
Lost Not Found: The Circulation of Images in Digital Visual Culture

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There is a strain of net art referred to among its practitioners and those who follow it as “pro surfer” work. Characterized by a copy-and-paste aesthetic that revolves around the appropriation of web-based content in simultaneous celebration and critique of the internet and contemporary digital visual culture, this work—heavy on animated gifs, YouTube remixes, and an embrace of old-school “dirtstyle” web design aesthetics—is beginning to find a place in the art world. But it has yet to benefit from substantial critical analysis. My aim here is to outline ways in which the work of pro surfers holds up to the vocabulary given to us by studies of photography and cinematic montage. I see this work as bearing a surface resemblance to the use of found photography while lending itself to close reading along the lines of film formalism. Ultimately, I will argue that the work of pro surfers transcends the art of found photography insofar as the act of finding is elevated to a performance in its own right, and the ways in which the images are appropriated distinguishes this practice from one of quotation by taking them out of circulation and reinscribing them with new meaning and authority.

The phrase “pro surfer” originated with the founding in 2006 of Nasty Nets, an “internet surfing club” whose members were internet artists, offline artists, and web enthusiasts who were invited by the group’s co-founders (of which I was one) to join them in posting to their website materials they had found online, many of which were then remixed or arranged into larger compositions or “lists” of images bearing commonality. Soon a number of group “surf blogs” appeared around the net, including Supercentral, Double Happiness, Loshadka, and Spirit Surfers, each of which share some number of common members, social bonds, or stylistic affinities. There are also a number of “indie surfers” making similar work, some of whom will be mentioned here.

While the artists in this movement have at times debated whether or not they are truly part of a movement, or whether their posts (most of which take the form of blog entries) are truly art or just “something else,” there have been a number of

movement-like signs. In 2007 we had our own happening in the form of the Great Internet Sleepover, held at New York’s Eyebeam and organized by Double Happiness co-founder Bennett Williamson—to which surfers flocked from as far as California, Utah, Wisconsin, Texas, Georgia, Virginia, Rhode Island, and elsewhere. Many pro surfer artists, on their own or in their respective collectives, are being curated into major museum exhibitions and film festivals. Despite such recognition, there have yet to be many significant essays on the movement, and the artists have debated the need for anything resembling a manifesto, saying amongst themselves that they are waiting to hear interpretations from exterior critical voices. So I am making a first stab here, knowing full-well that I might wipe out.

If we are to consider pro surfer work in relationship to photographic media, we must begin with the concept of *circulation*—the ways in which the images are produced and exchanged, and their currency or value. The images that get appropriated on these sites are at times “cameraless” (i.e. created by software or other lensless tools that nonetheless aspire to optical perspective, typically follow normative compositional rules, and tend to index realism), while others are created with some other being behind the aperture, only to be found and appropriated by a surfer. In their re-presentation in a different context—arguably a different economy—the images are taken out of circulation, often without attribution or a hint of origin, unless that is part of the story being told by the artist. Two Nasty Nets members even programmed a web-based tool called Pic-See that makes it easier for internet users to plunder images archived in open directories. When the images are reused, they are positioned as quotations yet inscribed with authorial status by the artist who posts them. Let’s consider some examples.

Justin Kemp’s *Pseudo Event* is an assemblage of photos taken at ribbon-cutting events, with each picture lining up perfectly so as to form a continuous red ribbon that stretches wide across the screen, requiring quite a bit of horizontal scrolling. On a similar note, Guthrie Lonergan’s *Internet Group Shot* gathers group photos found online (of teams, coworkers, families, etc.) and collages them together into a larger portrait. In some sense this is a group portrait of internet users. The image unfolds vertically, with the individual components rising up from the herd as they are moused-over. John Michael Boling’s *Four Weddings and a Funeral* culls YouTube videos of just that series of events. The five videos attest to the popularity of this content on the

video-sharing website and stack up to a rather clever evaluation of the nature of web-based forms—a common trope in this genre of net art. Consider Oliver Laric’s *50 50*, which pieces together fifty YouTube clips of different people singing the music of hip hop artist Fifty Cent, or Seecoy’s *matrYOshki*, which nests within itself the same YouTube clip of Russian nesting dolls. At times, these works are simultaneously celebrations of net culture, critiques of it, commentary on the experience of web surfing, and a flexing of the artist’s geek-muscles. While not all pro surfers are extreme hackers—in fact many rely on WYSIWYG tools and Web 2.0 devices that make DIY code tricks easy—others cleverly exploit html, javascript, css, and other programming languages (often those dating to the early days of the internet that have since waned in popularity). One such example is Boling’s *Marquee Mark*, which makes internet-derived images of pop star cum actor Marky Mark Wahlberg scroll in a marquee fashion. These practices resemble the art historical use of found photography, but verge on constituting some other kind of practice—something, dare I say, more original.

It should be noted that other artists in this milieu are making images that verge on the sublime; images of which one would never question the originality. These pictures also employ found material—whether it is extant photography or images that were always/already “fake,” i.e. cameraless digital images created to index reality without ever having an analogous relationship to it. These include video game graphics, low-pixel sprites, bitmap illustrations, and other digital renderings. Artists Travess Smalley and Borna Sammak both make collages out of such materials that resemble Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings or Kurt Schwitters more than anything as mimetic as even Robert Rauschenberg or Richard Hamilton, to whom they clearly owe some sort of creative debt. Petra Cortright’s landscape images are deceptively realist, while constructing epic janky-edged, behemoth mountain ranges that could never truly exist in nature. James Whipple’s work often begins with real images of existing spaces and then forces a harmony with the so-called organic shapes of power icons and female body armor found in online multiplayer video games.

Charles Broskoski’s *Cube* copies and pastes together the scroll bars usually interpreted as “outside” of the internet—the frame—and uses them to create one of the most pervasive art historical forms: the grid, thus slamming social context back into the domain of modern aesthetics. Paul Slocum’s *Time Lapse Homepage* is a sort of video soundtrack to the evolution of his personal webpage, which in some

senses is also a record of his ongoing response to working online and experiencing the internet. These meta-commentaries continue the practice of critiquing the internet and greater network culture through its own lenses. And while pro surfers like Michael Bell-Smith are better known for works like his *Chapters 1–12 of R. Kelly’s Trapped in the Closet Synced and Played Simultaneously*, in which he overlapped the web-based episodes of R. Kelly’s show to reveal its formal qualities (a significantly “offline” project directly influenced by the content and experience of the internet), they are also engaged in a distinctly social practice, as was the case in Bell-Smith’s Nasty Nets post, entitled “The post where we share awesome gradients.” In the post, members of the collective and other readers posted their favorite gradient images usually meant to linger as background information on a webpage but scraped, collected, and re-presented in celebration of their often overlooked beauty. It is no wonder, in this genre, that the playlist is the formal model par excellence (see first Lonergan’s playlist of MySpace users’ diaristic YouTube-based “intro videos”); but in this case the artists are frequently playing with other people’s property. In this sense, they are not unlike some of our most beloved contemporary photographers.--Queue the obligatory art historical references: The Surrealists, the Dada guys, The Pictures Generation, Andy Warhol, Barbara Kruger, Thomas Ruff, and even Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, Gerhard Richter, Christian Marclay, or Tacita Dean, if you want to consider “found” tropes or photo-based painting, etc. The list is long.

Found photography has enjoyed a particularly dubious legacy. Scraped from the dustbins of history, the worlds these images encapsulate already represent a universe other than the one occupied by the discoverer. Whether hailing from a different time or place or both, there tends to be a discrepancy between the intention of the eye of the photo-taking artist and the later viewer. The discrepancy draws on the voyeuristic curiosity of the latter—eyes for which the image may or may not have been intended. The ways in which these eyes might interpret the images recalls film theorist Christian Metz’s distinction between a viewer’s primary identification with the camera and secondary identification with characters, while problematizing the third term of a viewer’s relationship to the artist, particularly when the viewer steps in to appropriate the image.

These relationships are distinctly marked by the question of the photo’s content, which is in turn overdetermined by the circulatory patterns of found photos. The earliest images we have of this nature

are those eerie images with which many of us are now familiar: studies from mental institutions that sought to link physiognomy and psyche; mug shots that presaged racial profiling in their linking of a suspect's silhouette and a predisposition toward deviance. Whether we're talking about Ishi or Salpetriere patients or those forever interned at the Mütter Museum, these indices of abnormality spliced *vérité* and constructed horror in their archiving of impending disaster, perhaps kicked off by the snap of the aperture. These bodies were taken out of circulation in the economy of signs to which they belonged—taxonomized like a beloved stuffed pet—in order to be preserved. The same can be said of the family photos that now populate the “found” genre, which in some sense most immediately signify death. Ironically, these images circulate in excess. Their value may be the inverse of one predicated on scarcity, but they stand in a position of contrast to proper “Art Photography.”

Despite existing mostly as unique prints, their distribution is far less controlled than editioned photos which tend, for whatever reason, to be just as controlled with regard to form and content as they are with regard to reproduction. The application of free market metaphors here becomes complicated. The copywritten image acquires more cultural currency in correlation to its increased monetary value, yet the priceless snapshot is the one that floats freely. The author's right to control the image, to claim ownership of it as an object or a product of their mind or labor, is theoretically ceded when it's tossed into the bin, whether at a garage sale or a fancy photo fair.

This is where we can begin drawing analogies to the internet. When an image is uploaded, it can presumably be accessed by any person with any intent. We know this because, in these days of increasingly perpetuated political paranoia, a new form of technophobia related to identity theft skews most cultural commentary related to the posting of photos on social networks and other public sites. Nonetheless, the correlation between *vérité* and free circulation persists: the photos that truly represent mainstream life (for all its absurdities), that truly reflect those spectacles about which we fantasize producing and witnessing, are the ones left out there to be found, floating sans watermark. This accounts for their popularity among artists and non-artists alike. Make no mistake, found photos are enjoying celebrity on the internet among surfers pro, indie, and amateur. Those split-second bloopers, acts of conspicuous consumption, and diaristic elevations of otherwise banal moments found on sites with names

like Ffffound comprise the backbone of contemporary digital visual culture. They are the vertebrae of a body we otherwise seek to theorize as amorphous, overlooking this proliferation of images as somehow anomalous, not yet part of the master narrative of network conditions.

Rosalind Krauss argues that while there are many spaces and contexts in which photographs live, the wall of the gallery is the primary discursive space of the photo. But the leap to digital form—indeed, how many of the world's photos are even printed anymore?—prompts us to consider not only the vertical plane of the webpage as the new home of photographic media, but also to consider the relationship between taxonomy à la the stuffed-pet metaphor and taxonomy à la the digital archive. In so many ways, the archive has become the dominant mode of not only presentation, but even production. This was true of August Sander and Walker Evans, picked up and modified by Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari, and in the work of pro surfers continues to indulge our impetuses toward narrative order, whether images are produced from the get-go as one of a series, remixed according to database aesthetics (to exploit an early net art catch phrase), or folded into a list presented as a sort of precontextualized readymade. The history of photography makes clear that this is a common practice, but what we must ask ourselves now is whether these are, in fact, still readymades or whether the degree to which they are prepared makes them something else.

Montage theory argues in favor of “something else.” The famous “Kuleshov Effect,” named for film theorist Lev Kuleshov, is one in which linked shots add up to something greater than the sum of their parts, dialectically constructing a narrative by way of association. These same words can clearly be used to describe the representational strategies at play in the aforementioned pro surfer work samples. But the resemblances also extend to the social life of this creative community. In “The Principles of Montage,” Kuleshov discusses the period, in the nascent stages of Soviet cinema, in which he and his comrades attempted to discern “whether film was an art form or not.” Kuleshov argues that, in principle, “every art form has two technological elements: material itself and the methods of organizing that material.” Kuleshov and his peers felt that many aspects of filmmaking—from set design and acting to the very act of photography—were not specific to the medium. Nevertheless, he argues, “the cinema is much more complicated than other forms of art, because the method of organization of its material and the material

itself are especially ‘interdependent’.” In specific opposition to his examples of sculpture and painting, Kuleshov is describing a medium in which the very structure, indeed the very structuring context (its machines and process—in short, its apparatuses), is responsible for not only the production of signifiers but also the signification itself. This insistence on the “complicated” role of apparatuses foreshadows later critical insistence on the interdependence between the content and the hardware and software organizing the content of a work of new media art, and certainly in the art hack, by virtue of the work’s signification through resequencing.

When we apply this logic to the practices and products of pro surfers, we see that they are engaged in an enterprise distinct from the mere appropriation of found photography. They present us with constellations of uncannily decisive moments, images made perfect by their imperfections, images that add up to portraits of the web, diaristic photo essays on the part of the surfer, and images that certainly add up to something greater than the sum of their parts. Taken out of circulation and repurposed, they are ascribed with new value, like the shiny bars locked up in Fort Knox

It was once argued that collage was the most powerful tool of the avant-garde; that it was a literalization of the drive to reorganize meaning. Now that it has become a mainstream practice, its authority has become virtually endangered. New media often suffers the fate of receiving inadequate criticism, and this is particularly true of internet-based work. Because these artists are practicing within a copy-and-paste culture in which images, sound files, videos, and even source code are lifted and repurposed, the work is often dismissed, full stock, as derivative. (A fact my Rhizome colleague Lauren Cornell and I attempted to address when we co-curated the New Museum exhibition, “Montage.”) Despite the implied claim that anything derivative is incapable of signifying on its own, the representational practice upon which this work hinges—montage—is by definition an act of bringing meaning to something. It borrows the techniques of collage—namely piecing together fragments, objects, and ideas in what Roland Barthes might call a “tissue of quotations”—to create new valences. This is not so much derivative as dialectical. Each “lifted” piece is put in conversation with each other, so that the combination creates a third (or fourth or fifth...) “term.”

As if the art world has not already flourished after decades of pop art and other recitations, the label

“derivative” becomes a blockade, denying artists entrée to a shared discourse, or denying the radical potential of these montage-based practices.

A few years ago, respected new media curator and self-described “former photo boy” Steve Dietz wrote an essay entitled “Why Have There Been No Great Net Artists?” The essay was inspired by the semi-rhetorical question asked by Linda Nochlin in her legendary essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Dietz summarizes the quandary posed by Nochlin’s essay and the same paradox is invoked in his own. The immediate answer is that of course there have been great female/internet artists. The second response is to say that the question is incorrectly framed. Not all female artists are the same (we are not a category!), and the same can be said of internet artists whose work now takes on a variety of forms and contents—just like photography! But the deeper issue here is art history’s compulsion toward recursion. The history that repeats itself is one written by archetypically old white dudes (as Paris Hilton so poignantly described John McCain in a recent web video) who tend to leave the ladies out of the yearbooks of their self-perpetuated old boys club. The same could very easily happen with net art.

There are artists I respect whose work couldn’t be adequately described within my assigned word count, artists who might take issue with my interpretation of their work, and artists who may see the field moving in entirely different directions. But if we are to be taken seriously, we must take a considered look at our playlists, to think about our favorite artists’ favorite artists—to learn and assert our own art history, so that in the near future, we will be found in those yearbooks.

WORDS WITHOUT PICTURES
18 SEPTEMBER 2008

Notes

1. <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2008/06/art/chuck-close-with-phong-bui>
2. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1961), p. 19.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 273–4.
4. Quoted in Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 318.
5. Quoted in Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. xv.
6. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 76.
7. Quoted in Deleuze, p. 70.