Mythologies of AI Consent: A Review of “A Third Act” at Sulk Chicago

BY FRANK GEISER | JUNE 11, 2024

Justice Apple and Mac Pierce, installation view of “A Third Act,” at Sulk Chicago, 2024/Photo: Justice Apple and Mac Pierce

My biggest issue with most AI-generated art being created in 202[illegible] is the common misconception that simply using AI amounts to a

care about how you might use it to say something. AI, like graphic design, painting or photography, is a good tool when used as a means to an end; artworks using AI because it’s tech-y or trendy is, to borrow some Gen Z lexicon, cringe.

All of this would just be me shaking my fist at the newest technological gizmo if it weren’t for the promises that seem to be attached to each new generation of AI capabilities. Every day, more and more companies race to make the experience of using computers more unpredictable by implementing half-baked AI features into their apps, widgets and whatnot. I am part of a subset of people who believe AI is going to change everything about our digital lives, but I am also certain that most of these changes are things we are culturally unprepared for.

In late January 2024, AI-generated “deepfakes” of Taylor Swift were distributed through 4chan and Twitter (sorry, “X”). These sexually explicit, often violent images were purportedly viewed more than fifty million times before being pulled from most online platforms. Perhaps much of this review’s audience would find the idea that the entire AI libraries have already been created for the explicit purpose of making porn from clothed or otherwise non-consenting individuals shocking, but I am reminded of a recent conversation I had with Newcity 2024 Breakout Artist Ava Wanbli, who correctly pointed out that porn has been a driving force behind so many historical media innovations.

The craziest thing about viral, non-consensual deepfakes of Taylor Swift is that the ability to create them is actually not new at all. AI wasn’t used to do some sort of crazy technological wizardry that made impossibly real deepfakes. For reference, photoshopping a head onto a different person’s body is almost trivially easy after learning the basics of how Photoshop works. This is the crux of the matter: It is incredibly difficult to use AI for things that can’t be done manually. Most of the time AI is simply a way to automate that labor into a quickly generated, statistically average result. I think the world is already poorly prepared to address photorealistic deepfakes and other falsified imagery, but I think it is wholly unprepared for technologies that allow anyone to create them instantly without effort.

Justice Apple and Mac Pierce, work “In Likeness” from “A Third Act,” at Sulk Chicago, 2024/Photo: Justice Apple and Mac Pierce

Long-winded introductory remarks aside, “A Third Act” by Mac Pierce and Justice Apple at Sulk Chicago is conceptually ahead of its time but technologically rooted in our contemporary reality. By using an open-source AI library created for mapping nude bodies onto clothed individuals, Pierce and Apple manipulated images of themselves wearing full-body morphsuits in elaborately constructed sets, creating convincing but ultimately fake pornographic images. In a discussion with Pierce about the work, he says, “We wanted to show the state of technology today, and ask people what happens when AI gets it right.” While the images in “A Third Act” are partially AI-generated, it is still a very labor-intensive process to create them. Pierce and Apple took 300-800 images in each hand-constructed set, and the AI goes through 2000-5000 iterations for each selected image. Pierce and Apple

them. Their work is a testament to the power of AI tools that won’t require as much setup in the not-so-distant future.

The images in “A Third Act” are uncanny in ways that take time to fully realize, as the show pretends to be many things that it is not. Everything in each of the five photographs on display is real, meaning it actually existed on set and was captured by a camera, except for the bodies populating the scene. Each of the photographs was taken in the same location, but printed backdrops and detailed ornamentation in each scene create the illusion that these photographs were taken in several different bedrooms. The AI-generated bodies in “A Third Act” are as diverse and varied as the multitude of kitschy, ornate props placed throughout these sets, but prior to being “nudified” each of these photographs is populated by the same two people. The most obvious way that the visual surface of these photographs begins to break down is reflections from carefully placed mirrors in several of the scenes. Instead of reflecting the AI-generated bodies, we see contorted figures in morphsuits and tacky wigs.

Justice Apple and Mac Pierce, work “A Carnal Ruse” from “A Third Act,” at Sulk Chicago, 2024/Photo: Justice Apple and Mac Pierce

“A Third Act” is a deeply unsettling, critically important look at AI capabilities in the here and now, wrapped up in a playful, gaudy pastiche. The AI-generated bodies feel like particularly risqué characters in a Rococo painting whose blissful hedonism prevents them from noticing the revolution brewing in their midst. Don’t let the glossy surface fool you; the photographs in “A Third Act” are urgent warnings made palatable by Pierce and Apple’s high-effort, nuanced approach.

The scenes also contain a multitude of references to artworks in the classical Western canon, calling attention to the ways that our relationship to all past images is being actively developed by generative technologies. In many ways, the photographs in “A Third Act” function in the opposite way in which many classical scenes do: instead of using the guise of academic disinterestedness to

consequences accompanying technological progress. There is a lot to unpack here, but it is remarkably apparent that most platforms aren’t built to handle nuanced conversations on AI and digital consent. Audiences that wish to share images from the exhibition on social media can hold up little black rectangular showcards to censor any AI-generated nipples in their posts, which I find equally amusing and depressing.

Justice Apple and Mac Pierce, work “A Grand Illusion” from “A Third Act,” at Sulk Chicago, 2024/Photo: Justice Apple and Mac Pierce

What Pierce and Apple have accomplished is nothing short of a watershed moment in our understanding of AI usage in art. Pushing an emergent technology to its contemporary limits, doing so in a way that transcends many of the problematic aspects of that technology, and making a real statement about its capabilities in

commentary in the photographs on display, but I was also continuously noticing new visual details in the artworks as I spent time with them.

I think this exhibition is a must-see on its own merit, but, as an additional incentive, it will also be the final show in Sulk Chicago’s current space on South Dearborn. The legacy that Taylor Payton has created in this tiny space is unparalleled, even within Chicago’s vibrant art scene. It feels appropriate to wrap up Sulk’s run in this space with such a strong, boundary-pushing show, and I look forward to whatever Payton chooses to do next. I know Sulk will be dearly missed, yet the reverberations of its cultural impact will still be felt for some time.

“Justice Apple and Mac Pierce: A Third Act” will be on view at Sulk Chicago, 525 South Dearborn, through June 30.

Frank Geiser

Frank Geiser is a visual artist and arts writer based in the south suburbs of Chicago. He is a professor of Visual Communication and Design at Purdue University Northwest.

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POPULAR SCIENCE

A simple DIY hoodie can fool security cameras

The 'Camera Shy Hoodie' looks innocuous, but keeps your face invisible to surveillance.

BY ANDREW PAUL | PUBLISHED FEB 27, 2023 1:00 PM EST

Despite objections from privacy advocates and many everyday citizens, surveillance technology such as facial recognition AI is appearing more and more in modern life. The market is booming—by 2026, the surveillance tech market will reach over $200 billion, despite being less than half that size in 2020. New products designed to collect personal data and track physical movements will likely keep popping up until meaningful legislation or public pushback causes companies to slow their roll. And that s where people like Mac Pierce enter the picture.

Pierce, an artist whose work critically engages with weaponized emerging technologies, recently unveiled their latest ingenious project—an everyday hoodie retrofitted to include an array of infrared (IR) LEDs that, when activated, blinds any nearby night vision security cameras. Using mostly off-the-shelf components like LumiLED lights, an Adafruit microcontroller, and silicone wire, as well as we software Pierce that made open-source for interested DIYers, the privacy-boosting "Camera Shy Hoodie" is designed to enable citizens to safely engage in civic protests and demonstrations. Or, wearers can just simply opt-out of being tracked by unknown third-parties while walking down the street.

Although unnoticeable to human eyes, the garment s infrared additions wreak havoc on surveillance cameras that utilize the light spectrum to see in evening darkness. Emitting the flashing infrared bursts from the hoodie will force nearby cameras auto exposure to try correcting for the brightness, thus obscuring a wearers face in a bright, pulsating light.

Speaking with Motherboard on Monday, Pierce argued, "surveillance technology has gotten to such a point where it s so powerful and so pervasive. And it s only now that we re realizing, Maybe we don t want this stuff to be as powerful as it is. " Projects like the Camera Shy Hoodie—alongside Piece s earlier, simplified "Opt Out Cap"—are meant to simultaneously bring attention to the issues of privacy and authority, while also providing creative workarounds to everyday, frequently problematic surveillance tools, he says.

Pierce has made all the designs, plans, and specifications for their hoodie hack available for free on their website. Unfortunately, the project isn t cheap—all told, the work would set makers back around $200—but anyone interested in a Camera Shy Hoodie to call their own can also sign up to be noticed by Pierce when custom kits are available for purchase.

Meanwhile, there are a number of interesting (and cheaper) clothing options in the vein of Piece s Camera Shy Hoodie, including an apparel line meant to confuse license plate scanning traffic cameras, and facial recognition-obscuring makeup techniques.

Andrew Paul

Andrew Paul is Popular Science's staff writer covering tech news. Previously, he was a regular contributor to The A.V. Club and Input, and has had recent work also featured by Rolling Stone, Fangoria, GQ, Slate, NBC, as well as McSweeney's Internet Tendency. He lives outside Indianapolis.

CLTC Announces Winners of Third Annual Cybersecurity Arts Contest

CLTC UC Berkeley Center for Long-Term Cybersecurity

April 4, 2023

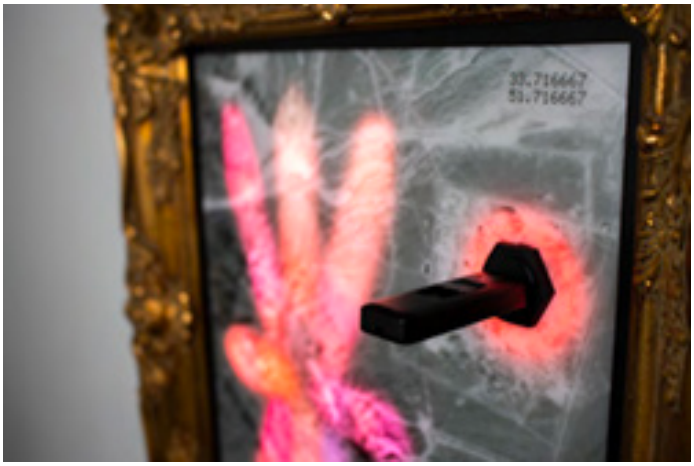
By Rachel Wesen

The Center for Long-Term Cybersecurity (CLTC) is proud to announce the winners of our third-annual Cybersecurity Arts Contest. Following a review by an independent and interdisciplinary panel of judges, three projects were selected based on their artistic merit, relevance, and potential impact.

The primary goal of the Cybersecurity Arts Contest is to expand representations of cybersecurity, broadly defined, through artistic expression and public dialogue.

2nd Prize
Mac Pierce
"Portrait of a Digital Weapon"

Issues of cybersecurity are rarely couched in terms of warfare to the larger public, and are often portrayed




as one-off attacks or the work of stateless cyber criminals. This no longer reflects the reality of the situation, as some of the largest attacks are carried out by national actors for the purposes of achieving state goals, much like traditional armaments of war. As more nations develop cyber-offensive capabilities, more of these attacks will occur. However, unlike conventional warfare, these attacks will never elicit an in-kind declaration of war, as they often remain covert. This cloak-and-dagger approach to cyber warfare allows these attacks to continue and escalate.

Mac Pierce's Portrait of a Digital Weapon is a series of electronically activated portraits depicting infamous, real-life examples of computer viruses, such as Stuxnet and NotPetya, being used as a tool of geopolitical and financial attack by nation-states. Each piece reads off the decompiled source code of the virus while displaying select elements of how each of the viruses operated and satellite imagery of the attack target. These works lay out the story of the battlefields in which these cyber weapons were used within a traditional painting frame, alluding to the many examples of works of art about war and global conquest throughout history.

The ongoing Portrait of a Digital Weapon series attempts to bring these covert attacks to light and highlight these viruses for what they are — cyber weapons. "When a viewer engages with this work, processing the meaning and the ramifications of the content of the work, I hope that they come away with a sense of unease about the computer viruses depicted," Pierce said. "Ultimately, the two viruses highlighted so far were covert operations, and greater knowledge of the particulars of their use will only lead more people to question why these viruses existed in the first place. By aestheticizing the elements of each virus, they become far easier to understand."

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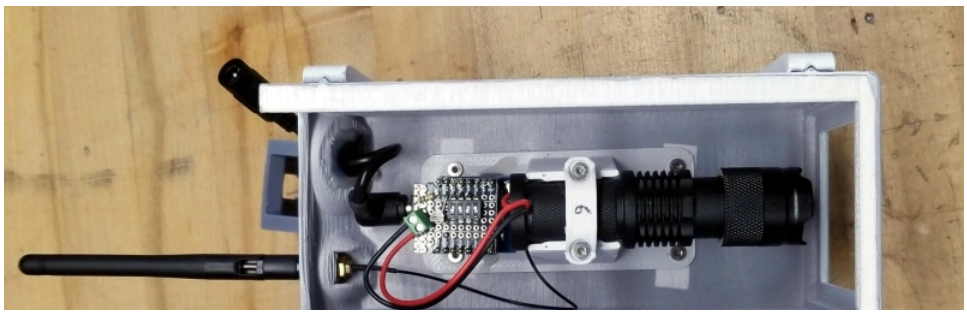
Building An Army Of Faux Cameras In The Name Of Art

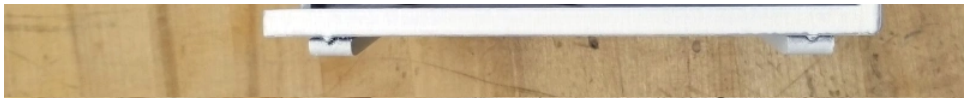
3-4 minutes

Skip to content

After taking mental note of the number of surveillance cameras pointed at him while standing in line at the local Home Depot, [Mac Pierce] was inspired to create *A Scanner Darkly*. The art installation uses beams of light projected by mock security cameras to create a dot-matrix character display on the opposing wall, which slowly blinks out US surveillance laws and regulations.

[Mac] has put together an extensive behind the scenes look at how he created *A Scanner Darkly*, which among other things covers the incredible time and effort that went into producing the fifteen identical cameras used to project the 3×5 grid. Early on he decided on 3D printing each one, as it would give him complete control over the final result. But given their considerable size, it ended up taking 230 hours and 12 kilograms of PLA filament to print out all the parts. It took a further 55 hours to sand and paint the camera housings, to make sure they didn't actually *look* like they'd been 3D printed.





Internally, each camera has an off-the-shelf LED flashlight that's had its power button rigged up to an ESP8266. Once they've been manually pointed to the appropriate spot on the wall, [Mac] can turn each camera's spotlight on and off over WiFi. Rather than rely on the gallery's infrastructure, all of the cameras connect to the ESP32 M5Stack that serves as the central controller via ESP-Now.

From there, it was just a matter of writing some code that would load a text document from the SD card, convert the current character into a 3×5 array, and then command the appropriate cameras to turn their lights on or off. [Mac] has not only provided the STL files for the 3D printed camera, but the client and server Arduino code to control the lights. Combined with his excellent documentation, this makes *A Scanner Darkly* something of a viral art piece; as anyone with the time and appropriate tools can either duplicate the installation or use it as a base for something new.

While some will no doubt argue that [Mac] could have completed this project far faster had he just modified some commercial dummy cameras, it's important to remember that as an artist, he had a very specific look in mind for *A Scanner Darkly*. This project is a perfect example of how a creator's passion can take an idea to new heights, and we think the end result proves it's worth the time and sweat to put in the extra effort.

hackaday.com

Portrait Of A Digital Weapon

4-5 minutes

Over the years, artists have been creating art depicting weapons of mass destruction, war and human conflict. But the weapons of war, and the theatres of operation are changing in the 21st century. The outcome of many future conflicts will surely depend on digital warriors, huddled over their computer screens, punching on their keyboards and maneuvering joysticks, or using devious methods to infect computers to disable or destroy infrastructure. How does an artist give physical form to an unseen, virtual digital weapon? That is the question which inspired [Mac Pierce] to create his latest Portrait of a Digital Weapon.

[Mac]'s art piece is a physical depiction of a virtual digital weapon, a nation-state cyber attack. When activated, this piece displays the full code of the Stuxnet virus, a worm that partially disabled Iran's nuclear fuel production facility at Natanz around 2008.

It took a while for [Mac] to finalize the plan for his design. He obtained a high resolution satellite image of the Iranian Natanz facility via the Sentinel Hub satellite imagery service. This was printed on a transparent vinyl and glued to a translucent poly-carbonate sheet. Behind the poly-carbonate layer, he built a large, single digit 16-segment display using WS2812 addressable LED strips, which would be used to display the Stuxnet code. A bulkhead USB socket was added over the centrifuge facility, with a ring of WS2812 LEDs surrounding the main complex. When a USB stick is plugged in, the Stuxnet code is displayed on the 16-segment display, one character at a time. At random intervals, the LED ring around the centrifuge building lights up spinning in a red color to indicate centrifuge failure.

The 16-segment display was built on an aluminum base plate, with 3D printed baffles to hold the LED strips. To hold the rest of the electronics, he built a separate 3D printed frame which could be added to the main art frame. Since this was too large to be printed in one piece on the 3D printer, it was split in parts, which were then joined together using embedded metal stud reinforcement to hold the parts together. Quite a nice trick to make large, rigid parts.

An Adafruit Feather M0 micro-controller board, with micro SD-card slot was the brains of the project. To derive the 5 V logic data signal from the 3.3 V GPIO output of the Feather, [Mac] used two extra WS2812 LEDs as level shifters before sending the data to the LED strips. Driving all the LEDs required almost 20 W, so he powered it using USB-C, adding a power delivery negotiation board to derive the required juice.

The Arduino code is straightforward. It reads the characters stored on the SD-card, and sends them sequentially to the 16-segment display. The circular ring around the USB bulkhead also lights up white, but at random intervals it turns red to simulate the speeding up of the centrifuges. Detecting when the USB stick gets plugged in is another nice hack that [Mac] figured out. When a USB stick is plugged in, the continuity between the shell (shield) and the GND terminal was used to trigger a GPIO input.

Cyber warfare is here to stay. We are already seeing increasing attacks on key infrastructure installations by state as well as non-state actors around the world. Stuxnet was one of the first in this growing category of malicious, weaponized code. Acknowledging its presence using such a physical representation can offer a reminder on how a few lines of software can wreak havoc just as much as any other physical weapon. Check out the brief project video after the break.

boingboing.net

Make: a facial-recognition confounding "Opt Out Cap" | Boing Boing

Cory Doctorow

3-4 minutes

Mac Pierce created a simple wearable to challenge facial recognition: do a little munging to an image of a face, print it on heat transfer paper, iron it onto see-through mosquito netting, slice, and affix to a billed cap — deploy it in the presence of facial recognition cameras and you'll be someone else. It's the kind of "adversarial example" countermeasure that fools computers pretty reliably but wouldn't work on a human. (*via JWZ*)