

Essay 2
Jay Jasztrab
03/27/2026
Megan Arnold
Experimental III

How does one write an essay on readings that they had to absolutely purge from their mind to maintain some semblance of sanity? Is it even possible? I have the misfortune of living in a time so heavily influenced by AI and shortform style content that I am numbed to how normalized it is and its attempt to influence the creation of art. While I am delighted to say I've maintained academic integrity in a world surrounded by AI, I cannot say the same for the rest of my life. I believe that digital culture in the face of AI and shortform content is shaping our contemporary reality in a way where humans cannot understand what their reality actually is. I can confirm as the person writing this that even I don't understand what reality is. I am so integrated into a system that is not what I would have ever wanted for myself, but I don't know how or if I can escape it.

Trevor Paglen's *Society of the Psyop* argues that digital culture is no longer just influencing reality, but instead is actively producing, scripting, and destabilizing it. Across both essays, he frames contemporary reality as something increasingly shaped by psyops, where media, technology, and power converge to manipulate perception at scale. In the first part, Paglen argues that UFO narratives show how institutions shape belief through ambiguity and spectacle. Today's digital platforms amplify this by spreading unresolved, contradictory information, blurring truth and fiction and making reality feel unstable. As a result, digital culture trains us to accept uncertainty as normal. This then connects to the second part in which

Paglen argues that AI-driven platforms subtly shape perception through opaque systems like algorithms and data targeting. He compares this to “magic” because its hidden processes have real effects, guiding what we see and think while maintaining an illusion of user control. These readings were very hard to digest as both an artist, but more importantly, as a human who was put on this earth with the expectancy to thrive. I found myself overtime compartmentalizing these readings and the thoughts brought up in our class discussion so much that all I can really say is, “Man, this sucks”, because truly. It does suck. Especially trying to navigate a world that’s so inhumane for humane ideas to turn into art.

That being said, video art has been a long standing art form, that when done with tact can really encompass the human condition and its surrounding emotions. I believe that “Untitled Fall ’95” by Alex Bag heavily encompasses real human emotion, especially that of an artist. Her piece includes confessional style videos documenting her feelings about each semester spliced with skits that include themes of: online identity and self-performance, parody of media culture/early internet culture, and gender stereotypes. As an artist I found her confessionals very relatable as they are a variation of the feelings that I feel as an artist making art primarily within an institution. However I feel as though her skit style content resonated with the child in me who had unrestricted internet access, and not the current version of me who is an adult with the free will to consume whatever content I please. It’s a free will I don’t fully exercise however as I have let the media decide what I consume.

I’ve noticed a great amount of changes within how video art (or should I say video “art”) is produced and distributed. First and foremost the creation of shortform content platforms has

completely altered how we consume content. I find myself consuming real content made by real artists, (video skits/sketches, animation, etc) but in such short bursts as humans have begun to reject long form content. I find myself scrolling to an oblivion losing more time than I've realized. It's hard to be able to sit with a long form video art piece and just enjoy it, and it's always been that way in my life due to undiagnosed ADHD up until recently, but more so now than ever because of the normalization of shortform content. In addition to most forms of video media being shortform, the platforms they reside on are absolutely plagued with AI to the point where I find myself constantly falling for it, it is very hard to discern and I find myself succumbing to it more and more. I find myself defending my lack of awareness saying something along the lines of, "Oh, well, the idea was cool". Forgetting to acknowledge that the execution of making content is worth just as much or more than the idea, and AI is unable to add human emotion to its creation. For most humans their consumption of video art is the same I imagine. We as a society do not take the initiative to search for art uninfluenced by AI and social media, we let an algorithm feed us. The more I write the more I realize that we as humans are so incapable of even finding art due to the system we've been integrated in.

I'm spiraling again, just like I did reading Paglen's essays the first time, and like I did in the class discussion on these readings. I keep circling back to the same thought: that my difficulty in writing/talking about how AI and media have impacted art is not a lack of understanding, but a reflection of something larger. It feels almost impossible to isolate art as a separate category when the systems shaping it are the same ones reshaping how we think, feel, exist, etc. To talk about art in this context begins to feel like treating a symptom while ignoring the condition itself. There is a kind of quiet panic in recognizing that the images, narratives, and

aesthetics we engage with are no longer just expressive or cultural artifacts, but outputs of systems designed to influence and predict us. Having recognized this I don't know where to go from here. I'm so lost.

Worked Cited

Bag, Alex. *Untitled (Fall '95)*. 1995. Video.

Paglen, Trevor. "Society of the Psyop, Part 1: UFOs and the Future of Media." *E-flux*, Issue #147, September 2024, pp. 1-8.

Paglen, Trevor. "Society of the Psyop, Part II: AI, Mind Control, and Magic." *E-flux*, Issue #148, October 2024, pp. 1-16.