

## Seeing Stars: Reading Melancholy and Power at Madame Tussauds through the Lens of Hiroshi Sugimoto

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In a hallway of the London Madame Tussauds, the wax figures which are the chief attraction for most visitors overlap with two of Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographs of wax subjects from his *Portraits* series. Decorated with old-fashioned flocked wallpaper, the passage contains a number of vintage Tussauds advertisements and newspaper clippings. Few visitors entered the space when I visited the wax museum, since using it meant bypassing the special room devoted to popular singer Kylie Minogue. The two Sugimoto prints, which were unlabelled, hung halfway down the hallway. One is of Queen Elizabeth I, the other of Princess Diana (Fig. 1, Fig. 2). They are somewhat smaller than Sugimoto's gallery prints, but otherwise appear identical.<sup>1</sup> Seeing them there and recognizing them for what they were, I wondered if I was the only visitor that day aware of their provenance, and this gave me my own thrill of celebrity sighting. The juxtaposition of wax figures and Sugimoto's portraits highlights not only the contrast

between high art photography and displays meant for mass entertainment, but also the difference between what the wax figures offer, the illusion of proximity to fame, and what the photographs offer, the illusion that the figures have come to life.



Fig. 1: Hiroshi Sugimoto: Elizabeth I, 1999. Gelatin silver print, 58  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 47 inches (149.2 x 119.4 cm), Negative 839, copyright: Hiroshi Sugimoto



Fig. 2: Hiroshi Sugimoto: Diana, Princess of Wales, 1999. Gelatin silver print, 58  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 47 inches (149.2 x 119.4 cm), Negative 861, copyright: Hiroshi Sugimoto

Surprisingly, Sugimoto's *Portraits* have a much more convincing illusion of life than the waxworks themselves. In fact, they unsettle and disorient the viewer with their lifelike appearances.<sup>2</sup> Even historical figures who lived and died long before the era of photography, for example Elizabeth I, seem to have come back to life, as if they made their way to Sugimoto's studio to stand before his view camera for a formal portrait (Fig. 1). The waxwork figures in Madame Tussauds are simultaneously hauntingly famil-

iar and disturbingly lifeless. The photographs, on the other hand, give the illusion of live subjects. Yet, on different terms both create an experience of reality testing which is the key to a complex discursive trajectory through which the portraits move, articulating the relationship of celebrity to melancholy and power.

The image of Princess Diana adorning the hall at Madame Tussauds is "Diana, Princess of Wales," 1999 (Fig. 2). Diana's mythologization as the "people's princess," an almost-commoner who became an almost-queen, would have made her of interest to Madame Tussaud, who started out a housekeeper's daughter, made her way to Versailles as an artist, and prospered as a businesswoman. The photograph in the hallway is a portrait of the same figure of Diana that was on display when I visited the museum, completed over the course of six months following a two-hour sitting in 1996.<sup>3</sup> At the museum, this figure stood alone, separate from the more regally attired Windsors. Wearing an evening gown, the white top half of which is festooned with pearls and ribbons, Diana bears a rueful expression, almost a grimace. Her sad expression seems to anticipate her untimely death, which occurred two years before the photograph was taken. Because Diana was so frequently photographed, this image reads at first as just another photograph of a famous figure. But spending some time with the image allows the stillness of the figure to transcend the photograph. Putting one's finger on exactly what gives the image away as a wax figure is difficult; thus the figure gives the illusion of vacillating between the real person and the wax copy.

The photograph of Elizabeth I (Fig. 1) is of a wax figure modeled after a painted portrait attributed to Nicholas Hilliard, *Ermine Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I* (1585). This photograph lacks the automatic authenticity of the portrait of Diana, a familiar subject of photographs. The ermine on Elizabeth's arm is clearly stuffed, and this detail defeats the reality of the image as a whole, while simultaneously adding a humorous aspect to the wax figure's fidelity to the painting. At the same time, the viewer's knowledge that a photograph of Elizabeth I is a temporal impossibility also impedes the illusion of life. Nevertheless the momentary sensation that Elizabeth I has stepped out of time into Sugimoto's studio persists, if only long enough to be captured on film.

These two photographs were the only Sugimotos I found at Madame Tussauds, but they represent the range of illusory reality in the *Portraits* series as a whole, from the more evident artificiality of *Peter Stuyvesant* to the surprisingly convincing *Henry V*. They invoke photography's usual indexicality with its referent, and then are unable to quite deliver what is expected: the actual person. The viewer is left in a sort of vacuum in between

reality and falsehood.

Reality and falsehood operate in a different kind of relation at Madame Tussauds, which offers a fantasy in which the gap between the ordinary individual and the celebrity collapses. The wax museum, a form of mass entertainment, provides the illusion that the visitor is not part of the mass but rather the equal of the celebrity. The fact that this fantasy is so appealing to so many (over two million visitors a year at the London Tussauds) demonstrates that there is something at stake in the fantasy the museum offers.<sup>4</sup>

Cultural theorist P. David Marshall has suggested that celebrity is an empty sign where different types of power converge. The relationship of the ordinary individual to the celebrity demarcates a complex power relationship in the consumer capitalist democracy. It might even be said that the celebrity wax figures at Madame Tussauds articulate in some ways the average citizen's lack of power in a capitalist democracy. Sugimoto's photographs of the Tussauds figures, though they may be viewed by a different audience from that of the wax museum and, as photographs, transform the physical relationship between viewer and figure, also function to remind the viewer that he or she is disempowered and, in fact, a part of mass culture.

Social disempowerment has been analyzed in terms of melancholy by sociologist Wolf Lepenies, who has described melancholy as an expression of protest over loss of power and the ability to act. While the visitors to a Chelsea gallery in which Sugimoto's photographs are on view do not necessarily display melancholy, and it is even less apparent in the behavior of visitors to Madame Tussauds, nevertheless it is possible that it lies buried beneath the socially sanctioned affect particular to each venue. It may be helpful then to consider melancholy as a theoretical construct to be used to analyze the transformation of the wax figure into a photographic image and the subsequent impact of both on the viewer.

### ***Melancholy***

In "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Sigmund Freud distinguishes between the two by observing that while mourning has a specific lost object, the cause of melancholy is often unknown, unnamable.<sup>5</sup> In mourning, the ego goes through a process of reality testing, ascertaining that the lost object is actually lost; reality testing is the work of mourning.<sup>6</sup> In melancholy, where the lost object may not be identified, reality testing cannot proceed successfully.

Reality testing plays a significant role in the viewer's experience of both the wax figures at Tussauds and their appearance in Sugimoto's pho-

tographs, suggesting that in both cases there has been a loss. In order to participate in the fantasy of access to power and celebrity on display in the wax museum, the visitors must suspend disbelief. A form of reality testing takes place constantly as the visitor moves through the exhibit. Wax imitates flesh, but of course does not exactly match it visually. A direct sustained gaze at the wax figures ascertains their artificiality. Visitors must ignore the fact of the wax figures' immobility, that they are not exact likenesses of the stars, and that some are images of people who are no longer living. In the wax museum, reality testing constantly reminds the viewer that the celebrity before them is not real, reaffirming the visitors' own non-celebrity status. What is lost remains lost except for split seconds of fantasy facilitated by the realistic effigies of the celebrities.

Because the wax figures are life-sized (although visitors regularly comment that they had no idea certain celebrities were so short) and because they are generally not set off from the group of visitors, the only way to tell at a glance who is real and who is wax is whether or not they are famous, whether or not they move, and in some cases, whether or not they are dressed in everyday clothes.<sup>7</sup> As a visitor to the museum, you know automatically that Jerry Hall and Samuel L. Jackson are wax simply because they are recognizable celebrities. The importance of the connection between a figure's celebrity and its reality is made evident by the wax figure of a female tourist; posed as if she is photographing the wax figures, her camera is raised to her eye and her face is hidden. After moving out of the way of her camera several times, I finally realized that she was a wax figure, but was nevertheless fooled again by her a couple of times. Because she was not a recognizable celebrity, I assumed that she was real.<sup>8</sup> Tus-sauds played with this aspect of the visit by positioning a staff member costumed as a vampire next to the newly-added figure of Sarah Michelle Gellar as Buffy the Vampire Slayer. The staff member was convincingly motionless for long periods of time before lunging at startled visitors with a growl. Between the wax photographer and the "real" vampire, I found myself half expecting one of the celebrity figures to be real as well. The slouching figure of Bob Geldof in the Grand Hall, incongruous in his rumpled casual clothes amongst the luminaries, gave me pause several times. Nevertheless, the process of reality testing grew briefer with each successive figure, until by the end of my visit, it barely occurred at all.

The appearance of the reality of the figures is enhanced by Sugimoto's portraits of the wax figures, which shift the viewer's relation to the celebrity significantly.<sup>9</sup> While the wax figures offer the illusion of proximity and equality, the photographs substitute the powerful illusion of life. The act of photography, which seems to bring the figure to life, undermines the wax

museum visitor's knowledge, reinforced by the stillness of the wax figure, that the figure is actually not the real person. As Nancy Spector describes this phenomenon, "Inverting the logic of photography's unavoidable alliance with death, its capacity to entomb its subject in a moment that will never recur, Sugimoto gives breath to the wax statues."<sup>10</sup> Stillness seems out of place in the three-dimensional wax figures but very much at home in the photograph. The replica of the body of the celebrity creates an illusion of presence; the illusion of the figure's movement, created by the stop-motion aspect of photography, replaces the illusion of presence. The photographs hide the fact that the figures are immobile.

Sugimoto's photographs are black and white; the loss of the realistic flesh tones of the wax figures somehow enhances the illusion in the photograph that the wax is indeed flesh. Cultural historian Marina Warner observes that wax "cannot be photographed to resemble its appearance to the naked eye with a flash because the light doesn't bounce off the waxy surface but soaks into it."<sup>11</sup> Even though I knew that the photographs were of wax figures, I nevertheless repeatedly experienced the sensation that they were of living people while viewing them.<sup>12</sup> However, this appearance of life is fleeting; prolonged examination of the photographs reveals subtle clues that the figures portrayed are not real. For example, in the portrait of Winston Churchill, one hand rests on his hip, the other on a cane, but they don't appear to carry the weight they should in these positions.<sup>13</sup> Disbelief cannot be maintained indefinitely, although it may last significantly longer than in the presence of the wax figures. As reality testing takes place before the photographs there is a sustained sense of the flickering that is present only fleetingly at the wax museum. Even after repeated viewings, the images are still able to fool the eye momentarily. The process of reality testing is never fully accomplished in the presence of the Sugimoto photographs. Of course, all photographs have the potential to impede reality testing by preserving moments that are lost forever; in the *Portraits*, Sugimoto uses this aspect of photography provocatively.

What is most obviously absent in the wax museum is proximity to the actual celebrities; in the gallery it is the proximity to the wax figures. This chain of loss, represented in different ways, marks a place of social loss. For both viewer groups, this loss is related to lack of access to power. Loss is a large part of what is on view at the wax museum. For the visitor to Madame Tussauds, the process of reality testing is ultimately largely successful, with the wax figures losing their ability to fool the eye over the course of a visit; this visitor is positioned more in a place of mourning. For the gallery visitor, for whom the photographs never completely lose their life-like appearance, the process of reality testing is never completely resolved, and

thus the position, I argue, is more one of melancholy.

Lepenies's *Melancholy and Society* examines social melancholy as it is expressed by writers of particular classes, a melancholy brought about by their class's loss of or lack of access to power and the impossibility of action, as opposed to the often unnamable object loss of which Freud writes.<sup>14</sup> Like the individual melancholic theorized by Freud who was unable to express negative feelings toward a loved one,<sup>15</sup> the social groups analyzed by Lepenies were unable to either express criticism of existing power structures, or were powerless to effect change. Such melancholy tends to take the form of ennui and a feeling of uselessness.

Lepenies identifies the second rebellion of the Fronde, that of the princes, as an expression of social melancholy, a desperate attempt to escape the futility of powerlessness. In response to this threat, the royal court permitted the nobility a ceremonial form of power to replace the real power to which they had no access; this was accompanied by etiquette of strict affect control.<sup>16</sup> Lepenies locates another example of social melancholy in the German bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century; despite their increasing economic means, they were unable to wield any political power. They could not act, but could write; instead of the collective affect manifested by the French bourgeoisie, the German bourgeoisie's ennui and melancholy was expressed by a proliferation of writing on the sentimental, with a focus on subjectivity.<sup>17</sup> The French aristocracy and the German bourgeoisie displayed what Lepenies described as the "resigned behavior of a social class which was no longer able to influence the real course of events."<sup>18</sup> Lepenies distinguishes between the losses represented by aristocratic and bourgeois melancholy: "the latter resulted from a loss of world, the former from having relinquished a world that had never been possessed."<sup>19</sup> Both, however, are "cut off from action in terms of acting in the world and influencing that world."<sup>20</sup> For both groups, the object loss represented by the impoverishment of the world resulted in ego impoverishment as well.

### ***Celebrity and Power***

Contemporary Western culture is based on the ideology that the individual is not powerless, as were the French aristocracy and the German bourgeoisie, according to Lepenies. Democratic ideology suggests that all citizens have equal power which they can express either as consumers in the choices they make purchasing goods and services, or as citizens voting on government representation; the mass has the power to effect change.<sup>21</sup> The individual's power lies in his or her role as a member of a group. But at



the same time, the populace is a potential mob, irrational, emotional, and potentially threatening to the status quo, a force that must be contained and controlled. For Marshall, "the term celebrity has come to embody the ambiguity of the public forms of subjectivity under capitalism."<sup>22</sup> The celebrity, as well as Madame Tussauds, operates within this conflictual space between the ostensible power of the individual in the democracy, and the individual's role as part of the mass. Sugimoto's *Portraits* distill this strange collapsed mélange of celebrity, power, history, and temporality into a few luminous and deceptively simple photographs. In both cases, the actual space occupied by the individual is negotiated via reality testing.

Celebrity glorifies the potential of the individual in the ideal democratic culture, where historical hierarchies have been removed so that personal merit prevails. In a consumer-oriented democracy, according to Marshall, "Celebrity status became aligned with the potentialities of the wedding of consumer culture with democratic aspirations."<sup>23</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, in their "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" argue that the celebrity's representation of success is a false motivation offered by the capitalist system, since only a few people actually achieve stardom.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, celebrity has become an increasingly empty sign, with individuals attaining celebrity for dubious reasons. Celebrities are often not heroic figures, but individuals whose notoriety has been capitalized on. The celebrity represents both individual social success and pure image devoid of meaning.<sup>25</sup>

This ambiguity is reflected by the way in which celebrity, as represented in the media, and at Tussauds, can encompass figures from multiple fields, such as politics, sports, or entertainment. As Marshall points out,

In the contemporary public sphere, divisions exist between different types of players: politicians are made to seem distinctly different from entertainment figures; businesspeople are distinguished from sports stars. And yet in the mediated representation of this panoply of figures, they begin to blend together. Film stars ... share the stage with politicians like George Bush; Gorbachev appears in a film by Wenders; Michael Jackson hangs out on the White House lawn with Ronald Reagan; Nelson Mandela fills an entire issue of *Vogue*. The celebrity is a category that identifies these slippages in identification and differentiation.<sup>26</sup>

Marshall goes on to note that these slippages result in shifting representations of power:

in contemporary culture there is a convergence in the source of power between the political leader and other forms of celebrity. Both

are forms of subjectivity that are sanctioned by the culture and enter the symbolic realm of providing meaning and significance for the culture. The categorical distinction of forms of power is dissolving in favor of a unified system of celebrity status.<sup>27</sup>

The power wielded by a celebrity may be fleeting; in Western culture, when it is sometimes hard to say exactly who wields power, celebrities are personifications of power, made all the more potent because a real person inhabits the sign.<sup>28</sup>

Celebrities represent a sort of ego ideal which the non-celebrity longs to equal, a role model for one's own potential in society. At the same time, they represent the non-celebrity's failure to capitalize on culture's ostensibly endless possibilities for advancement and success. They are a reminder of the non-celebrity's shortcomings, of their relative cultural unimportance and role as part of mass culture. The wax figures at Madame Tussauds confront the visitor with his or her longing for celebrity and power while they simultaneously remind the visitor of its impossibility.

Marshall's description of the confluence of different types of celebrity is identical to what happens in the wax museum, except that the wax museum includes anachronistic historical blending. There visitors encounter life-sized, three-dimensional, realistic portraits of individuals who have attained celebrity. With the illusion of meeting a celebrity in person, of physical proximity to this loaded sign, the wax museum visitor embodies an at times seemingly euphoric experience. Like a child who jubilantly but mistakenly recognizes the potential for a unified self in Lacan's mirror stage, the wax museum visitor falsely recognizes in the wax figure of the celebrity his or her own possibility for success.<sup>29</sup>

### ***History of the Wax Museum***

Madame Tussauds is a remarkably long-running institution, with roots in the period just prior to the French Revolution. In 1766, the Prince de Conti invited Philippe Curtius, a Berne doctor originally renowned for his wax anatomical figures and subsequently for his wax portraits, to Paris.<sup>30</sup> Public interest in his wax portraits inspired Curtius to creating a display of wax figures in 1770.<sup>31</sup> Eventually he trained his housekeeper's daughter, Marie Gresholtz, the future Madame Tussaud, in the art of wax portraiture.

Tussaud's talent and Curtius's affiliation with the aristocracy resulted in her invitation to Versailles to teach art to Madame Elisabeth, the sister of Louis XVI. Tussaud lived at Versailles for nine years. Curtius, meanwhile, began to associate with the Jacobins, and participated in the storming of

the Bastille. The revolutionaries made use of Curtius's skill by commissioning portraits of heroes and martyrs.<sup>32</sup> As the revolution progressed, Tussaud, threatened by her association with the court, was imprisoned in 1794, and was so close to being executed that her hair was cut in preparation for the guillotine.<sup>33</sup> Curtius's influence and her skill with wax saved her; subsequently she found herself at the graveside of many of those with whom she had lived at Versailles, making wax impressions of their decapitated heads. The Chamber of Horrors at the museum in London includes a tableau of Tussaud searching through a pile of bodies at the cemetery of La Madeleine for the head of Marie Antoinette so that she may make a wax cast of her face. She became the owner of the wax museum when Curtius died in 1794, the same year that she was nearly guillotined.

The wax museum that is her legacy is today a tourist attraction profitably managed by a large corporation. Its revenue is based, in a way, on the commercialization of Tussaud's personal experience as a witness to the vicissitudes of power. Madame Tussauds capitalizes on the ordinary visitor's lack of access to power by creating a mirage of it.

### ***The Wax Museum's Illusion of Proximity***

Eighteenth-century wax museum visitors longed to see what famous people looked like.<sup>34</sup> Today, representations of the famous proliferate throughout our culture; since it is no longer necessary to visit a wax museum to see what a well-known person looks like, the function of the still very popular wax museum has changed. Celebrity operates on a paradox around availability: images of the famous are everywhere, but the celebrity him- or herself is someone the average person will more than likely never meet. Madame Tussauds intervenes in this paradox with the pretense of making the celebrity available. Clearly, this illusion provides a thrill lacking in the usual representations of celebrities found in film, photography, and on television.

In the wax museum, the visitor experiences illusory proximity to the celebrity impossible in reality, either because of the individual's social status or because the celebrity is deceased. "Who will you have a close encounter with today?" asks the cover of the souvenir guide; the back cover depicts anonymous visitors literally nose to nose with celebrities. Warner's description of this nearness to the celebrity vividly captures the atmosphere of the museum:

The sense of involvement with a simulacrum, a wax figure, overrides its actual fakery ... The fantasy is stimulated by the public's proximity

to the stars, by the possibility of touching or being photographed with them ... the figures stand at ground level, as if mingling with the crowd.<sup>35</sup>

As Warner points out, the mixing of visitors and wax figures at the same level creates not just an illusion of availability and proximity but also one of equality. Visitors may stand in a group with Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama, or perch on a sofa with the Beatles in their Sergeant Pepper's garb; such access is impossible outside the museum. That impossibility is due to the visitor's lack of cultural and political power. The equality on which democracy is founded is problematized in the wax museum; there the visitor comes face to face with his or her own social limitations.

Unlike traditional museums, which present artifacts behind glass or velvet ropes, Tussauds promotes physical contact with the figures: "visitors to Madame Tussauds often get quite affectionate with the figures, touching their hair, even hugging and kissing them."<sup>36</sup> In New York, for example, the wax figure of Brad Pitt is frequently the subject of touch-ups to remove lipstick marks left by visitors' kisses.<sup>37</sup> Damage caused by such contact is expected; every morning at 7:30 a team assesses all the figures for problems like broken fingers or damaged hair and makes any necessary repairs before the museum opens for the day.<sup>38</sup>

Photography plays an important role in the fostering of the illusions of nearness and equality. Several kiosks in the museum sell disposable cameras. The tableau of the royal family in the Grand Hall is attended by a photographer dressed in Elizabethan attire who gives visitors costume crowns to wear as they stand with the Windsors; a tableau of Henry VIII and his wives includes a vacant medieval-style chair so that visitors may be photographed in their company. Having photographs of the experience to look at afterward is a clichéd element of the tourist stereotype, but it plays an important role in the visitor's experience of Madame Tussauds. Photographic commemoration of the encounter with the stars creates an image in which not just the figure of the star but oneself is permanently frozen, further encouraging the illusion of proximity. However, because of the difficulty of photographing wax, as noted by Warner, such photographs reinforce the falsity of the figures.

The first space the visitor enters in the London Madame Tussauds is called "the Garden Party." In this room, lit as if an evening party is underway in a private garden, visitors mill about wax figures of celebrities such as Whoopi Goldberg, Susan Sarandon, and Sarah Ferguson. The figures are arranged in pairs, as if in conversation. It is easy for a visitor to stand between two such figures to have his or her picture taken with them. Subsequent rooms explore different settings for proximity to the famous. The

“Superstars and Legends” room features a grandly curving staircase, with smiling celebrities descending as if to a theater stage. Other stars mill about the room, with separate vignettes provided for some, like Michael Jackson in a pose from his “Thriller” video, and Marilyn Monroe posed over a vent with her skirt blowing, from the movie *The Seven Year Itch*. In the huge Grand Hall, historical figures are grouped together, with clusters of current celebrities scattered throughout the room. At the far end of the Grand Hall stood a mock United Nations podium with George W. Bush on one side and Tony Blair on the other. The visitor’s spot was between them, just behind the podium, where a video camera projected the image of all three onto a huge screen behind them.

Today, the political and historical figures appear to be of far less interest to the crowd than the figures from the entertainment world. The wax museum has become an homage to the celebrity. Historical significance carries less weight than the new and the now. If politics and celebrity merge, as in the case of Rudy Giuliani, then political figures may match entertainers in popularity. When Giuliani became a heroic figure after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, his wax figure at the New York Tussauds was so popular that its head had to be repainted on a weekly basis, presumably damaged by the touches of fans.<sup>39</sup> The museum keeps its Voltaire and its Ben Franklin on display, but does not appear to add to its stores of historical figures as much as to its collection of currently popular celebrities.

### ***Sugimoto's Portraits***

Unlike the typical visitor, Sugimoto eschews figures from contemporary popular culture, focusing his lens instead on significant historical figures, important figures from art and literature, and members of royalty.<sup>40</sup> These figures occupy celebrity not because of the notoriety which accounts for so much present-day fame, but for more traditional reasons: accomplishment or aristocratic birth. In the *Portraits*, they become not just another face in the crowd, but imposing and heroic portraits of important people. They no longer fraternize with the viewer on the viewer’s level. Set apart, monumentalized in flawless, perfectly lit large-scale photographs, the wax figures radiate with vitality denied them in the typical Tussauds tourist snapshot.

Sugimoto removes the figures from the wax museum setting and shoots them like formal studio portraits, each in a  $\frac{3}{4}$  length pose. Because they are so uniformly photographed and presented, with identical black backdrops and simple black frames, there is a sort of mournfulness to their

ubiquity. Richard III, Oscar Wilde and Salvador Dali occupy the same physical and chronological space. The realistic appearance of figures like Richard III, who died long before the era of photography, challenges the viewer's knowledge that no such photograph of them could exist. Yet there they are, almost breathing. Reality testing struggles under this illusion.

Because of their interchangeable, placeless settings, the figures share a sort of desolation. In the wax museum, the mingling of figures from different historical epochs adds to the visitor's feeling of equality; in the photographs, the identical setting for all the portraits creates a sense of futility. The precise temporality in which each individual had power has passed. Instead of imparting a sense of posterity, as traditional portraits may, they are steeped with loss, the loss of power and the ability to act. They become imbued with melancholy, and even with boredom.

### ***Affect Control***

At the time of Tussaud's rise to prominence as a sculptor in wax – the time of Louis XIV – and in Germany of the 18th century, the loss of or lack of access to power led to feelings that were perceived as potential threats to the status quo. The control of affect was one way to minimize the risk posed by boredom and melancholy.<sup>41</sup> In contemporary Western culture, melancholy is pathologized as depression, and is stigmatized. Forms of entertainment such as the wax museum may serve to prevent melancholy, and to distract people from their powerlessness.

Seeing the wax figures in Sugimoto's portraits at a gallery is a vastly different experience from viewing them at Madame Tussauds. Sugimoto's photographs, while popular, collected by museums and the subject of numerous books, appeal to a somewhat narrow art audience. Unlike the Tussauds visitor, the gallery visitors may disdain what Marshall refers to as celebrity's "vulgar association with consumer culture,"<sup>42</sup> and perhaps are more highly educated. This disdain marks a class or consumer group separation. Without specific demographic information about the typical visitor to Madame Tussauds or to a high-end contemporary art gallery, I can only speculate about this separation. However, it appears that the person who would typically visit a commercial gallery is more than likely someone who would only visit Madame Tussauds as a kitsch experience.<sup>43</sup> Sugimoto himself notes that "I've visited Tussauds several times, but always with my work in mind."<sup>44</sup> Tussauds is perceived as a commercial business, a trafficker in mass culture, selling souvenirs in a shop at the end of the tour.

Loud music and videos of famous people play for those in line, gearing

up the visitors for their encounter with stars, and creating a mood of excitement and anticipation. Mourning and melancholy may be felt momentarily in the wax museum, but are as out of place there as in the French court, where a complex web of etiquette forbade melancholy.<sup>45</sup> People generally go to the museum as part of a group, and the atmosphere is one of pleasure and play. The wax museum visitor is in a setting from which melancholy has been banished. Many of the wax figures, especially contemporary celebrities, appear to express pleasure themselves, and are presented with the perfect toothy smiles associated with stars.<sup>46</sup> The usual museum rules do not apply, and an informal mood prevails. When I visited Madame Tussauds, visitors tended to laugh loudly, to exclaim over sightings of "stars," to bump into each other as they meandered through the crowd. They happily posed with the wax figures, throwing an arm around their necks or waists, or pretending to kiss them.

The visitor to the wax museum is a consumer of mass culture who pays to participate in the fantasy of being the equal of the celebrity.<sup>47</sup> In the wax museum, the usual distance from celebrity is illusionistically removed so that the visitor can experience the thrill of proximity to the type of power embodied in the sign of the celebrity. The purported equality of the democratic state is made available to the consumer who can pay the high entry fee. The visitor to Madame Tussauds can indulge in the fantasy of individuality and the possibility of success promoted by capitalism. Thus the wax museum visitor, by indulging in this fantasy, reinforces that he or she is indeed a part of the mass.

At the Chelsea art gallery, by comparison, behavior is muted, and lone visitors are not uncommon. There is a greater rigidity in the gallery, with very different unwritten rules of control of affect and behavior than in the wax museum. The illusion of access to power is created not by proximity to wax figures of famous people, but by the gallery visitor's own social positioning as part of a small educated audience who can appreciate the intellectual complexities of contemporary art, or perhaps even as a potential collector. However, for most gallery visitors, the art is prohibitively priced; prices for the Sugimoto photographs, for example, currently range from \$10,000 for a small photograph from the *Diorama* series to \$65,000 for one of the portraits.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the gallery visitor is in a culturally elite commercial space where entry is free, as opposed to the high cost of tickets to Madame Tussauds. Anyone may enter the gallery, but must know which one to go to in the first place. In the gallery, the elite status of the viewer of the Sugimoto photographs appears to be reinforced; ultimately, however, it is revealed to be a fallacy in the following ways.

The "close encounter" with the celebrity advertised by Madame Tus-

sauds is not possible, since the viewer is looking at photographs; the gallery visitor is more likely to see an actual celebrity strolling through Chelsea. Instead, the magic of Madame Tussauds is filtered through the medium of the photograph and by Sugimoto's choice of portrait subjects. Their enforced equality in the identically formatted shots levels their achievements. Their fluctuating lifelike-ness, instead of adding to the thrill of nearness to fame, is a subtle indicator that they are really wax figures from a kitschy tourist enterprise. The viewer's appreciation of them is constantly tied back to commercialism.

Unlike Pop art which appropriates mass culture (for example Warhol's Campbell's soup cans), Sugimoto's photographs of the wax figures draw the viewer into mass culture in a more subtle way. The viewer is less able to take a distanced, ironic look at mass culture, as is the case with Pop art; the photographs reiterate the viewer's position in mass culture with their sense of loss. They remind the gallery visitor that he or she is also one of the mass, of the involuntary disburdenment of power never possessed. The false power of the art connoisseur replaces any actual social power. The gallery visitor's elite cultural status, seemingly validated by the gallery experience, is as illusory as is the wax museum visitor's access to celebrity.

The visitor to Tussaud's goes home with a collection of photographs in which most of the realistic appearance of the wax figures has been diminished. A nostalgic look back at the photographs will confirm the falseness of the figures, completing the process of reality testing in operation at the museum. The gallery visitor, in contrast, leaves, perhaps with a catalog of the show in which the figures' illusion of life persists, or else with a confirmed sense of cultural eliteness; reality testing is not forced to any conclusion.

## **Conclusion**

My recognition of the anonymous Sugimotos at Madame Tussauds was exciting; it reinforced my sense of myself as a knowledgeable person, a scholar of art history. At the same time my excitement was based on my recognizing them in an unlikely place, Madame Tussauds; my recognition of the photographs was thus based on my participation in a mass culture consumer enterprise, which I was enjoying, and not just from a distanced, ironic vantage. Spotting celebrities in the form of the two Sugimoto photographs, I was re-inserted immediately into mass culture with the pleasing experience of recognition of "stars."

Reality testing, the work of mourning which is never completed in the



case of melancholy, plays a role in the experience of both the visitor to Tussauds and the viewer of Sugimoto's *Portraits*. Lepenies's theorization of social melancholy in relation to power provides a way to theorize the losses associated with both, as well as the significance of affect control in each venue. The Tussauds visitor suspends disbelief in a high-energy, playful setting in which the illusion of celebrity gradually gives way to a gradual relinquishing, for the most part, of the illusion of proximity to the powerful and famous. The viewer of Sugimoto's waxworks portraits, in contrast, in a more subdued gallery, remains trapped within the photographs' astonishing vacillation between reality and falsehood. Yet the celebrity's symbolization of the potential for success remains a false promise for both sets of viewers. Sugimoto's elegantly conceived and at times staggeringly lifelike *Portraits* provide a powerful counterpoint to the kitschy Madame Tussauds, bringing to light the roles played by melancholy, reality testing, and affect control in relation to the actual wax effigies and his images of them.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sugimoto presents the wax figures in very large black and white gelatin silver print photographs, 58 ¾ by 47 inches, a much larger format than his previous prints. Thomas Krens, "Acknowledgements," *Sugimoto Portraits*, ed. Tracey Bashkoff and Nancy Spector (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2000), p. 8. His intent was to make them life-sized. See Bashkoff, "The Exactness of the World: A Conversation with Hiroshi Sugimoto," *Sugimoto Portraits*, p. 33

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Rolf-E. Breuer, "Forward," *Sugimoto Portraits*, p. 7, writes, " ... the persons represented in the works seem much more alive than the actual figures in the wax museums of London, Amsterdam, Tokyo." Dr. Breuer is the Spokesman of the Board of Managing Directors of Deutsche Bank, which works in partnership with the Solomon R. Guggenheim foundation in support of the visual arts. The Deutsche Bank supported the commission of which these photographs are a product. That the introduction to the catalog of the *Portraits* series is written by a bank representative is of interest in relation to this paper's discussion of power and consumer culture. For more on the commissioning of the *Portraits* by the Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, see Nancy Spector, "Reinventing Realism," *Sugimoto Portraits*, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Jo Grant, *Madame Tussauds London Souvenir Guide: Who Will You Have a Close*

*Encounter with?*, n.d., n. p., p. 35.

- <sup>4</sup> Marina Warner, "Waxworks and Wonderlands," ed. Lynne Cooke and Peter Wollen, in *Visual Display: Culture beyond Appearances* (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 193.
- <sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. XIV (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-1974), p. 245.
- <sup>6</sup> Freud, "Mourning," p. 244.
- <sup>7</sup> On visitors' expectations about the height of celebrities: statement by Janine Scarpello, general manager of the New York Madame Tussauds; Tom Gliatto, "Hot Wax: Until fame melts away, the Top 10 statues at Madame Tussauds can hold a candle to their celebrity brethren," *People Weekly* 57, no. 4 (2002), p. 142.
- <sup>8</sup> I spoke with a staff member who stated that even though he had worked at Tussauds for a couple of years, the figure of the photographer still fooled him.
- <sup>9</sup> It is important to distinguish between two versions of Sugimoto's waxwork portraits. The photographs discussed in this paper are part of the series called *Portraits*, in which Sugimoto isolates the wax figures from their surroundings and photographs them against a dark backdrop. In an earlier series called *Wax Museums*, Sugimoto photographed the figures in situ; in these images the illusion of life is lessened. See Krens, "Acknowledgements," p. 8.
- <sup>10</sup> Spector, "Reinventing," p. 18.
- <sup>11</sup> Warner, "Waxworks," p. 187.
- <sup>12</sup> I first saw the *Portraits* at an exhibit at Sonnabend Gallery on West 22<sup>nd</sup> St. in New York's Chelsea art district.
- <sup>13</sup> Sugimoto's play with photography is at work in particular in this piece: the wax portrait is based on a famous photograph of Churchill by Yousuf Karsh (1941).
- <sup>14</sup> Richard Burton posits the idea of the melancholy society in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, first published in 1621. "Kingdoms, provinces, and politic bodies are likewise sensible and subject to this disease," he writes. Burton, "Democritus Junior to the Reader," *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 79.
- <sup>15</sup> Freud observes that the melancholic's relentless self-criticisms are often "hardly applicable to the patient himself," but that they are more appropriate descriptions of "someone the patient loves or has loved or should love...the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which has been shifted away from it onto the patient's own ego." Such criticism toward the love object was for some reason impossible to express, and the patient's self-criticism is a result of "avoid[ing] the need to express [their] hostility to him openly." Freud, "Mourning," pp. 248-51.
- <sup>16</sup> Wolf Lepenies, *Melancholy and Society*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris Jones (Cambridge, MA and London, England: 1991), p. 38. Only the ruler was at times permitted to express melancholy; Lepenies, p. 67.
- <sup>17</sup> Lepenies, *Melancholy*, p. 62.
- <sup>18</sup> Lepenies, *Melancholy*, p. 39.

- <sup>19</sup> Lepenies, *Melancholy*, p. 141.
- <sup>20</sup> Lepenies, *Melancholy*, p. 141.
- <sup>21</sup> P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 242.
- <sup>22</sup> Marshall, *Celebrity*, p. 4.
- <sup>23</sup> Marshall, *Celebrity*, p. 9.
- <sup>24</sup> Marshall, *Celebrity*, p. 9, citing Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1972), pp. 123-71.
- <sup>25</sup> Marshall, *Celebrity*, p. xi.
- <sup>26</sup> Marshall, *Celebrity*, p. 19.
- <sup>27</sup> Marshall, *Celebrity*, p. 19.
- <sup>28</sup> Marshall, *Celebrity*, p. xi.
- <sup>29</sup> Marshall points to Christian Metz's discussion of a film star's representation of the ego ideal, noting that "film's pleasure is partially built on this fundamental misrecognition for identification," Marshall, 14, citing Metz's "The Imaginary Signifier," *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (London: Macmillan, 1982). I am extending this comparison to include the wax museum experience. For Lacan, see "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1977), pp. 1-7.
- <sup>30</sup> Some accounts say that Marie was Curtius's niece, and that she and her mother joined Curtius's household after the death of her father; see Warner, "Waxworks."
- <sup>31</sup> Warner, "Waxworks," p. 180.
- <sup>32</sup> Warner, "Waxworks," p. 180-1.
- <sup>33</sup> Grant, *Madame Tussauds*, p. 3.
- <sup>34</sup> Grant, *Madame Tussauds*, p. 2.
- <sup>35</sup> Warner, "Waxworks," p. 193.
- <sup>36</sup> Grant, *Madame Tussauds*, p. 20.
- <sup>37</sup> Gliatto, "Hot Wax," p. 142. It is tempting to think of these kisses in terms of reversal of the fairy tales of Snow White or Sleeping Beauty, in which a kiss from the handsome prince revives the sleeping princess.
- <sup>38</sup> Grant, *Madame Tussauds*, p. 28.
- <sup>39</sup> Gliatto, "Hot Wax," p. 142.
- <sup>40</sup> He made portraits of Mae West, Jean Harlow, and the Chamber of Horrors as part of the *Wax Museums* series.
- <sup>41</sup> Lepenies, *Melancholy*, p. 38.
- <sup>42</sup> Marshall, *Celebrity*, p. 9.
- <sup>43</sup> I visited Madame Tussauds twice in the course of research for this paper. When I mentioned these visits to students in my program, describing how much fun I'd



had, many expressed undisguised disdain for Tussauds.

<sup>44</sup> Bashkoff, "Exactness," p. 28.

<sup>45</sup> Lepenies, *Melancholy*, p. 67.

<sup>46</sup> The wax figures are not made from casts because you cannot cast a smile, since the eyes and mouth must be closed during the casting process. A face cast with eyes and mouth closed often looks like a death mask, thus melancholic.

<sup>47</sup> Currently \$29.00 for an adult at the New York Madame Tussauds; 18.5.08, <<http://www.nycwax.com/openingtimes.htm>>.

<sup>48</sup> According to Sonnabend Gallery, December 5, 2002. Since that time Sugimoto's standing in the art world and collectibility have skyrocketed, no doubt along with his prices.