

Exploring the relational element in the photographic portrait

How may contemporaneity in the form of the relational be reflected in the
photographic portrait today?

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This Master's Thesis is carried out as a part of the education at the

University of Agder, 2013
Faculty of Fine Arts
Department of Visual and Dramatic Arts



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Preface

This dissertation is a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of fine arts degree at the University of Agder, Norway. It accounts for 50 per cent of the full degree and accompanies the other half, the art work *Cast Off* – an installation based on 12 photographic portraits, exhibited in The Project Room at Kristiansand Arts Hall in May 2013.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation for the invaluable support, guidance and assistance I have received throughout the last two years from the teachers and staff at the University of Agder's Faculty of fine art, in particular my supervisors Helene Illeris and Anna Svingen-Austestad. Thank you all! It has been an amazing learning experience!

I would also like to acknowledge the likewise invaluable assistance from the pupils and staff of the MS "Sjøkurs". The pupils have made themselves available to my project by modeling, and also by talking to me about their thoughts and ideas of how it is to be young today and wanting to go to sea. This project would not have been possible without them. A very special thank you to each and every one of you!

(Approval for the research and works of art that constitute this dual Master's thesis has been obtained from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services by way of the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities.)

Abstract

This dissertation focuses on relational elements in the photographic portrait, asking how contemporaneity in the form of the relational may be reflected in the photographic portrait today, in 2013. The question is approached phenomenologically and hermeneutically, by probing the topography between art and photography theory, the work of other artists and the author's personal artistic practice. Central theorists are Roland Barthes, Jacques Rancière and curator Nicolas Bourriaud, and referred artists are Roni Horn, Rineke Dijkstra and Nelli Palomäki. The final result will be disseminated by the exhibition *Cast off* - a portrait photography based installation in Kristiansand, Norway, at the end of May 2013. But here, in this dissertation, the author outlines his approach and findings. These include the gaze as seen in the photographic portrait as a central place for facilitating dialogue; a prerequisite for inter human relations, and the importance of context for the creation of meaning and also how this may be addressed through the semantic and physical dissemination of the artwork.

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By Jan Arve Olsen

Introduction

My preliminary studies were initiated by the rediscovery of a thick, old and reddish photo album containing some 60 *carte de visit*-sized photographs a few years back. I had forgotten all about it, but there it was. I was redecorating my bedroom and found it in a cardboard box in the very back of my closet where it had been stored since we moved into the house, nearly 20 years ago..

It was the second time the album reemerged this way. The first time was when it was found in a box in the attic of my great-grandmother's house sometime in the late 1950s, when my grandmother and her sisters cleaned the house after their mother passed away.

The pictures in the album are all quite old. They are mostly portraits and family groups and, judging from the postures and clothes, from around 1860s - 1900. Most are ordinary family photographs, showing both young and old people looking solemnly towards the photographer, either individually or in small family groups.

Although they were unknown at the time, almost all of them are now identified – thanks to my uncle's interest in genealogy. But about a dozen show young men between 15 to 25 years of age who are still unknown (plate 1). On the back of the photographs one finds the names of the studios where the pictures were made. A few are from local Norwegian studios in Grimstad and Kristiansand, but most of them are from studios in European ports town such as St. Petersburg, Ystad, Dunkerque, Whitby and Marseille.

Personally I have always found the portraits of the unknown young men intriguing. I liked to look at them when I was a boy, so much in fact that when my grandmother died she left the

photo album to me. The story behind the portraits is mysterious and unknown, and when I look at the pictures I wonder who the boys were, and how their lives were. Did they remain sailors for the rest of their lives? Did they see the world? Or did they sign off at the very first opportunity and return home? What happened to them? Did they marry and have children? If so, who and where are their descendants today? I also appreciate that, at a time when it was quite customary for boys in Southern Norway to go to sea at the age of 15 and to stay away for at least two years before returning home for the first time, portraits like these must have been valued greatly by their families and others who knew the boys.

Actually, reflecting on this I have no trouble relating the photographs to the French theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes and his ideas in *Camera Lucida* (1980). Here Barthes investigates the effects of photography on the spectator, and develops the twin concepts of 'studium' and 'punctum'. The 'studium' denotes the cultural and descriptive interpretations of a photograph, and the 'punctum' denotes a personally touching detail within the picture which, through its photographic presence may establish a strong feeling of relationship with the person depicted. Indeed, the photograph that made Barthes realize this was an old picture of his mother as a young woman.

Barthes also notes that the photograph is the medium which confirms the past most strongly. And since the past only is the past in relation to the present, my present is also confirmed, albeit reflexively by looking at the old portraits. I therefore wonder about my own present, both in time and space. Where am I in my life? Have I lived the life I thought I would? What might the future hold in store for me?

It was around the same time, in the first semester of my master's studies, that I was introduced to the French curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud and his ideas of relational aesthetics as a prominent, avant-guard-trend in contemporary art. I found his thoughts intriguing and was captivated by his efforts to synthesize and find a common trend in the works of a generation of artists that he knew and had been working with as a curator and critic.

In his book *Relational Aesthetics* and in several interviews later Bourriaud defines relational art as "a set of practices which take as their point of departure the whole of human relations

and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (Bourriaud, 2007, p 165¹ and applied it to artists as different as Liam Gillic, Dominique Gonzales-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe, Rikrit Tiravnaja (plate 2), Henrik Plene Jacobsen and Felix Gonzales-Torres. Says Bourriaud: “I tried to find what was specific; what did these artists do that hadn’t been done before.” (Gali, 2013, p. 60.)

What intrigued me especially, was his thoughts about how relational art produces intersubjective encounters through which meaning is elaborated collectively, rather than the artwork being an encounter between a viewer and an object. (Bourriaud, 2007, p.13). At first glance this seemed to be quite incompatible with photography – at least with how Roland Barthes depicts the encounter between the viewer and the image. In his description of a photograph’s essence, its punctum, Barthes stresses the subjective, individual effect – not the collective elaboration of meaning.

It seems to me, however, that such a conclusion may be a bit hasty. There might be more to it. For one Bourriaud himself states, when discussing art and relational form in a more general sense that “Art has always to a certain degree been relational, that is to say a social factor and a founder of dialogue” (Bourriaud, 2007, p.13). As for photographic portraits, it seems to me that their special characteristics of being indexes of people, visually realistic and at the same time containing both studium and punctum, makes them very well suited for creating space and initiating such dialogue among spectators. And also – potentially – for further thoughts about, among other things, modes of social action.

The more I have been deliberating on these issues, the more I have come to realize that I have entered a for me new experiential realm in relation to photography; a realm which have made me reflect on my own photographic practice, and also where I have become more and more interested in how the relational element in a photographic portrait may be expressed *today* – in art contemporary to the first decades of the 21st century. I still love the pure beauty of a typically modern fine art photographic portrait, preferably expressed by an exquisite black

¹ All references to Nicolas Bourriaud’s collection of text *Relational Aesthetics* are in this thesis are from the Norwegian edition *Relasjonell estetikk* published by Pax forlag in 2007. (This is a translated version of the

and white silver gelatin print in the spirit of American photographer Edward Weston (1886 – 1958). In fact this has been the kind of portraits that I myself have been striving to make numerous times. But looking at the old portraits of the unknown young men has made me realize that I also want to know more about the role of the portrait photograph and its relational properties in a contemporary setting.

In fact this is what has led me to this thesis. Here I want to open up and stress relational aspects of the photographic portrait. I want to look for the characteristics contained in the portrait which may be suited for facilitating dialogue; a cornerstone in relational art. And I want to see if there are other aspects too which might be important facilitators in attempts to enhance aspects of the relational when exhibiting and disseminating photographic portraits, or portraits as an important part of a relational intended work of art.

The core of this exploration is centered around a series of photographic portraits of 17 year old pupils on board the training ship MS “Sjøkurs”, an upper secondary boarding school in Kristiansand for young people who aim at a career at sea, which I made this spring. The photographs will make the nexus of an installation I have called *Cast Off*, which will be on show in Kristiansand Kunsthall (Kristiansand Art Hall) the last week of May this year.

As for art theory I will lean on both Barthes and Bourriaud, and also on the theories of Algerian philosopher Jacques Rancière. In his book *The Emancipated Spectator* (2011) he devotes a full chapter to what he calls “The pensive image”. Here Rancière proposes a change of regimes: From a representative regime that expresses image as compliment; a “story” made into a composition, toward an aesthetic regime of presence or presentation. By this he means that an image such as a photograph is two or more things at once. It is both a photographic representation of something; a duplicate, *and* an image conceived as an artistic idea or action. As such a photograph is both what you see quite literally, and also that which you cannot see - represented by the artist’s thought.

In many ways this dual effect is reminiscent of Barthes’s *stadium* and *punctum*. But unlike Barthes, Rancière insists that a photograph’s creation as a complete work of art only can be achieved if its viewer or viewers take an active part in the creation of meaning through unfolding the indeterminacy of the image. As such an image rather presents its audience with

a means to create meaning, rather than containing a subjective and individually perceived ‘punctum’. To me that seem like an important prerequisite for creating a space for inter human relations and the creation of meaning – in short: dialogue.

Also of importance in my inquiries is the work of contemporary photographers such as American artist Roni Horn, Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra and Finnish photographer Nelli Palomäki. Each in her own represents aspects that I will explore and refer to. In her book sized series *You are the weather I and II*, 1994-96 and 2010-11 (plate 4), Roni Horn makes me think about life and transition. She also disseminates her work in very special ways. Rineke Dijkstra, in her series of large colour portraits of teenagers, *Beach Portraits*, 1992–2002 (plate 5), makes me think about how short and transformative the period of adolescence is. Nelli Palomäki’s work, especially her large sized black and white photographs in the series *Sons of Nakhimov*, 2011 (plate 6), also touches me in a somewhat similar manner. A prominent aspect – at least to me – of her portraits of the boys at the Nakhmov Naval Academy in St. Petersburg suggests that innocence is doomed to fall. Common to them all is their contemporary modus operandi of arriving at universal statements of general validity through a body of individual pictures; the series.

Considering the above I have formulated my research question accordingly:

How may contemporaneity in the form of the relational be reflected in the photographic portrait today?

I base this on a close study of the notion ‘relational’ in a contemporary setting, in which I have identified two distinct aspects which relates to the portrait photograph. They are what I call *the reveling gaze* and *the unifying series*. The essence of these are, respectively, the gaze as a relational focus point in a portrait, and the special effects of a series of portraits as opposed to a single image. Also of prominent importance is how works of art are exhibited and disseminated.

The written part of this thesis will form the theoretical exploration of the research question while the physical work on the installation *Cast Off* will constitute the practical artistic approach and the dissemination of the art work. In practice the two parts will support, influence, and fulfill each other.

The structure of this dissertation is loosely divided into six parts. In the first I will go into more detail on the theoretical concepts of relational art, punctum and pensiveness - which might not be as straightforward as it may seem but will be of vital importance to my exploration into how contemporaneity in the form of the relational may be reflected in the photographic portrait. This part will form the theoretical background for the rest of my thesis and also, hopefully, opening up the notion of the relational.

The second part comprises the theoretical and practical methods I will lean on to investigate the research question. Given the inter-relation of theory and practice these will be experimental and hermeneutic in nature, aiming to reveal and articulate the tacit knowledge that I will situate and embody in the specific artwork that forms the core of this thesis and which I aim to develop, make and disseminate in the end of May.

In the third part I focus on my photographic work with my models – how I approached them and how our sessions on board MS “Sjøkurs” progressed and developed.

The fourth part constitutes two aspects of the relational which I have come to identify through my theoretical studies *and* the practical work with the artistic project *as this progressed*. In other words: This is where I ask my research question both theoretically and empirically and reflect upon what I encounter. They are as previously mentioned called the revealing gaze and the unifying series.

The fifth part focuses the dissemination of the finished art work. Proper dissemination may be invaluable in “making” a work of art, while the opposite may go a long way in obscuring it.

And in the sixth part I discuss whether the research question is answered, and also whether the answers may hold a broader-ranging impact and perhaps be a contribution to the understanding of contemporary aspects of the portrait photography as such, than merely supporting the development of my own, personal artistry alone.

Plates 1 - 3



1: Unknown – portraits from app. 1880s.



2: Left: Rirkrit Tiravanija : Untitled (Still) (1992), 303 Gallery, New York.



3: Right: Rirkrit Tiravanija and SUPERFLEX: Social Pudding 2003 , Leipzig.

Plates 4, 5, 6



4: Roni Horn. From *You are the weather*



5: Rineke Dijkstra. From *Beach portraits*



6: Nelli Palomäki. From *Sons of Nakhimov*

1: Theoretical perspectives:

Relational aesthetics, punctum and pensiveness

In this first part I will go into more detail on concepts needed to elaborate on the question of how contemporaneity in the form of the relational may be reflected in the photographic portrait today. This part will form the theoretical background for the rest of my thesis and also, hopefully, opening up the notion of the relational somewhat.

It seems obvious that the place to start looking is in the writings of curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud (b. 1965) who coined the concept “relational art”. But I also need a vocabulary I can use when talking specifically about photographs and their effects. Hence the writings of Roland Barthes, arguably the most influential Western theorist on a photograph’s nature and essence in the last 50 years, will be looked into. Furthermore, I need to open up and understand how one might view a photograph today, in the first decades of the 21st century. One of only a few theorists who have written about this is Jacques Rancière. Aspects of his thoughts, especially his theory about a photograph’s pensiveness, an openness for interpretation, will be of significant interest.

1.1 Relational aesthetics

While Roland Barthes was arguably the most important photography theorists of what might be called the early post-modern area, others followed. One of them is Nicolas Bourriaud, who in the 1990s invented the terms “relational aesthetics” and “relational art” when describing a whole new avant-guard-trend within post-modern art.

Actually, the term relational aesthetics was first coined in 1996 in association with exhibition called *Traffic* at CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, curated by Bourriaud. *Traffic* included several of the artists that Bourriaud would continue to refer to throughout the 1990s, like Liam Gillick; Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Douglas Gordon, Jens Haaning, Christine Hill, Noritoshi Hirakawa; Carsten Höller; Pierre Huyghe; Peter Land; Miltos Manetas; Gabriel Orozco; Jorge Pardo, Philippe Parreno, Jason Rhoades and Rirkrit Tiravanija. Says Bourriaud:

"I remember seeing the work and trying to find the theoretical point of view, the angle, from which I could envision their work in a different way than saying it was "ne-conceptual", or "neo-fluxus" or "post-fluxus", or whatever people said at the time when looking at the work of these artists." (Gali, 2013, p. 60.)

Bourriaud structured and elaborated theoretically on his experiences in his now seminal collection of essays, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998.) Here he aims to portray the generation of contemporary artists that he knew and had been working with as a curator and critic. As he tried to find a common trait among them, he invented the term "relational art", which, as stated, he defined as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space." (Bourriaud, 2007, p. 113)

Central to this is the understanding that an important aspect of relational art is to create a social environment in which people come together to participate in a shared activity. Says Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics*: "The role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist" (p. 16). As such a relational work of art *presents* its audience with a possible meaning; a way of living.

This rejuvenating view of art is anchored socially, focusing on social themes: relations between individuals, communities and societies.

One example of such artwork may be the Thai kitchens of Argentinian artist Rirkrit Tiravanija. In these installations from the early 1990s Tiravanija would set up make-shift kitchens in a gallery space, fully equipped with a refrigerator, a cooking stove, chairs and tables. By offering the food to gallery visitors, he attempted to create spaces for socializing and interaction; the public were able to experience art through pleasure and conversation (see plate 2 and 3).

Another may be Cuban born American artist Felix Gonzales-Torres (1957 - 1996) and his work "candy pieces" (1991). These are piles of candy put on the floor as a minimalist sculpture, inviting the audience to pick up and eat. The piece has been extensively exhibited around the world since its inception. In short, the weight of the artwork matches the weight of Gonzales-Torres' partner when he contracted aids. With this in mind, the spectators are

invited to each take a piece of candy as they pass the installation.² When they do, the artwork is “activated”; its formal characteristics dissolve and the idea behind the artwork is revealed.

Central to Bourriaud’s perspective is a shift in how spectators perceive an aesthetic experience represented by relational works of art. However, in this shift towards a relational perspective is not limited to works of art of the period under consideration. It occurred in other humanist fields too, such as in psychology, where one started to focus on relational psychoanalysis about the same time as Bourriaud focused on relational art. (Binder, Nielse, Vøllestad, Holgersen, Schanke, 2006, pp. 899-908).

Within psychoanalysis the relational shift is basically denoted in motivational theory, describing a shift from regarding man as primarily drive-oriented, to viewing man as a mainly contact and meaning seeking being, thus opening up for new theoretical perspectives on the relationship of transference and countertransference of meaning as being mainly being co-constructed. It also opens up for conceptualizing the meaning of artworks as relationally constructed, and in a constant state of “becoming”, along a temporal frame.

But overall it denotes – as does Bourriaud - a view of man as an acting and meaning seeking being, where an individual enter into a relationship with another on an *equal basis* where both have the same opportunity to influence the relationship – and where man is seen as a relational being; a *homo communicans*.

In the wider sphere of things relational aesthetics is also characterized as an avant-guard trend within contemporary art. In his article *Periodising Contemporary Art in Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence* (2009), art historian Alexander Alberro defines the contemporary as a historical period spanning the last almost 25 years. Says Alberro:

“The years following 1989 have seen the emergence of a new historical period. Not only has there been the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states and the heralding of the

² In fact, Gonzales-Torres’ installation is exhibited in Norway right now, in the show *Døden og kjærleiken (Death and Love)* at Permanenten, the premises of The West Norway Museum of Decorative Art in Bergen, until June 2.

era of globalization, but technologically there has been the full integration of electronic or digital culture, and economically neo-liberalism with its goal to bring all human action into the domain of the market has become hegemonic. Within the context of the fine arts, the new-period has come to be known as “the contemporary.” (Alberro, 2009, p. 937.)

He then goes on to identify four distinct features of hegemonic formation with which he describes this present period. They are, in summary, these:

- The first formation is social and political (and to a large degree economic) and relates to what has, since the end of the Cold War, come to be referred to as “globalization.”
- Second, the contemporary is witnessing the emergence of a new technological imaginary following upon the unexpected and unregulated global expansion of the new communication and information technologies of the internet.
- Third, the reconfigured context of contemporary art prompts a thorough reconsideration of the avant-garde.
- Fourth, the new period is witnessing the surprising re-emergence of a philosophical aesthetics that seeks to find the “specific” nature of aesthetic experience as such.

It is in the third formation that Alberro places relational art. Historically the idea of the avant-garde refers to artists and theorists whose work is characterized not only by being experimental or innovative – cutting edge – but also which was in opposition to what was then mainstream cultural and political values.

Common for several historical avant-gardists of the early 20th century was their effort to open pathways through new cultural or political terrain for society to follow, and to instigate social reforms. Over time, however, avant-garde art became associated with movements concerned with art for art's sake, focusing primarily on expanding the frontiers of aesthetic experience, rather than with wider social reform.

Alberro, in turn, does not see this “new” form of avant-garde advocated by Bourriaud as primarily being a recurrent instigator to new political and social reforms, nor as “art for art’s sake”, but rather that “the avant-garde promise of aesthetic equality has reemerged in the form of a “relational aesthetics” by artists who make work out of social interactions—work that engages, and is made out of, social communities”, as he puts it. ((Alberro, 2009, p. 942.)

Interestingly, Alberro also adds what might be seen as a *fifth* distinctive trait to his description of the contemporary present: The spectator. He suggests that the factors that came together between 1989 and 1991 also did something to the formation of the spectator, or, as he puts it: “realigned the manner in which art addresses its spectator – indeed, in which it constructed the spectator”. What he sketches is that art stemming from the contemporary challenges the spectator in a much more active way than in the periods preceding it, especially the modern. In particular he emphasizes the importance of experience based knowledge that requires an active participation on the part of the spectator as important for creation of meaning, suggesting also that meaning in contemporary art is determined *by usage* (context) and may be located *after* it is seen or experienced, in the experience-based knowledge that requires an active participation on the part of the spectator.

In sum, then, it might be possible to pose that relational art is an aesthetic expression of a reconsidered understanding of the avant-garde; one which emerges from social interactions, is based on dialogue and active communication, and also derives its meaning from the same. Additionally, being a trend within a formation of the contemporary, relational art may also be understood as being subjected to general characteristics of its period, such as letting both context and time influence how meaning is created in conjunction with the experienced based knowledge of the spectator or spectators.

1.2 Punctum and studium

Within photography the French theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes (1915 – 1980) has been extremely influential in European philosophical theory formation. A graduate of the Sorbonne (classical letters), his work in the 1950s -1970s contributed especially to the development of theoretical schools such as structuralism, semiotics, and post-structuralism.

While his influence is mainly found in these theoretical fields, he was throughout his concerned with the photograph as such and its potentials too, most notably, perhaps, in the 1960s, in essays like *The photographic message* (1961) and *The Rhetoric of the Image* (1964), in the latter where he analyses an advertising image and identifies how different messages are conveyed by a system of signs.

However, in 1980, only two months before he died, a small book titled *Camera Lucida*³ was published. Here he enquires into the nature and essence of photography.

Since its publication *Camera Lucida* has been the pivoting point around which photography's relation to reality has been discussed in the West.

Barthes began writing the book in 1977, the year his mother died. As such the book is an attempt to explain the unique significance a picture of her as a child carried for him.

Camera Lucida is in two parts, and in the first part he cites two main factors in a photographic image, studium and punctum, in which he reflects on the relationship between the symbolic meaning of a photograph (studium), and that which is purely personal and dependent on the individual, that which "pierces the viewer" (Barthes, 2000, p. 42.) and creates a subjective, individual interest (punctum).

'Studium' is, then, basically the element that creates a general interest in a photographic image. It shows what the photographer has photographed. It is then up to the spectator to "see" what has been photographed and interpret it. As such culture is an important connotation within studium, "explaining" how the spectator or spectators "should" view the studium content of a photograph.

'Punctum', on the other hand, is a detail in the image that subjectively attracts the viewer. It is a subjective point of impact. This point of impact may in itself have meaning, but this meaning is *not* originally hidden within the studium. As such it can be anything: The collar of a jacket, something in the background, a twinkle in someone's eye. The punctum is as such not influenced by a common culture as is the studium, but rather of a person's personal life experience. As for Barthes, he found the unique personal significance of the picture of his mother in the mildness of her face. This was his "punctum".

These two concepts – studium and punctum - have since they were used by Barthes been central to any discussion of the properties of a photograph. They make it possible to talk about what one sees and also what one feels when viewing a photograph. They will therefore be crucial in my further discussion of any points of contact between photography and relational art.

³ The original title in French is *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie*. All references in this thesis, however, are from the English version *Camera Lucida* issued by Vintage of London in 2000.

In the second part of the book Barthes elaborates further on the photograph of his departed mother and realizes that it, through its photographic presence, confirms to him that his mother has indeed been alive, and that the essence of the photograph therefore is “what has been” (Barthes, 2000, pp. 76-77). As such he sees the photograph both as a marker of time *and* a phenomenon with psychoanalytical and autobiographical implications.⁴ Barthes notes that the photograph is the medium which confirms the past most strongly.⁵

On the surface of things it seems that Bourriaud and Barthes have two very different approaches to how meaning may be constituted in works of art such as a photograph and a relational artwork respectively. It is almost as if they are at extreme ends of one another. Interestingly, on the other hand, that even if they so clearly differ, they do seem to have an odd resemblance too, in that both of them seem to view a duality in images. By this I mean that both of them seem to view a photograph as being constituted both as a physical thing, an object ; a studium to use Barthes concept – and one from which it is possible to extract a certain meaning ; punctum.

Where they differ radically, however, is on their descriptions of the essence of the punctum. Barthes describes how meaning is constructed subjectively and individually, while Bourriaud describes how meaning is derived at collectively.

Barthes expressed his views on photographs in 1980, almost a decade before the historical period of the contemporary emerged. He is however still regarded among the most influential writers on photography theory today, and his concepts of studium and punctum are still current and very much so indeed. The reason may be because, as Alberro sketches above, the spectator has emerged as a distinctive trait in the contemporary present, as opposed to the period preceding it. Alberro suggests that what came together in the world between 1989 and 1991 also did something to the formation of the spectator in relation to art: it “realigned the

⁴ Wells, Liz (ed.): P 15 in *The photography reader*, Routledge, London 2003

⁵ And since the past only is the past in relation to the present, my present is also confirmed, albeit reflexively, by looking at the old portraits. When I look at them I therefore wonder not only about them, but also about my own present, both in time and space. Where am I in my life? Have I lived the life I thought I would? What might the future hold in store for me?

manner in which art addresses its spectator – indeed, in which it constructed the spectator”⁶. And here Barthes concepts and views are still applicable for the creation of meaning. Roland Barthes is - in short - still contemporary.

1.3 Pensiveness

Another theorist who enquires into the nature and essence of images is Algerian born French philosopher Jacques Rancière (b. 1940), professor of philosophy at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee in Switzerland and professor emeritus at the University of Paris, St. Denis.

Throughout his career Rancière has been concerned with theories of democracy, disagreement and human rights, and the last decades or so also with visual aesthetics. While his influence in his early career is found mainly in his work on politics (he used to be known as a Marxist), he is perhaps just as well known today for his thoughts on aesthetics.

Starting with *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1991), originally aimed at educators, Rancière postulates (in brief) that we are all of equal intelligence, and that insights from which knowledge is constructed can be found in us all. It is therefore possible for everybody to learn whatever one wants to learn, and not really needing to follow the teachings or ideas of others passively. The role of the teacher thus becomes to release this possibility in the individual rather than to guide students towards prescribed ends defined by others.

The thought that we are all capable to construct knowledge ourselves, is carried over into the field of aesthetics in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2010), a collection of texts reflecting the active/passive role of the teacher/student that he investigated in the *Schoolmaster*. He suggest that a move to actively seek one’s own interpretation when confronting a work of art actually emancipates the spectator from previous interpretations of meaning, thus breaking the ground for new ways to experience works of art.

Rancière devotes the last and concluding essay to what he calls “The pensive image”. Here he proposes a change of regimes: From a representative regime that expresses image as compliment; a “story” made into a composition, toward an aesthetic regime of presence or

⁶ See page 20 above.

presentation. By this he means that an image such as a photograph is two or more things at once. It is both a photographic representation of something; a duplicate, *and* an image conceived as an artistic idea or action. As such a photograph is both what you see quite literally, and also that which you cannot see. Says Rancière: “To speak of the pensive image is to signal a zone of indeterminacy between these two types of images” (p.107).

In many ways this dual effect is reminiscent of Barthes’ concepts of *studium* and *punctum*. But unlike Barthes, Rancière insists that a photograph’s creation as a complete work of art can only be achieved if its viewer or viewers take an active part in the creation of meaning through unfolding the indeterminacy of the image. As such an image rather presents its audience with *a means* to create meaning, rather than *contain* a subjective and individually perceived *punctum*. This way meaning can be elaborated individually *and/or* collectively, and its determination may be coloured by its circumstances, its context, both historically and contemporary. In particular he emphasizes experience based knowledge that requires an active participation on the part of the spectator as important, suggesting also that meaning in contemporary art is determined *by usage* and may as such – as also Alberro suggests - be located after it is seen or experienced, in the experience-based knowledge that requires active participation/interpretation by the spectator.

Also of interest is Rancière’s critique of Barthes in this text. In brief Rancière disagrees with Barthes’ definition of ‘*punctum*’ as being a specific detail that pricks the viewer. To Rancière a photograph’s *punctum* is rather which aspect the spectator *chooses* to emphasize when imbuing a picture with non-*studium* meaning. As such Rancière’s ‘*punctum*’ *is* the pensiveness of the picture.

In order to clarify his argument, Rancière discusses several photographs. One is a contemporary portrait of an adolescent by Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra, showing a girl in a swimming suit on a beach, from “Beach portraits” (1992) – the same series that is one of my inspirations in this thesis. In opposition to Barthes, who in the photograph of his mother looked for “the true being” and found it (her) by what became for him the ‘*punctum*’ of the photograph, Rancière on the other hand, insists that the girl in Dijkstra’s portrait should not be seen as anything resembling a “true being”, but rather as an “ordinary being, whose identity is unimportant, and who hides her thoughts in offering up her face” (Rancière, 2011, p. 116).

To Rancière the effect of the photograph works is not necessarily to “prick the viewer”. The function of the image is rather uncertain and open for interpretation; it is *pensive*.

Rancière’s and Barthes’ positions are thus quite different here. In fact Rancière regards Barthes position as representative for a last century area regime, where a photographs function of effigy still were so prominent that it produced an affect directly on us by the body of the one who had faced the lens; one “who is no longer there, and whose fixing in the image signifies death’s grip on the living” (Rancière, 2011, p. 113). He claims that Barthes thus produced a short-circuit in his reasoning, one that, if following Rancière, erase the characteristic features of many photographs; that is the features of indeterminacy - which in turn breaks the ground for pensiveness.

It should be noted that Barthes *did* touch upon the notion of pensiveness when, in his notes, he talked about various characteristic traits of photographs; the pensive ones being those which “induces us, vaguely, to think” (Barthes, 2000, p. 38). Interestingly the examples he refers to are all portraits, where he places the pensive element in the “mask” which presents itself to the viewer.

In a reversed position this might seem to echo Rancière’s thoughts about pensiveness in images. But Barthes does not elaborate very much on the issue, he just notes it as one of several traits which he sees on his ontological search of what photography is, but which he does not elaborate any further in his pursuit. Thus Barthes’ position is very different from Rancière in that the latter puts great import on pensiveness, claiming it to be the essence of the relationship between two operations that, on one side, are determined by the artist and, on the other, the spectator who acts to fix the relationship and impart reality or meaning.

In this part I have tried to sketch a theoretical backdrop for my work on the planned installation *Cast Off*. I have tried to highlight how Nicolas Bourriaud explains how the social in the form of relational aesthetics has become a prominent avant-garde trend in contemporary art. In order to put Bourriaud’s thoughts in perspective I have also touched upon common traits in other humanist fields, such as psychology and art history.

I have then introduced Roland Barthes' concepts of 'studium' and 'punctum' in order to use them when talking about photography later. But more importantly I have also focused on how Barthes explains how a photograph may initiate fluctuations connected to the past and the present in someone viewing a photograph, and also instigate individual psychoanalytical implications.

Lastly I have introduced Jaques Rancière who suggests that pensiveness is both a prominent feature of contemporary portrait photography and also a way to understand art in a broader way today.

Together these three theorists have given me a set of tools, or a vocabulary if you like, which will be used throughout this thesis. Bourriaud has given me the concept 'relational' plus an understanding of how a trend in contemporary art may manifest itself. Barthes has given me the concepts of 'studium' and 'punctum' in order to talk about important aspects of how one may perceive a photograph. And Rancière has given me the notion of 'pensiveness', a powerful and contemporary tool which loosens up Barthes' definition of 'punctum' when trying to inflict meaning to a photograph and other works of art. The three of them, who together span a period of in excess of thirty years, are – although different - all concerned about art and photography in their own time.

Overall these concepts will enable me to understand one and the same photograph from three different angles. 'Relational' will hint at social interactions, dialogue and active communication. 'Punctum' hints at fluctuations connected to the past and the present. And 'pensiveness' hints at the aesthetic quality of openness as a contemporary trait.

It is now time to move forward and look at the approaches and methods I intend to use when carrying out my artistic development project and trying to find answers to my research question: How may contemporaneity in the form of the relational be reflected in the photographic portrait of today?

2: Approach and method

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the relational element in the portrait photograph, and expand the knowledge and understanding of how contemporaneity in the form of the relational may be reflected in the portrait photograph today. So far I have addressed questions related to the origins and theoretical characteristics of relational art (Bourriaud), how the trend fits into the wider picture of contemporary art (Alberro), and also how some central theorists view important ontological aspects of photographic portraits (Barthes and Ranciere).

In this part I will take a closer look at the methods I will use. But first I need to be precise in what kind of artistic research I am conducting. Since I am trying to find answers by carrying out a photographic project through my personal artistic practice, I want to start by outlining how I distinguish my work from other types of artistic research methodologically.

2.1 Research *in* the arts

In this I lean on the defining work by Dutch theorist Henk Bergdorff, professor of art theory and research at the Amsterdam School of the Arts, who in the article *The Debate on Research in the Arts* (2006) emphasizes three types of artistic research by using the concepts formulated by Christopher Fryling in his 1993 article “Research in Art and Design”: Research *on* the arts, research *for* the arts and research *in* the arts.

In his elaborations Bergdorff emphasizes that research *on* the arts is research that has art practice in the broadest sense of the word as its object, and that it refers to investigations aimed at drawing valid conclusions about art practices from a theoretical distance, a fundamental separation. Research of this type is common in the humanistic disciplines such as literature, art history and media studies and also in social science research. The common characteristics of a research on the arts approach are ‘reflection’ and ‘interpretation’ – whether the research is more historical and hermeneutic, philosophical and aesthetic, critical and analytic, reconstructive or deconstructive, descriptive or explanatory.

When it comes to Research *for* the arts Bergdorff described as applied research in a narrow sense where art is not so much the object of investigation, but rather its objective. Explains Bergdorff:

“Examples are material investigations of particular alloys used in casting metal sculptures, investigation of the application of live electronics in the interaction between dance and lighting design, or the study of the ‘extended techniques’ of an electronically modifiable cello” (Bergdorff, 2006, p. 6).

He underlines that these are all studies *in the service of* art practice and emphasizes that this form of research delivers the tools and the knowledge of materials that are needed during the creative process or in the artistic product.

Of the three types of research Bergdorff regards research *in* the arts is the most controversial, in that it does not observe a distance between the researcher and the practice, which in other fields of research is essential. Instead, the artistic practice itself is an integral part of both the research process and the research results – which is important for my project.

Bergdorff specifies that such an approach is based on the understanding that no fundamental separation exists between theory and practice in the arts. Says Bergdorff:

“After all, there are no art practices that are not saturated with experiences, histories and beliefs; and conversely there is no theoretical access to, or interpretation of, art practice that does not partially shape that practice into what it is. As such concepts and theories, experiences and understandings are all interwoven with art practices and, partly for this reason, art is always reflexive. Research in the arts hence seeks to articulate some of this embodied knowledge throughout the creative process and in the art object.” (Bergdorff, 2006, p. 7)

Bergdorff’s views of research in the arts coincides with those of Norwegian professor in art didactics, Aslaug Nyernes, head of Norway’s Programme for artistic development. In her essay "Between acanthus and arabesque: Rhetorical perspective on creative (research) work in arts and crafts" (Nyernes, 2006, pp 46-60 - my translation) she focuses on creative and artistic research in arts and craft from a rhetoric position, showing and illustrating how the artistic

research process is about exploring the relationship - the balance if you like - between the movements *and* the progression between the different topoi defining the topology of artistic research. As for her, she defines these defining topoi to be language, theory and artistic materials.

Nyrnes emphasizes that the relationship between these three defining topoi should be characterized by *one place challenging the positions of the other two and vice versa with no fixed progression between them through the process* (my emphasis), suggesting also that an artistic research project may *start* in no specified fixed manner. It can start from theory, language or materials – or as in my case from a dozen or so old photographs and a curiosity about a trend within the formation of contemporary art. From her perspective of the rhetoric she also questions of forming, reforming, taking chances, experiment, generate, observe, adapt, collect, copy, play, sample, resample and repeat again and again as arguably the most appropriate method in artistic research.

2.2 A phenomenological outlook

Both Bergdorff's and Nyrnes' approaches to research in the arts echoes exactly what I aim to do: I want to explore the relational element in the portrait photograph by researching theory, to look at other photographers work, and to experiment with work of my own – in order to understand how contemporaneity in the form of the relational may be reflected in the portrait photograph today.

There is, however, an inherent pitfall to this approach, one one might call “the reflexive trap” and one which I think it is important to be aware of. By this I mean that it is possible to let one of the three pillars of this approach influence the others to such a degree that the others merely act as illustrations to the first. It is for instance possible to imagine that a photograph is made to support a theoretical point to such a degree that it might be seen as an illustration more than anything else. Conversely it is possible to “find” a theory which supports how a work of art is understood.

The remedy to this is of course is always to be aware of this danger and to spot the reflexive trap before one falls into it; that is to have a phenomenological outlook throughout. As a matter of fact my approach to this whole complex is phenomenological in nature. That is

because I am interested in how contemporaneity in the form of the relational may be reflected in the photographic portrait today – that is how this appears and is perceived .

As such phenomenology is one of the dominant philosophical movements of today. It was founded by Austrian philosopher Edmund Gustav Albrecht Husserl (1859 – 1938), and its issue is appearances; how things appear through consciousness.

Phenomenology takes as its starting point people and the world we live in. It focuses on how an individual, a self, can take a step back and understand and make sense of a phenomena – a thing, a concept, an idea, etc. - *as it appears to and is perceived by the self*, and not by way of for instance an ideal. Phenomenology states that it is if one is concerned with the true nature of an object (or an idea), one should be interested in its appearances and the way it manifests itself to the self – because “an object’s specific character is not hidden behind the phenomena, but is being unfolded in it”. (Kollin & Køppe, 2003, p. 128)

Does this sound familiar? I hope so – because this is the approach Roland Barthes used when he searched for the unique personal significance of the picture of his mother, as described in the first part of this paper.

Although phenomenology is a philosophy more than a fixed theory, it has a fundamental vocabulary of concepts which it is important to know if one is to exercise a phenomenological analysis. Some of these will also be used in the other parts of this thesis. I’ll therefore outline a few briefly here:

‘Intentionality’ is perhaps the most important. This does not mean “intention” as it does when used in an everyday conversation. Rather it means “being directed towards”, in the sense that our consciousness is directed towards an object of some kind. In other words: We “intend” something when we have a conscious relationship to an object (when we focus on or “see” something, like a photograph).

‘Noema’ and ‘noesis’ are central concepts too. In phenomenology noema is that which gives meaning or sense to an intentional act. In other words: if you are in the act of intending (an object, a photograph), the noema is what constitutes the object *just as it is experienced*. It is not the object in itself, but what the object “is” while being intended.

The world is populated by people, with whom we interact. In phenomenological terms we also ‘intend’ them; we “see” them in their manifolds, including the way they see the world. In that way we can enter into a relationship with another and his or her self - making it possible to “see the world as they to”. This form of intentionality is called ‘intersubjectivity’ in phenomenology. (To me this concept is important. As we shall see in the discussion about “the revealing gaze” in the next part the ability to understand something in a manner similar to the way other people see it, is a prerequisite for meaning seeking dialogue.)

However, the most important about having a phenomenological outlook in this thesis is that it enables me to view phenomena – photographs – as these appear to me.

2.3 The hermeneutical circle

Since I wanted to explore the relational element in the portrait photograph by researching theory, looking at other photographers work, and to experiment with work of my own, I needed a methodology that supported this method and helped me to toward an answer to my research question. This I found in the discipline of interpretation theory - hermeneutics, as defined by German theorist Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900 – 2002).

As with phenomenology hermeneutics too has a fundamental vocabulary of concepts which it is important to know if one is to exercise a hermeneutical analysis. I’ll outline the perhaps two most important, ‘prejudice’ and ‘the hermeneutical circle’ here:

In phenomenology *prejudice* is not a negative word. It simply denotes ‘pre-judgement’ – that is ‘something that we “know” from before’. As such we meet every new situation full of prejudices – that is as we are; with what we know *now* at this exact time in space. He thereby states that there is no such thing as zero knowledge.

The principle behind hermeneutic understanding is *the hermeneutical circle*: When we want to understand something new – for example a work of art – we do not start with nothing. We use the knowledge we already have to interpret what we see or experience. That is we meet every new situation full of prejudgements; *prejudices*. As we continue to see and experience the artwork the information and experiences we gain are re-included in our understanding of the artwork, creating a renewed or elaborated understanding – or revised prejudices if you

will.

This way, the process of understanding always has a dialogical character. It does not fix concepts or “truths” eternally, but give them a certain elasticity, opening up for change as time goes by and new insights occur, thus suggesting that meaning is created through intersubjective communication taking place over time.

An illustrative three-step-in-a-circle-example of how to perceive the notion of prejudice and the hermeneutical circle may be art itself:

- If we try to identify something as ‘art’, we have already approached it with a more or less formed opinion about what ‘art’ actually is (our prejudices).
- Additionally, if we find that the important characteristics of this “new art” can be adopted or included in our previous understanding of what art is, our original conception of art is shifted.
- At the same time our original understanding of art is a prerequisite for considering the “new art” as art in the first place.

Thus the whole is understood from the part, and the part is understood out of the whole.

To me, who have an exploratory approach to my research question, this makes a lot of sense. It lets me understand that I can work with concepts and theories, experiences and understandings and interweave them all with my art practice reflexively by way of the hermeneutical circle toward some answers. And this is what I aim to do now, when I in the next part focus on the more practical part of this thesis: my artistic development project and the prominent aspects of the relational which emerges from combining the theories that I have sketched, other photographers work, and my own artistic practice.

3: Cast Off

As stated earlier the core of this exploration of potential relational elements in the photographic portrait is centered around a series of photographs of 17 year old pupils on board the training ship MS “Sjøkurs”, an upper secondary boarding school for young people who aim at a career at sea, which I made this spring.

The school, which is situated right outside Kristiansand, has 120 pupils divided in two classes, training pupils for a career as either seamen or motormen. The pupils attend for two years, before moving on as apprentices on board costal or seagoing vessels for another two years, when they sit for a final practical examination.

As for the ship itself, she was built at Bluhm & Voss Shipyard in Hamburg in 1956 as a costal passenger carrying tramp ship for the Norwegian Costal Express, travelling from Bergen to Kirkenes and back under the name of MS “Ragnvald Jarl” for 29 years before retiring as a training ship with a new name. The ship is 266 feet long and her top speed is 17 knots.

When I approached the school and asked if anyone would model for my project, I was met with interest by both the headmaster and the pupils alike, and after a brief audition I ended up with 12 models who agreed to let me photograph them during five afternoon sessions. They were all paid with a portrait of themselves to give to their parents, or just to keep for themselves.

The reason why I approached just this school in the first place is because the old portraits that instigated this thesis are of young sailors who probably were of much the same age as these pupils. I also had a vague thought about exhibiting the photographs on board the training ship, which, as it turned out, was not feasible.⁷

When I started working I did not have a clear concept of what I wanted to do, nor where or how the project might end up. Hopefully I and others interested in contemporaneity in connection with the photographic portrait would learn something from my efforts, but exactly

⁷ The ship will be in Aberdeen at the time of my exam.

what I did not know. In many ways I tried to approach the project with an open mind and allow myself to “go with the flow”, so to speak.

This does not mean that I came completely empty handed and ignorant when I arrived at the MS “Sjøkurs” for the first time. I came with a genuine questioning interest in both portrait photography, contemporaneity and relational art. As such I had also carried out two supportive assignments which focused on the portrait and young people the year before.

One, *Undaunted*, was a modest artistic development project which took as its starting point the period of transition adolescence undergo on their life journey towards adulthood. My aim was to try and convey aspects of this transitory phase through photography. In short I tried to convey what I perceived as a prominent trait in many of the adolescence I know, which I narrowed down to be an openness to go out into the world; in short their *undauntedness*, as this was expressed in their postures and gazes (plate 7).

The other was an experiment I carried out last fall called *Look at me!* Here I empirically tried to assess how a semantic context – a tell; a story - may influence the meaning seeking dialogue within a group of spectators when viewing works of art (plate 8). The results are described in full in part 5 of this dissertation, but here it might be of interest that the series in question focused on facial expressions and the photographic portrait too.

In my invisible backpack I also carried along more than 30 years worth of photographic experience, the last 10 with a focus on photography as art. Through this I arrived with among other things a thorough knowledge of such things as lighting, dept of field, shutter speed, two dimensional composition and colour theory - which obviously made the technical part of the photo shoots easier.

Or, to use Nyernes’ vocabulary; I arrive with one topos in place: My previous experience accumulated by and through my photographic practice.

I also carried with me some experience in approaching and photographing strangers from a 15 year long career as a journalist in Norwegian newspapers. This tacit knowledge did help things a bit. One successful “trick” in this respect was that I arrived at the ship with a couple of bags of chips and some bottles of Coca Cola. Heading out for the first time to meet an unknown number of unknown 17 year olds my previous experience told me that they would appreciate that. Which they did. True, after ten minutes the chips and the Cola was all gone,

as was most of the youngsters too, but 12 lingered on and became my models in the following four consecutive photo shoots which provided me with the raw material for the photographic part of my project. Needless to say perhaps, but I did bring chips and Coca Cola to the other sessions as well...

Location and light

As it turned out several things were assessed on that first visit to the MS “Sjökurs”. First of all I was looking for a location on the ship or on the quay where I might take the photographs. A tour of the premises suggested that the best place was in the saloon in the front of the ship on the top deck. This was the largest and lightest room on board.

The next thing I looked for was the light. I always look for the best possible light. Obviously light is paramount in photography. A good light is usually characterized by being not too sharp and pointed, because this creates too harsh shadows. Nor should it be too soft. And there should be enough of it so that every detail of what is being photographed is registered on the film or on the compact disc. But ultimately the kind of light one wants is determined by what one wants to express in the photograph, and exposed accordingly.

Again it was in the saloon that I found what I was looking for. Here daylight flooded through the windows from three sides and filled the room better than any other place on board. The room also had a number of old fashioned down lights with tungsten bulbs with a lower colour temperature⁸ (about 3400 K) than the daylight (about 5500 K), acting as warmer fill lights. As it turned out the overall lighting conditions presented me with a surprisingly good light. It was however a bit low and made the shutter times a bit longish (about 1/8 of a second), suggesting the possibility of motion blur⁹. I therefore put a small flash on the camera with a colour temperature of about 5500 K and aimed it backwards away from the model in order to “strengthen” the scattered daylight. This shortened the exposure times to around 1/15th –

⁸ The kelvin is often used in the measure of the colour temperature of light sources. Colour temperature is important in the fields of image projection and photography where a colour temperature of approximately 5600 K is required to match daylight film emulsions. As opposed to other degree measurements such as Celsius, higher Kelvin temperatures (3600–5500 K) are considered cool and lower color temperatures (2700–3000 K) are considered warm.

⁹ At ISO 100 – 200, my preferred film speed, and with a f-stop (lens opening) of about 4 or 5.6.

1/30th of a second (one – two stops¹⁰), enough if I put the camera on a tripod when photographing.

I did try to photograph in some other locations on board, such as in the galley and in the engine room, but eventually we all returned to the saloon and cared out the first tests there.

Background and pose

In my wanderings between my own work, other photographers work and theory, I had at this point decided that the perhaps most important aspect of the portraits I was about to make was to be found in the face – as will be thoroughly discussed in the following parts of this dissertation. I therefore decided to aim for a plain background in the pictures, one that did not compete with the face. To achieve this I placed the models in front of a plain white rolled down and adjusted their position according to how the down lights illuminated their heads and faces. My previous experience as a photographer also told me that this setup would make it so that the color of their clothes would affect the color hue of the white canvas, thus giving it a slight but hopefully pleasant tint so it did not appear bright white and icy cold in the finished picture.

As for the pose, this was also influenced by my triangular wanderings between what I was doing, what other photographers had done and theory. Through this I decided that I wanted to go for an expression that conveyed openness, equality and acted as an invitation to dialogue. I therefore asked the models to sit quite still and just behave normally (not smile too much), and look straight into the camera. Just before exposure I used a “trick” – I asked them if they could see their mirrored image in the lens. As they focused their eyes on the outer elements of the lens, changing their facial expressions ever so little, I made the exposure.

Process

At this point I also dwelt with other concerns. Like contemporaneity – that is how to how crate a sense of *todayness* in the physical artwork? At one point I seriously considered making portraits by using the wet plate collodion process¹¹, characterized by being able to

¹⁰ One stop is a halving or a doubling of exposure, depending on whether one increase or decrease the amount of light hitting the film plane in the camera.

¹¹ The process: a collodion mixture is based on bromide, iodide, or chloride is poured on a cleaned glass plate, which is allowed to sit until the coating gels but is still moist. The plate is then placed in a silver nitrate solution, which converts the iodide, bromide, or chloride to silver iodide, bromide or chloride. Once the reaction is

record and render microscopically fine detail. The process, which leads to images on glass plates, was invented in about 1850. In recent years there have been several symposiums focusing on the process, and wet plate collodion is presently experiencing a contemporary revival amongst art photographers both in America and Europe. The idea was that by making portraits by this old method, the method itself would aid me in addressing the issue of how one relates to other people today, in a reflexive way (plate 9).

I did, eventually, abandon the idea because I felt that the technical aspect of the portraits would make them being perceived as *exotic single images* of persons more than anything else. I therefore settled for ordinary colour photographs made with a digital SLR with a 28 – 105 mm lens, a dedicated flashlight and a tripod, post produced in photoshop, and decided to explore the issue of today's elsewhere.

All in all I made about 350 exposures on my visits to the MS “Sjökurs” – that is between seven and ten of each model on each visit. Initially I planned to carry out two photo sessions. But as it turned out, the maintenance crew on board changed all the light bulbs in the saloon after my second visit, thus changing both the colour temperature and the overall lighting conditions severely. I therefore had to carry out two more photo shoots than originally planned before I felt I had enough raw material to move on to the lightroom for further processing there.

Cut and composition

From here on most of the work on the photographs were done in photoshop. In the vocabulary of photography this is the *post*-visualization phase of the photographic process¹². I first made a rough selection of about 25 images, about 1-3 of each model. Then I carried out a set of technical adjustment; matching the tone in the images to each other, and sizing them all up so the heads in each picture were of the same size, before I made a further selection, narrowing

complete, the plate is removed and exposed in a camera *while still wet*. The plate loses sensitivity as it dries, requiring it to be coated and sensitized immediately before use. It must also be developed while still moist. (Source: James, Christopher: *The book of alternative photographic processes*, Delmar Cengage Learning, New York 2009)

¹² Visualization is a central concept in photography, introduced by American photographer Ansel Adams (1902 - 1984) who defines *pre*-visualization as the ability to anticipate a finished image before making the exposure. *Post*-visualization refers to execution of the image at the printing stage. Both forms of visualization are at the center of the zone system of exposure and development which Adams developed in collaboration with Fred Archer around 1939-40. (Source: Adams, Ansel: *The negative*, Bulfinch Press, New York 1991)

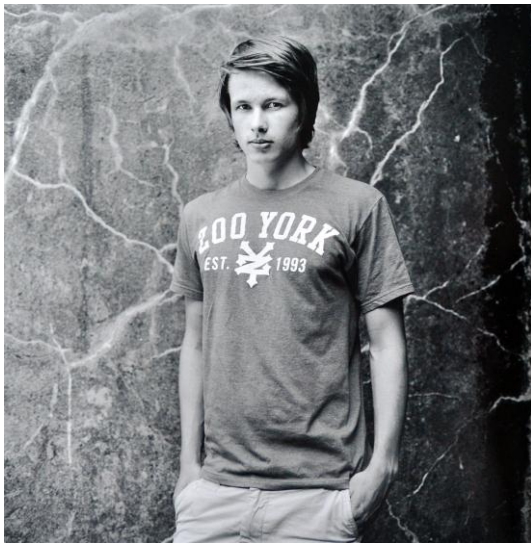
the number of photographs to about 16, and then finally deciding on the 12 master images that I would elaborate on further.

At this point I started to experiment with the cuts and compositions of the pictures, being inspired by both theory and other photographers portraits. In short I made a number of different cuts whe I went in close around the eyes, and stepped further back again, trying to look for which cut served my purpose best – all the time having Nicolas Bourriaud, Roland Barthes and Jacques Rancière in the back of my head while at the same time squinting at the works of Ronyi Horn, Rienke Dijkstra and Nelli Palomäki.

Eventually I decided on a cut that I felt was “just right” for my purposes. The cut is not too close, nor too far back. In fact I felt that by going in too close so just the eyes showed the studium of the image changed drastically, leaving no room for an invitation to dialogue. Similarly, by stepping too far back, everything in the image, the eyes became too small to invite you to a dialogue. The image also became more object-like and something to *gaze at* rather than being an image of someone one is *seen by*.

The composition of the final cut is made to enhance this feeling of being invited to a dialogue. The photographs are square and one eye is placed almost in the middle in order to induce the form and the gaze of the person depicted with a sense of calmness. What one see of the upper end of the torso is a little bit askew, thus introducing a bit of debt in the picture. One end of the shoulder is placed in the lower left or right corner, allowing ones gaze to travel smoothly and comfortably to the face and being kept there by the eyes. The form of the head is not touching any borders or any ”interesting” things in the background, thus leaving nothing there to derail one’s eyes away from the face in the pictures. The attention created is thus similar (but of course not the same) to meeting the person depicted face to face. (Plates 10-11)

Plates 7 – 9



7: From the *Undaunted* project.



8: *Look at me!* – experimental project.



9: Wet plate collodion process - example (by Ian Ruhter)

4: Aspects of the relational: The gaze and the series

During the first session with the pupils I made about 70 exposures. I varied the shots quite a lot - going in close and backing away, zooming in and out, turning the models' faces this way and that and varying the background. Aiming for portraits, I wanted to concentrate on their faces, but besides from that I kept it open and rather went with the flow. Also I did not know how close in I wanted to go, or the expression I was looking for. So I varied.

After the photo-shoot I played with the photographs in Photoshop – adjusting tone, colours and sharpness, and also doing a lot of cropping, in short; experimenting (plate 10). As I did so I also looked for what in relation to the photographs might fit into wide categories of “relational” and contemporary” my lead words in this exploration, so to speak.

I tried to look at these questions from a phenomenological point of view; that is how some of the manifolds of this issue appeared to me. I also tried to enlist some help from Roland Barthes and his ideas of *studium* and *punctum*, as discussed above, because these concepts provide a way to come to grip with the essence of a photograph - and also because Barthes came to his conclusions by way of a phenomenological approach. By intending and evidencing several single images of different genres, spanning from news photographs to historical photographs via art photographs, he reached his conclusions through looking at a double portrait photograph of his mother as a child along with her brother.

4.1 The revealing gaze

When playing around with the pictures in Photoshop I came to think about a photograph of a young woman which was part of the *Undaunted* project I carried out last year (plate 11). It is a black and white portrait in a somewhat “classic” style, showing a neat young woman, perhaps in her late teens, sitting or standing in front of what seems to be a ruin or an old industrial building of some sort, all rather uninteresting and almost drab. Intending the photograph it is very hard to tell if it is a recent one, or an old one. Nothing in the background gives this away. Nor does the woman's hairstyle or clothes. Thus the *studium* of the photograph does not reveal much to me. If anything the setting leaves more open questions than answers. What pricks me subjectively however, is her eyes. They radiate confidence and self-awareness, and a detached curiosity; and watching her gives me a feeling of *her* looking

at me rather than me looking at a photograph of her. She seems to be the one in control of her life. And what more: being in such control seems quite natural to her. This, then, is the punctum of this photograph to me: The eyes. The photograph's *noema* follows in extension: The curious confidence of a young woman, being: *The potential of youth*.

A more well known portrait photographer who has explored this feeling of directedness of gaze is the Finnish photographer Nelli Palomäki. In her series *Sons of Nakhimov* (2012), a series of large scale, black and white portraits of young pupils from the Nakhimov Naval Academy, a Russian military school in St Petersburg (plate 12), the subjects' gaze and its directness is in many ways the focus point, the barthean punctum, of the individual photographs.

The same is true for the works of other contemporary photographers, like American photographer Roni Horn and Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra. In her series *You are the Weather* (parts I and II, spanning a period from 1994 to 2011) Horn shows 100 photographs of a woman, situated in the hot springs and pools in Iceland. In each image (plate 13), the woman's facial expressions change from photograph to photograph with the changes in the weather conditions around her. But the focus point in each photograph is her eyes. The series are often installed in a room where the photographs fill all four walls, creating an impression that the viewer is being looked at by Margret, the woman in the photographs.

As for Rineke Dijkstra she too utilizes a direct gaze in many of her portraits, whether it is adolescence on beaches (plate 14), bullfighters, baby mothers or soldiers in the Israeli army, almost to such an extent that it is a "trademark" in her oeuvre, spanning more than two decades now. Although there is a visible stadium in the photographs in her early oeuvre, like the background in her beach portraits (1992), she subdued the background information, or the stadium, in many of later series. In her series about bullfighters (1994) and her series about soldiers in the Israeli army (2001) the background is completely neutral, leaving whatever stadium there is to be found in the clothes or faces only of the models.

In all of these contemporary portraits the subjects look straight at the lens at the moment of exposure, thus creating a feeling of direct contact between the viewer and the person photographed. Even though one knows that it is a photograph, an inanimate object, it is

difficult to decide who is looking at whom: is the spectator looking at the subject in the picture, or is it vice versa?

What is most striking is that in this meeting of gazes no one is subordinate to another. It appears to be a meeting between two equals; and thus a place set for an equally based dialog between the spectator and the person depicted – and as such for opening up for subjective interpretation by the viewer.

It also struck me that in this the contemporary photographs differ quite clearly from the old portraits. The gazes of the young sailors are not open and frank as in the new portraits. Many of them do not even look into the lens when photographed, but to the side. Their whole posture seems to say that if anything they are a bit uncomfortable at being looked at by the photographers, and *being photographed*. In fact what is prominent in relation to the gaze as such is the gaze of the photographers; how they looked at or intended their models at the time of exposure. As such the young sailors are subordinate to the photographer and not at all inviting either him or the spectator to any kind of equally based dialogue. In the old portraits then, the beholder of the gaze is the photographer/viewer, and not the person depicted.

I am not the only one who has noticed this experiential expression of openness in contemporary photographic portraits. Philosopher and visual image theorist Jaques Rancière focuses on this when he discusses characteristics of *The pensive image* in relation to one of Rineke Dijkstra's beach portraits. What he sees in the image, the way it appears to him, is not the unique being spoken of by Barthes, but rather the contrary; that of an ordinary being who's identity is unimportant (Ranciere, 2009, p. 120). What *is* important, however, is what the spectator reads in the picture, in the hidden thoughts of the face.

Having established theoretically that the gaze may represent the punctum in a portrait, which noema in contemporary photographic portraits may be a meeting between equals and a place set for dialog, it was time for me to move forward and explore just how this may manifest itself in the portraits I was trying to make for my installation. In my sessions with the pupils I

therefore carried out a series of trial photos of my models, the young people attending the SS “Sjøkurs”.

The first thing I realized was that if I wanted to explore the gaze I had to focus as much as possible on the eyes. I also had to remove as much background information, or studium, as possible. I therefore decided that the background should be neutral; whitish seems to be best. The same was true of their facial expressions. I wanted this to be quite neutral in order to enhance the eyes. No smiles, but no grim looks either. In the sessions following our first photo shoot I also asked the models not to wear hats or headgears of any kind, and if possible not to wear tops which were too multicolored. The last thing I did was to reduce the main light during the photo shoot in order to widen the pupils of the eyes. This created a more “intimate” look in the eyes, inviting “closeness” and “dialogue”.

I then started editing the photographs by going from a very wide view where the whole upper body and quite a lot of the surroundings were included, to a very close crop revealing almost nothing but the eyes. It immediately became apparent the wider shots were not working. They were just too drab. But to my surprise the same was true for the closest ones too. When they became too close, they did not work; the images simply became uninteresting images of eyes.

The cut – or composition if you like - that seemed to work best was a square photograph containing the head and shoulders only. Placing one eye centrally in the picture introduced a sense of calmness. In order to get a bit more dynamic lines I asked the models to turn their torsos about 20 degrees to the right or left, and in some instances I asked them to lift their chin just a fraction (plates 15-16).

Taken together this created a sense of leveled directedness that seemed to facilitate a meeting of gazes between the person depicted and the spectator, thus preparing the ground for a dialogue and any kind of meaningful relation. I have called this particular gaze *the revealing gaze* because it reveals to the spectator that there might be more to the photograph than what simply meets the eye. And as such the most prominent aspect of this gaze is that it presents a place set for open ended dialog.

4.2 The unifying series

Another thing that struck me when playing around with my portraits was that the effect of the revealing gaze, this invitation to dialogue, seemed to be enhanced when I put one portrait next to another until the group of portraits stopped being individual pictures, but rather a series of portraits.

It was as if a sort of collective effect occurred, one whereby the sheer number of portraits shifted the focus away from interest in the individual portraits and questions like “who is he/she?”, interest in individual details like “look at the way his hair is cut”, and judgments like “he does not look nice”, towards a more inquisitive attitude; one that seemed to instigate question of “what is this group of pictures about, actually?” (Plates 8 and 17.)

This of course, is the effect of portraits in a series, used throughout the history of photography as an emphasize; a way to enhance an overarching theme in a body of works. In the early days of photography the series was used to express groups of people like clergymen, fishermen and criminals, in archival ways, to mention some. In the early 20th century this continued in among others the series by August Sanders (*Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts*) although now with a political/sociological twist. After WW2 the series was used as a way to express insights into the sitter by placing him or her in unfamiliar circumstances, like in the studio portraits by Irving Penn (as in his 1950s portraits of Francis Bacon). And later it became a prominent stylistic tool for conceptual artist like Ed Ruscha (*24 gas stations*) and Bernd and Hilla Bechers photographs of water towers.

Today, in contemporary photographic art, the series continues to be a prominent feature of many photographers’ work. One of them is American photographer Roni Horn, represented by the installation *You are the Weather* where she uses a hundred portraits of her Icelandic friend Margret Haraldsdottir (plate 4). Here too it is not the individual pictures that are the issue, but rather the sum of the pictures and the accompanying unifying thought and its transcending effect that is the basis of the artwork’s impact.

This is represented in at least two different readings of the work. Mark Godfrey, curator at Tate Modern, states that Horn was interested in the way which Margret’s features and expressions changed in different climatic conditions, thus stating a noema of “becoming”

(Godfrey, 2010, p. 117.) Belgian theorist Thierry de Dueve on the other hand, thinks more about the ways in which the viewer is addressed by Margret (de Dueve, 2000, p 83). He finds that through her gaze (as she looks at the viewer from all four walls of the installation space), she seems to be asking “what do you want of me?” – thus making the portraits’ *combined* gaze the punctum of the installation.

Another contemporary photographer who uses the series in a similar manner is Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra. In her book *Beach Portraits* (Dijkstra 2003), showing a series of large scale photographic portraits of older children and adolescence on the beach or in other open landscapes (plate 5), the publisher even accentuates and demonstrates connections that complement the information communicated by one picture on its own in her work, by stating in the public relation material following the book, that: “seen together, the complete series of 20 Beach Portraits creates a kind of collective portrait of the existential insecurity and awkward beauty of youth" (Vincent Borelli 2013).

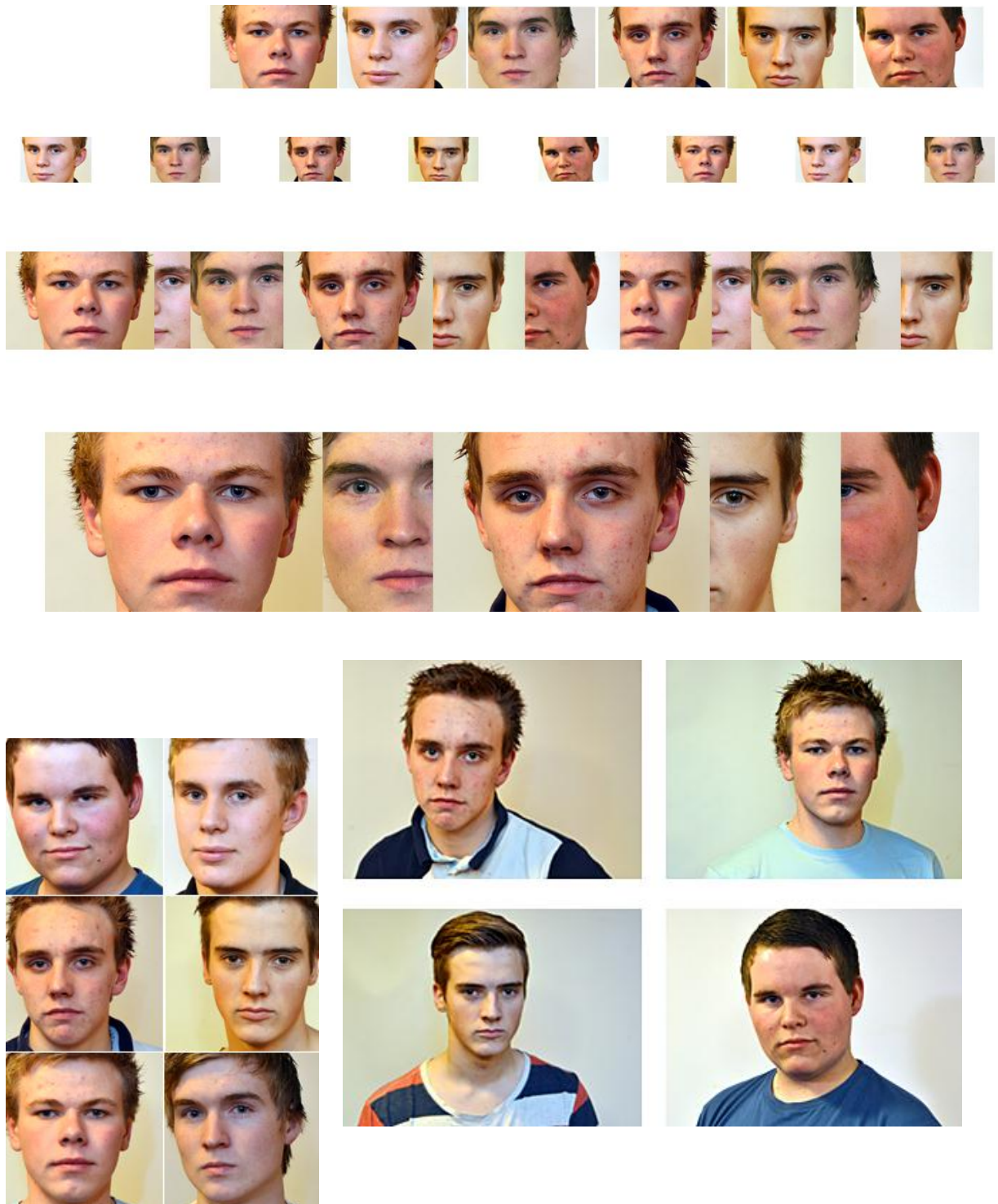
The overreaching effect of a series also reminds me of the notion ‘unified thought’ which is often used when talking about composition, and how to arrange several if not all the visual elements in a picture in a way that makes the composition harmonious (Barnbaum, 2011, p. 18). Within the frames of this thesis the notion also seems to apply positively to what I want to do, and as such being an important aspect in my search for how contemporaneity in the form of the relational may be reflected in the photographic portrait today.

Some may say that using the series to enhance the effect of a group of photographic portraits, to invite dialogue, is a measure of dissemination more than anything else, and that in itself it has nothing to do with photography as such. I can follow this reasoning but only to a point. To me it seems that such a position does not take into account that a series of photographs is not just a stack of individual pictures, but a single work in itself. By this I mean that once a group of pictures is constituted as a series, it is *one* work, albeit made up by several parts. This way *being a series*, with the effects it may carry, is thus an integral part or aspect of a work of art on par with other inherent traits like size, cut and form.

In sum, then, the gaze one meets in a number of contemporary photographic portraits appears to have to have certain characteristics which concur with core aspects of relational art; such as directness, equality, dialogue and communication. Another common denominator is that contemporary photographic portraits often is presented in series which emerges as a powerful measure that emphasize the characteristics of the gaze.

Additionally, and as mentioned earlier, any art understood as being within a formation of the contemporary, must also be understood as being subjected to general characteristics of this period, such as letting context (and time) influence how meaning is created in conjunction with the experienced based knowledge of the spectator or spectators. Therefore, what also emerges as a powerful aspect in the creation of meaning regarding the portraits made for this thesis, is the way they are disseminated.

Plate 10

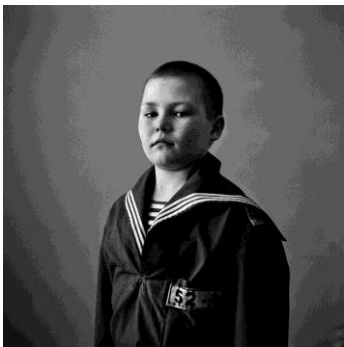


10: Various cuts, Experiments

Plates 11 - 14



11: Self-initiated assignment 2012.



12: Nelli Palomäki, from *Sons of Nakhimov*



13: Roni Horn, from *You are the weather*, detail



14: Rineke Dijkstra, from *Bach Portraits*, detail

Plates 15-16



15: From *Cast Off*



16: From *Cast Off*

Plate 17



17: From *Cast Off* . sketches

5: The power of dissemination

When the artwork is made it needs to be disseminated in order to reach a wider audience. In fact an artistic development work is regarded by many as incomplete until this happens (UHR 2007). Here, therefore, I will elaborate on how I intend to disseminate my work and the effects that I hope to achieve.

But let me first illustrate the importance of dissemination with an example from my preliminary work with this thesis:

5.1 *Look at me!* – an experiment

In the fall of last year I wanted to see how the story surrounding a series of portraits influenced the way a group of spectators created meaning when seeing the photographs. In the experiment I made a series of nine portraits, using friends of mine as models (plate 6), and showed them to fellow students and teachers/researchers at a seminar at the University of Agder.

What happened was the following: First I presented the pictures without saying anything about them. The reaction of the spectators was one of uncertainty. They looked at the portraits without saying much. One of the spectators asked why some of the persons had their eyes averted. Another wondered whether the pictures were analog or digital. A third wanted to know who the people were.

I then told the group that I had asked the sitters to think of something disgusting – anything revolting while they were being photographed. The reaction were still one of uncertainty, but two of the spectators stated at once that they could see that in some of the subjects' facial expressions, and a wage general discussion about bodily expressions and how these were expressed in the individual pictures took place. The expression of disgust was “evidently” more present in some of the portraits than in others.

Finally I told the spectators the “true” story behind the portraits¹³; namely that I had conducted a small artistic project a few weeks back, related to a group of gypsies who had caused quite a stir in Kristiansand last summer, by becoming a prominent feature in the largest commercial street in town, begging shoppers somewhat aggressively for money. The local newspaper ran stories about the gypsies and their activities on a more or less daily basis and the police declared themselves impotent in the matter, except in the most aggressive cases. Begging is not illegal in Norway, but it is perceived as a nuisance and very uncomfortable aspect of an otherwise positive shopping experience by a large number of the general public. In a larger and more discursive view the “problem” of the gypsies is addressed in a pan-European setting, among other things addressing core issues relating to basic principles of citizenship within the European Union, principles of travel between countries in the Schengen-partnership, European poverty issues, and racism.

I told the spectators that I had called the project “*Look at me!*”, and that the portraits were of “ordinary” people in Kristiansand who had been asked by me to constitute themselves exactly how they behaved and looked when they passed a beggar who stretched out his or her hand asking for money.

What happened, then, was a noticeable shift in the comments. Instantly the beggars and then how they were treated by “ordinary” people became the focus of the comments. One of the spectators also exclaimed: “Ah – now I get it! Now it makes sense - the expressions, the glances and also the eyes!” Then several of the spectators stated talking about how they themselves viewed the beggars and their predicament, event to the extent of (briefly!) touching upon deeper rooted discursive elements of the issue, such as basic principles of citizenship within the European Union, principles of travel between countries in the Schengen-partnership, European poverty issues, and racism.

This suggests that the way and the context in which art is presented is paramount for the creation of meaning for a spectator or a group of viewers when confronted by a work of art.

¹³ The “trick” of using different tells is not new in the history of photography. American photographer and conceptual artist Douglas Huebler (1924 – 1997) had at least three different tells to his famous *Variable piece #105* (portraits) in 1972.

5.2 The space

Obviously there are other factors too that influence how a work of art is perceived. In the preceding parts of this dissemination I have emphasized the power of certain characteristics of the portrait photograph that prepare the ground for dialogue. As such the exhibition will be the social setting where this dialogue may take place - as opposed to a private setting like viewing a TV-programme at home, or reading a written description of something - like this dissertation.

This way the exhibition will not only be a place where images are to be seen, it will also function as a scene for a specific social production; a meeting place in the bourriaudean sense, which not only facilitates a meeting between the portraits and the spectators, but also between spectators, and hopefully also opens up for a possible and immediate exchanges of meaning. This way the photographs and the dialogue they invite to may also be seen as a suggestion of a social model, or traits of such models.

This way, when the frame is expanded from including only one isolated object to include a whole scene, it is possible to talk about a physical dimension to the dissemination - one which includes an installation or dissemination strategy. Of the artist I have referred to above, Roni Horn is perhaps the one who utilizes this opportunity most clearly. In *You are the Weather* she builds up the installation by lining every wall in the exhibition space with portraits of Margret, structuring the installation in such a manner that the viewer is forced to move around the space in a loosely choreographed ways; that is making the spectators follow the flow of images as they run around the 'circumference' of the space¹⁴ (plates 18 and 19). In addition to being led round the edge of the exhibition space, the spectators, or participants, of her photo-installations are also pushed toward the center of the floor as they attempt to grasp the work in its entirety, thus mixing and thereby taking part in "momentary collective", as Bourriaud calls it (Bourriaud, 2007, p.22).

¹⁴ *You are the weather* has been exhibited numerous times. This description is based on an exhibition at the Mathew Mars Gallery in New York in 1996: http://www.matthewmarks.com/new-york/exhibitions/1996-02-11_roni-horn/

5.3 The installation

As for me, I will exhibit my work by way of an installation too. Like Roni Horn's exhibition this will facilitate a move away from photography simply as image, and instead offer a somewhat untraditional photographic experience in a three-dimensional meeting space.

The complete installation will not be put together and displayed until after this dissertation is handed in for evaluation. However, the venue will be in the project room at Kristiansand Art Hall on the 24th – 26th and on the 29th of May. This is a white walled room measuring approximately five by ten meters. I plan to project the 12 portraits I have on four or five canvases hanging from the ceiling, fading the images in and out in sequences of succession. On the opposite side I think about placing a small sofa or sitting bench, balancing the line of canvasses. This will also providing a place of rest and contemplation for spectators, while at the same time defining a physical meeting space within the rom in front of the canvasses – a place made for dialogue.

I also play around with the idea of installing a sound shower by or over the bench, lightly showering anyone sitting there with stores told by the pupils on board the MS "Sjøkurs", telling why they want to go to sea and their hopes for the future. Whether this will work, I don't know yet. That is one of the things that will have to be tried out when making the installation *in situ*.

During the opening hours I, the artist, will also be in place in the the art hall, making a web site on site about the project and engaging in conversation with anyone interested. It will allow me to introduce visitors to the old carte de visite portraits, and also in a non-active way on my behalf to engage them in a conversation, a dialogue about the installation, thus adding a prominent relational element to the whole through a dynamic dissemination of the artwork.

Additional disseminaton

The installation will also be accommodated by this thesis, which is intended for the more than average interested audience. To seriously take into account my own experiment regarding the effect of the semantic context, a pamphlet containing a presentation of the installation will also be produced as an aide to anyone visiting the exhibition The pamphlet will also be at

hand in the galleries which represent me as in Kristiansand; Galleri Bi-Z and Agder Art Centre, and by courtesy also at Grimstad Art Association in Grimstad. Additionally, Kristiansand Art Hall will announce the exhibition on their web pages (as will hopefully the University of Agder too). A press release will be issued to local media in an attempt to get editorial coverage.

It might also be in its place to add here that both Alberro and Ranciere, discussed in part one, stressed that meaning in contemporary art may be seen as being determined by usage and therefore may be occur *after* a work of art is seen or experienced, in the experience-based knowledge that requires an active participation on the part of the spectator. As such the web pages in particular will aid the dissemination of the installation even after the installation has been cleared away.

Plates 18-19



17: You are the weather, detail. (Photo: Mathew Mars Gallery)



18: Installation view, Mathew Mars Gallery in New York, 1996. (Photo: Mathew Mars Gallery)

6: Discussion and conclusion

In the introduction to this dissertation I made some presumptions about relational art and the portrait photograph. I stated that at first glance the two seemed to be quite incompatible – at least if one’s starting point was how Roland Barthes depicts the encounter between the viewer and the image. In his description of a photograph’s essence, its *punctum*, Barthes stresses the *subjective*, individual effect – and not the *collective* elaboration of meaning which characterizes Bourriaud’s view.

But I also stated that such a conclusion might be a bit hasty, and that there might be more to it. I based this on Bourriaud’s own statement that that “Art has always to a certain degree been relational, that is to say a social factor and a founder of dialogue” (Bourriaud, 2007, p.13). And as for photographic portraits, it seems to me that their special characteristics of being indexes of people, visually realistic and at the same time containing both *studium* and *punctum*, makes them very well suited for creating space and initiating such dialogue among spectators, and also for further thoughts about, among other things, modes of social action.

6. 1 The theories

These presumptions led me to a closer reading of both theorist Roland Barthes and curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who in many ways represent two outer edges relative to one another. I have tried to sketch their respective theories, and also tried to probe them and challenge them in order to open them up somewhat. To open the landscape even more I have also drawn on the ideas of theorist Jaques Rancière, especially his views of an image’s ‘pensiveness’. Similarly, and in an attempt to place the discussion in a current setting, I have leaned on art historian Alexander Alberro and his definitions constitutive features of the contemporary period – today - in the history of western art.

It is through their work I try to find some answers to whether or not there are some common denominators between relational art and aspects of the portrait photograph. Roland Barthes aids me first of all by his concepts of *studium* and *punctum*, which enables me to talk about meaning-making aspects of photographs, and in a wider sense also art in general.

When pursuing the ontology of photographs, Barthes also touches upon an image's pensiveness - briefly. He describes this characteristic, which he finds in some images, as something which "induces us, vaguely, to think" (Barthes, 2000, p. 38).

However, Barthes does not elaborate on this. But that is exactly what Jaques Rancière does when he three decades later takes a refreshing new look at this characteristic some images seems to radiate. In fact Rancière criticizes Barthes for being too "narrow" in his description of what an image's punctum might be and that he therefore actually overlooks or erases a prominent and characteristic feature of many photographs; their pensiveness. By this Rancière opens up for a broader understanding of the meaning-making aspects of images, one which steps outside of the bartheisan view which states that the most prominent of these, their respective punctum, is subjectively defined. Rancière rather sees meaning imbued by context as important for pensive images. He also emphasizes the importance of experience based knowledge that requires an *active* participation on the part of the spectator for creation of meaning.

As for Bourraud a close reading of his texts about relational aesthetics makes it possible to see several traits. The most obvious is of course that relational art may be seen as an aesthetic expression of a reconsidered understanding of the avant-garde; one which focus esis on modes of social and human interactions. Of importance is also that relational art is based not so much on the works of art as such, but rather on dialogue and active communication which emerges in and from these works, and also derive their meaning from the same - in short their context.

To me Rancière's "expanded view" of the meaning-making aspect of images makes it possible to view the punctum of a photograph to be freed from being perceived purely subjectively, allowing meaning-making to occur collectively by active participation by the spectator under the right circumstances. The question thus presenting itself is of course which circumstances this may be. To this there is no fixed answer, but through the theoretical investigations I have come to identify some key aspects that seem to be important elements in such circumstances. These are in sum communication by dialogue based on equality.

6.2 The method

Parallel to my investigations into the theory mentioned above I also looked into which method or methods I could utilize to see if there might be more to it relation to the portrait photograph and relational aesthetic and relational art. As such I quickly realized that I was interested in *how* things appeared to me as opposed to *which meaning* the phenomena as such express. This gave me a phenomenological outlook. I also knew that I wanted to take as a starting point my own photographic practice, meaning that I would have to conduct experiments. Thus my approach would be hermeneutical in nature. Additionally I would try and look to other photographic artists; was there somebody out there who touched upon anything related to what I was looking for?

Taken together these three pillars – theory, other artists’ work and my own photographic practice and the experience imbued in it – would then constitute the cornerstone which I would wander between in no fixed order in my search for some answers to my research question.

6.3 The project *Cast Off*

When my own photographic practice is concerned, this is tied to the project *Cast Off* (pp. 32 – 39 above). This constitutes an artistic development project addressing themes such as parting, leaving, going away, and disappearing. The main issue of the artwork, however, is, by way of the photographic portrait and the way it may be disseminated, to prepare the ground for possible collective meaning-making among the spectators, thus facilitating an aesthetic experience in or towards the realm of the relational.

The aim is not to impose a fixed meaning on the viewers, but rather to open up for possible dialogues – both subjectively and individually within the spectator and the portraits, but also among spectators. As such the artwork has emerged and materialized as a result of my wanderings between my three main topoi; the theoretical investigations, the investigations of other photographers work, and the implicit knowledge in my artistic practice – all the time spiraling towards a visual, tangible end result.

6. 4 Dialogue

Of the themes that have emerged throughout my investigations, the most prominent is dialogue. Dialogue is at the very center of any kind of collective meaning-making activities, whether it is between two people or within a collective, and as such a prominent feature of all relational works of art. But it is not just any kind of dialogue that is at issue here. For meaningful meaning-making to occur, the parts engaged in dialogue must be viewed by each other as being equals. It was not be easy to see this at first glance. I therefore had to take a small detour into the field of relational psychoanalysis in my theoretical investigations to establish this.

Another theme that emerged was the gaze. Here I do not mean the gaze of the photographer; the way a photographer looks through his or her camera and “sees” the world. I mean the gaze you, as a spectator, meets when you look at a portrait where the person depicted is looking (back) at you. Because equality is a prominent facilitator for meaningful dialogue, the gaze you meet must be the same as yours; that is a gaze that invites you to a dialogue. Through investigating other photographers work and experimenting myself, certain characteristics connected to the gaze emerged; those of a frank open face “looking” straight at you in a mildly inquisitive way – a face inviting you to enter into a dialogue.

A third theme is seriality. Through experiments of my own (plates 8 and 17) and other photographers work, it soon became very clear that portrait in a series have the ability to, as opposed to a single portrait, to create a certain overreaching effect which may enhance some traits as opposed to others. If applied correctly this effect may be used to enhance the issue of dialogue.

6.5 Dissemination

And then there is the issue of dissemination. The way a work of art is disseminated may influence its reception immensely. Again I would like to refer to my experiment *Look at me!* (plate 8) as an illustration of the power of dissemination, in this case its semantic context: Three different tells gained three different receptions. I think this speaks volumes. It also opens up avenues for further investigation into the very interesting relationship between a work of art and its semantic setting or context.

But of course other settings are important as well. To me it has been important to utilize the exhibition room in the best possible way, and to continue to focusing on collective dialogue, embedded in a work of art based on photographic portraits addressing themes such as parting, leaving, going away, and disappearing.

6.6 The research question and beyond

When I started this journey my research question was “How may contemporaneity in the form of the relational be reflected in the photographic portrait today?” While underway I have been asking some supporting questions, like “what is contemporaneity?” and “what may be central aspects of relational art?” I have also been asking both theoretically and within my artistic practice how this may be reflected in the photographic portrait of today. Together these have all given me a certain freedom in my investigations, but more importantly they have been the essence of my dialogue with myself, with theory and with the work of other contemporary photographers.

Approaching the end of my quest the question now, of course, is: “What answers do I have?”

I find it hard to sum up my findings in a simple answer, because many things might be said about each part of this project. Seen with the benefit of hindsight I also realize that the theoretical texts that form part of this thesis is complex and not perhaps crystal clear. Nor is my writing about Bourriaud, Barthes and Rancière necessarily simple and straightforward. The same is true for the artists which I refer to, for the execution of the project per se and for all of its parts through to its final dissemination. All of these issues are pluralistic and complex and this have perhaps coloured the presentation. Also, the complexities of the task itself make it paradoxical if it were to be expressed one sided.

However, if I must answer directly, my first respons will be: Look at the installation *Cast Off!* as it will appear in Kristiansand Art Hall in the end of May. This is where I have tried to answer the original question. I have tried to answer it visually.

I have also tried to outline the answer verbally through this dissertation, which constitutes half of my thesis. First of all I have tried to show that how relational art is a formation within contemporary art. I have also identified some central and important aspects relational art,

which I have summed up in the concept of dialogue. These aspects have in turn influenced my artistic development project by to be a work of art which aims to facilitate dialog about interpersonal relationships. As such my photographic work has in turn influenced the choice of theory. Along the way I have discovered how an image may contain elements of pensiveness, by which collective meaning-seeking may be induced. And through my own experiments I have demonstrated the power of dissemination and the importance of having a strategy for the same, which may be used to enhance relational elements in works of art, mine included.

At this stage in my investigation, nearing the end, I have also asked myself whether or not my artistic research work is reliable and valid. The choice of subject matter, research question, selected theory and method will all influence the outcome. To me the question of reliability is therefore best answered by referring to the investigations I have carried out, asking if the parameters used are relevant: Is the approach relevant? Is the supporting theory relevant? Is the method used relevant? Is, as in my case, the artists I refer to relevant? And is what I have been doing explained clearly and properly within the sphere of photographic theory and the traditions of artistic research, to such an extent that they are verifiable? If the answer is yes, then my work is reliable and valid.

Another question I have asked myself is whether or not I have produced anything which may hold a broader-ranging impact and perhaps be a contribution to the understanding of contemporary aspects of the portrait photography as such. Or has it merely supported the development of my own, personal artistry alone. Again, this is difficult to answer. I will, however, emphasize that I was quite surprised myself how clearly the issues of the gaze and the series emerged, and also the immense power of dissemination in facilitating meaning-making. In an extension of my work I think there may be valuable insights to be gained in the sphere of photography by pursuing both of these issues.

Appendixes

Litterature

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Model release form/models' consent form

Forespørsel om deltakelse i masterprosjektet Exploring the relational element in the photographic portrait

Bakgrunn og hensikt

Som en del av mitt masterprosjekt ved UiA, der jeg utforsker det relasjonelle elementet i portrettfotografiet både teoretisk og praktisk, trenger jeg fotomodeller for å kunne lage en fotografisk basert utstilling / installasjon i mai 2013. Du er derfor spurt om å delta som fotomodell våren 2013.

Hva innebærer deltakelsen for deg?

Det innebærer at du deltar i 2 - 4 fotosesjoner våren 2013 med meg etter nærmere avtale. Fotosesjonene vil fortrinnsvis foregå på din skole-/arbeidsplass.

Mulige fordeler og ulemper

Deltagelsen vil ikke ha noen direkte fordeler eller ulemper for deg, men vil bidra til ny kunnskap om temaet jeg fokuserer på.

Hva skjer med informasjonen om deg?

Mens prosjektet pågår: Informasjonen om deg er i dette tilfellet fotografiene som tas, samt navn og i noen tilfeller e-postadressen din som kun vil bli brukt slik som beskrevet i hensikten med masteroppgaven. Bildene som tas vil bli behandlet uten navn eller andre direkte gjenkjennerende opplysninger. Alle bilder og all informasjon vil oppbevares innelåst på min PC.

Etter at prosjektet avsluttes: Alle bilder av deg, med ett unntak, slettes ved prosjektslutt sammen med all annen informasjon om deg (navn, e-postadresse m.m.). Bildet som ikke slettes er det bildet som inngår i utstillingen/installasjonen som inngår i masterprosjektet mitt. Du får et eksemplar av dette bildet ved prosjektslutt. I tillegg beholder jeg et eksemplar i min samling som kan bli vist i senere utstillinger/kunstprosjekter.

Frivillig deltakelse

Det er frivillig å delta som fotomodell. Du kan når som helst og uten å oppgi noen grunn trekke deg fra å delta. Dette vil ikke få noen konsekvenser for deg på noen som helst måte.

Dersom du ønsker å delta, undertegner du samtykkeerklæringen nedenfor. Dersom du senere ønsker å trekke deg eller har spørsmål om masterprosjektet du bidrar til, kan du kontakte meg: Jan Arve Olsen - jan.a.olsen@uia.no - tlf 905 64 774, eller min veileder Helene Illeris - helene.illeris@uia.no - tlf : 38 14 18 51.

Samtykke til deltakelse i masterprosjektet

Jeg er villig til å delta som modell i masterprosjektet

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Jeg bekrefter å ha gitt informasjon om masterprosjektet

(Signert, rolle i studien, dato)

Feedback on message processing of personal data

Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste AS

NORWEGIAN SOCIAL SCIENCE DATA SERVICES



Harald Hårfagres gate 29
N-5007 Bergen
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4606 KRISTIANSAND S

Vår dato: 15.02.2013

Vår ref:33143 / 3 / LT

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

TILBAKEMELDING PÅ MELDING OM BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 01.02.2013. Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

33143	<i>Exploring the Relational Element in the Photographic Portrait</i>
Behandlingsansvarlig	<i>Universitetet i Agder, ved institusjonens øverste leder</i>
Daglig ansvarlig	<i>Helene Illeris</i>
Student	<i>Jan Arve Olsen</i>

Personvernombudet har vurdert prosjektet og finner at behandlingen av personopplysninger er meldepliktig i henhold til personopplysningsloven § 31. Behandlingen tilfredsstiller kravene i personopplysningsloven.

Personvernombudets vurdering forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i tråd med opplysningene gitt i melde skjemaet, korrespondanse med ombudet, eventuelle kommentarer samt personopplysningsloven og helseregisterloven med forskrifter. Behandlingen av personopplysninger kan settes i gang.

Det gjøres oppmerksom på at det skal gis ny melding dersom behandlingen endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for personvernombudets vurdering. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema <http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/meldeplikt/skjema.html>. Det skal også gis melding etter tre år dersom prosjektet fortsatt pågår. Meldinger skal skje skriftlig til ombudet.

Personvernombudet har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet i en offentlig database, <http://pvo.nsd.no/prosjekt>.

Personvernombudet vil ved prosjektets avslutning, 01.07.2013, rette en henvendelse angående status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Vennlig hilsen

Vigdis Namtvedt Kvalheim

Lis Tenold

Lis Tenold tlf: 55 58 33 77

Vedlegg: Prosjektvurdering

Kopi: Jan Arve Olsen, Enrum 7, 4616 KRISTIANSAND S

Avdelingskontorer / District Offices:

OSLO: NSD, Universitetet i Oslo, Postboks 1055 Blindern, 0316 Oslo. Tel: +47-22 85 52 11. nsd@uio.no

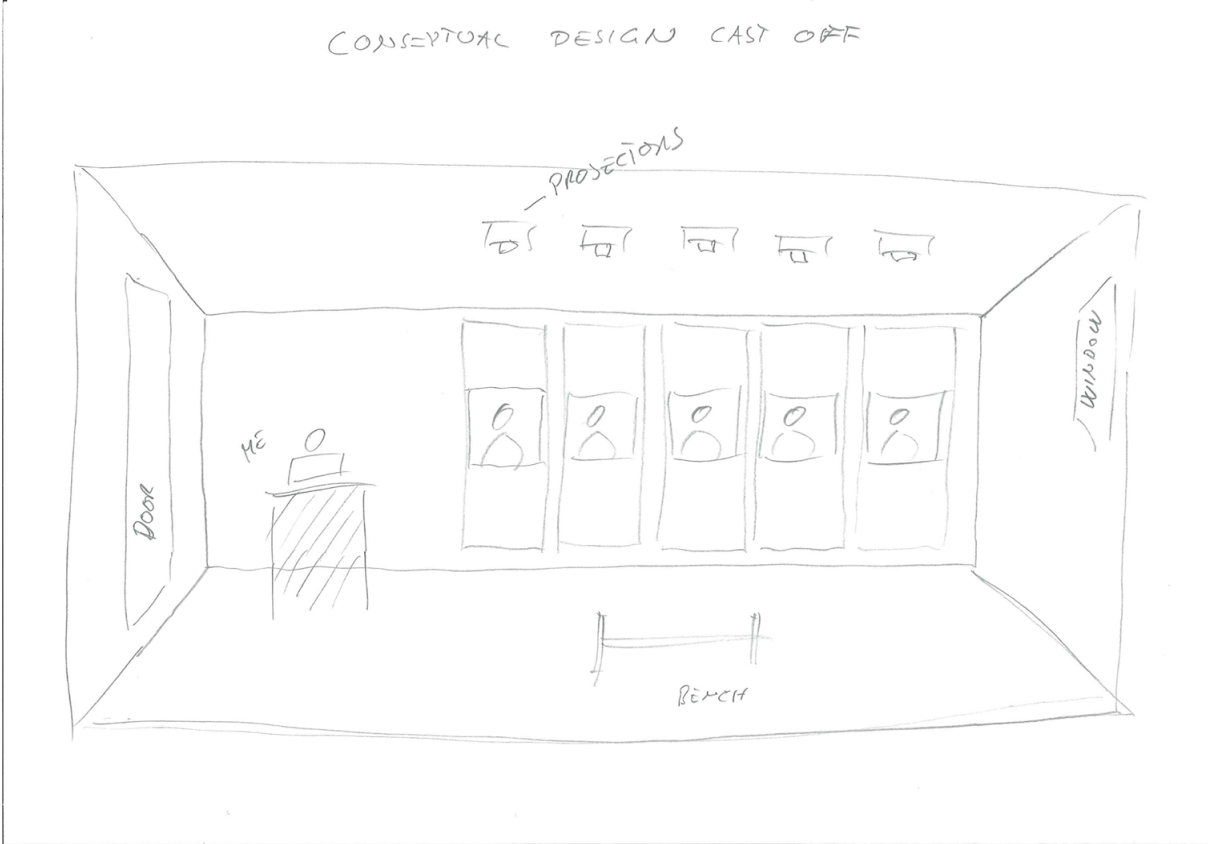
TRONDHEIM: NSD, Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet, 7491 Trondheim. Tel: +47-73 59 19 07. kyrre.svarva@svt.ntnu.no

TROMSØ: NSD, SVF, Universitetet i Tromsø, 9037 Tromsø. Tel: +47-77 64 43 36. nsdmaa@sv.uit.no

Photographs of MS “Sjökurs” and places on board



Conceptual design (sketch) Cast Off



12 portraits – *Cast off*























