The situative portrait
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3. THE ANTICIPATED SPECTATOR

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

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

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

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

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

3.1 The Anticipated Spectator in the Mind of the Photographer

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

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

95. Iser, *The Act of Reading*.

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

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

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

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

Inner Spectator

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

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

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

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

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

Artistic Emancipation

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

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

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

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

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

Case Study One: Making Anamorphosis

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

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

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

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

Anamorphosis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Excavating the Practice

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

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

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

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

Conflating Form and Meaning in Photography

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Case Study Two: DALL-E Misreading My Practice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Precise Articulation

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

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

108. Bender, "Climbing towards NLU."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My Ideal Inner Spectator

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

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

- *Not a mirror*

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

- *System reader*

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

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

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

- *Expert*

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

- *Traffic warden*

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

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

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

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

3.2 The Spectator in the Mind of the Sitter

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Face

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

127. Schoonenboom, *Het gezicht*, 33.

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

The Mind and The Body

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

132. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 12.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.4 The Familial Spectator

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

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

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

Family Portraits

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

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

The Familial Gaze

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

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

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

Marianne

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

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

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

Photographs as Traditional Art-Historical Icons

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marianne 2

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

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

Experiment One Theo & Sarah, Lou & Eva

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

141. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 109.

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

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

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

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

Placing Oneself in The Picture

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Familial Family Portrait

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

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

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

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

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

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

Experiment Two: A Familial Family Portrait

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

Mijn Mensen

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

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

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

3.5 The Situative Portrait

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

149. Nancy, *Portrait*, 14.

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

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

Who Is It?

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

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

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

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

The Unknown Face in Society

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Physiognomy

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

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

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

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

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

Visual Arts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Toward a Situative Portrait

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

Playing with Subjects

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adding Perspectives of the Situation

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

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

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

Diversion

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

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

Erasure by Accumulation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Anti-Portrait

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

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

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

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

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

The Situative Portrait as an Anti-Portrait

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

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

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

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

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

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

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