August Sander and the Task of the Photographer

by
Claire L. Sykes
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Abstract

While August Sander worked as a commercial portrait photographer before the War, during the Weimar period his practice eventually led him to undertake a monumental project which he never completed, entitled “Citizens of the Twentieth Century.” After the War, with the demand from families for reprints of portraits of loved ones who had been killed, Sander had to revisit his negative archive. Seeing these portraits again from the perspective of loss, inspired him to envision a broader project. Sander was now left with the countless traces of the departed as recorded in his commercial portraits. These portraits inspired him to undertake what would become his lifelong project. Sander saw his era being transformed by the advent of modern technology and endeavored to document his time before it disappeared. His project to “create a piece of History” by capturing the “face of his time” through his portraits stemmed from a firm belief that “the essence of all photography is of a documentary nature” and that photography, in the hands of an “honest” photographer, could “give an absolutely faithful picture of [one’s] time,” allowing present and future generations “to see things as they are and not as they should be” (Sander 1989, 107). While Sander’s approach to the photographic medium may initially appear somewhat naïve, the present account ventures to explore the complexity of his practice and thus legitimize the task he set out to accomplish as a photographer.

Keywords:  August Sander, “Citizens of the Twentieth Century,” photography, portraiture, documentary, history, Neue Sachlichkeit, Germany, Weimar Republic, loss.
For my parents, Janet and Brian Sykes
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Introduction

Historically, August Sander (1876-1964) is regarded as one of the medium's "great" portrait photographers. He is best known for his ambitious project (Menschen des 20 Jahrhunderts) "Citizens of the Twentieth Century"\(^1\) and for an "objective" and exacting style of portraiture. While never completely realized, "Citizens of the Twentieth Century,"\(^2\) was envisioned as a large, comprehensive, portrait compendium; one that would present a range of social types reflecting the stratification and transformation of Wilhelmine and Weimar society. Begun around 1910,\(^3\) it was a life-long project that ventured to visually document social types to create a sort of inventory of the German people; a physiognomic portrait of an age.

Sander is considered a "master" both in his ability to see the "type" in the subjects who posed in front of his camera and in his ability to grasp an "historical truth" in the social types that he portrayed. The portraits associated with this project are deemed to have a directness and clarity quite unprecedented in portraiture. Praised for their "objectivity" and "authenticity," they are seen as an invaluable historical document, representing an authentic historical source, "unparalleled in the history of photography" (Newhall 1980, 6). Such appraisals

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1. Throughout this text I refer to the project as "Citizens of the Twentieth Century" or "Citizens," however "Menschen" is variously translated as "People," "Human beings," Man," and "Citizens," and this inconsistency will be apparent in quotations throughout the text.
2. Ulrich Keller has reconstructed Sander's "Citizens of the Twentieth Century," as Sander had conceived of it using what remains of his detailed outline, notes, letters, lectures and statements, on the subject of the project's structure and the photographs that he intended to use.
3. 1910 is both the date that Sander claims he began his project, as well as the date that he moved from Linz to Cologne and began photographing the Westerwald peasants. However as I will outline, the project's genesis and evolution occurred over a long period of time and cannot be
(echoing Sander's own expressed intentions) are typical of the many exhibition catalogues, introductions and prefaces that recognize Sander as one of the most significant portrait photographers working in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s.

While Sander is often cast as a "master of the type" by such sources, the literature surveying photography all too often overlooks or only cursorily mentions Sander.\(^4\) The texts that look specifically at German photography of this period,\(^5\) with their emphasis on the New Photography, often limit their account of Sander's work to a discussion of his peripheral association with the avant-garde and the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement and thus rarely consider his work in all its complexity and specificity. The literature which more specifically addresses Sander's life and work via biographical and anecdotal accounts,\(^6\) tends to simplify the relationship of his work to this avant-garde and to the larger debates and developments in photography. As well, these monographs fail to pursue some of the more fundamental questions concerning the actual nature of photography which arise from Sander's work.\(^7\)

Through my own account, I would like to reposition Sander's work in relation to this literature and explore the broader issues stemming from both his work and his own statements concerning his project and the medium of photography. Sander states his intention in the following way: "It is not my

\(^4\) For example Newhall's *History of Photography* contains only a passing reference to Sander's relation to the rise of documentary photography, and Freund's *Photography and Society* does not even mention him.
\(^5\) Eskildsen, Coke, Mellor.
\(^6\) Günther Sander, Kramer, Keller.
\(^7\) I would, however, like to stress my debt to Keller's important study which is by far the most detailed, rigorous, and critical account.
intention either to criticize or to describe these people, but to create a piece of History with my pictures” (qtd. in Maddow 241). Sander saw photography as the most appropriate means to create a documentary record, believing that through photography one could “give an absolutely faithful picture of [one’s] time;” that it could allow one “to see things as they are and not as they should or might be” (Sander 1989, 107). Of course, such faith in the capacity of photography can be seen as problematic. However, in trying to understand what Sander saw to be the task of the photographer, one needs to consider the historical reasons underlying such claims for photography. This thesis will try to outline what in fact could have motivated Sander’s ambitious project.

In chapter one I discuss the genesis and evolution of Sander’s project through biographical narrative, looking at his particular development as a photographer and assessing the impact that certain events and trends may have had on both his practice and his perspective of photography. In chapter two, I look at the major developments and main debates of modern German photography at the time. While it is difficult to align Sander with one particular tendency or trajectory, I nevertheless stress the importance of situating both his project and his claims for photography within the context of these trends and ideas. Chapter three discusses his style and approach to photography, his larger project (its themes and structures), as well as the various criticisms directed at Sander’s practice, specifically what is deemed the naïveté of his claims for “objectivity” and “truth.” I conclude by highlighting a key event in his career which I argue was the initial motivation for his project: the notion of historical loss. It is
from this perspective of loss that Sander's project acquires considerable weight. While working within the context of modern German photography, where photographers typically focused on the futuristic possibilities of new technology as well as industrial and urban subjects, Sander set himself the unusual task of documenting a way of life that he sensed was disappearing as a result of such "progress."
In this chapter I will try to explain August Sander’s stylistic evolution and his project’s genesis by looking at his biography. In the general literature this chronology of events is elided and in effect perpetuates the dominant reading of Sander’s project: that “Citizens” is a master project coming from the talent of a great artist who “knew what he wanted from the outset” (Hartz 7). A closer look at this chronology allows for a more nuanced reading and will bring to light what I understand to be the catalyst for the project which was the photographer’s new recognition of loss.

Sander was born in 1876 in Herdorf, a small town near Cologne, in the mining and farming region of Siegerland. Sander’s father was a carpenter in the mines and also operated a small farm. At the age of fourteen, as was common, Sander began working in the mines. His son Günther recounts in his biography that Sander, “as a young worker on the spoil heaps of the mine ... had an experience which was to have a determining influence on his whole life, and contribute a great name to the history of photography” (287). We are told that he was asked to assist a visiting photographer with his equipment as he took pictures of the mine. Sander was thus introduced to the camera, and photography soon became a hobby that occupied all his spare-time.

In various texts introducing us to Sander’s work, allusions are made to Sander’s mining background. Typically Coke observes that: “In his portraits
August Sander exemplified, as no other photographer did, the special nature of German realism of the 1920s. Thus he is truly related to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement. The son of a miner, he never strayed far from the hard look on life that characterized the men who intimately knew the bowels of the earth" (36). Such references are typical of the superficial analyses of Sander’s work which appear in the literature surveying German photography. To suggest that his mining background with its “hard look on life” led to his “objective” and detached portraits of people and their occupations seems facile and somewhat misleading. I want to argue that Sander’s stylistic evolution from “Art Photography” to “exact photography” can be understood only as part of a much more complicated picture.

In contrast, Keller’s assessment of Sander’s relationship to his background is more nuanced. Unlike the Ruhr region where large industries and large-scale agriculturists employed significant numbers of workers, the Siegerland region was not industrialized. According to Keller, Sander’s conception of society was significantly influenced by a way of life that had not yet experienced the Industrial Revolution: “Sander did not experience nature and technology as opposing forces” (12). Here “iron-ore mining and forging were carried out by farmers who had their own homesteads. For this native population, industrial employment was not alienated wage work; it was a craft exercised with professional pride…” (Keller 12). It is important to understand this anachronistic way of life, where people were defined by profession and where skills and professions were passed down through generations with pride, as it
played a determining role in Sander’s conception of his project and his view of social hierarchy. 

Around 1896, while doing his military service, Sander began his professional photographic career as an apprentice to a commercial portrait studio in Trier. From 1899 to 1901 he traveled around Germany (Berlin, Magdeburg, Halle, Leipzig) gaining experience in various commercial firms and even studying painting in Dresden. (It was still customary for portrait photographers to paint portraits upon a client’s request.) In 1901, Sander accepted the position of “first operator” for a studio in Linz, Austria, which he soon was able to purchase (Keller 12). That same year he married, and together with his wife Anna, worked hard to attain a bourgeois lifestyle and access to a “high society” clientele (Keller 12).

What becomes clear in biographical accounts of Sander’s beginnings as a photographer, and what I would like to stress, is his dependence on his commercial practice and his bourgeois and artistic aspirations. Sander was not independently wealthy and the style of portraits he produced at this time had a lot to do with attracting and pleasing clients as well as defining himself as an “artist.”

In these early years Sander assimilated the painterly style of portraiture associated with Art Photography which was reaching the height of its popularity.

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8 Ernst Bloch uses the term ungleichzeitig (often translated as “Non-synchronicity”) to talk about the particular German manifestation of the simultaneous existence of the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. As we shall see further on, and in chapter three, Sander’s conception of social structures and his portrayal of social types is very much rooted in the former.

9 I will explore in more detail how Sander negotiated what he described as the question of “serving culture or the market place” in chapter three. His later commitment to serving “culture,” “posterity,” and “truth,” (what I see to be the eventual purpose and significance of his project), became a vocation that was not merely dictated by commercial interests.
at the turn of the century in America and Europe.\textsuperscript{10} I want to briefly discuss Art Photography and the role it played for Sander since he was to later reject it. As we shall see in chapter two this rejection of Art Photography is one of the defining characteristics of the modern New Photography.

The tension between the artistic / subjective and scientific / objective merits of the medium has been with photography since its invention and continues to frame any account of the medium's history. Certainly at this time, the new Art Photography movement can be understood as having been part of a continued effort to legitimize photography as a veritable art form by steering it away from its characterization as a purely mechanical and thus objective and uncreative scientific tool. It can also be seen as a response to the perceived "industrialization" of photography in general and of portraiture in particular. In 1854 Désdéri's invention of the carte-de-visite enabled a more efficient and inexpensive production of portraits.\textsuperscript{11} This small mass-produced format soon became popular world-wide as the demand for pictures of celebrities, relatives, friends and family steadily grew among the bourgeoisie (Newhall 1986, 66). By the 1860s the trend among commercial portrait photographers was to provide their sitters with elaborate painted backgrounds and props of papier-mâché,

\textsuperscript{10} It is worth noting that the "Art Photography" label is employed variously among different writers. For example Newhall makes a distinction between "Art Photography" and "Pictorial Photography." Art Photography for Newhall is a movement of the 1850s and 1860s which he identifies with Oscar G. Rijlander, David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, Henry Peach Robinson, Julia Margaret Cameron and others, whereas Pictorial Photography for Newhall appears in the 1900s and is associated with the Emerson, and the Photo-Secessionists, Steichen and Stieglitz. In this text, following Keller, the term is used in relation to Sander and a style of portraiture around 1900 exemplified by Rudolf Dürkhoop (6). The German term was Kunstphotographie. For a more nuanced history of the development and state of commercial portrait photography, see both Newhall's History of Photography and Freund's Photography and Society.

\textsuperscript{11} For a more in depth look at Désdéri's invention see Newhall, 1986, pp. 64-66 and Freund pp.
instead of the simple screens which had been used since the days of the daguerreotype (Newhall 1986, 70). At the end of the century, pandering to the masses, studio productions of this type were common-place.\textsuperscript{12} Such was the state of the industry from which the art photographers sought to distance themselves. These photographers emulated painting (through manipulating lighting effects and soft-focus lenses as well as "retouching" each individual image in the printing stage),\textsuperscript{13} in an attempt to give a sense of "art" to their work and elevate it above the profit-oriented production and the stuffy artificiality of the commercial studio (Newhall 1986, 141). As Keller writes: "Evidently the highest ambition of these photographers was to give their pictures the appearance of ... hand-made artifacts ... motivated by an antipathy toward everything mechanical and technical ... transforming the 'mechanical' camera image into a handmade art object" (7).

If as outlined above, photographers saw Art Photography as an effort to establish the medium as an "art," it was also a style that the "educated bourgeoisie" wanted. There was a commercial demand for flattering, "soulful" or introspective portraits which members of the educated middle-classes could use to distinguish themselves from the "'stereotyped, tasteless' popular styles of earlier periods" (Keller 13). As Keller argues, this style can be seen as one of the many sociological symptoms of a larger backlash against technological progress

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] As Freund writes: "By 1891 there were more than a thousand studios in France and more than a half million photographers employed..." (85). In Germany the situation was similar.
\item[13] During this period new printing techniques using gum, oil, bromoil, and carbon were developed to make these photographs look more like paintings. At this time Sander worked mostly with the gum-bichromate print as it gave the photographer increased control in the formation of the image
\end{footnotes}
and modernization (6). Keller links the rise of Art Photography to the Jugendstil movement and a renewed interest on the part of the upper middle-classes in interior design, arts and crafts, and the handmade.14

Through his training and apprenticeship Sander acquired all the necessary skills and Impressionist inspired techniques of Art Photography. He very quickly perfected his own style and professed an ability to make "portraits that claim the right to be elevated as works of art" (Sander qtd. in Kramer 17). We can see Sander's mastery of this style in one of his few surviving gum bichromate portraits (fig. 1). Here the subject is presented in a rather conventional and flattering manner. The background is unadorned and the subject is simply seated. His fine clothes and pose (chin resting on hand and head turned in partial profile), suggest the sitter's importance and self-assurance which is reinforced by a sense of pre-occupation: his oblique gaze belongs to a sphere of reflection to which the viewer has no clear access. Furthermore, various "hand-made" qualities are stressed such as the "painted" moon and clouds in the upper left hand corner and the "hazy" atmosphere created for the background.

Sander's portrait of his wife Anna, from 1902 (fig. 2), is another good example of Sander's Art Photography style. Here the subject, seemingly unaware of the photographer, turns her body away from the viewer and gazes off into the distance. Importantly this photograph is not taken in a studio. Although the

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14 "Middle-class soul searching led to a new concern for the spiritual essence of man... A strong need for a sheltered private life made itself felt, and interior design and applied arts gained interest. There was a harkening back to pre-industrial residential styles; interiors were attuned to the inhabitant and were furnished with artistically refined and often hand crafted objects rather than tasteless mass-produced wares." See Keller pp. 6-7.
“brush work” is less apparent since the image is sharper,\textsuperscript{15} the subject’s pose and the photograph’s general effect, fall within the tenets of Art Photography. Here Sander has constructed a space for the viewer to gain access to a private moment. While the photographs are posed and the subject is fully aware of the camera, the art photographer does not try to capture a sense of external self-projection (something that Sander would later deliberately highlight). Instead the art photographer attempts to portray something of the inner nature of the subject and his/her soul. These photographs will serve as useful points of reference when considering Sander’s later more “exact” style.

Evidence of Sander’s belief in Art Photography at this time (as well as his confidence in his own practice) appeared in the promotional material for his new business which was described as a “first-class photographic art studio.” Eager to distinguish himself, Sander advertised himself in the following way:

As the contents of the accompanying portfolio clearly show, my photographic images compare favorably with the previously accepted type, especially as far as the careful treatment of the background is concerned. As is commonly known, most photographic portrait studios abound with painted architectural or scenic backgrounds, which are mechanically employed without any regard for the sitters’ varying social position, so that a harmonious pictorial effect is out of the question from the start. Owing to special arrangements in my studio, I am now qualified to make unique and tasteful portraits there, allowing for the fact that not all clients can be photographed in their own home or garden—which, however, is quite desirable and for which I recommend my services. In examining my work it should be understood that—much in contrast with current practice—I endeavor to retain all the characteristic features which circumstance, life, and times have stamped upon the face. Thus I can offer to produce expressive,

\textsuperscript{15} This portrait is taken from Keller’s reconstruction of “Citizens.” While dated from 1902, I think that the sharpness of this image can be attributed to the fact that it was later reprinted to be included in “Citizens.”
characteristic likenesses that completely represent the nature of the subject (Sander qtd. in Keller 13).

In this quotation and in the catalogue for his 1906 exhibition in Linz, Sander expressed the desire to get beyond external facades and artifice. Sander was concerned to reveal the unique essence of the subject before him and stressed the importance not only of the sitters' surroundings but also of the variations in their social position. In particular, he was interested in how faces reveal traces of a singular human experience of life. All these considerations thus become the defining characteristics of his conception of portraiture and a key marker for his later transition toward developing the "type."

It is important to mention that "on-location" photography was a relatively new technological possibility. Before the advent of "dry plates" in the late 1890s, the "wet-plate" collodion process required photographic work to be done near the darkroom. The invention of the dry-plate process changed everything, since the prepared negatives became easier to handle and allowed the photographer to move away from the darkroom. The "dry plate revolution" was part of a series of rapid advances in the technology of photography: films became faster, new cameras were developed that were more portable and easier to use and new printing papers were introduced. All of these inventions eventually contributed to the growth of photo-journalism and documentary photography and to a shift in photographic style from pictorialism to realism. As we shall see in chapter two, this shift, which does not get fully played out until the 1920s, marks the

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16 I am referring here to a large solo exhibition of 100 of Sander's photographs at the Landhaus Pavilion in Linz.
beginnings of “modern” photography.

As was common at this time, Sander submitted work to various international exhibitions where he proved himself to be a “first-rate” Art Photographer winning numerous prizes and medals, as well as critical attention in press reviews.\(^\text{17}\) The two following excerpts from reviews of the time attest to his success in achieving the desired effects while concealing the artifice involved. “Lifelike postures, \textit{no pose}, good groupings, the right grasp of the essential characteristics of a person, and excellent execution distinguish these pictures. The rigidly formal studio picture has vanished...” (review qtd. in Kramer 17, my emphasis). Elsewhere it was noted: “In portraits, too, this master has shown mature accomplishment. Here even the expert would have difficulty recognizing the work of a machine...” (review qtd. in Keller 13). In Linz, Sander was commercially well respected and highly successful, cultivating a sizable and “distinguished” clientele (Keller 12). Given all of this success, Sander began to consider himself an “artist.” As Keller notes, “he furnished his studio like a painter’s, wore velvet clothes, and gave a place of honor in his home to a reproduction of Rembrandt’s famous Dresden self-portrait” (14). Certainly, at this stage of his career, he showed little sign of the “objective” photographer he was to become.

It is difficult to determine the year in which Sander consciously began his project of documenting the German people. In 1929, Sander claimed that the idea first came to him in 1910 (Sander 1978, 677) but it was only in 1924 that

\(^{17}\) As Keller writes: “In 1904 alone he received two gold medals, in Wels and Paris, in addition to
Sander started making portraits expressly for his project. As will become apparent, the project's beginning is difficult to determine because Sander constantly revisited and reworked his commercial archive. He began reprinting older negatives in a "new" manner (i.e. on technical paper) and producing photographs which were sharp and rich in detail. This shift was a departure from the earlier retouched and painterly effects of the gum-bichromate prints. I should mention that it is not possible to know for certain the dates of the photographs. The dates attributed to a number of images are inconsistent given the various time lags between when a photograph was first taken and its subsequent printings and reprintings. This "problem" of dating various images certainly complicates any stylistic analysis. For instance one cannot determine whether the portrait of his wife Anna, taken in 1902 (fig. 2), which subsequently appears in 1929 and posthumously in Citizens, originally had this degree of "sharpness" and detail. Again, as mentioned, it seems that given the composition of this portrait and the viewer's relationship to the subject, this photograph originally would have had more brush work.

Two main events are regularly cited in the Sander literature as having a determining influence on Sander and his conception of "Citizens." In 1910 he moved from Linz to Cologne and after the War, in the 1920s, he established a relationship with a group of artists known as the Cologne Progressives. In 1910, leaving behind a well established, prosperous studio and a hard-earned clientele, Sander moved to the Cologne suburb of Lindenthal. An outbreak of polio in 1909

the 'Donor's Award under the highest patronage of His Majesty the King of Saxony'" (13).
is cited as the reason for this upheaval. This transition is noted because it marks the beginning of a new style of portraiture. Sander was less successful in attracting new customers in Cologne so he turned to the surrounding rural farming communities of the Westerwald, seeking commissions to supplement his business. What was initially a result of economic necessity rather than anything else, ended up having "a liberating effect on him and brought new talents to light" (Keller 14).

The pictorial style associated with Art Photography was not appropriate for the "tradition-bound" Rhineland farm families. Since they were not concerned with atmospheric and soulful portraits, Sander had to develop a new approach. Keller writes: "Instead of 'catching' his sitters in cultivated privacy and introspection, Sander now fixed them as simply and directly as possible on his plates, abandoning the dusky, romantic gum-bichromate technique completely" (14). This directness is evident in Sander's portrait of a farming couple (fig. 3). In contrast to his portrait of his wife, this couple present themselves to the camera and Sander records them in a straightforward, sharply focused manner. There is no attempt to manipulate the photograph to hide the signs of work or age visible in their hands and faces. At this stage it is worth noting that his Cologne business eventually improved. This meant that Sander still continued working in the style of Art Photography for his middle-class clients until 1922 when he finally completely rejected Art Photography and turned exclusively to this new "objective" and more direct approach.

It is difficult to ascertain to what extent the Westerwald portraits which
marked the start of Sander's "objective" style were commercially or creatively motivated. There are different opinions in the literature. Generally these portraits are considered part of "Citizens," and discussed as such. In the more superficial descriptions of the evolution of Sander's project, a cause and effect narrative is typical, as is the case in John von Hartz's account: "Seeking photographs that revealed more than subjects sitting in his studio, the photographer mounted a bicycle and rode into the countryside of Westerwald to make studies of local farmers and tradesmen—the start of 'Man of the 20th Century.' It appears he knew what he wanted from the outset" (7). In Maddow's book surveying the subject of portraiture, these excursions are referred to as a "spare-time" project (241). Günther Sander recounts that his father seemed more interested in this kind of "creative work" and the freedom it gave him, although Günther also acknowledges its importance economically: "These excursions gave my father a great deal of pleasure, and they also compensated for the lack of business..." (295). What seems to make the most sense, is that these excursions were both economically motivated and creatively and personally rewarding for Sander since they freed him from the obligations of Art Photography. Importantly, when the business improved in Cologne, Sander nevertheless continued to produce work for his Westerwald customers perhaps because, as Günther writes, he was "more at home with their physical presence. Thus it was that he left the business in my mother's hands whenever possible" (296).

It would be a mistake to presuppose, (as in the case of John von Hartz’s
account cited above that “he knew what he wanted from the outset”) and that the stylistically different portraits of the Westerwald farm families were made with a concrete project in mind and clearly formulated from the beginning. Hence we must even approach Sander’s own account of his project skeptically. As mentioned earlier, with the vantage of hindsight, Sander claimed in 1929 and again in 1931, that he began his project in 1910. Whether true or not, it must have been tempting for Sander to look back at this work and attribute a visionary intentionality to it.

Nevertheless, these excursions to the Westerwald do mark the beginning of Sander’s interest in social documentary. As Keller suggests: “After his success in Linz, his widened horizons opened up fresh perspectives on things that had previously seemed unremarkable. He was now able to recognize the socio-cultural structure of the Westerwald farm life as something unique and worthy of record...” (14). In this vein, I will argue that Sander must have sensed its uncertain future and felt how greatly it contrasted with the modern urban contexts of Cologne and Berlin. (This sense would only grow stronger and finally crystallize into a clear project in 1924). A number of the photographs, for example Sander’s group portraits of “prize-winning singers” (fig. 4) and “three mobile young farmers” (fig. 5), record his interest in the culture of these people and the changes that were taking place between the generations. Keller convincingly points out that Sander was fascinated by the younger generation and focused on the distance between their “worldly, fashionable inclinations” and the “strict moral conventions of their fathers” (14). Keller goes on to argue that
some of these photographs could not have been commissions, nor would they have been suitable for photographic exhibitions. Instead “Sander seems to have disregarded the customer’s interests in order to pursue his own documentary purposes” (ibid.). We can also recognize that in this work, Sander was able to pursue his interest in the portrait’s setting (the background, the environment), using it to “speak” of the person portrayed, or at least of an identity as defined through an occupation. Certainly here, he was able to distance himself from the artifice of studio portraiture. We should keep in mind, as Günther reminds us, the “idea of photographing his subjects in their own surroundings had already occurred to him in Linz, and now he pursued it with renewed vigour” (295).

At this point I would like to re-emphasize that Sander’s fledgling interest in social documentary and the change in his photographic style were bound up with economic and commercial considerations and were not purely the result of a clear-sighted vision. Rather, I would argue that it was the effect of war (loss), along with an ensuing economic collapse that both motivated Sander and provided him with the “opportunity” (i.e. time) to consider this new approach to portraiture and its significance.¹⁸

In 1914 after the outbreak of the First World War, Sander a reservist, was detailed “for service in the army of occupation” first serving in Belgium and then

¹⁸ The effect of the war is not really discussed in the literature except that it took Sander away from his work and that afterwards, during the ensuing period of economic crisis, artists had time to rethink their work. Keller writes: “After the war, the political and economic crisis made a swift return to normal business impossible for many Germans. Artists, writers, and intellectuals in particular suffered from a lack of commissions and work opportunities. However, while this period of enforced inactivity hurt them financially, it did afford them a valuable chance to reflect upon and reshape the theoretical foundation of their work. The informal circles that came into existence provided forums for passionate discussion and [the planning of] bold projects…” (Keller 14).
in October of 1918 in Cologne (Günther 297). Günther mentions, what becomes here, an interesting and significant anecdote. During his absence, Sander’s wife Anna, “began to make reproductions of old photographs” as an “increasing amount of work came in from the relatives of fallen soldiers” (297). (One could assume that because of the restrictions on travel these requests were from Sander’s Cologne customers.) Similarly upon Sander’s return after the war, when he was able to visit the Westerwald again, “he received a good deal of work, above all enlargements of pictures of relatives who had been killed in the war—often a far from easy task” (298). In both cases it is significant that Sander had to revisit his negative archive. Here I am arguing that this demand from relatives for reprints can be seen as a catalyst for rethinking these portraits and the role of the photographer—seeing them again after the impact of the war from a perspective of loss. I will argue that this plays an important role in the genesis of “Citizens” despite the fact that to date no-one has suggested this connection in the Sander literature.

As a result of the serious economic crisis (1918-1923) and the new political situation after the war, Sander received considerably fewer portrait commissions. Therefore, when revisiting his archive Sander also had time to experiment. It is difficult to determine whether the following “breakthrough” was the result of “a fortuitous accident,” as Kramer suggests, or of a creative experiment:

Thus it came about that one day he made an enlargement of the portrait of a peasant on a type of paper which was normally used only for technical photographs—a smooth paper with a glossy surface which emphasized every detail and concealed nothing.
When August Sander compared this picture with a gum-bichromate print of the same portrait, he was delighted with the result, and his enthusiasm was shared by Seiwert. The “pictorial” effect was entirely lacking.... These experiments produced a whole series of enlargements of his best photographs (Günther 298).

That August Sander should now be “delighted” with these photographs which “concealed nothing” is generally attributed to his exposure to avant-garde ideas which were circulating at the time in his informal circles of friends, exhibitions, arts magazines and the press. As we shall discuss in chapter two, this shift in style parallels other trends in German photography at the time. During this period in Cologne in the course of his commercial work, Sander met various artists and intellectuals. Günther writes of the “prominent people” who began coming to Sander’s studio and bringing him into contact with “modern painting” by giving him commissions to reproduce various artists’ work. “Otto Dix, Jankel Adler, and Wassily Kandinsky were among his customers” (300).

According to the literature, Sander was especially influenced by one such circle, the Cologne Progressives, and its main theorist (Sander’s close friend), Franz Wilhelm Seiwert. The literature on Sander consistently mentions Seiwert, even if there is some debate about the nature and extent of his influence. Günther for example attributes a “deep influence” to Sander’s discussions with Seiwert, even though he does not discuss Seiwert’s politics or theories, nor those of the Cologne Progressives who are not even identified. Instead he tells us that:

Lively discussions sprang up between him [Friedrich Brockmann], Seiwert and my father.... I remember one evening my father showed them a portfolio of Westerwald peasants, all of them startlingly true to life and photographically accurate, printed on glossy paper. In reply to the question as to the purpose of this
series, he answered that they represented the beginning of a photographic work on “People of the Twentieth Century,” and that he planned to start the work with portraits of farming people because he recognized in them an archetypal element, an unmistakable human essence. His intention was to follow these farmer’s portraits with people from all walks of life and professions (299).

Günther continues by noting the enthusiasm that Seiwert and Brockmann had for the project, even though Sander “refused to be influenced as to the arrangement of the work ... he only accepted concrete suggestions concerning possible subjects on the condition that the persons in question should appear without name or title” (299).

I will mention here that it seems that most of the Sander literature is influenced by Günther’s biography of his father. Despite the simple cause and effect anecdotal narrative progression, Günther’s biography nonetheless has a certain “authority,” not only because of his familial proximity to his subject, but also because Günther apprenticed with him. Thus he acquired an intimate knowledge of Sander’s photographic practice, techniques, philosophy, and intentions. As Günther observed: “My father was pleased at the thought of being able to hand on his knowledge” (299). However, as might be expected, this account lacks certain critical insights and fails to situate Sander in the larger context of either the Cologne Progressives or (as we shall see in chapter two) of the broader trends in German photography. Similarly, citing Seiwert’s influence on Sander but also without explaining its precise nature, Van Deren Coke simply writes: “In 1918 Sander became acquainted with the painter Franz Wilhelm Seiwert, who urged him to undertake a sociological study of the German people
by taking their pictures. This project became ‘Man of the 20th Century’” (52).

While much of the literature on Sander suggests that the Cologne Progressives influenced Sander’s conceptualization of the project, it does not treat the subject in any detail. In fact little has been written in English about the Cologne Progressives (or the “Gruppe progressiver Künstler” as they called themselves) with the exception of Richard Pommer’s article entitled “August Sander and the Cologne Progressives” which usefully foregrounds Sander’s association with the group and provides an overview of their politics and theories. Pommer notes: “The other artist of the group who best achieved its systematic ideal was August Sander. His work owes much of its strength, if not its substance, to the Cologne Progressives” (39). While I am reluctant to attribute as much influence to the Cologne Progressives (I see their role as helping to germinate ideas that Sander already had), this group obviously played a significant part in Sander’s theoretical and practical formulation of “Citizens,” especially in terms of their ideas about the structure and organization of society, social typology, and the differences between painting and photography.

The painters Seiwert and Heinrich Hoerle were the main theorists of the group, which also included the graphic artist Gerd Amtz and Friedrich Brockmann (who lived in the Sander household for two years). According to Pommer, the Progressives (Marxists of the radical left who were critical of the Communist Party) “called for an art of ‘collective informational signs’ whose pictorial organization would correspond to the organization of society. Art was to be an instrument for the destruction of the ruling classes...” and should be
"scientific" (in the Marxian sense) rather than propagandistic in its critique of the ruling classes (38). For instance they disliked the work of George Grosz, Otto Dix, and Käthe Kollowitz because of the way they used expression and caricatured "appearances." In their eyes, given that work was "the sustenance of society, art must be the manifestation of the organization of work" and would reveal its structure (38).

Their influence upon Sander can be seen in his 1929 book Antlitz der Zeit, which echoes both name and content of earlier publications by Seiwert and Arntz. In 1921 Seiwert had published "Seiben Antligtze der Zeit" in an anarchist journal. It consisted of "polemical drawings ... of workers, teachers, clergymen, union leaders, bureaucrats, soldiers and capitalists." All of these "people" are presented in the guise of their profession or trade in order to show society's structure. As Pommer argues, such typologies are part of "the esthetic ideology of a 'scientific' Marxism.... As Marx had said in the introduction to Capital, individuals merely personify economic categories, as representatives of particular class relationships" (39). In 1927 Gerd Arntz had also published a similar work entitled Zwölf Häuser der Zeit. This project consisted of a portfolio of woodcut drawings which were abstracted to be read as symbols of various institutions (i.e. prison, hospital, factory, department store, sports arena, barracks etc.). According to Pommer, this project was modeled on Seiwert's earlier work (fig. 6).

Keller also acknowledges Sander's relationship with the Cologne Progressives, noting that: "In long arguments with [them] ... Sander became convinced that photography and painting were completely separate media and
should follow independent courses" (15). A few years later Sander made this view more explicit in his 1927 "Remarks on my Exhibition," where he wrote: "Photography has opened new possibilities for us, compared to painting, it pursues different purposes." Again in 1931 in his radio lecture series, he stressed that: "photography is a special discipline with special laws and its own special language" (Sander 1978, 679). (Both of these texts are discussed further on.) From the perspective of the Cologne Progressives, Pommer writes: "Photography had freed painting from the depiction of temporal reality so that painters could undertake this task of structural revelation with more abstract "collective informational signs." Indeed Pommer's line of argumentation is hardly new given that many art historians have repeatedly stressed that after the advent of photography, painting was free to pursue a "modern" course, which involved not only moving away from mimesis towards abstraction, but also reflecting upon its own essential properties. Thus both Sander and the Cologne Progressives believed that photography could both reveal the structure and organization of society and follow its own unique path of objective documentation. I will argue that, while the Cologne Progressives moved towards abstraction by "reducing human images into simplified geometric forms," Sander was "reducing" his portraits of the particular and the individual to the "type" by planning a project that would reveal society's structure, ideally through the representation of "all levels and types of occupations" (Sander qtd. in Keller 23). Sander hoped his project's

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19 Keller does not, however, explain why Sander became convinced of this, nor does he expand upon the nature of Sander's relationship to modern artists and ideas, despite the fact that he feels they were significant. For example, he writes that Sander's relationship with modern Cologne artists "gave his career a distinct turn" (15), and convinced him of photography's documentary
pictorial organization would correspond with the "existing social order" (ibid.).

However, it is important to note that Sander did not share the radical Communist politics of the Cologne Progressives despite the fact that, as Keller suggests, his contact with the group prompted him to reevaluate his relationship to the bourgeoisie. Apparently at this time, Sander “adopted a more reserved attitude” towards the middle class which became evident in his more “distanced” and “exacting” pictures (Keller 15).

By 1924 Sander stopped working from his archive and began making portraits expressly for the project. Keller claims this “was by no means accidental” and attributes Sander’s “more systematic accumulation of new picture material...” to the economic consolidation and improvement brought about by the currency reforms of 1923-24 (15). Sander also received new sources of income from architectural and industrial contracts. This brought his studio relative financial security and allowed him to pursue his project without worrying about catering to the sitter in order to sell the work. The fact that this new commercial work with its focus on inanimate architecture and the symbols of industrialization failed to inspire Sander (since he preferred, when he could, to work on his project), suggests his genuine interest in the more traditional ways of life.

Günther tells us that as “the cultural life of Cologne slowly began to come to life again, my father had plenty of opportunities to find the subjects he wanted” (299). Sander started to seek out his subjects from “all” classes and walks of life.

(Sander’s approach, selection of subjects and conception of the social order will 


be taken up in chapter three where I discuss the project in detail.)

Having produced enough material, Sander publicly exhibited this new work in November of 1927 at the Cologne Art Union. The exhibition was a success and Sander received considerable recognition for it. It subsequently traveled to the Osthaus Museum in Essen and Carl Georg Heise purchased some of the work for the Lübeck Museum "with his own money since spending public funds for photographs was still unthinkable" (Keller 17). Importantly, Heise introduced the publisher Kurt Wolff to Sander's work. At the time Wolff was enjoying great commercial success with Die Welt ist schön, his 1928 publication of Albert Renger-Patzsch's photographs. Thinking that it would have a similar appeal and considering the popularity of portrait books in general, Wolff was eager to publish Sander's work. Antlitz der Zeit appeared in 1929 as a photo-book consisting of sixty portraits from the Cologne exhibition and a short essay by Alfred Döblin. Wolff and Sander saw this book as an introductory volume that would "serve as an invitation to subscribe to the completed work." It is important to note that the exhibition and the subsequent book offered the first glimpse of Sander's "Citizens of the Twentieth Century."

Antlitz der Zeit was not the success that Wolff and Sander had hoped it would be. Apparently it only appealed to the more educated public since the majority of the 2000 subscriptions came from journalists and intellectuals (Keller 17). Sander, however, was sufficiently encouraged to continue with his ambitious project.

In the 1920s, books showcasing the work of specific photographers can
be seen as constituting a new genre (Keller 17). As distinct from the many publications illustrated by photographs which were often supplied from commercial picture agencies, the "photo book" privileged the photograph by recognizing it as "a work of art, or at least [as] a significant visual statement, for which the author took responsibility" (ibid.). Although some of these books were accompanied by texts, the primary emphasis was placed on the presentation of the photographs in terms of sequencing, layout, design and so forth. These books often involved a collaboration between the photographer and the publisher. On this point Keller suggests that Sander had to make a few concessions to Wolff: "contrary to Sander's first intentions, the book presents the proletarian class as a rather compact and clearly delineated group. Also where the projected portfolio series was to end with pictures of the sick and dead, the final images ... show unemployed people" (ibid.). Ending on such pictures certainly changes Sander's original plan. "[I]nstead of a timeless memento mori" (fig. 7), the book concludes with pictures of a current social problem (fig. 8). This marks a shift away from the universal dimension that Sander wanted to represent towards a more specific and topical political focus. Sander did, however, manage to retain his original plan of having titles that simply listed the subject's occupation and the date of the photograph. His book also had only one portrait per two page spread which was an unusual luxury as Keller notes. For Sander, this layout was important since he hoped that it would prevent misleading associations and comparisons "foreign to the nature of the pictures" (Keller 17).

Antlitz der Zeit was the subject of numerous reviews, most of which saw
the work, whether consciously manipulated or not, as an “expression of the changes occurring in German society” (Günther 29). Consequently critics evaluated Sander’s version of the “face of the time,” according to their own political points-of-view about this rapid social transformation. Suffice it to say that at this point, while his work received considerable attention, it was not discussed in the more universal terms that Sander had hoped, namely in terms of its objective, documentary and historical value. Nevertheless, as a result of this book and his ensuing Cologne exhibition, Sander gained a national reputation and in 1931 was invited by Kölner Rundfunk, [Cologne Broadcasting Company] to give a series of six radio lectures on photography. It was through these radio lectures that Sander was able to further develop and articulate his ideas about photography and his project.

It should be noted that that these lectures have become an important source for Sander scholars, many of whom have used comments from 1931 to explain his earlier work. Reading his earlier work from the perspective of the radio lectures has fostered the impression that Sander not only had a clear conception of his project in 1910, but that the project was created by Sander the “artist,” and not Sander the commercial photographer.

The publication of Antlitz der Zeit and the radio lectures were the high points of Sander’s career. After the Nazis came to power in 1933 Sander’s career took a turn for the worse. His son Erich, a member of the Communist Party, invited scrutiny despite the fact that his politics were not shared by Sander. Furthermore, according to Nazi racial ideology, Sander’s book was deemed
unacceptable since it included portraits of Jews, Nazis, Communists and the disadvantaged (the disabled, the poor, the blind, the homeless), all portrayed in the same "objective" manner. Such equality of representation was not appreciated and thus all copies of the book as well as the printing plates were ordered to be destroyed. As a result Sander was effectively forced to abandon his portrait project. Instead he turned to the landscape and retreated to the Siegerland.
Chapter Two
Modern Trends in German Photography

In the many accounts of modern photography and specifically in discussions of the innovative and exciting directions taken by German photographers in the twenties and thirties, August Sander, strangely enough, is rarely central. When Sander’s work is taken up in this literature it is often in relation to the “New Photography” and / or the “Neue Sachlichkeit” movement, but even these points of reference are not consistent. As one surveys the literature on German photography (Coke, Mellor, Pommer, Baker, Eskildsen), it becomes apparent that these designations are neither uniformly understood nor consistently applied to Sander’s work. Even when they are applied, they tend to be understood in stylistic terms which do not address the specificities of his larger project and the question of the artist’s intentions and approach. Because of these tendencies in the literature I believe his work has been misrepresented. Conversely, the Sander monographs which do discuss his project tend to avoid using these designations and shy away from any broader discussion of how his work relates to modern photography. While I agree with Ulrich Keller’s

20 During his life, Sander was excluded from the influential and ground breaking exhibitions and books which highlighted the new and exciting directions of modern photography. Here I am referring to the 1928 “Pressa” exhibition in Cologne, the “Neue Wege der Photographie” exhibition in Jena, and the famous 1929 “Film und Foto” exhibition in Stuttgart, which were seen as important showcases for these new trends; as well as the influential books, Foto-Auge edited by Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold and Es kommt der neue Fotograf by Werner Gräff (both from 1929).

21 In the literature Sander’s work is variously described as being: “avant-garde” (Coke 37, 38), part of the “New Objectivity” (or “Neue Sachlichkeit”) and by extension part of the avant-garde or the “New Photography” (Coke, Mellor), associated with the Cologne Progressives (Pommer 39); or else as “not avant-garde” (Baker 80), as “documentary” (Eskildsen 105, Newhall 246), as an exemplary “new form of portraiture” (Mellor 7), and as well as “New Realist.” I discuss some of
suggestion that “functionalist” photography reveals little about the special cultural background of Sander’s project (8), nevertheless it is important to look at this and other new directions in German photography since Sander’s work clearly involves a more complex relationship to the photographic currents of his day than most scholars usually acknowledge. In this chapter, then, I wish to chart both the major developments in photography (inside and outside the commercial sphere) and the main debates in photographic circles, as they were played out in the context of Weimar society.

In most histories of photography the “modern” era is said to have only truly begun after the First World War as new technical developments, applications and attitudes towards photography started to challenge the prevailing mode of turn-of-the-century Art Photography. And it was in Germany, during the brief and

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22 Keller, and others, use the term “functionalist” to refer to the experimentations of the international avant-garde, particularly as practiced and theorized by László Moholy-Nagy who was interested in generally exploring the inherent possibilities of the medium itself. This approach is discussed in detail later in this chapter.

23 I will note that Keller instead situates Sander’s project in the context of “politically oriented portrait photography” in Germany and more specifically in the context of the various portrait books and “illustrated surveys of contemporary history” that became fashionable toward the end of the twenties. (Keller cites as examples Franz Schauwecker’s This is Peace, Alexander Márai and László Dormándi’s 1910-1930: Twenty Years of World History in 700 Pictures, and The Face of Democracy introduced by Ernst Jünger.) First of all, it is important to note that the photographs for these publications usually came from picture agencies and were not taken specifically for these books, and second, as Keller points out, “the clever selection, arrangement, and commentary ... was processed so as to interpret recent history according to ideological presuppositions rather than according to chronological facts” (Keller 9). In general the rise of portrait books in Germany can be understood as a response to what was seen as a national “identity crisis” where “questions about the nature of society, especially German society and its future became vitally important” after Germany’s defeat in the War and the establishment of the new Republic (Keller 8). Keller explains that such portrait books were politically and ideologically biased and motivated. In comparison, Keller distinguishes Sander’s as neutral. While I recognize the importance of situating Sander’s work in relation to such publications, it is nevertheless important to situate it in relation to the trends in modern German photography. First of all, because, as I have argued, he is often associated in the literature with it, and second, as we shall see, he positions himself and frames his project within its debates, and not in terms of the ideological debates about national identity. See Keller pp. 8-11.
tumultuous interlude between the two wars, that this modern photography—the New Photography—was really pioneered.\textsuperscript{24} Accordingly, accounts of German photography tend to focus upon two main issues: photography's central role in the burgeoning mass print media, and the new stylistic approaches and experimentation of the artistic avant-garde.\textsuperscript{25} I will outline the two in turn, since it is in these areas that photography in Germany was seen to have been the most innovative and to have had the most impact.

As early as 1922, photography in Germany was assuming new forms and functions and expanding into the new realms of advertising, photo-journalism and the illustrated popular press. New technical developments helped to precipitate these particular applications. The end of the nineteenth century saw the possibilities of photography broaden with the advent of dry-plates, faster film, flashbulbs, and less cumbersome hand-held cameras.\textsuperscript{26} However it was not until the 1920s that "the potentials of what has come to be called 'existing light' ... photography first became apparent" (Newhall 1986, 219). It was the appearance of the German invented Ermanox camera, equipped with a shutter speed of up to 1/1000 of a second, "extremely fast lenses," and an increasingly wide aperture (\(f/2\), then \(f/1.5\)) that finally enabled "candid," snapshot photography (pictures taken

\textsuperscript{24} While the contributions of photographers outside of Germany is significant—in America for example we can immediately think of such important figures as Alfred Stieglitz, Walker Evans, Paul Strand, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams to name a few—the debates pre-occupying German photography are distinct in terms of having a certain resonance and intensity specific to a context of immense social, political and technological transformation given the impact of the war. With respect to the latter, Germany's defeat forced it to look to the future and the possibilities of rebuilding itself.

\textsuperscript{25} Often these two are not clearly separated, as there was a lot of cross-over between the avant-garde, the mass media and commercial photography. One can see a reciprocal influence and relationship as many avant-gardists worked in the commercial sphere. See Lavin and Rogoff.

\textsuperscript{26} In chapter one we discussed how this enabled "on location" photography.
unobtrusively, quickly, and in low-light conditions). As an advertisement from the manufacturer of this camera suggests: “this extremely fast lens opens a new era in photography, and makes accessible hitherto unknown fields with instantaneous or brief time exposures without flashlight...” (qtd. in Newhall 1986, 219, my emphasis). Similarly, another important German development was the Leica camera which made its debut in 1925, soon replacing the Ermanox and becoming an industry standard by 1933. This camera was the first to use 35mm roll-film instead of plates. Not only was roll-film cheaper, it also allowed the photographer to take up to thirty-six exposures in rapid succession without having to reload (Newhall 1986, 220). In effect both snapshot and serial photography were made possible by these German innovations in cameras and film. This is significant because photography became increasingly accessible (both technically and economically), popular (as witnessed by the rising number of amateurs and the phenomenon of the Illustrierte), and versatile (almost anything, and everything, was, or could now be, photographed).

The rapid growth of the mass print media was a notable new phenomenon in Germany at this time. “The figures are staggering: over four thousand titles, comprising daily newspapers, tabloids, weeklies, journals, illustrated press and magazines, were published on a regular basis in Germany in the mid-1920s” (Weimar 641), and it is estimated that by 1930 “their combined circulation was five million copies per week ... [reaching] at least twenty million readers” (Newhall 1986, 260). Photography played a key role in the remarkable

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27 According to Freund only 1,000 Leica's were produced in 1927 however by 1933 the number had increased to 100,000 cameras clearly indicating the popularity of this new camera (130).
development of this mass print media and the new "visual culture" in Germany. The photograph was the reason for the proliferation and popularity of the illustrated press—the illustrierte. These publications all relied on photo-journalism.\textsuperscript{28} Germany is recognized for its pioneering role in the new photo-journalism which reversed the traditional dominance of text over image. Instead of photographs illustrating written stories, photographs now told the story and the text was reduced to captions or cut lines which were "chosen to explain or illuminate the photographs, not to repeat their content" (ibid.). It was a new relationship between text and image, photographer and editor.

Commending his paper's progressiveness, Kurt Korff, the editor of one of the largest weeklies, the \textit{Berliner illustrierte Zeitung} (BIZ), explains:

The BIZ adopted the editorial principle that all events should be presented in pictures ... It was not the importance of the material that determined the selection and acceptance of pictures, but solely the allure of the photograph itself ... [The illustrated papers] are no longer directed by text editors but by those who are capable, like film writers and directors, of seeing life in pictures (646).

Korff, writing in 1927, attributes this to a "change in the public's attitude towards life." He continues that "only when seeing life 'through the eye' began to play a more significant role did the need for visual observation become so pressing that it was possible to make the transition to the picture itself as the report.... The shift signified a completely new attitude towards pictures" (646). As Korff develops his argument for the merits of the picture, he states that only the picture

\textsuperscript{28} For the history of this development see for example, Newhall 1986, pp. 259-260, Freund, pp. 115-140, Lavin, pp. 48-59, Schreier, pp. 125-134, and the \textit{Weimar Republic Sourcebook}, pp. 641-654.
could reproduce "the event in its full dimensions, in its total effect—only the picture offered that to the reader. Without a picture the things going on in the world were reproduced incompletely, often implausibly; the picture conveyed the strongest and most lasting impression" (ibid.). We shall see in Sander, a similar belief in seeing life through the eye of observation. But the point I would like to emphasize here is the primacy of the image and this emphasis on the visual.

The belief that the photograph could present the "full dimensions" of something and convey a strong and lasting impression was also the main assumption behind its employment in advertising. Surprisingly, the recognition of the significance and effectiveness of the photograph as an advertising tool came relatively late in Germany. "Only in the last several years have industry and commerce taken significant steps towards making use of photography to commend their wares in advertisements, posters, catalogues, and other printed forms," wrote Willi Warstat in 1930 (650). He goes on to point out that photography has the qualities, (long recognized and exploited in other contexts, i.e. science) of an "objectivity in the representation of things" and its psychological correlate. That is, he writes: "The public simply believes without reservation that the photographic representation is truer and more real than any artist's graphic representation" (651). According to Warstat, because the public trusts the photograph, it is "the most effective form of advertising representation" (ibid.). Here we can see that Korff and Warstat believe not only in the

29 Sander, however, was not interested in capturing the "event." Importantly, as we shall see his intentions were different from both those of the photo-journalists (for whom serial and candid snap-shot photography played a key role) and the German worker photographers who organized to document the working-class for the left-wing illustrated press. See Münzenberg.
photograph's relationship to truth / reality but also in the very possibility of realism and veracity. This belief which has characterized discourses on photography since its invention appears in the theory and practice of both Albert Renger-Patzsch and Sander.

Given the proliferation of images during this period, we can see how photography came to be seen as synonymous with modernity. For many, only photography could truly capture the "reality" of the modern world. On one level, as a powerful means of mass communication, photography introduced the changes that were taking place in German society by representing everything from the new products and achievements of German technology and industry (i.e. modern objects, buildings, modes of transportation, and so forth), to new urban lifestyles, "problems" and trends (i.e. the New Woman, unemployment, or the movie star). It is important to note that the subject matter for the new, modern photography, was directly related to new technologies and forms of urbanization. (Sander differs from many of his contemporaries in this respect as we shall see.)

On another level, photography introduced a number of new perspectives which were made possible through aerial and micro photography, X-ray and photomontage, all of which allowed for a different experience of the world, objects and things. For example, photomontage allows for composite pictures of "reality" to emerge by bringing forward the fragmentary and simultaneous.30 As Maud Lavin points out, such photography was recognized for its "ability to grab a

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30 Dadaists often employed the photograph in photomontage as a means of challenging the
moment of stillness from the modern rush and ... through montage layout and serial photography, to give ... a multiplicity of impressions, reflecting the daily, distracted experience of modern life” (48). Thus photography was seen as a uniquely modern medium, simultaneously contributing to, and representing the “new experiences and perceptions” of the modern world, whether through commercial advertising, “photo-stories,” or (as we shall see) through the practices of the “artistic avant-garde.” To quote Renger-Patzsch, who in 1929 succinctly expressed an observation shared by others: “… modern life is no longer thinkable without photography” (143). By the late 1920s there was a corresponding increase of interest in critically investigating photography as artists, curators, historians, critics, and the public sought to understand its significance in philosophical, historical and sociological terms. 31 As Christopher Phillips notes in his introduction to Photography in the Modern Era, this interest should be seen as part of a larger debate in Germany about the way technology was transforming modern life (xvi).

I will now consider the issue of photography’s artistic development which tends to be privileged in most historical accounts of German photography. Here the new stylistic approaches and experimentations of the avant-garde will be discussed, particularly those practices which have come to be grouped under the term “New Photography” which was widely used at the time. It is important to note that the terminology used to talk about these modern directions in photography is not always consistent. Despite significant differences, terms such

31 Trachtenberg, Mellor, Newhall, and Phillips have provided English translations of many of the
as "Neue Sachlichkeit," "New Photography," "New Vision," "functionalist" and "avant-garde" are often used interchangeably. In highlighting these difficulties with terminology, I am not dismissing the value of the work that has been done on German photography, nor attempting to definitively label either particular terms or Sander's work. Instead I want to understand how and why these various labels were attached to Sander's practice. In my view, Sander has a rather more complicated and contradictory relationship to modern photography than is usually presented. As we shall see, he shares many things with the New Photography movement, particularly his rejection of Art Photography and his interest in reflecting upon the medium itself. And yet there are significant differences in terms of his view of the world (of the present, of tradition) and his reasons for taking photographs.

Here I use the term "New Photography" in a general way to refer to a range of photographic practices that rejected the basic tenets of pictorialist Art Photography.\textsuperscript{32} We should remember that Art Photography was prevalent in German photographic magazines, annuals, and exhibitions up until the late twenties, and that anyone working in photography would necessarily position themselves in relation to it. The New Photography, in its various forms, generally sought instead to identify and exploit what was particular and essential to the medium itself, moving it away from what was considered an erroneous

\textsuperscript{32} As discussed in chapter one, Art Photography was a very conscious attempt to overcome the idea of photography as merely a mechanical recording process of the material world. As mentioned art photographers emphasized the subjective and unique in their work. By manipulating the images, they effectively worked to conceal photography's own traits and qualities.
relationship to "art" and pushing it in modernist and functionalist directions. In a
general sense, as we have seen, this is parallel to the particularly modern
applications of photography that we have just outlined (its expansion into
advertising, the illustrierte, and photo-journalism) as such uses of photography
make no claims to be "art."

Ostensibly the New Photography consisted of two different, yet modern,
directions: on the one hand, there was the experimental direction of the New
Vision\textsuperscript{33} associated with László Moholy-Nagy and the more experimental type of
photography he and other avant-gardists practiced and on the other, there was
the sort of "objective realism" championed by Renger-Patzsch and associated
with the Neue Sachlichkeit or New Objectivity movement. The directions taken
by Moholy-Nagy and Renger-Patzsch differed in terms of what they identified as
the nature of the medium itself and photography's purpose. In fact, the issue of
the nature and purpose of photography (which at the time was discussed in
terms of its possibilities and the task of the photographer), constitutes the crux of
the debate preoccupying modern photography. I will look in turn at these two
main directions and leading practitioners, both of whom figure prominently in the
histories of European photography from this period.

Hungarian born, Moholy-Nagy immigrated to Berlin in 1920, a place that
was fast becoming the center of international avant-garde activity, particularly

\textsuperscript{33} The "New Vision" as Philips notes was the title given to the American translation of Moholy-
Nagy's \textit{Von Material zu Architektur} (1929), published in 1930, "which summarized Moholy-Nagy's
famous Bauhaus preliminary course" (cited in Philips, n.1, p. 82). Philips mentions that: "In the
United States, the "new vision" has generally come to designate the kind of experimental
photography that Moholy and other avant-garde photographers advocated." I use the term to
refer to this experimental direction (ibid.).
with the influx of Russian avant-garde art (Constructivism and Productivism) by 1921. In Berlin, Moholy-Nagy soon became a central figure in this vibrant artistic avant-garde community, regularly associating with people such as the Berlin Dadaists Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch, the constructivist El Lissitzky (who also moved to Berlin in 1922), and the De Stijl artist Theo van Doesburg. Moholy-Nagy was in Germany for fourteen years (1920-1934) and during this period he became one of the leading figures of photographic modernism in Europe.

In general Moholy-Nagy’s prolific writings and work of this period addressed the present (the contemporary) and the latent possibilities of technology, both in terms of the technological materials and processes themselves and in terms of casting technological development as future progress. He writes of his larger vision: “This is our century ... technology, machine, Socialism...” (qtd. in Willet 76). It is well known that German technology and the machine intrigued (albeit somewhat ambivalently) many artists in the 1920s. Although Moholy-Nagy was trained as a painter, his move

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34 The connection with van Doesburg was partly responsible for Moholy-Nagy receiving a teaching post at the Bauhaus in Dessau in 1923. Moholy-Nagy’s appointment and tenure at the Bauhaus were important and while I will not discuss his relationship to the Bauhaus in detail, there are a few things to note. First of all, his appointment came at a time of redefinition for the school. Walter Gropius the school’s director, in 1923, announced the school’s new direction with the slogan “Art and technology—a new unity” (Willet 82). What ensued was a shift from a previous expressionist arts and craft centered curriculum to one that focused on the technological, the functional and design. Gropius hired Moholy-Nagy to teach the “Basic Course,” and it was under his pedagogical instruction that the emphasis was now directed to typography, furniture design, architecture and the other functional and design oriented directions that we have come to know the Bauhaus for. While Moholy-Nagy worked in photography at the Bauhaus, it was not formally taught there until 1929. It was also at the Bauhaus that he published some of his most important theoretical texts.

35 For example as Hight suggests, the Berlin Dadaists frequently used images of machines in their work "as symbols for the evils of society," where the Russian Constructivists "revered technology for the positive values they assigned to it: logic, clarity, geometry, precision,
to Berlin brought out his “passion for the machine and the industrial landscape,” and he began to work and experiment with other media, including photography which he took up in 1922.Moholy-Nagy was an artist who sought a unity between art (or “creative production,” as he understood it) and technology. In particular he advocated working with contemporary media, which, in his view, could in themselves best speak of the time in question. “It seems to me indispensable that we, the creators of our own time, should go to work with up-to-date means” (1973, 9). Because “photography [was] an artistic language conceived out of modern technology,” he felt that, as such, it presented him with more possibilities to represent something of the modern world and of Modernismus (the experience of contemporaneity, technology, industrialization and urbanism), aspects that were a central preoccupation for him (Hight 3,8).

Similarly Coke writes: “Moholy-Nagy took the radical view that photography was the quintessential modern medium with which to deal with the psychological effects of the new environment and the new sense of space and time” (9).

It is significant that Moholy-Nagy did not approach the medium in a conventional manner. Informed by Constructivism, his first foray into photography began with photograms (figs. 9, 10). Here photography is efficiency. Technology for the Russians was often seen as “the salvation” for the postwar period, which could move their agrarian economy into an industrial one (20). While such imagery probably had more complex meanings than those outlined above, the machine and technology nevertheless became central subjects in much of the art of this period.

Moholy-Nagy during this time also worked in sculpture (light sculpture), film, typography and graphic design, as well as theatre set design. However, as it is often noted, photography was probably his most original contribution (Coke 9).

As Lavin notes: “In Weimar Germany the term Modernismus was associated with the words Moderne (modern, contemporary, fashionable) and modernität (modernity, the experience of modernization)” (Lavin, 1992, 57). Also see Hight p. 3.

Hight defines the photogram as a “camera-less photograph created by placing objects and
understood simply, essentially, as “the recording of forms made by light” (Hight 57). The work is generally abstract (light becomes medium and subject matter) and investigates the basic principles of form and composition. Moholy-Nagy’s approach to photography was an attempt to identify and work with what he saw as the basic elements of photographic language: light and all its gradations to darkness, all the optical properties of camera vision, perspective and so forth.

While the photogram was Moholy-Nagy’s abstract starting point, he then turned his attention to the camera and representational photography. Here he continued to investigate formal and compositional issues, stressing that what was photographed was not as important as how it was photographed.

Motivating his representational investigations was a desire to break with conventional ways of seeing and with the dominant use of photography as a reproductive medium. For Moholy-Nagy formally provocative representational photography had the potential to expand traditional visual perception by offering the viewer new ways of seeing and representing the world. In his words, “photography must teach us to see ... it must help us to open our eyes” (1989c, 136). By this he means the revelation of unknown or unfamiliar forms of representation through such techniques as oblique camera angles (strong diagonals), shots from above or below, distortion through lens manipulation, X-

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materials ... on light sensitive paper. The paper is then exposed to a light source or sources and developed. The areas of the paper completely covered remain white, and those that receive exposure to light become transformed into a range of tones from light gray to black” (59). For a more detailed look at the photogram, its history and Moholy-Nagy’s use of it, see Hight’s chapter four.

39 “Light” played an important role in Moholy-Nagy’s thought and work (in his painting, sculpture, photography). However, because it exceeds the focus of this paper, it will not be taken up here. Hight tells us that: “for him, it was the element that embodied the essential characteristics of a ‘modern’ art, the emphases on form, space, movement. At the same time the imagery of light
rays, micro and macro photography, stop-action, and photomontage. These are the formal and stylistic techniques associated with New Vision photography (figs. 11,12,13) and were for Moholy-Nagy the “true photography.”

The theoretical starting point for his approach to photography can be found in “Production-Reproduction,” an essay he wrote in 1922. Here he discusses the opposing principles of production and reproduction. For Moholy-Nagy, art, or in his words, creative production, has an important role to play in human development by creatively providing the senses with new experiences and unfamiliar relationships. In contrast, art forms that are reproductive merely reiterate “relationships that already exist” and do not contribute to human development (80). Here, and in his book *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, he radically argues that conventionally reproductive media, like photography could and should be opened up to creative or “productive ends.” Photography, if approached photographically (the way that he understood this), was certainly a medium through which one could “objectively” represent the world and “reality,” but thus far it had only ever been used in a reproductive way, reproducing the world as we see it by conforming with the rules of perspective and often trying to imitate painting (1973, 27). (These comments indicate his distance from the position of Art Photography.) Photography, he argues, has the potential to “make visible” existences which cannot be perceived or taken in by our optical instrument, the eye.” It has the power to discover “reality” in the sense of that

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40 “Produktion-Reproduktion” was originally written in 1922 and published in Holland in the magazine *De Stijl*. It is unlikely that Sander would have read this. However, it is worth citing because it helps clarify Moholy-Nagy’s position.
which is optically and objectively true existing beyond our own physical
limitations of “subjective” experience (1973, 28).

Moholy-Nagy further explains what he means by “objective vision” by
opposing it to the “conceptual image.” Referring to “so-called ‘faulty’
photographs” which seemed “accidental” because of their strange angles, he
comments:

The secret of their effect is that the photographic camera
reproduces the purely optical image and therefore shows the
optically true distortions, deformations, foreshortenings, etc.,
whereas the eye together with our intellectual experience,
supplements perceived optical phenomena by means of
association and formally and spatially creates a conceptual image.
Thus in the photographic camera we have the most reliable aid to a
beginning of objective vision. Everyone will be compelled to see
that which is optically true, is explicable in its own terms, is
objective... (1973, 28).

Again, in his 1929 essay “Sharp or Unsharp,” Moholy-Nagy stresses “it is not
[about] 'objective' and 'subjective,' but rather the possibilities of photographic
procedures transcending ocular experience...” (138).

However, for many, Moholy-Nagy’s notion of “objective vision” and his call
for “transcending ocular experience” via optical experimentation pushed
photography too far—such extreme angles and “distortions” moved it away from
what others held to be the true nature of the medium: its unique capacity for
realistic representation. As we shall see, this latter understanding of the “true
nature” of photography forms the basis for both Renger-Patzsch and Sander’s
approach to photography and to their concept of “objectivity,” which for them has
more to do with how subject matter is selected and approached.
It is important to note that much of the criticism of Moholy-Nagy's practice was directed towards what was perceived to be academic, formulaic and fashionable (Phillips xiv). Often his work was discussed in formalist terms at the expense of his other concerns such as representing the modern industrial world and contemporary urban life as well as exploring the possibilities of technology for future progress. Central to Moholy-Nagy's work was his belief that "objective," formally provocative photography could help people relate to their experience of modern life in a new rapidly changing and anxious environment. This aspect, as we shall see, provides an interesting point of comparison with Sander's own practice.

Having outlined the experimental tendency associated with Moholy-Nagy and the New Vision, I will now turn to the realist tendency associated with Albert Renger-Patzsch and the New Objectivity or Neue Sachlichkeit. Before discussing Renger-Patzsch's own work and views about the nature and purpose of photography, I want to look briefly at this concept of Neue Sachlichkeit and the

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41 One of the most vocal opponents of what he perceived to be a "fashionable" experimental tendency, was Renger-Patzsch. Commenting on the FIFO exhibition, he caustically writes: "In the fashionable photography—with a few exceptions—affectation and craving for originality are coupled with a lack of aesthetic standards and of craft. A blatant example: the Stuttgart exhibition, a selection of photographic ephemera in pretentious get-up... The recipe for success: shoot from above or below. Enormous enlargements or reductions... Take pictures at night, underexposure has the most interesting effects. And then let chance work for you, it'll do the job. That's how modern photos are made..." (Kallai and Renger-Patzsch 141).

42 Referring to Moholy-Nagy's frequent use of diagonals (i.e. fig. 14), Coke explains: "Because we are bilaterally symmetrical, we tend to reject diagonals, endeavoring to make forms parallel with the edges of pictures. A feeling of tension occurs when we encounter pictures that have strong diagonal elements. The anxiety created by this formal device reflected what many people felt subliminally in Germany.... That viewers could identify with the subjects in Maholy's photography made it easier for them to embrace and emotionally respond to the energies and anxieties beneath the surface of his nominal subjects. They could translate the language of photography into personal experience—something that many people found difficult to do when confronted by works done in other media focusing on the same phenomena" (Coke 10).

43 "Neue Sachlichkeit" is most commonly translated into English as "New Objectivity," but it is also
impulse behind it. The term itself was first used by the art critic Gustav Hartlaub to describe what he considered an emerging trend of "post-Expressionist" German painting (492). "Die Neue Sachlichkeit," was the title he gave to his exhibition, held at the Mannheim Kunsthalle in 1925. Cautious about creating a new "ism" Hartlaub identified the Neue Sachlichkeit not so much as a new and consistent style in painting but rather as a shared "overcoming" of Expressionism (492). In contrast to Expressionism's intense subjectivity, passion and faith, the Neue Sachlichkeit is characterized by a cool objectivity in the sense of a neutral, matter-of-fact, disciplined, sober approach and by its concern for the concrete "Sache" (fact, matter, or "thing") (Willett 110-112). Despite Hartlaub's apprehension about catchwords, the term nevertheless quickly caught on and was used to describe a larger "anti-expressive" trend detected in all the arts (i.e. in the new architecture, typography, cinema, photography, design, literature, theatre and music). It also referred to a new "matter-of-fact," efficient and objective attitude about the present and future.

This attitude of "Sachlichkeit" is related to Germany's efforts to rebuild after the war and the ensuing chaos of immense political tension and complete economic upheaval, runaway inflation and massive unemployment.

"Sachlichkeit" coincides with the period of relative political and economic stability achieved between 1924-1929. In this so-called period of stability, the Social Democrats (SPD), who were still opposed by the Communists and Nationalists,

referred to as "New Sobriety" or "New Matter-of-Factness."

44 The exhibition included the work of the painters Max Beckmann, George Grosz, Otto Dix, Karl Hubbuch, Anton Raderscheidt, Karl Rössing. Within the Neue Sachlichkeit, Hartlaub identified two different groups of painters who shared this characteristic of objectivity.
attracted nearly two million voters and a certain confidence was restored in the Republican government under the new conservative leadership of Gustav Stresemann (Willett 72). Economically the mark stabilized as a result of the Dawes Plan and the influx of foreign investment (mostly American) that it allowed. Industry was stimulated and expanded. Germany's enthusiastic adoption of more efficient, rationalized modes of mass production (Fordism and Taylorism) from America is well known and was seen as a progressive step. Great expectations were focused on new technology and industry as the necessary means for rebuilding the country and forging a new society.

Understanding the emergence of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* in the larger context of what Herbert Molderings calls "urban and technological utopianism" (89), I would like to suggest that while these themes were taken up by many artists in the twenties internationally, in the context of a technological and industrial boom in Germany between 1924 and 1929, they became central, if not definitive, to what we are calling German *Neue Sachlichkeit*. From this perspective, a certain utopianism is apparent in its photographic manifestation, especially in the work of Renger-Patzsch. In highlighting these themes one can

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45 For many German intellectuals, America became a model in terms of "its superior technology and ... its system of parliamentary democracy." It also served as a symbol of the future, progress, and a new world (Molderings 89). As one commentator noted: "We were determined to make the present honorable, and we were enthusiastic about the future.... America was a good idea; it was the future.... For long enough we had known the glories of technology only in the form of tanks, mines and blue cross gas, the destruction of human life: In America it was in the service of human life" (Hans A. Joachim, qtd. in Molderings 89).

46 I would like to point out that this "utopianism," which I am identifying with *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography in general and with Renger-Patzsch in particular, is not a definitive characteristic of *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting. In general, outside of photography, artists were not only enthusiastic (a celebratory engagement with the city, the "beauty" of machines and their products, and with the promise of technology), they were also very critical. Here one could cite the paintings of George Grosz and Otto Dix, both of whom were included in Hartlaub's 1925 "Die Neue Sachlichkeit" exhibition.
start to question the way Sander has been associated with the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. More generally, one wonders how he fits into the New Photography movement as it has been described when one encounters the comments of writers such as Molderings, who notes: "whereas industry and technology had so far been excluded from bourgeois art, things now went to the other extreme: there was a regular cult of technology and *every one of the new photographers is a symbol of it*" (91, my emphasis).\(^47\)

I will return to this line of questioning further on, but first it is necessary to mention that when the term "Neue Sachlichkeit" is applied to photography, it refers to a new objective realism. *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography is recognized * stylistically* as being sharply focused, highly realistic, straightforward and "objective," in contrast to the subjective and manipulated character of both Art Photography and the New Vision.\(^48\) As previously mentioned, it is most often applied to Renger-Patzsch whose work and approach are considered exemplary, but would also include the work of Karl Blossfeldt, Heimar Lerski, Hans Finsler, or Hein Gorny. It is here, in terms of style, that Sander gets associated with the term.

Renger-Patzsch, an active amateur since the age of fifteen, turned to

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\(^47\) As a mechanical, technological medium photography was seen to embody Neue Sachlichkeit. As Molderings observes: "[M]any felt that photography, itself a child of scientific and technical progress, was the natural medium of expression of the 'industrial world'" (90).

\(^48\) It is worth noting that as a general label (outside of its use in the specialist literature focusing specifically on painting and photography) the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* is sometimes extended to include Maholy-Nagy and other Bauhaus Constructivists. For example Willett writes: "the sober, tidy approach characteristic of *Die Neue Sachlichkeit* is found ... among the Bauhaus Constructivists, above all Moholy-Nagy..." (117). It is interesting that Willett neglects to even discuss Renger-Patzsch which is a serious omission considering the book’s title *The New Sobriety: Art and Politics in the Weimar Period*. This presents some difficulties because, as I hope to show, Moholy-Nagy and Renger-Patzsch had very different attitudes and approaches to
photography professionally after the War when he became head photographer for the Folkwang Archive in Hagen. At the archive his position involved documenting art and ethnographic objects, activities which seem to have influenced his own practice. In his work, from 1922 onwards, there is a consistent concern to document the formal beauty hidden in everyday objects and things. This interest finds full expression in his enormously successful book *Die Welt ist schön* (1928) which was seen as a model of Neue Sachlichkeit photography. As Ulrich Rüter suggests, the title itself—The World is Beautiful—became a catchphrase and symbolized the “attitude of Neue Sachlichkeit to the world…” (192).

*Die Welt ist schön* consisted of one hundred black and white photographs of a wide variety of different things, representing various categories (plants, animals, people, architectural structures, machines, industrial objects and products) (figs. 15, 16, 17). These photographs are all recognized for their sharp realism and straightforward presentation of the materiality of things. Attention is drawn to the structural details and patterns in the objects themselves. Also important is the arrangement of the photographs as whole. The viewer is encouraged to see relationships—larger patterns and similarities—between different things.

Renger-Patzsch, like Moholy-Nagy, was vocal in his criticism of Art

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49 In 1924 he published *Das Photographieren von Blüten*, a book of photographs of flowers, which was followed in 1926 by *Die Chorgestühle von Cappenburg* (photographs of choir stalls). Cited in Heckert, p. 206.

50 *Die Welt ist schön* was published in 1928 by Kurt Wolff (the same publisher who, riding on its success, supported Sander's *Antlitz der Zeit* which however did not sell as well).
Photography. In 1925 Renger-Patzsch published his essay "Heretical Thoughts on Artistic Photography," a bold statement addressing what he perceived to be a "misunderstanding of photography's working materials and intended purpose." He writes: "What those who are attached to the 'painterly' style regard as photography's defect—the mechanical reproduction of form—is just what makes it superior to all other means of expression" (179). Unlike Moholy-Nagy, Renger-Patzsch clearly gives photography a reproductive function. He calls for the "serious photographer" to return to what is essential to the medium: the camera's unique ability to realistically record with great clarity and accuracy the material world. In remaining true to the medium the photographer has the opportunity to render visible the concrete facts and beauty of the object world, to reveal what we often do not take the time to see—the details, textures, and patterns found in everyday objects and things. In his 1927 essay entitled "Aims," he writes: "We still don't sufficiently appreciate the opportunity to capture the magic of material things. The structure of wood, stone, metal can be shown with a perfection beyond the means of painting" (105).

Accordingly, for Renger-Patzsch photographs are judged in terms of how exactly the object world is mirrored which in turn relies on how the photographer approaches the medium and subject. First of all, the photographer must have mastery of his equipment and know the basic rules of photography. Renger-

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51 In 1927 Renger-Patzsch's essay "Aims" and Moholy-Nagy's essay "Unprecedented Photography" both appeared in the inaugural volume of Das Deutsche Lichtbild. These essays are often compared as they usefully mark the distance between their respective identifications of the nature and tasks of photography. However, this longer, earlier essay usefully discusses the role of the photographer in more detail.
Patzsch is not advocating formal experimentation. There is an unequivocal difference here between Renger-Patzsch’s respect for the basic “fixed” photographic rules and a traditional point of view and Moholy-Nagy’s “objective vision” and idea of “creative production” as expressed in his book *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*. Secondly, while such technical mastery and knowledge are important, a no less essential aspect of the photographer’s task is the choice of subject-matter (Renger-Patzsch 1997, 180). To this end the photographer, according to Renger-Patzsch, must learn to disregard all the other things that our senses take in and that the camera does not. “He must not allow himself to see colours, to be caressed by the spring wind,” but instead he must “coldly and soberly” attempt to comprehend the formalities of his image, see his subject “photographically,” and attempt to “express it is as purely as possible without irrelevant things” (ibid.).

One of the key strategies at play in his work (which I will argue is predominant in *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography) is the isolation of the object, by removing it from its context, (i.e. how it exists in the world) in order to concentrate on the object’s form. This is most often achieved through the use of close-ups. In the preface to *Die Welt ist schön*, Carl Georg Heise explains that Renger-Patzsch in fact “isolates the characteristic fragment from the multiplicity of the whole, underlines the essential elements and eliminates that which could lead to a deconcentration into the complexity of the whole” (9). For example his

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52 In fact for Renger-Patzsch, Moholy-Nagy’s experiments were too subjective in their deviation from the medium’s unique capacity for an objective realism. He thought that Moholy-Nagy’s work was “no more than a modern version of earlier, so-called pictorial photography which had mimicked the visual idioms of Impressionist and symbolist painting” (Phillips xiv).
photograph of a snake (fig. 18) is taken from extremely close-up. Here the picture frame is filled with a coiled snake. Its skin is shown in sharp detail with the scales forming a pattern that encircles the snake's head and eye which are at the centre of the image. Renger-Patzsch focuses on what is "typical" or essential to the species in general, rather than what is particular to the individual snake (Heise 10). Similarly his "Driving Shaft of Locomotive" (fig. 19) isolates that element that is particular to trains.

Renger-Patzsch's concern to express the formal beauty of the object is clear but, significantly, on the level beyond individual photographs, he works to reveal patterns and structural similarities between things that would commonly be thought of as different and unrelated. This is achieved through the deliberate juxtapositions and sequences of organic and inorganic, machine-made and natural objects. The images lose their specificity and relate instead to one another through formal similarities which efface the actual object's specificity, function, meaning and place in the world.

In *Die Welt ist schön* Renger-Patzsch brings together things that are disparate. Yet by visually uniting them on the level of style and on the level of the object, he attempts to create a totality or a cohesive and stable point of view where everything becomes equal, level, and logically related. As Coke notes:

The precise interrelatedness of parts became a symbol of the order many people felt would come to German society through advanced technology. It was the view of commentators and critics that exposure to photographs like those of Renger-Patzsch would increase the cohesiveness of society and encourage people to work concertedly for the common good... (Coke 34).
Especially relevant is the continuity and harmony suggested between nature and technology which is achieved through both the decontextualization and aestheticization of the modern industrial and technological world and the rationalization of the natural (Simms 199).\textsuperscript{53}

Renger-Patzsch's work in particular and the Neue Sachlichkeit in general were also criticized at the time precisely for this aestheticizing tendency and ahistoricism. In his 1934 essay, "The Author as Producer" Walter Benjamin criticizes the Neue Sachlichkeit. Positing Renger-Patzsch's work as exemplary of its photographic form, he asks:

What do you see? It becomes ever more \textit{nuancé}, ever more modern, and the result is that it can no longer depict a tenement block or a refuse heap without transfiguring it. It goes without saying that [such] photography is unable to say anything about a power station or a cable factory other than this: what a beautiful world! \textit{A Beautiful World}—that is the tile of the well-known picture anthology by Renger-Patsch [sic], in which we see New-Matter-of-fact photography at its peak. For it has succeeded in transforming even abject poverty, by recording it in a fashionably perfected manner, into an object of enjoyment (229-230).

What is it about Sander's work then, that allows it to be associated with New Photography, or more specifically the Neue Sachlichkeit?\textsuperscript{54} First of all, as we have seen, the fact that he rejected Art Photography helps to define him as

\textsuperscript{53} As Simms argues, this alleged "harmonious coexistence of nature and technology within a greater, all-embracing chain of being ... is only made possible by a curious double reversal. First, technology, and along with it the entire domain of human production and invention ... is naturalized and drained of its historical specificity. Second, nature is reconstituted in the image of technology and is made to speak the language of logical order." He goes on to suggest that "[t]he extension of the rational necessity of natural forms right into the modern world of industry and commodity production can perhaps best be understood as an attempt to legitimize the new technologies as not only reasonable, but also necessary" (Simms 199).

\textsuperscript{54} It is interesting to note that Benjamin does not include Sander's work in his assessment of the Neue Sachlichkeit. See his "Short History of Photography."
“modern.” Secondly, we can see that the sharpness and objectivity attributed to his new style, along with a new approach to his subject matter (a shift away from flattering portraits of individuals, towards matter-of-fact, impersonal portraits of everyday, almost generic types) could account for his work being described as *Neue Sachlichkeit*. For example his “Barman” (fig. 20) is certainly a sober and unflattering portrait, almost a mug-shot. Thirdly is the fact that Sander did “experiment” stylistically by deviating from what was his “regular” practice both in terms of style and subject matter. For example, his “Epidermis” (fig. 21) is a sharply focused close-up of a cheek. Isolated and abstracted, this photograph presents the surface and texture of skin, pores and all. (This photograph is very similar to the work of Lerski (fig. 22) and employs strategies associated with *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography.) Another example of stylistic deviation is Sander’s “Spiral Light Bulbs” (fig. 23). This too is radically different in both style and subject matter from the work done for his project and can be seen to be more stylistically in tune with New Vision photography. It is worth mentioning that this latter photograph appears as one of only three examples introducing the reader to Sander’s work in Van Deren Coke’s *Avant-garde German Photography*. Such selective inclusions contribute to the misrepresentation of Sander’s work and are typical of the literature on German photography with its emphasis on style and formal innovation regardless of the larger intentions and interests of the photographer / artist. What I will stress here is that such experimental images were anomalous and constituted a very small part of Sander’s photographic work. I prefer to see these images as experiments which indicate that Sander
was fully aware of the techniques and strategies of the New Photography.

A final point that connects Sander with the New Photography is the fact that he consciously positioned himself and his work in relation to the modern debates preoccupying German photography at this time. This positioning is evident in Sander’s own statements and in his choice of terminology. He too, was critical of experimentation and manipulation and advocated an “objectivity” and “exact photography.” He called for photographers to follow the chemical and optical path as the traditionally developed methods of the medium. In his radio lectures Sander, like Renger-Patzsch, sees Art Photography as a “misunderstanding.” He writes that:

it was a mistake and so carried within itself the seed of its destruction since it was not based on the chemical-optical evolution of photography.... For photography this development had the advantage of making the real nature and possibilities of the medium apparent again.... Only along the lines of clear, realistic photography ... was it once more possible to achieve progress. Meanwhile, modern objectivity, which arose in opposition to the painterly style, aided progress in photography and carried it beyond painting (qtd. in Keller 18).

As outlined, these points could lead one to position Sander firmly within the Neue Sachlichkeit. However, as we shall see, despite the stylistic similarities with the Neue Sachlichkeit and his conscious attempts to legitimize himself within the discourse of modern German photography, Sander’s work and approach are very different. Through a closer look at his project, I will show why such a designation is misleading and in effect fails to address what is the real power and significance of his work. This does not mean however that situating Sander in relation to the German photography is irrelevant. As I hope will become clear, it
is only in trying to understand his project in the context of German photography and its debates that we can more fully appreciate both the work and Sander's claims for "objectivity" and "truth." As I have pointed out, this perspective has been largely ignored. The monographs do not discuss Sander's project in relation to German photography at the time, while the literature on German photography either obscures Sander's main project or tends to focus on a few of his more famous and exceptional images.
Chapter Three
Sander’s Project and the Task of the Photographer

In general terms, Sander’s “life long” project “Citizens of the Twentieth Century” was envisioned as a large and comprehensive portrait of the German people. This was not to be a portrait in the traditional sense since Sander was not concerned with representing celebrities or even naming the people portrayed. Instead, as he claimed, his intention was to “create a piece of History” by visually documenting, through photography, the range of social types that made up Weimar society in order to create a social and physiognomic portrait of an age.  

His project was intended to be both an “objective” and “honest” portrayal of the “existing social order.” He noted:

I am often asked what gave me the idea of creating this work: Seeing, Observing, Thinking and the question is answered. Nothing seems better suited than photography to give an absolutely faithful historical picture of our time.... [P]hotography has given us new possibilities and tasks that are different from those of painting. It can render things with magnificent beauty but also with terrifying truthfulness; it can also be extraordinarily deceptive. We must be able to bear the sight of truth, but above all, we must transmit it to our fellow human beings and to posterity, regardless of whether this truth is favorable to us or not. Now if I, as a healthy human being, am so immodest as to see things as they are and not as they should or might be, I hope I will be forgiven, but I can do no other.... Therefore let me honestly tell the truth about our age and people (1989, 106-107).

In this chapter, then, I will describe this project and discuss Sander’s

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55 As we shall see, Sander’s recognition of the nature and purpose of the photographic medium is important. In his radio lectures he commented: “My photographic work—“Human beings of the Twentieth Century”... is basically a declaration of faith in photography ... I attempted to arrive at a physiognomic definition of the German people of the period by means of the chemical and optic, historically developed methods of photography—that is, by the creation of images through the
working method, style and approach. As I have argued, the details of the structure and arrangement of Sander's proposed project have rarely been analyzed with any specificity either in the monographs about him or in the photography literature that mentions his work. An important exception is Ulrich Keller's exhaustive and rigorous study of "Citizens" which reconstructs Sander's larger project as he had conceived of it by using the notes that he made outlining its structure and the specific photographs he intended to use. Keller has identified a number of different and incompatible "structural systems" at work. He argues that despite "Citizens"' expressed goal of depicting "the existing social order," its formulation is far more complicated and ambiguous than generally presented (23). Following Keller, I will look at the project's structure (i.e. the arrangement of the photographs), briefly discuss these different "systems," and consider how they would have functioned within the project itself. But, first of all, I want to look at the content and style of the photographs associated with this project.

While we know that as a commercial portrait photographer Sander worked to portray the personal, psychological truth or unique character of a particular individual (client), for "Citizens" he pursued rather different objectives. From what we know of the purpose of Sander's project ("to create a piece of history"), Sander believed that this "historical image" could best be revealed through the "type." He explained:

"The individual does not make the history of his time, but he both impresses himself on it and expresses its meaning.... The historical

use of light alone" (qtd. in Halley 677).
image will become clearer if we join together pictures typical of the many different groups that make up human society.... [which together] would carry in their physiognomies the expression of the time and the sentiments of their group. The time and the group-sentiment will be especially evident in certain individuals whom we can designate by the term, the Type.... The photographer who has the ability and understands physiognomy can bring the image of his time to speaking expression (1978, 678).

The portraits associated with Sander’s larger project can be described as social or sociological rather than individual given their “objective” distance. What Sander means by “the many different groups that make up human society” is certainly ambiguous. However Sander’s project is most often described as an occupational typology, one that breaks society down according to “occupations” or social roles. This designation is plausible since the majority of Sander’s photographs do indeed portray occupational types. In looking through Antlitz der Zeit and Citizens⁵⁶ one sees this range: crafts and trades people, farmers, servants, students, politicians, public officials, soldiers, revolutionaries, professionals (doctors, lawyers, small business men), industrialists, land owners, architects, artists (musicians, painters, writers) and scholars.

I would like to look at some of Sander’s more famous images in order to discuss both his working method and style, and, perhaps even more importantly, the ways in which he created the type. The photographs I have selected are “Pastry Cook” (1928), “Hod-Carrier” (1928), and “Notary” (1924) (figs. 24, 25, 26). I will discuss two important aspects of Sander’s practice: the composition of the photograph by the photographer and his emphasis on the pose of the subjects. It

⁵⁶ When I refer to Citizens, it is to Keller’s reconstruction of it.
is clear that these photographs are not candid snapshots. Sander was not interested in capturing the subject unaware, arresting a moment of time, or revealing a slice of fast-paced modern life. Instead the subject is fully aware of the camera and poses for it. (We can see how this contrasts with the modern preference for snapshot and serial photography which characterized photojournalism and the New Vision.) All of Sander's portraits were in fact carefully and methodically constructed. He writes:

One may press a button, or one may take photographs. Pressing a button implies that one relies on chance; taking photographs means that one works with forethought—that is, tries to understand a scene, or bring a conception out of its beginning in a complex of ideas into finished form. If we are successful photographers we reach that goal (1978, 679).

We should keep in mind the kind of equipment that Sander used since it helps us understand certain aspects of his approach to portraiture. Unlike many modern photographers, he did not work with the latest in photographic technology. In fact, he openly rejected the new smaller format hand-held cameras and 35mm roll-films and he also avoided artificial lighting where possible. Sander preferred instead to work with older (more traditional) equipment, which included: a small view camera outfitted with an older antistigmatic Voigtlander lens (f 6.8), larger format glass negatives (8 x 12 cm to 18 x 24 cm), and a tripod (Keller 27). On a very practical level, working with such equipment required "forethought" and careful composition since the negative plates were costly. Following this process, one certainly could not just "press a

57 I refer to these new developments in photographic technology in my first and second chapters.
button" and rely on chance the way one might with a cheap roll of celluloid film. Keller notes that Sander rarely made more than two or three exposures of each subject. Therefore all the elements of the composition (i.e. lighting, angles, focus) had to be right.

There is a notable consistency and uniformity in Sander's work, in terms of style and composition. First of all, this is apparent in the fact that all his photographs are sharply focused and rich in detail. Sander avoided high contrast, stating that "there must be no unrelieved shadows in a picture" (qtd. in Keller 28). The images are intended to be descriptive and informational rather than atmospheric or expressive. Secondly, we can see that the vast majority of his images are taken from a direct and frontal point of view, usually offering the widest possible angle to the viewer. The subject is shown either full length (head to toe) (figs. 24, 26) or in a three quarter pose (fig. 25). Sander avoided close-ups, strange angles and other optical distortions. Instead he placed his subject in a recognizable and logical space, explaining that: "[w]hen a person is shown seated in a photo, the viewer must have the feeling that he will not bump the ceiling if he stands up" (qtd. in Keller, 28).

In fact, on the descriptive and informational level, Sander paid particular attention to location and *mise en scene*. We will recall, that as an Art Photographer, Sander had already been concerned to get beyond the artifice of the conventional studio by using the sitter's surroundings to speak of their social position. For his project, Sander still preferred to work "on location" but now,

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58 Note the significant depth of field.
instead of attempting to reveal his sitter's particular character and social standing, he emphasized the general social category of the Type. Unlike private personal portraits, Sander's subjects are presented as they would appear to a stranger, occupying their own social sphere, and more often than not, their own working environment. The "Notary" is shown outside his city home as he would appear in public. The "Pastry Cook" is seen in his kitchen. Furthermore, many of Sander's subjects either hold the tools of their trade or stand near them. For instance the "Pastry Cook" holds his mixing bowl and spoon, the "Hod-Carrier" carries his bricks, a mother cradles her child and a farmer stands near his horse and plough. As we can see, Sander's photographs are highly staged: he chooses his subjects, he places them in certain settings, he pays particular attention to appearance and props (clothes, tools, accessories), and he shoots them in a sober and analytic manner, using a consistent angle and distance.

I will now turn to consider the pose which is an important aspect of the photographic portrait. The pose attests to how one perceives oneself and how one wants to be perceived by others. It is about pretension and aspiration. The pose is constructed and self-conscious and therefore necessarily social. As Golo Mann explains, in relation to Sander's work:

When someone is trying to be natural, or, better, when he does not even know he is being photographed, then he reveals character. But if he approaches the camera with a certain solemnity, with the intention of showing himself off, then he has become something more than himself: he is revealing a secret self-image. Then there is no movement, no laughter, only a deadly seriousness and the desire to be taken seriously by others. Then the type is created (7).

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59 I should note that while there are some domestic scenes, these tend to emphasize the subject's function in the family (i.e. Mother), or focus on the notion of family life.
We should recall that as a commercial photographer Sander had had to mask the social pretensions of his clients as much as possible in order to create the illusion of capturing his subjects unaware (i.e. lost in private thoughts, figs. 1 and 2). Now, however, when making photographs explicitly for his project, Sander sought to analyze and methodically record the poses and self-projections of his sitters (Keller 2). For Sander, the pose became a key factor in the creation of the type.

The type emerges through a form of collaboration between photographer and subject which reinforces Sander's earlier claim that: "The individual does not make the history of his time, but ... both impresses himself on it and expresses its meaning" (1978, 678, my emphasis). As Keller points out, there was an important "dialogue" between Sander and his subjects. On the one hand, Sander encouraged his subjects to adopt certain poses and on the other, his subjects self-consciously inhabited or performed their social roles (31). Keller has identified individual images where such encouragement (or direction) is clearly evident, particularly in the use of a "well-articulated 'demonstrative gesture'" (31). For example, it is clear in Sander's "Farmer Sowing" (fig. 27), "Conductor" (fig. 28), and "Pastry Cook" that he has asked the sitters to demonstrate how they perform their respective tasks. Each of these portraits shows the subject holding the pose. They are not arrested in action. (In fact the camera Sander used had an exposure time of two to four seconds, which required them to hold

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60 Keller identifies Sander's photographic "staging principles" with Brecht's "epic theater" and his concept of the "alienation effect." See Keller p. 31.
their pose.) This worked to bring forward “a rather calculated, representative appearance” (Keller 27).

Finally then, if we look at Sander’s “Notary,” we can see how all these elements we have discussed, come together to reveal this “legal type.” This picture is typically cold and formal. Sander does not have the notary look at the camera. This creates a distance from which we view the notary’s pose and attire. The former is upright and rigid, while the latter is orderly and spotless. Even his dog is alert and disciplined. One notices his hat, coat, cane, as well as the shine on his shoes. Rigid from head to toe, this man projects self-assured importance and authority. He works “by the book” and is an official who will not be influenced or coerced. He knows his position and his duty. Upstanding and ethical, he is the law. Despite the fact that Sander titled his photographs (designating the sitter’s social or occupational position, along with the date), he also relied upon the viewer’s recognition of such typical visual clues to establish the type.61

We can begin to understand why Sander’s photographs were consistently noted for their objectivity given his lack of artistic flourishes, his anti-illusionary procedure, his emphasis on the pose and appearance of the sitters, the importance of locations and rational spaces, his *mise en scene*, his sharp focus and stable, direct and disinterested point-of-view. And certainly we can see how Sander’s practice and approach differed from that of Moholy-Nagy, Renger-

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61 In fact Sander had a lot to say about what he felt was the superiority of the photograph in terms of its universal comprehensibility. He felt photography was a much more reliable and complete means of communication than verbal or written language. While the idea of “photography as a
Patzsch and other experimental avant-garde photographers who sought to express the tensions and dynamism of the modern world through formal innovation by drawing attention to the medium itself, or to isolating the object by removing it from its context and concentrating on its formal properties. We might also note that even though Sander abstracted the type from the particular individual, he was still fundamentally concerned with the human element, not as a "thing" or object as we have seen in the work of Renger-Patzsch, but as an individual testifying to existence.

As Sander mentioned, it was through the range of social types (ones that would express the "time and group-sentiment") that he felt the larger historical picture could become clear. As we have seen, most of his images represent "occupational types." However, I should mention that both Antlitz der Zeit and Citizens also include pictures that do not correspond to occupational designations. These include photographs that speak of generational positions and family relationships (children and youth, couples, families, the elderly). In fact, Citizens ends with a picture of the dead (fig. 7). According to Sander's outline, it also includes, under the headings of "The Metropolis" and the "Last People," a strange mix of designations which try to capture those on the margins of society: itinerants, gypsies, the unemployed, disabled war veterans, beggars, persecuted Jews, the blind, a victim of an explosion, and other loosely labeled "universal language." It was the main topic of the fifth lecture in Sander's radio series. See Sander, 1978.

Sander's photographs of the more obvious "occupation types" most successfully realize his intentions. While interesting on many levels, the poses of "the blind," gypsies, vagabonds, and other "marginal characters," reveal more discomfort and vulnerability which tend to break down the intended distance and objectivity.
"City Characters" (Outline, reproduced in Keller 63). As we shall see, Sander's project is more complicated than this simple labeling suggests, even though a structure based on "occupations" is in fact both suggested in Sander's outline for "Citizens" and apparent in Antlitz der Zeit.

As I have argued, Sander's project is rarely discussed in any detail, and more often than not, exposure to his work remains on the level of the individual images which are presented and discussed in isolation and not in relation to the larger project. As such, these images are praised in terms of their "objective" and exact style (as we have seen in the literature on German photography) and Sander is seen as a "master" portraitist in terms of his ability to reveal the type in the subjects who posed for him. Such appraisals are certainly valid as many of Sander's photographs are exceptional on a number of levels, irrespective of their relationship to the larger project. Yet, an isolated viewing of these images downplays the emphasis that Sander placed on both the quantity and arrangement of his collection. He writes: "A successful photo is only a preliminary step toward the intelligent use of photography.... Photography is like a mosaic that becomes a synthesis only when it is presented en masse" (qtd. in Keller 36). Here the individual photograph acquires new meanings and effects when it is presented in relation to other images. ("The historical image will become clearer if we join together pictures typical of the many different groups that make up human society..." (Sander 1978, 678, my emphasis).) The problem facing Sander thus became one of "presentation," how each of these individual portraits could together represent the social order. I will now turn to discuss this
problem and the larger project.

Shedding considerable light on Sander’s intention is his Antlitz der Zeit, published in 1929. Containing sixty of his best portraits, Antlitz der Zeit was presented as a kind of introductory volume, one that would, in the words of its publisher Kurt Wolff, “serve as an invitation to subscribe to the completed work.” Although a condensed and preliminary version of the more extensive “Citizens,” this book nonetheless gives a good indication of Sander’s larger ambition and approach. Keller notes that the leaflet inviting subscriptions contains the “earliest authentic formulation of the project’s general concept” (23). In this invitation, we are told that the larger project was to consist of 45 portfolios, each containing 12 photographs, representing the various social groups “which correspond with the existing social order... [presented] without prejudice for or against any party, alignment, class, society” (qtd. in Keller 23). What we learn from this invitation is that the project was intended to be both comprehensive—“all levels and types of occupations”—and objective. Such “objectivity” was to be found in the photographs themselves (as we have seen), and in presenting the “existing social order,” as it was. But what was Sander’s conception of this social order, and how did he plan to represent it in the act of bringing the individual photographs together?

Before answering this question, it might be useful to consider the observations of the historian Jacques Le Goff, who has addressed the problem of representing social structures. He writes: “When societies attempt to describe their own structures, they seek schemata that correspond to concrete social
realities and that offer those who wish to conceptualize these societies ... intellectual means for doing so" (1990, 10). Le Goff's statement from his introduction to The Medieval World reminds us that Sander's version of the social order is constructed in the sense that he sought various conceptual schemata, which were not necessarily direct reflections of reality, but which were necessary to create a picture of his society and his time.

Contrary to what we as contemporary viewers may expect, Sander's version of the social order is not determined by economic class or hereditary lineage. Sander does not present a picture of society that progresses from the poor to the wealthy, nor from the peasant to the nobleman. Rather, as we shall see, the project's intended structure is much more complicated and ambiguous. In a draft plan from 1924, Sander delineates the following seven groups: "The Farmer," "The Craftsman," "The Woman," "The Professions," "The Artist," "The Metropolis," and "The Last People" (Keller 36).63 These groups at first glance may seem rather unsystematic but, according to Keller, they can be understood in terms of three different and incompatible "systems." These systems can perhaps best be grasped in relation to various discourses and ideas about physiognomy and typology, degeneracy and decadence which were circulating at the time. Also influential was Sander's interest in medieval guild systems (ibid.). With respect to the latter, Keller's arguments (about the medieval guild system) are vague. For example, he notes that Sander's version of the social order, "how high or low a given occupation ranked ... was determined by ancient traditions ..."

63 This plan was later modified, but according to Keller it is an "authentic 'ground plan'" for the project (36).
which dated back to the medieval 'estate' or 'guild' system..." (39). However, Keller neither elaborates on the structure of these systems, nor explains how they worked in terms of positioning medieval people. Before proceeding, let us simply note that in medieval feudal relations, guilds (i.e. organizations of special interest or skilled groups) were formed for self-protection, fostering business interests and the maintenance of everyday social life.

What is intriguing for our purposes is the fact that the idea of the medieval guild was revived in Weimar, as many people felt it both “desirable and possible to reorganize the fledgling democratic government along the lines of a professional or guild hierarchy” (Keller 40). Keller sees this ideological revival as a mostly middle-class conservative reaction, to both communism and the establishment of the Weimar Republic itself, with its institution of political parties and democratic rule (40). For example, in order to resist Communism an idealized notion of the guilds was actively promoted by estate farmers and industrialists as propaganda to dissuade rural and industrial workers from adopting the Marxist agenda of fostering class struggle (ibid.). Instead the guild system would supposedly encourage a sense of community and cooperation between people who had “common” stakes in the same sphere of production even if they occupied completely different ends of the spectrum (i.e. farm labourer and land owner or employer and employee). Such advocates of the guild system felt that the worker had lost a sense of pride in his work which the guild system could restore (ibid.). This rhetoric clearly served those interests threatened by class struggle, rather than genuinely building community
consensus and mutual respect. The notion of a guild system also seemed to address the dissatisfaction with the new Republic which was experienced by certain segments of the middle-class (shopkeepers, craftsman, and small-scale farmers) who felt disenfranchised and threatened because they lacked both the voting clout of the working class and the financial influence of corporate employers (Keller 40). These groups believed that a political model based on the professional interests of the guilds would better represent the concerns of the middle-classes. Thus we can see that those who wished to revive the medieval guild system were politically motivated and self-interested.

Keller argues that Sander was influenced by the circulation of this guild ideology and that it informed the project’s structure in a number of ways. The idea of "professional interest groups" or communities based on general occupational categories is clearly evident in Sander’s first five groups. For example, the first group entitled “The Farmer” consists of the following representative types: “The Young Farmer,” “Farm Child and Mother,” “The Farmer (his life and works),” “The Farmer and the Machine,” “The Gentleman Farmer,” “The Small-Town People,” “Sport,” and “The Farmer of the Second Half of the Twentieth Century” (ibid.). Included in this single social group is a rather diverse range of “farmers,” each of whom would have had a different social and economic status. As Keller notes, “Germany’s rural population consisted of proletarian tenant farmers, independent middle-class farmers, and aristocratic estate owners” (39). Similarly, Keller explains, that Sander’s second group entitled “The Craftsman” encompasses both the factory worker and the
industrialist. What gets masked in such a “guild” arrangement is a vast discrepancy in socio-economic status and experience (ibid.).

In fact, one can argue that in creating many of these social types Sander idealizes the subject’s relation to their work. This is apparent in “Worker in a Spinning Mill” (fig. 29) where, as Keller suggests, the factory worker leans against his machine with pride as though he owned it (40). Here Sander distances his subject from the reality of his industrial work and his relationship to the means of production. In general, then, it can be argued that Sander’s pictures are anachronistic. For example, Sander consciously did not represent the modern worker, new industry or technology. Keller points out that Sander easily could have visited the new Ford automobile factory in Cologne, with its assembly lines and the latest in automated modes of production, but that he chose not to do so (ibid.).

Through his pictures Sander valorizes a way of life and certain occupations and skills which were not only being devalued but which more importantly were also disappearing in the face of Germany’s rapid modernization and industrialization. In this sense then, Sander’s work can be seen to loosely reflect the medieval guild ideology, in that he both privileges the more traditional occupations (i.e. peasant farmer, crafts and tradesmen) and presents an idealized model of society which is based on community, respect, and professional pride. This can be understood as a reaction to modernism, industrialization and wage work, where people are defined and rewarded in economic terms, rather than respected in terms of their social function.
As previously mentioned, Keller also identifies two other systems evident in the project's arrangement. The first of these relates to what Keller identifies as a cyclical notion of civilization or history. Keller points out that the organizational structure based on the guild model breaks down when we get to Sander's last two groups: "The Metropolis" and "The Last People." Instead, here we see types that can be characterized as "decadent and asocial," rather than occupational (39). Keller argues that this second system of ordering was influenced by various "philosophies of decadence" prominent at the time, specifically those theories of Oswald Spengler whose work was circulating in the 1920s and which Sander reportedly admired (ibid.). Spengler presents a cyclical theory of civilization whereby historical events are seen to follow a pattern of birth, growth, maturity, and old age. Thus degeneration is seen as an inevitable aspect of the cycle (Fischer 15-17). Spengler, among others, felt that Western culture was in a period of decline which was characterized by its lack of social unity and decadence.

Such a cyclical view of civilization affected Sander's own ordering of his project which, in his words, "proceeds from the earthbound man to the highest peak of civilization, and downward according to the most subtle classifications of the idiot" (qtd. in Kramer 11). Sander sought to "demonstrate that society represents a circular formation of historically ascending and descending social

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64 Keller refers specifically to Spengler's *Decline of the West*. The theories of Georg Hansen are also cited as possible influences on Sander (specifically his 1889 treatise entitled *The Three Levels of Population*). However it is not clear that Sander read the latter. Keller suggests a "congruity between Hansen's view of society and the arrangement of *Citizens of the Twentieth Century*..." and explains how "both assume a historical succession rather than a simultaneous existence of social groups" (38).
groups, that is, a simultaneous fusion of subsequent steps in the course of civilization” (37). Civilization, according to this model, begins with agriculture which “supplies the roots and vital resources for all further cultural development.” Whereas the industrialized city, the latest product in this evolutionary process, is seen as the site of over-refinement and decadence and thus decay (ibid.). This view of history governs Sander’s first group “The Farmer,” where those who work on the soil are privileged. It helps explain the content of Sander’s “The Metropolis” and “The Last People” where one finds the “decay,” the disadvantaged, the marginalized, and finally the dead (fig. 7).

It is worth quoting at length a review from 1927, written by Sander’s friend Paul Bourfeind, who helpfully describes how he sees the cyclical model of civilization expressed in Sander’s pictures:

> Rural natural man is the source of life for the bustling metropolis; the oversupply of unbroken vitality flees from the country into the cities. To the extent that man removes himself from nature he becomes more complicated and uses himself up. Two or three generations are enough to reveal this process of decay. This transformation is surprisingly shown by the progression of Sander’s pictures. There before the viewer stand pictures of the farmer with an inner firmness almost unknown to the city dweller. In spite of all internal and external restraint imposed by nature on these faces, we find in them first signs of that mental openness that, passed on to later generations as a fateful legacy, will develop under the city conditions into a one-sided specialization foreign to nature. This brings about the decay which is after all shown to be only a necessary result of the high development that we so highly prize. Thus the tragedy of human existence becomes apparent ... appears before us with inexorable love of truth resulting from the simplicity of the medium (review qtd. in Keller 37).

This description of Sander’s Cologne exhibition seems to correspond to the

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65 On these philosophies of decadence, see Keller pp. 38-39.
progression of pictures in *Antlitz der Zeit*, as well as to the intended structure of “Citizens.” It could also explain Sander’s obvious privileging of the rural over the urban.

The last system that Keller identifies relates to Sander’s attempts to simultaneously present a typology of physiognomical constants of a universal or ‘generally human’ nature (23). Again Sander outlined this intention in the preface to *Antlitz der Zeit*, explaining that each “portfolio” or group would mirror the organizational principles of his first one. He explains:

The First portfolio, the *Stammappe* is arranged according to the following points of view:

- Plate I, The Earthbound Man
- Plate II. The Philosopher
- Plate III, The Revolutionary
- Plate IV, The Wise Man
- Plates V-VIII, The Woman (in the same succession as I-IV)
- Plate IX, The Woman of advanced Intellect
- Plates X-XI, Two Couples, Self-Control and Harmony
- Plate XII, The Family in Generations (Sander qtd. in Kramer 11).

As we have seen, Sander’s typology begins with “The Farmer.” In following the above structure, Sander presents four men (“Earthbound Man,” “Philosopher,” “Revolutionary,” and “Wise Man”), four women (corresponding to the same categories), an additional woman (“of advanced intellect”), followed by two portraits of couples (personifying “Self-Control” and “Harmony”), and closes with a family portrait. This structure forms the basis of what would be repeated “structurally” in the remaining forty-four portfolios. As Keller explains, “this would
have meant that a certain variety of basic human characteristics would have recurred on different social or cultural levels" (23). Apparently Sander saw the farmer or the "earthbound man" as archetypal. He acknowledges that these figures:

originated within my actual Westerwald homeland. People whose customs I had known since my youth appeared by their close connection with Nature to be excellently suited to the realization of my ideas in a germinal portfolio.... I proceeded to subordinate all later types to the archetype with all its generally human characteristics (qtd. in Keller 23).

However, as Keller notes, this last system is the least successful and most ambiguous. "Here it is impossible to detect any particular emphasis on 'generally human' constants; the order and title of the pictures are subordinated to professional-social viewpoints" (24). As previously mentioned, it is possible that in Antlitz der Zeit Sander's publisher forced him to abandon these more universal and timeless dimensions in favour of the more topical ones. Significantly Keller notes that in Sander's 1931 radio lectures "references to 'archetypes' and 'generally human characteristics' are missing while the term 'physiognomy' is clearly used in a historical sense and social rather than characterological sense" (24). As Sander commented in the radio lectures, "I attempted to arrive at a physiognomic definition of the German people of the period by means of ... photography" (1978, 677).

In the end it is not all that important whether Sander managed to successfully incorporate any of these three structures into his project since no one system could ever "objectively" capture this social order. What is important,
however, is Sander's expressed interest in the way these systems complemented one another. I will argue that by attempting to include all three, Sander's claim to objectivity is rendered more credible. Rather than limiting himself to a single structure which, in practical terms, would certainly have proven more feasible, he chose to adopt a more complex approach. As seen in his expressed intentions (to “honestly tell the truth about our age and people”), the project he envisioned was exhaustive and therefore highly ambitious. Had Sander adopted a single established system, his project was more likely to fall prey to the tainted and biased perspective of ideology. Instead, by including three different systems, Sander reduced the possibilities of this type of bias given that the different structures worked both with and against one another. Furthermore, the presence of more than one system drew attention to the constructed nature of each one. And finally the simultaneous presence of three systems forced each structure out of its established rigidity and enabled a more comprehensive and objective portrayal of society.

It would be interesting to undertake a detailed analysis of how these systems affected and influenced one another within the different portfolios, but spatial constraints prevent me from exploring these questions here. Nevertheless, on a more general level it is clear that in wanting to be “true” and “objective” Sander wanted to be exhaustive. He thus included structures that would account for the specificity of the people of his time (i.e. their social function) which he based on models which had outlasted the passage of time.

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66 The motivation behind reviving the Medieval guild structure during the Weimar period is a clear example of this.
particularly the medieval guild and cyclical systems. The notion of endurance was important to Sander given his apprehension of the futurist developments of modern technology and its impact on social relations.

In general we can see through a closer look at his project, that his privileging of the rural and traditional as well as his interest in the more universal and "generally human in nature," suggest a rather antithetical relationship to the modernist developments and themes of the New Photography, as outlined in my second chapter, specifically the "urban and technological utopianism" of the Neue Sachlichkeit and the general progress-oriented perspective of the New Vision. Given Sander's rather critical relationship to the themes and forms of photographic modernism, it is curious that his project is most often simply labeled as Neue Sachlichkeit. I have argued that this is because most of the literature on German photography tends to focus on his style and rarely considers the project in any detail.

Another limiting aspect of most discussions that engage with Sander's project is the pervasive preoccupation with identifying and criticizing its more problematic aspects. Most often criticized are Sander's claims for "honesty" and "objectivity" in relation to both his presentation of the social hierarchy (as one that would correspond to the "existing social order") and in the photographs themselves (as a medium that could ideally "give an absolutely faithful historical picture of [the] time") (Sander 1989, 106). According to such criticism, Sander's claim to "objectivity" is deemed impossible since he does not acknowledge the

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67 First of all it implies that "society" can be objectively and accurately known (inventoried,
fact that the action of taking a photograph necessarily invokes an individual perspective, however objective the photographer tries to be. While these criticisms are valid, most considerations of the project stop here and conclude that Sander’s project is naïve and critically suspect.

As I have argued, however, such writers tend not to place Sander’s work within the context of modern photography despite the fact that Sander himself consciously positioned himself in terms of these modern trends. By historically contextualizing Sander’s claims, we can see that his notion of objectivity is both more limited and more nuanced than his critics have suggested. For instance, we might recall Sander’s remarks that “[t]he nature of all photography is documentary” and that “[p]hotography is capable of documentary authenticity only under the condition that we follow exactly the chemical-optical methods; that is, produce pure light creations by chemical and optical means....” (Sander qtd. in Keller 19). Such a statement, which stresses the importance of adhering to the technically correct methods, while highlighting the capabilities and nature of the medium, echoes arguments put forward by Renger-Patzsch. However Sander also stressed that photography should be “less concerned with filling the aesthetic requirements of external form and composition than with the significance of what is represented” (ibid.). In rejecting Art Photography Sander, like Renger-Patzsch, advocated an “objectivity.” However for Sander such objectivity required being true to the medium itself, and more importantly, it required an honesty on the part of the photographer. Once again, he writes “We
must be able to bear the sight of truth, but above all, we must transmit it to our fellow human beings and to posterity, regardless of whether this truth is favorable to us or not..." (1989, 107, my emphasis).

In conclusion I will now turn to consider Sander’s particular understanding of the task of the photographer and what I see as the ethical impetus behind the project which I believe was the photographer’s response to the notion of historical loss. While I acknowledge the validity of the criticisms outlined above, they tend to obscure the question of historical loss. If one reconsiders Sander’s assertions from this perspective, they regain a certain legitimacy and his ambitious project, to “create a piece of history with [his] pictures” acquires considerably more credibility. What becomes important is not the validity of the structures imposed upon the photographs but the factual nature and value of his massive archive.

As we saw in my first chapter, after working as a commercial photographer, Sander eventually shifted his interest from portraying specific individuals to documenting society as a whole. This significant change in his career was brought about by two key events: first, his move from Linz to Cologne which brought him to a new form of portraiture, namely, the more “objective” style used in the Westerwald, and second the post-war demands from previous customers to reprint portraits of relatives who had been killed in the war. At this point Sander was no longer recording a current reality but instead was re-creating traces of loved ones, no longer present. What I am suggesting is that these two events were both the catalyst for Sander’s project. The process of
revisiting his negative archive forced Sander to rethink the role of photography and the task of the photographer. (However, as we have seen, Sander does not explicitly describe his project or talk about photography from this perspective of loss.) Though his ambition was far reaching, Sander’s position was a humble one. In rejecting the aesthetic of Art Photography, he realized that the task outlined for him by families after the war called for a return to a more essential form of documentary photography. In the process of providing families with photographs of lost loved ones, the photographer’s artistic agency played a secondary role. His photographs were requested for a quality which exceeded any prior form of intentionality on the part of the photographer. What the families wanted was a trace of that singularity which no other medium could reproduce more authentically than photography which faithfully recorded that which lay in front of the lens. This then was what Sander defined as true objectivity in his “Citizens” project.

Although it is not entirely mistaken to affiliate Sander’s work with the modern trends in photography, namely Neue Sachlichkeit, most of the existing literature fails to identify what constitutes the “modern” aspects of Sander’s practice. As we have seen, there are some clear stylistic parallels between Sander’s work and the Neue Sachlichkeit photographers. Nevertheless these parallels do not shed much light on what I have argued was the most significant aspect of his project.

To recapitulate my argument, it is worth stressing that Sander’s practice is particularly modern in that he allowed the specificity of photography to reveal
itself through the medium itself, in historical rather than formal terms. Objectively
documenting the people of his time was not something which Sander actively
pursued during the initial phase of his career. Instead, as we have seen, his
documentary pursuits emerged as a direct result of the course taken by history.
The losses incurred through the war, provided the photographer with the new
function of “authentically” testifying to a reality which had existed. In this instance
it was not his particular ability to provide a resemblance or mimetic reproduction
which was being sought but rather the “objective” photographic testimonial to
actual existence as it had been. After realizing this fact, Sander re-defined his
task from the more passive job of reprinting past portraits of individuals, to
actively creating the type. His new task would be to record his time, (to “create a
piece of History”) and this forced him to consider all the available means and
possibilities for achieving this goal successfully. From this perspective, his work
to master the type, as well as his study and inclusion of various archetypal
structures point to his “honest” commitment to this monumental task. It is likely
that Sander was well aware that he could never achieve a fully comprehensive
system or portrayal. While we may agree with the criticism directed to his
project’s shortcomings it would perhaps be more appropriate to remember that
his project was a work in progress, rather than a completed whole.

As we have seen, seeking to portray an era in an objective manner is
necessarily paradoxical since the instant the photographer asserts his agency,
the photograph is inevitably biased. However, since the “objective” and
“authentic” nature of Sander’s photography ultimately lay beyond the stylistic or
prescriptive intentions of the photographer (residing instead in what he recognized to be the very nature of photography), the various structures which order Sander's photographs are ultimately secondary to the truly documentary and historical value of his portraits. Beyond the order or the intent, without which the project would not exist, Sander's photographs continue to document an age which has since disappeared. Thus he fulfilled his goal to "transmit [the truth]" of his time "to posterity."
fig. 1.
fig. 2.
fig. 5.
fig. 7.
fig. 10.
fig. 12.
fig. 14.
fig. 15.
fig. 18.
fig. 19.
fig. 20.
fig. 28.
Bibliography


Appendix

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