

STARING

How We Look

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PART IV

STARERS AND STAREES



LOOKING AWAY, STARING BACK

The first problem is where to direct your eyes.
—medical sociologist, Fred Davis, “Deviance Disavowal”(1961)

LOOKING AWAY

The contradictions among our desire to stare, the abundant offering of stareable sights, and the perpetual admonitions of our mothers make public staring a furtive pleasure at best for many Americans. Few of us get the unambivalent license to stare that the writer Walker Evans found, as we saw in the last chapter, in Parisian café society. Consequently, our eager stares often quickly shift to uncomfortable looking away. Our ocular id, in other words, jerks our eyes toward a stimulating sight and our ocular super-ego guiltily retracts them. We may withdraw a stare in simple deference to propriety or parental prohibition. Charges of rudeness further encourage us to cut and run. Sometimes, however, truncated stares come from our distress at witnessing fellow humans so unusual that we cannot accord them a look of acknowledgment. To be suddenly confronted with a person extraordinary enough to provoke our most baroque stares withers our ready curiosity and we turn away, snuffing out the possibility for mutual recognition. If the knowledge that staring delivers is unbearable, the expected elasticity of human connection that mutual looking offers becomes brittle. When we suddenly find ourselves face to face with some *momento mori* or our most dreaded fate—we look away.

The turmoil that looking away brings has led several artists to ponder *staring* relationships in their work. In 2005, the portrait painter Doug Auld

created ten paintings of young people significantly disabled by burn injuries. His portrait series, "State of Grace," explores the "visual reality" of his subjects and reaches to express "who they really are at their core" (Auld 2005-08). Auld uses the familiar conventions of traditional portraiture—such as realism, texture, color, pose, and likeness—to portray very unconventional subjects. The jolt of these portraits of burn survivors comes from showing us a kind of person we rarely see. As portraits, the paintings announce that their subjects are worthy of public commemoration, important enough to look at, even beautiful. These pictures force us to make sense of faces patterned with vivid colors, limbs sculpted into surprising shapes, and bodies deeply etched with intricate swirls. They lure our curiosity, invite us to stare. As the realism of portraiture does its work of making a likeness, we come to recognize the effects of burning on flesh. Auld's portraits translate what we think of as disfigurement into pictures of "beauty and courage." They confront us with "our fear and our repulsion of the unknown," converting it into appreciation for their subjects' "unique disarming beauty." (Auld 2005-08).

Auld undertakes more, however, than making people who are hard to look at presentable. He intends these paintings to let us stare without having to look away. "I hope," says Auld, "the viewer will look" (Auld 2005-08). The motivation for the series of portraits came from a scene of staring Auld experienced thirty years before he began to paint burn survivors. Ambling

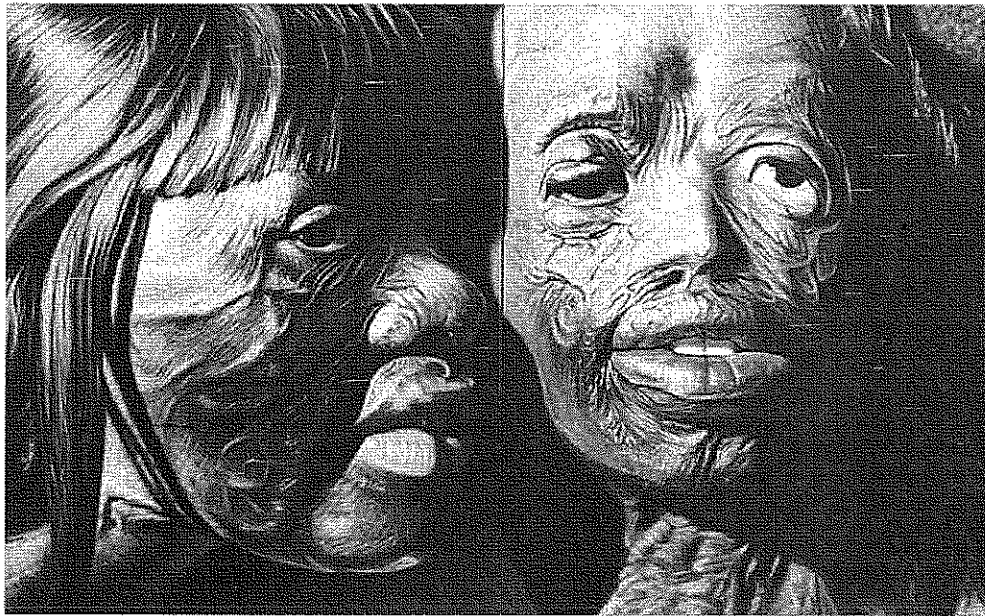


Figure 7.1. Doug Auld, "Rebecca and Louise." Diptych/oil on canvas, 50 in × 80 in © doug auld (2005) from his series "State of Grace" (portraits of burn survivors). www.dougauld.com.

through an outdoor market, the young Auld encountered a vision he was not “prepared for,” he told a *New York Times* reporter in 2006. He caught sight of a young girl who was significantly burned. Her face shocked him into staring, imprinting a vivid image that stayed with him over the years. “She was literally melted—no ears, no nose, just holes. Slits for eyes. Her neck was like a long, drawn thing.” His description captures his struggle to make sense of her strange face. So challenging was this task and so unprepared was Auld that he withdrew his stare, short-circuiting his inquiry into her humanity. When the girl looked back at the man whose eyes were locked on her face, he lost his voice and did “what everybody else did. I turned my head away” (Newman 2006, 1.25). Haunted for years by this broken connection, Auld decided to address his regret with his art. He approached the Burn Center at St. Barnabas Medical Center in Livingston, New Jersey, in order to contact former patients to seek permission and cooperation in painting their portraits.

“So go ahead and stare,” the open faces and direct looks in Auld’s portraits seem to say. In fact, one of the subjects, Alvaro Llanos, explains his willingness to participate in the project by saying: “I’d rather people be staring at a painting than at me” (Newman 2006, 1.25). Another subject, Louise Benoit, appears in a double portrait along with her sister, Rebecca (figure 7.1). Instead of the conventional double portrait of aristocratic couples or monarchs, however, this picture shows sisters who acquired their distinctive looks together in a fire that killed five other family members. Auld means his pictures to sustain our stares, to give starers “the chance to gaze without voyeuristic guilt at the disfigured, [so] they may be more likely to accept them as fellow human beings, rather than as grotesques to be gawked at or turned away from.” In staring at the portrait of herself and her sister, Louise Benoit wonders however whether the arresting close-up views of their burned faces will disgust people or encourage them to “see more than scars” (Newman 2006, 1.25). What happens in the delicate transaction of looking and looking away is unpredictable.

The artist Chris Rush also grants us “Permission to Stare” in his portrait series of “unusual children and adults,” most of whom are people with disabilities, that was exhibited at a Brooklyn gallery in 2006.¹ Rush’s drawings are studies from life done at a facility for disabled people where he volunteers. Like Auld’s paintings, Rush’s portraits gain their aesthetic punch by putting unusual faces in our faces. Whereas Auld uses bold texture and color to render scarred flesh less shocking but still compelling, Rush gets between his subjects and our discomfort by softening their differences with the medium of conte crayon and posing them with great dignity. Rush’s pictures navigate between us and them, attending carefully to the visual relationship by gratifying our “deep curiosity” while at the same time inviting “empathy” and “sensitivity.” The exhibition narrative explains that the portraits invite

us “to draw close to their strangeness and see something of ourselves waiting there.” They show what to many of us is the “strangeness” of disability in the familiar frame of a portrait.

One of Rush’s most arresting drawings presents a young woman in the regal profile pose we know from the familiar commemorative portraits of the Italian Renaissance (figure 7.2). Her likeness emerges from the sharp line her stately features form against the background; her nose and chin lift imperially; her eyes gaze impassively down on the world beneath her. Her head is turbaned with a richly colored and ornately patterned aristocratic headdress, and her shoulders reveal a simple but elegant gown. On first

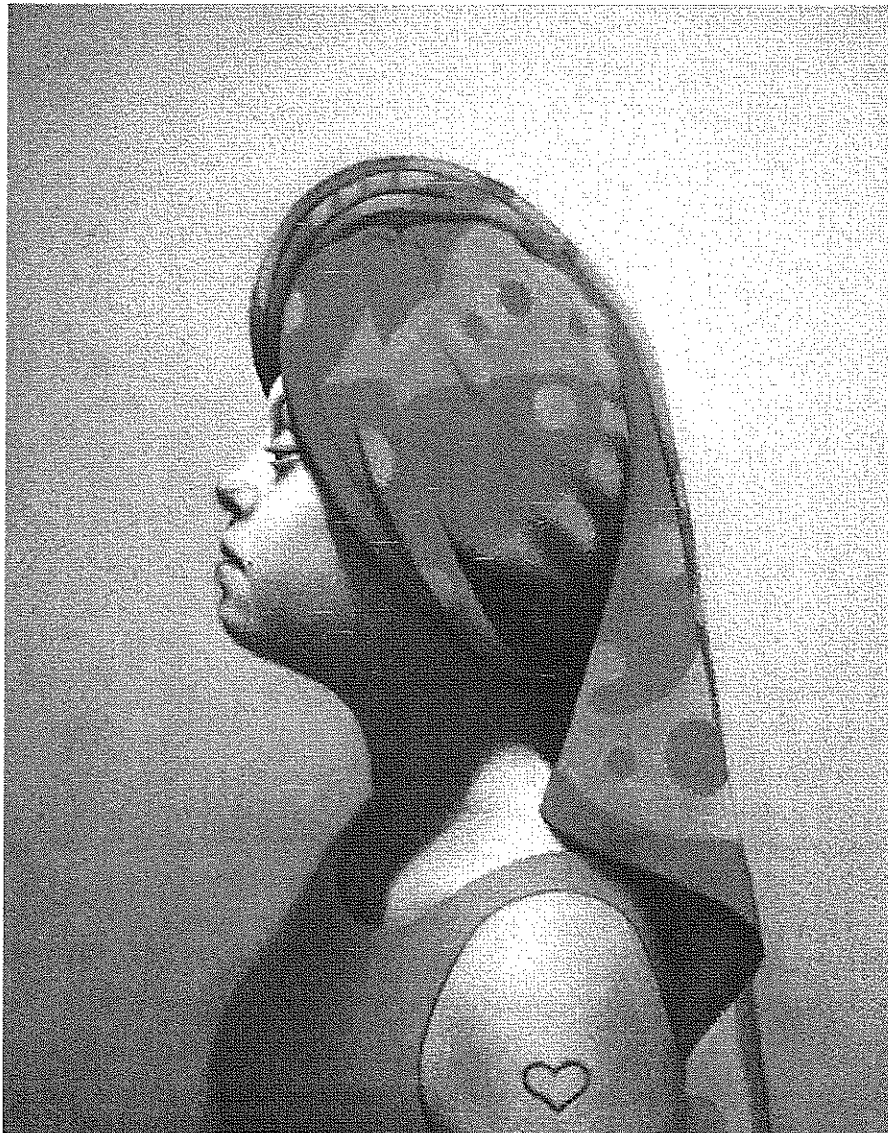


Figure 7.2. Chris Rush, “Swim II.” Conte crayon on paper. Portraits are life size in scale.

glance, she looks like a modern Florentine lady. On second glance, however, we recognize a face we have never seen in a portrait. We see the distinct features of a person with Down syndrome, her hair wrapped in a bright beach towel, her face in a faraway reverie, and a simple heart tattooed on her shoulder below her bathing suit strap. The portrait invites us to stare, engrossed perhaps less with the “strangeness” of this woman’s disability and more with the strangeness of witnessing such dignity in a face that marks a life we have learned to imagine as unlivable and unworthy, as the kind of person we routinely detect in advance through medical technology and eliminate from our human community.

In *The Body Silent* (1987), anthropologist Robert Murphy, who conducted fieldwork on his own experience of quadriplegia, points out that looking away from people who make us uncomfortable differs from granting them visual anonymity. Looking away is an active denial of acknowledgment rather than the tacit tipping of one’s hat to ordinary fellow citizens expressed in simply not noticing one another. Looking away is for Murphy a deliberate obliteration of his personhood. “[A] wheelchair cannot be hidden,” he notes, “it is brutally visible” (93). People refuse to look at Murphy, he concludes, partly because they know that they are not supposed to stare at him and have no easy way to relate to him. Having been on both sides of stares, Murphy writes of his own “selective blindness” before becoming disabled, contending that a disabled person entering his “field of vision” would not register in his consciousness. After he began using a wheelchair, however, he saw that sociality between nondisabled and disabled people is “tense, awkward, and problematic,” and that this is often expressed through ocular evasion. The newly quadriplegic Murphy found that acquaintances “did not look [his] way” and that he was “virtually ignored in crowds for long periods, broken by short bursts of patronization” (91). This “pattern of avoidance” begets feelings of shame and guilt which initially erode Murphy’s dignity and self-esteem (91). Murphy’s subtle analysis of the social message that looking and looking away sends to starees suggests that recuperating the dignity lost in such exchanges is a demanding task for people with disabilities.

Conferring dignity on people whose differences draw stares is the challenge to which these portraits of disabled people rise. These portraits intervene between starees and starers to offer respectful, even beautiful, pictures of people we have not learned to look at in this way. They revalue devalued people, the kinds of people most of us have only glimpsed in institutions or in medical pictures with black boxes over the eyes. This anonymity that medical photographs impose on a staree also prevents the person pictured from staring back at the viewer. Auld’s and Rush’s portraits rework the way we usually stare, however. They keep us looking rather than looking away. They grant us more than permission to stare; they use the clout of high art to transform

our staring from a breach of etiquette or an offensive intrusion into an act of appreciation. These portraits enable visual pilgrimages of deliberate contemplation that might be scuttled in a face-to-face encounter on the street. The invitation to look that a portrait offers precludes our skittish staring and instead allows us to look deep and long into these unfamiliar faces made strangely familiar.

STARING BACK

Staring is a high-stakes social interaction for everybody involved. The struggle for starers is whether to look or look away. The struggle for starees is how to look back. Stareable people have a good deal of work to do to assert their own dignity or avoid an uncomfortable scene. People with unusual looks come to understand this and develop relational strategies to ameliorate the damage staring can inflict. Rather than passively wilting under intrusive and discomfiting stares, a staree can take charge of a staring situation, using charm, friendliness, humor, formidability, or perspicacity to reduce interpersonal tension and enact a positive self-representation.

In her memoir, *Autobiography of a Face* (1984), Lucy Grealy writes about discovering as a young girl the possibilities that staring back might hold for her. Grealy spent a lifetime as a staree after her multiple surgeries for jaw cancer, starting when she was eight years old. Having to navigate the world outside her family soon showed Grealy that she “possessed a certain power” because people “noticed” her. “Wherever I went, even just to the store with my mother, I was never overlooked,” writes Grealy, “I could count on some sort of attention, and I discovered that people were embarrassed when I caught them looking at me. I stared right back at the strangers. . . . They always looked away quickly, trying to pretend they hadn’t been staring” (Grealy 1984, 101). What practiced starees come to understand, Grealy suggests, is that stares are to be engaged rather than avoided. Some take up this engagement with the relish and others with dread. Nevertheless, whether they are a challenge or a burden, stares do not necessarily make one a victim; rather, they can make **one a master** of social interaction.

Accounts from starees such as Lucy Grealy about staring back find support in the portraits of people with disabilities by Doug Auld and Chris Rush. These portraits show rather than ~~tell how~~ starees stare back. Portraits can provide their subjects with an opportunity to deliberately engage their viewers through the conventional poses of traditional portraiture. Eye comportment is one of the most important elements ~~through which~~ portraits define their subjects. Intense eye-to-eye engagement with the viewer can

make a subject seem to reach out of the picture to stare down the viewer. A pose of outstaring one's starrer confers an authority that people like the ones that Auld and Rush portray can have trouble maintaining in facing social stigma. We expect such an imperial gaze to come from a monarch but not from people we have learned to see as pitiable or even repugnant. One burn survivor who saw Auld's pictures, Dan Gropper, thinks these portraits work against what he calls the tiresome "poor Dan" attitude he gets along with the stares (Newman 2006, 1.25). Taking a good look at these portraits can show viewers that people who look like Gropper or Auld's subjects can and do "have a very good life."

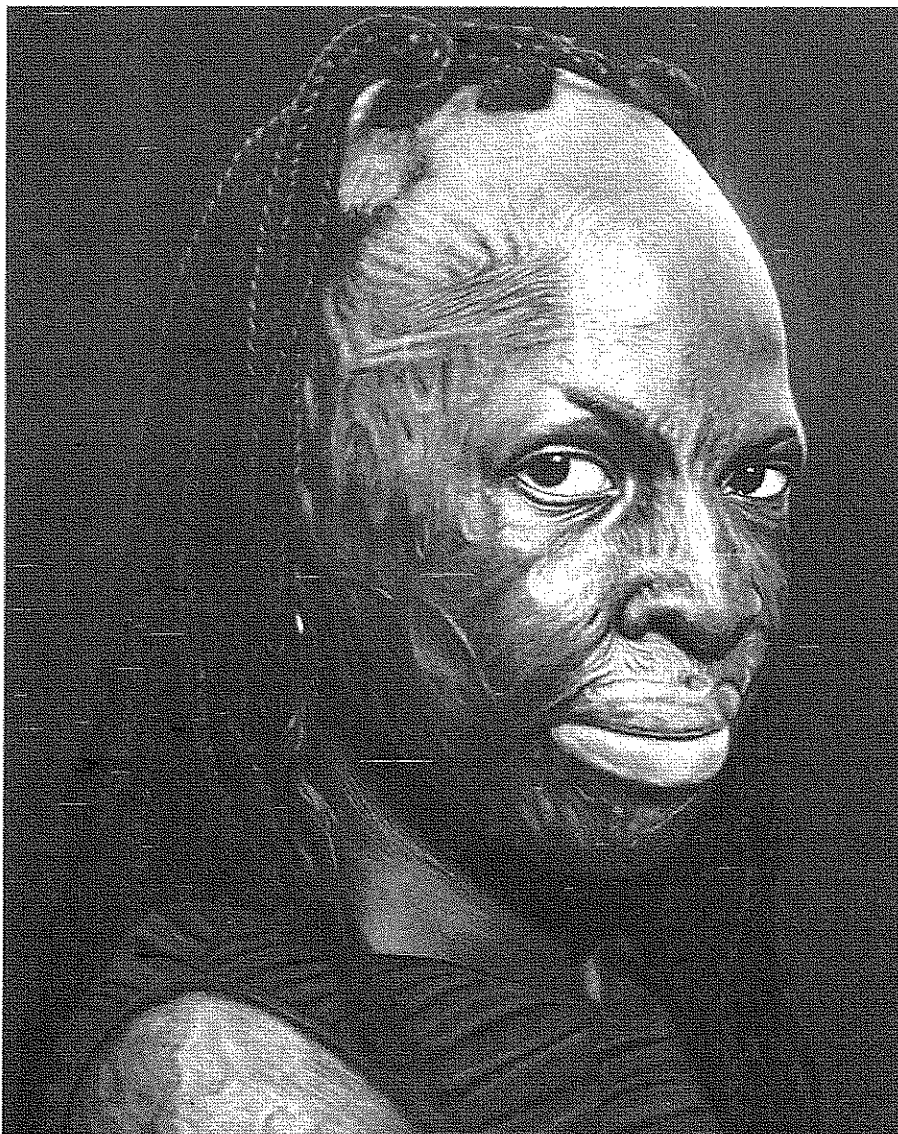


Figure 7.3. Doug Auld, "Shayla." Oil on canvas, 40 in \times 50 in \copyright doug auld (2005) from his series "State of Grace" (portraits of burn survivors); www.dougauld.com.

Refusing to wilt under another's stare is a way to insist on one's dignity and worth. Shayla, for instance, one young African-American woman Auld portrays, stares back with a particularly penetrating look (figure 7.3). In a three-quarter profile pose and bedecked with African-style braids scattered across her scarred scalp, Shayla's eyes are steady on us, emerging from beneath furrowed brows out of a stern face textured with intricate brushstrokes and colors that announce the residues of burning. Shayla is staring hard at us staring at her. Her look refuses even a shred of the poor victim role. She has caught us and we cannot look away. In another example of looking back, one of Rush's most striking subjects stares at us with a look that approaches an ironic smirk (figure 7.4). In a little black dress and a sleek hairstyle, a young woman named Gwen elegantly fans out a hand with long, beautiful fingers just beneath her chin, accentuating her face. Her eyes stare directly at us from a most unusual face, one we'd consider disfigured. As a vamp, the ever-desirable woman playing hard to get, she stares openly at us staring at her. This vamp's self-presentation suggests a womanly confidence and sophistication that contradicts what we have learned about people with so-called facial deformities.

Portraits, of course, show only half of a staring exchange. Because they are static representations of starees, the portraits of Shayla and Gwen allow us to consider how starees can use comportment, expression, and even costuming to stare back. In other words, these portraits pull the staree out of a live encounter in order to deliberately stage a staree's self-presentation. Face-to-face staring encounters, in contrast, are living communications filled with complex and dynamic interrelations. Many starees take the lead in these interactions. Uninvited attention is something that people generally do not put up with for very long without developing a set of effective responses. Sometimes starees rise to the occasion with deliberateness, grace, and generosity. Sometimes, however, the stare-weary have crankier responses. One man with restricted growth who has been stared at his entire life reports that he reacts to gawkers with "avoidance" or "disengagement," and often "flips them the bird" (anonymous, 2006 interview).² Part of the "embattled" nature of having a stareable disability, Robert Murphy (1987) observes, is managing the patterns of attention, avoidance, and awkwardness. Murphy concludes that the visual presence of disability "robs the encounter of firm cultural guidelines, traumatizing it and leaving the people involved wholly uncertain about what to expect from each other" (87). As many of the interviews for this book suggest, the work demanded of ultra-noticeable people to deal with this uncertainty can be taxing, tedious, or even tormenting.

Nonetheless, starees also suggest that managing staring exchanges can generate creative interpersonal skills that are psychologically sustaining.



Figure 7.4. Chris Rush, "Vamp." Conte crayon on paper. Portraits are life size in scale.

A vigilant staree assesses the precise attitude of the starrer, measuring intentions and attitudes so as to respond in the most effective way. Accomplished starees can help starers maintain face by relieving them of anxiety, understanding their motivations, working with them to overcome their limited understanding of human variation, and indulging their social awkwardness. A seasoned staree evaluates when to turn away, stare back, or further extend the stare. Some allow the staring to go on in order for the starrer to get a good look. Others find it most effective to use eye contact and body language to terminate the stare as soon as possible, although this risks being interpreted as hostile. Another option is to redirect the stare. For example, one staree reports connecting her own eyes to those of the immobilized starrer and guiding them away from the feature of her own body upon which the starrer's eyes have fixed. By taking over the stare, this staree adeptly rescues the hapless fellow from the embarrassment of the stuck stare and restores the ease of typical face-to-face encounters.

Starees develop fluent staring management routines that are more sophisticated than simple defensive reactions. The psychologist Len

Sawisch (2006 interview) explains the process he uses to steer staring interactions the way he wants them to go:

Staring by itself is not usually noticed unless I “see” the starer staring. When I do, I acknowledge the stare non-verbally with eye contact and a slight nod, a faint smile, or other gesture. This then “requires” the starer to either signal back or to look away. If they don’t look away, I can exaggerate my acknowledgement (point, bug my eyes, mock bow, etc) or I can choose to look away. If I don’t look away, I am challenging the other party to a confrontation escalation—which I am not usually interested in doing. If the person is close enough, it is easier to go “verbal” and acknowledge their presence generally with my most masculine but non-threatening voice tone and a situation appropriate greeting, like “How you doin’?” I may use a honorific (“sir” or “ma’am”) but with no hint that I am of lower caste (i.e., “awarding” the other my social status).

For Sawisch, staring is an artful preamble to regularized face-to-face social interactions, conducted adroitly only by the experienced staree. Judiciously selected gestures, words, tone, and comportment acknowledge or establish social status. Accomplished starees agree that different starers require different responses. The adult starer, who has been acculturated against gawking, most often stares furtively, for example, which can make it difficult for a staree to directly take charge of the encounter. Adult starers sometimes exercise looking as a form of intrusive entitlement, which can require starees to use aggressive measures such as callouts or, as we saw earlier, middle fingers. Sometimes this curiosity appears as unwanted aid, as when starers try to lift limbless people or wheelchair users who have not asked for assistance (Frank 2000; Linton 2005). Entitlement sometimes occurs in the form of inappropriately familiar questions about how people with unusual bodies accomplish physical tasks that ordinary people cannot imagine them doing. One woman, who has congenital amputation of all four limbs, for instance, reports being accosted while waiting at the bus stop by a man who demanded to know the logistics of how she goes to the bathroom, eats, and sleeps (anonymous, 2006 interview). Such tacit or explicit demands to account for oneself ultimately require starees to prepare sets of responses to dispatch, engage, or defuse their starers.

Sometimes starees develop different strategies for managing children than they use for adults. Children not yet fully socialized can stare with an innocent curiosity that starees often indulge, but which sometimes swells into taunting or aggression. For example, several starees identified what one called the “persistent stare” often enacted by children who simply will not let go of you with their eyes. This is curious staring gone baroque, free from ameliorating restraint that comes from socialization. The asymmetry

in maturity and authority between an adult staree and a child starrer complicates things. Starees are often more likely to feel responsible for educating a child about tolerating human differences or indulging a child who does not yet know not to stare. While many starees are critical of parents who allow their children to taunt, one staree tells of how terrible she felt when a mother slapped her child across the face for staring and pointing gleefully to the innocent discovery of her first one-legged person. The same staree regretfully recalls her own response to a child starrer against whom she used semi-hostile humor rather than patient educating: "In the past I have responded quite unfairly to staring people. One tiny child once asked me where my leg was, and I (sort of fed up that day) looked down and FREAKED OUT! 'Oh my God!' I exclaimed, 'I had it this morning!' Now I simply tell them I was sick and the doctor took it off and wait to see if they have any other questions" (anonymous, 2006 interview). This staree is quick to acknowledge her leadership in directing the staring encounter and the generous seriousness she brings to that responsibility. "I know," she affirms, "I haven't seen the end of that little devil inside me who now and then likes to play with people's fear and disgust factor."

The staree Kevin Connolly has taken the staring management techniques he has learned over a lifetime into the realm of documentary photography (figure 7.5). Connolly, who was born legless and gets around mostly on a skateboard wearing a "boot" not unlike a strapless Birkenstock around his hips, draws baroque stares wherever he goes (Brown 2007). A professional skier and photographer who travels the world widely, Connolly decided in 2005 to start capturing his staring interactions with his camera. Having snapped over three thousand starrers in his travels, Connolly has become a canny observer of people observing him out on the street (figures 7.6–7.8). His point in photographing starrers is not to humiliate them in any way, but rather to make a study of what staring is about and how it works. Ordinary starrers hold as much interest for Connolly as his surprising appearance holds for them. He has come to understand staring as a universal reaction, what he terms "more reflex than conscious action." He himself stares and says that he would stare at someone like himself if he were to see him on the street. Connolly sums up the physiological impulse to stare, the way it precedes understanding and interrupts quotidian life: "Before any of us can ponder or speculate," he writes, "we stare. Whether it is a glance or a neck twisting ogle, we look at that which does not seem to fit in our day to day lives" (Connolly 2007).

The photographs along with Connolly's explanation of the project not only document startled looks but also offer a fuller description of the staring exchange than we have seen before. First of all, because the faces Connolly portrays come from all over the world, we see a wide variation in age, sex, race,

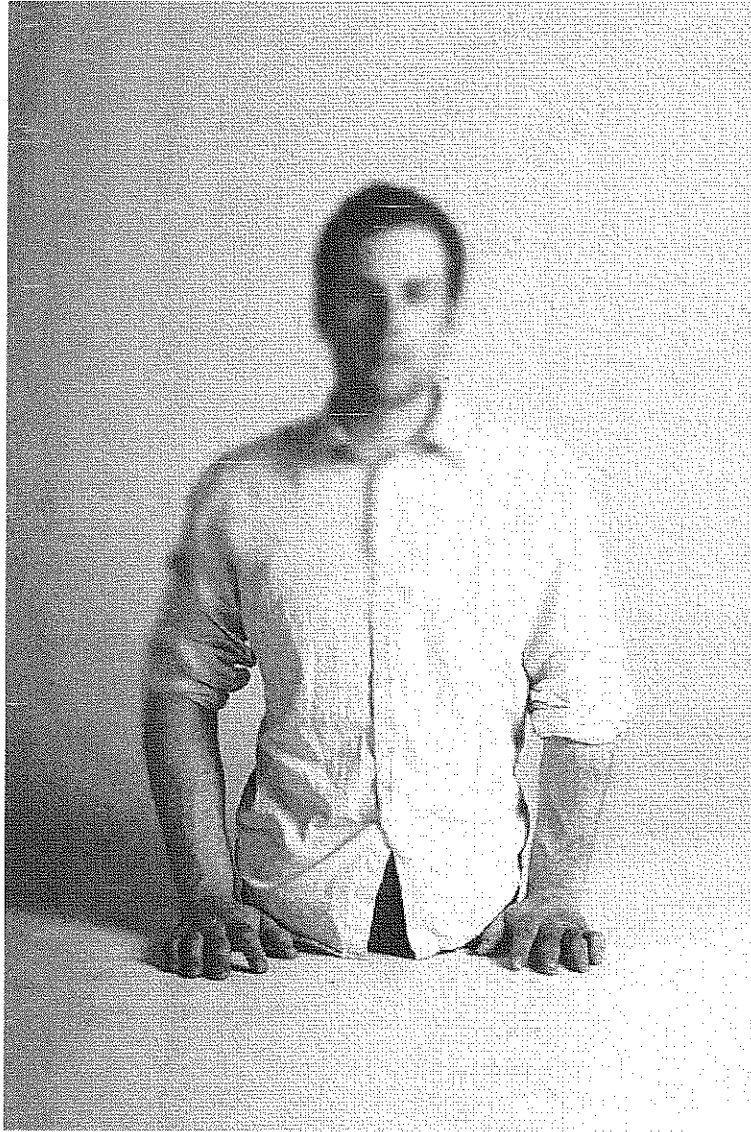


Figure 7.5. Chris Toalson, "Portrait."

ethnicity, individual features, and cultural contexts. At the same time, these faces pull together tightly into a uniform community whose membership we see through their remarkable unanimity of intensely attentive expressions. As such, Connolly's photographic project constitutes a visual catalog of starers. Looking at Connolly's pictures shows us what we look like when we stare. Seeing how befuddled they look is disconcerting. But his project goes beyond the immediate affective exchange of staring and extends into the interpersonal relationship that staring often begets. If staring bears witness to an interruption in our mundane visual field, as both Connolly and cognitive psychologists have suggested, it creates at the same time an urgency to stabilize the ordinary world again through finding a coherent explanation for the inexplicable sight.



Figure 7.6. Kevin Connolly, “Man and Girl; Reykjavik, Iceland.”

In other words, Connolly's starers often engage him in composing a story for themselves that explains his leglessness. In Bosnia, someone thought he was a landmine victim; in Romania, a gypsy vagabond; in Ukraine, a beggar; in New Zealand, a shark attack survivor; in the United States, a wounded Iraq war veteran. Starers' curiosity often extends beyond explanations for Connolly's leglessness into wonder as well regarding how he does quotidian tasks such as going to the bathroom, cooking, reaching places built for the fully legged—and especially about his girlfriend. People work to fit him into what they do know already in an effort to figure out something that is quite new to them. Apparently they need to know how someone who seems so much like themselves can at the same time be so different.³ Whereas some starees find



Figure 7.7. Kevin Connolly, "Woman and Children; Sarajevo, Bosnia."

such curiosity inappropriate, Connolly seems to relish the opportunity to help them imagine his life as livable and fully human.

As Kevin Connolly's remarkable archive of starers demonstrates, the most potentially generative staring situation is one that produces mutual interest. Rather than turning away his starers, Connolly engages them, if nothing else by surprising them with his camera. He moves many of them, however, beyond the startle he catches in his viewfinder into a relation of empathetic exchange. They begin to imagine what it is like to be him. In this way, the narrative that staring begets can lead to the kind of empathetic identification Walt Whitman calls for in his poetic celebration of hearty staring. Connolly nurtures this relationship with some of his starers, perhaps out of generosity,

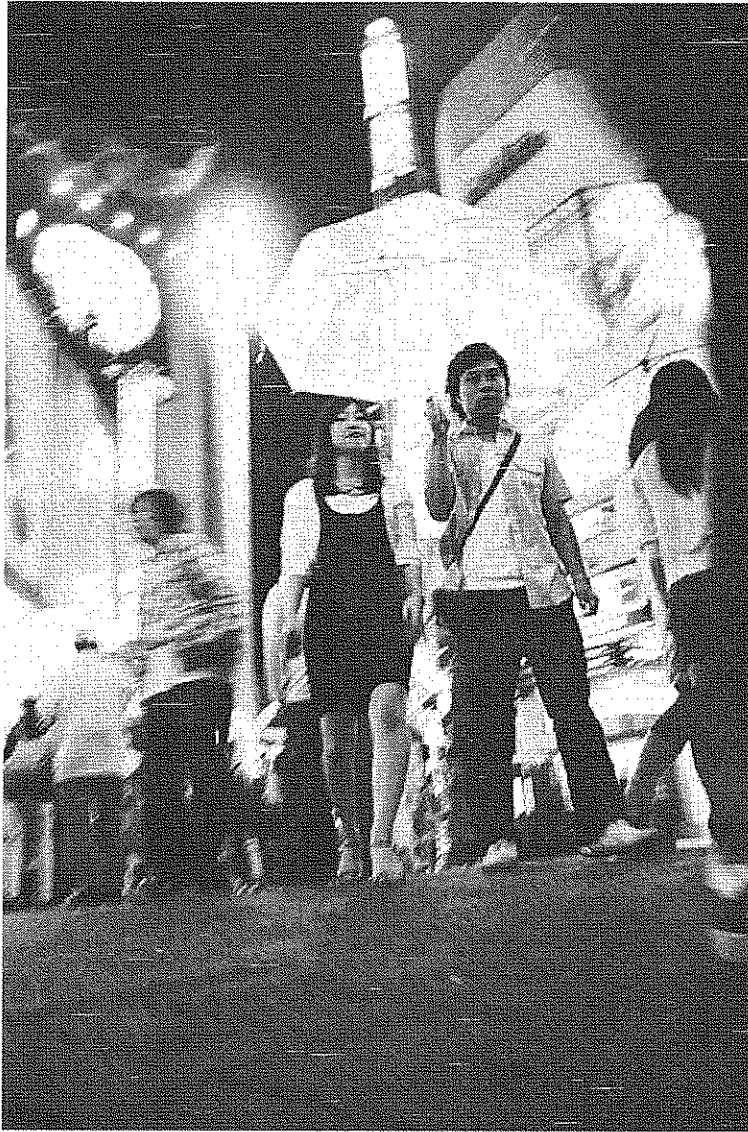


Figure 7.8. Kevin Connolly, "Woman and Man; Tokyo, Japan."

ennui, pragmatism, or his own need to reknit himself into the human community away from which stares push him. Starees may also elect to invite empathy as a counter to pity, the diminishing, too frequent response to disability. Pity is an emotional cul-de-sac that ultimately distances starrer and alienates staree. A block to mutuality, pity is repugnance refined into genteel condescension.⁴ Empathy, in contrast, bonds in a mutual recognition of shared humanity. Anthropologist Robert Murphy (1987) explains transformative staring encounters that brought him new knowledge and realigned solidarities. After becoming a wheelchair user with a literally diminished social status, Murphy, a white man, finds that women and Blacks look at him differently and more openly than before. Blacks, he finds, recognize and

greet him as “fellow Outsiders” (127). Before he used a wheelchair, women with whom he established eye contact would typically look away, but when he becomes disabled, women continue the eye contact, nod, or smile, which he interprets as “an opening of the self, an acknowledgment of the other, a meeting without closure” (127). Disability, he concludes, feminizes men, making them socially equal to women and people of color. This feminizing does not make Murphy feel further diminished, but rather seems to him an affirming recognition that gives him a new set of potential interpersonal relations within which he can develop a stronger sense of self. Murphy’s wheelchair dissolves his previous status, creating an opportunity for new relational equality.

If an arc of empathy is to leap across the breach opened up by staring, persistence and generosity must prevail on both sides. Starees must insist on recognition as fellow humans by wielding an array of interpersonal techniques that the commonly embodied need not acquire.⁵ One staree explains this interactive process as an opportunity to “transform an uncomfortable and annoying inevitability into a positive reflection of myself as a example of a person with a disability who is a proud and functioning member of society” (anonymous, 2006 interview). She understands her role in the staring encounter as one of “defiance.” Her aim in that defiance is to “reflect back to them that (1) they are staring at someone, (2) that someone KNOWS they are staring at them, and (3) that person they are staring at is an amazing person. Then they walk on with something to think about . . . they MIGHT be thinking that . . . we’re not so different after all.” When this woman stares back—much like Shayla, the burn survivor who peers starkly at us out of her portrait—her returned stare is not a plea, but rather an assertive outreach toward mutual recognition across difference. The returned stare from the starees both on the street and in the portraits instructs the wide-eyed that they are amazed by an “amazing person.” The starrer—whether stunned, tentative, or hostile—responds to the staree, who guides her visual interlocutor toward the self-representation of her choice. An amazing person, the eyes explain, is what you see.