



TEACHING PHOTOGRAPHY

NOTES ASSEMBLED
SECOND EDITION

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HOW TO DO A PORTRAIT

If I have something essential to communicate to another person, probably a good way to do this is to sit a reasonable distance from them and look straight at them as they look straight at me 'eye-to-eye.' If I am sitting on a lower seat than the other person, or if they other person is standing and I am sitting, then the relationship is altered in many ways both physically and psychologically.

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In the 19th century, making a portrait was clearly a serious event. There were no 'snapshots' yet. Generally people dressed up (sometimes in ill-fitting, borrowed clothes), and, most importantly, the exposures were quite long, which in itself brought seriousness of expression more or less automatically. It is hardly possible to find a portrait done before 1900 that does not contain some quality of intensity and penetration.

The most ambitious portrait project between two people is probably the photographs that Alfred Stieglitz did with Georgia O'Keeffe. Stieglitz, on more than one occasion, referred to these pictures as a collaboration, rather than 'photographer and sitter.' It is clear in many of the pictures that O'Keeffe is bringing most of the energy to the event. A brilliant aspect of the Stieglitz-O'Keeffe pictures is how Stieglitz used exposure, development and printing style to express the emotional quality of the particular situation in which the picture was made. The prints range from high contrast graphic all the way over to the cusp of murky. Stieglitz was not a person to worry about style.

Some of the photographs are among the most erotically charged ever done, some are transcendent, and some are silly and melodramatic. Life on earth.

In the work of August Sander there is an aspect of portraiture that needs to be examined. Sander encouraged people to present themselves in ways that they felt best expressed who they were. Usually wearing the costume of their profession (identity), they then assumed the physical attitude of this self-image. Sander composed brilliantly and exercised impeccable craft in making these pictures.

All this leads to the threshold of what is important. In using this method, Sander manages (here's the mystery) to show us the role being played and, at the same time, the creature inside playing the role. In experiencing the humanity of another, I can sense my own humanity and my world expands in that moment.

Diane Arbus used Sander's method with some success in the 1950s and 60s. I don't think she ever reached the level of Sander because the work remained so much about herself. There is more to art than self-expression.

The current state of portraiture is that there is a barrel-full of smart, talented, aggressive people making a lot of loot describing the roles people take in clever ways. The newest thing seems to be getting physically closer than normal, which creates a feeling of discomfort (any feeling will do).

It's not a coincidence that some of the current leading portraitists are also fashion photographers who are really good at expressing surface in an appealing way. I'm stopping this before it becomes a rant.

A few how-to's:

When doing a portrait with a cut-film camera, there is preparation needed. Positioning the camera on the stand, framing, focusing, stopping down, inserting film, pulling slide, etc. All of this serves as a build-up to the moment of releasing the shutter. This has a profound effect on the emotional quality and intensity of the picture made.

EXERCISE #8 SELF-PORTRAIT

With a small camera it is of course possible to capture a 'moment.' There is more of a chance for the unexpected to occur. The trade off is that with up to 36 chances it's easy for the whole thing to go soft and lose any kind of formal or human tension.

If artificial light is needed and money is short, an excellent light stand can be made with an empty gallon paint can, filled with plaster of Paris, and a broomstick stuck in when it's wet. If a higher stand is needed, duct tape can be used to add another broomstick.

Hardware store clamp-on reflector lights with photoflood bulbs give as good a light as the most expensive instruments. Foam-core is pure white for color balance and is lightweight enough to tape to things or hang from the ceiling with string; it provides instant bounce for soft, but directional light. Different focal-length lenses will describe physiognomy differently.

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A strong portrait is also a strong photograph.

There are several compelling reasons for a new photographer to make some self-portraits.

First, it connects the photographer to the history of art in a real way because there is a long tradition of self-portraiture in painting and photography.

Secondly, it gets the person out from behind the camera. This can start to open one up to the possibility of using the camera in different ways as a light collecting device and not always an instrument to look at things through.

If one of the central issues of learning the medium is to 'get interested' in a subject, then of course the self-portrait has that built in.

Probably the most useful aspect of the self-portrait exercise is that the photographer has to give up some amount of control (I don't know what the picture will look like). This can introduce a person to the idea of 'chance' as art-making.

Editing moves to the prime position – where it belongs – and better yet, if the metaphor sinks in, a whole world can open up for the photographer. The entire concept of chance and luck is very under-rated and under-used in European-American culture. I insist on taking credit for everything good that happens and on blaming others for everything bad.

All this from a self-portrait.