Title
No in Disguise: Algorithmically Targeted Conversations about Sexual Consent

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/18j186bw

Author
Boas, Simon

Publication Date
2018

License
CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
No in Disguise
Algorithmically Targeted Conversations about Sexual Consent

A thesis paper submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

in

Digital Arts and New Media

by

Simon Boas

June 2018
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents ........................................................................................................ iii
List of Figures .............................................................................................................. iv
Abstract ...................................................................................................................... v
Dedication ................................................................................................................... vi
Acknowledgements ...................................................................................................... vii

Introduction ................................................................................................................ 1

Context ....................................................................................................................... 5
  Data as Reductive Representation ......................................................................... 5
  Information Asymmetry ......................................................................................... 7
  Implications of Reductive Representation .............................................................. 10
  Control and Intent ................................................................................................. 11
  User Recourse ....................................................................................................... 14

Aesthetic Context ....................................................................................................... 16
  Kyriaki Goni: Deletion Process_Only you can see my history .................................. 16
  Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Level of Confidence ......................................................... 19
  Paolo Cirio: Obscurity ............................................................................................ 20
  Angela Washko: The Council on Gender Sensitivity and Behavioral Awareness in World of Warcraft ................................................................. 22
  Chris Johnson, Hank Willis Thomas, Bayete Ross Smith, Kamal Sinclair: Question Bridge: Black Males ................................................................. 25
  Eva and Franco Mattes: Darko Maver ...................................................................... 27

Overview of the Thesis Artwork ................................................................................ 30
  Source Material ...................................................................................................... 31
  Presenting Online Conversations for Offline Impact ................................................. 39
  Intended Audience ................................................................................................. 49
  Outcomes .............................................................................................................. 50

Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 52

Bibliography ............................................................................................................... 55
LIST OF FIGURES

FIG. 1: Emily’s profile, 2018, OkCupid.com screenshot.............................................40

FIG. 2: OkCupid Match Question about consent, 2018, OkCupid.com screenshot...........41

FIG. 3: Programmatically combined facial features, 2018, video still.........................49

FIG. 4: No in Disguise, 2018, interactive multimedia installation..............................51

FIG. 5: No in Disguise installation: Interactive iPod app, 2018 native iOS app............54

FIG. 6: No in Disguise installation: “NO MEANS NO” sign, 2018, neon-LED sign........56
ABSTRACT

No in Disguise

Simon Boas

As the distinction between our online and offline selves continues to collapse thanks to the permeation of networked digital services into nearly every aspect of our lives, how we are able to express ourselves in digital space holds direct consequence for the world we experience offline. The way sexual relationships and power are pre-structured in online dating apps provides a focused example. This paper describes the author’s artwork No in Disguise, an interactive multimedia installation that features procedurally generated video of men reading transcripts of conversations the author’s collaborator, Kris Blackmore, held with male dating app users who expressed harmful attitudes toward women in their profiles. The work responds to arguments that claim that the harassment of women is merely the product of a deviant male minority. The author wrote software that deconstructs and randomly recombines the video of the readers’ facial features as they read, creating an endless procession of unfamiliar faces that look like every man and no man in particular. The installation also features video of the readers responding to the statements they read as well as an iOS app on several iPods through which visitors may read the original conversation transcripts. In this paper the author discusses his motivation, gives context for the project, and describes the decisions made at each step of designing the installation while integrating a discussion about the cultural narratives of gender, power, and permissions that social media platforms reflect and reinforce.
DEDICATION

To my partner and collaborator Kris Blackmore, without whom this project could not exist.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my committee chair, Warren Sack, for helping me articulate and weave together the nebula of ideas that ultimately formed this project. To the other members of my committee, I am grateful for your guidance, for your support, and for the knowledge you’ve shared with me. Thank you to Sharon Daniel for helping me keep this project’s message central to its presentation and for never letting me settle too deeply into comfort while developing the work. Thank you to Ed Shanken for introducing me to so many inspiring artists and helping me contextualize my work. Thank you to Dee Hibbert-Jones for encouraging me to project my ideas beyond my immediate surroundings and for advocating my work. Thank you to Suresh Lodha for helping me learn the skills necessary to create this project. Though not on my committee, I want to thank Soraya Murray for introducing me to many of the thinkers featured in this paper.

Thanks also to Kristin Grace Erickson and Steve Gerlach for focusing your technical wizardry onto this project to make its execution and exhibition a reality. To John Weber for coordinating a stunning MFA show. To Kathleen Deck for building a custom display stand for the gallery installation in the 11th hour. To Aphid Stern for your sustained energy and enthusiasm in this work. To my lifelong friend Keith McGraw for surreptitiously traveling to Santa Cruz to see (and help troubleshoot) the project I’d been trying to describe to you for years.

To my sister Erica Boas for inspiring me with your research into the varied experiences of sexual consent among college students and for all the illuminating conversations we’ve had on the topic.

To my parents for leading by example and for always supporting me in every moment of my life.

And to my partner Kris Blackmore for wanting to work so closely with me to create something that will hopefully make a difference in an issue about which we both care deeply. I look forward to everything we have yet to make together.
Introduction

The dating website and mobile app OkCupid features hundreds of questions that users may answer with the hope of the site’s algorithms returning potential dates that are highly compatible with the user. The subject matter of the questions ranges from the innocuous (“Do you like scary movies?”) to deeply personal questions about sex (“Do you enjoy meaningless sex?”).¹ One of the sex-related questions has a particularly limited set of answer choices. The user is prompted with the statement “No means NO!” and presented with the following answer choices: A) “Always. Period.” B) “Mostly, occasionally it’s really a Yes in disguise.” C) “A No is just a Yes that needs a little convincing!” D) “Never, they all want me. They just don’t know it.”

Perhaps the OkCupid staff members responsible for writing these “Match Questions” wrote this one to reflect what they perceived as contemporary cultural attitudes toward sexual consent, but the answer options make it apparent how personal representations in online data reduce a complex gradient of human views and experiences to a relatively small number of discrete categories. The gray area that exists between each of those answers is lost, and everything beyond each end of the spectrum is obliterated. Yet all of the people using OkCupid who wish to have their views considered in their algorithmically generated profile matches must choose from one of the four provided answers. When the individual’s views on sexual consent do

not fit within the limited range of answer choices online, how does this affect their views and actions offline?

As users of networked devices and services, we voluntarily externalize a great amount of our personalities as data. Our attributes, opinions, and preferences become itemized online, rendered components of our consumer profiles by the companies that provide the digital platforms for our social interactions. As in the example of the OkCupid Match Question above, all these personality components are forced into an engineered data structure with little room for messy, human interstitial information. And as the distinction between our online and offline selves continues to collapse thanks to the permeation of networked digital services into nearly every aspect of our lives, the ways in which we are able to express ourselves in digital space holds direct consequence for the world we experience offline. Social media has been the public stage on which impactful social movements like #MeToo have pushed conversations about sexual violence into the mainstream. At the same time, recent global political events like the Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. presidential election, in which a political consulting firm manipulated voting results by using the Facebook profile data of millions of people to selectively target them with political advertisements, have begun to bring the power of social media data—and its abuse—into the public consciousness. It has therefore become paramount to study and challenge the hegemonic power structures that tech companies replicate in the online platforms for social interaction that they create.
Much of my work as an artist explores how our willingness to forfeit agency over our digital selves shapes the way we experience the world around us. The way sexual relationships and power are pre-structured in dating apps provides a particularly focused example. The interactive multimedia installation that I co-created with artist and designer Kris Blackmore titled *No in Disguise* takes a close look at OkCupid Match Questions about sexual consent as a way to question the cultural narratives about gender, power, and permissions that social media platforms reflect and reinforce.

While exploring the data publicly available on OkCupid, we wondered why some men chose to answer the questions about sexual consent the way they did. Were they really comfortable publicly stating that they thought it was acceptable to pressure people to have sex with them? Or were they trying to say something that was difficult to represent in the provided multiple-choice answers? Perhaps their chosen answers reflected a deeply ingrained form of sexual entitlement that was subtler than the available answers could express. Either way, this gave us an entry point to discuss with these individuals sexual politics that are underexamined and so often go unchallenged. My MFA thesis project thus became an effort to use technology to facilitate conversations about consent that usually don’t happen until it is too late—when someone’s personal boundaries have already been, or are about to be, crossed.

*No in Disguise* repurposes OkCupid’s data structures to pinpoint users who have expressed regressive views on consent in their Match Questions so that we can challenge those views in direct conversations with those users. The project uses the
The reductive nature of OkCupid’s user data as a relief map of personal values to find people with whom to conduct difficult conversations—conversations that are often dismissed or lack nuance when they happen offline. These conversations became source material for a series of video re-enactments and interviews with male volunteers to spark broader discussions about the role of masculinity in our culture. We then presented these videos to the public in a multimedia installation to highlight the important conversations we struggle to have in our culture as well as the difficulty of having those conversations. The faces in the video are sliced up and randomly recombined into a patchwork of masculine features to subvert the notion that these views belong to the individuals who said them more than they belong to the broader cultural context in which they originated.

The data structures created by tech companies invisibly shape our world, and No in Disguise challenges their authority to do so. Rather than a “No” sometimes being “a Yes in disguise,” as the OkCupid Match Question suggests, the project’s title argues that a “Yes” is more often really a “No” in disguise. This inversion questions the image of reality that OkCupid perpetuates.

Before going deeper into description of the project, I will provide some context on the subjects mentioned above.
Context

Data as Reductive Representation

As it applies to network technologies, data is mathematical. Data is limited by the technology that stores it as strings, numbers, Boolean values, zeroes and ones in its most elementary form. Data is limited by its structure. When users create and add information to their social networking profiles, they are translating parts of themselves into data. They do this by writing in text fields with limited character counts, uploading a quota of photos, creating visual avatars, and clicking a series of buttons. The data in these profiles is then stored in the website’s private database. Relevant parts of a user’s data are called and displayed whenever another user (or advertiser) wishes to interact with that person. The initial person becomes a network of objects in the data structure that the person requesting the data interprets. A user’s social networking profile looks complete within the context of the website, but it is limited to the data structure established by the website’s designers. Users, according to D. Fox Harrell, are “forced to fit” their information “into predetermined data structures and interfaces.”¹ Put simply, the platform engineers the representation of the user.

This user data can be highly illustrative. A 2013 study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* showed that “easily accessible digital records of behavior, Facebook likes, can be used to automatically and accurately predict a range of highly sensitive personal attributes including: sexual...

orientation, ethnicity, religious and political views, personality traits, intelligence” and more.\(^3\) But, as Harrell explained in a 2015 lecture at Amherst College, the data structures that represent users online lack the necessary nuance to effectively represent a person. In the real world, he said,

> you can’t just pin people down and say, you are in this specific category based on this information about you. In the digital world, that’s actually built into these systems. … These data structures are very limited. They are represented in a very simple way. You wouldn’t imagine you can fully determine someone in the real world by saying, you have this set of 10 characteristics, therefore I know your identity.\(^4\)

The effects of these limited structures for digital representations can be damaging when we consider how they reflect identity back onto the user. This is not necessarily the case; it depends on how those who engineer the “social infrastructures of classification,” as Harrell calls them, deploy them. Much of Harrell’s work researches ways these classification infrastructures might “capture the dynamic, constructive, and performed or enacted models” of identity we encounter around us every day, but he warns that some of them only replicate and reinforce social prejudice.\(^5\) More than a mere reflection of the world around them, social media platforms’ underlying user data structures actually normalize and codify reductive personal representations in the offline world.

---


Information Asymmetry

While the data structures through which users can represent themselves to each other online are limited, the total amount of data collected on each user is vast. The difference between these two types of data-driven representations is that the former is visible to users and the latter is not. The latter is visible only to the companies that engineer social networking platforms, collect user data, analyze and broker that data, or advertise to users. This disparity in information access, known as information asymmetry, means that the factors that generate the world users experience online are largely opaque to those users. After reducing their identities to fit into predetermined data structures, social networking and advertising companies use personal data to which users have no access to further engineer each user’s online world through targeted advertising, algorithmically ranked news feeds and search results.

When an opaque algorithm personalizes the information that a user sees online, the omission of information has the power to shape the offline world. Google search engine users rarely visit links that do not appear on the first page of search results. Jon Ronson’s nonfiction book So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed describes how a woman restored her online reputation by paying a public relations

---


company to publish a stream of vapid blog posts under her name to bury negative information about her past the first page of Google search results. A 2015 study concluded that slight changes in search rankings can shift undecided voter preferences without voter awareness of the manipulation.

It is not just selective search results that influence social media users’ experience of the world. In January 2012, a Facebook data scientist and two researchers from Cornell University studied whether emotional states could be transferred among Facebook users by “reducing the amount of emotional content in the News Feed.” The researchers found that when they manipulated users’ personalized News Feeds to show fewer positive emotional expressions from other users, “people produced fewer positive posts and more negative posts; when negative expressions were reduced, the opposite pattern occurred.”

There was a strong public backlash after the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences published the study in 2014, largely because the researchers did not obtain explicit consent from their subjects or give them the opportunity to opt out of the study. In response, study co-researcher and Facebook data scientist Adam Kramer posted the following on his Facebook page:

The reason we did this research is because we care about the emotional impact of Facebook and the people that use our product. We felt that it was important to investigate the common worry that seeing friends post positive content leads to people feeling negative or left out. At the same time, we were concerned that exposure to friends' negativity might lead people to avoid visiting Facebook.\textsuperscript{11}

The last line of Kramer’s response elucidates a simplified explanation of why companies would want to manipulate and filter emotional expression on the social networking platforms they provide: They want to create an attractive environment that entices people to keep using their products and spend as much time doing so as possible, thereby generating more valuable data on their users and creating more opportunities for advertisers to message users and more opportunities for users to buy. In pursuit of maintaining this attractive environment, the platform’s architects can regulate any negative emotional data—depression, discontent, dissent, to name a few—that users generate. This has grave implications for political discourse\textsuperscript{12} and elections,\textsuperscript{13} but the danger extends to the inner lives of individual users and to the ways those individuals think, feel and see themselves.

Regardless of whether we deem Facebook’s research methods acceptable, the study shows the potential impact of social media data. When we share information about ourselves with a social networking platform, we relinquish control over how


that information will be used. This study shows that it has uses beyond simply serving us more personalized advertisements. Rather than abusing user data to surreptitiously make digital products more profitable or to influence elections, can we use the power of this user data to cut through layers of social media noise and talk to people directly about sensitive social issues?

**Implications of Reductive Representation**

The limited data structures available to social networking platform users for self-representation and the invisible corporate censorship of user-generated expression combine to create what techno-sociologist Zeynep Tufekci calls “an environment that nudges you imperceptibly.”\(^\text{14}\) She claims that the method for shaping perceptions illustrated in the Facebook emotional contagion tests creates an environment in which “we are effectively micro-nudged into “desired behavior” as a means of societal control. “Seduction, rather than fear and coercion are the currency,” she says, “and as such, they are a lot more effective.” Tufekci argues that people have become generally wary of overt advertisements and no longer respond to them effectively, thus necessitating the invisible back-end manipulations that create experiences and environments that draw in and hold on to user attention. While the environment “nudges” the user into desired behavioral patterns, the long-term effect of this model on a vast user base like that of Facebook or Instagram is that users nudge themselves and each other into similar behavior. This normative behavior

affects the way users represent themselves online. The results of the Cornell Facebook study provide evidence that social media users only share online the parts of their lives that they see others sharing. Facebook need not hide negative user content when users do not post it for fear of not socially integrating with their peers. Self-expression online is first policed by the platform’s architects, then by the social group and finally by the individual users themselves. The effects of this can be seen in a typical Instagram feed: the original images are pictures of landscapes, pictures of food, pictures of attractive living spaces, pictures of smiling people in uniform poses, all visually normalized by Instagram’s photo filters.\footnote{15}

\textit{Control and Intent}

There are two main reasons why social networking companies provide such limited options for self-expression and self-identification to their users. First, the company deliberately engineers its users to increase their usage of the company’s products as discussed above. Second, unintentionally implemented control results from a homogenous group of founders and engineers making products they think represent the world (or at least enough of it to turn a profit) but in effect only represent their own limited viewpoints.\footnote{16}

\footnote{15. “Instagram,” Instagram, accessed December 11, 2016, https://instagram.com/. The images on the website’s landing page invites prospective users to share precisely the types of photos discussed here.}

Langdon Winner describes technologies as “ways of building order in our world.” He continues, “In the processes by which structuring decisions are made, different people are differently situated and possess unequal degrees of power as well as unequal levels of awareness.” This is to say that not all models of control are deliberately imposed; power asymmetries can arise from social myopia in platform design. As Winner explains, “In such cases it is neither correct nor insightful to say, ‘Someone intended to do somebody else harm.’ Rather, one must say that the technological deck has been stacked long in advance to favor certain social interests, and that some people were bound to receive a better hand than others.”

Returning to the OkCupid example, it is difficult to speculate about why 75 percent of the answer options to a question about sexual consent state that “no” does not always mean “no.” But perhaps the “About Us” page on the OkCupid website offers some insight: The company’s four founders are all men. At the end of 2016, the company claimed 50 staff members, 15 of whom were women. Of those 15, there was only one software engineer and one executive (Director of Customer Support). There were no women product designers on the team. OkCupid has since diversified its staff, but possible relics of the company’s male-dominated origins remain in places like its collection of Match Questions.


Regardless of a company’s motivation for maintaining information asymmetry and control over its users, profit-driven interests reinforce these structures of control. Even people who are aware of the damaging nature of online social networking platforms continue to use them because they offer unparalleled convenience of communication. Convenience is the service for which users passively sell their personal data and thereby allow their identities to be reduced to data structures. The promise of “enhanced user experience” allows the information asymmetry between companies and users to grow with limited resistance. Rita Raley explains in her essay “Dataveillance and Countervailance” that “there seems to have been a general acquiescence to the notion that the distinctions between private and public and personal and nonpersonal when it comes to data are at best tenuous and that it is practically and economically in our interest to regard them as such.” OkCupid asks people who use it to fill out a profile form and answer quizzes in order to meet people with whom they may be romantically compatible. This value proposition is apparently enough to encourage users to share deeply personal information that the website’s proprietors may then analyze and sell. Regardless of how the company uses the data, all the information users share within the online dating platform becomes accessible to anybody with an internet connection.

User Recourse

So, what recourse do people who use social media have? Hito Steyerl calls digital images “dangerous devices of capture: of time, affect, productive forces, and subjectivity. … [T]hey can trap you in hardware monopolies and conversion conundrums, and, moreover, once these images are online they will never be deleted again.” She argues that people have begun to avoid pictorial representation altogether as a response to the unrealistic standards established by mainstream media and the “mutual mass surveillance” of social media. “The more people are represented,” she says, “the less is left of them in reality.”

But is it possible for people to withdraw from their reductive representations as data? Raley argues that it is not; that people are already too entangled in various systems to escape. The best people can do is critique from within those systems:

Artists who appropriate dataveillance techniques and tools as a medium for creative production inform, enlighten, and help us to imagine otherwise by refusing the fantasy of exodus, a withdrawal from a given political, economic, or cultural system predicated on the notion that there is a neutral external vantage point from which one can begin the work of critical assessment.

On the other side of the control model, Harrell calls for responsibility in technology design. “Technologists,” he says, must “move beyond issues of utilitarian and productivity-oriented applications and to think about issues such as social identity,


22. Raley, “Dataveillance and Countervailance.”
power relationships, and political configurations.”

But the companies that provide social networking websites need some motivation, likely financial or political, to take on that responsibility. OkCupid is a successful dating site; the company appears to have little impetus to change its product thanks to the site’s 2.88 million monthly active users. What impetus, then, would incite the company’s executives and designers to change some of the inherently misogynistic aspects of their platform?

In No in Disguise, Blackmore and I asked men on OkCupid if their views aligned with those they had expressed in their profiles. This often precipitated a discussion about the shortcomings and complexity of the Match Questions we had asked them about, followed by a deeper discussion of their personal views. We then had the rare opportunity to dissect and directly challenge their views in a constructive manner. In this way the project allowed us to critique a data structure that reduces complex issues to a multiple-choice question from within while repurposing that system to advocate for positive social change on an individual level.

---


Aesthetic Context

This section describes various works that explore the meaning of being represented by data, information asymmetry, and ways to critique existing hegemonic systems and repurpose them for social good.

Kyriaki Goni: Deletion Process _Only you can see my history

Kyriaki Goni’s Deletion Process _Only you can see my history (2016) is an interactive multimedia art installation that presents the artist’s eight-year personal Google search history as a grid of white squares on a webpage. Each square represents one of Goni’s 10,650 search terms, and viewers may read each search term and choose to delete it, turning the square black. When a term is deleted, a connected printer prints out the search term on a small piece of paper. When all the terms have been deleted, the web page is completely black, and the only remnant of the search terms is in the pile of printouts that have accumulated on the gallery floor. The growing physical mass of printed search terms becomes a sculpture that gives material presence to the artist’s intangible, inadvertent personal history of the past eight years, now made public. In the artist’s words, the project investigates “our digital culture and our potential to reclaim ownership and control of our digital lives.”

25 This work visualizes the relationship between the online and offline, between the digital and the material worlds. It physically manifests one limited—yet expansive—slice of one digital body, suggesting the weight and consequence that

lurks behind the seemingly impossible amount of data that tech companies collect from us.

Like No in Disguise, Goni’s Deletion Process transmutes online user data into a form that feels more real to the audience. While my thesis project does not make OkCupid user data into a physically tangible sculpture like Goni’s work, it does give it a human voice for the audience to hear. Rather than only presenting the misogynistic statements that Blackmore and I encountered online as instant message or social media profile text, in our installation we paired the text with video and audio of people reading the text to make manifest the offline implications of the statements. I liken working with the volunteer re-enactors to make video recordings of them reading our conversations with real people on OkCupid to Goni’s printing search terms on paper. Both processes put seemingly ephemeral digital data into a new form that carries more emotional weight for the audience. However, No in Disguise brings in an additional audience: The volunteer readers hear and feel themselves reading someone else’s words, which leads them to address their own connection to, or distance from, the words they read. This can be seen and heard in the personal discussions I held with the volunteers after they finished reading, the video recordings of which are presented to the installation’s visitors alongside the re-enacted message readings in an effort to encourage them to consider their own connections to the subject.

In Deletion Process, Goni puts her personal information in a form that reaches over the line of asymmetry so that the audience may visualize its vastness. The
amount of data is not unique to the artist; the search history in this installation could belong to anyone. This data is publicly available, but the sheer volume that could be collected from each user is difficult for an individual to filter through and make sense of. The overwhelming majority of the search terms featured in Goni’s project are mundane phrases that tell us little about the person who initially typed them into Google. There may be revealing personal information buried among all those terms. Additionally, the entirety of the search term corpus may not accurately describe the person who wrote it. Either way, the audience’s experience of her search terms is beyond the artist’s control. Goni has thus effectively visualized an important aspect of my thesis project: I programmatically captured and filtered vast amounts of strangers’ OkCupid data to focus on statements Blackmore and I deemed important to discuss with them. Through these discussions, the men we spoke to on OkCupid revealed that they do not place the same importance on the statements they have made about consent and sexual obligation that we do. To them, it seems, those statements have meanings that are largely divorced from our interpretation.

**Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Level of Confidence**

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s *Level of Confidence* (2015) commemorates the kidnapping of 43 students from a school in Mexico. The project manifests as an interactive video installation that uses a facial recognition camera to check if the viewer’s face matches any of the kidnapped students. When a visitor approaches a screen featuring the school portraits of the students, the screen displays a “level of
confidence” on how closely the visitor’s features match those of any of the missing students. The artist says that the audience will never see the piece make a positive match, “as we know that the students were likely murdered and burnt in a massacre where government, police forces and drug cartels were involved.” The project instead is meant to commemorate the students through an endless search that overlaps their images with the faces of the public witnesses to this artwork.26

Lozano-Hemmer’s project repurposes biometric surveillance algorithms that police and military forces usually deploy to search for suspects for more tender purposes—in this case, memorializing victims who will never be found, no matter how many faces the project’s camera and software analyzes. My thesis project takes a similar approach to commercial social networking services instead of military or police technologies. OkCupid collects data on its users in order to provide a service product to their users, to advertise to their users, to make money. No in Disguise appropriates the company’s amassed user data to show that there can be other, more socially beneficial uses for that data.

**Paolo Cirio: Obscurity**

In 2016, Paolo Cirio started a project titled *Obscurity* to clone for-profit mugshot websites and obfuscate the images and names contained therein. Because of these predatory websites, the booking photos of anyone who has been arrested usually appear on the first page of Google search results. *Obscurity* aims to protect people

from extortion through search rankings by surrounding the damaging information with noise, so that the embarrassing booking photos that appear in search results might be lost in the blurry images of various different faces that appear adjacent to them. Cirio described the work as “reporting on mass incarceration, [a] social experiment, and [a] performative hack,” and coupled it with a campaign to advocate “for the legal right to remove personal information from search engines by adapting the [European Union’s] Right to Be Forgotten for the United States.”

Cirio’s work is an example of what can be done when artists, to quote Raley again, “refuse the fantasy of exodus” from dataveillance. Obscurity goes beyond simply envisioning a world free from the invisible confines of information asymmetry and pushes back against the entities that seek to use people’s data to exploit them by appropriating, hacking, and weaponizing the very same data structures that those entities use to exploit.

Cirio presents Obscurity in the gallery as a series of digital prints of the programmatically blurred-out mug shots his project has generated. In doing so, the work highlights how personal an image of one’s face is. The software Cirio wrote for this project hides the faces of people captured by police booking photos to obscure this otherwise uncontrollable aspect of their online identities. It is important to note that these blurred photos still resemble faces, but their unique identities have been generalized. In doing so Cirio suggests that the ongoing stigma of being arrested and


photographed is a misfortune that can befall any American—not just those who have actually committed crimes. Indeed, the photos are of people who have been arrested, and not necessarily proven guilty and convicted. In *No in Disguise* we visually deconstructed and randomly reconfigured the faces of the male volunteers who read the OkCupid conversation transcripts to take the emphasis off the individual that the audience sees and hears speaking sexually entitled statements, thereby showing these attitudes as part of a broader masculine culture that all men must confront.

Cirio paired his artistic work *Obscurity* with an online movement he calls *Right to Remove*, which, through an anonymous online public forum, facilitates supportive discussions among people who are being extorted on mugshot websites.\(^{29}\) There is social stigma associated with being arrested. People who have been often do not discuss the experience with those close to them because of the fear that it will be assumed that they have done something wrong. Even if they do not actively participate in the *Right to Remove* forum discussions, there is value in seeing others describe their experiences. Encountering this discussion as a natural one between people in similar circumstances normalizes the experience, thereby dismantling the discomfort of talking about it. Similarly, the goal of *No in Disguise* is to help make personal discussions about masculinity among men a part of the everyday experience of living in our society.

---

29. Paolo Cirio, “For the Right to Remove Personal Information on Search Engines in the U.S. Campaign - #R2R,” Right to Remove, accessed June 1, 2018, [https://right2remove.us/](https://right2remove.us/).
Angela Washko: The Council on Gender Sensitivity and Behavioral Awareness in World of Warcraft

Angela Washko has performed various online interventions with members of internet communities. Her project *The Council on Gender Sensitivity and Behavioral Awareness in World of Warcraft* (2012) features the artist facilitating discussions on casual sexism, misogyny, and racism within the popular massively multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft* (WoW). The artist worked through her own existing WoW character, as she had already invested the considerable time to raise her avatar to a sufficiently high level for other players to take her seriously enough to spend time in-game engaging in challenging discussions with her. Washko presents these interventions as live performances or real-time video captures of the in-game instant message discussions among players to present the discussions in their original context. This context is important to the piece, as Washko states that she is “interested in the impulse of the player-base to create an oppressive, misogynistic space for women within a physical environment that is otherwise accessible and inviting.”

Washko operates within an established digital platform and community as a microcosm of the broader American culture. She describes WoW as “a much more varied community to engage with than she has in public space,” and as a result the discussions she facilitates within the game “create a much larger picture of the


American opinion of what women should and should not be today.” She demonstrates in this project both the value and pitfalls of taking seriously the things that people say on the internet, particularly in a context that is considered by outsiders emblematic of the fringes of mainstream society. While some of the statements players make during the discussions she facilitates may be shocking for outsiders to hear vocalized (or read on a screen), they nonetheless represent viewpoints that are not openly discussed in mainstream public forums, and therefore rarely meet intellectual resistance. To address such toxic attitudes, they must first be identified, located, and understood. *No in Disguise* has this goal in common with Washko’s work.

Washko facilitates discussions about progressive issues in sexual and gender politics with selectively targeted groups in deliberately limited contexts to highlight the absence of those discussions in the broader mainstream culture. This can be seen particularly well in her recent multimedia installation featuring a dating video game called *The Game: The Game* (2018), which appropriates the statements and images of prominent “seduction coaches” (pick-up artists). Players experience virtual renditions of these men pressuring the player to sleep with them. The repurposing of online media that presents sex as a commodity and the gender role reversal that men who play the game experience were strong conceptual inspirations for *No in Disguise*. The connection between the project extends to some of their guiding philosophies. After

interviewing a prominent pick-up artist over the course of a year, Washko crafted an interactive experience “to add levels of complexity to public conversations around both pick-up and feminism which have both found themselves most often presented in highly polarized, dichotomous positions in mainstream media.” Similarly, No in Disguise is, in part, a response to the black-and-white characterization of the perpetrators of sexual violence. Rather than allow the audience to ascribe the misogynistic statements recorded in the OkCupid interviews at the heart of the project to an individual or certain type of person, the video installation, with its randomized patchwork of masculine facial features and voices, argues that the mentalities that precipitate doing someone sexual harm are in fact deeply and delicately intertwined in our culture’s dominant definitions of masculinity. Instead of focusing on the individual, No in Disguise implores us to examine the culture that normalizes such violence, as well as our role within that culture.

While her work may seem to drift into the field of social science, Washko performs her interventions in an artistic capacity. I characterize her work as socially engaged creative research, and the way she presents this work in galleries as interactive multimedia installations and video games positions the work as art. The aesthetics of these installations serves the research. They are visually appealing and heavily influenced by contemporary digital interfaces, but I argue that the most important aspect of her artwork is the research these installations present. The installation Blackmore and I created for No in Disguise follows the same principles:

The installation promotes a familiar user experience to draw an audience into the research—especially when the research presented is on sensitive, uncomfortable issues like sexual assault.

Additionally, No in Disguise occupies a similar space in terms of seemingly scientific research, but our methods, like Washko’s, should not be viewed as scientific as they seek to provide a basis for nuanced discussion more than aim to present hard findings.

**Chris Johnson, Hank Willis Thomas, Bayete Ross Smith, Kamal Sinclair:**

*Question Bridge: Black Males*

*Question Bridge: Black Males* (2012) is a project that facilitates conversations about life in America among Black men of diverse backgrounds through video recordings. According to the artists, the project seeks to overcome negative cultural bias about Black men by exposing the public to “more complex, multi-faceted, and whole images and narratives of Black males” than is regularly seen in mainstream media. The initial project, which premiered as a five-screen video installation in the 2012 New Frontier at Sundance Film Festival, features over 1,600 video clips from more than 160 men. The men in the videos look at the camera and ask a question or answer a previous participant’s question. The creators then wove these clips together to present them simultaneously in the multi-channel video installation, with the subjects taking turns speaking to each other to simulate a dialogue. The effect was

that the subjects in the videos appeared to be speaking both to the viewer and to the other men displayed on the adjacent screens about topics that often go unspoken.

The presentation we designed for exhibiting the videos featured in *No in Disguise* draws inspiration from the *Question Bridge* installation’s aesthetic language. In our project, the video clips of men re-enacting the online conversations projected on one wall take turns speaking with clips of the re-enactors personally responding to the transcripts they read projected on an adjacent wall, looping through an endless dialogue of statement and response. *Question Bridge* and *No in Disguise* both simulate a nuanced discussion between men to show the positive potential such discussions have as well as highlight their absence from mainstream cultural discourse.

*Question Bridge*’s creators explain on the project’s website that using video clips recorded in isolation rather than gathering groups of their volunteer subjects together to hold direct conversations in the same room was a deliberate move to encourage more honest discussion. The artists say their format “reduced the stress of normal face-to-face conversations and makes people more comfortable with expressing their deeply held feelings on topics that divide, unite, and puzzle.”

In *No in Disguise*, we used a related approach of technologically displacing participants in a potentially volatile discussion to explore the gray areas in men’s understanding of sexual consent that are rarely vocalized and therefore remain undefined. Several of our project’s stages exhibit communication that would be unlikely under other

36. “Question Bridge.”
circumstances, from men revealing their views on sexual consent through the OkCupid website to the discussions I was able to have with the men who volunteered to re-enact the OkCupid conversations. In this way *Question Bridge* laid some of the groundwork for the discussions we held in *No in Disguise*.

**Eva and Franco Mattes: Darko Maver**

Eva and Franco Mattes create interdisciplinary artworks that explore the shifting ethics and cultural norms that have come with the ubiquity of the internet, often dealing with the themes of privacy and anonymity. Their work places the world in the context of the internet, rather than the internet in the context of the world. The duo operates various pseudonyms, including 0100101110101101.org and the names “Eva and Franco Mattes.” Many of their works are of particular relevance to my thesis project, but I will focus on their project *Darko Maver* (1998-1999).

Darko Maver is the name of a Serbo-Slovenian artist whose work involved leaving lifelike sculptures of mutilated human bodies in hotel rooms throughout former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. His work, which exposed the brutality of war in the Balkans, lead to reports of his arrest as a political prisoner followed by his alleged death in jail. The artist’s work was featured posthumously in the Venice Biennale, after which Eva and Franco Mattes posted a statement on their website revealing that Maver was their work of fiction and that the widely disseminated photos of his grisly sculptures were, in fact, images of real violence they found on the internet. In their statement, the artists condemned the ways in which museums and the media
anesthetize both violence and art. In their book *At the Edge of Art*, Joline Blais and Jon Ippolito detail how the Darko Maver project criticizes the processes by which the art world normalizes violence, but they make explicit how the project extends beyond the art world to implicate consumers of media as well. “It would be easy to leave the blame for this disregard for human life in the lap of the art establishment and media,” they write. “What is more difficult is recognizing our own culpability in the easy way we are seduced by technological wonders.”

Blais and Ippolito’s words characterize the motivations behind my thesis project. *Darko Maver* highlights the anesthetic processes images and their meaning undergo as they move between contexts. As much as the art world normalized the shocking violence depicted in the Maver photographs, the internet can be said to do the same thing—Indeed, the artists appropriated the Maver photographs from websites where users shared violent images for entertainment. There seems to be a reluctance in our culture to take speech made on the internet as seriously as things people say in the “real” world, that just because someone said something violent from behind the safety of their screen does not mean that they mean what they said. *No in Disguise* argues that violent speech—particularly casual statements about sexual violence—can translate into violent actions in the physical world. To not confront people over their responses to OkCupid questions about sexual violence is to allow such questions to continue to normalize sexual violence in our society.

---

Beyond Darko Maver, nearly all of Eva and Franco Mattes’ work deals with performing as another person online. In an interview with the artists published in the book Co-Art: Artists on Creative Collaboration, the duo says that what fascinates them is "constructing and playing with new identities, which is something we all do anyway, more or less consciously. … Social networks are perfect places for this game of simulation, but in a sense not so different from other networks: banks, schools, golf clubs or churches."38 Who we are when we interact with other people online is not necessarily the same person we are in our offline relationships, but Eva and Franco Mattes’ work argues that we are each one of those personas equally. In No in Disguise, Blackmore asked men to re-examine statements they made online about how they view women. It is important that she asked them from behind the mask of a woman they were trying to date, as the men would behave differently if we asked them about their views under a different pretense. They might perform a different version of themselves that would be further removed from the persona they would perform to a woman with whom they are romantically involved—a woman who their attitudes toward sexual consent could actually harm. No in Disguise highlights the continuity between these different performed personas.

Overview of the Thesis Artwork

*No in Disguise* is a multimedia experimental documentary installation that repurposes online dating platforms to explore the role of power and permissions in contemporary hetero-masculine sexual identity.

Based on two years of research, the video installation represents conversations with dating site users who have expressed regressive attitudes toward women and the concept of consent. Women have long insisted there is a cultural problem of sexual violence in the United States. This problem has often been framed exclusively as a women’s issue, with the role men have to play in its prevention left out of the discussion.

This project focuses on a gradient of masculine viewpoints through an experimental audiovisual format. The physical features of male reenactors in the video are deconstructed and randomly recombined with every playthrough so that the definitions are read by an endless procession of voices and faces that look like every man and no man in particular.

The scripts recited in the videos come from recent conversations between Blackmore and male OkCupid dating website users. I targeted particular OkCupid users via techniques inspired by online advertising—programmatically filtering a large number of profiles down to just a few based on specific parameters in their profile data.

On a stand in the center of the space rest several smartphone devices with which visitors may explore verbatim reproductions of the OkCupid conversations
through a custom app interface that closely mimics the experience of looking through someone’s OkCupid profile and reading their messages.

**Source Material**

Misogyny is often internalized in our society, with those perpetuating the hatred of women unaware that they are doing so. Blackmore and I were fascinated by the fact that some men on OkCupid overtly state regressive views on consent and sexual obligation through the site’s Match Questions. We wanted to know why they had chosen to answer those questions the way they did. Our inclination was that they did not see their views as being problematic and that many of them simply had not closely examined those views or thought much about their answers to those questions. The only way for us to find out was to ask them directly.

To find men on OkCupid with whom to initiate conversations about consent, we needed an OkCupid profile through which we could access other users on the site. For our precursor project *Yes in Disguise*, in which we created an edition of trading cards of men who had made misogynistic statements in their dating profiles, I wrote Python scripts to search through the profiles of all male-identifying people on OkCupid within a 30-mile radius of my computer. I performed the search through a barebones profile that featured just enough information to not be quickly flagged for deletion by the site’s moderators for not representing a real person. This approach worked when I was scraping data from profiles without interacting directly with the people behind them, but it would not be effective here: I predicted that people would
be less likely to respond to an unsolicited message and less willing to engage in conversation about a sensitive topic like sexual consent without some personal investment in the interaction. Moreover, reaching out to users directly felt like forcing the conversation on them, and we worried that doing so would lead to disingenuous responses or even users reporting Emily’s profile to the site’s moderators. We wanted to speak to people who wanted to speak to us—or at least wanted to flirt with Emily.

So instead we let the men come to us.

*Creating Emily to Attract Men*

We set up a profile for a fictional woman named Emily to attract men on OkCupid. We used free stock imagery of various similar-looking women who appeared between the ages 20 and 30 and wrote the text in her profile to attract a wide range of heterosexual men. To achieve this Emily had to appear physically attractive but still approachable. She also had to say not too much in her profile, but just enough for these men to project their own desires onto her and send her a message. We wanted Emily’s profile to appeal to what Laura Mulvey called “the determining male gaze,” which “projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly.”

In the profile we created, Emily is a 28-year-old graduate student who describes herself as “an outgoing bookwork, nature lover, and whiskey enthusiast

---

She is looking for single men, within 25 miles of her location, ages 28-45, for short- and long-term dating, hooking up, or new friends. On a typical Friday night, she says she is “either in bed with my pjs on Netflixxing hard, or at a bar with friends.” We left some of the answers to the short essay questions OkCupid displays on the front page of users’ profiles intentionally blank in an effort to keep her canvas blank for projected male fantasies.

Figure 1. The OkCupid dating profile we created for a fictional woman named “Emily.”

Filtering OkCupid Profiles

Emily’s profile received hundreds of unsolicited messages from men every week. To search through all these users, I wrote a Python script that accessed an

40. Emily’s interest in whiskey is one of her many attributes born of Blackmore’s personal experience dating men online, in which an overwhelming number of them tried to tell her, with little provocation, what they thought were the best ways to drink the spirit.
unofficial API for the OkCupid dating platform called “okcupyd.” According to its GitHub page, okcupyd is a Python library that “enables programmatic interaction with OkCupid.com, using OkCupid.com's private OkCupid JSON API and HTML scraping when necessary.”

OkCupid’s value proposition to its users revolves around them answering optional multiple choice “Match Questions,” which, according to OkCupid’s web site, “helps us show you more people who you’re likely to be socially compatible with.” There are two questions among the hundreds of available Match Questions that are explicitly about sexual consent:

1. “No means NO!” with the following answer choices: A) “Always. Period.” B) “Mostly, occasionally it’s really a Yes in disguise.” C) “A No is just a Yes that needs a little convincing!” D) “Never, they all want me. They just don’t know it.”

2. “Do you feel there are any circumstances in which a person is obligated to have sex with you?” with “yes” or “no” as answer choices (Figure 2).

---


The Python script I wrote searched through answers to those questions in every profile that sent Emily a message to find users who had given any answer option besides “Always. Period.” to the first question or the answer “Yes” to the second. The script emailed the usernames associated with the profiles it found and their answers to the target questions to Blackmore and me. Blackmore would then log in to Emily’s OkCupid account and respond to the initial message those users had sent her.

This process represents a distilled form of the profile filtering that social networks like Facebook make available to their advertisers. While the power of this technology has become evident with the proliferation of targeted advertising, these tools are not overly complex to create and implement. (The scripts I wrote for this project require only a basic understanding of the Python programming language.) Blackmore and I wanted to explore the capacity of these tools to facilitate complex
Discussions on challenging, personal topics. Up to this point, this project was largely an exercise in seeing what we could accomplish by repurposing the highly personal user data OkCupid collected and made publicly available through its website. Outside of the context of this website, and in the cultural context of the United States, men are unlikely to openly discuss their personal sexual politics. It is difficult to challenge someone’s views when they avoid discussing them in a way that relates to themselves. But because some men were casually stating their controversial views on consent through OkCupid’s match questions, we had a direct path to discussing those views with them. We saw this as a rare opportunity.

Discussing Sexual Consent with Men on OkCupid

Blackmore performed as Emily in OkCupid’s text-based messaging system to engage in conversation with the men my Python script had targeted. They had already initiated the conversation, so she steered the discussion to ask about their Match Question answers. We wanted to see how they would respond when a woman asked them directly why they had said things like women are sometimes obligated to have sex with them. The conversations began as mundane dating site flirting (“What’s your favorite whiskey?”), but when the men asked Emily to meet them in-person, Blackmore would respond by asking them why they had answered our target Match Questions the way they had. An excerpt of one of these conversations follows. (I have changed the corresponding man’s OkCupid user name to B. T. to protect his identity.)
Emily: I thought the way you answered the "No means NO!" question was interesting... You said "Mostly, occasionally it's really a Yes in disguise." I was wondering what you mean by that? Because to me, no means no always, but I was wondering if you had a different perspective on it?

B. T.: Oh that. I meant some people would be too shy to say yes, when they say no, it actually means a shy yes, if that makes sense. But if I know no means no to you, I won't force you to do anything when you say no.

Emily: That's interesting! I can definitely understand where that comes from. And I'm glad to hear that :) But I guess that I think that you should listen and respect when someone says no every time. Does that make sense?

B. T.: After all, I wouldn't enjoy doing it if you don't. One good example, didn't I just ask you to try the gym? If you don't like it, I would just move on. lol.

The conversations Blackmore had with these men could not be easily conducted under more direct circumstances. Our decision to approach them as the Emily character was an effort to hear from these men how they describe their views on sexual consent to someone they might be trying to have sex with. One of the goals of this project has been to understand masculine views on consent as they affect the women, rather than how men might describe their views to another man or to a more generalized cultural audience (such as on Twitter as part of the myriad discussions that have formed there in the wake of the #MeToo movement).

In her project The Council on Gender Sensitivity and Behavioral Awareness in World of Warcraft, Angela Washko framed her questions to WoW players as “part of a research project.” Making research intentions clear in an online game space makes sense in Washko’s project, because the game already gives players a high degree of

---

anonymity by default: Their true identities are masked behind fantastical virtual avatars and screennames. Because participants in Washko’s project by default have a great deal of distance between their online and physical selves, they have little reason to regulate their speech; honesty has few, if any, lasting consequences for the speaker.

Approaching men on OkCupid called for different tactics because people interact with each other on dating sites under the pretense that their pictures and profile data are genuine and that they may eventually meet each other offline. If we were to frame our questions to users about their personal views on consent as part of a research project, those users might perform to the researcher. They might construct their responses based on what they thought a researcher would want to hear, and they might regulate their speech more carefully because researchers typically record and publish their findings. They would suspect their statements might have a life beyond the one conversation we had with them.

By performing as a woman who they may want to go out with, we were able to elicit a different kind of performance from the men we spoke to—one that represents a persona that is arguably closer to the persona they would have on a face-to-face date with a woman, and one that points toward the sexual expectations and behavior they might display on such a date.

A goal of this project has been to spark important conversations about consent and boundaries before it is too late—before the so-called heat of the moment when personal sexual boundaries are easily crossed. This made it important to talk to men...
who had indicated regressive views on consent online, but we wanted to export these conversations to the offline world.

**Presenting Online Conversations for Offline Impact**

Discussions about systemic issues in society are often deflected with the assertion that violent transgressions are committed by a deviant minority. A common response to discussions about men’s roles in sexual assault and harassment has been to say that “not all men” are responsible for harmful behavior. This response gained popularity as a Twitter hashtag used to respond to the #MeToo movement.

If we simply presented the conversations Blackmore conducted with men on OkCupid in their original form as text transcripts, we feared it would be easy for people who read the conversations to dismiss them as solely the views of the men who made the statements rather than see them indicative of a larger cultural issue. The first step was to remove from our records of the conversations anything that pointed directly to the individual: pictures, names, phone numbers. But we also wanted to give the instant message transcripts meaning and weight by presenting them with real voices and faces. The challenge was to present the conversations in a way that gives them the immediacy and emotional resonance of hearing and seeing them spoken by another person while obscuring that person’s identity as an individual. My solution was to surround their identities with noise by showing video of many faces reading the conversations at once.

Re-enacting Instant Message Conversations on Video

I solicited masculine-presenting volunteers from my social and professional network to read the conversation transcripts on camera. I had each volunteer sit in front of a white background and read the men’s words from Blackmore’s OkCupid conversations off of a teleprompter while I recorded his face and voice. In addition to presenting the online conversations through a myriad of voices and faces, I wanted to further distribute the visual identity of each masculine face reading them. I wanted to subvert the notion that insists that violence comes primarily from social outliers, and that all outliers look the same.

It is to this end that I compiled the faces of the volunteer readers into a database of masculine features. Using Adobe’s Premiere video editing software, I sliced the video of each volunteer’s face into six segments representing memorable facial features: eye, nose, lips, ear, eyebrow, forehead, etc. I then separated each video clip by spoken line for each re-enacted interview. The result was over 2,300 video clips of men reading interviews with four different men on OkCupid. As this project is ongoing, each one of those numbers will grow as Blackmore and I continue working on it.

I used Vuo media programming software to randomly combine the facial feature slice videos in a preset layout while playing back the recorded conversations. For each line read in a recorded conversation re-enactment, the Vuo program I created procedurally chooses and plays a video clip of a random volunteer reading
that line for each one of the facial feature slices I designated in the previous step. The result is that with each viewing of the video the conversations are read by a new unique collection of voices and facial features (Figure 3).

Part of the inspiration for randomized, constantly shifting grid of masculine facial features comes from science fiction. Philip K. Dick’s novel *A Scanner Darkly* describes a fictional piece of technology called a “scramble suit” that allows people to disguise their appearance by making them resemble many people at the same time:

As the computer looped through its banks, it projected every conceivable eye color, hair color, shape and type of nose, formation of teeth, configuration of facial bone structure - the entire shroudlike membrane took on whatever physical characteristics were projected at any nanosecond, then switched to the next... In any case, the wearer of a scramble suit was Everyman and in every combination (up to combinations of a million and a half sub-bits) during the course of each hour. Hence, any description of him - or her - was meaningless.  

If the viewers of the interview re-enactment videos never see and hear the same face explaining regressive views toward women, those views belong not to one person or type of person but to a more generalized masculine identity. This aspect of the project thus asserts that there is no single template by which to identify a misogynist.

---

Figure 3. A video still of the programmatically combined facial features reading the OkCupid conversation transcripts.

Re-Enacting Online Conversations to Spark Offline Conversations

An unintended effect of re-enacting the online conversations offline and in-person with other men is that it provided an entry point to talk about the socially challenging subject of sexual consent. As a cisgendered, heterosexual man, I find few natural opportunities to talk to other men about the evolving definitions of masculinity and power, and my attempts to broach these subjects with other men are often met with discomfort.

Recording the OkCupid re-enactments with other men often ended in meaningful discussions about the role of consent in our lives. After the first few sessions I started leaving the camera and microphone running to capture these
discussions, which became an integral part of the project. I’ve transcribed an excerpt of one of these discussions here:

Simon Boas: From what I’ve seen in these conversations, and you’re talking about your time in college, I can relate to that as well. Being around this type of talk, especially among men, where gender-based violence and sexual violence is a thing that social outcasts or people separate from the group do, or criminals do, and it has nothing that has to do with them. Gray areas aren’t even in the vocabulary. Especially, I think, among younger men. At least, that’s what I was around growing up and in college and stuff. It’s a separate conversation entirely.

Bob Majzler: Totally. This idea that a rapist is someone who is obviously bad, and that person is out there somewhere. And never within the friend group, or likely not even within the acquaintance group. Maybe a friend of a friend of a friend. But this rhetoric around no meaning something other than no, I’m sure was definitely part of high school, and college as well. It reminds me of the type of stuff that was surrounding me. I’m sure I contributed to it. So yeah, thinking about younger generations of boys… It comes up as well to have these conversations where, making it explicit like your project is doing, or hopefully doing, what do we mean when we use the word “consent”? Because I think younger boys, high school aged boys, college boys think of it in sort of black and white terms like, oh, if she says “no,” then I won’t. I obviously wouldn’t. But what about how to deal with the psyche of, well, a lot of times when she does say “no” the male psyche, or the way it gets socialized, comes up with all these answers to make it, “oh, is it actually a ‘no’?”

The final video installation alternated playing back the collaged readings with excerpts of these post-reading discussions. I kept the faces featured in the discussion videos intact, unlike the sliced and recombined reading videos.
I dubbed Blackmore’s voice into the collaged video interviews to represent the voice that initially interviewed the men on OkCupid. This maintained the gendered aspects of the initial conversations in their re-enactments on video. Additionally, the act of replacing my voice behind the camera with a feminine one in the edited recordings highlights the gendered aspects of conversation in our culture: Participants in a conversation perform their perceived roles, often along gender lines when it comes to discussions of sexual power. Put more simply, the men with whom I recorded the conversation re-enactments may have been less comfortable reading someone else’s statements of regressive views on consent to a woman than they...
would to me. Additionally, having another person in the room during these recording sessions would have put me, as videographer, in the role of spectator rather than participant—a role that felt inappropriate considering the sensitive nature of the recorded discussions.

Blackmore and I did not, however, dub her voice over mine during the post-reading discussions. We felt it important to present the personal discussions I had with the volunteers as nonfictional conversations between two men about our roles in a culture of masculinity, power, and sexual violence so that these discussions might provide an example—or at least a proof of concept—for men having such discussions.

Connecting the Video and Source Material for Viewers

The multimedia installation featured two walls on which the videos were projected: one wall with the collaged facial features reading the OkCupid transcripts and the other with the excerpts of discussions I held with the volunteers after they read the transcripts. The videos alternated: one re-enacted conversation, then one response video, then back to the re-enactments, etc. While the face on one wall spoke, the face on the other wall silently waited so that it looked like the two faces were listening and responding to each other.

To present the video collage and response discussion excerpts on their own would not give visitors a sense of the profile-filtering process and online performance that generated the source material for the videos. We deemed it important to
communicate the various processes that contributed to the video to communicate to viewers that the statements they heard recited in the video were not fictional.

To present the source material, Blackmore designed a static replica of the OkCupid iOS app that featured Emily’s profile, selected conversations from her inbox including the four conversations that volunteers re-enacted in the video, and the option to email feedback or questions to Emily (these emails went to an account we created for her character, and we’ve since been answering messages we received during the exhibition on our Instagram account). From this design I coded an iOS app using the XCode integrated development environment that I installed on three iPod touches. We commissioned the construction of a display stand with text that we wrote from Emily’s perspective introducing her character, describing the process behind the project, and inviting visitors to interact with the iPods we had placed on top of the stand.
The iOS app was successful in two ways: Some audience members believed they were interacting with Emily’s account on the actual OkCupid app rather than a static clone that we made for the exhibition, and many reported realizing the connection between the seemingly disparate elements of the installation when they heard the voices of the video subjects reciting the conversation transcripts while they simultaneously read the reproduced conversation text in the app in their hands. This convergence bridged the video and the source material, the conversations and the performance, the online and the offline.

We also wanted to aesthetically connect the videos projected on the gallery walls to the conversations visitors read on the iPod in their hands. I constructed the
videos I recorded to present the male volunteer’s facial features in the way we are accustomed to seeing feminine bodies: up-close, fragmented, and often devoid of visual context, as if it is as easy to view their bodies as a collection of parts as it is to view it as a whole. This format also emphasized the men’s physical imperfections and asymmetries. As a result, the videos in the installation look like mainstream advertisements, with soft lighting and a clean white background. The apps on our smartphones, like the OkCupid app, are typically designed to be similarly visually inviting: clean lines, a vibrant, limited color palette, and a fluid interface so that you need not think too carefully about how you use them. To bridge the visual languages of the projected videos and the iOS apps we leaned against the corner of the video walls a neon sign that replicated one of the OkCupid Match Questions that we used to target users for conversations about consent: “NO MEANS NO?” The pink light from the sign bled onto the projection wall and the gallery floor, reaching out toward the display stand holding the iPods featuring the cloned OkCupid app. As the real OkCupid app’s most prominent colors are pink and blue, the light from the sign created a visual and spatial link between the various elements of the installation. It also infused the space with a stereotypically feminine color.
Figure 6. The neon sign as it appears in the multimedia installation.

**Intended Audience**

The audience for this project is not limited to the gallery visitors who encounter the installation; the men we targeted for conversations on OkCupid and the men with whom I re-enacted those conversations on video are also very much the intended audience. The gallery installation represents one output format of an ongoing, evolving performance and conversation project. We intend to continue to conduct conversations with men we target online and to continue using those conversations as entry points to talk to men offline about consent, masculinity and misogyny. We hope that the project will travel to other geographic locations, as it will spark conversations that have different textures in different places. The more voices this project captures, the greater diversity of viewpoints it will represent.
Representing diverse viewpoints is key to sparking conversations that explore and challenge how men understand the gray areas in sexual violence.

**Outcomes**

The core goal if this project is to present conversations about consent that, on the individual level, typically do not happen between men and women until it is too late, or, on the cultural level, only respond to specific newsworthy incidents (such as the Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse allegations\(^46\)) and often lack a range of heterosexual male viewpoints. Men’s public responses to such incidents often deflect responsibility for contributing to a culture that permits the abuse of women\(^47\) rather than engage in nuanced discussions about how they can repair that culture. As seen during the initial #MeToo movement on Twitter, men’s voices in these cultural discussions often gravitate toward defensive extremes. A guiding principle of this project is summarized in the following quotation from New York Times columnist Charles M. Blow: “…too often we believe that the plight of the oppressed is solely the business of the oppressed, and that the society in which that oppression is born and grows and the role of the oppressors and beneficiaries are all somehow subordinate.”\(^48\) *No in Disguise* seeks to put the onus of leading constructive cultural discussions...
discussions about masculinity on men rather than on the women who are the victims of abuse by men.

The lasting impact of a conversation is difficult to quantify and measure. However, OkCupid’s data structure does provide a glimmer of insight into the effects of Emily’s conversations: We found that some of the men Blackmore interviewed changed the Match Question answers she had asked them to explain. For example, one of the men changed his response to the question “Do you feel there are any circumstances in which a person is obligated to have sex with you?” from “Yes” to “No,” as seen in the following screenshot from OkCupid.com. This means one of two things: That the conversation Blackmore conducted with those men encouraged them to re-evaluate their views on sexual consent and obligation, or that having a straight woman they hoped to date challenge their response to that question made them realize that having that particular answer appear in their profile looked bad to the women they wanted to attract and was therefore counterproductive to their efforts on the dating website. Either way, the fact that these men changed their Match Question answers shows that their conversation with Emily made them consider that their personal views on consent might be more meaningful to others than they are to themselves. I see this as a positive effect of the project, whatever the motivation for changing the answers may have been.

Another area in which the multimedia installation was successful is the atypical way in which it displayed masculine bodies. A visitor to the installation pointed out to me how rare she found it to encounter men’s faces presented enlarged
and fragmented in the way they were presented in the installation’s video projections. The videos were projected eight feet tall, with the fragments enlarged so that small facial features like a nose were between two and three feet tall. The audience member explained how this is how she was accustomed to seeing women’s faces in mainstream photographs and video, in particular because the clean white background and lighting sculpted the men’s faces in a way that evoked commercial photography. Seeing male faces fragmented and up-close so that every pore can be scrutinized highlighted the gender role reversal that is central to this project: Transferring the onus to promote conversations about sexual assault from women to men.

**Conclusion**

*No in Disguise* has evolved several times over the past two years, and it will continue to evolve as we continue to perform, record, and exhibit the project. It began with an exploration of the publicly available data OkCupid collects from people who use the website, then evolved into a series of trading made from the dating profiles of men who have made misogynistic statements, followed by an online conversation and performance project, and finally became the procedurally edited multimedia installation discussed in this paper. Future iterations of the project will see its focus shift to the discussions videos that grew out of the OkCupid transcript readings. We would like to experiment with moving the readings and discussions out of the video studio and into community spaces through workshops with live re-enactments of online conversations and public discussions. This project’s ability to spark deeply
personal conversations about challenging subjects with a group of people who are typically reluctant to discuss them is the core component that we want to distill and expand.

While we have been developing this project for the past two years, the video re-enactment and discussion portion of the installation is a recent addition and has the most room to grow. The randomized videos need to feature a larger number of facial fragments than they currently do for the composite faces they generate to appear unrecognizable to installation visitors. Some visitors to the MFA Thesis exhibition recognized several of the facial fragments as belonging to people they know—this is the result of producing the reading and discussion portions of the project in the same location and community where the project was ultimately exhibited. This does not break the project. In fact, I find that it enhances the experience if visitors can see and hear people they know describing their own deeply personal views. It is also valuable to hear people you know voicing the controversial viewpoints of other people, as it makes those viewpoints feel less distant and therefore more like immediate cultural issues that we must confront.

It is also important to expand the video portion project so that it includes greater diversity of people and cultures. I recorded this iteration of the video described in this paper with members of the arts community at University of California in Santa Cruz, and as a result the videos featured in the multimedia installation represent a somewhat homogenous community. We strove to work with people of various racial and cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, ages, and
experiences, but we deem it very important to continue to develop this project in different locations and communities going forward.

We want this project to continue and grow because we believe it highlights the convergence and interdependence of multiple contemporary cultural and technological issues. Every day, through news and social media, we see our culture’s emotional, psychological, and linguistic inadequacy to discuss and confront the nuance inherent in sexual violence. Is this because we lack the necessary vocabulary? Is it because we are unwilling? Whatever the reason, we need to talk about these issues more. Women on Twitter, have managed to force this conversation into the mainstream with the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, and now there is a lot of work for men to do to consider their roles and culpability in these conversations. These problematic cultural attitudes are widespread, yet often go unspoken. Through social media platforms that haphazardly represent people as data points, these attitudes get vocalized, written down, and preserved. This gives us a rare chance to talk about them.
Bibliography


