

The idea of (digital) image

#imperfect



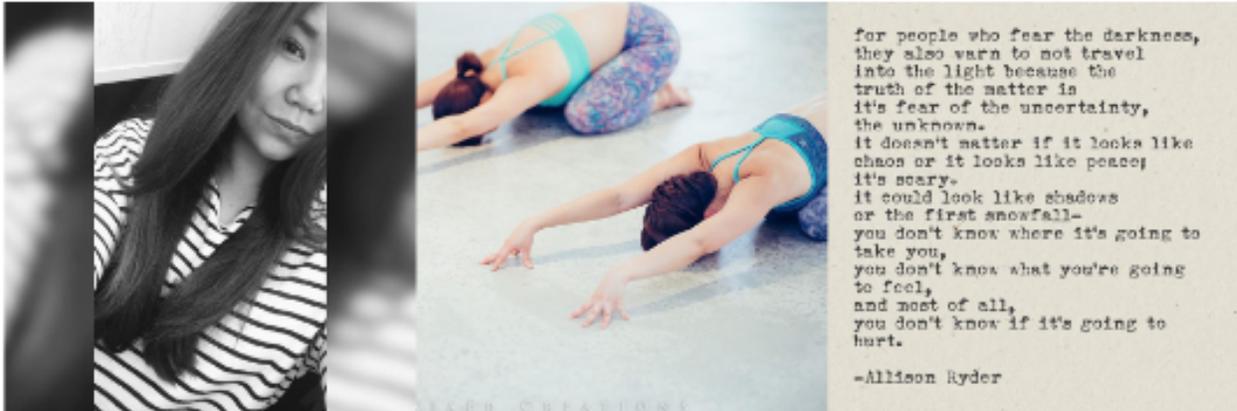
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by Alfredo Cramerotti

The development of photography in the digital age makes us constantly “involved” in image-making, whether we associate this visual language with precise functions, professional or artistic, or we use it to give shape to our existence through visual communication. We refer to images, or the act of creating images, to act socially, politically and culturally.

In this late age of photography, digital images become a visual translation of what we are, rather than a representation of something or someone (even ourselves). They make up a visual timeline, which could be compared to forming a textual narrative by using our shopping lists, the comments we write on social media or our work e-mails. Although these images are not coherent when considered together and are produced for different goals, they become knowledge chunks which translate different contexts into what we wish others to think of us. They therefore become a visual alphabet, or else the vocabulary of a language which is universal because not linked to specific ways of writing or reading. The outcome is a flow of forms and meanings which are interchangeable, independently from the situations in which they were generated and read.

#uncertainty



I work in the field of contemporary art. I wonder what artists and curators have to say about how we “critically” surf through the digital flow of images pervading and shaping us. How are changes in image communication and creation elucidated and debated by the art scene? In particular, I am interested in two aspects.

The first is the trade of personal information which is needed to build up a “well-looked after” public profile using social networks. The second aspect is the decentralisation of contents—whose origin and meaning are respectively learnt and processed by digital natives (i.e. the post-1990 generation) through several sources and perspectives. These two transformations deserve to be studied, and art can serve as a useful tool in this process.

Let’s begin by talking about the artists. Between 2012 and 2013 Erica Scourti completed her art project *Life in AdWords*, which focussed on one specific question: how do artists respond to network structures and institutions deciding and “formatting” their representation forms, and how do they, as artists, redefine their own role? In her work, Scourti kept a personal diary for a year, by sending daily writings to herself using her Gmail account. Because anything written through a Gmail account is analysed by Google algorithms, every day the artist received targeted advertising based on the contents of her diary. She then reintroduced the keywords from the advertisements on the net, using her webcam to upload daily videos on Youtube and her own website.

We could call this an extreme example of “computational photography”, in which the author is made capable of communicating by composing, taking and sharing pictures through online technology, rather than by means of photographic or film technology. The artist’s daily commitment to this project over a long period supports a net structure in which visibility serves as a form of proof. The algorithms of the search engine not only reflect the subjectivity of the artist, but with time also influence and define it—constantly looking for the meaning of what she writes and translating it into—or reducing it to—pure information. Scourti puts herself and her image back onto the net, adopting sarcasm and repetition as a translating tool and agent. Her subjectivity and self-representation are in constant flow, like a never-ending “work in progress” state in which technology is pushed against its own logic and the result of this action reveals its means.

#errant



If now we shift our focus to the role of curators, we could compare their work with the approach of digital natives in their visual rendering of life. Just like for curators there is a trade-off established between the time, resources and connections one has to invest in in order to access the ideas and materials needed to build an expository narrative, for post-1990 generations the social capital made available to multinational providers dominating network services is a specialised transaction enabling them to take care of their image, friendships and interests—often with a professional goal in mind. Exchanging details concerning one’s characteristics, attendance at events and personal ties, with the chance of building up a specific image of one’s life—targeting certain sectors via a selection of available visual information—is something which prompts positive reactions and is accepted as a necessary step.

The analogy between curators and net prosumers extends also to the decentralisation of contents aspect. Artistic creation and the curatorship surrounding it often adopt transversal research and production mechanisms. For instance, they could combine an artistic project, the aesthetics of a videogame, community or social initiatives, and political activism. Similarly, digital natives do not only “watch” the contents made available by this or that media tool, but actively go looking for contents in heterogeneous places. Then, after saving the results in lists and selections (both visual and oral), they share these with friends, family and colleagues, thereby contributing to shaping up other people’s impressions and thoughts about them.

#mistranslation



The status of image-making in the digital era has more to do with the idea of organising and developing a structure, a mechanism of visual translation, than with holding a specific position within contemporary culture through the idea of representation. It conveys the idea of delving into a process which is constantly evolving, rather than necessarily having a finished work to display.

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