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Self Aesthetic: Towards an audience of one

Keywords: portrait, studio residency, digital media, practice-as-research, audience engagement

Identify, Identity, Identikit: Portraiture As Residency

Identify, Identity, Identikit (2012, Figure 1) was a pilot project conducted in the initial months of my PhD research. In this project, I drew the eyes, eyebrows, noses and lips of Museum visitors between 10am and 4pm every Saturday for three months. By drawing the facial features of live participants, the project had an immediate connection to the practice of portraiture while explicitly connecting the art form to notions of identification and surveillance, themes that Alan Sekula has observed are always implicit within the genre of portraiture (Sekula 1986).

150 participants donated a total of 169 facial features including 42 pairs of eyebrows, 42 eyes, 43 noses and 42 pairs of lips. From this seemingly humble number of facial features the identikit can produce a total of 3,185,784 unique faces. The environment of the sittings was casual and conversational. Out of the 150 participants 26 were under 18 years of age and about half of those were children.

Upon completion of the residency I donated an identikit (Figure 2) made up of archival prints of the drawings of facial features slotted into philatelist sleeves. There was a pair of tweezers and a CD Rom-based digital interactive identikit (Figure 3). The digital identikit included all the same drawings as the hard copy version. On the right hand side of the interface was a composite face made out of the features from the identikit. On the left hand side there were four icons reading 'eyebrows', 'eyes', 'nose' and 'lips', which, when clicked, would swap the corresponding facial feature on the face displayed to the right. The virtual identikit was a flash-based widget which could be embedded on a website or opened offline using any web browser on Mac or PC, however it was not compatible with touch-screen devices such as smart phones or tablets. Its reliance on a mouse and a browser on a computer operating system as well as its incompatibility to touch screen devices would later prove to be a challenge in neatly exhibiting the work in a clean white cube gallery space. This was resolved a

year later by turning the identikit into an apple-based iOS app for general distribution through Apple's App Store.

In critically evaluating *Identify, Identity Identikit* as a pilot project for my research, I started thinking about which ways the work was activating the audience. I identified 3 different modes of engaging or activating the audience - as co-producers, users or viewers relates to the different aspects of the identikit's development with regards to, the audiences *collaborative* role of posing for the drawings, the audiences role in *using* the identikit (virtual or material), and the audience's role in *viewing* the drawings.

To determine the success of *Identify, Identity, Identikit*, I used the notion of audience activation to measure how engaging the work was in its various modes of production and reception. In Claire Bishop's book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Bishop traces the lineage of participatory arts from the early futurist performances, which began an 'active / passive binary' where 'conventional theatre is derided as producing passivity, while futurist performance allegedly prompts a more dynamic, active spectatorship.' (Bishop 2012) Bishop uses the term participatory to encompass a variety of artforms, broadly including interactive, relational and performative art practices which all aim to provide audiences a more active role.

The Audience As Co-Producer

Portraiture theorist Cynthia Freeland has stated a true portrait must, in order to be considered a true portrait involve an active and aware sitter that poses or at least "presents a self to be conveyed in the resulting artwork" (Freeland 2010). This level of agency makes the portrait subject a participant or co-producer in the artwork. Accordingly, the participant's input in *Identify, Identity, Identikit* was so integral to the outcome that they need to be considered as co-producers in the project. The social dynamic between the artist and sitter was, in part, shaped by which facial feature was being drawn. While the initial aim of the *Identify, Identity, Identikit* was to produce drawings to collect a series of forensic specimens; the participants found the experience engaging for other, more relational, reasons. For some it seemed to be rewarding to give something or contribute, while for others it was about slowing down, to be still for a brief period. After the second week or so it was apparent that these *participants* were an *audience* and that the aesthetic reception of the work had already begun.

The perception that the audience can come to a work and complete it by their presence and their unique engagement with the work is shared by many contemporary artists today and applied throughout art institutions. For a more pragmatic or even cynical take on this phenomenon, Helen Molesworth, Curator of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston has explained the inclusion of the audience as participants or co-producers as 'an institutional concern and need for an ever-expanding audience' (Molesworth 2009), which she says often results in two forms of festivalism - biennales and project rooms.

In fact Sydney's most recent Biennale *all our relations* conjures notions of Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (Bourriaud 1995), which foregrounds the trans-individual or relational element of artistic production and reception. For Bourriaud, art is a social interstice, consisting of moments of intersubjective encounter. Artists working in this way like Sophie Calle or Rikrit Tirivanija foreground the social aspect of art's production and reception as the primary aesthetic element.

Alternatively Marina Abramovic's performance *The Artist is Present* (2010) typifies, in some ways Molesworth's second notion of the project room. In 2010 Abramovic sat in New York's Museum of Modern Art for 3 months meeting the gaze of anyone who sat opposite her. A documentary of Abramovic's project reveals the intensity felt by participants from a prolonged intersubjective encounter with the artist (Akers and Dupre 2012). Abramovic's work from 2010 is a good example of Bourriaud's interstice.

Abramovic's *The Artist is Present* was, considerably more potent than *Identify*, *Identity*, *Identikit* – partly for its aesthetic and conceptual simplicity and also for the additional social pressures on the participants – including being the centre of a mass spectacle at MOMA. Abramovic's project was all about the gaze. Two subjects met in an intimate engagement, on display for that moment. The event had a ritual potency too. Abramovic, the celebrity artist was dressed in extravagant gowns in highly potent colours – white, black and red.

The theatricality of Abramovic's work facilitated a primal and ritualistic dimension that was not developed in *Identify*, *Identity*, *Identikit*, much to the latter project's advantage. Art critic Caroline Jones has criticized the premise of Abramovic's MOMA performance stating that the presence that Abramovic claimed for the project was dissolved by the mediated nature of the participant's experience. Participants were

guided through extensive model-release forms so that their participation could be included in photo and video documentation (Jones 2010). This element of the project was paradoxically ignored in the documentation, which only highlights the tensions inherent between the experiential event and document as both being somewhat untrue.

A similar level of mediation and bureaucratization was affected *Identify*, *Identity*, *Identikit*, in comparable ways. The University's ethics committee required similar consent forms. These forms set up the tone of the relationship between artist and participant by immediately bureaucratizing the participant's involvement, bringing their attention to legal issues such as copyright and discussions around potential discomforts of the research, which, however necessary for ethical reasons set a mood where participants were being asked to sign away their rights to the project. While Abramovic's sittings were more prolonged than the *Identikit*'s 7-minute sittings, it reveals how potent eye contact and the gaze can be. The sittings when I was drawing participants' eyes were usually intense because of the sustained eye contact required. Despite participants' initial eagerness to donate their eyes, very quickly participants remarked that they had not anticipated that level of intensity. Conversely, the relational side of the sitting ultimately affected the resulting drawing. Figure 5 shows a drawing of asymmetrical eyes. Over the time of this sitting, the participant's facial expressions changed as we weaved through conversation between the time it took to draw the left eye and then the right - from a state of relaxation to a state of excitement. I can recall the way the conversation unfolded from the beginning as we began to relax into the situation and find mutually enjoyable and perhaps exciting things to talk about. The time taken and the relationship built shaped what that person expressed, which in turn shaped the drawing.

Drawing lips meant that conversation needed to be reduced to a minimum so that the lips were still enough to draw. Figure 6 shows a drawing of lips where despite my efforts to let the conversation dissolve, the participant continued to talk to me so the resulting drawing was of the participant's moving, open mouth. People were most reluctant to donate their nose, and some participants were reluctant to donate their eyebrows if they hadn't recently been shaped.

Martin Gayford's book, *Man with a Blue Scarf* is a perfect example of how the portrait involves the subject as a co-producer. It is a diaristic account of the relationship that develops between Gayford and Lucian Freud while Gayford sits for a Freud portrait.

Gayford discusses not just how Freud handles the paint or how he sets up the model, but how Freud handles the social relationship between himself and his model. Gayford explains that it is through interaction with the sitter that the portraitist learns about his model, how his facial muscles work and how they respond in conversation (Gayford 2010). The situation of the portrait sets up an aesthetic and social experience for the participant, and is a mere by-product of the portrait sitting.

The Audience As User

Not only is the audience activated by the project as a co-producer, the project, and more specifically, the resulting identikit needs a *user*. This is the object is not an object to be displayed, but needs someone to activate it from an archive into a series of composite faces. In this sense the work is interactive (Rush 2005).

Interactive art, according to Christine Paul, refers to art that “allows different forms of navigating, assembling, or contributing to an artwork” than the purely mental event of traditional painting or sculpture (Paul 2008). While Bishop describes interactive art as “opposed” to participatory art due to its “one-to-one” relationship between artwork and viewer (Bishop 2012), Bishop’s “alleged” activation of the spectator is crucial to the context of interactive art.

When considering the audience of the identikit as a *user*, the work must then be judged on how *usable* it is. While it is successful as a museum artifact, being handled in the careful manner characteristic of museum staff, it doesn’t easily suit public handling at an art gallery. It requires the user to wear cotton gloves or else damage the prints of the facial features. This air of preservation and caution implicit in this process makes the object something that people will be reluctant to touch. There is every possibility that users don’t handle the work with enough care and then after a few showings it starts to fall apart. On the other hand, the digital identikit faces other aesthetic issues for art gallery exhibitions because of its reliance on a computer monitor, cursor, and operating system interface.

Hence the identikit was turned into an iOS touch-screen application titled [*Identikit*](#) (Figure 8) released through Apple’s App Store. This mode of distribution allows the work to be installed on a touch screen display on a wall, but more importantly can be downloaded onto the touch screens that people keep on their self every day.

The app *Identikit* is simple in its design. Its initial view screen is a white blank screen with hidden buttons in the alignment of a composite face. When these buttons are touched a facial feature appears and when touched again the feature is swapped

randomly for another feature of the same type. There is a subtle light grey lower case 'i' at the bottom of the screen which when pressed loads an information screen outlining what the project is and instructions for how the user can *use* it.

The Return Of The Viewer

This app is limited in its usability. The only thing users can do with it is change facial features, and therefore makes different faces. Although earlier beta versions of the application allowed the user to change the scale, position and orientation of each feature, the reduction of interactive options ensures that the facial features are received first and foremost as drawings. The white background echo's the blank page and each feature is seen in its relative size to the other features. The app is therefore ultimately a publication of drawings, which rather than viewed in isolation can be *viewed* in the context of an identikit.

In the early stages of the project, the identikit was to be the artwork, and the residency was a way to access diverse people from the region in the safe and accessible public space to invite them to participate. While the artwork is in fact the later incarnation of the app and the residency and the various beta stages as part of a studio process conducted in public. But as I've shown in discussing this residency, the public process needs to be considered aesthetically.

I'd like to call this a discussion about an artwork but in fact I consider it more an experiment that's informed a public open studio process / residency style practice of making portraits, which I'm now considering along the lines of an intimately scaled relational art form. This experimental nature of the project typifies the experimental nature of the studio, while affording institutions a public program to feed their insatiable appetite for greater audiences.

In one week from the time of writing I'll commence a new project titled *As Long As You're Here* that is informed by the experience of *Identify, Identity, Identikit*. For four weeks I'll be sitting in the Gordon Darling Hall, the main Atrium at the National Portrait Gallery to draw anyone who sits opposite me. Using a tablet device I'll be constantly drawing the chair opposite me - consequently drawing whomever sits down on it until they leave. Participants will be able to request to have their image emailed to them when they finish their sitting and they will have the liberty to disseminate that image however they choose.

The paperwork is almost non-existent for this project, as participants are not required to sign a consent form. The way that the work has been designed is that there is extensive signage and promotion of the project such that the University ethics have granted that if participants sit in the designated chair to be drawn it will be taken that they consent to the terms of participation, which include being drawn for as long as they're there.

As Long As You're Here is conceptually and aesthetically simpler than *Identify*, *Identity*, *Identikit*. In advance I'm well aware of the kinds of audience I'm hoping to engage. I've let go of the user because users demand a different form of engagement than is central to portraiture, which always must involve co-producers and viewers.

As Long As You're Here will explore how willing and for how long audiences are to sit for a portrait, and might indicate how interested they are both in participating in the process as well as engaging with the resulting image.

Figures



Figure 1 Identify, Identity, Identikit (room view), 2012
Historic Council Chambers, Museum of the Riverina, Wagga Wagga NSW



Figure 2 Identify, Identity, Identikit, 2012
Hexachrome archival prints in bound philatelist sleeves, CD ROM, cotton gloves, tweezers
Museum of the Riverina collection

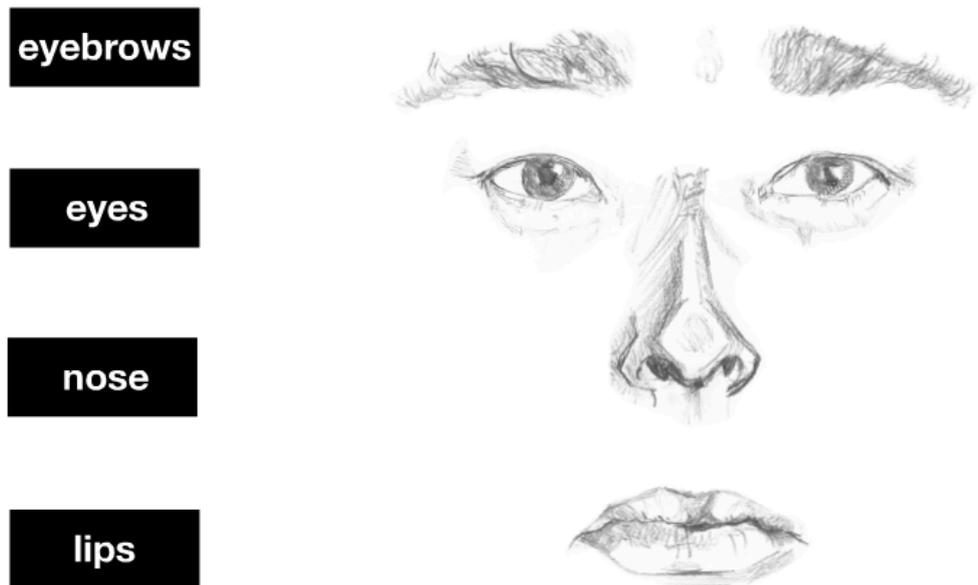


Figure 3 Identify, identity, Identikit (digital copy), 2012
<http://www.tonycurran.net/identify-identity-identikit-2012.html>

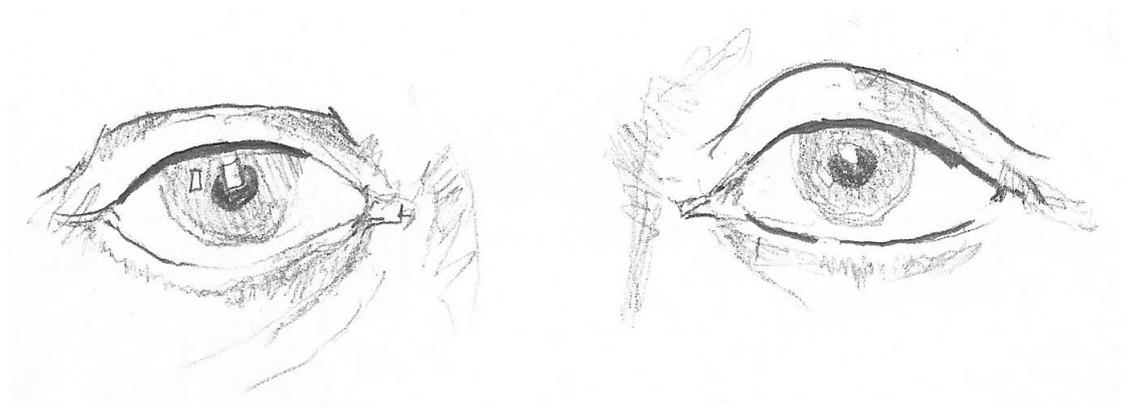


Figure 4 Eyes specimen from Identify, Identity, Identikit, 2012
Graphite on paper approximately 15 x 4cm

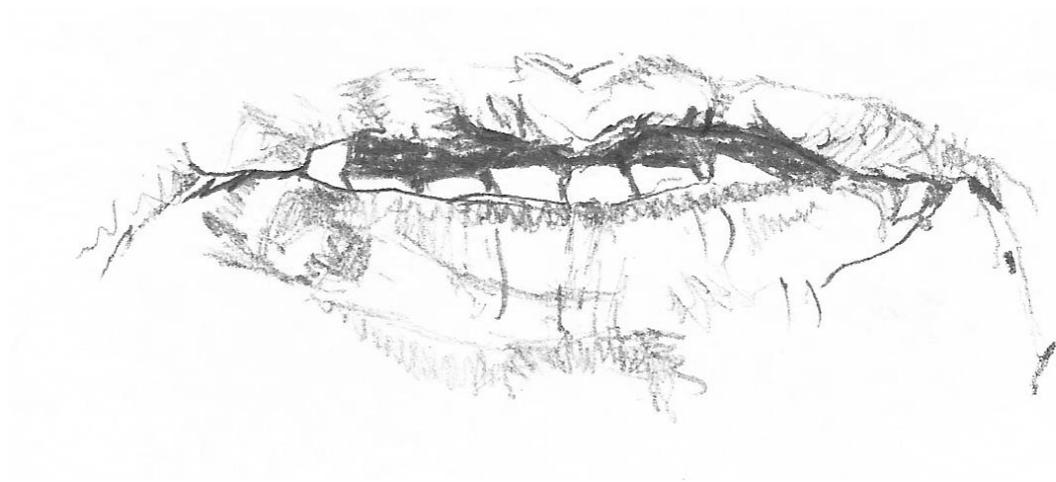


Figure 5 Lips specimen from *Identify, Identity, Identikit*, 2012
Graphite on paper approximately 6 x 4cm

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