TRAIN YOUR GAZE

SECOND EDITION

A PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION TO PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY

ROSWELL ANGIER

ROUTLEDGE

TRAIN YOUR GAZE

First published 2015 by Bloomsbury Visual Arts
Reprinted by Bloomsbury Visual Arts 2018

Published 2020 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Copyright © Taylor & Francis 2015

Roswell Angier has asserted his right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

For legal purposes the Acknowledgements on p. vii constitute an
extension of this copyright page.

Cover design: Sutchinda Rangsi Thompson
Cover image © *Stranger No. 8*, 1999 © ShizukaYokomizo

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:
Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the AVA edition as follows:
Angier, Roswell.
Train your gaze : a practical and theoretical introduction to portrait photography /
Roswell Angier. — Second edition.
pages cm. — (Required Reading Range)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4725-2510-9 (paperback)
1. Portrait photography—Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Title.
TR575.A545 2015
770.92–dc23
2014011575

Series: Required Reading Range

ISBN13: 978-1-3501-0784-7 (pbk)

Typeset by Precision Graphics

TRAIN YOUR GAZE

A PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION TO PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY

SECOND EDITION

ROSWELL ANGIER

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

PREFACE 6
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 7

CHAPTER 1 ABOUT LOOKING 8
CREATING SILENCE 9
THE LOOK IN THEIR EYES 11
WHAT LIES BENEATH 14
ASSIGNMENT 1 17

CHAPTER 2 PORTRAIT/SELF-PORTRAIT, FACE/NO FACE 18
SHOW SOME EMOTION 19
SHADOWS AND FRAMES WITHIN FRAMES 25
THE VIEW FROM BEHIND 29
THE WELL OF NARCISSUS 34
ASSIGNMENT 2 37

CHAPTER 3 AT THE MARGIN: THE EDGES OF THE FRAME 38
COMPOSITION AS GESTURE 40
MARGINALIZED PEOPLE: NOTES ON DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY 46
ASSIGNMENT 3 59

CHAPTER 4 TREMORS OF NARRATIVE: PORTRAITS AND EVENTFULNESS 60
PRIVATE NARRATIVES 63
ON THE STREET: BEYOND THE NEWSWORTHY EVENT 68
CONSTRUCTED STORIES 73
ASSIGNMENT 4 77

CHAPTER 5 YOU SPY: VOYEURISM AND SURVEILLANCE 78
VOYEURISM 79
SURVEILLANCE 82
ASSIGNMENT 5 93

CHAPTER 6 PORTRAIT, MIRROR, MASQUERADE 94
CARTES DE VISITE AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL MEDIA 96
INCARNATION: BEYOND THE AVATAR 100
MASQUERADE: ALTERNATIVES TO THE AUTHENTIC SELF 104
MIRROR AND MASK 119
ASSIGNMENT 6 133

CHAPTER 7 CONFRONTATION: LOOKING THROUGH THE BULL'S EYE 134
DEAD TO RIGHTS: ZEN ARCHERY, THE MAN IN THE BOWLER HAT, AND THE MUG SHOT 135
PASSING THROUGH / STANDING STILL 150
BACKGROUNDS AND BACKDROPS 154
ASSIGNMENT 7 159

CHAPTER 8 BLUR: THE DISAPPEARING SUBJECT 160
THE SECRET IN THEIR EYES 164
OUT OF FOCUS 168
THE ARRIVAL OF METAPHOR 172
ASSIGNMENT 8 177

CHAPTER 9 FLASH 178
SHINING A LIGHT ON THE REAL WORLD 180
THE BUSINESS OF PORTRAITURE: A MIDCENTURY EXAMPLE 189
MOTION STUDIES 192
A LIGHTING CEREMONY 195
ASSIGNMENT 9 199

CHAPTER 10 FIGURES IN A LANDSCAPE 200
PRELIMINARY: EXILE'S RETURN 201
TABLEAUX VIVANTS 204
REAL-LIFE TABLEAUX AND HISTORY PAINTING 208
DARKNESS VISIBLE 217
CAMERA BEHAVIOR AND ALTERED IMAGES 220
FAMILY SCENARIOS 221
ASSIGNMENT 10 235

CHAPTER 11 DIGITAL PERSONAE 236
DIGITAL BODIES 239
SIMULATIONS: DOCUMENTARY, IDEALIZED CHILDHOOD, AND THE FAMILY ALBUM 250
INVENTED MOMENTS, FABRICATED HISTORY 256
ASSIGNMENT 11 266

BIBLIOGRAPHY 268
INDEX 269
PICTURE CREDITS 272

This book is about photographing people, in many different ways and from various perspectives. It is meant for an audience already acquainted with photography. Basic competence with cameras, darkrooms, and/or image-processing software is assumed. Discussion of purely technical issues is limited to key elements of the image-capture process and can be found chiefly in the three appendices (see below for instructions on how to access the online appendices).

The book is by no means a manual, but it is practical. It examines the content of a photograph, discussing history, theory, and formal analysis along the way.

The book devotes a great deal of attention to different aspects of the picture-making process and to the conditions surrounding that process. Because scrutiny and interpretation of other photographers' work is an integral part of one's own practice, it presents and analyzes images by many photographers. Some of these images are portraits in the classic sense; others stretch the boundaries of portraiture as a distinct genre. What is common to all of them is the presence of a human subject and the photographer's thoughtful regard—the felt activity of someone looking, the photographer embedded in the image.

The catalyzing element in a photograph might be a moment exchanged between the photographer and the subject, an inadvertent spark in the empty space between them. It could be a long and steadfast stare, embodying the photographer's unformed but intense desire for a good photograph. Or it might be something stealthy, a quietly fascinated gaze thrown out like a fishing line at an unwary subject, with the hope of seizing some trace of that person's singularity. As much as anything else, cultivating and activating this presence, this way of looking, is what this book is about.

Student resources to accompany this book are available at:
http://tinyurl.com/pbqbejw
Please type the URL into your browser and follow the instructions to the online resources. If you have any problems, please contact
instructor-resources@bloomsbury.com

This book would not have been possible without the constant input, over many years, of more students than I can name here. In and out of class, their questions and comments have helped me form my own ideas and opinions about what is important to learn about photography. Some of these students stand out in my memory with particular clarity: Rachel Boillot, Matt Edmundson, Zeynep Erataman, Christine Hendrickson, Melissa Onel, Irina Rosovsky, Jenna Sirkin, Nicki Sobecki, David Trilling, Laura Wise, and Justin McCallum, to name a few.

I would also like to thank Brian Morris, my original publisher, for his open-ended generosity in giving me my wish list for the photographs reproduced in the first edition. Thanks are also due to Georgia Kennedy and Renee Last, for all their hard work, support, and belief in the continuation of this project.

I am indebted to numerous galleries and museums for permission to reproduce copyrighted images. In the long and sometimes aggravated undertaking of obtaining these permissions, Tom Gitterman helped speed up the process and came up with helpful solutions when permission was denied.

I am particularly grateful to my wife, Susan Hawley, the first person to suggest that this book was possible. She was my first editor. Her clarifying eye, and her suggestions for how I might loosen up my language, were essential.

CHAPTER 1
ABOUT LOOKING

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[1]

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. The camera is mounted on a tripod. The subject is stationary, but her eyes follow you as you move from side to side. Occasionally, one of her hands drifts downward toward a pocket or upward 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 expression or minor gestural event. The nervous tension you've been feeling, from not speaking to each other for what seems like a long time, is starting to subside. You are now almost 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.

CREATING SILENCE

In the late 1960s, Richard Avedon published a series of portraits in *Rolling Stone* called "The Family." The pictures were of powerful people, mostly men. The subjects were evenly lit by ambient light, without a hint of shadow, 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 feels the silence 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" × 10" view camera mounted on a tripod, had been focused in advance, using an assistant as a stand-in for the subject. For the entire session, according to legend, 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.

Avedon used a similar procedure in "In the American West," in which he photographed drifters, miners, housekeepers, factory workers, inmates, cowboys, itinerant preachers. The subjects were social types, carefully chosen for the ways in which they represented the old frontier culture of America. In the pictures they often look haunted or intimidated; in some of them, a hint of defiance is evident. Only a single subject—a Navajo rodeo cowboy—smiles.

These photographs communicate the sense that the subjects are hanging on to their identities by a thread. Avedon achieves this effect largely by relying on the overpowering presence of the camera. Whatever they may suggest of the social fabric, his portraits are not documentary. They are not intended to be dispassionate or objective; they are certainly not friendly or compassionate. They are aggressive personal statements. In an introductory comment to this work, Avedon said that he thought all portraits, especially his own, were "opinions." The photographer's eye here does not seek merely to represent. Its goal is to persuade. Its nature is predatory and confrontational.

In the early days of photography, when emulsions and lenses were slow just about the only thing the camera was good for was confrontation: the creation of an image in which the subject was required to squarely face the camera and to hold still for a long exposure. Being photographed was a ceremony that lent a special quality to the resulting image, one that is hard to replicate with modern equipment. To the extent that Avedon's portrait work has a rigorous ceremonial feeling, it is because of its affinity with the daguerreotype esthetic.

It is possible to make confrontational images with modern film and imaging devices. Modern cameras loaded with fast film (or digital cameras with a high ISO setting) can easily produce one kind of stillness: they can freeze motion with a fast shutter speed. But for the subject to produce an effect of profound motionlessness, the photographer must revert to the set of conditions imposed on the daguerreotypist. The subject must not only be told to remain motionless, but to be quiet.

Silence is a required condition for fascination. First and foremost, the photographer must be quiet, relinquishing the need to keep the subject amused with reassuring banter. This behavior 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 mask.

Maintaining silence is a different kind of masquerade. Not speaking may or may not be uncomfortable. It may result in a quiet power struggle, or it may become a seduction. The end result is bound to contain evidence of the kind of interaction that occurred between photographer and subject. Whatever the outcome, the picture will not feel like a moment caught on the fly.

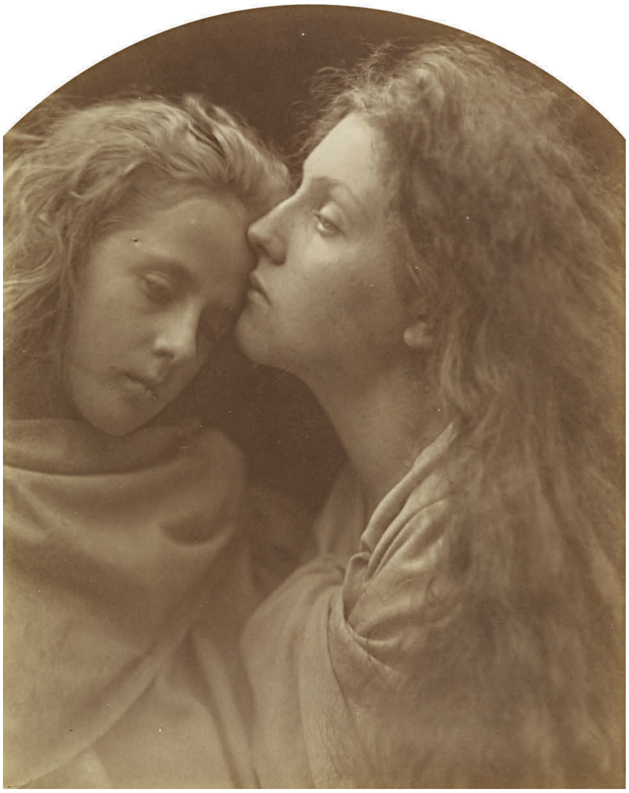

Fig 1.1
The Kiss of Peace, 1867
Julia Margaret Cameron

Fig. 1.1

THE LOOK IN THEIR EYES

Julia Margaret Cameron's "Kiss of Peace" (fig. 1.1) is about looking. The image shows a woman and a girl, presumably mother and daughter. As in Avedon's pictures, with their assertively blank backdrops, there is no suggestion of location here. The subjects inhabit an undisclosed space. There are no individuating details in the environment. Unlike Avedon's subjects, these figures are dressed in a nondescript fashion that looks vaguely ancient, but that belongs to no specific time or place. The viewer is asked to read this image in terms of bare essentials. Who are these people? What are they doing? What is being exchanged between them? Where do we, as viewers, fit in?

The composition suggests the late-19th-century cultural value of female modesty, indicated by the 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 downward, in the general direction of her mother's breast.

The mother's gaze provides a surprise. If we do not look too carefully, we might get the impression that her attention is focused completely on her daughter. In fact, her left eye is directed outward, toward but not at us. Violating the basic rule of the profile, in which the subject betrays no awareness of being looked at, the mother shows her awareness of an intrusive presence. The direction of her look suggests an attitude of cautious interception. She is ready to defend or protect. This awareness alters the intimacy of the moment. It is as if she is attempting to leach our attention away from her daughter, to interrupt the photographer's gaze, as well as our own. There is tension here between photographer and subject, faintly resembling the moment of concentrated tension that Avedon habitually seeks.

August Sander's portrait of boxers (fig. 1.2) shows two men unguardedly staring into the camera. Their gazes are open but noncommittal. They are not engaged in

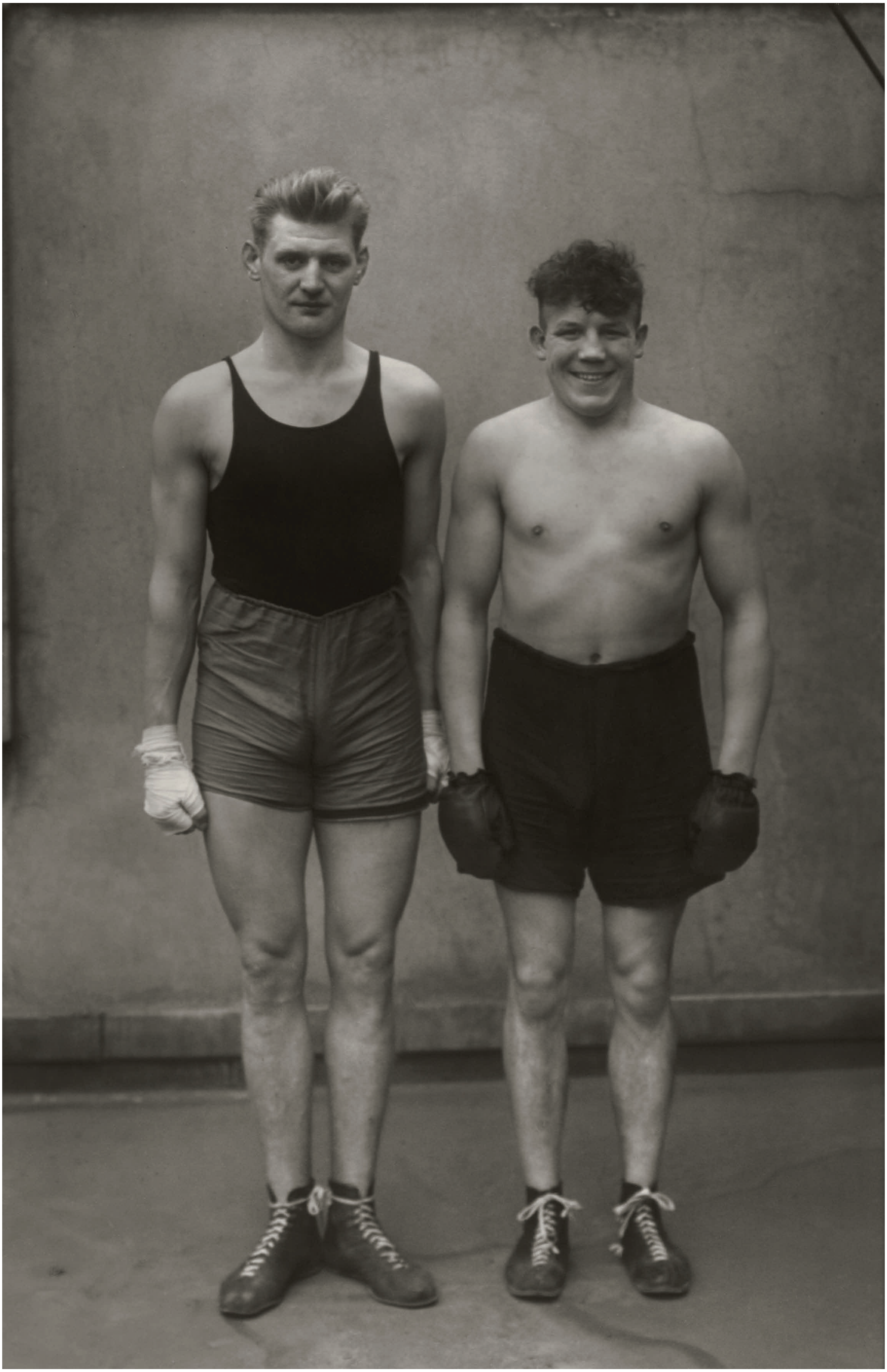

Fig. 1.2

Fig. 1.2
***Boxers*, 1929**
August Sander

a power struggle with the photographer or cautiously assessing the presence of an outside observer.

Sander did not seek out the revelatory moment or pounce on the transitory facial expression. His subjects usually look at us with utter equanimity. They are never startled. Their eyes appear to have nothing to hide. Their stance is settled. Sander's portraits are not opinions, in the sense that Avedon used the word. His objective was to create an even-handed inventory of social types (a topic discussed in more detail in Chapter 7).

What was interesting to Sander was the way his subjects inhabited a spectrum of socially defined roles. He sometimes referred to his subjects as "archetypes." Adrian Vargas, a professional boxer from San Diego, had this to say about "Two Boxers":

> Going to the gym, you see people all laughing and joking, then you see one keeping by himself, smiling. [In the photograph] you see a man on the right, and he's just smiling. Those are the type of people you have to think about the most. Those are the ones I fear, the ones with smiles on their faces, just all to themselves. Those are the ones that pack a deadly punch. The man on the left, he looks calm, he's ready to fight. His hands are like fists, he's ready to go.[2]

What is interesting about the two boxers is their different fighting styles, which, along with their obvious physical differences, reveal their identities. Neither Vargas, the fighter, nor Sander, the photographer, is interested in what lies beneath the surface, in the recesses of the men's psyches. Sander is interested in the subtle variations of the archetype, the small variations in the way each occupies his boxer persona.

The context of this portrait is important. The year is 1929. The boxer on the left looks Aryan; the boxer on the right might be Jewish. At the time, it would have taken some daring to circulate a photograph like this in Germany. The Third Reich wouldn't take power until 1933, but the Nazi Party had published its 25-point party program in 1920, and had publicly declared its intention to segregate Jews from Aryan society.

Sander's first book, *The Face of Our Time*, was banned in 1936, and the printer's plates were destroyed. Sander's offense was that he refused to promote Nazi values through photography. He did not view photography as a vehicle for making judgments or as a conduit for partisan values of any sort. His portrait of the two boxers is evidence of these convictions. (Sander's ambition to create a "portrait atlas" of German society is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.)

WHAT LIES BENEATH

Julia Margaret Cameron was one of the first photographers to state that she had psychological intentions. In her journal, she wrote that she sought to capture "the greatness of the inner, not the outer man" in the photographs she took of prominent Victorian intellectuals.

To do so, she had a technician remove some of the elements from her camera lens, reducing its resolution. The resulting images were soft in focus, a far cry from the sharpness of the daguerreotype portrait.

Cameron was more interested in metaphor than in description. The blurry quality of her photographs and their absence of crisp detail require us to imagine some of the missing information. They require us to assume an attitude of interpretation.

What information does "The Kiss of Peace" provide for us to interpret? The mother's mouth does not actually make contact with her daughter's cheek; her lips are closed, immobile, silent. The title of the photograph seems to contradict what it shows. The guarded quality of the mother's look, discussed previously, as well as her body language, has ruptured the feeling of tranquil intimacy the viewer may have initially thought was the subject of the picture. Instead of serenity, there is irony. The title may have been intended as a bit of a ruse, a camouflage the viewer is meant to see through. Cameron was one of the first photographers to assert herself as an artist, declaring that her motivation for making pictures was to penetrate beneath surface appearances. It makes sense that her efforts also went beyond her desire to reveal ephemeral aspects of the individual psyche, as in her portraits of famous Victorian men, and led her to insinuate some commentary on a cultural stereotype, while seeming to simply render it without critical distance. The stereotype here is that of the docile Madonna, ever available to the leisurely inspections of her viewers' admiring gaze. The subtle attitude of resignation in the mother's expression, and even in the tilt of her head, could be read as a sign of the burden involved in maintaining this masquerade.

Like Cameron, Cindy Sherman is concerned with the spectacle of female identity and issues of femininity, albeit in a way that is more overt and thorough. "Untitled Film Still, #3" is part of a series of portraits in which the artist impersonates various archetypes of femininity. Many of the images depict 1950s film noir–like narratives, such as sexual triangles in which a designing woman looks for a way out of an oppressive relationship with an abusive partner.

This image presents 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,

Fig 1.3
***Untitled Film Still, #3,* 1977**
Cindy Sherman

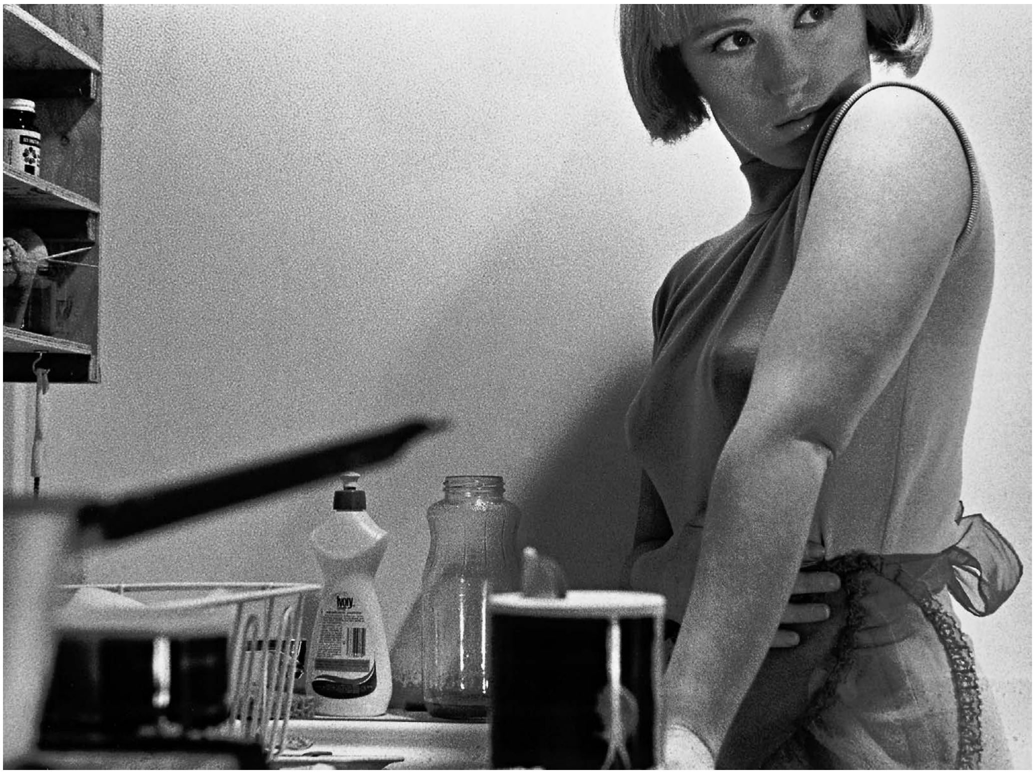

Fig. 1.3

as if she is looking toward someone else in the room, someone 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. From the other axis, the woman looks at her husband, who may or may not be looking back. There is no acknowledged contact between subject and viewer. We are put in the position of eavesdroppers, just as we are at the movies. The camera's relatively low angle of view reinforces the impression of being confronted with a screen image. We are looking slightly upward, as we would in a movie theater.

"Untitled Film Still, #3" is about spectacle. The woman has arranged her body for display. Her left shoulder is raised, in order to show her breast to best advantage, while her right hand ensures the flatness of her stomach.

The person she is looking at cannot see this display, but he sees something we cannot—her back, the top of her head, her eyes, looking at him over her raised shoulder. From his perspective, if he is indeed looking, it's likely that she seems submissive and scared, if a bit sullen. But we can't be sure. Maybe her glance is tantalizing to him but for reasons very different from what we as viewers find seductive from our special vantage point as surrogates for the third party in this implied love triangle. Sherman has here embodied the very essence of the Duplicitous Female, where her subject simultaneously displays opposing personae to her male beholders.

Sherman does not gently invite us to interpret this scene, as Cameron does in "The Kiss of Peace." She forces the interpretive posture upon us and then strands us (along with her subject) in a set of conflicting points of view. For whom, we need to ask, is she actually posing, if the recipient of her gaze, out of the frame, is not looking back at her? Is her alluring body language being presented to another, privileged character, through whose eyes we ourselves are looking, or is she doing all this for herself alone? Perhaps it is a learned set of gestures, a rehearsal for a performance by means of which she hopes to raise herself out of the surroundings in which she finds herself trapped.

The quality of these surroundings is emphasized by the placement of the camera, and the deliberately awkward framing of the scene. The crude black finger of kitchenware pointing toward the tip of her breast, as it collides with the tip of a bottle of dishwashing detergent, effectively sabotages the woman's erotic presentation of herself. The difference between the way she presents herself to us (and possibly to herself), and the way the camera presents her to us, and the way she presents herself to the other person outside the frame, generates complex questions about the act of looking and being looked at.

In this photograph, the activity of looking is exaggerated to the point at which it becomes the primary subject of the image, not merely the means by which something else is accomplished. Sherman forces us to ask questions that are crucial to the making of all photographs. What, or whom, 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 subject? These questions precede all others.

A NOTE ON THE ASSIGNMENTS

For the first assignment, you were asked to shoot one 36-exposure roll of film. In general, unless otherwise specified, it is assumed that a single roll of 35-mm film (or equivalent) is the bare minimum required for adequately performing an assignment. More than one roll is often better. Some of the assignments will have multiple parts, each one of which is like a separate assignment in itself, and should be treated as such in terms of how much film you shoot. Of course, you may not elect to shoot each part of these longer assignments.

As for what constitutes the "equivalent" of a 36-exposure roll of film, you will need to consider how much time, on average, is required for you to produce a satisfying image. Photography using 35-mm film is regarded as quick. Medium format (120 film) and large format (4" × 5" film) photography is progressively more deliberate and time-consuming. So the equivalent to a 35-mm roll of film would be, gauged in terms of time spent shooting, whatever would produce a single contact sheet on an 8" × 10" piece of enlarging paper: namely, 1 roll of 120 film, or 4 sheets of 4" × 5" film.

In terms of digital images shot on a DSLR, the question of what is equivalent to a roll of film is more complicated, because you aren't counting frames. If you already have experience with different film camera formats, you can use an inner measuring device while you're shooting, adjusting your number of exposures to the degree of deliberation or spontaneity you believe your subject requires. Digital photography is challenging because the technology itself does not slow you down, creating a rhythm for you, as film photography (particularly large format photography) often does. Instead of film frames, or exacting camera adjustments, you have only your frame of mind to use as a pacemaker. This is not always an advantage, but sometimes it is.

---

1 "Right in the Eyes," *The Responsibility of Forms* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1991).

2 *MOPA AUDIO/INSIGHT, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGNcojm2kE8*.

ASSIGNMENT 1

A

Get someone you know well to let you photograph him or her for at least 30 minutes, during which time you will shoot an entire 36-exposure roll of film. Then follow these instructions:

1. Do not give any directions before the shooting session, except to say that the person will be expected to stay in place, sitting or standing, for about half an hour, and to look straight at the camera (not at you).

2. Mount your camera on a tripod and position your subject in a location where the light will not change for the entirety of the shooting session. Leave the camera in place once you have focused it and determined the proper exposure. (This exercise is about looking in a concentrated way. Making even minor adjustments to camera position and composition will distract you from this task.)

3. Do not hide behind the camera. Use a cable release (the longer the better).

4. Do not speak, or allow your subject to speak, during the session.

5. Pace yourself, taking photographs throughout the half hour. Do not shoot the entire roll of film in the first five minutes.

6. Allow yourself to stare at your subject. You will find that minor fluctuations in expression, or small involuntary gestures, become significant events.

This assignment is about two people facing each other. The photographs taken while their gazes intersect will record those moments of connection.

B

Using the photographs in this chapter as a point of reference, photograph someone engaged in the act of looking at someone else.

CHAPTER 2

PORTRAIT/SELF-PORTRAIT, FACE/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 NONFETISHISTIC CULTURE (ONE THAT DOES NOT FETISHIZE NUDITY) . . . 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[1]

What is a portrait, and what is its function? The dictionary defines a portrait as "a likeness of a person, especially of the face." Although we may eventually want to ascribe subtler and more complex meanings to the term, this definition 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, later, the United States. At first, portrait subjects were mostly everyday people—shopkeepers, merchants, soldiers, family groups, children. Daguerreotype images of the famous soon followed. 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-Europeans.

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. Because early emulsions were relatively insensitive to light, exposures of ten seconds or more were required. In order for the sitter's face 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 "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. To lend an aura of seriousness to a portrait, daguerreotypists often employed props—such as plaster 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."[2] The idea was that the self was something that was worn, like a mask. Whatever might lie behind the mask was not important. (This issue is discussed at greater length in Chapter 11.)

SHOW SOME EMOTION

Julia Margaret Cameron may have been the first photographer to announce explicitly that she was interested in penetrating beneath this mask. Referring to her portraits of eminent Victorian artists and intellectuals, she wrote in her journal, "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."[3]

Fig 2.1
Faradisation du Muscle Frontal, 1862
Guillaume-Benjamin-Amand Duchenne de Boulogne

The representation of eccentricity and individual emotion predated Cameron, however. 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. First, the image was not as sharp as the daguerreotype. Second, 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.

“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 is also a precursor of the theatrical staging of the self that became prevalent in the late 20th century, in the work of Cindy Sherman and others. But however eccentric it may be, Bayard’s self-portrait is firmly rooted in the visual rhetoric of his time. Some of its trappings—the drapery wrapped around his legs, the vase, the small statuette of a crouching nymph, all of which are references to neoclassical 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 (as long as 18 minutes, according to Bayard).

Scientists in the 19th century used portrait photography to investigate human emotion. In 1862, Guillaume-Benjamin-Amand Duchenne de Boulogne published *Mécanisme de la physionomie humaine (The Mechanism of Human Physiognomy*). Duchenne studied medicine and applied electricity at the Académie de Medicine in Paris. He devoted his career to experiments with what he called therapeutic “electropuncture,” 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*.

Duchenne believed that a person’s face was a map, the muscular terrain of which could be identified and codified. He sought to chart the “grammar and orthography of human facial expression.”[4] In 1862, he wrote:

> 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

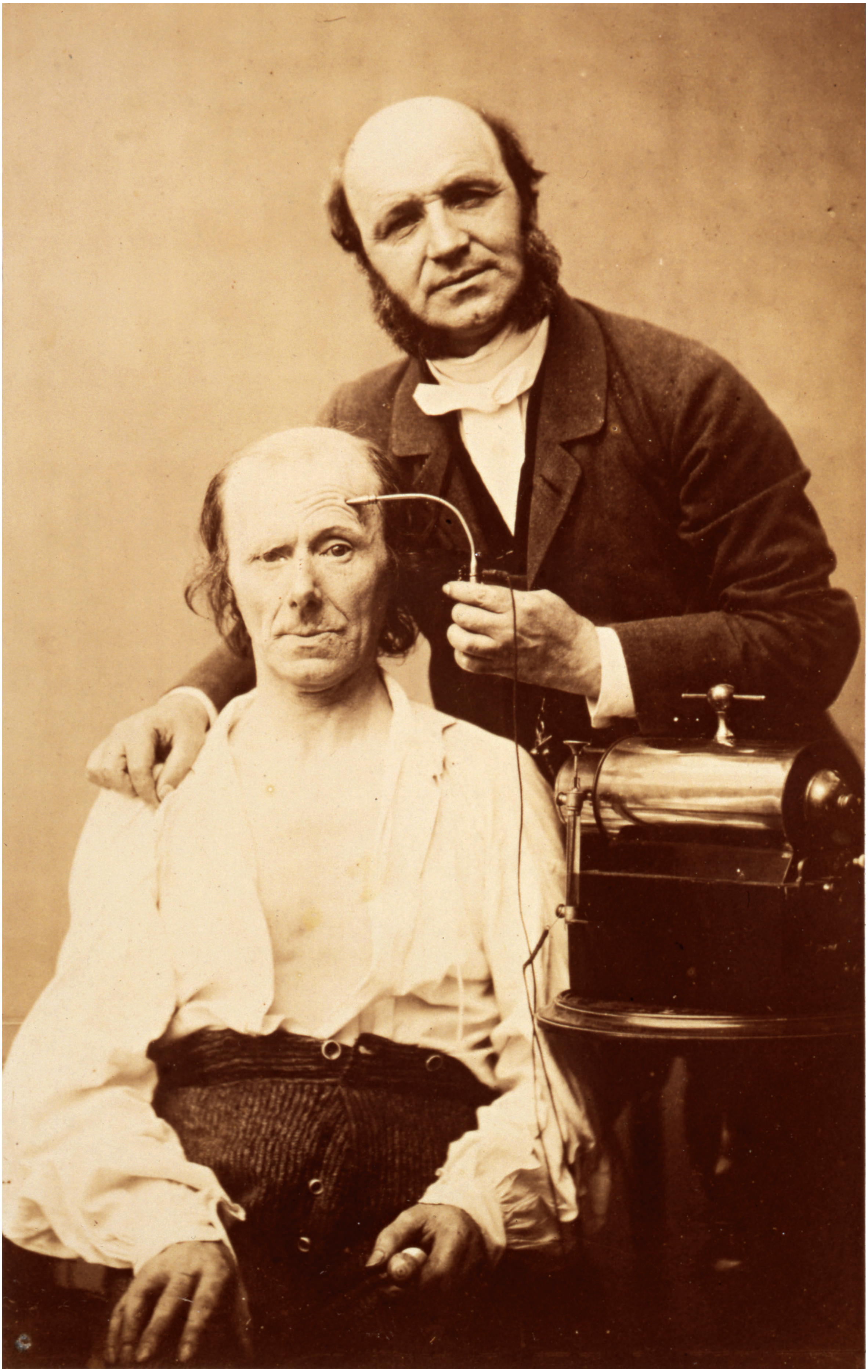

Fig. 2.1

> 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.[5]

To document his research, Duchenne enlisted the services of the photographer Adrien Tournachon. He also learned how to use a camera himself. The resulting images of what he called "the gymnastics of the soul" were without precedent (fig. 2.1). 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 revealed.

Duchenne did not believe that emotion is itself mechanically produced, but rather that there is a physiological mechanism—a predictable contraction of certain facial muscles—that causes a feeling to become visible. His work is based on his belief that the face is the primary seat of emotion.

Indeed, it would seem to go without saying (except in a dictionary) that a portrait without a face is not a portrait at all. One has only to think of the word "deface" in order to imagine how repugnant such an idea is to our cherished notions of personhood. With this in mind, let us take a look at the work of E. J. Bellocq. His portrait of a New Orleans prostitute (fig. 2.2) shows a naked woman, 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 ensuring that no one intrudes 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 has been scratched out.

Little is known about Bellocq's life or his reasons for photographing prostitutes. He was a commercial photographer who lived across the street from the brothels where he made these portraits. It is unlikely that this portrait was commissioned, as it flies in the face of the primary goal of most commercial photography—to present the subject's best face to the world.

The work was unknown until the glass negative plates were discovered in a junk shop after Bellocq's death. In 1967, the negatives were acquired by Lee Friedlander, who was instrumental in having them published as a monograph, *Storyville Portraits*.[6]

The negatives had been stored under adverse conditions. Many of them had suffered water damage, which caused parts of the emulsion to separate from the plates, creating black areas in the images. This damage does not account for the blank areas over some of his subjects' faces, however, where someone has deliberately scratched the emulsion off the negative. For a long time, it was assumed that Bellocq's brother, a Jesuit priest and the photographer's sole heir, had been so shocked by the pictures' subject matter that he defaced them. Recent experiments have proved, however, that the distinctive scratch marks could have been produced only while the negative was still wet. They were therefore presumably made by the photographer himself.[7]

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 the fact that sex workers, or women in general, 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 cannot 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 accomplishments.[8] 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 himself.

The image reproduced here is anything but romantic or sentimental. It 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 the woman's 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 hiding the face and the accidental damage done to the top part of the negative, over the heavy dark drapes covering the door. All this missing information—the woman's face, a part of the setting itself—turns the image into a riddle. The effect is to put us off balance, without a stable reference point for looking. There is a luminous female body surrounded by what are, in

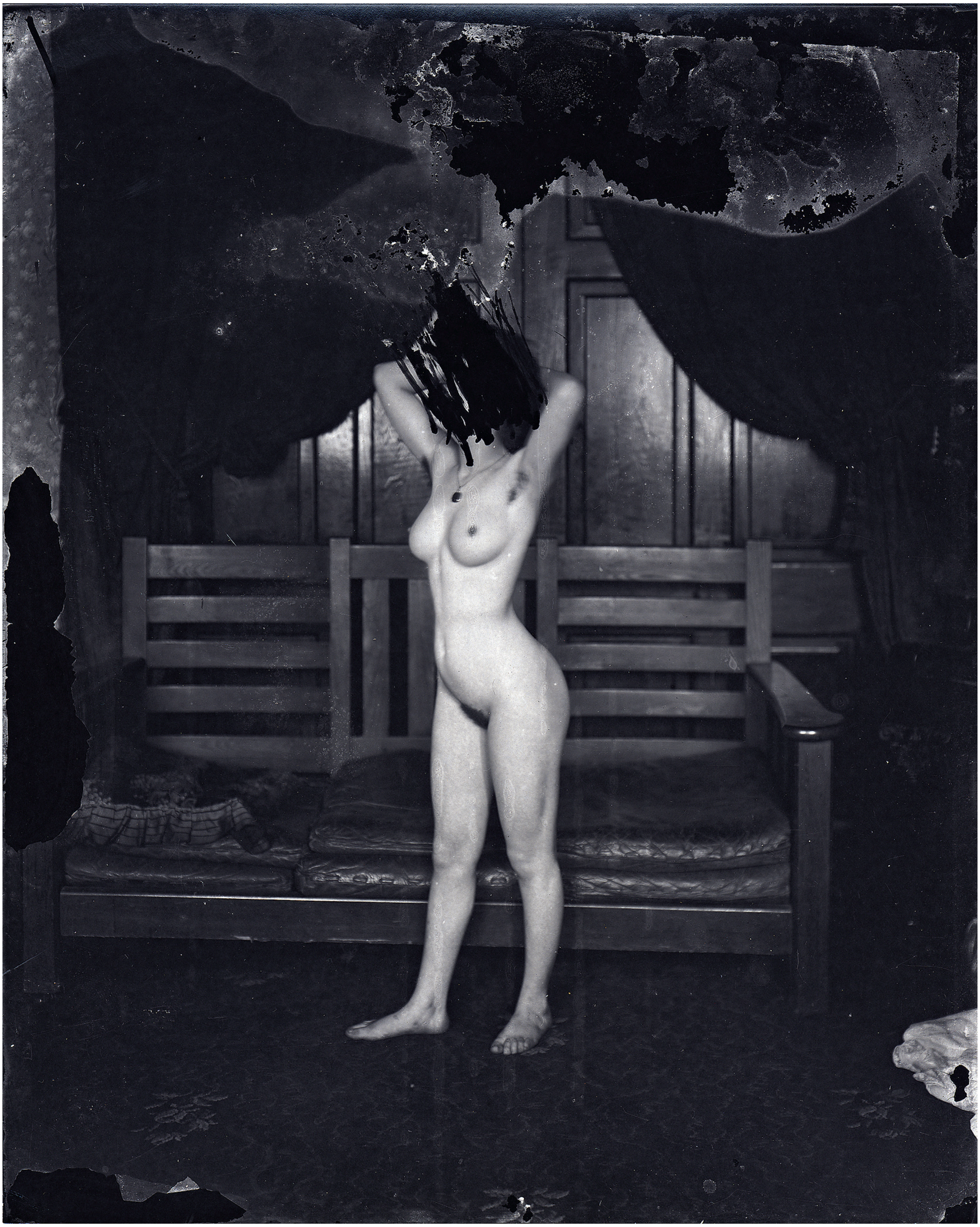

Fig. 2.2

Fig. 2.2
***Untitled*, c. 1910**
E. J. Bellocq

effect, problematic shadows; and there is a void, not even a mask, where her face should be. These ingredients resonate, hovering in front of us, but never quite connecting with each other into a cohesive whole. This is largely due to the fact that the photograph itself, as a physical object, quite apart from what it depicts, has been damaged. It has been defaced.

SHADOWS AND FRAMES WITHIN FRAMES

Lee Friedlander's "Madison, Wisconsin, 1966" (fig. 2.3) shows 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 of the sort taken in commercial studios for display at home. 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 entirely changes the context and intended purpose of the depicted portrait.

The Friedlander photograph provides us with a model for a certain kind of looking. Photographers routinely appropriate fragments of reality and turn them 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 bodies here. The image is a confusing theater of shadow and reflection. The markers that usually help us make sense of spatial

Fig 2.3
Madison, Wisconsin, 1966
Lee Friedlander

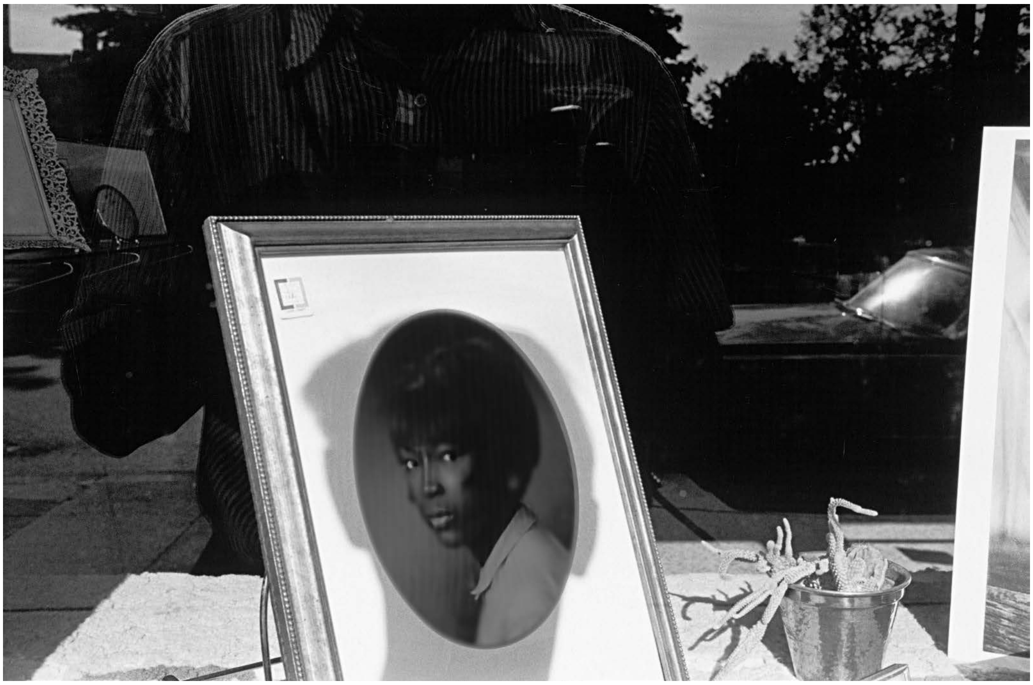

Fig. 2.3

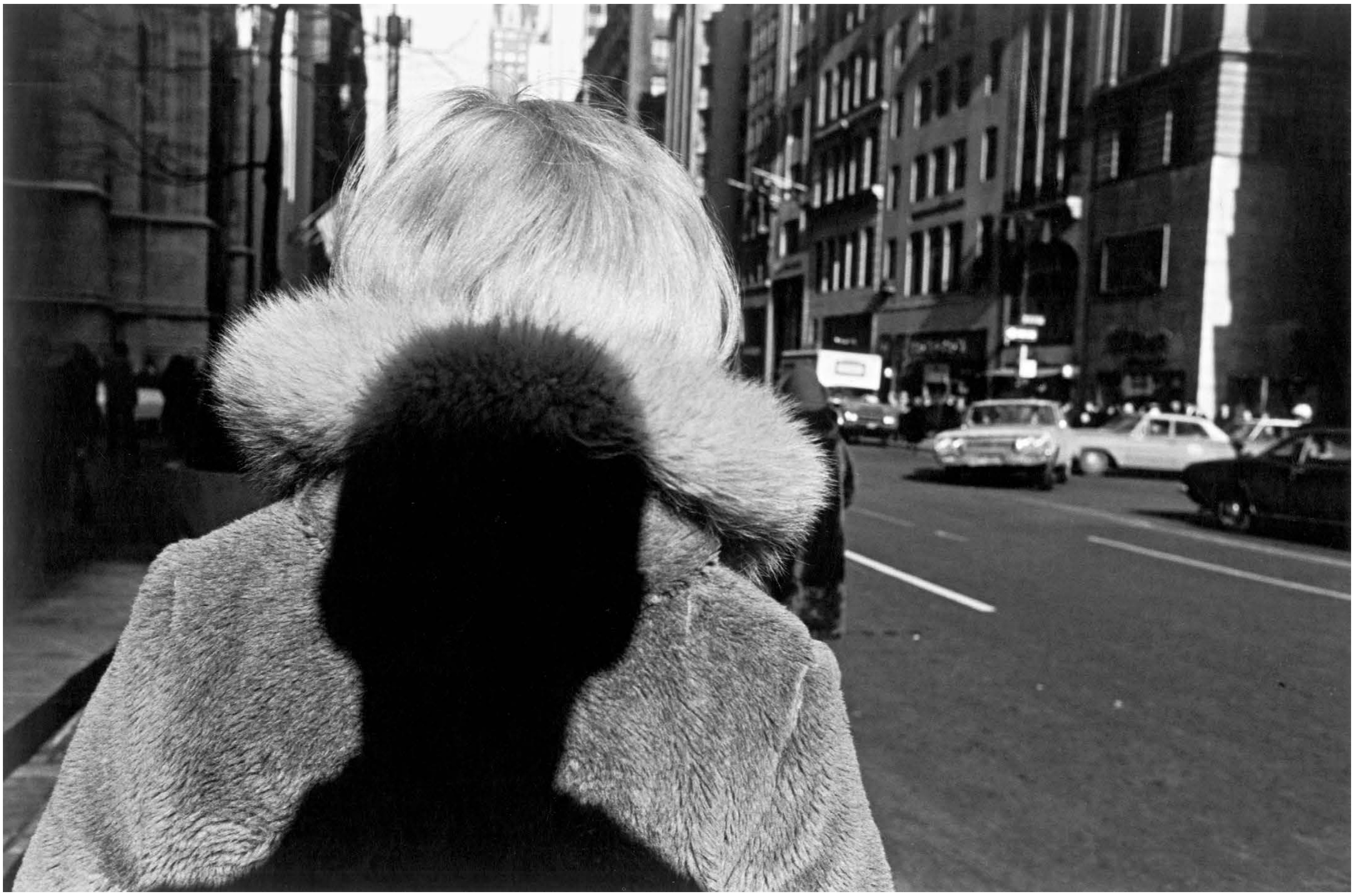

Fig. 2.4

Fig 2.4
New York City, 1966
Lee Friedlander

relations—foreground and background, inside and outside—have collapsed. We cannot see what is 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, in the frame of which he is able to stage 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" (fig. 2.4), 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; the top of his head coincides with the collar of her coat, causing his hair to look as if it is standing up on end. As his projected shadow takes on the texture of the coat collar, it looks as if physical contact has occurred, producing an electrical shock. He becomes a part of what he is looking at. It is a striking effect.

The photograph has little to say directly about who he is. It functions as a definition of the street photographer as someone who takes shape only by pursuing others. It is also an intellectual performance, a meditation on the photographic

Fig. 2.5 and Fig. 2.6
***Gulu Real Art Studio,* 2011–12**
Martina Bacigalupo

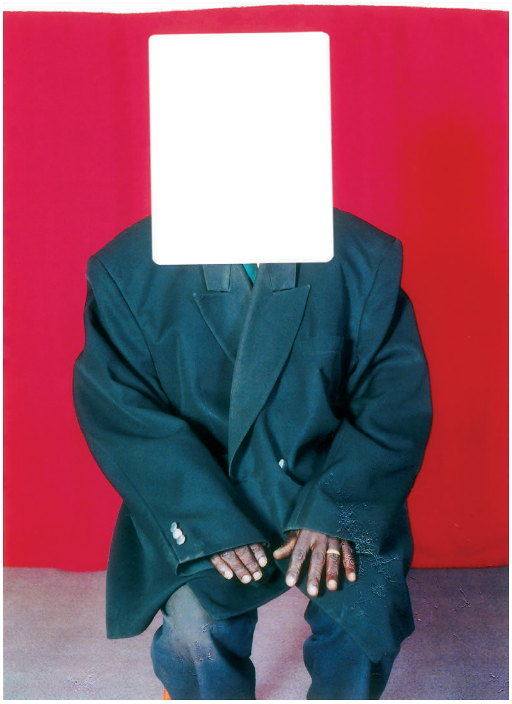

Fig. 2.5

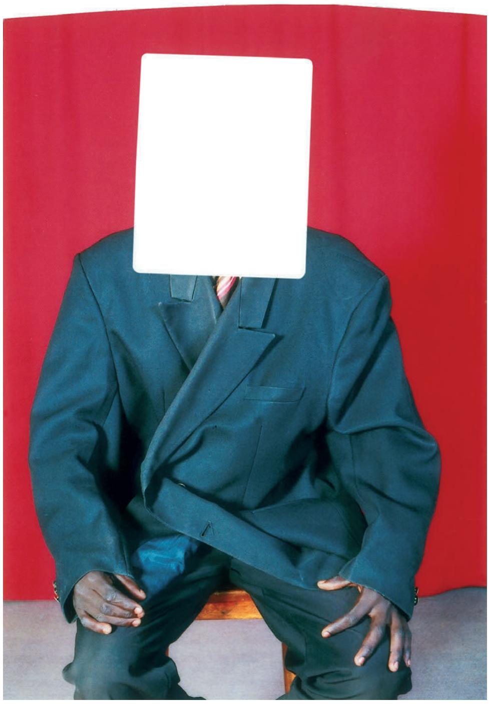

Fig. 2.6

process and the formal values of the image. The stark contrast between the darkness of his cast shadow and the brightness of the woman 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, which is partly a formal exercise. It is hard to imagine a more oblique, more reticent form of self-portraiture.

A variation on Friedlander's brand of cleverness with framing comes from Uganda, where Obal Denis makes ID pictures by cutting out the heads and shoulders of his subjects from larger, full body portraits. After the ID photos have been removed, the images depict the subjects' bodies, with an empty rectangle where their heads and shoulders had been (figs. 2.5 and 2.6). These leftovers, which the photographer saved after his clients had left his studio, were discovered by the Italian photojournalist Martina Bacigalupo, while she was working on an assignment for Human Rights Watch in the war-torn northern region of the country. She describes her discovery this way:

> The portraits were well composed, with subjects seated on a chair or on a bench, with a blue, white, or red curtain behind them, in various poses and modes of dress. Obal, who was running the oldest photography studio in town with his father, told me the secret behind those pictures: he only had a machine that would make four ID photos at a time, and since most of his clients didn't need four pictures, he therefore preferred to take an ordinary [single] photograph and cut an ID photo out of it. This was common practice in most of the studios in Gulu.[9]

Denis gave the pictures to Bacigalupo. Collaborating with the Gulu Real Art Studio, she organized and exhibited them at the Walther Collection Project Space in New York.