

UZH

Bachelor seminar  
Autumn 2025

**Title:**

The Politics of Portrait Photography: Objectification, Documentation and Resistance



*Zanele Muholi, Ntozakhe II, Parktown, 2016, from the series Somnyama Ngonyama – Hail the Dark Lioness*

**Brief**

Portraiture has long held a central place in the history of art as one of its most significant genres, functioning as a testament to the image-maker's technical mastery, the sitter's supposed status, and as a reflection of broader cultural, political, and aesthetic values shaping the codes of representation. Whether in devotional imagery, court portraiture, or ethnographic photography, portraits invite us to consider the social structures and visual conventions that determine what is perceived as plausible or truthful, and to question the fictions embedded in a pose.

Since its earliest technical developments, photography has been deployed to document people across the globe, scrutinising the body and especially the face as a supposed expression of someone's 'inward character'. Faces have been examined, photographed, and classified according to socially constructed notions of class, gender, and race, generating a series of 'types' arranged along pre-existing hierarchies. As a 'truth-telling' genre thought to witness and record the 'real', photography has been intrinsically related to and instrumentalised by governmental power structures to justify colonial and military rule.

Concomitantly, the same medium has been embraced by photographers and artists seeking to document themselves or their communities - through photo studios, domestic and urban encounters - to celebrate, preserve their existence and/or defy social norms affecting their everyday lives. Photographing the face has alternated

between objectification, documentation, and empowerment, employing a range of practices and technologies the medium could offer, while drawing upon both local and international narratives. Portrait photography today resonates with histories of knowledge production, a belief in the veracity of photography, and new technologies, offering us the opportunity to question the politics of representation and the blurred lines between 'fact' and 'fiction'.

The aim of this seminar will be to engage with the practice of contemporary portrait photography on a global scale, examining photographers and artists taking a documentarian and/or activist approach to portraiture through a series of case studies. Participants will be encouraged to 'read' photographic portraits with regard to their historical and geographical specificities and visual traditions, using photography, gender, and postcolonial theories as analytical tools to reflect on the capacity of photography to fix, unfix, and question assigned identities.

### **Assessment:**

The assessment consists of a presentation (on a pass/fail basis) and a written paper (graded). The written paper is to be submitted two weeks after the end of the lecture period. Please note that the seminar, readings and all evaluation materials will be conducted in English.

### **Structure**

#### **Week 1.**

**18.09.25**

**Seminar Introduction, Overview and Guidelines**

#### **Week 2.**

**25.09.25**

**Image Analysis, Research Framing and Public Speaking Skills**

#### **Week 3.**

**02.10.25**

**Critical Readings and Methodologies**

Selected bibliography

**Sekula, Allan.** "The Body and the Archive." *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3–64.

**Solomon-Godeau, Abigail.** "Who Is Speaking Thus?" In *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*, 169–183. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

**Stallabrass, Julian.** "What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography." *October* 122 (Fall 2007): 71–90.

#### **Week 4.**

**09.10.25**

**Ethnographic Photography and Self-Representation**

*The A.M. Duggan-Cronin Archives (early 20<sup>th</sup> century) and Santu Mofokeng's Black Photo Album (2013)*

Selected bibliography

**Enwezor, Okwui.** "Reframing the Black Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation." *Third Text* 40 (Fall 1997): 21–40.

**Garb, Tamar, ed.** *African Photography from the Walther Collection: Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive*. Göttingen, Germany: Steidl; New York: Walther Collection, 2013.

**Week 5**

**16.10.25**

**The Documentary Impulse: Visual Strategies**

*The Farm Security Administration: Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange (1930s)*

Selected bibliography

**Rosler, Martha.** "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)." In *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001*, 151–206. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.

**Tagg, John.** *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

**Week 6.**

**23.10.25**

**Celebrations and Resistances in Studio Photography**

*N.V. Parekh (1950s-1960s) and Malick Sidibé (1960s and 1970s)*

Selected bibliography

**Behrend, Heike.** *Contesting Visibility: Photographic Practices on the East African Coast*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013.

**Njami, Simon, ed.** *Samuel Fosso, Seydou Keïta, Malick Sidibé: Portraits of Pride: West African Portrait Photography*. Stockholm: Moderna Museet; Raster Förlag, 2002.

**Week 7.**

**30.10.25**

**Framing the 'Strange' and the 'Familiar'**

*Diane Arbus (selected works, 1960s) and Richard Avedon (In the American West, 1979-1984)*

Selected bibliography

**Green, David.** "On Foucault: Disciplinary Power and Photography." In *The Camerawork Essays: Context and Meaning in Photography*, edited by Jessica Evans, 119–131. London: Rivers Oram Press, 1985.

**Sontag, Susan.** "Freak Show." Originally published in *The New York Review of Books*, November 15, 1973. In *Diane Arbus: Documents*, edited by Max Rosenberg, 148–153. New York: David Zwirner Books/Fraenkel Gallery, 2022.

**Week 8.**

**06.11.25 – cancelled**

**Week 9**

**13.11.25**

**Intimate Diaries and Counter-Narratives**

*Nan Goldin (The Ballad of Sexual Dependency, 1985) and Corinne Day (Diary, 1990s)*

Selected bibliography

**Nickel, Douglas R.** *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life, 1888 to the Present*. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998.

**Solomon-Godeau, Abigail.** "Inside/Out." In *Public Information: Desire, Disaster, Document*, edited by Gary Garrels, Jim Lewis, Christopher Phillips, Sandra S. Phillips, Robert R. Riley, and John S. Weber, 49–61. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1994.

**Week 10.**

**20.11.25**

**Large Format, Seriality, and Exposure**

*Thomas Ruff (Portraits, 1981 - early 2000s) and Rineke Dijkstra (Beach Portraits, 1990s)*

Selected bibliography

**Chevrier, Jean-François.** "The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography." Translated by Michael Gilson. In *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960–1982*, edited by Douglas Fogle, 113–128. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003.

**Krauss, Rosalind.** "Grids." *October* 9 (Summer 1979): 50–64.

**Week 11.**

**27.11.25**

**Blurring Fact and Fiction**

*Roger Ballen (Outland, 1995-2000) and Pieter Hugo (Nollywood, 2008-2009)*

Selected bibliography

**Demos, T.J.** *Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

**Law-Viljoen, Bronwyn.** "Pieter Hugo: The Critical Zone of Engagement." *Aperture*, no. 186 (Spring 2007): 20–29.

**Week 12.**

**04.12.25**

**Rethinking Gender and the Domestic Space**

*Jodi Bieber (Quiet, 2014) and Pixy Liao (Experimental Relationship, 2007-present)*

Selected bibliography

**Butler, Judith.** "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519–531.

**Jackson II, Ronald L., and Murali Balaji, eds.** *Global Masculinities and Manhood*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011.

**Week 13**

**11.12.25**

**(De)Constructing the Self in the Digital Realm**

*Cindy Sherman (Untitled, 2023) and Amalia Ulman (Excellences and Perfections, 2014)*

Selected bibliography

**Mulvey, Laura.** "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman." *New Left Review*, no. 188 (1991): 137–150.

**Murray, Derek Conrad.** "Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media." *Consumption Markets & Culture* 18, no. 6 (2015): 490–516.

**Week 14.**

**18.12.25**

**Self-Portrait: Crafting New Heroes**

*Zanele Muholi, Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness, 2014 – present) and Omar Victor Diop (Project Diaspora, 2014)*

Selected bibliography

**Mussai Renée, ed,** *Zanele Muholi. Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness*. London: Autograph ABP, 2017.

**Powell, Richard J.** *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

## **General Bibliography**

**Azoulay, Ariella.** *The Civil Contract of Photography*. New York: Zone Books, 2008.

**Barthes, Roland.** *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

**Barthes, Roland.** "L'effet de réel." *Communications* 11 (1986): 84–89.

**Berger, Harry Jr.** *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt Against the Italian Renaissance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.

**Blokland, Sara, and Asmara Pelupessy, eds.** *Unfixed: Photography and Postcolonial Perspectives in Contemporary Art*. Heijningen, Netherlands: Jap Sam Books, 2012.

**Burke, Peter.** "The Renaissance, Individualism, and the Portrait." *Art History* 21, no. 3 (1995): 393–400.

**Butler, Judith.** *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

**Durden, Mark, and Craig Richardson, eds.** *Face On: Photography as Social Exchange*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000.

**Dyer, Geoff.** *The Ongoing Moment*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2005.

**Edwards, Elizabeth.** *Anthropology and Photography, 1860–1920*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

**Enwezor, Okwui, ed.** *Events of the Self: Portraiture and Social Identity*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2010.

**Enwezor, Okwui, ed.** *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*. Munich: Prestel, 2006.

**Garb, Tamar.** *Figures and Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography*. London: Victoria and Albert Museum; Göttingen: Steidl, 2011.

**Gombrich, Ernst H.** "The Mask and the Face." In *Art, Perception, and Reality*, 2–44. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972.

**Hight, Eleanor M., and Gary D. Sampson, eds.** *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*. London: Routledge, 2002.

**Jones, Amelia.** *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject*. London: Routledge, 2006.

**Kozloff, Max.** *The Theatre of the Face: Portrait Photography Since 1900*. London: Phaidon Press, 2007.

**Mulvey, Laura.** "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

**Sarvas, Risto, and David M. Frohlich.** *From Snapshots to Social Media: The Changing Picture of Domestic Photography*. London: Springer, 2011.

**Schmuckli, Claudia,** ed. *Beyond the Uncanny Valley: Being Human in the Age of AI*. San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and Cameron Books, 2020.

**Sekula, Allan.** "The Body and the Archive." *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3–64.

**Solomon-Godeau, Abigail.** *Photography after Photography*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.

**Solomon-Godeau, Abigail.** *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

**Sontag, Susan.** *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.

**Stallabrass, Julian.** "What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography." *October* 122 (Fall 2007): 71–90.

**West, Shearer.** *Portraiture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.