



Portrait of an Artist as an Old Man (2016-2018)

Mirja Maria Thiel

Abstract

In *Portrait of an Artist as an Old Man* Mirja Maria Thiel tells the life of Fritz Dressler (1937-2020), a former professional photographer and university professor, who suffered from Alzheimer's the last years of his life. Photographed over the course of more than two years, the black and white series is completely committed to the emotional reality of the charismatic protagonist. Dressler found immense pleasure and pride in himself by falling back on taking pictures himself. Adding some of his longing color images of his immediate surroundings, above all landscape and cloud images, as well as quotes by him gives the affected protagonist a voice and transforms this series into some kind of collaborative narrative which it has been in so many ways. The work intends to inspire a compassionate dialogue in society about issues concerning more respect, participation and empowerment towards people affected with Alzheimer's and dementia.

Keywords: Storytelling, Documentary Photography, Documentary Artwork, Environmental Portrait, Dementia, Alzheimer's disease, Memory Loss, Art & Aging, Artist, Photography & Life Writing, Life Portrait, Life Story, Visual Portrait, ArtDoc

Zusammenfassung

Portrait of an Artist as an Old Man erzählt vom letzten Lebensabschnitt des an Alzheimer erkrankten Landschafts- und Architekturfotografen Fritz Dressler (1937-2020), der auch als Hochschul-Professor für Fotografie unterrichtete. Die über einen Zeitraum von zweieinhalb Jahren fotografierte Schwarzweiß-Serie ist ganz der gefühlten Lebenswirklichkeit und den Emotionen des charismatischen Protagonisten verpflichtet. Angeregt durch die gemeinsam verbrachte Zeit empfand Dressler große Freude und Stolz wieder selbst zu fotografieren: sehnsuchtsvolle Farbbilder seiner unmittelbaren Umgebung, insbesondere Landschafts- und Wolkenbilder, und seine Zitate verleihen ihm als unmittelbar Betroffenen eine Stimme. Intention der Arbeit ist es, einen von Einfühlungsvermögen geprägten gesellschaftlichen Dialog zu inspirieren, welcher mehr Respekt, Teilhabe und Wirkmacht von an Alzheimer und Demenz erkrankten Menschen einfordert.

Schlüsselwörter: Demenz, Alzheimer, Dokumentarfotografie, Kunst & Altern, Visuelles Porträt, Lebensporträt, Erinnerungsverlust, Gedächtnisverlust, Porträtfotografie



'The First Portrait', September 2016

The beginning of a mutual fascination: This portrait captures Fritz at the end of a long walk together the day after we first met. I still feel his curiosity, concentration, and eagerness to connect to me.

Prologue

One day in late summer 2016, a befriended photographer called me during a shopping walk with my family, suggesting that I enroll in some photo-workshops given as part of a newly created photo-festival. He meant the famous artist village of Worpswede in Northern Germany, a place close to where I live.

At the time, I went to university again aged 42, studying photojournalism and documentary photography in Hannover. And that is why some weeks later I found myself talking on the phone to the lecturing photographer Hauke Dressler to discuss my application and to agree on a topic for the one-week-workshop to come. My proposed theme was something like 'tourism as a tension field for the artist village'. But my conversation partner gave the talk another direction all the time. Finally, he asked straightforward: 'What is the topic you are most interested in and have invested most energy so far?'

Well, I was quite familiar with the issue of dementia. Mainly through earlier photographic works about animal-assisted-intervention in nursing homes, and a reportage about an old couple struggling with Alzheimer's. And because my aunt had become demented some time before. But I did not consider 'dementia' to be an appropriate topic for a reportage-workshop called by the artist village's name: 'Worpswede'.

'There also exists dementia in Worpswede', Dressler said.

At once, I presumed this to be a joking remark.

Surprised I answered: 'You'll find dementia all over the world!'

But then he added:

'My father suffers from Alzheimer's.

And he lives in Worpswede.

And he was a photographer.'



'Past, Present, Future', January 2017

In 2016, I met 79 years old Fritz Dressler, a German landscape and architectural photographer who was afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. We got to know each other on a photo festival in his home village where he resided for more than 40 years. He was known for his influential and creative personality that – despite his dementia – had left him a deeply expressive character. Before his retirement Dressler had also lectured as Professor of Photography at the University of the Arts Bremen. During the time of the festival, Fritz became my reportage's protagonist for the workshop lead by his son. Following up on this, I photographed him in his house and his village over the course of two and a half years. What I had begun as a reportage on living with Alzheimer's transformed into an emotional reflection on challenging stereotypes about this disease by emphasizing 'ability not disability'. I became completely committed to the emotional reality of my charismatic protagonist: his intensity, vulnerability and resilience define the portraits of his soul.

By the time Fritz and I met, he was no longer able to call his illness by its name, but could only resignedly acknowledge, 'Actually, I don't know anything anymore.' But his self-awareness – as someone who saw himself as an artist and thus preserved his presence – was still very much alive:

'I am not dead, I'm still walking!'



'The Hermit', February 2017

'On this picture I look like a hermit,' Fritz comments. He had always been a lover of the outdoors and the rustic life. Every time I rang the doorbell I hoped to be recognized as the person I was. He opened the door, or more often the window of his sleeping room on the first floor and smiled at me: 'Oh, how comes you happen to be here? Come in!' In case of the window, I did remind him that I was not a bird who could fly. He seemed to be surprised then. He started to offer me books, glasses, and other items in front of him to open the door with. I tried to explain how his key looked like and where he might find it. He took it with humor. This was kind of a ritual we both enjoyed. Him because he loved my company, me because I was reassured, I had not lost him yet.

I had the chance to spend most of my time alone with Fritz, which is something very rare considering that I was not his partner nor a family member. That is why the 'facts', sorrows and joys of Fritz's life were conveyed to me mainly by himself. This opened an undisguised view into his diminishing world. Fritz's wife had died three years ago, and he lived by his own then. His life had become lonely in his home village. The more so as he had been a very social character throughout his life.

Permission to photograph him was given by his children; Fritz never had intellectual insight into my actions and motifs. He was nevertheless my irresistible emotional counterpart.



'Untitled', November 2016



'Enchanted Room', September 2016

Fritz loved company and disliked eating his meals just by himself, which could not always be avoided. The care situation was a real challenge for his two children who both were successful in their jobs with Jule having little children, and Hauke being an extensively travelling magazine photographer.



'Riversong', August 2017

This image dealing with 'love' I had in my mind for a long time. It captures Fritz and his last partner Renate after they went bathing. She lived a one-hour-drive away and visited him several times each week. They knew each other for more than 40 years, and she helped him a lot to reconnect to past times. One thing they had always done together was to go swimming in the little muddy Hamme river next to his home village. In August 2017, when Fritz strength already dwindled, the three of us made a photo session there.



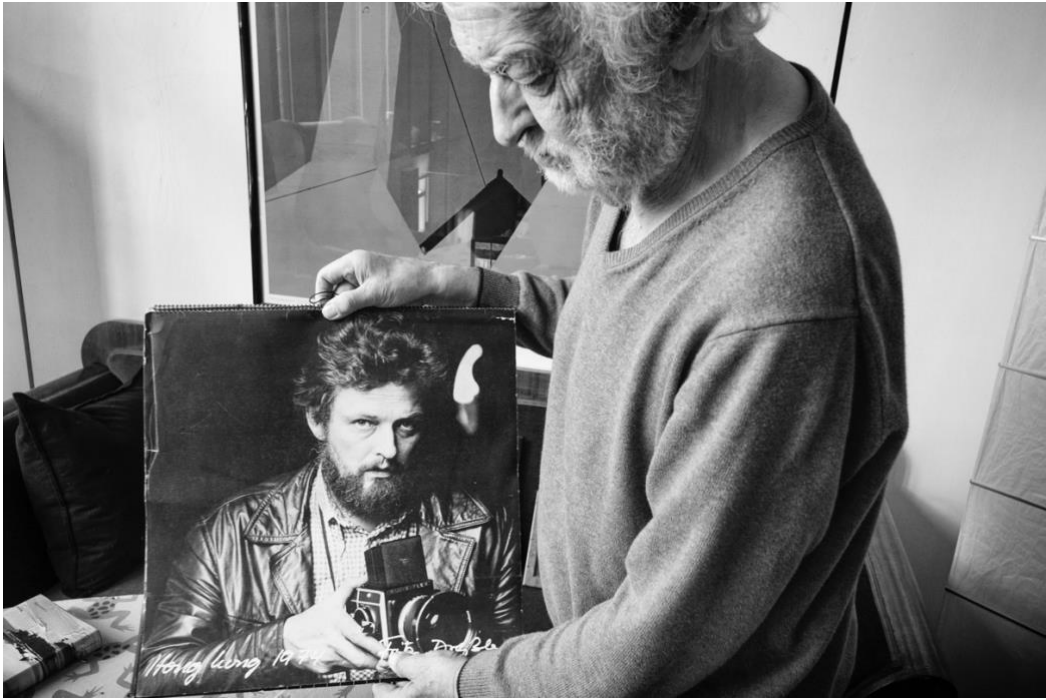
'Walking With Fritz', January 2017



'Snowfall', November 2016

Fritz sits on his bed, in a sudden moment of confusion and distress. He mumbles: 'I don't know what's happening with me right now.' We sit there for about five minutes. Very close. In silence. Then he turned towards me and gave me a frail smile. Later, he called this situation a 'snowfall'.

Fritz did not want to have a lot of people around anymore. Health workers, the cleaning lady or his housekeeper, he threw them out when in a fierce mood. His fulminant character and dominance had survived his Alzheimer's disease. It made it very difficult to meet his personal need for absolute freedom and self-determination, and at the same time to provide the basic daily care he nevertheless needed when his illness proceeded. Mutual trust was there right from the beginning. And it came quite naturally that I would cook for him, clean up or care for him taking a shower and getting dressed properly next to photographing. Most of the day, we were engaged in things that were connected to his former healthy life, generally photography and looking at books. Fritz was very keen to be a good 'model', and he felt nourished by my wish to photograph him in natural everyday-life situations. Sometimes we visited people he was befriended with, or just drove by car through the countryside. He depended emotionally very much on physical contact like holding hands, walking arm in arm, or sitting close to each other on his sofa.



'Mirror', March 2017

Fritz shows me a self-portrait in his mid-30s that is on the cover of his Hong Kong calendar. His sense of self can be sharp and exact concerning details he observes, but a conscious look in the mirror inevitably leads to the puzzled exclamation: 'I'm an old man!' Especially his whitened hair worries him. One time after telling him his age being 80 years old, his great sense of self-humor appeared at once and he asked me with a taunting smile: 'So white hair is normal then?'

The deeper I got involved into Fritz's life and his emotional ups and downs the more I felt the need to capture how *he himself* experienced the breakdown of his creative energy and the rapid disappearance of his intellectual abilities. Relating to former photographic works on the subject of dementia and more particularly on Alzheimer's, I had done quite a lot of research on the disease's impact on the everyday reality and mental health of the caregivers and the immediate family. But little is said about the agony afflicted people feel from time to time even in an advanced state of this illness. Fritz had many moments of 'insight' into his mental condition. Due to his aphasia he sometimes could not express his thoughts at all, or he did so in a linguistically incorrect way. Fortunately for him, he was very permeable for emotions – his own one's and that of others' - and his body spoke a touching language.

Whenever Fritz was frustrated and remained in silence, it felt as if everything around us would tighten and finally collapse. With the progression of the diseases those moments became more frequent. It was impossible then to stay immune to his mood of despair, anger, and sorrow. All this influenced my photographic approach. Especially my personal edit and writing changed over time.



'Time Crawls Like a Snail', December 2016

After I had taken off the winter semester to mainly concentrate on my work with Fritz, I continued my studies. In the months to come, lecturers, fellow students, friends, and people from the photo industry would respond in very diverse ways to my images made of Fritz. Astonishingly, I learned that a lot of people have very specific ideas of how someone affected with dementia should look and act in front of the camera. Many times, I've heard: 'He doesn't look like having Alzheimer's!' Most of them had never been in touch with Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia before. What had shaped their expectations? A misleading and single-sided representation of dementia and mental health issues in the media?

Inevitably involved when photographing someone no longer of sound mind were ethical implications which I discussed in a variety of constellations. Next to Fritz' close

family and my photographic environment I did so with Renate, Fritz's last partner, who was first vehemently opposed to the idea of me photographing Fritz, then kind of accommodated herself, and finally came to accept it as being the reason why I spent so much time with him, which she highly appreciated. Though Renate never stopped fearing for Fritz to be exposed to a sensation-hungry public which I could relate to.

It was indeed my three children then aging from 16 to 8 years old who became an invaluable source for feedback. At that time, their relationship to images was still quite impulsive, and unlike other critics their visual competence had not undergone any academic education. They used to drop in all the time at my workplace at home where I not only developed the digital raw files on a huge screen but spend hours figuring out image sequences to build the story adapted for different publishing channels and platforms. How did they think Fritz felt the moment the image was taken? What mood was conveyed? Did they like the image or did it trigger them to turn away? It was they who encouraged me not to photograph Fritz in the nursery anymore, where Fritz spent the last 13 months of his life: 'You made different images of him, Mama!' What my daughter was trying to say was that our 'collaborative' photographic journey had come to an end the moment his health condition required him to leave his house and his village. Both had defined his self-determined life.

There were almost no other people than Fritz himself involved in my story anymore. In the beginning, I had built the story like a classic reportage following the script of the workshop. My first images were embedded in the photo-festival including a lot of action and plot like visiting photo exhibitions in the village, his wife's grave in company with his family, and attending the daily medical care visit by health workers. We were amid a lively atmosphere with many people stopping by at his house. However, when I continued to visit him six weeks after the workshop the situation was different. Daily routine and quietness were ever-present. There was only Fritz and me. For good reasons most visual dementia stories concentrate on the caretakers' feelings and the hardship of dealing with demented people. But the more I got bound in the emotional web of Fritz's personality, the more I was motivated to solely concentrate on the affected person's feelings. After I had listened for a month to all sources of critic, inspiration, and support with increasing confusion, I finally decided to remain true to what I felt to be the 'truth' of his life's final chapter. A truth not proved by mere life facts but by Fritz' sense of reality. Not the rules of how to build an informative reportage, following the photojournalistic rule of 'what you see in this frame is as it was', prevailed in my mind anymore but the deep search for the man

Fritz once had been and still was in many aspects. To read Fritz, to feel his emotional reality and to translate this into emotive imagery and text and thus preserve him became the heart of my photographic work. By means of my female gaze other people simply dropped out of the story or became a marginal note. Eventually, Fritz became the all-encompassing character of *Portrait of an Artist as an Old Man*, something he had always been throughout his whole life's story.

By choosing this title I hoped to define my work not only through the characterizing keywords 'portrait' and 'artist' but associatively to embed Fritz' life story within the celebrated humanity of two literary novels. First, James Joyce's modernist Bildungsroman *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* comes into mind, a novel that explores what it means to become an artist by following the intellectual and spiritual development of its main character. In the context of a visual depiction of Alzheimer's this implies a bittersweet comment: my protagonist faces a countermovement; he is on the verge of losing himself instead of being in the position of power by means of his artistic mastery and the so-called 'wisdom of old age'. Secondly, some people might be reminded of Joseph Heller's last novel *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*, a lamentation of old age and fading but never dying creative ambition, its title strikingly similar to Joyce's work. Simply put, both novels make man's lifelong search for a meaningful life their subject of plot. This seems even more important when it comes to talking about Alzheimer's disease, one that robs you of your individuality, your past, present and future in so many ways.

My now documentary approach¹ focused on the genre of environmental portrait, visual metaphor and stills and was deepened by the lecture of *Alzheimer's from the Inside Out* by Richard Taylor, the first dementia activist. It would never have occurred to Fritz to publicly deal with his Alzheimer's diagnosis the way Richard Taylor, a retired American psychologist did; his motto was 'Stand up - Speak up!' Taylor's book provided a fascinating insight for me, nonetheless. Being with Fritz evoked an overwhelming feeling for the need to support participation and empowerment of demented people. And to empower people, no matter what conflict or illness they must handle, you first need to know about their feelings, and how they experience their life situation.

Michael Schmieder, one of the most influential dementia pioneers and ethical experts in Germany and Switzerland, was another inspirational source. In his lectures and his book *Demented, but not Stupid*, of which regrettably no English translation exists so far, he strongly advocates for more respect towards people affected with Alzheimer's and

other forms of dementia in society. Paying attention to demented people's dignity is his guiding principle when considering nursing and medical aspects.



'Hello! I'm Still Here!', January 2017

'Always look me in the eyes while speaking. Enough people have ignored me or changed their focus upon learning that I have Alzheimer's that I am extremely conscious, and self-conscious, of how people look at me when they are talking to me.' Richard Taylor PhD, Alzheimer's activist and affected by dementia himself in his book *Alzheimer's from the Inside Out*.

Falling back on taking pictures himself during the time we spend together was a source of immense pleasure and pride for Fritz. In many ways *Portrait of an Artist as an Old Man* explores his continuing self-awareness as an artist and pleasure in his art form, despite his illness. He still had a great eye for lines, forms, and colors, and he was incredibly proud when we looked at his images on my computer screen. I know that apart from my company, for Fritz it was the meaning-giving quality of taking pictures himself I could give him back in return for making pictures of him. According to his partner Renate he had lost this ability from one day to another sometime before I got to know him. And obviously he had not missed it.



'Untitled', January 2017



©Fritz Dressler, January 2017



'Grandchild', November 2016

At first, during the workshop in 2016, his son gave him his camera back because in the context of the workshop we wanted to make it clear that he had been a professional photographer, thereby conflicting with photojournalistic rules as Fritz had not used any camera for a long time. Because he had begun to give away personal things to foreigners, his camera equipment had been secured by his children. But when I began to visit him regularly after the workshop, he really longed for my camera. Because it was a model he had not used during the last years, he had an extremely hard time handling it. He could not memorize the new positioning of the buttons anymore and

made the same mistakes again and again which infuriated him. For this reason, his son decided to give permanently back to him one of his old cameras. He struggled with his own camera's technique as well but taking photographs reassured him of his identity.



'Airplane Above Weyerberg', September 2016



©Fritz Dressler, October 2018

Attracted by motor noise Fritz looks for an airplane. All his life he has been fascinated by condensation stripes in the sky.

With the loss of being able to define himself through his creative output, it became difficult for Fritz to relate to the public recognition he had achieved in abundance until dementia put an end to his creative and social life as he had practiced it before. Nevertheless, his self-perception as an artist never dwindled. It constituted a bulwark against the disintegration of his personality. In the nursery I remember sitting with Fritz on his old sofa in his single room, approximately nine months before his death, starrng at the huge still life of maple leaves his children had hang up over his bed. In those days, Alzheimer's had almost silenced him. But when he became aware of my attention to his image, which I knew he had made many years ago, he bent towards me and whispered while trying hard not to mumble: 'This image, this image I have shot earlier today.'

Adding Fritz's longing color images of his immediate surroundings, above all the landscape he deeply loved – taken when walking with me or his partner – transforms this series into some kind of collaborative narrative which it has been in so many ways.



©Fritz Dressler, December 2016

The trees in the Hamme river Fritz photographed with my Nikon before he got back his old Canon Mark II



©Fritz Dressler, January 2017

'Fritz was especially fond of this image, he loved "the blue behind the trees"'

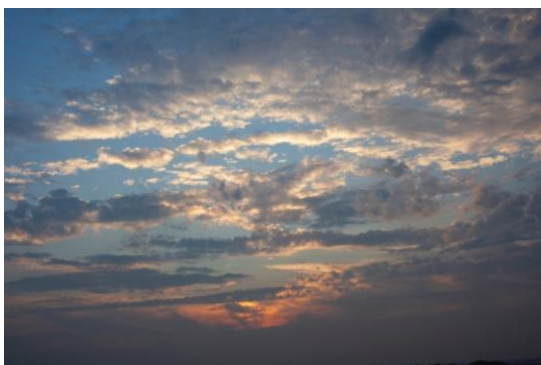


©Fritz Dressler, January 2017

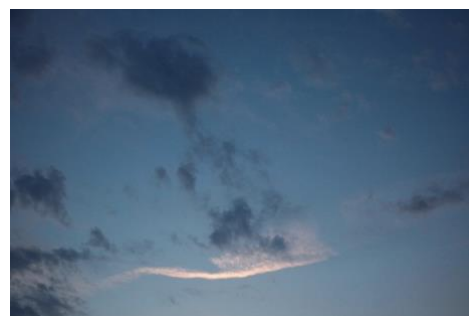


©Fritz Dressler, July 2017

Clouds – a motif that had found his photographic attention all his life – finally became one of Fritz’ favorite topics. Their ephemeral nature makes them almost inevitably a symbol for the fading of his memory.



©Fritz Dressler, November 2017



©Fritz Dressler, May 2017

With his old camera at hand Fritz not only photographed in company when going for a walk in the countryside but began to take images in his house as well. Often he was by himself then. It became my practice to search for his camera, right after I arrived in his house, and read out his memory card. By means of these images I got to know something about what had been on his mind, what had caught his attention at the time he pressed the shutter. One winter day in 2017, Fritz' partner Renate and I stood in front of Fritz and discussed appropriate winter clothing for him:

'That's the reason I want him to wear Polo Shirts under his sweaters', Renate states, 'he doesn't like scarves and his neck has to be warm'. 'When I put the scarf around his neck, he didn't refuse to wear it', I reply. This goes on for a further minute. Then Renate steps into the storage room to get something out of the fridge. The whole time, Fritz has listened to our conversation with apparently little interest. Suddenly, he grasps a banana from the table, sticks it under his chin in imitation of a scarf and calls out, highly amused: 'I could take this one!' I burst out laughing. And Fritz puts his head into the storage room to show Renate as well what he thinks of our clothing discussion.



©Fritz Dressler, January 2017



'The Archive', November 2016

His life's archive: Fritz's house in Worpswede. The pictures he took, the stories related to them, and the souvenirs he brought back from all over the world release memories and feelings very much alive. Inside his house Fritz seems to submerge into its interior, a perfect fit among the creative, dusty chaos that can be seen everywhere.



©Fritz Dressler, 'Writing Desk', October 2017



'Leaves In The Gutter As Seen From The Inside Of Fritz's House', September 2018

It must have been some hundred times before I noticed the beauty of the rotting old leaves. A few weeks before, Fritz had been severely ill with high fever in hospital. I had not been in his house over the summer holidays and became aware something not visible had changed when I visited him again.



'Untitled', September 2018



'Untitled', November 2016



'Home', December 2016

For a long time, Fritz's house had invaluable meaning in preserving his identity as did his home village, where he loved to take his strolls. Filled with all the items from his journeys, personal belongings, pictures, books, and its inherent memories the house was in quite a literal sense something like his life's archive, his stored identity. Fragments of memory he could grasp only by looking at familiar things that would

then partly reveal their stories for him. But no friends visited any more. The house that Fritz - an architect by training - once constructed himself slowly turned itself from his beloved retreat into a place of loneliness, and in the end of confusion and sometimes anger when he no longer was able to make much sense of his life's collectibles.



'Home', June 2017



'I Won't Be Here Forever', December 2016

'I Won't Be Here Forever!' 'Where will you be then?' 'Yeah, that I don't know about at all!'



©Fritz Dressler, April 2018



'Companions', April 2017

When visiting Fritz's daughter, we always took her dogs Alma (5) and Nika (12) out for a walk. Fritz used to take care of them in earlier years. He enjoyed the dogs' unconditional love for him.



'How To Stop Time', April 2017



'Travelling', October 2017

Cranes flying over the nature reserve Devil's Moor close to Worpswede in northern Germany in October 2017. In 2016, when I got to know Fritz, he had been still unsettled about his future, especially when he felt sad, exhausted, and tired. Later he forgot such a thing as 'future'. But for two more years he waited for the migrant birds to come back, he knew their pattern well. In the past, Fritz had spent uncountable hours in the Devil's Moor, on October 2017 this was no longer an option. I went by myself with a farmer's wife to show me this place, exactly where the cranes would fly in. Thinking of Fritz these symbolic migrant birds remind me of his love for travelling, nature's everlasting life cycle and man's mortality.



'That's Me!', November 2016

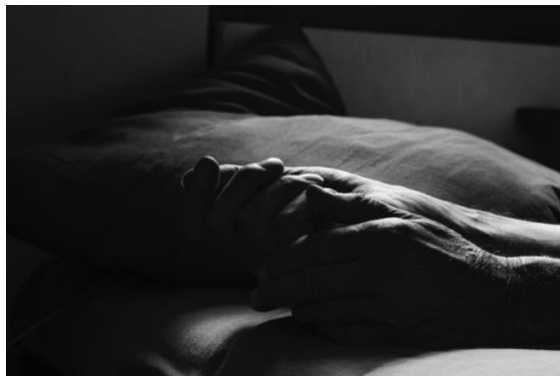
The black hat, one of his favorites, belonged to a Navaho Indian, that much Fritz can remember in autumn 2016. He loves to show me his souvenirs and self-portraits that correspond to his proud sense of self.



'A Birthday Cake', March 2017



'Daydream-Doze', December 2016



'Untitled', May 2017



©Fritz Dressler, November 2017



‘Winter Morning’, January 2017

Looking back this beautiful winter day stands out in my memory from all our nature walks. Fresh snow had fallen the night before, and Fritz enjoyed himself taking images of the landscape he loved.

Following September 2018, Fritz’s health declined steadily, and he became physically very fragile. In December 2018, he moved into a long sought-after special care residency for demented people, taking along some of his furniture and framed images. The efforts made by his children and partner to integrate him there coincided with a short but necessary hospital stay. When he came back into the nursery after only some days away his mental and physical strength had further decreased. He did not recover anymore. Sadly enough, this made it easier for him to feel some sort of ‘being home’ there, and to appreciate and finally enjoy the nursing staff’s dedicated caring. In January 2020, immediately prior to the outbreak of the corona pandemic, Fritz died aged 82 in his children’s and my presence of blood poisoning, a complication of his Alzheimer’s disease. His story stays to be the story of my heart.

Epilogue

When I began to photograph Fritz Dressler, I knew little more about him than the broad framework of his life, something like a short biography one reads on a book cover. His statements and remarks were often out of context and mysterious to me. Slowly his life story revealed itself through the personal stories I was told by his son and daughter, his late partner, and befriended photographers. All these stories were highly subjective, and in the face of the terminal nature of Fritz's Alzheimer's disease they were often charged with pain and the feeling not everything that mattered concerning Fritz had been addressed or lived out. It does not come as a surprise those stories about Fritz sometimes conflicted with each other to a considerable degree.

Portrait of an Artist as an Old Man is just another version of personal truth. It took me a while to fully understand that the complex story of Fritz, a subject no longer in command of his life narrative, could only be told through a 'conversation between images and text', a term used by Catalan multidisciplinary storyteller Laia Abril to describe her handling of the prominent components of her artistic practice.² Along with her and many other contemporary photographers and photo-based artists I do not believe that an image says more than a thousand words. I am confident that the image interpretation depends on text for deeper interiority: this counts even more for complex contexts as well as for issues and things that elude visibility. As Michelle Bogre writes in her newest book *Documentary Photography Reconsidered*:

No photograph operates solely in terms of its denoted literal content. We interpret all photographs, and all interpretation is culturally and situationally coded, shaped by broad social practices, cultural conventions, and personal experience. [...] The challenge for documentary photographers, photojournalists, and viewers is thinking about how the photographs are directing our understanding of the narrative.³

I absolutely wanted to have Fritz' personal voice in my work, wanted to achieve authenticity through his verbal utterances and later as well through his images he had made within the time we knew each other. This sometimes meant I had to take his

remarks out of the situational context, interpret them truthfully the way I thought he had intended to express himself and to apply them for example in the form of image titles or captions to my images of him. In doing so, Fritz's statements work as interpretations of my images. The idea of proceeding this way occurred to me in 2017, as well as combining my images with his. Ever since I have loved to adopt titles of songs or poems as image titles, for example in 'Riversong' or 'Mirror', to strengthen a certain association or mood already implicit in the image itself. Black and white gave me artistic freedom, a 'poetic dimension' (Cartier-Bresson) while supporting timelessness and universality which I consider to be so important for this story. In contrast, Fritz' color images strive for rootedness in the moment, a moment that passed and soon disappeared from his memory.

Portrait of an Artist as an Old Man has been recognized nationally and internationally. In 2019, it was one of five nominees in the 'Best work by an Emerging Photographer category' at the international Felix Schoeller Photo Award in Germany and was named 'Remarkable Artwork' at SIPA, International Photo Awards in Siena, Italy. The year before it won Silver (Portfolio) at TIFA, Tokyo International Foto Awards in Japan.

In 2020, the series was shortlisted for the prestigious Wellcome Photography Prize (Wellcome Trust, UK) and named 'Top 50' by Photolucida's renowned Critical Mass Portfolio Competition in the US.



©Mirja Maria Thiel, 2017



©Fritz Dressler, 'The Last Portrait', October 2018

About the Author

Born in Hamburg in 1971, Mirja is a German photographer whose approach to photography is rooted in her fascination for storytelling as a means of rising to challenge, living with change and showing compassion with humanity's and her own vulnerability. Originally, she completed a Master of Arts in literature and linguistics to become an editor in a publishing house. Later, while rediscovering her delight in photography by documenting her young children, she decided to study 'Photojournalism and Documentary Photography' in Hanover, Germany. As a visual author Mirja feels indebted to the documentary tradition and concentrates on personal projects mostly situated in her neighborhood. So far, her long-term work focuses on the elderly: the impact of Alzheimer's disease on the emotional landscape of caregivers and on the affected individual alike, as well as the exploration of eroticism in old age couples. She lives with her husband and their three children close to Bremen in Northern Germany.

Fritz Dressler (1937-2020) was a German photographer working in the genres of architecture, landscape, travel, commercial and reportage. Before completing his degree in architecture in Kassel, Dressler studied photography with Otto Steinert who is well-known for developing the theory of 'subjective photography'. Afterwards Dressler studied Ethnology at the Free University of Berlin. From 1967 until 1972 he worked for the German architect Frei Otto being part of the team who assisted in the construction of the roof of the Olympic Stadium in Munich for the 1972 Summer Olympics. However, Dressler gave up an architectural career to embrace his passion for the image. From 1972 he worked as a freelance photographer for agencies and huge companies as Airbus, Lufthansa, Klöckner and Bayer. In 1975 he obtained a professorship for 'Photography and Moving Images' at the University of the Arts in Bremen. For his calendars and more than 100 illustrated travel books he received 12 Kodak awards. Dressler has left behind a huge photographic archive that will be arranged in the future by his family.

Notes

¹ There is no single accepted definition of the term ‘documentary photography’ writes Michelle Bogre, a Professor Emerita of Photography, copyright lawyer and documentary photographer. Based on interviews with documentary photographers and photojournalists she suggests the following definition of documentary photography: ‘Maybe by combining these ideas [of the interviewed photographers] we might arrive at an expansive definition that begins with the idea of “documentation”, onto which we layer the idea that the documentary image is not constructed, although it may be slightly staged or directed; that it can be poetic, that it bears a degree of witness and provides some evidence, that it seeks truth and touches on reality, it involves storytelling, it is often intensely personal, it is democratic, and the photographer’s intent is the substrate upon which the image is constructed.’ In Michelle Bogre. *Documentary Photography Reconsidered. History, Theory and Practice*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019, p. 25.

² “Beneath the Surface”: Laia Abril in Conversation with Sophia Greiff in *image/con/text. Documentary Practices between Journalism, Art and Activism*. Edited by Karen Fromm, Sophia Greiff, Malte Radtke and Anna Stemmler. Reimer Verlag, Berlin 2020, with texts in German and English, p. 150-161.

³ Michelle Bogre. *Documentary Photography Reconsidered*. p. 56.