

At a distance of extreme intimacy

Stanley Moss

Identity, in its current incarnation as we understand it in our infinitesimal way, focuses not on the soul but on **the veneer of existence**, the ephemeral territory explored by artists like Velasquez a few centuries back, and Andy Warhol 15 minutes ago. How can we, in our own over-technologized era, address the mystery of our essential humanity, given the smart phones and digital tools of photography, YouTube, Instagram, and the Internet as our primary means of stating to ourselves and to each other who we are? What is 'who?' What is 'are?' What is 'you?' We are barely people any longer.

Instead we are sports events, products, movies, Facebook posts, Tweets, Korean pop songs.

The quintessential tourist of yore defined their existence by an image of themselves positioned in front of a monument taking symbolic ownership of the place, a physical emulation of being. Now everyone is a tourist of the mind, wandering the vague and unexplained territory of the soul, seeking coherent **touchpoints of ego-tourism**. Our presumption of truth in 2014 is formed via the intervention of synthetic media, whose wide availability enables us to delude ourselves into believing that with these devices we capture the essence of our souls. Can they really? The device is the new God, creator of identity, author of souls. Accordingly, we turn to celebrities represented by similar media to define the politic under which we justify our actions, our self-ness.

These multiple, disposable points of ego tangency define our lives. Such is the territory of self-examination confronted so eloquently in *Other People's Feelings Are Also My Own*.

If we are to believe the Tibetan Buddhists, the quality most desirable in this life is that of compassion. But if we are to search for the identical goal in the context of contemporary art, the very same attribute is barely present in the egocentric, superficial, disposable and commodified output found in the marketplace. We are accustomed to fortifying our psyches with brands, entertainments and commercial fantasies. **Reality is a car chase**, followed by an explosion, ending with a kiss in a computer-generated corona. And art today mostly concerns itself with monetary worth, image, self-aggrandizement, shock value, contempt or the aggressive construction of reputation and profile. Art seems to have lost its humanistic imperative.

Thus it is both fulfilling and refreshing to participate in Markus Hansen's series of double portraits, which cut to the deepest provocations, demanding that we reconsider soul and compassion on a multiplicity of levels **at a distance of extreme intimacy.**

Objectivity is a myth. No human possesses it, yet these idealistic diptychs proceed from the hopeful assumption that commonality can be achieved through the bond of creation. An instantaneous metaphoric duality occurs at the moment when Hansen first turns his camera on his subject, the point in time where the process originates on the semiotic *tabula rasa* of a plain background. While he invites his subjects to project their selfness outward, he concurrently injects the dynamic of co-creation into the artistic object, launching a personal dialogue of interdependence. It's a mysterious and biochemical reaction he seeks in the resulting interval,

the fusion of spirit and body projected over **the amorphous mass called time**, in search of the soul.

In the next stage of the undertaking the artist revisits the subject portrait seeking to empathically replicate pose, expression, emotion, even costume. His intent is to evoke and elicit a similar impression with his own countenance, one as nearly identical to that of the original portrait taken. If his presumption is correct, if the exercise works its uncommon magic, then his auto portrait serves as a proof of the universal oneness of mankind, and the potential for humans to truly understand one another in an increasingly alienated and fragmented world.

The grand temptation is that of seduction by **the thinginess of the thing.** The real value lies elsewhere, not in the physical object created, albeit a nearly

weightless one composed of miniscule electrical impulses careening around a micro-universe housed inside a hidden silicon chip. The work is a vector, a catalytic moment, and the energy created cannot be lost. It travels far beyond the notion of an object. The object resolves into a higher meaning, at which point it disappears.

The double portraits transcend all our traditional prejudices. Age, gender, race, culture, attire, **haircut**, brand name, genetic **profile** do not matter here. What remain are the traces of pure intuition, the invisible and **nonverbal** signals filtered through the imperfect and impersonal medium of digital photography. The rigorous process of the artist delving deep represents an ultimate act of profound compassion. It is a posture of hope and uncommon ideal at diametric odds with a world gone mad with things synthetic and mass-produced.

Little has changed in 800 years, at least not since the words authored by Meister Eckhart, the 12th century mystic, who preached that the soul “must keep absolutely pure and turned entirely inward: not running out through the five senses.” That is a harsh exhortation. He was **excommunicated for expressing** those sentiments, which probably won’t happen to Markus Hansen. Talk of the soul does not parse easily in an era of digital media. The connections are too abstract, too caught up with the notion of immediacy and instant gratification, and ignore the potential for ruminations over timelessness. Time is our dilemma, and in the act of refuting it we do not nullify it, we simply freeze it. We stop it for an interval, a nanosecond of reflection, but let us not deceive ourselves. We have not killed it. We’ve simply temporarily obliterated it.

Time will be back soon enough to perplex us, for we are its prisoners. Caught in the temporal conundrum, we endeavor to understand the soul, **groping in the darkness**, grasping at sensations. In these ephemeral frames, Markus Hansen has cleverly, successfully led us toward the overwhelming question: Can the humans captured here communicate to us the **essential mystery** of their being?