

How I got my picture taken by Markus Hansen

Martine Ravache

I didn't have any particular reason to have my picture taken. And nevertheless...

The first time I caught sight of Markus Hansen, he was an open and friendly face, surrounded by a group of people listening to him. He was displaying his series of diptych portraits and explaining that he creates them by a process of empathy with his model. "Empathy or mimicry?" My question burst out faster than I could restrain it; because thinking is also suspecting, especially for the viewing public in this age of artistic imposters. The question hung in the air for quite some time, the silence preventing it from landing. "Empathy or mimicry?" The artist shook his head, in indication of denial, and that's how we left it.

Several years later, I am reminded of this incident as I continually notice the strong public reaction to Markus Hansen's portraits.

I love to present his work as part of the art appreciation courses that I organize, which I call "Learning to See," because it is less about 'reading' the images than it is about opening the eyes. Among the numerous portraits that I have presented, from throughout the history of photography, it's his that have consistently kindled a passionate interest. Desire or rejection; it's always one of these two reactions that guides the viewer's angle on the image. One's tastes have a way of defending themselves with force and conviction. And that surely gives a touch of flare to our discourse and our emotions, but it doesn't lead us anywhere. Markus Hansen has never shown his double portraits before in France, so the public is just discovering, and taking a moment to get used to, the pattern that renews itself with each diptych. Visually speaking, he (the photographer) is on the left, while the other (the model) is on the right. The format is that of an identification photo. The similarity of the clothing puts us on the right track and serves as our first clue to what's going on. Still, I'm always surprised by the questions I get from viewers. For example: "Did the photographer shoot himself at the same time as his model?" But how could Markus, at the exact moment of the capture, be alongside his model and imitating their expressions? How would he be able to imitate what he could not see? It seems to me that there is a natural order of events: that he must photograph the model first, and then conform himself to them afterwards. "*A long time afterwards*" Markus Hansen clarifies, when we see each other next and have a chance to speak at length. Markus chooses "his" portrait, and works on "his" expressions, in private, and probably in front of a mirror (An Actor's Work?). He works tenaciously, never settling for a dissatisfactory result.

If he doesn't believe that he's got it right he starts over again, and his assistant, Bruno Scotti, shoots another frame.

"It can take anywhere from an hour to several days. Sometimes it can be quite complex, but I can never predict it. I have to enter into someone, to feel their interior, in order to bring it out again. Some people imagine it as this nineteenth-century thing, like I'm stealing their souls."

Markus's face is agile like elastic, made from a kind of dough that bends and unfolds itself, its hue changing with the light, or with his moods. He blushes, he pales, as quickly as a heart flutters between beats. My curiosity overcomes me before I realize it. I ask him, "If I look at you, and you look at me, can you mirror me? Can you reflect my facial expression back to me live, in the moment?" I almost think that he is going to answer, "Yes." It seems that I too have come to believe in the magic...

"Oh, no! It takes me some time."

And just like that, I've had enough of asking questions. It would be a better idea, I think to myself, to go play model and photographer with him for real, to go behind the scenes and take on a new role. To be the one who has fun and lives her life, rather than the one who merely asks questions and never loses her head. He agrees. We make an appointment for three days later. In the days that follow, I panic and send him an email, which will go unanswered: "*Do I have to dress myself expressly for the purpose of you imitating me? Because I was thinking of wearing this Peter Pan collar, and a Peter Pan collar on a man would be a bit strange, wouldn't it?*"

Even before his silence, I recognize that of course it's not up to me to dress myself like him, since the whole point is just the opposite.

In my impatience (half panic, half excitement) I see myself in the shoes of Simone de Beauvoir, frightened of having her portrait done by Henri Cartier-Bresson and asking him how long the sitting will last.

"Longer than the dentist, but not as long as the psychoanalyst" he told her. The comparison is perfect. The portrait rises to the challenges of photography and physicality, and even stands up to the test of the soul.

In the morning, at dawn, I receive one last generous piece of advice: *"Just come as you feel."*

It's a home fit for an artist. The light streams in from all sides, thanks to an abundance of windows that look out over the rooftops of Paris. Peering through their panes, I amuse myself by identifying all the steeples in the skyline. When the wind blows on the ninth floor, you'd think you were on a cruise ship, only more sheltered. I break the ice by passing on a message from E.V. who would also like to have a picture done. *"I can't say yes if I haven't met the person. At the conception of each portrait is a meeting. I have to get a sense of the person. It's an intimate rapport. Otherwise, I would feel uncomfortable. What kind of writing does E.V. like?"* To date, Markus Hansen has photographed ninety-six people, a whole population: men, women, children, old men, young girls, boys, blacks, whites... At the end of the day, he finds himself seated alongside each of them, with his air of inner resemblance unflappably renewed.

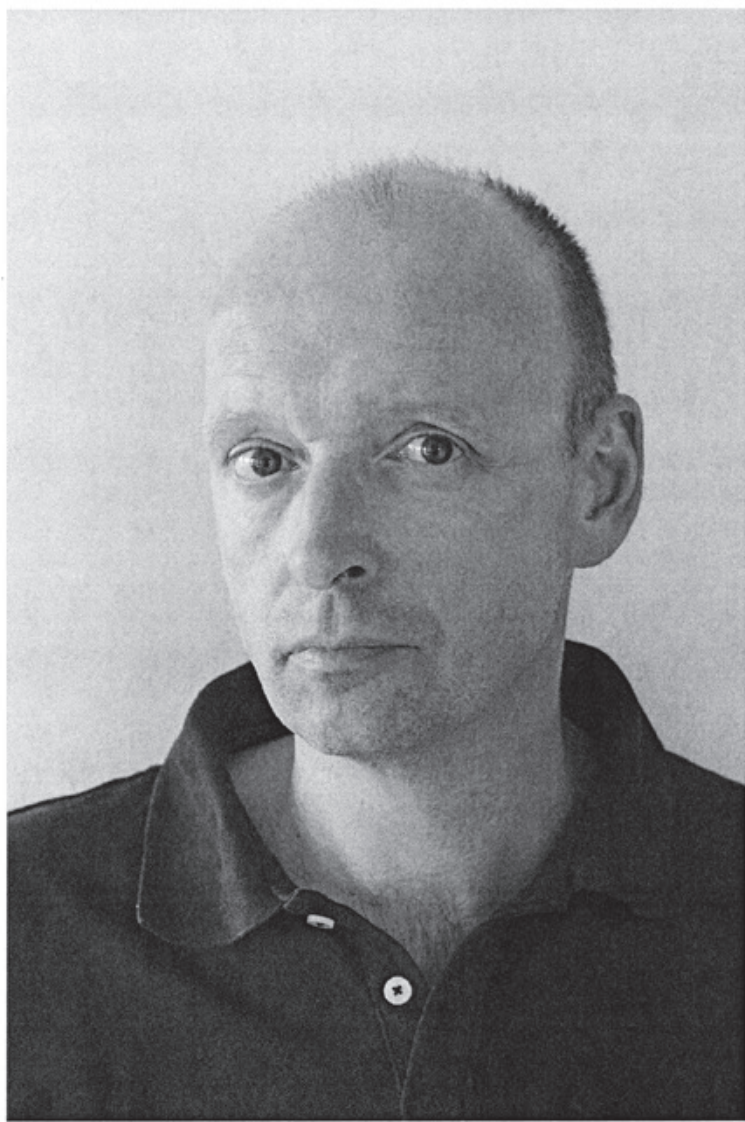
"This is good; I'm going to have fun with you." Standing fast against the curved white wall, I face the torrent of clicks, gusting from the lens. Markus clearly wants to avoid the "slouching" of a seated position. As time goes on, it's less and less comfortable, but it's not exactly hellish.

The sky is immense, and I have the sensation of floating off into it, carried away by the excitement of light. *"The only thing you have to do is look me in the eyes."*

"If I don't have your eyes, then it's not a portrait I can use." He offers to show me, on his screen, the photos that he's already done, but the paranoiac idea of controlling my own image just provokes a ridiculous horror in me. It's a shame for Markus, who enjoys knowing whether or not his models recognize themselves. *"Now you seem a bit frightened. You're showing your suspicion. Your eyes remain distrustful, even as the whole rest of your face is relaxed. But then again, it could be the other way around. Everything changes when the person begins to settle down after a while. Suddenly they relax into a different atmosphere. So I wind up having to take a certain number of photos in order to get the material I need."*

Out of a hundred photos, Markus explains to me that he will only keep fifteen or so expressions. *"Among those, there will usually be five or six very different ones that I can work with, and sometimes I'll even discover things that I haven't yet explored. I don't try to give a definition, in the absolute, to a person. In fact, it's more the opposite. There are things I will recognize that will seem both unique and universal, but I have to be careful because I can always come back tomorrow and find something completely different. After that, it's just totally intuitive. There might be a certain energy or a posture that will attract me."*

Markus Hansen has moved countries several times in his life: Germany (where he was born), England (where he grew up), France (which he has chosen for more than twenty years). To smooth over these traumatic breaks, he has had to cultivate a quite particular energy made up of emotional intelligence and communication through body language.



"These portraits are like translations. And I've been living in translation mode since the age of nine."

Markus Hansen doesn't like to talk about himself, preferring to relate to others by way of politics or religion or some other path. He notes a similar approach in his sister, who is so close to him in age and character as to almost be a twin. It's perhaps even thanks to his sister that he was first struck by the notion: All that matters is you and me and what we can do together. One thinks again of what we are shown in the diptychs, and of who it is that inhabits this work.

The time passes agreeably, but all too quickly. I ask him, *"Don't you find it strange that people can buy your portraits that depict other people whom they don't even know?"* He replies, *"Yes and no. When they buy two or three of them it begins to make sense."*

I don't dare to ask him again the question that brought us together back on that first day, but I have the impression nonetheless that I have been convinced. "To put oneself in the shoes" of the other, by means of gesture or dress, could aptly be called mimicry. But to live so intensely this rapport with the other can only be called empathy. Markus is playing on both of these two fields. Always two. Like the diptychs. That which might appear banal, or even boring at the outset, ultimately becomes exotic thanks to the cumulative effect of all these portraits, which don't resemble one another, but nonetheless each reflect a singular interior truth. Markus Hansen isn't stealing anything. On the contrary, he restores a version of the soul of which he has found the secret. Always playing an undertone to the still present "original," which is to say, his model.

Some time later, I received our double-portrait with the following dedication:

"You and me, right here, right now and forever."