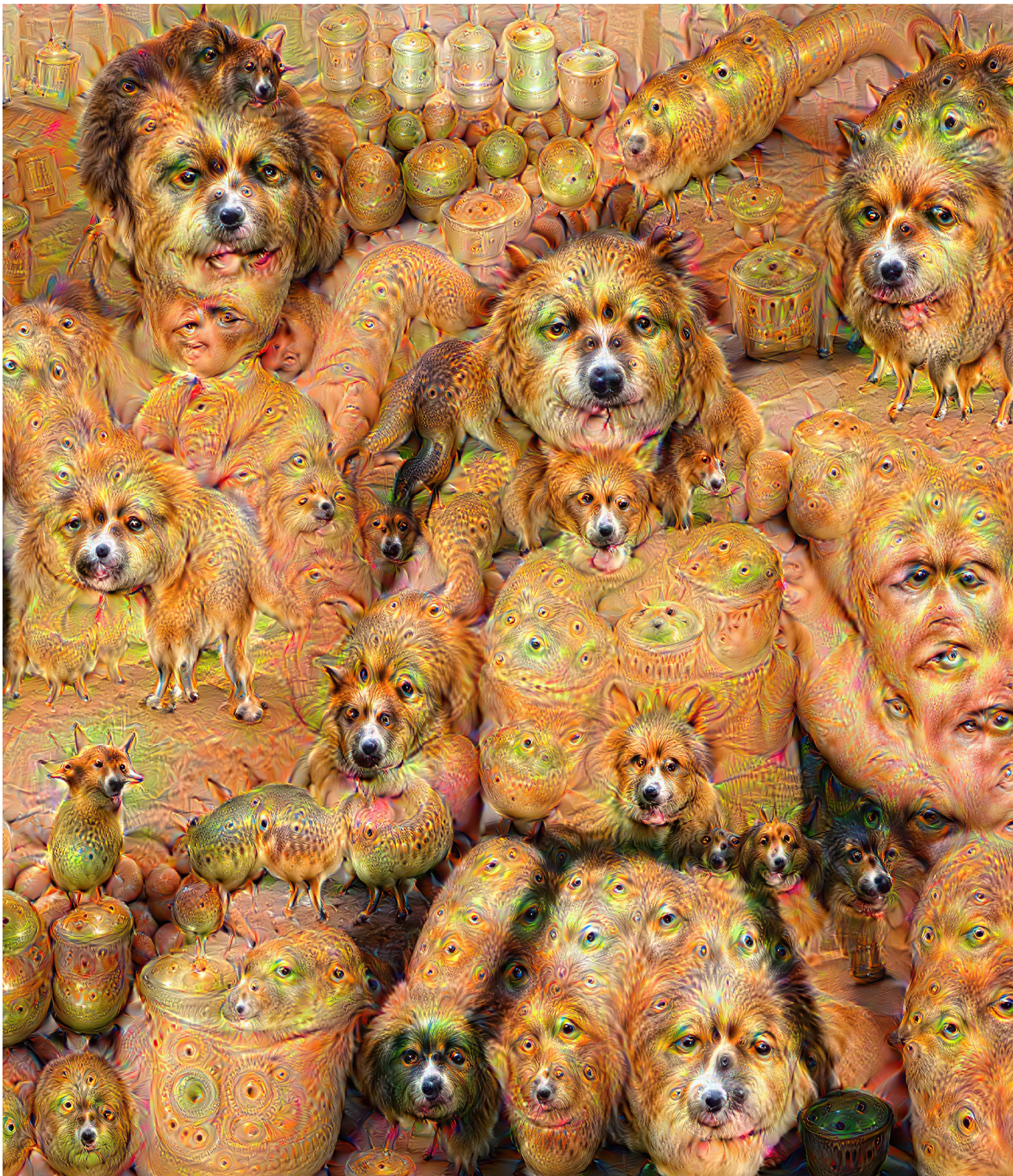


THE INDUSTRIALIZ

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ZATION OF DESIRE

by Michael Holden

In a world where our so-called choices are predicted, provoked and purchased, we need to start taking responsibility for knowing why we want what we want.

I recently left London and spent several months in my hometown. I was struck by the fact that billboard advertising seemed to have completely disappeared. The sites where I gazed at the abstract cigarette campaigns that skirted the law and the salacious ads for sun cream in the 1970s and 80s are long gone. Granted, the place is not too prosperous, but people don't stop buying things just because they're poor. No, like the drinkers that have also vanished along with the pubs they drank in, the covert glances of our covetousness have simply gone inside, gone home and got on with it alone, and we are none the better for it.

Just because the streets are quiet, don't think that this is not a revolution. However psychologically cynical the intentions of the 20th century Mad Men model (one might recall Don Draper's pitch to Jaguar: "When I was driving the E-Type I passed a 10-year-old boy in the window of a station wagon and I watched his eyes follow. He'd just seen something he would want for the rest of his life...") these intentions have nothing on what we are engaged with in the digital age.

The industrialization of desire has exploded to the point where it is about much more than making us want possessions, or even people. Now, our very choices – the stuff we might even deem to be ourselves – can be baited, bought and foreseen. Via data, we – our minds – have slipped beyond consumerism, through a touchscreen mirror, to become the thing that's owned. Even reading about how scary this is online generates data, and thus propagates the problem. Like the wise scientists in disaster movies, to speak of this is to raise no more than a passing flicker of interest among the crowds. And like the bathers in *Jaws*, we don't think about that shark when we hit the beach, we just keep running back into the sea.

Meanwhile, the influencer model makes Don Draper look like a saint. Yet none of this is new. It's there in the first flickers of the industry. A 17th century handbill for coffee assures its potential purchasers that this brave new beverage "is drunk generally throughout all the Grand Seigniors Dominions". Which is to say, it is enjoyed by people that you admire and envy. The difference is that making you buy coffee was, for centuries, nothing more than that. Now, our every prodded purchase can be used to tell us who or what to love or hate. Once, as Hannibal Lecter said to Clarice Starling in the 1991 movie *The Silence of the Lambs*, we would merely "covet what we see". Now, the mechanisms have become so intertwined that we inhabit an imperfect reversal, where what we covet

determines what we see.

What Cambridge Analytica termed 'the persuadables' (those whose plundered data revealed they had not quite made up their minds) became the target of perhaps the most bespoke and cynical act of emotional tailoring in history: a pornographic restructuring of politics that used what Lecter understood to speak precisely to what Clarice supposed (rightly) were the presenting manifestations of much more basic desires ("anger, social resentment, frustration") to provoke regime change through acts of targeted manipulation. No need now to seek out things to covet. You will see only more and more of what you want to see until you are led to what will feel like a decision.

Do not be fooled into calling the decentralization of commercial space democratization. When we were all watching television, at least we knew where to complain. If the providers of the digital space that now delivers 70% of advertising don't accept responsibility for those spaces, and it seems like they won't, then it falls to us to manage and defend our own terrain – our wits, ourselves, whatever you consider consciousness to be. They might build and fill the screens, but we run the projectors. The front line in this war is our own brains.

When I moved to London in the late 1980s, between the grand neon adverts of Piccadilly Circus and the cinemas of Leicester Square was a huge LED sign by the artist Jenny Holzer that read "Protect Me From What I Want". There is something in this plea, perhaps, that can steer us out of our predicament. The idea that the personal is political is as alive as Holzer's slogan is much missed, but less helpful to our liberation. The personal is pathological, primarily. We don't even know or care to know why we want what we appear to. With data, we gave (and are still giving) the decisions behind our so-called choices away.

Until we admit to ourselves that we are often deeply misled by what we think of as 'ourselves', none of this is going to go away. Realizing what makes us the way we are is just the first step of recovery. We must take that understanding and live better, despite all our old conditioning and mistakes, and take full responsibility for our choices if we want a future that gets beyond our past. To get free of those who can map our every instinct, we must truly understand ourselves.

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