

Assignment 6: Ironman Family

BACKGROUND

Ironman triathlon is an endurance sport in which each race involves swimming, cycling and running over 140 miles. The athletes have 17 hours within which to complete the course. The sport is open to men and women of all ages and events take place on every continent. Those who are successful in their age group or professional category win the right to compete in the Ironman World Championships held every October in Kailua Kona Hawaii. Getting to Kona is the 'holy grail' of the sport.

The reasons why people take part in such a demanding sport are many and varied. Some do it to compete with others. Others do it out of a sense of adventure or to achieve life goals such as losing weight or getting fit. A few have very personal and highly emotional reasons such as celebrating a recovery from a life threatening disease, honouring a bereavement of someone close or overcoming a disability. All of these reasons however are fundamentally about personal identity and self esteem. Ironman is a 'right of passage' - a ritual event that marks a person's progress from one status to another.

After completing a first Ironman many go on to compete again and again. People become part of the 'cult' of Ironman and are driven by the desire to remain so. They adopt modes of dress and appearance and tokens such as tattoos to signify their membership. There is tremendous mutual respect amongst Ironman triathletes. Professionals and amateurs compete alongside one another and the race winners often return to congratulate the last few finishers as they cross the line.

I am an Ironman triathlete myself and I have made many friends in the sport over the last 8 years. This work is a series of photographic portraits of these friends, my fellow 'iron' men and women. It is a photographic survey of my extended 'Ironman Family'.

INTENTION AND PROCESS

I wanted the portraits to appear natural and unmediated, and to be capable of convincing those viewing them that they are seeing the subjects as they really are. My overall aim was to unsettle my subjects by adopting a highly formalized approach to making the portraits. This I believed would be very different from what they might expect when being photographed by a friend. My hope was that the self-conscious posing (even clowning around), which very often occurs in 'family' portraits, would be replaced by uncertainty and introspection.

I adopted a fairly deadpan style avoiding overt signs of photographic authorship. The subjects are pictured against a plain grey background, centered in the frame, standing square to the camera. The portraits are three quarter length. The lighting is plain with a single studio light and soft-box for the key light, and ambient light for fill.

The photographs were made with a manual digital medium format camera. The process of setting up the camera and lights was slow allowing the subjects time to consider how to present themselves and adding a sense of gravitas to the proceedings. I gave my subjects little direction simply asking them not to smile, to think about what 'Ironman' means for them and to look into the lens of the camera, not at me. When taking the photographs I used a cable release and stood to the side.

Beforehand, I asked each of my subjects to wear something that signifies 'Ironman' for them. This

could mean dressing up in race kit, a team jersey, or simply wearing finisher's bracelets or their 'Ironman' watch or heart rate monitor. It was their choice. By asking them to choose what to wear, giving them the time to consider and decide on their pose, and providing only limited direction I tried to make the process collaborative.

In practice, my subjects were highly cooperative and thoughtful about how they should present themselves. Each responded in their own way. Some seemed uncertain, perhaps even nervous. Others were more confident and focused. Others were quite impassive. Most were surprised by what they saw when I showed them the photographs. This brought to mind Diane Arbus's concept of the gap between how people think they look and the way they actually appear to others. I discuss this further below in the section on influences.

The presentation of the photographs as a series, with each photograph having the same compositional structure, invites the viewer to compare the individuals portrayed and to identify similarities and differences. At the same time placing my subjects against a plain background forces the viewer to confront them as individuals, challenging any preconceived ideas viewers might have of what endurance athletes should look like. Whilst the series represents a particular group, i.e. my Ironman friends, it also invites the viewer to speculate on the general nature of people who take part in endurance sports such as Ironman Triathlon, and about why people challenge themselves in this way.

In total I have made 25 portraits, of which I have selected 16 for submission for this assignment. The portraits I have not included are either ones in which I felt that the subject is consciously putting on an act, despite my efforts distract them or where I was not happy with the pose of the subject. I had made some of the portraits at half rather than $\frac{3}{4}$ length and in the end I felt that presenting only those made at $\frac{3}{4}$ length worked better as a series.

The portraits were made in a variety of locations including a make shift studio in my own home, hotel rooms and the living rooms at friends' houses. This presented significant logistical problems and I had to devise a portable studio set up. As a result the lighting of the portraits vary somewhat. I was initially concerned that this might detract from the work, leaving the viewer with questions about why there are differences. On balance however I decided that these variations showed that the photographs were made on different occasions and that their production was not simply a matter of producing a series of portraits one after the other in a studio.

INFLUENCES

My work has been particularly influenced by the work of August Sander, Rineke Dijkstra, Albrecht Tubke, and Richard Avedon. All of these photographers have worked on series of portraits which seek to represent their subjects naturally, avoid overt photographic artifice and are made in a consistent compositional form which invite comparisons between portraits in the series.

August Sander's *People of the 20th Century* is a highly influential work, referenced by many contemporary photographers. Sander's portrait series was produced as a typology of the German people during the period from 1922 up to the Second World War. The individual portraits were intended to represent particular 'types' within German society at that time, each strictly ordered by social class (Sander 1994).



Public Prosecutor, 1931 August Sander

My work is not a typology. It is a documentary portrait series of a particular group – my Ironman friends. Nevertheless there are many qualities of Sander's portraits that I would wish to emulate. Sander consciously avoided overt photographic artifice, seemingly using the camera simply as a recording device. Variations from subject to subject depend only on the raw information in the photograph – the setting, the subject's expression, clothing and posture. Despite this objective approach, his portraits remain both sensitive and dignified.



Kolobrzeg, Poland, July 26, 1992 Rineke Dijkstra

Rineke Dijkstra has produced many series of portraits each characterised by her application of a consistent formal approach. Her subjects are photographed frontally against neutral backgrounds, looking directly at the camera. They are lit plainly. So just as Sander does, she presents the subjects to the viewer in an objective manner. The consistent nature of the compositions invites comparisons between the different subjects.

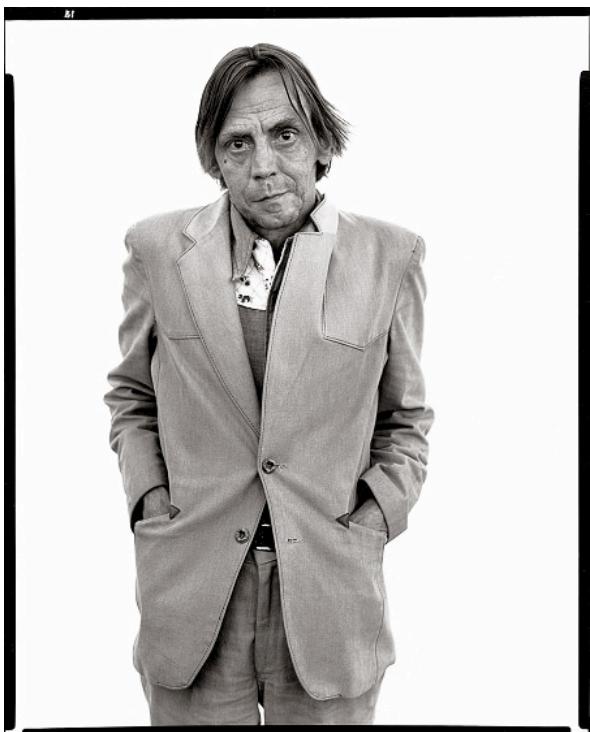
Dijkstra talks about capturing her subjects at a moment when their minds had moved on and they are no longer posing. She refers to this as "a moment when [the subject] display[s] a certain introversion" (Dijkstra 2012, pp 470). Dijkstra also refers to the concept of 'the gap between intention and effect', which was first articulated by Diane Arbus, who she says has been a key influence on her work. Arbus described this as follows: "Everybody has that thing where they need to look one way but they come out looking another way and that's what people observe." (Arbus, pp2).

Albrecht Tubke is another portrait photographer who works in series. In his 2004 series *Dalliendorf* (Tubke 2006) for example he returned to his birthplace, a small village in the northeastern part of Germany and made a series of full body portraits of the people who live there. The portraits are understated and quiet.

Talking about his work Tubke said in an interview "The first thing I would tell them is not to smile. I am not interested in a typical smiling face in a photograph. And when I told them I am not interested in them smiling, the situation of photographing the people changed immediately. People become aware that this is not a simple photograph, that this is something more." (Burbridge, 2010). I have been trying to exploit the approach of trying to make the subject feel that the situation to be strange and uncertain in my own work.



Dalliendorf Albrecht Tubke



Alan Silvey, drifter, Route 93, Chloride, Nevada Richard Avedon

Richard Avedon's work, in particular *Portraits of Power* and *In the American West* have influenced my work particularly on formal and compositional level.

Because of his approach Avedon's portraits sometimes appear confrontational rather than collaborative. It is as if the subjects are trying to resist the advances of the photographer. Some of his subjects stare back aggressively. Others seem to be withdrawing (Adler et al 2008, Avedon 1985).

I wanted my own work to be more sympathetic and collaborative.

PRESENTATION

I have visualised the photographs from the outset as large exhibition prints (close to life size) to be viewed 'on the wall'. The large size and gallery environment are intended to encourage viewers to spend time with the photographs. In this way I would hope that the viewer would relate to the subjects as individuals, consider the small nuances of expression and pose and to think about what motivates this person, and indeed many others, to take part in endurance sports.

The large format will also enable the details of clothing etc. to be revealed, providing the viewer with yet more food for thought about the individual before them. Placing a number of the portraits side by side in a gallery setting will also invite the viewer to compare and contrast and to appreciate the diversity of the subjects.

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