

That's not really me!

Since the beginning photographic portraits have been regarded as more accurate likenesses than forms of representation that require the hand (and mind) of an artist. Writing in 1926 Osip Brik stated, 'Even the most gifted painter cannot achieve the degree of faithful reproduction of which the camera is capable'. (Brik, 1926, pp 471).

Photography's reputation for 'faithful reproduction' derives from its indexical nature. The image is created by light reflected from the subject hitting the light sensitive material of the film (or digital sensor). It is a fundamental requirement that the referent be present when the photographic portrait is made. Barthes refers to this as the essential message of the photograph, which he calls '*the thing has been there*'. (Barthes, 1999, pp 76). It is this referential quality which gives the photographic portrait its sense of reality. This view persists even in today's digital age.

Trust in the photograph's ability to capture 'realistic' likenesses led to its early adoption as the means of identification in systems of social control, such as in mug shots for criminals and passport photographs. In 'The Body and the Archive' Allan Sekula explains that '...the potential for juridical photographic realism was widely recognised in the 1840s...' (Sekula, 1986). This was the beginning of the use of photography in panoptic systems of control that continues to the present. In such systems accuracy and realism are paramount. This is why, for example, there are strict rules for how the portrait should be presented in passport photographs.

The UK Passport regulations state that the subject is to be pictured showing head and shoulders only, in colour, set against a light grey or cream background. The aspect ratio and dimensions of the head are prescribed and the person should be:

- Facing forward and looking straight at the camera,
- With a neutral expression and mouth closed,
- Without anything covering the face,
- In clear contrast to the background,
- Without a head covering, and
- With eyes open, visible and free from reflection or glare from glasses.
- With eyes not covered by sunglasses, tinted glasses, glasses frames or hair.

Most people hate having a passport photograph made. The formal design is very unflattering, e.g. flat lighting, en-face, no accessories and so on. No 'idealisation' is permitted, so the airbrush has to be suspended. People often go back to be re-photographed trying to capture an image they believe looks like them. (Or more honestly, looks like the image of themselves they want to project). A good friend recently commented on her new passport photograph with the remark 'Camera malfunction or mug shot of a drug addict?' Clearly the idea that a single image can represent someone's identity is problematic. My proposed work 'That's not really me!' investigates this issue through a series of portraits.

The basic idea is to produce four portraits for each subject, to be presented side by side in a horizontal row. This style of presentation alludes to the format produced by studio photographers for passport photographs (see Figure one).



Figure One: Passport Photograph horizontal strip

The passport authorities require everyone to supply several identical portraits, apparently to avoid any ambiguity. But how do people decide which image out of many is the right one? In practice the process is somewhat random. It is the arbitrary nature by which a passport image is chosen, and by inference the way we are identified, that I want to explore.

My plan would be to show the photographs in a very large format - many times larger than life size. It is easy to overlook small nuances of expression in a small passport-sized photograph, but at the scale I envisage every little detail would be visible and the photographs would command attention emphasising difference not similarity. The work will be in colour and the formal design of the portraits will follow the UK regulations for passport photographs in all respects except for size. (see Figure Two).

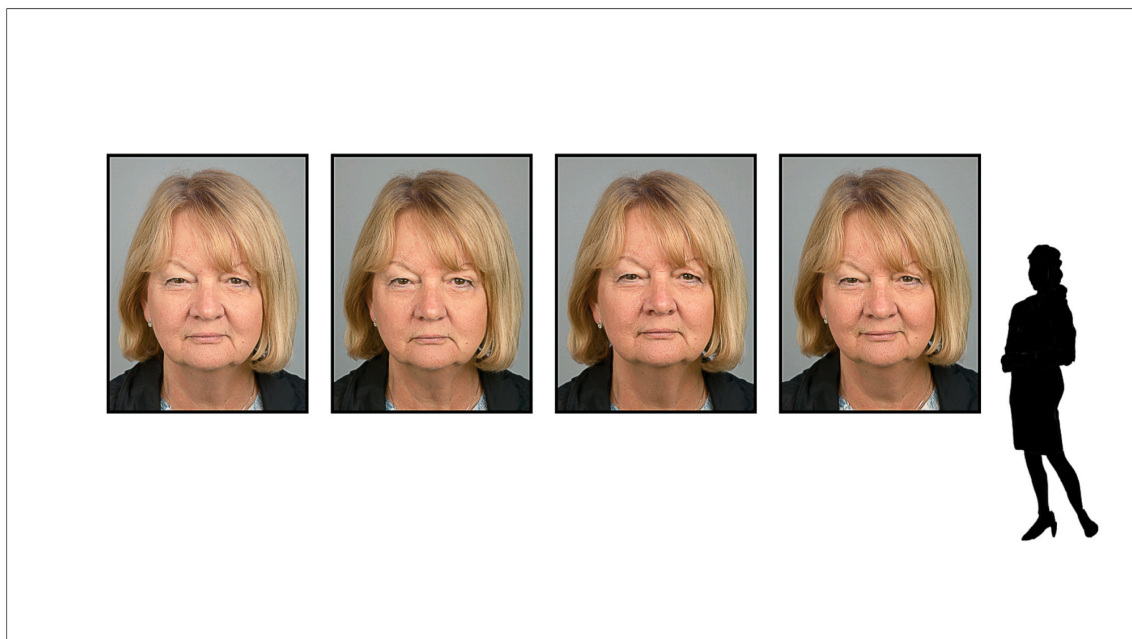


Figure Two: 2D view of 'That's not really me!' Installation

Showing multiple portraits of the same subject side by side can be read as a reference to the multifaceted nature of identity. It also points to the overload of images within postmodern society, the problematic nature of photographic realism, the passage of time and even mortality. It is a rich source of conceptual references. 'That's not really me...' uses the passport photograph as a metaphor for identity. The work is part of my broader study into photography and reality.

There are several artist/photographers whose work will be useful contextual references. Thomas Ruff's portrait series will be a starting point. Ruff's contention is that the portrait can only reveal surface appearance. His monumental portraits reference the humble passport photograph. Roni Horn's 'Portrait of an Image' shows headshots of actress Isabelle Huppert in sets of four. In each set Huppert is pictured assuming the face of a character she has played in one of her dramatic roles. This alludes to the illusive nature of identity. Arnaud Maggs produced several series where he presents multiple portraits of the same subject in grids. The most well know perhaps is "Joseph Beuys, 100 Profile Views" (1980). Magg's work alludes to the same questions about the mutability of identity but is also a record of an encounter. One senses the tension between subject and photographer in his work. I plan to undertake a more detailed review of the contextual framework for 'That's not really me!' which will include reviews of individual photographers.

Barthes R. (1999) *Camera Lucida* London: Vintage

Brik O (1926) *Photography versus Painting* In *Art in Theory* (1992) Oxford: Blackwell Publishing pp 470-473

Sekula A. (1986) *Readingan Archive: photography between labour and capital* In *Visual Culture: the reader* (1999) London: Sage Publications pp 181-192