

# Making Things Public Atmospheres of Democracy

edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel



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# Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy Publication

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H L R T S Johannes and Mindy Mann

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## What Is It Like to Be Face to Face with a Great Ape? Chris S. Herzfeld

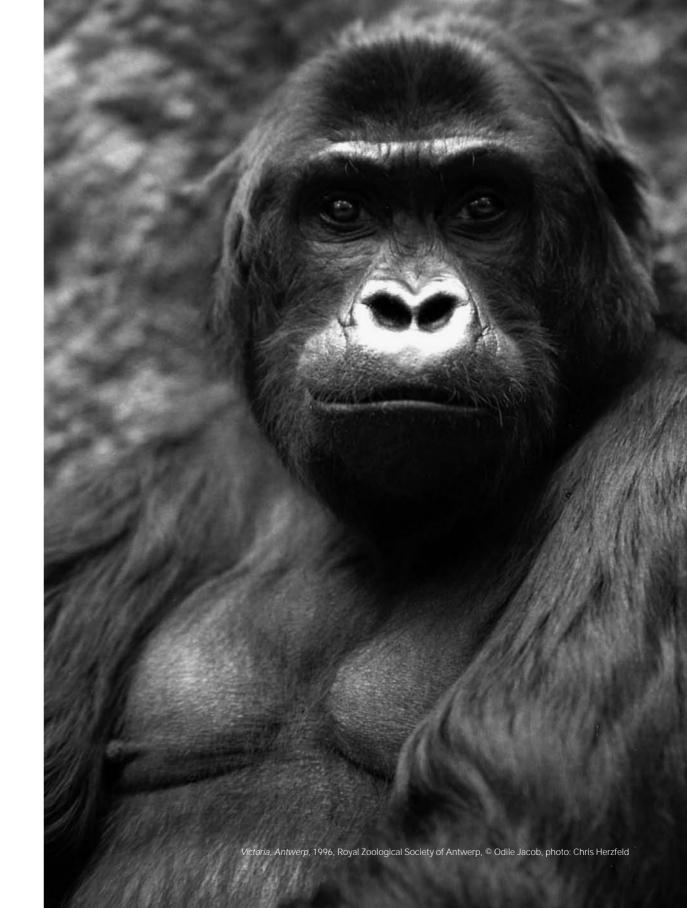
The portrait tradition is an ancient one. Present in the West from the fifth century BCE with the Greek naturalist school, it was, in its most common form, haunted by an impulse-for-realism (faire-réaliste), which stemmed from the requirement to remain faithful to the model and to search for an intimate likeness. *Stricto sensu*, the portrait, it's said, didn't appear until the Renaissance, a period when notions of the individuality and autonomy of the subject, at once unique and particular, were confirmed. When humans were portrayed, court dress, sword, compass, bobbin or lace generally made up an important element of the painting: They therefore contributed, to a decisive degree, to the individualization of the subject. Together they shed light on the story of a life. socially personify a face, tell us who a person is: aristocrat, military hero, geographer, lace-maker or courtesan. Most of the elements that contributed to the pictorial impulse-for-realism automatically exist in photography, itself seemingly marked by "mirror logic":<sup>1</sup> the respect for proportions, handling of shadow, capture through rapid execution<sup>2</sup> and the sharpness of detail.

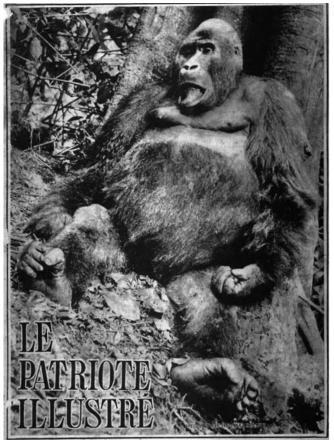
Nevertheless, these factors alone didn't instantly make the portrait possible. Nadar, Etienne Carjat, Julia Margaret Cameron and Clarence White, and later, Eugène Atget, Lewis Hine, August Sander, Edward Steichen, Paul Strand, Dorothea Lange, Richard Avedon and Diane Arbus<sup>3</sup> were not content with portraying identity alone;<sup>4</sup> they managed to convey the hidden character of their subject and to endow it with a presence,<sup>5</sup> a presence that demonstrates how much the force of the image can prove to be more powerful than that of language. The person who is represented is here, while also showing what had been here previously.<sup>6</sup> Faced with this person, the spectator stands in silent contemplation: "It's no accident that the portrait played a central role in the

early days of photography. In the cult of memory dedicated to loved ones who are far away or have passed on, the cultural value of the image found its last refuge."<sup>7</sup> The portrait comes to life, becomes the person; this allows us to feel close to him or her. Employing signs of reality in a medium that has become lasting and transportable, the photograph thus constructs a presence whose intensity especially enables the humanization of disappearance. When those who mean a lot to you are absent, the search for locations where closeness is greatest becomes urgent.

In this way, portrait making consists, in my opinion, of the *construction of a closeness* that operates on various levels: spatial, temporal, emotional, informal, of identification,<sup>8</sup> of memory. While a photo is being taken, the portrait photographer cannot escape this closeness: "Two things always occur: an impression of familiarity and then a feeling that it is absolutely unique. But for

- In fact, the photographic image fits into a whole series of transformations and can't be considered as a simple replication of reality. On the question of verisimilitude see, for example, Anne Wauters, "La photographie, médium de la vraisemblance," in: *Dits. La revue du Musée des arts contemporains de la Communauté française de Belgique*, Grand-Hornu. 3. Autumn-Winter 2003.
- 2 We know that the possibility of taking snapshots did not exist at the beginning: Technical constraints necessitated a very long exposure time.
- 3 See, for example, Beaumont Newhall, The History of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1982 [first edition 1937]; Jean-Claude Lemagny, André Rouillé, Histoire de la Photographie, Bordas, Paris, 1986.
- 4 Michel Frizot et al., *Identités. De Disdéri au photomaton*, Centre National de la Photographie/Editions du Chêne, Paris, 1986.
- 5 Euphrosyne Doxiadis, *Portraits du Fayoum*, Gallimard, Paris, 1995.
- 6 Roland Barthes, "Eléments de sémiologie," in: Communications, 4 (Recherches sémiologiques), Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1964.
- 7 Walter Benjamin, "L'œuvre d'art à l'ère de sa productivité," in: Essais 2, 1935-1940, Denoël/Gonthier, Médiations, Paris, 1983, p. 100 (trans. Sandra Reid).
- 8 Françoise Coblence, "La reconnaissance constitue l'essentiel du lien humain," in: *Peinture en Allemagne 1981*, exhib. cat., Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, Brussels, 1981.





me there is always a point when I identify with them."<sup>9</sup> A "portraitable" being would therefore be a being with whom it could be possible to share a relationship of closeness and even of identification, a "being that matters".<sup>10</sup>

For a portrait to be possible, it is therefore necessary that some closeness is thinkable. When it comes to animals, their relationship with human beings inevitably influences the manner in which they're depicted; it authorizes, or does not, the portrait and directs the way in which the representation should be perceived. "When a painter, in the past, gave his attention to depicting an animal, he would do it according to two approaches: either the animal would be showed as a wild beast, and this would end in a blood-stained painting as in Delacroix's work, or the animal would sit in the calm of his domesticity, as endlessly repeated in the minor paintings of the two last centuries, in tribute to the English thoroughbred horse. Wild or tame, the animal, nevertheless, was always conceived as a body-machine. The skeleton, the muscle, the fang, the sanguine energy, shed or restrained, only being showed in a purely physical presence. And so, never a portrait of an animal! The animal holds the body, but man appropriates the look to himself. And that difference, that alone, has allowed man to use the body of animals for vivisection, in contempt of their suffering."<sup>11</sup> When gorillas were savage beasts that hunters killed with no qualms, they were photographed

- 9 Diane Arbus, Marvin Israel, Diane Arbus, Editions du Chêne, Paris, 1973, p. 1 (trans. Sandra Reid).
- 10 Vinciane Despret, Quand le loup habitera avec l'agneau, Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, Paris, 2002.
- 11 Pierre Sterckx, "Fay et William. Le modèle et son artiste," in: William Wegman, exhib. cat., Galerie Philippe Kriwin, Brussels, 1990.

like trophies, a testimony to the superiority of one nation over another through its fauna (categorized as a "colonial commodity"), emblems of a civilizing project, additions to the showcase of triumphant imperialism. Our similarity to the big apes was therefore irrelevant for a long time: "[...] we must admit, if we look at them living in total liberty, that the great apes have little in common with us. Nothing in their behavior connects them deeply with man, nothing even indicates a clear superiority over monkeys."12 This observation strikes us as rather amazing today.

Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey and Biruté Galdikas were, in fact, fine builders of a human-primate proximity from the moment that we began commandeering the great apes for use in clarifying the origins of humanity. Talking about anthropoids from a new angle provided by the apparatus of long-term fieldwork, these scientists enabled us to discover naughty children, nurturing mothers, complex social relationships and unexpected skills. What's more, in certain situations where humans and captive primates established communal spaces, the great apes seized the opportunities presented to them and demonstrated that they were capable of making use of human objects and knowledge, if need be according to their own methods: Over several days, Nenette<sup>13</sup> can plan the unbolting of all the bolts of her cage. Victoria<sup>14</sup> draws curves and interwoven lines with bird excrement on the glass of her pen. Chantek,<sup>15</sup> familiar with using the toilet, panics in a new cage when he no longer has access to one. Panzee<sup>16</sup> carefully writes little characters that closely resemble human writing, taking care to work within the lines on the page. Dee Dee<sup>17</sup> makes strange objects with long grass, palm leaves, bark and cloth straps. Lana<sup>18</sup> prefers eating her yoghurt with a spoon. Wattana<sup>19</sup> threads beads and makes complicated knots. These practices, which closely resemble our own, haven't failed to move us and to contribute to the construction of proximity. Fulfilling the long cherished desire for direct exchange, primatologists have, furthermore, found a channel that allows great apes themselves to make public what concerns them. Kanzi<sup>20</sup> is capable of using a computer program, comprising dozens of lexigrams, so that he can communicate with his human companions in their language.

Koko<sup>21</sup> responds to the questions of Netsurfers who write in to his website. Researchers are thus relieved of the problem of finding reliable spokespersons: It's the primates who do part of the job. They gain a new closeness.

When the way of looking at apes changes and the relationships between human primates and nonhuman primates are experienced differently, photographers and primatologists assume the right to present other images. They're allowed to put together their photos in such a way that identification is possible.<sup>22</sup> Primates are photographed in a "tight" frame, the gaze alert, in poses that were, up until then, reserved for humans. Their bodies disappear, perhaps even becoming busts, and priority is given to the gaze and facial expression. It is, in fact, difficult to make a full-length portrait of a primate: The postures of the great apes, even when standing on two feet, blur similarities. We've noted: Animal representation often focuses on the body, whereas human beings appropriate the gaze, the vehicle for bonding.

Within this context, certain specific primate traits actively contribute to the identification process. Closely related on a phylogenetic level, anthropoids share many characteristics with man: muscles that permit facial expressions; hairless faces that enable the variety of these movements to be seen clearly; binocular, frontal vision possible thanks to the absence of a muzzle; the presence of a "real nose". Undoubtedly, this physical proxim-

- 12 Louis Pauwels (ed.), L'homme et l'animal, Encyclopédie Planète, Paris, 1964, p. 150 (trans. Sandra Reid).
- 13 Orangutan, Ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes, Paris (Gérard Dousseau, private note, Paris, 2003).
- 14 Gorilla, Antwerp Zoo (personal observation, Antwerp, 1996)
- 15 Orangutan, Atlanta Zoo (Lyn Miles, private note, Atlanta, May 2004)
- 16 Chimpanzee, Language Research Center, Atlanta (personal observation, Atlanta, May 2004).
- 17 Orangutan, Lowry Park Zoo, Tampa (Lorin Milk, private note, 2003)
- 18 Chimpanzee, Language Research Center, Atlanta (personal observation, 2004).
- 19 Orangutan, Ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes, Paris (personal observation, 2003).
- 20 Bonobo, Language Research Center, Atlanta.
- 21 Gorilla, Stanford University, Palo Alto.
- 22 Witness, for example, the cover portrait and the title of Frans de Waal's latest book, My Family Album. Thirty Years of Primate Photography, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003.

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Les grandes chasses au Congo: un gorille au tableau, in: Le Patriote Illustré, vol. 48, no. 4, Brussels, January 24, 1932



*Dr. Robert M. Yerkes with Chim and Panzee*, courtesy of the Yerkes Primate Research Center, Emory University, photo © Yerkes National Primate Research Center 2005

ity makes a difference. Another characteristic of primate portraits is the model's naked appearance: No accessory plays a part in the image. Primates are not there "as somebody," like, for example, an emperor basking in the glow of glory or a famous actress of the last century.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, they, too, are also unique beings. One of the important aspects of the series is that it shows this uniqueness. To make a portrait of an ape leads, therefore, to diverting the conventional connections between social position and the portrait, between the portrait and humanity, between humanity and the face,<sup>24</sup> and to highlighting the personalization of a subject other than human. We could therefore wonder how we've been able to so easily exclude from humanity species totally integrated in the Hominidae family and even (for some of them,<sup>25</sup> given their phylogenetic proximity) in the genus Homo.26



"Les mères artificielles", *Sciences & Avenir*, no. 190, Paris December 1962

Apart from a few photos of anthropoids that appeared in old zoo guides,<sup>27</sup> the first portraits of great apes were nevertheless portraits of *humans with monkey*. The well-known photographs of

- 23 Some photographers have nevertheless focused on this aspect. Roland Fischer, for example, makes portraits that demand the removal of all props. The work's focus lies in revealing a personality devoid of social delineations and disconnected from its network of affiliations, constraints that he accentuates by photographing his subjects naked in swimming pools (Roland Fischer, "Los Angeles Portraits" series).
- 24 Antonina Vallentin, "Visages d'hier. Visages d'aujourd'hui," in: Médecine de France, 38, Olivier Perrin Editeurs, Paris, 1952.
- **25** Cf. the work of Goodman concerning chimpanzees and bonobos. Because of a slightly larger phylogenetic gap and the separation of more ancient species, the orangutans belong to the *Pongo* genus; gorillas to the *Gorilla* genus.
- 26 See, for example, Jeff Hecht, "People and chimps belong together on the family tree," in: *New Scientist*, May 24, 2003, p. 15.
- 27 For example in William T. Hornaday, Popular Official Guide to the New York Zoological Park – with Maps, Plans and Illustrations, New York Zoological Society, eighteenth edition, 1923. See the cover photo and the portrait on p. 82.



Chantek, Chattanooga, 1978, © Chantek Foundation 2005, photo: Billy Weeks

Robert Yerkes (a pioneer of primatology research in the United States) with the bonobo Chim and the chimpanzee Panzee in his arms present the two young primates head-on, in a static pose. It is highly unlikely that the spectator perceived this photo as a group portrait; instead, the monkeys played the role of props.

In experimental psychology laboratories, the photos taken by behavioral scientists create another kind of image that primarily describes experiments undertaken. The relationship between researchers and primates excludes the portrait, because this relationship is purged of all close ties, an imperative condition for the experiments to be both scientific, "objective" ... and possible.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, the situations of cross-fostering<sup>29</sup> experienced by talking apes,<sup>30</sup> some trained apes, or apes raised by humans, are the framework of a communal space favorable to the

emergence of "true" portraits of primates. The ape couldn't be closer to man: He's part of his family. In order to immerse the primate in a world that gives meaning to the learning of a sign language that is truly human, the American anthropologist Lyn Miles raised Chantek like her own child. A photo shows the baby orangutan, its eyes wide open. For Lyn, this is *really* a portrait that has pride of place in her living room among the many other photographs or paintings of Chantek.

Little by little, the photographer learned how to make portraits, how to construct the closeness by which spectators learned to see something as being a portrait. Different choices that are linked to a practice – a subtle sequence of gestures, a group of habits and preferences - therefore tilt photography towards the portrait, while still telling of the photographer's ethos. The use of a lens particular to portrait photography instead of a long focal-length lens<sup>31</sup> that captures an image in the distance, without requiring any contact whatsoever; the choice of a particular diaphragm aperture;<sup>32</sup> the framing; a possible preference for monochrome, all of these contribute to a personalization of the primate and lead the spectator to perceive the photograph as a portrait. The long moments spent with each primate also play a fundamental role: We don't photograph someone we don't know in the same way that we photograph someone we do. To tame is also to draw nearer. When we are very close to one another, our faces

- 28 It should be pointed out that the little rhesus monkey in the photograph is not an anthropoid primate (member of the Hominidae family), but belongs to the Cercopithecidae family. However, it seemed interesting to present an illustration of what was one of the most controversial experiments of ethological research. (Harry F. Harlow, Margaret Kuenne Harlow, "Social deprivation in monkeys," in: *Scientific American*, 207, 1962, pp. 136-146).
- 29 Cross-fostering is a process that consists of raising the offspring of a particular species by members of a different species.
- 30 Cf. the diverse attempts to inculcate apes with a symbolic language (via sign language or different artificial languages created for them) from the 1950s onward.
- 31 The use of this kind of lens, omnipresent in animal photography, doesn't allow for a face-to-face encounter between the photographer and his subject. The flattening of perspective is another result of long-focus photography, diminishing the feeling of intimacy that is more present in photographs taken with a short focal-length lens.
- **32** The use of maximum aperture enables photographers to, for example, emphasize a detail and leave the rest of the image in a blur that preserves the sense of being near.

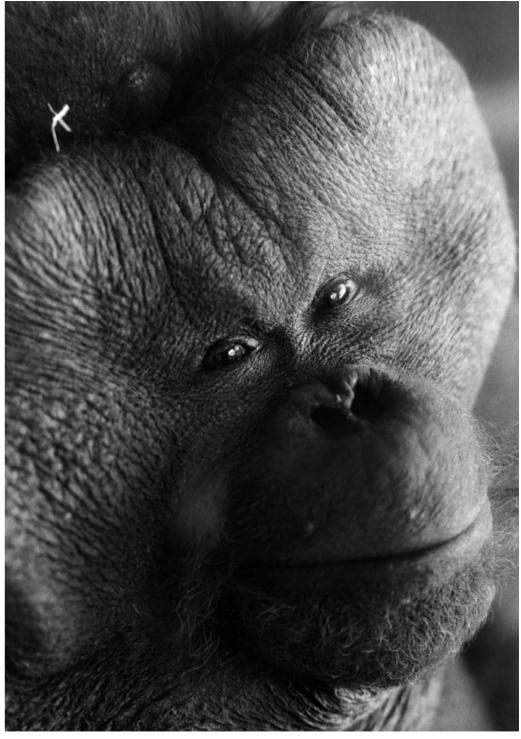


Shirley, Antwerp, 2002, Royal Zoological Society of Antwerp, © Odile Jacob, photo: Chris Herzfeld

separated by just a few dozen inches, the distance fades as soon as gazes merge. Eye contact is often complemented by hand contact – a pane of glass intervening when the anthropoids live in a zoo. A kind of intimacy is established that's difficult to describe: The image takes over, and what appears within the frame is a private matter. And yet, it's precisely this intimacy that allows it to be public. By capturing a moment of life, by making tangible a sharing of emotions and by revealing an exchange of a private nature, a story of two beings, the representation provides a glimpse of something that is the most deeply shared by us all.

The manner in which a work is presented also directs the way we perceive it. The portraits of primates illustrated are, for example, presented in large format. In our tradition, monumentality does not rule out the portrait. The combination of close up and large format opens up a face-toface encounter that is more in keeping with an experience than with contemplation. "If I paint very large paintings [...] it's because I want to be very intimate and human: To paint a small painting is to put yourself outside your experience. [...] When you paint a large painting, you're inside it," Marc Rothko said. We enter into the painting. "We see what we don't see, and we know what we don't know; it's no longer a question of appraisal but of encounter."<sup>33</sup> Close and different, a great ape stands in front of us. Looked at, it looks back at us.

Translated from the French by Sandra Reid



Solok, Paris, 2003, Ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes, Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, © Odile Jacob, photo: Chris Herzfeld

zfeld Face to Face with a Great A