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# NET WORKS

## James Coupe: Today, too, I experienced something I hope to understand in a few days

In the expansion of western capitalist disciplinary societies into societies of control, the paranoia and internalised guilt characteristic of the former do not go away, but leak out whenever there is a rip in the immateriality of informational machines that track our movements and channel our desires in societies of control. James Coupe's online project *Today, too, I experienced something I hope to understand in a few days* operates between these modalities. The project was commissioned by the Lancashire-based digital arts organisation Folly for its Abandon Normal Devices (AND) project in spring 2010 and was site-specific to Barrow-in-Furness, but it has been continuing since and will be part of the AND festival in Manchester this October.

The artwork comprises three elements which engage with and operate within the readymade data banks of information and images that circulate in virtual space. The first element is a series of video portraits of volunteers, some shot by Coupe in Seattle where he is based, the rest shot in Barrow, using poses and actions loosely based on Danish experimental filmmaker Jorgen Leth's 1967 film *The Perfect Human*. Coupe's title comes from a line in the film, which is perhaps better known as the occasion for Leth and Lars von Trier's *The Five Obstructions*, 2003, in which Leth attempted to remake his original film five times according to von Trier's dictates. Coupe, however, follows the dictates of software. Having instructed his volunteers to grin, scratch, munch, jump and stare, all against a clinical white background which gives them the aura of police mug shots or 21st-century screen tests, the videos are uploaded to a database where a programme automatically edits them in the style of Leth's film, their actions becoming jerky and strangely mechanical.

The second element of the work uses text from status profiles submitted by Facebook users based in Barrow who voluntarily signed up on Facebook to participate in Coupe's project. A software application automatically matches the Facebook profiles with the demographic of the video portraits, the Facebook profile texts serving as subtitles to the portraits, eg 'Male 22' refers to

a portrait of a fresh-faced grinning young man whose subtitle reads 'I am a bomb terrorist'. The modulations do not end there. The final component of the project involves software that searches YouTube for videos that link to code words in the subtitles, the final works being shown on YouTube as split-screen videos, the video portrait on one screen, its paired YouTube video on the other. Some of the pairings are puzzling to human intelligence, but others are more obvious – a video portrait of a young girl subtitled 'is tired n fed up' is juxtaposed with a YouTube video of a young Asian man playing guitar warbling about being fed up. The fact that their ages match but their gender doesn't perhaps alludes to the possibilities of online deceit, but might simply be a result of the gender-bending ambiguities inherent in pop and its fan base. During the festival period from 15 March to 10 April 2010, one film a day was generated. Since then, there has been one a week. At the time of writing, views of single works range from 11 to 218 and there have been no comments posted.

The project is both fascinating and disturbing. Fascinating in its use of readymade information and automated computer processes that highlight and expose how our relationships and identities are coded by powers beyond our comprehension that we have nonetheless created. Disturbing in the sense that, unlike disciplinary societies in which authority and responsibility are relegated to state bodies such as the school and the prison, in societies of control the place of authority and responsibility is abdicated in favour of the superficially benign democratic 'cool' of the corporation, which deludes us into thinking that we make our own choices rather than being subject to the fluctuating modulations of its systems. Both the worthiness of Folly's remit to develop local communities' relationships with art and technology, and Facebook's mission to connect and share, smack of an altruism that does not question whose interests are being served. The material we put out there, not just on social networking sites but also in emails, is continually being electronically linked in order to form identikits that are ultimately of use to the corporation somewhere down the line. Facebook Inc's face is an upbeat one that promotes a kind of hippy-dippy virtual communication between people sharing funny moments, drunken orgies, favourite bands, how they are feeling right now, and bad spelling. Saying you are a bomb terrorist is probably funny in the blasé humour of social

networking, in which deadpan blandness belies darker undercurrents. We can increase our numbers of friends and post images of how we want others to see us more easily than in real space because in virtual space there is no one to contradict us. Coupe's project buys into the extraction and expansion of identity that occurs in virtual space as well as creating a few blips in its smooth surface.

It is discomfiting to view the video portrait of a 50-year-old woman with a toothy grin whose subtitles read '...so hypo', which is paired with a YouTube video of Tina Turner, or a lookalike, strutting her stuff. The woman, who exists in real space, seems ridiculed by the juxtaposition. While Coupe has abdicated responsibility in a parody of the technology he is deploying, and likewise seems to be more interested in processes than content, nonetheless this kind of machinic pairing taps into the sadistic voyeurism behind the benign face of cool. Another video portrait of a 43-year-old man in an anorak, which appears in a number of the split-screen works – the database has obviously begun to replicate itself – is paired with YouTube footage of Barack Obama trying to sell his vision of healthcare to the American public as well as footage of a commentator on the current credit crisis, among others. Unlike some of the films, which are happily as short as the average online attention span, here, the split screens begin to comment on one another, the resolute presence of the man in the video portrait making Obama seem merely a silver-tongued performer who is not to be trusted. Instead of simply invoking a perverse gaze which gains pleasure in looking at others' discomfort, a user may begin to feel empathy for the subjects of these portraits; not something that generally emerges from YouTube. The philosopher Gilles Deleuze once said that the corporation is a gas. *Today, too, I experienced something I hope to understand in a few days* has entered the ether and generated a few solids. ■

[www.youtube.com/Ihopetounderstand](http://www.youtube.com/Ihopetounderstand)

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