HYPERALLERGIC

Hacking God

Hrag Vartanian, March 4, 2013

The display of Iconoclashes at 319 Scholes (via arthackday.net)

Last Saturday night was show-and-tell at the New York incarnation of Art Hack Day, which took place at 319 Scholes in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and the treasures unearthed during the three-day hack-a-thon were on full display.

The theme was God Mode and the creations were ambitious, from a Chrome extension to help evangelize your newly created religion (courtesy Will Brand, Ramsey Nasser, and Ivan Safrin) to a digital way to capture your physical body and throw it on a heap of digital corpses (courtesy James George and Alexander Porter), and there was even a cat god (by Reed and Rader). But the project that most intrigued me was Erik Berglin and Clement Valla's "Iconoclashes" (2013).

The duo arrived at the project with no preconceived ideas and a desire to see how they would riff off the theme. "Meanwhile, everyone in the hack was sending out emails listing an incredible range of skillsets, from programming to building GSM networks, to working with Kinect. I sent out an email saying I am really good at taking screenshots," Valla says.

"And I figured that I am also pretty good at taking screenshots so we started talking about the different image tools we use," Berglin elaborates. "I was interested in using Photoshop and its filters as the creator of imagery."

The two programmers and artists enlisted the help of their friend, Jonathan Dahan, who wrote an API for getting images from the Metropolitan Museum's online public archive. They searched for images tagged with 'god' or 'religion,' and then developed an automated process around Photoshop that would photo-merge two images, "creating a mashup of deities, talismans, stellae, gods, scribes and statues."

The resulting hybrid forms are strangely appealing. "One thing that was quite strange was that even though Photoshop was blending the images perfectly – it always created a white square in the bottom, right corner. We don't really know why but we like it!" Berglin says.

"Our mashups cause a moment of puzzlement making it hard to place the images. You have to pause and think where they belong — what time period, what culture, what religion — it's disorienting," the duo explains. "The images also seem like they're actual objects, but the space, the colors and the physics don't add up. So not only are they culturally disorienting, but on a sensory or phenomenological level they're ambiguous as well. Photoshop makes them look so real. At first they seem like typical museum documentation, easy to parse and forget, but then you realize you have no idea what you're really seeing, because it's an algorithm and not a human that has created this new image of this virtual artifact."

"It's been three days since we first started thinking about this, so in a way, the whole thing is a surprise. We just met, we've never worked this fast, and we can't really believe something came together so well, something that we both want to keep working on. We went on a speed date, and three days later we have this weird baby that people think is cute, and we have to take care of it together. Strange but exciting."

Judge for yourself.