

PAUL V. SCHMIDT¹

Trevor Paglen and
Anthony Downey, eds.

TREVOR PAGLEN:
ADVERSARIALLY
EVOLVED
HALLUCINATIONS

Sternberg Press, 2024.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is everywhere, and the ubiquitous urge to not miss out on it is accelerating. Artist Trevor Paglen already started to enter the discourse around AI in the 2010s, working on the topic by many means. One work, titled “Adversarially Evolved Hallucinations,” is presented, and discussed in the Research/Practice series of Sternberg Press, which brings visual and textual context to artistic research. Paglen canvasses his work together with series-editor Anthony Downey, Professor of Visual Culture in the Middle East and North Africa at Birmingham City University. With this publication they ask overall: How do machines see? How do we see their generated imagery, and how is the world influenced by that? The aluminium-print series title already insinuates the fuzziness of the artworks displayed in the book but hints even more to the *modus operandi* of the visual production process. Paglen relied for the creation on Generative Adversarial Networks (GAN), a class of machine learning frameworks, in which a generator repeatedly produces a range of fake samples on the basis of input. A discriminator, the adversarial, compares them to

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the input, in order to train the generator, until it cannot keep real and fake apart from each other. It aims to generate a realistic but unmatchable new visual compared to the original input, which therefore is the main point to exert influence on the process.

The works are reprinted on the first pages of the book, resembling the very early results of AI-art: blurry blends of colours and pixels, often indistinct whether in space, on the ground, or in an underwater setting. Objects are often on the verge of natural artefact and alien species. A result of the manifold different images put into the GAN, producing an output which is close to all the input at the same time—but in a single visual.

What makes these generations in the first place to Paglen's very own work is a respective naming, that tells what the artist recognized in the machine's results and wanted to convey with his art: depicted as a "Comet", "Vampire," or "A War Without Soldiers," among others, he nudges the observer to see through his readings. The artworks are interspersed with an essay by Downey, followed by undescribed thumbnails of the images comprising the datasets behind the works. It continues with a conversation between the two, ending with *Primitives*—special forms and edges produced by the GAN that Paglen wanted to highlight.

"Corpus" is used by Paglen as a synonym for dataset, to underline the importance of the input for his GAN. "The Interpretation of Dreams," "Things that Exist Negatively" and "From the Depths," etc., are names for the collections comprising material from various sources such as Internet downloads, and scans from books and magazines. The pages full of thumbnail-size pictures appearing like a Google Image search result invoke transparency about the datasets. The pictures that were fed into the machine are all at hand, but tiny in size and without any selection commentary. They become, at second glance, indicative.

The essay and conversation provide a good introduction into GAN: how they process input, generate new visuals, and initiate interesting phenomenological inquiries from the beginning. GAN as "algorithmic apparatuses" produce material that's difficult to get hold of, and as Paglen's work displays, they subsequently cut off "a recognisable order of being in the world."² With references to surveillance and drone warfare, Downey alludes to political causes that other Paglen's works address directly, and future developments of how we perceive the world through AI. The new kind of vision coming with algorithmic processes is momentous because it inevitably generates errors—in particular, the "correspondence" about what is present in front of us and the machine, and what it represents in the world, can diverge heavily.³ The book wants to shed light on the epistemology behind the new vision impending through a bouquet of AI-technologies by showing Paglen's datasets, his framings, the output, and relates them with each other alongside the texts. An opening of Paglen's black box—how the input transforms itself into the output, is signified through this sequence.

² Paglen and Downey, 48.

³ Paglen and Downey, 118.

Everyone stumbling upon AI-art interested in a common practice such as GAN, or wondering about the above-described eerie aesthetics surfacing, receives with the book a compact exhibition of Paglen's artworks, a basic explanation of the technology, and a look into a practice of a major artist with his team. This includes their perspectives on the datasets, hints on how they recognize form and shapes, and the curated artworks later printed for exhibition. However, the manifold pressing issues of AI being addressed are not sought to be approached in the context of the artworks. The list of problems coming up with classification—the insoluble definitive determination of representation in binary terms—bringing machines to wrong assumptions, which the technology in turn solidifies, are explicitly emphasised alongside many real-world implications this entails.

But the practice behind “Adversarially Evolved Hallucinations” was mainly scraping pictures, incorporating them without sources. Curation and intervention into the dataset are roughly outlined by Paglen in the conversation, but not actually described. The attempt to illuminate how machines see was concluded before coming to the point of the artist's influence on the process. Paglen wants his series to be considered as a critique on “machine realism,”⁴ but the practice materialises this realism and surfaces as an ingratiation of it, printed on aluminium.

Downey, Paglen, and the reader seem to be doomed to watch the machine from the studio and academy. The book points to important critique of AI, subsets of machine learning like GAN and its wider context. Paglen hasn't seized the opportunity to reflect on his practice over time. Since he started, machine learning algorithms developed into a tool for photorealistic production, which is merely present in the 2024 published book. Nevertheless, the book provides absolute essential elucidation on the technique and opens the door to discuss vision in times of the so-called AI. ▣

⁴ Paglen and Downey, 120.