Written by a highly respected academic, photographer and artist, with over 20 years' experience. Illustrated with images by some of the world's most influential photographers and artists. The easily navigable format enables the student to use the book in a flexible way: as both a cover-to-cover coursebook or as a handy reference for setting up portrait photographs.

Born in 1940, Roswell Angier discovered photography in the '60s, while he was pursuing a PhD in Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkeley. Since then, he has had a rewarding career as a photographer and educator. His projects include a book about strip clubs in Boston's Combat Zone, and a series about street life in the border towns at the edges of the Navajo Reservation in the southwestern United States. His photographs are in numerous private and public collections, including Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, the Addison Gallery of American Art, and the Fogg Museum at Harvard University. He is presently on the faculty at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, and is represented by the Gitterman Gallery.

This book emphasizes the situational element in various kinds of portrait photography. One point that is particularly stressed is the presence of the photographer's gaze, as an integral part of what the picture is about: the activity of one person looking, manifested in a moment that can feel as transitory as the blink of an eye or as durational as a small eternity.

Train Your Gaze: A Practical and Theoretical Introduction to Portrait Photography is a part of AVA Academia's Theory and Practice categories. This series of books enlarges the context for both the student photographer and the established practitioner.


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TRAIN YOUR GAZE

[A Practical and Theoretical Introduction to Portrait Photography]
TRAIN YOUR GAZE

[A Practical and Theoretical Introduction to Portrait Photography]

ROSWELL ANGIER
# CONTENTS

*How to Get the Most Out of This Book* ......................................................... vi

**INTRODUCTION** .................................................................................................................. 1

1 ABOUT LOOKING .............................................................................................................. 2

2 SELF-PORTRAIT/NO FACE ............................................................................................ 10

3 PEOPLE at the MARGIN: The EDGE of the FRAME ................................................... 28

4 BEHAVIOR in the MOMENT: PICTURING EVENTFULNESS ..................................... 46

5 YOU SPY: VOYEURISM and SURVEILLANCE .......................................................... 58

6 PORTRAIT, MIRROR, MASQUERADE ........................................................................... 76

7 CONFRONTATION: LOOKING THROUGH the BULL’S EYE .......................................... 98

8 OUT of FOCUS: The DISAPPEARING SUBJECT ......................................................... 118

9 DARKNESS .................................................................................................................. 130

10 FLASH! ......................................................................................................................... 146

11 FIGURES in a LANDSCAPE: TABLEAUX ..................................................................... 168

12 COMMENTARY: DIGITAL PERSONAE ....................................................................... 188

**APPENDICES**

A Cameras and Camera Controls
   *Some Differences Between Film and Digital Image Formation* .................................. 207

B Exposure and Metering
   *The Gray Scale, Color Film, and Digital Files* ............................................................ 208

C Using Flash .................................................................................................................. 210

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................... 213

Critical Bibliography ....................................................................................................... 214

Index ............................................................................................................................... 215
Each of the 12 chapters in this book consists of three elements: a critical and/or historical examination of one singular aspect of portrait photography, illustrative photographs from the past and present, and a related shooting assignment. The book can be treated as a read-through experience, with the chapters studied in numerical order, or it can be used as a reference guide, with the reader choosing the way.

This spread shows an example of a chapter opener. The navigation bar at the top of each chapter opener allows readers to gauge where they are within the book.

A sample spread from the book showing an image and caption, main text and a pull quote. All captions state the title of an image, its date, the photographer or artist, and any other necessary information. Pull quotes appear throughout the book to emphasize key points.
Some of the time it doesn’t make sense to me either. All I know is that every time I try to make a real-world detail that interrupts any erotic pleasure suggesting that the act of looking here may be more. All you can do is experiment with different contexts, within which the student can experiment with different approaches to a concrete portrait situation.
“I want to take your picture.”
**INTRODUCTION**

**This may be an utterly casual declaration.** Or it may express your desire to extend the momentum of an initial glance, a spark of fascination that has already occurred. Or it may function as a hopeful mantra, intended to create the very conditions in which that spark might be ignited.

If you ask politely for permission—“May I take your picture?”—the chances are that you are speaking to a stranger. If, on the other hand, you say “I would like to make a portrait of you,” the circumstances are entirely different. First of all, you probably know this person.

Second, and perhaps more important, is the fact that the word “portrait” has a special meaning. Portentous, loaded with gravity and subtle persuasion, without really saying anything about what it is that you want, it nonetheless reassures your subject about the seriousness of your intentions. It may influence the behavior of your subject, opening the door to anxiety and trepidation (“Should I look serious?” “Should I be wearing something special?” are two possibilities). It can discourage playfulness and experimentation.

A portrait, the result of a consensual process, depends upon the subject’s agreement to be photographed. It assumes a level of trust. The subject usually faces the camera, and the contract between subject and photographer hangs palpably in the air that separates them. It is across this agreed-upon distance that all sorts of power relationships and tensions between or among the people involved are negotiated. The picture itself records this exchange.

This book is about photographing human subjects—in many different ways and from a number of different perspectives. It is addressed to people who are already acquainted with photography. A basic competence with cameras, darkrooms and/or image-processing software is assumed, although not required for an understanding of most of this book. The technical matters discussed here are limited to key elements of the image capture process, and can be found chiefly in the three appendices.

This is nonetheless a practical book. It addresses issues of content, paying attention to history, theory, and formal analysis along the way. A great deal of attention is paid to different aspects of the picture-making process, and to the conditions surrounding that process. There are shooting assignments to perform, different kinds of photographs to make. With that in mind as the final objective, there is ample discussion of images made by different photographers. Some of these images are portraits in a classic sense (they are likenesses, or pictures that explore ideas about personal identity in a predictable way), and some are not (such as certain street photographs and fictional tableaux).

What is common to all the images with which this book is concerned, of course, is the presence of a subject—a person or a group of people on the other side of the lens. But there is something else of equal importance, something that is not literally visible in the image. It is something quite apart from the manifest subject. It is what finally makes a picture come alive. It is the presence of the photographer’s thoughtful regard. This ingredient, if that’s what it can be called, is not simply a way station in the picture-making procedure. It cannot be reduced to a burst of enthusiasm, a brilliant concept, a compositional strategy, or a stylistic quirk. This characteristic, this something that inhabits a picture, is the felt activity of someone looking, the photographer in person, embedded in the photograph.

Insofar as you, the reader, may wish to make substantial portraits, or pictures of people, the catalyzing ingredient in your photograph might be felt as a moment exchanged between you and your subject, a spark in the empty space between the two (or more) of you, brief as the blink of an eye. Or it might be manifested in a long and steadfast stare, something that may have felt at the time like nothing more than your own vague, but intense desire for a good photograph, now invisibly suspended in the image, like a bridge between inquiring, eager, or even fretful strangers. Or it might be felt as a fascinated gaze that wishes to remain solitary, thrown out like a fishing line at your unwary subject, with only the hope of seizing that person’s presence in the mirror of your own anonymity. As much as anything else, cultivating this presence, this way of looking, is what this book is about.

— Roswell Angier
train your gaze
You are alone with your subject. The room is silent. Neither of you is talking. You stare, concentrating on minor variations of facial expression, body language, gesture. You move slowly, carefully. Your subject is stationary, and does not change position relative to the camera, which is mounted on a tripod facing her. But her eyes follow you as you move a little bit from side to side. Occasionally one hand drifts toward a pocket, or up toward her face. She closes her eyes for a moment, reopens them. An eyebrow shoots up, as if to register a sudden thought.

Now. You squeeze the bulb at the end of the cable release, exposing a frame. You advance the film to the next frame. You wait for something else to happen, a facial incident or minor gestural event. The nervous tension you've been feeling, from not speaking to each other for what seems like such a long time, is starting to subside. It's almost like being in a trance. You take another picture. You advance the film again. You take another picture. You have fallen into the circle of your own gaze. You're in fascination time.

In the late 1960s, Richard Avedon published a series of portraits in *Rolling Stone* magazine called “The Family.” The pictures were of powerful people, mostly men. The subjects were evenly lit by ambient light, without a hint of shadow, and were posed in Avedon’s signature setting, against stark white backdrop paper. They seemed uneasy, many of them uncertain of what to do with their hands, some of them seeming to be collapsed inward on themselves, but nonetheless determined to face the camera.

Looking at these portraits, one felt the silence, which had been an element in their making, as a tangible presence. It was rumored that Avedon did not speak to his subjects while he was shooting. They were ushered into his studio by an assistant, and told to align their feet with a mark on the floor. The camera, an imposing 8 x 10-inch view camera mounted on a tripod, had been focused in advance, using an assistant as a stand-in for the eventual subject. For the entire session, the photographer would walk around the room, tethered to the camera by a long cable release, staring. After each exposure, an assistant would change the film holder, and the staring would resume.

The result was a series of portraits in which the subject’s own presence was engulfed by the intensity of the photographer’s gaze. Sometimes the subject would stare back aggressively, but there was never any doubt about who was in control. In a subsequent portrait project, *In the American West*, an example of which is included here, Avedon used a similar procedure, but he directed his camera toward ordinary people—drifters, miners, housewives, prison inmates, cowboys, itinerant preachers. They were carefully chosen for the ways in which they represented the old frontier culture of America. In the pictures, they often look haunted or intimidated. Sometimes you can detect a hint of defiance. Only once does someone—a Navajo rodeo cowboy—smile. The feeling communicated by this body of work is that its subjects are hanging on to their identities by a fragile thread. This may be partly because they are relics of a regional culture that no longer exists. But it is mostly due to the nearly overpowering nature of the photographer’s presence. Whatever they may suggest of the social fabric, the portraits are not documentary in nature. They are not intended to be dispassionate or objective, and would never be mistaken for being friendly or compassionate. They are aggressive personal statements. In an introductory comment to this work, Avedon said that he thought all portraits, and especially his own, were “opinions.” The photographer’s eye here does not seek merely to represent. It looks to persuade.

Science interprets the gaze in three (combinable) ways; in terms of information (the gaze informs), in terms of relation (gazes are exchanged), in terms of possession (by the gaze, I touch, I seize, I am seized). ...But the gaze seeks: something, someone. It is an anxious sign: singular dynamics for a sign: its power overflows it.”

Roland Barthes | “Right in the Eyes” | The Responsibility of Forms
In the early days of photography, just about the only thing the camera was really good for was confrontation. This was due to the low speed of early emulsions—their relative insensitivity to light—and the slowness of camera lenses—their inability to efficiently transmit light to the emulsion surface. Consequently, the subject of a photograph was required to squarely face the camera, and to hold still for a long exposure. Daguerreotype studios were routinely equipped with neck braces to help clients wait out the time while the shutter was open, and they stared quietly back at the camera. It was a ceremony, and it gave a unique texture—one that is hard to replicate with modern equipment—to the resulting images.

In some basic way, Richard Avedon’s method derives from this early method. It is possible to make confrontational images, where the subject acknowledges and returns your gaze, with modern films and imaging devices. There is a lesson to be learned from the old procedure. It has to do with stillness. Even more particularly, it has to do with silence. Modern cameras loaded with fast film can easily produce stillness, freezing motion with a fast shutter speed. A subject can be caught looking straight at the camera in less than a blink of the eye. But for the subject to produce an effect of profound motionlessness, we must revert to the earlier set of conditions. He or she must be not only motionless but quiet.

Silence is a prerequisite for fascination, that state of heightened attention in which particular effects of meaning can be produced. First and foremost, the photographer must be quiet, thereby relinquishing the responsibility to keep the subject amused with reassuring banter. This is markedly different from the chatty masquerade that characterizes commercial portrait studios, where the photographer’s job is to produce an image of the subject that has a smoothly socialized, gregarious surface. It is a different masquerade, by which I mean that photographer and subject will enter a ritualized region, where each will create a persona, or mask, in order to produce a different effect. The process may be uncomfortable or it may not be. It may seem like a quiet struggle or it may feel like a seduction. The end result will bear witness to the process. Whatever quality the result may have, it will not feel like a picture that has been caught on the fly.

With this in mind, perform the following assignment. Get someone you know well—husband, lover, wife, friend, family member—to agree to give you an hour of time, during which you will shoot a complete 36-exposure roll of film, under the following conditions.

1) Other than obtaining your subject’s consent in advance to be photographed, do not give any directions before the shooting session, except to say that he or she will be expected to stay in place, sitting or standing, for about an hour, and to look straight at the camera (note: not at you, but at the camera).

2) Have your camera mounted on a tripod, and let it remain there, in the same position relative to your subject, once it has been focused and proper exposure has been determined. This exercise is about looking in a concentrated way. Making minor adjustments to camera position and composition will only distract you from that task.

3) Do not hide behind the camera. A cable release will be most useful—the longer the better.

4) Do not speak, or allow your subject to speak, during the course of the hour.

5) Pace yourself. Try to use the whole hour. This exercise will be useless if you shoot the roll of film in five minutes.

6) Allow yourself to stare. You will find that minor fluctuations in expression, or small involuntary gestures, become significant events. This assignment is about two people facing each other. Their gazes intersect, and the photographs taken while this is happening will record those moments of connection.
Let’s take this basic event of looking a step further. Consider these two photographs. One is by Julia Margaret Cameron (above), the other is by Cindy Sherman (overleaf). They are pictures that are actually about looking. In the Cameron image, “The Kiss of Peace,” we see a woman and a girl, presumably mother and daughter. As is the case with Avedon’s pictures, with their assertively blank backdrops, there is no suggestion of location or context here. The subjects inhabit an undisclosed space. There are no historical markers. The figures are dressed in a way that belongs to no particular time. We are asked to read this image in terms of bare essentials. Who is there? What are they doing? What is being exchanged between these two figures, the woman and the girl, and where do we, as the viewers, fit into this scenario?

The look of these two figures, by themselves, suggests a Victorian cultural value, female modesty coded as an averted gaze. Mother and daughter show us their profiles. They do not confront us, and they do not confront each other. The daughter’s eyes float politely downward, in the general
direction of her mother’s breast. But the mother’s gaze provides something of a surprise. If we do not look too carefully, we might get the impression that her attention is focused completely on her daughter. But this is not the case. Her left eye is directed outward, toward but not at us, the viewers. The mother’s outward gaze includes us. The direction of her looking suggests an attitude of cautious interception. She is aware of our presence. She is ready to defend or protect. This awareness, the maternal overview, is superimposed on the intimate moment represented inside the frame. It is as if she is attempting to leach our attention away from the daughter, to interrupt the process of our own looking.

This is very different from Avedon’s strategy, which is to allow us to completely possess the image he presents us with. In another respect, however, Cameron’s portraits are similar to Avedon’s. They too are “opinions.” She was one of the first photographers to explicitly state that she had psychological intentions. She wrote in her journal, apropos of her pictures of prominent Victorian male intellectuals, that she wished to capture “the greatness of the inner, not the outer man.” In order to realize this goal, she hired a technician to remove some of the glass elements from her camera lens, thereby degrading its resolving power. The results of this operation were images that were soft in focus, a far cry from the sharpness of the daguerreotype portrait. She was more interested in metaphor than she was in precise description. Her pictures, because of their blurry quality and their absence of other crisps detail, require us to imagine some of the missing information. They require us to assume an attitude of interpretation.

Let us return to “The Kiss of Peace.” What information does it give us? Notice that the mother’s mouth does not actually make contact with her daughter’s cheek, that her lips seem decisively closed, immobile, silent. The title of the image seems to contradict what is there to be seen. The mood of the picture is anything but intimate and tranquil. The guarded quality of the mother’s look, and her body language as well, has ruptured the spectacle of female intimacy that we may have initially thought was the subject of the picture. We might conclude from this that the artist’s intent, and certainly the effect produced, is irony.

As a title, “The Kiss of Peace” is a modest deception, perhaps a piece of camouflage that we are meant to see through. Cameron, who was one of the first photographers to be taken seriously as an artist, has insinuated a commentary on a cultural stereotype while pretending to simply render it. The stereotype is that of the docile Madonna, ever available to the leisurely inspections of her viewers’ gaze. If it is possible to see an attitude of resignation in the mother’s expression, and even in the tilt of her head, it could be read as a sign of the immense effort involved in maintaining this masquerade.

Cindy Sherman, whose work might at first seem less than compatible with Cameron’s, employs similar strategies in her pictures. She is concerned with the spectacle of female identity, and issues of femininity, in a way that is more overt and thorough than is the case with Cameron. “Untitled Film Still, #3” is part of a portrait series in which the artist herself impersonates various archetypes of femininity. Many of the images depict situations that derive from 1950s film noir narratives, movies that deal with sexual triangles, typically centered on a designing woman who is looking for a way out of an oppressive or abusive relationship. This image presents us with a woman in a tight top standing at a kitchen sink. There is a suggestion of dirty dishes. A sharply focused bottle of detergent intersects the out-of-focus handle of a pot that juts into the frame like an arrow, pointing directly at the woman’s upraised left breast. The woman’s gaze is directed out of the frame. The implication is that she is looking toward someone else in the room, out of the camera’s field of view, possibly her husband/captor.

There are two axes of sight here. We, the spectators, see the subject—Cindy Sherman posing as a character in a hypothetical film—from one axis. She looks at her husband from another axis. There is no acknowledged contact between the subject and us, the viewers. Our sight lines do not coincide. We are put in the position of eavesdroppers, just as we would be if we were at the movies, where the actors rarely return our gaze directly. This impression, of being confronted with a screen image, is further reinforced by the camera’s relatively low angle. We are looking slightly upward, as we would be in a theater.

“One Untitled Film Still, #3” is about spectacle, about looking. The woman has arranged her body for display. Her left shoulder is raised, so as to display her breast to best advantage. Her right hand
assures the flatness of her stomach. What is particularly interesting, though, is that whoever she may be looking at cannot actually see this, although we can. He sees what we can only imagine—her back, the top of her head, and her eyes looking at him anxiously over her raised shoulder. Is this meant to be tantalizing? Is he meant to guess at what he cannot, but we can, clearly see? It is impossible for us to say, since we cannot clearly see his view for ourselves.

We are tantalized, both by what we can apprehend—the woman’s sexual display—and by what we cannot—the object and import of the woman’s own gaze. The photographer does not simply invite us to interpret the scene we find ourselves witnessing, as is the case with the Cameron picture. She forces the interpretive posture upon us, and she then strands us in a set of shifting possibilities. This is not all. There is a subtle act of sabotage here. The camera sees the subject from an unflattering vantage point—the camera angle almost coincides with the crude black finger of kitchenware pointed at the tip of her breast—just as the subject herself consolidates her body into a pose designed to be flattering. But for whom, we need to ask, is she posing, if the object of her gaze, out of the frame, cannot see it for himself? Perhaps her alluring body language is being performed for herself alone. Perhaps it is a learned set of gestures, a self-contained mantra of attractiveness, by means of which she hopes to raise herself out of the surroundings in which she finds herself trapped, a doomed reflexive defense against tawdry circumstances. In any event, the difference between the way the camera presents this woman to our eyes, and the way she attempts to present herself—no matter to whom—generates complex questions about the act of looking and being looked at.

In this photograph, this activity is exaggerated to the point where it becomes the primary subject of the image, not merely the means by which something else is accomplished. Sherman forces us to ask a series of related questions that are crucial to the making of all photographs. What, or who, am I, the photographer, looking at? From where am I doing the looking? How does this position define me? How does my gaze intersect with—or fail to intersect with—the gaze of my human subject? These questions precede all others. They are worth mentioning right now, at the beginning of our discussion of the act of looking, even though they do not pertain directly to the execution of the first assignment. You might wish to perform an additional version of this assignment, using either of the photographs we have been looking at as a point of reference, in which you make a picture of someone engaged in the act of looking at someone else.
SELF-PORTRAIT/NO FACE
“It is like the Indian said when the white man asked him why he ran around naked: ‘For me, it is all face.’ In a non-fetishistic culture (one that does not fetishize nudity as objective truth), the body is not, as in our own, opposed to the face, conceived as alone rich in expression and endowed with ‘eyes’: it is itself a face, and looks at you.”

Jean Baudrillard | Seduction
WHAT IS A PORTRAIT AND WHAT IS ITS FUNCTION? The Random House College Dictionary defines a portrait of any sort as “a likeness of a person, especially of the face.” While we may eventually want to ascribe subtler and more complex meanings to the term, this is a good place to start.

The practice of portrait photography began very shortly after Louis Daguerre’s announcement, in 1839, that he had invented a way of fixing an image made with a camera. Portrait studios sprang up all over Europe and subsequently in America. At first, portrait subjects were mostly everyday people—shopkeepers, merchants, soldiers, family groups, children. Daguerreotype images of the famous followed soon thereafter. By the 1860s, photographers began to make pictures of more uncommon subjects—scientific images of people with physical deformities and strange medical conditions, anthropological images of non-European people.

Regardless of the subject’s class or country of origin, the face was the key element in all daguerreotype portraits. It was taken for granted as the essential sign of identity. It had to be visible. Due to the relative insensitivity of early emulsions to light, long exposures of ten seconds and more were required. In order for the sitters’ faces to be readable, their heads were held in place by braces that were not visible to the camera. This procedure usually resulted in an appearance of extreme gravity, as the subject stared at the camera while concentrating on holding still. In the case of private “memorial” portraits (so-called because they were intended to evoke memories of someone the viewer knew well), accurate and precise description of the subjects’ features was the primary goal. In order to lend an aura of seriousness to a portrait session, daguerreotypists often employed props—such as platter replicas of fluted classical columns or balustrades, or folded drapery—which alluded to the dignifying effects of academic portrait painting. Early portrait photographs had little to do with complex notions of character or identity. They were not about the inner self. As portraits, they had their roots in a notion of the self that dates back to ancient Rome—namely, the notion of persona, a word of Etruscan origin that originally meant “mask.” The idea was that the self was something that was worn, like a mask. Whatever might lie behind the mask was not important.

Julia Margaret Cameron, whose work we looked at in the previous chapter, may have been the first photographer to announce explicitly that she was interested in penetrating beneath this mask. In 1874, referring to her portraits of eminent Victorian artists and intellectuals, she wrote in her journal that: “When I have had such men before my camera my whole soul has endeavored to do its duty towards them in recording faithfully the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer man.” In practice, however, the representation of eccentricity and individual emotion predated Cameron. In 1840, Hippolyte Bayard made three strange photographs that were variations of a single pose. Each was titled “Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man.” Bayard had invented a photographic process that was different from the daguerreotype in two respects: (1) the image was not as sharp as the daguerreotype, and (2) it involved a paper negative, which meant that, unlike the daguerreotype process, multiple prints could be made. His series of self-portraits was an attempt to express his frustration and disappointment with the fact that Daguerre had received all the credit for the invention of photography. Bayard had been, in effect, drowned by his competitor.

i. Unlike film images from which multiple prints can be made, daguerreotypes were one-of-a-kind images, made with silver-plated copper sheets and processed with mercury vapors. They were treated much like paintings (although they were considerably less expensive), as singular and precious objects. It was not until the invention, in 1854, attributed to André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, of the carte de visite, that repeatable versions of the same image became possible. These pictures, which were otherwise executed in the same way as the daguerreotype and obeyed its visual conventions, were made by a wet-plate collodion process. The resulting glass negative yielded 2½ x 4-inch paper prints suitable for family albums. People also left them as calling cards. In addition, this new process was responsible for the invention of the celebrity photograph. Many people collected carte de visite images of famous people and royalty, and displayed them at home in albums. These pictures have been referred to as “sure cards” because they were certain to be profitable for the photographer who took them.

ii. The idea of the mask, and the related concept of masquerade, are important for an understanding of the work of many contemporary portrait photographers, and will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 6.
As an image, “Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man” is interesting in a number of respects. It may be the first known example of a portrait photograph that tries to directly address a moment of intense personal feeling. It also is a precursor to the theatrical stagings of the self that became prevalent in the late 20th century, in the work of Cindy Sherman (whose work was briefly discussed in the previous chapter), and others. It should be noted, however, that Bayard’s self-portrait, however eccentric, is firmly rooted in the visual rhetoric of his time. Some of its trappings—the drapery wrapped around his legs, the vase and the small statuette of a crouching nymph, all of which are references to neo-classical painting—would be familiar to viewers of daguerreotype portraits. The fact that his head and upper body are propped up firmly against a wall, lending credibility to the fact that he is supposed to be a dead man, lets us know that his photographic process was as cumbersome as Daguerre’s, requiring a very long exposure. We know from his own writing that his exposure times were sometimes as long as 18 minutes.

Portrait photography was used by 19th-century scientists to investigate human emotion. An early example of this practice occurred in 1862, with the publication of Guillaume-Benjamin-Amand Duchenne de Boulogne’s Mécanisme de la physionomie humaine (The Mechanism of Human Physiognomy). Duchenne studied medicine and applied electricity at the Académie de Medicine in Paris, and devoted his career to experiments with what he called therapeutic “electropuncture.” This was a technique he developed in which an electric shock was administered to the facial muscles he believed were responsible for the expression of 13 primary emotions: attention, reflection, aggression, pain, joy, benevolence, lasciviousness, sadness, weeping, whimpering, surprise, fright, and terror. In 1872, Charles Darwin used some of Duchenne’s photographs to illustrate his book The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals. In Duchenne’s mind, his studies were applicable not only to science, but to the visual arts. He sought to chart the “grammar and orthography of human facial expression.” Duchenne believed that a person’s face was a map, the muscular terrain of which could be identified and codified.

“In the face our Creator was not concerned with mechanical necessity. He was able in His wisdom or—please pardon this manner of speaking—in pursuing a divine fantasy... to put any particular muscles into action, one alone or several muscles together, when He wished the characteristic signs of the emotions, even the most fleeting, to be written briefly on man’s face. Once this language of facial expression was created, it sufficed for Him to give all human beings the instinctive faculty of always expressing their sentiments by contracting the same muscles. This rendered the language universal and immutable.”

In order to document his research, he enlisted the services of the photographer Adrien Tournachon, and also learned how to use a camera himself. The resulting images of what he called “the gymnastics of the soul” were without precedent. Earlier researchers had applied electrical stimulation to the muscles of cadavers, but Duchenne was the first to use live subjects and to document his results with photographs. Many of his experiments were illustrations of relatively simple instances of facial expression. Others were more complex, in the sense that they attempted to represent facial musculature in the act of producing conflicting or ambiguous expressions. In order to do this, Duchenne applied shock simultaneously to two different muscles on different sides of a subject’s face, and instructed his audience to inspect each side of the face separately, in order to compare subtle differences between the different feelings so revealed. It should be added that Duchenne’s work does not rely on the assumption that emotion itself is mechanically produced, but rather that there is a physiological mechanism—a predictable contraction of certain facial muscles—that makes a feeling visible. It also relies on the belief that the face itself is the primary seat of emotion.
What about the body? What if the face is absent? For this assignment, you are to make a portrait of yourself, but you cannot show your face. This will be difficult, because it goes against the grain of what you would do instinctively when asked to make a self-portrait. You will have to think carefully. What does it mean to show yourself from below the neck only, or to photograph an isolated body part? Or to see yourself from behind, or as a cast shadow, or an obscure reflection? Think of the phrase “losing face,” or the single word, “defaced.” If your face is missing from your image, are you necessarily diminished?

Look at the untitled portrait of a New Orleans prostitute, taken by E. J. Bellocq in the early 1900s. She stands naked, her body turned toward the camera, arms raised and elbows bent. A locket hangs from her neck. Her pose clearly indicates that she is aware of the photographer’s presence. She appears to be a willing subject. The position of her arms suggests an effort to display her breasts to best advantage. A heavy wooden couch has been placed against the door behind her, perhaps as a means of insuring that no one would intrude on the scene. It is an awkward detail. It counteracts the easy straightforwardness of the woman’s posture, suggesting that the act of looking here may be more covert than intimate. The couch is an intrusion, a real-world detail that interrupts any erotic pleasure we might derive from looking at this scene.

But the most disturbing element in the picture is the fact that the woman’s face is absent. It has been scratched out. Little is known about Bellocq’s life, or about his reasons for photographing prostitutes. What is known is that he operated a commercial studio, and that he lived across the street from the brothels where he made these portraits, presumably for personal reasons. The work was unknown until his glass negative plates were discovered in a junk shop after his death. The negatives were acquired by Lee Friedlander, who printed them for publication in the book *Storyville Portraits* (1967). The negatives had been stored under adverse conditions, and many of them had suffered water damage, which caused parts of the emulsion to separate from the plates. This accounts for the black areas in the images, where there is no visual data. But it does not account for the blank areas over some of his subjects’ faces, where it is clear that someone deliberately scratched the emulsion off the negative. It was assumed for a long time that Bellocq’s brother, a Jesuit priest who was the photographer’s sole heir, had been so shocked by the pictures’ subject matter that he had been the one who had defaced them. Recent experiments have proved, however, that the distinctive scratch marks could only have been produced while the negative was still wet. They are not the accidental result of water damage, and could only have been produced shortly after the negative had been developed, presumably by the photographer himself.

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E. J. Bellocq
*Storyville Portrait, ca. 1910
© Lee Friedlander, Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco*

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iv. According to the reports of his contemporaries, Rousseau believed that he was making academically acceptable paintings, and had no clue that his work was in fact powerful because its style was so raw. A similar case is presented by Eugene Atget, who was lionized by the Surrealists because of the mysterious and evocative nature of his photographs of Paris streets. Atget himself believed his photographs were simply factual documents.
The scratching out of the woman’s face was an intentional and evidently violent act. It is hard to say what Bellocq intended by this gesture. Was it an awkward but tactful attempt to preserve his subject’s anonymity? Was it meant as a comment on turn-of-the-century sex workers, or women in general (that they were perceived only as physical objects), a comment that would have been more original then than it would be now? Or did he mean to fetishize this woman’s body for his own pleasure? These questions can’t be answered.

Bellocq was an outsider artist, a “primitive” in the manner of Henri Rousseau, someone whose intentions may well have been at odds with his actual accomplishments.

Judging by the numerous romantic images of women that were found on the walls of Bellocq’s apartment after his death, it is reasonable to assume that he may have meant to make similar sorts of pictures. The fact that he failed to do so is certainly interesting, but it is beside the point. What matters is the effect that his pictures produce. The image here reproduced is densely layered with tension and contradiction—the contradictions between the woman’s physical poise and the awkwardly arranged nature of the setting, and the tension between her willingness to be seen and the photographer’s erasure of one of her most distinguishing features. There is also the odd relationship between the deliberate scratch marks and the damage done to the top part of the picture by an accident. The missing information—a face, a part of the setting itself—turns it into a riddle.

Since Bellocq was a commercial photographer, and spent his professional life trying to satisfy the desires of his clients, it is unlikely that this portrait was commissioned. It flies in the face of the most basic goal of commercial photography—that a portrait must present the subject’s best face to the world. But there are other reasons for making portraits. In terms of the work you do for this assignment, Bellocq might be a good model. Perhaps you want to enter a danger zone, outside the pale of “looking good.” Perhaps you want to be ambiguous. Or perhaps you feel like being accurate, in terms of presenting a less than completely socialized version of yourself. Perhaps you want to get as far away as you can from self-flattery. Or not. You might want to glorify yourself, even beyond reason. In any case, you don’t have to turn yourself into a mindless recipient of your own gaze. The important thing is to relinquish your preconceptions of what a portrait should look like. Losing your face is the first step in this exercise.

To begin this assignment, you will need first to pay attention to matters of procedure. How are you going to focus the camera’s lens on yourself? How are you going to arrange the framing of your image so that your face is not visible? How are you going to press the shutter release button in the event that the camera is not in your hands? You may choose to mount your camera on a tripod, and you might use a long (10–20-foot) cable release, or use the camera’s self-timer. You might use an assistant to perform these chores. On the other hand, you may feel more comfortable and more at liberty to experiment if you do it alone, without a witness. These are important details, and you will need to think them through carefully.
Leaving issues of procedure aside, in favor of examining the question of content, I would like you to consider a number of self-portraits by different photographers. Each of these pictures could be seen as an appropriate response to this assignment. In the first picture, by Lee Friedlander (“Madison, Wisconsin, 1966”), there is a face, but it does not belong to the photographer. It is a framed photograph of a young African-American girl, staring out at us from a window display. It is a picture within a picture. The photograph of the girl is a formal portrait, the sort taken by commercial studios for display in the home. But here it becomes a found object encountered in a public location. The shadow of Friedlander’s head is cast over the girl’s face. This superimposition changes the context and intended purpose of the original portrait entirely. Friedlander’s photograph provides us with a model for a certain kind of looking. Photographers routinely appropriate fragments of reality and turn these fragments into something else. In this case, a picture of another person becomes part of the photographer’s picture of himself, like a mask.

The play of shadow and reflection in the image is disorienting. The photographer’s head is separated from his upper torso. The reflection of his torso is situated above and behind his head, the shadow of which floats separately over the framed image of the girl in the shop window. The photographer pictures himself in the act of taking the picture, surrounded by fragments of other frames displayed in the window, a scruffy potted plant, and the edge of what appears to be another picture within this picture. There are no actual bodies here. It is a confusing theater of shadow and reflection. The markers that usually let us make sense of spatial relations—foreground and background, inside and outside—have collapsed. We cannot see what is actually inside, behind the window display. Our minds may tell us that the sunlit street behind the photographer, and the photographer himself, are reflections of what is outside, but they appear to be inside, behind the window display.
As a self-portrait, what does this photograph communicate? The photographer’s presence permeates the scene, but there is no display of emotion. The inner Friedlander does not appear. He defines himself completely in terms of his activity as a photographer—his fascination with imagery as source material for other images, with the play of his own visual thinking. The picture is a mirror, onto which he projects a conversation between two different kinds of photography—the commercial studio portrait and the apparently casual street photograph. As a self-portrait, it is about his persona as an artist, someone who defines himself primarily in terms of his engagement with the seductive shadows and highlights of the black-and-white image world.

In “New York City, 1966,” he superimposes the shadow of his own head on the actual head of his subject, a blonde woman in a fur coat. He is behind her, and the top of his head coincides with the collar of her coat, causing his hair to look like it is standing up on end. His projected shadow takes on the texture of the coat. He becomes a part of what he is looking at. It is a striking effect. Again, the photograph has little to say directly about who he is. It is a kind of occupational definition of the street photographer as someone who only takes shape by pursuing others. It is also an intellectual performance, a meditation on the photographic process and the formal values of the image. The stark contrast between the darkness of his cast shadow and the brightness of the woman herself provides an emblem of black-and-white photography itself—the play between negative and positive, the seductiveness of rich tonalities. These values are an integral part of the content of the image. It almost becomes a formal exercise. It is hard to imagine a more oblique, more reticent form of self-portraiture.

Lee Friedlander
New York City, 1966
Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
John Coplans is an artist whose work seems to have little in common with Friedlander’s, other than the fact that they are both avid practitioners of self-portraiture. Coplans works in the studio with a big camera, not on the street with a small Leica. He has been making large-scale pictures of parts of his aging body for years. In the image reproduced here, the camera is situated on the floor. The frame is filled by his toes, feet, and lower ankles. There is an abundance of physical defects—gnarly toenails, wrinkles, unruly bits of body hair, a scar left by recent stitches on his left foot, a strange dark blotch near the outer part of his left ankle. His feet, which seem to be flexed upward, look to be either fat or swollen. There is nothing graceful about the body on display here.

And yet the picture itself is both elegant and monumental. Due to the scale and close view, what we see of his body is like a landscape, tree roots or outcroppings of rock with a small vertical sliver of bright sky in the background. This graceful curve of negative space, pure whiteness almost cutting the image in half, acquires a presence of its own and plays off the bulge of the photographer’s body parts. As is the case with the Friedlander images, there is little here that goes beyond appearances to investigate complex issues of personal identity. The power of the image rests in the tension created between its elegant visual organization and the crisply rendered details of the photographer’s own unglamorous body. Coplans’s engagement with these details takes the notion of the portrait as a “likeness” to an exaggerated extreme, far away from social or psychological notions of personal identity. His self-portraits begin and end with solid surfaces.

Jo Spence, on the other hand, was a critic and an artist who was deeply and directly concerned with issues of identity, particularly the social and psychological issues generated by representations of the female body. Unlike Friedlander or Coplans, she was not terribly concerned with formal issues, except insofar as they supported her politically focused investigations of the self. In examining the construction of identity, she drew on a wide range of source material, including family albums and fairy tales. The critic Patricia Holland refers thus to an early exhibition of Spence’s work, “Beyond the Family Album”:

“...she offered her awareness of the sickness, shame and struggles of everyday life as a commentary on the conventional smiles of the snapshots. ...Her work was embattled and engaged, determined to explore the taboos and hidden truths which bedevil family histories. She dealt with class, as she reflected on her working-class upbringing and the half-articulated exclusions that it implied; she dealt with gender, approaching the world from an uncompromising feminist perspective with a campaigning edge; and she dealt with subjectivity, always ‘putting myself in the picture,’ in a form of ‘politicized exhibitionism.’”

In the image reproduced here (overleaf), Spence presents her 47-year-old body in an industrialized landscape. Even though her face is not shown, the image clearly suggests that she is claiming this scene, the literal “background” of her physical identity, by her surveying gaze. Even though it is seen from behind, her body communicates a powerful sense of presence. The fact that she is naked is of course a key element in the picture. Her middle-aged flesh, in combination with the representation of the industrial landscape, presents a startling juxtaposition.

On one level, this picture refers to a basic strategy of traditional fine art photography, where a female nude is represented in the context of nature. But she has turned the key elements of this recipe upside down. There is nothing beautiful, no magical landscape, neither Nature nor smooth female form. Her research into the elements of fairy tales is relevant here. In her writing on this topic, she refers to the ugly sisters in the Cinderella story, and to the fairy tale genre’s widespread “exclusion of the ugly other.” Fairy tales are powerful cultural fables, with pointed references to contemporary values, even though they take place in a setting that always seems distant from our own. She writes:

“Power relations are caught in the hierarchy of a pre-technological age, set in a ‘historical’ past, where the modern child is somehow sited with her family. The technological, industrial and financial base of society is totally absent, as is any account of the power of the state.”

Spence does not advocate the banishment of fairy tales from the education of girls, but rather insists on examining the ways in which they persist in influencing our dreams of beauty and mastery. She presents us with a counter-image in which the ugly sister is the heroine. In her self-portrait, she situates herself in a politicized landscape, letting the camera dispassionately define
the look of her flesh, with all its history of accumulated defects. The landscape’s solid icons of electric power, receding toward a distant city, are like enlarged diagrams of the shape of her firmly planted body. The weeds seem to gather benignly around her hand. The image is of an industrial garden, a fairy-tale landscape transformed and brought into the present.

Catherine Opie’s work is also rooted in the politics of identity. Her self-portrait is part of a series of portraits of lesbian, gay, and transgendered people. This work is quite dead-pan, apparently without affect, and as such it bears some resemblance to the typological portraits taken by 19th-century anthropologists of people outside the pale of conventional European society. But Opie consciously plays with the idea of identity, specifically in terms of gender—what we think we know about people simply by looking at their pictures. She photographs people’s backs in order to make her subject’s gender hard to read. The back view does not have the effect of making her invisible or anonymous—the distinctiveness of her body, posture, and hairstyle identifies her as butch. The stick-figure drawing of two girls holding hands in front of a house reinforces the idea of a lesbian relationship. The suggestion that the drawing has been done in blood creates a strange
effect. The violence of the inscription is at odds with the innocent style of the drawing. It is both a scar and a badge of pride. It functions very much like a face, in the sense that it announces who she is.

Consider the self-portrait, “Untitled, 1996,” by Shirin Neshat (overleaf). The image is from her series, “Women of Allah.” Neshat was born in Iran, but was living in the United States when the Revolution took place. She didn’t return to Iran for many years; during that time, she acted out her ideas about Muslim female identity in front of a camera, trying to reconnect to her Muslim identity. She did not take the pictures herself, although she carefully designed and directed each shot. Throughout the series, she wears a chador (veil). Referring to the armed female commandos who fought for the Ayatollah Khomeini during the Revolution (and those who were ready to fight against him afterwards), she often holds a gun. On the photographs themselves, she covers the parts of her body that are not concealed by the chador with hand-written Farsi texts. The texts are poems by the pro-revolutionary feminist poet Tahereh Saffarzadeh. In addition to the Farsi calligraphy, which most Western viewers would be unable to recognize or decipher, “Untitled, 1996” has a
symbolic underpinning that would escape most people’s understanding. The subject’s hand, held to her mouth in a manner that is clearly iconic, contains an esoteric but quite precise reference to the Islamic idea of martyrdom.

“Untitled, 1996,” like the other self-portraits in “Women of Allah,” is wrapped in its own kind of veil. Like the Western stereotypes of Muslim women themselves, the picture does not reveal much of what lies beneath. On the surface, without the support of contextualizing information, it is ambiguous. What does the hand gesture signify? Is she about to speak? Or is she, so to say, holding her tongue, trying to keep quiet? Is the calligraphy a form of speech, or is it a decoration, a finely wrought glove? If speech, what does it mean? Is it exhortation? Interdiction? To whom do the words belong?

Neshat’s self-portrait encourages a diverse and often contradictory array of responses. Many of these responses are based on a degree of ignorance, combined with stereotypical assumptions about Muslim female identity. These can range from a Western feminist interpretation of Muslim women as oppressed and in need of liberation, to an orientalist view of them as an exotic blend of passivity and ferocity. The image also has a visual presence that is not so tightly tethered to its cultural or political underpinnings. The Farsi calligraphy can be seen as ornamentation, very much like the f-shaped sound-holes inscribed on the woman’s back in Man Ray’s well-known photograph, “Le violon d’Ingres” (discussed in Chapter 6). These markings transform the female subject into a musical instrument, a silent object, capable of sound only when played.

In fact, Neshat’s “Untitled” is startlingly similar to another Man Ray photograph, “Hands on Lips” (1929). The resemblance is so striking that it could be considered a quotation, or appropriation of the older image. Appropriation, in fact, was a strategy employed by artists—most conspicuously, Sherrie Levine—in the latter part of the 20th century. In 1979, using the pages of an exhibition catalog, Levine re-photographed some of Walker Evans’s Depression-era portraits of Alabama tenant farmers (see Chapters 5 and 7 for discussions of Walker Evans). She presented this work as her own in a 1981 show at New York’s Metro Pictures, the gallery that also represents Cindy Sherman. Her aim was twofold: to challenge the idea of originality in photography, and to dramatize the way in which decades-old documentary images of deprivation had become high-priced commodities in the contemporary art world. She had no intention of fooling people into thinking that her own images were in themselves valuable. The work was a kind of agitprop tactic, designed more to raise people’s awareness than to add to the art world’s inventory of precious objects. It had a predictable result. The Evans estate claimed copyright infringement of the work, thereby preventing it from being sold.

Levine’s work was useful as an investigation of the concept of authorship. As such, it depended on the ideas put forth in Roland Barthes’s influential essay, “The Death of the Author,” in which Barthes argued that works of art, or “texts,” as he called them, should be treated as being independent of their creators. In his scheme, a text is always subject to multiple readings. It is beholden to the organizing force of no single point of view. The author becomes simply a conduit through which meanings pass. He/she becomes another spectator. As Jacques Derrida put it, this person (the artist) is “an ‘I’ that, functioning as a pure passageway..., is not some singular and irreplaceable existence, some subject or ‘life,’ but only, moving between life and death, reality and fiction, etc., a mere function or phantom”. This idea has some interesting implications. On the one hand, it releases the work of art from what some have seen as the oppressively heroic aura of the artist as a god-like Creator. On the other hand, it implies that the artist is no longer responsible for whatever the work may signify.

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v. The reference is to the heroic death of the Shia warrior Abbas, who was killed by Sunni forces at Karbala in the year 680, prior to the massacre that marked the beginning of the sectarian struggle over who was to be the legitimate successor to the prophet Muhammad. Abbas, in an attempt to bring water to his Shia people, who had been encircled in the desert by the Sunni forces, had escaped to the Euphrates with a water skin. But after he had filled it, Sunni forces attacked him and severed his hands with arrows. He attempted to carry the water skin between his teeth, but he was killed before he could make it back to the Shia encampment. The image of a hand, which is meant to commemorate Abbas’s martyrdom, can be found on many public drinking fountains in Iran.
Barthes elucidates some of the reasons behind his idea. “The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us”. His goal is to change our understanding of how we read and look. As he says,

“We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.”

This is a challenge to the authority traditionally accorded to the artist as creator, but it is not an argument for irresponsibility. On the contrary, it seeks to place both the text and its originator firmly in a social context. While the “author” may be only a site, through which multiple and ambiguous meanings pass like ships in the night, these meanings are rooted in, and modified by, the real-world experiences of each reader/viewer. It is in this sense that the text is a tissue of quotations. In denying the claim of the image or text to singularity, Barthes tells us that it is inextricably tied to the constantly changing conditions surrounding its production and consumption. All texts and images are social documents. They are not closed systems.

Shirin Neshat’s “Untitled, 1996” is a good example of what Barthes is talking about. It drifts back and forth between discordant reference points. On the one hand, it suggests a heroic image of the Islamic woman, a revolutionary poet/provocateur; on the other, a Westernized objectification of femininity, an image of enigmatic allure. The photograph is simultaneously a self-portrait, a generalized romantic image of militant Islamic womanhood, and a quotation from the canon of Western fine art photography. The ambiguity of the image, the fact that the subject won’t sit still inside a single stable identity, is supported by the absence of a complete face, the one thing that might contain these contradictory elements and hold them steady.

Without the whole face, the portrait is beyond the comforting pale of likeness and recognition. We might read this as a strategy designed to catalyze the viewer’s interest, while simultaneously frustrating any attempt to easily decipher the image. As viewers, we are left suspended. The more we find out about the underpinnings of the picture, the more uncertain we become about who we are looking at. The meanings multiply. In this, we are asked to share the artist’s own divided vantage point, as she tries to make sense of her own Muslim identity. Neshat speaks about her experience of leaving Iran as a young woman:

“Leaving has offered me incredible personal development, a sense of independence that I don’t think I would have had. But there’s also a great sense of isolation. And I’ve permanently lost a complete sense of center. I can never call any place home. I will forever be in a state of in-between.”

The claims exerted by disparate cultures, Islam and the West, are held in a precarious state of tension in a single identity. While defining the emotional space of exile, the artist/subject has, at best, a fragment of a face.

When Shirin Neshat looks at herself through a camera, there is a real distance between herself as artist and herself as subject. This is of course true in the case of all self-portraits. You are no longer behind the camera. You cannot see yourself through the viewfinder, you cannot make any of the myriad of small decisions—about framing, about choosing the right moment—that make you want to press the shutter-release button. You have lost a degree of control. Because you are not behind the camera, you cannot previsualize the resulting image. That means that you may make a picture of yourself that you don’t like. Along with increasing the chances for accidents, it increases the chances that you will make a picture that you don’t understand.

You might consider relinquishing your desire for control. Consider instead the “what if?” scenario. What will it look like if I do this? Or this? What if I arrange the elements of the scene this way? Or change the framing a little bit? Or move the camera over here? Or there? You may think that this activity—variations of pose and gesture, changes in the setting, camera angle, or composition—
will get you closer to a premeditated result, an image of yourself that you can recognize as accurate or meaningful.

But it is really something else, a quite different method. It is predicated on the assumption that a photograph will always look different from the thing photographed. As Garry Winogrand is reported to have said, when asked why he took pictures, “I photograph in order to see what the world looks like photographed.” His statement acknowledges the essential difference between the image and its reference point; as a consequence of this difference, it also implies, there is no point in trying for complete control. Be curious, he says. Cultivate surprise.

As for self-portraits, think of this analogy. You look at your face in a mirror. There is no possibility of surprise. You adjust and readjust, in relation to your reflected image. You are your own surveillance device. You are in complete control. With a camera, when you are not behind the lens, you cannot see yourself (unless you have a digital camera that can be plugged into a computer monitor or TV set, or one with a rotating LCD screen, allowing you to preview the result). You are not there. The inner monitor is absent. So your photographs will always be something of a surprise, no matter how much control you try to exert.

This can be an advantage. There is a chance that you will discover something exciting. You may make a picture that goes beyond the controlled orderliness of your method, beyond what you thought you meant to do. You are not sleepwalking or engaging in unregulated subconscious activity. You are acting with intention, but you have opened yourself up to being lucky. It is thus that the satisfying shock of the unexpected may arise out of a conscious and deliberately executed procedure.

Sources

2. Duchenne de Boulogne, Mécanisme de la physionomie humain, 1862, part 3, p. 129
3. ibid., part 1, p. 31
5. Jo Spence, Cultural Sniping, London and New York, p. 66
8. ibid., p. 146
PEOPLE at the MARGIN: The EDGE of the FRAME
(And a Note on Documentary Photography)
“My photographs are not planned or composed in advance and I do not anticipate that the on-looker will share my viewpoint.”

ROBERT FRANK | “A Statement,” U.S. Camera Annual, 1958
The assumption here is that you are using a traditional analog camera with a manual focus lens. Single lens reflex cameras with auto focus lenses, whether digital or analog, will likely show a single, centrally located focusing marker, or a whole array from which to choose. Because these markers are visible, they will affect the way you think about framing your picture (as you will see in the following discussion). Some digital cameras do not have conventional viewfinders, and photographers have to compose their pictures by using the LCD display on the back of the camera body. Since this allows the photographer to quickly inspect the whole visual field, without necessarily assigning priority to a single area of the frame, it might be thought that some of the points raised in the ensuing discussion here are no longer valid. This remains to be seen. Old habits, including those encouraged by old cameras, die hard.
foreground, and sharply focused. Or you may not. The only requirement is that your picture be the result of a series of articulated decisions about how you are going to represent your subject in space, within the limitations imposed by the camera, so that your intentions are best served.

Consider the Jacob Riis photograph, “Police Station Lodgers,” a picture of an old blind woman, situated in the center of the frame. She is there, next to her wooden palette, because she has no other place else to sleep. A hand, holding a match, juts into the right-hand corner of the picture. The disposition of the data in this image was influenced by the nature of early camera technology. Riis did not have an optical viewfinder. He couldn’t see through the camera to compose his picture. He probably tried to center his subject in the frame as best he could. But he also managed to accidentally catch a view of his own hand at the edge of the frame. A moment before the film was exposed, the match we see him holding had lit the magnesium powder of his flash unit. In addition to being a portrait of a homeless woman, the photograph is also about itself. It actually shows us a part of the process by means of which it was made.

This chance detail gives energy and meaning to the image. Riis was an evangelical Christian and a political reformer. He saw the poverty-stricken immigrants who were his subjects as victims of a predatory landlord class. The photograph itself, however accidentally, is structured according to the terms of his religious and social beliefs. It is built around a Manichean, proto-Marxist sense of struggle. This is conveyed by the visual tension between the bull’s eye location (in the center of the frame) of the victim/subject and the predatory hand at the edge of the frame. Since the hand is the photographer’s, there is also an added element of commentary here on the nature of the relationship of the photographer himself to his subject. His gaze is itself predatory, adding another layer of meaning to what was intended by the photographer. The picture is not simply about the victimizing of the poor by the ruling class. It has something unsettling to say about the occasional brutality of the photographer’s gaze.
The book in which this picture originally appeared, *How the Other Half Lives*, is one of the earliest examples of the documentation of the lives of marginalized people. Riis’s pictures are engaging because of the visceral way in which their style consistently mirrors their content. With clearer conscious intent, more recent photographers have employed strategies that follow his example. Eugene Richards, a contemporary photojournalist, is a case in point. Consider the photograph (left), taken from his book, *Dorchester Days*, a look at the working-class neighborhood of Boston where he grew up. The frame of the image, particularly the top edge, which cuts off the top of the subject’s head, grabs at the old woman in much the same way that she herself clutches at the edge of her dress—or, more precisely, the way she holds onto her own right hand as it clutches at the edge of her dress. It is a layered gesture.

The act of photographic composition here is aggressive. The photographer’s own gesture, his act of framing, literally marginalizes his subject, implying thereby an opinion, certainly a feeling, if not a judgment, about the nature and quality of her life as represented in this moment. Richards works in the mode of personal documentary inaugurated by Robert Frank, who is himself partially indebted to Riis. It is readily apparent that he is not detached, and he makes no pretense of being so.

The relationship of style to content in Richards’s photograph is pushed to the point of hyperbole. His way of framing feels like a physical response to what he is seeing. Its effect is to forcefully *impose* meaning on the scene before him. We feel his presence as an active element in the scene. This presence is at least as important as the presence and condition of the subject herself. Style mirrors content. It is a kind of rhyming activity, recalling the foundational tenet of mid-20th century art theory, most conspicuously championed by the critic Clive Bell, who promoted the idea of “significant form.” Bell’s notion that there should be a seamless connection between style and content became an accepted critical standard for judging the effectiveness of visual images in the fine arts.

Visual rhymes are but one instance of how form can achieve significance. In the case of the Richards photograph, the rhyme is achieved by the way the photographer’s method of making the picture echoes the physical gesture of his subject. The photographer’s choice of moment, in which the key elements of the photograph are positioned in relation to each other, just so, is also crucial. The expression on his subject’s face—what we can see of it—could be interpreted as a moan or a muffled scream. The position of her hands (is she grabbing at her dress in order to give herself more room to breathe?) further conveys a sense of moment. Maybe it is a fleeting one, in between sips of coffee, caught in the blink of an eye. Maybe, in real time, this instant had very little significance. But that is beside the point.

With human subjects, the moment is always decisive in matters of framing. The photographer arranges the information found in the camera’s viewfinder, often intuitively and extremely quickly, in a way that seems appropriate to his sense of the quality of the instant. Henri Cartier-Bresson coined the term “the decisive moment.” It was the title of his first book. It is an idea that pertains directly to the issue of framing being discussed here.

For the photographer roaming the streets in search of images, Cartier-Bresson thought that there was a particular moment when everything coalesced—a coincidence of elements, a transcendent accident that could result in a photograph. He cited Surrealism—a movement that made a fetish of chance encounters—as a formative element in his own visual education. According to him, the moment in question came, and the moment went. You got it, or you didn’t. There was only one. It did not have multiple versions. Even though he did not speak or write specifically about framing or composition, he was certainly adept at it in his own practice. His theoretical assumption seemed to be that the photographer, if he was successful, simply recorded the moment, which would or would not be, by its very nature, “decisive.” The magic resided in the information itself. This information—the content of the photograph—often revolved around visual rhymes. The rhymes were internal, inside the frame. They had nothing to do with the photographer’s method, particularly with respect to his insinuating himself into the moment itself. He was simply there, observing what happened in front of him.

The event itself, however, is almost always ambiguous or ephemeral. It doesn’t tell a story; it has no particular point to make. As Colin Westerbeck says in his book, *Bystander: A History of Street Photography*,
“Although a typical Cartier-Bresson photograph doesn’t contain a clear incident, there is still usually a lot going on in it.”

Look at the well-known picture, “Behind the Gare St. Lazare, 1932” reproduced here. The silhouetted Everyman figure in the foreground, so precisely poised in the air over his reflection in the puddle below him, perfectly echoes the doubled image of the ballerina on the torn poster in the background, and the poster itself reflected in the water. The man in the background, by the fence, is a spectral witness to this event, like the photographer himself.
Distracted by the poise and graphic balance of the image, by the rhyming of a passing real-life moment with the static representation of a ballerina’s leap, caught by the elegance of this performance in image-making, we might forget to ask what is actually happening here, in this moment. What is this man doing? Why is he jumping off the end of this makeshift wooden ladder, into the water?

The event itself, obscure and elusive, has been permanently memorialized within boundaries of the frame. It is just barely contained. The leaping figure is not close to the center of the image, as he theoretically might have been. The graphic thrust of the photograph, from left to right, follows his trajectory, suggesting a future moment, seconds later, when he will have vanished from the scene, and the splash from his mysterious jump will have subsided. The frame here is not simply a static vessel for a thoroughly immobilized instant. It is interesting to note, in this connection, that the phrase, “the decisive moment,” which was the English language title of Cartier-Bresson’s 1952 book, was a mistranslation of the original French title, *Images à la sauvette*.

“A la sauvette is a colloquialism roughly equivalent to ‘on the run,’ but ...there is also an untranslatable future element involved. The instant being described is the one when you are just about to take off, the point at which the shortstop is ready to dash in any direction as he watches the batter step into the ball, or when the pickpocket waits for his victim so he can strike. *Images à la sauvette* is the right title because it characterizes the photographer’s actions as well as his subject.”

Cartier-Bresson’s street photographs, though taken on the run, are undeniably composed. In his best work, the extreme rational order of the image is held in tension with a kind of nervous energy that wants to burst out of the picture’s support structure. In “Seville, 1933,” reproduced here, the harsh light and triangular geometries of a Spanish alleyway is countered by the ephemeral presence of two boys. The solid architectural presence of the setting, old and cracked and seemingly extending backwards into infinity, provides a stark contrast to the ephemeral and transient presence of the human figures. Neither of the boys is sharply focused. One of them, at the lower left
edges, is barely contained by the frame. He looks like he is about to drop out of the picture entirely. The odd circular shadow at the bottom center of the image is more solid than he is.

Complementing the formal opposition of figures and background in this complex picture, there is also a network of subtle formal connections. The blankness of the architecture matches the vacuity of the older boy's face, and the unreadability of the younger boy's face. Also, the jagged edge of crumbling concrete on the wall, the inverted "V" shape that seems to be coming out of the older boy's forehead (coincidentally echoing the v-neck of his sweater), connects him like a leash to the rhythmically receding angles of the street behind him. The manhole cover at the bottom center of the photograph, and the circular shadow below it, provide an emblem of the photograph's seamless but elaborate structure of echoes and opposites. In shape, they mirror each other. In scale, and in their position relative to each other (although in reverse) they mirror the two boys. On their own, they are both like and unlike: similar in form, dissimilar in tone and substance.

There's something porous about the way Cartier-Bresson frames his pictures, as if the edges of the images are being allowed to leak. Garry Winogrand, whose work is certainly in the tradition of the decisive moment, frames his pictures differently. In the photograph, reproduced here, of the two women, the two girls, and the little boy on a New York street, the echoing hand gestures provide the same sort of visual echoes that would have attracted Cartier-Bresson's eye. But there is something about Winogrand's method that is very different from Cartier-Bresson's. First of all, Winogrand's lens of choice was a 28mm wide-angle lens, as opposed to the 50mm lens favored by the French photographer. Winogrand was probably no further than four feet away from the nearest of the women in his picture. He is more aggressive than Cartier-Bresson in terms of his willingness to invade his subject's personal space. He is often hyperbolic in his choice of moment, finding such a density of gestures that the photograph becomes something like a comic opera.

Street photographers who follow Winogrand's procedure, prowling the streets and pouncing on their subjects with a 28mm wide-angle lens, quickly discover that close physical proximity is crucial for achieving a feeling of contact with their subjects. Generally speaking, Winogrand's rule of thumb seems to be that if his subject can't reach out and actually touch him, he's not close enough. Even so, the lens coverage is such—the angle of view is so inclusive—that it's hard to compose a picture with any sort of graphic compression or simplicity. There's just too much visual data.

This is one of the reasons that Winogrand was attracted to the wide-angle lens. As Colin Westerbeck puts it:

"...he can play that delightful formalist game that Cartier-Bresson is so good at. ...But even if he's coming out of that kind of shooting, he's trying to go someplace else—someplace cruder, deeper and cruder... Winogrand wants to see what's left of photography, what the essence of it is, after you give up that kind of formal, French rationality that Cartier-Bresson always hangs onto."

The sudden eruption of contrapuntal gestures in this photograph may be an example of formalist playfulness, but that's as far as Winogrand takes it. Many of his pictures are packed with human figures, seemingly to the point of chaos, but the boundaries of the frame are usually assertively positioned. Here, there's a lot of space surrounding the figures. There's not much going on there, certainly not at the edges. The space serves only to encompass the moment, to make it feel like a self-contained performance. Paradoxically, as the field of view expands, the image itself becomes more enclosed. Winogrand believes in the four walls of the frame. They're solid. Nothing leaks out.

A Note on Documentary Photography

Many of the pictures discussed in this chapter, as well as others included elsewhere in this book, can be considered within the framework of documentary photography. This is a practice that was most clearly and extensively defined in the 1930s, by the work of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Esther Bubley, John Vachon, Arthur Rothstein, and others. Classic documentary was cast in a "social problem" framework, often finding its subjects in marginalized communities: the urban and rural poor, workers, the aged, people of color, immigrants, and others who were perceived to be at the mercy of circumstance. Jacob Riis and Eugene Richards are considered to be documentarians. One of the basic attributes of the traditional documentary photograph was its
alleged authenticity, based on the presumption that it was an unstaged representation of what was presented to the camera lens.

“This is how documentary works. ...It defies comment; it imposes its meaning. It confronts us, the audience, with empirical evidence of such nature as to render dispute impossible and interpretation superfluous. All emphasis is on the evidence; the facts themselves speak ...since just the fact matters, it can be transmitted in any plausible medium. ...The heart of documentary is not form or style or medium, but always content.”

According to this prescription, the actual framing of an image is generated by the subject, by the nature of the information to be conveyed, as opposed to being a manifestation of the photographer’s personal style. Image composition and other formal concerns were not felt to be particularly relevant. In practice, the subject would most often be placed in the center of the frame. The information toward the edges of the frame, and in the background, being lower in the hierarchy of significant data, would only be supportive of the central subject.

The authenticity of pure description that is supposedly guaranteed by this method, even when it is practiced, is, of course, illusory. The act of framing is always a choice that gives emphasis and excludes information that might be considered relevant. Recognizing the extent to which photographers always intervene in their work, Walker Evans himself insisted that he worked in “the documentary style”. James Agee collaborated with Evans on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, a book that documented six weeks in the lives of three tenant farmer families in Alabama. The project was begun as an assignment for Fortune, although the magazine never published it. Agee wrote this in the book’s foreword, thus initiating a continuing discussion about the ethics of documentary photography:

“It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together by need and chance and for profit into a company,
an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings in the name of [the] science of “honest journalism” (whatever that paradox may mean), ...and that these people would be capable of meditating this prospect without the slightest doubt of their qualification to do an “honest” piece of work, and with a conscience better than clear, and in the virtual certitude of almost unanimous public approval.”

Often, in the practice of documentary photography (and in portraiture generally), the brief acquaintanceship between photographer and subject leads to a presumption of closeness, a semblance of intimacy. The desire to communicate knowledge of the subject by means of the image (otherwise, after all, what is the point of making the picture?) leads the photographer to identify with the subject. There is a potential for bonding, which provides the rationale for a certain kind of portraiture, such as that practiced by Dorothea Lange. Her most famous picture, which has been taken to exemplify the work of the Farm Security Administration, “Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, 1936,” is reproduced here. Years later, in 1960, Lange spoke about making this picture.

“I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.”

Lange is perfectly up front about her intentions, and honest in her description of her working method. Operating “out of instinct,” she wanted an iconic image of a destitute, but determined mother, alone in adversity. In order to get the picture, she enveloped herself in a cloak of empathy, and moved into her subject’s personal space. Identifying with her subject, she behaved as if they were equal partners in understanding, and asked no questions. If she had asked questions, she would have learned that her subject’s name was Florence Owens Thompson. Ms Thompson, a widowed Cherokee farm worker and part-time waitress, had stopped at the pea-pickers’ camp because her car had broken down. She was waiting for a friend, her life partner and father of one of her seven children, who had gone to get help. Her son, Troy, later recounts:

“There’s no way we sold our tires, because we didn’t have any to sell. The only ones we had were on the Hudson and we drove off in them. I don’t believe Dorothea Lange was lying. I just think she had one story mixed up with another. Or she was borrowing to fill in what she didn’t have.”

Lacking in factual accuracy, “Migrant Mother” has nonetheless been thought to possess powerful symbolic and emotional truth. Roy Stryker, the head of the photography division of the Farm Security Administration, referred to it as the “ultimate” image of the Depression era. James Agee, however, was likely thinking of just this kind of imagery when he referred to journalistic (and documentary) photography as “obscene and thoroughly terrifying.”

The work of Walker Evans, co-author with Agee of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, is very different from Lange’s. The portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs, reproduced overleaf (and discussed further in Chapter 7), is typical. Although she nearly fills the frame, Evans did not work at close range here (he used a telephoto lens to collapse the space between him and his subject). While there is proximity, there is no intimacy. Evans does not identify with his subject. The aura of compassion that is so essential to Lange’s “Migrant Mother” portrait, because it allows us to feel that we understand this woman’s circumstances (even though we can actually see nothing of these circumstances), is missing. Allie Mae Burroughs, though introduced to us by name, remains essentially anonymous, anticipating the nameless subway passengers who were the subjects of Evans’s later work (see Chapter 5). The portrait asserts Evans’s core belief in the unknowability of its subject. If there is something poignant here, it is not Allie Mae Burroughs’s facial expression or her minimally rendered material circumstances, but the impenetrable nature of the image itself.
Recently, following Agee’s lead, some artists and theorists, notably Martha Rosler, Alan Sekula, and Susan Sontag, have amplified the moral critique of documentary photography.ii Sontag has argued that photographs can, at best, only represent symptoms of suffering and powerlessness; that the camera eye is singularly ill-equipped to illuminate the political structures within which these dramas occur, and therefore unable to truly raise awareness or generate social change. In her critical writing, Rosler has referred to the practice as “victim photography.” As an artist, she produced a small book, titled The Bowery in Two Inadequate Representational Systems (1974–75). The book is structured by a series of word/image juxtapositions: a photograph of a skid row building façade, often with empty bottles on the sidewalk, next to a page of text with a scattershot list of words denoting drunkenness (“soaked,” “soused,” “sodden,” “fuddled,” “lushy,” etc.). The photographs have a generic documentary feeling. Their most distinctive feature is that there are no people in them. The human subject, the victim for whom we might be expected to feel compassion, has been removed. Catchphrases and slang, crude vernacular expressions that attempt to describe the victim’s condition, are the inadequate substitutes for human presence in the scene. Rosler’s work says little about the actuality of poverty or alcoholism, but that’s not her point. Her aim is to say something about the problematic nature of photographic representation itself, particularly in displays of people who are vulnerable and undefended.

One way of dealing with this problem is suggested by the work of the Swedish photographer Leif Claesson. Claesson made photographs of the clothing, belongings, and makeshift shelters of homeless people in the parks of Stockholm. He paired these images, some of which have the disconcerting precision of a still-life, with pictures of himself, standing in for the absent vagrant. According to a catalog essay in which his work appears:

“Some of these photographs were made without the consent of the person Claesson presumes to represent. Thus the artist walks a fine moral line to confront us with our own prying curiosity, repulsion, or simple lack of acknowledgment of those who are allowed to fall between society’s cracks. To climb into the soiled clothing and bedding of a stranger requires an urgent sort of empathy, and Claesson’s facial expression reflects both dejection and a glimmer of accusation. If his remote engagement with the homeless population he depicts is ultimately futile, if he has failed these invisible, unlucky inhabitants of the park, so have we.”

Since it does not involve the direct portrayal of homeless people, Claesson’s method can be seen as an attempt to be morally responsible. But it’s also a little edgy, since his impersonation of a victim is a purposefully grotesque parody of empathy and compassion. It takes the portrait photographer’s temptation to identify with the subject to an unlooked-for, but totally logical extreme. In so doing, the photographer tests the limits of tact and good taste.

By way of contrast, the Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov confronts the question of exploitation head-on. His subject is the explosion of homelessness that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. “For as long as the USSR existed,” he says, “there were no homeless people.”

“I followed them in order to know how they lived, how they behaved, how they survived, how they fought for their lives. I chased some of them, paying them to pose. I was compared to a cat, studying its prey at large, insistently, before grabbing it.”

His book, Case History (1999), contains 400 raw color photographs of homeless people in his hometown of Kharkov. The project resembles an unedited album of intimate snapshots. Many of the pictures were taken at night, with flash (see Chapter 10 for a discussion of similar work). They are garish and unrelentingly confrontational. Many of the subjects—scarred, old, with bad teeth and rotting clothes—present themselves to the camera naked, or nearly so. Some are shown...
defecating, holding onto their own genitals or grabbing the private parts of others. Many are shown embracing each other. The design of the book reflects the photographer’s intentions. There are very few pictures that can be looked at as single images, isolated on the page by white borders. Most are full-page bleeds, reaching across the gutter to connect with the photograph on the facing page. Collectively, the portraits merge into each other, a continuous panorama with few resting-points or transitions. The cumulative effect is nearly overwhelming.

“I am not trying to take pictures of sensational things,” Mikhailov says, “but rather of those things which are in excess.” He emphasizes the fact that he is documenting history in a way that was never allowed in the former Soviet Union.

“In the history of photography of our country we don’t have photos of the famine in the Ukraine in the 1930s, when several million people died and corpses were lying around in the streets. We don’t have photos of the war, because journalists were forbidden to take pictures of sorrow threatening the moral spirit of the Soviet people... The entire photography history is ‘dusted.’ And we have the impression that each person with a camera is a spy.”

In spite of the fact that he is photographing subjects that would have been previously forbidden (he had gotten into trouble with the KGB earlier in his career for having made nude photographs), there is nothing edgy or morbidly exhilarating about Mikhailov’s portraits of homeless people. In fact, the pictures are disquietingly calm. They look like family snapshots, the willing subjects of which, facing the camera with patience and equanimity (and an occasional burst of playfulness), bear witness to their shared history.
Speaking of his decision to shoot in color (color film being a recent import to the former USSR), Mikhailov wrote that:

“...a color album photo [is] the thing that connects the rich and the poor. Both the rich and the poor [in post-Soviet society] wanted to have color photographs and there was only one distinction: the rich could afford them, the poor couldn't. The color photo became an image of the new life.”  

The modern photo album is an index to the post-perestroika cultural order, where there are, according to Mikhailov, only two classes: the rich and the homeless. “It suddenly comes to my mind,” he adds, “that these color photos are more like a rash on the ill body.”

The critic Vicki Goldberg succinctly sums up the central issues raised by his work:

“These photographs come smack up against the potential for exploitation so hotly debated in the criticism of documentary photography. He paid his subjects to pose—he says it would have been immoral not to—and often directed them, for instance, to take off their clothes. He writes that ‘manipulating with money is somehow a new way of legal relations’ in the former USSR and he wanted to show how openly people can be manipulated. His wife earned the trust of people who were afraid of everything, and he invited some of them to his home, let them take baths, gave them a drink and evidently food as well.

“He had the power of money and of the camera; they had none. They all agreed to have their pictures published in magazines so others would know how they lived. The imbalance of power inherent in photographing the poor remains disturbing.
“He has written that the homeless are either totally ignored or randomly kicked or shoved into the street. One passer-by shouted at him for photographing a man on the ground then walked on when he asked her to help stand the man up and take him home. He asks whether it would be better to let him die than to publish the photo. ‘In general,’ he writes, ‘it is hard to speak about morality when one is wearing long fur coats.’”

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**Sources**

2. ibid., p. 156
3. ibid., p. 376
11. ibid., p. 10
12. ibid., p. 10
A. THE EDGE OF THE FRAME

Make a picture of any human subject (or subjects), staged or unstaged, in which the energy of the image gathers around its edges. Feel free to use the frame like a knife, cutting off portions of your subject’s body. You may wish to leave the central area of the image empty (if that is possible). Shoot at least two 36-exposure rolls of film, or equivalent.

B. THE INTERNAL RHYME

Shoot at least two rolls of film, or equivalent. You are looking for something that echoes your subject. For instance, you might notice that, at a certain moment and from a particular angle of view, an object in the scene has the same shape as the person who is your subject, or is somehow similarly configured. A short squat man with a smooth round head might be standing to attention, arms at his sides, in the vicinity of a fire hydrant. He might even have a short cigar stuck in the middle of his mouth, like a plug. Or a girl in a flared skirt, holding her arms out to the side, might be situated in front of a sign depicting a butterfly. Or two people, or three or four, might suddenly gesture in ways that form a coherent pattern, as in the Winogrand photograph. These kinds of things, if you look carefully, can be found all the time.

C. POSITIONING THE “VICTIM”

You might actually photograph a homeless person, or someone else whom you perceive to be helpless or marginalized. Think about the implications of where you locate your subject in the frame. If you situate your subject at the edge of the frame, will that imply something about his or her social position, as a “marginalized” person? By framing a photograph thus, will you simply be adding insult to injury? Conversely, what might it mean if you place your subject at the center of the frame? Is it respectful to engage your subject so directly? Or do you thereby turn your subject into a specimen? (See Chapter 7 for a more complete discussion of the centrally located subject.)

Consider the diametrically opposed methods of Leif Claesson and Boris Mikhailov. If you stage the picture, using a stand-in for an actual “victim,” you will, at least in part, be making a comment about the nature of representation itself. If you follow Mikhailov’s lead, you will be involving yourself in other people’s suffering. If you do this, you should consider giving back something to your subjects. For instance, if you wish to photograph homeless people, consider volunteering in a shelter, possibly in exchange for the privilege of photographing there.
BEHAVIOR in the MOMENT:
PICTURING EVENTFULNESS
“Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than to the naked eye.”

Walter Benjamin | The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

“Photographs are, of course, artifacts. But their appeal is that they also seem, in a world littered with photographic relics, to have the status of found objects—unpremeditated slices of the world. Thus, they trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real. They are clouds of fantasy and pellets of information.”

Susan Sontag | On Photography

“A photograph is not what was photographed, it’s something else.”

Garry Winogrand
THE NOTION OF TIMING, IN RELATION TO CARTIER-BRESSON’S DECISIVE MOMENT, was discussed in the previous chapter. I would like to focus on a related issue here, namely the idea of the photographic event, and its relation to the news. At least until recently, we have accepted most news photographs as more or less accurate portraits of real facts and real behavior. This acceptance has been based on trust, a curious act of faith, since most of us also know how capable photographs are of distorting things. Photographers select one instant out of a whole range of possibilities; they edit reality. But distortion also occurs at another level. Viewers skew meaning in the act of interpreting photographs. This is particularly true of politicians and government officials, who routinely attempt to make news images fit their own ideological agendas.

For example, during the Vietnam War, General William Westmoreland asked if an Associated Press photograph of a napalm attack involving civilian victims might not simply represent a “hibachi [brazier] accident.” More recently, in a press conference on Iraq, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld referred to a television image of a child carrying a vase out of a building in Baghdad. He claimed that the image was simply an instance of the random chaos following the liberation of the city, and that it was broadcast repeatedly by the liberal media in an attempt to undermine the success of the American military operation. He made no mention of the fact that what was being portrayed was the systematic looting of priceless historical artifacts from a museum which the military—despite advance warning—had failed to protect.

Information manipulation is routinely performed by photographers and post-production technicians. It can consist of shading meaning by emphasizing certain image tonalities—the dramatic darkening of the Time cover portrait of O. J. Simpson is an extreme example of this practice. Although the actual content of photographs has been occasionally altered with the help of an airbrush, or by darkroom manipulations, it was not until the advent of the computer that this practice became widespread. The most common example of this kind of image manufacture is the marriage of one person’s head and another person’s body. In 1989, for instance, TV Guide published, on its cover, a portrait of Oprah Winfrey. The image was a seamless composite of Oprah’s face and Ann-Margret’s lithe body.

Perhaps you have heard someone say, or even said yourself at some time, “I saw the most amazing thing today. It would have made such a great picture. I wish I’d had my camera.” This statement rests on the assumption that photography is essentially about news—that there are event explosions out there in the world, and we want to be there with our cameras, so we can bear witness when they happen. Sometimes we are there; we take the picture, and the resulting image may indeed reward our effort. Or it may not, and we later wonder what it is we thought we saw. Be that as it may, there really is drama out there, things we need to know about and see. It is a news photographer’s job to show us these things. Often they are quite complicated, and go way beyond the recording of factual events.

A wire service photograph published in the May 9, 2003 edition of the New York Times, titled “Traveler’s Aid,” is a good example. The picture shows a Spanish soldier warming a would-be immigrant, as the caption explains, “one of about 50 who had crossed to Punta Paloma from Morocco in a small boat.” The picture has a Pietá-like feeling. It looks like a work of art. But as a newspaper photograph, with a date and caption attached, it is something more than that, more than a generalized emblem of human compassion. The event is not timeless—it happened “yesterday.” Context is crucial. The immigrant is illegal. The soldier’s job is to prevent his entry into Spain. There is political tension here, a conflict between the soldier’s duty and the moral obligation he feels toward the suffering. This is the real subject of the photograph. It is a densely layered event.

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i. For a detailed discussion of this matter, see William J. Mitchell, The Reconfigured Eye, particularly “How to Do Things with Pictures,” pp. 191–223.
From the standpoint of a news photographer, there is probably nothing happening here right now, wherever it is that you find yourself reading this, worthy of being photographed. But from another perspective, it might be said that this place where you are, and this moment, may be teeming with possibilities. We do not need crisis for news. There can be drama in the everyday. At any given moment anywhere, there may be myriad photographs to be found, layers of fascinating behavior and intriguing juxtapositions, if we but had the wit to see them. It all has to do with the difference between taking a picture and making a picture.

Consider some pictures by three different photographers: Weegee, Robert Frank, and Helen Levitt. Weegee was a news photographer, and therefore attuned to a certain notion of the worthy event. He photographed accident victims, burning buildings, criminals and crime scenes. But more often than not, he would make a picture that had little to do with the picture he was assigned to take. I would like to concentrate here on a picture that was catalyzed by a news event, but which is not related to its origin point. It shows the aftermath of a crime. A man, Harold Horn, whom we might assume to be the subject of the picture, has been arrested for the crime of having collided with a milk wagon in a stolen car. But he is barely present in the photograph. What is most prominent are the faces of the spectators in the background, small knots of men peering through the windows of the police car. These men are all either looking at each other or at the camera. No one is looking at Mr Horn. The detective in the back seat of the car, caught in the act of handcuffing him, is smiling, as if the whole thing were a comical performance. The event itself, the presumed reason for taking the picture, nearly disappears into the spectacle that surrounds it.

There is a curious detail in the picture of Mr Horn’s arrest, in the form of what appears to be an extra hand, jutting out from a shadow in the middle-right area of the image. The hand is gripping Mr Horn’s own left hand. Logically, we can infer that the hand must belong to another police detective, sitting in the front seat of the police car. He has just turned around to help his partner put on the handcuffs. But visually, the hand is a mystery. It feels like it is emerging from nowhere. It becomes a
source of fascination, pulling us even further from what we might have initially assumed the photograph to be about. This enigmatic hand becomes the point around which the rest of the picture revolves. In itself, it is not much. It is a banal and incidental detail, and yet it is not that at all.

Weegee did this kind of thing instinctively. In so doing, he helped to redefine our notion of what constitutes a photographically significant event. When he was dispatched with his camera to a crime scene, he was just as likely to concentrate his attention on marginal details as he was to point his camera at the criminal or murder victim. While he never completely obscures the event he was assigned to photograph, he twists it out of easy recognition, right in front of your eyes. He makes you look elsewhere.

Robert Frank was not a news photographer. He published a book of photographs called The Americans in 1956, at about the same time that a Harvard sociologist named David Riesman published a book called The Lonely Crowd. It was in Riesman’s book that the word “alienation” gained currency as an accurate description of the lives of many Americans. What Frank’s photographs brought to their audience was his own perception, without the label, of this spiritual and social condition. The events to which his pictures referred were inner events. Consider here a photograph of two mothers, one pregnant, one holding a young child, by a lake outside Detroit.

The mothers are standing in front of a tree-trunk; a body of water lies behind them. There are two smaller, separated figures in the distance, on either side of the tree. The mothers are white, pale-skinned. One is wearing a faded gingham dress, which is almost threadbare. Her face is blank. The other mother looks toward her, but there is no sense of a conversation. The two blurred figures in the near distance, framing the threesome in the foreground like parentheses, are black. At least one of them, a man, assumes a posture that could be read as graceful.

What is happening here? What is the event? What are we to make of the juxtaposition of the two groups of people in this setting? Is it about racial separation? Is there a metaphoric connection to
be made between motherhood, or family, and the branching tree? There is no joy implied by that association. And the tree has been abbreviated, by the edges of the frame, to a hard-edged outline, almost a shadow. The only sign of physical grace in the image is given to us by the man in the background, whose features, because they are out of focus, we cannot read. The event described here is a static one, fractured spirits caught in a kind of terminal stillness.

While the picture implies a judgment about the quality of these people’s lives, it is literally about nothing much. A few people were simply standing there, at a particular time, in the presence of a photographer. The photographer chose this moment to represent these people, and we have no way to measure its accuracy. We can never know for sure, but the women here might have been in some way content with their lives. Perhaps Robert Frank interrupted a conversation between them, and they were simply waiting for him to disappear so that they could continue it. Perhaps that is the meaning behind the expressions on their faces, and the event we have witnessed, the image-event, is a fabrication caused by the presence of a camera. The truth of the real-time moment and the truth announced by the photograph might be radically different from each other. Frank himself was never anything less than explicit about this.

The Americans is about alienation. As Jack Kerouac put it, in his introduction to the book, “Robert Frank, Swiss, unobtrusive, nice, with that little camera that he raises and snaps with one hand he sucked a sad poem right out of America onto film.” Helen Levitt’s photographs share some similarities with Frank’s work, although the sensibilities of the two photographers are enormously different. Like Frank, but before him (she began photographing in the 1940s), she shot casually on the street, catching unguarded moments in the lives of people in the city. These moments are by nature banal, completely without the kind of content that a news photographer would recognize as significant. Unlike Frank’s pictures, however, hers are all about poise: about her own poise in finding and framing moments of ballet-like precision, and about the poise that seems to inhere in the body language, expressions, and spatial disposition of her subjects on the city sidewalks.
behavior in the moment: picturing eventfulness
Levitt’s work is musical in the sense that it has an inwardly generated rhythmic structure, and is frequently based on visual rhymes. Consider this photograph—three young black men lounge seamlessly around a street corner mailbox. In the lower foreground, a cat pauses behind them. The picture was taken in New York. In an understated way, its content relates to notions of male self-image, composure and being “cool.” The look of the young man who almost confronts the photographer—this “almost” is a key element of being cool—is an embodiment of guarded calm.

The cat provides a bit of gentle humor, in the form of a pun referring to a 1940s, jazz-based, slang word for a particularly knowing kind of man: “cat.” The animal’s body echoes the poses of the men in the picture. Notice the angles formed by the legs of the young man who is looking toward the camera. They form exactly the same pattern as the back two legs of the cat. Now look into the background. The photograph reveals a slightly washed-out, brightly lit other side to the street, on the sidewalk of which you can just barely see a woman walking. She is white. Look at the pattern formed by her legs. It is the same, but in reverse, as the pattern formed by the two front legs of the cat. Negative/positive, reverse images, black/white. It all rhymes. In Levitt’s photographs, such precisely echoing relationships between foreground and background occur frequently, often spanning a considerable distance. Here, the space between the foreground and background figures functions as a bridge; in the Frank photograph, that space is more like an invisible barrier.

Newcomers to photography sometimes find it hard to accept that such elegantly coherent images have not been staged, or in some fashion directed by the photographer. Suffice it to say for the moment that it is a cardinal assumption, built into the working methods of photographers such as Frank and Levitt, that they did not photograph anything other than what they found. (Weegee presents a different case; he frequently became personally involved in the construction of his pictures, sometimes even giving direction to his subjects. This was the case in the creation of what is perhaps his most famous image, “The Critic,” where he gave instruction to one of the women involved, a street person, plying her with alcohol before he told her to confront the
elegantly dressed woman who was on her way to the opera.) It is amazing that so much meaning can be generated by pictures which, in a purely denotative sense, are about nothing at all. In the Frank photograph of the two mothers, there isn't much in the way of hard content. A similar statement could be made about the Levitt image. And yet they overflow with suggestion.

Many of the photographs discussed in previous chapters were built around constructed moments. Richard Avedon posed his subjects in a studio-like setting. Weegee turned the found moment of Harold Horn's arrest into a performance. Cindy Sherman took this approach a step further, using the conventions of set design, costume, and makeup for her work. It is remarkable how her self-portraits seem to represent a whole cast of different female characters, whereas in fact they are always herself. Other contemporary photographers have extended the practice of the constructed image still further. Gregory Crewdson makes pictures that have the production values of cinema. He creates elaborate sets on a sound stage, using actors, taxidermy models of wild animals, and complex lighting.

I would like to concentrate here on a photograph by Jeff Wall that looks rather casual, but is, in fact, a carefully constructed portrait. “Bad Goods” deliberately mimics the convention of the found moment, and by extension the methodology of documentary photography. The photographer/spectator appears to have accidentally encountered a Native American man in a desolate urban back lot. A mound of discarded lettuces sits in the foreground, separating the photographer from his subject. The image might initially appear to be a moment stumbled upon by the photographer. But it is a simulation. In gallery and museum exhibitions, it is presented as a life-sized, back-lit transparency. Due to its scale and mode of illumination, it echoes the brilliance and dominating aspect of a movie screen. It looks like a dislocated fragment of cinematic narrative.

Here is how Wall has described the work:

“This picture is constructed as a kind of triangle, one point of which is outside the image. The heap of rotting lettuces is the apex, and the two other corners are made up of the British Columbia Indian in the picture and the spectator in front of it. Both the spectator and the Indian are looking at the lettuces and at each other. But their social relation to that lettuce may be different. I say ‘may be’ because the audience for pictures is changing as the economy worsens. Some spectators are getting a lot richer, some maybe poorer. The Indian may need some of the lettuce to eat. If so he'll have to scrounge through it and find what is not rotten. His view of the lettuce is partially determined by his class position, his poverty, which is quite typical of, in this case, the native Indian people in British Columbia. ...Many of them exist apparently as victims of modernization, of development, of 'progress,' of capitalism. They are often depicted as just that victims of capitalism, and not much more. I fear and dislike these sorts of representation. But this Indian will never move toward the lettuce as long as the spectator is also there, as long as the triangle exists. This triangle separates two people from each other and in doing that it is a kind of diagram of the consequences of the economy. ...Ideally, humans are united over food. But I suppose that presumes there's enough food for everyone. The Indian will not move toward the lettuce, he will not be seen as just the victim, as a 'beggar' or whatever category you want to set up. He will not perform. That is his performance. His unfreedom is more important to him than food. He is not just a victim, he is also a fighter. In Bad Goods the whole structure of the picture is based on the figure's necessary unfreedom, and his expression of it."

Wall’s triangle, like the Cindy Sherman film still discussed in Chapter 1, presents us with an image where there are multiple axes of view, one of which directly implicates us, in terms of our class status as viewers. But there is something else. Inside the frame, the pictorial data is also diagrammatically organized around triangles. There is the messy triangular outline of the pile of lettuces; the triangular mounds of earth; the open triangular shape formed by the slightly inclined line of detritus terminating at the erect figure of the Indian; and the inverted perspective triangle, with a vanishing point illogically located in the foreground, where the lettuces are. I can only guess at the lengths to which the artist went to design and construct this scene, but I imagine they were considerable. The point is relevant here because of Wall’s enthusiasm for referencing the compositional techniques of European easel painting, and his frequently stated concern with formal representational strategies in general.
This concern with formal strategies of representation, and its coexistence with his commitment to making political art, is an interesting combination. It also presents a problem. In its crudest form, the problem can be posed in terms of the opposition between the esthete and the activist. The two are presumed to mix like oil and water. But let’s examine the issue in more detail. The photographic depiction of political and social conditions has traditionally been seen to rest on the foundation of the factual. To put it in terms of contemporary theory, it has been assumed that there is a necessary “transparency” in these kinds of depictions, a seamless connection between the image and its origin point, between the representation and the referent. We could thus say of the Weegee photograph that it is only marginally an image of Harold Horn’s actual arrest. The photographer has skewed it, as we have seen, in the direction of another kind of event. It is no longer “transparent.”

“Bad Goods” takes the discussion of the relationship between the image and its origin-point a step further. Although it is physically presented as a transparency, thereby offering an oblique comment on the theoretical term presently under discussion, it is not itself transparent in its essential nature. As an image, it is luminously real, but what it depicts is not. The human subject of the picture is not someone whom the photographer encountered by chance, but a poseur. The Indian was cast, as in a film, for this role. It does not matter that he is also really an Indian. The critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau sees this as a problem. Using remarkably dense language, she states the matter as follows:

“...this contradiction may be seen to be located in the instability of a directorial, synthetic mode of photographic presentation that wishes also...to insist on a ‘real’ Indian and his real relation to agricultural produce as capital. In abjuring (responsibly) either pathos or documentary description, Wall is constricted by the Procrustean bed of simulation; a conundrum illustrated in the use of a ‘real’ Indian to stand for a ‘real’ Indian.”

Solomon-Godeau accurately describes the conditions governing Wall’s work. Whether or not it is a defect, as she seems to imply, is open to question. I think his work is energized by its unstable ambiguities. The situation of the Indian man posing for this picture, his relation to the Indian he is in “real” life, and our relation to him as viewers, is not a simple one. It is inevitably part of a pre-existing political/cultural script. To pretend otherwise, by attempting to make a direct or apparently spontaneous portrait, would be disingenuous. These are not the terms of the encounter. It is not that kind of event.

There is always a palpable distance, sometimes paper-thin but invariably significant, between our apprehension of the content of Wall’s images (what we might be tempted to say they are “about”) and our awareness of their absolutely resolute status as manufactured pictorial objects. (You can only feel the full brunt of this when in the presence of the actual transparencies.) As objects, the pictures are grandiose, large and luminous. The moments represented therein, as is the case with “Bad Goods,” are often quite everyday. The effect produced thereby is a deflection of our attention, a movement away from an awkward encounter in a vacant lot toward an apprehension of a strangely grand spectacle. It is similar to what happens in Weegee’s photograph: we are caught, as spectators, between the actual event (Mr Horn’s arrest) and the conditions surrounding it.

Sources

PART 1

Go to a street corner, or park, or any other reasonably populated public location. Plan to spend a few hours there, by yourself. Whatever you choose as a location, make sure that it is not a place that will offer any kind of structured or inherently ceremonial event (what you make of it, as a picture, is another matter entirely). You are not looking for a prefabricated spectacle, such as a parade, concert, political demonstration, or any other kind of organized gathering. Once you are there, commit yourself to staying. Stare. Look at the passing human traffic. Use your camera to create juxtapositions between and among the people you see. Pay attention to foreground and background. Pay attention to the edges of the frame. Pounce on everything that interests you. Shoot quickly. Your job is to create events in the camera, to make photographs, more or less out of whole cloth. Shoot at least two rolls of film or the equivalent.

PART 2

After you have processed your film and made contact sheets (or the equivalent, whatever it takes to generate viewable images), examine the results. Choose an image that you like, and analyze its importance. What, broadly or narrowly speaking, do you think it is about? After you have performed this task, go back to the place where you made this picture (or to a similar location), along with whoever you may need in order to create a staged version of this image. You may want to recreate the original picture as precisely as possible, in order to examine the inevitable points of difference between the two pictures. Or you may make a picture that is true to the original in spirit, if not in fact. The choice is yours.
YOU SPY:
VOYEURISM and SURVEILLANCE
Voyeurism

Voyeurism is not about sexuality per se. It is more about a peculiar point of view, based on a longing to possess that which one knows one cannot (and ultimately does not want to) have. The basic condition of the voyeurist scenario is distance, an essential separation between seer and seen. Despite this distance, which is by definition unbridgeable, despite the unrequitable nature of the desire that drives it, the voyeur’s gaze is a privileged one. He usually positions himself in a concealed and protected location: a dark corner, on the other side of a window or keyhole, behind a windshield, any place where his gaze cannot be reciprocated. The last thing he wants is contact with, or recognition by, the person he is looking at. He is the invisible guest.

Merry Alpern is a photographer who uses the tactics of voyeurism in her book, Dirty Windows. Here is a quotation from her artist’s statement.

“I used to have a recurring dream, it went like this: I’m spying on some activity in the window when, suddenly, the subject becomes aware of my presence and looks up. We lock eyes. I know I’m in deep trouble. I gasp and wake up.

“New York winter of 1993–94 was something like the second coldest or snowiest in history. …I spent most of my nights that winter down on Wall Street looking into a bathroom window, watching people I didn’t know urinate, take drugs, have sex and count money.

“This routine started in October when a men’s club opened in my friend Norman’s building. He showed me how the configuration of his loft space enabled a view across the airshaft, into two small grimy windows, one flight down, maybe 15 feet away. As we stood looking into the empty windows one of them was suddenly filled by an astonishing body, wearing a sparkling harness, and doing something with toilet paper. I was transfixed. The body vanished a minute later and I wondered if I’d seen a mirage. I began calling Norman all the time, as relentless as the snow. Could I come over for just a little while?

“…So now I’m situated—dark clothes, camera on tripod, lens extended through the window bars—and waiting. I’m staring at the squares of light, eager for somebody to appear, but nobody does so I sip my cocoa, watch and wait, eyes on the windows, on the lookout for any stirrings of life. I listen for the music and wonder if the night’s snowstorm will slow business down.

“The room is freezing. I wrap up in some blankets and close my eyes, afterimages float in my brain—the same unswerving shape in a multitude of colors. I start to count, tell myself that when I get to 100 someone will appear. I try, like a two-bit psychic, to will a subject into view; it doesn’t work. …Finally, there’s nothing left to do but examine my motivations: Why am I sitting alone again in a darkened room, waiting to watch strangers fuck?

“I’d sometimes get a look like I’d announced I was twisting the heads off kittens when I tried to explain my evenings stationed at the windows. I loved to watch even the most mundane of anthropological details like how each man, after he urinated, shook his penis a little differently and none of the men ever seemed to wash his hands. I compared the tawdry, circus-like costumes the women wore, and was intrigued by the procedures of the sexual transactions: when the condom came out, when the money was handed over, how long it took, did they kiss goodbye.

“Stare. It is the way to educate your eye, and more. Stare, pry, listen, eavesdrop. Die knowing something. You are not here long.”

Walker Evans | from a draft text written to accompany a book of subway portraits, c. 1941

Merry Alpern
Untitled (from Dirty Windows)
Courtesy of Merry Alpern and Bonni Benrubi Gallery, New York
“...As February turned into March I became aware that the longer days were cutting into my shooting time. The warming air meant open windows and I felt I was pushing my luck with my subjects so close, the sound of the camera’s motor easily recognizable, and then one spring day, one thousand frames later, a message on my machine from Norman: ‘it’s over, baby, hope you got all your pictures, some kind of bust, hot tub being carried out last night...’

“I felt freedom, relief, disbelief. I had to go back and stare at the windows and absorb this turn of events, like viewing a body at a wake. I ran into the building’s real estate agent in the hallway and found myself improvising a frantic story about my search for a commercial space, a loft. Was there a space available in this building? Could I just take a quick peek?

“...This tiny, tiny bathroom was so anticlimactic. How could all that I’d witnessed have taken place in such cramped quarters? I gazed out and across, locating my former perch. It was really so inconspicuous: I realized then the unlikelihood of my ever having been discovered. And I took one last look up at the windows, from which I had watched, for so many days, the pastimes of perfect strangers.”

The look of Alpern’s photographs, which are literally voyeuristic, also suggests the inner world of the voyeur. They are high-contrast, grainy images, due to the exigencies of photographing in low light with a slow telephoto lens. (The maximum aperture of such a lens would probably be f5.6 or f/8, which even in the best of circumstances requires a slower shutter speed than one might wish, along with very little depth of field, even when the film speed is increased in order to increase the shutter speed and/or depth of field.) Their raw look replicates the agitated mind-set of the voyeur. Alpern herself clearly inhabits her role of voyeur. Her goal is to examine our furtive fascination with sexual display. She is partly a participant and partly an impersonator, acting out the figure of the peeping tom. She does a good job of this, down to dreaming of his worst fear: “...the subject becomes aware of my presence and looks up. We lock eyes. I know I’m in big trouble. I gasp and wake up.”

Voyeurism is usually assumed to be a male activity. It is associated with pornography, as distinct from the erotic. Linda Williams, in her introduction to the catalog for an exhibit of sexual images by British women photographers, writes that the debate about what constitutes pornography “goes to the heart of the question of spectatorship—of who gets to look and of how this ‘look’ is constructed.” The question of “who gets to look” —and how—is especially relevant to our discussion of voyeurism. The male voyeur occupies a privileged position. He may be furtive and emotionally fragile, but his gaze is grounded in a sense of entitlement. However unconscious she may be of his presence, he still possesses, if only by way of her image on film, the distant recipient of his gaze.

It is striking that there are so few voyeuristic pictures in the “What She Wants” exhibition, although there are numerous photographs of penises. The image by Diane Baylis included here, “In Bluebeard’s Castle,” is one of the few pictures that seem straightforwardly voyeuristic. The photographer looks through a keyhole at a man on a bed as he grasps his penis. The most striking thing about the picture is how little space in the frame is occupied by its subject. The darkness surrounding the keyhole dominates the image, emphasizing the private space occupied by the photographer herself, and subsequently by us, as viewers who are replicating her experience. The picture seems true to the requirements of the voyeuristic scenario. But the presence of the frame numbers at the edge of the negative creates some distance, reminding us that what we are looking at, after all, is only a picture. This provides some critical space between the photographer and the subject matter of the photograph. The image occupies a peculiar territory. It is not simply a replication of voyeuristic experience, because it is not fully immersed in that experience.

The story behind the making of “In Bluebeard’s Castle” raises some interesting questions. It also highlights the crucial issue of context, of what goes on outside the frame. The picture has an interesting history. When the photographer first decided to participate in this exhibition of pictures by women artists looking at the male body, she submitted several works that were intended “to offer alternatives to the idea of the penis, to be feared when erect or as an object of derision when in repose...I wanted to present images that would challenge the pervasive cultural dictate which seemed increasingly to vilify men, and in particular male sexuality.”
One of the works she submitted was a series of sequential photographs, similar to the one reproduced here, shot in collaboration with her partner and the father of their child. Later, she found that these black-and-white prints “gave the narrative the very somber overture [she] wanted to challenge.” Later, she decided that she wanted to begin this linked sequence of keyhole photographs with a photograph of her 22-month-old daughter, taken eight years earlier at the beach, “and lead the spectator to view the scene through the keyhole in a fresh new way.”

“The photo of our daughter ... provided exactly the sense of wonder, curiosity and trepidation I wanted to convey. It also allowed me to bring together in a form of dialogue; maternal pleasure, female desire, childhood experiences and family scenarios. ... However, the curator of the show, a woman, and the director of the gallery, a man, were both afraid that in the cultural context of the time the dominant discourse would prevail. This picture, they said, would, more than likely, be perceived as representing the very idea I wished to dispute. Collapsing time, the viewer, they believed, would decide that the man in the picture was thinking about the child in the first frame: the inevitable paedophilic story line.

“I was unhappy about letting this view set the standard for what is ‘normal’ and thus cede the territory of children’s bodies to the disturbed imagination of the paedophile. Still, I could see the dilemma. ... I agreed to remove the problematic frame.”

The experience reminded Baylis of the Bluebeard story, in which a wife is entrusted with a set of keys, and told she can inspect all the rooms in the castle except for one. She enters the forbidden
room, and finds it is filled with the bodies of former wives who had succumbed to the same temptation. The story gave her a title, and also served to identify the complex cultural prohibitions that she and the exhibition organizers, along with the rest of the participating artists, were trying to deal with.

In the words of the editor of the exhibition catalog, the “What She Wants” project began as an inquiry into the absence of erotic images of men made by women artists.

“The motivation for collating a survey show of this kind is to redress a number of imbalances and dispel a number of myths about the male body and the female observer. Questions raised relate to the practice of making explicit images: what is public, what is private, what is art, what is obscenity, why is the sexualized male body still so taboo? Presented here is a range of ways of looking at men and masculinity, exploring new ways of articulating and empowering an aesthetics of sexed subjectivity.

“...Can a good feminist exploit a male model in the manner which seems similar to the much-criticized commodification and objectification of women? Will the woman allow herself to look? Will she be true to her curiosity about the male body and her visual pleasure, or will she submit to her fear of transgressing an ideal model of behavior? If she cannot let herself look, she will refuse to objectify but does she not end up confirming the gender stereotype, that men look and women are looked at?”

For Diane Baylis, to say nothing of the other women artists in the show, articulating a vantage point for her imagery became a complicated experience that the curatorial statement quoted above, which is both apt and succinct, only begins to suggest. As she says:

“The piece was conceived to be displayed and viewed publicly, thus challenging the idea of the invisibility of the male nude viewed from a female perspective, as well as articulating the issue of female desire. The whole work was 26 inches long by 11 inches deep, taking in the four individual frames in the sequence. It would first be viewed from afar and require the spectators to come very close, thus drawing them into intimacy with the image. But then it was also important for each of them to become aware that other people were around while they were looking, not in the dark, but in broad daylight, and in a public space. The question there was how that might feel for a woman and for a man. I wanted to challenge, but hopefully reclaim something, including the idea of wonder and beauty.

“When the image is reproduced in a book, much of the original intention is negated. Viewed privately, as a small printed image, brings it back into the realm of pornography. Only a detail of the original intended sequence of pictures, only slightly enlarged, makes the experience very invasive, as opposed to being up-close, and so averts the idea of being drawn in and seduced. It assaults the viewer instead.”

On the other side of the fence, so to speak, Ralph Gibson’s photographs of naked and near-naked women are examples of how one man’s gaze works, easily and without compunction, to make a certain kind of voyeurism acceptable in the world of art photography. On the surface, his pictures bear some resemblance to Merry Alpern’s work. They are grainy, high-contrast images, shot with a small camera. But here the resemblance ends. If Alpern is the tentative voyeur, anxiously exploring strange territory, Gibson is the voyeur as self-assured connoisseur, following in the tradition of male-centered “erotic” photography. His chosen female subjects are nearly always cool and perfect: thin, curvy, with luminous white skin. The images themselves are formally lean and tightly composed. There is no sweat, no sense of agitation. He intends his pictures to be physically suggestive, but his talk suggests loftier ambitions.

“Sexual feeling floats well beneath the skin. The camera is not an X-ray machine. One can only hope that the eyes, our most sensitive organ, will traduce an inner glance. The further into the mind, the more delicate the nuance and the more delicate the caress. Perhaps an erotic photograph should not so much describe the act itself but the effect it produces.”

Gibson’s words are seriously at odds with his pictures. However much he may speak of nuance and delicacy, his pictures begin and end with surfaces. His “inner glance” simply refers to the
hidden and protected place, the classic voyeur’s location, from which his gaze proceeds. His subjects rarely acknowledge his presence. It’s a private show, in which the cool hunger of his glance is the only real participant. There is rarely any exchange between seer and seen.

In the picture from “The Black Kiss,” reproduced here, he is looking at a woman’s perfectly formed buttocks and a pair of legs in black stockings. Between this woman’s legs, on the other side of her body, we can see part of another woman’s face, her upturned eye directed toward the first woman’s pelvic region. This gazing woman’s eyebrow is graphically joined to the line formed by the top of

Ralph Gibson
Untitled (from The Black Kiss, 1972–76)
© Ralph Gibson
the stocking on the foreground figure’s left leg; in addition, the arc of her cheek echoes the curve of the foreground figure’s buttocks. The image is a carefully selected compendium of body parts. It suggests a secret and dangerous erotic encounter. It is a startlingly aggressive juxtaposition. This picture, like so many of Gibson’s other images, is pathologically composed. Even though the camera is extremely close to the subject, the image feels like something seen at a distance. This is because there are no distractions, no accidental details, no breathing room. The picture exudes a feeling of control. We can see only what the photographer wants us to see. There are no escape routes, nowhere for our eyes to wander. It’s a claustrophobic atmosphere, but also one that is completely protected, walled-in. It is the ideal environment for the invisible guest.

The Mexican photographer Daniela Rossell deals with the question of voyeurism in a different way. Her book, *Ricas y Famosas*, offers choreographed glimpses into the lives of some of her country’s privileged class, mostly women who are her peers and contemporaries. Although the mise en scène of her portraits—the gaudy living spaces of the super rich—is a secret and well-guarded precinct, there is nothing guarded about the way her subjects face the camera, and nothing secret about the photographer’s point of view. She is not an invisible guest.

Rossell’s pictures bear some similarity to Helmut Newton’s portraits, in the sense that they offer an erotically charged insider’s view of people who are very different from you and me. Her work, like Newton’s, is rich with environmental detail. It is loaded with décor—enormous chandeliers, animal skins and trophies, gilded mirrors, giant sea shells, scalloped ceilings, frescoes, altars, a riot of gaudy color. In his depiction of baroque sexual chic, Newton often mimicked the voyeur’s point of view by placing the camera on the floor, directed upward toward the object of desire, or by framing the picture with the outline of a keyhole. This is the vantage point of the abject voyeur, looking out from an unseen or unnoticed place, out of the orbit of consensual glances and the...
possibility of real sexual contact. Rossell’s subjects strip away the voyeur’s cloak of safety. Beyond merely acknowledging or accepting the intrusion of the camera into their world, they challenge us with their own gaze.

The relationship of Rossell’s portraits to voyeurism is complex. One of the defining elements of this activity, the secret vantage point, is missing. Yet it is no accident that the young woman who is the subject of the portrait reproduced here, “Untitled, 1999,” is wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the legend, “Peep Show! $1.00.” What makes this picture, and the whole of Ricas y Famosas, into a voyeuristic scenario, is the enormous distance between us, as viewers, and the people we are looking at. This distance is established by the environments in which these people have situated themselves. It is impossible to imagine them actually living in such places. Like overwrought movie sets, the surroundings have more weight than the people do. Their circumstances are so fantastic that the photographer needs to assert, at the beginning of her book: “The following images depict actual settings. The photographic subjects are representing themselves.” 9 The girl in the tennis outfit, the heel of her platform sneaker resting on the head of a stuffed lion, is for real. She even engages us with her gaze. But she may as well be on the other side of a locked window. She is completely out of reach.

Surveillance

Surveillance is a practice that is related to voyeurism, but there are significant differences. Surveillance is usually a matter for technology—it is most often performed by remote video cameras. There is no human eye behind the camera, and the camera itself is often located in plain sight. Surveillance cameras are everywhere. Without even checking it out, wherever you are in the city today, you assume that you are being looked at.

This practice derives from the utilitarian English philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s idea of the panopticon. In the 18th century, he proposed that an observation post be centrally located in
prisons, as a means for surveying and thus regulating the behavior of the inmates. An all-seeing
guard would sit in darkness as he secretly observed the prisoners’ behavior. Eventually, the
resulting degree of control would be such that the watchtower could be left vacant; the prisoners
would behave as if they were being constantly observed, and therefore they would discipline
themselves. In effect, the watchtower became a camera without an operator. Michel Foucault, in
his book *Discipline and Punish*, explored the idea of the panopticon in great detail, particularly its
dehumanizing effect on our daily lives. According to Foucault, an awareness of being constantly
watched has become a basic fact of life.

While the work of Walker Evans has nothing explicitly to do with Foucault’s ideas, there is a point
of contact with the idea of surveillance itself, as well as the voyeuristic gaze. In the late 1930s and
early 1940s, Evans photographed subway passengers in New York with a concealed Leica camera.
He characterized himself as: “a penitent spy and apologetic voyeur.” Evans acknowledged learning
from the French novelist Gustave Flaubert the notion of the apparently authorless work of art. He
said that: “...the non-appearance of the author ...is literally applicable to the way I want to use the
camera and do.” He further stated that: “...the ultimate purity of this method of photography—
the record method—has not been achieved here, but it is present as an unfulfilled aim.”

Evans was not unique in his enchantment with the idea of the absent artist. It has been much
discussed in contemporary theory, as exemplified by Roland Barthes’s influential essay, “The Death
of the Author.” The German photographer Albert Renger-Patzsch initiated a movement called
“the new objectivity,” an approach that was revived by the contemporary German photographers
Bernd and Hilla Becher, as well as by contemporary portrait photographers such as Thomas Ruff
and Rineke Dijkstra (who are discussed in Chapter 7).

The idea of the removal of the author, the seeming absence of a controlling gaze, has also been
central to traditional documentary photography (see Chapter 3), as well as being crucial to the
practice of surveillance. Both rely on the concept of the empty watchtower. Evans, as previously
mentioned, recognized that this idea, at least as it pertains to the practice of art, is an illusion.
“Documentary? That’s a very sophisticated and misleading word. And not really clear... The term
should be ‘documentary style.’”

The supposed impersonal nature of the camera’s gaze has been, and continues to be, a matter of
much debate and concern. As human physical gestures (like the movement of a brush or pencil
on a flat surface) were replaced by the camera, the relationship of artists to the work they produce
became problematic. In various ways, photographers have asked the question: “How do I leave
my imprint on my pictures?” Some have also played with a related question: “Do I want to?”
Throughout his career, Evans battled with the idea of personal style. While he made claims for
his photographs that clearly suggested a desire for objectivity, he was also opposed to mechanistic
purity. For example, he often cropped the images that came out of his camera, sometimes drastically.
He believed that a negative often demanded critical revision, and that cropping was a perfectly
acceptable means of achieving that end. “Stieglitz wouldn’t cut a quarter-inch off a frame,” Evans
said. “I would cut any inches off my frames in order to get a better picture.”

His manipulations were frequently attempts to produce an *effect* of objectivity and randomness.
He made many sequential and grid-like arrangements of his subway portraits, in an effort to
achieve the appearance of “an impure chance-average lottery selection of its subjects.” The subjects
themselves were carefully chosen because of their average appearance, because of their lack of a
certain kind of singularity. He puts the matter this way:

“As it happens, you don’t see among them the face of a judge or a senator or a bank president. What
you do see is at once sober, startling, and obvious: these are the ladies and gentlemen of the jury.”

The last sentence is significant, because it implies that the usual terms of relation between seer
and seen have been reversed. It is this “jury,” Evans suggests, which is observing him—or us, as
we look at the pictures—rather than vice versa. The photographer does not appear to be sitting in
the judgment seat. He seems to have relinquished control. This situation is, of course, as Evans
himself would acknowledge, an illusion. His method of working with a concealed camera, and
the apparent randomness of the arrangement of his images, constitutes a style, a signature. It is
a carefully articulated strategy of detachment. Whether or not these portraits are voyeuristic is an
open question. Evans himself seemed to believe they were. It is for this reason that he waited 20 years to publish them, believing that “the rude and impudent invasion involved has been carefully softened and mitigated by a planned passage of time.”

Sitting across from them on the subway, his camera under his overcoat, a cable release running inside a sleeve to his hand, Evans shot his subjects at relatively close range. His lens was visible between the buttons of his coat, and an observant or fretful subject could have caught him in the act. Perhaps this is one reason why he rarely photographed passengers who were looking in his direction. In any case, his own potential vulnerability, as an observer who might suddenly be recognized and called to account, is one element contributing to the way these pictures feel.

In the 1950s, influenced by Evans’s subway work, Harry Callahan made a series of street portraits of anonymous female pedestrians in Chicago. One important element that marks Callahan’s work as different from Evans’s is the absence of physical proximity. Callahan’s project was titled “Women Lost in Thought.” Although the faces of his subjects fill the frame, he photographed them from a distance, using a telephoto lens. Perhaps one reason why he chose to work this way, unobserved by his subjects and with the camera to his eye, was because he was more interested in precise framing than Evans was. But he shared Evans’s goal of creating a conceptually rigorous series of images, in this case a procession of women’s faces emerging out of darkness, that were so similar to each other that they appeared to be authorless. More recently, in “Heads,” Philip-Lorca DiCorcia adopted Callahan’s procedure, using a remote flash unit and a telephoto lens to photograph pedestrians near Times Square in New York.

In doing their surreptitious portrait work, Evans and Callahan had to surmount difficult technical problems. Of necessity, they used extremely slow film (there was no such thing as Tri-X then), and had to cope with very thin negatives. Evans, working underground, had the worst of it. He often had to wait for the subway to stop at a station in order to make an exposure (and it was then, when the noise level was at its lowest, that he was most likely to be given away by the sound of
his shutter). John Szarkowski, the former curator of photography at MOMA, has written, of Callahan's working method:

“The technical problems were formidable. To stop the motion of the subjects ...required a much faster shutter speed than the film of the day allowed in the shadowed city street. Furthermore, the problem of focusing accurately on a close-up of a moving subject would be almost impossibly difficult. To further complicate the issue, Callahan would also be a pedestrian, photographing as he walked, in order to avoid drawing attention to himself.

“Callahan approached the problem by defining a procedure that would give the greatest effective film speed and eliminate the need for focusing, and then worked within the limits established by this procedure. He exposed the film as though it were eight times faster than the manufacturer recommended and severely overdeveloped it in order to achieve maximum effective density, which produced a negative with little detail in the shadows and a rough abbreviated tonal scale. This required that the picture succeed in graphic terms, not through the illusion of continuous plastic relief that identifies classical photographic technique. To finesse the problem of selective focusing, he pre-focused the camera for the distance at which an average head, from chin to hairline, would fill the horizontal negative. Then he walked the streets, camera to his eye, firing on instinct when the right head filled the frame in the right way.” 15

Like the remote video camera located in a bank or shopping mall, the eavesdropping photographer now often places himself in plain sight. Such is the case with Kevin Bubriski, who photographed

“I felt the need to try to witness and understand the impact of the New York City tragedy through my camera...At the barricades surrounding the site, I found people experiencing a profound sense of community, but also the deepest kind of reflection on loss and mortality. I realized I was one of many who needed to be at the site, unable to truly comprehend the frightful images in the media.”

The subjects of these photographs seem unaware of the photographer’s presence. Their eyes are closed, or directed elsewhere. The pictures were taken with a bulky medium-format camera that would be impossible to hide. Given the charged nature of the situation, it seems improbable that he intruded verbally by asking his subjects to pose. It is possible that he obtained their consent, although there is no evidence of this. He and his camera were in plain sight. His subjects could have opened their eyes, or turned toward him and returned his gaze, but they didn’t. In effect, he was an unseen intruder, prying at the surface of other people’s private moments.

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i. One of the byproducts of using a medium-format camera with a waist-level viewfinder (a twin-lens reflex) is that people are often not aware of the fact that they are being photographed. They probably assume, if they notice anything, that the photographer is simply adjusting his equipment. This also applies to digital cameras with rotating LCD screens, which can have the same effect as a waist-level viewfinder. Many digital cameras also have a feature that allows the user to switch off the sound that is associated with the moment of exposure (there is no mechanical shutter), making the camera completely silent. This is an added benefit for the photographer who wishes to remain as inconspicuous as possible.
Intruding on someone else’s personal territory with a camera is a subject that has been much discussed. What is a photographer entitled to record, and under what circumstances? Albeit in slightly different circumstances, the question is again the same one, about spectatorship, posed earlier in this chapter by Linda Williams. Who gets to look, and how is this “look” constructed? What kind of agreement between photographer and subject (if any) is required in order to legitimize an image, particularly if it involves strangers? The voyeuristic image, because it is made in secret, implies an absolute lack of consent on the part of the subject. Traditional street photography, while practiced in plain sight, also depends on the unspoken premise that photographer and subject remain strangers to each other. They become acquainted, if at all, in a fleeting moment of eye contact around the instant of exposure. Rarely is the flow of human traffic interrupted for the signing of a model release or the handshake of consent.

So what about the photographer who sees strangers, or even the condition of estrangement itself, as a legitimate subject? How does he or she make work that is ethically appropriate, and still maintain the necessary defining distance between seer and seen? Shizuka Yokomizo’s series, “Dear Stranger” (1998–2000), addresses this question directly. She sent anonymous letters to people who lived in ground-floor apartments in Berlin, Tokyo, London, and New York, saying:

Dear Stranger,

I am an artist working on a photographic project which involves people I do not know... I would like to take a photograph of you standing in your front room from the street in the evening.

The letter also specified that “It has to be only you, one person in the room alone,” a statement that is quite interesting in itself, since it is cast in the language of a blackmailer or an obsessive lover.

The photographer requested that her subjects appear at their windows for a specified ten-minute period on a certain date, during which time she would make a photograph and then leave. She would stand in the light outside the window. It was very important to her that she be visible herself. But it was equally important that she remain a stranger. If a potential subject wished to come outside to meet her, no photographs would be taken. Otherwise, her identity would be revealed when the subjects received a print in the mail along with contact information (so that they could give permission for the image to be exhibited).

Yokomizo’s project simultaneously bridges and maintains the gap between the voyeuristic photographer and her subject. Even though they are separated, they can see each other and even exchange glances. Her salutation, “Dear Stranger,” is paradoxical, because it suggests both intimacy and distance. The surroundings in which her subjects appear—the details of their living spaces—and the ways they choose to address the camera may suggest something eccentric or revelatory about them, but they remain unreachable. While there is reciprocity between her and her subjects, it is the distance that separates them—the physical space marked by the presence of the window—that asserts itself finally as the true subject of her pictures. Her work is reminiscent of Edward Hopper’s paintings of urban disconnectedness, such as “Room in New York” (1932), where the artist imagines himself looking in from the darkness outside at a couple in their apartment.

The difference between Yokomizo and Hopper is that the people in her photographs know that they are being looked at, and they are looking back. There is an exchange of awareness that is pointedly absent in Hopper’s domestic scenarios, in which people never look at each other, or acknowledge the presence of an observer. A man leans forward in his chair, reading a newspaper. A woman idly fingers the keys of a piano. Yokomizo’s people are not like this, caught in a web of isolated reverie, although they are most emphatically alone. But isolation is not merely observed, it is assertively offered up for inspection. What happens is an encounter, albeit an anonymous one, a zero-degree confrontation in which the pre-condition for intimacy is present, but intimacy itself is left deliberately unfulfilled.

Voyeurism and surveillance are similar activities, in that they both presuppose that the participants (if that is the right term) are strangers to each other. But there are key differences. The voyeur seeks pleasure and excitement through the vicarious possession of his subject. His task is personal, and depends on the possibility—forever postponed—of intimate contact with his subject. Surveillance, on the other hand, is impersonal. It is often performed electronically by a remote camera, to
which no human is attached. Ordinarily, there is no need to even know who the subject is, unless a crime has been committed and the perpetrator needs to be identified. Artists such as Merry Alpern and Shizuka Yokomizo mimic the tactics of the voyeur. Walker Evans, with his hidden camera and ideas about randomly selected subjects, tried to behave like a human surveillance machine—hence his notion of the authorless photograph.

Beat Streuli uses a long telephoto lens so that he can track his subjects on the street without them being aware of his presence. This is a departure from the practice of street photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson or Garry Winogrand, who used shorter focal-length lenses, thereby creating a potent feeling of possible contact or interaction between photographer and subject. While this feeling is absent from Streuli’s work, it does have a compensatory gracefulness. His pictures are made without irony. He chooses not to emphasize moments in which people are awkward or comical, but rather to highlight those moments in which his subjects are confident and composed. He always grants them a certain poise.

From its remote location, Streuli’s camera captures the routine motions of the urban parade—people crossing streets, exchanging glances, talking on cell phones, sharing a snack. His emphasis is on facial expression, body movement and posture, the subtle physical adjustments that normally occur among people on crowded city streets around the world. Because of the shallow depth of field that results from shooting with a long lens, however, the background locations of his photographs often evaporate into suggestively blurred splashes of light and color. The cityscape itself becomes a generalized common space, a globalized version of downtown. As he says:

ii. Bresson insisted that a 50mm lens was the only focal length appropriate for street photography, and Winogrand habitually used a 28mm wide-angle lens, often shooting his subjects at extremely close range.
“I think it is easier to look at things against a neutral background, and this is why I hardly ever take pictures in poor suburbs where the social problems are obvious, because in such surroundings people could become just figures reduced to their social role.”

In the photograph reproduced here, “New York, 2000,” the background sign for a subway entrance is barely detectable in the distance. A fragment of stair railing juts up into the lower foreground. Instead of marking a specific location or pointedly defining a context, it serves a purely graphic purpose, underscoring the moment of personal contact between the two women. This isolated event is what the picture is about. It is the kind of moment that Streuli looks for: a moment of pause, a transitional instant picked out of the restless physical flow of street traffic, something so routine that one wouldn’t ordinarily notice it. As is often the case in his pictures, the moment is a subtle mixture of self-absorption and outreach, where wariness and generosity, a sense of isolation mitigated by a sense of community (or vice versa), blend seamlessly with each other in a standardized public space.

The connections that are made in Streuli’s photographs are always between or among the people in the frame, never with the photographer himself. Although place is not an emphatic element in the individual images, the project as a whole is definitively grounded in the urban environment by means of the way it is displayed. Groups of pictures are installed next to each other in series, either as outsized transparencies in the windows of office buildings, or mounted on billboards above a busy street. They are returned to their source, becoming part of the cityscape itself. The effect is similar to a large-screen surveillance display, mirroring the human traffic on the street below. Because of their size and forthright presence, and the gracefulness conferred on their subjects by the photographer, the surreptitious means by which they were made is not an issue. They simply take their place in the surrounding architecture, to be looked at or not, as the passing viewer chooses. The photographer himself, if not exactly an absent author, has long since vanished into the crowd.

Sources

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3. Diane Baylis, “In the Dark Room,” Context (the Magazine for Family Therapy and Systemic Practice), issue 55, June 2001
4. ibid.
5. ibid.
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A. VOYEURISM: THE HIDDEN VIEW

This is about vantage point, the place from which you look. You can hide in a closet, behind a windshield, look through a keyhole, or get down on the ground in a corner. It is important that you include your vantage point somehow, as a physical presence, in your picture. This will indicate the nature of your own involvement in the scene you are depicting. As for what you’re looking at, it should have a sexual element. You should consider staging this picture with an acquaintance, unless you can figure out a way around the ethical and legal issues involved in actually spying on someone who is a stranger to you. Of course, if it is a masquerade, it will be hard to fabricate and communicate the feeling of being a voyeur, but this could be an interesting challenge.

B. SURVEILLANCE: IN PLAIN SIGHT

1. Shoot in a public place, either with a concealed camera or a camera with a telephoto lens. The point is to eavesdrop on people without their knowledge. One problem to be solved here is how to make an engaging picture when there is no apparent contact between you and your human subjects. What happens when your subjects don’t acknowledge your presence? How do your viewers connect with you if you don’t connect with your subjects?

A note on concealed cameras: It’s hard to conceal a camera, especially when you’re physically attached to it. One way to create the effect of concealment is to use a camera with a waist-level viewfinder, such as a medium-format twin-lens reflex, or a digital camera with a rotating LCD screen/finder (which can function at waist level). You’ll be surprised how rarely people seem to notice you taking pictures when you don’t have the camera raised to your eye. (You can also try using a conventional SLR or rangefinder camera and shoot from the hip.)

2. Again in a public place, try to make a surveillance-type photograph that is not boring, in which the camera appears to be doing all the work. In other words, a photograph that seems to have no distinguishing stylistic mark, no signature. Try to behave like a machine. Of course this is impossible, but it’s an interesting experiment. You will not be able to be completely absent from your pictures, but you might use Walker Evans’s “chance-average lottery” principle as a starting-point. You could set up your camera on a tripod somewhere, and take pictures at predetermined intervals—every eight minutes, say, until you’ve finished a roll of film. Or you could press the shutter-release button in response to a predetermined signal—for example, every time a person carrying a plastic bag walks by. You could even choose your location in an arbitrary fashion, according to coordinates on a street map. You could also separate yourself from your camera—thereby preventing yourself from the activity of conscious framing—by using either a very long cable release or a radio-controlled remote triggering device. (This last option requires your camera to have a motorized film advance feature.)
“Also, it is always the instantaneous reaction to oneself that produces a photograph.”
ROBERT FRANK | U.S. Camera Annual, 1958

“My intention was always to get away from myself, though I knew perfectly well that I was using myself. Call it a little game between ‘I’ and ‘me.’”
MARCEL DUCHAMP | interview, 1962

“I’m sure I’m going to look in the mirror and see nothing. People are always calling me a mirror and if a mirror looks into a mirror, what is there to see?”
ANDY WARHOL | The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again
Within the first three months of Daguerre’s public announcement in 1839 of his invention of the daguerreotype, 9,000 cameras (along with the necessary plates, tripods, chemicals, and technical manual) were sold in France. By the end of the year, public enthusiasm was at such a pitch that the countryside and environs of major cities were crowded with photographers. The French press characterized the phenomenon as “daguerreotypomania,” which is the subject of a contemporary lithograph by Théodore Maurrisot. At first it was not possible to use the camera for making portraits. Because of the relative insensitivity of the emulsion to light, to do so would have required the subject to sit still for 15 minutes, even in the brightest sunlight. This is probably why the first photographers focused their attention on scenic views and architecture. Within a year, however, due to advances in sensitizing emulsion surfaces and improved lens design, exposure time was reduced to approximately ten seconds. This rapid advance in the development of the new technology, fueled by the public’s hunger for images of themselves, led to an equally rapid proliferation of commercial portrait studios (see Chapter 2).

Consider the daguerreotype “Jabez Hogg and Mr. Johnson, 1843.”

“Since this image may be the earliest representation of a portrait studio showing a photographer at work, it affords an opportunity to examine the equipment and facilities in use in the opening years of portraiture. A tripod—actually a stand with a rotating plate—supports a simple camera without bellows. It is positioned in front of a backdrop painted in rococo style, against which female figures probably were posed. The stiffly upright sitter—in this case a Mr Johnson—is clamped into a head brace, which universally was used to insure steadiness. He clutches the arm of the chair with one hand and makes a fist with the other so that his fingers will not flutter. After being posed the sitter remains in the same position for longer than the time it takes just to make an exposure, because the operator must first obtain the sensitized plate from the darkroom (or if working alone, prepare it), remove the focusing glass of the camera, and insert the plate into the frame before beginning the exposure. Hogg is shown timing the exposure with a pocket watch by experience while holding the cap he has removed from the lens, but in the course of regular business this operation was ordinarily left to lowly helpers. In all, the posing process was nerve-wracking and lengthy, and if the sitter wished to have more than one portrait made the operator had to repeat the entire procedure, unless two cameras were in use simultaneously—a rare occurrence except in the most fashionable studios. No wonder so many of the sitters in daguerreotype portraits seem inordinately solemn and unbending.”

The daguerreotype portrait was worth the wait, so to speak, because of its extremely fine detail. “Everything,” as one contemporary observer wrote, “was reproduced with incredible exactness.”

The question of identity is central to the practice of portrait photography. Who am I looking at? Who is doing the looking? The daguerreotype portrait concentrated only on the first of these two questions. People wanted stable images, fixed both by a chemical process and by accepted norms of identity. It was assumed that the subject, holding still and staring straight ahead, would be transparently represented by the camera. The photographer was simply a technician. It was this seemingly mechanical act of transcription, and the assumed absence of imagination or at the very least a conscious gaze, that aroused the ire of Charles Baudelaire, a fretful snob who was nonetheless an important 19th-century poet and otherwise perceptive art critic. He wrote thus about photography:

“During this lamentable period, a new industry arose that contributed not a little to confirm stupidity in its faith and to ruin whatever might remain of the divine in the French mind. The idolatrous mob demanded an ideal worthy of itself and appropriate to its nature—that is perfectly understood. ...A revengeful God has given ears to the prayers of this multitude. Daguerre was his Messiah. And now the faithful says to himself: ‘Since photography gives us every guarantee of exactitude that we could desire (they really believe that, the mad fools!), then photography and Art are the same thing.’ From that moment our squalid society rushed, Narcissus to a man, to gaze at its trivial image on a scrap of metal.”

Of course it wasn’t long before photographers realized that a portrait session involved something more than what Baudelaire described. Julia Margaret Cameron was one of the first to realize that
a photograph was an interpretive act, the goal of which was to get under the skin of her subjects, “to do its duty toward them in recording faithfully the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer man.”  

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Cameron’s mental model for the process of portraiture was very much like Michelangelo’s apocryphally reported mental model for how he made sculpture, by chipping away at a raw block of stone until he discovered the form that was already living inside it, waiting to be found.

It wasn’t until the mid-to-late 20th century that portrait artists began to entertain the idea that identity is something constructed, something neither given nor found lurking in some “inner” region beneath the social surface. This was a difficult idea for many to consider, particularly as it related to gender. In addition, the idea that our perceptions of gender roles are also constructions proved to be very controversial. Originally, gender issues were linked to feminist politics and to investigations of women’s subordinate place in the hierarchy of white male domination. Subsequently, these investigations were extended to include the gay/lesbian/transgendered populations, as well as racial and ethnic minorities. All this activity resulted in a broadly based critique that often took issue with the heterosexual norm.

The struggle was to claim a different kind of space for the self. Many artists assumed adversarial positions in regard to what they perceived as standards of acceptable behavior. Their goal was to make trouble. In describing the terms of this struggle to gain personal authority, the theorist Judith Butler posed the following questions:

“...What best way to trouble the gender categories that support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality? Consider the fate of ‘female trouble,’ that historical configuration of a nameless female indisposition which thinly veiled the notion that being female is a natural indisposition. Serious as the medicalization of women’s bodies is, the term is also laughable, and laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism. ... ‘Female Trouble’ is also the title of the
John Waters film that features Divine, the hero/heroine of Hairspray as well, whose impersonation of women implicitly suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real. Her/his performance destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about gender almost always operates. Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established? Does being female constitute a ‘natural fact’ or a cultural performance?^

Edouard Manet was one of the first European artists to represent gender and sexuality in a way that threatened conventional assumptions. In “Déjeuner sur l’herbe” (“Picnic on the Grass”), he painted the figure of a naked woman posed in a bucolic setting with a group of relaxed, but formally dressed men. The scene could almost be a hallucination, or a figment in which the woman appears purely as she is imagined and desired by her male beholders. The unlikeliness of the tableau suggests clearly that being female is a performance, and as such, a constructed role. “Olympia,” a painting that was first exhibited in 1865, was disturbing for slightly different reasons. It wasn’t only the subjects depicted in the painting—a naked courtesan and her black attendant/companion—that caused such a commotion among Manet’s contemporaries. It was her look, the confrontational way her eyes were directed straight at you, the viewer. That’s what

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^ When Manet exhibited his work, one salon critic wrote that Olympia herself was “a sort of female gorilla,” and another described her as “a sort of monkey” (quoted in T. J. Clark, The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers, Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 94). Gustave Courbet, himself a painter of stature, said that Olympia looked like “the Queen of Spades stepping out of her bath” (quoted in Theodore Reff, Manet, Olympia, Viking Press, 1977, p. 30). What was threatening to them was the painting’s suggestion of interracial lesbianism, and this led them to the irrational conclusion that being black and being a prostitute were somehow synonymous.

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Yasumasa Morimura
Portrait (Futago), 1988
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York
train your gaze
caused the trouble. This look is something way beyond a mere glance. It bears a striking resemblance to the concentrated look of innumerable daguerreotype portrait subjects as they stare back at the camera during the long moment of exposure. But it is sexualized and much more powerful. It is a perfect example of what Judith Butler is talking about when she mentions “the unanticipated agency, of a female ‘object’ who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position.” With her eyes, Olympia shatters the safety zone of the male viewer. She catches us in the act, rather than vice versa, which is the usual scenario. Through her, Manet makes us take account of our own act of looking.

Yasumasa Morimura’s digital montage, “Portrait (Futago), 1988,” is a restaging of “Olympia,” with the photographer himself replacing the subjects of the original work. He has turned the painting into a double self-portrait. It is a complex masquerade. Not only have gender roles and ethnic identities been switched, the painting has been turned into a photograph, and the sexual drama of the painting has been placed in a context of high-camp exaggeration, a flagrant display of gaudy artifice. Nothing is “real.” The flowers and the cat are fakes, as is the gilt “frame” around the edges of the image (actually, it is a part of the image). Olympia, the artist himself in a cheap platinum wig, is a low-rent simulation of a hooker, an artificial woman.

Left:
**Man Ray**
*Marcel Duchamp as Rrose Sélavy, 1920–21*
The J. Paul Getty Museum
Los Angeles. © Man Ray Trust
ARS-ADAGP

Opposite:
**Yasumasa Morimura**
*Doublonnage (Marcel), 1988*
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York
Morimura’s work is generally based on appropriation and parody. His habitual strategy is to borrow familiar scenarios from Western art history (as he does with the Manet painting) or to mimic well-known publicity stills of movie stars and portraits of other artists (as is the case with “Doublonnage (Marcel),” also reproduced here), in which he replaces the original subjects with images of himself. The images are performances, intended to challenge fixed ideas of gender and ethnic identity. The idea of the doubled body, with its inevitable declaration of narcissism, is central to Morimura’s work. It is not only a matter of duplicating another body from the world of art history, or repeating an image of himself in the same image, which he does often. He occupies different gender roles or ethnic identities simultaneously. In “Portrait (Futago),” for example, it is important that his “disguise” as a prostitute is incomplete. A potentially female face is crossed with an evidently male body. There is also a cultural doubling, manifested by his Nipponizing of an image from European painting, while at the same time drawing on the tradition of kabuki theater in Japan, in which females were portrayed by male actors.

In “Doublonnage (Marcel),” a picture that mimics Man Ray’s portrait of Marcel Duchamp cross-dressed as his female persona Rrose Sélavy, the doubling is more implied than overt, expressed through two sight gags, one of which is quite clear, the other of which is ambiguous. He is wearing two hats. It is not clear, however, to whom the two sets of arms belong. Who is holding onto whom? Are the two sets of arms male and female? Which set is attached to his body? The skin tones of the two pairs of arms don’t match each other, and neither of them matches the face. How you make the connections, or whether or not you bother to make them at all, doesn’t matter. He is playfully making a point about the instability of gay identity, a point that is close to the meaning of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud’s celebrated assertion, “Je est un autre” (“I is an other”).

The visual structure suggested by Rimbaud’s statement is the mirror-image. But in this case the mirror does not seamlessly reflect what is presented to it. The framework becomes a disrupted

ii. Rimbaud’s most famous work was the extended prose poem “Un Saison en Enfer” (“A Season in Hell”), in which this statement appears. European society was scandalized by his love affair with the poet Paul Verlaine. He has been a reference-point for many contemporary gay artists, among them David Wojnarowicz, who created a montage series, “Arthur Rimbaud in New York” in which he superimposed Rimbaud’s face on his own body. Duchamp’s creation of an alternate female identity for himself, Rrose Sélavy, had less to do with gay identity politics than with a more broadly based desire to play with the image of the artist as purveyor of high seriousness. As Rrose, he wrote stunningly inane aphorisms that were parodies of artistic wisdom. It was in this spirit that he applied a mustache to the face of the Mona Lisa, titling the piece “L.H.O.O.Q”—which, when you say it aloud with the correct French pronunciation, has a prurient meaning.
equation. Sex and gender are no longer assumed to be synonymous, the former being a biological
given, while the latter (often connected to racial and ethnic stereotypes) is considered to be a
cultural construction. Accordingly, male may be reflected as female (and white as black), or the
reverse. The two images of identity are deeply connected, as in a mirror, but discontinuously so.
Sameness is difference, and vice versa.

This ambiguous mirroring process is a kind of theater, creating a short circuit in the loop of the
mirror reflection. Nikki S. Lee and Mariko Mori are two artists who create apparently light-hearted
work in this vein, work that is explicitly about the construction of gender, ethnicity, and cultural
identity. Lee makes “snapshots” of herself with an inexpensive camera, complete with the
embedded date imprint that is meant to identify such images in contemporary family albums.
She impersonates ethnic or subcultural identities that accurately characterize the rest of the people
she has asked to pose with her in her group portrait projects: “Hispanics,” “Exotic Dancers,”
“Yuppies,” “Skateboarders,” “Seniors,” “Hip Hop” people. The pictures look casual and authentic,
but they are not. As in the photograph included here from “The Hispanic Project,” Lee’s persona
simply adheres to whatever cultural designation she chooses. She is always the “other,” any other.
She can become anybody. It is a portrayal of diversity and community as masquerade.

Mariko Mori’s self-portrait, “Tea Ceremony III, 1994,” a digital montage, is unlike Lee’s work.
Intense bright light illuminates her as she holds out a cup of tea. It is artificial light, unlike the
ambient light of the street scene in which she appears. The image does not strive to be believable
for a moment. She is playing the part of a happily subservient Japanese female (although it is
important to notice that her dress, far from being traditional, is more like that of a flight attendant
Lyle Ashton Harris
Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera #1, 1994
24 x 20 inches, unique Polaroid.
Lyle Ashton Harris and Thomas Allen Harris. Courtesy of the artists and the CRG Gallery, New York

from outer space). Although she is standing slightly behind the two businessmen who are walking by, she is also a bit larger than they are. This creates a spatial reversal, in which a part of the background assumes the status of foreground. The effect is to reverse the oppositional mirroring of male and female, the power relationship between her and the two businessmen in the scene, between subordination and authority.

Lyle Ashton Harris is an artist who is concerned with conferring power on the powerless and marginalized. “Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera #1” is a self-portrait with his brother Thomas Allen Harris that takes the form of a triptych. It addresses questions of gay African-American identity and self-definition. The image represents the two brothers as an erotically engaged butch/femme couple, naked, in front of the vivid colors of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association flag. In the first image, reproduced here, Lyle holds his brother’s subsiding body in his carefully manicured right hand. In the second, the two kiss as Thomas presses a gun to Lyle’s chest. In the third image, the embracing pair look out at us as they point guns in our direction, their eyes retaining the languid air of post-coital contact.
Harris renders sexual and racial identity as a strange composite, elegantly distilled and reshaped out of residual stereotypes of black masculinity: the macho posturing; the propensity to threaten members of his own racial community, as well as the rest of the world, with violence; the supposed stridency of black militants in the 1960s and 1970s. “The themes invoked in ‘Brotherhood,’” Harris says, “speak to the ambivalence around violence, betrayal, and abjection that is part of our collective legacy as African-Americans.” He continues:

“These images graphically mirror the violence and self-destruction that constitute our contemporary experience. I often question if it is easier to reject or destroy those like yourself—someone who mirrors your shared history of lynching, terror, and the historical trauma experienced by the collective black body—rather than to love them.”

As both antagonists and lovers, Lyle and Thomas mirror each other, exchanging roles, each being strangely dominant and submissive at the same time. Signaling the ambiguity of gender roles in his work, the first picture in the triptych contains clear echoes of two conflicting motifs: the warrior holding his dying comrade (Achilles and Patroclus in *The Iliad*), and the *Pietà* (Mary with the dead Christ in her arms). The artist himself is HIV positive, yet he represents himself here in the position of strength, firmly holding onto the body of his collapsing brother.

The central image of brotherhood in this work, where the two men exchange roles and therefore mirror each other, is provocatively narcissistic. Harris himself has referred to narcissism as a “form of resistance,” and he characterizes the mirror image as “a space for rigorous meditation, cleansing, and recuperation.” His thinking here may be based on an interpretation of the original story of Narcissus, in which a beautiful young man contemplates his reflection in a pool and drowns, that follows the theory of the mirror-stage in the child’s development of consciousness.

Mark Morrisroe
*Sweet Raspberry/Spanish Madonna*, 1986
Mark Morrisroe Estate
(Collection Ringier) at Fotomuseum Winterthur
train your gaze
This theory was introduced by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who proposed that the initial recognition of the self as an “I” occurs between the ages of six and 18 months, when the child first recognizes an image of the body, either reflected in a mirror or represented to the infant by the mother or primary care-giver. The child identifies with this image as an “Ideal-I,” which is a convincing fiction, and will strive for the rest of his/her life to reunite with it. What’s important about this idea as a metaphor for self is that it establishes the ego as fundamentally dependent on external imagery, images of others. It also implies that our sense of self is split in two. It is this effort to achieve internal coherence that gives meaning to the story of Narcissus.

Some self-portraits can be seen as attempts to reconstruct the original mirror-image, to transform the Ideal-I into something else, something like an alternate identity. In Lacanian terms, this new construction is an idealized fiction. This is clearly apparent in the autobiographical work of Mark Morrisroe, an artist who chronicled his participation in the bohemian gay subculture of the late 1970s and 1980s, until he died of AIDS in 1989. Although his work is rooted in the facts of his life, it is about a fabricated self. The art historian David Joselit describes the impulse behind Morrisroe’s work as follows:

“...if Morrisroe figures in such accounts [of his life] as a teller of ‘truth,’ he is also known as a compulsive liar. His friend Jack Pierson makes this point brilliantly:

‘Mark lied chronically and with such abandon, lying doesn’t even begin to name the activity. I guess he was trying to write a new life for himself. The weird thing is that his life was already pretty “interesting” and the stories didn’t move him up or down the social ladder, they just intensified where he was already to the nth degree.’

My purpose in introducing this biographical evidence—which is echoed by all of Morrisroe’s close friends and associates—is not to propose a counter-reading of the artist’s pictures as a series of deceptions rather than proto-journalistic facts. Instead, I want to insist that ‘Morrisroe-the-chronicler’ is inextricable from ‘Morrisroe-the-liar.’ ...the theoretical significance of Morrisroe’s efforts to ‘write a new life’ lies in his recognition that the compulsive and repeated effort to invent and re-invent oneself is fundamentally a form of ‘lying,’ or fictionalization, and that ‘truth’ is made up of a succession of lies. As an artist, Morrisroe located this performance of self at the heart of the photographic process. His complex manipulations of the photographic negative—a preoccupation which persisted and developed throughout his career—allowed him a means of transposing truth into lies and lies into truth, or, of ‘writing a new photograph.’"

Morrisroe’s “Sweet Raspberry/Spanish Madonna, 1986” is a C-print of himself in drag, disguised as a Hispanic person. But the originality of the photograph is in the physical structure of the image itself, the relationship of the negative to the print. The deep pockets of shadow, the pallor of the face, the grainy surface haze and peculiar tints in the picture are produced by a unique method of sandwiching a color and a black-and-white negative together. As was the case in the rest of his work, Morrisroe made a conventional color negative, and re-photographed the resulting print with black-and-white film, in order to combine the two negatives for the final C-print. In this and other pictures, he allowed the negatives to accumulate dust, scratches, and fingerprints, sometimes using retouching paint to create imperfections. The final images appear to be casual and unmanipulated, almost like something taken with a Polaroid camera (which he used to make studies for his C-prints). “Sweet Raspberry/Spanish Madonna” is not what it appears to be. It is an impersonation of a straight print.

In addition to disrupting norms of gender and sexuality, Morrisroe also alters the usual method by means of which data is passed on from the negative to the print. This technical process supports the new identity. It is an integral part of “writing a new life.” In “Ramsey, Lake Oswego, 1979,” the process changes. The subject of the portrait is presented in an apparently conventional head and shoulders format, facing the viewer. The effect is odd, because the subject appears to be submerged. Perhaps we are meant to believe that we are looking at a reflection. Are the surface patterns on the image actually liquid, or are they physical marks made by the photographer himself? Part of the subject’s body is brilliantly lit, but heavy shadows hover in front of him, rather than behind, where they would logically appear. The conventional spatial syntax of figure and ground has been reversed. Background has become foreground. The subject is about to disappear behind an ominous fluid veil.
At first sight, the work of Nan Goldin looks far removed from that of Morrisroe, although the color palette of many of her pictures is similar to his. They were friends, and moved in the same circles. The people in her pictures—herself, her friends and lovers, young artists and assorted others who gather at the edges of mainstream culture—are in some cases literally the same as some of Morrisroe’s subjects. Her work is also autobiographical, but her approach is quite different from his. The model for her book, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1982), is the family album. As she writes in her introduction, it “is the history of a re-created family, without the traditional roles.” The photographs are made spontaneously. They are unposed, convincing intrusions on real moments of intimacy and conflict. Her camera is always with her. Since her subjects are always aware of this, there can be no such thing as a discreetly seized moment. She is not a voyeur. She has said that she thinks of her camera as an extension of her arm, almost like another body part, making the moment of exposure like a moment of physical contact. One critic describing her work has said that her photography is “art that is practically identical with living.”

Goldin’s pictures bear some resemblance to those of Nikki S. Lee. Both artists rely on a surface veneer of casual authenticity. Lee’s work relies on imposture—her performance of an assumed identity, placed in the context of a group portrait that masquerades as a snapshot. This is not the case with Goldin, who in her own self-portraits is always as she seems, authentically herself, like the rest of her subjects—sometimes bruised, occasionally apprehensive, often vulnerable or weary. The pictures in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, in their non-judgmental depiction of sexual role-playing, are not fabrications, although they indeed represent people whose identities are primarily constructed through erotic friction.

Despite the undeniable authenticity of their content, there is an underlayer of performance and spectacle in Goldin’s work. Consider the two photographs reproduced here: “Nan and Brian in Bed, NYC, 1983” and “Brian with the Flintstones, NYC, 1981.” In the latter photograph, the presence of the TV set is a forceful reminder of the way in which mainstream media images define gender roles, even at the bohemian edge. Brian, who was in fact abusive, is equated with Fred Flintstone. The picture is carefully composed, so that the beer bottle is precisely aligned with the end of Flintstone’s arm, as if it were a club he was holding in his hand. This version of macho is reinforced by the cigarette dangling from Brian’s mouth, and by the exact positioning of the cigarette pack and its brand identification at the bottom of the frame, clearly making him into a parody of the Marlboro Man. The fact that the cigarette is not lit makes it seem like a prop, further emphasizing that Brian’s confrontational demeanor may be at least partly a performance for the camera.

The inclusion of this very photograph in the scene depicted in another photograph, “Nan and Brian in Bed” (it hangs on the wall in the upper right corner of the frame), suggests that there is an element of narcissism in Goldin’s work. The inclusion of this portrait within a portrait emphasizes the continual interplay between raw, lived experience, and crystallized representations of that experience. “Nan and Brian in Bed” is about people living out the consequences of the images they construct of themselves, and images that are memorialized in photographs made by one of the participants. It doesn’t matter where these images come from. The bedroom is a hall of mirrors.

Goldin’s people, including the photographer herself, do not simply live their lives in front of the camera; they perform their lives. One might think that this would undercut the authenticity of the moment of sexual tension represented here, since Goldin the artist, in the moment the shutter is released, must analytically distance herself from Goldin the performer. In fact, she operates on those two levels at once, participant and observer, simultaneously calculating and intuitive. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the self-portraits, where she must first set up the camera and compose the scene in the camera’s viewfinder before entering into it. It is only after that has been accomplished that she can rely on her instinct to tell her when the right moment has arrived, and squeeze the concealed cable release to take the picture. This tension between her two personae, actor and observer, mirrors the psychological tension between the two figures on the bed. The scene is constructed in the frame of the camera; the moment it contains seems raw and unfiltered. In showing herself with Brian, “[her] photographic act is incorporated as an authentic episode in their lives.”

Catherine Opie, whose work was discussed briefly in Chapter 2, has photographed her gay and lesbian friends with a large-format camera in the studio. The title of her 1991 portrait series,
“Being and Having,” which showed women posing as men, was a tongue-in-cheek reference to Lacan’s theory of sexual differentiation (in which the woman is presumed to “be” the phallus and to thereby represent male desire, whereas men actually “have” the phallus). The pictures in this series show women performing various stereotypes of masculinity, with the aid of fake beards, mustaches, and other props. Her later studio portraits are more straightforward. In the photograph reproduced here (“Dyke, 1993”), as well as the self-portrait discussed in Chapter 2, her subject is posed against a background of dark muted color. She has her back turned to the camera. Her hair is close-cropped. The word “dyke” is tattooed on the back of her neck. The display of butch identity is straightforward, but far from spectacular or aggressive. The pose is, by definition, the opposite of “in your face.” It is the opposite of what a viewer might expect from such a subject, the opposite of what the tattoo boldly announces.
Opie is playing with the idea of a portrait being a means of identification, where the display of a face is a necessary element. The tattoo suggests the idea of the body as a blank page, on which the text of identity is written. The text can be whatever we choose. Biology is not destiny. But there is a paradox here. Opie’s subjects are people who have been largely invisible to the eyes of mainstream culture. By showing us only her back, Opie partially preserves her subject’s invisibility. The tattoo becomes a mask-like substitute face.

Man Ray’s photograph of his mistress Kiki, “Le violon d’Ingres, 1924,” also presents us with a view of a woman’s back, on which the photographer has superimposed the markings of a stringed instrument. The marks are a kind of tattoo, which turns the subject into a classic stereotype of femininity. She is passive. Her body is openly displayed, but it is hollow. It can express itself fully, by making a sound, only when played. Kiki’s pose mimics that of one of the models in Ingres’s painting, “Turkish Bath” (1862). Man Ray’s title contains a joking reference to the fact that Ingres was a notoriously bad amateur violinist, implying that his true vocation lay in the “playing” of the female body, which was his true instrument. Opie’s “dyke” portrait replaces this stereotype of passivity with an emblem of butch identity.

Man Ray was associated with the Surrealist movement in the early 20th century. Surrealist artists often depicted female subjects’ faces with their eyes closed, as if dreaming. This was in keeping with their idea that women were the repositories of the unconscious, bearers of mystery, muses whose function was to inspire male artists. On their own, they were incapable of self-expression, to say nothing of self-invention. This implication is reinforced by another Man Ray photograph, “Noire et blanche, 1926.” In this image, Kiki holds an African mask, towards which she directs a coy sidelong glance. The mask is a fetish object, a projection of the artist’s association of female sexuality with tribal (so-called “primitive”) iconography. Even with eyes open, she stands in stark contrast to “Olympia,” whose eyes, aimed straight at us, do all the necessary talking.
Lorna Simpson’s work focuses on the struggle of black women to escape invisibility and achieve a viable sense of identity. In the 1990s she began to work on a portrait series in which she incorporated black women’s hairstyles into her signature text/image combinations. In “Flipside, 1991,” she combines a head and shoulders portrait of an unidentified woman, seen from behind, with a picture of the backside, or inside, of an African mask. The text, which also forms part of the image, reads: “the neighbors were suspicious of her hairstyle.” It is an off-handed statement—a seemingly innocuous judgment about the woman’s appearance. Yet these words, and the perception of identity that they embody (she asserts that black women with short kinky hair are not considered feminine), cut deeply into the lived experience of black women, as perceived by others. But something more than mere fashion is at stake. “The woman’s naturally kinky hair,” writes Coco Fusco...

"...might in some contexts connote rebelliousness, or pose a threat simply as a sign of blackness. But Simpson will not allow us to take any connection between hairstyle and blackness for granted. Ironically, the African mask is shaped in a manner reminiscent of Euro-American flip hairdos of the sixties, which became a trademark style of many black women entertainers of that period. The mask, a symbol for many of Africa and African aesthetics, is here recoded to also recall a European hairstyle appropriated by black women." 12

The diptych structure of “Flipside” suggests the format of an ethnographic study, where an anonymous representative of a particular ethnic or racial group is juxtaposed with a traditional tribal artifact, and the two images are intended to reflect each other, or to chart cultural change by comparing the present and the past. But Simpson’s photograph departs from the detached ethnographic model. She shows us the backside of the mask, the inside. We see it from the point of view of the person who would wear it. The picture asks the question, who is the performer and what is being performed?

“Those pieces [in the mask series] don’t really address the historical issues of identity in the black community, although they touch on those things. It is more an individual, psychological assessment of being of America and of Africa simultaneously. ...the work is not answer-oriented. It’s intentionally left open-ended. There’s not a resolution that just solves everything.” 13

By taking us inside the mask, we no longer know precisely what we are looking at, or who is doing the looking.

Sources
6. _ibid_., p. vii
Make a portrait that addresses a specific stereotype having to do with gender, sex, race or ethnicity. Regardless of whether you choose to stage the photograph or to shoot spontaneously, your picture should be carefully constructed. Your subjects should be people you know (including, perhaps, yourself). Take into account the following suggestions.

1. Consider what kind of camera you want to use (small, medium, or large format). This will have important implications. Do you want the resulting image to have a casual, vernacular look (as in the work of Nikki S. Lee or Nan Goldin)? Or do you want it to have a more richly detailed, monumental, or formal look (as in the work of Morimura or Opie)?

2. Consider using text as an integral element in your image. The image itself could be appropriated (a picture of a picture), or one that you make yourself. If you use a found image, make sure it is not protected by copyright. To create text, or any other kind of marking (as in Man Ray’s “Le violon d’Ingres”), you might write directly on the negative or print, or you might have a copy service create a typed transparency that you could lay over the enlarging paper when you print the negative.

3. Think about using a well-known image from art history as a reference point. You might want to restage the elements of a painting, attempting to deconstruct or reconfigure the meaning of the original. An alternative to this would be to make a picture that contains a reference to an advertising image from the popular media; or to a well-known story, myth, or motif, as in Lyle Ashton Harris’s portrait of himself and his brother (Achilles and Patroclus, the Pietà).

4. You might make a diptych, in which you use two separate images, either appropriated or original, or a combination of the two, in order to create a conversation between alternate emblems of identity.
CONFRONTATION:
LOOKING THROUGH the BULL’S EYE
train your gaze
The photographer and the subject stand facing each other. The subject is in the center of the camera’s viewfinder, plumb with the ground. The line of sight is close to eye level. The framing is either a close-up of the face, or of the head and shoulders, or of the full body. So many portraits are constructed in this way that the dead-center placement of the subject may seem like the only way. Because it is possible to work in this way without even thinking, it could also be seen as a stultifying strategy. You might want a more creative alternative. You might want to locate your subject at the extreme edge of the frame (see Chapter 3), or you might want to create asymmetry by tilting the camera. Or you might want to do something else entirely.

The balance and symmetry of the centrally framed subject has been actively encouraged by camera design. When it is superimposed on the subject of your portrait, the location of the split-image focusing aid or auto-focus mark (right in the middle of the viewfinder) is like a bull’s eye. It is easy to be persuaded to aim, focus, and shoot, without shifting the framing before the moment of exposure. This behavior is invisibly reinforced by the fact that many in-camera metering systems are center-weighted, giving preference to the reflected light values in the core area of the viewfinder, where the subject presumably will be located. The camera, in effect, acts like a template, telling us how to arrange the elements of the picture, and we follow its directions.

In certain situations, however, it may be wise to let the camera take over. Consider the practice of Zen archery (kyudo), a sport that was popularized in the West by Eugen Herrigel in his book *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Herrigel tells the following story about his efforts to learn archery in Japan. After three years of training, he was unable to hit the target with his arrow. His master finally told him, “Thinking about hitting the target is heresy. Do not aim at it.” Herrigel reports that he could not accept this answer. “If I do not aim at the target,” he said, “I cannot hit it.” His master then ordered him to come to the practice hall that night. As Herrigel tells it:

“We entered the spacious practice hall adjacent to the master’s house. The master lit a stick of incense, which was as long and thin as a knitting needle, and placed it in the sand in front of the target... We then went to the shooting area. Since the master was standing directly in the light, he was dazzlingly illuminated. The target, however, was in complete darkness. The single, faintly glowing point of the incense was so small it was practically impossible to make out the light it shed. ...Silently he took up his bow and two arrows. He shot the first arrow. From the sound I knew it hit the target. The second arrow also made a sound as it hit the target. The master motioned to me to verify the condition of the two arrows that had been shot. The first arrow was cleanly lodged in the center of the target. The second arrow had struck the nock of the first one and split it in two. I brought the arrows back to the shooting area. The master looked at the arrows as if in deep thought and after a short while said the following...

‘You probably think that since I have been practicing in this training hall for thirty years I must know where the target is even in the dark, so hitting the target in the center with the first shot was not a particularly great feat. If that was all, then perhaps what you think would be entirely true. But what do you make of the second shot? Since it did not come from *me*, it was not *me* that made the hit. Here, you must carefully consider: Is it possible to even aim in such darkness? Can you still maintain that you cannot hit the target without aiming? Well, let us stand in front of the target with the same attitude as when we bow before the Buddha.’
Contemporary western practitioners of kyudo, using Herrigel's book as a guide, have stressed the meditative qualities of Zen archery. Unlike other sports, they say, it's not about demonstrating your own skill at the expense of others. It's not competitive. It's not about mastery. The target is like a mirror. You do not aim at it; you connect with it. There is nothing mystical or spiritual about this. Conscious discipline and practice are necessary in order to achieve this goal. It involves the cultivation of an attitude, the end result of which is that you no longer try to direct the arrow to a preconceived destination. You, the archer, are an instrument. The weapon does the work. As Herrigel's master said of the bow, "It shoots."

This principle bears some resemblance to point-and-shoot photography, where the tool is a simple and inexpensive camera that offers its user no external controls over exposure or focus. Beyond that, it suggests that photography—even when sophisticated imaging equipment is used—is an intuitive practice. But it is not without method or discipline. The discipline consists in a deliberate relaxation of the urge to control the end result. Striving to master the picture-making process through clever composition or eccentric angles of view goes against the grain here; such efforts will only lead you to miss the mark. If you accept the mental model of photography as a kind of Zen target practice, then the camera becomes your master. You follow its lead, allowing your subject to be sharply focused in the center of the frame, and you think no further about it.

The point is to make pictures in which the act of framing/aiming will become invisible. In this scenario, composition not only ceases to be an aggressive gesture, it all but vanishes. It is important to bear in mind that the center of the frame does not have to be a dead zone. It can become a dwelling place. Direct your gaze at the way your subject occupies that territory. What will seize your attention are matters relating to your subject's presence. Assuming that the camera is mounted on a tripod, your only picture-making choice will be when to release the shutter, when to seize the moment. If you're not distracted by the possibility of adjustments to framing and composition, you can concentrate completely on minute variations of gesture, facial expression, and body language. Having relinquished the option of adjusting the angle or tilt of view, you can give your subject more freedom to react to you. There is a power relationship here between seer and seen. In this particular circumstance, without the conspicuous intervention of camera composition, this power relationship can tilt in favor of the subject. As you relinquish control, he or she will appear to dominate the frame. The resulting image will present itself as a momentary, seemingly unmediated exchange between you and your subject.

Consider the photograph by Manabu Yamanaka from his "Gyahtei" series. The title refers to the four Buddhist sources of pain: birth, age, disease, and death. Yamanaka photographed 17 women between the ages of 89 and 102, who were no longer being cared for by their families. The prints are presented life-size. The women are all in the center of the frame, naked, posed facing the camera against an evenly illuminated white background. The only shadows come from an accent light placed at a 45-degree angle to the subjects' bodies, emphasizing their infinitely wrinkled terrain. The contrast between the brittle vulnerability of their bodies, which seem about to dematerialize into ghosts, and the uninflected perfection of the backdrop paper, is startling. The desire that is usually associated with the representation of female nudity is replaced by a feeling of austere empathy. The photographs transform the traditional genre of the nude into memento mori, reminders of death. In the artist's words, they are "a Buddhist exercise in compassionate contemplation."

Yamanaka's pictures may be a challenge for viewers who see the representation of naked aging female bodies as taboo. (According to the photographer, because of the social restrictions of Japanese culture, many of his subjects' husbands had never seen their wives naked.) Yamanaka himself claims to work without any preconceptions about what is or is not proper subject matter for photography. "I usually give in to my instincts when taking photographs," he says, "which means I approach a subject with my mind turned off." This does not mean that he works in a vacuum of unawareness. His statement can be taken to refer to the empty mind that is the goal of Buddhist meditation, where all forms of judgment, as well as feelings of attraction and repulsion, are suspended. This state of calm is often described as "being centered," and the structure of the photograph perfectly mirrors the photographer's mental state. The archer and the target become united.

This is not an easy mental process. It is hard for the viewer to reach this end-point of calm, or even to recognize precisely what or who is being looked at. When Yamanaka exhibited the
“Gyahtei” series in the United States, a reviewer commented on how alien and yet weirdly alike these ancient bodies seemed.

“We fail to make proper distinctions when we face something we are unfamiliar with. I, for one, had to be persuaded that several of these women were not one and the same person. Age obliterates, and Yamanaka does well to confront us with it in this grim, startling and unsentimental way.”

Because of the startling nature of the subject matter, the writer’s eyes clouded over. He couldn’t get beyond that point, and looked for refuge. His initial perception, that the 17 women in the series were really the same woman, stereotypes old women—particularly naked old women—as being the same. They cease to exist as distinct individuals, and collapse into the distancing and comforting misperception of a category. Perhaps the pictures invite this response. Given the sameness of circumstance in which they were photographed—the consistency of lighting and backdrop—this is understandable. The photographer’s purpose, in this stark confrontation with physical frailty, is to make us bridge the distance between ourselves and what we are looking at.

August Sander’s work seems to be all about the solidity of categories. His portraits assert the presence of his subjects in a manner that actively encourages us to perceive them as social types. Sander worked in Germany during the period between the collapse of the Weimar government and the rise of the Third Reich, attempting to create a “portrait atlas” of all of German society. In his introduction to Sander’s first published book, _Face of Our Time_ (1929), Alfred Döblin emphasized the photographer’s scientific approach (which was linked to his belief in physiognomy as a reliable indicator of character), stressing Sander’s belief that photography represented a new vision, consisting of a capability for dispassionate description. Sander’s method was confrontational and simple. He posed his subjects, either standing erect or sitting, sharply focused and facing the camera. The background locations for these portraits (a city street, bare countryside, or an interior space) had a minimum of individuating detail, and were invariably out of focus. His subjects are often identified only by their occupation or social position (such as “Middle Class Couple,” “The Woman of the Soil,” “Bricklayer,” “Pastrycook”). For his planned book “People of the Twentieth Century,” he intended to include a prologue titled “Portfolio of Archetypes,” which in his first publication could only be shown as examples.

At first glance, there appears to be nothing intimate about Sander’s portraits. There is no display of emotion, no tell-tale signs of an inner life, no fugitive gestures. His subjects are defined exclusively by their roles. Sander appeared to be uninterested in the eccentricities and textures of personality, and to have no preference for photographing any one social type at the expense of another. His concern was with how his subjects inhabited their roles, whatever these roles might be. The relentless consistency of his approach—the sameness of the framing from image to image—is a throwback to the daguerreotypist’s method. It is a conscious choice, this relinquishing of “style,” implying that the photographer sees himself as a technician, applying the same template to each portrait session. The camera is used as a recording device. Variations from image to image appear to depend only on the raw information contained therein—the setting, the subject’s facial structure, style of dress, and posture.

In spite of the static quality of Sander’s method (or because of it), there is a great deal of tension beneath the surface of his work. In spite of the studied balance of his pictures, his manner of looking had little to do with the centered energy of Zen contemplation. Some of his portraits, based as they were on the twin assumptions of stable social identities and the viability of classification as a means of representation, function as a kind of wish fulfillment, a dream of orderliness in the midst of a politically volatile time. Whether by design or not, this work functioned for a time as a bulwark against the destabilizing insurgency of the Third Reich. His stated desire was to do no less than “hold fast the history of the world.” He willfully wanted to stop time, to immobilize it in photographs.

The archetypal contours of his subjects are perfectly supported by the out-of-focus settings in which they are placed (urban, or rural, as opposed to specific locations with identifiable local color). This is the scenario for many of Sander’s portraits. The pastrycook, his head and body stern and round, stands crisply focused holding a mixing bowl, against a background that contains just enough information to suggest a kitchen. The shape and size of the empty bowl, echoing the
train your gaze
body of its owner, establishes precise consonance between the subject and his environment. Nothing disrupts the presentation.

In some of his portraits, amid the anonymous bricklayers, pastrycooks, bankers, and “women of the soil,” he actually named his subjects. These people generally belonged to professions or to occupied roles that were not so easy to classify—avant-garde artists, industrialists and persecuted Jews, for example. Individuals started to peek out restlessly from beneath the solid archetypal facade. A case in point is the photograph reproduced here, “Painter [Anton Räderscheidt], 1926.” The subject of this portrait might be mistaken for a banker or an industrialist. He certainly looks the part. In fact, the artist/subject is dressed and posed like a figure from one of his own paintings (“Mann mit Laterne,” 1924). He is impersonating the stereotypical Man in the Bowler Hat, a bourgeois authority figure who was attacked by the Dadaists, and became a satiric target for other European artists.

If you look closely at the picture, it appears that Räderscheidt is clenching a fist, even though his arms hang loosely at his sides. His face is screwed tight, as if under great stress. As John Pultz has pointed out:

“…the people that Sander photographed …suggest through their poses that they are acting themselves and their professions for his camera. The photographs then read as records of performances—countering the assertion that the bodies are inherently linked to each individual’s profession.”

Sander’s work sometimes escapes his stated intention, and this is when it becomes most interesting. In the Räderscheidt portrait, the artist/subject is inhabiting one of his own creations. Instead of the representation of a pure archetype, where the subject’s actual identity coincides with the role he is enacting, it is a knowing impersonation. It is a seamless performance. Without the caption, it would be impossible to tell who we are looking at. The basic idea of the archetype—banker or businessman—may peek through the cracks. But it combines with a more complicated idea of role-playing, anticipating the sociologist Erving Goffman’s theory of dramaturgy, which is based on the idea that our public selves are nothing other than a repertoire of guises chosen for their effect-value. Our sense of self, in any given moment, is intertwined with our awareness of a part that we have elected to play.

Although a selection of Sander’s portraits was published in 1971 as Men Without Masks, the title is extremely misleading. His subjects are all wearing invisible masks. In the moment they inhabit, they often communicate a feeling of improvisation, as if testing the mask for a proper fit. This is what makes them come alive as subjects. It also mirrors Sander’s way of working. While in one respect his method was unrelentingly deliberate, in another respect it had an improvisatory element. I imagine he approached each portrait session knowing in advance exactly how he was going to proceed. The terms of each encounter—the centered axis of view, the sharply focused detail—were predetermined. The structure was automatic, itself a kind of invariable and archetypal process. But when he was inside this structure, in the actual moment, the photographer could lose himself in the observation of his subject, unencumbered by considerations of framing and composition. The camera would do the rest. In this respect he was a bit of a Zen archer.

Walker Evans’s photograph, “Allie Mae Burroughs, Wife of a Cotton Sharecropper, Hale County, Alabama, 1936” (discussed in Chapter 3), is simultaneously a portrait of a distinct individual and a social type—in this case, a representative of the Depression-era tenant farmer community in the rural South. While she can be said to belong to a category, she presents herself to the camera far too vividly, with her perplexed frown, to be considered only an archetype. To borrow Sander’s terminology, she is too much of an individual to inhabit the generalized role of a “woman of the soil.” The moment Allie Mae Burroughs occupies is historically specific. Her portrait image was part of a book project, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941), a collaboration between Evans and the writer James Agee that portrayed the daily lives of three tenant farmer families. While Agee’s prose was serpentine and introspective, Evans’s photographs had the look of pure unvarnished description. The portrait reproduced here is a tightly framed bull’s eye confrontation, containing just the barest amount of environmental detail that might help us draw conclusions about the quality of her life. It is a cold-blooded image. She is presented as a specimen for close inspection,
pinned to a wall that is as dry and angular as she is. Evans employs the apparently selfless esthetic of the collector, who chooses a subject, centers it in the viewfinder, and then steps aside in order to allow his subject to appear to speak for herself.

But his method is neither as purely descriptive nor as self-effacing as it seems. There is a formal rigor in his work, manifested here in the interaction of the subject with the stark geometry of the weathered clapboard against which she stands. The background is stylized, but in a manner quite different from that of a Sander portrait. The suggestiveness of a blurred three-dimensional space has been replaced by a sharply focused flat surface. This is due to the behavior of the camera. Evans habitually used a large-format Deardorff equipped with a long lens. He was physically distant from his subjects even though they appear to be seen at close range. The telephoto lens compresses space, thereby flattening out the relationship between foreground and background. In this case, since the subject is standing right up against the background, the compression of near and far is extreme. The image appears to be almost two-dimensional, like a picture of a picture. It has the look of a reproduction.

Evans was quite clear about his ambition to make disinterested, “authorless” photographs, where the camera would appear to be doing most of the work (this has been discussed in Chapter 5). Here, that ambition and the method used to serve it, have a distinct purpose. Speaking of himself in the third person, he once wrote that “Evans was, and is, interested in what any present time will look like as the past.” This is why the portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs looks the way it does, already removed from real time in the moment of exposure. The image is meant to appear to be an artifact of history, a clue. It looks like a bare fact, and as such it is incomplete. The surrounding context of Allie Mae Burroughs’s life, and the quality of that life, may be only partly inferred from the information supplied by the photograph—such as the expression on her face and the stark orderliness of the background. Evans refuses to give us more than this. His own reticence is what constitutes his style. It is a form of control, invisibly felt throughout his work.

Diane Arbus’s work is similar in some respects to the work of both Evans and Sander. It is disarmingly simple. Her subjects confront the camera, eyes locked on the photographer, and are centrally positioned in the square frame of her medium-format camera. Although the settings of her pictures are not generalized by being out of focus, as they would be in a Sander portrait, her images are tidily cropped and her backgrounds are usually purged of eccentric detail. Sometimes they look like improvised stage sets. In one portrait, “Man Pretending to Be a Woman,” her subject stands between parted floor-length curtains, as if in a theater. Also, although Arbus is known for her photographs of marginalized people, and for choosing to memorialize moments in which ordinary humans appear freakish or deranged, her work is grounded in a kind of typological thinking reminiscent of August Sander. One well-known image, “Puerto Rican Housewife,” suggests by virtue of its title that she was interested in portraying ethnic types and social roles. Other titles—such as “Patriotic Young Man with a Flag” and “King and Queen of a Senior Citizens’ Dance”—reinforce this expectation. She frequently used on-camera flash. This method, often associated with news photography, gives her pictures a clinical feeling that could be deemed appropriate for an unsentimental examination of social types.

Arbus’s work has the unrelenting aura of a theatrical performance. It is impossible to look at her pictures, even for a split second, without taking into account the mediating presence of the photographer and her camera. Her face-to-face encounter with her subjects is not presented as a moment of compassionate contemplation or as an exercise in dispassionate description. It is a collision. We may be reminded, in this regard, of the haunted look in the eyes of Richard Avedon’s subjects in In the American West (discussed briefly in Chapter 1). Avedon also came near to overwhelming his subjects with the sheer force of his gaze.

The subjects of Thomas Ruff’s well-known large-format color portraits stare out at us from the center of the frame. Their eyes are almost vacant. The lighting is flat. There are no shadows.

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i. Neither Thomas Ruff’s nor Diane Arbus’s portraits were made available for reproduction in this book, but they are widely anthologized, and can be seen in the collections of major museums worldwide. They are also available for viewing online.
The background is blank, often a kind of sickly white that suggests the way fluorescent light behaves with color transparency film. The images are printed larger than life. The faces convey no sense of drama. The pictures are confrontational, but they do not feel confrontational. They mimic the straightforward head-and-shoulders format of the familiar ID photo. Ruff studied photography in the 1980s with Bernd and Hilla Becher at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dusseldorf, and adapted their deadpan method of making industrial landscapes to the practice of portrait photography. At the heart of Ruff’s method is a crisis of belief in the objectivity of the photograph—the belief held in common by August Sander and others who had subscribed to the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) in the early part of the 20th century. Sander believed in the solidity of social types and in the solidity of the people who embodied those types. As Ruff has said:

“The difference between them and me is that they believed to have captured reality and I believe to have captured a picture. We all lost bit by bit the belief in this so-called objective capturing of real reality. ...Photography pretends to show reality. With your technique you have to go as near to reality as possible in order to imitate reality. And when you come so close then you recognize that, at the same time, it is not.”

Ruff’s belief that the only thing a camera can capture is a picture, that it cannot capture reality, implies that a photograph has no meaningful connection to its original reference-point in space and time. But he has also said, “You have to know the conditions of a particular photograph in order to understand it properly, because the camera just copes with what is in front of it.”

Whereas the conditions of an August Sander photograph were provided by a real-world background and a clear social context, the context of Ruff’s portraits is hidden, and barely detectable behind the vacant faces of his subjects. It turns out that there is meaning in his subjects’ lack of expressiveness, and significance in the strange, even lighting of their faces.

“I’ve been asked a lot why my portraits never smile. ...Maybe it has something to do with my generation. Like I use over-lights, no shadows. We grew up in the seventies. The reality was that there was no candlelight. If you go through a place, through the car park, it’s always fluorescent, so no shadows, just the all-over light. And in the seventies in Germany we had a so-called Terrorismushysterie: the secret service surveyed people who were against nuclear power; the government created or invented a so-called Berufsvernbot. This meant left-wing teachers were dismissed, so sometimes it was better not to tell what you were thinking. ...If you stand in front of a customs officer, you try to make a face like the one on your passport. So why should my portraits be communicative at a time when you could be prosecuted for your sympathies?”

The logic behind his imitation of the ID photo becomes apparent here. The pictures look the way they do because they are grounded in social and political conditions. The culture of the picture ID is a culture that stifles emotion, to say nothing of freakishness or eccentricity. Ruff’s portraits make this point rather bluntly. The feeling of personal presence, the evocation of anything like the “inner” qualities that Julia Margaret Cameron looked for in her subjects, is absent. What stands in its place is the cold clarity of a likeness.

In the absence of a psychological dimension and their emphasis on surface and saturated color, there are painterly qualities in Ruff’s portraits. In this respect, his work is similar to the photo-based paintings of his countryman Gerhard Richter. Richter spent his early childhood living in Nazi Germany and lived in East Germany until 1961, after which he started making his first photo-based paintings, using a slide projector to help him trace images on canvas. Richter repudiated the style of artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, describing the latter as “too artificial and too interesting.”

“He hasn’t got that astonishing simplicity. ...Johns was holding on to a culture of painting that had to do with Cézanne, and I rejected that. That’s why I painted from photographs, just in order to have nothing to do with the art of peinture,” which makes any kind of contemporary statement impossible.”

Richter’s use of photographs as source material allowed him to develop a painting style that appears to be the opposite of expressive. He has said elsewhere, “I depend on the photograph and mindlessly copy what I see. I am clumsy in that regard, even though I seem very skillful.” He seems to be content to let the camera—or, more precisely, the slide projector—do the work of describing his
subjects. He is merely a scribe, or a kind of editor, who uses a brush or squeegee to wipe away part of the painted surface. This technique accounts for the hazy glow in some of the work, as well as the frequent collapse of foreground into background, and the absence of brush strokes.

“I blur things to make everything equally important and equally unimportant. I blur things so that they do not look artistic or craftsmanlike but technological, smooth and perfect. I blur things to make all the parts a closer fit. Perhaps I also blur out the excess of unimportant information.”

Consequently, the subjects of his portrait paintings, like the subjects of Ruff’s photographs, seem flattened out and nearly anonymous. “Betty, 1988,” a portrait of his 11-year-old daughter, seems to
be a brilliantly colored copy of a found snapshot, a picture of a picture. The ambiguity expressed by the subject’s pose—her body inclined toward the artist, her head turned away toward a dark void—is mirrored by the ambiguous nature of the artist’s method of representation. This method reflects Richter’s attitude toward painting itself, a paradoxical mixture of doubt and belief that is quite similar to Ruff’s notion that photography is incapable of accurately rendering reality, in spite of its undeniable capability of rendering precise details. But Richter’s expression of antipathy toward the artistry and craftsmanship of traditional painting techniques is disingenuous. While the blurriness of “Betty” may remind some viewers of a badly executed snapshot, it may also remind others (who are familiar with the history of photography) of something else. Intentional or not, this blurriness is a clear reference to the soft-focus technique of early 20th-century Pictorialism—itself a self-conscious bit of craftsmanship, intended to dignify camera images by associating them with the visual properties of Impressionist painting and non-photographic printmaking practices.

Richter’s 15-painting cycle “October 18, 1977” (1988) created a controversy when it was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art. The paintings were based on media images of members of the radical Baader-Meinhof gang who had committed suicide while they were in prison. Some people thought that Richter’s deadpan portrayal of dead terrorists was morally offensive, and therefore inappropriate for public exhibition. Others thought that he could not legitimately be considered
“Gerhard Richter is a bullshit artist masquerading as a painter” is how Jed Perl began his cover story for the *New Republic*, April 1, 2002.

ii. “Youth Portrait” is unlike many of the pictures in the “October 18, 1977” cycle, which were painted from newspaper photographs that explicitly depicted the dead bodies of the Baader-Meinhof activists.
It is a monument of mourning. The title itself has multiple reverberations. It suggests a Sander-esque impulse to categorize Meinhof as a social type, and thereby “normalize” her. To a German viewer, it would also reverberate with echoes of the Hitler Youth movement.

In addition to being a politically charged picture, the painting poses a question about the relationship between visual imagery and knowledge. Because of its blurriness, it lacks the texture that we usually require for the conveying of accurate visual information. It is about uncertainty. It is a demonstration of the enormous difficulty of representing history by esthetic means. On a less dramatic scale, Ruff accomplishes much the same thing, although by different means. He allows the camera to do what it does best, which is to precisely describe what is in front of it. His portrait subjects are sharply focused. Their faces are alive with textural detail, but they remain hidden. The effect that Ruff’s photographs produce is like the effect produced by Richter’s portrait paintings, particularly his portrait of his daughter. Even though his subjects confront the camera, one might think their faces may as well be turned away, as Betty’s is. But of course they are not, and this is crucial to the meaning of the pictures. It proves that hitting the target—the face in the center of the viewfinder—can have an unanticipated result. Instead of producing knowledge, or

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**Rineke Dijkstra**  
*Hilton Head Island, S.C., USA*  
*June 24, 1992*  
*C-print. 153 x 129 cm Edition of 6  
35 x 28 cm Edition of 15.*  
*Courtesy of Marian Goodman  
Gallery, New York*
encouraging wide-ranging speculation about the lives of their subjects, the pictures resolutely remain pictures. We have to dig hard, and mostly on our own, for their social implications.

Ruff’s portraits play with the apparent certainty of the frontal pose—most particularly, the certainty of positive identification that this pose is designed to guarantee. Rineke Dijkstra’s work explores this idea in a different way. At first sight, her full-frontal beach portraits of European and North American teenagers look simple and straightforward, much like the work of August Sander, whose subjects seemed to define themselves by their sheer physical presence, with little intervention on his part. Dijkstra’s subjects stand facing the camera, centrally located in the frame. They are evenly illuminated by flash, which is just bright enough to fill in any stray shadows on their faces and bodies, and to make them stand out against the blur of a slightly darker background. The light from the flash is not jarring. The photographer does not assert her presence aggressively, as Arbus does. The subjects seem to produce their own glow, to be literally basking in the photographer’s sympathetic gaze.

Dijkstra’s method is the same from picture to picture. She does not usually give directions to her subjects, other than to ask them to face her. She uses a large-format view camera mounted low on a tripod, so that its central axis coincides with the subject’s navel. The camera is then tilted slightly upward toward the subject’s face. The horizon line is therefore low, and most often parallel to the top and bottom edges of the frame, bisecting the subject’s body at the hips. Skies dominate, and there is an absence of individuating detail (such as boats or other bathers) in the background. The beaches have the look of stage sets for the performance of her subjects’ individual identities. Her prints are large (59 inches high), and are hung on the wall so that the center of each image is at eye level. This causes the viewer to look up, thereby recreating the camera’s original angle of view.

The consistency of her method makes the boundary where ocean meets land appear like a laboratory for the study of adolescent body language, the moment when a person’s identity comes ashore and starts to solidify into adulthood. Her work is related to the typological analysis of August Sander and Thomas Ruff (insofar as Ruff’s work can be considered as a portrayal of a generation that grew up under a set of specific social conditions). We are invited to make cross-cultural comparisons between the teenagers of North America and eastern Europe. In the two beach portraits reproduced here, the girl at Hilton Head has freshly done hair, which she carefully holds in place. She wears jewelry. She is dry. She appears both guarded and totally prepared, as if for a fashion shoot. The Polish girl is partially wet from having recently been in the water. She has sand on her feet. Her hair is awry, and she is wearing a bathing suit from the 1970s. Her arms hang loosely. Her face is open and inquisitive. These pictures, however calculated, are empathetic in their assertion of their subjects’ presence. There is also a complex interplay between the monumental feeling of the images—created by their large scale and angle of view—and the varying degrees of awkwardness and vulnerability displayed by their subjects. It is not coincidental that the poses of these two girls contain strong echoes of Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus.” Despite their differences, they have this common point of reference.

The heart of Dijkstra’s method is her choice of moment, the way that she works with the pose. The photograph that she refers to as the key image in her development of a style is her only self-portrait, a picture she made in 1991 after a strenuous workout that was part of a year-long regimen of physical therapy designed to help her recover from a serious bicycle accident. She had previously been a commercial photographer. As such, she said:

“I used certain poses again and again, and, after seven years, I wanted to create something for myself, something more substantial. I made a portrait of myself after swimming thirty lengths, too tired to think about which pose to strike—that moment when you just stand.” 12

I think the key perception here is that the portrait photographer is not obliged to get her subjects to do anything. The pose should be an empty structure. The subject can simply stand there, like a target, and the photographer will fill the structure, give it definition, by choosing a certain kind of unbidden moment to make an exposure. “As a portrait photographer,” Dijkstra said:

“You have to deal with the self-image of people. You want to show what they think they are but also reveal what is beyond their control. That’s what is so beautiful about teenagers. They’re so self-conscious and also so helpless.” 13
The tug-of-war for control between photographer and subject is always present in a portrait session. Some photographers, such as Diane Arbus and Richard Avedon (see Chapter 1), habitually choose moments when their subjects appear to be dominated by the power of the artist's gaze. Others, such as Walker Evans and August Sander, choose moments when their subjects seem to transparently assert themselves, as if the photographer was not present. In either case, albeit differently, the pose seems resolved. The subject is either dominant or dominated. Dijkstra has it both ways. She preserves the tug-of-war by seeking out the indecisive or transitional moment, when a pose is either starting to form or is in the process of disintegrating. The Polish girl in the green bathing suit looks as if she doesn't know what to do with her left hand. Is she about to move it to her belly in an unconscious gesture of modesty, or is she simply confused? In either case, the non-gesture complicates the look of decisively sweet acceptance on her face. The girl at Hilton Head seems to have deliberately positioned her left hand on her thigh in order to display her rings, but the way she clutches her hair with her right hand seems to express a desire to retreat. At the core of each pose is a feeling of instability and tension. This can be seen as a perfect emblem of adolescent uncertainty, but it is also a signature element in all Dijkstra's work, something she looks for in many different situations. She photographed Portuguese bullfighters just after they had finished a match and were simultaneously showing signs of alertness and withdrawal. The same tension is evident in her self-portrait, where she visibly protects herself from the camera in a moment of otherwise candid self-display.

A Note on Backgrounds

“Background” is an odd word. As an optical reference point, its meaning is clear. It is the opposite of, or complement to, “foreground.” But the word also suggests a lack of value, relative to its complement or opposite. Photographers and viewers alike tend to pay less attention to what is in the background of a picture because they think it is less important than what is in the foreground. This is a mistake. You should always think of background and foreground as two equal parties to a visual conversation. A background should have something to say, even if it is blank. This is the case with the backgrounds of Thomas Ruff’s portraits. They are mirrors of his subjects’ faces. Richard Avedon’s white backdrop paper is functional because it transports his subjects into the isolating intensity of the photographer’s way of looking. Manabu Yamanaka’s luminously white backdrops, although similar to Avedon’s, function differently, daring us to contemplate his naked subjects with the empty mind of Zen meditation. In the sense that they contextualize and actively direct our responses to what we see, all backgrounds function as stage sets. It doesn’t matter whether the settings are carefully fabricated or found by chance. They should all be treated as constructions, because they are bearers of meaning. They are never neutral.

Since they can often suggest a cultural or political context that directly affects the lives of the people who sit for portraits, backgrounds can be especially significant in the practice of portrait photographers who have worked in colonial and post-colonial societies. Seydou Keïta operated a commercial portrait studio in Bamako, the capital of Mali (which was a French colony until 1960). During the country’s colonial period, he was much in demand by civil servants and other native well-to-do people, most of whom wished to be photographed in traditional clothing. Keïta stocked a wide variety of African textiles to use as backdrops for his portraits and became known for the pattern-on-pattern look of his photographs: the designs of his sitters’ gowns and robes echoed by the graphics of the hanging fabric in the background. In the untitled portrait reproduced overleaf, two well-dressed women are complemented by the cloth hanging on the wall behind them. This conversation between foreground and background suggests a fragile image of cultural unity, subtly disrupted by the presence of their matching European shoes, which are visible below the hems of their dresses.

Philip Kwame Apagya, a contemporary Ghanaian photographer, uses a wide variety of hand-painted backdrops for his portrait sessions. Occasionally, his subjects ask to stand in front of the camera in traditional dress, against a painted African landscape. More often, however, they pose cheerfully, smiling like tourists, in front of idealized views of their objects of desire: middle-class European and American living rooms, well-stocked refrigerators, home entertainment centers, fake New England houses. They look as if they are on a crudely rendered virtual tour of a modernized future that is almost within their reach. In “Travel and See” (see page 116), a young woman is about to climb aboard an airplane. There is no attempt to conceal the artifice in the photograph.
Train your gaze
The cartoon-like backdrop is clearly a painting, the ripples of its surface clearly perceptible. The bare wall of the photographer’s studio is visible above the top edge of the painted cloth, and the edge of a brown curtain juts into the left-hand side of the scene. There is no real attempt to make the trompe l’œil effect of the setting convincing. There is an element of genial self-mockery here. The intentionally crude production values of the photograph take the edge off the depiction of a culture that has a history of want and deprivation. The photographer knows that he is representing fantasies, and he wants us to know that he is not entirely convinced by them.

Apagya’s work is a good-natured variation on an African tradition of studio portraiture, exemplified by Seydou Keïta, in which the resolutely solemn pride of the sitter can be taken as a subtle sign of resistance to colonial subjugation. One might read the casual gesture of goodbye in this airport photograph as a sign of liberation from that burden of resistance. Freed of the indignity of colonization, his subjects no longer have a compelling reason to be solemn for the camera. In this photograph, the subject has become an indigenous version of the dapper European tourist, who was frequently represented in carte de visite portraits, posed against a painted backdrop depicting an exotic foreign locale. Apagya has grafted this method of simulated location photography onto a new set of cultural circumstances.

In addition, the solemnity of a direct confrontation between photographer and subject has evaporated. It has been replaced by a more casual sort of encounter. There is no staring here, no clinical examination. The subject is no longer tightly contained, either by his environment, or, as she gestures toward us, by a strictly frontal pose. The formal portrait has given way to a vernacular encounter. But there is nonetheless a sense of ceremony at the center of his portrait work. As in August Sander’s images, Apagya’s subjects perform a role—the role of the newly minted African tourist and consumer. Unlike Sander’s people, however, they perform their role with obvious gusto.

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**Sources**

7. ibid.
8. ibid.
Whatever format you use, mount your camera, with a cable release attached, on a tripod. This will slow you down and encourage you to pay a special kind of attention to what you are looking at. The cable release, particularly if it is a long one (10–20 feet), will give you freedom to move while the camera stays in place. Your task is to photograph a single person, located at or near the center of the frame.

**SETTING**

Before you do anything else, determine a location for your portrait. You may choose to photograph indoors or outdoors. You may choose to construct an entire environment. You may shoot in a real world setting without altering its elements in any fashion. You may choose a found location and rearrange some of its elements in a way that feels appropriate to you. You may want to shoot your subject against an almost or totally bare wall, against the sky, or against seamless backdrop paper. (Note: unless you really want a homemade look, you should avoid trying to replicate a studio environment by stretching a sheet across a wall.)

**FRAMING AND FOCUS**

Be attentive to these matters. Bear in mind that the distance, or lack thereof, between your foreground subject and the background (combined with your lens aperture) will have a significant effect on the degree to which the background will be in or out of focus. As the distance between foreground and background increases (assuming that the foreground is in focus), the background will become increasingly blurred. As this distance decreases (particularly with smaller lens apertures), the background will gain in sharpness.

Think about camera height and angle of view. Do you want the central axis of view to be at the subject’s eye level, or do you want it to be above or below eye level? Do you want to tilt the camera up or down to compensate for its height? Where do you want to place the horizon line in the frame? Wherever it is placed, make sure the horizon line is parallel to the top and bottom edges of the frame. (Any kind of sideways tilt here is going to look like a striving for compositional effect.) Pay attention to the edges of the frame. Is there anything intruding on your otherwise carefully composed setting? Do you think this intrusion, if there is one, will give energy to your eventual portrait (as is the case with Philip Kwame Apagya’s portraits), or is it an unnecessary distraction?

**SUBJECT**

Now it is time to think about who is going to inhabit the frame. Do you want to photograph someone you know, or a stranger? With a few exceptions (these being mostly self-portraits), the artists discussed in this chapter made portraits of total strangers, or of people with whom they developed relationships expressly designed to culminate in one or more portrait sessions. Rineke Dijkstra started her beach portrait series by attempting to photograph people she knew, but quickly came to the realization that the results were inevitably too predictable. For this reason, unless you want to make an unassisted self-portrait (in which case you will be unable to prejudge the result), you should photograph a stranger. This will involve a certain amount of preliminary work. You may advertise for a certain kind of subject, or approach an institution with a population you would be interested in photographing. On the other hand, if you set up your camera and tripod in a public place, people will come to you and want to know what you are doing. Some of them may become your subjects. Or you can approach strangers on the street yourself, having prepared a script describing what you want to do.

**PROCEDURE**

After having set up the camera, determined how you are going to frame the picture, and chosen a subject, proceed as follows. Look through the viewfinder and make sure your subject is at or near the center of the frame. Focus the lens. Do not move the camera. If the subject is too near or far, or is obscuring part of the background that you want visible, tell her/him to move. Refocus if necessary. If this does not work, you may allow yourself to make minor adjustments to camera height and/or angle of view, but you must not move the tripod itself from its location.

This will be the last time you look through the viewfinder until you are done with your subject. Because you are attached to the viewfinder by the cable release, but also separated from it, you can move around yourself, thereby giving your subject a choice of what to look at— you or the camera. You might consider telling him/her which of these two options to choose, but otherwise you should give minimal directions. The burden of how to address the camera is on your subject. This may feel awkward, but let it be. Your job is to be patient and choose the moment of exposure. Let the camera do the rest of the work. Shoot as much film as you can.
OUT of FOCUS: The DISAPPEARING SUBJECT
“Everything in photography boils down to what’s sharp and what’s fuzzy.”

GAYLORD HERRON
[ ASSIGNMENT N° 8 ]

This assignment starts with a set of specific requirements for a photograph. Think of the requirements as a mental model, or a template. You may photograph whoever you wish, in whatever circumstances, but your image must conform to the following specifications:

1. Your subject must occupy at least 50 percent of the frame area. He or she must be in the foreground. If you are using a lens in the 50–90mm range, the camera-to-subject distance will be between two and four feet. If you are using a moderate wide-angle lens (no shorter than 35mm in focal length), it will be between one and three feet.

2. Your subject must be out of focus. Not just indistinct, but seriously blurry. Nebulous. For this reason, you should avoid using an extreme wide-angle lens, because of the fact that it will achieve great depth of field, even at wide apertures. You will also need to be careful with digital cameras, which often give you more depth of field than you want, even when zoomed to a relatively long focal length.

3. Something (or someone) in the background must be crisply focused. You will need to make sure that this background element is far enough away from the foreground subject so that it will not influence the blurry quality of the foreground. A woman leaning against a background wall will not produce the desired effect, even if you focus on the tip of her nose. Depth of field is an important factor here. It should be as shallow as possible. Ideally, you should do this assignment in lighting conditions that will allow you to shoot with the lens wide open. To get a preliminary idea of what different near/far distance relationships will look like with a given lens set at different apertures, you can use the depth of field preview function on your camera (this assumes that you will be using a reflex, as opposed to a rangefinder camera). In general, you should avoid using this function when you are actually taking pictures, because it slows you down. If you can manage to set the lens to its widest possible aperture, however, the depth of field (or lack thereof) is always displayed in the viewfinder.

4. If you do not use a tripod, it is also important that you use a shutter speed that is fast enough (1/125 sec. or faster) so that there is no possibility of blurriness resulting from camera movement. Bear in mind too that you will not be able to execute this assignment outdoors in bright light unless you use slow film and/or a neutral density filter. Otherwise, in order to achieve proper film exposure, the brightness of the scene will force you to use a lens aperture that will give you too much depth of focus.
THE OBJECT OF THIS ASSIGNMENT IS TO ENCOURAGE YOU to question two peculiar bits of conventional photographic wisdom: first, that the subject of a photograph must be in the foreground and sharply focused; and second, if there is any area of the image that is out of focus, it must be the background, which is assumed to be a region of no importance.

This pictorial practice has achieved the status of a rule because it is attached to the idea of perspective that was developed in the Renaissance. There is nothing inherently truthful about the way space is represented in this way. It is simply a convention. Habit alone has taught us that it is an accurate way of representing reality; that a sharp foreground, with a receding and progressively blurred background, mimics the experience of human eyesight. This is not the case. The camera and the human eye do not see in the same fashion. The eye scans back and forth in time, and allows the brain to assemble an image that we perceive as a stable whole. But this image is really an assemblage of discontinuous fragments. The camera freezes an image, in a wider field of view than the eye can contain, in a single instant. The scanning eye sees things incrementally and in focus, regardless of their distance from the viewer. The camera sees objects distributed through space, simultaneously, at different degrees of focus.

The camera creates a very simple set of parameters for describing the world. Aside from color and tonality (which accounts for a lot), the only language it knows is the language of focus, the range of optical experience defined by the two extremes of sharp and fuzzy. This rather elementary set of options gives you the means to play with space in some complex and interesting ways. When you make a photograph where the apparent subject (conventionally the largest or most conspicuous element in the picture) is unexpectedly blurry, you create confusion and ambiguity. At worst, your viewer will dismiss the image as a mistake. At best, you force the viewer to ask, after a momentary hesitation: “What is the subject of this picture?” The experience of looking changes from passive to interrogative.

Consider a William Klein photograph. A woman’s face looms out of the frame toward you, almost out of the space of the photograph itself. It’s as if she has caught you looking at her, and has engaged your gaze with her own. In the background, faces gawk and stare, sideways, at something outside the frame. It seems we are at a public event. What are they looking at? Where are we meant to direct our attention? There are two different orders of spectacle here (the public event and the private encounter), and two different levels of spectatorship (the intimate exchange between the photographer and the woman, and the awkward gaping of the crowd). This photograph, taken at a St Patrick’s Day parade in New York, is in fact about the act of looking. It sets up an opposition between an inner and an outer gaze. The active eye contact between the woman and the photographer is opposed to the passive fascination of the crowd. It is a collage of viewpoints. Because of the blur, and her nearness to us, the woman almost enters our own space. It is as if she is a figment of our imagination, or a hallucination. The sharply defined crowd, on the other hand, occupies the world of fact. Because of the reversal of the usual parallelism between sharp/fuzzy and foreground/background, the picture almost seems inside out, in the sense that a public ritual has collapsed into a riddling private memento.

In its initial visual effect, Robert Frank’s picture, “Movie Premiere, Hollywood,” seems startlingly similar to the Klein photograph. The foreground female subject is blurry. The background spectators are sharply focused. Frank and Klein seem to be playing the same game, creating tension between two optically different worlds, and reversing the conventional optical scheme. In a general sense, this is true. But there are significant differences between the two images. Psychologically, Frank is farther away from his foreground subject. He is not engaged with her. She does not acknowledge his presence. Her eyes are blank shadows. She seems, if anything, to be completely wrapped up in herself. She is, although apparently a celebrity, a cipher. While the spectators in the Klein photograph are looking at something unspecified outside the frame, we know, or we think we know, what the spectators here are looking at. They are straining to get a look at the celebrity herself. Frank’s picture is analytic and emotionally distanced. It revolves around the disjunction between the cultural fantasy embodied by the celebrity and sheer ordinariness of the female spectators. But here, the fact is that these spectators are far from awkward or gawky. They have more presence, more texture, more grace than the woman who may be the object of their fascination. She herself is simply an empty vessel. The fact of her blurriness, aided by the empty spaces of her eyes, is here a token of vacancy.
Sharpness, or “edge definition,” as the technical manuals call it, belongs to the world of precise empirical description. It is what early commentators on photography first noticed. Many of us still assume that this form of optical clarity is what is most distinctive and significant in a photograph.

In 1839, a British writer discussing daguerreotypes referred enthusiastically to the “extraordinary minuteness of such multiple details as was shown in the street views.” He continued:

“The astonishment was, however, greatly increased when, on applying the microscope, an immense quantity of details, of such extreme fineness that the best sight could not seize them with the naked eye, were discovered, and principally among the foliage of the trees.”

What do blurry pictures describe? Or, more precisely, what is their manner of description? They are what Marshall McLuhan, in his book *Understanding Media*, called “low-definition” images. He was talking about the optical properties of traditional television, but his ideas are also relevant to photography. He argued that television was a “hot” medium that requires the active participation of the viewer. According to him, the lack of sharpness in the TV image forces us to imagine the missing detail. By virtue of this activity, blurry images often enter into our own interior space, sometimes without our permission. We become engaged with them; we cannot look at them dispassionately. They become more like metaphors than expository descriptions.

Alfred Stieglitz elaborated this thought in the 1930s, with his notion of the “equivalent.” His idea, which we now take for granted, was that photographs could describe inner states of mind with as much finesse as they could delineate the world of surface appearances. He believed that forms and patterns in a picture, more so than their literal information content, could communicate emotional and psychological meanings.

“Equivalent,” which served as a title for hundreds of pictures he took of sky and clouds, was meant to signify that outer appearances in a photograph were commensurate with an inner experience. Steiglitz did not use blurriness per se, or abstraction, to accomplish this goal. The cloud formations were always clearly focused, and sometimes included fragmentary elements of landscape. “Clouds, Music, No. 1, Lake George” (1922), reproduced here, indicates the direction his later work would take. The legible landscape, below the horizon line, is starting to drop out of the bottom of the frame. The small white house is a fragile anchor point, a punctuation mark, almost like an after-image left in the mind, indicating the location of memory. The mass of cloud, nebulous suggestiveness, is starting to displace the linear elements in the scene. What is significant, and relevant to our examination of the effects of blurriness, is the way in which the photographer starts to reduce clearly focused optical data—the house—to the status of a grace note, thereby opening the way for less literal kinds of meaning.

Stieglitz’s early connection to the photographers of the Photo-Secession movement, and their attempt to recreate painterly effects through the use of soft focus and blur, should not be confused with his own practice. His perception of the photograph’s potential for metaphor was grounded in the example of their work, but his own work attempted to go beyond their sentimentality, toward a more complex apprehension of emotion. In this respect, his work is not as far removed from Klein’s as one might at first imagine. Klein’s picture, as we have seen, demonstrates a certain disregard for what was, at the time, accepted procedure. Not only is his presumed subject out of focus, but the image is grainy and seems hastily composed. It’s clear that he’s after emotion.

In this respect he shares common ground with Stieglitz. But Klein’s pictures are more aggressive. They are gestural. Looking at his work, one feels that he does not so much hold his camera as wield it. It seems as if, in the moment of exposure, the camera itself has been momentarily arrested in its arc of motion. Jane Livingston, in her introduction to the anthology, *The New York School*, notes that Klein’s work is similar in feeling to the work of 1950s action painters, particularly Franz Kline. In other words, he used his camera like a fast-moving brush, just on the near side of being out of control.

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1. With the advent of high-definition television, McLuhan’s ideas may be in need of some revision, although they remain as a useful reference-point for any discussion of the evolution of media technologies and how these technologies affect our understanding of the world.
Nancy Rexroth is a contemporary photographer whose work, as well as her attitude toward technology, owes much to the examples set by Stieglitz and Julia Margaret Cameron. Along with a number of photographers who were active in the early 1970s, she used a cheap medium-format plastic camera, a Diana, then available in supermarkets for about $1.50 (the contemporary version of this camera is the Holga, which is priced at $50.00). The camera was cheaply constructed. It often leaked light. It had rudimentary shutter speed controls, and no light meter. Because of the nature of its plastic lens, she had no need, as Cameron did, to modify it so that it would become incapable of sharp focus. Rexroth shared with Cameron and Stieglitz a primary interest in the purely evocative potential of photographs. It should also be noted in this regard that Stieglitz, in his pursuit of a similar esthetic, also had a maverick attitude toward photographic technology. He often experimented with equipment that was not then considered artistically worthy. For the presentation of some of his work (“The Terminal,” a picture from 1892, is a case in point), he used a cumbersome lantern-slide projector, as opposed to the more respectable silver print or gravure print.

According to Rexroth, who speaks of technical procedures with her tongue firmly in cheek, the Diana is a tool that seems made expressly for metaphor:

“It is a toy camera that works well. The company also makes a cheaper model that squirts water when you press the shutter. I have developed my own method of hand-holding, sometimes shooting with my eyes closed, using the zone system, dreaming, using five different types of film.”

She published a portfolio of photographs, made with the Diana, called Iowa. As she says, after explaining that the images were actually made in Ohio:
“They are my twenty-year-old memories of an Iowa I visited when I was a child. For me, a photograph of Iowa doesn’t necessarily have to be taken in Iowa or be about Iowa. Iowa is flat and clean and has a lot of sunshine. In dreams and memories it becomes distorted. Dark evenings, hot-cold sunlight, diffused windows and hallways... Through the Diana they become memories of a place I might have been before.

“The Diana is made for feelings. The Diana images are often like something you might faintly see in the background of a photograph. ...Sometimes I feel as though I could step over the edge of the frame and walk backwards into this unknown region. Then I would keep right on walking.”

Her decision to embrace a low-tech imaging device was in stark contrast to the assumption that serious photographs were to be made with seriously expensive equipment. Her procedure challenged received attitudes about artistic prowess, competence, and professionalism. It was a model, with feminist undertones, which evoked an alternative to masculine ideas of mastery. Consider the name of the camera. Diana. She was the goddess of the hunt.

Rexroth’s method was unique in the world of 1970s art photography. Since then, other photographers, using different means, have made pictures with broadly similar results. Uta Barth, who works with a perfectly conventional camera lens, capable of precise focus, produces images that are even blurrier than Rexroth’s. Their lack of definition often reaches a point where it becomes nearly impossible to recognize what you are looking at. But the fact is that her pictures do not lack focus. In “Field #3,” reproduced here, there is simply nothing there, in the field of view, at the point where the lens is focused. The type of blur produced in this image can only occur when the lens is focused at the closest possible point, about two feet from the film plane. In other words, edge definition occurs invisibly here, approximately at the nearest location that
could be occupied by a foreground subject. A human subject is absent, but according to the convention that this person coincides with the camera’s point of critical focus, it is implied. This subject, instead of someone else, an “other,” could actually be you, clearly focused in the spectator’s space in front of this picture. The space is left empty so you may inhabit it. Barth’s pictures have been considered as portraits, albeit in a rather unique sense. They are not portraits of human subjects for you to look at, but rather, portraits of you yourself, caught looking.

The photograph here was taken while driving around Los Angeles. But the point of the image is not to evoke the passing spectacle of the urban landscape. Barth’s work is, in her own words, about “bringing the activity of looking to the foreground.” This is intended to be confusing, to provoke the spectator into sorting out the dynamics of this activity. “On the most obvious level,” she says,

“We all expect photographs to be pictures of something. We assume that the photographer observed a place, a person, an event in the world and wanted to record it, point at it. There is always something that motivated the taking of a photograph. The problem with my work is that these images are not really of anything in that sense, they register only that which is incidental and peripheral, implied. (The images lack focus because the camera’s attention is somewhere else. Many of these compositions, while clearly deliberate and carefully arranged in relation to the picture’s edge, are awkward, off balance and formally suggest a missing element.) Slowly it becomes clear that what we are presented with is a sort of empty container and it is at that point that people begin to “project” into this space. It begins to read as an empty screen. ...If the ‘subject’ is not fixed within the image on the wall, but instead is indicated to be in front of that, then the ‘location’ of the work hangs somewhere between the viewer and the wall, in that empty space we are looking through. In some images, when you locate the camera’s point of focus, you will find it to be that
of an extreme closeup. The location of the implied subject is pushed so far forward that it aligns itself with the very place one is standing in front of the picture. So suddenly the imagined ‘subject’ and the viewer are standing in the same place. ...Everything is pointing to one’s activity of looking, to an awareness and sort of hyper-consciousness of visual perception.”

In this quote, Barth was speaking specifically about Ground, a series of pictures that were mostly interiors, based on the conventions of still portrait photography (with the human subject missing). In her next project, Field, she modifies her approach.
“Field...takes cinematic background information as its point of departure. The composition becomes more fluid with the assumption that both the subject and the camera may be in motion. Things are no longer carefully aligned in relation to the edge of the image but instead flows off the edge of the frame. These images were all taken outdoors while driving around Los Angeles much like a location scout. I looked for places that lacked specificity yet had certain evocative qualities remembered from films. The later part of the series becomes very atmospheric as they are shot in dense rain and resemble Turner paintings of light and sky.”

Barth’s work is self-reflexive, in the sense that it calls attention to the status of the picture, and how we perceive it, as an object, as opposed to a representation of something. Blur becomes a strategy in this very cerebral enterprise. But this is not to say that her work lacks suggestiveness. It joins two elements that are often perceived as incompatible: evocative imagery and a carefully articulated and severe conceptual structure.

“At least it is my ambition to make images that have both [these elements]. ...It is not nostalgia or sentiment that I am interested in, but stillness, quality of light and time.”

This quotation may clarify her previous (and somewhat surprising) reference to Turner. It certainly points to her enthusiasm for the unsentimental awareness cultivated by minimalist artists.

Richard Billingham’s work presents a very different model of reflexive consciousness. Ray’s a Laugh, which portrays his own family, looks like a book of terrible snapshots. The pictures are raw and convincing. At the same time, they are loaded with self-conscious allusiveness to the conventions of vernacular photography. As is the case with family albums, the camera is a conspicuous presence. It relentlessly mediates our impression of the people who are his subjects. Billingham’s pictures are frantic, turbo-charged snaps: gaudy, harshly lit by direct on-camera flash, oddly composed, imprecisely focused. What is striking about the images is their merciless consistency. There is a picture of his alcoholic father Ray, caught in mid-air as he falls off a chair. There is another image, taken with a flash at floor-level, complete with red-eye, a noirish parody of a family snapshot, of the family dog licking crumbs off a filthy floor. There is a picture of both parents eating, with fresh food stains on the front of their clothes; and another, reproduced here, of his mother crouched by a window, furtively smoking a cigarette.

This last picture has a gauzy blur that would make Julia Margaret Cameron flinch. It is far from poetic. Billingham’s mother looks like a trapped animal, her face marked by an expression of fear and suspicion. In speaking of her portraits of male subjects, most of whom were prominent 19th-century British intellectuals, Cameron spoke of her desire to capture the greatness of the “inner” person, rather than simply the magnitude of their appearance. In these pictures and in her allegorical images of mothers and children, she attempted to achieve emotional focus by depriving the image of optical sharpness. Some, looking back through the historical haze of soft-focus imagery that picked up where Cameron left off, would call this a kind of sentimental excess. But it is important to remember that Cameron’s imagery, at the time it was made, was hard-edged in its impact, if not in its appearance. She could legitimately be considered as Richard Billingham’s distant ancestor.

**Sources**

2. Nancy Rexroth, in *The Snapshot*, edited by Jonathan Green, published as *Aperture*, volume 19, number 1, 1974, p. 54
3. ibid., p. 55
5. Email communication with the author, February 2006
6. ibid.
There is a story about John Cage visiting a sound-free laboratory at MIT. According to the story, he mentioned to his guide that he heard two sounds, one of which he recognized as the sound of his heart beating. But what, he inquired, was the other sound? His guide is said to have told him that it was the sound of his nervous system. “So,” Cage replied, “this is reassuring. This means there will always be music.”

We can apply this anecdote to the presence of light. It is easy to imagine an environment that is completely dark: a room without windows, with a door that can be sealed (in other words, a darkroom). But the fact is, in the overwhelming majority of situations, there is always enough ambient light to take a picture. For all practical purposes, photography is always possible. The crucial consideration is what you want your picture to look like, not whether or not it is possible to make a picture. Correct exposure in low-light situations without a flash, while always possible, does require special care. You will probably want to use a tripod to hold the camera steady during a long exposure.

There are also certain tools that you may want to avoid using. One of these is a digital camera. Even though you can increase the ISO setting on most digital cameras, thereby allowing you to make relatively short exposures in dim light, the results can be unsatisfying, because of the “noise” that the CCD image sensor creates, particularly in the shadows. Using a slow shutter speed is often not an option, because digital cameras can produce random spots of light (known as “dark current”) at exposures longer than $\frac{1}{2}$ sec. For these reasons, it will be assumed that a film camera will be used for the assignments in this chapter.

If you want to make photographs in extremely low light, and at the same time retain the texture and feel of darkness, you may not want to even think about using a flash, or any other kind of supplemental light. You should be aware of the fact that, in order to correctly expose your film, you may be placing demands on your camera’s metering system that it cannot meet. As ambient light levels decrease, in-camera metering systems become increasingly unreliable. While some of these systems are more accurate than others in extreme conditions, you are nonetheless likely to encounter a situation in which you will want to use an external, hand-held light meter. It is an extremely useful tool, because it allows you to determine an exposure that will result in perfectly exposed shadows, even in the most demanding situations. (For a detailed discussion of hand-held meters and how to use them, see Appendix B.)

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i. If you want to test the limits of your digital camera in this regard, try making a series of increasingly long exposures, with the camera set on Manual, starting with $\frac{1}{2}$ second. Keep the lens cap on, in order to ensure that no light reaches the sensor. At some point in your series of exposures, the camera will produce dark current. It will look like a star pattern.
Another thing that is important in low-light situations is the type of film you choose. Most low-light scenes present conditions of very high subject contrast, due to the combination of extremely dark shadows and very bright point sources of light (such as outdoor street lights, or even ordinary indoor tungsten lamps). The brightness range of almost all night-time scenes—the difference between the highest and the lowest reflected light values—is extreme. Since fine-grain black-and-white film emulsions (those with low ISO ratings) tend to produce high contrast negatives, they are usually inappropriate for use in low-light photography. It is better to use faster films, such as Tri-X (ISO 400), because these emulsions tend to de-emphasize subject contrast. (Notable exceptions to this rule are T-MAX 3200 and Kodak Recording Film. Both are extremely fast, but they behave like slower films in terms of their tonal values, yielding negatives that are high in contrast.)

Brassaï, who was the first photographer to systematically explore the city at night, calculated his exposures intuitively, without the aid of a light meter, and without a wide range of films at his disposal. For the photographs in his book, Paris le nuit (1933), it was said that he exposed very dark urban scenes for the length of time that it took him to smoke a densely packed, expensive cigarette. For slightly lighter nocturnal landscapes, he smoked a Gauloise, a cheaper brand that incorporated an oxidizer to promote faster burning of the tobacco. He used a 6 x 9 cm plate camera, mounted on a tripod. Since the camera lacked an optical viewfinder, he had to calculate focus by eye, or by stretching a length of rope, knotted at regular intervals for ease of measurement, from the camera to the subject. His human subjects, such as the woman pictured in the well-known “Streetwalker Near the Place d’Italie,” had to stand very still, and had to be situated directly under a streetlamp in order for the exposure time to be under ten seconds.

Today, it is hard to imagine making portraits with long exposure times as anything other than an irritating constraint, a holdover from photography’s early history, when daguerreotype studios were equipped with neck braces to hold the sitters’ heads in place. Yet Gary Schneider, a contemporary photographer who also has an affinity for darkness, has actively embraced this procedure, using really long exposure times as an integral part of his photographic practice. His early work grew out of an interest in 19th-century portraiture. From an archive of small collodion plate glass negatives, anonymous portraits of young women which he discovered at a New York flea market, he made a series of nine greatly enlarged, life-size silver prints, titled “Carte de Visite.” As he says of the work,

“These portraits seen in a large format unveil a previously undetectable exposure of the subject. They’re totally unveiled; they are presenting themselves.”

Schneider was struck by the paradoxical sense of openness communicated by these stiffly posed women, which was due in part to their lack of familiarity with the process of being photographed. They had not yet learned camera behavior.

The quality of the source images for “Carte de Visite” made Schneider search for ways to undermine the tendency of contemporary portrait subjects to instinctively put on their camera face. His solution, although grounded in 19th-century procedures, is startlingly innovative as well as simple.

“Schneider found an essential model in Julia Margaret Cameron’s unorthodox search for the essence of her subjects by making closely framed portraits with exposures lasting up to eight minutes. He greatly exaggerates her technique, expanding the length of his exposures to more than an hour for each portrait. Rather than clamping his sitters in place to keep them still, as was the practice in the nineteenth century, Schneider positions his subjects on pads and pillows on the floor of his studio, and has them look up at a camera suspended a few feet above. After adjusting the framing and focus of the portrait on the camera’s ground glass [he uses an 8 x 10-inch view camera], Schneider turns off the studio lights, opens the aperture, and in the pitch dark moves to within a few inches of the subject to begin the painstaking process of illuminating the face segment by segment with a small flashlight—an adaptation of a standard commercial technique for photographing still lifes that he learned from Peter Hujar.”

Schneider’s portraits begin with the basic agreement that the subject will pose. The long exposure time required by these portraits intensifies this collaborative commitment. The pose then
assumes the dimensions of a real performance. Some aspects of the performance are scripted (the photographer determines the composition and directs the beam of light), but it is mostly improvisational. The photographer gropes around, modeling the features of his subject with his penlight. It must be a little like being blind, tracing the features of a face with your hand.

Finally, the performance that occurs within the hour-long exposure is compressed into a still image. The effect is uncanny. There is no way we could see, in real time, the spectral woman who is the subject of “Shirley, 1991” (reproduced on page 132) as she appears in Schneider’s photograph. Even though her features were faithfully traced in the dark by the photographer’s penlight (or so we presume), the resulting portrait is nothing like a likeness, or an approximation of a wakeful encounter. It is an alarmingly intimate and unstable event. Her face is so close, so in our face, it might be a mirror reflection. Because of the durational dimension of the image, it is a composite picture, a montage. The subject is not a unitary, single person, although she is represented by a single image. Different versions of her collapse into the beguiling but deceptive framework of a fixed angle of view. Schneider, who photographs only those people he knows well (his partner, his friends, his family), is fully conscious of the paradoxical nature of this enterprise.

“When I’m working with someone’s face that I really know, what I’m doing to it is so extreme, I ask myself, is it really them still or is it just all me? I want to believe that it is the accumulation of the secretion of all the expressions that they were making during the exposure—what they were thinking, what they were feeling or what they were projecting. But, of course, there is so much interpretation going on in the camera and in the printing.” 3

When Schneider was enlarging the 19th-century glass negatives for the “Carte de Visite” series, he used his darkroom expertise to exaggerate the lighting on the subjects’ eyes—in order, he said, “to have the eyes really make contact with you.” 4 One of the first things we notice about “Shirley, 1991” is the specular brightness of the subject’s right eyeglass lens, which reflects back at us a myriad of bright shapes that look like free-floating eyeballs. These shapes may in fact be reflections of the photographer’s probing penlight, but a suggestive question is posed by the appearance of these shapes: who is looking at whom? “Shirley, 2001” has a similar effect, but on a grander scale. It is part of a series of color portrait heads that are designed to be printed five feet high. As you look at the image, you can see the actual tracery patterns of the penlight, like miniature vascular systems, reflected in the subject’s eyeglasses.

Although his method remains essentially the same as it was for the earlier durational portraits, Schneider’s color series differs from his black-and-white work in some important respects. In addition to being larger in scale, the color portrait heads are resolutely situated in, and surrounded by, total darkness. Also, even though he has managed to reduce the total exposure time from one hour to ten minutes, there is more evidence of movement than there is in the earlier work. As you scan the surface of “Shirley, 2001” (loosely imitating the progress of the penlight that progressively illuminated the subject’s features), you can see a double image, caused by her head moving during the progressive exposure, of her eyeglass frame on the bridge of her nose. For the same reason, the frame of her left lens displays a slight amount of ghosting, although, strangely, her left eyebrow retains perfectly sharp focus. Throughout the photograph, differing degrees of motion-induced ghost images, as well as blurring (the left side of her nose and cheek), alternate with isolated areas of sharp focus (her lower lip and her forehead).

The impression created by these extreme variations in optical definition (or lack of definition) depends on whether you are looking at the original image displayed at its intended exhibition size (60 x 48 inches) or at a small reproduction in the exhibition catalog (8 ¾ x 7 ¾ inches). In the latter case, where you can take in the whole image almost at a glance, the effect is of motion and rest condensed into an impossible instant. When looking at the work as the larger print, the experience is much different. In this case, the accumulation of glances that constitute the whole must be scrutinized bit by bit, pieced together out of the dark.

“In fact, Schneider deliberately enlarges the color portraits to the point where artifacts of the process begin to become visible. When we stand before these oversize heads, passages of color and form open up as if they were vast stretches of landscape… The viewer becomesentranced by the cinematic expanses held in the interstices of these epic portraits, and by the illusion that the pulsating heads alternately advance and recede in space.” 5
A group called Seeing With Photography (SWP), based in New York, has made pictures that are similar in their method to Schneider’s. Some of their work has been published in a book, *Shooting Blind: Photographs by the Visually Impaired* (Aperture, 2002). They employed Polaroid materials to photograph each other, as well as sighted subjects, using flashlights in a darkened room. One essential difference between their work and Schneider’s is that the method of progressive exposure, with its pockets of extreme darkness, punctuated by milky bursts of light, really is an accurate mirror of their everyday optical experience. Insofar as the method reproduces this experience, it gives their work a consistently self-referential, and sometimes humorous dimension. The built-in reference to protective eyewear in “John with Welder’s Goggles” is a case in point. It is a mixed metaphor with a great deal of poignancy. While the goggles may be functionally useless to someone who is already nearly blind, the blank look of the lenses is a perfect image for the eyes that lie behind them.

Stephen Dominguez’s portrait of Jose Fernandez—a legally blind friend of Dominguez—“Devil, Dogs and Vodka,” almost looks like an oddly lit, but otherwise conventionally confrontational portrait. But if you look closely, you can see that the sitter’s right eye has drifted off to the left, toward the...
bridge of his nose, and he is not engaging the camera with a direct gaze (in fact, he has glaucoma and cataracts, and has no vision in this eye). The classical portrait pose, which revolves around the ceremony of the photographer and subject exchanging gazes, is not what it first appears to be. Its usual solemnity is disrupted by the comically discordant note that is struck by the title of the image.

Blind people cannot look back at the camera. The proof of the subject’s consent, the eye contact that is the usual underpinning of formal portraits, is missing. This has interesting implications. According to Rebecca Solnit:

“Portraits of the blind are largely portraits without poses. Usually in a photograph the implicit center of attention is the photographer, at whom the subject looks or from whom the subject turns away, for whom the subject poses. In portraits of the blind, however, the face is a completely different organ of sense, one that points according to a different set of rules; the straight-on gaze is never encountered. Thus the photographer, and by extension the image and its viewers, are never acknowledged.”

Solnit points out that an awful lot of recent critical theory has focused on the activity of looking and its association with power and pleasure. Blind people, she says:

“...are subjects who shift the power of [the] gaze. They remind us of a desire to be seen and acknowledged, and they remind us by its very absence. The absence we see in these images is not in their world but in ours. This is, among other things, a way of looking at the blind less as victims, in terms of their lack, but rather as different, a perspective that underscores the fragility and contingency of our own vision. These images suggest too why the blind make us uncomfortable. It is popularly supposed that we feel pity for their exclusion from our ocular world, but these images propose instead that the blind somehow intimate that our world doesn't necessarily exist. It is our own condition, not theirs, about which we are anxious.”

The presence of a sighted child in the Mary Ellen Mark photograph, “Blind Children with Sighted Baby at the Special School for Blind Children” proves this point. Looking at it, our eyes seize on this child first, and return to her again for reassurance after we have inspected the rest of the image. She belongs to our world. She is one of us. Mark has composed the entire image around her.
She sits dead center in the frame, like a bull’s eye. Because of strong emphasis on her placement in the frame, she becomes the primary subject of the picture. To use the analogy of the human eyeball itself, the photographer has put her in the middle of the macula, the *fovea centralis*. This is the area with the heaviest concentration of cones, the receptors responsible for the perception of color and fine detail. The blind children are situated off to the side, in the retinal region with the heaviest concentration of rods. These are the receptors responsible for motion detection and peripheral vision. It is the area where people with macular degeneration and other serious visual impairments can still see, albeit darkly, out of the sides of their eyes. What we experience, looking at Mark’s photograph, is all macular. Everyone is sharp. There is no blur. She has made no attempt to mimic, reproduce, or directly empathize with the point of view of a blind person.

Below top left:
*Mary Ellen Mark*
*Blind Children with Sighted Baby at the Special School for Blind Children No. 5, Kiev, Ukraine, USSR, 1987* (from “A Day in the Life of the USSR”)
© Mary Ellen Mark

Below left:
*Nicholas Nixon*
*Perkins School for the Blind, Gary Moulton, 1992*
Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
In Mary Ellen Mark’s picture, there is no real point of sensory contact between photographer and subject. She is very much the observer, and her subjects very much the observed. The boundary line between the two is strictly maintained. In a series of portraits taken at the Perkins School for the Blind in Massachusetts, Nicholas Nixon attempts to cross over this line. He tries to connect with his subjects by describing some of the non-visual ways they experience the world, through tactile experiences of touch, hearing, and smell. All these sensory activities take place strictly inside the frame of the image. There are no reciprocated gazes in sight. One of the most intriguing of these images is the portrait of Gary Moulton, reproduced on the previous page. Divided into equal quadrants, with the subject sitting perfectly plumb in the center of the frame, it is a meticulously composed picture (it was taken with an 8 x 10-inch view camera, so this would have been no mean feat). A splash of daylight from a window strikes the subject on the hand and on the side of his face. At first, this detail might seem a heavy-handed reminder of Gary’s sensory deprivation. What could be more poignant than a blind boy sitting in the path of a poetic burst of light? But this is not what the picture is about. Look at the boy’s open mouth and the tilt of his head. He is leaning slightly into the spot of daylight, feeling its touch. He is also listening, intently, and he is either singing or talking in response. The photograph depicts a synesthetic moment, a blind person’s experience of light translated into touch and sound. The fastidiously crafted composition, which is purely visual and therefore outside the ken of Gary Moulton’s experience, is a bridge between his darkness and our sighted world. But it is a one-way bridge, for our benefit alone.

The darkness in Joel-Peter Witkin’s photographs is of a different order. It manifests itself, not primarily as a scarcity of light or optical deprivation, but as a condition of being, a matter of ontology. To begin with, his subject matter is in itself consistently shocking: naked amputees, Siamese twins joined at the head, cadavers, severed genitalia, dwarves, and hermaphrodites, to name but a few conspicuous examples.

“A perverse, morbid and dynamic eroticism …underlies [his] imagery of desecration, contact with the agonized and the dead and the excremental. Joel-Peter has said that he is a portraitist and that his portraits are conditions of being. Of being what is the critical question.”

Consider “Leda.” Its central figure, a deformed and naked anorexic figure with small female breasts, a penis, and bowed legs, holds the neck of a seated swan. The swan seems limp, perhaps dead, or merely exhausted. A large open eggshell lies on the ground. In front of it are two babies. It is hard to tell if they are alive or dead. One of them, face down on the ground, a grotesque cherub, has a pair of bird’s wings perched on its back. The other baby, a girl, lies on her back with her legs splayed out wide. No one in this picture can see. The Leda figure is wearing the kind of dark glasses given to people with damaged eyes. The babies are blindfolded. The setting of this tableau is murky, which has more to do with the lack of environmental detail than with an absence of light. It seems to be an artist’s studio, or some other kind of location that has been prepared for the staging of a ritual. A rumpled sheet or large piece of canvas covers the wall and floor. The only prop, a large black object that resembles an oversized ottoman, supports the body of the spent bird. The negative from which the print was made is mottled and scratched. Some of the scratches are black. Others are white, suggesting small stabbing shafts of light. Random stains, like the residue of bodily fluids, dot the image. It feels like an atrocity exhibition, or the aftermath of a disaster. It is a hard picture to look at.

The title refers to a Greek myth. Zeus, the greatest of the gods, disguised himself as a swan, and raped Leda, the wife of the king of Sparta. From this union were born Castor and Pollux, as well as Helen and Clytemnestra. From the Renaissance to the 18th century, the story served as the basis for numerous paintings and sculptures. In most of them, the swan was depicted as menacing or aggressive, as he was in Yeats’s poem:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl...

He was hardly the docile and deflated creature he has become in this photograph. In fact, Witkin has completely redirected the emphasis of the original story. Leda becomes the protagonist, partly by means of her central position in the frame, and partly by means of the way she is seen holding the swan. It looks like its head would fall if she let go. She is posing for the camera with her trophy. She may be the only one who is still alive here.
Witkin's photograph attempts to recreate the power of myth by redefining the actors—giving them back their standing as monsters, restoring the original shock value of the old stories. At the end of *The Gods of Earth and Heaven*, he includes an afterword that is in effect a casting call for a new mythology.

“The request for models in my 1985 monograph resulted in many of the photographs in this volume. Therefore, I ask again for a photograph, telephone number and brief letter to be sent to me at my publisher’s address, by all people, including anatomists (this is an ongoing request). Models and sources of the completed work receive a finished print made by me as payment. I need physical marvels—a person, thing, or act so extraordinary as to inspire wonder: someone with wings, horns, tails, fins, claws, reversed feet, head, hands. Anyone with additional arms, legs, eyes, breasts, genitals, ears, nose, lips, head. Anyone without a face. Pinheads, dwarfs, giants, Satyrs. A woman with one breast (center); a woman with breasts so large as to require Daliesque supports; women whose

Joel-Peter Witkin
“Leda” L.A., 1986
Courtesy of Joel-Peter Witkin.
Baudoin Lebon, Paris/Hasted Hunt, New York City
faces are covered with hair or large skin lesions and willing to pose in evening gowns. Active and retired sideshow performers, contortionists (erotic), anyone with a parasitic twin, people who live as comic book heroes. Boot, corset, and bondage fetishists, a beautiful woman with functional appendages in place of arms, anorexies (preferably bald), the romantic and criminally insane (nude only). All manner of extreme visual perversions. A young blonde girl with two faces. Hermaphrodites and taratoids (alive and dead). Beings from other planets. Anyone bearing the wounds of Christ. Anyone claiming to be God. God."

A Note on Camera Behavior

The optical behavior of the camera is always a determining factor in the way photographs look, and consequently it has a profound effect on what they signify. In his book The Keepers of Light, William Crawford uses the word “syntax” to describe this phenomenon. He starts by referring to William Ivins’s discussion of pictorial syntax:

“…which Ivins defined as the ‘conventions or systems of linear structure’ used in the preparation of a drawn image. In other words, syntax is the system of organization used in putting lines together to form pictures that can stand as representations of particular objects... Ivins showed that the syntax of printmaking must operate within the physical limits of the printmaking process used. Certain processes can allow only certain kinds of lines or tones built from lines.”

In defining the principle of photographic syntax, Crawford says:

“...it comes, not from the photographer, but from the chemical, optical, and mechanical relationships that make photography possible. My argument is that the photographer can only do what the technology available at the time permits him to do. All sorts of artistic conventions and personal yearnings may influence a photographer—but only as far as the technology allows. At bottom, photography is a running battle between vision and technology. Genius is constantly frustrated—and tempered—by the machine...Contemporary sensibility puts so much emphasis on photography as a ‘creative’ activity that we can forget that what photographers really do—whether creative or not—is contend with a medium that forces them to look, to respond, and to record the world in a technologically structured and restricted way. I think that this point is essential to an understanding of photography.”

He provides an example of one of the particular effects, among many, of camera syntax. In this case, it relates to the daguerreotype portrait.

“Long exposure times were needed and poses had to be held, sometimes for uncomfortable periods. In the studio this heroic immobility was usually encouraged by clamping the subject’s head from behind with an iron brace out of sight of the camera. Subjects in early daguerreotypes frequently sit with one hand supporting the chin. They look like deep thinkers. They were actually concentrating on not moving their heads.”

This has very much to do with our discussion of darkness. One of the reasons why daguerreotype portraits look the way they do is because of the relative insensitivity of the daguerreotype emulsion to light. However we may interpret their regard, the subjects of these portraits, by holding still, were simply doing their part to combat the potential darkness of an underexposed image. The architectural solidity of Brassaï’s streetwalker, mentioned earlier in this chapter, is also due in part to the necessity to hold still for slow film. Gary Schneider’s portraits present a more complex case.

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ii. For example, using a large-format camera with the lens wide open produces extraordinarily shallow depth of field. The only crisply focused details in “Shirley, 1991” are the leading edges and lenses of her eyeglasses. Everything else is a blur.

iii. One could cite myriad examples of the way camera syntax has determined the way photographs look, first out of blind necessity and then out of choice. The hand appearing at the edge of the frame in Jacob Riis’s “Police Station Lodgers,” discussed in Chapter 3, is a case in point. The hand belongs to the photographer, who had just ignited a magnesium flash to illuminate the scene. He couldn’t see it, and get it out of the way, at the moment of exposure, because his camera had no viewfinder. As discussed in Chapter 3, later photographers would deliberately build their compositions around the edges of the frame.
His starting point was a desire to recreate one aspect of this daguerreotype “look,” the gaze of the technologically innocent subject, who hadn’t yet developed a repertoire of learned responses to the camera. His solution, while it depended very much on how a camera behaves in low-light situations, required him to develop a new procedure, proving once again that necessity (in the form of severe technological constraints) can be the mother of invention.

There is no such thing as a photograph that does not display symptoms of camera and camera-related behavior. Much of the time, this behavior (such as lens coverage, sharpness, depth of field, tonal alternation, color balance and contrast) is simply an incidental and elementary part of the support system for the image. But the syntax is never invisible. Sometimes it becomes a significant part of what the image is about. A case in point is the slightly lurid color cast of Schneider’s color portraits, which is the result of the way color values shift and cease to be accurate when using long exposure times (reciprocity failure). Another is the grainy and high-contrast quality of Merry Alperrn’s excursions into voyeurism (discussed in Chapter 5).

Joel-Peter Witkin’s work, which is also edgy, plays with photographic syntax in a different and more elaborate way. His work is layered with references to art history and mythology. In his complicated printing process, he uses tissue paper to filter the light from the enlarger, mounts the images on aluminum and applies pigments before applying beeswax and polish to the surface. For an artist who is so aware of the potentially precious attributes of such an object, the vocabulary of his best work remains remarkably raw.

Consider the scratch marks and blob-like stains that appear in “Leda” (as well as in many of his other portraits). They may remind you of the erasures and damaged emulsion surfaces that are a conspicuous element in Bellocq’s portraits (discussed in Chapter 2). In Witkin’s pictures, these marks are no accidents. They are violations of photographic syntax at the root level, where the camera image is presumed to speak as a mechanically produced object, something that is “clean,” with none of the messy residue of human (or chemical) contact.

Witkin’s apparent quarrel with photographic syntax, it should be noted, has nothing to do with optics per se, or with the way the camera itself captures an image. His interventions occur after the fact, in the darkroom, where the negative acquires its distinctive veneer of abrasions, striations, and bruises. A question is posed by this practice of working on the physical surface of the image itself, after it has been formed by the camera lens and chemically processed. Is it simply a textural diversion, a matter of an add-on “effect,” like the fuzzy sheen of many turn-of-the-century pictorialist photographs, which were simply trying to disguise themselves as something they were not (like aquatints)? Or is the enveloping patina of damage an integral part of the vision?

Sources
2. ibid., pp. 8–9
3. ibid., p. 14
7. ibid., p. 21
11. ibid., p. 6
12. ibid., p. 9
It’s hard to see in the dark. When you photograph someone in a low-light situation, it is harder to anticipate the result than it is in daylight. At some point, if the light level is low enough, the best you can do is imagine the final result. In many of these situations, your camera’s viewfinder will be of little or no help. You could, for example, find yourself outdoors, in a situation where you cannot see well enough to feel confident about focusing the lens. You might therefore have to use a tape measure, or pace off the distance between the camera and your subject, and use the distance scale on your lens barrel to set the focus. In other cases, if you are photographing indoors and can turn on a bright light for a moment while you set the focus, you may not be able to see clearly while the shutter is open and the image is being recorded on film. To some degree, you can count on being surprised by your results.

A. Using Gary Schneider’s work as a touchstone, make a portrait of someone with whom you are intimate—a partner, friend, or family member. A large-format camera, equipped with color or black-and-white film, would be ideal for this assignment. (Digital cameras behave badly when long exposures are required—see Appendix A.) In any case, you will need at least three things:

1. A room that can be darkened to the point where a really long exposure (ten minutes or more) will be required.
2. A tripod to keep the camera steady.
3. Some kind of accessory light to illuminate part(s) of your subject while the camera’s shutter is open.

A long cable release would also be helpful, so you won’t have to be tethered to the camera.

Bear in mind that you are not being asked to copy Schneider’s method here. You are not looking to simply follow a formula. An artist’s procedure, the means used to produce an image, is driven and defined by the artist’s very particular need to give form to an idea. It becomes part of the idea, part of a style. (Richard Avedon’s signature use of white backdrop paper and flat natural light is a simple example of this.) It is not something that can be borrowed or appropriated without consequence.

Seductive though it may be, it makes no sense to pay homage to an artist by merely echoing his method. But it can make a great deal of sense to initiate a conversation with an artist’s work, in which you modify an established procedure, or use a familiar method in a new and unfamiliar context. Schneider has done both of these things in his work, by means of the unlikely combining of his interest in scientific photography (photomicrography) with techniques of Victorian portraiture. In the latter case, he took a cue from Julia Margaret Cameron’s method (which was in itself innovative), and added something distinctly his own in the process. Your task here is to see if you can follow his lead without simply being imitative.

Whatever you do, figuring out how to expose your film under these circumstances may be tricky. You will need a good hand-held light meter, and you will need to be ready for the unpredictable effects of reciprocity failure. First you will have to determine your basic unit of exposure with the room lights off. If the room will be truly dark, this will be easy. You can leave the shutter open as long as you want. The difficult part of the process will be calculating the exposure required for two possible lighting techniques.

iv. This is a complex issue. A lot of contemporary picture-making involves the appropriation and recycling of existing images, as well as pointed references to well-known works of art (see the discussion of Yasumasa Morimura in Chapter 6, and Jeff Wall in Chapter 11). Most of the artists who make work that falls into this category, however, are referencing the content, or iconography, of other pictures. They are not appropriating the methods of other artists.
Overall fill light. While the film is being exposed in darkness, you may choose to turn the room lights on for a brief period of time. You might want to do this in order to produce sufficient illumination for the perception of peripheral or background details in the final image. But since you want your photograph to retain the feeling of darkness, you will need to make sure that the room lights are turned on just long enough to produce a deviation from normal exposure (for the whole scene) of at least minus one and a half or minus two f-stops (see Appendix B for a discussion of metering techniques).

Selective subject illumination. Whatever you use as an accessory light to illuminate your subject, or parts of your subject, while the camera’s shutter remains open, you will want to make sure that the significant details (such as skin tones) register the way you want them to. You could, for example, carefully aim a flashlight at one side of your subject’s face, long enough to achieve maximum brightness (in black-and-white film terms, Zone VIII on the gray scale—see Appendix B). You could then carefully aim the flashlight at the other side of the face, just long enough to produce a darker value (say, Zone V on the gray scale). You could also expose both sides of the face for the same amount of time, in order to produce even illumination.

Regarding illumination levels, you have a lot of choices here. You could omit the overall fill light entirely, and leave much of the scene in utter darkness while you illuminate all or part of your subject. Or you could provide an overall fill light that just barely enables the perception of peripheral details, and provide more ample illumination of just one part of your subject’s face or body. These are just two of many possibilities. Whatever you do, careful metering will be essential, even though the final result will be hard to predict.

B. Using Joel-Peter Witkin as a reference point, explore darkness as metaphor. The point here is to deliberately construct a situation, with a human subject, which has something usefully disturbing about it. In order to do this effectively, it is not necessary to find someone with a real physical deformity, even though this might be appropriate (many of Diane Arbus’s portraits of “normal” people are as disturbing as Witkin’s images). You might also consider altering the negative by scratching and/or staining it. This could create a powerful impression.

Candor is an important concern here. Once your subject has agreed to submit to your camera’s scrutiny, you need to think about how open you are going to be with them, regarding your goals and expectations for this portrait. This is particularly true if you are digging around for something unsettling, something that might disrupt the surface of your subject’s persona.

What do you say to your subjects? How do you encourage them to enter into your world, crystallizing themselves, as it were, into an image that you wish to memorialize on film? What do you think Witkin said to his subjects? Do you think he encouraged them to have any illusions about why he wanted to photograph them? Do you think he led them to believe that the pictures would be anything other than disturbing? Do you think any of them thought his goal was flattery?

Reciprocity failure refers to the fact that film emulsions lose their ability to respond to light at extremely short or long exposures. There are no widely available films where short exposures will cause problems, all you need to be concerned about is the issue of really long exposures. Different film emulsions, both color and black and white, vary in the way they respond. Film manufacturers publish exposure compensation data for their various products, which can usually be found online. Guesswork combined with experimentation is also useful. Try shooting some tests with your chosen type of film. Use a film with a low ISO rating (100 or less). Make sure that your lens is closed down sufficiently to produce an exposure reading of ten minutes or more. Using your accessory light, make a series of exposures: one as suggested by your light meter, another at twice the meter’s indicated time, another at four times the meter’s indicated time, another at eight times the meter’s indicated time. This will result in a series of four different exposures. One of them will probably be correct.
FLASH!
“Don't make me out to be an artist. I am an engineer. I am after the facts, only the facts.”

HAROLD EDGERTON
In the ‘60s, partly because of the availability of faster film emulsions, many street photographers and photojournalists tried to avoid the use of any kind of accessory lighting equipment. They were devoted to preserving the appearance of the spontaneous and unmediated moment. They relied on ambient, or “available” light, often honing their skills to the point where they could hold the camera steady at extremely slow shutter speeds, in dim light, and still get a picture that was sharp, as well as perfectly exposed. Many portrait photographers have also subscribed to the available light credo, believing that it is either more flattering or “natural” than flash-lit pictures.

Flash photography *per se*, particularly in its simplest application, when the unit is mounted on the camera and aimed directly at the subject, can produce garish results. We are all familiar with family portraits where the foreground subject is awash in an explosion of chalky skin tones and over-saturated hair color, while the background setting recedes into a dark fog, punctuated occasionally by the glare of the flash as it is reflected off haphazard reflective surfaces. In these pictures, the presence of the flash is conspicuous to the point where it actually becomes an actor, a disruptive participant in the portrait process. In this regard, Weegee and Jacob Riis made good use of flash, by incorporating it into the actual content of their pictures.

Flash does more than simply alter surface appearances. It can also have a profound effect on a subject’s behavior. Consider another Jacob Riis photograph, reproduced here, of a man living in a windowless coal cellar. Riis, whose primary interest was in documenting the living conditions of poor immigrants in the slums of New York City, may have been the first American photographer to use flash. His lighting gear, a German invention that had been recently introduced in the United States, consisted of a unit that was loaded with magnesium powder and ignited with a match. It produced an instant burst of light, but it was not synchronized with the camera. The photographer was obliged to pay careful attention to the level of illumination, waiting until the light reached peak intensity, before tripping the shutter. There was a considerable delay between the initial burst of light and the moment the film was exposed. During this time, the subject had ample time to react. Thus the startled look on the face of Riis’s subject, which has been read as an emblem of defenselessness, was in fact a simple expression of surprise, produced by an unexpected eruption of light. However evocative the image may be, what has actually been photographed is something quite prosaic. Riis woke the man up.

Invading the personal space of people who have very little privacy to begin with, and who have little comfort in their solitude, is a problematic activity. (See Chapter 3, particularly the discussion of Boris Mikhailov’s flash-lit portraits of homeless people, for some further discussion of this issue.) In Riis’s case, there is the mitigating circumstance that his pictures were instrumental in generating social change. Engravings based on his photographs were published in *The New York Sun*. These stylized illustrations (newspapers did not then have the capability of reproducing photographs) were hardly capable of conveying much in the way of visceral information. But Riis also

**Flash Photography**

*Available light is any kind of light I can get my hands on.*

The photojournalist W. Eugene Smith was known for the luminosity of his prints. The richness and tonal depth of his images were widely thought to be the result of his considerable skill in the darkroom, teasing beauty out of film that was shot in challenging conditions, without the help of extra lighting. This was not in fact the case, as Smith freely admitted. He often used additional lighting—usually tungsten hot lights, as opposed to flash—in such a way as to mimic the behavior of ambient light. When asked whether or not he believed in using available light, he said, “Available light is any kind of light I can get my hands on.”

The blast of light from his flash altered the appearance of the scene he was shooting. In the world of crime scene photography, he presented himself as something of a celebrity, rubber-stamping the back of his prints, in big bold type, “Weegee the Famous.”
gave numerous lectures which included lantern slides of his work, so the public did have some opportunity to experience the original photographs. The images were, in fact, responsible for stimulating the first New York state legislation aimed at curbing tenement house evils.

Mark Cohen is a contemporary photographer whose work is in many ways similar to the work of Riis. His book, *Grim Street* (2005), is a collection of street photographs taken in the area of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. In the early ’70s, he worked at extremely close range, often closer than two feet, with flash and a 21mm or 28mm wide-angle lens. He also worked quickly—approaching his subject, making contact, taking a picture and disappearing, so to speak, in a flash, without conversation. His method recalls contemporary stories about how Riis would disappear, after having startled the inhabitants of a dark alley with his flash, and all that could be heard was the sound of the photographer’s retreating footsteps. But the intrusiveness of Riis’s pictures was simply a by-product of his involvement with political and social issues, Cohen’s work directly addresses psychological issues that are associated with the invasion of personal space.

His work concentrates on very specific locale, and the people in his pictures seem to adhere to a coherent, largely working class social group. But it is not documentary. The images in *Grim Street* are rooted in fact, but the address designated by the title is imaginary. It is a fictitious space. The world embodied in the photographs has a novelistic actuality. In an interview, Cohen described his work.

“I made the same pictures in Binghamton and Scranton. I just made them in Wilkes-Barre and a few other places because I wasn’t the kind of photographer who liked to, or needed to, travel around the world. That reminds me, I saw something you said about how artistic range affects an artist’s development over time. And I work on an extremely narrow range, in terms of my method, and technical issues too. It’s what is in my head that’s developed over time. So I’ve just kept taking pictures in the same two counties.”
“…Knowing the work of Flannery O’Connor or even Faulkner justified that for me. O’Connor’s stories, like ‘A Good Man Is Hard To Find,’ were very influential on me. The same with Faulkner. He wrote about real places, and I’m making pictures in this one area. But there are these odd, eerie impulses, maybe from some unconscious regions, influencing how I select people. And that’s why the book is called Grim Street.”

Cohen initially made a name for himself because of the jarring proximity of his subjects, combined with his adventurous use of flash. Due to the sheer physical closeness of the camera, many of the brilliantly lit people in his photographs are lacking heads or other body parts. Were it not for the fact that his pictures are carefully composed (and indeed they are), the experience of paging through the photographs in Grim Street might feel like a ride in an out-of-control automobile, punctuated by a series of near-collisions and spin-outs (see “Boy’s chest, man’s finger, 1975,” reproduced here). Even though he used a wide-angle lens and shot quickly, without looking through the viewfinder, he learned to hold the camera level. The pictures don’t have the characteristic look of extreme wide-angle pictures, with parallel lines in the scene diverging (or converging) from their parallel orientation in real time.

Because of the psychological dissonances in some of his pictures, Cohen has sometimes been compared to Diane Arbus, whose work he was initially attracted to in 1972. But his work is really very different, in terms of the basic encounter between photographer and subject. Arbus was in the habit of carefully cultivating relationships with her subjects. Of his own method, Cohen says, “there’s no complicity in my work.”

“I don’t know any of the people in the pictures. …Really I just walked through the whole town in Scranton or Wilkes-Barre and looked around and made these pictures. Looking at Arbus, I think her best pictures are the ones she made when she didn’t have an appointment, like the kid with the hand grenade. I think she just encountered him in the park. But you know, she had stillness. You can
see a whole different context in those Arbus pictures because she engaged for a much longer time than I would have. I might have just taken a picture of his hand with the toy grenade and gotten out of there.”

Consider the picture labeled “Woman and small radio, 1972,” reproduced on the previous page. Cohen was less than arm’s length from his subject. The sheer proximity is indeed startling and disorienting. It’s as if we frame ourselves, as viewers, inside the frame, stranded in someone else’s personal space. Adding to our unease is the aspect of this woman’s brightly illuminated eyes. Unlike Riis’s coal cellar tenant, she is not quite looking at the photographer. Her eyes are lifted slightly upward, and away. It’s as if she were looking at the photographer as he retreats. There is a peculiar dose of distance mixed into this encounter. In real time, in the moment when the flash fired and the film was exposed, the woman must have been aware of Cohen’s presence. But in the image, the world we inhabit with her, she looks like a somnambulist. And we find ourselves just underneath the axis of her gaze. Even though we could touch her without reaching out, she does not see us.

Cohen liked to photograph on the street at night, because, as he says, “When you take a flash picture of somebody at night you get a much more distinct and compact event.” For him, the flash acts as a kind of framing device, lifting the subject out of the surrounding darkness. But at the same time, Cohen is adept enough in matters of film exposure to make sure that the detail in the surrounding darkness is preserved in readable form. The background, instead of fading to black, still has texture and presence. It functions as a subliminal landscape, like a parallel reality, seeping into the picture from behind.

In the image we’ve been looking at, the interplay of darkness and light is different from the standard pattern for a flash picture, in which we expect an even progression, from a uniformly bright foreground to a progressively darker background. Here, however, the nearest foreground element is actually in shadow. This is because the flash was held off-camera, at a 45° angle to the subject (you can tell because of the way the shadows are cast on her nose and the collar of her coat). It acted like a spotlight, giving full illumination only to the face and upper body, leaving her hands and the radio in relative shadow. This is disorienting, because our gaze does not enter the picture where it logically should, at the point nearest to us (her hands). Bypassing the radio, which she holds so gingerly, as if offering us something fragile and precious, the first thing we notice is her face, the unnatural brightness of her eyes, her bad teeth. The radio is like an afterthought, like a subliminal message, a murmur in the background.

Chauncey Hare is a photographer whose career, in some respects, resembles that of Riis. A former engineer at Standard Oil in California, he was motivated to make photographs by strong political feelings. Influenced also by Walker Evans, and by Robert Frank’s classic portrayal of estrangement in The Americans, Hare traveled across America, looking for willing portrait subjects. Unlike Frank, he had what he described as: “...a stubborn, ironical, rebellious, yet empathic frame of mind. I could not proceed without the stubborn intention of entering and photographing homes.”

Hare gained access, in effect, to the homes that Frank had seen only from the outside on his road trip across America. In contrast to Frank’s outsider perspective, Hare wanted, even if only for a moment, to become directly involved with the lives of his subjects. Using a large-format view camera equipped with a wide-angle lens and a flash, he went door-to-door, concentrating mostly on working-class neighborhoods.

“I soon developed techniques to make the transition from outsider to insider. I solicited letters from museums, libraries, the Guggenheim Foundation and several state governors. These I assembled into a portfolio that presented the bearer as a serious photographer, knocking on doors that attracted me. I waved the letters and told the astonished resident that I was working on a book of photographs. I wangled my way inside fairly regularly. I also adopted the custom in small towns of first stopping by the local police station and introducing myself. This helped when cautious souls called the station to inquire after the identity of a person they were convinced was a high-powered salesman, or worse.”

He worked almost like a photojournalist or a news photographer, looking for the single picture that will say it all, but with very different intentions.
“Once inside a home I find the photograph very quickly, because there is only one picture for me in a place. I hardly ever take more than two. If someone tries to keep me from looking somewhere, say an upstairs bedroom, that’s where I know I’ve got to go. That’s where the picture is.”

Describing his working method, he acknowledges a certain amount of guile.

“I admit to some deception in making a number of these pictures, but under no circumstance would I allow any to be used for commercial purposes. The deception involves the use of a wide-angle lens, which encompasses more of the room than the homeowner probably suspects. Several subjects at the margins of the pictures very likely did not know that they were being included. This wider perspective is the only way I could get the photographs to carry the message of rage. I’m not exactly proud, though, of what I had to do to get the pictures, which to me show severe alienation in this country.”

Consider the subject of his photograph, “Cincinnati, Ohio, 1971,” reproduced here. Her gaze is directed toward a television set. There is no image on the screen. Its blankness coincides with the blankness of the expression (or rather the lack of expression) on her face. She looks drained. On a literal, factual level, because there is no image visible on the screen, we might assume that the TV is off. The woman may be sitting there in a daze, looking at nothing. There is no way of knowing for certain, but it is possible, even probable, that her attention was engaged by a program. The brightness from the flash may have overpowered the picture on the screen, making it appear to be off when it was not. As Hare says, describing various anecdotal details about the homes he visited, “the television sets are almost always turned on.” Getting to the heart

Chauncey Hare
Cincinnati, Ohio, 1971
(from “Interior America”)
BANC PIC 2000.012
Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

This photograph was made by Chauncey Hare to protest and warn against the growing domination of working people by multi-national corporations and their elite owners and managers.
of the matter, namely the occasionally dissonant relationship between the literal facts depicted in an image and the photographer’s attempt to get hold of a larger truth, he continues: “These odd bits of social facts have only a partial significance in the photographs. The pictures carry a more complex message that I am responsible for.”

This message is conveyed by the even spread of bright light over the whole scene, by the distinctive look of the direct on-camera flash, paired with a large-format camera. Obsessively particularizing, it lights up everything. It sees into corners. It obliterates nuance and eliminates the singling out of select details for dramatic emphasis. With democratic relentlessness, it creates a catalog of everything in the scene before us: the bare bulb ceiling fixture, the laundry basket, the peeling wallpaper above the baseboard, the scarred floor, the electrical wires, the white curtains carefully drawn aside at the entrance to the room, the paper tacked to the transom overhead, the cluttered and poignant domestic still-life arrangement on top of the TV. By sparing no detail from view (except perhaps for the image on the television screen), by bathing everything in a uniformly garish cloak of light, the flash creates an aimlessly atomized world, in which nothing is either more or less important than anything else. Even though it is world rich in particulars, it might as well be a blank, a void—just like the empty altar of the TV screen.

This kind of illumination is a rhetorical tool, a part of the syntax of the camera. It supports Hare’s perception of the powerlessness of working-class people in America. His photograph says that the woman here is a victim of her circumstances, as represented by the cacophony of objects surrounding her. The photographer’s use of a wide-angle lens increases the apparent size of the room, and adds to the feeling that she is lost and isolated. But it is his use of flash, which shows us the particulars of the scene itself, challenging us to investigate what is there, that has the most powerful effect.

Look at the picture again. Notice that, even though the room is sparsely furnished, everything seems to have been pushed against a wall, as if to establish a protective perimeter. Notice too that there are curtains on the doorway, what looks like a sheet of heavy paper covering the transom over the door, and a drawn curtain on a door just outside the room. There is no visible opening to the outside world. Everything is enclosed. It seems to be a place where there is no sunlight. It is like a cave dwelling, a dark place suddenly revealed by an abrupt burst of bright light.

Nicholas Nixon
The Brown Sisters, 1975
Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
Flash is often used outdoors to soften shadows cast on a subject’s face, as well as to separate foreground figures from the background. This is the case with Nick Nixon’s portrait of his wife with her sisters, reproduced here. Using a flash situated on the same axis as the lens of his 8” x 10” view camera, he was careful to mix the ambient light level of the scene with the illumination level of the flash, so that the brightness of these two light sources, in terms of film exposure, would be nearly equal (see Appendix C for more information on how to do this). The result is that the foreground figures are only moderately brighter than the trees behind them. Rineke Dijkstra, whose work was discussed in Chapter 7, uses flash in a similar manner. It may be evident only to a trained eye that her portraits were made with the help of flash. Slightly separating the figure from the background, it provides a subtle form of emphasis. This is not the case with the work of Riis or Weegee, where the flash aggressively creates a meaning of its own.

Consider the photograph by Lucian Brown reproduced here. It’s an example of a kind of on-location portrait photography that used to be practiced by commercial photographers, before everyone

![Lucian and Mary Brown](image)

**Lucian and Mary Brown**
*Untitled (two girls at window), 1958*  
started taking their own family pictures. The image shows the back of a girl in a white party dress, looking through her front window at a girl outside who is holding a gift. The other girl’s sister and mother are standing in the background on the path to the house. Behind them is an autumn or winter landscape, with bare trees and a lake or river in the distance. The picture was taken with a flash, from inside the house. The girl in the foreground is brightly illuminated. Outside the house, on the other side of the window, everything is in semi-darkness, due to the fact that the brightness of the flash (which diminishes rapidly in intensity as it becomes more distant from the camera) was greater than the brightness of the scene outside. In effect, the background landscape is underexposed, while the foreground interior scene is correctly exposed. Due to the imbalance in brightness values created by the flash, it appears to be late afternoon.

The photograph was included in an exhibition and book, curated and edited by Barbara Norfleet at Harvard’s Carpenter Center for the Arts in 2001, *When We Liked Ike: Looking for Postwar America*. As Norfleet says in her introduction, “the images in this book, taken by commercial and professional photographers, ...highlight the family, rituals, and social events for clients rich enough to hire them. Violence, politics, and war are absent from these photographs.” Moreover, she continues:

> “*The goal of [these] photographers was to take photographs that would please. If the photographers were to be successful, they had to understand and respond to the attitudes, prejudices, and values of their clients. They also had to understand the aspirations and iconography of the culture they visually preserved.*

> “*These photographers share certain stylistic earmarks and assumptions, such as a desire not to be cynical, ironic, or to catch the subject off guard. They want to portray the subject clearly. They do not use graininess, blurred movement, or extreme contrast between tones as aesthetic devices to portray their own personal vision.*

> “*This attitude was in marked contrast to the work of self-motivated artistic photographers working in the postwar period, such as William Klein, Louis Faurer, and Robert Frank, who took pictures to please themselves. These three photographers did not find happiness or community in this period.*”

The portraits of everyday life that were included in Norfleet’s exhibition were made in an era that coincided with another show, “The Family of Man” (Museum of Modern Art, 1955), the goal of which was to emphasize the global interconnectedness of the human community, and to minimize anything that might suggest otherness or fragmentation. It was in the same time period that Robert Frank attempted unsuccessfully to have his book, *The Americans*, published in the United States. Because Frank’s work had no visual precedent that could be used to validate its downbeat implications, it was simply perceived at the time as bad photography.

The photographs in *When We Liked Ike* are examples of what was generally accepted in the 1950s as good commercial photography. In the case of the Lucian Brown picture, flash was seen as an instrument of clarity, a tool for the accurate transcription of social ceremonies and the texture of everyday life—weddings, Tupperware parties, holiday gatherings, the attractions of car dealerships and life in suburban developments. It was linked to the concept of the photograph as evidence, the flip side of which can be seen in police photography, where the even illumination provided by the flash at a crime scene is an important element in providing a structure for understanding what happened. The syntax of flash photography in these cases was thought to be neutral, simply the best possible statement of the facts.

Looking backward through the lens of history, and with a very different awareness, we might think of this view as naïve. Today, we may be distracted by the staginess of the Lucian Brown picture. It looks acted rather than authentic. The difference between the light values in the scene—inside and outside—seems charged with a potentially ominous significance, as if these two micro-worlds were permanently separated, and the blonde girl in the party dress will be forever reaching out to the girl on the other side of the window, but will never be able to touch her. It is indeed an evocative picture, but it would be a mistake to read it in quite such dark terms. It would be more apt to read it as a representation of a tightly held cultural value, namely the idea of domestic shelter.

In technical terms, the Lucian Brown photograph presents a timeless paradigm. It has two very simple structural elements that are worth looking at.
1. The flash is the primary source of illumination, shedding just enough light on the girl in the foreground to produce a correct film exposure.

2. The background, which was illuminated mostly by available light, is dark. But atypically for a flash picture, it is not so dark as to be unreadable. Taken by itself, on strictly technical terms, it is underexposed (approximately) by a factor of \( \frac{1}{5} \) \( f \)-stops. The visual relationship between indoors and outside, as it pertains to the corresponding brightness values of foreground and background, is crucial to this picture.

What would have happened if the photographer could have considered taking a similar picture under different circumstances? If he could have taken it a few hours earlier, the girl in the foreground would have been properly illuminated by the flash, but the background (outdoors) might have been too bright, and the people on the other side of the window would have been washed out. If he had tried to take the picture much later, the foreground girl would (still) have been properly illuminated by the flash, but the background might not have gotten enough exposure, and the people on the other side of the window might have disappeared into darkness, or become illegible.

This is an oversimplification, but it highlights an important technical issue, which is the relation between flash exposure and available light exposure. Before we consider this, however, we must start at the beginning (for a detailed discussion of flash characteristics and behavior, see Appendix C). With flash, film exposure is determined by two factors: flash to subject distance and lens aperture.

1. **Flash to subject distance**

   The light emitted by a flash unit, or strobe, diminishes rapidly in intensity as it travels through space. The term for this behavior is the Inverse Square Law. This law expresses the way radiant energy (light) propagates through space. It states that the power intensity per unit area from a point source, if the rays strike the surface at a right angle, varies inversely according to the square of the distance from the source. In other words, a unit of light gets progressively dimmer as it travels through space. It is the scientific principle that explains why, in most pictures taken with a single flash unit aimed at the subject, the subject is correctly exposed, but the background is cloaked in darkness.

   Be that as it may, if you are using a single flash unit, and it is aimed at your subject, who is in the foreground, you have no choice but to make sure that he/she is properly illuminated. You must set your camera controls, as explained below, so as to make this happen. The way to deal with background exposure and illumination is a separate matter, and will be explained later (see the section on mixing flash illumination with ambient light, in Appendix C).

2. **Lens aperture**

   In order for your subject to be correctly exposed, your lens aperture, or \( f \)-stop, must match the intensity of the light reaching the film. If the lens is open too wide, too much light will reach the film, and your subject will be overexposed. If it is closed down too far, not enough light will reach the film, and your subject will be underexposed. The correct lens aperture depends on the flash-to-subject distance. As this distance increases (and the intensity of the light from the flash correspondingly decreases), you will need wider apertures. As the distance decreases (and the intensity of the light from the flash correspondingly increases), you will need smaller apertures.

   This is the basic principle for correct flash exposure with the most rudimentary (so-called “manual”) kind of portable flash unit, in which the light output from the flash is the same at all flash-to-subject distances. With these flash units, you must manually set the correct \( f \)-stop, based on the flash-to-subject distance. You do this by consulting a distance scale on the flash unit. In the case of so-called “automatic” thyristor-based units (which have a light sensor that regulates the light output, depending on the flash-to-subject distance), you pre-select your desired \( f \)-stop. The flash unit then delivers enough light for a correct exposure, with the lens set at that \( f \)-stop, and at that flash-to-subject distance (for a fuller discussion of how flash units operate, see Appendix C).

   Strictly speaking, the shutter speed has nothing to do with correct flash exposure, at least not in the basic scenario I have been describing, where you are using the flash as the only significant
One of the inherent problems of flash photography is that it freezes people in their tracks. Because of its short duration (usually less than \(1/1000\) sec.), the burst of light from a strobe acts like a fast shutter speed, freezing a moving subject in mid-stride or mid-gesture. This may be useful for studying body mechanics, but it doesn't communicate a sense of movement itself. All too often, the flash catches someone in mid-gesture (or mid-blink), and the result is a picture of someone who looks freakish or demented.

One way around this problem is the so-called “open flash” method, where the camera’s shutter is left open long enough for the ambient light, along with the flash, to have a significant effect on the overall exposure of the film. In essence, this method involves using two light sources: a

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i. If you are using a 35mm camera with a focal plane shutter, all you have to do is set the shutter at the speed designated for flash synchronization, or at a speed slower than this designated speed. Older 35mm cameras are synched for flash at 1/60 sec. and below; more recent cameras are synched at 1/200 sec. and below. Some high-end digital cameras are synched for flash at speeds up to 1/500 sec. Medium- and large-format cameras with leaf shutters, which are mounted inside the lens and are mechanically similar to the diaphragm that regulates lens aperture, are synched for flash at all speeds.

Focal plane shutters have a vertical slit that travels across the film plane when the shutter release button is pressed, progressively exposing a complete frame as it travels. At fast speeds, such as 1/1000 sec., the slit is very narrow. As the shutter speed decreases, the slit widens. At a certain point in this downward sequence of shutter speeds, traditionally at 1/60 sec., the slit widens to the point where it equals the width of the whole frame. It is at this speed, and all others below it, when the complete frame can be exposed to a very brief burst of light, that the camera is synchronized for flash. Due to the extremely short duration of the burst of light from the flash, if you use a speed faster than the synch speed, only a portion of the frame will be exposed.

ii. Although this is generally true, it's actually not quite that simple. If you study the distance scale on your flash unit, you will notice that there is a maximum flash-to-subject distance for each of the available f-stops in the automatic mode. For example, with a film rated at ISO 400, 40 feet might be the outer limit for a correct exposure at f/5.6. At f/22, however, the maximum flash-to-subject distance might be ten feet. You also need to be careful not to position the flash too close to your subject. Distances less than three or four feet tend to produce overexposure.

iii. One of the more interesting early practitioners of the open flash method was Brassaï, who used it for some of his Paris night-life pictures. It was the only way he could use the newly developed technology of the flash bulb (the successor to the magnesium powder used by Jacob Riis and other early photographers), since there was then no way of synchronizing the firing of the bulb with the shutter release mechanism (it wasn’t until 1935 that camera shutters could be synchronized with flash). He had to leave the shutter open at the “T” or “B” setting, manually fire the flash, and then close the shutter. In some cases, particularly outside on the street, he often placed the flash at some distance to the side of the camera, so he would have to mount the camera on a tripod, with its shutter open, walk over to the flash unit in order to fire it, and then return to the camera to close the shutter. These long exposures inevitably caused a certain amount of movement in his human subjects, who were always carefully posed, lending an air of credibility to his staged tableaux.
main light and a “fill” light. The flash is the primary light source, and the ambient light functions as the fill light. The flash will still produce a sharp image, but as the subject continues to move while the shutter remains open, some blurriness will occur, often in the form of a ghost image or motion trail. The resulting superimposition of blur over sharpness is nothing like what the unaided eye can see in reality, but it nonetheless creates a dynamic optical impression of motion.

Bruce Gilden's portrait of spectators at a horse race, reproduced on page 159, is a good example of open flash used in daylight. The flash produces a brightly illuminated and crisp image of the foreground subjects (the boy at the top left corner of the frame and the older man with the cigarette). The relatively long exposure time (made possible by the absence of bright sunlight) accounts for the ghosting effect around the edges of the figures, as they (or the camera) move during the time that the shutter remains open. The picture looks like a subtle collage of two separate exposures, a layered superimposition of blur and sharpness, created by the combination of the two different light sources and the slow shutter speed. It’s a seductive effect, combining as it does the ability of the flash to render sharp detail along with a feeling of movement in space.

Look at Gilden’s photograph from his Haiti project, “Plain-du-Nord, 1988.” At first glance, it looks a bit like a closely cropped, confrontational Diane Arbus portrait gone haywire. Indeed, some of Gilden’s subjects (ranging from fat people on the beach at Coney Island to middle-aged would-be street dandies) have a freakish aspect that falls somewhere between social satire and otherworldliness. The photograph reproduced here was taken in a region of Haiti that is noteworthy for its rituals of voodoo (or “vodun,” often translated as “invisible force”). Gilden made many images of frenzied mourning rituals in local cemeteries, coming in close to his subjects with his flash and wide-angle lens. The pictures communicate the often manic-seeming possession of the mourners by their grief, or, in the case of this portrait, by the loa, or voodoo spirit.

There is an affecting parallelism between the agitated appearance of the subject here and the photographer’s own gestural contact with him. It’s a “grab” shot, in the visceral sense of that photographic bit of jargon. Gilden seizes his subject in a way that reflects the man’s look of ecstatic possession. In fact, he has referred to his work as spiritual.

“In my own work the further I go into photography, the closer I get and I think by getting closer I say more, so I have a smaller canvas to work with and it is difficult to get good pictures. But when I do, they really say a lot about man and the spirit or about society. Someone said that my pictures are very spiritual. And I agree with that. Not everyone can deal with that because they don’t want to see the soul. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes it also means that the people looking don’t want to expose themselves. They feel threatened and like when I first started in photography, Robert Capa said if it’s not good enough, you’re not close enough and I keep getting closer and closer.” 10

Gilden does not appear to be bothered by the possibility that his involvement with his subjects may be a form of cultural voyeurism. One critic has suggested that his Haiti book “seems to represent the typical colonial curio mentality, obscuring Haiti by mystification.” 11 It is certainly true that Gilden pushes physical proximity to its limit, and that he exacerbates the invasive nature of the seized moment by his use of flash. It is also possible that the picture under discussion represents an accurate perception of the peculiar blend of energy and desperation that characterizes Haitian daily life, where a smiling portrait subject, possibly laughing, co-exists with a man being gripped by the “white darkness” of vodun possession.

There are really two pictures here, superimposed on each other in quickly overlapping moments in time. One, produced by the brief burst of the flash, is a sharply rendered image of the man. The other, produced by a shutter speed slow enough to respond to the ambient light in the scene, is a soft-focus portrait. The camera was probably in motion when Gilden took this picture, which is why you can see double images of the man’s mouth and shirt buttons. The combination of sharpness and blur here is odd because it creates simultaneous optical impressions of motion and rest, two things that by definition cannot happen at the same time. And yet that is precisely what appears to be occurring here, an everyday moment that exists in two illogically combined dimensions.

In the picture reproduced overleaf, “Fiddlin’ Bill Livers, Owen County, Kentucky, 1975.” Bill Burke uses open flash in the service of his own distinctive and idiosyncratic portrait style. The photograph was made as part of a survey project sponsored by the Kentucky Bicentennial Documentary Project.
[162] TRAIN YOUR GAZE
Here, the firing of the flash feels like an inadvertent burst of light, accidentally triggered by the photographer as he collided with something, perhaps the edge of a piece of furniture, in a dark and unfamiliar environment. Certain components of the picture—the ghosting around the head, the double images of the violin bow and the musician’s left hand—were produced by the combination of flash with a slow shutter speed. What appear to be streaks of light at the top corners of the picture were produced by the positive/negative Polaroid film that Burke was fond of using. The striking thing about the photograph is that everything in the scene, including the photographer, whom we may imagine as trying to regain his composure, seems to be moving rapidly in orbit around the central subject and the little girl by his side (she is the daughter of a sharecropper who worked with Bill Livers). The whole scene (which was a Thanksgiving celebration) is lit up with a precarious exuberance. The conjunction of the two subjects, a black man and a small white girl, seems simultaneously casual and edgy. The object of their ebullient gaze is obscure. The odd detail of Mr. Livers’s open fly, while it doesn’t seem sinister, suggests that the photographer isn’t the only party to this exchange who is not entirely pulled together.

Flash photography used to be predominantly harsh and clinical. It was the province of the empirical or analytic sensibility. Weegee, however idiosyncratic he was in other respects, was strictly typical in his use of the technology. At the time they were made, open flash pictures like Burke’s and Gilden’s were experimental and relatively unique. It wasn’t until recently that they became a widespread and acceptable part of a working photographer’s repertoire. The mixing of flash with ambient light, which encompasses more than just the open flash method, is itself a complex subject.

So too is the subject of supplemental lighting in general. As still photography and the time-based media of cinema and television move closer together, lighting strategies are changing. It is rare that one sees a contemporary photographic image that has the raw illumination of a Weegee or an Arbus. There is instead an emphasis on smooth and even extravagant production values. The work of Gregory Crewdson is a good example of this new look. The image included here (overleaf) is a staged tableau, a kind of fictional portrait of life in suburbia. The lighting (which was provided by a combination of fluorescent and tungsten light sources, as opposed to flash) is carefully arranged and expertly executed. The scene itself looks like a movie set. A girl in her pajamas, her head illuminated by an unseen spotlight, stands transfixed outside her suburban house. A man holding a portable lamp steps out of an empty school bus and appears to be approaching the girl. It is twilight. What is his purpose? Is he coming to take her away? Her parents, seemingly oblivious to whatever is happening outside, sit quietly separated from each other in the living room, reading.

The Crewdson photograph bears a superficial thematic resemblance to the Lucian Brown image discussed earlier in this chapter. They both belong to the same genre, although, in Crewdson’s work, the suburban milieu has mutated into a crucible for the uncanny, which the artist uses to

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iv. When the instant print is peeled away from the negative too abruptly, or if this motion is irregular or interrupted, the negative gets damaged and/or develops unevenly. Some photographers do not consider this an undesirable result.

v. So far I have discussed the mixing of flash with available light in situations where the flash provides the main light, and the available light acts as a fill, or secondary light. But this set-up can also be reversed. The flash can also be treated as a fill light, softening harsh foreground shadows, while the ambient light acts as the primary light source. In this case, the presence of flash illumination can be practically undetectable. See Appendix C for more details.
Gregory Crewdson
Untitled, 2001–2002
(Beckoning Bus Driver)
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York
produce a vague feeling of dread. His pictures are beautiful to look at, full of effect. But the relationships between the figures in the image are unresolved. The ambiguity of the image is free-floating. It isn’t grounded in a recognizable human situation. It doesn’t point to a real conflict. The picture almost begs for a line of ad copy: “Do you know where your child is going tonight?”

More charitably speaking, it is tempting to see this photograph, as well as other images in Twilight, as an attempt to reconfigure the way in which suburban life in America has often been represented, to rescue it from stereotypes of alienation and consumerist ennui, to imbue it with a sense of mystery. But it is a mannered performance. Solid content seems to have evaporated before it touched the ground.

The pictures of suburban life in Twilight are non-events that have a seductive patina of significance. This is largely the result of the artist’s reliance on the big-budget production standards of movies and television drama, where set design, casting, and intricate lighting set-ups are crucial. Crewdson’s use of cinematic syntax, artificial lighting arrangements in particular, is not unique in contemporary photography. While different in important respects, particularly in matters of substance, Philip-Lorca DiCorcia’s recent street photography (published in Streetwork and Heads) is another example.

DiCorcia positions a remote strobe unit off-camera, in inconspicuous locations on the street (attached to a lamp post or piece of construction scaffolding), and photographs unaware passersby when they cross the path of the flash unit, which is triggered by a wireless transmitter. It is a relatively simple strategy, and it often produces dramatic results, highlighting the faces of certain pedestrians more than others. The critic Andy Grundberg has referred to this work as “film stills of everyday life.” DiCorcia’s photographs, according to an exhibition announcement of his work at New York’s Pace Wildenstein Gallery in 1999, were a response to the “cinematization” of contemporary life. As Grundberg states, “these mise-en-scènes of pedestrians around the world have a nail-polish glossiness straight out of Hollywood. All that’s missing is the glamour.” They are non-events (a phrase used by the photographer himself), very different from the traditional “decisive moment.” Because of the aggressively dramatic lighting, however, these anti-moments seem fraught with enigmatic significance. However accidental the encounter between a pedestrian and the light path of a remote strobe may in fact be, the resulting images look choreographed. They are certainly the result of a meticulous procedure. DiCorcia scouts for potential sites in advance, studying the characteristics of crowd movement and natural light at various times of day, and investigates possible camera and flash positions. Ultimately, he depends upon chance encounters to provide him with material, just like any other street photographer. But his range of choices, in any given instant, is severely limited. Within the boundaries of the area of the street that he’s marked off in his mind as the image theater, there are only a few spots where a pedestrian will be caught by the flash. By limiting his options, he has raised the stakes in the game.

vi. Philip-Lorca DiCorcia is an important contemporary artist. Due to the fact that examples of his work were not made available for reproduction in this book, a more detailed discussion here is not possible.

SOURCES

1. Interview with Thomas Southall, in Mark Cohen, Grim Street, PowerHouse Books, New York, 2005, p. 139
2. ibid., p. 139
3. ibid., p. 157
4. Chauncey Hare, introduction to Interior America, Aperture, 1978, pp. 17–18
5. ibid., p. 18
6. ibid., pp. 18–19
7. ibid., p. 19
8. ibid., p. 19
10. Bruce Gilden in conversation with Christine Redmond, Source magazine, issue 10.
   http://www.source.ie/issues/issues0120/issue10/is10artbrugil.html
13. Andy Grundberg, Artforum, February 1999
Before you do these assignments, make sure you are familiar with the contents of Appendix C.

A. Pick any two of the portrait assignments from previous chapters that you’ve already completed, using ambient light as the only source of illumination, and repeat these assignments, using flash. You may approach this in three different ways:

1. using the same person as before for your subject, but in a different setting.
2. using another person for your subject, but in a setting you’ve used before.
3. using the same person as before, in the same setting as before.

Remember to maintain the thematic focus of the assignment (confrontation, for example, if assignment #7 is your reference point).

The important thing in each instance is to have a stable point of comparison between the two versions of the assignment (subject, setting, or both) so you can see how different lighting strategies affect otherwise similar images. Also, you should consider which of the different flash techniques discussed here will be most appropriate for each of these pictures. You may want to experiment with more than one method.

B. Go out on the street and photograph people using flash. If you are shooting strangers, be careful about how close you get to them. Mark Cohen made his wide-angle street portraits in the early ’70s, when it was arguably easier to get inside the envelope of other people’s personal space without generating anxiety or hostility. As of this writing, he is using a longer focal length lens, and staying further away.

Although you are legally free to make non-commercial photographs of people in public places, in whatever way and at whatever distance you wish, you do need to take certain things into account. Post 9/11, people are extremely aware of being looked at, in the broad context of surveillance, and this larger context will likely influence the way potential subjects will respond to you. That said, there are still certain situations, like parades and other public gatherings, where people will feel less invaded by the camera, and you will be able to work at close range with relative ease.

C. Experiment with making a series of portraits using open flash. (First you may want to review Appendix C, and make sure you are familiar with how to balance ambient light exposure with flash exposure.)

Begin with a lighting situation that will allow you to produce a legible background using a moderately slow shutter speed (1/15 sec.), and gradually increase the exposure time with successive exposures until you reach one or two seconds. One way to do this would be to make an initial set of exposures outdoors, just before dusk, at 1/15 sec. As the light level decreases (and it will do so rapidly, requiring you to be nimble with your ambient light exposure calculations), gradually increase the exposure time until you reach one or two seconds.

As exposure times increase, you can direct your subject to hold still or not, as you wish. But remember, in all instances, that the flash exposure must be correct and the background (the area of the image lit by ambient light) must have enough exposure to be legible.
FIGURES in a LANDSCAPE: TABLEAUX
Every portrait has a physical setting. It can be a visible environment, such as a bedroom or a city street, or a studio environment. It can be an invisible place, with monochrome seamless backdrop paper behind the subject, or an out-of-focus bare wall in the background. Whatever it is, and however minimal it is, there is always a there, where the subject of a portrait gets situated. In their resolute emphasis on placement and stillness, certain kinds of portraits are like landscapes. I’m thinking of those images in which the photographer communicates a sense of having carefully studied the subject, having so stabilized the subject’s persona as to suggest an architectural kind of immobility. Brassai’s portraits of prostitutes on the street (see Chapter 9) are like this, and so are most of August Sander’s portraits.

There is a strange kind of interaction between landscape and subject in Sander’s work, a shared stasis. Except for the foreground subject, the landscape looks like it has been evacuated. It is out of focus, generalized, free of incident or any spatial equivalent of gesture. It is a stage set designed to be inhabited by a stationary subject. But as we saw in Chapter 7, Sander’s scheme was not free of disruption. What often makes his portraits interesting is the odd shimmer of discomfort displayed by his subjects, the sense that they are chafing against the mold. It is this that makes the men in “Young Farmers” (1914) so engaging. As John Berger points out in his essay, “The Suit and the Photograph,” these men are trapped and restless in their new mass-produced costumes. They wear their hats jauntily, but they hold their walking sticks like cattle prods, and their bodies are deformed by their suits. Their torsos look too long, their legs too short.

“It was the English gentleman, with all the apparent restraint which that new stereotype implied, who launched the suit. It was a costume which inhibited vigorous action, and which action ruffled, uncreased, and spoilt. …The physical contradiction is obvious. Bodies which are fully at home in effort, bodies which are used to extended sweeping movement: clothes idealizing the sedentary, the discrete, the effortless.”

Just as the farmers don’t look like they belong in their suits, so too do they look out of place in the landscape. It’s the very vagueness of the rural setting that is jarring. It can neither contain nor support the vivid and contradictory suggestiveness of the human figures. There is a burgeoning sense of eventfulness in this picture. One can imagine Sander encountering these farmers on the road, stopping them, arranging for the photograph to be taken, setting up the bulky camera on a tripod, making the exposure, and bidding them goodbye. It is hardly a street photograph, but it does share one of the characteristics of classic street photography. It captures an instant, albeit an arranged one, when the random flow of human traffic coalesces into a pattern.

In terms of genre definitions, this image may appear to be an unlikely amalgam of landscape, portrait, and street work. In fact, it looks back to the tradition of the tableau vivant, particularly as it was practiced in the French theater in the 18th century. It was during this time that the philosopher Diderot developed his theory of the perfect moment, this being a climactic point in the narrative

“...The landscape is well handled, but the figures are slipshod.”

A contemporary critique of manet’s “Déjeuner sur l’herbe,” 1863

August Sander
Young Farmers, 1914

i. The novelist Richard Powers has written a book, Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance, in which he describes how Sander encountered the three subjects of the photograph. Through the mind of his novel’s protagonist, Powers imagines the future lives of the three farmers. To start, he takes the “dance” to be a metaphor for the impending First World War, and the barrenness of the surrounding landscape to be the blank page on which their subsequent histories will be written.
Clockwise from top left:

Joel Sternfeld
McLean, Virginia, December, 1978;
Gresham, Oregon, June, 1979;
Domestic Workers Waiting for the Bus, Atlanta, Georgia, April, 1983;
Page, Arizona, August, 1983
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

when the actors on stage formed a clearly composed visual image (a tableau), at which point they would freeze, and hold their positions until the curtain came down. For Diderot, the ideal theatrical narrative was a succession of tableaux, each one a self-contained moment in which past, present, and future coalesced. It is just this kind of moment that is inhabited by Sander’s three farmers. Rather than any sharply focused details that would indicate locale, there is simply the and future coalesced. It is just this kind of moment that is inhabited by Sander’s three farmers. Rather than any sharply focused details that would indicate locale, there is simply the

Joel Sternfeld has created his own version of the tableau, concentrating on a unique combination of portraiture, landscape, and street photography. He began working in color, with an 8 x 10-inch view camera, in 1970. A book, American Prospects, was published in 1987. Remarkably, he adapted the big camera, with its cumbersome procedures, to the esthetic of street photography and the demands of photographing people quickly, in the moment. In his pictures, the sudden incongruities and strange juxtapositions that one expects from street photographs are contained, with nonchalant precision, by the rigorous formal structures of large-format landscape photography.

One of his best-known pictures is “McLean, Virginia, December, 1978.” In the middle distance, the only visible person in the scene, a firefighter in full working dress, stands in front of a farm stand, casually inspecting a display of pumpkins. Flames and smoke are erupting from the roof of a house in the background. An aerial platform, connected to a fire truck, is extended over the conflagration. Hues of orange connect the various parts of the image to each other. In another photograph, “Gresham, Oregon, June, 1979,” a U-Haul truck is parked in the driveway of a recently completed housing development. Behind it, amidst a jumble of boxes and furniture, a mother sits on a folded mattress, breast-feeding her baby. There is a fire hydrant in the right foreground corner of the picture. In the distance, near the upper left corner of the frame, there is a snow-capped mountain peak. The visual path from hydrant to peak is bisected by the truck, and the whole image is partitioned into a series of perfectly interlocked triangles.

The figures in Sternfeld’s landscapes are often small. His prints need to be as big as they are (60 x 40 inches) in order for them to be adequately seen. He frequently locates the most significant figure(s) midway between foreground and background. When he operates according to this scheme, the camera is mounted high on the tripod, and the foreground starts 40–60 feet from the camera. He prefers to work in somber or pastel colors, in late afternoon or early morning light. Bright primary colors are kept in check. There is often a dominant all-over color—such as the orange in “McLean, Virginia”—that organizes the image into a coherent whole. Because pictorial energy is evenly distributed across the entire field of view, his pictures may seem initially to lack a single point of emphasis. The color palette in his photographs is organically connected to the scene itself. While it makes his images formally coherent—along with the constancy of the horizon line, which is always in place—the color harmonies provide an elegant but unexpected platform for illogical or incongruous juxtapositions of content.

Consider “Domestic Workers Waiting for the Bus, Atlanta, Georgia, April, 1983.” Three African-American women stand on the otherwise unpopulated pavement of a peaceful upscale suburban neighborhood. Alternating greens and orange-browns bind the image together. The three figures cast long shadows, echoed by the shadows of trees receding upward toward the horizon line. Visually, they are firmly rooted in a scene to which they do not truly belong. They do not live here. However they might harmonize with the landscape in this moment, they are not home. There is a subtle tension here between the formal qualities of the picture and its actual content. There is nothing abrupt or aggressive, nothing overtly ironic, about the social imbalance that lies at the heart of the image. Indeed, the women themselves are models of poise, in equilibrium with each other if not with their surroundings. At issue here is the disparity between the lives of those who dwell in this well-manicured garden and the lives of those who maintain the garden. The domestic workers are not offered up to the camera’s eye as victims for whom we should feel compassion. If anything, they are amplified by an almost symbolic emphasis, as if they were the Three Graces discovered by the side of the road. But they are not symbolic, and the moment is convincingly, and amazingly, real.

Sternfeld’s choice of this kind of moment is typical. The figures in the photograph exude a sense of self-possession and containment that suggests the deliberation and solidity of a pose, even though it is, in truth, a moment caught on the fly. When he does pose a figure in the landscape—
as in “Page, Arizona, August, 1983”—he finds a similar quality in his subjects. Whatever else she may be—a little sallow and slightly overweight—the woman facing the camera here seems to be at home in her body. She confidently gathers herself in front of the ugly and utterly bizarre asphalt walking trail behind her, and the blank jumble of tract housing in the distance. Even though she probably lives there, she does not look like she belongs there. She seems open, unselfconsciously aware of the direct address of the big camera. The look on her face is completely different from the haunted tension expressed by Richard Avedon’s Western subjects. She seems, in this moment, to be above the banality of her surroundings (which is, of course, literally true of her location in front of the camera). But there is no transformative moment here. There is instead a sympathetic dissonance, provided by the tension between her pose and her surroundings. The picture itself, the image that contains this tension, is where harmony can be found. The composition is divided into thirds, providing a dignified formal structure for the photographer’s steady regard.²

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² The so-called “rule of thirds” is a textbook example of how to frame a picture. It says that a well-composed photograph should be divided into three areas of approximately the same size, often (but not always) corresponding spatially to foreground, middle distance, and background. It is a principle often more honored in the breach than in the observance, particularly when it functions as an arbitrary template for giving structure to a scene that is lifeless to begin with. In this case, observance of the compositional “rule” binds together the elements of a precarious and subtle moment, and generates the necessary conditions for orderly contemplation. The fact that Sternfeld surrounded this simplest of portrait scenarios with such ceremony is part of his finesse as an artist.
Sternfeld’s vision is rooted in paradox. This is particularly true of the way time is represented in his work. Although many of his pictures are grounded in real-time moments—accidents of gesture and expression—these moments feel less sudden than they actually were. A sense of eventfulness is present, but it feels stretched out. The even distribution of similar colors in space, along with his rigorous composition and the insistent presence of the horizon line, affects our apprehension of time. Incongruous juxtapositions of subject and setting—which are the staple of fast-moving street photographers—don’t feel here like events that occurred in a split second, like moments abruptly seized out of the temporal flow. The time frame in which these moments occur appears to extend across a broader span than a mere instant can encompass.

Looking back to Walker Evans and Robert Frank, one of the themes in Sternfeld’s work is roadside America, sometimes reduced to the absurd banality of a paved walkway in the middle of the Arizona desert. But he is less detached than Evans, and less jarring than Frank. He has a sympathetic eye for the disharmonies that characterize the increasingly homogenized life of our culture. The nature of his encounters with the social landscape can best be understood in relation to the documentary practice of the Farm Security Administration photographers in the 1930s, whose goal was to assess the prospects of marginalized people on the move in post-Depression America. Dorothea Lange’s photograph, “Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, 1936,” for example, has become an iconic image of the hardships experienced by these people (see Chapter 3 for further discussion of this picture). Unlike Lange and her FSA colleagues, Sternfeld didn’t concentrate on photographing the poor and the obviously unemployed. His subjects do not present themselves as victims of circumstance; he does not see them as models of endurance. Instead of focusing on socially marginalized people, he worked at the margins of the landscape itself, in the intermediate zones between city and country (suburban developments), in out-of-the-way towns or simply at the side of the highway. If his people are on the move, they rent U-Hauls.

Sternfeld places certain demands on the viewer. He expects us to notice the small details, to walk into the picture and converse with the content. We are invited to inspect what’s there, to discover the significant particulars. Typically, there are no quick hits or instant revelations. The viewer’s vantage point, like the photographer’s, remains steadfastly external to the scene. When the foreground starts 40 feet from the location of the camera, as it often does, this is the imaginary distance where we, as viewers, remain. When we get closer to the subject, as in the portrait just discussed (“Page, Arizona, August, 1983”), we are still not invited inside, so to speak. We are not invited to be empathetic or compassionate, as we are in Lange’s “Migrant Mother” portrait. The rigorous formal ordering of the photograph establishes the distance between the viewer and the subject.

“Blind Man in His Garden, Homer, Alaska, July, 1984,” reproduced here, is a bit of an exception to Sternfeld’s usual practice. It is closer to the kind of portrait that does invite us to imagine, if not to identify, with the subject. It’s hard not to ask the basic question, “What would it be like to create all this profusion of color and vitality, and not be able to fully see it?” And it’s hard to avoid the poignance of the man’s pose, as he gently leans into a stand of delphiniums for shelter and support. Slightly different from his other work in its emotional tone, this picture nonetheless addresses thematic concerns that run throughout Sternfeld’s work. There’s a disjunction between the subject and the setting. In “Domestic Workers Waiting for the Bus,” the three women are harmonious elements in a scene where they don’t really belong. Here, the subject is exactly where he belongs, home, in a visual abundance of his own making, but he can’t really see it. American Prospects is strewn with images of different kinds of gardens. They are all inhabited by people who seem, in one way or another, to be strangers there.

Sternfeld’s prints are big because they need to be, in order for key details to be fully readable. Jeff Wall’s work also depends on sheer physical dimension. His images are exhibited as light boxes—back-lit color transparencies that have the physical presence of cinema and large-scale painting. His work is keyed to the scale of the viewers’ bodies, so that the figures in the picture may appear to be on about the same scale as the people looking at them. Along with the cinematic illusionism created by the brightness of the light-box installation, the size of the image makes the viewer feel present in the scene.

Like Sternfeld, Wall addresses issues of cultural estrangement through the medium of landscape and tableau. Consider “The Storyteller, 1986,” (see page 176) where disparate groups of British Columbia Indians are gathered on the sloping ground at the edge of an elevated concrete
highway exit. A young woman is talking animatedly to two men around the embers of a fire. Further up the slope, looking on, there is a couple on a sleeping bag. Directly beneath the overpass, a solitary male figure is perched on the embankment, his gaze only vaguely directed at the storyteller and her audience. The figures are small, and the image is huge—almost 8 x 15 feet.

Wall has called himself a history painter, referring to a European genre that dates back to the 16th century. History painting was narrative in nature; its subjects were derived from the Bible, mythology, or important historical events. Sometimes (as is the case with Poussin’s work), they were allegories. In post-Renaissance Europe, according to the academically accepted hierarchy of genres, history painting was thought to be the noblest form of visual art. The physical size of such work was meant to emphasize the importance of the subject matter.

The scene in Wall’s photograph refers to native North American traditions of oral narrative—stories told and retold in tribal communities about the origins of the earth and the place of humans in the natural world. The landscape in which these stories and their tellers were embedded was conceived of as a place of balance and harmony. Unlike the idealized landscapes of Ansel Adams, it was a populated place. While good and evil might both be present, it was the nurturing origin of the culture’s energy, a homegrown Arcadia. But in Wall’s picture it is an Arcadia gone haywire. The patch of green in the middle of the tableau is unoccupied. The Indians have situated themselves on the infertile dirt or on stone slabs embedded in cement. As your eye moves from figure to figure, left to right, and the figures diminish in number, there is a progressive deterioration of contact among them. The narrative energy begins with hyperactive enthusiasm (the storyteller’s gestures) and ends with a look of aggravated distraction (the sideways glance of...
the last solitary figure). The landscape itself is defined by opposition. At the central vanishing point, remnants of forest meet the end of the highway exit, joined by what seems to be a partially visible, anonymous office building.

Mirroring the displacement and lack of connection among the figures, there are two overlapping and contradictory formal structures at work in the picture. One is the traditional perspective scheme, which leads our eyes to the distant central vanishing point. The other is the pattern of horizontal power lines that cut across the foreground, diverting our gaze sideways. The power lines function as a barrier, fencing off the deep space in the background. The space of the picture is partially flattened out, making it as difficult for us to inhabit visually, as viewers, as it appears to be for the Indians to inhabit in real life—which is, of course, the point.

The picture is partly allegory, partly a self-explanatory image of a fragmented group of tribal people looking for shelter. The allegory, or back story, goes like this:

*If you are a slave, you must always at some level wonder what it would be like to be free. In The Storyteller, for example, I attempted to create an image of a way subjected people might try
to build a space for themselves. I imagined the picture as a speculative project. All my pictures are about talking, about verbal communication, are in fact about the ways people work on creating something in common, about how they work to find a way to live together.*

The picture is a carefully constructed image. Although it contains elements of a street photograph, it is by no means a found moment at the side of the road. The figures are posed, deliberately dispersed across the frame, and the location is carefully chosen. In a broad thematic sense, “The Storyteller” refers to Nicolas Poussin’s painting “Arcadian Shepherds” (1638), which is about the intrusion of death into the ideal landscape of Arcadia. In the painting, a dignified female figure explains the meaning of a Latin tombstone inscription to a group of shepherds. We cannot be so sure what her disheveled counterpart, in Wall’s photograph, is trying to say. It seems urgent.

In arranging his figures, Wall has adapted a number of poses from Manet’s work. The posture of the woman in the white sweater, looking over her shoulder at the storyteller, is reminiscent of the nude in “Nymph Surprised.” But the painting that resonates most as a reference point is “Déjeuner sur l’herbe,” a picture about the European transformation of the natural world into a support system for civilized dialog and its pleasures. Wall has transposed the body language and gender of two key figures in the painting. His female storyteller makes the same gesture as Manet’s speaking male figure. One of her male listeners has his arm cocked on his knee, precisely echoing the pose of Manet’s female nude. And the dying fire in the photograph, the tribal gathering point for dialog, occupies the same place, relative to the group of figures around it, as the French painter’s abundant picnic basket.

Wall’s photograph provides an elegant context for a narrative about historical cruelty. The implied connection between the marginalized Indians and the figures in the Manet painting is ironic. The painting is a male-centered vision of nature as a vehicle for pleasure, while the photograph is an appraisal of a matrarchial vision of nature that has become dysfunctional. Like the words spoken by the female figure in Poussin’s painting, this storyteller’s story has death in the background. But this time the story is firmly located in historical circumstance, and is being told with a much greater sense of urgency.

Family and Friends

For his large-scale 
*mise-en-scènes*, along with Manet’s paintings, Jeff Wall may have Diderot’s definition of the theatrical tableau very much in mind. While these pictures contain allusions to storytelling and other verbal exchanges, they are not, in themselves, narratives. They may reverberate with history, but they are themselves moments set apart. In this respect, “The Storyteller” bears a superficial resemblance to the ceremonial family snapshot, albeit one with implications that reach way beyond the nuclear unit, into the culture at large.

Photographers of family groups often feel compelled to cajole their subjects into looking “natural” for the camera. Whether or not the image itself is well-composed, this often results in a picture that displays its subjects arrayed in odd combinations of awkwardness and ease. Most often, everyone is looking at the camera, and the criterion for judging the success or failure of the image hinges on how comfortable each is (or is not) with his/her awareness of being photographed. Another way of putting this is to say that the success of the portrait is dependent on the subjects’ ability, while posing, to maintain the peculiar fiction that they are not posing at all. One of the things that ultimately distinguishes “The Storyteller” from any kind of family snapshot is that nobody is looking at the camera. Consequently, we as viewers feel as if we’re eavesdropping on the scene, that there is a carefully maintained separation between spectacle and spectator. This is a feeling that is inherently foreign to the family portrait, the goal of which is usually to establish an instant link, via eye contact, between subject and viewer.

Because she photographs friends, family, and other people from her own upper-class milieu, Tina Barney’s work (see overleaf) is frequently discussed in the context of the family portrait aesthetic. Her photographs contain elements that are frequently found in amateur snapshots and therefore read as “mistakes.” There are figures partly cropped out of the image by the edge of the frame, people with their backs to the camera, heads obscuring the view of someone in the background. Sometimes there are non sequiturs of detail, such as the conjunction of a baby bottle and a beer
bottle on a dining room table cluttered with newspapers; or pregnant but obscure gestures, such as a man comparing his wristwatch with a woman’s diamond engagement ring. Or there is the seemingly gratuitous compositional detail, such as the yawning empty foreground, inexplicably lurching out into the viewer’s own space.

Barney has chosen to re-enact the ceremony of the family snapshot with a difference. She uses either a 4 x 5-inch or 8 x 10-inch view camera, sometimes with flash, and her prints are big (4 x 5 feet). Her method is a combination of chance and choreography. Her frequent practice, not unlike the designated photographer at important family events, is to wait for a resonating moment to occur, at which point she will step in and ask the subject(s) to re-enact some element of what just happened. She explains her procedure for making “Sunday NY Times,” reproduced here, as follows:

“I walked into that room where everyone was sitting around reading the paper, knowing they would be there. Since I have a view camera, that takes a certain amount of planning. The first step is always to find my vantage point, where I stand, which designates my attitude toward the situation. To me, that is almost the most important decision of all. In this case, I decided that the father would be at the head of the table and the point of focus. So I yelled at him to hold still, but didn’t ask anybody else to be in any certain place or to do any specific thing. Everything else was chance. I did not arrange or rearrange any objects.”

Describing the purpose behind her family tableaux, she continues:

“I’m documenting something that’s important historically, that has never been done before, in photography at least, from the inside—a way of life that I don’t think might ever happen again in
America, because our priorities, or the ways people choose to spend their time, have changed so much. The time that it takes to live with quality—in a style of life that has quality—is disappearing.  

Barney’s work is an unapologetic celebration of an essentially insular way of life. Her tableaux have the appearance of complexity, because of the tenuous ways in which they maintain their feeling of pictorial solidity. There is a subtle feeling of incipient visual decomposition, as if everything were about to quietly drift apart. In “Sunday NY Times,” it is the father’s determined gaze, his solitary engagement with the camera, that organizes the apparent chaos into a coherent image. In “The Portrait,” also reproduced here, the ordering element is the painting over the mantel (it occupies the same position in the frame as the father at the head of the table). But the painting is counter-weighted by the foreground area of the photograph, which has not been illuminated by the photographer’s flash. This darkness is peculiar. And what is that indistinct object hidden in the shadows on the lower left? Is it inhabited? The murkiness of the lower third of the image seems about to engulf the people in the scene. The light, it appears, is about to go out.

Andy Grundberg, writing about Tina Barney’s work, makes a peculiar assertion:

“...she focused on families—her own and those of her friends—in tableau-like positions that suggest an order that is essentially entropic. That is to say, the orderliness of the compositions seems on the verge of breaking down and falling apart, although the people portrayed in them are apparently oblivious of this danger.”

It should go without saying that the artist’s subjects don’t know what the picture (the “composition”) will look like. Perhaps Grundberg means to imply that they are unaware of the artist’s feelings about their way of life, that it is on the verge of vanishing. Postulating that there is a difference in awareness between artist and subject leads to an important question, which is not posed here. The question is this: to what degree, if at all, has the artist achieved critical distance from her subjects and their milieu? Is she, in fact, aware of something that is beyond their ken, a context that is larger than their shared milieu, something that reverberates beyond the immediate moment?

There is an insular quality to her pictures. This is partly due to the fact that the vast majority of her subjects are members of the same social class, but it is also the result of her working method. On the rare occasion when she has an opportunity to show some curiosity or empathy for someone outside her circle, she does not take it. Consider the figure of the maid in “The Portrait.” She is useful to the composition, because she helps to bracket the painting of the girl over the mantel, along with the woman in red, just as the two female family members (older sister and mother?) bracket the actual girl. The photograph revolves around a series of triangular formal relationships: most prominently, between the two different sets of human figures, each of which finds its apex in the little girl or a painted image of her presumed forebear. Supporting this structure, there are two additional elements: the foreground space that finds its apex at the maid’s feet; and the triangular surface of the bed, its apex just beyond the presumed mother’s feet.
The space between the maid and the other figures in the photograph does not signify the distance between social classes. Consider “The Dollhouse,” also reproduced here (see previous page). The teenage boy standing outside on the deck, clearly a friend or family member, occupies a position similar to the maid’s in “The Portrait.” It is only by a polite stretch of the imagination that he could be considered an outsider. Like the maid, his position is really a matter of spatial composition, a way of spreading things out into the requisite dimensions for a tableau. Even though there is an edge of unease in many of Barney’s pictures, or a feeling of occasional distraction in her subjects’ expressions, her work is not configured around psychological tensions or social differences. Her tableaux are very public manifestations of private lives, and in that context there are certain things that are not discussed.

Tina Barney has spoken about her work as a collaboration between herself and her subjects.iii As a practical matter, this method seems inevitable when your subjects are your friends and family, photographed repeatedly over time. It is also a way of working that makes it hard to maintain a critical distance between yourself and your subjects. But it is precisely this quality that is missing in her work, and very much present in the work of another photographer, Barbara Norfleet, who worked in similar sorts of situations. She photographed upper-class people on the east coast, a project that was published as All the Right People in 1986. Here is how she describes her method of working.

“The documentary process is exhausting because you’re constantly having to adjust to the people you’re taking. And also you have to be able to take the pictures. And you also have to somehow be a fly on the wall. If you’re going to make it successful, you have to interact with the people tremendously while not interacting with them at all. And that’s a very difficult balance to take. Being as though you’re not there at the time when you are there totally. And they know you’re there, but you have to get them so they don’t think you’re there.

“I don’t believe in sneak documentary. I don’t believe in going out on the street and just shooting, shooting, shooting. I really want to take pictures of people where they can say no, where they know I’m doing it, but yet they’re so used to my being there, that they will behave as though I’m not there. This requires a lot of pre-work. Often I will go into parties, I mean for the upper class, go into a ball and spend the first hour just talking to people or dancing or doing something and becoming one of the group. And then you finally will start taking pictures.

“But, again, you have to adjust yourself totally to the people you’re taking, because you are literally taking from them. It’s one reason why I always give them pictures too. I always ask them what pictures they would like me to take of them, which is how I got all the people with their servants. With some people I even made up little books and said, ‘a day at this plantation.’ They were totally different pictures than the ones I used in my own book, because they were ones they wanted me to take. It was how they wanted to remember their plantation.”

It is not unusual for photographers to make the distinction between the kind of photograph one makes for oneself, and the kind of picture one makes for one’s subjects (in the world of commercial photography, these people are simply referred to as clients). Nor is it necessarily deceptive to do so. The necessity for making the distinction, and acting upon it, is first of all practical. It becomes a means for discovering the pictures you really want. It is also the result of having achieved a measure of critical distance—an awareness that your needs are not the same as those of your subjects, and that you do not have to be complicit with them in order to gain their trust. Norfleet needs the cooperation of her subjects. She does not, however, require their collaboration.

Consider the photograph, “Private House, New Providence Island, the Bahamas, 1982,” reproduced here. The photographer and her subjects are in close proximity. There is not enough physical...
distance between them (not to be confused with critical distance) for the image to become a tableau. The illumination from the on-camera flash fills the whole frame, making the inside of the room (from which the picture was taken) as bright as the outdoor scene that lies beyond the doorway. Flat and clinical as it is, it is a far cry from the dramatic spot lighting provided by the flash in Barney’s “The Portrait.” Norfleet is more interested in examining the relationship between her subjects than she is in creating a theatrical tableau. If anything, her picture is more like a film still that encapsulates the social dynamic between these two people.

“This was taken at a very private club in the Bahamas on New Providence Island. They have club houses. You can either own a house there, or you can stay in one of the many club houses. It’s extremely fancy, and has a lot of European royalty who are there. After I took this picture, this young gentleman said, ‘Oh, you want a picture of me,’ and he mentioned his maid’s name. He said, ‘Let me get dressed,’ and he grabbed her and pulled her on his lap. But, I decided I shouldn’t use that picture, because I felt that people would misunderstand it. So I told her I wasn’t going to use it. I got her permission for this picture, but then said, ‘I don’t want to use this in the book.’ Maybe today I would.

“I think this picture, in a way, represents exactly what I was finding as I looked at the upper class. The upper-class boy is totally self-confident, totally self-assured, who was allowed to be practically naked. He is coming in from the out-of-doors with a big smile on his face that is sort of a knowing smile. And the maid who is submissive whose head is bowed, who is in the cleaning room with her cleaning equipment. Her stance is so different from his. She doesn’t look him in the eye; he looks her in the eye. He is standing up straight; she’s sort of bowed a little bit. So I just loved it because it said everything I saw in my whole project. It just shows who is the person who has the power here. He has the power. He owns her, in a way.”

Because of the collaborative nature of her work, it is hard to imagine Tina Barney making two separate sets of images—one for herself and one for her subjects—as Norfleet does. Barney’s work is celebratory, not critical or analytic. It does not seem to require much of the inner balancing act, the precarious combination of proximity and detachment, that Norfleet so carefully
Larry Sultan
Dale Carnegie Class
Photograph 1947, 1990
from “Pictures From Home”
Courtesy of the artist and Janet Borden Gallery, New York

describes. Imagine, then, the difficulty of undertaking a portrait project with your own parents as subjects, in which the exercise of critical awareness, and compassion alike, become part of a collaborative enterprise. This is precisely what Larry Sultan has undertaken in his remarkable project, “Pictures from Home” (1992). The book is a narrative collage, consisting of still images from old home movies, transcribed interviews and conversations with his parents, historic family snapshots and mementos, combined with writing and photographs by Sultan himself.

About halfway through the book, on facing pages, are two photographs of his father. One is an altered version of an image from earlier in the book: an appropriated class picture from a Dale Carnegie course, in which his father was a star pupil. Irving Sultan, a young man, is seated front row center, hands clasped, beaming with confidence. Everyone else, beside and behind him, has been inked and scratched out, reduced to blank silhouettes. On the facing page is a recent color portrait, by his son. In this picture, the father sits, precisely centered in the frame, on his bed. He has dressed expressly for this photograph, which is meant to echo the earlier image. His pose is the same, and he is wearing a suit. But here, he looks patient and tired. Together, the pictures encapsulate an entire career.

Sultan describes what motivated him to start this project, which began with pictures of his father.

“I can remember the peculiar feeling I had looking at the first pictures I made of him. I was recreating him and, like a parent with an infant, I had the power to observe him knowing that I would not be observed myself. Photographing my father became a way of confronting my confusion about what it is to be a man in this culture. Unaware of deeper impulses, I convinced myself that I wanted to show what happens when—as I interpreted my father’s fate—corporations discard their no-longer-young employees, and how the resulting frustrations and feelings of powerlessness find their way into family relations. These were the Reagan years, when the image and the institution of the family were being used as an inspirational symbol by resurgent conservatives. I wanted to puncture this mythology of the family and to show what happens when we are driven by images of success. And I was willing to use my family to prove a point.”

In the context of this statement, the two paired photographs of his father function quite well. In fact, if you take them by themselves, they are a good deal richer and more evocative without the words.
Considered by themselves, some of Sultan’s photographs of his parents seem self-sufficient, without a need for textual support. They have the look of small-scale tableaux. In two such images, reproduced overleaf, this is due to the way he has situated the camera, carefully facing a large curtained window in the background, so that the domestic interior becomes a proscenium, and the subject a carefully placed actor on a stage. In one, his father, dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, stands on a lawn-green carpet, swinging a golf club. He is accompanied by a talking female head on the television set. In another, his mother, dressed in a pink sweatshirt, cautiously parts the heavy living-room drapes. A brilliant shaft of daylight only partly penetrates the surrounding darkness. On their own, these photographs function quite well as detached but poignant statements about the comfortable insularity of life in retirement, southern California-style.

But this is only half the story. Sultan continues:

“What drives me to continue this work is difficult to name. It has more to do with love than with sociology. With being a subject in the drama rather than a witness. And in the odd and jumbled process of working, everything shifts; the boundaries blur, my distance slips, the arrogance and illusion of immunity falters. I wake up in the middle of the night, stunned and anguished. These are my parents. From that simple fact, everything follows.”

Larry Sultan
Dad on Bed, 1984
from “Pictures From Home”
Courtesy of the artist and Janet Borden Gallery, New York
What does follow, in effect, is a rare event: the photographer lets his subjects talk back to him about his work. The self-contained tableau dissolves, and is replaced by the flow of conversation.

“Mom calls and tells me that the pictures I made of her for the real-estate section of the Los Angeles Times are so miserable that she refused to tell anyone that I had made them, and when asked about them she said that she had to hire some hack photographer because I was unavailable. I can hear her trying to disguise her anger, but it comes through. ‘Here I am top saleswoman in the office and I’m the only one in the newspaper that doesn’t even look like a sales agent. Who would buy a house from someone who looks so severe? It doesn’t even look like me. I hate that picture.

“My father shares her feelings about many of my pictures:

‘I don’t know what you’re doing. You seem to be just as confused as I am. I mean, you pussyfoot around; half of the time the tape recorder doesn’t work and you want me to repeat conversations that occurred spontaneously. And on the other hand you take the same picture over and over again and you’re still not happy with the results. It doesn’t make a lot of sense to me. I don’t know what you’re after. What’s the big deal?’

“A lot of the time it doesn’t make sense to me either. All I know is that every time I try to make a photograph, you give me that steely-eyed look. You know it; penetrating but impenetrable, tough and in control. Or you shove your hands in your pockets and gaze off into some mythical future, which for some reason is about 45 degrees to my left. It’s like you’re acting the role of the heroic executive in an annual report, or in a diorama on success. Maybe you’re looking for a public image of yourself and I’m interested in something more private, in what happens between events—that brief moment between thoughts when you forget yourself.

“That sounds good but I think it’s a load of crap. If anything, the picture shows how strained and artificial the situation was that you set up.
“Sure, it was a charade. But I’m talking about how the image is read rather than what was literally going on when it was made. There’s a difference. Don’t you think that a fiction can suggest a truth?”

“Maybe, but whose truth is it? It’s your picture but my image. Like the photograph of me sitting on the bed; maybe I’m a little bored but I’m not melancholy, longing for the old days of Schick or waiting for death.”

The text in *Pictures from Home* recreates the process by means of which the images were made, the ebb and flow between witness and participant in the artist’s own consciousness, the battle between him and his subjects for control. Finally, we are reminded of the provisional nature, and joint ownership, of the photograph itself. “It’s your picture but my image.”

Sources

4. *ibid.*, p. 6
9. *ibid.*, p. 18
10. *ibid.*, pp. 113–114
[ ASSIGNMENT N° 11 ]

A. MORE THAN A FAMILY ALBUM

Think about Diderot’s idea of the pregnant moment, as it applies to theatrical tableaux and possibly even film stills. In the latter regard, you might also review the discussion of Cindy Sherman’s work in Chapter 1, and also look at some actual film stills. With all this in mind, your task is to choose a place and time when a group of friends and/or family will be gathered, and where you will be at leisure to make photographs of them for at least an hour.

Think carefully about what you want from your subjects. What do you want your picture to look like? What kind of pregnant moment are you looking for? Do you want something that feels like a climactic fragment from a family drama? Something psychologically significant? An elegant composition? Do you want to make a social or political statement?

Who do you want to be here? Will you be a witness or a participant? Will you give directions to your subjects, or will you wait patiently for something that engages you to occur spontaneously? If you want to be both witness and participant, how will that work?

How will your choice of equipment affect your pictures? If you are mostly silent and use a large-format camera on a tripod, will that tilt the results in the direction of witness pictures? If you walk about with a handheld small camera, will your pictures feel more participatory? If you use a digital camera, and share the pictures with your subjects as you shoot, will that make the session a collaborative event?

Finally, as you think about the two background models for these pictures, the theatrical tableau and the film still, it might be helpful to make a distinction between them. The tableau tends to be a carefully choreographed and balanced arrangement that involves a fairly large number of people, seen from a distance. A film still often focuses on a single person or a couple, and is taken at close range. Bear this distinction in mind as you think about whom you want to photograph, and what you might want to say about them.
B. Images from History

Do a little research on history painting. Create a tableau, modeled on a well-known painting and/or fragments of images from art history, that speaks about some aspect of contemporary life. The idea here, which will be difficult to execute well, is to stage a commonplace or representative event (such as getting a group of people to act the parts of homeless Indians hanging out by a freeway exit), and use the historical allusions to give it texture and depth.

C. Landscape as Portrait: Playing with Syntax

Tina Barney’s “Sunday NY Times” has one thing in common with some of Joel Sternfeld’s work. There is an important figure—the father, the one person in the photograph who directly engages the camera—who is relegated to the background. He is not really hidden; he does not need to be discovered, like the nursing mother in “Gresham, Oregon,” but there is a similar principle at work. The father in Barney’s picture, according to the syntax of traditional portraiture, cannot be the subject, because he is not in the foreground. But he is a subject, because he is behaving like one. He is facing the camera. Therefore, we must think of him, not as being in the background, but rather as being in a peculiar foreground that happens to be behind the background (the actual “ground” of backs that are in the forefront of the picture).

This refusal to distinguish the important from the less important elements in a picture according to the traditional front/rear foreground/background spatial hierarchy of portrait photography is what distinguishes many of the pictures in Sternfeld’s American Prospects. It is also what leads people to categorize the work as landscape photography, which is not really accurate. It is, more accurately, a portrait of American culture, a collective glimpse of who we are, by way of landscape. A tableau.

Your assignment here is this. With your camera mounted on a tripod (in other words, acting like a traditional landscape photographer who wants not only to prevent camera shake, but also feels the need to be extremely deliberate in matters of framing and camera angle), prepare yourself to make a picture of a scene in which you can reasonably expect an event of some sort to occur. This should not be hard, particularly in the city. The difficult part, the heart of the assignment, will be finding an appropriate vantage point, one where your subject(s) will be no nearer than the middle distance. Therefore, in order not to be distracted by other possibilities, you might want to make sure that you choose a location where the foreground is inaccessible to human traffic.

v. The fact that these people may actually be, in reality, just who they claim to be representing, as they probably are in Wall’s “The Storyteller,” is not a requirement here. The important thing is that the tableau be choreographed in a convincing way.
“Once it was enough to ask whether photography was art; now we have to ask ourselves whether the bewildering array of imagery we see is photography at all.”


“Photography is what its first practitioners said it was—pictures created by the controlled actions of nature, of light reflected from surfaces. Nevertheless, we have only been able to suggest what that means for the practice of photography.”

When we look at photographs of people, we have become accustomed to thinking that the depicted subjects were really there, in front of a camera, somewhere in time, in a moment or situation that actually occurred. We assume that the camera more or less accurately traced the contours of what was on the far side of its lens. Sometimes, when we are looking at a picture we really like, it feels like we could reach out to the people we see there, or imagine conversations with them.

Analog photographs adhere to their reference points in real space/time. They feel like a solid mirror of the material world. In fact, they consist of physical marks, made by the chemical reactions of silver salts suspended in a light-sensitive emulsion. These marks are supported by the material surface of film or printing paper, from which they are not separable. Their basic constitution, as solid objects in their own right, has a profound effect on how we perceive them. It is at the root of our tendency to believe them, to trust them as evidence.

In his book *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes goes beyond this truth-telling function, toward a deeper awareness of the relationship between a photograph and the real world. He was obsessed by the ontology of the photograph (the nature and mode of its being in the world), and by the ways in which we experience the presence of an image. “What does my body know of Photography?” he asks. Although his language was often densely theoretical, his primary concern was with the corporeality of the image, with its ability to provoke a physical response.

“It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent within itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures; or even like those fish...which navigate in convoy, as though united in eternal coitus. The Photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape...”

For Barthes, there were two different orders of experience that could be produced by a photograph. The first, and lesser of the two, he called the *studium*.

“The studium is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste: I like/I don’t like. The *studium* is the order of liking, not of loving; it mobilizes a half desire, a demi-volition; it is the same sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds ‘all right.’”

The second, the truly animating force in his experience of looking at photographs, he called the *punctum*:

“Occasionally (but alas too rarely) a ‘detail’ attracts me. I feel that its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value. ...the detail is offered by chance and for nothing; the scene is in no way ‘composed’ according to a creative logic... In order to perceive the *punctum*, no analysis would be of any use to me...: it suffices that...given right there on the page, I should receive it right here in my eyes.”

The *punctum* is not a thing in itself, but an effect produced by the appearance of one or more physical facts in an image. It is something felt—a puncture wound, a disruption. The impact, although entirely palpable, cannot be explained. It is what animates an image, and stays visible in our memory.

“However lightning-like it may be, the *punctum* has, more or less potentially, a power of expansion. ...while remaining a ‘detail,’ it fills the whole picture. ...William Klein has photographed children of Little Italy in New York (1954); all very touching, amusing, but what I stubbornly see are one child’s bad teeth.”

Klein’s picture, although posed, was the result of a chance encounter. The people in the photograph seem bedraggled but happy. The oldest has a toy gun. It wouldn’t have taken Klein long to set up the shot, and perhaps give directions to his subjects. Maybe he asked the older boy to put the gun to the younger one’s head. Maybe the idea was volunteered by one of the group. Maybe it happened spontaneously. In any event, it surely would have instantly occurred to the photographer that there...
was something bizarre and unsettling here, a picture of a family group happily united around a symbol of urban violence. In Barthes’s scheme, this would be the \textit{studium}, the image territory that is thoroughly known, the pose. By contrast, it is the unforeseen detail, the boy’s bad teeth, the \textit{punctum}, that gives the image its crucial feeling of presence, its corporeality. In this case, the \textit{punctum} also arouses empathy. It has a social dimension. It connects us to the people we are looking at.

\section*{Digital Bodies}

Although wholly or partly constructed out of the ethereal fabric of numeric code, many digital images exhibit an obsession with physicality. An extreme example of this is the virtual reality environment—prefigured by the addictive “simstim” experience depicted in William Gibson’s science fiction—in which electronic simulations replace real experiences and provoke sensual responses in the user. The ability of the computer to generate fake material realities that are accepted by a willing audience has become a part of the folklore of electronic image production. It is in opposition to this folklore of idealization—according to which the computer can fashion bodies without defects and create perfect sensory experiences—that many digital artists situate themselves, casting a wary eye on the very medium that is essential to their practice. According to Anthony Aziz and Sammy Cucher, two artists who work collaboratively:

\textit{“The buzz and excitement generated by media technologies are but a logical reaction in a culture steeped in materialism: it creates the illusion that we can reduce every mental act into matter, with no regard to how poor or incomplete that alchemy may be. As the technology progresses and the possibility of manipulating and communicating exclusively with images grows, mental space will be eradicated, fixed into flattened expanses of unambiguous surfaces.”}\(^5\)

In “Lynn, 1994,” reproduced here, a blonde woman is posed against a day-glo orange background. Her facial orifices have been digitally sealed. She touches an earring of clustered pearls. The picture is an idealization in reverse: all her individuating features have been erased. She is, frighteningly, all surface, an undesirable fantasy figure, distinguished only by a piece of the kind of jewelry advertised on The Shoppers’ Channel. What gives the image its odd visceral power is only partly the asphyxiating closure of her eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. What could be seen as the woman’s poignant attempt to divert attention from the void that is her face by pointing to her jewelry, her effort to look glamorous, seizes us. The gesture is a kind of \textit{punctum}, analogous to the revelation of a set of bad teeth embedded in an innocent smile.

Aziz and Cucher’s “Dystopia Series,” with its undisguised manipulations of body architecture, is a satirical fantasy of artifice run amok in the name of beauty. Their other work explores different connections between the body and technological innovations, such as cloning and other forms of bioengineering. In the “Chimera Series,” they have used the computer to produce unsettling pictures of oddly shaped objects, composed of human skin, that suggest mutant forms or prosthetic devices, each with its own set of nipples, plugs, orifices, and joints. It is hard to accept the representations of these alien-seeming entities as portraits, unless we are also prepared to accept the idea of the embodied self as a technologically engineered amalgam of spare parts. But this is precisely the point. While there is something monstrous about these biomorphic forms, that is not the only thing that is interesting about them. The pictures, with their black backgrounds and careful lighting, look like images from an exhibition catalog. The \textit{chimerae} themselves often resemble carved tribal artifacts, perhaps ritual objects.

\textit{“Chimera #1,”} reproduced here, looks like an amulet. It is not simply and only frightening. As Cucher puts it, “we experience the new biotechnological reality as something both comforting and disconcerting.”

\textit{“I was diagnosed with HIV in 1989, and was very ill for a couple of years. Yet, I owe my current active life to the fact that there were medicines developed out of recent research in bioengineering}
which allowed scientists to study the AIDS virus and to design these very particular drugs that attack or inhibit its replication. It’s an example of how our ability to tamper with the bio-molecular world through technology has produced protease inhibitors which have literally changed the relationship of my body to the AIDS virus. Whereas once my body was just deteriorating before my very eyes, now it’s a body that functions very well... In the mid- to late ’80s in relation to AIDS, the abjection of the body was its ‘truth’; one couldn’t understand the body in any other way because all we knew was illness and death. Now the reality of living with AIDS as an active body with a future is my reality.”

Cucher himself is both active and drug-dependent, restored but not cured. His account of the reshaping of his own body by bioengineering sets the context for his work with Aziz, in which the basic structure of the human body is ambiguous, caught in a metamorphic transition point between natural flesh and electronic artifice.

Like Aziz and Cucher’s work, Nancy Burson’s constructed portraits are fictions that point back to the conditions of real life. In the late 1970s, Burson started developing a system that could simulate the aging process in children and adults. The morphing software, which she patented in 1981, interpreted the differences between a younger and older person by using a database with stored templates of typical wrinkling and muscle-softening patterns, and determined what a person’s face might look like after a predetermined passage of time, based on considerations of gender, body weight, and bone structure. She and her husband David Kramlich, who had helped develop the system, used the compositing process to assist families searching for kidnapped children. They were contacted by the FBI (which is still using their software) to help locate a six-year-old
boy who had disappeared in 1979. Although the child was never found, other missing children have been identified and returned to their families.

Although she has consistently made portraits of the human face for the past few decades (some of them digital composites, others straight photographs), her work as an artist has gone in a number of different directions. In the 1980s, she began to explore how beauty is defined in our society. She created archetypes electronically that consisted of the combined facial features of different movie stars. “First and Second Beauty Composites” is reproduced here. It is interesting to see what happens when the features of individual stars are subjected to an electronic averaging procedure. The result is unsettling, perhaps because we tend to confuse the ideal with the scientific average, and they are very different.
In the 1990s, using a simple plastic camera, Burson started making unaltered photographs of children born with craniofacial disorders and progeria, a rare condition that causes them to age a lifetime during a few years and to die before reaching adulthood. The subjects of the photographs are people who are difficult to look at, although the images themselves, due to the rudimentary optics of the camera she used, are surrounded by a soft haze that is reminiscent of the esthetic of Pictorialism. There is a disjunction between the challenging nature of her subjects and the way she chose to represent them. The camera transforms the children into objects of esthetic contemplation (as in “Untitled, 1992,” reproduced here). The effect is the reverse of that produced by the “Beauty Composites,” where Hollywood icons are morphed into robotic monsters. Unlike the movie stars, the children are light and graceful.

In all of Burson’s work, both the straight photographs and the digital composites, the boundaries between beauty and deformity are constantly shifting. Ultimately, she challenges us to examine the ways in which we judge one another by our faces, particularly in regard to culturally engraved ideas about people who are different from us. In “The Human Race Machine,” in which she produced multiple variations of a face composited from an array of racial templates, her goal was to show how we are all connected. As she puts it,

“My intention in building The Race Machine was to allow us to move beyond difference and arrive at sameness. When I discovered, while doing research on a project involving genetics, that there is no gene for race, I felt it was one of the most important things to understand about genetics. The DNA of any two humans is 99.97 percent identical. And then The Race Machine became The Human Race Machine. We are all related, all connected, all one.”

Nancy Burson
DNAid Billboard (From “The Human Race Machine,” 2000)
© Nancy Burson
train your gaze
In an interactive computer installation that was part of her 2002 exhibition at New York University's Grey Gallery ("Seeing and Believing: The Art of Nancy Burson"), she demonstrated this idea. Viewers could scan their faces and digitally alter their ages, ethnicities, and facial features. Depending on your point of view, you could see yourself as someone you might become, as someone you once were, or as someone else.

Burson’s work examines the implications of our ideas of ourselves as distinct from others. Her approach is typological. When she applies algorithmic averaging techniques to her images, she moves far away from the classic motivation of the portrait artist, as first defined by Julia Margaret Cameron, to reveal the distinctive inner qualities of the individual person. Burson’s portraits are more like August Sander’s. He produced an expansive catalog of social types, consisting of thousands of discrete images. From perhaps just as many source images, Burson distills a single picture.

Keith Cottingham takes the typological approach to portraiture a step further. In his “Fictitious Portraits” project, he uses images of himself, combined with clay models and anatomical drawings, to create perfect and completely imaginary naked boys. The three figures in “Fictitious Portrait (Triple), 1993,” are all the same body, electronically arranged in different poses. Two of them appear to stare out at us; the third, seen in profile, inclines his head downward. In a limited sense, the figures are lifelike. But they are empty shells, a hollow idealization of male youth. The two figures facing forward are looking at nothing: not at the camera, not at us. There is nothing behind their eyes with which to see. They might as well be sealed. By the same token, the arrangement of the figure seen in profile could easily be mistaken for a pose suggestive of emotion: perhaps modesty, or melancholy. But again, there is nothing of that nature here. As Cottingham says:

“By mimicking representational photography, Fictitious Portraits demonstrates that as a label ‘realism’ is remarkably elastic, and that just like painters, photographers invent rules and schemata for laying down visual signs. Electronic reproduction allows me to use and abuse photography’s myth, its privileged claim to the real; to critique the most important invention of modern times—the subject, the Modern notion of personhood.

“The ‘realism’ in my work serves as a revealing mirror into ourselves and our inventions, both beautiful and horrific. These seemingly formal portraits foreground human reality as construction, as the product of signifying activities which play upon the body. In Fictitious Portraits, I hope to simultaneously challenge what the viewer perceives as portraiture, and question the alienation and fragmentation of image from matter, soul from body.”

Cottingham’s equating of the idealizing tendencies in other art media with similar tendencies in photography raises an interesting point. It is certainly true that photographers, particularly when aided by the computer, can construct imaginary realities as handily as painters and sculptors. But if we compare one of his portraits to any ideally proportioned piece of classical or Renaissance sculpture, there is a key difference. In these earlier works, there was often an element of narrative that situated the work in a shared cultural or social context, and it was this context that animated the art. Michelangelo’s “David,” for example, referred to a particular moment in a familiar story, the moment before the smaller man killed Goliath with a stone. Cottingham’s figures, who have neither past nor future, exist in a virtual vacuum. The repetition of the same figure, with minor variations, within the framework of a single image, certainly demonstrates the computer’s capacity to endlessly replicate and recombine data. But the source material, the original reference point, if there is any, gets lost in the shuffle. It becomes like a language experiment, where words are repeatedly recomposed until they lose their meaning.

In a series of nudes downloaded from porn sites on the worldwide web, Thomas Ruff uses digital technology to explore relationships between the image and its origin point. His source material consisted of tiny thumbnail preview images, greatly enlarged and manipulated in Photoshop. Common to all of the images in this “Nudes” series is a haziness and lack of definition that distances them even further from their physical origin point, and from the titillation for which they were designed. All that is left to signify the initial purpose of the source images are the original electronic file designations used by the porn sites themselves. The file tags become part of the titles—“Nudes hl13,” “Nudes dyk09,” “Nudes pusi0,” and so forth. Each image has been completely disengaged from its source. In this respect, the greatly enlarged final images are idealizations, not dissimilar to the soft-focus nudes of early 20th-century Pictorialist photography.
Thomas Ruff’s “Nudes” series is so disengaged from corporeality that it is almost abstract. It is of course paradoxical that imagery based on pornography should be so lacking in physical detail, so devoid of any sort of punctum. Perhaps this lack of disruption and surprise is in the nature of digital image-making, regardless of its content. Post-production editing software has certainly made the visual world infinitely malleable. With a little help from Photoshop’s tool box, we can tame or even eliminate the unruly proliferation of details that used to populate our photographs whether we liked it or not. More significantly, we can use the software to stage “events” that never occurred in real time (such as Mariko Mori’s “Tea Ceremony III, 1994,” discussed in Chapter 6).

Does this mean that we are near the end of photography’s romancing of the found moment, and along with it, what we have come to regard as the authentic instant? Has authorial control become so complete that there is no longer any room for contingency? Most probably not. Staged tableaux and complex darkroom manipulations, as historians have tirelessly pointed out, are almost as old as photography itself, and certainly older than street photography. A more interesting question is this: how does digital technology intersect with, and enrich, traditional photographic practices?
Consider Jeff Wall’s choreographed accidents—for example, faux street photographs like “The Stumbling Block” (1991), “A Fight on the Sidewalk” (1994), or “Mimic” (1982), the last of which is reproduced here. They are all fabricated images, rigorously articulated and acted out by models, and frequently assisted by post-production software. The pictures ask us to scrutinize the significance of certain allegedly casual public encounters. “Mimic” shows three figures, two men and a woman, in a charged moment just after the two men have made eye contact. The central figure, a bearded Caucasian, is still looking in the direction of the other man, an Asian. The Caucasian man is pulling his eye slantwise with his middle finger, thereby making a doubly insulting gesture. His girlfriend is squinting, echoing her partner. There are no distractions in the image, no accidents, nothing that does not support the central event. The stage has been wiped clean. The picture, for better or worse, operates exclusively in the theater of the studium.

Consider also a more complex picture: “Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol Near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter, 1986).” The title suggests a reference to a real event, although in fact this particular ambush never occurred. Although this work is thematically related to “The Disasters of War,” Wall would not write, as Goya did underneath one of his etchings, “I was there.” Unlike a combat photographer, he does not bear witness. He has never been to Afghanistan. The entire tableau was manufactured and staged in the artist’s studio. The figures were photographed separately, either individually or in small groups, and were later digitally stitched into the final image. As suggested by the key phrase, “A Vision,” the work is, down to the last twig, stone, and handful of dirt, a product of Wall’s imagination. Given the precision of the composition, combined with the anecdotal details of the peculiar resurrection scene, where living Afghani rebels mingle with the garrulous ghosts of their dead victims, how could it be otherwise? For instance, one of the dead soldiers, his hand positioned exactly in the center of the frame, dangles a strip of flesh in front of the open mouth of a fallen comrade. This soldier’s head is being held up by another, whose own bloody entrails are spilling out of his gut as he sits astride his comrade’s back.

“What is most original and compelling, even surprising, about Wall’s piece is not the shocking content, but the rigorously measured pictorial space he has constructed to contain it. Although strictly speaking it is a theatrical tableau, “Dead Troops Talk” is fashioned with the microscopic rigor of a still-life. As the French critic Thierry de Duve has written:

“...you will be struck by the fact that this image has no horizon, that the eye is drawn from the top of the picture to the middle by a curved pathway, that the central group of soldiers is arranged on a very artificial entablature, like one of Cézanne’s fruit bowls sitting on a table; that the ground falls away from this toward the bottom of the picture like a tablecloth, especially toward the right; and that toward the left it rises and dissolves into the vertical, as in the still lifes where Cézanne uses a tablecloth, or draperies, to fold back the horizontality of the table, into the verticality of the picture.”

It is shocking how elegantly the bodies are arranged on this stage, how the carnage flows downward, bulging outward in the center of the picture plane before it spreads out opulently at the bottom
Train Your Gaze
of the frame. If one were to make a diagram of this pattern, it would look very much like the outline of a cornucopia, spilling its riches on the ground. A war photograph *cum* history painting, “Dead Troops Talk” is genre-bending in a way that Ruff’s nudes only hint at. It challenges us to look at its explosive content with the kind of equanimity that we would ordinarily bring to the contemplation of a beautiful object. There is no *punctum* here. Far from reaching out to touch us, it challenges us to study it and to keep our distance.

As a photographic object, “Dead Troops Talk” has a peculiar relationship to the physical reality it depicts. Not only is it an enactment of the aftermath of a fictional event, it is also an image that has been constructed out of many images. Although it may be said to represent a single scene, it does not represent a single instant. It is a montage of different moments. This spreading out of time, across the whole field of view, might seem to constitute a challenge to the basic nature of photography, breaking the customary link between the picture and its single temporal reference point. Wall does not think so.

“I don’t think it’s really being broken, because everything in [it] is a photograph. The montage is composed of acts of photography, even if there is no simple photographed moment. I don’t think any photographic qualities are eliminated, except the single moment in which the entire image was made. I admit that that may be the decisive absence, but I like to make a picture that derives from that absence and contemplates it.”

This statement goes to the heart of his practice as an artist, and begins to explain why he uses digital technology in his work. The aggregation of interlocking but separate moments in “Dead
“Troops Talk,” each one with its own cluster of figures, creates a feeling of narrative density and breadth. There is no one emblematic message here in the rubble, no encapsulating or representative instant. The absence of the “simple photographed moment” creates an opportunity for a different kind of theater. “When I started to work with the computer,” Wall says:

“I had the idea that I could use the otherworldly ‘special effects’ to develop a kind of philosophical comedy. …Dead Troops Talk [is] in this genre… This makes me think of Diderot, of the idea that a certain light shone on behavior, costume, and discourse creates an amusement which helps to detach you from your immediate surroundings and project you into a field of reflection in which humanity appears as infinitely imperfectible. This imperfection implies gentleness and forgiveness, and the artistic challenge is to express that without sentimentality.

“…I guess the key metaphor in these works is ‘learning.’ We learn; we never complete the process of learning, so learning is a kind of image of incompleteness and limitation but a hopeful image as well. I’ve tried to express this feeling, and this love of learning, in pictures on the subject of discourse and talk…”

There are layers of discordant elements in “Dead Troops Talk.” The title itself, especially in its abbreviated form, suggests a tabloid headline (“Russian Corpses Reveal All!”) that is quite at odds with the photograph’s pictorially elegant manner of address. What these soldiers are saying, what their “talk” is about, is anybody’s guess. One of them, with his hand poised over his heart, seems as if he might be singing. On the other hand, he may simply be enviously eyeing the small morsel of dead meat (a field mouse?) being dangled in front of his panting comrade in the center of the frame. Or perhaps he is meant to remind us of one of the reclining men in Manet’s “Déjeuner sur l’herbe.” There is certainly enough black humor in the image to allow for that possibility.

Underneath the surface of the image, another kind of conversation is occurring, one that is shaped by Wall’s customary allusions to European painting. In addition to the complex formal qualities that the photograph shares with Cézanne’s still-life paintings, there are at least two references to Géricault’s “Raft of the Medusa” (1819). The first reference is thematic. The photograph echoes the history painting’s motifs of suffering and survival, although Géricault’s solid mass of noble figures has been scattered and disconnected from each other. The second reference is anecdotal. The odd arrangement of objects on the ground in the upper left corner of the picture, the uprooted tree and sheet of corrugated metal, itself a kind of still life, looks like the blown apart mast and sail of a life raft, a fugitive memory of the Medusa.

“Dead Troops Talk” is seamlessly executed and composed. It is also full of discordant echoes. The art historical reference-points, like the breaking up of the single moment into separate units, don’t provide a logically consistent framework. Goya, Cézanne, Manet, and Géricault are a strange combination. And it doesn’t end here. In the background is an even more important allusion, to Raphael’s “School of Athens,” the prototypical European painting on the subject of dialog, or, to use Wall’s words, “the subject of discourse and talk.”

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i. Géricault’s painting refers to the shipwreck in 1816 of the Medusa, a vessel that was part of a fleet sent to Africa by the Bourbon monarchy to receive the British handover of the Senegalese port of Saint-Louis. The disaster led to a scandal in the French government because it was the result of the incompetence of the ship’s captain, who deserted his crew and passengers. The few survivors of the wreck, whose makeshift raft was eventually picked up by another ship, were unsuccessful in obtaining justice when they got home. The painting caused a sensation when it was first exhibited because of its unusual reference to a recent event, and because of its apparent anti-monarchist sympathies.
Train Your Gaze
“The School of Athens” is also a painting that has particular importance for the early history of photography. It provided a model for Oscar Rejlander’s picture, “The Two Ways of Life” (1858), a composite print that was constructed out of 32 separate negatives. Leaving aside the moralistic allegory at its core, Rejlander’s image is a stunning technical accomplishment, every bit as optically seamless as “Dead Troops Talk.” It is a further reminder that the single instant, or concentrated moment, is not the only useful paradigm for photography.

ii. Early photographers were limited to the use of orthochromatic film, which was more sensitive to blue light than to the rest of the visible spectrum. This presented a dilemma for landscape photographers, since it meant that skies were always uniformly white, due to overexposure. Many photographers simply lived with this limitation, sometimes to great advantage. Timothy O’Sullivan’s spare pictures of the American West, in which the negative space of blank white skies provides an elegant counterpoint to the rough textures of desert rock formations, are good examples. So too are Atget’s views of empty Paris streets in the early morning, where the overexposed skies impart a ghostly feeling to the urban landscape. Other early photographers, however, perceived the behavior of orthochromatic film as a problem in search of a remedy. Their solution was to make separate sky negatives, correctly exposed, which they could sandwich with landscape images, in order to create more credible or picturesque views. This technique was but a step away from the more complicated technique of combination printing, employed by Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson in the 19th century, and Jerry Uelsmann in the 20th century.

SOURCES

2. ibid., p. 27
3. ibid., pp. 42–43
4. ibid., pp. 43, 45
12. Arielle Pelenc, “Interview,” in Jeff Wall, op. cit., p. 21

Opposite top: Raphael  
The School of Athens, 1510–11  
From the Stanza della Segnatura,  
1510–11 (fresco) by Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio of Urbino) (1483–1520), Vatican Museums and Galleries, Vatican City, Italy/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library

Opposite bottom: Oscar Rejlander  
Two Ways of Life, 1858  
Gift from the Royal Photographic Society. Courtesy of George Eastman House. Gelatin silver print, 41 x 79 cm
appendices
APPENDIX A: CAMERAS AND CAMERA CONTROLS

Some Differences Between Film and Digital Image Formation

All cameras—analogue and digital, large format and small format—control light in the same way, by means of a combination of lens aperture and shutter speed. The variable element is what goes on behind the lens, how image information is recorded and stored inside the camera.

Much has been written about digital versus analogue photography, and the pros and cons of each. I will not attempt to summarise the debate here. It is simply a fact that the practice of 35mm film photography, along with darkroom printing, is declining. As photojournalists and news photographers switch to digital single-lens reflex cameras (DSLRs), major manufacturers have stopped producing many of their small-format film cameras, as well as some other darkroom-related imaging materials. Meanwhile, fine art and other professional photographers continue to use medium- and large-format film cameras. Some still rely on the darkroom, while others scan their negatives or transparencies for output on electronic printers.

1. Film Images

Analogue cameras record visual data as a latent image, on a tightly packed array of light-sensitive silver halide particles that are suspended in a soft emulsion, supported by a thin sheet or strip of clear plastic (i.e. film). An image is formed and fixed by the action of various chemical agents, after which it can be printed in a darkroom or scanned and stored on a computer for various kinds of digital output.

“Film” is a really broad category. Images made on different emulsions produced by different manufacturers, to say nothing of different film formats (35mm, 120, 4 x 5, 8 x 10), have a huge variety of different “looks” and attributes. It goes way beyond black and white versus color. Black-and-white images vary in appearance and quality depending on the size and structure of a particular film’s grain, as well as its tonal range, both of which can be affected by choice of developer and developing technique. Color emulsion palettes are also very different from each other, and produce widely varied results. Photographers have formed fierce loyalties to particular brands and types of black-and-white film, color negative or transparency materials, to say nothing of particular film formats. Many of those photographers who continue to work with color and black-and-white film have become attached to the results they obtain with a particular film/developer combination, which they usually find impossible or impractical to achieve digitally.

Shooting film is a private experience. Because there is a delay, lasting hours or days (or even longer) between the time your film is exposed and the moment a visible result is produced, because there is no instant feedback, you have time to worry about the quality of your images. You also have time to reflect on, and picture in your mind, what it was you thought you saw and captured on film, and let that sink in, before you see the actual results. This can be an extremely useful experience.

Perhaps most important, however, when you do have the images to look at, you have the leisure to edit your work in privacy, without having to deal with the reactions of others. If and when you want conversation, you can seek it out. But it often requires time and solitude to mentally unpack the contents of your photographs, to clarify their meaning, claim some of them as your own, and throw the rest away.

This meditative interval (assessing contact sheets, or transparencies on a light table) can be an important part of the film experience. But some aspects of the process, which may take a long time from start to finish, can be initiated rather quickly. Because of their direct legibility, film images can be edited in groups. You can quickly lay out dozens of transparencies on a light table, or scan a few contact sheets with your eyes, and make initial judgments about exposure and other technical issues in a matter of seconds. You can juxtapose or sequence many work prints or transparencies, side by side or in a grid, rearranging them as needed, for more leisurely consideration. You cannot do this with digitized images on a computer monitor.

2. Digital Images

For some, the instant feedback provided by digital cameras is a major part of their appeal. The images become, like cell phones that have had cameras grafted onto them, part of a culture of connectivity. In this context, photography has very little to do with studied reflection. It is immediate, very much of the moment and in the moment. For photojournalists, digital cameras are a boon for many reasons, not least of which is that the technology allows them to edit their work in the field, whereas, in the past, they had to send raw film to their editors, and they rarely even saw their own work until after it was published. For artists who want to work collaboratively with their subjects, digital cameras are a boon, as they may also be for photographers who need to develop a more gregarious stance toward the recipients of their gaze.

How does a digital camera work?

A digital camera records visual data onto an image sensor, most often a charge-coupled device (CCD), but sometimes a complementary metal oxide semiconductor (CMOS), which translates light values into electrical charges of varying voltage, depending on the brightness of the light. The brighter the light, the more powerful the charge. On the surface of the sensor, a silicon chip about the size of a small fingernail, there is a grid of light-sensitive diodes, called photosites, where this electrical information is stored. Each photosite contains one pixel’s worth of information.

Except for one type of image sensor that has not yet been widely adopted by camera manufacturers (the Foveon image sensor, which captures color directly onto three layers of pixels), the chips in today’s digital cameras record everything in black and white. What they actually “see” is the gray scale: 256 different tones, ranging from pure white to pure black. Color is created by means of one of two processes (one called a Bayer Matrix, the other a Color Filter Array), each of which uses its own complex algorithm, combined with a set of color filters superimposed on the sensor chip, to create a full-color image.

Compared to the size of a 35mm negative or transparency, an image sensor is extremely small. A typical consumer-level digicam uses a sensor that is about 7 x 5mm in size. This constitutes an area that is 25 times smaller than the dimensions of a 35mm film frame, and 9.5 times smaller than the larger sensors in higher-end digital SLRs. Because of the small size of the image sensor on a digital camera, different focal lengths are needed for lenses to provide normal angles of coverage. For example, a typical consumer-level camera may need a 7mm focal-length lens to provide a field of view, or angle of coverage, that is equivalent to...
that provided by a 35mm lens on a 35mm camera. One of the side effects of this dramatic reduction in focal length is in depth of field. Especially at the short end of a digicam’s zoom range, just about everything in the image, from near foreground to infinity, will appear to be in sharp focus. If you want an image with truly selective focus, you will have to create it later in an image-editing program.

The difference in focal lengths, as it affects lens coverage, is not quite so dramatic for DSLRs, where a 21mm lens might provide a field of view comparable to a 35mm lens on a 35mm film camera. Some other differences between consumer level digicams and DSLRs is in their aspect ratio. The former produce an image that has the same length-to-width ratio as a conventional TV screen (4:3). The latter preserve the aspect ratio of a 35mm film frame (3:2). Another difference is that digicams control exposure electronically, reading the data from the sensor in real time, whereas DSLRs control exposure more traditionally, by means of an actual shutter. This is a significant difference, since it means that DSLRs, lacking the ability to monitor images on the LCD screen in real time, are missing a feature that is common to some digicams, and prized by street photographers and others who wish to shoot inconspicuously in public places: namely, the rotating LCD screen that allows you to precisely frame an image while holding the camera at waist level.

The issue that bedevils most discussions of digital photography, particularly debates about the relative merits of digital versus film photography, is resolution. This word, which many seem to use as a yardstick for all sorts of issues that relate to image quality, simply refers to the number of pixels on the image sensor that are available to form a picture. Thus, an 8-megapixel camera can write 8,000,000 pixels of information for each image it records. The degree to which an image can be enlarged for printing depends greatly on its resolution.

But pixel count is not the only issue. All pixels are not equal. One characteristic of professional grade DSLR cameras is that they have greater bit depth than less expensive digital cameras (bit depth refers to the amount of color information a single pixel can record). The smaller sensors on consumer digicams create smaller pixels than those that are created by the larger sensors on DSLRs. These smaller pixels are of lesser quality than their DSLR counterparts. Thus, an 8-megapixel digicam may actually have less effective resolution than a 6-megapixel DSLR, which has a chip that is six times the size of the digicam’s image sensor. Added to this is the fact that smaller pixels have a greater tendency to generate noise and other visual artifacts that may compromise image quality.

The practical truth about digital versus film images, as it relates to resolution, is that there will be very little effective difference between a carefully made 13 x 19-inch print from an 8-megapixel digicam file and a custom C-print made from a 35mm color negative. If you want greater resolution and/or larger prints, you have to use medium- or large-format film. (Digital backs are available for large-format cameras. But they are, in effect, scanners, with slowly moving parts that are appropriate only for capturing stationary subjects.)

If you want the highest-quality images from a digital camera, you must pay attention to how the camera processes the pictures. You should always choose the RAW format option, which allows the imaging chip to record the information with no interpretation whatsoever. You will have to convert the image later to a TIFF file, at which time you can make adjustments to white balance, exposure, sharpness, and color. The RAW file will retain all the original image data, and you can convert and adjust it repeatedly. If, on the other hand, you write the image as a JPEG file (allowing the camera to apply a non-reversible standard type of conversion formula to your images), you may encounter serious problems on your way to outputting a high-quality image.

See Appendix B for more information on the handling of digital image files.

### APPENDIX B: EXPOSURE AND METERING

The Gray Scale, Color Film, and Digital Files

#### A. In-Camera Metering Systems

Digital cameras and 35mm film cameras have built-in meters that measure and interpret reflected light values in a variety of ways. They all provide you with exposure information that should require no adjustment, except in unusual lighting situations. You simply expose the film, or the sensor, the way it tells you to. There are various types of in-camera metering systems.

1. **CENTER-WEIGHTED AVERAGING METER**: This is the most primitive kind of meter. It averages all the reflected light values throughout the image, but applies more weight to the central part of the scene in the viewfinder. It is designed with the assumption that your subject will be centrally located in the frame. Many digital cameras, and older 35mm cameras, rely on this kind of meter.

2. **MATRIX OR MULTI-SEGMENT METER**: This kind of meter breaks the scene into parts and measures each part separately. In order to determine an exposure setting, it collects this information and weighs the relative value of each measurement. The advantage of this type of metering is that it takes into account the contrast characteristics of the scene.

#### 3. SPOT METER

This is designed to measure light exclusively in the center of the image. The most precise spot meters concentrate on the central one percent of the frame. However, most digital cameras have less precise spot meters that read anywhere from two to ten percent of this central area. Spot meters are most useful in extreme lighting situations, such as back light, when your subject is in shadow, and there is strong light (from a window, a bright lamp, a doorway, the sky, etc.) streaming toward the camera from behind your subject.

An advantage to built-in meters, as distinct from hand-held meters, is that they read light through the lens, right at the film plane, which means that they automatically take into account any filters you may have on the camera, as well as the light transmission capabilities of the lens.
B. Hand-held Light Meters

The first thing you need to know about hand-held light meters is that a good one will allow you to make exposures, particularly on film, that will be far more precise (in other words, better) than anything you can accomplish with your in-camera meter. The next thing you need to know is that hand-held light meters are not intelligent. They have no idea what are the most important elements in a scene. What they tell you needs to be interpreted. This is because they see everything, to use a term from Ansel Adams’s Zone System, as a Zone V (middle gray).

What is the Zone System?

The Zone System divides the gray scale into ten distinct values, or zones. These zones correspond to the tonal values on a black-and-white negative that can be subsequently translated to a print. In terms of film exposure, the difference between adjacent zones is the same as the difference between adjacent ƒ-stops on a camera lens.

ZONE I is the darkest value, equivalent to an unexposed area of film that shows no information (also called film base plus fog).
ZONE II is the darkest (shadow) area to show any detail, but it is too dark to register on a print (film has a greater capacity than enlarging paper to register information).
ZONE III is the darkest shadow area to contain printable detail.
ZONE IV is a dark middle tone.
ZONE V is middle gray.
ZONE VI is a light middle tone, and is sometimes considered to be the best tone for Caucasian skin in shade.
ZONE VII is a highlight, and is sometimes considered to be the best tone for Caucasian skin in sunlight, or snow in shade.
ZONE VIII is a bright highlight, and is sometimes considered to be the best tone for snow (or sand) in bright sunlight. Most photographers consider this to be the brightest highlight (the area of the negative with the most density) that can hold enough detail to register adequately on a print without excessive darkroom manipulation.
ZONE IX is the brightest highlight. Most photographers consider this zone, and everything beyond it, to represent those areas of a negative that are overexposed.

There are only six zones (III–VIII) that contain adequate detail for a good-looking print.

Handheld light meters measure light in two different ways:

1. by means of reflected light (light reflected off your subject), and
2. by means of incident light (light falling on your subject).

For a reflected reading, you stand close to your subject (regardless of where the camera will be), and point the meter at the subject.

For an incident light reading, you stand where your subject will be and point the meter at the camera.

An incident reading gives you a direct read-out of possible exposure settings. You simply choose one of the displayed shutter speed/ƒ-stop combinations and set the camera accordingly.

A reflected reading is what you will want to use most frequently, because it is the most precise. But it requires interpretation, and is best used in conjunction with the Zone System.

To take a reflected reading:

1. Make sure the ASA (film speed) is set correctly on the meter.
2. Point the meter at your subject, and remember that whatever you point the meter at, the meter sees it as a Zone V (middle gray) value. This means that if you point the meter at a white wall, it will give you shutter speed/ƒ-stop combinations that would result in the wall showing up as a middle-gray tone (Zone V) on your film, and so forth (a black tuxedo jacket would also end up as a middle gray jacket if you simply obeyed what the meter told you to do with your camera settings).
3. Since you want neither of the above-cited examples to occur, you have to interpret what your meter tells you. There are a number of ways to do this.

a. Carry an 18 percent reflectance gray card with you and put it in front of your subject, take a reading, and do what the meter says.

b. Find something in the scene that would naturally translate as a middle gray on black-and-white film, make sure the light falling on it is the same as the light falling on your subject, take a reading off that, and proceed as above.

c. Find the darkest important shadow area (note that in photo jargon, anything dark is referred to as a shadow), take a reading off that, and close down your lens two stops from the indicated reading, in order to place that shadow value at Zone III on the gray scale. In other words, an indicated reading of 1/125 sec. at f/8 would become an actual exposure of 1/125 sec. at f/16.

The most accurate readings are always obtained by taking a reflected reading, using the last method (metering for the shadows). This is most emphatically true when the lighting conditions are of high contrast (subway stations, night-time landscapes, dramatic studio lighting, tungsten-illuminated interiors, desert scenes in Africa or the American southwest). It can also be the most time-consuming. A gray card reading is often accurate enough if the lighting is diffuse and/or really evenly distributed throughout the scene (indoor fluorescent lighting, overcast days, etc.).

To take an incident reading:

Slide the incident dome over the meter’s sensor window, place yourself where your subject will be, and point the meter at the camera (you are measuring the light falling on your subject, as seen from the camera’s position). Simply follow what the meter tells you, with no adjustment or interpretation.

Incident light readings are generally best for digital cameras and color slide film (where correct highlight exposure, combined with adequate shadow exposure, is crucial).

Reflected light readings are generally best for negative film (either color or black and white), where adequate shadow exposure is essential.

C. Using a Handheld Meter to Measure the Brightness Range of a Scene, and How to Solve Some Difficult Exposure Problems
(Note: this applies only to black-and-white film.)

This is a way of controlling or regulating the contrast of your negatives, particularly when you’re faced with a really high-contrast situation (strong back light, city streets at night, any ordinary interior scene lit by a scattered arrangement of tungsten lamps).

1. Remember, there are only six “Zones” (III–VIII) that will register sufficient detail on your negative.
2. Since the difference between adjacent zones is the same as the difference between adjacent ƒ-stops, any scene that has a brightness range greater...
than six f-stops can be considered high contrast. In such a situation, if you have carefully geared your exposure for adequate shadow detail, as explained earlier (see 3c on previous page), your brightest highlights will be off the scale—in other words, overexposed. There is a remedy for this, which will be explained shortly.

3. To measure the brightness range of a scene, point the meter (using the reflected mode) at the darkest part of the scene. Note the shutter speed/f-stop combination. Then point the meter at the brightest part of the scene. Note the shutter speed/f-stop combination. Using the same shutter speed as a reference point for both these readings, count the number of f-stops between the two (for example, if the shadow reading is 1/125 sec. at f2, and highlight reading is 1/125 sec. at f11, there is a five-stop difference, and the scene is not a high-contrast scene; if the numbers are 1/125 sec. at f2 and 1/25 sec. at f22, there is a seven-stop difference, and it is a high-contrast scene).

4. If you find a high-contrast scene, using the above method, and base your film exposure on a reading of the darkest shadow area (closing down your lens two stops from the meter’s indicated exposure), the brightest highlights in the scene will be overexposed, as we have noted previously. This is OK. Realistically speaking, if the highlights will only be 1 or 1.5 stops overexposed, the chances are reasonably good that you can burn them in when you are making the print in the darkroom. But if you want a perfect negative (which was a necessity for Ansel Adams and other members of the f/64 club, who couldn’t burn and dodge because they were making contact prints from 8 x 10-inch negatives), or if the brightness range is even greater than seven stops, you will have to do something else. You will have to reduce the negative contrast.

5. Reducing negative contrast is accomplished by reducing film development time. Up to a point, decreasing development time only affects the density of the highlights on your film, not the density of the shadows. The tonal relationship of shadows and highlights—manifested as contrast—changes as the development time changes.

A basic formula for reducing contrast is that you reduce the time 10–15 percent (from normal) for each f-stop increment that you want the contrast to be reduced. In other words, if your brightness range was seven stops (a plus-one deviation from the maximum range of six stops), and you wanted to produce a negative with a tonal range of six stops, you would develop the film for 10–15 percent less time than the “normal” recommended time (a factor of minus one f-stop). A 10-minute time for Tri-X at 68 degrees Fahrenheit would become 8.5 or 9 minutes. If the brightness range was eight stops, development time would decrease by 20–30 percent. Under the previously described circumstances for Tri-X film, the normal time of 10 minutes would become 7–8 minutes. In no case, however, should you develop film for less than 50 percent of the normal time, or for less than 4 minutes.

6. Finally, you can also change film development time to increase the contrast of your negatives. This would be appropriate if you measured the brightness range of a scene and found there was only, for example, a four-stop difference between highlight and shadow. You would then increase the development time 10–15 percent for each f-stop increment that you wanted to “stretch” the contrast of your film.

7. Important note: Now you can understand the Zone System mantra, “Expose for the shadows, develop for the highlights.” As far as the second part of this mantra is concerned, it should be noted that it was first intended for photographers who were using large-format cameras and shooting single sheets of film that could be specially processed one at a time when necessary. It is hard to use the method for a whole roll of film, the many frames of which must be developed for the same amount of time, unless, of course, the whole roll was shot under the same conditions. This is not a bad idea. Even if there are a few renegade frames on a roll mostly containing images that need a contrast reduction of minus one or minus two f-stops, and you calculate development time based on this need, the worst that can happen to the renegade frames is that they will be severely lacking in contrast. This is a problem that is easier to solve in the darkroom than its reverse, namely, a negative with blown-out highlights.

D. Exposure Issues with Digital Cameras

1. It is not possible, as it is with film, to compress or expand the tonal range of a digital image.

2. Like color slide film, but even more so, the exposure of digital images needs to be geared for the highlights. Because bright values can so easily be overexposed and blown out in a digital image, a good spot meter is a useful tool. It is for this reason that it is also important to shoot in RAW mode, as opposed to JPEG. According to the Adobe Systems white paper, “Making the Transition from Film to Digital,” a 12-bit RAW file has the potential for containing 2048 levels of information (distinct tonal values) in the highlight areas of an image, whereas an 8-bit JPEG file can contain only 65 levels.

3. Even when an image is properly exposed, digital cameras are useless in extreme low-light situations, because of the aberrations they produce during long exposures (see Chapter 9).

4. Good DSLRs have excellent matrix metering systems. Because of the instant feedback provided by digital cameras, it is possible to shoot test exposures in difficult lighting situations, and work with the camera’s exposure compensation system until you get satisfactory results.

APPENDIX C: USING FLASH

The basic principle of flash exposure was explained in Chapter 10. This appendix consists of supplemental information about different kinds of flash units and their operation, as well as information about how to combine flash illumination with ambient light.

1. Guide Number

All flash units have a guide number, which designates the maximum amount of power they are capable of producing. Guide numbers are valid only for a particular film speed (or digital ISO rating), and are usually given by default for materials rated at ISO 100. If you know the guide number of your flash unit, and it has been accurately represented by the manufacturer, you can use it to calculate proper flash exposure, as follows:

Guide number/flash-to-subject distance = correct f-stop.

Thus, if the guide number (CN) is 100, and the flash-to-subject distance is 10 feet:

100/10 = 10 or f11 (the closest number)

Of course, it is easier and more practical to calculate exposure by using the unit in automatic mode or by using a flash meter. But doing it this way is a good method for discovering any discrepancy between the advertised power of the unit and its actual power.
2. Types of Portable Flash Units

A. Manual units: These have a distance scale, typically on the back of the unit, which enables you to match the film speed and the flash-to-subject distance with the f-stop for a proper exposure. Unlike automatic units (see below), these units give off the maximum available power each time they are fired. Consequently, it is important to pay attention to alterations in flash-to-subject distance. As you get closer to your subject, you will have to close down your lens to an appropriate aperture; as you get farther away, you will have to open up the lens to the appropriate aperture.

B. Automatic units: The power output of these units, which are the most common type of flash, is variable. A light sensor is situated on the unit. It is a semiconductor device, commonly referred to as a thyristor, and it can turn off the discharge of light from the flash when needed. It does this when it receives a signal from a photo cell that enough light has been reflected back from the subject for a proper exposure. The sensor is usually situated on the central axis of the light path of the flash, so it only reads the light reflected from the nearest subject situated in the center of the frame. Anything that is at the edge of the frame, and closer to the flash than the centrally located subject, will receive more illumination, and consequently will be overexposed (see Flash Connections, right, for more discussion of this potential problem).

Automatic units usually offer you a choice of f-stops. Often they are color-coded, and you indicate your choice of, say, f/8, by dialing in the color that matches that f-stop for the speed of the film you are using. Having done that, you set your camera lens at f/8, and you’re ready to start shooting. You can move in and out, altering your flash-to-subject distance at will, without making any adjustments to your lens aperture, because the flash itself is automatically varying the level of illumination in order to achieve proper exposure at a constant aperture.

C. Zoom units: Flash units produce a cone of light that is intended to produce even illumination of all parts of a scene. For most portable units, this cone of light, by default, is sufficient to cover the angle of view of a 35mm fixed-focal-length lens. To broaden the coverage so that the flash can provide adequate illumination for an extreme wide-angle lens, or to narrow it so that it matches the angle of view of a telephoto lens (and therefore not waste power), accessory filters can be used. Some units, so-called zoom flashes, have the built-in capability of matching the focal length of the lens in use. When zoomed in to accommodate longer lenses, their guide number (maximum available power) increases, and when they are zoomed out for shorter focal length lenses, their GN decreases.

D. Dedicated units: Some units are “dedicated” to particular camera brands and models. Sometimes called TTL units (for “through-the-lens”), these units measure the light off the film plane during exposure. The light sensor and other automated features are typically inside the camera itself, as opposed to being mounted on the flash unit.

E. Built-in flash units: These in-camera units are less powerful than external units, but they can be extremely useful, particularly in non-demanding lighting situations when you want to mix flash with ambient light (see section at end of this Appendix).

F. Mono-lights: These are single-head, relatively simple units, suitable for location work. They require a light stand and an external battery pack (or household current). They are not set up for automatic exposure, and therefore must be used in conjunction with a flash meter. They are very useful for portrait work in tightly controlled situations, either indoors or outdoors.

G. Slave units: These are units that are triggered, via a special light sensor, by the firing of another flash. They are very useful for lighting a scene from multiple angles, for providing accent lights, or for filling in shadows created by the primary flash.

3. Flash Connections

One way or another, the flash has to be electronically connected to the camera. Most small cameras have a hot shoe connection, situated at the top of the camera body where the flash unit itself slides into place. Older 35mm cameras may have, instead of or in addition to this type of connection, something called a PC (standing for “positive connection”) that allows the camera to communicate with the flash by means of a PC cord. Mono-lights, and any kind of flash used with a large-format camera (and many medium-format cameras) use PC connections.

The advantage to using a PC cord, particularly a very long one, is that you can take the flash off the camera, and aim it at your subject in such a way as to not illuminate something that stands in the path between the camera and your subject, perhaps at the edge of the frame (see section 2b, left).

Another alternative to the long PC cord is the wireless connection. A transmitter, mounted on the camera, can send a signal to a receiver, mounted on the flash unit. Using this method, you can set up a flash anywhere you want, on a light stand or clamped to a piece of street scaffolding, and move freely about, photographing whoever happens to be in the light path of the flash unit. If it is an automatic unit, you won’t need to worry about flash-to-subject distance. If it is not an automatic unit, you will have to limit yourself to photographing whoever crosses the light path at a predetermined distance from the flash unit itself.

4. Synchronization speeds

As stated in Chapter 10, the typical synchronization speeds for older 35mm cameras is 1/60 sec. More recent cameras are often synchronized for flash at 1/200 or 1/250 sec. These represent the fastest speed (shortest exposure time) at which a whole frame of film is exposed to light. At faster speeds, such as 1/1000 sec., a vertical slit travels across the film plane, progressively exposing the whole frame. If the flash were to fire during this time, only a portion of the frame would be exposed. Consequently, flash must be used at the synch speed designated for a particular camera, or at any speeds slower than that synch speed.

This rule, however, applies only to cameras with focal-plane shutters. All 35mm cameras have focal-plane shutters, as do digital SLRs. Most digital point-and-shoot cameras do not have focal-plane shutters, and are therefore synched for flash at all speeds. Most medium-format cameras and all large-format cameras have leaf shutters, situated inside the lens, which are synched for flash at all speeds. (This is because they are constructed like a diaphragm, and are either fully open or fully closed.)

A. “X” and “M” synchronization: Older cameras used flash bulbs, which didn’t instantly reach peak intensity, as electronic units do. The camera’s shutter had to wait a moment before opening, or it would miss the instant of brightest illumination. “M” synchronization, which provided a short delay before the shutter opened, was for flash bulbs. “X” synchronization, which directs the shutter to open instantly, is for use with electronic flash. If you have an older view camera lens, it will probably be equipped with both these synchronization options. If you are using electronic flash, you should make sure that the shutter is set for “X” synchronization. If it is not, the shutter will open after the flash has fired, and your picture will be seriously underexposed.

B. Second-curtain synchronization: Photographers often use flash combined with long exposures, in order to produce some blurring of a moving subject (see section on mixing flash with ambient light, at the end of this Appendix). With standard camera shutters, the flash is usually fired at the instant the shutter opens. If the shutter stays open for a significant amount of time (say, 1/8 sec. or longer), this results in pictures with a motion trail in front of the flash image of the moving subject, thus making him or her appear to be moving backward. It is therefore sometimes desirable, in the application of so-called “open flash,” to have the flash fire just before the shutter closes. This requires support from the camera body, in terms of communication with the flash unit, as well as a flash unit that is capable of second-curtain synchronization.
5. Working Range of Flash Units
There is a limit to the maximum distance at which a subject can receive sufficient illumination from a flash unit. Many manufacturers grossly overestimate this limit. (If you own a portable flash unit, and consult the distance scale, which will purport to show you the maximum feasible flash-to-subject distance, do not be surprised if it is something like 40 feet.) This limit, whatever it is in reality, will correspond to a situation when the flash is operating at maximum power, with the camera’s lens wide open.

What is surprising to some photographers is that there is also a minimum working distance. This is a function of the electronics of the flash unit. Operating in automatic mode at really close range, flash duration becomes very short, and it becomes impossible for the thyristor unit to switch off the power in time to avoid overexposure. In manual mode, it is simply impossible for the flash to deliver a full-power burst of light that would be brief enough for a correct exposure.

Another issue in using a standard flash unit at really close range is parallax. Relative to the subject, the angle of view of the camera lens and the direction of light from the flash (due to its position on top of, or to the side of the camera) will be radically different. Even if a proper exposure was possible, the subject might be only partially illuminated. (Close-up flash photography is possible, but it requires the use of a ring light that is mounted around the lens barrel of the camera.)

In practical terms, it is important, even when using automatic flash, to take note of the maximum and minimum working distances (particularly the minimum figure) at a given lens aperture.

6. Basic Types of Flash Illumination
A. DIRECT FLASH: This is the most basic kind of illumination. It is done with the flash on-camera, with the head aimed directly at the subject, or with the flash off-camera, aimed at an angle to the subject. The former produces heavy cast shadows on the subject’s face, and on anything close to the subject in the background. Direct flash off-camera tends to separate the subject from the cast shadows in the background, sometimes producing a film noir effect. It is with this method that the effects of the inverse square law can become most apparent, as the environment behind the subject shrinks quickly away into darkness.

Because the light from direct flash is so directional, like a spotlight, it produces high-contrast images. (For example, see the Weegee photograph discussed in Chapter 4. The use of direct flash was central to the edgy and sometimes comically lurid look of his work.) If you shoot a whole roll of pictures using direct flash, and you are shooting in black and white, you might want to consider reducing the development time for the film, of blown-out highlights, precise exposure with direct flash is crucial.

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B. BOUNCE FLASH: This is accomplished by swiveling the flash head away from the subject, and letting the light bounce off a ceiling, a wall, a bounce card attached to the unit, or an umbrella. It diffuses the light, causing softer shadows and more even illumination of the whole scene. With this method, the flash-to-subject distance is not the same as the camera-to-subject distance, even if the flash is on-camera. The flash-to-subject distance is the actual distance the light must travel to the ceiling (for instance), and then to the subject, with an allowance made for the amount of light absorbed by the ceiling (or other reflecting surface). In automatic units, of course, the calculation is made by the light sensor. In manual units, the best way to calculate it is to use a flash meter. Most automatic units will also have something called a confirmation light, which will tell you, when you test-fire the unit, whether or not sufficient light has achieved the subject for a correct exposure.

7. Mixing Flash With Ambient Light
In the simplest flash photography scenario (direct on-camera flash), the foreground subject is correctly exposed, and everything in the distant background, due to the inverse square law, falls quickly into darkness and murk. In order to remedy this problem, and achieve a result in which the background environment is visible, the camera’s shutter has to remain open long enough for the ambient light, along with the flash, to have an effect on the overall exposure of the film or digital sensor.

In order to do this, remember that correct flash exposure is the first and absolute requirement. You must set the correct f-stop for the flash exposure. And you must increase the exposure for ambient light by selecting a slower shutter speed. If the flash requires f/8, for instance, and you are shooting indoors in dim light, this may mean a very slow shutter speed indeed. So be it. If you want to run the risk of creating motion trails via camera movement during such a long exposure (or if you want to do this intentionally), then you can hand hold the camera.

The flash, due to its extremely short duration, will freeze any moving subject and create a sharp image by itself, as long as that subject is in focus (see the discussion of “open flash” images in Chapter 10). If you do not want to create motion blur with a long exposure, then you should use a tripod (your background may still be blurry, but this will be due only to the fact that it is out of focus, and that produces an entirely different look).

When you start thinking about mixing flash with ambient light, you should think in terms of using two different light sources. One will be the main light, the other will be the “fill” light. Only on very rare occasions, if ever, will you want to think of them as equal. The two scenarios I will discuss here are: using flash as the main light, and the ambient light as fill, and using ambient light as the main light, with the flash as fill.

A. FLASH AS MAIN LIGHT, AMBIENT LIGHT AS FILL: In this scenario, you will want to combine a correct flash exposure with an ambient light exposure that would be, by itself, an underexposure in the range of minus one or minus two f-stops.

For example, if the flash requires a setting of f/8 for a correct exposure, you have to find the shutter speed that would produce an underexposure of minus one or minus two, when combined with f/8. If you took a handheld meter reading (the best method), and determined that 1/8 sec. at f/8 would produce a correct ambient light exposure, you would set the camera controls (in manual mode) for either 1/4 sec. at f/8 or 1/8 sec. at f/8.

You would base your choice of shutter speeds on how much variation you want between foreground and background illumination levels. If you want your foreground subject to really stand out from the background (but still have the background legible), then you would probably want to underexpose the background by a factor of minus two, and choose 1/8 sec. in the example above. On the other hand, if you want to be more subtle, and minimize the foreground/background illumination difference (the lighting ratio), you might choose 1/4 sec. in the example above.

If you want to make the presence of the flash illumination almost undetectable (but still use it as your main light source), you might choose a setting that corresponds to an ambient light underexposure of minus half a stop. Some of Rineke Dijkstra’s beach portraits (see Chapter 7) were probably made this way. She used flash for all of them, and it served her well as a way of emphasizing and highlighting her subjects’ presence, without separating them from their environment.

Some small cameras are equipped with separate exposure compensation dials for ambient light exposures and for flash exposures. This is a highly desirable feature, because it provides a simple way of combining flash with ambient light. In theory, all you have to do is set the ambient light exposure compensation dial to minus one or minus two, and set the flash exposure compensation dial to zero (or whatever is the usual setting for a correct flash exposure). In practice, you may have to do some testing in order to get the results you want. This is, of course, easier with a digital camera, since you can evaluate the images immediately. The best way, however, and the only way if you are shooting medium- or large-format, is to use a hand-held meter (and perhaps a flash meter as well).
b. Ambient Light as Main Light, Flash as Fill: This scenario is the reverse of the above. Here, you may simply be using flash to fill in harsh cast shadows on your subject’s face, or just to slightly increase the readability of something in the foreground of the picture. In any case, you will first want to set the f-stop on your lens so as to produce a flash underexposure of minus one or minus two stops (although I would recommend avoiding minus two, because I think it just doesn’t provide enough supplemental illumination). Then you will need to set the shutter speed, combined with that pre-selected f-stop, for a correct ambient light exposure. In other words, using the previous example, if the flash needs f/8 for a correct exposure, you set the f-stop at f/11. Then, you find the shutter speed that will produce a correct ambient light exposure with that f-stop.

One limitation here is that you have to end up with a shutter speed that is still synchronized with the flash unit. Many situations in which you will want to use flash as a fill light will be outdoors in bright sunlight, and if you have an older camera with a focal-plane shutter, the fastest shutter speed you will be able to use will be 1/60 sec., which may not be fast enough, even if you are using slow film and can stop the lens down to f/22. If your camera is synched for flash at 1/200 sec., as many contemporary 35mm and digital SLRs are, then this is not usually a problem. If you are using a digital “prosumer” level camera (with a fixed zoom lens and some advanced camera controls) or a medium-format or large-format film camera, all of which are equipped with leaf shutters, this is not a problem, because they are synched for flash at all speeds.

8. A Note on Using Flash with Digital Cameras

Digital cameras do not handle high-contrast lighting situations very well. This includes bright sunlight of any kind, anywhere; indoor environments illuminated by tungsten lights; night scenes or any other dark situations combined with point sources of ambient light (the latter being complicated also by the fact that digital cameras aren’t friendly to long exposures, as noted in Chapter 9).

The problem for digital cameras in high-contrast situations is that it is really easy to get blown-out highlights. While it is possible, sometimes surprisingly so, to use Photoshop to tease detail out of murky shadows in a digital file, there is no honest way of producing detail in a highlight that isn’t there in the first place.

Gearing digital exposures for the highlights, as explained in Appendix B, is a crucial first step. But it doesn’t always produce satisfactory results, particularly in darker areas of the image. This is where flash comes in. Unless you are willing to limit yourself to flat lighting situations, knowing how to mix flash with ambient light, as explained above, is a necessary part of competence in digital image-making.

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Page numbers in italics denote illustrations.

35mm cameras 158, 207, 208

age 102–3, 193–5
Agee, James 57–8, 41, 105
Alpern, Merry 60, 61–2, 54, 73, 143
ambient light/flash mix 155, 163, 214–15
Apagya, Philip Kwame 113–14, 116, 117
Arbus, Diane 106, 112–13, 151, 165
authorship 25–6, 68
automatic flash units 212
Avedon, Richard 4, 5–8, 55, 106, 113
Aziz, Anthony 192–3, 193
backgrounds 113–14, 123, 157
Barney, Tina 177–81, 178–9, 187
Barth, Uta 126–9, 127
Barthes, Roland 5, 25–6, 68, 191–2
Bayard, Hippolyte 12, 13, 15
Baylis, Diane 62–4, 63
beauty 192–5
Becher, Bernd and Hilla 68, 107
Bell, Clive 33
Bellocq, E.J. 16–17, 17
Bentham, Jeremy 67–8
Billingham, Richard 128, 129
black identity 96
see also ethnic identity
blind people 138–40, 174, 175
blurring see out-of-focus photography
body 12, 16–17, 20, 192–203
bounce flash 214
Brassaï 134, 142, 158, 171
brightness range 210–11
Brown, Lucian and Mary 155–7, 155, 163
built-in flash units 212
bull’s eye photography 100–17
Burke, Bill 161, 162, 163
Burson, Nancy 193–5, 194–5, 197
Butler, Judith 80–1, 83
cable release 117
Callahan, Harry 68, 69–70, 69
cameras 101, 142–3, 158, 207–8
see also digital cameras
Cameron, Julia Margaret 7–8, 7, 13, 79–80, 107, 125, 129
cartes de visite 13
Cartier-Bresson, Henri 33–6, 34–5, 73
center-weighted averaging meters 209
cinematic narratives 55–6, 166
see also cinematic narratives
clic release 117
clothes 12–27
c Millennials 177–86
Farm Security Administration 38, 174
femininity 7–9, 20, 26, 95
see also gender
figures in landscapes 170–87
flash use 133, 215
film stills 186
see also cinematic narratives
film types 154, 247
flash photography 133, 148–67, 212–15
flash-to-subject distance 157
focus 31, 117, 120–9
foreground 113, 123, 127
Foucault, Michel 68
framing 30–57, 102, 117
Frank, Robert 30, 33, 78, 122, 123, 174
flash photography 152, 156
newspapers 50–2, 52, 54–5
Friedlander, Lee 16, 18–20, 18–19
friends and family 177–86
Gardner, John 137
gaze, interpretation 5
gender 22, 80–1, 83–7
see also femininity
Grécault, Theodore 202, 203
Gibson, Ralph 64–5, 65
Gilden, Bruce 158, 159–60, 161
Goldin, Nan 90, 91, 180
grey scale 209
guide numbers 212

INDEX
hand-held light meters 133, 209–11
Hare, Chauncey 152–4, 153
Harris, Yyle Ashton 86–7, 86
Herrigel, Eugen 101–2
history painting 175, 187, 202–3
homelessness 41–5
Hopper, Edward 72

ID photos 107
in-camera metering systems 209
incident light 210
interline transfer 208
Keïta, Seydou 113, 114, 115
Klein, William 120, 121, 123–4, 190, 191–2
Lacan, Jacques 89, 93
landscapes 170–87
Lange, Dorothea 36, 38, 39, 174
Lee, Nikki S. 84, 85, 90
lens aperture 157–8
Levine, Sherrie 25
Levitt, Helen 50, 52, 53, 54–5
light 132–45, 148–67, 212–15
see also metering
looking 4–9
low-light situations 132–45
'M' synchronization 213
McLuhan, Marshall 124
Man Ray 25, 83, 84, 85–4, 95
Manet, Edouard 80–1, 80, 83, 176, 177
manual flash units 212
marginalized people 30–45
Mark, Mary Ellen 138–40, 139
masks/masquerades 13, 83–4, 96
metering 133, 209–11
Michelangelo Buonarroti 197
Mikhaylov, Boris 41–4, 44, 45
mirroring process 78, 85–7, 89
mono-lights 212
Mori, Mariko 85–6, 85
Morimura, Yasumasa 81–2, 83–4
Morrisroe, Mark 87–8, 89–90
multi-segment meters 209
narcissism 87, 89
Neshat, Shirin 23, 24, 25, 26
news photographs 48–57, 149
Newton, Helmut 66
night photography 134, 152
Nixon, Nicholas 139, 140, 134, 155
Norfleet, Barbara 156, 158–2, 181
'open flash' method 158, 161, 163, 167
Opie, Catherine 22–3, 50, 92, 93, 95
orthochromatic film 205
out-of-focus photography 120–9
overall fill light 145
Perales, R. 50
photographer's presence 1
Photo-Secession movement 124
Pictorialism 109, 105
Polaroid film 137, 163
pornography 62, 197–8
portraits
definitions 1, 13
syntax 187
Poussin, Nicolas 173, 176, 177
reciprocity failure 144, 145
reflected light 18, 210
Rejlander, Oscar 204, 205
Renger-Patzsch, Albert 68
Rexroth, Nancy 143–6, 160
rhymes 31, 45, 54
Richards, Eugene 32, 33, 36
Richter, Gerhard 107–11, 108–9
Ris, Jacob 20, 31–3, 36, 142, 204, 149–50, 153
Rimbaud, Arthur 84
Rosler, Martha 41
Rossel, Daniela 66–7, 66
Rousseau, Henri 16, 17
Ruf, Thomas 68, 106–9, 111–3, 197–8
rule of thirds 173
Sander, August 103–7, 104, 112–14, 170, 171, 197
Schneider, Gary 132, 133–4, 135, 136–7, 142–4
second curtain synchronization 213
Seeing With Photography (SWP) 137
Sekula, Alan 41
selective subject illumination 145
self-portraits 12–27, 89
settings 117
sex/sexuality 61–2, 81, 83, 85, 91, 95
shadows 18–19
sharpness 123, 124
Sherman, Cindy 7, 8–9, 9, 15, 16, 186
shutter speed 157–8
Simpson, Lorna 95, 96
single lens reflex cameras 31
slave units 212
Smith, W. Eugene 149
Solnit, Rebecca 158
Sontag, Susan 41, 48, 199
Spence, Jo 20, 22
spot meters 209
Sternfeld, Joel 172–4, 173, 175, 187
Stieglitz, Alfred 124–5, 125
street photography 33–6, 73–4, 149, 166, 171–2
Streith, Beat 73–4, 73
subject 117
Sultan, Larry 182–4
supplementary lighting 148–67
Surrealism 33, 95
surveillance 67–75
SWP see Seeing With Photography
synchronization speeds 213
syntax of photography 142–3, 187
tableaux 170–87
telephoto lenses 62, 73, 106
television images 124
text 95, 96, 184–5
time frames 174
Ut, Huynh ‘Nick’ 48, 49
‘victim’ photography 41, 45
voyeurism 61–7, 72–3, 75
Wall, Jeff 34, 35–6, 174–7, 190, 198, 199–203, 200–1, 205
Weegee 50–1, 51, 54–6, 149, 155, 163
Westerbeck, Colin 33–4, 46
Williams, Linda 62, 72
Winogrand, Garry 27, 36, 37, 48, 73
Witkin, Joel Peter 140–1, 141, 143, 145
working range, flash units 213–14
‘X’ synchronization 213
Yamanaka, Manabu 100, 101–3, 113
Yokomizo, Shizuka 71, 72–3
Zone System 209
zoom units 212
This book emphasizes the situational element in various kinds of portrait photography. One point that is particularly stressed is the presence of the photographer’s gaze, as an integral part of what the picture is about: the activity of one person looking, manifested in a moment that can feel as transitory as the blink of an eye or as durational as a small eternity.

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