

The art of the other  
person's *je ne sais quoi*  
Fabienne Kramer



The basis of the project *Other People's Feelings Are Also My Own* is an understated device: a portrait of a model juxtaposed with a self-portrait by Markus Hansen\*, the two arranged side-by-side. Same framing, same lighting. Him always on the left half of the image, and his model occupying the right. The idea of the series is simple (read: overtly simple): to capture, in his own self-portrait, something of his model's face. And it works – even quickly becoming addictive – without us really knowing what it is we're picking up on.

### **Perceiving the imperceptible in the other**

Even if the idea is simple, defining Markus Hansen's work remains complex. Listing the things it is not, however, is a relatively straightforward procedure. It is not a work of mimicry or imitation. It is not an attempt at the photographic "copy-paste" in the manner of Cindy Sherman, nor is it a simple trace or some kind of morphing. It is a subtle recreation of the other person's "je ne sais quoi." The piece rests on the artist's ability to soak up the other, on his capacity to listen, on his sensitivity to the self, and ultimately, on his aptitude for empathy. This is not just the plastic reproduction of an expression. This is the digestion, and the delicate regurgitation, of another's essence. An essence in all its senses.

Photography, used as the medium, captures, arrests, suspends and juxtaposes an instant – a snapshot – of the other, and of their revelation in Markus Hansen. If we could somehow subtract, line by line, a neutral portrait of Markus from the image of the other, what would finally float to the top would be that "je ne sais quoi," the essence of which he or she is made.

### **It's so him!**

In this way, Markus Hansen reveals in his models what he ignores in himself, and restores, for those who know them, that unique sensation that makes one say, "That's so him!"

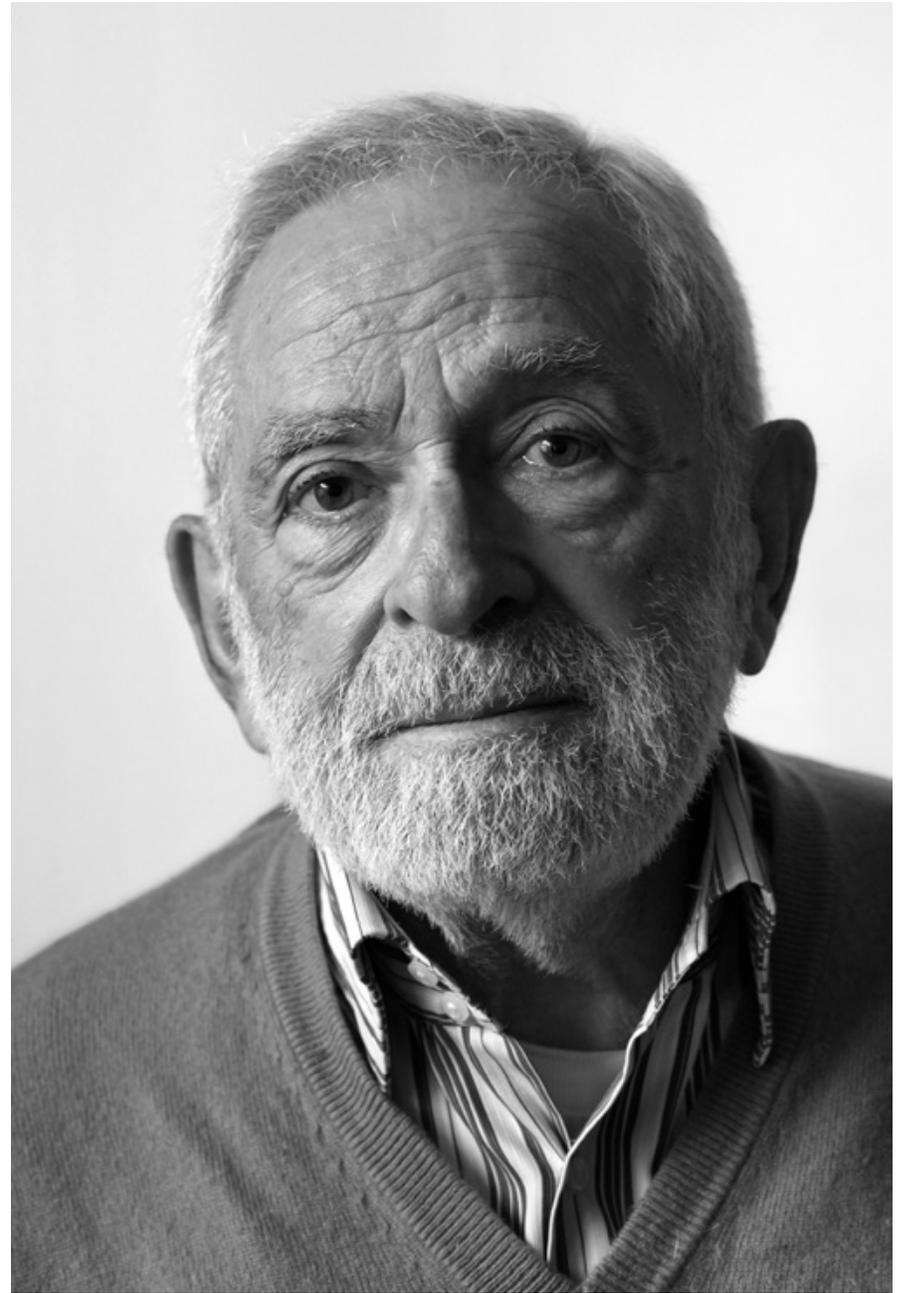
One such model, Nine<sup>[Nine]</sup>, appears to be pleased and pacified in her portrait. The "Markusian" subtraction leaves us with an undefined, yet infinite resemblance, a likeness that cannot be denied. It presents us with a reinterpretation of Nine. The "Markusian" Nine, perhaps more true than the real one, reveals a sadness hidden beneath the control of her composed smile.

Passing back and forth, from Nine to Markus and Markus to Nine, our brains playing a game of "Spot the Difference," we catch a glimpse of that smile Nine has manufactured, even more real than her sullen nature. Like a second skin, her smile accompanies and defines her, turning our attention away from the sadness that dwells inside.

### **"... Are Also My Own"**

In the four series of double-portraits, ranging over several years, Markus Hansen also explores what he recognizes of the other in himself: "...Are Also My Own." In this grand patchwork of others, Markus goes on a quest to find himself in what he perceives through the other ("Other People's..."). So he chooses them based both on what he gleans from them and on what he gleans about himself in them. Take Casper<sup>[Casper]</sup>, a child who Markus told me had "played all afternoon," while Markus tried to capture some part of his essence on the day of the shoot. At one particular moment, which proved the crucial one for Markus, Casper reminded him of his own relinquished childhood, and Markus was swept with a physical sensation of the memory.

\* Self-portraits taken with the assistance of Bruno Scotti



It was a feeling he'd had on the tip of his tongue, but now he was able to fully digest it, to reconstruct it in himself, and to recreate it for the portrait.

### **The mysterious scent of the other**

Above all, Markus Hansen explores his own unconscious. He questions himself. What about the other does he recognize in himself, and what about himself does he find familiar in the other?

In this work, he talks about the other, but also explores his own empathetic tendency.

Portrait after portrait, it's really a self-portrait that he is drawing for us. A veritable kaleidoscope of his own emotions. It is because he can hear in others that echo of his own voice that he succeeds in isolating in himself this "extract" of the other.

Like a perfumer dropping a whiff of fragrance onto a blotter strip, Markus absorbs some of the other; he "blots." He transposes that intangible and infinitely subtle thing, the reality of the other, through the imagination of the self. He captures and transcribes it, then reveals it on the paper like a trace residue of the other's essence.

It is in this way that he chooses his models: at the moment when he recognizes something of himself in them. He then proceeds by instinct, learning to "feel out" and really "get" where the other is coming from. This collection of revealing self-portraits of other people seems to say, "I am the sum total of you all."

### **Raphaël<sup>[Raphaël]</sup>: Markus's "other father"**

One of the most fascinating portraits is the one of Raphaël. In this one, we are immediately seized by the resemblance. And so the age difference evokes a father-son relationship. Many of us have asked Markus if Raphaël was his father. But he's his neighbour.

Markus is tall; Raphaël is short. Markus is an ethnic German, Raphaël an Ashkenazic Jew. This "other father" is not Markus's, but well could have been. Recognizing something of himself in Raphaël is perhaps a redemptive approach to the past life shared across two sides of the same history.

There is, in the juxtaposition of these two portraits, an invisible bridge that links them. A kind of transfer of the soul. A silence that speaks volumes, both about the rapport between them and about their separate histories. A "je ne sais quoi" that reveals the other side of a story, another point of view that we could just as easily have adopted.

### **The white band**

The whole piece rests and resides in that space, passed over by the eyes, which separates the two images. Our vision swings back and forth over this band without stopping, without seeing it, without feeling it, without grasping or calculating it, without even trying to understand what is happening there. It's like a subliminal image that imprints itself on our subconscious and puts the question to our capacity for empathy. Do we, or do we not, see all there is to be seen? In only an instant, it seems we have sensed the subtle intangibility of another, someone unknown and yet already so present.

In conclusion, this is a work as infinite and profound as the distance between Zero and One, as subtle as the essence of the individual, and as exhilarating as the sensation of empathy.

