

MULTIPLE EXPOSURES

JEWELRY AND PHOTO- GRAPHY

URSULA ILSE-NEUMAN

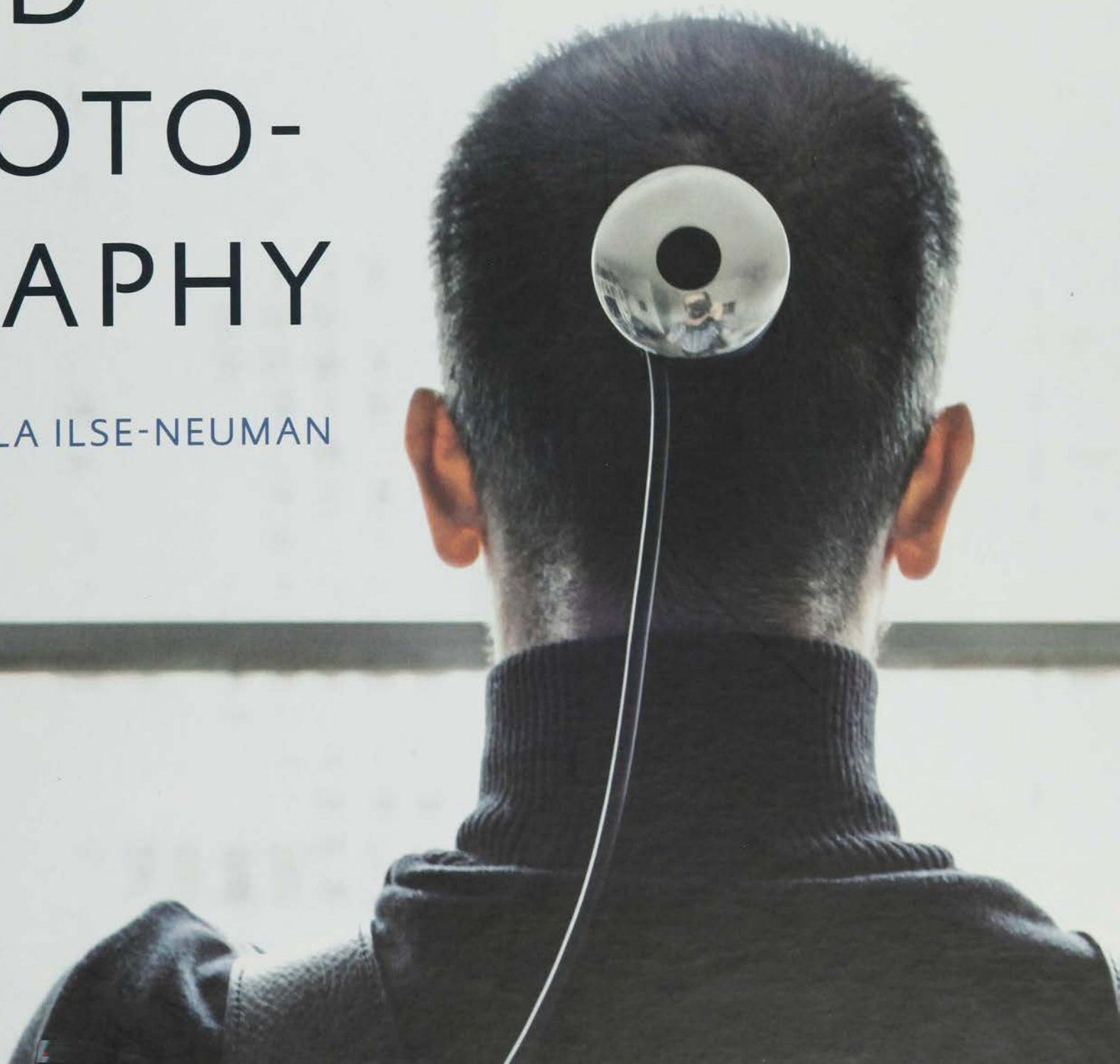


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SAVING FACE PHOTO PORTRAIT JEWELRY

SUZANNE RAMLJAK

THE CREATIVE CONJUNCTION of jewelry, photography, and portraiture yields a heady compound, ripe with association. When merged into a single object, these three artistic genres trigger a complex interplay between opposing elements, among them private/public, past/present, subject/object, and absence/presence. Along with generating dichotomies, such jewelry also raises essential questions: Why affix another person's image upon one's body? How do we identify with those with whom we adorn ourselves? What does it mean to wear a stranger's likeness, or that of a beloved? Are we sporting the jeweler or the portrait subject?

Deep biological roots underlie the practice of donning people's faces. In fact, researchers have posited an innate neural mechanism designed to read and decipher human features. Whether or not this decoding capacity is inherent at birth, we are naturally drawn to and responsive to facial expression for our social success and ultimately for survival. Our fixation on the visages of others persists even after they have died, as witnessed in death masks and other funerary renderings, from which portraiture originates in Western art.

The age-old quest to reproduce appearances got a boost in the nineteenth century, when photography provided a prime means of capturing a sitter's semblance. By the mid-1800s, photo portraiture had become widespread, and the images lent themselves to prevailing customs of wearing keepsake ornaments and painted portrait jewelry. Such photographic portraits enable the contemplation and display of loved ones as part of everyday dress. This newfound ability to preserve a human likeness gained urgency in an era marked by memorializing and mourning, especially when life expectancy was so short.

Photographic portrait jewelry still performs this essential task of negotiating loss and carrying our grief into public, as observed after the 9/11 attacks when mourners openly wore portraits of the deceased (fig. 1). Numerous contemporary artists enlist photographic jewelry for this traditional purpose, making keepsakes that pay homage to late family or friends. Among works in this vein are Sonya Clark's *Remembrance* (NO. 27) and pieces by Iris Nieuwenburg (NO. 28), Joyce Scott (NO. 37), and Pamela Morris Thomford (NO. 39). In Ashley Gilreath's draping necklace, *I Am Who They Were*, a transparent glass and decal portrait gallery allows the wearer's skin to show through and complete the ancestral photographs (NO. 40). To extend the tradition of commemoration, today's artists employ imaging modes and technologies such as photo etching, digital photography, and video.

This memorial role notwithstanding, our current rapport with photo portraits is distinctly altered from that of the past. Whereas photographs were once rare and precious, now the cultural landscape is densely strewn with photos, which appear on every possible surface from T-shirts to taxicabs. Indeed, the sources for the contemporary portrait works in this exhibition encompass photo ID cards, advertisements, filmstrips, newspapers, and postage stamps.

Within our Facebook era we are inundated with photos of other people, and this public intrusion into private space often leads

to facial overload. Personal lives are becoming increasingly publicized via social networks and various forms of exhibitionism, foremost through reality TV. "Private life," according to Roland Barthes, is "nothing but that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object."¹ Today it is becoming extremely difficult to avoid being objectified as an image. The inherent intrusiveness of imaging other people is staged in Jordan Doner's *Surveillance Pendant*, which harbors a tiny video camera that covertly records those who cross its lens (NO. 52), while the accompanying "Display" cuff allows the wearer to view illicitly captured images on a small LED screen (NO. 51).

Whereas we once wore portraits of only those we knew, mass media now provides access to a vastly expanded visual family. Accordingly, we can opt to identify with strangers or public figures with whom we feel strong kinship. Such identification is a key dynamic in the wearing of photo portraiture. Jewelry's inextricable link to the human body forges a strong union between owner and work, possessor and possessed. Because

jewelry is an art form that comes with a face attached, the wearer becomes implicated with the subject, especially when it is another human being.

What, then, is conveyed when we bedeck ourselves with portraits of those whom we've never met? In some instances, this co-optation serves as a tribute to the photographed personage, as found in Don Tompkins's *Janis Joplin* and *Minnesota Fats* (NOS. 33, 34). Beverley Price's highly invested *Nelson Mandela* neckpiece also pays homage through its fusion of a traditional Xhosa collar type and photographs documenting highlights of the great statesman's life (NO. 25). Other pieces use photos of anonymous faces to represent a cultural group or era, such as J. Fred Woell's *Come Alive, You're in the Pepsi Generation* (NO. 32). The artist and wearer declare an allegiance to such depicted figures, as if sporting a campaign button to support a candidate. The act of adorning oneself with prominent personalities runs rampant in Hally McGehean's dress, *Everyone Who's Anyone* (fig. 2), which compiles well-known faces from magazines into a wearable *Who's Who* of present-day culture.

FIG. 1
REUTERS / Jessica Rinaldi,
New York
"Liza Adams wears a
necklace with a portrait
of her daughter, Mary
Lou Hague, 26, killed
during the 9/11 attacks
on the World Trade
Center in New York.
September 11, 2001."



When the portrait subject is infamous, not just famous, a new set of issues arises. While it is conceivable that one could identify with a cultural leader, affinity with child molesters or criminals is harder to fathom. This quandary is posed by Shari Pierce's necklace *34 Sex Offenders and 2 Sexual Predators from within a 5-Mile Radius* (NO. 50) and by Peter Deckers's *Ten Most Wanted* ring (NO. 49). In both, the portrait photograph is derived from mug shots posted to help apprehend outlaws. Wearing the ID photos of these social deviants helps broadcast their menace, while raising questions about the company we keep.

At the opposite pole of these notorious figures are the anonymous souls who populate the tintypes and silver prints



of bygone years. There is a poignant irony in the fate of these faces; originally photographed to preserve their memory, their identities have evaporated over time.

Portraits of the now unknown are the centerpieces of Bettina Speckner's, Robert Ebendorf's, and Bernhard Schobinger's jewelry, where they become subjects for free association and sentimental musings (NOS. 42-44, 35, 36, and 26). Like human Rorschachs, these nameless characters elicit our own hopes and memories.

The process of identification grows further entangled when the person portrayed is the artist him- or herself. While art serves like a hazy mirror reflecting the beholder's views, it also embodies a reflection of its original maker. "All photographs are self-portraits," claimed photographer Minor White,² but some more explicitly so than others. A number of today's jewelers have produced engaging photo self-portraits, including Bernhard Schobinger, Fritz Maierhofer, Ruudt Peters, and Martin Papcún. In each of these cases, the artist has aestheticized him- or herself into a portable object, packaging identity in a form to be worn. Whereas some self-portraits prove defacing in the very act of depiction—like Schobinger's commuter card photo half-eclipsed by a clownish red nose (NO. 19)—others reveal a more earnest intent, as do Maierhofer's portrait bracelet made as a gift for his mother (NO. 20) and Papcún's rings made for his friends (NOS. 22, 23). All of these works seek to propagate the artist's own self-image, an aim blatantly fulfilled in the edition of face pins created by Peters, suggestively titled *Ritual* (NO. 18). To wear a jeweler's self-portrait is to get the artist squared—both as an object-maker and a subject of interest.

FIG 2

Hally McGehean

Everyone Who's Anyone (dress), 2010

522 laminated magazine cut-outs, stainless steel split rings, silk ribbon straps

1³/₄ in. (4.4 cm), each cut-out; size 2

Collection of the artist

Although the bond between a wearer and portrait subject is largely psychological, it also involves a physical dimension. Jewelry's direct contact with human skin heightens the communion one feels when wearing another's semblance; two bodies brush against each other across distance and time. The photographic portrait is literally a "print," with a causal connection to the originating body. Every photograph results from a "physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface," affirms Rosalind Krauss. "The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, that bears an indexical relationship to its object."³

Photographs have been rightly compared to relics and function similarly to preserve remnants of an individual. This capturing of human life is most pronounced in photo portrait jewelry that also contains physical matter from the subject. Geoffrey Giles's *Self-Portrait, Cultivated Perception*—a photo bracelet that documents the artist's transformative haircut—includes actual clippings from Giles's head (NO. 21). Other works preserve photographs in elaborate casings that sanctify the treasured image, as found in Eleanor Moty's opulent brooches (NOS. 45, 46) and the intricately layered setting by Truike Verdegaal (NO. 53). With or without real bodily fragments, subjects within portrait jewelry are like specimens under glass, akin to embalmed corpses primed for open-casket display.

As much as photographs are thought to harbor life, they also signal loss and the passing of time that cannot be regained. Our effort to save the lives of others through photographic portraiture ultimately betrays us, and we are left with the dry taste of death. As Susan Sontag famously stated, "All photographs are memento mori."⁴ This deathly essence pervades Babette Boucher's *Souvenir* brooches from her Dead Class series, portraits of her mother's classmates from the 1940s (NOS. 29, 30, 31). Equally tinged with morbidity is Loes van Riel's and Robert Pfuelb's *Saturday, 20 June, 1942*, titled after a dated entry in Anne Frank's diary (NO. 24). Sally von Barga's

devastating *Elegy*—with over forty-two hundred portraits of American men and women who died in Iraq under the Bush administration—is a wearable memorial to the human casualties of war (NO. 41). Even when the depicted person is not deceased, the photo can remind us of a vanished past or fleeting moment that is gone for good.

Neither dead nor alive, the faces in photographs appear as haunting specters, echoing from another realm. When we put on these portraits, we adorn ourselves with ghosts whose spirits waft about us. The spectral nature of these photo apparitions is underscored by titles such as Keith Lo Bue's *The Spectre Woman*, Klaus Bürger's *Ghost Ring*, and Nancy Worden's *The Revenants* (NOS. 47, 48, 38).

Photo portrait jewelry casts a potent spell, resulting from a blend of bodily touch and intangible trace, presence and absence. It invites viewers and wearers to ponder the limits of both life and death, as we encounter frozen faces affixed to breathing beings.

Suzanne Ramljak, an art historian and writer, is currently editor of *Metalsmith* magazine and curator of exhibitions at the American Federation of Arts, New York.

1
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Richard Howard, trans. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 15.

2
Minor White, *Documentary Photography: Time Life Library of Photography* (New York: Time Life Books, 1972), 231.

3
Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Part I," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1986), 203.

4
Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1977), 15.

SONYA CLARK

Remembrance



Is it possible to become immortal through objects? This question led me to make *Remembrance* in homage to my late father. It is not my memory of my father's physical presence that endures but rather the qualities of his spirit. He was a man of incredible kindness, grace, and warmth. *Remembrance* is an object that refers to locket (memory keepsakes) and watches (measurers of time). The piece is a repository for my father's presence (embodied in the last photograph I took of him) and his spirit (etched in glass). It is an attempt at immortality, merging his intangible qualities with a tangible object.

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Sonya Clark

Remembrance (pendant), 2012

Digital artist's photograph, hand-blown and etched glass, copper

2 1/2 in. (6.4 cm), diameter

Collection of the artist