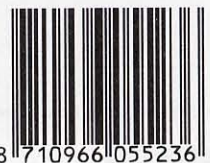


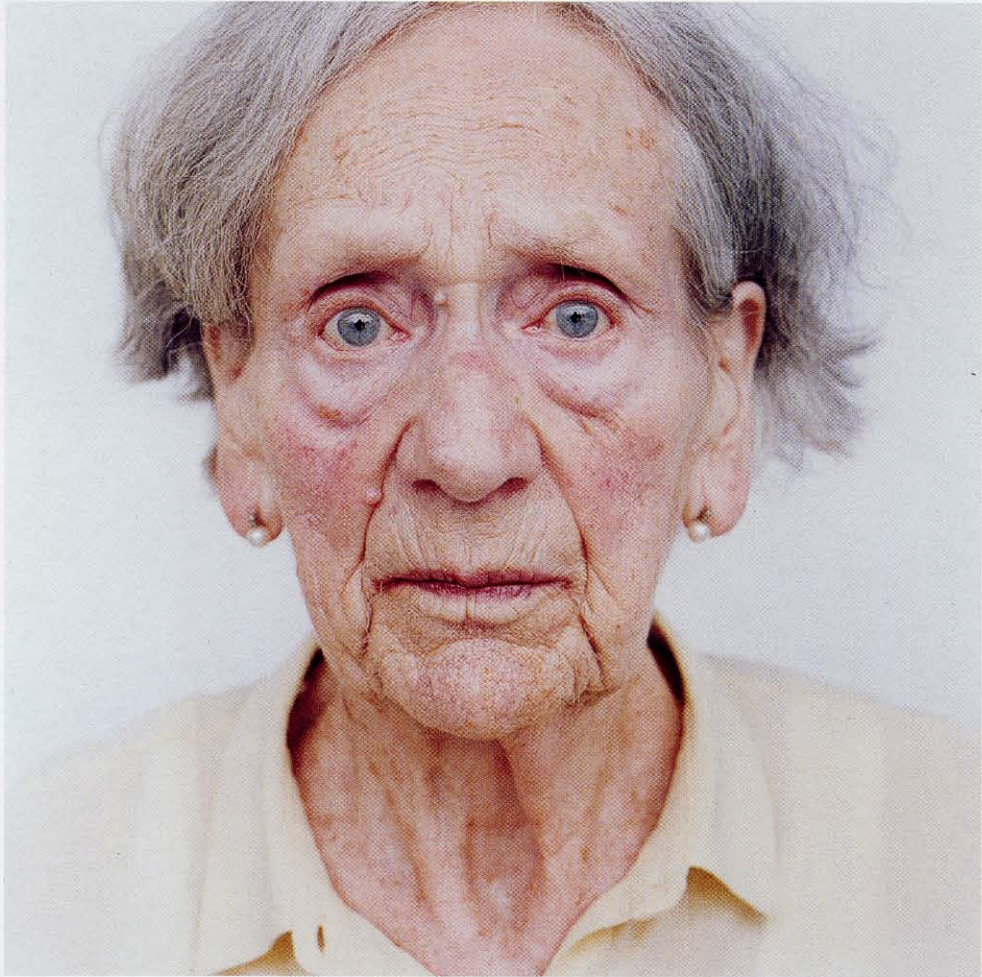
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Photograph:
Portrait Eight
Alzheimer Series, 2001
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Portrait One



Portrait Nine

The families of the patients were more doubting. They were afraid my work might lack the proper feeling. As a result, some of them wouldn't give me permission to photograph their father or mother. With the others, I agreed they could first preview the photos before they gave their consent.

I didn't want to take shocking pictures. It wasn't my intention to take away the patients' dignity. I consciously refrained from photographing some occurrences. There was a woman who regularly got undressed; there were those who were incontinent, they smeared faeces on the wall. That's interesting if you want to know more about the sickness. But it wasn't suitable for my approach. I wanted pictures that motivate people to think about the effect this illness could have on somebody's life.

There were 24 patients living in the home where I took pictures, but in Stuttgart and its surroundings, there are about six thousand Alzheimer patients. Periodically that leads to terrible situations. Patients who are tied to their beds because better care is too expensive and time consuming. The sickness is on the increase in Western countries. Approximately 7,5 percent of elderly people suffer from it. That number will only rise. Alois Alzheimer discovered the illness in 1907. Little is known about the causes.

I think it's important for photography to draw attention to social themes. Like Alzheimer with a serious tone, but I also like to use irony. For example the photo series I made earlier in Sun City, a town in Arizona which only accommodates people above 55. I'm greatly fascinated by leisure culture. I've also made a photo series about Coney Island and the clichés of tourism in Austria.

Perhaps the tendency to smile does remind you of Martin Parr's method, but my imagery is completely different nonetheless. I did happen to meet Parr

some time ago and spoke at length with him. That greatly influenced my way of working at the time. I'm autodidact and initially I modelled myself very much on the classic black and white photography of the Magnum star photographers. About four years ago, I switched from 35mm to a mid-sized format and colour negative. I'm especially inspired by William Eggleston's use of colour.

It's important to build up a strong empathy with your subject. That's when you take good pictures. Life's complexity means that now and again you need some diversion. That's why magazines are full of stars and starlets. Currently people are so swamped by visual garbage they don't even realize that there are still sensitive photos being made. That's why the preliminary talks with the families of the Alzheimer patients took up so much time. You have to explain what photography can express. That it can be moving, informative or explanatory. After the pictures were published, I received many positive reactions. It was a surprise that some people confessed to having gained a different view of their sick mother or father.'

Peter Granser (1971) has lived his whole life in Germany. Because his father is Austrian, he has dual nationality. He works regularly for magazines such as Geo, Stern, Die Zeit and Neue Zürcher Zeitung. The jury of the World Press Photo awarded Granser a prize in the category Stories for his series on the life of a senior citizen's colony in Sun City, Arizona.

He has participated in numerous exhibitions in Germany, Italy, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. He is a member of the German photo agency Laif (www.laif.de) and his work is available via Galerie Photonet in Wiesbaden (www.photonet-online.de). On his own website Granser also has a large number of photos on show (www.granser.de). This spring will see the publication of his book Sun City by Bentell Verlag in Switzerland.

Peter Granser
talking to Edie Peters

For a period of four weeks, Peter Granser visited the Gradmann-Haus, a home for Alzheimer patients near his home in Stuttgart. While attending the Joop Swart Masterclass of World Press Photo, he shot a photo series in which bold, close-up portraits are alternated with images of the situation these people find themselves in. It earned him the Deutsche Sozialpreis für Alzheimer and the Discovery Award 2002 during the Rencontres d'Arles photo festival.

About access to patients and their family.
About access to photography that makes you think.

'No, conversation with the patients was practically impossible. You can only make small talk. You see, the people in the home where I took photos all suffered from Alzheimer in a well advanced stage. They forget everything. They forget to eat; they can't find their own room. Two women in the home were slightly better. One of them used to say: look the photographer is here again. However, most of the patients saw me as just someone standing somewhere in the room. That made taking pictures tricky. Especially in the beginning, I needed time to get used to the daily routine. I often went for walks with the patients. I was more concerned about the people than with photography. On some days I took only three pictures.

I was keen to take close-up photos of the patients. To photograph their eyes because they're so empty which makes it clear they live in a very personal world. I selected a suitable white wall and set a chair from the dining room in front of it, hopefully a chair they were well acquainted with. The patients who had agreed to pose for me sat down there. Often that was only possible with the help of the nursing staff. Subsequently I had to wait and see how they would react to my camera on a tripod. Some stared silently in front of them. Others couldn't stop moving, a symptom of the illness.

Sometimes I only had the opportunity to take two photos. I wanted to avoid using flashlight; assembling the spots would create too much distraction. Luckily, the home is so built that there's plenty of natural light.

After I had been at work for some time, I had the idea that it would be appealing if I alternated portraits with situations that depict the symptoms of the illness: loss of reality, hallucinations, restlessness and impulsive movement, passivity, orientation difficulties, insomnia, phobias and depression. Sometimes to express this, my photos are out of focus or something in the picture moves.

Alzheimer leads to loss of mental capacity. It's an illness that robs patients of their past. For family and friends it means a long and painful process of saying goodbye. It starts with forgetfulness and leads quickly to loss of memory. While I was present, it happened that a woman no longer recognized her son, which of course is terrible. Most patients die after eight years at the most, often due to additional ailments or injuries sustained by a fall or similar causes.

The Masterclass assignment was to explore the theme of identity. To me, loss of identity seemed interesting. I had long discussions with the people in charge of the home. I quickly managed to convince them of the importance of making photographs that make people think about the illness. After all, it's a problem we like to suppress. I showed examples of earlier work I'd made in order to win their confidence.