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To double or diffuse: Art and the mobility of images, ca. 2005

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Around 2005 the image gained a new mobility. Undergirded by digitisation and the large-scale dispersal of digital technologies into everyday life, a series of events marks 2005 as a tipping point for this development. Arguably the most important factor was the implementation of the so-called Web 2.0 in 2004-05 and its inauguration of social media. Facebook and Flickr were founded in 2004 and YouTube in 2005. Commenting on this overall transition 'from the model of the static web page' towards 'a social web model' based on sharing and exchange between multiple users, Tiziana Terranova and Joan Donovan have described it as a 'new topology of distribution of information [...], based in "real" social networks, but also enhanced by casual and algorithmic connections'.[1] With its amplified ability to be copied, shared, and traverse networks at ease the image also became eminently transient, existing 'in a number of states that are potential rather than actual'.[2] Walter Benjamin in his artwork essay had already noted a fundamental correlation between the capacity of an image to be reproduced and circulate and its material and temporal transience, finding that the reproduced image installed a link between 'transitoriness and repeatability'.[3] This link radically tightened with the networked mobility of images installed around 2005.

In what follows, I examine how artists responded aesthetically and affectively to the new order of image mobility and transience when it was still unfolding. For the present decade's younger generation of what some call post-Internet artists, this condition is a given, but not so for artists working

15-20 years ago.[4] How were the emerging platforms and practices for producing and sharing 'content' – and the social and algorithmic networks that underlie them – inscribed in art at the time? By revisiting this watershed moment in art and recent media history from the hindsight of the present, we may discern new patterns and models for how art and artists at the time tackled the amplified mobility of the image.

More specifically, I examine art that takes the moving image as a starting point and is produced within a few years leading up to 2005, wherein low resolution imagery is purposefully deployed to signal the travels of an image through a network. As charted by a number of film and media theorists and commentators, low resolution images have surged in contemporary visual culture alongside the quest for ever more sharp and crisp imagery. This tendency has been discussed in terms that foreground variously the haptic qualities of such imagery, their ruinous or precarious conditions, or their 'poorness', to mention but a few.[5] My own interest here resides in a rather restricted register of low resolution aesthetics, pivoting around the correlation between image reproducibility, mobility, and 'transitoriness', as addressed by Benjamin.[6]

Exploring how this low resolution register manifests itself within the confines of a deliberately narrow window of time, I confer two works: Slater Bradley's video series *Doppelgänger Trilogy* (2001-03) and Seth Price's photographic sculpture *Hostage Video Still with Time Stamp* (2005). Bradley and Price are New York-based and of the same generation, making a comparison viable. Whereas conceptually and aesthetically radically different, both artists in their work draw heavily on images and (pop) cultural forms that are already in wide circulation. Moreover, both came to art world fame around 2005, which signal the broader resonance of their work at the time and make them representative for this moment.

In the works examined, Bradley and Price purposefully employ the aesthetics of media storage formats that, at the very outset, prioritise access over durability, namely (analog) videotape and jpeg respectively. From these works I extract two different models for responding to the amplified condition of image mobility and 'transitoriness' spurred around 2005: one premised on the operation of *doubling*, the other on *diffusion*.[7] Doubling and diffusion are here employed as analytical tools to differentiate between distinct material-technical and networked practices of reproduction and distribution evoked in the works, as well as between the affective charge and sentiments they induce. Along the way, I foreground the formats in which the works'

imagery is (apparently) stored and distributed, since it is ultimately through them that the images gain their mobility. In doing so, I draw on recent scholarship on circulation and distribution of art and media, seeking to add to it concrete models for how this new image mobility was handled artistically when it first emerged.

Poor images, provisional formats, affective intensities

In the last ten years, a series of interrogations of the amplified mobility and transience of the image have been formulated at the intersection of art history and film and media studies. Four of these interrogations particularly inform the conceptual and theoretical framework of this essay, synthesised to grasp the more granular variations between artistic deployments of a low resolution aesthetic around 2005.

Somewhat belatedly yet all the more productively, one intervention focuses specifically on moving image art and foregrounds the distribution practices and models through which such art is circulated and sanctioned. Since the mid-1990s and throughout the first decade of the 21st century, the moving image became fully endorsed by the art world proper, supported by the digitisation of film and video and the turn toward large-scale projections. Erika Balsom and Lucas Hilderbrand have both explored the concrete models through which moving image art is distributed, suspended between the model of the rarefied and singular object that has traditionally dominated the art world, and the multiple copies model of film distribution.[8] Particularly informative for the present study is Balsom's chronicling of how the model of limited-edition copies during the 1990s came to dominate the distribution of moving image art, and Hilderbrand's examination of the unsanctioned distribution practices of both analog and digital video bootleg culture.[9] Also Sven Lütticken has pointed to the unregulated grey zones of moving image art distribution by foregrounding the conflicting and 'spectral' status of what in the art world are generally known as 'viewing copies' – unofficial reproductions that circulate in and beyond the art world apart from the tightly regulated number of limited editions.[10] These studies provide an invaluable backdrop for my inquiry here, since they chart decisive infrastructural and economical parameters, and some of their aesthetic repercussions, for artists working with reproducible media in the year of 2005 and before. Yet

my interest departs from these studies in looking not at the actual distribution practices through which Bradley's and Price's works are sanctioned, but rather strictly at how networked image distribution is aesthetically and affectively imagined in the works themselves.

Nicholas Bourriaud has, in another intervention, foregrounded the 'transitoriness' that ensues from amplified mobility, aiming to extract the aesthetic and epistemological characteristics of the current condition of amplified mobility as well as art's own responses to it. Wide in its scope, Bourriaud has employed the phrase the 'precarious aesthetic regime' to describe art as a function and a critical affirmation of the fundamentally fluid and transient condition of contemporary society; a 'liquid modernism' answering to what Zygmunt Bauman has designated as 'liquid modernity' (2000).[11] For Bourriaud the primary signifier of this condition is the loosening of stable form, resulting instead in a transience of forms. Identifying three distinct patterns of transience, he terms them transcoding, flickering, and blurring. Importantly, for Bourriaud, transience extends beyond the issue of the material duration and the potential immateralisation of the artwork, inscribing itself fundamentally into the very structure of the work. Whereas not writing specifically about images or moving images, Bourriaud's emphasis on transience and art's own reflection of it is congruent with the present inquiry. Contrary to what Bourriaud argues, however, in Bradley's and Price's works, as well as in numerous others from the last 10-15 years, a conceptual interrogation of material duration seems in fact to be a crucial strategy for the articulation of a condition of liquidity and transience.

Material tear and wear is a crucial dimension in a third interrogation – Hito Steyerl's influential concept of 'poor images', which designates precisely the positive correlation between image mobility and the low resolution of concern in this essay.[12] In a much-quoted passage, Steyerl writes:

> A poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. [13]

Frequently it is a multiple-generation copy, which has been 'uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited'.[14] Due to its repeated circulation, the poor image may be degraded and blurred to the point of abstraction. The opacity, obfuscation and illegibility of such imagery is thus an inscription – or an index – of the rate and velocity at which images may be reproduced and distributed, and of the mobility and generative logics they possess. For

Steyerl, the poor image is the 'lumpenproletariat' in a class hierarchy of images 'ranked and valued according to its resolution'. Implied in this socio-economical analogy is not only the lowliness assigned to the poor image, but also a quantitative assessment: despite the ostensible prominence of high definition images in our contemporary visual culture, these are in fact instantly outnumbered by the poor ones that follow in their wake. Thus, for Steyerl, it is the poor image that most defines digital, visual culture. Without fully adopting her Marxist polemic of a class society of images, this essay rests on the dialectics inherent in Steyerl's notion of poor images in probing different reactions to the trade-off between image resolution and mobility at the intersection of analog and digital media culture. Yet this analysis departs notably from Steyerl's account in that it seeks to parse out the aesthetic and affective variability of such imagery rather than seeing them as a uniform 'mass', as implied in her equating of the poor image to the lumpenproletariat.

A less polemic and poetic, and even more materialist, take on the correlation between circulation, transience, and resolution loss is advanced through a fourth interrogation – the notion of format, as put forward by David Joselit and Jonathan Sterne. Probing developments that also took shape in the early 2000s within the art world and digital (audio) technology respectively, Joselit and Sterne both advocate for a perspectival and conceptual shift from medium to format, if on different grounds. For Sterne, foregrounding the format – in his case the MP3 – implies the excavation of underlying, material structures of media that may otherwise be hidden from view; 'to focus on the stuff beneath, beyond, and behind the boxes our media come in'.[15] This, in his view, allows a degree of specificity to historical and aesthetic analysis that the notion of 'medium' does not. Thus, the concept of format allows Sterne to narrow his scope to compression – 'the technique of removing redundant data in a file' which cuts across media – used in the service of 'facilitating greater mobility', as manifested by the MP3 format.[16] Like Steyerl's empowerment of poor images, Sterne thereby troubles any teleological media history that understands technological development as driven by a progressive 'quest for definition, immersion and richness of experience'.[17]

Joselit, on the other hand, finds the notion of format to be more productive for parsing out the defining characteristics of the current condition of mobility for art and images than 'medium'. For him, a 'format' regulates what he refers to as 'image currencies' – the flows, values, and powers of images –

through establishing connections and links between different kinds of entities, such as people, goods, and money. Where the concept of medium in Joselit's understanding designates the singular object as well as the convergence of a given technical support with an aesthetic tradition, 'format' does not come with such (formalist) baggage. Joselit's denunciation of the concept of medium is obviously predicated solely on its art historical use, and does not take into account its genealogy within media theory, nor its recent revisions therein, which his own notion of format in many ways echoes.[18]

For both Sterne and Joselit the difference between format and medium is predominantly one of scale and flexibility, with the concept of medium being seen as more closely tied to hardware (Sterne) and objects (Joselit) and thereby more easily reified than formats.[19] The notion of formats, in contrast, foregrounds the codified yet ultimately 'contingent' (Sterne) and 'often provisional' (Joselit) structures in which sound and image are stored and distributed.[20] Important in this context is that formats thereby modulate the 'force, speed and clarity of images', as understood by Joselit, or in Sterne's terms, that it determines the sensory and aesthetic appearance of its stored content.[21] Without denouncing the concept of medium as Joselit advocates, nor adopting wholesale Sterne's claim for the default fine-graining bestowed to technical-material analysis by accentuating the format, the concept is productive for my purpose here, since it directs attention towards the balance between distribution, storage, and quality of images (and sounds). As such it supplements and fine-tunes Steyerl's conception of poor images by foregrounding the material structures in which such images are embodied, their historical contingency, and the particular aesthetics they emit. Simply put, deploying the concept of format allows us to distinguish between kinds and degrees of poorness and the different affective intensities they may convey.

To double

In Slater Bradley's *Doppelgänger Trilogy*, the correlation between image mobility and transience turns on the operation of doubling, and it is from this operation that the video cycle acquires its affective charge. For the trilogy, Bradley has produced forged film and video recordings from what appear to be live concert performances by three pop and rock icons from the 1980s and 1990s, all of whom have died or lost status: Ian Curtis, lead singer of post-punk band Joy Division; Kurt Cobain, vocalist and guitarist of grunge band

Nirvana, and Michael Jackson.[22] All three stars are played by Benjamin Brock, Bradley's own real-life doppelgänger, who between 2000 and 2012 featured prominently in a number of video works by Bradley.[23] When installed in a gallery space, the works are projected separately but simultaneously in a black box environment. In each video, the imagery is low resolution and heavily degraded, forcefully foregrounding both the material specificity of the media formats in which the imagery (ostensibly) is stored, and the (self-)destruction of the icons the works depict. Whereas the Jackson work evokes the look of Super 8 black-and-white film, the Curtis and Cobain works emulate analog video – Beta and VHS – and the distinct distortions, historical moment, and patterns of use they conjure. In the latter two videos, on which I concentrate in the following, doubling is medially and affectively bound to what Lucas Hildebrand has called 'bootleg aesthetics'.[24]
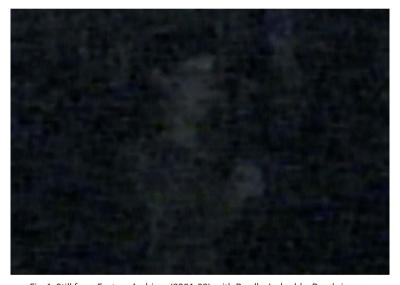

Fig. 1: Still from Factory Archives (2001-02), with Bradley's double, Brock, impersonating Ian Curtis. Copyright Slater B. Bradley. Courtesy of Slater Bradley Studio, Berlin.

Factory Archives (2001-02) takes its title from Joy Division's now defunct record label, Factory Records, and passes itself off as a recording of a live concert performance by the band – potentially illicitly retrieved from the label's own vaults. About three and a half minutes long, the very first image (falsely) announces the tape as a Beta recording, thereby situating the recording somewhere between 1975 and 1985.[25] Following that is a black screen, accompanied by the easily recognisable off-centre rhythms and wavering tune of Joy

Division's song *Decades*. Eventually a human figure vaguely emerges from the dark background of grayscale video. Oscillating in and out of figuration, one can discern an idiosyncratically dancing Curtis-like figure, impersonated by Brock, Bradley's double. Throughout, the image is heavily distorted, seemingly marked by luminance noise and other artefacts that emulate analog video. Merged with these video artefacts however is what appears as the coarse grain of Super 8 film. The effect is ghostly, with Brock-as-Curtis' apparitional presence being simultaneously evoked and erased through the fuzzy image.

Reflecting on his own work, Slater Bradley has pointed to the discrepancy that existed between the immaculate sound recordings of Joy Division, produced by Martin Hannett, and the lack of existing footage of their performances during their short existence (1977-80). As perceived by Bradley, the band 'fell into a sort of technological black hole in terms of video'.[26] Bradley here refers to the fact that the band's performances took place just at the moment of transition between Super 8 film as the medium of choice for amateur recordings and consumer camcorder formats such as Betamax and VHS. Anachronistically merging 'the look of super 8 and tube videos', *Factory Archives* simultaneously exposes and fills this technological gap; in contrast to the pristine quality of the band's sound recordings, the diminishing image serves as a marker of the absence of visual recordings of the band.

Fig. 2: Still from Phantom Release (2003), Brock here impersonating Kurt Cobain. Copyright Slater B. Bradley. Courtesy of Slater Bradley Studio, Berlin.

If *Factory Archives* assumes part of its power from the scarcity of the material it emulates, *Phantom Release* charts a different situation. Whereas *Factory Archives* presents itself as an illicit copy of the unreleased material longed for by the fan, *Phantom Release* comes across as a bootleg video recording of a performance made by a fan. A phantom release is a term for an unauthorised recording of a live performance: 'Like ghosts, phantom releases are thought to exist, yet their existence is unproven.'[27] Nirvana had their breakthrough in 1991, when home camcorders – especially of the compact VHS-c type, as Bradley specifies – proliferated on the consumer market, resulting in 'a ton of amateur footage' of Nirvana's performances.[28] *Phantom Release* presents itself as one such bootleg recording, which would typically be part of the private collection of the individual fan and shared among peers for further reproduction. Through a handheld, restless camera and slow-motion close-ups, we see the characteristic longish, blond hair of Kurt Cobain – also impersonated by Brock – bent over his guitar. Clothes and instruments are exactly replicated, as are gestures and postures, 'so that even the most hardcore fan would not be disappointed by a dumb mistake in detail'.[29] The degraded, colour-saturated image continuously verges on abstraction due to the incessant movement of camera and performer, flaring stage lighting, and pictorial decay, as marked by washed-out colours and horizontal lines.[30]

Two manifestations of doubling are brought forth in Bradley's videos, one grounded on iconic likeness, the other on contact as evoked by the relic.[31] Most obviously, doubling is evoked in the Doppelgänger motif that runs through the work. In its most basic sense, a Doppelgänger is the identical other. For Bradley and Brock, the likeness was so acute that they repeatedly were mistaken for each other. Moreover, helped along by the degraded imagery, Brock's impersonation of Curtis is convincing enough in its semblance to be included in the extensive body of Joy Division artefacts collected by knowledgeable fans. In short, the *Doppelgänger Trilogy* acquires its affective power through iconic likeness, as does the figure of the Doppelgänger in general. But harboured in likeness is always difference. According to Otto Rank, the Doppelgänger was initially both an assurance of immortality and the harbinger of death.[32] In Bradley's work, this duality is forcefully articulated as the tension between presence and absence, inscribed in the oscillation between figuration and abstraction, inscription and erasure that the videos pivot around, as well as in the very subject matter of the work: fan culture and star worshipping.

Generally, the Doppelgänger theme is linked with a 'set of anxieties about the relationship between the self and its image', a relationship into which media technologies, with their capability of reproduction, insert themselves with great force – and even more so when experienced as new.[33] Revisiting German Romantic author E.T.A. Hoffmann's Doppelgänger tales, Andrew Webber has traced how the Doppelgänger appeared in literature and film in the decades after the turn of the 19th century to emblematise the novel mechanisation and mediatisation of the body and its functions, challenging essentialist ideas of identity along the way.[34] Friedrich Kittler too understands the Doppelgänger in relation to the technology and techniques of the film medium specifically, based on its capacity to produce and reproduce what is real and convey it to a 'motorized mirror image'.[35]

> Film doppelgängers film filming itself. They demonstrate what happens to people who are in the line of fire of technological media,

Kittler writes.[36] Transposing Kittler's insight to the early 2000s with Web 2.0 as the new medium, Brock here embodies the role of a medium in a double sense: he is the human intermediary between fan and star, and by the same token, personifies the crucial role played by technological media in this complex relation. Moreover, his shadowy presence as a double – formally expressed in the decayed imagery – serves as a metaphor for what Benjamin called the 'transitoriness' of the reproduced image.

Doubling is implied also on a technical-material level through acts of copying and duplication, which are paramount in the bootleg practices that the work gestures toward. Aesthetically, a bootleg recording is generally of inferior quality compared to industrial and official releases – a case of poor images and sounds from the outset. This inherent poorness is multiplied by subsequent duplication of the sought-after 'collector's item' within a community, thereby enforcing additional resolution loss.[37] Implied in a bootleg aesthetics is thus the transaction between high access and low resolution that for Steyerl defines the poor image, but also the tapes' functions as relics. André Bazin has famously offered an analogy between photography and relics, based on their shared 'transfer of reality from the thing to its reproduction'.[38] Crucial in this transfer is the contact that has taken place between them.[39] Bazin's analogy is emphatically evoked in Bradley's videos, since they turn on the desire that the star's presence is preserved and transferred not only through first-order reproduction but also through multiple generations of subsequent duplications.

Implied in the work's 'bootleg aesthetics' is also a quite specific social structure, given that it serves as an inscription of uses of these treasured tapes; joint acts of 'watching, sharing, and copying the illicit text' carried out within an informal network of peers, as Hilderbrand describes it.[40] As a network-based practice centred on acts of video-sharing, analog bootleg culture may resemble or even foreshadow – in a small-scale, analogue iteration – the file-sharing practices spurred around 2005. However, the bootleg culture summoned by the work is premised on a one-to-one-to-many paradigm, to employ the vocabulary of communication theory and design. A videotape can be copied again and again to produce new copies that in turn may generate new copies, yet the point of departure is nonetheless that one tape produces one copy at a time; in effect, doubling it. This operation contrasts fundamentally with the many-to-many-sharing encouraged by the social networking sites that would make themselves felt soon after Bradley finished his trilogy.

From these entwined manifestations of doubling in Bradley's work emerges an overall sensibility of lamentation, whereby the incipient mobility and transience of the image around 2005 is met with the futile desire to preserve and retain. What the work effectively and affectively demonstrates is that every attempt to record, capture, and preserve the stars through an image in order to get closer, bears the threat of an even further blurring out and distance from the icon. This conundrum is aptly articulated in a plea that Bradley has used as a title for two of his other works: 'Don't let me disappear', taken from a line by Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger's cult novel *The Catcher in the Rye*; it was first used as the title for an artist book of Bradley's photographs published in 2003, and more recently in 2012 as the title of a solo exhibition at Team Gallery in New York, consisting of a single video of that very title. Here Bradley's Doppelgänger Brock is featured as a kind of contemporary iteration of Caulfield: a deeply alienated character aimlessly wandering the streets of New York, observing and touching the built environment and the crowds of the city, yet without engaging persons or things. Neither absorbed into the crowd, nor fully standing out from it, Brock once again impersonates the intermediary between presence and absence, appearance and disappearance.

To diffuse

'In any case, there's no longer such a thing as a copy.' So wrote artist Seth Price in his text 'Was ist los' (2005), offhandedly yet efficiently trumping both material and conceptual art practices modelled on the double.[41] Faced with the amplified mobility of images across platforms and formats, Price neither proclaims the restricted reproduction implied in doubling, nor the retention of images on the move. As demonstrated in his work *Hostage Video Still With Time Stamp* (2005-), he instead offers a model for art production and image reproduction that can best be described as that of diffusion.

The departure point for *Hostage Video Still with Time Stamp* is a jpeg image of the decapitated head of American Jewish businessman Nicholas Berg, who was executed by al-Qaeda in 2004. It is taken from a Jihadist propaganda video released on the internet shortly after Berg's body was found. By starting off from a jpeg file, Price's work makes the image transience wedded to mobility a fundamental structure in his work. Like the analog video formats evoked by Bradley, the digital jpeg is from the outset a lossy format that prioritises the reduction of file size for easy storage and circulation over high resolution. Through compression, the jpeg balances 'precision and detail, which entails huge and slow files, against the need to save time and space via the elimination of redundant data and data that is not detectable to the human eye'.[42] In the vernacular language of digital visual culture, jpeg compression has come to testify to the new order of digital storage and dissemination, as pointed out by Ingrid Hoelzl and Remi Marie.[43] Price exploits the jpeg format's inherent transaction between access and quality further, as he runs the already compressed image through multiple cycles of downloading, uploading, resizing, and scaling. In doing so, he brings the pixilation associated with web images to the forefront of the work. Like Bradley, Price in short deliberately subjects an already degraded image to a process that furthers its deresolution.

Fig. 3: Seth Price, Hostage Video Still with Time Stamp, 2008, screen-print ink on polyester film, grommets, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York.

Heavily pixilated and abstracted, in *Hostage Video Still with Time Stamp*, the resulting image is screen-printed in jet black on a clear polyester film, known as Mylar. Price himself has described the material as one 'which folded, crumpled, and slumped'.[44] The polyester roll may, according to Price's instructions, be reinstalled in any configuration using the various existing eyelets, with the precondition that it is mounted to be topographically distorted. From no vantage point should it be legible as a flat picture. Such a crumbling necessarily intensifies the already compromised legibility of the degraded image and gives it a spatial and physical manifestation. Yet, this is not necessarily thereby an attempt to restore a lost materiality to an immaterial image. Instead, it can be seen as 'spatial metaphor for the ostensibly "immaterial" traffic of images online', as Joselit writes of this work, as 'though successive screen views had piled up continuously like a disorderly comic strip rather than being constantly "refreshed"'.[45] Moreover, Price's instruction that the work can take on any configuration also serves to inscribe a fundamental instability of spatial and visual form – formlessness, as Bourriaud would have it – into the very structure of the work, now at the level of the otherwise 'durable' and stable material of polyester film.

As in Bradley's work, a reflection is produced here between human death and material degradation. However, whereas for Bradley the longing for and

identification with the deceased star is a driving force in this relation, human death in Price's work is treated seemingly affectless, in spite of the provocative and grisly content of the image. Updating (post-)Minimalist artist Richard Serra's famous list of verbs (1967-68) – 'to roll, to create, to fold…' – to art produced within the parameters of networked, digital media, Joselit has written of Price's work in general that his 'project has less to do with what he represents […] and more to do with the (transitive) actions to which he subjects his content'.[46] In effect, Price's interest in the 'hostage video still' lies as much in quantitative acts of viewings and downloads as in its qualitative content. Whereas in Bradley's work the alleged scarcity of the video recordings is figured as a drive for their reproduction among peers, the opposite is the case in Price's work: the hostage video still is copied, compressed, decompressed, and printed because it already circulates widely. Indeed, it is this very logic that may be grasped by conceiving of Price's work as operations of diffusion.

As listed in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, as a verb, 'diffusion' is defined as: 'to pour or send forth as from a centre of dispersion; to spread abroad over a surface, or through a space or region; to spread widely, shed abroad; disperse, disseminate'.[47] As an adjective, we get the following list of synonyms: 'confused, distracted, perplexed; indistinct, vague, obscure, doubtful, uncertain'.[48] Significantly, diffusion thus refers both to the act of spreading widely and the quality of uncertainty and lack of distinction. Whereas there is not a default causal relationship between the verb and adjective form of the term, such a relationship is indeed defining for *Hostage Video Still* and the rest of Price's Mylar works. Like the wide dispersal of an image may cause its indistinct, vague, or 'poor' appearance, as Steyerl has reminded us, so too may its indistinctness cause its further dispersal.

Price's own essay 'Dispersion', published in its earliest forms in 2002 as a pdf, has in itself become a widely distributed and cited source for thinking on the circulation of imagery and text.[49] Taking a lesson from the art world's subsuming of conceptual art into documentation and discourse, Price here proposes that the most productive route for art production in the 21st century is by creating work that can vanish into the structures of mass distribution. For Price, this has included an output across a range of media and platforms, including book and music publishing, video, sculptural work, and online-based projects. Dispersion refers to the spatiotemporal spreading of something and is in this sense synonymous to diffusion. Yet the latter term adds the qualities of indistinctness, instability, and vagueness, which as we

have seen are critical for Price's Mylar work, and for much of his work based on recorded imagery. Implied in both terms, however, is the promise of disappearance.

Where Bradley pleads us not to let him disappear, Price has encouraged the opposite. His publication 'How to disappear in America' (2008) is an instruction-manual for disappearance. Mostly appropriated from an anonymous online source, the text is 'written in the paranoiac and antiestablishment tone of a 1970s' anarchist manual or a 90's how-to Internet text file', as succinctly described by one critic.[50] Like most of Price's texts, it exists both as a pdf freely distributed from Price's website and as a published chapbook. Found online, it is put back in networked circulation in a slightly different packaging; a case of mass distribution, indeed. In contrast to Bradley, the sensibility invoked by *Hostage Video Still with Time Stamp*, and Price's oeuvre in general, is that of full immersion, whereby the amplified mobility of images and information is conceived as a potentially liberatory condition. Crucially, the liberatory promise conjured by Price's work lies not in an idea of 'free' or democratic circulation of images enabled by its networked exchange, a fantasy that was much courted in the spheres of art and new media around 2005. Rather it is found in the possibility for an image – or person– to go with the flow so as to become one with it; to acquire the degree of indistinction that allows it to blend in and, in effect, diffuse.

To double and diffuse

Based on the previous discussion, what the models of doubling and diffusion allow us to see is how, in a strand of art in the early 21st century, distinct medial processes of reproduction and distribution are aligned with much wider sets of affective, social, and cultural sentiments and practices. In Bradley's work, doubling is correlated with analog media culture, fan perspective, a peer community, presence effects, and lamentation. In Price's work, in contrast, diffusion is wedded to digital media culture, the user, the (online) commons, disappearance, and an embrace of the new condition of image mobility. Indeed, these opposing responses to the correlation between image mobility and transitoriness (to employ Benjamin's curious phrase) can be seen to reflect two different stages in what Joselit has identified as a shift from the 'singular artwork' to what he designates as 'populations of images'; images that are 'everywhere at once', typified by the jpeg file reformatted by

Price.[51] Ultimately, then, these two models amount to two divergent conceptions of the place of the artwork within the accelerated image flow of the 21st century.

Yet, shared by the works of Bradley and Price is a fundamental precondition that – if emulated through radically different artistic strategies – may serve as a provisional sketch for some of the overriding artistic concerns evoked by the fundamental transitoriness of images installed around 2005. Crucial is their foregrounding of the duration and sustainability of degraded, recorded imagery – not in spite of their contingent material situation (i.e. their fundamentally unstable formats), but rather because of it. Thereby the low resolution of the imagery in question can be refunctioned as marking not only their past circulation and dispersion, but also their future travels. The material decay of the recorded imagery, resulting from their passing through generations of copies, cycles of compressions, and format-shiftings, attest thus not simply to their eventual disappearance but as much to their survival through their social use. In fact, this may be one of the characterising paradoxes of both paths of art identified here: that the transient condition of images, emblematised here in lossy formats and low resolution, is ultimately what secures their sustainability. Either through doubling and holding on, or by diffusion and letting go.

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Notes

[1]   Terranova & Donovan 2013, p. 297.

[2]   Lister 2013, p. 8.

[3]   Benjamin 2008, p. 23.

[4]   The debated term 'post-internet art' has increasingly been employed by curators and critics to art by a younger generation of artists that take the internet and online life as a basic condition of contemporary life. Such work typically explores new understandings of materiality, social ramifications of networked structures, and new conditions for circulation of images and objects.

[5]   See for example Marks 2000 and 2002; Habib 2011; Fetveit 2015; Steyerl 2009, 2012; Casetti & Somaini 2013.

[6]   Steyerl 2012.

[7]   I borrow the term 'affective intensity' from Jonathan Sterne, who connects it specifically to low definition formats, with the MP3 as a case in point. Sterne 2012, p. 5.

[8]   Balsom 2017; Hilderbrand 2012.

[9]   Balsom 2013; Hilderbrand 2004, 2009.

[10] Lütticken 2016. See also Ross 2013 for a discussion of the 'spreadability' of the sounds and images of video art into and beyond its exhibition environment.

[11] Bourriaud 2009. For a perceptive discussion of how the notion of precariousness has been employed by Bourriaud and other theorists to grasp the uncertain and unstable condition of both art and human life in the 21st century, see Fetveit 2015.

[12] Steyerl 2012, p. 32.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Sterne 2012, p. 11. As pointed out by Lev Manovich, Sterne's conceptual and analytic intervention at the level of format can be seen as part of a broader turn towards media materialism, including platform and software studies, media archaeology, and studies of infrastructure. Manovich 2013, p. 12.

[16] Sterne 2012, pp. 2, 5. As Sterne explains, the threshold for what is considered 'redundant' is always context-dependent, but has been standardised through the technique of 'perceptual coding'. Sterne 2012, pp. 92-148.

[17] Sterne 2012, pp. 3-5.

[18] I am thinking here particularly of the recent elemental and environmental turn in media theory. See for example recent work by W.J.T. Mitchell (2012; 2013), Antonio Somaini (2016) and John Durham Peters (2015), all for whom 'medium' is as much the environment in which objects, 'technical supports', and hardware finds themselves and engage, as the technical apparatuses themselves.

[19] Their concept of format is differently scaled, since Joselit finds medium to be a subset of format, whereas Sterne sees it the opposite way, stating that a format 'specifies the protocols by which a medium will operate'. Joselit 2013, pp. 55-60; Sterne 2012, p. 8.

[20] Sterne 2012, p. 8; Joselit 2013, p. 52. The degree of provisionality accorded to formats is however dependent on the point of comparison. Whereas VHS may seem provisional compared to painting, within the realm of computational media file formats are in fact far more stable than many other elements, as noted by Lev Manovich (2013, p. 216).

[21] Joselit 2013, p. 55; Sterne 2012, p. 15.

[22] Jackson was still alive at the time of production, but a struggling star; a target for the tabloid press, the subject of financial problems, and accused of child abuse.

[23] Bradley has recounted how his friends and aquaintances in New York repeatedly would mistake Brock for Bradley. The artist marked the end of his decade-long Doppelgänger-project in 2012, by the symbolic killing of Brock in the video *Dead Ringer*. See Bradley 2005; Rappolt 2010.

[24] Hilderbrand 2004, pp. 56-91.

[25] Sony introduced the Betamax format to the consumer market in 1975, and ceased production of Betamax recorders in 2002, and of videocassette tapes in 2016. By most, however, 'Beta' was assumed defunct already by the late 1980s, after it lost the so-called 'format war' to the rival VHS format developed by JVC.

[26] Bradley 2005, p. 108.

[27] Ibid., p. 109.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Bradley quoted in Rappolt 2012, p. 46.

[30] The work was first shot on Super 8 film, and subsequently transferred to video and subjected to further distortions.

[31] I take my cue for this pairing of icon and relic from Francesco Casetti's evocative discussion of contemporary cinephilia and André Bazin's ontology of photography according to the two paths provided by likeness and contact respectively. Casetti 2015, pp. 43-67.

[32] Tucker 1971, p. xvi.

[33] Bode 2005, unpaginated.

[34] Webber 2012, p. 162.

[35] Kittler 1999, p. 149.

[36] Ibid.

[37] For an illuminating study of the aesthetic and legal repercussions of analog video bootlegging culture, see Hilderbrand 2009.

[38] Bazin 2005, p. 14.

[39] It is particularly Bazin's idea of contact that has given rise to the subsequent readings of Bazin as a theorist of the index.

[40] Hilderbrand 2004, p. 58.

[41] Price 2005.

[42] Hoelzl & Marie 2014, p. 84. For an instructive discussion of the technicality of jpeg compression, see their article 'CODEC: On Thomas Ruff's JPEGs' (2014).

[43] Ibid.

[44] Price 2015, p. 50. Price calls his series of photographic installations in this material by the common designation Mylar Crumbles.

[45] Joselit 2011, p. 84.

[46] Ibid., p. 86.

[47] OED 1989, p. 644.

[48] Ibid., p. 643.

[49] Price 2002.

[50] Blagojevic 2016.

[51] Joselit 2013, p. 34.