

CONTACT

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT PALUMBO

Since mid-March 2020, I've worn a mask to cover my mouth and nose whenever leaving my house to protect me from Covid-19, and to protect people I come into contact with from getting it from me, in case I have it. Most people I encounter are also wearing masks, which gives me some sense of security. But it also gives me a sense on insecurity; I can only read what I see in their eyes. The complexities of their true feelings are mostly concealed behind that piece of fabric covering much of their face. Human contact has been squelched down into a fraction of what it was.

For me, it's been especially unnerving. An important part of my photographic practice has been photographing faces. Without masks, and much closer than 6 feet away. Its been a way for me to be in contact with the world through a form of portraiture that originated in Police photography.

In June 1998, I saw an exhibition called "Police Pictures: The Photograph as Evidence" at NYU's Grey Gallery in New York. The show was a revelation to me on every level, aesthetic, thematic, emotional. The show was a survey of the history of photography as a tool for establishing evidence in criminal cases, and included images from the 19th Century through the OJ Simpson case. What I latched onto in the exhibit was the mug shots. How in that instant when the ID photo is taken, something so deep from within the subject is revealed, transcending a mere marking of identifying traits. Identification melted into identity.

The act of executing a "mugshot" portrait was not what I expected. Far from the impersonal, clinical whir of the auto camera we are all familiar with when having our passport or driver's license ID photos taken, when I was confronted with the close proximity of a human face, full of the nooks and scars and lines of life, it gave me a chill. For the right focal length, I needed to be very close, and despite the presence of the camera between us, I felt a palpable connection. I felt that as I took the photograph, I was being photographed as well, my identity transposed on the identity of the detective, and his identity transposed onto mine for that fraction of a second. I experienced a form of contact that was full body, full emotion.

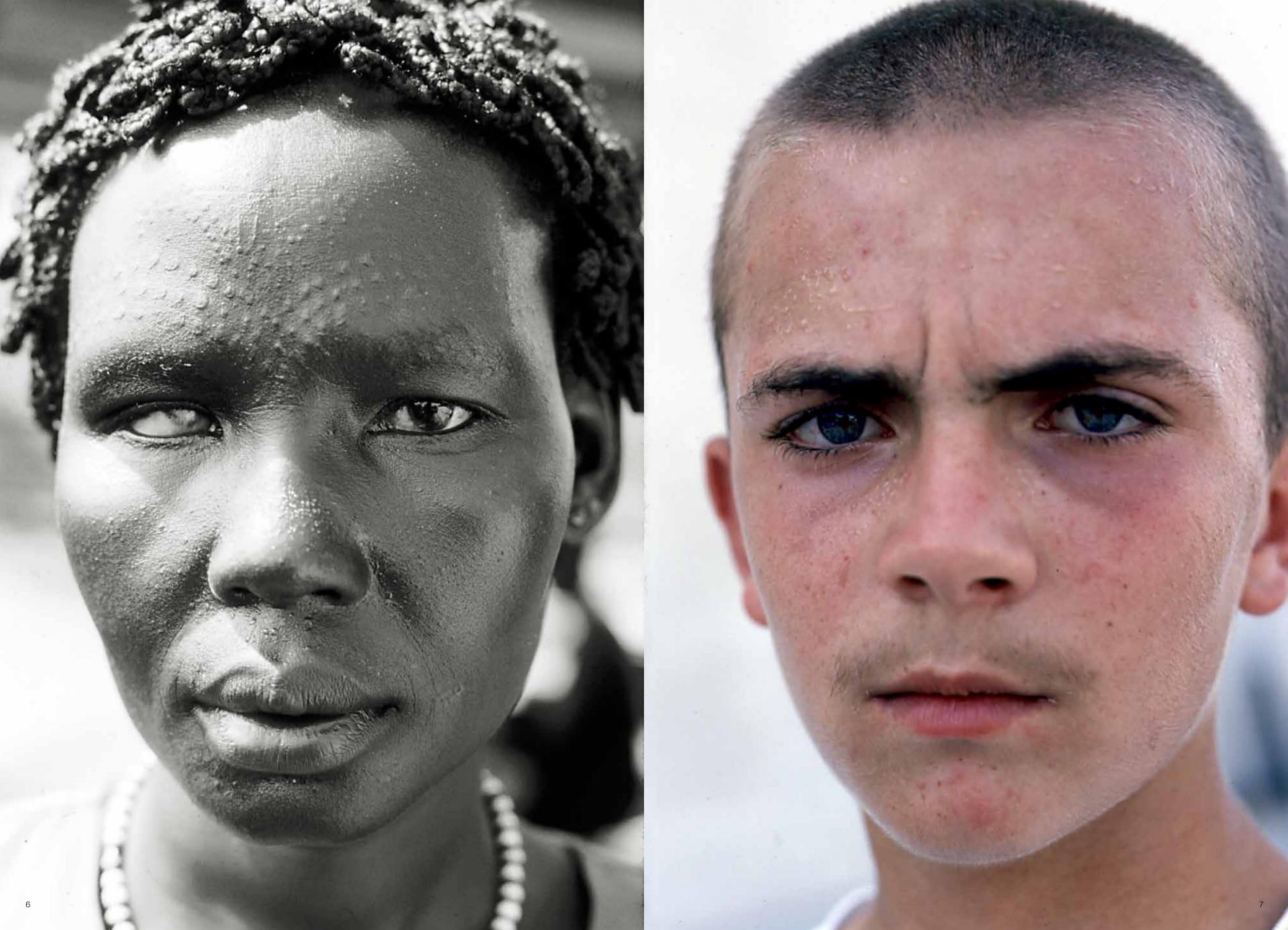
Over nearly 20 years, traveling the world while working as a documentary TV producer, I've witnessed a lot, and met an amazing range of people. Criminals, hucksters, and the destitute, but also holy men and women, entertainers, and mountain men. Sometimes I had the privilege to spend a lot of time with them and get to know them really well, and sometimes my contact was fleeting, just long enough to ask them "Can I take your picture?" In the end, it didn't really matter that much, the fraction of a second during which they performed as themselves for me and I performed as myself for them was equally as charged with the frisson of humanity.

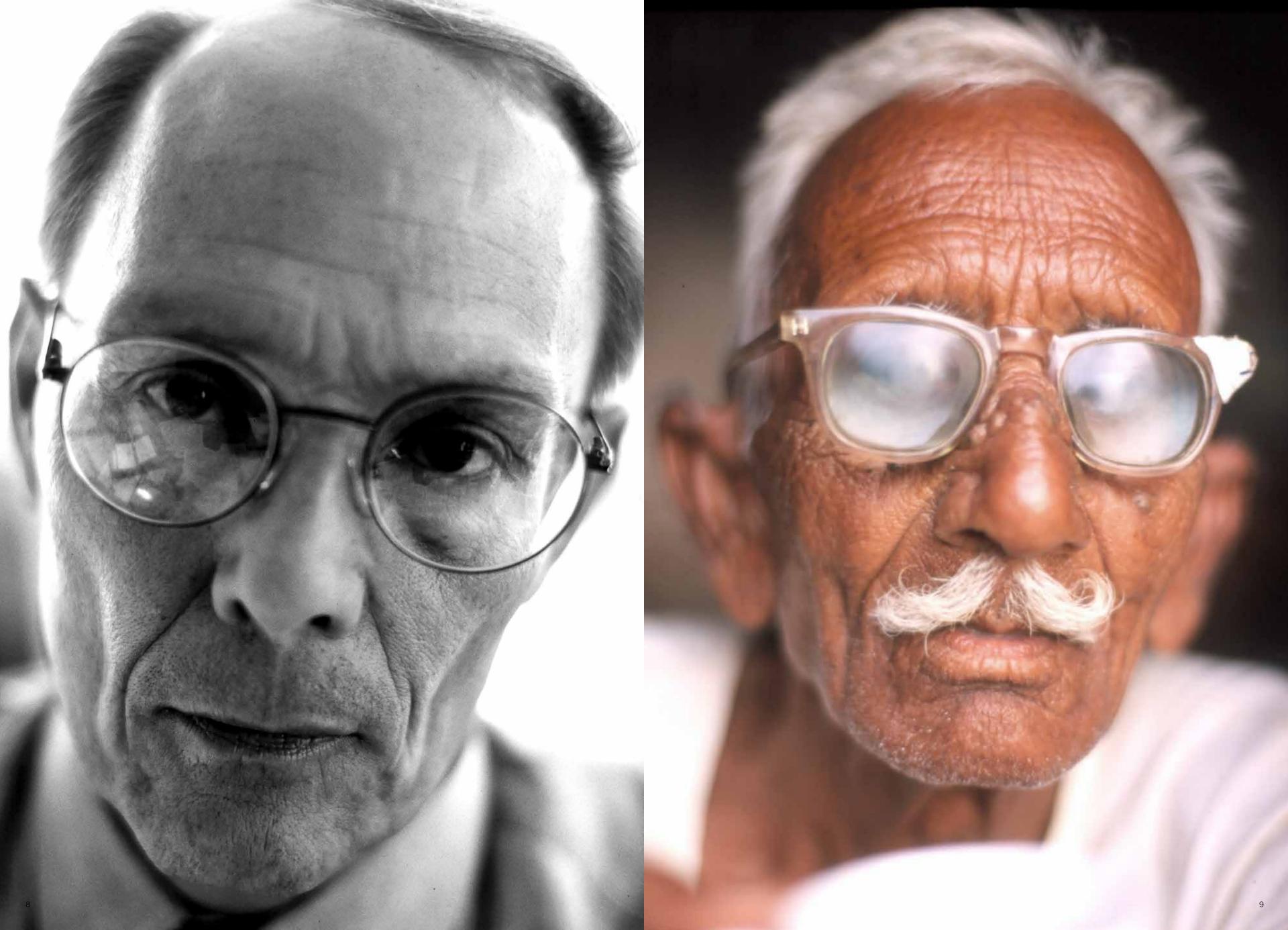
Over time, my "catalogue" grew and deepened, and I began to imagine that the men and women who I had photographed formed a family. A complicated and messy family, with me the spoke in the wheel, a cousin to everyone. After my diagnosis of multiple myeloma, an incurable cancer, in 2018, I felt an urgency to collect this family and present it as a kind of evidence of my contact with the world, and so I collected these portraits into CONTACT.

I can't say I'm tempted to take mugshots of people who are wearing masks. This would be counter to what motivates me to make these kinds of portraits, that split second of naked contact that achieve, at it best, an unguarded honesty of emotion. This collection, with photographs from 2000 through 2019, now marks an historic record for me. Once we can venture out into the world again unmasked, I hope to start over again, with a new round of post-pandemic CONTACT.

> R.P.

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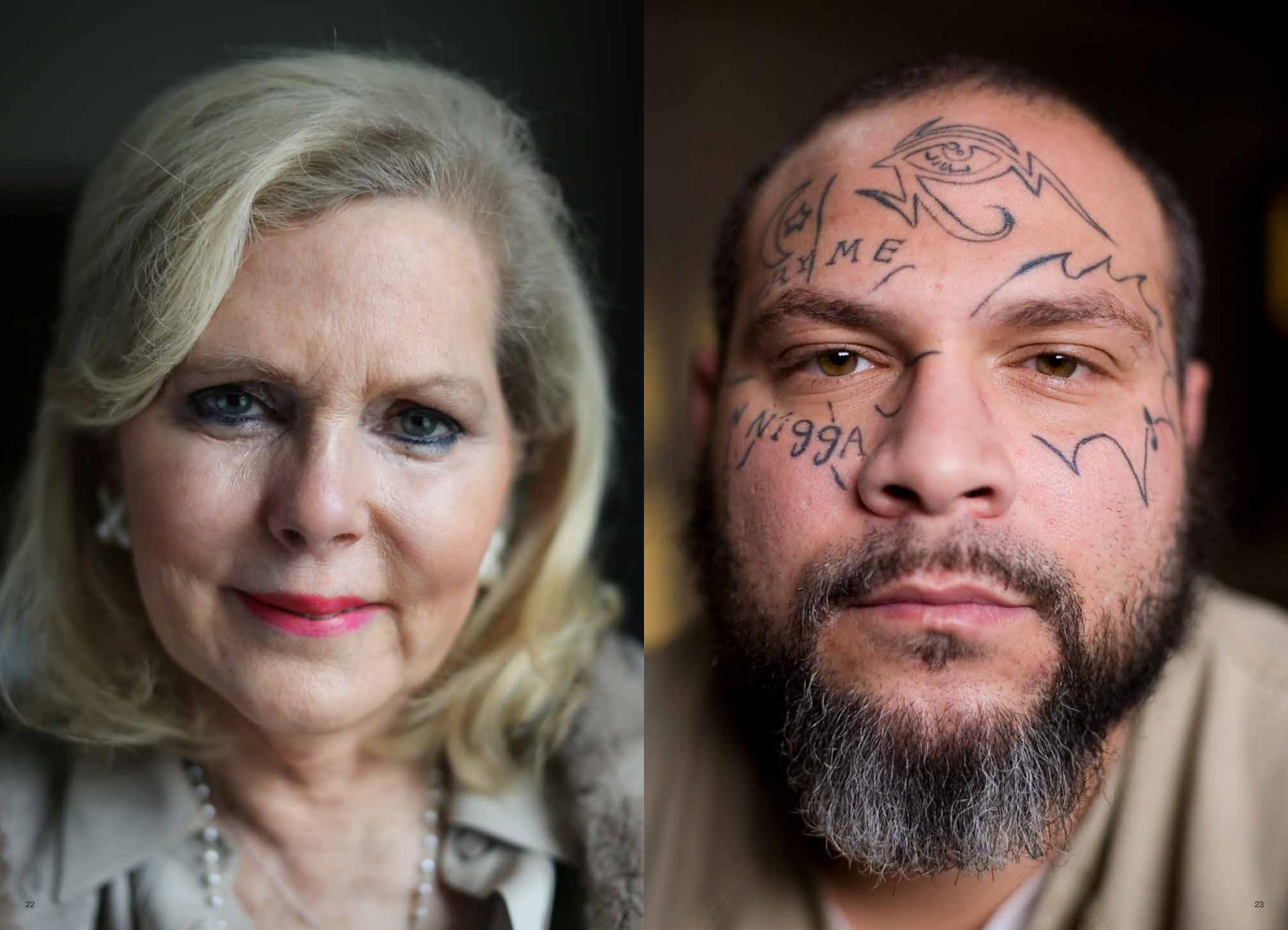


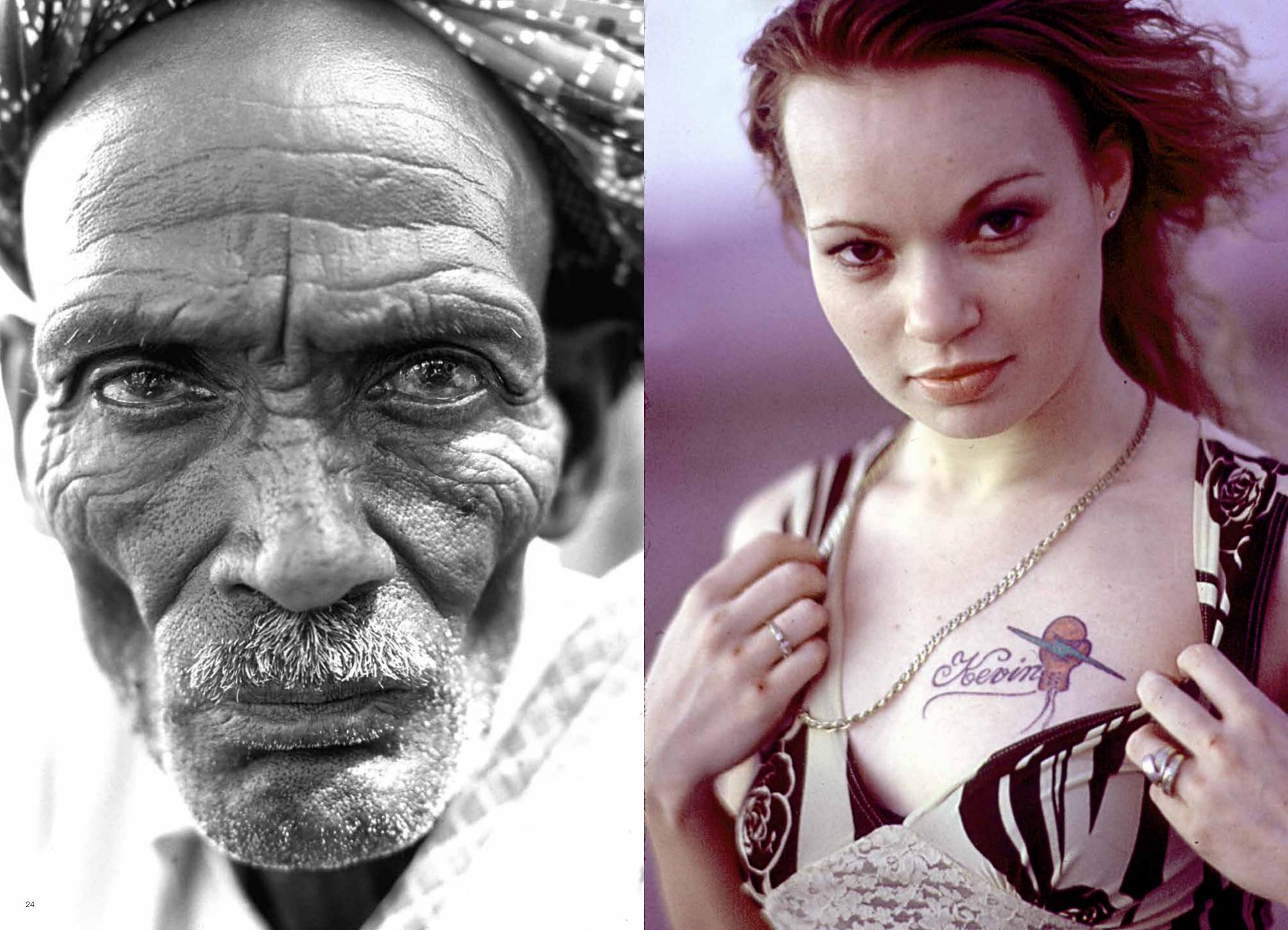
























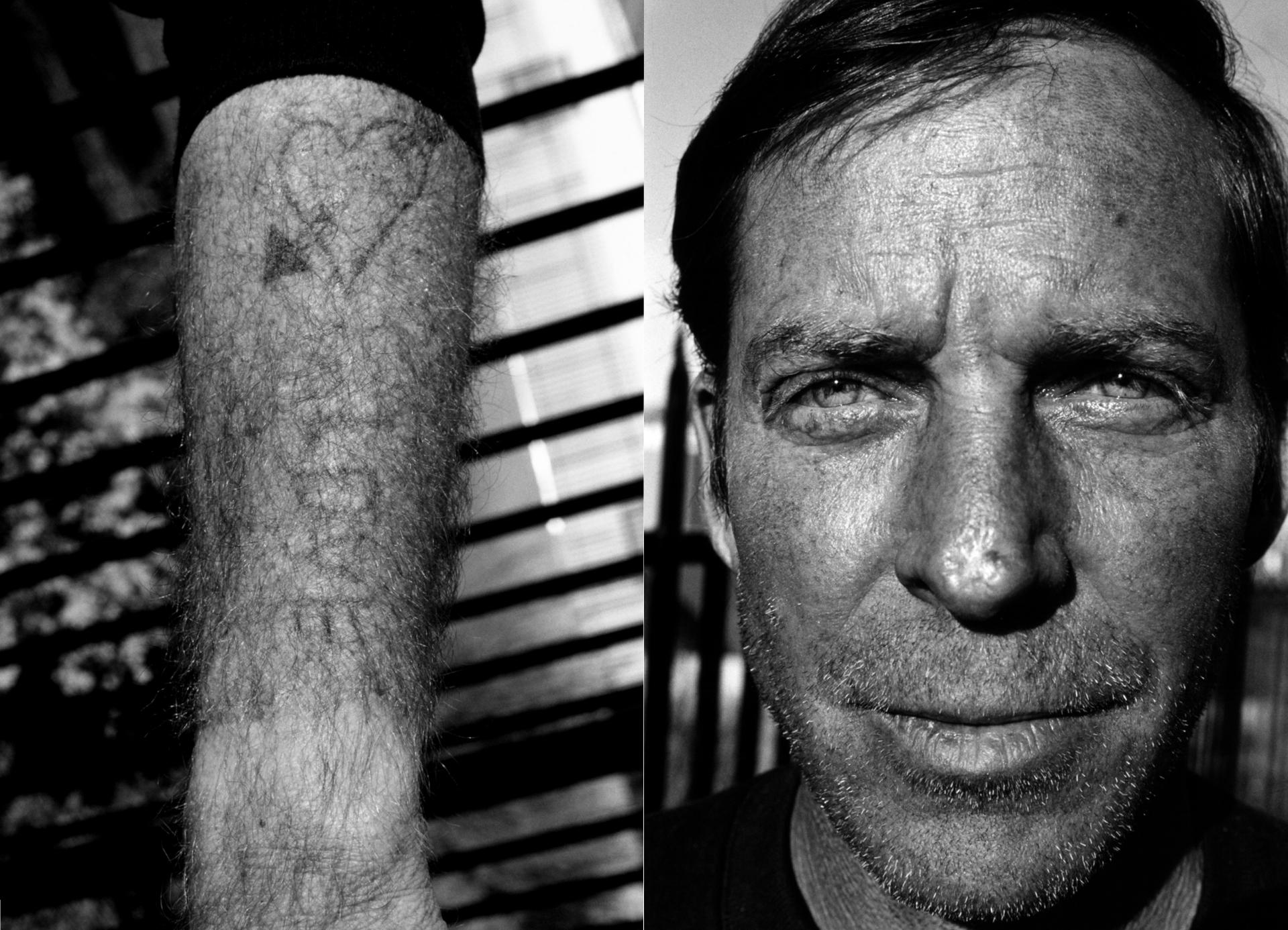










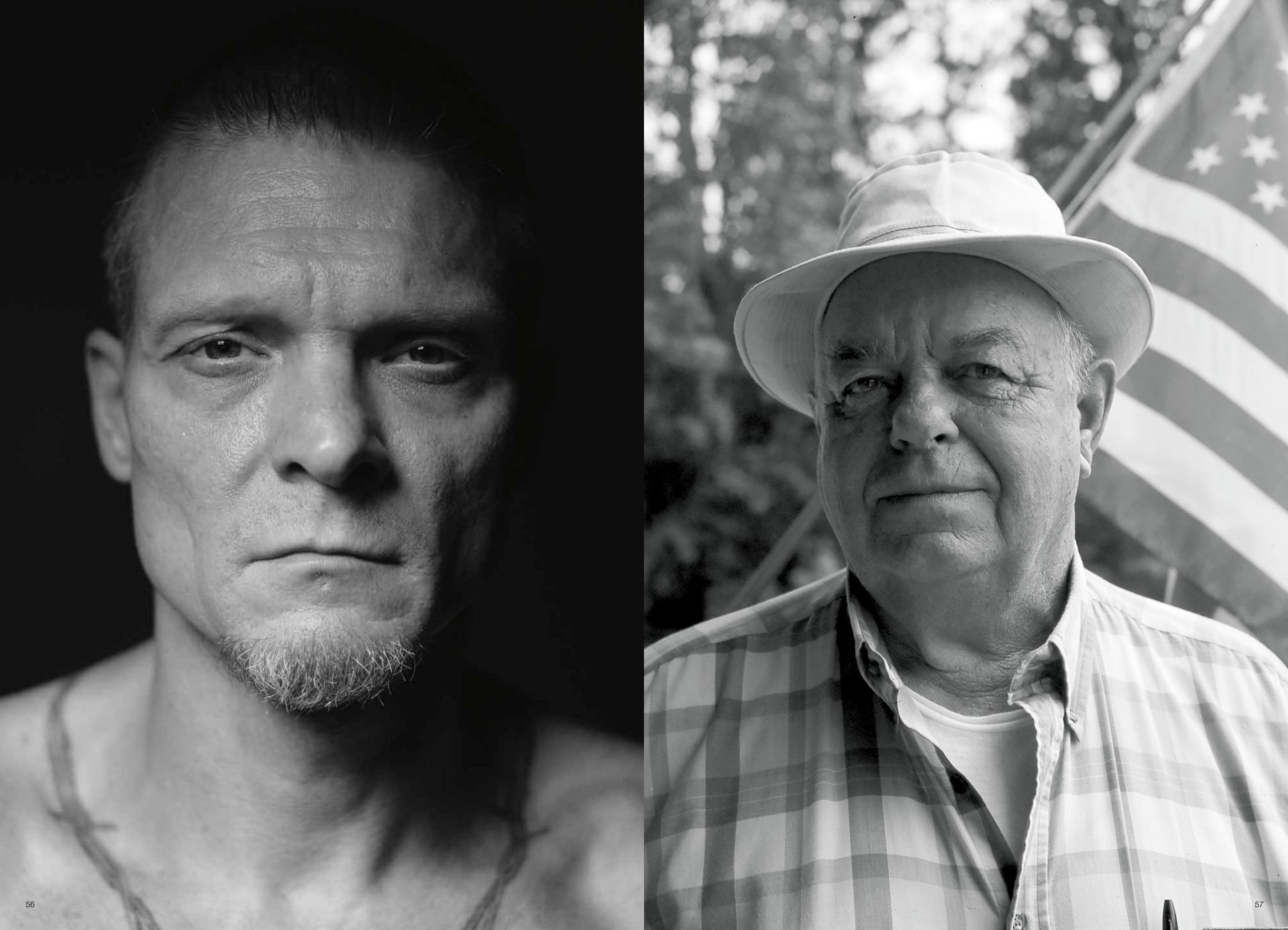










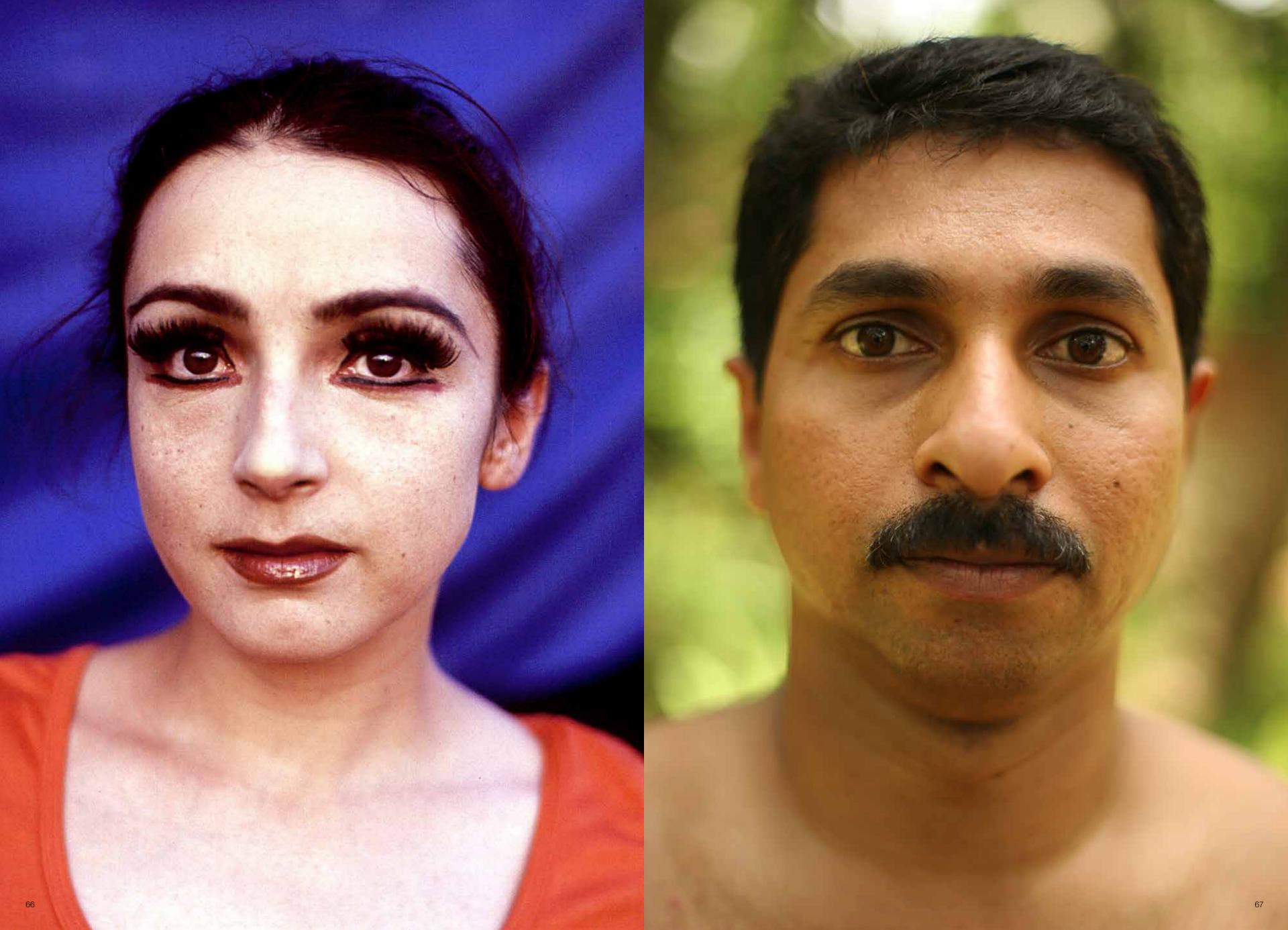










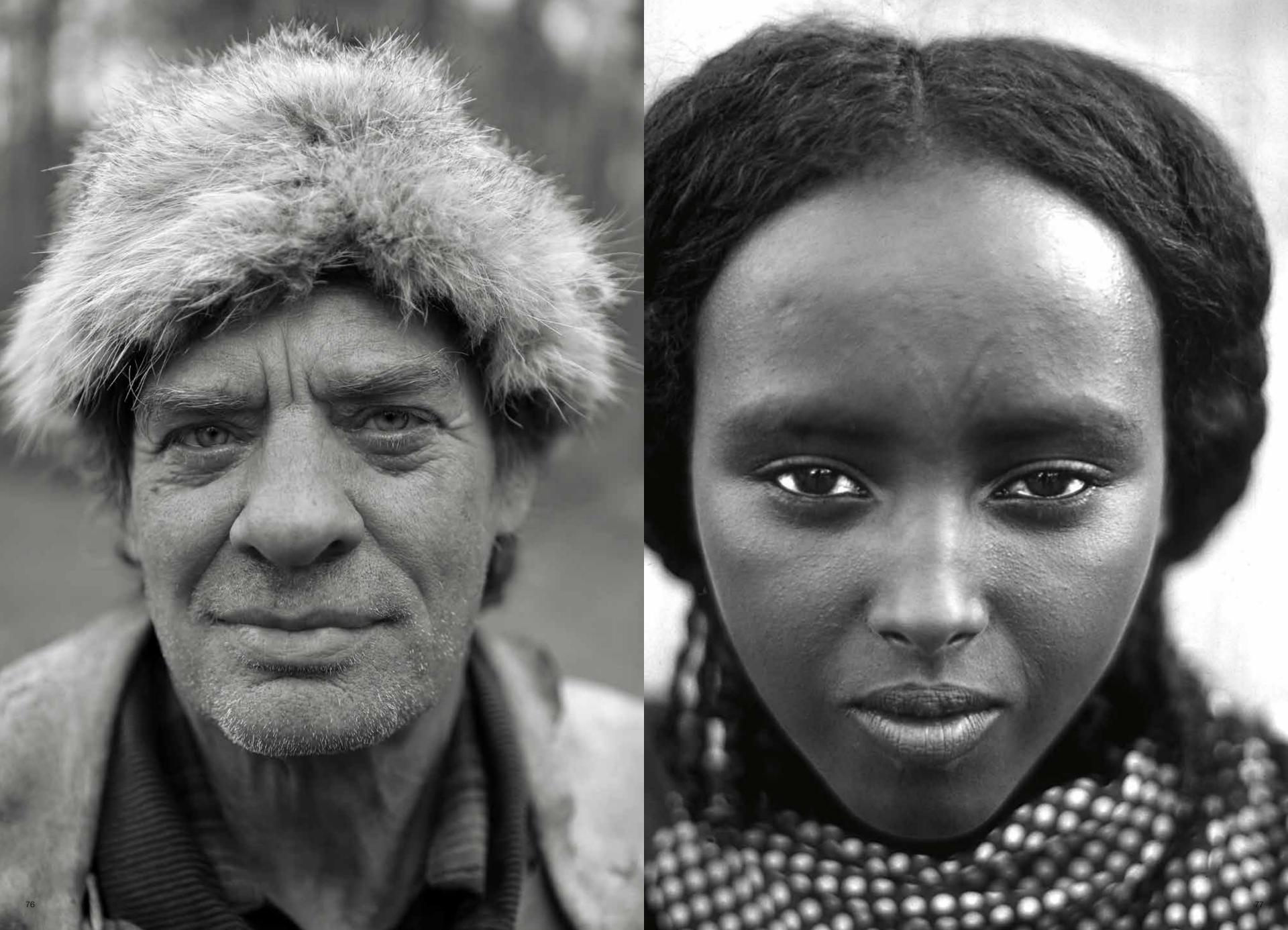










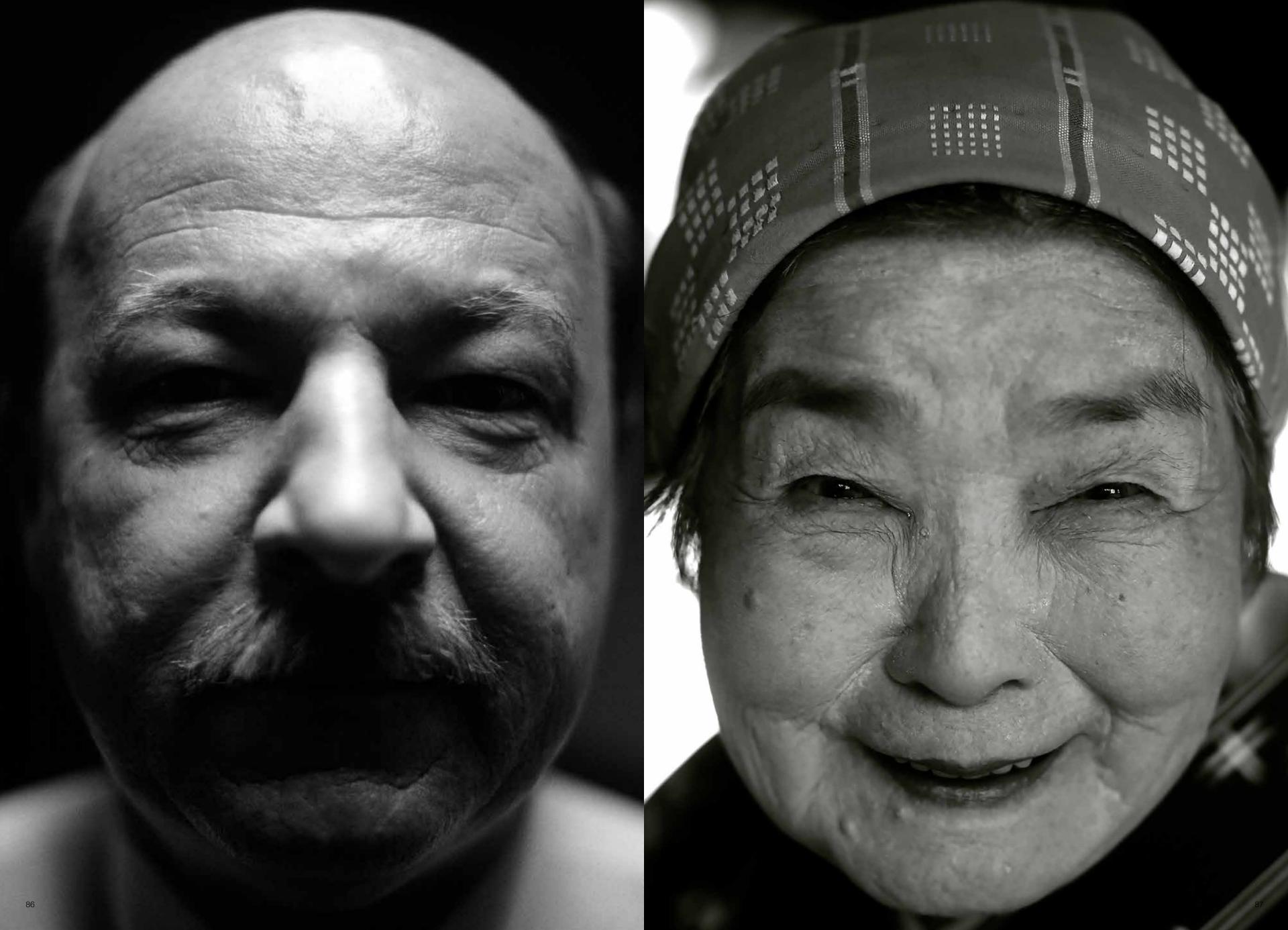












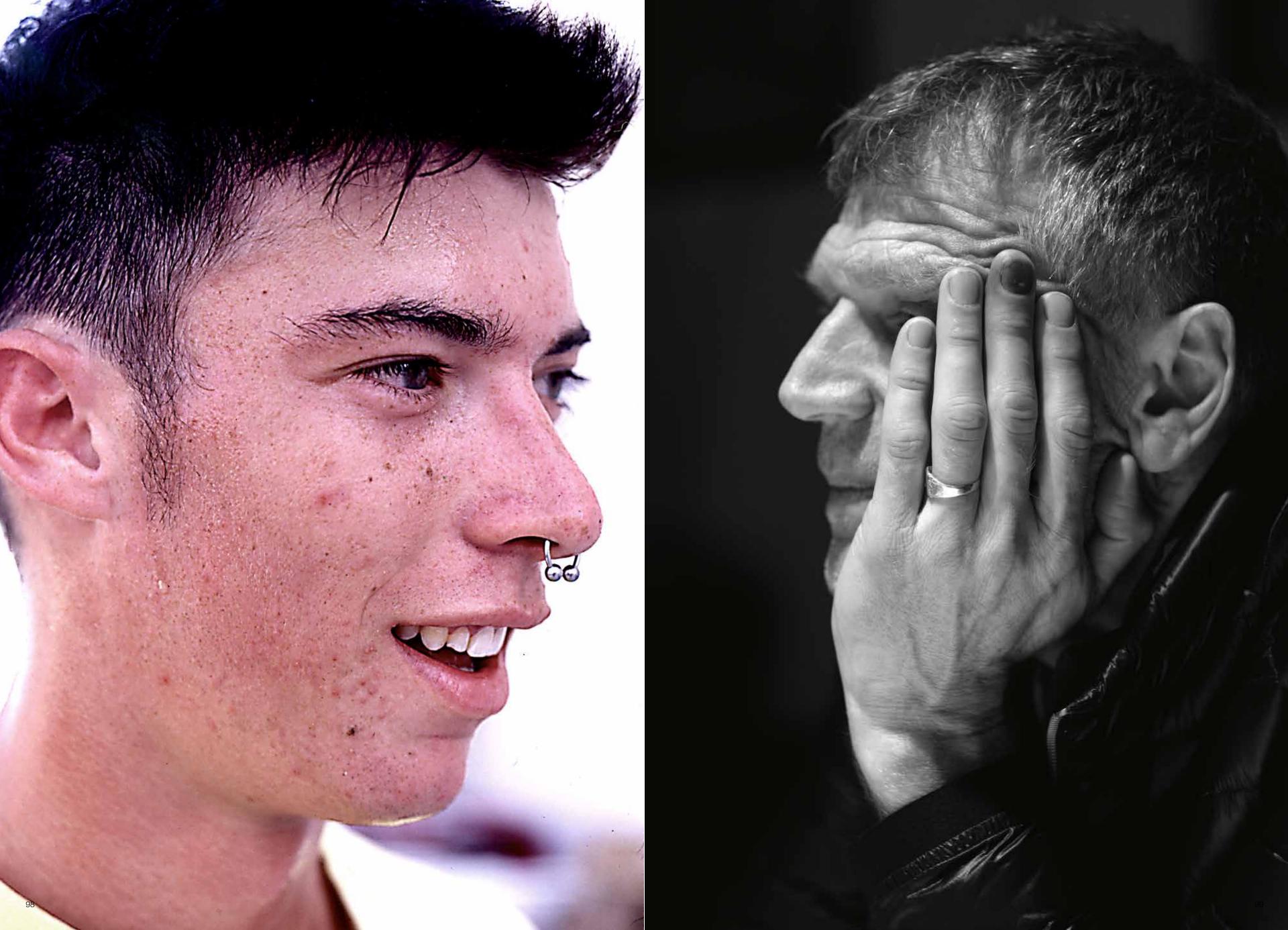






























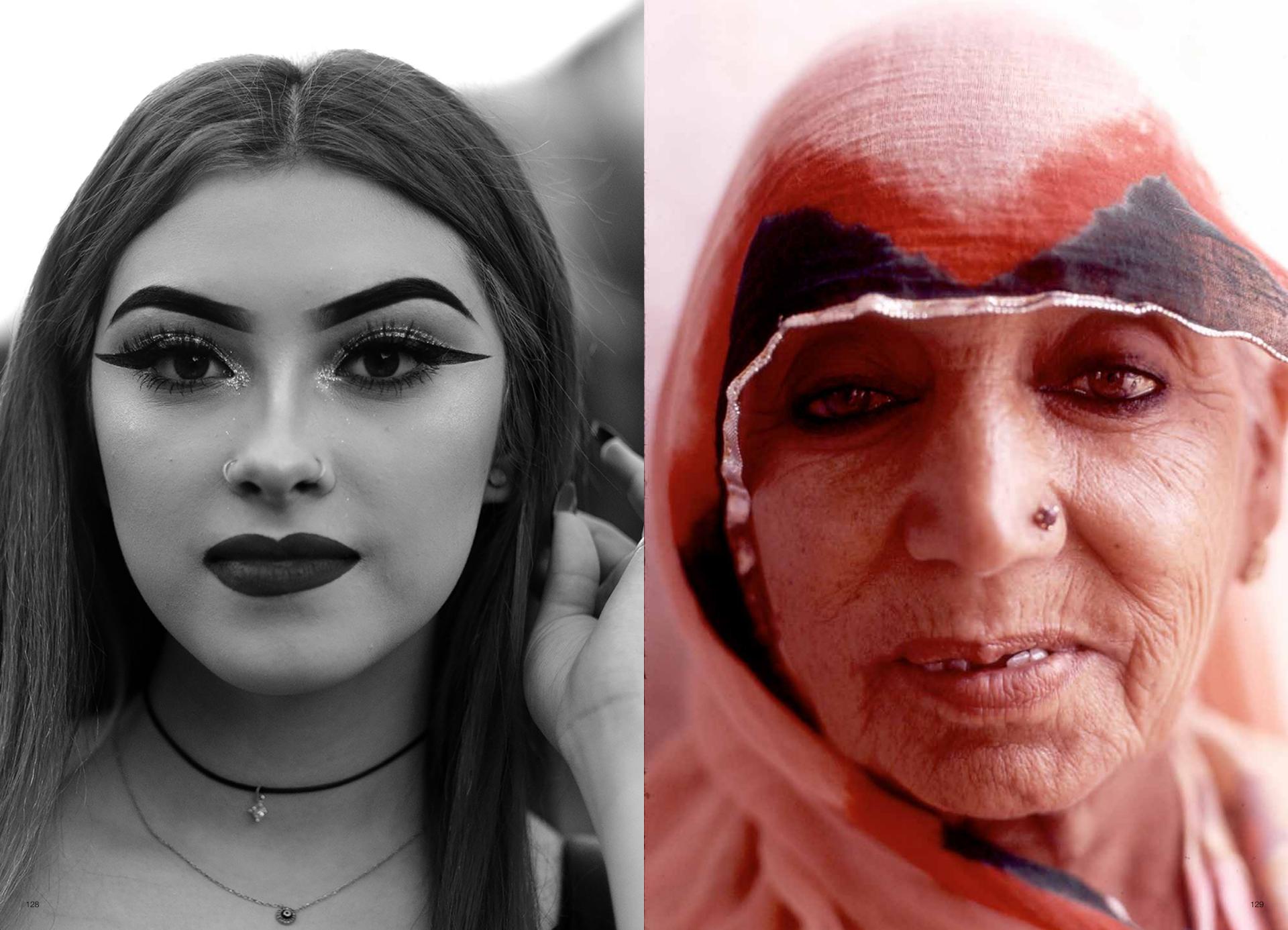
























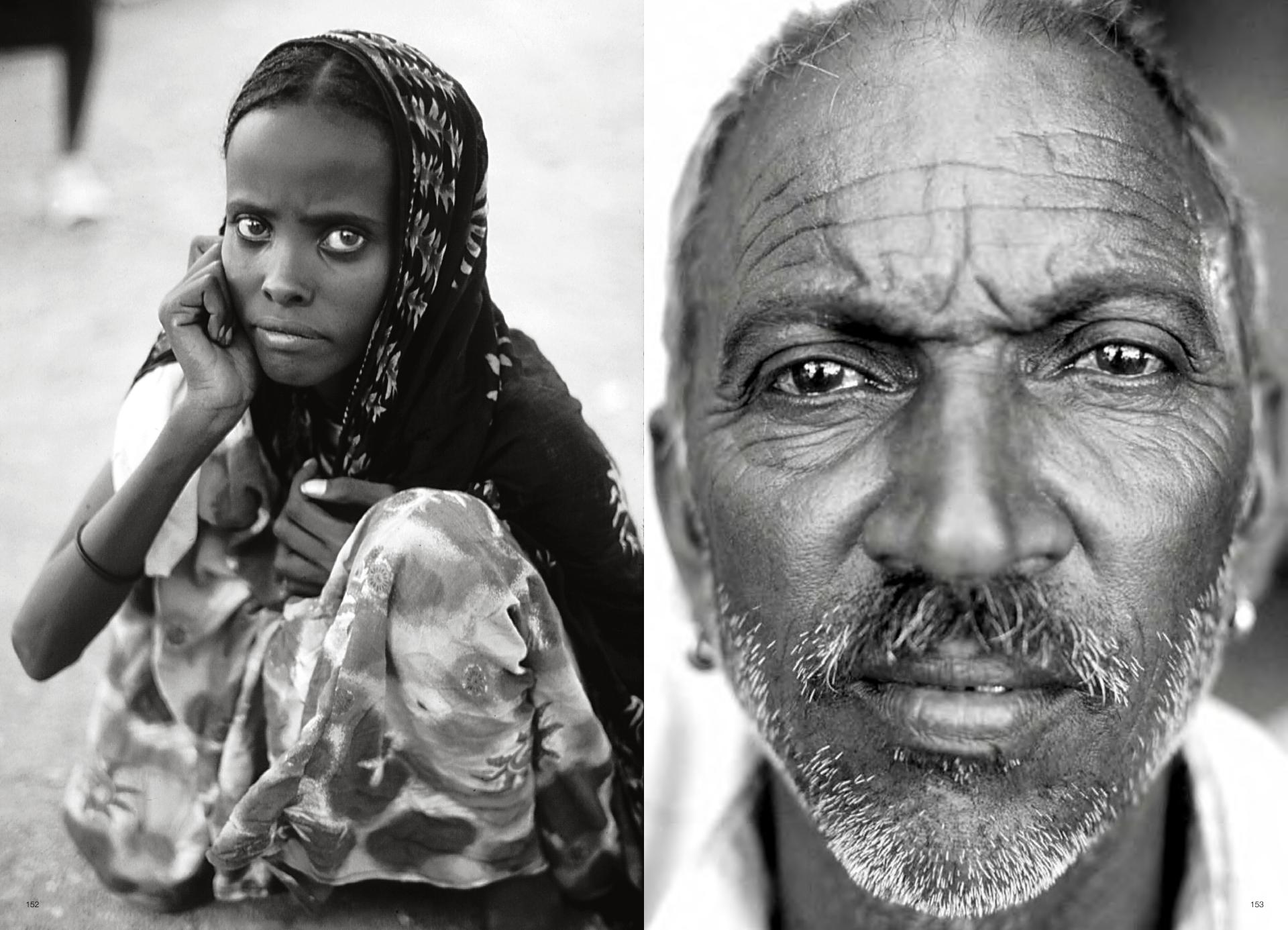




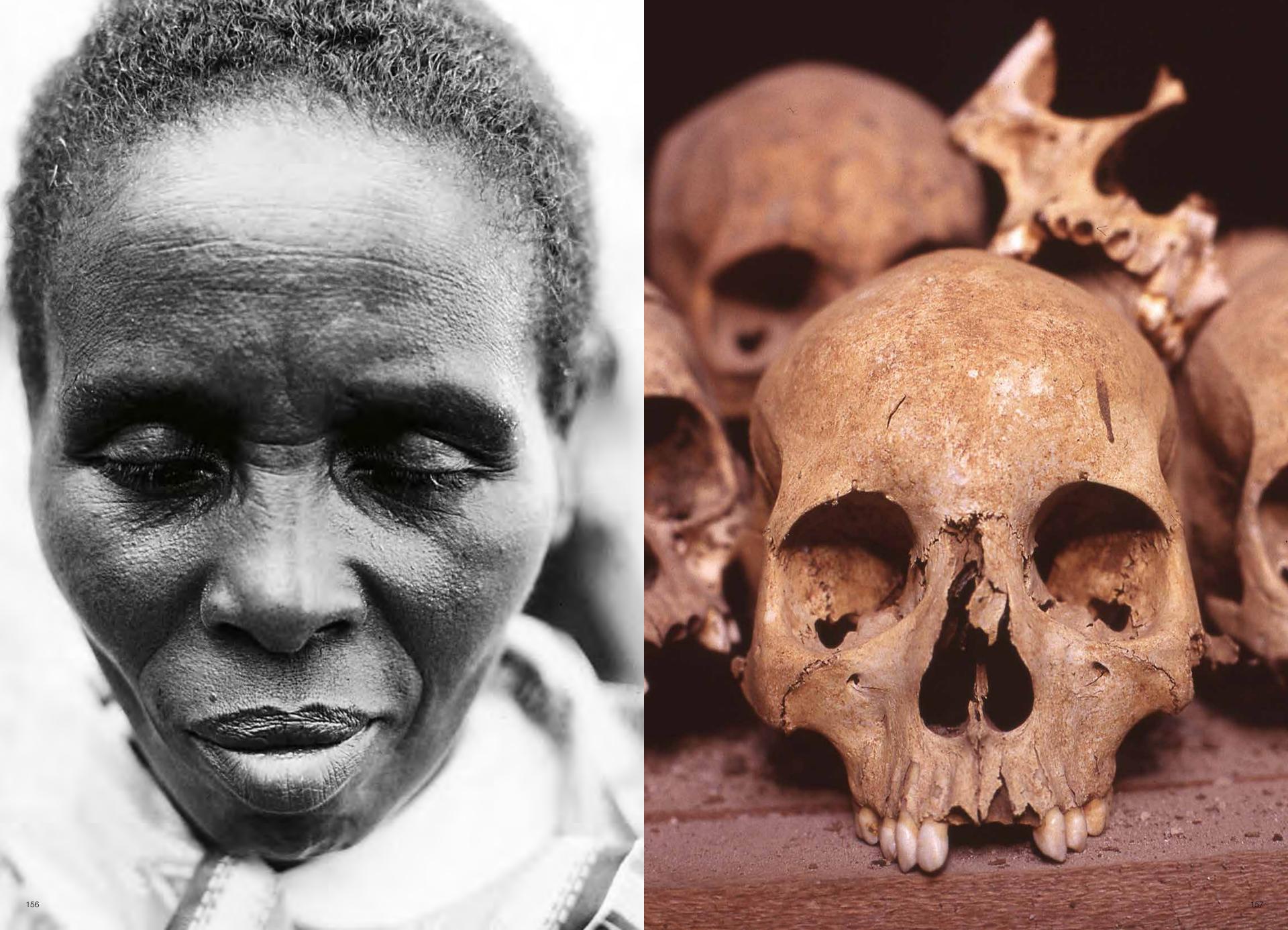
















DOSSIER

- Endpapers Board of Murder, 2000, Baltimore Police Department. This is a tally board of all the current murder cases under investigation by the BPD Homicide Unit as of October 2000, with the assigned detectives' initials beside the name of the victim, and the homicide number for the year. Baltimore has been one of the leading cities in homicides per capita since the 1980s.
- 8 Beautician, Akuem, South Sudan, 2002. In 2002, I spent 6 weeks embedded in the small South Sudanese village of Akuem, in Bhar Al Ghazal province, filming for the National Geographic documentary series "Doctors Without Borders." I got to know most everyone in the village, and photographed many of them. This woman, with her distinctive Dinka tribal scarification, was the local beautician and all around style advisor for the young women in the village.
- **9** Steve Ashbaugh, Las Vegas, 2000. At the Western edge of Las Vegas, where the suburban streets meet the desert, Steve Ashbaugh was one of a group of skateboard kids I met at a newly constructed skate park in 2000. They skated for hours on the wide open concrete slab with temperatures reaching well over 100 degrees F.
- 10 Lieutenant Falteich, Baltimore Police Department, 2000. I spent over a month embedded in the Baltimore Police Department's Homicide unit in the fall of 2000, working for New York Times television. I formed close relationships with many of the homicide detectives, including Lieutenant Falteich, who was featured in David Simon's groundbreaking portrayal of this unit "Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets," the basis for the TV series "Homicide:Life on the Streets" and "The Wira"
- **11** Pinku's Father, Rajliya, India, 2003. In the small Rajasthani village of Rajliya, the wedding of Pinku to a young man from a neighboring village was cause for a week long celebration. Pinku's father remained calm and stoic through all of the commotion.
- **12** Shepherd girl, Rajasthan, 2003 I met this girl with her grandfather and their herd of cattle in rural Rajasthan.
- **13** Young Dinka girl, Akuem, South Sudan 2002. This girl had not yet reached the age for facial scarification.
- **14** Steve, Lion and Bear animal trainer, near Palm Springs, California.
- **15** Woman with Sprayed Hair, Little Haiti, Miami, 2004.
- 16 Rajliya Poet 2002, Rajliya Rajashan, In July 2003 I spent nearly a month in the Rajasthani village of Rajliya, working for National Geographic. I was able to get to know many of the villagers, and to learn firsthand how the village worked, who the leaders and followers were, how it both absorbed and stubbornly resisted the modern technology that was seeping into its daily rhythms. This woman was called the "poet", because each morning she sang her interpretation of the local news of the day for all to hear.

- **17** Ishamuddin Khan, Sr, New Delhi, 2012. Mr. Khan is a magician, snake charmer, and monkey trainer. He lives in the Kathputli Colony, an enclave of performers, puppeteers, acrobats, and musicians in New Delhi.
- **18** Homer Pennington, BPD Homicide Detective, 2000.
- 19 Star, exotic dancer, Las Vegas, 2000. Like many young women who come to Las Vegas to dance and perform in the big stage shows, Star wound up as a stripper and exotic dancer. When I met her, she was trying to start a sort of half-way house for other women in her industry who were in trouble with drugs or domestic violence.
- **20** Layla MacCarter, boxer, Las Vegas, 2000.
- **21** Detective "C", Baltimore Police Department Homicide, 2000.
- **23** Genocide survivor, Butare, Rwanda, 2003.
- **24** Homeless artist, Miami 2004. I bought a sketch from this artist in South Beach as he sold them in the shadows of the big hotels.
- 25 Deborah Tipton, socialite, Memphis, 2018. Deborah's son, Robert, died in what could have been a fraternity hazing incident in 2012 at High Point University. His case was never fully investigated, and she has been trying to find out what really happened to him ever since.
- **26-27** Shepherd, rural Rajasthan, India 2003.
- 28-29 Boys at Gacaca trials, 2003. With over 100,000 genocidaires imprisoned for the 1994 genocide, the Rwandan government decided that rather than try and punish each one of them, a program of reconciliation would lead to peace and a more stable country. As part of the process a series of gacaca, or meetings in the grass were organized during which the accused killers would meet the families and friends of their victims, hear their brutual stories. then ask for forgiveness. I was there at an emotional gacaca in Butare, Rwanda in 2003, during which I heard the most grisly tales of the genocide. At the end of the process, the genocidaires were released back into the community.
- **30** Jason, prisoner, Lackawanna jail, 2009. I met Jason, a muslim, in the Lackawanna County jail in 2009. In addition to his facial tattoos, he had the names of three different women tattooed on various parts of his body.
- **31** Che Che Whitecloud, 2003. WhiteCloud is a Seneca/Onondaga native American, who makes his living as a knife thrower.
- **32** TJ Ott, skipper of Hot Tuna, Gloucester MA 2015. TJ is a bluefin tuna fisherman.
- **33** Lance, bull rider, Marshall, TX, 2000.
- **34** "Pete," nightclub entrepeneur, Las Vegas, 2000

- **35** Pinku, bride, Rajliya, India, 2003. The bride at the center of the 9 day wedding celebration in the village of Rajliya, Pinku was forbidden to see her husband, a young man from a neighboring village, until the moment after they were officially married.
- **36** Diamanda Galas, 2007 NYC. I did this portrait of Diamanda backstage at the Knitting Factory after her stunning St. Valentine's Day Massacre Concert in February 2007.
- 37 Maize Galfand, Fire Island, 2015.
- **38** Lucca Palumbo 2015. My daughter Lucca at age 14, caught in transition between phases of her life as she tries to make sense of who she is and who she wants to be.
- 39 Smoking Ogek (motorcycle taxi driver). Bandung 2007. After a day in Bandung, Indonesia, I foiund myself coughing, blowing my nose, and a little short of breath. There is no real public transportation in Bandung (on the island of Java, about 3 housrs east of Jakarta), and so the city has a ubiquitous, vibrant motorcycle culture which makes the air smoky but the scenery fabulous.Indonesia is the most highly populated Muslim country in the world, and I was struck by the contrast between the Americanized "biker" costumes of the Ogek and many of their hejab-wearing clients. These guys make about five dollars a day and put a lot of effort into perfecting their hard glare, which with the slightest provocation, breaks into a full grin.
- **40** Tommy Gallagher, trainer, Gleasons gym,Brooklyn, 2005. Tommy has trained hundreds of fighters in his over 40 year career as a trainer, manager, promoter, and gym owner and operator.
- **41** Regilio Tuur, boxer, Brooklyn 2005. Regilio was born in The Netherlands and was crowned the WBO super featherweight world champion in 1994.
- 42 Leroy, prisoner, Lackawanna jail, 2009.
- **43** Shaman, Java, Indonesia, 2007. Traditional healer who I witnessed going into a trance-like state after sticking a 4 inch needle through his tongue.
- 44 Abu, TBA, Akuem 2002. Abu was one of the star pupils in the Traditional Birth Assistant corps, trained by the Doctors Without Borders team in Akuem. Amidst the Civil War's shooting and air raids, and with no modern sterilization or running water, Abu learned maternal care in its most basic but vital terms. Training the local population in how to provide maternal care was one of the most important goals of the MSF mission. One night I witnessed Abu's steely nerves and concentration as she assisted an MSF doctor in a harrowing, but (mother's)life-saving fetal chraniotomy.
- 45 Shazaly, trans woman, Oahu, 2018.
- **46** Macin, Heavyweight Boxer, Brooklyn, 2003, after winning his match at the Aqueduct Raceway.
- **47** Ivory merchant, Bhar Al Ghazal province 2002. This man traveled from village to village in Bhar Al Ghazal selling ivory jewelry. His arrival was marked by great excitement in the village from both women and men.

- 48 Monte's homemade "LOVE" tattoo
- 49 Monte, gambler, Las Vegas 2000. I met Monte outside the North Las Vegas homeless shelter where he was in line for a morning meal. Three weeks before I met him, he had sold his lawnmower repair business in Oklahoma for \$7,000, and moved his wife and 2 children to Vegas. Within three days, he had lost it all on "21". As far as he knew, his family had returned to Oklahoma, but he hadn't seen or spoken with them in over a week.
- **50** Gateball referee, Okinawa, 2017. Okinawa is one of the world's "blue zones" in which life expectancy is over 80 for men, and there are hundreds of centenarians. Diet plays a big role, but also the social fabric for those over 80. Gateball, a fiercely competitive and structured game similiar to croquet, is a way for the elderly to keep their minds, bodies, and social skills engaged and sharp.
- **51** Bearclaw, Idaho, 2015. Bearclaw gave up his "normal" life to live off the land in the hills of Idaho. His main residence was a tipi, he traveled mostly by horse, he hunted for his food and made all of his own clothes.
- **52** TB patient, Afar Region Ethiopia, 2002.
- **53** Mimi Miyagi, Vegas, 2000. Mimi was a porn star transitioning to producing and directing her own content when I photographed on the set of her directorial debut.
- **54** One-eyed Ogek, Bandung, Indonesia, 2007. This ogek lost his eye in a motorcycle accident on the streets of Bandung.
- **55** Doc, Eastern Washington state, 2015. The letters of his tattoo stand for "I Have Fucking Had It."
- 56 Valerie, squid fisherwoman, Shinnecock harbor, 2004. I met Valerie early one morning as she was about to embark on her first day on the job as a deckhand on a squid boat headed out to the North Atlantic.
- **57** Folies Begere acrobat, Tropicana Hotel, Las Vegas, 2000.
- **58** Genocide survivor, Butare, Rwanda, 2003.
- **59** Benny Ivey, Jackon, MS, former regional captain of the Simon City Royals gang in Central Mississippi.
- **61** Alan, aka Smiley, backhoe operator, East Branch NY, 2011. Alan was the go-to guy in the East Branch area if you needed a hole dug, earth moved, or brush cleared.
- 62 Young woman, Akuem, South Sudan
- **63** Randy, former member of the Aryan Brotherhood, Travis County Jail, Austin, Texas, 2009
- **64** Veiled woman in Ethiopia, 2003, Afar region.
- 65 Woman in Ethiopia, 2003, Afar region.

- 66 Janu Tornell, showgirl, Folies Bergere, Tropicana Hotel, Las Vegas, 2000. Janu's Cuban mother had been a showgirl in Havana, and Janu was one of the featured showgirls in the Folies Bergere show at the Tropicana Hotel in Las Vegas. She eventually went on to be a contestant on "Survivor", and a professor of French at UNI V
- **67** Chelly, dancer, Folies Bergere, Tropicana Hotel, Las Vegas, 2000. Chelly was one of the few showgirls, acrobats, and dancers in the Tropicana's Folies Bergere who balanced life as a mom with her grueling life onstage.
- **68** Gypsy Eyez, Brooklyn, 2016. Gypsy is one of the muses and models of Nigerian body artist Laolu Senbanjo. Photographed at the AfroPunk festival, Brooklyn.
- **69** Sara, South Sudan IDP camp, 2002. Sara had grown up mostly in an Internally Displaced Person camp near the Ugandan border, and worked as a teacher. The young people of the camp looked up to her because she spoke Arabic as well as her tribal language.
- **70** Mexican circus acrobat, Nevada 2001. She was part of the Vazquez Mexican Circus that traveled all summer around the American South West.
- 71 Kalaripayattu master E.S.Narayyan Embanthiri Calicut, Kerala, India, 2008. Legend traces the 3000-year-old art form to Sage Parasurama- the master of all martial art forms and credited to be the re-claimer of Kerala from the Arabian Sea.
- **72** Ducktail haircut, Governors Island, 2012.
- 73 Medicine Man, Akuem village, South Sudan 2002. The village doctor, whose status had definitely declined with the arrival of the Doctors Without Borders mission. But there was still a place for his traditional remedies, which included various part of python anatomy, tinctures of rare berries and plants, and dancing, both by him and by the patient.
- **74** Palestinian college student, Ramallah, West Bank, 2007. I met a group of smart, passionate, and hopeful college students on the campus of Birzeit University near Ramallah. They could have been students at pretty much any college in the US, except that to them, their futures were severely limited by the restrictions the Israeli goverment had placed on their mobility and opporunity.
- **75** Ogek with helmet, Bandung, Indonesia, 2007.
- **76** Edith Warren Palumbo, New Castle, PA, 2003. My mother.
- **77** Rose Warren, New Castle, PA, 2003. My aunt and mother's identical twin sister.
- **78** Twiggy, West Baltimore, 2000. Twiggy consented for me to take this portrait of her in custody in the back of a BPD undercover vehicle after being arrested on drug charges in West Baltimore.
- **79** Tam, West Baltimore, 2003.

- **81** Young woman, Ethiopia, Afar Region, 2002.
- **82** Grandmother of the bride, Rajliya 2003.
- **83** Warrant officer, Baltimore Police Department, 2000.
- **84** Joan, showgirl, Harrah's Las Vegas, 2000.
- **85** Masai warrior (Moran), Kenya 2002.
- **86-87** Tara, teen runaway, Las Vegas, 2000.
- **88** Earl, USMC scout sniper, Iraq war veteran, New York, 2010. Earl is a veteran of the first battle of Falluiah. 2004.
- **89** Earl's "I Am My Brother's Keeper"
- **90** Homicide Detective Jack McGrath, BPD, 2000.
- **91** Ometa-san, Okinawa, Japan, 96 yrs old, 2017. Ometa-san was still performing as a dancer in an Okinawan traditional stage show at age 96.
- **92** Wendy, cocktail waitress,
- **93** Elder of Rajliya Village, Rajasthan, 2002
- **94** Avivit Cohen, Krav Maga Master, near Netanya, Israel, 2008
- **95** Young Ogek, Bandung, Java, Indonesia, 2007.
- **96** Bryan Christy, National Geographic Explorer, 2014, Los Angeles. Bryan is one of the leading wildlife writers and activists in the world, and has written extensively about elephant and rhino poaching in sub-Saharan Africa.
- 97 Mimi Miyagi, Las Vegas, 2000.
- **98** Victor, artist, Bucks County, PA 2000.
- 99 Carly Ripp, Brooklyn, 2016.
- **100** Punk girl, Hank's Saloon, Brooklyn 2013.
- **101** Tiger Lily, porn star, Las Vegas, 2000
- **102** Travis Smith, Skateboarder, Las Vegas, 2000.
- **103** Wolfgang Held, cinematographer, New York City, 2017.
- **104** George Soehngen, Martinez, CA, 2005
- **105** Ethiopian Jew, Israel, 2007
- **107** Colbert, Vadosta, GA, 2015. Colbert abandoned his life as a stockbroker, sold his mansion, and has been living as a pioneer and frontiersman in the swamps of Georgia. He makes his living largely through selling beaver pelts.
- **108** Jeannie, Eastern Washington State, 2016.

- Graham Patrick, Elvis impersonator, Harrah's Casino, Las Vegas 2000. His identity as Elvis usurped his identity as Graham. After Vegas, he spent years touring Europe as "late Elvis."
- Dallas Seavey, Anchorage Alaska, 2014. Dallas is a four-time winner of the Iditarod dogsled race in Alaska. His cauliflower ear is the result of a high school wrestling injury.
- Erica Soehgen, Peakville NY 2001.
- **112-113** Young woman at genocide trials, Butare Rwanda 2003. Hundreds of spectators and participants came to Butare, some walking for more than a day, to witness the gacaca genocide trials.
- Chief of Akuem village, Bhar al Ghazal province, South Sudan, 2002.
- Teo Palumbo, 2017. My son.
- 116 Satchell Haynes, Brooklyn, 2018.
- Zola Ross-Grey. Peakville, NY, 2013.
- Ellen Spirer, Architect and Designer, New York City, 2000.
- Sensei Goda Shihan, Kyokushin karate master Tokyo, Japan, 2007.
- Veiled woman, Rajliya, Rajasthan, 2002
- Homicide Detective "D", BPD, 2000
- Palestinian college student, Ramallah, West Bank, 2007.
- Palestinian college student, Ramallah, West Bank, 2007.
- Pageant mom. Savannah GA. 2009.
- Heather, pageant mom, Savannah, GA, 2009.
- Young woman, Internally Displaced Persons camp, South Sudan, 2002.
- Princess Roop, village of Rajliya, Rajasthan 2003.
- Boxer Eddie Scolaro, Las Vegas, 2000.
- Laura Serrano, boxer, Las Vegas 2000. Laura gave up her career in Mexico City as a lawyer to pursue a new career as a boxer in Las Vegas.
- Palestinian college student, Ramallah, West Bank, 2007.
- Bull Rider, Marshall, Texas, 2001.
- Cornelius, Kigali, Rwanda, 2003. Cornelius lost much of his family in the genocide, and barely escaped with his own life.
- Corradino John Palumbo, 2000, New Castle, PA. My father, a second generation Italian-American. The youngest of 9 children, he was the only one of his siblings to get a college degree.
- Punk, near Hank's Saloon, Brooklyn, 2016.
- 135 Indian woman, Rajasthan, 2003.

- Lady D, Boxer, Vegas, 2000.
- Nushawn, Lackawanna jail, Lancaster PA 2010.
- 139 Shilpa Ray, singer, NYC, 2011.
- Detective Jon Gigante Baltimore Police Department, 2000.
- Bull Rider Marshall, TX, 2000.
- **142-143** Young man, IDP camp, 2002, South Sudan.
- Dancer, Folies Bergere, Tropicana Hotel, Las Vegas, 2000.
- **145** Mother of Triplets, Akuem, South Sudan, 2002. When this woman gave birth to healthy triplets, she became a regional celebrity, the subject of celebrations, feasts, and dancing for the villagers of Akuem and for the curioius villagers of nearby villages as well.
- Ogek, Bandung, Indonesia, 2007.
- Palestinian college student, Ramallah, West Bank, 2007.
- Young Nuer man, South Sudan, 2002.
- **149** Tamiko Kawata, artist, in her studio, Manhattan, 2019.
- Hands of Bill, a blackjack dealer, Las Vegas, 2000.
- Bill, blackjack dealer and limo driver, Las Vegas, 2000. Bill was the puppet master within a certain substrata of the Vegas underground, touching upon the casino, porn, prostitution, and entertainment worlds.
- **153** TB patient, Afar region, Ethiopia, 2002. I made this portrait in the Medicin Sans Frontieres mission where I lived for almost a month in the northernmost reaches of Ethiopia. The volunteer doctors were treating a TB outbreak within the nomadic Afar tribes.
- Young woman, IDP camp, South Sudan, 2002.
- Albino genocide survivor, Butare, Rwanda, 2003.
- Polly Brown, Photographer, New York City, 2011. I've considered documentary photographer Polly Brown a mentor and family member since I met her through her daughters in the mid-1990's.Polly Brown, NYC.
- Polly Brown, Photographer, New York City, 2011. In order to correct for the double vision that a tumor was causing, Polly wore steampunkish glasses that to my eyes made her look as if she had transformed into a human camera.
- Shilpa Ray, singer, in her studio in Bushwick, Brooklyn, 2011.

- 160 Fireman Rob Natale, Engine 10, Lower Manhattan near Ground Zero, September 13, 2001. On September 11, 2001, I was living just north of the World Trade Center, and was enveloped in the dust from the falling towers. Over the next several weeks, I photographed extensively in the area around the fallen towers, including a series of portraits on September 13th of the members of Engine 10, after they emerged from a shift at Ground Zero.
- Firewoman Jodi Gomez, Engine 10, Lower Manhattan near Ground Zero, September 13, 2001. I reunited with Jodi in 2016 after she was alerted that this photo had been posted on my Instagram page. We have become friends all these years later, after our first brief encounter in 2001.
- Guru, Hanuman temple, rural Rajassthan, 2003.
- **164** Genocidaire at gacaca trial, Butare, Rwanda, 2003. In shooting the gacaca trials, I was struck by how gentle the genocidaires seemed to be. Could they be entrusted with reconciliation?
- Genocidaire at gacaca trial, Butare, Rwanda 2003
- Genocide survivor, Butare, Bwanda 2003
- Skulls of Tutsis murdered in the genocide, Rwanda, 2003.
- Erica looks away, Fire Island, 2016.
- Fireman Doug Evanuska, Engine 10, Lower Manhattan near Ground Zero, September 13, 2001. I noticed his haunted and angry eyes from across the street. He had just worked all night on "the pile".
- Young man with WTC dust in his hair, Lower Manhattan near Ground Zero, September 11, 2001. This man was beside me in the dust cloud after the South Tower fell. One of my cameras that day happened to be loaded with Infra-Red color film.
- Lower Manhattan, early afternoon, September 11, 2001.

Robert Palumbo is a New York-based filmmaker and photographer who has worked for The New York Times, National Geographic, and the German culture magazine Du. His work was featured in Scalo's acclaimed photo book about 9/11, "Here Is New York," and is included in the collections of the Smithsonian, the Library of Congress, the New York Historical Society, and several prominent private collections. His acclaimed film and televison work includes "Mars", the groundbreaking TV series for National Geographic about the first manned mission to Mars, co-produced with Ron Howard's Imagine Entertainment, and "Years of Living Dangerously," the Emmy Award-winning series about climate change. He is a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow in Photography, and lives in Brooklyn with his family.

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