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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

DUBLIN

PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO:

THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN

& COMPLIMENTARY STUDIES

AND

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART

DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING

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APRIL 1986

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PREFACE

The general intention of this thesis is to discuss the aims, methods and achievements of Portrait Photography, and how these have changed and developed over the period of its history. Since a comprehensive historical survey of the genre is beyond the scope of a work such as this, it concentrates on three distinct periods of photographic hostory, in three different countries. Taking one photographer in each case, their work is discussed in relation to their own social milieu, and, along with their individual characteristics, the photographic influences which informed their work is investigated. These photographers are: Felix Nadar, in France during the late I9th century; August Sander in Germany between the two World Wars; and Diane Arbus, in the United States during the I960s. In conclusion, as an example of current concerns in Portrait Photography, there is a short discussion of the recent work of the American photographer Richard Avedon, which became available during the writing of this thesis.

Chapter I. PRECEDENTS - The Human Trace

Of the millions of photographs taken every year, in this century of image making, the vast majority are attempts to record a human presence and likeness, and as such, fall into the category (in the broadest sense) of Portrait Photography. The commonness of this type of photograph, from that early moment (in 1840) when the first advances in emulsion sensitivity allowed the human face to register itself on the glass, suggests strongly that these new images fulfilled a longstanding human desire. We are the most self-conscious species to have evolved on earth and our attempts, from the earliest known times, to register our presence fill the archives of all the anthropological disciplines.

Twenty thousand years ago, our Cro-Magnon ancestors, beside the drawings they made of game-animals, outlined on their cave-walls with earth pigments, the shape of their hands, as a mark of individual presence and as a token of their personal identity. Our earliest attempts at recording human presence were connected directly with the acts and rituals of physical survival (the hunt). But at that early fragile moment, from the very edge of our species' existance, this mental jump was achieved which projected an individual presence beyond physical death through this direct human trace on the rock-face: here the possibility of civilization rather than mere survival was momentarily anticipated. These hand-prints still have the power to startle us in a way that the accompanying drawings, even those which depict humans - filtered as they are through our aesthetic sensibilities - can never do. They are, like the first photographs - as John Berger has written of them - "a trace, something stencilled off the real".

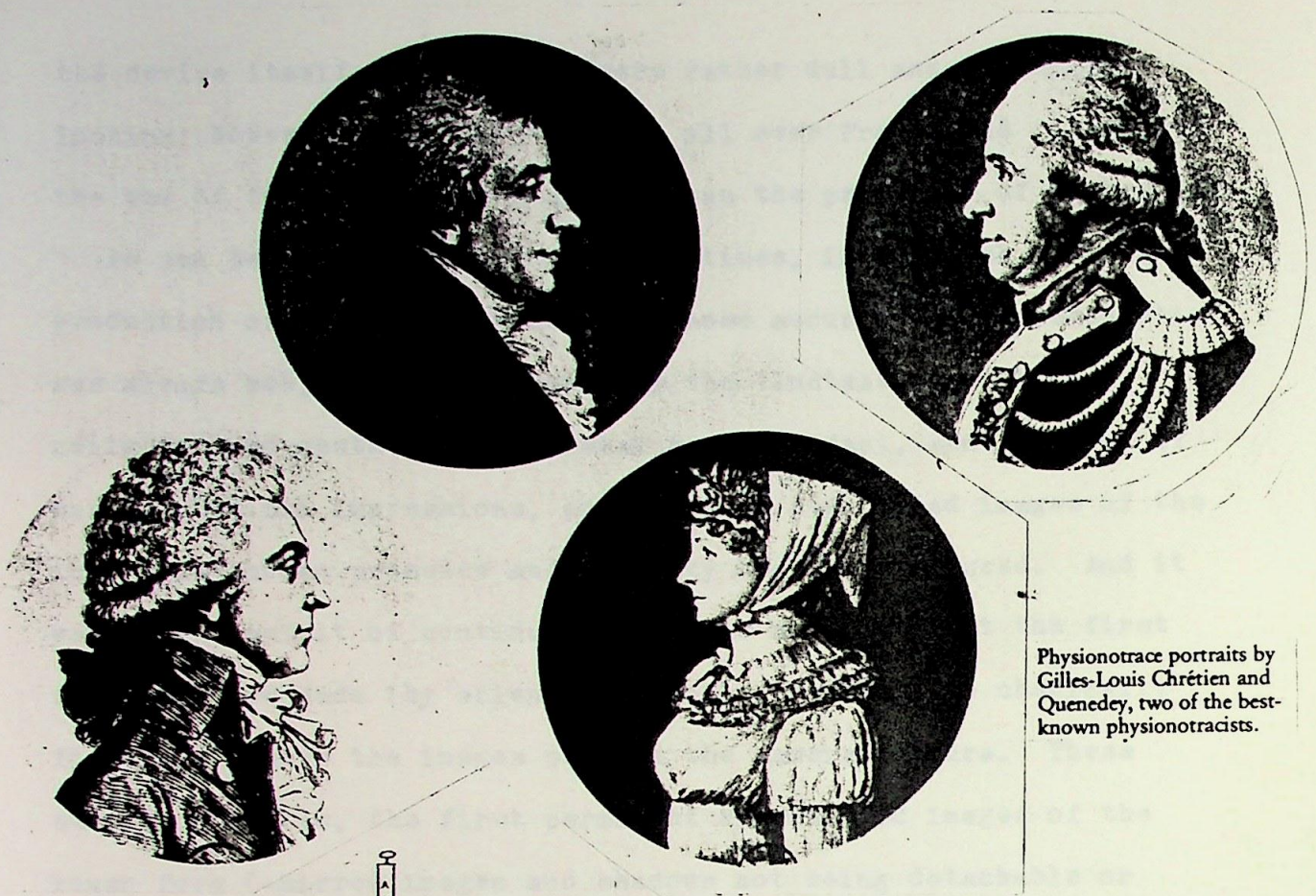
When that anticipated Civilization had secured its grasp and the danger of the demise of our species had begun to seem remote, the recording of human presence and identity was incorporated in religious rituals. In Dynastic Egypt, for example, from about 2000 B.C. masks of plaster were moulded over the face following death, to preserve the features and to guide the spirit back into the body in the afterlife. In time these rough masks evolved into more specifically personal portraits of the deceased, and it is believed that this practice led to the use of casts made directly from the faces of the living as models for the remarkably realistic portrait heads carved from hard Basalt rock in the late period. Unfortunately none of the casts themselves survive to prove the point, nevertheless we can see from the many funerary masks (often of gold or silver) the value the Egyptians placed on the preservation of a specific personal likeness in direct physical contact with the deceased, and the belief that the accuracy of the likeness enhanced his power in the afterlife.

In ancient Rome, when a member of a noble family died, a death-mask taken from the deceased, and cast in wax, was worn by a hired actor during the funeral procession, and was later preserved by the family for use in commemorative ceremonies.

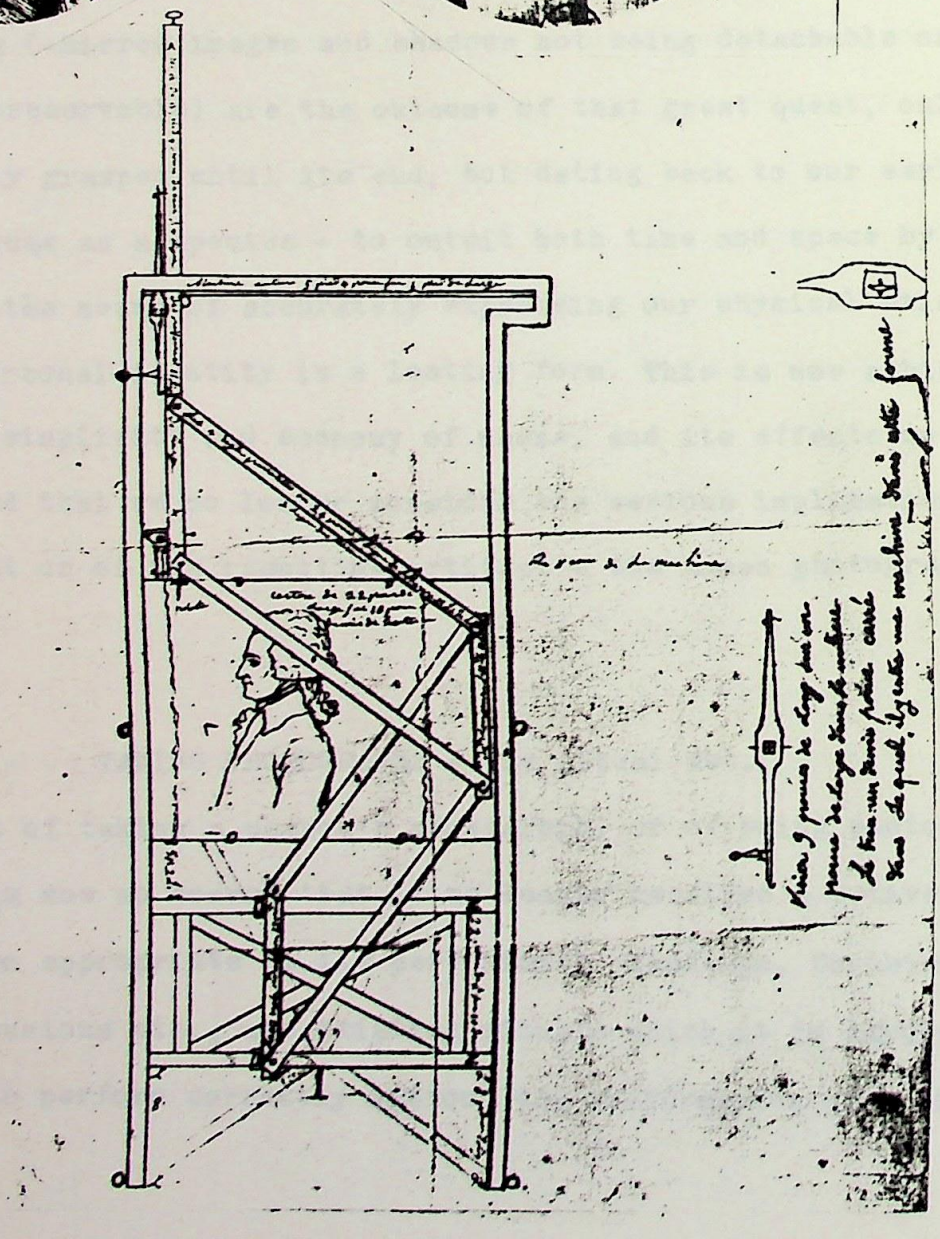
In France and England from the middle ages, a death-mask of a deceased monarch, realistically painted and bewigged would be affixed to a dummy dressed in the royal garments, and given full lying-in-state with all the attendant ceremony, while the real body decayed in the vaults below. The earliest surviving European example of such a death-mask is that of Edward III (died 1377) and is accurate enough to show facial distortion resulting from the stroke which killed him. Death masks of

famous people in Europe were taken as a matter of course from the I7th century, and these provide our most reliable information on a person's actual appearance, often countering the inaccuracies due to aesthetic interventions of the artist in their official live portraits.

Early in the I9th century life-masks were rising in popularity among those who were willing to suffer the discomfort of having their faces temporarily encased in plaster. The less adventurous favoured the Silhouette -a 'portrait' cut from black card, usually by itinerant artists who travelled throughout Europe. Invented in the late I8th century in France, it was a down-market substitute for the traditional, but expensive, miniature painted portrait. Larger versions of the silhouette could be traced directly from the subject's shadow, and often had some details of the features scratched or drawn onto the black surface. A mechanized development of this process was the invention of the physionotrace (I786). It (p.IO was based on the pantograph (a mechanical device still used to enlarge or reduce drawings), and it involved the sitter being posed in position (with the aid of clamps and rests) behind a vertical frame on which the pantograph could slide. On one end was a movable sighting aperture through which the operator looked at the subject, tracing it over the details of his face, while the other end moved a sharp stylus engraving a corresponding image onto a metal plate, at a pre-selected scale of reduction, and giving an exact trace of the subject's features. The resulting engraving was then printed in the usual manner. A portrait could thus be produced at one sitting, and at a reasonable cost. The French bourgeoisie and later those who came to power and prominence with the revolution all sat for this type of direct portrait. Because of the inevitable stiffness of the pose and the limitations of



Physionotrace portraits by Gilles-Louis Chrétien and Quenedey, two of the best-known physionotracists.



the device itself, the results were rather dull and mechanical looking; however it became the rage all over France and it spelled the end of the miniaturist's art. It was the precursor of photography.

As can be seen, from the earliest times, in parallel with the production of artistic likenesses (whose accuracy of representation was always subject to debasement by the fluctuating political, religious and aesthetic requirements of the day), another flow of marks, physical impressions, and directly stencilled images of the individual human presence and identity has been produced. And it was in the spirit of continuing the same movement that the first attempts were made (by scientists -not by artists) to chemically fix and preserve the images seen in the camera obscura. These shadowy spectres, the first permanent disembodied images of the human form (-mirror images and shadows not being detachable or directly preservable) are the outcome of that great quest, only tentatively grasped until its end, but dating back to our earliest consciousness as a species - to outwit both time and space by capturing the means of accurately expressing our physical existance and our personal identity in a lasting form. This is now achieved with such simplicity and economy of means, and its effects so taken for granted that we no longer consider the serious implications of this act or of its resulting artifact - the human photographic portrait.

TAKING PHOTOGRAPHS - The Ritual Act.

The act of taking a person's photograph, or of being photographed oneself, is now so common that it no longer requires a motive, only an occasion appropriate to its performance. Weddings, Christenings, first Communions etc., are existing rituals which it is hardly now possible to perform correctly without the confirmation of a photo-

graphic record. (A wedding album seems to supply at least as great an evidence of marriage as the certificate itself). But in addition to these existing rituals, many more events in the family are ritualized in themselves by the very fact of photographing them. For birthdays, family gatherings and family outings, sports-team photos and presentations of prizes, we stop and stare into a camer lens. There is a 'sense of occasion' in the performance of the act itself; a certain self-awareness comes into play, even in those not given to self-contemplation, we are forced to face up to the fact that we are approaching a moment where our 'self-image' will escape us - will pass out of our control, into the realm of public property and possibly into immortality. We immobilize ourselves for the moment and we imitate a pre-concieved mental image we have of ourselves - our photographic selves. Or, if we take the camera, we herd our subjects into a close group (they know their places - they already know what the picture should look like), they each transform themselves into an image and the camera merely records it. It is as if we each have a photo-image of ourselves inside, which we try to 'will' on to the film.

Photographing people in these circumstances is not usually motivated (primarily) by aesthetic considerations, it is more connected with identity, with 'likeness' at its most basic. It supplies evidence of identity, of presence at a certain time and location, that a certain relationship existed at that moment between the constituent members of the group (the nature of this relationship being further explained in written captions). Its use is as an aide-memoire and as an expression of social identifying - evidence of belonging. When we photograph our children we express our relationship to them, our power over

them, their compliance with our aims in objectifying them as photographs. We express our own pride in their yearly progress, while at the same time wishing to 'freeze' time itself.

Expressing social identity is even more involved in taking single adult photographs: the taking of photographs to publicize or to commemorate newly acquired position (in business etc), or Author's or Artist's photographs in connection with new publications and exhibitions. These seek to establish a certain identity, but also a certain persona related more to a required public conception of that person than to an expression of the subjects individuality. Its most extreme manifestation is seen in advertising imagery where human 'images' and 'personalities' are created to order through photography, using photographic 'models' (a literal description of their role). Advertising presents the most seductive images of human beings (and the most false), where the models' own true personalities are totally submerged beneath their 'applied' image. This is a simple indication of the untruthfulness of photography as a medium for the depiction of human beings.

Its use in the political manipulation of whole cultures by control of the 'models' of identification is well known - the Nazis produced a large amount of photography of this type, promoting their philosophy of Aryan racial purity. The modern equivalent in the western world - the Coca Cola culture, expressed by certain clothing, make-up etc, with consumer products, uses the sensuousness of the human presence in modern publicity colour photography. (Sociability, sexuality and sincerety are the necessary ingredients in such mass-identification photographs). This kind of photography is aggressively anti-individualist,

although it often implies that such a mass culture promotes individuality, and this genre looks set to produce most of our 'portrait' photographs for the foreseeable future.

The production of serious photographs which aim to deal with the individual human in an open and honest way, without attempting to impose an identity, a personality from without, on them, is much less common. There is no existing ritual occasion on which these images may be acquired without difficulty or self-consciousness. They require a very special commitment on both the photgrapher's and the subject's part.

THE SUBJECT - Self-consciousness and Identity.

Comparatively few serious photographers in the (relatively short) history of the medium have set out to produce a body of work in this area: to photograph people directly, with their consent and their co-operation, not instigated by specific events or special occasions. To focus attention on the individual human being, in these circumstances involves the intention that such a photograph will accomplish more than just registering a person's surface appearance. If we were merely collecting facial appearances - a common enough type of photography - there would be little or no point in proceeding. We require the belief that we can see, by our powers of perception and intuition past the surface and into some kind of truth about the subject (not necessarly a verifiably catalogue of visual facts, but possibly an intuitive recognition, 'held' and re-transmitted through the medium of the photograph), and therefore about humankind - about ourselves.

The difficulties in making this kind of photograph are great.

For the photographer, the need to leave aside (or at least to subdue in favour of inquiry) the given set of aesthetic conventions of portraiture (both from photography and painting), while still having to deal with the aesthetics of human appearance - the subject's will to present a 'good face'. In fact the difficulties for the subject, begin before the actual taking of the photograph. If we are aware (through familiarity with the photographer's work or statements of intent) of the motivation behind the wish to photograph us, this may lead to our presenting a pre-concieved, predictable façade to be photographed. Too full an explanation of the photographer's aims may curtail the possibilities of producing a more honest photograph. But, if the photographer leaves his aim un-explained, this hardly improves the situation. In an age of manipulated images, how will one's appearance be distorted? One cannot live up to an image of oneself which is more noble or more physically impressive than one knows oneself to be. We wish for a more honest image than that, but we feel (distrustfully) that the photographer cannot know what we are <u>really</u> like. Experience tells us that our appearance in formal photographs is invariably far removed from how we see ourselves. We may try to 'will' our inner feelings on to our faces, but the result is likely to be an embarrassing exaggeration, a caricature. We must finally accept that as photographic <u>subjects</u> we are without control. Having agreed to be photographed we surrender that degree of autonomy. From then on, whatever image of us is produced it will have an existance independent of us.
Roland Barthes has described being photographed as: "...the advent of myself as other: the cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity".[I] We imitate ourselves and consequently we suffer from "a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of

imposture".[2] We fear this dissociation. We fear what the future viewer of our image will, in our absence, read into that image (without us being present to further modify their dislocated experience of us). We also fear the motives of the photographer, who can, all too easily, use our image to express his own view of humanity. Most of all we want our photograph to express, not just our image (our effigy), not just our identity, but essentially our value. We feel the photograph must be, not only a 'certificate of presence' (as every photograph is), but also a certificate of worth.

Like the members of some tribes who believed that the camera steals their souls, we feel at the moment of exposure that we are becoming an object (and that that object has excaped our control). This, Roland Barthes calls "...a micro-version of death: truly becoming a spectre", (thus he finds ironic the photographer's attempts "to product effects that are 'lifelike' ").[3] To have produced, our (potentially) immortal image must evoke a premonition of our mortality. Most people have had the wish, at some time, to destroy an image of themselves which they feel is in-authentic. 'It is not me', they will maintain, that is to say: 'it is not how I want to be remembered'. We begin to appreciate the frightening magic that impressed the viewers of the first photographs of humans, when they observed themselves caught and frozen forever in the glass of the Daguerrotype.

THE FIRST PHOTOGRAPHS

Even more sophisticated viewers were not immune from these mixed feelings on seeing the early photographs. One early photographer (Dauthenday) said: "At first one does not trust himself to look for very long at the first pictures he has made. One shies away

from the sharpness of these people, feels that the puny little faces of the people in the pictures can see him, so staggering is the effect on everyone of the unaccustomed clarity and the fidelity to nature of the first Daguerreotypes". [4] The relationship between the photographic image and reality had not yet been established - our present all too comfortable acceptance of the photograph (which our best photographers are trying to disrupt).

These images differed also from later photographs in that they were not frozen fractions of a second, but were the image of a measured period of stillness, sometimes lasting minutes (necessary because of the insensitive emulsions available at the time). These early likenesses seem all the more intense and penetrating precisely because, as Walter Benjamin says, the procedure itself caused the models to live, not <u>out of</u> the instant, but <u>into</u> it; during the long exposure they grew, as it were, into the image. [5]

Not just the photographer, but the subject also, was required to <u>will</u> the image into existance during the time necessary to perform this 'alchemy' (not of gold but of silver) which transformed a person's 'aura' into their chemical trace on the glass plate. Ironically the early Scottish photographers Hill and Adamson, seeking a 'still' environment with suitably solid props to steady their subjects, posed many of these subjects among the tombs in an Edinburgh graveyard, doubling the intensity and poignancy of their images for us, a hundred years after their real deaths. They are long dead now, but they have yet to die in the photographs. These two facts co-exist in these photographs. And by extension, all photographs, old or modern, contain this premonition of death.

The remainder of this thesis deals with four photographers,

working in different locations, and different historical periods over the past 125 years, who have sought to record and reveal some greater truth beyond the surface detail of the human image.

Chapter II. NADAR (1820-1910)

Gaspard-Felix Tournachon (later known as Nadar) was born in Paris in 1820, the son of a Lyon printer-shopkeeper. After a middle-class education he moved, at the age of 18, with his family to Lyon and began work as a free-lance theatrical journalist, which he continued in Paris after his father's death. To suppliment his meagre income he attempted many other jobs, including clerk, shop assistant, pedlar, poacher and smuggler. His free time was spent with the Bohemian crowd who congregated around Charles Baudelaire. Nadar started two Literary periodicals, which failed almost immediately. He contributed to some left-wing publications, and, following the February 1848 attempted revolution (which, he claimed, 'woke him up') he joined a band of volunteers who set out to take part in the Polish insurrection. Unfortunately his luck failed and he was arrested at the German border and sent to a coal-mine for a week. Back in Paris he offered his service as a government secret-agent and spent six weeks wandering around Germany with a false passport, posing as a travelling artist. His dispatches were apparently not of much worth and he was recalled to Paris. Here he took a few drawing lessons and soon added sketches and caricatures to his theatrical and literary reviews, as a further source of income.

He next embarked on a grandiose scheme - a giant lithograph caricature of three-hundred Parisian literary and artistic personalities, titled 'Le Pantheon Nadar', which, when published in 1854, brought him fame, but failed to produce the fortune he had hoped for. Many of the preliminary sketches were drawn from life by Nadar himself (the law at that time obliged a caricaturist to get permission of the subject before publishing

a cartoon), but he sometimes used photographs supplied by his subjects when he could not sketch them directly from life.

Following this initial contact with photography, Nadar convinced his younger brother Adrien to take some photography lessons, and to set up a studio. Within a few months (in January 1855), Nadar himself had taken some tuition in photography and had built his own studio on the roof of his house.

As with all his schemes he threw himself wholeheartedly into his new obsession. At this time he married, which may have had a settling effect on his lifestyle, because his business (and undoubtedly he saw it, initially at least, as a business venture) was an immediate success, greatly helped by his recent fame as the creator of the 'Pantheon Nadar'. In 1860 he moved to a more elegant and fashionable address, which became his living quarters and the centre for his circle of Bohemian friends. Decorated totally in red and filled with objets d'Art this studio became a curiosity in itself, and brought the fashionable crowds to him to be photographed. The sittings were a social occasion in themselves and attracted to his studio, most of the artistic and literary celebrities living in, or visiting Paris.

Nadar's early photography in the mid 1850s was produced against the background of the tradition of portrait painting. The difficulties of the struggle to achieve a likeness (usually a pleasing, flattering one) consumed all the effort of most portrait painters. They aimed at little more than this. To these painters the invention and rapid technical advancement of the new skill of photography caused hostility and resentment, as it threatened to make them redundant. Their criticisms were centered on the allegations of lack of aesthetic content in the new medium, on its 'vulgarity' in comparison with the 'nobility'

of painting. It was not considered that photography could, or would later, develop its own aesthetic (independent of the concerns of painting) as painting itself had, over the centuries, evolved and changed. In 1859 Baudelaire, the opponent of realism and defender of the imaginary in Art, wrote: "If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the multitude which is its natural ally." [I] He advocated that it be confined in its uses, to be the humble servant of the sciences and arts, "like printing or shorthand which have neither created nor supplimented literature". He warned against photography being "allowed to encroach upon the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary, upon anything whose value depends solely upon the addition of something of a man's soul..."

But Nadar was not a painter, nor was he overly concerned with philosophical questions about realism. He was, as a former caricaturist, an expert analyser of faces, of facial expression, and how they related to the character of the subject. Nadar could, in his caricatures, apparently without difficulty, identify, distil out and enlarge upon (often literally) the individual identifying elements which constituted a likeness. Bringing this ability to his new enthusiasm for photography, it was inevitable that he would produce more than just an adequate likeness. Initially using his photographs of his notable compatriots as a basis for the caricatures in his 'Pantheon', he seems quickly to have seen several possibilities of benefit, not least of which was the economic one. The business which he founded with his brother Adrien was commercially successful, but he did not discend to the level of his rivals in business who specialised in publicity pictures and 'Cartes-de-Visites'. (His contemporary,

Disderi, who in 1852 had invented the Carte-de-Visite, employed 90 assistants; another photographer took photographs of dead children and had wings painted on to them as momentos for their parents!).

NADAR'S SUBJECTS

Many of Nadar's friends among the radical literary, political and artistic circle sat for him, without charge. Looking at these pictures we can see that they benefit greatly from Nadar's personal acquaintance with their characters, and particularly from his sympathetic approach, which invests them with a seriousness - almost a nobility - which has nothing to do with the pompous posturing of most portraits of the time. It cannot be doubted that many of these subjects had, in sitting for Nadar, one eye on posterity, and Nadar himself was conscious of this also, but he did not try to create heroic 'monuments' for the future from these sittings. By purely photographic means (lighting, control of tonal values, attention to placement in space, etc.) he convinces the viewer of the three-dimensional physical reality and humanity of his subjects. The relaxed look of many of them is noteworthy, considering that poses had sometimes to be held for several minutes. He aimed for gravity of expression, perhaps trying to express universal truths beyond individual personality. This balance between the mortal individual and more universal and permanent values is consistant with his humanistic views and those of the Paris circle to which he belonged. In this he differed from other photographers at the time. Disderi, his rival, emphasised detail of dress and pose and was the fashionable photographer for rich Parisians. Nadar always aimed to draw attention to individual character. He sometimes went so

far as to drape his subjects in a dark studio curtain so as to de-emphasise dress which might distract from their personality.

He was acclaimed in his own time for his innovative experiments with artificial lighting and other techniques. These experiments were always aimed towards achieving more three-dimensional presence - the solidity of the subject in space - not to produce dramatic or exaggerated effects for their own sake.

He did not allow his humanistic reverence for the individual to lapse into mere flattery. His exceptional loyalty to his friends, for which he was well known, did not cloud his perception of them. Baudelaire, for example, who posed several times for him during their long friendship (this in spite of Baudelaire's criticisms of photography), is seen changing, in a few short years, from the optimistic and image-conscious young poet and critic, to the (p.27
prematurely aged, disillusioned, alcoholic and syphilitic man of 44 (in the 1865 photograph) Nadar's sympathy does not cloak the (p.28
reality of Baudelaire's life which can be read in his face and demeanour, but neither does it condemn him. The elements of cynicism, satire and of cruelty which were to surface in photography in the 20th century are not part of Nadar's work. This is not to say that none of his subjects appear as unsympathetic characters. Many of his sitters must have been shocked at how much of their real character was revealed in these photographs. A letter exists from the painter Delacroix (dated 9th July 1858) begging Nadar to destroy the plate of a photograph he had just received. This request was not carried out by Nadar and the photograph still exists, showing Delacroix tired and suspicious, (p.29
worn out by the attacks on him by his bitter opponents in the ongoing debate in the Paris art world between the Realists and the Classicists and Romantics. Of his less sombre sitters,

Alexandre Dumas is seen as the genial and self-confident best-seller; and the composer Rossini is seen as tired but still cheerful, in spite of his deteriorating physical and mental state. In contrast, the photograph of Pierre Joseph Prudhon the anarchist writer (who invented the slogan 'Property is theft') shows him sad and world-weary, at the end of a life spent in jails or on the run from the authorities. Nadar, who admired him, photographs him sympathetically, in strong side light which emphasises his dishevelled and worried appearance. (p.30 (p.3I (p.32

One of Nadar's most striking portraits is of Charles Garnier (resting his elbow, incidentally, on the same arm-chair which supported Prudhon's fifteen years earlier) shortly after the completion of his first large architectural commission, the Paris Opera house. He looks out through us with a distant gaze, a dreamy romantic, his eccentric, untidy hairstyle contrasting with his neat fashionable clothes. An even later photograph shows the great literary figure, Victor Hugo, very old, but still powerful and intense, within three years of his death. On seeing this picture Hugo wrote to Nadar: "I have received your splendid print. Thanks and Bravo! You've succeeded in everything, even with an old pumpkin head like mine..."2 (Nadar had photographed him many times, and was called out, at Hugo's death to make a deathbed photograph of him). The 1883 print sums up many of the qualities and achievements of Nadar's art. His admiration for strong-willed personalities (and Paris during his time, as the cultural centre of the world, was full of such remarkable people), his sensitivity to the inner life within the public personality, and the humanitarian sympathy he shows, particularly when age or ill-health has lessened exceptional powers. The intimate view and the public persona co-exist equally in his (p.33 (p.34

best work.

NADAR - the views of his contemporaries.

Although his business continued under his son Paul, his interests moved on to other fields. In the 1860s a new passion had overtaken him - for Ballooning, which he pioneered and advanced, spending most of his fortune from photography on larger and larger balloons, and almost losing his own and his family's lives when they crash-landed near Hanover. He returned to photography in debt and although he lived until 1910, he took few photographs after 1890.

He had lived a very full life, full of enthusiasms: for Socialist politics; for literature (he wrote 15 books, several of them novels) for Aeronautics, (along with the successful ballooning, he had participated in the development of various unlikely - and sometimes alarming - flying machines, which never left the ground) for artificial lighting (which he used with success in photographing the Paris Sewers and Catacombs) for Art collecting (he had lent his studio to the Impressionists for their first exhibition) and also for the new inventions of the telephone and gramaphone, and some mysterious device which he proposed, called the 'Daguerreotype Acoustique' (Talking Pictures?!)

In 1859, an editor for whom he had worked as a journalist wrote of him:

> "Nadar is and always will be the lovable Bohemian we knew in our youth. A man of wit without a shadow of rationality; enthusiastic about everything, wanting to do everything, taking on everything, and then always losing interest and giving up. His life has been, still is, and always will be incoherent",3

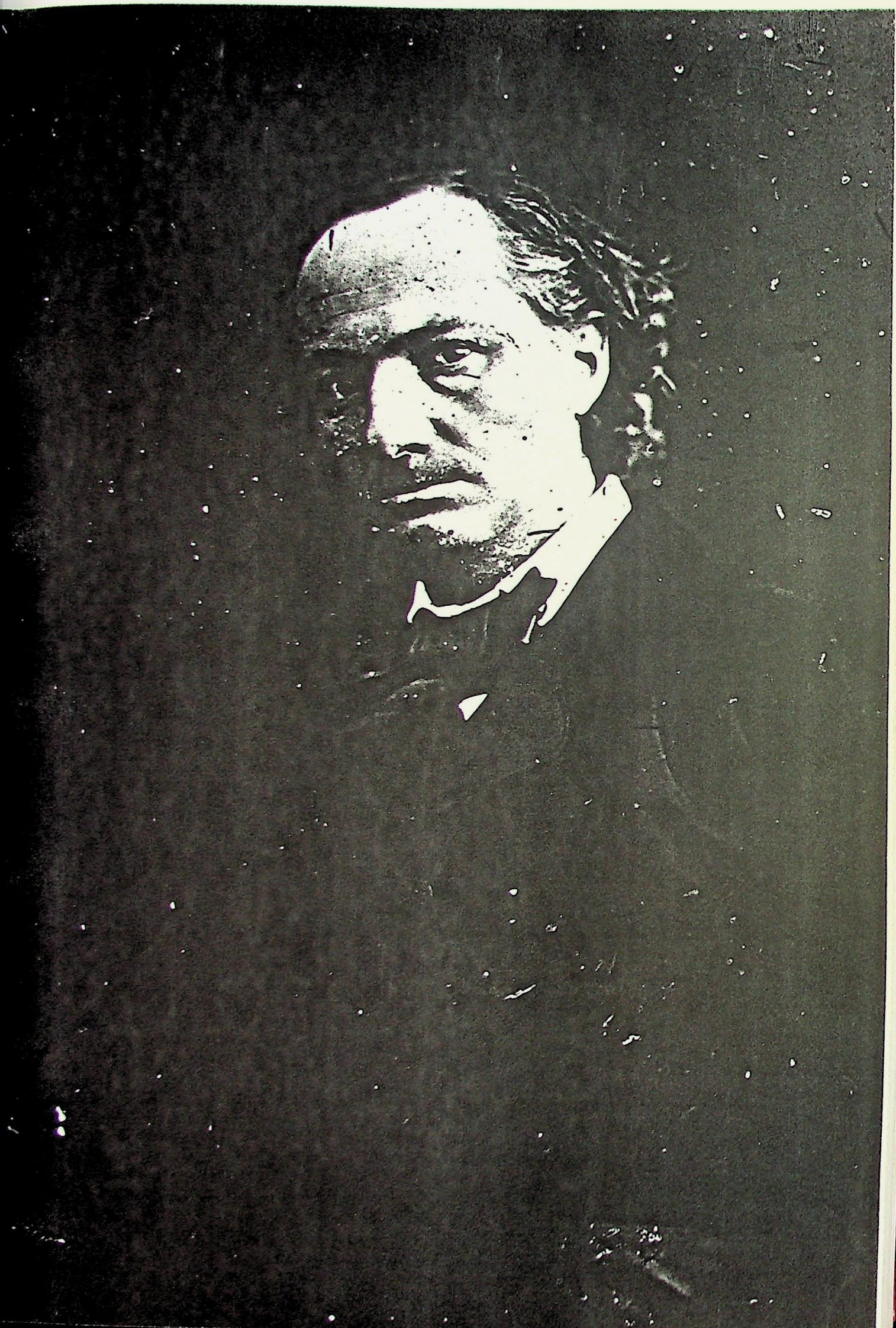
His own description of himself was as follows:

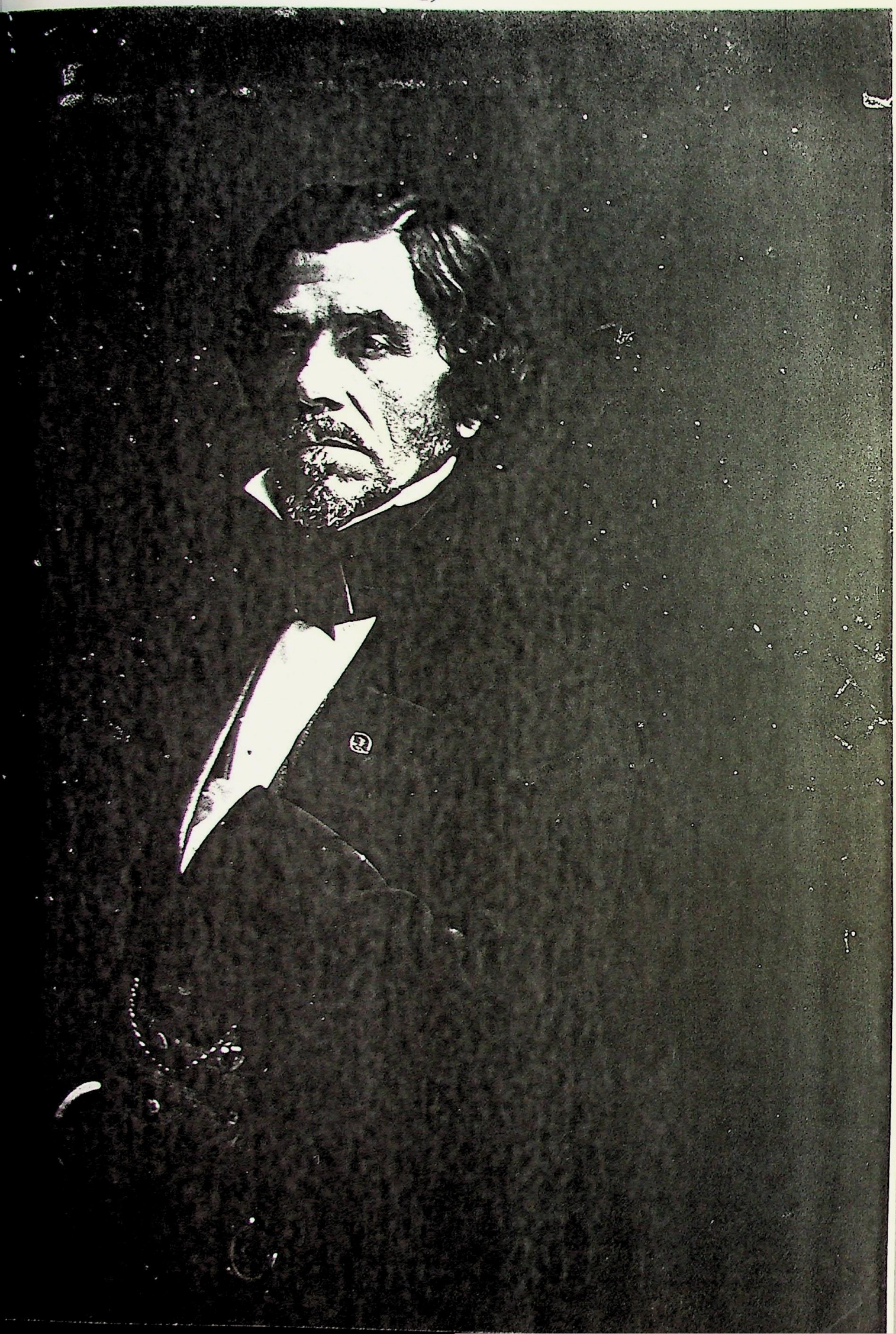
> "A superficial intelligence which has touched too many subjects to have allowed time to explore any in depth... A dare-devil, always on the lookout for currents to swim against, oblivious to public opinion, irreconcilably opposed to any sign of law and order. A jack-of-all-trades who smiles out of the corner of his mouth and snarls with the other, coarse enough to call things by their real names - and people too- never one to miss the chance to talk of rope in the house of a hanged man". [4]

What he aimed for (and achieved) in his photography he summed up himself in 1856:

> "...the moral grasp of the subject - that instant understanding which puts you in touch with the model, helps you to sum him up, guides you to his habits, his ideas and his character and enables you to produce, not an indifferent reproduction, a matter of routine or accident... but a really convincing and sympathetic likeness, an intimate portrait". [5]


Baudelaire





Chapter III. AUGUST SANDER (1876-1964)

August Sander, about whom less biographical information is available, worked in Germany between the two World Wars and produced portraits which were much less 'intimate portraits' than Nadar's. That is not to say that they are unsympathetic portraits, but that they do not show the empathy with the subject which was characteristic of Nadar's photography. Nadar's photographs were an extension of his personality. They directly spoke of his own interest in each of his subject's personality and individuality, people he knew well, or, at the very least, was acquainted with their work or reputation.

Sander, for the most part, photographed people who were, to him, strangers. In most cases he knew little more about them than their occupation. Unlike Nadar, Sander was driven, not by individual engagement with a personality, but by a plan - a theoretical approach to his subjects. His aim was not Nadar's individual pictures, but a body of work, five or six hundred photographs in all, of the people of Germany from all walks of life, every stratum of society, which would stand as a unit - a great historical document, in pictures, of the German people. His humanism (which is undoubtedly present, and evident in his work) may well have been the motivating factor behind the project, but it does not interpose itself directly in his relationship with the subject, as the photograph is taken. He is always the professional photographer using his profession to gain access; using his professional skills to describe his subjects photographically; to allow them to place themselves (unconsciously, on their part) in one of his social categories by their demeanour. He allows them to demonstrate to him, their place in society.

His pictures seem cool, dis-engaged on a personal level. The

people here do not engage our sympathies, our concern, our emotions, as do Nadar's. But Sander's intention was that they should engage our curiosity, as historical 'specimens'. Their interest for us is, of course, accentuated by our knowledge of subsequent German history. We cannot, while looking at these faces, avoid speculating on their future (now in the past), on what part they each would play in the great events to come: which of them had survived, which had killed, and which had died.

Sander was born in Herdorf Seig, a mining district east of Cologne, in 1876. He was the son of a mine carpenter, and after a very basic education, he was sent into the mines as an apprentice. By chance he was introduced to photography when he was appointed by the mine foreman as a guide for a landscape photographer visiting the area. A home darkroom and a present of a plate-camera from a well-off uncle set him on a new career.

While doing military service he got a part-time job with a portrait photographer in Trier, taking photographs of his fellow-soldiers. After his release from the army he toured Germany as a travelling landscape and architectural photographer, studied drawing and painting for a year in Dresden, and in 1901 became a photographic studio assistant in Linz, in Austria. He was successful in his work as a commercial studio photographer, and bought-out the business from his employer. However, not being experienced in money matters, he invested unwisely and got into debt. In 1910 he returned to Cologne to start a new studio, advertising his services to take: "natural portraits that show the subjects in an environment corresponding to their own individuality".[I] In this way he began his serious work, for which he is now known, travelling the countryside on bicycle, in the areas he knew well from his childhood, working first in

a limited area, and photographing this time, not landscapes or buildings, but the people of the farms and villages. These he filed according to class, profession, social standing etc. He later wrote of this period:

> "These people, whose way of life I had known from my youth, appealed to me because of their closeness to nature... Thus the beginning was made and all the types discovered were classified under archetype, with all the characteristic common human qualities noted".[2]

He was called back to the army during the First World War and, after the German defeat, he began to associate with the artistic and radical circle in Cologne. He joined a group of writers and artists (apparently an informal association) called the Cologne Progressives, a radical Marxist group, whose chief artists, Gerd Arntz and Franz Wilhelm Seiwert were attempting to produce an art based on a system of graphic signs, reflecting the stratification of society under Capitalism. Following discussions with Siewert, Sander's already schematized photography project was broadened to include the urban proletariat and bourgeoisie along with land-owners and the professional classes.

At this time also he began to reprint his old negatives on photographic paper intended originally for technical photographs, which counteracted the flattering romantic tendancy of the traditional portrait photographer's methods. He also avoided retouching his photographs, which was common practice at the time. The result of these changes was that the detail of face, costume and setting was brought forward into greater clarity, supressing the warmth and 'mood' of the original method. The effect on Sander was to sharpen his perception of the possible scope and worth of his project, and to harden his resolve in pressing on

towards its completion and publication. A projected total of over 500 pictures was to be titled 'Man of the 20th Century'. In 1927 he had an exhibition of some of his photographs and at that time he wrote:

> "Nothing seems to me to be more appropriate than to use photography in order to present a contemporary picture of our time, absolutely true to nature... photography has given us new possibilities and tasks different than painting. Painting is capable of rendering objects in magnificent beauty but also in dreadful truth, then again it can deceive outrageously. To see the truth is something we must be able to bear, but, above all, we must hand it down to our fellow men and to posterity whether it puts us in a favourable light or not.
>
> "The exhibition... is the result of my search and I hope to be on the right track now. I hate nothing more passionately than sugary photography using tricks, poses and effects.
>
> "Therefore allow me to tell the truth about our era and its' people in an honest way", (August Sander 1927) [3]

In 1929 he published a book of 60 photographs: Antlitz der Zeit (Face of the Time), arranged according to his scheme, the subjects un-identified, except by profession. Starting with peasants and workers, communists and revolutionaries, it moves on to the professional and middle classes, some businessmen, factory owners etc. students, artists and ends with the unemployed.

Not all of the photographs fitted neatly into the categories (e.g. Boxers etc.) which led to some criticism by his colleagues in the Cologne Progressives, who may also have felt that some of the photographs subjects displayed too much individual character

to act as symbolic representatives of their class. Marx, in the introduction to 'Das Capital' had said that individuals merely personify economic categories, as representatives of particular class relationships. Sander, it is clear was not willing to sublimate his personal aesthetic to scientific Marxism, while nevertheless making use of this structure, which suited his purposes. It is the tension observed between the individual personalities of his subjects and their evident place within the structure of society which we now recognise as the great strength of these pictures. The book however, did not sell well, and this failure was the beginning of many years of disaster for Sander.

With the rise of Nazism, pressure on Sander increased. His son Erich, a communist, (whom Sander had actively helped with photographic duplication of propoganda) was arrested and died later in a concentration camp. Unsold copies of Sanders book Antlitz der Zeit were destroyed in 1934 along with the printing plates, and Sander was forced to move his family to the country, where he spent the war years taking landscape photographs.

The Nazis themselves had, of course, used pseudo-scientific analysis of society to justify their racialist theories, but Sander's photographs, while they did not betray his feelings about his subjects' politics (he had photographed several Nazi supporters as well as communists), they had the opposite effect to Nazi glorification of 'Aryan superiority'. His pictures of Nazis, far from raising them above the rest, as personifications of the 'master-race', showed them, without praise or condemnation, as members of the large mass of society, and so were considered subversive by the new authorities. Sander, despite his anger and despair at his treatment, was still able to retain his

admirable detachment when he photographed Nazi subjects, (and even members of the S.S.) in 1936, 1938 and again in 1945. They are photographed without malice, re-emphasizing what he had previously written:

> "It is not my intention either to criticize or describe these people, but to create a piece of history with my pictures".[4]

He also said, in advice to his grandson, a photographer:

> "I never made a person look bad. They do that themselves. The portrait is your mirror, it is you".[5]

Indeed we do see, in the absence of Sander's praise or condemnation of his subjects, only reflections of our prejudices

Although Sander's photographs repay careful scrutiny individually, they are intended to be seen as a group, so it would be against the spirit of Sander's enterprise and against his intentions to analyse individual images. However, his achievement is immediately appreciated by seeing many of his images together. Sander believed that individuals showed their place in society by the way they presented themselves to the camera. The middle classes stand confidently but formally, sure of their worth and the value of their place in society. The peasants seem self-conscious but docile, they stand stiffly as if hypnotized by the camera. The workers look reluctant to pose, they seem suspicious of the photographer's motives. The intellectuals look tense but determined. Sander is particularly astute at showing how some people seem to have fused into their occupation. The varnisher whose clogs match the shape of his (p.45
head. The upholsterer whose moustache curls up like his hammer. (p.46
The round-headed, pot-bellied pastry cook who stirs a pot which (p.47

could have been made for no one but him. The herbal doctor who (p.48
stalks the camera like some kind of giant insect. The prim
notary who poses as sharp and alert as his dog. The unemployed (p.51
sailor who lists precariously, even on dry land. They all have (p.52
their humour but there is no malice in these pictures because
when we look in their eyes (and most often they look back at us)
we see above all else their individual humanity, and the comic/
tragic outer layer drops away.

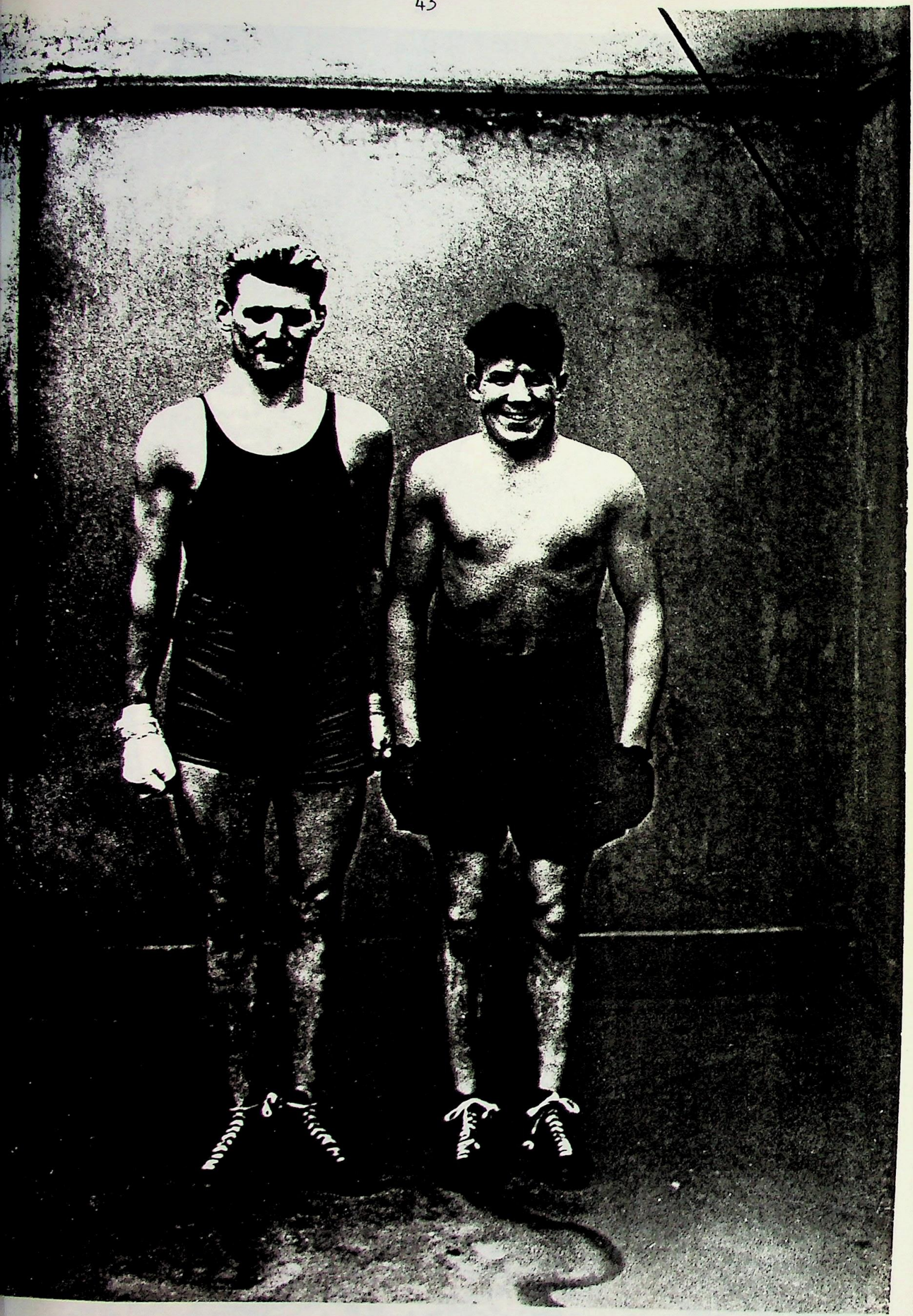
Other pictures are far from any kind of humour. Widower with
Sons, Cologne, 1928, is suffused with a sense of loss and pain. (p.53
This small round man holds onto his two small sons, but his mind
is elsewhere: there is a poignant desperation in the gesture.
Despite their comfortable surroundings the feeling of loss is
palpable. Likewise, in Unemployed 1928, the emaciated man stands (p.54
in a dark alley, seeming ashamed to face the brightness of the
streets we see in the distance - he is without hope.

If there is anything approaching judgement in Sander, it is,
not even in his portraits of lumpish young Nazis, but in the 1928 (p.55
portrait of a Member of the Student Corps, with his ostentatious (p.56
display of braid, weapon and medallion and his duelling scars.
Even he is not ridiculed by Sander, he is allowed to present
himself: beneath his glittering little hat, his conceit, his
intolerance, and his cruelty blaze out through his eyes.

It was not until 1982 that Sander's portraits were published
in anything like their projected form and under their intended
title: 'Menschen Des 20 Jahrhunderts' (Men of the 20th Century,
which contains 431 photographs). It comprises probably the
greatest sustained project undertaken yet by anyone in the history
of Portrait Photography.

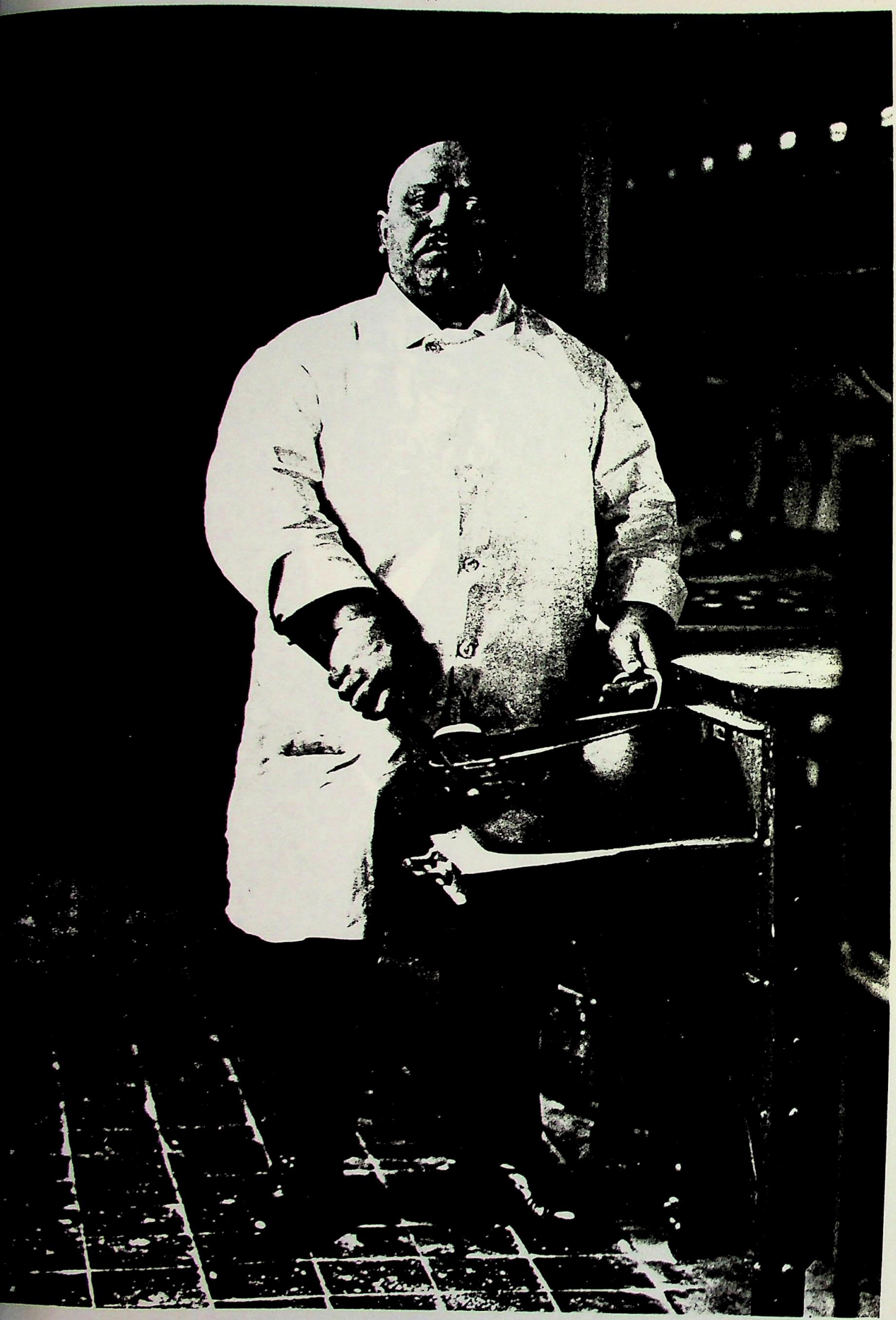
Sander's studio was destroyed in the bombing of Cologne in

1944, and after the was in 1946, 40,000 of his negatives were lost in a fire. He felt unable to continue with his project, and lived on, with little recognition of his achievements until his death in 1964.

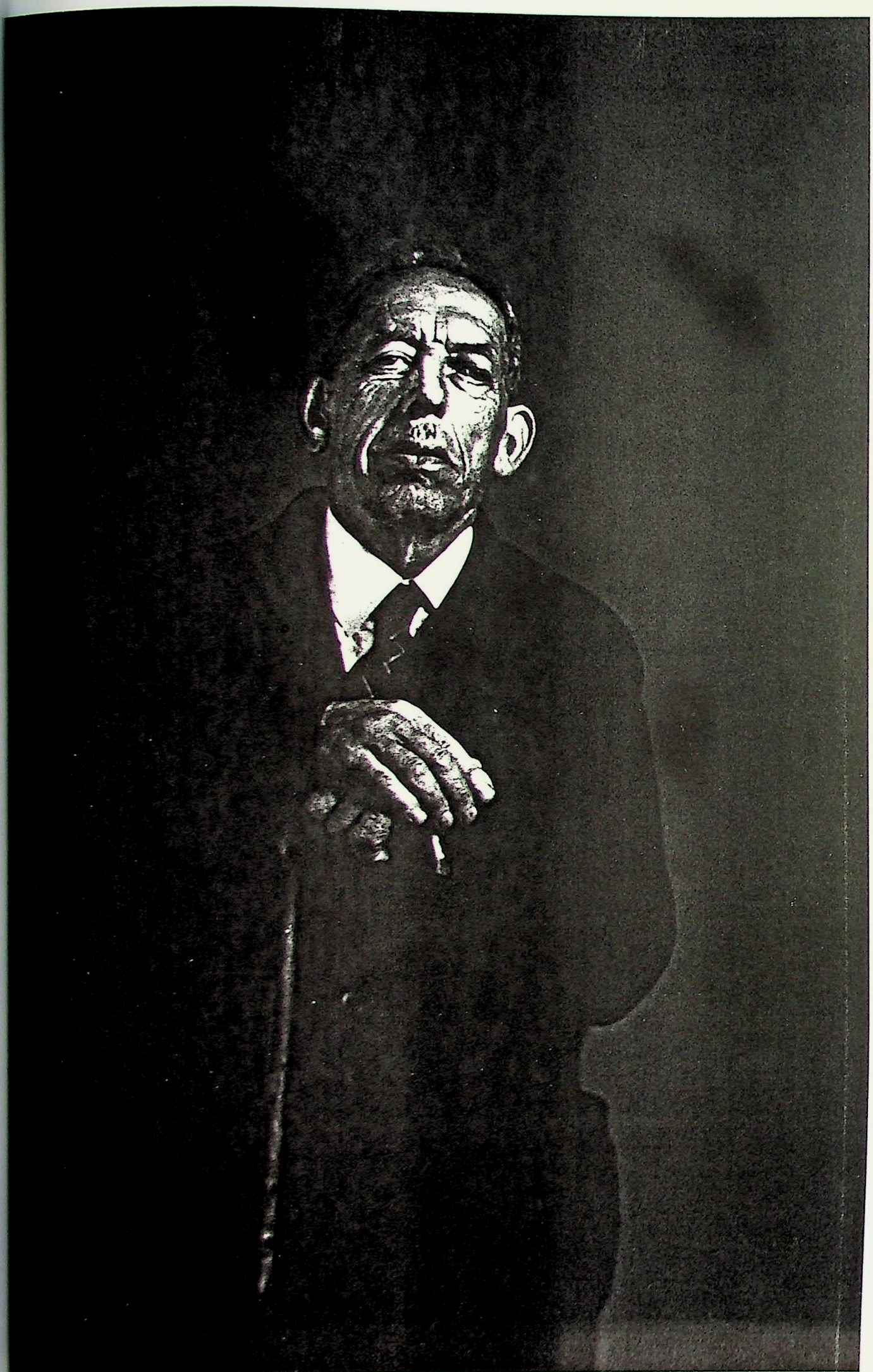


28 · Boxers · Boxeurs

ezierermeister 1928 · Master upholsterer · Maître tapissier



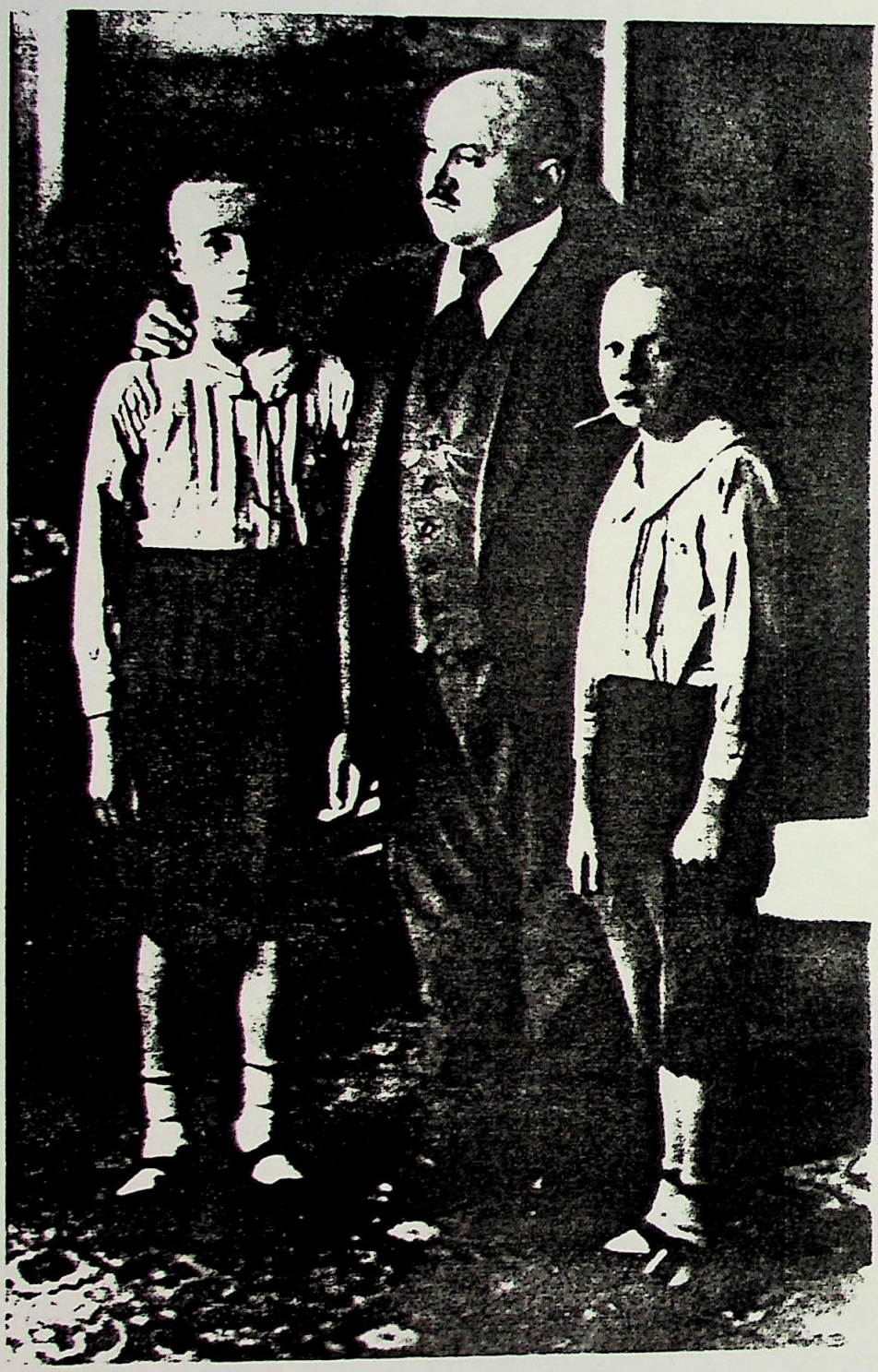
1928 · Pastry cook · Maître pâtissier



Barman · Garçon de comptoir

1928/29 · Communist leader · Leader communiste

Bauter Seemann 1928 · Unemployed sailor · Marin au chômage



28 · Unemployed · Au chômage

student ca. 1928 · **Member of a student corps · *Etudiant de corporation***

Chapter IV.

AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY - Myths and Strategies.

The fifty years between the working periods of Nadar and Sander seem to us now, quite brief and uneventful (in terms of photographic progress) compared with the next fifty, which bring us up to Diane Arbus, working in America in the 1960s.

In photography, most of our achievements seem to have been made in the past fifty years, some resulting from technical advances - smaller cameras and faster film led to photo-journalism as we know it today; some with commercial considerations - the use of colour magazines for advertising has, largely, created the typical look of our mass-media photographic imagery. But the most important changes are in the attitudes expressed by, or motivating the work of photographers now, particularly in America.

From the start of its use in portraiture in America, photography had to deal with the novel, the unfamiliar. Pocket-sized photographs sent home by emigrants must have seemed like messages from another world, to the peasants of thousands of villages all over Europe: the familiar face seen in this unfamiliar form, proudly beaming out its faith in future success, and the strange formal dress, hinting that this success has already been achieved. These images are far removed in intention and effect from photographs made in their home community - images which grow old <u>with</u> their subjects, which adhere to their subjects' lives and share the total meaning of those lives; which form part of the treasure-store of cultural artifacts giving identity to the community. There, their meanings were not fixed, but were fused onto the mythic fabric of society, and their meanings evolved and matured in response to cultural evolution. In contrast, the

images received from the travellers to America seem to be sealed in a vacuum; their viewers would not have had the necessary background information to decipher their correct meaning, or to place them in context. Passed around with pride , as proof that these voyagers had 'arrived', both physically and culturally; and with sorrow, as a token of absence; they served also as a 'novelty' - an exotic extra-cultural artifact, an exciter of dreams, longings, and desire. The commercial photographers who made them were well aware of this - was not their whole business founded on the new arrivals' hope to surprise and impress? The legacy of this tendancy towards sensation continues even up to the present generation of American photographers in the desire to show for the first time, the previously unseen or unphotographed.

It was in America that this type of photography first found its appropriate vehicle - the picture magazine - disseminating images which aim to surprise or shock, which rely on the jolt of the unfamiliar. (The competition to capture the most dramatic images - the biggest prizes, still operates with the same intensity, but now on television). Whatever uneasse is brought on by such magazine pictures is calmed by the balm of images of familiarity and security, in the form of the accompanying advertisments. Together they supplied the pain and the pleasure required by a society with an aversion (even in its favoured images) to passivity, and and an insatiable need for mental provocation. LIFE the the first mass-media magazine, when it started in 1936, had one third of its photographs in its advertisments. From the beginning this relationship had established itself. The functional images of publicity would fully use photography, with its talent for awakening desire and promising gratification, while the editorial pictures filfilled the public's wish for a national view of itself,

(necessary to fuse a nation of diverse cultures into a unified whole) by creating a common mythology, a national memory-bank of shared images. For example, as LIFE's myth-making photo-journalists followed the U.S. tanks and troups through southern Europe in World War II, photographing young American faces against the new ruins and the ancient ruins of Italy (for photographers, myth-making in a truly mythic arena) they created for America a view of itself and its relationship to the rest of the world which it still clings to today.

After the war, magazine photography's prototype image of the individualistic American, as a model of asperation and emulation, reached its height (with pride of place reserved for movie stars and politicians. And when the brightest star, the most photographed, the personification of the national myth, John F. Kennedy, had fallen, and the mourning time had elapsed (the burden of national 'image-carrier' having temporarily passed to his widow), it was time for photography to turn towards the darker recesses of America's psyche - the, until now, unadmitted underbelly of the myth - and (starting with the face of the assassin Oswald) to make its descent into the underworld.

Diane Arbus and, more recently, Richard Avedon, are the two photographers whose visions of America and Americans rely on very particular and distinct attitudes. Their respective subjects and methods differ significally, but they do share a common dark view of the human condition. In terms of the scope of their projects, similarities to Sander's enterprise may initially seem identifyable, however there is a fundamental difference, in that Sander's project was, in form as well as in content, inextricably bound to the structure of pre-war German society. That society was less heterogeneous and less centered on the

singular person than is U.S. society - it had a rigidly formal structure which made a project such as Sander's feasible. The German at that time, could (and indeed was expected to) see himself as part of the great 'machine' of society - a dense unyielding stratification of classes and occupations. Despite straining to come to terms with industrialization and (with great difficulty) democratization, during the years of the weak Weimar Republic (1918-1933), this inflexible social structure still dominated the lives of most Germans. Sander's subjects represent the constituent parts of that society which, in total, (when the project was finished) were intended to describe the complete 'machine' of a functioning society. The smooth running of that mechanism was dependant on preserving the status-quo. Its rigidity and formality tended always to resist change.

American society in contrast, even the early century, but especially by the sixties, was more eclectic. It was based on the individual and its natural condition was one of continuous flux. There was greater interchangeability between the parts, and an American could quite easily change function in society - or, could get lost between the functioning parts. Ambition and insecurity are the lubricants of such a machine, and failures are ground between those functioning parts. What Arbus and Avedon have in common is that they show how their subjects are coping individually with these forces in their own lives.

Arbus' subjects were chosen quite often from among those who had, through choice or necessity, opted out of the system, and were adopting a personal alternative strategy for survival; while Avedon has concentrated more on those who, in spite of evident damage to themselves as persons continue to function somewhere in society, whether vigourously at the highest level

of power, or tenuously, on the periphery.

Photography in the United States had received its greatest forward impetus from the work of the social documentary photographers of the depression years. Taking their cue from the pioneering working of Jacob A. Riis who had photographed the slum-dwelling immigrants in New York City between 1870 and 1890, and his successor Lewis W. Hine who (from 1908 to 1914) exposed the living and working conditions of child labour in America, this group of documentary photographers (under the auspices of of the Farm Security Administration) set out specifically in 1935 to show (and thereby hoped to change) the poverty io the rural areas. Their pictures certainly showed real human degredation, but they were essentially positive in their assertion of human values. They implied that the system had somehow broken down, but the faults could be corrected. The flaw was not seen as inherent in the individual but in the external effects of society. By the end of the 1940s after the accumulated shocks of six years of war, and particularly of the Nazi exterminations, some photographers began to show the tragic flaw as being within the individual human being. The vindictiveness and paranoia of the McCarthy era and the rapid growth of Nuclear weapons throughout the 1950s seemed to confirm this view.

In photographic terms the consummation of this tendency was Robert Frank's 1959 book The Americans whose grainy wide-angle grab-shots, taken on a cross-country trip in 1956 captured the restless, aimless transient inhabitants of a successions of bars, bus stations, motels and roadside cafés. These inelegant but dynamic compositions had an immediate stylistic impact, but their underlying pessimistic vision; the hopelessness of ordinary citizens, has had a greater long-term effect on American photography.

However, where Robert Frank glimpsed his subject, snapped, and was gone, his American successors have stopped to stare. The new method, developed during the sixties by Diane Arbus (and continued today by Richard Avedon) was based on an uncompromising intensity of looking, often at the socially unacceptable; the exposure of the wounded, and sometimes the wounds, of victims of the American dream.

Chapter V. DIANE ARBUS (I923-I97I).

Diane Arbus was born Diane Nemerov in May I923, into the family which owned Russeks, a large department store on fashionable Fifth Avenue in NewYork. Her grandparents had been poor Jewish immigrants from Poland and Russia who wad risen to prosperity in the garment district selling furs and ready-made fashions.

Diane's parents increased their inherited wealth and lived a luxurious and flamboyant lifestyle, with servants, chauffeur and annual trips to Europe to see the fashion collections. For their children, a pampered but suffocatingly over-protected environment, where they were under constant surveillance by governesses, had the effect of making them shy and nervous. In later years, Diane recalled being brought to the park by her governess, and standing by the side of a drained reservoir, looking across to the other side where the poor lived in a shanty town. She described it as:

> "... a potent memory. Seeing the other side of the tracks, holding the hand of one's governess... I grew up exempt and immune from circumstances." I

Asked about how the public experience of the Depression had affected her she answered:

> "I was aware of it partly because it <u>didn't</u> affect me. That sense of being immune -ludicrous as it sounds -was painful.Now I seek danger and excitment... I've come to believe that you can really learn by being touched by something." 2

Early in her life she seems to have developed a distrust of the reality of outward appearances. She came to believe that the behaviour of the adults around her, her parents and their nouveaux riches friends, was a hollow act intended to impress

each other.

> "My father was a kind of self-made man,... His friends were richer than he was, but he was the most flamboyant of them... It was a front. My father was a frontal person. A front had to be maintained... in business if people smell failure, you've had it." 3

This early contact with, and awareness of the human presentation of 'image' and its failure to convince, was to form the basis of her work in photography. As Halla Beloff has recently written of her:

> "... genteel women who are taught, over taught to be skilled in social mores, are likely to be especially sensitive to the breakage of these customs. They are fascinated by the leakage behind a social presentation. So one can understand her preoccupation with freaks and others whose face-work doesn't work. She understands that maquillage doesn't hide everything. Alienation is understood." 4

Her disillusionment stayed with her through her school years (she received a liberal and artistic education) where she was regarded by her teachers as an exceptional artistic talent - an opinion she seemed to reject as mere flattery. Within her family she was shy and withdrawn and seems to have felt, as a heavy weight, the claustrophobic athmosphere of the family home.

When at last, during her high-school years, she could, temporarily escape her surveillance, she and a friend would travel on the New York subway, just to stare at people, -ordinary people, tramps and eccentrics. Sometimes they would follow these characters home to the seediest parts of the city just to see how and where they lived. She was fascinated and puzzled by the difference between what was normal and what was not. Anyone who was not

part of her enclosed world, even the most ordinary person, seemed (in her words) "extraordinary". Here, long before she had considered being a photographer, she was developing both her nerve in confronting people, and her interest in the type of subjects which would dominate her work twenty years later.

In her mid teens she was introduced to the work of George Grosz by an art teacher who had been his pupil, and she immediately recognised an affinity between his subject matter and her own vision of her surroundings. While she still lived within the enclosed family circle her mind was preoccupied by the forbidden low-life she saw in the city just out of reach. The strain between her real life and her imagination was causing alienation from her family, and she began to succumb to long periods of depression, which were to be a recurring problem throughout her life.

At this time she met Allan Arbus, a window-dresser in her father's department store, and an acting student, who was a nephew of the stores manager. Although she was only fourteen, and he nineteen, she shocked her family by announcing that they intended to get married. After four years of her family trying to keep them apart (they considered his family socially inferior), and as soon as she was eighteen, (in 1941) they married.

Allan Arbus got training as a photographer in the army and served during the war in Burma, with a photographic unit. After discharge he and Diane decided to set up a fashion photography business as his prospects as an actor seemed poor at that time. Their main income was from her family's business, photographing clothes for their newspaper advertisments. Around this time also Diane started taking photographs for herself, mostly pictures of her friends and her new daughter, while still concentr-

ating on developing their business. Their work was considered technically excellent, but not innovative, however they did eventually win some of the less prestigious projects for the quality magazines (Vogue, Glamour, Harper's Bazaar etc.) - contacts which helped Diane later in getting her personal work published. They did, in time, make quite a good living from fashion photography, and the business lasted until the late sixties.

PHOTOGRAPHIC INFLUENCES.

During the 1950s Arbus' bouts of depression became deeper and longer lasting, putting a strain on her marriage. Her husband's acting ambitions were also frustrated, and in 1957 they separated, although he kept the business going, out of financial necessity until 1969. Her personal photography up to this time was haphazard and lacked a subject or a sense of direction. She started to study, first with Alexey Brodovitch, the art director of Harper's Bazaar, who was publishing serious documentary photographers in his magazine, and encouraging top fashion photographers like Irving Penn and Richard Avedon to tackle serious subjects.

However Arbus found his classes too tough. Brodovitch was very critical of all his students' work. He insisted:

> "Don't shoot haphazardly!... If you see something you've seen before, don't click the shutter".5

Although she learned this lesson well, Arbus eventually dropped out of the classes and started to study the history of photography by herself.

She was impressed by Lewis Hine's pictures of child labour in the 1910s and by Robert Frank's recent photographs, and was introduced to the work of Lisette Model, a photographer of French/

Austrian aristocratic background who had come to New York in 1941 from France, where she had photographed the rich tourists and inhabitants of Nice, with a very un-flattering directness.

Model had several documentary projects published by Brodovitch in Harper's Bazaar (between 1941 and 1953) - direct flash shots of New York night life, Jazz clubs etc., and (like Jacob Riis, sixty years earlier) she photographed recent immigrants in the slums of the Lower East Side. In 1958 Diane Arbus became her pupil and eventually her close friend. Although by this time Model had stopped publishing her work, and it is unlikely that Arbus had yet seen many Model photographs, her influence was of central importance in Arbus' development.

Model emphasised a commitment to subject matter rather than style in photography and indeed, encouraged an emotional engagement on some level with the person to be photographed, whether that be of a conversational or confrontational nature. She told her students:

> "Don't shoot until the subject hits you in the pit of the stomach".[6]

She referred to the camera as "an instrument of detection" and continued: "... when I point my camera at something I am asking a question, and the photograph is sometimes an answer... In other words, I am not trying to prove anything. I am the one who is getting the lesson",[7]

Model considered Arbus' first pictures weak and "wispy". She insisted that Arbus decide on a personal subject matter, and Arbus decided: "I want to photograph what is evil".[8]

Retracing the routes she took as a schoolgirl to the "forbidden" parts of the city, this time with a camera, she began to find her subject among the tenements, dingy hotels, penny-arcades, bath-

houses, and tattoo parlours. She admitted later that she was "terrified most of the time".[9] She was using photography as a means of confronting her deepest anxieties about her relationship to the 'real world', as compared with the protected world she grew up in - which had come to seem increasingly unreal.

Gradually she became more daring, and eventually developed a psychological dependence on the excitement of these potentially dangerous encounters. She used them to counteract her depression; her self-confidence grew, and from her first hesitant and distant shots, she progressed to close-ups with the subject looking straight into the camera. At this time she was using a 35mm camera at eye-level, with available light, and although the subject-matter was unusual, the technique was that of conventional documentary photography.

Her first extended projects which she set for herself, involved a flea-circus on 42nd Street called 'Hubert's Museum' and 'Club 82', a nightclub in Lower Manhattan, which featured female-impersonators. In each case she visited them regularly, gained the confidence of the owners and performers and eventually was permitted to photograph backstage and in the dressing rooms.

She was interested at this time in producing series of pictures describing the total atmosphere of these places, rather than concentrating on finding a single image which would stand alone and embody all of the mythic and magical associations these places were beginning to hold for her, as she would do later when she had developed her mature style.

Arbus was certainly not the first to deal with taboo subjects. E.J.Bellocq had photographed the brothels of Storyville, New Orleans, in 1912. Brassaï in Paris and Cartier-Bresson in Spain, both in the early 1930s had dealt with the same subject,

and Arthur Fellig - known as "Weegee"- had, since the 1940s photographed for the New York Daily News, the victims of every kind of disaster (shootings, stabbings, fires, suicides etc.). He particularly focussed on people in extreme situations, 'convulsed with pain or terror'[10], usually photographed at night with direct flash, and he had no hesitation in invading people's private lives, to catch them at their most vulnerable. Weegee's photography concentrated on freezing the essential moment of highest drama in an event; there is always a sense of movement, either in the subject or the camera (as expressed in the camera angle or the cropping of the image). He urges the viewer to speculate the preceeding events and the aftermath of each frozen instant - to complete the narrative.

In contrast, Arbus, even in her early photography de-emphasises the narrative element. The emphasis is on the subject <u>being</u> rather than <u>doing</u>. This stillness in photographs tends to lead us to psychological analysis of the subject rather than to narrative speculation. Her subjects stop all activity and present themselves to us willingly. And her first subjects, the 'freaks' in Hubert's Museum were used to 'presenting' themselves to curious onlookers, some of them doing a five minute spot, twenty times a day. When they began to trust her, she photographed the dwarfs, fire-eaters, a half-man/half woman, the seal boy (whose hands grew from his shoulders), the fat lady, the lady with the serpent, and the Jungle Creep.

Arbus seemed to go immediately to the most extreme subject-matter as if, having been so timid at first, she wanted to prove to herself that she had the nerve to do it, to finally break the taboos which because of her background, weighed so heavily on her. The breaking of these taboos came to be intimately connected, for

her, with the act of photographing itself:

> "I always thought of photography as a naughty thing to do. That was one of my favourite things about it, and when I first did it.I felt very perverse." [11]

Photography provided the license to confront people and situations which both frightened and fascinated her, and, at the same time, the courage she developed through these adventures spurred her on to acts of greater daring and greater risk. Photography was both the means and the end. The capturing of a shocking image was, in turn, the motivation, the means, and the proof of her freedom.

Following Arbus' career in fashion photography with her husband (she had not started to produce her serious work until her late thirties), she seemed to feel an increasing sense of urgency. Later she said in an interview: "I let ten years go by before I really started out on mt career. But it was my fault. I don't blame anybody but myself."

She immersed herself totally in her search for new photographs. Soon she was alarming her friends with stories of the situations she got into when approaching the petty-criminals, pimps and prostitutes, drug-addicts, sexual deviants, and other underworld characters who were her latest subjects. Although she took hundreds of pictures of the members of these subcultures, she thought of their motivations as being very obvious and they held less interest for her than the truly mysterious and enigmatic lives of solitary and unique eccentrics, people who were, as she wrote: "Author and hero of a real dream." [12]

Around 1960 Arbus had started to look for commissions for editorial photographic work on the magazines for which she had previously worked as a fashion photographer. This was a financial

necessity as she was now separated from her husband, and had two small daughters. (Since her marriage she had never received financial support from her family). She was glad to get what commissions did come her way (for Esquire, Harper's Bazaar, Show, Saturday Evening Post, New York Times Magazine and later the London magazines Nova and The Sunday Times Magazine) also because they gave her legitimate access to people and places otherwise out of bounds to photographers.

In 1967 she showed some of her early prints in a group exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and although her friends encouraged her to have a one-woman show of her work, or to publish a book of photographs, she seemed reluctant to commit herself to either project, perhaps believing that if the particular slant of her vision became more widely known, her freedom to approach potential subjects would be limited.

Among those Arbus photographed for magazine projects were:- a midget who dressed in stars and stripes and called himself Uncle Sam; a woman who believed she had been, in turn, the wife of Solomon and of Moses, the twin sister of Jesus Christ and who now called herself a bishop; several Soothsayers and Astrologers; a man called the Mystic Barber who wore antennae on his head and received messages from Mars; and another man who claimed to be heir to the throne of the Byzantine Roman Empire and who wrote poetry in Latin: People she described as: "Characters in a fairy-tale for grown-ups."[13]

MYTHS AND MASKS.

In 1963 Arbus won the first of her two Guggenheim grants. Her application stated that she wished to explore and photograph: "American rites and customs, contests (and) festivals...

"I want to photograph the considerable ceremonies of our present because we tend while living here and now to perceive only what is random and barren and formless about it. While we regret that the present is not like the past..., its innumerable habits lie in wait for their meaning. I want to gather them, like somebody's grandmother putting up preserves, because they will have been so beautiful."[14]

As had Robert Frank before her, she set out on a cross-country trip, travelling alone by bus, to search out these rites and customs and their practitioners, and taking risks by approaching the most dangerous-looking, and consequently to her, the most interesting people. She believed that nothing bad could happen to her if she always wore her cameras; that being a photographer was both a license and a protection against the real world. She photographed the travelling carnivals -'mud-shows' as they were known - and their performers. These were familiar territory for her, but now she also began to see the strangeness in quite ordinary inhabitants of the towns and cities she visited.

She developed a kind of second sense about people, so that she could often tell just by looking at someone, whether they had some secret life, some extraordinary peculiarity or obsession which gave meaning to their lives. She was now attuned to the 'slight flaw' in anyone's projected exterior, the clue to "some mysterious aspect of them"[15] which she would discover when she went home with them. and she had the ability to convince even the most suspicious subject to open up their lives to her. In an interview in 1969 she admitted:

"I've learned to lie as a photographer... There are times when I come to work in certain guises, pretend to be poorer

than I am - acting, looking poor." [16]

and in 1970 she told some photography students of "acting dumb" so as to seem less threatening to her subjects.[17]

Her aim now was to produce in each case the single direct image which would contain all the mystery and strangeness she saw in the subject. On one level she was allowing the subject to project their own image of themselves, but as the photographic session went on, sometimes for hours (she had infinite patience when taking photographs), eventually the presented façade would begin to slip. In each case, we see the intended 'normality' of the subject's appearance, but under Arbus' direct stare, the mask doesn't quite fit correctly, and beneath we see a more abnormal or sordid reality which it is meant to conceal. The bland utilitarian culture in which they lived seemed to give insufficient nourishment to many of the people she chose to photograph; they tried to enrich their lives by an individualistic vision born of subjective impulses which they developed into a mythic other life beneath the conformist façade. Exposing these personal myths became her fascination. Each photograph was an enigma which "revealed the bizarre in the commonplace and the commonplace in the bizarre", as her friend Marvin Israel wrote after her death.[18] She herself had written: "A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know." [19]

When she returned from the two-week trip she felt that "it had been her proving ground",[20] and she wrote to a friend "I have discovered that life is really a melodrama".[21]

Soon her technique was fully developed - a technique which made her pictures immediately recognisable. She had changed her 35mm camera for a larger square-format waist level camera which

she often used with direct flash. The larger negative gave her less grain, and the square picture is more passive compositionally compared with the dynamic 35mm negative; it allows formal, static compositions - associated both with early primitive photography (such as most Daguerreotypes), and with the amateur 'snapshot'. There is an assumed naïvety in the form which is out of tune with the often disturbing subject matter, and this incongruity increases the viewer's uneasyness. Similarly the direct flash is associated with the amateur photo and its homely intimacy, but it can also evoke the press photograph, suddenly catching its victim wide-eyed and revealed in a burst of searing light (Weegee's technique). Arbus was well aware of these conflicting elements and juggled them effectively to produce the rawest, most confrontational image of her subjects. In cruel irony, we can often see the trust of her subjects as they look out at her. They cooperated with Arbus, but now we are implicated in their betrayal by being forced to accept and return their stare.

There are times when photography can be used for moral improvement, by making us confront the unacceptable, in poverty or war, to evoke compassion by shocking us; but Arbus' aims are not compassionate. The Young Brooklyn Family or the King and Queen of Senior Citizens Dance or the Young Woman wearing lipstick, are (p.79 (p.8I (p.85 are photographed at the same level of pain and intensity as the dwarfs, transvestites etc. We are not allowed to apply our (p.78 own standards of judgement (emotional, moral, compassionate), - all her subjects, from the ordinary to the extraordinary are on display in the same way and in the same 'freak show' which Arbus has assembled. We can never be sure that if Arbus had photographed us, that we would not fit in perfectly well among these pitiable faces.

If Arbus, as her career developed, gained in strength, and lost her fear of confronting the world, she achieved this by suppressing something else - compassion. She shows us her subject's pain - she can recognise it, draw it out, and pass it on to us; but she doesn't seem to feel any of their pain herself. This emotional detachment led her to define herself as "an anthropologist of sorts"[22] but the true anthropologist avoids reacting with the subject of study, and avoids judgement; what Arbus liked to classify as detachment was really her growing alienation. We seem to detect her suppressed fear and anger in these images.

In bad health and increasingly frequent periods of depression Arbus embarked on one last project: to photograph the patients in a home for the mentally retarded. At first, as subjects, they seemed akin to some of her early photographs, of the physically abnormal. Their strangeness appealed to her. "These people are so angelic" she said.[23] They were separated from society by an accident of birth; and like the eccentrics their appearance belied their nature - their adult bodies and faces contradicted their childish behaviour. But here, for the first time Arbus found that she could not control the subject or the situation. She could not seduce or decieve them into cooperation. They would either stare blankly at her or totally ignore her. They had unpredictable movements and facial expressions. Most of the time she couldn't even win their attention, not to mention their collaboration, - she said that she could never take the pictures she intended, they either came out better or worse. The experience was frustrating and exhausting her.

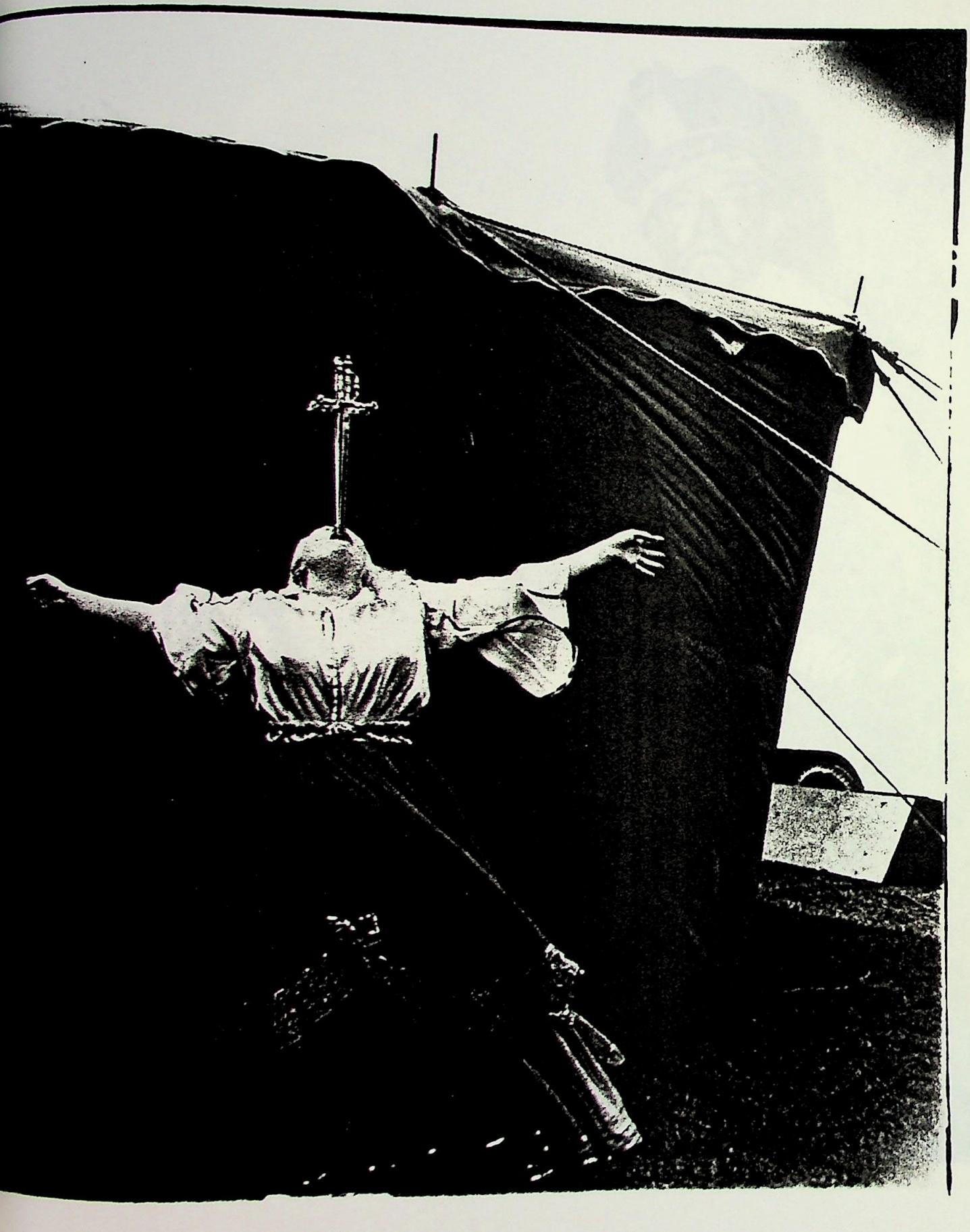
Arbus' incredibly perceptive intuition had been developed to prise off the masks, the devices, we all use in our attempt

to project our self-image; but these retardates had no false veneer.- they had not 'invented' themselves. She didn't know how to deal with their real innocence.

She spoke to friends of her photography being 'out of control': "my work doesn't do it for me anymore".[24] In July 1971 she committed suicide.

Those of the retardate photographs which were published after her death, show them standing outdoors in odd, detached groups, ironically wearing paper masks (they were taken at a Halloween party). Even without seeing their faces, their incomprehension is evident. Curiously, for the first time in an Arbus photograph, it seems as if it is the photographer who is under scrutiny by the subject. (p.86

Arbus, whose genius was in blurring the dividing line between the abnormal and the normal, here fails to find any open channels of communication. If her subjects speak at all through these enigmatic pictures, all they express is the unbridgeable gulf between them and their viewer.



Lady at a masked ball with two roses on her dress, N.Y.C. 1967

Chapter VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Down through the centuries, to satisfy the desire to preserve one's image past death, two distinct streams of images have flown. In the main stream, the creations of artists are expressions of the aesthetic expectations of their age; and, whatever their value as Art, they fail to give us an experience of direct contact with the people depicted in them. We cannot with Twentieth Century eyes, see back through this veil of aesthetic distortion without experiencing an inauthenticity of image which would not have been evident to contemporary viewers. In parallel, the second stream, more ancient but less vigorous and only occasionally flowing above ground, was concerned with the direct trace of the individual human presence, and passed, in different cultures, through primitive magic, through religion, on to pseudo-science and eventually true science. Tribal ancestor-masks had allowed the dead to live at least in the belief of their users; the alchemists, in their search for immortality, made discoveries which laid the base for modern chemistry and it was experiment in chemistry which in turn, gave us photography - and the means of one kind of immortality through authentic images. This extraordinary phenomenon, photography, is perhaps too sharp an implement for most of us, to allow it to be applied to us unblunted (few of us yet have the nerve to see ourselves as others see us); for almost as soon as it was discovered it was debased, or at least distorted by its re-routing into the aesthetic stream. The promoters of 'Photography as Art' have succeeded in having it accepted, not only as a branch of Fine Art, but as the primary artistic means of expression of popular culture in the late twentieth century. The still photographic image of the human face confronts us

constantly in all reproduction and promotion media. It is the primary carrier of our cultural values.

This thesis has concentrated on the historical development of this use of photography - on those photographers for whom aesthetic form was subservient to psychological and sociological considerations. Nadar, who first took this 'novelty' and intuitively felt its potential for expressing the vital, vigorous humanity of his contemporaries, and developed its power and scope in an age which did not know the cynicism and lack of faith in human values of our time. Photography had arrived just in time to express and preserve the sense of individual value among the emerging middle-class in France, and Nadar and his subjects were the creative flowering of that class.

With industrialisation human value became quantifyable in a mechanistic way. Sander's subjects are classified by their roles in society. The peasant life, from which many of the workers had been lifted, had provided its members with its own value system; the life blood of the community - its culture - flowed through each and every member, sustaining and nourishing them; but severed and displaced in cities their sense of worth is lost. Value in an industrial society is arbitrary and fluctuating, based on production and consumer indices. Very often Sander's subjects are like empty shells into which functional impulses have been slotted. Their sociological identity is fused into that shell until they have become a symbol of their profession. Sander gives us through photography, his pessimistic demonstration of this distruction of the individual.

In America, where industrialisation is also highly developed, the structure of society is looser and more fluid. One's role in society is changeable and the pervasive myth of personal

freedom, does not exclude the freedom to fail. Failure to forge any social identity for oneself - any sense of belonging - has a potent symbolic presence in American consciousness, dating back to the outlaw of the old West; and there has always been an indifference (posing as tolerance) to the people who, unable to find an identity within society, re-inforce their fragile sense of individuality through expressions of eccentricity. Arbus, herself alienated from her parent culture, explored with penetrative intuition, the inhabitants of these jagged edges of American society. In the progression of images from Nadar, through Sander and on, her images are the most extreme examples of the dislocation of image from essence within the individual.

Current advances in electronic technology suggest that we may be on the verge of a fundamental transformation, which within two decades will make the still image obsolete. If this happens we will, in the photograph, have lost the tool which has had the potential to make the most intense and intimate psychological investigation and expression of the human mentality. The moving image which will replace it is transitory, gives rise to narrative speculation rather than psychological understanding, and is akin to the way we see people as we meet them casually in real life - a succession of visual impressions, furtive glances which are deflected by the moving surface of the skin. The taboo against intense looking, which usually in adult life is set aside, only between lovers, and lifted temporarily in the act of portrait making, will not have to be broken in producing the moving images of the future. Undoubtedly the majority of people will welcome the greater resemblance of the moving image to the usual appearance of their family and friends, but this surface resemblance will be at the expense of those qualities of the still image which have been discussed in this thesis.

If indeed we are now, into the last decades of the portrait photograph, it is not because of any decline in the potency or quality of the genre. In 1985 a book of photographs was published of the recent work of Richard Avedon, entitled In The American West. It was the result of a five year project to photograph west of the Mississippi and was sponsored by a Texan museum. Avedon visited 189 towns and cities and produced a final collection of 750 portraits - almost rivalling Sander's great German enterprise. Avedon is America's most famous and most successful fashion photographer. Since the 1940s he has been consistantly the most creative and dynamic producer of exquisite seductive images of the clothed human form. (pp. 95-107.

During the 1960s he began to take serious portraits, mostly of New York celebrities, and in the following years, along with his fashion work, he made portraits of artists and poets, of members of the American Labour Movement, and a group portrait of the American Military leaders in Vietnam, (those whose success within the value system of their country, had raised them to high status as stars of the political, artistic and business establishments).

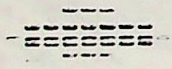
His work reached its greatest personal intensity in the series of portraits he exhibited in 1974 of his own father dying from cancer. The pain of their relationship, which had not always been an easy one, is laid bare in these photographs. Few depictions of the human face can show such raw exposure of the nerve-endings as here. These pictures shocked even those who had, two years earlier, overcome their uneasyness at seeing some of the images in Arbus' 1972 retrospective exhibition. Avedon, who had been a close friend of Arbus, had taken from her the intensity of gaze, but had directed it with higher risk, much closer to home. (pp. 93,94.

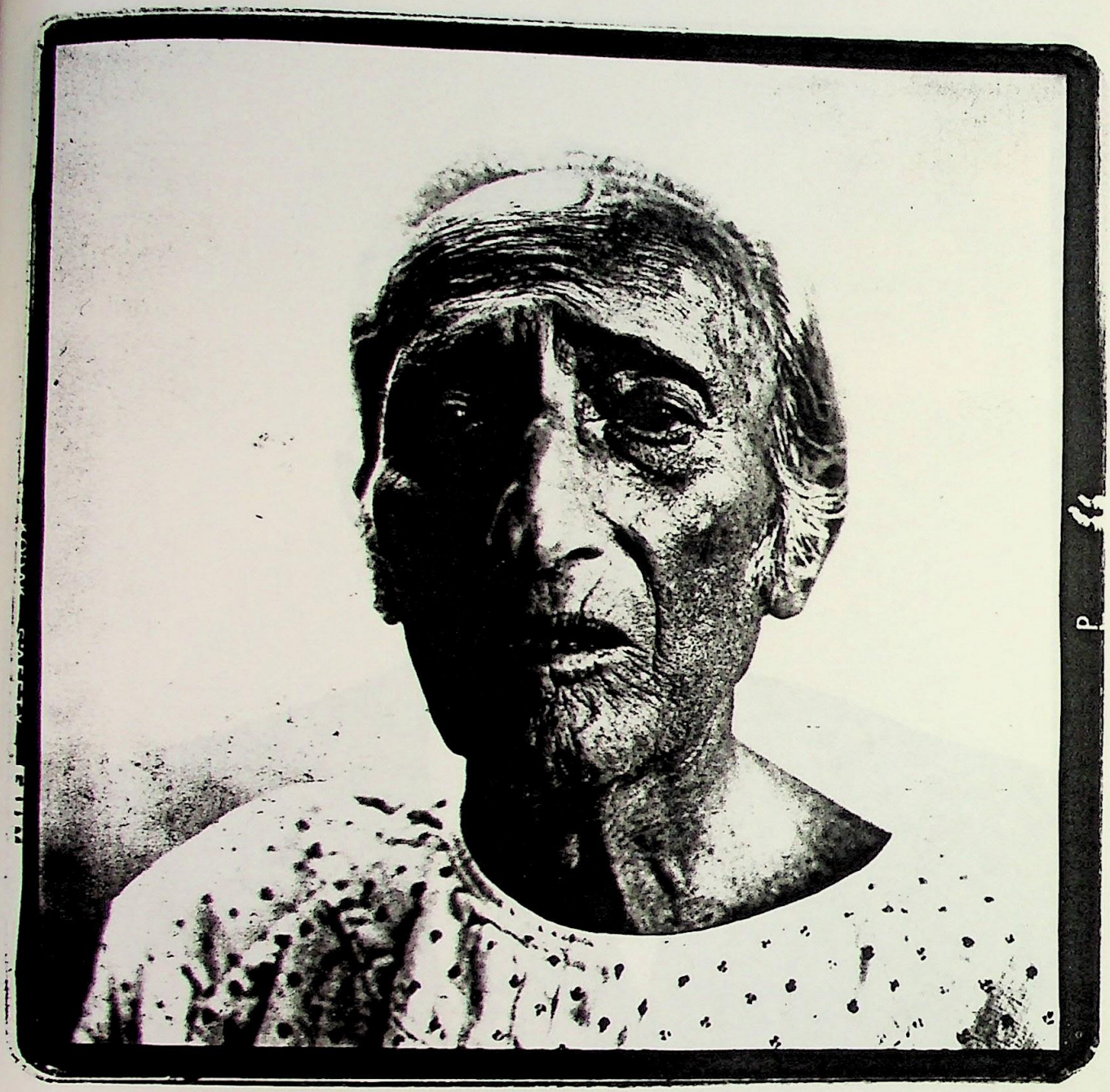
The complexities of these images, and the feelings they provoke are beyond analysis. No amount of information about techniques or historical influences, can explain in rational terms what is immediately gripping on an intuitive emotional level. Avedon's extraordinary nerve in these exceptional circumstances produced memorable images, but what of his latest photographs of strangers, those he met on his travels in the American West? These images are still too young to have found their level - the place we as viewers will ascribe to them in the hierarchy of images which affect us and which we carry in our memory; but on first acquaintance they offer a view of a society whose members, while surrounded by a wealth of physical resources, are suffering from a kind of cultural malnutrition. They are, as we can see, just ordinary people (we can easily imagine them laughing, working or playing); but Avedon makes us see them as we try not to see people in real life. It has been said that Avedon uses his camera like a scalpel.[I] Here he puts them under the kind of still, sharp scrutiny, in self-consciousness and isolation from their familiar props and surroundings, which exposes their vulnerability and the damage already done to them by their environment. Unlike Arbus' subjects we can readily identify with these people. They are not unlike working people in any westernised society, where anxiety and alienation are the familiar companions of industrialisation. As an example of the best work currently being produced it is certainly a welcome sign of the vitality of the medium and the genre, and one feels that in the distant future these photographs may well be the source of information consulted by those who want to know what it felt like to live in the 1980s.

At a time when 'Information Technology' is being proffered as the latest great achievement of our century, it is perhaps ironic

that we have to turn to such an old product of science as photography to give us information about ourselves as individuals, and an account of how we are doing, late in the century of scientific progress.

As our lives become more anonymous, and our identity more fragile, the greater we feel the need to discover or construct a valid self-image. Consumerism invites us to achieve this self-image by identifying with 'models' - the ideal human faces and figures which it provides through advertising photography. We are urged to 'model' ourselves on them, to aspire to always matching their latest 'image', and when fashion changes, to trade-in that image for an even better one, thereby (it is implied) increasing our intrinsic value in the process. But, as has been shown here, there is another use for photography, in the hands of those who have the skill and the nerve to use it as a tool of investigation: to give us an account of our individual and collective identity and value in a society which sadly has debased both.



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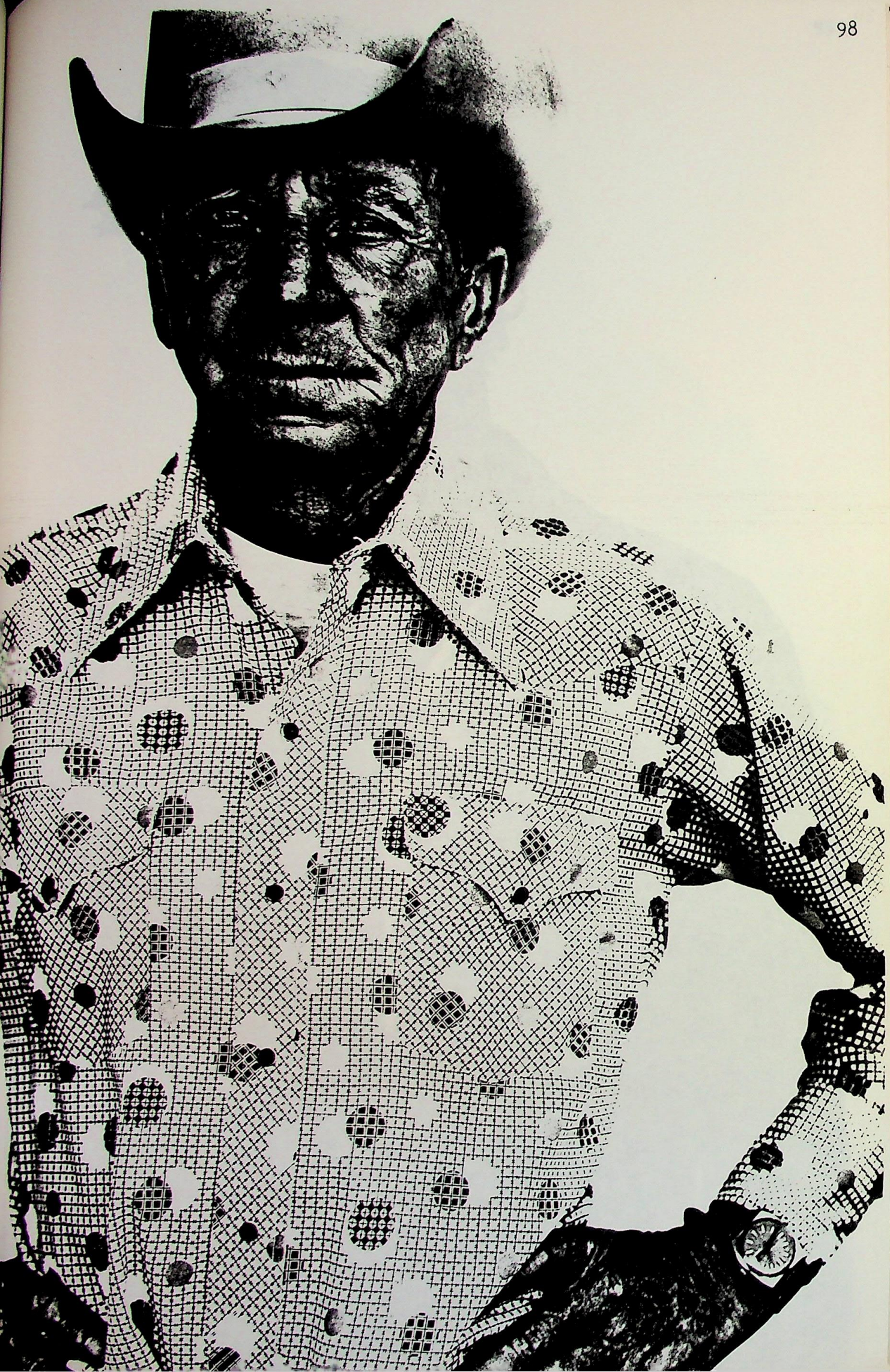

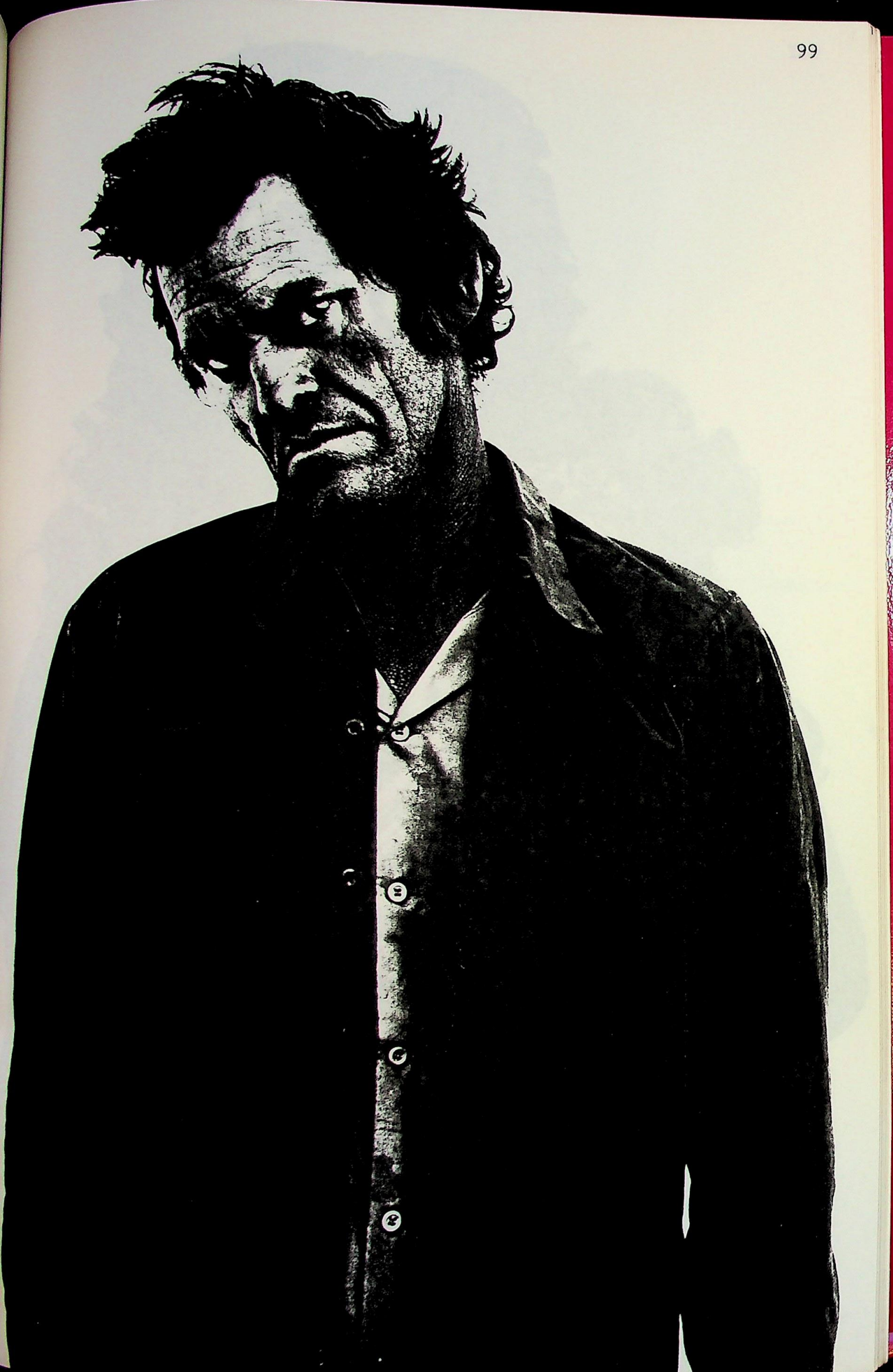


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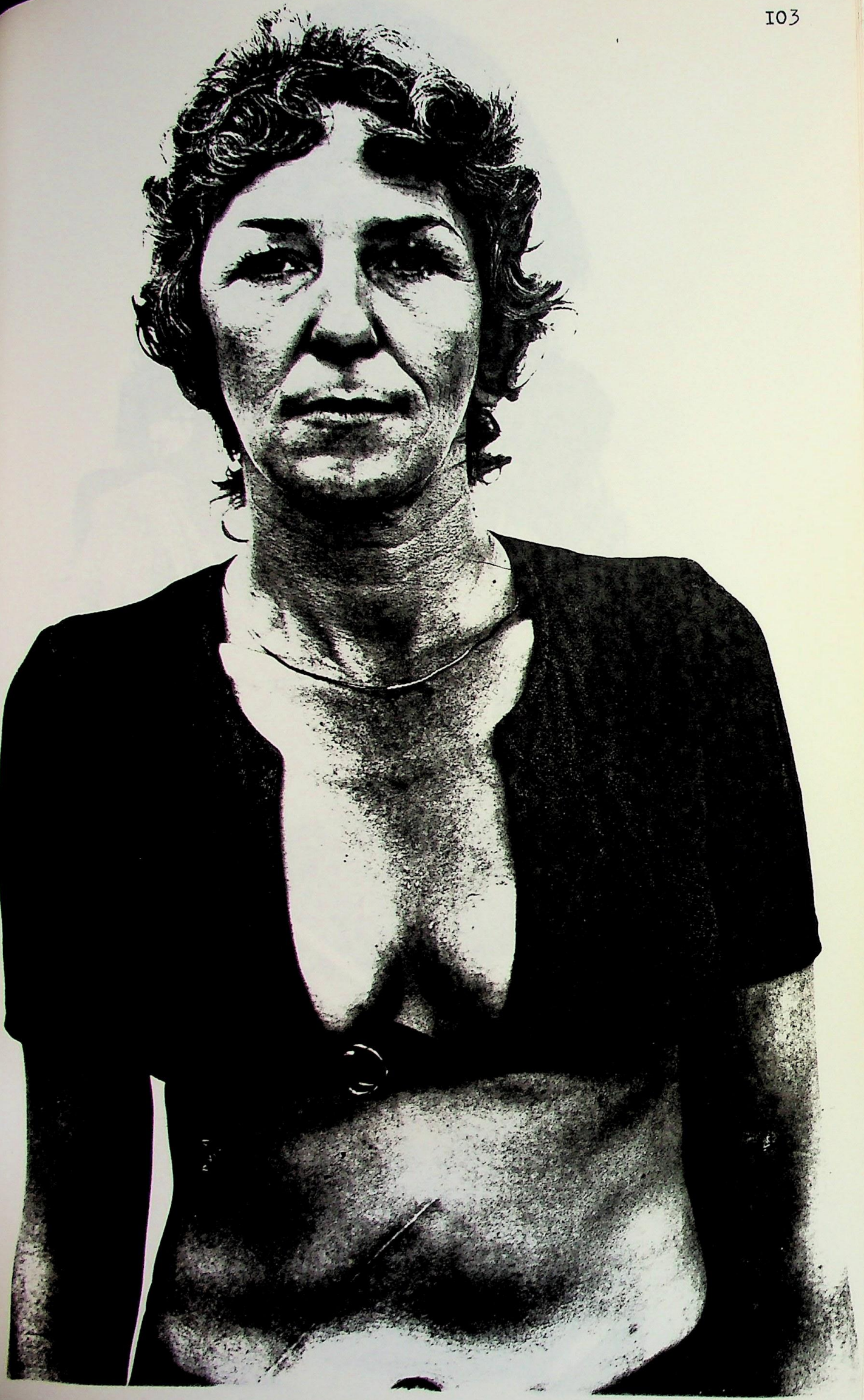


YES I AM!

FOOTNOTES

Chapter I.

[1]Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, p.12.

[2]Ibid. p.13.

[3]Ibid. p.14

[4]Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography" (1931), Artforum, Feb.1977. p.48.

[5]Ibid. p.48.

Chapter II.

[1]Charles Baudelaire, "Photography" (1859), (See Bibliography).

[2]Ben Maddow, Faces -a Narrative History of the Portrait in Photography, p.159.

[3]Nigel Gosling, Nadar, p.11.

[4]Ibid. p.27.

[5]Ibid. p.37.

Chapter III.

[1]Ian Jeffrey, Photography: A Concise History, p. 132.

[2]John Von Hartz, August Sander, p.7.

[3]U. Schneede, George Grosz -his Life and Work, pp.102,103.

[4]Ben Maddow, Faces, p.241.

[5]John Von Hartz, August Sander, p.6.

Chapter V.

[1]Patricia Bosworth, Diane Arbus - a biography, p.279.
[2]Ibid. p.208.
[3]Ibid. p.279.
[4]Halla Beloff, Camera Culture, p.60.
[5]Bosworth, pp.122,123.
[6]Ibid. p.129.
[7]Ibid. p.129.
[8]Ibid. p.130.
[9]Ibid. p.131.
[10]Ibid. p.130.
[11]Beloff, p.69.

Contd.

FOOTNOTES Contd.

[12]Doon Arbus & Marvin Israel (Ed.), Diane Arbus Magazine Work, p.14.
[13]Bosworth, p.181.
[14]Doon Arbus & Marvin Israel, "Diane Arbus", Modern Photography Annual 1973. p.144.
[15]Marvin Israel, "Diane Arbus", Creative Camera, May 1974, p. 164.
[16]Bosworth, p.278.
[17]Ibid. p.303.
[18]Doon Arbus & Marvin Israel, "Diane Arbus", Modern Photography Annual 1973. p.144.
[19]Ibid.
[20]Bosworth, p.219.
[21]Ibid. p.218.
[22]Ibid. p.228.
[23]Ibid. p.306.
[24]Ibid. p.319.

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[1]Halla Beloff, Camera Culture, p.175.

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