

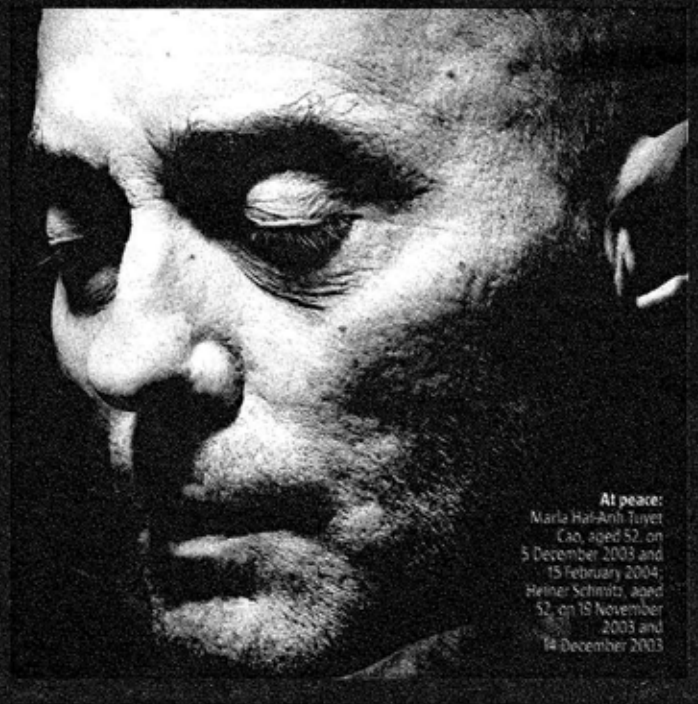
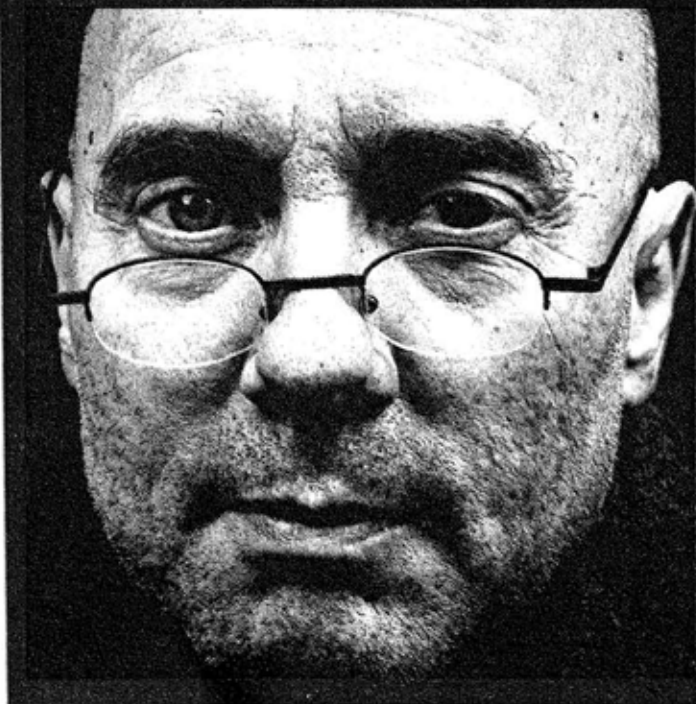
Arts & Reviews

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Before... and after

The Wellcome Trust's exhibition of portraits showing people shortly before and after their deaths finds both dignity and beauty in its subjects, says **Brian Sewell**



At peace:
Marla Hai-Anh Tuyet
Cao, aged 52, on
5 December 2003 and
15 February 2004;
Heiner Schmitz, aged
52, on 18 November
2003 and
14 December 2003

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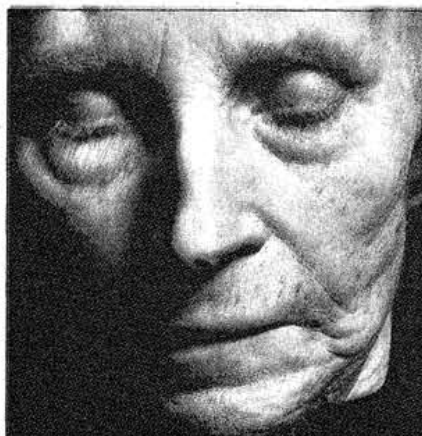
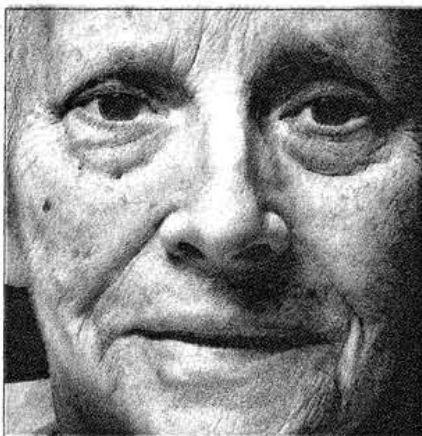
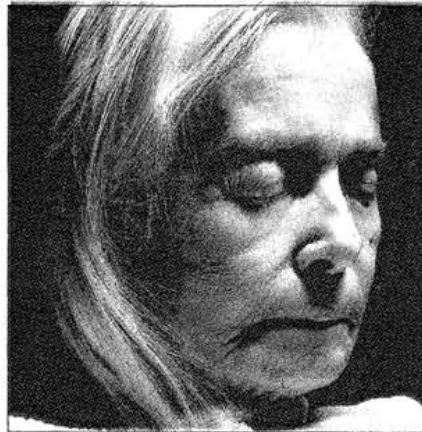
A MAN'S dying," wrote Thomas Mann in his novel *Der Zauberberg*, by chance set in a sanatorium, "is more the survivors' affair than his own." I am inclined to substitute spectators for survivors, for it is they who, as watchers of decline, visitors to the dying, wonderers how soon, close examiners of minute evidence, and those who see and hear and smell and taste death's coming, are entertained by it. A deathbed vigil can be the equivalent of reading Proust or hearing the whole Ring while waiting less for a Götterdämmerung than for a diminuendo of the breath. It can be a wonderful opportunity for self-importance in the careful scheduling of travel to match the visiting hour and enjoy the half-masked stinks of hospital or hospice, in the purchase of unwanted chrysanthemums, grapes and expensive magazines that will say more of the giver than the recipient, and in gossip with other visitors — for some, it is even the opportunity to show off clothes. In all this we are performers as well as spectators, ritual contributors to the last act of life's long play, bit-part players, the supporting cast of the dying star who is, for one month, one week, or for one night only Parsifal or Violetta. We have all held the dying hand, kissed the dying brow and murmured what we think the necessary platitudes, but how much have we understood?

It is a question asked, and to some extent answered, by a new exhibition at the Wellcome Collection, part of the Wellcome Trust that spends so much on biochemical research and occasionally dips a tentative toe in the even more uncertain waters of contemporary art. *Life Before Death* — or rather, just before it and just after — consists of large black-and-white portrait photographs of willing subjects who seem to have been unsmilingly comfortable with the idea of being recorded on both sides of the divide. They are a disciplined exploration of the physical changes that can occur with such rapidity between the one state and the other; but this is only the half of it, for each pair of portraits is accompanied by a text that records the subjects' feelings in the imminence of death, and these lend yet more pathos to what, for some visitors, has already proved almost unbearably pathetic. The photographs are by Walter Schels who, a generation ago, spent some years photographing children at the moment of birth; now, at 72, old enough to have seen something of death in the Second World War and its long aftermath, old enough himself to be within spitting distance of mortality, he has an interest in the dying and the dead.

The texts are by his partner, Beata Lakotta, aged 43 and young enough to wrestle the corpses into the upright position necessary to make something of a match with the photographs taken when the subjects were alive. They all died in hospices in Germany, triggering my recollection of Mann's sanatorium, a self-contained world of the sick, a microcosm of a futile civilisation — and what is a hospice if it is not the hopeless ante-chamber of a managed death?

The two dozen subjects all gave their consent to the project, but could not predict when the post-mortem occasions for photography might occur, and Schels and Lakotta had to be prepared to spring into action in the darkest hours of the night to comply with our common Western customs of either immediately making the dead decorous for relatives hurrying to the scene, or hustling the cadaver to the mortuary as swiftly and silently as Sir John Moore to his grave at Corunna.

Of the delicacies of death, the dropping of jaws and slackening of sphincters, there is not the slightest hint. In



Final Journey: (from top) Michael Laueremann, aged 56, on 11 January 2003 and 14 January 2003; Edelgard Clavey, aged 67, on 5 December 2003 and 4 January 2004; Waltraud Bening, aged 80, on 12 January 2003 and 26 January 2003

'To do what Schels has done two dozen times must have been a task requiring not only great physical stamina for a man of his age, but heroic resolution and emotional control'

these photographs the dead are beautiful. A metre square, had they been paintings, these large faces would have been raw in colour and blotched with rough brushwork (we see the type in plenty in every annual show of contemporary portraiture at the National Portrait Gallery). Instead, in gradations of black and white, without attempted skin tones, all details subordinate to the whole, these images of the dead take on something of the ideal characteristics of sculpture. Did Schels deliberately adjust the lighting to enhance the depth of shadow and its contrasts and lend his human subjects the calm sanctity that the camera so often reveals in sculptures of ecstatic and dead saints? Yet again I have the sense that artists centuries before the invention of photography paved the way for it, saw more in their subjects than we credit, and that, consciously and unconsciously, the sensibilities of the photographer are still influenced by art.

This is not intended in any way to diminish the achievement of Walter Schels; many of his images are indisputably beautiful and I can think of no

portrait painter of his generation who could so subtly and sensitively document the transformations that occur in the human face in the shift from life to death. Age has wearied his subjects less in death than in life, lines are smoothed away, deep furrows filled, and anger, madness, resentment and all other stressful emotions have, in the relaxation of muscles, faded from their flesh, leaving, in some cases, a disconcerting hint of androgyny.

Nothing in these images recalls the ghoulish guignol of the plasticised corpses so dramatically exhibited in tableaux by Gunter von Hagens for the various frissons of horror and disgust that they induce — vulgar fairground stuff. They are instead observations achieved in sympathetic melancholy and with poetic force, consoling rather than unsettling. Schels may soon, however, have a rival in the work of Gregor Schneider, a disconcerting German installation artist who intends to exhibit, as just such a work of art, the dying of a compliant patient taken from a Düsseldorf clinic. Without the distancing achieved through the artist's

sensibility, can such a disquieting thing be art? Should it, indeed, be done in a civilised society? Perhaps so. There is a precedent in the work of Guillermo Habakkuk Vargas, who is to represent Costa Rica in the Central American Biennale this year. In October last year he gained great notoriety by tethering a dog in an art gallery, utterly comfortable, and starving it to death for the aesthetic satisfaction of his patrons — I have photographs of the gallery taken from the eye-level of the dog at the vernissage, the guests drinking and conversing; other photographs record various stages of the animal's starvation. This was to go far too far and should, in any decent society, have resulted in prosecution, if not, first, in public intervention. The more violent death, by bludgeoning, of farm animals, among them a sheep, a cow, a deer and a horse, filmed by a Paris-based Algerian artist, Adel Abdessemed, was exhibited as art four weeks ago at the Art Institute of San Francisco. There, responding to the storm of public protest, the exhibition was suspended within a week.

The public need not intervene in the Wellcome exhibition. To do what Schels has done two dozen times must have been a task requiring not only great physical stamina for a man of his age, but heroic resolution and emotional control. Such strengths and virtues are no less evident in Beata Lakotta's illuminating texts. These are not essential to the photographs, and the photographs are perhaps not essential to the texts, for both stand on their own; each, however, is enhanced by the other and Lakotta evidently had such sympathy for her subjects that they felt able to be remarkably frank in extremes of reconciliation and resentment. I'm not afraid of what's coming," said one, "I'm just so frightened — I don't know whether I'm going to Heaven or Hell," another, "Death is nothing," a third, "I embrace it."

THERE were women who wanted just a little longer — one to go to the sea again, the other to dip her feet in the River Elbe once more. One of the earliest subjects was angry, cheated of her retirement — "Can't death wait? — my whole life has been work, work, work." Vanity makes its appearance even at this juncture — "I shouldn't be wasting away at this age," complained a woman of 64, and another consoled herself with the thought that her suffering would not show on her face (and it did not). "Where is God now?" contrasts with "I want to be part of that vast extraordinary light". Some believed that they would meet God, others that as a grain of sand among millions, nothing follows death.

Among the insights offered by these texts I was particularly touched by the man in his early fifties who complained that his visitors, his friends and workmates pretended that nothing was much amiss with him, always offering the conventional greetings and assurances that he looked fine and would soon be back on his feet. "They are all shit-scared of death," he observed (as though he were not), "they avoid the subject. They talk about all sorts of other things. But it's death I think about every second when they are not here."

Some years ago, on the stairs at Christie's, I bumped into an art dealer whom I had not seen for months. "God, you look ill," I blurted out. "I'm so glad you said that," he answered, "I'm dying of cancer and I'm sick of people telling me that I look well." Perhaps we should never dissemble with the dying.

■ *Life Before Death* is at the Wellcome Collection, NW1 020 7611 2222, www.wellcomecollection.org until 18 May. Tues-Sun 10am-6pm (Thurs until 10pm, Sun from 11am. Admission free.