Edward Jonathan Turpie.

**Photographic Portraiture In The Western Context**

In the context of contemporary globalisation and social media imagery, the doctoral thesis resulting from the present research will address issues of portraiture from a diverse multicultural perspective, however the scope of the current report is limited to the Western tradition.

In a pre digital age Susan Sontag wrote: *‘Photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation”.* (Sontag,1977:135) This was an analogue environment where consumerist photography was in its populist infancy with photographic negatives posted to Kodak for processing and prints physically returned to the photographer for viewing and sharing. In the twenty-first century the instantaneity of digital camera technologies and channels of social media has produced a tsunami of images of human beings made and shared in an instant global environment. Participation, intrusion, ownership, collaboration, ethics between subjects and producers alike is even more complex than in the analogue 1970s. It is in this context that this research investigates questions of contemporary portraiture.

**Discreet and Surreptitious Photography and Art**

*‘The camera is clumsy and crude. It meddles insolently in other people’s* *affairs. The lens scouts a crowd like the barrel of a gun.’* (Barker, 2010:205)

To build a portfolio of portrait images for subsequent drawn prints smart phone camera photography is the medium used in this research.  In making these photographic references, surreptitious methods are adopted, to achieve a representative image of the subject, without them being aware of the lens and therefore ‘posing’, as indicated by Roland Barthes:

*‘Once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of posing, I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image’.* (Barthes, 2000:10)

This surreptitious practice could be perceived as a potentially fraudulent act and raises motivational and ethical questions.

The earliest Parisian street images were captured in 1838 by Daguerre and presented to King Ludwig 1 of Bavaria as proof of the invention of the daguerreotype. It has been argued that the practice of photography was inaugurated with a surreptitiously-made image where ‘a man having his boots polished … is hardly likely to have known that his picture was being in a very real sense, “taken”.’ (Barker, 2010:205)As image capturing technology matured in the early twentieth-century, photographers and artists consciously adopted and applied discreet and surreptitious photographic methods. In the spirit of enquiry, adventure and investigation, documentary photographers sought to expand the means of recording their subjects. In some cases deceptive means to hide their intentions from their subjects were adopted. An example is photographer Ilya Ehrenburg:

*For many months I roamed Paris with a little camera. People would sometimes wonder why was I taking pictures of a fence or a road? They didn’t know that I was taking pictures of them … The Leica has a lateral viewfinder. It’s constructed like a periscope. I was photographing at 90°.* (Barker, 2010:207)

Ehrenburg compares himself with a writer: ‘*I can talk about this without laughing, a writer has his own notions of honesty. Our entire life is spent peeping into windows and listening at the keyhole – that’s our craft’*. (ibid) Ehrenburg was an early adopter of voyeuristic photographic methods with many others following, including Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Helen Levitt, Ben Shan, Paul Strand, Cartier Bresson, Brassai, Diane Arbus and Wickes Hine.

As technology and photographers developed their craft a variety of surreptitious methods of recording and ‘shooting’ were experimented with. It became easier to ‘take’ the subject by surprise when smaller cameras enabled street photography where no one at first expected it.  It is reported that:

*Early portable cameras were given a name: “detectives”. The design of the detective cameras was usually more fanciful than useful – one was designed as a stack of books, another a parcel; one fitted into a cane; another into an umbrella’s head or the heel of a man’s shoe. One camera was made like a revolver.* (Phillips, 2010:13)

Quickly, public opinion went from tolerating the foibles of young and avid ‘kodakers’ to viewing these same men as unfairly and abusively ‘lying in wait to catch their prey. (ibid)

In the 1930s photographer, Walker Evans, made his rightly-famous social documentary work for the US Government’s Farm Security Administration.

He also adopted discreet techniques in his personal work:

*Looking intrusively seems to have been Evans’ great pleasure,*

*and one of his most consistent interests. As he wrote to a friend:*

*Stare, it is the way to educate your eye, and more. Stare, pry, listen, eavesdrop. Die knowing something. You’re not here long.’ (*Garland-Thomson, 2009:118 as cited by McKay, 2013:339).

Later he invited friend and photographer Helen Levitt to accompany him to the subway, where he outfitted himself with a camera hidden under an overcoat, a cable release running from the camera on his chest down his sleeve to his hand. Evans wanted to photograph people without self-conscious projection, in private interior moments while on public transport. (ibid)

Contemporary artists have also adopted surreptitious image capture. Nan Goldin photographed from embedded participation in groups of subjects for familiarity and intimacy in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (Heiferman, et al. 1986.)and Philip Lorca di-Corcia’s covert recording of *Heads* with elaborate hidden flashes in the street which: ‘*offers unblinking insight into unguarded, distracted faces of total strangers, capturing moments of absolute, impenetrable introspection on to which we can only project our own assumptions.’ (*MoMALearning, n.d.)

As well as ethical considerations, such surreptitious acts have legal implications. Di-Corcia was taken to the New York Supreme Court by one of his unsuspecting subjects. In his defence he pleaded his first amendment right to exhibit a photograph of the subject that had been taken without their knowledge. (Wortman, 2010) US artist Barbara Kruger was sued for using a picture in *It’s a Small World … Unless You Have to Clean It.* A New York federal court judge ruled in Kruger’s favour, holding that, under state law and the First Amendment, the woman’s image was not used for purposes of trade, but rather in a work of art. (Gefter, 2006)

# Beyond photography artists have made surreptitious recording core to their practice. In Vito Acconci’s *Following Piece,* the artist follows (stalks) random people in the streets and photographically documents the actions until they reach a private space. (Acconci,1969) In Sophie Calle’s *Sleepers* she takes photographs of her nightly bed fellows. In *Suite Vénitienne* she follows a French man to a Venice hotel and secretly photographs his comings and goings*. ‘She flirts with opposites: control and freedom, choice and compulsion, intimacy and distance. On one level, her art responds to the surfeit of choice in late capitalist society.’* (Jeffries, 2009) She uses photography as a tool to document her artistic motivations to which she has commented: *‘Ultimately, my excitement was stronger than my hesitation.’* (ibid)

In the age of social media a legal case centred on artist Richard Prince’s usage of images from the internet without consent and elicited comment: *‘Is Richard Prince a “trolling genius” or a plain old rip-off merchant?’* (Gorton, et al 2015). *New Portraits* featured thirty-eight images that Prince screen-grabbed from the ‘Suicide Girls’ Instagram channel, ink-jet printed onto large-scale canvases along with short social media comments, and a comment by the artist. Prince has used ‘Fair Use’ copyright law in the past, which rules that if you tweak something enough, it can become something original. So Prince, by adding his own, rather distasteful comments, enlarging the images and exhibiting them in a refined art context, will argue he has transformed them. One of the subjects of Prince’s *New Portraits,* Suicide Girls’ founder Missy Suicide, offered to sell her own prints for ninety dollars, with any proceeds going to charity. (ibid) She is taking control of her image and exerting her right to, and ownership, of her image.

Most recently artist, photographer writer Teju Cole published a collection of photographs and texts inspired by memories, fantasies, and introspections. This includes a photograph of a woman walking down a street from behind. On the facing page is the text:

*I follow her for one city block. Thirty seconds after the first photograph, I take a second. Against my will, and oblivious to hers. I lose her to the crowd – the mutual danger is defused. On Instagram, the ones who see what you saw are called your followers. The word has a disquieting air. (*Cole, 2017:295-6)

This brief summary of the use of surreptitious photography serves to establish the context for doctoral research into contemporary portraiture initiated from the smart phone photographic image and points to the complex ethical considerations that the research addresses.

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