WHY IT DOES NOT HAVE TO BE IN FOCUS

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MODERN PHOTOGRAPHY EXPLAINED

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INTRODUCTION

JACKIE HIGGINS

"It's time, then, for [photography] to return to its true duty, which is to be the servant of the sciences and arts—but the very humble servant." French poet Charles Baudelaire wrote these damning words in 1859, only a few decades after William Henry Fox Talbot began his pioneering photographic experiments at Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire. From its very inception, photography has fought to earn recognition as a form of art. To many its mechanical, automated nature rendered it no more than a mere transcriber, which left no scope for artistic skill and interpretation. Pictorialism, one of the earliest international photographic movements, did little to help the medium's cause. Its adherents believed that before photography could be seen as art, its origins in the mechanical and chemical had to be disguised. Pictorialists deliberately defocused their images and invented ingenious methods of printing, with the sole intention of emulating the aesthetic of painting. As a result, photography came to be regarded as a mere surrogate of the established order.

Today, photography has come full circle. It has at last been embraced by the art world as an art form in its own right. Encouraged by a growing community of collectors, more artists are turning to it than ever before. National art galleries that previously had dismissed the medium are now prompted to reexamine their photographic holdings and retain specialist curators. Yet despite this, we appear to be witnessing a resurgence of the out-of-focus aesthetic popular at the turn of the 19th century, but for radically different reasons.

Why It Does Not Have to Be in Focus analyzes one hundred photographs by one hundred, mostly contemporary, artists. For example, Uta Barth makes only defocused imagery. She treats with disdain claims that her work is modern-day Pictorialism, asking in response why a photograph must aspire to the attributes of painting in order to justify itself as art. She uses camera focus to interrogate notions of perception. "I value confusion," she claims, adding that it underscores the "activity of looking." Chuck Close is one of a growing number of artists turning to antiquarian photographic techniques—he is drawn to the daguerreotype by the sculptural quality of its shifting focus—whereas Ryan McGinley repeatedly creates blurriness in his imagery of leaping and running bodies, thereby softening hard lines in a technique comparable to Leonardo da Vinci's *sfumato*.

Contemporary artists are experimenting with photography in diverse ways other than through focus. This book considers a whole litany of what might be called "photographic errors." When Taryn Simon made a portrait, she chose to underexpose, and therefore erase, her subject. In direct contrast, Paul Graham's landscapes are so intentionally overexposed that a number of readers returned his book to the publishers convinced that there had been a printing problem. Ed Ruscha's series, taken from a moving car, features skewed horizons and cropped subjects, whereas Daido Moriyama, whose aesthetic has been labeled "blurry, grainy, and out of focus," barely stops walking to capture a frame. Portraits are equally mishandled: Lee Friedlander obscures his face with a light bulb, Anne Collier fractures hers in a mirrored disco ball, John Baldessari is portrayed with a palm tree sprouting from his head, and Philip-Lorca diCorcia catches his subjects unawares, showing slack, adrift expressions.

Some artists desecrate the photographic surface by scratching and smearing it with a cocktail of substances: Jennifer West opts for whiskey, sunblock, and nail polish, Robert Rauschenberg uses bleach, and Gerhard Richter finds paint left over in his studio. Other artists go to more extreme lengths. Martin Parr and Gavin Turk abdicate authorship by enlisting a third party to take their portraits, whereas Andy Warhol delegates this responsibility to a machine, posing in an automated photobooth.

This book reveals why a photograph need not be crisply rendered or "correctly" exposed, color-balanced, framed, or even composed by the photographer in order to have artistic merit. Artists are pushing the boundaries of photography in so many ways that their efforts are arguably redefining the medium. Art historian Geoffrey Batchen notes, "There can be no such thing as a singular photography at all, only discontinuous, myriad photographies." Critic Gerry Badger adds, "We think of photographs as fact, but they can also be fiction, metaphor, or poetry. They are of the here and now, but they are also immensely potent time capsules. They can be downright utilitarian or they can be the stuff of dreams." *Why It Does Not Have to Be in Focus* reveals how Baudelaire's "humble servant" has undoubtedly earned the right to be promoted. Photography is not simply an art form but is one of such shape-shifting variety that it is possibly the most important art form of our time.

GUIDE TO SYMBOLS

Explains why the photograph is an important work of art.

Describes the artist's approach, process, and technique.

Locates the image in its historic and artistic context.

Unattributed quotes are by the photographer featured.

Provides additional incidental information.

Lists examples of similar images by the same photographer.

Type of camera used

CHAPTER ONE
PORTRAITS / SMILE

We expect a self-portrait to be an act of introspection, to somehow reveal the artist's psyche. Likewise, we expect a portrait to expose the character of its subject. However, faces rarely reflect the inner workings of minds. Furthermore, the field of psychiatry suggests that there is no such thing as the unified self; it is invariably fractured, multifaceted, fleeting, and shifting. Consequently, as art historian Jean-François Chevrier remarks, "Every portrait, even the simplest and the least staged, is the portrait of another." Such thoughts seem to preoccupy many of the artists selected; their portraits act to conceal rather than reveal the subject. Martin Parr offers a blank, expressionless face while Gavin Turk chooses to close his eyes. Others hide their identity from the lens: Francesca Woodman obscures her features with a mirror, Andy Warhol appears disguised in dark, impenetrable glasses, and Gillian Wearing dons a full prosthetic mask. The photographs show that portraiture is possibly the most complex and compelling area of current artistic practice.

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Warhol's silk screen of his four grainy, pixelated self-portraits was based on a strip of photographs taken in an automated booth. All he had to do was feed a coin into the slot. Yet these mass-produced images appealed to Warhol, and to fans of Pop art; they challenged the aesthetics and authorship of the traditional paradigm. 'The reason why I'm painting this way,' he said, 'is that I want to be a machine.'

SELF-PORTRAIT
ANDY WARHOL
1963–64

Self-Portrait is regarded as Andy Warhol's first major self-portrait, acclaimed in nearly every Warhol monograph and exhibition catalogue. Warhol (1928–87) became fascinated by the photo booth after a commission from *Harper's Bazaar*. He took photostrips of painter Larry Poons, curator Henry Geldzahler and composer La Monte Young, which were published in the April 1963 edition as *Instant Self-Analysis, 25¢*. The project launched a three-year obsession with the machines. Actress Mary Woronov says, 'I seem to remember there was a photo booth in the Factory at some point.' Artist Gary Indiana recalls, 'The idea [was] that he needed a kind of photo morgue, that portraits could be made from.' Here, the photo booth enabled Warhol to create a self-portrait that discourages a traditional reading. The mechanically produced image refuses authorship, while its serialization creates a sense of narrative, much like a filmstrip, and the various silk-screened gradations of blue move the viewer's eye from panel to panel. Warhol appears in this mini-movie as if in disguise, his dark glasses masking any emotion, his face expressionless. This staged self-portrait frustrates our voyeuristic impulse. Warhol's faces are much like screens onto which we project our fantasies. His first self-portrait is perhaps more accurately an anti-self-portrait.

Warhol was a leading figure of Pop art, often hailed as its high priest. In an interview with critic Gene Swenson in 1963, he described Pop art as 'liking things'. The movement embraced popular culture and mass-produced objects. The photographic image, in particular, dominated Warhol's art because it is the preferred medium of mass media.

Warhol chose the commercial technique of photo silk-screening to produce images cheaply in an array of colours. He claimed, 'Hand painting would take too long and anyway that's not the age we're living in.' He and his assistants at the Factory made silk screens of mass-produced photographs in all their guises, from photo-booth strips to celebrity publicity stills. *Marilyn Diptych* (1962) was based on a still for the film *Niagara* (1953), and *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* (1964) on police mugshots.

Double Elvis, 1963
Ethel Scull 36 Times, 1963
Blue Marilyn, 1964
Most Wanted Men No.1, John M., 1964
Self-Portrait, 1964

If you want to know about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings . . . there I am.

In this self-portrait, the lightbulb has almost entirely blotted out the artist's face—only one eye can be seen staring back at the viewer with a blank expression. Friedlander intentionally positioned the light between his lens and himself, switching it on to create an opaque white void at the center of the image. Artist self-portraits are usually aggrandizing affairs, yet Friedlander not only deftly disrupts the traditional self-portrait, in which viewers are able to access and read the subject's face, but also debunks the age-old myth of the artist as hero.

House, Trailer, Sign, Cloud, Knoxville, Tennessee, 1971

Albuquerque, 1972

Oaxaca, Mexico, 1995

California, 1997

PROVINCETOWN, CAPE COD, MASSACHUSETTS
LEE FRIEDLANDER
1968

Provincetown, Cape Cod, Massachusetts is one of many Lee Friedlander (1934–) self-portraits. This seemingly narcissistic project started in earnest in 1965. While looking over his contact sheets, he noticed how often his shadow accidentally intruded, so he set about consciously including it. He photographed it on the backs of women walking (*New York City*, 1966), on their faces (*Minneapolis, Minnesota*, 1966), on their framed portraits (*Madison, Wisconsin*, 1966). He photographed himself reflected in windows (*New Orleans, Louisiana*, 1968), in rearview mirrors (*Hillcrest, New York*, 1970), even in gleaming trophy cups (*Tallahassee, Florida*, 1969). In the rare instances that he presented his face to the camera, he sought to obscure it with something as mundane as a light bulb. Throughout this catalog of self-imagery, Friedlander never fails to conceal, rather than reveal himself; he appears as shadow, reflection, cipher. Indeed, the project is wholly anti-narcissistic, leading critic Andy Grundberg to find parallels with "artists of the post-abstract expressionist generation," and curator John Szarkowski with Pop art. Friedlander approaches the traditional artist's self-portrait as egocentric nonsense.

Friedlander uses awkward compositions beyond his self-portraits. Photographer Lewis Baltz notes that his images "so thoroughly defied traditional photographic composition that they were . . . interpreted as metaphors for the . . . chaos that is modern life."

Friedlander was one of three relatively unknown photographers championed by John Szarkowski, then director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, to remap documentary photography in the seminal "New Documents" show (1967). Szarkowski claimed, "This new generation of photographers has redirected the technique and aesthetic of documentary photography to more personal ends. Their aim has been not to reform life but to know it."

SELF-DECEIT 4
FRANCESCA WOODMAN
1978–79

The earliest photograph by Francesca Woodman (1958–81) is a self-portrait that she took aged thirteen. Indeed, in her short life, before she committed suicide at the age of twenty-two, she photographed herself at least a further 500 times. It is hard to resist scrutinizing this self-imagery for clues to her untimely death. *Self-Deceit 4* is one of five pictures that Woodman took in the basement of the 15th-century Palazzo Cenci in Rome. The series depicts her exploring a mirror; alone and naked, she hides behind, crawls around, crouches beside, and stands on top of its reflective surface. The mirror is a trope that signifies the search for self; we turn to it to see and reassure ourselves of our existence. Yet some argue that it also reveals oneself as "other": the poet John Ashbery writes, "This otherness, this 'Not-being-us' is all there is to look at in the mirror." Photographs themselves are also viewed as mirrors in which one's self further fractures into selves. In effect, *Self-Deceit 4* situates Woodman in a hall of mirrors, reflecting the camera's gaze back on itself. Ultimately, as the title of the work implies, it questions the authenticity of any act of self-portraiture.

In her self-portraiture, Woodman relied on myriad tactics to conceal and camouflage herself from the camera and the viewer. Firstly, she theatrically conceived all her imagery: staging scenes like a director, stepping into roles, and performing like an actress. Secondly, she rarely showed her face; in *Self-Deceit 1*, viewers are offered a glimpse, but it is only an indistinct reflection in a mirror. Thirdly, she would often move during exposure, so that the film registered a blur and she became a ghostly apparition. In *Self-Deceit 4*, she also bounces dappled light off her skin; by mimicking the characteristics of the wall, her body appears to melt into the stone.

A person, scattered in space and time, is no longer a woman but a series of events on which we can throw no light, a series of insoluble problems.

MARCEL PROUST, *LA PRISONNIÈRE* (1923)

While in Rome, Woodman discovered the works and writings of André Breton and other Surrealists. Her work echoes many Surrealists' themes, such as their attraction to romantic ruins, dilapidated interiors, and mirrors. Woodman's interest in fragmenting the female form also finds precedence with the Surrealists, perhaps not as much in the vein of Hans Bellmer's portrayals of dissected and dismembered dolls, but more Man Ray's cropped, fetishized female nudes.

As the exposure is made, the naked woman tilts the mirror so its formless blur obscures her face. Moreover, her body is rendered indistinct, mottled with the same patina that ages the wall, as if being dissolved and devoured by the building. Art theorist Abigail Solomon-Godeau finds echoes of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), saying, "The space of a woman's seclusion and worldly exclusion not only imprisons, it also consumes." Woodman's attempt to dissipate her flesh and her refusal to offer her face to the camera create a self-portrait that achieves self-erasure.

Nos. 3 and 4, from the "House" series, 1975–76

Eel Series, Roma, May 1977–August 1978, 1977–78

Space², Providence, Rhode Island, 1975–1978, 1975–78

Composite photographic portraits predate the computer era. In 1877, the British eugenicist Francis Galton likely made the first. On a quest to define types in society, he exposed negatives of different faces, for example of criminals, to form one composite portrait. He found that faces are more alike than we realize.

SECOND BEAUTY COMPOSITE
NANCY BURSON
1982

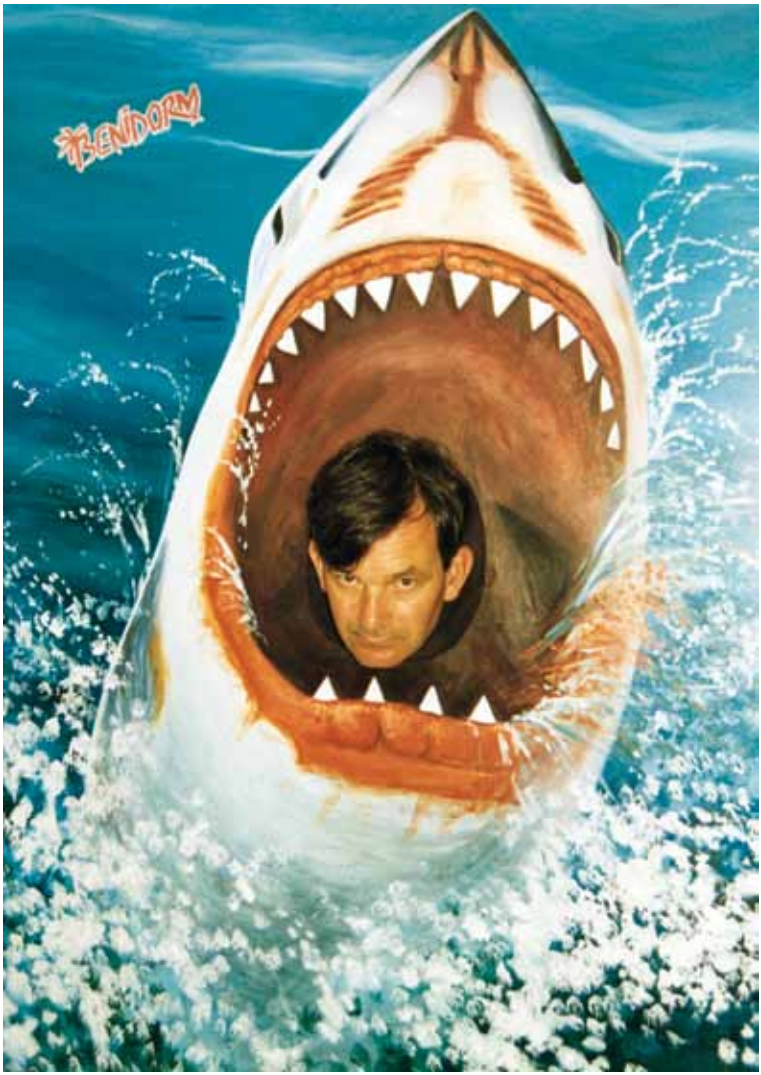
"We're all composites," claims Nancy Burson (1948–). "We're composites of our parents. We're composites because our molecular structure, every atom in our bodies, was all once part of the stars. We're composites of our emotions [and] of our history." Yet, the computer composite faces that Burson creates belong to no one. She starts with a hypothesis. For example, *Warhead I* (1982) theorized the face that might start a nuclear war with composite portraits of the world's leaders, weighted by the number of nuclear weapons they controlled: 55 percent Ronald Reagan, 45 percent Leonid Brezhnev, with hints of Margaret Thatcher, François Mitterand, and Deng Xiaoping. In *Mankind* (1983–85), she morphed Asian, Caucasian, and black faces but, by accounting for population statistics, the result looked predominantly Asian. *Second Beauty Composite*, which amalgamated the faces of five female movie stars from the 1980s, was a follow-up to *First Beauty Composite* featuring the 1950s stars Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, Sophia Loren, and Marilyn Monroe. These two works enabled Burson to map how ideas of beauty had changed. Throughout, Burson's work tackles issues of political power, race, and celebrity by putting a face to abstract concepts, as curator William A. Ewing says, "personalizing the impersonal."

With Massachusetts Institute of Technology engineer Tom Schneider, Burson created a revolutionary computer method to fuse photographs into believable faces. She was later commissioned by the FBI to create a composite of a missing child.

Goddess (Mary, Quan Yin, Isis), 2003

One (Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha), 2003

The combination of high contrast and soft focus seems to transform the woman's face into a graphic cipher. Speculation about her identity is swept away by the discovery that this is a composite of five movie stars from the 1980s: Jane Fonda, Jacqueline Bisset, Diane Keaton, Brooke Shields, and Meryl Streep. This face belongs to no one; it has never existed.



By assuming the role of the subject, Parr seemingly hands over authorship to the studio portraitist. At first glance, the piece appears to lack not only artistic sophistication, but also the artist's involvement. However, Parr retains control. His blank expression (which refuses engagement) combines with the project's seriality to encourage a conceptual reading. In effect, photographer becomes performance artist.

SPAIN. BENIDORM. AUTOPORTRAIT.
MARTIN PARR
1997

Martin Parr (1952–) once said, "Have you ever heard a photographer speaking about the power he or she has over people? Yet, it's unquestionably there. Photography isn't innocent, it's riddled with ulterior motives." "Autoportraits" represents a radical departure for Parr; he willingly hands over this power, and the photographer becomes the photographed. Stepping into various local photographic portrait studios around the world, Parr has been immortalized as an oiled and muscle-bound bodybuilder in New York, in a straw skirt and garland as a hula dancer in Rimini, beret-capped alongside the Eiffel Tower in Paris, and peering out from the serrated jaws of a shark in *Spain. Benidorm. Autoportrait*. This series lays bare the artifice of such studio portraits—the bizarre props, the ever more extraordinary stagings—but it also mocks our faith in the "telling" portrait. Since photographic portraiture was invented in the 19th century, its aim has been to create reflections that capture the sitter's character. However, throughout these images—enough to fill Parr's book *Autoportrait* (2000)—the photographer's deadpan demeanor and *Mona Lisa*-like expression mock such beliefs, while exposing the vanity involved in our endless pursuit of self-definition.

There was opposition to Parr's election into Magnum Photos in 1994. Magnum photographer Philip Jones Griffiths said, "I have a great respect for him as the dedicated enemy of everything I believe in and, I trust, Magnum still believes in." Parr may reject the agency's classic humanist tradition, but the way his unflinching eye frames modern life has revitalized British documentary photography.

"Cynical" and "patronizing" are words mentioned in conjunction with Parr's work. One critic of "The Last Resort" series (1983–85) wrote that the working classes "appear fat, simple, styleless," and a subject in "The Cost of Living" (1986–89) was so horrified by her portrayal, she claimed "photo-rape." Parr does target uncomfortable subject matter, such as class, but with such a penetrating eye that viewers may attribute prejudice when it is, in fact, their own.

I'm attracted to kitsch and to things that are bright and colorful because they reveal a lot about our society.

New Brighton, Merseyside, from "The Last Resort," 1983–85

Badminton Horse Trials, Gloucestershire, from "The Cost of Living," 1986–89

A man's clean-shaven head and shoulders are presented flatly lit against a blank backdrop, much like a passport photograph or mugshot. His closed eyes suggest that the photographer chose the wrong microsecond to trip the exposure. However, this is the artist's self-portrait and nothing was left to chance. "I tried hard to appear without expression, leaving my eyes closed so they became the focus," claims Turk. "The eyes act as a full stop." This simple gesture frustrates the viewer's attempt to read the portrait for personality.

Camouflage Self-Portrait (A Man Like Mr Kurtz), 1994

Car Boot Mask, 2006

Self Portrait (Fountain), 2012

PORTRAIT OF SOMETHING THAT I'LL NEVER REALLY SEE

GAVIN TURK

1997

Anarchist, mischief-maker, prankster, and hoaxer are some of the names given to Gavin Turk (1967–). Like Woody Allen's human chameleon Zelig, in the film of the same name, he has morphed himself into well-known celebrities and artists. In *Dorian Grey* (2010), he appears as Elvis, whereas in *In Memory of Gavin Turk* (2003) and *Large Red Fright Wig* (2011) he becomes Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol respectively. Curator and critic Rachel Newsome wryly notes, "In Turk world, all art is punk because all art is necessarily fake . . . a joke on the viewer, bringing into question both perspective and perception by presenting something that is not." By closing his eyes in *Portrait of Something That I'll Never Really See*, the photographer presents a mute, impenetrable facade, but the joke is that the portrait, as the title hints, would "never really" reveal any more were his eyes left open. Turk uses his face to challenge the myth that the self-portrait (indeed, any portrait, in any medium) can reveal anything concrete about the sitter. As Newsome continues, "Behind it's fake-ness, or perhaps because of it, is the [question] how can we know what is real?" Conceivably, as the Surrealist playwright Antonin Artaud wrote in 1925, "Reality is not under the surface."

Turk claims, "I was trying to make a piece of work that was simple and only a fraction away from an ordinary picture." The blank, closed expression, the straight, frontal framing, and the neutral lighting and staging all combine to create a seemingly artless photograph. Turk chose to portray himself through the camera. Like Ed Ruscha (see pp.46–47) and John Baldessari (see pp.48–49), he is drawn to its automated, mechanical nature, which appears to negate the artist's touch. He did not even take the photograph himself; that credit goes to Anthony Oliver. Ultimately, though, Turk conceptualized all the aspects of *Portrait* in order to question notions of artistry and authorship.

Turk shot to fame as the first student to be denied a master's from London's Royal College of Art for his degree piece. *Cave* (1991) showed a room, bare but for a commemorative blue plaque reading "Gavin Turk, Sculptor, worked here 1989–1991." Ironically, *Cave*, now an iconic piece, led to his inclusion in the Young British Artists (YBA) group and Charles Saatchi's controversial yet influential exhibition "Sensation."

> *[By] looking inwards, not outwards, what the artist "sees" is that he cannot see himself in all his totality.*
>
> RACHEL NEWSOME, CURATOR/CRITIC