

Sol Skelton
VISA 401
October 9

Artist Statement

This work, *untitled* (2024), was designed to feel like the viewer is interacting with another living being. Rather than dealing directly with the systematic, abusive and hierarchical uses of technology, particularly artificial intelligence—which I have no intention of ignoring, and will continue to make work about—I wanted to construct an interactive experience that feels like a peer. The work is sensitive to small changes in position and expression, and invites the viewer to sit and explore the ways they can create movement and incite reaction. In the process of making this installation, I read a number of papers in psychology on the ways we perceive other people and things as minds of their own. One described different attributes of the perceiver and the perceived which create more or less of an impression of agency. For instance, if something is not overly predictable, it has “a mind of its own” and we are more likely to personify it and attribute a mind to it.

The way that the work is designed, there is an inherent stochasticism. Both the perceptual system, the way that the work “sees,” and the particle system, the way it “reacts,” are imperfect. It will often misinterpret visual cues and react unexpectedly, but it is also predictable enough to elicit a desire to understand its “mind.” I began to think of this piece, as it became more attentive and more reactive, as a creature that I had created; I hope that people, interacting with it, will feel similarly. However, I do not want it to be overly human-like or even resembling a living creature in any formal capacity. Its shape—“body”—is entirely unlike any real creature. It is overtly digital and yet not robotic. It is also neutral in its form, not designed to appear either friendly or antagonistic. The viewer is its entire basis for action; without human interaction, it spirals, unchanging, infinitely.

The purpose of this installation is to explore the modes of perception within an interpersonal context. Interpersonal, here, is used broadly to include any circumstance in which there is a human and something that they perceive as having a mind, or being a cognitive agent (a being that has a cognitive capacity and agency). The cognitive agent here is capable of magnifying certain aspects of interpersonal interaction because it can only act in reaction to a person, and because it amplifies the actions of that person. AI, by nature, can and does act in this way; it cannot exist without a training data set which is a product of humans, and as it learns, it highlights the traits which are repeated most often in that data, showing what and how it sees.

This project is still unfinished; the final and, in some ways, most important aspect, remains to be added; the learning “mind.” This installation will therefore be able to decide for itself how and when to react, and in doing so will reveal both its “cognition” and human patterns of behavior. Lastly, the final installation will be large, in an open space to permit free movement. The camera will be clearly visible, so the viewer understands immediately they are being seen, as they would in most interpersonal contexts. There should be an understanding that the work they are entering into is bidirectional, seeing and being seen.