

Face to face with death

Sarah Birke

When Heiner Schmitz was 52 he was told that he had a brain tumour. Seeing the scan he realised that he did not have long to live, but his friends continued to tell him to get well soon and to bring him the ingredients of bedside parties: beer, cigarettes and bright smiles.

This was exactly the opposite of what Schmitz wanted, and he found it disturbing that his friends continued to deny that he was about to die.

"No one asks me how I feel," he said at the time. "I find it really upsetting the way they desperately avoid the subject." He died a month later.

Schmitz is one of the 24 people who feature in the Wellcome Collection's *Life Before Death* thought-provoking exhibition of photographs.

It is the result of a year-long project in northern Germany. The subjects, male and female, ranging in age from 17 months to 83 years, were each recorded in two black-and-white photographs taken by Walter Schels.

Many of the first portraits were taken only days before the subject's death; for the follow-ups the hospice or family rang Schels as soon as his subject died.

Each pair of close-up photographs — every line, eyelash and freckle is visible — is accompanied by a text written by Beate Lakotta, which gives an insight into the person's life and their last, dying thoughts.

The juxtaposition of such detailed before-and-after portraits goes some way towards capturing the process of dying rather than just the state of being dead. Before death, the subjects' eyes are open, staring ahead with varied but always serious expressions. In death the eyelids are closed, the eyes

and jowls sunken, the hair brittle and lifeless. Some faces look peaceful, others worn.

Most, like Schmitz, were suffering from cancer and were aware of their fast-approaching demise. What differs among them is their attitudes: while none feared death and none, we suppose, wanted to die, their reactions range from sadness to anger.

"Where is God now?" asks Gerda Strech, a 68-year-old soap factory worker; Beate Taube, 44, wants just one more summer by the sea with her husband and four children; Waltraud Bening, 80, realises that she might have lived life another way and with a different husband; and Elly Genthe, 83, cries out that this is "an emergency".

For Wolfgang Kotzahn, 57, the last days are surprisingly vivid, a chance to notice every flower and every cloud; for

others the end has different, shockingly sad, priorities: Silke Boehmfeld, 30, wants to live only long enough to save her six-year-old son Jannik, also dying of a tumour, from seeing his mother die.

As Schmitz observed, no one would know about these thoughts if it were not for this exhibition.

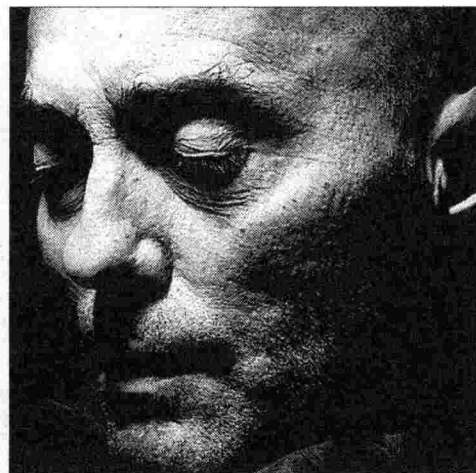
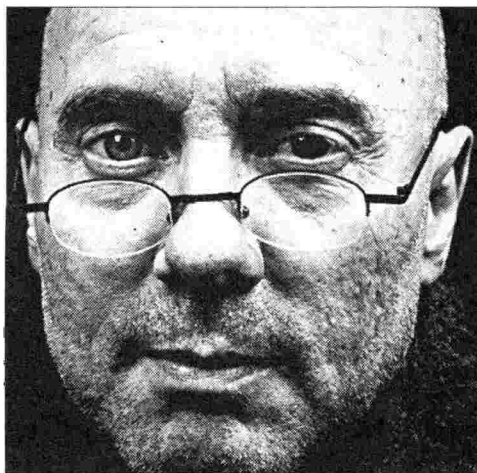
"I'm going to die! That's all I think about, every second when I'm on my own," Schmitz says. Edelgard Clavey agrees, although she is stoic about it. "Death is a test of one's maturity. Everyone has to get through it on their own."

Our reluctance to talk about death is the taboo that Schels and Lakotta want to break. We must stop skirting around death, they say. The dying want to talk about what it feels like to die, and the living ought to listen, for death can strike at any time.

Indeed, age does not seem to alter the way the subjects approach dying. Those who feel they have much to live for are more relaxed about no longer being here; the unhappy or unfulfilled suddenly realise they want to live. For all, dying puts life more clearly into focus.

And this is the case for visitors too. The comments book is full of remarks that the exhibition is uplifting, pushing the visitor to grasp life and to be realistic about the end. For death is part of life.

Life Before Death is at the Wellcome Collection, 183 Euston Road, NW1, until May 18. Admission is free. www.wellcomecollection.org



Heiner Schmitz: he was distressed by his friends' reluctance to admit that he was dying

