

Tony Curran
Charles Sturt University

How can Portraiture elicit Participation?

Keywords: Portraiture, participation, performance, contemporary art, drawing

In recent years, artists such as Lucian Freud and David Hockney have shown that drawing offers a temporal pictorial realism for portraiture, by layering time within the pictorial composition. As a result, these artists have challenged the representational power of the photograph and have shown that a greater duration of subject participation results in a heightened but differing form of realism compared to that of photographic realism. Three series of artworks by the author, *Identify, Identity, Identikit* (2012), *Parts of you are dying* (2013) and *As Long as you're here* (2013) test the importance of 'layered time' and subject participation in shaping the representational structures of portraiture. An analysis of these works demonstrates strategies for contemporary portraiture to enhance subject participation.

Overcoming Photography

When reviewing the 2014 Archibald Prize, critic John McDonald remarked how dependent on photography the finalists had been compared to the finalists in previous years. He began his review:

Imagine if the Archibald Prize banned all portraits that relied on photographs. The number of entries would drop from 884 to something fewer than 100, while the exhibition would be dominated by amateurs and unknown artists. Even the subjects would be strangers to most viewers, because it's unlikely that anyone mildly famous could spare the time for the repeated sittings. (McDonald, 2014, p16)

McDonald continued to discuss the important historical legacy of artists getting to know their subject. He cited post-war masters and explained that 'Any portrait by Giacometti, Balthus or Lucian Freud required numerous sittings.' (McDonald, 2014). Not because these artists were necessarily slow to adopt new technology but because as McDonald goes on to quote Giacometti, 'posing is an active participation in the work.' (Giacometti cited in McDonald, 2014).

Lucian Freud learned the importance of active participation through the pose from Alberto Giacometti on a studio visit in Paris after the Second World War. In a posthumous documentary on the artist's life, narrator Rufus Sewell explains, 'Lucian was captivated by the cluttered studio and Alberto's procedure; the constant scrutiny'. (Wright, 2012) As a result of Giacometti's influence, Freud's sittings with his

subjects were numerous and long. Sitters of his have commented on how serious a commitment it was, involving many hours a week for months on end with no indication of when their involvement would conclude.

Due to the disciplined working with his subjects, Freud's paintings are best interpreted not as documents of individual moments but as hundreds of hours of momentary observations stitched together in paint. Fellow artist David Hockney has interpreted Freud's work in precisely this way after having sat for and seen Freud at work. In an interview Hockney described the benefits of Freud's working method:

His method of painting is very good because being slow means you can talk. If you're going to draw someone for one hour, you can't really chat to them because you haven't got that long and you want to watch the face but if you have longer and if you talk, you of course get to know and watch the face do a lot of things and obviously that's part of his method, isn't it?... What he's doing, I mean it's so layered. Photographs can't get near it. They thought the photograph would do and it won't, really. (Auerbach and Feaver, 2012)

Hockney's response to Freud's work comes out of his art historical and studio research investigations into the relationship of photography to painting. In the 1980s David Hockney produced a series of joiner photographs for exhibition and among these were several portraits. In *Crossword* (1983) (Figure 2), multiple close-up snapshots comprise a time-based and complex pictorial narrative of several moments stitched together, of a couple working to complete a crossword. The result is a dynamic portrayal of these two individuals absorbed in the process of thinking about the crossword clue, discussing the clue and also writing down the answer. This narrative is not depicted in a frozen moment or a sequential series of frozen moments, as in the language of cinema or the comic book, but through multiple moments presented in a temporally non-hierarchical field, in other words, presented simultaneously to the viewer. Hockney refers to this process as a form of drawing (Featherstone, 1983).

Hockney's reading of the works of Lucian Freud is supported by the account of Martin Gayford who wrote of the process of sitting for the late painter. He explains:

The portrait, when I look at it during a break, seems to have a twin expression. There is a half smile, but also a slightly anxious feeling that seems to coexist with the smile. (Gayford, 2010, p152)

Here Freud has pieced together different moments and instances observed from life, elicited with the participation of his sitter. The result is an emotionally rich image in

that as the viewer fixates on different parts of the picture, the figure in the image displays different and increasingly complicated emotional states.



Figure 2, David Hockney, *Crossword*, 1983, Edition: 10, 33 x 46 in. © David Hockney, Private Collection

Participatory Portraiture: A pilot strategy

I observed the effects of ‘layered time’ in life drawing sittings for my PhD research in 2012. I was artist-in-residence at the Museum of the Riverina, a natural history museum in regional New South Wales, for a project titled *Identify, Identity, Identikit*. Every Saturday for three months from March until June I drew Museum visitors’ eyebrows, eyes, noses and lips in an attempt to produce an identikit as a collective portrait of the region. Participants were asked to donate 7 minutes of their time, and in return, the identikit would be produced and donated back to the public and held in the local community museum.

Figure 3 shows the effect of layered time in *Identify, Identity, Identikit*. During the seven minutes of drawing a subject’s eyes, the sitting the subject became more conversational, which in turn changed the subject’s facial expression. In this particular drawing I started with the participant’s right eye, shown on the left of the drawing, at which point conversation was minimal. By the time I made it over to the right eye the conversation had moved to a topic of particular interest to the subject causing his eyes to widen for the rest of the sitting. This anecdote explains the asymmetry of the eye as based on Freud’s ‘layering of time’ as Hockney refers to it.

Judged on the grounds of photographic realism this asymmetry might seem clumsy. However, when viewed in terms of 'layered time' the drawing can be seen to represent the subject with an enhanced temporal sensitivity.

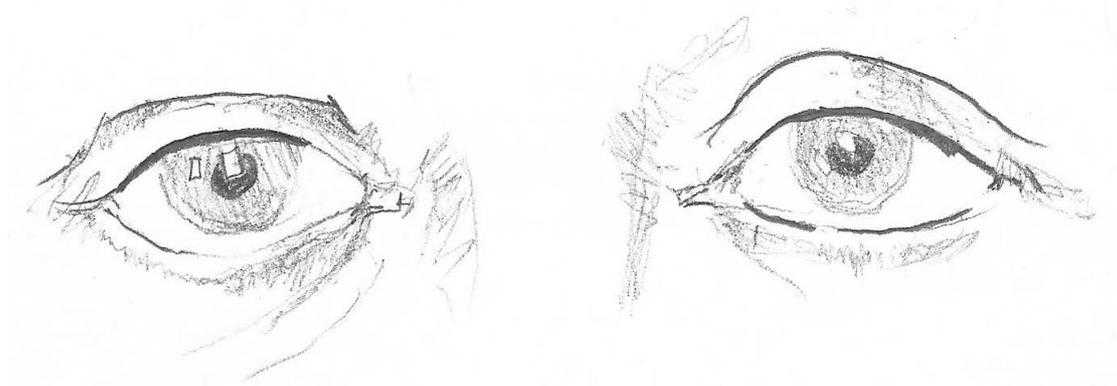


Figure 2. *Identify, Identity, Identikit eyes specimen*, 2012, Graphite on paper. Approximately 15 x 10cm

Freeing the Subject

Subject participation was explored further in 2013 in a series of paintings for an exhibition titled *Parts of You Are Dying*. The work came out of a strategy to elicit participation from subjects and was possible only with relatively new technology – the iPad. While selecting portrait subjects to paint for the exhibition in Sydney, I needed a way to ensure that whomever I chose as a portrait subject could be relied upon to participate for multiple sittings. One of the common factors among available participants was that they all had competing commitments that involved a combination of work, family or study and meant that they found it difficult to spend hours at a time 'posing'.

In order to make participation more appealing to potential subjects, I used portable digital media tools in a way that allowed subjects to move freely rather than pose in a fixed position. The drawings were produced on a touch-screen tablet using an app named *Brushes*, which recorded every mark made and played back the drawing process as a video. The time-based drawing form allowed me to be a 'fly on the wall' while they worked, studied or attended to other commitments. This process shifted the focus of representation from displaying individuals as fixed identities to representing individuals as moving targets, connoting and denoting a constant state of change and flux.

A series of paintings were then produced using the videos as reference material. By scrolling through the videos I selected marks to be painted onto the canvas, one after the other until an abstract composition emerged with a 'finished' visual design from marks made in the observational life drawing sitting. Banou (2013) (Figure 4) is one example of the oil paintings produced in this series. In the top left of the painting, a

grey tone suggests the shape of the figure's hair near a yellow adjacent to a blue shape, which together reference a pillow that the figure was resting on during the sitting. The straight red marks that fall down the picture were drawn after a book the subject was reading. The book was a deep red colour but when light fell in certain ways the book appeared as the lighter red line also visible. The lines shift orientations because the book did. Other straight lines reference the participant's crutches and towards the bottom of the picture is a somewhat fuller depiction, in grey, of a water glass resting on a wooden tabletop.



Figure 4. *Banou*, 2013, Oil on linen. 30 x 40 cm, Image courtesy the artist

Seven of these works were exhibited at Art Atrium gallery in Sydney and comprised the solo exhibition *Parts of You Are Dying* - a truism that reflected the constantly evolving nature of self as both a process of decay and growth - a metaphor present in the process of making the works and in their reception.



Figure 5. *Banou*, 2013, Hexachrome archival digital print. 28 x 33cm with frame, Image courtesy the artist

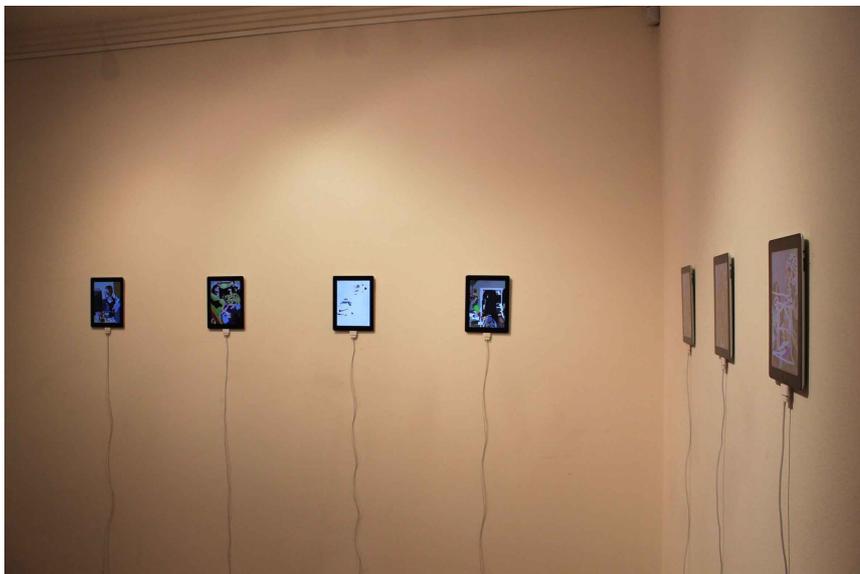


Figure 6. *Parts of You Are Dying* (exhibition installation detail), 2013, Image courtesy the artist

Although the level of participation was incomparable to that of the models of Giacometti, Balthus or Freud, the subjects' freedom to move strongly affected the

resulting portraits and produced works that were interpreted by art critic Andrew Frost as:

[floating] between figuration and abstraction in a manner that seems immediately modern and colourful with a strong flavour of British painting of the 1980s informing the work. (Frost, July 19, 2013)

The Subject on Exhibition

Focusing on the term 'participation' creates a nexus between the antiquated notion of the painted portrait, and the increasingly fashionable notion of participation in contemporary art (Bishop, 2012). American Curator Helen Molesworth has referred to the adoption of participatory art by contemporary art museums and galleries as 'an institutional concern and need for an ever expanding audience.' Molesworth stated in 2009 that 'Much contemporary art has forsaken the object for the audience; hence contemporary art's demand for participation.' (Molesworth, 2009). This was made possible with the rise of conceptual art, but here Molesworth's comments illustrate a bureaucratic pragmatism geared at the survival of art institutions.

Building on both the medium of digital touch-screen painting and working with participants in an open process (ie. Allowing them to behave and move freely) a subsequent work titled *As Long As You're Here* was produced to test the relationship between the life-painted sitting and recent trends in participatory gallery programming. Located in the National Portrait Gallery's (NPG) main atrium, Gordon Darling Hall, I sat tooled with an iPad in one of two facing chairs and drew anyone who sat in the chair opposite me for as long as they remained in that chair.

As Long As You're Here was a set up that was not dissimilar in structure to that of Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present* (2010), a blockbuster work of participatory art. *The Artist is Present* consisted of Yugoslavian born, New York-based performance artist Marina Abramović sitting with and meeting the gaze of individual participants, during normal gallery operating hours, for a period of three-months at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

For 33 consecutive days I drew people during gallery hours at the NPG amassing a collection of 194 portraits. Having used the same drawing application as in *Parts of You Are Dying* mentioned earlier, the drawing process saved and was exported as a video file running for four hours and eleven minutes. What unified each of the participants was that by being situated in the NPG, most if not all, participants were primed to the context of portraiture and were already participants in the reception of portrait images.

The resemblance between *As Long as You're Here* and *The Artist is Present* was not accidental. My intention was to build upon Abramović's work by responding to criticisms aimed at the photographic surveillance and control over participants in *The Artist is Present*. In an issue of *Artforum* in 2010, critic Caroline Jones argued:

The Artist is Present has only a fractional relation to the fetish of presence. The experience of the intersubjective gaze, admittedly compelling, is consistently bracketed through photo releases you must sign, through three "live" webcams, through the Italian photographer making a book of the piece, and not least from the picture-snapping visitors surrounding the spotlighted atrium ... *The Artist is Present* inserts the visitor into an intensely mediated and surveilled art activity; one's production of performatives is compromised, to say the least. (Jones, 2010, p218)

Informed by Abramović's participatory structure and Jones's criticism of *The Artist Is Present*, *As Long As You're Here* used the slower process of drawing, rather than photography, as a means of documenting the performative and transient encounter between artist and subject. The time required of drawing the figure meant that the subject could sabotage attempts to be documented by ending their participation or moving in their seat. As a means of increasing the subject's participation even further, there was also only one rule that participants were urged to follow, compared to the multiple rules required of participants in Abramović's work - if the chair was empty, anyone could sit down in it for "as long as" they liked and I would continue to draw – no matter what they did. In this sense participants were in control of the portrait process, themselves dictating the length of their sitting, their pose and, by staying still or by moving, participants directly influenced the degree of verisimilitude and abstraction in the resulting portrait. Each participant was emailed the image after it was completed and were granted license to use their image in whatever way they chose.

The documentation of *As Long As You're Here* is thus to be found in the portraits themselves. Rather than the obligatory installation shot that characterizes much of modern and contemporary art, *As Long As You're Here* produced its own documentation in the form of digital drawings as still images and in video. The documentation was thus embedded into the central activity of the work - drawing the subject. The sped-up video play-back of the previous days equated to approximately one-and-a-half minutes of video for every one hour's worth of drawing. This meant that the actual artwork can be used as a recording measure not just of the numbers of participants but of how long they participated, how much they moved and how many times they participated. Subjects who sat for a long time had fuller more developed portraits than those that sat for less time. #18 (Figure 7) from the series

shows the results of a relatively short sitting, whereas #144 (Figure 8) shows a more developed result from about a two-hour sitting. In addition #44 (Figure 9) and #10 (Figure 10) show the difference between subjects making themselves visible, as in #10, versus being represented as moving targets in #44. The abstracted elements in #44 are a result of the layered time in the sitting through the shifting positions of the child laid over the mother's lap, having sat on the mother's lap and having placed her white soft toy lamb in different spots throughout the sitting.



Figure 7. *As Long As You're Here #18*, 2013, Digital image. 2048 x 1536px, Image courtesy the artist



Figure 8. *As Long As You're Here #44*, 2013, Digital image. 2048 x 1536px, Image courtesy the artist

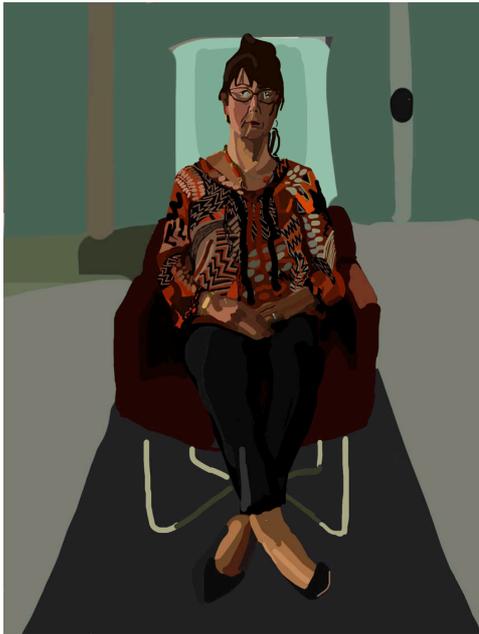


Figure 9. *As Long As You're Here #144*, 2013, Digital image. 2048 x 1536px, Image courtesy the artist



Figure 10, *As Long As You're Here #10*, 2013, Digital image. 2048 x 1536px, Image courtesy the artist.

The rate of participation in *As Long As You're Here* confirmed that there were individuals willing to spend hours at a time to sit for a portrait. The series shows several images of individuals who chose to sit several times for various reasons including returning for a portrait when they had more available time, trying for a 'better' portrait or returning the next morning to finish a portrait they didn't get to 'complete' on the previous day because the gallery had closed. Figures 11 through 13 show one subject depicted on three different occasions.

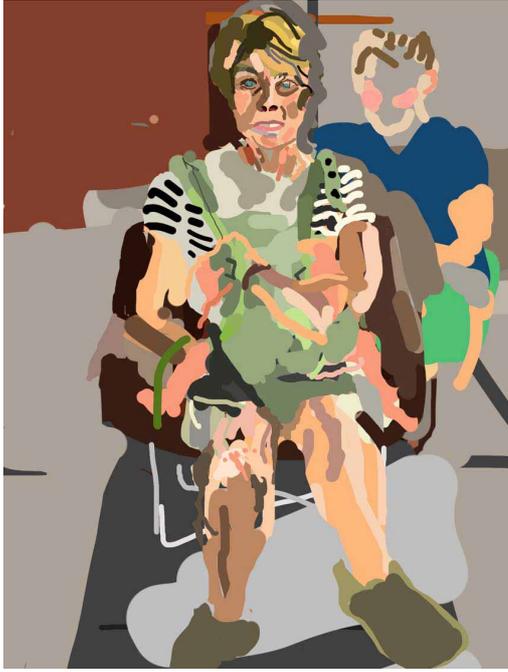


Figure 11. *As Long As You're Here #4*, 2013, Digital image. 2048 x 1536px, Image courtesy the artist



Figure 12, *As Long As You're Here #118*, 2013, Digital image. 2048 x 1536px, Image courtesy the artist.



Figure 13, *As Long As You're Here #163*, 2013, Digital image. 2048 x 1536px, Image courtesy the artist

How can portraiture elicit participation?

John McDonald's article on the 2014 Archibald Prize warns about portraiture's dependence on photography claiming that:

Today we have less time for everything, and this fits in neatly with the inexorable rise of photography. Why bother drawing when you can pull out a smartphone and go "click"? Regardless of their own inclinations few artists feel that they can ask a subject to sit for days until a portrait is finished. (McDonald, 2014, p16)

Parts of You Are Dying confirms McDonald's suspicion – that some artists do not 'feel like that they can ask subjects to sit for days until a portrait was finished.' In *As Long As You're Here* I didn't have to ask subjects to sit for days, because they elected to. With participation as a primary concern for both bodies of work, their success can rightly be attributed to developing strategies to emphasize participation in portrait practice. Now with the advances in touchscreen computing, drawing can be portable and the process saved as moving images, undermining the need for a painted or drawn portrait to be a fixed and final image and allowing for abstract compositions to take on representational potentials. In order to explore new ways that drawing can advance practices of portraiture, it is necessary to ask the question, 'how can portraiture elicit participation?'

REFERENCES

- Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present, 2012. Directed by AKERS, M. & DUPRE, J. USA: HBO Documentaries.
- Lucian Freud - Portraits, 2012. Directed by AUERBACH, J. & FEATHER, W. 2013. As Long As You Are Here [Online]. Canberra: National Portrait Gallery. Available: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/nationalportraitgallery/sets/72157636640046004/> [Accessed 4 August 2014 2014].
- David Hockney: Joiner Photographs, 1983. Film. Directed by FEATHERSTONE, D. London: Arthaus Musik.
- Lucian Freud: Painted Life, 2012. Directed by WRIGHT, R. London: BBC.
- BISHOP, C. 2012. Artificial Hells: Participation and the Politics of Spectatorship, New York, Verso.
- FREUD, L. 2012. Some Thoughts on Painting (1954). In: STILES, K. & SELZ, P. (eds.) Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A sourcebook on artists' writings. Second Edition ed. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.
- FROST, A. July 19, 2013. Parts of You Are Dying. The Art Life [Online]. 2014].
- GAYFORD, M. 2010. Man With A Blue Scarf: On Sitting for a Portrait by Lucian Freud, London, Thames & Hudson.
- JONES, C. A. 2010. Staged Presence (vol 48, pg 214, 2009). Artforum International, 48, 375-375.
- MCDONALD, J. 2014. Small Wonders: A selection of petite, unpretentious portraits bolster the quality of this year's Archibald Prize. Sydney Morning Herald.
- MOLESWORTH, H. 2009. A Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary': 32 Responses. October, 130, 111-6.