



M o M e n t o

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The images of adolescents collected together here come from a cross section of contemporary New Zealand photographers, with an historical photograph from the collection of John B. Turner and an essay by photographer Haru Sameshima.

An Auckland based photographer, Amanda A'Hara began attending motocross meets as a teenager, with her father and brothers. Photographing teenagers amidst a sports culture, A'Hara explores through her work "social fantasies, particularly as they are evidenced in the formation and structure of social and personal identities."

The young people Paul Konings photographed were living in District 6, Capetown; friends and families, Scorpions – imminent displacement a part of their culture. Images from this immense body of work were exhibited and published internationally in the 1980's. Paul built friendships with the people in his photographs, re-visiting them with their images over the years that he was studying in Capetown.

Elizabeth Corin photographed her friends in her final year at High School, documenting their relationships with one another. The photograph of my sister Lish at the local Farmers department store was taken during a documentary project, on a day out shopping with Mum. The boys Jan Young documented were from her local area, known to her through their community, and included her son Jack.

These photographs depict adolescents in disparate communities, their uniting thread being the permeation of the relationship between the photographer and the portrayed. The liaison allows our entrance into a sphere of cultural knowledge extraneous to our own, the unparalleled and privileged opportunity of photography.

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PhotoForum is a non-profit society dedicated to the promotion of photography as a means of communication and expression. The 2008/2009 Membership fee for PhotoForum Inc is \$65 (Students and Concession \$45), for which members receive at least one copy of a new PhotoForum magazine or book, and other membership privileges, to which this publication, *Momento*, has been added.

The Pact of Portraiture

Portrait photography is not without its complexities.

From its onset, the power of photographic depictions of people prompted many to reject the practice as soul stealing black magic. Conversely, photography's explosive popularity created a new industry of studio portraitists satisfying the insatiable demand of the burgeoning middle classes to create a reflection of their existence and elevate their sense of self-importance.

According to the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin, some of the earliest daguerreotype portraits, and their contained cult of remembrance, were refuges for *aura* – the quasi-religious sanctity of the experience of an original work of art in its original place and time. He argues that this aura began to be eroded by photomechanical processes – the ubiquitous reproductions in photographs and photomechanical printing shifted the status of an artwork and its meaning from that of experience (ritual) to that of reading (exhibition value).¹

The implications of portrait photography as practiced today perhaps parallels this well-known theoretical proposition. The ritual experience of and interactions with people are somewhat eroded by the ubiquity of photographic portraits and the increasing importance we place upon such images – mere shadows – to define others and ourselves.

Max Kozloff argues that portrait photography in its most popular form is the product of routine deception where the subject and the photographer collaborate, often with an unspoken understanding, producing a moment of theatre where the subject appears to be self absorbed and without concern for the audience that will view the image. The portrait is a transaction, a pact between the subject and the photographer, which 'masks the fact that he or she is primed and ready for inspection.'² Kozloff argues that one of the complexities of reading a photographic portrait stems from this duplicity, where the photographs appear to be 'providing intimate and pointed visual access to the subjects, in the interest of confirming them for future memory and appraisal.'³

In commercial portraiture, such as wedding or school photography, the individuality of the subject is swiftly replaced by conformity to a set of prescribed codes of appearance. The posture, expressions and even the garments are pre-determined by the genre; only the facial features are different. Deborah Chamber takes this idea further in her study of family photo albums from the 1950s. Similarities across individual family albums demonstrate the extent to which a culture embraces an external concept of Family. Even such a personal activity as making a family album

only reinforces the broadly endorsed notion of the nuclear family.⁴ The family photographs are made as a prescribed ritual and privacy is seldom revealed. The 'ideal' images in these family albums shed little light on the individuals and the specific lives they lived, but tell us much about the aspirations of society at large.

In the case of most fashion and editorial photography the transaction is more professional in nature. Expectations are explicit and the subject's role has little to do with his or her personality, even – or perhaps *especially* – when the purpose of the portrait is to accentuate the 'individual', as in a magazine feature of a public personality. The theatricality of the exchange takes over, and the subject usually has a clear understanding of the outcome required by the professional photographer, the commissioning editors and art directors. The success of the image depends on masking any slippage, the *punctum* that may betray the intended message and reveal more than the original contract warranted. In this way fictionalised public personas are created, and the more powerful the mythology, the less it has to do with the individual behind the image.

The intimacy that can charge the private exchange between a photographer and the subject plays part, and in the hands of a (clever? masterful? skilful?) auteur photographer the images are charged with fleshy fantasies that defy easy demarcations between fact and fiction. Professional 'art' photographers such as Richard Avedon, Wolfgang Tillman, Nobuyoshi Araki, Nan Golden and Ann Shelton have all understood the private/public, ritual/exhibition dichotomies of portrait practice. They accomplish this by disrupting the expectations within, over and beyond the immediate use value of the portrait viewed in privacy, and by inserting the images into the space of art.⁵ Paradoxically, the private dimensions of the portraits are accentuated and accrue power as artworks only through being publicly exhibited.

Interestingly, such portrait practices were assimilated into the art galleries of the period alongside more self-conscious postmodernist critiques of portraiture as represented by the works of Cindy Sherman. While such critiques were seamlessly absorbed into art discourse, it is notable, as Sarah Parsons suggests, that more conventional, old fashioned 'art photography', such as the work of Sally Mann in her book *Immediate Family*, has retained its power to provoke.⁶ After examining some of the processes in which these photographs were made, and having identified the collaborative relationship between the photographer and her subjects – 'spinning a story of what it is like to grow up' – Parsons pinpoints the tangled reality behind the portraits as the source of their power – they are her children, she is their mother. The psychological dynamics that lie behind the photographs and their far-reaching consequences mean we cannot easily let these images go.

The private/public disruptions of the comfort zones of smug notions of family and children are absent in the recent furor over Bill Hansen's images of naked young people. They seem to be an instance of exactly such a disruption or complication. Yet his pictures make no immediate reference or pretence to any kind of reality. The images are the artist's own concept and vision (imagination? projection?) that the actors play out according to his scripts. His images live out the fantasies with the participants. This is in fact much less complex and complicating than it might seem.

More open ended and affecting instances of portrait photographs seem to emerge when the intentions of the photographer towards the subject are less de/refined – a kind of naïve encounter that charges the portraits with rawness. The communication embedded in the images is not wholly a product of the artist's intentionality or the theatricality of the subject. The maker of the image may in fact be misguided, led by say an aesthetic agenda, a belief in the medium's objectivity, or a personal fascination with the subject. Whatever the motive that prompted the image's creation, the power of the image sits outside of the intended use value. The subject is puzzled, the photographer is puzzled, neither quite knowing what is expected, or what to do. That rawness is, for a viewer, a memorable encounter.

Haruhiko Sameshima

Notes

- 1 Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin – Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken Books, 1969, pp.217-252.
- 2 Max Kozloff, 'Opaque Disclosures', in *Lone Visions, Crowded Frames: Essays on Photography*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994, p.3.
- 3 Kozloff, p.5.
- 4 Deborah Chambers, 'Family as place: family and photograph albums and the domestication of public and private space', in Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan (eds.), *Picturing Place: Photography and Geographical imagination*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2003, pp.96-114.
- 5 As Rosalind Kraus suggests, what distinguishes art photographs from other kinds of photographs is a set of aesthetic criteria, like author, intention and oeuvre, which are cloaked in "autonomous Art and its idealised History, which constituted aesthetic discourse". (Rosalind Kraus, 'Photography's Discursive Spaces', *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1986, p.141.)
- 6 Sarah Parsons, 'Public/private tensions in the photography of Sally Mann', *History of Photography*, v.32, n.2, Summer 2008, pp.123-136.



Amanda A'Hara
Shaun (waiting to race), 2006

A cross over of street and subcultures, Amanda A'Hara is fascinated by the aesthetic and rituals of motocross. A'Hara's portraits capture young people in a period of transition. Her subjects occupy a space 'in between'; the images record this adolescent blend of innocence and experience viewed in hindsight. (Serena Bentley)



Amanda A'Hara
Claudia (with bike), 2006



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Lish, Farmers, Takapuna, 2001

A brief during a Diploma in Photography moved photographing Alisha from a familial level to a documentary approach, which went some way to sharing the beauty and strength of my sister. This particularly personal moment refutes the historically hidden otherness of disability, through the identifiable experience of adolescence.

These three images are from a series of many photographs taken over a period of ten years from 1976 to 1986. Konings was studying at the Meachalis School of Fine Art in Capetown when he started visiting District 6 with his camera. District 6 is a symbol of mass removals of people from their traditional home to areas alien to them – systematic destruction of established communities under apartheid.

Paul Konings
Mark and friends



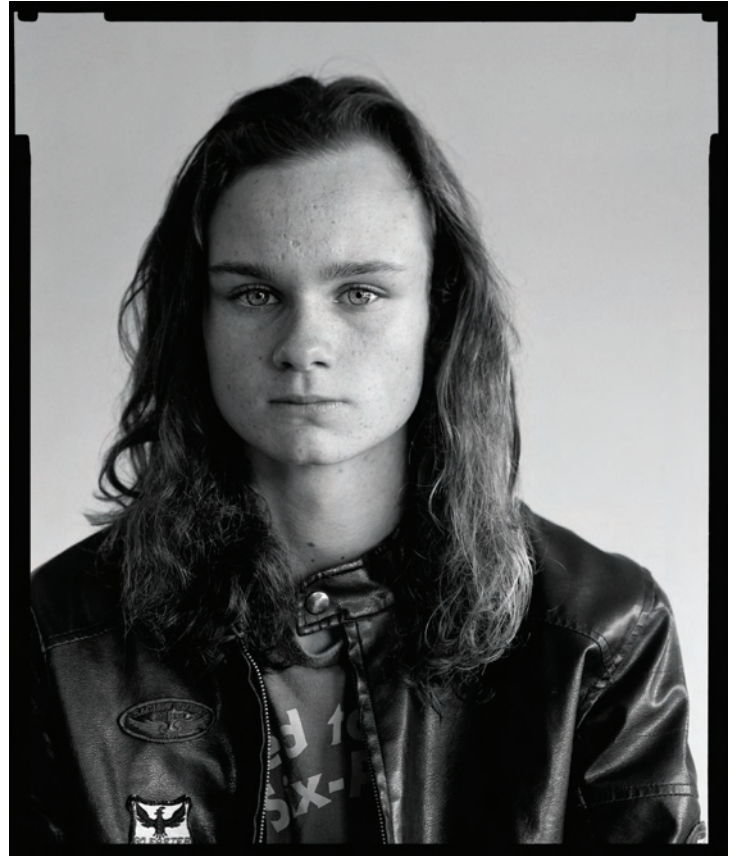


Paul Konings
Issy (left)
Gaya (above)

Elizabeth Corin
Kim and Jerico

This work was produced in April/May of my final high school year, a project where my main focus was to capture how people emotionally relate to one another. The work I presented in the Unshore exhibition at the Depot Artspace extended on my earlier project and explored the way teenagers relate in intimate relationships. This is a topic I am particularly interested in, as many of my peers and I have experienced the joys and turmoils of a relationship. These photographs were taken at my school of a selection of friends and acquaintances who conveyed emotional intimacy in each of their individual relationships and this is what I wanted to capture.





Jan Young
Jack Y (left), Jack B (right) — from The Transition Series, 2007

My chosen subjects were asked to present themselves for photographing as they were in their daily lives... 'not tidied up for the camera'. The boys especially seemed very comfortable with this request. Using a large format film camera allowed very fine facial detail to be recorded. In the end, it was the boys that most succinctly captured that temporary state of pubescence (neither child nor adult) that I had hoped to document.



Jan Young
Chris (left), Tony (right) — from The Transition Series, 2007



G. Leslie Adkin (1888 – 1964)
Nancy Adkin in School Uniform, c. 1930.
Collection of John B. Turner

front cover:
Jan Young
Roman — from The Transition Series, 2007