

# Unusual Portraiture: Kentaro Yamada at Window

Jaenine Parkinson

*Written for Window <http://www.window.auckland.ac.nz/> June 2006*

Kentaro Yamada has created an unusual set of portraits. They are not unusual in their subject matter – depictions of his friends – nor in their style – a cool clean aesthetic reminiscent of a modern photo shoot. They are unusual because they listen to anyone who will talk to them. Speaking into one of the two microphones that hang in front of these large-scale representations provokes an emotive but silent expression from the sitters.

Although, under the promise of dialogue the work often leaves us with incongruous chaos as our impulsive utterings clash with the randomly selected expressions of the figures. The outcomes sometimes gel but at other times we are left to tease out strange scenarios from the unorthodox responses we get from the listening heads. The source of this random experience – the computer – is here obscured behind a human face as it distorts even an automated semblance of conversation. This inconsistency of outcomes also disrupts an understanding of the computer as a machine of formulaic logic. We expect computer generated responses to be immediate and logical, neither of these axioms are consistently adhered to by Yamada's portraits. This form of interaction offers the audience an encounter rather than control. Unlike branching hyper-linked narratives where one click locks you to a predestined reaction, Yamada's works are open systems of potential events.

The responsiveness of these portraits provokes an idiosyncratic type of audience participation. Yamada's portraits are as much a study of his friends as it is a study of audience behaviour. We (often quite curiously) modify our behaviour and our words in accordance with our expectations and habits of engaging with computers. At their core the words we direct at the portraits often imply – "what happens when I do this?" – as a way to heuristically discover the work.

At the initial moment when we realise that – "it hears me" – these portraits become more of a mirror than a representation of someone else.<sup>1</sup> No longer solely about the sitter, the portrait now includes us by returning our gaze. In acknowledging our presence the work reflects attention onto ourselves. Then to further reinforce and reflect our inclusion we are left with the echo of our voice throughout the space.

Knowing that they now share the limelight, the user becomes performer and a possible vehicle for collective spectatorship. The interaction of one viewer with the work becomes a performance for other viewers, situated within the work's arena. This further affects the behaviour of the user whose actions are now oriented both to their onlookers and to the work.

Users are also able to insert themselves and their point of view into the accompanying projected work, which feeds imagery from participant's webcams and cellphones into a grid formation (see links and instructions above). The grid work also functions not only as a meeting place of images contributed by users but can also be used as an alternative channel for engaging the portraits. Every time a local or remote user contributes a new image to the grid the portraits reward them with a kiss.

*The artist would like to give special thanks to: Lee Bergman, Luke Duncalfe, Holly Shepherd, Tu Rapana, Katrin Hagen, Daniel Munn, and Lisa Taylor.*

David Rokeby Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media  
<http://homepage.mac.com/davidrokeby/mirrors.html> [accessed 29-05-06]

---

Downloaded from the ADA Article Library, 05 Feb 2012  
This article is protected by a Creative Commons license  
<http://aotearoadigitalarts.org.nz/articles/Essays/118>