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# Photography After Capitalism

*Libraries gave us power,  
Then work came and made us free  
What price now, for a shallow piece of dignity?*

Manic Street Preachers, *A Design for Life*, 1996

# Photography After Capitalism

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Ben Burbridge



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# 1

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## Google Street View Car Drivers Are Human Too

Google Street View is a good example of what Joanna Zylińska calls ‘non-human photography’. Pictures are produced by spherical arrangements of between nine and fifteen cameras, mounted on cars, trikes and backpacks, and programmed to photograph automatically approximately every five metres travelled. The digital photographs are later stitched together as part of a tapestry of billions, creating a simulacrum of the physical world as viewed from just above eye level. Like ‘CCTV, drone media, medical body scans, and satellite imagery’, Street View sees photography become ‘increasingly decoupled from human agency and human vision.’<sup>1</sup> By 2012, Google had covered 5 million unique miles and produced 20 petabytes of images this way.<sup>2</sup> Most of the streets in North and South America, Europe and Australasia are now available to view, with progress well underway in Asia and Africa. Google has also extended the range of sites it photographs, to include monuments, tribal villages, areas of outstanding natural beauty, the interiors of shops and cafes, and the inside of art galleries and museums.

Street View is also a good example of what artist Hito Steyerl calls ‘bubble vision.’<sup>3</sup> Like virtual reality and 360° video, Street View users can look up, down and around, as though positioned in the interior of a sphere. But, unlike the viewers of conventional photographs—who understand themselves to occupy a space behind the camera and thus outside the area of the landscape depicted—bubble vision situates us *within* the environments represented. Navigating 360°-image worlds is a peculiarly disembodied experience. Because heads, hands, feet are all invisible to users, bubble vision is profoundly paradoxical. We are simultaneously present as a seeing entity; entirely absent as an embodied one. Steyerl believes immersive image environments to be populated by body-shaped holes.

Almost two hundred years ago, the industrial medium of photography helped, in Allan Sekula's words, to displace 'artisanal and manual modes of visual representation.'<sup>4</sup> Today, computational systems are implicated in a parallel process. If this is true of the automated Street View cameras that no longer require a human agent to activate them at the time that specific pictures are produced, it is also true of digital photography more generally. The legibility of digital photographs *as images* relies on algorithmic processes taking place within the digital cameras on which they are made, and the devices on which they are viewed, not on rolls of film made and developed by people. In this sense, the production of all digital photographs shares important traits with the computational systems used in call centres, supermarket checkout counters, and the driverless cars pioneered by Google that, at some stage, will almost certainly be used to produce its Street View imagery.

For Steyerl, bubble vision provides a forceful allegory for the social effects of automation. If we are 'busy handing over... power to opaque automatic procedures... to black-boxed algorithms, crystal ball gazing and all sorts of artificial stupidities,' then could 360°-seeing provide a sort of 'training scheme to adapt humans to a world from which they are increasingly missing, because they are being replaced by invisible systems?' The experience of viewing the photographs on Street View provides a way to symbolically represent the modes of production through which the pictures used on Street View came into being.

The inter-relationship between bubble vision and non-human photography—the political and technological world represented *as an image*, and the political and technological world reproduced through *the making of images*—is also expressed *at the level of the image* on Street View. The imagined worlds of VR are made computationally. Like the CGI fantasies of Hollywood film, they share no indexical relation to the real. The making of 360° video and Street View, by contrast, relies on a camera being present in the real-world landscape depicted. Instructional videos for the Go Pro Fusion, a popular 360° camera, advise the use of a tripod and the activation of the device by remote control in order to avoid the strange appearance of the human operator reaching into the image, finger raised, as they press the shutter release button. A super-high-resolution 360° photograph taken from the top of Shanghai's Oriental Tower depicts



Section from Google Street View, 2020.

the city in extraordinary detail but, look down, and the tower itself is present only as a shadow and a circular graphic promoting ‘Shanghai Branding’. The photographs on Street View are stitched together in ways that similarly ensure the more obvious traces of their own production are largely, but not entirely, erased. Look directly down and you will see the road, not the roof of the car on which the cameras that made the pictures were mounted. If Street View is populated by the body-shaped holes of its users, then it is also home to the phantom cars involved in its production, visible as reflections in shop windows and through the reactions of the Street View people that raise middle fingers as Google vehicles pass them by.

The force of the bubble vision allegory relies precisely on this absence of people—as people being present only as body-shaped holes. But is it possible to think in alternative terms about the regimes of bubble vision, focusing not on the dispossession symbolised by the experience of looking at Street View and instead on the productive roles of human beings within the regimes of non-human photography? Who drives the Street View cars? Who writes the Google algorithms? Where are the black boxes manufactured? Who trains machines to ‘see’ and ‘think’ like humans? How else could these brave new worlds be imaged or imagined?



Google Street View car reflected in a shop window, Brighton, UK.

Between 2010 and 2015 the UK government reduced funding to London's Science Museum by a third, increasing its reliance on private finance. Cuts were part of a package of violent government 'austerity' measures justified as a response to the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>5</sup> Upstairs at the Museum, what had been free interactive children's exhibits have been replaced by 'Wonderlab', a series of participatory displays sponsored by a multinational oil company where visitors are charged for entry.

The Science Museum received a donation from Google in 2014. The tricycle, with an unusual-looking set of cameras mounted on the back, is displayed towards the back of the second floor, accompanied by a short text panel:

Google Street View gave viewers access to amazing detailed images of our planet. It uses cameras mounted on cars, tricycles and backpacks to capture beautiful 360-degree photos of remote locations and famous landmarks around the world.<sup>6</sup>

With its happy coupling of celebratory adjectives and the language of conquest, the text is typical of the largely uncritical, often fetishistic, story of technological progress that plays out across the Museum's displays. It is also either factually incorrect (the vast majority of the images on Street

View are of accessible locations) or it is so obvious as to be meaningless (everywhere is remote to the person who doesn't leave their computer screen). The tricycle is shown next to a large, but just smaller than life-sized, black-and-white photograph, which depicts it being ridden by a white man in his early thirties. He is wearing chequered shorts, tee shirt and white trainers. Behind him we can see Stonehenge. Attentive viewers will note knowing links between technology in the past and in the present—from the astronomical observations of the Neolithic Age to digital observations of everything today. But I am more interested in the man riding the trike. Is this what a Street View driver looks like?



Google Street View trike displayed in the Information Age Gallery, Science Museum, London, 2018.

The Saatchi Gallery is located near Sloane Square, two stations away from the Science Museum on the District and Circle line. In July 2012, it hosted an exhibition of work by artist Jon Rafman. Entitled *The 9 Eyes of Google Street View* (2008–present), the series consisted entirely of screen grabs showing the absurd and intriguing incidents to be found on the Google mapping service: the violent descent of a flock of seagulls, an armed vehicle driving down a nondescript suburban road, deer skipping freely down the highway, a group of youths being searched by the police. *9 Eyes* had initially been published as a Tumblr feed, but at the Saatchi Gallery it adopted the more conventional form of contemporary photographic art: large archival pigment prints, back mounted on aluminium, displayed together against clean white walls in a neat, linear hang.

In a quote published extensively to promote the Saatchi exhibition, Rafman described his project as an allegory for relationships between human beings and machines in an age of networked computation:

I was fascinated by how powerfully Street View photographs can represent our contemporary experience, the conflict they can express between an indifferent



Jon Rafman, *The 9 Eyes of Google Street View*, 2008–present. Installation view, Saatchi Gallery, London, 2012.

robotic camera and man's search for connectedness and significance.... The photos underscore the tension between an uncaring camera and man's need to interpret his experience. While celebrating and critiquing modern experience, the technological tools themselves show how they can estrange us from ourselves.<sup>7</sup>

Rafman's interest lay in the forms of estrangement made palpable by the appropriated Street View images. His series focuses on pockets of intense experience that break from, and thus make visible, the distancing effects ordinarily produced when the world is viewed through the automated lens of an 'uncaring camera'. As a human agent, he finds meaning in the unfeeling/unthinking regimes of non-human photography.

Parts of that description cast the online world as an extension, and intensification, of what Guy Debord once described as the spectacle. Writing in Paris in 1967, Debord observed that media culture had infiltrated the fabric of everyday life, instilling the logic of commodity exchange into many and varied areas of human experience. Where Marx understood the commodity to be '*an alien being... a power independent of the producer [emphasis in original quotation]*', Debord saw this as true of social relations more broadly.<sup>8</sup> People had come to experience society as atomised and fragmented because sociality was mediated by images, 'either the "diffuse" images of consumerism or the "concentrated" images of the leader.'<sup>9</sup> 'All that once was lived directly' had 'receded into representation.'<sup>10</sup>

Another interview with Rafman outlined plans for a future film project about the people who drive Street View cars. 'I see them as the ultimate embodiment of post-industrial labour,' he explained, 'somebody moving around the world, probably making very little in wages, capturing reality but totally alienated from it.'<sup>11</sup> In one sense, the project would have revisited conceptual ground already covered by *9 Eyes*. Like Street View users, drivers are said to experience reality at a remove due to the technology via which it is mediated. This is exaggerated and compounded for drivers who, it is assumed, lack opportunities to exercise subjective judgement in relation to what is photographed by the camera, or about how it is represented. Talk of 'alienation' could mean something else in such a context, however, more immediately linked to Marx's original use of the term. Under capitalism, Marx explained in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 'work is not voluntary but imposed, *forced labour*. It is not the satisfaction

of a need, but only a *means* for satisfying other needs [emphasis in original quotation].<sup>12</sup>

Rafman did not go on to make his film, but we can piece together some information about the work of Street View drivers from various interviews and testimonials published online. Their recruitment normally takes place through agencies, which advertise the work on websites like Craigslist and Adecco. The adverts refer only to driving work, not to Google or to Street View, for fear of attracting media attention and the ‘wrong sort’ of applicant. The majority of drivers are employed on a temporary basis, initially to photograph the local areas they know well. While they are entitled to apply for another contract working in other areas, some have complained this was not explained to them until after the deadline for applications had elapsed. On such occasions, Google has exploited local knowledge as and when it was needed, dispensing with drivers’ services once their utility had been exhausted—an approach to the social world not so unlike the treatment of natural resources by multi-national mining firms. As temporary employees, drivers are not eligible for sick leave or paid holiday. Neither do they enjoy the rights or opportunities to address conditions that they would as longer-term or permanent staff.<sup>13</sup>

An anonymous Google Street View car driver from Ohio relays an interesting experience in an interview from 2015:

When I was assigned a point that would take me through my old hometown, I felt nostalgic and covered every corner of it. On the other side of the coin, a few days later I was to end on the city where an ex-girlfriend lived. It had been extensively covered several years earlier, but because of unpleasant memories there, I quickly went through, only taking a slight detour to cover a monument that was there. The rest I kept in the past.<sup>14</sup>

I have spent a lot of time looking at the towns and cities of Ohio depicted on Street View, using the historical image function to look back to when I think those journeys were probably made. I try to work out in which order the locations were photographed and whether one has been covered more comprehensively than another: unlikely psycho-geographies plotted by precarious digital workers.

Google has developed alternative, much cheaper, ways to obtain its Street View imagery in recent years. Some of them are advertised in short

videos on a dedicated area of its websites. Fashionably multi-cultural casts live out happy lives against feel-good stock music soundtracks.<sup>15</sup> One shows a group of attractive-looking hipsters making 360° photographs on their global travels. The call to ‘participate!’ makes good use of the wider ethos of social media exhibitionism and the company’s ‘don’t be evil’ self-image to encourage people to produce photographic content for free because it seems like a neat thing to do. Another suggests that businesses pay Google for the opportunity to upload images of their interiors as a way to gain visibility and custom. Yet another encourages jobbing professionals to upload fifty 360° photos to Street View in order to earn a ‘Trusted Photographer Badge’ that Google suggests will increase their public profile and maybe attract new clients.<sup>16</sup> The latter scheme extends a business model familiar to photographers operating in other fields. Those working in art, fashion and editorial, for example, are often required to work for free in order to develop a reputation necessary to attract paid opportunities, in what amounts to a form of speculative investment in their own, future careers.

It is more than ironic that Google has contributed directly to the circumstances in which this model of self-exploitation has gained traction.



Still from ‘Capture and Publish Your Own Street View’, promotional video for Google Street View, 2019.

There is a wealth of photography available online, which Google's 'image search' function helps to make easily accessible. The corporation only placed limits on the ease with which higher-resolution imagery can be accessed directly through its search engine because of legal pressure from another multi-national corporation (stock image provider Getty Images believed its content was being used without attribution or royalty payments as a consequence of the Google image search function).<sup>17</sup> Google is also one of a small number of platforms that dominates the sale of online advertising, draining an important source of revenue from traditional media organisations and creating new economic pressures that have, in turn, reduced the paid opportunities available to professional photographers.

Street View works with, and as part of, Google Maps. Users are given the option to drop the icon of a small yellow man onto the aerial view of a particular area to explore it as photographs in Street View. By blurring the lines between digital maps, navigation services and virtual environments, Google has introduced what Irit Rogoff describes as a 'media business model' of value production into the realm of mapping and navigation. The majority of news outlets still rely on advertising revenue—a fact made plain by the proliferation of free newspapers handed out to commuters in recent years. These companies, Rogoff explains, are 'not selling papers and magazines to readers' but 'selling readers to advertisers.'<sup>18</sup> Where maps, like newspapers, were previously sold as commodities, Google creates revenue by exploiting the attention we pay to maps, and to the photographed versions of the world that expand the definitions of what we understand a map to be.

This happens in two ways. Firstly, businesses are charged to advertise on, or next to, the maps we view, closely paralleling Rogoff's example of free newspapers. Secondly, Google monitors our service use in order to identify the kind of behavioural patterns that allow paid advertising to be targeted with new levels of efficiency. For Ingrid Hoelzl and Remi Marie, Street View is best understood as 'databases... navigable as images.' It provides Google with:

powerful weapons in the war of data acquisition/exploitation... the [Google Street View] database functions as a navigational tool only to create another database of

user mobility patterns, preferences and purchasing behaviour that feed back into the first, with unprecedented possibilities for commerce and control. Every move, whether on-screen or on-site, reveals a wealth of data about our daily life patterns, purchase preferences... and social network... It is not only that we are operating the world through Google images, it is also and primarily that in generating, with each user query/navigation, huge amounts of user data linked across its different services, Google's images are operating us.<sup>19</sup>

Google is both an active shaping force within, and major beneficiary of, the political economic configuration described by Jodi Dean as 'communicative capitalism.' Today, many and varied communicative activities generate value for corporations, expropriated from 'an emergent knowledge class.' Dean explains how 'voluntary, unpaid, everyday activities of media use... are traced, stored, aggregated and analyzed as a proprietary resource for capitalist accumulation.'<sup>20</sup> When human experience is unilaterally claimed 'as free raw material for translation into behavioural data,'<sup>21</sup> talk of 'access, participation, and democracy work ideologically to secure the technological infrastructure of neoliberalism.'<sup>22</sup>

Horzell and Marie address Street View through the lens of what artist Harun Farocki called the 'operative image.' Interactions with the photographs are viewable to machines as data, with behaviour subject to constant corporate scrutiny. Images do not only 'represent an object,' but are also 'part of an operation.'<sup>23</sup> A platform such as Street View pushes that logic to new extremes. It is precisely *because* we experience the photographs as images that we so often ignore the larger operations in which photography is enmeshed. For the photographic historian Geoffrey Batchen:

the invisibility of the photograph, its transparency to its referent, has long been one of its most cherished features. All of us tend to look at photographs as if we are simply gazing through a two-dimensional window onto some outside world. This is almost a perceptual necessity; in order to see what the photograph is of, we must first repress our consciousness of what the photograph is.<sup>24</sup>

Batchen highlights those ways in which the representational content of photographic images makes particular appeals to our attention, and how this can make it difficult to recognise what the photograph is in material terms. This can also make it difficult to develop a strategic and critical understanding of what Katrina Sluis describes as 'the techno-social

infrastructures which sustain the photographic image today.<sup>25</sup> It is in this sense that photography has long exemplified the operative logic of communicative capitalism today, insofar as its users have typically focused on representational content visible on the surface of the photograph—at its visual interface—not the materiality of the photographic object, or the systems of production and circulation in which photography is entwined.

Francis Hodgson has drawn an important distinction between the work of photographers and that of what he calls ‘photo operators.’ Hodgson finds most value in ‘the art form’ of photography. He is concerned with the ‘quality’ of individual photographs, which he believes to be tied up in principles of communication and intentionality—in the artfulness and sophistication with which photographs communicate the intentions of their author. If photographers conceive of pictures as ‘single events or single cultural moments,’ photo operators are those ‘for whom the culture of photography is of no concern.’ Hodgson illustrates the point with reference to estate agents, who ‘do not think of themselves as making any allusion to photography and yet everyday they go to visit people’s apartments and make photographs according to a set of standards, and these pictures have to be good by some kind of odd estate agent standard if they’re going to work.’<sup>26</sup>

Hodgson is right to talk about the difficulty of assigning value to photographs, and of knowing towards which area of photographic activity we should direct our attention. This has always been the case with a medium that performs so many different functions across diverse areas of the social world and which, as Susan Sontag once suggested, allows aesthetically accomplished pictures to be created almost entirely by chance.<sup>27</sup> It has only intensified now that billions upon billions of photographs circulate publicly each year. Hodgson is also right to insist upon the need to develop explicit criteria against which to make those judgements, if we are to avoid the elevation of individual preference as the principle determinant of cultural value. Any reliance on personal taste—often as evident in serious photographic criticism today as it is in the wider culture—chimes too readily with the supposed freedoms afforded to the subjects of consumer culture (*‘I don’t know much, but I know what I like’*).

The distinction drawn between the work of photographers and photo operators is also of considerable use, although perhaps not on quite the terms Hodgson implies. The term ‘photo operator’ takes on a particular potency in relation to the images produced for Street View, and—potentially—to other examples of non-human photography, where intentionality at the point of production is severed from individual human actors altogether (at least before the photographs are appropriated by artists, at which point some of them would presumably pass Hodgson’s quality test). For my purposes, the term is interesting because of the ways in which it conjures the unusual, and often overlooked, relationship between photography and a particular form of semi-manual labour; labour that is not so much mindless, as it is unconcerned with conscious acts of aesthetic expression, or with what Hodgson calls the ‘cultures of photography’. Taken in this sense, the activities captured by the term are more varied, and more expansive, than Hodgson’s own writing on the subject implies.

Hodgson’s concern with the value of particular *images* ensures that his ‘photo operators’ can only be those who make images that do not matter. His definition of ‘making’ takes its lead from those images that he believes do matter: namely from those taken by photographers as conscious acts of meaningful expression. But contemporary photography—including that made by ‘photographers’—is reliant on the labour of many people who do not ‘take’ photographs at all. Camera manufacturers, satellite transportation crews, Street View car drivers, content moderators would certainly not describe themselves as photographers, or even as ‘camera operators.’ But, without their work, photography as we know it today would not exist. Could an expanded understanding of ‘photo operators’ encompass this kind of activity as well?

If the work of ‘photo operators’ is to some extent unthinking, at least in Hodgson’s sense of the term, then there are also important ways in which it is unthinkable or, more accurately, *unthought*. We may possess some vague awareness that our camera phones were made in factories on far-off shores, using minerals that must have come from somewhere; that the absence of pornographic content on Instagram involves someone else’s labour; that Street View cars are driven by someone. We may also have some inkling that the conditions under which this work is performed are far from wholesome. But then any such considerations are normally very

far from our minds when we make, share and look at photography on our smartphones today.

In his 2001 essay, 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?', philosopher Jacques Rancière insists on the political imperative of thinking about unthinkable images. Political action, Rancière contends, often requires a community to draw attention to that which remains unaccounted for within existing regimes. Rather than assume certain subjects or events to be 'unrepresentable, unthinkable, untreatable or irredeemable', we should instead question 'under what conditions might it be said that certain events cannot be represented?' The question helps to illuminate the boundaries imposed by certain regimes on what is intelligible, and to reconfigure those same regimes, by drawing into focus the boundaries imposed. To deem one thing or another to be un-representable, or unthinkable, is to reproduce the limits imposed on our capacity to think freely and so to constrain political action. The unthinkable is much better understood as the hitherto unthought.<sup>28</sup>

The notion that certain forms of photographic labour remain unthought contains further potential, gesturing towards other activities, including forms of photographic making that are not normally experienced or thought about as work. In a 2014 book about the digital economy, Trebor Scholz observes how 'the activation of our social behavior on the web... doesn't feel, look, or smell like labour'. It is therefore 'much akin to those less visible, unsung forms of traditional women's labour such as childcare, housework and surrogacy.'<sup>29</sup> Philosopher Ariella Azoulay has made a compelling case for understanding the people in photographs as co-producers.<sup>30</sup> In which case, should they—not just photographers—be understood as workers deserving of payment, particularly when they occupy less privileged socio-economic positions to the person holding the camera, and when pictures circulate publicly in ways linked to the production of value? When disenfranchised groups are encouraged to contribute photographs to larger projects, perhaps as citizen journalists or as 'participants' in collaborative art initiatives, why should they content themselves with the reward of increased visibility, the satisfaction of taking part, when the individuals and organisations that set up and facilitate projects stand to benefit in financial terms?

The unthinkable, or unthought, activities at the core of this book—the images it endeavours to think about—are all of, or have something important to do with, the production, circulation and consumption of other images. The distinctiveness of photography as a visual medium lies, partly, in its capacity to reproduce the real. But the act of reproduction is always enmeshed in chains of production and consumption altogether more material. Conservative histories of the medium have favoured one mode of production, and one producer: the ‘privileged see-ers’ who make photographs that matter.<sup>31</sup> Even then, discussions of labour are normally veiled behind romantic notions of artistic expression. This book makes the case for a radically expanded conception of photography, encompassing the types of labour too often obscured both by a focus on photographs by artists, and by black-boxed technologies, slick platform interfaces, the compulsion to display lives to others. The term ‘unthinkable’ is taken here not as an unchanging assertion but as a challenge.

My main concern is how representations of our photographic lives—in advertising, journalism, scholarship and, particularly, contemporary art—shape a sense of what photography is and the social relations that comprise it. More precisely, I focus on how different critical and creative strategies—from the appropriation of social media imagery to performative traversals of the network; documentaries about secretive manual labour to science fiction fantasies of future sabotage—affect our understanding of photography’s interactions with political and economic systems. This should be counted as one part of a larger turn within Photography Studies, towards the types of vernacular practices that have too often been neglected in favour of photography-as-art or as a mechanism of coercion and control.<sup>32</sup>

The field in which I intervene is sometimes shaped by a division, between photography as contemporary art, on the one hand, and vernacular photographic practices, on the other. Scholars pay attention either to ‘large-scale... images hung in museums’ or to ‘the billions of pictures made on cellphones and shared on the internet.’<sup>33</sup> I focus instead on a space where contemporary art and mass photography encounter each other directly. Artists have set their sights on what Annebella Pollen calls ‘mass photography’ with what has felt like increasing frequency in recent times. By examining key examples of this work across a period of roughly

ten years, I provide one of the first sustained critical analyses of an important area of contemporary art practice, based on the insights into photographic culture it affords. This is, in part, a practical decision. Artists' engagement with what Joachim Schmid describes as 'other people's photographs' provides a remarkably convenient lens through which the dizzying variety of a sprawling universe can be temporarily stilled, drawn into focus. Paying close attention to that work helps provide my book with some needed parameters. But it also creates opportunities to take art seriously as a pedagogical tool, a site for knowledge production, where individual and collective understandings of vernacular photographic cultures are developed, challenged and shared.

My analysis of recent art pays particular attention to the ways it both illuminates and obscures photography's economic condition, complex networks of social relations and the work that underpins today's vernacular cultures. Such a focus also has implications for the way contemporary art is studied. As Hito Steyerl suggested in an essay from 2010, the contemporary art world is a place of work; one that—in the context of my study—takes on characteristics of a kind of secondary economy built on the re-framing of photography's everyday lives.<sup>34</sup> Where some artists make this an explicit theme or sub-theme in their work, others disavow or obscure awareness. I take my cue from those projects which address their own economic condition with a degree of self-consciousness. To that end, analysis is concerned with art as a symbolic site where the political and economic world is explored, and as an active, material participant in larger economic and political systems. I am particularly interested in the implications of each for the other.<sup>35</sup>

Photography does not operate alone or independently. It is always enmeshed within practices, platforms, contexts and discourses other than itself. For Michelle Henning, it is therefore necessary 'to embed both photography and photography theory in a wider set of cultural phenomena' in ways capable of illuminating the 'many constellations in which photography is included.'<sup>36</sup> The central challenge is to understand what those constellations bring to photography, and what it has to contribute to the broader contexts in which it is positioned. This book does not limit photography to rigid ontological definitions. Much like Henning, I embrace its promiscuity as a technological and cultural hybrid: a means of production

and reproduction, a machine that makes images, a network of activities comprised of complex sets of social relations. The example of Street View signals how, when photographic culture is viewed through the lens of work, it demands a range of framings, each likely to emphasise some characteristics over others.

My brief analysis of Street View also indicates how the varying definitions impact on precisely how photography's relationship to work, and to capitalism, is configured. Notions of 'cognitive capitalism' find applications in the discussion of software development, at one end of the spectrum, and the menial work of training algorithms to 'see' photographs like humans, at the other, for example.<sup>37</sup> The sharing of photographs on social media platforms is at once a matter of 'communicative capitalism', if we emphasise the sociality of this activity, 'surveillance capitalism' if we address the activity that enables corporations to profit, and 'platform capitalism', where we think about the specific medium and business models through which surveillance and communication combine.<sup>38</sup>

As one constellation in which photography can be situated, the analysis of work and political economy have received comparatively scant attention from scholars, particularly in the context of contemporary practices.<sup>39</sup> That scarcity becomes especially clear when photographic studies are compared with the rich accounts of networked culture produced by scholars of digital media, whose analyses of labour are more frequent and significantly more developed, and thus provide important insights for my own analysis. Social and economic histories of labour provide further significant perspectives, largely absent from specialist histories of photography, and central to my own work. The field of political philosophy, to which I look for my overarching theoretical framework, also opens the study of photography to new vantages.

While photographic analysis has much to gain from dialogues with these inter-lapping fields, it is perhaps less clear what it could contribute to the broader discussions. This book signals two possibilities. Firstly, by restricting its focus to a single cultural phenomenon, it provides what I hope proves a compelling and manageable route through a wide-ranging set of related debates, while at the same time adding specificity and nuance to each. The structure of the book moves from the ideological transformations that have helped to power a compulsion to share photographs on

social media, to digital surveillance, the production of software and hardware, comparative forms of unpaid photographic making, and loops back to the roles photography is assigned within ‘free’ services such as Google Earth and Google Books. While some of the ‘circuits of exploitation’ explored are familiar to studies of digital media, the focus on photography opens onto additional sets of practices—for instance, the work of those who appear in pictures—along with specific histories, such as the changing fate of a company like Kodak, which a more general focus on digital media would likely discourage.<sup>40</sup>

The political and analytical utility of photography lies precisely in its much-remarked ubiquity. My focus on a range of institutions, and different types of work, linked to the monetisation of its everyday lives provides the means to develop what Fredric Jameson describes as a ‘cognitive map.’<sup>41</sup> Tracing the multitude of ways in which the photographs we regularly encounter intersect with larger political and economic structures has the potential to make complex global systems legible at the level of individual subjects. In pursuing this possibility, the book also examines why such a project is of such fundamental strategic importance to any meaningful attempt to transform capitalism from its current, savage form.

Secondly, there is something about how photography is actually experienced that distils the fundamentals of my argument. Across its histories, many prominent voices—from Walter Benjamin to Jo Spence, bell hooks to Lazlo Moholy-Nagy—have celebrated a potential to democratise culture, challenge private ownership, and to empower the disenfranchised. As a medium of production, photography is relatively cheap and simple to use.<sup>42</sup> As a means of expression, it enables aesthetically accomplished pictures to be produced by those who lack experience and training. As a mode of documentation and communication, it creates representations of the world that—while far from simple—are altogether more universal in their meanings than spoken or written language. As a means of reproduction, it subjects the uniqueness of private property to the logic of replication, broadening access and ownership along collective lines. In short, photography appears in many ways well suited to realising the democratic ideals at the heart of a socialist project.

If those characteristics have been radically accentuated by networked computation—think of the billions upon billions of photographs made

cheaply, shared freely, and existing on multiple screens simultaneously today—in economic terms, the situation could not be more different. The paradox of a so-called digital revolution lies in the intensive privatisation of the channels through which photography's democratic possibilities are publicly and collectively explored, the brutal exploitation of the invisible labour that hardware and software require, and the concentration of the resulting wealth among a small and increasingly powerful proportion of the population. As Slavoj Žižek has observed, the possible and impossible have been unevenly distributed in recent times. On the one hand, technological freedoms have felt close to limitless. The history of culture, images of anywhere, personal archives of treasured memories conveniently ordered by algorithm, are available for free, at the swipe of a finger. Socio-economic relations, meanwhile, have often appeared unchangeable, fixed in the individualistic market-oriented model prescribed by neoliberalism.<sup>43</sup>

This book was initially conceived as a critical reflection on how asymmetries such as these have played out through, and in relationship to, photographic culture. During the five years I have spent working on the project those intentions have shifted, along with my central argument. What follows does not only set out to expose photography's close relationship to the strange imbalance described by Žižek, but to think seriously about how the utopian and democratic parts of photographic culture might provide a template for remodelling concomitant social relations that play out through photography in more material terms. The participatory, egalitarian and inclusive experiences of making, using and accessing photography, I suggest, signal precisely the principles according to which society could and should be restructured, particularly in terms of its relationship to work. *Photography in its present state exemplifies the best and worst of what we can be.* This observation provides the book with its specific focus, and provides a kind of allegory for the larger political project with which it grapples.

If the initial response to the 2008 financial crash, and the period of cruel austerity that followed, was to take to the streets *in opposition*, then more recent times have witnessed a renewed interest in developing alternatives to the status quo and the pursuit of structural change.<sup>44</sup> The left, it seems, has moved away from *only* critiquing capitalism, in order to

think seriously about the future. Because this book examines what contemporary art can teach us about vernacular photographic cultures, particularly with regard to the politics of work, it also represents an effort to trace where and how this emergent politics can be felt across the different art projects considered. To that end, I situate the specific tactics, sensibilities and logics reproduced and promoted by different models of art making in relation to broader shifts in the political imagination. Where some of my case studies appear unable to conceive of a world beyond the neoliberal status quo, others playfully undermine the current system through acts of subterfuge and sabotage. Some seek out alternative systems and structures, on a variety of scales, in ways that redirect sites towards political horizons that have for too many years eluded us. The book is not so much a prediction of what lies ahead, as it is an exercise in looking closely at artists' engagement with mass photography as one site where the shimmering possibility of a world after capitalism has, at times, been obscured, but has, at others, been drawn into sharp and compelling focus.

# 2

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## #JeSuisNan

In 2016 *The New York Times* ran an article with the headline: ‘Nan Goldin Wants You to Know She Didn’t Invent Instagram.’ The rumours had started in the art world, mainly among curators. Critics and art historians had soon chipped in and the gossip started in earnest. Nan Goldin began by feeling angry (*‘I can’t be held responsible for all that has happened since’*). But then something started to change (*‘I’m not responsible for anything like social media, am I? Tell me I’m not... It can’t be true... I feel terrible’*).<sup>1</sup> So what if Nan Goldin did invent Instagram? Why did she do it? And, if she did it, why was she telling *The New York Times* that she didn’t?

Photographs by Nan Goldin came to art world prominence in the 1980s, entering the canon of contemporary art photography in the 1990s. The pictures centre on a cast of her friends, a group of bohemian outsider figures, shown in a range of intimate situations: in bars, apartments, baths, lost in thought, having sex, shooting up. The content of the photographs finds an aesthetic equivalence in their ‘snapshot’ style, evoking the domestic feel of the family album or the type of pictures once pinned to the walls of teenagers’ bedrooms. They often appear to be candidly produced, with the subject unaware—or unconcerned—that they are being photographed. Pictures are casually framed, figures are cropped, the use of flash creates dramatic shadow, prints appear somewhat grainy. The casual appearance is offset by a knowing aesthetic element, coupling a rich palette of colours with the play of light and shadow.

Goldin’s most famous work, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1984), was initially exhibited to her friends as a slideshow in the nightclubs of the Lower East Side. Photographs were grouped together according to themes, accompanied by a soundtrack that mixed ‘classical, pop and rock music’ in



Nan Goldin, *Greer and Robert on the bed, New York City, 1982*.

ways ‘intentionally both ironic and sentimental.’<sup>2</sup> *The Ballad* was included in the Whitney Biennial in 1986 and published as a book in the same year. This was followed by others, including *Cookie Mueller* (1991), which documented her relationship with the eponymous actress until her death from AIDS in 1989, and *The Other Side* (1992), comprising photographs of trans women and drag queens taken over a twenty-year period. Goldin’s work has been celebrated widely, including retrospectives at the Whitney in New York in 1996 and the Whitechapel in London in 2002.

The political potential of Goldin’s work has always been linked to the placing of private lives on public display. As she explains in an interview from 1997:

Of course it has a political agenda. It always has. The agenda is about making what is considered private in a society, public. It is about discussing real histories of people’s life [sic] rather than media versions of histories and it’s about making it clear that all possibilities of gender and sexuality are legitimate in life, and that all possibilities of gender are as valid as any other.<sup>3</sup>

Goldin is riffing here on Carol Hanisch’s famous phrase, first coined in 1969. In its original context, ‘the personal is political’ provided a way to

contest the marginalisation of women's issues within areas of left politics. The personal was politicised through the formation of women's groups, providing opportunities to share experiences and identify common sources of exploitation: 'to say what I really believe about my life instead of what I've always been told to say' in the company of other woman saying similar things.<sup>4</sup> Feminist consciousness raising was a step towards the pursuit of collective solutions to what were too often experienced as individual and private problems.

Goldin outlines a similar project, but one directed against representations in the mainstream media and the exclusions they involve. Her photographs depicted subjects including same-sex relationships, domestic abuse, addiction, unconventional modes of living, and experiments with gender identity, which were all either absent from, or stigmatised within, media reporting in the late 1970s and 1980s. In contrast to the collective conversations promoted by women's groups, the presentation of Goldin's photographs in books and exhibitions ensured messages were addressed not just to those most affected by those issues, but also to an undifferentiated gallery going public.

Goldin offered a variation on the 'personal is political' theme in another interview, this time from 1996:

I came from a family and a culture that was based on 'Don't let the neighbours know'. That was the gospel. And I wanted to let the neighbours know what was going on in my house and find out what was going on in their house.<sup>5</sup>

Here the political potential of the personal takes on a more general character, based on the rejection of repressive suburban conformism. The normative world of social convention is shaped as a source of oppressive authority that Goldin sets out to challenge. The artist's introduction to *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* developed the type of narrative capable of providing that rejection with a form of biographical legitimacy. A lot of the writing about her work has reproduced some version of that story. Nan Goldin was raised in the suburbs. An older sister committed suicide when her sibling was just eleven, at a time 'when suicide was a taboo subject'. Goldin left home at fourteen, seeking refuge in a number of foster homes and, eventually, a hippy school modelled on Summerhill in England.<sup>6</sup> It was here she took up photography, after Polaroid sent a shipment of materials for the students to use. She made her way to New York, befriending a group

of drag queens, assorted creative types and junkies living on the Lower East Side. It was then she started to photograph her friends, and to share the photographs as slideshows in the clubs where they liked to hang out. Only later did the art world show an interest.

For curator Martina Weinhart, the lives documented by Goldin's photographs hark back to the late 1960s rejection of normative domestic life, abandoning 'family, home-centred consumerism, marriage-centred sex, polarized gender roles, and the quest for meaning through children.'<sup>7</sup> Important parts of this rejection were amplified through her photographs' knowing allusions to domestic snapshots. When Kodak released the Brownie in 1900, it set in motion a radical democratisation of a technology that had remained the preserve of a relatively small and economically privileged elite. As the company began to create a market for popular photography, it also played an important role in shaping the uses to which it would be put.

Some of Kodak's best-known advertisements focused on 'The Kodak Girl', a fictional young woman who functioned both as a sexist symbol of the ease with which the technology could be used (*even a woman can do*



Nan Goldin, *Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston*, 1973.

*it...*) and an image of aspirational, independent femininity based on the figure of the new woman (*look at her...!*). But the Kodak Girl was outlived by images of the domestic photographer as mother and housewife, which came to dominate advertising from the mid-1950s onwards.<sup>8</sup> This focused on the preservation of precious memories and a common script of significant events—babies, birthdays, holidays—in ways that knowingly exploited a maternal desire to capture memories of rapidly changing children (*they'll be gone soon, and then what will you have...?*). This was closely tied up with the standardised models of domestic mass consumption that found clearest expression in the tracts of suburban housing springing up around the same time.

In photographing a group of friends whom she often referred to as her 'family', Goldin depicted many of the subjects typical of the domestic snapshot: parties, picnics, birthdays, moments of warmth and happiness. But, by depicting signs of domestic abuse, animosity between couples, sexual activity, the use of drugs, overt signs of drunkenness, experimentation with gender, same-sex relationships, she also included subjects that felt decidedly alien to the standard family album. Her pictures took a familiar domestic form and loaded it with content that felt familiar enough, and yet also non-conventional enough, to simultaneously evoke and disrupt the genre of the domestic photographic snapshot.

While the relationship of Goldin's pictures to the typical subject matter, and the appearance, of family photography has been discussed elsewhere, very little has been said about those ways in which the public display of her photographs may have functioned in similar terms. In a well-known book first published in France in 1965, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu analysed photography as a practice circumscribed by class-based distinctions. These dictated the occasions it was appropriate to photograph, but also the ways in which photography should be displayed and consumed. In the case of domestic images, photographs remained private artefacts. Among the middle-classes:

the ordinary photograph, a private produce for private use, has no meaning, value or charm except for a finite group of subjects, mainly those who took it, and those who are its objects. If certain public exhibitions of photographs are felt to be improper, this is because they are claiming for private objects the privilege of the art object, the right to universal attachment.<sup>9</sup>



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Pictures of those wonderful kids  
will save this day for the years

*Your snapshots tell the story best*

Around home or on an outing, you and your camera  
can make a priceless snapshot record. And with extra  
prints for family and friends—especially that boy in  
the Service—it's easy to share the record.

Eastman Kodak Company, Rochester 4, N. Y.

*Share "snapshot news" from home—and extra prints*



At your dealer's—dependable  
Kodak and Brownie cameras for  
snapshot opportunities ahead.

For black-and-white snapshots,  
Kodak Veribrom Film. For full-  
color snapshots, Kodacolor Film.

Kodak advertisement, 1951.

Across photography's analogue histories, the snapshot possessed a paradoxical character as a format both ubiquitous and hidden.<sup>10</sup> Family photographs were usually consumed by small groups of friends and relatives in albums. Where images of the family 'went public', it was normally the closely controlled format of the portrait, not the snapshot, that provided an outward-looking face for the domestic realm.

It is in this sense that the counter-cultural character of the lifestyles documented in Goldin's photographs, and the fact they are being photographed in the manner of family snapshots, extends to the pictures' public display. The sharing of the photographs amounted to a form of transgression that made the personal public. It was not simply the institutional framing of Goldin's pictures, nor their aesthetic knowing, that identified the snapshot as art. It was a digression from the norms that prevailed across a wider photographic landscape—the norms of mass consumption—through which the photographs signalled their difference, their subversive distinctiveness, and thus became identifiable as products of artistic, not simply domestic or reproductive, labour.

Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have observed that critiques of capitalism normally adopt one of two forms: a 'social critique' focused on the distribution of wealth and the equality of opportunity and an 'artistic critique' demanding greater autonomy and more authentic forms of experience. The events of 1968 combined aspects of both as part of an awkward coalition. Trade unions directed a social critique towards the 'threats posed to them... by the restructuring and modernization of the productive apparatus'. They spoke 'the language of *capitalist exploitation*, "struggle against the government of monopolies," and the *egoism* of the oligarchy that confiscates the fruits of progress [emphasis in original quotation]'. Students and intellectuals 'instead developed a critique of *alienation*' directed at 'the disenchantment, the inauthenticity, the "poverty of everyday life"... the loss of autonomy, the absence of creativity... the different forms of oppression in the modern world'. Where the former demanded the redistribution of wealth and job security, the latter desired freedom from the monotony of mass-produced consumer culture and the drudgery of nine-to-five working.<sup>11</sup>

In was during the following years, Boltanski and Chiapello suggest, that capitalism succeeded in evading the demands of the social critique by answering parts of the artistic challenge. Questions of socio-economic injustice were circumnavigated by co-opting parts of the alternative, bohemian discourse. This is why, in recent times, the ‘spirit of capitalism’ has made increasingly vocal claims to having liberated the workforce. ‘Freedom’ takes the form of a flexi-time world, in which success is gauged not through movement up definable hierarchies but by a capacity to move between projects and across global networks. Cultural and commodity production has fragmented and multiplied into what can feel like infinite variations designed to meet the minutiae of personal preference. As the freelancer *par excellence*, it has been the figure of the artist that provided a template for the precarious working and round-the-clock creativity that defines a growing proportion of contemporary labour.<sup>12</sup>

Boltanski and Chiapello pay particular attention to the ideological effects of this move: the emergence of ‘shared beliefs, inscribed in institutions, bound up with actions, and hence anchored in reality’. As citizens of the ‘projective city’—a social space ‘founded on the *mediating* activity employed in the creation of networks [emphasis in original quotation]’—we are unbound by traditional structures of profession, church, class and nation. So we construct our selves through the micro-identities we consume. Work today is based on the relationships we develop and the connections we forge: on the extensiveness and effectiveness of our networks.<sup>13</sup> As the distinction between labour and leisure becomes unclear, the identities we fashion play an integral role in what would once have been called our professional lives. Identity becomes increasingly performative and necessarily image-based in such a context, with success measured not by ‘an individual’s achievements in the public interest’, but ‘according to the degree of acquired visibility and public exposure.’<sup>14</sup>

The present situation serves the interests of capital in at least two ways. Opportunities to fashion a public self are often highly profitable. The extraordinary growth of commercial plastic surgery and the fitness industry during the past twenty years are two of the more prominent examples. The construction of micro-identities also works against the traditional sources of solidarity on which socio-economic critique relies. As Jodi Dean explains, ‘neoliberalism does not produce its subjects

by interpolating them to symbolically anchored identities (structured according to conventions of gender, race, work, and national identity). Instead, it enjoins subjects to develop our creative potential and cultivate our individuality'. Not only 'do the multiplicity and variability... prevent them from serving as loci of political action,' their 'inseparability from the injunctions of consumerism reinforces capitalism's grip.'<sup>15</sup>

For cultural theorist Sarah Gram, the effects of these shifts come into clearest focus in the figure of the teenage girl. Understood 'more as a concept than a biological necessity,' the teenage girl is 'the central unit of late capitalism, the model citizen of commodity society'. Perceived to be useless as a worker under industrial capitalism, the teenage girl was made useful through the requirement to purchase. She became 'a worker whose primary labour is dedicated to looking a particular way rather than making a particular thing'. Her body was re-fashioned as a commodity, 'one which belongs to her and is her responsibility to maintain the value of.'<sup>16</sup> The limited form of agency the teenage girl is compelled to enjoy masks the absence of more profound forms of freedom: the choice as to whether this is the most desirable way to establish her subjectivity, for example.

Placing agency at the level of the image makes it subject to new controls. For Dean, the 'multiplicity and adaptability of these identities does not mean that subjects are somehow freer or more liberated than they were under the discipline of the welfare state.'<sup>17</sup> The regimes of advertising and the templates peddled across an image world replace the factory and state institutions as sites of domination and power. That dynamic is made evident in photographs by Rineke Dijkstra, much beloved by the art world at the turn of the millennium. Dijkstra asked young people to pose 'naturally' on beaches. The use of a medium-format camera, which requires an extended period of stillness from those photographed, intensified the feelings of self-consciousness that can accompany the experience of being a teenager, and posing for a stranger in public wearing only a swimming costume. The photographs depict subjects centrally in the frame, with the shoreline and horizon positioned in the same place in every picture. The similarities in composition encourage viewers to compare and contrast the young people in terms of their bodies, their clothing and their pose. Photographs are titled with details of the country where they were made, along with the day, month and year they were taken. Thus

individuals become representatives of particular places and times.<sup>18</sup> ‘The Americans appear much more body-conscious, probably because of the media,’ Dijkstra explained to me in an interview years ago, ‘they read all these glamour-magazines and tried to look like that. At that time, in 1992, when I started to make pictures in Poland there was not much like that... it was only three years after the Berlin Wall came down.’<sup>19</sup>

Artist Melanie Manchot photographed young women in Moscow in 2004 using a similarly standardised approach. Her subjects had lived through the Soviet fall-out as teenagers, in a country that had ‘very quickly become, not just capitalist, but hyper-capitalist’. The photographs present a series of young women who demonstrate a ‘strange attention to detail... this complete and utter obsession with labels, what labels signify, what these trophies on your shoulder somehow bestow.’<sup>20</sup> For Fredric Jameson, the ‘shock-wave impact’ of the media on Western Europe had ‘enabled the observer to take a little critical and perceptual distance from the gradual and seemingly natural mediatization of North American society in the 1960s.’<sup>21</sup> The particularly acute forms of self-fashioning observed



Installation view for *Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective*, 2012, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

by Manchot allow for a denaturalisation of similar qualities in countries where the hegemony of consumer capitalism has taken hold more gradually and over a longer period of time.

As subjectivity has become increasingly tied to the construction of a public image, so the logic of celebrity has taken on more prominent roles in everyday life. This has helped to blur traditional distinctions between the representation of the masses and those modes of visibility once reserved for the rich and famous. The rapid expansion of celebrity magazines and cable television in the late 1980s and 1990s dramatically lowered entry thresholds. Increased demand and the diversification of platforms led to an assortment of 'it girls,' 'celebrity' couples, hangers-on and other C-listers becoming a regular presence on television screens and the pages of tabloids. An interest in imperfections and unhappiness displaced the more polished glamour of earlier celebrity culture, particularly as we neared the millennium. A concern with sweat patches, spots and assorted drunken antics helped refashion celebrities in the image of ordinary folk. With the so-called 'grunge aesthetic' of 1990s fashion photography, figures such as Corinne Day and Juergen Teller drew inspiration from artists like Goldin and Larry Clark. Models posed in crappy flats, often wearing their own clothes, to provide photographs with the feeling of being low-fi and authentic. Alternative lifestyle magazines such as *i-D* and *The Face* provided a natural home for this imagery, before it gravitated to the mainstream through commissions for Versace and *Vogue*.

A boom in first-person media saw traditional channels open their doors to the stories and perspectives of 'ordinary' people. Media scholars Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette point to the ways that the diaristic programming of the 1990s paved the way for the reality television that came to dominate broadcasting at the turn of the millennium with assorted 'docu-soaps' and game-show-format offerings like *Big Brother*. This was 'an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real.'<sup>22</sup> A symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship was established with more 'traditional' celebrity culture—the programmes providing a regular and relatively cheap source of copy for magazines and chat shows.

Powered by the same ideological formations that privileged public visibility over achievement in the collective social interest, these emergent media cultures promised a more authentic form of spectacle. In the process, authenticity became further tied to first-person perspectives and to the valorisation of individual subjectivity. For Jon Dovey, the proliferation of subjective, autobiographical and confessional modes of expression across literature, factual TV programming and digital media is linked both to its comparatively low production costs and to the post-modern anxiety regarding the authority of grand narratives, which left only 'the politics of the self to keep us ideologically warm.'<sup>23</sup>

This brief historical survey demonstrates that the advent of so-called 'Web 2.0' no more invented the compulsion to attain public visibility than it made the conditions in which individual subjectivity became a synonym for authentic representation. The proliferation of camera phones and social media platforms has certainly increased opportunities to engage in acts of public self-fashioning, which exist today as a spectrum stretching from the photographs of friends posted on Facebook or Instagram to the uploading of home-made pornography. But the uses to which networked computation is sometimes put are shaped by a longer history, and by a series of ideological mutations. As Gram explains, becoming 'a spectacle, a narcissist, a consumer are simply the criteria that have to be met to be legible under late-capitalism, particularly as young women.'<sup>24</sup>

Yet the advent of social media has been felt with particular force within the field of domestic photography. Before Web 2.0, the cultures of first-person media remained largely bound to the moving image, particularly to the format of the video diary. People's personal photographs were sometimes used in such a context, but almost always in ways that felt as though private artefacts had been repurposed in retrospect. They were fragments of past memories now being shared, not images made for the purpose of wider consumption. It remained remarkably rare for people's snapshots to be shown publicly (at least outside the worlds of art and fashion), even at a time when other areas of visual culture were moving towards a more confessional, sometimes DIY, mode. Jonas Larsen and Mette Sandbye are right to observe that the behaviour promoted by social media platforms has helped transform snapshot photography from a medium of memorialisation to one of communication.<sup>25</sup> A cornerstone

of domestic consumption has been radically redefined in the process. What was once called 'the Kodak moment' no longer suggests a private or semi-private memory, but an opportunity for public display.

Work by artists like Dijkstra and Manhot now appears to sit at a threshold: Alice staring through the looking glass before she steps through. Looking back, we now know that the looking glass will shatter, fragmenting into innumerable smartphone snapshots shared on Instagram and Snapchat, shimmering like a mirror-ball. Large-format C-type prints front-mounted on plexiglass, sold in editions of three, will also disperse, as data files in untold numbers materialise as images on innumerable liquid crystal screens. And what does Alice see, as she takes her first step through? Ageing bohemians holding family albums to their chests. Angry, disorientated, bewildered.

As snapshot photography has been drawn further into the orbit of public self-fashioning, relationships between the art of Nan Goldin and ideological currents that pre-date, inform and help power the photographic cultures of communicative capitalism have become clearer. That relationship shares important characteristics with the model of co-option and critique developed by Boltanski and Chiapello. The critique implied by Goldin's photographs was primarily directed at the bourgeois nuclear family and, potentially, the models of consumption it was harnessed to support. This happened in two ways. Firstly, the lives documented in the photographs suggested alternative models of experimental social relations. Secondly, the insistence that those lives be photographed, and that those photographs be shared widely with others, transgressed the bourgeois conventions ordinarily enacted through people's everyday photographic rituals.

Where the second transgression helped amplify and extend the challenge of the first, its politics were secondary to, and dependent on, that associated with the lives documented by the photographs. As with the social, economic and cultural changes that followed 1968, elements of one critique have been co-opted and absorbed by the interests of capital in ways that may have allowed significant parts of the alternative challenge to be ignored. Here it is the principle of public disclosure that has been re-processed. This was already clear in the expansion of first-person media, of reality television, and in the increasingly permeable boundary between

celebrity culture and 'normal' society. Social media platforms have not only allowed for, but have expressly encouraged, the public display of what, not long ago, were perceived to be private moments. Although a significant degree of stage management abounds—a close editing of shared experience that reproduces new sets of aspirational socio-cultural norms—those norms have been extended to sometimes include content that would, for many people, have felt deeply inappropriate to share with others when Goldin exhibited photographs at the Whitney in 1984.

So what of the alternative critique suggested by the lives depicted in the photographs? Writing in 1979, Ellen Willis suggested that any desire to replace the family with a system of collective child rearing would—even at that time—require 'a social and psychic revolution of almost inconceivable magnitude.'<sup>26</sup> Helen Hester describes the intensification of that situation in recent years in terms of 'domestic realism.' The model of nuclear families living in single dwellings has become hyper-normalised, to the point that it can feel impossible to even imagine alternative modes of living assuming an equivalent status today. The types of transgressive, queer and experimental social relations photographed by Goldin have been permitted to enter today's mainstream only after adopting more conventionally acceptable form: filtered through the bourgeois institutions of marriage and civil partnerships, for instance, or the parenting of children by same-sex couples. Challenges to these norms continue to exist, of course, and changes associated with Web 2.0 can provide those alternatives with new forms of public visibility. But they remain marginal to the political and cultural mainstream in ways that potentially confirm, not undermine, the centrality of the nuclear family to contemporary capitalist societies. The demands that private worlds attain public visibility have become conventional. Photo-sharing has become ubiquitous. But the pursuit of experimental domestic relations feels further away than ever.<sup>27</sup>

What does this mean for the work of Goldin? In her 2012 book, *Artificial Hells*, Clare Bishop explores participation in art as what she describes in terms of a 'constantly moving target.' In the context of art practice, participation lacks intrinsic value because its meanings will always be defined in relation to the term's broader cultural connotations. The inter-activity of reality television and commercialised social networking has implications for the meanings of participation as art.<sup>28</sup> When Goldin's exhibitionism is addressed in those terms a similar dynamic

becomes clear. Changes to a wider photographic landscape associated with Web 2.0 mean that what once suggested a radical departure from social convention now looks fairly similar to what everyone else is doing.

The effects of that change are evident in the ways Goldin's work has been framed. For a long time, writers and curators focused on a potential voyeurism and a personal compulsion to record. The photographs were understood either as documents of a specific group of people and her relationships to them, or as meditations on human relationships and emotions in a general sense. Emphasis was placed on what is recorded and represented in the images, not on the act of disclosure involved in display.<sup>29</sup> The desire *to be seen* and *to show* remained secondary to discussions of documentation and surveillance. References to social media pepper most of the articles written about Goldin and her work today.

The increased appearance of exteriors and landscapes in Goldin's oeuvre is generally attributed to lifestyle changes resulting from 'going clean.' In a 2008 interview, she explained:

People used to say, about my work, that we all have pictures like that, personal, sexual pictures, but we just never show them to anyone. But for me it was the landscape photographs I took that I kept hidden.<sup>30</sup>

Might the reverse now also be true? The statement indicates an awareness both of structural tensions that define photography's status as art, and the significance of showing intimate moments in establishing the difference of her work from the lumpen mass of other people's snapshots.

At first glance, a 2014 book of photographs depicting friends' children, to some of whom Goldin is godparent, seems to complicate the contention that photography-as-art can no longer rely on the sharing of intimate lives in galleries to signify its difference. There is certainly no shortage of baby pictures online. But the sharing of photographs of children on social media platforms remains more closely bound to sentimental notions of good taste and clichéd humour than the typical teenager's Instagram feed. In Goldin's pictures, children often feel strange and otherworldly. In some of the photographs they are naked. And of course these are not *her* children. Fears of paedophilia and child pornography police against sharing naked pictures of young people, however innocent the intention behind them. The same, ugly threats discourage the taking and sharing of photographs containing other people's kids, with schools increasingly prohibiting photography at

plays or sports events. Goldin's book, and its relative art world success, is structured according to the same relationship to photography's mass cultural roles as the earlier project of sharing, highlighting one area of photographic culture that remains more closely tethered to the bourgeois principles of old, albeit ones reshaped according to emerging post-digital neuroses. The norms established through our daily photographic lives still provide the backdrop against which digression can be established, distinction achieved, photography's value as art established.

If the effects of an increasingly confessional culture were largely absent from writing about Goldin and her photographs during the 1990s, they could be felt elsewhere in the art world. The turn of the millennium saw galleries open their doors to the grungy realism of contemporary fashion photography. Figures such as Day and Teller made their names in fashion. The work for which they became known as artists involved depictions of their everyday experiences in low-fi snapshot-style photographs. But however much their pictures resembled those of Goldin, and however much fashion photographers sometimes tried to keep their 'art' and their 'commercial' work apart, it represented a very different proposition to a project like *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*.



Georgina Cooper by Corinne Day, published in *Diary* (2000).

Day's *Diary* (2001) was promoted as being wholly distinct from her fashion work: the photographs depicted her *real* life, as opposed to the 'reality' used as a visual rhetoric pitched against glamour and artifice in the context of her fashion photography.<sup>31</sup> Yet some of Day's friends were models, the interiors they inhabited in her art photography were similar to those in her magazine work, and her attempts to become an artist followed her success in the world of fashion. As a device deployed in mass culture, 'the real' continued to insist on its reality relative to the artifice of fashion. However much it was fused with commercial culture, it was nevertheless more real, more authentic, than the glamorous forms of photography it displaced. If the 'reality' of diaristic art photography is seen to start with the candid documentary work of someone like Goldin, then Day imported the reality from art into fashion, and then back into art again. The work of Day and Teller cannot help but be marked by some self-consciousness regarding the presence of the camera, the anticipation of a likely audience, the need to perform and, so too, the artificiality of its particular version of the real.

The fifth episode of *Nathan Barley*, a 2005 Channel 4 television satire written by Chris Morris and Charlie Brooker, begins with a launch party for the 'vice issue' of *Sugar Ape* magazine. This includes what soon becomes a controversial photo shoot, depicting several semi-clothed young women engaged in sexual activities with the magazine's male staff members. Some of the staff are shown discussing the pictures:

**Rufus Onslatt:** The idea, yeah, was to make it look like these models were being molested in a magazine office, yeah.

**Ned Smanks:** When actually that is sort of what was really happening.

**Rufus Onslatt:** Only, because we're all in on it, yeah, it isn't.

**Ned Smanks:** Except, because we were actually touching them, it kind of is.

**Nathan Barley:** Yeah, I touched two of them. They were really up for it though.

[Nathan points to the photograph as though to prove the point.]<sup>32</sup>

*Sugar Ape* parodies *Vice* magazine in its turn-of-the-century incarnation: an emergent hipster class engaging in subterranean activities (that

included cage fighting, drug consumption and having sex with pensioners) in order to write about them in quasi-ironic tones for an appreciative audience of other prototype hipsters. 'Immersionist, DIY and deliberately controversial, but run entirely on advertising revenue,' *Vice* parodied and simultaneously embodied 'a rampant money-is-everything neoliberal ethos.'<sup>33</sup> In 2013, *Vice* sold majority shares to Rupert Murdoch's Fox Group. Writing at the time, journalist Hamilton Nolan observed that, 'lured by the promise of not giving a fuck, cool kids had been assembled into a space where their desirable not-give-a-fuckness can be sold to corporate sponsors for hefty fees, which go into the pockets of *Vice's* owners.'<sup>34</sup>

*Vice* provided a natural home for the work of photographer Ryan McGinley, who was for several years regarded by many as Goldin's heir apparent. What had started off as somewhat self-conscious diaristic-style images based on a cast of beautiful New York friends had rapidly become something more fantastical. The artist and his gang went on road trips funded by art buyers, got naked and took drugs all *in order to be photographed*. *Vice* also provided an important platform for photographs by Terry Richardson, which I can only assume inspired the fictional photo-shoot in Nathan Barley. It is here we encounter the clearest expression of all that Goldin worked so hard to avoid, or at least to disavow.

Richardson's best-known pictures depict a cast of models, celebrities and lesser-known young women goofing around and engaging in sexual activity. One photograph shows Steve-O, from the MTV programme *Jack-Ass*, slumped in a corner surrounded by used nitrous oxide capsules, a string of vomit emerging from his mouth. Another shows the pop singer Miley Cyrus posing topless as she pretends to fellate a police truncheon. Many of the more explicitly sexual photographs include Richardson as an active participant, often receiving fellatio.

Richardson's subject matter is matched by his photographs' rough-shot composition. Pictures look as though they were taken quickly, carelessly, in the moment. Scenes are ordinarily staged in the studio, where a white backdrop often replaces the domestic interiors that, in Goldin's photographs, signified the real. The models, celebrities and New York hangers-on occupy a similar social milieu to Richardson, and to each other. Like Goldin's earlier project, the photographs both depict, and help to construct, a social circle



Ryan McGinley, *Dakota's Crack-Up*, 2007-8.

of sorts, but here relationships appear as much professional as personal. The sex depicted in the pictures is unremittingly heterosexual. Any fooling around with gender (a well-known picture shows Richardson with his penis tucked between his legs) feels more frat party than counter-cultural. Same-sex relations between women are very clearly staged for the benefit of male viewers.

To this day, Goldin has tried hard to assuage the suspicion of a choreographed or self-conscious private life that could have resulted from a thirty-year career. She does not 'think about the wider audience, the people I don't know,' much as her close friend, David Armstrong, does not let the prospect of being seen 'penetrate my thoughts.'<sup>35</sup> Richardson's subjects are acutely aware they are being photographed, and of the future audience this implies. They meet our gaze and play around for the camera, which we often see in the frame. With a small number of exceptions, Goldin does not appear in her photographs. Richardson's body appears repeatedly, often holding a camera.

When Goldin made occasional forays into fashion photography she found it 'really hard... People kind of want me to do a "Nan Goldin"'

They don't understand that it's not about a style or a look or a setup. It's about emotional obsession and empathy.<sup>36</sup> The point here is that two worlds—that of Goldin and her art, and that of fashion—remain apart. Photographs by Richardson occupy a more ambiguous position, loading fashion imagery with unruly types of content to achieve some fragile separation and, through that distinction, seek out the status of art. In the eyes of Oliver Zahn, Richardson's work is 'not pornographic, because it reveals how the rest of photography today is pornographic. By having these images in a commercial context they act as a Trojan horse that transcends the original format. They sneak the viewer a moment of truth.' Goldin's work insisted, above all else, on its relation to the real. In Richardson's work, 'You don't know what is real and constructed.'<sup>37</sup> Yet Richardson continues to describe his work in terms of an 'authenticity' of sorts, a quality that—as in the work of Goldin—cannot be reduced to commercial imperatives alone:

I'd have a lot more money if I was more careful of what I do, image-wise. I still have this struggle; I'd like to buy a house and all, but when I try and do pictures just for money I never do them that good. When I do what makes me happy, that's what people respond to.<sup>38</sup>

Just as with discussions about Goldin and her work, writing about Richardson's photographs often makes reference to a well-worn series of biographical details. His mother was a Copacabana dancer, his father a fashion photographer, 'partying with Keith Richards, participating in group sex, shooting speed'. When Richardson was three, his dad smoked too much hash and passed out in the street in Morocco. His mother went into 'bohemian hippiedom', marrying the musician Jackie Lomax and moving to Woodstock.<sup>39</sup> Richardson was a violent child. His mother crashed a car, came out of a coma after a month and suffered permanent brain damage, after which he was raised by his mother and grandmother on welfare. He got into the LA punk scene in the 1980s, which was around the same time he started shooting smack. He worked on and off as a photography assistant; 'had these Hollywood friends who were actors, like Donovan and Alex Winter and Balthazar Getty' so started photographing them. His dad mentored him for a brief time, then, in 1993, he did a shoot for *Vibe*, the magazine that would later become *Vice*. It showed 'kids at urinals, spitting

beer on the sidewalk, roller-skating at the Roxy.<sup>40</sup> By the mid-1990s he was photographing campaigns for major fashion brands and magazines.

The narrative is not of any particular interest because of the insights into individual motivation it provides. It is interesting because, like the myth of Nan Goldin, the story maps so closely onto larger cultural changes. Where Goldin escaped repressive suburbia to seek bohemian authenticity, Richardson reacted to an upbringing in the counter-culture turned sour, embracing the anger and nihilism of the LA punk scene, then the excess of the exhibitionist consumer culture that 1960's radicalism was morphing into. The contrast extends to the spaces in which the photographers worked. Goldin documented the dilapidated New York of the 1970s and 1980s. Richardson hung out with actors and trust-fund kids in Hollywood, before moving to New York in the early 1990s, by which time the city's gentrification was getting underway.

Where Goldin became established as a critically acclaimed contemporary artist supported by prestigious institutions, Richardson has remained a peripheral figure in the art world, better known as a fashion photographer. Exhibitions have been staged at commercial galleries, not public art museums. Initial acclaim came from the hipster classes clustered around *Vice* and the more irreverent moneyed collectors associated with galleries such as Perrotin. Books of his photographs are normally published by niche outfits. The main exception, a now-notorious book of collected works entitled *Terryworld*, was published by Taschen, but under the auspices of its erotica arm, not its art or photography divisions.<sup>41</sup>

Richardson's work should be understood both as the product of late-capitalism and a knowing effort to push its operational logic to carnival-esque extremes. Like other aspects of capitalist realism, it performs what Mark Fisher described as 'a kind of super identification with capital at its most pitilessly predatory.'<sup>42</sup> As goofball puppet master of a pantomime world, Richardson plays at what Dean calls 'the free-marketeer': one 'who sells himself, who sells out, who sells it all'. The free-marketeer:

over-identifies with neoliberal ideology, eliminating the place of the warm, interesting person that the system is supposed to serve, whose needs the system is supposed to meet. When he sacrifices everything to the system, the player, the investment banker or entrepreneur, acts as if such sacrifice is necessary for success. He exposes the truth of the system—it really does demand all sorts of

horrible, incalculable sacrifices; it really does brutally disregard real human needs and relationships.<sup>43</sup>

It is through both the self-consciousness and excess with which Richardson and his subjects sacrifice themselves to the imperatives of commercial image culture that they seek out some small remove. As Zahn explains, the work involves ‘a sacrifice of the artist who *knows* that he must sacrifice himself to the system, the fashion system, the pornographic system [my emphasis].’<sup>44</sup>

As a strategy for art making, this is close to what former *Art Forum* editor Jack Bankowsky describes as ‘subversive complicity.’<sup>45</sup> The later work of Andy Warhol, with its endless stream of commissioned portraits and celebrity magazines, actively participated in the lows of commercial culture but also appeared to promise a paradoxical kind of remove. Similar strategies have been refined by artists such as Jeff Koons, Takashi Murikami and Damien Hirst in recent years, embracing the worst excesses of consumer culture—including the commercialisation of art—but without wholly abandoning a position of criticality (at least in the eyes of some).

Koons married the Hungarian-born porn star, Cicciolina. They appeared together in posters promoting a pornographic film that was never made, and were depicted by Koons as sexually explicit, self-consciously kitsch sculptures. Murukami makes pop videos with Hollywood celebrities and exhibits them in galleries, sells cheaper versions of his sculptures as soft toys, and designs handbags for luxury brands, some of which were sold in the Louis Vuitton boutique installed at the heart of a 2009 museum retrospective. In 2008, Hirst engineered an auction of new work, much of it remakes of earlier projects cast in gold and platinum. The sculptures are sometimes read as comments on the absurdity of art’s marketisation, but circulated in the art market without any problem. The auction itself can be read both as a performative exploration of art selling and as a way of making money selling art.

Bankowsky sees subversive complicity as one of the few modes of resistance available to artists in a world of hegemonic consumer capitalism, requiring them to ‘give in to both the culture industry and the art system at once—willfully, strategically, exultantly.’ The ‘pay-off comes when these systems are not only played, but played with a little “art,” played for some

slim but decisive disturbance.<sup>46</sup> Subversive complicity is thus distinct from satire—an exaggerated but fictional version of the world that points to the absurdity, hypocrisy and corruption of the real. It is also distinct from irony in its pure form, which implies a clearer critical remove. With subversive complicity, the embrace and the critique of consumer culture are so deeply implicated in each other they become almost impossible to wrench apart. For critics, this means it can only ever be ‘weak and modest’ as critique, ‘strong and strident as celebration.’<sup>47</sup> ‘Mimetic exacerbation,’ Hal Foster explains, ‘might compound the alienation that it means to volatilise, with the difference between acting-out and acting on thereby lost.’ The consequence? A ‘collapse into capitalist nihilism.’<sup>48</sup>

Those risks take on a distinctive and particularly extreme form in Richardson’s photographs, where more is at stake than the consumption of art or of luxury handbags. Capitalist realism demands we make commodities of ourselves; that we treat ourselves and others as an image. By showing themselves to be enjoying that process, the young women and aspiring models photographed fellating Richardson, holding his penis, taking off their clothes for the camera, are encouraged to believe they could achieve some fragile separation from the larger culture. They made visible what was in some sense true for most, certainly for most celebrities and models, but did so with such gusto, and—we are encouraged to assume—self-awareness, that it was both more than, and somehow different from, what the rest of late-capitalist culture was doing.

If Richardson takes on the role of free-marketeer, then his subjects perform the role of what Hannah Black describes as the ‘Hot Babe’:

Self-as-semblance (the Hot Babe) is the objective subjectivity that has yet to find its true social form.... She objectifies herself ‘for herself’ (“I do it for myself because I enjoy fashion, it makes me feel like me” – Beyonce), but also ‘for all women’ (“I think that women feel akin to me in a way because I’m so incredibly honest about who I am as a person” – Jenna Jameson), and evidently for all men... The condition of the Hot Babe is invisibility or (the same thing) pure contentless visibility. Her image is the appearance of what cannot appear. Image, which is impossible, is itself a taboo on the impossible. All impossibilities (image, love, desire, sex) must be played out as possibilities: the Hot Babe volunteers to perform this necessary self-abasement. The Hot Babe is the embodiment of the flatness and emptiness of the image, but the very flatness and emptiness of the image, any image, is its uncanny fullness.<sup>49</sup>

The Hot Babe and the Free-Marketeer share important traits: ‘lacking all interiority, super-connected, ultra-contemporary, without guilt or grief.’<sup>50</sup> But they are also gendered concepts that, in Richardson’s photographs, operate through and in relation to each other: Richardson with his camera in hand, young women with his penis in their mouths. The more celebratory interpretations of the photographs assume the mutual compatibility of these positions. The roles adopted may be profoundly unequal, but the enthusiasm with which they were embraced—and the paradoxical liberation this promised—made them somehow similar, if not quite the same:

There was something exciting about being involved in something that feels just really freeing... like, ‘Oh, I’m totally expressing myself, and this is great’.. I’m always like, ‘I look so hot in that picture’.. when I look at those pictures, I’m smiling... I’m having the time of my life, I look great, I have a beautiful haircut. This is a great day.<sup>51</sup>

The view became harder to maintain following the publication of several first-person accounts describing the manipulation and coercion to which some of the young women feel they were subject. Speaking in 2010, Jamie Peck explained:

I can remember doing this stuff, but even at the time, it was sort of like watching someone else do it, someone who couldn’t possibly be me because I would never touch a creepy photographer’s penis. The only explanation I can come up with is that he was so darn friendly and happy about it all, and his assistants were so stoked on it as well, that I didn’t want to be the killjoy in the room. My new fake friends would’ve been bummed if I’d said no.<sup>52</sup>

Writing in 2014, Anna del Gaizo reflected on why she had initially maintained her silence following a similar experience:

When Terry Richardson shoved his hardening dick into my face in 2008, when I was 23 years old, it wasn’t anything for me to get too emotional about... Only pussies get emotional. I might be a girl who wears lipstick just to check the mail and whines when her high heel breaks and cries when certain things don’t go her way and wants a brand-new dress for every minor occasion and yes, has a pussy, but I would not be a pussy. I would be a “player” impervious to emotions, too aloof to be vulnerable, too tough to act sensitive, and too cool to admit I sometimes, only sometimes, wanted a boyfriend and not just a one-night stand. I would give blowjobs because I liked giving blowjobs, not because I care about making guys like me.<sup>53</sup>

The accounts of Anna del Gaizo, Jamie Peck, and Karen Bernstein hint at an important, feeling presence in Richardson's photographs that cannot be suppressed: an uncomfortable, vulnerable, interior. What Richardson and his assistants described as 'fun' is remodelled as something altogether more complicated.

The 'Hot Babe' allegorised an emergent mode of subjectivity at a time when its dominance was building, both through the rapid expansion of social media and an ongoing erosion of distinctions between celebrity and the everyday:

Public services are privatized and private life is public. Once, only the professional Hot Babe adorned all major media outlets: now social media makes of everyone a Hot Babe, should they be willing. What is private, secret, is not the detail of the life but the disappearance at its core.<sup>54</sup>

Richardson's photographs, and the more enthusiastic interpretations they sometimes garnered, should be counted as products of a slightly earlier time, a kind of hinterland between Goldin's wilful flaunting of bourgeois convention and the hegemonic exhibitionism of communicative capitalism. *The Theory of the Hot Babe* identifies an intensification, and democratisation, of the cultures that Richardson mimics. As the logic of the commodity—of the self as public image—has leaked into many and varied aspects of everyday life, so the Hot Babe has become the new norm.

As with Goldin's earlier project, changes to the wider culture have come to threaten the distinction—in Richardson's case, the precarious distance—sometimes thought to separate art from the broader contexts in relation to which it operates. The explicit sexual content of Richardson's pictures, and the inclusion of anonymous young women, disrupted the polite conventions of fashion and celebrity, revealing what was rotten at their core. But today the internet is awash with photographs of young women succumbing to similar pressures, without the sweetener of a supposed remove.

In Alex Garland's 1996 novel, *The Beach*, a backpacker called Richard acquires a map in a Bangkok guesthouse, which leads him to the secret beach home of a small bohemian community. They have created a more authentic form of traveller experience on a remote island, one that

provides a retreat from the commercialised spectacle of full-moon parties, buckets of SangSom, and drug-fuelled antics on the Khao San Road. The community has to maintain the secrecy of the beach, both for fear that it will face the same grotesque commercial fate as the rest of the country, and because they worry a group of local marijuana farmers will evict them if any more people arrive and draw attention to their illegal crops. Growing tired of the slow trickle of newcomers, the farmers shoot a group of American backpackers and deliver their corpses as a threatening indication of what will happen to the others if they do not leave the beach right away. Tripping on fermented coconut milk and too much weed, the group experience a collective mental breakdown, ripping the corpses apart. Then they turn on Richard, who they believe to have leaked their secret. Some disperse and escape, returning home to take up jobs in design and admin. Others remain to face an unknown fate.<sup>55</sup>

Published the same year as Goldin's first retrospective at the Whitney, *The Beach* provides yet another reflection on what happens when counter-cultures collide with a commercial mainstream. The novel offers a playful meditation on the contradictions that confront efforts to preserve hippy fantasies, when those same fantasies helped produce the threats they come to face. It ends in brutal violence, self-destruction and the eventual acceptance that paradise is, indeed, lost.

Goldin did not invent Instagram. Richardson did not invent the photographic manipulation of young women. But aspects of their work, and the ways it has been discussed, still suggest something important about the potential, and the limits, of particular strategies for resistance in the context of the current culture. While both imply a critical distance from the exhibitionism of social media, and both resemble it in other ways, it turns out that neither is much help for those of us looking to strategically navigate these brave new worlds.

Richardson's approach is grounded in exaggeration. Recognising the artistic critique to be spent in the context of late-capitalism—chewed up and spat out as the phony image-based agency afforded by fashion and celebrity—he sought a form of separation by performatively embracing the worst extremes while insisting that he felt nothing. We know now that others continued to feel, and felt that this wasn't right. Goldin favours a politics of rejection grounded in sentimental nostalgia for a golden age of free love

and bohemian experimentation. But there are limits to this position too. For Walter Benjamin, nostalgia could prove a powerful tool, but one that must be deployed, dialectically, as a mobilising force: shaping, and shaped by, experiences of the present in ways capable of correcting the future.<sup>56</sup> The most important projects facing us today lie not in the wholesale rejection of new image cultures in favour of fixed and fetishised versions of the past, but in efforts to recognise how current situations demand positions taken in the context of previous struggles be contested, revived or revised. Where Goldin spends her days looking back, Richardson knows only the present. Neither has much time for the future, which it must fall to others to build.



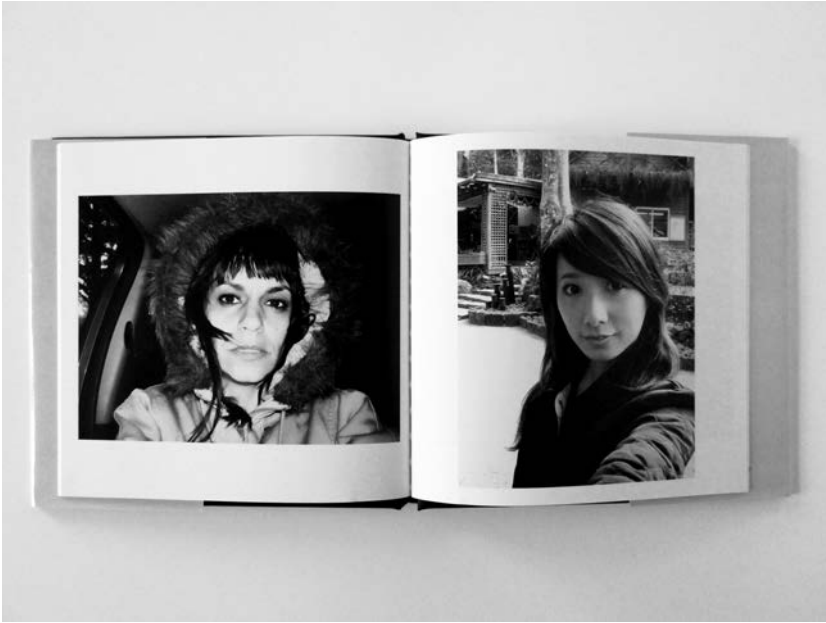
# 3

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## Appropriation 2.0

*Other People's Photographs* (2008–11), a project by artist Joachim Schmid, consists of ninety-six self-published books. Each contains sets of photographs depicting similar subject matter 'found' by Schmid on Flickr. Pictures of currywurst, selfies, fridge doors, women's cleavages are printed one a page in dedicated volumes. More photographs from Flickr, this time depicting sunsets. The pictures, sourced by artist Penelope Umbrico, have been cropped in Photoshop to place the sun at the centre of the image. Output as cheap 4" × 6" machine c-prints, they are arranged in grids on gallery walls. The title of the project—*Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*—is followed by the number of hits Umbrico got searching for 'sunset' on the photo-sharing platform, and increases every time the series is exhibited (on 3 April 2016 the total stood at 30,240,577). Still more aesthetically similar photographs, taken from photo-sharing websites. They depict popular tourist attractions, superimposed on each other in Photoshop to create a series of composite images. The common forms that emerge—the unlikely legibility of their central focus, be it the picture of Chairman Mao at Tiananmen Square, the pyramids in Giza, the Eiffel Tower in Paris—highlight the common photographic rituals performed by twenty-first-century societies.

An essay by curator Clément Chéroux situates projects such as these as part of a longer history of artistic appropriation, powered by technological change. Where photomechanical printing spawned photo-montage in the early twentieth century, and television was fundamental to the development of Pop, today the internet is linked to an 'intensification of appropriation art strategies.' Artists such as Schmid, Umbrico and Corrine Vionnett 'take advantage of what the internet has to offer them,' appropriating 'what

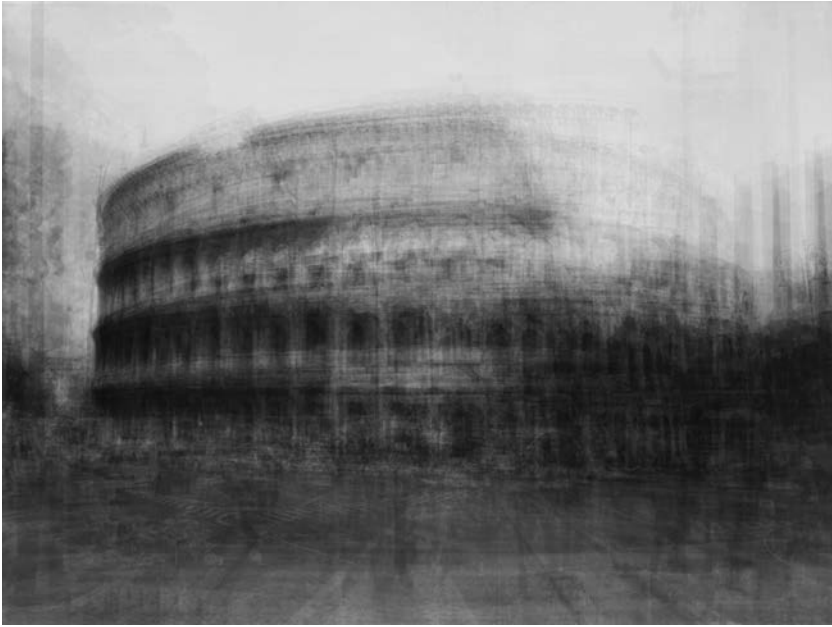


Joachim Schmid, from *Other People's Photographs: Self*, 2012.

they find on screens, editing, transforming, moving around and adding and subtracting from it'

Chéroux links the appropriation of internet photography to an irreverent kind of politics. Artists consolidate and expand on the 'desacralization of art' historically associated with acts of taking and re-using, shifting 'emphasis from skills and craftsmanship to the celebration of artists' choice'. The artists celebrate non-professional creativity and the democracy of online culture: their 'heroes... no longer the technicians, engineers or professionals who possess the know-how, the expertise, and strive for a certain quality, but rather the amateurs or collectors who pursue their passion as a hobby'.<sup>1</sup>

The second point does not follow easily from the first. If the commitment to deskilling artistic production seems clear enough (though note here that the making of Vionnet's composites would require at least some competence using Photoshop), the re-contextualisation of content made by amateurs may not amount to an act of hero-worship. As Chéroux



Corinne Vionnet, *Roma*, 2007, from the series *Photo Opportunities*, 2005–present.

explains, appropriation shifts the locus of art production away from the manual labour of skilled craftsmanship and onto the intellectual activity of selection. Any heroes implied by the artists' internet scavenging are more likely to be earlier artists using similar tactics than the masses towards whose photographs they direct their attention.

Taken as an artistic act, appropriation is ordinarily linked to the potential to generate a critical commentary with some bearing on the original material. The nature of that commentary—whether it is sneering or celebratory, for example—depends on what is appropriated, how it is taken, and then how it is presented and re-framed. The context from which the material is lifted, the context into which it is introduced, and the relationship between them are all central to the production of meaning.

Writing in 1969, Theodor Adorno observed a secret affinity between work and leisure in capitalist societies. It turned out that capital was very good at prescribing what we ought to do with our free time, not just when we are

paid to toil.<sup>2</sup> Something like that observation is lent visual form in the photography of Andreas Gursky, which gained art world prominence in the 1990s. Raves and factory floors are shown from the same aerial view, reducing people to an ant-like presence in a mass subject within a common underlying grid-work. The photographs expose what Julian Stallabrass calls a ‘universal banality described by a highly rational and ordered compositional structure.’<sup>3</sup> Gursky’s photographs pivot on the interplay of similarity and difference, within a framework that ensures that similarity prevails. The individual always dissolves back into the mass, much like brushstrokes dissolve into the larger composition in examples of Impressionist painting.

Artists’ appropriation of online content involves a related dynamic. We turn the pages of Schmid’s books to see more and more examples of the similar subjects. The totality of Umbrico’s installation is overwhelming. In Vionnet’s composites the individual images become entirely indivisible from each other. But, unlike Gursky’s crowd scenes, in which uniformity is linked, in part, to compositional decisions taken by the artist, here the sameness appears self-generated: isn’t it the masses that produced the same picture in the same way? The distinction is false, of course. What Gursky imposes through choice of subject and the position of the camera, Schmid and others impose through the images they choose to work with, and through the ways in which they are presented and arranged. The web is awash with photographs. It is just as easy to envisage projects about difference.



Andreas Gursky, *May Day IV*, 2000.

The series are not without radical potential. Network society was founded on the promise of undoing the predictable patterns of Taylorist work and the uniform consumption of mass-produced commodities. Post-Fordism was meant to make work feel more like leisure, an opportunity for individual self-realisation. The fragmentation of consumer culture into kaleidoscopic variety services similar ends. Those changes are entwined with what Jodi Dean describes as the 'fantastic suppositions of neoliberal ideology that have become part of the air we breathe, elements of our most fundamental assumptions about how the world works: everyone is individual with a unique identity; the free-market enables us to create and develop these unique identities.'<sup>4</sup>

The social media platforms on which photographs are shared provide opportunities to enact a public performance of our unique, individual selves. Interface design privileges difference over uniformity. Landing pages and news feeds show photographs from different users based on when they were uploaded, sometimes in combination with other types of content, rather than on the similarities that certain images share. If artists' projects suggest the web to be a strangely uniform space, that uniformity contains a subversive potential insofar as it disturbs the popular image of social media platforms as sites where uniqueness and individuality can be attained. It is not simply the fact of our online photographic performance, but the content of particular photographs, even the way those photographs are composed, that is shown to be the same.

Pierre Bourdieu identified a direct correlation between a person's level of education and their likelihood to eschew clichéd objects of popular admiration in favour of the unique, the unusual and the distinctive.<sup>5</sup> Writing in 2012, Annebella Pollen observed how a similar separation sits at the core of many scholarly interpretations of amateur photography. When an impression of 'overwhelmingly conventionalized sameness' is contrasted with 'elite art practices,' the latter are 'positively polarized as avant-garde, creative and distinctive.'<sup>6</sup> Contemporary artists' treatment of photographs from social media platforms relies on the same distinction, placing similar images together in an institutional context founded on the valorisation of individuality and the celebration of creative difference. By highlighting the paradoxical sameness of supposedly individual photographic lives, artists have performed a labour of differentiation on behalf

of themselves and their audiences. Viewed within the institutional context of art, which is itself premised on the cultivation of difference and individuality, we are encouraged to assess similar claims made elsewhere. By holding those claims up to be false, somehow wanting, due to the uniformity now revealed, art confirms itself as the true domain of the creative individual.

This is a specific manifestation of a wider tendency described by Allan Sekula in 1986. The ‘aesthetically informed viewer examines the artifacts of mass or “popular” culture with a detached, ironic, and even contemptuous air,’ Sekula explained. The ‘look of the sophisticated viewer’ possesses a ‘covert elitism.’ It makes ‘an implicit claim to the status of “superior” spectatorship.’<sup>7</sup> The championing of the reflexive, critical subjectivity of art over what is presented as a spectacular mode of subjectivity promoted by social media—the mindfulness of elite culture pitched against the mindless reproduction of mass cultural templates—makes this



Penelope Umbrico, *2,303,057 Suns from Sunsets from Flickr (Partial)* 09/25/07, 2007. Installation at the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia, 2007.

a gendered distinction. The artists' ethnographic surveys suggest a similar 'disgust for bodies that run in emulation, whose primary labour is dedicated to looking a particular way rather than making a particular thing,' which Sara Gram observes in journalists' moral condemnation of social media narcissism.<sup>8</sup>

Artists' recourse to the visual language of the grid takes on somewhat sinister connotations in this context, recalling the earlier pseudo-scientific surveys reliant on photography to compare strange specimens for the benefit of elite groups of gentleman scientists. At its extreme we find the composite, a system developed by eugenicist, Francis Galton, to identify signs of physical—and, he argued, moral and intellectual—sameness in portraits of criminals, the mentally ill, syphilitic patients and Jewish schoolboys.<sup>9</sup>

Pollen's account of sunset photographs concludes with an appeal to future scholars who, she hopes, will reimagine their approaches to amateur photography. By talking to, not only about, some of the amateurs who submitted pictures to a popular photography competition in Britain in the 1980s, Pollen's own work identified an interesting disjuncture between 'the conventional pictorial forms the photographs utilised (what the photographs were *of*) and the sometimes complex, at times counter-narrative, informational and emotional content that they are expected to convey (what the photographs were *about*) [emphasis in original quotation].'<sup>10</sup> When artists and academics focus on aesthetic uniformity, they risk ignoring the diversity of motives and meanings invested in visually similar images by their makers and their audiences. Photographs of sunsets can suggest so much, from the memory of a first kiss to the creation of an arty composition, knowing parodies of a stereotypically 'amateur' subject to memorials to dead loved ones. They may look similar, but their meanings are different and unique.

Pollen's work relies on an important reversal of naturalised tendencies, opening mass photography to an interest in individual motivations more often reserved for the appreciation of photography-as-art. There are limits to the proposed reversal in the context of photography's sharing on social media platforms, however, for here the inscription of individual agency works in accordance with, not against, the central operating logic of communicative capitalism. It is precisely what is chewed up, co-opted

and spat out as data to be mined for profit by the platform's corporate owners. Working against artists' identification of uniformity by insisting on difference reproduces fundamental and problematic parts of social media culture.

It might be tempting to reverse the reversal, highlighting the sometimes-striking similarities shared by works of art. Look carefully and it can feel as though precisely that awareness haunts areas of the art world. *From Here On*, a 2010 exhibition that included the projects by Schmid, Vionnett and Umbrico, adopted the form of a chaotic architectural installation, with temporary walls of varying sizes, colours and angles. Artists printed work at different scales, framed it in eclectic ways, helping to obscure the remarkably similar aesthetic and conceptual ground occupied by their typological studies of like motifs appropriated from user-generated culture. Is this not so unlike the social media interfaces that allow uniformity to be experienced as diversity? While audiences may offer different interpretations of what they see in museums and galleries—contemporary art flatters viewers by being deliberately open-ended in its meanings—is their behaviour not also remarkable in its uniformity? Viewers shuffle from one work to another, looking carefully (and never touching), standing back, thinking, perhaps passing comment to a friend in reverent, hushed whispers. They will grow noticeably perplexed, even angry, if anyone deviates from these rituals, even just by talking too loudly. Such a reversal would certainly fly in the face of art world custom. But it does little to unsettle the ideological positions that art and social media hold in common. Individuality remains the condition towards which photography must aspire.

Dean returned to her earlier thoughts on communicative capitalism in an article about selfies written in 2016. It argues that individual self-fashioning may have contributed to the formation of an unpredicted and paradoxical form of collective subjectivity. Communicative capitalism has enlisted photography as a vital tool in a continual performance of self in order to produce value for social media platforms' corporate shareholders. And yet collective social patterns have developed over time; rituals and common motifs that possess important, often unacknowledged, potential. The selfie, 'should be understood as a common form, a form that, insofar as it is inseparable from the practice of sharing selfies, has a collective subject.'



*From Here On*, Atelier de la Mécanique, Parc des Artelier, Recontres d'Arles, 2011.

The subject 'is the many participating in the common practice, the many imitating each other'. The act of freely sharing photographs challenges what Benjamin saw as the cult value of unique objects: 'Reproduction becomes inseparable from production... the image posted on Facebook can be on any number of screens at the same time, whether or not it even registers to anyone scrolling through'. Updating the old Marxist adage that capitalism would produce its own gravediggers, Dean describes the effects in terms of a 'secondary visibility', a collective subjectivity that emerges as an unintended consequence of the realisation of a unique self when it is performed publicly, online and en masse.<sup>11</sup>

Dean's argument is linked to an understanding of the changing socio-economic contexts in which these mutations in meaning occurred. The artistic critique of capitalism directed an authentic individualism at the uniformity of mid-twentieth-century Fordism. This was absorbed and repackaged as the fetishisation of unique consumer-producers, policing against the formation of collective identities that effective political

challenges to neoliberalism will likely require. The emergence of common forms of cultural production necessarily means something different in this context to what the mass consumption of like commodities meant decades ago.

Dean's analysis also raises complex questions for artists' appropriation of similar photographs to form typologies. The positioning of mass cultural sameness in art world contexts built on the celebration of uniqueness, originality and the new may imply a sneering class politics. But this cannot be guaranteed. The simple act of gathering and re-contextualisation means projects are sufficiently open-ended to allow for alternative readings. Writing in 2013, Geoffrey Batchen suggested that Schmid's books allowed 'us to take note of exhibitionist desires that might otherwise remain scattered and lost in the infinity of digital space'. The series took notice of sociological patterns before they became firmly established. The fact that his essay used the Korean term, *selca*, not 'selfie' to describe the emerging genre of the camera-phone self-portrait illustrates the point.<sup>12</sup> 'Selfie' would only enter the common lexicon, and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, after the article was written, suggesting Schmid's book on the subject—already more than two years old by that time—was well ahead of the curve.

Looking today, it is indeed possible to see the projects as studies of an emergent culture, of potential collective identities, irrespective of the irony originally intended by artists, projected onto the series by viewers, or implied by institutional contexts. The alternative interpretation would have important ramifications for the cultures it brings into contact. If, rather than point to the persistence of Fordist rationalisation, the series herald the era of what Dean calls 'selfie communism', then perhaps it is the art world's continued commitment to the exchange of rarefied commodities, along with its fetishisation of individual makers, that will, in time, come to feel anachronistic, backward-looking, out of step.

*New Portraits* (2014), a well-known series by artist Richard Prince, consists entirely of enlarged versions of photographs published by other people on Instagram. All of the pictures show bodies, many of them belonging to women, sometimes semi-clothed in sexualised poses. Prince adds cryptic additions in the comments below the images, produces screen grabs that include the photographs, comments and other parts of the Instagram

interface, and has the screen grabs printed onto canvases measuring a bit less than two metres in height.



Prince remains best known for photographing sections of Marlborough advertisements in the late 1970s and 1980s, a gesture often discussed as a cornerstone in critical post-modern art practice. A copy of a copy of a copy, the series raised questions about the nature of authorship, originality and value that many believed to be important at the time. The fact that photographs depicted cowboys pointed to the mythologisation of the American West and marketable versions of rugged masculinity peddled by US consumer culture. *New Portraits* bears a closer resemblance to a series of photographs depicting bikers' girlfriends posing semi-clothed on motorcycles, submitted to magazines by the women's proud partners. Prince's interest appears to have been in the amateur emulation of commercial pin-ups, a reproduction of mass cultural image templates in semi-vernacular form.

The appeal of Instagram to Prince is easy to understand: its combination of photographic imagery and the cultures of micro-celebrity absorb, intensify and reproduce many of the concerns at the heart of his earlier work. This is true of the social media platform in a general sense, but particularly of the photographs used in *New Portraits*, which seem to have been selected with consideration and care. Some were produced by members of Suicide Girls, a commercial organisation that promotes amateur pin-up culture. Another shows Lady Gaga, a post-post-modern pop star known for her playful self-image and social media following as much as for her music. A picture of the former Baywatch actress Pamela Anderson hints at the ways in which older traditions of sexualised celebrity have been redefined under communicative capitalism. A photo of Kate Moss, iconic creation of the fashion industry, serves a similar function. Other photographs were posted to Instagram by aspirant creatives, who are much less likely to be known to viewers. The resulting combination of established and micro-celebrity highlights the blurring of traditional distinctions between the famous and the public in a domain where followers, likes and shares act as the primary markers of status.

Some commentators believe the enigmatic comments posted by Prince amount to an important break from established approaches to appropriation. In some small way, the artist has participated in the culture he now

reframes, making him more than a mere ethnographer.<sup>13</sup> The gesture is incapable of undoing the structural imbalances that define relationships between Instagram and the art world, however. As one reviewer put it, Prince is ‘painfully removed from the youth culture in which he is participating, which only extenuates the project’s problems.’<sup>14</sup> If the main concern here is the artist’s age, income and experience, the point can be straightforwardly extended to include the elite culture for which he serves as representative, and to which he conveys back news from the frontline of social media. What was difficult about a series such as the bikers’ wives—and about the work of Schmid, Umbrico and Vionnett—is also difficult here. The more democratic parts of mass cultural production are held up for scrutiny and contemplation among a more sophisticated class of viewers.

The social media platforms from which Prince takes the photographs have created new opportunities for those from whom he has appropriated material to respond publicly to the project. While a number of the people whose photographs are included in the series shared their thoughts through blogs, tweets and Facebook posts, journalists exploited the ease with which users could be identified and contacted via Instagram to approach them for comment. Prominent members of the Suicide Girls started selling their own prints, based on Prince’s use of their images, for \$90, with proceeds going to charity. The group’s founder, Missy Suicide, warmed to Prince’s project only later: ‘Richard Prince is an artist and he found the images we and our girls publish on Instagram to be worth commenting on, part of the zeitgeist I guess? Thanks Richard!’<sup>15</sup> The later response is typical of a wider tendency, with users savvy to the potential of *New Portraits* as a kind of high cultural endorsement for their online brand, an alternative way to achieve the goal of public visibility. A *Guardian* article quotes Jan Gatewood, who hoped the series might bring exposure to his own work as a painter and musician. Sita Abellan, who moved to Tokyo ‘to further a modelling and DJing career’, describes Prince as ‘a really cool artist, I like him very much... I feel special that an artist like that used my picture to make his project.’<sup>16</sup> Others have been less enthusiastic. Professional photographer Donald Graham launched a lawsuit against Prince and Gagosian when one of his photographs, posted to Instagram without permission by a user called rastarjay92, was included in *New Portraits*.

<h1>\$90,000</h1> <p>SOLD BY FAT CAT ARTISTS AND MILLIONAIRE GALLERY OWNERS</p>	<h1>\$90</h1> <p>SOLD BY SUICIDEGIRLS</p>
	
<p>Based on people you follow 24991 likes</p> <p><b>bigtimo123</b> I like her tounge <b>kashimmi</b> @kalypsoskitz basically she's obviously my purrfect sister from another mister! 🐱👍 <b>richardprince1234</b> Private Lives, mind if I sneeze on</p>	<p>Based on people you follow 24991 likes</p> <p><b>bigtimo123</b> I like her tounge <b>kashimmi</b> @kalypsoskitz basically she's obviously my purrfect sister from another mister! 🐱👍 <b>richardprince1234</b> Private Lives, mind if I sneeze on <b>suicidegirls</b> true art</p>
<p>size: 67x55 materials: ink jet on canvas</p> <p>profits go to rich gallery owner and millionaire "artist"</p>	<p>size: 67x55 materials: ink jet on canvas</p> <p>sold by the actual people who created the image and profits go to charity</p>

Screen capture from the Suicide Girls website, offering a \$90 version of Richard Prince's Instagram portrait, August 2015.

The contrasting reactions speak to a larger shift in the perceived value of photography as a form of cultural production. Established professional photographers vigilantly adhere to principles of intellectual property, are prepared to challenge powerful interests within the art world and, it seems, to ignore the histories of twentieth-century art, the intentions lying behind the appropriation of their images by others, and its capacity to produce new and transformative meanings. Aspirant young creatives, by contrast, attach little direct economic value to the photographs they share online, which are part of a larger and ongoing project of self-promotion. Many also identify with the contemporary art world, appreciate how meaning

is produced, and thus feel both obliged to respect its hierarchies and to recognise the comparatively lowly position they currently occupy within.

The rejection of Prince's motion to dismiss the Graham case by a US District Court judge provided the distinction with an interesting legal dimension. Prince's argument of 'Fair Use' required *New Portraits* to pass four tests relating to the purpose and character of the use, the nature of the copyrighted work, the amount of the original work used in relation to the whole, and any impact on the market for the appropriated image. The judge ruled that Graham's photograph was—like Prince's series—an example of fine art photography, so it was unclear how far *New Portraits* amounted to a form of re-contextualisation. It was also possible that Prince's appropriation of the image had damaged the commercial value of the original work. A lot of the other photographs re-used by Prince, particularly those produced by lesser-known Instagram users, possessed little or no comparable commercial value before their appropriation, nor enjoyed the status of fine art, so would presumably have been much less likely to receive similar legal protection. Art world value systems were eventually reasserted through supporting documentation provided by Prince's legal team. Expert testimonials from curators and critics attested to the transformative effects of Prince's re-framing. Larry Gagosian argued that the work of the artists appealed to different buyers, and that he 'would neither buy nor show a Graham photograph.' Graham's own sales records indicated that *New Portraits* had most likely increased the value of his photograph, due to the publicity it had received through the exhibition, legal case and extensive media coverage.<sup>17</sup>

Discussing the rise of appropriation art during the 1970s and 1980s, art historian Isabelle Graw observed that:

the understanding of appropriation... was based on the Marxist interpretation of the term... In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels had proposed the 'abolition of property' as the first measure to be taken, and more than a hundred years later, such a method of dispossession was believed to be possible of artistic works.... While for Marx appropriation was simply the form in which exploitation took place, because capital appropriated alienated labour, alienating and dispossessing the workers from their own appropriation of the product of their labour, artistic appropriation... under conditions of private property, alienation and totalized spectacle culture became a legitimate and necessary method: a kind of defense mechanism... Appropriation became a method that one assumed

could stand up to alienation. This was due to the concept of a strong artistic subject, which would ultimately remain in control of the situation.<sup>18</sup>

That assumption may also have relied on a disavowal of art's own economic condition or, at the very least, a belief that art represented a space somehow less compromised by capital than that from which its source material was taken. The meanings of appropriation ought to be, but are not always, informed by some understanding of the economies from which the photographs are lifted, and into which they are subsequently moved. From whom, it is necessary to ask, are the pictures being taken? How do those groups fare, in material terms, when compared to the particular sections of the art world within which their photographs come to circulate?

It matters that the advertisements re-photographed by Prince to make his cowboys were produced by a professional photographer, paid for by a multi-national corporation, and used to peddle cigarettes. It also matters that Prince's cowboys were sold through a relatively small New York gallery in editions of ten for as little as \$1,000 each (just short of \$3,500 in today's money).<sup>19</sup> The fact that prices climbed into the millions through subsequent re-selling at auction, and that a work from the series once held the title of most expensive photograph by a living artist ever sold, may also have some bearing on what it means. It is less clear from whom exactly the pictures in *New Portraits* were taken. In legal terms, Instagram retains copyright over its interface design. While photographs remain the intellectual property of their makers, Instagram's Terms of Use provides it with a non-exclusive, fully paid and royalty-free transferable sub-licence to use and sell content to third parties.<sup>20</sup> While makers include some well-known and wealthy celebrities, *New Portraits* also drew on pictures from lesser-known Instagram users, working low-paid jobs to sustain their creative lives. Prince's series was available for purchase through Larry Gagosian's multi-national operation, with unique canvases reportedly selling for up to \$90,000.<sup>21</sup> If views of appropriation art as an affront to private property have always relied on a disavowal of art as an activity embedded in, and dependent on, capitalist markets, perhaps it was easier to turn the other way when imagery was being taken from paid photographers and tobacco companies, not young women working hard to maintain their own precarious visibility. As student

Anna Collins told *Business Insider* magazine, 'I'm extremely broke, and here is a middle-aged white man making a huge profit off of my image. Kind of makes me sick.'<sup>22</sup>

A *Guardian* article about the series concludes with an underwhelming visit to the Gagosian Gallery in London, where *New Portraits* is being exhibited. The canvases cannot sustain the aura developed by the media spectacle; enlarged screenshots are poor quality; text in the comments is difficult to read. The journalist decides to ask the security guard what he thinks:

He gives me a look which manages to combine: a) what, this crap? b) utter indifference c) concern for his job. At this point... a young man wearing Buddy Holly glasses, a member of staff, asks if he can help.... He's more enthusiastic about *New Portraits*. He may be professionally obliged to be—Larry Gagosian has a long-standing relationship with Prince and represents him—but he seems genuine. He talks about what it all means: appropriation, age of the internet etc.<sup>23</sup>

Could this be what Prince's series is really about? Low-waged workers drawn into its orbit only to be reduced to socio-economic caricatures? The young enthusiast, the philistine security guard, the micro-celebrity. Perhaps. But something important is missing. If the heated discussions that have surrounded *New Portraits*—across old media, as well as new—went some way to opening up the politics of appropriation, particularly by providing a voice to the makers of appropriated content and highlighting the exploitative economies of the art world, then a familiar blind spot remained. At no stage have the financial operations of Instagram—nor of Facebook Inc., which owns the platform—been subject to any similar levels of attention among critics and arts correspondents. Such an absence signals something important about appropriation art and its limits in the age of communicative capitalism.

The integration of snapshot photography into networked computational systems has helped shift the primary site of its monetisation. This is best understood as a chain or process, beginning with the purchase of the camera. In analogue days, we would buy the camera and pay both for the film required to take photographs and to have the film developed. The profitability of mass photography lay primarily in the production, sale and developing of film, which—unlike cameras—were continual, not

one-off, purchases. Thus Kodak adopted what is sometimes referred to as a 'Gillette' model. Its cameras were priced cheaply, much like Gillette priced its razors. Money was made through film, in the same way Gillette profits from razorblade sales.

We continue to pay for cameras today, many of them included in smartphones. But we no longer purchase film, nor pay to have that film developed. The fate of Eastman Kodak, which filed for bankruptcy in 2014, is often used to symbolise this shift, and has become the go-to anecdote for academics keen to discuss the fate of analogue photography in a digital age.<sup>24</sup> New sites for monetisation have emerged to offset that loss, the majority based on the public sharing of photographs across computer networks and the online interactions they facilitate. We often pay monthly tariffs to access the network, sometimes impacting on the production of value earlier on in the chain, with the cost of smartphones discounted in order to attract us onto particularly monthly deals, for example. There are parallels to be drawn with a Gillette model here, but it is network access, not film and developing services, that we pay for. The two are not directly comparable, however: where Kodak was a 'vertically integrated' company and had financial stakes in almost every stage of the photographic process, smartphones are generally produced by companies other than those which provide broadband.

More fundamentally, advertisers pay to access the attention we devote to photographs and, particularly, the ability to manipulate desires facilitated by harvesting user data. Every time a photograph is uploaded, tagged, shared, viewed, liked, geo-tagged and commented on, our preferences, relationships, and social networks become clearer. When algorithms survey what we do, what we like, who we like to do it with, they get better at encouraging us to want stuff, whether sports shoes or presidential candidates. For Mark Andrejevic:

The goal is not just to determine what information might be useful to consumers, but how best to trigger the anxieties and concerns that might motivate them to buy, how best to use information about their hopes, dreams, and desires, their moods and their health, as well as their romantic and family histories, to figure out how to bend consumer behaviour to the priorities of marketers... all of our activities, to the extent that they can be redoubled in the form of data harvested by interactive networks, return to us in unrecognizable, perhaps even unremarked form.<sup>25</sup>

The process is based on a quantifiable, essentially statistical, notion of selfhood. As artist Erica Scourti observes, ‘algorithms... do the number crunching to be able to predict what you might buy, and hence who you are, not because anyone cares about *you* particularly, but because where you fit in a demographic is useful information and creates new possibilities of control.’<sup>26</sup>

A platform such as Flickr was originally targeted at more serious amateurs and charged for data storage. At one stage, it announced plans to sell canvas prints of images uploaded onto the site under Creative Commons licenses; a proposal that shares certain structural similarities with the work of artists like Schmid, but in ways no longer linked to the production of any knowing conceptual commentary.<sup>27</sup> Until 2014, Flickr’s free accounts offered very limited storage, included advertising, and only allowed the most recently uploaded photographs to be viewed by others, in order to encourage the purchase of a Pro account which offered more storage and no adverts. More recently, the Pro package doubled in price, while free accounts became almost identical to the paid ones with the exception of the advertisements. The clear intention was to shift the platform’s primary income stream towards the sale of adverts shown to those with free accounts. As one user asked, ‘who is going to pay \$50 a year just to avoid seeing adverts?’<sup>28</sup> Most of the major photo-sharing platforms now use data harvesting to make money. This is increasingly true of providers of stock imagery too. Rather than charge for non-commercial image use, Getty requires the public to embed code that allows this activity to be monitored in ways that will inform future commercial activity. For Katrina Sluis, that decision represented ‘a paradigm shift in which there is less value to be extracted from individual images than from relations between them.’<sup>29</sup>

This shift in the financial value of photography—from that of mass-produced commodity to part of larger assemblages of data to be mined for the purposes of predicting future trends and targeting advertising—plays out through the representations of popular photographic lives in advertisements. A former Kodak executive explained that the ‘Kodak moment’ was ‘a way to scare people that unless they bought a little yellow box, their most important memories risked ruin.... the ads were meant to make you cry, and if you cried, that meant you pay an extra 45 cents for

a roll of film.’<sup>30</sup> Along with an increasing emphasis on youth, advertising today highlights the need to share our experiences, not just to preserve our memories. We are required to *show others* how much we care across social media platforms.

For Fred Ritchin, the relationship of digital photography to its analogue forebears is equivalent to early descriptions of automobiles as horseless carriages, which lived on in terms such as ‘horsepower’. Metaphors helped minimise ‘the manifold ways in which the automobile... transcended its beginnings.’<sup>31</sup> They were reassuringly familiar. Social media platforms make shrewd use of the capacity of metaphor, dressing up the invitation to freely share content in the sepia-tinted language of ‘albums’ and ‘photos,’ not ‘folders’ and ‘image files.’ This helps obscure the nature of the changes through which revenue is now made and so masks the whiff of exploitation that hangs over our online image lives.

Scholz suggests that people sometimes find it hard to understand social media activity as unwaged work ‘because in opposition to traditional labour, casual digital labor looks merely like the expenditure of cognitive surplus, the act of being a speaker within a communicative system’. Nevertheless, our ‘intimate forms of human sociability are being rendered profitable’. Oligarchs ‘capture and financialize our productive expression and take flight with our data. We, the “users” are sold as the products.’<sup>32</sup> For Nick Srnicek, data is better understood as ‘the raw material that must be extracted, and the activities of users to be the natural source of that raw material’. Like oil, ‘data are material to be extracted, refined and used.’<sup>33</sup> It is difficult to imagine a situation in which the users of social media platforms could unionise to demand better working conditions, or to have a system for payment introduced; it is much simpler to imagine opting out of social media altogether, or developing alternative platforms that do not rely on data mining and advertising for revenue, in ways closer to consumer activism than to industrial action. But when data is understood as a resource in need of refining, it does not appear to be ‘natural’ in the same way as crude oil because it involves the monetisation of human interactions. It is the social dimension of the process that lends it the appearance of unpaid work, even if the nature of value production means it does not sit comfortably within traditional definitions of labour.

Why does this matter? In his book *24/7* Jonathan Crary describes the effects of the network as the realisation of earlier industrial fantasies of round-the-clock productivity. The capacity of networked image culture to produce capital around the clock links it to a world ‘reimagined as a non-stop work site or an always open shopping mall of infinite choices, tasks, selections, and digressions.’<sup>34</sup> What is described here is something more than a post-Fordist erosion of distinctions between the professional and the private. There are fewer and fewer times when we are not producing in the interests of capital. Crary identifies what Foucault called a ‘network of permanent observation,’ but one that sees most of the ‘historically accumulated understandings of the term “observer”... destabilized... that is, when individual acts of vision are unendingly solicited for conversion into information that will both enhance technologies of control *and* be a form of surplus value.’<sup>35</sup> Even when we are at work, we are performing additional forms of labour. A significant proportion of the research that informs this book involved internet searches of one kind or another. Based on my purchase history, Amazon does a very good job of recommending books in which I am likely to have an interest. Is it shameful to admit that purchases suggested by algorithms have played an important role in helping to forge my argument? Could this be yet another part of photography’s expanded field?

It is not only data mining that should concern us here, but also the distribution of the resulting wealth. The financial arrangements of Instagram’s owners, Facebook Inc., are typical of many other multi-nationals, which exploit de-territorialised activities to avoid taxation. For many years, Facebook based its international operations in Ireland, where corporate tax rates were set at 12.5%. This compared favourably to Britain, where businesses at the time were taxed at 19% (still low compared to other countries). Until 2017, money made from sales to advertisers in the UK was routed via Ireland. Thus an additional 6.5% of Facebook’s annual UK revenue went into the pockets of shareholders, rather than contributing towards the healthcare, education and other public services on which many Facebook users rely.<sup>36</sup> That sum is not insignificant. In the UK, where the tax was avoided, it would amount to either the annual salaries of 376 nurses, the cost of running one large sixth-form college, one year’s university tuition fees for 877 students, or 2.5 of the better-known photographs by Gursky. The sum was actually much larger due to the corporation’s use of

staff bonuses and the payment of hefty licensing fees to subsidiaries registered in the Cayman Islands, which reduced the level of profits on which it was required to pay tax in Ireland.<sup>37</sup>

The effects of these changes may require us to rethink many of the foundational assumptions about what photographs actually are. Or, more—in something like a reversal of Pollen’s scheme—to recognise the disparity between what they look like to us (images), and what they mean to the corporations that profit from their public sharing (the basis for interactions that are surveyed as part of much larger datasets). As Sluis suggests, computational photography is a ‘two-faced janus,’ simultaneously both image and data.<sup>38</sup> If images continue to operate in the messy realm of individual and collective human experience, the algorithmic surveillance of our interactions with, through and around photography processes parts of that activity in statistical terms. It is for this reason that computational photography presents some profound and fundamental challenges to artists, neatly outlined by Trevor Paglen in an article from 2014:

How do we begin to think about the implications on societies at large of this world of machine-seeing and invisible images? Conventional visual theory is useless to an understanding of machine-seeing and its unseen image-landscapes. As for art, I don’t quite know, but I have a feeling that those of us who are interested in visual literacy will need to spend some time learning and thinking about how machines see images through unhuman eyes, and train ourselves to see like them. To do this, we will probably have to leave our human eyes behind. A paradox ensues: for those of us still trying to see with our meat-eyes, art works inhabiting the world of machine-seeing might not *look* like anything at all.<sup>39</sup>

Via which strategies—which modes of art making—can we hope to make sense of, to critically frame, or simply to shine some light on the operationalisation of photography within computational culture?

*Excellences and Perfections* was a 2014 performance by artist Amalia Ulman staged across her own social media accounts. Curator Rozsa Farkas has described the project:

Amalia (the artist) presented herself online (mainly on Instagram) as what could be described as an ‘Instagram Girl,’ without telling anyone it was a performance until afterwards. A sort of micro-celebrity, the Instagram Amalia followed a typical narrative: good girl, moves to city, breaks with long term boyfriend, becomes

a sugarbaby, does drugs, gets boob job, self-destructs, apologises, recovers, finds new boyfriend and yoga. The narrative is 'normal', and thus believable, because Amalia presents herself in the performance as the stereotypical hot white girl, taking or being inspired by images from 'real' Instagram girls.<sup>40</sup>

Because Ulman's actions were identified as a performance only after they had finished, the responses posted by other users on Instagram were unwittingly absorbed as a central part of the work. Many followed a predictable pattern: 'sexy' photographs receiving more 'likes' than less provocative pictures; Ulman judged harshly during her self-destruction, more positively through her supposed rehabilitation.



Amalia Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections* (Instagram Update, 1st June 2014).

*Excellences and Perfections* shares important similarities with *Dorm Daze* (2011), a social media performance devised by artist Ed Fornieles. A 'Facebook sitcom set at the University of California in the fall of 2011,' *Dorm Daze* used information 'scalped' from the existing social media profiles of Berkeley students, which was used as the basis for characters performed on Facebook by the artist's friends according to a semi-scripted narrative.<sup>41</sup> Interactions took the form of written comments, links to websites and videos, and photographs pulled from the web, all shared as though based on real occurrences in the characters' lives. As the stories developed, characters began to deviate from stereotypes. Action became melodramatic, less predictable and more extreme.

Artists such as Prince, Umbrico and Schmid extract photographic source material from social media platforms and place it within the institutional contexts of art. Image files are output as prints to be displayed in galleries, museums or artists' books in an act of physical and material displacement. The performative approach of Ulman and Fornieles also uses art to frame aspects of online photographic culture, but in ways that do not conform to quite the same principles of removal and extraction. Instead, the introduction of fabricated content into the network aims to estrange its standard operations and thus to make them more clearly visible. The seeming differences between the appropriation of user-generated content and performative interventions should not be overestimated, however. The legibility of *Dorm Daze* and *Excellences and Perfections* as art relies on a structural separation from the areas of mass culture in which they also participate: a paradoxical remove required if their work is to become recognisable to the art world, at which stage the trolling masses or policing of obscenity regulations can be replaced by folio essays and text panels as appropriate modes of interpretation and response.

Both the ephemeral and the embodied condition of performance art have traditionally been regarded as an affront to art market systems based on the sale of precious commodities. A performance could not be bought and sold in the same way as a painting or a photograph, so it was often as a photographic record that performances found their way into museum collections and onto the market. The mediated nature of *Dorm Daze* and *Excellences and Perfections* closes the gap between the performance and its documentation. Audiences could, in theory, return to the relevant areas

of the platforms to explore the activities that unfolded there. Questions about their potential sale are therefore technological as much as philosophical: how can particular areas of social media platforms be enclosed, preserved and exchanged? Earlier questions about the ephemerality of performance art now pertain more to the various archive functions of the platforms that host the work. Transience or permanence is determined in very real ways by the decisions of Facebook Inc., not artists or curators.<sup>42</sup>

Neither are the projects entirely immune to the logic of extraction that defines more conventional appropriation art. In the most literal sense, both continue to rely on other people's content, with the scalped profiles initially used in *Dorm Daze* and the various comments that became a central part of *Excellences and Perfections*. Both also involve a claim to authorship, asserting a degree of ownership over areas of the wider culture that provides them with their subject matter and their medium. At some level, both reshape the unacknowledged and unpaid labour of other social media users as unpaid content production for the art world. It is telling that, when Ulman's series was included in a survey exhibition at



Ed Fornieles, *Dorm Daze*, 2011.

Tate Modern, the gallery's lawyers approached Facebook Inc. to request permission to reproduce the Instagram interface in the exhibition catalogue but did not approach the Instagram users whose comments were featured in the project. Facebook asked only that the most recent interface design be used, rather than the older one that appeared in archived versions of the original performance.<sup>43</sup>

The differences between appropriation and performance become clearer in the understandings of photography and computation they imply. The appropriation of photography combines an interest in the representational content of specific images and some concern with their previous uses. The act of re-contextualisation draws attention to particular images while, at the same time, gesturing towards the fact they have served some previous function outside the art world context in which they are presently viewed. The relationship between the two, and particularly the emphasis placed on one or the other, relies on the specifics of any particular project. When Schmid and Umbrico re-present material from Flickr, it is wrenched from the network and onto the wall or page, becoming static, printed images. As performative explorations of the network, *Dorm Daze* and *Excellences and Perfections* shape photography as part of a series of continual, changing, unpredictable connections. Viewed on social media platforms and therefore via computer screens, the projects come closer to addressing the simultaneous condition of photography as image and data.

The distinction I am proposing here—between appropriating networked imagery then displaying it as prints and performatively participating in its networked circulation—owes something to Henri Bergson's writing on duration. It was impossible to measure time, Bergson believed, for the act of measuring imposed a fixed frame that necessarily destroyed the mobility and flow of that which it set out to measure.<sup>44</sup> The fossilised, residual, static, image-based ontology of photography promoted by certain appropriation projects seems particularly ill-suited to understanding the digital image 'as a layer of ubiquitous information that continually combines and recombines figures, texts, glitches and numbers by passing electronic signals between the nodal points of the internetwork.'<sup>45</sup> A playful interaction with the network can potentially take us closer.

If certain modes of performance hold the potential to highlight those aspects of photography that allow for its operationalisation by capital, that is not to say they necessarily frame the act of operationalisation itself. Typical responses to *Dorm Daze* and *Excellences and Perfections* assume a straightforward equivalence between what the artists and their collaborators knowingly perform and what takes place on social media platforms every day. The gap between who the artists really are, and the stereotypes they pretend to be, creates a self-conscious version of what is already true of the cultures in which they participate. Writing in *The Telegraph*, Alistair Sooke described Ulman's project as 'a spoof, lampooning the self-regarding way we all behave on social media... a sharp diatribe against vacuity'.<sup>46</sup> In *i-D*, Felix Petty suggested *Dorm Daze* was 'about the way we perform our lives online and how much of what we perform online slips into stereotypes'.<sup>47</sup> In accounts such as these, the site-specificity of the performances is reduced to a framing device used to signal which areas of contemporary culture are being spoofed. Attention is focused towards the behaviour of internet users and away from its monetisation. Critics' privileging of what Alexander Galloway calls 'surface over source' promotes an understanding of Facebook and Instagram that remains closely aligned with the logic of the interface.<sup>48</sup>

Writing in 2008, Geert Lovink recalled a time, as recent as the 1990s, when the internet provided a site for social experimentation and where playful, unstable and multiple personae interacted with one another. 'The Self,' Lovink explains, 'was seen as a fundamental lie (I am not me), an antagonism that one should have chucked out a long time ago. If you live a thousand lives, you can endlessly switch to another identity. There is no true self, only an endless series of interchangeable masks.' Lovink believes that the effects of post-9/11 paranoia were exploited to promote an alternative culture based on 'coherent, singular identities in synch with the data owned by police, security and financial institutions'.<sup>49</sup> Precisely that shift was made clear in 2010, when Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg went as far as to suggest internet users who adopted multiple online identities lacked integrity.<sup>50</sup> The economic benefits of the changed culture are clear. Advertisers want access to users' truthful data.<sup>51</sup> The requirement to present a single, stable identity is essential to the effective monetisation of our online behaviour. Even when the online world is understood to be

inherently performative, it is the consistency of individuals' performances in particular contexts or situations that allows sociological patterns to be identified, specific demographics exposed and common desires to be exploited.

In a 2013 article published in *Furtherfield*, Robert Jackson proposed that algorithms be understood not as 'monolithic, characterless beings or generic function, to which humans adapt and adopt', but as 'complex, fractured systems to be negotiated and traversed'. By suggesting ways to creatively navigate computational systems, art can become 'more than mere commentary', suggesting different 'modes of traversal'.<sup>52</sup> The proposal involves an important reversal of the typical relationship of art to mass culture: the former regarded less as a space for critically ridiculing what is already really happening beyond, more as an experimental domain where potential templates for future interactions in the wider culture are developed. When approached as the strategic negotiation of systems proposed by Jackson, *Dorm Daze* and *Excellences and Perfections* suggest something important about the political potential of re-imagining the playful personae of earlier net culture in the age of Web 2.0. An interview with Fornieles points to the ways in which *Dorm Daze* 'pushed against the algorithmic environment within which it existed (the numbers, the data that feeds Facebook and other social media), turning analytics into a redundancy... adverts and suggested friends become repurposed as scenery or props to a new fiction'.<sup>53</sup>

The suggestion bears an interesting relationship to arguments developed by Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum in their 2015 book, *Obfuscation: A User's Guide for Privacy and Protest*. Outlining strategies available to mitigate and defeat digital surveillance, the book provides what its authors describe as a 'toolkit for evasion, noncompliance, outright refusal, deliberate sabotage, and use according to *our* terms of service [emphasis in original quotation]'. Obfuscation is 'a tool particularly suited to the "weak"—those at the wrong end of asymmetrical power relations—providing a means to hide, obscure and make space for resistance when we cannot afford to opt out, create alternative systems, or tackle issues at a structural and governmental level'. Strategies include 'the deliberate addition of ambiguous, confusing, or misleading information to interfere with surveillance and collection'.<sup>54</sup> Their most memorable example is

the famous scene from the 1960 film *Spartacus*. When the phrase, 'I am Spartacus,' is spoken simultaneously by many people, it is impossible to determine the identity of the real Spartacus.

At first glance, *Dorm Daze* and *Excellences and Perfections* appear to sit beyond, or outside, the concerns of *Obfuscation*. The identities performed by the artists are fabrications, plain and simple. The information produced and shared is, in one sense, false and entirely useless to those who produce and share it, as well as to advertisers, if the goal is to communicate with others. But to accept such a suggestion is to limit our understanding of communication and its complexities to the same statistical logic imposed by computation. Micheál O'Connell has written about the potential of 'artificial stupidity' in such a context. By *pretending* not to understand the bureaucratic social systems we inhabit, it is possible both to sabotage the operations of those systems and to communicate something fundamental regarding what we think and feel about them.<sup>55</sup> This is one example of what Caroline Bassett discusses as the promise of metaphorical communication in a digital domain. An encoded meaning, 'produced by, but nevertheless separate from and irreducible to the truth and the lie it combines,' metaphor is the form of language 'furthest from coded instruction.' It could take the form of silence: 'a public silence that refuses to make a statement, nonetheless contains—and *contains audibly*—all kinds of intentions [emphasis in original quotation].'<sup>56</sup> It could also involve the enactment of false identities central to the metaphorical meanings and meta-narratives of certain contemporary art projects. *Dorm Daze* and *Excellences and Perfections* do not merely perform personae but—through the gap between the performance and the real—adopt a critical and strategic position in relation to the wider culture in which they participate. The images shared are not an exteriority to become, but a mask to hide behind, and through which to develop alternative meanings.

If that proposed shift in understanding highlights an important political potential, it also confronts alternative sets of limits. While the activity generated by *Excellences and Perfections* and *Dorm Daze* may be grounded in fabrications, this does not make the data produced entirely useless to advertisers. The individuals involved are obscured, but not other people similar to those the artists and their collaborators pretend to be. This is the limit of Ulman's project as a template for obfuscation, for it relies on the

reproduction of stereotypes and the real responses they generate among Instagram users. Adverts targeted at the artist may fall wide of the mark, but corporate algorithms continue to learn about the behaviour of ‘typical twenty-something year old white women’ and the ways in which people interact with them. The fabrication of a believable identity, to which people respond based on the assumption it is real, risks a lack of solidarity with the rest of the online world.

The full potential of the move became clearer when *Dorm Daze* characters departed from stereotypical behaviours and explored more fantastical identities: the basketball star who gets involved with a drug gang, the emo and the jock exploring sadomasochistic sex, the yoga-lover who blows up a bank, the rich kid whose dad is found to be harvesting human organs in Cambodia. Here Facebook became the site for two parallel processes of interaction, neither of much use to advertisers. *Dorm Daze* suggests modes of traversal available to others to intensify and expand, creating multiple, playful and contradictory personae in ways capable of confounding algorithmic surveillance. In contrast to the theatre of self-promotion it is today, the worlds of social media become a space of constant confusion, uncertainty and play—an anti-capitalist theatre of the absurd. This is not to refrain from, or opt out of, sociality. On the contrary, it is to radicalise it: sabotaging the economic operations of internet platforms, while maintaining the pang of satisfaction achieved when connections with others are forged.

Understanding artists’ social media performances as an instructive traversal of networked architecture, rather than as participatory ethnography, has wider implications. We could, for example, think again about more conventional approaches to appropriation according to the processes through which projects came into being, not just the images that eventually result.

Jon Rafman’s series is one of a longer list of contemporary art projects based on imagery from Google Street View. Where Doug Rickard took ‘four years to virtually explore the roads of America looking for forgotten, economically devastated, and largely abandoned places’ to produce his series *A New American Picture* (2012),<sup>57</sup> the photographs in Mishka Henner’s series *No Man’s Land* (2012) show prostitutes sitting by roadsides

in semi-rural European locations.<sup>58</sup> A brief controversy erupted when Michael Wolf received an honourable mention in the 2011 World Press Photo for his project *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2011), which—like Rafman’s series—seeks out unusual happenings and picturesque goings on among the scenes depicted on Street View.<sup>59</sup>

The projects by Rafman and Wolf suggest we navigate Google’s image world through a curious and unstructured ramble, following no particular logic beyond an intuitive sense of what makes for an intriguing image. In this sense, the making of their series bears some resemblance to what Debord termed the *‘dérive.’* If the modern metropolis was a manifestation of capitalist domination, designed to ensure the smooth flow of workers and consumers in tightly scripted daily rituals, then it was by allowing ourselves to drift and to ‘be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters’ during unplanned explorations that we might resist the circumscribed behaviours.<sup>60</sup> This is not the case with Henner and Rickard, whose series adopt a more structured approach. Both seek out particular types of subject matter in ways that tie specific locations to political and economic dispossession. It is not hard to see how the data generated through the production of *No Man’s Land* and *A New American Picture* could find very real, instrumental uses.<sup>61</sup> The projects’ interest as art may be their downfall as templates for resistance.

If an engagement with photographs as images limits our understanding of photography as data, any parallel effort to attend to photography only as data risks reversing the current imbalance. Andrew Dewdney sums up the dilemma, observing that:

this global condition of the algorithmic image continues to function within the field of representation, precisely because it remains as yet the humanly understandable surface of communication operating within common sense... we need an approach to understanding the interface between mathematical and cultural coding... to engage productively with the flat topology of the computer screen.<sup>62</sup>

The representational content of computational photography is not distinct, or somehow separate, from the operationalisation facilitated by its parallel condition as data. The algorithmic harvesting of digital information is based on the surveillance of activities promoted and encouraged by the content of different pictures. The locations we view, the people with

whom we interact, the types of content that prompt us to like, love or LOL, reveal different things about users, their preferences and their likely future behaviour.

Images make data legible to humans as something other than data. The resulting interactions make humans legible to machines. The challenge is to reverse that dynamic, using the content of images to develop forms of critical legibility through which the operations of the network become clearer to humans. Control today is exercised through the shadowy regimes of online surveillance. But photography links the activities surveyed to areas of the social and material world—from the identities we perform to the urban spaces we navigate—which are linked, in turn, to longer histories of activism and critique. There is much to be gained by re-imagining these histories of resistance in the age of communicative capitalism.

A particularly chilling chapter in James Bridle's 2018 book, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* focuses on the proliferation of false, deceptive and misleading online content in an era of fake news. It seems that artists' prankish gestures, and the multiple personae of earlier net culture, have been re-fashioned as the nuclear arsenal of a communicative regime, where idiocy is disguised as mainstream politics until it becomes mainstream. Viral videos and comments co-ordinated by Kremlin stooges, fictive headlines dreamt up by young Macedonians as profitable click-bait to be dangled under the noses of angry alt-right voters, pillow-talk with promiscuous algorithmic partners, Twitter bots closing down dissent through repeated posting, have each confused any easy distinctions between real and imagined content. The resulting pantomime has also provided convenient cover for global elites: it turns out that bots and opportunistic Macedonians created the threat of neo-fascism, not forty years of neoliberal rule. For Bridle:

Watching endlessly streaming videos, scrolling through walls of status updates and tweets, it's futile to attempt to discern between what's algorithmically generated nonsense or carefully crafted fake news for generating ad dollars; what's paranoid fiction, state action, propaganda, or spam; what's deliberate misinformation or well-meaning fact check.<sup>63</sup>

It is a profound, disturbing and painfully accurate observation. But it neglects one thing. While diverse actors, operating in the service of disparate and sometimes conflicting interests, treat social media with unruly contempt, the majority of its users—people like you and me—continue to obediently upload, like and comment on content in line with all that we would have others believe is singular, genuine and authentic about us and our unique selves. We know the game is rigged. Still we play it like it isn't.

# 4

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## The Wasteland

*At the height of its power, the photography company Kodak employed 140,000 people and was worth \$28 billion. But today Kodak is bankrupt, and the new face of digital photography has become Instagram. When Instagram was sold to Facebook for a billion, it employed only 13 people. Where did all those jobs disappear?!*

A lot of the writing about photography and digital culture includes some reference to the remarkable volume of photographs produced in recent years. A 2012 book by Martin Hand notes that in 2009 Facebook alone hosted over 15 billion photographs.<sup>2</sup> Jonas Larsen and Mette Sandbye point to a 2011 report suggesting that 5 million photographs are uploaded onto Flickr every day and around 2.5 billion photographs onto Facebook each month.<sup>3</sup> A widely quoted blog post from 2015 estimated that more photographs had been taken in that year alone than across the entire history of analogue photography.<sup>4</sup> Writing in 2018, Sean O'Hagan drew attention to the 'mind-boggling... 350m photographs a day uploaded on Facebook; 95m photographs and videos shared on Instagram daily'.<sup>5</sup>

Statistics such as these were lent material form in a 2011 installation by the Dutch artist Erik Kessels. Piles of prints made from the 350,000 digital photographs uploaded onto Flickr in a single day provided gallery visitors with a sense of what networked images looked like in old money. The arrangement of the photographs appeared like waves forming across the surface of an ocean. Audiences were encouraged to explore the installation, literally immersing themselves in a sea of other people's photographs. A widely circulated publicity shot showing a child submerged in the tide of pictures seems to literalise a metaphor used by Julian Assange when he complained that Wikileaks was 'drowning in material', and by the NSA that it was 'drowning... in a sea of data'.<sup>6</sup>

But when digital photographs leave the network and take the form of piles of paper, does the language of liquidity start to falter? Was Kessel's installation not so much an ocean of data, as mounds and mounds of rubbish, piled up and awaiting disposal?

The idea of photographic waste could mean at least two things in such a context, one looking back to analogue days, the other to a digital present. The backward glance highlights the environmental costs of photography's analogue histories: *how wasteful, how selfish we were to make our memories into things!* Joachim Schmid recognised the problem as early as 1990, when he posed as the owner of a recycling studio. 'Used photographs do not belong in the household garbage, they need specialist disposal,' explained a leaflet distributed to households across the artist's home city of Berlin. *The First General Collection of Used Photographs* adopted green politics as a comic metaphor for what Schmid described as the problem of 'visual pollution.'<sup>7</sup>

A short video showing artist Thomas Sauvin buying material for his project *Beijing Silverman* suggests something similar. His supplier salvages photographs from Chinese rubbish dumps, normally to extract the valuable



Erik Kessels, *24hrs in Photos*, Kunsthalle, Kiel, 2012.

silver nitrate they contain, rather than service the artist market for found images. 'He doesn't care about the visual content,' Suavin explains, 'if it's an x-ray of a broken spine or the life of a Chinese man over twenty years, he doesn't care.'<sup>8</sup> Other areas of analogue photographic waste do not lend themselves so readily to creative forms of recycling. What could an artist do with the toxic chemical output produced by a company like Kodak, the traces of which persist in the natural environments surrounding its derelict factories? Reported by locals as a pollutant linked to detrimental health effects, the company's waste materials included dioxin, one of the most potent ingredients in Agent Orange.<sup>9</sup>

The second possibility also invokes an analogue past, but this time to reassure us about behaviour in the present: *Imagine if our digital photo junk was real junk, then we'd really be fucking up the planet!* It is easy to assume that the dematerialisation of photography has reduced its associated environmental damage. Now photographs are no longer things made using chemical processes, surely ecological costs are minimal? But things are rarely ever so simple. In 2013, US server farms alone used 91 billion kilowatt hours of energy, the equivalent to the output of thirty-four large coal-fired power plants. The 416.2 terawatt hours of electricity used by the world's data centres in 2015 was significantly higher than the UK's total electricity consumption of about 300 terawatt hours.<sup>10</sup> As Martin Lister has observed, digital photography's much-trumpeted 'loss of the real' takes on new meaning in such a context. As long as energy supply involves the burning of fossil fuels, there is more 'than a semiotic question... at stake; it is the real in the most material and physical sense that could be lost'.<sup>11</sup>

The extraordinary increase in the number of photographs now being made is one consequence of radical reductions to the economic cost of producing and viewing digital photography, which does not require the purchasing of film or processing services. It is also linked to radical increases in the number of cameras in existence, most of them integrated into networked computational devices such as smartphones, tablets and laptops. Compare the 23 million cameras purchased in 1994 to the 1.8 billion cameras sold in 2014 (a figure which excluded webcams and security cameras). 95% of those cameras were installed in cellphones.<sup>12</sup>

Columbite-tantalite, normally known as coltan, is used to make heat-resistant tantalum powder, a vital component in the capacitors used

to store electrical charges in digital devices. The period from the 1990s onwards saw a rapid increase in demand, the implications of which are described in a report from 2013: ‘control over the coltan ores in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has helped to fund domestic militia and foreign armies, prolonging the war crimes and human rights abuses committed there over many years.’<sup>13</sup> Muhanga Kawaya is a miner who works up to fourteen hours a day extracting coltan in the DRC. He describes his work:

As you crawl through the tiny hole, using your arms and fingers to scratch, there’s not enough space to dig properly and you get badly grazed all over. And then, when you do finally come back out with the cassiterite, the soldiers are waiting to grab it at gunpoint. Which means you have nothing to buy food with. So we’re always hungry.<sup>14</sup>

For photographic professionals, the shift from analogue to digital has often been a matter of image quality. For many years, well-known artists bemoaned the slow demise of film photography on aesthetic grounds. For others the effects have been felt in the cheapness of making pictures and the ease with which they could be shared across computational networks. That focus is often paralleled in scholarship, both about photography and, sometimes, about the internet more broadly, where writers focus critical sights on the experiences of ‘prosumers.’ If and when the question of labour is addressed, it is normally in relation to the production of digital content: a matter of images and interfaces, not the hardware and infrastructure on which the hosting and circulation of content relies. A 2014 essay by Enda Brophy and Greig de Peuter makes a persuasive case for an expanded view of communicative capitalism, one sensitive to what they describe as its ‘circuits of exploitation.’ The making and sharing of digital content is caught up in processes of ‘extraction, assembly and design through mobile-work, support work and e-waste.’<sup>15</sup> What could such a view mean for photography?

In an excellent essay from 2013, artist Harry Sanderson points to ‘a relation, largely avoided and unexpected, between the ubiquity of digital commodities, and the capacity of these devices to produce and maintain a necessary insouciance towards the exploitation and violence required for

their continued production.' Relating 'a Google search return to an equivalent expenditure of fossil fuels, or the fluctuation of pixels across a screen with the exploited labour of rural migrant workers in Shenzhen, or topsoil loss in Inner Mongolia, is as remote and unattainable for the majority of users as is an understanding of the technical functionality of the devices themselves.'<sup>16</sup>

Sanderson develops his analysis through references to a 2012 work by artist Thomas Hirschhorn, entitled *Touching Reality*. The 4-minute 45-second film shows a hand scrolling through a gallery of images on an iPad. Most of the graphic, brutal and disturbing photographs depict the effects of modern munitions on human bodies, including numerous mutilated corpses. The work is generally read as a contemporary updating of Susan Sontag's well-known critique of our repeated exposure to violent imagery, which she believed to have a callousing effect.<sup>17</sup> Clare Bishop describes the work in relation to 'an incommensurability between our doggedly physiological lives and the screens to which we are glued.'<sup>18</sup> Sanderson opts instead to highlight the toxic effects of the N-Hexane chemical used in the manufacture of iPads, which has been linked to numerous cases of blindness and paralysis among Chinese factory workers. A focus on the experience of navigating photographs of violence on computer screens obscures the 'human cost already embodied in the specific *surface* of the object itself.'<sup>19</sup>

*Gravesend*, a 2007 film by British artist Steve McQueen, shares a number of concerns with Sanderson's essay. Adopting what T.J. Demos describes as a 'geopolitical montage,' the film guides viewers between and across the various sites of coltan extraction and processing: technicians and machines in British labs process the valuable mineral; prospectors seek out the material in the Congo; boats deliver it to the industrial port of Gravesend in South East England; Congolese labourers toil in mines to extract the precious commodity.<sup>20</sup> The spatial and temporal collapse confronts viewers with the geopolitical realities of globalisation, linking digital consumption in the Global North to the exploitation of natural and human resources in the Global South. In this way, the film takes some significant steps towards developing what Fredric Jameson described as a 'cognitive map,' providing the means through which the operations of complex economic systems start to become legible to the individual subjects who occupy them.<sup>21</sup>



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Touching Reality*. Exhibition view, *Intense Proximity – La Triennale*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2012.

*Gravesend* weaves the realist conventions of documentary together with poetic, aesthetic devices. Cameras mimic the movement of precision machinery in the British lab. A sunset in *Gravesend* creates space for reflection, slowly fading into images of Congolese workers. Miners are depicted not as individuals, but as fragmented shapes and silhouettes: parts of people, locked in toil. For *Demos*, the joining of ‘documentary and fictional modes into uncertain relationships’ possesses an important force, ‘advancing political investment by means of subtle aesthetic construction.’ According to this view, the film opens up a space for affective and imaginative engagement in ways that resist the subjects’ ‘entrapment by political systems of representation and exclusion.’ It expresses ‘the limits of its capture of a reality that exceeds it.’<sup>22</sup>

The importance of such a project is made clear if we compare *Gravesend* with advertisements produced for multi-national technology giants such as Cisco. Globalisation is once again represented through montage. People, cultures and businesses engage with each other around the world and in ‘real time.’ Against the hollow euphoria of stock-supplied



Still from Steve McQueen, *Gravesend*, 2007.

electronica, images of global transportation networks—trains, bicycles, planes, rickshaws—are interspersed with scenes of human interaction and the sharing of information. No distinction is drawn between face-to-face contact and the digital devices used to communicate and trade. Borders are porous and permeable: a matter of swipes, waves and luxury air travel, not bureaucracy, walling and surveillance. The adverts' corporate humanism represents the dark other to *Gravesend*—a reflective meditation on the sites of labour displaced by quick-fire representations of global service industries and free trade. Here is a world where things and information are indivisible: bought, sold, used and moved, rarely if ever made. Sociologists Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson describe the adverts as an unlikely appropriation of avant-garde forms: constructivism reshaped by the interests of global finance.<sup>23</sup>

In *Phone Story* (2011), a gaming app for smartphones produced by artist-activist Molleindustria, users are presented with some of the same spaces encountered in *Gravesend*. It adopts the format of a series of low-fi computer mini-games that require players to assist in the production, consumption and disposal of iPhones: manipulating armed guards to make workers mine for coltan, catching suicidal workers in the Foxconn factory where Apple products are made, coercing consumers into the Apple store to buy new products, and disposing of e-waste in Pakistan. The game was banned from the Apple App Store after four days when the corporation took issue with the suicide game. This encouraged players to

catch jumping employees in nets, to highlight the suicides of more than twenty workers within a period of a few months at Apple's supplier factory in Shenzhen. Rather than 'addressing 36-hour shifts and working poverty in special economic zones, Foxconn installed safety nets to catch workers leaping from the factory's roof.'<sup>24</sup>

A website about *Phone Story* contains a detailed account of Apple's decision to ban the app, along with links to the extensive media coverage it generated.<sup>25</sup> Apple's heavy-handed efforts to prevent access to the game are absorbed as an important part of the work in ways that helped to extend the scope of its critique. Like Kodak before it, Apple is known as a 'vertically integrated' company, building hardware, owning the core software experience, optimising its software for that hardware, equipping it with its own web services, and controlling the selling experience through its own retail stores. *Phone Story* used an app to critique the conditions in which Apple devices are made. When the corporation used its control of software distribution channels to censor the work, its control over the digital market became clearer and the initial critique reached a wider audience, owing to the media coverage that followed.

Both the sartorial black humour and activist sensibility of *Phone Story* are a world apart from the poetic high-mindedness of *Gravesend*. Compelling arguments can, and have, been made for the political effectiveness of both. For present purposes, I am more interested in the contrasting strategies through which the disavowals central to today's popular photographic cultures might be explored. My concern is not so much with



Molleindustria, *Phone Story*, 2011.

the projects' respective representations of communicative capitalism's exploitative circuits, as it is with the very different positions they adopt in relation to the exploitation shown.

*Gravesend* was shot on 35mm film and transferred into HD digital format. It is normally screened using an Apple Mac Pro 5G5 or Mac Mini, both of which contain coltan.<sup>26</sup> Like the smartphones on which the *Phone Story* mini-games are played, encounters with *Gravesend* rely on the same practices the film critiques: challenging what is reproduced, reproducing what is challenged. In this sense, *Phone Story* provides the means to shine light on an unacknowledged self-reflexivity in *Gravesend*, unlocking a kind of potential energy through which the distance that separates us from the exploitative practices in the Congo is further disrupted and disturbed.

Money made from the sale of *Phone Story* went to workers' organisations and non-profits 'working to stop the horrors represented in the game.'<sup>27</sup> The same is not true of the money made through sales of *Gravesend* (or, if it is, that fact is not published in ways that would provide it with an active role in the production of meaning). The significance of that point does not necessarily lie in the difference the donations from *Phone Story* have made. Some gratifying stories are listed on the website, but the extent of the horror is so significant that—in real terms—impact has inevitably been negligible. Global exploitation is structural. There are very real ways in which the redistribution of revenues through non-profits risks buying into the view that capitalism can provide its own cure, or that charitable intervention can replace political change. Where trade unions, workers cooperatives, activist groups and charities each seek to remedy the effects of exploitation, the cures they prescribe are often radically different.<sup>28</sup>

The material and economic benefits of artworks made *about* exploitative practices in the Global South often remain concentrated *in* the prosperous cities where the work is typically bought, sold and viewed. Critical art enlists exploited and impoverished populations as its subject matter. But, whatever symbolic value is sometimes shared at the sites of production, material value remains concentrated in the metropolitan centres of art world consumption. Funding for the festivals and museums that buy and display critical art is often linked to efforts to attract cultural tourism, to draw in corporate investment and to drive up real estate prices. The dynamic is paralleled by the asymmetrical forms of labour associated

with the different sites. Many people in the Global South exist in poverty, working for a few dollars a month on plantations or in coltan mines, for example. In doing so, they provide the object of the critique which artists, curators and critics in the Global North produce to pay the bills.<sup>29</sup>

*Gravesend* was sold in an edition of six. Copies are owned by Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin, Fondation Louis Vuitton pour la Création in Paris, De Pont Museum of Contemporary Art in Tilburg, Ellipse Foundation in Cascais, The Art Institute Chicago in Illinois, a Private collection in Greece and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.<sup>30</sup> It has also generated countless words, most written by critics and art historians in North America and Western Europe (a list that now includes myself). Art, like photography, is a two-faced janus. What is critiqued at the level of content is reproduced by its operationalisation in the art world on which its visibility as critique relies.

I am looking at a black-and-white picture by photographer Moises Saman, showing the back of an office worker sitting in front of a PC. The scene will seem familiar to anyone who has done their share of admin or telesales working. But the large windows and pleasant landscape views are much better than those enjoyed by an average humanities graduate. I can only see the back of the worker, who has long black hair. But I would guess it is a woman, probably in her mid-twenties.

The photograph is one of a number by Samuels to accompany an article about social media content moderators—‘The Labourers Who Keep Dick Pics and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed’—published in *Wired* magazine in 2014. The author of the text, Adrien Chen, described the experiences of another young woman, who had spoken to him about the very worst thing the job had demanded she watch. The video showed a female, ‘probably in the age of 15 to 18, I don’t know. She looks like a minor. There’s this bald guy putting his head to the lady’s vagina. The lady is blindfolded, handcuffed, screaming and crying.’<sup>31</sup> The person in Samuels’ photograph holds her head in her hands, peeping at the screen through her fingers. Is she tired? Or looking at yet another horrific image? It is difficult to photograph the labour of looking, without also reproducing the disturbing content that moderators are paid to view precisely so that others do not have to.

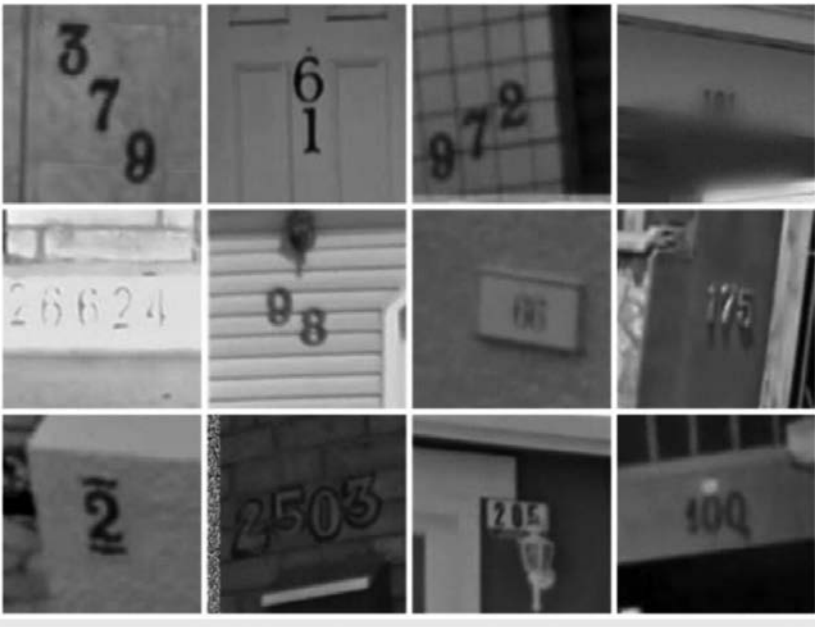


Moises Saman, *PHILIPPINES. Manila, August 28, 2014*. An employee working as a content moderator for Task Us sits in front of her computer at her cubicle on the eleventh floor of the SM Aura Office Building Tower in the Taguig district of Manila.

Elements of the tasks assigned to content moderators could potentially be performed by machines, which are becoming better at identifying the content of photographs. Yet improvements to machine-seeing still require input from human workers. Invitations to tag the faces of friends on Facebook help train algorithms to recognise different faces. Google's 'reCAPTCHA' authentication tool, which asks humans to verify their humanness by deciphering a jumbled text or image and typing details into a computer, has previously used sections of photographs from Street View. When typing in house numbers, or identifying cars, trees and street signs, the requirement that humans demonstrate they are not machines helped train machines to see like humans. The Yahoo-Flickr Creative Commons 100 Million, or YFCC100M—a large and freely usable dataset—was compiled using photographs uploaded onto Flickr with a Creative Commons license. Users can buy expansion packs to supplement the dataset, which

include ‘autotags’ identifying the ‘presence of visual concepts, such as people, animals, objects, events and architecture.’ The utility of the Flickr photographs lay not only in the abundance of images, but in the existing tags and categories provided for photographs by the platform’s users.<sup>32</sup>

Paid roles are usually outsourced to casual labourers via platforms like Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, ‘a digital labour market where workers from across the world and around the clock browse, choose, and complete human intelligence tasks that are designed by corporate or individual contractors.’<sup>33</sup> The platform exemplifies the logic of low-paid, outsourced, casual working that defines so much of neoliberalism.<sup>34</sup> The same labour-force plays an important part in the growing number of large-scale academic research projects based on machine learning and image recognition. A project such as *Selfie-City*, for example, which used media visualisation to identify common tropes across 656,000 Instagram images, was heavily reliant on ‘Turkers’ to view and categorise its initial datasets. An



Google reCAPTCHA using images from Google Street View, 2016.

interesting essay about the project by Elisabeth Losh suggests it is hard to reconcile Amazon's exploitative arrangements with traditional academic values. Using 'an alienated labour pool seems less desirable than urging scholars to resist the tendency to trivialise tagging and data entry work'.<sup>35</sup> Algorithms are getting better at identifying pornographic and offensive material, but continue to face challenges: 'even though porn abounds on the web, good clit and dick detection is still hard—in part because no one's gone through and labelled dick and clit pictures like they have cute cats or their latest pimped up car'.<sup>36</sup> At present, machine-seeing is neither sophisticated nor reliable enough to perform the job of content moderation as effectively as human beings.

A recent study of the secretive industry describes a variety of workplace organisations stretching around the globe. Where some of the work takes place in large call-centre environments like those depicted in Moises Samuel's photographs, it is also farmed out as piecemeal micro-work in the global gig economy. The work of making decisions about that content is complex, particularly when it is outsourced to other countries. Workers must 'become steeped in the racist, homophobic, and misogynist tropes and language of another culture', and are thus often required to put aside personal belief systems and morality. While platforms that rely on user-generated content face intense commercial pressures to remove it, some degree of offensive content is important to many sites because it drives up attention, clicks and traffic. As a result, workers 'find themselves in a paradoxical role, in which they must balance the site's desire to attract users and participants to its platform—the company's profit motive—with demands for brand protection, the limits of user tolerance for disturbing material, and the site rules and guidelines'.<sup>37</sup>

The work of content moderators has helped to shape a number of contemporary art projects. Sarah Roberts—author of the study quoted above—contributed an essay to *Pics or It Didn't Happen*, a 2017 book by artists Molly Soda and Avida Byström.<sup>38</sup> The publication features photographs removed from Instagram for being offensive, then shared with the artists after they made an appeal to friends and followers through their social media networks. The limited demographic of the self-selecting group means the content of the images is strikingly mild. The book features tampons, pubic hair and rogue testicles, not the beheadings and child rape to which workers in the Philippines are sometimes exposed.



Arvida Byström and Molly Soda, *Pics or It Didn't Happen*, 2017.

Eva and Franco Mattes' project *Dark Content* (2015) provides an altogether more disturbing view, using avatars and voice software to animate accounts provided by real content moderators. Some of the workers were hired by well-known companies, others were independent contractors paid by anonymous 'requesters.' One moderator, who lived in their car and used Wi-Fi connections in fast-food restaurants, recalled being 'in McDonald's reviewing images that were fairly dense with hard-core porn.... About three hours in, I got up to use the restroom and looked behind me. There was a family sitting there, able to see everything I was doing. Apparently there was a door I hadn't noticed and people were coming and going the whole time.' Another has tried to avoid the 'requesters' who ask them to look at suggestive images of children or people engaging in sexual activity with animals.

Works of art such as these possess an ambivalent relationship to the labour of the content moderators on which it relies. In one sense, Byström and Soda use the moderators, even their paymasters, as unintentional and unknowing editors of their project. During a talk at the ICA in London in 2015, Eva and Franco Mattes explained how they initially struggled to make contact with potential interviewees, so took to advertising



Eva and Franco Mattes, *Dark Content*, 2015. Exhibition view, Essex Flowers, New York.

content moderation work online to establish links, before explaining their true intentions.<sup>39</sup> The subsequent email interviews provided the basis for the videos, which—while initially viewable only on the dark web—eventually went on sale as unique installations through commercial galleries in London and New York. Parts of that dynamic were playfully reversed when artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin served as guest editors of *Der Greif* magazine. An open call produced a collection of images that people would not be prepared to share online. Broomberg and Chanarin then paid \$500 to a former content moderator to decide which photographs should appear in the magazine.<sup>40</sup>

*Kodak* (2019), a 33-minute video by Andrew Norman Wilson, starts off as a montage of found imagery, including historical photographs of workers at Kodak's Rochester plant, George Eastman's personal snapshots, Kodak advertising campaigns, and Wilson's childhood family pictures.

A narrative develops through audio design: the sound of a tape recorder, voice recordings played on the machine, and the mumbled thoughts of the person activating the tape player. It emerges that we are in the company of a man called Rich, a former Kodak employee. Rich is in some sort of archive or public library, listening to tape recordings of Kodak's founder, George Eastman. He seems to be looking for something, but we are not always entirely sure what.

The narrative takes in the founding of the company and Eastman's efforts to democratise an ability to lend permanent form to ephemeral experience. Mid-way through the video, we hear the voice of a younger woman—a librarian maybe—talking to the man who is listening to the tapes. The imagery starts to change. Found photographs are replaced by CGI renderings of Kodak's machinery and its unrealised plans for new products. The voice of the woman and that of George Eastman begin an impossible conversation. Talk turns to paranoid accusation and suicidal fantasy. Images morph into perplexing landscapes and threatening, liquid forms.

The video establishes a series of dialogues between past, present and future, but also between and across different media. Individual, technological and economic biographies fuse and grow apart. Mark Fisher



Andrew Norman Wilson, still from *Kodak*, 2019.

observed how, 'like sound recordings, photography—with its capturing of lost moments, its presentation of absences—has an inherently hauntological dimension'.<sup>41</sup> The tape recordings of Eastman's voice parallel his photographic mission: aural and visual experiences are made permanent, becoming material permutations of memory. When Kodak's images combine with snapshots and home videos—could the man in the library be Wilson's father?—personal and public are woven together, each informing the other.

*Kodak* finds precedents in *Krapp's Last Tapes*, the Samuel Beckett play in which a man interacts with tape recordings made by his younger self. But, where Beckett's play harnessed the distinction between the embodied performance of an actor on stage and the disembodied voice on the recordings to represent past and present, Wilson's video plunges us into a world consisting solely of images and sounds. The shift it enacts is not from the embodied to disembodied, or just from past to present, but from analogue to digital. Activity in the present is interrupted by visions of past, potential futures. The computer-generated images that emerge towards the end of the film are sometimes inspired by archival records, but—unlike photographs—they have no purchase in the real. Their indexicality is uncertain, complex and confused.

The actors involved in *Kodak's* three-way dialogue point to the social history of twentieth-century working. In the figure of George Eastman, with his egoism, self-importance and controlling rationalistic paternalism, earlier twentieth-century corporate culture is provided with a human allegory. Wilson's father embodies the career worker, injured on site, who eventually lived through the fall-out of 'corporate subdivisions and tenuous contracts'.<sup>42</sup> Their one-way conversation across time grounds personal lives in larger economic narratives. That Eastman does not, cannot, respond to Rich's strange mumblings suggests something important about operations of power and the relationship they share. When that conversation shifts to the millennial women, the nature of the allegory, and the types of work it allegorises, change too.

The video is not so much a melancholic lament for a lost culture, as a meditation on the social, technological and economic forces that have powered that change. Acts of remembrance based on photographic archives are unsettled by 'fantastical abstractions and paranoid delusions

through the limitless elasticity of CGI.<sup>43</sup> The displacement of a patriarchal world of manufacturing jobs for life by the feminisation of labour, and by outsourcing, precarity and the forces of automation, finds a strange equivalence in the imagery used. An archival film clip of a former factory being obliterated by explosives is later mirrored by a computer-generated cityscape. The Kodak building appears intact and unscathed: uncanny replicant based on a world now gone.

*Kodak* sets out to reconstruct history through the disordered mind of what remains of the old regime, which we experience only as a voice and a series of spectral images. In a famous essay inspired by Paul Klee's 1920 painting, *Angelus Novus*, Walter Benjamin described progress as a storm. Turning to face the wreckage piling up behind him, the angel of history is propelled backwards, into the future.<sup>44</sup> Wilson's angel takes the form of a battered blue-collar worker, blinded on site in a photographic factory: Beckett's Vladimir or Estragon reshaped as the human waste of an insurgent cognitive capitalism. Seeking to make sense of his displacement—his lack of economic utility—the former worker rakes over lost certainties from a previous century: photographs, sound recordings, libraries, Fordism, the promise of stable employment.



Andrew Norman Wilson, still from *Kodak*, 2019.

The ghostly absence in Wilson's project provides a further allegory, this time for a more general absence within the art world. While artists sometimes set their critical sites on exploitative labour practices in a digital economy, how often do we see projects about the individuals once employed in factories, about what that work meant to them, or about their experience of profound social change? Instead, photos of Kodak factories join the canvases of urban explorers: rusting industrial machinery, abandoned office spaces, crumbling plaster and the daubing of graffiti. Disaster tourism meets Situationist freedom, like the images of derelict Detroit that make occasional forays onto gallery walls. Melancholy odes to the darkroom lament the lost manual labour of photography. A well-known example is described by Martin Parr in terms of the 'passing of an era': we 'will look back at these images and mourn the dark room.'<sup>45</sup> *Analogue (1998-2009)*, a celebrated project by Zoe Leonard, depicts storefronts disappearing under the effects of gentrification, including a number of Kodak booths. They find a knowing parallel in the Rolliflex camera on which they are photographed, described by Leonard as a 'relic from a machine age.'<sup>46</sup> One text notes the striking absence of humans from the images: 'implicit victims' of the changes on which the project focuses.<sup>47</sup>

It is the former spaces of production and retail—the dying technologies, empty factories, disappearing shop fronts—that entertain the eyes and minds of the contemporary art world, not the continued lives of those once employed to work there. Experiencing these pictures of abandoned tools and buildings, one senses that we would sooner forget, or perhaps cannot yet bring ourselves to remember, the workers expelled from these spaces and, potentially, from the socio-economic order. Contemporary image workers deal instead in the absent materiality of a former industrial workforce through traces left behind.

Historian Sanford M. Jacoby explains that Kodak's early employment policies were representative of what is sometimes described as 'welfare capitalism'. Enlightened employers believed they could be trusted to act responsibly and in the best interests of employees, who would be provided with pay dividends, pension plans, healthcare and/or other perks. Welfare capitalism was always dualistic. In one sense, it was seen by employers as the right thing to do according to a paternalistic concern for workers,



*Derelict Kodak building, Mt Dennis, Toronto, 2013 (Photo: Geo Swan).*

their families and wider communities, in ways linked to improvements to morale and productivity. But welfare capitalism was also understood to be preferable to relinquishing power to strong trade unions or answering to the demands of meddling politicians.<sup>48</sup>

From the 1930s to the 1960s, Kodak ‘made regular incremental improvements to benefits that had originated in the Eastman years, while periodically forging ahead with new policies’. A wage dividend, paid to every employee with at least six months’ service, shared profits generously. Pension and healthcare plans provided protection against ill-health and security in old age. The scientific management of production lines was initially designed not only to create efficiency but also to ensure stable, year-round employment for the majority of staff. Considerable investment went into developing ways to extend the shelf life of film stock, allowing the company to offset seasonal variations in demand and thus avoid lay-offs at quiet times.<sup>49</sup> The Kodak Park at Rochester boasted extensive recreational facilities, anticipating the Googleplexes and Facebook campuses of today.

Although Rochester was a traditionally conservative town, George Eastman remained concerned about the effects of the growing labour movement. In 1919, he launched an Anti-Bolshevik Program, producing a newsletter warning that professional agitators were ready 'to fasten the poisoned talons of anarchy upon the whole community'.<sup>50</sup> The later introduction of additional wage dividends was prompted by fears that the government planned to break up Kodak's monopoly on photography's production chain by challenging its vertically integrated operations. In 1964, about 600 African American people worked for Kodak in Rochester: less than 2% of the company's 33,000 employees. Change, in this instance, resulted from more assertive forms of campaigning. An organisation called FIGHT—Freedom, Integration, God, Honor, Today—led by Franklin Delano Roosevelt Florence, a friend of Malcolm X, launched a concerted campaign to challenge Kodak's racist employment practices. While the corporation rescinded on an initial agreement to increase the number of black employees, by 1968 2,000 black workers were employed in Rochester.<sup>51</sup> Company owners attributed changes to a deep-felt sense of social justice, much as they had attributed the wage dividends, healthcare plans and pensions to a benevolent concern for workers. But, across Kodak's early history, it is clear that corporate policy was shaped by specific and general fears of collective action and government intervention.

The economic pressures faced by Kodak from the 1980s onwards were in many ways representative of those faced by US industry more broadly. Increased competition came from Japan, where industry had recovered from the ravages of the Second World War and lower wages provided companies with a competitive advantage. Kodak's main Japanese competitor, Fujifilm, actively under-priced its rival. Kodak's well-publicised failure to adapt to the effects of digital photography was central to its demise. Although the company invented the first digital camera, it initially suppressed its development for fear of hurting its lucrative film business. It eventually responded to the change, too late, by buying in established digital expertise rather than by supporting research and development. Fuji, by contrast, looked to diversify its business, realising that the anti-oxidants used to preserve photographs could also be used in cosmetics, for example. Where Kodak believed the future lay in digital printing, the Japanese company demonstrated a more sophisticated grasp of the ideological shifts that shaped social applications of digital technologies. If citizens of the

projective city care less about remembering the past than they do about how they are perceived in the present, then profitable photo-sharing sites like Facebook and Instagram hold more in common with face creams than they do with precious mementos pasted into albums.<sup>52</sup>

Kodak responded to pressures by adopting an increasingly Toyotorist approach to production, employing staff only during the very specific times their labour was required. Savings were made by systematically dismantling the employment conditions at the heart of the earlier corporate culture. Changes to pension plans passed risk from employer to employee. The wage dividend was replaced by a performance-related scheme. A 'new social contract' was introduced, promising 'lifetime employability' not 'lifetime employment'. Tens of thousands of job cuts were made and important roles were outsourced.<sup>53</sup> Managers were pressurised by investors and outside directors, frustrated at the company's dwindling short-term profits. One incoming CEO was offered a \$100 million bonus if stock prices climbed high enough. Economic historian Rick Wartzman explains how incentives such as these—increasingly common across US corporate culture during the period—provided an effective means through which the interests of bosses were aligned with those of shareholders rather than workers.<sup>54</sup>

Just as Kodak's earlier response to the 'labour problem' had been forged in relation to a wider political economy, so its response to pressures faced during the 1980s and 1990s was moulded by the emerging orthodoxies of neoliberalism. Economist Nick Srnicek sums up the fundamentals of that doctrine in ways that chime with the actions of Kodak:

Production was to be streamlined... Companies were increasingly told by shareholders and management consultants to cut back to their core competencies, any excess workers being laid off and inventories kept to a minimum... Trade Unions faced new legal hurdles, the deregulation of various industries, and a subsequent decline in membership. Businesses took advantage of this to reduce wages and outsource jobs.<sup>55</sup>

In Kodak's case, the outsourcing of labour, casualisation of work and stripping away of benefit packages such as pensions were reported as the inevitable and necessary response to declining profits after the company failed to adjust to the demands of new digital photography markets. But, by that time, precisely that response represented the new common sense.

Photography's digitalisation provides a very good example of those ways in which computational systems now carry out tasks once performed by human beings. Thanks to the algorithmic operations taking place inside digital cameras, we no longer require rolls of film manufactured or developed by people in order to view our photographs as images. Social media giants like Instagram, which profit from opportunities to share our digital photographs across computer networks, have created remarkably few jobs compared to a company like Kodak.<sup>56</sup> A significant proportion of those they have—tasks linked to content moderation, for example—have been auctioned off to the lowest bidder as part of the gig economy. Associated roles, including the production of smartphones, have been outsourced to countries with cheaper labour. Yet here, as with the digital economy more broadly, the analysis of labour conditions is partially obscured by—or, at least, sits in marked tension with—the celebratory discourse around digital prosumption, with its emphasis on choice, participation and abundance. We are too busy taking selfies, praising the insights of citizen journalism, and looking at LOL cats to think about the physical and psychological demands of the low-paid precarious labour that sustains the contemporary photographic economy.

The history of employment at Kodak indicates that, far from being the inevitable effect of a so-called 'digital revolution', changes to work are linked to a wider political economy. The benefits once afforded to Kodak employees were not only a product of paternalistic pursuit of worker morale and improved productivity, but also—if sometimes indirectly—governments acting in the interests of society and the strong trade unions through which workers exerted pressure on employers. George Monbiot reminds us how, 'during the Keynesian era, the state was the institution to which people turned for protection from exploitation and arbitrary power'. Today 'it is perceived as an agent of exploitation and arbitrary power'.<sup>57</sup> That shift took place at the same time as an all-out assault on trade unions.<sup>58</sup>

Any progressive political challenge to neoliberalism will need to revive and reimagine these institutions, but also to recognise those ways in which casualisation, automation and a globalised economy demand organisational forms and traditional objectives to be radically rethought. For those in work, this will likely involve trans-national alliances, and what Brophy and de Peuter call 'experimentation in the development of

new organizational forms and connections between and among different moments on the circuit.<sup>59</sup> As the Italian collective Wu Ming suggested in 2011, ‘a global alliance between “digital activists”, cognitive workers, and electronics manufacturing employees would be, for the owners of networks, the most fearful thing.’<sup>60</sup> But that challenge must also account for those no longer assigned a productive role within the global economy, including former blue-collar workers struggling against the effects of outsourcing and automation, ‘so dispirited that they stopped looking for work altogether.’<sup>61</sup>

The same politico-economic forces power the automation, casualisation and outsourcing of work and the decimation of the natural world. Corporate profitability increases at the expense of wider social and environmental wellbeing. As Saskia Sassen observes, the ‘dangerously narrow conception of economic growth’ to which neoliberals have fallen sway marks a radical departure from the earlier Keynesian view of growth as ‘a means of advancing the public interest, of increasing a prosperity in which many would share.’ The swelling ranks of those ‘expelled’ from the social and economic order altogether, along with those clinging on to its ‘systemic edge,’ make the brutality of the larger system visible with particular and painful clarity.<sup>62</sup>

Today’s progressive political movements must work both to mobilise, and to forge meaningful alliances between, low-paid workers, the emergent precariat and those forced out of employment, if they are to mount effective challenges to neoliberalism. Recent political upheavals provide an irrevocable demonstration of the ruthlessness with which any failure to do so will be exploited by the alternative coalitions gathering on the political and economic right. Former factory towns such as Rochester, historic home of Kodak, have provided a strategic and symbolic focus for Trump and his message.<sup>63</sup> His promises to ‘get Apple to build its damn computers and things in this country’ go hand in glove with the construction of walls and the tightening of borders.<sup>64</sup> They also impede the forms of global solidarity that an authentic politics of the dispossessed will today require. The ‘horizontal solidarity’ of a resurgent nationalism leaves the concentration of wealth unchallenged, the stronghold of corporate power undeterred. It should by now be clear, as McKenzie Wark tweeted in January 2019, that ‘the ruling class prefers fascism to paying their taxes.’<sup>65</sup>

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## Folk Politics

*Episode III (Enjoy Poverty)* (2008) is an unusual documentary film about poverty and photography in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Artist Renzo Martens encounters a cast of photojournalists, aid workers and plantation owners, variously involved with producing, publishing and profiting from photographs of human suffering. Youthful Unicef volunteers capture village children on their digital cameras: cheerful mementos of virtuous gap years. European photojournalists manoeuvre artfully around hooded militiamen, who pose threateningly for clicking cameras. Martens films himself at a charity photography auction, looking at tastefully composed black-and-white portraits of plantation workers and their labour. He talks to a plantation owner, who pays employees as little as a few dollars a month, about the lots that he is planning to bid for.

The encounters function as a series of parables: specific manifestations of the uneven social relations reproduced by photographs of atrocity that speak of larger truths.<sup>1</sup> Taken together, they underline the multifarious ways in which an international image economy is directly implicated in the structures of global capitalism. More precisely, *Enjoy Poverty* reveals parallels between the trade in ‘poverty pornography’ and a global humanitarian project that has, over the past fifteen years, been transformed into a \$110 billion a year industry. In an excellent essay about the film, T.J. Demos explains that photojournalism and the aid administered by NGOs:

risk exacerbating conflicts more than mitigating the contexts they work to alleviate. This owes in large part to the fact that NGOs, like photojournalists, proclaim to serve emergency victims (limiting their identity precisely to victimhood), yet come to depend on them and importantly their sensationalised images—much



Still from Renzo Martens, *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, 2008.

like vampires depend on the blood of their victims—to generate funding streams that guarantee their continued existence.<sup>2</sup>

The film makes for a deliberately uncomfortable experience. Martens refuses the consolation that can sometimes come from viewing images of suffering (*I am no longer ignoring...*), from the act of charitable giving (*I am helping...*), or—importantly—from engaging with art world critique of global capitalism (*I am thinking about the contradictions involved in helping and not ignoring...*). Wearing a white linen suit and straw hat, he adopts the appearance of the ‘stereotypical white other,’ wilfully embracing ‘colonial clichés’ that recall previous cultural depictions of colonial history: Michael Caine in *Zulu*, Mr. Kurtz and the *Heart of Darkness*, the megalomaniac anti-hero in Werner Herzog’s *Fitzcaraldo*.<sup>3</sup>

At several, crucial moments, Martens turns the camera back on himself, performing a visual shorthand for the vanity he knows he shares with his cast of neo-imperial missionaries, an indication of that self-knowledge, and a blunt insistence that he—and, by extension, we, the viewers—should not be positioned outside the exploitative structures the film explores. He has explained how:

The film breaks one clear rule: that audiences should be exempt from the pain that half the world experiences on a daily basis. We can watch it, but we should not be

made a part of it. Or, if it should happen that a work reveals our part in it anyway, through some economic or political system we support or benefit from, then we are exempt from the pain.<sup>4</sup>

That sentiment necessarily extends to those who write about the film, and to those who read those essays, each of whom stand to yield some personal gain from their relationship to the representation of poverty in the Congo, however critical that particular representation purports to be. As long as we are positioned within the orbit of *Enjoy Poverty's* bleak vision, the relief of anteriority eludes us.

Hilde Van Gelder has discussed *Enjoy Poverty* in relation to the idea of civil spectatorship, first outlined by political philosopher Ariella Azoulay in her influential book, *The Civil Contract of Photography*.<sup>5</sup> Published in 2008, *The Civil Contract* provided a much-needed realignment of photography's theoretical framing. Post-modern critical analysis maligned documentary photography as a form of exploitative and voyeuristic spectacle. It focused on the uneven power relations that separated the privileged photographer/viewer from a disenfranchised subject, and criticised the callousing effect that images of suffering could have on audiences. Far from acting to alleviate the horrors represented, photography was said to redouble and reproduce them.<sup>6</sup>

Azoulay moved to reconceptualise photography, no longer seen as an image that objectified and exploited but, instead, as 'the product of an encounter... between a photographer, a photographed subject and a camera.'<sup>7</sup> This helped to create the theoretical and political space necessary to re-inscribe a potential for agency, both for photography's subjects and its viewers. This is expressed in terms of a civic duty to reconstruct the photographic encounter, in order to better appreciate the complex circumstances that produced it and, most importantly, the specific claims made on our attention by the people photographed. Azoulay's central focus is pictures from the occupied territories, where many have been denied recognition by the state as citizens. It is through *photographic representation* that we are afforded new opportunities to reflect on the forces through which subjects' *political representation* is either granted or denied. For Van Gelder, 'the concept of civil spectatorship implies that we come to see our relationship as spectators, to the subjects depicted and to the artist that produces the work, in juridical terms: as a triangular or

a contractual relationship between photographed subject, photographer, and viewer.<sup>8</sup>

Towards the middle of *Enjoy Poverty*, Martens encounters a freelance photojournalist, covering the conflict for a multi-national press agency. They look at some photographs of the fighting together on a laptop. A dialogue ensues:

**Renzo Martens:** *Who is the owner of these pictures? Whose property is the picture?*

**Photographer:** *I am the owner. I can use it if I want to make an exhibition, a book.*

**RM:** *I see. You don't have to pay for that. And the people in the pictures? The people you have photographed, are they the owners of the pictures, too?*

**P:** *No.*

**RM:** *You are the owner? Those you photographed own nothing?*

**P:** *No, because I took the pictures. I'm the photographer, the author of the pictures.*

**RM:** *But they organised everything that is in the picture. You just came and made the picture.*

**P:** *What do you mean, 'organised'?*

**RM:** *Well, the situation that you made the picture of, they made the situation.*

**P:** *But not due to me.*

**RM:** *No, not due to you.*

**P:** *Yeah, sure. But it's me that made of that situation a picture. There are thousands of situations. I choose the one that I think makes a good picture. And that makes that picture mine.*

The introduction to *The Civil Contract* also describes photography in terms of property and ownership. When 'photography is produced by many parties it can no longer be regarded as the possession of the photographer alone,' Azoulay explains. Property, in this context, refers largely to the issue of meaning and how it is attributed to any particular photograph. If it 'exceeds any presumption of ownership or monopoly and any attempt

at being exhaustive,' this refers largely, although not exclusively, to what is being communicated, by whom, and on whose terms.<sup>9</sup>

The assertion amounts to an important ontological claim. Photography is distinct from other media because of its direct, immediate and particular relationship to the real. Photons have reflected off the surface of a person, have been focused by the camera's lens, and left a permanent trace on light-sensitive material. The photograph could not exist without that encounter. The person depicted can make some meaningful claim to co-ownership, even a privileged form of co-ownership, regarding the photograph and its meaning.

Martens' exchange with the photojournalist advances a related view, but in ways that redirect Azoulay's argument towards matters of intellectual property and financialisation. In one sense, he affirms that the meaning of the photograph can, indeed, exceed that prescribed by its makers, for the conversation reshapes what the journalist had perceived to be an image of fighting as one among many manifestations of the uneven transactions that define a global image economy. At the same time, Martens highlights some of the specific cultural and, particularly, legal frameworks that police against any similar excess finding purchase at the level of ownership when addressed in relation to copyright law or finance. Where Azoulay uses photography as the means to explore larger issues regarding political representation among stateless people, Martens focuses on the specific material and legislative protections that bond photographic encounters to the reproduction of unequal socio-economic relations.

It is rare for the ownership of photography to be the focus of dedicated legislation, falling instead within a number of related legal frameworks, including intellectual property, personal privacy, private property and anti-terrorism. While the law regarding production, publication and ownership varies across local and, particularly, national jurisdictions, some general features can be identified. UK copyright law credits the 'creator' of a photograph as its owner. The fact that what exactly constitutes the 'creation'—and, so too, the 'creator'—of an image often remains undefined points to a series of naturalised assumptions about the specific character of photographic production. In the eyes of the law, it is the person who operates a

camera (or what the UK's Intellectual Property Office calls 'the one to press the trigger') who creates, and thus owns, the photograph.<sup>10</sup> That point was illustrated in 2015, when Wikipedia refused to pay photographer David Slater after using a selfie taken by a Celebes crested macaque on Slater's camera. Wikipedia believed that copyright belonged to the monkey, as it had activated the shutter release. An animal rights group later attempted to sue Slater on behalf of the monkey in relation to payments received when the image was used elsewhere in the media. The court ruled that only humans, not animals, could file lawsuits. Slater voluntarily agreed to pay 25% of future fees to animal rights charities nonetheless.<sup>11</sup>

It is normally legal to photograph in public places, but some local authorities may charge to issue a licence, particularly for commercial photographic shoots. This is true for the National Trust-maintained landscapes in the UK, much to the frustration of some photographers who perceive it as an affront to their livelihood, rather than a levy placed on the commercial use of designated non-commercial spaces, or just a way to redirect part of the income generated towards maintenance.<sup>12</sup> A similar policy was implemented in Sudan, where all foreign travellers, including journalists, have been required to obtain a photography permit for \$50 before taking pictures. Although this was justified in terms of national security, not financial gain, the permit amounted to a tax on the production of photography.<sup>13</sup> Something like this model could provide one means for governments in impoverished countries to profit directly from the industry in poverty porn that the suffering of their citizenry helps support. Potential arguments against that move—namely, that a tax on the making of images might encourage photographers to transfer their activities to more affordable war-torn regions—closely resemble austerity-era rhetoric used to justify cuts to corporate tax rates (*if we raise, or even maintain, levels of taxation then won't business go elsewhere?*). The centralised administration of taxation would also leave it open to the risk of government corruption and the misuse of funds.

It is, in effect, legal to photograph almost anywhere in the UK, but the owners of private property have the right to prohibit certain behaviours. The breach of those codes would constitute a form of trespass.<sup>14</sup> Issues pertaining to photographing individual subjects are normally addressed by privacy legislation. For this reason, the law is primarily concerned

with the publication, as opposed to the taking, of photographs. In the USA, this is normally a matter of a perceived ‘misappropriation’: the non-consensual use of a person’s image to endorse a product or political campaign. In such cases, individuals will typically sue publishers, corporations and advertisers, rather than photographers, for the emotional distress or loss of earnings the misappropriation has caused.<sup>15</sup> This does not apply to art or journalism, however, which are protected by the right to free expression enshrined in the First Amendment. Professional photographers use model release forms to avoid claims of misappropriation. When students at the university where I work have their pictures taken during visits to museums and galleries, for example, the photographer has them sign a form that allows the university to use the pictures to advertise its degrees.

This brief survey points to an ontological splitting of photography, which is at once perceived as a form of intellectual property (a creation that can be bought and sold, belonging to the person who operated the camera) and as a document containing information about individual people (a factual image or record, over the use of which those depicted may have some say). The recent histories of art photography provide some interesting insights into how that splitting has played out in practice, particularly when the individuals depicted in photographs try to address a perceived breach of privacy as though a commercial concern.

In 2005, Erno Nussenzweig, a retired diamond merchant from New Jersey, filed a lawsuit against artist Philip-Lorca diCorcia and commercial gallery, Pace MacGill. This stated that a photograph of Nussenzweig which appeared in diCorcia’s 2001 series, *Heads*, contravened New York law prohibiting the use of a person’s likeness ‘for advertising or for trade purposes.’ The photographs, available in editions of three, had sold for between \$20,000 and \$30,000 each. The court dismissed the lawsuit, identifying the picture as a form of artistic expression, and thus confirming that it is when a photograph is used to sell *another* product, in the form of an advertisement, that US citizens have a claim to remuneration.<sup>16</sup> Given the ruling, it is possible Nussenzweig would have had a better case if the image had been used on a poster advertising the exhibition. This is also unlikely, however, as it would have been diCorcia’s picture, not just an image of Nussenzweig, which appeared on the poster. The work of art, not *just* a photograph, would have been doing the advertising.



*Philip-Lorca diCorcia: Heads*, 6 September – 13 October 2001, Pace Gallery, 534 West 25th Street.

The same legal definitions lurk behind a number of art projects in which the payment of the photographed subject represents an important component in the production of meaning. For *Case History* (1999), Boris Mikhailov paid homeless people in the Ukraine to appear in his photographs, which often involved asking them to take off their clothes and to pose as bizarre tableaux. In the introduction to a book of the photographs, Mikhailov explained:

Manipulating with money is somehow a new way of legal relations in all areas of the former USSR. And by this book I wanted to transmit the feeling in that place and how people can be openly manipulated. In order to give this flavour of time I wanted to copy or perform the same relations which exist in society between a model and myself.<sup>17</sup>

An earlier series by diCorcia used male prostitutes as models, who became the focus of cinematically lit scenarios staged in and around Los Angeles's Sunset Strip. Subjects were paid the same fee they would have charged a client for sex, with their first name and the amount they were paid used to title the photograph in which they appeared. The fact that diCorcia used

part of his National Endowment for the Arts grant to make the payment provides the transaction with a further interesting dimension.<sup>18</sup>

Payment can function as a conceptual artistic device precisely because the subjects of documentary photography do not customarily receive financial compensation when they appear in photographs, irrespective of the commercial gain the pictures sometimes afford to the person in possession of the camera. While no one is legally entitled to payment simply for appearing in another person's photograph, only some are subject to the types of socio-economic circumstances that compel them to accept payment for being photographed in ways that others would potentially choose to avoid. The payment is, moreover, implicitly attached to the additional forms of labour the photographs demand, particularly stripping and posing. This raises further questions about if and where a line exists between the subjects of documentary pictures and artists' models: a distinction knowingly blurred by these projects in ways capable of shining a light on the economic frameworks that help define such categories.

Art historian John Roberts sees Azoulay's *Civil Contract* as an important re-politicisation of photography. Its 'rejection of the monological and instrumental accounts of documentary practice prevalent in some quarters in the 1980s and 1990s' represented a 'compelling and... powerful advance even on those redoubtable defenders of documentary practice during the period.'<sup>19</sup> *The Civil Contract* makes a persuasive case for photography as a vital political force, based on the forms of encounter between subjects and viewers created. Azoulay provides a model for photographic engagement that works against a deconstructive logic too quick to cast all photographs as intrinsically, fundamentally and irredeemably exploitative.

Roberts also observes that Azoulay's central focus on 'the noncitizens in photographs taken in the occupied territories in Israel' means her 'social relational form of photography is premised on a highly *under-determined* notion of the political [emphasis in original quotation]'. *The Civil Contract* focuses on principles of statelessness in the most profound and irrevocable sense, in ways close to Giorgio Agamben's notion of 'bare life'. As a result, her view is largely unconcerned with questions of labour and class. Roberts goes on to note that Azoulay's social ontology of photography operates adrift from discussions of its critical precursors, particularly the egalitarian photographic cultures that grew up around previous left



Boris Mikhailov, from the series *Case History*, 1999.

movements, such as Worker Photography in 1930s Europe or community photography in Britain in the 1980s.<sup>20</sup> Both linked an analysis of class to questions of making and dissemination, aiming to demystify the processes of photographic production, provide access to photographic technologies, and create increasingly participatory photographic cultures drawn along class-lines.

A related point can be made when *The Civil Contract* is framed by the lessons of *Enjoy Poverty*, which highlight the continued pressures that the material realities of labour place on efforts to reshape photography as a space in which questions of political representation can be opened up. If agency is provided to subjects and audiences through the process of civil spectatorship, this often operates in tension with the neoliberal social relations tied up in the production, exchange and ownership of any particular photograph.

Martens' exchange with the photographer is the catalyst for the film's central narrative thread. Earlier on, a group of photojournalists are shown looking at a small kiosk on the edge of a village where local photographers ply their trade. Martens returns to the kiosk, to gather the locals together. With whiteboard and markers, he compares the amount of money to be made photographing the local celebrations on which they normally focus with the money made photographing 'raped women, corpses, and malnourished children', in the manner of international photojournalists. It works out as \$1 and \$1,000 a month, respectively, according to his calculations. Martens instructs his student-collaborators in how best to photograph the more lucrative subject matter. The intense discomfort they display when setting about their education sits in stark contrast to the slick professionalism of the European professionals witnessed earlier in the film.

Martens arranges to meet with a representative from *Medicins Sans Frontières* in an effort to sell the pictures. The charity worker initially dismisses the venture as an obscene effort to exploit poverty for commercial purposes, eventually conceding that this is perhaps also true of European professionals. The photographs are finally rejected on instrumental-aesthetic grounds: they are simply not 'good enough pictures' to solicit the emotional responses and charitable instincts on



Still from Renzo Martens, *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, 2008.

which the NGO relies. Martens decides to end the venture, explaining that the local photographers lack access to the systems necessary for the project to succeed. I find it striking how often my students consider the sense of disappointment and betrayal clear in the eyes of the nameless Congolese photographers to be among the most harrowing parts of the film.

Martens' neo-colonial photo start-up is the product of his earlier conversation with the photojournalist. In the context of the film, it appears as a peculiarly rational attempt to promote principles of socio-economic justice within the limited possibilities ritually and legally inscribed within the current politico-economic system. If poverty is a resource from which the poor rarely profit directly (or even, as the film argues, indirectly), Martens proposes we find ways to extend access to the means through which poverty can be monetised. In this case, it is by shifting the status of those who live in so-called 'developing' nations from being the subject matter to the makers of photographs. Like so much else in the film, the project and its eventual failure denote larger truths. For Demos, this is a matter of 'the unbreakable barriers of western institutions that regulate the media as much as the marketing of coltan, gold and diamonds.' The 'Congolese position as objects of humanitarian discourse and its image is incontrovertible.'<sup>21</sup>

The model of grassroots photojournalism engineered by Martens shares interesting characteristics with the field of ‘participatory photography’, which gained an increasing profile in the contemporary art world around the time *Enjoy Poverty* was released. Many participatory projects see artists working alongside groups of disenfranchised people who would have remained on the other side of the camera in traditional documentary projects. Typical ‘collaborators’ include members of the homeless, migrants, refugees, and those living in war zones. In some projects, workshop sessions focus on the technical elements of photography or on issues of visual literacy, before participants produce photographs, with or without the supervision of the artist. In others, subjects are asked to contribute their existing photographs to a larger project, which they may or may not play a role in editing. Others involve subjects in writing or drawing over prints. Many combine some or all of the above. Well-known examples include Anthony Luvera’s work with homeless people in London, Belfast and Brighton, Jim Goldberg’s study of migrants and asylum seekers making the passage to Europe, Eugenie Dolberg’s collaboration with women living in Iraq after the country’s invasion by a ‘coalition of the willing’, and Monica Haller’s work with veterans of various military conflicts.

Participatory methods found increasing currency in international NGO circles around the same time, with a number of specialist agencies established to provide expertise. London-based organisation, Photo Voice, for example, has worked with partners including Barnardos, Overseas Development Institute, The Red Cross, and Christian Aid to produce projects with groups including young people affected by sexual exploitation and trafficking, people diagnosed with HIV in Malawi, and communities ‘at the grassroots of development’ in China, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nepal, Peru and Tunisia.<sup>22</sup>

The field of participatory photography is by no means identical to Martens’ critical experiment. The majority of projects encourage those involved to explore their immediate and personal experiences, particularly those involving their friends, family and close community. Martens’ project, by contrast, involved Congolese photographers who occupied a different socio-economic position to the majority of people they photographed. While subjects existed at the extreme peripheries of society, the clothes Martens’ collaborators wear, the fact they already own



Documentation of the making of *Assisted Self-Portrait Fred Clarke*, from *Assembly* by Anthony Luvera, 2013–14.

SLR cameras, and the manner in which they interact with the people they photograph attest to their relative affluence. It is extremely complex to determine decisively who constitutes ‘us’ and ‘them’ in such a scenario, due to the ways in which national, economic, social and professional identities overlap, undermine, and operate in relation to one another. And yet the characteristics shared by participatory photography and Martens’



*Picturing Progress*, Zimbabwe. PhotoVoice, Zimbabwe Red Cross Society and British Red Cross, 2015.

satirical model remain striking. Each relies on an outside ‘facilitator’ to create the circumstances in which members from some other community produce and publish images of a world to which they exist in much closer proximity than funders and facilitators. The resulting pictures are almost always consumed by those in more privileged positions.

*No Olho da Rua* (1995–2010) was produced by Julian Germain, Murilo Godoy, Patricia Azevedo and ‘street kids from Belo Horizonte in Brazil’ over the course of more than a decade.<sup>23</sup> An invitation was extended to the young people to capture their lives on cameras provided by the artists. The resulting pictures offer an unusual and often moving insight, depicting a range of experiences far removed from conventional representations of homelessness in the media. Many of the photographs include signs of intimate relationships: a loving hand resting on a baby, a group of boys relaxing together in the sun, a man performing playful acrobatic

feats. Viewers also gain access to the domestic uses of the subterranean city: waterways used to wash in, clearings as bedrooms. The appearance of the images is typical of snapshot photography, with cropped figures, unconventional compositions, shadow produced by flash, all attesting to the absence of professional training and, commentators often assume, the authenticity of the pictures.<sup>24</sup> Photographs were edited, collaboratively, to meet the demands of a variety of formats: initially as fly-posters pasted to the walls of Belo Horizonte, then as thousands of newspapers distributed free across the city by the homeless children. They were later distributed as free supplements with a UK-produced photography magazine, before the project became the focus of an exhibition included as part of a festival I myself co-curated in 2012.

Mark Sealy is the Director of Autograph ABP, one of the organisations that helped to fund parts of *No Olho da Rua*. He describes it here:

The investment made in the production and delivery on this project highlights the raw return that can be extracted by simply allowing power relations to be inverted.



Camera – film ref: 2005-Rosemary-06-18. From *No Olho da Rua*, 1995–present. By Patricia Azevedo, Julian Germain, Murilo Godoy and street kids from Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

Rather than just being willing students, these kids have actively negotiated the terms in which they have allowed themselves to be seen; they have performed for the camera and pointed the camera. In many ways though, through the production and distribution of these photographs, the kids have become activists for social change. The newspaper therefore allows their experiences to transcend the street and be literally placed in the hands of those all too ready to ignore their very existence.<sup>25</sup>

The account offers a good indication of the two interpretations that have dominated the recent reception of participatory photography within the art world (and, indeed, within development agencies, the social sciences and NGOs). On the one hand, it is seen as a form of activist grassroots journalism, through which the lives and experiences of disenfranchised groups are provided with a distinctive and important form of visibility. The urgency of that project is sometimes said to have intensified as a consequence of the increasingly commercial agenda of contemporary news media, which favours the type of sensational stories that sell papers, not the more nuanced, intimate, sustained and understated views presented here.<sup>26</sup> The logistical difficulties of accessing such stories, particularly in conflict zones, are also cited as an important reason for supporting participatory journalism. On the other hand, the projects are celebrated for inverting the same relationships between photographer and subject that were maligned by influential critics in the 1980s. Participatory methods are thought to create opportunities for self-representation that disturb the uneven distribution of power which prominent voices have attributed to documentary photography in the past.

Sealy's description of *No Olho da Rua* also hints at some of the challenges faced by those laudable aspirations. The notion that power relations should be *allowed* to be inverted points to the paradoxical agencies in such a context, raising the complex question of how far control can ever be relinquished in projects initiated by the artist-facilitators. Any power that is freely shared can be, and eventually is, taken away; the inversion is more temporary loan than permanent gift. Writing about participatory practices in 1991, Martha Rosler observed that, when work such as this 'circulates publicly,' simply 'relying on giving the camera to the subjects underestimates the shaping effect of institutions and the context of reception, which are likely to re-impose the unequal power relationship banished from the photographic transaction.'<sup>27</sup> It matters,

then, that Sealy's text was originally published in the newspaper that the children distributed in Belo Horizonte ('literally placed in the hands of those all too ready to ignore their very existence'). It also matters that the newspaper later circulated among subscribers to a UK-based art photography magazine, and were viewed by visitors to a visual arts festival in Brighton.

The reference to social change is also important in this context. It could refer to the images themselves as a form of campaigning, the political potential of which presumably derives from the affective potential of 'seeing through the eyes' of homeless people and the empathy this can encourage. It could also refer to the inversion of power involved in the pictures' production and the world it temporarily brings into being. For Photo Voice founder Tiffaney Fairey, it is the agnostic and experimental social relations produced via this kind of collaborative photographic framework that matter most. Drawing on the work of political philosopher Chantal Mouffe, she argues for the need to produce new types of relationship through photography in order to challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism.<sup>28</sup> While that argument is certainly enticing, the challenge of translating changes in consciousness to material political transformation is significant. As Mouffe herself has explained, it is necessary to engage with, and to establish, institutions, if small-scale gestures are to lead to permanent gains.<sup>29</sup> The situation is particularly pronounced in the context of many recent participatory projects, given the extreme lack of social, economic, political and cultural capital that typically qualifies certain groups to 'participate' in the first place. Much of the work also favours project-based models that characterise the contemporary art world, along with post-Fordist labour more broadly. The temporary engagements of participatory photography shares structural parallels with the approaches of international NGOs, who favour advocacy work over the cultivation of collective organisations like trade unions.

Discussion of at least some of these issues is not infrequent in writing about participatory photography.<sup>30</sup> Much less has been said about the immediate socio-economic relations that play out through the projects, in the manner highlighted by Renzo Martens' film. Whether projects are conceived of and interpreted as exercises in experimental social relations, grassroots documentary, or—as is more likely—an indivisible combination

of the two, their value to participants and artist-facilitators is articulated in terms of personal, creative and symbolic reward. Participation provides a break from the realities of a life dedicated to day-to-day survival and/or answers what the *PhotoVoice Manual* goes as far as to describe as a 'Right to Be Heard'.<sup>31</sup> More critical assessments of the projects operate within the same, broadly defined parameters: debating if and how these aims were adequately fulfilled and 'whether or not—and to what extent—projects are properly "open" or "inclusive" of their participants.'<sup>32</sup>

It is also possible to read Sealy's description against the grain, so that talk of 'investment' and 'raw return' act not just as metaphors, but as factual economic descriptions. This could point accusingly towards the Brazilian government and towards a so-called 'international community,' which—it would seem to imply—did not provide that investment. That it has fallen to a publicly funded UK arts organisation, and the voluntarism of artists, to support the work means there are very real ways in which economic arrangements mirror the structures of global development funding and charitable giving. The terminology could also hint at a disavowed awareness of photography's socio-economic identity, which haunts the field of participatory photography more broadly: the knowledge that any symbolic and personal rewards are not always matched by actual payment. That absence is symptomatic of the disavowals and self-exploitation that characterise so much of contemporary artistic production, particularly when it has a political bent. But it takes on an additional dimension in relation to work so explicitly wrapped up in questions of power, uneven social relationships and collaborative working with disenfranchised groups from outside the arts.

It is difficult to pinpoint with any certainty what, exactly, is produced via such projects, if and how it can be exchanged for capital, and—so too—what precisely constitutes photographic labour. On closer examination, the competing claims of journalism and participation—a concern with the content of particular images and the social relations forged through their making—provides room for slippage, allowing the question of payment to become obscured or deferred.

If the projects are taken as a form of grassroots reportage, then it is the images themselves that would be bought and sold. This is a model close

to Martens' vision of Congolese photographers competing with international rivals in the production of poverty porn. Yet the distinctiveness, and consequent value, of many participatory projects is often framed in terms of the counterpoint to mainstream media representations they offer. It is the non-sensational insider insights into the day-to-day lives of those existing on the political and economic margins that matter. This is as true of work made for NGOs as it is for the art world. If a collective appetite for such images is linked to the ways they avoid the sensationalism and violence used to shift papers, this means they are also likely to be unattractive to news-desk picture editors. Part of their value as art results from their shortcomings as commercially viable photojournalism.

Photographs instead circulate within the image economy of contemporary art, which operates according to very different financial models. While some pictures have been included in exhibitions at public museums and galleries, few have been sold as objects on the art market. Where they have been sold directly it has often been in the form of books, a format from which it can be difficult for photographers to make the amounts of money sometimes generated through the sale of limited-editioned prints. This is particularly true when publishers expect artists to contribute financially towards production costs, an increasingly common practice.<sup>33</sup> The value of books sometimes increases through the resale market: due to the relatively small editions printed, they can sell out quickly, signaling their importance to other collectors, who are then willing to pay more for a copy. Critically acclaimed examples of books based on participatory projects including Geert van Kesteren's *Baghdad Calling* and Eugenie Dolberg's *Open Shutters Iraq* have begun to find some traction on the collectors' market, with copies available for more than ten times the original cover price. This still pales in comparison to canonical titles by individual photographers, which can sell for upwards of a hundred times original cost. Artists are unlikely to profit directly from that dynamic, however, unless they had the foresight to hold back copies of books to be sold later on. Even then they face a dilemma. Van Kesteren took the ethical decision to continue making his few remaining copies of *Baghdad Calling*—an extraordinary take on the Iraq conflict based on mobile phone imagery shared with him by Iraqi civilians—available at cover price, when books were already selling for significantly more online.<sup>34</sup>

Mark Neville's *Port Glasgow Project* (2004–6) represents a rare effort to creatively and critically explore established models for the sale and ownership of photography books. The Arts Council Scotland-funded project saw Neville work closely with a small town community in Western Scotland to produce photographs of local scenes and people. Pictures were published in a hardback coffee table-style book, printed in an edition of 5,000 and distributed free to every household in Port Glasgow by members of the local football team. Neville also sent a small number of copies to writers and curators, which helped to raise the profile of the project in the art world.

The series has generally been interpreted as a self-reflexive interrogation of the politics of looking as they play out through the dissemination of documentary photographs, addressing the same capacity to reintroduce power structures critiqued by Martha Rosler.<sup>35</sup> But the gesture lends itself equally well to a materialist view, with the extremely limited availability of the books operating both as a conceptual device and, potentially, as a means to drive up prices at resale. Part of what makes the books so interesting is the fact that the general public, and particularly dedicated



Camera – film ref: 2007-Newspaper-4-2163. From *No Olho da Rua*, 1995–present. By Patricia Azevedo, Julian Germain, Murilo Godoy and street kids from Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

collector-dealers, rarely have the opportunity to buy them. In principle, this should help drive up the desirability of ownership among collectors and so, too, prices, in ways that directly benefit participant-owners. *The Port Glasgow Project* expands our view of which activities should be understood as making up the photographic encounter, in ways that include the dissemination, sale and resale of photography across a variety of formats. The project is also progressively redistributive, given that it was publicly funded and the average income in Port Glasgow falls well below the national figure. The artist-facilitator is re-fashioned as an important constituent part within a larger system—a long and complex process—that affords multiple opportunities for exploitation, redistribution and profitability.

The initial newspaper publication of *No Olho da Rua* engaged with similar issues, although perhaps in a less self-consciously conceptual fashion. By producing a cheap publication in its thousands and distributing it to members of the public for free, the project eschewed the format of the collectable photo-book fetish and the systems via which art objects are typically bought and sold. Julian Germain's website directs those interested in purchasing a copy to the relevant back issue of the UK magazine with which it was given away, still retailing at £5.95.<sup>36</sup> An alternative approach was adopted with *No Mundo Maravilhos de Futebol* (1995–2002), an earlier participatory project organised by Germain, Azevedo and Godoy, where revenues from book and prints sales funded the construction of a library in the favela where the majority of pictures had been made.<sup>37</sup>

In a roundtable discussion from 2014, Matt Daw, then the Creative Director of Photo Voice, expressed his frustration at the ways in which photographs resulting from the organisation's activity were typically treated in the press:

Many of our projects involve incredibly important stories. They often present unheard and very valid viewpoints on an issue the media is talking about. But the media will usually see it as a story about a participatory photo project. That's what they want to feature.<sup>38</sup>

This lends force to the earlier point about the lack of commercial interest in the photographic stories as an alternative form of photojournalism. But it also speaks of a larger truth regarding how participatory projects

are sometimes framed at the point of reception, within and outside the art world. This is clearest in who is credited as *the maker* of the work, and the form that accreditation takes, when the projects are published and exhibited. Almost without exception, artist-facilitators (and sometimes even commissioners) are named as author, with individual photographers only sometimes credited in relation to the specific images they contributed to the larger project. If and when the participants receive a credit as the projects' co-author, it is usually based on the socio-economic specifics that qualified them for inclusion in the first place ('street kids from Belo Horizonte in Brazil'). Part of the issue is practical, of course. The projects often involve so many people that the inclusion of all the names on book jackets, text panels and press releases would jar with conventional formats. One alternative, rarely pursued, would be to use a single, shared title, suggesting an egalitarian collaboration in the manner of an artists' collective. As things currently stand, decisions about how to credit the different parties often reflect the amount of time they have invested in the projects.

The manner in which authorship is credited ensures the artistic 'product' is identified as the project, not the specific photographs or series it features, which are implicitly modelled as interchangeable and exchangeable parts of the larger initiative. In the eyes of the art world, projects are inconceivable without the vision, inspiration and commitment of the artist, whereas another willing participant can always be found. The question of authorship matters as something more than a post-modern conundrum in this context. Something like Daws' point about media attitudes has direct financial implications. When the project becomes the subject of the story, newspapers are less obliged to pay for the use of particular images than would be the case were they used as photojournalism in their own right. Participants become both the medium and the story, rarely if ever paid journalists. Much the same is true when it comes to remuneration in the field of contemporary art.

Art world attitudes to authorship are also linked to the radical expansion of socially engaged art in recent years. Much of this has relied on the creation of circumstances in which unusual forms of behaviour and social interaction are encouraged. To cite one well-known example, Rirkrit Tiravanija installed a kitchen in a gallery where visitors were invited to make and eat Thai curry. The relationship between art as social practice

and participatory photography is by no means straightforward, however. In Tiravanija's project, it is difficult to pin down the exact nature of the tangible product: interaction was fleeting and transient in ways linked to the legacies of performance art and happenings. Participatory photography, by contrast, relies on the making of images, which are usually deemed to possess an autonomous artistry *as pictures*, even in those projects that emphasise the importance of process and making over the final product. Art world definitions of authorship-as-facilitation sit in direct tension with the models of property outlined in the copyright legislation that provide the legal basis for Martens' materialist critique. It is the participants, not the artists, who 'pressed the camera trigger'.

Although it is not widely reported, most participatory photography projects involve a legal, not just a civil, contract.<sup>39</sup> This is necessary if artists are to freely use what are, in the eyes of the law, someone else's pictures. Julian Germain is one of the few involved with participatory work to make that contract public, publishing it on his blog and including it in the 2012 exhibition:

It is agreed that the authors of the project "No Olho da Rua" will respect the integrity of the archive and credit individual participants wherever appropriate. Royalties and profits from possible sales, publications or exhibitions shall be distributed to projects, organizations or activities that bring pleasure or practical assistance to people who live on the streets of Belo Horizonte. If the book of the "No Olho da Rua" project is finally realised, all participants will receive a copy.<sup>40</sup>

The blog post is followed by some personal reflections on the participants' motives for accepting these conditions: 'It is interesting that they aren't interested in money. They freely acknowledge they can't keep it or use it wisely. Neither are we, nor have we ever been, interested in receiving fees from the project.'<sup>41</sup> The notion that the homeless participants accept the terms of engagement based on an inability to save their money or use it wisely sits in contrast to what readers of the blog may assume to be the artists' motives for downplaying the importance of payment. The former is based on what is described as a fraught and largely pragmatic relationship to money; the latter on a personal commitment to the project and the community which—it is implied—would be somehow compromised by any explicit concern with individual remuneration.

This is one way in which contemporary art attitudes mark an important departure from 'NGO-ised' participation. *The PhotoVoice Manual* lists a capacity for individual participants to earn money as an objective, but in ways linked to the potential to find future employment as a result of the experience and skills developed by taking part.<sup>42</sup> Time is invested for free in the hope of acquiring the contacts and expertise necessary to eventually secure paid work. In such instances, participation comes to resemble an instrumental view of education, or just the free labour involved in unpaid internships. Thus it also reproduces the 'increasingly entrepreneurial mind-set of young professionals' and the corporate belief that 'labour costs should be ruthlessly minimised'.<sup>43</sup> The use of internships has become so widespread in the arts that publicly funded organisations in Britain are now required to either offer payment to interns or to retitlle the role as 'volunteer'.<sup>44</sup> The use of the same terminology in the context of participatory photography projects could produce an interesting shift in how we understand the contributions involved.

The disavowal of economics is powerless to resist the structures by which value is ascribed and monetised. In fact, the disavowal possesses a paradoxical financial value of its own. Few of the better-known collaborative projects received direct funding, provided artists' fees, or generated income via sponsorship or sales. But the profile achieved by the work has produced significant reputational capital for the artists involved. The art world is structured to provide mechanisms to exchange this for financial capital down the line, whether through payments for talks, future exhibitions, commissions, teaching opportunities, or by raising interest in the artists' commercial practice. Rather than sit outside the art economy, participatory photography projects are in many ways representative of the speculative capitalist model that defines the art world more broadly. Practitioners invest heavily in projects in ways that help build critical acclaim and a reputation that will eventually lead to payment. The same does not apply to those who make the photographs, to whom the mechanisms to monetise free labour normally remain closed. When galleries, festivals and universities organise fee-paying talks about this kind of work, invitations are extended to facilitators, maybe even to the curators who have supported the work, not participants. The situation closely mirrors the bleak conclusion of

Renzo Martens' failed experiment, when the Congolese photographers discover they lack the professional network necessary to sell their pictures as photojournalists.

That point should be directed at a system, not the individuals who occupy it. Even the very best of intentions are sometimes unable to resist the effects of the institutional structures in which projects are produced and consumed. In participatory work, the imbalance is the result of a series of naturalised assumptions about how meaning and authorship function, rarely any conscious decision to exclude on the part of artists, art organisations or funders. But, if those assumptions were to be denaturalised, the opportunities to draw participants into a larger discussion has the potential both to expand and enrich the critical discourse around the work, while offering some small form of payment to those who need it most. A speaker's fee of £250, an international flight, a free meal and/or a night in a hotel could mean a lot to people surviving on the breadline. The risk, of course, would be a kind of ethnographic spectacle, as socially and economically disenfranchised groups—not just their photographs—are rolled out as a feel-good diversion for the middle-class art world.<sup>45</sup> As things stand, it falls to artists to make the ethical decision to channel income towards grassroots initiatives serving the communities involved, and to leverage cultural capital to increase the sales that enable that investment. Or else participants can generate income through their own enterprising offshoots. Rosemarie—one of the homeless people involved with *No Olho da Rua*—was found to be charging people to make photographic portraits on her borrowed camera, when they stopped at a set of traffic lights in the middle of the city.<sup>46</sup>

An excellent article by Emily Rosamond discusses the operations of socially engaged art in terms of a 'double bottom line'. On the one hand, projects serve the interests of immediate 'stake holders' based on the personal and social good achieved. In participatory photography this would be a case of the break from the norm, of building self-esteem, the opportunities to behave creatively, and the increased public awareness of important social issues potentially achieved. The other aspect relates to speculative investment in the projects and the capital generated by those who support them in the art world:

Many debates in contemporary art tend to understand ‘social engagement’ as something that happens within the boundaries of a particular project—in other words, between live, active, participants—even though in many projects, pictures of these participants circulate as images of participation for a secondary social network of image-consumers, within and beyond the bounds of a particular place, time and social group, they sometimes generate value for those who have invested in these images of social investment.<sup>47</sup>

Rosamond does not unpack the ambivalent position of the artist in this dynamic, who is often both a stakeholder involved in the original collaboration, but also a player in the secondary image economy of the art world. That position becomes more complex, still, in participatory photography projects, where social engagement takes the form of producing images eventually destined for the art world in the form of books and exhibitions. Contrast the photographs taken by Julian Germain to document the homeless children when they distributed newspapers in Belo Horizonte, and those photographs taken by the children that appeared in the newspaper, for example. Where the former sit comfortably in Rosamond’s scheme as images *of* participation, the distinction becomes much less clear when copies of the newspaper containing the images made by the homeless children circulate in the art world.

The two bottom lines map closely onto the distinction between use value and exchange value central to Jodi Dean’s examination of communicative capitalism, a politico-economic and ideological configuration in which the latter overrides and displaces the former. The value of communication today is determined less by content than by a capacity to circulate: a matter of speed, frequency and volume.<sup>48</sup> The analysis of the two bottom lines also makes clear that, in an art world context, that relationship does not function in quite the same way as it does in the wider culture. Social media relies on communication as a continual stream, marked by its intensity: a constant talking without necessarily being heard. In the context of participatory art, an institutional infrastructure consisting of galleries, PR teams and media interest helps single out and amplify particular pieces of communicated content. The social rituals performed by the readers of photography books and, particularly, visitors to exhibitions also encourage slower and more contemplative forms of engagement.

Yet communicative capitalism still finds certain echoes in the operations of participatory photography. This is, firstly, a matter of the increasing tendency towards gauging the value of art not through its content, but through the additional representations it manages to generate. Arguments about art's importance are increasingly put to funders in terms of visitor numbers, column inches and levels of social media activity generated, not the aesthetic or creative specifics of particular works.<sup>49</sup> It is, secondly, a matter of how capital is produced and shared. Content producers are frequently prevented from profiting directly from the fruits of their own creativity, a discrepancy that is often justified by citing the personal rewards extracted through opportunities to participate and be seen.

It is tempting to conceptualise the gestures of small-scale inclusivity promoted by some participatory art projects and Martens' bleak account of inevitable exploitation as the opposing poles that necessarily guide an understanding of participation and its meanings. According to such a view, those positions would represent two irresolvable extremes, each requiring us to refute or disavow claims made by the other. Participation provides opportunities for social enrichment, experimental relationships, the inversion of hierarchies, and grassroots journalism. Or else it reproduces the very same social and economic equalities that, at the level of content, it seeks to disturb.

Those positions mirror the dominant faces of left politics during the past twenty years. The cynical insistence on the absence of a space outside capitalism speaks to a larger 'left melancholy,' described by Dean as 'backward-looking, self-punishing, attached to its own failure, and seemingly incapable of envisioning an emancipatory egalitarian future.'<sup>50</sup> It bemoans and denounces the ills of capitalist exploitation, but is incapable of proposing—or even imagining—alternatives. The symbolic view, by contrast, finds parallels in what Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams describe as the 'folk politics' characteristic of more optimistic left projects, involving a 'fetishisation of local spaces, immediate actions, transient gestures, and particularism of all kind'. It is, the authors suggest, 'a politics of defense,' incapable alone of 'articulating or building a new world'. Protests and performances 'can build connections, encourage hope and remind people of their power... Yet, beyond these transient feelings, politics demands the exercise of that power, lest these affective bonds go to waste.'<sup>51</sup>

Rosamond introduces the question of economics not to deride an inevitable complicity, which would be ‘neither interesting, nor fair’ at a time when ‘investment capital has so innovatively woven its expropriations into the social fabric.’ It ‘is all too easy to claim that “everything... has been appropriated by investors’ interests”’. To ‘make such a blanket claim would be to dismiss any potential in these projects for resistance.’ That position finds its mirror image in any equally facile claim that participatory projects—and particularly those that do not directly generate financial value—are ‘necessarily outside of, or antithetical to, financial investment exchange.’<sup>52</sup> To focus solely on one or the other bottom line is to artificially limit the meaning of the work. If some participatory photography projects—and, particularly, the critical discourse that has engulfed them—disavows economics in ways that support that second claim, it is not enough to match that with the parallel claim that they exploit. Attention should focus, instead, on opportunities for what Rosamond calls ‘strategic intervention into the cultural logics of investment.’<sup>53</sup> This will likely involve a more dialectical view; one that does not see the reproduction of inequality as the inevitable material consequence of the production of symbolic value, and which questions if and how socio-economic exploitation can be restructured in line with the symbolic social relations the projects manufacture.

This would raise some interesting questions: does a critical interrogation of art’s material condition necessarily involve a performative redoubling of its very worst, exploitative traits? Or, conversely, would the positive social value of art projects really be sacrificed if methods could be found to redirect the flow of financial capital back towards the communities involved, not as an incidental effect, but as a central component in the production of meaning? How might we create the conditions through which participants take on the role of co-producer in material, not just symbolic, terms? Why can’t critique be delivered through affirmative means?

Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality (LIRCAEI) is a collaboration between Cercle d’Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolese (CATPC) and the Institute for Human Activity (IHA). CATPC is a collective of Congolese artists, many of whom also work on plantations. IHA is a project initiated by Renzo Martens in 2010.

The research centre is situated in Lusanga, a town 650km southeast of Kinchasa, on the site of a former Unilever plantation. Its main objectives are described on its website:

For decades, monoculture has been violently imposed in the plantation zones by distant shareholders. The immense wealth generated by this exploitative system has been partially invested in art institutions devoted to critique, taste and aesthetics.... With the establishment of LIRCAEI, the mechanisms through which plantations underwrite the art world will be reversed. In Lusanga the White Cube will attract the capital and visibility needed to invent a new ecological and economic model on site: the post-plantation.<sup>54</sup>

As a well-known artist, Martens has been able to use his own reputational capital to access the art world finance streams required to fund the project's initial phases, and to draw on money made through the DVD sales of *Enjoy Poverty*. An extended period of research took the form of public seminars and experimental gatherings situated in the Congo, many based on collaborations with plantation workers. An opening seminar, funded by the 2012 Berlin Biennial, included panels on institutional critique and a Skype broadcast by Richard Florida, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, a well-known manual outlining how the arts and creative industries can be leveraged to regenerate urban areas. Talks from Kinchasa-based academics, ecologists and artists addressed related sets of issues from local perspectives.<sup>55</sup>

A 'critical art curriculum' introduced Congolese plantation workers to the politico-economic operations of the global art world and the forms of art making it supports. Workshops led to the formation of CATPC, which currently comprises eight plantation worker artists—Djonga Bismar, Mathieu Kilapi Kasiama, Cedrick Tamasala, Mbuku Kimpala, Mananga Kibuila, Jérémie Mabiala, Emery Mohamba, and Thomas Leba—as well as the ecologist Rene Ngongo and Kinchasa-based artists Michel Ebeka, Eleonore Hellio and Mega Migendi.

At present, CATPC is best known for its production of sculpted self-portraits, reproduced in Belgium chocolate using 3D printers. The sculptures share interesting characteristics with the collaborative documentary photographs engineered in *Enjoy Poverty*. Theorists often suggest that the distinctiveness of photography lies in its 'indexicality'. Like a

footprint in the sand, or a death mask, it is understood to be a direct trace of the subject matter it represents.<sup>56</sup> The CATPC portraits were originally sculpted in mud, gathered from a Congolese riverbank, then cast in chocolate, also sourced from the same locale as the subject matter depicted by the sculptures. The 3D scanning required to produce the print is a photographic process, which traces the contours of the object using light. The eventual 3D print reverse-engineers that process, by filling the scanned contours with solid matter. Like documentary photographs, the portraits exist both as collaborative representations of economic exploitation and as material traces of the exploitation represented.

Portraits by Daniel Manenga and Djonga Bismar can be bought through the LIRCAEI website for \$39.95. Martens has used his network of art world contacts to secure exhibitions of the work in international galleries, raising its profile and boosting sales. The group has so far made more than \$100,000.<sup>57</sup> Funds have been used to buy an area of former plantation, providing a permanent home and symbolic focus for activities developed by LIRCAEI. This includes its attempts to develop a worker-owned 'post-plantation', in which different species of plants are cultivated 'in synergetic constellations across 20 hectares'. Here 'experiments are being undertaken to pair crops... the leaves of banana trees help to shade more delicate plants, or the proximity of the river brings humidity to some fruits, while others benefit from the sandy earth of the arid hillside.'<sup>58</sup> A gallery opened on the site in 2017, designed by Amsterdam-based architects OMA and built by local construction teams. Adopting the form of the archetypal 'white cube', it started life with an exhibition of work by CATPC and donated pieces by well-known artists including Marlene Duman, Luc Tuymans, Sammy Baloji, Carsten Holler and Kadia Attia. A chocolate sculpture of 'the art patron' appeared inside the white cube, with the other works exhibited in a large structure made of palm fronds designed by CATPC as an alternative architectural setting.

Alexandro Alberro describes institutional critique of the late 1960s and early 1970s as an effort to 'juxtapose... the immanent, normative (ideal) self-understanding of the art institution with the (material) actuality of the social relations that currently formed it'. At that time, artists appeared to maintain some faith in art's capacity to reshape the institution, an 'expectation that these interventions would produce actual change in relations



Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise self-portraits, displayed at National Museum Cardiff, 2014.

of power.<sup>59</sup> It is difficult to maintain any similar hopes in the context of the neoliberal system in which institutional art now functions, at least in this earlier form. Any belief that the symbolic exposé performed by artistic critique will be able to overturn the regimes of capital accumulation that play out through contemporary art appear both to overestimate the power of artistic critique and to ignore the ways in which that critique is, at some level, always already in the service of the politico-economic machinery it seeks to expose and oppose.

Where *Enjoy Poverty* addressed that scenario through its performative self-awareness—the parallels implied between the political economies of photojournalism and art—LIRCAEI embraces the logic of capitalist art making in an attempt to re-engineer its operations. Critique, here, is produced via the manufacture of ethical alternatives financed by the corrupt and unequal regimes of the global art world. Art is used as a tool for capital accumulation in the context of the impoverished plantations that have, for many years, powered the same process elsewhere. Models are developed that allow money to be equitably distributed, and to be used to develop

the sustainable economies of the 'post-plantation.' Again, the structural and institutional conditions in which it operates mean it is necessarily and unavoidably complicit with much of what it opposes. But it uses the spoils of its complicity to fund the formation of another kind of art system based on principles of co-operation and ecological sustainability. The critical and creative feedback loop established through the process has sufficient symbolic and self-reflexive knowing to satisfy art world demand for conceptual sophistication, therefore helping to ensure present and future funding.

The initiative has attracted mixed reactions, with some considerable scepticism directed towards the ambiguous role of Renzo Martens as both a powerful white outsider figure and author of a meta-narrative in which Congolese artists are reduced to a living medium.<sup>60</sup> While those reactions are understandable, and grounded in some considerable truth, they often ignore the importance of the educational model on which LIRCAEI is premised. This has been designed to provide access to the forms of knowledge necessary for Congolese plantation workers to take on more active roles as



Opening the White Cube, Lusanga International Research Center for Art and Economic Inequality, 22 April 2017.

co-producers—or perhaps just producers—of the forms of artistic critique most likely to attract art world funding. While Martens engineered the initial situation, those efforts responded to, and grew out of, conversations with collaborators in the Congo, many of whom have been active in the project from the outset. Over time, they have moved from being its object to its subject, flying in the face of the parallel economies of emergency aid, poverty pornography and critical art practice exposed by *Enjoy Poverty*. Thus it would also seem to matter that writers and critics have gradually moved their attention away from Martens and onto the activities of LIRCAEI as an institution.<sup>61</sup> A recent Sternberg book focused solely on the work of the CATPC.<sup>62</sup>

In a famous essay published in 1971, art historian Linda Nochlin pointed to the institutional and structural forces of exclusion implicit in the question, ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’:

The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education – education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals. The miracle is, in fact, that given the overwhelming odds against women, or blacks, that so many of both have managed to achieve so much sheer excellence, in those bailiwicks of white masculine prerogative like science, politics, or the arts.... The total situation of art making, both in terms of the development of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occur in a social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions, be they art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator, artist as he-man or social outcast.... A dispassionate, impersonal, sociological, and institutionally oriented approach would reveal the entire romantic, elitist, individual-glorifying, and monograph-producing substructure upon which the profession of art history is based.<sup>63</sup>

A similar point is made by Martha Rosler, when she describes ‘the acquired nature of the attitudes necessary for partaking in that culture [of contemporary art], the complexity of the conditions under which they may acquire them, and the restrictedness of access to the means for doing so.’<sup>64</sup> Nochlin and Rosler base their ideas on a Marxist critique of realism. Their concern is not so much with realism as an aesthetic, but as a condition of belief, one that obscures the ideological character of intensely political perspectives and the operations through which they come to take on the appearance

of common sense. Their essays highlight the material conditions and cultural experiences required to attain access to the higher strata of what had hitherto appeared to some as though natural hierarchies within the arts. LIRCAEI takes up the point in relation to critical art practice, particularly the geographical, economic and racist partitions it typically reproduces. It does so not just by identifying them as problems, but also by creating the circumstances in which those partitions can be partially undone.

Efforts to re-engineer the labour undertaken by plantation workers have been accompanied by a parallel shift in the socio-economic relations of art. Profits are returned to the makers, on much better terms, it should be noted, than would be the case with most commercial art galleries (LIRCAEI artists keep 100% of direct sales, in contrast to the 40% artists typically receive from a gallery). The principles of collective ownership and sustainable development in the post-plantation push the project far beyond a symbolic reversal of the flow of art world capital, bordering what the feminist economists writing as J.K. Gibson-Graham call the 'community economies' emerging as real-world alternatives to capitalism in its current neoliberal form.<sup>65</sup> Through its combined activities, LIRCAEI proposes innovative ways to support forms of ethical consumerism in the art world, promotes principles of co-production and cooperative ownership in the Congo, develops approaches to economically and environmentally sustainable reinvestment of surplus in the form of the 'post-plantation'; eschews the short-term satisfactions of consumerism in favour of investment in the continued future livelihoods of its producers; and encourages the 'commoning' of resources. It develops a form of art practice that is collaborative, critical of the neoliberal status quo, but also redistributive. Critique is developed through the production of what J.K. Gibson-Graham call 'constructive content'<sup>66</sup>

The view of Martens as an exploitative imperial figure may well be a trap. His role is an inevitable product of the structural dynamic in which a project of this nature has to operate (something that his gallery-based performances about the venture aim to highlight). Rather than ignore those structures, they are acknowledged, embraced and, at least in some way, strategically undone. Followed to its extreme, the critique of Martens becomes immobilising, closing down the space for action within the field of art in favour of the ethical purity that only total withdrawal can allow.

Like the discussion of participatory art based solely on its inclusivity, and the folk politics of social movements such as Occupy, it risks prioritising the fetishisation of organisational forms over a movement to bring about larger-scale, outward-looking and more tangible transformations. A concern with abstract discussions of hierarchical power, and the delusional belief that asymmetries can be imagined away at will, risks obscuring the potential to harness the power already afforded by existing structures and achieve material change.

# 6

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## Images of the World

Ten square-format colour photographs. Shades of dull brown and beige interrupted by abstract designs. Painterly blue forms, black flecks, geometric patterns. A text describes the pictures as archival pigment prints. But, for the meantime at least, they flicker on the screen of my laptop. While it may be difficult initially to decode the precise meaning of the details, I know this is the world seen from above. As Hito Steyerl observes, we have grown ‘increasingly accustomed to what used to be called a God’s-eye view.’<sup>1</sup>

The advent of aerial photography was linked to the series of social, cultural and political upheavals that defined industrial modernity.<sup>2</sup> Where advances in human aviation increased the presence of aerial views, the invention of photography provided a means to make highly naturalistic and reproducible images. For an artist such as Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, aerial photographs possessed the potential to de-familiarise the world and cultivate new ways of seeing.<sup>3</sup> The novel and disorientating perspectives provided modernity with one of its ‘emblematic visual forms.’<sup>4</sup>

Recent years have witnessed an extraordinary proliferation of aerial imagery. Drone technology provides new possibilities for remote controlled killing. A rapidly growing domestic market has increased access to the means of production. It is not uncommon for weddings, sports days and village fetes to be photographed or videoed from the sky. Web platforms such as Google Earth have created abundant opportunities to view satellite imagery. The fact that the novelty of aerial imagery, so central to its cultural meanings during industrial modernity, has been superseded by its ubiquity today provides Steyerl with a further allegory for the social effects of contemporary capitalism. The rapid multiplication, and resulting

normalisation, of aerial views suggests a society in free-fall, devoid of stable horizons. With that 'loss of horizons also comes the departure of a stable paradigm of orientation, which has situated concepts of subject and object, of time and space, throughout modernity'.<sup>5</sup>

Aerial views reveal the traces of human activity as though a series of painterly abstractions. What we first read as Mondrian or Kandinsky requires a caption to become legible as wheat fields, copper mines, server farms.<sup>6</sup> The photographs in *Libyan Oil Fields*, the 2011 series by artist Mishka Henner that I'm looking at, are captioned with names and geographical co-ordinates: *Zelten oil field (28°54'58"N 19°46'12"E)*, *Nafura*



Mishka Henner, *Zelten oil field (28°54'58"N 19°46'12"E)*, from the series *Libyan Oil Fields*, 2011.

*oil & gas facility (29°14'24"N, 21°33'28"E), Haram oil field (28°50'0"N, 18°50'35"E)*. An accompanying text explains that, 'in satellite imagery available to the public, the Libyan desert is in low resolution, except for its oil fields.'<sup>7</sup>

Writing in *Frieze* in 2013, Sarah James suggested that that the politics of Henner's work is often linked to the instrumental value of the information being shared. In his series *Levelland Oil Field and Feedlots* (2012–13), 'painstakingly layered images of American oil fields and cattle feed lots taken from Google Earth' were exhibited alongside geological maps that continue to be used by companies to locate potential drilling sites.<sup>8</sup> Henner initially found the information required to produce *Libyan Oil Fields* as an online PDF priced at \$12,000. Rather than buy the document, he pieced together similar information using publications on Google Books and annual reports produced by the oil industry, all freely accessible online. Data was used to produce a diagram, showing the position of the oil fields in relation to each other, which he superimposed onto the map of Libya using Google Earth's 'Image Overlay' function. The approximate co-ordinates proved close enough to the actual locations to facilitate a successful search, aided by the discovery that areas containing oil fields were shown in higher resolution than other parts of the surrounding desert landscape.<sup>9</sup> Zoom in on particular sites and higher-resolution imagery allows for greater magnification before it dissolves into pixels.

The series shares characteristics with a wider strain of art photography, prominent in recent years. Initial investigative work unearths sensitive geographical data, which is shared, and sometimes sold, in the form of photographs. The goal of illuminating areas of the social world that powerful bodies would sooner remained hidden shares an obvious affinity with a longer history of 'concerned' documentary photography. But, where documentary work has traditionally highlighted specific manifestations of injustice and exploitation by depicting its human symptoms—the victims of war or poverty, for example—recent artists turn their sites towards secretive locations implicated in the exercise of asymmetrical power, or what Trevor Paglen calls the 'black world' of a 'secret state'.<sup>10</sup>

A well-known series by Paglen enlisted online communities of amateur satellite spotters to identify the position of classified surveillance

satellites, photographed in colour and exhibited as beautiful C-type prints. *Limit Telephotography* (2005–8), another series by Paglen, deployed high-power telephotographic lenses to take pictures of CIA black sites: military bases, positioned beyond the range normally viewable to the naked eye, used for activities including the ‘extraordinary rendition’ of terrorist suspects to international locations where they can be tortured on a semi-legal basis. *Dronestagram* (2012) by James Bridle used information about the location of US drone strikes sourced from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism to find satellite imagery of the relevant areas. The pictures were shared on Instagram, Twitter and Tumblr, and formed the basis of an interactive installation shown in galleries. *Watching the Watchers* (2013), another series by Bridle, displayed satellite imagery of stationary drones parked in airfields both as a slideshow and as exhibition prints.

Henner’s series *51 US Military Outposts* (2010) identified the locations of US army bases using a wide variety of publicly accessible resources. Shortly after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton denied the existence of a military base in Honduras, for instance, Henner found pictures taken by



Trevor Paglen, exhibition view, Secession 2010.

a Honduran worker posing with US soldiers on Google's now-defunct photo-sharing site Panoramia. Metadata embedded in the image files confirmed the location and time they were produced.<sup>11</sup> Satellite photographs of the locations were printed in an artist's book and exhibited horizontally on plinths in a commercial London gallery. Visitors to the exhibition were made to look down on the scenes, as though from a drone or satellite.

Projects of this nature involve an interesting definition of what constitutes legitimate modes of artistic labour. They deploy the resources available to artists—often a matter of time, access to an interested audience, and opportunities to secure payment through subsequent sales—to assemble and share sensitive information regarding the operations of powerful militarised bodies. While this work may provide important insights into the secretive world of a US military-industrial complex, it also possesses limits, particularly when taken as the basis for larger political projects. For Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle:



Mishka Henner, *51 US Military Outposts*, 2010, installation view, Carol/Fletcher, London, 2014.

Detection and discovery fall short... While exposure makes for important political work, it has to be linked to systemic concerns if it is not going to be reduced to a mere cataloguing of the black world—an activity which, like that of the satellite spotters whom Paglen enlists to such effect in his work—has its own downsides, with its libidinal investment in infinite registering, itemising, classifying, in the desperate attempt to leave no hole in knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

An understanding of systemic concerns would, at the very least, require access to other bodies of information about the function of these locations and their relationships to other, related sites.

The sophistication of Paglen's work lies in its conscious exploration of those limits. We only have his word that the photographs show what he says they do. The resulting indeterminacy is knowingly accentuated by the quasi-abstraction of many of the scenes depicted, in which it can be difficult to make out clearly discernable forms.<sup>13</sup> Uncertainty is granted an allegorical potential by writers, grounded in the 'interplay between the strategies through which visual and documentary form is given to the refractory geography of covertness, and the awareness that the limits are simultaneously political and cognitive.' Paglen provides a self-reflexive meditation on relationships between visibility, perception and knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

It is less clear where series such as *Dronestagram* or *51 US Military Outposts* sit in relation to such a project. Approaches here more closely resemble the visual forms, and key objectives, of military reconnaissance, particularly through the use of aerial views to document politically sensitive locations. Speaking in 2014, Bridle explained that:

Imaging remains important, whether it's machine vision or it's human imaging. How do we make these things visible in ways that allow us to share and discuss them? I'm not even going to get into my slight doubts about the power of discussing this, the usefulness of making this visible. That alone is not enough. Making a space for debate is not enough. But it's a start. So that's mostly what I am doing at the moment until I figure out the next thing.<sup>15</sup>

Bridle eventually explored those doubts in some detail, in a fascinating 2018 book about society's misplaced faith in the emancipatory character of technology. Principles of counter-surveillance, he suggests, maintain an uncritical commitment to public visibility as the basis for political action, but often fall short of indicating what form that action should take.

‘In opposition to secrecy, we assert transparency,’ but while ‘demands for clarity and openness may appear to be a counter to opacity and classification... they end up asserting the same logics.’<sup>16</sup>

Bridle describes a situation in which politics is reduced to a continual effort to conceal and expose information. The question of how that information could be used, along with the analysis of how accountability can be linked to transformative action, is too often ignored or deferred. At the same time, pleasure can be gained from the vicarious thrill attached to our encounters with covert information (Paglen once ‘confessed’ to being ‘seduced by blank spots on maps, by the promise of hidden knowledge they seemed to contain’).<sup>17</sup> The work of artists appears particularly vulnerable to those risks, due both to the limited demographic of its audiences and its presumed remove from political hustle and bustle beyond the gallery. An aestheticisation of risqué information can slide all too easily into a kind of quasi-political spectacle, titillating viewers with classified materials, while offering no sense of how information can be leveraged to catalyse material change.

The landscapes depicted in *Libyan Oil Fields* are not so clearly implicated in the covert operations of the US military as the drone bases, satellites or black sites identified and shared in other contemporary art projects.<sup>18</sup> The locations of torture, surveillance and covert killing are replaced by what curator George Vasey calls ‘manufacturing sites of global capital... the cheap fuel... that sustains our economic condition.’<sup>19</sup> Yet militarism and the secret state continue to orbit the series as important concerns, linked both to the locations of the specific oil fields depicted by the photographs, and the particular period of time during which *Libyan Oil Fields* was made.

In a 2014 interview with Robert Shore, Henner explained that he produced the series ‘in light of the civil war Britain was about to enter’: a reference to the NATO bombing of Libya in 2011.<sup>20</sup> Viewed in these terms, his appropriated aerial photographs of oil fields combine a particular mode of representation and the object it represents to invoke the mechanisms, and core objectives, of ‘militarized imperialist capitalism.’<sup>21</sup> The aerial perspective provides a detached, militaristic vantage, recalling the reconnaissance photography of earlier conflicts and the drone imagery of today. The oil fields represent the valuable resources of a weaker nation, destabilised

by internal fighting. Their combination alludes to the violence of primitive accumulation and the appropriation of national assets via means of 'regime change.'

The fundamentals of what Naomi Klein calls 'disaster capitalism'—the 'exploitation of moments of crisis, sometimes engineered, to rapidly privatize public resources and turn a quick buck'<sup>22</sup>—were outlined by Milton Friedman as early as 1963:

Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change.... When the crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas lying around. That,



Mishka Henner, Al Kotlah oil field (28°36'10"N, 18°54'46"E), from the series *Libyan Oil Fields*, 2011.

I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.<sup>23</sup>

Fear, disorder and collective upheaval can be exploited 'to engage in radical social and economic engineering.'<sup>24</sup> The privatisation of the New Orleans education system after Hurricane Katrina, the sell-off of Iraqi security services following the deposition of Saddam Hussein, the corporate resorts that sprouted up along the Sri Lankan coast once the 2004 tsunami receded, are among the more recent examples of the doctrine in action.

It is not just the locations of the oil fields that are revealed by Henner's series, but also the politico-economic understanding of war precluded and obscured by more benign justifications for the NATO attack. International supporters explained the intervention as an effort to end state violence against the Libyan people in response to the popular uprising earlier in the year.<sup>25</sup> Writing ahead of the bombings in 2011, economist Michel Chossudovsky provided an alternative view, which linked NATO activity in Libya to 'the broader military agenda in the Middle East and Central Asia which consists of gaining control and corporate ownership over sixty-percent of the world's reserves of oil and natural gas.'<sup>26</sup> A 2013 book by political economist Horace Campbell outlined how NATO, and its allies including Qatar and Saudi Arabia, had taken advantage of the disorder that followed the February protests in order to pursue the goal of regime change. The effects of the 2008 financial crisis, Campbell argues, had compelled neo-imperial powers to find new ways to pry wealth from African states in attempts to revive their own floundering economies.<sup>27</sup>

US diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks in July 2011 revealed diplomatic efforts to woo the Gaddafi regime dating back to 2007. Repeated references are made to Libya's significant 'hydrocarbon producing potential', major 'sedimentary basins with oil and gas resources' and other undiscovered resources revealed by seismic data. Cables demonstrate a mounting anxiety about the 'threat of Libyan Resource Nationalism'—the nationalisation of natural resources—which could jeopardise existing and future contracts for US companies. Concerns were also expressed about Libya's increasingly close relationships with international rivals in China, Russia and India. The US government had, for many years, attempted to

cultivate relationships with key figures in Libya potentially opposed to the Gaddafi regime.<sup>28</sup>

Contemporary artists' identification of black sites highlights the tactics of illegal surveillance and violent control on which powerful bodies rely. This represents one way to undermine carefully constructed images of the US government as democratic, transparent and benign. The landscapes re-presented in *Libyan Oil Fields* operate in distinct but related ways. Audiences are pointed towards nefarious activities knowingly evaded and concealed, when signs of imperial ambition weaken talk of humanitarian goals and the 'responsibility to protect'. But, in this instance, activities speak more directly to the politico-economic logic at the core of global capitalism. The itemisation of black sites is linked to specific and abhorrent injustices, profound breaches of human rights and a disregard for international law. But, as Kinkle and Toscano suggest, this may fall short of illuminating the strategic roles performed by those activities within larger politico-economic formations. The deeds to which *Libyan Oil Fields* alludes—the exploitation of social upheaval to privatise and appropriate another nation's resources—indicate a goal or objective. Military intervention is recast as the mechanism through which that objective will be pursued.

The political space that concerns us is defined, in part, by the reporting of the conflict in Libya. The pictures of aircrafts, bombings and grateful civilians constructed a familiar narrative of democratic intervention. Any distinctive or novel features—the widely circulated pictures of civilians photographing the corpse of Gaddafi on camera phones, for instance—updated that narrative with some new technology and a bit of local flavour. The 24/7 coverage that dominated reports of recent conflicts compounded photography's historical appetite for unexplained and violent incident. As Stallabrass observes, today's news organisations demand 'spectacular or at least up to the minute reports, high on emotion and low on analysis.'<sup>29</sup> When we look at the images that came out of Libya, we cannot help but register those ways in which they either support a discourse of humanitarian intervention or, at the very least, risk an uncritical complicity with those justifications by documenting unfolding events on the ground.

Harun Farocki's 1989 film, *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, focuses on a series of aerial photographs taken by Allied forces over



A missile drops in the vicinity on residence of leader Moamer Kadhafi and military targets in the suburb of Tajura, Tripoli, Libya, March 29, 2011.

Poland in 1944. At the time the pictures were made, military analysts saw only the IG Faben industrial complex, of interest as a potential target for future bombings. When CIA staff returned to the images in 1977 they noticed ‘the long, sinewy lines of people huddled before the gas chambers’ at Auschwitz, also depicted in the photographs. Farocki’s film is concerned with the political and cultural lacunae reproduced through our encounters with images. Acts of looking, seeing and finding, he suggests, are conditioned by wider contexts. Those contexts, and the modes of understanding they sanction or encourage, help determine what is legible or illegible in any particular image.<sup>30</sup> The forms of legibility that result from the aerial photographs in *Libyan Oil Fields* do not only relate to what had hitherto remained unnoticed in its pictures of the Libyan desert. Those pictures, and what they are used to suggest about the NATO intervention, lend visibility to what remained illegible elsewhere. Photographs of dropping bombs and military hardware are recast as signs of disaster capitalism in action.

Henner has described *Libyan Oil Fields* as an exercise in 'pre-emptive photography'.<sup>31</sup> The series did not originally provide a response to actually existing justifications, nor even to an actually existing conflict. Instead it anticipated the intervention, and the claims used as its justification, by venturing an alternative explanation *before* events occurred. *Libyan Oil Fields* takes lessons learnt from Iraq and projects them onto Libya to model a likely future scenario, reconfiguring the hawkish rhetoric of the Bush administration as playful political gesture.

What we witness in *Libyan Oil Fields* is less life imitating art, than art anticipating life, albeit it in a fairly rudimentary way. As 'pre-emptive photography', the conceptual foundations of the project rested on a speculative investment in the strong likelihood of yet more neo-imperial war. Linking military intervention to primitive accumulation highlights questions of causation to build knowledge of systems. The gesture of pre-empting a specific intervention, based on its likely adherence to those principles, signals one way in which that knowledge might be put to use.

Tactics deployed to wage that claim speak to a larger shift in contemporary photographic art, described by Lucy Soutter as a 'move into three and four dimensions'.<sup>32</sup> Soutter points to the variety of ways in which artists have combined an interest in photography's representational capacities as a two-dimensional image with reflections on its potential as a material object and/or with acts of making, viewing and presenting photographs as something performative and, ultimately, time-based. *Libyan Oil Fields* provides an interesting manifestation of the second tendency: utilising the time period during which the photographs were sourced from Google Earth, and the anticipation of events that would follow, as the basis for an act of site-specific appropriation. The specific 'site' is a matter of time, space and geopolitical circumstances. The meanings suggested through the act of finding and re-framing the pictures of Libya are determined both by what was taking place at the particular moment they were 'found', and its relationship to a series of events that were yet to happen.

*Libyan Oil Fields* marks a significant break from the temporal relationships that have characterised some of the more prominent examples of art photography as it addressed a so-called 'War on Terror', where a focus on the effects of war on landscapes pulled attention in the opposite direction. In a persuasive critique of the genre, David Company

describes a ‘highly visible turn towards photographing the aftermath of events – traces, fragments, empty buildings, empty streets, damage to the body and to the world.’ These images ‘appear to us particularly static, often sombre and quite “straight” kind of pictures. They assume an aesthetic of utility closer to forensic photography than traditional photo-journalism.’<sup>33</sup> As though developing the theme, Simon Norfolk—a well-known proponent of the genre—likens his photographs to archaeological sites.<sup>34</sup> It remains unclear if and how viewers can obtain the tools necessary to begin an excavation (something that normally requires reference to accompanying texts) or exactly what type of knowledge they are likely to produce when they do.



Simon Norfolk, ‘Landscape with shepherd boy’ from the series *Afghanistan Chronotopia*, 2001. Bullet-scarred apartment building and shops in the Kart-e Char district of Kabul. This area was trashed by many waves of fighting during the civil war of the 1990s. As the main road to the new Parliament and a US Special Forces base, it has also seen many car-bomb attacks by the Taliban in more recent years.

To position photography long after the action represents a very different proposition to pictures made ahead of the Tomahawks and tanks. If the exploding bombs of photojournalism represent a kind of temporal ground-zero, then *Libyan Oil Fields* and aftermath photography face off on either side: one dealing with cause, the other with effect. For John Roberts, ‘photography of the event-as-aftermath... tends to stress the ineluctability of the recent past through emphasising the melancholic allure of photographic stillness.’ This functions ‘not as a critique of photographic transparency,’ but a ‘place where photography openly declares its public and social limits.’<sup>35</sup> The move away from the depiction of unexplained violence takes the form of a fetishistic incomprehension, insisting not on the demand for further work, but on an inability to catalyse that work in the first place. The political and economic imperatives that power disaster capitalism become further buried behind the ruination caused by war, and the alluring surfaces of the photographs that document the wreckage. The danger, as Company sees it, is the cultivation of ‘an indifference and political withdrawal that masquerades as concern.... Mourning by association becomes merely an aestheticized response.’<sup>36</sup>

The manner in which certain activities contribute to the potential meanings of *Libyan Oil Fields* ensures that access to them requires considerable work and significant additional knowledge. We need to know about the particular moment the series was produced, for instance—captions provide only the year, not the day or month—and what would take place in Libya after that time. This is itself representative of another wider tendency, also discussed by Soutter, when she writes about the commonplace assumption that ‘we may need to read around contemporary art photography to understand it.’ Seasoned audiences routinely expect exhibitions to include explanatory texts. They understand that catalogue essays, even ‘conversations with gallery assistants,’ can provide access to the additional knowledge required to illuminate art and its meanings.<sup>37</sup>

Open-endedness and ambiguity are generally viewed in positive terms. Artists, critics and curators identify a generous act, creating space for individual agency to be exercised and subjective responses developed. This takes on a distinctive and in some ways contradictory character when projects are based on sharing covert or sensitive information,

however. A tension exists between the drive towards exposure and transparency, on the one hand, and the opacity resulting from a refusal to share information, on the other. Those lacking the knowledge required to appreciate the political dimensions may be encouraged to seek it out. Or else, unaware of the violence anticipated but not depicted by Henner's series, may instead take pleasure from the seductive 'painterly' quality of the appropriated satellite photography.<sup>38</sup>

*Libyan Oil Fields* is based on two acts of identification. The locations of the oil fields are shared through the combination of images and titles. That these were the only areas of the Libyan desert to appear on Google Earth in high resolution is signalled by an accompanying text, which hangs over the series as an unexplained and open-ended provocation. Appreciating its full significance for the project and its meanings requires yet more additional work.

Google does not own imaging satellites. Instead, it licenses existing photographs from a number of corporate providers, originally produced for a variety of clients.<sup>39</sup> Copyright information included alongside the photographs on Google Earth indicates that two companies supplied the images of Libya. Digital Globe is an American operation, described on its website as:

a leading provider of commercial high-resolution earth observation and advanced geospatial solutions that help decision makers better understand our changing planet in order to save lives, resources and time. Sourced from the world's leading constellation, our imagery solutions deliver unmatched coverage and capacity to meet our customers' most demanding mission requirements. Each day customers in defence and intelligence, public safety, civil agencies, map making and analysis, environmental monitoring, oil and gas exploration, infrastructure management, navigation technology, and providers of location-based services depend on Digital Globe data, information, technology and expertise to gain actionable insight.<sup>40</sup>

Airbus Defence and Space works closely with the French Space Agency to provide 'decision makers with sustainable solutions to increase security, optimize mission planning and operations, boost performance, improve management of natural resources and, last but not least, protect our environment.'<sup>41</sup>

Two, related, economic models play out through the photographs re-used by Google. The first is the subject of a project by photographer Toby Smith, documenting the personnel, equipment and working spaces involved in building, maintaining and transporting satellites. Photographs linked to a device used above Latin America, for example, show a team of engineers in Toulouse, along with the Antonov AN-124, ‘the heaviest cargo plane ever made’, on which it was shipped to Bainhanous in Kazakhstan. The plane is staffed by a twelve-man Ukrainian crew, ‘who live in a tobacco tarnished bunker-like space inside it and rarely disembark.’<sup>42</sup> Smith’s series presents us with the brute materiality of the bodies and infrastructure on which networked communications rely.

The national affiliations of satellite owners, and the geopolitical networks in which their work is enmeshed, become evident through the resolution and availability of images depicting particular locations. It has not always been possible to purchase high-resolution photographs of Israel, for example, because American companies owned the only satellites operating above the country. Neither are US corporations legally permitted to sell high-resolution imagery of the country today, if it is not already available commercially from a non-US provider.<sup>43</sup> The limiting of

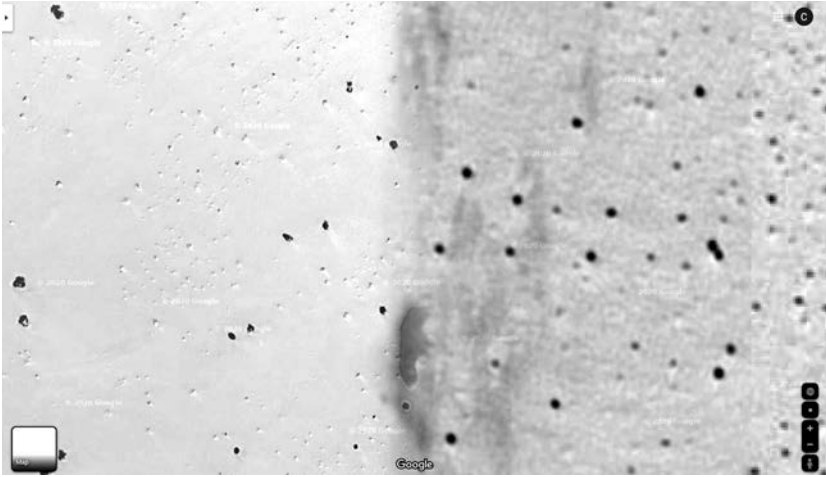


Toby Smith, SES-6, a telecommunications satellite destined for service over Brazil, is loaded onto an AN-124 cargo plane at Toulouse Airport, 2014.

supply is not only a matter of overt prohibition. In 2003, artist Laura Kurgan attempted to buy high-resolution imagery of Baghdad from US-owned Digital Globe, in order to see where American troops had been located when Iraq's national museums were being looted. Although 'no shutter control had been exercised by the US government', Kurgan explains in her book *Close Up at a Distance*, the company 'had informally and voluntarily not distributed imagery of Baghdad in which US troops might be visible'.<sup>44</sup>

The varying resolution of satellite imagery used on Google Earth speaks of a second set of transactions, structured according to the interests of specific clients, not the patriotic duties of producer-providers. Because Google re-uses photographs produced for 'customers in defence and intelligence, public safety, civil agencies, map making and analysis, environmental monitoring, oil and gas exploration, infrastructure management, navigation technology, and providers of location-based services', the contrasting resolution of its online image tapestry bears the traces of previous clients' work.<sup>45</sup> As a result, 'the resolution of differentials in Google Earth act as a map of (predominantly Western) economic and political interests - which is to say, those of customers of the commercial imaging companies from whom Google derives its data sets'.<sup>46</sup>

The relationship between Google's images of the world and the reproduction of larger politico-economic projects is part of a much longer history. The Mercator Map, for instance, scales regions according to their distance from the equator. Countries in the Global North appear to be significantly larger than those in the south, ignoring actual landmass in line with Eurocentric bias.<sup>47</sup> Google Earth distorts the world according to similar principles, but through the resolution of the imagery used. Areas that appear in detail with a fast refresh rate are 'typically those with the highest real estate values... Disaster areas, conflict zones or places where intelligence has been directed can also suddenly emerge with startling detail'.<sup>48</sup> The difficulty of knowing precisely which characteristic has prompted the production of the imagery, and the close inter-relationships they share, means the political economies of satellite photography provide a perfect visual allegory for the standard operating procedures of disaster capitalism: the imperatives of military surveillance, corporate prospecting for natural resources, and the drive towards privatisation coalesce in the existence of high-res image files.



Photograph showing the different resolution of the photographs of Libya used on Google Earth (2020).

A widely quoted essay by Steyerl addresses the politics of resolution in terms of ‘the poor image’: ‘a copy in motion... its quality... bad, its resolution substandard... a rag or a rip; an avi or a jpeg, a lumpen proletariat in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution.’<sup>49</sup> *Libyan Oil Fields* focuses not on poor images, but on a plutocracy of sorts. For Mark Dorian, there is ‘a certain bravado attached to image definition in relation to national territories’: Silicon Valley workers speak in terms of ‘third world low-res,’ not poor images. Being ‘first world may come to mean not just having more air-conditioned offices and motorway networks, but also having hyper clear territorial images on Google Earth.’<sup>50</sup>

The satellite photographs used by Mishka Henner were produced commercially to meet the needs of particular clients. While it is difficult to establish with certainty who those clients are, or what functions those images served, their resolution indicates the level of scrutiny to which the landscape depicted had been subject. So we can speculate, however tentatively, about the specific roles images served for the governments, military planners and corporate prospectors who used them before Henner or Google.

Given the relatively small number of providers that dominate the satellite imaging marketplace, and the timeframe during which *Libyan Oil Fields* was produced, it is perfectly possible that we are looking at the very same images that, in one way or another, informed a NATO intervention which, at the time the series was made, had not yet happened. The existence of the high-resolution photographs lent credence to Henner's speculative analysis regarding true motives behind the intervention. Discovering the images on Google Earth confirmed the likelihood of military action the series was produced to pre-empt.

Dean explains that Keynesianism viewed criminality within the framework of functioning institutions. Crime was seen as a social and collective problem to be remedied through state intervention, particularly forms of socialisation linked to education and job opportunity. Contemporary criminology, by contrast, 'views crime as routine... a response of normal individuals to available choices based on market incentives like any other.'

Rather than target the causes of criminality, neoliberal ideology promotes the pre-emption of specific crimes. The dramatic expansion of CCTV, increased reliance on police stop-and-search powers, partitions that separate rich from poor, all endeavour to prevent crime through its anticipation. Something similar is true of facial recognition software, which allows the state, even individual businesses, to identify the faces of known criminals, monitor their behaviour in particular contexts, and intervene to remove them before crimes are committed. Dean explains that actions such as these ultimately accept—and, in doing so, actively reproduce—the notion that crime is an inevitable and inherent part of any functioning free-market system.<sup>51</sup>

The same principles find unlikely grassroots expression in the subject of another project by Mishka Henner. The term 'scam-baiting' is used to describe the activities of those in the Global North who attempt to waste the time of internet scammers—often known as '419ers'—based in the Global South, often in Nigeria. Scam-baiters reply to phishing emails from the fictional relatives of disposed African leaders, looking for bank accounts in which to deposit fortunes in exchange for generous fees. Playing along with the request, they exchange numerous and increasingly absurd emails, before asking for a photograph to prove that the scammer

is a real person. Clear instructions are provided, often demanding the correspondent be shown holding a sign bearing a demeaning pun, dressed in women's clothing, and/or performing sexualised poses. The intention is to use up as much of the scammer's time as possible, in order to limit the resources available to successfully commit fraud elsewhere. The resulting photographs serve both as fetishistic talismans and sadistic trophies, exhibited to like-minded folk on social media platforms and online picture galleries.<sup>52</sup>

Henner's series remade a selection of the jokey signs as meticulous copies, displayed alongside prints of the photographs in which they appeared. Measurements of the fingers in the photographs were used to accurately scale up the signs to the size of the cardboard originals. The painstaking craft involved in their reproduction resembles that of Mark Wallinger's widely celebrated recreation of Brian Haw's anti-Iraq protest camp for display in the Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain in 2007. Here a team of assistants used photographs as the basis for a careful fabrication of the weathered banners and yellowing pictures which Haw had used to



Mishka Henner, *Scam Baiters*, 2013, installation view, Carol/Fletcher, London, 2014.

condemn Tony Blair's slaughter of the innocent. Speaking about the project at the time, Wallinger explained that 'it is only when things are of accepted worth that they are remade with such precision and thorough means'.<sup>53</sup> It remains unclear with whom Henner's series would have us identify and, so too, what exactly should be considered the source of the signs' worth. Are we to pay attention to the labour of the people who crafted them, to the sardonic humour of those who ordered them into existence, or to the photographs in which they appeared? What justifies the precision and care involved in their remaking?

The acts of pre-emption that *Scam Baiters* and *Libyan Oil Fields* entail share important similarities, particularly in terms of the political diagnoses implied. The scam-baiters believe citizens cannot rely on existing systems to protect those other than the wealthy from exploitation and crime. *Scam-o-rama*, a manual for aspirant vigilantes, explains how a 'victim with anything less than huge losses and resources... is unlikely to be vindicated through the justice system'.<sup>54</sup> In more profound terms, their activities attest to the failure of globalisation as a political and economic project. That internet fraud is motivated by market incentives is understood by scammers and scam-baiters alike. Angry testimonials from 419ers describe their work as a replication and reversal of the exploitative dynamics that normally define the relationship between Global North and Global South.<sup>55</sup>

*Libyan Oil Fields* suggests that governments and military bodies cannot be relied upon to act in ways that are either transparent or just, by pointing to the violent means through which profit and privatisation are pursued. Anticipated events suggest that the mechanisms through which those institutions should be held accountable, whether representative democracy or international law, are ineffectual as deterrents. The overall effects of the pre-emptive gesture are remarkably similar to those outlined by Dean's analysis of criminology: actions that may once have been regarded, however idealistically, as a form of deviance are reshaped as inevitable and, ultimately, normal in a world where the interests of a 'powerful ruling alliance between a few very large corporations and a class of mostly wealthy politicians' shape activity on the international stage. Far from 'freeing the market from the state... political and corporate elites have

simply merged, trading favours to secure the right to appropriate precious resources previously held in the public domain.<sup>56</sup>

Photographs demanded by scam-baiters can be properly described as operative images: symbolic fetishes, yes, but also a genuine preventative measure. Low-level vigilante action deploys the time taken to produce the photographs, and the protracted email exchanges through which they are ordered into being, as a way of stopping potential crimes. This relies on the application of basic principles regarding efficiency and production: maximising the time spent on non-profitable activities and thereby minimising the time available to commit successful fraud. The appropriated photographs in *Libyan Oil Fields* are also operative images: used by the military and corporate prospectors to inform future activity, by Google to generate behavioural data, then by the art world as objects to be sold. By focusing solely on the first of these activities, *Libyan Oil Fields* risks obscuring the other two. Google is modelled as a useful resource for artists, not a constituent part of surveillance capitalism; the art world as a space for political and aesthetic expression, not financial exchange. At the same time, the military intervention informed by the images' initial application becomes no less likely as a result of its artistic pre-emption. Anticipation is linked not to attempts to prevent predicted wrongdoing, but on rehearsing likely futures as a kind of symbolic and ritualistic act.

What Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick described as 'paranoid thinking' is above all a temporal condition, grounded in pre-empting the very worst that can happen. By ensuring 'that bad news be always already known' paranoia internalises the experience of oppression, reproducing it as a protection or shield: 'anything you can do (to me) I can do worse... Anything you can do (to me) I can do first - to myself'. The principle casualty is the hope that things could turn out differently in the future, for this permits us to avoid the painful knowledge that things could have turned out differently in the past. It is only when we are free from paranoia, Sedgwick suggests, that 'the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present'. This demands 'her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did.'<sup>57</sup>

Unable to change the system, or to entertain the possibility it might be changed, *Libyan Oil Fields* provides lessons in the operational logic to

which disaster capitalism adheres. But, by mapping lessons from the present onto the future and anticipating capital's next move, does it also relinquish the hope that things could turn out differently? Those who believe themselves to lack power in the current system gain the illusion of agency, or at least something that resembles it, by demonstrating their sophisticated knowledge of a cruel and sordid game. This is based not on attempts to subvert the rules, to change its likely outcome, or exploit anticipated crises for progressive ends, but only to predict the likely score: we lose, again.

The discovery of the high-resolution images of the oil fields, signalled by the text accompanying the photographs, indicates the very real ways in which the actions anticipated were in fact already underway. This is to both to validate paranoia—*just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not after you*—and to underline its inherent futility. Its efforts to envisage the future appear to confirm, not unsettle, the powerful hold exerted by the current order upon what we are capable of dreaming.

Post-industrial work is linked to what Fredric Jameson describes as 'a convulsive shift in our mapping of reality', one 'that tends to deprive people of their sense of producing that reality, to confront them with the fact of pre-existing circuits without agency'. In an era of networked communications, meetings arranged ad hoc via smartphone replace longer-term commitments placed in diaries. Rolling television news feeds of current events reported in 'real time' are substituted for detailed or reflective forms of journalism. Social media platforms reshape experience as continual streams of status updates: life lived as a perpetual present.<sup>58</sup>

Changes replicate the effects of larger transformations associated with the dematerialisation of capital, the expansion of financial markets, and 'the novel and universal micro-temporality' it produces. Volatile speculations on stock market 'futures' and the cultures of just-in-time production find close parallels in the day-to-day uncertainties of precarious work.

Something similar has been true of the art world, where a seemingly constant stream of art fairs, group shows and biennials have replaced established cycles of monographic exhibitions of new work, held every couple of years.<sup>59</sup> Print-on-demand self-publishing has radically

accelerated the speed and frequency with which some feel compelled to produce books. The more successful artists are required to be physically present at a never-ending roster of openings, tours, press tours, previews, and at paid 'gigs' such as talks, seminars and workshops. The less successful must dedicate time to the creation of opportunities and to gaining access to networks, above and beyond making art.<sup>60</sup>

'Few periods,' Jameson suggests, 'have proved as incapable of framing immediate alternatives for themselves, let alone of imagining those great utopias that have occasionally broken on the status quo like a sunburst.' Yet it 'is scarcely fair to expect long-term projections or the deep breath of collective projects from minds trained in the well-nigh synchronic habits of zero-sum calculations and keeping an eye on profits.'<sup>61</sup> Is pre-emptive photography the product of a condition for which it also provides a powerful allegory?

The systemic knowledge on which the making of *Libyan Oil Fields* relies can perform important strategic roles. But that potential can only be realised when opportunities to change systems are identified and pursued. This will require a political imaginary capable of envisaging futures radically different from the horrors faced in the past, and in the present, working against the disabling effects of our free-fall by seeking out utopian horizons.

# 7

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## Photography After Capitalism

*Movement Materials and What We Can Do* (2012) is a video essay by Andrew Norman Wilson, about the production and reception of his 2010 project, *Workers Leaving the Googleplex* (2010).<sup>1</sup> Two separate videos, shown next to each other on the screen, depict people moving around a Silicon Valley campus. A voiceover explains what we are seeing.

Wilson had been working as a contractor at Google, employed to edit video. He became aware of a group of mainly black and Latino people leaving the Google complex at 2.15 every afternoon. All employees at Google wear badges, the colour of which designates their employment status. Permanent employees have white badges, interns have green badges, contractors such as Wilson have red. The workers leaving the Googleplex at 2.15pm wore yellow badges. Wilson searched the company intranet for more information, learning that the yellow badge workers were ‘Scan-Ops’—the low-paid temporary contractors employed to produce the vast volumes of content required by the corporation’s controversial effort to publish all the books in existence online in digital form. The term ‘Scan-Ops’ is misleading, however. The books were not scanned, but photographed using two digital cameras positioned on a specialist copy stand. It was the Scan-Ops’ job to position the books, turn the pages, and to operate the cameras.

Wilson discovered that the people with yellow badges started work at 4.00am, and used their own transport, not the shuttles laid on by Google. Where red, green and white badge workers were entitled to a wide range of perks and facilities, yellow badge workers operated according to strict shifts and had to ask managers for toilet breaks. He decided to film the



Andrew Norman Wilson, *Movement Materials and What We Can Do*, 2012.

different workers as they entered and exited the Googleplex, in an effort to visualise how Google's caste-based employment system played out through the movement of employees across time and space. He also struck up conversations with some of the Scan-Ops, to find out more about their jobs, and 'because it seemed like a nice way to meet people who work right next to me.' When Google managers found out that Wilson had been filming, and that he had tried to talk to Scan-Op employees about their work, his contract was terminated.

The rest of the presentation conflates corporate, academic and artistic lecture techniques to explore diverse sets of references that expand the meanings of Wilson's earlier Googleplex project.<sup>2</sup> The video essay establishes a constellation of creative and non-creative labour practices, which speak to and through each other. A meditation on the materiality of the images we view, and the sounds we hear, is linked to the materiality of the body that advances the PowerPoint slides by pressing computer keys, and the bodies that operated the cameras at Google. The audience is made aware of the furniture they are sitting on, the phones in their pockets. These are not phones, but small computers, connecting them to the network and thus enabling behaviour to be surveyed, and then monetised, by multi-national corporations.

Wilson explains that his decision to film the workers leaving the Googleplex drew directly on the Lumière brothers' famous early film of workers leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon where photographic plates were made. It also looked to a multi-screen work by Harun Farocki, similarly inspired by the earlier film, about the representation of workers leaving factories across the histories of cinema. *Workers Leaving the Googleplex* revisited those motifs using contemporary techniques, including 'high-definition video, information visualisation, spatial montage and media installation.'

We learn how, in order to 're-photograph' Walker Evans' iconic images of rural depression-era workers, artist Sherrie Levine instructed her studio assistant to photograph pages from an exhibition catalogue. Larry Page and Sergey Brin also instructed workers to operate cameras to photograph books. In both cases, cognitive labour is afforded the status of authorship/ownership, while manual labour provides the technical support through which the larger plans are realised. Levine's critique of authorship and the fetishisation of the art object were easily subsumed by the paradoxical operations of the art market. Her pictures were protected by copyright and sold in the form of rarefied commodities possessing an aura of their own. Google profits from our search histories by harvesting data.

The perks made available to the green, red and white badge workers, but denied to those with yellow badges—the free food, Google bikes, sleep pods—resemble some of the benefits attached to twentieth-century welfare capitalism. When viewed as efforts to increase the loyalty of workers to the company and thus to improve productivity, they share some important characteristics. But they are by no means the same.

Kodak wanted to curb the appeal of trade unions and resist government action to break up monopolies. The same is true of its scientific management of production, which was initially implemented in ways that aimed to increase job security and stable employment. The perks available to Kodak staff and, particularly, the company's redistribution of profits among its workers, betrayed anxieties about the latent power of collective bargaining and the social democratic principles of an emerging Keynesian consensus.<sup>3</sup> A multi-national corporation such as Google has less to fear. A concentrated thirty-year assault on trade unions, the neo-liberalisation

of government, and the ease with which profits can be channelled via alternative jurisdictions to avoid tax, have weakened, if not entirely dissolved, the sources that fuelled the anxieties of Kodak Eastman.

In Dave Eggers' 2013 novel, *The Circle*, youthful staff employed at the eponymous corporation—a fictional amalgam of Facebook and Google—seem happy to work long hours because their days are punctuated by a range of leisure activities. Many choose to sleep in beautifully designed dormitories, available for free, to save them the bother of taking the shuttle bus back to their own apartments.<sup>4</sup> This is only a slight exaggeration of the world described by Wilson, and by other Google employees. One software engineer explains that, because:

of the large amounts of benefits (such as free foods) there seems to be an unsaid rule that employees are expected to work longer hours. Many people work more than 8 hours a day and then will be on email or work for a couple of hours at home, at night as well (or on the weekends).<sup>5</sup>

Google's services blur the distinction between labour and leisure for the post-Fordist workers on whose creativity and cognitive input it relies. The health spas, parties and free food are not simply a way to cement loyalty, but also to colonise the imaginations of employees, redirecting their creativity and emotional investment towards the goals of the corporation. When work feels like fun, and is experienced as an opportunity for individual self-realisation, not just a means to get by, people are likely to invest more of themselves in the work they do.

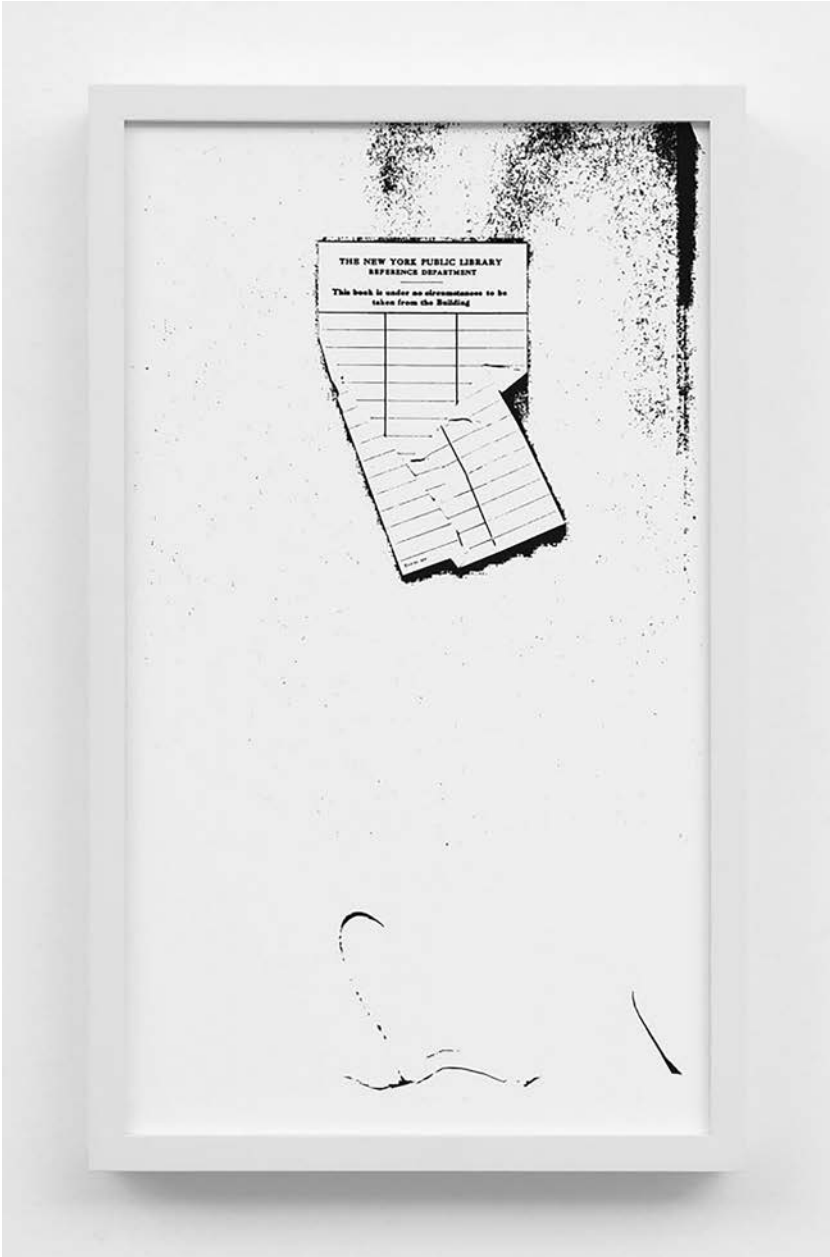
Like some strange Fordist hangover, the manual work performed by the Scan-Ops requires no equivalent creative engagement. The task they are paid to perform is so straightforward that it limits the space for almost any creative reflection. It makes no financial sense to squander additional services on efforts to colonise their imagination. The fact that this work had not been automated tells us only that people were more efficient (i.e. cheaper) than robots in the present context. That the work had not been outsourced to China, like the production of computational hardware, may have more to do with the ready availability of English language books in American libraries than with an ethical concern about creating jobs in the USA. The last point puts an interesting spin on arguments developed by economist Mariana Mazzucato about relationships between tech

industries and the state. Most Silicon Valley corporations develop products that draw on research and technology funded by governments, often in relation to its military activity. While corporations are rarely charged for using that knowledge, and little action is taken to curb tax evasion, this has not prevented the neoliberal caricature of the state as being a barrier to innovation.<sup>6</sup> *Scan-Ops* (2011–present), a photographic series produced by Wilson using anomalies discovered on Google Books, includes a photograph of the lending docket stuck to the cover page of an item from the New York Public Library.

By documenting the different forms of movement associated with the green, red, white and yellow badge employees, *Workers Leaving the Googleplex* highlights Google's efforts to separate those who perform different types of labour. That very deliberate division tells us something important about capitalism in its current form. Despite a thirty-year assault on trade unions, it seems that the poorly paid manual workforce—most of them black and Latino—are still perceived to represent a threat. But is this really because they are regarded as an imminent revolutionary force?

In a harrowing account of the precarious existence of UK 'jobseekers'—the British government's preferred term for unemployed people in receipt of welfare—Ivor Southwood points to the ways in which the ideologies of post-Fordism have penetrated deep into the culture of working. On the one hand, Job Centres reproduce the disciplinary regimes faced by Google's yellow badge workers, via strict timetables, militant structures and draconian punishments. On the other, jobseekers are expected to embrace the characteristics that define the cognitive regimes of white, green and red badge employees, seeing work not only as a means of material subsistence, but as a site for self-realisation.

Even the most menial roles today are dressed up as 'passions'. In job interviews, candidates 'must project an all-purpose positivity' by extemporising around a common script about their interest and dedication, but 'without revealing its artificiality'.<sup>7</sup> That scenario plays out as dark comedy in Irvine Welsh's 1993 novel, *Trainspotting*, when Spud, one of the book's junkie protagonists (played by actor Ewen Bremner in Danny Boyle's 1996 film adaptation), is forced to attend an interview for a job in a leisure centre. Although Spud does not want the job, he cannot be seen to sabotage the interview deliberately because this will mean his



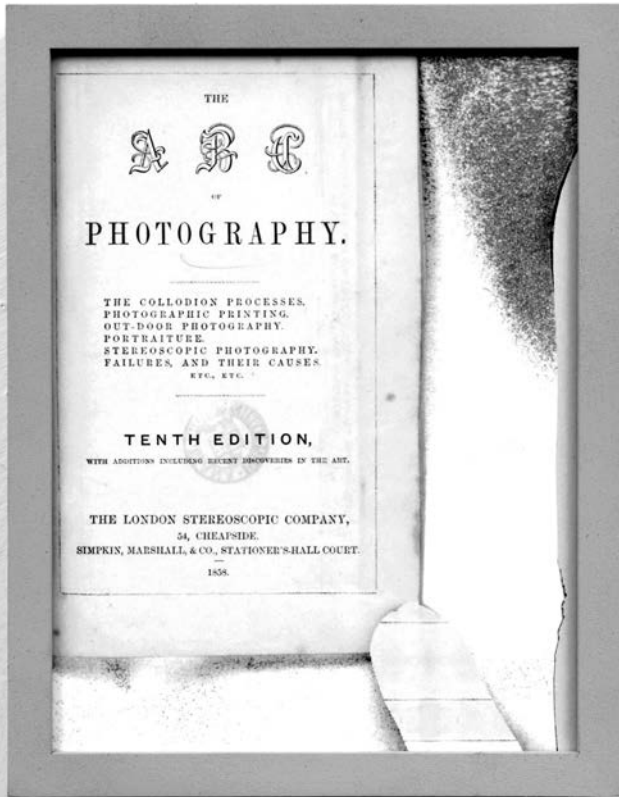
Andrew Norman Wilson, *The Lives of Saints - 485*, from the series Scan-Ops, 2012–present.

unemployment benefits will be cut. He attends the appointment high on amphetamine, pushing the script to hilarious extremes. Buzzing on speed, Spud enacts an identification with the prescribed role that appears so disturbing in its enthusiasm that the interview can only fail.<sup>8</sup>

An acute asymmetry defines the field of work today, for many of the jobs workers are obliged to appear to feel passionate about do not typically enjoy the social status, the wages and/or privilege of those recognised as *being cognitive*. Any demand for a performance of passionate enthusiasm becomes particularly obscene in such a context. The threat of the yellow badge workers lies in their potential to see that asymmetry reversed. The Scan-Ops confront those who have fallen most fully under cognitive capitalism's spell with the series of disavowals that structure their lives. Society has not been liberated from toil, so much as work has been repackaged as freedom. Many of us are continually haunted by the repressed suspicion that every part of our existence—the things we love, the relationships we forge, the beliefs we profess to hold—are, at some level, always already co-opted by the imperatives of profit.

Google makes work feel like play. The yellow badge operatives make plain to others that play today means increased productivity and the maximisation of shareholder gain. As labour is dematerialised and traditional divisions between work and leisure break down, 'capital not only occupies the working hours during which products or goods (and its surplus value) are produced; it absorbs all of the worker's time, as well as his or her existence, thoughts, and creative desires.'<sup>9</sup>

Speaking in 2003, Brian Holmes proposed that art museums provide a training ground for cognitive workers employed in the manipulation of signs: 'it mobilizes you, it plugs you into a communications loop, it gets you to adhere, to commit, to do your part, to play your role, to burn the midnight oil, it makes you part of a dynamic society.'<sup>10</sup> That work is supported, in turn, by the creatives employed directly within the art world, and by what Hito Steyerl calls 'the reproductive labour of cell-phone bloggers and cleaning ladies' which supports the work of artists and curators.<sup>11</sup> Distinctions between these fields are fluid, of course: curators blog, artists clean, bloggers create art content. In the same essay, Steyerl observes how Farocki's *Workers Leaving the Factory* gains additional meaning when



Andrew Norman Wilson, *The ABC of Photography - 2*, from the series *Scan-Ops*, 2012-present.

shown in the context of contemporary art museums. Farocki's workers leave the factory and enter the art space, re-treading the path that leads from Fordist to post-Fordist working.<sup>12</sup> In Wilson's video essay the workers spill out of the factory across the histories of image culture—the Lumières'

photographic factory, Farocki's appropriated cinematic representations, Wilson's earlier Googleplex video—and enter the art space we occupy.

Art historian Catherine Grant has explored the importance of re-enactment to a wide range of contemporary art practices, through the lens of what she terms 're-performance'. Artists who knowingly revisit earlier cultural texts, often produced by other people, embody and analyse 'an event, text or ideas' in ways that 'put the past in the presence of now'.<sup>13</sup> *Movement Materials and What We Can Do* does something similar but, in this instance, the past encompasses the video about the Googleplex workers, the reception of the video described in the presentation, and the various forms of creative and non-creative labour to which it is linked. The 'now' is both that of its public screenings, and of *now*, as writer and readers perform the roles assigned to them within art's strange economies.

The institutions of contemporary art are not confined to buildings such as museums. As Andrea Fraser observes, the labour of a range of groups and individuals help define and reproduce the field of art.<sup>14</sup> *Movement Materials and What We Can Do* knowingly highlights its own relationship to this work. The constellation of practices established through Wilson's video essay, and the way they are described—the relationships between Scan-Ops, artists, corporation owners, video makers, security guards—places the self-reflexive examination of work on a socio-economic footing. This complicates any simplistic distinction between the supposedly critical spaces of art and those associated with other forms of labour. It also frustrates easy distinctions between the operations of corrupt multinationals and the financialisation of creative culture.

That fact is made particularly clear when the video is installed in galleries, which are re-fashioned as what press releases describe as corporate-style 'viewing stations' and 'meditation environments'.<sup>15</sup> Taking up positions on inflatable gym balls, yoga mats and work stations, all that separates art lovers from tech workers is the irony with which the former view the latter, and the self-consciousness with which they take on their role. Irony and self-consciousness are, of course, central components of the work they are required to undertake in the art regime. Even those who *know they know* are haunted by the knowledge that their knowing is, in all likelihood, an important part of the work they are required to perform in the current context.

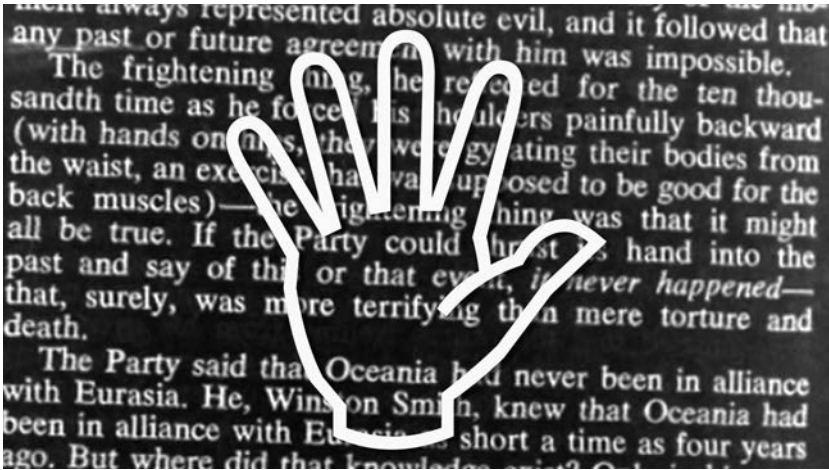
Wilson published a playful, self-reflexive essay about the Google project and its impact on his career in *e-flux* in 2016. It discusses the opportunities the video had made available, the contradictions those opportunities involved, and the limits of what is described as the ‘cottage industry’ of critical art practice. A memorable passage recalls a time he was ‘paid 500 CHF to talk about art and politics for fifteen minutes at an international art fair’. He used his VIP card to get a free ride in a new BMW 7 Series to the Schaulager museum in Newmünchenstein.<sup>16</sup> The essay is accompanied by a YouTube video of Decadence, one of several Google employee dance troops. Dressed in black and red costumes, six workers perform a routine of sexualised movement in approximate synchronisation to *My Lovin (Never Gonna Get It)*, the sassy, upbeat number by 1990s R&B group En Vogue. A sign at the bottom of the stage uses the corporation’s trademark font to brand the spectacle a ‘Google Dance Performance’. When more colleagues join the dancers on stage, the tempo speeds up. Dance moves become more frantic, the audience hoots, and the workers’ widening, manic smiles appear to show genuine pleasure.

Writing about the art world vogue for Brechtian self-reflexivity in 2015, Sarah James pointed to the ways in which recent efforts to lay bare the mechanisms of representation have too often existed adrift of an explicitly political, overtly emancipatory project. This is a consequence, at least in part, of the absence of the actually existing alternatives that shaped earlier examples of radical cultural production. Contemporary art proffers ‘not a solution but a means of constantly dismantling and reassessing’. While in some senses productive, this ‘might also be seen as having dangerously disempowering consequences under contemporary capitalism’. James makes the case for an alternative and, at that time, still ‘unfashionably utopian’, iteration of Brechtian art making: ‘Gaining dissidence or alienating capitalism itself should not be based only in scepticism, irony or even mimicry’, but in the types of ‘responsible intellectual action which could gravely proclaim that another world is possible after all.’<sup>17</sup>

An important change in temporality takes place about three-quarters of the way into *Movement Materials and What We Can Do*, with the introduction of what Wilson has described as a ‘science fiction’ scenario:<sup>18</sup>

Let's imagine I was a Scan-Ops employee and, one day, I am digitising an out-dated edition of George Orwell's *1984*. I scanned the page, slowing down at the line, 'the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say of this or that event, *it never happened*.' I think about the times when my own hand ended up obscuring the texts I was digitizing. An accidental concealment of information in Google's permanent collection. My eyes then scanned down to the line, 'the lie passed into history and became truth. The Party slogan went, "Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present, controls the past."' I see potential in this present for my own control of the past. Not the top down control exerted by ESOP, the totalitarian party in *1984*. But a rewriting of histories, coordinated by my co-workers and me. At the public library, we will read copies of the books that are queued for us at the Googleplex, and prepare our own altered pages of those books for when they end up on our platforms for digitization. Imagine a future impacted by these rewritings. Imagine a future with choral singing in the morning; three-day weekends; white badges for all; time and energy to read these books; no early afternoon migraines; no restrictions on bathroom breaks; no criminal records; no more mechanical labour. In *1984*, Orwell describes the mechanism of ESOP's discursive manipulation as it actively revises history in order to serve its own political agenda from moment to moment. But in the world state of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, active revision is unnecessary because the population is conditioned to believe that history is bunk. Because they are trained to see history as worthless, they are trapped in the present, unable to imagine alternative ways of life. Which raises the questions, would I be able to convince my co-workers of the significance of this subversive plot?

We see images of the relevant page from *1984*. The camera zooms in on the passage to which Wilson refers, as though viewing it through the eyes of the Scan-Op. A bright pink graphic representing a hand obscures the text, followed by images of out-takes from Google Books, in which the hand of a Scan-Op remains visible. Another image of a hand, its index and middle digit wearing the pink finger condoms designed to stop the moisture produced by the Scan-Ops' bodies from damaging the pages of the books they photograph. The other fingers have bright orange nail varnish, replicated by the bright orange background of the PowerPoint slide. A photograph of a page from a book containing an illustration of a printing press, distorted, as though the page had been moved while the photograph was being taken. An image of a dark interior space, tilted and elongated. Another image of a Scan-Op's hand, its thumb, index and middle fingers wearing pink finger condoms, the other fingers cropped by the edge of the picture frame.



Andrew Norman Wilson, *Movement Materials and What We Can Do*, 2012.

The scene suggests two important, and closely related, points about relationships between images and labour. When the Scan-Ops see potential in Orwell's text, they draw inspiration from the content of the photographs they have been paid to make. What is depicted in the photograph, and the conditions in which the photograph was made, enter into a productive, synergistic relationship. Rather than think of photography only in terms of its visual content, or solely in relation to the labour involved in its making and circulation, each is brought into view simultaneously, their implications for each other explored.

Similar concerns underpin Wilson's project *SONE* (2014–16). As the CEO of a youthful start-up, Wilson devised a range of dystopian 'image concepts' intended to 'more accurately reflect people's experiences of capitalism' after the 2008 financial crisis. They included a drunk CEO sobbing into a KLM airplane blanket while taking an automated customer satisfaction survey, colourful smoke billowing from ATMs, and 'a freelancer wearing Red-Head 3D evolution Hunting Gear perched in a tree shooting down all but one of a pack of businessmen walking through a deciduous forest'. Investors were invited to fund the realisation of those ideas, with returns made through subsequent sales, both as stock imagery supplied by providers such as Getty and as limited editions on the art market. In a

2016 interview, Wilson explained that many of the scenes engaged with the psychological effects of precarious working, and would be deployed by precarious workers: they were ‘often orientated around freelancing subjects and will be used by freelance journalists, advertisers, designers, curators and so on’. A knowing relationship was established between the social relations depicted in the images and those reproduced through their making and circulation.<sup>19</sup>

Projects such as these offer a distinctive take on what Blake Stimson and Robin Kelsey have described as the ‘the promise of photography’. Across its histories, photography has mediated between internal and external domains, between the realm of subject and object. Harnessed as a detached observer by science, as persuasive witness by journalism, or as confessional subject by art, photography enabled specific acts of viewing to be experienced publicly and collectively. The framing of a pocket of time and space, by makers situated in a related time and space, was reproduced and disseminated across other times and spaces. *Movement Material and What We Can Do* and *SONE* explore what this could mean for the labour of photography. It is the content of specific photographs, and the work involved in their production, circulation and consumption, that make up what Kelsey and Stimson describe as ‘the worlds in-here and out-there.’<sup>20</sup>



Screen capture of video by SONE on Getty Images.

The second point also relates to the relationship between the content of images and the economic conditions in which they are produced and consumed. In the introduction to their 2018 book *Futures and Fictions*, Henriette Gunkel, Ayesha Hameed and Simon O’Sullivan discuss the political potential of creatively depicting actions that might yet happen. Speculative images of alternative futures, ‘beyond what neoliberalism holds for us,’ have the potential to ‘impact on the real,’ not least ‘insofar as they can offer concrete models for other ways of life in the present.’ The projection of utopian futures can inform and enrich ‘a political imaginary which needs to be read [in relation] to historically situated struggles that give us insights into alternative times and spaces.’<sup>21</sup> For Helen Hester, ‘imagining the future is a tool for building a better present, because it is an affective technology... Feeling enabled to hope makes change seem more possible... It can also be a way of reckoning with the past.’<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to the cinematic dystopias devised by *SONE*, *Movement Materials and What We Can Do* focuses on affirmative images of scenarios yet to happen, invoking several potential futures simultaneously: a world of three-day weekends, choral singing, the time to read books, but also the moment when the workers’ subterfuge helps to bring this world into being. It dreams of different futures, playfully reflects on the barriers that might impede their realisation (*would I convince my fellow workers...?*) and creatively explores the strategies by which they can be achieved. The content of the image inspires a positive indication that the exploitative economic conditions in which it was created—and which it therefore materially embodies—can be changed for the better.

Jameson advanced the idea of ‘cognitive mapping’ as a means to make immensely complex economic arrangements legible to individual subjects. This demanded aesthetic approaches ‘able to unravel the tangled socio-economic threads that situate both artist and spectator productively within the broken totality of a post-industrial and neoliberal world system.’<sup>23</sup> For art historian Peer Illner, it is highly unlikely that contemporary art practices that map capitalism in the most literal sense—through data visualisation or information aesthetics, for example—will be up to that task. Too often, such approaches ignore the affective potential of art and, particularly, the capacity of figuration to combine cognitive knowledge

with ‘the tangible medium of daily life in vivid and experimental ways.’ The closest Jameson gets to providing an example of cognitive mapping, Illner observes, is in his book *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, when he focuses on ‘a renewed interest in allegory that allows a story’s partial aspect to stand in for a larger narrative.’<sup>24</sup>

Writing in 2015, Kinkle and Toscano reflected on the ends towards which such a project might be directed. In ‘a strong interpretation,’ they explain, ‘the mapping of capitalism is a precondition for identifying any “levers”, nerve-centres or weak links in the political anatomy of contemporary domination.’<sup>25</sup> They leave open the question of what a weak interpretation would involve, and the limits it would encounter. With its science fiction scenario, *Movement Materials and What We Can Do* moves from a creative, investigative mode towards the painting of future fictions, as though staging the necessity of making the transition from self-reflexive forms of mapping to the identification, and activation, of levers required to bring alternatives into being. Its fantasy works, retroactively, to highlight the limits of *only* mapping when conceived as a self-contained end; the risk of fetishising whatever knowledge is generated about exploitation under the status quo, even when undertaken in playful and self-conscious ways. *Movement Materials and What We Can Do* not only provides a cognitive map of sorts, but a lesson in the useful objectives of mapping. A ‘strong interpretation’ of the cartographic project is imperative, not just preferable.

For Jodi Dean, the radical, collective forms of subjectivity cultivated by protest movements such as Occupy have now matured. The swelling ranks of the precariat increasingly seek concrete political gains, not just changes in consciousness, by engaging with institutions and formulating clear demands.<sup>26</sup> Recent years have witnessed a string of publications mapping radical alternatives to neoliberalism.<sup>27</sup> The direct links between many of their authors, social movements and, increasingly, progressive political parties, means at least some of their ideas have started to shape mainstream political discourse.

The types of future envisaged by Wilson’s video essay find clearest articulation in calls for a shorter working week and the introduction of a universal basic income. These are, on the one hand, pragmatic measures,

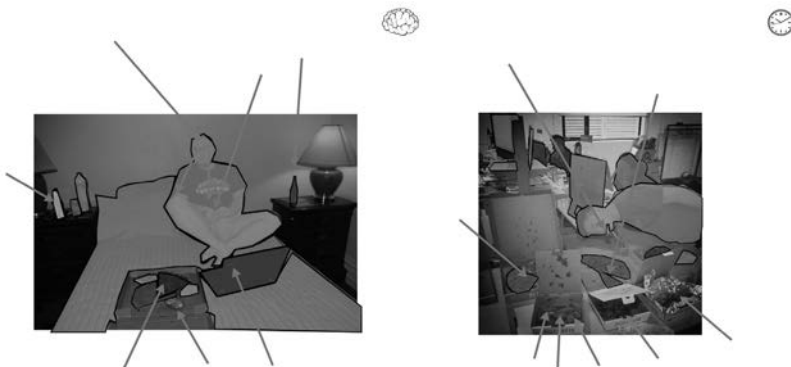
required to remedy the effects of automation and an economy in which extraordinary levels of wealth remain concentrated in the hands of small elites. They also possess an important utopian dimension, creating mechanisms through which people would be liberated from waged labour and offered greater choice about how to use their time. For economists Philippe van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght, universal basic income enables people to say yes to the meaningful jobs that do not necessarily pay so well, and no to the meaningless jobs that they do only for money.<sup>28</sup> The white badges for all, imagined by Wilson's performance, would not so much signal stable employment, as freedom from precarity, alienation and oppressive working regimes. Funded through taxation on the most wealthy in society, universal basic income has the rare ability to answer both the artistic and the social critiques to which capitalism has historically been subject. Structural inequities are challenged through the redistribution of wealth, while individuals are provided with greater autonomy to decide what to do with their time.<sup>29</sup>

I find it striking that *Movement Materials and What We Can Do* is roughly contemporaneous with Mishka Henner's *Libyan Oil Fields*: two contrasting meditations on the future, suggesting very different routes of political travel in a post-2008 context. On the one hand, there is a political imagination fuelled by the possibility of change; on the other, an effort only to anticipate more horrors yet to come. It would be foolish to suggest, and impossible to prove, any causative link between Wilson's project and shifts in the wider political imagination. We would be better advised to talk about the speed with which a project such as his can make broader changes visible, in comparison to the cumbersome and often bureaucratic processes that shape the work of institutions such as universities, trade unions and political parties.<sup>30</sup> On occasions, art succeeds in expressing a glimmer of possibility—a changing subjectivity, often felt as much as thought—yet to find concrete articulation in the form of books and articles, policy proposals or clear demands.

*Movement Material and What We Can Do* is by no means alone in turning its sites towards the future. *I Will Say Whatever You Want in Front of a Pizza* (2017), 'a speculative Prezi performance' by artist Sebastian Schmieg shares a number of concerns with Wilson's video essay, but here the work performed for requestors on Amazon Mechanical Turk provides

the basis for a science fiction scenario. The presentation charts a constellation of activities and structures to highlight the different human decision makers involved in the processes of training machines to 'see' like humans. Schmieg is interested in the ways in which subjectivity becomes encoded into software, and the place of those activities within larger political and economic systems. It is suggested, again, that digital workers use such knowledge to inform co-ordinated acts of sabotage; in this case to misinform the algorithms they are paid to train. Conversations hosted on internet forums build awareness that 'it was in our power to manipulate, or even to change the very core of such mechanisms: our data-sets, machines, society, you, the future.' Machines start to interpret photos of aubergines as images of British singer Chris Maloney, pictures of Donald Trump as representing terrorists. But, unlike *Movement Material and What We Can Do*, we are provided with no indication of preferable alternatives that will emerge as a consequence of these actions, nor how they will come into being.

Creating new worlds will require more than obfuscation and sabotage. *Inventing the Future*, a timely 2015 book by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, envisages a broad ecology of organisations operating 'in a more or less co-ordinated way, to carry out the division of labour necessary for political change.' Popular movements nurture collective subjectivities and



Sebastian Schmieg, still from *I Will Say Whatever You Want in Front of a Pizza*, 2017.



Sebastian Schmieg, still from *I Will Say Whatever You Want in Front of a Pizza*, 2017.

affective bonds. Foundations and journalists change mainstream media narratives. Intellectual organisations such as think tanks, educational institutions and more informal consciousness raising-bodies enable ideas to be produced and shared. Labour organisations, retuned to the realities of contemporary work and more closely engaged with wider communities, take struggles into the workplace. The state has powers to legislate, redistribute wealth and finance alternative systems.<sup>31</sup>

Organisational ecologies will, in time, be required to take on a global dimension, if they are to stand a chance of taking on the interests of multinational corporate power and avoid the emancipation of some nations at the expense of others.<sup>32</sup> They will also require the capacity to disrupt the smooth operations of capitalist systems and thus to reimagine industrial action in line with changed conditions resulting from automation and precarious working. The human beings who write code, train algorithms, or even make art that illuminates the operations of the network could have roles to play, when a technical comprehension of machines becomes ‘vital to understanding how to disrupt them.’<sup>33</sup> Photography’s capacity to lend critical legibility to the larger systems in which it is enmeshed possesses real potential in such a context. And yet the effectiveness of new tactics will always be linked to the larger strategic plans in relation to which they are situated.

A project such as Wilson's provides a further, perhaps less overt, lesson about the pursuit of a world after capitalism. The powerful institutions through which artists are permitted to speak provide an important means to amplify what they express. But the audiences reached through such channels remain largely confined to educated groups who, while often on low and insecure incomes, nevertheless remain rich in cultural capital. Projects like *Movement Materials and What We Can Do* help cultivate a form of subjectivity open to possibility and the potential to create change. But they do so for the benefit of a remarkably limited demographic, at a time when it has never been more necessary to think seriously about the relationship between how we communicate, where we communicate, for whom we talk, and with whom we do this talking.

Wilson's eventual uncertainty about the limited reach of critical art practice as a 'cottage industry' has implications for political strategy, particularly in terms of the institutions required to build meaningful coalitions between groups which, while they share material interests, currently find themselves on competing sides of a harmful culture war.<sup>34</sup> This is not to question the importance of art, alternative media organisations or campaigning groups centred on metropolitan areas; only to highlight the need to be mindful of the risks involved in privileging some sites over others. We cannot afford to strengthen divisions between those living in the wreckage of older working-class communities and a younger, largely city-based precariat, vulnerable to being caricatured as a 'metropolitan elite'. Art can be an important site for politics, but only if we remain attentive to the politics of art.

*Movement Materials and What We Can Do* speaks to many of the issues examined by this book: the relationship between photography and labour, in the past, the present and the future; the ways in which different types of photographic activity become legible as work; the specific ends towards which such a project should be directed.

The labour of a manual and semi-manual workforce is often obscured from view by its geographical distance, the psychological and material partitions that separate manual and cognitive labour, or the black-boxed technologies used to interact with the network. Other activities are not immediately identifiable as work because they do not feel or look like traditional forms of exploitation. They provide opportunities to achieve

subjectivity, based on public visibility and chances to communicate with others, whether through social media platforms or participatory art projects. The fact that attention remains focused on the representational content of photographs, not the technical, political and economic infrastructures that sustain the photographic image, helps to mask photography's direct and material relationships to neoliberal economics.

The radically expanded conception of photography I have outlined provides one means to highlight what is concealed by the logic of the interface, particularly the common interests shared by different groups of people. As a technology involved in production and reproduction—a machine that makes images of the world—photography provides a powerful way to situate mechanical and cognitive labour in relation to each other. Chains of exploitation connect the work of coltan miners in the Congo, smartphone factory workers in Shenzhen, Scan-Ops at the Googleplex, Street View car drivers, digital content moderators, Mechanical Turks, assorted image workers, and the precarious knowledge classes whose online lives are being constantly surveyed and sold on to advertisers. A common operational logic also binds these experiences to each other: the merciless minimisation of labour costs; a ruthless maximisation of profit; the deliberate evasion of social responsibility by hoarding funds offshore. Money and power flow up towards small elites. The rest make do with images, assuming they even have access to those.

It is not enough to map the inequities of a neoliberal world order, nor to trace the lineaments of larger structures, without the ambition, or ability, to transform them. But neither is it enough to only dream of better worlds. A meaningful response to the wastelands of today requires images of better tomorrows, yes, but also an understanding of politico-economic systems and those activities through which material change can be achieved. Where are the pressure points and nerve centres? Who will activate the levers? Which worlds will they bring into being? How can those forced to the systemic edges of the political-economic order be convinced that a better world is both possible and more appealing than the reactionary promises of a return to yesteryear painted by nostalgic nationalisms?

The photographs we make, look at and share, along with the act of making, looking at and sharing, often have close affinities with the individualistic logic nurtured by the current system. Yet the bond is not unbreakable or guaranteed. Those activities may, in fact, produce the unintended

forms of collective subjectivity required to loosen the hold of the market on our imaginations. The infrastructure on which interactions with images occurs is entwined with the political and economic interests of multinational corporations. But other systems are already under construction, on a variety of scales.

Photography's economic condition has always taken shape in relation to broader formations, whether Fordist mass production and consumer culture in the middle of the previous century or communicative capitalism today. So alternatives will also be forged in relation to larger politico-economic projects. The main goal of this book has not been to predict the future. Instead, it addresses the more modest task of seeking signs of an emergent political imagination in artists' engagement with today's vernacular photographic cultures. While it celebrates the potential of future fictions, it is not itself an exercise in science fiction writing. However, it seems disingenuous not to offer at least a few thoughts on where the directions of travel identified by certain projects might yet lead.

The first involves the migration of online photographic lives, from the spaces owned by corporate giants onto decentralised, user-owned platforms. Egalitarian, cooperative and ethical alternatives hold much in common with the types of post-capitalist politics outlined by J.K. Gibson-Graham.<sup>35</sup> That existing initiatives such as Diaspora, PixelFed or Friendica have hitherto failed to mount a significant challenge to giants such as Instagram or Facebook signals the considerable barriers faced, particularly what Srnicek calls 'network effects': the 'cycle whereby more users beget more users, which leads to platforms having a natural tendency towards monopolisation.'<sup>36</sup> Even 'if all its software were made open source, a platform like Facebook would still have the weight of its existing data, network effects, and financial resources to fight off any co-op rival.'<sup>37</sup> The struggle to achieve prominence may also indicate that our Faustian pact with multi-nationals may not actually bother most users, who accept surveillance and advertising as the price that has to be paid for 'free' access.

The idea that photo-sharing platforms be brought under collective ownership has real appeal. The same is true for sites such as Google Earth and Street View. Were this taken as an opportunity to remove surveillance and advertising, then social media would shed the characteristics that tie it to regimes of 24/7 production and so become something closer to the participatory media outlet and public playground it purports to be.

If data extraction continued, however, the extraordinary profitability of such sites could be directed towards creating better conditions for those workers who currently lack them, and towards a variety of public projects, in the same way that social housing represents a just and commonsensical alternative to the private rental market. That surveillance could have suspect applications signals the importance of building democratic accountability into future plans; it is extraordinary that we should find any similar accountability almost entirely absent from the current corporatised model.

Refashioning platforms as publicly owned utilities would initially prove costly, and exceptionally complex, given the multi-national operations of social media giants and the national territories served by most public institutions.<sup>38</sup> It is more straightforward to imagine steps being taken to break up monopolies and to ensure that a greater proportion of the wealth generated by privately owned platforms is reclaimed. Jaron Lanier once envisaged a system of micro-payments to remunerate individual users based on their specific contributions.<sup>39</sup> I think it simpler, and more politically sentient, to increase taxation on platforms, harnessed to fund the public services users require, along with the provision of a universal basic income.<sup>40</sup> The ease with which large corporations currently avoid tax signals the requirement for countries to act together as large blocks. The most effective way to tackle the power of multi-nationals is through the creation of parallel, trans-national entities. This is among the clearest and most powerful arguments for the existence of organisations such as the EU, which, regrettably, remained largely unexplored by politicians and the media during Brexit debates.

Distinctions between these options have too often been framed as a binary. Supporters of cooperatives perceive structural change as a deferral of action, while proponents of larger transformations regard community ventures as small-scale distractions from the more fundamental activity required. But the relationship between the two need not be understood as a stark choice: platform co-ops today *or* universal basic income tomorrow. One can provide a stepping-stone towards the other, by creating spaces where collective subjectivities are nurtured, developed and maintained. It remains imperative therefore that means are not mistaken for ends.

My expanded view of photography also signals certain lacunae in prosumer-oriented futures such as these, particularly with regard to their

relationship to global inequalities. Speaking in 2019, Dean highlighted those ways in which accelerationist fantasies of societies liberated by automation, and living on universal basic income, often ignore the manual production and brute extraction on which machines rely. The international solidarity and managed economies of communism, Dean argues, dissolve national boundaries and so bring different choices into view: do I want a smartphone so much that I would be prepared to spend part of my working life in coltan mines?<sup>41</sup> Do I desire an internet free of brutal images to the extent that I am prepared to do my time as a content moderator? Why does it currently appear to us as somehow natural, not perverse, that the most demanding roles are performed for the lowest pay? The promise of photography is not a simple argument for more and more images available for free as part of participatory cultures, but also a way of accessing more profound questions about egalitarianism and its implications. Fair remuneration for participation in photography projects is a laudable goal. But surely the critical aim is to fundamentally reshape the global structures that enfranchise some and not others in the first place?

If the causes and consequences of an emergent political imagination stretch far beyond photography, the transformations envisaged nevertheless possess profound implications for its present and future meanings. At the same time, experiences of photography provide a palpable indication of principles according to which society can be restructured. At its best, a democratic, accessible and readily reproducible way for people to share lives with others, photography provides a bridge between individual and collective subjects.<sup>42</sup> This is true of the specific pockets of time and space that it permits us to frame, share and view, and the increasingly common experience of framing, sharing and viewing the world photographically.

Where networked computation has radically extended access to the means of production and distribution, this has not yet been accompanied by a parallel shift in ownership of the wealth produced. Communicative capitalism has used today's abundance of images as ideological cover for a radical entrenchment of neoliberal social relations and global inequality. Our challenge is to re-engineer that dynamic, seeing all that is egalitarian and participatory about photographic cultures not as compensation for, or distraction from, the plutocracy we currently inhabit, but as the basis for new economies and better worlds.



## Afterword

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London. 2017. A conference about new directions in the critical analysis of photography. One delegate points to the strange absence of violent and sexual imagery on social media platforms. Another, very senior, academic responds that, while this may well be the case, other areas of the internet are saturated in pornographic content. A question from the floor enquires about the different types of work involved in that distinction: what about the moderators in the Philippines paid minimal wages to look at the content that we are currently discussing? How do we make sense of relationships between the attention they pay to photographs, the attention of the photographs' intended audiences, and the attention of people like us? Would it help to think about photography as labour? 'My labour,' the senior academic replies, 'is the production of knowledge.'

The research leave used to work on this book was provided not only because of the subject matter it explores—relatively few colleagues have much idea what I have been working on—but because I promised an 'output' that can be submitted to a government research audit taking place three years from the time of writing. The application for leave had to make reference to a 'Personal Research Plan,' which I am required to update at least twice a year and share with members of the school management team. The plan maps precisely where my attention will be directed, month by month, across five years, in terms of 'outputs,' 'impact' and 'grant capture.'

In *Speaking of Universities*, Stefan Collini observes that the government auditing of academic research privileges the exchange value of intellectual endeavour over its use value.<sup>1</sup> The same terminology is used by Jodi Dean to describe the fundamentals of communicative capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Within today's universities, the audit transforms 'quality,' 'environment' and 'impact' into measurable traits that—as representations—can be exchanged for other abstractions such as money. This is true of the distribution of future government funding for research and, increasingly, the effect on the league table metrics that help to pull in fee-paying students. Experiences of students are bound by a similar logic. It is perfectly understandable that increasing numbers of young people feel compelled to see

the attainment of good grades as their primary goal in attending university. They have been socialised to believe in the value of abstractions, not least through the price tag now attached to their degree. So one abstraction is traded for another, and hopefully then another, in the form of a salary, part of which will pay off the debt accrued by obtaining those grades in the first place.

Mark Fisher observed that the audit culture which has grown up across the public sector over the past thirty years undermines the claim that neoliberalism would bring about the end of bureaucratic meddling. This is the result, he explains, of the 'inherent resistance of certain processes and services to marketization.' The desire to monitor and improve production relies on the creation of systems by which processes can be measured. The result is not a direct comparison of the work itself but of audited representations of the work. What 'late capitalism shares with Stalinism,' Fisher suggested, 'is just this valuing of symbols of achievement over actual achievement.'<sup>3</sup> The same is true of many publically funded arts organisations, obliged to justify their existence with reference to audience evaluation, self-monitoring, the number of column inches generated by their activities, and other 'Key Performance Indicators.'<sup>4</sup>

The fetishisation of representations has adopted an increasingly temporal character within universities over recent years. The obligation to bring in external income through grants means that a great deal of time is dedicated to outlining something yet to happen. Research is articulated in language geared towards finance long before it actually begins. The low success rates for grant applications, particularly in the arts and humanities, means it is this speculative mapping alone that takes up a growing proportion of academic life. At the time of writing, many universities are in the midst of mock research audits. Significant human and economic resources are being invested preparing for an exercise that is still three years away and the shape of which has yet to be confirmed. Activity in the present is determined by the requirement to produce representations in the future. The future is rendered legible as a representation in the present. Tasks associated with those activities are symptomatic of the wider proliferation of what David Graeber describes as 'bullshit jobs' in post-industrial contexts. Today's academics count themselves among the 'huge swathes of people, in Europe and North America in particular, who spend

their... working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed.<sup>5</sup>

This changed temporality acts according to, and reinforces, a profound shift in universities' visual regime. Notions of education and intellectual enquiry as collective endeavours modelled according to principles of solidarity and trust are replaced by a regime of suspicion and constant surveillance. The psychological effects of that shift are severe. An essay by Rosalind Gil observes that 'academics are, in many ways, model neoliberal subjects, with their endless self-monitoring, flexibility, creativity and internalization of new forms of auditing and calculating.'<sup>6</sup> For staff and students, increasing resources must be invested in the emotional labour required to disavow a shared knowledge of the emaciated condition of the system they occupy.<sup>7</sup>

The numerous references to work by other authors peppering this book represent a form of academic capital, itself a product of our neoliberal university system and its research assessment procedures. According to such a view, this kind of writing is driven by institutional requirements, a need to prove to others one's conversance with scholarly patter. But it can also be understood as an effort to explore photography through and with the work of others, and to credit those whose thinking has guided and shaped one's own. Taken in these terms, referencing matters, 'not as impact, reach or citation but because it says something about how we see our collective work.'<sup>8</sup> In a similar sense, the positioning statements now customary in the introductions to books such as this, particularly their immodest insistence on shifting paradigms and the originality of contributions, make individualistic claims to new territories in order to reassure nervous REF readers, underpaid and short on time, that here is a four-star submission. This is nothing less than a cheapening of prose, a hollowing out of language; the demands of the audit felt in the very form of what we do. Here, again, is the familiar insecurity that it is not sufficient to simply be or do something, without also producing additional signs of our being and doing, supplementary representations of supposed achievements. But introductions also enable unfamiliar readers with less experience of the specific fields explored—undergraduate students, perhaps, or those who pick up books in gallery shops because they recognise a topic of potential interest—to become better orientated in exotic terrains and to prepare for the routes to be travelled.

The art practices explored in this book provide valuable perspectives on the economic condition of mass photography. They also function materially as a part of a secondary economy based around exchanges in the art world. It follows that any analysis of these projects, and of the art economy in which they participate, represents one part of a tertiary economy operating according to its own conventions and rituals. What art shares with mass photography, academia shares with both photography and art. I cannot claim to resolve the resulting ambivalence, any more than I can decisively unravel the threads of resistance and complicity in the work of the artists discussed here. But, in facing this conundrum directly, I can at least talk with some confidence about two, related, matters.

Firstly, it should be clear by now that to signal one's awareness of facts such as these is not enough, in itself, to resist the effects of the current system, at least not in any substantive sense. A self-reflexive knowing can draw attention to some fairly obvious contradictions. But without some sense of the emancipatory political project towards which critique might contribute, such gestures—however well intended—too often end up reproducing the system they are meant to resist. Contours of oppression are traced in new and compelling form, like a prisoner scanning the interior of their cell, unconcerned with escape plans and without imagining the world beyond. Secondly, it is apparent that efforts to use the freedoms afforded by institutions to critique the limits imposed on those freedoms by institutions must serve strategic goals: the need to overcome, not only expose, those limits, while extending existing freedoms to others.<sup>9</sup>

Collini identifies a 'strain of hostility or resentment' in public reactions to arguments for the intrinsic, social and public value of higher education and academic research. In this he detects 'a twisted acknowledgment that there is something desirable, even enviable, about the role of the scholar':

Part of the reaction, of course, involves resentment at the supposed security of tenure in a world with very little security of employment; some of it is a sense of how much autonomy, competitively speaking, academics have in their working lives.... But some of it also may be a kind of grudging acknowledgement that the matters that scholars and scientists work on are in themselves more interesting, rewarding and perhaps humanly valuable than the matters most people have to devote their energies to in their working lives.<sup>10</sup>

That resentment has been mercilessly exploited by neoliberalism to strip away privileges, impose a regime of ‘bullshit working’, and increase the levels of precarity experienced by many employed in universities today. The move is typical of the larger race to the bottom that so often defines a system built on competition between individuals. Yet academics would be well advised not to dismiss such resentment out of hand. Why should they devote their lives to pursuing their intellectual and creative interests in relative security when the rest of society is locked in toil? Why should this sector be so uniquely de-burdened of bullshit, and provided with relative material security, when the rest of the world is left to burn?

Potential responses to those questions would benefit from the suggestions made by Andrew Dewdney in his reflections on the trajectory of ‘twenty-first century photography’. Networked computation, Dewdney observed, has helped to forge modes of collaborative and dialogic cultural production that radically undermine the individualistic models still favoured by universities and the art world. In an analysis that shares important traits with Dean’s thinking about ‘selfie communism’, he indicates how the experiences of networked users have cultivated forms of subjectivity that sit in radical tension with those enshrined in alternative organisational structures:

Art as photography and photography as art is a busted flush trumped by the Internet and its networks. The job now is for the cultural institutions of modernism, galleries, museums and universities to seriously plug into the network and its users. Artists, photographers, curators, students and academics have a great opportunity before them to collaborate and co-create with network users and groups, in order not only to make the networks of power visible but to create new publics based upon equality of knowledge, access and experience.<sup>11</sup>

Any efforts to expand educational institutions along the lines envisaged by Dewdney would share important traits with the ‘free universities’ developed as a knowing counterpoint to the rampant marketisation of higher education. Writing in 2008, Irit Rogoff observed how these experimental gatherings could help to redefine ‘the point of entry into the structure (free of fees and previous qualifications)... the modus operandi of the work (not degree-based, unexamined, not subject to the state’s mechanisms of

monitoring and assessment)’, along with where ‘the actual knowledge... [is] situated.’<sup>12</sup>

If the cultures of the network bring collaborative modes of creation into view, they are not without their risks. The free universities described by Rogoff rely almost entirely on voluntarism. While academic labour is provided for free, and students attend without paying fees, the material subsistence of both groups relies on their willingness and ability to sell time to capital elsewhere. The co-production described by Dewdney could all too easily make yet more unpaid work for the expanding ranks of the precariat, at the same time that academics, artists and curators continue to be paid. Or else professional creators and educators would join the swelling ranks of the un- and under-employed, once their roles are crowd-sourced to the unpaid public (remember the ‘Big Society?’). None of which is to say that the utopian ideals of co-production should be set aside, only that demands for greater access and participation should not be separated from calls for a greater share of economic power or more equitable redistribution.

This book is built on the belief that, rather than continue to remodel the work of universities to resemble the worst parts of the neoliberal economy, future societies could embody the values at the core of what universities, at their best, can be. This would be embodied in the freedom, creativity and playfulness cultivated, but also in the social and economic security that allowed autonomy to be experienced as a source of pleasure and excitement, not anxiety and pain. *Imagine the forms of cultural production that would become possible in such a world.* Choral singing in the morning. Growing vegetables in the afternoon. Playing games in the evening. Three-day weekends. White badges for all. The time and energy to read books.

# Image Credits

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## Chapter 1

Section from Google Street View, 2020: [www.google.com/maps/@48.8522368,2.3569143,3a,49.4y,340.97h,73.64t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sUtQsGQN-Il0NBdLj9DobFg!2e0!7i16384!8i8192](http://www.google.com/maps/@48.8522368,2.3569143,3a,49.4y,340.97h,73.64t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sUtQsGQN-Il0NBdLj9DobFg!2e0!7i16384!8i8192) (accessed 1 February 2020)

Google Street View car reflected in a shop window, Brighton, UK: [www.google.com/maps/@50.8266755,-0.1381208,3a,75y,117.2h,88.43t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sxF8bDmzQi9PleKzVl-4IrQ!2e0!5s20110501T000000!7i13312!8i6656](http://www.google.com/maps/@50.8266755,-0.1381208,3a,75y,117.2h,88.43t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sxF8bDmzQi9PleKzVl-4IrQ!2e0!5s20110501T000000!7i13312!8i6656) (accessed 1 February 2020)

Google Street View trike displayed in the Information Age Gallery, Science Museum, London, 2018 (Courtesy of the Science Museum, London)

Jon Rafman, *The 9 Eyes of Google Street View*, 2008–present. Installation view, Saatchi Gallery, London, 2012 (Images © Sylvain Deleu, 2012. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London)

Still from 'Capture and Publish Your Own Street View', promotional video for Google Street View, 2019: [www.google.com/streetview/contributors/](http://www.google.com/streetview/contributors/) (accessed 1 February 2020)

## Chapter 2

Nan Goldin, *Greer and Robert on the bed, New York City*, 1982 (© Nan Goldin. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris, London)

Nan Goldin, *Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston*, 1973 (© Nan Goldin. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, Paris, London)

Kodak advertisement, 1951 (Courtesy of Envisioning the American Dream)

Installation view for *Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective*, 2012, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (Photograph by David Heald © SRGF)

Georgina Cooper by Corinne Day, published in *Diary* (2000) (Corinne Day/Trunk Archive)

Ryan McGinley, *Dakota's Crack-Up*, 2007–8, C-print, 11 × 14 inches, edition of three (Courtesy of Ryan McGinley Studios and team [gallery, inc.], New York)

### Chapter 3

Joachim Schmid, from *Other People's Photographs: Self*, 2012 (Courtesy of Joachim Schmid)

Corinne Vionnet, *Roma*, 2007, from the series *Photo Opportunities*, 2005–present (Courtesy of the artist)

Andreas Gursky, *May Day IV*, 2000 (© Andeas Gursky / DACS, 2020. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers)

Penelope Umbrico, *2,303,057 Suns from Sunsets from Flickr (Partial) 09/25/07*, 2007. Installation at the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia, 2007 (Courtesy of the artist, David Smith Gallery, Denver and Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York)

*From Here On*, Atelier de la Mécanique, Parc des Artelier, Recontres d'Arles, 2011 (Courtesy of Erik Kessels)

Screen capture from the Suicide Girls website, offering a \$90 version of Richard Prince's Instagram painting, August 2015 (Courtesy of Suicide Girls)

Amalia Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections (Instagram Update, 1st June 2014)* (Courtesy of the artist and Arcadia Missa, London)

Ed Fornieles, *Dorm Daze*, 2011. Dorm Daze Facebook sitcom, Dorm Daze sitcom photographs, script book, Magic Johnson poster, red NYC cap, sports socks, steel pentagram, glass, silk jersey, computer, projector, popcorn, basketball, pinboard, jacket, voodoo doll (Image © Ed Fornieles 2019, courtesy the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, London)

### Chapter 4

Erik Kessels, *24hrs in Photos*, Kunsthalle, Kiel, 2012 (Courtesy of Erik Kessels)

Thomas Hirschhorn, *Touching Reality*, 2012. Exhibition view, *Intense Proximity - La Triennale*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2012 (Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: Romain Lopez)

Steve McQueen, *Gravesend*, 2007. Two parts: HD with 5.1 surround sound (18 mins 04 secs, looped) plus silent 8 millimetre (54 secs 06 frames) (© Steve McQueen. Courtesy of the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery and Marian Goodman Gallery)

Molleindustria, *Phone Story*, 2011 (Courtesy of Molleindustria)

Moises Saman, *PHILIPPINES. Manila. August 28, 2014*. An employee working as a content moderator for Task Us sits in front of her computer at her cubicle on the 11th floor of the SM Aura Office Building Tower in the Taguig district of Manila. Task Us is an American outsourcing tech company with offices in the Philippines (© Moises Saman/Magnum Photos)

Google reCAPTCHA using images from Google Street View, 2016

Arvida Byström and Molly Soda, *Pics or It Didn't Happen*, Prestel, 2017 (Photograph by Jaana-Kristiina Alakoski. Courtesy of the artists)

Eva and Franco Mattes, *Dark Content*, 2015. Exhibition view, Essex Flowers, New York (Photograph by Kyle Knodell)

Andrew Norman Wilson, still from *KODAK*, 2019 (Courtesy of Andrew Norman Wilson)

Andrew Norman Wilson, still from *KODAK*, 2019 (Courtesy of Andrew Norman Wilson)

*Derelict Kodak building, Mt Dennis, Toronto*, 2013 (Photo: Geo Swan)

## Chapter 5

Still from Renzo Martens, *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, 2008 (© Renzo Martens)

*Philip-Lorca diCorcia: Heads*, 6 September – 13 October 2001, Pace Gallery, 534 West 25th Street (© Philip-Lorca diCorcia, courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York)

Boris Mikhailov, from the series *Case History*, 1999 (Courtesy of the artist)

Still from Renzo Martens, *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, 2008 (© Renzo Martens)

Documentation of the making of *Assisted Self-Portrait Fred Clarke*, from *Assembly* by Anthony Luvera, 2013–14 (Courtesy of Anthony Luvera)

*Picturing Progress*, Zimbabwe. PhotoVoice, Zimbabwe Red Cross Society and British Red Cross (© Kate Watson 2017)

Camera – film ref: 2005-Rosemary-06-18. From *No Olho da Rua*, 1995–present. By Patricia Azevedo, Julian Germain, Murilo Godoy and street kids from Belo Horizonte, Brazil (Courtesy of Julian Germain)

Camera – film ref: 2007-Newspaper-4-2163. From *No Olho da Rua*, 1995–present. By Patricia Azevedo, Julian Germain, Murilo Godoy and street kids from Belo Horizonte, Brazil (Courtesy of Julian Germain)

Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise, Self-Portraits, displayed at National Museum Cardiff, 2014 (Courtesy of CATPC/IHA)

Opening the White Cube, Lusanga International Research Center for Art and Economic Inequality, 22 April 2017 (© Thomas Rolf. Courtesy IHA)

## Chapter 6

Mishka Henner, Zelten oil field (28°54'58"N 19°46'12"E), from the series *Libyan Oil Fields*, 2011 (Courtesy of Mishka Henner)

Trevor Paglen, exhibition view, Secession 2010 (Photo: Wolfgang Thaler, courtesy of Secession)

Mishka Henner, *51 US Military Outposts*, 2010, installation view, Carol/Fletcher, London, 2014 (Courtesy of Mishka Henner)

Mishka Henner, Al Kotlah oil field (28°36'10"N, 18°54'46"E), from the series *Libyan Oil Fields*, 2011 (Courtesy of Mishka Henner)

A missile drops (R) in the vicinity on the tightly guarded residence of leader Moamer Kadhafi and military targets in the suburb of Tajura, as two loud explosions rocked the Libyan capital Tripoli on March 29, 2011. NATO-led coalition aircraft had been seen in the skies over the capital earlier in the afternoon. (AFP Photo/Mahmud Turkia)

Simon Norfolk, 'Landscape with shepherd boy' from the series *Afghanistan Chronotopia*, 2001. Bullet-scarred apartment building and shops in the Kart-e Char district of Kabul. This area was trashed by many waves of fighting during the civil war of the 1990s. As the main road to the new Parliament and a US Special Forces base, it has also seen many car-bomb attacks by the Taliban in more recent years (© Simon Norfolk, courtesy of Michael Hoppen Gallery, London)

Toby Smith, SES-6, a telecommunications satellite destined for service over Brazil, is loaded onto an AN-124 cargo plane at Toulouse Airport, 2014 (Courtesy of Toby Smith)

Photograph showing the different resolution of the photographs of Libya used on Google Earth (2020): [www.google.com/maps/place/28°50'00.0%22N+18°50'35.0%22E/@28.8500911,18.8494079,438m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m5!3m4!1s0x0:0x0!8m2!3d28.8333333!4d18.8430556](http://www.google.com/maps/place/28°50'00.0%22N+18°50'35.0%22E/@28.8500911,18.8494079,438m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m5!3m4!1s0x0:0x0!8m2!3d28.8333333!4d18.8430556) (accessed 1 February 2020)

Mishka Henner, *Scam Baiters*, 2013, installation view, Carol/Fletcher, London, 2014 (Courtesy of Mishka Henner)

## Chapter 7

Andrew Norman Wilson, *Movement, Materials and What We Can Do*, 2012 (Courtesy of Andrew Norman-Wilson)

Andrew Norman Wilson, *The Lives of Saints – 485*, from the series Scan-Ops, 2012–present. Inkjet print on rag paper, painted frame, aluminium composite material (Courtesy of Andrew Norman Wilson)

Andrew Norman Wilson, *The ABC of Photography – 2*, from the series Scan-Ops, 2012–present. Inkjet print on rag paper, painted frame, aluminium composite material (Courtesy of Andrew Norman Wilson)

Andrew Norman Wilson, *Movement, Materials and What We Can Do*, 2012 (Courtesy of Andrew Norman Wilson)

Screen capture of video by SONE on Getty Images: [www.gettyimages.co.uk/videos/andrew-norman-wilson?phrase=andrew%20norman%20wilson&sort=best](http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/videos/andrew-norman-wilson?phrase=andrew%20norman%20wilson&sort=best) (Courtesy of Andrew Norman Wilson)

Sebastian Schmeig, still from *I Will Say Whatever You Want in Front of a Pizza*. Video loop, lecture performance, Prezi, 2017 (Courtesy of Sebastian Schmeig)

Sebastian Schmeig, still from *I Will Say Whatever You Want in Front of a Pizza*. Video loop, lecture performance, Prezi, 2017 (Courtesy of Sebastian Schmeig)



# Notes

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