

Dear Andrea Orejarena, dear Caleb Stein

1) Since 2020, as an artist duo, you have been exploring the ever-growing visual worlds on the internet and social media. You focus on conspiracy theories and image manipulation. You are interested in how individual perception is tricked. How American society is manipulated. Especially American society. Where does your curiosity - your urge to enlighten- come from? Do you want to protect and warn others?

Neither of us were born in the U.S., but we both moved here as children. Andrea was born in Colombia on October 12th, 1994, and Caleb was born two days later, in the UK on October 14th, 1994. In both cases, we came to the U.S. with only some of our immediate families, with the vast majority of our families and communities remaining in our respective countries. In a bizarre incident of complete synchronicity, we both arrived in the U.S. shortly before the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers. For both of us, watching footage of the attack is one of our earliest memories.

We come from radically different backgrounds and hold distinct perspectives, but through our collaboration we explore our relationship to the U.S., which is our adopted home. We're fascinated by the U.S. and how it constructs an image of itself that is broadcast globally. We're fascinated by the complexity of ways in which this image is broadcast: through the military, imperialism, soft power, capitalism, and Hollywood, and the relationship between all of these variables. The U.S. has the power of representing itself, through Hollywood, on a world stage, with an effectiveness and on a scale that is unparalleled.

There are things about the U.S. that we still love. We love the earnest, soulfulness of many of the people who call it home. We love that difference is still celebrated and respected in many parts of the country.

In some ways, we think of our work together as an act of placemaking, a way of questioning, a way of opening up. During an early conversation about 'American Glitch' with David Company, who wrote the introduction for the artist book of the work published earlier this year, we were struck by David's comment that "to be critical of one's country is to love it." This resonated with us. In fact, the same could be said of any relationship, because to be critical is to extend energy and care towards something with the desire to deepen knowledge and connection.

Recently, we came across the term 'third culture kid'. The idea of being neither here nor there. The idea of containing multitudes. Perhaps that's a part of why

we've chosen to look closely at the U.S., and perhaps it's part of the reason that we're also interested in the notion of an emergent property through collaboration. In other words, what we make together is not equal parts of each of us combined in a clean, direct, mathematical sort of way. Instead, our collaboration leads to questions and forms that we could not have arrived at alone. The fact that we're in love with each other also helps.

Exploring the richness of the emergent property, in a melting pot of a country, as third culture kids.

We wouldn't say that, as you put it, we have an urge to enlighten, protect, nor warn others necessarily. We'd almost say it's the inverse— we feel the internet is enlightening us, shining a light into our collective subconscious, and bringing forward the manipulation and fictitious elements that photography has always had as long as the medium has existed. There are, however, things about our current moment that concern and inspire us, and our work reflects our engagement with our adopted home and the position it asserts for itself through mythology and through policy. We are interested in making work that holds a multiplicity of perspectives, that makes space for contradiction, for messiness, for humor, for poetry, and for spirituality of a sort. Ultimately, though, we do respect and hope that each viewer comes to our work with their own perception, and we want to encourage that. Art is how a person embeds feeling and thought into material and form, but it isn't intended as a direct message, and it does partially exist outside of language. We believe in the collective power to interpret meaning and to imagine new meanings, and we don't want to be too prescriptive about things. People are smart and have their own readings.

2) You have collected false truths. Mostly images that you have fed with new lies. You have twisted and inflated these images. Yet all your exaggerations are believable. How did you manage to never overfeed these new realities?

They're not exactly false truths. What we're addressing here is the ever-growing grey area in between veracity and myth. The internet and AI broaden this gap between the two. We feel the era in which we live in, in which we have tools at our disposal, i.e. the inundation of images that circulate globally, and various image manipulation softwares, make us more prepared than ever to address these questions of truth. We're interested in how the collective is contending with this, and with visual humor and spirituality in photography as forms of human resilience.

Oftentimes, documentary photography has this fraught relationship with truth, extending back to the genesis of the medium. Before, when an image was taken, it was generally assumed to be a truthful representation of a moment. However, this is far from the absolute truth. Photography, which often contains infinite complexity, can also oversimplify. Taking a look at any contact sheet reveals the role that the photographer plays in both framing but also the moment that they choose to publicize. Not to mention that every form of manipulation that we can do with photoshop today has been done to images before digitization and dates back to the beginning of photography.

We have not fed our images with lies, at all. Everything you see in the images is real. Regarding the found image archive, we view them as images that have circulated widely as forms of documentation.

We're interested in an expanded notion of documentary photography.

These works, particularly the glitch in real life archive, are a document of a mentality and a culture. They are living documents that change as they circulate. One could argue that these collective documentations of the same event, from various pedestrian perspectives, offer a more dynamic truth than the standard documentary photograph that is circulated by press, which often has a more pointed agenda. With the images we found for the glitch in real life archive, we come to them knowing that they may have been altered, whereas we are not necessarily, as a society, encouraged to come to documentary, photojournalistic photographs with the assumption that the images contain manipulation of their own form.

That said, regarding the photographs we made, these are all unaltered images of real locations that contain some form of myth, simulation, or construction. We are playing with the futility of trying to take a truthful, frontal, objective photograph of an already mythological or simulated circumstance, whether that's a fake Iraqi village in the middle of the U.S desert, a Mars Simulation in the Utah desert, or a telephone wire disguised as a fake tree that real birds come to perch in.

3) Your images are invitations into your home. You don't make it too comfortable for your guests. You want the viewers to stay active. To think along. An excellent example is your series "American Glitch." Here, you take us viewers to the crossroads of reality and fiction in an American landscape that feels strangely familiar to us. Do you want us to rely on these worlds? Or should we be on the lookout for authenticity?

True. Everyone should be aware. Remaining critical, staying open to discourse - these are crucial acts of self care.

When confronted with an endless stream of images, we can sometimes feel the urge to yearn for something we can look to as pure information, pure fact, pure evidence. Something solid, something simple. The reality is that every medium for conveying information is already a frame, a funnel, a material, and this means that all communication inherently contains subjectivity (at best), or manipulation (at worst). Almost, you could argue, that the difference between perceiving an image as subjective versus manipulated lies on the viewer and their lens.

Manipulation in photography has been around since the beginning. U.S. Civil War photographers moved canon balls closer together and even rearranged bodies to make more 'impactful' images.

Ghostly apparitions were 'captured' in some of the earliest photographs - some photographers made a living out of this (sometimes playfully and with a tongue-and-cheek sort of humor, sometimes as 'clairvoyant' con artists).

Mia Fineman, in her seminal exhibition 'Faking It: Manipulated Photography Before PhotoShop' at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2012 made a strong, detailed argument that underscores the notion that manipulation has been a part of the medium since its birth.

There is truth with a little t, and truth with a capital T. Yes, U.S. Civil War photographers moved certain things around, so it's fair to say that images were not truthful in the little t sense of the term. But the photographs do convey something of the destruction and chaos of the war. That's the big T truth. The line between these two forms of truth is constantly shifting - in every image. It remains unfixed.

And yet there is no doubt that photography has on some level, historically, contained documentary value. For example, photography is used to document where certain objects were placed within a scene on Hollywood sets. Sometimes months pass between two scenes on the same set, and photography is used to document where the teapot was placed, how the light was falling on a chair, how

the newspaper is folded, that sort of thing. No one can question that these photographs contain information that has a practical application. These Hollywood set photographs, which contain facts about a constructed environment, enable the illusion of narrative continuity in the final, edited film. There's some sort of irony or paradox in all of this for someone to tease out.

Can we look to photography as something that can contain partial evidence, or something that contains signs and symbols of one sort or another that can be useful in a documentary sense? Or have we now arrived at a deeper, more insidious level of manipulation of images to the point where we can't trust them at all?

Now that there are sophisticated deepfakes, how does photography or video become permissible evidence in a court of law?

Technology is advancing so rapidly that it may not always be possible to detect AI's behind the scenes manipulations. We won't always be able to know AI has been at work by spotting the sixth finger on Pope Francis's hand in the already-iconic AI generated image. AI doesn't always reveal itself so obviously. It doesn't always glitch so revealingly. However, today we are looking for these manipulations more than ever, and we think that's a good thing.

Recently, we took a group of found images from our glitch in real life archive and we remade them with PhotoShop's new generative fill feature. We made a slideshow where we paired the 'original' image with the 'new image', without saying which was which. We then showed these images to a friend, a curator we feel is highly intelligent, and who we know to be someone who has worked with photographs for their entire adult life. It was impossible for them to discern which was 'fake' and which was 'real'. In some cases, they perceived the 'fake' image to be the one that we had not altered.

And, after several months without looking at these images, we returned to the slideshow comparisons, and in some cases we couldn't even remember which images we had manipulated and which ones we hadn't.

Along similar lines, anyone who has done extensive retouching in PhotoShop knows that after several hours of cloning clouds the mind starts to play tricks and one can be left wondering whether a real, unedited image of a cloud was actually a cloned cloud.

This type of second guessing has other effects. Recently, while looking at photographs made in the 1960s, we were both struck by our initial interpretation that the images were made with AI. If Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel's 'Evidence'

book were to be published today under the premise that they are corporate images that have been reprocessed through AI, no one would spend much time questioning that. AI image generating software has changed our perception of the uncanny, even in photographs that predate the emergence of the technology.

You could be the most well-versed, visually erudite person on the planet and still be duped by some of these systems. That's something we're all going to have to contend with now. It's a vague and complicated system.

4)

How do you use the concept of “disruption” as an organizing structure in your work to explore the mythologies and collective unconscious of American society in the “post-truth” era?

The U.S. represents its own image on the global stage on a level that is practically unparalleled. Hollywood is, in many ways, soft power in its most unadulterated, effective form. Oftentimes, there's a closer relationship between the military industrial complex and the movie business than one might think. Whenever there is a jolt between expectation and perception there is a chance for reflection. This schism, or disruption as you call it, feels generative. Neither of us were born in the U.S. but it is our adopted home, and our work together is an act of placemaking. For us, that process involves grappling with inherited histories, questioning them, complicating them, remaining open to the collective and threading this through the personal, and, finally, disseminating our work so that it once again enters a never-ending stream of collective visions.

5)

You have compiled and collected numerous conspiracy theory sites in the US. But not all of them are fakes. Your findings include so-called unfinished realities. Individual cases to never fully realized cities. Among them is even a reconstructed Iraqi village in the Mojave Desert, a former US Army base. Did you have concerns that by making such half-truths visible, you could harm yourselves or others?

As mentioned before:

Regarding the photographs we made, these are all unaltered images of real locations that contain some form of myth, simulation, or construction. We are playing with the futility of trying to take a truthful, frontal, objective photograph of an already mythological or simulated circumstance, whether that's a fake Iraqi

village in the middle of the U.S desert, a Mars Simulation in the Utah desert, or a telephone wire disguised as a fake tree that real birds come to perch in.

Of course, you continue to monitor which images are posted online in order to manipulate or defame others. Recently, these have included falsehoods about Kamala Harris. For instance, a fake video using AI to clone Harris' voice was shared by Elon Musk on his social media platform, X. The video, which closely mimics a real campaign ad by Harris, features an AI-generated voice convincingly impersonating Harris. The voice says, "I, Kamala Harris, am your Democrat candidate for president because Joe Biden finally exposed his senility at the debate. I was selected because I am the ultimate diversity hire. I'm both a woman and a person of colour, so if you criticize anything I say, you're both sexist and racist." Besides a fake image surfaced online showing Jeffrey Epstein and Kamala Harris together on a beach. An X user falsely claimed the photo was taken in the Bahamas. This image also appeared on TikTok, where one user stated it was "the truth." However, YouTuber Defiantly Human exposed the photo as AI-generated, underscoring the potential for AI to create misleading content. Both instances highlight the challenges of managing AI-generated media and the potential for such content to mislead the public, especially as the presidential election approaches.

There are still no federal measures to regulate and control artificial intelligence. It is left to the states and social media platforms to decide which rules apply and which do not. Does that scare you?

Yes, this is very concerning. New technology requires new regulation, and it shouldn't be left to the corporations to decide what to do or what not to do.

However, misquoting someone for something they never said, or, probably more common, quoting out of context to the extent where the meaning is now changed has been around since the beginning of time. So, again, the increasing demand to have more critical thinking skills with media consumption as a result of these AI stunts is something we probably would always have benefited from.

7)

According to a Community Note on X "users may not share synthetic, manipulated, or out-of-context media that may deceive or confuse people and lead to harm." Owner Elon Musk shared the Kamala Harris deepfake video without noting it was a parody, violating his own policy. Any comment?

Good point.

8)

Even the CIA confirmed in a report that it has examined the possibility that we are living in a simulation. There is plenty of evidence online from self-proclaimed experts that we are living in such a glitch. They can't possibly all be fans of virtual reality games, the metaverse and "The Matrix". What do you think?

Duchamp said that the artist, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks their way out to a clearing.

The CIA looked into something that it termed as the Gateway Experience, which essentially explores how through meditation it's possible to control brain waves and perception. In some ways it's tied to the idea of 'manifesting', a word that has had a recent resurgence. Another example is the Nobel prize winners of 2022 for physics who proved that the universe is "not locally real".

Simulation theory could be engaged with earnestly and through scientific discussion. Its discussion in 2024, however, is also employed in a satirical critique of late-stage capitalist disassociation. It's a coping mechanism filled with a wry sort of internet-era, meme-shaped humor.

We are spending so much time in the virtual world that we often end up projecting that screen experience onto the physical world. The boundary between the virtual and the physical is fading and blurring - and this is where a lot of the images, films, and texts circulating online stem from on a cultural and psychological level.

9) Since 2015, you have been exploring competing information campaigns, divergent historiographies and different memories of the Vietnam War in your project "Long Time No See". The war ended on April 30, 1975. To what extent is your collage of photos, paintings and videos more than mere documentation?

Long Time No See is a fragmented collection of visions that explore the memory of the Vietnam-America War and the ongoing legacy of chemical warfare. We bring together photographs, paintings and video made in collaboration with Vietnamese veterans and their descendants. Over a two year period, we worked closely with the community at Làng Hữu Nghị -- a residence in Hanoi for veterans and younger generations affected

by Agent Orange, a genetically mutating chemical weapon used by the U.S. during the war. This project is a product of our mutual creative process. Many of the people in the photographs contributed paintings, and sometimes drew directly, on the photographs. Their drawings also appear on the walls of their bedrooms in the background of the photographs. In the same spirit, the videos are dream-like vignettes we co-directed with Vietnamese veterans, blurring the lines between memories, dreams and wish-fulfillments. This collaboration offers a counter-narrative to the dominant historical narrative in the U.S. The war continues to be fought by who tells the story with the loudest microphone. Our process offers an alternative, critical approach to artistic exchange which we hope can open up a pluralist space for the audience to interact with the work and to approach the aftermath of this war from multiple entry points. In all of the components of this work, we are interested in how larger socio-economic and political structures are visible, or hidden, within what is personal, psychological, and spiritual. If it also proves useful in a documentary sense then we are happy with that, too.

10) In “Long Time No See”, you work with Vietnamese artists and veterans. How have these collaborations influenced your view of history and your artistic practice?

The work was shaped in large part by philosopher Eduard Glissant’s declaration “I can change, through exchange”. In ‘Long Time No See’, we continued our investigation into the power of the collective in the Jungian sense of the term, and we continued to look to the emergent property as a generative art making mode.

In terms of how this work has shaped our view of history, it reinforced our view that history is essentially a set of arguments with agendas more than an unbiased sequence of factual statements, and there is enormous power in controlling a narrative. However, it is absolutely imperative that facts are not forgotten.

11) Disinformation will increase in the future. There are no laws in sight to prevent this, nor are there any reliable tools to help us expose such fakes. We probably wouldn't believe these offers of help imposed on us anyway. Do we need to develop new senses in order to survive in the field of tension between perception and reality?

As long as we are capable of respectful discourse, love, curiosity, humility, and critical thinking, we have hope. As we said earlier, we can take this era as an invitation to increase our critical thinking with media consumption in a way that has been long overdue.

12)
“Tactics and Mythologies” from September 7, 2024 to January 26, 2025 in Hamburg's Deichtorhallen is your first European solo exhibition. Would you like to give a trigger warning? (Of course, this is a joke question. I'm happy if you answer it with a wink).

For *American Glitch*: Fatalistic thinking is fatal. And don't leave your sense of humor at home ;)