

DUGGAL

Q&A WITH ARTIST & EDUCATOR JARET VADERA

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There is no question that the world as we've known it is at a pivotal moment of change. What that transformation might look like is anybody's guess. What we do know is that technology, from the scientific to everyday digital tasks, is at the center of it. For a deep dive into the technical and social implications of images in contemporary culture, we reached out to artist and educator Jaret Vadera, Assistant Professor of Practice in New Media at Cornell University. Read on to hear his thoughts on automation bias, Generation Z, the subjectivity of photographs, and the intersection of politics, technology and images.



Jaret Vadera, *Untitled III*, 2009, c-print, 7x11"

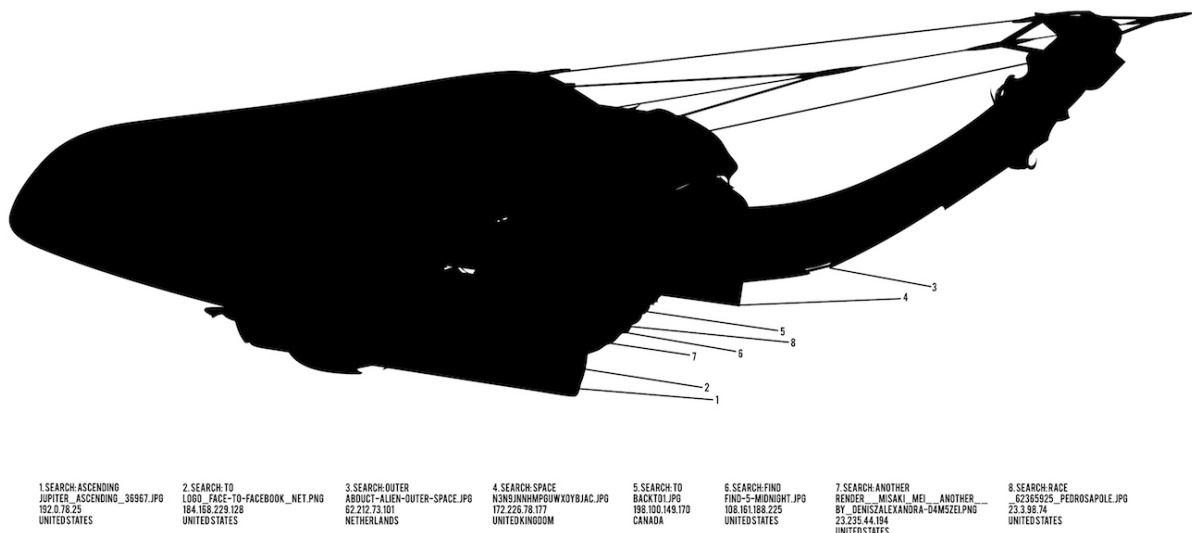
DIANA MCCLURE: The relationship between algorithms, imaging and power is one of your research interests as an artist and educator. This dynamic has become front and center as we reckon with the issue of fake news or facial recognition technology used to identify protesters in both the protests inspired by George Floyd and the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong over the past year. What do you think is important about this dynamic, especially for the general public to understand?

JARET VADERA: Facial recognition technology software is being used by law enforcement agencies around the world in unprecedented ways. AI algorithms can access billions of pictures culled from CCTV cameras, driver's license databases, "scraped" pictures from social media photographs, and any other images uploaded of you over your entire life. This information can be used in concert with location tracking data from your smartphone.

This has dangerous implications across the board on civil liberties, on our right to privacy, and to peaceably protest. The research repeatedly shows that algorithms and data sets are often full of bugs especially when it comes to people with more melanin, and particularly women of color. Algorithms are far from neutral, and often just amplify and then automate the programmer's biases at breakneck speeds.

Since companies protect the secrets of how their algorithms work, and because the ways that algorithms process data are so complex, it is very difficult to assess them ethically, and to hold anyone accountable legally. To make matters worse, we tend to overly trust "the evidence" that algorithms produce, even when they are incorrect. Researchers call this phenomenon "automation bias." And because algorithms are generally running on autopilot, stealthily in the background, we are often blind to their ubiquity, and are easily susceptible. This can make them very powerful weapons. Facial recognition software is particularly dangerous under our current administration, making it easier for law enforcement to potentially retaliate against BLM protestors that are calling for more accountability and to defund the police.

Edward Snowden and Cambridge Analytica show us how easily it has been to collect our personal data, and to weaponize it, to shape our perception of reality and to influence our elections. We need to slow down, and make sure that our laws catch up with the technology. We need more transparency, oversight, and stricter guidelines to ensure algorithms are used ethically.



Jaret

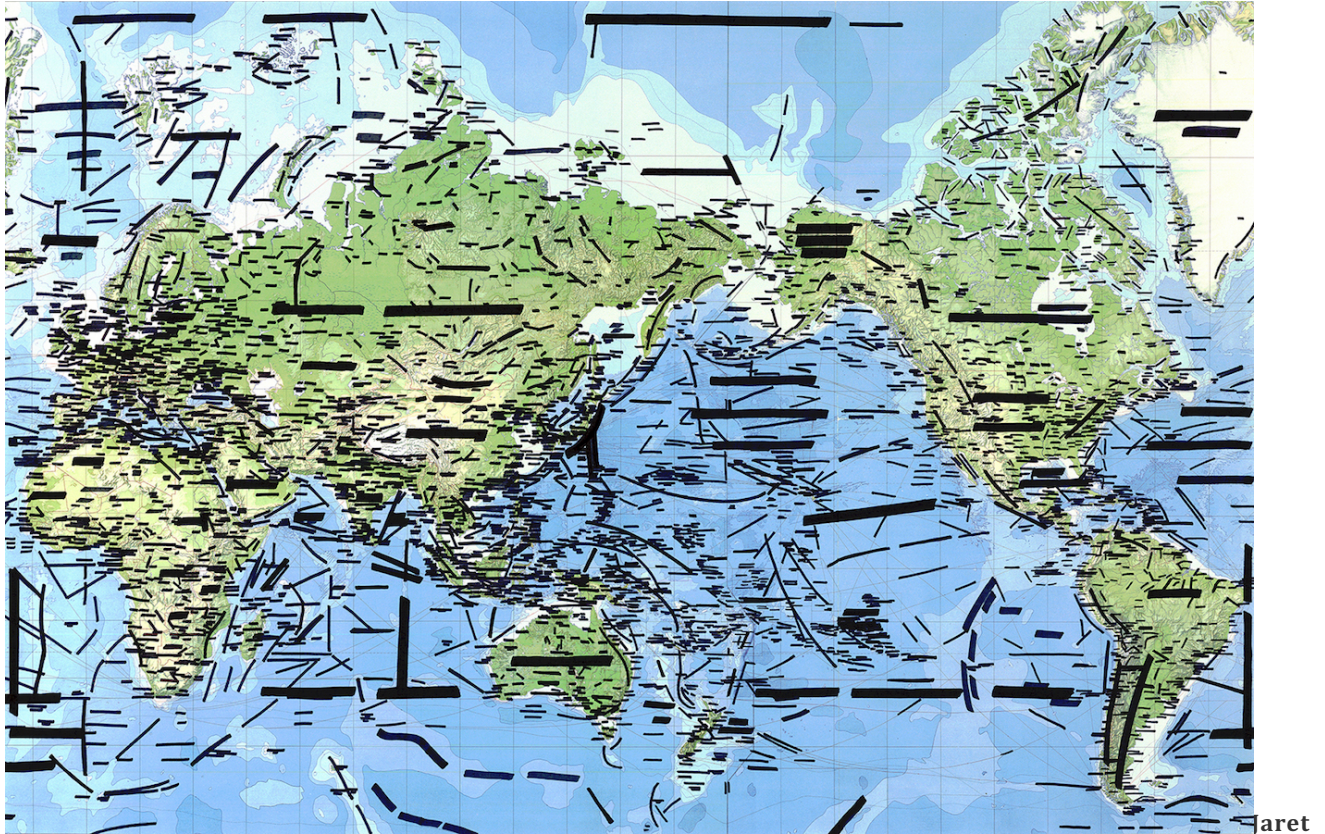
Vadera, ASCENDING TO OUTER SPACE TO FIND ANOTHER RACE, 2017, vinyl cut on wall, 12x5'

DM: As an educator, you are in direct contact with a generation of students who are at the center of a remarkable historic moment - a pandemic and a reckoning with inequity and racism around the globe. From your vantage point, are there any concerns, thoughts, ideas or paradigm shifts that seem to be gaining momentum among your students or young people in general?

JV: Most of my students are Gen Z. They are digital natives. They grew up online and are extremely savvy at processing information through multiple interfaces at the same time, in ways that feel superhuman to a Gen Xer like myself. My students are idiosyncratic, brilliant, and inspired. They are remarkably fluent when it comes to issues of gender, orientation, and race, in ways that many of us weren't when I was growing up.

In both of my classes last semester, we were already talking about politics, the media, perception, social justice, technology, and disaster capitalism. So, when the pandemic hit, what we were discussing in class hit my students in a very real way, in real time. When the BLM protests began this summer, a few of them took their own initiatives and started social media projects that helped to amplify the movement, building on strategies we had explored in class.

The protests that we've been seeing both here and around the world show young people coming out in full force. I feel that Black Lives Matter, the Me Too movement, Occupy, the Hong Kong protests - and countless others around the world - have shifted the ways that we organize. It is a lot more tech savvy and modular. In Hong Kong, their counter-surveillance tactics were ingenious. It was next-level. And I have personally enjoyed the ways that K-pop fans and TikTok teens have been trolling malignant hashtags, political merchandising websites, and booking up seats at rallies.



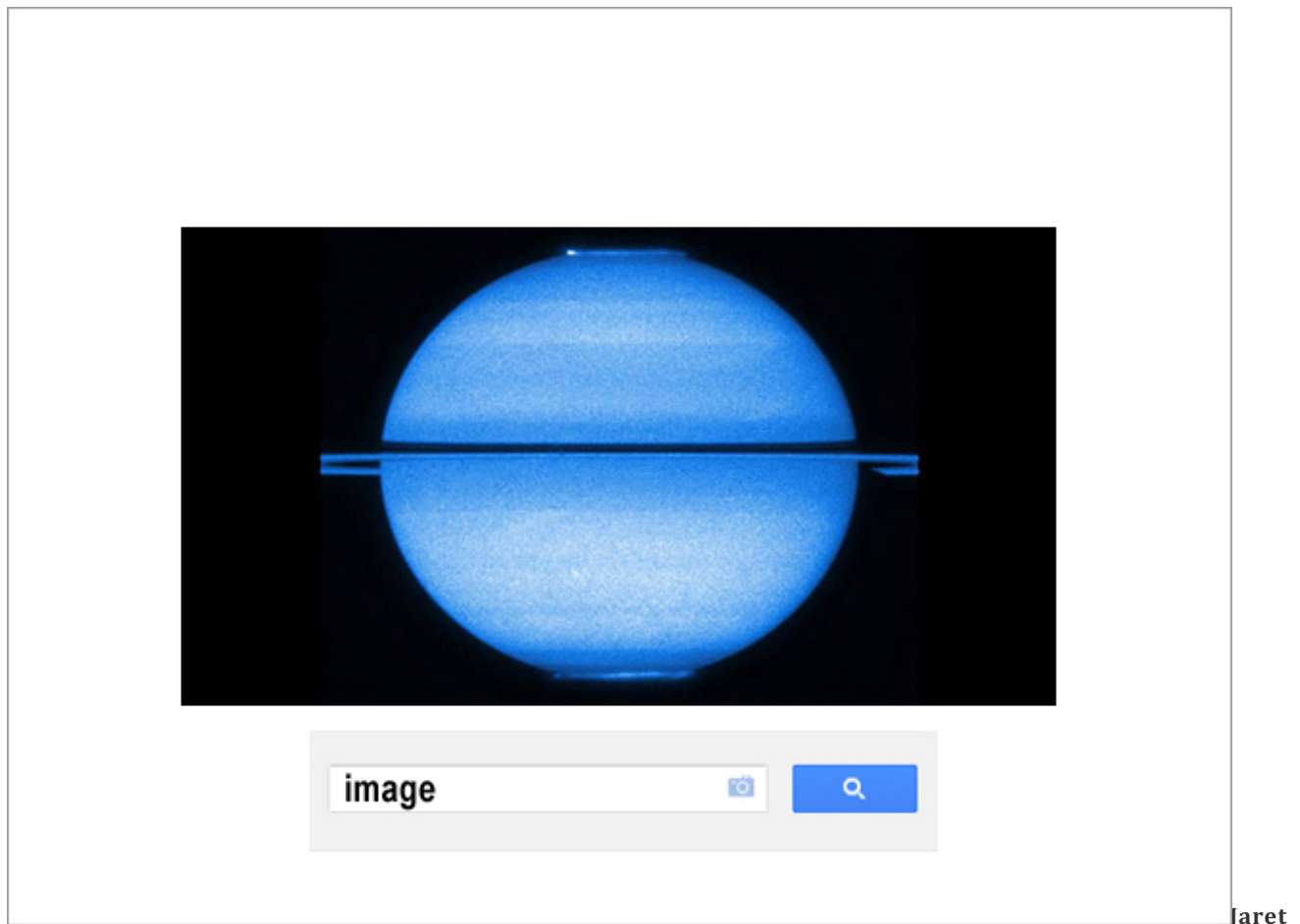
Vadera, *No Country*, 2014, from the *Pangea* series, black marker on world map, 20" x 30"

DM: In the context of photography and its ubiquity as a democratic tool—social media, cell phone photography and video, etc.—what do you think the role of conceptual photography is?

JV: Images have power. They always have. So, I am not surprised that the advent of smartphones and social media has significantly changed the landscape of our culture. The constant stream of viral cell phone videos of police brutality has undoubtedly played a significant role in catalyzing the movement in the U.S. and around the world.

On the other side of the coin, in other hands, the ways that photography has been used historically, as a form of “objective” evidence, hasn’t always been so democratic. From anthropological photographs, to Kodak film, to Shirley cards, photography has been far from neutral. Consciously and unconsciously manipulating how and what we see, and what we don’t. Fake news, biased algorithms, maps, infographics, and colonial photographs all share similar DNA. Even at their most innocuous, all images embed the larger stories of their time, the social conditions in which they were made, as well as the biases of the technology and the photographer.

In this way, I feel like all images are “conceptual,” or contextual. They are visual translations that appear to be fixed, but in reality, are really quite fluid. So, I hack and reconfigure contemporary images that are used to control how we see. I unfix them, break them apart, and then put them back together to reveal some of the invisible stories lying beneath the surface, but more importantly, to reimagine new ways of seeing. I have been called a fugitive image-maker and a lexicographer. But I am really interested in images as pharmakons, that are simultaneously both the poison and the cure. Maybe I am just trying to do what Audre Lorde says we can’t, to use *the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house*, in the smallest and most powerful unit, in the image.



Vadera, *File_Not_Found*, 2013, video still from digital video, 1 minute

DM: Lastly, in light of recent events, what are your thoughts on your own art practice and teaching? Is your work and its communication being informed by the current moment? Do you see the role of the artist evolving in new directions?

JV: I try to keep my practice open and adaptable. I often throw myself into new situations that require me to grow, and learn, while questioning what it is that I really do and what my work really does out in the world. We live in a world oversaturated with images and I feel it is important to deeply understand how they colonize our vision and influence how we see the worlds around and within us.

But what does it mean to try to make poetic “slow work” for white box spaces at a time when we need immediate and direct action? I feel ambivalent. But instead of feeling that I need to choose one over the other, I am leaning into both. I think it is crucial right now to reimagine, organize, and build new systems based on equity and justice, in a pragmatic, on the ground, real-world way. So, I have been trying my best, in big ways and small, to affect every space I have access to and hold power. While, in parallel, I feel it is also important to zoom out, slow down, reflect, and continue my mixed media and video work interrogating the subterranean uses of images and how they manufacture consent and colonize vision.

I was a rebellious student, and the teachers who had the greatest impact on me were the ones who taught me to trust myself, to take risks, to make lots of mistakes, and to learn from them—but, most importantly, how to think critically and develop my own idiosyncratic creative process. As a teacher now, I endeavor to do the same for my students.

For the most part, I don’t tell students what to think. I want them to actively engage in the world, while sharpening their critical thinking skills. To move beyond binary polemics and become more comfortable with complexity. To hold multiple points of view at once, while still making proactive decisions and developing their creative voices. My role as a teacher hasn’t fundamentally changed. But, perhaps the call to action is louder now.

Artists have a unique inside-outside status in our society that allows them to shape-shift as they move in and out of different systems. This makes artists ideally positioned to reimagine and implement a new order, as conduits, seers, and social sculptors in the days ahead.