

This Person Does Exist

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ABSTRACT This Person Does Exist is an artistic approach to exploring a large dataset of photographic portraits in a randomised manner. The dataset was originally created by Nvidia Research Lab, which has scraped and analysed creative commons images from the popular image hosting platform Flickr. These pictures were then used to train a machine learning model which can create new stochastic images of faces. In contrast to a popular website that showcases the computer generated images, I am displaying random faces from the dataset with their corresponding metadata. This essay looks into extractivist mechanisms in current machine learning techniques, using the internet to populate and refine databases, while focusing on artistic approaches that expose them. I make the case for Dataset Art as an emerging field which reframes scientific corpora by placing them into galleries and exhibiting them as found objects online. Finally, I argue that this artistic practice is a legitimate way of opening up a larger public discourse, although artists working with human data must be aware of ethical issues and responsibilities regarding privacy and consent.

MAKING ART WITH HUMAN DATASETS

As machine learning techniques in computer vision advance, they demand larger training sets. Scientists filled the gap by algorithmically scraping and categorising images from sites like Flickr where they could exploit creative commons licenses to copy and create derivatives of people's photographs. This practice has been widely unknown to the general public, as shown by interviews of affected individuals by the New York Times (Hill and Krolik 2019) and NBC News (Solon 2019).

Training sets were not made for human consumption, but rather created for the statistical analysis and modelling of patterns between individual data points. By shifting our gaze onto these vast collections, we can find hidden biases that are transported into the model. We can also find a great number of individual efforts, from taking pictures to labelling and categorising them. In this paper, I discuss my approach of looking into one specific dataset and works of art that have dealt with similar issues in the recent past.

INTRODUCTION TO FLICKR FACES

In 2018 the research lab of Nvidia, one of the leading companies for visual computing, published a paper introducing a machine learning architecture called StyleGAN (Karras, Laine, and Aila 2019). They improved on generative adversarial networks (Goodfellow et al. 2014) in such a way that it was possible to create controllable synthetic high-resolution images. In simple terms, scientists are able to abstract large amounts of images with a model that in turn outputs similar-looking pictures. In this case, they were able to generate realistic-looking images of human faces. As previous face datasets were too low in resolution,¹ a new corpus was created by scraping images with Creative Commons, Public Domain or U.S. Government Works licenses from the social photo sharing platform Flickr. The new dataset was named Flickr-Faces-HQ (FFHQ).²

Since 2004 Flickr endorsed the use of CC licenses and their open access made it legally possible for researchers to scrape and analyse the material.

In fact, the largest open media dataset existing is shared by the research lab of the parent company Yahoo, with 100 million media objects (Thomee et al. 2016).

In response to scrutiny about the failures of IBM's face detection algorithm, which affected black women in particular (Buolamwini and Gebru 2018), the research department created a public database of 1 million faces from the Yahoo dataset. They called it Diversity in Faces (DiF) (Merler et al. 2019) and added questionable metadata of estimated age, gender and craniofacial measurements with the aim of making face detection fairer.³

In comparison, FFHQ, which was used to train the above-mentioned generative model, is more than 10 times smaller, as it only contains 70,000 images. The dataset itself is published under a CC-BY-NC-SA license and the instructions for use and download are very clear, making it manageable in terms of size, license and ease-of-use to discover the underlying characteristics.

The crawled images were automatically aligned and cropped around a face to a square ratio with a dimension of 1024²px with the open-source library dlib. The library provides fast facial recognition and identifies 68 points around the face outlining the chin, eyebrows, eyes, nose and mouth. The resulting dataset was finally checked by Amazon Mechanical Turk workers "to remove the occasional statues, paintings, or photos of photos."⁵

In contrast to other scraped datasets, the Nvidia researchers provide a tool to see if an image is part of the collection and allow the removal of the photograph from the FFHQ training set. As an investigative article from NBC News (Solon 2019) suggests, most photographers on Flickr are oblivious of the fact that they are part of the larger IBM DiF dataset and they are divided in their opinions on being used for facial recognition research. We can assume that this is the case in the FFHQ corpus too, as the researchers did not get consent before creating the collection.

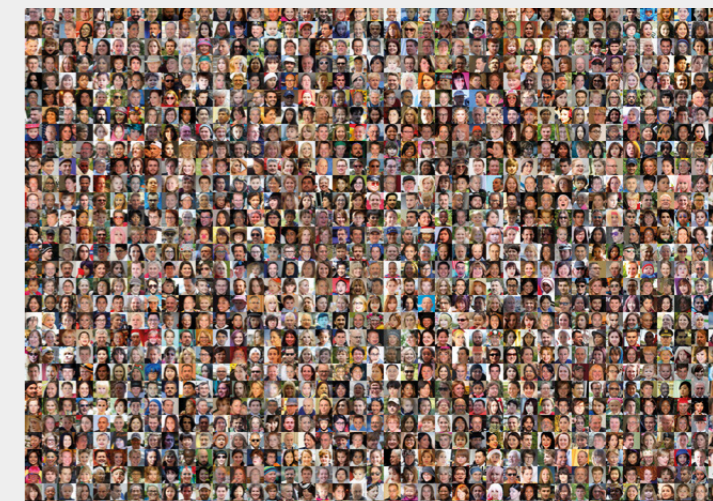


Fig. 1. Cropped 1024 x 1024 px image from the FFHQ dataset, overlaid with face landmarks from the dataset by the author.

Fig. 2. "In The Wild" image scraped from Flickr, overlaid with face landmarks and cropped from the dataset by the author. License: CC-BY-2.0. Crossing Europe Filmfestival Linz.



Fig. 3. 69,960 faces from the FFHQ dataset compiled into a grid by the author. On the right, a zoomed area of the grid. License: CC-BY-NC. Original Image Credits can be found at: <https://github.com/NVlabs/ffhq-dataset> <https://this-person-does-exist.com/credit.html>



THIS PERSON DOES EXIST

After Nvidia released its StyleGAN paper, the software developer Phillip Wang published a website⁷ that showcases generated faces of people that do not exist. The site quickly took off and alarmed people about the capabilities and potential impact of AI systems generating synthetic media.

As a counter-narrative to the AI image creator, I wanted to showcase the people who were used to train this generative system. My first look into FFHQ was in the spring of 2020 and I faced technical roadblocks such as downloading and disseminating the images from the dataset. I moved the cropped and aligned face images to my server and built a website⁸ that displays the faces from people that do exist.⁹

Looking at the individual images facilitates an interpersonal connection with the unknown person and evokes a feeling for the images that were used to train the generative model. As Flickr is used mostly by hobbyists and professional photographers, one can find portraits of children and families, speakers at conferences or people on holiday. The authors claim that FFHQ includes more variety than other face image sets in terms "of age, ethnicity and image background, and also has much better coverage of accessories such as eyeglasses, sun-glasses, hats, etc." (Karras, Laine, and Aila 2019).

They admit to biases inherited from the Flickr platform but fail to mention them. One example (Fig. 1) shows such a cropped image from the dataset with face landmarks. The landmarks are part of the metadata and were used to align images for training. The corresponding original (in the wild) image reveals more context and the title clarifies that the image was taken at a film festival brunch (Fig. 2).

To get a sense of scale of the dataset, I compiled all face images into a grid, reducing the size of each image to 16 by 16px (Fig. 3). This simple montage makes it possible to get a feeling for the vast amount of normalised image data.

Another technique to visually find biases in image sets is to average their pixel values. This suppresses outliers, but it allows us to see an overall trend of the dataset. The resulting composite image The Flickr Face (Fig. 4) might reveal a trend towards smiling and light-skinned people in the data set. This correlates with my subjective experience, but further analysis is needed to be able to measure biases in this image set.

The following section presents other artistic projects that used similar techniques to make large image sets experienceable and critique the unsolicited collection of human data.

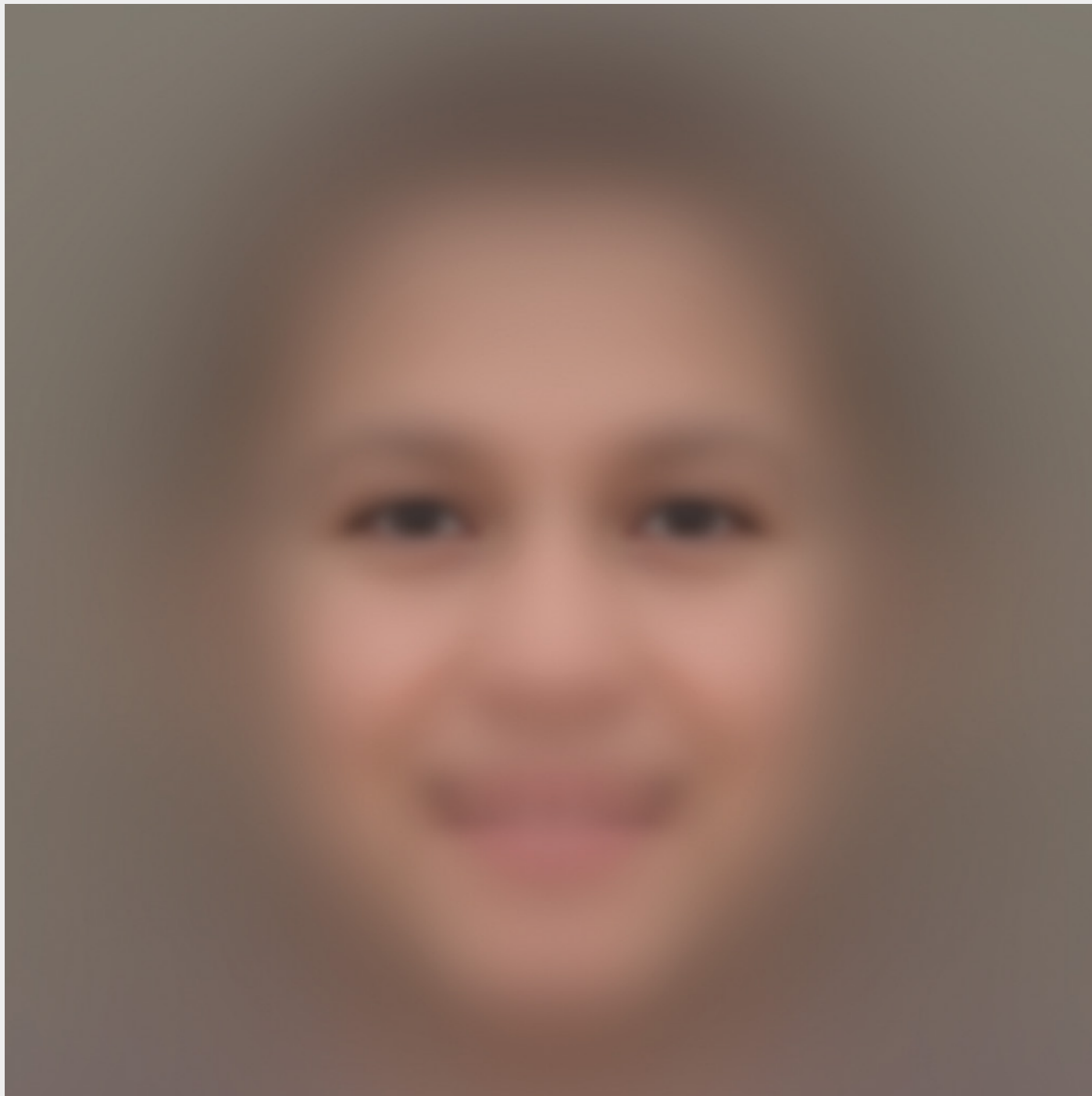


Fig. 4. Averaged Flickr Face. Generated by the author by calculating the average pixel values of all 70k aligned face images.

MEGAPIXELS, TRAINING HUMANS & HUMANS OF AI

Since 2017 Adam Harvey and Jules LaPlace have been working on the art and research publication *MegaPixels*,¹⁰ where they analyse facial recognition and detection datasets. As a result of their research and media attention, multiple datasets have been revoked and removed, for example, the MegaFace dataset (Kemelmacher-Shlizerman et al. 2016) with roughly 4.7 million faces from Flickr (Thomee et al. 2016). The corpus was used by private companies for commercial purposes and the image authors were not sufficiently credited. Furthermore, the dataset contains images of people in Illinois, where the collection, capturing and purchase of biometric information is prohibited (Hill and Krolik 2019).

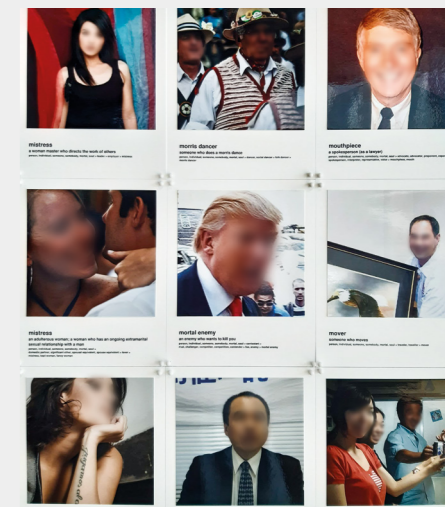
While Harvey and LaPlace have been applying traditional forms of data visualisation and academic publishing, they also found ways of making scraped media in machine learning much more personal.

In 2017 Adam Harvey showed¹¹ an interactive installation for the Glass Room exhibition in which visitors' face landmarks are compared with images from the MegaFace dataset and the closest matches were displayed.

In 2019 the artist Trevor Paglen and researcher Kate Crawford collaborated on an exhibition titled *Training Humans*, dedicated to human image databases¹² (Fig. 5). One of the main exhibits was a vast collection of human images from the ImageNet dataset (Fig. 6), initiated by Stanford University's AI professor Fei Fei Li (Deng et al. 2009). It was created to tackle object recognition tasks and consists of 14 million images organised and labelled by Amazon Mechanical Turk workers. Some images of people fall into categories such as "Bad Person, Call Girl, Drug Addict, Closet Queen, Convict" and so on (Crawford and Paglen 2019a). The artists used these absurd, racist and misogynistic labels to train "ImageNet Roulette,"¹³ a recognition algorithm that was accessible online and in an interactive installation. A result of the media attention that followed was that 600,000 images were removed from ImageNet and, due to maintenance,¹⁴ the website and dataset have not been properly accessible since (Yang et al. 2019).

But *Training Humans* comes with its own issues, as Michael J. Lyons (2020) recently wrote in a critique of the work of Crawford and Paglen. Exhibiting some of the image sets violates the terms of use, which only allows for non-commercial scientific research. He criticises the double standards of Crawford and Paglen using human data without prior informed consent. Knowing fully about the ethical dilemma, the artists argue against privacy "to have the real conversation about what's going on with these [AI] systems" (Crawford and Paglen 2019b). Even though visitors were able to remove their images from the exhibition, it was sometimes too late for them. This was the case of the photographed volunteers from the exhibited JAFFE dataset by Lyons, Kamachi, and Gyoba (1998), which was never intended for use as a "training set." Only after the exhibition closed did they realise that the images intended for scientific use were distributed all over the internet as advertisement and a bad example for emotion recognition research.

Two other artists focused on the labelling and annotation process of Microsoft's COCO dataset (Lin et al. 2014), which was scraped from Flickr and annotated by clickworkers for object recognition models.



↓ Fig. 5. A photograph from the exhibition *Training Humans*.

→ Fig. 6. A photograph of the exhibited ImageNet dataset and their labels. Faces blurred by the author.

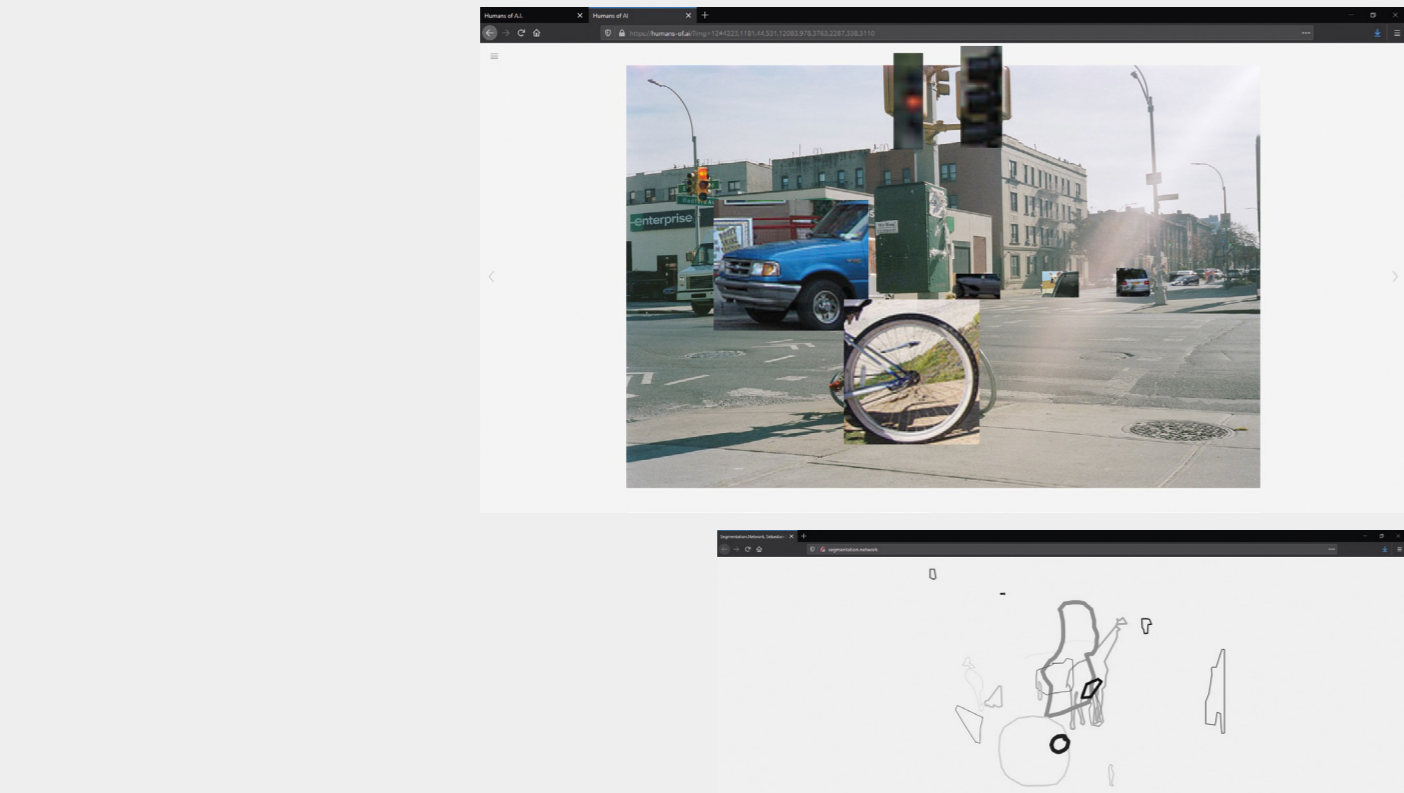


Fig. 7. Screenshot of a Certificate of Appreciation by Philipp Schmitt.



Noticing the missing image attributions, the artist Philipp Schmitt published Humans of AI.¹⁵ He created certificates of appreciation for all 34,248 contributors (Fig. 7) and made the list into a new dataset coCOCO (context for Common Objects in Context). Using YOLO (Redmon and Farhadi 2018), an object detection system that was trained on COCO, he created the Declassifier (Fig. 8), which superimposes images from the dataset onto another picture. Finally, he produced a slideshow that fades between all images from the collection, showcasing an endless amount of mundane amateur photographs. Another artist, Sebastian Schmieg, has acknowledged the work of the unknown clickworkers outlining objects for the COCO set by creating segmentation.network,¹⁶ a website that endlessly redraws and overlays the 600,000 hand drawn outlines (Fig. 9).

CONCLUSION
While big datasets have enabled new image technologies like generative adversarial networks and detection algorithms, the research community exploits open licenses to do so. In most cases, the contributors to scraped datasets do not receive fair recognition and are unaware of their material being used.



➤ Fig. 8. Screenshot of the Declassifier from Humans of AI by Philipp Schmitt.
➔ Fig. 9. Screenshot of the website segmentation.network by Sebastian Schmieg.

Artists have responded to the creation of these datasets by analysing and exhibiting them in galleries and online. Their works make large datasets comprehensible and engaging. In some cases they have created enough media attention and scientific discourse for institutions to remove questionable parts or entire collections. With my research into the FFHQ dataset, I found common issues that tie it to the other presented works, which include the use of human data without prior informed consent, particularly the use of images with CC licenses from Flickr and the use of clickworkers to refine the dataset. Other issues were not present: the authors attributed the creators accordingly, created a tool to find and delete images from the dataset and released the collection under a CC non-commercial license itself. Still, looking through the automatically cropped images of human faces creates a certain unease of human identities reduced to decontextualised statistical occurrences. My work shows the person that does exist behind the AI model, but it does violate personality rights as much as the original dataset. This ethical dilemma needs to be explored further, but so far I think Dataset Art, as shown in this paper, helps to broaden the discussion and create awareness of practices in ML research.¹⁷

BIOGRAPHY

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Matthias Schäfer is an artist who explores algorithmic cultures. As psitcher, he creates performances, installations and web based works with which he engages with centralised online platforms in a deconstructive and humorous way. His works have been exhibited at transmediale, Ars Electronica Festival, Xie Zilong photography museum, Roehrs & Boetsch and multiple other exhibitions and festivals. Schäfer is currently enrolled in the Interface Cultures Master programme at the University of Art & Design in Linz, where he is focusing on the field of machine learning, automation and its core mechanism of data collecting.

ENDNOTES

1. For the preceding Paper 'Progressive Growing of GANs for Improved Quality, Stability, and Variation' (Karras et al. 2017) the authors up-scaled images from the popular CelebA (30,000 images) dataset to meet their demands.
2. See <https://github.com/NVlabs/ffhq-dataset>
3. The inclusion of computer-generated face measurements, age and gender assumptions were highly criticized, because of their roots in phrenology. According to a discussion on GitHub (<https://github.com/tensorflow/datasets/issues/299>) the dataset is not available from IBM, though it is still being publicised by IBM.
4. See <http://dlib.net/>
5. Quote from the readme file in the GitHub repository of the FFHQ dataset (endnote 2). Accessed 25 January 2021.
6. See <https://nvlabs.github.io/ffhq-dataset/search/>
7. See <https://thispersondoesnotexist.com/>
8. See <https://this-person-does-exist.com/>
9. Six days before my website went live, Vincent Woo published a page with the same concept, but that gets the images directly from Flickr and crops them in the browser. See <http://thispersonexists.net/> and the corresponding tweet <https://twitter.com/fulligin/status/1335030372187312128>
10. See <https://ahprojects.com/megapixels/> and <https://exposing.ai/>
11. See *MegaPixels: Faces*, <https://ahprojects.com/megapixels-glassroom/>
12. See *Fondazione Prada, "KATE CRAWFORD | TREVOR PAGLEN: TRAINING HUMANS"*, <http://www.fondazioneprada.org/project/training-humans/?lang=en>
13. See *Trevor Paglen, ImageNet Roulette* <https://paglen.studio/2020/04/29/imagenet-roulette/>
14. On 11 March 2021 the team updated <https://image-net.org/>. They addressed the criticism by removing 2,702 synsets and experiment with blurring faces to preserve people's privacy.
15. See *Philipp Schmitt, Humans of AI*, <https://humans-of.ai/>
16. See *Sebastian Schmieg, Segmentation.Network* <http://segmentation.network/> further information on: <http://sebastianschmieg.com/segmentation-network/>
17. The publication <http://plottingd.at/a/> explores datasets through artistic interfaces and critical reflections much further.

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