

Blush in all the colors of the brightest sunset - A Timid Exploration of The Invisible Treasures Inside Our Shells



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Lilli Weinstein, Selfportrait (Sweating, Blushing Carelessly), 2021



INTRODUCTION



“Shy” is a label that has been taped onto my forehead in kindergarten or even earlier, because I prefer to sit by myself, observe and enjoy silent, solitary activities. The idea of “joining in the fun” was never really appealing for me and rather filled me with breath-taking fear. Back then, my shyness was talked about as something I was going to grow out of and when it became clear that this was not just magically going to happen, it was suddenly expected of me to “come out of my shell” myself somehow, with the help of probably well-meaning but sometimes brutally forceful teachers and peers. Generally, shyness is a painful experience, because it feels like it keeps us from doing what we want to do. Or at least that is the common understanding of it.

When I started my research for this thesis I was looking for books about shyness and almost all I could find were self-help guides that offer “solutions to shyness” in one way or the other and promise to help shy people to step out of their shells to change their lives for the better. I have to admit that these titles spoke to me in a deeply seductive way. I have been dreaming of these kinds of quick-fixes for as long as I can remember: How can I get rid of this label that seems to haunt me as soon as I step out of my door? Is there a way to make my heart keep its normal pace when I am being called on in class or just talked to by an acquaintance? How can I attend ‘fun’ social events without ending up hiding myself in the bathroom or turning around on the doorstep without even entering - and actually enjoy them?

Part of me also knows that shyness is more deeply rooted within me



and that being quiet and introverted is part of my personality. It is simply not in my nature to express my opinion out loud all the time or to put myself in the centre of attention in a room full of people. And according to various studies¹ this is also the nature of a third to even half of the population world-wide. So, I am wondering, if shyness has a right and a place to exist. Do we only experience it as a problem, because of what our society chooses to view as “normal behaviour”? What are the advantages of being shy?

Art is quite an obvious area that comes to mind, in which introverted, thoughtful, solitude-seeking people can flourish and show their strengths. The idea of working in solitude, behind closed doors, to create work that expresses all the things I am not able to speak out loud sounds wonderful to me, and I probably use my photographic work in this way somehow. But does this mean that the art world is full of shy people? Who are they? And how do they deal with everything besides creating art, that is part of being a successful artist? I get sweaty hands just from thinking about networking at art events or giving a speech in front of strangers at the opening of my own exhibition.

As a photographer, who works mainly with portraiture, the romantic notion of creating in the comforting company of nobody but myself, does not exactly apply either. In fact, most of my images I shoot while being far out of my comfort zone. And I like it. This role I can play with the camera in my hands, allows me to create a space, where breaking out of my shell feels natural. Instead of only being a refuge for the shy, art might be a tool to handle shyness as

well.

In this thesis, I want to explore these ideas and question our view on shyness, by reflecting on my own experiences as well as examples from both, the art world and everyday life. I want to read about other people's blushes and compare them to my own, find out where this feeling might come from and where it can be used to flourish, not to hide. Without disregarding the serious pain and struggles that come with it, my main goal is to find a way to turn the idea of shyness into something empowering, into a strength, not a sickness. I do not want to find a way out of the shell, but rather explore the possibilities that are hidden inside.

SHYNESS: DEFINITION AND TERMS

HOW SHY ARE YOU?

To be honest, I did not expect it to be so difficult to define the term shyness. It has been invisibly written on every piece of pavement I ever glued my eyes on when walking somewhere and I cannot recall the exact amount of times I heard somebody say “she’s just a bit shy” to excuse my behaviour (or lack of it). If anyone, I should know what shyness means. This lifelong struggle, which regularly makes me look up restaurants’ menus online before going there, just so that I would not have to find myself in the awfully embarrassing situation of having to choose a meal in front of other people (and considering how each choice could influence the image they have of me as well as, of course, rehearsing the exact wording of the order in my head) under time pressure. I have always identified as shy; I never had to question this fact. But now, that I am in the position to actually write about it and therefore define its meaning, I suddenly feel like I first have to prove my shyness in order to qualify as the author of this thesis. Ironically, this urge probably also has its origin in my fear of embarrassing myself in this writing or being judged by a future reader, who might question my credibility.

The easiest way I could think of (that does not involve picking up my phone to ask people about their opinion on me), to check whether I am eligible to call myself shy, is to do an online self-test. One of the most popular contemporary personality tests is the “16 Personalities test”, which was developed by Raymond B. Cattell, Maurice Tatsuoka and Herbert Eber in the early 90’s and has been improved and adjusted further since then. It is based on the model of the so-called Big Five personality traits, a popular model in modern psychology. In this model, a person’s character is described

Frederic Leighton. *Solitude*, 1890



by five traits and their two poles: openness (inventive/ curious vs. consistent/ cautious), conscientiousness (efficient/ organized vs. extravagant/ careless), extraversion (outgoing/ energetic vs. solitary/ reserved), agreeableness (friendly/ compassionate vs. challenging/ callous) and neuroticism (sensitive/ nervous vs. resilient/ confident)². After answering the questions on the website, you get categorized into one of 16 personality types, depending on where on the spectrum of each trait your answers position you.

Of course, every person's character is so unique and shaped by the circumstances of their upbringing, genetics and other influences, that it is impossible to come up with universal categories to describe them all in detail. In that way, these kinds of tests might be superficial, but they are based on many years of research and different kinds of experiments, so that it is possible to define some basic criteria that most people who share a certain character trait, fulfil. I chose this test, not only because of the very inviting website (each of the sixteen personalities is visualized by a charming illustration of a little human character in a specific colour with attributes around them that fit each description), but also because it is a popular tool for companies to get to know their employees better. It seems to suit my questions about the suitability of certain character types in certain professional fields.

So, after spending approximately 20 minutes answering questions about my behaviour in social situations, the way I deal with different tasks and a lot of self-reflection, I received my result: INFP, which stands for Introverted, Intuitive, Feeling and Prospecting. An

illustration of a sweet, green fairy watering oddly angular flowers accompanied the text. I scrolled down to the description and there it was, in the first sentence even: “On the outside, Mediators (INFPs) may seem quiet or even shy.”³ Shy. This is my proof: I am shy, or at least I seem like it. And I am in good company : Apparently, people like J.R.R. Tolkien, William Shakespeare, Björk and William Wordsworth are part of the same category. It is not surprising that mainly authors and poets are part of this group since writing often requires a lot of internal reflection and the ability to work in solitude.

What struck me in this description was also how shyness seems to be viewed as a superficial attribute: Mediators seem shy on the outside. My first reaction was to think (in this indignant, angry voice that mainly exists in my thoughts and very rarely also finds its way through the narrow opening between my lips - I tend to move my mouth very little for articulation): “They do not even know what it’s like! I truly do feel shy on the inside, more than anywhere else. In fact, my outside does not even reflect the tiniest part of the shyness I feel.” This thinking pattern is one I fall back to in many settings where my shyness begins to grow bigger than what my chest can hold and takes on the shape of an anxiety attack. It comes from the feeling of not fitting in, of hating to be scared of what others enjoy, of being thoroughly misunderstood. Self-pity is an easy refuge in those moments, because it offers some kind of justification, at least towards myself. It also increases the gap between my inner world and others. Before sinking deeper into this rather unproductive mood, I should probably continue exploring the actual meaning of

shyness. At least, I can do so with a clear consciousness now, that I proved to be affected by it myself.

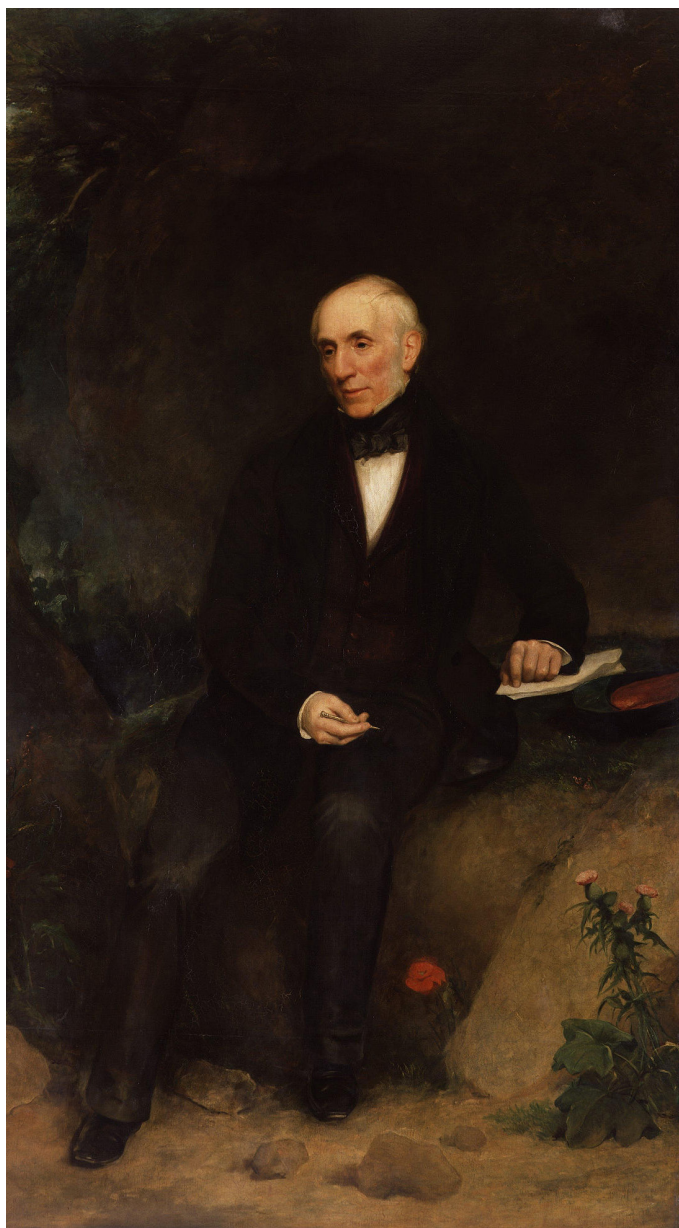
INTROVERSION OR SHYNESS?

Shyness is often linked to introversion, sometimes confused by or explained with it. In the 16 Personalities test I scored 97% on the Introvert scale - the most definite result of all the traits. The first person to define and popularize the term introvert was Carl Jung in his book *Psychological Types* from 1921. In his theory, Introversion and Extraversion are the two central categories every person's character can be assigned to. Introverts focus more in their inner world, while extroverts direct their attention towards the external world and the people around them. In a seminar on Analytical Psychology given in 1925, he explains that he came up with the idea of intro- and extroversion by starting from the notion of energy flowing inwards and outwards.⁴

The idea of energy makes sense to me: after social events with a lot of interactions I feel like all the energy has been sucked out of me and I need to retreat to a quiet room by myself in order to recharge. Friends, who would describe themselves as extroverts, told me that they feel the opposite way: after spending too much time alone, occupied by more quiet activities, they feel the need to expose themselves to more and new stimulations in order to get energized again. This definition of introversion is also in line with the one Susan Cain bases her famous book “*Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*” (2012) on. But while I also identify as an introvert, I do think that there is an important distinction to make between shyness and introversion. Cain describes the difference in this way:

“Shyness is the fear of social disapproval or humiliation,

Henry William Pickersgill. Portrait of William Wordsworth, ca. 1850



while introversion is a preference for environments that are not overstimulating. Shyness is inherently painful; introversion is not.”⁵

So, while introversion seems to be rooted more naturally within a person as a fixed character trait, shyness is an emotional response to the effects of the outside world. Shyness, being more of a feeling, vanishes as soon as one is by themselves, or in a setting where no negative judgement has to be feared and it varies in its intensity from one situation to another. Introversion can cause shyness (for example, if one is constantly being criticized for being too quiet), but it is, as the model of The Big Five suggests as well, merely a personality trait that is neither a strength nor a weakness (although it often seems like our contemporary society prefers and is shaped to fit the extroverted type).

Shyness on the other hand is always experienced as a struggle. It is a painful emotion, an obstacle, often accompanied by strong physical and psychological symptoms of anxiety. From the outside, both may look the same: An introvert, who is not shy, and a shy person both could sit on the outskirts of a group of people and quietly observe the action. While the introvert is feeling at ease, because they act according to their nature, the shy person is trembling with fear that keeps them from speaking up while also feeling judged for being boring and not contributing to the conversation. Shyness is actually very much inside. Of course, there are visual clues like blushing, sweating and trembling that can blow the cover of a seemingly calm, shy person, but they can be quite

subtle and for a person unfamiliar with the feeling they might not be as revealing as they feel like on the inside.

It is crucial to me to make this distinction, so that I can explain why I will use the term shyness in the following text. Introversion is a trait one can eventually come to terms with, even though it might often be a long and difficult process, as most social environments require people to “come out of their shell” in order to be successful or accepted. And I passionately agree that it is important, to rethink this “extrovert ideal”⁶, as Cain calls it, and that we implement the realization that the world needs both, intro- and extroverts, equally in order to function properly, in our thinking and the way we structure education, work environments and social norms. Without exploring this actually very urgent matter much further, I will leave you with this beautiful quote by Allen Shawn for now:

“A species in which everyone was General Patton would not succeed, any more than would a race in which everyone was Vincent van Gogh. I prefer to think that the planet needs athletes, philosophers, sex symbols, painters, scientists; it needs the warmhearted, the hardhearted, the coldhearted, and the weakhearted. It needs those who can devote their lives to studying how many droplets of water are secreted by the salivary glands of dogs under which circumstances, and it needs those who can capture the passing impression of cherry blossoms in a fourteen-syllable poem or devote twenty-five pages to the dissection of a small boy’s feelings as he lies in bed in the dark waiting for his mother to kiss

him goodnight ... Indeed, the presence of outstanding strengths presupposes that energy needed in other areas has been channelled away from them.”⁷

The pain my shyness makes me experience on a daily base is one I never become immune to. Most people feel shy from time to time, but not everybody identifies as a generally shy person. It depends on the intensity and frequency with which the feeling of shyness is experienced and how strong of an effect it has on a person's everyday life. When I was diagnosed with social anxiety disorder, which could be described as pathological shyness, it was overwhelming to realize how many of my very private struggles are actually quite universal - up to a third of the population report to have suffered at least at one point in their lives from social anxiety. It feels good, to be able to give the pain a name, a medical one even, and in my mind this sometimes functions as an excuse, when I beat myself up too much for missing another great opportunity because of my fear. But it does not make it less painful.

I want to explore the power of shyness in this thesis, because it is a strong emotion that has severe effects on the person experiencing it. I do not aim at redefining shyness as an entirely positive trait or to romanticise it in any way - most of my fellow shy people would agree, that they would give a lot to be able to get rid of it, and some people are even able to, through a lot of work and sometimes with the help of therapists or medication. But I do want to focus on the negative power of shyness, the pain it causes, and how something valuable can be found in this struggle. Is there a way to

embrace the vulnerability of shyness and discover another kind of strength within this everyday torment? Are there any positive skills specifically shy people can acquire through their unique experience of the world?

SHYNESS: A MODERN SICKNESS?

The fact that shyness is even experienced as such a painful emotion depends a lot on standards for “normal behaviour” which are set by different societies. In most Western countries, shy children are seen as problematic, because they feel uncomfortable speaking up in a class room and being outgoing amongst their peers. But this is only a problem because it is expected of children to behave differently, to be loud and chaotic like some kind of colourful Pippi Longstocking instead of the modest, more quiet Annika in the background. Being a private person, who is uncomfortable when being observed, is becoming increasingly difficult with the rise of self-exposure through social media and modern perceptions of the importance of teamwork or charisma in work environments.

But shyness is not a modern term. In his book “Shrinking Violets” Joe Moran reconstructs the history of shyness. He suggests that shyness might have been a by-product of civilisation: Only when our minds are not preoccupied with the fear of wild animals or the search for food and shelter, can we “afford” to become self-conscious and worry about other people’s perceptions of ourselves. This sounds plausible as shyness, which Darwin called “this odd state of mind”⁸, does not seem to serve any evolutionary purpose. Whatever the true origin shyness might be, it has been talked about for a long time already. What has changed is our notion of it.

Ancient philosophers, from Aristoteles on, viewed shyness (in moderation) as a virtue. It meant that a person was able to feel and express shame and was therefore trustworthy and less likely to act out in obnoxious or disgraceful ways. But too much shyness

was not to be aspired after either, since this would lead to some sort of unhealthy self-obsession which could keep a person from pursuing honourable endeavours. Later in history, towards the end of the eighteenth century, Moran writes, the stereotypical “British reserve” was observed by tourists in England and Victorians viewed shyness as a god given force, an “unwavering disposition”⁹ which one had to suffer from and that could not be overcome.

This Victorian image of shyness does not match our modern perception of a personality which can and should constantly be improved. A huge industry is formed around the idea of self-improvement or self-development. The notion of a good personality¹⁰ only came up in the twentieth century, together with the idea that charisma and likeability are crucial in order to become successful in the increasingly anonymous and global business world. In order to be visible, one has to actively make themselves be seen. Cain famously describes this development as the rise of the “Extrovert Ideal”.¹¹ When we began to admire public figures like movie stars and other celebrities, external appearance and appeal became a bigger focus than the more private, invisible parts of one’s character. Very telling examples of this new, extreme self-consciousness are advertisements and self-help guides from the early twentieth century. The brand Woodburry, for instance, advertised their soaps with lines like “All around you people are judging you silently” or “Stranger’s eyes, keen and critical - can you meet them proudly - confidently - without fear?”¹² The anxiety addressed in these advertisements very deeply corresponds with the one I experience in the context of my shyness. Advertisements

9 Moran, p. 41

10 Cain, S. (2013). *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. Broadway Books, p. 30

11 Cain, pp. 19-30

12 Wyeth, N. C. (Newell Convers). (1888- 1945). *The Ladies' home journal*. Philadelphia: [s.n.].

of this kind imply that being confident and outgoing is what everybody should strive for and the habit of self-consciousness is one to simply overcome. Hundreds of psychological self-help guides promise cures to shyness and to turn every person into the “best version of themselves”. It seems as if the American Dream of everybody having the same chances to become successful in their career and live the ideal life is now also being applied to personalities.

The idea that the ideal personality is a celebrity-like, outspoken team player, who stands out from the crowd, paired with the belief that personality is something to be improved and worked on, generates an enormous pressure for shy people. The constant feeling of not fitting in, by itself already painful enough, is now also pointed out and criticised by teachers, employers, strangers in bars and in advertisement or movies. Comparing yourself to others superficially on a personality-level is happening in an even more exaggerated way on social media, where an abundance of role models makes it almost impossible to feel any kind of acceptance towards oneself. In German, instead of “coming out of your shell” you say “aus sich herauskommen”, which literally translates to “coming out of oneself”. The idea of myself as a place I am supposed to abandon in order to be “out there” is, honestly, frightening and it does not feel quite right.

Especially when retracing the history of shyness and realising how old the notion of it is, I want to believe that it is eventually just a natural part of the human condition. It is an anxiety, a fear of



The friends who greet you in your own drawing-room receive an impression of you that you will never know . . .

All around you people are judging you silently

YOU CANNOT escape it—that frank, unspoken comment that is born in the mind of every person you meet.

The friends who greet you in your own drawing-room—the strangers who pass you in the street—each one of them is storing up impressions of you that you will never know.

Don't let little evidences of neglect—carelessness about your appearance—create an unfavorable impression.

Keep your skin clear, smooth, flawless! Nothing has more influence on your appearance than the condition of your skin. It should be above criticism, always.

If you have an unattractive complexion—a skin that is dull and sallow, or marred by ugly little blemishes—begin now to overcome this condition. Any girl can have a smooth, clear complexion. For each day your skin is changing—old skin dies and new takes its place. By the right treatment you can make this new skin what you will.

Read the two treatments given on this page. One of them tells how you can correct an oily skin and give it the smooth, velvety texture it should have. The other tells you what to do for a pale, sallow skin—how to rouse it to color and life. These are only two of the special Woodbury treatments used by fastidious women everywhere for improving the condition of their skin.

These and other complete treatments for each type of skin and its needs are given in the booklet

of famous skin treatments that is wrapped around every cake of Woodbury's Facial Soap.

Get a cake of Woodbury's today and begin tonight the treatment suited to your skin.

The same qualities that give Woodbury's its beneficial effect in overcoming common skin troubles make it ideal for general use. A 25 cent cake lasts a month or six weeks for general toilet use, including any of the special Woodbury treatments.

A complete miniature set of the Woodbury skin preparations

For 25 cents we will send you a complete miniature set of the Woodbury skin preparations, containing:

- A trial size cake of Woodbury's Facial Soap.
- A sample tube of the new Woodbury's Facial Cream.
- A sample tube of Woodbury's Cold Cream.
- A sample box of Woodbury's Facial Powder.

Together with the treatment booklet, "A Skin You Love to Touch."

Address The Andrew Jergens Co., 112 Spring Grove Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio. If you live in Canada address The Andrew Jergens Co., Limited, 115 Sherbourne St., Park Ontario. English Agents: H. C. Ouellet & Co., 4 Ludgate Square, London, E. C. 4.



Use this treatment for a skin that is too oily

With warm water work up a heavy lather of Woodbury's Facial Soap in your hands. Apply it to your face and rub it into the pores thoroughly—always with an upward and outward motion. Rinse with warm water, then with cold. If possible, rub your face for thirty seconds with a piece of ice. Use this treatment regularly each night before retiring, and within a week or ten days you will notice a marked improvement in your skin.

A pale, sallow skin should be given this special treatment

Just before retiring, fill your basin full of hot water—almost boiling hot. Bend over top of the basin and cover your head with a heavy bath towel, so that no steam can escape. Steam your face for thirty seconds. Now lather a hot cloth with Woodbury's Facial Soap. With this wash your face thoroughly, rubbing the lather well into the skin with an upward and outward motion. Then rinse the skin well, first with warm water, then with cold, and finish by rubbing it for thirty seconds with a piece of ice.

Woodbury advertisement in *The Ladies' home journal* v. 39, December 1922, p.45

being judged by others, accompanied by self-consciousness and insecurity. Some people might only experience it as a rare emotion, triggered by very specific situations, while others feel like a bigger part of their identity is influenced by it. Shyness in itself is therefore neither necessarily a burden nor a virtue. Only the expectations and norms of the world around us determine the value attached to shyness. It is certainly not a modern invention, but I do think that it is harder to find peace with it in these times.

THE ARTISTIC PERSONALITY



Throughout history art seems to have functioned as a refuge for those who feel out of place within a society or who seek a slower, more introverted way to process and express their thoughts and experiences. Thinking of Jung's notion of energy flowing inward and outward, which I mentioned earlier, it makes sense to me that more introverted people see the value in artistic practise as a retreat from social life, a way to recharge in voluntary isolation while being creative. By withdrawing one's focus from the often overstimulating outside world, rich inner lives are likely to emerge and to fuel creativity and imagination. This introverted quality to reflect and the talent for solitude which is common amongst shy people can certainly be applied in the arts. Of course, this does not imply that only people with introverted personalities can engage in creative practise, but it is a helpful trait. To me, art also speaks to the often painful experience of failing to communicate in person or being too shy to say what I would like to say in a certain moment. By creating in solitude and under controlled circumstances, the tongue-tied could find this to be an alternative and more suitable way of expression. We are used to seeing extreme moods or mental states such as depression, mania or psychotic experiences as creative fuel for artistic expression. Why is the agony of shyness not just seen as one of them as well?

When picturing the stereotypically ideal contemporary artist I imagine a boldly alternative, confident avant-garde character. I find it intimidating that, as figures of public life, artists are expected to be visible outside their studios and participate in interviews and artist talks, give speeches at their shows and to



Andy Warhol. Photograph of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Bryan Ferry, Julian Schnabel, Jacqueline Beaurang, Paige Powell, and Others at a Party at Julian Schnabel's Apartment, 1985, 1985



Rembrandt van Rijn. The Artist in his Studio, ca. 1626

be, overall, part of the network in the art world. Because I do not really see myself to be part of any of these public events, I wonder if it really plays a role in how successful an artist is. The website Artsy published an article last year in which the author Casey Lesser investigates and questions the relation between an artist's success and their social connections within the art scene versus the originality of their work.¹³ In the article this research is discussed by using the example of a group exhibition about abstraction which was shown at MOMA in 2012. The exhibition featured a diagram depicting the connections between the different artists who were part of the movement. It showed that the artists with the biggest social networks, like Picasso and Kandinsky, were indeed the most famous ones, apparently regardless of their creativity. I find it problematic that there is no real explanation mentioned of what is defined as creativity here, but the fact that a greater network in the art world can not only inspire an artist through the diversity and input of so many different fellow creatives, but can also open up new career opportunities and exposure seems plausible to me. Networking events (which I can never imagine myself to attend. The entire concept seems so intimidating since the whole point is to be noticed, which I try to avoid most of the time) sound like they should belong in the formal, impersonal world of corporate business, but even though they may differ in form, they are just as common and needed in order to get a foot in the door of the creative world.

This requirement of being part of the public life and actively engaging in social events in order to build connections can cause

13 Lesser, C. (2019, February 27). Artists Become Famous through Their Friends, Not the Originality of Their Work. Artsy. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-artists-famous-friends-originality-work>

immense distress for shy artists. While the often quiet, solitary nature of their practise offers them the space and freedom to express themselves as boldly as they wish and urge to, the pressure of the public world, to which they are used to present themselves in the shelter of the so-called shell and which they seek to escape through their work, has the opposite effect. This split into two personalities is especially apparent when comparing the literary and the actual personalities of writers. I can identify with this notion and it actually also applies to me writing my thesis right now. Writing about shyness is much easier, than actually being shy. It also has something hypocritical to it. While I am developing these ideas about how to be more accepting towards shyness and embrace its strengths, my inner (shy) critic reads along and proofreads every sentence with very strict eyes in order to save me (or us) from possible embarrassment. It is difficult to consciously resist this censorship all the time, because the thought of somebody else's eyes wandering along these lines almost compares to the thought of somebody's eyes wandering over my actual body and the fact that I know that it will be evaluated by somebody in the end, even increases this anxiety. But still, I am sitting in my room by myself as I write and delete and write again the things I want to reveal about myself, without the pressure of spontaneity. After handing in the paper, I do not have to be present while it is being read and in that sense, I experience writing as a safe space to be more daring.

As a more famous example, Agatha Christie, who is best known for her mystery novels and short stories featuring bold characters like the amateur detective Miss Marple is known to have been a



Exhibition view “The Secrets of Mona Lisa” at The Reading Public Museum, USA, 2015

seclusive, bashful person herself. She once missed a party in her honour because the doorman failed to recognize her and she was too shy to tell him who she was. All dressed up and ready for the event, she listened to the celebration of her play *The Mousetrap* as the longest running production in the history of British theatre through closed doors in the hotel lobby.¹⁴ This incident happened in 1958 and by that time she had already published more than 60 novels and was celebrated all over the world. Still, she was not able to overcome her painful shyness. In contrast to the timid character with which she presented herself to the public stands the audacity with which she invented fictional characters on paper, who seem to be her polar opposite. Miss Marple's nosy and reckless nature could function as the counter-ballast to Christie's own timidity. Part of her writing process was to dictate her thoughts into a portable tape recorder. These recordings were later discovered by her grandson and can now be listened to online¹⁵. Christie's voice in the tapes which she recorded in privacy does not carry a trace of the bashfulness she is so well known for. Instead, the confident pauses between her sentences and her clear pronunciation with elegantly rolling r's remind me of what the fearless detective Miss Marple sounds like in my head when reading the novels.

14 Moran, J. (2017). *Shrinking Violets: The Secret Life of Shyness*. Yale University Press. p. 87

15 Dowell, B. (2015, December 7). Hear Agatha Christie speak in exclusive audio clip of her private dictaphone tapes. Radio Times. <https://www.radiotimes.com/news/2015-12-07/hear-agatha-christiespeak-in-exclusive-audio-clip-of-her-private-dictaphone-tapes>

CAN THE ARTIST STILL REMAIN A MYSTERY?

Listening to Christie's private tape recordings feels somewhat intrusive and reminds me of our general obsessive interest in the private lives and personalities of public figures like artists. When analysing the work of famous artists, we always take into consideration what we know about their personalities and about the private circumstances under which they worked. This knowledge can alter the way we view a piece of work and sometimes it becomes even more interesting than the art itself. The first example I have to think of is DaVinci's Mona Lisa, this famous portrait of an unknown woman with a mysterious smile, which inspired so many theories, movies and books about its origin. Speculations about the artist's sexuality, the subject of the portrait and his relation to her (or him?), the secret that might be hidden behind her smile or even somewhere in the mountain landscape in the background offer intriguing and entertaining material for books and movies¹⁶, but it remains unclear to me whether they add anything to the actual value and meaning of the painting itself or rather just nurture our natural hunger for drama and tragedy. Would people be moved to tears when looking at Mark Rothko's abstract paintings even if they did not know about the tragedy of his life that eventually led him to commit suicide?¹⁷

Art often comes from a place of extreme emotions and strong urges to express something so personal that, in the end, only the creator themselves can fully grasp the meaning and intention of the work. It is understandable that a viewer will start to wonder about the person behind the work and will try to imagine what somebody with a soul

16 Wikipedia contributors. (2020, September 7). Speculations about Mona Lisa. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speculations_about_Mona_Lisa#:~:text=One%20long%2Dstanding%20mystery%20of,did%20paint%20eyebrows%20and%20eyelashes

17 Kedmey, K. (2017). Mark Rothko | MoMA. The Museum of Modern Art. <https://www.moma.org/artists/5047>



Agatha Christie Credit: Alamy



Everett Collection. Movie Poster
Miss Marple - Murder She Said, 1964

like the one reflected in this artwork could possibly be like, what they might have experienced. It lies in the nature of mysteries that they want to be solved, that they evoke a prickling kind of curiosity and a hunger for the truth behind them. We long for explanations, so we listen to artists talk about their work, or rather just about themselves, about their families, about their secrets. We desire to lift the curtain and shine a bright light behind the scenes. But is the mystery not a big part of what makes art so appealing? Not knowing all the answers triggers our own imagination, which can also lead to a more intense and unique experience of an art work. After all, we are drawn to the Mona Lisa because so many answers about its background remain a mystery.

Is there still space for mysterious artists, who want to remain in the shadows and only show themselves through their work? The anonymous British street artist Banksy is a contemporary example of an artist whose identity remains a secret. Only the recognizable style of Banksy's stencil graffiti work, which often appears in public places, links the work to the same artist. The secrecy around his identity started out as a simple way to protect himself from getting fined for criminal damage back when he was a less well-known street artist¹⁸. Now that his art is widely recognized as such, the mystery around him functions less as a protection from trouble but rather just became an exciting part of his artistic identity. He stands out from the crowd of famous artists paradoxically by being invisible. It became part of his handwriting not to be known.

Apart from this rather extreme case of mystery around an artist,

there are especially many actors and musicians who express themselves boldly and uninhibitedly on stage or in front of the camera, but when they step off it they are actually very private people who do not enjoy the attention their celebrity-status generates. The comedian and actor, Sasha Baron Cohen, who is famous for playing the character Borat since 2005 in his political comedies, gave his very first speech and interview only this year. Before, he would occasionally speak as his character. He is a very reserved person, who is reluctant to be seen as a celebrity.¹⁹ It seems like his private life is completely separated from his work and his fame only affects the character Borat, not Cohen himself. Not always does this kind of separation function so smoothly. I often think about how difficult it must be as a musician to, apart from writing and recording songs, constantly also having to perform them. One really becomes the personification of the work, not just the maker, but a crucial part of it. The musician's presence is required for the music to live. How much confidence it must require to sing one's own songs in front of a live audience over and over again, sometimes years after they have been written. Even the most quiet songs have to be blasted out loudly in order to be heard by a concert crowd. The musician Nick Drake struggled with this pressure. He is considered a talented artist, but his awkwardness and shyness on stage made it difficult for him to hold an audience's attention. According to The Atlantic, fellow musician Brian Cullman compared a performance he saw of Drake to "being at the bedside of a dying man who wants to tell you a secret, but who keeps changing his mind at the last minute."²⁰ During his concerts he would often mumble barely audibly into the microphone or away

19 Dowd, M. (2020, October 26). Sacha Baron Cohen on the "Borat" Sequel and Playing Abbie Hoffman. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/17/style/sacha-baron-cohen-maureen-dowd-interview.html>

20 Gritz, J. R. (2014, November 25). Nick Drake, 40 Years After His Death: How the Internet Finally Made Him Into a Star. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/11/howthe-internet-and-volkswagen-made-a-dead-folksinger-into-a-star/383145/>



Banksy. Graffiti on the wall of a printing shop in Shoreditch, London, 2002



Keith M Page 13 oris. Portrait of Nick Drake, 1969

from it, stopping a song in the middle, because he forgot the lyrics or because he just remembered the ones of another song. Drake only became famous after he died, aged 26, from an overdose of antidepressants. He could not find shelter on the stage as a place to free himself of his shyness. Instead, his timid personality kept him from expressing his actual talent and passion for music to others.

The secrecy and privacy shy artists naturally seek and which create a mysterious aura around them can be an impassable wall which keeps them from receiving the recognition they might deserve. But especially now, in times where everyone is expected to be an exhibitionist and barely any secret is kept from the public, this subtle presence or non-presence could be a powerful counter-movement. Maybe we need more mystery in the world. Instead of dragging shy artists into the spotlight we could start to embrace the curiosity their shadowy existence fills us with.

CAMERA-SHYNESS AND THE SHY CAMERA



SILENT VOYEURISM



When I was a child I was convinced that I would grow up to become a movie director. I do not recall where this idea came from or what exactly I imagined it would be like, but it was the answer I wrote down in all the friend books my classmates handed to me in elementary school. This was the initial reason I started to play around with my father's camera, creating short films with my siblings and friends. It was still my plan to become a director, when I had already abandoned this hobby and became more fascinated by photography. Maybe I just never cared to update my standard answer to these kinds of questions, but I was already researching filmmaking schools and the courses one could take there.

When I try to think about what made me eventually reconsider my ambitions, I clearly remember a conversation with my father that touched me deeply. I was probably around 15 years old and we had one of the many talks about what I was going to make out of my future. I told him how I wanted to become a movie director and he replied with something along the lines of: "You mean you want to be the person on a chair who is always shouting at people and gets angry when something does not go the way they have it in mind? You would really need to be able to direct people and tell them what you want. Don't you think you are too shy for that? Not even I could..." It had never occurred to me that there could be jobs that you needed a certain personality for. I could not imagine, bossing anyone other than my little brother around and began picturing my future self on a movie set, desperately trying to make myself noticed with my quiet voice and fear of attention.

Of course, I do not believe that this realization is what made me change my mind and study photography instead of applying at the film academy. Many factors played into this decision and I have not regretted it a single time. Yet, I do sometimes find myself wondering where I would be and what I would be doing right now, more generally, if it was not for my shyness. Then again, every job in its core is probably a way for people to find a place where they can apply the strengths of their unique and differently shaped personalities, while their weaknesses are challenged to a healthy degree. Shyness is often an obstacle, but so are other emotions.

Photography and shyness have a strange and ambiguous relation. On one hand, photographing is a pretty introverted activity: With most of my face hidden behind the camera, I am able to silently observe the world from somewhat of an outsider's perspective. This alienated feeling of not belonging to the crowd, that my shyness often causes me to experience, is completely acceptable, even desirable, when photographing. Not being noticed and not disturbing the scene is a helpful ability then, not a desperate refuge from the paralyzing anxiety that my body reacts with to the looks of too many pairs of eyes. I remember reading an interview with the unit still photographer Matt Kennedy last year in which he said: "Being in the shadows and not distracting everyone is crucial. [...] I love hearing from an actor or filmmaker 'How did you get that shot? I never even saw you.'"²¹ This description aligns with the imaginations of myself on a movie set, just that this is not a nightmare scenario, but somebody's actual job. As a set photographer, a wedding photographer or a photo-journalist, being able to make yourself

unnoticed is often a crucial skill. In this way, photography offers a space where we shy people can operate more or less in our comfort zones and according to our quiet nature.

While writing about this invisible photographer, lurking in the shadows and watching the world like a hunter their prey, another term, which is closely linked to both, photography and shyness, comes to my mind: voyeurism. Because of its obsessive and often sexual nature, the word has quite the negative connotation.²² Originally, the word comes from the French “voir” which is just the verb for “seeing”. So, in its core meaning, a voyeur is a person who enjoys to watch.

As a shy person I naturally spend a lot of time observing. I love just to stare at people, as they pass by, or even sit next to me, engaged in a conversation I do not participate in. My non-participation is probably the most enjoyable part of this activity, and because strangers do not know of my existence there is also no pressure to break this shield of passivity. I am extremely curious about other people's stories and since I would rather not ask them where they were going, which relation they have to the person they just waved at or whether that eye twitching was caused by a specific thought, I fill up the gaps myself. While being an extremely private person, the privacy of others has this fascinating, almost magnetic effect on me. I am not sure how much of this curiosity about other people's lives is linked to my shyness, but in most cases I would prefer to stalk a person in secrecy (and find great pleasure and excitement in it) than to expose myself to their eyes and judgement by talking



ROOM 47

Sunday February 22, 1900 a.m. I go into 47. All the beds are unmade: the double bed, the single bed, and the small bed up bed. The first thing I notice are four pairs of slippers: two pairs for adults, two for children. There is French toast on the table, a bulletin hanging from a handle on the chest of drawers. On the right hand bedside table a book on legal and fiscal research companies and some Marlboro in the drawer. On the left hand one a guide to French hands and, in the drawer, some Tropic. At night, he wears light cotton green pajamas, and she a blue flannel nightgown. There is a suitcase on the floor. Inside I find several plastic bags filled with medications and a book. Venice is on every I art. On the luggage stand, a second suitcase. Its full. I find penicillin, I find food, I am already here. In the wardrobe: two pairs of trousers, a mauve sweater, a mauve shirt, three pairs of feminine briefs, red, black, and pink blue. Only the bright colored slippers show up the room. At the foot of the night table, a leather briefcase containing two Stein puppets (they are a married couple living in Geneva). I just note that she is of medium height with dark eyes and brown hair and he of

medium height with blue eyes and brown hair, a sheet of paper with a few typed lines: "Amusing Venice: two dreams of all those years and there one day, you're off to the City of Dices which you think you already know after all you've read and seen and heard. The most striking thing is probably the silence: no sound of cars, motorcycles or anything else. You can hear people talking in the street. There's no dozing around. In fact, that is impossible here: no one can run through these narrow, winding streets, constantly cut off by stairways and ladders. In this one, you either walk or do nothing. It is therefore wise to bring comfortable shoes and a Comfort spray." Further down, these handwritten words: "Classroom: not bad. Cemetery: feminine. Goodbye ride worth it."

Monday 23, 9:45 a.m. The bathroom is messier than yesterday. They took a bath. The towels are piled up in the locker. The cigarette pack is unopened. The bed on Venice, taken out of the suitcase, is now set on the bedside table. Next to it, I find four postcards written in French, since of the city. The first is addressed to Mr. and Mrs. D. in Geneva:

"Greetings and warm regards. See you soon. The S. family." The second is to the G. family in Barcelona: "Everything is very beautiful here. We send you warm regards. See you soon. The S. family." The third is to the C. family in Barcelona: "Dear all, Venice is very beautiful. Every corner is a little work of art. Tomorrow, God willing, we go to see the surrounding islands. Hugs. The S. family." Lastly, the fourth one addressed to the B. in Geneva: "Everything is very beautiful here but it would be even more so if we were enjoying it together as a family. See you soon. The S. family." In the wastebasket I find a postcard torn into eight pieces. It is of the same scene as the one addressed to the B. and is addressed to these same. Only the text is different. One could read: "Everything is very beautiful here but it would be even more so if we were enjoying it with you. See you soon. The S. family."

Tuesday 24, 10:30 a.m. They are going to leave. The suitcase are packed. They are set in front of the door. They leave behind the bedsheet, which is hanging limp, and aside lace.



Sophie Calle. L'Hôtel, Chambre 47, 1981



Sophie Calle. Suite Vénitienne, 2015



Sebastian Kim. Portrait of Sophie Calle, for Interview Magazine, 2014

to them.

The French photographer Sophie Calle obviously shares my secret fascination about strangers. Most of her photographic work involves following or peeking at unknown people. She takes on the role of a stalker, a voyeur and tries to find out intimate details about her often unsuspecting subjects. These are, for example, the guidelines she set for her series “Hotel Rooms”:

“On Monday, February 16, 1981, I was hired as a temporary chambermaid for three weeks in a Venetian hotel. I was assigned twelve bedrooms on the fourth floor. In the course of my cleaning duties, I examined the personal belongings of the hotel guests and observed through details lives which remained unknown to me. On Friday, March 6, the job came to an end.”²³

The series is presented in diptychs, one for each room: The first part consists of a printed text listing the objects and other findings about the visitors which the silent stalker, the chambermaid in disguise, observed in this room during the period of their stay. The text reads like a diary, written from a first person’s perspective. In the second part of the diptych nine black and white photos, printed in three rows of three, show objects that were mentioned in the text above: an open suitcase, an unmade bed, pieces of a torn postcard, slippers in different sizes, the inside of a wardrobe. The use of an on-camera flash reminds me of forensic photography,

while also emphasizing the intrusive nature of the performance. Calle's gaze is quite literally highlighted, the images are, just like the text, very much taken from a first person's perspective. But while the written observations and the flash of her camera boldly reveal private details about the people whose rooms she enters, her own character remains a mystery. Being behind the camera means inevitably to be invisible for the viewer. Even though this work is highly performative and Calle herself almost plays a bigger role in it than her actual subjects, the act of photographing is still happening in secrecy, reminding me of the words of the set photographer Matt Kennedy I mentioned earlier. The camera becomes an object that enables the person holding it to look (and expose) without being seen.

This play with her own personality and her curious fascination with strangers runs like a red thread through Sophie Calle's work. I do not know if she would identify as shy (in fact, judging from the way she expresses herself in interviews and in some of her other, less silent pieces, I would actually dare to doubt it), but the voyeuristic qualities of photography, which she highlights in her practise, are examples of how it can be a medium for the shy.



Lilli Weinstein, M: des: , 2020



Lilli Weinstein, M: des: , 2020



BEAUTIFUL AWKWARD STRANGERS

The other side of the bilateral relationship between photography and shyness is linked to a rather obvious quality of the medium: As opposed to, for instance, writing or painting, where the artist creates work with the help of certain materials and tools, photography is about capturing, and therefore inevitably involves some kind of interaction with the world. To photograph a wave crashing at shore on a cloudy morning, right before the sun rises, I have to travel to the sea and wait for exactly that moment, hoping for the right weather conditions. And to capture the smile of a man I keep seeing in the cafe I visit every Friday morning, I have to approach him and somehow make him smile at me. A photograph is as much proof of an event itself, as of the fact that the photographer was present at this specific time and place, stood or sat across. Although we might never see them, the photographer is always present outside the frame. This aspect of photography, which is such a substantial part of it, causes me to regularly find myself in the most unexpectedly exciting situations. Most of all, it forces me far out of my comfort zone. I often experience photographing as some intense kind of adventure, where the adrenaline levels in my blood cause my vision to become blurry at the edges and my sweaty forehead to leave embarrassingly revealing marks on my camera's display. When I walk home from a shoot, I am filled with an exciting rush of risk and I am secretly amazed to have made it out alive, every time.

In my opinion, this feeling is quite justified. Except for some very few people, I never feel calm in anybody's company, in any kind of interaction. I go out of my way (often quite literally) in order

to avoid bumping into an acquaintance and I never attend any kind of gathering without an excuse in mind, which can help me to escape if necessary. Being potentially visible to anyone, for example when walking down the aisle of a supermarket or sitting on the bus, is sometimes already a challenge, but as soon as there is a conscious interaction, I know for sure that I am subject to the other person's gaze and judgement. My body reacts to this thought with immediate panic. One definitely does not need to identify as shy in order to agree that it is a rather uncomfortable and stressful task to approach a stranger in order to ask them for a photograph. But as someone, who would rather forever get lost than to ask somebody for directions it often feels like an impossible task to ask so much from a person I do not even know. The fear of rejection is breathtaking. I would much prefer to just silently stalk strangers, like Sophie Calle. But then again, something in me also enjoys this little, quite easily accessible adrenalin rush. I am not a fan of watching horror movies at all, but I understand why people seek out these safe, contained kinds of adventure-simulations. The excitement is bearable, because in the back of your mind you know that you are safe and that after an hour and a half the experience will be over. During a photo shoot I can feel terribly nervous, jittery and anxious, but because I am setting the framework myself, there is a sense of safety that makes it possible to surrender to the situation for the time being, knowing that I can retreat to my safe space afterwards.

I am not alone in my experience of this thrilling excitement which strangers and the (possible) interaction with them make me feel.

Many photographers, more at least, than I expected, confessed that they struggle or used to struggle with the interactive part of photography. Rineke Dijkstra, for example, told Artnews in an interview, that her shyness kept her from photographing people in the beginning of her career.

“The first pictures I took of people were always taken from the back; I was too shy to ask them. This time [during a field trip] in Rome was the first time I took pictures from the front... and I think there were some good ones.”²⁴

Dijkstra is well known for her series “Beach Portraits”, in which she captures teenagers on various beaches. All the subjects are positioned in the center of the frame and their entire body is shown. What is most apparent is the awkward self-consciousness, which is so typical for this in-between state of teenage hood and which all these subjects with their uncomfortable body positions and ill-fitting swimwear express. Part of this is probably caused by the use of a large format camera, which took Dijkstra a long time to set up, so that the subjects had to wait in front of the lens, unsure when the photo was going to be shot. But I also imagine that the discomfort of her subjects somehow reflect the photographer’s state of mind. I have to think of school photographers who all seem to share this humorous charismatic character trait that helps (most) children feel at ease and smile in the camera without inhibition. You can almost read the joke about monkeys and diapers or the “cheese” from the big, bright, crooked-toothed smiles. The same way, you should be able to read some of the photographer’s own insecurity

24 Mirlesse, S. (2012, June 25). THE VULNERABLES: INTERVIEW WITH RINEKE DIJKSTRA. Artnews.<https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/rineke-dijkstra-guggenheim-sfmoma-56276/>



Alec Soth. Charles, Vasa, Minnesota, 2002





Dan Dennehy. Portrait of Alec Soth, 2009



Rineke Dijkstra. Hilton Head Island, 2000



Rineke Dijkstra. Maddy, Martha's Vineyard, MA, USA, 2015



Portrait of Rineke Dijkstra. Courtesy de Volkskrant.

in the halfway bent limbs of Dijkstra's subjects.

This awkwardness in an interaction, which most shy people, including myself, know all too well and experience as something close to hell, also holds a certain beauty. Captured awkwardness is strangely pleasing to look at. The photographs by Alec Soth often capture these offbeat moments. He too works with a large format camera and consciously makes use of the extra time required for taking a portrait with it. His subjects look charmingly unarmed, I love, for example, the confused, lost and somewhat awkward look of the man holding two model planes in his hands while standing on a rooftop in the photo called "Charles", which is part of Soth's series "Sleeping by the Mississippi". This mercilessly exposed vulnerability is relatable, because it is simply part of the human experience. It offers an entrance into the photograph, a way of empathising with the subject. As a shy person, it often feels like I am wearing all my weaknesses visibly written all around the silhouette of my bent shoulders and in the corners of my tense lips. The feeling of being so exposed is truly uncomfortable, but as a photographer, it can be a strength. By being vulnerable and accepting, even embracing the discomfort of my own shyness, I can invite the person on the other side of the camera to mirror my openness and expose some of their own vulnerability.

Instead of trying to be a forced, grown-up version of the school photographer, shy photographers could become aware of the strengths of awkwardness. The fact that the situation you share with a stranger in front of your camera makes you insanely nervous,

does not have to be hidden, but it can open a door to a different kind of interaction, a more quiet, honest one perhaps. Alec Soth beautifully puts it this way:

“I’ve noticed that when you take a portrait, you kind of race through it, to get it over with, because it can be this unpleasant thing: but if you just sit in that awkwardness for a period of time that’s where some of the magic can appear.”²⁵

25 Macdonald, F. (2017, May 12). How being shy can help you take good photos. BBC Culture. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20170512-how-being-shy-can-help-you-take-good-photos>

Many therapists claim that Exposure Therapy, which is a commonly used technique in behaviour therapy, is one of the most useful tools to overcome shyness.²⁶ With the guidance of a therapist the patient gradually engages in more difficult social situations which they would usually avoid as they trigger anxiety. If, for example, somebody is afraid of or extremely uncomfortable with phone calls, they would start by making short calls to acquaintances and increase the length of these calls, until they manage to have a conversation with a complete stranger over the phone.

In her book “Sorry I’m Late I Didn’t Want to Come: An Introvert’s Year of Saying Yes”, Jessica Pan embarks on a year long experiment in which she tries, with the help of different kinds of psychological experts, to say “yes” to all the things her introverted, shy nature usually would keep her from doing. One of the first exercises involves asking every stranger in a London Subway station who the Queen of England is. The goal of these kinds of tasks, almost performances, is to make yourself numb to embarrassment in some way. Or, at least, to realize that the negative judgement of others does not kill you.

I compared this experiment to a performance, because there is one important element, which, in my opinion, takes away from the sincerity of this action: Pan knew that she was just acting. She knew that she was playing the role of this embarrassingly uneducated woman for therapeutic purposes, but she was not exposing her true self. Somebody told her to ask this specific question and knowing this could enable her to distance herself from that role. I do not

know if this fact really alleviated her embarrassment in any way. But the notion of how the knowledge that you are merely playing a role in a frightening social situation, can help to protect your true self from anxiety, is an important one when thinking about the place for shyness in photography.

There is a very fitting German word which can help explaining this thought: Maskenfreiheit, which I would loosely translate to “the freedom that comes with wearing a mask”. I noticed earlier, how acting (after writing) seems to be an art form which especially many shy people are drawn to. It sounds like a contradiction at first, but because shyness is essentially the fear of negative judgement, taking on the role of somebody else, frees the true person in a protective way. The fixed setting, in which the acting takes place, offers a refuge, where one can break out of their shyness in a safe, somewhat controlled way. And as you are not exposing yourself, but a fictitious character, or some kind of alter ego you take on when entering a stage, you are immune to embarrassment, as long as you manage to stay in the role.

A camera can also function as a very powerful mask for shy people like me. The role of the photographer is also a role I can invent and take on when needed. Instead of a stage or a movie script, the setting is the place I choose to photograph at and the camera in my hands functions in the same way as a doctor's white uniform, which clearly communicates their role and gives them a certain authority. Asking a stranger if I can take their portrait is much easier than asking them out for dinner, because I can hide behind

the photographer-role I take on and use it as an excuse to talk to them. Who gets rejected is not really me, but the photographer.

By functioning as an excuse to talk to someone (or a mask to hide behind) the camera opens many doors to worlds that would usually remain hidden. My interest in a certain person gets backed up by an external reason and purpose and I can get myself invited into someone's private space. The photographer who is also me, but mainly a part of me that got exaggerated and turned into a role I play, is allowed to ask very personal questions and have exceptionally intimate conversations. Alec Soth once described this as "profound intimacy"²⁷ which you have the privilege to experience as a journalist or photographer. And indeed, the conversations I have while photographing somebody often feel more profound and deeper bonds are made much more quickly than in the context of my everyday life.

Because the interaction is so intimate, it almost is not apparent that I am hiding my true face, or part of it, behind the body and lens of my camera. Also, because the action of photographing requires, besides all intimacy, some sort of hierarchy in which the photographer takes on a leading, somewhat commanding or dominant role. In sometimes more or less subtle ways the person in front of the lens needs to be directed in order for the photograph to become what the photographer has in mind. Already the act of pointing a camera at somebody puts that person in a quite vulnerable, slightly submissive and often uncomfortable position. Suddenly my gaze is controlling the situation, not my fear of the

27 de Pressigny, C. (2017, September 20). Alec Soth didn't expect to become a world-famous photographer. I-d. https://i-d.vice.com/en_au/article/evpnem/alec-soth-didnt-expect-to-become-aworld-famous-photographer

other's gaze. By emphasizing the action of looking at somebody, I become less aware of them looking back at me. Locking eyes with someone through the viewfinder does not make me blush, since I am the only one making eye contact while the other person only sees the dark circle of the shutter open and close behind their own reflection on the curved glass of the lens.

Now, I realize that it sounds like I am suggesting to use photographing as a therapeutic method to help deal with shyness. Maybe this does not have to be linked or limited to photography, but by creating a performative setting where breaking out of my shyness feels natural and is motivated by internal desires instead of external pressure, I am able to explore a part of myself that is not limited by my inhibitions. In fact, if it wasn't for my initial reticence and self-consciousness I might not be able to experience this freedom with such intensity or make so much use of it. Exercises inspired by theater and improvisation are often used in a therapeutic setting, especially when dealing with inhibition and shyness, but the important part of photography is, again, that it is set against the background of the real world, where nobody expects you to act, or asks you to, and the experiences you make that way are not artificial or scripted.

SELF PORTRAITURE: EXPOSURE FOR THE SHY

In the 1980's photographer Jo Spence and artists and psychotherapist Rosy Martin collaborated on a long term research to develop a new method of using photography in therapy: phototherapy. Their approach is meant to be applied in a more classical therapeutic setting, with a therapist and a client. It is opposite from the one I suggested above in the sense that this time, the client is actually in front of the camera and the therapist behind it. Through a performative re-enactment approach the method enables the client to shape and reflect on their own (photographic) representation. In a session, the therapist becomes the photographer, but the client is in control. By using props and costumes they are able to dress up, act out traumatic experiences from their past or reshape them, imagine possible futures or completely reinvent their own identity. The photographs document this process and allow the client to reflect on their own images, but the action itself is highly performative and uninterrupted by the thought of a photograph as the end result. Martin describes her method as a "sophisticated and contained form of adult play."²⁸ In a case study of one of her own clients, who reenacted a scene from his school-times, in which his "sadistic" teacher put him down while he was reciting a poem, Martin quotes his feedback: "the camera makes me look at parts of me I have suppressed for most of my life."

Photography is a powerful tool when it comes to self-image. Many photographers have played with this freedom of self portraiture outside of a therapy setting and by taking on both roles, the one of the subject and the photographer's. This way, they can be in full control of the image. While I have been talking about photography mainly as an action or a performance, here the end result, the

28 Martin, R. (2009b). Inhabiting the image: photography, therapy and re-enactment phototherapy. *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling*, 11(1), 35-49.



Infantilization, Jo Spence, 1986



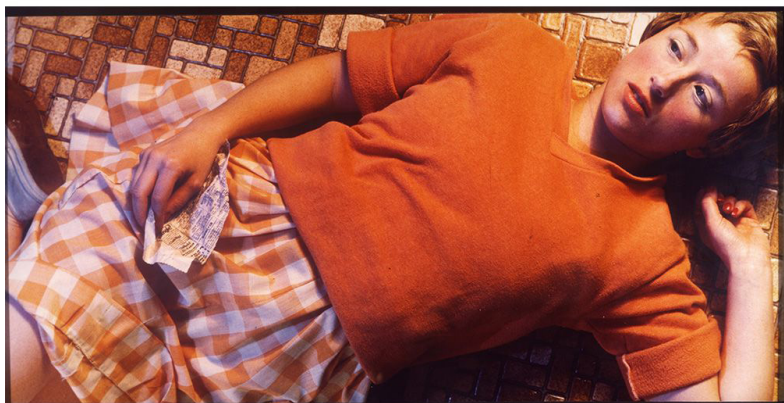
Jo Spence. Self Portrait with Rosy Martin, ca. 1980s

photograph, becomes equally as important. Being able to look at a captured image of oneself, and controlling the way one is presented in that image, can have a big effect on a person's perception of themselves. Shy people often struggle with very low self-esteem. My fear of being judged negatively comes from the conviction that there is in fact a lot to be criticised about myself. The urge to hide from the looks of too many eyes, means that there apparently is something which needs to be hidden. Often, this turns into a vicious circle: the fear of being perceived negatively keeps me from speaking up and by remaining quiet I think I am perceived as boring, so that my fear increases even more. The self-images of shy people are often quite distorted as they are made up of a negative exaggeration of what they expect others to see in them.

Being able to control and reflect on your self image in a private and safe space can offer a way of exploring what lies underneath the layer of shyness. The first photographs I ever took were self portraits. This was actually not motivated by the fact that I was too shy to ask anyone else to pose for me, but rather by the fun I had when dressing up and looking at photographs of myself. I already had a very defined image of myself in public and only in the extreme privacy of my room could I dare this extreme exposure of another part of myself (or not myself at all). The freedom this made me experience is closely related to Maskenfreiheit. But the mask in this case is not the camera. Other than discussed in the previous chapter, here the acting or expressing happens in a safe space, completely shielded from any stranger's gaze. This eliminates the fear of being looked at and allows more freedom and honesty in

front of the camera. Deciding to publish these images, the results of this unwatched acting and self-staging, is the actual exposure. Rather like an author, not an actor, I can make use of the freedom of creating in privacy and decide not to be present when the result (in this case the exposure of myself) is being looked at.

In the professional photography field, Cindy Sherman is probably known best for her self-portraits. But instead of using them to reflect hidden parts of herself, she uses herself as a mirror which reflects issues in contemporary society. The costumes and props she uses in her images are actual costumes that are supposed to turn her into somebody else. Even though they are all self portraits, they are actually very unrevealing. When I was looking for a potentially shy photographer, who is using self-portraits as a way to express what remains hidden behind inhibition in their everyday life, most of the images suggested were “self portraits of camera shy photographers” which showed a person photographing their own reflection, but with their face hidden outside the frame in one way or the other. In the term camera shy shyness is seen not as a character trait or an emotion, but as a specific kind of behaviour. Somebody who is shying away from a camera is not necessarily shy in general, but possibly just unhappy with their appearance or self-conscious about it. As I described in the context of photographing strangers, a camera pointed at a person also puts them in a vulnerable position - they are actively looked at and a lot of attention is directed toward them. Most people would experience some kind of shyness in this situation. And since being looked at is one of the specific fears of shy people, there might in fact be more



Cindy Sherman - Untitled # 96, 1981



Juan Guzmán. Frida Kahlo painting “Portrait of Frida’s Family”, 1950-1951

camera shy people who are also shy in most other parts of their lives.

This brings me back to self portraiture: An image I captured of myself allows me to see myself the way I appear when nobody is looking at me. I remember the first thing I noticed when I started to take photographs of myself was how the corners of my mouth were relaxed. It sounds banal, but the deep creases reaching from the outside of my nostrils to both corners of my mouth were always so apparent to me in photographs others took of me and they made me self-conscious. Of course, the reason was my overall tension and discomfort around people, paired with my camera shyness. In my self portraits I could look relaxed and confident. They allowed me to be and look at a person I would maybe like to be. This made me think of the painted self portraits of Frida Kahlo. She is often admired by the feminist movement for her strong expressions and the rich feminist symbolism. By depicting her slight moustache and iconic unibrow she challenged contemporary beauty standards in women and celebrated nonconformity. All this strength and confidence, the female power associated with her is also closely related to the act of picking up the brush yourself and being in control of constructing your own identity. It is a strong image: a severely injured woman who, tied to her bed, paints the identity she might not be able to act out at the moment, depicts the huge pain and discomfort she is challenged with, while at the same time liberating herself from them through her paintings. Despite her fragile body, she expresses rich inner strength in her paintings.

Photographic self portraits can have the same effect: they allow you to construct and control your identity outside of external pressure. They allow the shy to express themselves quietly and in privacy, to see (and possibly show) their inner strengths and hidden qualities. Just like Kahlo turns her physical pain into a powerful artistic force, the agony of shyness can fuel bold self expression.

THE STRENGTH INSIDE THE SHELL - CONCLUSION

When beginning to write this thesis I kept doubting my plan of finding a valuable pearl inside of the burdensome shell us shy people lock ourselves into. The pain this trait causes me and so many others to feel on a daily base, in the most unexpected and sometimes ridiculously harmless situations is one I would love to take a break from sometimes. I did not want to arrive at the conclusion that shyness is indeed nothing but a disorder and the only way to deal with it is to fight against it. What kind of use can possibly be found in the need to hide in a bathroom or in constantly not doing things because I am afraid to?

Exploring this topic, that is so close to me, that sometimes seems to be everything which is me, defining so many of my decisions, occupying more space in my mind and heart than many other things, was also a way of finding another angle towards my own shyness. I wanted to find out about my own strengths instead of focussing on the weakness that seems so obviously limiting to me. Reading all these stories about artists and other people dealing with shyness, some of which made me smile or even chuckle, most of them making me nod in sad sympathy, wrapped me into the blanket of good company. It kept weaving itself, threading together all these separate, private destinies created by the same, universal feeling. Shyness is experienced everywhere. Everybody feels shy from time to time and more people than I will probably ever expect to see it as a fixed part of their identity, like me. It is part of being human, just like so many other beautiful flaws we all share. The difficult part is to discover the merit, to see the beauty that can grow out of all the struggle. Shy people would be better

off if they, instead of spending their lives trying to get rid of the curse and maybe feeling like they fail at it, utilized their shyness in order to succeed in ways only they are able to. By embracing the blush and exposing the tied tongues we can open up other ways of communication and have unique experiences. By sitting in awkward silence with a stranger we can expose what would usually be covered by piles of distracting small-talk and discover something intimately private about the other.

Of course, not all sides of shyness can and should be accepted as a strength. Especially when shyness becomes a disorder, that is when it keeps one from living the life they would like to, it is appropriate and necessary to reach out for help. But even then, the goal does not have to be to get rid of this character trait (in fact, most people I have written about in this thesis died as shy as they were born), but to find a balance between challenging and overcoming the fear and learning to live with it. Making use of Maskenfreiheit and integrating performative settings in one's everyday life or artistic practise can be one way. It helps to create a place where leaving behind the inhibition feels natural.

Generally, there is not enough space to embrace the advantages of shyness. In most professional and private environments, there is an enormous pressure to fit into an ideal personality type that is free from inhibition and shyness. The goal of self-improvement is often to become bolder, more confident, to shine brightly for everyone to see instead of being discovered in the shadows by a careful watcher. Even in the art world, the place where people who prefer to

express their thoughts other than through the spoken word often find refuge, outspokenness and social skills are valued and often only the loudest one is listened to. The quiet power of empathy, of being vulnerable and inviting others to take part in this, is easily overheard. I think, instead of urging shy people to raise their voices and penetrate the walls of their shells, we should urge everyone else to learn to listen more closely, to kneel down sometimes and catch a glimpse of the inside of a modest shell, admire the simple, unobtrusive beauty of a shrinking violet.

Edward Step, Favourite flowers of garden and greenhouse, p.68, 1896



PARMA VIOLET
(*VIOLA ODORATA*—var. *parmensis*)

Nat. size

PL. 32

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