

"Why Can't Women Time Travel?"

The question that serves as this essay's title comes from a sculpture by Aleksandra Domanović, an artist who uses a feminist lens to consider the conditions of the circulation and reception of images and information made possible by the Internet, the topic of this text. A Google search on the phrase "Why can't women time travel?" produced 97,500,000 results in 0.39 seconds at the time of this writing. Among the top image results were a movie still from *Back to the Future Part II*, a stock photo of an expectant mother caressing her stomach that accompanied an article about the dangers of traveling while pregnant, an advertisement for a travel journal priced at \$11.99, and a professionally made installation view of Domanović's sculpture. This disparity reflects the values of an increasingly distracted society consumed by entertainment and advertising (as well as the interests of advertisers). Internet image searches produce thousands of seemingly arbitrary results, ranging from personal snapshots to commercial pictures to spam.

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The easy searchability and quick dissemination of pictures in the digital realm have ushered in an era of image overload, as well as a new class of commercially available and produced images.

The developments of the Internet and digital technologies have conditioned a new relationship to the image, particularly in regard to distribution, circulation, and production.

Photography is the lingua franca of our distracted age—it is used where common languages don't exist (and even when they do).

The numerous interlinked digital networks that move beyond fixed geographies and political boundaries offer unprecedented ways to communicate and share information. From the Arab Spring uprisings to Occupy movements to the rallying hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, social media platforms and personal networks have facilitated the quick dissemination of pictures and data, where traditional media could not. The ability to reach increasingly wider audiences, however, is tempered today by the threat to privacy through surveillance of our data and lives.

Commercial images of the twentieth century were traditionally

obtained through catalogs, image agencies, and other commercial outlets that controlled the quality, publication, and integrity of those pictures. Today's images are increasingly available for easy alteration and reproduction, and in the quick dissemination through social media and image sharing outlets, original credit and authorship are frequently lost. Ubiquitous and authorless, they are the ordinary pictures of today. Commercially produced images reflect cultural models, values, and aspirations, and more and more today they signal an era in which originality, image integrity, and factual truth are not assured. Artists have engaged with and responded to the current conditions of image production with wide-ranging works and methodologies—some with a sense of optimism, and others with unease or downright skepticism.

This text takes its inspiration from the Internet itself. What follows is a dictionary of relevant concepts and a selection of artists who have responded critically to the digital dissemination of industrially produced and commercial images. Several of them fall under the rubric of “post-Internet” artists, an inadequate and misleading term used to

describe work that engages critically with the Internet (see **Post-Internet** below). Some of the following artists have used the aesthetics of corporate branding, while others have mined the language of still life, celebrity portraiture, advertising, or product photography. And yet others have probed the limits of authorship and copyright in the digital age. Like the Internet, the following is by no means an exhaustive overview of image-making in the early twenty-first century. It is a somewhat arbitrary, and decidedly personal, lexicon of how we might navigate the unruly landscape of ordinary pictures in the age of the Internet.

Q

QUERTY–QWERTY is the arrangement of keys on a standard English computer keyboard and provides the organizational structure of this dictionary.

W

Warburg, Aby–The German art historian Aby Warburg created the *Mnemosyne Atlas* (unfinished at the time of his death in 1929), a subjective effort to chart the afterlife of antiquity and the transformation of antique images and motifs into the modern era. Taking

the form of thousands of images, Warburg's project was made possible by the advent of mass reproduction of images, including prints, photographs, and magazine and newspaper illustrations. In an analogue to contemporary hypertext, Warburg laid down visual arguments based on connections among gestures and symbols in artworks not typically considered together, raising questions of subjectivity and meaning in art, history, and varied sites of cultural expression.

E

Espionage/Edward

Snowden—Former government contractor Edward Snowden alerted the world in 2013 about National Security Agency (NSA) surveillance activities. His leaked classified information has been the linchpin in debates about the right to privacy in the age of the Internet and the subject of Laura Poitras's Oscar-winning film *Citizenfour* (2014).

R

(Re)Appropriation—

Appropriation is a methodology associated most closely with the Pictures Generation artists in the 1970s and 1980s, who used existing images from

movies, TV, and print to suggest the finiteness of the visual world, the depreciation of the primacy of a single image, and photography's capacity to both bolster and undermine the production of stereotypes and representations in our dominant camera culture. In the age of the Internet, such strategies are utterly commonplace, and the ease with which (re)appropriation is made possible represents a sea change in how we understand originality and authorship. Images quickly lose their authors as they are circulated, often without credit, and then reposted, reblogged, pinned, tweeted, and **hashtagged** in entirely new contexts. Once circulated, pictures that were made for specific commercial or individual contexts become collective images. Viral images, memes, and trending videos gain currency, power, and new branding possibilities in an ever-expanding image economy.

T

3-D Scanning—The technology of 3-D scanning (now available as a smartphone app) has marshaled the precise replication of objects, people, and animals. In an era when appropriating images is routine, Oliver Laric explores ideas about authorship and

authenticity through remixed, bootlegged, and “cover” versions of visual icons. To produce *Yuanmingyuan Columns* (2014), Laric made 3-D scans of seven marble columns from the Old Summer Palace in Beijing, once housed at the KODE Museum in Bergen, Norway, and since returned to China. He 3-D printed the sculptures and presented them in art galleries; the scans were made freely available to the public, without copyright restrictions, to be used in a variety of contexts, from video games to commercial backgrounds for TV and movies.¹

In the digital era, copies quickly usurp originals, and Laric’s work considers how we understand the ownership of intellectual and cultural legacies today, specifically the politically loaded legacies of European colonialism.

Y

YouT ube—The video sharing website that introduced Justin Bieber to the world is one of the most powerful and popular platforms for disseminating moving images. Artists have used the site as a platform for circulating their work outside the constraints of the commercial art market and have turned to it for stylistic inspiration as

well. Ryan Trecartin, touted
as the reigning artist of the
“YouTube age,”²
has created
videos that evoke the DIY energy,
individual creative expression,
multiple narratives, and
sampling from diverse contexts
and identities that are made
possible through the site.

U

Umbrico, Penelope—

For Penelope Umbrico the
Internet is an ever-expanding
collective archive from which she samples. Drawing on the
vast number of pictures uploaded
and shared online, Umbrico
has seized upon a generic and
universal subject—the sunset—familiar
to us from our
own phones and social media
feeds. For her monumental
and ongoing work *Suns (from
Sunsets) from Flickr*, begun
in 2006, Umbrico has gathered
hundreds of thousands
of images of sunsets from the
popular image-sharing site,
which she prints as 4-by-6-inch
snapshots and installs in a grid
on the wall; the presentation
changes with each installation,
its size dependent on the space
allotted to the artist. The
sheer quantity of the images
underscores the universality of
the sunset motif across geographies,
including political and

economic ones.

I

Image Object—Artie Vierkant, artist and author of the 2010 essay “The Image Object Post-Internet,” considers the relationship and ownership of objects and images in today’s digitized culture.³ He draws on existing images, logos, and intellectual property to make work in photography, video, and sculpture. For his photographic series *Usage Pending* (2014), he appropriated the logo of the Polaroid corporation, once a leader in the analog photography industry. Although the artist sought to legally use the company’s brand, he was denied approval, so he covered each photograph with a translucent film, creating a physical manifestation of the digital blur seen in online images when the rights to a person’s likeness or to a logo have not been secured.

O

Open Source—“Open Source” refers to a program where the source code is available to the public free of charge, to use and modify from its original design. It has become shorthand for the model of our current digital sharing culture

and our understanding of intellectual production and public space today, which prizes universal access, transparency, and free license. The concept was at the heart of the New Museum's 2010 exhibition *Free*, organized by Lauren Cornell. Featuring artists such as Rashaad Newsome, Trevor Paglen, Seth Price, and Amanda Ross-Ho, the exhibition examined the many ways that collective experiences, which are now based on simultaneous private experiences, are navigated by artists in a world where images, ideas, and data are given free rein.

P

Post-Internet–“Post-Internet”

is a term coined around 2006 by artist and writer Marisa Olson to describe art made in the “wake” of the Internet.⁴

In a panel discussion that year, Olson explained: “What I make is less art ‘on’ the Internet than it is art ‘after’ the Internet. It’s the yield of my compulsive surfing and downloading. I create performances, songs, photos, texts or installations directly derived from materials on the Internet or my activity there.”⁵

Generally used to describe a

group of artists born in the mid-1980s working in London, Berlin, and New York, the term has been applied to a wide variety of art, from screen-based work to painting, sculpture, and performance, that critically addresses the Internet and an array of related issues, from the loss of privacy to the changes in language in the digital realm and how we understand images and information today. Like all art historical monikers, it has proved very limiting (isn't most art today made after a spell on Google?), and even its initial adherents were collectively indecisive about its definition. This is made even more confusing by the use of the prefix "post," which in most other contexts (e.g., postmortem or postmodern) means "after." Writer and artist Karen Archey has argued that what initially emerged from political positions in the legacy of institutional critique has become co-opted by the art world and market:

Post-internet art purports to address the changes in society when ever-present advanced technology is so banal it becomes invisible. Thus, it is the calling of a post-internet artist to reveal the invisible, and to teach us about oft-overlooked aspects of society.... But [the] traditional modes of artistic production, professional comportment,

and artwork sale are conventional, outdated, and at odds with the internet-age democratization of culture that post-internet art seeks to address. Such practices fall back on conventions of authority and class that we have so desperately sought to undermine since the advent of Institutional Critique in the mid-20th century.⁶

A

Abeles, Michele—Michele Abeles's crisp, colorful studio constructions and photomontages combine common objects—wine bottles, terracotta pots, newspapers, and printed fabrics—and nude bodies. Drawing on the language of commercial still life, Abeles's props are familiar, even bland, with minimal symbolic or narrative associations. Her titles, constituting an inventory of the objects in the photograph, further emphasize the pictures' generic quality. In response to the endless recirculation of ordinary images in mass culture today, Abeles has used elements of her own older photographs to make new work, as in *Progressive Substitution Drills* (2012), which appropriates imagery of a rock, printed fabric, and a newspaper scrap from her earlier photographs.

S

Steyerl, Hito—Filmmaker, artist, and writer Hito Steyerl has produced a poetic and visceral body of work that traces connections between economies of images, entertainment, and violence. In her video *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013), she wryly takes on the issue of surveillance today. Narrated by an automated male voice, the video is a parody of instructional films, outlining strategies on how “not to be seen.” These techniques include shrinking down to a unit smaller than a pixel, living in a gated community, or being female and over fifty years old, and they are demonstrated by Steyerl alongside generic faceless figures (the kind available in 3-D modeling programs). The video was filmed on a desert site covered with aerial photo-calibration targets—symbols painted on the ground that are used as test patterns for cameras on planes. Steyerl proposes here a new ontology for images and the representation of the body in a world where everything is visible. On this new understanding of representation and visibility in the digital age, the artist has stated:

This condition opens up within and by means of an avalanche of digital images, which multiply and proliferate

while real people disappear
or are fixed, scanned
and over-represented by an
overbearing architecture of
surveillance. How do people
disappear in an age of
total over-visibility? Which
huge institutional and legal
effort has to be made to
keep things unspoken and
unspeakable even if they
are pretty obviously sitting
right in front of everyone's
eyes? Are people hidden
by too many images? Do
they go hide amongst other
images? Do they become
images?⁷

D

DISimages—The online
fashion, art, and lifestyle
magazine **DIS** was founded in
2010 by four friends and artists.
Responding to a world in
which everything is branded,
the group uses its own platform
to create editorials, fashion,
and stock images. A division of
the magazine, DISimages, is a
fully functioning stock-image
library featuring commissioned
pictures by artists such as **Katja
Novitskova**, Timur Si-Qin (see
Logo), and Anicka Yi. Using the
language of corporate aesthetics,
their images broaden the
typical portrayals of lifestyle
and commercial products. Often
set against a neutral white
backdrop, the pristine photographs
are arranged by themes
such as “modest by the sea,”

which features women in body and head-covering garb. The artists and their collaborators disrupt the corporate images by **hashtagging** them with elusive keywords such as “after salad,” “post-organic,” and “the new wholesome.” DISimages simultaneously participates in the stock-image industry (their photos are fully licensed and available for sale through their website), while also manipulating the codes and expectations of that industry.

F

Facial Recognition

Software—Used by law enforcement, immigration authorities, and employers, facial recognition software identifies an individual through the comparison of selected facial features with a digital picture from an image database. Zach Blas’s ongoing *Facial Weaponization Suite* (begun in 2011) is composed of a series of bright pink plastic masks that confuse facial recognition software. Purportedly compiled from the biometrics of a variety of gay men, Blas’s objects resist surveillance in the digital age while challenging heteronormative masculine cultural codes. With this work Blas addresses the loaded questions of representation and queer identity through

the pointed lens of the increasing threat to privacy that is a hallmark of our digital age.

G

Grosse Fatigue—Camille

Henrot's single-channel video *Grosse Fatigue* (2013) responds to the prevalent way images of all types are consumed today: on a screen, and often layered with numerous open windows. Set to a spoken-word poem with a throbbing percussive soundtrack, *Grosse Fatigue* is composed of accumulated shots that attempt to narrate the creation of the universe. The images are drawn from the scientific and natural collections of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, mixed with found images from the Internet and scenes filmed in diverse locations, including domestic interiors and pet stores. The series of pop-up images and windows that animate *Grosse Fatigue* propose a new methodology for understanding our own history—not through the linear models of a previous era, but rather through the consumption of incongruent linked images, which raises questions about subjectivity and meaning today. Like the prescient work of **Aby Warburg**, who similarly created subjective relationships among disparate images to create new narratives and question established

hierarchies, Henrot's video suggests how the immense and never-ending avalanche of available pictures and information today produces a condition of image fatigue.

H

Hashtag—A hashtag is a label that can be searched on social networks, allowing users to find images and information related to specific content, events, and actions. Personal pictures tagged, for example, with #ArabSpring, #BlackLivesMatter, and #LoveWins have been swiftly and widely disseminated in ways that supersede the networks of traditional media. Once uploaded, these personal images are used in the service of news reporting or for commercial purposes, representing a paradigm shift in the source of commercially disseminated images from professionals to amateurs.

J

JPEG—JPEG, the acronym for the Joint Photographic Experts Group (the committee that created standards for coding images), is among the most common formats for the compression of digital images and has made possible the online transmission and circulation

of photographic images.

Photographer Thomas Ruff has engaged the aesthetic and philosophical conditions of the vast amount of ordinary digital images that circulate widely, from pornography to natural disasters to newsworthy acts of violence. For his *jpeg* series (2002-2007), Ruff downloaded low-resolution images from the Internet, enlarged them to monumental size, and presented them mounted and framed, giving material form to images that were meant to be viewed only on-screen. The enlargement of low-quality pictures results in a grid composition of large pixels, rendering the image virtually illegible at close range.

K

Kline, Josh—Josh Kline’s wide-ranging body of work considers the commodification of identity and youth culture in today’s digital society. For his videos *Forever 27* and *Forever 48* (both 2013), Kline digitally grafted the likenesses of Kurt Cobain and Whitney Houston (respectively) onto the faces of actors, with the titles referring to the age these celebrities were when they died. Taking the format of a documentary interview familiar to us through reality television and TMZ reports, the “musicians”

participate in mock interviews as if they were still alive. The effect is at once familiar and unsettling. Kline proposes new models for reimagining the body in the era of the celebrity image and the superlative pursuit of health, fitness, and physical perfection.

L

Logo—Synonymous with brands, trademarks, and watermarks, logos are everywhere in the commercial landscape, used by corporations and artists alike. Artist Timur Si-Qin has developed his own logo—“peace”—drawn from the yin and yang sign, which populates his displays and backdrops. In installations that mine the presentation modes of commercial shop or trade-show displays, using materials that range from 3-D prints of fossils to yoga mats, Si-Qin considers our culture’s preoccupation with appearance, health, and luxury brands. For *Premier Machinic Funerary: Prologue* (2014), the artist produced 3-D printed sculptures of hominid fossils, presented in Plexiglas vitrines in an arrangement reminiscent of a funeral altar, all set against a brightly colored fabric printed with a generic-looking corporate design. “I’m interested in the way commercial images

reveal the processes by which humans interpret and respond to the world around them,” the artist has stated. “These are the fingerprints of our cultural image-search algorithms.”⁸

Z

No matches found.

X

XXX—Widespread public access to the World Wide Web has led to a radical increase in the production, availability, and dissemination of commercially produced pornographic images.

C

Corbis—One of the largest stock-image agencies, Corbis owns more than one hundred million photographs, including nine million works from the Bettmann Archive, which are stored at Iron Mountain, a high-security and temperature-controlled converted mine in Pennsylvania. Owned by Bill Gates, Corbis was originally founded as an art licensing company that provided digital images of iconic artworks to consumers, businesses, schools, and libraries.

V

Video Backdrops—Commercially available

video loops are used in a wide variety of applications, including promotions, advertisements, and TV news backdrops. Such material represents one aspect of “distributed media,” a subject mined by artist Seth Price in his widely downloaded 2002 manifesto “Dispersion.”⁹

Price defines distributed media as “social information circulating in theoretically unlimited quantities in the common market, stored or accessed via portable devices such as books and magazines, records and compact discs, videotapes and DVDs, personal computers and data diskettes.”

Referencing Marcel Duchamp’s famous interrogation—“Can one make works which are not ‘of art’?”—Price proposes that the question has new life in the space of distributed media, “which has greatly expanded during the last few decades of global corporate sprawl. It’s space into which the work of art must project itself lest it be outdistanced entirely by these corporate interests. New strategies are needed to keep up with commercial distribution, decentralization, and dispersion.

You must fight something in order to understand it.” His

Untitled Film, Right (2006), depicting a rolling ocean swell, was created from a six-second computer-generated

clip the artist purchased from an online distributor of video backgrounds. Price digitally altered the clip and repeated it 150 times before transferring the digital file to 16mm film, bringing a digitally native commercial clip into the rarefied worlds of filmmaking and the art gallery.

B

Blalock, Lucas—Using a medium-format film camera, Lucas Blalock addresses the conventions of photographic picture-making, specifically the still-life genre familiar to us through commercial and stock images. His still lifes incorporate ordinary objects, including found textiles, hot dogs, cans of food, and sheets of plywood, and engage the aesthetics of commercial display. The analog pictures are finished digitally in postproduction, through deliberately flatfooted Photoshop gestures executed by the artist, such as using the clone tool (typically used to create seamless pictures when digital data is missing) to create purposefully imperfect images. Through this rupture, Blalock suggests new ways of looking at ordinary images and objects in a world where everything has already been photographed.

N

Novitskova, Katja—Katja

Novitskova uses found and stock images of nature to make work in sculpture, photography, and installation. Her series *Approximations*, begun in 2012, features large-scale cutout images of animals presented on aluminum stands, the kind used in commercial and advertising displays. These sometimes pixelated images are cropped in odd places, as they are reproduced faithfully from their original contexts, whether a magazine or a website. Her work underscores how our digitized culture requires artists and viewers to adapt to a new viewing condition for images: “As everything is simultaneously realistic and camouflaged,” she has written, “the skill needed to navigate the space meaningfully is to be fluent in image editing effects.”¹⁰

M

Mroué, Rabih—Rabih

Mroué’s series *The Fall of a Hair* (2012) affirms the central role that cell-phone photographs and moving images have played in informing and mobilizing people during conflict and collective actions today. *The Fall of a Hair: Blow Ups* features seven enlarged and heavily pixelated photographs of gunmen aiming weapons at the viewer. These images were taken during

the first year of the Syrian civil war from the phones of civilian journalists and activists, whose deaths were captured by their cell phones, acting as an extension of the eye to reveal the fatal shot. The images were posted posthumously on the Internet and made freely available through virtual and viral platforms. Mroué places the viewer in the varying positions of photographer, victim, and co-conspirator, a poignant reminder of the power that phones can wield in a reality in which mobile devices (and the associated digital dissemination of the images they produce) have become an indispensable weapon in conflicts and revolutions.

Eva Respini joined the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston as Chief Curator in 2015. Previously, Respini was Curator in the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art. She specializes in contemporary photography and video, and is broadly interested in post-1960s art and visual culture.

Notes

¹ See www.yuanmingyuan3d.com/english.html.

² See, for example, Calvin Tomkins, “Experimental People: The Exuberant World of a Video-Art Visionary,” *New Yorker*, March 24, 2014.

³ Artie Vierkant, “The Image Object Post-Internet.”