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VISUAL ESSAY

HOW TO LOOK AT A CAMERA

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In order to inquire into the nature of photography I work with found photographs, collecting originals and manipulating them, liberating the images from their very first context of meaning.

I am going to explain the process of thought that withstood the exhibition 'Reconsidering Photography: The Staging of the Gaze', curated by Esther Ruelffs, at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe (MK&G) in Hamburg (2023/2024). The museum asked me to select some pieces from its collection, in order to create a dialogue between these and a selection of my works entitled 'How to Look at a Camera' (2019). Already embedded in the title of my exhibition is the relationship between the gaze and the camera; looking and being looked at. The exhibition in Hamburg allowed me to explore more in depth the contrast between the visible and the invisible in photography. It meant to question the roots of the motifs, the original purpose of the pictures, but most of all the action of temporality on our way of looking and reacting to the poetic and disturbing power of the images.

It is surprising how many objects in the collection connected with my pieces creating a new discourse.

In Geoff Dyer's book, *The Ongoing Moment* (2005), a difficult book to define, the relationship between photography and blindness is discussed. Dyer quotes a passage from "The Prelude", Book VII (1805), in which Richard Wordsworth writes of his encounter with a beggar who, in a single word – blind – pinned to his chest,

Figure 1.

Linda Fregni Nagler, *Untitled (after Adolphe Jourdan)*, 2023.
Inkjet print, 40 x 30 cm
© Linda Fregni Nagler Collection.
Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2.

Paul Strand, *Blind Woman*, 1916,
platinum print, 34 x 25,7 cm
Published in *Camera Work*, no. 49-50.
Aperture Foundation, Inc., Paul Strand
Archive.
Image courtesy of The New York Public
Library.



Figure 3.

Unknown Authors, unknown date,
carte de visite / tintype / cabinet card,
8,9x5,4 cm / about 9x5,5 cm / 16,5x10,8 cm
© Linda Fregni Nagler Collection.
Image courtesy of Linda Fregni Nagler.

sums up his existential condition – and simultaneously ‘the deepest consciousness, both of ourselves and of the universe’. The poet gazes into the beggar’s staring eyes, as if ‘admonished from another world.’¹

In the great American documentary photography epic, Dyer notes, almost every photographer (Lewis Hine, Paul Strand, Garry Winogrand, Bruce Davidson, Philip Lorca Di Corcia – just to mention a few of them) has taken at least once a picture of a blind beggar. It is not necessary to photograph the subject in secret. But the attraction, Dyer writes, does not end with the possibility of being able to study one’s subject carefully. The photographer, in fact, is faced with his own opposite: If he earns his living by *how* he sees and *what* he sees, that beggar earns his living because he *cannot* see.

I started wondering whether portraits of blind people existed before the advent of the instant camera. In the 19th century, at the dawn of photography, when a subject had to go to a photographer's studio to get a portrait, what could have been the relationship to one's own photographed image for a blind person, considering that in that case he/she was obviously aware to be posing for a photograph? What was and what is a photograph for a blind person? Can he/she imagine an image? And what awareness of the image, and of oneself as an image, could and can a blind person have?

I found many images of blind people posing in a photographer's studio in the second half of the 19th century [Figure 3]. However, these portraits did not answer my questions. On the contrary, they left me even more dismayed and unable to empathize with their darkness.

One portrait above all has haunted me for years and I think it exemplifies much of my research on photography. In this photograph on glass, entitled 'Blind Brazilians', five blind people pose for a typical group photo, a souvenir photo of someone they will never *look back* at. "The blind man affirms our omnipotence as observers - that looking without shame and reticence on the strength of the lack of reciprocity of the gaze - and at the same time manifests its limitation, as if we were grasping a blindness that is also our own: That zone of shadow that concerns every image - its disposition between the visible and invisible, within the opacity of reality - and the very act of seeing, with its constitutive partiality."²



Figure 4.

Unknown Author, *Blind Brazilians* [CIEC-001-ML], unknown date, hand colored gelatin silver positive photograph on glass 8 x 10 cm

© Linda Fregni Nagler Collection.

Image courtesy of Linda Fregni Nagler.



Figure 5. (top)

Linda Fregni Nagler, From the series *How to Look at a Camera, Tapada Limeña* (001) and *Tapada Limeña* (002), 2019, photogravure on Zerkall paper, 112,5 x 81 cm framed each
© Linda Fregni Nagler Collection.
Original archive photo: Courret Hermanos, *Tapada Antigua, or veiled woman*, 1867, in *Lima souvenirs* (1867)
© Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (95.R.29).
Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 6. (bottom)

[Left] Unknown Authors, unknown date, tintype, about 8 x 5 cm each
© Linda Fregni Nagler Collection.
Image courtesy of Linda Fregni Nagler.
[Right] Linda Fregni Nagler, From the series *How to Look at a Camera, Back to Camera* (003), 2019, photogravure on Zerkall paper, 81 x 59 cm framed
© Linda Fregni Nagler Collection.
Image courtesy of the artist.



My show *How to Look at a Camera*³ presented photogravures that I have produced using images from the second half of the 19th century, depicting blind people, back-to-camera figures and veiled women of whom only one eye is visible through the embroidery of the veil. They are all studio or posed photographs, in which the sitter is aware of being photographed, and in which the denial of the gaze (or its enigmatic offering) contrasts with the declared willingness to show oneself. What do we *really* see? If the image 'looks back' at us and provides us with the fundamental experience of 'being seen by others', something in these photographs collapses, and at the same time, or precisely because of this, questions our ability to see. Apparently, some images have a power of their own. The subject is not just there to be looked at, but is an active force, returning our gaze and by denying it or making it ambiguous, it looks back at us.

Photography shapes our view of things, capturing all the gestures of our lives in codified forms and moulding our perceptual regime; it is a social construction tool. So, when we look at photographic figures like these—back-to-camera-figures, or classical *Rückenfiguren*—a question arises: what is photography? What is the meaning of the gesture of turning around and rejecting a classical portrait? [Figure 6].

I came across an extraordinary image, almost an abstract form. I later found out that this peculiar back- to-camera photograph is a *Tapada Limeña* [Figure 7]. The covered woman from Lima. The *cartes-de-visite* produced in Peru during the 1860s displayed local costumes and were meant for a European public. By far the most important of these social types was the *Tapada*, 'the veiled woman'. The costume and manner of the *Tapada* were peculiar even in Peru and were associated exclusively with Lima. Travel literature is full of descriptions and comments on these women of good families covered with a uniform which provided modesty and total anonymity. The costume may have antecedents in Peninsular Spain, where the women in Andalucia (the Cobijada, for instance) practised the graceful art of the veil which has been represented in Mediterranean art since the bronze and terracotta figurines of the Hellenistic age. This image was juxtaposed in the show with the *Rückenfigur* from the MK&G collection, which portrays a woman in armour, something very out of the ordinary: A feminine heroic figure that refuses the gaze, turning away.

The *cartes-de-visite* of the *Tapadas* are perhaps the only studio reconstructions of the time, i.e. the interpretation of a phenomenon that, by 1850, had already disappeared. The photos are not dated, but we know the authors: Villroy L. Richardson, the Courret Brothers, Eugène Maunoury.⁴

There is a particular dialogue between these two monocular entities, these two Cyclopes, the lens and the *Tapada*, and I wonder: Who wins at the challenge of the gaze? Is it the invisible photographer who through his lens delivers us the image of a concealed woman, or the *Tapada*, who stares at us with one eye, passes through the lens and 'looks back' at us, unknown spectators of the future?



Figure 7.

[Left] From the series *How to Look at a Camera*, *Tapada Limeña* (005), 2019, photogravure on Zerkall paper, 112,5 x 81 cm framed

[Right] Pietro Poppi, *Fotografia dell'Emilia, Bologna, Museo Civico, Armatura di Donna, mezzo busto parte posteriore*, 1890–1896, albumen print mount on cardboard, 32 x 19,7 cm Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg (P1981.480).

Image courtesy of Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg.



Figure 8.

Various Authors, unknown date, carte de visite, 8,9 x 5,4 cm each. © Linda Fregni Nagler Collection.

Image courtesy of Linda Fregni Nagler.

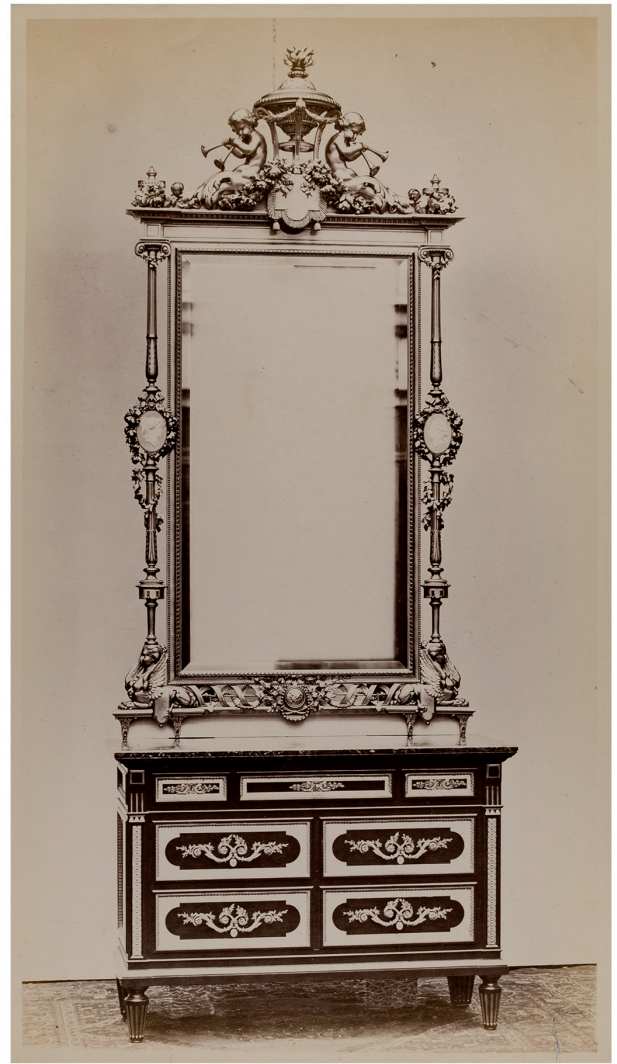
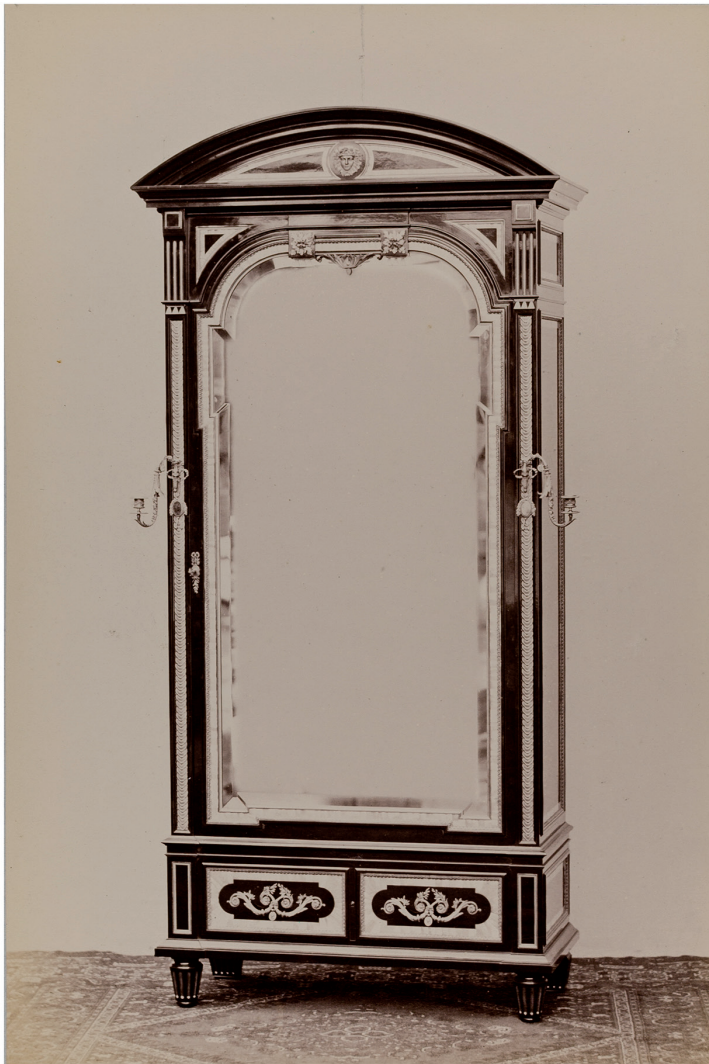


Figure 9.

Florentin Harmand, *Kommode mit Spiegel and Spiegelschrank*, 1865-1884, albumen prints, 29,6 x 19,7 cm | 34,5 x 19,2 cm

Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg (P2013.307 | P2013.304).

Image courtesy of Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg.

Mirrors are complex objects. Not only from a photographic standpoint, but also for their literary and philosophical poignance. In a text entitled 'Seeing Oneself Seeing Oneself',⁵ Valerio Magrelli reflects on Paul Valéry's work. The poet considers the mirror as a symbolic object and an experimental surface in which he investigates the act of looking: According to Valéry, experiencing the mirror is indicated *tout court* as the birth of the mental act.

In these photographs by Florentin Harmand from the MK&G collection, the mirror was masked in the printing process, as the photographer was unable to eliminate his own reflected image while shooting. In order to make himself invisible, he devised a non-compliant procedure, by replacing the mirror surface with a white area, which is not part of the photographed reality. That is quite astonishing: With the intention of creating a clean image, adhering to reality, one can decide to counterfeit it. Ambiguities, psychological and psychoanalytical aspects emerge in these photographs, which were taken with a completely different purpose (the very banal one of showing furniture).

The execution on 19 June 1867 of Habsburg Ferdinand Maximilian of Austria (1832-1867), entitled by Napoleon III emperor of Mexico, was made famous by the paintings by Manet "The Execution of Emperor Maximilian" (from 1867 to 1869) [Figure 10].

The French photographer François Aubert photographed Maximilian's body and his bullet-riddled clothing after the execution. The images of his jacket and waistcoat were later reproduced by the successful Parisian photographer André Disdéri in the popular *carte-de-visite* format. Disdéri retouched the frame on which the garments originally hung, leaving them floating in an empty space and turning them into relics of the executed emperor. Another manipulation, another counterfeiting of reality.

CONCLUSION

The function of all photographs is to introduce the viewer to what is to be seen: The subject is placed before our eyes. Photography is, in fact, a rectangle in which the relationship between what is visible and its opposite is played out. But when within this rectangle the dialectic becomes contradictory, the problems become semantic and we are led to question the very nature of this medium. To photographically represent something that is hidden is, by equivalence, a crucial theme of photography.



Figure 10.

André Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, *Jacke des Kaisers Maximilian I. von Mexiko* and *Weste des Kaisers Maximilian I. von Mexiko*, about 1867, albumen print mount on cardboard, 10,5 x 6,3 cm each, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg (P2013.235 | P2001.367).

Image courtesy of Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg.

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1 Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment* (London: Little, Brown, 2005), 12.

2 Luisella Farinotti, "Quello che (non) si riesce a vedere", in *Ceci n'est pas un livre. Parole e immagini per Sandra Lischi* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2021).

3 Monica De Cardenas Gallery, Milan, 28 May-21 September 2019.

4 From the stamp behind the *carte-de-visite* we know that Eugène Maunoury was 'Lima Correspondent of the House Nadar'.

5 Valerio Magrelli, *Vedersi vedersi. Modelli e circuiti visivi nell'opera di Paul Valéry* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002).