

IMAGE, INTERRUPTED

Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer
Kiera Brew Kurec
Xanthe Dobbie
Ash Garwood
Maya Kilic
Ella Sutherland

13 February—12 April 2024
Curated by Eleanor Zeichner

The way we experience images is shifting. Our ability to discern and interpret visual information is challenged by the accelerating proliferation of artificial intelligence models designed to influence our thinking. The perceptible divide between real and unreal, between fact and fiction, is narrowing. In parallel, contemporary visual culture is dominated by algorithmic images made for and by machines: to monitor, to survey and to target.ⁱ Mostly invisible to us, these images entirely bypass human imagination, while mining human data to serve their functions.

Image, Interrupted brings together works by 6 contemporary Australian and Aotearoa/New Zealand artists to consider the ways in which data, and its related image technologies, can be troubled, harnessed and understood via the tactile imagination. The artists in the exhibitions complicate the machine-generated image and seek to reveal data's influence on contemporary politics, storytelling, the environment, warfare and sex. *Image, Interrupted* considers the extent to which data technologies mediate our desires, shape our destinies and distort our understanding of images, in visible and invisible ways.

Ella Sutherland's series *Speaker of the House* (2022), made in the context of the 2022 Australian federal election campaign, visualise the interruption of a formal democratic process with the insertion of 'bad data'. Drawing on the visual language and colour theory of electoral politics – campaign materials, ballot papers,

polling graphics – Sutherland's composition of graphic forms imply the subversion of a binary system. The sleek geometric planes of the painting are disrupted by pixelated glyphs, unstable shapes and broken lines.

From the false dialectic of a two-party political landscape, Sutherland suggests the multitude of variances beyond the compositional structures of the ballot and, by extension, the absurdity of binary choice.

As the proliferation of deepfake representations of political figures threatens to further destabilise Western democracies, our ability to discern the veracity of visual information and interpret images becomes urgent.ⁱⁱ Meanwhile, empowering media conglomerates to regulate user content may serve only to reinforce existing power structures.

Kiera Brew Kurec's installation *In the dark the spiders weave* (2024) restages citizen-led tactics of camouflage used in Ukraine since the 2014 Russian invasion alongside an archive of digital images reflecting the Ukrainian diaspora and the role of social media in shaping our perception of global conflict. The work considers what it takes to be both invisible and visible in the age of big data.

When unmanned Russian military drones learned to detect commercially produced camouflage netting being used by Ukrainian defence forces, civilians began to make handmade camouflage to evade easy detection.

In civic and domestic spaces across the country citizens made camouflage netting by hand, adapting the colour palette of scrap materials for defence installations dependent on landscape and season. These community led tactics undermine the automatic pattern-recognition systems on unmanned military drones with a stubbornly unpredictable human object. They serve to short circuit what artist and filmmaker Harun Farocki termed 'operational images'—images not made to represent an object for human contemplation but used by machines to perform a function.ⁱⁱⁱ

Suspended on an aluminium support, hand-woven camouflage partly conceals videos from the artist's personal archive: footage of family land in Poland, filmed by Brew Kurec's mother in 2012; documentation of family making *psanky* in regional Victoria in 2011; and social media content depicting the 2022 Russian invasion, taken from the artist's own social media feeds. The concealment of these videos emphasises the human lives the operational image does not understand, and what is at stake when the machine achieves its mission. In the context of Brew Kurec's broader work, in which she investigates modes of archiving performance practices, the hand-woven camouflage is a testament to the embodied work of Ukrainian resistance, and the archive of cultural practices held by people in diaspora. The assemblage of a personal archive sits uneasily aside the algorithmic archive: trillions of images categorised, quantified and stored by the platform.

Our understanding of global events is subject to algorithmic currents that drive visual content to our screens and reinforce bubbles of consensus. In response, critical theorist McKenzie Wark proposes a model of 'ficting and facting': the production of new knowledges and the blending of multiplicities of understanding to highlight the artifice of creating an artefact.^{iv}

Ash Garwood's photographic series *Equivalence* (2020–2022) enacts Wark's proposal, creating a meticulous fiction that challenges the history of nature photography and our ability to tell fiction from fact. Garwood uses Cinema 4D software to construct the image of a turbulent ocean, the surface of the waves lit by an unseen sun, gradually accreting textures and shapes in a process she likens to sculpting from raw material. She then exports this 3D render and produces a photographic negative which is hand-processed as a large format contact print.

In moving between digital and analogue techniques, Garwood invites chance into the production of the image, where details are concealed or enhanced. The process refutes a mastery of the natural world redolent in the history of landscape photography, in which documentation of the landscape served the colonial project of acquisition of natural resources. Garwood's oceanscapes, free from microplastics, present a utopian vision that creates an entirely new place beyond the reach of humanity and a sense of the sublime suited to our unreal times.

A newly commissioned series of digital still life collages by Maya Kilic, *Floral Arrangements* (2024), presents another kind of sublime, one marked by human excess. For this series, Kilic prompted ChatGPT to produce imagery of the most common litter on London streets, collaging it into surrealist photomontages of the objects that will undoubtedly outlive us. Scraps of litter, fragments of plastic and crumpled bank notes hover among the petals.

Kilic's *Floral Arrangements* comment on the fleeting nature of earthly pleasures. Their historical antecedent — 17th century Dutch still life painting — burnished the reputations of men made wealthy by European imperialism, their economic prosperity symbolised by masses of exotic flowers and fruits. In our era of ultra-convenience and single-use everything, where

all desires can be fulfilled with same-day shipping and all knowledge is seemingly at our fingertips, Kilic asserts that our personal abundances have untold global consequences.

Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer's approach to AI image generators DALL-E 2 and Midjourney positions them as non-human collaborators, the biases of which produce unexpected ruptures. His prompts include art historical references such as Dürer etchings and medieval tapestries as well as what he calls "the folklore of the internet": incel screeds from 4chan, body-building forums and fringe online political extremist manifestos. The resulting images portray closely cropped portraits of characters the artist will use to develop a graphic novel, depicting a lone young man falling through disintegrating environments, reacting with anger and apathy to the world shifting around him. Distorted monsters and waifish women, always crying or bowing, fail to alter the hero's journey.

The images are processed by various means of machine translation: via vector path, converted to pen plotter, then machine-woven on a jacquard loom. The combination of these disparate sources reveals the AI's seeming inability to generate new concepts outside the narrative convention of a young, able-bodied male protagonist at war with the world, lashing out in impotent fury and suffering. In prompting these generators with the insular logic of the terminally online, Aloisio-Shearer reveals the dreams of the machine to be all too human, flimsy and self-defeating. The increasing sophistication of image-generating platforms is propelled by the masses of images used to train neural networks: the intellectual property of artists now grist for the image-mill.

Xanthe Dobbie's video work *FutureSex/Love Sounds* (2024), proposes a radical scenario in which AI technology is deployed for erotic revolution. Starting with the premise that we

have already reached the techno future envisioned by Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) or of the *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century* (1991) by VNS Matrix, Dobbie asks, where are the sex robots?

Deepfake versions of figures such as Morgan Freeman, Hilary Clinton and Cate Blanchett espouse the virtues of completely customisable sex robots that are responsive to any imaginable fantasy. The sex robots don't just have erotic benefits — though this is ample, according to deepfake Queen Elizabeth II — they have also solved the climate crisis, established universal basic income and discovered intelligent life on other planets. In this version of the future, dating apps are no longer problematic and the arts 'get so much funding'. Dobbie's vision of post-labour hedonism, facilitated by the offshoring of societal problems to benevolent cyborgs, flips the anxiety that automation makes human intelligence redundant. Imagine if the machines could free us.

Recent technology forecasting placed generative AI at the 'peak of inflated expectations', predicting a decade of over-investment and experimentation before we reach the 'trough of disillusionment'.^v Our expectations for the conveniences and pleasures afforded by technology are muddled by the reality of human needs and desires, and our capacity to visualise the future is constrained by our experiences of the past. To expect something greater of technology, of course, is to expect something greater of humanity. The peaks and troughs are all our own.

i: Paglen, T. (2016, December 8). Invisible Images (Your Pictures Are Looking At You). *The New Inquiry*. <https://thenewinquiry.com/invisible-images-your-pictures-are-looking-at-you/>

ii: Ray, Andrew. "Disinformation, Deepfakes and Democracies: The Need for Legislative Reform." *University of New South Wales law journal* 44, no. 3 (2021): 983–1013.

iii: Parikka, J. (2023). *Operational images: From the visual to the invisual*. University of Minnesota Press.

iv: Lemos, S. (2020, December 22). Ficting and Facting. McKenzie Wark, RIBOCA2—2nd Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art 2020. *Mousse Magazine*. <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/ficting-facting-mckenzie-wark-sofia-lemos-riboca2-2nd-riga-international-biennial-contemporary-art-2020/>

v: Bant, A. et al. (2023, December 14). 5 Forces That Will Drive the Adoption of GenAI. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2023/12/5-forces-that-will-drive-the-adoption-of-genai>

List

of

works

Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer
Decalcify Your Pineal Gland
2023

jacquard woven tapestry
40 x 40 cm
Courtesy the artist

Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer
Xenodemon From the Future Is Pulling The Strings
2023

jacquard woven tapestry
40 x 40 cm
Courtesy the artist

Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer
/imagine:
2023

jacquard woven tapestry
40 x 40 cm
Courtesy the artist

Kiera Brew Kurec
In the dark the spiders weave
2023

Aluminium, textiles, family video, found footage from social media
Video credits:
Tatos home, 2013, 2 mins, 46 secs. Footage courtesy of Erica Kurec
Pysanky, 2011, 12 mins, 12 secs.
Feed, 2022-2024, 58 mins, 07 secs.
For a full list of social media accounts visit:
<https://bit.ly/kurecinthedark>
Courtesy the artist

Xanthe Dobbie
FutureSex/LoveSounds
2024

2 channel digital video with sound
12:18 mins
Courtesy the artist

Ash Garwood
Equivalence
2020-2022
silver gelatin print after 3D render
Each work 152 x 106 cm
Courtesy the artist

Maya Kilic
Floral Arrangements 1
2023
c-type print on Hahnemühle museum etching
127 x 96 cm

Maya Kilic
Floral Arrangements 2
2023
c-type print on Hahnemühle museum etching
127 x 96 cm

Ella Sutherland
The House Divided
2022
Acrylic on linen
106 x 96 cm
Courtesy the artist and Sumer, Auckland

Ella Sutherland
Secret Ballot
2022
Acrylic on linen
76 x 66 cm
Courtesy the artist and Sumer, Auckland

Ella Sutherland
Spoilt (Donkey)
2022
Acrylic on linen
76 x 66 cm
Courtesy the artist and Sumer, Auckland

Ella Sutherland
Humours of an Election
2022
Acrylic on linen
76 x 66 cm
Courtesy the artist and Sumer, Auckland

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