**Gerlinde Miesenböck: „autres"**
**A photographic project, since 2021**

> *„Human beings incline to see people in their environment, even and above all when they are invisible. Tiny clues – a type of movement, the outline of a form, an unexpected sound... - suffice to bring about the feeling of being in the presence of an entitiy endowed with intentions, a persona, whatever the manner of perception, and the dimensions of the thing perceived."* (Museum Quai Bramley, seen in Paris 2016, during my residency in the Cité international des Arts)

Because of this I always have been wary to photograph other people than myself.
"autres" ( French for "others") is a critical engagement with portrait photography in the digital age. It contests use, function of and expectations of portraits and using automated software for their creation.

For many years I have been concerned about the a) representation of the subject through pose and clothing; b) the control over the portrait image concerning use and perception; c) digital technology & artificial intelligence; and d) the ethical question of how I can present my subjects with dignity to possibly voyeuristic gazes.

Portrait photography and manipulation of photographs is as old as the medium. Most recently, the discussion about Boris Eldagse's AI generated, Sony award winning photograph (or rather promptograph) "Pseudomnesia: The Electrician" has provoked a wider debate about manipulation. However, in1908, J. B. Schriever published the handbook "Complete Self-Instructing Library Of Practical Photography".In other words: Painting and Collaging is a historic photo manipulation method.

Historically, the portrait used to be a privilege of the powerful and rich. Photography democratized (self-)representation. However, lens-based media also always have been used to document, classify and control. Face recognition software and state control mechanism under the pretext of "safety" collide with the pandemic medical masks and cultural or religious clothing requirement.

My artistic work often engages with making-absent of the subjects, pushing them to the corners of the photographs, but still showing traces of their presence. Over the years my photographic approach has focused on representation/presence and concealment of the portrayed subject in relation to the public/the private, but also in relation to the art historic image/figurative questions.

These themes are based on old questions and conflicts around control of self-representation, photographer's copyright issues, privacy concerns, but also the desire for global attention through social media. While many people are looking for recognition, now easily provided by social media, they eagerly use tools such as over-beautifying filters to retouch some wrinkles and pimples. Meanwhile, others are worried about their rights on privacy and the (ab-)use of their images.

Consequently, I have been asking myself how little I can show of a person and still represent him/her adequately, while not giving away too much to voyeuristic eyes. Over the years I developed different projects based on the same methodology: erasing and retouching faces digitally, sometimes using analogue colours and old-fashioned brushes.

While I regularly use myself as a subject for self-portraiture, to not touch other's private sphere, the most recent project, "autres" uses portrait photographs of "others": I ask them to sit in a photo studio and have their portrait taken. I also tell them to bring different outfits for the purpose of variation. Their posture, sitting direction and the lighting setting are the same. This systematic approach seeks to create a comparative series depicting a a sample of society.

I also made some interesting observations over the process:
Contrary to my apprehensions, that many might find a beheaded portrait of themselves uncanny, the general attitude is leaning to: "As long as nobody recognizes me, I am fine."
So far, only two people I approached preferred not to be part of "autres", but actively approaching candidates outnumbered them. Visiting a photo studio, which still is an activity for special occasions, seeing how I work, and the prospect of having some contribution of themselves being presented in exhibitions seems more appealing than presumed superstitious fears.
I am also surprised to see that male participants bring at least as many clothes as women. Women tend to experiment more with scarfs, men bring hats.
Some outfits function aesthetically better than others.
Etc.

Later, after editing the raw material, I start retouching a selection digitally through automated algorithms. The focus lies on personal identifiers, such as head, skin and hair. The software offers automated replacements of these areas. I do set some definitions, which result in varying versions offered by the artificially intelligent software. The results are sculptural, crippled, beheaded and weird figures. Most importantly: never ever would I have come up with the proposed aesthetics myself!

The model remains anonymous, but their poses, taste and choice of clothes and their individual physique refer to their gender, social class, and age. The fundamental function of representation remains. While I avoid depiction and identification, I also liberate my subjects from beauty pressures and eternal documentation. The uncanny impression points at the momentariness of live, documented by photography to let our traces last forever.

The final pieces of artwork are created as round photographs mounted behind acrylic to point at the light circle inside the camera, the technical principle of photography. Furthermore, it reminds on the round shaped portraits of social media profiles, such as in Instagram.


*Note:*
*If there is the possibility of using a photo studio with a black background and 2 flashes at the conference site I happily offer to extend this project in Helsinki with the assistance of conference delegates, speakers, university staff, students and whoever enjoys to do so.*

*"autres" has been exhibited in Florida, Linz, Trier, Munich and will next be shown in a solo show in Dresden.*

**portrait, privacy, representation, retouching, manipulation**