

# LIFE BEFORE DEATH

A compelling exhibition exploring death and the process of dying shows at the Wellcome Collection until 18 May. Lara Holmes speaks to photographer Walter Schels, who collaborated on *Life Before Death* with his life partner, journalist Beate Lakotta

The exhibition *Life Before Death* looks straight into the eyes of the dying, and accesses their thoughts, in deeply honest, personal accounts. At the Wellcome Collection until 18 May, the exhibition is the result of a collaboration between life partners photographer Walter Schels and journalist Beate Lakotta.

Schels and Lakotta say it was their profound fear of

death that gave rise to the project. Photographing death has become increasingly taboo. Although many capture death in conflict and disaster, it has long since ceased to be visible in the domestic context, as it was in Victorian times, when images of the dead, especially children, were made as keepsakes.

With 13 years separating the two, Schels and Lakotta



are acutely conscious of impending death. It was this reality that intrigued them. In the words of Schels, they wanted to confront death, 'what it looks, smells and feels like', and this led the couple to embark on this sensitive and compelling study.

They spent a year photographing in a hospice, getting to know the 24 terminally ill subjects and compiling their personal accounts. Incredibly, they spent the whole year 'on call': people die at all times of the day and night, and their response needed to be immediate if they were to photograph bodies before they were removed to the mortuary. They built a relationship with the patients and hospice, so that as soon as a patient had died, they were alerted and rushed straight in – regardless of what time of day or night it was.

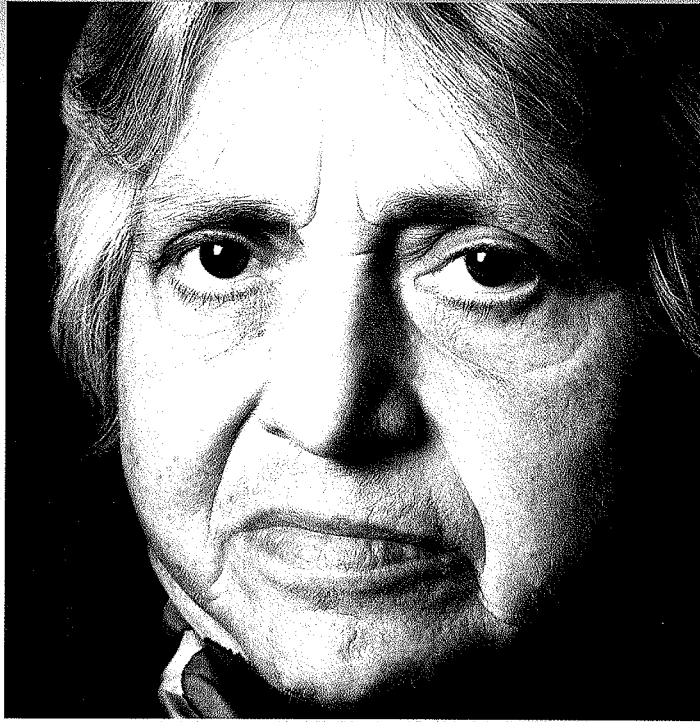
Schels set up a permanent studio at the hospice, and over

time developed the lighting and positioning techniques that gave his work consistency. He used a 6x6, square format Hasselblad, with fine grain black and white film, accompanied by flash and a black cloth backdrop.

The exhibition comprises 24 large format diptyches: a picture taken before the subject died, juxtaposed with one taken shortly after death, each with a personal account. The effect is arresting. There is a quality in the expression of each subject before they died that makes you want to know more about them.

Walking round the exhibition, I noticed that two of the sitters are smiling in their before death pictures. I asked Schels about this. "I shot two or three rolls of film for each subject", he says, "but didn't instruct them on how to pose, so what you see is their natural expression. I placed these two together because they somehow looked

**Above: The friends of Heiner Schmitz, 52, don't want him to be sad. They try to take his mind off things. Many of them come in twos, because they don't want to be alone with him. What do you talk about with someone who's been sentenced to death? Some of them even say, 'Get well soon' as they're leaving. "No one asks me how I feel", says Schmitz, "because they're all 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."**



**“This project has taught me to stop thinking about dying. I’ve learnt to appreciate every day”**

WALTER SCHELS

Above: Gerda Strech, 68, can scarcely believe it: the cancer is cheating her of her hard-earned retirement. “My whole life was nothing but work, work, work”, she says. She was employed on the assembly line in a soap factory, and brought up her children single-handedly.

“Does it really have to happen now? Can’t death wait?”, she sobs. “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, she went to church to pray. “Maybe God will be able to help me”, was how she expressed her hope.

What followed was incessant vomiting, and an intestinal obstruction. “It won’t be long now”, Frau Strech realises, panic-stricken.

Her daughter tries to console her: “Mummy, we’ll all be together again one day.”

“That’s impossible. Either you’re eaten by worms or burned to ashes.”

“But what about your soul?”

“Oh, don’t talk to me about souls”, cries Gerda Strech in an accusing tone. “Where is God now?”

Until 18 May, *Life Before Death*, Wellcome Collection, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BE. 020 7611 8348

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similar. Maybe it’s because they were the only two smiling. I wanted to create a melody through the exhibition, so there are different crops, angles and ages in the flow of the images, to give variety and reflection.”

Strangely, Schels likens birth and death, believing there to be little difference between the two, although this can be put into context by his earlier work. Born in 1936 in Landshut, Bavaria, he travelled to New York with photography commissions in 1966, before returning to Germany in the 1970s to work for illustrated and fashion magazines, as well as in advertising. From 1975, he spent several years capturing the moment of birth for the parents’ magazine *Eltern*, and it was during this time that he developed his fascination with faces. He became known for his portraits of artists, politicians and prominent figures in cultural and intellectual circles. His work won him Hasselblad Master of the Year 2005, and received second prize in the World Press Photo 2004 competition.

The concise and frank accounts of subjects’ lives accompanying the images meanwhile, are written by Beate Lakotta. Known for reporting on serious social, medical and psychological issues, she won the Schizophrenia Reintegration Award in 2001, a Deutscher Sozialpreis in 2004, and a nomination for the Egon-Erwin-Kisch-Prize in 2002. Born in Kassel in 1965, she studied German literature and political science in Heidelberg, before joining the editorial team for the science section of *Spiegel* magazine in 1999. Lakotta’s insights evoke strong reactions. Her ability to summarise complex human thoughts into meaningful reflections over an extended period of time should not be overlooked.

A book accompanying the exhibition, *Life Before*

*Death, Encounters With The Terminally Ill*, was awarded the German Photographic Book Prize 2004, and with over 50,000 visitors attending the six week exhibition at Dresden’s Deutsches Hygiene-Museum, the work has confirmed that there is an interest in the subject, regardless of how taboo some may feel it to be.

The response from relatives however, has been mixed. As Schels explains, “The families have mostly reacted positively, and for some the project has brought comfort.” Silke Boehmfeld’s son Jannik, for example, developed a rare type of brain tumour when he was four, and tragically died when he was six. Silke stayed with her son until the end, fighting her own breast cancer to achieve one goal: not to die before him. She managed her wish, surviving him by 25 days, but her grieving husband was left behind to come to terms with the loss of both. He consoled himself with the photos in a similar way to the Victorians - treasuring the final pictures and displaying them on his wall to remember their lives.

There are few subjects that affect us as profoundly as death, and this collection of portraits must have taken courage, patience and sensitivity: from the subjects, as well as from Schels and Lakotta. Through their honest accounts, we have extraordinary access to the thoughts, experiences and ultimately fears that face those with a terminal illness.

Schels and Lakotta work wonderfully together, and there is a powerful need to look, read and understand. By confronting our fears, they becomes less taboo and, as Schels reflects, “I feel satisfied now; happy to be alive. Undertaking this project has made me ready for anything, and taught me to stop thinking about dying. I’ve learnt to appreciate every day.” **Lara Holmes**