Introduction: The time of the portrait is now

Melinda Hinkson

In December 2008, Australia celebrated the opening of a new national cultural institution. A striking new building in Canberra's parliamentary triangle declared portraiture to have achieved a rare political outcome: a $76 million building cemented the genre's status in our national consciousness. The process leading to the opening of this building had commenced a decade and a half earlier with the advocacy of arts philanthropists Gordon and Marilyn Darling and the mounting of a travelling exhibition, *Uncommon Australians: Towards an Australian national portrait gallery*, which opened at the National Gallery of Victoria and then toured to Canberra, Brisbane, Sydney and Adelaide. Funding was subsequently allocated to enable the establishment of a fledgling national portrait gallery in three rooms of Old Parliament House. In 1997, then Prime Minister John Howard declared his enthusiasm for a freestanding institution dedicated to portraiture and allocated the funds required to plan and erect the new building.[1] Portraiture was the art form that seemed to speak most compellingly to the cultural moment; in terms of the public politics fostered by Howard, the actions and achievements of individual 'great Australians', whether past prime ministers, cricket players, entrepreneurs or neighbourhood heroes, were to be lauded over 'lofty ideas' or 'culture'. In this context it was observed that the new institution enjoyed a dream run of political support and public acclaim.[2]

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1   See 'Gallery history', National Portrait Gallery, www.portrait.gov.au/content/gallery-history/, nd, accessed 1 November 2015.
2   John Thompson, 'At the national portrait gallery: Art or history?', *Recollections*, vol. 5 no. 1, 2010, recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol_5_no_1/notes_and_comments/at_the_national_portrait_gallery_art_or_history, accessed 1 November 2015.

The government's backing of the gallery turned out to be an inspired move. People came in large numbers—300,000 passed through the doors in the first three months—and they have continued to come in good numbers since. Yet the reason for the gallery's success as a new place of the people may well rest on a more complex conjunction of factors than its champions had in mind.

Following the opening of the gallery, I wrote an essay in which I posed the question, 'What is this new institution?'

> Part of its interest and potential surely lies in its very ambiguity: this is not simply another fine art gallery, nor a museum in the conventional sense of the term ... the very idea of a portrait gallery built around the recognition of 'notable' individuals and their contribution to nation making has been scorned by some as an exercise in barren elitism, and the gallery's ambiguous status accused of giving rise to nothing more than a mix of 'bad history and inadequate psychology with inferior art'.[3] Yet such criticism seems to miss a fundamental point: this is a gallery born in an era of accelerated technological mediation. Part of the aim of the Gallery requires it to eschew the values of high art in favour of forms of image-making drawn from a wider public domain. In a society that measures social achievement in large part through a person's attainment of status *as* image, most often attended to in the form of the face, a portrait gallery is likely to have a particular appeal, especially for its direct engagement with the cult of celebrity, with forms of image culture that are embraced in the world beyond art galleries.[4]

In an age of digital mediation the portraiture recognised by and displayed within the art museum cannot but collide with and be shaped by a swirl of images and image-based practices that circulate beyond its doors. Faces of advertising and consumer culture, the reconfiguration of public/private spheres found in the new self-fashioning and presentation techniques of social networking,

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3   Humphrey McQueen, 'In for "'higher art' I'd go" at the National Portrait Gallery', *Australian Book Review*, May 2009, pp. 41–3.
4   Melinda Hinkson, 'Seeing more than black and white: Picturing Aboriginality at Australia's National Portrait Gallery', *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 49, 2010, pp. 5–28.

a burgeoning industry in cosmetic surgery, the increase in surveillance technologies dealing in facial recognition all indicate a collective heightened attention to faces.[5]

From a diverse range of perspectives, the essays in this book consider why it is that portraits—pictures of faces—continue to have such galvanising appeal and perform such fundamental work across myriad social settings. In doing so, they look beyond conventional ideas of the portrait as a medium for celebrating individual and national achievement to the wider cultural contexts, governmental practices and intimate experiences that shape relationships between persons and pictures.

These essays have their origins in an international symposium held at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra over three days in July 2010. Strongly interdisciplinary in its focus, that event brought together anthropologists, artists, art historians, literary and media scholars, and curators to explore a conjunction of interests and paradoxes at work in contemporary image-making practices and visual experience. While preserving the diversity of perspective and concerns of the 2010 symposium, the essays collected here also traverse considerable shared ground. They are written by artists, anthropologists, art historians and media scholars. At the heart of their collective concern is a commitment to understanding interactions between persons and images as an elemental component of what it is to be human, and to grapple with what is distinctive in such interactions in the present, a time when digital forms of imaging and interaction have become ubiquitous, contradictory, constitutive elements of everyday life.

Attending to the many ways in which identity is 'imaged' in the present, contributors find various degrees of analytical traction in the concept of portraiture. Portraiture has been crucial to the formation and articulation of modern individualism;[6] it might be seen as a primary genre through which the culture of western modernity has

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5   Martyn Jolly, 'The face in digital space', in Anne Marsh, Melissa Miles and Daniel Palmer (eds), *The Culture of Photography in Public Space*, Bristol, Intellect, 2014, pp. 144–57; Justin Clemens and Adam Nash, 'Take a good hard look at yourself: Autoscopia and the networked image', in *New imaging: Transdisciplinary strategies for art beyond the new media*, Sydney, Australian Network for Art and Technology, 2011, pp. 40–51.
6   Joanna Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the subject*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997.

been animated and reinforced. As a genre of European art, portraiture is a well-travelled field.[7] Yet as Ernst van Alphen observes, artists have continued to push the boundaries of the medium as they have grappled with a changing world of human experience, and especially with the dislocation and diasporic experience that is a cornerstone of modernity. Just as what it is to be human has continued to be reshaped by technological intervention and other transformations in our world, artists have grappled with such change by re-imagining and reformulating the medium of portraiture. In the words of van Alphen, 'the project of "portraying somebody in her/his individuality or quality or essence" is no longer the sanctifying function of portraiture'. But this is not to say that portraiture is an exhausted medium; a genre can be liberated from its history.[8]

> The portrait returns but with a difference, now in order to expose the bourgeious self, historically anchored and naturalized, instead of its authority; to show a loss of self instead of its consolidation; to shape the subject as simulacrum instead of as origin.[9]

While not all contributors would agree with van Alphen's interpretation of the nature of contemporary subjectivity, they do agree that portraiture as a genre is necessarily remade to capture new kinds of persons and new perspectives on human experience in new times and places. In the essays that follow, this work occurs along four analytic fronts. Firstly, there is a decentring of focus from the object of portrayal (the authority of the sitter) to the effects of the picture, or in the words of philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, its 'increase of being'.[10] Secondly, there is an exploration of the medium from the inside: for practising artists, portraiture becomes an activity in autobiographical sense-making. Thirdly, portraiture and images of the face are taken up as a medium for exploring larger social relations; for example, the practices of governmentality and biopolitics that are

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7   Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture: Essays in art and culture*, London, Reaktion Books, 1991; Woodall; Tony Halliday, *Facing the public: Portraiture in the aftermath of the French Revolution*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999; Shearer West, *Portraiture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004; Stephen Perkinson, *The likeness of the King: A prehistory of portraiture in late medieval France*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2009; Cynthia Freeland, *Portraits and persons*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010.
8   Ernst van Alphen, 'The portrait's dispersal', *Art in mind: How contemporary images shape thought*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2005, p. 47.
9   van Alphen, 2005, p. 25.
10   Cited in van Alphen, 2005, pp. 23–4.

seen to characterise our times.[11] And finally, anthropologists explore the elasticity of portraiture as a medium, testing the genre's capacity to convey ontologically different modes of personhood and relationships between human and other beings and the environments they inhabit.

While working from diverse disciplinary bases and with different materials and influences, all the contributors to this book are firmly focused upon the *intersubjective* space of the portrait image. In each of the essays, people are considered to enter into highly intimate and potentially transformative relations through images. In declaring 'the time of the portrait is now', Didier Maleuvre foregrounds the 'now of encounter', the moment of embodied meeting between person and picture. For artists/authors John Conomos and Gali Weiss, portraiture is approached as a practice through which shape and meaning might be given to elusive diasporic life trajectories. Jennifer Deger is more circumspect about the capacity of portraiture to capture the dense intergenerational and intercultural relations between persons, spirits and environment in eastern Arnhem Land, but the multi-mediated 'BarkTV' she produced with her Yolngu collaborators presents a compelling instantiation through which to contemplate such a constellation of relations. She alerts us to the difficulty of grappling with cross-cultural portraits, reminding us via Jean-Luc Nancy that while portraits are places of encounter between self and other, they 'await viewers already imprinted with the echo of encounter'. In other words, crucially, we have already learned how to look at pictures, and *what to look for* in them, before we come to gaze upon any particular portrait.

One avenue of consideration opened up somewhat differently in essays by Didier Maleuvre and Melinda Hinkson is the importance of distinguishing the material presence and 'still' pictures of painting from photographs and the 'fleeting' images we commonly confront in digital format on the screens of computers and mobile phones. Paintings 'allow us to reflect from a distance and visually grasp the whole',[12] whereas digital images travel before our eyes at speeds at which we can only grasp them partially, fleetingly. The distinction

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11   Pasi Väliaho, *Biopolitical screens: Image, power and the neoliberal brain*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2014.

12   Väliaho, 2014, p. 12; Siri Hudsvedt, *Mysteries of the rectangle*, New York, Princeton Architectural, 2005.

between these two differently structured visual experiences marks a crucial element of portraiture's crisis, and simultaneously its renewed interest for the contributors to this volume.

Didier Maleuvre responds provocatively to our concern with the specificity of the digital. The time of the portrait is now, he declares, but the portrait he champions is not the transforming and fleeting digital image but rather the classical, painted portraiture of Rembrandt. He finds the special potency of Rembrandt's portraits in the nature of encounter they call out between viewer and painting, as well as the fragility they convey. Drawing our attention to the cultural context in which Rembrandt's commissions were produced, Maleuvre observes the 'pained need for confirmation' in these 'faces of people who lived by the esteem of others'. Rembrandt's portraiture distils a significant moment of social transformation when an emergent merchant class looked to secure public recognition. Thus, Maleuvre suggests, Rembrandt's picture-making marks the emergence of acknowledgement-based identity in the Netherlands—the coming into being of the social gaze that lies at the heart of modern European subjectivity. Rembrandt's portraits do not *observe* but rather *recommend* a face for our attention. Rembrandt's method turns upon 'a labour of becoming acquainted' involving months of grappling in paint with a sitter's face. For Maleuvre, Rembrandt's paintings call out mutuality.

Didier Maleuvre juxtaposes this dense painterly activity with the practice of photography, which lacks duration. Photography's incapacity to 'wait on the face' cannot produce portraits. Here Maleuvre articulates the ultimate moral argument for distinguishing technological modes of mediation: while the practice of painting provides a vehicle for the sustained care of the other, photography is distracted, fleeting, superficial; it turns away, calling on technical skills, not human engagement. The portrait, Maleuvre concludes, 'is a modality of human solidarity' and thus the term must be reserved for the medium of paint and activity required of it.

For artists/writers, such distinctions between media are not necessarily so straightforward. Moving between and across the methods of drawing, painting, photography and video, artists often adopt a variety of practices and processes as a means to work through problems. Such practices of sense-making are highly intimate and

evolve organically, but are also rigorously tested against a wider field of ideas and scholarship. Melinda Hinkson's essay explores these processes at work in the practice of three Canberra-based artists, all of whom identify first and foremost as painters. In this ethnographic engagement with artists in their studios, photography emerges as technical prop, as escape from the intensity of painting and also as facilitator of human interaction and the making of portraits. In watching painters wrestle with the challenge of creative work—with the conundrum of how to make something that is absent present in the form of a picture—the interplay between photography, on the one hand, and the hand-based practices of painting and drawing, on the other, emerges as vital and highly contingent. In one case, the intervention of photography is essential to artist Jude Rae's being able to gain sufficient distance on her subject to produce a satisfactory picture. For Micky Allan, photography facilitates creative social interaction in a period when painting is difficult and alienating. For Vanessa Barbay, the use of scanner and projector in the making of pictures that speak back to abstract engagements between persons and animals is a necessary compromise to help her meet the formal requirements of her PhD painting program. These intimate glimpses of creative work reveal that portrait-making cannot but shadow the artist's own subjectivity. The works and working methods of Allan, Barbay and Rae show image-making to be a product of habitus,[13] the location of the enactment of personhood where life experience and social constraints come together in processes of mutual constitution.

Artist and writer Gali Weiss explores portraiture as a medium for grappling with her own and others' diasporic subjectivities. Drawing on the work of Stuart Hall, Weiss adopts a view of diasporic experience as a constant process of becoming through creative action—a form of *identification*, rather than identity. Diasporic experience is necessarily intersubjective: it 'cannot be represented from the viewpoint of one-point perspective'. The space of diaspora encompasses 'those who leave as well as those who stay and those who return'. Taking that observation as a central force in her work, Weiss has developed a portrait practice that incorporates this 'doubling reference', producing pictures that distil the relationship between a sitter and an absent relative, as well as herself as image-maker. Working between the media

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13   Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

of photography, photocopying and drawing, Weiss' portraits become meeting places—of two individuals separated by space yet connected by a shared history of familial and emotional ties, brought together in the activity of making the picture. Art, and portrait-making in particular, are regarded here not as representation but rather as performative agency.

The digital is a crucial medium for Weiss' mode of exploration, as it is also for Chinese-Australian artist Lindy Lee, with whose work Weiss closely identifies. In Lee's portraits, the photocopy works as a metaphor for the diasporic experience of unbelonging and cultural displacement—the impossibility of reaching the 'original'. Lee speaks back to the conventional portrait and the illusion of the authentic subject it celebrates, appropriating images of European Old Master portraits and reworking their clarity and their visibility. New modes of identification and experience as well as indeterminate futures are attended to once the space of portraiture is reconfigured to shadow the space of diaspora.

John Conomos reflects upon four decades of his own film- and video-making and the evolution of a mode of practice consonant with his 'poly-cultural' or 'hybrid alien' Greek-Australian identifications. In this deeply personal essay, Conomos tracks his adoption of the video or film essay as the truest, most open creative form in which to wrestle with and express who he is. He gives us the image of himself as a small boy hanging about in his parents' suburban milk bar, watching the doorway that would 'magically transform into a movie screen, a world of enchantment' as he waited for the next customer. For Conomos the diasporic experience of being in-between calls out a distinctive imagination and need to write and make films as acts of 'interior emigration'.

In declaring the video essay as his chosen mode of self-portraiture or autobiography, Conomos adopts a practice of creative exploration that is at once intimate and 'dear', yet theoretically significant. In the presentation of his life trajectory, we witness not an unfolding of technological developments but rather a splicing of the analogue and digital as 'one continuous dialogue of art-making'. Conomos pays homage to Montaigne's idea of the essay as a vehicle for 'speculating aloud and testing ideas on paramount questions of life, culture, politics, human fragility and society', with what he sees as a play

between 'fact and fiction' that later writers such as Georg Lukacs and Theodor Adorno honed into an aesthetic that privileged 'fragmentary, wandering concerns and stylistics'. Imagination, the unreliability of memory and pastiche are all crucial elements of Conomos' production. In his work the portrait emerges as a highly elastic and fluid set of traces: blurred images of encounters and experiences, lines of text, sequences of film, the influences of absent persons, his own mimetic performances—enfolded in the video essay. There is a strong moral element to Conomos' work that references artists, scholars and filmmakers of earlier eras as an 'antidote' to what he sees as 'the underlying institutionalised amnesia' characterising much of the contemporary interest in 'new' media. While his approach as 'rag-picker' gives him a predilection for seeing a continuous flow between and across forms of media, he nevertheless wants to make visible the history of genre and form that informs such intertextuality. Consequently, Conomos' images lead the viewer away from their surfaces, tracking art and life as a form of personalised interrogation of the past.

Michele Barker and Anna Munster take us to another, related field of exploration in their examination of the links between nineteenth-century scientific pursuits and contemporary adaptations of facial-imaging techniques. They do this by way of their own video installation, *Duchenne's smile*. The subject matter of this work are certain photographs in Charles Darwin's 1872 *The expression of the emotions in man and animals*, and in particular a series made by neurologist Guillaume-Benjamin-Amand Duchenne, who photographed his own experiments with electrical stimulation of facial muscles of patients suffering from various neurological conditions. Taking up the camera when the technology was in its infancy, Duchenne's experiments required him to work with long shutter speeds. He thus devised techniques to prolong the electrically charged expressions on his patients' faces so that they could be captured, making their responses conform to the technical constraints of the camera. Michele Barker and Anna Munster draw our attention to the doubled process by which a scientist would experiment with a technical treatment for an affliction at the same time as ensuring that the results of his experiments were recordable and thus visible to his peers. Drawing a link from Duchenne's experiments to contemporary facial-recognition software, Barker and Munster explore the incorporation of a typology of emotions into the workings of diverse corporate, governmental and policing practices.

Digitisation has been crucial to these developments, enabling the rise of a new biopolitics in which the face 'becomes *the* dominant surface for tracking, tracing and controlling the subject'.

Along with the other contributors to this volume who see the portrait as a genre ceaselessly being refigured across time and space to grapple with distinctive and evolving forms of personhood, Barker and Munster observe how the 'the abstract machine of faciality', as elucidated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is refigured, made subject to new techniques and technologies as new circumstances arise. They observe in the post-9/11 security environment an extraordinary expansion of the application of facial-recognition techniques. The developments they track call to mind the work of WJT Mitchell,[14] who identifies images as living organisms and argues that a recent biocybernetic turn in imaging has supplanted earlier representational modes. Endorsing this interpretation, Pasi Väliaho has recently written that 'images today proliferate and evolve in parallel with the production and promotion of the neoliberal way of life, with its notions of threat, contingency and emergency'.[15]

As they trace echoes of Duchenne's experiment in the workings of present-day surveillance technologies, Barker and Munster reveal the distinctive regime of truth constructed for reading emotions, a regime that operates entirely at the level of technological abstraction. This is the real-world nightmare of securitisation, which dovetails with Maleuvre's critique of photography.

The final essay in this volume draws our concerns with the intersubjective nature of person–image relations into the space of cross-cultural collaboration. Jennifer Deger revisits the process of producing, with her long-term Yolngu research associates and adoptive family, a 'BarkTV' to honour the remarkable intercultural life and legacy of their deceased husband, father and adoptive brother, Dhalwangu community leader and media maker, Bangana, who died suddenly in 2002. *Djalkiri #1* is a multimedia work, a bark painting in acrylic, the first of its kind produced at Gapuwiak, and even more unusual, incorporating a blank panel through the middle—a screen

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14   WJT Mitchell, *What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2005.
15   Väliaho, 2014, p. xii.

onto which video footage is projected of the headstone-laying ceremony that completed the formal period of mourning for this man. His is the only headstone in Gapuwiak to incorporate a portrait photograph, declaring Bangana's role as a man of 'modern technologies', as he used to describe himself. In turn, Deger recounts how this grave became a favoured site for family portraits, enabling the deceased to be explicitly enfolded in the imaging practices of the living.

Jennifer Deger eloquently traces the strands of dense symbolic significance and the relationships between persons, ancestors and forms of image-making that converge in *Djalkiri #1*, as well as the weight of feeling behind its production. In so doing, she produces an idea of the portrait that, in order to *truly be a portrait* in this context, must enact a whole complex of intergenerational, interspecies and intercultural relationships. By contrast, some photographs of persons, including family photographs, may be regarded as 'simply snapshots'. Only when a photograph is taken up and assembled, activated within a fundamental set of relationships—linking an image of a person to his place, to the ancestors that confer his character, to other qualities of personality as well as authority, to the activities and pleasures for which he is known, to the people who miss him—only then is a picture transformed into a portrait. Thus in Yolngu reckoning we see the accepted face of the portrait flipped—the immediacy of recognition is dismissed in favour of 'the pulsing substrates that extend beyond and beneath the span of a single life'. There are strong resonances between Deger's project and those of Conomos and Weiss, all three transcending accepted parameters of image-making and ways of seeing persons to explore modes of identification that are deeply held, defy fixed or conventional categories, and call out new visual forms of articulation and expression.

Like Maleuvre, Deger foregrounds the idea of the portrait as encounter, invoking the work of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy's writings are particularly pertinent to the interests of all the essays in this collection, as becomes clear in his observation that portraits are a special instance of the wider phenomena of images:

> a portrait touches, or else it is only an identification photo, a descriptive record, not an image. What touches is something that is borne to the surface from out of an intimacy. But here the portrait is only an example. Every image is in some way a 'portrait', not in that it would reproduce the traits of a person, but in that it pulls and

> *draws* … in that it *extracts* something, an intimacy, a force. And, to extract it, it subtracts or removes it from homogeneity, it distracts it from it, distinguishes it and casts it forth. It throws it in front of us and this throwing, this projection, makes its mark, its very trait and its stigma: its tracing, its lines, its style, its incision, its scar, its signature, all of this at once.[16]

Nancy goes on to elaborate this weight that the image brings to bear upon those who encounter it: the ultimate significance of the image is that it offers up 'a world we enter while remaining before it … a world, which is to say: an indefinite totality of meaning (and not merely an environment)'.[17]

The essays that follow are all engaged with this power of portraits to draw us into worlds. Their overriding common purpose is to reveal a fundamental symbiosis; to understand the workings of images is to understand something vital of what it is to be human.

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16 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The ground of the image*, trans. Jeff Fort, New York, Fordham University Press, 2005, p. 4, original emphasis.

17 Nancy, 2005, p. 5.