

Technical images

Seasons

1: Under The Hood

About

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Working the Labor-Leisure Machine: Proposal for a Photography Museum Without Images

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Text

Central to this proposed museum is the understanding of photography as a practice, an apparatus, and a form of social interaction. The museum examines photography as a complex mechanism where labor and leisure overlap. Photography can simultaneously serve as a means of production, a source of entertainment, and a commodity for consumption. This essay introduces five rooms of the museum. These rooms offer ways of viewing photography as part of contemporary technological culture, with a focus on concepts like the labor-leisure machine, the networked camera, photography without images, obsolescence/prescience, and human-machine relationships.

Entrance: The Museum's Mission Statement

This museum collects and exhibits responses to what Vilém Flusser calls *technical images* as well as related concepts, debates, and miscellanea. There are also images in the museum, but most often they serve as footnotes or commentaries. describe all kinds of photography (including both analog and digital), film, video, animation, CGI, and hybrid forms. The museum takes from Flusser the clear distinction between all traditional (handmade) images that are “observations of objects” and all technical (machine-made) images that are “computations of concepts.”¹ Unlike traditional images, “technical images don’t depict anything; they project something” and “they don’t signify anything; they indicate a direction.”² Flusser offers one approach to technical images: “To decode a technical image is not to decode what it shows but to read how it is programmed.”³ Such decoding can lead to an infinite number of outlooks, from dystopian gloom to the brightest visions of personal liberation. The main purpose of this museum is not to convince visitors of a particular response, but rather to initiate thinking about technical images as a key to understanding—and decoding—our contemporary culture.

“For the last hundred years [...] art history has been the history of that which can be photographed,” observes André Malraux in *Museum Without Walls* (1953).⁴ The catchy phrase “museum without walls,” gained new significance during the COVID-19 pandemic when museums, galleries, and other public venues had to close, impelling them to invent new ways to reach their audiences via online presentations.⁵ Malraux’s idea, however, was not to substitute actual artworks in museums with their reproductions, but to prompt a different way of looking at art and narrating its history; this history could be more inclusive but could also risk, as he readily admitted, misleading audiences.⁶ Malraux’s essay itself models this museum without images: His writing *is* a museum without walls, not a text *about* a museum without walls. Likewise, what you are reading now *is* an imaginary photography museum without images, not a text *about* such a museum.

Another attempt to narrate and understand culture with the help of photographic images is Aby Warburg’s *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (1927–29). This “mnemotechnical and initiatory atlas of Western

culture,” as Giorgio Agamben characterizes it, could play a redemptive role: “Gazing upon [them], the ‘good European’ (as he liked to call himself, using Nietzsche’s expression) would become conscious of the problematic nature of his own cultural tradition, perhaps succeeding thereby in ‘educating himself’ and healing his own schizophrenia.”⁷ Warburg’s *Bilderatlas* took the form of a doubly mediated technical image: He first assembled photographs (predominantly reproductions of artworks) on panels covered with dark cloth, and then photographed those panels. He produced three versions of these montages, including the last and unfinished version, which consisted of sixty-three panels with 971 images.⁸ These panels allowed Warburg to explore visual, historical, and ideological connections in an then-unprecedented way.

Although Warburg’s primary interest was the afterlife of antiquity in Renaissance, he also included several “non-art” images like press photos and advertisements, yet another unprecedented choice for his time. As Charlotte Schoell-Glass comments, “He saw his research institute (and the atlas) as a laboratory, where information was assembled and then processed and worked with just as in a chemistry or a physics lab.”⁹ Warburg’s approach to narrating history and working with images marks an early stage of what we today know as cultural studies, visual culture studies, or even cultural analysis. Moreover, his approach would not have been possible before photography. For that reason, Warburg’s *Bilderatlas* is an eccentric predecessor to the interpretation of culture and history with the help of technical images.

Exhibit 1: The Labor-Leisure Machine

The exhibit itself is in your pocket, purse, or backpack, because here the word “machine” describes any “black box” composed of computer hardware, software, networks, and AI. Practical examples of such machines include smartphones, laptops, desktop computers, or even tablets. Such machines are universal labor-leisure machines because they are simultaneously a “factory” where twenty-first century paid work is conducted, a source of entertainment and personal gratification, and an object of consumer desire; it is ironic that such devices are also the ultimate instrument of exploitation, control, and surveillance. Simply put, it is quite common to use the same machine to earn your income, pay bills, file taxes, apply for visas, plan vacation trips, stream movies and music, share social media updates, and talk to friends and family. This same machine, however, traces, records, and analyzes your actions in order to sell them to advertisers or for other, more obscure purposes. Our relationship with the labor-leisure machine is part of the condition of our globalized, born-digital culture, defined by Lev Manovich as “softwarization.”¹⁰

Because we do not yet have intellectual tools to fully grasp the complexity of either the machine or our relationship with it, in this museum we look back at historical discussions surrounding machines, art, and labor. In this room, for example, we observe how the Productivists—a small group within the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s—argued for a new mode of artistic production and for the abandonment of the easel in favor of the machine. Among the basic principles of Productivism were the integration of artistic production into everyday life and the elimination of a separate field of art both in terms of its production and consumption.

Moreover, for Productivists, there was no need for a designated art object such as a photo book or exhibition print, just as there was no need for designated arts spaces. Instead, they focused on the factory as the major site of production in the industrial economy, insisting that it is where artistic production should take place. One of the Productivist theorists, Russian art historian Boris Arvatov, envisioned the new socialist object, an object that functions “as a social-laboring force, as an instrument and as a co-worker.”¹¹ Tarabukin’s Productivist manifesto, *From the Easel to the Machine* (1923) pronounces “the triumph [...] of ‘mechanized and collective forms of production and distribution’.”¹²

Of course, the Productivists could not foresee the ways in which people would be able to interact with their labor-leisure machines in the twenty-first century and how human input would be analyzed,

synthesized, and otherwise processed by software and AI, only to be disseminated via computer networks. But we could approach the functions of today's labor-leisure machines with concepts like Arvatov's: Our machines are the factories of the digital economy that we always carry with us. The majority of today's collectors and museums still expect artists to produce tangible objects, but the history of digital art suggests that some work might as well remain within the same factory that facilitated its creation.

Exhibit 2: The Networked Camera

This exhibit is also related to the smartphone in your pocket, purse, or backpack. The networked camera is a hybrid tool that integrates picture creation, editing, sharing, and viewing.¹³ It involves hardware such as digital cameras and software like editing programs, wireless networks, online image-sharing platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Flickr, and others. It moreover comprises AI, whether as automated facial recognition technology, the software that operates your smartphone's camera, or via standalone image-editing apps such as Lightroom, Facetune, Reface, and others. "Due to the addition of AI [to mobile phone cameras]," observes Manovich, "by approximately 2020, it became actively difficult to take an unusable photo. In practically any situation, the photo has perfect exposure (i.e., enough details in the dark, medium, and light parts), and the main subject is in focus."¹⁴

The images produced by the networked camera are more than just photos, just as the networked camera is more than just a new sort of camera. Although the products of the networked camera can feel reminiscent of pre-digital photographic images, this machine produces not only images, but also layers of metadata and human connections and relationships. Metadata can include automatically generated data (e.g. geo-tags and time stamps, information about the camera and software), data added by the user (e.g. caption and hashtags), and data added by other users (e.g. comments) which simultaneously document part of those human relationships that the image establishes or puts in motion.

One of the networked camera's characteristic features is foregrounded in the work of Penelope Umbrico (b. 1957) who uses found, born-digital photographic images. Her *Everyone's Photos Any License* (2015–2016) is a collection of images of the full moon sourced from Flickr. The artist points to the absurdity of the "all rights reserved" license that photographers attach to the seemingly similar images, emphasizing the superficial uniformity of contemporary photography and, by extension, visual culture in general.

Even more noteworthy are the details that go unnoticed and perhaps characterize machine-based creativity better than its alleged monotony. Authorship in this context has less to do with the visual "originality" of each image and more with invisible layers of metadata. By licensing their work, photographers on Flickr are claiming authorship and making sure credit will be given when a particular author's image is used. In this case, what is crucial lies beyond the image's surface.¹⁵

Moreover, the networked camera can materialize one of the Productivists' fantasies: Making it possible to not only produce images, but to distribute them to a broader range of individuals than a narrow elite of "artists" or other professionals legitimized by their society. The seamless sequence of taking photographs, editing them, disseminating them via platforms such as Instagram, and soliciting feedback is something that was not possible before the networked camera. And, paradoxically, the role of images themselves in this flow may be diminishing, while the very process of sharing, consuming, and commenting on them becomes more relevant.

Let us consider the next exhibit, *@carolinecalloway*, the Instagram account of Caroline Calloway (b. 1991), an art historian, writer, and Instagram celebrity. Since 2012, Calloway has used Instagram to produce posts whose most relevant features are not the images themselves but rather their diary-like captions. Those captions narrate her life—the life of a somewhat privileged and well-educated white woman in her late twenties who, among many other things, lives in the West Village, goes to Pilates

and therapy, likes to wear real flowers in her hair, reminisces about her former Adderall addiction, and hawks her paintings, used clothing, and bottles of self-made Snake Oil for your face, body, and hair. She publicly claims to earn thousands of dollars on OnlyFans in order to support her mother who is undergoing cancer therapy, mourns her father's death by suicide, turns spelling errors into her "brand," pre-sells a book titled *And We Were Like* which still needs to be written, and so on.¹⁶ By late 2021, the account @carolinealloway had attracted more than 600,000 followers, and the clout she gained from Instagram spilled into real life, with Calloway appearing at literary and social events in New York City while her creative and entrepreneurial activities received coverage in mainstream outlets such as *New York Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *Teen Vogue* and others. In November 2021, however, all content on her Instagram account disappeared, and it remains deleted at the time of writing in January 2022. Depending on when you read this, the account may or may not be active again. For precisely this reason, the Instagram account @carolinealloway cannot be a more perfect exhibit in the museum room dedicated to the significance of invisible networks undergirding photographic images.

Invisible networks also have the power to elevate and amplify voices that otherwise would have remained obscure. For example, director and screenwriter Madelaine Turner (b. 1994) shares her eerily compelling and elaborate short films on her TikTok account @madelaineturner. Although the platform is more known for lighter and less intellectual entertainment, Turner's arthouse films have reached more than 500,000 followers as of January 2022, and some of the films have over four million views. Her audience is notably wider than such content could attract, for example, in the indie film festival circuit that would have been the go-to distribution network for a young filmmaker before the age of TikTok. Turner, who is referred to as "the Wes Anderson of TikTok" in a conversation with Calloway for *Interview* magazine, exemplifies one way in which artistic practices can thrive in networked platforms initially engineered for different purposes.¹⁷

The primary functions of platforms like TikTok and Instagram do not prioritize in-depth reflection or media (self-)critique either. Nevertheless, the networked camera can also facilitate a shift in power distribution. The great (and mostly male) photographers of the twentieth century can be viewed as imperial agents who have enjoyed what Ariella Azoulay calls "the right to roam around with a tool that penetrates people's lives and to take their pictures without being invited to do so."¹⁸ Meanwhile, technical images produced by creators like Turner and Calloway overturn or bypass this power imbalance because they put themselves in the front of their cameras. Although such human-machine relationships also can be exploitative or serve imperial projects, I would like to believe that these (female) creators are claiming a certain agency for themselves while subverting the built-in exploitative program of the photographic apparatus.

Exhibit 3: Photography Without Images

Let us look back at technical images before the networked camera. Here the main exhibit is an unusual book by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), originally published as *Un art moyen* in 1965 and only in 1990 translated from French into English as *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*. Presciently, Bourdieu wrote about photography as predominantly social practice in which networks and relationships are more significant than images themselves. Moreover, Bourdieu observed that in the 1960s, "photographic practice, even in its most accomplished form [came] very low in the hierarchy of artistic practices."¹⁹ Bourdieu de-romanticized such practice, acknowledging that "while photography may be seen as an art, it is only ever a minor art. Hence, in this area, barbarism and incompetence are of no more consequence than virtuosity."²⁰ Central to his understanding of photography is his recognition of French society's professional, educational, and class structure: "Unlike going to museums or concerts, [photography] does not have the support of an authority with the explicit role of teaching or encouraging it."²¹

While young female creators of technical images such as Calloway or Turner can find audiences for their work on Instagram and TikTok, a young female creator of technical images in the 1960s did not

have access to similar platforms and audiences, especially if she lived and worked in the Soviet Union. One such creator was Latvian artist and photographer Zenta Dzividzinska (1944–2011), active locally and internationally in the 1960s when she was the same age as Calloway or Turner. Dzividzinska abandoned her creative experiments with photography around 1972 and was subsequently forgotten. At the center of her legacy is a vast collection of hundreds of negatives and prints depicting the daily lives of three generations of women as they unfolded in and around their small house in the Latvian countryside, as well as self-portraits and collaborative work produced with other young female artists and art students while she studied at art school.²² Dzividzinska was misunderstood for most of her lifetime, and only beginning in the 2000s has her legacy begun to attract interest from art historians, curators, and contemporary artists.

But one of the main challenges for anyone who would be interested in her work is that it is invisible. Many museum curators and collectors are interested in “great” artworks—they look for large, high quality, well-preserved vintage prints ready for framing and exhibiting. But Dzividzinska did not make many exhibition-size prints during the 1960s. Her most radical work at the time was not thought of as exhibitable, so it exists only as small test prints or negatives; Dzividzinska did not always have the time or resources to produce prints.

Knowing this, curator Zane Onckule envisioned a new model of collaboration between the estate of a deceased artist, the practice of a contemporary artist, and the labor of an archivist. This vision materialized as a solo show by Austrian contemporary artist Sophie Thun (b. 1985) featuring the archive of Zenta Dzividzinska, *I Don't Remember a Thing: Entering the Elusive Estate of ZDZ*, which was exhibited at the Kim? Contemporary Art Center in Riga, Latvia in 2021.²³ Onckule invited Thun to exhibit her own work in addition to studying Dzividzinska's archive. During the exhibition, Thun discovered Dzividzinska's negatives and printed new images from them onsite. Meanwhile, archivist Līga Goldberga opened the boxes where the family had kept Dzividzinska's archive, described their contents, and helped Thun with the selection of negatives.

On the last day of the exhibition, two large panels were completely covered by the new prints. The selection of self-portraits, snapshots, staged setups with nude female models alongside test prints left an impression of work in progress, even though Thun's work here was finished and would be deinstalled the next day the gallery. This feeling partly speaks to Dzividzinska's career in photography, which she abandoned at such an early stage without a chance to fully develop her own practice. Thun's contribution here, however, is more than just printing; she interprets Dzividzinska's work.²⁴ Treating the photographic negative as a musical score that gets interpreted by each musician who performs it, Thun opens a whole new avenue for thinking about technical images in terms of authenticity and authorship. By centering the project around darkroom work—usually the most invisible part of photographer's labor—the exhibition challenged the cultural status of that labor as well.

The intimate subjects and idiosyncratic style of Dzividzinska's work, however, is likely to discourage herise of her posthumous celebrity likeoother, morewell-known cases. For example, though Eugène Atget (1857–1927) provided artists and municipal institutions with photographs of buildings of Paris for decades, it was only upon his passing that his images began to be treated as art, thanks in part to Man Ray and the Surrealists. To give another example, Vivian Maier (1926–2009) worked as a babysitter in Chicago, and her dedication to street photography was a hidden hobby that was only “discovered” after her death.

Images are just one—and oftentimes not even the most important—part of a longer sequence of events. To expose those events means to deconstruct, deny, reject, or at least challenge the mainstream understanding of fine art photography, a modernist myth glorifying an honorable craft and practice whose purpose is to produce “great”—pleasant, likable, beautiful images—in the form of pristine, archival quality prints. I came to think of photography without images while researching the development of midcentury photojournalism. For example, in the late 1940s Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908–2004), then working as a photojournalist in China, used to send exposed film back to New York

City where other people, from anonymous darkroom technicians to influential editors at the *Life* magazine, completed the remaining steps of the photographic process, including developing film, printing contact sheets and enlargements, selecting images and cropping them, and so on.²⁵ Cartier-Bresson himself was responsible for the camera work on location, while his “great” images were actually “made” by others at the Magnum Photos and the editorial office of *Life*. Even the elaborate captions that accompanied his photos were written by others, such as his wife Ratna Mohini or friends like Jim Burke in Beijing and Sam Tata in Shanghai.²⁶

Artist and photographer Ivars Grāvlejs (b. 1979) has produced works that function as agents for purposefully exposing the social connections and networks that underlie technical image production and consumption, but which typically remain obscured by the visual pleasure the images evoke. For example, in a unique moment of life-art conflation, Grāvlejs wrote a master's thesis on Latvian photography history, referencing a vast bibliography of completely made-up sources. He successfully defended it at a school in Czech Republic where nobody knew details of that “history.” In another such moment, he collected my husband's and other unsuspecting attendees' cell phones, left the building, and remained unreachable for a worryingly long time. That moment marked the end of his talk about his urban intervention *Live and Learn* at the opening of the first edition of Riga Photography Biennial in 2016. The point he wanted to make with this intervention was to “draw attention to our current-day obsession with photography and social media, as a result of which everyone is too preoccupied with this visual pollution—the smog of visual information, and appear to no longer have time for objective reflection.”²⁷ Almost ten years earlier, Grāvlejs approached well-known artists and art lovers at gallery and museum exhibition openings, invited them to look at his latest work on his phone and filmed their reactions to that work, which was a fragment of a pornographic video (*Mobile*, 2007).²⁸ His work belongs to a different cultural field than that of Cartier-Bresson, Dzividzinska, Calloway, or Turner, but what bring them together in our museum is that their photographic practices at certain points revolve around something more than *only* making images.

Exhibit 4: Retrofuturism and Robots

The main exhibit here is a vinyl album *Die Mensch-Maschine* (*The Human-Machine*, 1978) by pioneering German electronic band Kraftwerk, which at the time of its recording was both historical and futuristic. Central to the album's theme is human-machine interaction, which imagines a future with humanoid robots that will look like us, act like us, and in general be just like us—a mechanic, electronic, automatic or whatever “other” version of us.²⁹ This romanticized vision links the aesthetics of the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s, the interwar Bauhaus, and the later twentieth century developments in computing, robotics, and electronic music and sound.

Kraftwerk's self-identification with a machine, translated into images of humanoid robots, is ubiquitous in photographs, album covers, and music videos, as well as live performances in which robots replace the musicians on stage. The human voice in their music is either transformed by software or completely machine-generated to create their signature distanced, detached, and emotionless manner of singing (or rather reciting). For example, in the single “Die Roboter” (“The Robots”), a computer-modified voice recites in Russian: “Я твой слуга, Я твой работник” (*Ya tvoi sluga, Ya tvoi robotnik*, which means, “I am your servant, I am your worker”).³⁰ These lines situate the robot as a servant to humans, a machine that is programmed to perform tasks assigned to it, yet which has agency, personality, an ego (via first-person perspective), and a certain level of mental-emotional capacity that can mimic human self-awareness, if not the human mind.

In the 1920s, Russian avant-garde artists Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Liubov Popova, and Gustavs Klutskis visualized the Productivist body through photographs, photomontages, posters, and costume sketches. The Productivist body was a human body that had acquired machine-like qualities, a body that desired to mimic a machine or identify with a machine to become more productive at its site of labor. These images of the Productivist body seem to anticipate the human-

machine that speaks in “Die Roboter”: “We’re charging our battery / And now we’re full of energy / We are the robots / We’re functioning automatic / And we are dancing mechanic.”³¹ Meanwhile, in the much blander reality of 2020s, we live with invisible “robots” who, instead of “dancing mechanic,” quietly participate in and shape our daily lives.

Exhibit 5: Simulacrum and Speculation

The main exhibit in this room is the NFT art market.

On January 10, 2022, Sultan Gustaf Al Ghozali tweeted “Uploading my photo into NFT lol, ”putting up a collection of selfies for sale for approximately \$3 USD as a joke.³² Thanks to several beneficial circumstances, by January 21 the price for selfie #932 went up to \$12,000 USD.³³ Al Ghozali is a twenty-two year-old Indonesian computer science student whose photographic self-portraits or selfies brought him more than a million dollars on the NFT art marketplace in January 2022.³⁴ “I took photos of myself for five years since I was eighteenth to twenty-two years old. It’s really a picture of me standing in front of the computer day by day,” wrote Al Ghozali about his now-famous selfie series, *Ghozali Everyday*.³⁵ The museum asks: How can a traditionally trained art historian navigate, interact with, and examine this rapidly emerging art world in which people talk about mining, minting, and Generative Adversarial Networks?

The NFT art marketplace has emerged partly as a response to the mainstream art world’s elitism. The NFT universe offers an alternative space for a group of people who either want to create art or experience and own it but who are—or feel—excluded from the traditional art market and institutions. For example, some NFT art collectors are known only by their pseudonyms, such as Cozomo de’ Medici, Vincent Van Dough, and Starrynight.³⁶ Their nicknames point to a superficial interest in the arts. Typically, the collectors—just like the producers—of this art have backgrounds in computer science or business and finance. Their art reflects aesthetic sensibilities that have taken shape under the influence of sources other than the curriculum for any arts or humanities degree.

“If the teleological art of the past found its meaning in recognition by the individual, then the art of the future will find such meaning in recognition by society. In a democratic art all form must be socially justified,” Tarabukin wrote in *From the Easel to the Machine* in 1923.³⁷ Tarabukin likely did not quite imagine the way “socially justified” art would evolve in front of our eyes, nor exactly what kind of “recognition by society” compels members of that society pay \$400,000 USD and up for a 24x24 pixel avatar to use as their Twitter profile photo.³⁸ If Tarabukin was thinking about art that all of society recognizes as such, then that concept will have remain theoretical as long as we want a diversity of opinions. But NFT art—just like other artforms known to us now—is art for a certain part of society. “The admiration of one’s peers constitutes a partial legitimacy which is at least enough to establish the photographer as an artist,” Bourdieu said in the 1960s, when photography was not yet a recognized art form.³⁹ Moreover, “It is only through the group that the precedence and uniqueness of the work can be established: the merit of the work thus always seems to be recognized for reasons which lie outside the work itself.”⁴⁰ We can say something similar about NFT art.

The artworks themselves perhaps are less important than what they symbolize, even if that symbolic quality is ownership. Such high-stakes and extremely visible transactions as the purchase of Beeple’s (b. 1981) *Everydays* for over \$69 million USD via Christie’s are not always and not necessarily affirmations of a certain visual style or aesthetic.⁴¹ The collectors who bought *Everydays*, MetaKovan (Vignesh Sundaresan) and Twobadour (Anand Venkateswaran), claimed that “The point was to show Indians and people of color that they too could be patrons, that crypto was an equalizing power between the West and the Rest, and that the Global South was rising.”⁴² The new art market is steeped in well-aimed idealism, as it is common at the early stages of anything new. The technological novelty of the process itself seems exciting because its downsides, shortcomings, and limitations have not yet become visible; “decentralized” and “democratic” are its buzzwords. It can also be weirdly satisfying

to see millions of dollars by passing elitist blue-chip galleries with addresses in New York, Zurich, Paris, as well as a few token former colonial outposts in Asia.

Despite all this egalitarian and decolonial discourse, NFT art forums tend to emulate the same old hierarchical structure of the art world, including making clear distinctions between a tiny elite—one per cent or so—of financially successful creators and masses of participants trying to sell their work for a few dollars.⁴³ Consequently, the NFT art world’s institutionalization serves as a distorted and uncanny reflection of the mainstream art world’s structure. For example, the Museum of Crypto Art (MOCΔ) is an online platform accessible on the web site <https://museumofcryptoart.com> and as a parcel #3397 in the VR world Somnium Space, which displays works selected and curated by the museum’s co-founder and director, NFT art collector Colborn Bell. The museum’s website states that the institution “poses two questions: ‘What is art?’ and ‘Who decides?’”⁴⁴ But it is not immediately clear whether the museum’s mission statement overflows with irony or is composed by a badly trained neural network: “MOCΔ is a testament to those who dared to believe in a better future that prioritized sovereignty, market access, and freedom of expression in the arts. Crypto art is a visual aesthetic that communicates these ideals. Those who rise to the challenge of creating crypto art are evangelists for a new socio-economic paradigm. MOCΔ takes collective actions to form a revolution.[...] MOCΔ welcomes the public to explore the beautiful and soul-quenching need to create and recreate.”⁴⁵

At the time of writing, Bell plans to open a physical space as an extension of MOCΔ’s online and VR presence.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, in January 2022 the Seattle NFT Museum has already opened, a brick-and-mortar venue where “digital collectibles” are “displayed on a series of custom-designed screens.”⁴⁷ The space’s website, www.seattlenftmuseum.com, opens with a slogan “Explore the Future of Art.” Although the space calls itself a “museum,” it does not aim to gather a collection. It is not claiming to function as a commercial gallery or dealership either. The museum’s self-presentation, like the MOCΔ website, has a predilection for glitchiness: “Vivid color. Perpetual motion. Without the limitations of mediums and materials, digital art pushes the boundaries of physical space.”⁴⁸ One might expect a more self-aware, realistic, and critical understanding of “digital art” and its limitations from people who represent the elite of the blockchain community, but this does not appear to be the case.

We must ask: Do these galleries, collections, and museums without walls describe contemporary culture in ways comparable to Malraux or Warburg? Or is this just the art-washing of what has been called hyper- or anarcho-capitalism?⁴⁹ Currently, the NFT art market is primarily a forum for a group of tech and finance professionals who do not have enough opportunities to spend their cryptocurrency. It still is not widely accepted as a form of payment for the usual luxury goods and signifiers of wealth in the real world. Partly for that reason, words like “art” or “museum” appear in this context because they possess a degree of cultural legitimacy and prestige, even among people who have little or no knowledge about professional art production and its institutions. While the money invested in NFT art does not automatically signify its value, it gradually legitimizes it. Even if the whole NFT art hype is a speculative simulacrum, professional art institutions cannot ignore it or dismiss it as completely irrelevant. The brick-and-mortar art market also is a speculative simulacrum—we are just more used to it.

In 1985, Flusser wrote: “Images are intended to serve as models for actions. For although they show only the surfaces of things, they still show relationships among things that no one would otherwise suspect. Images don’t show matter; they show what matters.”⁵⁰ Technical images are a mode of documenting and narrating modernity. They do this not only as illustrations in history books but even more so by being exactly what they are. Their materiality and embeddedness in the ever-changing machine shows us what matters. Technical images are not “free” as some NFT art museums would like to imagine, but rather too tightly connected to the machine(s) that produced them. File formats, software, and hardware age and become obsolete faster than one would expect. Machines, although they may seem so powerful, are also utterly unreliable. How could you access a book manuscript saved

on a floppy disk? What happened to your website that launched in 2001 with fancy Java animation? What is on that undeveloped 35mm film found in the attic?

We have no way of knowing the expiration date of everything that is, for example, saved on the cloud, displayed in the museum located at the parcel #3397 in the Somnium Space, or posted on Instagram. We cannot predict whether that content will be completely obsolete and forgotten, or if it will serve as source material for a future *Bilderatlas*. Perhaps what is an obvious daily necessity in our present world at one point in future will appear a mere footnote in a visual culture history textbook. It will be something weird and outdated that requires a lengthy explanation for the reader to get the vaguest idea what it was and how it worked, just like today's readers need explanations of dioramas, stereophotography, laterna magica, and other types of forgotten technical images. At the same time, the opposite shift is also possible. We have seen how images, ideas, and narratives emerging in relative obscurity reappear later when the society is ready to appreciate them.

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