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Recirculation
The Wandering of Digital Images in Post-Internet Art

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ABSTRACT: The text considers recirculation as a process through which both visual and cultural imagery are put in motion over and over again in the current information age, especially in the context of post-Internet art. Hito Steyerl's writings and thoughts on the 'poor image', namely the low-resolution digital image bound to a perpetual wandering or 'circulationism', here serve as major reference points for the development of the argument.

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Starting from the double meaning of circulation as 'continuous motion' and 'public availability of something', I would like to address the flow of digital images; principally the idea of *recirculation* as a process through which both visual and cultural imagery are put in motion over and over again in the current information age, and in the context of post-Internet art in particular.[1]

Recirculation has of course to do with the many ways in which images are nowadays produced and exchanged, as well as evaluated and accepted. That the accelerated dissemination of images is rapidly changing the relationship to them is already well known. More and more images affect us and, at the same time, we affect them as viewers

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[1] For a definition of post-Internet art, see Marisa Olson, 'Postinternet: Art After the Internet', *Foam Magazine*, 29 (2011), pp. 59–63 (p. 60).

too by repetitively circulating and framing them anew, with each Internet 'share', 'tweet', or 'meme' that makes them go viral as doppelgängers. But that makes us loose control over them both as senders and receivers. Once an image is online, it can presumably be accessed and used by almost everyone regardless of intent, thus distancing the image from the initial purpose for which it was uploaded.[2] In this regard, it is also important to remember that, theoretically, the source of a digital image is less relevant than its destination, that is, the recipient, or rather, the vast and diverse audiences it may reach.

These new modes of distribution present, no doubt, one of the main challenges for artists, since the World Wide Web permits the large diffusion of images outside institutional contexts and can have a positive effect in terms of critique and social impact. It can therefore function as an alternative approach to the traditional system of circulation — and also production of meaning —, through which artists are able to develop different strategies of resistance, although there is still a margin for doubt. The way in which images are received and operated is in fact not predictable, and, moreover, no one can really determine who the final receiver is: if it is still human or, more likely, an algorithm.[3]

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2   See Marisa Olson, 'Lost Not Found: The Circulation of Images in Digital Visual Culture', in *Words Without Pictures*, ed. by Alex Klein (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2009), pp. 274–84 (pp. 276, 280).

3   I won't take into consideration here the vast and challenging debate around what Harun Farocki, in his video work *Eye/Machine I* (2000), referred to as 'operational images', and what Trevor Paglen calls 'invisible images', namely, images that don't need humans because they are made 'by machines for other machines': images that are dramatically changing our visual culture and the way in which we have to approach and study images by establishing both new categories and interpretative tools borrowed from computer science. See Trevor Paglen, 'Operational Images', *e-flux journal*, 59 (2014) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/59/61130/

With its vast social communities that everyday spread large amounts of images across different screens and among distributed spectators all over the world, the Internet has merely augmented a process that is clearly nothing new. The circulation of images concerns a 'visual economy',[4] which in the twentieth century has been reflected upon both in the tradition of 'the wandering image', initiated by Walter Benjamin, with the new possibilities of the mechanical reproduction of images as a crucial starting-point, and Aby Warburg's account of the survival of ancient image forms, which he configures as an engram, a mnestic trace reactivated under specific circumstances or in the presence of specific stimuli.[5]

By appropriating, editing, and recirculating presumed 'originals',[6] artists act as special 'iconographers' who both

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operational-images/> [accessed 18 December 2018]; and, by the same author, 'Invisible Images (Your Pictures Are Looking at You)', *The New Inquiry*, 8 December 2016 <https://thenewinquiry.com/invisible-images-your-pictures-are-looking-at-you/> [accessed 18 December 2018].

4   Significantly enough, in the last edition of her propaedeutic book on visual studies, Gillian Rose has answered the central question of what difference digital technologies are making in the understanding of the contemporary iconosphere by adding a fourth 'site' dedicated to circulation to the three previously existing ones: the site of the production of an image, the image itself, and the sites of its audiencing. See Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (London: Sage, 2016).

5   Following his interests in empathy theory and bodily movement, Warburg further evolved the concept of engram, first coined by neurologist Richard Semon — who also referred to it as 'mneme' — into what he called 'dynamogram', that is, a visual inscription of primal, affective experiences.

6   With all the uncertainties that this notion of an 'original' includes, since originality is a problematic and rather recent concept, championed mostly by Romanticism, which the avantgarde movements have vigorously attacked. A picture is indeed a site where a variety of non-original images mix and clash, and repetition is possible not because an image

produce and consume images.[7] In so doing, they keep questioning the ontology of the image, especially in its shift from analogic to digital, which has led to various new issues related to their life and afterlife. Just to briefly name a few: (1) the question of the transferability of images, not only from one medium or support to another, but from one context to another as well; (2) the question of their alleged immateriality, considering that the way in which images get seen online is shaped by energy and algorithmic patterns; (3) the question of the difference between what is real and what is unreal when we look at images.

Hito Steyerl's theoretical writings, which together with her practice as a video artist and filmmaker represent some of the most influential thoughts in the current debate on the status and dispersion of digital images, will help me to unpack these issues.

For Steyerl, 'postproducing, launching, and accelerating' an image — that is, diffusing it — is more important than making it. The term she coined to describe this principle is 'circulationism', which, although it relates especially to our digital age, according to her emerged in a very specific moment in time: in 1989, namely when, in the midst of the Romanian uprising, 'protesters invaded TV studios to make history'. Since then — Steyerl suggests — images have changed their function and have become 'nodes of energy and matter that migrate across different supports, shaping and affecting people, landscapes, polit-

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or gesture has a specific origin — thus could be considered unique — but simply because of its anteriority.

7   Cf. *Les Artistes iconographes/Artists as Iconographers*, ed. by Garance Chabert and Aurélien Mole (Paris: Empire Books-Villa du Parc, 2018), pp. 319–26.

ics, and social systems'.[8] And that basically means that images not only present reality, they also make it.

However, the fluidity, variability, and migration of images — in particular when artistic appropriation is involved — inevitably produce an impoverishment, if not of content, at least of form. It is in this regard that Steyerl speaks of the 'poor image', namely a copy of poor quality, of low resolution and definition,[9] which is bound to a relentless peregrination. And which ends up being 'a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution.'[10]

Once removed from secure places such as the archive and the film library, the 'poor image' is thrown into a land of uncertainty, that is, the Internet. Here it becomes available, therefore also exposed, to easy appropriation, reuse, and alteration, allowing a wider audience to participate in its new reproduction and distribution processes. Speed, intensity, and circulation become its new features; while qualities such as resolution and exchange value recede into the background, or even disappear. Though what comes back is the aura, which is no longer based on the notion

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8   Cf. Hito Steyerl, 'Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?', in *The Internet Does Not Exist*, ed. by Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), pp. 10–26 (pp. 11, 20–21).

9   On the concept of low definition see Francesco Casetti and Antonio Somaini, 'The Conflict Between High Definition and Low Definition in Contemporary Cinema', *Convergence*, 19.4 (2013), pp. 415–22; and Antonio Somaini and Andrea Pinotti, *Cultura visuale. Immagini, sguardi, media, dispositivi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2016), in particular chapter 5.

10   Cf. Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), pp. 31–45 (p. 32).

of uniqueness, authenticity, and authorship, but rather —
in Steyerl's words — 'on the transience of the copy'.[11]

The idea of the remediation of the image is crucial
here. Granted that the original, even if reproduced as an
exact copy, is never a true replica because it loses the two
qualities that make it unique — the here and now —, the
copy of the original gets its own aura as well, since, thanks
to its refashioning, it is linked to a specific new context and
time.[12]

Since in the digital visual domain things are evolving
rapidly, Steyerl is at the same moment updating and re-
shaping her thoughts. As she argues, in the last decade (her
text on the 'poor image' was first published in 2009) two
main changes occurred: first, what previously would have
been considered high resolution images are now very nor-
mal and diffused images; second, what once was regarded
as a free circulation of images, today increasingly appears
as a regulated flow, mainly under the control of powerful
platforms. And, what's more, energy has turned out to be
a force or medium for circulation, which affects both nat-
ural, social, and power relations, since the transmission of
digital images (Steyerl refers to videos in particular) will
soon be the principal cause of electricity consumption in
the world. That is why she is now progressively moving
from the definition of 'poor images' towards that of 'power
images'.[13]

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11   Ibid., p. 42.

12   Cf. Andrea Pinotti, 'Optic Distance, Haptic Immersion', in *The Encyclo-
pedic Palace*, ed. by Massimiliano Gioni and Natalie Bell (Venice: La
Biennale di Venezia–Marsilio, 2013), pp. 193–94; and Boris Groys, 'Art
Topology: The Reproduction of Aura', in *When Attitudes Become Form:
Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, ed. by Germano Celant (Milan: Fondazione
Prada, 2013), pp. 451–56.

13   This is a very condensed summary of a much more articulated talk she

Allan Sekula, whose artistic work is likewise rooted in a strong theoretical basis and who produced a consistent corpus of writings throughout his entire career (he died in 2013), was even more sceptical than Steyerl is, and made similarly critical comments in relation to the photographic archive.[14] For him the image's 'loss of context' starts already from the archive tout court. 'In an archive', he writes, 'the possibility of meaning is "liberated" from the actual contingencies of use. But this liberation is also a loss, an *abstraction* from the complexity and richness of use.' This is because photographic meaning depends largely on context, which has both a spatial and temporal connotation'.[15]

The (archival) image abstraction described by Sekula — which can be compared to the (digital) image poverty pointed out by Steyerl — undermines, in his words, the 'notion of mutual recognition, of global connectedness and legibility, at the heart of the promise of the Internet', and highlights the dangers of digital iconographic greed, kleptomania, and piracy. Referring especially to digital images, in fact, Sekula warns of another main and often underestimated risk: that of the increasing privatization of images

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recently gave in the context of the conference on *Art/Politics* at n.b.k. – Neuer Berliner Kunstverein in Berlin on 12 May 2018.

14   I won't consider here indexicality as an opposition between analogue and digital photography, since the most recent debate on this subject matter is eliminating the problem by giving a whole new interpretation to indexicality, both from a historical and contemporary perspective. For a short overview, see Jaime Schwartz, 'Is a Photograph Still an Index If It's on the Internet?', *Dis Magazine* <http://dismagazine.com/discussion/41736/a-discursive-mask/> [accessed 18 December 2018].

15   Cf. Allan Sekula, 'Reading an Archive: Photography Between Labour and Capital', in *The Photography Reader*, ed. by Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 443–52 (p. 444).

or change of ownership, and the consequent monopoliza-
tion of copyright.[16]

Under these circumstances, the flow and recircula-
tion of the 'poor' images would seem to be jeopardized by
private property appetites, the control exercised by search
engines, and the congestion produced by the increasing
amount of ghost data that accumulate on a daily basis as
'digital debris' and are dispersed as spam.[17]

But, in the end, should this only be seen as a danger?
Certainly not. If on the one side poor images show the hid-
den social mechanisms and political forces that rule today's
visual economy, on the other they also create an alterna-
tive circuit that fosters the reappearance and recirculation
of excluded or marginalized visual materials, creating new
networks and debates. Furthermore, as contemporary art
practices show, it also facilitates the images' reenactment
and refashioning, thus opening ever new, eclectic visual
possibilities.

Since the circulation of poor images feeds both cap-
italist media appetites and alternative artistic experiment-
ation, Steyerl reserves judgment.[18] Alongside sameness,
anaesthesia, alienation, and control, the circulation of poor
images also has the potential to create — according to her
— 'disruptive movements of thought and affect', continu-

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16   The target of Sekula's critique was principally the 'cybericonographic
      omnivore' Bill Gates who — as long as he owned the Corbis agency
      — collected and controlled almost every valuable image in the world,
      thus also their reproducibility and circulation, or better, since these are
      services for a fee, their 'traffic'. Cf. Allan Sekula, 'Between the Net and
      the Deep Blue Sea (Rethinking the Traffic in Photographs)', *October*,
      102 (2002), pp. 3–34 (pp. 3, 11).

17   See Hito Steyerl, 'Digital Debris: Spam and Scam', *October*, 138 (2011),
      pp. 70–80.

18   Steyerl's remarks concern especially experimental cinema, hence audio-
      visual material.

ing, in the twenty-first century, the tradition of avant-garde 'non-conformist information circuits'. The shift of attention is thus all on the afterlife of images, on their 'swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities'. Which means that in the digital realm the focus is no more on the 'original' image itself (the real thing) but on the conditions of its recurrent circulation (reality) and translation.[19]

19   Cf. Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', pp. 43–44; and also Hito Steyerl, 'Politics of the Archive: Translations in Film', *transversal* (Vienna: eipcp, 2008) <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0608/steyerl/en> [accessed 18 December 2018]; repr. in Steyerl, *Beyond Representation: Essays 1999–2009*, ed. by Marius Babias (Berlin: n.b.k., 2016), pp. 160–66.

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