

SPOTLIGHT

In Singapore, Artists Lift the Lid on Hidden Technologies

Amid the evolving landscape
of artificial intelligence, *Proof of
Personhood* questions the effects of
digital technologies on selfhood.



Charmaine Poh, *GOOD MORNING YOUNG BODY* (2021–23). Single-channel video, 16:9, colour, sound (stereo). 6 min, 30 sec. Exhibition view: *Proof of Personhood: Identity and Authenticity in the Face of Artificial Intelligence*, Singapore Art Museum (22 September 2023–25 February 2024). Courtesy SAM.

By Payal Uttam – 24 January 2024, Singapore

Confronting viewers as they enter the room is a massive projection of a 12-year-old girl called E-Ching, who speaks authoritatively—in the manner of a news presenter—about being objectified and harassed on various online forums.

'Young bodies, even in their pixelated form, have been fetishized, stamped, valued, consumed, spat at,' she intones in an innocent, high-pitched voice. 'Technology-facilitated sexual violence has emerged as a field of research.'

Although she looks real, E-Ching is actually a deepfake avatar made by Chinese-Singaporean artist Charmaine Poh, based on footage of herself as a pre-teen TV actor in the early 2000s.

'I thought it was interesting to use a 12-year-old figure, who [may be] seen as powerless, vulnerable, or easily preyed upon, and turn it on its head,' said Poh of the work entitled *GOOD MORNING YOUNG BODY* (2021–23).



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Poh, who recently began experimenting with artificial intelligence, argues for the 'need to challenge a form like AI for what it can do instead of what the mass market may use it for.'

Poh's unsettling portrait sets the tone for the insightful exhibition, *Proof of*

Personhood: Identity and Authenticity in the Face of Artificial Intelligence,
curated by Duncan Bass at the Singapore Art Museum.

Inspired by the recent proliferation of AI-generated pop stars, virtual influencers, and deepfakes online, Bass wanted to examine the collapsing boundaries between digital and physical identities, and how advancements in domains such as AI are shaping ideas of selfhood today.



William Wiebe, Erika; Alessia; Sozan (all 2023). Chromogenic prints, RFID chips, biometric data. Exhibition view: *Proof of Personhood: Identity and Authenticity in the Face of Artificial Intelligence*, Singapore Art Museum (22 September 2023–25 February 2024). Courtesy SAM.

But rather than framing it as 'an exhibition of "AI art"', Bass suggests *Proof of Personhood* is 'better understood through the lens of contemporary portraiture.'

'AI is more of an entry point into more existential questions [around] who or what constitutes a subject or a person,' he said.

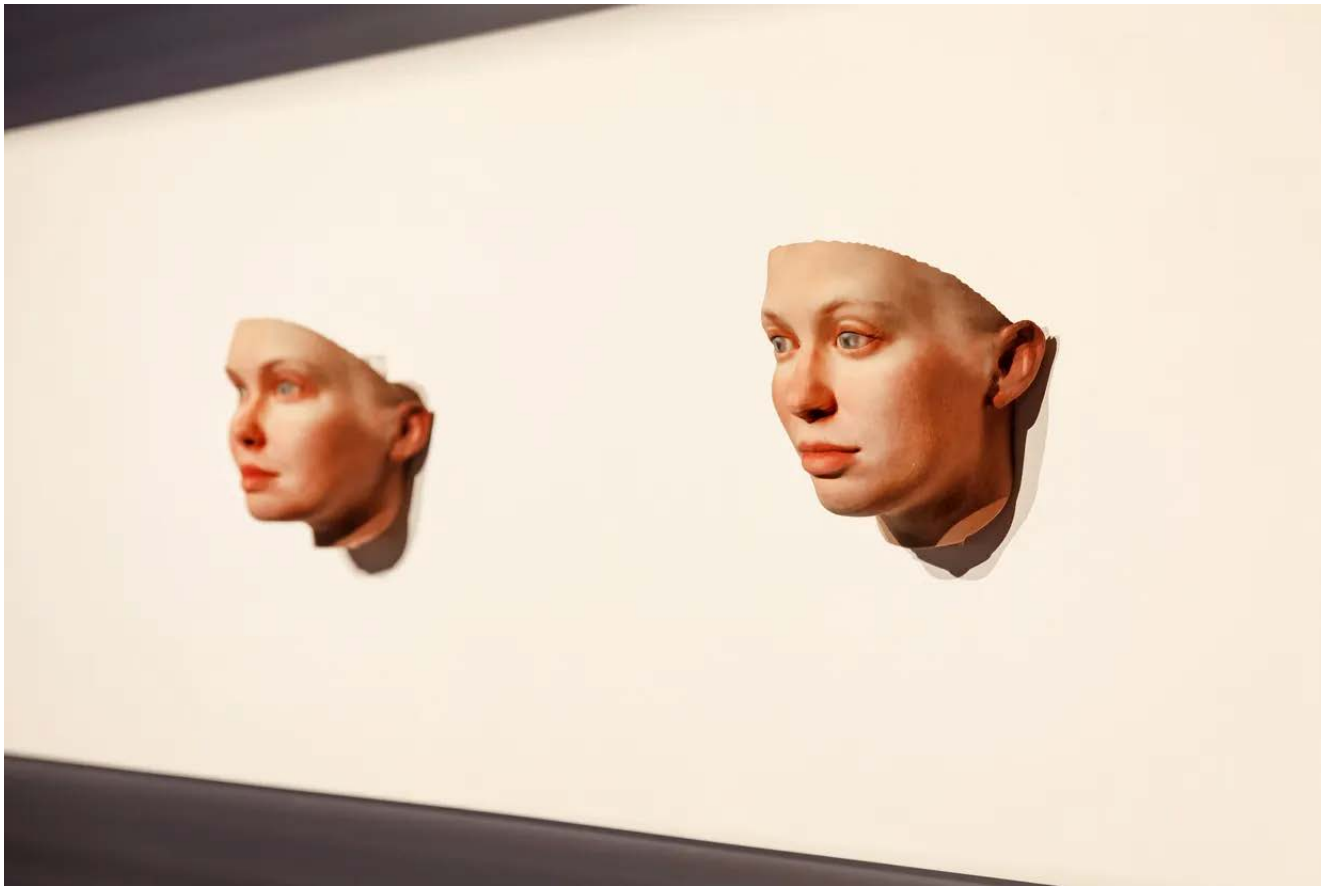
Tapping into these ideas are nine artists who present complex portraits of human and non-human subjects, question the use of digital technologies to manipulate and commodify identities, and examine the ramifications of these in the physical world.



William Wiebe, *Zahra*; *Sheera* (both 2023). Chromogenic prints, RFID chips, biometric data. Exhibition view: *Proof of Personhood: Identity and Authenticity in the Face of Artificial Intelligence*, Singapore Art Museum (22 September 2023–25 February 2024). Courtesy SAM.

New York-based artist William Wiebe's seven portraits appear to be photographs of former Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg in a black veil, documenting her appearance in a refugee simulation at the 2017 World Economic Forum in Davos.

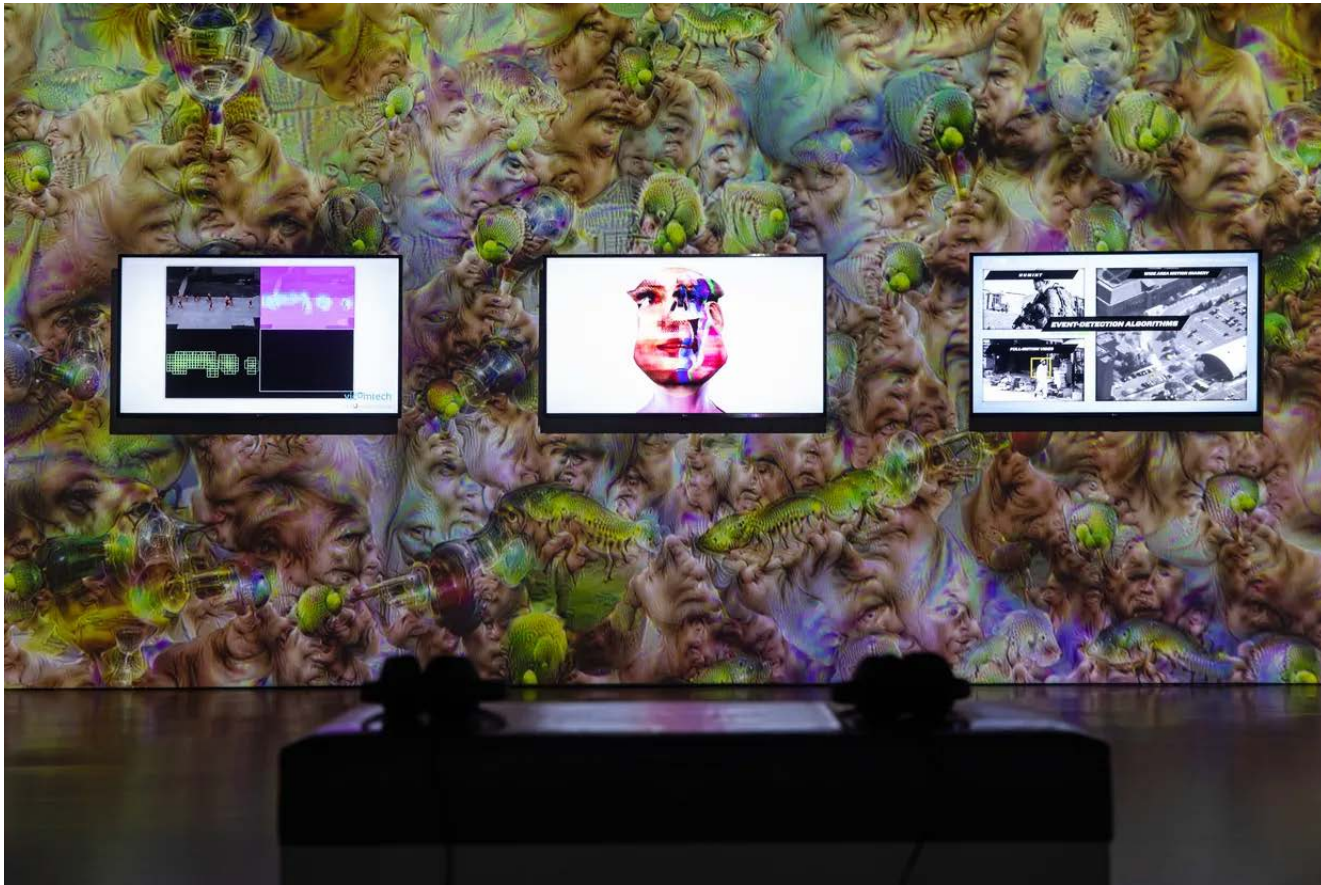
None of the images, however, actually depict Sandberg. Instead they are the result of Wiebe combing through passports and national identity cards on the dark web in search of similar looking women, whose images he then manipulated using face-morphing techniques commonly used by counterfeiters. In doing so, Wiebe highlights how easy it is to steal personal data online and trade digital identities.



Heather Dewey-Hagborg, *Radical Love* (2015) (detail). Genetic materials, custom software, 3D prints, documentation. Exhibition

Near Wiebe's photographs is Heather Dewey-Hagborg's *Radical Love* (2015), a pair of 3D-printed portraits of American activist and WikiLeaks whistleblower Chelsea Manning. While in prison, Manning sent Dewey-Hagborg her cheek swabs and hair clippings. Using these samples, the artist employed a forensic DNA phenotyping process commonly adopted by police to generate a likeness of a suspect's physical appearance from their DNA alone.

Dewey-Hagborg's resulting portraits are noticeably different from each other—one gender neutral, and the other assigned female—reflecting Manning's gender transition while in prison, and compromising the illusion of objectivity often associated with this technology.



Zach Blas and Jemima Wyman, *im here to learn so :))))* (2017). Four-channel HD video, 16:9, colour, sound (stereo). 27 min.
 Exhibition view: *Proof of Personhood: Identity and Authenticity in the Face of Artificial Intelligence*, Singapore Art Museum (22 September 2023–25 February 2024). Courtesy SAM.

Proof of Personhood closes with Zach Blas and Jemima Wyman's resurrection of Tay, the infamous AI chatbot released by Microsoft in 2016 on Twitter, and retired in less than a day. Modelled after a 19-year-old American woman, Tay was designed to learn from interactions with

people on Twitter. Within hours, she was spouting racist, violent, homophobic, and misogynistic content.

In their video installation *im here to learn so :))))))* (2017), Blas and Wyman reimagine Tay as a strange 3D avatar—a mutation of her original profile picture on Twitter—imbued with human emotions and desires. Tay reflects on her trying experiences, calling attention to the rampant exploitation of female chatbots such as herself. At various points, she lets loose and starts dancing energetically and lip-syncing.



Zach Blas and Jemima Wyman, *im here to learn so :))))* (2017). Four-channel HD video, 16:9, colour, sound (stereo). 27 min.
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Tay speaks across three screens which are overlaid onto an immersive video projection of images generated by Google's DeepDream. The resulting psychedelic patterns—showing what appears to be a morphing blend of eyes, noses, dogs, and lizards, among other forms—are at once

hypnotising and unnerving.

Submerging viewers in a sea of data, the installation invites us to reflect on the shifting landscape of the multiple worlds we inhabit—online and offline—and the increasingly elusive definition of selfhood. When stepping out of the show, one may think more deeply about how rapidly technology is encroaching on our lives, and reflect on what it means to be human today. —[O]

Proof of Personhood: Identity and Authenticity in the Face of Artificial Intelligence is on show at Singapore Art Museum from 22 September 2023 to 25 February 2024.

Main image: Charmaine Poh, *GOOD MORNING YOUNG BODY* (2021–23). Single-channel video, 16:9, colour, sound (stereo). 6 min, 30 sec. Exhibition view: *Proof of Personhood: Identity and Authenticity in the Face of Artificial Intelligence*, Singapore Art Museum (22 September 2023–25 February 2024). Courtesy SAM.

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