

## News Release

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### Art & Algorithms – new exhibit highlights differences between algorithmic and human curation



The Algorithmic Pedestal, photograph by Fabienne Hess

*As algorithms infiltrate our visual culture, what impact do they have on how audiences perceive creative content? University of Oxford researchers question the role of algorithmic curation in a forthcoming London exhibit.*

In the past months, the rapid deployment of generative AI technology such as [DALL-E2](#), [Stable Diffusion](#) and [Midjourney](#) have led to fever-pitched speculation about the future of art in the face of automation. Whilst generative AI technology has received plentiful attention, little is known about the cultural impacts that algorithmic recommendation platforms have on visual culture. Though these platforms are not creating art, they *are* curating it.

As we enter an increasingly AI-driven world, what can we do to understand algorithms' impact on our society? Researchers at the Oxford Internet Institute, part of the University of Oxford, are investigating the use of algorithmic models in visual art curation by exploring the differences between human and algorithmic curation. To study this, the Oxford researchers are launching 'The Algorithmic Pedestal,' a public exhibition taking place at J/M Gallery in London from 11-17 January 2023, which will highlight differences between human and algorithmic ways of seeing. Artist Fabienne Hess is bringing her human perspective, while the Instagram algorithm adds the machine perspective.

Laura Herman, doctoral researcher, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford said:

"As generative AI tools allow anyone to make 'art' with the snap of their fingers, we will come to rely even more on algorithmic platforms to sort, search, and display this content. The ever-expanding sea of content will be impossible to traverse without the ability to consume thousands, if not millions, images in a nanosecond. Of course, no human has this ability, leading us to become completely reliant on the discernment and decision-making of algorithmic platforms. Our research seeks to unpack how algorithmic 'ways of seeing' are different from human perception."

Drawing on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's open access collection, the 'Algorithmic Pedestal' will showcase a selection of images curated by both artist Fabienne Hess and Instagram's algorithm. Instagram's curatorial decisions were captured by uploading images from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Open Access collection to [@thealgorithmicpedestal](#)'s Instagram account. The exhibit demonstrates which images Instagram's algorithm chose to display—and in which order.

Herman adds:

"In recent months, Instagram has [publicly announced](#) that the content displayed in users' Home feed will increasingly be decided by a "black box" algorithm, rather than what friends or family have recently posted. This means that we do not know exactly what Instagram chooses to prioritise, though these prioritised selections drastically influence users' experience of visual culture. In this exhibit, the algorithm reveals its own ways of seeing, providing the audience with an intimate lens into its perceptual mechanisms.

The artist-led portion of the exhibit showcases Fabienne Hess' image collection, the *Dataset of Loss*, which she has created over the course of three years as a resistance to the dominant algorithmic ways of seeing. Hess believes that loss is a uniquely—and universally—human experience, inescapable in human lives. Her curatorial process is driven by the human experiences of time, curiosity, and patience. In this way, Hess' curation represents both a very human process and a very human selection criteria.

Sorting through thousands of images, the two curators have each chosen a collection of images to display in a particular order and layout. Members of the public are invited to consider the differences between machine and human curation at the interactive exhibit, which is free to the public.

Concludes Herman:

"Many of these algorithmic platforms, such as social media platforms like Instagram, were not created with the intention of artistic display. They have very different goals: enabling connection between friends, selling ads, gaining attention, serving as a marketplace, and so on. This means that the underlying formulas according to which they operate (that is, the algorithms) are not tuned to artistic considerations of aesthetics, beauty, novelty, or even creativity. We are outsourcing decisions about our visual culture to an inanimate machine with very different [ways of seeing](#). Our upcoming exhibit, The Algorithmic Pedestal, seeks to foreground these urgent considerations."

#### **Media information:**

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#### **Notes to Editors**

##### **About 'The Algorithmic Pedestal'**

'The Algorithmic Pedestal' exhibit takes place 11-17 January 2023 at [J/M Gallery](#) at 230 Portobello Road, London. More information can be found on the [exhibit website](#) and [Instagram](#). 'The Algorithmic Pedestal' is a doctoral project by [Laura Herman](#), who is a researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute, part of the University of Oxford, and is supported by the [UK Arts & Humanities Research Council](#). The project is conducted in collaboration with [Dr. Kathryn Eccles](#), a Senior Research Fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute, and [Dr. Caterina Moruzzi](#), a Research Associate at the University of Konstanz. The project is funded by the Oxford-Minderoo AI Challenge Fund. The physical exhibit has been designed by design and research agency [Parasite 2.0](#).

Fabienne Hess is a London-based artist and graduate of the Royal College of Art. Her work can be seen on her [website](#) and [Instagram](#). She graduated from the Royal College of Art in 2012 and has since shown her work, among other places, at Art Night, French Riviera, London; MK Gallery, Milton Keynes; Baltic, Newcastle; Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh; Upstream Gallery, Amsterdam; Museum Tinguely, Basel and Dakar Biennale. She has been awarded a fellowship by Artangel, published an artist book with Common Editions and has received commissions from LUX artists's moving image, the BBC and the University of Edinburgh.

#### **About the OII**

The Oxford Internet Institute (OII) is a multidisciplinary research and teaching department of the University of Oxford, dedicated to the social science of the Internet. Drawing from many different disciplines, the OII works to understand how individual and collective behaviour online shapes our social, economic and political world. Since its founding in 2001, research from the OII has had a significant impact on policy debate, formulation and implementation around the globe, as well as a secondary impact on people's wellbeing, safety and understanding. Drawing on many different disciplines, the OII takes a combined approach to tackling society's big questions, with the aim of positively shaping the development of the digital world for the public good. <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/>