The August Sander Project, Year Five: *Contradictions Are Key*

Nicole Acheampong, January 4, 2022

Fig. 1

On the second Friday in September, for the fifth and final time, a group of scholars, artists, writers, and curators gathered for the symposium of lectures, conversations, and focused discovery that is the August Sander Project. That Friday looked a bit different than iterations past; after a one-year pause due to the pandemic, the convening was now partially virtual. In MoMA's Founder's Room, in-person presenters directed their observations and queries to those seated with them around a wide, wooden table, as well as to the webcams and large Zoom projection screen that connected contributors and viewers from across the country and other pockets of the world to the day's festivities. Despite these changes, one of the thrills still stuck to tradition: along one wall, photographic prints from August Sander's *People of the Twentieth Century*, rare and arresting as ever, were lined up for lucky viewers. **[Fig. 1]**

"We will preserve our favorite characteristics of past gatherings," said Sarah Meister, the former longtime MoMA curator and new executive director of Aperture, who has co-organized the August Sander Project with art historian and Columbia professor Noam Elcott since 2016. "Close readings of photographs, intellectual risk taking, and returning to the question of this towering historic achievement's relevance today." As Elcott soon emphasized, these readings would be performed, crucially, by incisive thinkers who are not Sander specialists. From their unique intellectual and creative harbors, the participants proceeded to share insights on Sander's project that were as disparate as they were revelatory.

Historian and MoMA curator Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi opened the day with a comparative study, placing Sander's "Portfolio of Archetypes" in fruitful, intercontinental conversation with projects by Irish-born South African photographer Alfred Duggan-Cronin and Sierra Leonean photographer Alphonso Lisk-Carew, both of

Fig. 1 August Sander Project participants in MoMA's Founder's Room. Photo: Will Ragozzino. © 2022 Scott Rudd Events

Fig. 2

whom produced their images contemporaneously with Sander. Woven through all three artists' bodies of works is a thread of performativity: photographic subjects shifting into intentionally stylized characters, in order to either elaborate upon or completely fabricate their roles in their respective societies. These photo-performances are not all equally convincing. Nzewi cast a sharp eye on Duggan-Cronin's "flattening tribal types" made throughout southern Africa, which straightforwardly reinforced "colonial taxonomies of control" and threw into even starker relief Lisk-Carew's sophisticated and malleable depictions of Sierra Leone's elite families.

"I have more questions than answers at this point," the artist Zoe Leonard said at the start of the following presentation, a series of open-ended inquiries into Sander's lesser-known landscape photography. Still, she first laid out the things that we know to be true: that Sander, celebrated for his portraits of people, had in fact made over 4,000 photographs of landscape subjects; that his first show in 1906 was mainly composed of these subjects; that in 1953, he gifted MoMA with 60 prints, approximately one-quarter of which are focused on the countryside, the Rhine River, and the tributaries that course through Germany. Then, Leonard guided listeners through the historical landscape in which these photographs were made—in between the World Wars and alongside calcifying ethno-nationalism—inviting us to wonder with her how these photographs can be complicated in our current moment. In a political atmosphere intent on binding people to land and blood to soil, Leonard asked, "How do these photographs read now…? How does the idea of landscape intersect with ideas of motherland? Fatherland? Homeland?"

Picking up on some of these questions of political fealty, and in a seamless match of subject and scholar, David Gill, German Consul General in New York, presented on "The Official." Flipping rapidly and cyclically between Sander's 12 portraits of German civil servants, Gill offered a close read of these individuals' carefully constructed uniforms. In portraits spanning from the German Empire's last decade through to the final years of the Weimar Republic before the country's declension into Nazism, Germany's shifting politics are revealed via these government workers' sartorial allegiances. Gill zeroed in on details as particular as the sharpness of their suits and (thrillingly!) the volume of their moustaches. **[Fig. 2]** He also considered his own position as a German official, ending the presentation with a reflection on the country's civic future, and the role he plays in shaping it.

Deborah Willis led Nzewi, Leonard, and Gill in the day's first panel discussion, connecting each of their presentations to the theme of "protection": as Sander's civil servants made political armor out of their moustaches and attire, so too did the studied gestures of Lisk-Carew's subjects offer a safeguard of sorts, against prevailing, colonialist stereotypes. Similarly, Sander's photographs of the German countryside, in their implicit patriotism and implied borders, could be read as protective, nation-building work. Still, as is typical of Sander, these projects self-contradict, often exposing more than they shield. Sander's portfolio of so-called archetypes is pointedly ambiguous; the "types" are oddly difficult to differentiate. The river that courses freely through his landscape portraits belies the static nature of borders, its basin touching multiple nations; the river undoes the very notion of nation.

During the second session of the day, curator Sarah Kennel highlighted the strangeness of Sander's portfolio "The Industrialist." Kennel contended that these portraits reveal much less about the

Fig. 2 August Sander. *Police Officer*. 1925. Gelatin silver print, 10 3⁄16 × 7 3⁄8" (25.8 × 18.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2022 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur – August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

subjects' professional or inner lives than is typical of Sander's work. The seven men are pictured in poses of indistinguishable stillness, and each portrait background is impenetrably neutral. Kennel combed the portfolio for clues that unveil, if not the psychological state of these sitters, then that of the artist himself. Upon closer inspection, the chosen subjects are all identifiable as representatives of their respective family businesses, and in this way can also be seen as symbols of Sander's enduring preoccupation with the family unit. Even in a portfolio as seemingly impersonal as "The Industrialist," kinship emerges, through Sander's lens, as the most salient organizing principal, and the truest form of inherited capital.

Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Mia Fineman, fresh off her work on the *New Woman Behind the Camera* exhibition, excavated Sander's portfolio "The Woman in Intellectual and Practical Occupation" for signs of the new woman that resided in 1920s and '30s Germany. Of the 20 portraits in this relatively large portfolio, only one frames a woman in the context of her working environment: that is *Kontoristin* [Office Worker] (1928). **[Fig. 3]** (The exception to the rule is likely no coincidence, given that, as Fineman pointed out, the year when it was made marked "a period when secretarial work became a so-called 'pink profession.'") Subtle rebuttals to Sander's context-less compositions nonetheless persist, namely via his striking 1925 portrait of the painter Marta Hegemann. **[Fig. 4]** Having painted half her face with birds, waves, a heart, a star—recognizable iconography from her oeuvre—Hegemann positioned herself as Sander's collaborator rather than subject, "assert[ing] her agency as a professional artist in her own right." This portrait can be considered one of many "radical singularities," to borrow moderator Luis Pérez-Oramas's phrase from the subsequent panel discussion, that characterize *People of the Twentieth Century*. As Fineman summarized, "Sander's photographs always exceed their classifications." The presenters in the third session of the day were equally entranced with the expansive possibilities of Sander's work. We heard from the artist's great-grandson, Julian Sander, who serves as director of the August Sander Foundation. Julian Sander narrated "The Aristocrat" portfolio, offering, in the words of Pérez-Oramas, an "architectural read" of the conspicuously small set of five portraits. Julian Sander pushed against subjecting these historical photographs to an overly contemporary gaze, instead emphasizing how the artist's portraits of the interbellum elite represent a very small part of a nuanced whole.

After the aristocrats, "The Clergyman" took center stage. Art historian and critic Thomas Crow assessed the performed pieties of the Catholic clergy that Sander photographed in the early decades of the 20th century: a nun photographed without her habit, so that "no enveloping costume obscure[s] the pious self-containment of her pose"; Catholic priests photographed against white backdrops emptied of any reference to their hallowed environment or role. Cistercian monks posing with unadulterated and unholy pride in front of their elaborately ornate library. Are these portraits, Crow asked, meant to "emphasize the sly calculating worldliness" of the Catholic clergy? By contrast, Sander's images of Protestant leadership firmly and energetically embed them within

Fig. 3 August Sander. *Office Worker*. c. 1928. Gelatin silver print, 10 3/16 × 7 3/8" (25.8 × 18.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2022 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur – August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ ARS, NY

Fig. 4 August Sander. *Painter [Marta Hegemann]*. c. 1925. Gelatin silver print, 10 3/16 × 7 3/8" (25.8 × 18.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2022 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur – August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

their communities, underscoring Sander's barely hidden bias: "Catholicism detaches and Protestantism bonds."

In Antonio Somaini's presentation, the professor's read of the portfolio "The Teacher and Educator" was framed by Walter Benjamin's pivotal 1931 essay "Little History of Photography." Of Sander's physiognomic portfolios, Benjamin wrote, "Sander's work is more than a picture book. It is a *training atlas* [Übungsatlas]." With a proper translation of Benjamin's German and a deep dive into visual epistemology, Somaini returns Sander's project to the long tradition of scientific atlases and its resonances with learning, teaching, and mapping new worlds.

The picture atlas also invokes questions of mobility, as Sarah Kennel pondered during the session's panel discussion. So many photos and people in each of Sander's nominally specific portfolios seem like they could fluidly travel to another. For example, Kennel noted, an intimate photograph from "The Clergyman" looks as though it were originally conceived as a portrait for "The Family" portfolio; and throughout the project, several subjects reappear in new roles. These "slippages," these insistently flexible identities, undo the very tenets of physiognomy and bring us back to the day's refrain: in Sander's work, the contradictions may very well be the point.

"Different levels of trouble haunt these images," said art historian and writer Molly Nesbitt about halfway through her presentation on the portfolio "The Street and Street Life." The day's final session was a series of lively looks at Sander's relationship to city, or *Großstadt*, spaces. Nesbitt offered a tour of Sander's off-kilter urban photographs in which the horizon line is hard to find and "the street itself resisted him." The artist privileged his figures over the ground they stand on, and so some of the photographs suggest their subjects are floating, one of many illusions of framing that characterize the portfolio. This odd and lurching work finds its footing only when Sander returns home. In *Wochenmarkt in Köln, um 1925* [Weekly Market in Cologne, c. 1925], the photo's key sightlines point the viewer to a dark building at the end of a busy street. **[Fig. 5]** This "vanishing point," Nesbitt reveals, is not an anonymous structure but is, in fact, Sander's family residence: a safe haven recognizable to his kin, a visual cue in which to rest after the street's strange chaos

MoMA's chief photography curator, Clément Chéroux, looked at the "Festivities" portfolio, narrowing in on Sander's photographs of the Lumpenballs—eclectic, private parties thrown by the radical artist group known as the Cologne Progressives. **[Fig. 6]** These "rag balls" gathered artists and intellectuals with a penchant for cross-dressing: the wealthy dressed as poor, men slipped into womenswear, and self-avowed intellectuals and artists descended on taverns and studios for colorful celebrations of idiocy and regression. Sander's photographs, Chéroux argued, are not only festive documentation but also testimonies to the Dada spirit that energized the Cologne Progressives' politics and art practice. The title of Chéroux's talk, "Dada Sander," is "deliberately provocative. My point is not to say Sander was Dadaist," he explained, but rather that Sander managed to preserve the movement's essence in his

Fig. 5 August Sander. *Weekly Market in Cologne*. c. 1925. Gelatin silver print, 10 3/16 × 7 3/8" (25.8 × 18.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander.

Fig. 6 August Sander. *Artists' Carnival in Cologne*. 1931. Gelatin silver print, 10 3/16 × 7 3/8" (25.8 × 18.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander.

Fig. 7

otherwise formally compartmentalized project. “This is, for me, the most exciting aspect…. It reveals an unexpected and surprising direction” for the artist.

To close the last session of the final convening of the August Sander Project, theorist and writer Tina Campt delivered a near-lyrical narration of the artist’s “Foreign Workers” portfolio. She considers this body of work to be as captivating as it is challenging. “Foreign Workers” mainly features Ukrainian expatriates, all agricultural workers, not city dwellers, despite Sander’s cataloguing them within the “Die Großstadt” folder. And despite the portfolio’s title, the people pictured are not shown at work but rather arranged in poses of rest. The poses are stiff. Their accessories (or props) accentuate a vision of leisure—an accordion, a motorcycle, a printed, formal dress. Campt examined their faces. She noted their apprehensive expressions. She asked herself, “How does what I am told I am seeing relate to that which stands before the camera?” She asked us, “What do we do with the gaps that remain?”

In early 1940s Germany, when these photographs were made, the labor of foreign workers like those shown was coerced, if not forced. That brutal reality escapes the frame. Campt plumbed this gap; here, again, are Sander’s photo-performances, new slippages that contradict and complicate the artist’s professed project of objectivity.

During the open panel discussion, Deborah Willis asked about the order and disorder alternately animating these final portfolios. “I think often we come to Sander’s project with the expectation that taxonomy will prevail,” said Nesbitt—that logic will descend upon the project and allow everything to “click.” She recommended instead considering the body of work as a collection of singular exchanges, as myriad daily negotiations between photographer and subject. Chéroux likewise encouraged us to imagine the artist not as a fixed form or a stand-in for one truth: “We can always reinvent Sander.” Campt spoke to the inherent tensions of Sander’s attachment to typologies. As each of the day’s wide-ranging presentations exemplified, these tensions can illuminate as frequently as they obscure the artist’s varied motives. “How do we attend to that in a way that respects the aspirations of the project and also allows us to access that which the camera cannot attain?,” Campt wondered.

The August Sander Project, over the last six years, has been an exercise in profound, prolonged attending. The gathered presenters, through their patient looking at and sharp questioning of *People of the Twentieth Century*, have uncovered many compositions and contradictions of not just Sander’s universe but our contemporary world as well. They have moved these photographs into urgent, new conversations. They have considered the camera’s limits; graciously, they have widened the frame. **[Fig. 7]**

Nicole Acheampong is a writer and editor based in New York. Her words have appeared in Aperture magazine, Art and America, The Atlantic, *and* New York Review of Books, *among other places.*

Fig. 7 August Sander Project participants. Photo: Will Ragozzino. © 2022 Scott Rudd Events