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Performative Portraiture

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Using Michael Fried's theories of *tableau* and *morceau* to shift portraiture's informative function to a performative function.

Abstract

Portraits can be assessed through their descriptive or didactic potential with regard to their subject. When their subject matter is anonymous, portraits can be disregarded as inconsequential. This limitation contributes to the long-standing perception that portraiture is a 'lesser' form of art.

This paper proposes an alternative to judging the success of a portrait through aesthetic and narrative principles and in doing so, extinguish the need to 'identify' the subject. It assesses the internal dynamics of portraits as a finished pieces of fine art, rather than descriptive summations of individuals as a historical document. The enduring value of a portrait, *as a work of art*, comes from the artist's focus on the internal formal and narrative relationships of the work in order to transcend mere description.

Determinations about the convincingness of a work of art are found in 18th and 19th century French notions of *tableau* and *morceau* as outlined by art critic and historian Michael Fried. These concepts have enduring significance in contemporary aesthetics despite shifts towards the blurring of art and life in the twentieth century. They also influence the critical reception of portraits, anonymous or otherwise.

Fried's concepts were tested in a series of artist residencies undertaken by the author. The studio development shows that by focusing on *performative* potentials within the work, rather than looking at the *informative* potentials, portraiture can build a distinctive sense of intrigue and subsequently possess a stronger position within the discipline of fine art.

Keywords

Portraiture, Performative, Contemporary Art, Anonymity, Michael Fried, Tableaux

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Introduction

Portraiture has been more closely associated with documentation over aesthetic autonomy, or what can be referred to as an *informative* function. This paper argues that portraiture must move to a more *performative* function, which opens portraiture to allow for subject anonymity by considering formal and narrative content.

The early institutions of portraiture have cemented a focus on the identity of the sitter over and above the aesthetics of the art object. Since the emergence of portrait institutions the collecting and exhibiting of portraiture has focused more on the identity of the sitter than on the significance of the portrait as a work of art. During the National Portrait Gallery in London in 1856, seventeen years after Louis Daguerre demonstrated his new invention of the camera, the British Parliament bestowed upon the new gallery a mission to show features of individuals who are "worthy of our admiration, and whose examples we are more induced to imitate when they are brought before us in the visible and tangible shape of portraits." (Graham-Dixon) Portraits were then and still are today means of communication about verifiable facts of the individual depicted.

The focus on the identity of the individual is also the primary focus for the Australian National Portrait Gallery (NPG). The NPG has as part of its strategic vision today, 250 years later, to "develop and maintain a representative collection of high quality portraits of subjects who have made a major impact upon Australia." (National Portrait Gallery) The NPG has stated its purpose as a form of documentation of national identity. It's stated mission is "to increase the understanding and appreciation of the Australian people – their identity, history, culture, creativity and diversity – through portraiture." (National Portrait Gallery) It can be seen that National Portrait Galleries (in various forms worldwide) are collections of portraits of individuals who have a historical and national significance over and above their significance as successful works of art.

The examples of leading portraiture institutions show that the tradition of portraiture is inherently *informative*. Using the theories put forward by Michael Fried, what follows in this paper is a means by which portraiture can use strategies of high art to have a *performative* function, that is to have an energy that acts on the viewer aesthetically.

For the last several years my art practice has interrogated the relationship between portraiture and fine art more generally. The findings of my work have tested the arguments put forward by contemporary American critic and theorist Michael Fried about the effect of painting on the beholder. He

uses terms such as *tableau*, *morceau* and theatricality (in a context derived from the French *beaux-arts* system of the 18th and 19th centuries) to explain the problems portraits face when they aim for recognizability beyond other aesthetic concerns such as pictorial unity and narrative .

When I embarked on a performative portraiture project titled *As Long As You're Here (ALAYH)* at Australia's National Portrait Gallery in 2013, I saw it as a means of testing the role of participation in portraiture. This was situated by recent trends towards relational aesthetics in contemporary art galleries and museums, which seek to provide audiences with *active* experiences, by positioning audiences as co-creators of the work of art (Bourriaud). According to such rhetoric established by relational aesthetics as well as other participatory and interactive art, the well-established National Portrait Gallery model (previously discussed) might be seen as conducive to a *passive* engagement with an artwork, in the form of beholding inanimate objects and reading didactic panels regarding their subject's contributions to the nation.

To test how a relational aesthetic might connect to portraiture, participants were invited to sit for a portrait for a drawn portrait, for as long a duration as they liked. I sat in the main atrium of the gallery for 33 consecutive days drawing whomever sat in the chair opposite me using an iPad. Participants' involvement was on their terms and anonymous. The project resulted in 194 portrait images as well as over 4 hour time-lapse video of the drawing process as it unfolded. Without knowledge regarding the sitters' identities, the portraits can be judged according to their pictorial interest alone.

Upon review of the completed series, I was struck by the images in *ALAYH* that evoked narrative over verisimilitude. Figures 1 through 4 show examples of drawings that were relatively fully formed, that is the participants sat for a period that was long enough for the image to have a level of pictorial information that describes the identity of the sitter. Each figure looks straight at the artist drawing them and therefore at the beholder. The pictorial content is a description of their face and body in the act of being seen.

Some of these narratives are inferred by the inclusion of one or two objects that make the viewer wonder about the nature of that person. These become a point of engagement beyond identifying the sitter or assessing the virtuosity of the drawing. In #132 (Figure 5), #161 (Figure 6) , #172 (Figure 7) and #194 (Figure 8) each subject possesses something that makes them stand out from the series overall – an incidental prop, stance, or article of clothing. The conceptual tension between the anonymous figure and their secondary object of attention provides a tension or gravity unique to that image.

Each of the drawings from *ALAYH* have the same formal structure that resulted from my fixed position in space relative to the participant. The formal commonalities across each image in the series reduces the autonomy of the images to stand alone and asserts a fragmentary nature that contemporary American art critic and historian Michael Fried has described as *morceau* – a pejorative term of art that has threatened the aesthetic autonomy of portraiture for centuries.

A Critical Framework for Anonymous Portraits

In his book *Absoption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980), Michael Fried described the terminology used by the French Beaux-Arts System that distinguished successful works from unsuccessful works of art of the 18th and 19th centuries. The term *tableau* referred to a finished coherent picture where the composition and the action within the painting build towards a coherent logic. He explains through the writings of prominent critics of the time:

Specifically for French of the anti-Rococo reaction, Grimm and Diderot foremost among them, the term tableau denoted the achievement of a sufficiently high degree of compositional and coloristic unity (the latter mainly the work of chiascuro) to produce a powerful and instantaneous effect of formal and expressive closure. Indeed the term was first mobilized in this way to mark a distinction between the incorporation of painting within a larger decorative scheme, which writers like Shaftesbury, Grimm and Diderot regarded as degrading to the art, and the portable, self sufficient esthetically autonomous picture, which they strongly advocated. (Fried Manet's Modernism: Or the Face of Painting in the 1860s)

By contrast, the term *morceau* refers to "pieces or fragments, regardless of their actual size." (Fried Manet's Modernism: Or the Face of Painting in the 1860s)

The 1750s idea of the *tableau* is still relevant for critiques of contemporary art which includes portraiture. When the journal *October* surveyed curators, critics, theorists and historians about the nature of contemporary art, Nigerian curator and former Director of *Documenta* (2002) Okwui Enwezor characterized contemporary art through the language of *tableau*:

[Contemporary art] can be properly apprehended through the formal language of immersive installations, cinematic projection and large tableau style photography dominant in global contemporary art. (Enwezor)

Fried cites several artists – including Jean-Marc Bustamante, Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky, Luc Delahaye and Jeff Wall – as engaging in a contemporary *tableau* style (*Fried Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*). Fried notes that their preferences for large-scale and 'internally motivated narratives' evoke fellow critic Jean-François Chevrier's precedent of the *tableau*, arguing that successful contemporary photographers actively consulting art history on matters of pictorial composition (de Duve). To retain this stylistic form, the 'subjects' must not appear to reveal their awareness of the artist's presence. The artist must remain anonymous to the immediate subject matter, and by implication, external to the viewer's reading of the artwork's narrative.

The Problem of Portraiture: The portrait as *tableau* and *morceau*

The rules that govern portraiture are in conflict with the rules that governed 'high art', namely the *tableau*. However portraits that aspire to the ideals of the *tableau* could achieve this aim. In the Beaux-Arts system painting was the highest ranking of all art forms and within painting, and more specifically, it was history painting that was considered the highest art of painting over and above genre painting and portraiture. Fried's reasoning for this is, in the 18th century and early 19th century that art critics, such as Denis Diderot, valued paintings where the subjects were completely absorbed in the action around them, the singular event of the picture, over any other painting. Fried states that this kind of painting has

a specific relationship to the beholder, one where the beholder is treated as if they do not exist – that the figures are unaware of their being beheld. Works where it appears as if the figures are *posing* or in any way aware of being beheld were considered theatrical and superficial. Fried quotes Diderot extensively who derides theatricality and reveres what Fried refers to as “absorptive motifs”.

Michael Fried identified that the artworks in the 18th and early 19th century, that achieved the highest critical success from Diderot and others, carried ‘motifs of absorption’ in which figures were wholly absorbed in an activity or event. It was this element of early modern secular art that meant history painting remained the highest ranking form of painting of the arts generally (Fried Absorption and Theatricality : Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot).

In Fried’s theses, portraiture continues to be discussed as a specialist and difficult genre. He describes the portraits made of French critic Denis Diderot and the subject’s response. On portraiture at the time Fried writes that the genre was saturated in a fundamental critical flaw, which he identified as “the inherent theatricality of the genre.” (Fried Absorption and Theatricality : Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot) He goes on to explain:

More markedly and as it were categorically than the conventions of any other genre, those of the portrait call for exhibiting a subject, the sitter, to the public gaze; put another way, the basic action depicted in a portrait is the sitter’s presentation of himself or herself to be beheld. It follows that the portrait as a genre was singularly ill equipped to comply with the demand that a painting negate or neutralize the presence of the beholder, a demand that I have tried to show became a matter of urgent, if for the most part less than fully conscious, concern for French art critics during these years. (Fried)

Although Fried describes an inherent problem faced by portraiture as high art, there are instances in his writing that indicate that successful portraits did overcome this in the 1700s. A deeper reading of his history of *tableau* is encouraging for the pursuit of portraiture as high form of art. Fried advocates for the aesthetic virtues of absorptive and narrative portraiture:

This is not to say that all contemporary portraits were regarded by the critics with distaste. A few artists, La Tour preeminently, largely escaped negative criticism on the strength of the sheer vibrancy and verisimilitude of their representations. In addition La Tour was seen as having made a point of portraying famous and accomplished persons, whose likenesses were for that reason presumed to be of interest to a wider audience. But what I find arresting are those cases in which a portraitist was praised for devising a composition in which his sitter or sitters appeared to be engaged in a characteristic activity and thus were rendered proof against the consciousness of being beheld that compromised the genre. (Fried)

Portraiture and Absorption: Van Loo

A figures’ absorption in an event or activity, or as Fried refers to it, *absorptiveness*, was one of the more successful strategies that artists of the eighteenth century employed as a means to convince audiences of the authenticity of the story within the portrait. One artist of the time, Louis-Michel Van Loo used absorptiveness as an “anti-theatrical” strategy for the portraits he painted. In *Absorption and Theatricality*, Fried describes Louis-Michel Van Loo’s *Portrait de Carle Van Loo et sa famille* (1757) as an example of a portrait in which the subject is wholly absorbed in an event, neutralizing the inherent theatricality of portraiture. Here the subject, Carl Van Loo is depicted with his family, drawing the portrait of what looks to be his daughter. Each family member is equally absorbed in the single event of the girl posing (to the father rather than the painting’s beholder) and the subject drawing. One of his daughters looks at the girl posing, his son stares at his drawing, his other son staring either at his father or brother or at their interaction. The mother gazes out at the viewer holding what appears to be a musical manuscript, an object that echoes the guitar that lies on the lower edge of the painting indicating that the family was previously engaged in a musical activity or that they might be in a few moments.

Fried also cites two critiques by Denis Diderot of portraits that artists had painted of the esteemed critic as evidence for the importance of absorptiveness in differentiating good portraiture from bad. Diderot criticized the “distracted gaze” in *Portrait de Diderot* (1767) (Figure 9 – <http://www.louvre.fr/oeuvre-notices/denis-diderot>), also by Louis-Michel Van Loo. This distracted gaze was the product of the artist’s wife attempting to engage him in conversation and therefore distracting him from having any moment of absorptive reflection (Fried Absorption and Theatricality : Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot). The distracted gaze divides and disunifies what the single action as the subject’s hand holds a pen signifying an intention to write while the distracted gaze nullifies the intention of intellectual activity. With the single action fragmented, the work does not add up to a cohesive whole in the Diderotian sense and therefore can not be said to be a *tableau*. On the other hand *Portrait de Diderot* (1760) (Figure 10 – <http://utpictura18.univ-montp3.fr/GenerateurNotice.php?numnotice=A5572>) by Garand, which exists now only as a drawing, solicited a positive response from Diderot who Fried has quoted as saying “I am, in fact, meditating in this canvas. I am living in it, I am breathing in it, I am alive in it; thought is visible on my brow.” (Fried) According to this testimony Diderot was convinced that all of the aspects of the picture confirmed a meditative and thoughtful state – in other words, the subject was in the action of thought rather than necessarily a transcription of an identifiable physiognomy.

The portrait of Van Loo and his family can thus be seen to be a *tableau* – a finished image where each element is resolved and in which the absorptive mode of address to the beholder counters any theatricality (*Fried Courbet’s Realism*). While Fried does not explicitly state it, there is sufficient evidence in his writing to presume that his problem of portraiture was not just the theatricality of the genre but also its fragmentary nature – rather than being a *tableau* it is in fact a *morceau*. Garand’s successful portrayal (according to Diderot) of an absorbed figure in his *Portrait de Diderot* cannot be said to result in a *tableau* because it depicts only the figure and not the causal event of his absorptive mode. If Fried through Diderot states that absorption serves arts highest purpose of cohesively representing an event, one should presume that not that only each element of the painting unifies to support a single event but also that there needs to be sufficient information in the painting to explain the event. However in Garand’s portrait there is no cause of the subject’s absorption. The image presumes a cause outside of the boundaries of the portrait. Therefore it is what critics of the time called *morceau*, which Fried translates as “fragments”, and unfortunately for Garand, is not a fully realized *tableau*.

Fried does not raise the issue of *morceau* in any discussion of portraiture. However, one could argue that if a work of portraiture suffers from the problem of not qualifying to be a fully realized *tableau*, it is on the basis that portraiture has a tendency to fail to provide a cohesive and unified

narratives.

Philosopher Cynthia Freeland has discussed the troubled relationship between narrative and portraiture, arguing that “portraits are paradigms of non-narrative art.” (Freeland) Freeland explains that narrative requires a cohesive relationship of events displaced in time, and this would be at odds with the complex and shifting nature of ‘self’, which the philosopher views as central to the subject of portraiture. To support this view, like Fried, she also cites the hierarchical position of portraits relative to history painting in the Beaux-Arts Academies.

Freeland’s position is oblique to Fried’s in the sense that Freeland judges portraiture as a document that represents the subject’s self – a criterion that is inherently *informational*:

We use portraits to learn about people, to see how someone looked, and beyond this, to infer how they felt and what they were like. We see in a portrait how one human being saw and interpreted another human being. (Freeland)

On the other hand, as has been discussed, Fried argues that the success of art is more than mere description. Successful artworks, according to Fried, aesthetically perform for the viewer by creating a distance between the beholder and the object of the artwork’s contemplation. The aesthetic ideal is intrinsically tied to managing narrative through absorptiveness rather than abandoning narrative for description. The cliché of the head and shoulders portrait severely hampers the extent to which a narrative of absorption can be reinforced by subject matter or by formal unity. It risks being considered theatrical because it is an unconvincing window into another world that is unaware of the beholder’s presence. The portrait of Diderot by Garand is also not a fully unified composition because it only depicts the subject’s face without suggesting a scenario to explain the subject’s absorptive state. Anonymous portraits provide even less context for their viewers, which is why head-and-shoulders compositions were avoided in *AYAYH* and subsequent iterations in *STAY* (2015) and *Meeting Room 1* (2015 – 2016).

The Autonomy of the Portrait: Lucian Freud

The British painter Lucian Freud (1922-2011) held a standard of pictorial success that was not about capturing the life of the sitter, but rather, giving his portraits a life of their own. Fried describes the virtues of a particular strategy in which artists managed the narrative content within portraits by depicting scenes in which their subjects were wholly absorbed in some activity and unaware of the beholder. This strategy echoes the approach of the Freud, whose portraits refer to the act of painting over the representation of a subject.

In an article in *Encounter* magazine Freud wrote:

The artist who tries to serve nature is only an executive artist. And since the model he so faithfully copies is not going to be hung up next to the picture, since the picture is going to be there on its own, it is of no interest whether it is an accurate copy of the model. Whether it will convince or not, depends entirely on what it is in itself, what is there to be seen. The model should only serve the very private function for the painter of providing the starting point for his excitement. (Freud)

In *Naked Man With Rat* (1977-8) (Figure 12) a man named Raymond Jones is painted holding a rat near the man’s testicles. In an interview with Georgie Greig, author of Freud’s posthumous biography *Breakfast with Lucian: A Portrait of the Artist*, Jones describes the way Freud proposed this picture to the subject:

In 1977 Lucian told me, “I want you to sit in the nude. You’ll be the first man I’ve painted in oil and I am confident I can do a major picture of a man naked.” He then paused, before saying, “... With rat. Would you mind being naked with a rat? That’s more important.” I said “Oh not at all, Lucian, I wouldn’t mind one little bit. But how will you get it to behave on my thigh?” He said, Leave that to me... (Greig)

Freud’s emphasis on the rat signals a need to create a compelling narrative for the viewer. The situations that Freud constructed take the paintings beyond the issue of likeness or realism. The viewer is not compelled to judge the work using the sitter as their measure, in fact often the sitters are left anonymous to the viewer with titles like “Naked Man” de-individualizing the subject. Their thoroughly individual body, face and gestures convince the viewer that every part of the figure in the painting is represented in its unique form. They are anonymous individuals, not ambiguous representatives of humanity writ large.

Although Freud’s paintings do not conform strictly to the 18th and 19th century notions of *tableau*, his narratives are mysterious. In many instances his subjects stare back at the viewer with no pretensions to absorptiveness. His works demonstrate the aesthetic value in charging the picture with energy beyond a slavish representation of the physiognomy of the individual depicted. These portraits maintain their effectiveness and affectiveness despite the anonymity of the subjects.

Freud’s portraits testify to the importance of implied narratives to energize the act of painting. Having painted almost all of his paintings in one or other of his London studios, Freud’s oeuvre, specifically his full body naked portraits, carries with it the narrative of the setting – the sitter in some or other space within his studio, and implicit narratives between two or more subjects, some naked, others clothed and more often than not steering their gaze away from the viewer – a device that strengthens the content to be read as narrative.

Renowned Canadian artist Jeff Wall applies an absorptive mode of address to link his work to the ideals of tableau portraiture. Jeff Wall’s portraits are made in what he refers to as “near-documentary” a narrative photograph that has been constructed in response to something true that has been observed by the artist. Wall constructs his photographs to address similar technical concerns to painting. Wall’s portrait of Walker is completely staged. While it is Adrian Walker sitting there, the subject is posed in his studio office posed *as-if* he is drawing, but although the subject is posing, the viewer does not read the portrait as a pose. Fried quotes Wall saying:

... [Adrian] and I collaborated to create a composition that, while being strictly accurate in all details, was nevertheless not a candid picture, but a pictorial construction. I depicted the moment when he has just completed his drawing, and is able to contemplate it in its final form, and, once again, at the same time, to see its subject, the

specimen, the point from which it began. There was such a moment in the creation of his drawing, but the moment depicted in the picture is in fact not that moment, but a reenactment of it. Yet it is probably indistinguishable from that moment. (Fried Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before)

Each element in Wall's image supports the overarching narrative. The figure can clearly be seen to be absorbed in the event drawing of drawing – or finishing the drawing, judging the work against the specimen on his desk.

Applications to Anonymous Portraiture: Tony Curran

In response to Friedland analyses on tableau I attempted to apply these models of *formal and narrative* unity to the *ALAYH* model of participatory portraiture to inform a new series of works titled *STAY* (2015). The variety of compositions that this project's structure afforded facilitated a greater degree of narrative complexity that was not evident across the *ALAYH* series.

In order to bring this performative dimension of the tableau to in-situ gallery performances a new performance-cum-portrait-series was designed to allow for further compositional variety and a range of gazes and narratives. As part of my exhibition *STAY* at Wagga Wagga Art Gallery (2015), members of the public were invited to register for an appointment and advised that they could make as many appointments as they liked. In the space were three different kinds of seats, including an ottoman, a chaise longue and a single backed chair. The furniture was arranged in a triangle formation and participants were free to use the furniture however they liked for a pose for their choice. Having three options of furniture meant that there was a greater variety of places where the subject could sit, which in turn led to a series of different compositional structures making the reading of each drawing particular to each subject and facilitating different kinds of portraits within the series as compared to *ALAYH*. In addition, as the artist, I had the option to then choose my position relative to the subject and control the subject's tendency towards a theatrical full-frontal gaze.

STAY aimed to increase the compositional variety by constantly redrawing the background. In *STAY*, participants were not drawn over a consistent backdrop (like *ALAYH*) but rather their surroundings were constructed specifically for their pose. Once the subject was comfortable I would position myself to encourage the formation of an open-ended narrative through interaction with the subject. For example, Figure 13 shows an image of a mother and suckling child. The image is tightly composed and drawn from an oblique and overhead viewing position. The overhead view aims to depict the action more coherently and also takes on a light voyeuristic menace. The two figures are in an embrace and the tight framing echoes this sense of embrace.

Happenstance objects and settings could be pulled into the picture to increase the potential narrative or 'intrigue' of each image. Figure 14 shows a seated man in a thoughtful pose with his brow tensed, right arm resting on his leg with his hand touching his chin. This pose is echoed by what appears to be a blank piece of paper and a pen – materials which are an extension of cognitive activity, writing, designing or sketching. The pen and paper were the coincidental result of the participant's need to sign a consent form to participate in this project but in the picture, these objects interact with the subject's pose taking on further narrative significance.

Despite the compositional variety – there are consistent motifs across the series that anchor each image within that group such as the consistently golden brown timber floor against the cream walls of the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery. Like in *As Long As You're Here*, each drawing repeats the formal themes of the series, yet the variety of potential positions enables each work to be regarded as an individual piece with formal structures managed by a variety of angles shapes and weights of the figures surrounds. As a result each image can be considered as an autonomous piece.

STAY encouraged unique poses to enhance the intrigue of each portrait. While many people posed frontally, the new system doubled the number of diverted gazes. Of the portraits where the figure returned the gaze directly, their body language was often softened by being positioned at a three-quarter or more angle.

The innovations of *STAY* were *performative* rather than *informative*. They led to anonymous images the viewer could contemplate, rather than a portrait defined by descriptive information regarding a subject's identity.

Mutual Intrigue: Emphasising Narrative through Absorption

The limitations of *STAY* meant that participants were still directing their attention to the artist / viewer and as a result many of the images continued to emphasize the posed nature of the engagement and risk being comparatively theatrical in a Friedland sense. In response to this a subsequent project, commissioned by the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, *Meeting Room 1* was set up as a way of offering more opportunities for members of the public to participate beyond *STAY*. Rather than continue working on the same project I developed a new project that differed from *STAY* in that each sitting would be a portrait of two strangers randomly paired together in the gallery space for the duration of a one-hour portrait sitting. These were essentially 'conversation pieces', in which the interaction of two unnamed subjects should imply an open narrative.

In order to resolve the problem of theatricality of the posed portrait that continued through *ALAYH* and *STAY*, the premise for this new project was to give participants a social engagement that would preclude them from addressing me as artist / viewer. The result of removing myself from the equation was that participants were more interested in each other, and hence were more 'absorbed'.

In order to facilitate the participants' interest in each other, they were greeted with an introduction and advised to coordinate how they'd like to pose together in the space. After the introduction I would leave the room for a few brief moments. When I returned the participants were well acquainted and had already begun a conversation that usually continued throughout the sitting.

The figures ranged in how absorbed they were in their social encounter. Figure 15 shows two figures seated next to each other in a frontal position to the artist / viewer but generally speaking sittings have turned out more like Figures 16 and 17 where at least one or both participants are absorbed in the encounter. The instances where one person is more absorbed than the other point towards differing motivations in participating in the project. For some, participation might have been a "cultural" blind-date, whereas others may have been motivated by the opportunity to sit for a portrait or meet the artist. In circumstances where a participant's portrait partner did not show up for their sitting, participants engaged me as the object of their attention reinforcing the facing gaze of the social symmetry between artist and sole-sitter.

One limitation of *MR1* has been that the level of finish of these images is significantly reduced compared those drawings in *STAY* or *ALAYH*. There are two reasons for this. In the earlier projects there was typically only one person posing at a time. Also, participants were better able to organize to return for further sittings or to sit for extended periods. If participants wished to work further on their portrait on their portrait in *ALAYH* or *STAY*

they could do so by finding a time, however in *MR1* participants need to coordinate a booking with their portrait partner, which tended to be difficult for couples to arrange.

Despite the comparative lack of description in *MR1*, anonymous and unfinished figures from *MR1* argue for the power of pictorial intrigue over identity-based verisimilitude. Despite the roughness of these images, in the small city of Wagga Wagga, audiences have had little difficulty in recognizing the individuals depicted. This indicates that the power of these images as informative works is not substantially less than those from the more developed portraits in *ALAYH* or *STAY*. Having said that, Figure 18 (the second sitting) is more visually compelling than Figure 17 because it adds additional elements of pictorial complexity.

The viewer does not need to know the context from which these images came. They are offered the opportunity to observe a depiction of a social encounter between strangers. This series is an engagement with anonymity as a performative subject matter, linked to the principles of absorption and *tableau*.

Using the critical theory put forward by Michael Fried, this paper has outlined how a theory of art can inform portraiture to take on greater *performative* potentials to activate the work beyond mere informative content. While the three projects outlined above each have their limitations, they evidence the usefulness of *tableau* as a standard for assessing anonymous portraiture when considered as a work of art. They have also shown that a portrait's *performative* potential does not depend on its *informational* efficacy of known subjects.

As Long As You're Here #185, 2013
Digital image 1536 x 2048

Figure 2
Tony Curran
As Long As You're Here #147, 2013
Digital image 1536 x 2048

Figure 3
Tony Curran
As Long As You're Here #167, 2013
Digital image 1536 x 2048

Figure 4
Tony Curran
As Long As You're Here #76, 2013
Digital image 1536 x 2048

Figure 5
Tony Curran
As Long As You're Here #139, 2013
Digital image 1536 x 2048

Figure 6
Tony Curran
As Long As You're Here #168, 2013
Digital image 1536 x 2048

Figure 7
Tony Curran
As Long As You're Here #179, 2013
Digital image 1536 x 2048

Figure 8
Tony Curran
As Long As You're Here #194, 2013
Digital image 1536 x 2048

Figure 12
Tony Curran
Stay #48, 2015
Digital image 1536 x 2048

Figure 13
Tony Curran
Stay #171, 2015
Digital image 1536 x 2048

Figure 14
Tony Curran
Meeting Room 1 #4, 2015-16
Digital image 1536 x 2048

Figure 15
Tony Curran
Meeting Room 1 #3, 2015-16
Digital image 1536 x 2048



Figure 16
Tony Curran
Meeting Room 1 #9, 2015-16
Digital image 1536 x 2048



Figure 17
 Tony Curran
 Meeting Room 1 #33, 2015-16
 Digital image 1536 x 2048

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