



A Montage – A Few People – A Brief Moment in Time

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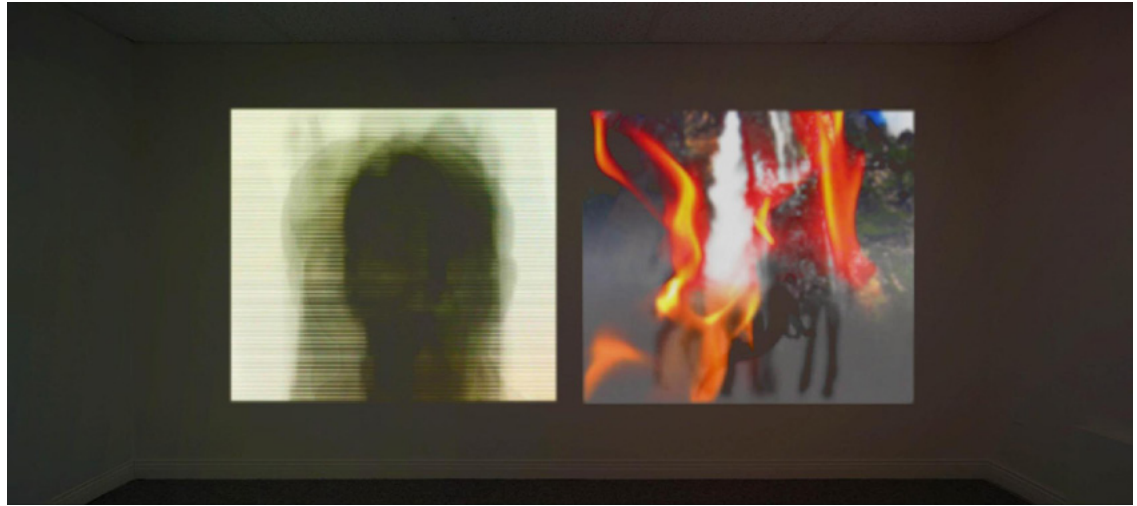
This work records and re-presents the passage of bodies through a space, building a narrative around them through contextualizing found images. The work uses Viola-Jones and KLT algorithms to detect people's faces and adds them as new frames to a movie playing at a very high speed. The faces captured are continuously added to a rapidly playing looped movie on a screen. They are treated as if they were steganographs – documents that contain hidden, yet retrievable and meaningful information – and parsed for recognizable patterns to generate search terms to scrape images from the net. The images are added to an adjacent screen.

The work uses the practical and theoretical features of two long existing streams of work: those that use face and visual pattern tracking to identify images at the limits of our perception, and those that use pattern recognition to tease cryptic content from silent spaces and random noisy images (Dunning and Woodrow 2009; 2011). Both use the idea of the unseen or unnoticed, at or beyond the limits of our perception, to change our perception of a space. Both use an expanded idea of what can constitute an index – the mark or sign left behind by an action, event or presence that can reconstitute that moment in the reconstruction of absent bodies and events.

Keywords Face detection,
pattern recognition,
steganography, montage

Description

Fig. 1. A Montage – A Few People – A Brief Moment in Time, prototype projection version, 2021.





























A Montage – A Few People – a Brief Moment in Time sets out to suggest that there is cryptic, yet discoverable information in the material of a space. Infinitesimal changes in a space, micro temperature shifts, the tiniest of pressure waves, our vocalizations, the breath, sweat and bodily detritus that trails behind us, the friction from a foot on a worn stair, make up the accretions that define a space. Forensic attention to any one of these can reveal some aspects of an absent body or event. This work looks closely at images as if they were similarly indexical and indicative of hidden meaning, relying on a suspension of disbelief when they are likely not, to build a sense of the cryptic content of a space.

This work uses aspects of research that suggests the brain is capable of processing images seen extremely briefly (Potter et al. 2013). Face tracking software records the faces of visitors to a space and adds them as sequential frames to a movie file. This movie is looped continuously, new frames being added as they are captured, and played back at very high speed. The resulting movie initially appears not unlike other face averaging projects as persistence of vision blends the faces together. On longer and closer inspection individual frames are recognized, enabling a viewer to discern individual faces and characteristics. While persistence of vision – the brain's tendency to blend sequential images together – provides an averaged face representing the passage of many bodies through the space, the increasingly smooth and characterless appearance that is characteristic of much face averaging as increasing numbers of faces are overlaid one on another, is disrupted and individuals emerge according to a viewer's interaction, her concentration, eye movement, blink rate and so on.

The faces captured are treated as steganographs – documents that contain hidden, yet meaningful information within the image itself, treating the colours in an image as if they were a code. The analysis of these documents is twofold: first, the images are converted from ascii to UTF-8 characters that are

scanned for sequences of letters that make sensible words. Simultaneously, pixel RGB values are tracked and assigned letters from the alphabet (Green-Armytage 2010). In both cases pattern recognition algorithms parse the documents looking for sensible arrangements of words and phrases. These texts are used to scrape images from Google and these images are inserted into a rapidly playing looped movie on a second screen. The found images are random, cryptic and elusive, most often generating little in the way of meaning, but on occasion can produce a quite startling juxtaposition. In combination with the faces these texts and images build a hybrid cast of real and imagined characters at play in the space. The longer the work runs the more complex and packed it becomes, though always just suggesting a fanciful echo of a poorly and discrepantly recorded and remembered past.

Fig. 2. Alphabet assigned RGB values.

 A 240 - 163 - 255	 J 148 - 255 - 181	 S 94 - 241 - 242
 B 0 - 117 - 220	 K 143 - 124 - 0	 T 0 - 153 - 143
 C 153 - 63 - 0	 L 157 - 204 - 0	 U 224 - 255 - 102
 D 76 - 0 - 92	 M 194 - 0 - 136	 V 116 - 10 - 255
 E 25 - 25 - 25	 N 0 - 51 - 128	 W 153 - 0 - 0
 F 0 - 92 - 49	 O 255 - 164 - 5	 X 255 - 255 - 128
 G 43 - 206 - 72	 P 255 - 168 - 187	 Y 255 - 225 - 0
 H 255 - 204 - 153	 Q 66 - 102 - 0	 Z 255 - 80 - 5
 I 128 - 128 - 128	 R 255 - 0 - 16	

The work relies on our innate drive to interpret images and texts. It is contextualized through rational, computing processes, and cinematic and linguistic forms that imply some sort of narrative, but reading the work becomes an exercise in looking for connections, for meaning that is at best elusive. Faced with such resistant meaning, the viewer is obliged to take an entirely interpretative stance to become a producer of meaning rather than a consumer of previously arranged meanings, establishing a direct connection to the space and contributing to its material histories. As its title suggests, the work as a whole – the screens, the texts, the viewers set adrift – recalls the strategies, even while eschewing its political aims, of the Situationist *dérive* to reshape urban space, though its essence might in the end suggest it owes more to the cinematic tradition of Russian Montage – that view that montage the *nerve of cinema* (Eisenstein 1949) is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots, wherein each sequential element is perceived not next to the other, but on top of the other. It is subjective, aleatory, often arbitrary, shaped by the flows and eddies of system and the viewer's existing sense of the psychological and material shape of the medium and the space itself.

The work uses the deficiencies of pattern recognition software, and its tendencies to produce false positives to suggest meaning in information flows.

Instances of what might be termed revelatory are momentary and rare – even in some installations non-existent. These works often produce little or nothing of note, only occasionally throwing up some startling juxtaposition, as much random as discovered. When this happens it is arresting, but it is unlikely that either faces juxtaposed with images, or any of the steganographic techniques used to extract meaning will reveal anything particularly striking, and even more unlikely, anything remotely meaningful in and of itself. Instead, meaning must be generated by an observer, driven by a need to make such meaning and coloured by individual circumstance.

Max Ernst’s and André Breton’s understandings of Lautréamont’s “...chance juxtaposition of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table” (Lautréamont 1978), led to the core principle of the surrealist aesthetic of objective chance – that sudden uncanny awareness of mystery revealed or withheld. This work uses similar juxtapositions, relying on coincidence, serendipity, and a complicit viewer to produce apparent meaning, or perhaps, more importantly, the sense of a hidden meaning – even when there is likely none. The work uses an analytical and logical, authoritative means to suggest the possibility of hidden meaning, to shift our sense of reality, to challenge our received notions of the material world.

The work uses the deficiencies of pattern recognition software, and its tendencies to produce false positives to suggest apparent meanings in information flows, and to attend to these as potential moments of revelation. The project suggests that just lightly scratching the surface of any information can reveal the possibility of alternative realities and histories, that can inform our sense of ourselves in our world.

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