

# The Interpretation of (Deep) Dreams

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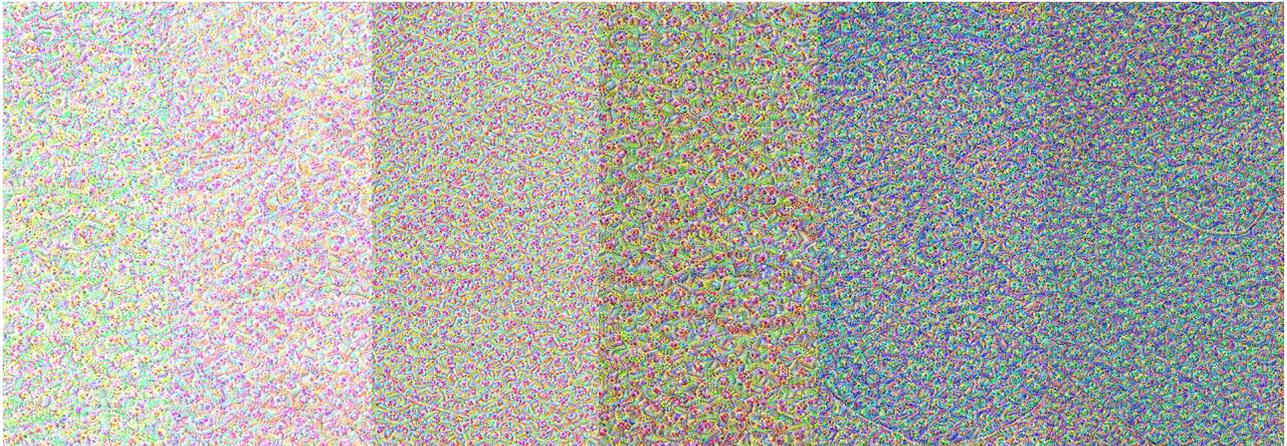


Fig. 1. *Slow Fakes*, 2020, Kwan Q Li, DeepDream-generated imagery, © Kwan Q Li.

## Abstract

Every arrival of new visual forms has a long journey ahead until occupying a unique position within the existing art canon. The politics of images are never confined within the visible, as the production process is as important as its consumption and circulation which yield an ecology that could have political implications. Probing into versatile semiotics of Deep Dreams, a digital dream machine that signifies machine-learning advancements, deconstructive approaches in artistic and creative practices might help to unleash a generative space that transfigures a contested machinal spectacle and synergizes the rapidly evolving field of computer art with a provocative agency of contemporary art.

## ‘Deep Dream’ as a Linguistic Subversion

DeepDream, created by Google engineer Alexander Mordvintsev in 2015, is a computer vision program that utilizes a convolutional neuronal network and a pareidolic algorithm to generate a specific tactility of images that are often seen as hallucinogenic. The code prescribes a trained deep network to identify

visual layers in an input image, then modify this image to enhance desired patterns through iterative activations (Mordvintsev 2015). As against the deepfakes genus which is often criticised to manipulate truths, DeepDream generates images that are instead hailed for their dynamic plasticity.

One may call the over-processed aesthetic of DeepDream a mistake, whilst Mordvintsev resorted to poetics and called the unwanted images the machine’s “dreams.” This mesmerising act of linguistic subversion turns the notorious deepfake into the nostalgic DeepDream. In between indexical reality and manufactured fakery, there exists a subliminal space of dreams that defies dualities such as true/false, correct/mistake, legal/unlawful.

In “The Interpretation of Dreams,” the classic work of Sigmund Freud written in 1913, he quoted philosopher Ludwig Strumpell’s note that “he who dreams turns his back upon the world of waking consciousness” (Freud 1913, 4-5). The fine line between truth and fiction seems to be a deliberate stretch, a voluntary submission that might be seen as religious more than reason-based.

### From Optical Errors to Aesthetic Prompts

As its distinctive output style is what has defined its essence, the DeepDream program has mostly been seen as an end rather than a means. Exposing the not yet overcome limitations of machine learning in realistic visual generation, it is largely seen to be a window to the science of artificial neural networks, whilst yet to be internalised within mainstream visual culture and artistic media. Its semiotic transition from an “error” to a “dream,” however, incubates a rhetorical proposition that can potentially bridge artistic and computer art languages in a new way.

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière noted that the politics of aesthetics lies in the practice and modes of visibility of art that reconfigure the fabric of sensory experience (Rancière 2010, 140). In response, the aim of the two creative interventions of this work is to interrogate the visual poetics of DeepDream for new meanings to bestow onto these mechanical visuals that are still read primarily through surface quality.

### Interventions – Soft and Slow Fakes

Mesmerizing images by DeepDream recall deeply intricate sentience amongst us, and especially towards contemporary politics. In *Slow Fakes*, a set of 6 political leaders’ portraits were selected and processed via the Deepdream program. Against the common illusionary effect that rearranges the original image in titling patterns and identifiable features, our experiment targets a set of parameters that dissolve the visible rather than accentuate particular characters, resonating with the aspects of dreams as invoked by the work’s interests.

The second intervention *Soft Fakes* investigates further potentials for manifesting generative images, which are liberated from being screen-based image networks to entable tangible agency. The work suggests alternative formats for deepfake and DeepDream imageries to engage audiences beyond the objectives of novelty or entertainment. A series of masks that prevailed in different global activist waves such as the Egyptian Revolution and Extinction Rebellion in the last decade are stitched together to imagine a new layer of consciousness. The

collage fabric, ostensibly shields an unknown organism gasping beneath, evoking a sense of vulnerability in the age of multiplicity. For more, please visit <https://slowfakes.info>.

One of these experimental implications lies in how fictitious materiality and ambiguous aesthetics could potentially empower individuals through provocative language that might spark new conversations in social-political debates. Besides, the physiological and psychological interpretations of “dreaming” might be worth further exploration to develop this discourse of generative art.

### References

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### Biography

**Kwan Q Li** is an interdisciplinary artist from Hong Kong. Coalescing lens-based mediums, performance and writing, her research-based practice explores creative possibilities and generative alternatives within postcolonial, technopolitical and anthropocentric contexts. Former exhibitions include performances and lectures at the AI and Society Journal conference, University of Cambridge in 2019; the Hong Kong Art Book Fair: Booked, at the Tai Kwun Contemporary in 2020; the IdeasCity residency co-curated by the NTU CCA and the New Museum in 2020; and the Venice International Architecture Exhibition—Hong Kong Pavilion in 2021.

Queenie holds a BFA degree from the Ruskin School of Art, Oxford University and a B.B.A. in Global Business Studies from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Currently, she holds a teaching fellowship in the Program in Art, Culture and Technology at MIT.