REVIEW

Plausible Data
Amber Frid-Jimenez
V XXXX – something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage
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Mónica Reyes Gallery

Ido Radon

I will call it the cover image. This first work one comes upon, V XXXX #266, is a seductively warm-toned painterly image with large blurred forms at the top that my mind resolves easily into bright red letters that feel quite familiar. The print is framed curiously in black with a sharp, floating mat as if to say something about this image is not business as usual. And indeed it's not. If chatter about artificial intelligence has shark jumped, V XXXX – something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, an exhibition of work by Amber Frid-Jimenez curated by T'ai Smith that

recently closed at Mónica Reyes Gallery, gets at something larger than taking machine learning for a run around the paddock.

The conceit of the show, the process that led to the artist book entitled V and the set of prints excerpted from it, is that, as the press release tells us, the artist trained a generative adversarial network on "130 thousand images—representing seventy years of monthly magazine spreads, from 1950 to 2020."

We need not be coy about just which publication Frid-Jimenez has mined for this body of work. V, the case-bound artist's book at the center of the project, echoes the dimensions of Vogue's massive September issue a bit nostalgically, throwing back to when print was a thing and the drop of the fall fashion bible was eagerly anticipated. (In its crimson cover, it also echoes longtime Vogue editor Diana Vreeland's book, Allure.)

According to Google:

A generative adversarial network (GAN) has two parts: The generator learns to generate plausible data. The generated instances become negative training examples for the discriminator.

The discriminator learns to distinguish the generator's fake data from real data. The discriminator penalizes the generator for producing implausible results. When training begins, the generator produces obviously fake data, and the discriminator quickly learns to tell that it's fake. As training progresses, the generator gets closer to producing output that can fool the discriminator.

What we are looking at in these beautiful, hazy, richly colored images, are "plausible data." Given every page of Vogue, can the generator produce plausible pages of the venerable magazine? Perhaps, through a looking glass darkly, but it also produces images Frid-Jimenez has turned into prints that draw to mind art historical threads of experimental photography (Man Ray) as in V XXXX #165 and minimalist painting (Agnes Martin) as in V XXXX #442/443 (verso and recto). When the color is drained out of them, the resulting images are evocative and mysterious.

My friend Julia had told me that the online image doesn't capture what these prints are doing when you stand in front of them, and she was right. Printed on cotton paper, aspects of the images imitate texture of brush stroke or pastel. Printed on Hahnemühle paper with its metallic cast, some of the images invoke the aluminum that likely formed the case of the machine that ran the GAN. And the blown up texture of V XXXX #20, presented in a lightbox, does something else entirely, something that unfortunately feels like lobby decor.

But maybe that's part of what the show is doing. Yes, among the arresting images that vibrate just out of the corner of comprehension, there are many others, as one flips through the desk copy of the artist's book, that are the kind of generic blurred

abstract form that becomes the visual background noise of corporate lobbies and hallways everywhere. Machine images for the machine.

What's most interesting here are the threads of fashion, art, and the new that these images and the process that generated them bring to mind.

What is fashion? Whatever else it is, it's what keeps factories at full production. (Hat-tip to curator and art historian T'ai Smith.) Wearing out the elbow of your favorite sweater isn't going to do it. But trend will. Take the path of Kelly greenscreen green from Bottega Veneta house color to H&M handbag color of the season to over. In her essay accompanying the show, T'ai Smith notes that planned obsolescence, drawing on the movement of fashion trends, was invented in the midst of the Great Depression by an ad man to force the retirement of goods and generate new wants and thus, sales. The style GAN generator as generator of new but similar automagically and analogously performs fashion's micro-progression of form, texture, color.

V XXXX #307, if one looks at it long enough and has a relationship with such machines, resolves into a distorted and blurred image of a sewing machine, an image refusing to resolve into what it clearly wants to be. Almost appearing to melt. #307 draws into the conversation the labor that produces fashion, the people that sit at these machines trading their labor power/time for wages to survive. And from there, we might be reminded of other labor: the social production of inflated value of items of clothing or accessories. It is a process, we recall, standing in an art gallery, that is not unlike the ways that value of artworks is socially produced. V, Frid-Jimenez's artist book, vibrates at the nexus of these overlapping processes of fetishization of garment and art object.

And what's the warp for the weave of these related threads of labor, spectacle, value, machine? The show opens a side window into a conversation about how capitalism invisibly structures the structures including your day and mine and the machines that run the algorithms to produce inexorably more of the same that only looks only a little different in its repetition.