

Exhibition

Dying art: photographic *memento mori*

"I'm not afraid of death", declared Klara Behrens (1930–2004), a few weeks before she died. "The only thing that frightens me is the process of dying. You just don't know what actually happens." Behrens was one of 24 terminally ill men and women in German hospices who agreed to be photographed by Walter Schels and interviewed by journalist Beate Lakotta, in the weeks or days before their anticipated deaths. More unusually, the participants also agreed in advance that Schels could photograph them again, soon after their deaths. These paired portraits—alive and dead—are exhibited at the Wellcome Collection's *Life Before Death* exhibition in a stark series of black and white photographic *memento mori*.

In her book *On Death and Dying* (1969), Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler Ross suggested five stages that dying people may go through: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Most of the dying people Lakotta interviewed were

"Schels' portraits capture the basic humanity of men and women approaching their deaths."

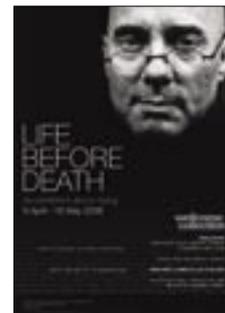
accepting of their imminent fate, but some were not. "To be able to have one more summer. Not to die now, but rather to have until the autumn", bargained Beate Taube (1959–2004), after 4 years of battling breast cancer. Her wish was understandable, since her five children were then aged

between 7 and 15 years. Yet she was not afraid of death. "If my soul is able to float away, as I hope it will, I will lie there completely at peace."

Barbara Gronë (1951–2003) felt worthless and sad. "All my efforts were in vain", she said. "It is as though I am being rejected by life itself." By contrast, Heiner Schmitz (1951–2003) was angry about the inability of his work colleagues to acknowledge that he was dying when they visited him at the hospice: "No one asks me how I feel, because they're all shit scared. I find it really upsetting the way they desperately avoid the subject, talking about all sorts of other things. Don't they get it? I'm going to die! That's all I think about, every second when I'm on my own."

Other individuals who took part in the year-long project seemed to approach their imminent deaths with serenity. "Death is nothing", said Vietnamese migrant Maria Hai-Anh Tuyet Cao (1951–2004), drawing strength from the spiritual teachings of Suma Ching Hai, founder of the Quan Yin method of meditation. "We are only called back to earth if we are still attached to another human being in the final seconds", said Cao, whose aim was to achieve a sense of total detachment at the moment of her death.

Although most of Schels' portraits are of adults, the exhibition also includes those of children: a 17-month-old girl and a 6-year-old boy. For these portraits, the parents were interviewed and allowed Schels to photograph their children. What is striking about the two children's portraits is how little of their short experiences of life seem to have registered in their faces, unlike the photographs of the adults who are marked by decades of living. In death, the facial features of the infant girl Elmira Sang Bastian (2002–2004),



Life Before Death
Showing at Wellcome Collection, London, UK, until May 18, 2008. <http://www.wellcomecollection.org/exhibitionsandevents/exhibitions/lifebeforedeath/index.htm>



Walter Schels

Jannik Boehmfeld, born July 23, 1997, died Jan 11, 2004, first portrait taken Jan 10, 2004



Walter Schels

Maria Hai-Anh Tuyet Cao, born Aug 26, 1951, died Feb 15, 2004, first portrait taken Dec 5, 2003

dressed in a lace-trimmed cap, resemble those of a fragile wax doll. Her death portrait and that of Jannik Boehmfeld (1997–2004), who died from a brain tumour, evoke funerary portraits of children taken by 19th-century photographers as keepsakes for grieving families. Tragically, Jannik's mother, Silke Boehmfeld, died from breast cancer only a few weeks after him, leaving her husband and their younger son to grieve doubly.

Schels has been a photographer for 42 years. From 1975, he spent several years photographing newborn babies and became fascinated with faces and then went on to photograph prominent figures in public life. Lakotta is a science writer, who

covers diverse aspects of medicine and psychology. How did repeated exposure to the dying and dead affect them? Schels and Lakotta say that capturing the appearances and final thoughts of dying people is not something they could have done without each other, since it would have been too emotionally draining. Their most difficult challenge was being continuously on call to go to the hospices and take the photographs after people had died; they also had to move supine corpses into seated positions to photograph their faces head-on, as in the earlier portraits.

The large square photographs on display are framed, but not glazed, which brings us into more

direct contact with the faces of Schels' subjects. Hung in pairs, the life and death portraits have a spiritual intensity that is ecumenical; encompassing all religious beliefs and non-believers. Schels' portraits capture the basic humanity of men and women approaching their deaths. Although the photographs acknowledge the inevitability of death, they also celebrate life. Lest we become too sad, Behrens' expression of concern about the process of death is balanced by the ironic humour inherent in her regret at having only just bought herself a new fridge-freezer. "If I'd only known..." But few do.

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