

Huw Davies Gallery  
10th June - 10th July, 2021

## Portrait

### Melita Dahl

ACT-based artist Dahl presents a series of digital prints raising questions about the links between facial expression recognition (FER) technologies and traditions that understand photographic portraits as windows to a subject's soul.

FER is a rapidly developing algorithmic technology that aims to measure variations in facial expression to detect emotional states and predict behaviour. The software is now becoming integrated into marketing, retail, educational and security surveillance systems.

Dahl focuses on the 'deadpan', exploring the idea of the neutral expression as perhaps a form of resistance to data collection, a loss of human agency in emotional life or a space for the viewer to find their own meaning in a portrait.



Melita Dahl, *happy (0.96)*, 2019, archival pigment print.

### The Bounding Box

*Like Albrecht Dürer's 'perspective machine, bounding boxes remind us that the final perspective is that of the image creator – and, indeed, the viewer of the image. The viewer discerns meaning in the face of another – a comparative analysis basing one's assumptions on prior experience. A neutral, or deadpan face, is subjectively viewed. And the neutral is never neutral.*

- Melita Dahl 2021

A bit of background.

In the mid 1990s in Canberra I occasionally joined a collective of young women photographers for lovely at home lunches and chats about their current work. It wasn't an activist group but gendered in the sense of being a mutually supportive, comfortable space. Before becoming a curator I had been a practitioner briefly in the 1970s. Decades on in the 1990s, mutual respect and seriousness about practice was still something of an unfamiliar public profile for women photomedia artists. The group held an exhibition, *Interaction*, in 1995 at CCAS<sup>1</sup> and members went on to various careers, artistic and administrative.

One of their number was Melita Dahl, whose 1995 *Totem* portraits of friends' faces morphed with that of felines I have still on my walls. I acquired two of her equally atmospheric and mysterious 1991 *Museum of Silence* series for the National Gallery of Australia through the Kodak Fund (what a blessing that untouchable fund used to be for emerging artists).

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From afar I followed Melita's own metamorphosis into a sophisticated multimedia artist in Germany where she lived and worked between 1997-2007. I re-engaged with her in recent years through placing her work in public collections. I followed her evolution of her doctoral body of work on the concept of facial recognition and portraiture that is in part on view at PhotoAccess.

In the current exhibition Dahl pursues the conundrum of the deadpan portrait in the age of digital pseudo-intimacy and potentially sinister surveillance and algorithmic categorisation, especially of young people and children. The poignancy of the exquisite fresh faces of her young subjects in the context of Facial Expression Recognition (FER) systems is quietly ominous. As Dahl notes, the 'neutral is never neutral' as portraiture is a symbiosis between the created image and the viewer.

Cutting edge FER technology and its future is addressed in the current exhibition through portraiture of the generation that will feel its impact; a group of young girls, friends of Dahl's daughter, and the young men in the Techlauncher team recruited by Dahl for her more complex experimentation with portrait image analysis. Paradoxically, the resulting deadpan neutrality Dahl sought in these portraits is countered by the very ability of naturalistic and digital photomedia to create characters that we as viewers, respond to. As an art historian in the Western tradition in front of these quite hypnotic works, my mind swims with images of Greek busts and friezes, Renaissance portraiture and allegorical paintings, as well as 18th-19th century artists and photographers who made capturing fleeting expression their quest.

I am drawn in to the amorphous deep space in which Dahl's figures live and communicate or dis-communicate, by gesture and glance. The images' lustrous sensual surfaces, delicately interlinked poses, front and profile views largely side lit against velvet darkness, with overlaid text and graphics, step out of the time and space of the sitters' 21st century dress and accessories.

The belief that faces revealed inner truths of character or reflect a symbiosis with animal behaviour was first defined by the ancient Greeks and called physiognomica. A serious methodology for physiognomy was developed and published by Swiss pastor Johann Lavater in the 18th century. He thought the profile view was the best pose for determining character, an aspect explored by Dahl. Graphic artists quickly developed the political art of caricature based on physiognomic abstraction and that art form remains physiognomy's enduring legacy. Photographers were among those who attempted to capture expressions using the camera but slow speeds meant sitters had to stand still and fake their emotions.

At times physiognomy was seen as a science able to determine criminality, but in the 20th century it was roundly dismissed as a dangerous pseudo science supporting racism. With facial recognition software having some sinister applications there has been a resurgence of studies on physiognomy.<sup>2</sup>

In the selection of works on view at PhotoAccess there are both group studies and individual heads. Most of the images are of a cast of young girls on the cusp of teenage self-consciousness, anxiety and 'attitude'. A number wear matching t-shirts from a local performance by Melbourne chamber folk sister duo 'Charm of Finches' whose branding imagery is Renaissance to Gothic.

In several works the girls enact different mouth pulls on each other. Can such strategies counter FER systems? In one a neon perspective box isolates the centre figure whose mouth is being manipulated into contradictory expressions by her companions. She is highlighted in colour, her companions in monochrome. Our emotions jump between the codes their contradictory expressions invoke.

These images seem to have echoes of allegorical paintings of nymphs of antiquity and rites of passage. When the young women gaze outward it seems to be an alert addressed to the viewer about judging anyone on a single image.

In other studies the girls enact different mouth pulls on themselves. These bring to mind the attempts in 18th and 19th century art and photography to capture and codify expression. We forget that until faster exposure times became standard in the early 20th century fleeting expressions were largely impossible to record on film. While modern mass produced mirrors in the 19th century could show a person their own image, only staged facial gestures could be transferred to a permanent image in early-modern photography and even then only in black and white. Today we are inundated by our own faces.

The close up profile busts of the young men from the ANU TechLauncher project somewhat turns technology back on the technologists. Their faces are already marked by early adulthood but have the same sombre profile poses and side lighting of the young girls. In truth, they are probably a bunch of energetic hip, tech nerds at work but here become, in their deadpan profiling, a kind of mute male chorus.

This exhibition is a paradox in which past, present and future overlap through technology and styling. These meta-portraits invite an immersive mental wandering and contemplation and hopefully an arrival at the message contained in the technologic bottle.

#### Gael Newton

Gael Newton AM is former Senior Curator, Photography, National Gallery of Australia,  
and since 2014 a Canberra based photo-arts consultant and valuer.

#### End Notes

1. *Interaction* : Canberra Contemporary Art Space November 25-December 17, 1995 / coordinated by Benita Tunks  
[https://issuu.com/ccas\\_canberra/docs/interaction/24](https://issuu.com/ccas_canberra/docs/interaction/24)

2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Physiognomy>

## List of Works

1	Melita Dahl, Perspective Machine 01, 2020, Pigment Ink Print on Archival Paper, 60 x 80cm	Edition of 6 + 2AP	\$1800
2	Melita Dahl, Deadpan 9.980549278246, 2021, Pigment Ink Print on Archival Paper, 80 x 60cm	Edition of 6 + 2AP	\$1800
3	Melita Dahl, Action Unit [outer brow raiser], 2019, Pigment Ink Print on Archival Paper, 100 x 75cm	Edition of 6 + 2AP	\$2500
4	Melita Dahl, Action Unit [lip stretcher], 2019, Pigment Ink Print on Archival Paper, 100 x 75cm	Edition of 6 + 2AP	\$2500
5	Melita Dahl, Type: 3/4 pose, 2021, Pigment Ink Print on Archival Paper, 60 x 80cm	Edition of 6 + 2AP	\$1600
6	Melita Dahl, Type: profile, 2021, Pigment Ink Print on Archival Paper, 60 x 80cm	Edition of 6 + 2AP	\$1600
7	Melita Dahl, happy (0.96), 2019, Pigment Ink Print on Archival Paper, 52.4 x 69.9cm	Edition of 6 + 2AP	\$1200
8	Melita Dahl, happy (0.69), 2019, Pigment Ink Print on Archival Paper, 52.4 x 69.9cm	Edition of 6 + 2AP	\$1200
9	Melita Dahl, happy (0.27)/neutral (0.7), 2019, Pigment Ink Print on Archival Paper, 52.4 x 69.9cm	Edition of 6 + 2AP	\$1200

## Melita Dahl | About

Melita Dahl is a visual artist, currently pursuing a PhD at the School of Art and Design, Australian National University. Her work has been exhibited widely in major art museums, galleries and art fairs, in Australia and internationally, and is held in major Australian public art and private collections. Melita has worked collaboratively with artists from a range of disciplines to produce interdisciplinary works or theatrical performances. Her current focus is on commercial Facial Expression Recognition (FER) technologies and applications that attempt to detect human emotion or type.

## Public Program | Artists-In-Conversation: Faces, Places and Interiority

Thursday, 8th July, 2021, 6-7.30pm

Please join exhibiting artists Melita Dahl and Sarah Rhodes for a lively conversation diving deep into their practices to trace some of the boundaries and meanings of contemporary photographic portraiture. While Dahl explores emerging technologies reducing people's faces to emotional data abstracted from any context, Rhodes focuses on the intimate inter-weaving of a person and their place. Facilitated by PhotoAccess' Caitlin Seymour-King, this interactive program brings Dahl and Rhodes together to explore the limits and possibilities of the idea that a portrait reveals the interior life of its subject.

Join us in person (numbers limited, so please register via the 'Events' page on the PhotoAccess website [www.photoaccess.org.au](http://www.photoaccess.org.au)) or join us online via our Facebook page ([facebook.com/photoaccess](https://facebook.com/photoaccess)).

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