

Assignment 4: 45 Seconds....

BACKGROUND

In 'A Short History of Photography' first published in 1931 Walter Benjamin made this statement about early portrait photography (Benjamin & Bond 2011, location 220 of 415):

'The procedure itself caused the subject to focus his whole life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it: during the considerable period of the exposure the subject as it were grew into the picture, in the sharpest contrast with appearances in a snapshot...'

Benjamin is commenting on his perception of the effect of long exposures in early photographic portraiture. He refers also to comments made by the painter Emil Orlik, who was a contemporary originating from Prague. Orlik suggested that these portraits had an 'expressive coherence' due to length of time *the subject* had to remain still. Benjamin also specifically mentions the work of David Octavius Hill the Scottish painter and photographer as being exemplary in this regard. Hill produced his photographic portraits in collaboration with Scottish photographer Robert Adamson in the mid 1800s, using the Calotype process.

Walter Benjamin's observations gave me the idea of carrying out my own investigation into what happens when the portrait subject holds a pose for a long time. This concept fitted very well with my broader enquiry into ways of 'Disarming the Pose'.

INTENTION AND PROCESS

I spent a considerable amount of time researching alternative approaches for this project. My first thought had been to make a series of portraits using a pinhole camera with long exposures. After testing out several ways of doing this I was not happy with the results. The portraits were very soft and blurry making interpreting the facial expressions difficult. This also gave the images an ethereal quality with associated 'dreamlike' and psychological connotations. This was inconsistent with the rest of my work during the course, which for the most part has an objective, documentary feel.

After further testing, I decided to approach this investigation by making a series of diptychs each made up of two portraits of the same subject. The process I adopted involved asking my subjects to hold a pose for 45 seconds. I made two photographs - one at the start and one at the end of this period. The exposure time was chosen following research into the Calotype process. (University of Glasgow Website).

I was very conscious that what I was doing referenced early photography. I decided to use a 5x4 view camera and black and white film to emphasise this link. I also constructed a headrest similar to ones that would have been used in the 1800s. For the composition, I decided on a frontal headshot placing emphasis on the subject's eyes and mouth - the features we use the most for communication.

My subjects were volunteers from my Rotary Club and neighbours. They all found the process quite stressful and this can be seen in the resulting portraits. The relaxed expressions at the start become much more strained after 45 seconds. In many cases the subject's eyes seem to have glazed over as happens when one's mind starts to wander.

I have called my series *45 Seconds...* referencing directly the length of time my subjects held their pose for my camera.

INFLUENCES

Walter Benjamin's reference to Hill and Adamson's photography was a starting point for this work. In terms of process and aesthetics I have been more influenced by contemporary artist/photographers Bettina von Zwehl, Roni Horn, Luc Delahaye and Chuck Close.

Throughout her work, von Zwehl has 'developed strategies and rituals to distract the sitters from posing, none of which are revealed to the viewer immediately.' (von Zwehl 2007, pp71) She has experimented with various means of distraction of the portrait subject. She has photographed subjects who have just been exercising vigorously (my own 'I am an Ironman' series echoes this), who have just been woken up from sleep and so on.

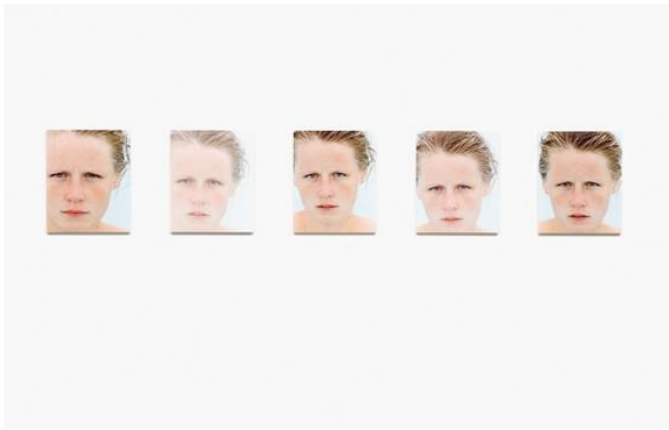
When making *45 Seconds...* I was particularly influenced by her work *Atemwege 2009-2010* (Bettina von Zwehl Website). This is a series in which she presents diptychs of her subjects with one portrait of them breathing in and the second of them breathing out.



Inhalation/Exhalation no4 from *Atemwege 2009-2010* by Bettina von Zwehl

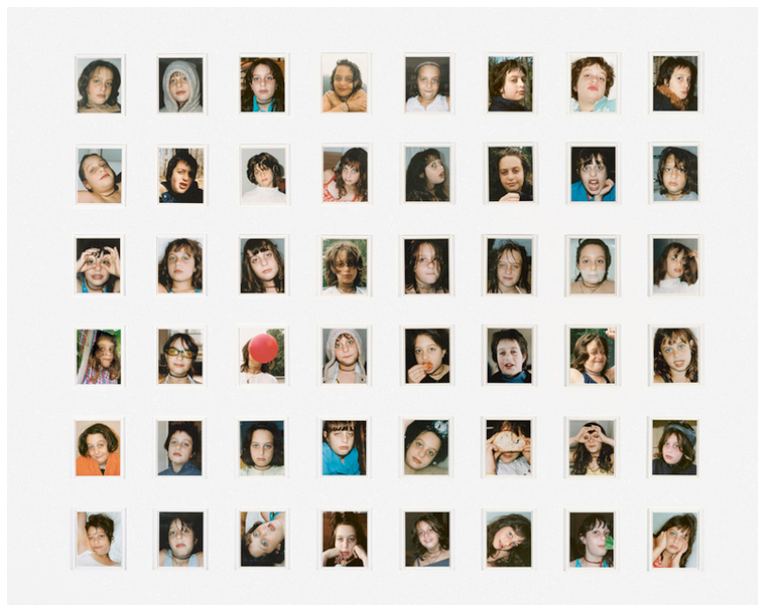
The differences between the two portraits in each case are small but discernable. They are more evident in some diptychs than others. Indeed, discovering the difference in one pair made me look again more closely at the others. This is just the response that I am hoping to achieve with my own series.

Roni Horn is another artist/photographer who makes frequent use of multiple images of her subjects. She does this to explore questions of personal identity and to challenge the viewer's process of looking. In *You are the Weather* (Horn 1997) Horn's installation presents 100 photographs each of which is a headshot of the same young woman (Margrét Haralðsdóttir Blöndal). In each, she is submerged up to her neck in an Icelandic hot spring. Each photograph was taken on a separate occasion and we are invited to link her expression to changes in the weather. Horn's photographs challenge the viewer to look, think and look again.



Roni Horn - 'You are the Weather' (1994-96)

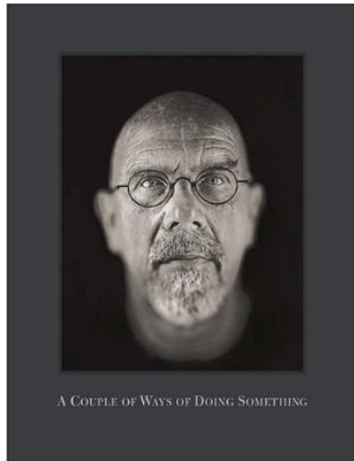
A second series which employs the same technique of using multiple portrait images is *This is me This is you.* (Horn 2002) In this work Horn shows two grids of photos each showing 48 portraits of the artist's niece Georgia when she was about 10. The images which are close up headshots are playful and have the look of family snapshots. At first sight the photographs in each of the grids look identical, but in fact Horn made two exposures of each shot a fraction of a second apart. So each grid is made up of unique photographs. There are subtle but perceptible differences between the equivalent photographs in each of the grids.



Roni Horn – 'This is me, This is You 1998-2000

With this work Horn is once again referring to the complex nature of identity. In an article on the ART IT website she explains her approach with this work as follows: *'Portraiture seems to me a meaningful form, so I keep coming back to it. This is Me, This is You is not a portrait of Georgia, it's a portrait of someone discovering herself. Girls try on their identities at a certain age, go through a lot of testing and looking at themselves'* (Naomi 2008). It is my hope that my own work will also raise questions about what if anything a photographic portrait can say about the subject's 'inner self' or whether all we see is surface physiognomy.

My idea of using a frontal headshot was influenced by Luc Delahaye's *L'Autre* (Baudrillard & Delahaye 1999) and Chuck Close's *A Couple of Ways of Doing Something* (Close & Holman 2006). Delahaye's photographs were candid portraits which he 'stole' from people on the Paris Metro between 1995 and 1997. Close's work is a portrait series made using the Daguerrotype process – a poem is associated with each portrait. When talking about his portrait subjects Close commented that *'Each one of these people who lent me their image with no control over how it's going to come out, in this act of incredible generosity, had to put away whatever self-image they had of how they looked and accept this other image as being them. That goes beyond generosity.'* I must say that I feel that the subjects for the 45 seconds... have been similarly generous by allowing me to capture them 'warts and all'.



A Couple of Ways of Doing Something by Chuck Close



L.'AUTRE by Luc Delahaye

TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As I indicated above I chose to use a large format view camera for this work, as it would directly reference early photography. I had attended a workshop earlier in the year to learn how to use a view camera. I was also interested to learn how using such a camera, which is slow and cumbersome to operate would influence the relationship between photographer and subject. What I found reaffirmed what I had read which is that using this type of camera for portraits is a much more collaborative process. Subjects need to be patient and to keep still. I found myself explaining the process to them more carefully as I was making the photographs.

In order to speed up the turnaround of processing my 5x4 film sheets and also to exert greater control over quality, I chose to develop the film myself. I attended a short course at the City Lit in London to learn how to do this, and set up a temporary darkroom at home. With time I was able to get the quality I was looking for. I scanned the negatives with an Epson V700 Photo scanner and processed and printed the negatives digitally.

PRESENTATION

All along I had envisaged the final photographs being shown as printed diptychs. I also considered using video but found through a test that this medium reveals the differences between the portraits too obviously and shortcuts the interaction between the viewer and the photographs.

By using pairs of photographs I was hoping to engage an instant reaction from the viewer of 'why has the photographer/artist presented two identical photographs?' On closer inspection this would be shown not to be the case encouraging the viewer to scrutinize the portraits in greater detail to 'spot the differences'. This should challenge viewers to analyse their process of looking and to think

about their personal response to photographic portraits.

I envisage the diptychs being shown at head height in a row around a room, with the pairs being placed quite close together. Clearly how this would be done would depend on the particular space. However the aim is that someone stepping into the room would be surrounded by faces looking at them. I plan to print the each portrait at about A3 size making each diptych A2. At this size, the faces would be a little larger than life size but not so large that they are perceived as hyper-real.

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