Interview with Jaret Vadera by Charu Maithani

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Jaret Vadera is an artist and cultural producer working between New York, Toronto, and India. Through his interdisciplinary practice, Vadera explores how different social, technological, biological, and cognitive processes shape and control the ways that we see the world around and within us. Vadera's thinking is influenced by the disciplines of cognitive science, post-colonial theory, science fiction, Buddhist systems of thought, as well as the study of impossible objects. Vadera's paintings, prints, photographs, videos, and installations have been exhibited and screened at: the Queens Museum, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai; Films Division of India, Mumbai; Paved Art + New Media, Saskatoon; and the Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah.

Charu Maithani [CM]// Let's start by talking a little about your practice – what informs it and your current pre-occupations?

Jaret Vadera [JV]// That should be an easy question to answer, but every time I am asked, I'm not sure what to say. Probably because I like to keep my practice open and out in front of me, shapeshifting into whatever I need it to be. I use my work as a means to be more present, more aware, to see more clearly, to process my experiences, and to ideally facilitate new ones.

Since as far back as I can remember, I have always been making things and breaking things. Taking things apart and then putting them back together, to see how they work, to see how I work. Over the last few years, I have been exploring some of the ways that different technologies colonize vision, shaping the ways that we see the world around and within us.

My work often drags in the quasi-objective visual language of documents associated with proof, like maps, photographs, and x-rays. I reconfigure them into visual conundrums, into cognitive Rorschach tests in an effort to reveal some of the collective myths, biases, and malignant ideologies that are often hidden in plain sight. I've been thinking a lot recently about dead pixels, dragons, and *other* spaces.

CM// The work, *File_Not_Found* plays with the relation between memory and images in a digital context. The Internet is not only a transactive memory partner but influences our memories, representation and perception. Could you describe how do you deal with the relationship of memory and images both aesthetically and conceptually in this video?

JV// In *File_Not_Found*, I was thinking about how rhythms, ruptures, and resonances between words and text could be arranged over time, to slow the viewer down, and to facilitate an experience that opens up an awareness of the process through which we "make sense." We "make sense" of things in real time. We process, digest, and filter what we are seeing as we are

interpreting it. This happens through the technology of the body, through tissue, blood, and biochemical reactions. But, we don't see this process. We don't see how we see. So on one level I am interested in the technology of the search engine as a metaphor for the ways we perceive and remember. On another level I am thinking of the Internet as an archive, and as a mind in and of itself.

CM// Your video on light, *Ascent*, explores the relationship between vision and perception. While viewing the video, one concentrates on seeing rather than the image on screen. In *File_Not_Found*, you have explored another dimension of the visual process, investigating the relation between images and text. Perceptions are at play here too, but in a different way. The image lies in relation to the text, resulting in the concentration of image on screen rather than the act of seeing. What are your thoughts on this?

JV// In *Ascent,* I shot footage of sunlight reflecting off the surface of water, and then adjusted the underlying grid of the digital matrix. Everything we see in a digital image is just a collection of dots on this grid. I wanted to see what would happen to the underlying experience of the original video if I shifted the structure of the grid. I was also interested to see if I could use video as a way to slow the viewer down. *Ascent*, works best when it is projected large, when it is immersive. It is meant to pull you in – in an experiential way.

File_Not_Found is more about the experience of reading. It is more about image and text, and time. The interface is familiar and the images and text are legible, but then in another way, not. And while *Ascent* is about slowing down, *File_Not_Found* is more about speeding things up. Although, different in many ways, both videos are in dialogue, and attempt to generate meaning through the poetics of entropy.

CM// In the contemporary society and our obsession with producing and sharing images, one wonders about the point of making new images when images can be re-appropriated and re-circulated. This ushers a new way of image making that reuses existing images. How has this affected your practice of painting, printmaking and installation art?

JV// I feel like there is a lot of noise today and I sometimes get overwhelmed with all of the quick-fix, attention grabbing, junk-food. I use my work to filter through the noise, to understand my relationship to the world around me, so on one level, it just makes sense for me to use material from my everyday as a starting point.

I often make work about something that is haunting me. An image, or a video, or an experience can sometimes stick with me in such a way, that I have to "make my way through it." But, at the same time, I have an ambivalent relationship to making more things. I like to make objects. Do we really need more things in the world?

Over the last few years I haven't had or wanted a studio. I have been moving and traveling quite a bit and I wanted to be in the world more. I have been predominantly making new work specifically for individual exhibitions. My laptop has become a way to work wherever I am, and has added a pragmatic dimension to working digitally as well.

CM// *File_Not_Found* also highlights the function of a search engine. The search engine functions are biased based on popularity, relevance, region, political pressures and other criteria, which in turn affects how we see things. This can lead to a cultural or social shift. Were you thinking about this while making the work?

JV// Absolutely. The archive and the algorithms influence everything. They influence how and what we see, and more importantly, what we don't. The Internet is often talked about as a shiny new democratic frontier, but it is far from it. There is a lot of potential, but only once we move beyond "globalization" style PR propaganda and start understanding how it actually works.

CM// Another theme that I noticed in the video was the comment on eternity towards the end. The World Wide Web can provide a function of eternity. Several countries, specially in the European Commission, talk about the right to be forgotten. This is linked not only to the erasure of the past but to the issues of de-contextualisation which are primarily provided by search engines. Your works like *File_Not_Found* and *All We See is Vision* involve search engines. How do you see these works, in conversation with these ideas?

JV// The right to be forgotten, and to not be tracked are very important issues. I am optimistic about the future, but I don't have much faith in states or corporations to solve or correct these problems. This is precisely why understanding how these systems work is the first step towards navigating them in a more conscious and deliberate way. Only then, can we move towards building alternative networks and systems.

It is interesting that you bring up eternity. I will have to think about it a little more. I often think about the future, but I feel that most technologies have a life span and will one day be obsolete. In *File_Not_Found*, I was definitely thinking about time, and space; about echoes and the future; about ghosts and machines; in how we remember and how we forget.

All archives are a malleable form of memory. Things get forgotten, shifted around, and recontextualized time and again. A search from a few years ago will bring up a different set of results if repeated today. And these results will change again based on where in the world you are. *All We See Is Vision,* was also making visible the invisible processes and biases implicit in search engine algorithms. And contrary to the idea of a floating nowhere space, I wanted to map the physical locations of the company servers where the search engine information actually came from.