

Pelican Stairs: a Wapping Great Pandemic Memoir

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Abstract

Pelican Stairs is a multimedia art project started during the depths of Covid-19 lockdown in 2020. I took photos of my local neighbourhood, Wapping in London, on my daily walks between March and September. I often visited the Thames shore area by climbing a set of steps known as Pelican Stairs. Using those photos as a training set, I generated new images with a Generative Adversarial Network (GAN), which I paired with excerpts from my diary during the same period. The unsettling, almost-real images contrasted with the mundane reality of the diary entries allow the viewer to viscerally (re)experience the inherent tension between an increasingly uncertain external reality and internal attempts at control or sense-making through normal, everyday habits. The project is hosted at <https://pelicanstairs.art>.

1. Premise

27 March 2020

Yesterday at 8 PM there was an organized effort to get everyone outside to applaud for the NHS and care workers. I thought there would be a poor showing and I'd seen some doctors and nurses saying they didn't want applause, they wanted more PPI so they could do their jobs more safely. But at 8 PM I heard a noise-through my noise-cancelling headphones-and when I went out every single balcony in Newlands Quay, Maynards Quay, and all the other surrounding housing units had someone one it making a joyful noise. It was really stunningly moving. We could hear fireworks and air horns in the distance. Really beautiful. I felt connected to the neighbourhood in ways I hadn't before. The next few weeks are going to be difficult and grim but now I feel we can do it together.

Figure 1: 27 March 2020 diary entry including GAN-generated imagery from Pelican Stairs.

2020 was a turning point, and a strange one, for all of us. In a time adrift from my usual life patterns I used my daily walks as a routine to give focus and structure to my day. I had high anxiety about going outside during the early days of the pandemic and I felt especially far from my family overseas, who I knew I might not be able to see for a very long time. Giving myself the assignment of taking interesting photos of my daily walks was a way of keeping track of a bizarre period in my life, a stimulus to get out of the house despite my fears, and a reason for

regularly checking in with new content to share with my parents.

The distortions and surreality introduced by feeding the images through a GAN represent the blurred, overlapping, confusing nature of that time. Pairing them with real extracts from my diary entries during that period captures the tension between the attempts at everyday normalcy and an ever more uncertain outside reality.

More and more of our interactions with others are mediated through digital technologies, a phenomenon that became particularly noticeable during the pandemic when those were often the only means available for contacting loved ones or simply conducting day-to-day business. Closeness is both facilitated and occluded through these digitized windows into each other's worlds. The GAN images, based on reality but not real in themselves, amplify the distortions and communicative frictions that accompany our digital communication tools.

2 April 2020



Had a little cry at the 6 o'clock news which had a segment on people not being allowed to see one's dying relatives, or even attend their funerals. I was overwhelmed with a sense of not wanting to die alone. But when I got on the phone with my parents they said they were talking about what they'd do if I got sick and I really need to make clear to them that they wouldn't be allowed to see me. Plus they might not be able to fly home.

Figure 2: 2 April 2020 diary entry including GAN-generated imagery from Pelican Stairs.

The original photographs of real objects and landscapes remain hidden. Only the

manipulated images are available to the public, an exploration of what we share and how we present ourselves online.

29 September 2020



First morning in the new flat. So far I've learned the walls & ceiling are very thin, the pipes bang, and I am a little freaked out by the spare room that's locked. What if someone's secretly living there like that girl who was living under someone's wardrobe? Still so much to do-shoulders sore from lugging stuff. Plus had to go on a Sheets Quest to buy new ones that fit and make sure I could make my bed! And the estate agents didn't fix any of the stuff they said they would, which they used as a reason for not letting me move in early when I asked. But honestly it didn't go too badly. Better get up & going.

Figure 3: 27 September 2020 diary entry including GAN-generated imagery from Pelican Stairs.

The GAN model can generate a theoretically infinite number of new images based on my original collection of photos. I chose to bound this project within the six months between the announcement of lockdown and my move from London to Edinburgh, but for as long as life remains disrupted, I can continue to generate new images that smear out the initial confusion and blurriness of that time to infinite strange new futures. **Here, in this space**

between the river and the shore, in this time adrift, is Pelican Stairs.

2. Method

The original images and videos were taken with my smartphone as offhand snapshots. I fed the 1,100 real photos and videos I took during this six-month period into a Generative Adversarial Network (GAN). The GAN produced unsettling, almost-realistic images which are the featured images in the project paired with excerpts from my diary entries in the same period. The diary entries are real, though I've changed names.

I have been a long-time though intermittent practitioner of Julia Cameron's 'morning pages' journal technique [1], a longhand stream of consciousness reflexive practice for artists, and it is edited versions of these journal entries which are used in the diaries. They are edited primarily for coherence and relevance: I decided to focus only on those passages which had direct sensory or emotional relevance to the experience of living through those six months.

I used commercially available machine learning tools to train a data model that generates new images based on my photos. I trained my model with [RunwayML's StyleGAN2](#) and used ESRGAN to improve the image resolution output.

The Pelican Stairs Twitter bot responds to the prompt "@pelicanstairs take me to #pelicanstairs" by sharing a random image from the generated art. I used readily available online tutorials to create a Twitter bot that replies to a trigger phrase with a piece of text, then modified this to include an image in each

response. The code for the bot is [available on GitHub](#).

3. Concluding thoughts

The arts have long been a means for driving innovation in the field of technology as well as for critically reflecting on potential technological impacts. As a digital anthropologist, I use the arts to enhance my research: to better understand novel technologies, their uses and misuses, I explore them through art projects that are illuminating, aesthetic, or simply whimsical. Pelican Stairs offered the opportunity to continue my exploration of the reflexive interplay of my practices and capabilities as a technologist, an artist, and a researcher. It fits within a growing body of work in sociotechnical studies examining the critical and productive possibilities at the intersection between the arts, design and cultural sectors and the tools, techniques and data of the technology sector [2, 3].

Digital innovations such as desktop word processing, photo and video editing opened up new technology-assisted creative possibilities for those without specialist training in design, publishing, photography and film. Spreadsheets created new informational management capabilities reaching far beyond accountancy [4]. Similarly, tools like RunwayML open up machine learning techniques like StyleGAN to those without data science skills, offering a new wave of creative exploration. This project furthered my belief that the availability of inexpensive machine learning tools ready for use by non-specialists creates new opportunities for reengaging with questions about the meaning, role and definition of art, much as paint-by-numbers kits offer a vehicle for critical reflection on the distinction between commercial and fine arts, or Warhol's

Brillo boxes inspired Danto's reconsideration of what distinguishes art from other objects or modes of expression [5].

Using digital tools to create the surreal specifically for the purpose of an artwork upends the assumption for rationalism or formalism which is a frequent postulation for the value of digital technologies, particularly sophisticated machine learning models like those underpinning the GANs I used to create the images for this project. Among technologists, the development of digital technology is often presented as an uncritical inherent good for all; an inevitable march of progress [6]. There is a growing body of critique against these presumed rationalisms [2, 3, 6, 7]. In this context, using a GAN for a deliberately non-functional creation can be viewed as an act of rebellion against these techno-utopianist rationalisms through reclaiming technology as a means for realizing imaginative possibilities encompassing the irrational, intuitive and whimsical.

4. References

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