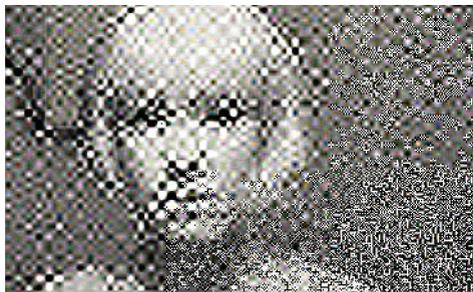
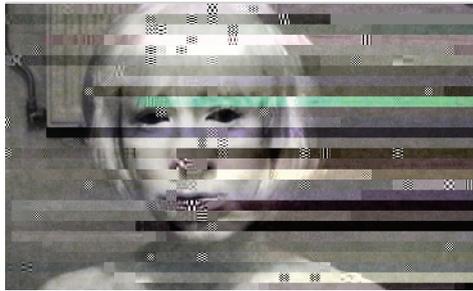


From the series "A Vernacular of File Formats" (2010):
Downsampled Joint Photographic Experts Group (.JPG)
Baseline optimized. (irreversible databend)

Graphics Interchange Format (.gif), interlaced, animated
256 colors, restricted pattern (with dither)
(irreversible databend)

Joint Photographic Experts Group committee in 2000;
low res (.JPEG 2000) (irreversible databend)

7. Yet, if it was just that, it wouldn't be that interesting. Rosa Menkman's work and, more broadly, Glitch Art and the best contemporary computer-based art is not just an attempt to liberate a medium and its own languages – it is also an attempt to use them to say something that could never be said otherwise. Let's look back to the early examples of the use of deterioration and accidents in art. Edvard Munch "matured" his paintings because conventional painting techniques did not allow him to express the existential drama he wanted to convey. The Surrealists adopted automatic techniques such as frottage and grattage as a means to access the unconscious. The original shooting of the *Vernacular of File Formats* would never have succeeded in saying what its seventeen iterations do say. However interesting as an image, it is the result of a medium under control. It is just a nice, black and white picture file where a heavily made-up Menkman is seen combing her hair (an explicit reference to Marina Abramovic's *Art Must Be Beautiful*, 1975). It is like AnnLee before she was bought and shared by Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe back in 1999: a ghost image waiting to be rescued from an industry that had condemned her to death. Similarly, the flow of data it consists of has been condemned to be always visualized in the same way. In his essay "Art in the Age of Digitalization" ^[10], Boris Groys claims that every digital image is a mere copy of an invisible original – the image file. The image file is an invisible string of digital data; the digital image is the way that file is visualized (that is,



performed) in a given context. Introducing a glitch between the image file and the digital image, Menkman liberates the latter from its status of copy of an invisible original. The same image is now different every time it is performed. From its birth to its death, it has many possible lives. It is no longer a copy: it is the source of many possible originals. In the *Vernacular of File Formats*, this story – actually an illustrated theory – is told with an extraordinary level of pathos. The woman portrayed in the picture fades into pixel

blocks, gets grainy, duplicates, disappears beyond a coloured camouflage, then reappears, violently slashed.

The same oxymoron – an apparently cold, geeky theory expressed in a warm, emotional way – can be found in her video works, especially *Dear Mr Compression* (2009) and *Collapse of PAL* (2010). In the first work, Rosa – impersonating Benjamin's Angel of History – writes a poem to Mr Compression. The dialogue appears to take place in a chat room, and the Angel of History expresses her feelings while a silent Mr Compression turns her attempt at communication into an increasingly corrupted signal. In the latter, the Angel of History reflects on the PAL signal, its termination, and its survival "as a trace" in newer technologies. How poetry can be composed about such a technical issue is something we should ask Lucretius or Raymond Roussel. PAL was the analogue television encoding system used in Europe, South Asia and other countries. Whole generations grew up with it, and got used to its specific characteristics and glitches. And Mr Compression is the personification of a computer process. Do they deserve a poem? According to the Angel of History, they do. But *Dear Mr Compression* is also the story of a woman talking to a man that makes her suffer; and the live TV performance that originated *Collapse of PAL* was also, according to Menkman ^[11], a last attempt to deliver a message to somebody getting the PAL signal. Is this medium-specificity? According to the Angel of History, it isn't.

[1] Oliver Laric, *Versions*, 2009 – 2010.

Online at www.oliverlaric.com

[2] Trond Aslaksby, "The Weathered Paintings of Edvard Munch. Artist's intention, conservation, display – a triangle of conflicts", 1998.

Online at www.munch.museum.no/40/6/aslaksby.pdf

[3] Sylvère Lotringer, Paul Virilio, *The Accident of Art*, Semiotext(e), New York 2005, p. 63.

[4] James Der Derian, "Is the Author Dead? An Interview with Paul Virilio", 1997. Online at <http://asrudiancenter.wordpress.com/2008/11/26/interview-with-paul-virilio/>.

[5] «A glitch is a short-lived fault in a system. It is often used to describe a transient fault that corrects itself, and is therefore difficult to troubleshoot. The term is particularly common in the computing and electronics industries». In Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glitch>

[6] Rosa Menkman, "Glitch Studies Manifesto", 2009 – 2010. Online at <http://rosa-menkman.blogspot.com/2010/02/glitch-studies-manifesto.html>

[7] In Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photography>

[8] Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, Sternberg Press, New York 2009, p. 138.

[9] Rosa Menkman, "Glitch Studies Manifesto", op. cit.

[10] Boris Groys, "From Image to Image File – and Back: Art in the Age of Digitalization", in B. Groys, *Art Power*, The MIT Press, Cambridge – London 2008, p. 84.

[11] Email to the author, December 16, 2010.

Rosa Menkman Order and Progress

Curated by Domenico Quaranta

January 15 _ February 25 2011

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Rosa Menkman Order and Progress

Life and Death of an Image

Domenico Quaranta

1. Deterioration has always been part of the life of an image. Any image we can think of, from prehistoric cave paintings to the latest Hollywood movie, can be described in terms of its level of deterioration. Deterioration can start straight away or come later; it can be almost invisible, or have a huge impact on the current perception of a given image. In a recent video essay ^[1], artist Oliver Laric shows how, paradoxically, iconoclasm made true “icons” of images that would probably have been of little interest for the modern tourist if they were not damaged; and if we think about Romantic painting as dark and contrasted, it is mainly thanks to the widespread use of bituminous colours, that darken over time. That said, deterioration is usually perceived as negative. The general view is that a damaged piece needs restoration. But what if deterioration is adopted as an artistic strategy, integrated into the creative process? Before the age of mechanical reproduction, Edvard Munch was the only artist to address this. His infamous “hestekur” (a Norwegian term that can be translated into “horse cure”) consisted



Frame from *Dear mr Compression* (2010), 03':40"

in leaving his paintings in the open, exposed to rain, snow, high and low temperatures, sunlight and humidity, dust and mould, to make them physically “mature” – or die ^[2].

2. While deterioration has usually been considered something bad, as a creative stimulus the accident has a long tradition in art: from Leonardo, who looked into the stains on walls, ashes, clouds and mud, to the Surrealists’ automatic techniques, the accident – accidental revelations, incidents and mistakes – has often heralded epiphany. Rosa Menkman often quotes Paul Virilio: «The accident doesn’t equal failure, but instead erects a new significant state, which would otherwise not have been possible to perceive and that can “reveal something absolutely necessary to knowledge”.» ^[3]

3. Virilio’s interest in accident is strongly related to the zeitgeist of the 20th century. Today, images are not made to last; they deteriorate at an incredible rate. Furthermore, in the age of electronic – and, later, digital media – errors in communication and visualization occur on a daily basis. Transmission goes wrong, storage media get obsolete, file formats disappear, reading softwares are updated. If «to invent the train is to invent derailment» ^[4] and «to invent the ship is to invent the shipwreck», then to invent film is to invent scratches (as in Nam June Paik’s

Zen For Film, 1964); to invent video is to invent white noise and signal distortions; and to invent files is to invent glitches ^[5]. Research on technology has been always guided, as Rosa Menkman puts it, by a «dominant, continuing search for a noiseless channel.» ^[6] Artists, on the other side, have always been much more interested in noise, errors, failures, glitches. But why?

4. New media – from photography to computers – are not neutral tools, like a pencil. They have been designed to get a certain result, and they have been perfected in order to make the process smoother and the result better. Let’s take photography. Technically, it is a process that consists in «creating still pictures by recording radiation on a radiation-sensitive medium.» ^[7] Yet it has been always viewed as a way to represent reality, and any technical advancement was made with this target in mind. This is the ideology of the medium. If you use it properly, there is no way to act outside of this ideology. The only way to do it is to hack the medium. Produce noise. Trigger mistakes. Exploit failures. Of course, a lot of good art has been produced without questioning the ideology of a given medium. Yet, the more that medium becomes a mirror of power, the more noise becomes an interesting artistic strategy. This is why hacking video is more interesting than hacking photography. Furthermore, the more a given medium attempts to turn any creative option into a convention, a filter, an option in a menu – inevitably normalizing it –



Frame from *Dear mr Compression* (2010), 03':40"

the more working outside of operating templates becomes interesting. That is why hacking computers – and any computerized medium, including digital photo and video cameras – is definitely more interesting than hacking any pre-digital medium.

5. And that is why exploiting the medium at its best has become a prerogative of mainstream culture, while art prefers, in Nicholas Bourriaud’s words, to focus on “the indeterminacy of its source code”: «today, one must struggle, not – as Greenberg did – for the preservation of an avant-garde that is self sufficient and focused on the specificities of its means, but rather for the indeterminacy of art’s source code, its dispersion and dissemination, so that it remains impossible to pin down – in opposition to the hyperformatting that, paradoxically, distinguishes kitsch.» ^[8] This quote might seem out of place here. Bourriaud is arguing against medium specificity, and what could be more medium-specific than exploiting a medium’s shortfalls?

This is the dead end that much criticism regarding the current artistic use of technology comes up against. Today, many artists are interested in noise and glitches, low resolution aesthetics, poor images, old media, dirty styles, but also, paradoxically, in an unprofessional, amateurish use of defaults and presets. Is their work formalist, in the sense codified by Greenberg? Definitely not, for two main reasons.

6. It is, first and foremost, a political act of liberation and resistance against control. They focus on the medium because they are combating the medium’s “order and progress” ideology – the ideology brings us to the “hyperformatting that distinguishes kitsch”. In order to do so, in Menkman’s terms, they «find catharsis in disintegration, ruptures and cracks; manipulate, bend and break any

Frame from *Collapse of PAL* (2010), 17':00"

medium towards the point where it becomes something new; utilize glitches to bring any medium to a critical state of hypertrophy, to (subsequently) criticize its inherent politics.» ^[9] They do this with the acute awareness that their time is short, because what they are doing will, sooner or later, become a style, a fashion, and a filter in the “tools” bar of some commercial software. This can be seen very well in Rosa Menkman’s work, particularly in her crazy jumping from one experiment to the other. She never uses the same glitch twice. She doesn’t like effects that are reproducible. She always looks for the unexpected, the unpredictable, the uncanny. She is a true “nomad of noise artifacts”. Let’s take the *Vernacular of File Formats* (2010), a collection of 7 videos and 10 file formats images where, as she wrote, she actively demystifies the most popular glitch effects. The *Vernacular* is, at the same time, an essay, a tutorial for wannabe glitch artists, and a collection of experiments that should not be repeated, but that will be inevitably be repeated until their aesthetic potential is exhausted.

