

THIS CREATIVE DUO DISRUPTS THE GOOGLE IMAGE ALGORITHM TO MAKE ART

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Detail, Money, Searching for Meaning, Scott Kelly & Ben Polkinghorne

Type a word into Google Images. Now scroll. Scroll faster. Faster. The thumbnail images will turn into individual blocks of colour, activating Google's 'lazy loading' technique. This limits the drain on data by reducing each search term to its purest aesthetic form, transforming the entire web page to resemble a Dulux Paint Chart. It's a phenomenon which is fascinating, mysterious, and is largely taken for granted by web-surfers every day. For Ben Polkinghorne and Scott Kelly, it's not just scrolling: it's art.

"We thought it would be interesting to try and play with lazy loading, and sort of intersect it," says Polkinghorne. "We spend a fair amount of time on Google Images, and it was just

something that we noticed one day – as you scroll, blocks of colour will appear until they become a limit.”

Following an initial set of works inspired by image searches in 2019, ‘Searching for Meaning: According to Google’ is the duo’s new 2021 version of the project, set to launch in July 2021.

Now based in London, the Kiwi duo were introduced to each other while interning at an advertising agency in Auckland. “Our boss must have spotted some sort of chemistry,” says Kelly. “We have a common interest in seemingly random subjects, and share a similar enthusiasm, energy level and passion – which I think is really helpful for junior creatives.”

Realising their energies clicked, the pair began working on side projects before establishing themselves as an artistic duo in 2016. Since then, they have been shortlisted for the Ashurst Emerging Artist Prize, were featured on the Forbes ‘30 under 30’ list, and gained global recognition for their ‘Signs of the Times’ project at the Seoul Museum of Art in 2017 – not bad for a pair who have been in the game for less than five years.



Jennifer Lopez in the dress that led to the invention of Google Images. Image: Harpers Bazaar

“Humans have almost pre-programmed themselves to go to Google Images if they need to see a photo of a dog or of a dolphin, or of anything,” says Polkinghorne, a self-confessed internet addict. Google Images was invented as late as 2001 to respond to an influx of

demand for pictures of Jennifer Lopez's green Versace dress worn to the Grammy Awards in 2000. "It must have been a moment where they recognised that people really value visuals," he says.

Each work in the new 'Searching for Meaning' series is organised by a distinctive search term: from abstract words like 'Simulation' and 'Mood' to recognisable objects like 'Money' and 'The Pope'. "Google Images feels like there's this kind of global consensus on a subject," says Kelly. "Even if that consensus is warped by algorithms and your place in the world, you can visualise anything almost instantly."

"It's a powerful tool," Polkinghorne muses. "Used responsibly, it can give you the freedom to see anything you want to."



Searching for Meaning: God (2019). Credit: Ben and Scott

Google Images works by using bots to rank results. Bots read data and alt-text across the internet and culminate a collection of images from billions of web pages which best respond to the specifics of the search query input. But with more research into algorithmic bias, these bots have faced increased scrutiny in recent years for being trained on Western-centric data sources. Data cannot always be transposed to new locations or contexts while maintaining effectiveness – meaning that the supposed freedom afforded by Google may be more prejudiced than many people are aware.

Polkinghorne and Kelly hope that their work will prompt people to think twice about the search results taken for granted by visualising just how limited the algorithm is. While the concept behind 'Searching for Meaning' is simple - input search term, activate lazy loading, screenshot the initial image and the colour blocks that follow - the pair spend hours navigating the algorithm to find the most satisfying aesthetic arrangements. "The most

disappointing colour palettes are those which are expected,” says Kelly. “But sometimes there are these big, lofty ideas that have a feeling communicated through colours which might be rich or unexpected.”

The image results change by the millisecond depending on the current ranking of data. “What used to happen when we found a really good one, is we’d lose it,” says Polkinghorne. “When we came back to it, we realised the images had changed.” The pair would have to wait a few hours or even days to grab the most appropriate initial image. “But the colour palette, or the general kind of feeling you get from the artwork, remains roughly the same,” says Kelly.



Trump Trays (2018). Credit: Ben and Scott

The couple shy-away from the word ‘political’, but their work is executed with a shrewdness and sense of humour, swiftly responding to current events and playfully rubbing against the system. ‘Trump Trays’ was released in 2018: recyclable ice-cube trays in a mould of the 45th President’s head, described as “perfect for global warming”. Dreamt up as a response to Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris agreement, it is gentle activist art for the Instagram generation: a simple idea with maximum viral potential.

Like many of us in the past year, Polkinghorne and Kelly have spent more time online as life was hurled into a Covid-induced digital reality. “Since we spend a fair bit of our time in the digital world, it does lead us to dig around and notice the quirks that are there,” says Polkinghorne, explaining that they had to put a few projects on hold due to the pandemic. “With that comes new things that we notice.”

The duo will exhibit the new series of artworks via an online exhibition and exclusive in-person viewings once Covid restrictions are relaxed. You can check out the duo’s website to read more about their creative projects [here](#).