

New York, Tokio, Heusenstamm

Photographer Alexander von Reiswitz Turns Passers-by into Family Members across the World.

By Freddy Langer

There's a banal fact that old people never fail to churn out with a certain degree of enthusiasm when describing the hint of melancholy which every family photo seems to give off: we'll never be that young again. And yet "back then" are often the first words that occur to you later on when you see the mother kneeling next to the children, the grandfather putting his hand on his granddaughter's shoulder and the teenage daughter breaking ranks to show, with her eccentric behaviour, that she's unwilling to pretend that life is full of harmony. But that's exactly what family pictures are all about: arranging memories; usually happy ones, of a party, an outing or a holiday.

Later on, someone will say "Look at that!" in a meaningful way and then ask the others "Do you remember?" The day always arrives though when everyone confesses that the picture of that moment has replaced the actual memory of it. The family picture doesn't document but rather idealises. Berlin photographer Alexander von Reiswitz's work also proves that only a few compositional principles taken from a trusted iconography are needed for such photos.

He intends to take family photos (or "family arrangements" as he calls them) in more than forty cities across the world.

But the people shown in these pictures will never gather round the photos and begin to reminisce about "back then". One can assume that this is because they will never see each other again.

"Would you mind being a grandfather for a picture?" is actually Alexander von Reiswitz's preferred question when starting to put his groups together.

He usually asks an old man this question to begin with and then, with him already on his side, is able to generate a sense of trust in the other people he goes on to ask. This avoids any elements of salaciousness that could all too easily arise when trying to get complete strangers to embrace one another and portray a form of privateness which may well convey a greater sense of security than these people may normally experience in their lives.

This is the real miracle of his series: most of the passers-by approached by Reiswitz are immediately willing to take part. He doesn't even have to give any great explanations, regardless of whether asking people in Tokyo, New York or a small German town. Even mothers show no qualms at putting down their babies for a second to be in these pictures.

"What a nice idea", the people say, smiling and moving closer together, following Reiswitz's brief instructions without any element of shyness; it's almost as if being in front of the camera creates a need for closeness. It's almost frightening to see how much these strangers actually like playing the role of a family and how easy it is for them to convey the idea of the family as a place of refuge.

Noticeably, it is only the girls who often keep their hands to themselves as if seeking reassurance.

The fact remains, however, that Reiswitz's photos read like a message of peace: are we not all just one big family?

The people in these pictures don't know each other. And yet they are perfectly capable of portraying a family in a believable way. But is this a message of peace or cause for concern?

It's only when Reiswitz mentions that he sees himself as playing God that all such sentimentality evaporates; while this may sound a little bit cool, perhaps it is a necessary part of his work.

For his work does, after all, suggest that fate could have had a different path in mind for these people. On one (and only one) occasion, the people in the photo actually exchanged telephone numbers. "I always wanted a father like you," he heard a young woman saying. "And I a husband like you" added an old woman.

Reiswitz's family portraits are thus not without a hint of melancholy. They are complete fabrication and yet some small flash of truth still sparkles within them. It is now exactly these groups though that are now to be firmly anchored in the real world; Reiswitz plans to have writers dedicate a story to each and every one of them.

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