1-1-1999

Portraiture: I See What You Mean

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Recommended Citation
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Portraiture:  
I See What You Mean

To pose the question “What was the first photograph you saw in your life?” is likely to leave us in a somewhat unsatisfied position, for we are not apt to arrive at an answer. Our earliest engagement of pictures may well have been in books designed to help us begin to associate names with the depicted objects: cat, dog, box, the ubiquitous ball. And, like the verbal nouns which were the point of these exercises, we soon discovered that these images were nothing so much as visual nouns; stand-ins for these objects which were somewhere else in our expanding little worlds. At the very time that we were being taught to comprehend the uses to which words might be put, we were also defining, in largely undirected and unconscious ways, understandings which would come to shape our sense of the photograph.

It is probable that among our earliest encounters with the photographic image were pictures of people, among them family members and, undoubtedly, pictures of ourselves. Pictures which in later years we came to understand as portraits arrived early on in our awareness of images, and inevitably played into our burgeoning sense that the photograph was nominal; that depiction was simply another way of naming things without using words.

Having looked at photographs with varying degrees of awareness for better than half a century, I continue to be both intrigued and perplexed by the realization that while over time we have acquired a much richer and more sophisticated sense of the possibilities of language (symbol and metaphor, poetry, drama, literature), we seem mired in the nominal conception of the photographic image, particularly in the case of those which proffer the human primary significance. We need at recognizing portraits with a very curious way, we continue to use them as stand-ins for the people, and, more generally, we conclude that appearances discout and discourse at work, we must at least undertake the systematic inquiry that would come to shape our sense of the portrait, and what the portrait means to us.

In discussions among professional producers of portraits, we face a set of claims regarding what a portrait shows. The first is the "mug-shot" imperative. If we pause this objective we might suggest some lines along which we might begin to comprehend it in this way. Instead, the images are not of men, but of men. Often in association with the images we see, there is a tenacious residue for the idea that objects and the needs of photography is not to be everything, they need to be named, and they readily serve the portrait function from commercial photography. It seems inconceivable that a visual achievement so inextricably linked to the medium should define the nature and the portrait. Verisimilitude is not a photographically generated image and in a vocation, the camera is designed to a piece of paper resembles a camera, the camera is not the camera, it is a tenacious residue for the portrait function from commerce and photography. It seems inconceivable that the visual achievement so inextricably linked to the medium should define the nature and the function of the portrait. Verisimilitude is not a photographically generated image and in a vocation, the camera is designed to a piece of paper resembles a camera, the camera.
In "What was the first word in your life?" is likely what unsatisfied position to arrive at an answer. Our pictures may well have helped us begin to associate objects: cat, dog, box, like the verbal nouns these exercises, we soon ages were nothing so stand-ins for these objects else in our expanding that we were being uses to which words so defining, in largely ways, understanding shape our sense of the

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Photographs with varying better than half a century intrigued and perplexed while over time we have and more sophisticated and language (symbol and literature), we seem conception of the photography in the case of those which proffer the human countenance as their primary significance. We’ve become very adept at recognizing portraits when we see them, but in a very curious way, we continue to imagine them as stand-ins for the persons depicted. In our reluctance to recognize that these are images, calculated appearances within which there is a discourse at work, we miss out on something important that we might consider about ourselves. The thoughts which follow are an effort to give some shape to this intrigue/perplexity and to suggest some lines along which we may consider what it is that we think we know about the portrait, and what the portrait may have in store for us.

In discussions among those who engage in the production of portraits, there inevitably surface a set of claims regarding just what it is that a portrait shows. The first might be termed the "mug-shot" imperative. Of course those who espouse this objective are never so crass as to state it in this way. Instead, there is talk of "likeness," often in association with "good" or "pleasing." Implicit is an assumption that while looks may not be everything, they are at least something, and they readily serve both the needs of the subject and the needs of photography. Perhaps this is a tenacious residue from the hand-off of the portrait function from oil painting to photography. It seems inconceivable, however, that a visual achievement so implicitly a part of the medium should define the significance of the portrait. Verisimilitude is the terrain of the optically generated image and is, after all, what the camera is designed to accomplish. If making a piece of paper resemble the sitter is the crux of portraiture, the camera incurs most of the obligation and in a very real sense, the photographer’s task is to stay out of the way. And if the depiction of likeness is the significance of the portrait, there is really no reason for us to engage portraits, except those of persons with whom we are familiar, and then only in terms of accuracy. Certainly there must be more to it than this.

The second, and alternative, claim which arises in discussions among portraitists might be called the “let’s get behind the mask” imperative. The articulation of this approach assumes a variety of forms, among the most common of which are: the mystical “I want to reveal the soul of the sitter,” the omniscient “I’m attempting to portray who so-and-so really is,” and the hopelessly ambitious “I’m most concerned with capturing the essence of my subject.” Common to all three is the recognition that the human being is more than meets the eye. Equally common is a very high unlikelihood of achievement. What we are talking about here is not superficial stuff, nor is it likely to be fathomed or portrayed as the result of a brief studio encounter in which power inequities and role lines are so clearly and immutably set. To suggest this possibility of the portrait requires ascribing such extraordinary powers of divination to the photographer that one immediately wonders why he or she is wasting their time making pictures? In the end what seems to underlie and to provide apparent credence to these claims is the possibility that the subject has been depicted in a way that we recognize to be characteristic. The set of a smile, the knit of a brow, the tilt of a head may be exactly the sort of thing we know so-and-so to do, but therein lies the rub. Even if we are willing to settle for the characteristic as the domain of
portraiture, the portrait can only have significance if we first know the subject.

Once again, as in the case of the mug-shot, the significance of the portrait depends entirely upon our placement in relation to a closed loop. If we are in, that is to say if we are sufficiently familiar with the subject of the portrait, there is benefit in engaging the portrait. If we are out, however, our appreciation that the portrait has expressed something characteristic of its subject is precluded in the same way that we can never assess its degree or quality of likeness. Taken to its conclusion, either assumption of what it is that we get from portraits reduces portraiture to a kind of benign in-joke, and relegates almost all portraits (excepting those of persons we know) to that vast category of things in the suburbs of our lives which are generally irrelevant.

And yet I continue to look at portraits, even of those whom I do not know, and portraits continue to offer me something which is independent of my acquaintance with their subjects. Clearly there is more involved than merely the depiction of persons. To arrive at what this might be we need to move beyond our preoccupation with the nominal significance of the portrait, to stop insisting that the portrait function as a stand-in for its subject (the visual noun of our infancy), to look beyond who the portrait depicts in order to see what the portrait shows.

Since photography as a medium depends upon appropriated appearances for its very existence, the portrait will always be of someone. But it is also made by someone, and if that one is doing more than what the camera itself does, the portrait will also be about something which the photographer wishes us to consider. The camera willingly embraces the task of showing us what a thing looks like; the photographer’s call is to show us what it is like to look. Photographs always present us with both of these imperatives and in the case of the portrait, the photographer inevitably speaks to us about a way of viewing and, consequently, of thinking about humanity.
To put it another way, the discourse of the portrait is nothing less than the photographer’s answer to that wonderfully ancient and most fundamental of questions: What is the nature of Man? In order to understand how this might be, how the most ubiquitous of images plays to the most profound of human concerns, and as a result can reward our attention independent of our knowledge of a particular subject, it may be useful to consider some examples of portraiture with which most may be familiar.

The photographer Arnold Newman has defined what many term the environmental portrait. In so doing, he has recognized two important aspects of the photographic portrait. The first is that there is considerable non-personed space within the image about which one must do something, and the second is that as far as the camera is concerned, everything is equally important. Newman has chosen to summon the subject’s surround into the conversation, to become an active player within the portrait. Whether this extra-person information derives from the subject’s literal environment, or from objects to which the subject has some important relation, these signals are carefully considered and heavily weighted. The intent is not to secure some aesthetically pleasing locale in which the subject may be seen, but to direct our attention to something about the subject which matters a great deal to Newman.

In viewing Newman’s portraits, there is much about his subjects which we shall never know. Indeed, most of the things which we might find interesting about another remain unknowable, foreclosed by Newman’s unequivocal assertion of his concern. Family life? Favorite music? Leisure pursuits? Cast the net of human interest as widely as we like, in the end we discover that we know very little about his subjects. Inevitably, however, we do know one thing and it is the thing which Newman’s portraits show us again and again. We know what his subjects do, what it is that they have accomplished. In these images, vocation is everything. In facing the question of the nature of man, Newman’s answer is unmistakable: Man is his works.

The portrait of Richard Avedon is quite another matter entirely. While Avedon’s initial acclaim derived from his ability to satisfy the ever changing illusions of the realm of fashion, his approach to portraiture presents a marked reversal from the work of idealized beauty. Locating his subjects in the anonymous space of white seamless infinity, combining an enveloping light with a terribly unmerciful lens, Avedon has produced a portrait which is insistently and unmistakably topographic. While the likeness may not be pleasing, it is nevertheless good, making unavoidable the scrutiny of every wrinkle, line, protuberance, and idiosyncrasy which the face presents. Avedon locates the focus of his and our concern in the palpability of flesh which has been occupied.

As with Newman’s portraits, Avedon is willing to pass on most of what might be known of his subjects in exchange for showing us what matters to him. Insistently, Avedon directs our attention to what his subjects have done to their faces as they have gone about their lives. He makes it clear that momentary pretense has its limits, that for most the jig is up, that in the end the truth will out, and has. Avedon understands exactly
that we carve our visages over time. Spend a life angry, it will show. Move with open awe through the wonders of existence, your face will tell us. Laugh often enough and the lines are set. Regardless of the starting point, and no matter what else we think we are up to, life is also about taking the faces we were given and making them our own. It is no wonder that Avedon rarely portraits the very young; this sort of sculpting takes time. Avedon has given us his answer to the question as well: Man is quality of being, manifest over time.

Wanda Schut-Chu is a third, intentionally pseudonymous, exemplar of a kind of portraiture which has become pervasive in our culture. Imagine that Schut-Chu is the proprietor of a highly successful portrait business, a member of the appropriate professional organizations, and a veteran of countless workshops and seminars. Her studio is a model of the latest thinking in portrait production and merchandizing, and having established her lighting set-up and camera station years ago, Schut-Chu is able to devote her entire attention to moving her subjects through their sittings with remarkable efficiency.

Schut-Chu’s portraits are nothing if not consistent. Indeed, what surfaces flirts openly with industrial monotony: backgrounds chronicle a succession of decorative trends, the posing template is manifest, facial expressions appear intended only to offer proof of pleasantness, and individuality is minimized in a swap for convention. In viewing a selection of these portraits we quickly recognize that we have been here before, that their upshot recalls nothing so much as butterflies pinned on green velvet, sealed in a display case in a natural history museum somewhere. Schut-Chu has appropriated the lesson shown first by Henry Ford, and in bringing it to her business has also given us her answer to the portrait’s question: Man is the raw material of the portrait factory.

May we be forgiven if we momentarily think it unfair to compare these three? After all, Avedon and Newman are giants in the field, whereas this is the field of Schut-Chu. Shouldn’t it have occurred to her that something; that if she’d only arrived at a more personal, human face. As with many things in our lives, our individuality is little to do with the example, we didn’t have someone taught us the that led us down to earth. It is. And so it is with the world of portraiture. Photography is the photographer’s hand.

What, then, are we to start by understanding? That portraiture is but one small and complex conversation in the matter how large it looks as an occupation. Sooner or later, to understand that to perceive the world, to order it along meaningful to us, and that a discussion in which we are monolog, no matter how we will carry us very far. And so it is only upon the visual evidence of our contribution to the order, as significant as a page in a phone directory. We must be to us (spoken, written, shown), catch their value in our competition commerce but in the give and take about what it means to undertake to sit others but also have given thought to how it is that we may know that those who what our portraits show what we mean. So far
over time. Spend a life with open awe through it, your face will tell us. And the lines are set. Respectful, and no matter what happens, life is also about taking the given and making them whatever that Avedon rarely portends. This sort of sculpting takes as his answer to the question of being, manifest a third, intentionally of a kind of portraiture live in our culture. Imagine the proprietor of a highly successful, a member of the associations, and a shops and seminars. Her test thinking in portraitizing, and having established camera station years devote her entire attentions through their sittings as.

Are nothing if not consistencies flirts openly with backgrounds chronicle a trends, the posing temporal expressions appear of pleasantness, and in a swap for conveniences of these portraits we have been here before, nothing so much as butte velvet, sealed in a display museum somewhere. And the lesson shown first bringing it to her business to the portrait’s questions material of the portrait whereas this is the first we’ve heard of Schut-Chu. Shouldn’t it matter that it had never occurred to her that the portrait is about something; that if she’d only known she might have arrived at a more palatable answer? Not really. As with many things which turn out to matter in our lives, our individual awareness of them has little to do with their reality. As children, for example, we didn’t hover about until the moment someone taught us the law of gravity and brought us down to earth. It and we were there all along. And so it is with the discourse of photographic portraiture. Photographs always tip the photographer’s hand.

What, then, are we to make of this? We may start by understanding that photographic portraiture is but one small part of an extensive and complex conversation about humanity, no matter how large it looms in our individual preoccupation. Sooner or later we are obligated to understand that to portrait is to act upon the world, to order it along lines which are meaningful to us, and that this action locates us in a discussion in which others are involved. The monolog, no matter how sophisticated, will not carry us very far. And if our portraiture insists only upon the visual equivalent of listing names, our contribution to the conversation will be about as significant as a page taken at random from the phone directory. We must attend to the voices around us (spoken, written, acted, sung, danced, shown), catch their various drift, and realize that our competition occurs not in the realm of commerce but in the give and take of competing ideas about what it means to be human. When we undertake to sit others before our lenses, we must have given thought to what we intend to say and to how it is that we may portray it. And we must know that those who view and who think about what our portraits show indeed will see what we mean. 