

# The August Sander Project, Year Two: The Politics of the Past through the Lens of the Present

by Tyler Green  
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Fig. 1

Symposia are most often one-day events. Sometimes they run into a second day, say over a Tuesday and Wednesday. The August Sander Project, a collaboration between The Museum of Modern Art and Columbia University that is examining MoMA's 2015 acquisition of a complete set of Sander's *People of the Twentieth Century*, is different: It is unfolding on one day a year over five consecutive years. Each year, nine or 10 historians, critics, curators, and artists come together to share ideas and research related to a single, self-selected portfolio from Sander's project. The 2017 symposium, the second of the series, showed why this extended duration was such a clever idea.

Among the benefits of a rolling five-year symposium is that it prevents the presentations from being too rooted in any single historical moment—especially in any single

political moment—and allows the nearly 50 presenters to touch on many historical moments (as Sander's over-four-decade-long project itself did). That's how it's worked out. In the first symposium, held in September 2016, almost none of the presenters focused on anything related to the international rise of extreme right-wing, nativist politics; this past September, most did. Some of those remarks were pointed, some were more suggestive; surely none were accidental.

MoMA curator Sarah Meister opened year two with Sander's *Woman and Man* portfolio. She said that most of Sander's contemporaries did not make portraits of men and women together, professional portrait studios did. In this small but important way, Sander was declaring an interest in a certain kind of society. Meister noted that the *Woman*

**Fig. 1** August Sander Project symposium participants examine photographs by August Sander from the collection of The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: scottruddevents.com



Fig. 2

and Man portfolio features an outsize number of creatives, architects, painters, and so on, and their partners. “[This] reveals Sander’s determination to use his own priorities as a guiding principle. This was not a photographically illustrated phone book.” (Inspired by Sander’s example and perhaps in sympathy with his priorities, Tina Barney, one of the 2016 presenters, made portraits of symposium participants throughout the day.) Throughout the day, speaker after speaker would extend Meister’s emphasis on Sander’s priorities.

Across the portfolios, one way Sander offered a bridge from a mainstream construction of the German people to his own priorities was by placing an acute emphasis on empathy, argued photographer Fazal Sheikh. He used Sander’s *The Family* portfolio to explain how many of Sander’s images offer us access to people or emotions that may be new to us. Sheikh opened with Sander’s *My Wife in Joy and Sorrow*, the last picture in the immediately preceding portfolio, *Woman and Child*, and a kind of bridge between the two portfolios. It’s a picture of Sander’s own wife, Anna. “When I saw it first, many, many years ago, I did not, at first glance, realize what the image was offering to me,” Sheikh said. “Only in reading the title, which is *My Wife in Joy and Sorrow*, did I begin to realize indeed that the child had been stillborn and that his wife, Anna, is presenting it to me...he’s presenting it to us, to the camera, to all her children.”

Sheikh built to an explanation of how Sander seems to be able to find common cause with people in nearly all of his pictures, and that we should consider how we might apply that lesson now. “Perhaps, in America, at this moment, this idea that one can only speak about a community; like if you’re African American, you can speak about the African

**Fig. 2** *The Painter Otto Dix and His Wife Martha*. 1925–26. Gelatin silver print. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2017 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY



Fig. 3

American community; if you’re Native American, you can do so,” Sheikh said. “But, in my estimation, there’s something divisive and terribly segregationist about that. And I think, perhaps, our nation has become so tethered at the moment that this is the opportunity for us to say, well actually, we need to pursue the notion of making gestures across race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and, perhaps, find a common ground that is more of a human nature.”

The artist Thomas Struth effectively brought Sheikh’s linking of Sander to the construction of empathy to his investigation of *The Persecuted*, a portfolio that features individuals whose only relationship to each other is their troubled relationship with the state. (Each of the 12 pictures in the portfolio is titled simply *Victim of Persecution*. Each picture was taken in about 1938, after the Nazis had risen to power. Struth has spoken often, including on this day, of his family’s own relationship to Germany’s past: His mother was a member of the Hitler Youth and his father fought in the Wehrmacht.) “I learned that identification with a specific group is a potentially dangerous attitude because when you identify with a group, then you establish kind of a counter-relationship with the other groups or with other people.”

Poet Adam Kirsch read selections from his recent collection *Emblems of the Passing World: Poems after Photographs by August Sander*, peppering his poems with analysis to frame his approach. Kirsch, who presented mostly on *The Small-Town Dweller* but also addressed images from other portfolios, argued that Sander’s sitters were interested in reaching beyond the type that Sander presented them as—“gamekeeper,” “washerwoman,” etc.—to try to encourage a potential viewer to empathize with their personhood rather than with their trade. As Kirsch put it, “I

**Fig. 3** Tina Barney photographing symposium participants. Photo: scottruddevents.com

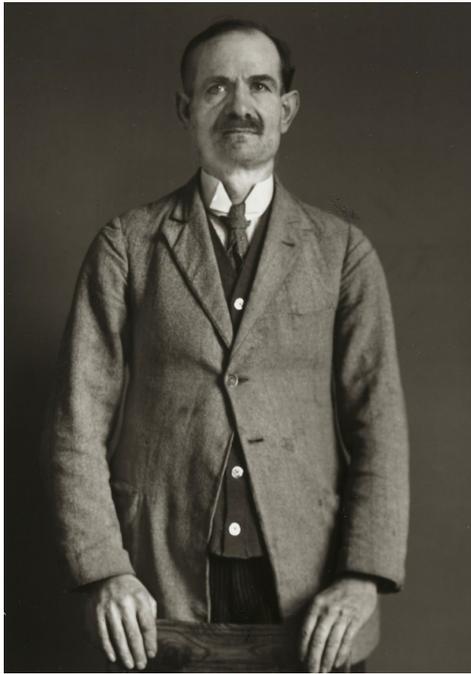


Fig. 4

feel like in these photographs a lot of what you're seeing is the individual at odds with what Sander wants to make of them, resisting the dehumanizing effect of categorization." One of those sitters is a Dr. Braun of the German Federation of Intellectual Innovators, a fringe political figure. Kirsch spotlighted the tension between Sander's portrayal of him and the man's insistence on his place. "The man identified [by Sander] as the leader of a splinter party, while himself destined for obscurity, reminds of the way people and views that once seemed marginal can in troubled times suddenly turn up in the center of power, remaking reality in their own image." Kirsch said, and then paused. "*Leader of a Splinter Party* is from 1931." Another long pause. Then he began to read the poem:

*There was a time when men as clearly mad  
As this would be avoided in the street,  
Or pacified with an indulgent nod  
As he described the glory of the fate  
His plotted-against nation had in store,  
His volume climbing as the audience,  
Busy and having heard it all before  
Would drift off in amused indifference.*

When Kirsch was done with this picture, he looked up at the audience and raised an eyebrow.

**Fig. 4** August Sander. *Leader of a Splinter Party* [Dr. Braun, "German Federation of Intellectual Innovators"]. 1931. Gelatin silver print. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2017 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY



Fig. 5

Harvard arts-and-humanities dean Robin Kelsey argued that Sander's project was less an attempt at categorizing peoples than it was an attempt to extend the typologies of Goethe or Charles Darwin into the photographic sphere. Kelsey's chosen portfolio was *The Judge and the Attorney*, and he offered the example of how, as viewers, we assess and draw meaning through comparative analysis of the attorneys' appearance and attitude—their robes and suits and the ways they carried themselves—as analogous to, say, what Darwin found in the beaks of finches. "I do think it's really, really important not to read August Sander too much backward through the art museum and through the history of photography... as it has been fashioned and to be reminded that his project is of a type itself: it's the typological type," Kelsey said. "It's a type that extends across many different domains and probably has its greatest engine of paradigm-making in natural history." Then Kelsey brought the idea into the present. "One of the things that's striking about this moment is this incredible upsurge in anti-science sentiment in this populist, fascistic movement that we have encountered," he said. "I think it's a good moment to start disentangling what's progressive in science from what's regressive in science."

While Kelsey specifically, pointedly related Sander's project to the present historical moment, Walther Collection

**Fig. 5** Tina Barney. Robin Kelsey photographed at the August Sander Project at The Museum of Modern Art, September 15, 2017. © Tina Barney, Courtesy of Paul Kasmin Gallery



Fig. 6

curator and Bard College professor Brian Wallis examined his chosen portfolio, *Traveling People: Gypsies and Itinerants*, in a manner that was simultaneously more oblique and more pointed. *Gypsies and Itinerants* consists of 14 pictures made between about 1924, when the Nazi Party first contested parliamentary elections, and about 1931. None of the pictures were made after the Nazi Party became the largest parliamentary faction of German's Weimar Republic government in 1932.

Wallis introduced *Three Turks*, a picture of Turkish Roma, and explained that the Turkish Roma experience in Germany was one of seasonal travel and the practice of portable trades. By 1930, which seems to have been the latest this picture could have been taken, there were likely no more than 18,000 Roma in Germany, just one-quarter of one percent of the German population. Wallis added that German police often targeted Roma because they believed they were petty criminals, that some Germans considered Roma intellectually inferior because their skin was darker than that of other people in Germany, and that many Germans considered Roma a threat to the notion of Aryan purity.

**Fig. 6** August Sander. *Gypsy*. c. 1930. Gelatin silver print. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2017 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY



Fig. 7

“Though Sander must have known these prejudices he seemed to have a more benign and romantic view, as reflected in this famous, almost Pictorialist portrait of a young Gypsy boy,” Wallis said, before quoting Sander. “I wish to give neither a critique nor a description of these people, but only to create a piece of contemporary history with my pictures.” Wallis added that several of Sander’s pictures of Roma are pastorals that “confirm romantic stereotypes” and emphasize their tendency to keep to their own.

Wallis spoke after American president Donald Trump had twice attempted to ban Muslims from entering the United States, only to be repudiated by the judiciary, and after Trump had signaled he would try again. (He did, signing a third version of his Muslim ban 10 days after the symposium.) Wallis did not directly compare the treatment of Roma in the early 1930s to the situation of Muslims or Arab Americans in the US, but his implication was unambiguous. While listening to him speak, I looked up what percentage of Americans are Arab American: The percentage is only barely higher than the percentage of Roma in Weimar. Throughout Wallis’s presentation, the auditorium was unusually still.

Sometimes the links to present history were evident even in presentations that didn’t veer toward it. Filmmaker and art historian James Crump detailed how several American

**Fig. 7** August Sander. *The Painter’s Wife [Helene Abelen]*. c. 1926. Gelatin silver print. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2017 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY



Fig. 8

photographers, especially Diane Arbus and Richard Avedon, engaged with Sander's work, especially his *The Scholar* portfolio. (In the context of many of the other talks, even Crump's hewing to 1950s and 1960s offered perspective to how modern-day Americans would be wise to take note of Sander's achievement.) And art historian Elizabeth Otto looked at how Sander's progressivism was evident in how he portrayed women, specifically in *The Elegant Woman* portfolio. Her emphasis on how Sander's leftist politics migrated into his photographs, even in pictures as seemingly apolitical as *The Painter's Wife* or *Mother and Daughter*, served as a reminder of how artists build images to give them multiple meanings. Speaking of artists, Martha Rosler mused on what made Sander interesting to her and her fellow cohort back in the 1960s and '70s. She concluded that their response to Sander was created shaped by the world-wide political processes of the era, which prompted their "re-evaluation of the practices and positioning of Western art and photography" and led them to appreciate Sander's effort to produce an elegant social taxonomy.

Finally, instead of giving a textual presentation, Omer Fast presented his three-dimensional short film *August* (2016). The film was informed by Sander's life, and includes

fictionalized dramatizations of Sander making specific, famous pictures. *August* is a dark film; Sander is presented at the end of his life and nearly blind. Fast dwells much on Sander's supposed memory of his late son, a victim Nazi persecution. The film offers an artist as a maker of objects that inform and motivate us a century on, but also as powerless against both the state and the march of time. At the end of the film a Nazi officer visits Sander, offers himself as a lover of Sander's work, and suggests that he might be the subject of a portrait. Sander agrees to make it. The final scenes are an illustration of the challenges of navigating one's relationship with power while still being true to one's own foundational principles, which is to say the final scenes are as much about Sander's project as they are about our own.

*Tyler Green is the producer/host of The Modern Art Notes Podcast. He is the author of Carleton Watkins: Making the West American, which will be published by University of California Press in 2018.*

Fig. 8 Art historian Elizabeth Otto presenting on August Sander's portfolio *The Elegant Woman*. Photo: scottruddevents.com