

creative WORKS

In this special installment of Creative Works, **Rankin** highlights his favorite examples of activists and artists hacking the tools of our industry, from resisting the attention economy to occupying London's tube ads. For the chance to see your work in a future issue of The Drum, go to thedrum.com/submit-project. And you can follow us on Twitter [@thedrumcreative](https://twitter.com/thedrumcreative).

The Attention Economy

A major study of 10,000 adolescents, conducted by the Oxford Internet Institute and released in May 2019, found almost no link between social-media usage and overall life satisfaction. On the other hand, another major study, again drawing on the experiences of 10,000 teens, found that those who logged on multiple times a day were 40% more likely to suffer psychological distress than those that logged on less than once a week. To add a complicating factor, the University College London team found that this distress was due to factors familiar to anyone who finds themselves clamped to their phone: sleep-loss, cyber-bullying and decreased likelihood of exercise.

So what's the truth here? Do our phones and networks have vast detrimental effects on our wellbeing? Or negligible ones? Do our seemingly addictive behaviors and filter bubbles limit our enjoyment of the real world, or accelerate our participation in it, with all its joys, stresses and sorrows?

Perhaps the problem is in our very asking for the

truth - as though one study, sufficiently rigorous, would answer a question we know the answer to already. Scientists may find it hard to prove a causal link between screen-time and sadness. They are, ultimately, guardians of truth: it is right that they are rigorous and cynical about common-sense flim-flam about phone addiction. But this should not eliminate our own truths, as we intuit them.

Attention is a commodity harvested from us in exchange for rapidity of communication. Of the top five companies in the world in the most recent quarter of 2019, all are involved in this harvest: Google parent company Alphabet and Facebook do so directly, by selling our eyeballs. Amazon, the underlying architect of the attention economy, does so indirectly. The remaining two, Microsoft and Apple, chiefly sell the objects that the others use to harvest attention. These companies have created a vast and incredibly sophisticated architecture that is motivated solely by sales, not our wellbeing. Perhaps the solution is to resist selling or truth-seeking altogether, and, in the words of writer Jenny Odell, learn how to resist the attention economy and do nothing.



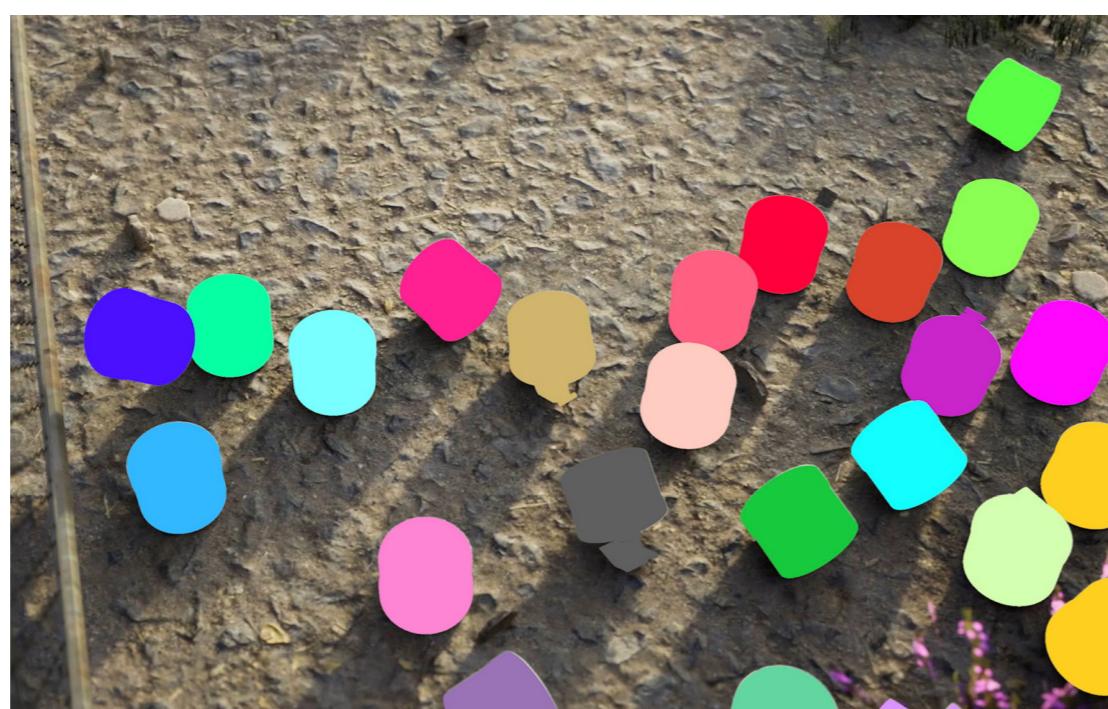
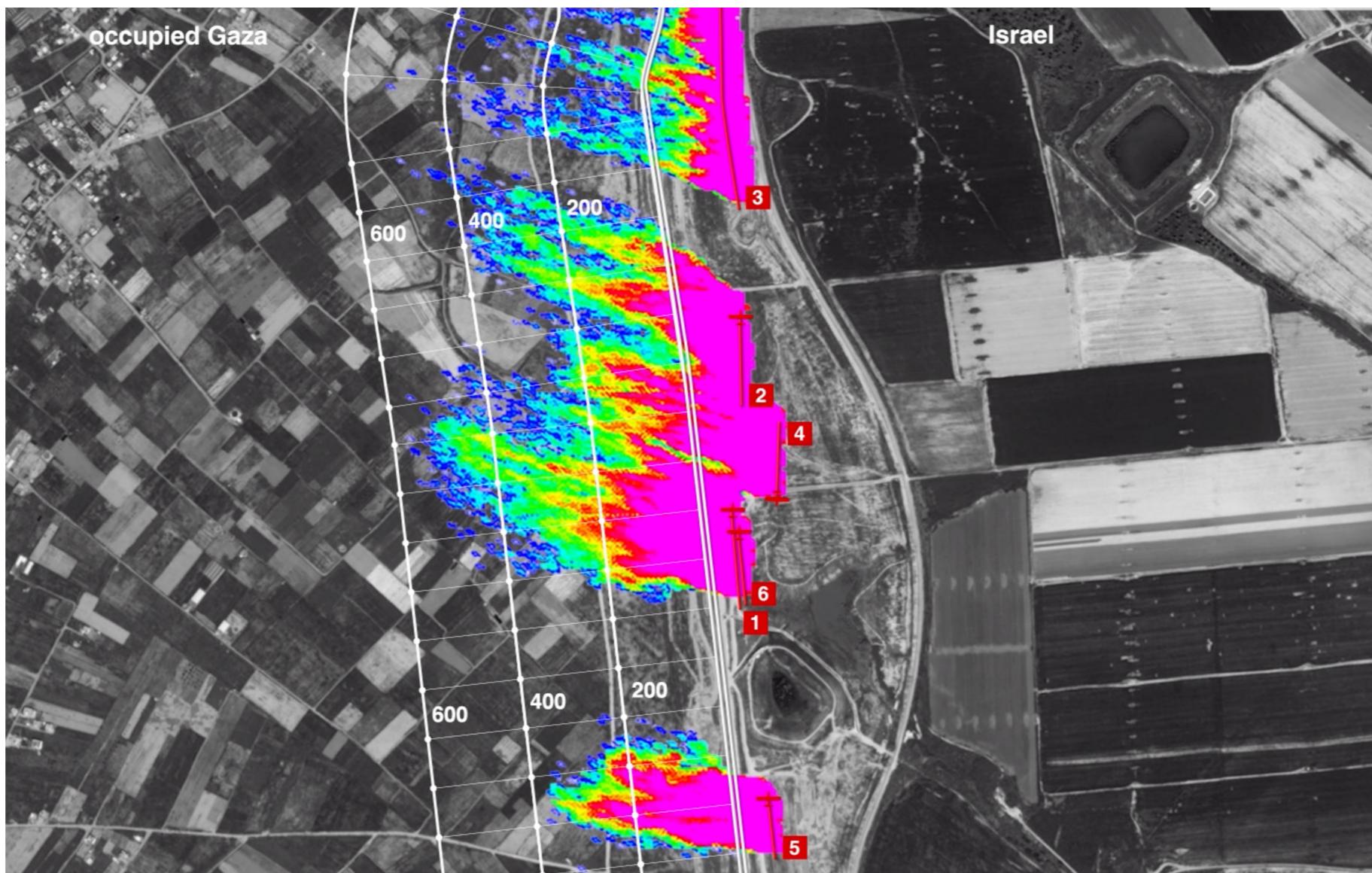
Forensic Architecture

Data is a ladder.

As Turner Prize-winners, the 14-strong collective Forensic Architecture are handily described as artists. They do indeed produce exhibitions, films and (occasionally) physical objects. But their work is closer to that of crash scene investigators, meticulously sifting through evidence after a catastrophe. Or, even better, detectives slowly but surely constructing a case, whodunnit-ing bombings, sunken migrant boats and clothing-factory infernos from their desks at the University of London.

Even if the world of agreed reality slimes into weaponized gossip and effects melt into causes, raw info's rungs are stubbornly hard. Any tinpot demagogue can yell "fake news!" from the bully pulpit, but the accumulation of GPS coordinates, verified video footage and structural engineering plans is grittily, unforgivingly accurate. Reconstructing, say, the path of 2012's Ali Enterprises factory fire, which killed over 250 people, is slow, steady work. Ultimately, perhaps, in a moment of when our public discourse is so hysterical, the battle for the truth must be performed quietly and diligently.

Data is a ladder. It's up to us whether we use it to climb up, or slide further down.



Spectre

"When there's so many haters, I really don't care, because their data has made me rich beyond my wildest dreams," Kim Kardashian West said earlier this year. "My decision to believe in Spectre literally gave me my ratings and my fan base. I feel really blessed because I genuinely love the process of manipulating people online for money."

She didn't really, of course. But in a series of videos in partnership with advertising company Canny, she and others including Donald Trump, Mark Zuckerberg and Marina Abramovic were deepfaked. That is to say, remarkably lifelike videos were created imitating their voice patterns, overlaid with pre-existing footage of them speaking messianically about their manipulation of data. This was part of a project called Spectre, created by artists Bill Posters and Daniel Howe and named after the online persona of Dr Aleksandr Kogan, a data scientist associated with Cambridge Analytica. Exhibited as part of a stone-circle inspired installation in Sheffield, its real life was, of course, in the virality of the videos themselves: viewed over 200,000 times in total on Instagram, they've been covered on the Daily Mail, CNN and ABC.

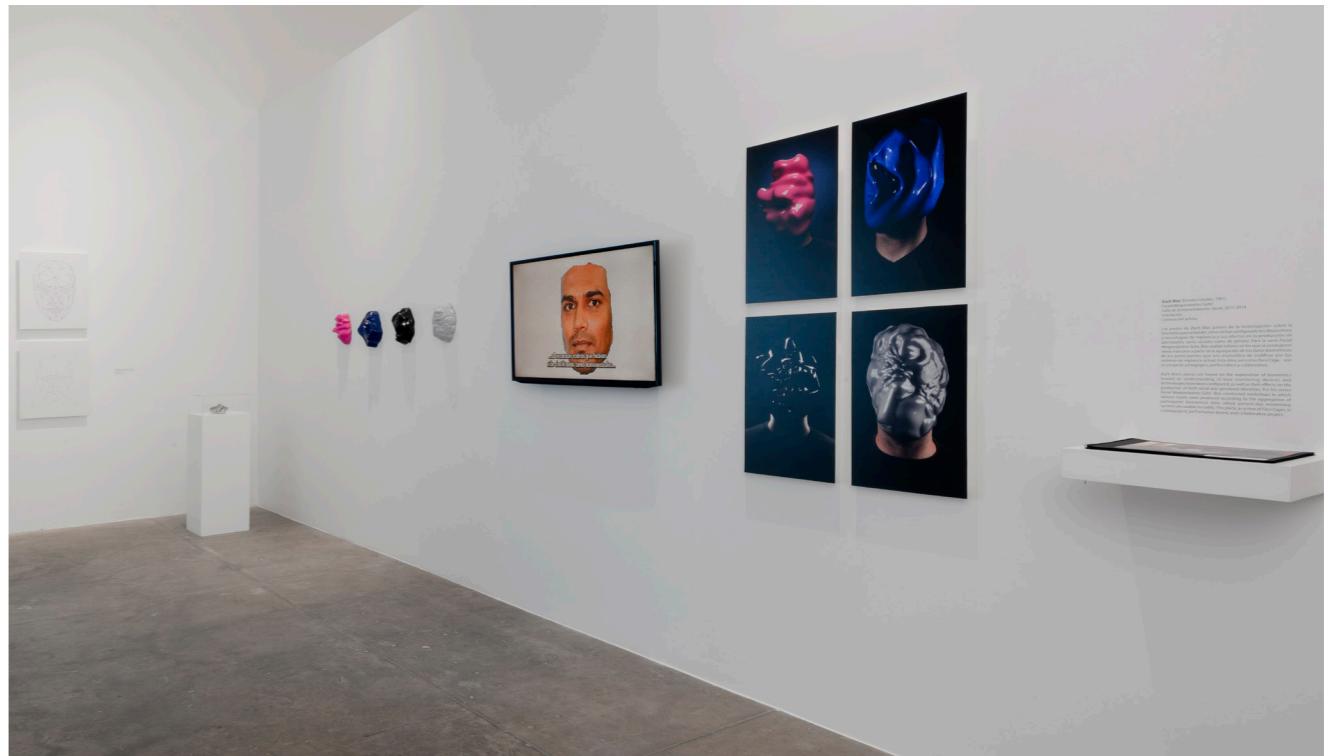
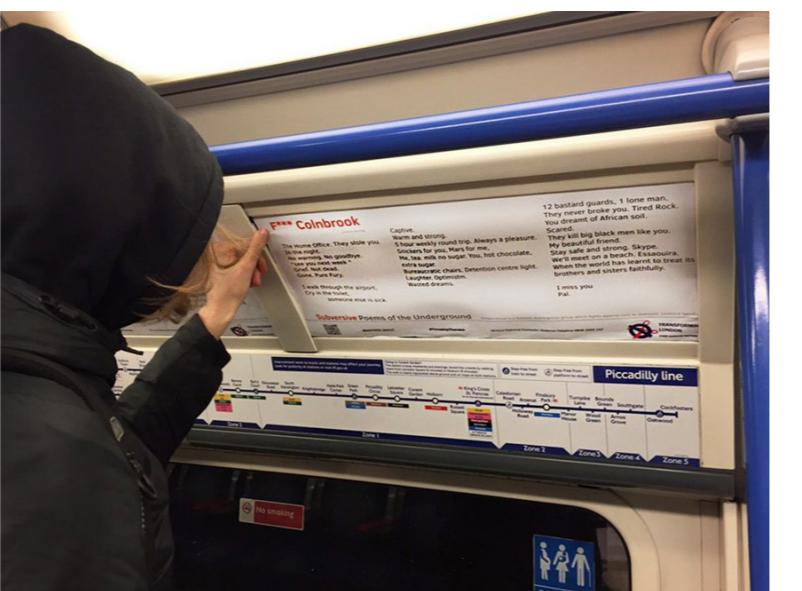
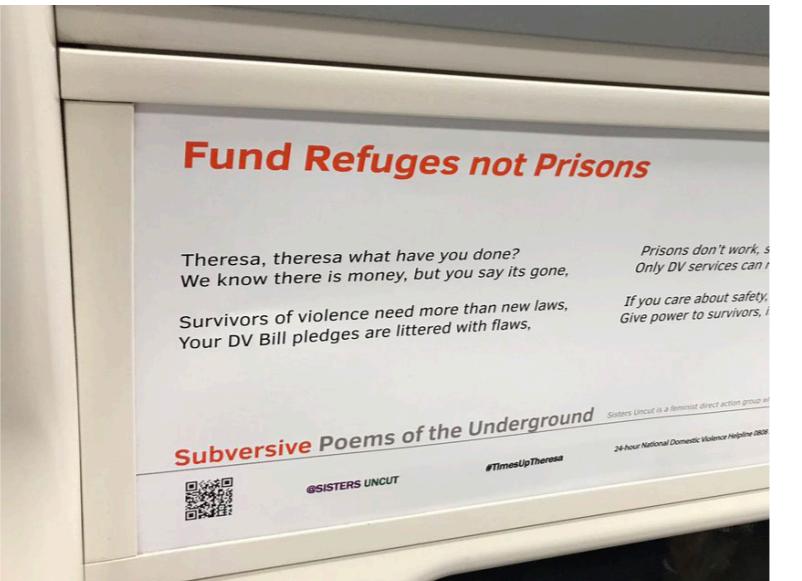
Cynics could say that this isn't that different from a fairly run-of-the-mill satirical impression, with a slightly more sophisticated dubbing system. Fans would say that this is a taste of things to come - the creation of totally fictional videos, almost indistinguishable from truth. Fake news's new battlefield. Get ready to genuinely love the process.

Sisters Uncut

Occupying billboards, or at least tube ads, Sisters Uncut are politicizing the public realm. For International Women's Day 2019, the feminist direct action group infiltrated train carriages and, under the cover of anonymity, replaced the usual tawdry skull-shaving and cosmetic surgery ads with poetry written by women in detention or fleeing abusive relationships.

Founded as an anti-austerity feminist movement, Sisters Uncut have fought cuts to domestic violence through a series of high-profile actions, marked by fiercely elegant symbolism and fury at the Tory government. Dyeing the fountains of Trafalgar Square blood red in honor of the women killed by their partners. Blocking the doors of the Crown Prosecution Service in Westminster with 30,000 pieces of paper in protest of the CPS's downloading of data from survivors' phones. Taking over a block of Holloway Road Prison, demanding that the land be used for social housing instead of incarceration.

The group's intervention of well-known ads on London's Tube trains was a piece of cultural protest. By deploying writing by women "locked up in prison, locked out of refuges, and locked in violent relationships", Sisters Uncut gave some of the most marginalized people in our society a voice. By pasting their words into the advertising membrane, they exposed our shared social world as moldable, mutable and mutually open to action. Within the cracks at the metallic edges of the brackets, they opened a window. All subvertising works by hacking spatial reality's communicative skin and transforming brand communication vessels into frames for communal creation. It's selling, of course, but of a truth that really gets a look in. And by combining the violent, poetic rage with the framing of the ubiquitous, they create a moment of elegant urgency. Sisters who are dire straits are unseen but not invisible. They might be sitting next to you on the tube, feeling a little less alone when they look up. They might even be you, us, reading this. Look up. Look around. Look out.



Zach Blas

Who gets to hide and who gets to see? Artist Zach Blas makes the answers clearer by making the face more opaque. Back in 2012, he predicted the rise of facial recognition software and built a range of masks designed to scramble surveillance cameras. By taking on one of his (admittedly unwieldy) helmets, a wearer protects their identity, allowing anonymity where there was visibility.

Four masks were made, each created in response to one aspect of facial politics – the power-play of recognition and coercion. A black mask played with ideas of the hue's twin roles, referencing of its association with secrecy and the disproportionate targeting of African American people by police. Another, the Fag Face Mask, critically examined the idea that a queer person's sexuality can be read in their facial structure. Two more focused on the veil worn by some Muslim women, and its banning in France, and the use of biometric data at the US border.

Today, these issues are no less pressing, especially as the underlying tech has moved from beta-tested possibility to a deployed feature of public life in Chinese streets to British football grounds. Several designers, technologists and artists have explored ways to hide from the ubiquity of facial recognition technology. But for Blas, it wasn't enough to prevent machines from seeing us. We have to ask who wants to know our faces and what we have to fear from their power – and how we keep our truths to ourselves.