Re-visioning and Investigating Portraiture: Representing the Immaterial
and Incorporeal Self

Marie-Louise Deruaz

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Abstract

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Marie-Louise Deruaz

Through this artistic approach, portraiture is viewed within a broad context of influences from both contemporary art and qualitative research in the social sciences. Focusing on the human interaction between the portraitist and the person being portrayed, a method integrating concepts such as collaboration and reflexivity from visual anthropology and sociology is explored. Aspects of working in portraiture using fine art photography and digital media are also investigated.

In creating three experimental portraits of Buddhist participants, I have combined digital audio, video and still photography media, discovering both advantages and limitations in working with this media. The Buddhist participants in this project added another dimension to the collaboration by providing their reflections on the concepts of self and portraiture. Creating portraits of individuals whose belief system differs from conventional notions of self as a separate and vulnerable entity allowed me to develop an experiential and transformative understanding of portraiture. This thesis suggests considerations for the integration of portraiture within art and photography education; it proposes a method that integrates reflexivity and other issues surrounding social representation, including considerations about subjectivity and the concept of self.

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1. Introduction

Photographer Richard Avedon is quoted as having said, "A photographic portrait is a picture of someone who knows he's being photographed, and what he does with this knowledge is as much a part of the photograph as what he's wearing or how he looks." (Broecker, 1984, p.48). Avedon's observation refers to the subjective nature of portraiture. The questions surrounding this statement are the subject of this studio inquiry, along with others that surface each time I turn my camera towards another person. This thesis project provided the opportunity for myself, also a photographer, to investigate portraiture, specifically the notion of photographing another, notions of materiality and non-materiality, and how these present themselves in the subject matter, process and final artwork.

Contemporary digital media has changed the face of photography in the last decade. It has influenced new forms of social representation, making possible large-scale web-based projects such as *Facing Australia*[1], as well as conceptually motivated digital composite works such as those of artist Nancy Burson[2]. Drawing from interdisciplinary research practices, as well as classical, documentary and contemporary approaches to photographic portraiture, I wanted to investigate and experiment with new methods for making a portrait using digital media and digital modes of representation. By also taking

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[1] Participants are invited to have their portraits taken based on census data. These images are assembled into male and female composite portraits created to represent specific communities in Australia. (*facingaustralia.com*)

[2] Burson's *Warhead 1*, for example, is a composite image created from the faces of the leaders of countries with nuclear power in 1982, weighted according to the numbers of weapons each country controls (Ewing, 2006).

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into consideration the temporal and subjective nature of portraiture, I intended to explore my understanding of portraiture as experience by describing the encounter between the subjectivities of the photographer (myself) and the person being photographed. This project also served to consider ways in which the multi-dimensional and multi-sensorial aspects of contemporary media might best represent the subjectivity of person being photographed.

Three individuals agreed to participate in a portrait session, with each final portrait comprising one or more captured representations. For the purposes of this investigation, portrait is defined as the entire visual, verbal and textual representation of each subject, assembled in digital media. I chose to work with practising Buddhists, either lay people or ordained practitioners, whom I had already photographed as part of the research project, 'Buddhism in Canada' for the Canadian Museum of Civilization. By selecting Buddhists as the subjects, I had the opportunity to explore and redefine my own notion of self as both material and immaterial, and explore the representation of that which can and cannot be seen.

The work/practice of a portraitist can be considered to encompass three aspects: material representation, that is, making a physical likeness; immaterial representation, that is, capturing something of the character or essence of an individual; and finally, the inherent negotiation and relationship between sitter and portraitist. All three aspects have associated conventions (West, 2004). For example, one convention is that a portrait must show the face of the subject. Related to this is the widely accepted notion that the features show emotions that have been elicited by the portraitist during the sitting. In the mid-nineteenth century, with the advent of new processes that eventually led to the

popularization of portraiture, it was commonly held that "a person's character and soul could be read in the features of the face . . ." (Peters, 2001, p.107) Peters goes on to comment that it was thought that photography could somehow better represent the complexity of social communication than painting by capturing the instantaneous emotional and expressive language of the human face.

In a wider sense, my inquiry attempts to establish a method for moving beyond the conventions that have evolved from early photographic portraiture to include aspects of ethnography and visual social research and to experiment with new media and new modes of representation. What can be communicated about the subject, the artist and the audience in a multi-layered and multi-media representation? Some of these aspects include engaging in a reflective, reflexive and collaborative artistic process that enable the resulting understandings to be more explicit for myself, for other photographers, and for those teaching portrait photography.

The implicit goal was to create representations — portraits — that allow for multiple readings and that invite reflection on the nature of social representation. By social representation, in its broadest sense, I mean, representation that is focused in some way on people, containing social, societal and humanistic themes that may or may not have been created with a goal such as social change in mind. Within this broader context, I would include not only the work of social documentary photographers such as Lewis Hine, who documented early industrial working and living conditions, but also visual artists whose work explores issues relating to our perceptions of what is human and how we relate to each other. I intended this creative visual research, along with the corresponding written analysis, to expand the definition of portraiture for myself as an

artist, for the participants/subjects I photographed, and also for the viewer-readers of this thesis. By offering an in-depth look into one photographer's reflections and process using a contemporary approach and digital media, portraiture is revealed as a collaborative process of investigation and social representation.

2. Influences and context

I received my training at Ryerson University, in a thorough, but technically rather than conceptually oriented, still photography program. This is a tendency that I continue to struggle with as an artist today. My interest in portraiture stems from my own sensitivities: I have always been interested in people and the contexts in which they live. In university I created a series of portraits where my subjects were photographed on Kraft paper backgrounds, on which I had drawn images in charcoal to represent their current interests.

Figure 1, 2. Kraft paper portraits

Had my career followed a different path, I might have become a photojournalist. I admired photographers who had the courage to spend time with their subject, producing photo-essays such as Mary Ellen Mark's work living with and photographing women in a locked asylum in the United States[3] and Robert Frank's *The Americans*. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to work as an assistant to a talented portrait photographer in Montreal, whose methods I observed and imitated as I learned to develop my own style of working. In particular, I observed his interactions with his subjects, struck by how he was able to put people at ease with humour and an unselfconscious and unceremonious manner. During this time, my ideas about what a portrait should look like were also modeled on certain well-known contemporary photographers whose black-and-white portraits have become iconic: Albert Watson, Richard Avedon, and Arnold Newman. Their portraits were often bold or stark in their composition and use of light, and over time have gained more significance as art objects than social documents. Working now as a professional photographer, artist, and someone deeply interested in representing all aspects of our social experience, I draw on over fifteen years of experience as a freelance photographer. Many of those years were spent creating editorial portraits for magazines and corporate publications, photographing artists, writers, politicians, and ordinary people in their workplaces. The portraits I made during these years could be referred to as environmental portraits. They were often shot using wide angle lenses, deliberately lit with portable flash lighting, and carefully composed to reveal elements in the surroundings that would offer clues about the person's work or talent. My subject would be positioned within the set I had chosen and illuminated, and coached throughout the

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[3] This work was published in a book, *Ward 81*, in 1979

process in order to elicit gestures and expressions that I felt were appropriate for the

representation I was creating.
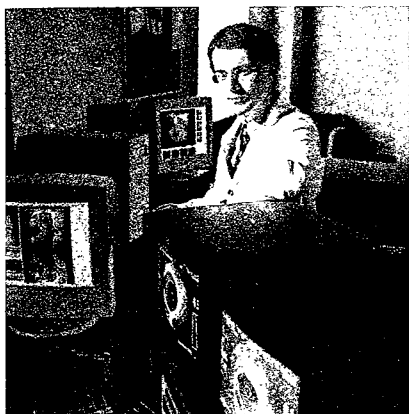
Figure 3. Portrait of Jean-Claude Tardif, a cardiologist, for *L'Actualité* magazine

Currently, my work at the Canadian Museum of Civilization encompasses the visual

representation of people, cultures and artifacts. While working for the museum, I had the

privilege of collaborating with ethnographer Aida Kaouk on a web-based exhibit on

Canadian women of African descent. Working with an ethnographer for the first time led

me to contemplate different approaches to portraiture as I photographed these women in

their homes with their personal objects and mementos (Deruaz, 2006). The experience

also led me to develop an appreciation for the ethnographer's in-depth approach and

research methods with human subjects. The site created by Aida, *Citizens: Portraits of*

Canadian Women of African Descent, provided an example of how ethnographic images

and portraits might be presented.
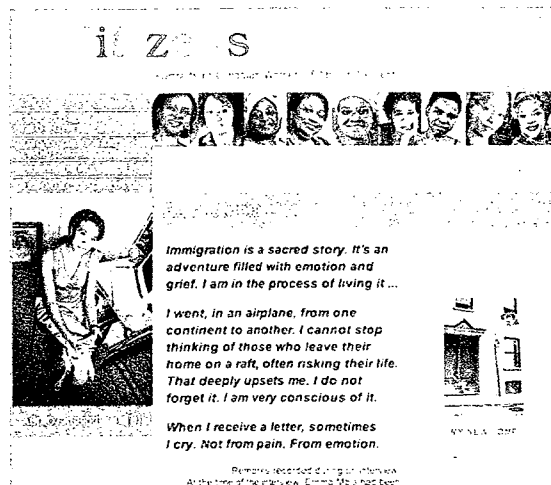
Figure 4. Emma Mbia's page

Working for the museum gave me the opportunity to realize that I could reconsider

my own definition of a photographic portrait and think carefully about the methods I had

developed to interact with and interpret the people I photographed. These ideas suggested

that I might revise the methods I had relied on for years as a professional editorial

photographer, and led me to wonder if I could create a complex and holistic

representation of a person that references their thoughts and influences as well as

referencing the interaction that occurs between the subject and the artist?

Some photographers consider their relationship to their subjects as that of an

outsider. While researching contemporary portrait photographers, I discovered Charles

Fréger, who photographs individuals belonging to social groups such as majorettes,

dancers or the military. I noted his observations about his own work in my journal:

> *His interest in groups comes from his belief that they exist to make outsiders feel*
>
> *they are not part of the group. This strikes me as having some psychological*
>
> *significance for him personally, but it's interesting. He thinks of himself as an*
>
> *outsider stepping into a group of insiders- he feels that through the process of*

photographing the group he is making his way into it, but, " . . . every time I finish,

my subjects make me feel that I am in fact, a total outsider. It's very frustrating but

that's the way it is . . ." (Jaeger, 2007). He creates a series of portraits of everyone

in the group, because he says he feels something happens to each person when they

step out of the group and exist on their own in front of the camera. (August 13, 2008)

More recently, ethnographers acknowledge that in their methods there is a balance

between participation and observation in fieldwork and that the two are in fact

intertwined (Wolcott, 1995, p.95).

Beginning in 2008, I worked with curator and ethnographer Mauro Peressini, who is

investigating the life histories of Buddhists of Western origin for an eventual book on

Buddhism in Canada. Dr. Peressini's investigation of each subject began with an

interview asking his subjects to tell their life stories, without limitations or time

constraints. His methods involved secondary interviews in which he asked further

questions regarding particular aspects of their life stories. All the material was eventually

compiled and transcribed, then provided to each subject for review. I was asked to

produce a series of portraits of certain individuals selected by Dr. Peressini. Before

photographing each person, I was given access to the life stories to provide me with some

background information. In the end, I did not entirely read these extensive documents,

instead skimming through them to gain an idea of the person's history. A significant

amount of time was accorded to these photography sessions; one half to a full day was

spent with each subject, often in more than one social context or location. This contrasted

with the typically short one to two hours I used to spend photographing an editorial

portrait assignment. In most of the Canadian Buddhist portraits completed so far, a

portion of time was also spent documenting the individuals as they engaged in their meditation practice as well as their physical environments and daily activities as monks, nuns or lay practitioners. Conversations with Dr. Peressini and the Buddhists I met through his research led to this thesis project.

While I do not practise Buddhism, I meditate occasionally. Each time I met an experienced practitioner who talked about the practices and concepts of Buddhism with me, I felt an unexpected sense of familiarity that I did not entirely understand. This surprising emotional response provided some of the motivation to continue working with Buddhist practitioners in my studio inquiry, while the project also provided a link to my work for the museum.

3. Investigations: key questions

The role I play in creating a portrait is the central consideration underpinning this work. As a portrait photographer, I must consider how do I, taking the role of photographer, contribute to and influence the representation that is created? If a portrait is a form of social representation, does it communicate something not only about the subject, but also about the social exchange between the portraitist and the subject? Could it be useful to include the physical space inhabited by the subject in the portrait? In what ways can material and immaterial aspects of a subject be interpreted in a representation of that subject? When I refer to immaterial aspects of a person I am referring to things such as their emotional state, personal philosophy or their moral code. It has occurred to me that digital media has a certain immateriality because of its ability to be easily reshaped

and repurposed. In certain forms it has transparency, and large volumes of information can be highly compressed. Are there ways that digital media — images, sounds, texts and video — can be layered and combined to provide a representation of the immaterial aspects/dimensions of a person? This question is perhaps one of the most intriguing to explore, and although it proved too complex to be answered by this investigation, more specific directions to follow emerged in the process.

Concerning the role of self in portraiture, my definition of the concept of self includes all the elements that make up the perception we have of ourselves at any given point in time. These include our physical appearance, our thoughts and emotions, and actions in relation to those around us, to name a few. This working definition differs somewhat from the concept of self that is implied by the Buddhist notion of non-self, which is detailed later in this paper. An important question arises when considering the notion of self in portraiture: What social and cultural aspects do our physical selves communicate in this kind of encounter, and can our words and actions during the exchange reveal or provide clues to our beliefs?

Maintaining an interdisciplinary approach in this investigation included reviewing recent trends from several fields outside art education and from qualitative research in the social sciences. Visual anthropologists and ethnographers are increasingly acknowledging visual methods in recent years, developing new methodological approaches to experiencing, interpreting and representing culture and society. The fields of visual anthropology, visual sociology, and cultural geography have tested and established methods for exploring social representation through photography (Ruby, 1981, 2005). Recently, more attention is being paid to specific methodological aspects in

visual ethnographic research, such as collaborative practice and researcher reflexivity (Pink, 2003, p.191). Sarah Pink (2003) also points out that contemporary visual research is increasingly incorporating interdisciplinary approaches using photography, video, drawing and hypermedia.

Applying arts-based or performative approaches to research apparently helps researchers move beyond rational and cognitive levels. In a special issue of the academic journal, *Qualitative Social Research*, authors Battisti and Eiselen focus on performative research methods and propose that researchers using these methods gain greater understanding of underlying or unconscious dynamics, emotions and resistances in the social interactions they are studying (2008). These trends in qualitative research led me to attempt to integrate certain social science methods into this artistic inquiry, with the goal of evaluating the blending of these two different approaches from the point of view of an artist rather than that of a researcher. Both creative work and social science research methods incorporate reflexivity, the latter perhaps more unconsciously than the former. Reflexivity can be defined by separating it into two variants, personal reflexivity and epistemological reflexivity. Personal reflexivity involves reflecting on the ways our values, beliefs, experiences, commitments and identities shape research and contribute to one's construction of meaning, as well as acknowledging the impossibility of remaining detached from one's subject matter while conducting research. Epistemological reflexivity concerns the overall design of the research and how the design, questions and methods either limit or construct what can be found (Willig, 2001).

Artistic practice is inherently reflexive; engaging in reflexive practices may be a way for artists to develop and define their body of work. The essential difference between

artistic practice and research practices is that although both must be defined and described in some way in order for a reflexive process to take place, artists may have a tendency to resist defining their work and methods in order to preserve the spontaneous aspects of the creative process. Some artists, after a period of practice, come to recognize that both reflection and reflexivity are essential for their artistic development. In his web log, *How Did The Artist Convince The World That It Exists?*, artist Nathan Stevens states that as an artist he needed to separate "being and doing" in order to understand the work on levels beyond merely referencing himself, and understand the multiple roles his work could have in relation to others (Stevens, 2009).

Further inspiration for new approaches to social representation and portraiture emerged from researching both historical approaches and contemporary postmodern and conceptual approaches to photography. Early documentary photographers who were interested in social issues assumed that photographic images existed as evidence of truth. The 'social documentary' genre of photographers often used portraiture to represent the disenfranchised and underprivileged classes. In the early to mid 1900s, photographer August Sander, seeking to represent a cyclical model of society, carried out a systematic, long-term documentation of groups he identified in German society — first peasants, then skilled workers, intellectuals, and finally gypsies, beggars and the insane (Misselbek, 2007). His large body of work continues to inspire portrait photographers to create series of portraits. Robert A. Sobieszek sums up one of my concerns with these de-contextualized portrait series when he states, "Photographers sought to express their own artistic agendas through the vacant faces of others" (in Peters, 2001, p. 25). Although the portraits of contemporary photographers such as Sebastiao Salgado, for example, are

appealing in their aesthetically gritty starkness, I tend to think that often these images say little about the context the pictures were made in, the people themselves, or their immediate concerns in the situation being represented. Prior to postmodern influences, photographers' work in the social documentary genre often did not supply context unless the work was accompanied by text in a book or presented with captions. As viewers and consumers we have come to no longer trust the veracity of a photograph, knowing what we do about image retouching. Alan Trachtenberg, cited in *Face: The New Photographic Portrait,* provided the following commentary on contemporary photography, "Sophisticated looking at photographs now wants the inscription within the image of signs of its making, marks of its being a photograph after all and not a timeless truth" (Ewing, 2006, in Notes, 56.).

Creating portraits that incorporate methods borrowed from ethnographic and social science traditions steers one back towards the social documentary genre, and allows one to address some of the issues that post-modernist critics had with these types of social representation. As Prosser and Schwartz (1998) noted in their discussion concerning the use of photographs in sociological research, visual ethnographers' and visual sociologists' methods give consideration to issues surrounding social representation — issues such as cultural expectations about photography, reactivity between subject and photographer, and the inherent characteristics of the technologies used. Ethnographer Sarah Pink reminds us that, "Images will be given different meanings as different people use their own subjective knowledge to interpret them" (2003, p.24).

Turning to look at contemporary artists who are working with digital media and photography reveals that using digital media and new technologies in various kinds of

humanistic representations inherently provides opportunities to reflexively examine the relationships between the artist/creator, the subjects, and the technologies themselves. Luc Courchesne is one such artist who uses digital media to explore the subjective nature of human and social experiences. Courchesne incorporates dialogue and interactivity in his video portraits as a way of addressing the inter-subjectivity in interpersonal exchange (Gagnon, 2000). Jason Salavon's *Flayed Figure, Male, 3277 1/2 square inches*, is a digital mosaic of the entire surface of his own skin, constituting a portrait on a different scale and one that would have been impossible without digital imaging technology. Yet it is unrecognizable as a conventional portrait (Goodyear, 2009). According to Anne Collins Goodyear (2009), digital media provides a strategy for the creation of contemporary portraits by implicitly representing the instability of identity, suggesting that artists now want to represent this slippage of visual identity rather than portray the security we once had.

Contemporary photographers are also consciously trying to address the issues of context in their socially motivated work. Photographer Jim Goldberg (1985), in his book *Rich and Poor*, displays a single black and white portrait on a page, accompanied by a short text, handwritten by the subject, who is commenting either on his/her situation or on the portrait itself. The inherently collaborative nature of portraiture becomes explicit in this kind of representation.

Wendy Ewald has long been a source of inspiration in her work around the world with children and her collaborative portrait projects. Between the 1970s and mid 1990s, she taught children to use cameras in photography workshops, suggesting themes for them to pursue and helping them review, select and exhibit their work as a group. In more

recent projects Ewald has tackled issues of gender and race by incorporating text and image in her collaborative methods. In certain projects she photographed the portraits herself but was directed by the subjects, who wrote accompanying text. In some cases the text and/or symbols were written or scratched directly onto the negatives. One such project, *White Girl's Alphabet*, was a collaboration with female students from Phillips Academy in Massachusetts. Each subject chose a word to represent each letter of the alphabet and was then photographed illustrating the word they had chosen, either with props or posed. The word was either written on the image in black ink or scratched into the emulsion of the negative, resulting in either black or white text in the final printed image. The students also wrote definitions for their words, which when their alphabet vocabulary was assembled together with the images, were felt by Ewald to reflect their personal experiences on campus (Berger, 2004).

Ewald's body of work, as well as other contemporary and collaborative forms of social representation, suggests the value in including text or finding additional ways to provide social context for images in portraiture. A review of social documentary and ethnographic photography web sites revealed that both photographers and visual ethnographers usefully combine images and textual information to provide more meaning. *Laponnensis* is an elegantly designed and personally motivated web based project documenting the historical context of the Sami people in Sweden (Brouwer, 2009) This site manages to powerfully convey in simple photo album style, accompanied by a single introductory paragraph, visual evidence of a controversial episode in the social history of Sweden. Most of these sites are modeled on text-based technology, where clicking links is similar to turning the pages of a book, the social context enhanced

with the inclusion of text either before or alongside the images.

4. Process and method

Visual and verbal methods of inquiry, as well as collaborative, adaptive and reflexive practices, have been integrated in this exploration of portraiture. Since this project originated as a creative investigation, the procedure and method varied with each subject throughout the process; however, the basic framework for communication with the subjects prior to meeting with them, the amount of time spent in a single encounter, and specific collaborative approaches was kept consistent for all three portraits.

Digital media, with its potential for layering information and linking different media, offers great potential for the creation and dissemination of portraits. It was chosen for the same reason I believe visual ethnographers collect their data using video and digital cameras: A lot of rich information can be gathered in a short period of time using reasonably compact equipment. The idea of juxtaposing text, audio and multiple images was envisaged as a way of extending the context of the representation of each individual beyond the authority of a single image. The use of video-editing techniques for the assembly of the portrait provided an opportunity to visualize parallel concepts in the construction of the representation. Digital media offered certain technological and methodological challenges in addition to adding some preconceived expectations about the process and the outcome for both the artist and the subjects. It was my impression that the subjects of my portraits, both in this project and in my past experiences, seemed to think that working with digital cameras requires less preparation, time and attention to

technique than traditional methods. When choosing equipment, the photographer must balance issues of resolution and quality with other considerations and, in the production phase, working with this kind of media is both limited and directed by the choice of software. I set about creating these portraits intending to choose the medium and content intuitively, believing that maintaining a reflexive stance would lead to insights about these choices. In the end, however, the inherent flexibility of digital media proved contrary to my expectations, and will be discussed further in Chapter 6. The media, equipment and software with which I chose to create and exhibit the final representations were selected for their accessibility and ease of use, both for me, and for future audiences.

In the early stages, through email communication, I provided each subject/participant with a project description which outlined my reasons for pursuing this subject matter and the origins of the ideas I wanted to test in developing a new method of portraiture. I asked them to commit two hours of their time and to choose a location representative of their current activities or interests where the portrait session could be conducted.

After I arrived at each person's place of residence, and the subject signed the consent form I had prepared (Appendix), we reviewed the proposed location for the portrait session. As it turned out, there was often little choice because of space and privacy considerations; I knew I had to be accommodating even if it wasn't quite what I had hoped for. This was in contrast to my work as an editorial portrait photographer, where the location of an environmental portrait was paramount to the success of the image and I tended to be quite forceful about choosing the spot, reorganizing a space if

necessary.

Before sitting down to begin the dialogue, I set up the video camera that would

document the encounter from a vantage point in the room, where we could both be seen

in the frame, and ideally from an angle where the subject's face was visible. The choice

of angle of view had to be made quickly, and since the location was new to me, it was

often difficult to position the camera in such a way that we could both be seen and heard

while still providing some sense of the context or space we were occupying. Two of the

portraits were conducted sitting on meditation cushions on the floor, since many

Buddhists generally sit this way for meals, meditation and social encounters.

After turning on a digital audio-recording device, I generally began by reminding

my subjects about the project, outlining my goals and the context of this work within my

role at the museum and as a portrait photographer. The encounters took the form of an

informal dialogue about the nature and act of being photographed and what this means

for the subject/participant and myself. The intention was also to discuss the interpretation

of certain Buddhist concepts that might be relevant, such as the idea that we are

immaterial and that there is no real, permanent or unchanging self within individuals. I

asked each person how the Buddhist concept of non-self might intersect with portraiture.

After a certain amount of discussion had taken place, I re-introduced my intention to

collaborate with them in choosing imagery that would be used to represent what might be

important to them at that point in time. I then formally asked them to identify three things

(objects, concepts, places or characters) that visually represented their beliefs, their

predominant concerns or ideals, who they were, or what was important for them at that

point in time. I suggested that once these things were identified, together we could decide

on how they could be represented visually, either in a still photograph or on video.

Each portrait session lasted between two and three hours. Two hours seemed a reasonable length of time to ask someone to commit in one block. All three subjects allowed the sessions to take their natural course without noticeably keeping track of time, surpassing the two hours I had requested. In this I was fortunate, since two hours proved not long enough to have both an extended dialogue and time to plan and capture images and video.

Incorporating multiple forms of technology in a portrait session requires some methodological consideration also. Having asked myself whether it was better to ask someone to assist me or to do things myself, I decided that the presence of someone else would alter the intimacy and trust I wanted to encourage. However, my experience working with assistants in the past has taught me that it can be helpful to have someone else present when equipment or technical concerns need to be attended to. Setting up the cameras and voice recorders proved distracting and, in one case, I actually forgot to put out the voice recorder. Fortunately for two of the portraits, the use of a video camera as well as the voice recorder to record our dialogue provided some useful overlap in the media[4] I collected. I tried not to let the various electronic devices interfere with my attention to the subject. If crossing the room to pick up the video camera seemed as if it would distract the subject, I avoided doing this. However, I couldn't avoid the fact that the mini-DV video camera tapes needed to be changed at certain points. I kept a digital still camera close to me and switched on so that I could quickly pick it up and photograph my subject, the surroundings, or anything else that our discussion prompted. It became

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[4] The term media is used throughout this paper to refer to the original unedited digitally captured stills, video footage or digital audio of my subjects.

clear during the portrait sessions that I should trust my instincts about when to move the camera and whether to use the still or video camera at a particular moment.

Throughout the entire project I was keeping a journal, recording my reflections about readings and portraits I viewed. I wrote an entry immediately after each portrait session to document the decisions I had made during the photographing and to record my impressions of each encounter. After all the portrait sessions had been completed, I reviewed the collected visual, audio and textual material in order to consider which aspects of the content could be constructed into a portrait, and to see if I could identify a principal theme, mood or feature to construct the portrait around. I chose not to include music in these representations, feeling that without discussing and selecting it with my subjects, my choices might culturally inappropriate to their traditions. Also, Buddhist practitioners typically renounce many aspects of conventional living, including entertainment.

As a way of further introducing collaboration into the construction of the portraits, I decided that I would send the subjects some of the images or video representing the three things they had identified which we had captured together and ask them to review the material and provide comments or feedback via email. This process would allow the subjects to contribute further or clarify how these things would be represented in the final portrait. Before sending them this material I edited the images, selecting the ones I felt were the strongest and correcting colour, contrast and sharpness using photo-editing software.

The process for assembling the portraits varied from one to the next as I experimented with different software and methods. For the portrait of Ajahn

Viradhammo, I first listened to the recording and made notes about the things I felt were significant or I might want to include. I then assembled the relevant video clips and digital images, as well as the comments Ajahn had emailed me in response to the photographs I had sent him. Initially I did not pre-visualize the final outcome, nor did I script a narrative prior to assembling the representation. I chose to work this way to encourage something new to emerge; I hoped that I would perhaps find alternative ways to combine text, image and sound that were not based on films, portraits or other visual representations I had experienced. This proved troublesome in the end, and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. Time was spent reviewing the material, and in the end, since I had decided that I would construct this portrait using Adobe Premiere™[5], I began by creating a rough storyboard of the clips and images and text using post-it notes. In assembling the portrait, I found that I had to find additional visual material and used video clips I had captured that summer at a cottage. Once the portrait was roughly assembled, I showed it to a few people for feedback, and discovered that additional context about Ajahn's life was needed for viewers to better understand the intention behind the short video. Finding additional audio, video or still images was difficult without further engaging with my subject — which I had decided was not an option. Fortunately the location for the portrait, Tisarana monastery, had a web site that provided image galleries for viewing, so after asking my subject for permission, I was able to integrate some of these photographs and add an introduction to the portrait.

Part of the way through this work I decided to engage the services of a professional editor, finding the learning curve for Premiere to be quite steep and not

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[5] Adobe Premiere is video-editing software, designed for non-linear and non-destructive editing of digital video.

wanting to waste time. After a couple of initial meetings to discuss the project and view

the material, I provided him with the roughly edited project file and all the captured

media, and we proceeded to work together via email and ftp. He would upload a

compressed mpeg version of the portrait to an ftp site, and I would download it, review it,

and send him comments and corrections.

I wasn't entirely satisfied working with video and I hoped to create a portrait of

Kelsang Drenpa different from the one of Ajahn Viradhammo. I therefore decided to

assemble the portrait using Microsoft PowerPoint™[6], a program I felt could offer better

control of text and graphics. Although I was relatively pleased with the initial results, this

software proved cumbersome to work with when integrating video. This, combined with

compatibility problems between Mac and PC platforms, resulted in the decision to go

back to using Adobe Premiere™, the video editing software. I found myself thinking that

the perfect software for combining audio, video, still images and text either did not yet

exist or I was not familiar with it. Although I knew that Adobe Flash™[7] might be the

answer, my schedule did not allow for learning a completely new type of software. With

Premiere, I already understood the principle of a timeline and off-line editing, which

allowed me to pre-visualize what I wanted and provide directions for the editor. The

portrait of Kelsang Drenpa was therefore adapted from PowerPoint to Premiere. I

encountered some scheduling difficulty with the editor; when I had time to view the files

and comment, he did not have time to work on the project, so the assembly of this portrait

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[6] PowerPoint is presentation software that allows for the integration and combination of graphics, animation and sound.

[7] Flash is primarily animation software that allows for the seamless integration of various text, graphic and sound elements with the ability to hyperlink content for web use.

was more difficult. I could not immerse myself in the process and work until it was completed, a luxury that I now understand belongs to the solitary artist.

The third portrait, of Miyokyo, was assembled in Premiere without the assistance of the editor. Having worked with the editor for the other two portraits, I found I had learned enough to be able to do most of the effects I needed. Contrary to the others, however, this portrait was pre-visualized to some extent and based on a narrative structure I had determined before beginning the assembly. Rather than listen to the entire dialogue, I decided to construct this representation around the three significant things Miyokyo had proposed in our meeting. As part of the context for the portrait, I also incorporated an image I had previously captured of Miyokyo, when I first met her working for the Museum of Civilization. In addition, I incorporated an image that she sent me as part of the email exchange we engaged in. It was tempting to use more of the material that I had captured in the first meeting with her, but I decided that this would defeat the purpose of my investigation by offering an easy solution to some of the creative challenges I was facing.

Although in reflexive ethnographic work a researcher might typically include their subjects in the process of assembly and/or final review of the data and conclusions, I decided that this was beyond the scope of my project since researching collaborative methods was not its primary aim. Given more time, it might have been interesting to involve non-artists such as my subjects in the problem-solving I faced in finding new ways of combining images, video, audio and text, since they would presumably be interested in the subject matter and the resulting representations.

The final stages of preparing the portraits for distribution and viewing involved

exporting the audio from each short video and working with an audio expert to clean up the most distracting aspects — background noise, clicks etc. It was also necessary to balance the sound quality between my voice, recorded using QuickTime™ at home, and my subject's voice, recorded during our dialogue. The edited audio was then re-imported into the project files in Premiere, and the final films exported by the editor at a higher resolution for inclusion on the final DVD. The final DVD, prepared using Adobe Encore ™, offers an introduction explaining the project and a menu allowing viewers to select which portrait to view. The order of the portraits on the DVD reflects the order I prefer they be viewed in. However, I felt it was important to give viewers the opportunity to choose, particularly since the audience the DVD will be distributed to is essentially quite small, the participants in the project and academics.

5. Outcomes: Expected and unexpected

Early on, I reflected in my journal on how I begin my portrait sessions:

I think beginning with a conversation is important to put someone at ease. This is an aspect of social engagement that most of us understand, and I feel it is important in this context. This conversation should, however, be the place where I identify myself to them, what my interests and concerns are, what it is I want from them. By first opening up myself I hopefully invite their collaboration and confidence. (August 7, 2008)

Each introductory dialogue I engaged in became progressively less structured. Because of my lack of experience with interviews, I preferred to let the dialogues follow their own course. I became content to let conversation meander, as long as I managed to fit in two

key questions: one regarding the concept of non-self and how this intersects with portraiture in general, and the second about three important aspects of their current lives and how they thought these could be represented visually in a portrait. In response to the second question, two of my subjects seemed to accept the structured approach I was proposing while one subject, Drenpa, appeared resistant. Nevertheless, by allowing things to develop in an unstructured manner and remaining flexible rather than stubbornly insisting on answers, I felt in the end we managed to identify things that were important to her.

Drenpa's difficulty in identifying three things arose not because she didn't know what was important to her, but because she felt that everything around her had equal relevance and the act of choosing would put undue importance on one thing. She somewhat arbitrarily pointed to a lemon sitting on a nearby table saying, "This, for example." Although feeling a bit frustrated, I picked up the lemon and asked her to hold it so that I could photograph it in her hands. I later found the photograph to be quite beautiful and a representation of pure form, which I believe was her point. She then balanced the lemon on her head, which I managed to capture in the fraction of a second it was there.

Figures 5, 6. Images captured during the portrait session with Drenpa.

At the time I felt I had no option but to respond to whatever she did, without evaluating. Later, on reviewing the images, I realized that her actions were an expression of her character and good humour, which I had managed to capture. The choice of the third image was a more consciously collaborative effort: a collage of images of people who had inspired her, which she had prepared as a gift for inmates she counsels in local penitentiaries. I knew this work was close to her heart and I felt it important to include it and represent it visually. However, I knew that the image could only say what I wanted it to say if combined with her explanation. This I videotaped carefully, in close up, capturing her descriptions of the people in the collage and the reasons she had chosen them.

In contrast, Miyokyo was able to quickly select three things that were currently significant to her: her relationship with Rumi, her dog, as an experience of love and compassion; sitting in the Zen tradition, as she does in meditation; and caring for her mother, who is elderly and living in a senior's home. Before moving around, we quickly decided how each thing could be visualized; I felt we made a good team as we exchanged ideas and solutions. I realized I was making the final decision on what to photograph and whether a digital image or digital video capture would work best. Perhaps this felt effortless because I was working with someone trained not to let ego get in the way. Certain things lent themselves to still photography; the meditation posture used by Zen practitioners is very specific, including how the hands are positioned.

Figure 7. Miyokyo in meditation posture

Her communication with Rumi, on the other hand, was better captured on video.

Although I was pleased with the process of visualizing and capturing these things, I felt at

the time that I did not have enough material. In comparison to what felt like a lengthy and

rich dialogue, three images/captured sequences felt meager. I wanted more varied

imagery to choose from, and wished for another space to use as a setting for the portrait.

My feelings may have been the result of previously photographing Miyokyo in the

summer with her dog on their daily walk at nearby Parc Mt. Royal — images I knew to

be colourful and a wonderful representation of an aspect of her daily life.

Sending each subject a selection of the captured images proved to be helpful in

providing additional context as well as an opportunity to renew contact. I wanted them to

know that I was thinking about them and working with the material they had provided.

During our dialogue, Ajahn Viradhammo did not hesitate to choose three significant

things; he answered, "serenity, compassion and joy". I later asked him why he came up

with what appeared to be aspirations. He replied that there are bits of him I wouldn't

want to represent, and that he was offering the best of his aspirations rather than the worst of his karma. Together we easily found ways to visualize these things, or perhaps, some combination of all three aspirations. We visited the pond at Tisarana where he often sits and meditates, and I photographed and videotaped there. He mentioned a photograph of a young refugee he had pasted in a journal, about which he wrote,

"The boy with the bread reflects my own refugee history and the story of so very many others. The smile of the boy is both his own joy and my joy at seeing his joy. The fact that people give themselves to this kind of humanitarian work gives me inspiration and hope." (Personal communication, October 2008).

He lent me his journal so that I could photograph the image of the boy, and suggested I look through it to see if any other images could be useful. No one had ever lent me something like this before, and I was surprised at his trust. I did not read the entries in the journal; I felt I would have been intruding into his personal life. I did look at the images he had pasted in and selected another photograph—one of his Thai teacher, Venerable Ajahn Cha, since I felt the image provided a good representation of serenity. Upon seeing my choice, he explained the significance of this man for him. "A truly awesome man in the most deep sense of that word — fearless, compassionate, humorous and so much more. His memory brings deep gratitude and strong motivation to do this spiritual work." (Personal communication, October 2008).

Figures 8, 9. Images copied from Ajahn's notebook

I also chose a photograph I had taken of Ajahn standing in the doorway of his kuti, the small wooden hut where he stays while at Tisarana monastery. I felt this photograph was appropriate since during our conversation he discussed time spent in his kuti; also, it was a more conventional portrait in the sense that he was facing and looking at the camera.

In other photographic portrait sessions, I have found that gender difference between the photographer and subject can add a level of tension to the encounter; however, because of my subjects' Buddhist beliefs, I did not expect the issue to arise. This assumption proved correct in the session with Ajahn Viradhammo; however, I had forgotten that the Theravada tradition in Buddhism does not allow a monk to be unaccompanied in the presence of a woman unless in a very public space. We therefore had to be accompanied by another monk when we set off to visit the pond. I commented on this portrait session in my journal:

We had to be accompanied by another monk, and that changed the dynamic our

discussion had created. I think I was able to capture a few moments that could work. Luckily I took the video camera with us on our walk as it proved to be somewhat more useful I think. It allowed me to capture the interaction between the two monks - perhaps something that could indicate connection. . . . Overall I think it was relatively successful as an information-gathering session, but visually I don't think I am there yet, something isn't quite working the way it should. It's the integration of visual with the dialogue, and how I approach the visual. (August 24, 2008)

Technological Issues and Digital Media Considerations

Many of the difficulties I encountered in working with the method I had chosen revolved around the technology and media I was using. I was very disappointed with the quality of what I had recorded and captured. One reason for this may have been the choice of devices: a small Sony Mini-DV video camera, a Panasonic digital voice recorder, and a Nikon D-100 digital camera. Since I was working alone, I chose these devices for reasons of accessibility and portability; however, the overall quality of the audio and video captures was poor, while the digital images, captured in raw format and processed afterwards using image editing software, were reasonably good quality.

I didn't feel that the material I captured overall met my aesthetic standards in several respects. Technical considerations such as exposure and sound levels were not consistent because I wanted to focus on the dialogue and was not monitoring these things as carefully as I might have done in other circumstances. Composition in the visual imagery also suffered since I favoured capturing anything that seemed relevant quickly and spontaneously; the dialogue consumed a large portion of our time together in all instances, leaving very little time to gather visual data. Finally, I felt the material lacked

richness and depth; the fact that we were only meeting once meant less information about their lives and their environment, and for two of the portraits we were limited to one indoor location.[8] It is likely that some of the richness I felt was missing is present in the recorded dialogue; as a photographer I very likely put more weight on visual data rather than audio material.

As a photographer I also found I was not entirely comfortable using the video camera. This had an impact on the quality of my footage as well as my ability to switch seamlessly from the video camera to the still camera or to talking with the subject. I realized that much of the artistry and creativity of my editorial portraits in the past was in the lighting. I would carefully supplement the available light in the scene and highlight individuals just enough to bring them forward in the final representation and separating them from a slightly underexposed setting. This aspect was entirely absent in the current process, and I missed it, not only because it was something I was skillful at, but also because even though working with available light provides a photographer with more time to focus on the subject, the generally low light levels in indoor spaces affect the overall quality of digital captures by creating 'noise' in the shadow areas. Perhaps the method I chose is more appropriate for outdoor settings, since I found these things to be less of a problem for the portrait of Ajahn Viradhammo.

Ethnographers have grappled with these aspects of visual representation in attempting to visually document social interactions. Which style of film-making, how the subjects should be positioned, and whether or not to augment the available light are some of the practical issues. The challenge of conveying ethnographic insights in the film when

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[8] One portrait session took place in August, the other two in December, on a very cold day.

the camera may not directly present them means that the distinctive "language of film"

becomes a central concern in ethnographic representations (Mason and Dicks, 1999). As

Drenpa began to speak about the work she does with incarcerated individuals who ask for

spiritual counseling, I knew I wanted to film her head and shoulders; I wanted to capture

her emotion and expressions from a closer viewpoint. I instinctively chose to handhold

the camera slightly higher than my eye level so that I could still meet her eyes and see her

expressions change. I hoped she would appear to be looking at the camera as she spoke.

Figure 10. Video frame, Drenpa

Further considerations around the choice of software and media emerged during

the production of the final representations — for example, what would be dictated by the

choice of medium. I forgot that if I were to create the final representations as videos, the

images would need to have the same aspect ratio as a digital video frame. During the

portrait sessions I shot both horizontal and vertical still images, forgetting that a video is

always horizontal. Of course, the images could be vignetted or cropped for use in the

video, but these things then became compromises in the creation of the final

representations. I also discovered while editing the first portrait using Adobe Premiere [TM] that incorporating real-time conversation in video adds length to the work that must then be matched with an equal amount of visual material — serving to reinforce my initial concerns about capturing insufficient visual material.

In the end I was disappointed with the representations I created; they do not combine text, image, video and audio in the ways I originally hoped, the overall quality of the visual media is poor, and they do not function well as narratives. I do think, however, that much was learned in the process of creating them and that numerous technical insights about working with digital audio and video were gained.

6. Reflections on method

On further reflection, I feel that some of the difficulties encountered with this portraiture method would work themselves out by repeating the experience. Like anything, the more often I engage in an activity or use a particular media, the better I become, and certainly some of the aspects of my method fall into this category.

Visual and Verbal Modes of Working in Portraiture

I discovered I needed more practice interviewing people. I found I was self-conscious and unable to quickly synthesize their response to determine if I needed to continue with that line of questioning or move on. I realized it was important to fully prepare and be very familiar with the concepts I planned to discuss. Although I was very interested in discussing the intersection of Buddhist notions of self and portraiture, I

found I had not synthesized my own position well enough to respond to some of the points introduced by my subjects. The previous experiences I had creating editorial portraits did help to some extent; however, I now realize I couldn't have been paying attention to what was being said since my attention was focused on the technical and aesthetic aspects of my work. I also felt that raising a camera once a dialogue had been established felt intrusive; the camera acted as a physical barrier between my subject and me, probably causing them to be self-consciousness and lowering the level of comfort we had established.

Some of these methodological problems have always been present in portrait photography for me. Even in the past I wanted to separate my discussion with the subject and the photography stage, wishing we had more time to get to know each other. In these three portrait sessions, I separated the discussion and photography/videotaping for the portraits of Ajahn Viradhammo and Miyokyo, although I still had the camera prepared and ready to use. I felt I had established a certain level of trust through dialogue but, not surprisingly, it felt difficult to switch to a new mode of interaction after a lengthy conversation together. This may be because different parts of the brain are being recruited for conversation than for visual processes, which, although completely beyond my area of expertise, would be interesting to investigate.

Another inherent problem in the process of capturing a portrait is assessing the content gathered during a portrait session and deciding where to focus more attention, especially without following some kind of plan. I felt that the visual material I was capturing was inadequate and in some way not reflective of the depth and intimacy of our dialogue. Although I had captured over an hour of interesting dialogue with each

participant, I seemed unable to give weight to this material — probably because I have little experience incorporating audio into this kind of representation. My background as a photographer also hampered my ability to work with the audio content as I worked on the final representations; for at least two of them, I found myself focusing on the available imagery rather than on the ideas we discussed in the dialogue.

A Collaborative Approach

The larger issue of how to represent the immaterial aspects of the encounter with visual and aural information still eludes me. I thought this could be at least partly addressed through a collaborative process of creation. In considering the effectiveness of collaboration after the three portrait sessions, I found the stage of creating imagery representing each person's three chosen 'things' to be most problematic. I have found that I tend to move towards clichés when feeling pressed for time; they often are the first thought that comes to mind. For example, when a subject from an earlier project told me the idea of justice was important to him, I immediately imagined a scale and wondered how I could visualize the weighing of two opposing things. In retrospect, I believe that asking subjects to collaborate when they cannot visualize the form of the final portrait and have not been shown any examples, may have made it difficult for them to decide if a particular image could reference the concept we were discussing. I knew that text and audio would support the image, but they probably could not envision this in the way I could.

In order for this kind of collaborative process to be more effective, or perhaps truly collaborative, the portrait-capturing phase and the assembly phase should have been

done in at least two sessions. Ideally, I would have returned to visit my subjects with an initial portrait representation assembled from the first captured media. We could have reviewed this together, and determined what visual or textual material could be captured or added. This would have enabled my subjects to visualize this kind of multi-media portrait and perhaps provide the richness and depth I felt was missing from what I was able to capture in a single session.

There was some evidence that collaboration did provide certain kinds of less visible insight into my subjects. In the case of Ajahn Viradhammo, the email exchange that took place after the portrait session offered clues or references to immaterial or perhaps spiritual aspects of himself. The comments he sent in response to the photos I sent him were revealing and eloquent, such as this excerpt: ". . . Open spaces, big skies, bodies of water all evoke the sense of freedom and space that are the hallmarks of the clarity that comes from meditation and contemplation."(Personal communication, September, 2008). There may be ways to combine images, video and audio successfully to represent some of the visual metaphors and ideas Ajahn discusses above. Mitchell Stephens argues for a new solution to the problem of communicating issues and abstract ideas through images by defining what he terms 'the new video' in his book, *The Rise of the Image, The Fall of the Word* (1998). Among other ideas, he suggests meaning can be derived through the intelligent juxtaposition of contrasting images (p.197). I decided that exploring this, and other ideas proposed by Stephens, would be very useful but would require a different approach from the one I had chosen for this project.

As I assessed my captured material for approaches to representation, I concluded that similar to ethnographers who review their data upon returning from the field, I had to

accept that what I ended up with would determine what I could create. Rather than being disappointed with the number of images, the quality of the sound or video footage, I realized that these things would simply become parameters for the creative process. If the video did not communicate what I intended, then it would become a background element; if the sound was unintelligible at the point I wanted to include it, then text would be substituted to express the thought. I had to remind myself that I was more like an underfunded ethnographic researcher, traveling light and working in difficult conditions, than a television broadcast network using state of the art equipment and a large crew of technicians.

Assembling the Representations

Initially, some of the ideas I had for constructing the final representations following the portrait sessions centered around the experience of meeting another individual. I considered constructing a filmic model based on steps that occur each time a new person is encountered — steps that provided clues to the person and could be represented: one's background knowledge of the person, the first look at their face, their surroundings and physical appearance, the voice and its accent or dialect, observed mannerisms, and finally, the conversation that occurred and interaction with others. This sort of representation might also consider what personal information is revealed as well as what the portraitist is prompted to reveal in exchange.

After the portrait session with Drenpa, I wrote:

The material I collected is very different this time around. It may lead to a different kind of representation. My impression is now of someone very real, very grounded who is accepting of her surroundings and role and someone who is content. . . I briefly thought

that maybe I could present the encounter as a conversation opposition of two elements –
sometimes starting with what I say and then her answer/image etc. Or, sometimes she
starts with something and then the response is from me? (December 19, 2008)

I now believe it would have been more useful to create different models or

representations of an individual with the same raw captured footage/media. I also have

concluded that the material I captured would lend itself more to a web-based

representation, created using a relatively sophisticated[9] html editing program. Using this

type of media would release me from the constraint of a horizontal frame, as well as

allow me to use text in more varied ways, and most importantly, to hyperlink content.

Linked content creates an interactive experience for the audience, while the links

themselves represent connections and hierarchies between different kinds of content. I

chose not to pursue this direction after having already invested a certain amount of time

learning to use video-editing software, deciding that it was best to focus my energy in one

direction.

As I worked on the portrait representations, I came to realize that developing a

method for working with multiple forms of media that offer a more contextualized

narrative must be guided by two principles. The first principle that must guide the process

is to decide what elements are needed for the representation. Even without a

predetermined narrative structure or storyboard, it is nevertheless important to identify

beforehand the elements without which the portrait would not function as a representation

of the person. This pre-conceptualization is particularly important if the subject is

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[9] A 'what you see is what you get' web design software such as Adobe Dreamweaver
would be required for creating this kind of representation

encountered only once; if several portrait sessions are planned, it could come down to a process of elimination when the captured results from the sessions are reviewed. The second principle is to consider what I as the portraitist bring to an encounter; what I desire in initiating the encounter, and what I believe I understood about the person. This shapes much of the portrait session, what is said, how the person is approached, what is captured, and eventually how the material is selected for inclusion in the final representation. As Fenwick English points out in his critique of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's use of portraiture as a qualitative research approach, " . . . while portraiture insists that it deals with meaning in context, the portraitist assumes the power to impose a vision of stable truth which is independent from the context in which it was generated." (English, 1998, p. 24). His critique makes the point that unless a portrait reveals simultaneous multiple stories or truths, it cannot be considered objective or reflexive, but remains a meta-narrative constructed by the portraitist. For this reason it became important to include myself in the representations, so that the representation itself reveals my presence and offers clues about the voice that created it.

I was prompted to reflect on the methods used by most filmmakers. In advance of filming, a storyboard is prepared, which includes the planning of framing, movement, timing, and a range of appropriate cutaways that will be required for editing. I had chosen not to do these things with the hope that creative impulse rather than preplanned visuals would lead to a sort of representation different from classic documentary and filmic approaches. However, since the sequencing of still and moving images is closely linked to narrative structure, without a storyboard I found myself essentially working backwards, trying to construct a narrative from a series of disparate elements. I should

note that, like any artistic medium, it is easier to plan required elements for a video in advance if one has some experience working with the medium.

I spoke with Frank Wimart, a documentary filmmaker, about his film *l'horloge interne* (2003), and asked him how he approached this subject. The film is a short documentary, a portrait of Denis Bissonet, who has a rare disease that inhibits the aging process. Frank commented that his film is decidedly a fiction, which he created by choosing to include and exclude certain elements of his subject's life, such as surrounding people. He told me that he wants to control what his audience is thinking while they watch the film; for example, to enhance the timelessness of his subject, he purposely excluded any elements that would mark time in the film (Personal communication, January 19, 2010). Although he told me that he felt his portrait is true to what he observed about his subject, and that his subject very much liked the film, I considered how much the concept contrasted with the kind of portraits I was striving to create. I felt that it would have been a psychological balancing act for me to produce a film in this way. Wimart's description of his methods clearly and unapologetically reveals that he as a filmmaker has the power to determine how his audience will perceive the portrait. The notion of power in the act of creating a portrait is also discussed by English (1998) in his critical appraisal of portraiture. I wanted to look for ways to reduce and make explicit the power and subjectivity in my method for creating portraits.

As I experimented with options for representation, it occurred to me that the portraits in their final form require 'deep reading' of my audience. The term 'deep reading' has taken hold in my vocabulary since taking a course in Visual Methods and Social Change with educational researcher Claudia Mitchell. I have adapted the term to

refer to the longer attention that may be demanded of an audience more accustomed to sound bites and fast-paced editing as a result of consumer-oriented media productions and television trends. The conventional approach and cues that one might find in a film documentary or a journalistic biographical piece are absent from my representations, and as experimental portraits, they may or may not be interpreted as such. I feel that these portraits are merely the first step in a process, where learning to negotiate the construction of a layered narrative, continuing to search for alternative methods of combining text, image and audio, and pursuing new methods of collaborating with my subjects will eventually lead to a concept of portraiture that I can be satisfied will encompass the multiple aspects of social representation.

The Role of the Face

Since beginning work on these portraits, I have been considering the idea of face, and wrote the following in my journal:

> *More recently I have been mulling over the idea of face, face recognition and how important this is in an encounter with someone. I have no real [useful] close-ups of the face of Ajahn, my first subject. I knew immediately after I had completed the portrait session that this was 'missing'.[10] It was my intention to move away from traditional representation of the face and head and shoulders, yet the more I think about it now, it is the essence of an encounter with another person, we look at their face for clues as to what kind of person they might be, is there a predominant expression, are there lines indicating worry or happiness, what do their eyes communicate? Did I think that a two-dimensional image of a face lacks*

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[10] The two portraits I took during the dialogue were out-of-focus. I was able to include a close-up of Ajahn smiling in the portrait by enlarging one of the still images, since the still images were captured at a much higher resolution than the video required.

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this information- is movement critical to reading a face? (September 28, 2008)

Many contemporary artists do not include such representational things as the face in portraits — part of the movement away from representational and authenticity-related issues in photography. I felt that the slightly unconventional approach I had chosen for this work was prompting me to return to the convention of including the subject's face, even in a symbolic way, in order to maintain that connection with our conventional notion of portrait. I found myself debating the issue; I wondered if I should videotape their face for a few minutes early in the interview as well as photograph them. This could appear confrontational as a first step, particularly if the person is feeling uncomfortable about the video camera. In developing my method, I hoped to remove some of the discomfort by beginning with a dialogue. I assumed the lens might cause less apprehension after some time had been spent talking together. In practice, I found that the dialogue did not remove apprehension so much as provide an opportunity to openly discuss the issue. How much of the apprehension is linked to the individual's personal experiences of being photographed or filmed? Or is it a matter of being comfortable with oneself? From a Buddhist perspective, my second portrait subject, Drenpa, offered the idea that the discomfort we have with being represented is useful; it can be used to meditate on form and the 'I' we feel when looking at a picture of ourselves.

"There is a picture, is that you? No. It's only a picture . . . it's like a reflection in the mirror, we think it's us." she says. " I think everybody has seen a picture that we really don't like and we should keep that picture actually." (Personal communication, December 19, 2008)

Portraiture may have cultural considerations also. Ajahn Viradhammo said that

traditionally Thai monks and teachers never smiled before a camera because they did not want to project any personality. "Now," he says, "they try to project compassion in their portraits." (Personal communication, August 24, 2008).

7. Reflections on Buddhism, concepts of self and immateriality

Defining self

I chose to create portraits of Buddhists partly because I wondered if representing individuals who have undergone transformative experiences around Buddhist conceptions of self (or 'anatman' in Sanskrit, sometimes referred to as non-self) would present a different experience. I say transformative, because typically non-Buddhists integrate all their thoughts, emotions, memories and feelings into one encompassing understanding of themselves, whereas, Buddhists, through many years of practice, ie. meditation, learn to let go of these things and develop a concept of self, or non-self, that is quite different. In my dialogue with Ajahn Viradhammo, he briefly explained the idea to me in lay terms. While there is still an individual functioning, there is no eternal essence in changeable things such as emotions, memories and thoughts — these are perceptions of self. There is, however, still individual expression, and so the goal is to express compassion rather than negative expressions that may arise out of attachment. He explains letting go of attachment as letting go of such things as sensory experience, gender identifications, and political expressions of self. What remains is awareness, a space where the ego is not in the way. He says,

> "Letting go is being patient when the negative things come up. We tend to use
>
> willpower to get rid of ego. However it is a paradox; if I believe in greed, hatred

and delusion, this creates more sense of self but if I can let go, then more of that is out of the way, and there is compassion, spontaneity, and there is connectedness." Therefore the Buddhist concept of enlightenment, or nirvana, is to return to an un-originated, unformed and uncomplicated state of awareness. He later offered one of the simplest descriptions of meditation I have ever heard; meditation is putting awareness on 'awareness' (Personal communication, August 24, 2008).

Each portraiture subject explained the concept of non-self differently. Miyokyo made a distinction between what she termed large self and small self, or, egocentric self. She explained that most people's life view is from an egocentric point of view, and that " . . .Buddhists aspire not to have a view from that egocentric self." (Personal communication, December 19, 2008). Drenpa explained it by saying that [all] things are form, but they can be used to bring one to a space where there is no form, for example, [contemplating] things which are simple and beautiful. She added that this is similar to the way [Buddhist] teachings bring her to a formless space (Personal communication, December 19, 2008). This formless space is essentially what I believe Ajahn Viradhammo was referring to when he spoke of awareness as being what remains once we are able to let go of sensory experience and other expressions of self. Ajahn also explained that in an enlightened being, individuality manifests according to context. One can feel compassion for someone who is sick, or joy for someone who is successful, but if no one is around, one would feel nothing. He mulled over the idea of portraiture in our conversation, saying that an artist projects his own ego into his work, and a portrait points to the object rather than the 'silence of a person'. He added that a photograph or work of art could bring you to a sense of awe, or state of emptiness, which I believe is what

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Drenpa was referring to when she said that things can bring you to a formless space

(Personal communication, August 24, 2008). In my conversation with Ajahn, I realized

that he was referring to the same perception I have of conceptual art, one that leads down

a path away from the art object towards a conceptual space or new state of awareness.

In my earlier photographing of Buddhist subjects while working with Dr.

Peressini, it seemed that the encounters had a different quality than those with non-

Buddhist subjects. As I learned about Buddhism and observed their beliefs and lifestyle, I

was being offered new ways of considering self and the possibility that my ideas about

representing self might be impacted as a result.

Buddhist influences on my portrait photography practices

In my conversation with Ajahn Viradhammo, he spoke about compassion, which

prompted me to write the following in my journal:

> *I have listened to Ajahn speak about compassion and I can't get it out of my head*
> *that a portrait is both an experience of being compassionate and at least for me, a*
> *visualization of compassion. This is a very interesting thing to contemplate. As a*
> *photographer you need to open yourself up to the person you encounter, to try to*
> *read their signals without knowing how the person communicates, in order to*
> *understand how and what you may communicate with them. The goal, again, for*
> *me, is never to create something ugly; to show something positive about the*
> *person and transmit something of the communication I had with the person,*
> *something of my impression of the person. Impression is a good word- thoughts of*
> *things that can never be verified, behavior and words that may only have been*
> *manifested in an encounter with the individual that I am, not anyone else. . . (July*
> *7, 2009)*

The project can also be viewed as an exercise in awareness, which is related to another Buddhist concept. As a photographer, visualizing my interaction with a subject and my choices regarding angle of view and framing can only make me a more thoughtful photographer in the future. Drenpa is the one who suggested the value of this to me during our dialogue (Personal communication, December 19, 2008).

Something in the belief system of Buddhist practitioners makes an encounter with them different than most encounters with other individuals I meet in a small city such as Ottawa. There is a sense of openness, trust, and being grounded that I don't feel when I meet most people. The belief systems in Buddhism are complex, based on teachings that vary depending on which tradition or lineage a practitioner follows; nevertheless, one could say that the underlying concepts are essentially similar and of the utmost simplicity. Is the trust and acceptance one feels in their presence due to their ability to differentiate between form and perception?

Anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, having observed the indigenous people of Papua New Guinea's first reactions to seeing themselves in a mirror and years later in photographs, concluded that mirrors and portraits corroborate the universal human notion that we have a symbolic self outside our physical self, and that when made explicit and vulnerable in a representation, the experience can be traumatic (Ewing, 2006). This may support the idea that non-Buddhists would find the idea of having their photograph taken to have considerably more import than my Buddhist subjects, as suggested by their trusting and open attitude towards me throughout the entire process.

I had hoped that this investigation would shed light on this and other impressions I had during my encounters with Buddhist practitioners. However well integrated my

subject's beliefs were with their behaviors, and however well they explained the ideas behind their beliefs in lay terms to a non-practitioner such as myself, I came to believe that I would best understand the concepts through the practice of meditation over time.

Future Inquiries

My experiences of working with these three Buddhists offered a glimpse into an alternate world view that is both frightening and fascinating to me; could I ever let go of my perceived relationship with others and the world to consider that these relationships have been constructed by me? The logical next step in exploring the idea of formless self as an artist would be to begin to meditate on the concepts I have been introduced to and perhaps engage in a process of self-portraiture to explore the changes or moments of awareness that might occur. I would also like to further my understanding of how to communicate these intangible things using digital media and its modes of representation. I am planning to pursue the creation of web-based portrait representations to see if I am able to integrate text and digital media in some of the ways I originally imagined — with less linear structure and using text as a graphic element as well as to provide context.

8. Implications for art education

Recent art education literature suggests there is increasing motivation for incorporating the processes of contemporary art into art education. Contemporary theorists argue that art education must move beyond the making of aesthetic objects to viewing art making as a process, exchange or transformative experience (jagodzinski,

2009). This research focuses on a collaborative and experiential approach to portraiture by incorporating dialogue and exchange with my subjects into the process. In considering my own method and experience of portraiture in detail, this thesis provides some background for developing and integrating contemporary portraiture and social representation into media arts and photography education, as well as providing a personal account of a photographer and artist's process of creating a portrait.

Portraiture has always had a relationship with social representation, as we have seen from examining its historical beginnings as an agent for social change by early documentary photographers. Digital media and Internet-based technologies have come to take a significant role in personal, social and cultural representation, as evidenced by the widespread use of digital photography and video in social networking, communication technologies, and corporate web-based applications. The theoretical framework within art education that currently examines and interprets these trends is visual culture. Drawing from approaches in fields such as cultural studies, media studies, and visual anthropology as well as a range of theories from critical theory to post-structuralism, visual culture's subjects include "an inclusive register of images, artifacts, objects, instruments and apparatuses, as well as the experience of networked and mediated subjects in a globalized 21st century . . ." (Tavin, 2005, p.17). Technologically speaking, this implies the integration of digital media within curricula and the inclusion of specific projects or courses designed to teach students to work and think critically with media such as digital video, digital still photography and web-based technologies.

Concepts from visual anthropology and sociology as well as cultural geography could help art and media arts students think critically about the processes of and issues

behind creating representations of others. Ethnographers' and visual sociologists' methods give consideration to issues surrounding social representation, issues such as cultural expectations about photography, reactivity between subject and photographer, and the inherent characteristics of the technologies used (Prosser and Schwartz, 1998). Additional considerations can be learned from the way qualitative researchers and ethnographers gather their data — how the subject of a portrait is contextualized, for example. Visual ethnographers develop relationships with their subjects, and in assembling their data are combining images, captured interactions and interpreted textual observations in their attempts to capture the complexity of human experience. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) points out that, as other anthropologists have acknowledged, ethnographic work is inherently creative. Her motivation for working with portraiture stems not only from her wish to acknowledge this creative aspect but also from her desire to move beyond the academic audience and open her work to a wider audience. She writes, "With its focus on narrative, with its use of metaphor and symbol, portraiture intends to address wider, more eclectic audiences. . . . In Clifford Geertz's terminology, portraits are designed to "deepen the conversation" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 10). These ideas point to the relevance of including portraiture in contemporary art education, and suggest approaches to teaching portraiture as an experiential method for investigating social representation of all kinds.

Understanding the concept of reflexivity in creating social representations is essential, including that as a portraitist one is shaping the process and the final representation, and that this shaping must be made explicit in the representation if the portrait is to be a reflexive exercise. Students interested in working with portraiture

would be well served to ask themselves before beginning: What do I bring to the encounter? What do I desire to learn and why did I want to create a portrait of this particular person? And, finally: What do I think I already know about the person? For researchers, and for myself as a portraitist, video recording operates as a reflexive tool by visually capturing the participation of both the researcher and subjects in their choices and mutual awareness of their roles in the process (Lomax and Casey, 1998).

Contemporary artists and photographers have shown us that using digital media and new technologies not only expands possible forms of representation for portraiture and social representation through variations of scale, new methods of diffusion and the addition of the dimension of time. Their works also reflexively examine the relationships between the artist/creator, the subjects, and the technologies themselves.

My experiences of working with digital media in portraiture offer certain insights into shaping a creative learning experience with this media. It would have been useful to outline the parameters and characteristics of different media and tools for assembling digital media constructions in order to make decisions about how best to capture certain elements of the portrait and how to construct the representation. I discovered that working with time-based media such as video and audio necessitates constructing a narrative and storyboard, either before capturing the media or afterwards. Later in the process, after concluding that the linearity and framing of video was making it difficult to create the kind of portrait representation I had envisaged, I realized that I might have learned more by creating multiple representations and applying different technological models to one subject.

Investigating my own assumptions, definitions and methods offers some insights

into portraiture as a collaborative process. My assumptions about inviting collaboration from my subjects guided the method in this investigation; however, I came to additional conclusions about collaborative practices that could be more effective. It became evident that flexibility was required to accommodate the differences brought to the process by each subject, as evidenced in my engagement with Drenpa. In order for a method of portraiture to be truly collaborative, I concluded that multiple interactions with my subjects would have offered additional and probably richer audio-visual material to be collected. Allowing my subjects to be involved in or respond to the assembled media may have provided useful insights, since editing the images and video is an important part of the process. This would have given them the opportunity to better understand the kind of representation I was visualizing.

On a personal level, enhancing my understanding of process-oriented creative work using digitally captured media provided me with a renewed vision of portraiture, while grounding the practice in contemporary discourse about photography and ethnographic representation. New directions were suggested, and personal and technological limitations were discovered in the process. This work provided an opportunity to explore interesting observations on the interplay between practice and theory in the artistic process. Writing in a journal throughout the process provided a way of distancing myself from the work in order to allow reflections and new ideas to emerge. During the writing of this report, new visual solutions would suddenly present themselves, as if engaging in a different kind of analysis erases the visual patterns that have been established from reviewing the same sequences and captures over and over again. The opportunity to collaborate with Buddhist subjects led to some stimulating

ideas and exchanges, and most of all, I am grateful for these insights.

In my interactions with students and interns within the Canadian Museum of Civilization's photographic studio setting, I hope to act as a knowledgeable photography educator. The fields of visual sociology and visual anthropology, as well as contemporary art, can offer new approaches and provide examples of how collaborative and reflective practices could be integrated in the work of a museum photographer. I consider the museum's mandate to include social representation. If I am creating and capturing images that become part of its collection and exhibitions, then it is relevant to continue to investigate connections between disciplines that approach social representation. The search for new approaches to visualizing and interpreting human, social and cultural representations continues. This investigation marks the beginning of my search towards that larger goal.

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Appendix A

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN:

Re-visioning and investigating Portraiture: representing the immaterial and incorporeal self

This is to state that I agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by Marie-Louise Deruaz, of the department of Art Education of Concordia University. marielouised@gmail.com, 613 234-9971.

A. PURPOSE

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is as follows: To investigate the nature of photographic portraiture and, by combining images and audio collected from a portrait session and dialogue, create a multimedia representations of the experience between the photographer and subject.

B. PROCEDURES

Subjects are asked to collaborate in a dialogue and portrait session, in the location of their choosing that may best represent their current activities and interests. The dialogue will consist of an informal conversation that is recorded, during which the subject will be photographed and/or videotaped. Any material that is collected from this meeting can be reviewed and rejected by the subject prior to being included in a final representation. Two hours would be an ideal length of time in which to conduct the interview/portrait session, however this could be broken up into shorter sessions if preferable.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

There are no physical or psychological risks involved in this research. The benefits include access to audio and visual material that is collected in the process of the interview/portraits, as well as a copy of the final multi-media portrait and thesis paper, provided on cd.

D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at anytime without negative consequences.

- I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and

    NON-CONFIDENTIAL (i.e., my identity will be revealed in study results)

- I understand that the data from this study may be published.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print   _____

SIGNATURE   _____

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Adela Reid, Research Ethics and Compliance Officer, Concordia University, at (514) 848-2424 x7481 or by email at areid@alcor.concordia.ca