

A Portrait of Philosophy: The Photographs of Steve Pyke and the Conversations of Hans
Maes

'These people are not known for their faces but their ideas' – Steve Pyke 1993

Through Steve Pyke's photographs and Hans Maes' *Conversations on Art and Aesthetics* we are granted a frank encounter with the faces and thoughts of contemporary aestheticians. These are individuals who have helped to shape this philosophical field and are playing a central role in determining the future direction of aesthetics. Likewise, Maes using the art of conversation and Pyke using his Rolleiflex 2.8f camera, have paved the way for documenting this field.

The origins of Pyke's project trace back to a commission he received in 1988 to photograph Sir A. J. Ayer for a magazine. In an interview a few years afterwards, Pyke explained how 'the fifteen minutes I had been told I could expect with him turned into three fascinating hours.' (Gibson 1995) This exchange set Pyke's *Philosophers* series into motion and also set the tone for the conversational nature of the project. Pyke not knowing many philosophers himself asked his first few subjects to name ten living formative influences (Gibson 1995). The first three philosophers were more than obliging and offered Pyke twenty-three names. As a result of these early exchanges Pyke knew that documenting the face of philosophy would be a long-term project (Gibson 1995).

What is particularly intriguing about the portraits of the aestheticians is that their practice involves reflection on the very activity that Pyke has used to document them.

'We can think of the photographer, rather than getting in the way of our view of the object, as showing it to us and getting us to see it in a certain kind of way.' – Kendall Walton (Maes 2017, p297)

In particular, Pyke's methods embody Walton's thoughts on the role of the photographer. Through the close cropping and proximity that Pyke assumes when photographing his subjects¹, his arrangement of camera settings², Rolleinor close-up attachments; Tri X black and white film, and natural light, Pyke has granted the viewer a uniquely intense and intimate way of seeing his subjects.

The intensity in these portraits is heightened by the use of a dark backdrop, which sees the philosopher's enlightened faces emerging from the darkness. Danto likened this dramatic device to a painting by Caravaggio, believing that it brought the viewer into the space of 'the dense concentration of the philosopher that has come to be a mark of having participated in tutorials or seminars, as listener or speaker.' (Danto 2011, p6) Indeed, Pyke has utilized the photographic technique to reflect the practice of the philosopher. He has used the focus of the lighting and the lens to hone in on the centre of the thinkers' faces, much as these philosophers are able to focus on and get to the heart of complex cases. Moreover, the often candid poses that Pyke captures these sitters in, further reflect the nature of philosophical practice. In some portraits, we see the inquisitive gaze of the sitter meeting our own as we scrutinize their features with a curiosity that reflects their own enquiring expression. Others appear preoccupied in their thoughts and both of these poses embody the practice of philosophy – an innate inquisitiveness and an ability to reflect on and refine thought.

¹ His method invades what is usually considered to be the subject's personal space by photographing them within two feet of their being (Gibson 1995).

² Pyke sets his camera at f8 and 1/8 of a second (Danto 2011, p6).

In the process of photographing his sitters Pyke spends a good amount of time conversing with them and conversation is a consistent theme that runs through these portraits and also into Maes' project. In Pyke's *Philosophers* series, he invited the sitters to reflect on the philosophical preoccupations that they had been grappling with throughout their careers:

'By asking philosophers to write a hundred words to describe their 'philosophy' I hoped to give an insight into the thoughts which they have devoted their lives to. In some ways I feel this demystifies philosophy. Before I started this project philosophy was to me like magic, a word accessible to only a few.' – Steve Pyke (Gibson 1995)

Pyke then included these summaries next to the respective portraits. This could be seen as the beginning of the conversation that Maes was to continue in his book *Conversations on Art and Aesthetics*. Maes' exchanges with Levinson, Korsmeyer, Walton, Freeland, Currie, Carroll, Scruton, Guyer, Robinson and Danto have developed and extended Pyke's mission. These dialogues provide an accessible route into aesthetics, demystifying the practices behind philosophical theorizing about art and other aspects of aesthetic experiences, which are revealed by these philosophers to be as diverse as musical chills to the savouring of wine.

In the book, Cynthia Freeland states that in making portraits artists 'try to show both what's beneath the pose' whilst also representing the fact that the subject is 'self-presenting' or posing. The duality of this act is brought to the fore by the addition of Pyke's portraits to Maes' exchange with these theorists. Maes was inspired to collaborate with Pyke having heard the photographer in an interview describe making the pictures as being like a conversation. The conversations we are invited to behold in this body of work take on an

additional depth by reflecting through the visual and linguistic media of the photographs and the discussions, the unification of senses and mind, the collaboration of which is necessary for the study of aesthetics. More poignantly, in the exploration of the thoughts and faces of these ten contemporary aestheticians, a set of portraits has been made that captures both the pose and what lies beneath it.

References

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