

From Image to Image File—and Back: Art in the Age of Digitalization

The digitalization of the image was initially thought of as a way to escape the museum or, generally, any exhibition space—to set the image free. But in recent decades we have seen the growing presence of digital images in the context of traditional art institutions. So the question arises: What does this fact tell us about digitalization and about these institutions?

On both sides of the digital divide one feels a certain discontent. On one side, the liberated digital image seems to be subjected to a new imprisonment, a new confinement inside the museum and exhibition walls. On the other side, the art system seems to be compromised by exhibiting digital copies instead of originals. Of course, one can argue that the digital photographs or videos—like readymades or analog films and photographs before them—being displayed in the exhibition space demonstrates the loss of aura, the postmodern skepticism toward the modernist notion of originality. But one can doubt that such a demonstration is a sufficient reason for producing and exhibiting the huge amount of digital images that confront us in today's museums and exhibition spaces. And: Why should we exhibit these images at all—instead of just letting them circulate freely in the contemporary information network?

Digitalization would seem to allow the image to become independent of any kind of exhibition practice. Digital images have, that is, an ability to originate, to multiply, and to distribute themselves through the open fields of contemporary means of communication, such as the Internet or cell-phone networks, immediately and anonymously, without any curatorial control. In this respect we can speak of the digital images as genuinely strong images—as images that are able to show themselves according to their own nature, depending solely on their own vitality and strength. Of course, one can always assume that there is a certain hidden curatorial practice and a certain hidden agenda concealed behind any concrete strong image—but such an assumption remains a suspicion that cannot be proven “objectively.” So one can say: The digital image is a truly strong image—in the sense that it is not in need of

any additional curatorial help to be exhibited, to be seen. But the question arises: Is the digital image also a strong image in the sense that it can stabilize its identity through all its appearances? A strong image can be regarded as truly strong only if it can guarantee its own identity in time—otherwise we are dealing again with a weak image that is dependent on a specific space, the specific context of its presentation.

Now, one can argue that it is not so much the digital image itself as the image file that can be called strong, because the image file remains more or less identical through the process of its distribution. But the image file is not an image—the image file is invisible. Only the heroes of the movie *Matrix* could see the image files, the digital code as such. The relationship between the image file and the image that emerges as an effect of the visualization of this image file—as an effect of its decoding by a computer—can be interpreted as a relationship between original and copy. The digital image is a visible copy of the invisible image file, of the invisible data. In this respect the digital image is functioning as a Byzantine icon—as a visible copy of invisible God. Digitalization creates the illusion that there is no longer any difference between original and copy, and that all we have are the copies that multiply and circulate in the information networks. But there can be no copies without an original. The difference between original and copy is obliterated in the case of digitalization only by the fact that the original data are invisible: they exist in the invisible space behind the image, inside the computer.

So the question arises: How can we possibly grasp this specific condition of the digital image, the data, inside this image itself? The average spectator has no magic pill that would allow him or her like the heroes of *Matrix* to enter the space of the invisibility behind the digital image—to be confronted directly with the digital data itself. And such a spectator has no technique that would allow him or her to transfer the data directly into the brain and to experience it in the mode of pure, nonvisualizable suffering as is done in another movie—*Johnny Mnemonic*. (Actually, pure suffering is, as we know, the most adequate experience of the Invisible.) In this respect, how iconoclastic religions have dealt with the image could probably help. According to these religions the Invisible shows itself in the world not through any specific individual image but through the whole history of its appearances and interventions. Such a history is necessarily ambiguous: It documents the individual

appearances or interventions of the Invisible (biblically speaking: signs and wonders) within the topography of the visible world—but at the same time it documents them in a way that relativizes all these appearances and interventions, that avoids the trap of recognizing one specific image as *the* image of the Invisible. The Invisible remains invisible precisely by the multiplication of its visualizations.

Similarly, looking at digital images we are also confronted every time with a new event of visualization of invisible data. So we can say: The digital image is a copy—but the event of its visualization is an original event, because the digital copy is a copy that has no visible original. That further means: A digital image, to be seen, should not be merely exhibited but staged, performed. Here the image begins to function analogously to a piece of music, whose score, as is generally known, is not identical to the musical piece—the score itself being silent. For music to resound, it has to be performed. Thus one can say that digitalization turns the visual arts into a performing art. But to perform something is to interpret it, to betray it, to distort it. Every performance is an interpretation and every interpretation is a betrayal, a misuse. The situation is especially difficult in the case of the invisible original: If the original is visible it can be compared to a copy—so the copy can be corrected and the feeling of betrayal reduced. But if the original is invisible no such comparison is possible—any visualization remains uncertain. Here the figure of the curator arises again—and it becomes even more powerful than it was before, because the curator becomes now not only the exhibitor but the performer of the image. The curator does not simply show an image that was originally there but not seen. Rather, the contemporary curator turns the invisible into the visible.

By doing so the curator makes choices that modify the performed image in a substantial way. The curator does this first of all by selecting the technology that should be used to visualize the image data. The information technology is constantly changing nowadays—hardware, software—simply everything is in flux. Because of this the image is already transformed with every act of visualization using a different, new technology. Today's technology thinks in terms of generations—we speak of computer generations, of generations of photographic and video equipment. But where there are generations, there are also generation conflicts, Oedipal struggles. Anyone who attempts to transfer his or her old text files or image files using a new software

will experience the power of the Oedipus complex over current technology—much data gets destroyed, lost in darkness. The biological metaphor says it all: Not only life, which is notorious in this respect, but also technology, which supposedly opposes nature, has become the medium of non-identical reproduction. But even if the technology could guarantee the visual identity of the different visualizations of the same data they would remain non-identical because of the changing context of their appearances.

In his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Walter Benjamin assumes the possibility of a technically perfect identical reproduction that no longer allows a material distinction between original and copy. Nevertheless at the same time, a distinction between original and copy remains valid. According to Benjamin, the traditional artwork loses its aura when it is transported from its original place to an exhibition space or when it is copied. But that means that the loss of aura is especially significant in the case of the visualization of an image file. If a traditional “analog” original is moved from one place to another it remains a part of the same space, the same topography—the same visible world. By contrast, the digital original—the file of digital data—is moved by its visualization from the space of invisibility, from the status of “non-image” to the space of visibility, to the status of “image.” Accordingly, we have here a truly massive loss of aura—because nothing has more aura than the Invisible. The visualization of the Invisible is the most radical form of its profanation. The visualization of digital data is a sacrilege—comparable to the attempt to visualize or depict the invisible God of Judaism or Islam. And this act of radical profanation cannot be compensated by a set of rules that would enforce the iterability of the visual on the results of this profanation as, for example, happened in the case of the Byzantine icons. As has already been said, modern technology is not capable of establishing such homogeneity.

Benjamin’s assumption that an advanced technology can guarantee the material identity between original and copy has not been validated by further technological developments. The actual development of technology went in the opposite direction—in the direction of the diversification of the conditions under which a copy is produced and distributed and, accordingly, the diversification of the resulting visual images. The central characteristic of the Internet consists precisely in the fact that on the Net, all symbols, words, and

images are assigned an address: They are placed somewhere, territorialized, inscribed into a certain topology. This means that even beyond the permanent generational differences and corresponding shifts, the fate of digital data on the Internet is essentially dependent on the quality of the specific hardware, server, software, browser, and so on. The individual files may be distorted, interpreted differently, or even rendered unreadable. They may also be attacked by computer viruses, accidentally deleted, or may simply age and perish. In this way, files on the Internet become the heroes of their own story, which, like any story, is primarily one of possible or real loss. Indeed, such stories are told constantly: How certain files can no longer be read, how certain Web sites disappeared, and so on.

The social space in which digitalized images—photographs, videos—are circulating today is also an extremely heterogeneous space. One can visualize videos with the aid of a video recorder, but also as a projection on a screen, on television, within the context of a video installation, on the monitor of a computer, on a cell phone, and so on. In all of these cases, the same video file looks different even on the surface—not to mention the very different social contexts within which it is shown. Digitalization, that is, the writing of the image, helps the image become reproducible, to circulate freely, to distribute itself. It is therefore the medicine that cures the image of its inherent passivity. But at the same time, the digitalized image becomes even more infected with non-identity—with the necessity of presenting the image as dissimilar to itself, which means that supplementary curing of the image—its curating—becomes unavoidable.

Or to put it in another way: It becomes unavoidable to bring the digital image back into the museum, back into the exhibition space. And here, each presentation of a digitalized image becomes a re-creation of this image. Only the traditional exhibition space opens up the possibility for us to reflect not only on the software but also on the hardware, on the material side of the image data. To speak in traditional Marxist terms: The positioning of the digital in the exhibition space makes it possible for the viewer to reflect not only on the superstructure but also on the material basis of digitalization.

This is especially relevant for video, because the video has meanwhile become the leading vehicle of visual communication. When video images are placed in the art exhibition space, they immediately subvert the expectations

we generally associate with this space. In the traditional art space, the viewer—at least in the ideal case—has complete control over the duration of his or her contemplation: He or she can interrupt contemplation of a particular image at any time to come back to it later and resume viewing it at the same point it was previously interrupted. While the viewer is absent, the unmoving image remains identical to itself. The production of identity of the image over time constitutes what we refer to in our culture as “high art.” In our usual, “normal” lives, the time dedicated to contemplation is clearly dictated by life itself. With respect to real-life images, we do not possess sovereignty, administrative power over the time of contemplation: In life, we are always only accidental witnesses of certain events and certain images, whose duration we cannot control. All art therefore begins with the wish to hold on to a moment, to let it linger for an indeterminate time. Thus the museum—and generally any art exhibition space in which as a rule unmoving images are exhibited—obtains its real justification: It guarantees the ability of the visitor to administer the duration of his attention. However, the situation changes drastically with the introduction of moving images into the museum, as these begin to dictate the time the visitor needs in order to view them—and to rob him of his traditional sovereignty.

In our culture, we have two different models that allow us to gain control over time: The immobilization of the image in the museum, and the immobilization of the audience in the movie theater. Both models, however, fail when moving images are transferred into the space of a museum. In this case, the images go on moving—but the audience also continues to move. One does not remain sitting or standing for any length of time in an exhibition space; rather one retraces one’s steps through the space again and again, remains standing in front of a picture for a while, moves closer or away from it, looks at it from different perspectives, and so on. The viewer’s movement in the exhibition space cannot be arbitrarily stopped because it is constitutive of the functioning of perception within the art system. In addition, an attempt to force a visitor to watch all of the videos or films in the context of a larger exhibition from beginning to end would be doomed to failure from the start—the duration of the average exhibition visit is simply not long enough.

It is obvious that this causes a situation in which the expectations of a visit to a movie theater and a visit to a museum conflict with each other.

The visitor to a video installation basically no longer knows what to do: Should he stop and watch the images moving before his eyes as in a movie theater, or, as in a museum, continue on in the confidence that over time, the moving images will not change as much as seems likely? Both solutions are clearly unsatisfactory—actually, they are not real solutions at all. One is quickly forced to recognize, though, that there cannot be any adequate or satisfactory solution in this unprecedented situation. Each individual decision to stop or to continue on remains an uneasy compromise—and later has to be revised time and again.

It is precisely this fundamental uncertainty that results when the movement of the images and the movement of the viewer occur simultaneously that creates the added aesthetic value of bringing the digitalized moving images into the exhibition space. In the case of a video installation, a struggle arises between the viewer and the artist over the control of the duration of contemplation. Consequently, the duration of actual contemplation has to be continually renegotiated. Thus the aesthetic value of a video installation consists primarily in explicitly thematicizing the potential invisibility of the image, the viewer's lack of control over the duration of his attention paid in the exhibition space, in which previously the illusion of complete visibility prevailed. The viewer's inability to take complete visual control is further aggravated by the increased speed at which moving images are currently able to be produced.

For the viewer, formerly the investment in terms of work, time, and energy required for consuming a traditional work of art stood in an extremely favorable relation to the duration of art production. After the artist had to spend a long time and much effort on creating a painting or a sculpture, the viewer was then allowed to consume this work without effort and with one glance. This explains the traditional superiority of the consumer, the viewer, the collector over the artist-craftsperson as a supplier of paintings and sculptures which had to be produced through arduous physical labor. It was not until the introduction of photography and the readymade technique that the artist placed himself on the same level with the viewer in terms of temporal economy, as this also enables the artist to produce images almost immediately. But now the digital camera, which can produce moving images, can also record and distribute these images automatically, without the artist having to spend any time doing so. This gives the artist a clear time surplus:

The viewer now has to spend more time viewing the images than the artist has to produce them. And again: This is not an intentionally lengthened duration of contemplation that the viewer needs to “understand” the image—as the viewer is completely in charge of the duration of conscious contemplation. Rather it is the time a viewer needs to even be able to watch video material in its entirety—and the contemporary technique allows producing a video work of considerable length in a very short time. That is why the basic experience had by the viewer of a video installation is thus the experience of the non-identity and even nonvisibility of the exhibited work. Each time someone visits a video exhibition, he or she is potentially confronted with another clip from the same video, which means that the work is different each time—and at the same time partially eludes the viewer’s eye, makes itself invisible.

The non-identity of video images also presents itself at another, as it were, deeper technical level. As has already been said: If one changes certain technical parameters, one also changes the image. Can one perhaps preserve something of the old technology so that the image remains self-identical through all the instances of its display? But to preserve the original technology shifts the perception of a specific image from the image itself to the technical conditions under which it was produced. What we primarily react to is the old-fashioned photographic or video recording technology that becomes apparent when we look at old photographs or videos. The artist did not originally intend to produce this effect, however, as he lacked the possibility of comparing his work with the products of later technological developments.

Thus the image itself may possibly be overlooked if it is reproduced using the original technology. And so the decision becomes understandable to transfer this image to new technological media, to new software and hardware, so that it may look fresh again, so that it becomes interesting not merely in retrospect, but rather appears to be a contemporary image. With this line of argumentation, however, one gets caught in the same dilemma out of which, as is generally known, contemporary theater is unable to extricate itself. Because no one knows what is better: to reveal the epoch or the individuality of the play by the means of its performance. But it is unavoidable that every performance reveals one of these parameters by obscuring the other one. However, one can also use the technical constraints productively—one

can play with the technical quality of a digital image on all levels, including the material quality of the monitor or the projection surface, the external light, which as we know substantially changes the viewer's perception of a video image. Thus each presentation of a digitalized image becomes a re-creation of the image.

This shows again: There is no such thing as a copy. In the world of digitalized images, we are dealing only with originals—only with original presentations of the absent, invisible digital original. The exhibition makes copying reversible: It transforms a copy into an original. But this original remains partially invisible and non-identical. Now it becomes clear why it makes sense to apply both cures to the image—to digitalize it and to curate it, to exhibit it. This double medicine is not more effective than the two cures taken separately; it does not make the image truly strong. Quite the contrary: By applying this double medicine one becomes aware of the zones of the invisibility, of one's own lack of visual control, of the impossibility of stabilizing the identity of the image—of which one is not so much aware if he or she is dealing only with the objects in the exhibition space or the freely circulating digitalized images. But that means that the contemporary, postdigital curatorial practice can do something that the traditional exhibition could do only metaphorically: exhibit the Invisible.

