

Staring at the Screen

Interview with Photographer Robbie Cooper

Iza Pevec

From the beginnings of the photography, portrait photography has had a special aura – reading one's own facial expressions and those of others is after all a very human trait. In his project *Immersion*, British artist Robbie Cooper presents a specific type of portraits – portraits of people as media consumers. We are all aware of the frightening statistics of the average number of hours spent behind the screen, yet Cooper's intention was not to moralise. A diverse spectrum of people's expressions captured during watching various media content tells only one part of our human story. In the *Immersion*, the screen becomes some kind of mirror, recording intense expressions of the portrayed persons, captured with an in-built camera. Because of the accompanying sound, we can guess what the people are watching – the content includes everything, from video games, pornography to snuff movies. Stills from the movies have less documentary value. With the help of the high quality of the photos, the frozen grimaces become peculiarly similar to the classical portraits from the history of art. Almost eccentric grimaces confuse us and at the same time remind us how realistic virtual reality feels. Cooper had already explored our relationship towards virtual reality in his project *Alter Ego*, in which he sets the gamers of virtual games next to their avatars. He was interested in the human element of virtual worlds by questioning what imaginary personas can tell us about their creators. Throughout our conversation, questions of human consciousness arose.

I would like to start with an introduction to your project *Immersion*. How did you get the idea and how did the project evolve? I was also wondering about the technical aspects, which I feel are quite important – how did you manage to hide the camera and shoot such high-resolution videos?

The project before *Immersion* was called *Alter Ego* in which I took photos of gamers and their avatars. In Korea and China for example you would be talking to people and they wouldn't look away from the screen, so I could do the whole interview, as they just kept staring at the screen the entire time. Therefore, you get an intense look on their faces. It got me thinking about Errol Morris, who is an amazing documentary filmmaker, in my opinion probably the best living documentary filmmaker. He shot *The Fog of War*, a film about Robert McNamara, who was the U.S. Secretary of Defence during the Vietnam War. He basically authorised the killings of all those hundreds of thousands of people, and during that documentary, he is looking straight at you as he talks about it. It is extremely powerful. It got me thinking about it. Errol Morris made this thing called the *interrotron*. With it he is able to interview people using two cameras and two teleprompters so that he is in a different room and is looking at the teleprompter which has the face of the other person on it and the other person has the face of Errol Morris on his or hers teleprompter. They are looking straight at each other, although located in separate rooms. So I just thought I could plug PlayStation into a teleprompter and all of sudden you would be looking straight into the eyes of people absorbed in screens. So that's how the idea came about, but at the same time, I have been reading about how much time we spend looking at screens. At the time in the USA the average was about six or eight hours per day, which is an incredible amount of time.

Regarding this incredible amount of time – what I also find interesting in your project is that there are no moralistic tendencies. For example, when I was doing research for the interview I found a video entitled *Evidence*, with a somewhat similar topic, showing children watching cartoons. This video had much more moralistic tendencies. I suppose you had this in mind when shooting it?

I find that campaigning about something is boring. As soon as it looks like someone has an agenda or is making the agenda obvious it really reduces my interest in what is said. Even more than that, I started out as a photojournalist and I was one for 15 years. Very quickly, you recognise that there are about six different stories, so there is a template of sorts for things. You start to feel like you are repeating yourself all the time. Psychologically it is a lot healthier to just throw all that stuff out the window and think to yourself: I'm just recording and kind of making it beautiful.

Still, were you perhaps shocked in some cases? Somewhere you said that one cannot predict the reactions of people, were you in some instances shocked; did you maybe try to predict the reactions?



Sumara Bi Sultan, Bradford, UK, *Torture of a Zeta Soldier*, 2009.

Alexander Kinch, Grimsby, UK, *Call of Duty 4*, 2008.





Drew Hugh, New York, USA, Hulk, 2008.

Jessica Hardy, Grimsby, UK, Tekken Dark Resurrection, 2008.



There are things that you just expect to see but there are also other things. At one time I was doing a series on a type of snuff movies and related things. I got a video that was made by the Zeta cartel in Mexico. It showed how they twisted someone's head off. It is a very weird video because it somewhat resembles a home movie and you do not really realise how terrible it is going to be just until right the very last minute. It does not exactly show the face of the person that is going to die... The girl watching it started laughing when his head fell off. When that happened I was quite shocked, but then I thought – that sometimes you just cannot process things; it is almost as if you reject it in your own mind.

When working as a journalist in war zones you see horrible things happen. In the media generally, I suppose, we are used to receiving information in a certain way. It is packaged for us. We are basically told how to feel about things, but when that happens in real life there is no script, there is no music, and sometimes really horrific things can unfold in a very, very ordinary way. In a way what is really horrifying about it, is that it is just normal life, except that really bad shit happens. When I thought about how she was processing it, I realised that that is actually probably more realistic than watching the movie *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).

Let us perhaps move on to the voyeuristic aspect of your work. In some moments, it can be unpleasant for the viewer to watch, for example, people watching porn.

That is an interesting thing. Because your brain, when you watch porn, starts to simulate sex, so it is kind of mirroring what you are seeing. I believe that even more so than in cases of any other activity that you watch on screen. There have been MRI studies done on it, a truly remarkable thing. When you remove the sex, you are left with the intimacy, which is maybe what you do not notice when watching pornography. The fact that you are seeing things that sexually excite you, draws your attention away from intimacy, but on the other hand, when you only have the intimacy, it can actually become quite uncomfortable.

It really does. But how did they react? The responses seem quite genuine, yet they knew you were filming them...

I shot a lot of footage. When you start shooting, people are quite aware of it, but then the longer it goes on for, the more they switch off from it. At the same time I think that there was always a little bit of performing on their part, perhaps on a subconscious level. However, nobody was ever completely unaware of being filmed. Whenever it was clear that awareness was making them behave in an unauthentic way, I did not use it or I waited until they began behaving more naturally.

Your project includes both the video and the still image and I feel the video has more documentary aspects, while the photos seem to emphasize the grimaces more. How do you view the results in these two mediums?

It is interesting how much sound there is to it. You said that there is no moralisation in the project, but probably the part of the project that seems to have an agenda the most is the one showing kids playing video games. I think this to be the case because even though I haven't intended it, videos of games have a lot of shooting sounds, so that's maybe not quite what I intended ... Personally, I thought it to be somewhat sweet, but some people saw it as an attack on videogames. Therefore, I think the sound adds a dimension to it in a way. You are just recording the sound that is playing and not altering it in any way, but when you edit it all together it goes from one dramatic situation to another, which you cannot see, it is off the screen. I quite like that, but I did not want people to think that my message was that videogames are horrible.

I think there are different aspects; we can also interpret it as a type of critique, for example, I found this quote on Open Culture: "But before we denounce the mostly underage participants' dead eyes and slack jaws – an effect made more disturbing by the soundtrack's high incidence of gunfire – perhaps we should turn the webcam on ourselves." Turning the cam on ourselves was actually part of the plan. I would like to address the participation aspect next – what kind of turn would the participatory part of the project bring?

(Cooper had a plan of creating an internet platform "a project hub, that would allow anyone interested to shot themselves responding to media" a participatory website for submitting videos and photographs and assigning new tasks for other participants. Authors note.)

Yeah, that never worked. I am interested in games, game theory, videogame culture, that kind of things. With Jeff Watson, an academic from California we tried to collaborate on something – our ambition was to try to make the whole thing into a collaborative project, but it did not work, maybe because of the heavy voyeuristic aspect. What I wanted was scale. Right at the beginning of the project, I had this kind of illusion that I would be doing it for the rest of my life. It is the kind of illusion that one has at the beginning of a project, because one thinks of it as being the best project ever. I was thinking about Bernd and Hilla Becher's documentary project – they ended up doing it for years and years and years. However, when I realized that I do not have that kind of patience, I thought it would be cool if everyone else did it for years and years and years. I also saw other internet sites where people share pictures of their orgasms and so on... What I wanted to bring in the project was a scale and unexpected things, things I would not have thought of if I were to just continue to do it myself. That is the beauty of these types of collaborative projects.

Now you already partially answered one of my next questions. You mentioned the Bechers, but I also thought of August Sander and this rather scientific drive or a way to approach a certain topic, this wish to collect every specimen, in your case every expression in front of all kinds of different media content.

That's right. That is what photographers are in a way, photographers are collectors. Certain kinds of photographers,

specifically documentary photographers, who are photographers of the real world, they transform into collectors *per se*. I suppose that at that point in my career I was heading in that direction. However, what ended happening is that a completely different branch of my work started to take over. If you look at that book from 18th century, *Cabinet of Natural Curiosities*, it contains all these crazy illustrations of natural phenomena. What I love about that book and the eras preceding its making is that when people try to be rigorous and scientific – then hundreds of years later we can observe this rigour and the attempts to be scientific and can almost get a glimpse of the characters of the makers. What I think is interesting is that you try to be rigorous and you try to be scientific, but there is no real way of doing that. There is some kind of honesty about it; I don't know what it is, but something that is quite revealing.

If we stay in the realm of art history – viewing your work I thought of character studies from art history, e.g. grimaces as expressions of characters. Could you perhaps see any kind of connection between characters and expressions or did you try to guess the characters of the people you portrayed?

Well, there is one story – facial expression of one kid was quite extreme and at the time I thought that was because he said he played less videos than others, whereas I thought that it was simply due to immense concentration, which made him forget about facial expressions. Well, he is now in prison. I think there has to be some kind of connection between facial expression and character. I know there is a considerable amount of discussion surrounding the matter. If there is one thing, in the world that we are designed to read it is human faces and I guess body language as well. I think we give away a lot and it might not be the obvious things, but I think there is something in it.

Do you think that the faces we make during watching certain media content are something we only make in that occasion or would we also do it otherwise and this content only intensifies it?

I believe it is more complicated than that. However, it is funny – I sometimes find myself almost greeting someone coming into the room in a TV program that I am watching, as if they are coming into the room in real life. Your face does something and then you go: wait a minute, what is going on there? It is weird, but I think in science they call it mirroring. We have social brains, which focus on performative actions and other goings on, so perhaps that is what causes those little reactions. There have been studies done about, e.g. the sound of opening a can of Coke and what happens in your mind when you hear it. Therefore, you have these little simulations going on in your head all the time. You are creating these little worlds and reacting to things and just because there is an image on the screen, there is a tiny little reaction in your brain, although you can tell the difference between the image and reality. In my opinion, to negotiate with the world, one has to be able to simulate it as well, which is why one has a kind of map of reality with which

one builds little simulations of different things in one's head and explore the world in that way.

I think that maybe we understand our own grimaces as something that is to a certain extent foreign to us. For example, one of the definitions of a grimace that I found goes like this: “A facial expression in which your mouth and face are twisted in a way that shows disgust, disapproval, or pain.” Do you think we identify ourselves with these kinds of faces?

Yes, I know what you are saying and I think we have a very strange relationship with ourselves. When we look in the mirror, we do not look at ourselves the right way around. Right now, I am engaged on the project with photogrammetry, real photo scans of people. One of the things I am doing is putting them into the VR (Virtual Reality) and if you put yourself into the VR and look at yourself in 3D it is really strange, really weird. I think sometimes images of yourself add a distance to you, and with time this distance become ever greater, until suddenly it is almost as if you were another person altogether.

If we rewind slightly, when you said how you almost greet people in a TV program, I was surprised how communicative we seem to be, when we are watching media content...

Yeah, absolutely. According to a few scientists, the purpose of facial expressions is not to express emotion, but rather to communicate it. That is an important difference.

Still it is funny that we do it even when we are alone and nobody is watching.

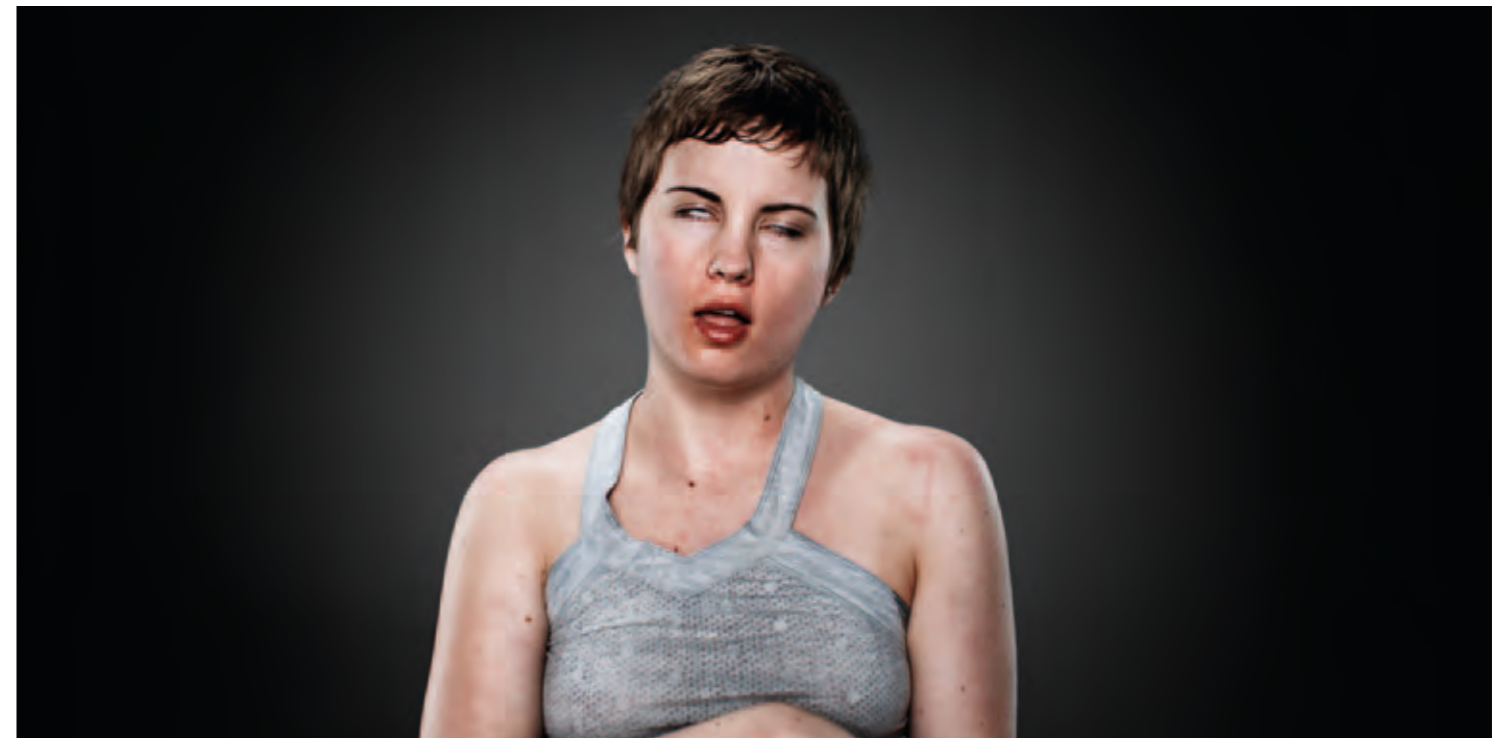
A lot of that process is automatic. When you dive into it, you realize that nobody really knows why and I think that these areas probably blur into one-another. For instance, if I step on a Lego when I am alone, I will cry even though there is nobody there to hear me. I believe this to be interesting, and the science of it truly fascinating, but at the end of the day there is no point in getting bulked down in this as an artist. If you as an artist end up doing a scientific research project, you have forgotten what the point was in the first place.

You said something like this: “playing roles in virtual lives is just an extension of playing roles”. This is quite obvious in the *Alter Ego* project, but would you say there is a sense of it in the *Immersion* project as well?

Although it is present, it is much subtler in *Immersion*, while I think that in *Alter Ego* it is extremely obvious. In *Immersion* it concerns a type of automatic role-playing that happens when, like I've mentioned before, you are simulating things in your head and about those tiny little reactions that happen. Whereas in *Alter Ego* it is in many cases proper role-play.



Rob Wanders, Amsterdam, Netherlands, Bach concerto, 2010.



Lindsay, New York, USA, Crashpad, 2009.