

## The Situative Portrait as Artistic Resistance to Physiognomic AI

### *Summary*

As AI systems increasingly treat portraits as tokens for emotion recognition and data collection, this presentation introduces the Situative Portrait as an artistic method for disrupting the placeholder logic of photographic portraiture. Through tinkering, relational image-making, and strategies of opacity, the situative portrait repositions the photographic portrait as the outcome of a social event rather than a proxy.

### *Photographic portraits as placeholders*

Photographic portraits circulate today as if they were reliable stand-ins for the people they depict. From profile images on social platforms to identification photos in institutional systems, they operate as avatars or placeholders: tokens that appear to condense a person into a single, legible surface. This placeholder logic encourages a 'pars pro toto' reading in which a smile stands for happiness, a pose for personality, and a face for a person. Such readings suppress the social situation behind portraits, where photographer, sitter, and anticipated spectator co-produce an image. Instead, they rely on a 'window' model of photography that treats portraits as transparent encounters rather than the result of a largely invisible social situation. In doing so, this approach revives a long-discredited tradition of physiognomic interpretation, whereby a person's essence is presumed to be readable from their depiction.

Contemporary AI systems approach photographic portraits not as relational events but as data points to be sorted and classified. For these systems, the portrait is a stand-in that enables emotion recognition, behavioral prediction, and data collection. This technocratic gaze depends on a physiognomic logic that conflates surface and meaning, reducing persons to parameterized faces and reinforcing infrastructures of profiling and control.

'Operative portraits', as Roland Meyer calls portraits circulating on various digital networks, and used in contexts such as hiring processes, surveillance, and emotion-recognition systems, directly shape our lives.<sup>1</sup> They influence, for instance, who is offered a job and what the consequences may be of attending a demonstration. In doing so, they also affect the physical spaces we are permitted to enter. In addition, portraits deployed for data extraction – such as the reverse-image-search systems developed by companies like Clearview AI – render a person's past instantly accessible and tighten the web of images from our past that surrounds us. As a result, operative portraits not only shape where we can go and the spaces we can occupy, they also shape who we can become.

It is precisely this, the portrait as an automated placeholder, that my artistic research aims to unsettle.

### *Method: The Situative Portrait as artistic resistance*

My practice-based doctoral research, *The Situative Portrait*, developed a form of portraiture that shifts attention from the image itself to the conditions of its construction. In this presentation, I discuss the development of new artistic work emerging from this research.

---

<sup>1</sup> Roland Meyer, "Operative Portraits, or How Our Faces Became Big Data," in *Reconfiguring the Portrait*, ed Abraham Geil and Tomás Jirsa (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 21-42.

This work was sparked by an encounter with a Large Language Model that misclassified portraits *of me* with portraits made *by me* – a confusion that illustrates how easily AI collapses form and meaning, mistaking what something *looks like*, with what it *is*. Using this encounter as a starting point, the presentation traces a reflexive and artistic journey that responds to this simplification of my photographic images, and of me. I apply the approach formulated in my doctoral research, one that foregrounds the social dynamics of making rather than the final image.

Central to this method is *tinkering* (the Dutch verb *sleutelen*) as a photographic gesture. Rather than the ‘hunting’ mode that dominates canonical photographic discourse, tinkering is iterative, relational, and exploratory. It treats portraiture not as a moment of capture but as a co-produced attempt. This shift foregrounds the negotiation between photographer and sitter and anticipated spectator. As an artistic strategy, tinkering opens portraits to complexity and resists their absorption as clean, machine-readable proxies. The situative portrait also draws on an understanding of photographs as ‘signs of absence’. Building on appropriation art and a reading of Sherrie Levine’s *After Walker Evans*, opening the portrait “from behind”.<sup>2</sup> These ideas materialize through artistic strategies of ‘disruption’, for example ‘diversion and redirection’, which shift attention away from the final image of a face toward the situational context and ‘erasure by accumulation’.

*Objective: Reframing portraiture*

By foregrounding relations rather than representations, the situative portrait challenges the conversion of photographic subjects into placeholders. It emphasizes that portraits arise through shared activity in time and space, not as static surfaces awaiting interpretation. This reframing resists the transformation of photographs into proxies that travel freely across datasets, platforms, and analytic pipelines. Instead, the situative portrait insists on the grounded social specificity of the scene.

Physiognomic AI generates a spatial imaginary in which identity is captured, modeled, and sorted, turning faces into topographies to be mined and narrowing the spaces in which people can move freely. By contrast, the situative portrait engages the relational space of photographic production and makes tangible forms of presence, both visible and invisible, that do not fit computational templates.

My presentation outlines an artistic resistance to portraits treated as fixed, machine-readable proxies. The situative portrait redirects attention to the encounter that creates the image, keeping portraiture entangled with social dynamics rather than letting it drift into computational stand-ins. In a landscape shaped by reverse-image search, classification engines, and systems like Clearview AI, portraits risk becoming anchors that follow us everywhere. By emphasizing relation over representation, the situative portrait reopens space for ambiguity, negotiation, and modes of presence that cannot be flattened into data. It returns portraiture to what it is: human and relational.

Keywords: Photographic portraiture, Physiognomic AI, artistic research

---

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition,” October 18 (Autumn 1981): 65.