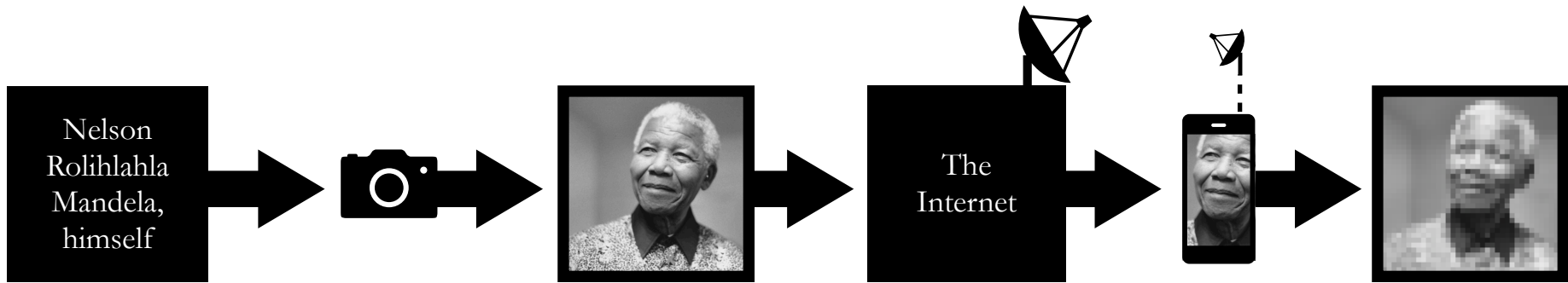


IMAGO-REVIVIFICATION



John 12:24

I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives.

The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution.

Hito Steyerl
from the essay *In Defense of the Poor Image*
e-flux Journal #10
November 2009





a factory



Brian Matthew Whirlledge

1

Choose an individual who has had an impact on you. In general, publicly known individuals whose image would be readily available on a search engine will be the best choice for this project.

2

Watch and take notes on John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, Episode 1 from 1972. (This is accessible on YouTube).

Read the attached excerpts from Hito Steyerl's essay *In Defense of the Poor Image*.

Consider how the iterative translation of an image over time can impoverish and shift its meaning. Consider *also* how the forces of online distribution and multiplication can increase the cultural gravity of an image, even as its detail is lost to the grid of pixelation.

Create a mind map or do some writing about how these forces might effect the individual whose image you are working with.

3

Create one finished work that uses the devices of portraiture, iconography, and gestalt to revivify the digital image of the individual you have been studying. Your finished work should include at least one iconic, one symbolic, and one indexical signifier. Each of these signifiers should prompt us to feel or think about one aspect of the individual's identity, legacy, history, work, etc... in a way that is meaningful. Your finished work does *not* need to be strictly two dimensional, does *not* need to be a rectangle, and does *not* need to conform to a specific size. Consider how all of these decisions can prompt your audience to feel and think about the individual you are depicting.

Hito Steyerl

Excerpts from the essay *In Defense of the Poor Image*

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The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution.

The poor image is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution. The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited. It transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction. The image is liberated from the vaults of cinemas and archives and thrust into digital uncertainty, at the expense of its own substance. The poor image tends towards abstraction: it is a visual idea in its very becoming.

The poor image is an illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image. Its genealogy is dubious. Its filenames are deliberately misspelled. It often defies patrimony, national culture, or indeed copyright. It is passed on as a lure, a decoy, an index, or as a reminder

of its former visual self. It mocks the promises of digital technology. Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all. Only digital technology could produce such a dilapidated image in the first place.

Poor images are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies' shores. They testify to the violent dislocation, transferrals, and displacement of images—their acceleration and circulation within the vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism. Poor images are dragged around the globe as commodities or their effigies, as gifts or as bounty. They spread pleasure or death threats, conspiracy theories or bootlegs, resistance or stultification. Poor images show the rare, the obvious, and the unbelievable—that is, if we can still manage to decipher it.

[...]

The networks in which poor images circulate thus constitute both a platform for a fragile new common interest and a battleground for commercial and national agendas. They contain experimental and artistic material, but also incredible amounts of porn and paranoia. While the territory of poor images allows access to excluded imagery, it is also permeated by the most advanced commodification techniques. While it enables the users' active participation in the creation and distribution of content, it also drafts them into production. Users become the editors, critics, translators, and (co-)authors of poor images.

Poor images are thus popular images—images that can be made and seen by the many. They express all the contradictions of the contemporary crowd: its opportunism, narcissism, desire for autonomy and creation, its inability to focus or make up its mind, its constant readiness for transgression and

simultaneous submission. Altogether, poor images present a snapshot of the affective condition of the crowd, its neurosis, paranoia, and fear, as well as its craving for intensity, fun, and distraction. The condition of the images speaks not only of countless transfers and reformattings, but also of the countless people who cared enough about them to convert them over and over again, to add subtitles, reedit, or upload them.

In this light, perhaps one has to redefine the value of the image, or, more precisely, to create a new perspective for it. Apart from resolution and exchange value, one might imagine another form of value defined by velocity, intensity, and spread. Poor images are poor because they are heavily compressed and travel quickly. They lose matter and gain speed. But they also express a condition of dematerialization, shared not only with the legacy of conceptual art but above all with contemporary modes of

semiotic production. Capital's semiotic

turn, as described by Felix Guattari, plays in favor of the creation and dissemination of compressed and flexible data packages that can be integrated into ever-newer combinations and sequences.

{...}

The poor image thus constructs anonymous global networks just as it creates a shared history. It builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates. By losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it. This aura is no longer based on the permanence of the "original," but on the transience of the copy. It is no longer anchored within a classical public sphere mediated and supported by the frame of the nation state or corporation, but floats on the surface of temporary and dubious data pools.¹⁵ By drifting away from the vaults of cinema, it is propelled onto new and ephemeral screens stitched together by the desires of dispersed spectators.

{...}

The poor image is no longer about the real thing—the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation.

In short: it is about reality.

Things to Read

Ways of Seeing, John Berger

(This is both a book and a short documentary series produced by the BBC.)

The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility, Walter Benjamin

(This is an essay, which you can find online or in print.)

The Art of Mechanical Reproduction, Tamara Trodd

(Book)

Artists to Research

Njideka Akunyili Crosby



Swoon



Brian Matthew Whirledge



Kristen Schiele

