

*Authorship, Collaboration, Computation?
Into the Realm of Similar Images*

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Photographers may think they are bringing their own aesthetic, epistemological or political criteria to bear. They may set out to take artistic, scientific or political images for which the camera is only a means to an end. But what appear to be their criteria for going beyond the camera nevertheless remain subordinate to the camera's program.

(Vilém Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography).

I feel like everyone sort of has the same photos.

(Hannah, respondent in a 2008 Facebook study).

In 2011, Google added a 'search by image' feature to its suite of search products. Capitalising on advances in computer recognition, the tool enabled users to find images with similar 'visual fingerprints' spread across the web. On Google's search blog, Johanna Wright, Director of Search Product Management, described its value as follows: 'You might have an old vacation photo, but forgot the name of that beautiful beach. Typing [guy on a rocky path on a cliff with an island behind him] isn't exactly specific enough to help find your answer. So when words aren't as descriptive as the image, you can now search using the image itself' (Google: Inside Search). Being able to search 'visually' was the latest method through which one might overcome the fallibility of human

memory in an age of accelerating data. Its launch presented Google as an indispensable aide, collaborator and confidante for your digital lifestyle. Or, as Google VP Marisa Meyer phrased it: ‘Your best friend with instant access to all the world’s facts and a photographic memory of everything you’ve seen and know’ (Google: Official Blog).

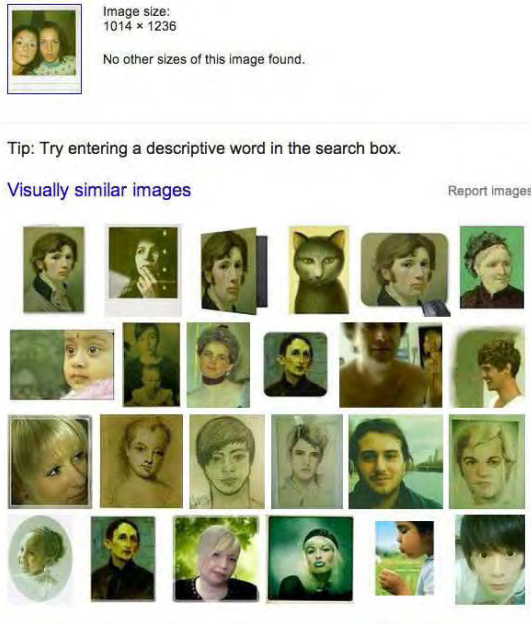


Figure 19.1 Erica Scourti, ‘search by image’ from *So Like You*, 2014

Through the magic of pattern-recognition algorithms, Google would be there to help you recall names and locations, and create novel vectors between your snapshots and billions of others in only milliseconds. By temporarily unifying groups of dispersed images hosted on remote web servers, the tool offered itself up as a kind of networked, protological vision machine. Just as image tagging had transformed Web 2.0 platforms, here was a technology that offered a new navigational paradigm for the image ‘cloud’. But, whereas tagging was an important part of the social

life of platforms such as Flickr, with ‘reverse image search’ it became possible to plot a course through a web of images using the ordering logic of the machine’s gaze. Think your #srsly #cute #scottishfold #cat is unique? Think your enhanced high-dynamic-range photo of the Franz Josef glacier viewed from the altar window of Waiho church in the South Island of New Zealand is unique? Think again. The grouping, aggregating and tracking online of images ‘visually’ made it possible to discover images that were *just like yours*, and escape the image-language problem of previous archival taxonomies.

Authorship and collective labour in an image cloud

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was not in the potential imag(in)ing of collective memory but in the arena of rights management that Google’s reverse image search was quickly co-opted by photographers. Professionals and amateurs alike praised the tool for its ability to track an image’s reuse online in order to ‘catch copyright crooks’ and ‘recover what is rightfully yours’. Rather than sending photographers into a spiral of angst around the cultural politics of reproduction, ‘search by image’ became the Holy Grail for a community intent on defending its authentic creativity against an information economy that valorises the real-time exchange of multiple, simultaneous, orphaned images.

But the question of how to be acknowledged as an author – with all the economic and social capital that entails – is not just limited to professional photographers in network culture. The pursuit of self-realisation through creative digital labour has been a defining feature of social media in an era characterised by hyper-individualism (observe the rise of the ‘selfie’) and hyper-consumption (observe the rise of the ‘selfie, holding my new boutique pet’). Within neoliberal culture we are all invited to endlessly re-invent ourselves, turn our life into a work of art and, in the process, make ourselves transparent to software and to each other. How, then, might it be possible to be recognised as a unique individual with a creative voice when Instagram has made everyone’s photos look the same?

In considering this paradox, it is worth returning to a question that has haunted photography since its inception: is photography a technology of reproduction or a tool for artistic expression? The problem with the latter, as critics point out, is that the collective labour that makes photographic

reproduction possible (from design and marketing to manufacturing and display) is rendered invisible when the photograph is limited to a creative act originating in the mind of an individual photographer. And despite the increasing automation of photography, this model of modernist authorship persists in the rhetoric of consumer electronics manufacturers, museums, and university photography courses alike. But when the act of viewing, searching or tagging an image online potentially changes its visibility, velocity and legibility, the separation of author from audience, individual from crowd becomes extraneous. Not least because today's web architectures have become 'social machines' in which the boundaries between computations performed by machine logic and those that result from human sentiment are increasingly interwoven.

Collaborating with machines

It is precisely this meshwork of humans and non-humans, images and code that the artist Erica Scourti attends to in her practice. Setting out to test the limits of self-expression in a fully mediated culture, her work explores the tension between the desire to be (or believe oneself to be) authentic and singular within it. Subjecting her life to the gaze of the machine (and keenly aware of the implicit narcissism), Scourti has collaborated with security experts, software platforms, Googlebots and other network users in her search for self-knowledge. Informing her approach is an understanding that sharing the digital detritus of our lives may connect us to a host of interested and interesting unknown people, in ways that ultimately require us to be readable to others (and their non-human agents) too.

In *Life in AdWords* (2012–13), Scourti wrote and emailed her diary to her Gmail account over a year, collecting the keywords that Google had scanned and harvested for targeted advertisements. She read the results to her webcam wherever she happened to be that day, creating video portraits of her life as mined and understood by Google's algorithms. Rather than a document of authentic or quotidian experience, Scourti explains that her diary became a compilation of 'clusters of relevant ads, making visible the way we and our personal information are the product in the "free" Internet economy'. Hijacking and making visible the commercial exploitation of personal data, the project uses the intimate mode of the



Figure 19.2 Erica Scourti, from *So Like You*, 2014

webcam confession in order to raise the question of whether there is any area of life that can't be assimilated and commodified through the power of computer analytics.

In approaching her commission for Brighton Photo Biennial 2014, Scourti set out to discover what happens when statistical correlations are used to delineate existing links between things and direct relationships between people. Beginning with the specificity of her own personal memory – in the form of documents, love letters, snapshots and other ephemera – she used Google's 'search by image' function to create a version of her own life through the discovery of thousands of other images that visually resemble it. Brought into this process was an array of network users who gained a temporary closeness with Erica not through shared interests but through the statistical similarities determined by Google's

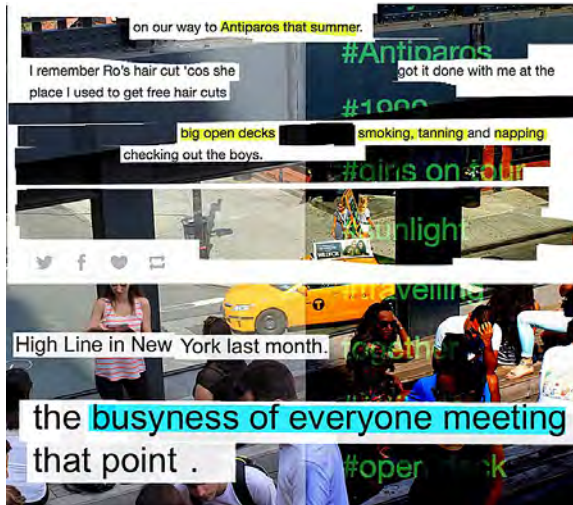


Figure 19.3 Erica Scourti, from *So Like You* Tumblr, 2014

VisualRank algorithm. Her investigation into the mediation of the self through software also has links to the increasingly popular paradigm of the statistically derived or quantified self – in which one’s own identity makes sense as part of a wider demographic. With this in mind, Scourti asks us to consider how this tension between the individual and the collective be staged in relation to the images we capture and continuously share? What does it mean to open oneself up to metadata? What possibilities become available when you acknowledge software as a collaborator in the reflexive project of the self?

Scourti’s work helps to highlight the way that a photograph’s value might not lie in the specificity of its content but in its legibility to machines and the data generated around it. Whilst photographers continue to demand control of their intellectual ‘property’, ownership and monetisation of the data that accumulates as a by-product of our collective creativity remain less contested. This is, of course, what Getty understood when it decided to give away its image assets for ‘free’ – with the condition that we permit it to harvest information about the photograph’s use. This reflects a paradigm shift in which there is less value to be extracted from individual images than from the relations between them. These relations tell us much about audience sentiment, patterns of consumption and

potential future demand for images. The situation has wider implications for culture, as data-driven decision-making becomes the latest business meme to cross over into UK arts policy. One wonders if, in the future, it will be Getty and not the gallery that will serve as an example of what an audience-responsive, market-driven, image-serving organisation might look like in tune with the public's cultural desires.

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