

Assignment 3: I am an Ironman, Self Portraits

Introduction

'Ironman' triathlon is an endurance sport, which involves swimming, cycling and running. Competitors have 17 hours to complete a course of some 140 miles. For the last 8 years I have actively competed in 'Ironman' races all over the world.

Training for 'Ironman' triathlon forms a huge part of my life and the fact that I can call myself 'an Ironman' has a major positive influence on my self-esteem.

For this assignment I decided to document this part of my life. In particular I wanted to try to convey what it feels like to train for day after day. I have chosen to do this through a series of self-portraits.

The work is essentially autobiographical - an exploration of self. I have been photographing myself to see what this might tell me about myself.

Intention and process

The series of portraits comprises of three groups of 10 portraits. Each group represents a different phase of my training. The first group, 'Building the base', dates from February - March 2012 when my training was just getting started; the second, 'Ready to race?', was made in June 2012 just before my first race of the season in Frankfurt and the third, 'Struggling on', was captured in August 2012 when I was preparing to race for a second time in Louisville, Kentucky, just seven weeks after the first race.

All of the portraits were made immediately after a workout in the clothes I had worn for the workout. I used the same compositional structure each time. I am pictured centre frame, at $\frac{3}{4}$ length against a plain background. The lighting is plain, using a studio light with soft box for the key light and ambient light for fill.

My intention was to try to present myself as others might see me at an unguarded moment. I was seeking to minimize the influences of environmental context, theatrical posing and photographic artifice. The repetitive nature of the portraits also references the repetitive nature of the training itself.

When designing my approach, I had in mind following observation on portraiture made by Roland Barthes in Camera Lucida (Barthes, pp 13)

"The PORTRAIT-PHOTOGRAPH is a closed field of forces. Four image-repertoires intersect here, oppose and distort each other. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art."

By making the portraits immediately after working out when I am tired and distracted, I have been trying to catch myself unawares, to avoid my conscious posing as 'the one I want others to think I am'.

The deadpan formal construction for the portraits has minimised photographer driven expression - the 'image repertoire' of 'the one the photographer thinks I am'.

What remains are the 'image repertoires' of 'the one I think I am' and 'the one the photographer uses in his art'. To a great extent these are one and the same in self-portraiture. The photographer has the scope to edit the self-portraits shown to reflect a self-image rather than a view as others might see them.

What I found in practice was that the portraits were not consistent with my self-image. The old, wrinkled slightly overweight person in the photographs does not accord with my vision of myself as a vigorous, sleek, older athlete. The range of expressions and my body language also show variations in

mood and levels of fatigue I had not expected. All of this brought to mind Diane Arbus's concept of 'the gap between intention and effect', which she explained as people trying to look one way but coming out looking another, which is the way people actually see them. (Arbus, p. 1-2)

Influences

I have researched many photographers whose work may be relevant to my assignment. Three photographers, Rineke Dijkstra, Elina Brotherus and Lee Friedlander, have particularly influenced me.



Rineke Dijkstra is a photographer who works exclusively on portrait series. In her work she has constantly looked for ways to capture her subjects at moments when their thoughts have moved on from thinking about posing. In an attempt to do this she has often photographed people immediately after highly emotional events. Bullfighters just after the kill and mothers just after giving birth are two such examples.

After a career as a commercial portrait photographer she decided to focus on her own work. This was at a time she was recovering from injury. She decided to start with some self-portraits. In a recent interview she said "First I decided to make portraits of myself and not concern myself with posing, do away with it in fact.....So,I thought I'll go swim thirty laps, then I'll stand there, too tired to pose..." (Dijkstra, pp 46). One of Dijkstra's self portraits is shown at left.

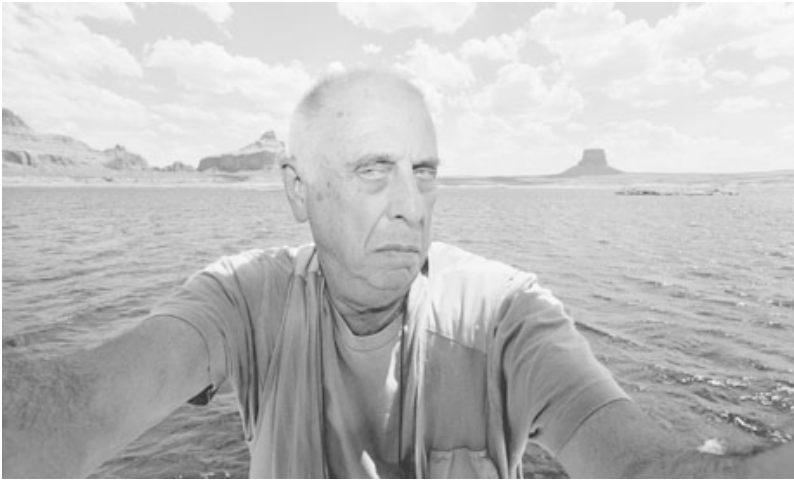
Dijkstra was trying to find a way to disengage the natural inclination to present a desired self-image through posing.

Elina Brotherus has a photographic practice, which is based largely on self-portraiture. Her approach is to produce the portraits at times when she is distracted with significant life events. She has stated "It's only possible for me to photograph when something really happens, which makes the images authentic, emotionally genuine. Even though I construct images, I don't act or role-play, and in this sense my work is rooted in the documentary tradition." (Brotherus) A good example of this is her 'Divorce Portrait' at right.

Lee Friedlander has incorporated self-portraiture into his work over many years. It is a part of his practice and by no means the main thrust. He seems to have developed a fascination with finding curious ways of including his own presence within his photographs – a shadow, a reflection in a window or a car mirror etc. He has also produced many 'straight' self-portraits, which in my view are distinguished by the fact that he shows himself as he really is with no



attempt to glamorise. William Ewing makes the following observation whilst commenting on two Friedlander self portraits from the 1990's, "Self-portraits of photographers are usually arrogant affairs...Rare indeed is the self-portrait in which the photographer admits to a decline in his powers with age...Here, however, Lee Friedlander faces up to his imminent demise " (Ewing, pp 48). One such portrait is shown below.



Presentation

Were I to show my portraits in an exhibition I would present them in three grids of 10 photographs. Each grid would include the portraits from the same period of the training and would be captioned with a quotation from my training diary from that time. The quotation provides some context for the viewer, but is not too prescriptive, and the use of the grid presentation invites the viewer to compare the portraits and reinforces the repetitive nature of the training.

I would expect that the grids would be displayed large so that the viewer is able to easily see the nuances of expression, body language and clothing.

For the purposes of this assignment I have submitted three grids of photographs as collages, as I would wish them to be displayed. The title and caption for each is included in the metadata of the file and the title is used to name the file.

The titles and captions are as follows:

February - March 2012 - Building the base

'The race seems a long way off. Will I get there? Feeling so out of condition and overweight'

June 2012 - Ready to race?

'Am I ready to race? Not feeling as strong as I usually do. Lets hope I stay injury free'

August 2012 - Struggling on

'Recovery from Frankfurt painfully slow. Have lost some condition. Louisville going to be a slow one'

References

Barthes R. (1982) *Camera Lucida* New York: Hill and Wang

Arbus D. (1972) *Diane Arbus An Aperture Monograph*, Millerton, New York: Aperture

Dijkstra R. (2012) *Rineke Dykstra: A Retrospective* New York: The Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation

Brotherus E. (Interview 1999) *Das Mädchen sprach von Liebe (1997-1999)* Available from: <http://www.elinabrotherus.com/photography/das-madchen-sprach-von-liebe/> [Accessed on 24th June 2012]

Ewing W.A. (2006) *FACE The New Photographic Portrait London*: Thames & Hudson