



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture

Alphen, E.J. van; Mosquera G

Citation

Alphen, E. J. van. (2011). The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture. In *Interfaces: Portraiture and Communication* (pp. 47-62). Madrid: La Fabrica. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17734>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17734>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture

Ernst van Alphen

The pictorial genre of the portrait doubly cherishes the cornerstone of bourgeois western culture. The uniqueness of the individual and his or her accomplishments is central in that culture. And in the portrait, originality comes in twice. The portrait is highly esteemed as a genre because, according to the standard view, in a successful portrait the viewer is not only confronted with the "original", "unique" subjectivity of the portrayer, but also of that of a portrayed. Linda Nochlin has expressed this abundance of originality tersely: in the portrait we watch "the meeting of two subjectivities"¹.

Such a characterisation of the genre immediately foregrounds those aspects of the portrait that heavily depend on specific notions of the human subject and of representation. As for the represented object, this view implies that subjectivity can be equated with notions like the self or individuality. Somebody's subjectivity is defined in its uniqueness rather than in its social connections: it is someone's interior essence rather than a moment of short duration in a differential process. Somebody's continuity or discontinuity with others is denied in order to present the subject as personality. One may ask if this view does justice even to the traditional portrait.

As for the representation itself, the kind of notion we get from this view is equally specific. It implies that the portrait *refers* to a human being which is (was) present outside the portrait. A recent book on portraiture makes this notion of the portrait explicit on its first page:

Fundamental to portraits as a distinct genre in the vast repertoire of artistic representation is the necessity of expressing this intended relationship between the portrait image and the human original².

The artistic portrait differs, however, from the photographic portrait as used in legal and medical institutions, by doing a bit more than just referring to somebody. It is more than documentation³. The portrayer proves her/his artistic originality by *consolidating* the self of the portrayed. Although the portrait refers to an original self already present, this self needs its portrayal in order to secure its own being. The portrayer has enriched the interiority of the portrayed's self by

Ernst van Alphen teaches comparative literature and literary theory at the University of Leiden. His research examines the relationship between Modernist and Post-modernist literature and the visual arts.

1. L. Nochlin, "Some Women Realists", *Arts Magazine* (p. 29), May, 1979.

2. R. Brilliant, "Portraits: a Recurrent Genre in World Art", in Jean M. Boratti and R. Brilliant, *Likeness and Beyond. Portraits from Africa and the World*, Center for African Art, New York, 1990, p. 7, pp. 11-27.

3. For the use of the photographic portrait in medical and legal institutions, see J. Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photography and Histories*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1988; and A. Sekula, "The Body and the Archive", in Richard Bolton (ed.), *The Contest of Meaning. Critical Histories of Photography*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1989, pp. 343-89. Sekula argues that the photographic portrait extends and degrades a traditional function of artistic portraiture, that is, of providing the ceremonial

bestowing exterior form, on it. For, without outer form the uniqueness of the subject's essence could be doubted. The portrayer proves her/his own uniqueness by providing this proof.

The traditional portrait in this equally traditional view seems to embody a dual project. Two interests are intertwined in this genre. The first interest is quite obvious: the portrait's investment in the authority of the portrayed. The most innocent reading of portraits would be that the sitters were portrayed because they had authority in the first place, in whatever field of society. But since our insight into the past distribution of authority is mediated, among other things, through portraits of historical figures on which we bestow authority because they have been worthy of portrayal, this intuitive acceptance of the "real" authority of the sitter is actually the reverse of that other activity, namely, placing authority in them through the function of the portrait. From the perspective of the viewer this innocent reading is a case of analepsis, of chronological reversal. It is because we see a portrait of somebody that we presume that the portrayed person was important and the portrayed becomes the embodiment of authority in whatever way. Thus, authority is not so much the object of portrayal, but its effect. It is the portrait which bestows authority on an individual self. The portrait, especially when it is framed by its place in the National Portrait Gallery or a comparable institution, expects us viewers to stand in awe, not so much of the portrait, but of the portrayed.

The portrait, however, does more than this. Not only does it give authority to the self portrayed, but also to the mimetic conception of artistic representation that produces that increase of authority. Since no pictorial genre depends as much on mimetic referentiality as the traditional portrait, it becomes the emblem of that conception. The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer is a clear spokesman for this exemplary status of the portrait.

The portrait is only an intensified form of the general nature of a picture. Every picture is an increase of being and is essentially determined as representation, as coming-to-presentation. In the special case of the portrait, this representation acquires a personal significance in that, here, an individual is presented in a representative way. For this means that the man represented represents himself in his portrait and is represented by his portrait. The portrait is not only a picture and certainly not only a copy, it belongs to the present or to the present memory of the man represented. This is its real nature. To this extent the portrait is a special case of the general ontological value assigned to the picture as such. What comes into being in it is not already contained in what his acquaintances see in the sitter⁴.

In the portrait, Gadamer claims, an individual is not represented idealised, nor in an incidental moment, but in "the essential quality of his true appearance".

presentation of the bourgeois self. "Photography came to establish and delimit the terrain of the other, to define both the generalized look - the typology - and the contingent instance of deviance and social pathology", p. 345. 4. H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Continuum, New York, 1975, p. 131.

This description of the portrait as exemplum of the (artistic) picture reveals the contradictory nature of mimetic representation. It shows how the traditional notion of the portrait depends on the rhetorical strategy of mimesis. According to Gadamer, in the portrait, more than in any other kind of picture, an "increase of being" comes out. This increase turns out to be the essential quality of the true appearance of the sitter. The portrait refers to this sitter who exists outside the work. Since the sitter exists outside the work, we may assume that also her/his essence exists outside the work⁵.

This implies that the portrait brings with it two referents. The first is the portrayed as body, as material form. The second is the essence of the sitter, her/his unique authenticity⁶. Within the traditional notion of the portrait, it is a truism to say that the strength of a portrait is being judged in relation to this supposed essence, not in relation to the looks of a person. This explains the possibility of negative judgements on photographic portraits. Although a camera captures the appearance of a person maximally, the photographer has as many problems in capturing a sitter's "essence" as a painter does. Camera work is not the traditional portrayer's ideal, but its failure, because the essential quality of the sitter can only be caught by the artist, not by the camera.

But in Gadamer's text we don't read about an essential quality which has been *captured*. The essential quality of the sitter is the increase of being that seems to be *produced* by the portrayer in the portrait. "What comes into being in it is not already contained in what his acquaintances see in the sitter". The portrayer makes visible the inner essence of the sitter and this visualising act is creative and productive. It is more than a passive rendering of what was presumed to be already there, although interior and hence invisible. The portrayer gives his supposed interiority an outer form so that we viewers can see it. This outer form is then the signifier (expression) of the signified (the sitter's inner essence).

What to do with the surplus of the increase of being? It is clear that Gadamer does not use the term "increase of being" for the portrait's "likeness" with the sitter's material form. He indicates the second referent of the portrait: the sitter's essential quality. Gadamer *makes us believe* that what comes into being in the portrait is the same as the referent of the painting. He presumes a *unity* between increase in being and the essential quality of the sitter or, semiotically speaking, between signifier and signified. By presuming that unity, he denies that the increase of being is a surplus. By doing that, Gadamer exemplifies the semiotic economy of mimetic representation. This economy involves a straightforward relationship of identity between signifier and signified.

This identity between signifier and signified is not inevitable. Andrew Benjamin historicises the kind of semiotic conception which also underlies Gadamer's view in the following terms:

5. Brilliant sees the portrait as a transcendent entity: "Portraits concentrate memory images into a single, transcendent entity; they consolidate many possible, even legitimate, representations into one, a constant image that captures the consistency of the person, portrayed over time but in one time, the present and potentially forever" (Brilliant, *Portraits*, p. 13). I contend that his transcendent entity, the result of the concentration of several images into one, is based on the same representational logic as Gadamer's "instance of being".

6. A. Benjamin, "Betraying Faces: Lucien Freud's Self-portraits", in *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde*, Routledge, London and New York, 1991, pp. 61-74. He discusses the semantic economy of mimetic representation from a philosophical perspective. I follow here the main plints of his argument.

7. See K. L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe. On the Foundation of the Representational Arts*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1993.

The signifier can be viewed as representing the signified. Their unity is then the sign. The possibility of unity is based on the assumed essential homogeneity of the signified. The sign in its unity must represent the singularity of the signified. It is thus that authenticity is interpolated into the relationship between the elements of the sign. Even though the signifier and the signified can never be the same, there is, none the less, a boundary which, transgressed, would render the relationship inauthentic⁸.

Most surprisingly, Benjamin attributes authenticity neither to the signifier nor to the signified, but to the special relationship between the two. In the case of the portrait this semiotic economy implies that the qualifications "authenticity", "uniqueness", or "originality" do not belong to the portrayed subject or to the portrait or portrayer, but to the mode of representation which makes us believe that signifier and signified form a unity. In connection with the issue of authority, this entails a socially embedded conception: the bourgeois self depends on a specific mode of representation for its authenticity.

Now my earlier remark becomes clearer, because more specific, that the portrait embodies a dual project: it gives authority to the portrayed as well as to mimetic representation. The illusion of the uniqueness of the portrayed subject presupposes, however, belief in the unity of signifier and signified. As soon as this unity is challenged, the homogeneity and the authenticity of the portrayed subject fall apart.

In the following pages I will argue that in twentieth-century art the portrait has become such a problematic genre, marginal as well as central in a subversive way, because from a semiotic point of view the crisis of modernity can be seen as the recognition of the irreconcilable split between signified and signifier. At the moment that artists stop seeing the sign as a unity, the portrait loses its exemplary status for mimetic representation. But artists who have made it their project to challenge the originality and homogeneity of human subjectivity or the authority of mimetic representation, often choose the portrait as the genre to make their point. The portrait returns, but with a difference, now exemplifying a critique of the bourgeois self instead of its authority; showing a loss of self instead of its consolidation; shaping the subject as simulacrum instead of as origin.

SUBJECTED SUBJECTS

In an article on the ends of portraiture, Buchloh sees the portraits Picasso made in 1910 of his dealers, Kahnweiler, Vollard and Uhde, as pronouncements of the death of the genre:

These antiportraits fuse the sitter's subjectivity in a continuous network of phenomenological interdependence between pictural

8. Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

surface and virtual space, between bodily volume and painterly texture, as all physiognomic features merge instantly with their persistent negation in a pictorial erasure of efforts at mimetic resemblance⁹.

In these Cubist paintings Picasso has not only explored a new representational mode, but at the same time articulated a new conception of subjectivity. What kind of subjects emerge from these portraits, and how?

Picasso no longer makes use of a plastic system of signs which refer iconically to referents, fictional or not. His representational mode is no longer mimetic. He uses a small number of forms which signify in relation to each other, differentially. This new mode of representation is based on an economy in which no signifier forms a fixed unity with a signified. Yves-Alain Bois has described this Cubist mode of signification in detail in his article "Kahnweiler's Lesson". He writes: "A form can sometimes be seen as 'nose' and sometimes as 'mouth', a group of forms can sometimes be seen as 'head' and sometimes as 'guitar'"¹⁰. The signs Picasso uses in these portraits are entirely "virtual, or nonsubstantial" and can no longer be assumed to relate mimetically to the object of representation: parts of the sitters, faces, for instance. The portrayed subjects are shaped mainly as a result of a differential process *between* the signifiers used.

But does this signifying model based on structural difference also give rise to a new conception of subjectivity? Because of my earlier claim about the intertwinement of these two kinds of conceptions, one should expect so. There are remnants of the mimetic model insofar as the portrayed dealers "look" different. They can be distinguished from each other. But as we have seen, a "good" portrait claims more than physical recognisability and it would be ludicrous to claim that Kahnweiler is depicted there in his full presence or essence. Here, the process of constructing the illusion of subjectivity with forms which are *arbitrary and exchangeable* has become predominant. To differentiate subjects from each other, to depict them as individuals, is not the same as bestowing authenticity on them¹¹.

Andy Warhol's portraits have played a major role in posing questions concerning the social and public dimension of subjectivity. In his work, the subject has acquired explicit mythical and incredible proportions. This ironic mythification leads to a disappearance of all subjectivity on both sides of the portrait: that of the portrayer and the portrayed. Warhol's individuality, his painterly performance, is systematically absent. His photographic, mechanically produced portraits leave no room for the illusion of the unique self of the portrayer. But the portrayed sitters are also bereft of their interiority. They are exhibited as public substitutes for subjectivity. We viewers see not

9. B. H. D. Buchloh, "Residual Resemblance: Three Notes on the Ends of Portraiture", in Melissa E. Feldman (ed.), *Face-Off. The Portrait in Recent Art*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 1994, pp. 53-69, p. 54.

10. Y. A. Bois, *Painting as Model*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, p. 90.

11. Buchloh argues that post-war New York photographers like Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon and Irving Penn try to reassert the bourgeois concept of subjectivity. Photography is often the medium used for regressive reactions to new conceptions of the subject. Buchloh sees their works as desperate efforts to hold on to unique individuality. Since the mythical dimension of this notion is increasingly exposed, they try to convince by representing extreme cases. They focus on forms of eccentricity and on sitters who are the "victims of their own attempt to shore up traditional bourgeois conceptions of originality and individuality" (Buchloh, *op. cit.*, p. 59). When the notion of individual subjectivity is more and more contested, it is safeguarded as a spectacular sight. It is hard to deny "uniqueness" in the forms of the grotesque or in the life of freaks.

a unique self, but a subject in the image of the star, totally modelled on this public fantasy of "stardom".

The avant-garde opposition to the portrait by Pop artists like Warhol stems from an uncanny insight into the formative dimension of the mass-media. In the 1980s, feminism gave a new and more fundamental dimension to the conviction that identity is not authentic but socially constructed. It is not the domain of the mass-media which is foregrounded in its effect of making, or rather emptying out, the subject, but rather representation in the most general way. The "Untitled Film Stills" by Cindy Sherman address this issue most disturbingly. These famous black and white photographs show female characters (always Sherman herself) in situations which remind us of Hollywood films of the 1950s. The "Untitled Film Stills" give the illusion that they are based on original shots from existing films and that Sherman has re-enacted such an original still. Each effort to point out the original film that the photographs are based on is, however, frustrated. There is no "original" of a Sherman "Untitled Film Stills". As Krauss writes:

Not in the 'actual film' nor in a publicity shot or 'ad', nor in any other published 'picture'. The condition of Sherman's work in the *Film Stills* – and part of their point, we would say, is the simulacral nature of what they contain, the condition of being a copy *without an original*¹².

It is not by accident that Sherman "made her point" within the genre of the (self-) portrait, because it is exactly the relation between subjectivity and representation which is scrutinised in her work. The standard relation between subject and representation is now reversed. We don't see a transparent representation of a "full" subjectivity, instead we see a photograph of a subject which is constructed in the image of representation. The traditional portrait, or rather the standard view of the traditional portrait, is turned inside out¹³.

In all her "Untitled Film Stills" we are impelled to recognise a visual style and a type of femininity. The images suggest that there is a particular kind of femininity in the *woman*, whereas in fact the femininity is in the image itself, it is the image¹⁴. This conclusion could give the impression that there is a little difference between the notion of the subject in Pop-art portraiture and in Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills". For both oeuvres short-circuit the idea that the portrait provides a representation of a subject which is authentic and original.

There is, however, a major difference between the Pop-art portraits of the 1960s and the feminist photographs of Sherman of the late 1970s. This difference gives a new edge to the deconstruction of the portrait by twentieth-century artists. In the words of Rosalind Krauss:

12. R. Krauss, *Cindy Sherman. 1975-1993*, Rizzoli, New York, 1993, p. 17.

13. For a brilliant Lacanian analysis of Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills", see the last two chapters of Kaja Silverman's *The Threshold of the Visible World*, Routledge, New York and London, 1996, 14. J. Williamson, "Images of Women", in *Screen*, 24 November, 1983, p. 102.

"Indeed, almost two decades of work on the place of woman within representation has put this shift into effect, so that a whole domain of discourse no longer conceives of stereotype as a kind of mass-media mistake, a set of cheap costumes women might put on or cast aside. Rather stereotype - itself baptised now as "masquerade" and here understood as a psychoanalytic term - is thought of as the phenomenon to which all women are submitted both inside and outside representation, so that as far as femininity goes, there is nothing *but* costume"¹⁵.

This implies that representations in the restricted sense – films, advertisements, novels, paintings – are part of a far more absolute set of mechanisms; of representation in the broader sense, called the symbolic order in Lacanian psychoanalysis¹⁶. Subjectivities are shaped, are constructed by this symbolic order.

The portrait receives a new significance in the light of this feminist, psychoanalytically informed conception of subjectivity. In Sherman's case, the portrait is not used as a critique of the mass-media, but as the framework which explores and exposes modes of femininity. This had to be done within the genre of the portrait exactly because, according to the standard view of the traditional portrait, that was the place where we could watch femininity as an essential quality, as beauty, that is. If the portrait has been one of the main frameworks in which the notion of "real" femininity had been advocated, it is of course the most relevant space for a deconstruction of that notion.

SUBJECTING POWERS OF REPRESENTATION

Although I have assumed an intertwining in the portrait between the conception of subjectivity and that of representation, I have so far focused on twentieth-century portraiture whose main point it is to propose new notions of the subject. Not all twentieth-century artists who have challenged portraiture began by reflecting on subjectivity. Some of them gave rise to new conceptions of subjectivity as a result of their challenging reflections on the effects and powers of representation, especially of the representation of human subjects. Because of the intertwining of the two conceptions, the difference is often hard to discern. Challenging the notion of subjectivity has immediate consequences for the notion of representation; and the other way round. But emphases shift. Therefore, I will now focus on artists who have changed portraiture by their reflections on representation.

In his *Camera Lucida*, the French critic and semiotician Roland Barthes has written about the nature of the relation between portrait and portrayed. In his view, the image has a strong hold over the subject through the ability to represent the body of the subject as whole, an ability that the subject itself lacks. For the subject has only transient

15. Krauss, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

16. See J. Lacan, *The Four Fundamentals! Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, edited by J. A. Miller and translated by A. Sheridan, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1979. For a good introduction and critical discussion of Lacan, especially in its consequences and possibilities for such visual studies as art history and film studies, see K. Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margin*, Routledge, New York, 1992.

bodily experiences and partial views of its own body. To transform these fragmented experiences and views into a whole, the subject needs an image of itself.

Barthes, however, does not see the dependence on the unity-bestowing relation with the image as desirable, but as mortifying. "I feel that the photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice". Barthes' remark about the effect of photographic portraiture can be read as a characterisation of discourse and representation in the most general sense¹⁷. The subject loses itself when it is objectified in representation. This loss of self is brought about because the objectification of the subject that bestows the experience of wholeness on it is a discursive transformation that translates the subject into the terms of the *doxa*, the platitudes of public opinion. The subject falls prey to a representation that constructs it in terms of stereotypes. So, according to Barthes, in the portrait the subject is not confronted with itself in its essential quality but, by becoming an image, it is alienated from itself because assimilated into the *doxa*.

Barthes' view on the portrait is highly ambivalent. One depends on portraiture for the illusion of wholeness, but at the same time one has to pay for that by a loss of self. One's image is always cast in terms of the already-represented. Barthes needs the portrait and resists it, which makes the portrait into a space conflict. Barthes' view of the alienating effect of representation enables me to discuss the disturbing quality of the portraits of Francis Bacon. Barthes' account of the relationship between representation and subjectivity as a discursive conflict enables Bacon's portraits to be seen as efforts to unsettle the kinds of representations of the self that mortify any self-experience. In his interviews with Sylvester, Bacon's emphasis on the need for distortion in order to represent the "real" appearance of somebody can be understood as a fight against stereotypical representations of the subject.

FB: What I want to do is to distort the thing far beyond the appearance, but in the distortion to bring it back to a recording of the appearance.

DS: Are you saying that painting is almost a way of bringing somebody back, that the process of painting is almost like the process of recalling?

FB: I am saying it. And I think that the methods by which this is done are so artificial that the model before you, in my case inhibits the artificiality by which this thing can be brought about¹⁸.

Bacon talks about his portrayals as conflicts between the artificiality of representation and the resistance of the model to that artificiality. That which Bacon depicts is exactly the fight between subject and

17. For a relevant discussion of Barthes' view on the mortifying effect of discourse, see Ann Jefferson, "Bodymatters: Self and Other in Bakhtin, Sartre and Barthes", in Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd (eds.), *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1989.
18. D. Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1982, p. 40.

representation. He folds the subject back onto itself, endorsing the resulting fragmentation as the inevitable consequence of this denial of the unity-bestowing power of representation.

There are many motifs in Bacon's portraits which give rise consistently to this view of the mortifying effects of representation on the portrayed subject¹⁹. Let me digress for a moment on one motif which strikingly and literally substantiates the power of the portrait to threaten subjectivity²⁰. The painting *Three Studies of Isabel Rawsthorne* (1967) is not only a portrait, it is also a work about the portrait. Isabel Rawsthorne is portrayed on different ontological levels. We see her in the primal space of the painting, but also as the subject of a portrait nailed to the wall. In this painting the distinction, or tension, between inside (subjectivity) and outside (representation) is first of all thematised literally. We see the figure opening or closing a door²¹. But she does this with her back turned to the act she is executing. This suggests that there is danger or revulsion involved in this act, a reading supported by *Painting* (1978) in which we see a naked figure locking or unlocking a door. The extremely artificial pose in this second painting expresses even more unambiguously the anxiety involved in this simple act. But the ambiguity between inside and outside, and the ambivalence of the distinction as such, is repeated in the relationship between reality and representation, here thematised as the distinction between literal, primary space and figural, represented space. We see the female figure not only inside and outside the door; we see her as a shadow on the white door and in a painting nailed on the wall (thus represented indexically as well as iconically). This image on the wall encapsulates the tensions produced by the painting that it is part of. As in many Bacon portraits, it is as if the represented figure is coming out of the image; or perhaps it is the other way around, and a figure is being sucked into an image. The figure is both inside and outside the image.

Bacon's representational logic also manifests itself in *Three Studies of Isabel Rawsthorne* (1967) in the form of another motif recurrent in his oeuvre. The portrait within the portrait is pinned down to the wall by a nail. This nail evokes immediately other Bacon paintings: his *Crucifixions*²². In the context of Bacon's allegorical polemic with the western tradition of mimetic representation, the motif of the crucifixion signifies more than just bodily suffering and sacrifice. Within Bacon's consistent reflection on the effects of representation, the crucifixion betokens the inevitable consequence of representation, the tearing apart of the subject, the destructive effect of reproductive mimesis. And this is even more obvious in those works where the crucifixion is not represented by the cross or by slaughter, but subtly and microscopically by nails. As indexes of the immense suffering and the total mortification to the body, the nails suggest that any attempt to represent mimetically may be regarded literally as an attempt to *naïl the subject down*. Bacon

19. See Ernst van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*, Reaktion Books, London, 1992.

20. In Chapter 3 of van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*, I develop a view on the portrait and of Bacon's deconstructions of that view, by focusing on Bacon's famous "Pope paintings". I discuss the pictorial genre of the portrait there in comparison with the literary genre of the detective novel.

21. This situation of a figure opening or closing a door is a recurrent motif in Bacon's oeuvre. See, for instance, the central panel of *In Memory of George Dyer* (1971), *Painting* (1978), the outer panels of *Triptych* (1981), and *Study of the Human Body* (1983).

22. See his *Fragment of Crucifixion* (1950), *Three Studies for Crucifixion* (1962) and *Crucifixion* (1965).

accuses mimetic representation, by foregrounding its mortifying effects on the subject²³.

PORTRAITS REFERRING DIFFERENTLY

The portraits of Sherman and Warhol undermine the idea that the portrait is able to refer to somebody outside the portrait. Portraits are caught up in the realm of representation. They refer to mass-media-produced stereotypes or simulacra which function as screens that block a transparent view of reality. Does this mean that reference is a passé notion in contemporary portraiture?

I don't think so. Instead, referentiality has become an object of intense scrutiny. The work of the French Jewish artist Christian Boltanski explores the concept of reference in a fundamental way and he does that mainly within the genre of the portrait. He is very outspoken in his desire to "capture reality". Many of his works consist of re-photographed "found" snapshots. He incorporates these photographs into larger installations. In his *The 62 Members of the Mickey Mouse Club* (1972), for instance, he presents re-photographed pictures of children which he had collected when he was eleven years old. The original photos were pictured in the children's magazine *Mickey Mouse Club*. The children had sent in a picture which represented them best. Looking at these pictures seventeen years after he collected them, Boltanski is confronted with the incapacity of these images to refer. "Today they must all be about my age, but I can't learn what has become of them. The picture that remains of them does not correspond any more with reality, and all these children's faces have disappeared"²⁴. These portraits don't signify "presence", but exactly the opposite: absence. If there were "interiority" or "essence" in a portrait, these photographs should still enable Boltanski to get in touch with the represented children. But they don't. They only evoke absence.

In some of his later works he intensifies this effect by enlarging the photos so much that most details disappear. The eyes, noses and mouths become dark holes, the faces white sheets. These blow-ups remind us of pictures of survivors of the Holocaust just after they were released. This allusion to the Holocaust, which I will call Boltanski's "Holocaust-effect", is not caused by choosing images of Jewish children. He has always avoided using actual photographs from the death camps and in only two of his works used images of specifically Jewish children²⁵.

The "Holocaust-effect" undercuts two elements of the standard view of the portrait. By representing these peoples as (almost) dead, Boltanski foregrounds the idea that these photographs have no referent. And by representing these human beings without any individual features, he undermines the idea of "presence" in the portrait of an individual. All the portraits are exchangeable: the portrayed have become anonymous, they all evoke absence. Absence of a referent

23. As often, Bacon also picks up a motif from the history of art to make his own point with it. In Vermeer's *Woman with a Balance* in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, a tiny nail in the wall on the left of the represented painting of the *Last Judgement* also suggests a critical note on the illusory quality of realistic painting. See the opening pages of M. Bal, *Reading 'Rembrandt': Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991.

24. Boltanski, quoted in L. Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, Flammarion, Paris, 1994.

25. In *Chases High School* (1987) and *Reserves: The Purim Holiday* (1989).

outside the image, as well as absence of "presence" in the image. About his *Monuments* (1986), for which he used a photograph of himself and of seventeen classmates, he says the following:

Of all these children, among whom I found myself, one of whom was probably the girl I loved, I don't remember any of their names. I don't remember anything more than the faces on the photograph. It could be said that they disappeared from my memory, that this period of time was dead. Because now these children must be adults, about whom I know nothing. This is why I felt the need to pay homage to these "dead", who in this image, all look more or less the same, like cadavers²⁶.

The photographs don't help him to bring back the memories of his classmates. He calls his classmates "cadavers", because the portraits of them are dead. The portraits are dead because they don't provide presence or reference. He only remembers what the picture offers in its plain materiality as a signifier: faces.

The dead portraits are in tension with another element of his installations. The installations are always framed as monuments, as memorials or as shrines. The portraits are often lit by naked bulbs as if to represent candles, to emphasise their status as memorial or shrine. These framings make the intention of the installation explicit. These works want to memorialise or to keep in touch with the subjects portrayed. The photographs produce, however, an effect which is in conflict with this intention. They are not able to make the portrayed subject present. They evoke absence. That is why the memorials are not so much memorials of a dead person, but of a dead pictorial genre. The portrait is commemorated in its failure to fulfil its traditional promises.

But Boltanski has made other kinds of work which are closer to fulfilling the standard claims of portraiture. In 1973 and 1974 he made several installations, generically called "Inventories", which consisted of the belongings of an arbitrary person. In his *Inventory of Objects that Belonged to a Woman of New York*, he presented the furniture of a woman who had just died. The function of these belongings was to witness the existence of the woman who had passed away. Semiotically speaking, these "Inventories" are fundamentally different from the installations with photographs. While the photographs refer iconically (or rather, fail to do so), the inventories refer indexically. The pieces of furniture represent the woman, not by means of similarity or likeness, but by contiguity. The woman and her belongings have apparently been adjacent²⁷.

The point here is the shift from icon to index²⁸. The difference between the iconical and the indexical works is a matter of pretension. The photographic portraits claim, by convention, to refer to somebody and to make that person present. They fail, as I have argued, in both

26. Interview with Christian Boltanski by Démétrios Davvetas, quoted in Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*.

27. Or rather, these belongings pretend to, and thus represent the idea of, having been contiguous to the woman, because later Boltanski admitted that he had "cheated" the audience by exhibiting furniture which he had borrowed from personal acquaintances. But this only proves the semiotic status of his work.

The sign, according to Umberto Eco's definition of it, is "everything which can be used in order to lie". Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1976, p. 10.

28. For a seminal discussion of the important role of the index in contemporary art, see R. Krauss, *Notes on the Index: part 1 and Notes on the Index: part 2*, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1985, pp. 210-20.

respects. The indexical works don't claim presence: they show somebody's belongings, not the person her/himself. And strangely enough, they are successful as acts of referring to the person to whom the objects belonged. This success is due to the fact that one of the traditional components of the portrait has been exchanged for another semiotic principle. Similarity has gone, contiguity is proposed as the new mode of portraiture. When we stay with the standard definition of the portrait, Boltanski's indexical works fit much better in the genre of the portrait than his photographic portraits.

Although referentiality is more successfully pursued in the indexical installations, the problem of presence in these works is again foregrounded as a failure. In *The Clothes of François C.*, for instance, we see black-and-white, tin-framed photographs of children's clothing. The photographs or these clothes immediately raise the question of the identity and the whereabouts of their owner. This leads again to the "Holocaust-effect". The clothes refer to the storage places in the death and concentration camps where all the belongings of the internees were sorted (thus depriving them of individual ownership), and stored. After the war, some of these storage places were found, and became symbols, or better indexical traces, of the millions who were put to death in the camps²⁹.

Marlene Dumas, a Dutch artist of South African origin, also addresses the problem of reference in her oeuvre, which mainly consists of groups or individual portraits. This artist is even more explicitly concerned with the problems of reference. She has said about her work: "I want to be a referential artist. To refer is only possible to something which has already been named. (But names are not always given by you)"³⁰. Like artists such as Warhol and Sherman, Dumas is aware of the screen of images and representation, which makes reference impossible, but she does not accept the situation. Instead of foregrounding the screen and the impossibility of plain reference, she fights, while referring, against the conventional "names" which were not given by her. How does she do this?

The portraits and group portraits of 1985-87 show faces that often look like masks. The faces are usually very light. They look like sheets or screens which are emptied out; black pupils, surrounded by white, attract the attention in these bleached faces. The eyes are very ambiguous, in an uncanny way. It is not clear if, in their round darkness, they should be read as remnants of subjectivity - as the eyes peeping through holes in the artificial mask - or whether they are nothing other than stereotypical signs in a mask, indicating eyes. The mask, as well as the caricature, has had an important function in dismantling the traditional portrait in twentieth century art. Buchloh describes this role of the mask and the caricature as follows:

[...] both caricature and mask conceive of a person's physiognomy as fixed rather than a fluid field; in singling out particular traits, they

29. In other indexical portraits, the Holocaust-effect is even more directly pursued. Part of the installation *Storage Area of the Children's Museum* (1989), for instance, consisted of racks of clothing. The piles of clothes which were stored on the shelves referred to the incomprehensible numbers who died in the concentration camps.
30. M. Dumas, *Miss Interpreted*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1992, p. 10.

reduce the infinity of differential facial expressions to a metonymic set. Thus, the fixity of mask and caricature deny outright the promise of fullness and the traditional aspirations toward an organic mediation of the essential characteristics of the differentiated bourgeois subject³¹.

The mask represents essential features of subjectivity as fixed, mechanical or grotesque. Although this is relevant for an understanding of Dumas's work, her mask-like portraits evoke at the same time a very different quality. The faces in her work evoke emptiness and death. Subjectivity is not present, but rather absent. Like Boltanski's installations, these portraits give rise to a "Holocaust-effect". In her group portraits it seems that the group as such is responsible for this. In *The Teacher* (1987) she portrays a class of schoolchildren in uniform. Uniform is usual in South Africa, but this portrayal emphasises how apartheid culture fixed identities on the basis of the most superficial exteriority. As a consequence, the children's faces have the same empty, uniform expression as their clothes. In *The Teacher* we see that the uniform expression of the students is that of their teacher. This sameness is presented as death or absence. The question arises, then, whether it is the situation of the group as such, or the *portrayal of a group*, which causes this putting to death of subjectivity, this Holocaust-effect? One cannot help remembering there that apartheid was quite literally the representation or "portrayal" of groups. But Dumas' work goes beyond such a political statement alone. She explores the intricate relationship between the political situation of apartheid and the representational consequences of mimetic portrayal, looking for essences.

For Dumas' later portraits suggest by their difference that these earlier works are part of an overall project to explore and challenge systematically the conventional characteristics of the traditional portrait as a politically invested genre. In the later works she continues to pursue the genre's conventions, but takes a different approach. She begins to experiment with format. While portraits are usually vertical (reflecting the human subject in its most respected posture, standing), an extreme horizontal format is also introduced. In such images the figures are stretched out in all their horizontality. It is as if they are pulled down, made powerless, by the format of the portrait³². There is a relation between being depicted horizontally and powerlessness, as opposed to the connection between the vertical format of the portrait and the authority of the portrayed person. This becomes provocatively clear when Dumas paints a male nude in this horizontal position in *The Particularity of Nakedness* (1987). Dumas tells about a museum director's response to this painting³³. He considered it a failure, because it had "too many horizontals" [*sic*]. A successful painting needs verticals, he seemed to imply, without

31. Buchloh, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

32. This is especially the case in *Warhol's Child* (1991), but also in those paintings which seem to comment on the tradition of the female nude: *Snow White and the Broken Art* (1988), *The Guilt of the Privileged* (1988), *Snow White in the Wrong Story* (1988), *Waiting (for Meaning)* (1988) and *Losing (her Meaning)* (1988).

33. Dumas, *Miss Interpreted*, p. 43.

realising that Dumas had purposefully represented masculinity in this painting in such an un-erect way.

Dumas' explorations of the relation between format and authority are shaped by contrasts. While representing masculinity horizontally, she depicts babies vertically in four vertical paintings: *The First People (I-IV)* (1991). When depicted horizontally, we would see babies in these poses in all their vulnerability and powerlessness (see *Warhol's Child*). But, erected, these little creatures suddenly become monsters with grabbing claws. By enlarging this authority-effect of the vertical format, Dumas deconstructs this quality of the traditional portrait. She undoes the increase of being, namely the bestowing of authority on the portrayed, by giving it grotesque proportions and by attributing it to inappropriate exemplars.

In her work *Black Drawings* (1991–2), and the portraits she made for the mental institution Het Hooghuis, in Etten-Leur (1991), Dumas explored portrayal in yet another way. This time she made no individual portrait or group portrait, but a group of portraits. *Black Drawings* consist of 112 portraits of black people; the work made for Het Hooghuis consists of 35 paintings, with one panel containing a poem by the Dutch poet Jan Arends. Most of the paintings are portraits of the people what are living in the mental institution, some are of animals.

These two groups of portraits are radically different from the earlier group portraits. They don't produce a Holocaust-effect. Nor do they work as a collection of original subjectivities. Instead of promoting black subjects or mentally ill subjects to the status of bourgeois subjectivity, she constructs a conception of subjectivity based on variety and diversity, but not on unique individuality. The portrayed models are not bestowed with subjectivity in terms of original presence, but in relation to each other. They are, because they are all different. That is why they all deserve their own panel within their collective portrayal.

The kinds of images I have discussed all suggest that the portrait has not at all become a dead genre in twentieth-century art, as some critics have claimed recently. Conceptions of subjectivity and identity have been challenged and mimetic conceptions of representation have been undermined in all kinds of ways. This has led to the implausibility of the intertwining of bourgeois subjectivity with mimetic representation, but not to the death of the genre as such. Although genres are of course contaminated by their histories, it is not necessary to define a genre by its history. Artists like Warhol, Sherman and Dumas show how a genre can be liberated from its history so that it can become an arena for new significations. The project of "portraying somebody in her/his individual originality or quality or essence" has come to an end. But portraiture as genre has become the form of new conceptions of subjectivity and new notions of representation.