

images for a book

Photography today is more than a science: it has risen to the level of art.

NADAR

I AM CONTEMPLATING TWO PHOTOGRAPHS of his friend Charles Baudelaire taken by Nadar in the mid-1850s. In the first, the poet, now in his mid-thirties, is standing at an angle to the camera, left hand in his trouser pocket, the silk lining of his closely fitted jacket exposed, round his neck a large bow-tied cravat. He looks sideways, directly into the lens, eyes intense, lips pursed, the light catching the left side of his face and forehead, from which his hair is swept back. The image is slightly out of focus, and seems over-exposed, the illuminated half-face starkly white, the featureless space in which he stands going into darkness in front of him. Baudelaire liked this portrait enough to have owned it. Perhaps it was the almost fleeting, apparition-like immateriality of the image that appealed: the intensely self-aware dandy-poet caught between light and dark. The other photograph, again both imperfectly focused and exposed, pictures him leaning backwards into an armchair, with his high forehead catching the light, which comes this time from the left of the picture, illuminating his hands against the undifferentiated darkness of his coat, the left raised to his cheek, the right resting on white gloves on his lap. His raised collar and right arm create a dark diagonal silhouette from upper right to lower left. His expression is dreamy, as if thought had deserted

him, but the slight angle of his head to the diagonal division of darkness and light destroys any sense of repose, and the blurring of the image around his face creates a mysterious vagueness out of which the poet seems to be emerging like a ghost.

THERE ARE OTHER, more famous, photographic images of Baudelaire, including others by Nadar himself, who was a close friend and admirer, but none that match these in intensity, that catch for the viewer the febrile unease that was so distinct an element in the personality of the great poet. Though the rich and famous – *le tout Paris* – clamoured through his portrait studio at 113 rue Saint-Lazare during its golden years in the late 1850s, and paid handsomely for the privilege, Nadar approached his work with artists and writers, the circle of his true friends, as a creative rather than a commercial enterprise. It may be that the technical imperfections of these Baudelaire images are precisely what give them their special potency, a poetic energy that seems to emanate from the sitter himself, and which distinguishes them from the conventionally posed formal photographic portraits so fashionable at the time. 'Although the universal principle is one, Nature presents us with nothing absolute, nothing even complete' Baudelaire had written in 1846; 'I see only individuals.' Praising the portraiture of Ingres he remarked that he was not 'one of those painters-by-the-hour ... to which the common lout can go, purse in hand, to demand the reproduction of his unseemly person', but that he '*chooses his models*', bringing 'a wonderful discernment to his choice of those that are best suited to exploit his special kind of talent'. Nadar's photographs of his artist and writer friends exemplify the virtues implicit in Baudelaire's words: they are of remarkable individuals, whose character or personality might be revealed to the camera in sessions distinguished from everyday commercial sittings by their pleasurable informality, a kind of intimacy or complicity; they were not commissioned but done out of a passion at once intellectual and emotional; and they have the quality of the best kind of portrait, being '*a model complicated by an artist*'. They are, that is to say, expressive both of the artist behind the camera and of the artist in front of it.

THERE ARE PHOTOGRAPHERS – Kertész, Cartier-Bresson, Brassai, Brandt come immediately to mind – who have brought to the portraiture of artists something comparable to this kind of concentration with its attendant

revelation, who have been in the way that Nadar was, artists in their own right. There have been, on the other hand, any number of photographers who have been fascinated by artists, or who have exploited the curiosity of the public in the lives of artists, and the demand that has existed since Nadar's day for photographs of them. Gautier Deblonde belongs in the former company. His work possesses those qualities that makes the best photographs of artists so memorable: they are the outcome of a kind of creative collaboration. This requires specific definition. It does not, in the first instance, derive in every case from close friendship, or even acquaintance, but in most cases it does recognise the unusual nature of the exchange between the photographer and 'the model'. These photographs of Deblonde's have no documentary intention (though he is a most accomplished documentary cameraman, when commissioned to be such), and neither are they 'portraits of the artist' whose purposes might be usefully promotional, which purport to reveal the 'character' of the 'person behind the work', or, taken in the artist's studio, provide 'insight' into the creative impulse itself. Deblonde's methods deny control to the subject, refuse to allow the subject's management of the photographic image, are not employed to project the image of the artist in the other, wider, sense of the term. He is after an image, to be sure, but it is one that is expressive on its own terms, and like any true artist he cannot predict exactly what it will be. To be photographed in this way is to accept certain conditions of engagement, to cede control. It is to accede to the creative purposes of another artist.

IN PUTTING IT THIS WAY we come close to the heart of the matter. For what makes these photographs so extraordinary is the quality of the engagement of their subjects with the process. Who better than artists to know what creative purposes are like? What is the distinction between creative and other kinds of purpose? It is this: that the creative purpose is its own end, and works through the creative being to make a work. Artists are the instruments of these purposes, the means to creative ends. The greatest photographs of artists are those in which the subject, recognising the artistic integrity and creative otherness of the photographer, connives in a joint enterprise to serve creative purposes. These purposes may, of course, differ, and they may include those of serving the art of the artist-subject even as they serve the expressive purposes of the artist-photographer. Consider some famous examples, drawn from the work of those mentioned above: Kertesz's photograph of Mondrian's Paris apartment, which constitutes the

most telling portrait of the invisible painter, a wonderful resemblance; Cartier-Bresson's poignant studies of Bonnard at Le Cannet, in which the photographer is allowed, momentarily, to share the loneliness and sadness of the painter's last years without Marthe; certain of Brassai's portraits of Picasso, which elaborate a myth in which he fully believes, yet hint at the vanity of genius; Brandt's catching, in lurid lamplight on Primrose Hill, a demonic Francis Bacon. In each case there is the precondition of collusion, a relation quite different to that of the documentary photographer or professional portraitist with his or her subject. With the exception of the Kertesz, whose true subject has made of himself an eloquent absence, the artists in these great photographs each indicates, as does Baudelaire in the Nadar portraits, by a look, a gesture, a physical disposition, that he is aware of the camera, is *at work* with the photographer.

WHAT IS AT STAKE here is something other than a likeness, 'the exact reproduction of Nature' scorned by Baudelaire in his satirical attack on portrait photography. What is found in those celebrated images is a poetic truth, over and above the representation of a situation, the recording of a moment. As with any other poetic image, there arises the question of meaning. That is something created by the viewer, not necessarily in words, though the works must make their way within a discourse. What distinguishes these images of Deblonde's from those of the photographic diarist of the 'art world', the formal portraitist, or the documentary observer of the 'artist in the studio', lies precisely in the discursive field within which they operate upon the receiving sensibility. It is the field of art itself. That the images are of artists is, essentially, incidental. It is not, however, at all unimportant; indeed the information that the images *carry*, their import, is central to their interest and power. The subject matter of art, what it pictures (or not) is central to its creative purpose. And this makes the example of Nadar with which we began (and with which photography as an art, consciously professed begins, with, as it happens, a precisely analogous subject matter,) so apposite. Defending his pseudonym (and his reputation) against its misappropriation by his less-talented brother, he declared that photography was both a scientific process (with, by implication, many possible uses in any number of discourses, scientific, topographical, sociological, journalistic etc.) and an art requiring special gifts for its successful practice: 'What can be learned still less [than 'the sense of light ... the different and combined qualities of light'] is the moral intelligence of your subject ... [or] the swift tact that puts you in communion with the model ... and allows

you to render ... the resemblance that is most familiar and most favourable, the intimate resemblance ... What also can't be learnt is integrity of work; in a genre as delicate as portraiture, it is zeal, the search, an indefatigable perseverance in the relentless pursuit of the *best*.'

TO THE ARTISTS with whom he has worked to create images for this book, Deblonde is well known for his persistence, his 'indefatigable perseverance' in pursuit of the image. For the 'best' means to him, as to his great predecessor, the image that goes beyond 'commonplace and accidental' likeness, or that pretends to the revelation of the inner person, when its actual purpose is to invent or construct a character or personality appropriate to the self-image of the subject or to the image the public might think proper to the subject's calling. (There is no consensus to these public perceptions.) To get the image that meets his demand for truth, his truth, may entail many occasions of working with the artist (Deblonde always speaks of 'working with'), of visits and re-visits; and after all, scanning the frames on many contact sheets, there may remain frustration that the resemblance is uncaught, the best has eluded the camera, the quality so desired is unachieved. In other cases the sought-for occurs immediately: out of the darkroom solution there precipitates a marvellous image from a single encounter. What Deblonde seeks is hard to define in words. Talking with him about the project over several years I have not learnt from him what it is. What Deblonde *finds*, on the other hand, is evident: it is something unexpected, unplanned, unpremeditated; it is a discovery determined by his method; it is an event you couldn't anticipate.

IT IS AN IMAGINATIVE event created out of an encounter with an artist. That is what is special about these photographic events, and creates a sequence, or concatenation, of images. To suggest that they belong as works of imagination within the realm of aesthetic discourse is to be obliged to define the discursive space within which they are intended to make their way into the viewer's imagination. It is the space of the book, specifically the photographic monograph, and this places them within a discernible artistic tradition, of which Deblonde is keenly aware. The disposition of images in any book will have a logic that serves a purpose; in the present case it is random, and the viewer may look at these images in any order, start anywhere, close the book anywhere. There is indeed a purpose

here: the book reflects the world it pictures, and refuses to categorise in the different ways characteristic of other discursive spaces, those, for example, of the exhibition, the art history, the journalistic survey. It makes no distinction in its ordering between the potential and the established, the famous and the little known, the glamorous and the unglamorous, and the young, the middle aged and the old, those who are of a particular tendency or movement, or the focus of a publicity phenomenon. It makes no claim to be comprehensive, to establish a pantheon. There are artists who might have been here, but that the contact sheets failed to yield the image desired; there are some artists who, denying the encounter, refused to be here; there are others, who failed to return telephone calls, or were away, or could not find time. In such fortuitous inclusions and exclusions also the book is like the world from which it comes.

WE ARE ACCUSTOMED to call this 'the art world'. And it is a world of which we heard a great deal in the mid-1990s, the period in which these photographs were taken, and which will give them their particular feel and atmosphere as time goes by. But, in truth, there has never been one 'art world', the more so now when there has been a quantitative leap in the number of practising artists, an explosion of artistic activity, an unprecedented increase in public interest in art. Rather it is a lot of little worlds, some of which run into others, some posh, some glamorous, some down-at-heel, some more or less inhabited by the young, some institutional, some academic, some sedately bourgeois. The last time it seemed possible to chart the most interesting enclaves of this diverse territory with confidence was in the 1960s, when Bryan Robertson, John Russell and Lord Snowdon published *Private View*, which claimed to 'identify' the 'specific society' within which, and for which, works of art were made in 'one of the world's three capitals of art'. It was a society, Robertson and Russell asserted, with truth, that could 'only be known and presented, as we do here, from the inside'. I doubt if the task could be approached with such cartographic confidence in 1999. Now we have partial views, partial mappings: post-modern diaristic meanderings, photo-reportage, promotional catalogues, and 'users' guides'. The most comprehensive of the latter, Louisa Buck's *Moving Targets*, claims no more than to be highly selective, 'an indication rather than a representation of what is taking place at the moment'. The London art world of *Private View* was a place to explore; the British art world of the mid-1990s was a time to be had.

IT WAS QUITE A TIME. And if much that was written about it in the broadsheet newspapers and the magazines was nonsense, there was a lot of diverse and unpredictable art being made, and not only in London. There was also *attitude*: art was important, art was crucial, but it didn't need to be po-faced, pompous or self-righteous. It could deal with the here-and-now, it could remake the world as beautiful or ugly; it could take many forms; whatever you made, or did, might qualify. After a decade of critical and commercial success for painting and object sculpture, those media were called into question once again, as they had been in the so-called 'conceptual seventies': who was art for? what was art for? The art of the 1990s, we are told, was gestural and conceptual; it could be cool, and ironically self-reflexive, or messy and personal; it could play games with categories, with the meanings of words and things, and with the systems by which things are classified. It could be non-referential, or irresolutely political. It was best if it was witty, disingenuous, hinting at the impossibility of knowing the true nature of things (whatever that may be). That kind of ironic distance is what passed for reality in the murky later years of Conservative rule. There was an elegiac irony in the air; a sense of lost innocence, lost beauty (the word itself was lost to use: what did it mean?), lost optimism, lost confidence. The bright young British artists so much in demand for their season, were not so much the Children of Albion, claiming their inheritance in days of hope, as the witnesses of social disinheritance and cultural disintegration. That much of their best art reflected this with a hurt sad rigour seemed to have been lost in most of the excited commentary.

IF I DETECT A LEIT-MOTIF in this succession of photographic images it is this, a kind of melancholia; and this may be a truth about the artist in the mid 1990s that Deblonde, the outsider-insider, coming from elsewhere, has discovered. It is not the only truth revealed here. For there are other energies in British art, and they are to be found in the work of artists of all generations, working in all sorts of ways in all sorts of places. Much of it carries forward the diverse projects of painting, sculpture, performance, printmaking, installation, photography, film and video in modes and means determined in all the decades of modernist experiment and consolidation, or in the years of post-modern reaction and reformulation. Deblonde, close as he in age is to the younger artists with whom he has worked in London, has taken the necessary journeys to other places, other worlds. Wherever he goes, what makes his work

distinctive is the intensity of its attention to its subject, the quality of its 'complication of the model'. It is an intuitive collusion with the human reality of the artist, a provoking of the event that will make the image. He says: 'The work is a series of discoveries, infiltrations of private worlds and intimate spaces.' The work is the book, a procession of momentary events, of facts not fictions. I mean, the photographs are the facts. Deblonde knows that the camera alters reality, creates its own. And he knows, perhaps, that the camera, like the artist, lies to tell the truth. As an artist it is a truth he can live with.

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Notes and references

Nadar is quoted from 'A Portrait of Nadar', by Maria Morris Hambourg, in *Nadar*, the catalogue to an exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay, June to September 1994, and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from April to July 1995, p.25. The photographs described are reproduced as nos.33 and 34 and dated 1856–58 and 1855 respectively. Baudelaire is quoted from 'On the Ideal and the Model' in *The Salon of 1846*, 'Ingres' in *The Exposition Universelle 1855*, and on photography from 'The Modern Public and Photography' in *The Salon of 1859*: all to be found in *Art in Paris 1845–1862 Reviewed by Charles Baudelaire* (Phaidon, London 1965). For Brassai on Picasso, see *Picasso and Co.* (Thames and Hudson, London 1966). Rosalind Krauss discusses 'Photography's Discursive Spaces' in the 1982 essay of that title reprinted in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths* (MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, paperback edition 1986). *Private View* was published by Nelson, London, in 1965. *Moving Targets: A User's Guide to British Art Now* was published by Tate Gallery Publishing, London, in 1997.