

# BORDERLINE

Ralf Grauel

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In Olaf Heine's studio there is a wall of framed photographs by fellow photographers. There are also a few original Heines: In the middle is a self-portrait from the period when his girlfriend at the time had just broken up with him. With a shaved head and wearing a black suit, Heine stands there dirty, and possibly beaten up. He holds his jacket open, and in the place of his heart is a target painted on his chest in blood. "I originally wanted to do a triptych," says Heine "but after that photograph it was over. I was done and didn't feel anything anymore."

The way Heine deals with himself is the same way he treats the artists he portrays. For Heine the staging of the image is a form of therapy; the artists he photographs grow through these kinds of situations. Musician Blixa Bargeld described them as follows: "The more vulnerable, the more tangible you make yourself, the more untouchable you in fact become. You can show the greatest and most wounded fragility, but because of the very fact that you show it to the world, you become all the more invulnerable." *Leaving the Comfort Zone* reveals these very moments.

It is Olaf Heine's job to supply a market crazed for perfection and glamour with photographs. Heine takes a close look at the artist, studies his or her work, reads texts, watches his or her films, listens to his or her music, and then waits for images to come to him. He devises cinematic scenarios, organizes props and lighting and then acts as the director on the set. Usually, he somehow turns the image of the artist on its head: the person whose portrait is being taken becomes an actor in the role of reinterpreting his or her own image. The film, however, is pure Olaf Heine.

The mood on the set is almost always playful and relaxed, and it is Heine himself who is the most playful. He makes art out of chance circumstances, reacts with lightning speed to unexpected details and uses them for his purposes. His intensive

preparation makes the production run smoothly. The person in front of the camera clearly feels comfortable—but from his team, Heine demands a lot.

Heine's films noticeably often lead into vast spaces. In cities, he searches out a sense of expanse, often choosing views over rooftops. His scenarios play with architecture, line, and structure and almost always follow a strict, formal aesthetic and clear composition. Regardless of what the many stories in Heine's images are about, the segments he selects often show moments of failure. His themes are loss, loneliness, and emptiness. Singer Sting, for example was photographed in a swimming pool, tied up and gaged (ill. pp. 88–89).

Heine staged androgynous British singer Brian Molko lost in thought as a possibly impotent dandy sitting in a wheelchair with a female playmate (ill. pp. 66–67). A painful image, especially because it has grown tragically quiet around his band Placebo since their 2006 album *Meds*. But even if the photos are not shot in quite such a dark mood, Heine gives them an uncanny twist. Take, for example, the photograph of Thomas Kretschmann, which was taken during the production of the movie *Seewolf* (ill. pp. 138–39). The actor had called Heine up and said, "I have a beard. Let's take some photos." Every actor knows the value of a new look in their portfolio, since there is nothing worse than always being pegged as the same type. Olaf Heine had an intersection blocked off in Berlin's Karl-Marx-Allee, got hold of a lamb and an old Ford. The stage directions were: "Imagine you have lost everything in a fire. Wife, children, the farm. The lamb was the only thing you could save."

Years ago, Heine photographed Mark Spoon, the excess-driven techno and dance DJ, in front of a pressure pot with the needle pointing to zero. Seven years later time did run out on Mark Spoon; his heart gave out. Mark Löffel, so his given name, died

in Berlin in 2006. For Heine, the old image, which was already very minimal, was not enough. A year after Mark Spoon's death he took a print, set it out in the desert, and burned it: Heine's own way of saying good-bye (ill. pp. 52–53).

And finally the photograph of Herbert Grönemeyer \*: "I wanted to create a Berlin picture," explained Heine, "I wanted it to be dreary and have an element of *film noir*." Heine tied up Grönemeyer, blindfolded his eyes, and staged an execution. At the time the photograph was taken, Grönemeyer had lost his wife and his brother just six months earlier. This photograph may only be shown in exhibitions and on Olaf Heine's web site. Heine is not permitted to publish it in magazines, on posters, let alone on advertising banners. This image may not be used to sell anything, for it shows too clearly an individual's true pain.

One could criticize the lack of scruples in having someone play the victim of an execution just after such great personal losses. However, just before the photo was taken, Grönemeyer had released his most successful album by far, *Mensch* (Human), in which he himself tells of his sad fight to simply keep on going. Is there a difference between a sufferer working through his pain by making it into a performance and this pain as the basis for a drama staged by someone else?

Heine might have overstepped a boundary with Herbert Grönemeyer. However, more than any portrait photograph, the staging of the image enables us to see Grönemeyer as human, which is what the musician wanted to achieve with his album title *Mensch* (Human). One also has to acknowledge Heine's courage and strength in convincing the person in front of the camera to go that far. Heine usually stages photographs with extremely strong personalities. People who are so famous that that most viewers have some association with them—and who in this sense are more like brands than real people: globalized

public figures. They are accustomed to playing with their artificial image. Olaf Heine persuades these celebrities, who are almost always the "decision-makers," to follow him on his path. Heine loves friction, but he also enjoys engaging his subjects. It does not always work. But when it does, it is a euphoric sensation. For actors, slipping into a role is an everyday experience. To involve others, however, is hard work, regardless of whether the photograph is commissioned or an independent project.

However tragic the stories behind his scenarios are, the resulting snapshots are sensational, archaic, and beautiful. Icons emerge from the place where archetype and perfection meet. And naturally the photographs are a joint product, created by Heine and his subjects.

"Vicarious lives" are lives lived in place of other people. Many reporters, photographers, and actors experience these moments incessantly: they experience themselves through other figures and expand their own existence in the process.

Heine's personal theme has to do with suffering and with death. It goes beyond the many stage directions that he gives to actors and pop stars—bringing about their downfall in a small form of death from which they are then resurrected. For Heine himself death holds a certain fascination. He frequently visits historical medical collections, from which he borrows exhibits for his works (ills. pp. 83 and 162). He visits cemeteries and finds within them a mirror image of life. The cemeteries in Hawaii, he claims, are like paradisiacal palm gardens. The graves of Hollywood are miniature celebrity shrines with gilded actors names (ill. p. 37), while the cramped stone cemeteries of New York form long alleyways. According to Heine, "the cities of the dead reflect those of the living."

Authors write when they need to come to terms with something. Photographers take photographs. Many years ago, before Heine

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