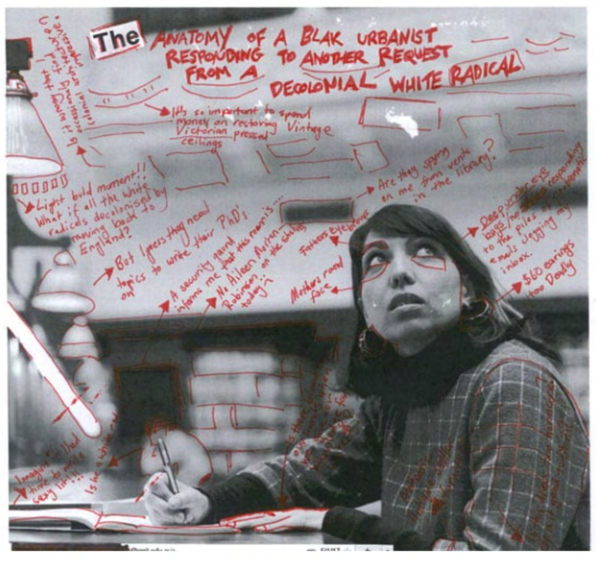

Timmah Ball

A **portrait** displays the likeness, personality, and even the mood of a person. It is defined in the following way:

Noun

1.1.
a painting, drawing, photograph, or engraving of a person, especially one depicting only the face or head and shoulders.
Similar:
painting picture drawing sketch
likeness image study representation
portrayal depiction canvas miniature
self-portrait portraiture photograph
photo studio portrait shot
still snap snapshot vignette

In the social media era, we are saturated with them. Our **portrait**s are everywhere. We are the most photographed generation in modern history. In this moment the **portrait** of a writer, or the biopic is heightened. It is almost inseparable from the work itself. Occasionally the **portrait** arrives before the work has even started. We are expected to know how to portray ourselves before we know what our work/art/writing actually is. 'In the Belly of the Trojan Horse' Ahmed Yussuf writes:

'To be a writer today is to make yourself a product of public consumption on the internet, to project an appealing image that contextualises the actual writing.'

His essay acerbically summaries how the **portrait** of a writer or biopic carries just as much weight as the artwork itself. I feel this weight, wondering what image I should project even though I am still unsure what the writing will be.

In 'Author Photo, Part One', Kate Zambreno observes the stereotypical imagining of a writer. She states that:

'Roland Barthes is smoking a cigarette.
James Baldwin is smoking a cigarette.
Karl Ove Knsugaard is smoking a cigarette.
Marguerite Duras is smoking a cigarette.
Susan Sontag is smoking a cigarette.
Alejandra Pizarnik is smoking a cigarette.
Paul Bowles is smoking a cigarette.
Jean Genet is smoking a cigarette.
Yukis Mishima is smoking a cigarette.
David Wojnarwicz is smoking a cigarette.'
Etc, etc, etc, etc.

I don't smoke. But I've always wanted to write and the cigarette is the writer, when the writer is their bio pic. When I look at photos of Susan Sontag she is almost always smoking. I'm tempted to start or at least fabricate the image in my own bio pics, gently holding a rollie in one hand knowing it will never enter my mouth. Because it captures the writer and therefore the writing with sublime agility. It makes both her and her writing playful and serious, something I would like to replicate for myself and my writing.

When Sontag looks at the camera, she is aware of her gaze. It is as if the process of writing 'On Photography' taught her how to tame the cameras power. We can see it in the way she slightly tilts her head and whether she looks directly at the camera or to the side. She knows how she wants to portray herself. I don't. Whenever I am asked to supply a bio pic, I clumsily supply selfies or a semi decent photo taken by someone at an event that makes me appear writerly but in a low-key kind of way. Without a cigarette my arms always look awkward, unsure of what to do with themselves. In 'Author Photo, Part Two' Zambreno writes:

'After a haircut: "You look more like yourself again."
When asked to elaborate: "Well, more like photographs of you."'

It's hard to tell if Zambreno is offended by the comment or not. If we look better in our biopics, is it a complement to our photos or an insult to us? I am trying to take a biopic that looks better than what I really look like but not so much better that it could be perceived as indulgent, fake or unrealistic. I am trying to take a picture of myself as a writer which resembles Sontag because in some absurd way, I am genuinely starting to feel that my writing might improve or at least be perceived in a different way - (aka taken more seriously, progressed to the next level, etc) if I had a better bio pic. But If I wanted to become a better writer, I also know that I need to write more, but I fixate on my biopics whenever the requests by organisations come through.

In 'Author Photo, Part Three' Zambreno writes:

'She was so recognizable before. She is still recognizable, although slightly less recognizable. As she grows out her hair, will she continue to become less and less recognizable? Her book has gotten wonderful reviews.'

Her thoughts heartbreakingly remind me of the onerous fixation placed on femme bodies and appearances, no matter what the quality of the actual work produced by them is. I wonder if I would remember 'On Photography' as vividly If I couldn't remember the portraits of Sontag? Almost all of my biopics are selfies, that are designed to appear as if they are professional **portrait**s. The effect varies. And most of the time I am asked by organisations if the biopic is a selfie rather than who to credit the photo too. If appearances matter, my writing will need exceptional reviews and it is unlikely that I will ever be recognizable.

I have one professional photo that was taken of me by an artist in the state library. The experience was uncomfortable. I didn't have control and had to accept the image of myself, presented through the artists photographic lense. Their project was intended to capture different writers and artists at work, I was asked to pretend that I was working and forget that they were there. But it obviously felt staged. When I receieved the photos the artists said that they were happy for me to use them as biopics. I wanted to, because they looked so professional but they also didn't look like me, or at least how I wanted to portray myself. So I continued using selfies despite the high quality photos and my own inability to capture myself in the way I wanted. Overtime I gravitated towards the professional photo because there was something in it that resembled what I wanted people to see even if it didn't quite materialise. I decided to turn the photo into a found text/ collage poem that would eventually appear in unMagazine. And as the portrait turned into text I wondered whether I could use it as a biopic. The image became something else, and I finally liked how it represented me.

— Timmah Ball, 2022.

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5 Screen shots of Susan Sontag, found on Google Images, 2022.

28 April - 4 June 2022

As a genre of photography that conflates image with identity, 'the portrait' carries a complex and problematic past. Yet how portraiture is made and used is ever-evolving. The history of portraiture is itself a record of social change, documenting shifts in cultural values and technological advances. Just as the role that portraiture performs in our lives has transformed, so too have the attitudes and approaches of artists who are responding to the task of art-making, amidst the rapidly changing conditions of contemporary visual culture.

The Portrait is an investigation into the emerging and fluid possibilities of portrait photography and its impact upon image-making today. Ten artists have been invited to produce 'a portrait' for exhibition. The artists selected work in both traditional modes of portrait photography and within alternative multidisciplinary practices. By considering the medium in an expanded sense, the artists are able to contemplate, critique and challenge the limits of what a portrait can be.

Blindside is situated on Wurundjeri woi-wurrung Country. We acknowledge that this land was never ceded and pay our respects to Elders, past, present and emerging.

The Portrait

Arini Byng
Nayuka Gorrie
Anne Moffat
Phebe Schmidt
Danny Cohen
Lucy Foster
Abigail Varney
Sara Tautuku Orme
Sam Lieblich
Lisa Sorgini

An exhibition at Blindside for PHOTO 2022, curated by Josephine Mead and Karl Halliday

Josephine Mead

The Portrait as an entity, object, gesture and device is ubiquitous, universal and completely evasive. Its meaning is never fully fixed. Its past is troubled. When coupled with the complex history of photography – another elusive field – it becomes further complicated. In curating this exhibition we entered into a photographic discourse, trying to textually unfold and expound the complexities and possibilities of the **portrait**. We invited ten artists to respond, creating a **portrait** while considering what a **portrait** is and can be. Some of the artists selected were from strictly photographic backgrounds and others were from multidisciplinary fields, and were asked to think through notions of the **portrait** in a photographic sense. To ask an artist to create **a portrait** sounds like a simple task, but we found that the broadness of this idea created complexities that were not expected. When reflecting on what portraiture means, for me, I return to one of my favourite relationships – that between images and language...

A photograph's meaning will change and shift over time. It is influenced by cultural context, ethical, critical or emotional progressions, understandings and fluctuations. Its meanings shift as a result of personal experience. Language can assist us in examining, simplifying and/or further-complicating these intricacies. Allan Sekula considers this tension between simplicity and complexity, and the photographs relation to language, suggesting that 'a photograph is an utterance of some sort, that it carries, or is, a message. However, the definition also implies that the photograph is an "incomplete" utterance, a message that depends on some external matrix of conditions and presuppositions for its readability. That is, the meaning of any photographic message is necessarily context-determined.' [1] Nothing in a photograph is ever fully fixed. Likewise, we can be determined and defined by the reality and experiences that we find ourselves within.

This fluidity that the photographic **portrait** contains is echoed in language. In both fields, and in our extended lives in general, we are conditioned and defined through the contexts we find ourselves within. The speaker (or writer/reader) and the environment in which the words are spoken (or read/written) dictates how their meaning exists in the world. As stated by Sekula, 'we might formulate this position as follows: a photograph communicated by means of its association with some hidden, or implicit text; it is this text, or system of hidden linguistic propositions, that carries the photograph into the domain of readability.' [2] Through touching base with the artists over the last few weeks, the value of text – through conversation and writing – has come to the fore. Several of the artists have turned to text to assist while they confront the task of presenting a **portrait** — Abigail Varney offers a string of text messages aside her work, Nayuka Gorrie and Timmah Ball have written reflections on **portrait**s and the other artists offered us words, via email and video call, to talk through their findings. Of course, nothing can ever be fully defined or fixed in words. Likewise, as Victor Burgin proposes, 'work in semiotics showed that there is no 'language' of photography, no single signifying system (as opposed to technical apparatus) upon which all photographs depend (in the sense in which all texts in English ultimately depend upon the English language); there is, rather, a heterogeneous complex of codes upon which photography may draw.' [3] There is always room for new interpretations.

The generous text that Nayuka Gorrie has offered questions what it means to be observed and the social and racial discrimination that consistently revolves around acts of observation within our society. Gorrie asks who we are 'when we are not being observed' [4] and considers that 'when a cop kills a black man and the body cam is rolling, does it matter whether or not someone was observed?' [5] In Daniel Palmer's ruminations on "relational portraiture" they suggest that 'the degree to which subjects are empowered to participate in the photographic act is closely related to their social power.' [6] Historically, the camera has not been a fair observer. Some **portrait**s are valued unfairly over others; the act of the photographer can be a violent one; and inaction and lack of critical observation when viewing a photograph, usually on the part of white people, can be equally destructive. The observational aspect of **portrait** photography throughout history is deeply problematic. The **portrait** has waded through muddy and contentious waters, being dragged through the ongoing destructive project of colonialism and invasion. Photographic portraits have been taken without consent— taken in an effort to situate the sitter in a place of disempowerment. There is a reason why the word "taken" has become connected to the act of photography. The camera can capture experiences where moments of harm have deprived the sitter of their own power, as illustrated in Gorrie's recollection of 'a police photo of my mother's bloated face, broken nose and bruises from strangulation around her throat. I remember the events surrounding the photo but it is the photo that I remember the most.' [7] Photographs become a construction of and housing place for memories. Their resonance can last long after our presence. However, the camera can and has been taken back as an act of anti-colonial force. As Gorrie implies, artists such as Hayley Millar Baker have shown us that sovereignty can be claimed and held through acts of photographic **portrait**ure. At the same time, one can also purposefully step out of the **portrait** in order to find themself and claim power. As Gorrie suggests, 'unobserved is the most honest any of us can be.' [8]

Sara Tautuku Orme has reclaimed the camera's ability to observe, turning it into an anti-colonial device, through creating works that celebrate her patrilineal heritage (Ngati Awa & Te Arawa). This action has been inspired by the way in which Orme's life has been defined by the complexities of her own self-**portrait**:

'It would be fair to say that most people, both White and Maori, who hear about my 'Maori heritage' assume that I must be just 'a bit', and that I'm probably part of the new renaissance of Waka blondes who are renewing their cultural interest. But the truth is, I'm more than a bit and I have grown up very much knowing my heritage, my whakapapa, my whanau, my marae, my turangawaewae. The hardships, the love, the boil ups, the pipi digging, the crayfish diving, the poverty, the toughness, the cultural wealth, this has always been part of my life. [...] But racism for me is about the spirit of those before me. It is not about colour or economics but the struggles, pain and wisdom of my iwi and my whanau. I am blonde, I am white, and I am considered privileged. I am all those things. But I know I also carry the struggles of my Dad, my Grandparents, my Great Grandparents, my iwi and their significant tribal losses and various historic punishments for being Maori. For them this was closely linked to their race. For me it is that spirit that has never left.'[9]

For 'The **Portrait**' Orme presents a new work – a large photograph of Darling, also known as Darz – a mother of 7, as part of her ongoing Ko Toku Awa project. The project explores 'the spiritual connection with whenua (land), tupuna (ancestors) and wairua (spirit). Ko Toku Awa draws strongly on the complexity of colonialism in Aotearoa New Zealand, The Raupatu, (land theft) consequences of dislocation and assumes norms that are referenced from history, memory, whenua (land) and moko kauae (chin tattoo representing tupuna ancestors) and whanau (family).

The awa (river) is a toanga (treasure) towards identity and is the mauri (life force). Darling embraces her own mana motuhake (self-determination) – "I submit and let my awa swallow me. Through that comes my real power. I can forget about the cancer growing inside me for this one moment ... My wiarua (spirit) is orbiting out of me as I am lost in my own journey, my vulnerability, my broken, my happy, my free, my everything, my whole tangata whenua (people of the land)."' [10] Through a shared deep understanding of and dedication to whanau (family), the photographer and the photographed have found many moments of connection. Through the undeniable strength possessed by Darling this **portrait** symbolizes the value of family, story and whakapapa (genealogy).

The **portrait** is an object of value and objects of value lead us to think of currency. Sam Lieblich's work, from his ongoing investigation of fungible tokens, focuses on the evolution of **portrait**s of sovereigns on coinage and bank notes. Lieblich's interest lies in 'the way that the sovereign, supreme amongst citizens, becomes associated with a supremely interchangeable **portrait**. That is, for a coin that bears the **portrait** of the emperor, [there is a notion that] this one is just as good as that one. The sovereign who makes an attempt to centre their own personage, ends up dissolving themselves ever more fully in the economy, and becoming co-extensive with the form of value, in the process losing their own qualities.' [11] As faces morph into one another through video, we consider how interchangeable we are. How valuable is your own **portrait**? These threads are also picked up in the essay that Timmah Ball has written for the exhibition, where she makes reference to the value and currency of the artist bio pic. When considering the value of our own image, we may consider to what degree the photographer can be considered as the author of that image. As Ariella Azoulay notes, 'a photograph is neither the product of a single person, despite the concept of "author" having been established in relation to photography, nor is it even solely a product of human hands. A photographic image, then, can at most be entrusted to someone for a certain time. It is a deposit, temporarily given over to whomever has it for safekeeping, but such persons are never its owner.' [12] As Lieblich suggests, 'I am very interested in the way that the One becomes dissoluble in the Many when it is made into a token. The token only demands to be called non-fungible precisely because the nature of the token is to be fungible.' [13] Everyone is connected and value is never fixed. As Hans Hess has pointed out:

'If we look at a coin of Hadrian or Constantine, we look at it as a work of art, a finely modelled **portrait** head, a very useful document for art historians, a thing of rarity and beauty. If we look at a 50p piece, we do not think of it as a work of art because it is currency and still functions as money, but it is as much a work of art as the coin of Hadrian which was also used as money in its own day. If, however, our coin is taken out of circulation and goes to a numismatic collection in Japan, let us say, it loses its function and becomes an objet d'art.' [14]

What is a **portrait**? By definition it is 'a painting, drawing, photograph, or engraving of a person, especially one depicting only the face or head and shoulders.' [15] Lisa Sorgini presents a **portrait** without a face in view – a child, standing with their body slightly to the side, holding an orange balloon that hides their face from view. They are standing in what appears to be a public carnival – a site synonymous with childhood joy. But the darkness of the image brings a certain level of pensiveness. The triggering orange of the balloon could either be a visual motif for possibility and light, or an ominous colour, suggesting danger. It is hard to tell and the lack of a face to connect the body with leaves one unsure. In this **portrait** Sorgini keenly observes the slipperiness that exists within all images, a quality that photographers often challenge through the notions of trace and gaze. Theories of photography examined by Azoulay take 'into account all the participants in photographic acts – camera, photographer, photographed subject, and spectator – approaching the photograph (and its meaning) as an unintentional effect of the encounter between all of these. None of these have the capacity to seal off this effect and determine its sole meaning.' [16]

Anne Moffat's triptych, 'Mum and Dad getting beamed up', presents a chance moment of family connection at the end of the long Melbourne lockdown. These images are relational objects. In the words of Arielle Azoulay they, 'bear the traces of the meeting between photographed persons and the photographer.' [17] Azoulay also considers that while 'photography may appear to be a distinctive object of the contemplative life (vita contemplative), a moment in which all movements have been eliminated, it is actually deeply embedded in the active life (viva active); it attests to action and continues to take part in it, always engaged in an ongoing present'. [18] These photographs by Moffat are active. They speak of the activity of the moment – bearing one's face to the sun as request for reprieve; and activity of the future, using the sun's physical and sensorial qualities as a wish for a future without lockdown, where families can be together without restriction. These photographs were taken when the artist could meet her family again for the first time after restrictions were eased. Moffat has created portraits towards a hopeful future.

When considering 'the portrait', one thing remains clear – it is complex, problematic, slippery and brimming with ongoing possibility.

[1] Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," in 'Thinking photography', ed. Victor Burgin (Macmillan: London, 1982), 85.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Burgin, "Looking at Photographs," in 'Thinking photography', ed. Victor Burgin (Macmillan: London, 1982), 143.
[4] Gorrie, Nayuka, 'Under observation', written text produced for 'The Portrait' at Blindside, 2022.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Palmer, Daniel, 'Photography and Collaboration : From Conceptual Art to Crowdsourcing' (Taylor & Francis Group: UK, 2017), 109.
[7] Gorrie, Nayuka, Under observation, written text produced for 'The Portrait' at Blindside, 2022.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Orme, Sara Tautuku, 'Growing up blonde and Maori', 2020, https://www.saraorme.com/post/https-www-saraorme-com-post-growing-up-blonde-and-maori.
[10] Written correspondence with the artist Sara Tautuku Orme, 2022.
[11] Written correspondence with the artist Sam Lieblich, 2022.
[12] Azoulay, Ariella, 'The Civil Contract of Photography', (Zone Books: New York, 2008), 98.
[13] Written correspondence with the artist Sam Lieblich, 2022.
[14] Tagg, John quoting Hans Hess, "The Currency of the Photographer" in 'Thinking photography', ed. Victor Burgin (Macmillan: London, 1982), 120.
[15] Definition by Oxford Languages.
[16] Azoulay, Ariella, 'The Civil Contract of Photography', (Zone Books: New York, 2008), 21.
[17] Ibid., 136.
[18] Ibid., 90.

Karl Halliday

From prehistoric cave paintings to the Archibald Prize to the selfie, **portrait**ure endures as perhaps the oldest ongoing form of image-making. The **portrait** owes much of this success to the persisting assumption that a person's character can be expressed and judged through appearance alone, as if written on the skin. Upon this basis, the instinctual logic of the **portrait** laid the groundwork for the image-saturated consumer culture of contemporary capitalism, within which we too are positioned to measure our identities through what we buy, what we wear, what we eat; to define ourselves, as Barbara Kruger so presciently put it, 'I shop therefore I am'. [1]

Set in her mother's home, Lucy Foster's 'self timer' sees the artist record herself performing a series of self-**portrait**s wearing her mother's clothes. In each scene of the video, Foster sets the self-timer function on an analogue film camera, presses the shutter and poses in anticipation of the shot before resetting the camera, documenting step by step the creation of a second set of **portrait**s that we never see. But so too, the images portray not just the artist herself, but another person we also never see, her mother, whom the artist affectionately portrays through their eccentric dress sense, through their belongings, furniture, decorations, through their home, their bedroom, their garden, through lived spaces, through the environment of their life.

Foster writes, 'The clothes I wear belonged to my late mother Judy. She died a few months before I started making this work. The scenes are captured in her home where she spent the final years, weeks and days in her body. Judy was an avid op-shopper, sewer and assembler of quirky things. She expressed herself through clothes, cooking and decorating the home; there was no particular style, trend or recipe she followed. My understanding of her expression was to be driven by emotion - a spontaneous response to the present moment.

Amidst all the things she left behind, I found a letter she had written to her Mum (my Nonna) not long after she had passed away. It read: 'Dear Mum, thought about you again today. Hope it's fun being in Heaven. I miss you and just wanted to say that since you have gone I have had terrible trouble trying to find something to wear.' [2]

In thinking about the ways the environments we occupy shape us. Arini Byng's 'Talking to the back of your head' extends the equation between site and self in a video work that looks at the language of **portrait**ure as performed through the body. Describing the work as a poem, in 'Talking to the back of your head', Byng turns away from spoken and written forms of communication in favour of dialogue expressed through the kinetic exchange of physical gestures and movements between performers. Here, the body takes on the haptic qualities of architecture as it intersects and reverberates through space in a sequence of sculptural arrangements and abstract compositions that fluidly collapse object and subject into one.

For many, photography acts as a kind of storage bank for preserving memories, making possible future opportunities to revisit a past rescued from the forever-fleeting current of time. This tension between the movement of our lives and the stillness of the image manifests in the work of Abigail Varney, but not because of any attempt to resist the tides of change through securing the past through documentation. On the contrary, Varney's **portrait** of her basketball team before they dissolved and parted ways is rendered all the more meaningful and precious by its very transience. Accompanied by a transcript of the conversation that preceded the team's final hours together, Varney's photography resigns from the need for control in a wistful but meditative acceptance of the ephemeral and unfixed passage of our lives.

In 'Irons in the Fire', Phebe Schmidt & Danny Cohen combine wit and imagination to cunningly critique the **portrait** through the lens of its corporate guise: the professional headshot. They write:

'Branding an individual requires a likable, trustworthy and authentic image especially for a business profile picture. Essentials appear to be smiling with your teeth, choosing dark-coloured suits to suggest dependable formality and presenting a persona that implies there is a connection with each and every viewer / potential punter. Without this attention to detail there is a risk of being overlooked, of impeding or growing your business. 'Irons in the Fire' explores an alternative 'reality' that disingenuously challenges the absurdity of these 'real' people creating a different version of making a good impression.' [3]

[1] Kruger, Barbara, 'Untitled (I shop therefore I am), 1987, photographic silkscreen on vinyl.
[2] Written correspondence with the artist Lucy Foster, 2022.
[3] Written correspondence with the artists Phebe Schmidt & Danny Cohen, 2022.

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