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The situative portrait

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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 photo-

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.

graphs, 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.

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 hand-held 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 80s*, 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 Sitter* 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.