

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – PHYLOGENESIS

A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

5. SANDER (Germany, 1876-1964)

Between organism and role

Dry photography, beginning in the years 1870, does not only comprise Atget and Stieglitz, but also Riis and Hine. These two photographers, armed with their now lighter tripod and with a flash that allowed them to work at night, started visiting the New York slums to photograph and show the poor.

This time around, the medium largely served the theme. In turn, the theme will stimulate the medium, and will reveal novel formal virtualities (unusual shadows, shots sectioning objects haphazardly), and specifically political-social ones, in a word, photography as a means of predication. Riis – and Hine in particular – started organizing cleverly orchestrated slide sessions. Riis, who starts in 1887 with the invention of the flash, only wanted his photographs to be ‘a way of putting before the people what I saw there’. Hine, who starts in 1904, displayed more ambition. In accordance with the American dream, he showed the ‘good material at first’; the lively forces of the youth that had to be liberated from the ‘making junk’, their exploitation. Riis and his substitutes were oppressive. Hine was tonic. In the thirties, he still photographed – intrepid – the acrobat workers building skyscrapers.

Sander is neither a social worker nor a preacher, but a sociologist, even an anthropologist. When, in his beginnings, he photographed peasants in the area surrounding Koln, instead of looking from top to bottom as Hine would, he looked, as a steel miner, from bottom to top. Hence, he not only sees the rich or the poor, but, in the way of the proletarian according to Marx, he sees Man himself or at least, Society itself, in the German society of his era. He will complete his great work project ‘Citizens of the Twentieth Century’ in 1929 as *Antlitz der Zeit*, the title of the part published while he was alive. The word ‘Antlitz’ is a heavily charged poetical and mystical substantive made up of ‘ant-ent’ (coming to meet), and gothic ‘wlaiton’ (casting one’s gaze around oneself). There is a Heideggerian dimension in the ‘Face’ that comes to meet Sander. *Sein und Zeit* is dated 1927.

The outcome of Sander’s project will be fundamental anthropology. For him, and without explicitly knowing it, mankind is the signed animal. It is an organism invested with *indicia* of states (paleness, redness, shakes), like any animal organism. As a standing, two-

handed primate, it is also an organism invested with *indexes* (the finger, the nose, the sexual organs), of *digital referential signs* (as the fingers can make out a square, a circle, a triangle, or count from 1 to 10), and assuredly of *analogical referential signs*, in particular a more or less conscious image of the body itself.

We must retrospect the road travelled since Nadar. For the latter, when romanticism switched to positivism, the heterogeneous layers (between themselves) of the organism and the signs, of the organism to the role, and of the organism and the craft, were all rather unified under the hot pressure of the 'genius' physiology. Through the evanescence of the late century, then the Great War, then the Weimar republic, this relationship distended itself. In any event, from 1920, the role – and in particular the craft – begins to be understood as a mechanic, which is either decomposable or re-composable and whose body is only a support. Bauhaus analyses their former elements to recompose them later, not only all the industrial, artistic, semiotic *products*, but also the human *gestures* that make them, right to the theatrical gesture according to a universal Combinatory that reminds us of Leibniz's project. There is no better time than this era to understand what the body of a notary, engineer, pictorial, or musician is, or to follow some human structures circulating and varying in their craft, going from one role to another. In the German Kulturgeschichte tradition, Spengler published the prodigious *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* from 1918 to 1922, a structural and existential anthropology of civilizations.

What about photography? Well, it was pre-destined. Firstly because it captured as many – if not more – *indices* than *indicia* and referential signs, and could therefore let speak the articulations between body and role, between body and craft, independently from the intentions of the portraitist. Then, it allowed the portrayed body to animate – consciously or unconsciously – the signs it was invested with, under the condition to work in the dark room and the studio, subject to the constraints of the appointment and the pose, which is reminiscent of the psychoanalytical séance. In the same fashion as Nadar, virtually always excluding the model's feet and legs that would have allowed it to walk, hence dissipating its structure. Finally, an all-important detail: offering the finished product on a bare paper; the peasants he photographed in their environment could not care less for luxury prints, they only wanted their image. However, Sander's close friends remarked that these poor images were much more structural and existential than rich images! When large distribution prints won the war against singular prints, the essentialisation of roles and organisms was accomplished, notes Szarkowski. In a 1910 print, a serf peasant appears in infinitely subtle nuances (PN, 240); post 1920, the faces disclose their 'elements' in the bauhausian sense of the term to respond to the rawer details of photoengraving (PN, 241).



Sander, Wilhelm Furtwängler, PF, 153

The result was Sander's ethnographic Combinatory. Portrayed by Sander, or rather, portraying himself with Sander's assistance, conductor *Wilhelm Furtwängler* (*PF, 153) informs us as to the jacket and tie (particularly Bauhaus) one should wear, what angles should be defined between limbs and bust, what tension between his eyes, brows, and nose, what seating position to adopt on the seat, what diffuse unease should be encouraged, what weft the clothing should show to trigger Beethoven's nine symphonies like no one before or since has ever managed, not even Toscanini. Bodies and roles thereby propose a game of functioning elements specific to WORLD 3, rather than a bunch of attributes proceeding from a focus, like in Nadar's work that still largely belongs to WORLD 2. This would not have been the case had

Furtwängler appeared that same year before Erfurth's 'criminological' camera, nonetheless of the same age (PN, 175-5).

However, all these logic-semiotic field effects, where organisms, *indices*, *indicia*, analogical and digital referential signs meet in compatibilising coils must not lead us away from Sander's perceptive-motor field effects, which, like in Nadar's work, were in return intensified by the logical field effects they come across. It is partly to do with structure, particularly with the definition of a square that is neither too big nor too small, that allows for the positioning of oneself, without which the roles would lose their combinatory articulation to turn picturesque. It is also a question of texture, grain (of the skin, clothing, leafage, construction timber) that must be firm, cellular, and neither too large nor too small.



Sander, *L'oeil droit de ma fille Sigrid*, BN, 232

In his 1926 acme, Sander photographed what he titled *L'oeil droit de ma fille Sigrid* (**BN, 232). Nothing can display more semiologically certain concepts like the relationships between the organism (the eye) and the sense (the gaze). Nothing indicates better the plastic relationships between horizontality and verticality, emptiness and fullness, clear and obscure, bare and hairy, smooth and granulated (of the skin) etc., hence, what perceptive topologies and cybernetics had to be kept going to obtain 'The Face of Time' (*Antlitz der Zeit*).

For the cover of *Photography Until Now*, Swarkowski chose the photograph of Sander's '*La Petite Foraine*' dated 1932 (PN, 241). She looks at us through the opened window next to the

closed window of her trailer; her arm forms a right angle on the outside to reach the key in the lock. Among all these vertical and horizontal angles, her face is also made up of vertical and horizontal rectangles. The wood has the required grain to spread the combinatory of the structure and the texture.

Henri Van Lier

A photographic history of photography

in *Les Cahiers de la Photographie*, 1992

List of abbreviations of common references :

PN: Photography until Now, Museum of Modern Art.

BN: Beaumont Newhall, Photography: Essays and Images, Museum of Modern Art.

PF: Kozloff, Photography and Fascination, Addison.

The acronyms (), (**), (***) refer to the first, second, and third illustration of the chapters, respectively. Thus, the reference (***) AP, 417) must be interpreted as: "This refers to the third illustration of the chapter, and you will find a better reproduction, or a different one, with the necessary technical specifications, in The Art of Photography listed under number 417".*