GB11 Curatorial QA – The Image People

Conversation between Maria Lind, Nadia Belerique, Agnieszka Polska, Sören Andreasen, Trevor Paglen, Mariana Silva

Maria Lind: Today, in an age of mass information and big data, there is a renewed interest in representation and its politics, an inclination similar to that of the late ’80s and early ’90s, but filtered through new technology and social media. Instead of "representation," or even "pictures," as in the Pictures Generation in the US, with artists such as Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Robert Longo, and Richard Prince in the 1980s, it is now "the image" and "the image regime" which engage many artists. It is not confined to one generation, or a central interest, like, for example, the making pictures of pictures of the Pictures Generation, but is present in the work of artists of varying ages, with a tendency of the work being made in the Western hemisphere. Central to this resurgence seems to be on the one hand, a concern with the conditions of production and circulation with an exponentially growing access by "ordinary citizens" to both, and on the other hand, on the image itself and how it creates meaning. How does this resonate with your work?

Nadia Belerique: Regarding the politics of representation (and I would add "identity"), my work interests itself in hybridization (or, what is a picture? what is an object? is it both? what is it identified as? is it image?)—using collage, shades of gray, and then a "screen-like" mode of presentation. So yes, I think "image" is a good term for it despite it resonating immaterial and thin when you say it. The term “image” has a propositional and conceptual undertone and thus I think it fits. It also seems to encapsulate "representation" and "picture" within it. I also think it is useful to refer to it as object, or sculpture—so, an expanded understanding of “image.” I am interested in the assumptive misunderstanding of image solely as surface; or, that because we produce and consume images so quickly, they lack any metaphoric depth or consequence.
My work resonates with the above but more so with the image itself (in the context of production and distribution) and how the viewer perceives them—the image’s or artwork's mode of production as the viewer reads them or unpacks them. The viewer is meant to look at the images and what they are depicting while simultaneously considering its shape, size, and literal surface. Be confronted with depictions of translucency and flatness, sometimes with recognizable forms, other times not. Can an image be the thing itself and what it represents at the same time? What if there is depth in the surface, and what if there is learning how an image is made the longer you look at it?
Agnieszka Polska: Similarly to the so-called Pictures Generation, I am appropriating and reworking images and visual information, sourced from various channels: from books to stock libraries. Lots

of these images can be classified as “informational waste,” since they lost their publicity potential and became noise in the stream of visual information. Still, it is very often impossible to classify these circulating images as waste by the recipient, because they do not bear any visual signs of being useless.

Mariana Silva: I suspect that the appearance of 3-D scanning and printing puts us closer to the invention of photography, in how high-quality scans can be apparently indistinguishable from the originals. More significantly, the difference between original and copy, but also between a 2-D image and a 3-D one, may not make sense in the future. Because the same file can already take different shapes, the borders between the tridimensional and the flat image are blurring.
Photography impacted a great deal how art history was perceived, articulated, and how art entered museums. Although it is impossible to know how it will affect our relation to material culture, it is likely that something will also happen with 3-D scanning and printing. For example, one of the arguments is that scans allow the study of referents in ways that originals cannot, due to scanning precision and different forms of visualization.
I think of the artists belonging to the Pictures Generation as constructing an ethics of reception, as a reaction to centralized forms of mass media and advertising. Today, more than the abundance of images, how and why they circulate may be more determining: as an infrastructure, we are at risk of seeing the Internet become even more centralized. Furthermore, while a “generation” is culturally and temporally situated, a “regime” can carry a misleading universalizing seduction. It is counterintuitive, but the growing immateriality of images is probably proportionally inverse to the energetic consumption images (along with their circulation) require, in a world that demands climate justice of us. We should embrace this paradoxical blind spot. Another example is that many of the smaller 3-D printer companies have been bought out by major companies, while they rely on plastic (in a time in which we must radically exit our carbon economy) or, at best, on the mass production of corn, which has its own problems.

Sören Andreasen: Although I am quite uncomfortable with the term “image” unless treated as a thought experiment, there is no doubt that the production and use of images constitute social and cultural regularity. To me, working with images therefore involves a critical questioning of how the production and use of images support cultural hegemony and social privilege. Also, I agree that digital technologies affect cultural and social regularity. But whether these new technologies will radically change the conditions of material life, or if the effect is rather a perpetual mediation of the known, I don’t know.

Working with images is thus a two-sided effort, as I see it. On the one hand, any image carries out a thought experiment, considering a hypothesis of what an image might do. On the other hand,

that same image supports social and cultural regularity, inscribing cultural hegemony and social privilege in itself. I aim to generate a dynamic relation between these two aspects of an image: a sort of driver for articulating specific points of interest that have nothing to with the image. But that is another discussion, I suppose.

Trevor Paglen: Among a lot of my colleagues, it's obvious that there's a strong resonance with Pictures Generation artists in terms of playing with the aesthetics of identity, community, and such. In my own work, I'm actually much more interested in making what we might think of as "bracketing" images—images that are more about the conditions of possibility of images. For example, on one hand, instead of appropriating the visual culture of the Internet to make artworks, I try to engage the material substrate of the Internet itself: the cables, routers, surveillance mechanism, satellites, and so forth. I often make pictures or artworks that point to—or intervene in—the often invisible material infrastructures that form the spatial and technological underpinnings of the possibility of visual culture.

On the other hand, I'm working at the other "bracket" as well: other bodies of work I'm developing have to do with trying to understand what's truly radical about the digital proliferation of images. In the '90s and early 2000s, there was a kind of consensus that what was radical about digital images was that there was no "original" (and the endless echoes of Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"). I think that's not actually what's radical about digital images. What is radical about digital images is that, in the first instance, they're machine-readable and only in the second instance human readable. In other words, digital images are essentially made out of digital bits, which are readable by machines. In a minority of cases, such as what happens in your digital camera or phone, those bits are translated into color, edges, luminosity values, etc… to make something recognizable to us as a cat or whatever on a screen.

But in all cases, digital images are machine-readable. Here in 2016, most images in the world (depending a little on how you measure it) are made by machines for other machines, and those machine-to-machine images are literally invisible to humans. Invisible machine-to-machine images are used in everything from urban surveillance to industrial quality control, and in applications including biometric identity verification, autonomous and semi-autonomous vehicles, endless Artificial Intelligence-enabled image-based data mining on Facebook, Google, and much more.

For me, the question is: what is the status of visual culture when most images are invisible but nonetheless strongly intervene in everyday life?; what theoretical tools can we develop to try understanding something about the "operationalization" of visual culture?; as image-makers, what strategies and tactics can we develop to stage critical interventions into this ubiquitous landscape of machine-seeing and invisible visual culture? In sum, a lot of my work is about trying to explore the "outer spectra" of the visual landscape, from the material underlying infrastructures, to the world of invisible machine-to-machine seeing that invisibly structures much of everyday life and

culture.

ML: What are the advantages and disadvantages of the current image regime?

NB The disadvantage and advantage to this regime is that there is a false sense of understanding images. That seeing is knowing. I think this presumption is useful fodder for an artist to work within and against expectations of practiced lookers. The disadvantages are that images have the potential to become boring, and talking about them in relation to their role of social media or advertising and/or truth can be boring as well. Our eye may want to avoid them. Or that the topic blurs because there are too many of them. Ocular fatigue.
AP: It is pointless for art to compete with the abundance of the visual information. It is also getting harder for the viewer to recognize art in an environment not designed as an art exhibition. The situation resembles the state foreseen by the theorist Jerzy Ludwiński and his limitless model of art: in his understanding, the gradual expansion of art was supposed to eventually lead to the whole world being completely swallowed by art.

MS: On the one hand, any displacement as to how we deal with material culture and still fetishize objects and images might be interesting to think what images are and do. On the other, I am unsure if it will help us exit our belief that either society produces images or that images produce society. For example, we are becoming more conservative as intellectual property rights become a full-fledged industry, with the status of an image polarized into public domain vs. cultural property. This is a dichotomy that does not do images justice, and which can cause great violence to other aesthetic regimes—I'm talking, for example, about other status of image stewardship or custodianship that possess barely any legal capacity to enter into the above form of aesthetic diplomacy, if we wish to call it that. Collective production and distribution is usually absent from this game, where at best the shared emergence of meaning is only acknowledged through literal forms of monetization.

ML: What does your own work "do" in relation to this? Not necessarily in a utilitarian sense, but what it generates/emits/reverberates—its agency.

NB: What I would like my images to do is create a feeling of familiarity and confusion. Ask the viewer to look, then look again, feel their feet, then look at the image again. That within the surface and flatness exist many subtle layers of depth that are metaphoric; that there are potentials, even through a small window or a seemingly flat or shallow plane.
One analogy I like to think of is an image as a hand pointing at something else. As an artist, I want the attention to stay on the hand and extended finger. Then to what it points to, then back to the

hand, then back to its representation, and so on. Within this is also the reflection of the viewer; a third space. The image as an object has potential to flicker between the viewer and what they are looking at, what it makes them think of, and then back to the viewer. The space between the hand and what it points to is dense and opens up new ways of thinking.

AP: I am working with the content that was already processed and was once genuine, but lost its purpose; or that was never genuine and achieved its commercial goal the moment I bought it. What I am trying to do is to create a new temporary moment of autonomy of the image.

MS: When we think about how the divide between nature and culture might not truly exist, it has become common—because of its urgency—to measure its impacts on nature. I am, however, as interested in understanding its consequences for the culture side of this apparently fading side of the equation. That is, I am interested in how this is shifting the way we perceive, classify, and exhibit objects or artifacts, be they material or immaterial, tridimensional or flat, and how objects become meaningful to us outside of nature/culture. Evidently, forms of sociality are part of this process as well. I am not sure this questioning transpires in such broad terms in my work, nor that it should. But in general, this entangled take on things, between the social, the individual, collective ideals and their aesthetic declinations, informs the perspective I take on the case studies my work takes into consideration.