Animism

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Theses on the Concept
of the Digital Simulacrum

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1.

The deceptive nature of the digital image is not evoked by a certain re-
semblance between original and copy, or reality and its simulation. No
matter whether faithful or unfaithful, the similitude of the simulacrum
seems no longer a question of likeness or unlikeness. Instead, similarity
has turned into simultaneity; it has become a question entirely occu-
pied by time: synchronized time and temporal command.

The digital image is characterized by a promise of instant avail-
ability in so-called real time that comes along with the idea of glo-
bal compatibility. Today, the illusionary character of the image lies in
the proclamation of immediate access to the recorded data as well as
in the idea of unlimited exchangeability bypassing any actual resem-
blance.

2.

The realm of the digital is organized by discrete signals, and it has to
result in a limited amount of data. The illusion of instant availability
is based on a prompt compression without sensible delay and without
any kind of processing, development, or conscious manipulation over
time. It stands for a dramatic diminuition of raw data that are reduced
to what various algorithms of the format may identify as useful infor-
mation according to recurring patterns. Allegedly useless information
is discarded without further notice; this negotiation happens constant-
ly and without a public possibility to interfere.

3.

The process of reduction used to characterize the act of creation: As
framing, focussing, composing, it was supposed to structure the im-
age and define visibility, to produce meaning and to give order to what
would be otherwise considered unsolicited. With the digital simu-
lacrum, these traditional techniques are backing out and they become
subject to automatization themselves. Ironically, the act of photogra-
phy regresses to the state it was conceived of at its very beginning:
rather than the product of an act of creation, the image itself is a simple
reproduction, a soulless replica, and the photographer appears just as a
prolongation of the machine.

4.

The elimination of uncontrolled and uncontrollable creativity over time seems to allow the re-inscription of the ancient property regime of the original into the copy. Neither iconicity, nor indexality nor symbolicity are any longer inherent in the image; they are attached to the image post festum and with a relevant effort afterwards or independently from the act of creation. The singularity of the image, its documentary function, appears as a supplement that is added only in the form of separate metadata.

These metadata appear as coordinates that have to be synchronized in order to anchor the digital image that is always on the move in a real life that otherwise would have no connection to reality. It becomes obvious that metadata are the surplus value that is to be appropriated and expropriated from the images.

5.

Contemporary image production is condemned to pose the question of property at the intersection of two axes: property that becomes increasingly a matter of imagination, and images that are subject to ongoing propertization.

In an economy based on imaginary property, the real abstraction of the exchange has turned into its opposite, the real-time exchange of data that are abstracted from the image that does not portray or equal anything anymore. What matters instead is the instant comparison of metadata that are divested and transformed into relational value.

Relational value is everything but beyond measure. In fact, it solves a fundamental problem: how could one quantify the appropriation of images in terms of value if what is produced is immaterial or merely affective, let alone imaginary? What can be counted, measured, and traded are indeed the relations generated from the abstraction of metadata out of images.

The passage from real abstraction to the abstract reality of an economy of metadata inverts the laws of exchange: The solipsism of the exchangers is replaced by gregarious networking; the constancy of the commodity form has become precarious and unstable always threatened by decay; exchange and use are no longer separated in time, but happen simultaneously; the principal of exchangeability is outsourced from the commodity itself and its abstract singularity to all its potentially ubiquitous and simultaneous relationships.

What reveals itself is nothing but the common in the commodity form.

6.

Consequentially, the simulacrum has lost its potential to challenge and overturn the privileged position, and open up to the lived reality of the sub-representational domain. On the contrary, the privileged position of ownership, no matter whether legitimate or illegitimate, has seized the subversive power of the simulacrum.

In the society of control, permanent availability has replaced the idea of representation. That means that the attempt to re-present has expanded beyond any limit of gravitation, and it contracts in the notion of real-time. This is only possible because of a shift: what is in fact subject to control are just images rather than the lives of individuals themselves; while the micro-mechanisms of diciplinary power are concerned with the production of a self, the society of control operates through profiling: instead of copies of an original, these profiles are animated images of a self that need to be multiplied infinetely in order to satisfy the insatiable demand for omnipresence, which renders possible the very idea of control.

7.

The subversive potential that once characterized the simulacrum has been dispelled to an imaginary area below the noise margin. Here, in a state of exile, it enjoys a regained freedom of movement that is opposed to the very idea of purification through compression. Rather than the border of the image towards an underground territory that is unconscious or whatever, the noise margin folds into a spatio-temporal matrix in which data is pointless in the three dimensions, of solicitation, purpose, and meaning. In a fourth dimension the linearity of time has collapsed: too early, too late, in any case, a false time that is radically opposed to real-time. In the society of control, this is the area of retreat for any resistance against communication.