

## Seeing Things

29th November, 2021.  
Clementi West, Singapore

ROSEMARY OVERELL  
*Seeing Things.*

Nowadays, you could be forgiven for thinking you were seeing things. A Telegram reaches me from somewhere south of here.

*They're flying a flag from America on the streets!*

*Don't Tread On Me.*

People place syringe emojis<sup>1</sup> after their names on social media.

*Huh.*

I think.

How quickly the things we see swirl into some semiotic elsewhere. The junky's fit suddenly rendered a sign of healthy citizenship. Mutations free-float; at once a menace and a mobilisation.

*A Team of Five Million.*

With all the things we see – the graphs, indicatives, speculations – there's a meaty, real thing at stake. A body-thing at stake. Strangely, at least in Aotearoa, a body which is relatively unseen. Deaths from viral things were moved to by-lines, "person, 77, died". Instead, solace lies in the little emoji syringe.

A syringe might build a body; a nation-as-people. Syringe optics, perhaps. We make ourselves seen in relation to all for which that barrel-and-plunger-thing stands.

*Don't Tread On Me.*

Some take the plunge; building bodies through the offering of an arm. Others, though, feel that barrel is a lens. *Surveillance!* (Sign Says: syringe emoji + 'X' emoji). A plunge becomes a tread ...

This body-within-a-body; a group within a nation-as-people who move with an

Rosemary Overell reflects on artworks by Simon Denny from the exhibition "Simon Denny et al" at Michael Lett, (17 November - 18 December, 2021.)

a ~~strikethrough~~, a 'NO' feel trod upon. *The More You Know The More You NO!* (Sign Says: magnifying glass over syringe + ~~X~~).

*They aren't seeing things.*

The scales have fallen from their eyes!

What they *know* ... brings a NO-body of refusal into being.

-

Simon Denny's work, at Michael Lett until the 18th December 2021, was made before the height (or is the *depths*?) of the Plague. His series of three collages parry with this body-knowledge *thing*, this *seeing bodies* thing. His work asks: is a know-body possible? And once we see this / our / their body as knowable – is the *quite natural* response to *nix* all that? Perhaps a time before COVID, certainly, a firm ~~X~~ would strike through all those insidious machinations of *surveillance*. What happens, though, when the discourse of critique *surveillance* moves out of the mouths of intellectuals, scholars and artists and on to placards bearing not only '~~X~~-s', ~~strikethroughs~~ and 'NO-s' but also Apartheid flags, Nazi symbols and other right-wing signifiers?

Well, I venture Denny, like myself, is not one for absolutes. It is not as simple as a take up of NO and a return to some(unsullied)-body (the one whose arm was never offered, who never *took one for the Team*). Nonetheless, some in the art world, and academia, seemed to tread a line of one-or-the-other in questions *surveillance* under COVID-conditions in 2020-1 (the Agamben / Bratton division being the most obvious example).<sup>2</sup> Denny's work takes a different path, and reminds us that it is not quite so simple. His collages make the body-knowledge *thing* palpable. Emerging from what appears, at first glance, typed pages of scientific-speak non-sense, are three men's faces. The works are three-dimensional, and two of the faces are fleshy, human-looking,

1 – It is interesting that Apple felt the need to remove the blood droplets which characterised the original syringe emoji, apparently due to the upswing in its new connotations, as one of 'health' (See BBC, "Apple revamps syringe emoji for Covid vaccines." <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-56099162>).

2 – For more on this, see Benjamin Bratton's post on *Verso* "Agamben WTF, or How Philosophy Failed the Pandemic." <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5125-agamben-wtf-or-how-philosophy-failed-the-pandemic>



Figure 1.  
Simon Denny  
Document Relief 31 (Palantir Image Identification patent)  
2021  
Ink jet print on archive paper, glue, custom metal wall mount  
297 x 210 x 110mm

any-bodies (Figure 1 and Figure 2). The third face is carved from paper, the same scientific markings, but without the fleshiness (Figure 3). Perhaps he is an every-body?

Of course, these men, at least the first two, are not *quite* any-bodies, and the paper surrounding them, filled with scientific language, is not *quite* just a generalised 'jargonised' stand-in for Knowledge. The paper is, in fact, a US Patent submitted by the Palantir corporation for an app called FALCON – a bird who is rather good at *seeing things*.

In brief, FALCON is an image database and recognition system, intended to swiftly capture and catalogue human faces for use by police and other state-agencies.<sup>3</sup> A classic body-knowledge nexus. While the face offered in the Patent seems to be an 'every-man' (the third face), we know that some faces and bodies are more likely to be caught in the FALCON's biometrical talons than others.

Some bodies are not so outraged by state surveillance! To be tracked and traced and, yes, *trodden* (think Chauvin, a boot, a neck) has always been a part of their lives!

Denny moves in an unexpected way here. Instead of the indignity of rehearsing another obscene representation of the body-we-know will be targeted by Palantir's gaze, he gives us the 'BACK END' (part of the cut up programming-parlance he places underneath the face of the bespectacled man in Figure 3). That is, he reveals the men least likely to be apprehended by FALCON's gaze: Palantir's co-founders Peter Thiel (Figure 1) and Alex Karp (Figure 2). They are the 'BACK END' behind the app. They peer out – and through – sliced up, but precise, signifiers of the problematics of when bodies become knowledge, from words taken from the Patent: 'capture'; 'identify' and, even, 'Ontology'.

Surely, for Thiel and Karp, the FALCON project is one where *they* wield the optic, rather than become rendered by it. Nonetheless, Denny has rendered their likenesses using a 3D printer. These are men usually positioned beyond the limitations of biometric imaging and the unsteady provisional citizenship with which such *seeing* is so entangled. Thiel famously gained citizenship in Aotearoa without the usual requisites. He might be something of like the NOI-bodies mentioned earlier. Thiel apparently gained as much *know-how* as possible

about the best places to live in case of an apocalypse. Refusing the riskiness of Palo Alto, he has navigated an exit ... to Wānaka.

*We know this.*

We know that – indeed, the way that Palantir, Thiel, Karp and FALCON *see things* surely demands a resounding NO! from us. From those who know better,

Indeed. But let me close with an attention to the materialities of things seen, not just any-things, but body-things. The trodden nay-sayers; the anti-vaxxers and all those living in the present (wrong?) negation, fall into the same logic as Thiel: that to know, is *to NO!* To *refuse* to live out one's days in California; but also, to obliterate those bodies caught in the FALCON's sights.

Such solidity, though – of *presence* as Affirmation / Life, and Yes-bodies; Or, *absence* as Negation / Death, and No-Bodies, is not quite fully formed in Denny's work. He refuses such turn between two. The frailty of the collages is foregrounded. The know-how of the Patent is sliceable; playable. If we know (if we are privy to an artist's statement) we recognise Thiel's and Karp's smirks, but otherwise, they are everybodies and nobodies all at once. Worse, they are engulfed by their own adherence to a strict, to quote the Patent, 'ontology', where all is knowable – the body and the body's future (*Palantir*, after refers to Tolkien's predictive 'seeing stones').

Those trod-upon bodies filling streets with ~~X~~-s; ~~strikethroughs~~ and NO-s – they, too, move into the same perilous territory; where one presumes to see and know it all.

*I've done the research.*

*The More You Know The More You NO!*

For them *seeing is believing*.

Or maybe I'm just seeing things too.

**Rosemary Overell is an academic in Communications and New Media at the National University of Singapore. Her research interests include psychoanalysis, feminism and mediation. She tweets @muzaken.**

3 – Discussed in more detail by Kate Crawford in *The Atlas of AI: Power, Politics and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (Yale University Press, 2021).



Figure 2.  
Simon Denny  
Document Relief 29 (Palantir Image Identification patent)  
2021  
Ink jet print on archive paper, glue, custom metal wall mount  
297 x 210 x 110mm

First published 2021  
by Michael Lett Publishing  
Text © Rosie Overell  
All photography © Sam Hartnett  
Artworks © Simon Denny  
Edited by Michael Lett  
All rights reserved

No part of this publication may  
be reproduced in any form without  
permission in writing from the above  
publisher and copyright holders

Designed by Inhouse

Typeset in Helvetica Now Text

ISBN 978-1-99-115124-7



US010339416B2

(12) **United States Patent**  
**Goenka et al.**

(10) **Patent No.:** **US 10,339,416 B2**  
(45) **Date of Patent:** **\*Jul. 2, 2019**

(54) **DATABASE SYSTEMS AND USER INTERFACES FOR DYNAMIC AND INTERACTIVE MOBILE IMAGE ANALYSIS AND IDENTIFICATION**

(52) **U.S. CL.**  
CPC ..... **G06K 9/6202 (2013.01); G06F 16/2379 (2019.01); G06F 16/58 (2019.01)**

(71) Applicant: **Palantir Technologies Inc., Palo Alto, CA (US)**

(72) Inventors: **Aakash Goenka, London, UK; Ajay Jain, Santa Clara, CA (US); Arash Taheri, New York City, NY; Daniel Isaza, Redmond, WA; Jack Zhu, Stanford, CA; Manson, Palo Alto, CA; Deger Turan, Stanford, CA; Stanislaw Jastrzebski, CA**

(73) Assignee: **Palantir Technologies Inc., Palo Alto, CA (US)**

(\* ) Notice: Subject to an extension of time under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) if this patent is amended to include this claim.

(21) Appl. No.: **16/027,813**

(22) Filed: **Jul. 5, 2018**

(65) **Prior Publication**  
US 2018/0314910 A1

**Related U.S. Applications**

(63) Continuation of application Ser. No. 15/111,111, filed Mar. 16, 2016, now Pat. No. 9,811,111 (Continued)

(51) **Int. Cl.**  
**G06K 9/62 (2006.01)**  
**G06F 16/58 (2019.01)**

(Continued)

image captured using a camera on a mobile device and performs image analysis to identify the person in the image.

(Continued)

20 messages  
the mobile device

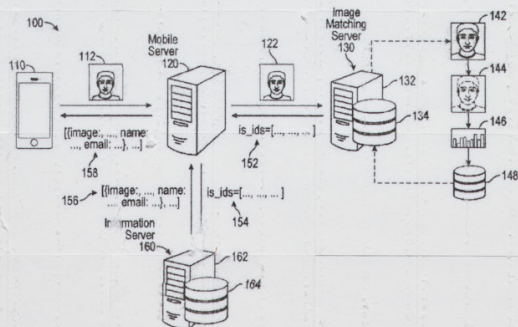
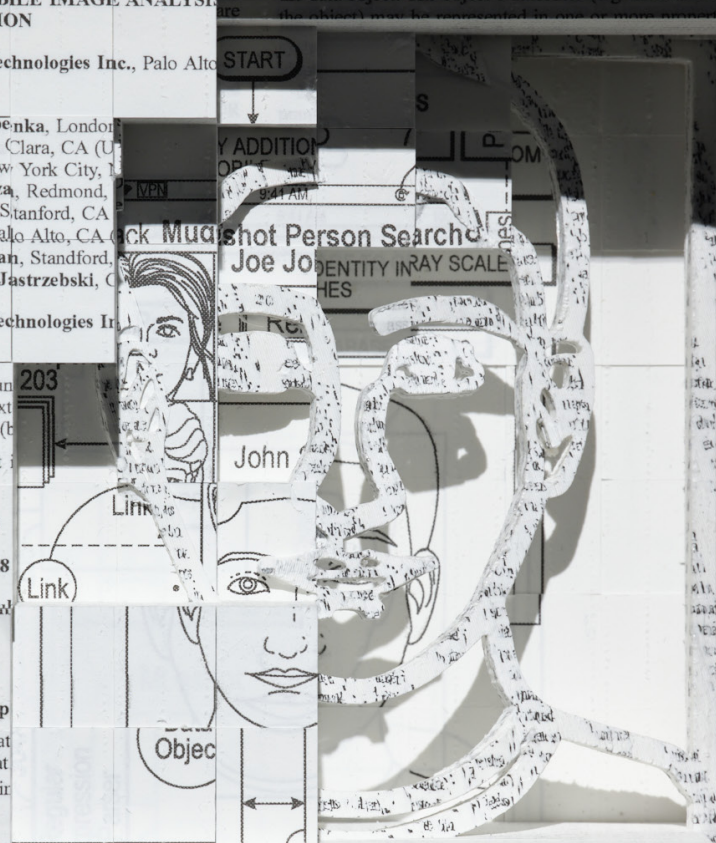


Figure 3.  
Simon Denny  
Document Relief 30 (Palantir Image Identification patent)  
2021  
Ink jet print on archive paper, glue, custom metal wall mount  
297 x 210 x 110mm