

Niklas Taleb

b. 1986 in Munich
lives and works in Essen

Last months lived under the sway of an unspecified pandemic: high-strung, irritable, unnecessarily confused. I see myself in the hospital, otherworldly on sedatives. "I have the feeling for perhaps the first time in my life that I can simply ,be'. I no longer have to push myself to do anything, to prove anything. I can just sit on the bed and be."¹ Assured by the statistical certainties of living my best Leitkultur life, it's no accident that each morning is greeted by familiar faces, family, and friends, that each evening I expire into clean, white sheets again. But again, I'm not there. I'm here, pleading with an insurance provider not to cut my coverage over overdue fees accumulated in income-free months – pleading for my supply of antiretrovirals. I'd love to "be" but can't, so instead I forget. In the evenings, I do my best to expire into an insatiable series of strangers. In the mornings, I wonder whether it's an accident that I haven't expired in a border camp, an accident that I probably have more than 8 minutes and 46 seconds left.

From here, family photos seem pretty complicated, which is what Niklas Taleb's most recent photos are. Not only do they signify the perpetual order of this world, but of the medium of photography itself. Already in 1965, it was "clear that photographic practice only exists and subsists for most of the time by virtue of its family function or rather by the function conferred upon it by the family group"; clear that "the need for photographs and the need to take photographs... are felt all the more intensely the more integrated the group and the more the group is captured at a moment of its highest integration."² Integrated: by a slip of the translated tongue, the genre of family photography is not only the idealized image of bourgeois respectability, but also of belonging and citizenship as such. That's 1965, but what about now?

When "the relations of biological resemblance are inscrutable" – read impure – the family relationships become so complex that "no uninformed viewer could be expected to work them out."³ Maybe that's why Taleb's figures are always alone anyway. Not just because kinship goes far beyond "biological resemblance," but also because family photos couldn't tell you that much about families to begin with. Ohne Titel (Hannover) (2020), for example, shows us family friend before there was a family Alexander Schöpfel on a trip to the Viêt Giác Pagoda in Hannover. His eyes focussed elsewhere, Schöpfel isn't actually posing for Taleb, but for the artist Phung-Tien Phan. The awkward juxtaposition of Schöpfel's double-breasted grey suit, his Dr. Seuss smile, and devotional buddhist statues doesn't tell us much about his relationship to the absent photographers, but seems like a comical inversion of the fantasy of integration as such. Elsewhere, Psychologie (2020) shows us the floor of a small kitchen. A halo of extraterrestrial light rests on the floor beneath the dishwasher, while

¹ Moyra Davey, Long Life Cool White, p. 81.

² Pierre Bourdieu, Photography: A Middle-Brow Art, p. 19.

³ Michael Fried, Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before, p. 206.

an oven bathes the stool to the left in stripes. The play of artificial light is so photographic it looks rendered, while the title mocks our attempts to project meaning onto the image as nothing more than kitchen sink psychology.

But by far, the biggest plays on photographic opacity are the two images of the artist's daughter, Luna. It feels like *Ohne Titel* (2020) wanted to show us a mundane middle-class interior replete with laundry stand and a framed artwork on the wall, but a blurry mask-like bust has barged in on the scene from the right. Whereas in *Reverse psychology* (2020), she stares right back at us, scrutinizing our motivations with her unintelligible gaze. Both images draw on the vernacular of the family snapshot – blurry things intruding from out of frame – but the composition is too clear to be casual. Instead of images of happy childhood, we're met by an unreadable visage, a black box, a question mark. If it is this child that "embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation's good,"⁴ then it's fair to say we can hardly imagine what she'll look like, let alone think. And that, if nothing else, is grounds for hope.

- Stanton Taylor

Niklas Taleb *1986 in Munich, lives and works in Essen. He was founder and co-curator of the exhibition space *Belle Air* in Essen (2014 - 2017) and is co-founder of the artist group *New Bretagne*. His recent and upcoming exhibitions include a solo show at Bonner Kunstverein (2021), *Soft View / Privatissime*, Neuer Essener Kunstverein (2020), *Subjekt und Objekt*, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (2020), *Every Loft Needs a Sink*, Vleeshal Center for Contemporary Art, Middelburg (NL) (2019), *Die Idee der besten schlechten Geschichte*, 8. Salon, Hamburg (2018), *Harmoniemusik und Vogelschiessen*, Shanaynay, Paris (2017)

⁴ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, p. 11.