

Tina Ruisinger, *Faces of Photography*
Introduction by A. D. Coleman

Rarely today does an emerging artist in any medium elect to construct her debut performance as a tribute to her creative predecessors. Such self-effacing homage recalls the manners of an earlier age, the protocols of the master-apprentice relationship at the outset of one's journeyman phase a century or more ago. So this unusual project by Tina Ruisinger embodies something admirably and even determinedly old-fashioned: an insistence on first applying her manifest skills to the obligation of acknowledging and appreciating her influences. This is particularly welcome because, perhaps even more in photography than in other forms, paying one's respects to one's mentors and forebears is a ritual honored more in the breach than the observance. I'll return to that subject shortly; first, I think it appropriate to attend closely to this particular work in and of itself, because what it accomplishes deserves our full concentration.

In *Faces of Photography* Ruisinger introduces us to the visages and words of fifty senior figures who left their mark indelibly on twentieth-century photography, and offers her own thoughts about them as well. Each of these accomplished men and women has performed a difficult and culturally significant act, that of producing some durable images which many world citizens would recognize immediately, though they might not attach a name -- and most probably not a face -- to the making of any of those pictures. (It's in the nature of photography that its results seem to derive from the world as pictured, not from the individuals who do the picturing.) A few of these photographers -- Gordon Parks, Robert Frank, Leni Riefenstahl, Helmut Newton -- have extended their range of influence and their fame (or notoriety) well beyond photography, themselves becoming familiar and recognizable cultural icons and even (in several cases) mass-media darlings in the landscape of twentieth-century art, and so could expect not just their names but even their faces to be known to many even outside photography's professional spheres. Others of these elders are at least readily familiar by appearance to those in their field because they've played prominent public roles -- as the founders of major institutions (Cornell Capa of the International Center for Photography), as regulars on the lecture and workshop circuit (Duane Michals, Mary Ellen Mark), as spokespersons for their profession (Elliott Erwitt of Magnum).

Yet, venerable as they all are, many of them remain known by sight only to their close co-workers. Indeed, after more than thirty years in the field and relatively wide travels on my part, I've never laid eyes on in the flesh or seen portrayed at least a quarter of Ruisinger's honorees. And while I've come across portraits (and, sometimes, self-portraits) of and by the rest, many of them excellent, I've never seen a finer cumulative set than this one. Ruisinger has approached them all with profound respect and obvious admiration, yet also with utter fearlessness. Bringing herself and us face to face with them and close up, she uses the illusionism of the medium to persuade us that we are within intimate distance of them, communing, both looking at and simultaneously being looked at -- being *seen* -- by some of the keenest eyes and minds and spirits in the field of visual communication.

This speaks to a particular self-reflexive dynamic at work in this set of portraits, that of photographers self-consciously posing for a photographer. Do Ruisinger's subjects know, perhaps better than anyone, how interpretively the process of photographic seeing can function, how much the photographer imposes of his or her own vision on the subject, and thus how much the individual subject risks in allowing any skilled photographer free access to one's surface appearance? Unquestionably. But they

also understand, again perhaps better than anyone, the transactional nature of the negotiation between a skilled photographer and any photographically sophisticated subject, the degree to which a consensual portrait of this kind represents a collaboration. They know from direct experience the imagistic consequences of the tools and materials in use: the likely effects of this format, that lens, a particular film, the predictable results of self-evident choices of proximity, lighting, point of view -- even, in pictures made in such close quarters as these, the decisions visible and audible to the knowledgeable sitter regarding depth of field and shutter speed. So, to a greater extent than most human subjects of most photographs, they exercise a deep if invisible form of control over the ensuing images in any portrait sitting. We thus need to understand these images of Ruisinger's as agreements, joint ventures, duets, equal partnerships.

And, because her subjects also know the extent to which photographic practice remains largely unsung and undervalued, we need to weigh this compilation as not only Ruisinger's contribution to the medium's public record but as her subjects' deliberate and considered gift to it as well. With Ruisinger as their willing instrument and conduit, they've volunteered to help fill in some notable lacunae in the medium's history. From the evidence, they not only opened themselves forthrightly to her visual scrutiny but spoke frankly with her, offering professional insights and personal information not readily available from any other source. Thus this book becomes a repository of sorts -- an archive, an historical document, and even a reference work -- though it may not appear as such. That Ruisinger persuaded so many notable figures to lend their energies to this undertaking tells us things about her not immediately evident in the images and texts.

Given the undisputed centrality of photography to western culture and communication since its introduction in 1839, the documentation of the medium itself -- meaning not just written historiography but also oral historiography, biography, and autobiography -- remains remarkably, even breathtakingly, scant.

It seems curious that photographers -- who appear to have set out, almost from the medium's inception, to describe every conceivable culture and subculture in the entire world -- have only recently begun to turn their attention to their own. Name the occupation, the national or regional or ethnic or religious identity, and no matter how obscure it seems there's at least one book devoted to it, possibly a dozen or more, with an archive of imagery and annotation behind each: Muslims and Orthodox Jews, native New Yorkers and the aborigines of Australia, Panamanian scientists and Portuguese fishermen, Nobel prizewinners and anonymous gypsies.

To put an even finer point on it, there's no form of creative activity that lacks its dedicated photographers. Since the 1930s, at least, we've had thousands of books of photographs of painters, sculptors, writers, dancers, musicians, actors, filmmakers, and others in the traditional and new arts. Some of these have emphasized formal portraiture of their subjects; others have considered them at their work, or at ease. More than a few -- like Brassai's and David Douglas Duncan's multi-image projects on Picasso, or Roy DeCarava's on John Coltrane -- have described a "day in the life of" their subjects, explored their working methods, or otherwise scrutinized individual artists in depth. Some volumes have even essayed the construction of "photobiographies" of specific artists in the various media, bringing together pictures of them from diverse sources to create chronological photographic narratives of their lives.

So, from the evidence, we know that photographers surely understand the role of their medium in preserving traces of our past. Yet, although they have always taken portraits of their colleagues in the medium, and have certainly made self-portraits ever

since the medium's invention, the extensive, committed documentation of photographers by photographers doesn't really begin until the 1970s, and it was really only in the final fifteen years of the last century that projects like this one of Tina Ruisinger's began to take shape and find their way before the public. Even now, at the outset of the twenty-first century, they remain rare enough that each serious new effort breaks ground, adds significantly to the literature, and calls for celebration.

This can't be explained on the basis of something inherently self-effacing in the personalities of those drawn to photography, or some assumed reticence before the lens that sets in as soon as one picks up the camera. For every notoriously camera-shy recluse like Robert Frank or Henri Cartier-Bresson there's an outgoing photographer with a touch of the actor in his or her personality; consider the exuberant Lou Stettner as observed in these pages. And most photographers, as Ruisinger's work demonstrates, at least feel -- or can be made to feel -- comfortable on the other side of the viewfinder in the presence of a fellow practitioner whom they have reason to trust. In my experience, photographers on average are no more reluctant than the rest of us to pose for portraits or participate in other kinds of images, despite a certain mythology to the contrary.

Of course, only over the past thirty years has what we loosely call "fine-art photography" -- including documentary and even aspects of photojournalism -- achieved museumization, collectibility, critical attention, academic legitimacy, and general cultural recognition. That may explain photographers keeping a comparatively low profile, and the absence of any substantial publications recording their visages and their lives until recently. Moreover, prior to the '70s, hardly any photographers were household names; who, aside from a handful of other photographers, would have bought books or prints of their portraits? Choose any legendary figure now firmly ensconced in the pantheon -- Stieglitz, Modotti, Man Ray, Bourke-White, Weston, Adams -- and ask yourself who would have published another photographer's book-length photographic project about any of them in 1975, and who would have bothered to pick one up and peruse it. We can only imagine the volumes that might have been, and regret the fact that the context which would have birthed and nurtured them did not begin to exist until a few years ago.

Yet this absence I'm describing may turn out to be only an apparent and temporary one. It doesn't necessarily mean that earlier in the twentieth century photographers didn't make the kinds of images I'm describing, or even create the types of extended consideration I noted. Countless invaluable but unpublished projects of all kinds reside in the negative files of photographers living and dead, still awaiting their historic moment. I would not find it surprising if a steady stream of such work from the past began to emerge, now that the medium and its practitioners have established themselves as permanent fixtures in the arts and interest in the lives of the medium's significant figures has reached an appropriate but unprecedented height.

Meanwhile, fortunately for us all, members of a younger generation of photographers have begun stepping in to fill some of these gaps. Though their approaches may vary, they all seem to come to this challenge with an impulse similar to that described by Ruisinger in her foreword to this volume: a desire to engage directly with the formative figures of the medium, the individual sensibilities who shaped the germinal images, and also to give them their due by establishing a form of public recognition of their achievement. We should understand this not as the work of the adoring acolyte, or even the reverential disciple; like Ruisinger, most of the younger photographers who've taking on this task (Adál Maldonado, Bill Jay, Mark Edward Harris, Paul Waldman, José Francisco Gálvez also come to mind) have pointedly portrayed photographers across the stylistic spectrum, always including individuals they didn't

study with or apprentice themselves to and who work in ways quite different from their own. Rather, it's a way for a young photographer to describe the diversity of contemporary photographic practice and establish a broad platform from which to speak. It's also an identification of and expression of gratitude toward the diverse shoulders on which one stands. In a time that encourages the aspirant to pretend to total innovation and to claim to have sprung full-blown from the head of Zeus, that's an extremely modest position to take.

Save for Neal Slavin, no photographer that I know of has attempted an equivalent for photography of the famous Art Kane photograph from 1958 in which jazz musicians from every era gathered in Harlem for an historic group portrait. Yet, individually and collectively, these projects portraying the great living photographers achieve something of that sort: a representative cross-section of the medium's living legends. Notably, in pursuing her own chosen representatives Ruisinger sought out not currently trendy members of the younger set but instead senior figures, more than a few of them unfashionable but all with a demonstrated lifelong commitment to the medium. Many of them she came to at the very end of their careers. Some of them, indeed, have passed on since this project's inception; as of this writing we've lost Gisèle Freund, Edouard Boubat, Esther Bubley, Andreas Feininger, Mario Giacomelli, Erich Hartmann, and Ilse Bing. What Ruisinger adds to our understanding of them therefore becomes extremely precious, more so every day.

So this book serves not only as an historical record but, at the same time, as a family album. That's reflected not just in its contents but also in its style. The way that this volume moves so easily from formal presentation to scrapbook-style collages and back again, oscillating between the snapshot album and the official portrait gallery, reflects something of the way in which photographers everywhere understand and address and speak about their own work -- recognizing in it both its personal, diaristic aspects and its broader public implications and statements.

By this I mean that any working photographer's archive simultaneously manifests what we might call both an onstage and a backstage function. The onstage aspect refers to its function as a formal chronicle of its subject matter -- in this case, let's say, how Inge Morath or Ted Croner presented themselves to Ruisinger's camera on a certain day, and what they had to say on that same occasion. The backstage aspect has to do with the photographer's negative file, contact sheets, notes, and such, functioning as the raw material of a private journal of personal experience.

Sit with photographers, go through their contact sheets with them, encourage them to caption their work verbally in conversation, and you will almost invariably find them moving back and forth between these two modes of perception. Ruisinger's book makes this fascinating apposition manifest, in fact uses it as a structural principle. The isolated single images, with their cohesive extracts from Ruisinger's interviews and her own comments neatly arranged in classic photo-book layout form, provide a welcome yet traditionally styled redaction of the results of each sitting, in which the sensibilities of the sitters seem to dominate. Her collages feel more like the field notes from each sitting, the raw ore of each encounter mined but unrefined, a rougher, more spontaneous set of responses to the engagement with the characteristic intensity of these varied others. Physical, emotional, fragmentary, playful, they tell us more about the give and take of a portrait session, and about the photographer's subsequent editing activity, than do the finished, more polished results. In that way they lay open to us Ruisinger's own process, and in doing so comprise a self-portrait -- ambitious yet unassuming, industrious but determinedly behind the scenes, yet there for the glimpsing if you look

closely enough.

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In conjunction with a happening on which Slavin and this author collaborated in 1972, "The Market Diner Bash," a group portrait was produced that included a diversity of people in the field, among them Mary Ellen Mark, Les Krims, Arthur Tress, James Enyeart, Betty Hahn, Lee Witkin, and dozens more. For an account of this event, see my essay, "Confirming Her Fatalism (Q.V.)," *Village Voice*, Vol. 17, no. 25 (June 22, 1972), pp. 30-31.