

The August Sander Project, Year Four: *People of the Twentieth Century* as *Gesamtkunstwerk*

Hannah Shaw, January 24, 2020



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

“When the lights go down, you’ll know we’re getting started—just like at the opera,” quipped master of ceremonies Noam Elcott. As shades magically unfurled over the room’s large windows, attendees made their way to rows of orange chairs, many clutching cups of coffee and the odd brownie; others, empty-handed, came from examining precious prints that had been laid out for examination on side tables. **[Fig. 1]** It was time for the penultimate meeting of the August Sander Project to begin in earnest. Organized by MoMA curator Sarah Meister and art historian Elcott, this year would feature illuminating presentations on 10 of the 49 portfolios that comprise Sander’s sociological portrait of Germany, *People of the Twentieth Century*.

The opera: it was an off-handed characterization by Elcott, but one that proved remarkably apt. Between sessions—when the shades of Columbia University’s Lenfest Center were again opened to reveal a brilliant, blue sky—the room buzzed with the kind of excited energy one finds at intermission. **[Fig. 2]** At the same time, it was difficult not to see the opera as a useful reference point for what was building over the course of the day. Emotional intelligence, performance, and music were among the central topics of the meeting, and they were woven together into a remarkably unified whole.

While last year began with an exploration of the material elements of *People of the Twentieth Century*, this edition unpacked the portfolios through the lens of personal experience. Presenting on “The Master Craftsman,” artist Oliver Chanarin charted how Sander’s methodology had guided his own work, created in collaboration with Adam Broomberg. Sander was “in the DNA” of some of their notable early projects **[Fig. 3]**, when the duo pursued more traditional forms of documentary photography; when they



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

became disillusioned with “the role of witness,” exploring more impersonal forms of image-making like computer modeling, they remained inspired by Sander’s interest in archetypes.

In the moving presentation that followed, MoMA curator Lucy Gallun considered the portfolio “Woman and Child” from the perspective of a grieving parent. Focusing on Sander’s portrait *My Wife in Joy and Sorrow* [Fig. 4], Gallun demonstrated how the pain of losing his infant son Helmut in 1911, and later his adult son Erich, echoed through Sander’s work. Drawing on her experience of personal loss, Gallun explained that photographs like *My Wife in Joy and Sorrow*, which shows Helmut shortly before his death, have an unusual power in their ability to mark a child’s fleeting existence—to declare that “this really happened.” The insight that taking a photograph can be a ceremonial act, one with an impact separate from that of the resulting image, resonated with Chanarin. During the discussion moderated by art historian Brigid Doherty, Chanarin shared that he found the absence of the “ritual click of the shutter” to be the most depressing aspect of a recent computer modeling project.

As Doherty later observed, the second session zeroed in on “modernity as a problem” for *People of the Twentieth Century*. In his discussion of “The Doctor and the Pharmacist,” historian Andreas Killen argued that the portfolio captured the conflicting nature of medical modernity in Weimar-era Germany. In defiance of the entrenched medical establishment of physicians and public health officials, the population increasingly turned to those who sought the “re-enchantment of the body, health, and healing,” like herbalists and hypnotists. “After all,” Killen remarked, “superstition is also modern.”

In the next presentation, curator Florian Ebner observed that the portfolio “Servants” represented a partial “*Querschnitt* [cross-section]” or “montage,” rather than a “mirror” of the contemporary state of the occupation. The portfolio included servants of the old aristocratic order and of new urban capital, as well as those who were brought into the work through recent trends in migration. Yet it excluded statistically significant categories for the period, like housemaids. During the discussion, the *Querschnitt* emerged as a useful analytical frame to apply to other portfolios, especially when Sander’s insistence on typology seemed ill-fitting. Elcott closed the session by returning to Killen’s presentation; he suggested that the contrasting figures of *The Physician* and *The Herbalist* stood in perfectly for Sander’s dual faith in modern science (characterized by mechanical objectivity) and ancient knowledge (characterized by physiognomy).

The afternoon was dedicated to artists—the fifth group of portfolios, gathered by Sander under this aegis. The first of two post-lunch sessions began with a presentation on “The Actor,” by cultural historian Sabine Hake, focusing on the socially marginalized *Touring Player* [fig. 5] who “hammed it up” for the camera. Hake emphasized that photography had been integral to the construction of actors’ identities since the 19th century; the *Touring Player*, she argued, should also be understood as part of a “larger culture of performativity” in Germany during the period. Similarly, architectural historian and curator Barry Bergdoll saw Sander’s professional relationship to his subjects as the key to understanding “The Architect.” Since Sander counted architectural studies among his commercial photography endeavors, these men were likely clients or potential clients. Largely local practitioners whose styles were very similar, the subjects are also not clearly identifiable as architects—making this far from a clear typology or even *Querschnitt* of the profession.

Fig. 3 Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin. *Rene Vallejo Psychiatric Hospital, Cuba*. 2003. Chromogenic color print. © 2020 Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin

Fig. 4 August Sander. *My Wife in Joy and Sorrow*. 1911. Gelatin silver print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2020 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY

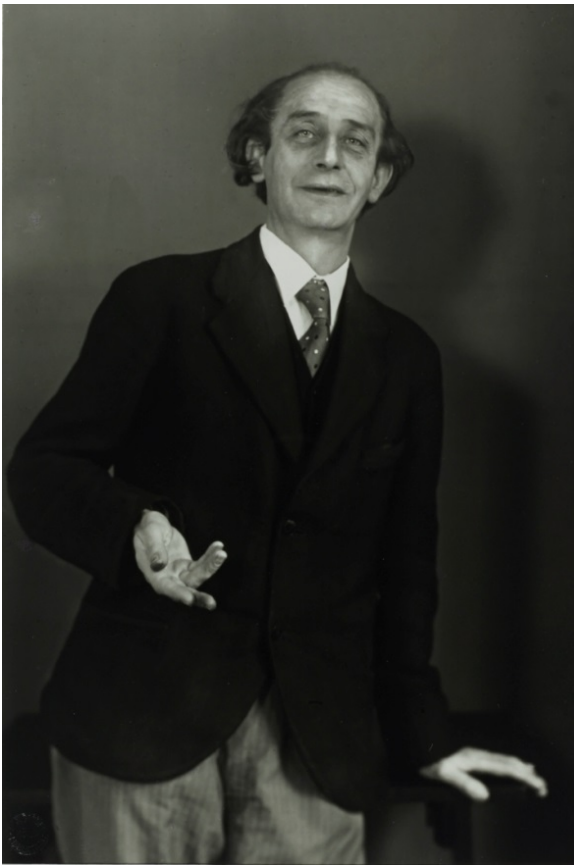


Fig. 5

Presenting on one of the shortest and most inscrutable portfolios, “The Sculptor,” art historian Megan Luke offered a novel interpretation of the theoretical underpinnings of *People of the Twentieth Century*. Looking closely at a radio lecture Sander delivered in 1931, Luke noted the photographer’s use of the verb *prägen* (“to mold”) to describe how his subjects’ faces and physicality were shaped by the historical moment. The verb, Luke continued, “recalls sculptural technique”; in other words, “history is not written on the face, it is cast.” Luke convincingly traced this notion back to Sander’s close friend, the artist Franz Wilhelm Seiwert, who had written two articles in 1929 that analyzed sculpture as an embodiment of epochal change.

Moderating the discussion that followed, art historian Robin Kelsey identified a tension in *People of the Twentieth Century* between individual portfolios and the project as a whole. Each of the portfolios in the session, for example, was on the verge of becoming “a kind of meta-portfolio,” which “explains” but also “threatens to undercut” the larger project. Later, a question posed by one of last year’s presenters, curator Virginia Heckert, probed the subject of structural tension further by reminding the audience of the fraught status of the portfolio itself. In nearly all cases, as Heckert’s session last year made clear, our understanding of what Sander meant to include in a given portfolio is partially speculative, with later generations compelled to fill in the many blanks.

Fig. 5 August Sander. *Touring Player*. 1928–30. Gelatin silver print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2020 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY



Fig. 6

Fig. 6 August Sander. *Writer and Journalist* [Otto Brües]. 1926. Gelatin silver print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2020 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY



Fig. 7

The final session ended the day in a crescendo of energy—and music. Writer Geoff Dyer’s wry presentation began with a group quiz, in which he asked the audience to identify writers from their portraits. The room resounded with names like James Baldwin and Susan Sontag, but fell silent once the members of “The Writer” portfolio appeared. All we know about the writer Otto Brües [Fig. 6], Dyer joked, is that he “looks like this” and was likely “not a happy bunny.” The quiz illustrated Dyer’s larger point that the category of “writer” does not exist in itself, but relies on the recognition of an audience. By this metric, “The Writer” is one of Sander’s least successful portfolios.

Philosopher Lydia Goehr also grappled with feelings of disappointment with her charge, lamenting humorously, “I, too, didn’t like my portfolio.” Like previous presenters, Goehr was baffled by Sander’s selection, noting that only 4 of the 12 men in the “The Composer” were known to her, or even to her father, a prominent German-born composer. Nevertheless, Goehr found the portfolio’s skeleton key in the figure of the talented but hapless Paul Hindemith [Fig. 7], who defied clear classification among modern composers. Drawing on Theodor Adorno, Goehr concluded that in the portfolio—as he had in music—Hindemith revealed that the “edifice of typology is cracked,” and that because it contains such cracks, “the edifice stands on the basis of nothing quite fitting.”

Multifaceted composer and musician George E. Lewis began the last presentation with a tongue-in-cheek reference to Richard

Fig. 7 August Sander. *The Composer* [Paul Hindemith]. c. 1925. Gelatin silver print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2020 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY



Fig. 8

Wagner: “I’m going to take on the Parsifal role, in other words, the *reine Tor* [the innocent fool].... *Parsifal* is, of course, my favorite opera.” By contrasting “The Performing Musician” with the “The Composer,” Lewis identified a current of “collusion” that ran below Sander’s “claims to objectivity.” By reserving the cerebral “headshot” format for the composers, while picturing musicians as laborers with their instruments in hand [Fig. 8], Sander promoted the kind of artistic hierarchies that continue to stereotype artists, and especially artists of color. The portfolio’s original German title, *Der reproduzierende Musiker*, which Lewis noted literally translates as “the reproducing musician,” further underscored Sander’s intellectual disenfranchisement of the performer.

The discussion that followed continued to circle around themes of recognition and legibility. It was an effective place to conclude as we looked ahead to the final meeting of the August Sander Project, in September 2020. These issues point to a more fundamental question for MoMA’s five-year initiative, and for the study of this photographer more broadly: namely, how do we get the most out of Sander? Should we approach *People of the Twentieth Century* as a living document, one that is most powerfully interpreted through our contemporary moment? Or do we gain more when we focus on reading August Sander’s work through the history that cast him?

Hannah Shaw is a PhD candidate in art history at Rutgers University. Her dissertation, “August Sander and the Photographic Conditions of Nazi-Era Germany,” focuses on Sander’s career under fascism.