

PHOTOGRAPHY, TRUTH, AND SELF

In one sense, Mark Berghash's *Jews and Germans* is a failure. Indeed, the central theme of all his creative work—that someone's "true self" might somehow be revealed in a photograph or series of photographs; that the pictorial formula for deciphering the human facial code is waiting somewhere to be discovered—is but a wonderful, futile, dream.

The artist himself knows the potential for failure in *Jews and Germans*, and in the larger project he calls *Aspects of the True Self*. While his essay on the preceding pages is filled with the hope of recording "a person's true inner self," in conversation he emphasizes that he is presenting only *aspects*: "Falsification," he says,

"is an aspect of character, too." Thus, we must agree that the project is ultimately an act of faith: though *we* cannot know which aspect of self is revealed, we trust that *the photographs* hold these secrets. (The subjects are party to this agreement, too. It is likely that they have the same doubts about knowing their true selves.)

This faith in photography's almost omniscient truthfulness (a seemingly unshakeable cultural dogma) is, it seems to me, the real subject of Berghash's work. As viewers, we are called upon to "[verify] the degree to which expression may be correlated to perceivable emotional response." But any such verification would

necessarily rely for proof on the photographs and interviews, in a kind of Tautology of Images.

My own introduction to Mark Berghash's photographs was quite by accident—I was reading someone else's mail and ran across a xerox copy of one of his pieces. That was almost eight years ago, and the serial portraits he was making then were only beginning to show the authority and confidence of his latest work. Yet, even in a photocopy the portrait was compelling.

"Compelling" is a word I use advisedly. The word is a cliché of criticism, often useless to readers because it isn't clear what they are supposed to be compelled to do. But that was my exact dilemma in viewing Berghash's work. I felt forced to *look*, but why? What made this portrait more insistent upon my attention than the hundreds of other pictures of people I might see in a day? And what was the point of such a compulsion to look—the profit, so to speak, in looking?

There are, of course, technical tools which Berghash uses to command our notice. Repetition, the large scale of the original works (which can extend over 17 feet), and the technical excellence of the prints themselves are some of these. Added to his technical skill is the photographer's obvious rapport with his subjects, which puts them at ease and allows them to reveal their remarkable facial expressions. Any of these factors might attract our interest; all of them together fairly seize the eye.

Even more persuasive, though, is the quasi-scientific format of *Aspects of the True Self*. Berghash pre-defines a uniform working procedure; captions each individual image of the larger piece ("Mother," "Father," etc.) in accordance with that procedure; and presents the results in a strict sequence or grid. This system reinforces our presumption of the veracity of the photographic process, so that we are not likely—particularly at first viewing—to question such immediate evidence. That evidence seems to support a notion of photography's ability to record, not just the face we present to the world or the faces we might make in a 25-cent portrait booth, but our very thoughts and memories.

Struck by this first contact with the Berghash portraits, one might choose to go no further, to preserve intact the pictures' mysterious and powerful claim to a kind of 1980s physiognomic accuracy. But we curators are not satisfied by "mystery," any more than good viewers are. And in de-mystifying these compelling pictures we reach deeper into their potential meaning. These are not documents, in the evidentiary sense, but emblems. They stand for an idea, an image already cast in our brains, of Mother, Family, War, Racism, Pain.

As emblems, they hold a curiously unassailable position. The photographs we have already seen elsewhere of Nazi concentration camps could hardly be outdone for sheer repulsiveness. And no single picture of an existent mother would satisfy us all as the idea of Mother. *Jews and Germans* convinces us that we are seeing these things, by claiming to show us responses to them. Of course, in the process they amplify our personal, pre-formed images by their complicity with them.

The fact that quite specific interview responses accompany these less-than-specific photographs matters only a little. Outside a court of law, visual proofs carry far more weight than verbal testimony. Moreover, it is the photographs and not the words which serve as emblems. The interviews are but peculiar, personal interpretations of the pictures.

Like all photographs, these pictures are keys to memory. But they are also *about* memory: about certain individuals' memories, and about photography itself as a mnemonic device.

If it is not the ultimate goal of every museum to exhibit failures, perhaps it should be. For to seek out grand failures on the scale of Berghash's *Jews and Germans* is to deal with the very edge of the possible. In the process, we learn not only about the capabilities of art and photography, but about the nature of visual communication, and, of course, about ourselves.

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