In life and death

An extraordinary series of before-and-after portraits, with the final thoughts of the dying

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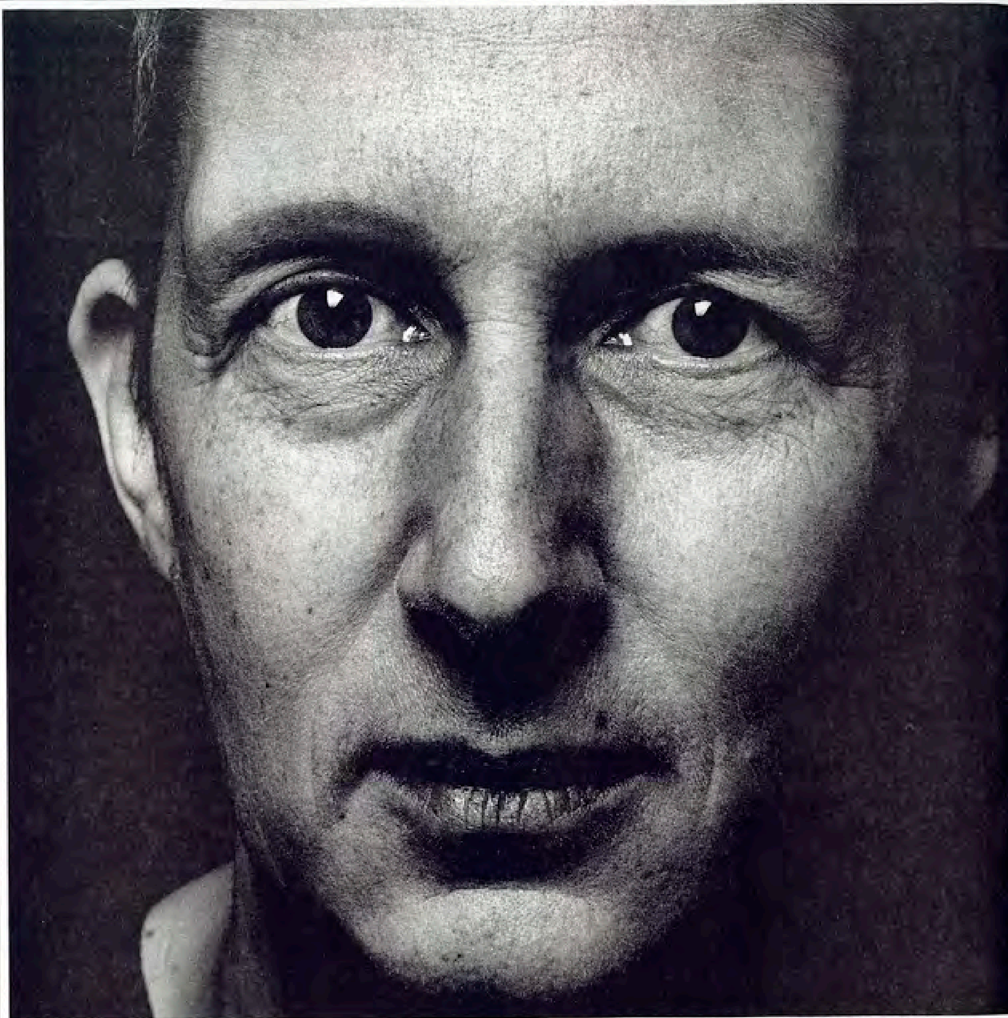
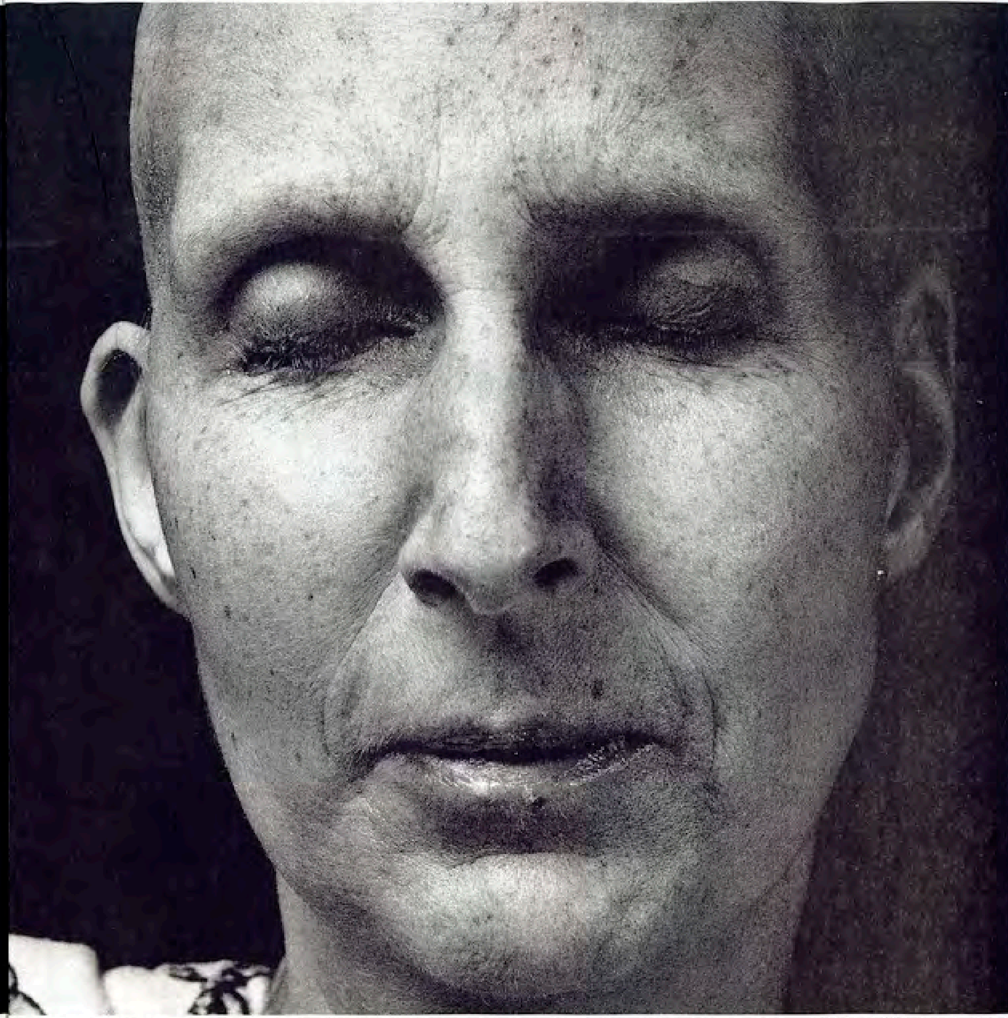
Endangered birds Michele Hanson Les Dennis Clive James Steve Bell





This is the end

German photographer **Walter Schels** was terrified of death, but felt compelled to take this extraordinary series of portraits of people before and on the day they died. His partner Beate Lakotta recorded the poignant and revealing interviews with the subjects in their final days. Overleaf, the couple tell **Joanna Moorhead** how facing death changed how they felt about dying – and living

Beate Taube, 44
First portrait taken
January 16 2004
Second portrait taken
March 10 2004

"To be able to have one more summer. To go to the sea with my husband one last time. Not to die now, but rather to have until the autumn . . ." these are the things Beate Taube told me she longed for. Beate had been receiving treatment for breast cancer for four years, but by the time we met she had had her final course of chemotherapy and knew she was going to die. She had even been to see the grave where she was to be buried.

Beate had four children: leaving them behind was the worst thing she had ever had to face, she said. The youngest, a girl, was seven at the time; the oldest, a boy, was 15. "I'm so sad I won't be there to support my children. I wanted to be there for them for ever. Now I tell them a hundred times a day how much I love them."

The only thing she was not afraid of, she told me, was the moment of death itself. "In fact, I imagine that passing from one realm into another must be quite a beautiful experience. I think that after I have died the suffering won't show on my face. If my soul is able to float away, as I hope it will, I will lie there completely at peace."

Beate felt that leaving her husband and children behind would be too difficult and painful if they were with her: before she died, she sent the children away to stay with friends and family. At the moment of her death she was entirely alone – her husband was in the kitchen making a cup of coffee. He told me later that he felt disappointed that he hadn't been with her, holding her hand, but he knew that is what she had always said, that dying alone would be easier for her.

Nothing, it is said, teaches us more about living than dying. But if so, isn't it odd how little we face up to death? And isn't it odd that modern societies, which appear so keen to find meaning in the business of living, push death to the periphery, minimising our contact with it and sanitising its impact?

The German photographer Walter Schels thinks it not only odd, but wrong that death is so hidden from view. Aged 72, he's also keenly aware that his own death is getting closer. Which is why, a few years ago, he embarked on a bizarre project. He decided to shoot a series of portraits of people both before and after they had died. The result is a collection of photographs of 24 people – ranging from a baby of 17 months to a man of 83 – that goes on show in London next week. Alongside the portraits are the stories of the individuals concerned, penned by Beate Lakotta, Schels' partner, who spent time with the subjects in their final days and who listened as they told her how it felt to be nearing the end of their lives.

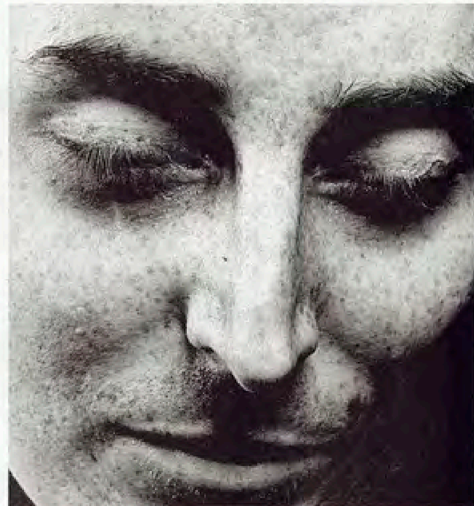
Schels and Lakotta work out of a spacious, top-floor flat in Hamburg: the tables, and even the floor, are littered with images from both this series and from the thousands of other shoots Schels has done during a long career taking portraits for some of the world's leading glossy magazines. But all his life, says Schels, he has had a crippling fear of death, and of dead bodies. "I was brought up in Munich during the war, and one day our house was bombed. I saw many bodies – limbs torn off, heads torn off, terrible things – and I have never forgotten them. Since that day, I was always afraid of dead bodies. Even when my mother died – she was 89 years old, and I'd taken her photograph earlier that very day – I didn't want to see her after death."

So it took every ounce of his courage to embark on a project that was going to force him into such close contact with the dead. "I was filled with terror. Sometimes when I was taking pictures of a body I would be loading my camera and I'd keep looking at their face out of the corner of my eye, making sure they really were dead. Once I had a dream in which one of the subjects woke up during the shoot, and said, 'What are you doing?' And I knew she was dead but I didn't want to tell her, and in my dream I was thinking, 'Oh no, how am I going to tell her she's dead?'"

Logistically, the project was fraught with difficulties. Finding people who were dying was relatively easy – the couple tracked them down through hospices in Hamburg and Berlin. Perhaps surprisingly, most of the people they approached were willing to be included, though a few said no. But a bigger problem, for Schels and Lakotta, was being continuously on standby to go to take pictures. "You'd get a call at 3am and it would be the hospice to say that someone had died, and we'd have to get up straight away and get over there so we could fit in a photo shoot between the relatives arriving and the undertaker coming," explains Lakotta, 42. "It was relentless, and very draining emotionally." Schels agrees: "We'd come back here in the evening, after a day when we'd maybe been to a funeral and shot pictures of a dead body, and we'd sit here crying and drinking whisky and wine." Both agree they couldn't possibly have completed the project alone. "There were times when it seemed such a strange, unbelievable thing to be doing," says Lakotta. "We could only talk to one another about it."

Photographing the bodies was a challenge. "The first shoot was terrifying: we were so afraid that we just crept in and photographed the body in profile, lying on the bed, without moving it at all," says Schels. "But when we compared the before-and-after pictures, we realised it didn't work – we hadn't captured the face in a way that mirrored it in its before-death state." Over the next few weeks the pair experimented to overcome the problems of rigor mortis and the effects of gravity on a dead face, until they came up with an answer. "We realised we had to sit the subject up, as they had been in the before-death shot," says Lakotta. She went, she says, from being someone who could hardly bear to touch a dead body to someone who thought nothing of moving a body around and coaxing it into a »

Jan Andersen, 27
First portrait taken
April 8 2005
Second portrait taken
June 14 2005



Jan was 19 when he discovered he was HIV positive. "But it was no longer a fatal disease by then," he said, and so he had carried on living life the way he liked, in the fast lane. Then, on his 27th birthday, he learned he had a rare form of cancer triggered by his HIV infection. After a short, fierce fight, he seemed to accept his destiny: he told his friends that he felt he'd had a good life, and that made it easier to go.

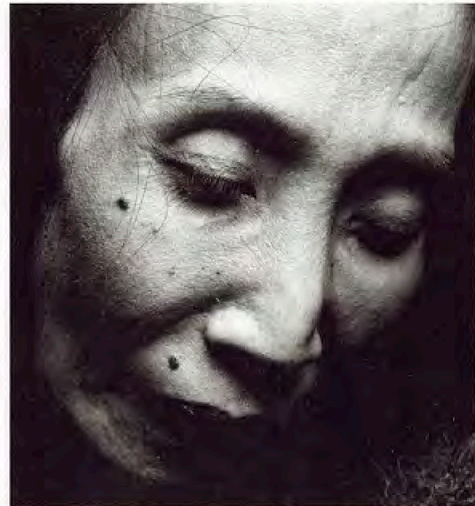
But he told me he was worried about the details of death – he asked his nurse, Iris, to tell him precisely what would happen when he died. And when the woman in the next room died, he went to have a look at her; seeing her had seemed to allay his fears.

His mother was with him at the end: earlier that evening he'd woken up and found her there beside his bed. "You're still here?" he asked. "You're not that well," she replied. "I thought I'd better stay."

Later on, Jan said: "I'm going now." He hadn't wanted any physical contact because it was painful; but in his final moments, he asked his mother to hold him again in her arms. "I'm glad you stayed," he told her.

Jan hadn't wanted any physical contact, but in the final moments he asked his mother to hold him

Maria Hai-Anh Tuyet Cao, 52
First portrait taken
December 5 2003
Second portrait taken
February 15 2004



"Death is nothing," said Maria. "I embrace death. It is not eternal. Afterwards, when we meet God, we become beautiful. We are only called back to earth if we are still attached to another human being in the final seconds."

When we met, Maria's thoughts on death were permeated with her belief in the teachings of her spiritual guide, the Vietnamese Buddhist guru Supreme Mistress Ching Hai. "The Mistress says, all that is beyond this world is better than our world . . . it is better than anything we can or cannot imagine."

Maria's life was tough. A refugee from Vietnam, where she had worked as a teacher, she had had to make do with lower-paid work in Germany, and ended up as a factory seamstress. She suffered many disappointments, and when she discovered she had an emphysema-like, fatal lung disease in her early 50s it had felt like yet another blow; but as death approached, she was calm.

She had two daughters, and a baby grandchild, and they were with her at the hospice when I visited. As her death drew near, her family surrounded her bed, stroking her body and singing to her.

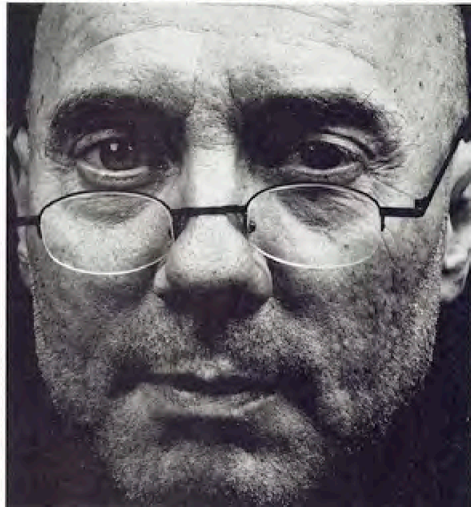
'Death is not eternal. When we meet God. We become beautiful. Beyond this world is better than our world'

sitting pose to get a good face-on shot. "But one thing you never get used to is the feel of a dead person – it's always shocking," she says. "It's like cement – that cold, that hard, and that heavy."

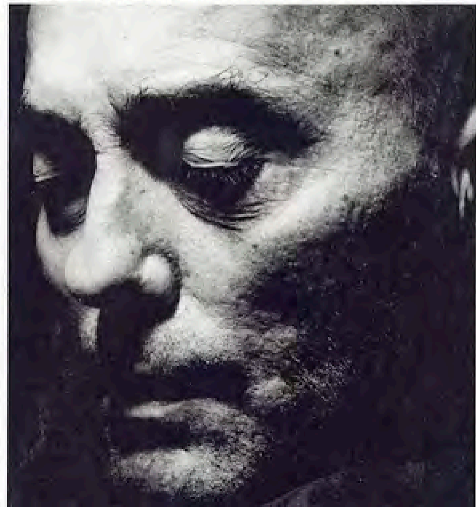
But, horrifying though photographing the bodies was, more shocking still for Schels and Lakotta was the sense of loneliness and isolation they discovered in their subjects during the before-death shoots. "Of course we got to know these people because we visited them in the hospices and we talked about our project, and they talked to us about their lives and about how they felt about dying," explains Lakotta. "And what we realised was how alone they almost always were. They had friends and relatives, but those friends and relatives were increasingly distant from them because they were refusing to engage with the reality of the situation. So they'd come in and visit, but they'd talk about how their loved one would soon be feeling better, or how they'd be home soon, or how they'd be back at work in no time. And the dying people were saying to us that this made them feel not only isolated, but also hurt. They felt they were unconnected to the people they most wanted to feel close to, because these people refused to acknowledge the fact that they were dying, and that the end was near."

Some of the subjects, says Schels, were bitter about how lonely the business of dying had made them feel – for some, this was why they agreed to take part in the project. "Some of the dying said, 'It's so good you're doing this – it's really important to show what it's like. No one else is listening to me, no one wants to hear or know what it's really like.'"

Both Schels and Lakotta feel the experience of being close to so many dying people has changed how they feel not only about dying themselves, but how they feel about living – and also, how they would support a friend or relative through terminal illness. "I know now how important it is to be there, or at least to offer to be there, as much as possible – and to not be afraid of asking questions, and of listening to the answers," says Lakotta.



Heiner Schmitz, 52
First portrait taken
November 19 2003
Second portrait taken
December 14 2003



Heiner was a fast talker, highly articulate, quick-witted, but not without depth. He worked in advertising. When he saw the affected area on the MRI scan of his brain he had grasped the situation very quickly: he had realised he didn't have much time left.

When I visited him in the hospice, Heiner's friends were there. They clearly didn't want him to be sad and were trying to take his mind off things. They watched football with him, just like they used to do: they brought in beers, cigarettes, had a bit of a party in the room. The girls from the advertising agency brought him flowers. Many of them came in twos, because they didn't want to be alone with him. Heiner noticed this.

"Some of them even say, 'Get well soon', as they're leaving; 'Hope you're soon back on track, mate!'" said Heiner, wryly. "But no one asks me how I feel. Because they're all shit scared. I find it really upsetting the way they desperately avoid the subject, talking about all sorts of other things. Don't they get it? I'm going to die! That's all I think about, every second when I'm on my own."

'No one asks me how I feel – they are all shit scared. I find it really upsetting. Don't they get it? I'm going to die'

Schels, meanwhile, says that while death never loses its ability to shock, it has – for them – lost its ability to frighten. He is no longer terrified of dead bodies, and nor is he frightened of the future. He remains, as he has long been, an agnostic, having noticed that believers and non-believers alike showed the same fear of the unknown that awaited them.

Most importantly, the couple feel they know the importance of making the time they have left count. And though we are discussing a most sombre subject, there is much laughter: both Schels and Lakotta have a wonderful ability to find pathos and humour in many of their experiences. There was the man who refused to die (he was eventually told by the hospice that he would have to move back home; but when he called his girlfriend, she told him she had given all his possessions away . . . he finally died a few days after realising that he was on a one-way street, and there really was no going back). Another patient, a woman, had been disappointed by almost everything, all her life. "She proudly told me that her funeral would be packed, with at least 85 people there," says Lakotta. "But I went to it, and there were only about 30 of us . . . and I thought, this was inevitable, really."

"What I was used to," says Schels, who has taken hundreds of portraits during his career, "was people who smiled for the camera. It's usually an automatic response. But these people never smiled. They were incredibly serious; and more than that, they weren't pretending anything any more. People are almost always pretending something, but these people had lost that need. I felt it enabled me as a photographer to get as close as it's possible to get to the core of a person; when you're facing the end, everything that's not real is stripped away. You're the most real you'll ever be, more real than you've ever been before"

Life Before Death runs at the Wellcome Collection at 183 Euston Road, London, NW1 from April 9 to May 18; wellcomecollection.org.uk
See additional photos from the exhibition guardian.co.uk/g2

Gerda Strech, 68
First portrait taken
January 5 2003
Second portrait taken
January 14 2003

Gerda couldn't believe that cancer was cheating her of her hard-earned retirement. "My whole life was nothing but work, work, work," she told me.

She had worked on the assembly line in a soap factory, and had brought up her children single-handedly. "Does it really have to happen now? Can't death wait?" she sobbed. "I'm just so frightened. I don't even know whether I'll be going to heaven or to hell."

Once the illness took hold, Gerda told me, she went to church to pray. Maybe God will help me, she thought. But her prayer was followed by incessant vomiting and an intestinal obstruction.

On one visit, Gerda said: "It won't be long now," and was panic-stricken. Her daughter tried to console her, saying: "Mummy, we'll all be together again one day." "That's impossible," Gerda replied. "Either you're eaten by worms or burned to ashes."

"But what about your soul?" her daughter pleaded. "Oh, don't talk to me about souls," said her mother in an accusing tone. "Where is God now?"

Elly Genthe, 83 *(Pictured on cover)*
First portrait taken
December 31 2002
Second portrait taken
January 11 2003

Elly Genthe was a tough, resilient woman who had always managed on her own. She often said that if she couldn't take care of herself, she'd rather be dead. When I met her for the first time, she was facing death and seemed undaunted: she was full of praise for the hospice staff and the quality of her care.

But when I visited again a few days later, she seemed to sense her strength was ebbing away. Suddenly, she clutched her granddaughter's hand: "Don't go! I'm suffocating!" She begged the nurses: "Please, breathe for me!" Elly was given morphine, but because her kidneys had been consumed by cancer, her morphine levels fluctuated. Sometimes, during those last weeks, she would sleep all day; at other times, she saw little men crawling out of the flower pots, who she believed had come to kill her.

"Get me out of here," she whispered, as soon as anyone held her hand. "My heart will stop beating if I stay here. This is an emergency! I don't want to die!"