

Sydney College of the Arts
The University of Sydney

MASTER OF VISUAL ARTS

2003

RESEARCH PAPER

OTHER LIVES

by

Patricia Verden
Photomedia

***This volume is presented as a record
of the work undertaken
for the
degree of
Master of Visual Arts
at
Sydney College of the Arts.***

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor Steven Lojewski, John Wilde alias the Colonel for all of his assistance in locating Elvii and those who follow, Sandy and Andy Levy for their generosity, kindness and valuable assistance both personally and professionally while I was at the Baltimore Sun.

| Table of Contents | | Page |
|--------------------------|--|-------------|
| i) | List of illustrations | 5 |
| ii) | Summary of work presented and abstract of paper | 6 |
| iii) | Introduction | 7 |
| 1. | Chapter 1 <i>The Background, Historical, Technical, Cultural and Social Frameworks</i> | 9 |
| 2. | Chapter 2 <i>Conceptual and Technical Influences</i> | 33 |
| 3. | Chapter 3 <i>Other Lives</i> | 38 |
| 4. | Bibliography | 49 |
| 5. | List of images on CD-Rom | 50 |
| 6. | Catalogue of work presented for examination | 51 |

List of Illustrations

Page

Chapter 1 *The Background, Historical, Technical, Cultural and Social Frameworks*

| | | |
|-----------|---|----|
| Figure 1 | <i>Ulambana</i> , Cabramatta, 2000, Patricia Verden | 11 |
| Figure 2 | <i>Colonel Tom Parker impersonator John Wilde's shrine to Elvis</i> , Marrickville NSW, 2003, Patricia Verden | 12 |
| Figure 3 | <i>Graceland Restaurant</i> , Parkes NSW 1999, Patricia Verden | 18 |
| Figure 4 | <i>Girl dressed as scarecrow</i> , Milton Scarecrow Festival, 2003, Patricia Verden | 19 |
| Figure 5 | <i>Man dressed as a medieval knight</i> , Stratford on Avon Festival, Hunter Valley NSW 2002, Patricia Verden | 20 |
| Figure 6 | <i>Graceland Portfolio</i> , 1983, William Eggleston | 21 |
| Figure 7 | Oakland, California, 1972 Chauncey Hare | 23 |
| Figure 8 | <i>Puerto Rican woman with beauty mark</i> , NYC, 1965, Diane Arbus | 24 |
| Figure 9 | <i>Bricklayer's Mate</i> , from <i>Face of Our Time</i> , Cologne 1929, August Sander | 26 |
| Figure 10 | <i>Red Owens, oil field worker</i> , Velma, Oklahoma, 1980, Richard Avedon | 28 |

Chapter 3 *Other Lives*

| | | |
|------------|--|----|
| Figure 11 | Boy re-enactor, Battle of Cedar Creek, USA 2002, Patricia Verden | 39 |
| Figures 12 | <i>Other Lives</i> Untitled, 2003, Patricia Verden | 41 |

Summary of work presented for examination and abstract of paper

Abstract

The areas of investigation are the portrait, the gaze, the American filmmaker Errol Morris, representation of reality and subcultures. These are discussed within an historical, technical, cultural and social framework.

Colour, the film theorist Bill Nichols, the filmmaker Errol Morris are discussed with reference to the central gaze and what constitutes reality. Taking on another identity, the role of subcultures and my influences as a photographer are explored within this context.

Work for Examination

Other Lives is a photographic work consisting of portraits including:

- civil war re-enactors who believe that the war between the northern and southern states of America still exist
- Elvis Presley impersonators and fans who believe that Elvis Presley still lives
- people who take on another identity as scarecrows in the context of a local festival
- people who take on another identity as medieval knights.

Introduction

*This is my real life*¹

In the essay from Chauncey Hare's monograph titled *Interior America*, Hare wrote about the split between his working life as a petrochemical engineer and that of a photographer, "*In some fashion, acquisition of the view camera was symptomatic of the growing schism between my life as a discontented engineer and as an emerging photographer. That year I began vomiting in the mornings*".²

This statement connected with my own feelings about life as a public servant with the NSW Department of Education and Training. The schism between the job and my work as a photographer was one of the reason for undertaking the MVA. Hare's dilemma and mine were the same. The need to create another life or world to deal with the difficulties of life is a common thread within society that may lead to the creation of subcultures.

My research concentrates on the events and festivals that allow people the opportunity to take on another identity. Within this context the person maintains a level of privacy that is not evident in the work of the photographers that are discussed in this paper. This is the primary difference between *Other Lives* and the work of Chauncey Hare, Diane Arbus, August Sander and Richard Avedon.

Other Lives consists of portraits of people involved in subcultures, something outside of their working lives as accountants, administrators, lawyers, truck drivers and fathers. The act of photographing people in their other life or reality, the one that many describe as 'their real life,' is the focus for my work.

¹When photographing Elvis Presley impersonators, I asked "*What do you do in real life?*" This was the answer.

²Hare Chauncey, *Interior America*, Page 14

The research paper consists of three chapters:

Chapter 1 Background Historical, Technical, Cultural and Social Framework

1. This chapter explores the work of photographers Chauncey Hare, Diane Arbus, August Sander and Richard Avedon and the influence they have had on my work.

The work focuses on the fantasy of taking on another identity or persona within the context of group events. Subcultures are identified and explored from a social, cultural and religious perspective. The group event provides a safe harbour to express a more personal aspect of their lives that may ordinarily be private.

Chapter 2 Conceptual and Technical Influences

2. The notion of reality in the context of this paper is defined as what people believe or create is their reality. The work of the filmmaker Errol Morris and the writing of the film theorist Bill Nichols who has written extensively on the theory of representing reality in documentary film provide a theoretical context for the work. Technical innovations such as Errol Morris's Interrotron™ and Megatron™ are discussed as they are integral to my interest in the gaze and portrait.

Chapter 3 Other Lives

3. The paper concludes by examining the way early influences, researching the work of photographers, filmmakers and writers, have clarified the way in which I work through the academic process.

Chapter 1 Background Historical, Technical, Cultural and Social Framework

Introduction

In the essay from Chauncey Hare's monograph titled *Interior America*, Hare wrote about the split between his life as a petrochemical engineer and that of a photographer, "*In some fashion, acquisition of the view camera was symptomatic of the growing schism between my life as a discontented engineer and as an emerging photographer. That year I began vomiting in the mornings*".¹

Dick Hebdige's book, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, addresses subcultures as 'style'. That is 'subcultures' that are based in 'time' and 'fashion' for example, hipsters, punks or teddy boys. They are discussed within a particular time and place historically. "*The twin concepts of conjuncture and specificity (each subculture representing a distinctive 'moment' – a particular response to a particular set of circumstances) are therefore indispensable to a study of subcultural style*".² The subjects of *Other Lives* are to some extent beyond time and fashion as someone who dresses as Elvis Presley, a medieval knight or a civil war redactor will always live in a photographic sense and are therefore beyond time or as Hebdige writes '*distinctive moment*'. They are subcultures that are prosaic rather than poetic or historical, that is different to music or fashion subcultures, which tend to be poetic (style fed) and historical (of the time).

A psychological or psychoanalytic analysis of these prosaic or A-historical subcultures would be difficult without mythologising the subjects and I am not aware, nor was I able to locate any major psychological or psychoanalytic studies in this area. Approaches with a psychological element lean towards style-fed subcultures, such as those referred to by Dick Hebdige. They are less problematic in terms of mythologising the subjects involved because they are

¹Hare Chauncey, *Interior America*, 1977, Page 14

²Hebdige Dick, *Subculture the Meaning of Style*, 1979, Page 84

knowing subjects; their culture is a self-aware one of aesthetic distance and historical knowledge. The subjects of *Other Lives*, a 'style less subculture' are not as interested in this kind of awareness or knowing distance. It may perhaps be possible to do such analysis but it was considered to be outside the scope my research.

Instead of taking a psychological or psychoanalytical approach, the work is more concerned with the development and influences of my work within the genre of portraiture.

Context

Making portraits in everyday situations where the subject is familiar and comfortable adds a sense of connection between the photographer, subject and the location. The acceptance of the photographer within the subjects' space is an important part of a consensual style of portraiture. There is always an awareness of being photographed. The portrait is also a reflection of the photographer.



Figure 1 *Ulambana, Cabramatta, 2000, Patricia Verden*

My most recent work prior to the MVA was a documentary on the lives of various ethnic Buddhist groups in Sydney titled *Buddhist*. The work followed the same pattern as previous work as it linked the person and the location in time. It was the first body of work that I completed where titling was essential to provide context. There were no visual clues within the images as far as location was concerned so it was essential to provide commentary so people knew the work was made in Sydney rather than Asia where it would have looked like a documentary of Asian community life, rather than Australian contemporary community life. This was consistent with my earlier work. However it is a clear departure point technically and conceptually for *Other Lives*.

Other Lives is not a documentary as such but more an investigation of my own work within the genre of portraiture. The formal influences of August Sander remain and the interest in documenting groups based on formal societal structures such as families or communities, have become subcultures. All of my previous work has involved a linear narrative and a logical visual connection between what was in the image (connection between the subject and its environment locking it into the time in which it was made - historical) and

placement in a sequence providing clear instructions from the artist to the viewer. The work had also been presented in a small format inviting the viewer with an intimate perspective on the subject. I had begun to feel very dissatisfied with this approach and process. I had not really acknowledged the important influences within genre of portraiture, hence the basis for this research. I started to work in colour for the first time and to work with digital prints. The focus of my work changed from a literal historical documentary to producing a work of fiction where all of the parts made a whole and became one work titled *Other Lives*.

The Social and Cultural Context for Subcultures



Figure 2 Colonel Tom Parker impersonator John Wilde's shrine to Elvis, Marrickville NSW, 2003, Patricia Verden

Introduction The Subjects of *Other Lives*

Other Lives is a photographic work whose subjects are involved in some type of subculture often celebrated in the form of a festival. I have chosen to focus on the subcultures that allow a person to take on another identity such as Elvis Presley, scarecrows, medieval knights and football fans.

The Elvis Presley Subculture

Why do people dress up as Elvis Presley? There is a plethora of material that has been written about the Elvis Presley cultural, social and religious phenomenon, *Elvis Culture Fans, Faith and Image* by Erika Dross; *Reflections on the Birth of the Elvis Faith* by John Strausbaugh and *Elvis People The Cult of the King* by Ted Harrison. The exploitation of Elvis phenomena is also explored in Greil Marcus's book *Dead Elvis*.³ The publications deal with the Elvis Presley phenomena from the fans and impersonators perspective within the context of religious practice. Peter Guralnick's *Last Train to Memphis* and *Careless Love* are very personal portraits of the man and the myth and are considered the master works on Presley by many fans.⁴ Guralnick took over twelve years to research and complete the books. They present an enormous amount of factual information in a way that allows the viewer to draw their own conclusions as to the vulnerability or arrogance of Elvis Presley.

In exploring the Presley subculture and factors that have influenced the work I want to discuss these influences incorporating a social, cultural and religious perspective and then discuss fans.

Elvis Presley is celebrated in the form of festivals such as the Elvis Presley Revival in Parkes, at local Clubs in NSW such as Leagues, Workers and RSL clubs and at informal gatherings such as BBQ's, birthday parties and through fan clubs. All of these events merge social, cultural and religious practices. The aspect of celebrating in the form of festivals where large groups of Presley fans gather is discussed later in this chapter.

It is a wintry Sunday afternoon in downtown Canterbury. I have come to the Canterbury Hurlstone Park RSL Club with John Wilde a fan who impersonates not Elvis, but Colonel Tom Parker, Elvis's manager. We are here to see a Queensland Elvis impersonator called Dean Vegas who the Colonel considers

³Dross Erika, *Elvis Culture Fans, Faith and Image*, University Press of Kansas, 1999
Strausbaugh John, *Reflections on the Birth of the Elvis Faith*, Blast Books, 1995
Harrison Ted, *Elvis People The Cult of the King*, Harper Collins Religious Press, 1992
Marcus Greil, *Dead Elvis*, DoubleBay, 1999

⁴Guralnick Peter, *Last Train to Memphis, Careless Love*, Back Bay Books, 1994, 1999

to be one of the best. We settle in with a drink and say hello to several other Elvis fans who are here for the show. The Colonel has donned his best Elvis is King tee shirt and Sue, one of the other fans is wearing one of similar vintage.

The performance of Elvis's classic repertoire usually commence with some of the faster rock and roll numbers like Jailhouse Rock and Viva Las Vegas, moving into the sexier numbers like Little Egypt and the Edge of Reality. This is often accompanied by a long legged dancer in a diaphanous outfit and then to the tragic romantic numbers of Kentucky Rain, Suspicious Minds and Can't Help Falling In Love With You. The performances always conclude with the American Trilogy that is both religious and revivalist in nature.

In John Strausbaugh's book, *Reflections on the Birth of the Elvis Faith*, Strausbaugh describes a concert that he visited called Good Rockin Tonight. He writes about an performer call Terry Mike Jeffrey a singer who "*does not imitate Elvis, but rather evokes him*".⁵ Terry Mike Jeffrey performs the American Trilogy that parallels the resurrection of Christ. The evocative aspects of the performance never fail to move the audience regardless of whether it is performed in Memphis or Canterbury. It is performed in the white gospel, religious tradition and show time Vegas and is reminiscent of many revivalist church services. There are similarities to traditional church services. The use of smoke like incense, used in Buddhist, Catholic and Orthodox religious practices to take prayers to heaven, the Lord or in the Tibetan tradition blown on the winds from prayer flags to those you love opens the American Trilogy sequence.

Spot lights from a low angle spear into the sky from the stage. Elvis emerges from the smoke in a classic Greek thinker pose backlit by the spotlights. It is emotive, evocative and moving at the same time. He moves slowly and reverently from the stage to the audience. He kisses several women and gives them a scarf drenched in sweat. Like a priest giving the sacrament here is my blood. He touches many and the audience loves it. The music builds to an ear

⁵Strausbaugh John, *Reflections on the Birth of the Elvis Faith*, Page 57, Blast Books, 1995

splitting climax "Glory, glory hallelujah...." The lights dim and he has gone. Elvis has left the building.

I watched many versions of the American Trilogy and I began to realise that the performance of this song is highly ritualistic and religious in nature yet it always linked the audience in a way that religion never can. The link that the audience felt with Elvis Presley can always be impersonated or interpreted or evoked in a way that no one actually can who impersonates religious figures, for example Jesus Christ or the Archbishop of Canterbury. I took photographs of some of these performances, however they never reflected the seamless social and religious feel of the events or were representative of the audience.

John Strausbaugh highlights the way that some men just evoke Elvis Presley although they don't really look like him. This aspect is what I have tried to capture in the work that I have made. It is not so much a descriptive representation of Elvis Presley but a personal interpretation of the people who love and impersonate him.

When I began taking photographs of Elvis Presley impersonators and the fans one of the most interesting aspects for me was the way in which the fans separated what is an extreme passion for the King from their working life. This is the almost always the case, hence a subculture is born.

No two Elvis Presley fans are alike. The thing they all share is a passionate love and reverence for Elvis Presley, the King, with all of the associated merchandise. The passion is demonstrated through collections of memorabilia with many different individual themes, impersonating Elvis at festivals, getting married in Las Vegas by an Elvis impersonator or making what is a pilgrimage to *Graceland*, Memphis Tennessee or perhaps to his birthplace in Tupelo, Mississippi.

The Ultimate Fans

John Wilde known as the Colonel after Colonel Tom Parker, Elvis Presley's Manager, is a social worker who lives in a tiny apartment in Marrickville NSW.

His apartment is a shrine to Elvis Presley. There is no surface that is not covered with Elvis memorabilia from Elvis perfume and hair conditioner to copies of US Esquire magazines touting sordid exposes on Elvis's sex life. He lives alone with Elvis.

Sue works for Australia Post for five hours each day. Her afternoons are free. She lives in a small house on a corner block in Mortdale where she shares her home with her two teenage sons, two dogs and a cat. Her husband works in Newcastle and travels home on the weekend. She too lives with Elvis. When I contacted Sue to arrange to photograph her and the collection Elvis Presley answered on her answering machine.

I met Sue through the Colonel at the Cabravale Diggers Club where I had gone to see an Elvis impersonator called Dean Rias. She was sitting watching in a wild Elvis tee shirt with tiny gold earrings on in the shape of a portrait of Elvis. The Colonel and Sue are what I would call parallel collectors and ultimate fans. They each have their own ideas about what sort of Elvis memorabilia is worth collecting. They both love having some Elvis collectable that the other doesn't have.

There are remarkable similarities between Sue and the Colonel that I think are representative of all fans. I consider them the ultimate fans as they believe that Elvis does live and they live through him. Elvis is not dead but a permanent daily presence in their lives. I have made photographs of both of these people and felt an enormous sense of pathos yet at the same time I have felt connected by sharing Elvis with them.

I found it very hard to photograph them when I first saw their homes. It was totally overwhelming to see the amount of Elvis Presley memorabilia that they had. There was also something intensely personal and private about sharing something that was extraordinarily special.

In working with them over time similarities that all fans or members of subcultures tend to demonstrate emerged. This was evident in the way that they had:

- favourite pieces
- favourite memories associated with pieces
- favourite films and photographs
- favourite Elvis moments that they had shared

and

- favourite Elvis song.

Talking to fans it seems that the favourite song is often the thing that seems to describe the fans connection with Elvis. John's favourite is American Trilogy which is very much in keeping with my impression of him. It is dramatic, religious and totally over the top. Sue's favourite is Can't Help Falling in Love With You, one of the most beautiful and soulful love songs ever written. Sue's collection is very romantic and much more personal than the Colonel. She wears delicate Elvis earrings with her Australia Post uniform creating an interesting sense that she does have another life. But, you have to look closely.

The Festivals

I will describe three festivals that illustrate the point where fantasy and reality combine. The festivals are:

- The Elvis Presley Revival Parkes, NSW – the largest festival of Elvii in Australia
- The Shakespeare on Avon Festival Gloucester, NSW – relieving history
- The Scarecrow Festival Milton, NSW – a pagan ritual.

The festivals focus on celebrating another reality in the form of taking on a character or persona. I have included my perceptions of the events as a way of linking my role as the photographer with those who participate.

There is safety in numbers and it is one of the aspects of the festivals that allows complete strangers to dress up and have fun in public. This is also one of the characteristics of subcultures.

The Elvis Presley Revival Parkes NSW



Figure 3 *Graceland Restaurant, Parkes NSW 1999, Patricia Verden*

The first festival I went to was the Elvis Presley Revival in Parkes, NSW. Each year Graceland Restaurant and Function Centre hosts many of the activities for the commemoration of Elvis Presley's birthday on 8 January. My interest in attending the festival focussed on the Elvis Presley impersonators and the opportunity to photograph many of them performing in Elvis Presley look alike and sound alike competitions. Where is the line between fantasy and reality?

The annual parade of Elvii (plural for a number of Elvis impersonators) which takes place on the Saturday morning of the festival was one of the funniest things I have ever seen. The Elvii were piled on the back of cattle trucks looking a little worst for wear after a long nights partying. Viva Las Vegas one of Elvis Presley's greatest hits, played loudly in the background. No one seemed to have any idea of parade protocols so the convoy of trucks roared through town at 80 km per hour and it was over in seconds. I didn't take one photograph. When I asked one of the locals why it was so quick, he explained that it wasn't over and that they would go around the block and do a couple of circuits of the main street. The Elvii reappeared just as the local had said,

looking very dishevelled. The Elvii struggled to pose on a moving cattle truck while shouting “*Thank you very much*” to the crowd.

The Scarecrow Festival Milton, NSW.



Figure 4 *Girl dressed as scarecrow, Milton Scarecrow Festival, 2003, Patricia Verden*

The Milton Scarecrow Festival is held at different times each year and does not have a consistent theme to celebrate other than allowing people to dress up as live scarecrow or to make inanimate ones. The first Festival was held in September and I associated it with a pagan harvest ritual. The festival has an edge to it as there is something peculiar about people dressing children up as scarecrows. Many of the people do not appear to have hands as they are hidden behind bundles of straw. Faces can be obscured with stockings, cotton wool, Hessian bags or heavy makeup. Scarecrows are judged and classified as live or dead ones. The judging takes place on the Sunday of the Festival with prizes awarded for the best scarecrow.

I have photographed the scarecrows a number of times and the live ones enjoy taking on a persona meant to scare. For them it is a once a year exploration of being an inanimate object that is meant to frighten or amuse.

The Shakespeare on Avon Festival Gloucester, NSW



Figure 5 *Man dressed as a medieval knight, Stratford on Avon Festival, Hunter Valley NSW, 2002, Patricia Verden*

The Stratford on Avon Festival is held each year in the town of Gloucester in the Hunter Valley. The Festival is a celebration of the links between the towns of Stratford in the United Kingdom and Australia and commemorates Shakespeare. Each year the local drama group gives a performance of one of Shakespeare's plays and then over the two days of the Festival people dress up as medieval players, jousting and in general beating one another up.

Photographing against a backdrop of country racetracks, telegraph poles and gum trees added a surreal edge to the event. In discussion with those who were participating in the event many stated how they enjoyed the transformation. Many of those who participated were accountants, administrators, car mechanics and police men.

Technical Changes

Two major technical issues have emerged in the development of *Other Lives*. The first is the change to making work in colour and using a commercial digital printing process. The second is the acknowledgement of the gaze and a central alignment between the photographer and the subject and the way this can be used to create a fictional reality.

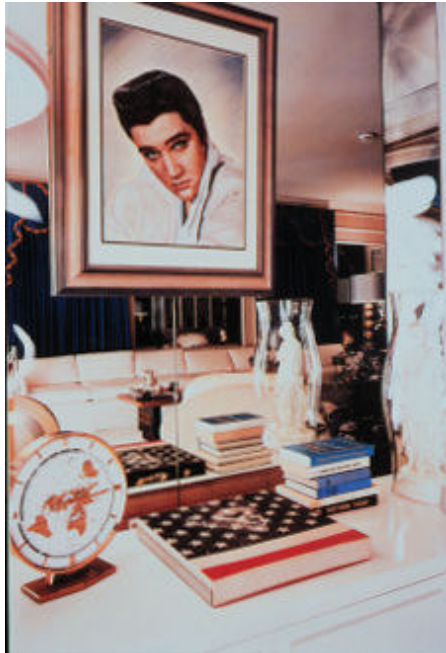


Figure 6 *Graceland Portfolio, 1983, William Eggleston*

The work of the photographer William Eggleston, especially the *Graceland* portfolio consisting of eleven dye transfer photographs taken in 1983, was the reason I began working in colour. I was interested in the portfolio as it connected literally and figuratively to my work with the Elvis Presley impersonators. Although there are no portraits, the portfolio consists of interior landscapes of Graceland, Memphis Tennessee, Elvis Presley's family home. The work has a similarity to the interior portraits of Chauncey Hare, in that they seem to describe a metaphorical interior. I saw the *Graceland* portfolio at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2002. The photographs represent a benchmark for me for all other colour prints in terms of the composition, light and visual interpretation. The velvety quality of the prints was the reason I began started to work with digital printing.

Eggleston turns the gaudy landscape of Graceland into something poignant, tragic and memorable. Eggleston has removed the tacky lurid aspect and through his use of light creates an air of pathos from within the images. They become funerary rather than icons in a museum, which is what Graceland has become. The way that colour in the same way as lighting could be used and manipulated to create another reality became a much more accessible goal for me after seeing the *Graceland* portfolio. It is also a metaphorical portrait of Elvis Presley.

Other Lives – The Genre of Portraiture

I want to compare the styles of four photographers who make portraits, Chauncey Hare, Diane Arbus, August Sander and Richard Avedon. Each photographer is discussed as a way of illustrating how my work differs from its influences. I want to introduce the notion of subcultures by discussing the role that the photographer plays in not just documenting subcultures but also creating a fictive photographic reality. I have linked the work of August Sander who photographed many groups of workers or trades to this Chapter as he makes some interesting observations on classifying people's occupations and what he says about them. This is also extended through the work of Richard Avedon.

The photographs are a consensual style of documentary portraiture that represents an interaction between the photographer and the subject in a structured way, the act of taking a photograph. The people I photograph know they are being photographed in the style of American photographer Diane Arbus and the German photographer August Sander. August Sander's major work, *Man of the Twentieth Century* has continued to influence my work.



Figure 7 **Oakland California, 1972 Chauncey Hare**

Chauncey Hare's work it has been an important conceptual influence. His portraits differ in that they are about an interior landscape that is a reflection of the subject rather than the interaction between the photographer and the subject with the photograph the visual record of that interaction. The idea of how the exterior reveals the interior influenced the work I undertook for *Buddhist* and then in quite a different way *Other Lives*. Hare's choice of subject and the way in which he photographed suggests that the subject's home life is a direct reflection of the subjects individual life. Hare's photographs mirror the internal and the external placing the image within an historical moment. Hare influenced *Other Lives* significantly in terms of how I started to think about the placement and the combination of images that you could use to create a single work. Revisiting *Interior America* I realised that it was possible to use an image that was not a portrait by creating a visual expectation that there should be one, as part of the overall piece. This suggested greater possibilities for the portrait genre and to push the fictitious qualities of photography. The untitled image from *Other Lives* on page 45 is an example of the influence of Hare.

Diane Arbus



Figure 8 *Puerto Rican woman with beauty mark, NYC, 1965, Diane Arbus*

Diane Arbus said, “*Nothing is ever the same as they said it was. It’s what I’ve never seen before that I recognise*”.⁶

Arbus’s quote seems to define the way in which photography can isolate something and make it seem as though you have never seen it before. It defines another reality that only exists because the photograph does. Diane Arbus photographed a number of groups considered subcultures. Those with physical peculiarities and disorders, midgets and dwarfs, circus performers,

Diane Arbus photographed groups including nudists, midgets and what she described as freaks. Arbus stated; “*Most people go through life dreading they’ll have a traumatic experience. These people are born with their trauma. They’ve already passed their test in life. They’re aristocrats*”.⁷ This is important to those subcultures where people may not relate to the subject or they may have a voyeuristic interest. I think that much of the interest in Arbus’s work lies

⁶Arbus Diane, *The Early Years*, <http://photography.about.com/library/weekly/aa110600a.htm>

⁷Arbus Diane, *The Early Years*, <http://photography.about.com/library/weekly/aa110600a.htm>

in the subject as much as the image. We can't stare in reality but we can stare at a photograph. What is interesting about the portrait is that the image also has power as it stares back at us. Portraits that have a strong central position and an eye level gaze that is aligned to the viewer seem to equalise the voyeuristic act of looking.

I am a similar height to Arbus so that most of my work appears to be taken from a low angle. I had never realised that the effect of this heightens the fantasy element in *Other Lives* as the subjects seem larger than life. Arbus used a medium format camera and flash that is similar to the Rollieflex I use. In a review by Elsa Dorfman for the Diane Arbus publication *Untitled*, Dorfman highlighted this aspect, "*Part of the power of these mostly perfect portraits comes from the absolutely square camera format Arbus used. The square has just enough unfamiliarity to hold our attention and make us look hard. It compresses the space and is unlike the computer monitor or screen*".⁸

I think that there is some truth in Dorfman's comment. The effect of using a square format particularly when you truncate the body heightens the awareness of the space around the subject. This was one of the aspects that I started to actively use as a device in *Other Lives*. By centralising the subject with the subject looking directly at the viewer the space on the edge of the image takes on a more dynamic aspect. If a number of portraits are placed together, regardless of the lack of any linear narrative there is still a tendency to go from one image to another. By placing images that are different fictions it enhances this fiction again and again.

⁸Dorfman Elsa, *Untitled* by Diane Arbus, Aperture 1995

August Sander



Figure 9 *Bricklayer's Mate, from Face of Our Time, Cologne 1929, August Sander*

August Sander

August Sander photographed professions in the tradition of the *Ständebuch* or book of trades. Sander wrote of the body of work, which became *Man of the Twentieth Century*; “More than anything else, physiognomy means an understanding of human nature. . . .

We know that people are formed by light and air, their inherited traits, and their actions, and we recognize people and distinguish one from another by their

appearance. We can tell from appearance the work someone does or does not do; we can read in his face whether he is happy or troubled, for life unavoidably leaves its trace there. A well known poem says that every person's story is written plainly on his face, though not everyone can read it. These are runes of a new, but also ancient, language. . . .

“The individual does not make the history of his time, he both impresses himself on it and expresses its meaning. It is possible to record the historical physiognomic image of a whole generation and, with enough knowledge of physiognomy, to make that image speak in photographs. This historical image will become even clearer if we juxtapose pictures typical of the many different groups that make up human society, which together would carry the expression of the time and the sentiments of their group. The time and the group sentiment will be especially evident in certain individuals whom we can designate by the term type. The same observations can be made about sports clubs, musicians, businesses, and similar organizations. Thus the photographer with his camera can grasp the physiognomic image of his time”.⁹

This statement by Sander is important as it assumes that we can tell much about a person if we know them in the context of their job. I think that this is an interesting proposition in relation to subcultures. Any of Sander's subjects could have had other lives that have not been photographed. Therefore Sander's work is to some extent reinforcing typecasting and class rather than really investigating what people were doing. While it is indexed as an historical photographic documentary, they represent certain general truths, it is still a fiction created by the photographer. My work documents the other less visible life.

Sander has influenced all of my work in terms of composition and lighting and continues to do so. The truncated figure such as that in figure 9 is typical of the way in which I have framed images in *Other Lives*. Sanders capacity to make his subjects feel at ease and to give them grace and dignity no matter what their occupation is an extraordinary achievement. Sander photographed notaries,

⁹Sander August, *Man of the Twentieth Century, The Nature and Development of Photography*, Lecture 5, 1931

pastry cooks, industrialists and farm workers in the same consensual way with the subject gazing directly at the photographer. This aspect is something that I have always considered important in that Sander always photographed in a way that never made his subject look ridiculous. He had empathy for all of the subjects that I have tried to emulate. Arbus's work by comparison has an empathy with the subjects, but the use of the flash increases the psychological not just physical distance between her and her subject. It also increases the voyeuristic aspects of the work.

Richard Avedon

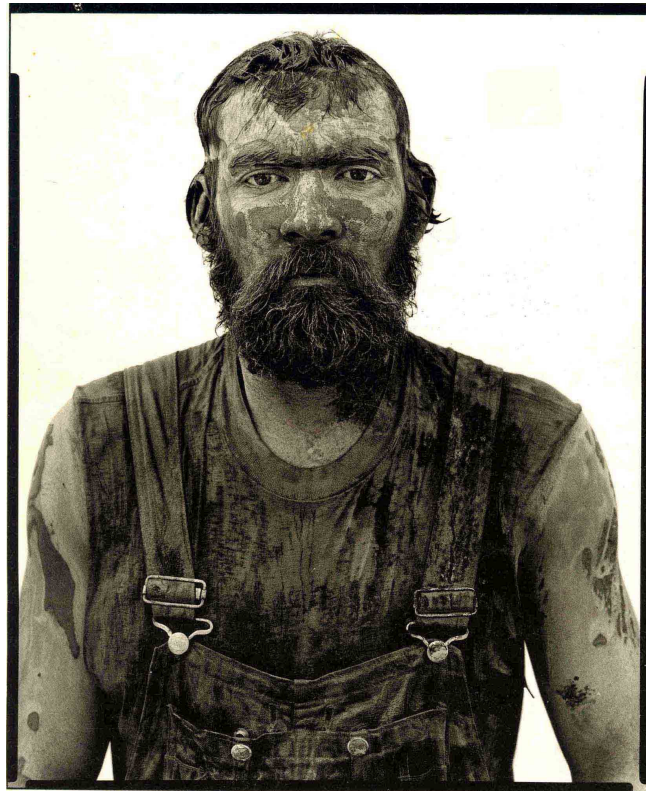


Figure 10 *Red Owens, oil field worker Velma, Oklahoma, 1980, Richard Avedon*

Richard Avedon's book, *In the American West*, is another case where his choice of subject, drifters, abattoir workers, scientists and inmates invoke the creation of a photographic subculture that is a fictional creation of the photographer.

Avedon uses the device of a backdrop to isolate the subject creating a fictional space in which the subject lives. It is also used as a device to promote a singular fiction while using different subjects such as drifters, scientists or inmates. It creates a space where simply by placing any person in the space there is a visually consistent view. The fact that none of the people smile promotes the notion that these people are simply subjects – props that are doing as they are told. *In the American West*, says more about Richard Avedon that it does about anyone in the work. Avedon said, “*This is a fictional West*”, and it is Avedon’s fictional creation.¹⁰ A singular fictive west that exists as only as a photographic documentary. Using a backdrop is also a way of taking the subjects out of their time and place denying any historical connection. What I have always found intriguing about *In the American West* is that Avedon chose to title each image with the place, date and occupation very much in the style of a typical documentary. This to some extent undermines the notion of fiction but does not enhance it.

Figures 8, 9 and 10 highlight the central gaze and the way in which it is used to engage the viewer as much as the photographer. Portraits are a way of allowing us to stare at what we can’t in ‘polite society’. It is impossible to stare or gaze continually into the eyes of a stranger. This highlights my point that the more direct the gaze the more we are engaged and interested and can then go on and create another reality that is photographic. Museums like events and festivals also provide a safe environment in which look at others.

Conclusion

The work of Chauncey Hare influenced my work in the way in which he uses the possessions of the individual to illustrate the subject’s life (*Interior America*). There are similarities to both Arbus and Sander. To some extent the background possessions are part of the fantasy construction of the subject’s life. The placement of the possessions, the framing of the image by the photographer and the photographer’s part in the creation of the reality differs from the fantasies created by Arbus, Sander and Avedon.

¹⁰Avedon Richard, *In the American West*, Thames and Hudson 1985

Arbus highlights the photographer's objectivity as revealer of underlying truths in people's lives. Arbus enters the world of her subjects but they are still the photographer's fiction. Her subjects are revealed often in their home or office or within a location such as Central Park where they have a link with the environment. Arbus goes under the surface of the work to reveal deeper truths, the trauma of a more exposed or real humanity. *Other Lives* undermines this concept as what is revealed is a fantasy world. The subjects maintain their privacy in being photographed as they are costumed. They remain 'unrevealed' in an Arbus sense. In photographing the subjects of *Other Lives* the photographer is complicit with the subject in the creation of the photographic reality.

The work of August Sander is illustrative of certain general truths of man at certain historical moments. Again they are fictitious – what is the truth or reality? The photographer's role in the construction of the reality is highlighted.

Richard Avedon's work is the creation of the 'star' photographer is a kind of meta-genre of portraiture (*In the American West*). It is A-historical and anesthetized where the truth/reality of the subjects lives are distanced or erased. *Other Lives* multiplies this effect, sets it free of its centrally aesthetic subject, and lets the photographic fiction become a mutual, shared production by the photographer and the subject. The photographer participates in the construction of the sub-cultural life. The series of photographs that make up *Other Lives* which are a series of different fictions re-enactor, Elvis impersonator, knight and fan (Arbus, Sander and Avedon only work with one fiction presented in a series), highlights their constructed, contingent character and their separateness from an authentic singular artistic expression (Avedon). They become not one photograph but as the other. The Elvis fiction as fiction of a knight as a fiction of a scarecrow as a fiction of a civil war re-enactor as a fiction of a fan. The fact that there is little in the photographs to place them in an historical time or place or a similarity of subject adds to the fictional quality.

In the book *The Critical Image*, there is an essay titled *Photograph and Fetish*, by Christian Metz that discusses the difference between photography and film. This is relevant to the editing process used for *Other Lives*. "If the filmic off-

frame is substantial, it is because we generally know, or are able to guess more or less precisely, what is going on in it. The character who is off-frame in a photograph, however, will never come into the frame, will never be heard – again death another form of death. The spectator has no empirical knowledge of the contents of the off-frame, but at the same time cannot help imagining some off-frame, hallucinating it, dreaming the shape of this emptiness. It is a projective off-frame (that of the cinema is more introjective), an immaterial, ‘subtle’ one, with no remaining print”.¹¹

To some extent this notion of the off-frame is why there appears to be a cinematic process happening in *Other Lives*. There is a tendency to look towards (for) the next image as you would view a film. The horizontal edge of the image as well as the placement of the image next to it is transformed – one fiction becomes the other as becomes the other.

The Concept of the Hero

I want to conclude this Chapter by briefly touching on the concept of the hero. It is worth considering if part of the connection to the character is seeing themselves as an heroic figure. Most denied this when I asked however; it is telling that people always seemed to behave well rather than badly.

The filmmaker Errol Morris’s film *Mr Death* (1999), is provocative. The film allows Fred Leuchter, a designer of death row devices to tell the world of his theory of the Holocaust. He believes it is a myth. The film is terrifying as it demonstrates how one’s own belief can justify ones reality. The theme is familiar in that conceptually Fred Leuchter is one of the same eccentric characters that have featured in other Morris documentaries and could be any of the people I have photographed in an event or festival situation. Fred is an heroic figure making death more pleasurable for those who have no choice. The film can be compared to French/Israeli documentary *Un Spécialiste* (*The Specialist* 1999), which is reconstructed from video footage that was originally

¹¹Metz Christian, *Photography and Fetish*, Page 161, *Essays on Contemporary Photography, The Critical Image*, Publishers Press (1990)

shot for American television in 1961.¹² The footage shows the trial of war criminal Adolf Eichmann.

The Specialist subtly and relentlessly shows how someone who looks both ordinary and harmless, rather like Fred can methodically plan the mass extermination of Jews without remorse. The editing and digital techniques used create a portrait of evil that is unforgettable. By choosing not to focus on showing the footage of the extermination camps the viewer sees the footage through the eyes of those at the trial and by watching Eichmann's reaction. Eichmann doesn't register anything. He continually justifies everything he did as "he was only following orders". As a parallel, *Mr Death's* Fred Leuchter talks relentlessly about how he wants to make death more humane. He discusses his ideas in a simplistic manner. In this sense it is reminiscent of *The Specialist*, however Fred is not on trial, he is out there designing electric chairs with the support of America.

"Subcultures are therefore expressive forms but what they express is, in the last instance, a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate position and second class lives".¹³

I think this is a very interesting proposition by Hebdige but it illustrates how *Other Lives* is 'style-less and timeless'. All of the subjects of *Other Lives* are figures of power. Elvis Presley; a 'live scarecrow'; the knight; the doctor; the sports fan barracking for a team represents tribal competition. In their own way they represent a rigidity that is no different to other structures within society. It results in a kind of non-developing stasis or a kind of death which never grows or develops. As such the way in which the gaze is used does much to enhance the notion of power as does the size and scale of the work. The aspect of a shared central gaze also has the effect of stasis or symmetry which has a strong effect of power and domination.

¹²Sivan Eyal, *Un Specialiste*, 1999

¹³Hebdige Dick, *Subculture The Meaning of Style*, Page 132

Chapter 2 Conceptual and Technical Influences

What is reality? The Oxford Dictionary defines reality as *being real, likeness to original; existent thing; real existence; what is real; real nature*.

This definition could describe any of the events I photograph. The definition that I introduced in Chapter 1 is another interpretation on reality. Diane Arbus also said, *"I immediately recognize something I have never seen before"*.¹⁴ Arbus's quote defines the way in which photography can isolate something and make it seem as though you have never seen the subject before.

The American film theorist Bill Nichols analyses the way concepts of reality are represented in documentary film through the historical world. The historical world is defined as the world we know and the filmmakers place in it. Nichols also has an interesting perspective on the technical and theoretical notion of the gaze that is relevant to my own work. The aspect of a central gaze is also taken to extreme technical limits by the American filmmaker Errol Morris.

The issue of the gaze is critical to my interpretation of reality as people often perceive that there is something real about a photograph that is taken in a direct, candid way. It implies and authenticates much like a snapshot from a family album. However, when you use this technique to photograph people involved in fantasy situations it creates a tension within the work.

The Gaze in Documentary

Bill Nichols, professor of Cinema Studies at San Francisco State University defines gaze in documentary film as *"the primary markers of stance, or space occupied, are the sound and the image relayed to the viewer. To speak of the camera's gaze is, in that one phrase, to mingle two distinct operations: the literal, mechanical operation of a device to reproduce images and the metaphorical, human process of gazing upon the world. As a machine the camera produces an indexical record of what falls within its visual field. As an*

¹⁴Arbus Diane, The Early Years, <http://photography.about.com/library/weekly/aa110600a.htm>

anthropomorphic extension of the human sensorium the camera reveals not only the world but its operator's preoccupations, subjectivity, and values. The photographic and aural record provides an imprint of its user's ethical, political, and ideological stance as well as an imprint of the visible surface of things".¹⁵

Nichols has defined gaze very broadly "*the primary markers of stance, or space occupied, are the sound and the image relayed to the viewer*". I have assumed that the gaze takes up the full frame of the image taken by the camera. This does not take into account the point of focus or the position of the subject. This is most often within a part of the frame – rarely is the entire frame deliberately out of focus for stylistic reasons. This doesn't necessarily imply that within the gaze that there is a point of focus or direction. This is not addressed in *Representing Reality*.

It is the decision what to focus on within the frame that indicates the director's ethical, political and ideological stance rather than the full frame. As Nichols stresses this point it is worth acknowledging that the director chooses what to focus on not the camera. Stylistic attributes can be used to have the audience believe that something is a documentary when it is not. To illustrate this point I would like to provide some examples that also address ethical issues. For example, what the director chooses to focus on is the ethical decision within the frame.

Example 1- *14 Up*, Michael Apted (1970) Documentary

A young girl is being interviewed and her pet dog is in the background killing a rabbit. The point of focus (camera) changes from the girl being interviewed to the dog killing the rabbit. This is represented as a real event. The girl is then asked what she thinks of this as a way of acknowledging the change of focus both literally and figuratively.

Example 2 Abraham Zapruder's footage of the John F Kennedy's Assassination (1963) Historical footage by amateur photographer

¹⁵Nichols Bill, *Representing Reality*, Page 79, Indiana University Press (1991)

We know this is real as we know the outcome. But is it documentary or fiction? There is a documentary about the film footage as a physical object not what is on the film or the part the film played in history.

The number of versions of the film is an issue of ethics in itself. If you were to use Nichol's criteria that the photographers film /gaze is a reflection of an ethical stance the footage only has value from a futurist perspective. History changes the original context of the film. If nothing had happened and John F Kennedy had not been killed the film would have no value. The fact it records the moment of death is what gives it authenticity and creates an ethical context, not the footage itself.

Example 3 *The Thin Blue Line*, (1988) Errol Morris Documentary

Within the film there is a reconstruction of a statement made to police about a shooting. The point of focus within the frame shows a milk shake falling to the ground. It is visually interesting but does not relate to any event representing a truth. This is a fictional representation that is used to illustrate how we can be manipulated to question/interpret everything that is presented as evidence in a trial by the commentary or other events within the film.

Example 4 *Vernon, Florida*, Errol Morris (1981) Documentary

The turkey hunter talks constantly about the turkey shoot but we never see it. Is it fiction or a documentary of his notion of reality. Does he actually kill turkeys at all? Does the fact that we never see the kill mean it doesn't happen. If you use Nichol's criteria for the gaze is it fiction or documentary?

Example 5 *Nashville*, Robert Altman (1975) Fiction

The film was not scripted as such but used 24 characters interspersed with Nashville residents in the style of a documentary. The actors are miked at all times and filmed from a number of cameras. While the film is seen as fiction as it had a screenplay if you were to use Nichols criteria and look at it as film it could be a documentary. The construction of the film with its mix of real actors/characters and real people from Nashville is another reality.

As part of a presentation on Bill Nichols I showed the examples outlined above. I provided no context for the pieces but asked that the group use the criteria provided by Nichols as a reference point to make a judgement as to whether the film was fiction or non fiction. The group identified the Zapruder footage but no one in the group was able to say decisively if any of the pieces were fiction or non fiction.

How a director edits the film is the ultimate record of the director's ethical, political and ideological stance. The context that the footage is given by the director is just as important as what is in the frame. This notion has been important to my own work as eye contact within a portrait is a decision not just about stylistic interpretation but a reflection of the ethics of the photographer, not the subject of the portrait.

In Nichol's book *Representing Reality* he discusses Errol Morris's style of documentary and the way in which Morris used highly stylised reconstructions in the context of Morris's film *The Thin Blue Line*.¹⁶ The notion of the reconstruction is used extensively in Morris's work. I think all documentary is fictive as it represents the photographer or filmmaker's view. Errol Morris's work makes this aspect more visible.

The Filmmaker, Errol Morris

Morris's later work is the reverse of *Other Lives*. My work has documented the separation between a person's working life and that of a fantasy life. The people I have photographed don't merge the two aspects, in fact they make a point to keep them separate. Morris's work blends the two aspects. This is especially evident in his series for Bravo TV, *First Person* that I will discuss in detail later in the Chapter.

Errol Morris was asked about the importance of eye contact.

“Q *Is eye contact important?*”

¹⁶Nichols Bill, *Representing Reality*, Page 100, Indiana University Press (1991), Errol Morris's film *The Thin Blue Line*, used reconstructions to illustrate different testimonies of murder.

For primitive man it was the difference between life & death. How else could you decide who was friend or foe? Does that hairy beast over there want to invite you to dinner or have you for dinner? Does he see you as a collection of sinew boiling in a pot? It was looking into the eye of that other being.... What are its intentions? What are its thoughts? Modern man has incorporated eye contact into many aspects of life. But what about television? A newscaster looking into the camera is not looking at anyone. He is simply looking into a dead lens. A piece of glass with a diaphragm behind it. And if there's a prompter, the situation is no better. Now, he's simply looking into the "face" of dead copy, verbiage, lines on a page, the prompter version of text splayed out in readable form. What does that mean? I'll tell you what it means, it means NOTHING. None of this is about a relationship.

Q *A relationship? What kind of relationship?*

Say, a relationship between one person and another. It's about the relationship of a person with a machine.

Q *But cameras are machines, aren't they? How could it ever be different?*

I'm so very glad you asked that question. The answer is: There is a way. And that way is the Interrotron".¹⁷

I have watched both series of the *First Person* television series where the Megatron™ was used and the effect of the direct eye contact is like looking into a talking photograph. The point that Morris makes about the TV newsreader is important as it highlights the difference the viewer feels. When you watch the news you are watching someone talking to a teleprompter, where watching *First Person* you feel as though the person is speaking directly to you. There is something confessional about the exchange between Morris, the person being interviewed and the viewer. It becomes a three way confession in the way that a photograph or a documentary can never be. A photograph is limited by being a static form where film allowed an ongoing interaction with the subject.

¹⁷ Morris Errol, Interview on www.errolmorris.com

Chapter 3 *Other Lives*

In 1984 the photographer Chauncey Hare published a book titled *This is Corporate America*.¹⁸ The book documented emotionally abusive work environments in California. Hare was ultimately terminated from his job for “undermining the authority of a federal agency”.¹⁹ Hare later became a family therapist and has spent his life photographing and helping those who are abused in the workplace.

When I proposed to investigate subcultures, the gaze in photography and genre of portraiture for my MVA they were areas that I had always been interested in. Through the research process I realised that my subconscious choice was revealed through *Other Lives*. Reflecting on what I was consciously doing technically, conceptually and visually I recognised the connections within the area of investigation and my own life.

Nichol’s theory helped me recognise the connections between the areas I was investigating especially the construction of a person’s reality - the link between the photograph and the person making it, the dynamics of that process, what influences it technically, ethically and conceptually and the criticality of direct gaze. It is about the conceptual process of looking at other people.

I had always loved Eggleston’s *Graceland* portfolio and Elvis Presley however, it was only through seeing the work first hand that I understood my connection to Eggleston. *Graceland* revealed what I had felt when I first saw the real Graceland in Memphis. The ambiguity I had felt when I visited Graceland were visible in those photographs. My interest relates to with the way in which he uses colour to highlight visual ambiguity, reality or a metaphorical connection. What becomes apparent is there is no truth in photography or film. It is a fictional world created by the photographer or the filmmaker. Whatever the viewer believes is reality.

¹⁸Hare Chauncey, *This is Corporate America*, 1984.

¹⁹Wyatt Judith, *Understanding Work Abuse: Violating Human Needs at Work*, 1984



Figure 11 *Boy re-enactor, Battle of Cedar Creek, USA, 2002, Patricia Verden*

In making *Other Lives* other areas for possible investigation have been revealed. The most evident is a photograph of the small boy dressed as a confederate soldier during a civil war re enactment.²⁰ Re-enactments take place all over America to commemorate civil war battles. On the other side of the hill 15,000 re-enactors were involved in the battle of Cedar Creek in full battle gear, with charging horses, guns and cannons. I found the boy on the hillside playing by himself near the tent. His father and older brothers were involved in the battle.

In future work I want to extend *Other Lives* by exploring the way in which it is possible to create the impression of an historical image in a modern form. This aspect also references back Chapter, August Sander. “*The individual does not make the history of his time, he both impresses himself on it and expresses it’s meaning*”. If I had taken the same photograph as above in black and white rather than colour it could be an original historical photograph. Using colour it could be still from a film set. This aspect of another kind of reality falls outside what I have investigated in *Other Lives*. The image is not typical of *Other Lives*, as the subject is a child, who does not have the same conceptual understanding

²⁰The image was not exhibited as part of Other Lives.

of the creation of another life or involvement in a subculture as referred to in this paper. Rather, it represents an area for further exploration.

The Work for Exhibition

The work for exhibition consists of eight portraits presented as colour digital prints. The subjects are civil war re-enactors, Elvis Presley impersonators and fans, American football fans, people who impersonate scarecrows and medieval knights.

The portraits are untitled and can be viewed as single images but in total form *Other Lives*. Although I have discussed the editing process in Chapter 1 it is worth reiterating the process as it was one of the most important aspects of *Other Lives*. Each of the images adds to the fiction of the previous and then to the next in a non linear way. The result is a work that becomes one piece that mirrors cinema. Each fiction becomes the other.

The work provided an opportunity to observe, participate and photograph others who use subcultures as a parallel life. I became aware that I was not just documenting reality it had become my reality too. It was my other life. This work for presentation is a documentary of *Other Lives* including my own.

Other Lives







