



## The Image Compressed

### Introduction

In this presentation I attend to the compressed image in relation to contemporary discussions on digital aesthetics. If compression constantly redefines visual information as it enables data to travel through digital infrastructures, the key question then is- what is this redefinition? I examine the way data compression translates information in an act of productive reduction that obscures, marks and folds the image. It draws from David Joselit's *After Art* and Hito Steyerl's *In defense of the poor image* to argue, not for its possible mass dissemination and re-presentation, but for the ontological potentials and dangers of the image itself. Alongside this discussion images and video of my practice are presented. Compression and loss are incorporated as an artistic strategy in my practice whereby hybrid digitally and physically compressed works form encounters with trace, difference and loss.

### Compression

Digital images seem to proliferate independently through the cables and servers that disseminate them, but they are absolutely reliant on processes of compression. The digital file is continuously compressed and decompressed, each time carrying the indexes of the process of its formation, memories of its state changes; its traces are passed on in digital events where its content and the material commodity of matter is not. Abstracted from its context, compression becomes almost a universal principle of digital dissemination. It seems that in a world suffused with generated images, an understanding of compression perhaps allows an opportunity to reflect on these worlds of images, the ways they are reproduced, received and represented.

I define compression as the action of pressing together as well as the condition of the pressed together. That which has been pressed together by force becomes under the condition of being pressed together, and that which is under the condition of being pressed together gives sensible form to the event of the pressing together.

Compression's etymological root is located in the verb "compress," meaning to put under pressure and further in the Latin work "press" denoting crowding. Compression acts, and its action forces things into less; things become shortened, constricted, abbreviated, squashed, flattened, crushed, crammed, jammed, stuffed, wedged, packed, shaped and compacted. The imperative of compression is to respond to the problem of limiting a mass of something within finiteness. It expresses a desire to contain more within less. While expansion releases things into more; they become enlarged, extended, elongated, allowed, inflated, lengthened, broadened and opened. The imperative of expansion responds to the problem of unfixing something to a limited space. It expresses a desire to allow more into more. If expansion can free things from pressure or a forceful ordering, then compression binds, enslaves and encrypts them. Alongside with the compressed we may consider the suppressed, repressed and the depressed, all states that signify a forceful or an entrapping presence of control on persons, things and information.

In a digital context, the term compression is used to describe data that has been fed through a compression algorithm. Data compression encodes files into smaller information-bearing units, to enable these files to travel faster and take up less storage space. This compression, which is formally named "source-coding", rearranges the relations inside and between the data of files through means such as reordering, scaling, reduction and decomposition.

The transformative act of compression condenses a density of data, compacting it to be contained into a different file type or size. These processes of containment, condensation and compaction reconfigure the information and image. They bring about a decomposition of the file and a resultant obscuration of the image. The image becomes effaced of its previous level of detail while at the same time becomes marked with the traces of the translation. The absence of detail in combination with the presence of trace fragments obscures the image and abstracts it from readability. The image's transformation goes from detailed clarity and quality towards distortion and abstraction, eventually leading to the loss of an image completely as the file becomes corrupt and unreadable. The compressed image folds and collapses into and out of itself, meaning falls to the void.

## Dissemination

Artist and writer Hito Steyerl's article *In Defense of the Poor Image* explicitly confronts the aesthetic conditions of such low-resolution digital images, addresses these images as copies in motion that migrate across a network. Through an analysis of the exchangeability of the copy as well as its process of dispersion, Steyerl explores the relations between an image's resolution, its ability to travel and its output. Hito Steyerl draws from Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* to offer an alternate perspective on the copy as one that not only allows reproduction but the ability of the audience to represent information. The text celebrates low-resolution images for being widely used, socially useful and non-authoritative. Hito defines the poor image as having inherently oppositional qualities that resist the realism and verisimilitude that is demanded of its representations. Rather than effacing, it makes visible its mediated nature. The poor digital image has been copied and renamed until it becomes unreadable and without a context of origin or intent. Like the poor image, compressed images force the viewer into a heightened awareness that what they are experiencing is a digital representation. The aesthetic affect of digital images stands in metonymically for the networks they navigate and the means by which those networks are exposed. They are a profile of the network. The compressed image brings into view the concept that networked space itself is a medium, that it is both a container and marker.

Art theorist David Joselit continues the discussion of network aesthetics, of art under the condition of big data. He argues that what counts "is not the nature of the material acted upon...but the generation of form through action.... Such substitutions mark a shift from the manipulation of material to the management of populations of persons and/or pictures."<sup>i</sup> He is interested in a shift toward network aesthetics, in artists working in modes where "the single image and the network are visible at once."<sup>ii</sup> In these works, the image contains the indexical history and marks of the network. He argues that mediums are now best considered as configurations of force; provisional structures that aggregate and channel content, establishing patterns of links or connections between images. "I think there has been a gain of information through transmission: Significance is accumulated through the re-enactment and relocation of the "same" image in different places and times."<sup>iii</sup>

While Steyerl's and Joselit's theories on the disseminated image are centred on understanding the affect of the image, its relational qualities and productive output, I am focused on the image itself, it's process of becoming and what it can tell us about the systems that surround and inform it. I seek to pause upon this image to see its ontological position, its situation of lossfulness, to be present in the violence of impermanence, this tragedy of time and our impossible project of memory.

## Loss

If compression redefines information engendering images with loss, what is this loss? Loss can be defined as the state of being deprived of something that was one once had. Derived from the Old Norse and Old English term "los", meaning destruction, looseness or a breaking up. When thinking of loss, one thinks of a

company's profit loss, the hair loss of baldness, the memory loss that comes from age, the loss of a loved one, being a loser when one loses at a game, being at a total loss, lost in the world, and then perhaps cutting your losses and breaking loose.

Loss is a heavy term, full of the pain and misfortune of someone or something being lesser or without. While losslessness represents a utopian vision, a perfect idea in which things remain and remain unchanged. It is not just information that is lost with these images, but our ability to perceive them; it is our translation of them that is becoming difficult. When we speak of the forms and processes of compression in terms of loss, we speak also of our fear of loss and desire for losslessness. We are trying to grasp the world around us, but it is rapidly transforming through digitization and there is a growing mass of data, both of which are beyond my comprehension. Jean Baudrillard suggests that we do not know the reality of things, that "we live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning."<sup>iv</sup> For Baudrillard, the distinctions between representation and reality break down to only simulacra. While Lev Manovich outlines in his *The Language of New Media*, that the machine or medium, at every instant of interaction, reminds the user of its existence, in a sense, adding information. It is in this play between an awareness of structures and an embrace of the processes that perhaps these images become poetic to us.

Philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman contemplates the problematic of trusting the cultural archive to be stored in volatile media, musing "it is extraordinary that men have entrusted so many images, so many affects, so many constructions, such beauty to a medium so close, ontologically, to its own ruin."<sup>v</sup>

## Storage

A hard drive fails in an instant and with it goes a collection of memories. The somewhat volatile medium of the digital is expressed as irrecoverable loss and leads to an obvious lack of trust. Without trust one enters into a tenuous relationship. There is an anxiety inherent to the impending possibility of a sudden end. At the same time digitisation offers older mediums the promise of overcoming their own physical degradation. Cultural works from the history find themselves uploaded to digital storage networks by the millions of libraries and archives across the world. Does one volatility supplant another? Recently cloud storage, or stratification, has become a more prevalent storage option. The promise of the Internet found its genesis in the avoidance of loss. If digital storage fails in one place, at least it may be resurrected in another. To spread something across the network for an assumed archival posterity became an inadvertent step toward peer-to-peer sharing. For as soon as anything entered the network, encrypted or not, it had become accessible to another. Storing personal information in international locations, some of which are subject to corporate ownership, has become the normative response to this lack of trust that one has towards their own personal storage devices. At this negotiation the historically private begins to enter gated public domains. Here the personal enters into a state of forced transparencies replete with all manner of promises to ensure these locations are secure and trusted. Yet security online is much like it is in any other place, promised but vulnerable, a trade-off is struck. Files stored locally are likely to perish without recovery. Files stored globally are likely to be kept, but are also likely to be used. Because the likelihood for failure is lowered, what enters the network often stays there. A chain of associations and pathways, alterations, enhancements and degradations become possible. A scattered history is kept, only perforated by broken linkages and pathways that no longer point to new locations.

The other fragility of the digital medium that leads to its volatility - is actually predicated on the behaviour of the subatomic particles that pulse through the current of its circuitry, the solder that binds its connections. Heat and other physical issues cause things to behave in ways that are not optimal to their performance. This is why your computer has "character". The computer crash does not always come from the code, but from the physical architecture of its transmissions and those of the network to which it is connected. In this way the material nature of the digital is constantly asserting itself. Materiality lurks - latent to all digital efforts. To be

clear, there is nothing virtual about the digital or the network. In 2006, when a 75 year old woman in Georgia accidentally put her spade through a cable in the ground the entire neighbouring community of Armenia lost its Internet connection for five hours. I propose that there is no such thing as the cloud. More accurately, there are pipes. They connect to buildings. In the buildings are machines and people. They are sitting in their local environment. Digital space is as delicate and finite as any other, and particularly any other that exists within a global ecology. Uploading a new set of photos is not committal to an infinite space: it means a new server rack in a new room somewhere for some period of time. The aggregate of these connections in time and space is the formation of a shifting and inflating archival network – the cloud. This brain cloud is a tapestry of indexes, an embroidery of voids, a constellation of simulation, a technological fold and just “a bunch of patterns being fed to us as we stand around within the space-time cube.”

My practice of moving and still digital images are abstract simulations approached from the vantage point of an already abstract experience within a simulated environment. My practice attempts to undermine any supposition that there can be a world in which all of this mass of pixels, big data and processes of compression is reconciled. Instead the works present lossy images as an ineffable element of the everyday but with the plenipotentiary to create encounters and speculations on the intangibility an incomprehensibility of this world.

## Closing

Data compression enables a mass of data to be shared and stored efficiently but at the trade-off of quality. Compression is the product of a compromise – it is both a desperate and inspired incorporation through which the lossful image and its process of becoming are together entwined or encrypted. Reduced to a cipher, and occupying the threshold between exchangeability and readability, the folded remnants of trace give rise to a proliferation of phantasms — shards of meaning and memory – fragments of aesthetic experience — that, untethered from their original context, are given over to a delirium that only the act of contemplated composition can temporarily arrest. I feel melancholic.

Perhaps compression has a dual function - both the edifying cultural emancipation that is described by Steyerl and Joselit, as well as a shock of the abyss that returns the conceptual and sensual gaze to the nature of an image itself. To understand the compressed image is not to attain certitude about an image, but to know the radical incompleteness of representation and experience. I see the compressed image as one that forces us to confront loss and difference, and their function in the ideation of being.

## Bibliography

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- Steyerl, Hito. *The Wretched of the Screen*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012.
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## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> David Joselit, “What to do with pictures”, *October*, Vol. 138, 2011, p 81.
- <sup>ii</sup> David Joselit, *After Art*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), p 39.
- <sup>iii</sup> David Joselit, “Signal, Processing,” *Artforum*, June, 2011.
- <sup>iv</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994) p 79.
- <sup>v</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, quoted in Andre Habib, “Ruin, archive and the time of cinema: Peter Delpout’s Lyrical Nitrate,” *Substance*, Vol. 35, 2006, p 120.