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The situative portrait

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2. THE PHOTOGRAPHER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While the practices of these three artists differ from mine and are not representative of it, certain aspects of their work resonate with my own. For instance, Louwes'

engagement with her subjects, Van Ark's exploration of the expanded field of photography, and Kahrmann's interest in the visual appearance of photographic images reflect elements of my practice.

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

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

2.1 What the Photographer Wants

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Daniëlle van Ark

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I show her the image on the camera.

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

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

"Maybe a little closer?" I suggest.

"No," Van Ark replies.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.2 The Expanded Field *before* Photographic Portraits

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

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

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

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

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

photography that precedes the photograph's materialization.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Inner Complexities of Photography

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Limits are essential to photography. Boundaries are its backbone.

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

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

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

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

2.3 Speaking via Someone Else's Face

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

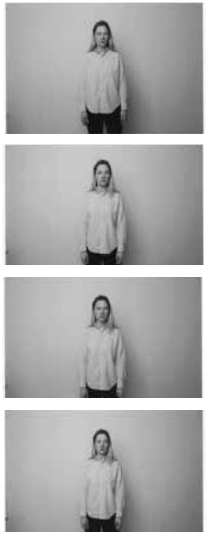

Fig. 31. Judith van IJken, *Les Clichés sont conservés*, Daniëlle, Inkjet print, 2023.

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

Daniëlle van Ark 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On an iPhone, my face appears more evenly lit – almost as if illuminated from behind – resulting in less depth, and fewer curves, shadows, and wrinkles. While I have always been aware that smartphone cameras rely on algorithms to enhance images, the contrast between the natural light in Kahrmann's photo and the smooth, almost orange-hued version of my face that I have grown accustomed to is striking. Ramesh Raskar (Nashik, 1970), associate professor of Media Arts and Sciences at MIT Media Lab and director of the Camera Culture research group, explains this phenomenon in a YouTube video.[67] He explains how smartphone photos are not a single images, but rather, computational composites. Algorithms process multiple exposures, adjusting tones and smoothing out details based on what manufacturers believe people prefer to see. This means that what is captured is not simply an objective record of light falling on a face, with its natural variati-

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

ons and plasticity, but a composite of many exposures altered by algorithms based on what companies think people want to see. What we see on iPhones, Raskar explains, are hallucinations, and that "photorealism is dead." I think of the photos of my children that have become part of my memory in recent years. It is unsettling to realize they should be viewed less as photos and more as drawings created by algorithms based on popular preferences. "People don't remember what you look like; they remember your photograph," someone once told me. I imagine people perceiving each other as caricatures. But what strikes me most is the subtle way I have unconsciously alienated myself from my own image.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I meant digital photography," I clarify.

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.4 *Sleutelen* as a Photographic Gesture

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

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

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

Hunting as a Photographic Gesture

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

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

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

My Photographic Gesture

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

Rules and Restrictions

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

70. Susie Linfield, *Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Picador,1990); Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (Reaktion Books, 2000), 35.
71. Jan Dibbets, "Uit de Kunst: Jan Dibbets," interview by Yoeri Albrecht, *Uit de Kunst*, YouTube video, January 18, 2023, 8:04, https://www.knaw.nl/bijeenkomsten/uit-de-kunst-jan-dibbets.
72. Nathan Jurgenson, *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media* (Verso Books, 2019).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sleutelen – A Special Kind of Tinkering

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sleutelen and Photography – Practices of Coexistence

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

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

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

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

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

Sleutelen and Photography, Practices of Not Knowing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sleutelen as Photographic Practice – An Experiment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the Studio

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sleutelen with the Social Aspect of Photographic Portraiture

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Will Sleutelen Save the World?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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