'That has never been' -
Andreas Mühe's Mischpoche as a Construct

> 'Then I decided that this disorder and this dilemma, revealed by
> my desire to write on Photography, corresponded to a discomfort
> I had always suffered from: the uneasiness of being a subject
> torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical;
> and at the heart of this critical language, between several
> discourses, those of sociology, of semiology, and of pyschoanal-
> ysis-but that, by ultimate dissatisfaction with all of them, I
> was bearing witness to the only sure thing that was in me (how-
> ever na ve it might be): a desperate resistance to any reductive
> system.'
> - Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, 1980[1]

Searching for an approach that can begin to do justice to Andreas
Mühe's photographic family portraits, for a 'satisfactory take' on
them (to use a camera-related metaphor), one is offered different
paths of association, ranging from the intimate family picture to
works that call for art historical appreciation and sociocultural
analysis. While there is no doubt that these works bear all the marks
of technical and aesthetic sophistication, there seems to be consider-
able leeway in widely diverging directions as regards their interpre-
tation. Opting for only one such path would distort the overall pic-
ture and reduce the great number of points of reference that
make Mühe's work so striking, articulate and, at the same time, en-
tirely hermetic. Titled Mischpoche (Tribe, 2016-2019) this group of
works combines the artist's personal story, various social and soci-
etal conditions and artistic traditions and creates portraits of a
family that resonate with the histories of the times and of art.

It is precisely for this reason that this text opens with a
quotation from Roland Barthes' 1980 essay Camera Lucida: Reflections
on Photography, today one of the key texts on photography.[2] In it,
Barthes addresses the difficulties that hamper all attempts to write
about photography. Torn between different languages, none of which he
felt was sufficient by itself, Barthes amalgamates in his essay per-
sonal experience with abstract theory. He defines photography as a
domain which - in a manner that seems contradictory at first sight
- combines the emotional with the theoretical. Barthes' approach of
shedding light on the topic of photography from many different direc-
tions and of refusing to let himself be tied down to any single meth-
odology will serve as a point of departure for the following discus-
sion of Andreas Mühe's photographs: 'I was bearing witness to the
only sure thing that was in me (however na ve it might be): a desper-
ate resistance to any reductive system.'[3]

Barthes' Camera Lucida presents affective content in a discur-
sive form. The genesis of the text is linked to the highly idiosyn-
cratic reaction Barthes experienced when he found a photo of his late
mother depicting her precisely as he remembered her.[4] Engrossed in

mourning the death of his mother, the author found a photograph of his mother as a young girl and felt called upon to write an essay on photography. In this picture ('among pictures partially true, and therefore totally false'[5]) he actually recognised his mother of whom he retained such keen memories. The photograph constituted the memento mori that ensured, to a certain extent, the survival of his late mother for the son who survived her.

Barthes sees in this a distinctive characteristic of photography. In its capacity of providing a frame of reference for reality and the past, photography is unique in that 'no painted portrait, supposing that it seemed "true" to me, could compel me to believe its referent had really existed.'[6] According to Barthes, what sets photography apart from all other disciplines, is its direct communion with the past. Building on his own experience of what a photograph can do for someone in a state of mourning, he proceeds to propound his thesis. Rather than opt for a scientific, detached line of argument, Barthes focuses on the emotional level of his analysis: '(...) instead of following the path of a formal ontology (of a Logic), I stopped, keeping with me, like a treasure, my desire or my grief; the anticipated essence of the Photograph could not, in my mind, be separated from the "pathos" of which, from the first glance, it consists.'[7] In his choice of a subjective narrative style he remains true to this approach. Speaking in the first person singular, the author deliberately abandons the scientific distance normally expected in a discourse like this in favour of an autobiographical attitude.

In the case of the present group of works, too, it was an emotionally fraught event in the artist's life that triggered the creative process. Mischpoche puts the artist's father, the renowned actor Ulrich Mühe, centre stage; Ulrich had died at the age of fifty-four. Here, too, the creative process was presumably preceded by a phase that saw Andreas Mühe, not unlike Barthes, trawling through a mass of photographic material in the search for a photo that portrayed his father 'as he was'. In this case, however, the historical photographs are no more than first steps in a long-drawn out artistic process. Mühe's family portraits came into being only after the deaths of his father and other key family members, such as the grandparents and Ulrich Mühe's two ex-wives. In an intense and highly complex production process based on photographic material, the artist had the deceased members of his family recreated as stunningly lifelike puppets. These he arranged with his living relatives for two group portraits – one that centres on his mother's side of the family, the other on his father's side. So the resulting family portraits depict four generations of Hahns and Mühes.[8] Even though the complex production procedure does not transpire at first sight, there is something uncanny about the photographs. The figures - whether alive or present only as simulacra - give the impression of being transfixed and completely detached from any conceivable time continuum so that transience and closeness to death are very much present as motifs.

Death and Photography

The link between photography and death has been taken for granted from
the first stirrings of the discipline. In this context Katharina Syko-
ra notes that 'since its first beginnings photography has been credit-
ed with a mortifying potential; it is regarded as the "dead mirror" of
the world.'[9] Both for Barthes and for Mühe their works were preceded
by a period of intense preoccupation with the death of a beloved per-
son.[10] It was through mourning their loss that they became able to
address it on an artistic level. In a first step, the photograph
provides the possibility of building a rapport with the deceased per-
son. It captures a moment which is both irretrievably lost in the past
and frozen in time. For Barthes, as is well known, the relationship
between photography and time is a constitutive element, which he con-
denses to the phrase 'That-has-been'.[11] For him, this is what distin-
guishes photography from painting: 'Contrary to these imitations (as
in painting and discourse, A/N), in Photography I can never deny that
the thing has been there.'[12]

A point is now reached where Barthes and Mühe decisively part
ways. While in both cases the passing of beloved parents and memories
of them encapsulated in photographs mark the beginning of their artis-
tic approach to this theme, the resulting significance of photography
as a medium is completely different. For Barthes a particular photo of
his mother transcended all others in rendering the essence of her as a
person. Remarkably, the photo depicts Barthes' mother as a young girl,
at an age when Barthes fils was not even born. In 'real life', there
was no way he could have seen or have had anything to do with his
mother at that point, which does not alter the fact that the photo
depicts a moment his mother experienced as real - that was real - at
some stage of her past. This is what the photo bears witness to, even
if Barthes was not there to witness it. The relationship between lived
reality and the reference function of photography therefore remains
intact. Katharina Sykora notes in this context: 'Given that photogra-
phy as an analogue medium presupposes the existence of the referent
in front of the camera, every single one of its pictures bears witness
to the fact that the referent was actually present at the precise
moment and in the location where the shot was taken. Having been con-
stituted in this way, the connection between photo and referent is
subsequently expanded to the observer and the referent. The original
connection that manifests itself in photography as a trace manages
again and again to overcome the distance in terms of time and space
that comes into being when the photo is taken and is made more promi-
nent with each subsequent scrutiny of that photo. The dead puppets and
medusoid likenesses are reborn as living people in the
eyes of the observer.'[13]

Observers studying Andreas Mühe's Mischpoche are likely to
assume that what has been captured here is a moment of life as we know
it. However, the 'dead puppets' that Sykora refers to only in a meta-
phorical sense, have never been anything but lifeless, artificially

generated figures in Mühe's case. He adds an additional level to photography's capacity of calling the dead back to life: using old family photos, he has constructed deceptively realistic revenants of deceased family members, with the sole purpose of taking a photo of them. These 'dead puppets' in the literal sense become alive because we view them with the set of expectations we have come to associate with photography: that the medium will deliver on reproducing a real past. These photos, however, create a sense of unease in the observer that refuses to be dispelled. An interpretation of the scene as a family gathering of four generations quickly reveals that there is something that does not feel quite right, that cannot be 'right': the grandparents and the parents are roughly the same age, both are in their late thirties. This corresponds to the age of the artist when he created this work. In real life the protagonists - grandparents, parents and children - could never have got together in a situation where they were all the same age.

Mühe makes use of the reference function of photography only to deconstruct it completely with these 'incompatibilities'. Roland Barthes' claim that photography serves as a reference to the real past is no longer applicable here. 'That-has-been' is no longer valid. Rather than capturing a scene 'taken from (real) life', Andreas Mühe creates anew the reality of a family as it looked like for him. In his photos he organises a family reunion that could never have taken place in real life. This is not how it was. And what's more, it was never like this. Mühe raises a fundamental question concerning construction and art that goes far beyond photography and involves issues such as identity, society and history.

The Portrait

Detached, objective observers are given the purely formal impression that they have come face-to-face with a classic family portrait. The father or the mother respectively take up the space in the middle of the photo, with the other family members grouped round them. The figures are arranged frontally towards the camera lens. The father, who has taken up the position at the centre as the head of the family, is framed by his (ex-)wives, children, the children's partners and their children and his parents. The family group has gathered in a generously dimensioned room. There is a parquet floor and the lower half of the wall is covered with elegant white tiles, elsewhere a tasteful green-blue curtain predominates. There is a piano in the room and an antique desk, both made of dark wood and decorated with filigree ornaments. The artist's grandfather elegantly supports himself on the piano, while three girls, his great grandchildren, - with their back to the camera - seem to be playing it. A landscape painting, a tall potted plant, a grandfather clock and a chandelier suspended from the ceiling complement the 'setting' surrounding the protagonists. The furniture and the other objects, some personal heirlooms, function as props to enliven the composition of the photos. The side-by-side

arrangement of the figures, some standing amid the props, some seated, creates a harmonious, pictorially well balanced overall impression.

That terms such as 'setting' and 'props' come to mind underscores the artificiality of the scene. The family has gathered in an artificially furnished room expressly created for these photos. This is by no means unusual for photo portraits, as Michael Sauer notes: 'In the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century studio settings were used for portrait photos that included canvas backdrops, chairs, small tables, columns and artificial plants, providing the environment in which the sitters were positioned.'[14] The two portraits by Andreas Mühe are quite obviously instances of this type of staging. The family groups have come together in a carefully controlled environment on a well-lit stage at the photographer's studio expressly for the purpose of having their photos taken.

The Tradition of Portrait Painting

In iconographic terms Mühe's work falls in line with the tradition of portrait painting and portrait photography. Already in sixteenth-century Holland, as Friedrich Tietjen has pointed out, the group portrait served the need of the upper middle class to document their identity and social position in a way that went beyond the horizon of the immediate present.[15] Ilsebill Barta has shown that, 'under the motto "Vita brevis - ars longa", an important requirement modern portraiture was expected to meet was the documentation and preservation of the individual's identity in defiance of death.'[16] This motif was assigned a particularly important role in family portraits: 'In family portraits the ephemeral nature of human life (...) can be negated to a certain extent by concentrating on the depiction of the continued life of the family as a perennial organism, of subsequent generations picking up where their predecessors had left off.'[17]

It is obvious that from their first beginnings portraits had social and representative functions. Having remained of topical interest for centuries, these functions were taken over by photography in the nineteenth century: 'For the middle classes the plethora of portraits (...) served the function of a social currency which made it possible for members to socially constitute their identity.'[18] Tietjen adds: 'Rather than being about the rendering of a person's visible appearance, the portrait (was) understood as the representation of personality.[19]

Citing the attributes one would expect to find in a middle-class family scene - from the piano to the obligatory potted plant - Andreas Mühe's portraits also stake out a claim to be representative. Centred on his mother, Annegret Hahn, the portrait of the maternal line of his family even features a Christmas tree - a symbol beyond compare of the traditional (German) way of celebrating Christmas in the innermost circle of the family.[20]

A (German) Family

The two photos use the typical hallmarks of a family scene not only to provide the compositional setting but also to reflect on the very concept of 'family', as defined in social terms valid in the Western – or at least in the German – context. The close connection between the ideological concept 'family' and the family portrait becomes apparent from the development of the portrait genre: the 'family portrait', a subset of the group portrait, developed in parallel to the emergence of the concept 'family', which only acquired general currency in the German language area in the eighteenth century.[21] The emergence of the concept was of course related to the formation of a new, self-confident and enlightened class of citizens, the bourgeoisie.[22] What this makes also clear is the organic connection linking the formation of social identity with its rendering in visual terms. The representative character of the (family) portrait that has already been mentioned is not confined to documenting the social standing of the depicted persons, it can be broadened to become relevant ideologically on the level of society as a whole. The Hahn-Mühes fulfill this function twice over: their portraits provide images of a cross-generational family history and at least some of the family members lead – or led – lives exposed to public view. Their professional activities in the worlds of the theatre, film and the visual arts enable(d) them to take part in Germany's cultural life and – even more importantly – to contribute their share to shaping the country's cultural and social identity.

Focusing on his own family, Mühe remains true in Mischpoche to the themes he has kept addressing in his work from his first beginnings as an artist. In addition to dealing with his own family history, his main concern has been with images and sites of power both in the context of the present and the past – from National Socialism to the GDR. A preoccupation with identity and its photographic representation, especially with regard to Germany's partly highly problematic recent history, runs like a golden (for which read: 'dark') – thread through Mühe's work. He draws on the German pictorial tradition and references compositions by Caspar David Friedrich, that beacon of Romanticism, as well as propagandistic iconographies and stagings informed by Fascist ideology.[23] He therefore moves along the thin line between reproduction and exposure, a strategy that is itself prone to attract critical comment and, at the very least, illustrates the difficulties in dealing with recent German history.

However, the precise choreography of these photos which does not leave even the most insignificant detail to chance, the avowedly artificial lighting of the motifs, the mostly lightless backdrop extending into spaceless black nothingness – all these features emphasise the staged character of these works and reveal them as illusory. Indebted to the principles of classical composition, the pictorial structure advertises its artificiality through its manifest austerity and rigidity.

What Mühe shows us are quite clearly no family scenes depicting an intimate, private moment selected more or less at random. He composes the portrait of a family that puts before our eyes precisely this: the portrait of a family - as a cultural, social and historico-political subject. And he composes this portrait for the public and an audience of art connoisseurs rather than for the family album. Several details in the photos document this, such as the camera slider installed in the lower part of the picture at the edge of the parquet floor and the shadowy outlines of a camera dolly.[24] Prints with historical family portraits are scattered on the floor. A wall that is supposed to margin the picture on the right has been arranged in such a way that it is revealed as a fake. The light that falls through a window in the wall, another fake, is not daylight but the glare of a spotlight. The construction of the scene, the setting, is portrayed together with the family.

Mühe not only reveals the artificiality of the scene, he also puts question marks against the truthfulness of the pictures' content. As is to be expected in all family histories, the Hahn-Mühes are no strangers to intact and failed relationships, births, deaths, quarrels and reconciliations. At the same time the portraits underscore the spirit of solidarity that unites several generations and the durability of family ties.

The photographer himself features in the two portraits as a family member and makes himself known as the stage director of these scenes: in the photo with his father he is seen seated in the left half of the picture, slightly averted, with a cylinder music box in his hands.[25] In the photo with his mother he places himself next to the camera. These family portraits are, in a manner of speaking, a memorial Mühe has erected for his parents, especially for his late father, who serves as the emotional point of departure and the centre of the entire work group. At the same time, however, the artist uses the work as a deliberate act of defining his own position, perhaps even as an act of disengagement. The photos are, after all, revealed to be artificial - or, to be more precise - artistic constructs. It is up to the artist to decide all matters related to the pictures and to interpreting the constellation of his family.

It may be said that in this work Mühe concerns himself with questions of identity and history on both a general and a highly personal level. The photos' oscillation between truth and construction, representation and identification is never decisively resolved one way or another. To go back once more to Roland Barthes' Camera Lucida quoted at the beginning of this essay, these family portraits achieve their effect by evoking the tension that exists between allegedly different 'languages'. The arc connecting the French philosopher's 'That-has-been' and Mühe's 'That-has-never-been' bridges the gap between the personal and the general, the familial and the strict requirements of form and the affective and the discursive. In Andreas Mühe's Mischpoche all these different strands come together to generate powerful images charged with multiple and multifaceted meanings,

whose cumulation aims above all at 'a desperate resistance to any reductive system'.[26]

Kristina Schrei

1
Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, New York, 2010 (1981), p. 8.

2
Barthes' Camera Lucida is now widely considered to be a standard work of reference. Critical comments on it are to be found in Barthes' own writings and alternative concepts in the works of authors such as Philippe Dubois and Walter Benjamin.

3
Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, p. 8.

4
'(...) but my grief wanted a just image, an image which would be both justice and accuracy-justesse: just an image, but a just image (juste une image, mais une image juste).' Ibid., p. 70.

5
Ibid., p. 66.

6
Ibid., p. 77.

7
Ibid., p. 21.

8
The unusual procedure these photographs owe their existence to is not recognizable from the result. The lifelike fig-ures were destroyed after the photographs were taken; all that remains of them is the photographic likeness.

9
Katharina Sykora, Die Tode der Fotografie, vol. 2: Tod, Theorie und Fotokunst, Paderborn, 2015, p. 13.

10

Siegfried Kracauer, too, cites photos of his late grand-
mother to illustrate his reflections on photography. See
Philippe Despoix, 'Kracauer as Thinker of the Photographic
Medium', in: Siegfried Kracauer, The Past's Threshold.
Essays on Photography, ed. Philippe Despoix and Maria Zin-
fert, Zurich and Berlin, 2014, p. 8. Memories of his late
grandmother as a motif for artistic elaboration are also
to be found in Marcel Proust's la recherche du temps
perdu. Roland Barthes refers to Proust in Camera Lucida:
'For once, photography gave me a sentiment as certain as
remembrance, just as Proust experienced it one day when,
leaning over to take off his boots, there suddenly came
to him his grandmother's true face (...).' See Roland
Barthes, Camera Lucida, p. 70.

11

Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, p. 77. See also Peter Geim-
er, Theorien der Fotografie zur Einführung, Hamburg, 2009,
p. 42.

12

Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, p. 76.

13

Katharina Sykora, Die Tode der Fotografie, vol. 2, p. 71.

14

Michael Sauer, 'Bilder als historische Quellen', 2005,
http://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/medien-und-sport/
bilderin-geschichte-und-politik/73099/bilder-als-
historische-quellen?p=all (accessed March 18th, 2019)

15

Friedrich Tietjen, 'Immer gleiche Bilder. Zur Notwendigkeit
der Re-Inszenierung fotografischer Gruppen- und Einzelpor-
traits', in: Klaus Krüger, Leena Crasemann, Matthias Wei
(eds.), Re-Inszenierte Fotografie, Paderborn, 2011, pp.
279-294, here p. 292.

16

Ilsebill Barta, Familienportr ts der Habsburger. Dynas-
tische Repr sentation im Zeitalter der Aufkl rung, Vienna
et al., 2001, p. 11.

17
Ibid.

18

Similarly relevant for the social constitution of a bour-
geois identity, according to Tietjen, were considerations
of fashion and the choice of suitable interiors. See
Friedrich Tietjen, 'Immer gleiche Bilder', in: Klaus Krüger
et al. (eds.), Re-Inszenierte Fotografie, pp. 279-294,
here p. 290.

19

Ibid., p. 281.

20

See Lothar Gall, 'Picture of Krupp: The Family. Official
Upper Middle-class Culture and Family Intimacy',
pp. 203-213, and Karin Hartewig, 'The Sentimental Eye.
Family Photographs in the Nineteenth and Twentieth
century', pp. 215-239, in: Klaus Tenfelde (ed.), Pictures
of Krupp: Photography and History in the Industrial Age,
London and Munich, 2005.

21

Ilsebill Barta, Familienportr ts der Habsburger, p. 127.

22

Jürgen Habermas, Strukturwandel der ffentlichkeit: Unter-
suchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft,
Frankfurt am Main, 1990, pp. 107-108.

23

The term 'Mischpoche' succinctly illustrates this. A loan
word from Hebrew/Yiddish, 'Mischpoche' generally signifies
'family', 'clan', 'tribe', the entire network of relatives.
See Heidi Stern, W rterbuch zum jiddischen Lehnwortschatz
in den deutschen Dialekten, Tübingen, 2013, p. 147. The
word is used in common parlance in German. While value-
neutral in Yiddish, it frequently carries derogatory over-
tones in German. In Berlin 'Mischpoche' is usually spelt
'Mischpoke'. When the term was included in the Duden in
1941, it was explicitly marked as being of Jewish origin.
It had already been used by Joseph Goebbels in a speech in
1938 in a clearly derogatory, anti-Semitic context. See
Christoph Gutknecht, Gauner, Gro kotz, kesse Lola:
Deutsch-jiddische Wortgeschichten, Berlin, 2016. The seman-
tic change the term has undergone and its usage up to its
racist appropriation by the Nazis provide clues to German
contemporary history.

24
This camera is not the one that was actually used to shoot
the photos. The large-format camera is only a mock-up.

25
The music box was left to Andreas Mühe by his grandfather.

26
Roland Barthes,