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ELLIE WYATT
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IN THE HAZE AND TURMOIL: RESPONDING TO CHERRYPICKER

Stan Portus

UFOS, mermaids, divers, crabs, aliens, rockets or rocks, bigfoot, angels, presidents, public sex, area 51, time travellers, the Moon landing, cloud formations, fires and the smiles of celebrities. These are just some of the things that flash before your eyes in Ellie Wyatt's 2021 online video work *cherrypicker* as soon as you press 'play'. Picked out by a red circle which does not change in size but shifts from a solid to a dashed line, moves from sharp to hazy and varies in thickness, the images appear for fractions of seconds, before more images appear, nudging your brain along. It's tempting to try and figure out a narrative through the images that appear in front of you, but quickly you give over to the visual association, flickering circle and audible drone. The images come from night cameras, CCTV, dash cams, aerial photography, maps, CGI and celebrity news, to name a few sources. They reflect, in short, the kinds of media you willingly or unwillingly see on the internet. And like what you doom scroll and sift through, you're not sure if the images repeat. You're not sure what has passed you by.

Watching *cherrypicker* feels analogous with being online today. It's an experience markedly different from the early days of the internet, where the web was seen as having the potential to empower individuals and expose them to the wonders of the world and like-minded people. It's also different from the internet a decade ago, which was characterised by the WikiLeaks disclosures and network-based activism.

Yes, there is still a sense of being an active participant on the internet, discovering kindred spirits, swiping and clicking through media as well as creating our own, in the form of tweets, stories, reels and posts. But underneath this there is a passivity, much like the viewing of *cherrypicker*: platforms serve you images, videos and texts; we follow a platform's logic rather than our own.

In his 2017 book *Psychopolitics*, named after the study of psychological aspects of political behaviour and structures, Byung-Chul Han explores how neoliberalism and a new regime of technological domination now utilise the productive force of the psyche. Through the internet and smart devices, people are now treated as producers of data and consumers across all aspects of life, including politics. But it wasn't always like this. Byung-Chul Han points out that 'the internet was celebrated as a medium of boundless liberty', encapsulated by Microsoft's 1994 slogan 'Where do you want to go today?'[1] The freedom and communication promised by the internet has become a means of control and surveillance. For Han, social media is integral to this. It acts as a panopticon watching over the social realm, exploiting it in the process and capitalising on people's willingness to expose themselves. By engaging with 'digital panopticon', people are not surrendering data under duress but offering it freely.[2]

The fact we publicise personal information on the internet and hand over data about ourselves plays a part in the fact we are entering an age of digital psychopolitics. 'Big Data', as Han calls it, can be used to predict human behaviour and 'means that the future is becoming calculable and controllable'.[3] We aren't just surveilled but our actions further expose our desires, wants and wishes. For Byung-Chul Han, technological power, whose 'signal and seal' is the *like* button, has eliminated free choice and replaced it with free selection of what's on offer.[4] It can feel as if 'Where do you want to go today?' should be turned from an open question into a statement: 'this is where you will go today'.

As you read search engine results pages or scroll through social media, it can be unclear why you are seeing what you are seeing. Since the inception of personalised web searches in 2005 ('Personalisation is subtle – at first you may not notice any difference', reads a Google blog from the time)[5] to today's aggressive TikTok algorithm (which can snare people into endlessly viewing the hate speech of people like social media personality and renowned misogynist Andrew Tate),[6] there can be a sense that what you view and engage with online presents a cohesive world view. Like in *cherrypicker*, these apparently logical worlds can change so quickly that querying what you are looking at can feel a lot harder than riding the free association – let the links manifest later, see where you end up in the flow of endless, disjointed imagery and information.

Trying to comprehend what is in front of you – and to even engage with it critically – can lead you down the rabbit hole to a place devoid of sense and removed from reality. Your clicks increase page views, dwell times and engagement rates in the process. Building connections and mapping isn't just the pastime of 5G sceptics or chemtrail fanatics. It is – or can be – a logical way to piece the world together.

The epitome of this logic in our media-saturated age is arguably what Eyal Weizman calls 'image complexes'. Weizman says we can no longer rely on what is captured in single images. With the proliferation of recording devices such as cameras and smartphones, there is an increase in the number of primary sources in conflict zones. While this expansion of information can help dispel lies and challenge official narratives, it can also be used to create new ones, and a secondary conflict occurs around authenticity, veracity and interpretation. The challenge, then, is to verify the truthfulness of sources, locations and even the composition of scenes. As a result, Weizman says we must rely on complexes that are 'a time-space relation between dozens, sometimes hundreds of images and videos that were generated around incidents from multiple perspectives including ground, air and outer space'.[7]

This is an 'active practice' which multi-disciplinary research group Forensic Architecture, founded by Weizman, uses to understand some of the most horrific events imaginable, from airstrikes in Syria to the police shooting of Mark Duggan.[8] [9] However, it can be understood as a general concept of how we often work to make sense of the flow of imagery and information around us. Looking at a picture, claim or story and asking, 'is this true?' is a sensation many will have had in the haze and turmoil of online culture. Assessing the veracity of information and its relationship with other sources is a necessary part of existing in the contemporary world where, as Franco Bifo Berardi writes, 'history has been replaced by the endless flowing recombination of fragmentary images'.[10] From scrolling through and posting on social media to watching and reading accounts of real-world events as they emerge, we're all engaged in creating image-complexes – or even image-text-complexes – of our own.

This can reveal the truth of the world and events, but it can also lead to the proliferation of lies, as Weizman says of primary sources in conflict zones.[11] The construction of these complexes works to create narratives, an essential navigational tool in the onslaught of information. Narratives, synthesised from flows of information, are often simplifications. Afterall, no single story can account for the complexity of the world. In his 2018 book *New Dark Age* James Bridle describes the drive to create narratives to understand the world as a paranoid state where the failure to comprehend complexity leads to a demand for more information, further clouding and bifurcating understanding. Bridle says this works to an extreme with conspiracy theories. He cites chemtrails as an example where 'its adherents believe in fractal versions of the same idea'.[12]

This is the seduction of conspiracy theories on the internet: regardless of the segmentation or differentiation in ideas, the horrors we sense in the world are given expression by what we discover as we seek out explanation.

While this might seem like the terrain of the delusional, we are all affected. To varying degrees nearly all of us are dragged down algorithmic wormholes providing an 'endless echo chamber of supportive opinion'.[13] This echo chamber and support appeals to a baseline desire for connection and relation, while obstructing the possibility of a common reality.

As Hannah Arendt notes in *The Human Condition*: 'The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves'. Arendt says the fully developed private life of the modern age leads to intensified and enriched subjective emotions and private feelings and 'this intensification will always come to pass at the expense of the assurance of the reality of the world and men'.[14] For Arendt, then, the intensification of subjective emotions and private feelings is in negative correlation with an assurance of reality.

The Human Condition was published in 1958 but it feels like a prescient claim for the current internet age, where understanding the world often comes through solitary exposure through smart devices and siloed online groups rather than engagement with people in physical space. The centralised power of platforms like Facebook can be used to feed different groups different truths, further isolating individuals and groups. Furthermore, A/B testing can be leveraged to intensify the potency of falsehoods and exploitative messages. The consulting firm Cambridge Analytica's involvement in the 2016 American election shows this manipulation in the extreme.[15] By harvesting personal data from over 50 million Facebook profiles, Cambridge Analytica could help build psychological profiles of voters to then establish the best ways to sway opinion through refined and targeted political advertising. It has been reported, if not officially proven, that Donald Trump's presidential campaign used the harvested data to present Trump supporters with triumphant visuals of the President-to-be while swing voters were shown negative graphics and ideas about Trump's opponent, Hillary Clinton.

The sense of being exposed to an abundance of unprovable facts and provable falsehoods can overwhelm and lead to what Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman describe as hyperaesthesia, 'a neurological condition in which sense perception radically overloads'.[16] The multiplication of images and information may seem like a natural state of the internet but it's also a form of aesthetic politics and a tactic: instead of denying or removing information from the public domain, more images and information can be added to the flow to drown out truths. This is a technique often used by conspiracy theorists such as Holocaust Deniers, who will

bury images that demonstrate culpability under more images devoid of responsibility or historical fact.

Hyperaesthesia stands in the way of sense-making, stupefying and numbing people to what's around them, making understanding the world through complexes of information and images a troublesome task. *cherrypicker* evokes this overwhelming sensation, inducing its own small-scale hyperaesthesia through a barrage of images too fleeting to fully register.

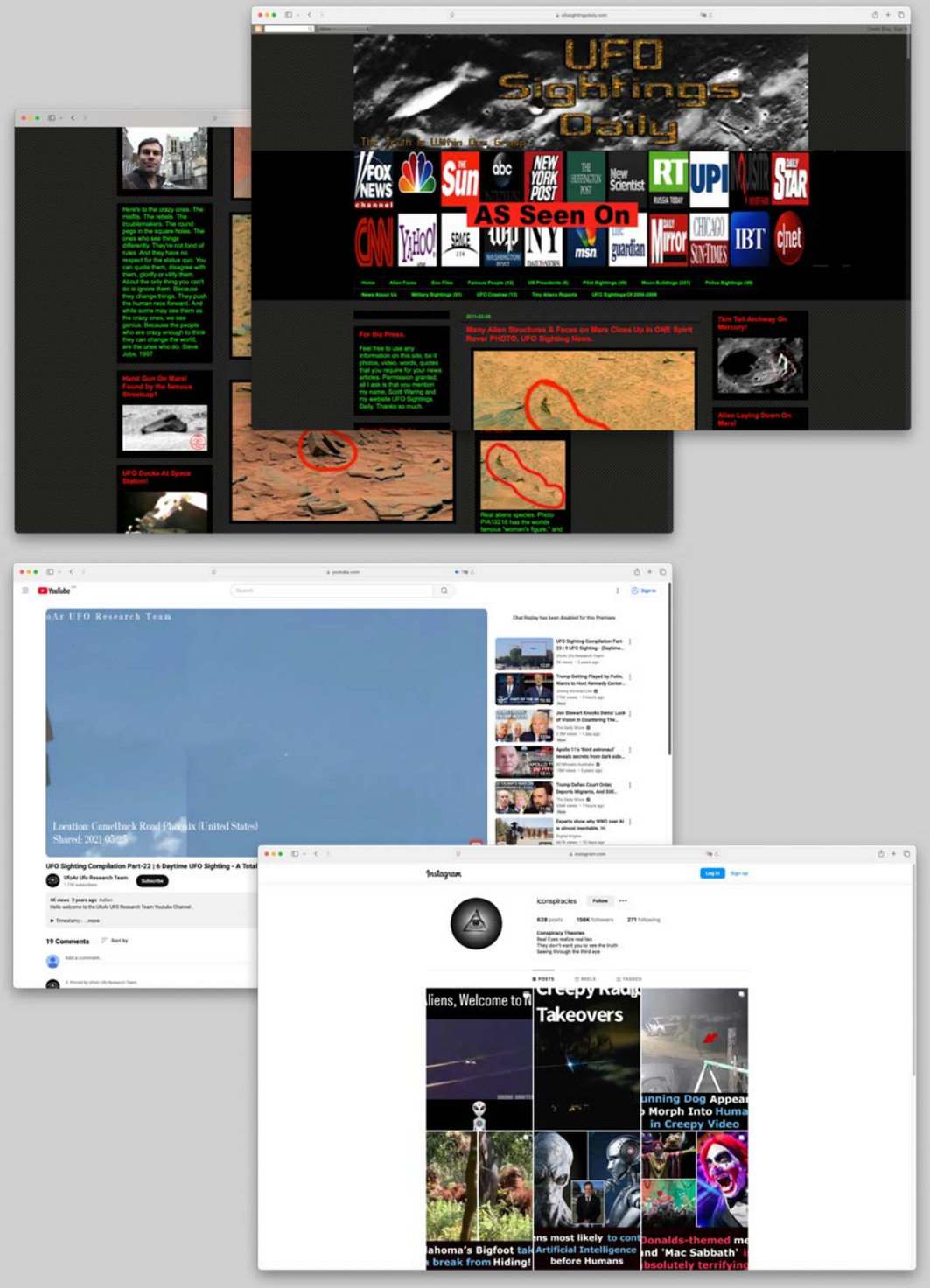
Like hyperaesthesia, *cherrypicker* is 'akin to the old figure of the alchemist or the magician driven mad, poisoned, by the pursuit of knowledge just beyond their reach'.[17] The imagery and figures in *cherrypicker* reflect this drive beyond the rational, into the supernatural and the mad. The elision of the otherworldly and the real – the scientific and celebrity, the paranormal and the political – suggests how these real phenomena are so often understood and interpreted in ways that are beyond sense. In the flow of information there is a sinister banality, a superstition and incomprehensibility, out of step with rationalism and logic. Empirical reckoning be damned. Belief is the ultimate driver here – even if it is manufactured, manipulated, skewed and corrupted.

What can be done about this? How do we find a way to reject the logic of the platforms we live through? How do we escape echo chambers and controllable futures? How do we see the horrors we sense for what they truly are?

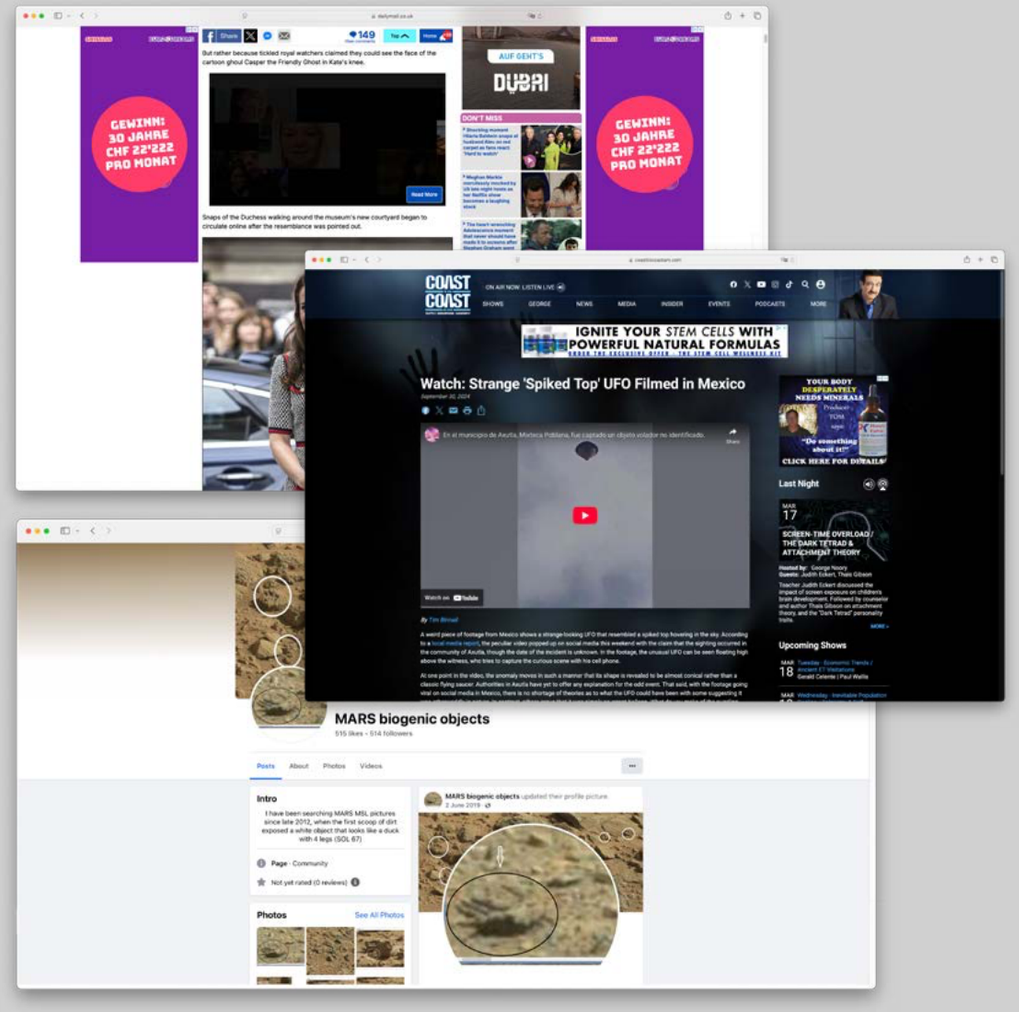
There is no singular solution to these questions but one step might be to adopt an approach of critical ignoring.[18] We are arguably not yet equipped for the online world – out of sync with our own creation – in terms of the techniques we learn about how to decipher and judge information, as well as how we relate to others in this space. In the offline world, we are taught how to research and assess the validity and value of resources and information, from learning close reading in school to being warned of the pitfalls of Wikipedia at university. The internet has arguably created a climate where these processes are inadequate. Critical ignoring would require us to learn what not to pay attention to. We should learn what is noise, trolling and flooding, exercising impulse control and reading laterally, researching claims and where else information appears before we're carried on by belief and motivators beyond our immediate control.

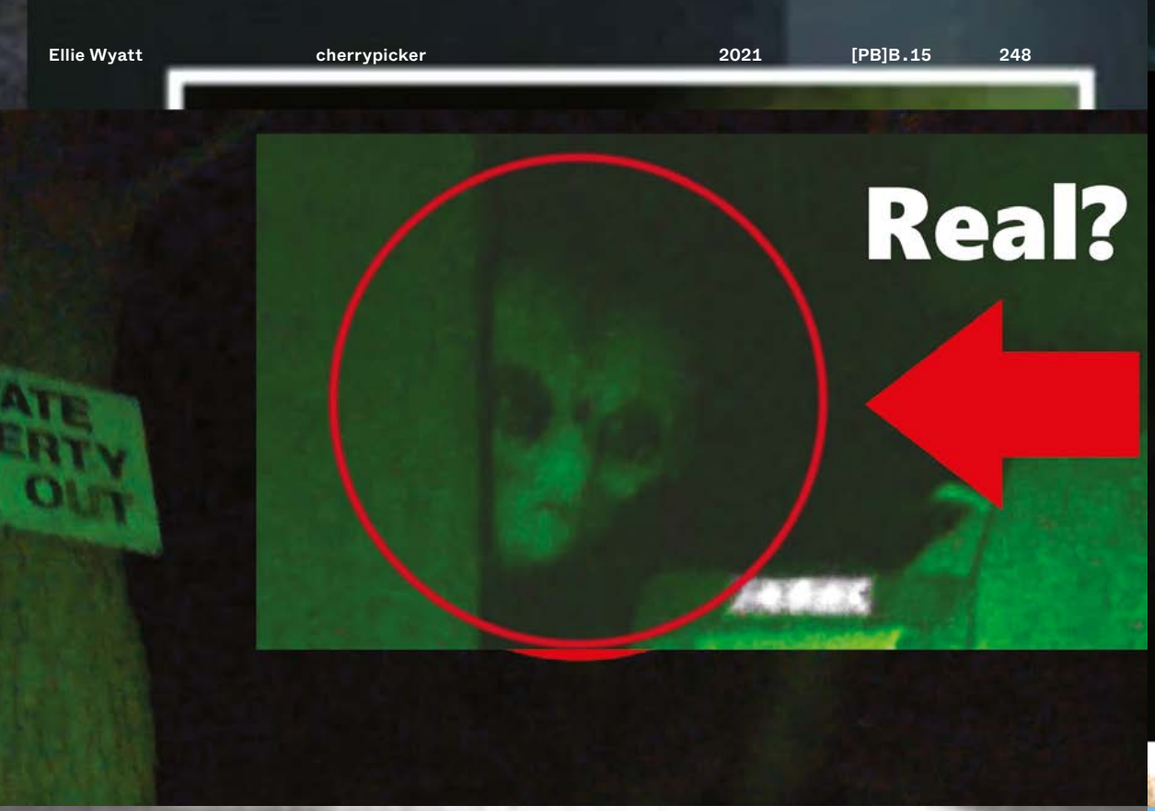
There is a case to develop great online literacy and build an arsenal of tools to navigate online spaces. But there is also a need to challenge cultures of passivity, shock, and the treatment of people as producers-cum-consumers, and to find commonalities that don't shy from complexity – even if we must hit pause.

Stan Portus, 'In the Haze and Turmoil: Responding to cherrypicker', in *Ellie Wyatt's PARALLAX*, ed. Ellie Wyatt and Daniel Fletcher (Foolscap Editions, 2023), 67–70. Kindly reprinted with permission from the author.



[1] Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, transl. by E. Butler (London: Verso, 2017), 8.
[2] Ibid., 9.
[3] Ibid., 12.
[4] Ibid., 15.
[5] Sep Kamvar and Marissa Mayer, 'Personally Speaking', *Official Google Blog*, 2 February 2007, https://googleblog.blogspot.com/2007/02/personally-speaking.html (all URLs accessed on 9 June 2023).
[6] Shanti Das, 'Inside the Violent, Misogynistic World of TikTok's New Star, Andrew Tate', *The Guardian*, 6 August 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/aug/06/andrew-tate-violent-misogynistic-world-of-tiktok-new-star.
[7] Eyal Weizman, 'Before and After Images: Eyal Weizman's The Image Complex', *The Photographers' Gallery Blog*, 22 May 2016, https://thesandpitdotorg1.wordpress.com/2016/05/22/the-image-complex/.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Forensic Architecture, *Forensic Architecture Report #1: The Police Shooting of Mark Duggan* (London: Cabinet Books / ICA, 2021).
[10] Bifo Berardi, 'Introduction', in Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012),
[11] Weizman, *Before and After Images*.
[12] James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London: Verso, 2018), 193.
[13] Ibid., 212.
[14] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 50.
[15] Matthew Rosenberg, Nicholas Confessore and Carole Cadwalladr, 'How Trump Consultants Exploited the Facebook Data of Millions', *The New York Times*, 17 March 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-trump-campaign.html.
[16] Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth* (London: Verso 2021), 83.
[17] Ibid., 85.
[18] Anastasia Kozyreva et al., 'Critical Ignoring as a Core Competence for Digital Citizens', in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 32, 1 (2022), 81–88, doi:10.1177/09637214221121570.




Real?