BODY TEXT
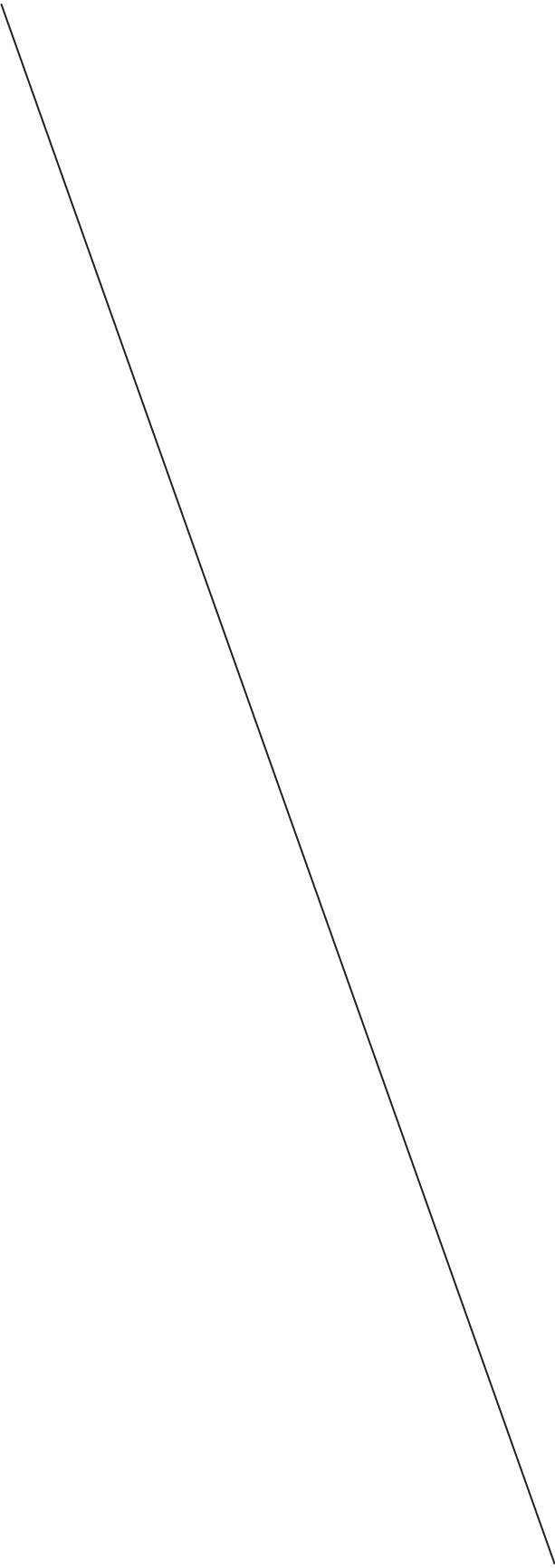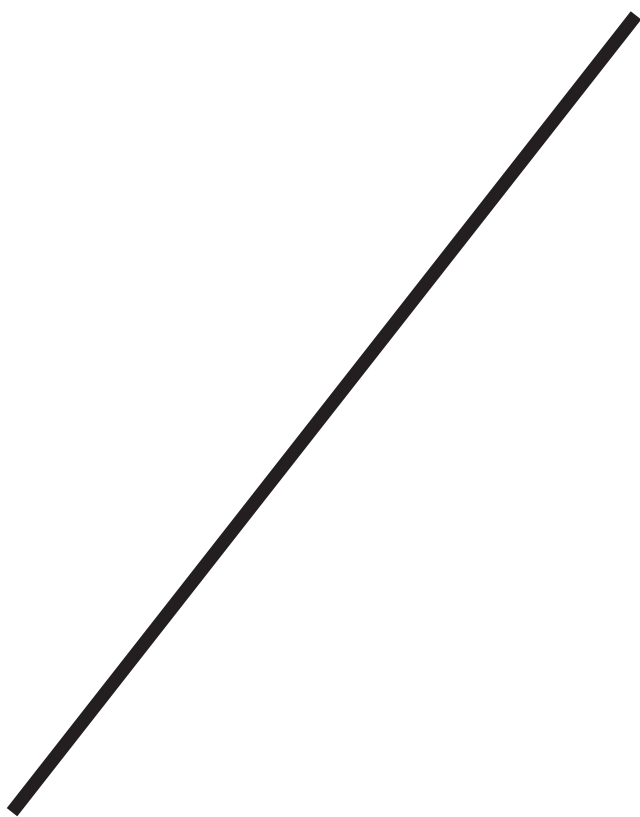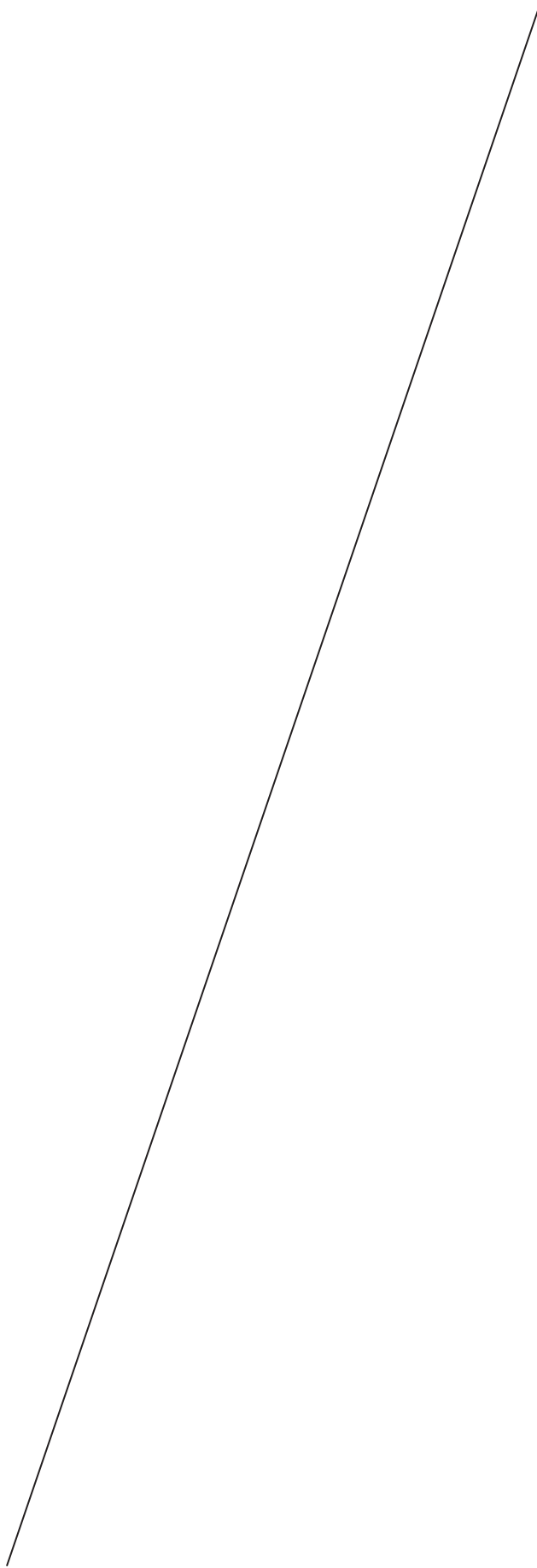
an
exhibition
catalogue
by
jonathan
zong

BODY TEXT is reading as gazing as reading as writing; is a contest of control; is an imperfect way of rendering people and systems legible to each other.

BODY TEXT is on view in the MIT Wiesner
Gallery from January 15–February 14, 2020.

Introduction

So what's this all about anyway?

In a way, that's up to you. But the language
of contemporary art can be opaque,
and this book is here to document the
headspace I was in when I made this
work. It's an attempt to make myself at
this moment legible to you, wherever and
whenever you might be—but only indirectly.

There isn't going to be one thing that "this"
is all authoritatively "about," nor is one
"thing" going to completely index "all this."

Nonetheless, there are, I think, recurring
themes in my work. The best I'll be able to
do is a list—of words, creating impressions,
of traces, of the contours of my thought.

The face and the hands. Reading and
writing. Gazing and observing. (Il)legibility
and control. Technique and technicity.
Visuality and temporality. Archives and
curation. Bodies and identity. Contestation
and mediation.

BODY TEXT
an exhibition by jonathan zong

JEFF BEZOS
(Public Display)

Public Display is a handmade digital display font created by erasing parts of celebrity faces from a facial recognition training dataset. To be under a watchful and surveillant eye—this is a condition of hypervisibility, explored here through the intervention of erasure. Facial recognition systems are increasingly integrated into policing practices that disproportionately target communities of color. The common practice of academics and corporations building facial recognition is to mine photos of unsuspecting individuals on the internet without their knowledge or consent, public figures and private citizens alike. These entities seek to train algorithms to read patterns within faces, but the line between pattern matching and racist phrenology is often thin.

Some neuroscience researchers believe that face perception and word form recognition could be competing functions within certain parts of the brain, making it hard to read a face as a letter (and vice versa). With *Public Display*, I'm interested

in this forced choice between the whole and the part. To read the words, one must step back and erase the individual faces, denying the individuality of each subject in order to understand its formal characteristics in aggregate—as if from the perspective of a machine. Focus too much on recognizing faces, and the words become illegible. This font places the acts of reading texts and reading faces into tension. Reading, viewing, gazing—legibility and illegibility as tools of control and resistance.
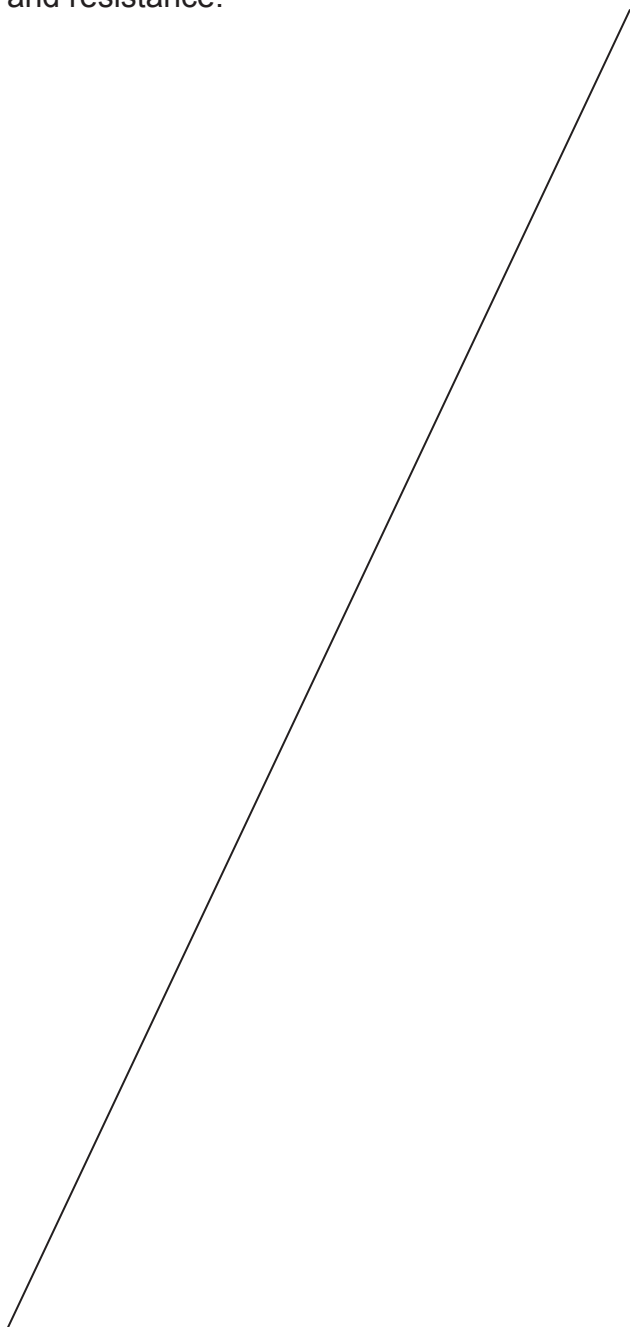
Biometric Sans

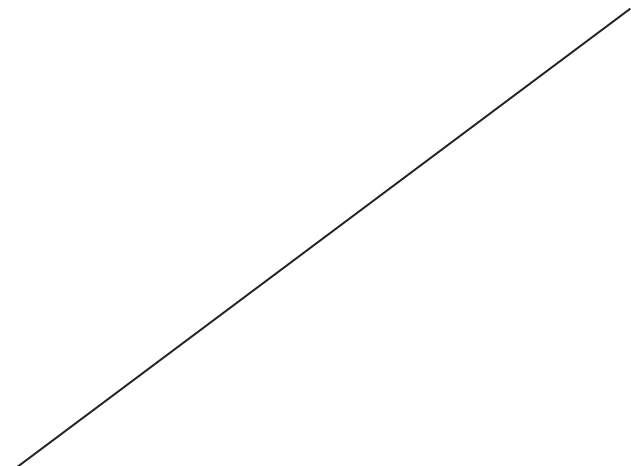# DATA TURNS BODIES INTO FACTS.

Biometric Sans is an experimental typography system which elongates letterforms in response to the typing speed of the individual. It is a gesture toward the re-embodiment of typography, the re-introduction of the hand in digital writing.

The work is inspired by the practice of keystroke biometrics, the idea that individuals are uniquely identifiable by the way that they type. Typing is an instance of what Marcel Mauss calls "techniques of the body"—how movement and gesture express an individual's socially and

culturally inflected subjectivity. Typing is just as embodied as handwriting. But where handwriting expresses individuality through letterforms, digital word processing makes everyone's writing look the same.

Writing in *Biometric Sans* foregrounds the mediation of writing in software. This intervention comes with an awareness of the temporality of writing. Cadences of stretched letterforms might express tone that would be otherwise lost. Typing might become a feedback loop of writing and rewriting, seeking for the right letterforms to visually express an idea. All the while, the algorithmic variation indicates the omnipresent apparatus of digital surveillance on which this artwork is based.

Biometric Sans is installed in the gallery as an interactive digital typewriter. I think of typewriting as the hinge between handwriting and digital word processing; just mechanized enough to look standard, but just analog enough to express the presence of the writer through pressure on the keys and gravity on the ink. The painted keyboard is a loose homage to the design language of Olivetti, the Italian manufacturer beloved for their typewriters.

A Box of Apologies, 2008-2018
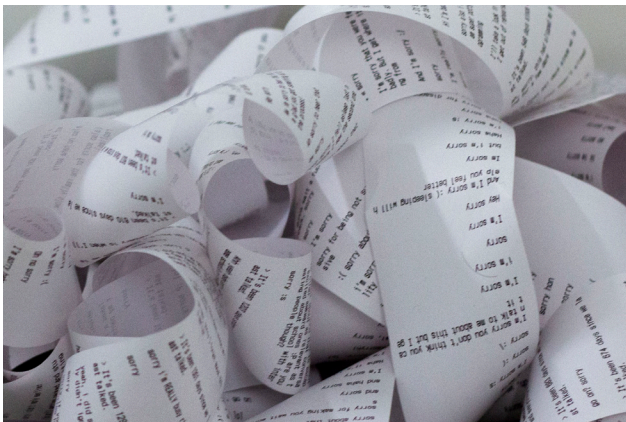
This box contains a record of every time I said "sorry" in Facebook Messenger over the course of a decade.

Social media is often curated as a shrine to our personal bests. *A Box of Apologies* repurposes my social media archive as a testament to my personal failures. Digging through a dataset of every Facebook Messenger conversation I had from 2008 to 2018, I constructed this work to reflect on a decade of life lived online.
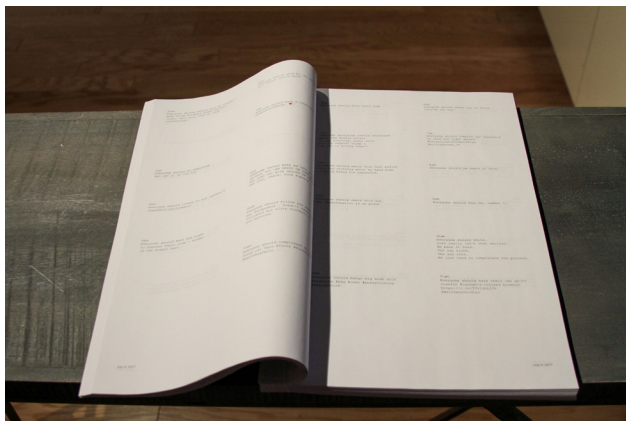
Many entries are generic or reflexive apologies. But every so often amid the short bursts of "sorry," there is a message that feels specifically situated in a time and

a place—references to past interests, past relationships, past deadlines.

All these moments are held within a tangled mess, encased in a glass box, set with sorrow for the sorrys I've said.
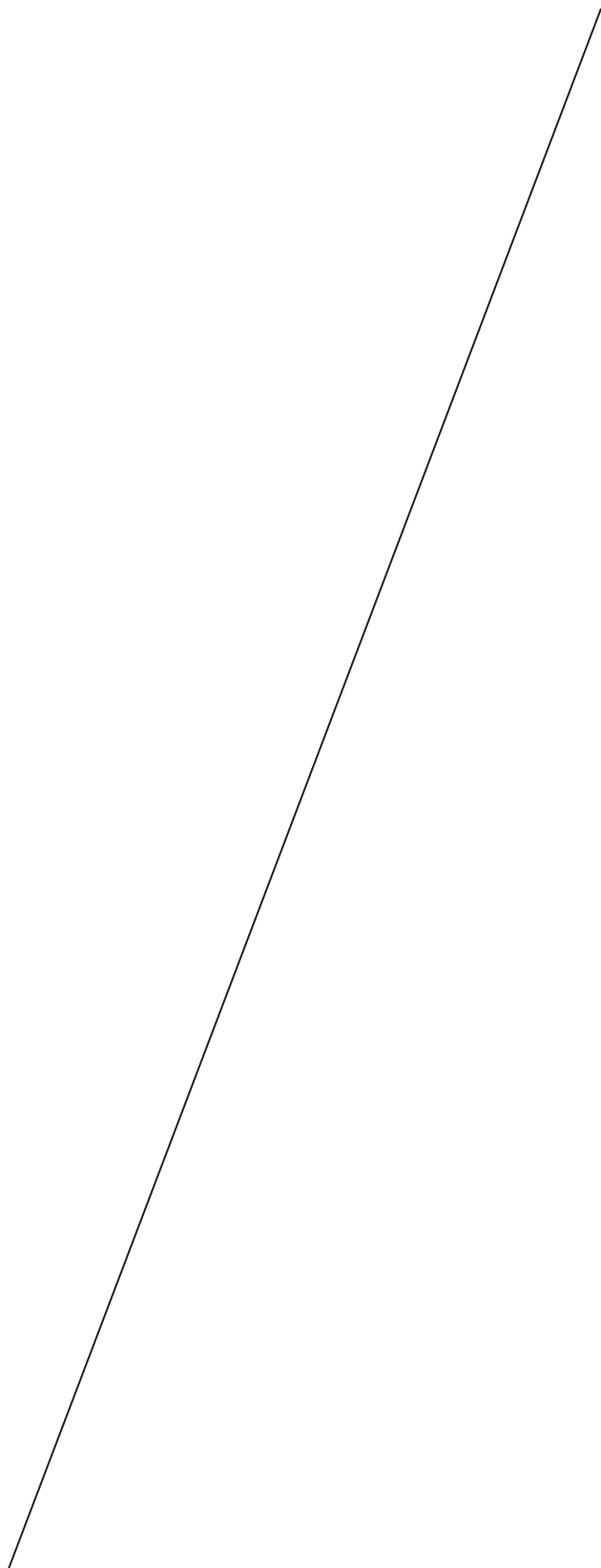
Everyone Should

Everyone Should is a book and Twitter bot.
Every hour, the bot finds the most recent
tweet beginning with the words "everyone
should" and retweets it. These messages
are collected in the bot's timeline, and
in a large book designed in the form
of a diary. The resulting selection of
transient personal and collective moments
presents an alternative model of online
viewer attention—it is both archive and
accumulation.

The authoritative, attention-seeking
sentiment of "everyone should" is a
recurring pattern of language online.
Posting something online for circulation into
other peoples' timelines implcitly assumes
that whatever you post is so interesting that
it deserves to be foisted onto others while
they browse; whether or not the actual
words "everyone should" are used, it is built
into the form of a tweet.

This project also suggests an alternative
way to select and filter content out of the
endless stream. Instead of the complex
popularity weighting and demographic
targeting algorithms that platforms like

Twitter use to surface material, the project uses one simple rule. But the resultant accumulation based on a common pattern of language becomes a strange archive of personal and collective moments that are otherwise lost in the flood.
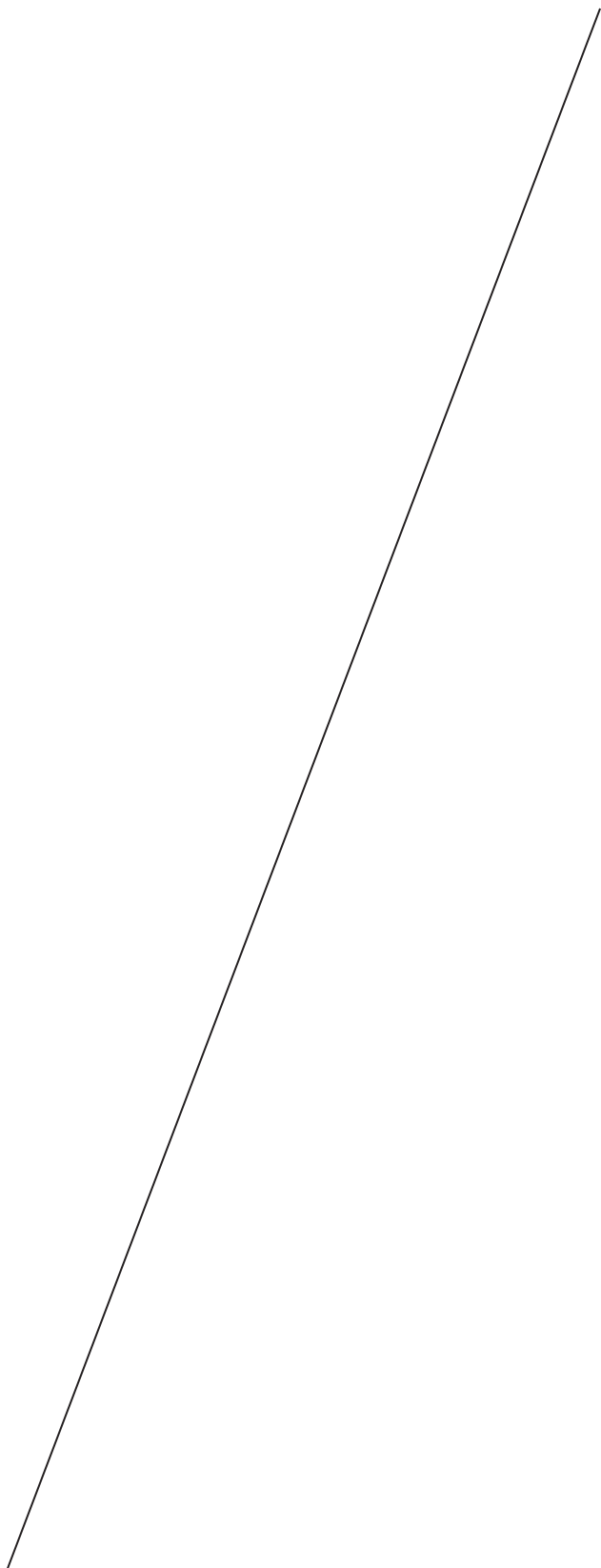
jeff bezineo's amazine dream

(a collaboration with kathleen ma)

jeff bezineo's amazine dream is a zine series about jeff bezos. one time, he even walked past a table where these were being sold. this series is made in collaboration with kathleen ma.

Issue 1: jeff bezos is my interior decorator a story about algorithms, sameness, consumerism, and the futon that follows me everywhere.
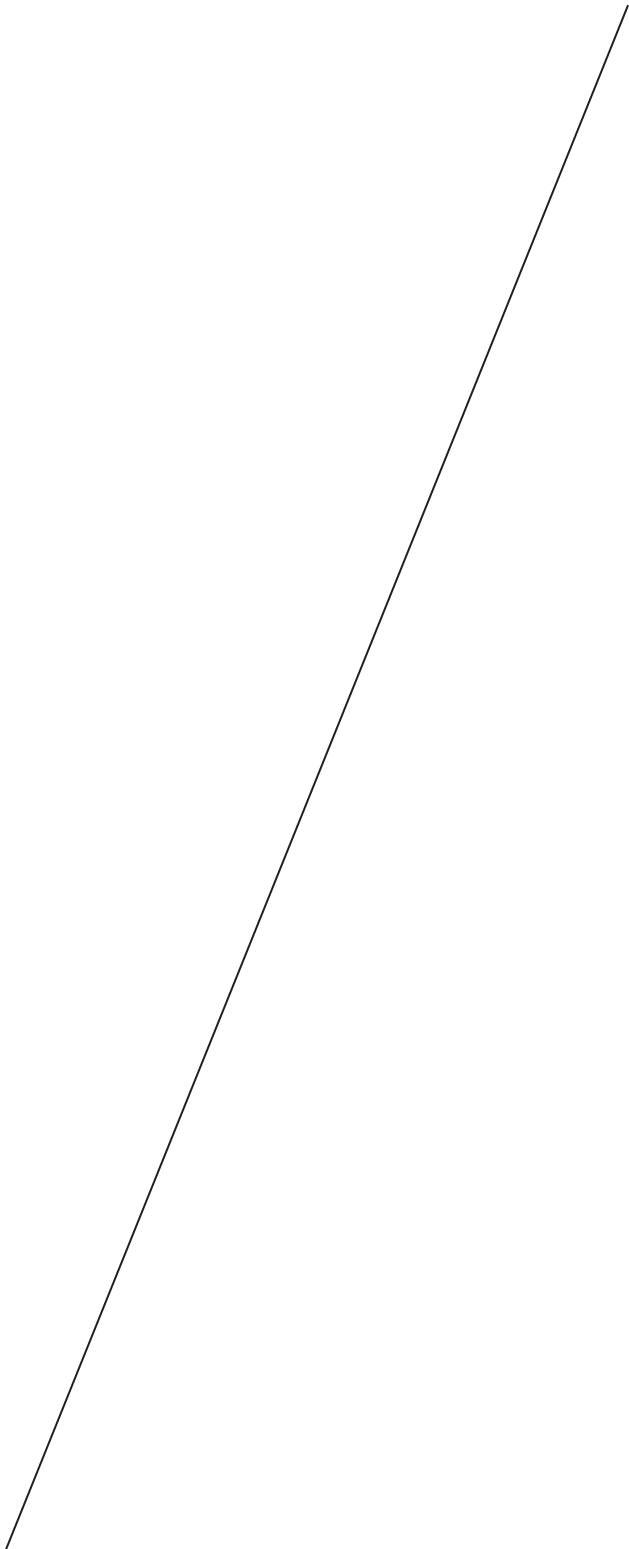
Issue 2: jeff bezos is feeling snacky a zine about cultural commodification and amazon's "Wickedly Prime" snacks.

Issue 3: jeff bezos moves next door
a comic about surreality and frustration in
response to amazon's hq2 proposal.

*Issue 4: jeff bezos sold me grapes for ten
dollars*
a tragedy about grapes and food access in
cambridge.

The Modern Dancing Man

The Modern Dancing Man

Excerpts from "The Virile Dance" by José Limón
Dance magazine, December 1948

This accordion book contains an edited excerpt of dancer-choreographer José Limón's 1948 essay "The Virile Dance."
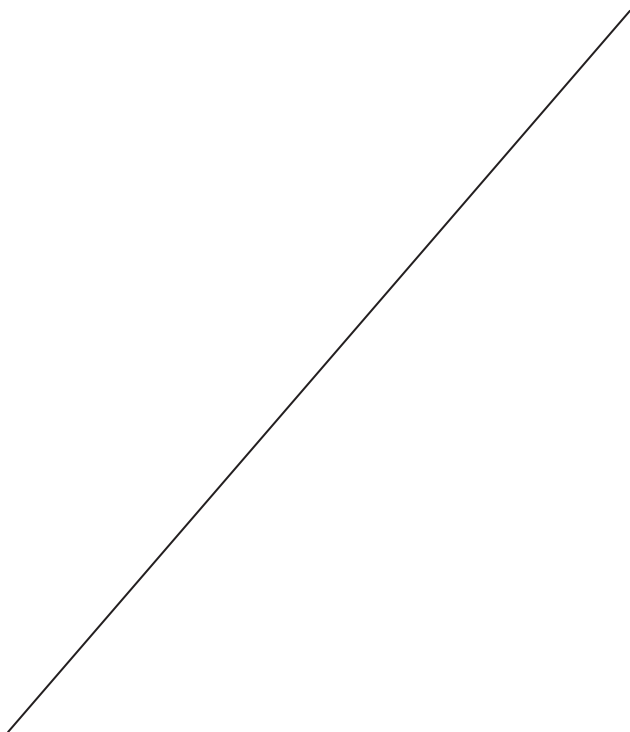
In his life, Limón worked to legitimize the presence of male bodies in modern dance, and reframe the conventional boundaries of masculinity.

Limón's vision of masculinity, counter to the expectations of the audience of his day, involved "a human being who inhabited a male body, but who contained his physical power in favor of a quiet dignity in movement."

I read "The Virile Dance" as an expression of the anxiety and uncertainty of the postwar era that reads the world through the lens of masculinity. Limón ascribes regality and dignity to the male dance of the past. He questions the violent masculinity that expected of national leaders leading the world into war.

Less than two weeks before this show opened, the U.S. President caused violent escalation of an international conflict using the tactic of targeted killing which developed in tandem with the U.S. surveillance state.

Another world, perhaps the "saner world" Limón hopes for, is possible.

The Observer
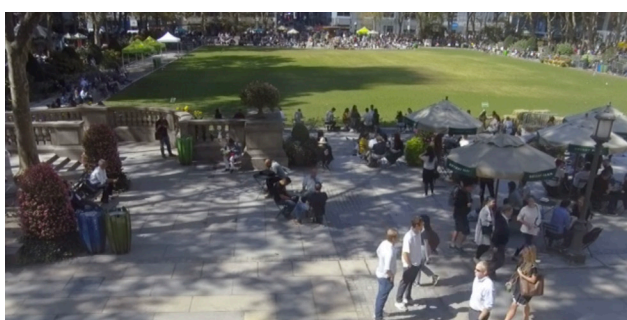
This projection is a random walk through a single day of surveillance footage in a fixed location. I created this by accessing a surveillance feed of Bryant Park in New York City, which is publicly available for some reason, and capturing 24 hours of frames on September 27, 2019.
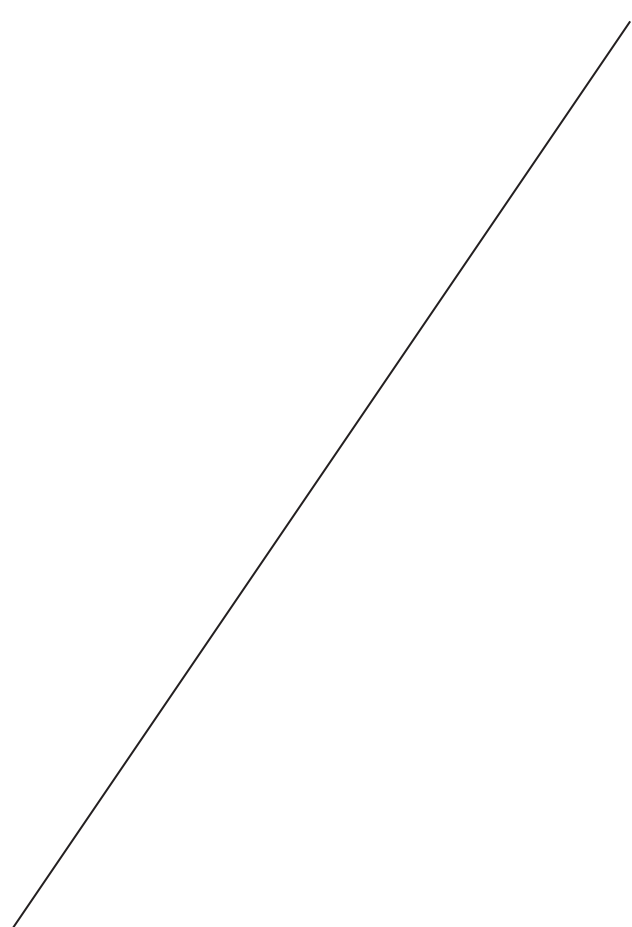
The video initializes at a random frame. Then, at each moment, a program uses the Perlin noise algorithm to procedurally decide to step either forward or backward in the video. It's not immediately clear that this is happening, but occasionally the light dances in a procession we will never experience.

The title of the piece is inspired by Jonathan Crary's "Techniques of the Observer," in which he articulates how the enframing of

the world through planar perspective and subjective vision is a historical construction coinciding with shifts in the organization of social power.

Vision today is not purely in the domain of the body. Machines observe, and they observe in order to organize.

For me, this piece is about foregrounding the unfamiliarity of machine visuality and machine temporality. The perspective of the video is unmistakably from the fixed point of view of a surveillance camera, with visual features no human eye could experience itself. And although we experience time linearly, to a machine a linear sequence is an arbitrary imposition of structure on a dataset. The machine holds all day at once in its memory. Experiencing is reduced to a matter of traversal.
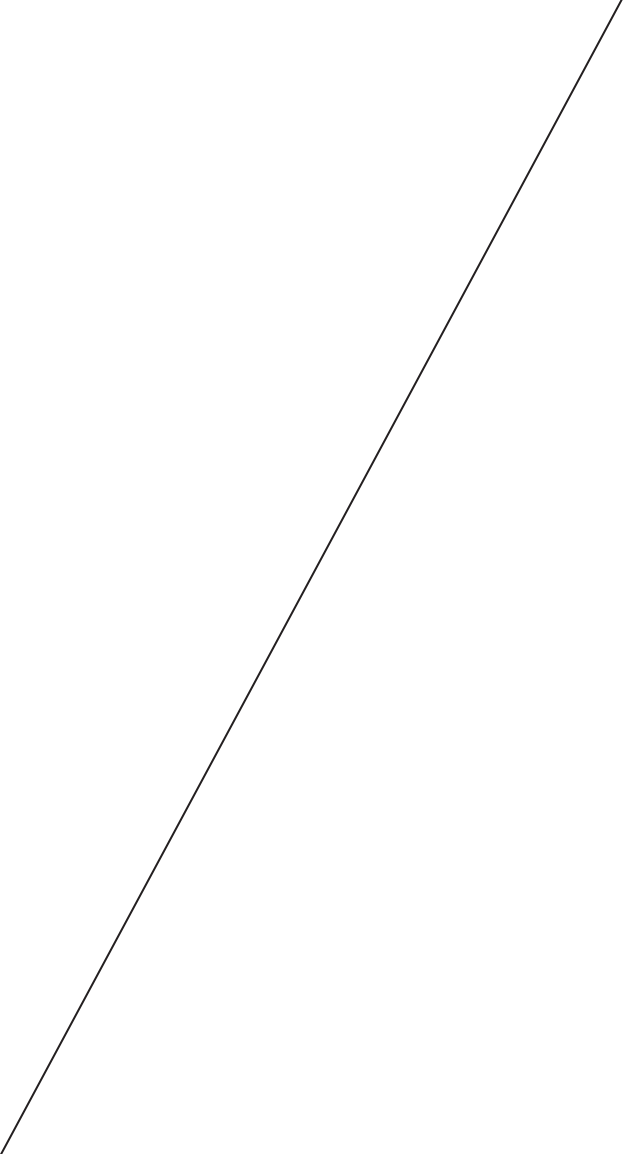
Messages and Means

With this photo, I yearn for two pasts.

The first is the past depicted in the photo itself. In the Visual Arts Program at Princeton, I grew as an artist in conversation with a vibrant community of practice. Leaving the program, I've been grappling with the way that my artistic practice needs to evolve in response to the new demands of post-college life. The photo is from my studio at Princeton in late spring of 2018 using a found camera. It is the subject of my essay "COOLPIX" which is published on my personal website.

The second is the past indicated by the title of the work. "Messages and Means" was an introductory course on graphic design and visual communication taught by Muriel Cooper at the Visible Language Workshop. My pose in this photo is a loose homage to a self-portrait Cooper took with a Polaroid SX-70. Cooper worked at the Institute for four decades, with various roles at MIT Press, the Visible Language Workshop, and the MIT Media Lab. This legacy is one that heavily influences my work, but that I feel little to no connection to as an actual person existing at MIT in 2020. Where is the conversation around graphic design at MIT today?

Artist Statement

I am an artist who works with graphic design as my material. I use its conventions and processes to think about technologies of social mediation and power. I work to imagine and build the repaired world I want to live in years and decades from now. In my practice, I've experimented with 3d printed letterpress type, printed books collecting algorithmically curated found material, and created personal data visualizations used by tens of thousands. Working with visual form in a digital substrate helps me think about the continually negotiated boundary between bodies and machines in society. How should designers think about the social commitment of the forms they create? Answering this question will help me—and the field of contemporary art—come to a new understanding of design's present and future territory.

Colophon

This book was printed at the MIT Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory in January 2020. The title text is set in a custom typeface that I call "Exterior," created by modifying the stroke settings of a digital pen used to trace out letterforms based on Helvetica. The body text of this book is set in Arial.

Acknowledgements

I'm extremely grateful to Sarah Hirzel for the opportunity to exhibit my work in the Wiesner Gallery, and for her dedication to helping student artists who do not fit neatly into institutional categories. Sarah's work for students goes above and beyond what her job entails on paper. I'm also deeply grateful for the support of many on the CAST team, including Stacy DeBartolo and Harry Bachrach.

Thank you to printjob press, our little artist collective, for your friendship and creative support.

Extreme gratitude to Lilly Chin, the best person to hypothetically do a heist with, especially if said heist eventually results in the need to drill a hole.

Thank you to Crystal Lee and Wonyoung So for being conversation partners throughout the development of this show.