ON FRINGES, PEASANTS, AND PRIVILEGES

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In 1912, the Horn family carried a chair to the edge of a nearby forest in the village of Isert in the Westerwald to present themselves to the photographer August Sander. On that day, five portraits in different constellations were made. Based on the different backgrounds, one can reconstruct the precise place, even today. The oldest couple, my great-great-grand aunt Katharina and her husband Adam, is captured against the relatively close background of the spruce needle forest. The tree trunks are clearly discernible. Adam is sitting, his hands on the walking cane, and Katharina stands next him with her hands folded. A younger couple was positioned at a greater distance to the spruce needle forest so that the trees in the background are slightly out of focus. In this picture, she is seated, while he stands next to her with a cigar in his hand. The girl Lisbeth and her brother Emil were in turn photographed in front of the bushes of the deciduous forest. Lisbeth is holding a bouquet of flowers in her hands. The fifth photo depicts the mother in the middle linking arms with her two daughters. Their picture was taken in front of the path leading along the deciduous forest. The two daughters each hold a bouquet in their hands. The vegetation and clothes indicate that the photos were shot on a warm spring or summer day.

Sander selected only the portrait of my great-great-grand aunt Katharina Horn and her husband Adam from this series as part of the *Portfolio of Archetypes* und thus under the category of peasant for his artistic concept work *People of the 20th Century*. It has become one of the iconic photographs of the series of peasants and is included in numerous collections, e.g., the Photographische Sammlung of the SK Stiftung Kultur and Museum Ludwig in Cologne, the Museum Folkwang in Essen, or the Ann and Jürgen Wilde Foundation in the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich. It is also one of Sander's few photographs bearing a specific title: *Zucht und Harmonie* (Propriety and Harmony)—that in the family context has led to many amusing comments.

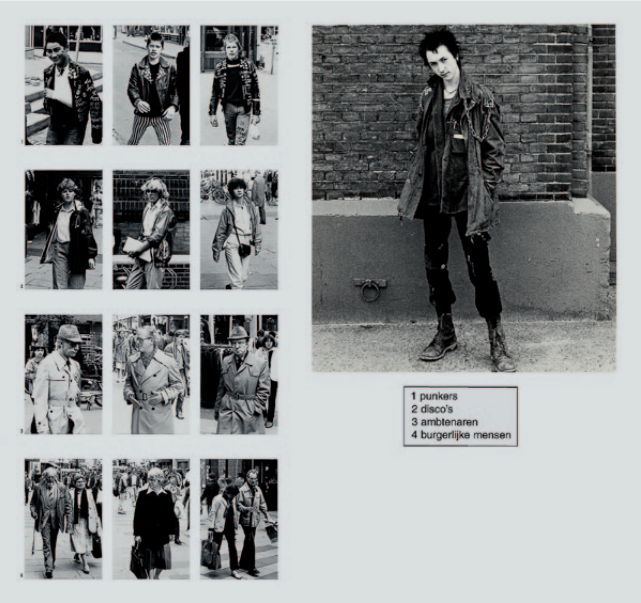
Portraits of family Horn taken by August Sander in 1912, photographed 2019

The conversation with the grandson of Adam Horn, Karl, and his wife Marlise on the photo quickly switches from the portrayed persons to the economy and thus to the inheritance procedure of gavelkind that was practiced in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century. It means that the land was equally divided among the male family members und for this reason became ever more fragmented. The consequence was that less and less land remained for the individual families to cultivate. Many could no longer make a living off the land, so that a lot of men had to work in one of the numerous iron ore mines. [1→p.139] This was also true of Adam Horn, portrayed under the category of peasants. He later worked as a wagoner. Hence, Adam Horn, like many

others, was never only a peasant but simultaneously a worker. The category under which August Sander classified Adam and Katharina Horn withholds this part of his biography. The multiple forms of labor and the attendant identities demanded by the economic conditions are omitted by Sander's narrow categories. August Sander himself was a worker at the mine in Herdorf before becoming a photographer, so he too was never only a "photographer" in his occupational biography.

Even if the photographer August Sander did portray a pensioned worker in Kuchhausen around 1945 or a group of farm hands in the Eifel, he looked for most of the laborers included in his artistic concept work *People of the 20th Century* in the urbanized industrial regions of Cologne, Berlin, and the Ruhr region. So which photographs did August Sander select as representative of which category, and what did this entail for the social cross section he compiled? The persons portrayed as three young peasants, for instance, were in reality never only young peasants but two workers and a clerk of a nearby iron ore mine on the way to a parish fair, as we today know [Pabst 2014]. Also important in this context is the assessment of Karl and Marlise that the photograph of the young couple made on the same day as the portrait of Adam and Katharina was likely not included in the *Portfolio of Archetypes* on account of their bourgeois appearance. Is this a time of societal transition, in which the phenomenon of multiple occupations was new and the part-time peasants still had to be recorded as such? Or did Sander reduce the complexity of their occupational biographies "for the sake of simplicity" to fit them into his pattern?

In contrast to August Sander, the artist Hans Eijkelboom undertakes a participatory opening of categories in his work *Ode an August Sander* from 1981. [2] Eijkelboom asks pedestrians in the street in Arnhem: If people are not all the same, into which categories would you divide them? He asks them to point out these people in the street. Eijkelboom portrays both the person making the respective selection and the three people that are supposed to represent the category, depicting them together along with the names of the categories. One woman chooses the categories



Hans Eijkelboom, *Ode an August Sander*, 1981

happy, businesslike, ill-tempered, and stinking rich persons. A punk, on the other hand, chooses punker, disco, official, and bourgeois persons. Eijkelboom juxtaposes Sander's generalizing and objectifying approach with a variety of subjective views that playfully question Sander's empirical take. Eijkelboom's work, then, makes visible how variegated the individual views on differences in social relations are and what all can be raised to a category depending on the perspective. The work also shows how the first impression based on these categories is attributed to the respective persons.

Where does Sander's "delicate empiricism," as Walter Benjamin euphorically described Sander's publication *Faces of Our Time* from 1931 [Benjamin 1979] lead us? In *A Small History of Photography*, the philosopher compares Sander's *Faces of Our Time* with an atlas of instruction (Übungsatlas) that teaches us how to read physiognomies in regard to their origin, and writes: "Whether one is of the left or right, one will have to get used to

being looked at in terms of one's provenance. And one will have to look at others in the same way. Sander's work is more than a picture book. It is a training manual." [ibid., 252]. The art critic Benjamin Buchloh critically points to where just a few years later these physiognomic observations led: "the physiognomic observation would not only serve as the pretext to political discrimination but more brutally as the pseudoscientific legitimation of racist persecution, this exercise manual, as Benjamin optimistically claims, will educate its viewers in the physiognomic study of the relationships between the class identity of the depicted sitters and their political and ideological affiliations in the imminent future" [Buchloh 1999].

In his essay *The Body and the Archive*, the photographer Allan Sekula examines the systematizing role that photography played at the end of the nineteenth century with the aim of marking deviations within the social body based on the physiognomy. In this context, he mentions the invention of the criminal distinguished from the bourgeois body or the law-abiding body [Sekula 1986, 107]. In criminology, an extensive archive emerged that contained these interpreting and systematizing materials on criminals. Hence, Alphonse Bertillon developed in criminal technology the first systematic identification in which he combined photographs with anthropometric data and other information on cards. His approach was not after typical features of criminal types, but instead recorded the body that had already been classified as criminal [ibid., 117]. The natural scientist Francis Galton, on the other hand, was interested in the essentialist classification of a criminal type and in this context developed the method of composite portraiture. Several portraits were superimposed to arrive at average typologies. Allan Sekula aptly describes the composite portrait: "[it] can be seen as the collapsed version of the archive" [ibid., 126]. [3] One of his popular composite portraits at the time was that of the "Jewish type" [ibid., 126]. Galton was also a co-founder of the then new discipline of eugenics and showed interest in the "betterment" of the human race. The sinister impact of Anglo-American eugenics on the National Socialist race theory could be observed a short while

later, although the National Socialist race theory, as opposed to Anglo-American eugenics, ultimately pursued the elimination of the other. Galton also developed the method of identification by means of fingerprints. A method that is still used today as part of a comprehensive biometric identification procedure. Persecuted persons seek to elude this identification by deliberately obliterating their fingertips. [4]

Georg Pahl, *Arrival of Black Africans*, Berlin, 1931

In the wake of colonialism, the discipline of anthropology was also invented in 1870. First-generation anthropology mainly distinguished between "nature people" and "culture people." Anthropology and the empire wanted to create a difference between people of European origin and all others with this distinction. This difference consequently served the empire to legitimize itself and anthropology to legitimize itself scientifically [Houlberg Run, Vestergaard Jorgensen, and Zimmerman 2021, 49]. The false hierarchy of difference led to a close complicity between anthropology and the colonial power structure.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, exoticizing portrayals of others at *Völkerschauen* (ethnological exhibitions) at World Fairs or other ethnic shows were very popular. A photo by the press photographer Georg Pahl from 1931 shows

the arrival of people of the Sara-Kara tribe at the Anhalter Bahnhof in Berlin. They are depicted together with the director of the Berlin Zoo, Ludwig Heck, who was their host at one of the last large ethnological exhibitions before the Second World War. The group was apparently asked to line up for the photo. The women and men of the Sara-Kara tribe look insecurely to the camera. They have half-covered their faces with veils, obscuring their mouth ornaments. The zoo director looks proud. The bare breast of the woman carrying a child in her arm grants an intimate view of her body, generating a gaze that I find voyeuristic and encroaching. The relationship between subject and object appears clearly defined here. Thus, the colonial structure becomes visible in this photo, a structure of which the photograph and its production are also a part. In her reflections on photography, the art historian Temi Odumosu refers to the power relations inscribed in photography: "Who has the right to look and who has the right to appropriate, show or narrate the pictures? Who controls the pictures?" [Odumosu 2021, 138].

These colonial, racist, classifying, and stereotypical categorizations were active at the time when August Sander produced his archival concept work *People of the 20th Century*. When comparing his work with the archives of Bertillon and Galton, the difference becomes evident. Sander's photographs are mise-en-scènes that grant the protagonists space for their own individuality. The mise-en-scènes appear as if they were discussed together with the protagonists. The portrayed persons do not appear to be forced into a simple object relation or depicted in an exoticizing way, as was the case in many photos of ethnological exhibitions. The portraits usually show three quarters of or the entire body against a local background. Things get more difficult, though, when turning to Sander's categories. The category of the "Last People" refers to a common classifying construction of value during this time. Working with various subcategories may also be a sign of how difficult the narrowness of the defined categories was. At this point, the work loses its conceptual clarity. It is also striking that the portrait series of persecuted Jews from 1945 is made up almost entirely of studio portraits shown

in oblique three-quarter view. Interestingly, they are set off from the otherwise more common front view and indoor setting and refer to the specific context of their origin.

August Sander, *Persecuted* [Mrs. Levysohn?], c. 1938

The curator Linda Conze speaks of the photograph's nestling to the sociopolitical conditions in regard to Sander's publishing of region-specific illustrated volumes during the time of National Socialism, in which the portraits were reproduced with captions of characteristic regional attributions [→ p. 97]. Some of these photos were shot for the illustrated volumes by August Sanders's son Erich during his travels through Germany. These trips simultaneously served as camouflage for his anti-fascist resistance activities. August Sander's photos are initially always also commissioned works. Many of the portraits of persecuted Jews subsequently included in the concept work *People of the 20th Century* were shot during National Socialism in his studio,

because since 1938 Jewish residents had to indicate their Jewishness on an ID card along with a passport photo [Betancourt Nuñez 2018, 16]. They therefore refer to the coercive conditions under which these portraits were made during the time of National Socialism.

But as the art historian Christian Weikop explicates in his article, Sander's photographs differ from the usual fascist depiction of peasants as they can be found, for example, in Lendvai-Dircksen's photos,[5] where they are often shown in traditional garb in close-ups. Sander, on the other hand, stages them in self-chosen Sunday attire against specific landscape backgrounds in three-quarter or full-body view. While in National Socialism, an archaic depiction of peasants was often chosen, the bourgeois character of the peasants' Sunday clothes seems to point to a social transition. The staging of the three-quarter portrait can also be interpreted as a reference to the bourgeois studio portrait that Sander—albeit in a rural landscape environment—chooses for his protagonists. This, too, reflects August Sander's bourgeois gaze [→ Reinhard Braun, p. 89].

However, the question arises as to the extent to which the documentary representationality according to categories succeeds in critically reflecting society. In 1931 Bertolt Brecht writes: "The situation [in capitalist society as a whole] is now becoming so complex that a simple 'reproduction of reality' says less than ever about reality itself. A photograph of a Krupp factory or the AEG says practically nothing about these institutions. Reality itself has shifted into the realm of the functional. The reification of human relationships, such as the factory, no longer betrays anything about these relationships. And so what we actually need is to 'construct something,' something 'artificial,' 'posed.'" What we therefore equally need is art." A year earlier, Siegfried Kracauer already remarked in *The Salaried Masses* that "[a] hundred reports from a factory do not add up to the reality of the factory, but remain in all eternity a hundred views of the factory. Reality is a construction." [Kracauer 1998 (1930), 32]. Proceeding from these two quotes, the writer Jochen Becker comes to the following conclusion in his study on urban architecture and its photographic depictions

by Venturi/Scott Brown, Ed Ruscha and others: “In 1930, such a notion of reality as a creation of the imagination was quite extraordinary. Artifice and composition are not transposed to the realms of art, but described instead as a ‘construction.’ In essence, this is not about the nature of things, but about the process by which they are created” [Becker 2013, 389]. For artistic methods, this raises the question of how they can succeed in visualizing these construction processes. So if we, like Kracauer and Brecht, start from the assumption that the pure depiction is not enough to comprehend reality, wasn’t a much stronger artistic intervention needed at the time to arrive at a deeper understanding of society?

Walker Evans, *Louisiana Plantation House*, 1935

At this point, I would like to turn to another classic. In the 1930s, the photographer Walker Evans developed his exhibition and catalog project *American Photographs*. They resulted in 1935 from a commission by the U.S. Farm Security Administration that engaged photographers to document the situation of the particularly affected rural population in the frame of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal relief projects. From the extensive exhibition, Walker Evans created a more compact catalog of the same title comprising 87 photographs. The catalog is divided into

two sections: The first one focuses on portraits of persons, occasionally combined with interior views of their homes, street views, billboards, or monuments. The second section combines city, landscape and village views as well as buildings and ornaments. Information on the photographs, such as date, place and subject of the photo, can be found numbered at the end of each chapter. The focus is therefore at first on the photographs themselves and their succession. As an introduction, Evans chooses the photo of a studio in New York, followed by a photo depicting the display of another photo studio with numerous passport photos. Only as the third photo does Evans show his portrait of two young men, shot in Pennsylvania Town in 1936. Starting the series in this way, Evans refers in a self-reflective and slightly ironic manner to the medium of photography and the genre of portraiture. His working method is characterized by the portraits of persons at times shot in a spatial environment, while other portraits are followed by the attendant spaces, separated from each other, as short series. He also includes visual representations such as advertising or monuments in his series. For example, he uses half torn-off posters to address the racist minstrel shows touring the United States at the time. In his montage, the racist depiction is followed by the intimacy of an empty bed in a plain housing, followed by the photo of a Black woman lying in bed, whose gaze we do not meet, because she is looking at another person outside of the image space. Evans repeatedly takes up the theme of colonialism and racism and concludes the series in the first section with a view to the devastated garden of an abandoned mansion of a plantation owner in Louisiana. Unlike August Sander in his book *Face of Our Time* (1929) published six years earlier or his subsequent concept work *People of the 20th Century*, Evans focuses not only on the human portrait but combines it with spatial views, monuments, billboards and so forth. There are obviously staged individual or group portraits as well as unobserved shots from behind that let us gaze together with the portrayed persons. In contrast to August Sander, Evans develops condensed narrations through the montage of these diverse views and depictions. Adhering to categories plays no role here.

In this small, inconspicuous volume, Evans succeeds in showing the contradictions of American society during the Great Depression of the 1930s in a dense and sophisticated collage.

Hannah Höch, *Bäuerliches Brautpaar* (Peasant Wedding Couple), 1931

During the same period, the Dada artist Hannah Höch opts for a more intimate dealing with montage in her series *Aus einem Ethnografischen Museum* (From an Ethnographic Museum) that completely refers to found footage and thus to then common depictions in magazines and newspapers. Her appropriation of ethnographic objects is not free of racist hierarchies at the beginning of the twentieth century in Germany. In *Fremde Schönheit* (Strange Beauty, 1929), she attaches to what is conventionally deemed a beautiful white body a black shrunken head whose eyes, magnified by a pair of glasses, look in the direction of the viewer. The cultural historian Maud Lavin describes the montage as follows: "the self is re-presented as the other—revisited and rendered abject. Thus, as in other *Ethnographic Museum* montages, there is a shifting between identification and differentiation with tribal peoples [...]. By emphasizing this fluctuation, Höch deviated from the unambiguous, folkloric representation of African

and other tribal peoples in the illustrated weeklies and laid the foundation for a critique of racism, even if she did not pursue it further" [Lavin 1996, 123]. Höch questions how race is coded in ethnographic museums. And through the distorting effect of montage, both the white female body and the black shrunken head appear alien. But since this work associates ugliness with the black body, it does bear racist overtones. In her montage *Bäuerliches Brautpaar* (Peasant Wedding Couple, 1931), she goes significantly further with her critique of racism. In this montage, the head of a black man is mounted above a pair of masters boots of a white colonial ruler, and the blond pigtails of a woman are attached to an ape's face, which in turn is placed on a pair of children's shoes. The body parts in between are missing. On the horizon in the background, there are signs of rural agricultural usage, and two different arms lift a milk churn from a light brown surface. The fragmentation of bodies drawn from different culturally and racially coded contexts gives rise to a torn couple within an unequal power structure. Telling in this context is the black male head mounted on the colonial boots of a white master. Here, a transgression takes place in which the black body is not depicted as ugly or distorted. As much as Hannah Höch succeeds in highlighting the different elements, there is a certain repetition and renewed inscription of racist elements, particularly in regard to the ape's head within the overall structure. In contrast to August Sander's approach, Hannah Höch's working method appears disorderly, personal, grotesque, and deliberately transgressive. She takes her picture material from popular magazines and thus from circulating representations and depictions. She isolates the categories and mixes them up in new combinations. The cultural historian Maud Lavin describes Höch's ethnographic series: "[it] led away from the orderly and toward an exploration of the confusion between self and other, self and selflessness, ego and the abject, Western legs and African headdresses, lived femininity and images of the New Woman" [ibid., 123].

As opposed to Hannah Höch, Sander makes the effort with *People of the 20th Century* to compile a social cross section over a long period of time based on a classification system. The radical

societal changes affecting people of the twentieth century appear in August Sander's work, for example, in the expansion of categories and the portraits of persecuted Jews that were included in 1945. They are thus presented next to the portraits of National Socialists as well as of other politically persecuted persons. From today's point of view, I am particularly interested in the fringes of this monumental work, which from the perspective of the artist himself remained incomplete. What I mean by this in regard to the series of peasants is above all the commissioned photos of peasants that were not included in *People of the 20th Century*, photos of other family members, for instance, that were shot on the same day. I find these fringes of the commissioned photographs promising with respect to an expanded reading of August Sander's concept work. What belongs to this, in my view, is to listen to the way in which the protagonists or their descendants read these photos. Or also how they regard the intersection with art and their exploitation. For example, Karl Horn, one of the descendants of the famous peasant couple, makes it clear that only the use value of the photographs counts for him, although he is well aware of how valuable the photographs are. The exact price is irrelevant, however, since he doesn't want to sell them. Ms. Elfriede Bitzer, on the other hand, has been informed of the value of the photos and decides to auction them at Sotheby's for an age-appropriate conversion of her house. The knowledge of the monetary value on the art market has given her autonomy of decision in dealing with the photographs. Others are annoyed or also embarrassed that they didn't know how valuable the photos were, when especially local, knowledgeable actors talked them into giving them the photos in exchange for "high-quality" prints, a "good" bottle of wine or ridiculously small amounts of money in unfair barters that were partially not agreed upon.

If we grasp the portrayed persons and their descendants not merely as objects but as active, equal actors, it would be necessary to raise the tricky and annoying question as to the provenance of the commissioned photos of the peasants. A question that has long been raised in regard to the controversial acquisition of artifacts during colonialism. With the question of class, this appears

more vague, however, obscured by the legitimization of regional belonging and impeded by the complicity of renowned international art institutions. But embarrassment by their previous ignorance also makes it difficult for those to raise demands due to their age. To whom should they turn, when the photos have meanwhile been sold on? Of course, there is the recurring argument that the sets have been archived and kept together well, the same common argument one can hear in the provenance debate on artifacts acquired during colonialism.

I am part of both contexts, the art context generating surplus value, and the region in which the peasant portraits were made, where I grew up. Therefore, I also generate cultural surplus value with my artistic work. Yet here I feel obliged to Sekula's considerations: "Our problem, as artists and intellectuals living near but not at the center of a global system of power, will be to help prevent the cancellation of that testimony by more authoritative and official texts." [Sekula 1986, 134] If we take decolonization seriously, this naturally also affects the context of class as well as intersectionality. This would then entail moving from the center of the system of power to the fringes and understanding the portrayed persons and their descendants as actors on an equal footing. For the individual person and for the institutionalized art context based on class difference and exclusion, this would mean calling the privileges and narratives to date into question and enduring a disorder in the sense of a reordering. For the author Avery Gordon writes "that ghosts are real." [Gordon 2008, 17] What such an approach could look like in detail can only be developed together with various institutional and non-institutional actors. It would require the willingness to engage with this courageous, joyful and, in some instances, certainly also painful process.

[1] At the end of the nineteenth century, 35 % of the German iron ore requirements came from the Siegerland (Schneider 2014, 78).

[2] The exhibition *Photographische Konzepte und Kostbarkeiten — Sammlungspräsentation — Teil 1; Porträt,*

Landschaft, Botanik at the Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur in Cologne juxtaposed Eijkelboom's work *Ode an August Sander* (1981) with a selection of photographs from August Sander's *People of the 20th Century*. https://photographie-sk-kultur.de/ausstellungen/aktuell (accessed 04/06/2022).

[3] There was also a converse application of composite portraits with the photographer Lewis Hine, who in 1913 made one of child laborers in a cotton factory to show what effects the work had on the body of a child.

[4] The artist and cultural scholar Brigitta Kuster describes techniques of biometric control and how they can be evaded in her article "Biometrische Filmbilder: Eine neue Weise, in der audiovisuelle Aufzeichnungen die Wirklichkeit berühren?" (Kuster 2018).

[5] See Weikop 2019.

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