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## Designs on Life: An Interview with Arnaud Maggs



[Robert Enright](#) · Interviews · [Issue 122](#) · May 2012

Seeing, in the photographic world constructed by Arnaud Maggs, is not believing. You don't get what you see; you get what the photographer is looking at. And for Maggs, looking is a continuous process of inventing abstraction. Our confusion comes from a sense that we understand the modes of representation with which his photographs seem to be engaged. Documentary, portraiture and fashion have recognizable pictorial conventions, so when we see a number of white-hatted chefs, individual portraits of artists and celebrities, a roster of students in an art school or the hair on a man's head combed with ducktail precision, we assume we are in familiar territory.

Maggs wants us to partake of that familiarity and then does everything he can to negate it. His first body of work, *64 Portrait Studies*, was made when he was 52 years old and it launched him "fully bloomed" into the art world. While the work carries the designation of portraiture, it has the look of something else. Maggs wanted it read analytically, which is why he chose the grid as an organizing structure.

The piece is comprised of four rows of 16 silverpoint prints. Each of the subjects is photographed looking straight ahead and in profile looking right; everyone is topless but nothing is indiscreet. He chose the final 64 images from 2,400 photographs, and he wanted images that had no emotional display and little personality. His strategy was to play Glenn Gould's *Goldberg Variations* during the sessions as a way of "stilling the subject out." In a manner of speaking, his intention was to shoot still lifes.

The resulting body of work is a kind of abstract taxonomy. It is significant that when he saw an exhibition of the *Framework* houses by Bern and Hilla Becher in New York, he recognized in their physical structures an equivalent tone to what he was aiming for in his portrait studies. Maggs is closer to the formal qualities exemplified by the Bechers than to the mixture of aesthetics and cultural anthropology that interested August Sander, another German photographer. "It's as if a machine could have done it," Maggs says about *64 Portrait Studies*, "as if there's no photographer involved." There is certainly a shading of Warhol in this observation, and something classical as well. In the Aristotelian accounting of origins, God emerges as "a self-thinking thought." Seen through this lens, Maggs touches on the quality of the divine.

His projects are ambitious. In *48 Views*, a work from 1981-83, he took 8,000 images to get 162 toned silver prints; the *Complete Prestige 12" Jazz Catalogue* is 822 Cibachrome photographs; *Notification* is 192 Fujicolour photographs; *Travail des enfants* is comprised of 198 images of small booklets, called livrets, that were used to identify child labourers in the French textile industry in the early 20th century. Each of his two-part portraits of Joseph Beuys involved 100 portraits. Its making is a classic example of the combination of formidable will, sheer luck and gift for improvisation that has distinguished Maggs throughout his lengthy career. The work was produced on a photographic wing and a repetitive prayer. When he proposed photographing Beuys, he had no idea what form the pictures would take but was fortunate enough to get the idea for the structure from a Carl Andre floor piece in an exhibition of minimalist art from the Panza Collection that happened to be in Düsseldorf. Art begets art, or at least it provides the framework within which art can happen. In the Beuys works, art happened.

Maggs is consistently inventive in the way he reuses found objects. He has said that all his work "uses systems of identification as an underlying spine," and the spines are various. In *Repertoire*, 1997, he took photographs of Eugène Atget's appointment book at the suggestion of his wife, the artist Spring Hurlbut. The 48 Fujicolour photographs are intensely personal (Atget is one of the photographers for whom Maggs has a deep admiration) and curiously abstract. *The Dada Portraits*, 2010, operate in reverse. They are photographs of diagrammatic drawings used to educate carpenters in mid-19th-century France, and Maggs saw in them anthropomorphic possibilities. Named after the major figures in the European Dada movement (including Kurt Schwitters, Hugo Ball, Hannah Höch and Marcel Duchamp, a portrait which Maggs says looks "like an explosion in a shingles factory"), these eccentric diagrams draw on the spirit of the artists for whom they are named. The archival jet prints function as found and transformed ready-mades.

Maggs's approach to making art indicates a remarkably consistent single-mindedness. In designs from the '60s you can see him introducing ideas that he would carry into his photo-based work. The cover design for the Art Directors Club annual in 1961 shows a spare and elegant placement of the large black numbers 1

and 3 on clean white stock. Twenty-seven years later, in the *Complete Prestige 12" Jazz Catalogue*, he made the entire 800-plus-photo work out of numbers (this time white numbers on a black ground). In 1964 he amused his children with a drawing done while sitting at the kitchen table. It is a series of heads on lined paper, 12 in profile and one facing out. The heads wear prosthetic harnesses and share the space with some medical instruments. He gave the drawing the ridiculous Latin title, *flaccus noxious*. In 1979 he initiated his fascination with the human head, and its seemingly infinite variety, in *64 Portrait Studies*. No good ideas are lost; they simply find new forms. As he says in the following interview, "Everything I had done as a designer I put into the photographs right away." He has continued that personal tracing for more than half a century.

In his latest body of work he returns to France, this time reprising and personalizing Félix Nadar's photographs of the great mime, Charles Deburau, playing Pierrot, the sad clown from the Commedia dell'Arte, a fool in life and love. It is an apposite choice. Pierrot was sympathetically rehabilitated by 19th-century literary luminaries, like Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire, as a surrogate for the artist. Maggs becomes this redefined clown with an artistic pedigree who he provides with autobiographical emblems and activities; in one image he holds a collection of enamel pots; in another he reads a letter announcing someone's death; in still another he stands at an easel painting a number on a canvas. Of course, the most telling tribute is Arnaud as *Pierrot the Photographer*. The layers are perfect: Maggs the photographer dressed up as Pierrot, the pantomime character played by Deburau and photographed by Nadar, captured in his role-playing by Katya Doleatto, the artist's studio assistant and friend, herself a photographer. The "After Nadar" series is a complicated loop of aesthetic reiterations, a world made today in thrall to a world made yesterday. Looking at these flawless pictures, we can ask Yeats's question, "How can you tell the dancer from the dance?" in another way: How can you tell the photographer from the photograph? The rhetorical reposing comes with the same doubled answer. No line separates them. They are both seamless, and seamless.

To read the interview pick up Issue 122 on newsstands June 1, or [click here](#) to subscribe.