

‘A Specific Kind of Eye’: Richard Hamilton’s *Polaroid Portraits*

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When Richard Hamilton visited Roy Lichtenstein’s studio in March 1968, the New York artist took Hamilton’s photograph using a Polaroid camera. Proud to show off his ‘new toy’, Lichtenstein gave Hamilton the photograph to take home with him. This snapshot, in which Hamilton stands casually in front of a Lichtenstein painting, with a drink and cigarette in hand, inspired an entire series of informal and instantaneous *Polaroid Portraits* of Hamilton, made by his artist friends.

Published in four volumes each containing 32 images, the project was on-going throughout most of Hamilton’s life, beginning in 1968 and not concluding until 2001. Browsing through these intimate photo-books provides a unique glimpse of the man and the artist through the eyes of 128 of his contemporaries. These include Jasper Johns, Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter, and some of the artists represented in *Portrait of the Artist As...*, namely Francis Bacon, Gilbert & George and Derek Jarman.

At first Hamilton wanted each portrait to contain a work of art by the artist taking the photograph, as was the case in the first image by Lichtenstein. Hamilton soon discarded this idea because as the project progressed, he saw that the photographer need not be made identifiable by the presence of their work in the image. More and more, the photographs seemed to have the ‘personality and practice’ of the artist taking them somehow embedded in the picture.¹ A good example is [the photograph by Man Ray](#), in which Hamilton is shown holding a picture frame in front of his face. In this playful image, Hamilton is framed twice - first by the Polaroid photograph, and second by the picture frame he holds in his hands. Hamilton described it as having ‘a touch of genius’, a touch of Man Ray.²

Many of the *Polaroid Portraits* are less carefully designed images. Hamilton wrote: ‘When Francis Bacon photographed me, after saying that he had never used a camera before, he hardly knew which way to point the lens. He was swaying about and slightly tipsy, yet the first picture was just like a Bacon painting – accidental movement of both camera and subject produced a blurred, multi-viewpoint image... At that point it seemed clear that the artist does have *a specific kind of eye*, an attitude that will direct the image in an entirely personal way.’³ Indeed, it is scarcely possible not to associate Bacon’s photograph of Hamilton with one of his painted portraits, in which the sitter’s facial features are usually heavily distorted. In

Bacon's photograph, Hamilton's head thrusts backwards, his eyes look down and the shape of his head is partly disguised by the dim light.

Hamilton was so captivated by this image that he used it in one of his best known self-portraits, [*Portrait of the Artist by Francis Bacon*](#) (1970). Bacon's original Polaroid photograph has been retouched by Hamilton and subsumed within a loosely defined head and shoulders shape. As such, *Portrait of the Artist by Francis Bacon* is a double portrait. While it depicts Hamilton's likeness by appropriating the photograph of him taken by Bacon, Bacon did not execute the portrait. Bacon's original photograph has been manipulated by Hamilton, with the retouched image in its background perhaps even more effectively mimicking Bacon's painting style, but in an entirely different medium. The finished work becomes just as much a portrait of Francis Bacon and his practice by Richard Hamilton as it is a portrait of Richard Hamilton through the eyes of Francis Bacon. This work was not the only one to grow from Hamilton's *Polaroid Portraits* series. Displayed in this exhibition is Hamilton's [*portrait of painter and filmmaker Derek Jarman*](#), made using another discarded photograph taken in relation to the series.

Shortly before Jarman died from an AIDS-related illness in 1994, Hamilton attended a lunch at the Tate Gallery held in Jarman's honour. Hamilton took his Polaroid camera with him because Jarman had agreed to take his photograph for the fourth volume of *Polaroid Portraits*. The effects of AIDS had severely damaged Jarman's eye-sight, and so before he took the photograph, Hamilton offered to set the focus for him. The resulting test-shot, abandoned at the time, later fascinated Hamilton when he studied it back in his studio. He wrote: 'The spontaneous photograph I made of Derek conveyed his extraordinary courage, while it also revealed his pitiful condition.'⁴

After retouching the photograph, Hamilton chose one of Jarman's own paintings for the background, [*Ataxia – AIDS is Fun*](#) (1993). This was one of a series of paintings Jarman made in his final years. Almost blind, he used his fingers to spread a word or slogan related to his illness across scraped and splattered canvases, viscerally demonstrating the emotional and physical impact of AIDS. By superimposing the blurred Polaroid photograph of Jarman's face over a sharply focussed image of this painting, Hamilton reflected 'the focus of [Jarman's] mind, rather than the blur on his retina.'⁵ Indeed, just as Bacon could take a photograph evoking his characteristic style despite his inexperience with a camera, even a blind Jarman could still express himself in his final paintings. What seems to have captivated Hamilton about these works, and about the *Polaroid Portraits* series as a whole, is how the specific and creative mind of a particular artist is physically manifested in their art.

After studying the images in the four volumes of *Polaroid Portraits*, the blurry figure of Hamilton which appears in each one begins to fade into the background. He says, ‘I realise how silly, how banal, I often look. The same face and figure constantly reappearing (though it ages over the years).’⁶ The purpose of the project seems not to be, as it is sometimes described, to construct a photographic autobiography, but more to investigate whether artists do indeed have this ‘specific kind of eye’, an eye which can even penetrate through a technical device (such as a Polaroid camera). In fact, the four photo-books give the impression that they contain a portrait of each of the 128 photographers, as well as 128 portraits of Hamilton. Like many of the works in this exhibition, Hamilton’s project demonstrates that the portraits artists make of one another reveal as much – or more – about the artist making the portrait as the artist being portrayed.

¹ Richard Hamilton, *Collected Words, 1953-1982*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 82.

² *Ibid.*, 83.

³ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴ Richard Hamilton, quoted in ‘Richard Hamilton: Derek Jarman 1996-7’, Tate, accessed 3rd June 2012, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hamilton-derek-jarman-p78013/text-summary>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Hamilton, *Collected Words*, 83.