

Damn, This Shit Crack

It has been suspected by many journalists that in the 80s, U.S. Intelligence was involved in trafficking crack cocaine to Black inner-city communities, in efforts to push political ideologies while also funding the Nicaraguan Contras against the socialist Sandinista government to enforce global political agendas. I am not writing this essay to dispute whether the Contra-cocaine scandal is real or a conspiracy but after reading the two first parts of Trevor Paglen's *Society of the Psyop* essay series and reflecting his writings on AI, surveillance, data infrastructure and how it is used to manipulate, I think it is important to note the recurring fear that elites are using tactics to manipulate nations through systematic and invisible means. Paglen argues that what we perceive as "reality" is increasingly pre-processed through invisible algorithms, surveillance networks, and data infrastructures that filter, predict, and subtly influence what we see, shaping our beliefs before we are even aware of it. Which leads me to ask this question; Is our digital culture functioning as a new form of mass control, shaping beliefs, behaviors, and ideology much like drugs once did, but in ways that are invisible, normalized, and addictive?

Social media algorithms are invisible but they are incredibly powerful. We live in a moment where the majority of the population is shaped by what they see and not what they experience. Algorithms are designed to maintain engagement, using tactics that hijack your brain and dopamine by catering content to you that makes you keep scrolling, while occasionally showing you content that can place you into a depression or "learned hopelessness".

Through my own addiction to crack cocaine in 2024, I have learned that through puppet strings of addiction that a person is easily swayed or manipulated by anyone or anything around them to bring them that high again. There is desperation. Instead of seeking a sustainable remedy to the issues at hand, it is easier and even favoured to reach out for an intense remedy even at the cost of our own wellbeing. Just as addiction shapes perception and decision-making, algorithms exploit these same vulnerabilities in our attention and desires. In this vulnerable state we lack critical thinking, we stop seeking truth and security, settling for reality as presented.

Another way digital culture shapes our reality is through isolation. We are told we have connections through social media, chat rooms, forums and what not. In the early days of social media, my friends and I would use it to arrange plans to hangout or give brief updates, but with the explosion of accessibility and post-pandemic reliance on digital communication, it has grown to be the main way of communication.

Miscommunication occurs constantly and many connections on social media are just superficial. I find people now are more conscious of their appearances in hopes not to lose followers and friends. Which is problematic as that means people are more compliant to the status quo in means to be deemed relevant or even out of fear of being banned from apps or censored.

You are now at the point of the essay where you feel bummed out or an overwhelming feeling of helplessness. Well, I guess we can talk about art now. First, another negative notation... Due to how the digital world is shaping our reality, we are witnessing an increase of sellout artists; "creators" that are given large sums of money to produce manipulative art of no substance with either the goal to capitalize on our

collective dopamine addiction or spread propaganda or both. An example of this is *Stranger Things*. The show leans heavily on 1980s nostalgia, creating comfort while simplifying political history into digestible narratives. Paglen's concept of pre-processed reality is clear here: viewers are fed emotionally compelling, repetitive content for passive consumption. The show's frequent plot and dialogue reiteration allows distracted viewing. People can scroll on their phones while still following the story. Attention is fragmented, engagement is shallow, and audiences are subtly conditioned to accept what they see without critical thought. Entertainment itself becomes a system of normalized control.

Alright, now that the final "bad vibe" point has been made, we got good shit now too. I mean art. We got good art too. Art has been made more accessible than ever. Many artists are creating digital art experiences and posting their pieces rather than relying strictly on galleries and auctions for circulation. Which is fantastic because after the AGO forced Wanda Nanibush to resign due to her public support for Palestinian rights, we realized that physical art institutions can push a particular narrative. As well, in general historically there are a lot of hurdles when it comes to circulating art. Hell, it took Van Gogh dying to gain recognition. Nowadays, you can go through r/art for free and see millions of pieces.

I know I'm supposed to now compare art of this millenium to Alex Bag's *Untitled Fall '95*. I think mainstream art is very different to this piece, going back to my points of mainstream art being manipulative, focused on monetization while enforcing an order, but comparing Alex Bag to the art I've seen my peers and my niche favourite artists create, it's very similar. I find current art is hyperfocused on identity and there is a surge

in self-performance. Many artists adopt personas in their work, much like Alex Bag, using satire to critique media culture. This could be because we are all vain and attempting to be the next influencer or it could be due to accessibility (why buy paint and a brush when you have your body for free?), I'm not sure what the reason may be. But I enjoy it because there is this genuineness when the art is human (hopefully not AI).

Next I noticed Alex Bags piece is not high budget, it was recorded on crappy tape, there were cheap old toys, wigs you'd get at a party store and sometimes even the sound was illegible. I am finding with a lot of art being made today, it is also low budget like this.

With all the technological advancements being made: cameras are cheap and overall producing art such as videos, audios, photography and all things experimental are easier to do now. It is so accessible.

SLEDD, who came in for an artist talk, shared making music and art from his cabin in the woods, eventually turning it into a livestream show on YouTube. Accessibility empowers independent creators to resist the social and economic pressures of mainstream art. Similarly, Ed Video pursues analog production, pushing back against digital and AI advancements. These creators are infiltrating the very system that seeks to manipulate us, using its tools to subvert it.

The digital world is a deeply manipulative and often invisible system however it has made art more accessible, and jokes on the elite, we the artists will spam post our weird, lowbudget, counterculture art pieces until we gain societal consciousness. So don't use your phone to doomscroll, fuck it, use your phone to make a movie, post it everywhere, change the world.