the photograph because, in a sense, the photograph of Barend is participating in the conversation through her own mind. This is what Maynard calls the "manifestation" function, as opposed to the "dedication" or representational function.[139] The manifestation function is less about realistic likeness and more about giving the spectator a sense of contact.

This is how some describe the experience of looking at photographic portraits, as Sontag did when she wrote, "The photograph of a missing person will touch me like the delayed rays of the stars." It evokes a sense of connection, which Barthes describes as "a kind of umbilical cord linking the body of the photographed to my gaze: light, touch impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with everyone who has been photographed." In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes searches for a photograph of his deceased mother not only to see her but to experience "so much, yes, so much and more."[140] When Barthes finally discovers what he calls the "Winter Garden Photograph," he describes it as a "sudden awakening."[141] What he desires is not merely to

138. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), 4, 53, 56.
139. Maynard, *The Engine of Visualization*, 234.
140. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 109.

recognize her, as he had in other photographs, but to find her essence and to feel in contact with her. He longs not just to look at his mother but to be looked at by her.

So, what the familial spectator seeks is contact – to feel "seen" by the subject in the photographic portrait.

Marianne 2

The portrait of Barend was part of an unfinished project in which I asked the sitters' partners to influence the sitter while they were posing. When I imagine Marianne talking to Barend's photograph, I realize that she is a familial spectator who is not only perceiving the image now on her bookshelf but who was also present when the photographic portrait was made. Although she was not the one who pressed the shutter – I did when I saw Barend's face change in response to her presence – she evoked that reaction. So, she, the person who would later become the familial spectator, influenced the portrait as it was being made. The fact that she is now the familial spectator makes her an anticipated spectator who actively shaped the photograph. I realize now that I should have titled Barend's photograph "Marianne" to acknowledge her invisible but influential role in its creation.

Intrigued by Marianne's influence as a familial spectator during the making of the portrait, I set up two experiments involving familial spectators influencing the sitter during the portrait's creation. I asked two young boys and their mothers to participate.

Experiment One Theo & Sarah, Lou & Eva

I vividly remember twelve-year-old Theo's reaction when his mother, Sarah, entered the scene and stood

141. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 109.

behind me and the camera (Fig. 52). His eyes widened, as if warning her to stay away. In the first image, before Sarah arrived, Theo gazes into the camera with a casual, relaxed expression. In the second image, however, he looks angrily past the camera, toward where Sarah was standing behind me. His shoulders are slightly tensed, and he turns his eyes away from the camera, refusing to share, what I assume was, a look of anger.

Fig. 53. Judith van IJken, *Experiment One: Theo & Sarah,* Inkjet print, 2023.

Fig. 53. Judith van IJken, *Experiment Two: Lou & Eva,* Inkjet print, 2023.

Lou is eight years old, and compared to Theo's portrait, his photos show far less complication or confusion when his mother, Eva, enters (Fig. 53). Lou's face immediately breaks into a big smile from ear to ear, in stark contrast to the photo I made of him without Eva. In that first photo, his expression is rather blank as he looks into the camera, anticipating what's about to happen. He seems to be observing the camera, wondering what Judith, someone he knows but only sees a few times a year, expects from him. It is a look of attentiveness that I recognize in him.

Placing Oneself in The Picture

Lou's second photograph evokes a sense of voyeurism. His gaze is not directed at me, and in some way, it feels as though I should not be the one looking at it. I feel out of place. As I look back at the first image, with its blank expression, it feels much more appropriate. The image not influenced by his mother, Eva, but directed at me or the camera, feels more appropriate. It positions me, so to speak. As a spectator, one is not only looking for a connection or to be seen, but is also looking for one's own position in relation to the person portrayed. One is, in a sense, looking for something of oneself. This constitution of subjectivity as a product of familial

relations, according to Hirsch, is fundamental to the familial gaze.[142] The familial gaze, Hirsch argues, is not a subject looking at an object, but a reciprocal gaze – where the subject looks at a subject who is also looking (back). Family subjectivity is constructed relationally, and in these relationships, one is always both self and other, both the speaking and looking subject, and the spoken to and looked at object: one is simultaneously subjected and objectified.[143] This recalls psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's (Paris, 1901 – 1981) point that seeing is always relational, because the moment of seeing is also the moment of being seen (even by a photograph), a moment of connection between exteriority and interiority, between self and other.[144]

In this way, familial spectators are not only seeking contact with someone else, but they are also constructing their own subjectivity in relation to the photographic portrait being made.

Constructing subjectivity involves "putting ourselves in the picture" when we look at family photographs, as literary scholar Nancy K. Miller (New York, 1941) explains in her text *Putting Ourselves in the Picture: Memoirs and Mourning*.[145] She illustrates this with a scene in which Simone de Beauvoir looks at an old photograph of herself and her mother, imagining herself as both her mother's and her own grandmother: "Today I could almost be her mother and the grandmother of that sad-eyed girl [de Beauvoir herself]. I feel sorry for them – for me, because I am so young and understand nothing; for her, because her future is closed, and she has never understood anything."[146] In this mental exercise, de Beauvoir reflects on her younger self and her mother, but ultimately, this exercise is about her

142. Marianne Hirsch, ed., *The Familial Gaze* (University Press of New England, 1999), 32.
143. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Harvard University Press, 1970), 9.
144. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (W.W. Norton, 1998), 106.
145. Nancy K. Miller, "Putting Ourselves in the Picture: Memoirs and Mourning," in *The Familial Gaze*, ed. Marianne Hirsch (University Press of New England, 1999), 51–66.
146. Miller, "Putting Ourselves in the Picture," 55.

present self – the person she portrays in the text as understanding more than both her younger self and her mother and feeling sorry for them.

A Familial Family Portrait

The unease I feel when looking at Lou's smiling photograph highlights a paradox in traditional family portraiture. In a conventional family portrait, where the family poses together, none of the people in the picture are looking at each other – they are looking at the camera and the photographer. Even though the photograph will likely be viewed most often by the same people posing for it, they are not engaging with one another in the moment it is made. Instead, they appear to be responding to outsiders, performing their roles as family members for an unknown audience. Traditional family portraits are therefore not about intimacy; they are about the external – about presenting individuals within a group to a broader audience. While these portraits depict a family, they often lack a familial gaze.

Thomas Struth's famous family portraits (1980 – 2000) address this individuality within the family portrait (Fig. 54). By deliberately using long shutter speeds, Struth allowed his subjects to project their own image, their "mirror-image."[147] He did not want his sitters to look at him, so he stood beside the camera, enabling them to focus on expressing their individual subjectivity. Struth wanted his sitters to "grow into the picture," echoing Benjamin's description of early portrait photography, where long exposure times forced subjects to reflect on their lives in that moment rather than rushing through it.[148] Struth also created an extraordinary number of images, up to 50 sheets, a labor-intensive process with a large-format camera, as each sheet of

Fig. 54. Thomas Struth, *The Richter Family 2*, Chromogenetic print, 2002.

147. Miller, "Putting Ourselves in the Picture," 106.
148. Miller, "Putting Ourselves in the Picture," 54; Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings*, *Volume 2*, Part 2, 1931–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 514.

film required multiple steps from the photographer. Though Struth was not looking through the camera (as this is impossible with a large-format camera), his presence and actions were far from invisible to the sitters. His elaborate process meant that a single family portrait could take one or two days to complete. This setup heightened the sitters' awareness of being photographed and the expectation of projecting their individual subjectivity, while simultaneously diminishing their awareness of their surroundings, including other family members.

Would it be possible to do the opposite? Could a family portrait incorporate familiarity and the familial gaze, going beyond merely sharing a frame? Could I create a "familial family portrait"? I set up another experiment, this time to incorporate the familial gaze into the creation of the family portrait.

Experiment Two: A Familial Family Portrait

I asked Theo to influence the portrait of his mother, Sarah, and then I asked Sarah and her husband, Roel, to influence each other's portrait. This results in an interesting set of portraits, where family members are influencing and reacting to one another. Both Sarah's and Roel's portraits feature contagious smiles, much like Barend's photograph. Of course, I can't claim that these portraits truly represent their exact gaze on each other, yet they form an intriguing and intimate group of images to observe. Which, you might think, is the whole point of a family portrait. I set up another experiment. This time, I asked my own daughter, Winnie, to pose for each of her extended family members.

Mijn Mensen

Within this third experiment, I had mostly been drawn to the idea of the "familial portrait" and its incorporation of the anticipated spectators. The idea of different family members influencing Winnie during the creation of the portrait, with their presence possibly reflected in her expression and their names used as captions, excited me. What I had not expected was that it would actually "work." Looking at the print-out of the 6 faces of Winnie and the names of her relatives under each one, I somehow seem to see these people in Winnie's face (Fig. 55). When I see her looking at her stepmother, Femke, I notice an expression in my daughter's face I have never seen before. What I see in this particular portrait is not just Winnie, nor is it Femke. It is something connected to both of them – and even to me. I see Winnie looking at Femke, being influenced by her, and in that moment, becoming a part of that relationship. Yet, I also see myself as I observe this, just as Nancy describes the portrait as revealing not the identity of the model (or the painter) but "the structure of the subject: its subjectivity, its being-under-itself, its being-within- and so its being-outside-, behind-, or before-itself. On the condition, then of its ex-position."[149]

Fig. 55. Judith van IJken, *Mijn Mensen, a familial family portrait,* Photographic prints on paper, 2024.

For Nancy, a portrait does not show who someone is (their identity), but what someone is – a subject that exists only through relationships, displacements, and exposures to others. He calls this ex-position: the way a subject is always simultaneously inside and outside itself.

3.5 The Situative Portrait

Another future spectator the sitter might imagine, alongside themselves and the familial spectator, is the

149. Nancy, *Portrait*, 14.

"unknown spectator." Starting from the questions, "What does the unknown spectator want?" and "How might this influence a posing sitter?" this section embarks on a journey that traverses, sometimes brutally, cultural studies, art history, and media philosophy, alongside the presentation of a series of photographic images I created. This journey ultimately leads to the formulation of the "situative portrait."

I propose the "situative portrait" as an alternative to portraiture that relies on a physiognomic contract between a supposed self and the portrait. Rather than focusing on representing an individual subject, the situative portrait prioritizes the context of its creation. It considers this situation itself to be the portrait. Is the situative portrait the answer to the unknown spectator's demands? I'm not sure. But I do know that it arises from the problematic conflation of photographic portraits – images of faces – with the inner world of a person. The situative portrait rethinks the photographic portrait in response to the unknown spectator's urge to quickly define and categorize the faces of strangers.

Who Is It?

It all started with a series of photographs I made of a group of friends many years ago – my friends. We had organized a weekend trip to celebrate Sinterklaas. But more than the actual evening or the weekend on Terschelling, I remember the photographs. Over the years, I kept returning to them. I wondered whether they could be developed into a project. Or I would reflect on the technique used to make them, particularly how crucial the flashlight had been. The flashlight was essential because it created a "flatness" in the environment that matched the flatness of the faces – or more

precisely, the flatness of the masks. Because that is what they were: photographs of people, my friends, wearing cardboard masks depicting the faces of characters from the board game *Wie is het?* Peter, Susan, Anita, and David. I had made the masks for David. David was the only one in the group I did not know, and when I saw his name on the little piece of paper telling me for whom I had to make a "surprise" and write a poem, I was not sure what to do. Eventually, my "Who is David?" thinking led me to the board game *Wie is het?*

That evening, everyone wore the masks. Photos were made, and ever since, I have wondered about those photographs because, in my mind, they really "worked."(Fig. 56) And yet, I never quite understood why they "worked," aside from the fact that the masks played with the question of who the people were.

Fig. 56. Judith van IJken, *Wie is het?*, Chromogenic print, 2002.

The Unknown Face in Society

"Who is this person?" is likely the first question that comes to an observer's mind when looking at a photograph of someone they do not know. This may be followed by a series of other questions: What is their name? What is their emotional state? What is their character? Are they good or bad? Friend or enemy? These questions are similar to what we ask ourselves when we see unfamiliar faces in the street. We want to know who they are. From an evolutionary perspective, this makes sense. Knowing who people are, and understanding their intentions and emotions, has been essential to our survival. The faster one can assess an unfriendly face, the better – because time is critical when one needs to flee. This is why our brains are highly developed for quick facial recognition. We have become so adept at this task that we even see faces in inanimate

objects, like the moon, toys, and plastic bottles. According to neuroscientist David Alais, this tendency to see faces where none exist highlights the importance our brain places on rapid recognition.[150] The brain seems to prefer the errors caused by quick recognition to a slower, more nuanced assessment. We are biologically programmed to quickly recognize and evaluate unfamiliar faces. The accessibility of other people's faces is therefore important, especially in times when they feel surrounded by many strangers. This is why the beginning of industrialization is often seen as a period of heightened attention to the face, as cities became crowded with people who did not know or easily recognize each other.[151]

As mentioned earlier, we currently live in what Schoonenboom calls the "fourth heyday of the face," where the face has become the "outpost of the self in the community." People, to some extent, "become their face," Schoonenboom writes, as seen when using dating apps, where swiping on someone's photographic face is the first step toward starting a conversation.[152] Moreover, dating apps are just one of many situations where the faces we "meet" are photographic portraits standing in for people we often do not know.

The most curious yet problematic aspect of our current era's focus on the face is the revival of the previously discarded tradition of physiognomy – reading the face to assume a direct connection between the facial representation, often a photographic portrait, and a person's self. In doing so, the period in which we now live brings back two long-rejected misconceptions: first, that human beings can be reduced to an essence that can be captured in a representation, and second, that

150. David Alais, "A Shared Mechanism for Facial Expression in Human Faces and Face Pareidolia," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* 288, no. 1954 (2021): 1–8, https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/epdf/10.1098/rspb.2021.0966.

151. Alexander Todorov, *Face Value: The Irresistible Influence of First Impressions* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

152. Schoonenboom, *Het gezicht*, 9; Sigrid Weigel, "The Face as Artefact: Towards an Artefactual Genealogy of the Portrait," in *Reconfiguring the Portrait*, ed. Abraham Geil and Tomáš Jirsa (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 61–75.

the nature (good or bad) of people can be read from their appearance, from their face and, by extension, from a photograph of their face. These misconceptions become particularly troubling, as history has shown, when applied to photographic images of people we do not know.

Physiognomy

The desire to define and categorize through images has a long and controversial tradition. It began with the human – animal comparisons in *Physiognomics*, an ancient Greek treatise attributed to Aristotle, dated to the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C., the earliest surviving text on the face, which compared a person's facial features to the character traits of animals they resembled.[153] Around 1775, this was followed by theologian Johann Caspar Lavater's (Zürich, 1741–1801) four-part *Physiognomische Fragmente*. Lavater focused on the structure of the face, particularly the silhouette, to indicate a person's intelligence, morality, and emotional life.[154] His work, both popular and controversial, paved the way for what would become a pseudo-scientific system of identification in the nineteenth century. Criminologist Cesare Lombroso (Verona, 1835 – Turin, 1909), for example, created an archive of photographs of noses and eyebrows in the 1870s to identify potential criminals. The face, and its representation, became something to be measured, dissected, filtered, categorized, and read.

These heydays of the face were typically followed by a "crisis of the face" for several reasons. The results from criminologists did not meet their expectations, and with the rise of neurologist Sigmund Freud (Příbor, 1856 – London, 1939), the founder of psychoanalysis, at the

153. Elizabeth C. Evans, "Physiognomics in the Ancient World," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 59, no. 5 (1969): 1–110. https://doi.org/10.2307/1006011.

154. Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente, zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniss und Menschenliebe* (Weidmann Erben und Reich, 1775), https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_W1ZJAAAAcAAJ/page/n5/mode/2up (accessed April 16, 2025).

end of the nineteenth century, public attention shifted toward the invisible workings of the mind.[155] Additionally, criminological practices became increasingly controversial. After the Second World War, the notion that face-reading could be scientifically practiced became unthinkable. However, the damage had been done – the idea that one could read faces to gain valuable information about people, even strangers, had embedded itself into our (unconscious) thinking.

Visual Arts

In the visual arts, the question what (photographic) images of people express or omit has long interested artists and art historians. Traditionally, the portrait has been the quintessential example of pictorial representation – an image that attempts to make virtually present what, or rather who, is physically absent. Since the early Renaissance, the individual portrait has functioned in European visual culture as a kind of double of the body. The singular, autonomous painted portrait both documented and affirmed the equally singular and autonomous individuality of the person portrayed. The traditional Western understanding of the portrait, inherited from these Renaissance paintings, is based on a kind of physiognomic contract between the bourgeois self and the portrait. Each serve as a guarantor of the other, manifesting the referential function of the portrait – what philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (Marburg, 1900 – Heidelberg, 2002) called "occasionality," the intentional relationship between the portrait and the "being" of the person portrayed.[156]

Portraits in this tradition put into practice what art historian Benjamin Buchloh (Cologne, 1941) describes as the "foundational promise" of portraiture, which, he

155. Hans Belting, *Faces: Eine Geschichte des Gesichts* (C.H.Beck, 2013).
156. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Continuum, 2004); Ernst van Alphen, "The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture," in *Interfaces: Portraiture and Communication* ed. Gerardo Mosquer (La Fabrica, 2011), 47–62; Joanna Woodall, ed., *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (Manchester University Press,1997), 1.

argues, persists as "a latent argument found in every traditional photographic portrait of the twentieth century" – namely, "the promise to the spectator of the continuing validity of essentialist and biologistic concepts of identity formation."[157]

Many art historians have convincingly argued that the traditional link between visual representation and the inner self is no longer tenable. They emphasize, for example, the aesthetics of material surfaces and the intersubjective and archival constellations that produce the portrait as a "social document," as seen in the work of art historian Catherine Sousloff (Providence, 1951), or as part of the wider "social body," as explored by photographer Allan Sekula (Erie, 1951 – Los Angeles, 2013).[158]

Nevertheless, according to many art historians, the portrait as a pictorial genre continues to resurrect itself in twentieth- and twenty-first-century art, particularly due to the complex relationship between the portrait and the status of the subject – even (or especially) under the sign of the "anti-portrait." The "anti-portrait" is a term used to describe various artistic strategies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that radically alter the traditional Western understanding of the portrait.[159] As Buchloh notes, the portrait has been "constantly re-staged on the ruins of representation."[160] Artists such as Andy Warhol (Pittsburgh, 1928 – New York, 1987), Sherman and others have continued and extended the project of the portrait by problematizing and even exploiting its traditional conception. "The portrait returns," professor of literary studies Ernst van Alphen (Schiedam, 1958) observed in 2011, "but with a difference – now exemplifying a critique of the bourgeois

157. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth Century Art* (MIT Press, 2015), 471-508.
158. Woodall, *Portraiture*, 471–508; Catherine Sousloff, *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern* (Duke University Press, 2006); Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986): 3-64.
159. Fiona Johnstone and Kirstie Imber, ed., *Anti-Portraiture: Challenging the Limits of the Portrait* (Bloomsbury, 2020), 1–24.
160. Buchloh, *Formalism and Historicity*, 471–508.

self instead of its authority, showing a loss of self instead of its consolidation, and shaping the subject as a simulacrum instead of as an origin."[161]

Toward a Situative Portrait

Four photographs lay in front of me. The multiple masks, the interiors, the hidden people. I focus my attention on one of the pictures. Three people are sitting on a green sofa. On the left, a woman sits with her arms crossed, holding herself as if to shield herself from exposure, while at the same time leaning slightly forward, toward the camera. Next to her is a man in a white T-shirt sitting in a seemingly relaxed pose that matches the casual expression of the mask he's wearing. To the far right, mostly out of frame, is another person in a blue sweater, with hands intertwined.

Playing with Subjects

Who are these people? Out of habit, my eyes go to the masks. I recognize them, I think – Philip, Susan, and David. They are characters from the board game, familiar types: the woman with black curly hair, the earrings, and a downturned mouth; Philip with his cheerful face and red cheeks. The last one, with yellow hair, seems withdrawn. The play with the subjects is obvious – I cannot see the people behind the masks, which confronts me with my own desire to discover and name them. It confronts me with my urge to identify them, as my eyes meet these masks instead of photographed faces. What was I looking for?

The absence of faces draws my attention elsewhere. I notice the postures – the pose of the woman on the left, which suddenly seems very intimate to me. The environment now shifts to the center of attention. I now

161. Van Alphen, "The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture," 50.

notice the tactility of the fabrics – the clothes. My eyes move to the room's interior: the texture of the wall, the green couch, the floral curtains, and the framed poster on the wall, all of which suddenly seem very real, meaningful, and revealing

Leaning back from the computer, I look at the four pictures together. One of the masks is worn by different people in two photographs, which brings my thoughts to the situation. I imagine the setting – people putting on the masks, deciding which one they want to wear. Looking at each other while wearing the masks, wondering if they would rather be Philip or Robert, and seeing their own image in the Polaroids being made. I see the whole performance – the interaction between people and with themselves. Toward the camera. And I think of myself, initiating that performance and making those photographs as part of that situation.

Could these photographs and their play with the subject open up a new way of looking at photographic portraiture along the lines of Nancy's "other portrait," which no longer aims to reproduce a living person but to evoke their uncertain identity?[162] Unlike traditional portraiture, which is based on the mimetic representation of the sitter's unique subjectivity and aims to reproduce the subject's appearance, the "other portrait," according to Nancy, is based on "an identity that is hardly supposed at all, but rather is evoked in its withdrawal."[163] Nancy's non-representational understanding of portraiture draws attention to what traditional portraiture seems to exclude: the environment, the subject's milieu. An exteriority, I suppose, that is not only the physical context, for example the curtains, but also the social interaction with the other people, the performative

162. Nancy, *Portrait*.
163. Nancy, *Portrait*.

relationship to oneself, as well as the whole photographic setting as it is created by me with my masks and camera.

The idea of the photographic situation as a series of performances underpins art historian and media theorist Roland Meyer's (Augsburg, 1970) concept of "operative portraits."[164] Meyer developed operative portraits in 2023, inspired by filmmaker Harun Farocki's (Nový Jičín, 1944 – Berlin, 2014) operative images, to capture a fundamental shift in the role of portraiture in an era where billions of digital images of faces circulate on social networks, fueling the continuous production of digital identities.[165] Rather than focusing on the photographic portrait and the person it depicts, Meyer's "operative portraits" emphasize their functional and systemic role – how they operate within a larger (digital) network. I propose extending Meyer's approach to photographic portraits in a different direction – toward their construction, specifically the photographic situation. Like Meyer, rather than synthesizing various aspects of an individual into a fixed, representative image, I suggest rethinking the portrait as a dynamic, interchangeable configuration shaped by and within the moment of its creation. What I call *situative portraits* are photographic portraits formed through a network of actions and performances. Instead of treating the act of making as merely a preparatory step, the situation itself becomes the portrait: the situative portrait. The situative portrait is a form of portraiture that consists of a network of actions and interactions during the creation of a photographic portrait. The process of making a portrait is not simply a precursor to the final image – an invisible step that fades once the portrait reaches its final form. Instead,

164. Roland Meyer, "Operative Portraits, or How Our Faces Became Big Data," in *Reconfiguring the Portrait*, ed. Abraham Geil and Tomáš Jirsa (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 21–42.

165. Harun Farocki, "Phantom Images," *Public* 29 (2004): 12–22, https://public.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/public/article/view/30354.

the process itself becomes the central focus. Here, photography operates on multiple levels: as an initiator (organizing the situation to create a photographic portrait), as a participant in the collaborative act of image-making, and as a means of documentation (capturing this social interaction). In other words, the situative portrait is a documentation of a social situation oriented toward the creation of a photographic portrait. By placing the act of creation at the heart of the work, it highlights the dynamic interaction between the sitter, the photographer, and the "inner spectator" within each. This form of portraiture thus foregrounds human relationships and relationality in the context of portraiture, which has traditionally been associated with identity formation, subject formation, and their visual representation.

In developing this research project, I have undertaken multiple visual experiments that, in various ways, invited the situation of making into the final outcome. In hindsight, these were attempts to render the photographic portrait situative. Through these actions, three commonalities surfaced, characterizing the situative portrait: "adding perspectives of the situation," "diversion," and "erasure by accumulation."

Adding Perspectives of the Situation

When I invited sitters to come to the studio to be photographed for the project *Les clichés sont conservés*, I asked them to bring an image depicting a pose they wanted to imitate. This required sitters to think about their pose before the photographic session. It required sitters to ask themselves how they would like to be portrayed, rather than me, the photographer, deciding on the spot. In this way, their perspective was added to

the portrait. Instead of the photograph, in its composition and the pose of the sitter, reflecting my perspective, the result would now also incorporate something sitters wanted to bring in beyond their likeness; their chosen example would reflect their expectations and ideas, and perhaps their ideals.

Sitters also contributed their perspectives in reflective sessions. A week after the photographic session, I invited sitters to return to the studio to reflect on the photographs we made. During these sessions, on the table in the studio there were many printed versions of the photographs, and I asked sitters to express their opinions about them. Some shared their opinion verbally or in writing alongside the image, others directly intervened on the prints with tape or pen, or they made selections. The starting point of this photographic project had been the question of what it is like to be confronted with your own photographic portrait, and these reflection sessions were engaging with this for each individual. At the same time, these reflections, as part of the work, also added another perspective to the portrait. While a sitter's opinion about their portrait is usually invisible to the spectators, incorporating their reflections into the work here added their perspective and emphasized the sitter as not just a passive subject but as an active participant with their own ideas and expectations. By incorporating the sitter's perspectives into the work, the portrait became "situative."

Diversion

Another strategy for making a situative portrait involves diversion. Diversion directs attention away from the photographic portrait as a direct representation of an individual. The photographic portrait becomes a sign

of absence, a void. This happens for instance when people imitate an existing image. In such a situation, the appropriation no longer points only toward the person depicted in the photograph but also toward the original image. Likewise, diversions can direct attention toward the situation around the person, such as when the faces were obscured by masks in the photographs at the Sinterklaas party, shifting attention from the face toward the sitter's gestures, clothing, and surroundings. Diversion may create confusion about who is represented. For instance, in the work *Mijn Mensen*, when I made a "familial portrait" of my daughter Winnie in the presence of her extended family. As she posed, her father, stepmother, stepfather, brother, and sister were seated next to the camera, each evoking her reaction. The final presentation displayed six portraits of Winnie, each captioned with the name of the family member she was looking at during the session. The captions emphasized the role of others in the portrait-making, raising questions about who truly was represented – Winnie or the family members she faced? Or neither of them? Or both?

Erasure by Accumulation

In *Experiment no. 3*, I photographed Winnie while walking around her. Shown as a slideshow, the focus shifted from single images to the act of photography itself. The sequence made my movement perceptible to the spectator, even if not directly visible. This strategy, which I refer to as "erasure by accumulation," diverted attention from the depiction of the sitter to the photographer's gestures and diminished the weight of the individual images while also articulating something that usually remains invisible. These strategies – adding perspectives, diversion from representation, and erasure

by accumulation – are all methods of incorporating the situation into the work. They shift focus from the final image to the conditions of its creation, challenging traditional ideas of portraiture.

The ambition to "open up" photographic portraits and reveal their structure resonates with the practice of theatre practitioner, playwright, and poet Bertolt Brecht (Augsburg, 1898 – Berlin, 1956), as well as the broader tradition of Brechtian aesthetics and poetics, particularly his methods in epic theater. In this regard, the methods used to make the photographic portrait situative may recall the strategies formulated by Brecht for epic theater, such as the *Verfremdungseffekt*, known as the estrangement effect – one of its characteristic techniques for engaging the audience.[166]

Brecht's epic theater is a form of theater designed to provoke critical thinking rather than emotional immersion.[167] Unlike traditional Aristotelian drama, which seeks to draw the audience into the story through illusion and emotional identification, epic theater constantly reminds spectators that they are watching a constructed reality. Brecht's goal was to encourage audiences to critically reflect on social and political issues, prompting them to question the world rather than passively consume entertainment. In doing so, he established a tradition that influenced the performing and the visual arts, and artists and filmmakers like Harun Farocki and artist, writer, and filmmaker Hito Steyerl (Munich, 1966).

There is a shared element between Brecht and the situative portrait in the emphasis on revealing the apparatus – making it transparent and stripping away

166. Ekkehard Schall, *The Craft of Theatre: Seminars and Discussions in Brechtian Theatre* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 205.
167. David Barrnett, *Brecht in Practice* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 3.

illusion. The difference however lies in the starting point of the ambition. While the situative portrait is developed from close examination of the artistic practice of photographic portraiture, ultimately raising questions about critical awareness of photography and images in our time, Brecht, as a communist, developed his practice first from a societal and political ambition. For Brecht, the political ambition came first, and his practice from the onset was embedded within a broader political and societal educational ambition.

In this regard, Brecht's work can be seen as a response to the ambitions of playwright, poet, philosopher, and historian Friedrich Schiller (Marbach am Neckar, 1759 – Weimar, 1805). In the eighteenth century, Schiller proposed that classical Aristotelian illusion theater played a crucial role in the democratic education of society.[168] Schiller envisioned a future democratic society built on beauty – a program that was both aesthetic and political. In his view, theater served as a tool for political and moral education. This belief helped establish theater's central role in German culture, leading to the proliferation of theaters. Brecht, as a communist, adopted this idea but subverted it. While he maintained that the arts play a central role in education and the shaping of society, he rejected the notion that this should be achieved through illusion and drama. Instead, he argued that breaking the illusion – forcing the audience to critically reflect – was essential.[169] Rather than being educated through the machinery of classical theatrical illusion, audiences should become aware of it, be challenged by it, and arrive at their own judgments. By highlighting instability and impermanence, Brecht sought to make audiences aware that the world could be changed – making his theater

168. Friedrich Schiller, "Theater Considered as a Moral Institution," speech read at a public session of the Elector's German Society in Mannheim, 1784, translated by John Sigerson and John Chambless, accessed via Schiller Institute, https://archive.schillerinstitute.com/transl/schil_theatremoral.html.
169. Bertold Brecht," The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (Radha Krishna Prakashan, 1978), 37.
170. Barrnett, *Brecht in Practice*, 3.

fundamentally political.[170] As Benjamin writes in Understanding Brecht (1966), "It was the theater's task not to reproduce social conditions, but to reveal them."[171]

The origin of the situative portrait is the artistic practice itself – its inquiry into the meaning of photography and portraiture within culture and society – and its critical stance toward how photographic images are perceived – stems from this practice rather than being informed by an overarching political program, as seen in Brecht and Schiller. Therefore, while the methods and tools of the situative portrait bear similarities to Brecht's techniques, the underlying intent is different. Because the term situation already carries a strong history in twentieth-century art and theory, it is important to distinguish my use of it from that of the Situationist International.

The Situationist International, founded in the 1950s and 1960s by, among others, Marxist theorist, philosopher, filmmaker, and critic Guy Debord (Paris, 1931 – Bellevue-la-Montagne, 1994), was an avant-garde political and artistic movement that sought to critique and subvert the structures of modern capitalist society.[173] Central to its philosophy was the concept of the spectacle, as Debord described in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967).[172] The Situationists aimed to deconstruct propaganda language, dismantle capitalist imagery, and create a revolutionary situation.[174] While the situative aspect of the situative portrait refers to the specific social context of making a photographic portrait, the situation in the context of the Situationist International refers to a constructed moment of lived experience – designed to alienate from and disrupt the routines of

171. Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (Verso, 1998), 4.
172. Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (Routledge, 1992), 1.
173. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014).
174. Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture*, 4.

everyday life under capitalism.[175] These therefore refer to different situations, and although similar to Brecht, there is a shared interest in revealing, "opening," and raising critical questions about the interpretation of (photographic) images and what is made, the difference lies in the origin of this ambition.

At the same time, it is useful to acknowledge a resonance between the two. The situative portrait resists interpreting photographic images as windows onto the world. By foregrounding process, interaction, and contingency, it unsettles the assumption that photographic portraits can function as fixed representations or as stand-ins for a person. In this respect, it does not replicate the Situationists' anti-capitalist project, but it shares their impulse to expose and question the structures that shape how images operate in society. In doing so, the situative portrait gestures toward a critical potential of its own – one rooted in making visible the relations and negotiations through which photographic images of people are produced and understood.

The Anti-Portrait

Another concept to consider when formulating the situative portrait is the concept of the anti-portrait. The anti-portrait broadly refers to portraits that reject or subvert traditional art historical conventions.[176] This approach is diverse; it may involve figurative or conceptual strategies, the use of objects, text, or traces of the subject to create an analogy. As British art historians Fiona Johnstone and Kirstie Imber state in *Anti-Portraiture: Challenging the Limits of the Portrait* (2020), anti-portraits often scrutinize the nature of subjectivity. They challenge the common perception of a portrait as a likeness of a particular person – a notion supported by

175. Ken Knabb, ed. and trans., *Situationist International Anthology*, rev. and expanded ed. (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 49.
176. Fiona Johnstone and Kirstie Imber, ed., *Anti-Portraiture, Challenging the Limits of the Portrait* (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), 1.

traditional art history.[177] For example, art historian Richard Brilliant's definition of portraiture in his book *Portraiture* emphasizes "likeness," while art historian Joanna Woodall (UK, 1956) claims the centrality of a naturalistic likeness to Western art.[178] Even though, according to Johnstone and Imber both Brilliant and Woodall occasionally acknowledge non-figurative portraits, their arguments ultimately reinforce the dominance of naturalistic representation.[179]

The anti-portrait moves beyond physical likeness. It questions the genre's historical ties to figuration and associations with physical or emotional likeness.[180] This aligns with British curator and writer Paul Moorhouse's belief that the concept of resemblance unfairly dominates the way people read paintings: for many, he notes "there is an abiding conviction that in order to refer to something other than itself, a painting has to replicate the appearance of its subject."[181] This according to him is a misunderstanding that fails to account for the ability of the human mind "to read one thing as embodying or expressing another."[182] Historically, anti-portraits emerged in response to developments in art and society as writer and art historian Michael Newman (London, 1954) explains in his essay "Decapitations: The portrait, the anti-portrait… and what comes after?"[183] Early avant-garde movements of the twentieth century, such as Picasso's experiments with Cubism, marked a turning point where artists began challenging the mimetic tradition. Later periods saw further experimentation influenced by postmodern critiques of subjectivity and identity. As new technologies and social contexts emerged in the twenty-first century, artists have continued to explore and expand the boundaries of portraiture.

177. Johnstone and Imber, *Anti-Portraiture*, 3.
178. Brilliant, *Portraiture*, 8.
179. Johnstone and Imber, *Anti-Portraiture*, 3.
180. Johnstone and Imber, Anti-Portraiture, 3.
181. Johnstone and Imber, Anti-Portraiture, 2.
182. Johnstone and Imber, Anti-Portraiture, 2.
183. Michael Newman, "Decapitations: The Portrait, the Anti-Portrait…and What Comes After?" in *Anti-Portraiture: Challenging the Limits of the Portrait*, ed. Fiona Johnstone and Kirstie Imber (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), 26.

The Situative Portrait as an Anti-Portrait

The situative portrait shares common ground with the anti-portrait in its critique of traditional representation. The characterizations mentioned above all, to various extents, *sleutel* with the parameters of the traditional representational portraiture to formulate an alternative, and the situative portrait may therefore be considered an anti-portrait. Yet it retains one essential element of conventional portraiture: the situational context in which it is made. The situative portrait is made in a social situation set up with the intention of making a photographic portrait. In this sense, the situative portrait adopts a dual stance toward representation. It resists or question traditional visual representation as the end result, but still operates within this setting. What happens in this setting happens due to the traditional representational understanding of the portrait that it is surrounded by. Sitters act as they do because they know that their depiction will be read in a certain manner. If the camera had no film, the dynamic between photographer and sitter would change drastically. Similarly, if found footage were just brought to the studio but were not going to be imitated, the sitters' choices and actions would shift because they would not be performing these poses. The situative portrait thus alters the parameters of the traditional portrait but also draws upon the meaning attached to the representation of portraits in our society. This duality around themes of identity and representation is intended to provoke reflection.

My experiments and the situative portrait show different strategies for subverting the representational portrait in the traditional sense. But what they show above all and redirect toward is an emphasis on the social situation within which photographic portraits are

created – a social situation that takes place in the representational context of the photographic portrait. To recapitulate: This third and final chapter explores the role of the anticipated spectator, the imagined future spectator, who influences both the photographer and the sitter in the portrait-making process. Although not physically present, this anticipated spectator plays a crucial role in shaping photographic portraits, as it can influence the photographer's artistic choices and the sitter's participation in posing and facial expression. As a result, the anticipated spectator further complicates what a photographic portrait conveys.

For photographers, this inner spectator can serve as a critical guide in the development of a photographic project, but it can also be misleading. Three case studies illustrate how photographic images in different contexts – outputs from large-scale language models (LLMs), an art-historical interpretation of large-scale photographs, and my own practice – are easily taken at face value. This interpretation of photography highlights the importance for an artist to clearly define the ideal inner spectator with whom they wish to converse when developing their projects.

Sitters also expect to be seen, which inevitably influences their expressions and poses. Three different anticipated spectators that a sitter might consider when posing were examined: the future self, perceiving their own image, the familial spectators, and the unknown others. Each of these anticipated spectators has different expectations of a photographic portrait.

In the midst of these different expectations, which further complicate what happens in a photographic

portrait, the chapter concludes by introducing the concept of the situative portrait – an alternative approach to photographic portraiture that prioritizes the act of creation over fixed representation, shifting the focus from a static image to the performative process of image-making itself.

CONCLUSION

This research project began with the question: Is it possible to develop photographic portraits that explicate the social dynamics of their creation and make these dynamics visible? My answer to this question is both yes and no.

Beginning with the affirmative: Yes, it is possible to explicate the social dynamics of their creation within the photographic portraits themselves. The visual and theoretical explorations and the experiments I set out during this research project helped to formulate the concept of the "situative portrait" to describe a type of photographic portraiture that incorporates precisely that – its own making.

The Situative Portrait

The situative portrait reimagines the photographic portrait, shifting the focus from a static representation of the sitter to the broader social context in which the image is created. Rather than presenting the portrait as an isolated artifact, the situative portrait highlights the dynamic network of actions, interactions, and relationships that shape its creation. In this framework, photography functions as an initiator (organizing the portrait session), a participant (engaging in the act of making), and a documenter (capturing the social situation).

The situative portrait reflects my perspective on photographic portraits as incomplete documentation of a social situation as it seeks to render this social dynamic visible. By emphasizing the social situation, the situative portrait invites spectators to reflect on what lies beyond the frame, drawing attention to the unseen interactions and decisions that underpin the portrait's creation. This approach challenges the traditional reading of photographic portraits as definitive representations of identity. It acknowledges the persistent desire to see portraits as avatars – direct reflections of a person's essence – but seeks to disrupt this reductive tendency. Instead, the situative portrait encourages spectators to consider the invisible forces at play: the photographer's influence, the sitter's performance, and the role of the anticipated spectator. The situative portrait employs specific strategies – such as adding perspectives, creating diversions, and erasure by accumulation – to draw attention to the situational dynamics at play. These methods reveal what in traditional portraiture is often obscured, emphasizing that photographic portraits are constructed rather than innate representations.

Ultimately, the situative portrait is both a concrete intervention, such as including the photographer within the frame, and an invitation to rethink the act of looking. It encourages a reflexive attitude in both makers and spectators, prompting them to question what a photographic portrait is, what it is not, and how it is shaped by its social context. This reflexivity, though sparked by the situative portrait, occurs outside the image itself; it is not explicitly depicted. Instead, the situative portrait invites the spectator to consider what lies beyond the frame – the invisible aspects of its creation.

This brings me to the negative answer to my research question. Because while I have argued that it is possible to develop photographic portraits that explicate the social dynamics of their creation, it is also necessary to acknowledge the limits of this possibility. Part of these social dynamics exist beyond representation. The situative portrait, as a type of portrait that directs attention to its own conditions of construction, still relies on the spectator's imagination. It may hint at or signal the situation of creation, but it does not fully show it.

This understanding of photographic portraits as signs of absence, pointing toward an invisible context, emerged through a close examination of the three key actors in the portrait-making process. The situative portrait emerged as a key outcome of this research, which was driven by my motivation to understand and articulate, as precisely as possible, the act of making a photographic portrait. My aim was to grasp what takes place during this process and, in doing so, gain a deeper understanding of what you might see when looking at a photographic portrait. Informed by my experience as a photographer and my conviction that the act of creation is inseparable from the final image, I focused my attention on the process itself. I examined photographic portraits from the perspective of their creation, specifically through the lens of the social dynamics involved.

My inquiry centered on three key participants: the sitter, the photographer, and the anticipated spectator. I closely examined the actions of each of these participants in the making of a photographic portrait to understand the dynamics between them and the role each plays in shaping the final image. Through both

practice and theory, I studied each actor independently, devoting a chapter to each role. While their interactions are inherently interconnected, isolating them allowed me to explore their motives, behaviors, and influences in greater depth. At times, this required speculative thinking – for example, considering how a sitter might anticipate the gaze of a familial spectator in their pose. Ultimately, these examinations led to the formulation of the situative portrait.

Observing each actor up close and analyzing their behavior during the creation of a photographic portrait led to an understanding of this situation, in various forms, in relation to absence and aspects that are invisible. A close examination of the sitters' behavior in front of the camera showed sitters as hiding rather than revealing themselves, photographers appeared preoccupied with numerous aspects beyond capturing the sitter's essence, and the imagined presence of various spectators in the minds of both photographers and sitters only further complicated the situation.

Photographic Portraits as Signs of Absence

The sitter is a subject that knows they are being seen. This awareness profoundly influences how sitters present themselves: they may reveal, conceal, or deliberately shape their actions for the camera. When a photographic portrait is interpreted as a direct representation of a person, the fact that it is a constructed image – shaped by a complex social dynamic – can be overlooked. More importantly, the role of the sitter is then reduced to simply "revealing themselves." However, a closer examination of the sitter and their gestures suggests that the sitter is as much hiding as revealing themselves. Sitters may engage in subtle acts

of resistance – through direct gazes that shift focus onto the spectator, neutral expressions that mask emotion, or role-play that reframes identity. What is seen in the final image is not the sitter's essence but a deliberate negotiation of visibility and concealment.

The first chapter of this dissertation explores these dynamics by presenting the sitter as an active participant in the creation of the portrait. Their actions cannot be understood in isolation but are shaped by their interaction with the photographer. Building on sociologist Goffman's concept of performance, section *1.2 The Actively Responding Sitter* examines how both sitters and photographers adopt social roles during the photographic process. Just as sitters may conceal aspects of themselves, these roles complicate the idea of a portrait as a pure reflection of the sitter's identity, revealing instead a relational process.

Finally, I propose the photographic portrait as a "sign of absence" extending Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework. By pointing beyond the visible image, portraits evoke what remains hidden, absent, or outside the frame. This idea resonates with artist Levine's *After Walker Evans: 4* (1981), in which appropriation art disrupts conventional notions of representation. Like Levine's appropriations, photographic portraits function as layered constructs, directing attention away from what is depicted toward a broader context of absence and unseen influences.

In sum, the photographic portrait as a sign of absence repositions the photographic portrait as a site of tension between visibility and absence. The sitter's role – one of concealing, shaping, and responding – challenges

traditional interpretations, inviting us to see portraits as signs that extend far beyond what they depict. This realization led me to conceive of the portrait as something that exists beyond the image itself, ultimately culminating in the concept of the situative portrait.

However, it was not only the sitter's behavior that led me to think of the photographic portrait as something beyond the visible. The role of the photographer – their gestures, choices, and use of photography as a medium – also contributed to this understanding, which I explore further in the second chapter dedicated to the photographer.

Sleutelen as Photographic Gesture

Examining the role of the photographer in Chapter 2 led me to reconsider their position. When taking the other participants in the photographic process – such as the sitter and the spectator – more seriously, the photographer's role shifts. Rather than a solitary hunter, solely capturing and dictating the image or a sitter's essence, the photographer becomes part of a relational dynamic. Their work is no longer just about control but also about collaboration and engaging in a shared process with others. At the core of this chapter is the idea that photography is not about capturing an essence but about documenting an attempt. This is illustrated through my search for a long-lost Yashica T5 camera and its technical limitations, which encourage an appreciation for the act of trying – even when the result deviates from expectations. I found that one of the intrinsic complexities of photography is its ability to reveal the process of striving rather than simply presenting a final outcome. In the concluding section of the chapter, I introduced the concept of *sleutelen* – a Dutch

term referring to a hands-on, investigative approach – as a way of rethinking the role of the photographer. Rather than striving for control or predetermined results, sleutelen emphasizes curiosity, experimentation, and coexistence with the subject. This method creates space for the unexpected, allowing the photograph to reflect a shared process rather than being solely shaped by the photographer's authorship. Much like the concept of photographic portraits as "signs of absence" discussed in Chapter 1, *sleutelen* also connects to my broader framework of the situative portrait. When photography is approached through sleutelen, it highlights the relational and process-oriented nature of portraiture. It reframes the act of photography not as a solitary or definitive gesture but as an ongoing, collaborative exploration of what remains unseen and uncertain.

The Inner Spectator

Lastly, there is the spectator – present, not physically, but within the minds of both the photographer and the sitter – complicating what transpires in a photographic portrait. While the spectator is not physically present in the moment of creation, they exert a strong influence on the process. Both the sitter and the photographer are aware that the image they are making will be seen, and this awareness inevitably shapes their decisions. The role of the spectator is first explored at the beginning of Chapter 3, which focuses on the inner spectator within the photographer's mind. This inner spectator – an imagined audience – can act as a guiding voice during the creative process, influencing choices related to composition, style, and meaning. Drawing on a critical reflection of art historian Fried's theories, as well as on my own practice, I argue that while the inner spectator

can foster critical reflection, it can also mislead the photographer, conflating form with meaning. This risk underscores the importance of articulating the role of the inner spectator clearly to prevent it from diluting artistic intent. The presence of the inner spectator reflects the self-awareness of artists, who must navigate the tension between making their work accessible and maintaining the specificity of their artwork. By consciously engaging in a dialogue with a well-defined inner spectator, photographers acknowledge the future reception of their work while resisting the pressure to appeal to all audiences. This reflective process is essential to maintaining artistic clarity, transforming the inner spectator from a potential obstacle into a constructive collaborator.

The Spectator in the Mind of the Sitter

The influence of the spectator extends beyond the photographer to the sitter, who is acutely aware of being observed. Sitters may anticipate various audiences – familial, unknown, or even themselves – each carrying unique expectations. This anticipation is likely to shape their posture, expressions, and overall demeanor, creating a dynamic interplay between the sitter, the photographer, and the imagined spectator.

Reflecting on the influence of the imagined spectator led to the formulation of the "familial family portrait," a type of family portrait that incorporates comparative literature scholar Hirsch's concept of the "familial gaze" into the photographs themselves. This framework acknowledges the relational dynamics of the familial gaze within the photographic process, highlighting the mutual influence between sitters and their imagined familial spectators.

As an incomplete documentation of a social situation, the situative portrait thus emerges as a type of photographic portraiture that partially explicates the conditions of its own making. It fosters a reflexive awareness of what lies beyond the image – what remains unseen and invisible. Hence, the answer is both yes and no to the original research question: is it possible to develop photographic portraits that explicate the social dynamics of their creation and make these dynamics visible?

Rethinking Portraiture in the Age of Images

Throughout this research project, I have critically engaged with photographic portraiture at every stage – through studio experiments, theoretical readings, and reflections on my practice. This process has been as much about questioning assumptions as it has been about articulating new ideas with precision. Along the way, I became increasingly aware of the broader implications of this inquiry – not only for the development of a new kind of photographic portrait but also for how we understand and interpret portraits in everyday life. Problematizing photographic portraiture is not just the work of specialists; it is a vital process for anyone who has ever had their portrait made or encountered a photographic image.

The subject of this research project, photographic portraits, is far from an outmoded, purely artistic concern. Recent technological and societal developments make it more relevant and urgent than ever. Though this dissertation focuses on a specific practice, the insights that emerge resonate widely. They address critical contemporary questions about the nature and function of images in a world increasingly dominated by artificial intelligence and surveillance technologies.

One might assume we have long understood that photographic images are not neutral representations. After all, theories of physiognomy – which claim that character can be read from facial features – have been discredited for decades. Yet, paradoxically, the influence of surface-level interpretations is expanding in our society. AI technologies, in particular, amplify this tendency by confusing form with content. As Bender argues, this conflation risks reducing nuanced, contextual understandings of images to oversimplified labels.

Facial recognition technologies and emotion-detection algorithms further illustrate this issue. Portraits, once personal or artistic expressions, now contribute to systems of surveillance and control, often without the sitter's consent or awareness. These developments highlight how photographic portraits can serve as tools for data collection and identity policing, raising pressing ethical questions about their role in our visual culture.

In the epilogue, I explore these implications further, considering how machine spectators – AI systems that analyze photographic portraits – reshape our understanding of identity, privacy, and agency. While AI does not alter the central argument of this dissertation, that photographic images of people should not be misread, it does amplify the social and political consequences of such misreadings. This raises a crucial question: is this the end of photographic portraiture as we know it? Or can we rethink its purpose and practice in ways that resist these reductive forces?

The Situative Portrait, as developed in this research project, offers one potential path forward. By emphasizing the context of creation and the relational dynamics

of the portrait-making process, it challenges the traditional focus on representation. It invites us to see photographic portraits not as fixed depictions of identity but as complex, situational constructs. This shift in perspective is more than an artistic reimagining; it is a call to critically engage with the ways we produce, view, and interpret photographic images of people in a rapidly changing visual landscape.

Ultimately, this research project underscores the need for a reflexive approach to photographic portraiture – one that values the context of creation, challenges assumptions about what photographs depict, and resists the simplification of human identity in photographs. As we navigate an intensely visual world, the insights developed in this dissertation serve not only as a framework for rethinking photographic portraiture but also as an invitation to rethink our relationship with images.

EPILOGUE

"Who will ever want to be photographed by me?!" asks Adrienne, a photographer at the shared studio complex. "I don't want to be photographed myself," she adds.

She has just read journalist Tamar Stelling's article in *De Correspondent* about PimEyes, a reverse image search engine.[184] The idea of one's photographic portrait being viewed by non-human, machine spectators is indeed unsettling, and there is a good chance that sitters, anticipating such a gaze, might run from the studio. Does this mark the end of photographic portraiture as we know it? Are machine spectators yet another, and possibly the final, argument for redefining the photographic portrait? Not in pursuit of a better or more fitting portrait for the sitter and photographer but driven purely by necessity.

The interest of non-human spectators, or machines, in photographic portraits is twofold: emotion recognition and data collection. Neither scenario is particularly appealing for the sitter.

Emotion Recognition

Emotion recognition in machine vision is a subfield of artificial intelligence that focuses on teaching machines to recognize and interpret images of people. It often relies on machine learning (ML) techniques, where

184. Tamar Stelling, "Van swipe tot stalk: daten ten tijde van gezichtsherkenning," *De Correspondent*, February 14, 2024, https://decorrespondent.nl/15120/van-swipe-tot-stalk-daten-ten-tijde-van-gezichtsherkenning/b84dacd1-83f6-09a8-2235-623caa8fa9b1.

computers "learn" statistical patterns from pre-existing data sets and then use these models to identify similar patterns in new, related data.[185]

Humans have always found it useful to understand how others feel. Evolutionarily, our survival has depended on our ability to read faces and distinguish good intentions from bad ones. As previously mentioned, our brains are hardwired to do this. Many find it appealing to imagine that emotions can be extracted from facial images. If machines could do this, people's emotions may be "read" via cameras without their permission or knowledge.

The concept of machines reading people's emotions from their facial images has been warmly embraced by companies interested in understanding customer reactions to products or evaluating candidates for online job applications. Governments, too, are keen on reading emotions in public spaces (for example, to enhance security at airports). The desire to predict criminal intentions has been a major motivator for governments to advance facial recognition technology, particularly in the United States after the 9/11 attacks. However, it was not until 2015, with the number of faces online growing exponentially thanks to the popularity of Instagram and other social media platforms, that facial and emotion recognition truly began to flourish. These online faces provided the necessary data sets on which this technology relies.

What to Recognize?

Most emotion recognition systems are based on psychologist Paul Ekman's (Washington D.C., 1934) Facial Action Coding System (FACS), which stems from his

185. Ethem Alpaydin, *Introduction to Machine Learning*, 4th ed. (MIT Press, 2020).

Basic Emotion Theory (BET). This theory identifies six basic emotions – fear, anger, happiness, sadness, disgust, and surprise – along with a secondary category of "micro-expressions" that are supposedly impossible to simulate.[186]

It is tempting to believe that faces can be "read" in this way, and that distinct categories of human emotion can be universally interpreted from facial expressions. However, this is not how human emotion recognition actually works. For this reason, although FACS is widely used, it has been challenged and deconstructed by psychologists and anthropologists like emotion researcher Lisa Feldman Barrett (Toronto, 1963). After re-examining Ekman's studies, Feldman Barrett concluded that they were flawed, often based on suggestive questioning.[187] Human emotion is simply too complex to fit neatly into discrete categories. Some people laugh when they are happy, while others laugh because they are nervous. Moreover, happiness does not always translate into constant smiling. Emotions are relational and multifaceted, and it is a misconception that a face can be "read" in a split second just by deciphering an expression. Instead, people infer someone's emotional state by considering multiple factors, such as context and the events leading up to that moment.

The importance of context in recognizing human emotion is often illustrated with the example of a screaming football player in a photograph. The player is screaming, but what does the scream mean? People interpret it very differently depending on the information they are given. If told the player just scored, they see the scream as a cry of joy; if told he missed the goal, the scream becomes an expression of anger and frustration.

186. Paul Ekman and Erika L. Rosenberg, *What the Face Reveals: Basic and Applied Studies of Spontaneous Expression Using the Facial Action Coding System* (FACS) (Oxford University Press, 2005).

187. Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

This illustrates why, according to Feldman Barrett, current emotion recognition systems fall short. People do not passively recognize emotions; they actively interpret them, relying on a variety of contextual cues such as body posture, hand gestures, words, the social setting, and the person's cultural background. This complexity is missing in current emotion recognition systems. For computers to truly understand the nuances of human emotion, they would need to observe a person over a longer period of time.

Another misreading of facial expressions occurs in the Japanese Female Facial Expression (JAFFE) database developed by Michael Lyons, Miyuki Kamachi, and Jiro Gyoba in 1998, which is widely used in affective computing research.[188] This dataset contains photographs of ten Japanese female models in a studio, making seven facial expressions that are supposed to correlate with seven basic emotional states. The purpose of the dataset is to help machine learning systems recognize and label these emotions in newly captured, unlabeled images. Ironically, these facial expressions are performed, rather than occurring naturally. They are acted out in a controlled setting, meaning that they do not necessarily reflect the internal emotional states of the models. In this case, the "reading" of people's true emotions is based on comparison with datasets of images that do not actually correspond to real emotional states.

Confusing Form with Meaning

The fundamental issue with datasets used for emotion or face recognition, and with artificial intelligence as a whole, lies in how the images are labeled. In the JAFFE dataset, for example, an image of a woman pretending to be happy is labeled as "happy." This label is not only

188. M. Lyons et al., "Coding Facial Expressions with Gabor Wavelets," *Proceedings Third IEEE International Conference on Automatic Face and Gesture Recognition* (1998): 200–205, https://doi.org/10.1109/AFGR.1998.670949.

inaccurate but fundamentally wrong because the woman was not actually happy – she was pretending to be, which is entirely different.

Images do not describe themselves, and the interpretation of images – the relationship between images and meaning – is nuanced, unstable, and profoundly complex. It is a relational process. Images are elusive, laden with multiple potential meanings, unresolved questions, and contradictions. Anyone who has ever created or studied images – as an artist, art historian, philosopher, or media theorist – knows this well. Even someone simply wondering what they are seeing when looking at an image understands the complexity involved. However, as Bender points out, this critical understanding is often lost in the construction of AI training sets. These datasets conflate what something *looks like* with what it *is*.[189]

In datasets, images are labeled and categorized. At rates of up to fifty images per minute, large quantities of photographs scraped from the internet are labeled by remote workers sitting behind their computers.[190] While some labels may seem harmless at first glance, such as "happy" in the JAFFE dataset, the problem of labeling photographs becomes glaring when one tries to assign a label to a photo of a person. For instance, how does one decide whether a photographic portrait should be labeled "adventurous," "professor," or "criminal?"

Machine spectators compare new images to patterns in the training set, which consists of labeled image categories, and draw conclusions based on these comparisons. However, as AI researcher Kate Crawford (Australia, 1974) and artist Trevor Paglen (Camp Springs, 1974)

189. Bender, "Climbing towards NLU," 5186.

190. John Markoff, "Seeking a Better Way to Find Web Images," *New York Times*, November 19, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/20/science/for-web-images-creating-new-technology-to-seek-and-find.html.

argue, this process is built on several flawed assumptions about the nature of images, labels, categorization, and representation.[191] First, it assumes that categories such as emotions, gender, or "losers" exist as fixed and consistent concepts. Second, it assumes a universal, fixed correspondence between images and concepts, appearances and essences. It also assumes simple, self-evident, and measurable links between images, their referents, and labels. In other words, it assumes that abstract concepts – whether "happy" or "adventurous" – have some kind of visual essence, and that this essence can be identified using statistical methods to find patterns in labeled images. This means that images labeled "losers" should, in theory, contain visual patterns that distinguish them from, say, images of farmers or assistant professors.

Finally, the structure of these training sets assumes that all concrete nouns are created equally and that many abstract nouns can also be visually expressed (e.g., "happiness" or "anti-Semitism").[192]

Categories and labels attempt to impose order on a complex universe, but the impossibility of this becomes stark when we see labels applied to people. Crawford and Paglen illustrate this by searching the dataset Imagenet, one of the most widely used training sets in machine learning. They found a photograph of a child wearing sunglasses that was classified as a "failure, loser, non-starter, unsuccessful person."[193]

As Crawford and Paglen point out, these training sets are increasingly embedded in our urban, legal, logistical, and commercial infrastructures. They hold an important yet underexplored power: the ability to shape

191. Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen, "Excavating AI: The Politics of Training Sets for Machine Learning," September 19, 2019, https://excavating.ai.
192. Crawford and Paglen, "Excavating AI."
193. Crawford and Paglen, "Excavating AI."

the world in their own image.[194] Moreover, these assumptions echo times in the past when the visual assessment and classification of people was used as a tool of oppression and racial science.[195]

Physiognomic AI

This is why media scholar Luke Stark and attorney Jevan Hutson refer to emotion recognition as "Physiognomic AI." They coined this term to describe the practice of using computer software and related systems to create hierarchies based on an individual's body composition, perceived character, abilities, and future social outcomes, all inferred from physical or behavioral characteristics. According to Stark and Hutson, the logics of physiognomy (the discredited pseudoscience of facial reading) and phrenology (the equally discredited pseudoscience of skull measurements) are deeply embedded in the technical mechanisms of computer vision applied to humans. As a result, machine learning (ML), computer vision, and related AI technologies are ushering in a new era of computational physiognomy and phrenology, reviving these outdated ideas in concept, form, and practice, and posing a threat to civil liberties.[196]

Physiognomy and phrenology rest on the premise that analyzing facial features or the skull reveals a person's "mental and physical power." Today, similar conclusions about a person's abilities or future prospects are drawn from their physical appearance or behavior. These traits can include cognitive abilities, emotional tendencies, or even the likelihood of criminal behavior. The social outcomes predicted by these systems can range from employability and creditworthiness to voting patterns and potential criminality.[197]

194. Crawford and Paglen, "Excavating AI."
195. Crawford and Paglen, "Excavating AI."
196. Luke Stark and Jevan Hutson, "Physiognomic Artificial Intelligence," *Fordham Intellectual Property, Media and Entertainment Law Journal* 32, no. 4 (2022): 922–978, https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/iplj/vol32/iss4/2.
197. Stark and Hutson, "Physiognomic Artificial Intelligence," 944.

However, physiognomy, and the computer vision technology based on it, is fundamentally flawed. One cannot infer a person's character or abilities simply by observing their outward appearance. This has long been recognized, and scientists across various disciplines have repeatedly demonstrated that physiognomy is an unfounded, racist, and thoroughly discredited pseudoscience.[198]

Despite the discrediting of phrenology as a scientific field and the disappearance of physiognomy from popular discourse after World War II, interest in physiognomic analysis has never entirely vanished. This is largely because physiognomic and phrenological assumptions help maintain existing racist, sexist, and classist social hierarchies.[199]

Physiognomic claims also persist due to people's tendency to "judge a book by its cover," which is deeply ingrained in our cultural habits.[200] While this human tendency is damaging on its own, the automation of this impulse through digital technologies is even more alarming.[201] Unlike in physiognomy's original heyday, these judgments are now hidden behind the labeling and categorization of images in data training sets. They are disguised by the seeming objectivity of computers. For this reason, Stark and Hutson argue that physiognomic AI is reviving scientific racism on an unprecedented scale whenever it is used to make claims about people's thoughts, preferences, or potential behavior – whether evaluating their appreciation for products, suitability for jobs, or likelihood of criminal activity.[202]

As computer scientist Arvind Narayanan (Mumbai, 1981) states in his "How to Recognize AI Snake Oil"

198. Sharrona Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 222.
199. Sahil Chinoy, "The Racist History Behind Facial Recognition," *New York Times*, July 10, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/10/opinion/facial-recognition-race.html; Catherine Stinson, "Algorithms Associating Appearance and Criminality Have a Dark Past," *Aeon*, May 15, 2020, https://aeon.co/ideas/algorithms-associating-appearance-and-criminality-have-a-dark-past.
200. Pearl, *About Faces*, 216.
201. Stark and Hutson, "Physiognomic Artificial Intelligence," 939.
202. Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (Routledge, 2002).

presentation, AI's ability to predict such social outcomes is fundamentally questionable.[203] In Narayanan's words, "We can't predict the future. That should be common sense. But we seem to have decided to suspend common sense when AI is involved."[204]

It's a troubling scenario for sitters to have their photographic portraits scrutinized by machine spectators searching for emotions. Even if the camera in a studio is not connected to software that "reads" emotions and makes superficial, misleading claims about the subject, there is still a significant risk that the portrait could unintentionally end up in a database – perhaps via the photographer's website or social media – where it may be scraped and added to an image database. From there, it could contribute to pseudoscientific physiognomic AI.

(Un)interested Machines

Machine spectators also examine photographic portraits to gather data. In this context, a portrait functions as a key to other images and online information about the person. Through reverse image searches, the portrait is scanned to link databases containing the same face, connecting digital traces of the individual – such as holiday photos, traffic violation snapshots, or social media images where the sitter might appear in the background.

It's difficult to fully grasp the implications of a world without privacy, where walking down the street anonymously has vanished. In China, for instance, nearly one billion "smart cameras" are connected to facial recognition systems linked to "social credit," where even minor infractions – like ignoring a red light – can have conse-

203. Arvind Narayanan, "How to Recognize AI Snake Oil," Arthur Miller Lecture on Science and Ethics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, November 18, 2019, https://www.cs.princeton.edu/~arvindn/talks/MIT-STS-AI-snakeoil.pdf..
204. Narayanan, "How to Recognize AI

quences, such as difficulty in applying for a mortgage. Similarly, in the Netherlands, there are an estimated 1.2 million cameras illegally monitoring the streets, capable of recording and sometimes analyzing everyone who passes by.[205] What happens when one's past is always publicly accessible, both on a personal level and as a society? How does an adolescent develop their identity when there is no space to leave behind what they no longer want to be? How does change happen when (totalitarian) regimes can control any possible dissonance? As tech philosopher Evgeny Morozov (Soligorsk, 1984) suggests, what if Rosa Parks had never boarded the bus because the bus door wouldn't open for a Black face?[206]

What about everyday life? Strangers in a bar could quickly snap a photo of you and instantly find all your information online, including your address. Glasses equipped with reverse image search technology might soon make even taking a photo unnecessary – simply pointing the glasses at someone could project all the images and data retrieved online about that person onto the lens.

Algorithms that link a face in a photo to other online images, essentially a "Google for faces", have been in development since 2016, including by the founder of Clearview AI. In her book *Your Face Belongs to Us*, *New York Times* tech reporter Kashmir Hill (US, 1981) describes how Clearview AI goes beyond other companies by scraping millions of photos from social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram. These photos include not only people posing but also bystanders accidentally captured in the background.[206] Clearview AI's app licenses have been sold to

205. Iva Venneman and Pieter Sabel, "Slimme deurbel leidt tot hausse and privacyklachten," *de Volkskrant*, February 23, 2024.

206. Alexis C. Madrigal, "Toward a Complex, Realistic, and Moral Tech Criticism," *The Atlantic*, March 13, 2013, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/03/toward-a-complex-realistic-and-moral-tech-criticism/273996/.

207. Kashmir Hill, *Your Face Belongs to Us: The Secretive Startup Dismantling Your Privacy* (Simon & Schuster, 2023).

several U.S. police departments, who use it to find individuals resembling photographic images of criminals. Unsurprisingly, there have been cases where innocent people were stopped or even arrested simply because their photo appeared in Clearview's database.

What is particularly frightening about Hill's book is that this small start-up was able to gather all the information it needed from freely available online sources - and managed to create the most powerful facial recognition search engine to date. Moreover, the book reveals the immense power that can be wielded by individuals driven by technological progress but unencumbered by ethical concerns or consideration of the consequences.

These two scenarios are not very appealing for the sitter. In the physiognomic AI emotion recognition variant, the photographic portrait may unwillingly become part of data training sets used to make judgments about people. In the second scenario, the sitter's portrait becomes part of a web of information surrounding them, with every image of the sitter online contributing to an increasingly tighter web, making it harder to present oneself differently from what is already visible in the past.

The article Adrienne read in *De Correspondent* about PimEyes explains the reverse image search engine, which works similarly to Clearview AI.[208] Like Clearview AI, but available to anyone for €35 a month, PimEyes allows users to enter a photographic portrait (or hold their iPhone in front of someone's face), and the site will return numerous photos of that person from various websites. While this might be convenient for finding information that Tinder dates did not share in

208. Stelling, "Van swipe tot stalk."

their profiles, it has far broader, potentially invasive applications – such as identifying people at a demonstration or uncovering the hidden pasts of colleagues.

Although it may be fun to find information about others, it is far less comfortable to imagine what can be discovered about oneself. As a result, Stelling predicts that people will likely start adopting new ways of handling their photographic images. Schools in Amsterdam, for example, have stopped taking class photos for fear of GDPR-related claims, and clubs have begun taping over smartphone lenses to provide a safe space where no pictures are taken.

This is exactly what Adrienne fears: Who would willingly sit in front of a camera knowing that their photograph could become part of an ever-tightening web of visual information?

"Well, there are some tricks, I think," I say, trying to reassure Adrienne. "I briefly skimmed some information online, and it seems there's something about removing certain pixels to make images unrecognizable by machines."

"I want that!" Adrienne eagerly responds. "Please send it to me if you find anything."

That evening, as I search for "data poisoning 2024," it becomes clear that I will probably have to disappoint her. While there were hopeful developments like Fawkes and LowKey, tools designed to use adversarial machine learning techniques to disrupt images before they are posted online, they no longer seem effective. The idea behind these tools was to poison the facial recognition

models trained on these images. Unfortunately, I quickly come across an article explaining that these strategies do not work and merely provide a false sense of security. The authors suggest we place our hopes on legislation instead. Since 2022, there has been an eerie silence around potential countermeasures.[209]

Many artists have tackled the issue of facial recognition to raise awareness, such as the Dazzle Club, a group of art students who, in 2021, marched through the streets of London wearing geometric face paint to "dazzle" facial recognition systems. I have also noticed more and more profile photos of people with their eyes closed or with ping-pong balls over their eyes – presumably to confuse the algorithm.

I briefly fantasize about developing a counter-practice with photographic portraits, something that would poison the data training sets and resist this development. But I quickly realize I do not know how. Perhaps this is the moment to think differently about photographic portraiture, as Stelling predicts. Maybe this really is the time to rethink how we see photographic images. This could actually be the end of the photographic portrait as we know it.

Perhaps now *is* the moment to embrace situative portraits. Only this time, the need for situative portraits aligns not just with our contemporary understanding of identity and who we think we are but also with the kind of social environment in which we want to live.

209. Evani Radiya-Dixit, Nicholas Carlini, Sanghyun Hong, and Florian Tramèr, "Data Poisoning Won't Save You from Facial Recognition," paper presented at the International Conference on Learning Representations (ICLR), 2022, https://openreview.net/pdf?id=B5XahNLmna.

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SUMMARY/ SAMENVATTING

This dissertation, consisting of the main text and four visual appendices, documents the artistic research project *The Situative Portrait*. It focuses on the interpretation of photographic portraits. Starting from the question of whether the social dynamics of a portrait's creation can be made visible within the image itself, the research developed into a series of photographic and theoretical reflections on what is, and is not, perceptible in a photographic portrait.

The point of departure is the social situation in which a portrait is produced. The project is structured around the three main actors who make the portrait: the sitter, the photographer, and the anticipated spectator. Each chapter asks what a given actor seeks or does during the making of the portrait. The answers, in both text and image, challenge the widespread phenomenon of suspension of disbelief: the temporary neglect of the fact that a photographic portrait is a construct rather than a transparent window onto reality. At the same time, these reflections open up alternative ways of interpreting the actions of those involved, and thus the portrait itself.

The sitter, for instance, tends more to conceal than to reveal. While the photographer's role is often likened to that of a hunter, I propose instead the Dutch verb *sleutelen*: a process-oriented, exploratory, co-existential

approach, directed toward interaction and the emergence of unexpected outcomes rather than a preordained image. Photography, on top of that, is especially well suited to showing the attempt at capture, not the capture itself. Photographic portraits are thus best understood semiotically as "signs of absence": references to what remains outside the frame, hidden, or invisible. Such insights shift the portrait away from reflecting a supposed essence of the sitter and toward the broader situation and social context. This is reinforced by the role of the anticipated spectator, physically absent yet powerfully present in the imagination of both sitter and photographer, and therefore deeply influential in shaping their actions.

From these insights emerges the concept of the "situative portrait": an approach to portrait photography that emphasizes the context of creation and the network of actions and interactions from which the image arises. In this view, the process of making is itself the portrait, with human relationality at its core. Strategies such as adding perspectives, diversion, and erasure by accumulation are employed to make the construction visible. The situative portrait thus destabilizes the notion of the portrait as a fixed representation of identity and invites the spectator to reflect on what remains unseen in the image.

The critical stance of the spectator, as argued in this research, acquires heightened urgency in light of current developments in the representation of people in a digital age dominated by AI and surveillance. In a world where faces are reduced to data through facial recognition and other forms of monitoring, the situative portrait functions as an act of resistance, a reminder that critical engagement with images is a necessity.

Samenvatting Dit proefschrift omvat een tekst en vier beeldbijlagen en is het verslag van het onderzoek *The Situative Portrait*. Dit onderzoek richt zich op de interpretatie van fotografische portretten. Uit de vraag of de sociale situatie van de totstandkoming van een portret in het portret als beeld zichtbaar gemaakt kan worden, groeide dit onderzoek uit tot een reeks fotografische en theoretische beschouwingen rond de vraag wat er wél en juist níét zichtbaar gemaakt wordt in een fotografisch portret.

Het vertrekpunt is de sociale situatie waarin een portret ontstaat. Het onderzoek draait om drie hoofdrolspelers die samen het portret tot stand brengen: de geportretteerde, de fotograaf en de geanticipeerde beschouwer. Elk hoofdstuk is gewijd aan een van deze drie hoofdrolspelers en begint met de vraag wat deze hoofdrolspeler wil of doet tijdens het maakproces. De antwoorden, in tekst en in beeld, keren zich tegen het wijdverbreide verschijnsel van het opschorten van scepsis (*suspension of disbelief*): het tijdelijk negeren van de wetenschap dat een fotografisch portret een construct is en niet een venster op de werkelijkheid. Tegelijk wijst iedere analyse op alternatieve manieren om het handelen van de betrokkenen, en daarmee het portret zelf, te interpreteren.

Tijdens het fotograferen lijkt de geportretteerde zich eerder te verbergen dan te tonen. En waar het handelen van de fotograaf vaak wordt vergeleken met jagen, stel ik daar in dit onderzoek het Nederlandse werkwoord sleutelen tegenover: een procesgerichte en onderzoekende benadering, gericht op interactie en het voortbrengen van onverwachte uitkomsten. Fotografie blijkt bovendien bij uitstek geschikt om juist de poging tot vastleggen zichtbaar te maken, en niet het vastleggen zelf. Daarnaast betoog ik dat fotografische portretten semiotisch het beste kunnen worden opgevat als 'tekens van afwezigheid': het zijn verwijzingen naar wat buiten beeld valt,

verborgen blijft of onzichtbaar is. Deze inzichten maken duidelijk dat het portret niet moet worden opgevat als een weerspiegeling van een vermeende essentie van de geportretteerde. De aandacht verplaatst zich weg van de persoon naar de situatie en de sociale context. Dit wordt versterkt door de geanticipeerde toeschouwer: fysiek afwezig maar toch aanwezig in de verbeelding van zowel fotograaf als geportretteerde en daardoor van grote invloed op hun handelen en dus op de uitkomst van dit handelen, op het portret.

Uit deze inzichten volgt het concept van het 'situatieve portret'. Dit is een benadering van portretfotografie waarbij de nadruk ligt op de context van de creatie en op het dynamische netwerk van acties en interacties waaruit het beeld uiteindelijk ontstaat. In deze opvatting is het maakproces, waarin relationaliteit centraal staat, zélf het portret. Strategieën als het bieden van meerdere perspectieven en het strategisch verleggen van de aandacht worden ingezet om de constructie van het maken zichtbaar te maken. Zo ondermijnt het situatieve portret de opvatting van het portret als weergave van een vaststaande identiteit en nodigt het de beschouwer uit na te denken over het onzichtbare achter het beeld.

De kritische houding van de beschouwer, zoals in dit onderzoek naar voren komt, krijgt extra urgentie in het licht van recente ontwikkelingen in de representatie van mensen in een digitaal tijdperk dat wordt gedomineerd door AI en surveillance. In een wereld waarin menselijke gezichten door AI, in de vorm van gezichtsherkenning of als middel van controle tot data worden gereduceerd, is het situatieve portret een oefening in weerstand. Het is een herinnering dat kritisch kijken naar afbeeldingen niet vrijblijvend maar een noodzaak is.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Judith van IJken (b. 1977) is a visual artist and researcher based in the Netherlands. Her work centers on photographic portraiture. Through an iterative, practice-led process of making and reflecting, she explores its role in contemporary society.

Van IJken graduated cum laude from the Department of Photography at HKU University of the Arts Utrecht in 2001, followed by a two-year residency at the Rijksakademie (Amsterdam) in 2003-2004. Her work has been widely exhibited in the Netherlands and abroad, including at Wereldmuseum (Rotterdam), Tropenmuseum (Amsterdam), the Benaki Museum (Athens), and Institut pour la Photographie (Lille). In addition to exhibitions, Van IJken has self-published several photobooks.

More recently, her practice has expanded to include writing and performative presentations. She has contributed to the Art of Research Conference 2023 (Helsinki), Helsinki Photomedia Conference 2024 (Helsinki), the International Conference of Photography and Theory (Cyprus), and Absence as Artistic Strategy in Contemporary Art 2025 (LUCAS, Leiden) as well as the journal Research in Art & Education.

Van IJken has taught workshops and lectured at international art institutions, among them the Chinese European Art Center (Xiamen), Parsons School of Design, The New School (New York), HKU University of the Arts Utrecht, and Aalto University (Helsinki). Since 2010, she has been a senior lecturer at the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague (KABK), where she teaches in the Bachelor's program Photography and the Master's program Photography & Society.

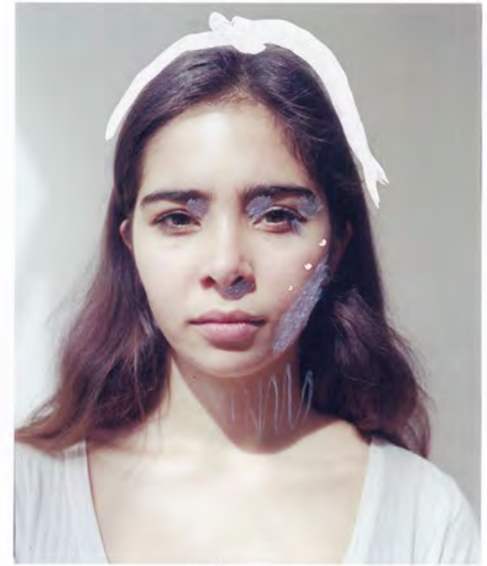
COLOPHON

Book design: Judith van IJken
Copy editing: Erin Hamayda
Printing: Print&Bind

Bestaat veel schaduw en wallen

Unidentified sitter by Unknown Photographer.

m'n lippen leken heel Bleek.



hele donkere schaduw

m'n mond licht raar & wallen
Veel haar ~~[illegible]~~ die vliegt

Ik ben inmiddels wel gewend aan foto's van mezelf zien, maar niet geprinte, de meeste geprinte foto's die ik van mezelf heb zijn van dat ik klein ben. Nu zijn de meeste foto's digitaal ~~ok~~ en ~~ol~~ online. Soms laat ik zelf ook wel foto's printen of een beetje van maken.

Deze foto's zijn wel al een tijdje geleden. Ik zie hoe ik ben veranderd; met name mijn haar. Ook de foto's die ik als inspiratie had gekozen zou ik nu misschien niet voorkiezen. Ik denk dat ik die met de Bloem niet had gekozen, ~~Ma~~ een beetje té oké. Ik zou denk ik voor wat simpelere foto's gekozen minder om attributen en poses. Ik denk dat dat komt doordat mijn smaak is veranderd en ik veel fierelantijntjes een beetje kinderlijk vind.

Ellen C. Robin de Puy.

warmere tint is al beter

Het is vrij kelftig, confronterend om jezelf in meervoud te zien.
De herhaling, de zoekende blik. De imitatie.
Je ziet jezelf dagelijks in de spiegel, in reflecties maar
dat is bewegend beeld, willekeurig en toch ook herhalend.
Want je weet inmiddels hoe het licht valt in de bad-
kamer spiegel, in de spiegel naast de kast.
Eigenlijk is een portret foto* een beetje hetzelfde als een
blik in de spiegel op een hotelkamer. Minder herkenning
en daardoor lichte teleurstelling.

- uitkijkbaarheid van gezicht wel interessant. te hard contrast, te weinig geel/magenta-toren..

algemeen: vrij kille, afstandelijke serie streng

wenkbrauw (rechter) omhoog, maakt het extra gedeposeerd

iets vriendelijker, maar ergens ook geforceerd / stijf

zou 'm anders kaderen

stoel + outfit leidt af

irriteer me aan de blouse

compositie / plaatsing gezicht in het midden beter... maakt het mistiger

hier zie ik m'n oma in terug... kelftig om te zien

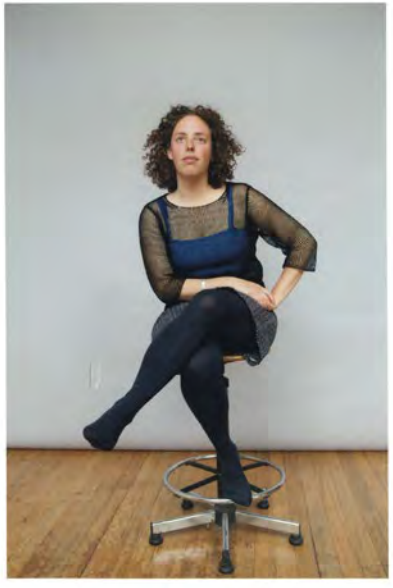
hangend oog

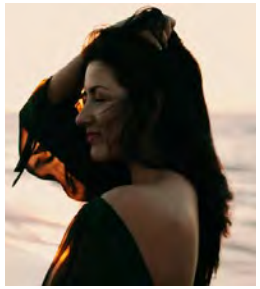
gelijke afstandelijke blik / haar wel beter losser outfit

tijner beeld veel luchtiger, grappiger, ongedwongen

volgens mij moet ik m'n haar weer los gaan dragen!

La Nymphe Surprise, Eduoard Manet.

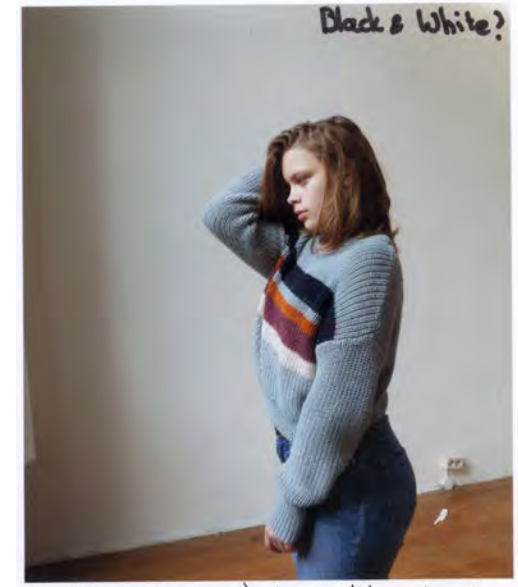




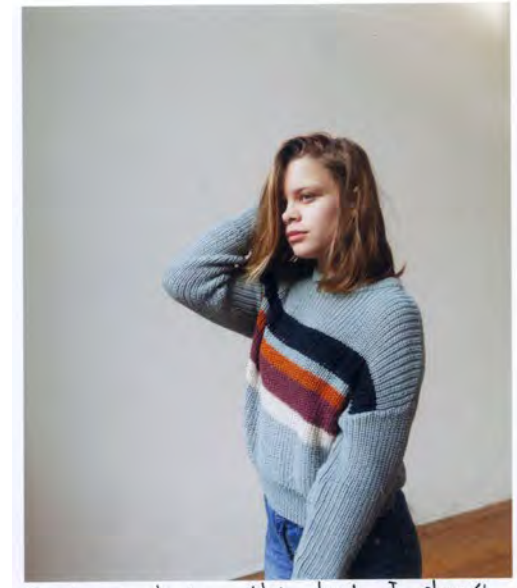
Unidentified sitter by Unknown Photographer.

What did I think of the photoshoot? Well, it was less weird than I would've expected, probably because I have done it before, so I'm a bit experienced. to be honest, I quite enjoyed being a center of attention and it's fun being directed. Sadly though, all the pictures I chose were with ~~because~~ my hair down ~~bcuz~~ wich looks great with most girls, but my hair has way too much volume, so it always looks like there has been an explosion on my head. Also, the sweater I wore today looks pretty old and I don't like the way my jeans fit. On the plus side, the natural lighting in the studio will probably make up for most of my flaws, at least for now I can only hope it will.
Bottom line is: I had fun, I just resent the way I look today.

Looking at the photos I realised how weird or stupid some of these poses look on me. I did like a few of my photos. In some, my face looks incredibly chubby. In others, I look pretty cute.



I like this photo, although it looks kind of depressing. I think it would look even better in black and white.



I don't hate this, but I don't like it either. I look pretty boring.

Self portrait by Daniëlle van Ark.

Al sinds jonge leeftijd, of zo lang ik me kan herinneren vermijd ik het het liefst wanneer er een foto van mij gemaakt moet worden, dus toen jij mij vroeg zei ik uit beleefdheid en om jou te helpen met je project JA. Om het proces zo 'pijnloos' mogelijk te laten verlopen besloot ik een zelfportret ~~[illegible]~~ mee te nemen als voorbeeld. Dit portret is naar mijn idee erg neutraal en toont mij! Je bent erin geslaagd dit idee daar te vereren. Nu ik de foto's zie is het resultaat toch weer bijna een buitenlichamelijke ervaring voor mij. Ben ik dat echt? Gefotografeerd en vereeuwigd worden geeft mij altijd meer vragen dan antwoorden en ik denk dit dan altijd ook het liefst zelf, (een portret maken van mijzelf) ~~[illegible]~~ Het was ook interessant om jouw rol hierin te mogen observeren omdat ik je denk ik als 'model' erg weinig gat. Dus hoe vond ik het om gefotografeerd te worden was je vraag; mijn hoop is en was dat het resultaat je tot een aantal mooie nieuwe inzichten kan brengen in dit project maar ik was blij toen je zei 'ik denk dat we het wel hebben'.

Daniëlle 03/05/22

Unidentified sitter by Unknown Photographer.

Jk zit bij deze foto aan mijn ~~buik~~ broek te pulken...

Fuju:

Jk vond het super leuk om hier aan mee te mogen doen.
K heb nog nooit aan zo'n project mee gedaan,
maar als ik nog een keer de kans zou krijgen, zou ik er zeker aan meedoen!
(Jk zou dan beter weten hoe zo'n dag/een uurtje er uit ziet, Dan zou ik serieuzer zijn, en dus minder lachen:)
Van te voren, voordat we hier aankwamen, wist ik totaal niet wat ik kon verwachten, dus het was niet anders dan in m'n gedachten hoe het er uit zag.
De ervaring om hier aan mee te mogen doen was super leuk! (geen logische zin)
Het was leuk om zelf de foto's te mogen kiezen. (ook geen logische zin...)
Uiteraard was het ook leuk om gefotografeerd te worden.

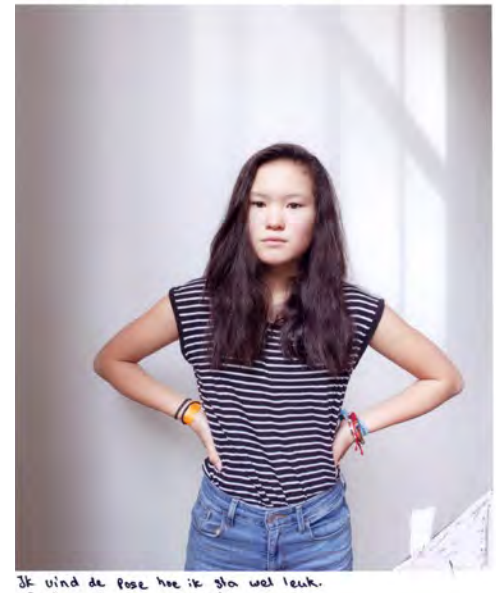
⇧ Dit waren de pluspunten denk ik.

⇩ Dit zijn de minpunten... Jn hoeverre je het een minpunt kan/mag noemen.

Jk was niet heel serieus... Jk moest de hele tijd lachen, maar dat lag aan mezelf, en niet aan jou.

Jk vond het heel gek om mijn foto's terug te zien.
Maar het was wel leuk.
Sommige foto's waren echt super goed gelukt, en super mooi.
maar sommige foto's (met het wapperen) vond ik minder mooi.

m'n hoofd is iets te overbelicht!
hout en stopcontact mag ook wel weg! haha
En het oranje bandje... maar daar kunnen we niks aan doen.



Jk vind de pose hoe ik sta wel leuk.
mijn haar is wel ontplofft!
♡

De grote van deze foto zou ik gewoon houden.
Deze foto is ook super leuk!
♡

Janine Brogt by Unknown Photographer.

Janine Brogt by Timothy Nunn.

Zoveel fotoportretten van mezelf
maken het, vreemd genoeg, makkelijker
om naar mezelf te kijken dan
wanneer het één portret zou zijn
geweest. Niet veel schrick, leuker
om te kijken dan om te poseren.
De fijnste foto's vind ik die
waar er sprake is van communicatie,
omdat die een levendigheid hebben
die voor mij dus niet 'poseren'
laten zien – wat natuurlijk eigenlijk
onzin is. En daartegenover de
foto's waarin ik juist in mezelf
zat, in gedachten – die dan ook
nog wat donker zijn.
Dat is het denk ik voor mij.
De echtheid in de communicatie
en de zwaarte in de reflectie.

Wat me ook opvalt is dat alle beelden
heel 'schoon' zijn, een helderheid
hebben. Dat komt zeker door
de voorselectie die jij al hebt
gemaakt, maar ik vraag me
ook af: doe ik dat, of
wij samen. Is dat iets wat
jij opzoekt of wat ik meebreng?

Ons gesprek over ons werk,
jij in fotografie en ik in theater –
en de combinatie met lesgeven
vond ik heel inspirerend.
Dank je dus, voor de foto's en
de gesprekken.

Frida Kahlo by Nickolas Muray.

Ik vind het moeilijk om naar mezelf te kijken op deze foto's. In eerste instantie vallen alle onvolmaaktheden op. Pas na lange tijd kijken, kon ik daar doorheen en zag ik de schoonheid in de armoede. En later de lichtpunten in de ogen van deze vrouw. Nog later kreeg ik oog voor de uitstraling die spreekt uit de foto's.

Justin Timberlake by Unknown Photographer.

Het is tamelijk overweldigend om jezelf in veelvoud op de tafel te zien liggen, iets wat ik nog nooit eerder had meegemaakt – zelfs als kind had ik het niet tot model geschopt. Maar tegelijk viel mijn oog al snel op een paar foto's die ik echt mooi vond, en dat stelde me gerust, terwijl ik de "lelijke" foto's – die ik ook meteen er tussenuit haalde – het liefst ter plekke verscheurd had.

Je ziet jezelf alleen in de spiegel & hoewel dat een dagelijks ritueel is, maakt een foto een (moment) opname van je persoonlijkheid, dát is volgens mij wat je niet gewend bent & waar je aan moet wennen ...

De foto met de arm achter de rug spreekt me aan omdat deze een soort "rust" uitstraalt.

Eigenlijk is er vooral als ik het gevoel heb dat ik "te lief" of "te suf" (of zelfs "te zwoel" haha) in de camera kijk → Kennelijk had ik mezelf iets "stoerder" ingeschat en moet ik nu leren leven met die realiteit ;-)

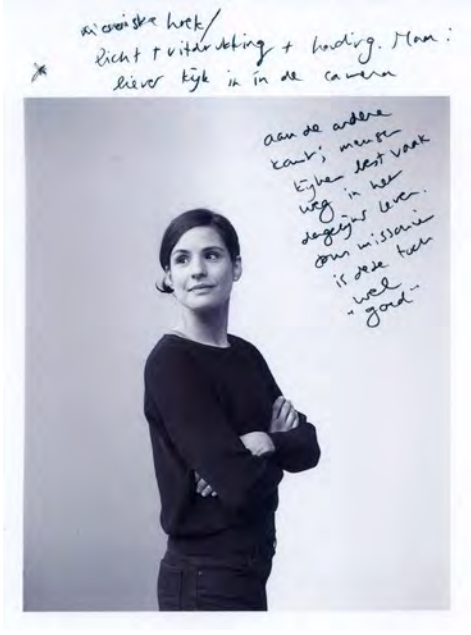
O ja, 1 foto vind ik erg mooi omdat mijn blik iets licht spottends heeft, dat zit tussen een glimlach & een arrogante uitdrukking. (spreek de narcist)

Peter Lieverga

Bruce & Talisa by Bruce Weber.

Susan Sontag by Peter Hujar.

Unidentified Group of Three Women by Southworth & Hawes.



1 De grap was:
Susan Sontag wordt
ook zo gefotografeerd,
en ik hou van die
foto omdat ze er
zo ontspannen en
peinzend op staat,
een contrast met
hoe ze in haar schrijven
is; strijdvaardig, druk,
veeleisend. En het is
gewerkt aan hier ook
zo'n ontspannen
beeld te krijgen,
rustig en nadenkend,
terwijl het ergens
natuurlijk heel gek
is om te zeggen —
ik poseer als
Susan; onbeschaamd/
schaamteloos / brutaal,
en dat te doen. Maar
de foto is niet
brutaal; de foto is
lief, zacht.

2 En ik vind dus
ook gewoon dat ik
er mooi op sta;
relaxed en nadenkend
maar ook een beetje
sexy — die mond
denk ik, en de houding
in het algemeen.
Goed haar ook.
Het licht is mooi,
die subtiele tekening
op mijn voorhoofd,
op de muur. Weer
duidelijk een moment-
opname. In het
eindeloosje doet het
licht ook iets moois;
in Susans voorbeeld
bestaat dat hoofdje
niet, beter dat het
hier wel is, beter
dan Peter.

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Otis

Niels

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