



Martin Parr

## ‘There’s something very interesting about boring’: Martin Parr on his life in pictures

From Benidorm sunbathers to British birdwatchers, for nearly 70 years the photographer has captured the magic of the mundane. What drew him to his subjects - and what do they tell us about a changing world?

By **Martin Parr**. Introduction: Wendy Jones

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**I**f you saw [Martin Parr](#) and didn’t know who he was, you would barely notice him. He is Mr Invisible and Mr Normal rolled into one, in his sensible jumper - probably from Marks & Spencer - and sensible socks and sandals. He has a neat side parting and neatly cut hair. He has a mild and conventional manner and a mild and conventional appearance. There is something of the naff birdwatcher about him. But do not be fooled. This is the disguise of a man who is seeing far more than most of us ever see, and he’s hiding in plain sight. He is a genius who has changed photography, one of the great artists of our time.

So who is Martin Parr? And what would he say if we listened? His life is, in many ways, an everyman’s life: he’s born into a family of mixed characters and classes; he has a devoted grandparent; he is undistinguished at school - perhaps not having the happiest of childhoods; he’s a silly boy; he goes to college; mucks around, tries new things, gets a girlfriend, has some holiday jobs. He enters adulthood in an inauspicious way, works hard, sees something of the world; gets married, becomes a father, builds up his career, travels; has conflict, success, illness, recovery; becomes a grandfather, gains wisdom and respect. An ordinary life that follows an ordinary arc.

Martin Parr’s life is also a life of its century. He was there in the great freeze of 1962 - he records it with his first photo. He’s a grammar school boy who trainspots the last steam engines, then a hippy student with long hair in the 70s. He’s in Ireland during the Troubles, then, in the 80s, he’s capturing fashion, luxury, consumerism and British Conservatism. He sees the fall of communism in the 90s, the rise of McDonald’s and the explosion in international tourism. In the new millennium, he watches India transforming, industry dying in the Black Country, the traditional English village enduring. He sees South Africa after

apartheid and the growth in the standard of living worldwide. He lives through the arrival of digital photography, mobile phones, selfies. He sees Gay Pride marches and Black Lives Matter protests, meets the elderly queen and survives the pandemic.

And he photographs it all. He's like a photographic Forrest Gump. In the mid-80s, like the film of *The Wizard of Oz*, his work burst into colour, not in a wonderland like Oz but in a downtrodden, dirty, unglamorous seaside resort near Liverpool called New Brighton. He photographed gulls, litter, sunbathers on cement walkways, babies crying and chip shops. Not for him the luscious aesthetic of 1930s seaside posters. This was a working-class day out, and Martin displayed it in vibrant, flash-induced, saturated colour. In New Brighton, Martin became the photographer we know him to be now - vivid, demanding our attention, socially aware and pulling us in like a magnet.

Many years ago, I approached Martin and asked if I could write his biography. He said yes. We tried, we failed. I asked questions; he replied quickly and briskly. I asked the same questions again, I tried to dig deeper. I failed. I wanted to write something analytical, deep, full of myth, id and ego. Martin talked about birdwatching and regularly said the worst phrase a biographer can hear: "That's all I've got to say about that." How could I write a book with so few words? I couldn't. Nearly all of Martin is in his pictures, not words.

Fifteen years later, I went back to him and said, "How about you tell your life story through photographs and you talk about your photos?" And he said yes.

Martin is older now, a statesman in his world. He has the air of someone who's seen everything - which, in a way, he has. But he's still at it. He recently held an exhibition of his photos on smoking, exploring the difficult borders between comfort and discomfort. He has work to do, an ever-changing world to document, boring things to find that he's going to make us interested in.

So if you see a mild-mannered man walking along and he points his camera at you - especially if you're doing something unremarkable, such as standing at the checkout, having a cup of tea, taking a selfie or even just waiting in a queue - you may have been Parr-ed. *WJ*

## **Frozen Stream, Chessington, England, 1962-3**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos

The first photo I remember taking is this one, of my father on a frozen stream. I used to play here, next to our house. I would have been 10 when I took this during the great freeze of 1962-3. I remember helping my father sweep the snow outside our house and people thanking us - everyone was being nice to each other because it was a very cold winter.

You can see my father's got his binoculars on. He was a great birdwatcher, as was my mother, which meant all our trips out were to birdwatching places - to Thursley Common to see the Dartford warbler, and down to Pagham, looking for waders.

We would go to Hersham Sewage Works, where I spent many Saturdays looking for migratory birds, because a lot came there to feed. It was smelly and we wore wellingtons. There were tomatoes growing. We used to pick green ones that had grown in human shit. They would never ripen; they were always green. We'd pick them and my mother used to make green tomato chutney.

## **Birdwatchers, Surrey Bird Club, England, 1972**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos

When I went home during the college breaks, I would take pictures of my father's birdwatching trips with the Surrey Bird Club - my father was the president. He made lists of the birds, and the Dartford warbler was his specialism. This picture was taken when the bird club was having its picnic lunch. I guess this photo works because you've got these two couples, both with binoculars, so it looks quite surreal. They look like owls themselves.

I was beginning to look at scenes that were familiar in a slightly remote way. And there's humour in it - it was the first photo I could clearly see the humour in.

## **Susie Mitchell, Paris, France, 1978**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos

Despite being “utterly inattentive and lazy” in French at school (to quote one school report), in the late 70s I began to go on trips to France. I went to see Jean-Claude Lemagny, who was in charge of the photography collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. He bought many early black-and-white prints from me - for bargain prices, but it was a great thrill. The trips were very exciting and helped build up my reputation in France. And Susie came along, because she could speak French.

This was taken in one of those classic French bistros. Susie didn't like being photographed by me at all. She'd put her hand up in front of her face. She has always said she looks awful, which is absolute rubbish. Her skin is beautiful. She still puts her hand up now. It doesn't stop me taking pictures, so it's a bit useless. I can easily outwit her. I've got lots of photos of Susie in the archive. We've been married for 45 years.

## Colour and Flash, New Brighton, England, 1983-85



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos, taken from The Last Resort

In 1982 Susie got a job in Liverpool and we found a house overlooking the Mersey. I knew the seaside resort New Brighton was a mile down the road and would be great for me to explore photographically. It was a tradition; people came here from all over Merseyside for a day out on the beach - if you could call it a beach. It was shabby, but it had an ice-cream parlour, an amusement arcade and funfair rides.

I kept working in black and white because colour photography wasn't taken seriously in the UK. In the 40s and 50s, it was regarded as commercial and trivial, used for family snapshots because you could get cheap colour cameras. Then, in the late 70s, I saw images from America of serious photography being done in colour: the likes of Stephen Shore, William Eggleston and Joel Meyerowitz were getting shows in the big museums. I thought, I must go to colour.

I knew I was on to something with this combination of colour, flash and New Brighton. I could tell these were good pictures. It made me realise colour really had potential to express my attitude and subjectivity much more efficiently than anything else. Colour is real, isn't it? It's right in your face. It just looks great. I still love black and white, but once I moved to colour, I never went back.

## Something That Seems Ordinary, Salford, England, 1986



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos, taken from *Spending Time*

I was hanging around a petrol station like a pervert. Photographers at the time would have said that this was the craziest place to take a picture. Because it's a very unglamorous subject matter. Boring. There's no drama here. But there's something very interesting about boring. Something that seems very ordinary at the time becomes interesting when you look back at it later, almost 40 years later: the pump has changed, the clothes have changed, the car has changed. It tells us something about consumerism, and how we depend on fuel, oil and petrol.

## Conservative Midsummer Madness Party, Bath, England, 1988



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos, taken from *The Cost of Living*

I went to the Conservative Party Association in Bath and asked if there was any chance of getting access to events happening in people's gardens and houses. They said, "Yes, here's a list." They were so very agreeable. Access, back in the 80s, was a much easier game to play. I guess now they would look me up and would be horrified by my reputation.

Every little component of this picture works - and that's an unusual achievement. The men are dressed up in suits and ties, and they look very smug. This lady's hair is like a helmet. It looks solid. It doesn't look like it would blow in the wind in the Midsummer Madness.

## **Small World, Kleine Scheidegg, Switzerland, 1990**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos, taken from Small World

In 1992, I had an exhibition of my ongoing project on tourism, *Small World*, in Paris. One of the guests was [Henri Cartier-Bresson](#), probably the most famous photographer in the world, and a founder of Magnum. He was so annoyed by the exhibition that when he got home he sent me a fax saying, "I don't see your viewpoint. Your work is from a different planet. We belong to two different solar systems." I thought, oh, this is fantastic. I replied, "I acknowledge there is a large gap between your celebration of life and my implied criticism of it ... What I would query with you is: why shoot the messenger?" He was photographing the old style of life; I was photographing modern things. I usually relish criticism and opposition. When I realised people were against me, I thought: I must be doing something right.

## **Lost ball, Chew Stoke, England, 1992**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos, taken from *Chew Stoke: A Year in the Life of an English Village*

It's classic to play cricket in summer in Britain, yet things can go badly wrong. It's not a professional match. Everybody's mucking in to find the ball so the game can continue.

## **McDonald's, Moscow, Russia, 1992**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos

When the first McDonald's in the USSR opened in Pushkin Square, Moscow, there was a queue of a thousand people trying to get in. I still remember the excitement and thrill of the diners. It was the largest McDonald's in the world, with 600 seats. It was nicknamed Bolshoi Mac and heralded as an amazing advance; because of Gorbachev's glasnost policy, the USSR let this icon of America in.

This was the only time I have been allowed to photograph in McDonald's. I've often taken pictures without permission; being thrown out by a faintly embarrassed duty manager gives a certain satisfaction.

## **Pyongyang, North Korea, 1997**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos

I've always been fascinated by North Korea. Finally, in 1997, I saw an advertisement in the Times for a trip that was leaving from Beijing and going to North Korea. I applied and said I was a lecturer - which I was; it wasn't a lie - and they gave me a visa. We were a coachload of 20 people driven around all the propaganda sites, which were like film sets. There were no cars anywhere. We knew there was a lot of starvation, but we didn't see evidence of that. Still, it felt poor.

We were controlled the whole time, in what we did, where we went, and we had to have an interpreter or a guide with us constantly. They were OK with me having quite a big camera. They must have realised I was a photographer, but they didn't stop me from photographing anything, because it was all so curated you could only take pleasant photographs, really. It was propaganda of the first order. Occasionally, like here, I had an opportunity to sneak an uncensored picture through the coach window. North Korea was the most surreal experience of my life.

### **A perfect cup of tea, Sand Bay, England, 1997**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos, taken from Common Sense

I've done many other pictures of cups of tea but this is the best: every component is correct. It's a perfect cup of tea in a perfect Wedgwood cup and saucer on a perfect red gingham tablecloth.

It was taken in a cafe near Weston-super-Mare that Susie and I used to frequent, called Monk's Rest, on a hill overlooking the sea. Sometimes we would have poached eggs on toast, and sometimes sardines on toast, and one day someone put this cup of tea on the table and I took a photo of it. It's a simple picture that's become very well known, licensed and used many, many times.

It's very rewarding to take an iconic image. I have taken millions of photos, and I'm always looking to take one that will survive on its own without context, without the narrative.

## **Benidorm, Spain, 1997**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos, taken from Common Sense

I was very excited about going to Benidorm with a macro lens for the first time, because it meant I could take photos at close range. And the scale of the beach in Benidorm is quite amazing. It's huge. It must be three miles long, with three different beaches, and there's this long path by the water where the Spanish go promenading during the day, particularly in the morning. It's quite an event. I call it the motorway.

I took the picture of this woman very quickly. She was fast asleep. Those blue things are eye shields. It was one of those rare moments when everything fell into place. I was very close to her. I only took one frame and then moved on. I had a hunch that this would be a good photo, and it is now one of my most famous pictures.

I've since had two people write to me and say, "That's a photo of my grandmother." They weren't able to prove it. The woman hasn't ever come forward.

## **Senegalese street seller, Dakar, 2001**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos, taken from Fashion Magazine

I went to Dakar for a fashion shoot for Rebel, a French fashion magazine. I had accessories to photograph: handbags, sunglasses and a Louis Vuitton cigarette case - the silver square in the front row. Every fashion picture is about solving a problem: how to make the picture look good while showing the item of clothing.

This guy was selling his wares on the street for two or three dollars. I negotiated to pay him to take his photo - I can't remember how much - and I placed the cigarette case into the tray. And Bob's your uncle.

It's all cheap stuff, apart from the Louis Vuitton cigarette case, which is an expensive French luxury good. It devalues it. It's ironic, isn't it, really? I put it there as a form of subversion, because everything else on that tray would be worth under \$10. And that Louis Vuitton cigarette case is going to be worth \$1,000. Minimum.

## **Shalfleet Church Fete, Isle of Wight, England, 2007**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos

I have been to so many country fetes over the years. I can't get enough of them, in particular church fetes, ideally in the vicar's garden. It's like stepping back in time to the 1950s. You can't help but admire the notice here: "Do take ONE cherry tomato with your roll." It's a shame these days the food is often covered in clingfilm. I can get an interesting photo of the reflections when I'm using flash, but clingfilm just annoys me. You don't need it. The food's only going to be in the open air for a couple of hours before it's eaten. It's health and safety gone mad.

## **Spectators in Switzerland Watching Polo, St Moritz, 2011**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos, taken from *Luxury*

I wasn't interested in the polo. I wanted the spectators. And they're very much spectating, wearing their sunglasses and watching intently. The way the dog is integrated into the fur works well, and I like the other dog, also paying attention.

**Employee of the Month, Rochester, New York, US, 2012**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos, taken from Tim Montondo is Employee of the Month at Wards Natural Science for the month of April. This is his sixth time

In 2012, Magnum initiated a project called Postcards from America, in which photographers were sent to different towns in the US for 10 days. I was sent to Rochester, where I came across Tim Montondo. The sign tells the story: he's Employee of the Month. It's his sixth time. I love that he's holding his cup, the way it's held in one hand and the other just drops down. I wanted him to look very proud. I had to tell him not to smile. I wanted to take it seriously. People assume for a portrait you should smile. The opposite is the case. I want the subject to show dignity.

## **The queen visiting Drapers' Hall, London, England, 2014**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos, taken from Unseen City

The Drapers' Livery company said, "We've got the queen coming to lunch to celebrate our 650th birthday. Would you be happy to take pictures of the event?" and I immediately said yes. The livery companies in London are trade guilds, or professional associations, and they are famously very wealthy. They are also typically very male, very white and very old. But still they go on. Still rich. Still giving out money. Still having their dinners.

As opposed to most of the times I've photographed the queen at public events, this time I was the only photographer, and I followed her around.

Here she is leaving the event. By this time, a good few pedestrians had twigged that she was in the building. Hence, you see people with their phones trying to take pictures of her. The trouble is they'll have me in them, with my camera. Sorry about that, folks.

This has become a very popular image. It's interesting in that the queen is perhaps the only person who's recognisable from behind. She's got that classic hat and a slight hunch. I'm sure she was photographed from behind many times, but here, it really works.

## **Tomato Soup, Royal Infirmary, Bristol, England, 2021**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos

Paramedics came to pick me up because I was vomiting and there was something wrong with my stomach. I had to have an emergency operation because something had come loose - I'm not sure exactly what happened. Anyway, by coincidence, when they were doing the scans for that they found "nodules on the spine". And when they say that it means it's cancer.

They removed my stem cells, gave me a blast of chemo, and put the stem cells back in. Then I had to remain in a highly controlled room for two weeks while my immune system was maintained. The only person allowed in was Susie, who came every day, God bless her. After that, I was in the ward. It took a long time for my bowel to start working again. I had to have food pumped in to me to keep me alive, it was nil by mouth. Then at some point they decided I was ready to eat.

The first food I had in three weeks was tomato soup - I think it was Heinz - orange juice and an ice-cream. NHS ice-cream was surprisingly good. During those three weeks I could only drink sips of water. I remember getting my first cup of tea. It was the best cup of tea I had ever drunk.

## **Amusement Arcade, New Brighton, England, 2023**

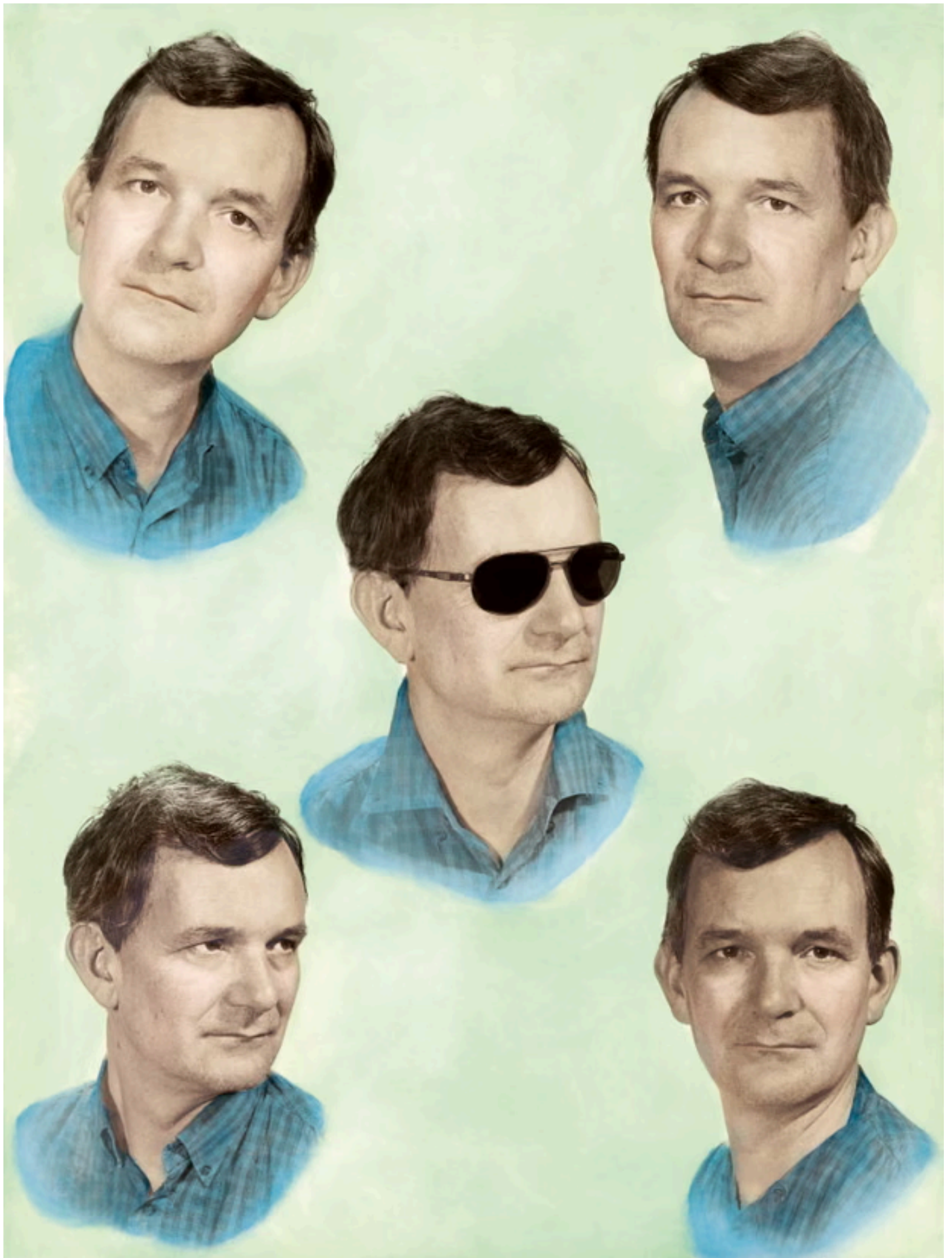


📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos

Back in New Brighton, I saw this mother with her five kids in their green outfits. I said, “Is there any chance I can take your picture?” She agreed and didn’t ask why. She must have been proud of her brood, so it made sense I’d want to take their photo.

New Brighton has changed, probably for the better. It’s virtually litter-free now, and there’s actually a beach, properly laid out. The amusement arcade hasn’t changed much, though: it’s brash, noisy and good fun. It’s the new New Brighton. Gentrification is the name of the game.

## **Autoportrait, Hanoi Studio, Havana, Cuba, 2001**



📷 Photograph: Martin Parr/Magnum Photos

My autoportrait project has run over 40 years. The aim is to demonstrate the different ways in which you can have your portrait done in a studio or public space, as well as the different techniques photographers employ. The only reason I use myself as the subject is because I'm the one person who's consistently there. Hanoi Studio took five black and white shots of me in different poses, and in one they gave me naff sunglasses. They then did a montage, printed in black and white, and hand-coloured.

I'm uninterested in how I look, as long as I'm presentable. I look in the mirror once a day - I have no choice, as I've got to comb my hair. I guess that's interesting given I do fashion photography. I'm not interested in clothes, I just wear what's comfortable. Socks with sandals is a good combination before it gets to the hottest part of the year. I guess you could call it my spring look ...

I have had a wonderful life with photography. From North Korea, to a vicar's garden party in Somerset, or shooting Mar del Plata beach in Argentina - what a privilege it has been to see the world and record my response. I had a funny one in Morecambe last summer. I was taking photos and this couple came up and said, "That's a nice camera. What are you doing around here?" I replied, "I'm documenting Morecambe." They said, "You mean like Martin Parr?" I said, "I am Martin Parr." They were rather surprised.

I've been taking photos for almost 70 years, and in that time we've seen the amazing transformation from analogue film to the digital era, and I've got a lot older. We live in a difficult but inspiring world, and there is so much out there I want to photograph.

This is an edited extract from *Utterly Lazy and Inattentive* by Martin Parr and Wendy Jones, published by Penguin at £30. To support the Guardian, order your copy at [guardianbookshop.com](https://guardianbookshop.com). Delivery charges may apply.

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