

The August Sander Project, Year Three: A Kaleidoscopic Vision of *People of the Twentieth Century*

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Jan 30, 2019



Fig. 1

The day unfolded before some 100 pairs of quiet eyes. We had convened for the third time to discuss August Sander's *People of the Twentieth Century* project, and portraits from 10 project portfolios had been hung around the room's perimeter. Somewhat appropriately, this arrangement left the audience penned in by these enigmatic subjects—spatially, but also psychologically. They beckoned during breaks and pauses in the day's momentum, spurring hungry questions that even a day of close study could not begin to satisfy. "No, but really," one audience member found himself repeating over successive courses at lunch, "why does the inventor appear that way?" This, of course, is the power of Sander's elusive project—and the draw of MoMA's

Fig. 1 A glass plate negative by August Sander showing the application of red new coccine for retouching. Courtesy Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne. © 2019 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY



Fig. 2

five-year August Sander Project, which invites leading academics, artists, and curators to present on one of the 45 portfolios that comprise Sander's unfinished sociological study of Germany.

Over the past two years, the August Sander Project has thrived by embracing the essentially unstable nature of *People of the Twentieth Century*, and in the latest symposium this interplay between vivid physical presence and deep structural uncertainty came alive immediately. Drawing extensively on the material record of Sander's prints and negatives, the first panel delved into the hidden life of *People of the Twentieth Century*, exploring the multiple possibilities generated by its incompleteness. Getty curator Virginia Heckert re-imagined the portfolio "The Farmer's Child and the Mother" through the lens of her museum's extensive collection of Sander photographs, including several portraits in this genre that do not appear in the official reconstruction of the portfolio that was completed in 2002. Next came Gabriele Conrath-Scholl, the director of the August Sander Archive housed by Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur in Cologne, Germany. Using the example of "The Farmer—His Life and Work," Conrath-Scholl walked the audience through the

Fig. 2 August Sander. *Sander's studio/home, Cologne: Laboratory (Shelves with chemicals and cupboard with poison)*. c. 1930–42. Courtesy the J. Paul Getty Museum. © 2019 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY



Fig. 3

complicated, often speculative process of reconstructing the artist's intentions. Of the 14 photographs that comprise the 2002 reconstruction, she explained, nine had been selected based on notations written on the negative or on the existence of a mounted print suitable for a portfolio; five were included in adherence to the first reconstruction, undertaken in 1980.

If these complexities left audience members feeling as though the ground beneath their feet was shifting, the final presentation of the first panel extended an invitation to step onto solid ground. Moving from Sander's choice of camera to his preference for the portfolio as a mode of organization, MoMA conservator Lee Ann Daffner used "Farming Types" to establish a shared vocabulary for understanding the photographer's practice (figs. 1 and 2).

In the second panel we zoomed out—way out—to focus on artificial intelligence and the evolving contours of scientific knowledge. But this was, in fact, familiar territory, as we confronted oft-recurring questions in the discourse on Sander, beginning with, What are the consequences of creating typologies and systems of scientific classification more broadly? In his presentation on "The Farmer's Family," artist Trevor Paglen applied this debate to our contemporary, Big Data-driven world; drawing on his own work on image databases like ImageNet, used to train computers' neural networks, Paglen warned that systems of classification today are designed not only to extract value, but also to control populations through repressive means. Historian of science Peter Galison then took the audience on a whirlwind 300-year tour of the shifting parameters used to establish "ideal types" in science, and the visual atlases created to circulate knowledge of them. He concluded with Sander's era, the 1920s and '30s, when typological atlases of people

Fig. 3 August Sander. *Working Students*. 1926. Gelatin silver print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2019 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY



Fig. 4

were largely constructed based on race—or, as Galison put it, using a "racial-facial" logic. Taking the portfolio "The Technician and Inventor" as an example, Galison argued that Sander's approach to typology represented a point of resistance to the "racial-facial," because Sander classified people based on profession—what they did—rather than on their racial or ethnic backgrounds. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a close reading of Sander's photographs took a backseat to broader philosophical and scientific concerns—that is, the epistemological underpinnings that made Sander's project possible in his time and relevant in ours. In the discussion that followed, moderator and MoMA chief curator of Photography Quentin Bajac added a final facet to the consideration of types, drawing a comparison between Sander and the Austrian novelist Robert Musil. Reading from *The Man without Qualities*, Bajac cited Musil's observation that the "futurist portrait of the engineer" clashes significantly with the mundane reality of the profession's practitioners. The contradiction between individual and type looms over Sander and his contemporaries' projects, Bajac argued, like a "black hole."

Things took a phenomenological turn after lunch; as art historian and panel moderator Lynette Roth pointed out, the third panel "put the photographer back behind the camera." In conversation with MoMA curator and August Sander Project co-convenor Sarah Meister, photographer Rineke Dijkstra juxtaposed her own work with Sander's portfolio "The Student." Comprised of portraits of young

Fig. 4 Rineke Dijkstra. *Odessa, Ukraine, August 4, 1993*. 1993. Chromogenic color print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Agnes Gund. © 2019 Rineke Dijkstra



Fig. 5

people brimming with assertiveness, yet also revealing a fragile self-possession—as in *Working Students* (fig. 3)—Sander’s portfolio provided a fascinating comparison with Dijkstra’s portraits, which frequently capture the delicate process of coming of age (fig. 4). While Dijkstra highlighted three compelling categories of overlap with Sander—the pose, the gaze, and the group—some of the most fascinating moments during her talk emerged from small observations about the concentration and receptiveness to chance required during a photo shoot. In the following presentation, curator Peter Galassi compared Sander’s portfolio “The Politician” to Judith Joy Ross’s 1986–87 series on US politicians (fig. 5). Galassi cited Ross’s reflections on her own practice, including this memorable statement: “I’m like any other hunter. I go into predator mode.” This underscored the distance between Sander’s approach, rooted in his commercial practice and the pursuit of objectivity, and that of contemporary art photographers, even those following closely in Sander’s footsteps. Ross, who happened to be in the audience, further distanced herself from Sander when she shared her motivation for the project, explaining during the discussion, “I photographed

Fig. 5 Judith Joy Ross. *Senator Strom Thurmond, Republican, South Carolina*. 1987. Gelatin silver printing-out-paper print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of Shirley C. Burden. © 2019 Judith Joy Ross; August Sander. *Member of Parliament*



politicians because I couldn’t believe that they were real.” The presentations in the final panel of the day refracted Sander’s work through various methodological lenses, but also circled back to themes from earlier panels. Delivered with great rhetorical flair, cultural historian Sander Gilman’s presentation on “The Soldier” was informed by his recent study of posture. In the notoriously rigid outline of the soldier’s body, Gilman found a proxy for the false promise of physiognomy: the soldier’s erect posture, after all, revealed little of his inner life or character. Echoing the first panel, the next presentation by Germanist and media theorist Thomas Levin honed in on Sander’s use of the portfolio as the basic unit of argumentation in *People of the Twentieth Century*. For Levin, the inclusion of a portrait of a down-on-his-luck match-seller (fig. 6) in “The Businessman” portfolio fractured any sense that a single, unified meaning could be assigned to the typically bourgeois profession, and thus revealed the narrative logic of montage. The final presentation of the panel turned again to the topic of Germany’s younger generation. To unpack the complexities of the portfolio “City Youth,” which includes Sander’s iconic portrait of a high school student (fig. 7), fashion history and

(*Democrat*). 1927. Gelatin silver print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2019 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY



Fig. 6

theory professor Caroline Evans introduced three temporal modes: shutter time, historical time, and photographic time. These categories allowed Evans to focus in on the revealing gestures and fashions inscribed in Sander's photographs during the fleeting moments in which they were taken—and then to step back, to consider the medium's unique capacity for allowing the past to intersect with the present.

In the day's final minutes of discussion, Gilman warned against our current tendency to lionize leftist struggles during the fascist era in Europe, while allowing instances of collaboration with or acquiescence to authoritarian regimes to disappear from scholarly view. Gilman's comments were focused specifically on Sander's sons: the radical affiliations of his eldest, Erich, are frequently invoked, just as his younger son Gunther's participation in the Wehrmacht is rarely mentioned. But Sander's own career under National Socialism has also remained largely unexamined. As Gilman's brief comment indicates, much exciting work remains to be done to unearth the political nuances of Sander's story and the many lives his portraits lived. In the meantime, though, co-convenor and art historian Noam Elcott's closing remarks ring true: "Had we removed the word 'Sander' from each panel, it would not have been clear that we were addressing the same body of work, the same figure. You have brought more facets to this material than we thought possible. Thank you for that."

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Fig. 6 August Sander. *Match-seller*. 1927. Gelatin silver print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2019 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY



Fig. 7

Fig. 7 August Sander. *High School Student*. 1926. Gelatin silver print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of the family of August Sander. © 2019 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv, Cologne/ARS, NY