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Hey Imagination, Reshape Our Reality

When my fingers press into the live bark of a tree, feeling its texture, temperature, and energy flow through me, and I remember what it's like to feel human, feel like myself, I hold a glimpse of eternity. It feels like my eyes have finally forced open after blindly coercing myself into believing I could see. I come closer to achieving some sort of perspective of how absolutely odd this reality is.

Living in a near-perpetual state of fear and overwhelm myself, when I gather the courage to take a step back and look around, I feel almost just as alone. It feels like nobody around me is fully present, like the phones and the overall digital overwhelm of the day have sucked most people dry of essential humanity. Phones have become like extensions of the body, intentionally engineered objects made to actively reorganize our attention and thoughts, and even restructure how we feel. What we experience as “reality” is increasingly filtered through oppressive systems of control that prioritize profit over people. Digital media, used intentionally and unintentionally, participates in structuring consciousness itself. Contemporary reality is not simply lived, but constructed through systems that manipulate perception at both conscious and pre-conscious levels. However, because perception and reality are inseparable,

imaginative artistic practice and embodied experience become critical sites of resistance, capable of reshaping how we understand and inhabit the world.

As Trevor Paglen argues in *Society of the Psyop*, contemporary media operates by “taking advantage of the malleability of perception,” shaping reality by exploiting the ways our brains process information. We now exist within what he describes as a “protean, targeted visual culture” that shows us what it thinks we want to see, measures our reactions, and then reshapes itself to better influence us. Phones, advertising, news, and algorithmic platforms are active agents in this process by using targeted language and manipulative strategies. Early experiments in artificial intelligence reveal how easily humans attribute meaning, intention, and even empathy to systems that possess none. Created by Joseph Weizenbaum in the 60s, ELIZA stimulated conversation through simple pattern matching. The system was meant to reflect the users statements back to them, modeled on Carl Rogers’ method of reflective listening (Paglen). Users projected intelligence, care, even consciousness onto what was in reality a basic scripted program, revealing how much language and perception are correlated in the creation of reality. Crucially, these mechanisms work more effectively by reinforcing existing beliefs and patterns. Paglen references “Magruder’s Principle,” originally used in US military deception, which suggests that it is easier to maintain a pre-existing belief than to change one. In other words, control operates by narrowing perception and making certain interpretations feel inevitable. Deception is not accomplished by producing confusion, but by reducing active imagination in the mind of the target,

encouraging them to commit to a particular version of reality. ELIZA and more contemporary versions of AI chatbots operate in this way, mirroring assumptions and defending beliefs, churning out the ideal conditions for close mindedness in order to reduce uncertainty and maintain order. These systems become internalized: shaping our actions, our beliefs, and how we perceive the world. Intuitive or feeling based processing are also vulnerable to being reshaped and exploited. Techniques of deception work precisely by operating at this level, overriding patterns and conscious reasoning and embedding themselves in perception itself (Paglan).

This tension between lived experience and constructed reality is reflected in *Untitled Fall '95* by Alex Bag. The video work unfolds through a series of ironic, low-budget performances that oscillate between boredom, anxiety, and exaggerated persona. Framed as a wry, diaristic account of an art student “finding herself” in NYC, the work traces both physical and emotional shifts across eight semesters. The confessionals are punctuated by satirical interludes about political and contemporary life. Within this framework, Bag makes recurring references to a professor figure that abuses his position of authority and recognized position of knowledge. Because he speaks with institutionally backed up confidence, using complex language that provides him legitimacy within the system, his perspective carries weight beyond its actual substance. With this form of manipulation, even when something feels intuitively wrong, it can be difficult to articulate why. This imbalance produces a subtle but powerful form of control. Students are led to internalize his judgments, coming to believe that their

tastes, instincts, or ways of thinking mark them as inadequate and “stupid”. In this way, authority extends beyond evaluation into the shaping of identity and imagination itself.

Bag sharpens this critique by suggesting the professor has effectively “brainwashed” his students, cultivating a circle of compliant followers who reinforce conformity through ridicule, such as laughing at her when she provides a contradicting opinion. Because institutional systems privilege those who can articulate themselves within its sanctions, those who cannot have their knowledge and personhood devalued. In this way, authority maintains itself by reducing complexity into rigid, “tidy” categories. When lived knowledge conflicts with institutionally validated knowledge, individuals are more likely to defer to the latter, eroding trust in their own perception and reframing confusion as personal failure rather than structural contradiction. This dynamic has direct consequences to artistic production, affecting the general output of art. Since art is circulated through the machinations of capitalism, much of what is widely seen is shaped by values of productivity, convenient consumption, and existing expectations. Bag expresses displeasure about artists “kissing ass” to remain palatable to the mainstream, underscoring how art can absolutely reinforce these structures.

If perception and reality are intertwined, then altering perception becomes a way of altering reality itself (Paglan). Imagination therefore holds fundamental potential for resistance: it resists the idea of a fixed, singular world by introducing possibilities that fall outside dominant frameworks. To expand perception through imagination and

openness becomes a form of resistance. Krista Franklin captures this urgency in “Call”: “If You find Your imagination cannot stop itself from churning out the scripts of the Death Machines, pull its plug. Dismantle it. Reprogram it. Dream Day-light. Manufacture Daylight. We are the Magicians. Make Magic.” To reclaim imagination is to reclaim the ability to perceive differently and therefore to live differently. We must recognize that no single perspective holds the full truth, and we must build understanding collectively through layered histories and shared experiences. It is important to make sustained effort not only by learning, but unlearning. We must admit that we know nothing, and learn to embrace contradiction as a necessary force.

Practices that prioritize process as an embodied act of creation are a great place to start. One way this resistance emerges is through engaging the senses directly rather than appealing only to intellect or established codes. This can be accomplished with sound, texture, movement, and materials. Not to accomplish fixed meanings, but to create space for interpretation, sensation, and reflection. Art that engages the senses can ground experience in the body and evoke emotions of love, joy, or curiosity rather than brewing shame. While mass media similarly mobilizes emotion, it often does so to capture attention and generate profit. Art, by contrast, can create space for more expansive and self-directed forms of feeling. This resonates with Em Wright’s artist talk, particularly their emphasis on improvisation, play, and “the art of trying.” Their practice foregrounds making as an open-ended exploration rather than a means to a polished outcome. Through making music with miscellaneous objects and garbage, Wright

describes a practice of discovering what can happen in real time. Here, the self and the object become collaborators. Meaning is not imposed in advance, but emerges through interaction, responsiveness, and play. This approach resists the pressure to produce coherent, market-ready work, instead valuing experimentation and presence. Like Bag's piece, it destabilizes the authority of fixed knowledge and invites a more intuitive, embodied form of understanding. Ultimately, the meaning of art is never fixed, and the same work can function differently depending on context, audience, and interpretation. Through storytelling and sensory engagement, art can position viewers within a broader spectrum of human experience.

In a world where perception is continually shaped and narrowed by powerful systems, the act of returning to the body, to sensation, and to imagination becomes not only grounding but transformative. Fleeting moments of embodied humanity, like the experience of wholeness I felt interacting with the tree, begin to uncover what is at stake. While contemporary structures of media, authority, and technology work to stabilize reality into something predictable and controllable, art and embodied practice offer a way to unsettle that stability. By embracing uncertainty, contradiction, and play, we open ourselves to alternative ways of seeing and being. In this openness lies the potential to resist passive consumption, to rebuild trust in our own perception, and to collectively imagine realities that are more expansive, humane, and alive.

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