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WHAT DOES A PORTRAIT, HUMAN AND UNSENTIMENTAL, LOOK LIKE NOW?

RINEKE DIJKSTRA'S WORK HAS PROVOKED ITS SHARE OF FRUSTRATING ASSESSMENTS, TYPICAL OF WHICH ARE THE FOLLOWING: "DIJKSTRA IS a very gentle person." "Dijkstra finds all the people she photographs beautiful." "She was touched…" "Struck by the classical proportions of the face of this girl, Dijkstra knew immediately that she wanted to photograph her." The photographer herself has done little to diminish the tide by making similar remarks: "I have a preference for introverted people because I feel an affinity for them." "It's about a particular kind of beauty that other people might find ugly, but it's a kind of ugliness that I find beautiful." And the nearly unbearable coup de grâce, "I really lost my heart to the whole atmosphere."

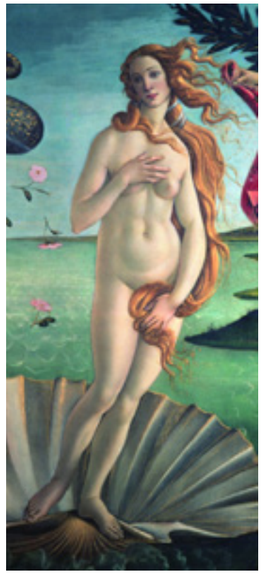
Skimming over the reams of such writing that's been produced in the last decade, it's easy to cherry-pick certain recurring words, including "gentle," "humane," "empathetic," "special," "compassion," "beauty," "connectedness," "sympathies," and "moments." There is the ongoing caricature of Dijkstra as a nervous girl trapped in a woman's body, searching for her lost self in the face of adolescent longing, no more helpful to our understanding of the photographs even for being perhaps her own true (and often stated) disposition. What makes all of this so frustrating is that it does nothing to explain how so seemingly mawkish a gal is producing some of the sharpest, most boldly unsentimental portraits in the world right now. Dijkstra enjoys immense popularity in worldwide art markets and institutions, and justifiably so, though perhaps the widest perspective of her importance isn't likely to be drawn from the terms in which her work is most commonly couched. If not by their value as humanist documents, how else can we come to understand images that appear to be portraits, but that so consistently withhold any of the traditional inferences of the genre?

If there's one series of Dijkstra's that epitomizes her approach, it's the one that launched her career. The *Bathers* series was the first suite of photographs she made in an attempt to get beyond the trappings of her work as a commercial photographer. Having spent years in the highly controlled context of corporate portraiture, she set out to re-establish for herself the meanings that one person's photographic observation of another can afford. She did so by making summer trips to beaches in the United States, as well as Eastern and Western Europe, where she produced about two dozen images of adolescents and young teens transposed against a blank slate of surf and sky.

Sounds simple enough, and it is, even devilishly so, because no critic or curator has written of them thus far as only just that, as distillations of bald and almost stultifying flatness. Instead (and at times with the photographer's unfortunate corroboration), there has been an effluence of lyrical description and comparisons with historical painting, a kind of leaden haze obscuring the rawness that constitutes their originality. There is a pervasive idiot tendency to claim that Dijkstra's greatest work is that which most readily evokes classical models, as if photography has any more need to justify itself than do the awkward and unfinished facts of the lives it depicts. The images from *Bathers*, as prime examples of what's most essential and powerful about Dijkstra's superb photographic approach, dare to propose a new form of portraiture without being deceitfully

(p. 76) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Coney Island, New York, USA, June 20, 1993, 1993. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

(p. 77) **BRADY, Matthew**
Walt Whitman. Photogravure scanned from the frontispiece of the 1855 edition of *Leaves Of Grass*, courtesy of The Library Of Congress. Brady's original negative of the poet is considered lost and no photographic print of this portrait is believed to exist.



over-fashioned, cynical, or so emptied of humanity as to be meaningless. Their brute plainness challenges our ability to look at them, to only look, without the additional armatures of context or concept. The very quality that unnerves and misleads so many viewers—the apparent vacuity that can push you to exasperation—is their stealthy strength. They feel moronic in the best way possible, purposefully, painfully, intelligently so. Counter to the predominant lavender view, Dijkstra's work could well be considered the cornerstone of this bleak but affirmative strike for photography's future. Hers is a forced imposition of the visual void, one in line with Thomas Struth's street scenes, Gerhard Richter's obliterated postcard landscapes, and Bruce Nauman's videos, a heroic and conscious refusal, a vanguard of the retarded.

The environments in the *Bathers* images are recognizable, but only generically. Dijkstra records in her titles the location and date of the photographic act, but not the name of the person who exists as its ostensible subject. She uses a large-format negative and electronic flash lighting to provide the maximum possible registration of detail and sharpness, but never manipulates that harvest of data to imply any kind of message or understanding. All of this goes to isolate the paradox of portraiture, of photography overall, and of the human experience they both attempt to approach: a surfeit of information is no guarantee of knowledge. She gives us more than we ask for to prove that all bets are off, and no desperate clinging to historical compass points will provide adequate orientation. Much is often made of the difference in dress (such as it is) shown in the pictures between bathers from the United States and Eastern Europe, of the self-consciousness of their poses or the lack of it. These are attempts at the same kind of exegesis that hangs over the historical examples of photographic portraiture that Dijkstra smashes through, and couldn't have less relevance here. (Should I mention that Diane Arbus is not only the photographer with whom Dijkstra is most often compared, but also the one whom she herself most often cites as an influence? Thus

MANET, Edouard
Considered to be one of the first modern painters, Edouard Manet (1832–83) created a sensation at the 1863 Salon des Refusés with his canvas *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, in which he not only defied conventional morality but also applied a radically inventive approach to modeling the figure. Influences that can be detected in his works—which are painterly but often include flat areas of color that are almost abstract—include the work of Velásquez and Goya as well as photography and Japanese Ukiyo-e prints. To Manet's distress, scandal continued to swirl around numerous works including his masterful portrait of a courtesan, Olympia, which was reluctantly accepted into the Louvre after his death.

KATZ, Alex
Born in New York in 1927, Alex Katz studied at Cooper Union and Skowhegan School of Painting in Maine. He has concentrated on portraiture throughout his career—rendering images of family, friends, and others in a flatly painted, forceful manner that is reminiscent of advertising images. His work is in many major museum collections. In 1972 he was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship.

(p. 78 *left*) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, USA, June 22, 1992, 1992. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

(p. 78 *top-right*) **BOTTICELLI, Sandro**
The Birth of Venus (detail), 1486. Tempera on canvas. © Scala and Art Resource, New York.

(p. 78 *bottom-right*) **DICORCIA, Philip-Lorca**
Head #10, 2000. Type-C print © Philip-Lorca diCorcia, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.

(p. 79 *left*) **MANET, Edouard**
The Piper, 1865. Oil on canvas. Courtesy Musee d'Orsay, Paris, France, and Art Resource, New York.

(p. 79 *right*) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Jalta, Ukraine, July 29, 1993, 1993. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

admitted, will you see past it? How much more plainly can the central challenge inherent to approaching Dijkstra's work be stated: Can you only just look?)

A further confirmation of the photographer's intentions working counter to her own success: In the early bather images, Dijkstra accidentally overexposed her subjects due to what she has acknowledged was her inexperience with the flash lighting she was using, and as a result underexposed the backgrounds. The remarkable contraposition of bright figures with dim environments pulls the subjects out of their everyday context. It effectively isolates the figure, creating a hermetic non-context of beachness that's no more knowable for being familiar to us strictly as a vague archetype. Edouard Manet first suggested the radical implication of a recognizable figure divorced from an understandable context in his 1866 image *The Piper*, and Alex Katz later translated that vacuum into his own cooler Pop sensibility (which Julian Opie picked up on in turn). But Dijkstra's uniqueness comes from the fact that there is no useful parallel with Manet's abstracting device once it's insinuated into the literalness we expect from the photographic image. It's a mirror-riddle: the image feels so perfectly like life, but is not at all of it. Philip-Lorca diCorcia, a photographer notably familiar with advanced lighting techniques, used the same device, though to much more exaggerated and dissonant effect, in a recent series. So definitively anonymous and archetypal do his figures become that he refers to the images, non-portraits all, simply as the *Heads* series. Later portraits in Dijkstra's *Bathers* series, made after she learned how to more conventionally equalize available daylight with the intensity of her flash unit, force her subjects to negotiate an environment of greater specificity, reducing the pictures to a more traditional, documentary level. The newer works achieve the social observation Dijkstra strives for, but shortchange their own wider potentialities.

The *Bathers* series highlights Dijkstra's most important break with traditional portraiture. She has created a series-structured typology, shaping what appears to be documentary information

RICHTER, Gerhard
The German artist Gerhard Richter, who was born in Dresden in 1932, is one of the most important art-world figures to have emerged during the postwar era. His childhood was marked by encounters with war and Nazism; in 1961 he left East Germany for Dusseldorf. He has since deployed various styles of painting, from the realistic to the abstract, often engaging German history, as in his cycle of paintings on the Baader-Meinhof group, *October 18, 1977* (1988). Other, sometimes absurdly clichéd subjects have included landscapes, portraits, and images of flowers or candles. Formally probing, his works offer no promise of emotional redemption.

(p. 80) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Kolobrez, Poland, July 23, 1992, 1992. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

(p. 81 *top-left*) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Tiergarten, Berlin, Germany, August 13, 2000, 2000. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

(p. 81 *top-right*) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Tiergarten, Berlin, Germany, June 27, 2000, 2000. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

(p. 81 *bottom*) **KATZ, Alex**
Paul Taylor, 1959. Oil on canvas © Alex Katz, Collection of Udo Brandhorst, Cologne.

into a vernacular idiom. Just as in the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, however, artists whose work is of such subtlety that it too is often mistaken for documentary, these trivial bits are never the photographs' final destination or even their best purpose. Dijkstra's portraits are in fact exceedingly detached from such details, which leads to a recurring question: not so much "Who is this?" but "How can I possibly ever know who this is?"

The *Bathers* series has its source in a self-portrait Dijkstra made at the time when the impulse first struck her to pursue her artistic efforts in earnest. This single image of her standing on a wet and empty pool deck is very much the originary point for her entire oeuvre. It's a direct proposal of the stripped and frontal approach that's her central talent. She has said as much: "I liked it because of its bareness—of course because of the fact that I wore nothing but a bathing suit. You can really see what you look like. It's almost nude, but it is not naked."

The self-portrait is a template. She deliberately made it after an exhausting swimming workout, motivated by the idea of getting herself to a place where conscious posing would fall away, where, in her words, she would be "too tired to think about which pose to strike—that moment when you just stand." She is talking here about a very reactionary notion, a notion embraced by Edward Weston and Henri Cartier-Bresson and almost every other photographic portraitist who has preceded her: the faith-based mythology that somehow the camera reveals not merely existence but also essence. Her desire to achieve a rare neutrality is admirable, but she is deliriously misguided in her hope that such a vacuum can—or ever needs to—portend anything other than its own hard clarity. Her images of people on the verge—mothers who have just given birth, bullfighters who have just escaped death—are unquestionably striking, but is that because the defenselessness and exhaustion they depict opens them to some platonic state of universal understanding, or, more likely, because they are simply open, simply universal in their lack of fixed expression, metonyms for nothingness itself?

DICORCIA, Philip-Lorca
The style of Philip-Lorca diCorcia's photographs is one of the most widely influential to have emerged in the last decade, and it has been rampantly reinvented in any number of guises. Known primarily for their vivid deconstructions of the documentary and narrative conventions in photography, his images are often cited, referenced, and even outright plagiarized as disquieting distillations of contemporary life. *A Storybook Life*, a collection of photographs diCorcia made intermittently over the past twenty-five years, was published by Twin Palms in 2003

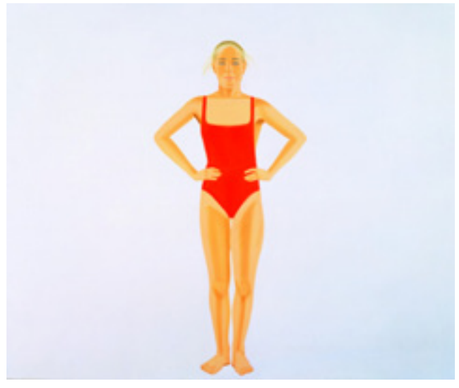
(p. 82) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Forte de Casa, Portugal, May 20, 2000, 2000. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

p. 83 *clockwise from top right:*

(p. 83) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Self Portrait, Marnixbad, Amsterdam, 1991. Type-C print. © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

(p. 83) **KATZ, Alex.**
Swimmer, 1990. Oil on canvas © Alex Katz, Collection of the artist.

(p. 83) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Tecla, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, May 16, 1994, 1994. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.



If *Hilton Head Island, S.C., USA, June 22, 1992* is too readily compared to an art-historical source, consider *Coney Island, New York, US, June 20, 1993* its converse, the anti-Venus, a non-decisive moment. The light is flat but perfectly descriptive; the background is identifiable but anecdotal and unknowable. The girl's suit is a black block void that absorbs and annihilates all inspection. She stands flatly frontal, arms hanging, face empty and waterlogged, seemingly exhausted and frail yet uncommented upon. In short, she is a vacuum, wholly, exceptionally supine to optical plunder and impenetrable to the same. Neither classically beautiful like a figure from a Botticelli nor acerbically overloaded like one from an Arbus, she floats, merely existent, suspended in that perfectable nether-region of photographic neutrality. Only look, the picture says, because this subject simply is. That has to be enough, because it is all that can ever be.

"For me it is essential to understand that everyone is alone," Dijkstra mentioned once, and in saying so tipped her hand. "Not in the sense of loneliness, but rather in the sense that no one can completely understand someone else." That one confession points out both the futility and fierce beauty of her proclaimed desire to know others. It reveals that she's always aware of the impossibility of her own effort, but hints at the fundamental human need to continue searching.

The time-lapse device she uses is a further assault on the hope we place in the comprehensive view: no repetition, no history, no all-encompassing eye can ever encompass all that we seek. Her sequences have a forerunner in Nick Nixon's famous photographs of his wife and her sisters, but his series never approaches the infinite potential offered by Dijkstra's *Olivier* series. As photographs of his family, Nixon's portraits become empathetic meditations on intimacy, age, and loss. They never escape their specificity or their status as documents, as pictures of his relatives. The subject of the photographs locks them into a spiral that collapses rather than expands. He makes the pictures at yearly gatherings of his educated and comfortable family, which is quite familiar by now not only with artistic endeavors but also their own historical place within this exercise. Each of the sisters knowingly takes up her regular (and celebrated) position. Earlier displays of their aloofness have been succeeded by the warmer patina we likewise expect of our most humane images. Twenty-five years on, they play at being themselves, the Brown Sisters. These are arch-portraits in the most traditional sense.

By way of comparison, Dijkstra made her photographs of Olivier Silva over the course of thirty-six months, starting when the seventeen-year-old left his home to endure the brutal and isolating regimen of the French Foreign Legion. He had absolutely no familiarity with Dijkstra's work or the artworld at large when the project was initiated, and his awareness of its progress was for the most part kept to the moments of direct involvement he had with her during its creation. In fact, a Legionnaire knows virtually nothing during his training outside of the Legion itself. As Raphaëlle Stopin has described the process, "The man gives up his name and assumes a fictitious identity. His mother tongue is replaced by French and his personal belongings handed over in exchange for a uniform. His personal history is confessed, then kept secret. Stripped of the gaudy rags of his previous life, the would-be legionnaire is exonerated and made to start again from scratch… One's private life is taken over by the soldier. The dichotomy between an individual's private and professional life does not hold here."

The relationship Dijkstra had with Silva epitomized what she had been seeking throughout her career: for all his humanity, her subject was as close to being an island unto himself as she is likely ever to find. She didn't stop there, though. As with her other subjects, she always photographed him at moments of exhaustion, vulnerability, or heightened tension, after intense drills and decoration ceremonies. She then pulled him still further out of the everyday, placing him against her standard neutral background. All of these devices—the time lapse, the odd moment, the neutral background—are well established in portraiture, but the key difference is that Dijkstra used them to disperse meaning rather than to falsely concentrate it, to plunge a man whose identity has already been forcibly reduced to nothingness into a zone as hermetic and detached from comprehension and assignation as portraiture can allow. We see everything that Olivier has endured and achieved, and yet we know nothing at all about him.

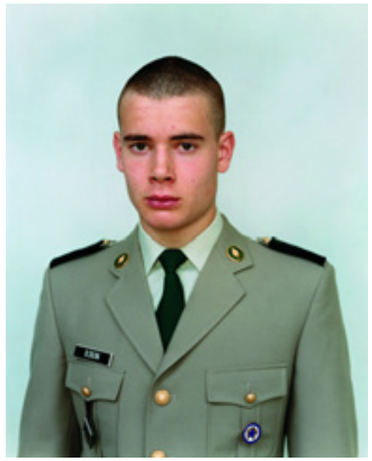
Dijkstra tried photographing her friends, but was displeased with the results—she has since restricted her choice of subjects to strangers because that lack of intimate knowledge presumably isolates her practice from emotional contamination. But does it? Of course, that's impossible; photography is a purely human endeavor, and only ever worth its human meanings. The point, as always, is the medium's inherent enigma: the attempt to create a perfect visual document parallels our attempt at a pure understanding of experience. Dijkstra pursues both goals while openly acknowledging their likely impossibility, but never stoops to mourning that loss by rehashing portrait truisms.

The devastating but triumphant note of refusal at the heart of the *Olivier* series also highlights the shortcomings of Dijkstra's similar time-lapse series, *Almerisa*. Made over the course of a decade (thus far), the photographs depict the highly fraught growth of a girl who emigrated at the age of six from Eastern Europe to the Netherlands. Much more focused on aspects of

NIXON, Nicholas
Nicholas Nixon (born in Detroit in 1947) has garnered acclaim for his detailed black-and-white portraits taken with a large-format camera. In one of his best-known bodies of work, *The Brown Sisters*, he has documented his wife and her three sisters since 1975. Other series have included the sensitive portraits of AIDS patients entitled *People with AIDS*, and images of his growing children entitled *Family Pictures*.

(p. 84 *left*) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Olivier Silva, Quartier Viénot, Marseille, France, July 21, 2000, 2000. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

(p. 84 *right*) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Olivier Silva, Les Guerdes, France, November 1, 2000, 2000. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.



(p. 85 *left*) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Olivier Silva, Quartier Viénot, Marseille, France, November 30, 2000, 2000. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

(p. 85 *center*) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Olivier Silva, Camp Rafalli, Calvi, Corsica, June 18, 2001, 2001. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

(p. 85 *right*) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Oliver Silva, Camp General de Gaulle, Libreville, Gabon, June 2, 2002, 2002. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

(p. 85 *bottom-left*) **NIXON, Nick**
The Brown Sisters, New Canaan, Connecticut, 1975. Silver gelatin print © Nick Nixon, courtesy Zabriskie Gallery, New York.

(p. 85 *bottom-right*) **NIXON, Nick**
The Brown Sisters, Brookline, Massachusetts, 1999. Silver gelatin print © Nick Nixon, courtesy Zabriskie Gallery, New York.

(p. 86) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Olivier Silva, Quartier Viénot, Marseille, France, July 21, 2000, 2000. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

(p. 87) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Olivier Silva, Quartier Monclar, Djibouti, July 13, 2003, 2003. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

WESTON, Edward
Edward Weston (1886–1958) is known for his beautifully composed photographs, including sensuously rendered nudes, landscapes, and images of shells and vegetables. He ran a portrait studio for over a decade in Tropico, California, working in a Pictorialist style, but abandoned Pictorialism around the time that he traveled to Mexico with photographer Tina Modotti in the early twenties. In 1932 he cofounded "f/64" with a group of photographers that included Ansel Adams and Imogen Cunningham. Five years later he became the first photographer to receive a Guggenheim fellowship; he used the funds to photograph the American West and Southwest with wife Charis Wilson. Weston's life and methods are documented in his *Day Books*, some of which were published posthumously.

STOPIN, Raphaëlle
The photography critic Raphaëlle Stopin was born in France in 1978. She has contributed to numerous exhibition catalogues.

(p. 88) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Tamir, Golani Brigade, Elyacim, Israel, May 26, 1999, 1999. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

(p. 89) **DIJKSTRA, Rineke**
Stephanie, Saint Joseph Ballet, Orange County, California, USA, March 22, 2003, 2003. Type-C print © Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

the subject's aging and socialization (the first image was made in a cubicle at an asylum center; a more recent shot shows Almerisa in makeup and a hot-pink tank top), it fits best within the documentary genre, in line with its Nixon predecessor. It abandons Dijkstra's unique ability to acknowledge features of separate photographic genres while flying above them. *Olivier*, which can certainly be read as a document—a visual record—of one man's evolution, impresses so much more for its inscrutability, its resistance to classification. A young man surrenders his identity to both the Foreign Legion and a photographer. He undergoes a twin process of being broken down and reconstructed into images not entirely of his own choosing. We see him in a variety of guises, we see the evidence of the physical and mental stress he undergoes, time passes, he continually offers himself up without resistance to his inspectors, and yet Olivier remains forever beyond us, thoroughly exposed and permanently inaccessible. The series is the culmination of Dijkstra's power: as a thorough depiction of a subject, it's beautiful, compelling, and evocative, but in the end perfectly illustrative of what we cannot ever know about each other, rather than what we'd like to hope that we can.

Here then is the open challenge of a new portraitist: Can you look past your own preferences? Your affinity for a new mother, your revulsion for an armed soldier? Can you disassociate from the immediate to see a portrait as an open conduit, refusing all knowledge and presumption? Can you make that leap, can you consider that state of suspension valuable or even possible? Can you navigate a territory that provides no fixed information about ourselves, that has no need for hope? This is the richest vein of Dijkstra's work—it radically realigns not only portraiture but also our expectations of what photography affords. She's right to speak about beauty in her work, but it's hard-won and obscure, and it first demands an awful capitulation. It strips you bare, but it doesn't leave you without cause for continuance. And it's how she's quietly creating some of the most heartbreaking and emboldening photographs of this moment. ■