

Thoughts to paper- Sloan Brookson

Screening : Alex Bag, Untitled Fall '95

Alex Bag sits in front of a camera for basically the whole thing and just talks. She plays this art student character, or maybe it's not a character, maybe it's her, and that's kind of the whole point and she delivers these monologues about school, about her identity, about feeling confused, about trying to figure out what she's doing with her life.

What's interesting is that it never fully commits to being a joke OR being sincere. There's this layer of irony over everything but underneath that there's something genuinely uncomfortable and kind of tender. Like she's confessing things but also making fun of herself for confessing them. It's a very specific emotional register that I don't think I've seen many other artists pull off as well.

Personal thought: there's something really relatable about this if you've ever been an art student (or any student really). That feeling of performing competence while being deeply unsure and she nails it.

There's also a feminist lineage here that's worth noting. Performance art, body art, video art by women artists who were using their own image and presence as the material. Artists like Hannah Wilke, Lynda Benglis, early work by people like Joan Jonas. Bag is aware of that tradition and is in dialogue with it, but she's also updating it for a generation that grew up with MTV and reality TV starting to emerge.

The 'Fall '95' in the title is doing a lot. It's super specific, kinda like a diary entry or a semester in school. It gives the video a feeling of being a document of a particular moment in time, not a timeless artwork but a thing that happened in a specific cultural moment. That's also kind of interesting when you place it next to Paglen's arguments about media and time, the way media freezes moments but also how those moments get reinterpreted.

Bag's whole thing is making the artifice visible she's clearly performing, and she wants you to know she's performing. Compare that to what Paglen is describing with psyops, which is specifically about hiding the artifice. Two totally different uses of the same technology.

Reading: Legacy Russell, "Reality, Televised: On The Rodney King Generation"

What the essay is doing

Russell's essay is about the hypervisibility of Black pain in Western media but specifically the way images of Black suffering and Black death get circulated, go viral, and become spectacle without that visibility actually translating into justice or change. The Rodney King beating footage is her central case study: a piece of amateur video that changed what people could deny about police violence, but whose existence didn't prevent the officers responsible from being acquitted in 1992.

That's the core tension of the whole essay: visibility does not equal accountability. And this feels so obvious once she says it but it's actually a really important argument to make, especially because there's this persistent assumption in a lot of media/activist discourse that if we can just get people to see something, they'll respond to it correctly. Russell is pointing out that that's not how it works.

Key points / things that stood out

The distinction she draws between visibility and justice is probably the most important idea in the essay. The footage existed. People saw it. And the verdict still came down the way it came down. The image didn't save anyone.

She's not saying: don't watch these images, or don't share them. She's asking a more uncomfortable question about what the act of watching actually does and who it does it for.

This made me think about social media now and how the structure of platforms is literally designed to make content go viral and then disappear. Which means it's designed to produce that exact cycle Russell is describing: brief hypervisibility, then nothing.

Honestly this essay is hard to read without feeling kind of implicated by it, like if you've ever shared a video of police violence on social media and then gone about your day, Russell is writing about that. She's not attacking individual people for doing it but she's asking what that act is actually accomplishing and whether it's enough.

I also think the connection to the Rodney King trial specifically is really smart. Because the acquittal is so well-known and so obviously unjust.

What I keep coming back to is her point about the audience. The image doesn't just exist in a vacuum, it exists in front of different viewers who bring different stakes to the viewing. And media, by its nature, can't control who's watching or what they're doing with what they see. That's both the promise and the problem of visibility.

Reading: Victor Masayesva, selections from "Indigenous Experimentation"

What the essay is doing

Masayesva is a Hopi filmmaker, video artist, and photographer. His essay is about how the label 'experimental' has been applied to Indigenous new media work, and specifically about how that label, which sounds like a compliment, has actually functioned to push Indigenous media art to the margins of the field rather than integrate it into the main conversation.

The argument is subtle and I had to read it a couple times. He's not saying Indigenous artists shouldn't be called experimental, or that experimental is a bad category. He's saying that when Indigenous artists get called experimental it means something different than when white Western artists get called experimental, it means: interesting but peripheral, belongs in a separate conversation about Indigenous culture, not the main conversation about media art.

Key points / things that stood out for me

The most important insight for me was the way he connects the marginalization of Indigenous media to the broader logic of settler colonialism. He's not making an argument about taste or aesthetics. He's making an argument about power, about how institutions decide what's central and what's a special interest, and how that decision-making has historically served colonial aims even when it looks like it's just about categorization.

Reading this makes me want to look up more Indigenous media art and actually trace where it fits in the histories I've been taught - which histories include it, how it's framed when it is included, and what gets left out. The fact that this anthology was published in 2005 and I hadn't encountered it or Masayesva before this class says something.

I also think the point about institutions is important and applies beyond Indigenous media specifically. The decisions about what gets into the canon, what gets taught, what gets collected and exhibited and those are always political decisions, made by people with particular positions and interests. Pretending they're neutral or purely aesthetic is itself a kind of ideology.

Reading: Trevor Paglen, "Society of the Psyop, Parts I & II"

These two essays are genuinely kind of wild and I mean that as a compliment. Paglen is an artist and researcher who works with surveillance and government secrecy, and these essays are him applying that research background to a really big question: has media always been, at least in part, a tool for psychological manipulation? And what does it mean that the infrastructure for doing that is now more powerful than it has ever been?

Part I uses the history of government UFO programs as his entry point. Which sounds like a weird choice but it ends up being really effective. His argument is that at least some of the UFO sightings that were reported over the decades by civilians and by military personnel were not aliens, but were classified military technology that the government needed to keep secret.

Part II extends this into the present. He draws a line from those Cold War psyop techniques to the current AI/algorithmic media landscape, and his argument is that we are living in an environment that is orders of magnitude more saturated with deliberate manipulation than most people including most media-literate people understand.

Key points / things that stood out to me

The fact that he's working from declassified documents and primary sources makes this feel very different from conspiracy theory territory. He's not saying everything is fake or that there are no real events. He's saying that there are powerful institutions with a documented history of

using media to manipulate perception, and the technology for doing that has gotten dramatically more powerful.

The UFO stuff is genuinely interesting as a case study because it shows how disinformation can work not through denying something but through offering an alternative explanation that makes people look in the wrong direction.

In Part II, the AI section, Paglen is not really making an argument about deepfakes specifically.

this changes how you read everything. Not in a paranoid 'nothing is real' way but in a 'I should actually think about who made this and why' way. Which is maybe just good media literacy but Paglen makes it feel urgent.

Honestly Part I was more compelling to me than Part II, not because Part II is weaker but because the UFO material is so specific and concrete that it made the abstract argument about media manipulation land harder. Paglen is good at finding the weird case study that illuminates the general principle.

Reading Part II in 2025, when AI-generated content is everywhere and it's genuinely getting harder to tell what's real, felt different than it probably would have felt even two years ago. The argument isn't theoretical anymore. You can go on any social media platform right now and see it happening.

Connections Between the Readings + Screening

The thing that strikes me putting all of these next to each other is that they're all in different ways about the gap between what an image shows and what it means and about who controls that gap.

Russell is writing about how an image that seems to show evidence of injustice can be made to mean something else in the context of a trial, or can be absorbed into a media cycle without producing change. The image and its meaning are not the same thing, and the gap between them is where power operates.

Bag is doing something interesting in relation to all of this: she's making the gap visible. Her video is so obviously performed, so aware of itself, that it refuses to let you forget that you're

watching something constructed. That doesn't solve the problems the readings describe, it's not like formal self-awareness is a political program but it's at least an honest position.

The week's theme is 'post-production' and I keep thinking about that phrase. Every image goes through post-production not just in the editing room but in circulation.

Our TV Show

Production notes, personal reflections, where we're at

The Group: honestly couldn't have asked for better people

I need to start here because it really is the foundation of everything: I genuinely love everyone in my group so much. There's something about working on a creative project together that either brings out the worst in people or the best, and we've had the best version of that. Everyone shows up, everyone contributes, everyone cares about the project, but also everyone cares about each other and makes the process fun even when things are stressful or complicated.

We've spent a lot of time together over the course of this production in pre-production meetings, on "set" during filming days, now in editing and I've genuinely enjoyed all of it. The dynamic we have as a group is one of those things that's hard to manufacture. People's strengths complement each other, the communication is good, and there's a shared investment in making something that we're actually proud of rather than just getting it done.

Personal note: genuinely one of the best group experiences I've had in school. I'll actually miss working on this when it's done, which is not something I usually say about assignments.

Now that we're deep into post-production and I can actually see how the footage is coming together, I'm even more excited about it.

Filming Days

We got shots that I'm genuinely proud of. Some of them came together exactly as planned and some of them happened spontaneously in the way that good things sometimes do when you're paying attention and willing to improvise. There were moments where we'd get a take and everyone would just kind of look at each other because we all knew it was right. Those moments are the best feeling.

One thing I didn't fully appreciate until we were actually shooting: When everyone is locked in and having a good time and trusting each other, it shows in what ends up on screen.

Where We're at in Editing

We're in the thick of post-production now and I am so excited about how this is coming together. Editing is the phase where you really discover what you made, you shoot all this footage and now you're finding the show inside it, making the decisions that determine the pace and the feeling and the meaning of what happens. It's the phase that takes the raw material and turns it into something.

The footage is genuinely strong. Seeing it assembled, watching cuts come together, finding the rhythm we got what we needed, and in a lot of cases more than we needed. There's good stuff to work with. That's not a given and I don't take it for granted.

I also feel like we're doing justice to the original idea in a way that doesn't always happen. Sometimes a concept sounds great in development and then the execution reveals the gaps. With this project I feel like the execution is actually making the concept richer.

What I Think We're Making

I genuinely believe we're making something good. Not just 'good for a student project' though it is that, but actually good. The kind of thing I'd be excited to show people regardless of context.

The locations, the compositions, the performances, the way we used light. We thought about what we wanted and then went and got it over multiple days of shooting.

I think we're going to finish this and be genuinely proud of it.

And I think a big part of why that's possible is the group we put together, people who worked hard, made each other laugh, pushed the quality of the work, and made this process one I'll remember.

Final thought on the group project: the best thing about working with people you actually like and trust is that it makes you braver creatively. You're more willing to try something and risk it not working when you know the people around you are going to engage with it honestly rather than just go along with whatever. We had that. It made the work better.