



"Trevor Paglen: These were the 'Adams and Eves' of facial recognition technology"

By Jacqui Palumbo

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Trevor Paglen's "It Began as a Military Experiment" shows a handful of the thousands of faces the U.S. Department of Defense used to develop facial recognition technology.

Courtesy the Artist/Fellowship/Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco/Pace Gallery, New York)

When we unlock our phones, pass through airport security, and — depending on where you live in the world — walk down the street, our faces are analyzed for the exact combination of nose width, eye spacing and jaw shape that allows an algorithm to see and recognize us. For billions of people, facial recognition technology has become part of daily life, allowing machines to assess our humanity and our physical identities in less than a second. In return for giving up this part of ourselves, we get a product or service or a sense of safety.

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But to learn *all* of our faces, it began with an original group. These "Adams and Eves" of facial recognition were part of a US Department of Defense initiative in the 1990s. Close to a decade ago, the artist Trevor Paglen was researching government datasets — which, though not widely seen, are in the public domain — when he came across one featuring the faces of thousands of government employees that the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency used to develop and train the nascent technology.

Since then, he has exhibited a selection of the images as a series called "It Began as a Military Experiment," which will display again in a 20-year retrospective of his work, "The Most Merciful Thing in the World," that is also part of the FotoFocus Biennial in Cincinnati this month. Titled after an H.P. Lovecraft quote, the wider collection of his work examines what is often unseen or hidden from us, including photographs of hundreds of unidentified objects in Earth's orbit, and hazy images of military sites magnified beyond what the human eye can see. Over the course of Paglen's career, the themes he has explored across our relationship to technology, the ways in which we are surveilled, and the invisible technological processes that shape our world have only become more urgent.



Paglen ran the images through an algorithm to identify the points on the face used for analysis and recognition. The artist is showing the work as part of an exhibition tied to the FotoFocus Biennial in Cincinnati. Courtesy the Artist/Fellowship/Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco/Pace Gallery, New York

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As an artist, Paglen explained by phone, "I honestly go back to the oldest trick in the book, which is take something familiar and make it strange, or take something strange and make it familiar." He added: "But that what that means always changes because history is changing."

In "It Began as a Military Experiment," the photographs show subjects of different ages, gender and skin tone against a blank sky-blue backdrop. Paglen ran each of the images through an algorithm to identify the points on the face that are measured and analyzed through facial recognition programs, and he shows the markers to the viewer — small white letters hovering over the corners of eyes and cupid's bows and nostril edges, which translate people into data.

The overall effect is uncanny. There is no way to place the subjects in time or space, beyond the occasional dated haircut. They mostly gaze off to the side, ignoring the camera. To the modern eye, a series of uniform, close-cropped portraits of a range of people might bring to mind the AI-generated portraits that at first shocked us with their realism. Now, we have to question every image put in front of us, looking for the increasingly more subtle signs that it might not be real at all. And, as AI has exploded, we have all quickly — and uncomfortably — had to adjust to the idea that we *all* have become the dataset on which these algorithms are trained, as they continue to gobble up our images and cultural output in the name of self-improvement.



Paglen selected images for their strangeness, but the interpretations of the image continue to shift and gain new meaning as our relationship to technology keeps vastly changing.

Courtesy the Artist/Fellowship/Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco/Pace Gallery, New York

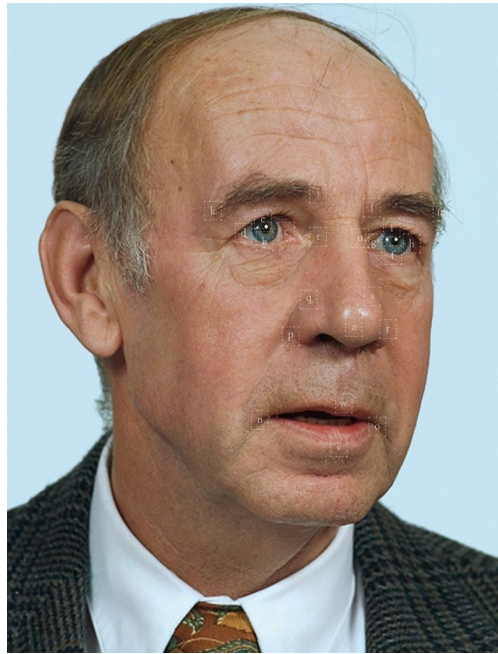
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When I spoke to Paglen, it was the day after the Anthropic researcher Jacob Coxon publicly announced on X that he had resigned from his job, and warned that the top labs building AI “earnestly believe that it could kill us all by the end of the decade.” In the weeks since, the mainstream discourse around AI has sharply turned for the worst. But it’s exactly the type of thing that Paglen has tried to capture in his work — the truest definition of the sublime, that heady mix of awe, beauty and horror in a world that’s beyond our cognitive understanding. “Our whole relationship to technology to me feels very supernatural, feels very in this world of cosmic horror,” he said. “And that is what our politics feels like to me as well. This YOLO, let’s-summon-every-demon-we-can-imagine-and-see-what-happens feeling.”

But when he created “It Began as a Military Experiment,” the conversations around the algorithms we were creating and the datasets we were feeding them were much different. In the mid-to-late 2010s, the conversations were largely around bias. Were algorithms used in policework prone to profiling? Was too much of our technology based on the perspective of privileged men?

While those were all important conversations to have, he also believes it’s a fallacy to believe it could be designed differently. Ultimately, he said, they are tools of capitalism, tools for extraction, which will never care about being fair.



The original images are part of a dataset in the public domain, which Paglen found among other datasets he’s used across his work.

Courtesy the Artist/Fellowship/Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco/Pace Gallery, New York

“The bias conversation puts you in a position where it’s almost like you think it can be fixed and it is possible to have equitable AI systems, and that always felt wrong to me because once you

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introduce these things into a market logic, they are going to discriminate," he explained. "That's what they do, and you're going to discriminate in order to figure out how to extract capital from different people in different ways."

Now when he looks back at these early facial recognition portraits, he feels their vulnerability more than anything else. The subjects were being photographed solely because they were government employees, and he wonders just how much they understood about the technology at the time and its implications.

"If you're being told to do this as part of your job, do you really consent?" he posed. "That's one layer."

The other is that they couldn't have possibly foreseen how our biometric data would underpin so many of our invisible systems today.

"Is it possible to consent to have something that you did today used in the distant future in ways that you could not imagine?" he asked. "We retroactively become a part of systems that didn't exist." Yesterday it was them, today it's all of us.

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