We all know that niggling sense of insecurity when we're about to have our picture taken. What pose, what facial expression should we choose? How can we minimize the discrepancy between what we want our portrait to say and what we unwittingly reveal about ourselves? How can we show ourselves in the best light? How do we deal with the unnerving fact that we are facing a camera and, with that, the concentrated gaze of the other?

Portraiture, one of the oldest and most venerable of genres, looks back on centuries of tradition. In contrast to rendering people as typological likenesses, portraits seek to capture a sitter's individual traits. In his seminal study of portraiture in the Italian Renaissance, Gottfried Boehm remarks that the historical objective of this genre was to render outward appearances so that they would reveal something about the sitter's innermost personal core.[1] Traditionally, portraits are therefore more than just a depiction of someone's outward appearance and social standing. Being a deliberate study of the sitter's soul and character, the portrait functions as a possible reading of an individual's personality and, hence, as a psychological interpretation.

In the past few decades, the clarity of purpose that once defined this artistic undertaking has begun to crumble. Undermining the traditional canon of portraiture, especially in the medium of photography, artists are increasingly exploring the representation of deliberately constructed, changeable or manipulated identities. Analogue photography may be a more or less faithful expression of the subject's self-image or it may primarily show what the photographer has in mind. As Roland Barthes observed, there are four parameters involved. "In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art."[2]

SUR-FACE: This title embraces a series of 18 pictures by Istvan Balogh, which appear at first sight to be traditional portraits of women. The hyphen in the title draws attention to a fundamental ambiguity. As our gaze glides over the surfaces of the faces, we initially perceive an apparently classical portrait of a sitter who has posed specifically for the camera. In some of the portraits it is not easy to discern the subtle departures from customary expectations; in others the deviations are unmistakable and conspicuous. In comparing the portraits, we are forced to take a closer look at each of them. All of the women are wearing make-up, the details of which suddenly arrest the gaze. The make-up is exaggerated, carelessly outlined and asymmetrical; we see, for example, deliberately applied freckles, slightly smeared lips or lopsided eyebrow pencilling.

For the sitting, the women had agreed to apply make-up in a way that they would otherwise never do. The make-up was not applied to emphasize a positive feature or conceal a negative one, i.e., as a

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[1] Gottfried Boehm, *Bildnis und Individuum*, Munich, 1985, p. 25.
[2] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography,* translated by Richard Howard, London, 1984, p. 13.

cosmetic reinforcement of the sitter's self-image; it was, in fact, diametrically opposed to its conventional function. Through the subtlety of their approach – the artist had explicitly asked his subjects to avoid clownish exaggeration – the sitters' faces were reduced to external appearances without any suggestion of an inner life. Istvan Balogh's photographs make clear to us that they are merely coloured surfaces that depict other surfaces. The photographed image no longer has anything to do with the individual it depicts; it has acquired a reality of its own that functions autonomously.

Istvan Balogh does not operate like an artist who provides us with meaning through his subjective interpretation of the person he is portraying. The consensus between photographer and model generates pictures that reveal nothing; our gaze cannot penetrate the mask. The participants allowed themselves to be photographed in their personal surroundings as if they were someone else. "I" is another person: this is the feeling the artist's subjects had when they faced his camera – and they look straight at the lens with confidence, with no insecurity whatsoever; their gaze directed at the world with nothing in between.

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