

## What Am I Looking At?

by Terry Barrett

When I first saw wide-angle publicity shots of an installation of *Malkovich, Malkovich, Malkovich: Homage to Photographic Masters*, I thought I was seeing a new exhibition of famous photographs. It is a stellar collection of forty-one iconic photographs by such luminaries as Richard Avedon and Irving Penn. I saw Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* and the photograph made by Annie Leibovitz of John Lennon and Yoko Ono on a bed with him nude and her clothed. I knew the images and many were, and still are, favorites. I was immediately drawn to the collection because I readily identified with the aesthetic and political sensibilities of whoever put the exhibition together. From the far away group shots of the individual photographs, I did not understand the inclusion of *Malkovich, Malkovich, Malkovich* in the exhibition title.

I learned, and based upon knowing, was only then able to see that every one of the photographs is a photograph of the same person, John Malkovich. The North American actor poses over and over again in different guises, and with his endlessly malleable face performs different characters. These are new iterations of masterful photographs of the 20th Century and in the reiterations Malkovich has magically replaced Lange's migrant mother, Avedon's beekeeper, and Diane Arbus's man in curlers.

Malkovich's assumed likeness to some of the subjects of the re-presentations are so well duplicated visually and evoked emotionally that I could not tell the difference between my memory of the originals and these new versions of them. Were I, and I believe most of us, to walk into a room with a poster hanging on the wall of Malkovich posing as Einstein, we would simply accept it without hesitation. When Malkovich replaces Salvador Dali in the famous photographic profile of that artist by Phillippe Halsman, I cannot distinguish the copy from the original without calling up and comparing the two side by side.

The exhibition is highly selective concerning photography and master photographers. Subject matters are missing such as

the nude, the still life, the landscape, and the abject. Important masters are set aside: there are no inclusions of the work of Ansel Adams, Henri-Cartier Bresson, Robert Frank, or Joel-Peter Witkin. There are no intellectually esoteric works like the photographs of water towers by Bernd and Hilla Becher, or Sherrie Levine's iconoclastic direct copies (appropriations) of photographs by Walker Evans and Edward Weston. The collection is weighted toward North Americans although it includes international photographers such as Bill Brandt and Eikoh Hosoe, and many of the subjects have world renown acclaim, such as Robert Mapplethorpe.

The exhibition consists of photographs of famous people, many needing only one name like Einstein, Dali, and Picasso. Some obvious candidates for inclusion in such a collection are absent, such as *Afghan girl* from the cover of *National Geographic* and contemporaneously and perhaps most pertinently, there is no inclusion of Cindy Sherman's numerous photographs of herself portraying multiple female identities.

I am unable to engage with some of the photographs. I do not get Malkovich reenacting *Mick Jagger / Fur Hood* by David Bailey, for example. Malkovich does not look like Jagger and I am unaware of the original occasion of the photograph that this new one preserves. I realize that what is iconic to some is not to others.

I am looking at a collection of photographs that one man selected and reproduced, replicated, or reinvented. Sandro Miller, or "Sandro," as he identifies himself in commercial photography, a realm in which he has been previously best known, is a friend of Malkovich. The two have long-standing ties to the city of Chicago, Miller's home town, where they met about 20 years ago, continue to enjoy a friendship, and are now engaged in this photographic collaboration.

The collection is, ultimately, an idiosyncratic collection of what a particular photographer knows best and loves best, the images that formed and informed him, photographs "that changed the way he thought about photography." Portraits especially intrigue Miller: "a strong portrait of someone can change the way we think of a person." He selected photographs that made him wonder, "how a single image can move so many millions of people and become iconic."<sup>1</sup>

Miller's inclusion criteria for admission into his elite gathering seem to be these: The original photograph has personal significance to Miller. The original photograph deserves re-creation. Miller can adequately replicate the original photograph. Malkovich can convincingly perform the subject of the chosen photograph. The original photograph is of historical interest. The original photograph has emotional power. The original photograph has aesthetic appeal.

So, what is there to appreciate here? Photographic portraits are in themselves interesting to think about. Photography revolutionized portraiture. Portraits were once the provenance of the rich and powerful, kings and queens and popes, set with mosaic tiles, painted into plaster, or on canvas. Now with smart phones everyone is both a portraitist and the subject of portraits.

If I am interested in a person, just about any photograph of him or her is interesting. Any photograph, as opposed to a painting, of the historical Jesus, Cleopatra, or Hannibal would fascinate me because of its visual accuracy. A photograph of the one I am curious about simply needs to be sufficiently focused, in decent light, and without blur to satisfy me, technical qualities that smart phones easily deliver.

Roland Barthes realized that when he is aware of being photographed he is "at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art."<sup>2</sup> In the exhibition, we are now contemplating not just Einstein posing for photographers, we are also looking at Malkovich willing himself and acting himself into Einstein as Einstein thought he was, how Einstein would like others to think of him, and the Einstein the photographer used to make the photograph.

There is delight in seeing any faithful imitation of an aspect of the visible world rendered into a visual art form. Plato and Aristotle long ago identified imitation as a foundation of art, and faithful mimesis remained the criterion for art for many centuries. Photography is the ultimate mimetic invention, automatically and mechanically reproducing what we see in ways we have grown accustomed to seeing, so much so that photographs seem natural rather than artificial, nature rather than artifice.

Miller is an exacting and expert technician of photography. He made all of the reproduced photographs — those originally made on site in locations from Central America to Central Park in New York City — in his Chicago studio in fifteen-hour shifts over four days. Prior to shooting, Miller and his crew researched each original choice, interviewing photographers, studying out-takes, meticulously choosing wigs and clothes, and "spent months" on lighting alone.<sup>3</sup> He and his talented team are able to exactly replicate diverse styles and subjects of their original existence: the frame, décor, props, costumes, and lighting for forty-one images re-presenting and evoking powerful people, events, occasions, and memories.

The photographs would not be as immediately convincing and then as confounding as they are without Malkovich, the actor who is also a director and producer and fashion designer, and now the subject of these photographs. The film of Malkovich's that is most informative in relation to this photography exhibition is *Being John Malkovich*, the whimsical feature made in 1999 in which Malkovich plays a fictional version of himself and during which we spend fifteen minutes inside his brain. What Roger Ebert, the film critic, wrote about that film now aptly applies now to this exhibition: "Whoa! What an experience...material that is somehow funny and serious, sad and satirical, weird and touching, all at once."<sup>4</sup> Just one version of an original well-known photograph, say, Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, with Malkovich replacing the original mother, is intriguing, but Malkovich convincingly becoming the migrant mother, Che Guevara, and Jesus in Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* is indeed funny and serious, sad and satirical, weird and touching.

In the photograph of Einstein, the most commonly reproduced close-up of the person most commonly associated with "genius," the scientist faces us with bright eyes, wild hair, and tongue sticking out. The image is so widely displayed that it is just part of the visual environment and its photographer and its making has never piqued my curiosity until now when it is re-presented. The photographs of Einstein, Dali, and others have been so often reproduced that they have lost their makers. Miller reacquaints photographs with their photographers.

Because Miller has brought the Einstein photograph to my attention, I am curious to know about its original making. I learn through the Web that Arthur Sasse, a press photographer, caught Einstein in the back of a car at Princeton University on his 72nd birthday. A man and a woman seated in the car on either side of Einstein are cropped out of the final famous frame. Other photographers were snapping away but their shots didn't last or they missed the gesture of the scientist that revealed his previously un-shown sense of humor and humility. With the prompting of Miller, I newly appreciate the spontaneity of the original photograph.

Because it is a photograph, rather than a painting or drawing, Einstein caused the original image. He was there. In Barthes's words and emphases, "I call the 'photographic referent' not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it."<sup>5</sup>

Yet the convincing Miller and Malkovich re-presentation of Einstein troubles my confidence in photography. The new one looks very much like Einstein, but it is not. I've been had. Miller is well aware of what he is doing: "I had always heard the camera doesn't lie. I suppose I looked at this as a chance to explore that... That's one of the reasons for doing this project—besides the simple fun of doing it."<sup>6</sup> The photographs that Miller and Malkovich made of Einstein and others are effective in challenging the photographs' credibility especially because of the likeness of Malkovich and the original subjects.

Some other replications are effective first and foremost because Miller's mastery of the frame and secondarily Malkovich's physical likeness to the original subjects. Arnold Newman made a memorable portrait of Igor Stravinsky at the piano in 1960. It is Igor Stravinsky but only as Arnold Newman posed him in the lower left corner of the composition that is dominated by the cover of the grand piano with an overall feeling of a Jean Arp bas-relief sculpture. Newman compressed modern music, modern art, and the new art of photography into one rectangle. Miller replicates it precisely and reminds me that I have not been looking at Stravinsky, but at the maestro as only Newman pictured him.

Neither would I mistake Malkovich for Che Guevara in *Che Guevara* made by Alberto Korda. In the new photograph Malkovich has persuasively reenacted the look and feel of steely determination of the Argentine revolutionary. Che Guevara, if he is known to us, is likely known because of Alberto Korda's photograph of him rather than his pivotal actions as accomplice to Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution. Che Guevara, as photographed by Korda, has become the iconic representation of a revolutionary.

One photograph in the exhibition seems commonplace and unworthy of reproduction in a collection of master works. A woman stands in high heels and without clothes with her back to us at a bathroom sink. It is not a portrait and it seems like just another voyeuristic photograph of a naked woman with a nice ass. When I read the label though, I learn that it is Simone de Beauvoir who Malkovich is enacting and Miller is reproducing. The knowledge that it is Beauvoir that Malkovich replaces is crucial. She is the philosopher and pillar of feminism who authored *The Second Sex*, life-long but unmarried partner of Jean-Paul Sartre, the Existentialist with whom she shared an "open" relationship during which they seduced one another's sexual prizes and then exchanged titillating details of those encounters. The picture is what its photographer Robert Shay refers to as a "grab-shot" that he made in his Chicago apartment in 1950 when Beauvoir was forty-two and romantically involved with Chicago novelist Nelson Algren, friend of Shay.<sup>7</sup> Shay's photograph of Beauvoir was first made public on the cover of an esoteric French journal in honor of the woman's hundredth birthday, long after she and Sartre had lived. Miller's reproduction of the photograph previously unknown to me rattles my notions of what feminism was, is, or can be. Without Miller's recreation of this otherwise little known original image I would be denied this perplexing information.

The whole exhibition can be seen as an illustration of some of Jean Baudrillard's ideas about "the simulacrum," specifically that we in late modernism have become so immersed in and massaged by images that we have lost sight of the real. An apt example is a set of four film stills by Herb Ritts that Miller gives to us of Malkovich posing as Jack Nicholson who is posing as

the Joker for the *Batman* movie directed by Tim Burton that is derived from a comic book. Herb Ritts's portraits of Nicholson acting as Batman are convincing copies "that bear no relation to any reality whatsoever."<sup>8</sup>

Through this exhibition Miller has importantly shifted attention from the "photographer's eye"<sup>9</sup> to the maker's mind. Most of the images that Miller and Malkovich recreate are known by the ideas behind them. I vividly recall my excitement in 1967 when I saw an *Esquire* magazine cover portraying Muhammad Ali in boxing shorts, pierced with arrows in the pose of St. Sebastian. When I search the Web, the photograph is not identified by the photographer who shot the photograph but as one of many brilliant magazine covers by art director George Lois. Cassius Clay had converted from Christianity to Islam taking the name of Muhammad Ali. He was subsequently jailed for refusing to fight in the Vietnam War, or the War as the Vietnamese call it. Once a North American hero who won Olympic gold for the USA by out-boxing communist Cubans during the cold war between the USA and USSR, he was embraced by whites as well as blacks. When Clay transformed to Ali, however, he became a symbol of black resistance and the photograph became a poster of protest. The Ali photograph itself is adequately made but it is its idea that is superlative. When Lois saw the transparencies from the shoot, he said to the photographer, "This is a masterpiece."<sup>10</sup>

The photographs Miller has chosen to remake can be recalled now, especially by viewers of his (and my) generation, and deserve to be remembered but may otherwise become forgotten because the original photographs were made for commercial assignments and presented in disposable print on the covers and pages of popular North American magazines like *Vogue* and *Rolling Stone*. They are not the kind of photographs the Museum of Modern Art was collecting and preserving during the years they were made, roughly 1950-1990. Miller's photographs preserve and celebrate the most popular images of photography rather than photographs that were shown, collected, preserved, and elevated as fine art.

I know most of the images in the collection and understand reasons for their significance, but I am white, male, from Chicago, and am about the same age as Miller and only eight

years older than Malkovich. I am curious to learn what a nineteen-year-old will make of the exhibition. I want to learn how the exhibition plays in Poland.

Minimally, someone young or old who is newly seeing the exhibition is given an entertaining array of photographs of famous people by master photographers, Malkovich's talent of morphing into so many different characters, and Miller's great skill in reproducing those photographs. The exhibition is also a visual survey of popular culture in the United States toward the end of the millennium. Maximally, Miller motivates exploration of the wonders of the photographic medium, what it does well, and what photographs can bring to mind and restore to memory.

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- <sup>1</sup> Christopher Borelli, "Sandro Miller Does All Malkovich, All the Time," *Chicago Tribune*, November 5, 2014, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-john-malkovich-sandro-miller-photos-20141105-column.html#page=1>
- <sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, New York: Hill & Wang, 1980.
- <sup>3</sup> Borelli.
- <sup>4</sup> Roger Ebert, "Being John Malkovich," Roger Ebert.com, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/being-john-malkovich-1999>.
- <sup>5</sup> Barthes, 76.
- <sup>6</sup> Borelli.
- <sup>7</sup> [http://chicagoist.com/2011/02/02/from\\_the\\_vault\\_of\\_art\\_shay\\_nelson\\_a.php#photo-1](http://chicagoist.com/2011/02/02/from_the_vault_of_art_shay_nelson_a.php#photo-1)
- <sup>8</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Two Essays," *Science Fiction Studies*, 18(3), November 1991
- <sup>9</sup> John Szarkowski, *The Photographers Eye*, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1966.
- <sup>10</sup> George Lois, "Showing Ali as a Martyr for Refusing to Fight in a Bad War," <http://www.georgelois.com/pages/Esquire/Esq.Ali.html>