

In images of both famous and lesser-known subjects, **Martin Schoeller** explores the question, *What's in a face?*

Close Up: Portraits 1998–2005,
by Martin Schoeller (teNeues, \$55), 128
pages, 11x13½ inches

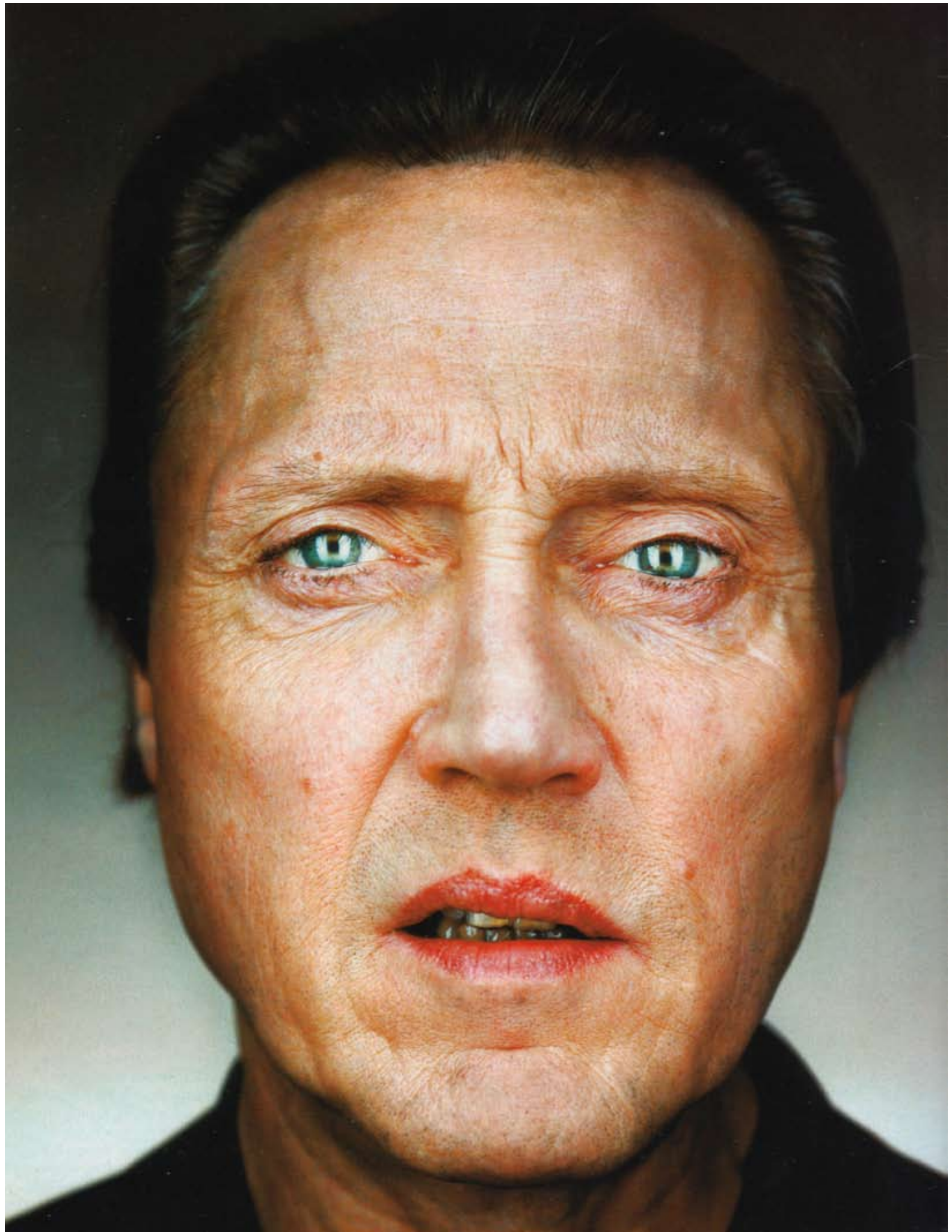
As a contributing photographer for *The New Yorker*, German native Martin Schoeller has taken the photo-verité style of a former colleague, the late Richard Avedon, to a new extreme: Many of Schoeller's portraits are large-scale, warts-and-all, tightly cropped faces, a series known as Big Heads. The 75 headshots in *Close Up* are literally larger than life. Ranging in subject from the obscure to the ultra-famous, these portraits all share traits of intimate intensity and unflinching honesty. "Even people who seem to have everything express the same fears, desires, longing, and sometimes a certain sense of melancholy," Schoeller says. (For more on his insights and techniques, see page 86.)

Although Schoeller often sets up portraits with various backgrounds and poses, the tight headshot has become one of his specialties—and a departure from the typical publicity photo. "I think portraits should not necessarily try to make people look good. They should capture their personalities," he says. "An ongoing question for me is: What can you read in a person's face? How much does their physical makeup reveal about their character?" When a friend pointed out that he had enough headshots to fill a book, the idea for *Close Up* was planted. The series has also become a traveling exhibition, with recent shows in Berlin, Germany, and Milan, Italy; the images are on view at Amsterdam's Wouter van Leeuwen gallery from January 21 through mid-March.

With a few exceptions—Bill Clinton looks almost sanguine, Sting wears a slight smirk—these subjects have not only allowed the lens to get close but also let their guard down; we see Tom Hanks looking grief-struck, Cindy Sherman unmasked and unvarnished, Christopher Walken slightly deranged. Schoeller's shot of outgoing news anchor Dan Rather was so revealing that it was called "ruthless" by some *New Yorker* readers. "When this book comes out, some people, or their publicists, might not like their picture," says the photographer. "But I just continue to do what I think is right and I hope people will understand." —JACK CRAGER



THE BIG PICTURE





While Martin Schoeller's new book, *Close Up*, is a striking series of headshots depicting famous and not-so-famous faces in straight-on, nearly identical poses, Schoeller is quick to point out that he typically shoots portraits in a variety of styles and settings. "I don't only do headshots—I do a lot of other stuff too, but I usually get closeups during the session," says the German-born photographer. "I'm taking pictures continuously. I'll shoot up to four or five rolls. I get people laughing, grinning, and also looking more serious. What I do like to capture is kind of an in-between moment when people are not thinking about being photographed. I want them kind of 'open'—that sounds cheesy—'vulnerable' sounds more sophisticated."

To that end, Schoeller says one of his key concerns is making portrait subjects comfortable. "I'm very friendly with them, and I try to be funny, or as funny as I can be as a German," he says with a chuckle. "I always play music. I read up on everyone I photograph so I know what they've been up to lately, so I can ask them halfway smart questions to engage them in a dialog. That way they are thinking about something and not just waiting to have their picture made. But it's a fine line, because if they talk too much I can't take pictures while they have their mouth open."

After studying photography in Hamburg, he moved to New York City in 1993 and spent two and a half years assisting Annie Leibovitz. "I learned a lot of different aspects from Annie," Schoeller says, "including how a professional photographer really works. She is very driven and

Schoeller on Rather: "This picture was made just about the time he was finishing his run as the CBS anchor, and he did seem a little bit down," Schoeller recalls. "But he was very polite, very nice. He was actually pretty open. *The New Yorker* picked that particular frame. And the funny thing is, when we picked it at the magazine office, nobody thought that he looked bad in it. But later a lot of readers wrote in and said we really did him wrong, to some extent. They acted like it was kind of a mean picture. And I always was surprised that people thought that, because I didn't think so. But in my edit, I try to choose pictures that go in the direction of honesty. I do remember that he had on makeup—you know, like newscasters always have on—and that made him look a little more strange. It's something I couldn't get off because he had to go back on the air."

Schoeller on Sherman: "For Cindy Sherman, I did all these different setups of her and offered them to *The New Yorker*, and in the end they picked the headshot because they thought nobody has ever really seen her, what she really looks like. She was such a pleasant person to photograph. We had a really good time during the photo shoot. She is, I think, one of the sweetest people I've ever met."



A FORMER ASSISTANT TO ANNIE LEIBOVITZ, THIS CELEBRITY PHOTOGRAPHER HAS FORGED A SIGNATURE PORTRAIT STYLE OF HIS OWN. BY JACK CRAGER

MARTIN SCHOELLER

Master Class

Opposite: Dan
Rather, 2005.
Right: Cindy
Sherman, 2000.

dedicated to her own vision. She is always prepared and plans down to the tee. And I learned lighting from her. She might not know how to achieve a certain look, but she knows what she likes and doesn't like, and she has good taste in lighting, styling, set design, everything."

After he took over Leibovitz's lighting tasks, pleasing the boss was a matter of trial-and-adjustment. "It would take about three days to do a humongous light test—'Try these lights and those lights and see how they look'—and we would shoot 20, 30, 40 rolls of film with different gels, different filters on the camera, different exposures, different lighting ratios, different distances from the face, and it was just endless," he recalls with a laugh. "And you get into putting silks in front of lights, and then one layer of silk, two layers, three layers of silk. And she would look through all these rolls and rolls of film to see what kind

of light she liked. This was before the subject even arrived. All of that taught me valuable lessons."

After striking out on his own in 1996, Schoeller began experimenting with the closeup series that would become known as Big Heads, first photographing friends and associates, later passersby at his studio on Manhattan's Lower East Side. He continued the style after achieving success as a celebrity portraitist for *Rolling Stone*, *GQ*, *Esquire*, and *The New Yorker*, where he became a contributing photographer in 1999. "My goal is to make the picture about the face and the expression," he says, "so you don't think much about how the photograph was taken. It is like an objective or neutral way of looking at somebody."

Schoeller's lighting setup consists of two banks of Kino Flo lights, which incorporate low-wattage fluorescent tubes and are most commonly

Schoeller on Lighting: "I use a couple of banks of Kino Flo lights, which are mainly used in the film industry. I haven't seen a lot of other photographers using this kind. They are very soft fluorescent lamps, and color-balanced to be like daylight, so they're not as harsh or as green as your regular fluorescent lights. I take them everywhere. I've been shooting with them so long that I can keep most of my settings the same for closeups. I put the lights behind me with my camera and a 140mm lens between two and three feet away from the subject, so it's close but not that close. I usually set up seamless behind them. My intent is to bring all these people to the same level, whether they're celebrities or not. By doing so, I hope people can have their own interpretation."

used in moviemaking. Though he sometimes shoots portraits with an 8x10 view camera, he usually uses a Mamiya RZ67 Pro II 6x7cm rangefinder and Mamiya 140mm f/4.5 Macro lens, placed for closeups about two to three feet from his subject. "I use the 140mm because I don't want to have a wide-angle lens coming in and distorting the face," he says. "Most of the pictures in the book were taken with Fuji NHG 800 film, which I like because it is not so contrasty and it keeps a lot more shadow details than other higher-speed negative films. Unfortunately, they don't make that exact film any more, so I've recently switched over to Kodak Portra 800." A typical exposure for Schoeller's closeups is 1/125 second at between f/5.6 and f/8.

After several of his headshots were published, Schoeller says he purposefully tried to branch out stylistically. "For awhile, magazines said, 'Martin, we want you to do a shoot, but please, we really don't want another headshot!'" he explains. "And stupid me, I listened to them, and I did a lot of photo shoots without even getting a headshot, which I now regret." One notable case was singer Johnny Cash. "It was, I think, the last photo shoot while he was alive. I didn't do a closeup with him—and I still beat myself up over that one."

Now that he's completed *Close Up*, Schoeller plans to continue the style. "I think now I don't have a choice," he says, adding that he has several subjects on his wish list, including Nelson Mandela and Fidel Castro. "Reinventing yourself doesn't have to involve a big change. You can explore within a style. You can edit differently, and it's amazing the huge change that your whole message can undergo. So I definitely think I will do another book of photos like this."

And call it *Closer Up*?

He laughs. "We can call it *Closer*." ■



Schoeller's shot of Frankie Vellita, 2001.

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