

*All That Isn't the Case:
Photography's Two Worlds*

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Pictures of people reading aren't simply (or necessarily or even usually) portraits. In fact, if the default setting of the portrait involves posing for the photographer, it would be more fitting to say that a picture of someone reading is a kind of anti-portrait. In André Kertész's book *On Reading* (1971), for example, most of the subjects seem to be so deeply absorbed in their texts that they're not even aware of being photographed. Indeed, going all the way back to the eighteenth century, paintings of people reading were often praised precisely for this reason. In *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980), Michael Fried quotes Abbé Laugier describing a "philosophe" painted by Jean Siméon Chardin as "so deeply absorbed in his meditation that it seems one would have a hard time distracting him." Of course, someone did in fact pose for Chardin (as it happens, a portrait painter named Jacques Aved), but the picture itself is not a portrait. That is, Aved may have posed for Chardin, but the picture he posed for is the picture of a man who is not posing; it's the picture of a man who doesn't know he's being painted and who, in the logic of the picture, isn't being painted.

Kertész's images of people reading are also not portraits, but the fact that they're photographs makes the situation a little different. Chardin can make his subject look like he's not posing even when he is; Kertész, looking for the same effect, doesn't want his subjects to pose. One way to accomplish this would have been to join the many photographers who used right-angle lenses or hidden cameras to take pictures of people who, because they didn't know they were being photographed, have (as Walker Evans said of the subjects of his subway photographs) let down their "guard" and taken off their "mask." But for Kertész, books do the work of Evans's hidden camera. In *Washington Square, New York City, April 18, 1969*, for instance, two men, separated by perhaps a couple of feet, are leaning against the trunk of the same tree, reading. The attention they're paying to their books is so intense that the photographer doesn't need to worry about whether they'll notice him taking a picture. Indeed, they're so absorbed in their texts that they seem to have no relation even to each other. It's as if they're in separate worlds, where their unawareness of each other lends conviction to their unawareness of the camera.

By contrast, Arthur Ou's image, *Luisa Lambri reading* 5:63 (2015), of the photographer Luisa Lambri reading Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921)

(like Kertész's readers, with her back against a tree and seated next to another reader) produces a very different effect. Where Kertész's two readers seem not to know each other, an impression enhanced by the other figures in the photograph (people out enjoying the day in Washington Square), there's a certain intimacy between Ou's two readers. It's one thing for strangers to sit that close to each other among others in a public square (or on a subway); it's a slightly different thing for two people to sit that close to each other in a space that could just as easily be someone's backyard and where no one else is around. Actually, the first thing you think is that they are mother and daughter, and the second thing is that they are aware not only of each other but also of the photographer, who is nearby and who has, of course, put the book in Lambri's hand (we don't know what the girl is reading).

Precisely because the space of within this photograph is more private than public, the figures in it are in a way less private, more aware of and connected to the world around them. The text that captions the photograph (or completes its title) says "I am my world. (The Microcosm)," but Kertész's readers are each much closer to "I am my world" than Lambri is, since her world includes her daughter and seems to be entirely produced for and constituted by someone else—the photographer.

All of Kertész's readers are different from Ou's because what Kertész wanted was subjects who were unaware of being photographed and Ou seeks just the opposite. Really, only Ou's image of Barbara Probst reading the *Tractatus* could possibly find a place among Kertész's readers, since the image's street-photography look—she is positioned between a man behind her who's gazing at his phone and an out-of-focus woman in front of her who's walking by—suggests that she is just as indifferent to and/or unaware of the fact that her picture is being taken as they are. But of course she isn't, and because the whole idea of this book insists on the pose, this particular photograph also insists on the difference between her and the two people in it who appear unposed. It's as if the photograph is of (or draws a line between) two worlds: one that exists for itself and one that exists for the camera, one that is reading its phone and one that's reading the *Tractatus*. The one reading its phone is Kertész's; the one reading the *Tractatus* is Ou's.

Insofar, then, as Ou's readers, like Chardin's and Kertész's, are philosophical (i.e., meditative and absorbed) readers, what's philosophical about them is only the notoriously difficult book they're reading and not their relation to it. Probably no one would describe Phil Chang lying on his back on a bench under some kind of citrus tree and

looking up at the *Tractatus* held above him as so absorbed that he doesn't even know his picture is being taken. The exact opposite would be more plausible: the only reason he is where he is, doing what he's doing, is in order to have his picture taken—which is true, also, for everyone else in the book. If reading in Kertész's series functions to overcome the sense that the subject is performing for the camera, here it is itself made into a performance. So, one likely response to these photographs would be to doubt that their subjects are even reading (much less reading with care) the texts in which they are supposedly so interested. Is Chang thinking, "The subject does not belong to the world"? Or perhaps he is asking himself, "How much longer will this take?"

This effect is enhanced by the fact that the subjects are all photographers and that they're reading the *Tractatus*. Although Ou's work seems to promise (and, I think, makes good on that promise) some significant relation between photography and the Wittgenstein text, it also produces a certain degree of skepticism. And this skepticism itself performs two functions: First, it turns the absorptive aesthetic inside out; these pictures do not ask us to see their subjects as so absorbed in their books that they don't know they have an audience. In fact, it's just the opposite—they're only reading the books because they're

performing for an audience. And second, the question of whether these photographs show us these particular people really reading this particular text raises a more general question about whether any photograph can ever show us what actually is going on inside other people's heads. Maybe even Kertész's absorbed readers are actually thinking not about what they are reading, but about something completely different.

But Ou's photographs turn this skepticism into a kind of confidence; if Barbara Kasten, in the image *Barbara Kasten reading 4.1212* (2016), is posing for a picture of herself reading the words "What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said," it doesn't matter the slightest bit whether she really is reading them or what she is thinking about. She might have those words or some other words or no words at all in her head. You can do the posing without doing the reading. After all, posing is just as much an intentional act as reading is, and a photograph of someone posing requires the same kind of allusion to his or her thoughts as an image of someone reading does. Indeed, the distinction between someone reading and someone posing as though they are reading only makes sense with reference to the subject's mind. But whereas with reading we can be tempted to think that the crucial thing is what we can't see, with posing for one's portrait the crucial thing is what we can see. The pose is

made to be visible. If a picture of someone reading raises questions about a subjectivity that we might understand as being behind or inside the body (a subjectivity that might be either concealed or displayed by the way you look), the picture of someone posing imagines subjectivity in a way that undoes the opposition between what you seem to be doing and what you really are doing or, more powerfully, imagines your thoughts as intrinsically visible. The interest of the reader is that her thoughts are not for us and may be hidden from us; the interest of the poser is that the thought that defines her is entirely for us and in fact consists in showing itself to us. The portrait—the photograph of a poser—shows us everything or, anyway, all that is the case.

But, of course, it doesn't show us what is *not* the case. The point here is not just that we can't take pictures of what isn't the case; it's more that we can't take pictures that can say something is not the case. The caption that accompanies the portrait of Kasten—"What *can* be shown *cannot* be said"—insists, or seems to insist on a fundamental distinction between showing and saying. But whether or not we believe that everything that can be shown can also be said, it's pretty clear that photography reminds us (and does more than remind us) of the way in which not everything that can be said can be shown. It's one thing to be interested in how photography deals with the question of what

can and can't be seen; it's a related but not identical thing to be interested in how photography might handle the question of what can't be seen but can be said, of how it might handle negation. It's easy to *say* something that is not the case, and it's not hard to Photoshop something and make a picture that shows what's not the case. I can say that "x looks young" even when he doesn't, and (with Photoshop) I can also show him looking young. In fact, especially with portraits, nothing could be more common. But Ou hasn't touched up these portraits—not because he wants them to be more authentic, but because he wants them to emphasize the difference between showing and saying.

The difference is between the way the photograph of Kasten reading is tied to the world and the way the sentence "Barbara Kasten is reading" is tied to the world. Both the sentence and its negation ("Barbara Kasten is not reading") have meaning independent of what Kasten is actually doing, of what is actually the case. But the photograph that shows her reading does not. Because it cannot be negated, its meaning is not independent of the way things are. And because its meaning is not independent of the way things are, it doesn't—in the way that language does—mean anything. What can be shown cannot be said; what is shown is not said.

The World Is All That Is the Case (2014–2019) thus takes as its subject the way in which the extraordinary ability of

the photograph to show us the world is indistinguishable from its complete inability to *not* show us the world, and hence the problem that showing poses for saying. And it seeks, at the same time, to imagine solutions to this problem. Actually, the pose itself aims to achieve such a solution. The collaboration between the photographer and the subject seeks to make everything expressive. The ring Kasten is wearing, the daybed she's sitting on, the photograph on the wall behind her, the plant next to her—these are all things she has chosen and that say something about her. And, of course, the fact that Ou pictures her through the bare branches of that plant expresses something of Ou's sense of her. These are all part of what's at stake in the pose, in the collaboration between photographer and subject.

But this level of expression is the least important and even the least convincing thing about a picture like *Barbara Kasten reading* for two reasons: The first is that insofar as what's being shown is the act of posing, the particular character of the poser tends to be subsumed rather than expressed by the more abstract expressivity of the pose. The second is that even the statement the pose seeks to make (the subject's "This is what I want to say about myself," the photographer's "This is what I want to say about her") is depicted as tied to and thus compromised by the photograph's inability to assert the opposite ("This is not what I want to say about myself/her").

In part, this appears as a problem of agency. “The world is independent of my will,” it says in the *Tractatus* and again in the caption for *Noritoshi Hiramawa reading 6.373 (2015)*, which shows Noritoshi Hiramawa seated before a wall of papers—a powerful expression of his will (they are presumably all there because he put them there)—and a dazzling fabric of surfaces that no one could possibly will. And the wall of papers has the same relation to the photographer’s will—not exactly independent of it but not entirely an expression of it either. Once everything in the image is understood both as dependent on and independent of someone’s will, it’s as if the two worlds made visible in the picture of Probst (the portrait inscribed in the street photograph, the posed and the unposed) only make explicit that what Ou wants to show is there in all the photographs, the imbrication of what the photographer can do with what he can’t do, what he can do with what he can’t help but do.

On the one hand, then, the photograph can’t separate itself from the world by negation (can’t show us “Barbara Kasten is not reading” and so can show us Barbara Kasten reading but can’t tell us that she is); on the other hand, Ou produces his version of that separation by showing us not one world but two, by producing a world that, internally divided, is separated from itself. In *Barbara Probst*, as we’ve seen, that separation is made possible by the almost

generic distinction between the street photograph and the portrait, and hence between people who aren’t posing and the one who is. And there’s a variation of that device in *Moyra Davey reading 4.114 (2015)*, in which Moyra Davey herself looks dutifully at her text while the dog on her lap looks straight into the camera; it’s her apparent unawareness of the photographer that says she’s posing, while it’s the dog’s actual awareness of the photographer that says he isn’t. Davey belongs to the world defined by the camera; her dog doesn’t.

Of course, in the great majority of the photographs, there are no other people and no dogs, but as with the image of Kasten in her studio, the picture not only shows us what it can’t help but show, but also finds a way to say that it can’t help but show it. When we see that the almost too artful, bare branches are reflected in the photograph behind them and look as if they’re reflected also on the table in front and on what seem to be plastic CD cases, we begin to understand the portrait not exactly as a collaboration between the sensibilities of the two photographers, but as the site of Ou’s desire to create a world around Kasten that is not hers (it belongs, rather, to the photograph). She’s enclosed in the picture in a way that, as we can only see from the picture, she is not enclosed in her studio. Because the photograph can only show us the world, it can only show us what is the case. But when *The World Is*

All That Is The Case shows us two worlds, it begins to show us also what isn’t the case.

Of course, we can find an analogue for this sense that the photograph depicts two worlds rather than one in Kertész’s readers, who have their backs to the same tree but are each lost in their own books. Their separation, however, is a function of their consciousness, of the philosophical absorption that Ou has ruled out from the start. What separates Davey from her dog and Kasten from her studio is not the quality of their attention, but the camera. The photograph’s effort to show us something that the world cannot—by producing what I’ve been calling two worlds—counts as its acknowledgment of the difference between showing and saying, as its further acknowledgment of the alignment between photography and showing, and finally as its effort not just to embody the one but to display the difference between the two.