EAST QUAY

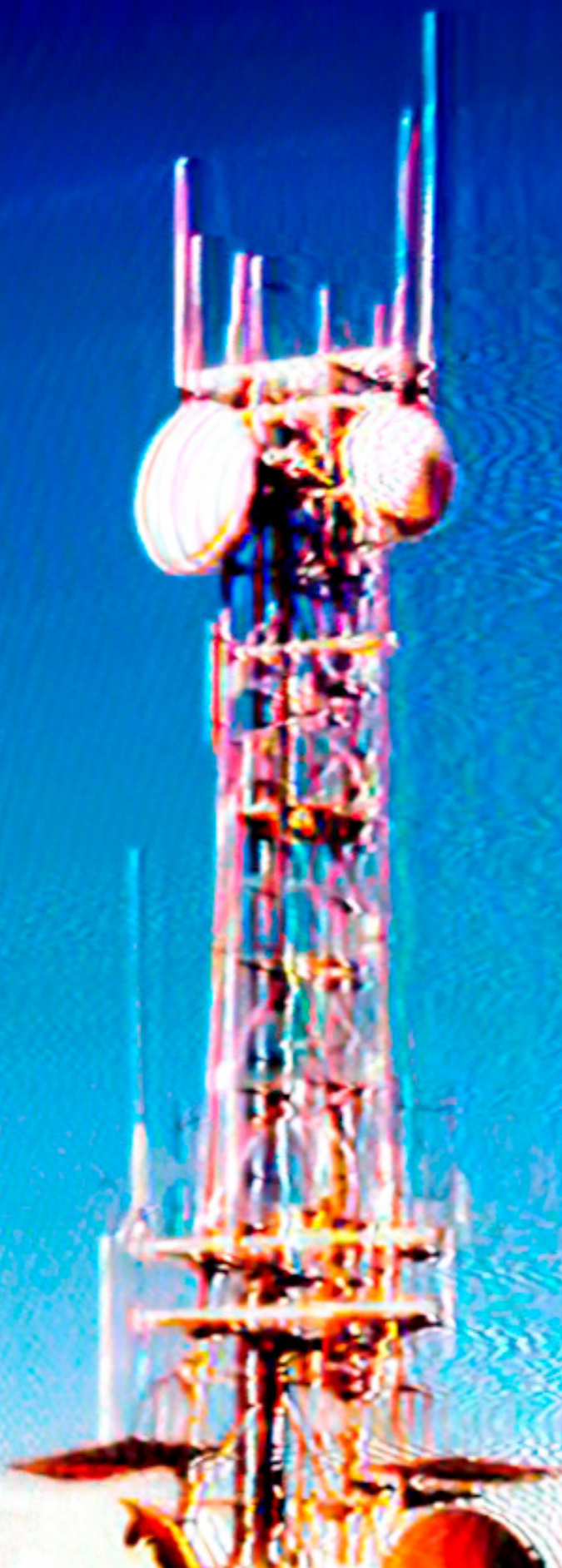**VERTIGO**
Nye Thompson
20.05.2023 -
03.09.2023

In the Eyes of the Machine

By Irini-Mirena Papadimitriou

> "*We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach - though not necessarily within arm's reach… We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves*." - John Berger[1]

People watching people watching TV in their homes, a woman at her office desk, and an empty sofa in someone's living room. These images were not meant to exist and were generated without any humans being aware. They have been captured by unsecured surveillance cameras across the world, internet connected security cameras that have been residing in our homes and offices and are considered part of everyday life. These normalised, but often vulnerable and unprotected devices are often discovered by search bots. The aforementioned images - stills from a home or an office security camera's video stream - are mementos of some of these encounters between machines taking place in a parallel world we are not familiar with.

In another instance, images captured by surveillance cameras are being watched in real time, analysed and described in words by bots: a display of boots at a shoe shop window is expressed as an army; a park at night with a bright light becomes a landscape on fire. Mundane images that would have passed unnoticed by humans, become dramatic, frightening, but also romantic and poetic scenes.

All above action - or lack thereof - takes place in *Backdoored*, a project by Nye Thompson exposing and bringing us face to face with our voyeuristic desires between physical - virtual domains, but also vulnerabilities, facilitated and accentuated by surveillance technologies, a project that triggered strong responses and complaints. But despite the outrage, *Backdoored* very accurately described our current state and a society obsessed with surveillance and control.

In an invisible network of infrastructures, from CCTV cameras and artificial intelligence to mapping software and satellite infrastructure, hundreds of thousands of images are generated constantly by and for machines. The machine gaze lays over the world as we are being monitored, analysed, categorised and commented upon by an ecosystem of machines and invisible apparatuses - in Agamben's words "anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings"[2] - that while we might not be aware of, we are very much connected to and subjected (entrapped) by them. Machines are making and interpreting us and the world.

Nye Thompson, shifting through millions of data, brings these hidden collections of images into her work, revealing the unseen infrastructures and architectures of technological systems, and unveiling power relations, surveillance, seeing and control. Through her work, she not only enables the human to meet the concealed machine gaze, she also activates interactions with dehumanised and distanced technological infrastructures enabling us to imagine relationships beyond corporate control.

In *The Seeker*, a machinic entity travels the world virtually and describes what it sees, while CKRBTs - physical avatars of *The Seeker* are bots with camera eyes and synthesised

voices that watch, analyse and whisper about people or anything else that enters their vision field in the installation space.

Images hijacked from unsecured CCTV cameras around the world are also the basis of *UNINVITED*, another artwork, made in collaboration with UBERMORGEN. In what becomes a reality seen through the eyes of CCTV and AI, these images are sorted, analysed and interpreted by deep learning algorithms put together into a horror film "for machine networks".

As demonstrated in these works, Nye is challenging and reversing conventional roles and human machine relationships by placing humans to the position of observers, while machines are "performers, audience, content providers, and commentators." Making artworks for a machine rather than human audience, she constructs new human-machine narratives re-contextualising images captured automatically by machines and opens up different perspectives in our understanding of these technological infrastructures.

INSULAE and the most recent work *CU Soon*, both presented in this exhibition, draw on Nye's fascination with government and military mapping technologies. In critical and playful engagements with overhead imagery and satellite devices, Nye positions these systems in radical new narratives whilst foregrounding the military origins of these technologies.

INSULAE ('*Of the Island*') takes us on an endless tour circling around British coastal waters, generated from AI-reconstructed satellite mapping imagery, using Google Earth created footage. In the context of Brexit, immigration and UK border control, Nye places the viewer in a position of monitoring and watching the water borders alluding to Google Earth as a surveillance and control tool that can shape our understanding and perception of the planet controlling what can and cannot be seen.

Allowing us to spy on any corner of the world, in Asa Mittman's words "it is hard to imagine that we will not be granted the greater power of the immediate and contemporary gaze at some time in the near future, merging the voyeuristic effects of the Webcam with the panoptical gaze of Google Earth."[3]

But Nye also highlights the fact that what we think of as an actual representation of the world, is actually aggregated data from different sources "processed, visually enhanced, artificially beautified and reconstructed by Google and the major satellite imaging suppliers." *INSULAE* reveals the glitches, patches of blue as they are stitched together, distortions and obscured or removed areas on a constructed and reconstructed map of the world with political agendas attached. In this slow, almost meditative journey, the viewer is a flâneur - to paraphrase Paul Kingsbury and John Paul Jones - strolling (or scrolling) through space drawn into each one of these glitches, intended distortions and re-constructions, that the artist has magnified and rendered inescapable, bringing attention to the power dynamics and secrecy of mapping landscapes from above.[4]

Nye pushes human-machine entanglements further in *CU Soon* by bringing us closer to the hidden machines orbiting far above our heads, and re-positioning these alien, militarised, controlling and surveillance tools from the dystopic Apollonian control to the Dionysian "politics of the artist, anarchist, hacker."[5]

Since the launch of Sputnik, the first human-made satellite in 1957, we have been placing an increasing number of satellites in orbit, with now over eight thousand objects surrounding the planet making for a crowded sky, not to mention the accumulation of

debris building up. Military, government, but mostly commercial satellites - the majority of which are owned and operated by SpaceX - are observing Earth, but also enable communications such as internet access, GPS, TV access and more. Satellites are distant objects and functionally invisible to most people, but in *CU Soon* Nye bypasses the gatekeepers to create a direct exchange with these alien objects that goes beyond their role as monitoring and communications systems.

Here, the satellite gaze is redirected giving place to a poetic, creative and performative exchange of imagery between the artist and the objects in orbit. Inspired by earlier space probes and analogue technology from the 1950s, Nye is using Slow-scan television (SSTV) encoding analogue images and transmitting them as radio signals to satellites using amateur radio frequencies. The satellites, assuming a creative collaborator role, collect the artist's tender signals, deconstructing them and sending them back to her revealing the journeys these postcards have taken from images to sounds and images again, travelling between our planet and the orbit.

How far does our ability to see the world in different eyes open up new possibilities and ways of thinking about the world? Nye disrupts rigid technological infrastructures and reimagines the possibilities of machines as creative entities. She is freeing them from corporate control while inviting us to explore non-human perspectives of our world through human-machine dialogues and synergetic relationships.

1 Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*, London: Penguin Books. 1972.
2 Agamben, Giorgio, *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. Stanford University Press. 2009.
3 Mittman, Asa. "Inverting the Panopticon: Google Earth, Wonder and Earthly Delights," *Literature Compass*, 9/12: 938–954. 2012.
4 Kingsbury, Paul and Jones, John Paul. *Walter Benjamin's Dionysian Adventures on Google Earth*, Geoforum, 2008.
5 Op cit-4.

About East Quay

East Quay is a brand new arts venue in Watchet, West Somerset. It is home to contemporary art galleries, artist studios, a paper mill, print studio, restaurant, an education space, and accommodation pods. It is run as a social enterprise that seeks to signal how community-led renewal can empower people, help them to develop agency, and rebuild a local economy in a turbulent and uncertain global context. Please visit our website to learn more about our programme of exhibitions and events. This exhibition is presented in partnership with Lumen Art Projects and generously supported by Arts Council England.

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