

# Wiebke Leister

Whilst doing my MA in Germany, I looked at the unclassifiable aspect of emotional turning points in photography. Since one can't really speak about "emotions" in photographs, one is merely left with the face and its expressions. It is just like the impossibility of neutrality in emotional expression: its openness triggers interpretation and this is what interested me.

The subject of my PhD is laughter – laughter in the sense of an un-photographable and un-photographic event that leaves the borders of the still image. In 2003 for instance, I had a show at the Goethe Institut called "Laughing in the Face of the Enemy", which looked at the moment when laughter flips into something other than simply joy. Thinking about the Final Show, I decided to concentrate on my most recent project, which started with the idea that tickling is in a way similarly intrusive to clowning. After all, the behaviour of a clown can also be violating and embarrassing.

At the heart of the whole project stands my inquiry into photography as a medium. How much we can actually reveal (or not reveal), and what we take away (or add) when taking photographs.

**Concerning visual research, how is the work you produced and how are you approaching the work as research?** It is investigating the boundary between emotion and expression and how photography is criss-crossing between the two sides of this gap. As a viewer you are continuously trying to bring the two together, but in the end you can't. This threshold is the fascinating thing for me. Trapping the viewer in it, s/he will find a way into the image – and the only way to enter the image is by recalling things.

The project started by thinking about the nature of portraiture. The English word "portrait" seems entirely bound to the likeness, the individual and its identity. In German we have two words: *Porträt* and *Bildnis*. The latter includes something more universal, not just the description of a particular person. These "unlike" portraits have a metaphorical potential. In response, I came up with the idea of the "non-likeness". The term bends portraiture away from the likeness in a similar manner to how I am attempting to pull expression away from an apparently connected emotion – for example laughter away from joy. The aim is to find out what happens when you "open up" the space, visually widening the gap.

**How about the work you have made around tickling?** The process of editing is what really makes my work. I start with about 150 prints, organizing them in lines, pairs or clusters to see how they inform each other. The flow of images is just as important as the single image.

In the process, the child is almost objectified – it is the tickled. But because I want to stress that there is a dialogue in tickling, I will juxtapose these images with the photograph of a child that clearly is an agent – the boy with a clown's nose. I want to install the images quite high up, so that they become these orgeastic angels playing their mythological games.

**What has the work told you about tickling and about photography?** Tickling stands between trust and fear, agony and ecstasy – perhaps the

agony of ecstasy. It's probably the kind of work you can only do if you don't have children yourself. The children return and ask for more when a moment ago they were half in tears. There is no consideration that someone could do them harm. Darwin wrote: "a young child, if tickled by a strange man, would scream from fear" – and it wouldn't laugh – but these children do laugh because they do not expect that you would really overstep the boundary. There is a kind of unspoken contract.

**And how does tickling become allegorical material for a reading of photography?** Well, for me these are not "portraits", they are rather portraying an action, or an expression, or the laughing, or a certain slice of what laughter can be. The images try to encourage your imagination, reminding you how laughter comes over you almost like an illness. Thrown by your body, you can't help laughing. I always find it interesting how one can add an element of motion to photography.

**How did you negotiate working with the children?** They are sitting on their parent's lap playing with each other. **So, it's the parent tickling the child?** Yes, but you can only see their hands. It's a bit like a miming play. **Or ventriloquy. What did Nietzsche say about laughter? Laughter means: being schadenfroh, but with a good conscience.** Tickling borders on something sinister, it borders on pain. Someone said tickling seems to train us for something. I suppose it is actually about inviting people into your space but at the same time becoming aware you have to defend your space. It is yet another threshold indicating both: the limit of subjectivity and the limit of the body.

**You've focussed the work very much on the individual being tickled and bracketed, in a way, "the tickler". If we approach tickling along the lines of the portrait and portraiture, what have you found to be the nature of the exchange between the tickler and the tickled?** That the ticklee laughs is inevitable, but it is strangely contagious. The tickler also laughs but you are not sure: is it empathic or does it reveal a feeling of superiority? There is a mechanical reaction of the body in tickling, but it also involves a loving gesture. It is a game, but at the same time there is this moment when the child can't breath any longer, when it is just screaming and you have to find out if this scream you have provoked is for pleasure or for fear.

[Interview by John Slyce](#)

wiebkeleister@hotmail.com

All images from the series  
'Hals über Kopf'

2006  
C-type prints, Diasec, framed  
50 x 60 cm

From the PhD Project '*Unjoyful  
Laughter and the Non-Likeness  
of Photographic Portraiture*'







*'It is a laughter that never  
sleeps, but is like a malady  
endlessly pursuing its destined  
way, ceaselessly carrying out  
the commands of providence.'*

Ch.B.