

Annotation

Conditional Design Workbook(Required)

Maurer, Luna

In *Conditional Design*, Luna Maurer and her collaborators identify a ghost haunting any rule-based system: "the specter of a totalizing, closed, and rationalized system." (Maurer et al., 2018, p.3). Reflecting on my own system (the website), I recognise that the same specter lingers within it, quietly narrowing the range of possibilities that translation might otherwise hold. This became particularly evident during the second week of experimentation. When I attempted to translate the act of looking at a painting into two musical versions, one based on human observation and the other on machine observation, the resulting sounds were nearly indistinguishable from one another. This outcome prompted me to reconsider my approach after receiving feedback: had I become too preoccupied with differentiating between the two kinds of observers, to the point of imposing a rationalized framework onto a process of translation that it did not suit? This insistence on systematization and quantifiability had, in effect, closed off the more varied and open-ended possibilities that the project might have otherwise explored.

In response to this reflection, during the third week I shifted direction, turning to a webcam as a means of capturing human looking, in search of a method more attuned to bodily experience and open to contingency.

The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects(Required)

Marshall McLuhan

McLuhan's central argument that "the medium is the message" prompted me to reconsider the process of translation at the heart of this project. In the second week, I attempted to translate data extracted from a painting (including pixels, the angles of lines, and so on) into two pieces of music, each following the viewing sequence of a different "observer." However, when visual sequence was converted into a purely auditory form, the sense of sequence itself became weakened. Music conveys information through auditory rhythm, but this logic does not naturally carry the content of visual order. The medium's own mode of perception had already begun to quietly rewrite the message.

This led me to introduce animation. Moving image conveys information through visual rhythm, which is structurally analogous to the auditory rhythm of music. When the two are combined, visual and auditory rhythm lock onto each other, allowing the fixed, line-by-line "atmosphere" of the machine scanning pixels to

be conveyed with greater precision. The timing of each line's appearance, its trajectory, and the way sound enters together form an inescapable temporal structure, within which the viewer can only perceive the image on predetermined terms. This is precisely what McLuhan means: the medium is not a neutral container; it participates in and shapes the message itself. And when two media are layered together, their shared mode of perception makes the transmission of information more exact, not less.

Illuminations(Required)

Walter Benjamin

Benjamin argues in *Illuminations* that mechanical reproduction strips the artwork of its aura — it is no longer encountered as a singular object, but consumed through a structure shaped by the machine. This sparked my desire to create the machine version of this music. Kandinsky's musical logic was built upon a human way of seeing, but if that way of seeing is no longer stable, if our attention is increasingly guided and reshaped by algorithms and new media, then what kind of observer does Kandinsky's "musical ghost" now rest upon? And if our current way of looking has already been conditioned by new media, how different is it, really, from the mechanical scan of a machine?

Ways of Seeing(Required)

John Berger

Berger argues in *Ways of Seeing* that when the presentation of an observed object changes, the perception of the observer changes with it (Berger, 1972). This project inverts that proposition: when the observer itself undergoes a fundamental change, what happens to the object being looked at?

With this question in mind, I brought the machine into the position of observer. By translating a painting through the machine's reading logic, I wanted to know: what does the machine's perception sound like when rendered as rhythm and sequence? How does it differ from the rhythm produced by a human looking at the same painting? And how do these two fundamentally different modes of observation begin to shape new ways of seeing?

The Audible Past

Jonathan Sterne

In the process of iterating through different media, I moved through several stages — animation, website — before starting to think about how to let the two pieces of music stand on their own. My initial instinct was to release them as two digital albums on Spotify. But after reading Jonathan Sterne's work on the media of sound transmission, I changed direction.

Sterne's book was written before algorithm-based music platforms became dominant, so the media he discusses feel comparatively traditional by today's standards. But that's precisely what drew me to them. What I'm translating in this project is the act of looking at a painting – something fluid, subjective, and unrepeatable. That act shouldn't be categorised, recommended, or personalised by an algorithm. Spotify would do all of those things. So I began to feel that a container that does nothing was actually more appropriate – one that simply holds the translation, without doing anything to it.

Point and Line to Plane

Wassily Kandinsky

Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane* is the theoretical foundation of this experiment. His argument that visual elements carry inherent sonic properties gave me the framework for mapping each element to an instrument – planes to synthesizer, lines to electronic strings, and the angle of diagonal lines mapped onto a continuous pitch bend. But more importantly, his idea that a composition feels like music because of the way human eyes move through it made me realise that the time structure of a painting is inseparable from who is looking at it. This is what pushed me to ask the central question of this project: what happens when the observer is a machine?

Beyond the image on visual culture in the twenty-first century

Alessandro Sbordoni

Alessandro Sbordoni uses the *Mona Lisa* to discuss how images become “devalued” once machines become new observers (Sbordoni, 2021, p.42). Within the context of machine vision, images are no longer understood through their historical or artistic meaning, but are instead broken down into recognizable and computable symbols and data. Even absurd recognition results – such as the incorrect labels from my previous project – still reveal how machines reconstruct their own systems of viewing through algorithmic logic.

This led me to question how these “new observers” construct their own symbolic systems. I began with the most basic unit of the digital image: the pixel – a form of data that can be classified, calculated, circulated, and transmitted. Once an image is translated into data, it also enters the field of machine vision. This way of thinking later became the foundation for my translation of Wassily Kandinsky's paintings.

Eye movements and vision

Ared L. Yarbzls

In the second week of the experiment, I forced the machine's spatial reading order onto the human version by simply reversing the axes – using the image's x-axis as the time axis instead of the y-axis. The two pieces of music that resulted sounded remarkably similar. The approach appeared to be exploring the

difference between human and machine reading order, but it didn't actually reflect how humans look at a painting. It was a contrast that existed for the sake of contrast.

Reading Yarbus's research on eye movement made me realise how fundamentally wrong this setup was. It violated the way humans actually look at images – we don't scan linearly, we jump, we linger, we skip. So in the third week, I introduced a webcam to directly capture each viewer's individual looking path, rather than imposing a predetermined structure onto it.

Techniques of the Observer On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century

Jonathan Crary

Crary argues that the act of looking is historically constructed. People in the Renaissance, in the age of photography, in the age of cinema, in the age of the screen – they all see differently, because every era's technology reshapes how the observer is supposed to look. For me, this is less a direct methodology than a conceptual extension: if observers have been shaped by technology since the nineteenth century, where does that historical logic lead when the observer itself becomes a machine? And what does the observed object become? I focused these questions on the specific act of looking at a painting, and by changing who the observer is, attempted to translate the result of that looking – the observer's perception of the painting – into music.

Ghost in the Machine Distributing Subjectivity

Andrew Blauvelt

This reference helped me break out of a loop I had fallen into during the first week. I had been reading extensively about how machines and humans see differently, and found that much had already been written on the subject. But when I returned to my own studio practice, I began to feel that what I was making could not truly respond to the phenomena these texts described, and I found myself stuck.

Andrew Blauvelt reframes what it means for a designer to solve a problem. He argues that building a precise system, redefining the problem, and allowing it to surface and become visible is itself a form of problem-solving. Reading his redefinition of what design and art can do made me realise that I didn't need to resolve the problem. So I began constructing a careful system to give form to the territory I was curious about, and to ask questions of it.

A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern(Mis-)Recognition

Hito Steyerl

This essay discusses how in the machine-dominated visual era, the act of observing has become quantified – vision itself is no longer the core, replaced instead by data filtering, decoding, and detection. This idea allowed me to move from the traditional ways of seeing discussed in my earlier references toward the new observational logic shaped by machines, and to attempt to translate that logic into forms humans can perceive: music for the auditory, animation and website for moving image, and score for static visual. But these translations did not make the machine's way of seeing more legible. If anything, they made it more invisible – absorbed into the sensory forms we already take for granted, to the point where we barely notice it is there.

A Thing Like You and Me

Hito Steyerl

Before encountering Steyerl's writing, I understood images primarily as visual objects, things that exist to be looked at. Her discussion of "a thing" made me realise that the electronic image is fundamentally a form of data: compressible, encodable, reproducible, and migratable, circulating freely across different media and systems. This recognition fundamentally changed the way I understood my project. Once Kandinsky's painting was converted into a machine-readable structure, it was no longer simply a painting, but a database open to analysis, translation, and recombination. It was this understanding that led me to attempt translating the graphic elements of the painting into musical notes, converting the vertical structure of the image into a timeline, and reorganising its spatial relationships into a scored sequence. Steyerl's framework provided a theoretical basis for these experiments: the image, understood as data, carries an inherent potential to migrate across media.

Text Analysis

Invisible Images (Your Pictures Are Looking at You)

By Trevor Paglen

This essay centres on a question: when images no longer exist primarily for human eyes, how can we use images as a form of resistance? In the opening section, Paglen makes this point through a simple but striking example. When a person picks up a phone to take a photo, they need a screen to see the image – but the machine doesn't. The moment the camera captures the image, it is already translated into data readable by the machine. In this sense, humans have begun to lose authority over the act of seeing (Paglen, 2016). In the final section, Paglen reflects on how visual culture has historically been used as a tool for resistance – to protect rights, to speak to social justice, to make re-representation a weapon. But all of those strategies assumed one thing: that images were made primarily for people. Now, with machines in the picture, images circulate between systems without human awareness (Paglen, 2016). They have become something that looks back – analysing, classifying, and surveilling us. Images are no longer passively observed. They actively participate in reality, shape behaviour, and structure power relations. Paglen's proposed response to this feels almost resigned: to create spaces of "inefficiency," areas of life removed from market logic and political capture – safe houses in the digitally invisible world. Many of the examples in this essay reshaped the way I understand visual culture in the digital age. For example, in the essay, he mentioned that a company named Vigilant Solutions and their ALPR system – an automated licence plate recognition database that tracks the movement of vast numbers of people. When a government hands over a list of people with unpaid fines, police cars equipped with the system can automatically locate them. The moment a plate is scanned, officers can pull the vehicle over immediately, and the person is given a choice: pay on the spot or be arrested. On top of that, a 25% processing fee goes directly to the company. The system presents itself as objective, automated, free from human bias – but what it actually encodes is government power, police surveillance, corporate profit, and the systematic targeting of vulnerable people. The machine is not neutral. It is a very efficient vessel for existing structures of control. (Paglen, 2016)

And I think the questions it raises apply directly to graphic design. Every major design movement – Modernism, Swiss Style, Postmodernism – was made for a human audience. Now that there is a new kind of audience, I find myself asking: could graphic design become complicit in building a machine-readable image system that appears neutral but is in fact deeply hierarchical? And if so, what does it mean to design against that – to make something that cannot be entered by the machine?

In my project, I translated a painting into music using the machine's own reading logic. In some ways, this is a simulation of how the machine reorganises its perception of the world through images. In that translation process, the machine ignores the sonic imagination of each element, ignores the mood produced by the overall composition, and ignores everything this painting represents – abstraction, spirituality, emotion, modernist history. It only reads, and can only read, pixel trajectories. This aligns precisely with what Paglen describes: "this idea of ambiguity, a cornerstone of semiotic theory from

Saussure through Derrida, simply ceases to exist on the plane of quantified machine-machine seeing."
(Paglen, 2016)

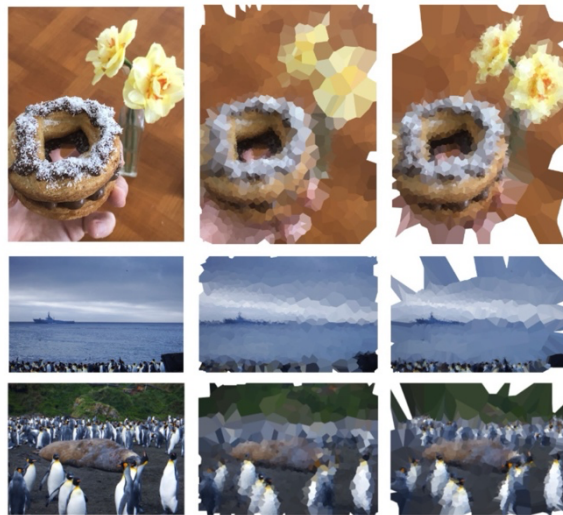
The next direction for this project is to bring that overflow into visibility – the ambiguity, emotion, and symbolism that the machine systematically discards. If Paglen's safe house is a space the machine cannot enter, then the question I want to ask as a designer is this: can I use image, sound, and the choice of medium to build that space? Not to fight the machine's logic, but to construct a safe house from the very things the machine has erased.

Practice Analysis

Diptychs of Human and Machine Perceptions

By Vivien Cabannes, Thomas Kerdreux and Louis Thiry

This work compares what humans and machines focus on when looking at the same image. The authors took an original image and produced two versions from it: one based on machine vision, one based on human vision. On the left is the original image. In the middle is the machine's version — a saliency map, which visualises which regions the neural network considers most important when processing the image. On the right is the human version, generated by tracking the eye movements of multiple viewers and turning the areas where people looked most frequently into a heatmap overlaid on the original. So the "human version" is not how one person looked at the image — it is an aggregate of many people's gaze data, showing where people collectively tended to look.



At its core, the aim is to use visual art to reveal the differences between human and machine perception. But for me, it also resonates strongly with Hito Steyerl's concept of the "mean image." The collective human gaze and the machine's identified "important regions" turn out to be surprisingly similar — and yet the machine's version is cruder and less nuanced than the path drawn by human eyes. This exposes a fundamental limitation of machine vision: what the machine produces is not a picture of a penguin, but a cluster of pixels that best matches the label "penguin" in its training database. It doesn't see an animal. It finds a statistical average.

Even without sophisticated graphic design, I think this work succeeds as a design reference — because it builds a clear and precise system that makes an abstract phenomenon visible. Graphic designers are often described as "problem solvers," but that definition tends to imply giving answers and making problems disappear. What this work does instead is make the problem visible. And I think that is equally valid as a form of design thinking.

What I find particularly useful is the structural logic behind it. The authors set up a reasonable tool, chose comparable objects, and established a set of rules. What followed was a repeatable process – producing pair after pair of images – and the accumulation of that process itself becomes the output that frames the phenomenon of the "mean image." This encouraged me to think about designing a system with similarly precise rules, where the process of repeating that system is itself what surfaces the question. It also shaped the way I think about the choice of container. These images exist primarily as figures inside an academic paper. That context makes the argument clear and allows the details of the experiment to be understood precisely – but it also limits the reach of the work. Kept in a supporting role, they could have stood on their own. If they had been brought together into a standalone publication, their impact and circulation could have been much greater. This made me think more carefully about my own project. Rather than deciding on a single format early on, I tried presenting the same experiment through different containers – animation, website, score, CD – in order to find the one that best allows the core question to be felt, not just understood. Because the medium is not just a delivery tool. It is part of the argument itself.

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