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Digital Micro-ecologies of Portrait: Morphed Identities

The research project entitled *Photo-Robot* has established two specific aims: the examination of identity throughout the genre of 'portraiture', and the exploration of the visual effects of photographic morphing. Both aims referred to the cultural epistemologies of the identity and to the media skills of digital imaging. Both considerations were juxtaposed and spectacularized within the photograph itself.

What is this all about?

With the introduction of the new mechanical and electronic reproductive media (ranging from the opto-chemical image recording in photography and the mechanical sound recording in phonograph to the synchronized electromagnetic recording of image and sound), the Modernism witnessed the accumulation of means and techniques used for recording the reality. The key interest of Modernism as an avant-garde of the old media is – according to Lev Manovich – the invention of the new forms and new methods for humanizing and objectivizing the utterly alien image of the world offered by the new mechanical and electronic media. Media artists are no more concerned with the new ways of observation and presentation of the world, but they focus on the new ways of approaching and utilizing the information accumulated by the media. The artist uses archived and catalogued 'images' to trigger the chain of perceptual events in the world. In *Photo-Robot* project, Dejan Grba and his collaborators /accomplices had questioned the relationships of the observed, the media-processed, the re-apprehended and the media-referenced with the image-samples extracted from their models by morphing. This initiated an intricately circular visual-perceptive hermeneutics of the image and its original, of the original and the sample imitated by morphing. The relation between the image and its referent became highly complex and turned into an illusion in which the referenced and the non-referenced are indistinguishable.

At the same time, this project is conceptualized through modification and provocation of 'portrait' as an artistic and documentary genre. The provocation and modification of the genre of portraiture by morphing is an intervention with certain cultural consequences. These consequences refer to the visibility and comparability of the subject's image, and aim to problematize the visual quality of human 'identity'. The identity is a goal or an effect of the psychological, cultural and social process in which the subject matches the other (real or ideal) subject, the social group or some of its aspects, or (the notions of) the defined set of criteria for the individual or social recognition. This process is defined by: (a) the statement of identification and (b) the performance of identification. The human identities can belong to different categories of: gender, race, class, family, tribe, ethnic group, they could be national, generational, professional, cultural, economic, etc. The *Photo-Robot* project provokes primarily the 'visual identity', the identity defined by vision relating to the direct experience, to the photographic mediation and to the digital image morphing. The world of *Photo-Robot* is a micro-ecology of morphing: of instability, uncertainty and infinite potentialities.