

Photofit: Self-Portraits

A project by Giles Revell & Matt Willey

Interviews by Philip Oltermann

Introduction

There are no photos in circulation of Jacques Penry, the man who invented the Photofit, but from what he wrote in his books, you would guess that he might have looked a bit suspicious. A photographer by trade, the Frenchman had been fascinated by facial topography as early as the 1930s, when he published his magnum opus *The Face of Man*. There was, Penry claimed in it, a direct link between any human's physique and their personality: philosophers, for example, would show a marked development of the lower cheek muscles, while idiots and simpletons would invariably possess a markedly receding forehead. Following the Penry-method of facial classification, he claimed, one could cleanse society of "criminals, mental deficits, neurasthenics and vocational misfits."

Perhaps unaware of the supremacist overtones of its creator's early musings, Scotland Yard gave the Photofit kit a go in 1970. The kits come in wooden boxes, containing narrow paper strips with various facial features and an index listing the contents: eyes, noses, mouths, haircuts, chins, roughly 40 in each category. There are transparencies for add-ons, such as glasses, facial hairs or wrinkles, and a frame on which the individual parts can be assembled.

The first Photofit portrait of a British suspect was broadcast on 22nd of October 1970, in connection with the murder of James Cameron in Islington, London. Surprisingly, it came up with the goods:

the image jogged a shop assistant's memory and led to the arrest of John Earnest Bennett in Nottingham. Soon though, policemen found that Photofit portraits of suspects often looked nothing like the criminals that were eventually caught: the Penry-method clearly had its limits. In 1988, the Met introduced computer programmes for facial profiling ("E-fits") and Photofit kits across the country were hurled onto rubbish heaps.

Penry's system might have been inaccurate and ideologically dubious, but it has qualities that appealed to us when we came up with this project. Photofit is tactile: you can touch the individual parts with your own hands and move them about until things click into place – it's like creating a puzzle. And it is immediate: there is no person standing between you and the final picture. We managed to track down a male and female kit from a Police Museum in Kent and invited a number of people to assemble their own Photofit self-portrait in Giles' studio in Clerkenwell. The end result, we think, is curious. Each portrait tells a story: it speaks of the hang-ups, insecurities and vanities we all have about our own appearance. They hint at how deceptive our relationship with our self-image can be. Jacques Penry claimed that he could deduce a person's character from their face in an instant. If nothing else, we hope that this project shows how the connection between persona and personality is a lot more complex than that.

*Giles Revell, Matt Willey & Philip Oltermann
August 2007*

Edmund Davies

Model

For me, it all clicked into place when I found the pair of eyes where the eyebrows joined in the middle. I thought it was interesting doing this experiment, because you could see how different hairstyles affected the way you look.

My dad was an optician, and I was his guinea pig. At school, the other kids used to laugh at me and call me speccy. Sometimes they used to call me Jarvis Cocker. One day I was in the queue for the Camden Job Centre, and someone came up to me and said I looked interesting. He asked me whether I fancied being a model and gave me his card. A week later I had my first audition. I've been in adverts for the National Lottery and for McDonalds. I've never acted in school plays or had any training – I am really a musician, but it's practically impossible to get paid for that, so I do modelling.

I guess they like my geeky looks, but I don't mind that much. You get used to it.



Anne Parry

Police artist

I have to admit that I struggled to put together my self-portrait.

I smile a lot, so I find it hard to visualise my face looking serious.

I remember these old-style identikits well, because I joined the Facial Imaging Team just as they were phasing them out – nowadays we use computers to create profiles of suspects. It is still a composite system, but the difference is that you can select features within the context of a face and alter them individually at the witness's direction, using programmes like Photoshop. I deal with minor to major crimes. Sometimes people have seen the suspect for a split second. Sometimes the suspect we are trying to identify has committed fraud at his workplace and will have had colleagues who saw him or her every day. What's surprising is that people sometimes find it harder to put the composite together if they think they know the face really well.

Many victims of burglaries are old people. Often, they can remember someone they met 50 years ago, but not the person who robbed them six hours before our interview. In other cases, you get what is called 'weapon focus': the victim will focus on the gun, and not recall the face of the robber at all. It's the same effect as a disguise.

If there is something unusual about a face, people will remember it. The problem is that most criminals look perfectly normal. My job is not to create a portrait that is 100% accurate – I just need a likeness, something that makes them recognisable. All I need is one person in a million to recognise the composite – it might just be the that person who drinks in the same pub as them.

Recognition is a very powerful and complex mechanism in our brain. We pick it up right from birth, but I think we never really understand it fully.



Peter Butler

Plastic surgeon

I don't look at my face that often, so I found the process of assembling my face quite challenging in the end. I definitely found that I got slightly obsessive about it. I am perfectionist, and I like to get things right. So that Bobby Dazzler haircut is a bit irritating.

I do both cosmetic and reconstructive surgery on the face – but I don't really see them as two different operations, more like two extremes on the same spectrum.

The statistics for cosmetic surgery are quite phenomenal – there are massive increases year on year. Sometimes it can have massive psychological benefits. In other cases people think that surgery is the key that will unlock their problem but it isn't.

If we do reconstructive surgery, we will make sure that we have photographs in order to know what the person looked like before he had the accident. I once had a patient who was involved in quite a severe road traffic accident which had impacted on his cheek, but also nearly ripped off his nose. We put that all back together in an emergency operation. Only when we looked at old photos afterwards did we realise that we had given him a straighter nose than he used to have. Luckily he was quite happy with the result in the end.

In roughly a year's time, I will be the first surgeon to perform a full face transplant in the UK. The greatest misconception among the general public, and even among some of my colleagues, is that there will be an identity transfer following a facial transplant. It's the Face/Off syndrome: donors are worried that if they donate the facial tissue of a loved one, they might one day run into a stranger walking down the street with their partner's face. In reality it's not like that at all: the identity of your face is dominated by the bone structure and the muscles underneath the skin, rather than the colour or condition of the skin tissue on the surface.

Would I consider plastic surgery myself? I don't really mind getting old, I love lived-in faces. But it all depends on the circumstances: if I had severe facial burn, I would certainly consider plastic surgery. The sad thing for me is that at the moment we are treating facial transplants as a potential end-of-the-line treatment, something to consider of all other treatments fail. I would suggest that if the first facial transplant in Britain is successful, we should consider it as the primary treatment.



Ruth Ryan

Antiques dealer

I have always hated looking at myself in the mirror. I hate my nose – I think it looks like the nose of a man, it's very crooked. I like my eyes when I have make-up on, but I can't bear to look at them when I don't. My front teeth are incredibly wonky, and they get wonkier and wonkier as I get older, and I hate them more and more. There was a point at which I didn't use to smile because I hated the way in which my teeth and my nose would move when I smiled. There are no pictures of myself in my mum's house. I have ripped them all up.

One day I stayed behind late at work and I came across a website that listed all the symptoms that I had suffered from all my life and explained that my anxieties conformed to a serious medical condition. I was shaking as I read the words. I had spent 15 years of my life without realising that I suffered from Body Dysmorphic Disorder.

It's very difficult to explain BDD, but it messes with your fundamental grasp on reality. You hate to be looked at for fear of repulsing people. It would be like someone trying to tell you that you have five fingers, when you have always seen four. Everyone is unhappy to some extent about the way they look – but BDD is an anxiety disorder, and it impacts your whole life. In spite of the fact that the suicide rates for Body Dysmorphia are higher than those for Schizophrenia, few people have heard of the condition and in some cases this can lead to people not taking the condition seriously. I would say that in terms of recognition, BDD is where anorexia was ten years ago. In February 2006 I founded The BDD Foundation (www.thebddfoundation.org) to raise awareness about BDD and enable people to get the help they need.

My wish when I am having bad BDD times is that I just want to look normal – I don't want to look like a supermodel. I just want to be like my boyfriend Joe: whip on a pair of jeans on a Saturday morning, walk to the shops and not even think about it.



Marc Crank

Chief executive

I've always liked my nose, because that is the only part of my face that I actually broke myself – I practice martial arts – rather than having been broken or stretched by the tumour.

They first discovered the tumour behind my eye when I was about 18 months old – up until then, I had been a normal baby, or, as I like to think, an exceptionally good-looking baby. It started around the eye and then moved across the right part of my face – eventually, the tissue closed up around the eye and they had to surgically remove it. The tumour speeds up as your hormones go wild during your teenage years – as you get older, it slows down, but it never really stops.

Generally, I don't judge people who decide to have surgery, but it should be a choice they make for themselves rather than pressure from society. I am quite happy with the way I look. By accident I once looked into one of those distortion mirrors that double up one side of your face. I realised what I would have looked like without the tumour, and I actually found that quite shocking.

The ancient Greeks had this concept of 'kalos kai agathos', which inferred a link between beauty and goodness, and I feel we haven't moved on from that as much as we should. It's sad to see that the media doesn't always make the distinction between how good you look and how good you are. I have a real problem with the way in which people with facial disfigurements are underrepresented, or worse, misrepresented in the public – that's why I am on the Advisory Panel of the charity Changing Faces. Why, for example, is there no newsreader with a facial disfigurement out there?

The only time you see people with scars in their faces they are the baddies. However, my personal hero will always be Danger Mouse, with the patch over his left eye. He carries his disability with real grace and dignity!



Humphrey Ocean

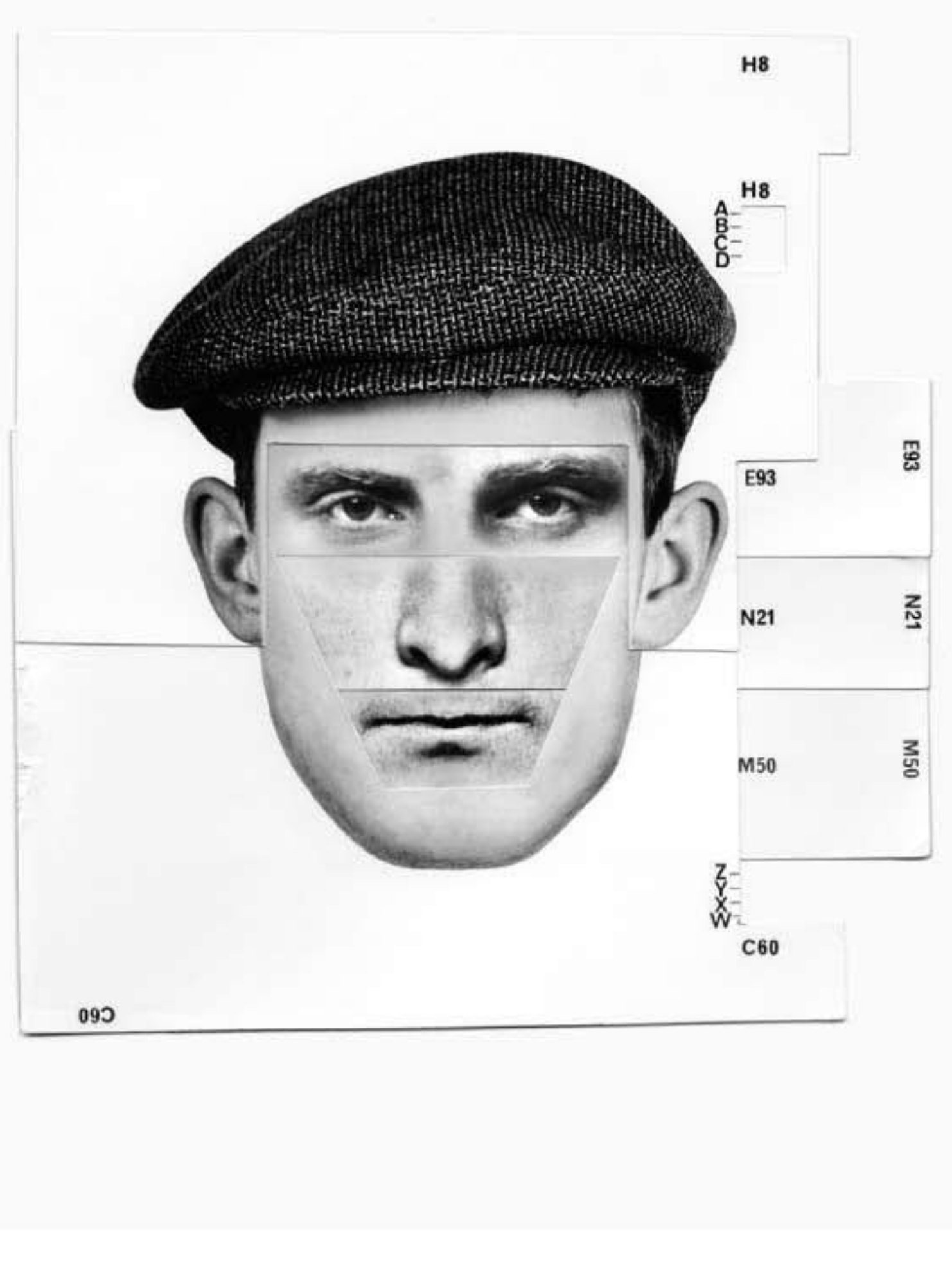
Portrait painter

Creating my portrait was easier than I thought it was going to be. Curiously, it's a very similar process to drawing or painting: it doesn't all happen at once, but slowly. Sometimes nothing makes sense until you put the hair in.

When I do a portrait I always start with the eyes. The heartbeat is in the eye. A good portrait should be like an extended conversation, and when we talk, we look into each other's eyes. It's very disconcerting if people look somewhere else while they are talking to you.

What is beauty? I don't know. I think when something is true, then it is beautiful. Take Rembrandt's self-portraits: they use beauty to attract you to the painting, but they are also slightly ugly. They are at once completely engaged and detached.

Beauty is such difficult thing to define: as soon as you start, it vanishes. As a portrait painter, it is my job to find sympathetic traits even in the most despicable person. I don't want anyone to walk past my portraits and feel no emotion.



Beryl Bainbridge

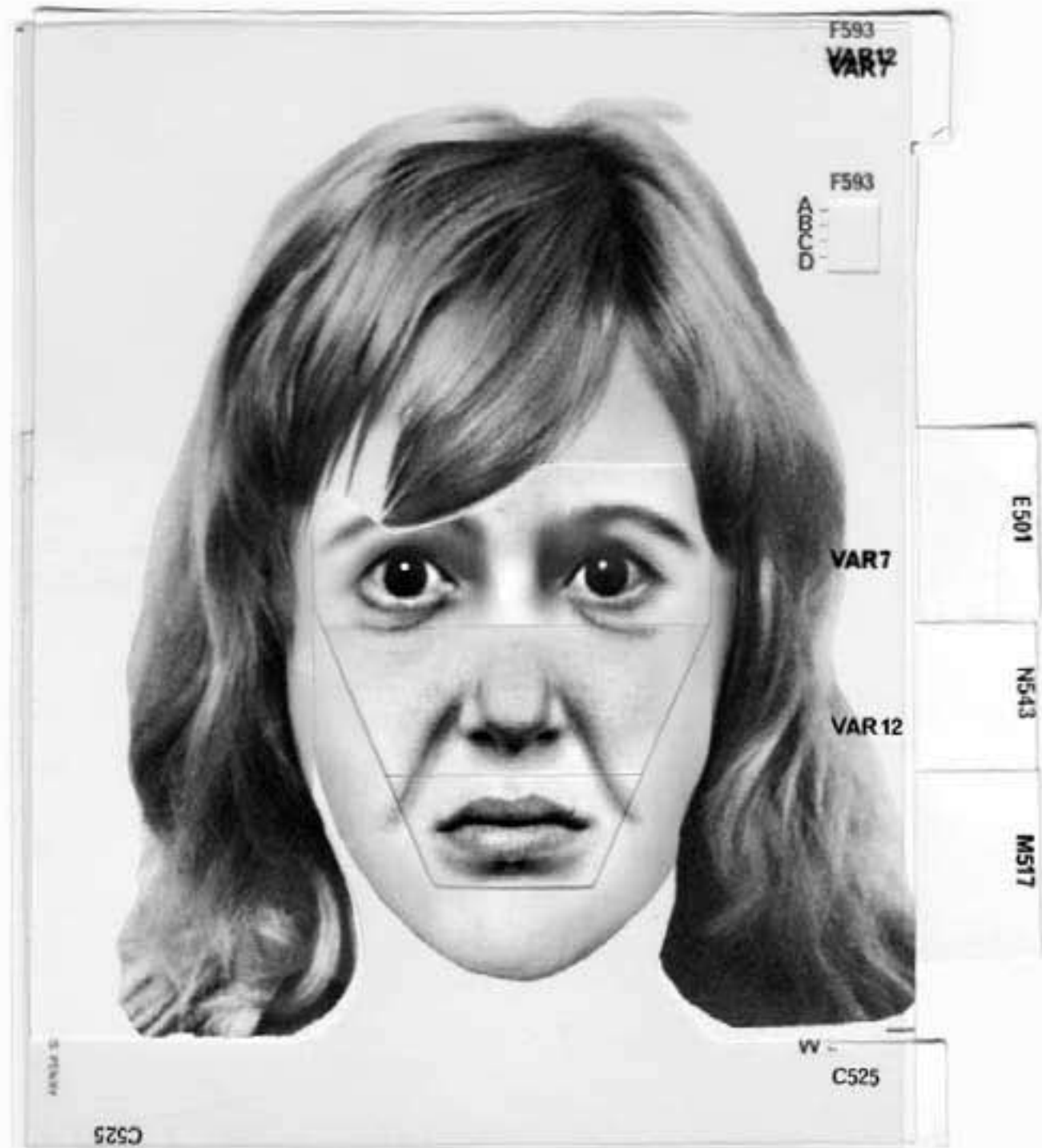
Writer

Putting together your own face is much easier when you are young. When you're old, your face is no longer the same. It's gone, in a funny sort of way. There are bits there, but it's not the way it used to be. Are there features of mine that have improved with age? No, nothing ever changes for the better. The wrinkles just arrived – I guess I got more because I smoked. Having spots was worse. The daft thing about faces is that when you are young, you are never completely satisfied with the way you look. And that continues right until you get old, and then you look back at photographs and you think: 'why on earth did I not think that that was alright?'

I myself didn't worry too much about my looks when I was young – I was actually quite confident. I used to fight a lot at school, I was a bit of a boxer. They called me 'basher'. There was a boys' school next door, and when they made remarks about our looks, I just used to wade in.

There's one thing I have noticed about faces recently: when you go away or you are downtown, and you catch a reflection of yourself in a window, it's not the same person as at home, in your own mirror. I have asked other people about that, and it's true. The image you see in your own mirror is presumably altered by your surroundings. While when you are out, you don't have that familiar space around you and your face appears quite different. You try it.

As a writer, one of the people who have most influenced me was Graham Greene, and he very rarely describes anybody's outer appearance at all. Sometimes when I write, I think God, I should say a little bit about what they look like. But I find that when you put words in their mouths and you write dialogue, you can sort of see what they look like. Lots of writers overdo descriptions – Dickens, for example, would describe every wart. I think it's more important to know what they are saying than what they look like.



Eamonn McCabe

Portrait photographer

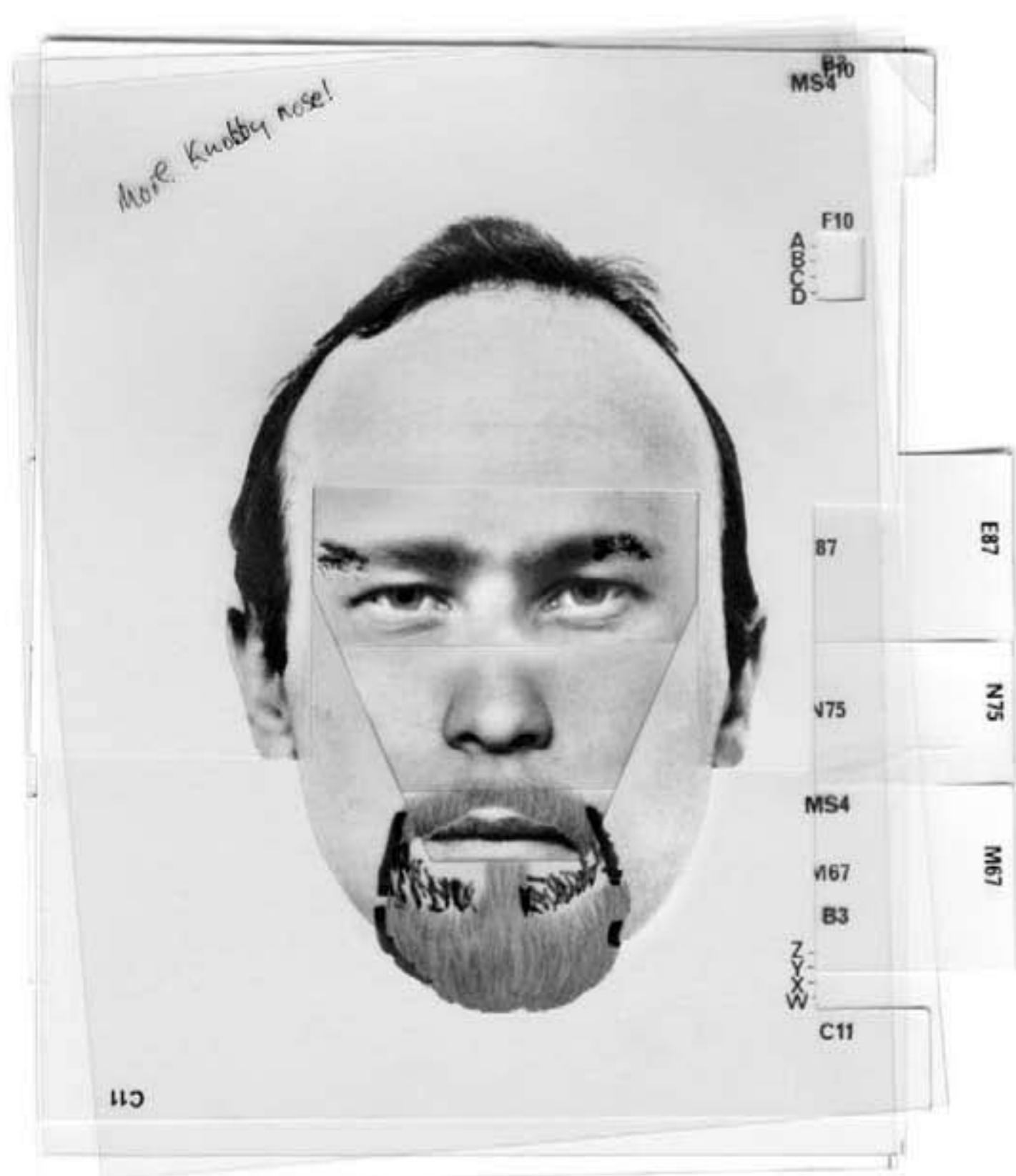
All portrait photographers focus on the eyes – when you set up a shoot, you make sure that there is light in that part of the face. But actually, the hair can be just as important. You get to a point in your career when people know who you are yourself, so you start to have a shave before you go on a shoot. Does that make me vain?

I'm not in love with my face – I think it's too round and I have this bald pate. You grow beards to complement the hair missing somewhere else – it's a good guise, if not a disguise. I've had mine since I was 19. It took me so long to grow that I didn't shave it off until about seven years ago – I was scared that I couldn't grow it back again. It took me 6 months to get the shape right.

I used to have a full beard, but I shaved it off one day. I remember I went into the office the next day, and the first person said: 'Hey, you've been growing your sideburns!'. When I grew it back into a goatee, someone said to me that I looked like a dead ringer for Richard Branson, and I quite liked that. The next person said, 'Nah, you look more like Burl Ives', and that got really under my ribs. I can take Branson, but Ives really got to me.

Men go through phases. I am 50 years old now, and I can't go back to being a twenty-four-year-old who reads Arena magazine and changes his hairstyle every week. The greatest thing I have missed is that I have never had to use gel – if I see another guy with that sprouting hair look, I'll scream.

I enjoyed the process of assembling this portrait, even though I am glad I wasn't chased by the police. The only disconcerting thing was that I found my forehead on the first page of the index. It was labelled 'bald'.



Simon Weston

Falklands veteran

I have had three faces in my life. The first was the one I was born with. The second one was the one I had after I got burned. The third is the face I have now, after numerous operations.

And yet I look at this self-portrait, and it doesn't look like anybody I know – it certainly doesn't look like me. It makes me think that there must have been hundreds of miscarriages of justice in the past. But I guess it's the closest we could get. I got the bone structure right: I have a round flat face. If you wrap a plastic bag around a pair of football boots, you could still tell that it is a pair of football boots in there. It's the same with your face.

The eyes felt right because one is slightly more closed than the other. My real eyelids look different, of course – they have been transplanted from my neck. The lip is full at the bottom like mine – it's like that because they had to pull skin from the inside of my mouth. The hair is the hair of a man in his twenties – I, however, am salt and pepper all the way. And the moustache is there. It always will be, because if I shaved it off, I would be left with just a white patch of skin underneath. The moustache saved that bit of my face, it took the initial flash of the explosion.

I reckon I was a pretty good-looking fellow before I got my burns. Then again, I reckon I'm a pretty good-looking fellow now. I really couldn't give two hoots about what other people think about me. The only person who has to live with me is me. That might sound arrogant, but I don't care.



Robin Taylor aka Rachel Williams

Music promoter

Trying to recognise bits of your face was a bit weird. There were moments where I thought I would just crack up, where I would have to just stop and look away. It was quite a challenge. The lips and the chin were the most important part. I have a dip in my chin, and I recognised that instantly. The only part from the male kit I used was the nose, but that didn't really occur to me at the time, I just used whichever pieces I felt happiest with. I guess I just found the pieces in the female kit more right.

I have been dressing up all my life, but only about three years ago did I become confident enough to actually go out as well. All my friends were totally fine when I came out. Most of them had had their suspicions anyway.

I am happy being either Rachel or Robin depending on what mood I am in. I have never been into the girly thing – I don't speak with a shrill voice or do the overly camp body language. But sometimes, when I am excited about going out on a Friday night, I like to flounce around. Rachel is definitely a bit of a Friday night girl. Robin is just Robin. I've not had any operations, and I have no intention to. With transsexuals, it's a case of you feeling that you are born in the wrong body – with transvestites it is easier. We just like to wear women's clothes.

I taught myself how to apply make-up. Someone told me that you should either accentuate your eyes or your mouth – I just go for it on both fronts. Occasionally, I will get stares, but I've never had anyone being rude to me in public. I've had people wolfwhistle at me from their cars in an ironic way, and I'd be like, 'Whatever, cheers!'

I guess Rachel has changed over the years. You've got to dress your age – even in drag. Sometimes you see people in their sixties in short skirts and you think: remember not to do that in thirty years time. Stick to what looks good.



Duncan X

Tattooist

I am not that good on faces. I often don't recognise people when they come into my shop – I will only remember their names when I see their tattoo.

The first tattoos on my own face were the two tear drops underneath my eye. It's an ironic reference to gangster culture – it's supposedly what you get done when you kill someone in prison. Or maybe I'm just very sad. Haha! I used to have a little beard under my lip, but then that suddenly became trendy, so I thought I'd go even more extreme and got this tattoo done. It's in the shape of an H. I used to have a bit of a problem with heroin, so it's a little reminder. I also have a tattoo on my eyelids: it says 'Don't Wake'. The X between my eyes? That's a bit hateful, really – it's actually carved in, so it's a scar rather than a tattoo. A lot of tattoos are like the acceptable face of self-harming.

When I am out on the street, having a tattoo across my face seems to work in my favour. It tends to disarm people. I know it can look quite threatening, and that was probably my intention to begin with, but if anything I tend to get nice comments these days. I have a kid now, and I recently went to a parents evening – they were fine, they know I am not aggressive.

I would tattoo the face of somebody who is in my profession, but I'd feel funny about doing it to somebody else. It has got to be acceptable. Once a girl came into my shop: she was a really angry person, and she wanted 'Fuck Off' tattooed across her neck. I wouldn't do it. I said to her, 'You're not always going to feel like that, my love'. She told me to fuck off. A colleague did it for her eventually. Now, a couple of years down the line, she's back in the shop to have the letters covered up.



Rajnaara C. Akhtar

Lawyer

I have never been really concerned about my looks. I grew up in Loughborough, in a largely non-Muslim school. The other girls at my school would spend several hours getting their hair right every morning – I never cared too much about that. I do think it's important to make an effort to not look scruffy when you go out, but I also think that there is a difference between looking presentable and looking attractive.

My parents encouraged me to wear the hijab when I was 14, but I was rebellious then. It was something that would have made me stand out, so I didn't want to wear it. Not until I was 18 and went to university did I start to understand the philosophy behind the veil. Now that I have chosen to wear it constantly, I know that it has come out of my own choice.

I noticed a change particularly in the way boys treated me. After I started to wear the veil, I just found that boys paid me that little bit more respect. When they did look at me, they would look me in the eyes.

I don't wear the niqab, but I disagree with the view that wearing a full veil is a barrier to communication. In this day and age, face to face communication happens so infrequently – most conversations are done over the phone or email – and we manage to express our feelings and opinions perfectly well that way. Why then, can we supposedly not communicate when we sit down together and look each other only in the eye? In Britain we don't expect people to subscribe to one way of dressing – that's just not how we do things.

At the end of the day, a woman is a woman. You don't have to show on a daily basis what it is that makes you female. I know that I am a woman – that doesn't mean I have to display everything to prove it.



Melissa Bradshaw

Music journalist

I started wearing hoodies when I was at boarding school. We used to smoke out in the woods, but teachers would come out to bust you, so everyone used to wear their hoods when smoking. Nowadays it's a comfort thing, so it's strange that some people perceive hoodies as threatening. Most of the time when I put my hoodie up, I do it because I'm tired and I want to shut out the world a bit. Living in London, I often come back home late, and I will always wear my hood up when I walk the streets at night – it makes me look streetwise and less vulnerable.

Obviously there are people who wear a hoodie because they are committing a crime and don't want to be identified, but it's a ridiculous generalisation to assume that everyone who wears a hoodie is a criminal. Recently I was in a pub, just having a few drinks with my mate, and a bouncer came over and told me to take my hood off. The psychology of that is interesting – you could write a PhD on it. Society is a lot more intrusive nowadays than it used to be: if you hide away a little bit from that surveillance, it is immediately considered aggressive.

I was very, very self-conscious about my looks from when I was about ten until I was about 18. You know at school everybody takes the piss out of you because of your red hair? I was at boarding school, and I had to walk past the boys rooms in order to get to class, and I remember once someone shouted at me “All ugly gingers should be shot!”. That when I was 14 and ridiculously paranoid anyway. One night I got really drunk and cut most of it off.

As soon as I left boarding school and went to London, everything was turned on its head – suddenly I got loads of attention from men because I was ginger. That was confusing. Now I am really happy with my hair, and I like being pale, even though I still feel uncomfortable about freckles. I am a music journalist and I go out clubbing a lot – UV lights can make freckles look very weird.

