

Double Vision

Angela Brennan

Matthys Gerber

Anne Graham

Graeme Hare

Tim Johnson

Stephen Little

John Nixon

Robert Rooney

Vivienne Shark-LeWitt

Peter Tyndall

Jenny Watson

Caroline Williams

John Young

Anne Zahalka

Double Vision

Artists' Portraits of Artists

Curator : Ben Curnow

Ivan Dougherty Gallery

The Infamous Incognito

Every day we are surrounded by images of 'personalities'. In mass media such as television and magazines, the human face is the most commonplace and multitudinous image, as well as being the most individualised. To be in the public eye, or to have a public persona, generally means that one's face is widely known. Visual artists, however, seem to have a special exemption from this general rule of visibility.¹ They usually become known, or make names for themselves, almost exclusively through the visual exposure of their work (and, in varying degrees, through its critical and curatorial contextualisations). When we do see images of artists within a 'high art' context, it is often 'through their own eyes', as it were — in self-portraits — as projections of their own 'singular vision', and not as objects of attention. So there is something ironic about presenting portraits of contemporary artists by their peers.

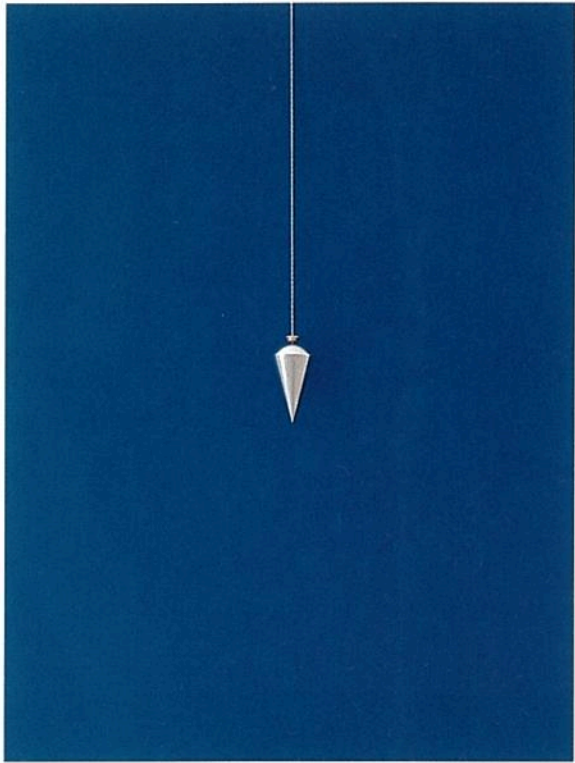
When this project began as an idea, about three years ago, the concept of such portraits seemed so peculiar that I assumed they would be very rare. While the resulting exhibition contains a surprisingly impressive line-up of portraits of Australian artists, the intention is not to show them off as celebrities. The 'cult of personality' — for good reasons — remains inappropriate for contemporary art (whether or not, as the case may be, one prefers to exclude issues of the artist's subjectivity and psychology from the discussion). Nonetheless, the category of individual practice remains indispensable for a comprehension of contemporary art.

These portraits represent accessible reference-points to individual artists' practices, and collectively put a human face on a realm of contemporary art that is sometimes perceived to be difficult, pretentious, or worse, dehumanized. They ought to serve as points of departure toward wider understandings of artistic issues. Curiously, the portraits' very structure — each involving two artists — unsettles familiar notions of pictorial meaning; they combine the seen (portrayed) with the unseen (the maker of the image). In this reflexivity, there is an intentional disruption of everyday legibility — a kind of 'double vision' that suspends the familiarity of straight perceptions. But the doubled image also represents the doubling of art's intensity, its information-density.

There is unfortunately a limit to the amount that can be communicated in this context about each artist and their work, and I hope that readers will be curious enough to pursue further information elsewhere. In a sense, this project is an allegory of representation — of the limits of representing art — and, like the human face itself, in its very discretion and superficiality, intimates that there is always more than meets the eye.

FOOTNOTES

1. Admittedly some visual artists do acquire 'star' status, or become cult figures, and photographs of artists appear regularly in some art magazines, but as a rule, these are still exceptional cases — in contrast to performing artists, for example.



John Nixon *Portrait of Robert Owen*, 1989

How do you like what you have.
This is a question that anybody
can ask anybody.

Ask it.

In asking it I began to make
portraits of anybody.

How do you like what you have is
one way of having an important
thing to ask of any one.

That is essentially the portrait of
anyone, one portrait of any one.
I began to think about portraits of
any one.

If they are themselves inside them
what are they and what has it to
do with what they do.

And does it make any difference
what they do and how they do it,
does it make any difference what
they say and how they say it.

Must they be in relation with any
one or anything in order to be one
of whom one can make a portrait.

I began to think a great deal
about all these things.

Gertrude Stein

Portraits and Repetition

The Anachronism of the Portrait

Portraiture has a bit of an image problem. In spite of the important place it held in the past, these days it tends to be associated with conservative official agendas and social pretensions, as well as with outmoded, traditional understandings of art. In previous times portraiture may have been one of an artist's simplest, yet most rewarding challenges; now it is problematised, and by no means expected as part of the contemporary artist's repertoire. This divergence between portraiture and vanguard practice has been notable for several decades, and is no mere accident of fashion.

In the sense that this exhibition addresses 'the place of portraiture' today, it concerns first its relative absence, for the place of portraiture seems a partially vacated, and hence *echoing* space. We should be under no illusions here that portraiture can undergo a revival or continue, business-as-usual (as though the concerted critiques of its foundations could be ignored). For example, the function of reproducing things as they appear, which the portrait is often held to exemplify, has ceased to be a necessary or direct concern of artists. Humanistic assumptions about the nature and priority of the individual have also been continuously re-evaluated both in modern art and critical theory. Consequently, portraiture may no longer take for granted a given or universal subject in 'the image of man'.

The portrait's fate has thus been, to an extent, that shared by the other pictorial genres of Western art. But it seems in some ways especially tied to conventional ideologies. It has generally been less adaptable to conceptual reorientations in art, and less translatable than other genres because it is so specifically value-laden. Moreover, at least from an avant-garde point of view, the archaic predisposition of portraiture has been preserved through the unmatched support it still receives from conservative sectors (institutional or pseudo-aristocratic patronage, and also prize competitions).



Angela Brennan *Portrait of Kathy Temin with one foot coloured in*, 1994

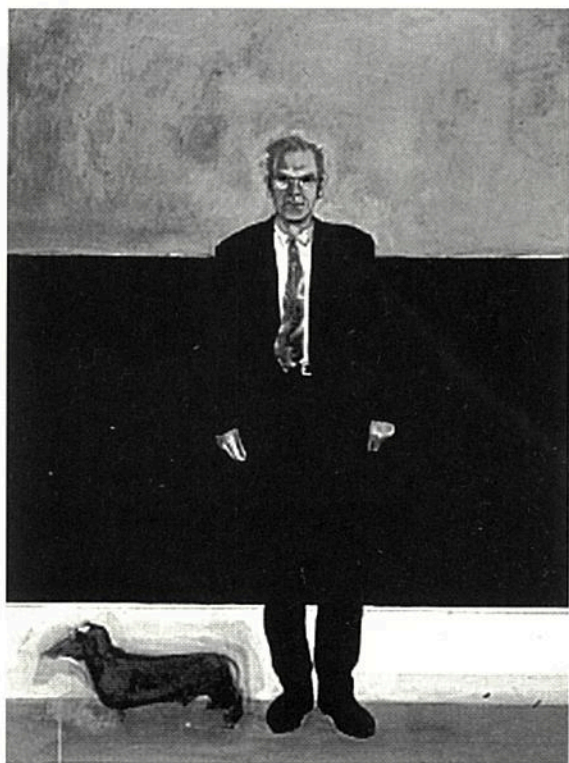
**A portrait is a likeness in which
there is something wrong about
the mouth.**

John Singer Sargent

Traditionally, a commissioned portrait is locked into a hierarchical artist-client relationship. The artist is given a brief, containing expectations that restrict the work to certain kinds of meaning and fixed types of rhetoric which are seen to serve the client's interests. Deviations from the established norms of resemblance and idealization would not be encouraged, since the primary purpose of such a portrait is commemorative. In contrast, contemporary artists invent their own briefs, and impose their own rules in relation to more lateral orientations.

So it is that few artists today (whose practices we might consider 'conceptually based') ever bother with portraiture in the customary sense. And so it is that portraiture has always been problematic for modern art and its successors. There are nevertheless positive aspects to reconsidering portraiture at the present time, and it is not inconceivable that the idea of the portrait can be renegotiated within a contemporary dialogue. At a time when we are departing from paradigms of art as a totally self-determined, self-exploratory, self-justifying discourse, the issue of how other persons and their activity might be configured has some relevance. And as this exhibition demonstrates, the idea of the portrait does continue to exist as something — not necessarily related to a singular tradition — that can be constituted or entered into by way of diverse methodologies.

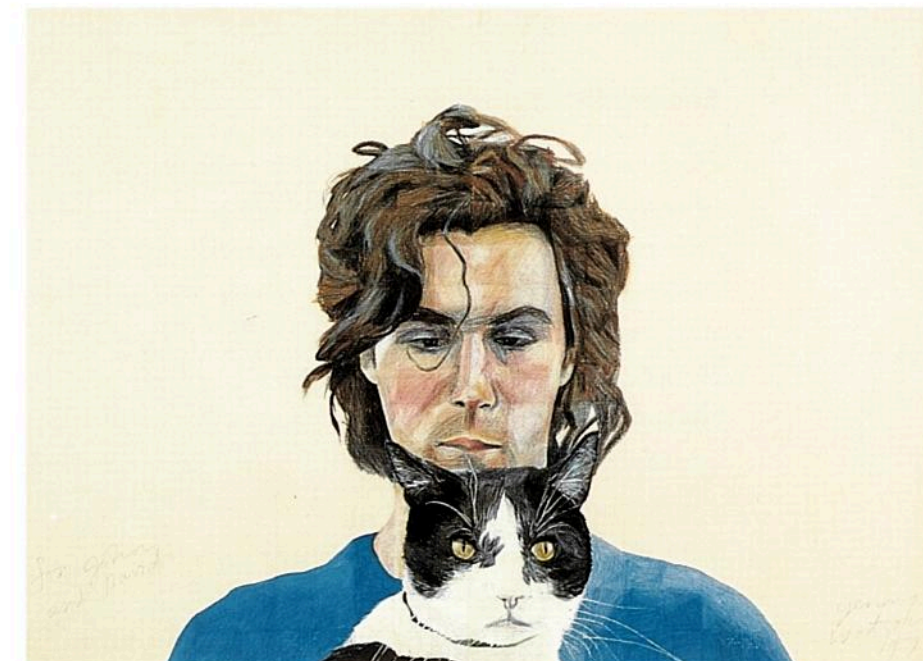
The anachronism of portraiture might also, in the case of Caroline Williams' work, be its lure. Seeing the formal portrait painting as 'forbidden territory', she accepts its imposition of inherently problematic conditions rather in the manner that conceptual artists begin with a set of restrictions or 'givens'. Her portraits simultaneously subject the portraiture tradition to satire and to reinvention. The arduous, synthetic process of studying a subject over numerous sittings becomes a performative project, involving negotiation and interaction; a test of perseverance in which the sitter's resistance must be eventually overcome. Apparently Richard Dunn was particularly resistant — trying to 'shake her off', she says, by changing his clothes and haircut, or wearing dark glasses, for example.



Caroline Williams *Professor Richard Dunn with Perpetual Nicky* (work in progress) 1993-95

The portrait of John and David is a document of a time as much as anything else. I met John in 1970, started going out in 1971, shared a house in 1972, and married in 1974. In 1978 John was extremely frustrated with Australia, and we went to London with the usual youthful idea of never returning. However, the isolation, the expense, and the situation of living in a bedsitter with no garden was too much for me, and I left after 6 months, prepared to re-establish in Melbourne alone. However, John didn't want to be in London without me, and so a short time later we re-established life at the Crimea Street, St Kilda flat. And John started 'Art Projects'. So the 1979 portrait is very much part of the beginning of a new hopeful era. David was our first cat. He had been brought as a kitten in a box to the staffroom at a high school in Niddrie where John had been teaching in 1974. John had not had animals as a child, so his attachment to David was enormous. (David was named after David Chapman of Powell Street Gallery, who had given me my first show in 1973). When David died in 1985 John buried him in a box with one of his paintings in the backyard at St Kilda.

Jenny Watson, Melbourne 1995



Jenny Watson *John and David (Portrait of John Nixon)* 1979

From One to Another

Here we are dealing with questions concerning the designation through art of an 'other person', aside from the artist who instigates the work of art. Effectively such considerations might counter and/or qualify 'modernist' preoccupations with the artist-artwork circuit as a closed system; however, this does not imply turning back to earlier modes of description. It is rather a question of possible relations, always specific, since a portrait always involves a pact between parties; the portrait is somehow counter-signed, like a cheque drawn upon a joint account. The pact is reciprocal, likely to occur 'between friends', and involves a sense of collusion or collaboration.

Officially, artists are presented as though they existed in distinct isolation from one another. In reality, however, they usually work in conscious proximity and are interrelated in ways that cover a spectrum from the professional to the social and the private. The connections are seldom acknowledged, and are strictly speaking

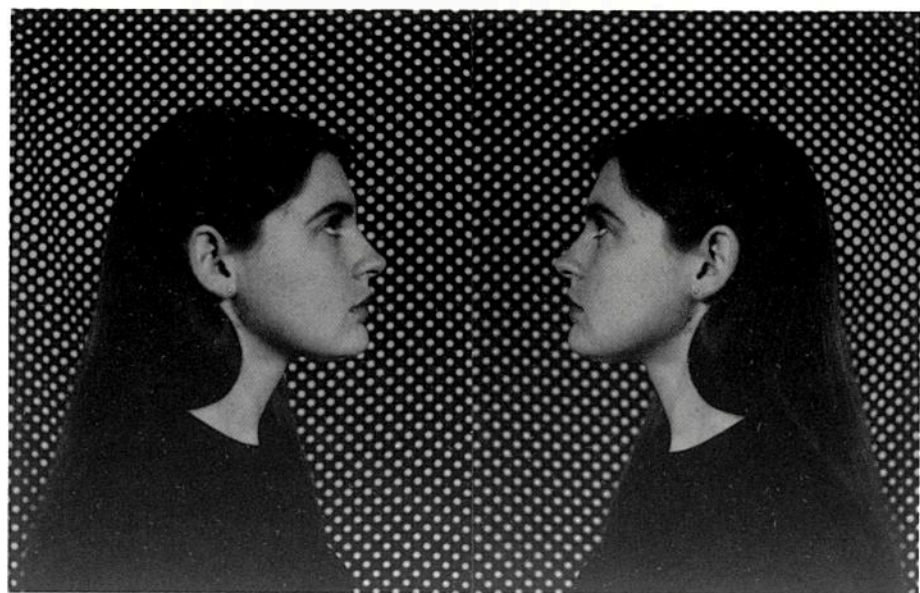
What is proposed, then, is a portrait — but not a psychological portrait; instead, a structural one which offers the reader a discursive site: the site of someone speaking within himself, amorously, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak.

Roland Barthes,
A Lover's Discourse

irrelevant to critical considerations of the individual artist's work. They belong to the realm of biographical detail, which is avoided by serious criticism for good reasons, even though the artist is free to draw on their own experience. While there is a natural proximity of the artist's life to the work, the narrative of biography misconstrues this dialectic relation as though it were a causal one.

Seeing Double

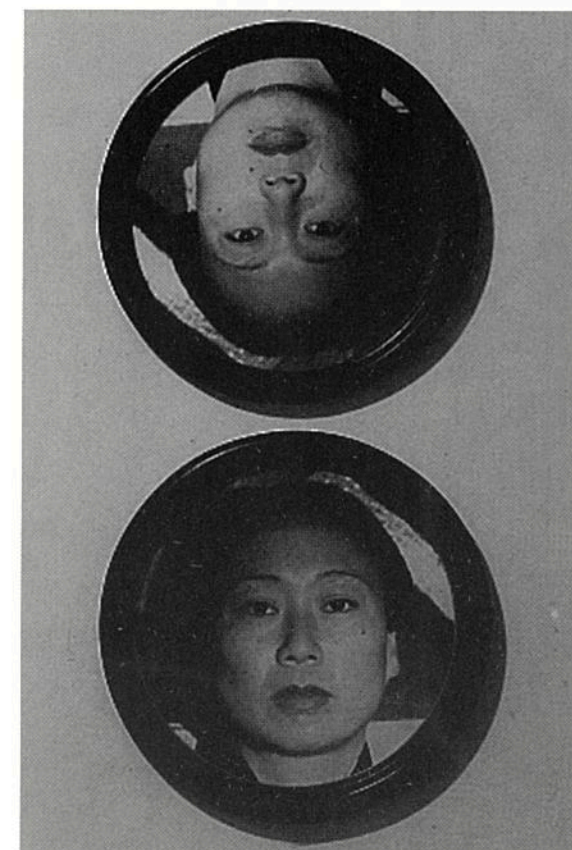
Whistler named a portrait of his mother, *Arrangement in Gray and Black* (1871). "Now that is what it is. To me it is interesting as a portrait of my mother; but what can or ought the public care about the identity of the portrait?"² The argument is logical, though it seems artificially limited; the picture is still, *at the same time* a portrait, in which another person's gaze is averted to one side, yet remains there *imagined* if not seen. The subject of Whistler's portrait is claimed to be only a compositional element, because the modern painter's gaze is that which claims itself as being the only gaze. If efforts at forging self-determining definitions of art can be identified with the early phases of modernism, they are indissociable from a conundrum of the time over subjectivity versus the possibility of objective knowledge. If one solution was a proto-formalist indifference to the subject, the extreme alternative was a purely subjective solipsism such as that of Oscar Wilde's painter in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "... every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself."³



John Young *Ultimate Entombment, Twins (Portrait of Elizabeth Pulie #1)* 1994

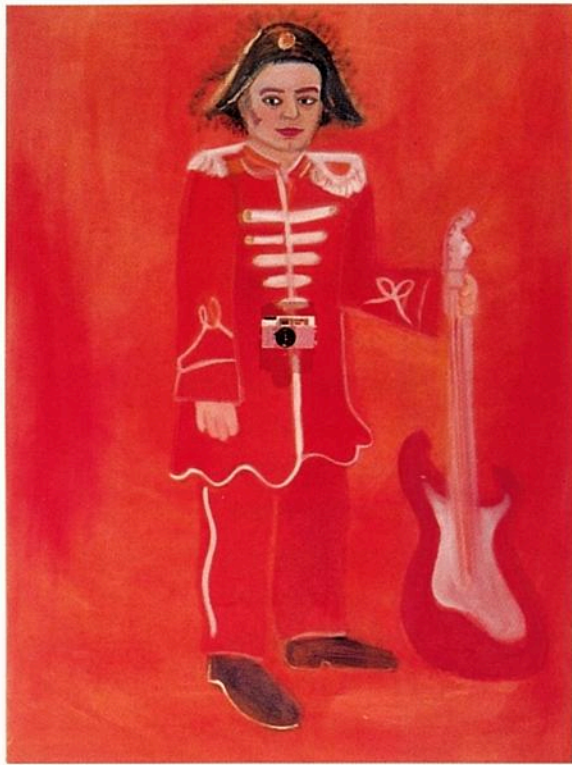
2. J.A. M. Whistler, quoted by Alfred H. Barr, in "What is Modern Painting?" New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943, p. 32.

3. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1895), London, 1985, p. 25.



Anne Graham *Portrait of Lindy Lee (from 'Noemata')* 1992

The eyes have been said to be windows to the soul, but the closer we get to a face the more inscrutable it seems. Stilled from the constant fluxes of life and the things around that are clues to meaning, people are not themselves but simultaneously are doubly 'themselves'. What you see is, but also cannot be, what you get. This fundamental separation of images from their truth is a 'secret' of which artists are among the keepers. In John Young's portraits of Elizabeth Pulie and Anne Graham's of Lindy Lee, the mirrored or doubled image no longer refers primarily to a unitary identity of the subjects themselves but to the division within existence, and to the repetition of images. The relation of images to themselves, in both of these cases, is perhaps appropriate to the mute nature of each of these artist's work.



Angela Brennan *Portrait of Geoff Lowe*, 1992

The history of philosophy is comparable to the art of the portrait. It is not a matter of 'making lifelike', that is, of repeating what a philosopher said but rather of producing resemblance by separating out both the plane of immanence he instituted and the new concepts he created. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*

Artists as Models

In being portrayed as the artists they are, personifications of their practice, the individuals portrayed are not merely the objects of an authorial discourse but are also subjects by virtue of their own actively signifying discourse. As such, there can be no clear-cut distinction between their personal identity and the nature of their practice. In some portraits, such as Peter Tyndall's of Imants Tillers, the relationship appears to be one between two conceptual personae. This is configured as a 'take' on Tillers' appropriation of images by other artists, from the point of view of Tyndall's own dictum: "A Person Looks At A Work Of Art/someone looks at something..."

Several other portraits here are suggestive of the subject's understanding of what it means to be put in the other artist's picture. Willing collusion is signalled by the knowingly full-frontal doubling back of the gaze in Angela Brennan's portraits, for example. Brennan's portrait of Geoff Lowe relies little on direct likeness, and floats the costumed figure of the artist as 'Sargeant Pepper' on a field of vivid colour, something other than a background, where the sense of corporeality verges on dissolving the into the simple chromatic sensation of the painting. Lowe seems to look straight out at another possible world.



Peter Tyndall *A Person Looks At A Work Of Art/someone looks at something ...* 1981

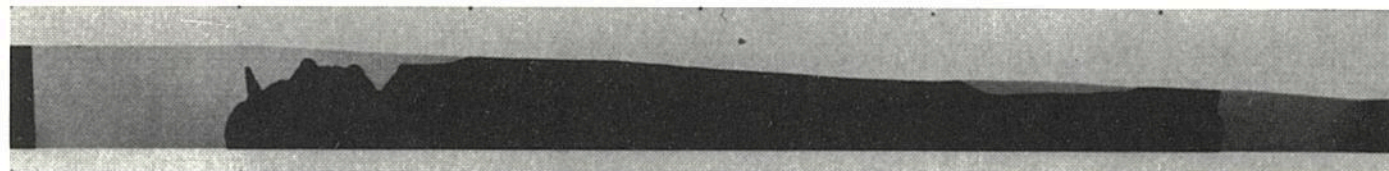
*This photograph of Imants Tillers looking through a polaroid camera at a two canvas boards *Work Of Art* by Jenny Watson was taken on Sunday, 6 December 1981. The occasion was an n-space (Director: Imants Tillers) one-day group exhibition, *The Beacon*, curated by Imants Tillers at the beacon off the end of Cremorne Point, Sydney. Each of the beacon's eight pillars bore the work of one of the eight invited artists: Peter Cripps, Richard Dunn, Adrian Hall, Rose McGreevy, John Nixon, Imants Tillers, Peter Tyndall, Jenny Watson.*

We are not a materially constituted whole, identical for everyone, which each of us can examine like a list of specifications or a testament; our social personality is a creation of other people's thought. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, p. 25.

In painting (I mean here, naturally, the accepted 'artistic' painting) one can discover behind a technically correct portrait of Mr Miller ... not a trace of the true essence of art — no evidence whatever of feeling. Painting is the dictatorship of a method of representation, the purpose of which is to depict Mr Miller, his environment and his ideas.

Kasimir Malevich,

The Non-Objective World.

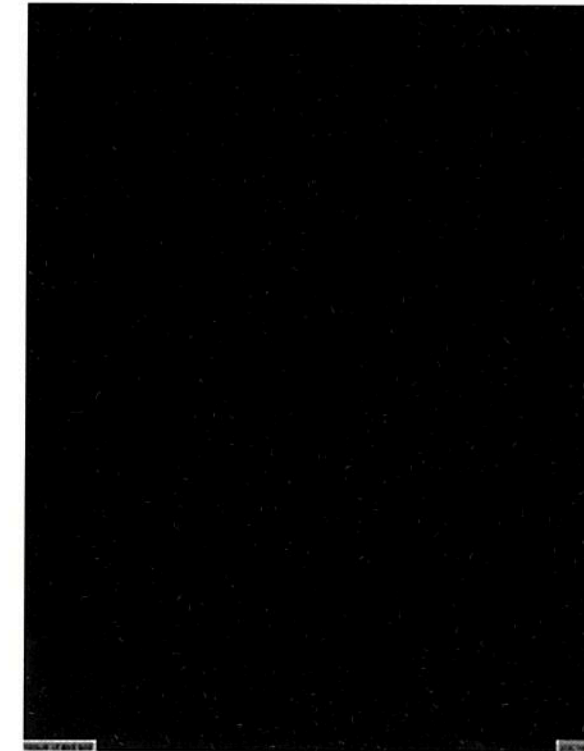


"The portrait is only an intensified form of the general nature of a picture. Every picture is an increase of being and is essentially determined as representation, as coming-to-presentation".⁴ Portrait and landscape might represent alternate models for the ontological status of an image. Graeme Hare's portrait of Aleks Danko treats its subject like a landscape, and departs from the usual head-and-shoulders formula which infers that being is located in the mind.

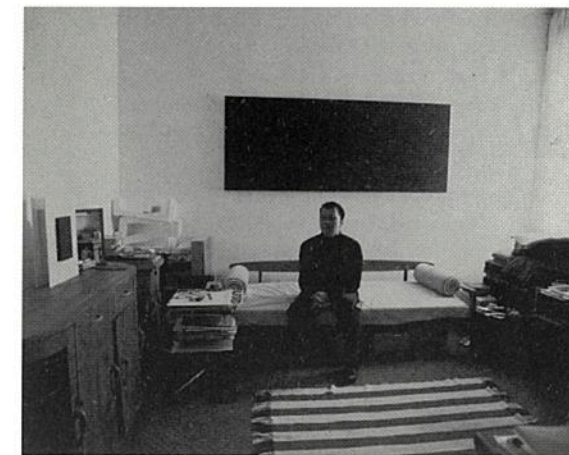
4. Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Truth and Method', London, 1962, p. 131

Second Sight

This portrait is painted in black enamel paint over a page from the Sydney Morning Herald, which was first inverted and pasted onto masonite. Prompted by Mike Parr's public defense of the artist after a particularly scathing review article appeared in that paper, as a symbolic gesture it can be seen as a homage to Parr combined with a negation of the newspaper and its supposed representational value. Nixon was at the same time giving his minimal/abstract works a standard title of 'Self-portrait/non-objective composition'. Here the extension of the title ('a portrait painted from life ...') refers to the wording of entry criteria for the Archibald Prize, although the work was not subsequently submitted to that competition.



John Nixon *Portrait of Mike Parr (A portrait painted from life of a man of letters etc.)* 1991



Stephen Little *Diversion series (Vicente Butron)* 1993-94

What is the difference between a portrait and a picture? What makes this picture a portrait of Mr Smith? Is it similarity to Mr Smith? No. The criterion of the portrait is not similarity because there are bad portraits and good. In a portrait we pre-suppose a particular kind of similarity; what makes a portrait a portrait is the intention.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

(*Wittgenstein's Lectures 1930-32*)



Anne Zahalka artist #1 (Peter Tyndall) 1990



Robert Rooney Portrait of Howard Arkley, 1980

Vis-a-vis

What does it mean to be (represented as) an 'artist'? A portrait denotes, in some measure, both the 'being' of an individual and their social identity, according to what they do in the world. On one hand, we have a popular understanding, based on the tradition of Romanticism, of the artist as constituted from within by an innate resource of creativity, and thus in possession of 'genius' to variable extents. At very least, we still recognise the artist as one who may act on convictions or motivations that are 'theirs' and not ours. But at the same time there are issues of externality that have come to the fore, especially in recent years. While the 'death of the author' may have been merely a catch-phrase for the '80s, a broader realisation of how the identity of artists is conferred from outside and mediated by others has been immensely significant for recent art.

"Right from the start I didn't pick my subjects because I thought they had interesting faces — the way some photographer might choose Lloyd Rees because his craggy face had 'character'. Some portraits were done on the spur of the moment ... others were done during visits to galleries or the artist's studio. I sometimes told them where to stand, but usually they suggested a particular place. For example, it was Howard Arkley's idea to sit in the Rietveld chair ... Jenny Watson was the only one who actually got dressed up for the occasion, as though for a fashion shoot.

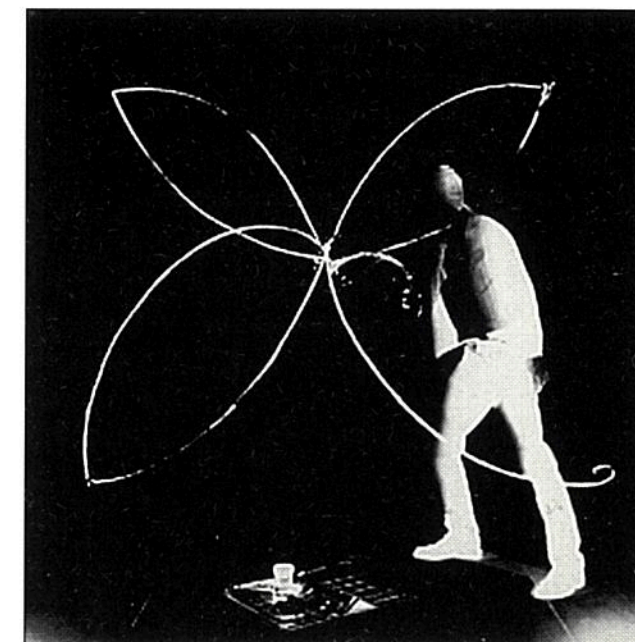
"In contrast to my instamatic works, where technical imperfections were of little concern or the pictures were taken without looking in the viewfinder ... the 'Portraits' were to be as perfect as I could manage. There were certain rules — to use available light, no matter how dim (long exposures) and no cropping of images."

Robert Rooney

Anne Zahalka's 'Artists' series largely focuses on how 'the artist' is seen, exploring various stereotypical images of artists in artificially constructed scenarios. Originally presented together like an inventory of available 'creative types', the series is on the border between portraiture and pure fiction where the artists would merely actors. In many of the images, the subjects willingly parody some aspect of their work, suggesting a capacity to regard one's own artistic persona with slight incredulity. Zahalka's portrait of Peter Tyndall was done in a true spirit of collaboration, and at the same time works as quite a representative portrait.

Beyond the stylization of such images, in other photographic series there are more matter-of-fact depictions of personages, visages who belong to the classification 'artist', a subset of all other individuals. Matthys Gerber's series of portraits is based on artists' passport photos — an obligatory, generic form of i.d. — which take on a new life when presented in the context of art.

Tim Johnson's several portraits of aboriginal painters from Papunya and Kintore, made during the 1980s, are mostly based on his own documentary snapshots, but depart from literal description, seeking an inter-psyche reality that cannot be captured by the camera's lense. This portrait of the late Tim Leura, who was one of the founding members of the Papunya artists' group, was painted immediately after his first visit in 1980. Contact and involvement with Leura among other aboriginal artists has been crucial for the development of Johnson's later approach to painting.



Anne Zahalka artist #7 (Stieg Persson) 1989



Tim Johnson T.L. (Portrait of Tim Leura) 1980

Who's Who

An exhibition that brings portraits of artists together in a public space cannot avoid the connotations of a 'portrait gallery', which suggests an authorised canon, or a 'who's who' of contemporary art. However, such connotations can perhaps be dealt with in interesting ways, while borrowing some of the portrait gallery's heuristic charms. This means playing a double game. Some of the artists included may indeed be considered important enough to be included in a current overview of Australian art, and conceivably be placed in a 'real' canon. Others, including some younger practitioners, would probably not be at this stage. Upon what criteria would artists be judged as worthy enough for inclusion? How can this be considered a representative grouping of artists?

While I admit my own mediation in selecting the works, the question of who is represented has been determined already, to a very large extent, by the artists and their subjective or perchance nominations — being nominations to their work, that is, not to a portrait gallery. A commemorative portrait gallery might apply criteria, draw on consensus, or simply say, "history has decided" its composition. But here, a reality of interconnectedness in the present is reflected; the rest is history. In the field of contemporary art, participation, currency and flux are significant values, whereas established fame has its pitfalls. The contemporaneity of art is thus its quality of constantly becoming, and try as we might, we simply can't adequately represent the present as if in some historical perspective.

Rather than imposing any principle of unity, then, this gathering indexes a series of divided and not entirely co-compatible imperatives. What is important, is not that a comprehensively or qualitatively coherent totality is produced, but that it differentiates a general field of plurality that includes a capacity for dialogue. And if such a collectivity of individual practices has meaning, and in turn constitutes a field of difference and struggle, it is precisely because of these practices' place in a non-unitary complex of representational systems, ideas and activities that we are sometimes broad-minded enough to perceive as our culture.



Matthys Gerber
Portrait (Hany Armanious) 1994



Vivienne Shark-LeWitt *Portrait of Caroline Williams, for Caroline Williams, 1994*

Double Vision : Artists' Portraits of Artists
4 February — 4 March 1995
Ben Curnow (curator)

Ivan Dougherty Gallery

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