



Towards a History, Politics and Philosophy of the Online Image

by
Laurel Ptak & David Horvitz

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My work as a curator has, for many years now, critically attended to new possibilities and cultural implications of online space for art. Interestingly the project for which I am best known is not an exhibition in any traditional sense, but rather a blog. For almost five years now I have presented my view of contemporary photography inside this context, putting countless images into public circulation and sharing them with a daily community of several thousand viewers, stretching across hundreds of countries over six continents, sparking a vibrant discourse about the medium of photography.

Over the span of this project it has often occurred to me that the online image in and of itself has some unique characteristics, and consequences, that have not yet been well articulated or understood. Like digital photography had earlier negotiated a new theorization of the medium, it seemed to me that the conditions of online culture would soon need to confront a new reality and ontology of the online image.

But so far I only had questions, not answers: How were artists, journalists, theorists negotiating the new meanings and implications of the photograph inside network culture? How do we make sense of the image's new forms of hybridity, modes of authorship, economies of attention, and conditions of sociality? Beyond undoing photography's prior relationship to the real, indexicality, or materiality does the online image define itself on new terms — through its flexibility, disregard for traditional ideas of authorship, ownership and authenticity and its privileging of pathways of circulation and distribution over the act of creation or production. Does the online image really have the potential to disturb established notions of visual culture, journalism or artistic practice in profound ways?

To attend to such questions, in December 2011, I'm launching a new research initiative that works towards articulating a yet unwritten history, politics and philosophy of the online image. Envisioned as a five-year inquiry I hope to engage many artists, theorists, historians, curators, institutions and publics along the way. For now I've decided to start right here in the pages of Foam. What follows is a conversation between myself and artist David Horvitz, addressing his unique artistic practice as one possible vantage point to contextualize and consider the specificity of the online image.

Laurel Ptak

Laurel Ptak: What do you think is distinct about the online image? A lot of your work seems to approach this question.

David Horvitz: The online image is something that can't exist outside of its condition of circulation. Obviously, an analogue photograph circulates, it had to get to where it is. But the online image is online. It's in the middle of net-

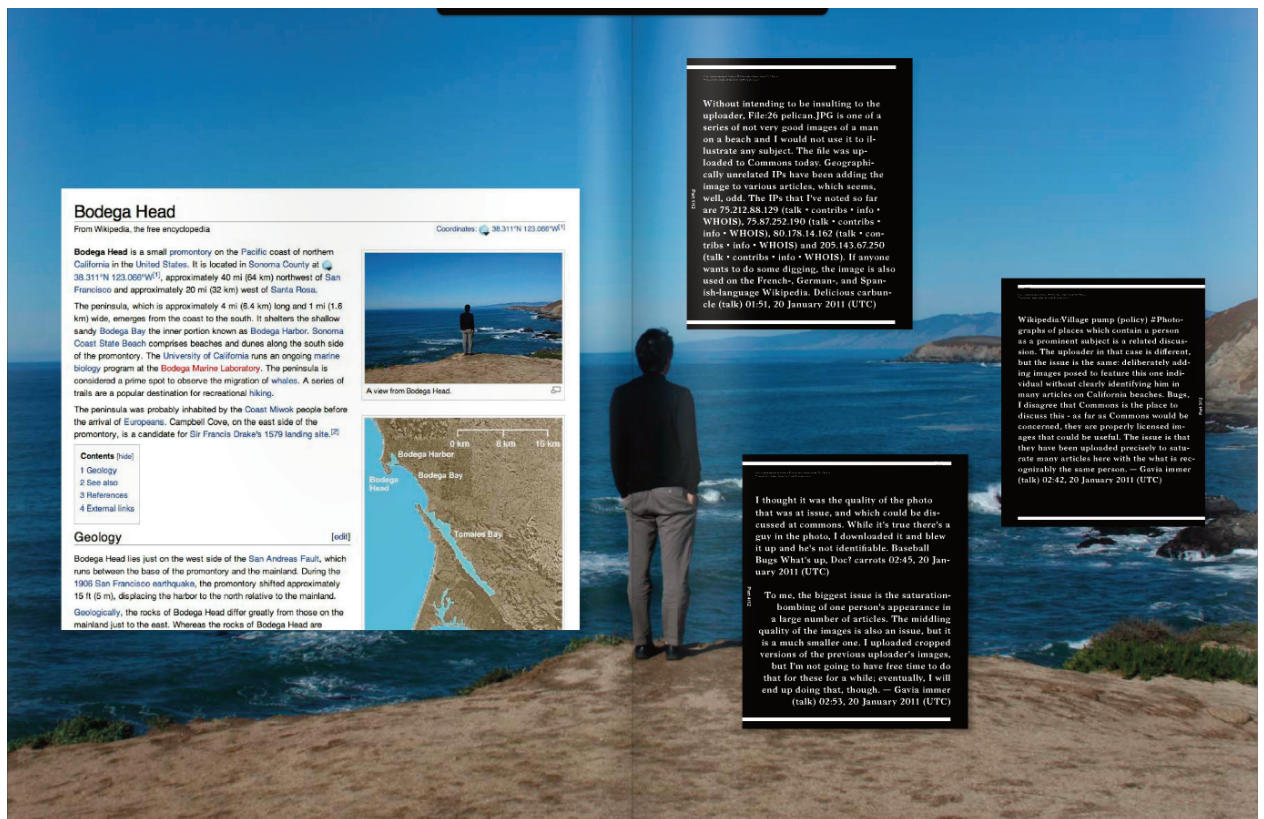
works and movements and acceleration. The online image is always re-contextualized. There is something about its timeless character. That it can be constantly in flux. The question is how do you work with this?

Your projects find compelling ways of negotiating this. I've often thought the real medium of your work might be distribution in and

of itself. For a Brief Time Only at a Location Near You is a perfect example. This project addressed context and the circulation of images as reconfigured by network culture rather interestingly.

I did this with Mylinh Nguyen. It was a photo project that distributed images as digital objects, dispersed around the world, which then materialized in

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people's specific localities. Twenty-four artists were asked to produce an image file that was 4 inches by 6 inches – the standard size of an American consumer amateur photograph. It was 24 because of the number of shots on a standard roll of 35mm film. The information for this 'exhibition' was announced online. If someone wanted to 'view' it they would email me their address. I would then look up their address in Google Maps and find the nearest drugstore to them. There are drugstores EVERYWHERE, so many had ones only a few minutes from their house. The image files were uploaded to the photo developer at the drugstore (many places now use internet uploading to send your photos to a printer) and the prints were printed within the hour.

The person who sent the email could then walk down the street, go in the store, and see the exhibition. Obviously, it was more than just seeing. It was the whole experience. It was happening in their own town, whether they lived in the middle of New York City, or they lived in Alaska. This exhibition was right there. It was both global and local. And, in each instance of its materialization, it had its own peculiarities. Different paper, maybe the printer would crop something or edit something out...and yes, sometimes they didn't print all the images!

Your projects are often circulating images in all kinds of ways, and further, bringing them through contexts that span the online and the offline. What happens to the image when it travels between these states?

I'm not sure what the space between it is. Is it a space of the image, or is it a mental space of the viewer?

Any relationship this space might have to those moments in the darkroom, waiting for the photograph to surface while sitting in the tray of fixer?

Wow! You just gave me a flashback. There are these moments, maybe we can call them poetic moments now, in analogue photography. I loved sitting in the dark room and watching images appear. And it feels that these moments of waiting are lost maybe. The space of waiting is replaced by the space of always being updated, of always not being up to date.

Yes. The online image does seem to have a distinct temporality, can you say more about that?

It is speed. Instantaneity. Simultaneity even. Even though there is always a delay (even the delay in our own phenom-

enological experience of seeing). With a newspaper things were 'updated' daily, or weekly. With the internet, it is constant. Continuous. Maybe too fast, and too much information. I read in a book how humans are orientated spatially, but recently our culture has been shifting to the temporal. But also, the brevity of messages has a history. The telegraph...

Explain.

I am curious about the moment when photographs were able to be sent using telegraph wires. We can trace a history from the telegraph to the internet. We take a lot of things for granted today. I think it must have been a pretty radical moment when you were able to see things almost simultaneously from around the world. When it was possible to publish a photo a few hours from when it was taken, regardless of where it was taken. When space is overcome as an obstacle. When the idea of a 'now' can be published. It's the same sense that a photograph is a likeness of a thing in the real world – that our image culture is a likeness of a right now. And possibly, this is just constructed. That it is impossible to represent a moment.

I'd like to discuss your recent Public Access project. In this instance you

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used Wikipedia as a site to circulate your photographs and by chance ended up testing the limits of how an image can be understood as objective information online. Can you explain?

Public Access was first exhibited (and commissioned) by SF Cameraclub in California. Basically, my proposal was to drive up the entire California Coast, along the highway closest to the Pacific Ocean. I drove from the Mexican-American border to Oregon. At each beach I made photographs of the beach with my body standing somewhere in the image: usually looking out at sea somewhere, or obscured in a shadow. Mostly I was hidden, but sometimes I was large in the photograph. I wanted to be an anonymous person who just happened to be there.

You chose a popular, collaborative, web-based encyclopedia that anyone is allowed to edit to also anonymously circulate these images. This gesture is essential to the project. Can you say more about it?

I uploaded these images of specific geographic places to Wikipedia articles about the beaches. So, one of my photographs would be used to illustrate an article on, let's say, Bodega Head, or Palos Verdes. There is a double play on 'public' here: the internet as a public space, and also, how all of California's beaches are public property (except for the military bases).

The images went online, and were intended to circulate as a kind of meta-data for the actual locations. Let's say you were to look up Palos Verde in an online search, this image might come up in the image results. Or, when you go on the Wikipedia page, you'll see the image there. So it wasn't just a 'Wikipedia' project, but it used Wikipedia as a place for 'releasing' an image into a space of circulation.

But quickly Wikipedia's editors, whose task is to monitor changes made to the website, became suspicious of your uploaded photographs. They noticed that the same anonymous figure appeared in each of the beach images. Reading through the way the editors talk about and treat

your pictures, it's really fascinating. It reveals some cracks and contradictions in Wikipedia's utopian idea for what an online encyclopedia edited by anyone is.

Many of my images were taken down because editors noticed similar activity coming from the same IP address, and noticed how all my images had someone in it, the same person. No one questioned it at the beginning. But after a few images went up, people were like, 'What's going on? Do these images break any rules? Is there some game going on, and if there is, is that wrong?' And so conversations emerged as to what is the ethical thing to do for Wikipedia. Some images were deleted. My favorite was when I was edited out of my own photograph, and then the photo re-uploaded.

But what rules did you possibly break?

That's the thing, no one was sure.

Wikipedia remains invested in an aesthetic of objectivity that an encyclopedia presupposes and you threatened that with your images?

I made them question it. One funny thing was that someone said I was not identifiable because they had downloaded the photos blew it up on Photoblog.com and they couldn't see my face and thought, 'this is OK!' I had no idea any of these conversations would emerge.

Eventually you included their debates in the book you made about this project. Can you describe what their discussion about your images was like?

This is going to be done from memory, so it's not all direct quotes – It's good to have the same person in all of these photos, it gives a kind of standard, a reference. There's obviously someone trying to trick us, this is bad. But why is this bad? Well, the images aren't that good, that's my concern. I actually like the images. I loved this part, when they judged my photos themselves. I never entered any of the conversations. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I did...

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