

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

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March 6, 2007

## Portraits and mug shots

Filed under: [portraiture](#), [quotes](#), [vernacular & Flickr](#) — alecsothblog @ 2:50 am

Zoe Strauss [recently asked](#), "What makes a great portrait?" In response, Zoe posted an essay by Richard Avedon (*Henry Kissinger's Portrait*) that includes this definition:

A photographic portrait is a picture of someone who knows he's being photographed, and what he does with this knowledge is as much a part of the photograph as what he's wearing or how he looks. He's implicated in what's happening, and he has a certain real power over the result. The way someone who's being photographed presents himself to the camera and the effect of the photographer's response on that presence is what the making of a portrait is about.

I agree with this definition, but it is a little misleading. It suggests that a portrait session is always charged with the dueling ambitions of subject and sitter. While this is undoubtedly true with Kissinger and Avedon, it isn't true of every good portrait. In fact, many of the great portraits are made when the subject loses ambition.



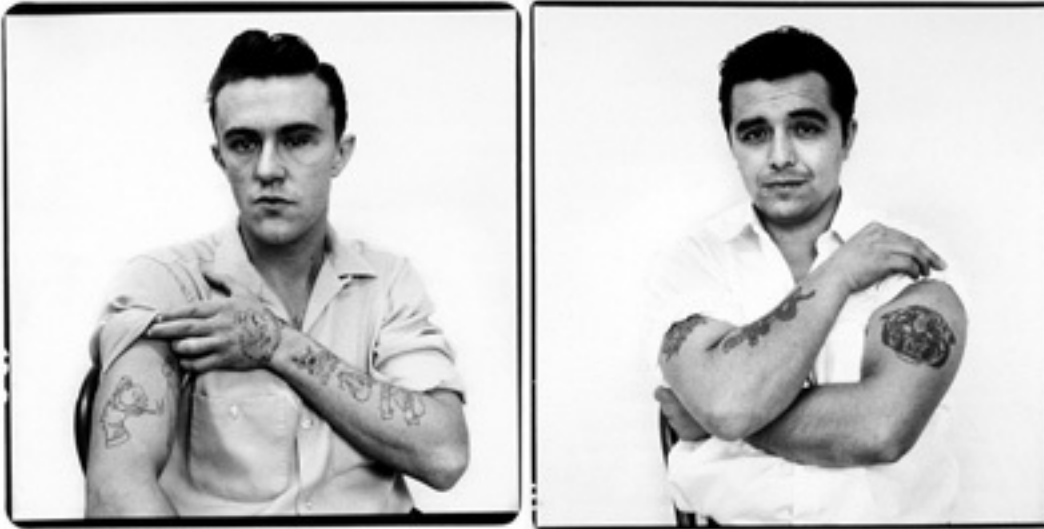
Anonymous mug shot, from Bruce Jackson's *Mirrors*

In [the preface](#) to his collection of found portraits of Arkansas prisoners, *Mirrors (1914-1937)*, Bruce Jackson writes,

Second only to a coroner's photographs of the newly dead, police and prison identification photographs are perhaps the least merciful and most democratic and anonymous photographs of all. The lighting is the same for everyone. The people being photographed have no interest in the photographs being made; the people making the photographs have no interest in the photographs they have made.

Avedon was undoubtedly familiar with this kind of apathy between photographer and subject. He began his career shooting ID portraits for the Merchant Marines.

In 1960 Avedon produced real mug-shots while shooting Dick Hickock and Perry Smith from Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*:



Most of the In *The American West* pictures share the same, mug-shot feeling. Look at this portrait by Avedon next to an anonymous picture from the book [Least Wanted: A Century of American Mugshots](#):



As much as I admire Avedon's supercharged portraits, most of his great images occur when the subject has let down her guard. This isn't limited to non-celebrities. One of the greatest Avedon pictures is his 1957 portrait of Marilyn Monroe. Vince Aletti discusses this picture in a [2002 Village Voice article](#):

After several hours of being flirtatiously, professionally "on," the actress finally sat down in a corner and switched off. Though she was not unaware of being photographed, she allowed Avedon a glimpse of something sad, anxious, and terribly fragile: a star momentarily dimmed. Only a few of Avedon's subjects have Monroe's iconic zap, even in repose, but many of them are caught, like her, looking not at the camera but inward. Pinned

before that stark white seamless, their self-consciousness hasn't vanished, but the performance has wound down and they've lowered their guard enough to appear wistful or reflective or simply, frankly preoccupied.



While Avedon is correct that the subject is sometimes 'implicated in what's happening,' more often than not the photographer holds all of the cards. To his credit, Avedon was honest about this power. In a [1984 interview](#), he said:

I used to think that it was a collaboration, that it was something that happened as a result of what the subject wanted to project and what the photographer wanted to photograph. I no longer think it is that at all. The photographer has complete control, the issue is a moral one and it is complicated.

## 28 Comments

1. there was a great mugshot show at Steven Kasher Gallery in october 2006. here some images:

<http://www.lichtensteiger.de/photos330.html>

<http://www.lichtensteiger.de/photos329.html>

<http://www.stevenkasher.com/html/exhibresults.asp?exnum=592&exname=LEAST+WANTED%3A+%3Cbr%3EA+Century+of+American+Mugshots>

best,  
rli

*Comment by [lichtensteiger](#) — March 6, 2007 @ [4:11 am](#)*

2. I find that Least Wanted photo more interesting than the Avedon — not least because no-one intended it to be interesting. I know you artists have an investment in “intending” things (e.g. a style of seeing) but for pure photographic pleasure you can’t beat a found photograph. It’s all about appearances and surfaces, and what we read into them, not intentions. Marilyn may be thinking about lunch, but it \*looks\* like existential dread (and perhaps, as a talented actor and people pleaser, she even guessed what Avedon wanted, and finally gave it to him ...).

*Comment by [Vinegar Tom](#) — March 6, 2007 @ [6:53 am](#)*

3. Limiting the definition of “portrait” to only images of people who know they are being photographed leaves many — including Walker Evans and his “Many are Called” — out in the cold. Unwise.

*Comment by [Michal Daniel](#) — March 6, 2007 @ [9:16 am](#)*

4. I would like to throw out Watson-

A great Portrait to me is a combination of photographer and subject working out the simple and sublime composition. Although a Fashion Photographer Watson worked in his own way but captured Portraits that described the people.

*Comment by [David Wilson Burnham](#) — March 6, 2007 @ [9:36 am](#)*

5. I’m a photographer from New Orleans. Several years ago I was researching through a treasure trove of historic photographs held by the New Orleans Public Library in preparation for a photographic project I was interested in pursuing. During the course of my research I discovered that the New Orleans Police Department had turned over to the library a collection of arrest photographs taken during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Many of these photographs included images of prostitutes who were arrested outside of the “legalized” prostitution zone of the famed Storyville District – an area, of course, that was photographed by E.J. Bellocq. I spent the better part of a week examining the prostitute arrest photographs in the collection and comparing them with the published images of the prostitutes photographed by Bellocq, the names of most of whom are lost to history. However, I found one arrest image in the collection that I believe looks remarkably similar to one of the women photographed by Bellocq. Of course, I have no way of knowing that this is true or even proving it if it is so. As a photographer with a strong interest in genealogy, it’s always rather interesting to be able to place a lost name to a photographic portrait.

*Comment by [James W. Bailey](#) — March 6, 2007 @ [10:37 am](#)*

6. i think the work of mike disfarmer (and august sander for that matter) perfectly straddles these worlds of the ‘scientific’ and the ‘artistic’ that mug shots and portraits fill. for anyone who doesn’t know his work, it is amazing, as is the odd story of his life and the odd story of the discovery of his work.

*Comment by john k. — March 6, 2007 @ [10:51 am](#)*

7. Portraits. I heard a quote from Katy Grannan that I particularly liked...

"I guess potraits are a way of honoring people that I hardly know, but already miss."

*Comment by [Jami Saunders](#) — March 6, 2007 @ [12:07 pm](#)*

8. And on point again, Alec Soth! Avedon's essay, while I find it moving, and true on the whole, implies that there is close to an equal distribution of power between the photographer and the sitter, which is far from true. That's why this essay was of such interest to me, that Kissinger knew the power of images and power of the recorder to manipulate the viewer through subtle tricks and editorial choices. Richard Avedon absolutely knew the nuances in a face that would lead a portrait to be read with sympathy, dislike, fear, attraction, etc. When Avedon said, "All photographs are accurate. None is the truth," without explicitly exposing the power dynamic he quietly stated the great power that a photographer and editor has when making a photograph and putting out an image into the world. I love the way he phrases it in the 1984 quote you put up.

I find Kissinger's portrait to have a air of malevolence, although others might read that as strength or directness. That's result of Avedon's choice when making the photo: he could have chosen a friendlier and jovial Kissinger! Or a moment when there was a sneering My Lai Massacre Kissinger! Obviously, my reading of this portrait comes from my own feelings about Henry Kissinger, but even with my strong feelings toward him I found something sympathetic in this photo despite my desire to see him as a monster. I really found great beauty in the nuances of this war criminal's portrait. But a photograph of Henry Kissinger is a very particular portrait; a portrait made of not just a recognizable face, but a face with a long history and strong emotional reactions attached to it. That's entirely different than a portrait of a complete stranger to the viewer.

Just an aside, I have never written the word Kissinger this much in my entire life.

The mugshots are an excellent example of who has control of the image... although they're forced portraits they say a lot about the implications of recording, editing and exhibition.

Alright, but here's what I've gotten out of this and I'm still kicking it around...so be prepared for more talking, Soth. Just bringing it back to myself as usual! In my own work, I've found that the portraits that are most compelling to me are the ones that have a sense of connection that can't be pinpointed. This is intangible and I have no way of articulating what this connection is. The portraits that I regard as the strongest are the ones that suggest trust between me and the person being photographed; in the moment of the photo being made it's a collaboration, and I generally choose the images where there's an implication that the sitter trusts me with the image past the shutter opening. Again, I can't articulate what creates the feeling of trust.

Now, enough self-reflection. I'm with you on how so many great portraits are made when the subject loses ambition, but I see it as a little more specific; the loss of ambition to present themselves as they want to be seen or as they think they should be seen.

Alec Soth, I've thought a lot about your recent assignment and the models who were unable to be photographed past the surface of their posed expressions. I know you will be able to make a series of beautiful photos, but it will be very interesting to see what you create coming from a place where you felt that inaccessibility was a dominant feeling in the portraits... as opposed to the warmth, vulnerability, beauty and openness that so many of your portraits exude. I'm really excited to see the finished work. You know I totally love Alec Soth! Please!

*Comment by [Zoe Strauss](#) — March 6, 2007 @ [1:01 pm](#)*

9. I notice an interesting feature shared by "scientific" mugshots and "artistic" portraits: the subjects seldom smile, unlike in most family and tourist snapshots.

If you don't believe me, take a look at Alec's latest Portraits project and see if you can find a smiling face.

<http://alecsoth.com/portrait/pages/frameset.html>

*Comment by [S. LIU](#) — March 6, 2007 @ [1:09 pm](#)*

10. Zoe alludes to a wonderful point about your recent assignment Alec, and something that I think about often.

In your portraits, as well as Zoe's, I think the beauty is in the relationship that exists in you approaching them for a portrait. You seek them out because you are curious, interested in their story, and you invite them to tell you their story- in words outside the confines of the frame, and visually within the image. They are strangers, and you have asked them to in essence be intimate with you. It's the trust, communication, and willingness to be exposed on their part that allows so much of what you do to work so well. I think the uncertainty and rush of that first encounter accounts for something bigger.

Can this same feeling be truly accomplished with an arranged meeting? One that the outcome is predetermined? If these same models in your recent assignment were 'found', persuaded, and treated as strangers, would the outcome be different?

A little off topic, but it's been on my mind lately.

*Comment by [ben](#) — March 6, 2007 @ [1:43 pm](#)*

11. What if we judge a portrait not by what the photographer has decided to make of it but, instead, but what we, as viewers, want to read in it? Doesn't that Marilyn Monroe portrait to a large extent derive its power from the "fact" (or so we think) that Marilyn was really just a lost child, so that Avedon merely took a photo of something that we somehow expected to see? Maybe that is what Kissinger intuitively understood - and what Avedon knew when he wrote what you quoted first?

*Comment by [JM Colberg](#) — March 6, 2007 @ [4:55 pm](#)*

12. Thanks for the great comments Zoe and Ben. For myself, I haven't found much of a pattern. Sometimes I have a magical connection and the pictures stink. Sometimes I have an assignment, spend 5 minutes with a person, and the picture is terrific. It is a little troubling. I mean, what if I just set up a booth at the mall and took portraits all day long? What if I didn't care at all? I'd probably still come away with one good picture and a whole bunch of rubbish - not unlike my usual average. Great pictures are so random and mysterious. I prefer to focus on the larger picture, the project, and cross my fingers that a little jewel will fall into my lap.

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — March 6, 2007 @ [5:18 pm](#)*

13. This comment may seem ancillary to the topic at hand, but I couldn't help but think, these past few days, of the amazing dialogue that takes place in blogs like Alec's. I'm about to sound as though I've just discovered the existence of the Internet, but I read Zoe's post over the weekend, as many of you did, I'm sure, and I was thinking about her work and Avedon's, as well as of the kinds of "portraits" I like to take, which are photos of people when they don't necessarily realize they're being photographed (as Michael Daniel alludes to above). This was all bouncing around up there, and then I read Alec's post which shed a slightly different light on the subject, or offered up a different perspective, as do all the comments here, including Zoe's and Ben's and Joerg's.

Meanwhile, over at Armando Bellmas's blog, I read earlier about Todd Hido, whose name was familiar to me but nothing more, and watched the video Armando linked to. Thought about that, was glad to have gotten a better sense of Hido. And then Shane Lavalette posted a follow-up on his own blog today-more about Hido, a link to an NPR interview.

And the conversation goes on. I wonder what role Avedon would have played if photo blogging were in existence earlier in his career. Would he have blogged? I've read the essays on his site (one of which was the one that Zoe started all this off with), and when I do, I can see him diving in to all this with gusto. (Did Avedon do anything without gusto?)

Anyway, as I said, it's a bit off topic, but I just wanted to convey my appreciation to all these great photographers and people who love photography for challenging me to consider things in ways I wouldn't have otherwise.

*Comment by [Liz Kuball](#) — March 6, 2007 @ [7:10 pm](#)*

14. Some of the most remarkable, most powerful portraits ever made in the history of photography, in the history of art, were of the about to be executed in Pol Pot's killing fields.

How does one even begin to approach that conversation?

[http://www.chgs.umn.edu/Visual\\_Artistic\\_Resources/Cambodian\\_Genocide/cambodian\\_genocide.htm](http://www.chgs.umn.edu/Visual_Artistic_Resources/Cambodian_Genocide/cambodian_genocide.htm)  
!

*Comment by [Stan Banos](#) — March 6, 2007 @ [7:37 pm](#)*

15. This is a terrific post and a nice set of comments. I have a couple of thoughts.

First, a question. In your comment in the thread here Alec, you make the process of getting a good photograph seem nearly random. Is that really so? Since I have no practical experience as a photographer I guess I'd like to think it is a bit of an exaggeration. But more importantly, in the post you suggest that the photographer holds all the cards. If the subject lets down her guard and the photographer has no real control either, perhaps it is all about luck?

Second, there is a slim little book by poet Murat Nemet-Nejat called "The Peripheral Space of Photography" (Gren Integer, 2003) that addresses a whole set of issues of the sort you raise. In particular he looks at the history of photography (with ballast in a big exhibition at, I think, the Met some time ago). He traces the way people learned how to present themselves to the camera and ultimately claims that photography is a relationship between subject and viewer, leaving the photographer almost wholly out of the equation (almost *siad* 'picture'). In other words subjects do not know how to sit for a portrait instinctively and Nemet-Nejat argues that the learning process is governed by a whole set of conventions.

Finally, like Stan, I immediately thought of the photos by Nhem Ein of prisoners about to be executed at Tuol Sleng. My reading of those is slightly different – unlike the withdrawn or introspective or nonchalant expressions of the mug shots you show, the Cambodians seem to me to be nearly petrified. Perhaps that is just because I know what happened to them.

*Comment by [Jim Johnson](#) — March 6, 2007 @ [11:25 pm](#)*

16. Thanks Jim. I suppose good photographs require a little skill. But the great ones, who knows? Luck sounds like the right word.

Perhaps it helps if your subject (Marilyn, a Cambodian prisoner) is about to die. I'm kidding, but it is true that plenty of external factors influence the way we read a picture. If we see a portrait in a coffee shop we will treat it much differently than if we see it at the Met. If we learn that the subject of the portrait was about to be executed, that will influence our reading too. Photographs are frames. Context (the Met, the execution) is just another part of the frame.

I was unaware of The Peripheral Space of Photography. Thanks so much for the recommendation. I'd love to get a taste of one of the poems on [your fantastic blog](#).

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — March 7, 2007 @ [12:32 am](#)*



17. My immediate reaction is that noone, not Avedon or any other photographer holds all the cards. Ever.

Use a camera? Create a relationship that is a two-way street, no matter how much we suppose it isn't. It could be five seconds, five minutes or five hours.

When is great portraiture or art defined by the time it takes to make it?

A relationship, no matter how cold and calculating, no matter how warm and genuine; builds, informs and ultimately reveals not the subject, nor the photographer, but the creation of a relationship: the photograph.

Avedon's last sentence is similarly revealing. 'It's a reminder of the wonder and terror that is a photograph.'

Thanks again Alec!

Sean Cayton

*Comment by [Sean Cayton](#) — March 7, 2007 @ [12:54 am](#)*

18. There has been quite a lot of speculation and theory in this great string, and I can only speak of personal experience. I toss out a much higher percentage of portraits than say landscapes or still-lives, because they simply aren't good enough. The "window" of success is just so narrow with the portraits which underlines the speculation that the sitter has quite a bit to bring to the image. In the end though, the photographer is holding all of the cards because the last card to be played is the paper shredder, or in most cases, just that box on the back shelf filled with hopeful attempts which just didn't quite work. "why" they didn't work is maybe the interesting question, everyone has their own measuring stick.

*Comment by [Andrew Phelps](#) — March 7, 2007 @ [3:07 am](#)*

19. Because Avedon's style is so distinctive (and yet frequently copied) I've often wondered what if any effect the fact he never looked through the lens had on the final picture. Does it create a bond, discomfort, comfort, intimacy? Maybe it's a common technique for all I know.

On intention and mugshots, I picked up a copy of Wisconsin Death Trip recently, what a headspin that is, such mysterious portraits and inventions.

*Comment by [rob](#) — March 7, 2007 @ [3:16 am](#)*

20. As Alec said, "great pictures are so random and mysterious", I have the same experience, sometimes I have a great connection with the person and the picture stinks and other times I snap a picture in five minutes that turns out to be the best picture I have ever taken.

The other day, I was driving with my family upstate New York. We got hungry and stopped at a diner to eat. I ordered fish and chips. When the food arrived, the plate looked remarkably well prepared, french fries were long and well fried, the fish filets had the same triangular shape as if they came out of the same mold. It even had a leaf of kale with slices of twisted oranges on it. It didn't take me long to figure out that I was about to have one of the worst eating experiences of my life. The fish and french fries were reconstituted, tartar sauce was in two small packaged containers and did not taste like tartar sauce. The kale leaf and orange slices were probably the best thing to eat on the plate, yet they looked so decorative as if they were not meant to be eaten.

This was the day I read Alec's post on Jeff Wall. Not that there is anything wrong with staging a photograph as artistic expression, the diner experience made me think of it. Photography has an ability to capture a candid moment that no other art form, including film, has. Why take it away from it? In my pictures, I like the imperfections, sometimes a blur can be the element that makes the point, however, it is totally random and can only be seen after the fact.

Same goes for the portraits. One of the recent trends is to isolate the person from any context, but why? I think context is an element we use to bring depth to a portrait. I don't believe portraits are capable of reading people's souls or showing us something about their personality, but they are not totally void of these elements either. When I make a portrait, I am making a comment or statement about the person and if all the elements together work to give some meaning to the viewer, the picture is successful. For me, the process is random and intuitive.

*Comment by [Metin Oner](#) — March 7, 2007 @ [7:18 am](#)*

21. I think there are all sorts of reasons why portraits can be great – but I don't think the connection between photographer and subject is necessarily the reason – I think that is one of the great mythologies of photography.

Look at the Monroe portrait – there is no connection between the photographer and Monroe – she is connecting with herself. In a similar way, the Cambodia portraits show no connection with the photographer – they are connecting with their terror and the camera as an instrument of that terror.

I don't know what connection August Sander had with his subjects – when I look at his pictures I am drawn into the people who are portrayed, sucked into their psyches in some strange mysterious way. I don't see August Sander there.

Of course, there are relationships between photographers and their subjects. But I'm not sure how much this relationship has to do with portraying an authentic vision of a person, whatever authentic means – often it's just as much to do with colluding with that person on some conscious or subconscious level to create a mythologized person. Isn't that what Avedon did with *In the American West*. Majestic stuff, but a mythology all the same.

Photographers, on the whole, (everyone on this blog excepted of course) are not that interesting – and the relationship they muster up in 5 seconds, 5 days or 5 years are not that interesting for the most part – what's interesting is the person who is photographed and the photographer who can get under their skin is a rare thing indeed.

*Comment by [colin pantall](#) — March 7, 2007 @ [9:11 am](#)*

22. You are all magnificent. I love this whole freaking thread of conversation.

it's especially compelling to me because I have two portrait shows on my near-future roster: [Benjamin Donaldson's \*Summerland\*](#) opens next Friday (3/16) and my summer group show, which I'm co-curating with [Joerg](#) is tentatively titled *The New American Portrait*.

*Comment by [Jen Bekman](#) — March 7, 2007 @ [11:16 am](#)*

23. I'll have to agree somewhat with the few dissenters here regarding the Avedon school of thought and presumed degrees of control. While I happen to be a bit of a romantic when it comes to my likes and dislikes of certain things photographic, I do think it's an overly romanticized, as well as overly philosophical point of view (not to mention kind of indulgent on the part of the photographer) to assume that the photographer has possession of such control. I don't think it's a matter of total randomness either – it can go both ways. In my opinion there's a limit to how much you can control the viewer's perception of a subject, before you simply reach the basic core of that person's presence. I find this to be especially true with celebrity portraiture, and for that reason find it slightly grating when so much attention is paid to the "artistic, disarming voice" (or something like that) of a photographer's portrayal of his/her subject (eg, a. liebovitz). The celebrity is the last person that should be considered 100% mutable to the lens of a camera, no matter how skilled the photographer. I love Avedon, and I think his portraits are often amazing, as well as I love the celebrity portraits of Irving Penn. I think these are people who at times (some more so than others) have successfully inserted their talents into a portrait. I don't however, agree with Avedon's statement.

*Comment by [boru](#) — March 7, 2007 @ [11:43 am](#)*

24. I guess to second Alec's final point, the one thing that I'll always remember about Avedon is from a documentary about his work, where he explains how he got the (in)famous photo of the former king of England and his American wife – where they both look so sad. If I remember correctly what Avedon said, they both were in a cheerful mood when they came to his studio, and he just wouldn't get the kind of expression that he wanted. Given that they both loved animals so much, he then told them that on the way to his studio his car had run over a dog in the street. When their expressions (their jaws quite literally) both dropped, he got his photo.

*Comment by [JM Colberg](#) – March 7, 2007 @ [12:52 pm](#)*

25. When stable photographic processes became the norm in 19th century England, the first use of portraiture was, in fact, for indexing. The first real "body of work" that appeared were of the mentally ill, the poor, the orphaned, and the petty criminals. Although the approach was "scientific" (creating an archive) clearly, these photos were also used to illustrate, even propagate "otherness" within society.

But that's a digression. What is most interesting about Avedon's portraiture was its utter reductiveness...and the fact that he famously stood next to his 8x10, not behind it.

*Comment by [Song Chong](#) – March 7, 2007 @ [3:59 pm](#)*

26. Mike Johnston's blog led me to Shelby Lee Adams website:

<http://shelby-lee-adams.blogspot.com/>

with the following great quote:

"These portraits are, in a way, self-portraits that represent a long autobiographical exploration of creativity, imagination, vision, repulsion and salvation. My greatest fear as a photographer is to look into the eyes of my subject and not see my own reflection."

*Comment by [guybatey](#) – March 8, 2007 @ [12:30 pm](#)*

27. As Elliot Erwitt once put it, "I always include Luck in the budget." I don't think that such an attitude necessarily deprives the photographer of the credit due him or her for a great photograph, but it does recognize to some extent the role that the object world plays in creating one – the photos that most interest me are those that have, in a sense, two authors.

*Comment by [Jon Anderson](#) – March 13, 2007 @ [6:19 am](#)*

28. JM Colberg – you mean Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson, I take it. Oddly enough, I just read a book by Philippe Halsman in which he mentions that when he was trying to take their portrait, they looked at him "like a pair of hungry, elderly jackals". He finally said to them something like, "Could you please look a little more human?! You look like you want to devour me. You're supposed to be the most romantic couple in the world – the king who gave up his throne for the woman he loved. Try to look like it." They smiled and relaxed a little bit, and he got the picture he wanted. Both pictures were reprinted in the book, and the change visible in pictures taken only about ten seconds apart is striking.

*Comment by [JD](#) – March 14, 2007 @ [4:10 pm](#)*