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.