

Hito Steyerl

The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation

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Dense clusters of radio waves leave our planet every second. Our letters and snapshots, intimate and official communications, TV broadcasts and text messages drift away from earth in rings, a tectonic architecture of the desires and fears of our times.¹ In a few hundred thousand years, extraterrestrial forms of intelligence may incredulously sift through our wireless communications. But imagine the perplexity of those creatures when they actually look at the material. Because a huge percentage of the pictures inadvertently sent off into deep space is actually spam. Any archaeologist, forensic, or historian – in this world or another – will look at it as our legacy and our likeness, a true portrait of our times and ourselves. Imagine a human reconstruction somehow made from this digital rubble. Chances are, it would look like image spam.

Image spam is one of the many dark matters of the digital world; spam tries to avoid detection by filters by presenting its message as an image file. An inordinate amount of these images floats around the globe, desperately vying for human attention.² They advertise pharmaceuticals, replica items, body enhancements, penny stocks, and degrees. According to the pictures dispersed via image spam, humanity consists of scantily dressed degree-holders with jolly smiles enhanced by orthodontic braces.

Image spam is our message to the future. Instead of a modernist space capsule showing a woman and man on the outside – a family of “man” – our contemporary dispatch to the universe is image spam showing enhanced advertisement mannequins.³ And this is how the universe will see us; it is perhaps even how it sees us now.

In terms of sheer quantity, image spam outnumbers the human population by far. It’s formed a silent majority, indeed. But of what? Who are the people portrayed in this type of accelerated advertisement? And what could their images tell potential extraterrestrial recipients about contemporary humanity?

From the perspective of image spam, people are improvable, or, as Hegel put it, perfectible. They are imagined to be potentially “flawless,” which in this context means horny, super skinny, armed with recession-proof college degrees, and always on time for their service jobs, courtesy of their replica watches. This is the contemporary family of men and women: a bunch of people on knockoff antidepressants, fitted with enhanced body parts. They are the dream team of hyper-capitalism.

But is this how we really look? Well, no. Image spam might tell us a lot about “ideal” humans, but not by showing actual humans: quite the contrary. The models in image spam are

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Example of spam advertising schooling, found here <http://www.symantec.com/connect/blogs/image-spam>

photochopped replicas, too improved to be true. A reserve army of digitally enhanced creatures who resemble the minor demons and angels of mystic speculation, luring, pushing and blackmailing people into the profane rapture of consumption.



Medical spam images retrieved from corporation Symantec Intelligence's blog, found here <http://www.symantec.com/connect/blogs/image-spam>

Image spam is addressed to people who do not look like those in the ads: they neither are skinny nor have recession-proof degrees. They are those whose organic substance is far from perfect from a neoliberal point of view. People who might open their inboxes every day waiting for a miracle, or just a tiny sign, a rainbow at the other end of permanent crisis and hardship. Image spam is addressed to the vast majority of humankind, but it does not show them. It does not represent those who are considered expendable and superfluous – just like spam itself; it speaks to them.

The image of humanity articulated in image spam thus has actually nothing to do with it. On the contrary, it is an accurate portrayal of what humanity is actually not. It is a negative image.

Mimicry and Enchantment

Why is this? There is an obvious reason, which is too well known to elaborate on here: images trigger mimetic desires and make people want to become like the products represented in them. In this view, hegemony infiltrates everyday culture and spreads its values by way of mundane representation.⁴ Image spam is thus interpreted as a tool for the production of bodies, and ultimately ends up creating a culture stretched between bulimia, steroid overdose, and personal bankruptcy. This perspective – one of more traditional Cultural Studies – views image spam

as an instrument of coercive persuasion as well as of insidious seduction, and leads to the oblivious pleasures of surrendering to both.⁵

But what if image spam were actually much more than a tool of ideological and affective indoctrination? What if actual people – the imperfect and nonhorny ones – were not excluded from spam advertisements because of their assumed deficiencies but had actually chosen to desert this kind of portrayal? What if image spam thus became a record of a widespread refusal, a withdrawal of people from representation?

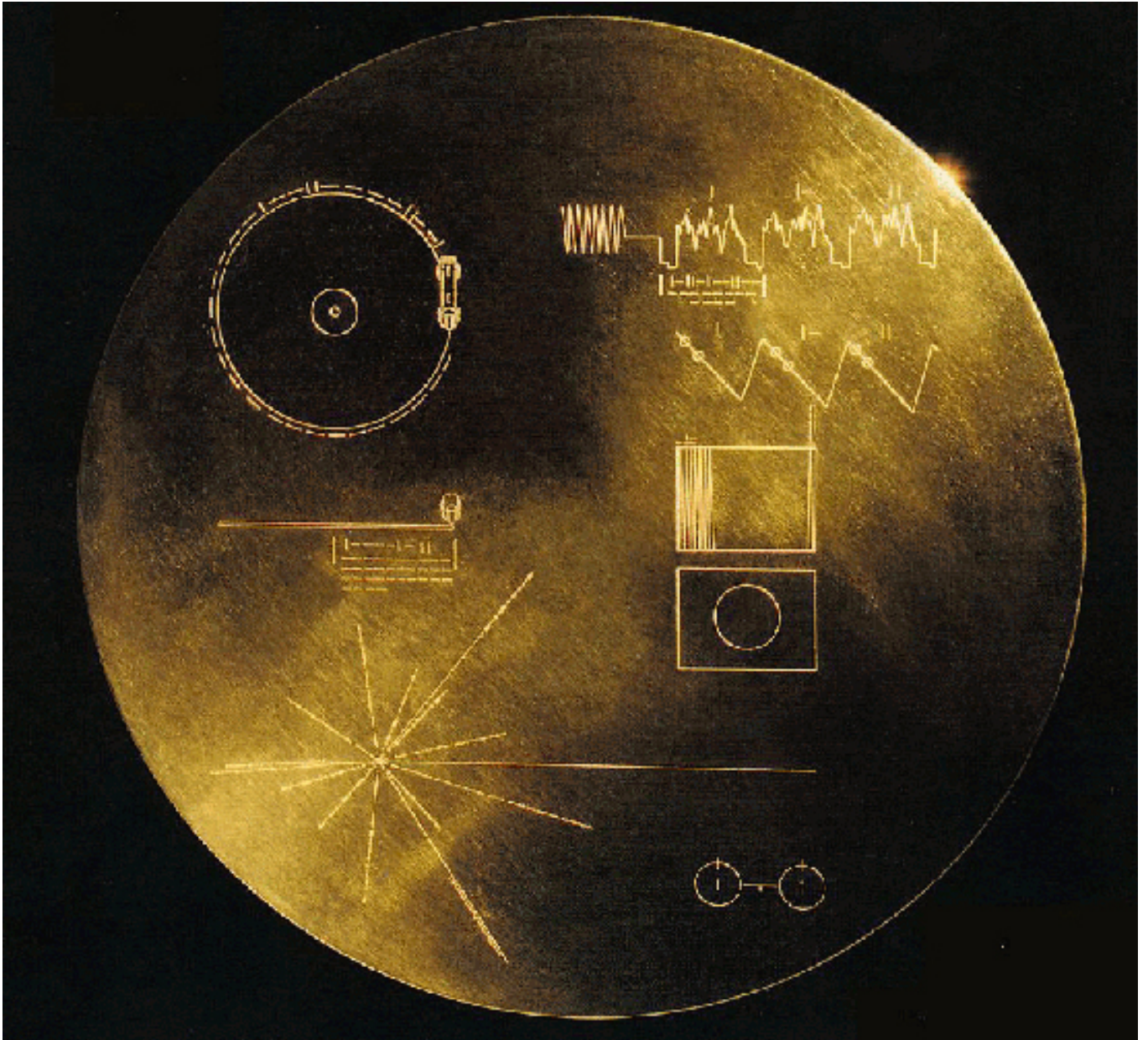
What do I mean by this? For a certain time already I have noted that many people have started actively avoiding photographic or moving-image representations, surreptitiously taking their distance from the lenses of cameras. Whether it's camera-free zones in gated communities or elitist techno clubs, someone's declining interviews, Greek anarchists smashing cameras, or looters destroying LCD TVs, people have started to actively, and passively, refuse constantly being monitored, recorded, identified, photographed, scanned, and taped. Within a fully immersive media landscape, pictorial representation – which was seen as a prerogative and a political privilege for a long time⁶ – feels more like a threat.



Ed Ruscha, *SPAM, Detail*, 1961. From the series *Product Still Lives*, 1961/1999.

There are many reasons for this. The numbing presence of trash talk and game shows has led to a situation in which TV has become a medium inextricably linked to the parading and ridiculing of lower classes. Protagonists are violently made over and subjected to countless invasive ordeals, confessions, inquiries, and assessments. Morning TV is the contemporary equivalent to a torture chamber – including the

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Cover of Voyager's golden record with playing instructions and sound diagrams, launched in 1977.

guilty pleasures of torturers, spectators, and, in many cases, also the tortured themselves.

Additionally, in mainstream media people are often caught in the act of vanishing, whether it be in life-threatening situations, extreme emergency and peril, warfare and disaster, or in the constant stream of live broadcasts from zones of conflict around the world. If people aren't trapped within natural or man-made disasters, they seem to physically vanish, as anorexic beauty standards imply. People are emaciated or made to shrink or downsize. Dieting is obviously the metonymic equivalent to an economic recession, which has become a permanent reality and caused substantial material losses. This recession is coupled with an intellectual regression, which has become a dogma within all but a very few mainstream media outlets. As intelligence doesn't simply melt away via starvation, derision and rancor largely manage to keep it away from the grounds of mainstream representation.⁷

Thus the zone of corporate representation is largely one of exception, which seems dangerous to enter: you may be derided, tested, stressed, or even starved or killed. Rather than representing people it exemplifies the vanishing of the people: it's gradual disappearance. And why wouldn't the people be vanishing, given the countless acts of aggression and invasion performed against them in mainstream media, but also in reality?⁸ Who could actually withstand such an onslaught without the desire to escape this visual territory of threat and constant exposure?

Additionally, social media and cell-phone cameras have created a zone of mutual mass-surveillance, which adds to the ubiquitous urban networks of control, such as CCTV, cell -phone GPS tracking and face-recognition software. On top of institutional surveillance, people are now also routinely surveilling each other by taking countless pictures and publishing them in almost real time. The social control associated with these practices of horizontal representation has become quite influential. Employers google reputations of job candidates; social media and blogs become halls of shame and malevolent gossip. The top-down cultural hegemony exercised by advertisement and corporate media is supplemented by a down-down regime of (mutual) self-control and visual self-disciplining, which is even harder to dislocate than earlier regimes of representation. This goes along with substantial shifts in modes of self-production. Hegemony is increasingly internalized, along with the pressure to conform and perform, as is the pressure to represent and be represented.

Warhol's prediction that everybody would be world-famous for fifteen minutes had become true long ago. Now many people want the

contrary: to be invisible, if only for fifteen minutes. Even fifteen seconds would be great. We entered an era of mass-paparazzi, of the peak-o-sphere and exhibitionist voyeurism. The flare of photographic flashlights turns people into victims, celebrities, or both. As we register at cash tills, ATMs, and other checkpoints – as our cell phones reveal our slightest movements and our snapshots are tagged with GPS coordinates – we end up not exactly amused to death but represented to pieces.⁹

Walkout

This is why many people by now walk away from visual representation. Their instincts (and their intelligence) tell them that photographic or moving images are dangerous devices of capture: of time, affect, productive forces, and subjectivity. They can jail you or shame you forever; they can trap you in hardware monopolies and conversion conundrums, and, moreover, once these images are online they will never be deleted again. Ever been photographed naked? Congratulations – you're immortal. This image will survive you and your offspring, prove more resilient than even the sturdiest of mummies, and is already traveling into deep space, waiting to greet the aliens.

The old magic fear of cameras is thus reincarnated in the world of digital natives. But in this environment, cameras do not take away your soul (digital natives replaced this with iPhones) but drain away your life. They actively make you disappear, shrink, and render you naked, in desperate need of orthodontic surgery. In fact, it is a misunderstanding that cameras are tools of representation; they are at present tools of disappearance.¹⁰ The more people are represented the less is left of them in reality.

To return to the example of image spam I used before; it is a negative image of its constituency, but how? It is not – as a traditional Cultural Studies approach would argue – because ideology tries to impose a forced mimicry on people, thus making them invest in their own oppression and correction in trying to reach unattainable standards of efficiency, attractiveness, and fitness. No. Lets boldly assume that image spam is a negative image of its constituency because people are *also* actively walking away from this kind of representation, leaving behind only enhanced crash-test dummies. Thus image spam becomes an involuntary record of a subtle strike, a walkout of the people from photographic and moving-image representation. It is a document of an almost imperceptible exodus from a field of power relations that are too extreme to be survived without major reduction and downsizing. Rather than a document of domination, image spam is

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the people's monument of resistance to being represented *like this*. They are leaving the *given* frame of representation.

Political and Cultural Representation

This shatters many dogmas about the relation between political and pictorial representation. For a long time my generation has been trained to think that representation was the primary site of contestation for both politics and aesthetics. The site of culture became a popular field of investigation into the "soft" politics inherent in everyday environments. It was hoped that changes in the field of culture would hark back to the field of politics. A more nuanced realm of representation was seen to lead to more political and economical equality.

But gradually it became clear that both were less linked than originally anticipated, and that the partition of goods and rights and the partition of the senses were not necessarily running parallel to each other. Ariella Azoulay's concept of photography as a form of civil contract provides a rich background to think through these ideas. If photography was a civil contract between the people who participated in it, then the current withdrawal from representation is the breaking of a social

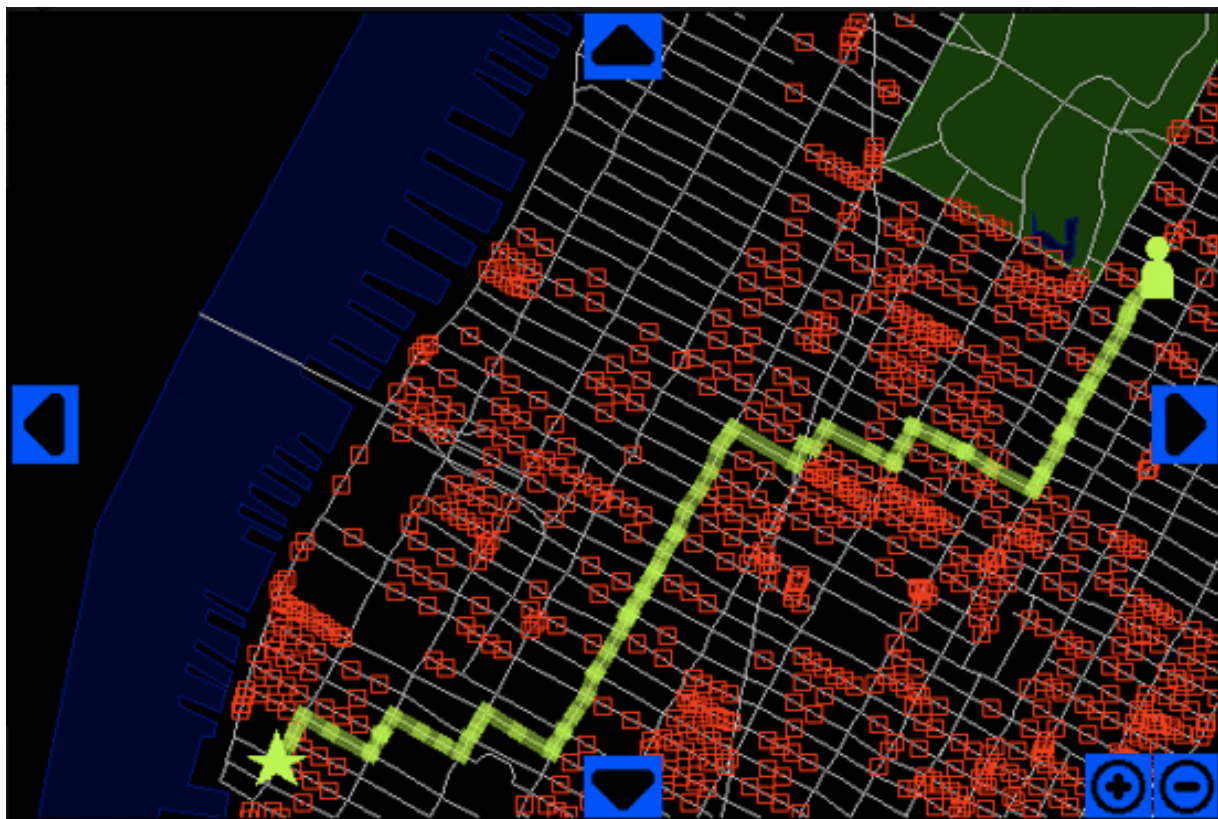
contract, having promised participation but delivered gossip, surveillance, evidence, serial narcissism, as well as occasional uprisings.¹¹

While visual representation shifted into overdrive and was popularized through digital technologies, political representation of the people slipped into a deep crisis and was overshadowed by economic interest. While every possible minority was acknowledged as a potential consumer and visually represented (to a certain extent), people's participation in the political and economic realms became more uneven. The social contract of contemporary visual representation thus somewhat resembles the ponzi schemes of the early twenty-first century, or, more precisely, participation in a game show with unpredictable consequences.

And if there ever was a link between the two, it has become very unstable in an era in which relations between signs and their referents have been further destabilized by systemic speculation and deregulation.

Both terms do not only apply to financialization and privatization; they also refer to loosened standards of public information. Professional standards of truth production in journalism have been overwhelmed by mass media production, by the cloning of rumor and its

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Rendition of iSee Manhattan, a web-based application charting the locations of CCTV surveillance cameras in urban environments. Users are able to locate routes that avoid being filmed by unregulated security monitors.

amplification on Wikipedia discussion boards. Speculation is not only a financial operation but also a process that takes place in between a sign and its referent, a sudden miraculous enhancement, or spin, that snaps apart any remaining indexical relation.

Visual representation matters, indeed, but not exactly in unison with other forms of representation. There is a serious imbalance between both. On the one hand, there is a huge number of images without referents; on the other, many people without representation. To phrase it more dramatically: A growing number of unmoored and floating images corresponds to a growing number of disenfranchised, invisible, or even disappeared and missing people.¹²

Crisis of Representation

This creates a situation that is very different from how we used to look at images: as more or less accurate representations of something or someone in public. In an age of unrepresentable people and an overpopulation of images, this relation is irrevocably altered.

Image spam is an interesting symptom of the current situation because it is a representation that remains, for the most part, invisible.

Image spam circulates endlessly without ever being seen by a human eye. It is made by machines, sent by bots, and caught by spam filters, which are slowly becoming as potent as anti-immigration walls, barriers, and fences. The plastic people shown in it thus remain, to a large extent, unseen. They are treated like digital scum, and thus paradoxically end up on a similar level to that of the low-res people they appeal to. This is how it is different from any other kind of representational dummies, which inhabit the world of visibility and high-end representation. Creatures of image spam get treated as lumpen data, avatars of the conmen who are indeed behind their creation. If Jean Genet were still alive, he would have sung praise to the gorgeous hoodlums, tricksters, prostitutes, and fake dentists of image spam.

They are still not a representation of the people, because, in any case, the people are not a representation. They are an event, which might happen one day, or maybe later, in that sudden blink of an eye that is not covered by anything.

By now, however, people might have learned this, and accepted that any people can only be represented visually in negative form. This negative cannot be developed under any circumstance, since a magical process will ensure that all you are ever going to see in the positive is a bunch of populist substitutes and impostors, enhanced crash-test dummies trying to claim legitimacy. The image of the people as a

nation, or culture, is precisely that: a compressed stereotype for ideological gain. Image Spam is the true avatar of the people. A negative image with absolutely no pretense to originality? An image of what the people are not as their only possible representation?

And as people are increasingly makers of images – and not their objects or subjects – they are perhaps also increasingly aware that the people might happen by jointly making an image and not by being represented in one. Any image is a shared ground for action and passion, a zone of traffic between things and intensities. As their production has become mass production, images are now increasingly *res publicae*, or public things. Or even public things, as the languages of spam fabulously romance.¹³

This doesn't mean that who or what is being shown in images doesn't matter. This relation is far from being one-dimensional. Image spam's generic cast is not the people, and the better for it. Rather, the subjects of image spam stand in for the people as negative substitutes and absorb the flak of the limelight on their behalf. On the one hand, they embody all the vices and virtues (or, more precisely, vices-as-virtues) of the present economic paradigm. On the other, they remain more often than not invisible, because hardly anybody actually looks at them.

Who knows what the people in image spam are up to, if nobody is actually looking? Their public appearance may be just a silly face they put on to make sure we continue to not pay attention. They might carry important messages for the aliens in the meantime, about those who we stopped caring for, those excluded from shambolic "social contracts," or any form of participation other than morning TV; that is, the spam of the earth, the stars of CCTV and aerial infrared surveillance. Or they might temporarily share in the realm of the disappeared and invisible, made up of those who, more often than not, inhabit a shameful silence and whose relatives have to lower their eyes to their killers every day.

The image-spam people are double agents. They inhabit both the realms of over- and invisibility. This may be the reason why they are continuously smiling but not saying anything. They know that their frozen poses and vanishing features are actually providing cover for the people to go off the record in the meantime. To perhaps take a break and slowly regroup. "Go off screen" they seem to whisper. "We'll substitute for you. Let them tag and scan us in the meantime. You go off the radar and do what you have to." Whatever this is, they will not give us away, ever. And for this, they deserve our love and admiration.

x

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This text originated as a presentation at the “The Human Snapshot” conference, organized by Tirdad Zolghadr and Tom Keenan at the Luma Foundation in Arles, July 2–4, 2011. It is the third part of a trilogy about spam, the first two of which are published in *October*, no. 138 (fall 2011), guest-edited by David Joselit. Part one is titled “Spam and the Angel of History,” and part two “Letter to an Unknown Woman: Romance Scams and Epistolary Affect.” The writer would like to thank Ariella Azoulay, George Baker, Phil Collins, David Joselit, Imri Kahn, Rabih Mroué, and the many others who sparked or catalyzed various ideas within the series. Thank you also to Brian, as ever.

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Hito Steyerl is a filmmaker and writer. She teaches New Media Art at University of Arts Berlin and has recently participated in Documenta 12, Shanghai Biennial, and Rotterdam Film Festival.

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1
Douglas Phillips, "Can Desire Go On Without a Body?" in *The Spam Book: On Viruses, Porn, and Other Anomalies from the Dark Side of Digital Culture*, eds. Jussi Parikka and Tony D. Sampson (Creskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2009), 199f.

2
The number of spam emails sent per day is at roughly 250 billion (as per 2010). The total amount of image-spam has varied considerably over the years, but in 2007, image spam accounted for 35 percent of all spam messages and took up 70 percent of bandwidth bulge. "Image spam could bring the internet to a standstill," *London Evening Standard*, October 1, 2007, see <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/news/article-23381164-image-spam-could-bring-the-internet-to-a-standstill.do>. All the pictures of image spam accompanying this text have been borrowed from the invaluable source "Image Spam", by Mathew Nisbet, see <http://www.symantec.com/connect/blogs/image-spam>. To avoid misunderstandings, most image spam shows text, not pictures.

3
This is similar to the golden plaques on the *Pioneer* space capsules launched in 1972 and 1973, which depicted a white woman and a white man, with the woman's genitals omitted. Because of the criticism directed at the relative nudity of the human figures, subsequent plaques showed only the human silhouettes. It will be at least forty thousand years until the capsule could potentially deliver this message.

4
This is a sloppy, fast-forward rehash of a classical Gramscian perspective, from early Cultural Studies.

5
Or it may more likely be analyzed as partially self-defeating and contradictory.

6
I have discussed the failed promise of cultural representation in "The Institution of Critique," in *Institutional Critique: an Anthology of Artists' Writings*, eds. Alex Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009). 486f.

7
This applies unevenly around the world.

8
In the 1990s, people from former Yugoslavia would say that the former anti-fascist slogan of the Second World War had been turned upside down: "Death to fascism, freedom to the people" had been transformed by nationalists from all sides into, "Death to the people, freedom to fascism."

9
See Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

10
I remember my former teacher Wim Wenders elaborating on the photographing of things that will disappear. It is more likely, though, that things will disappear if (or even because) they are photographed.

11
I cannot expand on this appropriately here. It might be necessary to think through recent facebook riots from the perspective of breaking intolerable social contracts, and not from entering or sustaining them.

12
The era of the digital revolution corresponds to that of enforced mass disappearance and murder in former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Chechnya, Algeria, Iraq, Turkey, and parts of Guatemala, to list just a few. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which saw roughly 2.5 million war casualties between 1998 and 2008, it is agreed on by researchers that demand for raw materials for the IT industries (such as coltane) played a direct role in the country's conflict. The number of migrants who died while trying to reach Europe since 1990 is estimated to be eighteen thousand.

13
This derives from a pirated DVD cover of the movie *In the Line of Fire* (Wolfgang Peterson, 1993), which states, in no uncertain terms, that public performance of the disc is strictly prohibited.

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