What's in a Face? The Trace of Ethnography in Contemporary Art Photography

Julian Stallabrass

['What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography', *October*, no. 122, Fall 2007, pp. 71-90.]

Figure 1: Rineke Dijkstra, *Dubrovnik, Croatia, July 13, 1996***, 1996**

We have no intention, however, of making a fetish of democracy. It may well be true that our generation talks and thinks too much of democracy and too little of the values which it serves.[1]

A prominent and distinct strand has become established in contemporary art photography in which people are depicted in uniform series, usually one per picture, and placed centrally in that picture, facing the camera head-on and gazing into the lens.[2] These people are represented straightforwardly, without much apparent intervention by the photographer, and the series displays manifestly uniform characteristics. Since many of the pictorial elements controlled by the photographer are held as standard, variability from picture to picture is mostly due to the particularities of the subject. Youths are disproportionately represented in such pictures. Sometimes short captions identify the subjects or their location, and sometimes text of their reported statements accompanies the pictures. This strand of images is visually akin to ethnographic photography of colonised peoples in controlled situations, and of that photography closest to the most objectifying type—that made with a measuring stick or standard grid.[3]

Such depictions can be seen in the work of Rineke Dijkstra, Céline van Balen, Thomas Ruff, Marie-Jo Lafontaine, Gillian Wearing and Jitka Hanzlova, among others, and in differing registers in some of the work of Hellen van Meene, Joel Sternfeld, Tina Barney, and Broomberg and Chanarin. The mode is also a regular feature of documentary photography, often as one part of a larger repertoire.[4]

On the face of it, the motive for raising that old spectre of objectification and domination is a puzzle, let alone that such a tactic should meet with art-world approbation. After all, ethnographic photography was subjected to damning critique by theorists and artists in previous decades, who exposed its power relations, and drew links to the continued use of photography for surveillance, classification and control. Yet one immediate answer to the puzzle is to say that this photography depicts subjects who are not, at least apparently, strongly differentiated from their likely viewers. An examination of this work may illuminate questions about the representation of difference and identity in the globalised art world. Perhaps, too, the success of this deadpan but alluring trend is connected to the political view of the subject under neoliberalism.

In this mode, an apparently objective manner of viewing shuns lyricism, overt identification with the subject, and compositional effort on the part of the photographer. The subject remains still before the lens, showing little or no activity other than self-presentation. The subject's awareness of the camera is a manifest theme of the picture, and this is demonstrated by the way that eyes meet lens. (A sequence of pictures by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, which conforms to the main characteristics of this strand but in which none of the subjects look into the lens demonstrates the importance of this aspect; without it, viewers are left to wonder about what the subjects are doing, and whether they were aware of the camera.)[5]

It is possible to place these photographs by thinking of them in structural opposition to other practices. In a spectrum of the photographic depiction of people, they stand opposed

to the mannered portraiture of celebrated subjects in which extreme individuality of style and composition is congruent with the supposed uniqueness of the subject. Their mode of depiction, by contrast, tends towards the establishment of the anonymous type. In their formality and standardisation, they are also opposed to the quasi-anthropological participant-observer model, in which photographers depicts a social scene with which they are intimately connected. While such depictions of marginal, often bohemian, folk in their natural habitat has a history that stretches back to Ed Van Der Elsken and more arguably Brassaï, it is strongly represented in contemporary photography in the work of Corrine Day, Richard Billingham, Nan Goldin and Larry Clark, among others (and, again, youth is often a feature).[6] Here the subjects seem to have forgotten about the presence of the camera, composition is casual—a mark of an authentic connection with groups which are not thoroughly civilised—and subjects do act, though usually in ways that work to fix a firm identity as alienated adolescent, bohemian or lumpenproletarian.

Figure 2: Corrine Day, *Georgina, Brixton***, 1995**

In meeting the lens with their gaze, and composing themselves before the camera, the subjects in the quasi-ethnographic strand also relate to fashion photography, but here turned, if not only to the mundane and unexceptional, to the exceptional as type. There is an interplay of stereotype and the palpable presence of an individual, so that the viewer is encouraged to place the individual within the stereotype but also to perturb the stereotype with the individual. In this way, these photographs depart from fashion, which holds out the promise of wholly individual expression through an assemblage of standard elements, and does so through the presentation of exceptionally beautiful people and settings. Fashion photography wages a paradoxical struggle against the destruction of aura (in Benjamin's sense of a unique weave of time and space) that the widespread distribution of its standard products manufactures, striving within the conventions of its craft to entrance the viewer with a palpable sense of a singular person with whom they can identify.[7]

Of these new 'ethnographic' photographers, one of the most successful and purist is Rineke Dijkstra. Her best-known series of pictures show youths standing against natural backgrounds—beach, forest and heath. They are straightforward pictures that reveal little overt intervention or even composition but rather present the human subject in a standardised frame. Dijkstra uses a 4x5 inch camera that yields fine detail and rich, subtle colour in large-scale prints (edition sizes vary but the museum prints are about five feet high). The camera is positioned quite low, around waist level, dropping the horizon line and lending the figures greater stature. She uses tripod-mounted fill-in flash, a fashion technique, that softens shadows and makes the figures appear a little cut-out from their sunlit backgrounds.

The conventional way to see Dijkstra and others like her is through an artistic lineage that runs through August Sander, Bernd and Hilla Becher and Thomas Ruff. This is a tradition that has its roots in a project of radical ethnography turned on a previously (and soon to be once more) colonising nation.[8] Yet the mode within which Dijkstra works may be associated with a variety of other interests and histories drawn from other areas of photography:

Another line, one closer to fashion and magazine work, and which Dijkstra suggests herself, comprises Irving Penn, Diane Arbus and Richard Avedon (we will return to this shortly).[9] Another is to see it as having a kinship with documentary style, with the rhetorical means by which photography signals its own objectivity; particularly in the head-on views and obsession with clarity in the work of Walker Evans (with Evans' insistence, for example, that the fleas on the Burrough's bed-sheet be visible in the printing of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*).[10] Yet the work may also be associated with more expressive and monumentalising combinations of text and image from the same period, including the work of Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, and Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor.[11]

These various affiliations point in very different directions. An affinity with documentary style would take readings towards the production of visual knowledge (the idea that photographs, particularly when combined with text, can yield social knowledge—a view that during the Depression reached a highly self-aware height in the collaboration between Agee and Evans); the art strand generally in the direction of the undermining of the previous view, which in postmodernism became as much a convention as the naïve belief that the camera cannot lie; an association with the fashion lineage, by contrast, may push our interest in Dijkstra, and others like her, towards thinking about the current art-fashion crossover 'madness' (to use Wolfgang Tillmans' word), and to thinking about youth as image and subject in contemporary art, and about the cross-branding and marketing opportunities presented by such work.[12]

Yet there is another aspect to that last line that is not so simple. It enables us to get a fix on the variables that art photographers have used to capture their subjects, and it opens up some surprisingly self-critical or at least manifest elements in the relations between photographers and their subjects.

So to the various projects of Dijkstra's tradition: little reminder is needed of the main components of Arbus' work—its journalistic origins, her view of the cruelty of the camera, that some (notably Sontag) took to be Arbus' own, and the idea that Arbus was a politely

raised Jewish girl on a prolonged tourist trip to weird-land;[13] or in contrast that her suicide proved the authenticity of her own alienation and thus of some affinity with her subjects.[14] The aspect of Arbus' work that should be highlighted here is its artistry and lyricism, at least when compared with much of the contemporary work that followed. This is not the way Arbus wanted herself thought of, and she roundly abused photographic composition.[15] It is true that many of her pictures are centred and frontal, and in this sense apparently free of composition, or as Carol Armstrong subtly notes, free of 'framing that clearly signifies artiness'.[16] Yet, given the considerable skill that she showed in these photographs, particularly in the precise and sophisticated positioning of figures against backgrounds (look, for example, at *Girl in a Shiny Dress, NYC*, 1967, or *Girl in Circus Costume*, 1970), Arbus' denial of composition should be taken as a rhetorical pose.[17] Varied compositional means are matched to variable subject matter, the point being that 'freaks' can be found as much amongst the 'normal' as the marginal, or that it is hard to tell where the border lies, and that any subject could be made strange by the camera, particularly in Arbus' hands.

The other projects, specific episodes within wider fashion-oriented practices, are less unambiguously celebrated in the art world, in part because of the highly successful commercial careers of their makers. In Penn's book, *Worlds in a Small Room*, he photographed a variety of people in temporary studios set up in rented rooms or in a tent-like structure. Penn saw this project as a release from over-elaborate fashion work, yearning, from the confines of his New York studio, to work in natural light with simple means and simple people.[18] The simple means were a Rolleiflex 6x6 cm twin lens reflex, natural northern light, and the arrangement of subjects against a plain backdrop. In these circumstances, set aside from their usual environment, photographer and photographed communicate as humans, Penn claimed, and his subjects acquired 'a seriousness of self-presentation that would not have been expected of simple people'.[19] The range of subjects varies but is always clearly separated from the implied viewer by virtue of tribal life, alternative lifestyle (hippies and bikers) or class (menial labourers such as charwomen, lorry washers and street photographers are depicted, displaying the tools and costumes of their labour).

Like Arbus, and again despite the frontality and centeredness of these images, Penn makes many artistic choices: first and foremost, he selects subjects, then he group figures, and decides what distance the subject should be from the camera. Penn is open about the way he directly manipulated his subjects by arranging their bodies to build his compositions. In Peru, working with indigenous people, and given the language barrier, he posed the subjects by hand, as he puts it:

> moving and bending them. Their muscles were resistant, and the effort it took on my part was considerable…[20]

He even published photographs of the process (taken by Lisa Fonsagrives-Penn) within the book itself.

Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn

Here I am preparing to photograph a group of mud men.

Figure 3: Lisa Fonsagrives-Penn, Penn arranging mud men, 1970

Avedon also looked to a road project to broaden his portrait of the United States, up to then built largely from urban celebrities, with pictures from the interior.[21] Avedon travelled 'In The American West' in search of his others, again labourers but also drifters, prisoners and the inmates of mental hospitals, who display the marks of their labour—blood, grime, amputations—and the way that prolonged work had honed and distorted their bodies as tools, before an implied audience of urban cosmopolitan types. John Rohrbach, the commissioner of this project for the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, put the matter of this difference plainly, not even feeling the need to spell out the identity of 'them' and 'us', by saying that the subjects are '…people whom many of us would prefer to step quietly around if encountered in life.'[22]

Avedon, aside from ensuring that this work received much prominence, was also an intelligent and self-conscious practitioner, and his work was made with an awareness of Arbus and indeed Sander.[23] Again, the means were quite simple: Avedon used a white paper backdrop; he did not, like Penn, insist on northern light but excluded sunlight because its accents would direct the gaze (we can compare the flat light of the Bechers and their progeny—and this is no accidental association, but a component in the evolution of a manifestly objective style). Another such mark of objectivity is printing the edges of the negative to show that the picture has not been cropped.[24]

Figure 4: Laura Wilson, Avedon at work

Avedon used an 8x10 inch view camera, which he stood beside, maintaining eye contact with his subjects at the expense of precise framing. The result is that few shots are quite central, and some pictures harshly crop their subjects (though these crops look deliberate and indeed mannered); there is much placing of people in the frame for expressive effect—the off-kilter

results suggesting social and mental instability, marginality and alienation (an old and regular photographic technique to suggest unease with an environment by a disturbance of the expected placement of the subject within the photographic frame).

As with Penn, Avedon made many compositional and other artistic decisions: the choice of subjects, picked up at rodeos, truck stops and places of work, was made on aesthetic grounds (thus we are far from Sander with his focus on the full range of the typical). It was Avdeon's concern to find 'a face that can hold a [museum] wall'.[25] Then, there is the variable distance of the subject from the lens and the height of the lens. As Laura Wilson, one of Avedon's assistants has shown in her photographs, he also used reflectors to direct the light.
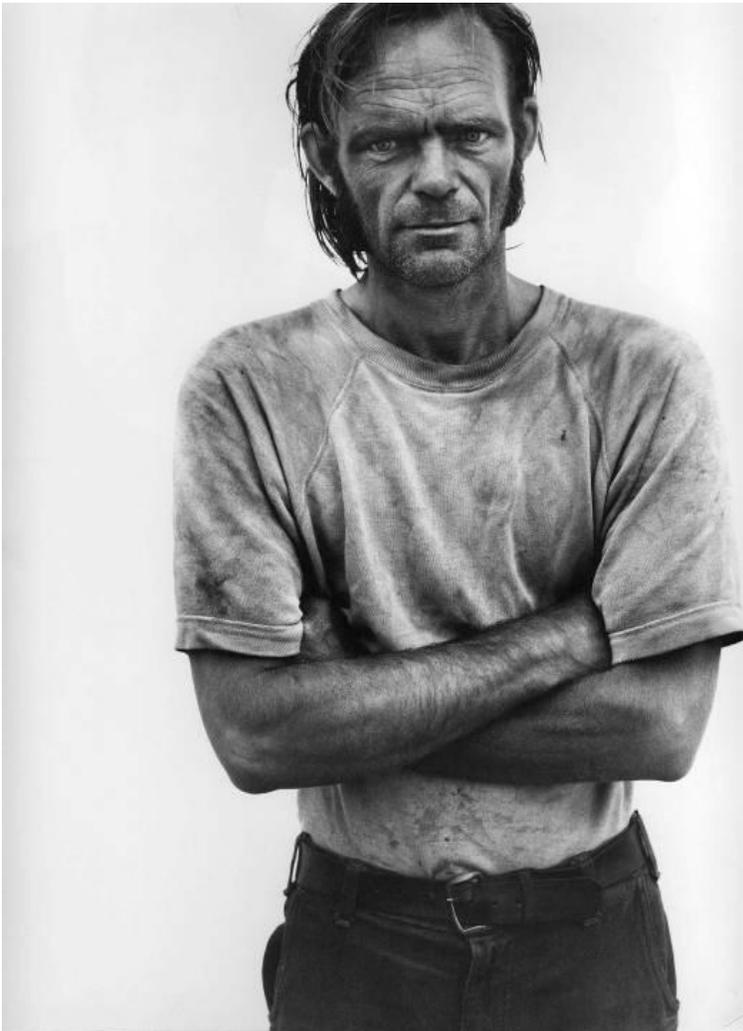

Figure 5: Richard Avedon, *Bill Curry, drifter, Interstate 40, Yukon, Oklahoma, 6/16/80*

Like Penn, Avedon instructed his subjects:

> …I am observing how he moves, reacts, expressions that cross his face so that, in making the portrait, I can heighten *through instruction* what he does naturally, what he is.[26]

For example, Wilson describes how, when photographing Bill Curry, Avedon had him remove his jacket and tuck in his shirt 'so that the form of his body would show'.[27]

Further, there was a great deal of micro-management of the print, the technical part of this managed by Avedon's assistants, to darken or lighten particular features.[28] In his foreword to the book, Avedon is open about the result:

> These disciplines, these strategies, this silent theatre, attempt to achieve an illusion: that everything embodied in the photograph simply happened, that the person in the portrait was always there, was never told to stand there, was never encouraged to hide his hands, and in the end was not even in the presence of a photographer.[29]

This is a false science of the other, then, that verbally reveals its techniques, while in the pictures they remain hidden—and, at the time, the pictures were often discussed as if they did yield knowledge of the subject.[30]

All of Dijkstra's precursors were noted for their simplifications or reductions of previous conventional practices, even in their commercial work. In his work for *Vogue*, Penn banished the palms, antique sofas, columns and other flotsam that had clung from traditional portrait photography into the fashion world, instead showing models against plain backdrops (though using highly elaborate lighting arrangements).[31] Avedon's portraits posed celebrity subjects against stark white backgrounds, and concentrated on a tonally harsh, wide-angle rendition of physiognomy and the imputed psychology of the pose. Arbus did not crop her prints, generally used frontal views and, remarkably, took her hands-off relation to her images to the extreme of doing no darkroom work to dodge or burn her prints.[32]

Dijkstra's affinity with these figures is not fortuitous: like them, she worked as a commercial photographer, and made portraits of celebrities, before turning to high art. Yet, although her acknowledged precursors worked with pared back means, we can see that by comparison with them Dijkstra's practice is a further reduced affair. She certainly chooses but does not apparently instruct her subjects.[33] Within each of her series, she takes a standard distance from the subject, alters the height of the lens a little, and otherwise does not compose. These pictures do not contain measuring devices, but otherwise approach an ethnographic practice in which the photographer appears to take the modest, largely technical role of recording variety and uniformity.

Figure 6: Diane Arbus, *Girl in a Circus Costume***, 1970**

Figure 7: Dijkstra, *Hilton Head Island***, 1992**

Comparing Arbus and Dijkstra, one obvious difference, driven by the shift in the primary destination of the work from magazine to museum, is the vast increase in photographic resolution. Arbus used a 6x6 cm camera for her best-known work; Dijkstra, as we have seen, uses a 4x5 inch. In addition, there has been a considerable improvement of film resolution between the 1960s and the present. The use of the large-format camera, governed by the requirements of the museum for large-scale visual spectacle, plays a determining role in the formality and stillness of Dijkstra's images. Such cameras are best suited to the depiction of static scenes, and people must pose quietly for them. They can record self-presentation, the composition of the pose, but rarely spontaneous activity.[34]

While there is a surrender in Dijkstra of composition, overt identification and artistic expression, other compensations are on offer. No contemporary practice that I know of goes all the way towards ethnographic blankness and objectivity of presentation while presenting subjects that may be presumed to be of similar status to the assumed audience. In Dijkstra, the glow of soft sunshine and flash on flesh, the lush colour and very high resolution work against the standard presentation, the lack of activity and incident, and the relative lack of exoticism of the subjects.

In a well-known essay, Leo Steinberg argued that avant-garde production is subject to a continual process of 'sacrifice' of the qualities of its precursors, a 'shrinkage' or subtraction, to which the previous generation of artists strongly objects.[35] Now one may say that subtraction and addition coexist, so that in this strain of photography what is taken away in terms of expression and artistic choice is compensated for by a great increase in print size, photographic resolution (the density and apparent seamlessness of the data) and above all colour. Another way of putting it is to say that subjective, creative choice has been subsumed in favour of greater resolution and bit depth, a measurable increase in the quantity of data.[36]

The manifest display of very large amounts of data in such images may be related to a broader trend in contemporary art to exploit the effect of the 'data sublime'. In providing the viewer with the impression and spectacle of a chaotically complex and immensely large configuration of data, these photographs act much as renditions of mountain scenes and stormy seas did on nineteenth-century urban viewers. This can be seen plainly in Thomas Ruff's series of portraits, made in contention with Sander's series. In denying social differentiation while providing a scale and definition that Sander could only have dreamt of, they overwhelm the viewer with an ocean of data that they cannot make sense of. Sander's work provided, for one famous interpreter, a social training manual;[37] Ruff's abandons the viewer in a wilderness of information.[38]

In this mode, the subjects do not act, or interact socially; thus if the attractors and art-historical references in this practice are fashion, avant-garde objectivity, and neo-objective art photography, the repulsors include photojournalism and documentary, in particular the tradition of expressive, committed documentary exemplified by W. Eugene Smith and more recently Sebastião Salgado. This is assumed, from the point of view of the art-world sophisticate, to embody social naiveté and cultural simplicity. The last thing, it seems, that must obtrude into these novel ethnographic images is a view of their subjects as interacting social agents.

Yet there is one kind of agency that is permitted: of self presentation before the camera. Dijkstra has said that part of her interest in the beach series was in the varied self-presentation of youths in Poland and the United States, the latter unsurprisingly being more self- and fashion-conscious than the former.[39] So a theme of the photographs is their subjects' self-presentation, and among those series of youths before ocean and forest an implicit idea of the process of socialisation into the commercialised image world (and perhaps out of 'nature', just as the figures are excised from their backgrounds by flash-guns). This theme is made more explicit in Dijkstra's series that track human variation across time rather than space, as in 'Almerisa', an exiled child, who is photographed over the span of nine years growing into the garb and body language of her adopted culture.

Figure 8: Rineke Dijkstra, ***Almerisa, Asylum seeker's centre, Leiden, The Netherlands March 14, 1994,*** **1994**

Figure 9: Rineke Dijkstra, ***Almerisa, Leidschendam, The Netherlands, June 25, 2003***, **2003**

Such images produce a double effect: of identification between viewer and subject through the apparent visual presence of a person, and distancing through their deadpan quasi-ethnographic photographic means. Distancing is also inherent in the silencing and stilling power of photography itself, exacerbated in the large, high-definition prints that produce an illusion of presence to set against that silence. Yet stilling and silencing, especially in such detailed prints devoid of action, focus the attention on the visual fact of the subject's passive body, in all its particularities and peculiarities. The basis of identification with a photographed subject, as Martha Rosler has pointed out, is a 'physiognomic fallacy', in which the face and body is seen as an expression of character.[40] This is what links ethnographic photography and the basic instinct of fashion, for, in both, constitutional vices and virtue, character, abilities—a person's very being—are written on the skin.

What kind of identification is had here? It may be useful to make a comparison with Walter Benjamin's writing about the one moment of photography that he thought produced auratic

images, because it confronted the viewer with a distinct presence. Benjamin argued that early photographs of bourgeois males exhibited aura because of the coming together of a variety of congruent technical and social factors. The reserve of bourgeois sitters, linked to their innocence before the camera, at a time when photography and everyday life were still unconnected by the press, was matched by the large but uneven tonal range of the medium, which left much in obscure shadow. The techniques that replaced such early efforts would rudely illumine everything. In addition, the long exposures required to render the images encouraged the subjects to reflect on their lives, as did the quiet circumstances in which they were photographed (David Octavius Hill, Benjamin notes, making his portraits in a graveyard to lessen the chance of interruption).[41] The photographer was a representative of the most advanced technical means of the time who confronted in his sitters representatives of a confident, historically rising class.[42] The result, Benjamin claimed, was 'a medium that lent fullness and security to their gaze even as it penetrated that medium'.[43]

Aside from the use of the view camera, which ensures a formality of depiction, and (given the rarity of these cameras now) makes of the photographic session a novelty, and may impart to the subject time to compose themselves and reflect, the conditions in which Dijkstra and those like her operate are very nearly the opposite of what Benjamin described. As with much fashion work, total revelation is strived for here: flash banishing deep shadow, and the slow, fine-grained film and large negatives ensuring that all detail is rendered minutely. While the particular circumstances of this photography are novel to its subjects, none of them are remotely innocent of photography's effects, for they have been saturated in them since birth. Above all, the confrontation here is of a marginalised offshoot of the multi-billion dollar photographic industry, the artist, who occupies a niche market in part by the combination of modern technology and old-fashioned means, with those subjects who (far from being the confident, mature representatives of a rising class) are half-formed adolescents of no professional status, or those emerging shaken from the bullring, the firing range or the obstetricians' ward, or those who are in the process of transforming their identities—those, in other words, who have uncertain control over their reserve.

Dijkstra herself writes:

> For me it is essential to understand that everyone is alone. Not in the sense of loneliness, but rather in the sense that no one can completely understand someone else. I know very well what Diane Arbus means when she says that one cannot crawl into someone else's skin, but there is always an urge to do so anyway. I want to awaken definite sympathies for the person I have photographed.[44]

In her statements, Dijkstra repeatedly stresses the solitary character of her subjects, and says that she wants to get at the essential, human aspect of them.[45] By apparently stripping away the social, in focusing on circumstances where its hold seems shakiest, she seeks to reveal the essentially human. In this, Dijkstra is indeed close to the ambitions of Penn and Avedon.

The identification between subject and viewer takes place at the level of the image, and in a visual engagement with an isolated subject: it is not dialogic, communicative or developmental but instantaneous and apparently instinctive.[46] If the poses seem familiar, it is because capitalist subjects are schooled in uniform disciplines of self-presentation; if they

seem redolent, too, of episodes in art history, that is because advertisers and marketers continually ransack a wide range of visual culture to borrow its allure for their products.[47]

Along with the process of simultaneous identification and distancing, the use of fashion techniques to depict ordinary folk produces a double effect: of celebration and critique; the critique is itself doubled, for the ordinary is rendered strange by such attention, as if these people, in departing from the standards of capitalist beauty, were deformed; and, through that deformation, the techniques that produce this standard beauty are held up to questioning. So there is a simultaneous elevation and lowering of the subjects, and this effect is dependent on the blankness of the form of presentation (this can be readily seen by comparing Dijkstra's work with that of Sally Mann or Jock Sturges, where manifest artistry and lyricism lead to elevation alone).[48] So, if there is a radical moment in this mode of photography, it is in the possibility of self-recognition of one's own flaws and striving to conform to the standardised image world, as in catching a glimpse of oneself in a fashion-store mirror, surrounded and denigrated by the icons of capitalist beauty.

The novelty of this photography is that in the past, such ethnographic means were turned on those viewed as definitively 'other', and when there was uncertainty about the otherness of the subject (as in Arbus) the addition of an expressive and individualistic style leavened the results. Now there appears a combination of deadpan ethnographic method applied to subjects who are not definitively marked off from the viewer, and it is often the instability of identity that is fixed upon. While such photography may offer a critique of the classifying impulse that lay behind imperial ethnographic photography at home and abroad, it is not one that impedes the guilty pleasure of viewing these contemporary subjects as mere image.

There is a break, too, with the old, discreditable notion that primitives, women and the lower classes had a greater and more immediate affinity with their bodies, on which was seen written their true character. Not that in this new work everyone appears as rational, active social beings but that the association applies more broadly to everybody as consumers and fashion victims, creatures of the image world. Thus the focus is on the young, especially adolescents, against whom those forces are deployed most fiercely and with the most tragic—and simultaneously most comic—effects.

This extension of those subjects who have become passive reflectors of spectacle is linked to the difficultly of knowing in neoliberal society who is really the other—due to social hybridity and fluidity, immigration, emigration, miscegenation and continual social upheaval. The effect is exacerbated by the generalised exoticisation of a multitude of fleeting micro-identities brought about by spectacular commerce. Such photography brings about a largely post-class, post-social movements sublime enjoyment of the mundane mass as exotica. It highlights an instability of identity, congruent with the micro-identities of consumerism, which the art world generally recommends, and it does so, not necessarily to produce a greater identification with these non-others, but a realisation that we are all (as images) irreducibly alien, contingent, and particular. Indeed, that as images, we participate, willingly or not, in the chain that that ties people's appearances to exchange value.

This constitutes the terrible plausibility of these images, and part of the basis for their success: they do describe and also enact a world in which people are socially atomised, politically weak and are governed by their place in the image world. In demanding that the

maximum visual detail be wrung from their subjects, they silence and still them. In their seamless, high-resolution depictions, they present the victory of the image world over its human subjects as total and eternal.

While the results may hold apparently radical elements—that the passivity and image victimhood of the subjects may rebound on their viewers—the ambiguity of such images finally salvages artist and viewer. Such images oscillate between identification and distancing, honouring and belittling, critical recognition and the enjoyment of spectacle, and access to the real and the critique of realist representation. Despite the vast amount of data in these images, their specificity is low in terms of unambiguous statements about their subjects. Given that lack of specificity, so standard a feature of art-world production, what is highlighted instead (as Rosler has argued) is self-projection by the photographer, and we should add by the viewer.[49] Dijkstra says that the bathers in the beach pictures are 'more or less a self-portrait.'[50] So we find ourselves in that familiar realm of thorough ambiguity, complex as a trap for thought, though far from complex, indeed clichéd, as a configuration in art production, in which, in the free-trade zone of the art work, artist and viewer are offered matching opportunities for the apparently non-instrumental play of their creative and intellectual faculties.[51]

Historically, this is a strange result. The legacy of the prosaic photographic series is, after all, bound to conceptualism and a critique of conventional notions of artistic subjectivity, originality and creativity. Here it implicitly produces its opposite: a standard and immediately recognisable form of distinction, in which a dose of art-historical conceptualism helps elevate straight photography to the realm of charismatic, individualised art.

In thinking about the role of this art in a globalised, neoliberal climate, we come back to the puzzle of the success of such images. Why are the subjects of contemporary art so often taken as merely spectacular fragments rather than as active persons, while the opposite is assumed of its makers and viewers? Even in the apparently opposing participant-observer mode, there is little stress on agency (other than entertaining misbehaviour) but rather on passive conditions that are meant to constitute assured identities. In both, the excluded middle is agency and its depiction in documentary, along with the construction of a realist structure through the combination of differentiated images, and particularly the idea that identity might be transformed through agency.[52]

The plausibility of the ethnographic strand of photographic imagery surely derives from the accuracy of its implicit view of neoliberal societies. The push and pull of identification and distancing, and honouring and belittling are staged only at the level of the image, not in seeing its subjects as agents. In this sense, such images exhibit a transparent complicity with commercialised spectacle. There is a link, in other words, between the presentation of these subjects as mere image and the familiar powerlessness of people in day-to-day democracy, of image and news management, of the hollowing out of citizenship in favour of consumerism, of broadcast and celebrity culture. This strand's relentless focus on the fixed image is a reflection of the marked decline in political agency, in democratic participation, which is a steadily growing and universal feature of neoliberal societies.[53] A deep distrust of an excess of democratic activism (the derogatory term is 'populism') has been a common feature of neoliberal regimes, and is indeed an element of its foundational theory from Hayek onwards.[54] The mediating and causal link between the realm of politics and art is primarily

through the museum, increasingly a branded and business-led entity, devoted to gallery spectacle, of which large photographic prints, alluring and accessible, have become a central feature.

Yet, in the vision implied in such photographs, all is not lost in surrender before the image world. In the panoply of exoticised similitude, a true other holds itself apart. Through the act of depiction, the artist becomes the other of the image-bound subjects, simultaneously creating each side of this opposed pair. Avedon, who it will be remembered made an *Autobiography* that consisted of portraits of other people, says this about the relation:[55]

> A portrait photographer depends upon another person to complete his picture. The subject imagined, which in a sense is me, must be discovered in someone else willing to take part in a fiction he cannot possibly know about. My concerns are not his. We have separate ambitions for the image. His need to plead his case probably goes as deep as my need to plead mine, but the control is with me.[56]

The artist retains agency, as does the viewer, a double of the artist, who freely reflects on the artist's products. Hal Foster has argued that even critical ethnographic projects can stray 'from collaboration to self-fashioning, from a decentering of the artist as cultural authority to a remaking of the other in neo-primitivist guise'.[57] This tendency to stray is less a fault of individual artists, less a matter of their lack of rigour or of insufficient safeguards established in particular projects, and more a structural matter. The awareness of the effects of the image world over its subjects separates artists and their viewers, a cultural elite, from those who worry overmuch about the light that they reflect into lenses. The terror that is safely distanced by the sublime here is that of unthinking immersion in the image world and the mass. In this way, class is after all written deep in these apparently post-class images. They bear the mark of fundamental deficiencies in democracy, that permit the general population to be plausibly viewed through an ethnographic lens, and above all of the disregard of democracy that lies at the heart of neoliberalism—as much in Blair's consorting with Berlusconi as in Thatcher's with Pinochet, and of successive US governments in their manufacture and maintenance of convenient tyrannies.

[1] F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, (George Routledge & Sons, London 1944) p. 52.

[2] I have given versions of this paper in various forums, and am indebted to the perceptive comments of their participants. In particular, I would like to thank those who responded to the paper at the symposium, 'Art in the Age of Globalization: Directions in Contemporary Art Since 1989' at the University of Florida, Gainesville, including Alexander Alberro, Nora Alter, Whitney Davis, Hal Foster and Anne Wagner. I am also very grateful to Joanna Woodall of the Courtauld Institute for her comments about Dijkstra.

[3] Such photographs were first made by James H. Lamprey who in 1869 devised a standard measuring grid against which subjects were photographed. Also in 1869 Thomas Huxley proposed using standard views of subjects with a measuring rod. Such techniques were adopted by others. See James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*, (Reaktion Books, London 1997) pp. 149, 151.

[4] See, for example, the portraits and reported text in Zed Nelson's *Gun Nation* (Westzone Publishing, London 2000).

[5] This series, 'Trust' shows people captured by other spectacles — in video arcades or at football matches— or with eyes closed in prayer or while receiving beauty and medical treatments. See Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *Trust* (Westzone Publishing, London 2000).

[6] A recent exhibition at the Barbican Art Gallery explored this lineage in European photography: *In the Face of History: European Photographers in the 20th Century* (Black Dog Publishing, London 2006).

[7] 'Little History of Photography', in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 2. 1927-1934*, Michael W. Jennings/ Howard Eiland/ Gary Smith, eds., (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1999) p. 518.

[8] August Sander, *Citizens of the Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, ed. Gunther Sander, trans. Linda Keller (The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1986).

[9] Jessica Morgan, 'Interview' in The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, *Rineke Dijkstra: Portraits*, (Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit 2001) p. 74. See also Urs Stahel, 'Afterwards', in Rineke Dijkstra, *Portraits*, (Schirmer/Mosel, Munich 2005) p. 147.

[10] See Belinda Rathbone, *Walker Evans: A Biography*, (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1995) p. 182; James Agee/ Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1941).

[11] Erskine Caldwell/ Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (The Viking Press, New York 1937); Dorothea Lange/ Paul Taylor, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (Reynal & Hitchcock, New York 1939).

[12] Wolfgang Tillmans, correspondence with the author, 18 June 2003.

[13] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (Penguin Books, London 1979), pp. 31-48.

[14] For a critical view of the Arbus literature, see Catherine Lord, 'What Becomes a Legend Most: The Short, Sad Career of Diane Arbus', in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

[15] Diane Arbus, *Diane Arbus*, (Allen Lane, London 1974), p. 10.

[16] Carol Armstrong, 'Biology, Destiny, Photography: Difference According to Diane Arbus', *October*, no. 66, Fall 1993, p. 32.

[17] Arbus gave the game way by declaring of composition '…I guess I must know something about it from doing it a lot and feeling my way into it and into what I like'. *Diane Arbus*, p. 10.

[18] Irving Penn, *Worlds in a Small Room*, (Secker & Warburg, London 1980), introduction, n.p. The book was first published in 1974. It was not the first time Penn had fled fashion for its other: in 1947 he had left *Vogue* to travel to Haiti to find some 'real women'. See Maria Morris Hambourg, 'Irving Penn's Nudes, 1949-50', in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Earthly Bodies: Irving Penn's Nudes, 1949-50*, (Bulfinch Press, Boston 2002) p. 8.

[19] Penn, *Worlds*, n.p.

[20] Ibid.

[21] According to Laura Wilson, *Avedon at Work in the American West*, (University of Texas Press, Austin 2003) p. 13.

[22] John Rohrbach, 'Preface', in Richard Avedon, *In the American West*, (Thames and Hudson, London 2005) n.p. The first edition was published by Harry N. Abrams, New York 1985.

[23] Richard Bolton notes Avedon's knowledge of his precursors, and gives an extraordinary account of the concerted marketing and press-management campaign that accompanied the exhibition and publication. See 'In the American East: Richard Avedon Incorporated', in Bolton, *The Contest of Meaning*.

[24] Arbus did this for the majority of her career, printing the edges of her negatives between 1963 and 1969. See Neil Selkirk, 'In the Darkroom', in San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *Diane Arbus: Revelations*, (Random House, New York 2003) pp. 270-1.

[25] Wilson, *Avedon at Work*, p. 102.

[26] Avedon, *American West*, n.p., my italics.

[27] Wilson, *Avedon at Work*, p. 22.

[28] Ibid., p. 117.

[29] Avedon, *American West*, n.p.

[30] See Bolton, 'In the American East', p. 264.

[31] See Ulf Hård af Segerstad, 'Irving Penn—Uncompromising Image Builder' in Moderna Museet, *Irving Penn Photographs: A Donation in Memory of Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn*, (Stockholm 1995) p. 35.

[32] Selkirk, 'In the Darkroom', p. 273. Dodging and burning are techniques used to manipulate the light reaching various areas of the print to ensure good detail throughout high-contrast images or to obscure unwanted elements. Arbus limited herself to altering the overall contrast of her prints by using different developing solutions.

[33] Dijkstra claims: 'I hardly give any directions and I demand a concentration that it decisive for the photographs'. See Mariska ven den Berg, 'Interview with Rineke Dijkstra', in The Photographers' Gallery, *Rineke Dijkstra: Location*, (London 1997) n.p.

[34] The lenses needed to cover such large negatives are of a long focal length, and they require small apertures and thus slow shutter speeds to keep scenes in focus. It will be interesting to see how far this aspect of contemporary photography is technologically governed, since very high resolution digital backs for medium-format cameras are now being made (up to 40 megapixels—I know this will sound quaint in a few years) which offer photographers the opportunity to make view-camera quality photographs with hand-held cameras.

[35] Leo Steinberg, 'Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public', in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford University Press, New York 1972). The passages on sacrifice are pp. 6-10.

[36] Megapixel equivalents of film negatives and positives are a controversial issue. Nevertheless, a scanned 4x5 inch negative will give a file size of about 500MB; of a 6x 6cm around a tenth of that; then taking account of the greater information in colour (24 rather than 16 bit), we can estimate that a typical Arbus and Dijksta will differ by an order of 2,560. This estimate discounts the changes to film resolution since the 1960s.

[37] Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', p. 520.

[38] Of course, this interest in the data sublime is not confined to photography. It is also apparent in painting (Julie Mehretu is a prominent example), and particularly in works that draw on digital data, for example Lise Autogena and Joshua Portway's *Black Shoals: Stock Market Planetarium* (2001) and Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin's *The Listening Post* (2002). For the former, see Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, *Black Shoals Stock Market Planetarium: An Art Project by Lise Autogena and Joshua Portway* (Copenhagen 2004).

[39] Morgan, 'Interview', p. 80.

[40] 'Post-Documentary, Post-Photography?' in Martha Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001*, (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2004) p. 221.

[41] Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', p. 512.

[42] Ibid., p. 517.

[43] Ibid., pp. 516-17.

[44] Cited in Andy Grunberg, 'Out of the Blue: The Photographs of Rineke Dijkstra', *Artforum*, vol. xxxvi, no. 9, May 1997, p. 87. Statement originally published in the catalogue to the Frankfurter Kunstverein's 1996 installment of its 'Prospect' series.

[45] For loneliness, see Mariska ven den Berg, 'Interview with Rineke Dijkstra', in *Rineke Dijkstra: Location*, n.p. Dijkstra says in an interview with David Brittain that she is searching for the 'essential' in her subjects. See *Creative Camera*, no. 357, April-May 1999, pp. 20-7.

[46] In some images by Dijkstra, more than one figure appears, yet the engagement of the each figure is with the camera, not with their companion in the frame.

[47] This is why the juxtaposition of Dijkstra and Cézanne bathers, seen at MoMA, part of a general museum effort to link contemporary photography with painting (rather than earlier photography) is less interesting than it may at first appear: certainly, self-conscious photographers search for agreeable art-historical parallels when making their work, knowing that it will ease the interpretative life of curators; certainly, too, their subjects may take on poses reminiscent of Botticelli or Cézanne mediated by a thousand advertisements; but to posit such resemblances on broader humanist or art-historical grounds would require further proof. A more radical juxtaposition would also include the advertisements.

[48] See, for example, Sally Mann, *Immediate Family* (Aperture, New York 1992); Jock Sturges, *The Last Day of Summer* (Aperture, New York 1991).

[49] Rosler, 'Post-Photography', p. 226.

[50] Morgan, 'Interview', p. 79.

[51] I make a more general argument about the character of the art work as such a zone between the worlds of work and mass culture, and the threats that confront this system, in my book *Art Incorporated* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

[52] In the ethnographic model, identity is uncertain but agency is denied; in the participant-observer model, agency is permitted insofar as it confirms identity as fixed. Broadly, this is, of course, the thinking attacked in much of Badiou's work. See, for example, Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (Verso, London 2001).

[53] For a fine account of the range of the decline in political activity across capitalist democracies, see Peter Mair, 'Ruling the Void? The Hollowing of Western Democracy', *New Left Review*, second series, no. 42, November-December 2006, pp. 25-51.

[54] David Harvey, in his recent history of neoliberalism, notes that it recommends that people should be free to make choices, as long as they do not choose strong forms of collective organisation. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005) p. 69.

[55] Richard Avedon, *An Autobiography* (Random House, New York 1993).

[56] Avedon, *American West*, n.p.

[57] Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1996) pp. 196-7.