

Letters on Contemporary Aug./ Sept. 2008

Dear friends,

Welcome to the August and September issue. The new gallery season was opened by Rémy Rusotto's magnificent exhibition.



His portrait series prompts me to explore the role of - and variations on - portrait photography since its beginning in the middle of the 19th century. A magical and very ambitious exhibition, "After Nature" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York just closed its doors, but I will try to conserve some highlights in my review. And finally I will make you familiar with the contemporary portraits by painter Kehinde Wiley on the basis of his show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, NY.

Imagine a face - then and now

"A portrait! What could be more simple and more complex, more obvious and more profound?" Charles Baudelaire, 1859

The word 'portrait' carries a great deal of historical baggage, and no small amount of confusion and contested meanings.

As a mirror would not have decorated the walls of 'ordinary' people before the end of the nineteenth century, the early years of photography were accompanied by a certain hysteria. People first had to overcome their lack of self-awareness in the visual sense. Even intellectuals such as Herman Melville or Honoré de Balzac flatly refused to be photographed. In the beginnings it didn't occur to people that photography could do anything but faithfully record what was in front of the lens.

But before long, people did absorb the lessons of photography, quickly the goal when visiting a photographer's studio became to look like one was supposed to look like. From the painted background, props (like flowers for a woman, a book for a gentleman) down to clothing – dignity and decorum were fundamental to the pose. And gradually, as people became aware of the fact that the portraits left the face miniscule in comparison with the figure, the face became the prime and only focus of the portrait. Due to the technical limitations of the time, blonde hair in particular always appeared dirty for the differentiated sensitivities of the plate, freckles came out as black spots, retouching became the order of the day. It also began to dawn on professional photographers

that portraiture made with more artistry might well justify higher prices. And there was and is one other reason for driving the art of retouching to greater heights: apart from our family and those we love, we rarely allow ourselves to scrutinize other faces in the flesh, but we readily can and do scrutinize faces in photographs, for we are confident that the subject is not looking back at us.

By the end of the century, people wanted something more expressive and portraits of many types proliferated. At one end of the spectrum there were the Pictorialist 'artistic' photographers who pursued painterly ambitions, at the other end, since the arrival of small hand-held cameras, the informal snapshots of the family album, and in between the professional studio photographers.

Throughout the 20th century the idea that a good portrait could and should reveal the character and soul proved remarkably resilient. Nowadays the studios still exist, though there are fewer and fewer of them. Funnily, the further away the studios are from big cities, the more they tend to conserve an essence of the old Pictorialist style. Paradoxically, it is the low-level amateur snapshot which has eventually triumphed. We tend to take faces in unguarded moments as more real and true. We have all seen too many photo-portraits in every possible context to still take them to count for much, all the more so as physical face change is only a cut away and the advertising world constantly undermines the credibility of a portrait.

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Small wonder that contemporary photographers are filled with doubt, but there is a positive side to all this vacuity: photographers have the opportunity to profoundly rethink the genre.

The face has become a battleground for science, technology, industry, commerce and art. Thus, today, art photographers who wish to say something meaningful

about the face are looking for strategies and tactics to keep up with its rapidly evolving social and technological environment. One of the predominant movements in portrait photography is the one analyzing, disclosing and sometimes deliberately hiding the confrontation between the photographer and the subject; a test of wills whose outcome in many ways decides on how a portrait eventually comes across. Two human beings facing each other always involves a degree of psychological give-and-take: sometimes the sides are equally balanced, sometimes the photographer dominates the exchange and sometimes it's the subject who tries- and at times succeeds- in getting the upper hand (by closing the eyes or turning away at the last second). One of the leading figures of portrait photography, Richard Avedon, at the end of a long career of 'making faces' came to the conclusion that a portrait wasn't a fact, but only an opinion.

Another spectrum of photographers focuses on the make-believe, the covering and disguise that can mislead our interpretation of what we see and interpret into a picture as well as dominant stereotypes and our subconscious expectancy. A look at the words we most commonly use in the context of 'face' reveals to which extent already our language carries the idea of the face as something that is to a great extent mouldable. The associated domains range from architecture (façade), literature (reading someone's face) to theatre (play of expressions).

"I wrote with light, and the model was transformed into all the figures of my imagination: a Napoleon, a beggar, a medieval monk, a knight, a modern technician, a religious fanatic, a gothic statue. A death mask." Helmar Lerski, 1953

Then there is a group of photographers that works on the concept of loss and

preservation of the face, and this in the literal as well as the figurative sense. At the drastic end our time has seen the first full face transplant in 2005, and of course it was all photographed. At the comparatively modest end we lose our face in embarrassing situations. In between these two poles there is plenty of space for reams of nuances.

Finally there is a vital tendency to make use of the composite photograph. As a technique, the composite photograph dates back to the nineteenth century, but the composites of our day are usually amalgams of photographs and computer manipulation. Paradoxically, the more people are composited, the more exquisite is their resulting face, as our concept of human beauty is based on the mean or average. There is this idea of metamorphosis, creating a new (id)entity and transplanting, literally as well as metaphorically, as shifting from one state into another.

Rémy Russotto's series "Faces" is located between the two last outlined fields of modern day portrait photography. His faces seem to be on the edge of vanishing or escaping the lens and at the same time, as the faces are wrapped in foggy twilight, they could belong to many different people. The features obtain a general and generic quality. We are more dealing more with a type than an individual.

He focuses tightly on the faces to the exclusion of the context and thereby he invents them with independent spirit, vitality and a degree of timelessness. As such we are tempted to read them, be it faces belonging to 1920s film stars or phantom images of suspects in a criminal case – and when we do, it is always us, the viewer who imposes meaning on them.

The enlargement of the heads has resulted in heavy grain, the faces appear indistinct, like phantoms in a dream. And still, Russotto has saved enough information for us to have distinct impressions. Intuitively we even develop a feeling for the frame of mind of the sitter.

Today, facial recognition systems are increasingly powerful and efficient. Each of our faces has certainly been recorded and stored many times without our knowledge or permission. It .



has become a trivial matter of fact that our faces are ‘stolen’ and in these times Russotto allows his subjects to keep their secrets with them. His portraits are futile when wanting to identify the sitter, his family background or age. The artist throws us back on our patterns of observation, on how quickly with so little of information we naturally grasp the features of

a face. All habitual questions arising from the portraits remain unanswered and so, in a world of day-to-day matter-of-factness, - Russotto’s photographs still allow for soaring imagination.

picture 1+2: Rémy Russotto, *Untitled*, 2002, Lambda Print/ Diasec, 150 x 100 cm, Ed. 5.

Review: “After Nature” at New Museum of Contemporary Art, NY

The exhibition curated by Massimiliano Gioni at the New Museum sets a standard in terms of seriousness and ambition to which most museums and biennials don’t even bother to aspire.

Assembling roughly ninety works made since 1884 that similarly evoke chaos and ruin, the exhibition both anthologizes prophetic visions (Gioni himself speaks of a ‘fragmented encyclopaedia’) while at the same time producing its own. There are two interpretational anchors for the show. The first is W.G. Sebald prose poem “After Nature” from 1988 that more or less directly deals with loss and the Holocaust. The poem is divided into three sections. Its first section focuses on the northern Renaissance painter Mathias Grünewald whose depictions of Christ readily come to mind when looking at **Belgian’s Berlinde de Bruyckere’s** work in this exhibition. Her sculpture, enclosed in an antique glass showcase suitable for Natural

one could recognize our planet. Fittingly nearby on a more abstract level Roberto Cuoghi’s series of large mixed media paintings “Axis of Evil” depicts the outlines of said countries. These



Filmstill from Artur Żmijewski, “An Eye for an eye”, 1998, single channel video, 10 min, colour, sound, courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich

maps of glass, minerals and pigment amazingly evoke an equally impressive representation of the balance of power.



Berlinde de Bruyckere, *Robin V*, 2006-7, wax, epoxy, glass, wood, courtesy Galleria Continua, San Gimignano/Beijing, le Moulin

branches also in wax. At this point, as it is frequently the case throughout the exhibition, neighbouring exhibits chime together. Next to the showcase we find William Christenberry’s photographs of the rapid spread of kudzu (a perennial vine capable of reaching heights of up to 30m) in rural Alabama. Here and there nature insatiably and blindly retakes the human landscape.

The second anchor of the show is **Werner Herzog’s** film “And a Smoke arose- Lessons of Darkness” from 1992. Herzog grants us a hair-raisingly beautiful look at the oil fields that the retreating Iraqi troops had set on fire after the Gulf War. The film is stylized as science fiction, as there is not a single shot in which



A true and highly romantic find were the “celestographs” made by the dramatist and painter August Strindberg in 1894. He made them by leaving photographic plates out at night and then developing the results. Understandably Strindberg took them for direct images of the cosmos, transcriptions of the skies above, so as something that would have been an image ‘after nature’ of the first order. Another magical work that had a spell on me was **Artur Żmijewski’s** video “An Eye for an Eye” from 1998. It shows a naked male amputee being helped by another man in the most peculiar way: the men walk in tandem up and down stairs and in the forest as if ‘lending’ of missing members was possible. The video ends with a scene where they lie on a bare wooden floor and perform a dance routine accompanied by their own whistling. Żmijewski claims that “Art is hard fight for human consciousness” and with this video

Filmstill from Werner Herzog, “Lessons of Darkness”, 1992, 52 min, S 16mm, colour, © Werner Herzog Film

he managed very well to exactly achieve this consciousness, as the first second of repulse immediately turns into an arresting fascination and the utopian quality of the 'experiment' keeps lingering in the viewer's mind.

Following the intended course of the visit, "After Nature" ends on the cathedral-like fourth floor on the magic tableau, developed from Maurizio Cattelan's back-part of a horse helplessly hanging from the wall at three meters height and Zoe Leonard's constructed tree. Leonard's old dead tree, only held together and upright by innumerable cables and metal plates and the horse that seemingly buried his head in the wall form an absurd and surreal playground or stage set, evoking stories of loss and decay as well as a timeless beauty and enigma.

After all, the exhibition displays an epic of humanity coming apart under the pressure of obscure forces as well as men himself. It draws a vision of a hallucinated panorama of a world on the verge of disappearance. Most important though, the clever selection of works allowed for an intelligent and intense perspective, and with their powerful imagery set several anchors in the visitor's mind.

Through to 21 September, New Museum of Contemporary Art, www.newmuseum.org (on website: slide show with all exhibits)

Review: Kehinde Wiley – The World Stage: Africa, Lagos ~Dakar at Studio Museum Harlem, NY

In his earlier paintings Kehinde Wiley used civilians, plucked from the sidewalk or the shopping mall, as sitters for his vibrant portraits, which are epic in scale and typically feature young, trendily dressed black men (silken running suits, carefully creased jeans and other bling reflecting the sartorial codes of hip-hop), assuming the heroic postures of Van Dyck's and Velázquez's dukes and burghers (walking sticks, steeds). This juxtaposition of young black men assuming the postures of European nobility lends itself to the (re)examination of identity, status and power in society. It asks not only "Who is entitled to it?" but also "Who decides entitlement?" The substitution of black for white faces and low for high culture creates manifold twists and turns, more so since Wiley, who is gay, often brought out the homoeroticism implicit in much European portraiture. He used it to undermine the otherwise dominating machismo of his subjects. Actually, Wiley let his models page through art-history books and select the poses in which they would like to be depicted.

The exhibition "The World Stage: Africa, Lagos, Dakar" features a selection of new paintings by former Studio Museum artist in residence Kehinde Wiley from his new multinational "World Stage" series. In this series Wiley continues the before described process, but the poses his models assume are based on local public sculptures, which themselves draw on a number of traditions, from European colonial styles to the Soviet Socialist aesthetic to local sculptural styles. The backgrounds, based on indigenous Dutch wax-resist fabrics once produced in Africa for European export, are used to sensational effect. The textiles continue their hidden side notes: had it been patterns implying sperm in former series, the vine-like patterns that break free of the backgrounds and coil across torsos in the new series are dotted with x's and o's that add up to the female chromosome symbol.

And as before Wiley approached strangers on the street, this time in Africa, to model for his paintings. Here the juxtaposition of rich patterns with sneakers and jerseys creates a tension that is directly traceable by any person simultaneously trying to express himself and observe tradition. Interestingly, it seems as if Wiley's compositions calmed down in the new series. The young African men are more simply dressed, the

poses they re-enact come across more natural and less staged. Where in some former pictures the relationship of figure to ground was still problematic, Wiley now manages to control the spatial play between the figures and their background. Again, the models are all black men posing, though in the Africa series the implications of his all-male cast are richer than mere sexual preference. A Nigerian, his father returned to his country, from Los Angeles, before the artist was born. Wiley never met or saw a picture of his father. Travelling to West Africa, "the genetic home of the African-American population," as he puts it in an interview in the show's catalogue, was a way of reconnecting with his father and his broader ancestry. Throughout his career Wiley upends the stereotype representation of African American men, historically being portrayed as two-dimensional characters: antisocial, hypersexual, hyper-masculine sport stars and gangsters. His paintings are a cultural hybrid that distorts the conventional portraiture while raising the genre of portrait painting itself to a conceptual level. And then, by questioning the still pervasive prejudices while at the same time being aware of media's power to influence the public's perception, Wiley presents a more accurate reality, one that tells a story of contemporary black men struggling between possibility and peril.

Until October 26, Studio Museum Harlem, 144 W. 125th St., between Lenox and Seventh avenues, www.studiomuseum.org

You would have seen two examples of Kehinde Wiley's portraits in the newsletter had the copyright holder reacted in time on my repeated requests. For images please go to the museum's website (see above) or to www.kehindewiley.com.

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Next Vernissage:

16 October

Goran Galić & Gian-Reto Gredig
'Photographers in Conflict'



The Swiss artist duo Goran Galić and Gian-Reto Gredig have been working together since 2002. Their latest work 'Photographers in Conflict' deals with renown photojournalists whose images form our daily perception of conflicts and disasters around the world and who build up the collective picture library of a century. Galic and Gredig realized profound video-interviews that grant a look behind the scenes and made magnificent photo-portraits of the photographers. 'Photographers in Conflict' investigates on the construction of reality, the tremendous power of the image and the extraordinary responsibility that goes with it on the photojournalists' side.