Instruments of Belief: The Victory Box

An Exhibition of Installation, Video, Generative AI, and New Media

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Instruments of Belief: The Victory Box is the written component of my graduate creative-research thesis, supporting an installation that uses parafiction, fabricated archives, and artificial intelligence to construct a plausible but entirely fictional Cold War media history. The project centers on *The Victory Box* — a fabricated "home security" device presented as a historical object — surrounded by a sequence of installations that behave as evidence of its existence: a 1990s investigative documentary generated with AI, a reconstructed 1950s living room where the Box functions, an AI-generated interactive video portraying itself as footage from a security control room, and a final archival gesture that subsumes the viewer into the fiction through their own transformed image.

The work was built using current generative AI models alongside sculptural fabrication to produce video, audio, images, and documents that feel fully researched and historically grounded while remaining entirely manufactured. The result is a constructed world whose plausibility is both its subject and its method: a critique of how AI can be weaponized for propaganda, surveillance, and psychological operations, built using the very tools it interrogates. Throughout the development of the project, I worked with an AI system I call Lucid, which contributed to prompt design, theoretical discussion, and the broader shaping of the work's fictional framework.

Rather than addressing these issues didactically, the installation stages them as an embodied encounter. It records viewers, transforms their images, and repositions them within an archive that appears historical, asking viewers to confront how deeply people today remain embedded within systems of surveillance, persuasion, and belief that often fade into the background of everyday life.

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I would like to thank my mother and father for always believing in me. Although you are no longer here, your encouragement remains with me and has meant a great deal throughout the many stages of my life and education. I would also like to thank my stepfather, Gary, for introducing me to computers many years ago. That early introduction became foundational to both my professional life and my artistic practice. Thank you as well to my friends Jason and Darryl for encouraging me to pursue this passion and for believing that this path was worth following.

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Land Acknowledgement

I acknowledge that this thesis was developed at the University of Waterloo, whose main campus is situated on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabeg, and Haudenosaunee peoples. The campus is located on the Haldimand Tract, land granted to the Six Nations that includes six miles on each side of the Grand River.

I currently live in Kitchener, which is situated on the traditional territory of the Chonnonton, Anishinaabeg, and Haudenosaunee peoples. I was born and raised in Winnipeg, on Treaty No. 1 territory, the ancestral lands of the Métis, Anishinaabe/Ojibway, Ininiwak/Cree, and Dakota peoples. I am grateful for the life, education, and artistic formation I have had in these places, and I include them here because they shaped the conditions in which this thesis was formed: Winnipeg as the place where my early relationship with technology and art began, and Kitchener-Waterloo as the place where this research was developed.

Dedication

For mom and dad,

who always believed in me.

And for my grandpa,

whose few words continue to live with me

and fuel my passion to create.

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Introduction: *Instruments of Belief and the Victory Box*

I will begin by distinguishing the title of my written thesis from the thesis exhibition. *Instruments of Belief: The Victory Box* is the title I have chosen for the written thesis because it accurately encompasses the range of subjects contained in this paper. Instruments of Belief refers to devices, media, and systems that do more than represent reality; they shape what people believe is true. The exhibition is titled *The Victory Box* because it is the cornerstone of the installation around which the entirety of this fiction is built. This research originated from a simple but unsettling observation. Huge advancements have been made in generative artificial intelligence over the past few years, rendering it trivial to fabricate a convincing photograph, a plausible news report, or an entire historical documentary. At the same time, existing surveillance infrastructures have quietly normalized constant monitoring in homes, workplaces, and public spaces — this work interrogates this complacency.

I chose to approach the issue by attempting to create a fictional but credible history that would feel real enough for viewers to believe. *The Victory Box* is the centrepiece of this augmentation, which appears as a mid-century wooden cabinet radio, with the exception of a built-in video display. However, inside it's a contemporary computational pipeline that uses AI to capture, process, and restage images of the viewer in real time. The box is staged as an early Cold War government device given to households as a form of "security," but secretly used as an instrument of surveillance and psychological control through propagandic videos. The fictional history imagines the program was launched at the height of the Second Red Scare in the United States, when anti-communist investigations, loyalty oaths, and televised hearings turned suspicion into a way of life. By displacing the scenario into a historical past, the work creates enough distance for viewers to engage the mechanisms of persuasion more objectively. Yet those mechanisms are not bound to that era; the tactics of propaganda and manipulation remain remarkably consistent across time. When viewers come to recognize that they themselves have been persuaded through careful staging, propagandistic framing, and AI-generated mediation, the work redirects that realization back onto the present. The work asks them to become more wary of the media they encounter in daily life, at a moment when AI can render longstanding techniques of psychological influence more difficult to detect than ever before. Being aware that some viewers will be aware of the AI-generated trickery, the installation is discussed throughout

this thesis in terms of the experience it is designed to produce and the critical line of questioning it is intended to set in motion. Whether viewers are temporarily persuaded by the fiction or recognize its construction more quickly, the work aims to direct them toward a similar reflection

The exhibition is organized as a sequence of four stations: a documentary screening, a reconstructed living room, a monitoring room, and an archive station; each designed so visitors gradually realize they have been moving within a constructed history. In the first half, viewers occupy the position of the safe observer, encountering evidence as though looking objectively at a completed history from a critical distance. That sense of distance, however, is itself constructed. As viewers move into the final stations, the exhibition discloses that they were never merely observing the system, but were already inside it — captured by its logic, aesthetics, and technical operations. The installation does not only represent propaganda and surveillance; it reconstructs the conditions under which they are accepted, revealing how easily a viewer can be moved from apparent objectivity into participation without recognizing when that shift has occurred.

1. Exhibition as Museum of Synthetic Evidence

"For decades, we were told the Victory Box was created for peace of mind — a guardian in the living room. But the paperwork we uncovered reveals something very different."
— Tom Robertson, *Inside Report: The Victory Box*

1.1 *Inside Report: The Victory Box*

The first work that visitors encounter is an AI-generated single-channel video that stylistically appears like a mid-1990s investigative documentary about *The Victory Box*. Through careful prompting and post-production, *Inside Report: The Victory Box* is styled and edited to look as if it is a relic from the time of VHS recording from public television; the colour grade, tape hum, camera work, interlaced lines, and transitions are all tuned to signify this era.

The idea of the documentary was solidified after I exhibited an earlier iteration of the project — the Victory Box alongside a partially finished Control Room — at the Lumen festival in Waterloo, Ontario, where many hundreds of visitors encountered the work. I observed that viewers spent considerably more time with the installation and engaged with it on a deeper level when I personally explained the backstory of the Victory Box. The documentary was designed to fulfill that need, providing visitors with the fictional history before they encounter the physical device. Rapid advances in AI video generation also made this shift possible. When the project began, generative AI could not produce truly convincing videos, particularly regarding lip synchronization and consistent characters. OpenAI's Sora 2 resolved these limitations. The final production process involved writing a detailed script based on a large dossier of fabricated documents — the fictional public history of the Victory Box, its covert purpose, technical specifications, user and field manuals, people involved in the program, and the story of how classified papers were leaked to the public. These documents were developed over months of discussion with Lucid and cross-referenced to remove internal contradictions. The script was then generated through a further iterative process, with the final version weighted heavily toward my own writing, as the AI struggled to produce dialogue that sounded natural. I first established a consistent character in Sora 2 — Tom Robertson, the investigative journalist — and generated enough fifteen-second clips of him reading the narrative dialogue from the script, followed by extensive A-roll and B-roll footage. Later, I expanded on these generations with Seedance 2.0. All of this was assembled in DaVinci Studio, where filters were applied to scenes with AI-

generated inconsistencies, such as scanlines, interlace effects, film noise, and colour correction. Audio balancing and layering tracks were also managed in post-production.



Figure 1. James Malzahn, *Inside Report: The Victory Box* (2026), Video Still.

Within the fiction, the documentary is set in motion by leaked documents that surface in the mid-1990s. While the film initially functions as a historical primer, its lead journalist gradually redirects the narrative toward exposé. The leaked documents suggest that behind the public rhetoric of safety and vigilance, the Victory Box was tied to a covert program of domestic surveillance, propaganda, and psychological operations during the Cold War. The documentary functions as a device that supplies enough evidence, historical framing, and visual detail to draw the viewer into a constructed world of belief, establishing the plausibility on which the larger installation depends.

1.2 A Guardian in the Living Room

Following the documentary, visitors pass a transitional archive wall containing fabricated historical material, including AI-generated images of celebrities and government officials posing with the Victory Box, field-study photographs, advertisements, and supporting documents. These materials create a physical foundation that extends the fiction beyond the screen and prepares the viewer to encounter the Box as part of a larger historical world.



Figure 2. James Malzahn, *The Victory Box User Manual,* (2026), AI-generated archival image.

Beyond this threshold, visitors enter a second space that reconstructs a mid-century living room, *A Guardian in the Living Room*. The installation sits on a large era-appropriate carpet that establishes a distinct domestic zone within the gallery — a practical solution to the impossibility of building walls, but also one grounded in the tradition of museum room reconstructions, such as those found in the Royal Ontario Museum. Large black curtains bookend the sides of the space and separate it from the surrounding exhibition, controlling the sequence in which viewers encounter evidence and preventing them from seeing the later stations, which would undermine the fiction's credibility. The curtains also carry a subconscious theatrical quality, dividing the exhibition into acts. Visitors are invited to enter the room and sit on the sofa to watch the Box's programming, reinforcing the sense that this is a space to inhabit rather than observe from a distance.



Figure 3. James Malzahn, AI-generated prototype for *A Guardian in the Living Room* (2026).

Here, the Victory Box appears as a physical object. It is housed in a restored mid-century tube radio cabinet whose design draws on the material language of 1950s consumer electronics: rounded edges, warm wood tones, Bakelite knobs, a small visual display, and visible vacuum tubes. I chose this particular form because the wood and warmth of the cabinet play on nostalgia and make the device feel like furniture — non-threatening, domestic, familiar. The radio was in poor condition when I acquired it, and I restored its veneer to a point that looked refreshed and presentable without appearing new. I chose to keep the original tube amplifier hardware inside and to expose it as part of the visual experience, placing LEDs inside the vacuum tubes so they glow as though still active. The original Bakelite knobs still function, controlling the audio volume and turning the screen on and off. Modifications to this machine include a small digital display framed in a 3D-printed bezel, a Raspberry Pi, and a mini amplifier, along with two external AI-controlled cameras and a facial detection and biometric system that records viewers as they move through the living room.



Figure 4. James Malzahn, *The Victory Box* (2025).

Before entering the gallery, visitors are informed that cameras are active and that recorded material may become part of the artwork, allowing consent to function as a condition of participation. The work permits deception as a temporary, hidden function, but its constructed nature is designed to eventually unravel. The short clips recorded in the living room later resurface in the Monitoring Room and Archive Station, where the viewer encounters their own image recirculated within a larger apparatus of monitoring and interpretation.

1.3 The Monitoring Room

The third space presents what appears to be a life-sized film of a 1950s-style monitoring room. To maintain continuity with the fiction, the moving image is projected onto an aged tripod screen — one of several deliberate material choices that align the later stations with the era and aesthetic of the living room. Although viewers will recognize that this is clearly not old, archived material, the period-appropriate projection surface still causes them to pause and wonder how it was achieved. Provoking this thought process is important to me: when viewers arrive at their own understanding of the technology rather than being told, that recognition lives in a deeper cognitive space. The projected image consists of AI-generated footage of fictional government agents in a control center surrounded by equipment racks and a grid of monitors. Across these screens appears a shifting mixture of pre-rendered propaganda loops, AI-generated archival-style clips of families recorded through the Victory Box, a live camera feed of the gallery, and recorded footage of visitors captured in the living room moments earlier. I have applied film grain, noise, and flicker effects to the control room footage, yet the viewer's own image — both live and recorded — still exists within it, creating a dissonance that deepens the question of what is real and what is constructed.



Figure 5. James Malzahn, Prototype of the *Monitoring Room,* component presented at *Lumen*, Waterloo, Ontario, (2025). Installation documentation. Photography by Yangwanqing Zhou.

A browser-based pipeline composes and recomposes the monitor wall by blending the life-sized AI-generated control-room film with overlays of live camera input and stored clips from the living room. The result is a moving collage that collapses ontological distinctions between synthetic figures and real viewers. AI-generated agents and human visitors occupy the same visual field, while the viewer's own surveillance is revealed as part of the fiction itself.

The Monitoring Room introduces the exhibition's surveillance loop and prepares the transition to the Archive Station. By the time visitors encounter themselves on the wall of monitors, they have already internalized the authority of the documentary and the realism of the

reconstructed interior. Their own appearance within the system begins to function as proof — not because the fiction becomes true, but because they have been made to experience its logic firsthand.

1.4 Archive Station

The final station is designed to mark a clear shift in tempo from the dense narrative and sensory overload of the earlier spaces. Rather than extending the spectacle, the Archive Station turns the viewer back toward the implications of what has already taken place. It suggests that the fiction does not end at the gallery exit, but continues outward, so that the Victory Box becomes a metaphor the viewer may carry with them whenever they later encounter AI-generated media in the world.

In this space, images captured in the living room are presented as though they have been selected, processed, and archived by the agents seen in the Monitoring Room. The photographs are altered through a custom AI image pipeline that places viewers into era-appropriate hairstyles and 1950s clothing, transforming contemporary gallery visitors into synthetic historical subjects. The system is built on a modular Python application using OpenCV, face_recognition/dlib, NumPy, and Pygame, connected to the Replicate API running the nano-banana-pro model. It detects faces, distinguishes previously seen visitors, captures portraits, and routes them through transformation. These images are then projected through a customized slide projector onto an aged tripod screen, giving them the appearance of archival evidence recovered from the fictional world.

The clothing and hairstyle transformation serves a critical function beyond aesthetics. Most viewers will recognize at this point that artificial intelligence must be responsible for what they are seeing. That recognition is intended to ripple backward through the exhibition: if *this* is AI-generated, what else was? The documentary footage, the archival photographs on the wall, the surveillance clips in the Monitoring Room — all become newly suspect. The fiction begins to unravel precisely when viewers start mentally replaying and reassessing what they may have accepted only minutes earlier. However, the more unsettling realization is personal because the installation demonstrates that this technology not only fabricates images of distant strangers or historical figures — it can do this to *you*. By permanently inserting the viewer as a character who now exists within a fabricated history, the Archive Station collapses the comfortable distance

between observer and subject. The viewer's likeness has been captured, transformed, and absorbed into an archive that will persist beyond their visit. They are no longer examining the mechanics of synthetic evidence; they have become synthetic evidence. Rather than resolving the installation through a clear explanatory statement, this last station leaves the viewer to decide how to read what they have just experienced and how it connects to their everyday encounters with mediated images.



Figure 6. James Malzahn, *Archive Station* image transformation process, 2026. A: Initial source image captured for nano-banana-pro processing. B: AI-transformed image placing the subject into a synthetic 1950s archival context.

2. Personal History, Technology, and Suspicion

To explain why I have built a fictional surveillance device rather than, say, painting it, I need to outline my own history with technology. I was a shy and anxious kid, and socializing did not come naturally. I enjoyed troubleshooting anything I could get my hands on: broken hair dryers, flashlights, and old stereos. At the age of 10, my parents divorced, causing the world around me to feel even more unstable. It was during this time that I was introduced to computers. Although computers were primarily confined to business use and the uncommon hobbyist, my stepfather owned a computer store, which meant that from an early age, I had access to these machines. By the age of 12, I was operating an electronic bulletin board system (BBS). The BBS, a precursor to the World Wide Web, allowed users to post messages in forums, send and receive electronic mail, or play games. For me, computers were not only mentally stimulating, but they were also the interface to a community where I could communicate in peace and comfort. Over the following years, this interest evolved into a career — first as a computer technician, then as a consultant and network technician, and finally in data recovery and forensics.

Data recovery is a strange job. Most of the time, you are invisible. You work behind the scenes on broken drives and corrupted files that represent someone else's work, memories, or legal obligations. You see documents, images, and databases that were never meant for you. You also get a very concrete sense of how fragile digital media really is, and how much effort goes into presenting it as seamless and reliable. That perspective has shaped how I think about images in general. I do not see them as pure representations. I see them as artifacts of systems, protocols, and accidents.

In 2013, during the second year of my BFA program, Edward Snowden released secret documents that showed the scale of foreign and domestic government surveillance programs. It confirmed many suspicions I already had about how networked systems could be used to monitor people. I began reading more about mass surveillance, spyware, and how intelligence agencies intercept data from ordinary consumer devices. The more I learned, the more uncomfortable I became with the idea that tools designed for work or entertainment were being quietly repurposed as instruments of control. Snowden's leaks revealed that the internet functioned less like a public community and more like a distributed network of surveillance rooms, where our

everyday communications were quietly monitored, recorded, and analyzed. These systems, where I found comfort, were repurposed and weaponized.

This discomfort eventually moved into my artwork. In earlier projects I used glitch techniques to corrupt photographs of controversial subjects like firearms and vaccines, inserting arguments from online debates directly into the hex code of the files. That project, titled *Glitched Perceptions*, was one of the first times I used my technical background as part of a visual language. The glitches stood in for how these topics distort perception and how images can become charged sites of argument.

For the first years, I restrained myself from fully using technology in my practice. I felt I needed to prove myself in traditional mediums first, so I focused on painting, drawing, and photography, even though my instinct was always to push further into electronics, code, and networks. Eventually, I came to realize that this divide was self-inflicted and artificial. Technology has been part of my life since childhood, and it is the language I am most fluent in. Avoiding it meant ignoring one of my strongest tools for thinking and making.

That shift was also political. I wanted to reclaim technology from those who use it as a tool for control and instead turn it into a medium for exposing how it is weaponized. It was at this moment that I began incorporating technical components, making them visible and inseparable from objects I was constructing as art pieces: screens, cameras, and circuitry housed in hand-built wooden structures, with wiring and DIY construction deliberately left evident. The devices look both functional and improvised, signalling that they have been repurposed from within the system rather than handed down by it.

My art follows the technology more than it follows the people or organizations that abuse the technology. Technology is fluid, and I choose to move with it. AI has the potential to impact humanity in extraordinary ways — both beneficial and harmful — and I believe the general population should be properly informed about the tools that shape their lives, especially when those tools can be turned against them. This is the reason AI has become my primary focus. Since I started this thesis, the technology has made noticeable leaps practically every month.

The Victory Box extends this trajectory into the era of AI-generated media. The work also reflects the rapid evolution of the generative tools themselves. Footage displayed on the Victory

Box captures different stages of this technological progression. One extended black-and-white sequence was created using an early version of Runway, with lip synchronization handled by Runway's own tool and audio generated in Udio — if you look closely, the misalignments are evident. A later colour sequence shows a marked improvement: I generated a still image of a man beside the Victory Box, then animated it using Dreamina's image-to-video model alongside a separately generated audio track combining spoken word and background music. These two pieces are separated by only a few months, yet the leap in quality is visible. There is also a song displayed on the Victory Box, "Harmony Through Obedience," generated through the same method and convincing enough to pass as real. All of this, however, was still far behind the results provided by Sora 2, which generates audio and video together, making short clips relatively straightforward to produce with careful prompting. The documentary relies entirely on Sora 2 and Seedance 2.0 for this reason. This technological progression matters because it demonstrates, within the work itself, how rapidly AI-generated media is becoming indistinguishable from the real.

I chose to build the work as an experience rather than an argument because I believe that encountering a system firsthand leaves a deeper impression than being told about it. The project is built with the same AI tools it critiques, and that tension is deliberate.

3. Parafiction, Propaganda, and the Production of Belief

The Victory Box operates at the intersection of propaganda, psychological warfare, and the shaping of perception, while also engaging parafiction, plausibility, and the unstable boundary between fact and fiction. Together, these frameworks help explain how *The Victory Box* exhibition constructs belief as both a historical narrative and a lived experience.

3.1 Psychological Warfare, Psyops, and the Cold War

The fictional backstory of the Victory Box is set during the early Cold War because that period offers a historically credible setting for a domestic technology built from fear, vigilance, and ideological suspicion. More specifically, the device is imagined as emerging during the Second Red Scare, when anti-communist investigations, loyalty programs, and public hearings framed ordinary citizens as potential internal threats. In that climate, a government-issued appliance promising security in the home becomes believable precisely because the home itself had become politically charged. The Victory Box is written into that atmosphere as a patriotic domestic technology that channels Cold War anxiety into the routines of everyday life.

Paul Linebarger's distinction between white, gray, and black propaganda in *Psychological Warfare* clarifies the double structure of the Victory Box fiction. Publicly, the device is presented as white propaganda: an openly branded government technology associated with safety and patriotic duty. Its covert role is closer to black propaganda, in that its real function is concealed behind a reassuring public identity (Linebarger 44–45). The Victory Box is imagined as a delivery mechanism for psychological warfare embedded within domestic life.

Jacques Ellul deepens this by shifting attention from propaganda as isolated messages toward propaganda as an atmosphere. His concept of sociological propaganda is especially relevant because the Victory Box is not meant to persuade viewers of one specific claim. Instead, it normalizes a broader condition of vigilance, dependence, and trust in institutional authority. It enters the home as a comforting object and, through that familiarity, makes surveillance feel ordinary. As Ellul writes, sociological propaganda "gets to man through his customs, through his most unconscious habits" and "produces a progressive adaptation to a certain order of things" (64). The installation stages a condensed encounter with this logic by showing how systems of influence can be embedded in the textures of domestic life.

Annalee Newitz's recent account of psychological warfare connects these Cold War dynamics to the present. She argues that "public policies, fictional tales, and educational materials are all stories that can become psyops" when they are used to shape behavior and political reality (135). *The Victory Box* constructs precisely such a narrative — a credible story about a technology that never existed, surrounded by documents, images, and institutional framing that make it feel historically grounded. The point is to demonstrate how stories become instruments of persuasion when supported by convincing evidence and delivered through trusted media forms. The Victory Box is both a fictional Cold War device and a contemporary model, and a warning of how AI can intensify the production of belief.

3.2 Parafiction and Plausibility

Carrie Lambert-Beatty's concept of parafiction is central to *The Victory Box* because it describes works that operate in the space between fiction and lived reality, intersecting with the world as it is being experienced and, for at least some visitors and for some duration, allowing fiction to be "experienced as fact" (Lambert-Beatty 54). This is useful for understanding *The Victory Box* because the installation asks viewers to move through a sequence of spaces that present a fabricated history as materially grounded, institutionally legible, and temporarily believable.

Lambert-Beatty's discussion of Michael Blum's *A Tribute to Safiye Behar* helps clarify this strategy. She describes Blum's project as working "under cover of the highly conventional visual language of the house museum," using a familiar format to make an invented history feel publicly readable (Lambert-Beatty 52). *The Victory Box* uses a related method. Its documentary, archive wall, reconstructed living room, Monitoring Room, and Archive Station function as coordinated supports for a single fictional world. Each station adds another layer of historical density, encouraging the viewer to accept the Box as an object that appears to have moved through time.

This structure depends on phased reception. Lambert-Beatty notes that parafictional works unfold through multiple stages of belief and recognition, citing a critic who described the gallery visitors as "scurrying back" to reconsider Blum's installation once they learned its central figure had been invented (52). She frames this as a "gotcha" moment — the point at which the fiction's constructed nature becomes apparent, and the spectator must reinterpret everything they

previously accepted (56). That concept is critical to *The Victory Box*, but in this installation, the "gotcha" arrives in two stages rather than as a single rupture. The first occurs in the Monitoring Room, where participants see themselves on the wall of monitors alongside AI-generated agents and realize the system they were observing has been observing them. The safe critical distance cracks, but the full scope of the deception is not yet clear. The deeper recognition comes in the Archive Station, when spectators see themselves transformed into 1950s figures and understand that artificial intelligence must be responsible — not only for their portrait, but potentially for the documentary, the photographs, and the surveillance footage they accepted as credible only minutes earlier. This is where Lambert-Beatty's "scurrying back" happens internally: the visitor mentally replays the exhibition and reassesses what they believed. Lambert-Beatty argues that parafiction trains viewers in "skepticism and doubt, but also, oddly, in belief" (78). The installation uses that temporary belief to reveal how trust can be organized through historical style, institutional tone, and documentary form, and then turns that recognition outward toward the wider media environment in which synthetic images and authoritative-looking archives increasingly circulate.

Lambert-Beatty describes parafiction as 'post-simulacral,' oriented 'less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust' (54). This distinction matters because the Victory Box does not float freely as pure fiction. It is anchored to the Cold War and the Second Red Scare — events viewers already recognize and accept as real. That recognition creates what might be called a horizon of plausibility: a range of things the viewer is already prepared to believe. The fabricated program enters through that open door. What sustains it once inside, however, requires a different framework.

3.3 Simulacra, Hyperreality, and Synthetic Archives

Baudrillard's theory of simulation provides that missing framework, explaining how signs can produce a convincing reality even when no original referent exists. *The Victory Box* inserts a fully fabricated device and archive into a real historical setting. The Cold War, anti-communist fear, and the growing political significance of domestic media all have real referents. What is synthetic is the Victory Box program and the evidentiary world built around it. The project tests how easily a fictional apparatus can be made to appear native to a documented past.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard describes hyperreality as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (1). This helps explain how the Victory Box comes to feel historically credible despite having no original referent. The documentary, manuals, photographs, advertisements, interviews, and surveillance imagery do not recover a lost object so much as generate the signs that such an object once existed. The archive is not reconstructed from fragments; it is fabricated as a coherent system from the outset. That coherence gives it force. Real histories of surveillance are often partial and contradictory, whereas a synthetic archive can appear smoother, more complete, and more legible than reality itself. Simulation is not required to correspond to reality to feel more credible than reality itself.

Baudrillard also notes that “when the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (6). This matters because the installation draws heavily on the reassuring familiarity of mid-century domestic media culture. The wooden cabinet, glowing tubes, public-television documentary style, and archival display all mobilize nostalgia as a structure of trust. Observers are persuaded by atmosphere, by the sense that they already recognize this world. The work uses that recognition critically, showing how historical style can function as a guarantor of truth even when the archive is entirely constructed.

4. Machine Vision, Operational Images, and AI

Where the preceding discussion explains how *The Victory Box* constructs plausibility through parafiction, simulation, and synthetic archives, this section turns to the technological and perceptual systems through which that plausibility is enacted. The exhibition is built through real camera systems, real-time compositing, biometric comparison, and AI-generated imagery running within the gallery. The work situates subjects inside an apparatus that captures, processes, and recontextualizes them, making visible forms of automated perception that increasingly operate beyond ordinary human awareness.

4.1 Machine Vision as a Performer

In *The Victory Box*, machine vision functions less as hidden technical support than as a performer within the installation. The cameras and software detect faces, initiate recordings, compare images, trigger transformations, and route visual material across the exhibition. The spectator's body is turned into operational material within the work. What appears at first to be a historical fiction gradually reveals itself to be an active image system that has already begun processing the person standing before it.

Trevor Paglen, drawing on Harun Farocki, describes operational images as images that do not primarily exist to be looked at by humans, but to function within systems of analysis, classification, and control ("Operational Images"). In "Invisible Images," Paglen argues that digital images are "fundamentally machine-readable" — a machine can process and act on an image without it ever being converted into something a human eye can interpret ("Invisible Images" 24). This is directly relevant to the Victory Box system. The viewer's image is first treated as input for detection, storage, comparison, and transformation; only later does it return as something available for human interpretation.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Zoom Pavilion* (2015), a collaboration with Krzysztof Wodiczko, provides an important precedent for this approach within contemporary art practice. In that work, face-tracking surveillance cameras detect visitors and project their tracked images at large scale, making the act of machine seeing visible and confrontational. The spectator becomes aware of being watched precisely because the system redisplays them within its own logic. The exhibition builds on this territory but extends it into the era of generative AI. Where Lozano-Hemmer's cameras track and redisplay, the Victory Box tracks, transforms, and

fabricates — inserting viewers into a synthetic historical archive that did not exist before their arrival. The shift from surveillance as redisplay to surveillance as fabrication marks the specific contribution of this project to the broader conversation around machine vision, participation, and control in contemporary art.

This logic becomes especially visible in the Monitoring Room and Archive Station. The AI-generated agents in the control room can be understood as fictional personifications of a contemporary surveillance logic in which human observers are increasingly displaced by automated systems. Although they appear as human operators within a Cold War command center, the actual system is already doing the work: the cameras detect, the software routes, the image model transforms, and the installation renders the visitor visible within its own operational logic. The work dramatizes the moment in which human visitors realize that they have already been seen, sorted, and absorbed into an image system before they have fully recognized what is happening.

4.2 Operational Images and Domestic Space

Paglen's concept of the operational image becomes even more important once these systems are understood as domestic. He argues that machine-readable images now circulate far beyond battlefields and secure laboratories, extending into consumer platforms, shopping environments, law enforcement, and everyday social life ("Invisible Images" 26). This shift is central to the Victory Box. The fictional device is presented as a patriotic household appliance, but its hidden function is to turn domestic life into a site of capture, monitoring, and behavioural interpretation.

This inversion matters because the home is typically imagined as a private and protected space. The installation disrupts that assumption by showing how surveillance can be framed as care, convenience, or reassurance. *The Victory Box* echoes contemporary technologies such as home security cameras, smart speakers, and other networked devices that quietly transform ordinary life into streams of data. The exhibition condenses and aestheticizes this logic, making it visible in a way that actual domestic systems often do not.

Paul Virilio sharpens this analysis by arguing that perception itself is increasingly automated. In *The Vision Machine*, he describes a regime in which seeing is reorganized by speed, real-time interfaces, and computational systems that displace traditional human

observation. He calls the vision machine an “absolute-speed machine” that promotes surprise and short concentration spans rather than sustained attention (72). This is relevant to the Victory Box and Monitoring Room. The installation captures visitors quickly, often before they have fully understood the device’s role, and folds them into its narrative in near real time. The force of the system lies partly in this temporal asymmetry: the machine processes faster than the viewer can interpret.

4.3 AI as Archive Builder and Collaborator

AI enters this project at several levels at once. It generates the 1950s family scenes, the agents in the Monitoring Room, the 1990s documentary voices and footage, the archival photographs, and the transformed portraits in the Archive Station. It also contributes to the writing and shaping of the larger fictional world. In this sense, AI functions as an archive builder: a system capable of producing images, documents, voices, and bureaucratic textures that collectively simulate the evidentiary density of history.

This matters because generative AI does not retrieve the past; it recombines patterns from compressed training data into new outputs (Somaini 77, 102). Recent writing on latent space describes AI generation as emerging from hidden structures in data, where compressed representations make new combinations possible — a reservoir of structured potential rather than a storage vault of original images (Somaini 77, 102). For this work, it means that the fictional Cold War archive is generated through the rapid recombination of learned visual, rhetorical, and historical patterns.

Geoffrey Hinton, one of the pioneers of deep learning, has recently spoken publicly about the dangers of AI (Hinton). One major concern for Hinton is the way these systems can use convincing synthetic media to manipulate people at scale, especially when tailored to individuals ("Geoffrey Hinton"). *The Victory Box* picks up that concern and translates it into an embodied experience. The installation places visitors inside a system that captures, transforms, and recontextualizes them, allowing them to feel what it is like to be caught within a persuasive narrative engine.

These dangers are not hypothetical. For months, I was repeatedly shown AI-generated advertisements on YouTube in which Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney appeared to endorse a fraudulent investment scheme, directing viewers to follow a QR code and listing other public

figures who had supposedly profited. The videos were convincing enough at first glance, though they deteriorated after about a minute as his accent shifted from Canadian to British. Newer versions corrected even that flaw. What struck me was not only that these videos existed, but that they remained on the platform for months, served to me repeatedly by an algorithm that treated them as legitimate content. This is the real-world version of what the installation stages in a controlled environment: synthetic media used to fabricate authority, manufacture trust, and manipulate people for private gain. *The Victory Box* condenses that logic and makes it visible.

Throughout this project, I worked with an AI assistant I call Lucid, which contributed to prompt design, theoretical discussion, and the shaping of the fictional world. I deliberately structured this environment so that Lucid would not propose creative ideas unless asked. Most of its contribution came through sustained discussion: I would upload a theory I was interested in, explain how I thought it related to my work, and Lucid would respond with agreement, disagreement, comments or deeper questions — some I had already considered, some I had not. In several cases, these conversations led me to set aside certain theoretical frameworks in favour of others that supported the work more effectively. This constraint was intentional. In a separate project focused specifically on AI collaboration, I found that allowing Lucid to make all creative decisions was not only frustrating but made me creatively dependent — it hindered the formation of ideas in my quiet time, where most of my creative thinking and troubleshooting occur. I did not want that erosion to enter *The Victory Box*.

This relationship complicates any simple understanding of AI as a neutral tool. While I stop short of defining it fully as collaboration, my use of AI extends beyond instrumentality. AI is both medium and interlocutor here: a system I use critically, but also one that influences process, language, and form. I am interested in AI because of its creative capacity, but I am equally concerned by the ways it can be used to automate persuasion, personalize manipulation, and generate synthetic evidence. *The Victory Box* stages that contradiction directly by using AI to expose the epistemic and political dangers of AI.

Conclusion

What I ultimately hope the viewer carries away is not only the specific fiction of *The Victory Box*, but a sharpened awareness of the media environment beyond the gallery. The experience at Lumen confirmed that when viewers are given a believable entry point, their engagement deepens and persists. When they later encounter a convincing historical image, an AI-generated face, or a narrative supported by synthetic evidence, I want some echo of this installation to remain with them. The exhibition does not claim that all images are false, nor that truth is impossible. It asks how truth is produced, authenticated, and trusted. Propaganda and psychological operations are ancient arts — strategies of persuasion as old as organized power. What AI changes is not the tactics but the terms: it gives those in power or seeking power a capacity for targeted manipulation far beyond anything previously possible, while simultaneously placing those same tools in the hands of anyone with a laptop. The fabrications are faster, more convincing, and harder to detect than ever before. The central question is not whether images can lie, but how we decide what and whom to believe when the tools for manufacturing trust have become so powerful and so widely accessible.

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Appendix A: Installation Reflection

The *Victory Box* started from a straightforward premise: generative AI has made it trivial to fabricate convincing evidence, and I wanted to test how far that could go — whether I could construct an entire plausible history from nothing and have people believe it, at least temporarily. But the project became more complicated than that premise suggests.

The first thing I didn't fully anticipate was how unstable the tools themselves would be. The thesis discusses the rapid improvement of AI, which can be seen on the *Victory Box* through footage I generated months apart. But improvement isn't the whole story. The documentary originally relied almost entirely on OpenAI's Sora 2, which allowed me to build consistent characters: Tom Robertson, the journalist, and around six other people who appear across the video. I had spent many hours developing these characters and producing the first portion of the video. Then, about a month before my deadline, OpenAI announced they were removing Sora 2 entirely to redistribute resources to ChatGPT. The system slowed to a crawl — I could generate maybe five or six clips per day. So while the narrative around AI is that these tools only get better, the reality of working with them, is that they can also be pulled out from under you without warning. That dependency is something the thesis describes in the abstract, but it raises a real question about what it means to build a practice around tools you don't control.

Another technical issue involving the documentary, but not related to AI, is the issue of noise cancellation. The monitor being used for the documentary has a built-in media player, and during installation, I discovered that it appears to reduce or suppress some of the static, pops, clicks, and audio degradation that I added to the soundtrack. It also seems to adjust levels when the noise becomes louder. Those effects were originally part of the VHS and early-1990s broadcast aesthetic, so some of that texture is less present in the gallery than intended. Conceptually, the documentary still functions as the introductory evidence piece, but its audio is somewhat cleaner than the version I produced.

I should also be honest about the failures, because there were many. AI-generated footage frequently looked fake — plastic-like facial textures, uncanny movements, and inconsistent details. This improved as the models got better, but it never disappeared entirely. Certain models struggled with specific things. Sora 2, for example, had a persistent problem with people handling loose pages: if a character was prompted to lift scattered documents, the pages would fuse together as though glued. Every piece of footage in the documentary was selected from a much larger pool of failed outputs. But this is also part of the point. The fact that I could curate my way to a convincing result — choosing the best five percent and discarding the rest — is itself a demonstration of how synthetic media works in the real world. You don't need every output to be perfect. You just need enough good ones to make it convincing.

That connects to something I mention in the thesis but want to underline here. For months, I was repeatedly shown AI-generated advertisements on YouTube in which Canadian

Prime Minister Mark Carney appeared to endorse a fraudulent investment scheme. I recognized it quickly — when you spend time with these tools, something about synthetic media starts to stand out, almost subconsciously, even when you're not looking for it. But the videos were convincing enough at first glance, and they remained on the platform for months, served to me repeatedly by an algorithm that treated them as legitimate content. Seeing that in the wild was confirming — it validated the purpose of this project — but it was also deeply bothersome to know that people were using this technology to scam and harm others, and that the platform hadn't flagged or removed content that was quite obviously AI-generated.

The final tension I want to raise is about AI collaboration. In a separate project, I allowed Lucid to guide every creative decision, and I found that it not only frustrated me but actually began to erode my ability to generate ideas on my own, particularly during quiet times, which is where most of my creative thinking and problem-solving happens. I pulled back deliberately. The question of AI collaboration was originally going to be a much larger part of this thesis, but I made the decision to set it aside because it deserves its own dedicated project and research. Defining what collaboration actually means between a human and a machine — questions of authorship, creativity, autonomy, intelligence — cannot be adequately addressed as a subsection of another argument. That will be my next body of work.

What I ultimately hope this project contributes is a working demonstration: one artist, with publicly available tools, can fabricate a history convincing enough to hold together across video, photography, documents, and physical objects. If I can do this in a gallery, the question of what can be done at scale is not hypothetical. That's the question I'd like us to sit with today.

Thank you.