

The Supermarket of Images: A conversation with curators Peter Szendy, Emmanuel Alloa, and Marta Ponsa

NECSUS 9 (2), Autumn 2020: 399–411

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/the-supermarket-of-images-a-conversation-with-curators-peter-szendy-emmanuel-alloa-and-marta-ponsa/>

Keywords: art, exhibition review, method, review

The exhibition *Le Supermarché des images* (*The Supermarket of Images*, Jeu de Paume, Paris, 11 February – 16 March 2020) explores the economy of images without reducing it to the funding systems of the production of images. Marta Gili, the former director of Jeu de Paume read Peter Szendy's essay *Le Supermarché du visible. Essai d'économie*, published in 2017 (*The Supermarket of the Visible. Towards a General Economy of Images*, 2019), and asked him to curate an exhibition around his concept of 'iconomy', a portmanteau that combines 'icon' (image) and 'economy'. The associate curators are Emmanuel Alloa (University of Fribourg, Switzerland) who published *BildÖkonomie. Haushalten mit Sichtbarkeiten* (*ImageEconomy. Households of Visibility*, 2013) in collaboration with Francesca Falk; and Marta Ponsa, head of artistic projects and cultural action at Jeu de Paume.

The guiding principle of the exhibition, through its five sections (Stocks, Raw Materials, Work, Values, Exchanges), would be that artworks and exhibitions can materialise the apparent fluidity and immediacy of seemingly dematerialised exchanges of information, data, and goods. This following conversation about the exhibition took place between the curators and writer Claire Salles.

Claire Salles: You proposed an exhibition about images as commodities and the consumption of images without exploring the mechanisms of production of this commodity (galleries, fairs, museums, sponsorship by private firms, exhibitions themselves). Could you describe the thinking paths and the readings that led you to consider iconomy beyond the art market?

Marta Ponsa: We focused on the economic life of images, on their production, storage, distribution, exchange, and consumption. Though some pieces in *Le Supermarché des images* hint towards the question of value and the art market (Sophie Calle, Wilfredo Prieto, Yves Klein), we considered that this subject would deserve a show of its own, dealing with sponsors, patrons, public and private funding, collectors, galleries, museums, and so on. Jeu de Paume, an arts center dedicated to photography and visual arts, does not have a permanent collection. Exhibitions are temporary and they often circulate afterwards, so Peter's reflections on iconomy were pivotal to think about our role and function as a cultural institution working with artists and producing images.

Salles: But you did not stop at exploring the monetarisation of images by cultural institutions.

Emmanuel Alloa: Indeed, the focus was not on art but on images and their peculiar economy. Restricting the domain of images to artistic images would mean to leave out the vast infinity of visualities that surround us on a daily basis and that were all too often left out by art history and criticism, but which finally come into focus thanks to visual studies. The exhibition gathered about 40 different artistic propositions reflecting this expanded domain of images. Following Peter's conceptual premise, we tried investigating this twofold aspect: how to represent economic processes that often escape our mind, and how to think about the image from an economic standpoint. In short, how images have become a new form of capital.

Peter Szendy: As an exploration of our contemporary iconomy, the show, like the essay that was its point of departure, is certainly not limited in its scope to the restricted visual economy of the art market; indeed, it aims at capturing the present-day effects of what we could call, thinking of Georges Bataille, a *general iconomy* (*La Part Maudite. Essai d'économie générale*, 1949). The art market relies on an economy of scarcity (the whole point of collecting, be it private or public) whereas the global circulation of images, for example on social media, faces us with the problem of an unprecedented overflow. It is an economy of overabundance or waste. Hence the importance of the environmental aspects that were presented in the show and then developed last June during an online conference, *Towards an Ecology of Images*, as the show was about to be dismantled.



Fig. 1: Evan Roth, *Since You Were Born*, 2019-2020, installation, printed images on vinyl.
© Jeu de Paume 2020, photo François Laugenie.

Salles: Some reviewers of the exhibition said they experienced difficulty to understand the artworks and their gathering in the exhibition, which was also perceived as a quality. For instance, *Telerama* wrote: 'Here, there is no question of "eating up" visual material [*bouffer du visuel*] without realizing it.' Did you reflect upon the idea that the artworks and the exhibition necessitate time and focus, whilst we are lacking time in the economy of attention in which images play such a crucial role nowadays? Was it a way, precisely by displaying images that cannot be captured in a second, to disturb and perhaps

subvert the usual distracted and superficial attention we pay to images because we are overstimulated? One can think about Jean-Jacques Wunenburger's analysis about the contemporary iconosphere which is so intense, fast, and repetitive that it induces hectic consumption of images that differ less and less from any commodity (*Philosophie des images*, 2001; *La vie des images*, 2002).

Ponsa: We paid close attention to the display and scenography of the works in each section in order to make room for the coexistence of various media (objects, installations, photography, videos, films). Every piece needs a specific duration to be perceived, especially videos. We also included a live performance during the first weeks of the show. There were multiple temporalities of perception involved. The architecture of Jeu de Paume induces that the basement rooms remain fairly independent. This is why we choose to install two complex projects that specifically require time: the film project on *Capital* by Sergei Eisenstein and Hito Steyerl's *Duty Free Art* installation (2015). Both projects require time and setting a specific area of the show aside for these two pieces allowed us to create a rhythm in the exhibition, like a musical score. In the exhibition rooms, we were sometimes overstimulated – as we are in our daily life – but visitors could manage their time differently, looking at the works, reading the leaflet, taking pictures with their telephones.

Szendy: As Marta says, it was important to let the works breathe according to their own rhythm. Indeed, after we worked for a long time with reproductions, sketches, and models, after we tried to imagine what the show would really look or feel like – physically – in the various exhibition rooms of Jeu de Paume, one of the happy surprises during the days preceding the opening was that nothing seemed overcrowded or crammed. I realise that this might sound contradictory since the exhibition is precisely about the overcrowded or crammed quality of our 'image-space' (to use Benjamin's expression from his *Arcades Project*) as we experience it today. Let's say that, in our idea, it was important to let each work thematise this overflowing of images in its own way: the most striking example is Evan Roth's *Since You Were Born*, an installation that required the whole surface of the Jeu de Paume entry hall to be covered with images accumulated in the cache memory of the artist's computer. Also, the interior designers for the exhibition (the architectural studio Martinez Barat Lafore) emphasised the circulation of the gaze between the works by building half-open walls that also evoked (discretely) the shelves in a supermarket. I think that the difficulty some visitors experienced might

have been the result of a deliberate choice we made: we didn't want to use the various works as mere examples or illustrations. Of course, they were subsumed under the headings of the five parts of the show, but we were very eager not to let the curatorial discourse engulf their presence and radiance, at the cost of creating some turbulence for visitors. Isn't it the role of a thematic exhibition to instill doubts rather than certainties?

Salles: To freeze in a museum images that flow seemed to be an assumed paradox of the exhibition, in order to make apparent what we no longer see when the images circulate. But the exhibition had to close after only a month due to the sanitary precautions taken to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. On the Jeu de Paume website, besides video interviews with some of the artists present in the exhibition, internet users could enjoy [a 3D virtual visit](#) produced by Artview. It was not planned, but the exhibition became a flux and produced an image of itself. Was it possible to avoid falling into the very logic of commodification that you were trying to highlight by setting up the physical exhibition at Jeu de Paume?

Ponsa: Exactly, a virtual visit does not allow for the same experience. We hadn't planned to create a 3D visit but it is interesting as an archival device and it allows for interaction with the artworks and free movement around the exhibition rooms. Moreover, our virtual visit offers some full-length video works thanks to the generosity of the artists as well as additional content, such as the artists' comments, according to common practice in online video platforms. I was even asked to lead online visits to the show for groups of people who were simultaneously connected. To me, it was almost like a *mise en abyme*. In this way, I still had the possibility of discussing the exhibition with the visitors and engaging in interesting dialogues with them (especially with those who had seen the show before), but there were also many limitations. The visual element is not enough. Other senses are required to *feel* a show, or at least a classical show located in a physical space. If in the future we were to conceive online shows, the selection of works would have to change, not to speak about the meaning of an exhibition as a historical and cultural device. This is certainly a path to explore.

Alloa: There is of course a true paradox here, as the exhibition complex was also meant to create a certain distance towards everyday modes of image consumption, not the least through the scenography created by the architects of MBL, which aimed at creating both immersive spaces but also glimpses of what happens behind the scenes, in the machine room of our all-too neat and flat screen surfaces. This spatial effect is lost, needless to say, but if we try to

set apart the frustration that the show couldn't reopen, the idea that it allows people to connect virtually from afar, and even in the future, is very much consistent with some of the basic tenets of the exhibition.

Szendy: For the show, the first consequence of the pandemic and the lockdown was that the exhibition rooms became all of a sudden empty – that is, empty of people, leaving only the works, the images, and their conversations, their exchanges between themselves. I kept fantasising about what could happen between images when there is no one to watch them. It reminded me of this song sung by Yves Montand in 1984, *Lettre anonyme à Monsieur le Conservateur du Musée du Louvre* (Anonymous Letter to the Curator of the Louvre Museum); the lyrics (by David McNeil) tell a similar story: 'Il se passe des choses bizarres au Louvre / Avant que les grilles ne s'ouvrent' (There are strange things going on in the Louvre / Before the gates open). Exactly like Mona Lisa who, in Montand's song, leaves Leonardo's painting and goes for dinner, I thought that in our show, for example, Richard Serra's *Hand Catching Lead* might leave its video monitor and try to grab Máximo Gonzales' glove woven with discarded pieces of paper used to print banknotes (*Guante blanco* [White Gloves]). I like to think of the virtual visit, with its empty rooms, not as a substitute for a lost presence, but rather as enhancing this fantasised experience of a circulation of the images between themselves. After all, this is also what the notion of iconomy is about.

Salles: The point of the exhibition is clear: the iconomy is the aesthetic regime of the globalised market economy. How did you manage not to fall in the traps of such a strong and necessary statement, that is, not to ignore resistances and negotiations, alternative discourses and practices?

Alloa: If by aesthetic regime you mean that by virtue of the strange egalitarian impulse of the algorithm, everything can be encoded, in theory this would entail that anyone and anything may now be depicted and gain access to visibility. However, we are seeing that the technological protocols are also strongly standardising all there is to be seen. Some of the artworks in the exhibit belong to activism and tactical media, which rather than fighting these data highways open up new venues to use them differently, by disrupting their flows and creating new, unexpected connections. Maybe some of us still remember the Indymedia battle-cry from the early 2000s: *don't fight the media, be the media!* Rather than a mere Luddite destruction of the machines or some sort of revamped iconoclasm of the products of the so-called Western spectacle, these new artistic practices pave the way for an informed and experimental practice of aesthetic disobedience. In my own contribution to the

catalogue ('Abstracting', pp. 73-94), I was stressing that the enemies of the spectacle, from Plato through Rousseau and Debord, were also deeply theatrical and invented spectacular rhetoric in their critique of spectacle. Beyond new calls for media abstention, 'disconnect days', and image asceticism, which are always tainted with some hypocrisy, I think we can find in the artistic avantgardes hints as how to move from predatory exploitations towards more experimental and yet very serious engagements with the world that surrounds us. The analytic diagrams by Kazimir Malevich from the 1920s, which we were able to display at the beginning of the show, indicate this ambivalence: there is an 'extractivist' tendency in every image, which is to make the most out of its limited pictorial resources; and yet, in its capacity of abstraction, and of taking a step back from what is immediately given, there is also an infinite promise, that of the detour, of a non-instrumental relationship towards what we are faced with, and of a play of imagination. I show in my contribution featured in the catalogue that Malevich himself dubbed this a new image 'economy', productive in its unproductivity, and at this very point, which is not devoid of theological ruminations, he is surprisingly close to Bataille's idea of a general economy of *dépense* that you mentioned a little earlier, Peter.

Szendy: To my eyes, the most important challenge was precisely to show the reverse side, the other side of the globalised iconomy: what I call (in the introductory essay I wrote for the catalogue) the 'shadow iconomies' that allow images to access visibility, to surface into the visible, so to speak. One of the most powerful works on display is Martin Le Chevallier's video, *Click-workers*: we hear the autobiographical narratives of female workers who click or do 'likes' 24/7 in offshore click-farms in order to produce visibility as one used to produce spare parts on an assembly line. Many links could be traced to Crary's observations in his book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013). But there are other strategies of resistance too, for example when Martin Le Chevallier appropriates the economies of waste and creates an ironic series of photographic homages to the inventors of planned obsolescence (the founder of Ikea, the inventor of disposable plastic cups): these photographs will self-destruct at an unforeseeable moment, either during the show (it happened) or afterwards. By 'shadow iconomies', I also mean the infrastructures that make the circulation of images possible while remaining themselves invisible, hidden underneath. I am thinking in particular about the undersea cables that carry the disassembled digital fragments of the visual traffic of the Earth. We were able to show a large-scale photograph of

these cables by Trevor Paglen (*NSA-Tapped Undersea Cables, North Pacific Ocean*, 2016). It was displayed on one of the walls of *Pirate Cinema*, an installation by the collective disnovation.org that gathers in real-time the bits and chunks of digital movie files as they circulate on peer-to-peer exchange networks. Paglen's sober and sobering photograph appears as the repressed precondition (the planetary plugging, so to speak) necessitated by the very immediacy of image-sharing. In the book that triggered the exhibition project, in *Le Supermarché du visible*, I described these infrastructures as the 'road networks of the visible' (*voiries du visible*), an idea that can be found, though differently, already in Warburg (for a start, you can refer to the introduction he wrote in 1929 for the *Atlas Mnemosyne*). They very often follow paths that have been cleared during the colonial era: cables laid for the internet land where telegraph cables used to land, in a striking infrastructural overlap between colonialism and neocolonialism. One of the most powerful visualisations of the economic exploitation involved in the laying of internet cables is offered by Rithy Panh's moving documentary *The Land of the Wandering Souls* (2000). The barefoot workers who dig the soil in Cambodia are paid a pittance and their families are condemned to beg for food while they build the foundations for the visual highways across continents.



Fig. 2: Trevor Paglen, *NSA-Tapped Undersea Cables, North Pacific Ocean*, 2016, C-Print, 121.9 × 182.9 cm. © Jeu de Paume 2020, photo François Laugenie.

Salles: Let me try to elaborate a little more on this. You insist a lot on the hidden backsides of the huge flux of images that characterises the now globalised regime of visibility. Spectators are invited to become aware of the ecological, geopolitical, and social implications of the production, circulation, and storage of images. Do you consider that the art world should strive for economically and ecologically virtuous circuits of the production of works of arts and exhibitions?

Alloa: Indeed, it is finally dawning on us that the digital images never were immaterial. The photo taken distractedly with the smartphone immediately travels to a satellite above the atmosphere, and is redirected to a huge data server stored in the desert of Nevada, which requires sheer infinite cooling energy, before being resent to your friend who might be living down the street via a submarine cable crossing the Atlantic, such as in Trevor Paglen's series *Submarine Cables* which were included in the expo. Digitality has immense costs – economic, technological, but also ecological. According to some figures, the exponentially rising carbon footprint of digital communication might soon exceed the CO₂ emissions of the aviation industry (currently 4% of the global greenhouse gas emissions). An oeuvre such as that by Geraldine Juárez for *Le Supermarché des images* highlights all these implications. Before even starting to discuss what a virtuous circuit of production, as you call it, would entail, we need to become aware of all these far-reaching entanglements. In a way, we are at a similar situation as people were in Late Antiquity: they realised that they had to start to think globally, in terms of an *oikoumene* (a truly untranslatable word), which entailed a new art of living in a global household which extended much further than hitherto imagined. The central issue of ecology today is that of coexistence: how to ensure that beings can coexist, without one (the human animal) threatening the very conditions of existence of all the other ones. Here is where images can play an important role in visualising the interconnectedness. This was certainly one of the striking experiences of the lockdown: while humanity (or at least large parts of the hyper-industrial Global North) was asked to stay home, images from all over the world kept pouring into living rooms, signaling a proximity in spite of the distance. *Stay in touch* is the watchword, while tactility is simultaneously reduced to the mere contact of a cold screen. I cannot help but think about Taysir Batniji's *Disruptions* series (2015-2017), on the attempts to connect to his mother in the Gaza strip during the bombings, with the pixelated images of her face embodying something both extremely tangible and remote at once.

Szendy: The global iconomy has huge environmental consequences, indeed. Not only in terms of carbon footprint, but also because of the use of many polluting agents necessary for the production of screens or other essential parts. Digital visibility fuels the reckless exploitation of deep sea beds, where some of the metals used for computer elements are found. To my knowledge, Susan Sontag was the first, in 1977, to consider an ‘ecology of images’, though she says very little about it (the expression occurs in the last paragraph of her book *On Photography*). When she takes up the idea again in 2003 (in her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*), she very pessimistically states that ‘there isn’t going to be an ecology of images’, alluding this time to what we would call today an ‘ecology of attention’: we are being ‘flooded’, she says, with images meant to elicit indignant reactions, and as a result we are ‘going numb’. After Sontag, we are only beginning to think what an ecology of images could be and mean. Some of the works in the show strongly gesture in this direction. In addition to Geraldine Juárez’s ice molds of storage devices that you already mentioned, Emmanuel, there are Andreï Molodkin’s oil-filled tubes (an allegory, so to speak, of the iconomy’s dependence on fossil fuels) or Minerva Cuevas’ seascapes dripping with crude oil.



Fig. 3: Minerva Cuevas, *Horizon II*, 2016, tar-soaked oil on canvas, 55 × 71 cm. © Jeu de Paume 2020, photo François Laugenie.

Ponsa: Not only the production of art but all aspects of our lives (agri-food, livestock, clothes, energy resources, means of transportation, biotechnologies) should take into account the ecological impact of every human decision. As Peter and Emmanuel said, when we make and share images with our iPhones, when we decide to book a flight for tourism or to dress with a T-shirt made in the PRC, we make a decision that has an ecological impact on our world. Trevor Paglen's, Minerva Cuevas', and Geraldine Juarez's artistic projects point out some of the traces and consequences of human actions on seabeds, on the Gulf of Mexico, and on Polar regions. Mankind overpopulates the Earth and has more and more demands. Our actions are overlapping and we have a responsibility for this. The major challenge of the future lies in the compatibility of production and circulation (of images, goods, energy) with ecological sustainability. It would be an interesting question to develop if our physical exhibition travels out of France, which is not yet certain. Assessing the environmental costs of the shipment would become an item to think about as a part of the project together with the recycling of materials or the energy supplies.

Salles: The exhibition also emphasises, in the wake of Trevor Paglen, that most images are produced by machines for machines, without being seen by humans at all, or just for a few seconds. Images now mainly exist as data (to be aggregated and often sold). What could be the ecological and anthropofugal effects of a better comprehension of this 'machine vision', as in Somaini and Leroy's researches, or in Albuquerque's experimental film practice?

Alloa: There is certainly a sort of narcissistic blow, as Freud would call it, upon discovering that the largest part of image production was never meant for any human beholder. The 'contemplative' paradigm in our understanding of images has made us blind for the many operative images that have a straightforward instrumental use, and which shouldn't be downplayed, as they are important tools for visualising and understanding the world (while of course they can also be used as power instruments for surveillance and control). Personally, I am somewhat skeptical however when it comes to the de-anthropocentering effects of machine vision: isn't applying the notion of vision to a machine the most sublime form of anthropomorphism, which never allows us to understand that other devices use non-perceptual ways to register and communicate about the world?

Szendy: We are witnessing a generalisation of what were once called *acheiropoietic* images (literally: images 'not-made-by-hands', the classical examples of which can be found in the Shroud of Turin or the Veil of Veronica,

i.e. Christian images of divine origin). These new images, as they are massively produced by today's machines, seem to break completely with the anthropocentric notion that visual artifacts are meant to be gazed at by beholders in flesh and blood. For me, their most thought-provoking consequence is that they force us to reconsider imageness or imageity on an unheard-of scale. Images meant for the human gaze or produced by human hands are reframed as being only a very small portion of the pictorial spectrum. But from the perspective of an ecology of images, something more is at stake: by putting anthropocentric iconicity in a new, decentered perspective, machine vision also asks us to reconsider, on the other end of the spectrum, the challenge that vegetal or animal images can represent. As I see it, this opens new avenues for the old question of mimicry, to which Roger Caillois dedicated wonderful meditations, trying to untie mimetic practices from their often unproven usefulness as a deterrent or a concealment. Mimicry is an acheiropoietic image production. In the end, as I tried to argue in my presentation for our [online conference](#), the central question in the general iconomy that I have in mind is the fascinating time-scale of the various modes of image production and consumption: from the milliseconds of machine vision to the eons required by the evolution of species in order to develop a certain visual pattern that is meant for no one in particular.

Ponsa: In the notion of image, it is crucial for me to include imagination as the possibility of creating a mental picture or an idea to be projected in the future. Will machines ever be able to see and project themselves in the future? Will they ever be able to ask questions, including questions about the possibilities of technology? For the moment, even if there are interesting artistic projects involving image generation by machine learning and AI (think of Trevor Paglen's *Shoshone Falls*, presented in the show, or Max de Esteban's recent *A Forest*), it seems to me that human presence remains at the forefront of artistic practices dedicated to the creation of images. They are ultimately created by artists. Machines produce images for other uses. And of course, since it is often for purposes of military or police control that they produce them, there is a question of responsibility for putting these images in circulation.

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