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The Travelling Self

Thera Mjaaland

http://thera.no

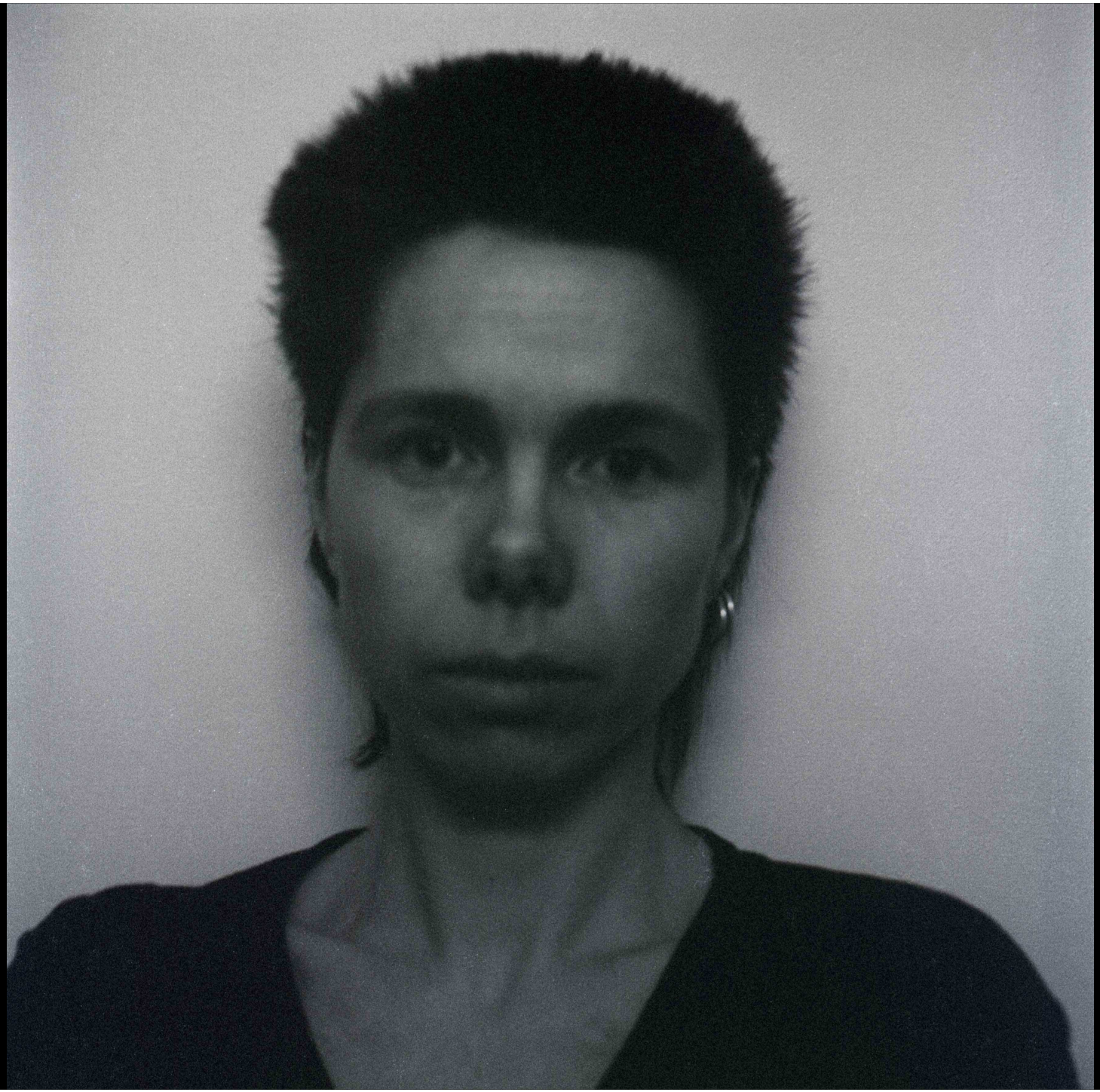
I have found great pleasure in moving on both in a physical sense and in my work. In the late 1990s I also travelled from the art scene to academia. This career move did not mean that I stopped photographing though. The methodological use of photography has been an integral part of my academic work as a social anthropologist. In what I see as a misunderstood schism between art and science, I am concerned with visual knowledge production at the intersection of experience-based artistic and academic practices.

And I have photographed self-portraits all along.

Svolvær, Norway
1986

But let me take a step back in order to contextualise my path: Choosing to be a photographer was not a matter of course (even though history does not lack examples of female photographers) up until the mid-1970s when I decided – as a personal feminist pursuit – to enter the still male dominated arena of photography in Norway.

Many of us went to the UK for our photographic education at the time, and many of us returned to Norway with the ambition of getting photography recognised as art. My career started with “female” or “woman” in front of the classification as a photographer. And it was indeed high time when I happened to be the first female photographer exhibiting solo in Preus Photographic Museum in Horten in 1979. One question at the time (and that might seem quaint now) was to what extent a female photographer “sees” differently and makes other images than a male – because of her gender? As a matter of fact, this was also a question asked by women who invested their academic efforts in feminist epistemology as a form of activism (e.g. Code 1981).



Røst, Norway
1986

Engaging with this question, my photographic art work, where I have used myself extensively, often took stereotypes of femininity as its point of departure.

The feminist slogan “the personal is political”, encompassed the question of what exactly it meant to be a woman not only as a personal project but in society. Changing my first name in 1987 – which might not have been a particularly tactical career move at that stage –was part of my own self-imagining project. With hindsight it is obvious that I was part of a bigger wave having started off in the 1960s and 70s, and which the art historian Frances Borzello classifies as the “feminist impact” on the till then male-dominated art scene. “What is new”, she asserts about this period in her discussion of women’s self-portraits since the 16th Century, “is that the artist uses herself [face and body] as a way of presenting much broader issues and ideas” (Borzello 2016: 198).

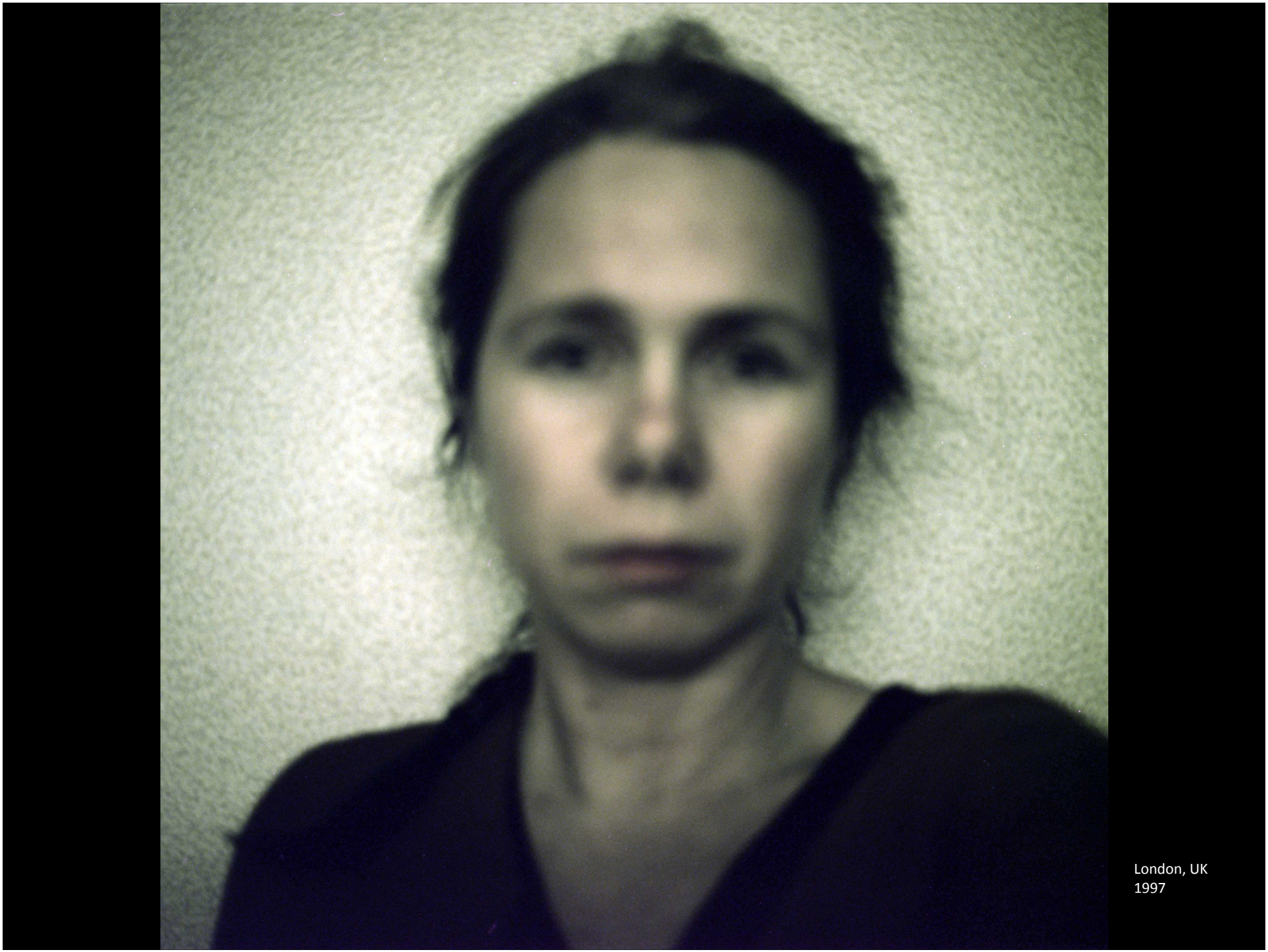
Untitled
1986

Untitled
1986

It is those images where my face is included that I have come to think about as self-portraits however, and which I will talk about here. In this project, which has followed me around on my personal travels as well as anthropological fieldtrips for at least three decades, the camera is turned around and held at an arm-length in a reflexive move.

The fact that these faces are more or less out-of-focus is a practical result of my arm not being long enough to fall within the focus range of the medium-format cameras used (since this was before the selfie-stick was invented) together with the fact that the images have often being taken in badly lit circumstances.

London, UK
1997

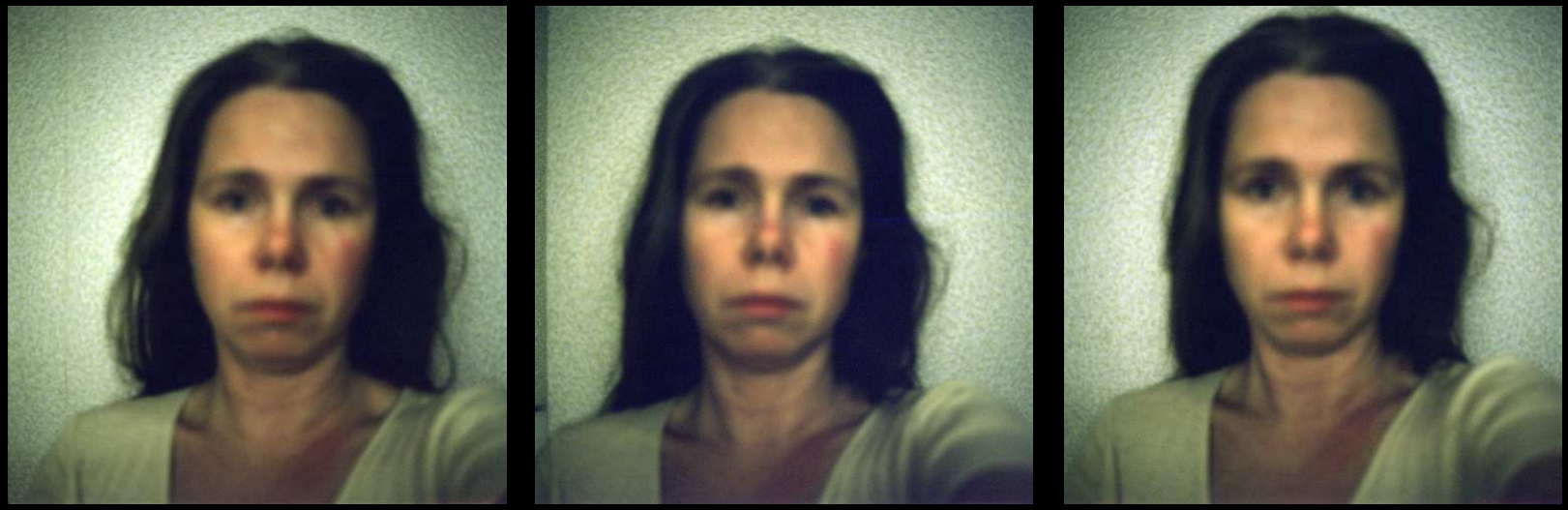


London, UK
1997

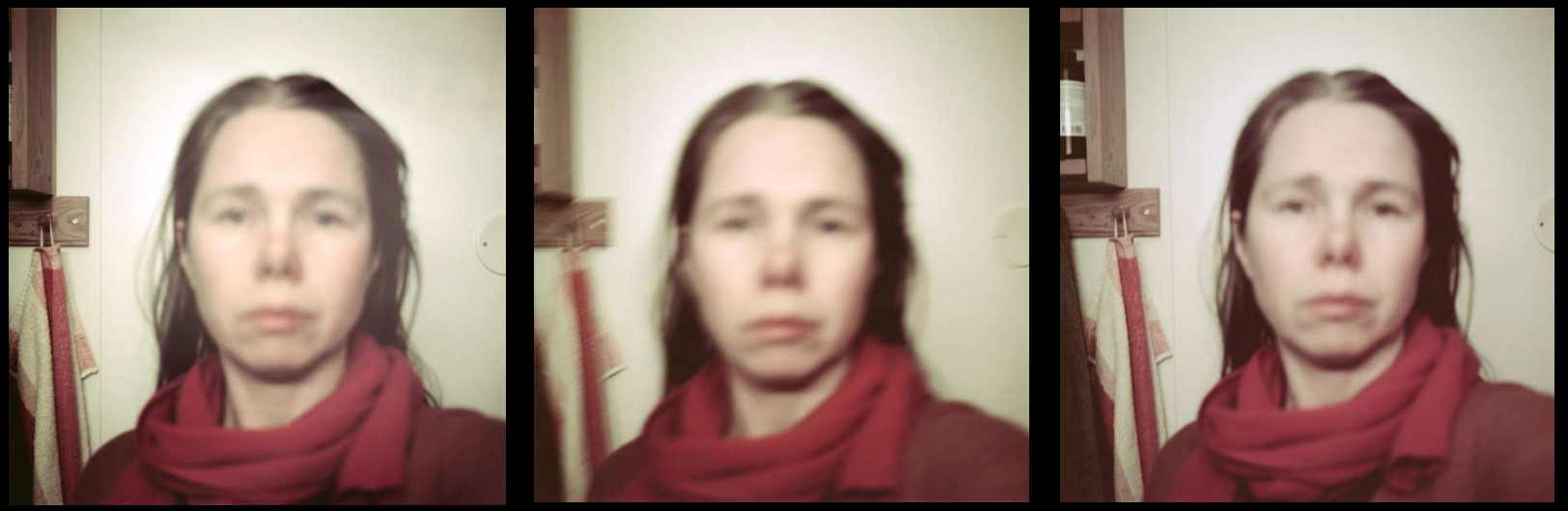
Arles, France
1989

In these moments of solitude a state of presence was sought for by looking straight into the camera. A state of emotional equilibrium based on not trying to generate a specific feeling other than being an embodied “me” – and resist the temptation of making myself into an image, to paraphrase Roland Barthes(1993) – was attempted.

Wanting to investigate the link between one particular state of mind and appearance in a photograph, these images have come to represent rather ambiguous expressions situated on a continuum between aesthetically appealing and intriguingly appalling.



London, UK
1997



Bergen, Norway
1997

As such they explore, in a visual sense, the subtle tipping-point for when a photographic portrait fares rejection as a “good” or sufficient representation of a person. As photographic portraits they play with the hard-lived belief that a self can surface in a photograph. It is also important to remember here that social norms of demeanour and aesthetic conventions of attractiveness and beauty underpin what is defined as an ideal image of a self at a specific point in time.

My self-portraits thus comment, more generally, on the photographic portrait tradition, which I have engaged with extensively both in my artistic and academic work.

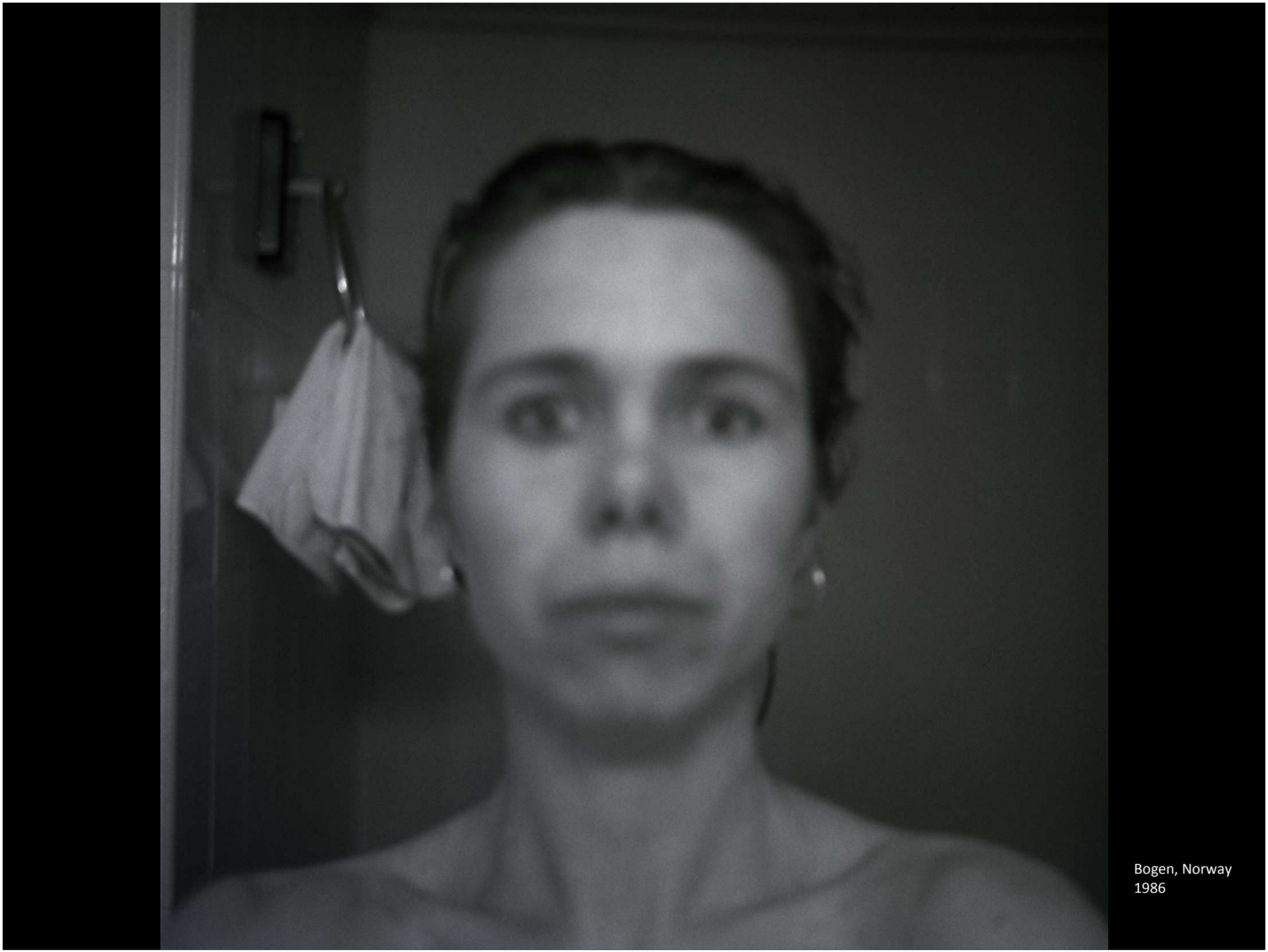
Paula
1992

Susan
1991

Art historian Sigrid Lien (1998) defines three conceptual portrait categories reflecting different interpretations of what a photograph of a person portrays. As early as the 19th century, there was "a widespread belief that the 'trace' produced by a photograph could be directly interpreted as an impression of the human psyche" (ibid: 26). Whereas this psychological portrait, or the modern character portrait, according to Lien, is expected to capture a true picture of this (inner) self – and consequently presumes the actual existence of an *authentic* self – typological portraits, on the other hand, focus on the individual as a "type", both as the product of and "emblematic of the society and the time in which they lived" (ibid: 128).

The (post-modern) view of portraits as "masquerade", in Lien's perspective, focuses on how the apparent neutral surface of these portraits is "constantly being threatened by a kind of underlying subjectivity" (ibid: 91). In my series of self-portraits I presume an interlinking of these interpretations. I am also interested in the discursive impact of the personal photograph on identity-forming processes (Mjaaland 2006; see also Sandbye 2001).

Oslo, Norway
1994



Bogen, Norway
1986

Jaques Lacan's (1996 [1949]) understanding of the mirror stage when the child is between 6-18 months, and the impact on personhood of this coherent image that for the first time is apprehended in the mirror (albeit at first misrecognized as another person), has been used to understand how photographs can enter into self-defining processes. Drawing on Lacan, Marianne Hirsch emphasises that the "mirrored" self, as we know it from personal photographs, produces an "ideal self" that "disguises the profound incongruities and disjunctions on which identity is necessary based" (Hirsch (1997: 101).

The many varied uses of photography as "a technology of the self" in a Foucauldian sense can, in Olu Oguibe's view, be conceptualised as ritual self-imaging (Oguibe 2001: 116-7); and hence, reaffirming us as persons in our own image.

Endabaguna,
Ethiopia 1997

Drøbak,
Norway 2014

But what about those photographs that we normally would not hold onto because they do not fit the "ideal image" of a self?

Or happens to reveal the most painful aspect of a relationship?

Mothers and
daughters.
Thera and Pitt,
Oslo 1995

The re-tracing of my travelling path as a photographing self here is based on an excavation of in-between negatives with self-portraits from the mid-1980s onwards, and that I always have wanted to show in one way or other as a series, but that with only a very few exceptions, till now have *not* been shown in public. One reason for this hesitation lies in the question:

What does it require for the photographic image of a face to transcend its privateness and strike a core of collective imaginaries?

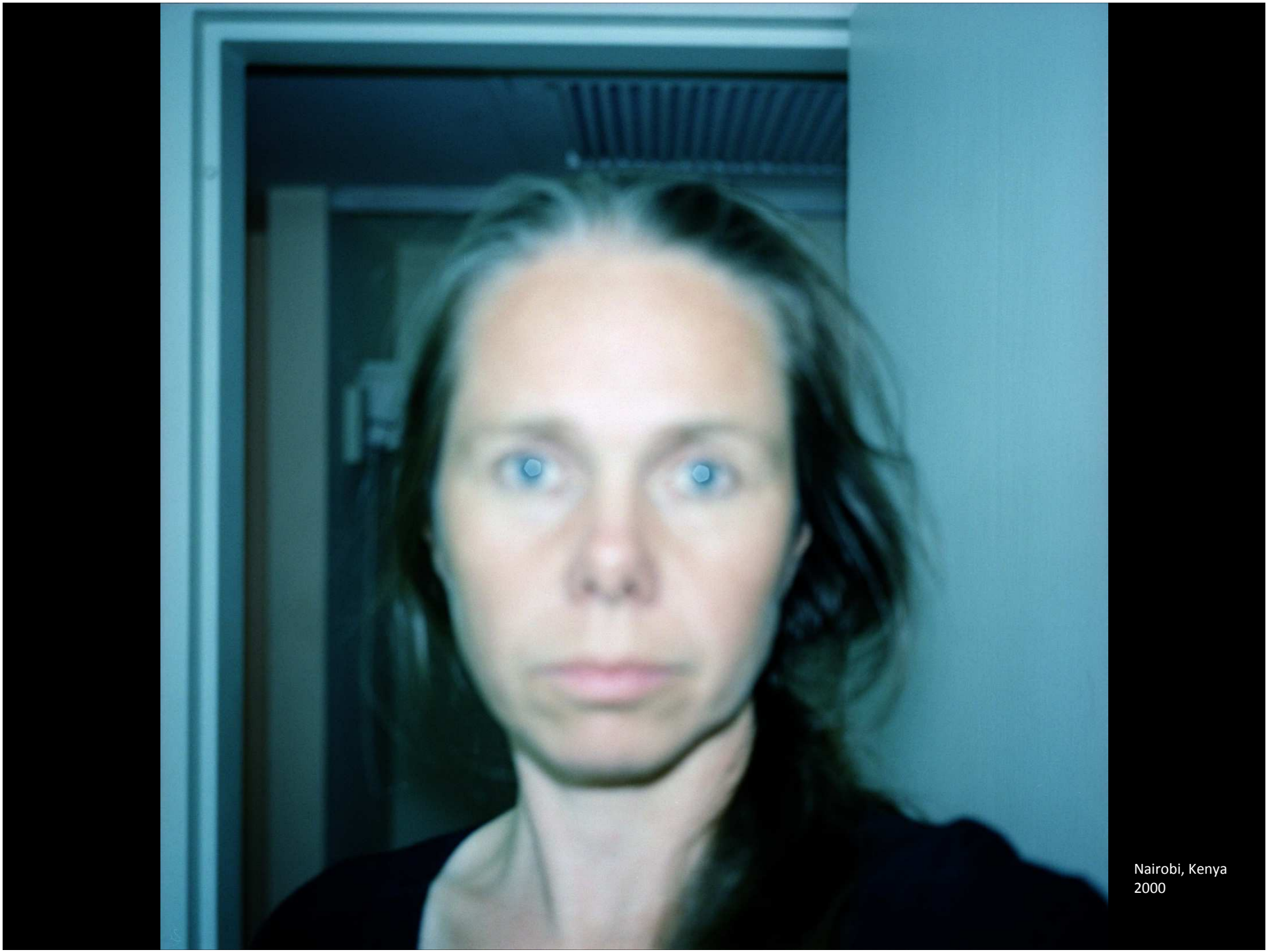
Asmara, Eritrea 1996

Asmara and Keren, Eritrea 1996

New York, USA 1998

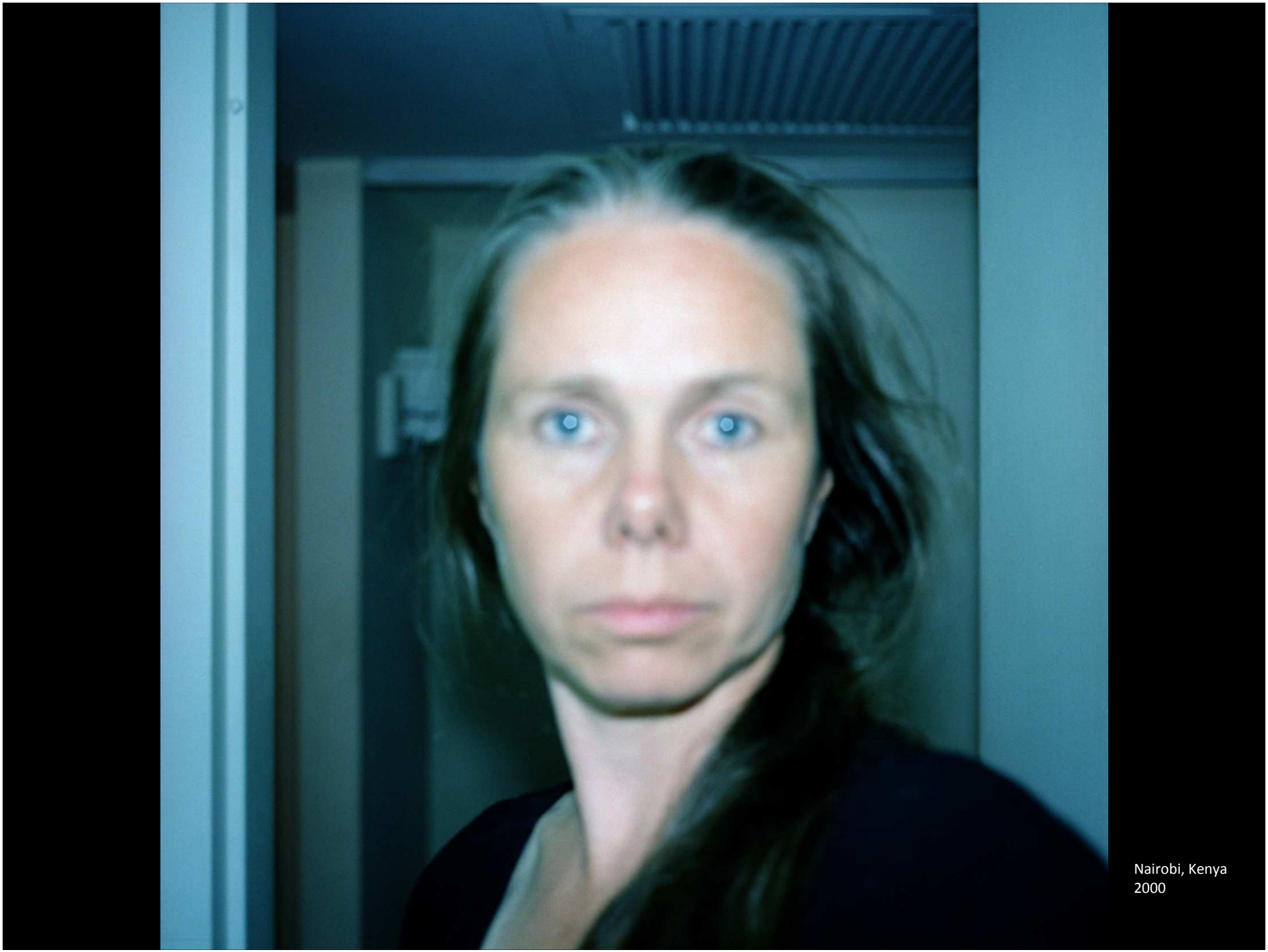
The above question does not concern self-portraits only but the image of a face in general. Does the photograph of publicly known people manage to bring us beyond voyeuristic curiosity? To what extent do we have to "know" the person to make sense of the photographic portrait?

Theoretically, I base my discussion on the perspective that it is the realism of photographic representations which enables them, in an indexical sense, to point back to a reality *beyond* themselves as images. In the same vein, it is as a metonymic space-time fragment that the photograph can indicate a continuation of reality *beyond* its own framing of the visible. This perspective is based on CS Peirce semiotic theory frequently used to explain the indexicality of photographs, and Roland Barthes phenomenological take on photographs where he differentiates between the denotative level of a photograph as description, or *studium*, and the connotative level, *punctum*, which by way of personal attraction or distress, even pain – can move the viewer *beyond* what is actually seen in the image.



Nairobi, Kenya
2000

Nairobi, Kenya
2000



Nairobi, Kenya
2000

Barthes asserts: “The *punctum,* then, is a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see” (1993: 59). Peter Larsen ends his discussion of Barthes’s interpretive approach – where Larsen links the *studium* to voyeurism and the *punctum* to fetishism – by asserting that “the Photograph is the most ambiguous of all known image forms. Photographs are always closeness, eternal presence, and fullness. And always – at the same time – absence, eternal past, and loss.” (2004: 285).

In what she terms the “ambiguity of the realist paradigm”, Elisabeth Edwards emphasises however that the more ambiguous the photographic image is, “the more *incisive* it can become in its revelatory possibilities” (Edwards 1997: 55, italics added). The photographic image then is not only about representation but how it manages to move the viewer *beyond* what he or she sees; or said more in line with the current theoretical discourse – the performativity of photographs.

London, UK
1995

It is this beyondness that photographs in their ambiguity performs that interests me both as an art practitioner and as an academic.

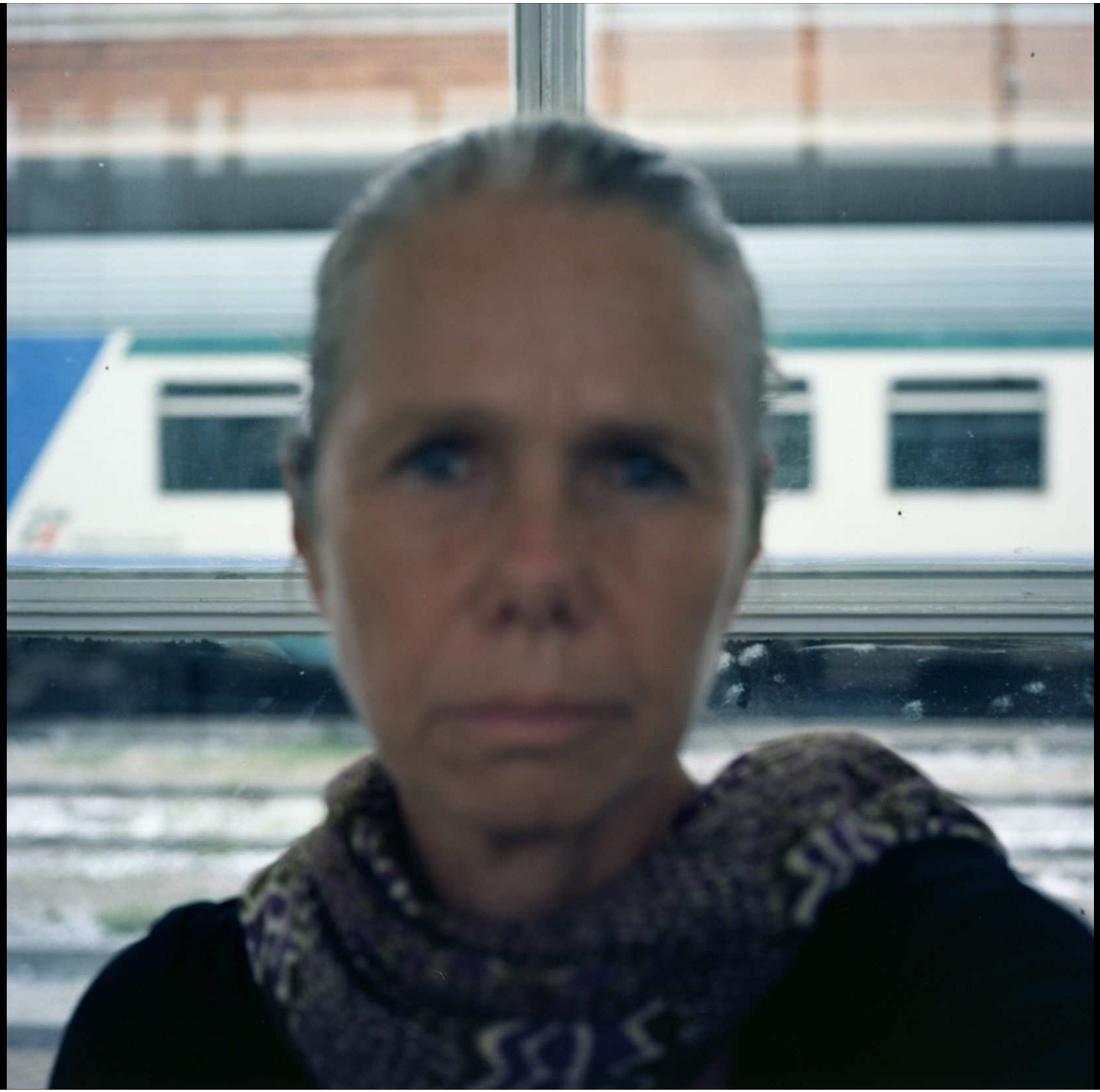
In my self-portraits this *beyondness* is also linked to place; sometimes implicitly with only a reference to place in the title, sometimes more explicitly by being placed in conjecture with images of that specific place taken at the same time. The reference to place, which in most images is not visible to any significant degree in the actual image of my face, also points to a traveling between these places – a travel *beyond* the frame of the image – in a process of creating a self which is more complex and inscrutable than the hard-lived belief in one ideal self presumes.

Zanzibar, Tanzania
2000

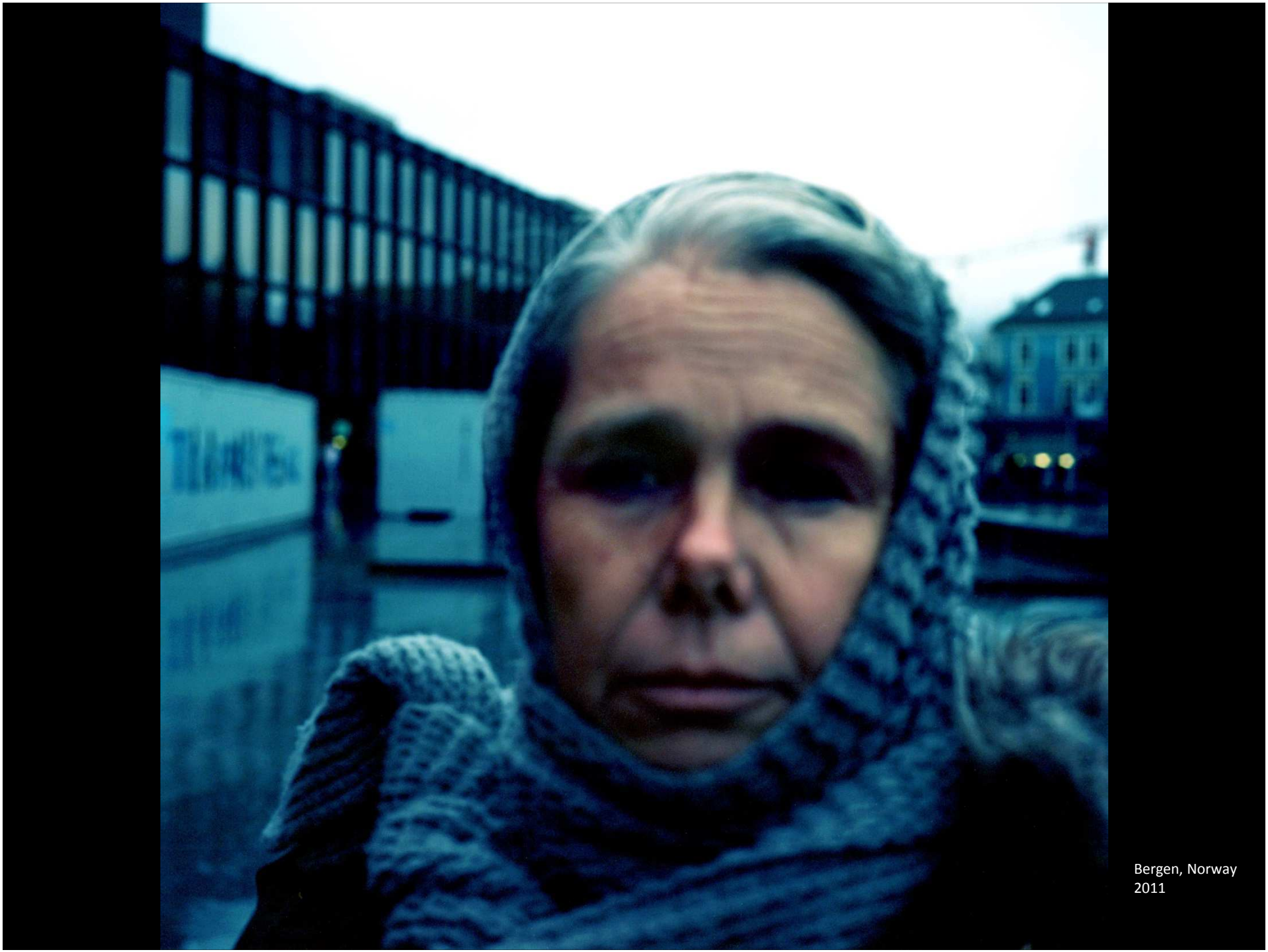
Massawa, Eritrea 1994

These are places with varying significance for my own life-history but often harbouring collective histories and meanings – even though the images do not show the most famous landmarks from the more well-known places – like Juliet's balcony in Verona.

Place has also been important in my academic work. Feminist epistemology emphasises the partial perspective from which scientific knowledge is always produced and, hence, the situatedness of knowledges (in plural). In an anthropological context, the reference to place can also be read as a critical comment on the "I know because I was there" still underpinning the ethnographic knowledge project. For what exactly is required to be able to know anything at all based on being in a specific place? Is it enough to observe?



Verona, Italy
2016



Bergen, Norway
2011

The first time I was in Eritrea in January 1994 it was less than one year since the country had become an independent nation after 30 years of liberation struggle.

It was the fact that women had participated with weapon in hand on equal footing with men that made me – driven by my feminist curiosity – travel there in the first place.

Forro, Eritrea
1996

Tigray region in North-Ethiopia has a similar history of armed struggle where the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front – also with about a third being women – had, together with its allies, seized power in the country in 1991.

My initial intention of doing documentary photographs that could tell everyday stories about a people who, in Western media, tended to be represented as war and famine-stricken *only*, had failed though, as people would pose as soon as they spotted my camera. It was peoples' eagerness to be photographed and the way they challenged the gaze of the camera with the directness of their own look, which had struck me and that generated a space for photographing *beyond* a colonial gaze on the "Other", since people were looking back and taking control over the photographic situation.

Mayshek, Ethiopia 2001

Mayshek,
Ethiopia 2001

Addis Ababa,
Ethiopia 1993

Turning my camera around was part of this process of reflecting on my position as a white female photographer travelling alone on the African continent.

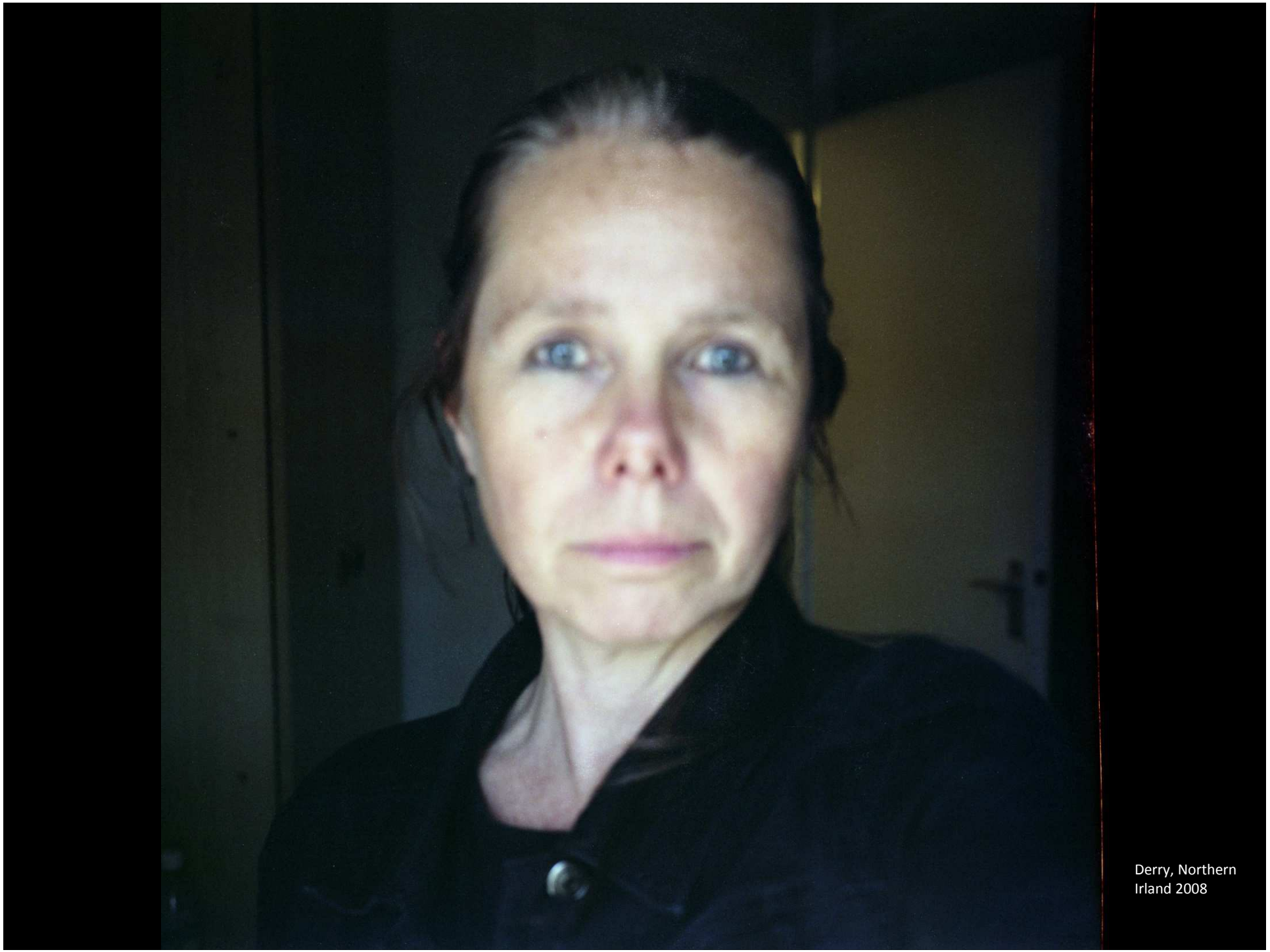
However, I realised I was often not seen as only me. At the same time I was a representative of a history of colonial oppression (even though Ethiopia prides itself of not having being colonised), and where it became difficult to travel *beyond* my own “whiteness”. Always having wanted to be seen, I was suddenly seen *beyond* my “self”; and hence, not necessarily as me – but as a “type” or phenomenon.

Bergen, Norway
2013

This series of self-portraits is not only pointing to a travel between places but a travelling over time. In spite of partly blurring the traces of ageing because of being slightly out of focus, and without explicating what has actually taken place in this particular life, these self-portraits nevertheless develop a time line of a lifetime when placed together. Hence, they draw on the other *punctum* that Barthes (1993) asserts is contained as an under-current in all photographs as a painful realization.

Precisely because the photograph is a fragment in time, it points to time, creating a connection with a now of the viewer and a that-has-been of what is actually represented in the image, reminding us of death.

Harar, Ethiopia
2012



Derry, Northern Irland 2008

Mekelle,
Ethiopia 2013

In conclusion, it is my contention that it is precisely the implicit time-specificness of place which generates a space in my self-portraits where self-exploration and collective imaginaries intersect and that, at least sometimes, harbours a punctum *that enables a travelling of the photographic representation of my face* beyond *being just private.*

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