

Picture This

From Roni Horn to Marina Abramović, Christina Zück examines the 'enraptured faces' of portrait photography today

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BY CHRISTINA ZÜCK IN FRIEZE | 21 MAR 12



As a photographer, I have always been interested in how the 'portrait face' is arrived at – in how the relationship that develops between the sitter and the photographer translates into an image. At times, the sitter presents me with the 'perfect' face; at others, I have to determine it myself during the process of selecting an image after the shoot.

Like their painted counterparts, photographic portraits require lengthy sittings, but in photography a face is not assembled from the combined application of paint and imagination. Instead, a session in a photographic studio usually generates a large number of separate, minutely differing images. The subsequent choice of image is as crucial to the final portrait as the process of taking the pictures in the first place. In the days of analogue photography, the cost of negative material limited the number of shots taken. I would sit with a magnifying glass over a few contact sheets: the work was fiddly and it called for a predetermined notion of how the finished result might look. Today, I have a digital camera, and I have developed the bad habit of filling the memory card at every session. Sitting in front of a screen sifting through a folder of 800 images is an arduous process.



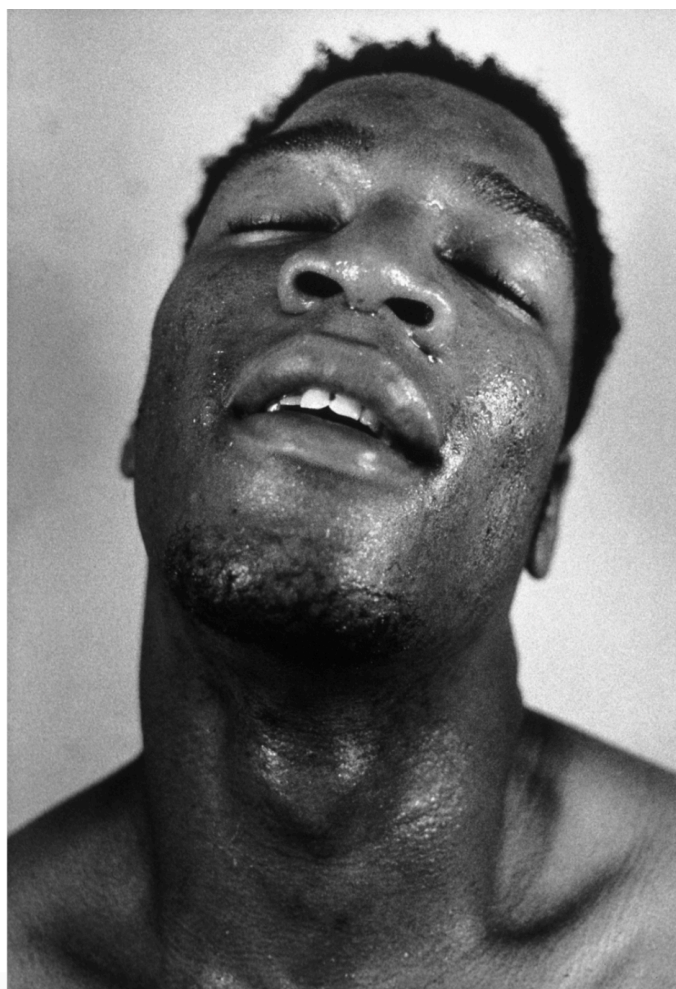
Pieter Hugo, *Yakubu Al Hasan, Agboghloshie Market, Accra, Ghana, 2009*, c-type print, 1.5 x 1.5 m. Courtesy Cokkie Snoei, Rotterdam and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town

At the beginning of a portrait sitting, people often feel awkward and self-conscious. The intimate situation they find themselves in with the photographer is a highly contrived set-up. Reactions swing between contradictory feelings: to use the clichés of psychoanalysis, these are narcissism (the wish to be looked at) and paranoia (the fear of being looked at). In a lecture on the introduction of perspective during the Renaissance ('Quid tum?', What Next?, 2002), delivered at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, the art theorist Bazon Brock described how the imaginary geometrical space of painting located the eye as a central point from which a real space could be encompassed. The physiological apparatus of the eye was what enabled the mind to create a unity through the image. During the early modern period, Brock argued, perspective led to an increased reflexivity in thinking. This self-mirroring (later pathologized as narcissism) provided an external anchor for burgeoning human subjectivity, and subsequently became an intrinsic element of cultural practice. In the light of technological advances – ranging from HD cameras, webcams and smartphones to endoscopy – a person's identity and self-perception today vacillate between complete instability and a normative commodity that can only be constructed via the perspectives of others.

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Nowadays, having a portrait made of oneself is charged with great significance – it can be endlessly replicated via Google and Facebook; it can be identified by facial recognition systems – consequently, the photographer is expected to make the sitter look perfect.

As a photographer, it is my task to relax people during a portrait sitting. I chatter incessantly in an attempt to make the huge lens I'm hiding behind simply disappear. I trip over the tripod, give a detailed commentary on what I'm doing, in order to distract attention away from my relentless clicking. Fellow photographers have told me they take a similar approach – or remain stoically silent throughout the entire procedure. Often, the pictures are just not good enough: the way the person looks into the camera is all wrong. Some people, I tell myself in such cases, are just unphotographable.



Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots DL*, from the series 'Head Shots' (1991-96), silver gelatin print, 41 x 30 cm. Courtesy Sassa Trülzsch, Berlin, and the artist

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Looking through *Magnum Contact Sheets* (Schirmer & Mosel/Thames & Hudson, 2011) – a new volume showing 139 historically significant contact sheets for the first time – I'm at a loss. There is no clear systematic approach to picture selection, no how-to guide to creating masterworks: it is left to the author's subjectivity, to the moment of publication and to other parallel narratives to decide why one particular image is better than the one just before it. Peter Marlow, who photographed Margaret Thatcher during a public speech in 1981 for *Newsweek*, always took several pictures of a given subject, so-called 'in-camera duplicates', enabling him to send original negatives of the same image to several agencies at a time. As we see from the contact sheet, Marlow photographed Thatcher from below: her gaze is aimed upwards, her eyes not trained on any object or other person, as though in a moment of pausing for thought. The differences in eye position and muscle tension in the frames leading up to the image Marlow selected are so minimal as to be barely visible. René Burri's famous portrait of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara only achieved the status of a masterwork in 1967, four years after it was taken, as a result of being reproduced across multiple publications. In 1963, it was only printed in small format as part of a 16-page picture feature in *Look* magazine. It was the response it gained from viewers which turned that particular image into an icon.

In Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present*, the role played by photography was secondary but nonetheless essential.

Although they depict 'visible reality', photographs need to be charged with additional meaning. Without the photographer's annotations, or just left on the contact sheet, these pictures would have been lost in the archive. In their comments, the photographers featured in *Magnum Contact Sheets* invoke the mysticism of chance – *le moment décisif* (the decisive moment), a term coined by the Frenchman Jean-François de Gondi, Cardinal de Retz, in the 17th century. In his 1952 book *Images à la sauvette* (published in English as *The Decisive Moment*), Magnum-founder Henri Cartier-Bresson referred to this idea, thus introducing it to photographic theory. This moment of divine grace – *kairos* in Ancient Greek – involves a coincidence of several uncontrollable factors, from various fields of perception and form, which leads to the pictorial 'event'.

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I take another look at the folder of portrait photographs on my desktop: 'A' gazes calmly, intensely into the camera, her eyes are melancholy and downcast, but I can tell she feels awkward. Slight tensions in her cheeks pull her mouth upwards; above the eyebrows her forehead is furrowed. 'B' pulls a face and stares into the camera with his mouth open – what a poser. I can't use this. For a representative commissioned portrait, I would like to show a face cleansed of all affect and muscle movements – energy should flow through it and off it, it should be permeable and open. 'Noble simplicity, quiet grandeur', as the 18th-century German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann called it – a living still life. Only the eyes should shine, gently, full of kindness. This would be the moment when the person was at one with themselves, or rather at one with me, having opened up and granted my wish for the chance to make a decent portrait.



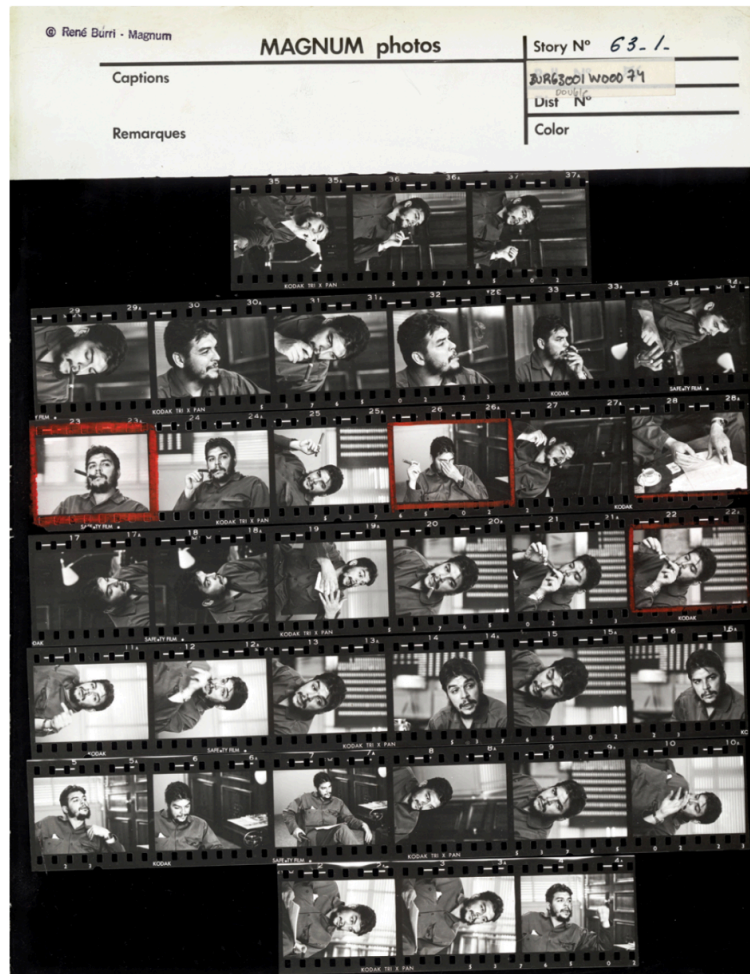
Tobias Zielony, *Jayde*, 2011, c-type print, 69 x 46 cm. Courtesy Tobias Zielony and KÖW, Berlin

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The tradition of straight photography – which has also been picked up in fine art since the 1990s – deals with visible reality, leaves found situations as they are, refers to recognizable art-historical traditions, and attaches importance to the form of presentation. It tries to add as little extraneous context as possible when creating pictures, so as to let the main subject speak for his or herself. Alterity is often a central theme. Time after time, contemporary art exhibitions present the sad faces of hopeless youths, as in Göran Gnaudschun's 'Berlin-Alexanderplatz' series (2010–ongoing), or in the atmospheric dystopias photographed by Tobias Zielony in many drab suburbs around the world (from Winnipeg, Canada, via Naples, Italy, to Zielona Góra, Poland); or the Ghanaian slum-dwellers in Pieter Hugo's series 'Permanent Error' (2010), who stand amid the toxic filth of an electronic waste dump, staring with dignity into a camera that cost several thousand euros. Referring back to the typologies of August Sander and the school of Bernd and Hiller Becher, these portraits are mostly presented in large, formally similar series. It is the fate of photography never to be able to separate itself from duplications and taxonomies. One example of a proactive approach to this is provided by Thomas Ruff's early portraits from the 1980s, which evoke the aesthetic of standardized passport photographs or physiognomical charts, with the neutral gaze of his sitters rejecting all fantasies of inwardness. Wolfgang Tillmans mixes up the classical genres of both photography and painting – landscape, portrait, still life, abstraction – and puts them back together again as sub-groups in a hanging or layout.

What is striking about the work of artists who use the medium of photography for portraits in this way is the phenomenon of the 'enraptured face'. In photojournalism, the prevailing ideal is to show faces with strong emotions: the pain of attack victims or the anger of rebels. In fashion photography, the emphasis is usually on the face's artificiality and mask-like quality: models stare stiffly, arrogantly, coldly. But in the fine art 'straight photography' of Rineke Dijkstra, Bernhard Fuchs, Jitka Hanzlová, Zoltán Jókay or Fazal Sheikh (if one can allow for such a generalized grouping in spite of the differences between these artists' practices) the faces are 'at one with themselves'. The sitters are not distracted by the outside world, they feel no emotion, they look – sometimes absorbed, sometimes with detached tenderness – straight into the camera. Here, the *moment décisif* has migrated from a movement in space to the sitter's inner intensity and concentration. Photography becomes a meditative practice. The neo-Buddhist notion of 'being at one with oneself' means perceiving the historical, chaotic world as a distanced viewer. In contemporary society, displays of emotion only bring a reduction of social status. In the tumultuous currents of capitalist globalization, it makes sense to let go of everything in a Zen-like manner and to allow disturbances, especially all that tiresome negativity, just pass straight through you.

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René Burri, *Che Guevara, Havana, 1963*, photographic contact sheet. Courtesy © René Burri / Magnum Photos

Thomas Struth has pushed the method of portraying sitters with an ‘enraptured face’ to particular lengths. Like a court painter of Baroque princes, in his series of family portraits (including one of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, taken in 2011 to celebrate her forthcoming Diamond Jubilee) he documents the habitats of social elites and spends large amounts of time with the sitters. The absorbed faces they are seen making in the magnificent finished pictures distract their own attention from the fact that the high-resolution detail and the spacing, gestures, constellations and interiors give a clearly legible account of conditions within society. Instead of pointing to inwardness, the face becomes a stylistic fetish to accompany a subtle, critically distant way of seeing.

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In his 1990 book *Bild und Kult (Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. 1997), Hans Belting describes the transition from icon painting to devotional images in the late Middle Ages. During this period, mysticism gained ground as a movement within the Christian church, with the emphasis falling on contemplation and the inner religious experience. Nuns and monks withdrew from public communal rituals and strove for an intense, private experience of God. In the pictures painted for private devotion, the faces of Jesus, Mary and the saints took on increasingly individual traits. This turn towards the gaze of the Other, symbolizing the experience of oneness with God's all-seeing eye, was further refined in the Renaissance by complex painting techniques, for example in trompe l'œil portraits whose subjects appeared to keep their gaze fixed on the viewer from any angle or distance.

These now-classical pictorial tropes continue to exert an influence, becoming strangely entangled with the self-help mysticism condemned by Slavoj Žižek as the ideology of Western Buddhism. Today, rather than becoming one with the Christian God, people assimilate with the 'now', with the esoteric flow or, in the field of fine art, with the photographer or viewer seeking enlightenment in the face of an Other. Photography has a special affinity with phenomena that are in decline: the European individual of old, caught in the crosslines of rampant growth and the digital tsunami, is no longer a given. With photographic portraits, we attempt to capture the individual precisely by referencing his or her inner boundlessness. In an uncontrollable outer world, any flight inwards might end up being just as untethered and groundless.



Mette Tronvoll, *Rena (10)*, c-type print, from the series 'Rena', 2006, 1.2 x 1.2 m. Courtesy Galerie Rupert Pfab, Düsseldorf, and the artist

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Artists who not only use photography but who also link their practice with a firmly conceptual approach have always articulated a conflict with hegemonic pictorial tropes. When they address the sitter's countenance and gaze in their works, they reflect on the compromising circumstances under which this occurs. For her 'Head Shots' series (1991–96), Aura Rosenberg asked a number of men if they could be photographed at the moment of orgasm (we are left to wonder which of the subjects might have been faking). The black and white works show faces that are blissfully out of control, sweating, with closed or rolling eyes and open mouths – leaving the viewer unsure if this ecstasy should be taken seriously. Rosenberg's series prompts less of a curiosity about the individuals depicted than an interest in the eroticism of photography itself – the wish, here taken to absurd lengths, to partake of intensity and to affect the sitters at a remove.

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For *Portrait of an Image* (2005), Roni Horn photographed Isabelle Huppert in lengthy studio sessions, asking the actress to re-perform various roles from her 30-year film career. The published work consisted of 50 close-ups of Huppert's face arranged into sets of five. In these images, the private Isabelle is indistinguishable from the film character she is enacting or the coolly staring image of the star. To further complicate things, the emotions being acted out under studio lights are not assigned any kind of meaning. Huppert's face escapes us by its very presence – the photographs portray a paradox.

In contrast to these works, Mette Tronvoll's *Rena* (2006) doesn't allow for much speculation on the authenticity of the way people present themselves. The artist had been commissioned by the Norwegian army to photograph the elite soldiers of a special unit at the Rena military base – with the requirement that she would not show their faces, which are obscured by the balaclavas and protective goggles of their hi-tech uniforms.

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Tronvoll photographed them in a style reminiscent of August Sander, except that in Sander's work the sitter's posture and gaze are an expression of social status, while the eyes of Tronvoll's soldiers stare out of their mask-like holes with a vacant gaze. Speaking of the mystifications involved in the militarization of the individual, the series acquired a new, eerie topicality following the highly detailed media reports on the case of Anders Behring Breivik who, in the summer of 2011, dressed as a policeman and executed 68 people.



Marco Anelli, from the series 'In Your Eyes', documentation of Marina Abramović's, 'The Artist Is Present' MoMA, New York, 2010.
Courtesy © Marco Anelli, 2010

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In 2010, in the atrium of MoMA New York, Marina Abramović gave a performance lasting a combined 760 hours entitled *The Artist Is Present*. Individual visitors could sit down opposite the motionless artist for as long as they wished during the museum's opening hours while she looked at them. The photographer Marco Anelli used a zoom lens to make portraits of each participant and the 1,545 pictures were published on the museum's interactive website and on Flickr. In this work, the role played by photography was secondary but nonetheless essential. One visitor selected portraits that showed her and others reacting intensely to the project and launched the blog 'Marina Abramović Made Me Cry' – a new round of artistic production had been set in motion. Another blog responded with a satirical meme, 'Marina Abramović Made Me High'. There was a blog with collected attractive faces, 'Marina Abramović Hotties', a computer game was developed, and sitters published videos on YouTube in which they described their experiences, speaking of energy exchange and telepathic phenomena such as involuntary trembling of the legs. Famous pop stars made the pilgrimage to visit Abramović, like a guru in a Satsang, and they could be identified by their fans in the portraits. Spreading from the present moment to the perpetuity of the Internet, the performance was cast outward like an inverted *mise en abyme*.

In this contest of 'being at one with oneself', Abramović remained the toughest power meditator in the ring. As she stated in the documentary *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present* (2011), the artist sensed the terrible inner pain of some of the sitters, and on occasion burst into tears herself. Her high-performance gaze was always present and, according to statistical analysis, the average length visitors could bear to sit opposite her was 21 minutes. The emotional transgression and intense control involved in such a heightened inner experience turned into a demonstration of power structures. The work evokes the traumatic, all-seeing eye that stares out at us from Renaissance portraits – the gaze later described by psychoanalysis as that of the absent mother, the father or the 'big Other' who doesn't actually exist and who, according to 21st-century discourse, we really need to eradicate – while nonetheless colluding with it. By blogging, for example, by taking our own photographs, uploading videos from mobile phones, making fresh selections from all the available images and glazing them with a layer of our own subjectivity. A symbolic substitute is required in order to externalize the imagined controlling gaze of the 'big Other': this job could be performed by an enraptured face carrying within it the idea of a space extending endlessly inwards, with which one could briefly commune. Just briefly – any longer would be unbearable.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell