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# THEORETICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS OF THE DEADPAN AESTHETICS

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## Abstract

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the deadpan aesthetics is a part of photography. However, this topic has not been covered sufficiently. In the area of photography, the deadpan aesthetics represents a relatively new summarizing term for similar approaches and visual languages which can be found as fragments in different phases of the history of photography. The objective of the paper is to create a complex theoretical source by selecting relevant facts from the history of photography and identifying their mutual connection with the deadpan aesthetics. The paper also clarifies the historical fundamentals of the term deadpan. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it became the term representing a technically formed aesthetics based on its historical substance. Except for the formalistic rules we elucidated in the paper, the deadpan aesthetics is inherently formed also by the effort to create as objective factual visual record as possible. In that manner, we placed the deadpan aesthetics in a position of a specific, scientific and systematic methodology frequently used by photographers. Creations of the authors mentioned in the papers represent particular phases in the development of this aesthetics. The overview of basic approaches, strategies and formal characteristics of the deadpan aesthetics can serve as a basis for photographic practice.

*Keywords:* photography, deadpan, aesthetics, new objectivity

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## 1. Introduction

In today's fragmented postmodern society, we could argue whether it is feasible to identify some of the visual languages as important and dominant. Despite current aesthetic and social plurality being unlimited by the number of approaches, some of these formal aesthetic approaches are markedly more respected and preferred. According to the Czech theorist Robert Silverio "the postmodern era does not necessarily destroy plurality. It also prefers its own favourite mainstreams." [1, p. 90] We can say that there exists a personal pluralism of infinite possibilities and that there are two or three public mainstreams which have been becoming a formal basis in the field of visual communication. In galleries and professional publications, we can see more than just photographic works which seem to be somehow alike. The deadpan

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photographs or photographs created in the context of the deadpan aesthetics are the preferred style, the visual language in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In photography, it represents rather new summarizing denotation of similar approaches and visual languages. Nevertheless, we maintain that historical phases of its development are scattered throughout almost the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century. The objective of this paper is to group these historical fragments and to put them into context with the current term, which describes this technically formed, descriptive aesthetics based on a scientific rationalization. Another objective is to substantiate the relevance of naming this aesthetics by the term deadpan, whose foundations can be found in theatrical terminology. This paper also briefly introduces basic concepts and iconic personalities of the deadpan aesthetics.

## 2. Deadpan aesthetics

The deadpan aesthetics is considered a technically perfect photograph which depicts a landscape, still life or a person by a direct centred composition. The photographs usually have a single central theme (a mining tower, face, mound of clay, etc.), the background is usually unimportant (which does not apply for more sociologically oriented concepts), ignored or is neutral and sterile. Other photographs are based on the richness of motifs (immense landscape, crowd of people, clump of trees, etc.), in which it is impossible to identify the main motif. The first paradigm was denoted by Robert Silverio as a *negation of composition* and the second one as a *disintegration of composition* [1]. Above all the other formal attributes, there is a high level of modality, based on which a photography has an impression of being very realistic and believable. Colours are slightly desaturated, dull. Composition gestures are constrained or minimized. Photographs seem depleted, describing a given reality without unambiguous attitude of an author. However, no photograph can be purely descriptive and unemotional, although, the photographer may seek to marginalize their subjective input and focus their attention to their objectiveness.

Besides high-level craftsmanship, the visual language of the deadpan aesthetics is mainly built on the absence of a photographer's emotional input. They deliberately give up their emotional or political view and keep a certain distance from the theme. However, paying attention to a strongly emotional theme is not totally excluded. Such emotional theme can have an emotional impact on a photographer, but they still keep their distance when taking the photograph and do not involve their emotions in the photograph. In that way, thanks to the neutral attitude of the author and the way of interpretation which is cold and objective, the recipient is provided with a strong emotional content of the photograph. When analysing deadpan photographs, it is important to perceive their content from a wider, more comprehensive point of view. Creation of such photographs results from an approach which is more anthropological and scientific than critical and artistic. Formal characteristics of the deadpan aesthetics can be described as means of expression of scientific and systematic methodology in photography.

According to Lewis Baltz, this aesthetic paradigm is based on a conscious effort to completely eliminate, or at least minimize any signs of style. Rejecting features and means which made traditional photography interesting was also characteristic for this paradigm. [2]. It means photographers do not prefer their unique visual signature, but they rather adopt a formally clear and uncomplicated view based on deaestheticised qualities. Even though they visually undermine their authorship, it provides space for the intellectual and conceptual view to come forward. According to Charlotte Cotton, a curator and theorist of photography, the deadpan aesthetics lead the art photography out of exaggeration, sentiment and subjectivity [3]. This aesthetics without emotions and engaging is the opposite of painting in the 80's and photography in the 90's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then, the art was very subjective in general. It was also being described as expressive. Gerry Badger metaphorically defined this approach as quiet photography. "In photography of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there existed a persistent, resilient tendency, whose influence we underestimated. I call this tendency quiet or calm photography – the art which is hiding. Topics addressed by this quiet photography are rather unassuming than megalomaniacal. This photography avoids quirks of technical and visual magic and most importantly it introduces itself in a very humble way." [4] The words of this curator of photography agree with Lewis Baltz's statements. Baltz also points out the calmness of a theme and of a viewpoint. Badger perceives the approach as a strategic development of photography and describes it as *quiet photography* because deadpan photographs often provide a humble view into people's daily life and point out questions which are usually left unnoticed. The Czech theorist of photography Robert Silverio calls this characteristic approach a *descriptive viewpoint* [1]. The English theorist of photography David Bate uses the term *blank expression* [5]. However, most authors have only recently started to use the term deadpan aesthetics or deadpan photography. This term became popular mainly because of the curator and theorist of photography Charlotte Cotton, who was the first one to devote the whole chapter in her book *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (2004) to the deadpan photography [3].

### **3. Theatrical and film nature of the term deadpan**

For the first time, the term deadpan appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in connection to the American writer Mark Twain (1835-1910). With his story *Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog*, published in 1865, he addressed a wide audience but especially the middle class. Twain's uncommon narration style and humour were being described by literary critics as a "*deadpan style*" [6]. Besides the primary meaning of the word '*dead*', which is something not living, there is a second meaning in English language which describes a lack of emotions, sympathy, sensitivity or excitement. The word '*pan*' is an English archaic slang term for face. Therefore, deadpan can be loosely translated as an 'empty' face, or a face without observable emotions.

In Anglo-American culture, the word deadpan was initially used to describe a special dry sense of humour and later a style of an unbiased humorous rendering in stand-up shows. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term deadpan started to be used in connection to a new form of art – the silent movie. Theatre was replaced by Hollywood. The legendary comedian Buster Keaton (1895–1966) managed to adapt, in his own way, to the new medium. In Keaton's movies, such as *The General* (1927), *Steamboat Bill* (1928) and *The Cameraman* (1928), it is possible to observe that he wittingly continued the tradition of the deadpan rendering. That differentiated him as an actor significantly from other comedians who were using the new medium in a different way (e. g. Charlie Chaplin, W.C. Fields). Keaton has been referred to as '*The Great Stone Face*' [R. Ebert, *The Films of Buster Keaton*, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-films-of-buster-keaton>], because his face looked impartial and without emotions all the time, even during the physically most demanding comedy scenes. Keaton embodies attributes of a gentleman (he boasts, behaves with elegance, wears gloves, acts warm), but even during the scenes in which his physical suffering is real, viewers cannot see any visible signs of pain in his face.

According to the philosopher and aesthetician Stanley Cavell, Keaton's acting is valuable also from the philosophical point of view because "his work can be considered also a manifest against the merciless and cruel behaviour towards the nature and a physical brutality of the bourgeois society" [7]. In the new social context, the term deadpan thereby gains a philosophical depth. From the philosophical point of view, Keaton's film legacy can be also interpreted as a certain form of apathy towards some aspects of emotional and social life. It is the state of apathy that is closely connected with the peace in Keaton's face which can be, to a certain extent, considered a symbol of a 'stoic serenity'. Stoicists advocated the need to reach inner peace which must be kept at any circumstances. A man should be able to deal with everything without the slightest excitement [8]. Keaton truly accepted everything the screenplay brought without any visible excitement. He turned his poker face into a personal brand, on which he built his career. The great space he got in the silent film screen and his stone face moved the term deadpan from being a rhetorical rendering and theatrical exhibition to the level of being a unique frame of mind and atmosphere. Psychological concept of the term deadpan as a unique feeling, through which we engage with the world, represents the beginning of the relationship between this baffling term and photography.

#### **4. Accession of proto-conceptual artists**

The first time the term deadpan gained some seriousness in relation to photography was during discussions about Edward Ruscha's (1937) photographic books such as *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), *Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) and *Baby Cakes* (1970) [9]. It was the book *Baby Cakes* which achieved wider awareness

because it was a part of Lawrence Alloway's curatorial project. This English art critic was a key personality in formation of British pop art. The concept of his project *Artists and Photographs* (1970) consisted of a saleable box (1 200 pieces edition) full of art works of various authors [S. Leiber, *Boxed Artist's Editions: Collection of Steven Leiber basement*, <http://www.publiccollectors.org/SteveLeiberArtistsPhotographs.htm>].

Lawrence Alloway (1926-1990) addressed artists who were not photographers but were using photography only as an experimental tool for crossing the lines among sculpture, painting and action art. In the box, there were works of Christo, Joseph Kosuth, Sol Le Witt, Edward Ruscha, Andy Warhol and other 15 artists. In the accompanying curatorial text Lawrence Alloway states, "Edward Ruscha is represented by the book *Baby Cakes*, one of the series of realistic photographs that he started in 1962 by the book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. This book is similar to the previous one, it is likewise sociological (the sample of subjects is selected randomly), it is not formalistic but it represents a harmony of decisions. It undeniably represents an aesthetic thank you to a deadpan objectivity and to an absence of another meaning." [10] Concept, content and structure of the curatorial project of Lawrence Alloway express a historical criticism of the value system of art not only in relation to the nature and the potential of photographic art but also related to a sociologically based aesthetics.

Books of Edward Ruscha may strike us as banal. However, each one of them is a systematic record of certain types of objects, what makes a typology. Visually, these photographs feel neutral and there are apparent ambitions of the author to keep their unbiasedness with the aim to reach the highest degree of objectivity. Ruscha often adds brief information notes to the photographs. For example, the book *Baby Cakes* consists of a photograph of a baby on the front page followed by a series of photographs of various cakes with a note about each of the cake's weight next to the photographs. Majority of Ruscha's books start with favourite tuneful words, for example 'gasoline' and 'twentysix' or 'baby' and 'cakes'. Only then the photographs are created [11]. Unlike previous typological books, in *Baby Cakes* Edward Ruscha trivializes the craft of photography even more by raising the concept (idea) above the medium. Books of Edward Ruscha and similar approaches of proto-conceptual artists can be considered a precursor for an important role which photography was about to play in conceptual art.

Conceptualism, as it is sometimes referred to, always perceived ideas as art. This approach resulted in the complete 'dematerialisation' of the physical art object to be replaced by events, actions and the creation of impermanent items – the art itself often happening outside of the gallery space and sometimes with little or no audience [12]. Because of the ephemeral nature of such works, photography was often used as a means to record them. Photographers were handling this kind of photographs in a very objective, direct, unbiased and pragmatic way. They were trying to create a visual record of their works as

objectively and informatively as possible. Such photographs represented a formal documentation with no emotions or stylistic expressions [13].

Conceptual photography is characterized by a certain form of mechanization which is confirmed by its seriality and its systematic and objective nature. With their approaches, artists such as Edward Ruscha, Dan Graham and Douglas Huebler moved photography closer to the centre of artistic production. These authors, however, were not photographers in the true sense of the word. They did not put such high emphasis on technical quality of the pictures nor on craft skills. To them, a photograph was a tool enabling them to materialize their conceptual works or to honestly capture and immortalize their other artistic qualities. The approach of these authors is generally important for the development of photography as a medium thanks to their connection of minimalistic, late modern and popart strategies.

## 5. Bernd and Hilla Becher, the legacy of New Objectivity

Along with the abovementioned artists, in the 60's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a couple of German photographers Bernd (1931-2007) and Hilla Becher (1934-2015) who were working with photography in a similar way, systematically capturing European industrial architecture. They did not gain recognition until later. In their expositions, they were using the principle of the sequential or the serial image. A series of nine, twelve, or fifteen images of the same type of architectural structure the Bechers call a 'typology'. A series of single images in which one particular structure is presented in a sequence of rotating views they call a 'development' [14]. The Bechers' works can be, to a certain extent, perceived in context of conceptual photography. Their photographic document replaces real industrial structures which are vanishing due to a changing society. However, the main connection with the conceptual movement is represented by the arrangement of photographs such as *Eight Views of a House* (1962-1971), where in eight photographs we can see one house systematically photographed from all the cardinal and ordinal directions. It is the emphasis they put on the craft skills that differentiate Bechers' works from conceptual art. The emphasis is observable in the high technical quality of their photographs, high level of credibility and maximized informative character. Their approach was based on a strict set of formal rules: standardized format of negatives, frontal scanning from the same level, identical light conditions, absence of a man in the images, the same framing, central composition and an effort to obtain the minutest gradations of tonal values of black and white photographs. This married couple's effort to reach the highest possible quality expands the deadpan aesthetics by the level of magnificent technical excellence. Formal characteristics of their photographs can be considered means of expression of scientific and systematic methodology. Such methodology represents an important complement and, to a certain extent, defines aesthetic features of similarly oriented concepts. We can consider the New Objectivity (Neue Sachlichkeit), from which the Bechers emerged, the primary historical

resource of the deadpan aesthetics. The Bechers were not oriented on the American neo-avant-garde phenomena of the 50's and 60's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, like it would be expected. Instead, they were openly emulating the ideals of August Sander, Albert Renger-Patzsch and Werner Manz to resuscitate the legacy of Weimar New Objectivity photography [B. Stimson, *The Photographic Compartment of Bernd and Hilla Becher*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/01/photographic-compartment-of-bernd-and-hilla-becher>]. Visual culture of the post-war Weimar Republic has nothing in common with the post-war subjectivity. In the spirit of the New Objectivity, Albert Renger-Patzsch insisted on an ontological realism in photography. Artistic view of a landscape or a figure was replaced by schematicity and detail. The forms were adapted to a technocratic approach [14].

The book called *Photography Sees the Surface* (1935), published in Czechoslovakia, represents a new visual language of that time and introduces photography in context of scientific rationalization and modern aesthetics. In the prologue, the art historian and professor Václav Vilém Štech states that a photographer “does not rhapsodise but provides a view of the world as it really is. They curiously explore how the things are, or were.” He also states that photography “obtains objective facts and teaches about the outside of objects.” [15] Aesthetics was being formed technically and adjusted to a changing social environment. There occurred a new mass public sphere and industrialization was rapidly moving forward. Herbert Molderings stated that the New Objectivity photographers discovered their aesthetic project only after it became clear that the serial principle and intensive repetition defines the whole industrial production. Since then, all pictures of a new photographer were about to be defined by the rhythm of standardization and ornamental gathering of immutable objects [14].

One of the most important figures in the history of photography is August Sander (1876-1964), undoubtedly the greatest photographer of the New Objectivity. He created an ethnographic collection named the Face of Our Time (*Anlitz der Zeit*), which was an attempt to provide a complex record of all the social strata of the Weimar Republic. This archive consists of more than 2 500 portraits classifying subjects according to their professional and social classification [W. Brückle, *Face-Off in Weimar Culture: The Physiognomic Paradigm, Competing Portrait Anthologies, and August Sander's Face of Our Time*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/19/face-off-in-weimar-culture-the-physiognomic-paradigm-competing-portrait-anthologies-and-august-sanders-face-of-our-time>]. Sander's life's work can be perceived as a systematic analysis of a subject in social context, using comparative method. Thereby a new portrait form arises, whose aim is a scientific understanding of social classification. Sander's portraits are always static and show the whole figure. Typically, he uses central composition and works meticulously with gesture and pose that look very naturally. A portrayed subjects always knew they were being photographed which is demonstrated by their direct look in the camera. People in Sander's photographs were rarely smiling. In most cases,

there is a neutral expression in their faces. We can assume that Sander was wittingly instructing his subjects of how to pose. By the deadpan expression in their faces, Sander avoided an emotional undertone and thus kept a certain neutrality of the photographed sample of subjects.

Thanks to Bernd and Hilla Becher, in a certain way, the tradition of the New Objectivity continues. However, by appropriating, they move the legacy towards new contexts. In the spirit of the New Objectivity, photography is modernistically perceived as a direct and authentic record. Above all, it is a technical record in which the artistic quality becomes overshadowed. The Bechers, in context of conceptual tendencies, alter the ontological realism of a photographic medium into a basis of an artistic nature of such projects. Therefore, the New Objectivity photography with its technically formed aesthetics may be considered the main historical resource of the deadpan aesthetics. The first more or less pseudoscientific concepts became the basis for development of scientific and systematic methodologies which are a part of the present photography and significantly participate in modelling the nature of the deadpan aesthetics. The Bechers' works can be perceived as a direction leading to an intersection between the scientific and artistic world. The scientific quality becomes the artistic quality, supported by objective visual facts.

## **6. Generation of the Bechers' students**

The Bechers did not influence photography just by their photographic work which is composed of an extensive visual archive of industrial structures, majority of which no longer exists. They managed to transform their unique but impersonal and objective approach into a postmodern component of a photographic tradition. That was made true also thanks to their teaching activities. More specifically, it was thanks to Bernd Becher, who became a teacher of photography at the Arts Academy of the city of Düsseldorf in 1976 (political reasons prevented his wife Hilla to be appointed as well). The Arts Academy took the lead in formation of the German fine arts, mainly after Joseph Beuys started to teach sculpture there since 1961. Among the first most distinguished pupils of the Bechers' 'school' there were artists such as Thomas Struth (1954), Thomas Ruff (1958) and Andreas Gursky (1955) [D. Eklund, *Photography in Düsseldorf*, [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/phdu/hd\\_phdu.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/phdu/hd_phdu.htm)]. In context of historical conventions, the professional public tends to aggregate these authors in one group. Yet, their individual artistic development rather reveals certain differences. They are all directly related to the Bechers. However, they expand the original approach by their unique reflections and strategies. They put photography, as an objective factographic record, in new contexts.

Thomas Struth was the first one to fully exploit the potential of the Bechers' typological approach. He focused on purely urban objects instead of industrial objects. He photographs districts in small cities as well as the world's metropolises. He systematically and objectively records his own experience with



space, which is reinforced by the absence of human activity in his photographs, as it is in the series *Düsseldorf* (1979), or in later series *Unconscious Places 1, 2*, (1980-1990, 1999-2007) [D. Eklund and M.M.Hambourg, *Thomas Struth*, <http://www.metmuseum.org/press/exhibitions/2002/thomas-struth>].

Similarly to Struth, in his early works Thomas Ruff also insists on using black and white photography. However, at the beginning of 80's, all of the abovementioned students started to work with colour photography. In his works, Thomas Ruff was creating extensive portrait series. That places this author at the centre of contraconceptual approach. According to the art critic Hal Foster, "a portrait is an object of an explicit deconstruction implemented by conceptualists who regarded it as a historically obsolete model through which false claims for an accessible physiognomic depiction of subjectivity and identity were made" [14, p. 560]. Thomas Ruff with his series called *Portraits* (1981-present) somehow reconstructed the genre of photographic portrait in the spirit of Weimar New Objectivity. During portraying, Ruff was using large-format camera with colour light-sensitive plates. He was using artificial light to illuminate subjects and he was shooting photographs in a studio in front of a solid plain background. Like August Sander, Thomas Ruff was also directing his subjects to act neutral, so that it was not possible to read any emotions from their faces – the deadpan expression. From a formal point of view, Ruff's portraits reminded of passport or prison photos. However, Ruff's physiognomic portrait study differs from Sander's work mainly because Ruff's portraits do not reveal anything about social categorization or a profession of portrayed subjects. With perfect sharpness of the large-format (210 cm x 165 cm) portraits, he shows in detail only the looks of the subjects, but not who they are. Ruff's approach is contradictory to the tradition of the portrait genre which has always been connected to an ambition to express a nonphysical, essential part of a subject's identity.

Andreas Gursky is a key figure of the art photography and the deadpan aesthetics. Like Ruff, Gursky also works with a principle of a technically perfect large-format photograph. But Gursky literally moves the printed photography to new dimensions. In current exhibitions, there are often photographs that are 2 metres high and 5 metres long [3]. Looking at Gursky's photos, we can generalize and say that he is devoted to visually mapping the new globalized world. Unlike other Bechers' students he does not focus on making series. Large-format photographs works similarly to paintings - autonomously, as an individual piece of art. In contrast to Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky approaches the landscape photography with a certain form of distancing himself. For him, it is not about an individual interpretation of the world but he reflects the world from a global point of view. Gursky acknowledges people in his photographs, but they are always only a part of a mass. Like Thomas Ruff, in the 90's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Andreas Gursky was also using a computer as a retouching tool. His first digitally adjusted photograph was *Restaurant, St. Moritz* from 1991. He was digitalizing large-format negatives and was processing them pixel by pixel [16].

The generation of artists such as Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff and Andreas Gursky seized the original approach of the Bechers in their own way and have been developing it individually ever since. Each of them, by their intervention, transforms a different part of the strict formalistic rules. However, none of these authors possess the 'imaginary patent' for the deadpan aesthetics. Many photographers were and still are approaching an analysis of the world in a way which is very similar to the deadpan. However, we focus only on the abovementioned authors on purpose. Those photographers made the deadpan aesthetics popular through their creative activities and they played an important role in its way to become accepted as a legitimate part of the photographic tradition. In this context, it is also important to mention photographers such as Candida Höfer (1955), Tata Ronkholz (1940-1997), Petra Wunderlich (1954), Axel Hütte (1951), Gerhard Stromberg (1952), Simone Nieweg (1962), who were also studying in Düsseldorf. Because of their German origin, studies with the Bechers and their works being situated in the context of the interwar avant-garde of the New Objectivity, the deadpan aesthetics is often characterized as *Germanic aesthetics* [3].

## 7. Conclusions

Since 1990 there has appeared a general tendency towards relieving the formalistic rules, which has created a space for new questions in the deadpan aesthetics. There arose a controversy between a documentary realism and a digital manipulation, a modernistic idealism and a postmodern scepticism, commercial and art photography, systematic and random capture. Because of these questions, the deadpan aesthetics acquires a character of a confusing and indefinite term. However, there remained the stable aspects of the deadpan aesthetics such as an effort to be as objective as possible, keeping distance and neutrality of the expression and atmosphere and retaining the factuality and technical precision.

Approaches of the German photographers from the first and also the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be considered the primary historical source of the deadpan aesthetics. The designation *Germanic aesthetics* is highly relevant but since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there have been occurring photographers of various nationalities and from different parts of the world who have started to work with similar analytical and systematic capturing. For example, the American author Richard Misrach (1949) in his photographs captures views of the country devastated by the men and thus raises political and ecological questions. In contrary, a Japanese artist Yoshiko Seino (1964) takes photos of places where the nature recovers from human interventions. Claire Richardson (1973) in the series *Sylvan Series* (2002) interprets, through photography, the life of an isolated community of people in Romania. A couple of Czech photographers, Lukáš Jasanský (1965) and Martin Polák (1966) work with black and white photography in a manner that is very similar to the

Bechers' approach. In context of communism they focus on an ownership and the use of Czech land. The list of authors who use the deadpan aesthetics in landscape photography might be expanded by names such as Bridget Smith (1966), Ed Burtynsky (1955), Takashi Homma (1962), Lewis Baltz (1945), Jaqueline Hassink (1966), Naoya Hatakeyama (1958), John Riddy (1959), Boo Moon (1955) and many more, mostly younger authors.

At the turn of the millennium, the deadpan aesthetics has started to become more and more present in photographic portrait. Photographic reflections of Thomas Ruff about man's understanding of a photographic presentation of a subject and about the capacity of this form of capturing are becoming very current in context of postmodern identity issues. Besides conceptual approaches, we can often encounter the deadpan portraits in relation to portraying people in the streets. As an example we can mention the American photographer Jeol Sternfeld (1944) who builds the concept of his portraits on reaching people directly in the street where he also takes the photos. The American author of Czech origin Jitka Hanzlová (1958) works similarly. In her series *Female series* (1999) she systematically creates a typology of women of various age categories and ethnicities. The Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra (1959) deals with a different theme. In 1994 she photographed three women at three different times after giving birth. With her unsentimental approach in which Dijkstra displays motherhood, she draws the attention to the impact of pregnancy on a woman's body that needs to recover after a delivery. These portraits visualize a deep shift in a woman's relationship with her body and an instinctive protection of a new-born.

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