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Welcome back to the Media at Risk podcast. My name is Roopa Vasudevan, and I'm a doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. I also curated the exhibition selective attention, Interventions into the computational Gaze, which is currently on view on the 5th floor of the Annenberg School and supported by the Center for Media at Risk. Selective attention is an exhibition that asks what it means for machines to be able to see. What do we imply when we talk about things like computer vision and more broadly machine intelligence? Where are the boundaries between what humans are able to perceive and what is visible to algorithms? And importantly, what do those tensions tell us about the way that we think about the limits and possibilities of computation. The exhibition features work by artists Kelsey Halliday Johnson and Lisa Marie Patzer, both of whom have strong ties to Philadelphia. Kelsey's works, KelcD and Third Eye encompass a Polaroid camera that she hacked to add a color filter to resultant images based on readings from galvanic skin response sensors she wore while taking the photos. Taking inspiration from the psychic practice of or photography, she then photographed spaces that were important to her own life, creating a set of images that reflected her emotional responses in ways that the camera could not do on its own. Lisa Marie exhibits her work Side border ceiling, which is a set of algorithmically generated wallpaper patterns. The model that generated the images was trained on and attempts to replicate early 20th century wallpaper designs, and the final work is exhibited both as a printed sample book of patterns and as a series of illuminated light boxes. Alongside both Kelsey and Lisa Marie, the exhibition also features a recent work of my own entitled Slow Response One Drawings, which is a series of 100 hand-drawn quick response codes or QR codes that experiment with form, color, texture, and pattern to define the line between when the codes are readable by a camera and when they are not. I'm joined today by both Kelsey and Lisa Marie to discuss our work and its relationships to the larger themes of the exhibition. We're currently recording this conversation on Zoom. Thank you both so much for being here today. Thank you so much, Roopa. Thanks for having us. So I think the first thing is just tell me a little bit about your work that's in the show, how you came to it, and how it was made, and I'll toss this to Kelsey first because you have kind of an older project in the show so I'm interested to hear about the ways that you have kind of reflected on it in a contemporary context and kind of how you're drawing the through line from when you first created it to today when you're exhibiting it and kind of featuring it in conversation with these other projects. My projects began out of a long standing crisis in photography in my own practice of wanting to have my hands more in the work and knowing that so much of photographic practice is a collaboration with a piece of technology, and that you give over a huge amount of the creative labor to this machine. It's about this kind of irreconcilability with the human visual experience and a recorded visual experience, and a crisis of, like, sensory difference between the two of them. And when I started the project, I heard about oral photography. It's now very hip again, and there's a lot of people doing it in like party contexts and in creative practices, but it was rarer in 2010, really, when I started the project. And was actively going to see a psychic. I thought originally I was like, oh, these cameras exist in the world that this person patented and put out. Like, could I go rent one of them and then use them for something unusual. The psychics were maybe 20 minutes outside of Philadelphia, and I went to see them multiple times. And they actually, at one point, let me, like, look into the back of the camera and were like letting me get my hands on it. And so I thought we were having this rapport that was developing. And then when I asked them specifically, cause I'd also done some like event photography, I was like, you know, I have rental insurance for equipment. So any way we could like work out a rental agreement for this, and they like, completely shut down and we're like, you are not here for your oral reading. And it was this huge roadblock in the project, and I was really kind of creatively depressed after that cause I thought I had this whole project in my mind that I wanted to do. Um, and it took me at least half a year or so to finally circle back around to being like, why don't I just learn how to make a camera myself? This can't be that hard. And so, you know, the project became as much about the pictures as it became about creating this personal viewing device and creating a camera and like hacking a camera that existed, not being satisfied with the. commercially made Polaroid camera, instead saying there needs to be this other layer of information on the picture to get closer to my own experience. And so, you know, both learning how to solder and do, you know, basic building of things, and Instructables.com is a huge resource that deserves a major shout out in this project. Um, they had kits on how to make Lie detector test, which is galvanic skin response, which is the backbone of the code that I needed. Like take that code and then manipulate it for, instead, this viewing device rather than making your own home lie detector test. It was a long project, and it made me really understand that my work is research-based. I find the problem. Make the hypothesis how to solve it, which is something that I definitely continue in my practice. But then, as far as, you know, this question about the timeline and the like where it is in the arc of the work, I've definitely done different collaborations with either technology I've broken and hacked or things I've found, or also did a major curatorial project about the history of women art and technology that was really Catalyzed by my own experience of being the only woman in the room while kind of doing some of these things and realizing how much rich history there was that nobody was pointing me to, and also how far we had not yet come and like needed more cheerleaders to really sing the praises of, you know, the trailblazers that did this work. Lisa Marie, I'd love to hear you speak a little bit about the work that you have in the exhibition, particularly because it feels like it's kind of coming from an opposite angle from what Kelsey is doing, and in some ways to what I'm doing, I think the two of us are really trying to kind of create a human. Intervention into processes that have traditionally been done or uh implemented by machines, whereas you are kind of throwing a machine's point of view into something that is very much a handcraft or something with a very human kind of tactile and sensory aesthetics. Yes, Side border ceiling, which is the name of the project, is a series of reverse lightboxes that are displaying really graphic prints of algorithmic generated patterns. And the content for the patterns was inspired by wallpaper sample books. And one of the things that Philadelphia actually is historically known for is manufacturing wallpaper. And so the images. For side border ceiling or from a 1914 sample book by Keiser and Alman. So they're a company that has ties, really deep ties to Philadelphia. From those wallpaper sample books, I then pulled out approximately 3000 images of different patterns that were originally designed to hang on the side, border and ceilings of a room. So wallpapering an entire room. Then I trained a machine learning algorithm against the. Assess using a program called Runway ML, which is really a tool for creatives to access these very complex machine learning algorithms, installation. And Annenberg is really, I kind of think of it as a blown up version of an AI generated wallpaper sample book, uh, because there were thousands of options from which I could select. And when I started the project, you know, I was really Asking myself questions about what is machine learning. And I really didn't understand what went into an algorithm being able to see data. I just wanted to better understand what is the relationship between a data set, a training model, and the output. Now going on about 2.5 years, and I finally feel like, oh, OK, when someone talks about machine learning and machine vision, like, I, I feel like I actually can add to the conversation because I, I have some personal experience with it. So yeah, I mean, I do think that I was really attracted to working with these old archives that were a pre-digital era, and you know looking at them through these new technologies. The inquiry still continues for me, and I feel like I am still trying to articulate what it is, um, but it's just, it's like this project is like one step in that kind of discovery for myself. Roopa, can I prompt you as our guide to talk about the work in the show that you put together? Thank you for that, because I was about to go into the next question without really acknowledging the fact that I'm one of the artists in the show as well. It's interesting to hear both of you talk about this desire to kind of have a more tactile experience with the technologies that you're using or with the things that you're thinking about, because I think that that is what drove this process as well for me. My piece in the So is the first iteration in a series that I've entitled Slow Response. It's named after the quick response code. It's the opposite of what that title entails. During the COVID pandemic, I became really interested in seeing the way that QR codes became this default that really like overnight it seemed became really ingratiated into our lives. We were using them all the time for contactless transactions. We have this kind of default embodied response whenever we see a QR code now, and that the expectation is that you scan it and you'll be delivered a piece of information. There's something kind of waiting for you on the other side. The QR code has kind of been in my periphery for about a decade now. Um, I remember when they were first coming into being, when they were really like talked about a lot or started to be talked about a lot, and they were ridiculed. Nobody used them, cameras didn't scan them by default on your phones. You had to download a special app if you wanted to kind of Use them and get the information from them. And so people were really thinking about the QR code is something that is like totally out of touch, something that you would never use. And then I moved to China in the interim, and all of my transactions, everything that I was doing when I was living in Shanghai was guided by a QR code in some way, shape or form. So seeing that being translated into the US context during the pandemic really started making me think about this idea of the form itself and the expectations that we have imbued in the form. And so I became really interested in seeing when that boundary was where the machine could still read the object as a QR code versus when it kind of broke down the system entirely and when the form was recognizable to us as humans, but still was not legible to the machine as a QR code where that translation process started to fray a little bit. And so in November or December of 2021, just kind of on a lark, I started to hand draw QR codes, and eventually the project kind of evolved to the point where I was kind of messing around as much as I could with things like form, with color, with texture, with pattern to kind of get An idea of what, how much the machine was actually willing to take before it decided that this was not a QR code that it was seeing, even though again it would register as such to the human eye. Even with the really simple 1 to 1 renderings where I was really just kind of coloring in a square black to correspond with where I saw it on the code, I would make mistakes. I would fill in the wrong square, I would kind of lose track of where I was. I wouldn't count properly. There would just always be something that was wrong, and it became kind of a game to me to see how much I could mess up the code and still have it lead me to the right place when I scanned it with my phone. And so in the end, I We did a series of 100 of these drawings. They don't always scan immediately, but if you are patient enough to scan them, 70 of them do scan with a device and they lead you to a poetic reflection on notions of speed and form and racing into the future, and all of these big existential questions that the QR code itself, in thinking about it and iterating on this project has brought up for me as I'm thinking about my own discomfort with how quickly technology moves around us. Both of you talked really eloquently about this idea of machine vision, uh, computational vision, something that is mechanically seen and something that I kind of designed the whole exhibition around, is this notion of actually assigning sense-making capabilities to machines or to algorithms, or to computers, or Mechanical processes that are born as human sense making capabilities. You know, obviously a human seeing something and a machine seeing something are very different, yet that same metaphor is kind of used pervasively, particularly around the machine intelligence community. This idea of a machine being intelligent, how are we thinking about intelligence. As it relates to machines versus our conceptions of it being a human being. And so I'm curious if either of you has reflections on this idea of what it means to assign these sense making capabilities to technology, what opportunities exist in doing so, and on the flip side, where might there be issues or problems with this metaphor? Yeah, I think that's the bigificifician kind of conundrum in my work, I guess. I am a total flip flopper in my tech optimism and tech pessimism. I can't say I come to it from either perspective. And I'm always moving from extremes on how I feel about it. I'm like either incredibly excited about where technology is going. I really want to integrate and know a lot about it, or I like have these like almost Ludd like tendencies where I'm very scared about where it's going, where the biases are in these situations and how it could be used for surveillance or privacy and dating purposes or creative license and artist. Expression and limiting what artists get paid now, as we're seeing with these emergent image generators, the idea of, of how we see and how we perceive is something that I guess, has always been this meta conversation with my camera of like how I'm looking through the world and how I'm taking time to reflect on things and capture things or collect things or build stories from fragments of what I've seen before. And that imperfection is only escalated as soon as you add new layers of technology onto it. You know, there's like a poetry and clearly a big stylization to like add this like candy colored pop and use this history of aura photography to get to what I was wanting. But the idea was like, how do you actually photograph and experience? Can I get closer to something more human by adding more layers of information or trying to stylize? Is it knowing that that thing is totally an arbitrary piece of coded information, you need to know that it's on the 360 color wheel, that red or stressed or excited is one thing. And then as my body is calmer, it goes into blue, purple. And what those things mean are so, like, I mean, it could be anything. I could be excited, happy or excited, sad when making that body of work, there was some really weird things that happened, like, I took a picture of a bathroom and my, my brother had childhood leukemia, really difficult traumatic thing that I'm still processing in my life. And, you know, was taking pictures of my parents' bathroom, which is where he threw up like over and over and over again. And the pictures were always red. And I realized that like I was in this heightened state of tension in this room and I had no idea about that from like, I was not self-aware about. Where my body was at walking into that, and here was this device teaching me about my own emotions. It had a vision that I didn't have in my own self-reflection of myself. And so that's really exciting, but yeah, the like red flags on player are just this like real risk to what creative careers look like in the future, and then how we think outside of the box. Like if we have so much good machine vision at our disposal, how do we see beyond the machine and get to something more imaginative. So I would say that I think part of the risk is that it's an oversimplification and kind of leads to maybe like a false assessment of the value or the potential risk of using the technology, and then there's also the risk of just not really Understanding some of the broader socio-technological systems from which these algorithms have been developed. Roopa, how you were talking about the QR codes and like, where, where does the QR code resolution break down? Where's that boundary between where like a human can still recognize it as being a QR code, but, uh, machine learning algorithm or a camera cannot, that question of resolution. It's really interesting to me because a lot of free digital data sets from really large archives, like the Library of Congress, for instance, the resolution of those images is not that great. And so when they're fed into these machine learning algorithms that are really trained to see high resolution, you know, high quality imagery. They're not able to read them accurately and it, it results in a lot of misinformation, a lot of, you know, you use a search term and the result that you get back is really not accurate. And so I think there are larger implications that we don't necessarily think about and definitely like the average. Consumer and user of these technologies is is not thinking about. So yeah, I just think that we have to be careful with the metaphors that we use and that have some of those conversations, um, whether it's in academia or, you know, through the discovery of where these new tools like chat GPT break down, we're seeing some of that conversation happen in popular media. I think it's really important to point out where those borders are. What both of you are saying is, is really resonating with me, particularly in thinking about the limitations that are inherent to these technologies and kind of the, the fundamental inability to kind of fully translate the human experience into something that a machine can process. And a lot of my work I really point to this idea of these ineffable qualities that make up being human, what that means, what that looks like, right? You can never reproduce. An exact carbon copy of a human being with human being experience through technical systems. There is always something that is gonna kind of be left behind. That could either be seen as a good thing, you know, in terms of social media where you can really carefully curate and edit things out, right? It's something that people do very strategically in order to cultivate their own images online, but then it also leads to, you know, atrocious bias and discrimination that we've seen rear its ugly head over and over and over again in the technical systems. That we're using. And I think that there's a lot to be thought about and it's something that I was really hoping to come across in this exhibition was this idea that machines will never be able to perceive on the same level as humans and vice versa, humans might not be able to see on the same level as machines can. And so what does it mean to kind of use this language and use this metaphor interchangeably between these two different types ultimately of vision and kind of what perception actually means and what it looks like. And both of you also kind of alluded to this explosion of generative AI, um, that is, you know, all over the news these days. I think that this, these ideas, these questions that are kind of being brought up with generative AI connect in very clear ways to the core themes of this exhibition, and I'm curious to hear your thoughts about both what have been the most exciting thing for you in seeing the explosion of these AI systems, and also what has been the most worrying thing for you and what do you think needs to be paid a little bit more attention to. This question really makes me reflect back like over the last 2.5 years, like when I started working with Runway ML and how much things have changed, and part of me is really excited about the fact that this field that was really niche when I got into it or felt niche, um, and, you know, I like had to have these conversations with librarians that were like training their students. on how to use Runway ML, um, you know, they, they patiently, you know, helped me kind of get onto the platform and, you know, it was like, definitely like a huge learning curve in terms of how to even get data into the system, you know, and now 2.5 years later, it's like, oh, you can like just hop online and, you know, generates using the journey. It's like, things have changed so rapidly and so, so. Much. And so, I guess the access in some ways like really excites me. But then there's just like a host of all these other issues that worry me. So I completely understand why there's, you know, some artists who are rejecting AI and are saying, partly out of self-preservation, you know, their jobs are at risk. Perhaps the quality of Work is at risk on some level I empathize with this movement to like push back against AI generated art, but I am concerned that if artists remove themselves from the, the AI conversation, that it's not gonna slow down the technology. It's instead going to have an impact on the conversations that are happening. But it's also making me think I was having a conversation with somebody a while back about how, you know, certainly this conversation around consent about kind of the artwork that gets fed into these systems, the text that gets fed into these systems, where it is collected from, who is getting the credit and permission from it. Like, those are all really important questions, but It also feels like a rehash of a conversation that has been happening over and over and over again in the art world. Ever since Duchamp took, uh, you know, a a pre prefab object, placed it in the gallery and was like, this is art. These are questions that are not new. It's just a new permutation of them. And my concern is that if we phrase these ideas as completely new and unprecedented and kind of um something that we never experienced before, as I think it's been a lot of the hype, particularly the negative hype around these technologies, we kind of lose our mooring and we lose the grounding and how to maybe understand and appreciate and work with these technologies as artists in ways that don't. Feel exploitative and don't feel like it's stealing and don't feel like it's not adding something new creatively to the conversation. This idea that we forget about things so quickly when it comes to emerging technology because we're so focused on something being so brand new, that is something that pervades the art and technology space as I've been doing a lot of research about towards my dissertation, and I think this is certainly just one version of that same question. Certainly the scale is something that is unprecedented, right? I don't think we've ever been in a situation where Other people's content have been able to be harvested and collected on such a massive scale, but the core fundamental of the question, I think is the same, that is that has existed for a very long time now. You know, as somebody that works with appropriated images, this is so, I don't say validating, but like freeing of like some of my guilt sometimes when I work with images that aren't mine, of like, yes, there is productive new things that we can create out of these other images, and there's a great history of that and we like need that. If artists aren't sitting at the table, the dialogue is just gonna happen without us, and artists bring criticality and humanism to things always. And that's our role, right, is this like interpretation and critical inquiry role as that's part of turning STEM into steam. I just installed a nest learning thermometer in my home, and just thinking about like eco-fus. It's like, it's so amazing to have a little computer that sits here and knows that I'm not down here when I'm at work and turns down my heat so that as I'm living in Maine, I'm not just burning through fossil fuels. And it feels like the Wonderful decision that I just made in my life to collaborate with a piece of technology. And it's getting really intimate information about my day to day lifestyle. I, I see these, um, really ecstatic moments where I'm so excited to have learning machines in my life, and they're making a real difference in the world. And it's like just a nice edge between that and something dangerous. And I know that. Um, and then meanwhile, I think I'm so grateful for, um, you know, I'm like, got my record collection behind me here as we're recording now, and love analog media and supporting artists, but I love, you know, working with Spotify and like making playlists and then having it suggest new music to me and these algorithms for, um, Suggesting, you know, storytelling through like streaming channels and things. It's really incredible that, like, these machines can learn similar patterns of behavior by looking at lots of humans and share things that might not be on your radar. That's great. And like, this thing that's very exciting for me and I'm like, you know, as a curator, as somebody that programs film, music, you know, all different kinds of media, like, there's so much more at my fingertips than ever before. And then I remember, I don't know that we know the full extent, but I know we all know that it's part of the complete cultural, you know, the culture wars and the complete political discourse breakdown in our country right now, um, because we just don't know how to talk to one another because technology has become this middle man that is negotiating what information we get back and forth. So it's um it's a really brilliant and exciting moment and we need so much those people to reflect on the possibilities for how it works our sense of self, how it works our sense of connection to others and to truth. Shifting gears a little bit, one of the things that has really been such a pleasure for me about this show is that it afforded the opportunity for me to think really locally, bringing together, first of all, three female identifying artists who I think are voices that are very underrepresented in the technology field. Then you add that other layer on top of it is that we are all hyper connected to Philadelphia, obviously, which is where the Annenberg School is based. The Exhibition also features a library curated by the independent Ify Books, which is located in Philadelphia's Callow Hill area and has a really deep connection to a lot of the artist run spaces in the area. And so that has been really exciting to me, not just about the opportunity that it gives me to center Philadelphia-based work, you know, which has been really fun for me because I've really grown to love the city as I've lived here, but Also thinking about the idea of the local, particularly when it comes to the work itself that is featured in the show, which I think hyper engages with the local in really different ways. So I'd love for you to, to kind of talk a little bit about the local in terms of the work that you have up in the show and your work more broadly and how site and place specificity make appearances in the projects and the work that you're doing. My um project sideboard ceiling is really rooted in the manufacturing of wallpaper in Pennsylvania. So there's like a very direct connection the place with this specific project. And I think that in my work, more generally, I tend to do a lot of work that's Get some kind of historic thread that goes through it, and oftentimes that is also very place specific. And so, whether I'm really conscious of it or not, place is a big part of my practice, which now I really want to think that through a little bit more and more intentionally because, you know, in general, I am Super interested in the history of technology and how it impacts the way that we experience the world and that's, that has to come with a whole context around where that experience is happening, which is then going to be rooted in a location. The pictures that ended up being taken with the camera were pictures of my old apartment on 45th in Chester, uh, my grandmother's house that was on the border of the Pine Barrens in New Jersey, um, and my parents' house that I grew up in, in South Jersey, when I was setting out on like, what am I gonna take pictures of once I had made the camera? I was like, what are the hardest things to tell stories about? And for me, it's always been the things that are closest to me. Um, I'm very eager to look. away, um, which I think is also why I work as a curator and an art administrator, and that I love amplifying others and pushing other people up, and it's hard for me to like take the spotlight and do my own practice sometimes and tell my own stories. And so, um, it was really, you know, a challenge to myself to be like, why, you know, why look far away? Here's the things. That have all these stories that you can't put into these photographs, and that's why you haven't been taking pictures of them before. We are so shaped by the places that we live and the communities we build, and so it's never gonna be apart from me and it's always interesting to me to work with artists and with a deep sense of like understanding the place where the work was made, the place where the ideas come from. And I think selfishly, it's a theme that I bring up because I'm very interested not just in the local in terms of kind of geographical places, but the hyperlocal as in the individual experience. I think one of the things that I struggle with. With technology is the fact that it likes to group, it likes to categorize, it likes big groups of things. It doesn't really make space to deal with individual experience. Personalization kind of gives the veneer of thinking about the individual, but it's really just, it's pulling the wool over the larger classification and categorization that is occurring just below the surface. Um, and so I think a large part of my practice has really been dealing with very small groups of people, communities of artists, of people who are engaging with technology, of consumers of technology. I like to incorporate, you know, qualitative research practices, like workshops and focus groups and interviews into the work that I'm doing to really kind of give space to people to uplift their voices and to kind of get their stories. Heard, which is something that I really appreciate about hearing both of you talk is kind of thinking about the individual experience and thinking about kind of centering individual stories and individual histories and not forgetting the importance of doing that. Um, and so I, you know, I just really appreciate the way that you're both thinking about specific places and specific people and specific ideas and really trying to forefront that in what is very tech-based work, which often doesn't do that a lot. The last question that I have today is what do you hope audiences take away from your work and your engagement with technology? And, you know, you both have pointed to the critical role of the artist and having a seat at the table as these new technologies are developing. And I guess I wanna ask, you know, where do you think art can help us understand the impacts of new digital systems and how do you hope that kind of translates into the work that you're doing? I think at its best art is like kind of like a time travel machine, right? It like really asks the viewer to be present and experience something so much of how when I go into galleries or museums that it's kind of this almost awareness practice that's very different than the way we look and walk around the world. So meanwhile, you know, audiences have a deep sense of being present with something in the now with their like senses heightened, and yet the stories and the things, you know, the work of arts, whether it's historical or contemporary, and then the content of that piece can like. Take us into all these radical directions. I guess because I approach my practice really as um one of inquiry and research, although I definitely have certain aesthetic standards that I try to uphold in any Show more important than the art and how it looks, it's really about the questions and the dialogue and the opportunity to, you know, engage the viewer for a moment in just maybe even just peeing a question. Like if I can, if I can inspire a question. From the viewer, I feel like I've met my, my goal. And so having work up like this show at a university, it's been interesting because I, I almost like kind of forget that it's there. And then someone will come and they'll be like, oh, at Annenberg. And I'm like, oh yeah. And then we talk about it for a little bit and that I just really enjoy having those conversations because it's the work is still really present with me because I'm, I'm interacting with people who had their own experience with it when it wasn't just, you know, at the opening reception, it's like this kind of like ongoing. conversation that like slow like I slowly dip in and out of throughout the semester, which has been really, really fun. So I think it's, it's those conversations, it's the dialogue, it's the questions, um, and that's really just what I, I hope that anybody who, who sees the work walks away with. OK. Cool. Well, I think that's a great place to end. I want to thank both of you so much for making the time to talk with me today. This has been a great conversation, and I'm really looking forward to kind of being able to engage with your work even further as it continues to remain up over the course of the next semester. Thank you so much. Thank you. Selective attention interventions into the computational gaze is on view on the fifth floor of the Annenberg School through the summer of 2023. Make sure to stop by and check it out. The exhibition also has a library curated by Iffy Books, which is located at 319 North 11th Street in Philadelphia. Visit them online at iffybooks.net. This episode was produced by me, Roopa Vasudevan, and edited by Jasmine Erdener. We'd like to thank Kelsey Halliday Johnson, Lisa Marie Patzer, Joanna Birkner, and Madison Miller. Barbie Zelizer is the director of the Center for Media at Risk. More information can be found at www.ASCmediaisk.org.