

Joanna Zylinska
Goldsmiths, University of London

Curating / Open / Images

This short piece discusses the theory and practice of curating images in the networked media culture. It also highlights the tension between ‘openness’ and ‘closure’ that surfaces in the often conflicting approaches to images and other forms of data adopted by various parties, such as image-makers, curators, archivists, writers, publishers and, last but not least, media users. The piece builds on my experience as an academic working in the field of media theory while also being involved in open access publishing, image-based art practice and curatorial work.

To begin with, let me say a few words about my academic background by way of contextualising my argument and approach. Having originally trained in literature and philosophy, I came to image-making via the fairly traditional scholarly practice, which consisted of writing books and articles. In 2007, when I was working as an academic, teaching digital media theory at Goldsmiths, I enrolled on the MA in Photographic Studies at the University of Westminster, from which I graduated two years later. This disciplinary hybridisation I opened myself to encouraged me to explore ways of practising ‘theory’ as if it was a form of art, while also attempting to approach photography as a way of ‘theorising with images’ – rather than just with words. And, since the problem of image-making and knowledge-making became increasingly important to me, I was then also drawn to curating: to working not just on the *production* of images and words but also on their *management, distribution, visual arrangement and conceptual encounter*, a process that involved arranging various configurations of my own and other people’s concepts, words and images. This trajectory perhaps explains my interest in the idea of openness as a form of practice – the openness of

knowledge, of texts and images, of exhibition forms – as well as my desire to undertake a radical rethinking of what it means to write, to make images and to curate, especially in the current era of significant change to our media landscape.

Indeed, many objects traditionally considered stable or fixed – photographs, imaging systems, technological networks – are now radically changing both their ontology and their visibility. In this context, the visual image can be described as existing in a dynamic set of entangled media relations, and hence as a process rather than as a discrete object, even though much of this entanglement often remains invisible to the human eye. For example, digital cameras today, be it as stand-alone devices or embedded in smartphones, enable instantaneous wireless transfer of images and their upload to image-sharing sites. As media users, many of us are no doubt appreciative of wifi technology on a practical level. However, on a philosophical level, it may be worth asking to what extent such undertakings may end up mystifying the image-making and image distribution process as a result of black-boxing, which involves the delegation of our everyday existence to ‘the experts’, i.e. the technocrats, as already predicted by Jean-François Lyotard in his report on the state of knowledge for the government of Quebec, subsequently published in 1979 as *The Postmodern Condition*. (As an illustration of this point please consider whether you *really* know what’s inside your iPad or your Nikon.)

My work with openness is part of a worldwide effort by certain academics, computer programmers, artists and curators to wrest control away from the technoscience industry and to outline a series of alternatives to knowledge production and knowledge curation. However, by identifying myself with this initiative *I'm not claiming that everything that is hidden should be revealed or that there is a positive value inherent in all kinds of openness*. (So, I'm no Edward Snowden, at least not in any straightforward way). The idea of openness I'm using in my image-making and curatorial work has a very specific meaning: it derives out of the practices of open source and open access in the academic and computer science community.

Open source – a term most often associated with computing culture – refers to software whose source code is available for modification or enhancement by anyone without any licence. Open access, in turn, is a worldwide movement which aims to make academic research freely available online, as a form of public good. There are a number of political positions taken with regard to open access: from neoliberal support for research as innovation (which is the rather conservative line taken by the UK government), through to open access as an incarnation of ‘gift economy’ or even ‘data communism’. It is this latter idea of what has been termed *radical open access*¹ as part of the gift economy that I have been involved in promoting, together with a number of colleagues internationally. Radical open access changes the conventional understanding of concepts such as the writer, the artist, the image-maker and the curator, but also concepts such as authorship, the book, the album, the exhibition and the work – which doesn’t mean it gets rid of them altogether. Collaboration is also very important to

making this idea of open access happen, as it is to any kind of open source projects. Indeed, many open access projects run on open source software – such as Linux and Wordpress.

However, while the ideas of open access and open source have been enthusiastically embraced by many academics, activists and computer programmers, artists and professional image-makers have been far less willing to come on board. The proliferation of images in the digital era in which culture has supposedly become free and hence devalued has posed a significant threat to the professional lives of many. Yet calls for the increased protection of intellectual property rights seem like a somewhat futile attempt to return to a pre-Internet era, when cultural goods were more difficult to duplicate – and when it was easier for at least some of them to become precious commodities that secured a high price. New media writer and activist Cory Doctorow has been promoting a ‘freemium’ model as a solution, whereby a ‘stripped down’ version of a product is made available for free, with a higher-spec one distributed at cost. Getty Images’ decision, announced in March 2014, to allow anyone to embed and share a low-resolution version on websites, blogs and social media platforms without seeking permission or making a payment, is an illustration of this freemium approach – even if for some it is first and foremost an example of yet another Internet-age Goliath dancing on the graves of individual image makers. And yet this announcement merely tries to legitimise the already widely established behaviour of Internet users worldwide, behaviour that would be very difficult to alter by nation-level legislation.

This behaviour and this practice are also part of a wider remix culture, where notions of the original and the copy have been put into question by the so-called deluge of images, on- and offline. To visualise this point, please think whether it is possible to take an original photo of a sunset. Won’t your even most unique sunset always to some extent repeat the visual and technical tropes of all the sunsets past? This conundrum is of course a variation on the Italian writer Umberto Eco’s question as to whether it is possible to say ‘I love you madly’ to someone without this phrase always being a citation – from literature, popular culture and your own and other people’s utterings of this phrase. Indeed, citation has arguably been foundational to the process of image-making through history, from ateliers of master painters through to Instagram. As an illustration of this state of events, in 1998 German artist Cornelia Sollfrank developed the so-called ‘net.art generator’ – a computer programme that automatically creates digital collages from artefacts taken from the Internet. Her exhibition *This is not by me* consisted of a series of four sequentially created artworks ‘that perform the paradoxes of intellectual property by investigating different aesthetic, theoretical and legal aspects of Internet-based artistic appropriation and reworking, all using the iconic Warhol Flowers as an exemplary case’.² We might thus say that Sollfrank is thus copying ‘the original copyist’, because, as writer Susana Zaragoza explains, ‘Warhol’s prints are based on an appropriated photograph of another artist, Patricia Caulfield, and it is not a coincidence that Sollfrank chose this art work for developing and expanding the matter further;

changing an image production with an industrial age machine as Warhol did with [an] Amiga computer, but using a networked machine without any centre of control'.³

Video artist and writer Hito Steyerl's recent project, *Is the Internet úäCì@?ù.1HcipiÙifé;Dead*, is an interesting intervention into this debate on the instability and openness of images in the Internet era. The artist designed a two-part edition to accompany her exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 2014: a free unlimited digital download and a new limited edition print. As explained on the ICA website,

The source for both editions is a found image of a woodcut print by Utamaro, which the artist has intentionally corrupted by embedding one of her written texts into the image's source code. The downloadable code reveals this hidden text, from which it is possible to reconstruct the original jpeg image. The limited edition print is a further derivative of this text, printed with silver ink containing silicone; a component of semiconductors.⁴

So can we explore the ideas of open access and open source as an opportunity – as well as a threat? In what follows, I would like to discuss some of the projects I have been involved in over the recent years as a way of demonstrating how this concept of open access can be useful to image-makers, image curators and ordinary image users. Let me repeat here once again that I am not promoting the view that all forms of openness are necessarily beneficial and advisable, for all users and all purposes. Instead, I'm developing my ideas from the very specific, socially and politically grounded academic and computing practices which adopt openness as a mode of challenging some established institutions, in academic and art contexts.

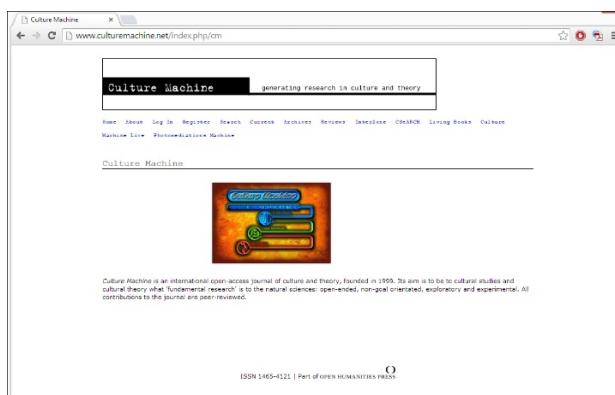


Fig 1. Culture Machine, <http://www.culturemachine.net>

The first open access project I had experience of was fairly conventional – and did not involve too much engagement with images, at least at the beginning. Over a decade ago I became one of the editors of *Culture Machine*, which was one of first open access journals in the area of cultural and media theory. Originally founded in 1999 and run on

open source software, the journal is still free to both read and publish in. *Culture Machine* has published work by established figures such as Mark Amerika, Alain Badiou, Simon Critchley, Jacques Derrida, Henry Giroux, Mark Hansen, N. Katherine Hayles, Ernesto Laclau, J. Hillis Miller, Bernard Stiegler, Tiziana Terranova and Samuel Weber, but it also showcases texts by up-and-coming writers, from a variety of geopolitical locations. In 2008 *Culture Machine* became one of the founder members of [Open Humanities Press](#), the first open-access publishing house dedicated to contemporary critical and cultural theory, established by an international group of scholars in response to the perceived crisis in academic publishing.

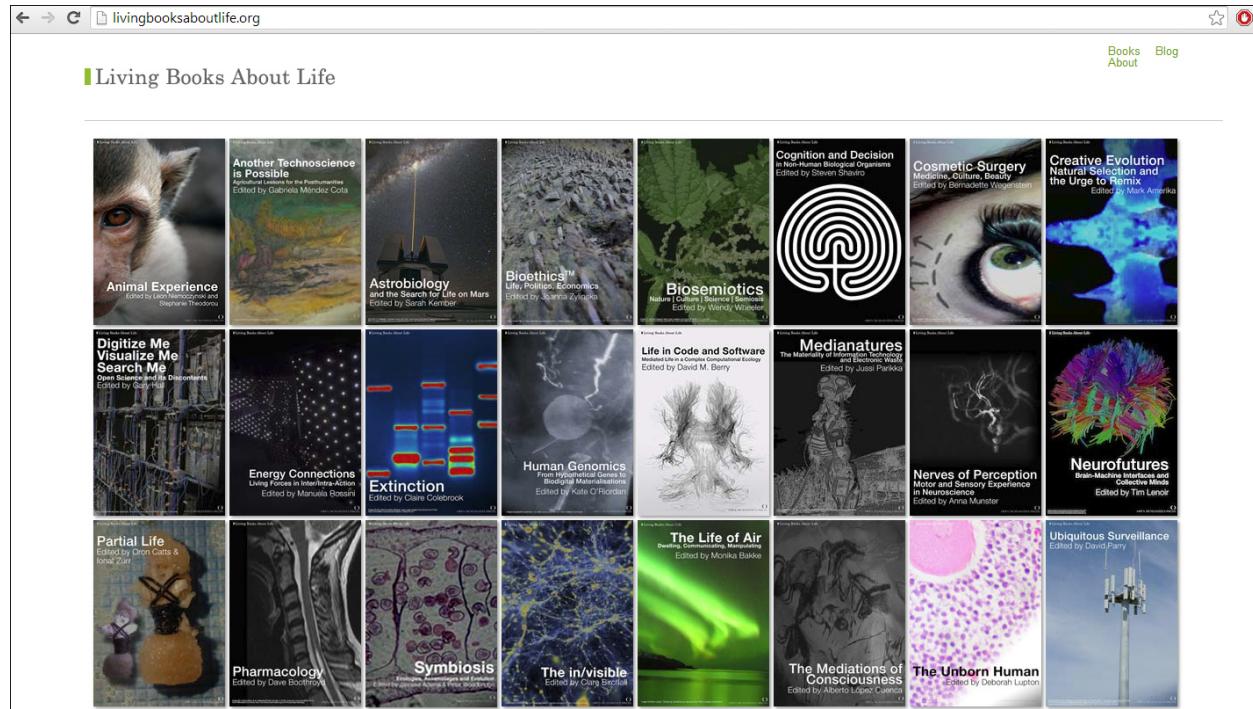


Fig.2 Living Books about Life, <http://livingbooksaboutlife.org/>

In 2011, with two of my *Culture Machine* collaborators, Gary Hall and Clare Birchall, I received some modest funding from JISC to develop an experimental open access project called Living Books about Life. Run in collaboration with Open Humanities Press, the series consists of over twenty curated, open access books which repackage existing open access science research by clustering it around selected topics whose unifying theme is life. The books are 'living' in the sense of being open to ongoing collaborative processes of writing, editing, updating, remixing and commenting by readers. Getting involved in this project was an attempt on our part to try and rethink the role of an editor of a book in curatorial terms: as someone who arranges knowledge and ideas – conceptually and visually – through philosophy, technology and design. The rationale behind this project was driven by the current ongoing transformation of the medium of the book, as evident in the increasing popularity of e-books available on different digital platforms and the expansion of Amazon as a 'global bookseller', coupled

with the fact that many traditional and local bookshops are now closing, while many scholars and other writers are finding it increasingly difficult to publish works that are not immediately profitable.

Yet, taking seriously the current socio-political context of the changing book culture, we wanted to highlight with this project the fact that books have *always* been living and open. Indeed, until mid-eighteenth century the book was an unstable object, with Shakespeare's folio, for example, including over six hundred typefaces and many inconsistencies with regard to spelling, punctuation and page configuration.⁵ Our goal with this project about 'living' books was therefore to foreground this inherent instability and openness of the book – and the decision on the part of the reader to make decisions about it: about how to use it, how to read it, what to make of it. We also wanted to remind people that engaging with a book – as a reader, user, buyer, producer, designer, writer, editor, publisher or funder – is an intellectual, political and ethical task, and, more importantly, that reading itself can perhaps be seen as a curatorial process.

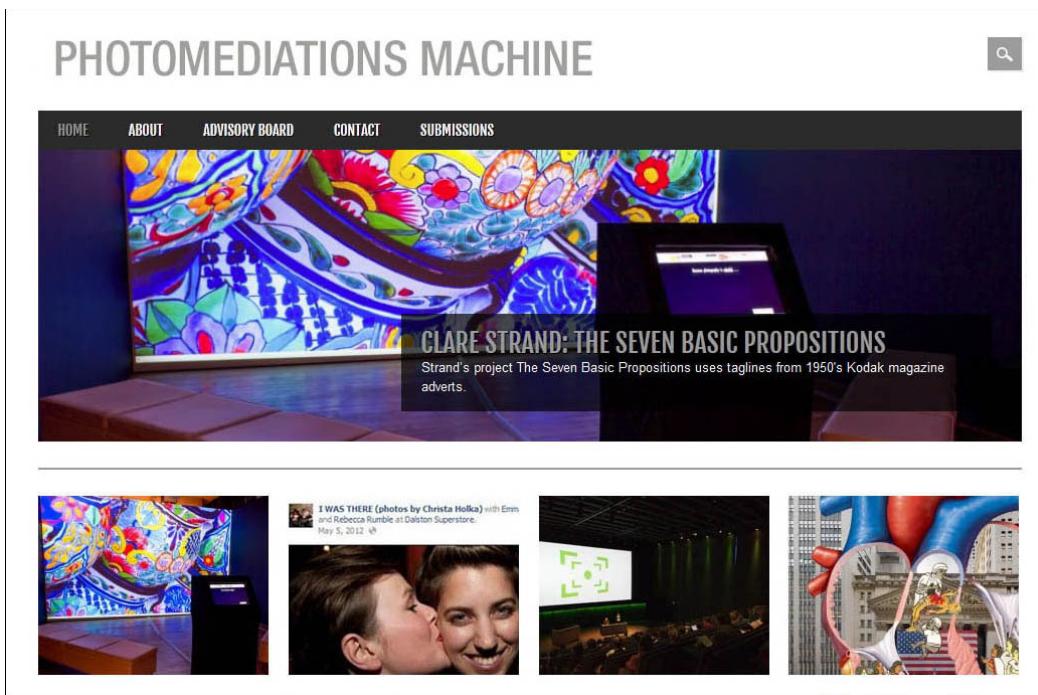


Fig. 3 Photomediations Machine, <http://photomediationsmachine.net>
Twitter: @Photomediations
Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/photomediations.machine>

Taking this idea of the inherent openness and entanglement of various media objects such as books and images on board, in 2013 I launched an online platform called Photomediations Machine. Curated by myself and Taiwanese artist Ting Ting Cheng, Photomediations Machine is a sister project to *Culture Machine*. Run on a pro bono basis by a group of academics and artists, the project is non-commercial, non-profit and

fully open access. Photomediations Machine functions as a curated online space where the dynamic relations of mediation as performed in photography and other media can be encountered, experienced and engaged. It showcases theoretical and practical work at the intersections of art and mainstream practices. The concept of mediation embedded in the idea of ‘photomediations’ – developed from the notion of mediation which Sarah Kember and I outlined in our book, *Life after New Media*⁶ – points to the more processual understanding of media that has recently been taken up by scholars, artists and media producers. It suggests that rather than study individual photographs in isolation, we should consider the multiple and ongoing processes of photomediation. The project therefore adopts a process-based and time-based approach to photography and image-making by tracing the technological, biological, cultural, social and political flows of mediation that produce photographic objects.

First and foremost, Photomediations Machine serves as an online gallery for unique projects, both recent and historical, that creatively engage with the technological and socio-political dynamism of the photographic medium: from EuropeanaPhotography’s 3D virtual exhibition of early European photos and Max Dean’s *As Yet Untitled, 1992-1995* project in which the viewer has the opportunity to determine the fate of family photographs by either archiving or shredding them, through to Trevor Paglen’s video *The Last Pictures* about one hundred images etched on a golden disk and sent to space on EchoStar XVI communications satellite, Juliet Ferguson’s images grids taken from hacked CCTV cameras accessible via the Internet and Véronique Ducharme’s haunting photographs taken with automatic hunting cameras. The site also features short critical essays on recent developments around photomedia by international writers and artists: Anne Burns on the narcissistic excess of selfies; Rob Coley on monstrous media in the society of control; Richard Whitlock on post-digital visuality. Last but not least, Photomediations Machine showcases books and other publications that comment on, or even enact, the current multiple mediations of photography and other media, such as sounds, painting, video, or, indeed, the book itself. These include Stephen Shore’s multi-touch book comprised of sixteen short films and titled *A New York Minute* and Jonathan Shaw’s multi-platform, open access book *NewFotoScapes*, which is a collection of curated conversations with key critics, curators and photography practitioners.

Even though Photomediations Machine is an open platform, it certainly does not associate openness with an ‘anything goes’ (or, worse, ‘everything is up for grabs’) approach. Instead, it supports and promotes the need for informed and responsible curatorial activity, and for singular ethical and political decisions to be made, over and over again, with regard to both the medium and its institutions, such as galleries, online spaces and intellectual property/copyright, in the current media landscape.

To conclude, I wanted to acknowledge that open images and open media platforms do of course raise questions of quality, authority, decision, copyright, exploitative labour practices, to name but a few. Many scholars involved in working on those platforms

have addressed these questions up-front (please see the Notes list at the end of this piece for some references). Yet my goal with becoming involved in projects such as *Culture Machine*, Living Books about Life and Photomediations Machine is to explore – not just theoretically but also on a practical level – to what extent this idea of ‘openness’ can be seen as culturally and politically enabling, and as promoting alternative, innovative image practices as well as alternative modes of images production and distribution – instead of it being interpreted as first and foremost a threat to the professional and artistic domains of photography and image-making. At a time when the digital reproduction genie is most definitely already out of the analogue bottle, and it doesn’t look like it’s going back any time soon, such an enquiry could not be more needed. Also, given the increasing enclosure of both online and offline spaces into all sorts of ‘walled gardens’ currently promoted by the likes of Apple, Google and Facebook, this enquiry could not perhaps be more timely too.

¹ For more on this idea of radical open access, see Janneke Adema and Gary Hall, ‘The Political Nature of the Book: On Artists’ Books and Radical Open Access’, *New Formations*, Number 78, Summer, 2013.

² Exhibition description, Dundee Contemporary Arts, <http://www.dca.org.uk/whats-on/exhibitions>this-is-not-by-me.html>

³ Susana Zaragoza, ‘Review of Expanded ORIGINAL. Cornelia Sollfrank’, September 16, 2009, <http://mastersofmedia.hum.uva.nl/2009/09/16/review-of-expanded-original-cornelia-sollfrank/>

⁴ Exhibition description, ICA, <http://www.ica.org.uk/shop/editions/hito-steyerl-internet-%C3%BA%C3%A4%C3%AC%C3%B9hcpi%C3%B9%C3%AE%C3%AA%C2%BFdead-2014>

⁵ This point was made by Gary Hall in *Digitize This Book!: The Politics of New Media, or Why We Need Open Access Now*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p.4.

⁶ See Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska, *Life after New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process*, Cambridge: MA, MIT Press, 2012.

This article is part of *Looking at Images: A Researcher’s Guide*:

<http://blog.soton.ac.uk/wsapgr/looking-at-images/>