The Death of the Death of the Portrait

About Face: Photography and the Death of the Portrait, Hayward Gallery, London, 24 June – 5 September 2004

reviewed by Richard Wright
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INTRO: In the Hayward"s show exploring the fate of portraiture, the image of the face became a mask that hid its technical and discursive means of its production.

It's hard not to like a show that's full of faces. The general mood of wonder and fascination makes it hard not to want to forgive its reductive pop discourse of the 'death of the portrait'. But such throw-away theory makes it difficult to account for the finely calibrated visual parameters of the human image. Any theoretical or technical analysis tends to be quickly overtaken by a human perceptual system that is subtle enough to register all the infinitesimal visual nuances of a face.

Here's an example. In Raphael Hefti's photographic series *Estheticiennes*, department store beauticians are all heavily made-up using the ranges they promote. Four are shown confronting the viewer head on like a police line up. Unlike most of the other exhibits, there is no apparent digital manipulation of these photographic records, yet what is it that makes them appear so unnaturally predatory, like a row of vampires mesmerising their victims? When you look very closely you can see that the photographs have been taken with two vertical lighting panels on either side of the camera. This has created two vertical highlights on either side of the pupils, producing an unsettling 'cats eyes' effect. This effect is largely subliminal, possibly even unintentional, a by-product of the apparatus.
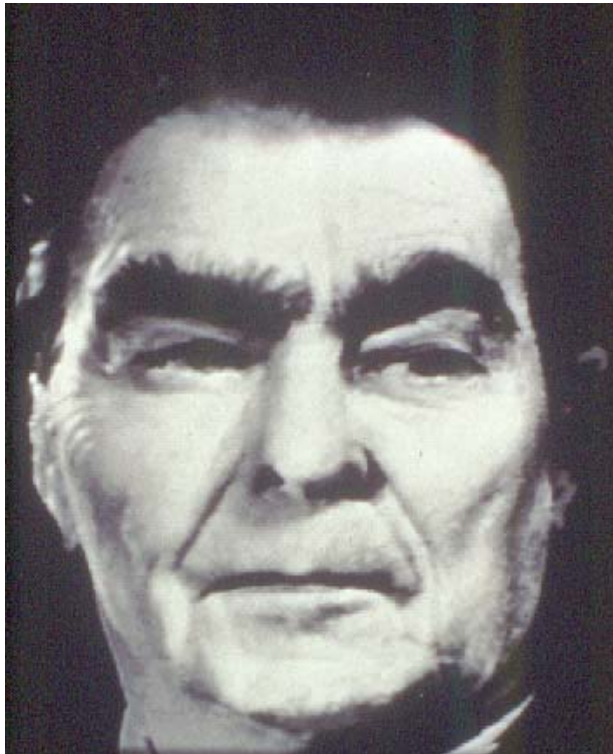
Nancy Burson, *Warhead I*, digital image, 1982.

If this is typical of conventional photography, will it still be possible for the unaided eye to account for the effects created by sophisticated digital compositing, retouching and calculation? Even when pictures use the same imaging techniques they can lead to entirely different representational outcomes. Nancy Burson's classic of early computer art, *Warhead I* (1982), is constructed by blending together the world's leaders according to the proportion of their nuclear arsenals. The resultant image portrays a dark, calculating character crowned by Brezhnev's heavy eyebrows, Reagan's craggy jowls and Thatcher's pinched lips. In the year 2000, Chris Dorley-Brown created *The Face of 2000* by photographing 2000 residents of Haverhill and morphing them all together to produce a single face. The result is a soft, almost featureless, angelic looking, white youngster who appears to be about fourteen years old. Whereas Burson's image still seems to function as a representation of a graspable set of political data, Dorley-Brown has updated this process of computerised blending to function on an industrial scale. It operates not only as a visualisation of the town's population, but also as a visualisation of the very process of representational politics itself, revealing it to be an inadequate, mythical chimera.
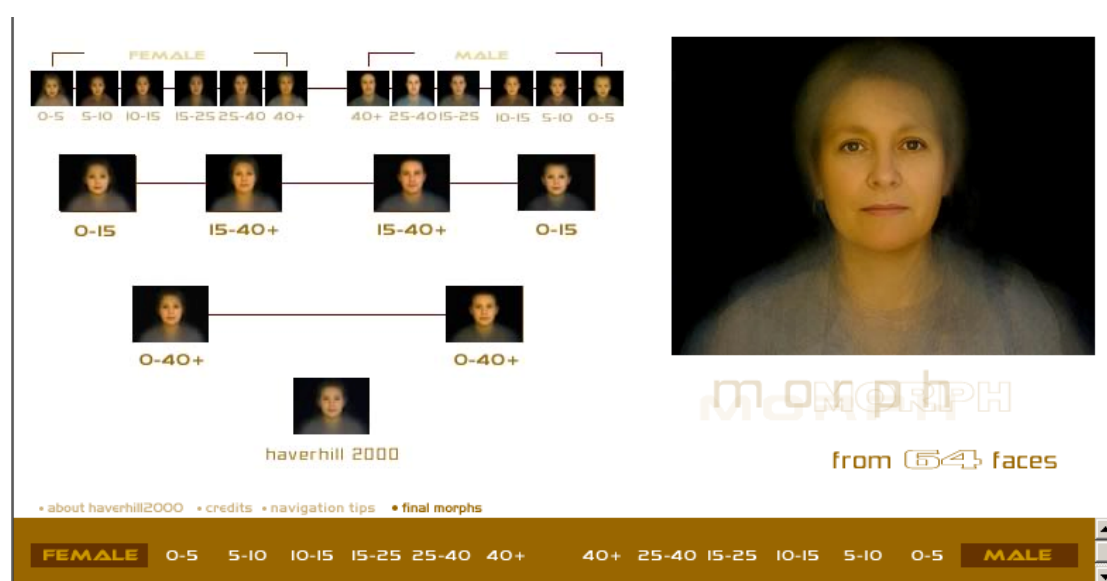
Chris Dorley-Brown, *The Face of 2000*, digital image, final morphs, 2000.
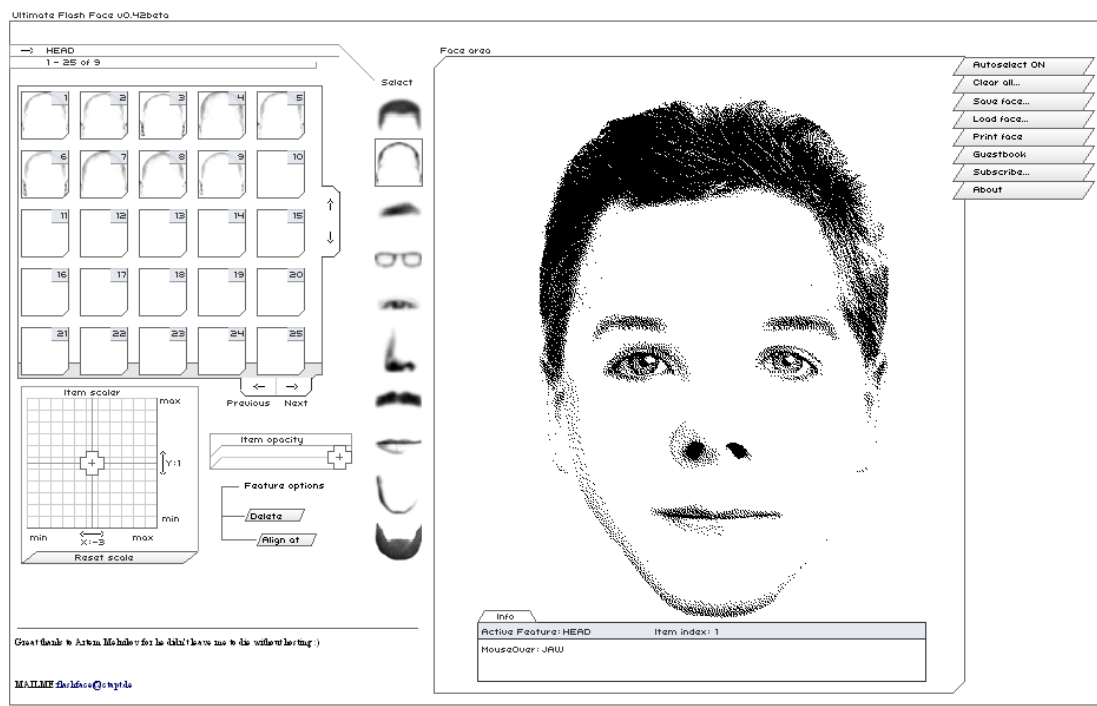
Of course none of this comes across in the show itself. Like all such big gallery shindigs, it is limited to showcasing only one or two examples of each artist's body of work, as well as offering only a brief gallery caption by way of explanation. These constraints prove very limiting, especially when some work could easily have included a visual record of its construction. On the website of *The Face of 2000* [http://www.haverhill2000.com], you can trace the process of morphing right through from its initial categorisations into gender and age groups. For example, you can also see how the face of 2000 grows up from the under fives through to old age, an apparent ageing process that is actually sampled from only one single year of time.

Most of the artists in this show have chosen to take the fashion aesthetics of celebrity as their starting point, perhaps feeling that this is the dominant genre of facial imagery. They also tend to stick within the concrete, literal register of photography instead of brazenly announcing the image's artificiality in order to work at a symbolic or analytical level. Yet despite the viewers usual unquestioning acceptance of a naturalistic photographic image, perhaps the greater visual acuity characteristic of facial perception might allow a more penetrating and revealing encounter than normal. But when curator William A. Ewing discusses the new aesthetics of 'the face' in his catalogue essay, he appears to regard it as no more revealing than the valueless play of expressions worn by a model. The show seems to treat the face's visual complexities as cosmetic, as capable of being only a factual result of the image's manufacturing instead of being reflective of it.

The human image has been invaded by the competing interests of fashion, ethnicity and demographics. Yet through all this the face retains its sense of tactile presence. Faciality operates at the outer reaches of cognition yet far closer than critical distance would allow, keeping us alert to any signs of an agency working beyond its immediate contours. This concreteness of the photographic or video image might be further developed to the point where it might slip between different modes of perception, between different subcutaneous tissues of information fed by arterial channels of data. So is the human eye's sensitivity to facial imagery enough proof that it can detect the traces of these formative processes and initial contexts?

At the end of the show were a couple of computer workstations running an identikit type program called *Ultimate Flash Face* by Max Ishchenko [http://flashface.ctapt.de]. This simple game that invited the visitor to assemble a self portrait out of a random collection of eyebrows, noses and hairlines had the effect of reducing our nations cultural intellectuals to the level of children squealing with delight. Yet after my companion and I had printed out the results from this software system, this successor to portraiture, something did not look quite right. We realised that it had left a subtle self-image of its own. The standardised facial elements we were given to chose from had the effect of rendering everyone at what would appear to be about twenty one years old (roughly the age of the writer of the software as far as I could see).

Just as portraiture expressed the parameters of individual subjectivity, this show raises the possibility of the face as one of a new class of image that can express the dynamics of information constructs yet leaves it tantalisingly unfulfilled. The question is no longer whether we can still take the portrait at face value, but whether we can take the underlying algorithm at face value. Without this expanded visual context, an exhibition like this is in danger of degenerating into an identikit collection of isolated snapshots. The face such an exhibition presents to the world is one tailored only for a fashion parade of art gallery shows.

Ultimate Flash Face by Max Ishchenko [http://flashface.ctapt.de]