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Persona

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Photography and the Portrait Tradition

As we are frequently reminded, the portrait is the oldest continuous pictorial tradition in the United States, the "backbone of American art"[1]. How are we to read this tradition, and the current fascination with images of the human form, so evident in the works gathered in "Persona"? What does it mean, now, in view of the forces which would challenge or undermine the portrait genre at every turn: a twentieth century artistic tradition that has been, at least in its European-derived modernist forms, resolutely anti-mimetic; the social dismantling and theoretical critique of humanist models of individual subjectivity which gave the traditionally-conceived portrait meaning; and the exhaustion of physiognomic systems as "the use of face and gesture to constitute the human body as an amalgam of clearly legible signs"[2], and the increased awareness of the repressive uses towards which such systems have been put?[3]

Nowhere are the conflicts surrounding the portrait more pronounced than in photography – a medium whose very technological development and popular dissemination was based on its unmatched capacity for recording the human form. As Walter Benjamin and others have remarked, to do without the face is a terrible renunciation for photography[4]. Indeed, photography as we know it is unthinkable without the portrait.

1   Earl A. Powell III, "Director's Preface", in Michael Quick, ed., *American Portraits in the Grand Manner, 1720–1920* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1981) p. 7.

2   Stephen Bann, in Graham Clarke, ed., *The Portrait in Photography*, London 1992, p. 35.

3   For a sustained critique of the portrait genre, which crucially recognized its uncanny resilience, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Residual Resemblance: Three Notes on the Ends of Portraiture* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1990). For the landmark Foucaultian analysis of the mutual implication of portrait photography and the police mug shot, see Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," in Richard Bolton, ed., The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1989); Bolton's anthology also includes Martha Rosler's classic critique of liberal social documentary as "victim photography", "In, around and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)". Buchloh's analysis in particular, is informed by the 1920's Soviet "photo debates" on the status of the monumental, iconic portrait – collected in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1982). See additionally the classic Marxist and Foucault-informed critiques collected in Victor Burgin, ed., *Thinking Photography* (London: MacMillan, 1982) and John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

4   Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," trans. Phil Patton, collected in Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980) and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," trans. Harry Zohn, collected in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (New York: Schoken, 1969). Rolands Barthes, Camera Lucida, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1981).

Of course, not all images of people are formal "portraits". Yet something of this portrait tradition, its pictorial conventions and social functions, informs and underwrites even those works which openly contest it. Arguably, the portrait, as a genre, shapes the production and reception of all images of the human figure, including those from such diverse and conflicting terrains as family snapshots, fashion photography, documentary photojournalism, film stills and police mug-shots. In «Persona», while the centered, formally posed photographs of Catherine Opie and Lyle Ashton Harris most overtly insert themselves into this tradition, the cinematically-derived images of Sharon Lockhart also partake in it, as do Collier Schorr's displaced and disguised self-portraits, employing codes of snapshot and fashion photography.

Perhaps the current move to photographic masquerade, performance-based devices, and increasingly technically-sophisticated forms of image manipulation is our way of preserving the appeal of images of the human face, while acknowledging that they can no longer truly function as they once did – as "true" representations of some essential personal identity[5]. In current photographic work exploring the mutability of human appearance and "identity", cinema seems to offer the dominant model for elaborate stagings of the figure – witness the widespread popularity of Jeff Wall's work – yet other sources can be found in the artifices of the painted portrait tradition or in the photographic manipulations and masquerades of Marcel Duchamp and surrealists like Man Ray and Claude Cahun – indeed, each has been drawn upon, and disseminated by the enormously influential images of Cindy Sherman.

Yet this dependence of photography on the image of the human face – "the mute bearer of all meaning"[6] – has historically played havoc with its position as a fine art. As photo historian Graham Clarke notes, "ironically, the portrait photograph achieved its dissemination at the very moment when painting, like literature, began to question the basis of mimetic representation"[7]. The strategy of much recent work – to use photographic capacities for mimetic representation to question their assumed

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5   In this context, I fail to see the increasing use of computer and digital technologies as constituting any decisive rupture. While (as in Susan Stryker's argument) the analogue photograph, as an indexical trace, may imply relative stability with respect to a referent, photographic image manipulation is as old as photographic print technologies; digital processes, with their increasingly seamless joins, only accelerate this. Pace the utopian cyber/ cyborg/transsexual theories of Sandy Stone and others, the difficulty, cost, and limited efficacy (particularly for ♀/♂) of surgical gender reassignment, at least within current medical capacities, seems to suggest the extreme limitations of actual bodily tansformation, when compared wih the endless mutability of the photographic or digital image.

6 · Lutz Bacher, Project Statement, "Jim & Sylvia", University Art Museum, Berkeley, 1992, p. 1.

7   Graham Clarke, "Introduction", *The Portrait in Photography* (London), p. 1.

veracity, adequacy and "realism" – provides one way to reject the implicit aesthetic conservatism of the "fine art photo" tradition and align photography with wider artistic practice. Yet ironically, many of the tensions which the photographic portrait embodies are themselves rooted in social and aesthetic ambivalences inherited from the (pre-modern) painted portrait and its commemorative functions.

As art historian Michael Quick notes, the traditional function of the post-renaissance European portrait painting was to "record the man in the fullness of his identity"[8], incorporating his character, poise, accomplishments and social position into one syncretic image[9]. As an overt visual representation of social power, traditional portraiture served unabashedly as personal and official propaganda. Over time, however, the painterly conventions developed to confer monumentality and prestige upon nobility (frontality, centrality, classical conceits, etc.) gradually dispersed to officials and wealthy commoners. Especially in the United States, this "Grand Manner" tradition was bastardized by the modest means and limited skills available, and by the upheavals in traditional social hierarchies. As American painters continued to emulate European models and styles – often at a substantial time lag – the pictorial conventions of court portraiture diffused throughout the culture, blurring the boundaries of high and low portraiture. In the nineteenth century, the daguerreotype and subsequent photographic technologies expanded and accelerated this popularization of portraiture; thus, in the populist mythos surrounding photography, "immortality, a privilege formerly reserved for the wealth and privileged few, could now be had by the working class"[10].

With the growth of popular photography and the mass media, the "fullness of identity" and distinct individuality which were initially attributes of the elevated few came increasingly to be represented as attributes of all, of "the common man" as well as the king. Yet the very tension between the uniqueness and intimacy of the family snapshot, and the accelerating reproducibility of the media image, im-

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8   Michael Quick, "Princely Images in the Wilderness: 1720–1775", in: *American Portraits in the Grand Manner, 1720–1920*, p. 10.

9   Such claims echo endlessly in the humanist rhetoric surrounding portrait photography, from, for example, Susan Sontag's oft cited assertion, in: *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) that "facing the camera signifies ... the disclosure of the subject's essence", to Brooks Johnson's received wisdom that "a good portrait is a search for the soul of the sitter", in his essay for *The Portrait in America* (Chrysler Museum, 1990).

10 Brooks Johnson, *The Portrait in America*, p. 1. That such naive populist views should continue to circulate now, after the work of Sekula, Rosler and others, is distressing but not surprising, given the enduring liberalism of the American photographic establishment. Stretching this mythos, Johnson claims "the development of photography paralleled another democratic innovation, the USA, ... founded in the equality and freedom on the individual".

mediately reinscribed new types of social hierarchies – hierarchies that photography, in the populist account, had supposedly dismantled.

It is at this time, in the mid nineteenth century, that "the celebrity" as a figure emerges, distinct from political leaders, royalty, folk heros and the like. Usually an artist, performer or cultural figure, the celebrity projects the romantic ideology of "the singular individual... institutionalized by journalism"[11]. As the career of the portraitist Nadar demonstrates, the template for this new portrait category itself predates photography, emerging from the caricatures of public figures run in the popular press. As Roger Cardinal argues, caricature, exaggerating the character qualities supposedly encoded in physical appearances, was based on already scientifically outdated physiognomic systems. Striving for greater realism and seriousness, the "portrait-charge" as practiced by Nadar and others rejected grotesque distortion and overt typology to "expose qualities of the veridical and the poignant ... previously deflected by caricature"[12] – not unlike the literary "portraits" of Balzac's "Comédie Humaine", Cardinal suggests. In particular, Cardinal notes, Nadar cultivated an "authenticating vulnerability" to record the image of a distinct individual, not an artificial type.

By our era, the extreme codification of such "authenticating vulnerability" has turned it into cliché, yet it is important to understand it precisely as an historical shift in representational codes, not an uncoded, natural, "humanity"[13]. A parallel shifting of pictorial codes, towards conventions of individuality and "intimacy", can be seen in the gradual upheavals within the painted portrait tradition – upheavals which, by the late nineteenth century, began to dislodge traditional formal portraiture. The growth of the non-commissioned painted portrait – of friends, relatives and other intimates – increasingly allowed more speculative, exploratory pictorial approaches to emerge alongside the constrained conventions of official portraiture. In addition, Quick argues, an "irreversible trend to informality"[14] saw monumentalized, formally posed subjects give way to lighter, more "naturalistic"

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11 Roger Cardinal, "Nadar and the Photographic Portrait in Nineteenth Century France", in: Graham Clarke, ed., *The Portrait in Photography,* p. 8. My brief rehearsal of Cardinal's argument here merely summarizes his extremely useful, and far more nuanced, essay.

12 Cardinal, p. 16. The same process may operate analogously in painting, with "realism" or "documentary effect" built precisely on the ruins of typological exaggeration and codification; as Stephen Bann suggests, in Gericault, "the documentary effect is established through the systematic erasure of the code of physiognomy" (Clarke, p. 37).

13 The classic analysis of "realism" as an effect of shifts in representation codes is, of course, Roman Jakobson's "On Realism in Art" (1921), collected in: *Language and Literature* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press/Harvard, 1987).

14 Quick, in: *American Portraits in the Grand Manner,* p. 74.

treatments, in domestic settings or out of doors. As photography increasingly usurped traditional portrait functions, the official painted portrait devolved into a minor artistic genre, while the "intimate", noncommissioned form increasingly took aesthetic risks, often diverging from mimetic likeness altogether.

Yet the humanist beliefs in individual uniqueness and interiority which underwrote the traditional portrait – "man in the fullness of his identity" – don't necessarily die with the emergence of early twentieth century avant-gardes. Far from it. Instead, the formal experimentation of modernist art is posed, by critics such as Kirk Varnedoe, precisely as the renewal and reinvigoration of such values: "In the context of such an art, the way seemed open for more profound revelation of individual personalities, especially in the increasingly important genre of noncommissioned portraiture, where neither finances nor flattery constrained, and where friendship promised privileged insight."[15]

This faith in personal "intimacy" providing privileged insight and precluding voyeurism, artifice, or manipulation, forms an enduring mythos – one which echoes through accounts of present-day "insider"/"subcultural" photography of Larry Clark, Nan Goldin, and, to an extent, Catherine Opie[16]. In the dispersed romantic mythos of the "specific individual", the revelation of psychological interiority and personal authenticity is increasingly sought among groups marginalized from public representation, or among others to whom special significant or deviance can be attached – artists, celebrities, the mentally ill, etc.[17].

In the late nineteenth century model of celebrity, the individuality once reserved for the noble (and then the bourgeois) subject, become increasing attached to artists and their entourages (a romantic fantasy of the artistic "demi-monde" that lives on in the portraits of Peter Hujar, Nan Goldin, Mark Morrisroe, and others). In this mythos, as Varnedoe unironically concludes:

"The modern artist is the giver, rather than the captor or preserver of identity. The artist assigns to his subjects a particular expressiveness and significance that originates in his own work rather than in the personality he treats; and this allows the sitter, while sacrificing any self-conceived uniqueness,

15 Kirk Varnedoe, "The Modern Portrait: The Self and Others" (New York: Wildenstein, 1976), p. XI (emphasis mine).

16 Interestingly, this "insider" claim to intimacy is frequently grafted onto a more traditional social documentary project of representing "marginal" communities – communities of which the photographer is now a part. The truth claim of such photography rests on the rhetorical premise that "I am representing my community, to which I have special access, insight, and representational privileges".

17 In the post World War II era, from Warhol to Oprah, it seems that anyone can be made to qualify for such a status, if only fleetingly, especially as talk shows promote a perverse neo-primitivism of the common man (or, more frequently, woman).

to gain an extra-dimension of identity. In modern portraits, it is often unequivocally clear that the stylistic identities of the respective artists are the dominant features. The form-system of the artist – cubist, abstract expressionist, and so on – literally cloaks the sitter and thus takes over the expressive role formerly filled by elements such as clothing, setting and gestures"[18].

While Varnedoe notes the emergences of artistic alter-egos and personae – Dada Max, Rrose Sélavy, and other Dada "portraits" such as Picabia's objects – he views these as symbolic self-portraits, "confessions in code", which allow the artist "to expand his persona and control access to his personality", concluding that role-play and impersonation offer "a fundamental modern means of self-expression"[19]. Disavowed altogether in such an account is how Dada portraits – such as Duchamp's altered "Wanted" poster – might fundamentally undermine such grounded, individualized forms of personal identity. The variety and arbitrariness of potential surrogates suggested by the ready-made form, after all, can clearly be read as an acknowledgment of the arbitrary, shifting and increasingly mass-produced nature of human subjectivity. As Dawn Ades asserts, Duchamp's alter-egos can be interpreted precisely as a rejection of the higher psychological truth claimed for painting and a critique of the misguided attempt to recoup for painting the faithfulness to identity seemingly usurped by photography.

Rather than claiming Duchamp's photographic masquerades as extensions of romantic self-revelation, Ades suggests "Duchamp's ironic response, in using photography as a disguise or mask to construct alternative identities"[20]. No longer interested in "the potential of the portrait to sum up a sitter, or reveal the truth about him or her, whether physical or psychological", Duchamp's Dada self-portraits, Ades argues, "declare the whole question of likeness… no longer relevant – or, perhaps, to be exploitable in ways which shift the center of interest away from the sitter/subject and towards the mode of representation. Rather than revealing a unitary nugget of identity, these photographs disguise, dissolve, multiply and contradict"[21]. In Duchamp's practice, as Ades emphasizes, photography offers not self-revelation but "the ideal alibi" for changes of identity.

This formulation, derived from Duchamp and Man Ray collaborations, offers one model for certain of the more radical works today – Cindy Sherman, clearly, is their inheritor. Yet the very popularity of such "performative" strategies may threaten to harden them into cliché. Perhaps the appeal of Catherine Opie and Lyle Harris's work, for instance, lies in their perverse tendency to combine

18 Varnedoe, p. XIV. Fascinatingly, in Varnedoe's account, style single-handedly appears to usurp not only the pictorial props of the earlier portraiture, but all other social functions of identity creation as validation.

19 Varnedoe, p. XIX.

20 Dawn Ades, "Duchamp's Masquerades", in Graham Clarke, ed., The Portrait in Photography, p. 97.

21 Ades, p. 97.

theatrically posed subjects and hyper-detailed modernist photographic technique – an approach whose history, it seems to me, lies more closely with Robert Mapplethorpe than Sherman.

Yet perhaps we are in a moment in which those legacies converge, or are used interchangeably: the modernist pursuit of the exotic, self-created subject, and the postmodern exploration of how subjectivity itself is constructed through representational modes. As Jacques Aumont suggests, in contemporary cinema and art, the face itself has become an object, a spectacle – no longer "an emblem of what is human"[22]. Aumont laments this passing: "There is a history of the face, which began a relatively short time ago, and perhaps ends here in front of our eyes, in this museum (but also in the street, on television, at the cinema)."

Nonetheless, the capacity to reproduce the recognizable human form, is still, it would seem, the anchor of representation and verisimilitude in our times[23]. Just as the test of fidelity and believability in audio recording technologies is the voice ("his master's voice", as the RCA Victor slogan used to say) in photography, film, video, it is the recognizability of the face – witness the aura that accrues to even its most degraded representation[24]. Perhaps the work gathered here, in its faith (however limited) in the face and figure as metonymic representations of personal and social identity (however mutable or constructed), is relatively traditional. It may be that the identity forms mobilized in contemporary portraiture are but the last gasp of a dying humanism. As Aumont notes, it is the cinema which has most successfully dismantled portraiture, in breaking the bond between face and portrait, producing crisis effects which now echo through all other visual media.
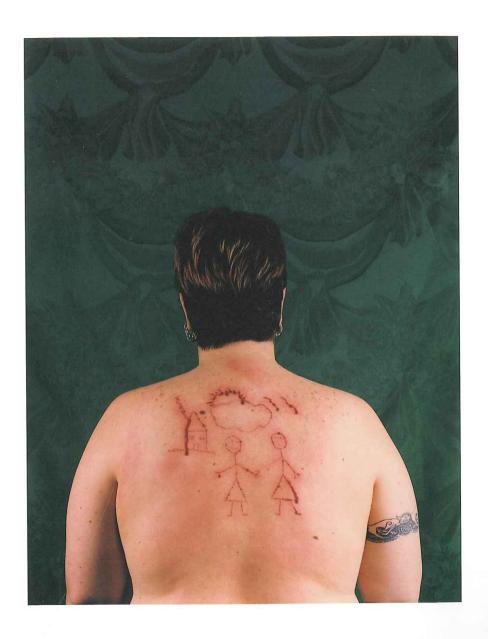
22 Jacques Aumont, "Image, Face, Passage", in Passages de l'image (Paris: Musée nationale d'art moderne, 1991), p. 86. Aumont suggestively locates this culmination at the end of the silent cinema of the 1920s, "an ideal point of junction when two conceptions of the human face become superimposed": 1.) "a conception of the face as support and signifier of the human function of communication (the face as an exchange value, expressed in cinema through 'metonymical' editing, the Kuleshov effect and classical editing" and 2.) "a conception of the face as something that is autonomous – and nearly autonomously expressive (the face as an exchange value by means of physiognomy and photogenics)".

23 This point is suggested by Aumont, when he asserts that "the history of representation was able to begin when the "divine face" was replaced by the face as a socialized, historical human face", p. 84.

24 And of course, our very sense of what it is to be human is itself modeled on these representational forms. In language, Michel Foucault has argued, it was practices of confession which sutured the speaking subject to the "I" of the statement, creating in the process a psychic interiority to be disclosed. And Lacan, of course, proposed that the very belief in the unity and coherence of the self is itself propped up on the unity and coherence of the visual image, seen in the mirror by the young child.

"What is the face today in images?" While the curator Jean Clair, in the 1995 Venice Biennale exhibition "Identity and Alterity", contentiously argues that self-portraiture, rather than abstraction, forms the backbone of twentieth century art, Aumont gives cinema the role of "preserving painting, ... while at the same time destroying one of its most profound bases, the humanist referent to the human face"[25]. Whichever version emerges triumphant, it is clear that the unresolved status of the portrait represents a major challenge to any searching account of twentieth century visual representation.

25 Aumont, p. 25. He elaborates that, since the development of the historical avant-garde, "painting has contributed to this destruction, to the abandonment of the humanist face (not so much cubism as abstraction, Malevich's blank ovals)".

Sharon Lockhart, *Audition Five, Sirushi and Victor,* 1994, C-print, Ed.: 4 Ex.,
124,5 × 154,5 cm / 49 × 61 inches
Privatsammlung Köln, Courtesy of Galerie neugerriemenschneider, Berlin

Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait*, 1993, C-print, 102 × 76 cm / 40 × 30 inches

Collection of Bill Begert, Courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles

Collier Shorr, *In the Garden (torso)*, 1995, C-print, 46 × 56 cm / 18 × 22 inches
Courtesy of 303 Gallery, New York