



# The Faces of the Accused and the Dead



Emily Pothast

Follow



Aug 31, 2021 · 3 min read ★

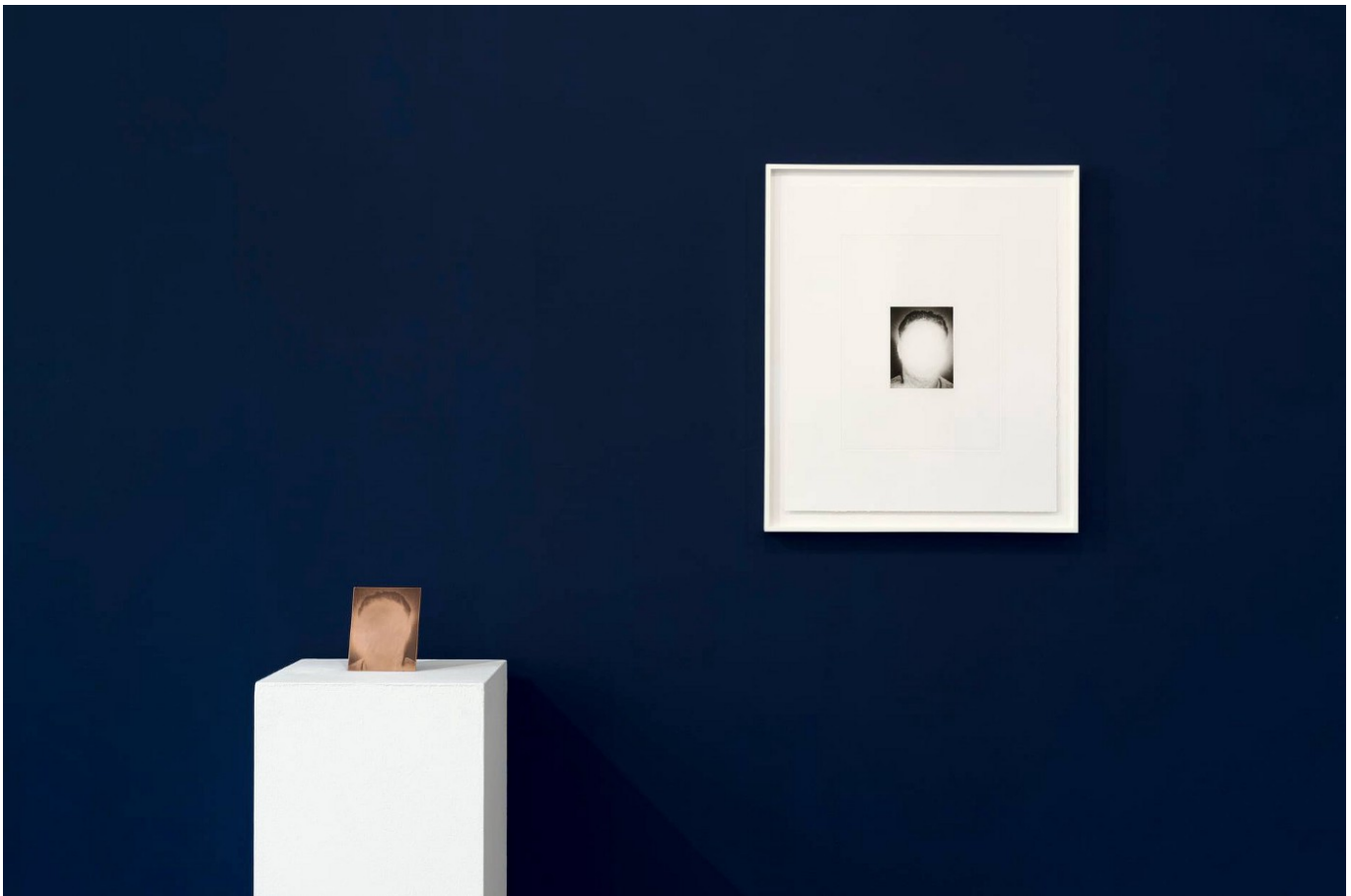
Two artists use archival mugshots to radically different ends



Dan Paz, "In 2020 I purchased and downloaded one of my father's mugshots from a third-party criminal-search website for \$29.99. My father died in 2009." Photogravure print on hand-made paper. 20 × 24 in. Commissioned for Lux Aeterna, Jacob Lawrence Gallery, Seattle WA. Curated by Emily Zimmerman.

In 2020, the artist Dan Paz purchased and downloaded a mugshot of their deceased father from a third-party criminal-search website for \$29.99. They then transferred this

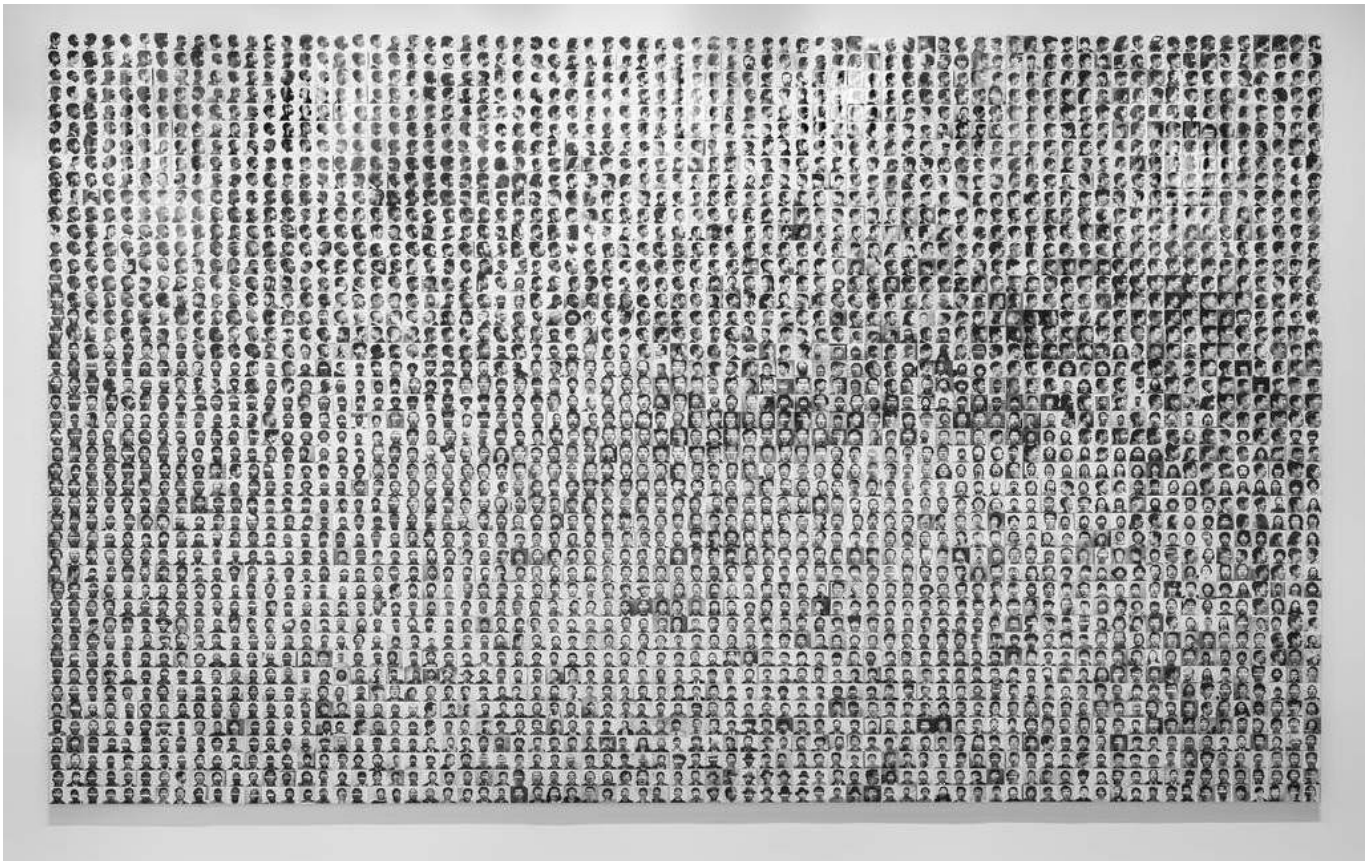
photograph onto a copper plate using an antiquated process known as photogravure. Using a scraper and burnisher, the artist obscured their father's face from the plate, rendering it smooth so that the facial features were no longer visible. They then inked up the plate and printed it on handmade paper. The white of the paper shines through the eradicated face so that it appears almost illuminated; like it's something too holy to render as a graven image. With this physical act of obfuscation, the memory of the artist's father is reclaimed as something that can't be stored in a database, or bought and sold as a commodity.



Dan Paz, "In 2020 I purchased and downloaded one of my father's mugshots from a third-party criminal-search website for \$29.99. My father died in 2009." Installation view with copper plate.

The resulting piece is currently installed at the Jacob Lawrence Gallery in Seattle as part of *Lux Aeterna*, an exhibition which invites viewers to consider how the physical existence of technological media helps frame our understanding of reality. It reminded me of another exhibition I saw recently, *Uncanny Valley: Being Human In the Age of AI* at the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco. Specifically, there are resonances between Paz's effaced photogravure and Trevor Paglen's *They Took the Faces from the Accused and the*

*Dead . . . (SD18)*, a wall-sized installation of over three-thousand mugshots taken from the archives of the American National Standards Institute.



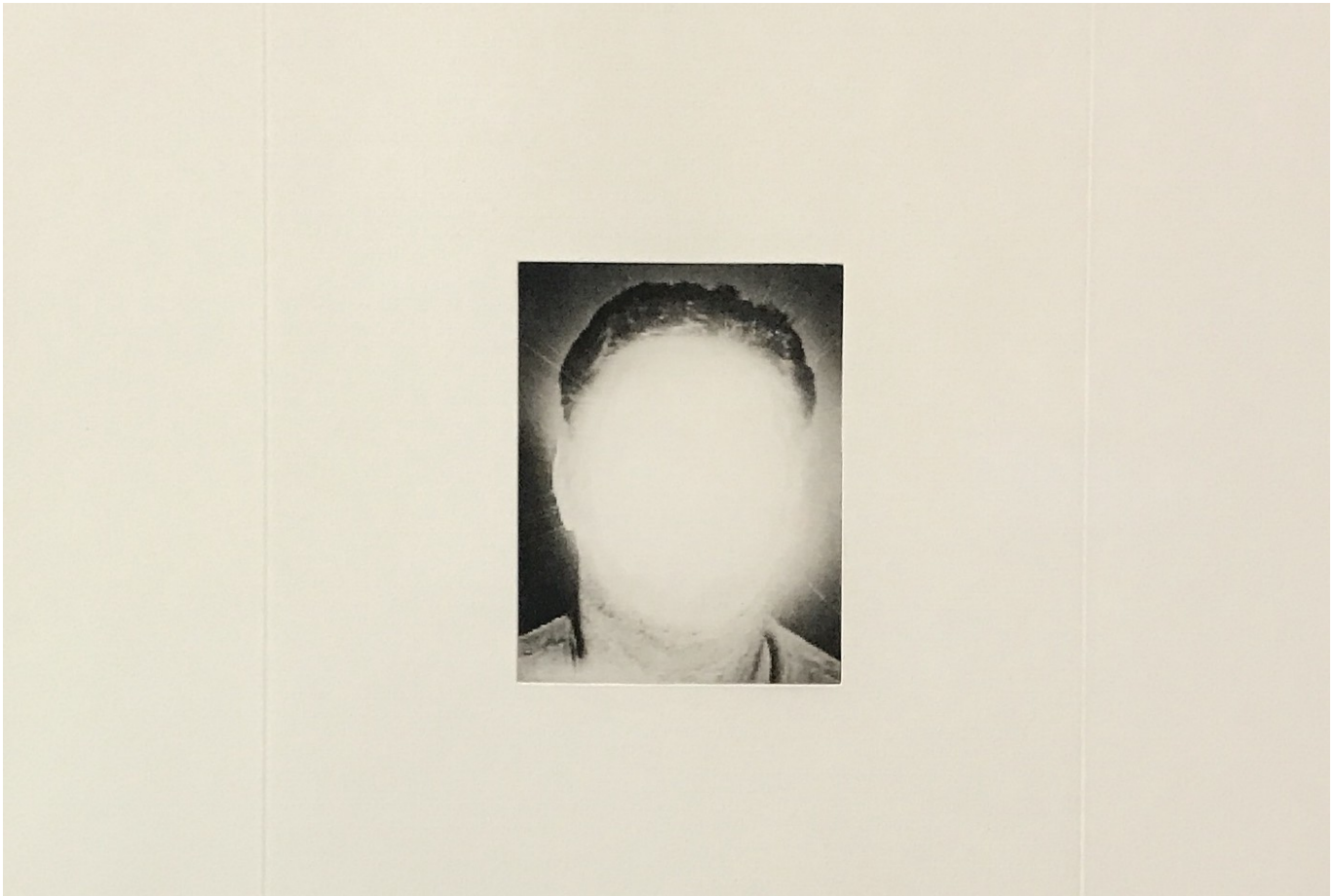
Trevor Paglen, “They Took the Faces from the Accused and the Dead . . . (SD18),” (detail), 2020. 3,240 silver gelatin prints and pins; dimensions variable. Installed at *Uncanny Valley: Being Human In the Age of AI*, DeYoung Museum, 2020.

As the wall text explained, images from this collection were once used by the government to create facial-recognition technology. “In other words,” writes curator Claudia Schmuckli, “originary facial-recognition software was built from images of prisoners repurposed by the US government without their consent.” Today, these same entities use photographs posted on social media to hone their algorithms.

Both Paz and Paglen have used archival mugshots as source material, but the work they produced with those mugshots could not be more different. In Paglen’s piece, the individual images are subsumed by the grid, their sheer volume affording them a kind of anonymity. We see them as the computer sees them: as a cache of raw, manipulable data, not as photographs of individuals. Paz, on the other hand, has created a poignant homage to a singular flesh and blood human being.

Both works underscore the dehumanizing gaze of Big Tech. But whereas Paglen makes the viewer complicit in this gaze—although their eyes are censored, there is something troubling about seeing all these faces in a gallery—Paz liberates the viewer from this complicity by foreclosing the possibility of voyeurism. What we don't see sets us free.

*Lux Aeterna* is on view through September 7 (extended date!) at the Jacob Lawrence Gallery in Seattle. *Uncanny Valley: Being Human In the Age of AI* is over but the exhibition catalogue is available through the DeYoung's museum store.



Dan Paz, "In 2020 I purchased and downloaded one of my father's mugshots from a third-party criminal-search website for \$29.99. My father died in 2009." (detail)