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The situative portrait

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CONCLUSION

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

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

The Situative Portrait

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Photographic Portraits as Signs of Absence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sleutelen as Photographic Gesture

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

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

The Inner Spectator

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

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

The Spectator in the Mind of the Sitter

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

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

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

Rethinking Portraiture in the Age of Images

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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