

## **What does the concept of 'imaginary property' mean, and how might it be useful in understanding what goes on in the image economy today?**

First of all I should say that 'Imaginary Property' is a term coined by Florian Schneider. It is not so much a concept, but more of a *condition* of the image economy. It starts from the transformation of the image from a static object into a performative, indexable, and infrastructural object. YouTube videos, or Google Image Search results, are emblematic of this transformation. Every part of the page in which a YouTube video is presented to you, shows the extent to which it is a tool of management. The URL, embed code and user channel with text comments, video responses and related videos are effectively *competing* with the video itself over which is to be 'read' first. While playing the video, YouTube's interface allows and stimulates you to look at similar or 'related' videos. A 'statistics and data' section shows the amount of views, comments and links as a popularity index. It is interesting to see how attention is categorised into different kinds of *metadata*. Clearly, metadata is central to the image economy. It generates value for the objects that it is attached to. Every kind of metadata, from exif data to tags, is a way to valorise an image.

The expansion of metadata seems to indicate that the image economy runs on images which do not represent, but manage reality.

The organisational character of images as traffickers of metadata is largely invisible.

An exception to this rule is 'the annotated Flickr photograph'. A remarkable transformation at flickr.com is presented by comments being positioned on top of the image, being added as a visual layer of text balloons. The *image* turns into a *map*; a diagrammatic collection of comments linked to the image. It is a map of comments, yet at the same time a map of relations between people, images and their cameras. They are organograms: visualising the organisational structure, the image architecture of data, as well as the social relations between Flickr users.

## What is the impact of these network dynamics?

These developments make concrete, in a novel way, what it means to 'look at' an image on the internet. What fascinates me about it is that the image turns into a slice of (social) network production. What you see is a hardworking group of Flickr Pro users inviting others to become a member of their 'Cream of the Crop', 'Nikon Digital', 'Cool Outdoor Pics' or 'AMaZING' pools. People invest their time in writing the-invitation-for-a-pool comment:

[ScurvyMouse](#) says:

This is great! Personally I think it's the net that makes the shot. It helps create that nothingness in the middle and highlights the feeling of inactivity. Think this would be good for the 'negative space' group. <sup>i</sup>

The kind of investment differs, from 'calling a photo a favorite' to setting up a pool and starting a photo community. Still all that happens in and around the image implies work.

With my 3D models I aim to show internal hierarchies in the image, by looking at its 'popular spots'. I try to design the image as a unit of production, and reproduction. Images are permanently (re)produced according to the growing amount of users and tags that are added to it. Comment sections and other metadata categories start to integrate with the image itself. The production and distribution of the image is no longer a preface to the end result, it is part of the image. Definitely, metadata is one of the founding mechanisms behind this transformation.

**mh: You have applied the concept of metadata to an actual drawing in the collection of the Van Abbemuseum. How did you deal with the physicality of the artwork?**

Intrigued by the organisational character of metadata, I was wondering how it can be overlaid on existing image economies, or managerial models that involve images. One of these models is that of the museum. One of the image management models I'm working with is restoration. In particular, I have been working with digital photographs of a drawing by El Lissitzky in the collection of the Van Abbe. This drawing presents an architectural concept. In restoration, artworks, images of artworks, and the role of the restorer are positioned

according to a fixed hierarchy. A digital photograph helps the restorer to update and improve an art piece in order to resemble a state it has previously been in. The photograph is a tool or resource to the artwork. Technically the photograph is the painting's informational parallel: it contains information about its transformation in time. A photograph of a painting could be considered part of the metadata of that painting.

What I find fascinating about (detailed) photographs of artworks – the ones that restorers use to zoom in on an artwork – is that it presents a disappearing object. Through these photos I understood that at every other moment of decay, the painting produces another image of itself. By reversing the work of the restorer, I tried to turn the photograph into another Lissitzky. The question is not only whether this is a copy but also what kind of copy. What does it produce for the museum, what is its value?

I think it is a kind of copy that museums should consider as a way to enter the image production cycle around their collection. Instead of being afraid of a copy being a duplicate, its operational qualities should be considered.

**MH: Do you mean to say that in an image economy based on the dissolution of digital files – where any file may be copied ad infinitum without loss of quality – it makes no sense to maintain this artificial binary between original and derivative as the basis of a property relation?**

Yes. It makes no sense to maintain it. It does make sense to redefine the relation. Imaginary property acknowledges social and technological aspects as possible editorial and critical points of entry into relations such as that of the copy and the original.

When applying the concept of metadata, as a socio-technological structuring device, to an artwork or to a collection, it results in a rearrangement of existing relations. The concept of the copy is limiting from an economical perspective because it devalorizes the original. According to classical economics, the relationship between original and copy is one between an essence and a derivative. From the perspective of metadata, I claim that the distinction between original and copy is redundant since they are inextricably linked. Isn't metadata

another representation of the image it relates to?

Instead of the creation of new images or originals, the focus in the image economy is more on the management, presentation and distribution of copies. My advice to museums would be to benefit from the copy as an operational image.

**MH: What is an operational image?**

KdG: Museums should think about how art exists as an image, and not only how it should be presented as art. Application means to put things into operation. The image of art offers potential to do this. Corporate art collectors acknowledge this or at least make use of it by using art as a visual brand. What is the potential of the image of art for a museum? I think that considering the artwork as an operational image may allow the museum to design new dynamics around the actual work. The museum could produce series of derivative images, itself based on a kind of information and metadata which only the museum possesses. An in-house copy culture would make it possible for museum to connect itself to certain image production cycles outside of the museum.

**MH: Like which?**

The production cycle of art book publishing for example. It is from the museum shop that visitors actually take a piece of the museum home with them, either through books, postcards or keychains. Art historical information of artworks can be found on Wikipedia, but what about a book on the social history of an artwork, describing its popularity index based on its exhibition record. Exhibition material can possibly go beyond general descriptions and take on a status of intermediary between work and viewer.

More fundamentally the image of art as operational image implies a complete reconsideration of the online representation of the museum. The museum's website is a powerful tool and startingpoint for 'a copy' that would attract a different crowd than the crowd that visits the

museum regularly. Besides that, the museums website allows for experimentation with the display of artworks.

Related to online representation, I'm investigating various ways of displaying artworks using a zoom or 3d views that allows artworks to be shown from both front and back for example.

Views on the work that are sometimes impossible within the museum itself.

<sup>i</sup> [www.flickr.com/photos/ende/7521239/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/ende/7521239/)