Thesis

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Abstract

My work reflects the power dynamic between the observed and observer. I engage in a practice of false information, camouflage, and unpredictability to resist influences of authority.
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Introduction

Governments and corporations are using data to manage human behavior in ways that we are unable to see or understand. Not only are we always being monitored, we actively install, and perform for, the apparatuses responsible for quantifying and archiving our bodies. Our intimate and amplified actions share an ambient anxiety, and a manic indulgence, in a time of rampant mental distress.¹ Information is archived, analyzed, and used to manipulate culture and society.² My work questions the vulnerabilities of being seen and the politics involved with becoming imaged through data.

Psychographics is the qualitative methodology used to measure demographics, attitudes, values, opinions, and personalities of people to manage character, behavior, and opinion. The screen is a psychological questionnaire that we are endlessly filling out. In our increasingly visible and connected world, our habits reveal predictable data sets that are then used to influence our actions. We navigate a world of targeted information that is designed to tap into our anxieties and fears, manipulating our perceptions.³

The screen reflects ideal versions of ourselves back to us like a mirror, reinforcing a dominating ideology of individualism. The solitary effect of the screen produces a vulnerable state of suspension that is free from physical touch and perceived dangers of the outside world. Existing parallel to physical space, computer networks seem to offer a retreat from the harsh realities of imperialism.

Capitalism creates a world where nobody knows what is true or false. Politics have amalgamated with the market, resulting in a government that is deferent to corporate demands. Under this model ethics are expendable in relation to power. There is seemingly an infinite capacity in the American people to forget the atrocities done in their names. Our screen-based culture makes it difficult to be truly present, distancing us from the violent and destructive wake of imperialism. We play along and pretend that nothing is wrong, because it is difficult to imagine an alternative.

My practice engages the same popular platforms of dissemination used to collect our personal data. With the objective of protecting my privacy, I experiment with different methods of camouflage as a response to our panoptic society. I manipulate predictability as a user while maintaining coherent access to the social benefits of the network. Without revealing an accurate identity, I exploit the non-critical readers of my work through the

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practice of suggesting online movements. Acting within social media networks, I navigate the contemporary multimedia-war through its inherent structures and efficiencies.
Figure 1 – Initial mask study on the failure point of DeepFace
Through online exercises, I find form directly within social media platforms. In 2016, I started examining Facebook’s deep-learning, facial-recognition software, *DeepFace*. Trained on over four million images uploaded by users, it is said to be 97.35% accurate.\(^7\) The discomfort of being recognized by a machine motivated a series of performances and pictures aimed at determining *DeepFace*’s point of failure. I uploaded a series of unaltered photographs of myself to a private album and confirmed perfect accuracy in recognition and tagging. Then, I tested the breaking point through a process of studio portraits and mask making. Layering Vaseline on my face, I slowly obstructed my features. Step-by-step, I photographed the process and uploaded the images to Facebook to test identification. *DeepFace* continued to correctly recognize me through the disguise as the landscape of my face transformed. Eventually after applying sixteen ounces of Vaseline, the algorithm no longer recognized me. I deleted all successfully identified images and manually tagged the unidentified one, archiving a new variable of my face.

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I was compelled to see how the digitally imperceptible mask operated in the physical world and thus decided to attend a football game camouflaged. The Ohio State University football program is valued at $1.5 billion, making it the highest of any such program in the country. The popularity of Ohio State’s brand draws in large audiences to every home game and offered a stage of consumers in which I presented the DeepFace mask to. Ohio Stadium or “The Shoe” holds an audience of 110,045 people providing an intoxicating atmosphere for the performance. The seductive force of stimulation echoes the spectacular effects of our digital realities, and in both worlds, willing participants are

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drafted into the production of content. The tailgate before the game provided a platform into which I inserted myself and exploited members of the unsuspecting audience. The *DeepFace* mask registered as out-of-place in the crowd, my conspicuous appearance attracted attention from the fans.

There was a heightened sense of security at the tailgate: officers with sniper rifles surveilled the crowd from the surrounding rooftops, militarized police vehicles were on display throughout the space, and a recurring message emitted from loud speakers warning people to be on the lookout for suspicious activity. All of these “safety” precautions appear to be lost in the excitement of the spectacle. I set up the conditions to pull people from the disorienting effects of the pregame atmosphere into moments of being truly present. To be truly present is to question the underlying structures that exist to manage our perceptions in both physical and digital worlds.

I confronted the sea of scarlet and grey by wearing a dull brown coat and with my face covered in the *DeepFace*-defying mask. My presence did not conform to the shared interests of the fans and therefore I was in opposition to their company. People analyzed and stared at me as I moved through the crowd; one person called me a whacko. The strategies used to find privacy online resulted in an increased visibility in physical space.
I am interested in how being truly present relates to being seen, and its effect on our physical awareness in space. The gaze controls the binary between subject (observer) and object (observed.) Objects and subjects are never entirely passive or stable - they’re crystallizations of processes and everything is in process, constantly undergoing transformation. During my performance many fans experienced moments of object/subject realization (even if they may not have articulated it that way) when they observed my unexpected presence. In the moment of the look, the subject experiences what it means to be truly present. The disorienting effects of the spectacle fades and the subjects’ bodily positions-in-space becomes their dominant perspective. Time passes and the subject is taken back into a state of groundlessness and overwhelming distraction. In

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both physical and digital realities, we continuously flow within the space between object and subject. The effect of being seen pulls us towards a spatial self-awareness that objectifies the observed and leaves them vulnerable to being managed.\textsuperscript{10}

Our permanent visibility through modern surveillance operates as a constant observer, one that is all seeing and knowing. Big data assures the automatic functioning of power by constantly objectifying individuals and influencing behaviors. Our data is filtered in a way that segments us into social spaces that only show us the contents of our interests; our feeds do not communicate information that challenges our preexisting beliefs.\textsuperscript{11} The radical nature of DeepFace – \textit{becoming truly present}, becomes a critical investigation into the effects of our social networks. In resisting synthesis with the fans, I invite an analytical dialogue on the conditions of uniformity. The performance is not confined to the picture frame or pedestal, instead finding form in the cultural mainstream.


Very DeepFace

Next, I developed a more efficient method of generating unique variables to overwhelm DeepFace. I collected hundreds of images from public Facebook accounts that were used to train DeepFace’s algorithm to unlearn my real appearance. As a daily practice I composited strangers’ faces over that of my own and then uploaded and tagged myself in the new, fake-representations. DeepFace’s ability to successfully identify me began to break as I introduced new variables. The algorithm started to tag the fake-representations
as me and ultimately forgot my truthful appearance. I continued with this exercise until reaching two hundred unique-face uploads, accumulating fifteen false positive-identifications.

I changed my profile name to Quiet Spruce. As Quiet Spruce I created a predominantly false social network of relationships through a new daily practice of requesting friends from lists of existing friends. Over a period of four months I went from having two hundred thirty-four “friends” to three thousand and thirty-one. My personal networks, which were almost exclusively based in New York and Ohio, expanded into a global representation comprised of strangers. To imply a true social relationship, I needed to engage my new “friends.” Birthday notifications provided a consistent framework that I could use to interact efficiently without overlap. These actions were predictable but dishonest, effectively providing Facebook with meaningless noise instead of an accurate account of my private information.

The complexity of my growing social network allows me to show up in many places in real time. This interconnectedness serves to blur my role as coherent agent, making my true-self less perceptible. The artist Seth Price refers to these conditions as horizontal blur: “blur occurs when something or someone moves too fast from one place to another for it to register optically as a bounded form.”¹² This blur describes a form of digital camouflage and informs my strategies and participation on social media.

Eventually my activities were reported as spam by other users who were acting as honest agents. I was locked out of my Facebook account and was asked to verify my false name with an official form of identification. I manipulated my student ID card using Photoshop to reflect that I was in fact who I said was and submitted the file for review. I receive the following message when logging in:

![Facebook notification for Quiet Spruce](image)

Figure 5 – Facebook notification for Quiet Spruce.

It has been three months since I submitted an appeal; there is no way to contact Facebook support for a status update on the investigation. My resistance to providing true, meaningful data has resulted in a pause and seemingly the end of existence for the original Quiet Spruce within the world of Facebook. Quiet Spruce continues to live on across other digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and my personal website.
Content

I participate in online social exchange and produce images that follow the logic of poor images. Through the false relationships I generated on Facebook, a new audience emerged with which I connect and share my work. The content I create integrates itself into networked structures of the cultural mainstream and embraces the profound mutability of the digital medium. My content exists in the form of photographs, videos, links, live streaming, videos, comments, and likes. I encourage contamination by releasing work directly into a system that is dependent on informational distribution. By setting frameworks that generate false yet predictable behavior, I intend to subvert the manipulative power of big data by resisting objectification.

Artist Hito Steyerl outlines qualities of a poor image:

*The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution.*

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14 Ibid
Assessed by velocity and exchange value, poor images perfectly integrate into information capitalism. I make work that is intended for short attention spans, for impression rather than immersion, and intensity rather than contemplation.

Although the content I generate exists within corporate archives, I also keep a personal record offline to use as a sort of materials toolbox. Digital video is my preferred medium to illustrate the qualities and function of poor images. The digital medium is insecure, open to being ripped from the Internet and reworked into new original forms. Combining appropriated content with images of my own creation, I call upon past histories as new ones continue to emerge. Everything I produce as an artist is freely available online, by sharing content I encourage a potential for new originals and authorship to emerge.
quietspruce

YouTube, which is owned by Google, is the second largest search engine in the world – after Google. The immense scale of this social media platform offers a direct link into the cultural mainstream, making it the ideal place to connect my practice with an audience. Taking advantage of popular comment sections across the web, I post links back to my videos that are hosted on YouTube. Operating across multiple social media platforms allows for cross-pollination. I intend to intervene in and prompt users to question their movements within the larger framework of the Internet. I prioritize subject interaction over didactic content. This is not to say that the content is without meaning or intent, but rather that I am more interested in forming significant interactions through followers, subscribers, views, comments, likes, and dislikes. These connections confirm an audience’s and the works’ existence within the dominant culture of the screen. This way of working exercises a freedom to participate actively in the transformations of everyday reality. Each upload presents a snapshot of the affective condition of a specific moment in time, embracing its conditional existence.

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Figure 6 – Still from TASBA

TASBA is a forty-four second video depicting the violent assault and destruction of representation of imperialist power. The original footage has been edited and remixed into a series simultaneous images and hyper-saturated color. Sounds of a chainsaw are met with the menace of a tornado siren, evoking fear and anxiety. The resolution is low to the point that individual pixels visibly deteriorate. Sound and picture crash into one another, repeating, reconfiguring, and growing in intensity. TASBA’s exaggerated qualities are critical of the spectacular media that we are subjected to on the screen as
well as our inability to distinguish fake from real. I distribute content through an act of spamming links that direct back to my YouTube channel. The material is designed to catch unsuspecting viewers off guard and cause them to consider the implications of their digital movements. The non-critical viewers’ social interactions reveal confusion and discomfort.

Figure 7 – Screenshot from TASBA comment section on YouTube

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My participation on YouTube resulted in a life-time ban from the platform for violating the spam, deceptive practices and scams policies. I was specifically banned for posting large amounts of untargeted, unwanted, and repetitive content. YouTube continues to host the quietspruce channel, publicly preserving the videos and social history, but when I attempt to access the channel I reach the following message:

**Unable to access a Google product**

If you’ve been redirected to this page from a particular product, it means that your access to this product has been suspended. Read on for more information.

Your access to this Google product has been suspended because of a perceived violation of either the [Google Terms of Service](https://www.google.com/policies/terms/) or product-specific Terms of Service. For specific product guidelines, please visit the homepage of each Google product you’re interested in for a link to its Terms of Service.

Google reserves the right to:

- Disable an account for investigation.
- Suspend a Google Account user from accessing a particular product or the entire Google Accounts system, if the Terms of Service or product-specific policies are violated.
- Terminate an account at any time, for any reason, with or without notice.

**Next steps for suspended accounts:** If you believe your access to this product was suspended in error, [contact us](https://support.google.com/accounts/answer/116641?hl=en).

Figure 8 – YouTube notification for Quiet Spruce
The punishment is not an enforceable measure. I operate two new accounts and continue the practice of manually spamming my content. YouTube’s lifetime ban refers only to the account in question and not to other linked Google products such as Gmail. All that is required to make a new account is to log out of the banned Google account and to create a new one. I have uploaded content from the original account and mirrored or flipped the videos horizontally (this is a common technique used to upload copyrighted material.) The mirrored images avoid being seen by the program’s copyright protection algorithms, preventing them from being subsequently deleted or banned from the platform. Through my ongoing participation, I continue to be truly present within the culture of the screen.
The parallel worlds created by computer networks shape alternative realities that distract from the harsh realities of imperialism. The complexities of the real world are multiplied through the interconnectedness of these digital networks, making it difficult to know what is really going on. Because reality is no longer an important factor, politics have become a game of perception management where anything can become anything.\footnote{Carlo Kopp, “Classical Deception Techniques and Perception Management vs. the Four Strategies of Information Warfare.” Clayton School of Information and Technology, 2010.}
Our data provides predictable behavior models that are used by corporate and
government agencies to manipulate our decisions. Collecting data on people is profiling
them, gaining insight into how to segment populations. These networks that are invisible
to ordinary people command an extraordinary power.\textsuperscript{18} Big data companies like
Cambridge Analytica effectively manipulate the psychologies of entire nations. The self-
described “premiere election management company” issued the following statement
following the 2016 U.S. presidential election: “We are thrilled that our revolutionary
approach to data-driven communication has played such an integral part in President-
elect Trump’s extraordinary win.”\textsuperscript{19} In the United States, almost all personal data is for
sale: you can simply buy the information needed to profile and target individuals. “At
Cambridge,” Alexander Nix, Cambridge Analytica’s then-CEO, said, “we were able to
form a model to predict the personality of every single adult in the United States of
America—220 million people.”\textsuperscript{20}

The strategy of keeping everyone confused and distracted effectively limits significant
opposition. We have retreated into an overwhelmingly spectacular, and often completely
fake version of the world and we accept it as normal. The camera has broken its promise
to index reality, not representing the world as it is but how it can be edited. The culture of
the screen is dominated by a sense of individualism that is fueled by its ability to reflect
ideal versions of ourselves. The content that I upload to the Internet is defined by its

\textsuperscript{19} https://cambridgeanalytica.org/
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid
inherently reflective and reflexive nature. I do not expect to defy the conditions of the screen while working within them, but I can resist the power of big data by manipulating my behavior and predictability as human object.
References


Appendix

I saw myself in the picture and I.

YouTube – Users: cut seal + quiet spruce + loud pine

Facebook – User: Loud Pine

Instagram – Users: quiet.spruce + huzzlebuzz

Twitter – User: quietspruce
Figure 10 – TASBA screenshot from web
FlipMaster69  5 months ago
same wtf is this

Shygirl Vlogs  5 months ago
Tbh this is the best “outfit of the day” video I’ve see on YouTube.

Pineapple Splat  4 months ago
Top 10 Jason Vorhees kills

Killer.:D  5 months ago
top 10 anime creepy moments

THE STUFF  4 months ago
its time to stop.

Abara  4 months ago
Bullshit

Jonny Brooks  4 months ago
Jesus backpacking christ

Figure 11 – TASBA screenshot from web
Figure 12 – TASBA screenshot from web
Figure 13 – TASBA screenshot from web
Sebastiaan De Bruyn 1 month ago
is dit zwarte piet?

Captain Tittus 1 month ago
i see would love to see the reaction of a person on lsd to your vids

Shae 4 months ago
is that a ghillie suit?

OKWEGL 3 months ago
wtf is dis

lets blame whitey 3 months ago
Skk kraattaar du , forlorar du

AmericanRaidersBall 4 months ago
Yee

Nick Craig 1 month ago
pauses video and picks up bottle of honey that was put in morning tea "ingredients may cause psychedelic or otherwise hallucinations. Avoid operating heavy machinery while ingesting this product. 'Well, that explains it..."