Red Millennial Apple:
The Rough and The Smooth Image

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ABSTRACT

Red Millennial Apple: The Rough and The Smooth Image

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Red Millennial Apple: The Rough and The Smooth Image explores the impact digital space has on our everyday lives and the reasons behind our desire to consume smooth visual content. The aesthetic of the smooth seeks to eradicate any resistance between images and viewers. Within contemporary capitalist production, poor images are no longer blurred due to low resolution; they are smooth from the rational elimination of excess information — looking becomes consuming. If smoothness is post-produced, then this thesis explores the possibility of reversing that process, roughening the communication between the sayable and the visible through post-production, disrupting the algorithmic automation in Adobe Photoshop, Premiere, and After Effects. Smooth images are progressively roughened to generate collages, objects, rotoscoped video, and stop-motion animation, keeping viewers at a distance but inviting them to linger, contemplating what they see.

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INTRODUCTION

My interest in this thesis topic originates from my twelve-year experience of moving across the globe as an international student: from China, my birthplace, to Singapore, the United States, and finally to Canada. During this period, I gradually realized that my role within consumer culture distracts me from fully engaging in everyday life. Regardless of where I physically reside, I am haunted by feelings of boredom. Even one minute away from my phone seems unbearable. Why do I mindlessly scroll through Instagram while waiting for a traffic light to change? Why must I play digital games that only require me to collect rewards as a break from working in real life? Upon reflection I realize I have an insatiable desire to consume. Online games and social media provide rewards that further spur this desire. Any attempt to pull away from this reward system triggers anxiety and the fear of a return to boredom. I intend to explore the impact digital space has on our everyday lives and to understand the reasons behind our desire to consume.

The context of this thesis deals with two theories and how they interact: German-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han's "Aesthetic of the Smooth" and German artist Hito Steyerl's discussion of "poor images" and post-production. With the introduction of digital technology and the internet, the backdrop of our everyday life is no longer limited to a geographical location. Rather, our immersive, fluid and borderless landscape consists of both physical and digital elements. Digital tools and software let us access consumables quickly and easily; and contemporary capitalist production further elevates the desire to consume by creating "smooth" visual content. Byung-Chul Han coined the term "aesthetic of the smooth" to describe how things created under the framework of capitalism focus on delivering immediate, corporeal pleasures (Han, 2015, 16). In reference to Hito Steyerl's discussion on "poor images" and post-production, I argue that digital visual content also becomes consumable and is produced with the aesthetic of the smooth. The subject of an image is cropped, exposed, and pushed to the front while the background remains empty, as any excessive or distracting information is removed so viewers can easily understand what they see.

"If reality is post-produced, then it also means that we can change it by post-production" (Steyerl, 2013, 17:10 - 18:30). If smoothness is post-produced, then my thesis explores the possibility of reversing that process through post-production. My research questions therefore include:

1. How does the “aesthetic of the smooth” transform the definition of the “poor image”?
2. How does smoothness reproduce itself and influence consumers and their post-production of visual content?
3. If smoothness is post-produced, how can I use the poor image as the material and post-production techniques tools to create a rough visual experience, one that cannot be quickly consumed and that demands a contemplative lingering?

The practice side of this thesis revolves around the writing of French philosopher Jacques Rancière and new media theorist Lev Manovich. Inspired by French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s discussion of the “pensive image,” my practice experiments with the concepts of such as *resemblance*, *punctum*, and the tangible illusion to stimulate contemplative lingering. In the chapter “Veil, Destabilize, and Walk Away”, I introduce the work of Vik Muniz and Sol LeWitt to elaborate on each concept’s ability to roughen the experience between what is visible and what is sayable. The five principles of new media analysed by Lev Manovich in The Language of New Media (numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding) play a pivotal role in my methodology (Manovich, 2001, 27). As modulation becomes a natural part of digital objects, I can intervene in various stages of post-production to create an unstable composition; one that performs what Han describes as “staging an appearance as disappearing” (Han, 2018, 31).

Using psychogeography as my methodology, I employ the methods of *dérive*, *détournement*, and selection to create the various projects of this thesis. After inputting keywords such as “red,” “millennial,” “apple,” into Google Alert, I receive a pile of emails each day for the duration of one year. The experience of clicking through hyperlinks becomes my practice of *dérive*, while screenshots become my method of collecting poor images as my primary material. Under the logic of *détournement*, I manipulate these images to create different ensembles using Adobe Photoshop, Premiere, and After Effects. The aesthetic outcome becomes a tug of war between my selections and the selections produced via algorithmic calculation. This selection dynamic assists me in creating an unstable composition that invites the viewer to contemplate, imagine, and think critically.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

From Inhabitants to Consumers

At some point before I was born, the phrase "Hello, World!" first flickered on a boxy computer screen, indicating the start of the information age. Computer users began to be connected to a giant urban mass of consumers. I first entered digital space at the age of eleven in 2001. My first visual cue was not "Hello, World!" but the "e" icon of Internet Explorer. At the time, I was just a child absorbing all the content available to me. My experience in digital space heavily influenced my understanding of the world because it let me explore things inaccessible in my middle school textbook or in real life. As the years went by, digital space became standardized, formatted and dull. I move my digital body by clicking through different hyperlinks to access various website with specific contents. When the web page is frozen at loading, boredom began to set in. Wherever I reside, regardless of city or country, the feeling of boredom haunts me and makes unbearable even one minute of nothingness, fueled by an insatiable desire to consume.

The city is no longer a static physical space but a fluid metaphor that surrounds us all. In this thesis, the term "city" refers to the urban experience that resides at the intersection of physical and digital space. The fact that geographical location does not create differences in the desire to consume forces me to question if it is necessary to rethink the concept of a city. We, as inhabitants of this city, access and navigate it daily using physical and digital tools. As we observe our surroundings, we encounter images unintentionally, while others will be sent to us deliberately. In "The Overexposed City," Paul Virilio describes today's metropolis as a phantom-like landscape. He says accessing a city has shifted from "to go to town" to "to go into town". The transportation and telecommunication technologies dissolve the boundaries between places, and merge initially disconnected "metropolitan fringes into a single urban mass" (Virilio, 1997, 360). As both inhabitants and consumers, we are continually immersed within urban life regardless of our geographical locations.

Psychogeography is a term introduced in the 1950s by the Situationist International (SI). Guy Debord defines psychogeography in *Situationist International Anthology* as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the graphical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of

individuals" (Debord, 2007, 8). Debord and the Situationist International sought to examine how capitalism affects the emotion and behaviour of individuals, their critique focusing on the sense of alienation created by the homogenization of space under capitalism. As urban planners organize space with a functionalist intent, inhabitants' daily lives become more efficient and in tune with their demanding work lives. The homogenization of space divides vast areas into places for specific functions: one district for work and another for leisure activities. The rationale behind the homogenization of space rejects the chance of encounters and eliminates the experiential value of everyday life. When inhabitants eventually tire of their lack of experiences, they turn to consuming material goods as a temporary substitute to keep them in a pleasurable state.

Han contends that "the smooth" is a type of logic involved in contemporary image making and urban development, and, according to Han, is slowly creeping into our everyday lives. "The smooth" removes any resistance, negativity, and otherness from images, making them easier to consume. Rather than looking at visual content critically, the experience of viewing becomes more like consuming pornography; viewers are aroused by the sight of an object. Like the classic pin-up advertisement, the female body and the straightforward narrative captivates the viewer, but is not meant to engage them on a deeper level.

If both physical and digital spaces are organized under what Debord calls a "totalitarian tendency of modern capitalism", this reduces leisure activities to moving between places so that "the isolated inhabitants see their lives reduced to the pure triviality of the repetitive combined with the obligatory consumption of an equally repetitive spectacle" (Debord, 2007, 94). From this perspective, the inhabitants become consumers in this fluid metropolis. How then do we live through these transitions and still desire to consume even amid the fading richness of daily life? Debord argues that capitalist production stimulates commodity fetishism by providing an abundance of material goods that seduce consumers to oversee their alienation (Debord, 9). For example, the increasing numbers of privately-owned automobiles shows how "capitalist production persuades the masses that car ownership is one of the privileges our society reserves for its most privileged member" (9). This "privilege" seems to grant consumers the tool they need to keep up with the breakneck speed of capitalist consumption. Media and advertisements offer an easy happiness in their promise to fulfill the desire for a better standard of living.

In our contemporary era, there is another layer of experience waiting to be investigated: our activities in digital space. In using the internet, smartphones, and digital software, we take the current rate of consumption for granted, always assuming high-speed satisfaction. Our current obsession is to keep consumption in perpetual motion. The wireless internet has emerged as a substitute for the privately-owned automobile of the 90s, becoming another type of capitalist propaganda for contemporary consumers (8). The illusory privilege of our generation is not the promise of limitless free travel on public highways but endless connections on the internet to smoothly consume digital content. In *Saving Beauty*, German-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han suggests the speed at which we obsessively consume is elevated by what he calls the "aesthetic of the smooth" (Han, 2018, 15). The aesthetic of the smooth seeks to eradicate any resistance that comes between the image and its direct, objective interpretation by viewers, for the purpose of speed and efficiency of communication.

Repeated encounters with smoothness may influence the way we experience the world. For example, smoothness may transform the act of looking into the act of consuming; instead of watching a film from start to finish, consumers may choose to spend two hours watching an abundance of short clips that circulate online. The act of consuming smooth content can become a fetish, resulting in the loss of the ability to view content critically. The production of space, object, and software aims to reproduce the smooth quality of images, and the aesthetic of the smooth seduces viewers into a constant willingness to consume. As a result, consumers overlook the loss of experience.

From Poor Images to Smooth Images

The aesthetic of the smooth can be observed in widely different aspects of everyday life: body-shaving and full-body skincare as a form of self-care; the metallic, fluid design of the smartphone; and the demand for high-speed internet both at home and in the workplace. Han's book further defines smooth as "an optimized surface without negativity" that is "free of pain and resistance" (2018, 16). For example, the buffering animation produces pleasure because there is no visual obstacle involved, granting a promise that things are moving. Though it actually signals a break in consumption of online videos, its smooth, continuous loop gives us the illusion that things are still moving.

Smooth describes not just the aesthetic surface of things, but also the level of communication between the image and the person viewing it. Han uses Jeff Koons's *Balloon Dog* to illustrate the critique against the aesthetic of the smooth. Han argues that Koons's sculpture "intentionally remains infantile, banal, imperturbably relaxed, disarming and disburdening" (2). The seamless, polished surface of Koons's sculpture creates a haptic compulsion to touch and an immediate response of awe because of its aesthetic perfection. However, the visual context of *Balloon Dog* does not escape or lead us to anywhere other than to its form as a giant, balloon dog. Hence, the viewer's emotional response to the work does not achieve the intensity of encountering the sublime, and remains a mere "like." Han argues that Koons's sculpture "does not require any judgment, interpretation or hermeneutics, no reflection or thought" (2). It lacks the contemplative distance that a viewer needs to form a more critical judgment.

If the smooth functions both as the act of removing resistance as well as the aesthetic outcome, then this elimination of distance between the context and viewer can be seen as what Han describes as the quality of transparency. An illusory impact results from the smoothness. For Han, "Transparency is a neoliberal dispositive. It forces everything inward to transform it into information" (Han, 2015, viii). Han argues that this transformation of things to information creates a society of control, like a digital panopticon, putting everything onto the state of hypervisibility and hyper-communication. Because the message of an image exists entirely on its surface there is no need to analyse its visual semiotics. Its purpose is merely to transmit its message in the most direct way possible. Transparency does not reveal the truth, but gives the viewer instead a singular, direct entry point to its predetermined information. To explain this illusion metaphorically, Transparency is like stepping into a Walmart and standing in awe at the variety of selection in the processed food section. The shopping experience seems transparent because the food items are displayed for us with price and detailed nutrition information on the box. The distance between the consumer and the product, however, does not extend beyond the packaging. It hides where the food came from, how it was processed, and who brought it to the shelf. The information between its appearance and its origin is opaque, not transparent.

Debord's discussion of how advertising consumables provides a false sense of happiness shows how the visual content we see in everyday life can influence our awareness and thinking. Hito Steyerl makes a similar observation in one of her speeches, that digital images are a fine layer of TV snow that falls upon us. As these images move from screen to screen, they acquire "an uncanny ability to proliferate, transform, and activate" as they are converted to "poor images" for better spreadability and mobility (Steyerl, 2013, 3:45). Hito Steyerl coined the term "poor image" in 2009's "In Defense of the Poor Image" as "a ghost of an image," a compressed reproduction of the original image that contain just enough information for the purpose of mass distribution. Moreover, poor images are commonly manipulated with a focus on consumer culture, distributed widely and circulated relentlessly online. Poor images are blurred but mobile, and they circulate and accelerate "within the vicious circle of audiovisual capitalism" (Steyerl, 2009, 1). Our daily interactions with poor images can shape and affect people, landscapes, and even social systems (Steyerl, 2013, 3:35). The digital images we encounter daily under the operation of mass media, televised news, and social media posts adapt the aesthetic of the smooth, directing consumers' awareness away from the loss of everyday life experience.

Steyerl discusses a change of exhibition value within the economy of images. Initially, cinema and film images had a higher exhibition value because of their high resolution. As more people have access to the internet, the value of images is no longer evaluated by the quality of their visibility. Due to the vast circulation of images online, the value of images now has more to do with their accessibility (Steyerl, 2009, 7). Steyerl says that poor images are the leftovers of consumption, "the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies' shores" (2009, 1). She also asserts that the poor image can function within production as "a copy in motion" (1). Poor images can be used over and over again but with a slightly different meaning each time. With the democratization of digital technology and the internet, consumers have access to a powerful resource that allows them to render more substantial, complicated files as well as produce them and share them in digital space. The sphere of poor images no longer consists only of low-resolution images, but also videos, screen recordings, or any audiovisual material we can download, manipulate, and copy. The poor image emerges as a widely circulated phenomenon because its smaller file size allows it to be shared among digital networks, avoiding copyright issues. It is this speculative quality of poor images that makes them so influential in our everyday life.

Figure 1. Screenshot of image from Google Alert with keyword “apple”

In 2009, the aesthetic quality of poor images could be described as blurry and low-resolution. However, ten years later, poor images no longer look poor. Instead, I argue they have become smooth. For example, when I type in the keyword “apple” into Google search, I am flooded with advertising images of iPhones, Apple Watches, and other Apple products. Apple’s images all look the same: a product in the centre, photographed against a plain, solid-coloured background. Instead of a low-resolution photo in a compressed JPEG format, most advertising images are digitally constructed. Eliminating extra pixels allows images within a smaller-sized file to keep the viewer’s focus on the primary subject: the product. Poor images now contain less “unnecessary” information. As a result, the use of solid, less-saturated colours, or a smaller set of color schemes, has become an identifying characteristic of the contemporary poor image.

Images of commercial products are cropped, focused, and pushed to the foreground so that they become the focal point, thus receiving the most attention. For example, an article about time will most likely contain a stock image of a clock. An image beside a news story about iPhones, will likely focus on a floating iPhone. The messages within these poor images need to be delivered to viewers in the most straightforward manner. Capitalist production aims to make sure these poor images have removed every possible distraction, to keep the focus entirely on what is sellable. In the fleeting moments when consumers encounter these images, we see, understand, and consume them without any difficulty. The aesthetic of the smooth creates

an unimaginative visual experience, quickly consumed. Like Koons's *Balloon Dog*, poor images engage consumers on a surface level and do not require more profound thinking. These images are like artificially-flavoured potato chips. We know they lack nutrients, but we continue to consume them because they are convenient, easy to digest, and satisfy desire, at least momentarily. Although poor images are no longer low resolution they are still poor because they lack information and context. Instead of reading poor images with care, we consume them regularly; our fingers continue swiping across the flat surface of a screen, clip after clip. Using digital devices in everyday life has become a practice that simulates both the physical and mental sensation of the smooth. The attentive stare we give to a screen, phone or device is not a form of worship, but rather the gratification we gain from the smooth process of consumption. The desire for smoothness becomes a fetish.

The infrastructure of digital space further encourages this fetishism through the use of embedded algorithms. Google, Instagram, and YouTube all have algorithms that reconfigure a page base on a user's previous activities. These refined algorithms automatically tailor digital space to our preferences, base on the numbers of "likes," or views making the digital world a reflection of our interests, like a never-ending maze of mirrors. These digital platforms supply content that is always novel and interesting. This keeps consumers in a pleasant mood, without realizing that specific information they cannot see prevents a fully realized experience. The information provides us an illusion of "truth"; we are not encouraged to question whether the information presented to us is distributed in a transparent manner. However, as the desire for smoothness and transparency becomes the norm, we exclude the perceived negativity of others, along with their otherness. In a way, we are always surrounded by images that we like, or that we are expected to like; Han describes this experience as a homogenized, permanent self-mirroring of an autoerotic space (Han, 2018, 26).

From Consumers to Producers

Steyerl writes that "the economy of poor images," in fact, "enables the participation of a much larger group of producers than ever before" (Steyerl, 2009, 6). The rapid development of digital technology allows consumers to have another role in digital space as producers of visual content. However, Debord suggests that the "introduction of technology into everyday life ultimately takes place within the framework of

modern bureaucratized capitalism and tends to reduce people's independence and creativity." If our image world functions in a derivative way, then consumers in this contemporary urban mass may adapt the aesthetic of the smooth. It is possible that consumers continue to produce smooth content because digital space exists within the framework of capitalist ideology by favouring a level of hyper-communication. Han argues that the quality of smooth is "an ideology," and "like all ideologies, it has a positive core," which is its potential for making everyday life more convenient by distributing information democratically (2015, viii). However, if the concepts of transparency and the smooth are totalized and used to evaluate and shape our surroundings, problems may ensue.

Instagram, as a social media platform based primarily on images, has become a digital space where consumers can produce creative content and share it with the world. My personal experience with Instagram suggests the aesthetics of the smooth and transparency influence the way its users produce their image content. For example, people continually produce selfies that treat their own faces like commercial products by cropping the face to centre it within the image, using filters to smooth the skin, and by posting these images on all social media outlets. As the ease of taking and sharing photographs of ourselves increases, so too does the proliferation of images of the body, showcasing arms, legs, torsos, and buttocks. The aesthetic of the poor image is pornographic, and "the intention of exhibiting destroys the restraint which constitutes the inwardness of the gaze" (Han, 2018, 13).

The economy of images on Instagram is similar to Han's view of contemporary society as a place of positivity. Their images may document moments of their lives, but consumers post them only after editing and beautifying them. They take these extra steps to ensure their images are smooth and pleasurable, to "flatten [them] out into an arrangement of pleasant feelings and states of arousal without complexity or consequence" (Han, 2015, 5). These moments of everyday life are categorized with hashtags for visibility and accessibility, and are no longer meaningful, personal memories. Like the factories that fill our marketplace with mass-produced products, we, the consumers, are producing smooth, pleasurable, and positive content in rapid abundance. Puppy photos, slime videos and pranks are typical examples. As the demand for smooth visual content grows, consumers up their supply. Producers please spectators with selfies, snippets of daily-life events, or some kind of "original" content. The intention behind these images is not to open up a dialogue or to create a deep connection with other producers, but to accumulate "likes," "shares," and "followers."

Charlie Chaplin's comedic films, such as *Modern Times (1936)*, strongly critiqued contemporary society. Chaplin's character's clumsy failures in everyday life used comedy as a way to engage viewers and make them aware of societal problems. His best comedies use satire and melancholy to connect us to a more meaningful discourse. In contrast, hashtag-comedy videos or images on Instagram leave no space for dialogue. They have been stripped of any unnecessary information. By keeping things simple and straightforward, the consumption of these images can be smooth. The screening of a 90-minute film has turned into a constant loop of short clips.

Figure 2. United Artists, *Modern Times (1936).* Wikipedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chaplin_-_Modern_Times.jpg

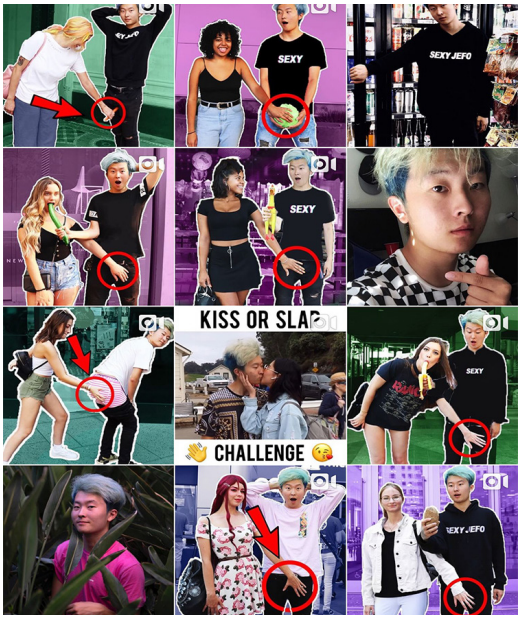


Figure 3. Screenshot of Instagram account and Jeffery Yang

For instance, "textfromurex", an Instagram account, compiles users' screenshots of ridiculous messages from their ex-partners. While some individual posts are funny, the site as a whole quickly succumbs to repetitiveness, as its topic and visual format never change. However, this has not stopped the account from accumulating over two million followers. Another example is Instagram star Jeffrey Yang, who posts videos of himself asking strangers to kiss him or slap him. Yang's videos often contain comedic sexual innuendos, such as a video of him holding a banana while asking young women on the street if they wanted to "touch my banana". Though Yang's videos include no thoughtful writing, consumers are attracted to his simple humour and bountiful production. As a result, Jeffery Yang's account attracts over two million followers, dwarfing most Instagram accounts.

The culture of "like" is more than just vanity. In this commercialized, digital space, a "like" is similar to the poor image; it constitutes exhibition value and produces social privilege. While the pleasant feeling of consuming keeps consumers content, a "like" encourages producers to reproduce smooth content to entertain others. As inhabitants of this urban mass, we consume and we produce, caught in a self-sufficient swamp of smoothness, rapidly losing our critical capacities.

Veil, Destabilize, and Walk Away

"What is beautiful is the object in its draping, in its veil, its hideout." (Han, 2018, 29)

The problem of the aesthetic of the smooth is that its straightforward directness triggers passive consumption rather than contemplative lingering. The logical solution would be to increase the distance between the work and the viewers. Jacques Rancière describes the "pensive image" as "a condition that is indeterminately between the active and the passive" (Rancière, 2011, 107). It relates to a type of visual experience that stimulates an almost disinterested lingering similar to a state of wandering, where consumers fleetingly glance at images with a passing curiosity (2018, 55). This kind of lingering is similar to the method of *dérive* in psychogeography. Guy Debord describes *dérive* as a point of view where "cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points, and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones" (Debord, 2007, 62). My thesis aims to translate these contours and currents into a visual language that disrupts the reading of the whole image.

For Jacques Rancière, the distance between the context and what viewers see is "a system of relations between the sayable and visible," as well as "between the visible and the invisible" (Rancière, 2009, 12). Photographers often engage with relatable visual elements from our surroundings to allow for clear narrative interpretations. These visual elements offer the necessary nuances for viewers to formulate a cognitive reading of a photograph. Rancière describes this process in art as "the interplay of operations," which is based on the use of *resemblances* to create a visible narrative (2009, 6). A *resemblance* can be a fragment of the image, a text, or formal qualities that create nuances or impressions familiar to the viewer that guides them to formulate a narrative. On the other hand, a *dissemblance* refers to elements that are unfamiliar and interrupt the viewer's connection with the content of the image. If images only operate within *resemblances* (like Apple's ad of an iPhone floating in front of a white background) then there is nothing sayable about

that image. “Images of art are operations that produce a discrepancy, a dissemblance” (7). In this context, it is important for images to include elements that disrupt and redirect the reading of the work because *dissemblance* can transform the linear interpretation of the image into a space for dialectic and critique. So, the artwork is able to deliver what the artist wants to communicate beyond its appearance by “playing on the ambiguity of resemblances and the instability of dissemblances” (24).

Figure 4. Vik Muniz, *Altas (Carlao), Pictures of Garbage.* 2008, Chromogenic print,
© Vik Muniz / SOCAN (2019)

Vik Muniz is a Brazilian born contemporary visual artist who established his reputation as a master of illusion. Muniz’s project *Pictures of Garbage* includes portraits of different garbage pickers working in the world’s most massive garbage dump on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. Muniz’s art-making process consists of multiple layers of reproduction. First, Muniz chooses a visual reference from pop culture or historical painting and then photographs the garbage pickers re-staging the poses of that particular piece. Later, the individual image is projected onto the floor of his studio where construction of the assemblage takes place. Lastly, Muniz photographs the final configuration of the portrait constructed with recyclable materials. At first, the lines and forms create the *resemblances* of the human figure which suggest that the work is a portrait. The recognition of material garbage, however, quickly breaks that illusion, bringing the discourse of consumerism and identity into the artwork. Muniz’s work creates an active engagement where the viewer continually questions what they see as they move towards and away from the photograph.

Another example of visual interplay is Roland Barthes's concept of the *punctum* and the *studium*, which eloquently describes the complexities of visual language. The *studium* is "a kind of education" where viewers learn to read the narrative of a photograph while the *punctum*, as Barthes describes it, is "an accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (Barthes, 1981, 26). While the *studium* offers the overall information to formulate a comprehensible narrative behind an image, the *punctum* poses as a counter force that "interrupt[s] the continuum of information" by triggering an emotional reaction (Han, 2015, 26). Barthes' theory of the *punctum* is slightly different from the idea of *dissemblances* because it engages the viewer on a psychological or emotional level. For Barthes, "the incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance," meaning that the alluring quality of the *punctum* can come from the fact it is uncannily undefinable, "acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence" (Barthes, 1981, 52). The *punctum* does not necessarily take a specific form in an image — it can be the colour tone of the scene or a partial object — but it opens a path to what Barthes describes as a "blinded field" (Barthes, 57). The "blinded field" describes a space of imagination that resides beyond what is visible on the surface of an image, making viewers question their initial reading of the image and consider alternatives.

In my master's thesis work, I collect digital "poor images" as my materials and use them as fragments to construct images, objects, and video installations. The *resemblances* in my work lie within the keywords I use to collect images. Similar to when street names trigger our memory of a certain place, keywords stimulate associations with images. For example, since digital space is flooded with smooth images, my search using the keyword "Apple" comes up with Apple products. These "Apple" images from my search act as the *studium*, giving viewers a general idea of which recurring subjects are associated with a particular keyword. The *punctum*, however, breaks through the *studium*. For example, the *punctum* may be fragments of things other than the commercial "Apple" products, such as the hands that gently hold the product, to make viewers question our relationship with digital devices.

Both *resemblance* and *punctum* seem to choreograph a viewer's experience by providing two layers of context, with the second layer revealing more information to the lingering viewer. Tangible illusion, on the other hand, makes almost everything rough and unreadable at any given point, with the readable context revealing itself only upon the viewer's action. Sol LeWitt is an American artist whose works reflect elements of conceptual art and minimalism. His installation piece *Incomplete Open Cubes* displays

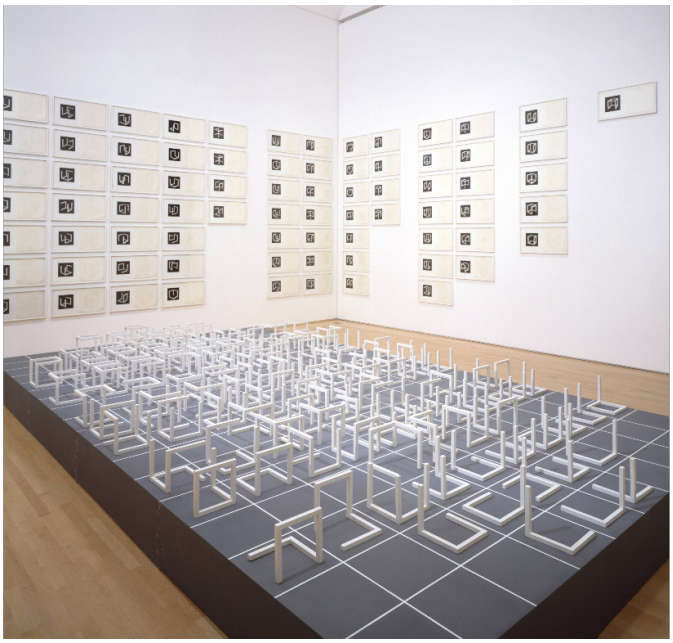


Figure 5. Sol LeWitt, *Incomplete Open Cubes*, 1974.
Installation, wood, paint, gelatin silver prints and ink on paper mounted on board with transfer type.
Dimensions: sculptures: 8 x 8 x 8 in., framed works: 26 x 14 in., base: 12 x 120 x 216 in.

122 painted wooden structures on a base. In an interview, LeWitt describes the installation as "simple, but the visual perception is complex" (LeWitt, 2013). When viewers look at the work, they see chaotic lines and forms, but as they walk around and view the piece from a certain angle, things start to align and become orderly. With another slight movement, everything falls back into chaos. This tangible illusion is interesting in how it prompts the viewer to navigate around it, only revealing the sensible arrangement of lines and forms as a fleeting moment. If *resemblances* and *dissemblances* create distance by redirecting the path of thinking, then tangible illusions may operate by playing with what is or isn't revealed to the viewer.

As Han argues, "Information, by definition, cannot be veiled," because "it is directed towards revealing" (Han, 2018, 31). The direction is a one-way street when digital images are exported or displayed. However, it is possible to use post-production techniques to alter the way information is revealed to viewers. The fragmentation of images has the same ability to create an experience that is always in flux, and the fragments of *resemblances* move into a composition that almost makes sense then quickly transforms to something else. My practice revolves around ideas like *resemblance*, *punctum*, tangible illusion, and their ability to create a visual experience that performs what Han describes as "staging an appearance as disappearing" (2018, 31). A tangible illusion lures the viewer into the contemplative space instead of using the bareness of the image to grab attention, as in commercial or pornographic images.

Number, Pixel, Image, Composition

In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich summarizes five principles that media objects usually obey: "numerical representation," "modularity," "automation," "variability," and "transcoding" (Manovich, 2001, 27). Manovich's discussion helps structure my investigation of the connection between digital content and the media platform that structures our experience in digital space. First of all, numerical representation indicates the transition of something physical to digital information. Since everything we see in digital space is digitally coded, it is fair to say that most of the images and text we see and produce are programmed with numbers. The most basic digital, black-and-white image can be coded in binary representation, as 0 is assigned to white and 1 to black (2001, 28).

Modularity is the logic of modular structure within media objects, software, or anything digital with smaller units building to larger while they "maintain their separate identities.". A digital object is constructed with multiple smaller units and each smaller unit has a range of independence that can be modified separately (30). For example, pixels create a layer, layers add up to a composition, multiple frames of images compose a video, and video clips build up to a compilation. Within each compilation, each video can be edited differently by adjusting the numerical value assigned to brightness or RGB. This logic of modularity is essential for understanding the transition of the aesthetic of poor images, because it means every part of digital content can be altered independently. For capitalist production, the aesthetic of a solid-colour background is adopted to reduce loading time because it has less information to process. In contrast, my work brings an abundance of images together in the same layer to provide excessive information for viewers to process.

Automation appears mostly when we use software to manipulate a media creation. Manovich separates the term into "high-level" automation and "low-level" automation (32). High-level automation can be seen in works of artificial intelligence, responsive installations and so on. Low-level automation is much more common, found in filters on Instagram, a word template, or within any Adobe Photoshop effect available to users. Since high-level automation requires an understanding of technology and programming, my research focuses more on low-level automation, as it is more accessible to consumers. Manovich argues that the logic of automation is built upon the previous principles of numerical representation and modularity.

For example, the filter “desaturate” can be understood as the change of information within each pixel: the number assigned as red is changed to the number assigned as black or white. When we click the button, the algorithm calculates the information and applies the change to each pixel and we receive the resulting black-and-white image. The concern here, as Manovich describes it, is that “human intentionality can be removed from the creative process, or at least in parts” (32).

At first glance, it seems that modularity and automation can offer much potential for creative production. For example, the production of an animated film which constitutes uncountable numbers of elements and compositions, can be greatly simplified through the use of automation. By modifying the elements within each composition, one can create many different versions. Another principle of new media is variability. For Manovich, the logic of variability “corresponds to the postindustrial logic of production on demand” as consumers can produce individualized versions by altering part of an already existing digital object for different needs (36). The emergence of smooth content on Instagram, however, indicates that creative producers have given in to the capitalist mode of production instead of experimenting with it. The consumers and producers of these visual content accounts refuse to delve into all that new media offers, sticking rather to old formats, and mass-producing in a default setting for minimum input but maximum output.

The last principle is transcoding, which is “the most substantial consequence of the computerization of the media” as we slowly replace the human logic of our “cultural layer” with the computing logic of the “computer layer” (46). Technically, transcoding describes the translation of digital objects into a different format. In this case, however, transcoding describes the process where the logic of computer influences the way we think about and represent ourselves, our creations, and our environment. Initially, we construct the digital space in ways that mimic the physical space by translating real-life experience into data information. As time goes by, it seems that much of our decision-making today prioritizes the role of information rather than the actual experience. This prioritization can be observed in something small, like creating nine images that will align and make up a full composition once they are uploaded to social media. Or, in something bigger, like the internet of things, where Google Home organizes our everyday lives into a standardized set of information.

The principles of new media translate into the quantization of everyday life as we submissively let digital technology divide our day into modules of time to complete various tasks. Digital modulations, such as a digital image or video, always appear as seamless and smooth, because a new media object continuously operates within an overwhelmingly large but still finite number of conditional statements. The physical reality we live in, however, does not work that way. Our frustration with moments such as waiting, comes in part because the smoothness of digital space maintains the process of production and consumption. The principle of automation is embedded in our daily lives, from the "low-level" filter that beautifies our facial skin in selfies to the "high-level" immediate update of suggested posts on Instagram.

The logic of media and new media, similar to the poor image, has the potential to be used for both creative and capitalist production. Regardless of the quality of the content, the post with more likes will be more visible to consumers, and as Steyerl argues, visibility is the new exhibition value. "The neoliberal rule of beauty produces compulsions," and much of the creative work we see today gives in to the aesthetic of the smooth because it fits with the aesthetic of digital space, generating attention and "likes" (Han, 2018, 57). My work for this thesis, however, has no obligation to generate "likes." If I follow the logic of modularity, then there are as many compositional spaces for me to roughen as the number of layers or stages. The investigation of my practice, then, experiments with different ways to challenge the automation of the software and to create as many variations as possible using poor images as my primary material

METHODOLOGY

Dérive and Détournement

Dérive is a form of urban practice that encourages the practitioner to drift through urban spaces following his or her personal inclination.The act of walking forces the practitioner to jump off the ordinary path, embrace the unexpected, and gain a different insight into space (Debord, 2007, 61). In this way, I explore both digital and physical environments by following my own curiosity, to discover new possibilities. Therefore, I see both walking through Union Station and clicking through hyperlinks online as a form of practicing *dérive*; while photography and screenshots become my method of collecting visual materials. To embrace that digital rationality and the idea of moving around in an already constructed space, I employ Google Alert as my platform for practicing *dérive.* Using keywords such as "red," "millennial," and "apple," I receive daily emails presenting the best results that the Google algorithm sorts out for me. And so keywords become street names, and the images the digital algorithms construct become the fleeting glances I encounter moving through the city. Through *dérive*, I discover the ambience of the digital space associated with each keyword, while investigating areas that overlap different keyword results.

Along with the visual materials, my thesis employs another essential aspect of psychogeography: *détournement.* In Amy J. Elias's "Psychogeography, Détournement, Cyberspace," she defines the term as "the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble" (Elias, 2018, 824). In my final body of work, through digital composition, I reuse visual materials from urban and digital space, constructing visual experiences. Fragments of poor images reenact that interplay of *resemblances* and *dissemblance*, as the works reveal images in an unstable physical or digital composition where poor images undergo a constant process of construction and deconstruction. Elias describes *détournement* as "a mirroring of capitalist recuperation," and "Instead of naturalizing existing reality, it denaturalized and parodied it to expose and counter alienation" (2018, 824). My work adapts the pre-existing aesthetic of the smooth, of the poor image, and modularity, but to create an experience that denaturalizes the mode of consuming.

Post-production Techniques and the Logic of Selection

Hito Steyerl ended her speech to photography students at The New School, with a series of questions which have followed me throughout the entire period of my thesis. Steyerl asked:

> "If reality is post-produced, then it also means that we can change it by post-production. We can sort of reverse photoshop it. We can intervene in reality with imaging techniques. The question may no longer be what is represented in images or how do we reads images. But additional questions are which image do we want to become real, as makers, producers, and co-producers? How do we change reality by means of post-production?" (Steyerl, 2013, 17:10).

With her words playing in the back of my mind, I recontextualize the software I use and the tools they offer. To use poor images as my primary material and render them into different ensembles, I import and export images back and forth among Adobe Photoshop, Premiere, and After Effects. Interestingly, because the interfaces and the simulations within each software are so smooth, I fail to notice that the tools I use in software, such as cutting out a fragment with a lasso tool, are very similar to the original techniques they mimic, i.e. carving a form out of stone. I realize it is easy to take digital techniques for granted and undermine their capacity as the immediate result from the default setting. However, if these techniques and tools are used attentively, then even the simplest function, "cut", becomes part of my practice. What software offers me is a blank canvas that "acts as a background for visual elements which can have arbitrary size, proportions, and content" (Manovich, 2016, 283). If a city is a playground for the Situationist International, then the blank digital background becomes my playground for détournement, "the free play of the imagination" (Elias, 2018, 824)

Adobe Photoshop, Premiere, and After Effects all create visuals using the principle of modularity but in the format of layer, sequence, and composition, respectively. Conceptually, a composition is like a group of sequences in a digital, three-dimensional setting, and a sequence is a stack of layers in a two-dimensional, frame-based environment. Regardless, in this paper, I use the term "composition" to describe any visual I create through different software and formats. In Manovich's definition, a composition is a combination of "any number of visual elements regardless of the media in which they originated and to control each element in the

process." Moreover, "each visual element can be independently modulated in a variety of ways: resized, recolored, animated, etc" (Manovich, 2016, 281). Composition is essential in my methodology because if the goal is to put elements into a new ensemble, then my methods become what to include or exclude, what to reveal or veil.

Figure 6. The transition from numbers to image in the logic of modularity

In Adobe Photoshop, the main tools I use are the polygonal lasso tool and the layer mask. Once I import the screenshots from Google Alert into Photoshop, I use the polygonal lasso to select the fragments I find interesting. Most of the time, the fragment I choose is the main subject associated with the topic, but there are also times where I abandon the association and select other parts of the image just because they appear more intriguing to me. The logic of my selection reflects the playfulness of psychogeography where I choose my route base on personal inclination. After the fragments are selected, I create a layer mask by reverse selecting everything but the fragments I want. A layer mask is not a mask, per se, but rather an attached layer that lets me adjust the transparency of my image in the region I select. This produces an image result with 100% visibility versus 0% for the non-selected images.

This logic of selection also works in Adobe Premiere as I edit video footage of snow cubes. In Premiere, I am working in a space of sequence, not a space of layers, so here I select how many frames to use from a given clip and in what order. To split a clip in half within the timeline, I use the razor tool. Although the razor tool appears to be cutting a rectangular segment in two, it is actually assigning a new "out" point for the first half and an "in" point for the second half. After that, I delete the unwanted portion of the clip and rearrange the selected portion into a new sequence. In a way, even though I see this stage as preparation, elements in the exported video have already been rendered into a new ensemble before being used for the next process in Adobe After Effects.

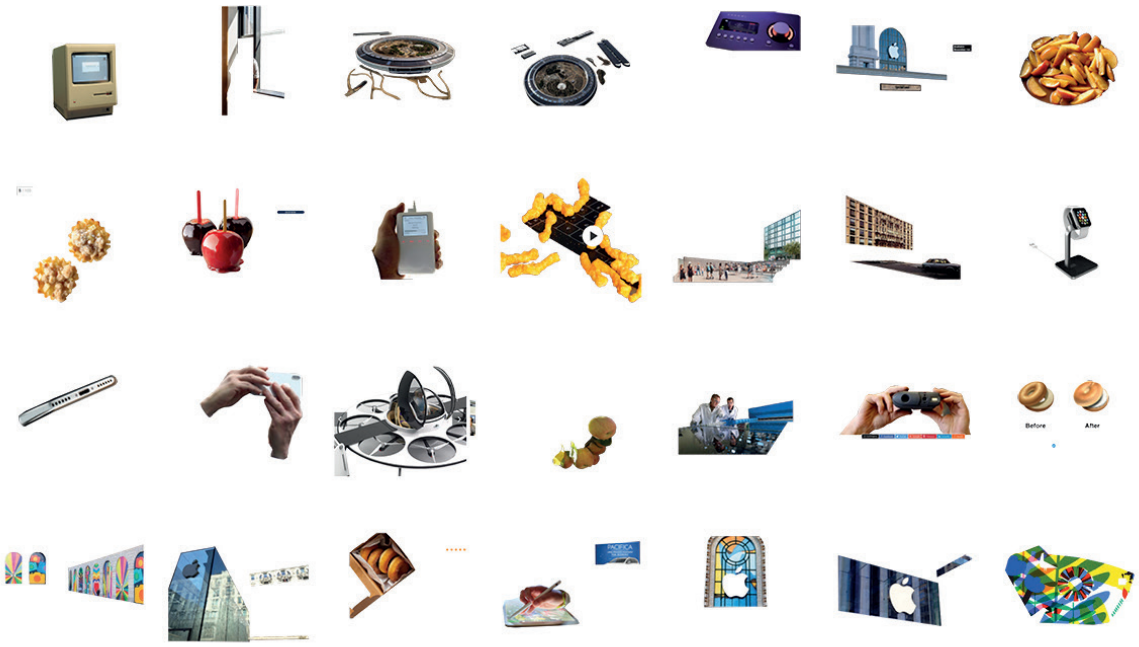


Figure 7. Some fragments selected from Google Alert images with the keyword “apple”

Adobe After Effects is a powerful software because of its ability to render graphic elements, videos, and animation all together. Therefore, the previous rendition of poor images, from Photoshop and Premiere, can now become the elements for me to modulate a more dynamic composition in After Effects. The tool I use to select or mask the elements becomes somewhat more complicated. Rotoscoping is most commonly used in the commercial film industry to cut out subjects from original environments so that the cut-out video footage can be seamlessly composited with other elements to construct a more dynamic scene. The logic of rotoscoping is similar to Photoshop’s layer mask but in a time-based environment, and applies to a range of frames through algorithmic calculation. By using the rotobrush tool to highlight and make selections on one frame, the algorithm of After Effect starts to calculate the data and automatically select areas on other frames that it assumes to be similar to the first selection base on the information of selected pixels. The chosen portion again remains 100% opaque while the rest becomes transparent. Rotoscoping can be a tedious task because its lack of accuracy means multiple attempts are necessary to adequately isolate subjects.

However, I realize with both my collages and snow cubes, the fragments I choose still reinforce the idea of transparency by selecting for what I assume is the primary object. For Han, the beauty of the veiling is about making the secondary object visible and taking away the hypervisibility of the primary objects (Han, 2018, 27). As a result, I see the flaw of algorithmic calculation as an opportunity to create that experience of the "instability of dissemblance." What if I use these selection techniques less purposefully, or what if the algorithm selects something irrelevant to the keywords accidentally? As a result, the aesthetic outcome becomes a tug of war between my selection and that of the algorithm. This push and pull follows the playful manner of psychogeography by showing the instability of a constantly changing composition.

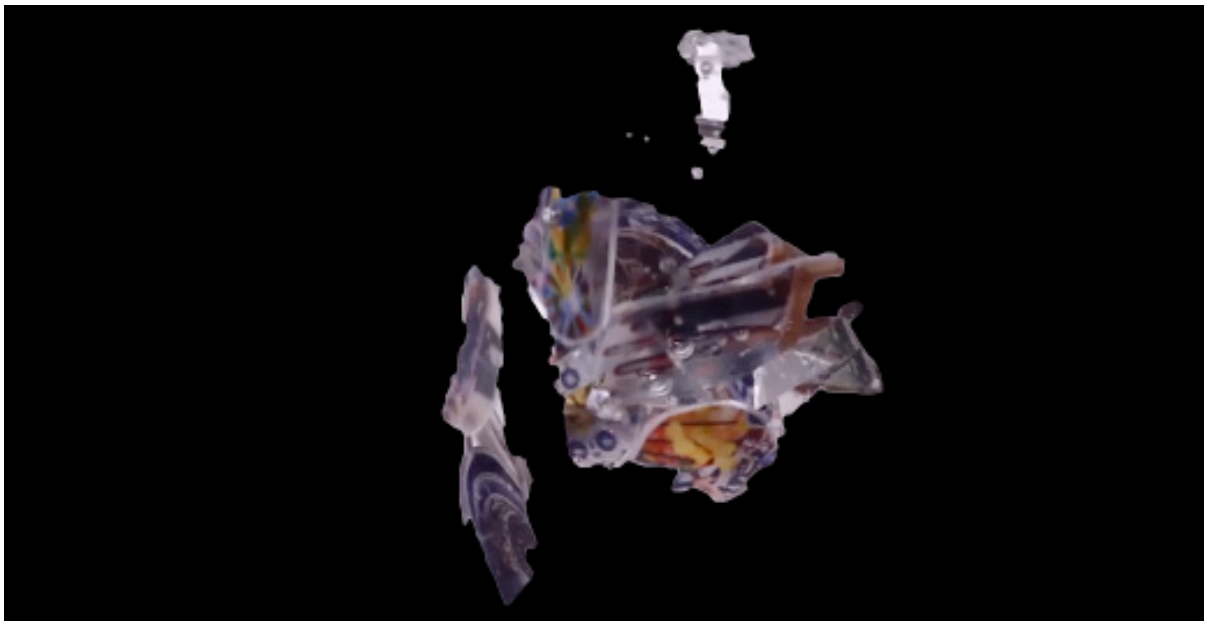


Figure 8. Still image of rotoscoping with keyword "apple"

BODY OF WORK

Inventory and Floor Plan of the Exhibition

A. *Google, Show Me the Colors*, 2018, Collage, 36” x 36”

B. *Cube 3.0 – Snow Cube*, 2019, Clear and mirror Acrylic, acetate, inkjet print, water, 3” x 3”

C. *Reflections Between the Real and the Fake*, 2019, Video, webcam, shadow box, monitor, Macbook, 6’ x 2’

D. *Format*, 2019, Animation, 4:00

E. *What Illuminate the City?* 2019, Video installation, projector, and foam board. 12’ x 7’

1. *Cube 2.0,* 2018, Clear and mirror acrylic, acetate, inkjet print, 9”x9”

2. *Untitled*, 2019, Animation, 6:21

Figure 9. Floor plan for Lingxiang Wu’s MFA thesis exhibition *Red Millennial Apple*

Google, Show Me the Colors

Figure 10. Lingxiang Wu, *Google, Show Me the Colors – Apple*, Collage, 2018

Google, Show Me the Colors is a series of collages made of image materials collected through Google Alert as a psychogeographical exploration of digital space. Using keywords “Red” “Blue” “Yellow” “Millennial” “Sad” “Patriotic” “Morale¨ “Apple” and “Landmark”, I receive daily emails presenting the best results that the Google algorithm sorts out for me. I take screenshots of these materials every five days, seven days, and nine days for the duration of the project (eight to ten months from 2017 until 2018). Here, clicking through hyperlinks functions as *dérive* and the collage process as *détournement.*

The use of Google Alert gives digital algorithms the pre-emptive opportunity to make the first selection, but at the same time, it creates pathways for me to access individual selections. Hence, I can make my pick by taking screenshots of interesting visual materials from Google Alert's selection. Similar to performing *dérive* in a city, the environment I navigate myself through is always pre-constructed. I use technology not to relinquish control, but as the necessary provider of the space I explore. The websites that Google Alert directs me to are not the destinations but instead the storefronts that display different visual elements for me in fleeting moments as I pass by.

My experience in the digital space that Google Alert temporarily constructs for me base on the individual keyword is as dull as walking through New York's financial district, where almost every building displays the same box form, with a similar smooth and reflective texture. Moreover, Google Alert's algorithm seems to follow a specific hierarchy of images that prioritizes sports and commercial products even though I never search for them. As a result, I end up with an abundance of images of athletes and commercial products. Surprisingly, sports images and commercial images have a lot in common. For example, commercial images usually put the product in the middle similar to the athlete's body. The background is all white in a commercial image and blurred in sports image to further expose the subject before our eyes. Without a doubt, these images from Google Alert are smooth and transparent.

Therefore, collage is my first attempt, through fragmentation, to roughen these poor images. Inspired by the work of Vik Muniz that plays with the operation of *resemblances* and *dissemblances*, these collages create different effects depending on the physical distance between the viewers and the work. From afar, the collages appear appear as mystical floating objects, landscapes, or machinery. However, as viewers approach, they can see details of poor image fragments. The interplay between *resemblances* and *dissemblances* comes from the viewer's impression of the keyword versus the fragments' cohesive or contradictory image.

However, despite its visual interest, collage as an artform is limited in its creation of an unstable composition. The format of collage does not contain the necessary spatial qualities of movement to reveal the instability and tension between my selections and that of the algorithm. For this reason, I extend my practice to other media such as sculpture and animation.

Format

Figure 11. Lingxiang Wu, Selected frames of *Format* animation, 2019

After completing some collages, I move on to printing and displaying. Since the final version needs to be much larger than a screen monitor, I experiment with tiling. In this way, the complete image not only speaks to the concept of modularity but also avoids the difficulty of large format printing. I split the image of my collage into one hundred squares and then export one hundred individual JPEG files. Something interesting happens when I accidentally drag the edge of the window. This algorithm automatically changes the file arrangement whenever the window changes size. At one moment, the thumbnails of these files, sorted by name, compose the image of the collage into exactly ten rows and ten columns. However, when the files are sorted either by label or date of creation into any number of rows or columns, the composition is destabilized and chaotic.

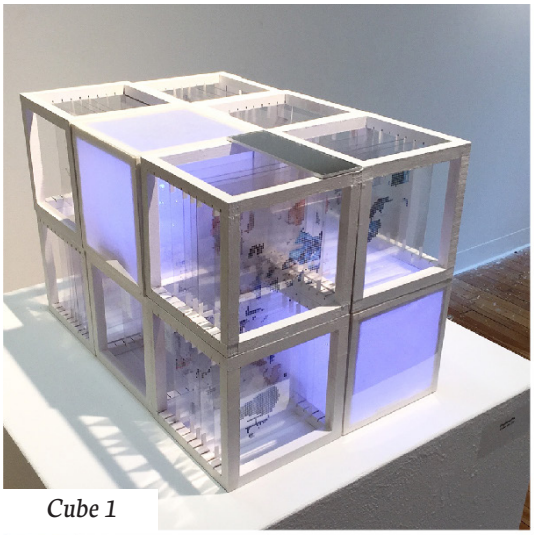
> How did this language come about? I believe that looking at the software involved in the production of moving images goes a long way towards explaining why they now look the way they do. Without such analysis, we will never be able to move beyond the commonplace generalities about contemporary culture—postmodern, global, remix, etc.—to actually describe the particular languages of different design areas, to understand the causes behind them and their evolution over time (Manovich, 2016, 244).

Through this interaction with the finder window, I realize I can use the automation of digital technology to destabilize my composition. Therefore, I return to the folder and repeatedly screenshot each transformation while continually adjusting the size of the window and the algorithmic logic of the arrangement. Then I import the screenshots into Adobe Photoshop to create a GIF animation by using each screenshot as an individual frame. The final animation shows a looping video of the constantly changing composition. The final visual feels odd to me as it only makes sense where it composes the image of the collage, yet watching the transformation is somehow satisfying. Because Photoshop and the finder automatically smooth out the adjustment, the animation appears similar to an ever-turning buffering icon.

The transformation is smooth because the automation instantly calculates the destination and configures the arrangement accordingly. If my objective is to defy the smoothness, then that means that I should create alternative configurations of thumbnails, either by arranging them, covering them up or adding new ones. I use these techniques to roughen the motion of the animation. However, this format of animation still lacks the spatial movement that I want, a specific motion that is lively, not artificial. I am looking for a type of motion that exists in three-dimensional space, one in which images can be revealed or hidden as the viewer turns toward or away from the screen. This inquiry leads me to create an object or structure that can further animate these images in real life, bringing them back to digital space through video recording for further manipulation.

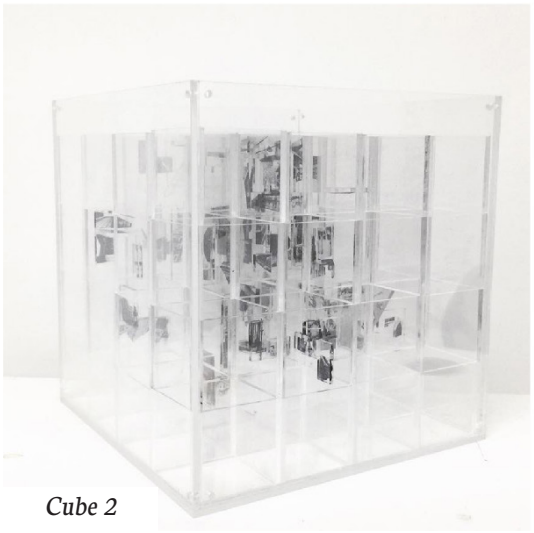
Cubes

My fascination with the form of cubes and squares is derived from Lev Manovich's concept of "modularity" as well as the shape of a pixel. Han's theory of the smooth promotes the sphere as a smoother shape. But a cube, as part of a module, can create a much more seamless form, in the same way pixels create an image. In my practice, I create three different versions of cube sculptures inspired by the logic of modularity. The first version, *Cube 1.0*, includes six wooden cubes. Within each cube there are five layers of acetates showing a composition of images collected through Google Alert. The images are pixelated and separated by colour to print on individual acetate sheet. From one particular angle, the composition is almost comprehensible, while from others it appears to be a group of dots.

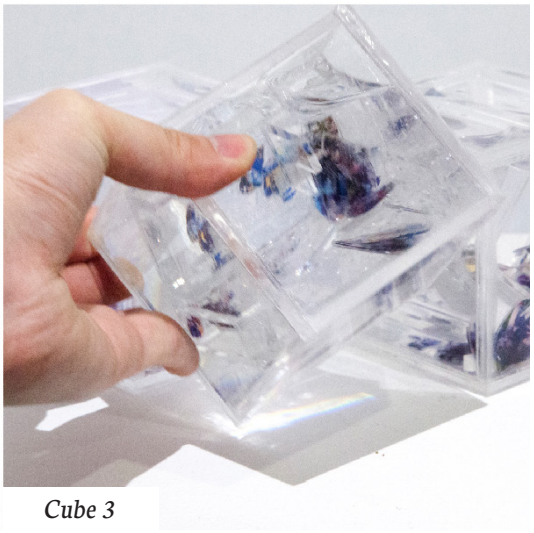


Cube 1

Cube 2



Cube 2



Cube 3

Figure 12. Lingxiang Wu, Documentation of different version of *Cubes*., 2018-2019

Cube 2.0 – Collection of Urban Fragments is the second version of the cube sculpture but with a different concept. Instead of positioning acetate as a layer within the wooden frame, I use clear acrylic to create a bottomless open cube that contains structures made of smaller pieces of clear or mirror acrylic. Images of urban space are printed on acetate, cut into smaller fragments, and mounted onto the structure within each cube. The final sculpture is 64 cubes positioned into a topless, nine-by-nine inch, clear acrylic container that becomes part of the installation project. In the making of the second version of the cube sculpture, I learn more about the material quality of acrylic, acetate, resin, and epoxy as well as the spatial potential within the cube form.

The goal of the third version, *Cube 3.0 – Snow Cube*, is to make it more animated and dynamic with the potential of including movement. My thoughts immediately turn to water-filled snow globes. Therefore, the third version is seven cubes made of clear acrylic with fragments of collage floating within them. Each cube contains images from the individual collages of different keywords. After experimenting with the spatial potential within the snow cube, each cube's interior structure differs. Some have divided spaces with different water densities, so fragments float at different speeds. Some have a loose structure, so everything floats together with the fragments. The central theme of each snow cube remains within the keyword for each search. However, since they are once again broken down into pieces, there is more potential to play with the ambiguity of the fragments' origins.

For me, the snow cube play off that tangible illusion and unstable composition very well. There is a finite number of elements within each cube; however, when viewers move, tilt or shake it, it appears capable of producing an infinite number of configurations — a never-ending collage. However, that illusion is quickly shattered because holding the cube directly informs viewers that it is a set ensemble containing a group of finite elements. As viewers see these initially flat, poor images differently from a two-dimensional collage, snow cubes construct a spatial relationship with viewers which triggers wonder and play. My selection happens when the collage is printed on acetate, cut into pieces and dipped into epoxy resin.The viewers' selections, however, are revealed as they shake the cube; the uncertainty of the movement destabilizing the composition.

Untitled

Since snow cubes have the potential of creating different compositions each time, they can also be used as an object to generate video footage of floating fragments. Therefore, another part of my practice is making a series of experimental videos using footage of the snow cubes and the technique of rotoscoping. First, I import the video footage into Premiere, editing out frames where the shaken cubes are not visible and keeping the parts with the most movement. Next, the edited videos are imported to After Effects. After I select the areas I want in one frame, After Effects selects other areas it thinks are similar.Since the selection may change and disappear with the movement of the video, I must make continual new selections in different parts of the video to influence After Effects.

However, as mentioned previously, it seems that my selections are always fragments related to the keywords. For Han, the beauty of the veiling is about making the secondary object visible and taking away the hypervisibility of the primary subjects (Han, 2018, 27). As a result, I decide to go back to the Google Alert results and record my screen as I browse through the pages again. In After Effects, I overlay the rotoscoped snow cube video on top of the recorded web browsings and again make rotobrush selections. In this way, instead of revealing the snow cubes' fragments, the video shows the hidden elements that are not selected in the previous stages. The footage of the snow cubes' movement becomes the intruder that disrupts and destabilizes the composition's hidden elements.

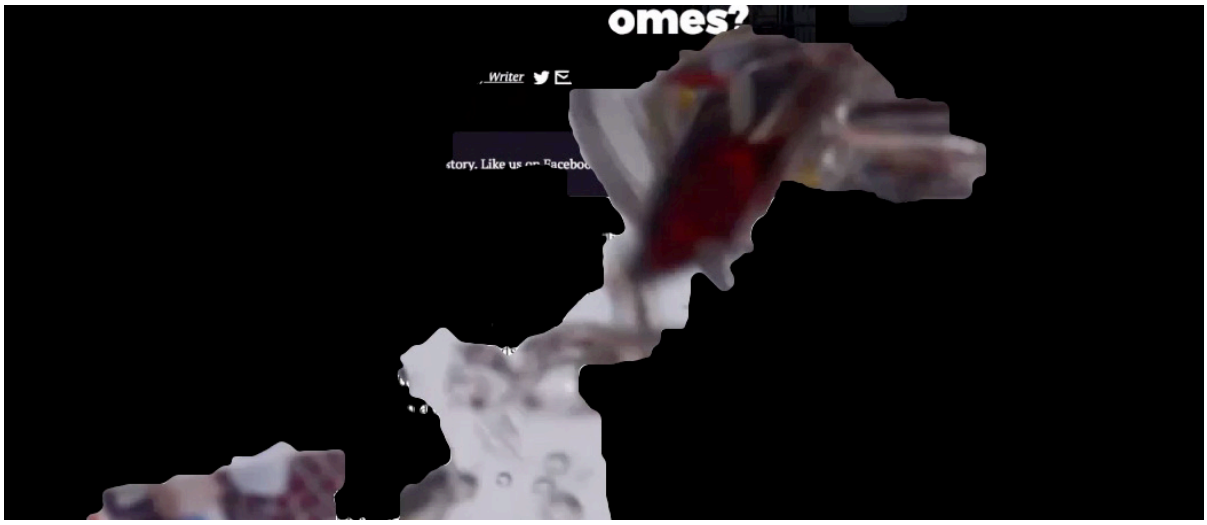


Figure 13. Lingxiang Wu, Still Image from *Untitled*, 2019

Reflection Between the Real and the Fake

The rotoscoped videos are used differently in two extended projects: a sensory project and a video installation with the sculpture of *Cube 2.0*. The first project, *Reflection Between the Real and the Fake*, includes a snow cube on top of a plinth and a large shadow box. The shadow box hung on the wall behind the plinth, contains a monitor. The webcam on top captures the viewers' movements, and, depending on the intensity of the movement, offers a different visual experience. When there is no motion, the shadow box appears to be a mirror due to the reflective film applied to its' surface. When there is a slight movement - such as a viewer examining the snow cube - the monitor displays footage of a rotoscoped digital cube. However, when the viewer starts to shake the cube, the web-browsing video disrupts the reading. This project creates an unstable composition by providing multiple alternatives - the physical cube, the reflection, and the digital cube - all fighting for the viewer's attention. Everything seems to be transparent, but at the same time, nothing is substantial. All elements, including the sensory tool, are used to push the viewer away, creating distance between what is sayable and what is seen. If viewers stare into the monitor screen as what we usually do, the algorithm will cut off the video and display only nothingness.

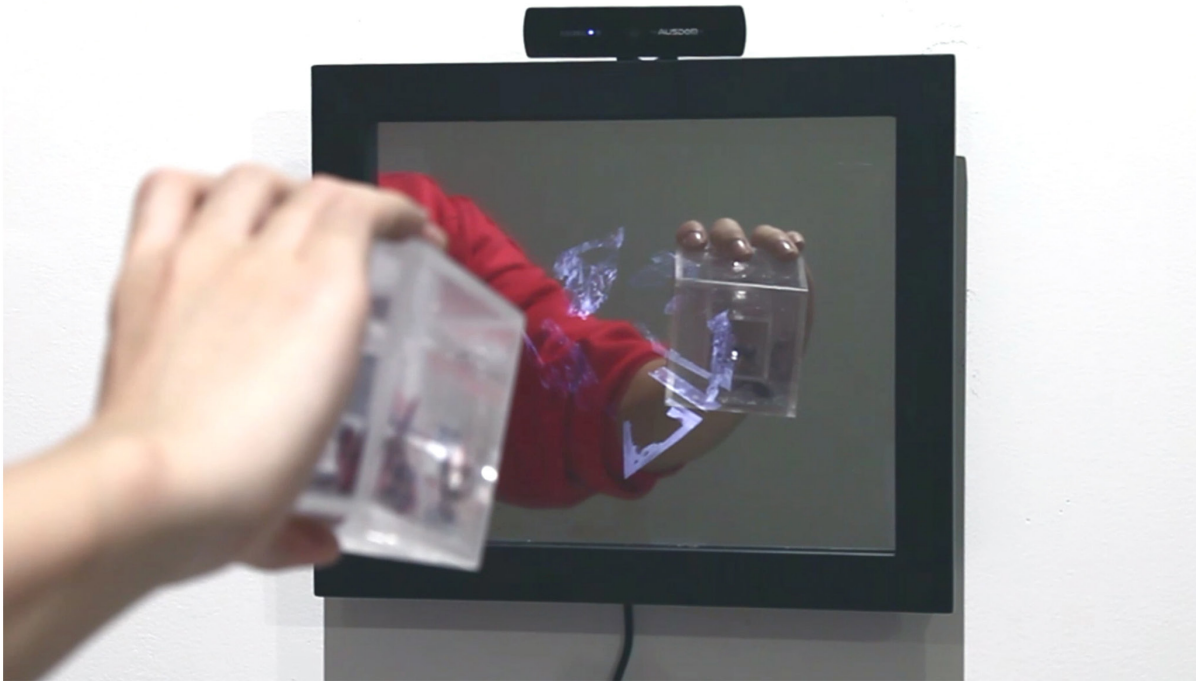


Figure 14. Lingxiang Wu, Documentation of *Reflections Between the Real and the Fake*, 2019

What Illuminates the City?

The last project is a video installation entitled, *What Illuminates the City?*. The installation of the projection mapping project involves two merged pieces. One element is a nine-inch cube with sixty-four two-inch cubes stacked within. Some of the cubes are empty, some have more complex interior structures, and some have black-and-white urban fragments. The primary materials are clear acrylic, transparent acetate, and mirror acrylic. The overall theme speaks to the phantom-like structure Virilio uses to describe our contemporary city, as well as Han's description of how the smooth and transparent reshapes our surroundings. I see this project as a poetic portrait of the city, of the urbanism of glass-box architecture.

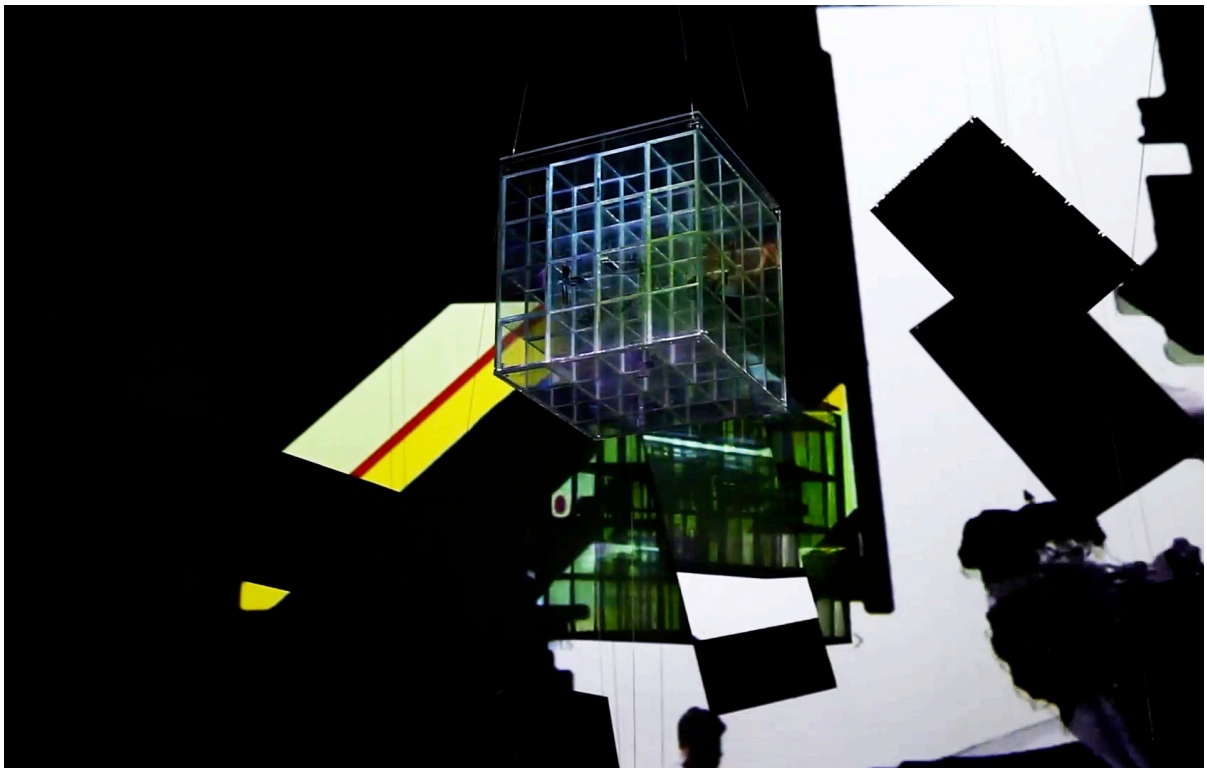


Figure 15. Lingxiang Wu, Documentation 1 of *What Illuminates the City?*, 2019

On the other side of the sculpture, a projector projects videos, casting shadows on the background. Around the cube sculpture, whiteboards in multiple sizes distort the video and shadow. With this project, I am changing the atmosphere of the space by projecting these different videos. For example, the projection may alternate between a rotoscoped web browsing video, snow cubes, animated digital file movement on a solid white background, or animated fake shadows on a solid black background.

In certain instances the visual is so chaotic that the viewer may have to step back to look, but at other times the space contains nothing but the smooth image of a centred cube sculpture.The piece revolves around the transparency of the city; it seems clear from the outside but the activities within remain invisible until the light shines through. The installation invites viewers to consider this question: is it the structure of the city that illuminates a false reality, or the shadow that illuminates what we call a city?

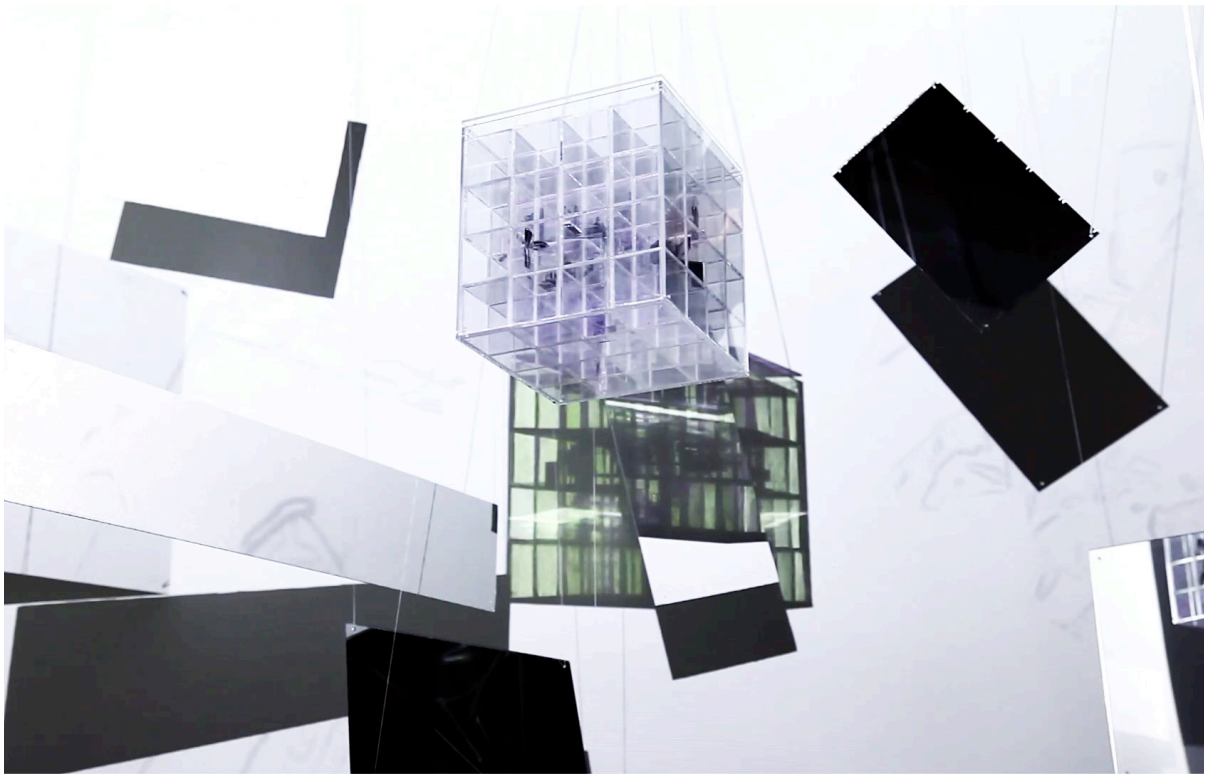


Figure 16. Lingxiang Wu, Documentation 2 of *What Illuminates the City?*, 2019

CONCLUSION

I came to this Master's program wondering about the relationship between digital space and its inhabitants, and if or how our activities in digital space impair us. Do these activities online shorten our attention span, or spoil us with the promise of speed without interruption? Now, looking back, it seems too hasty a question. The relationships behind these phenomena are much more complex than I could ever have anticipated. However, as a visual artist I decided to focus on what is being seen; and that is the poor image and the aesthetic of the smooth. Behind the smoothness, is a rationale similar to standardization and repetition, crucial for the continuation of everyday life.

Smoothness becomes problematic when inhabitants see it as an expectation and further populate our space with smooth images. My thesis, instead of forming a critique against the concept of smoothness, forms a critique toward the post-production of smoothness. For example, the misconception of selfies as identity, pranks as comedy, or paint pouring as art. The commonality among these examples is the illusion of taking what is surface and visible as equal to what is sayable. Therefore, my work becomes an almost obsessive attempt to prove that even though the environment can be filled with smooth images, the visual outcome of my production may not be smooth. The poor images I collect through Google Alert can be directed and homogenized, but the final composition can be distanced by using post-production manipulation. Similar to Sol LeWitt's intention, the objective of *Incomplete Open Cubes* is an infinity of incompletion. I want to use the smooth aesthetic of poor images and post-production, and create a rough visual experience that one can actually dwell in, unlike the algorithmic digital space.

As a result, while I think my work has progressed, I realize that it may be too large an investigation to undertake within this thesis. Starting with the screenshot of digital images from Google Alert, these images undergo multiple stages of destruction and construction. They are taken apart into fragments and reconstructed into collage; then taken apart again to build a constantly moving snow cube, then further edited into video sequences. Further still, they are rotoscoped and broken down once again in combination with other elements to construct an installation. Through these processes, I learn that as the poor image becomes less and less predominant in the final visual, there is more potential for broader visual contexts.

Can the unstable composition resulting from the battle between my selection and that of the algorithm's be considered the aesthetic of the rough? And if so, can I use this roughness in my future practice to comment on the aesthetic of the smooth or to investigate other contexts such as the culture of "likes?"

Moreover, the trajectory of my practice is definitely not linear since I experiment with different media to render and create images. There are still many paths I have not yet tested. What would happen if I opened every hyperlink Google Alert sends me, and went off the rail by clicking through other links within the initial web page? Where would that take me? What if I changed my platform from Google Alert to Instagram? Will the use of hashtags bring me other people's images related to a particular word or phrase? These are questions I will consider later.

I believe my work follows the theories of Byung-Chul Han and Hito Steyerl, performing an investigation into the possibility of using post-production to disrupt the reading of smoothness in our contemporary reality. I think that post-production can produce contents that are more contemplative and rough. However, my thesis does not aim to answer the question of how to cope with smoothness because everyone interacts with images in different ways. My work takes the first step to populate the space with non-smooth visual content, recalling the importance of contemplative lingering as a mode of looking rather than straight consuming. By doing so, perhaps other producers, users, or inhabitants of this urban mass will start to create non-smooth content, and eventually defy the implications of the aesthetic of the smooth.

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APPENDIX A: ADDITIONAL IMAGE DOCUMENTATION

Figure 17. Partial view of the exhibition - 1

Figure 18. Partial view of the exhibition - 2

Figure 19. Partial view of the exhibition - 3

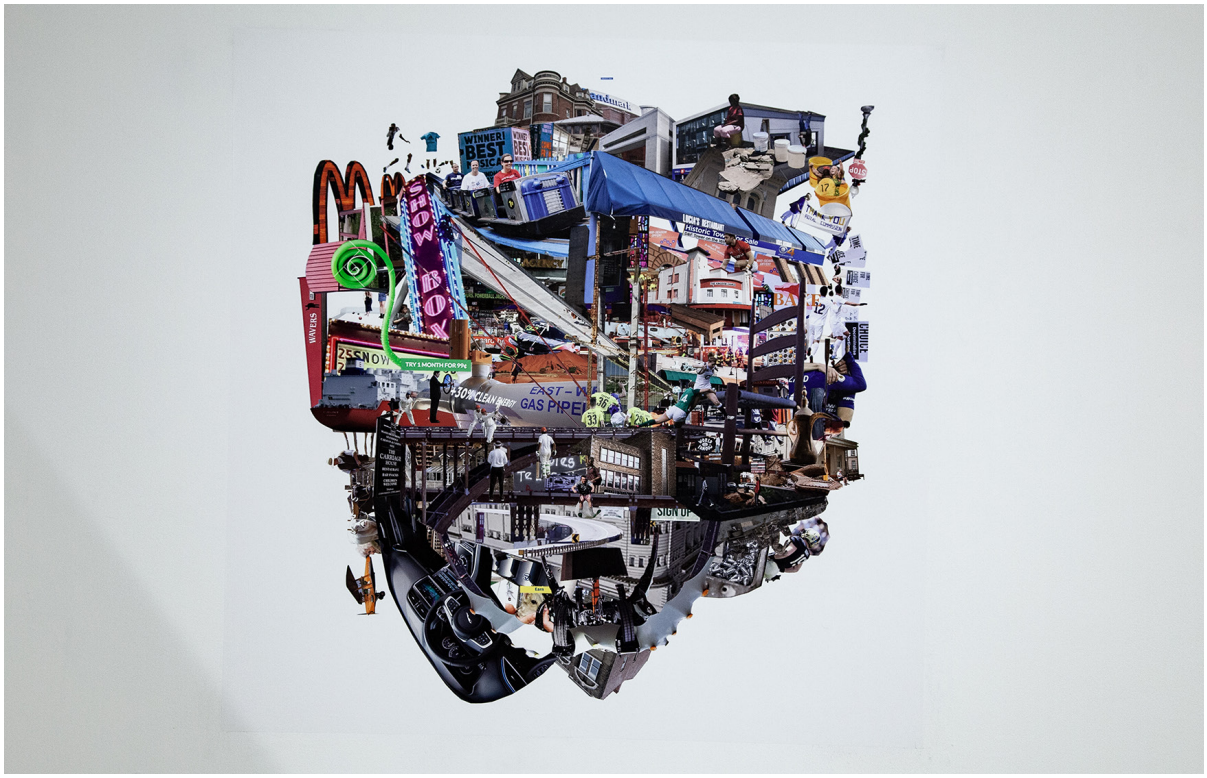

Figure 20. Documentation of *Google, Show Me the Colors - Landmark*, 2019

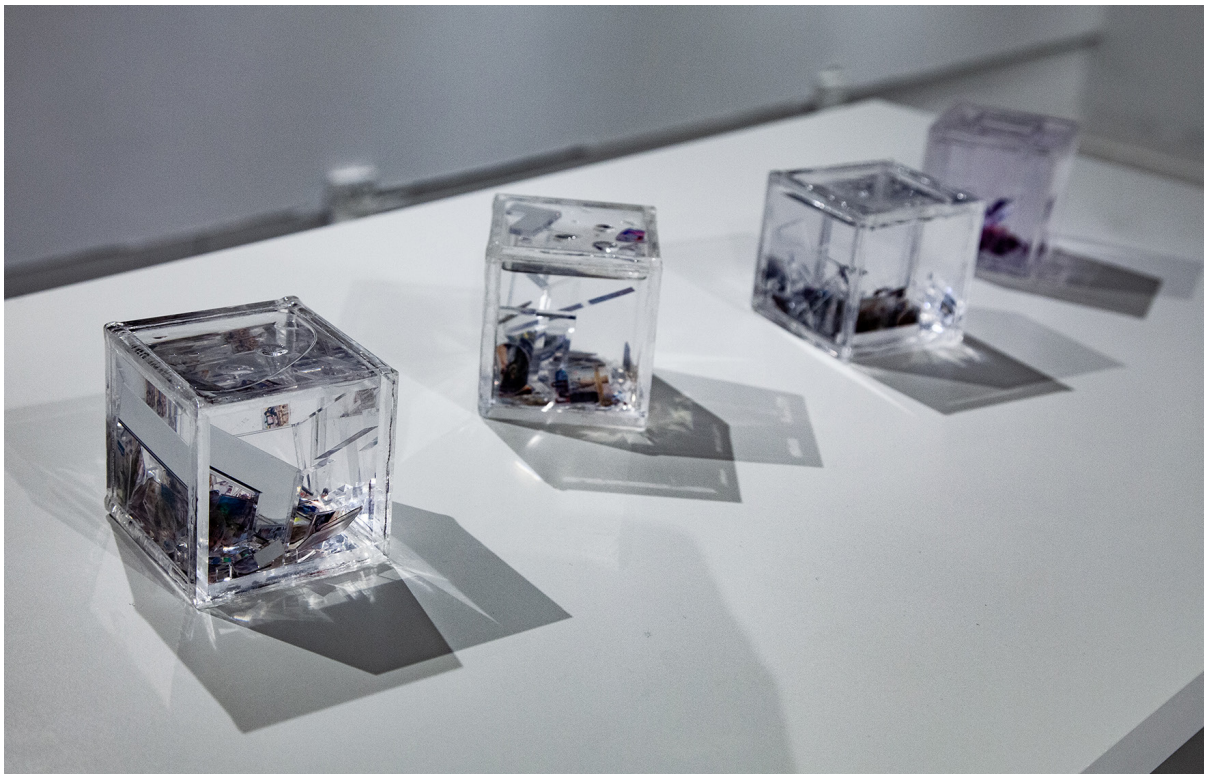

Figure 21. Documentation of *Snow Cube*

Figure 22. Documentation of *Reflection Between the Real and the Fake*

APPENDIX B: ADDITIONAL VIDEO DOCUMENTATION

Figure 23. Still from video documentation of *Snow Cube* (Full video is uploaded in repository)

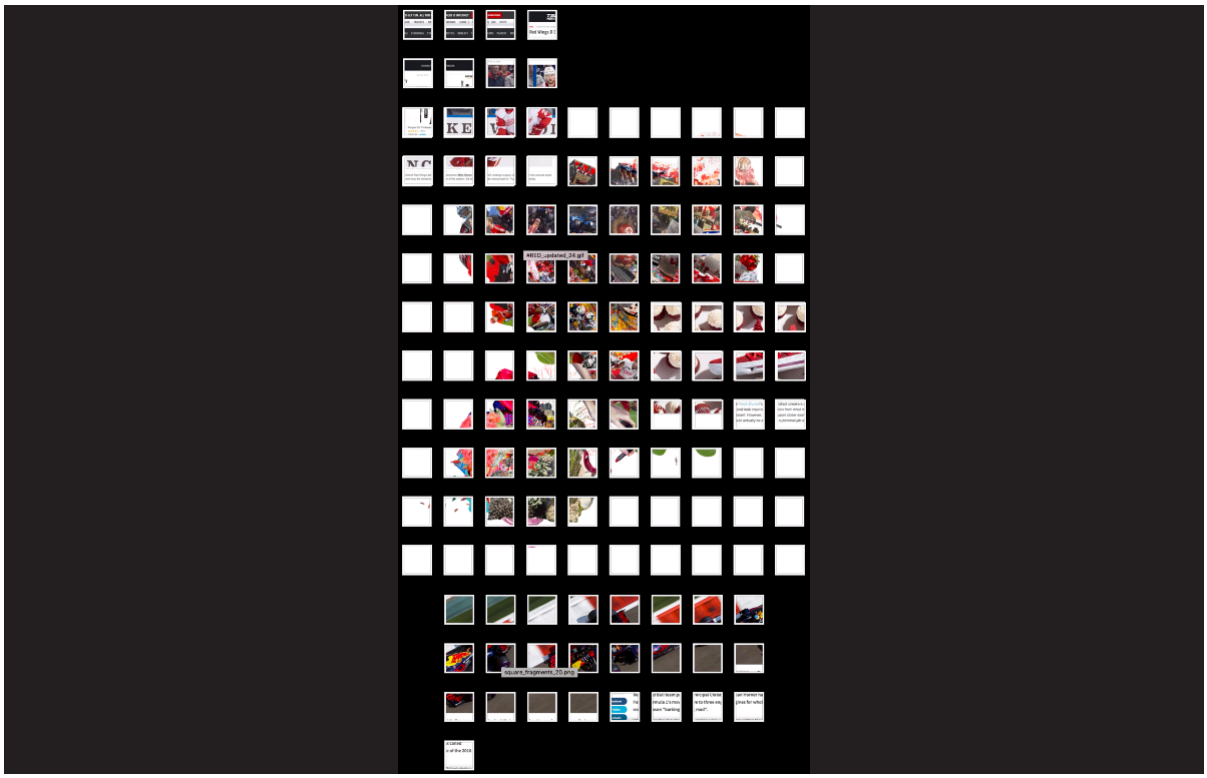

Figure 24. Still from video documentation of *Format* (Full video is uploaded in repository)

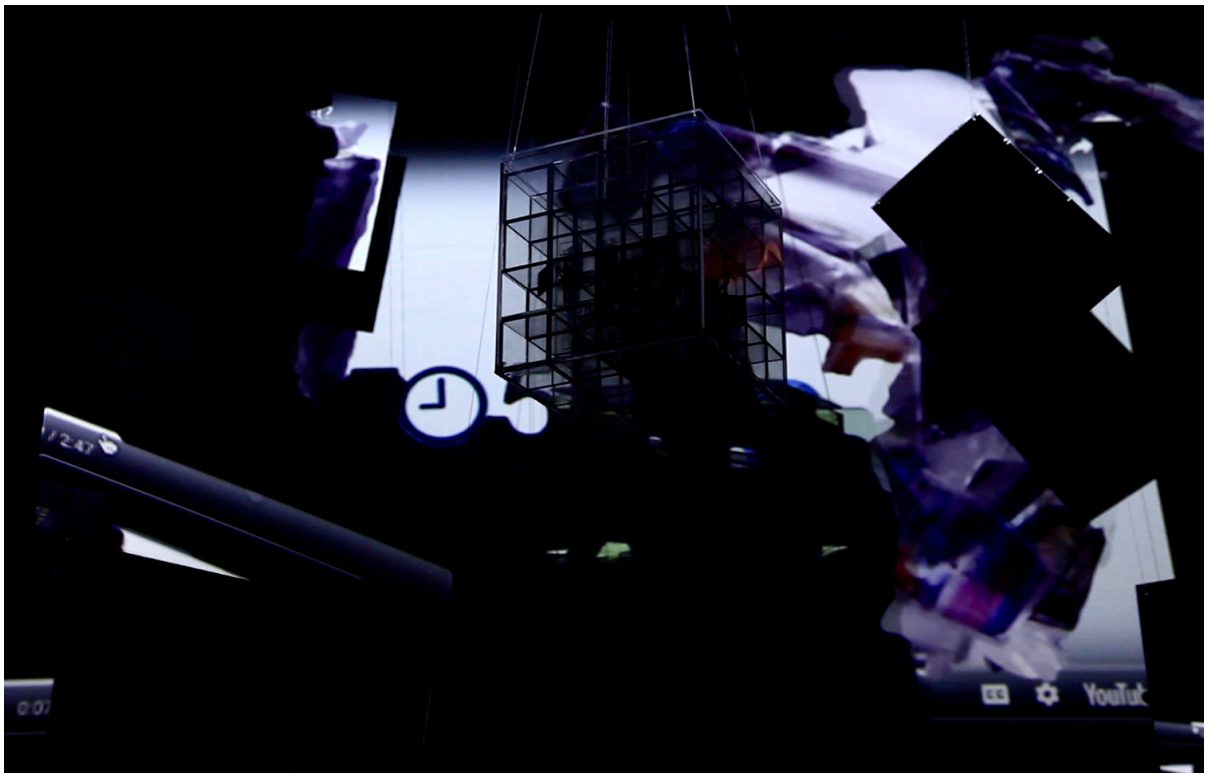

Figure 25. Still from video documentation of *What Illuminate the City?* (Full video is uploaded in repository)