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ROUNDTABLE

***What is an Image?* Roundtable transcription, International Visual Sociology Association annual conference, 16 September 2022**

JOHN GRADY, SUSAN HANSEN, GILLIAN ROSE, TREAANDREA M. RUSSWORM, PAOLO FAVERO, ORAIB TOUKAN, CRYSTAL ABIDIN, ACE LEHNER, M.C. CAMBRE, GABY DAVID AND TANIA ROSSETTO

John Grady: Since its inception, the IVSA and visual sociologists have felt a kinship with practitioners in other disciplines. Visual studies has developed into a vibrant interdisciplinary field of study, one that spans the social sciences, arts, and humanities. As interrelated intellectual arenas, visual studies, visual sociology, and visual culture all tend to view images as central to the formation of meaning in the social world.

In this year's Roundtable, we asked a diverse range of scholars and practitioners to consider what an image is today. In our twenty-first century culture, defined by rapid technological change and innovation, the very notion of an image has shifted dramatically. The visual is everywhere; it is arguably the most potent and ubiquitous form of communication today. In what manner has technology transformed our understandings of what an image can be? New technologies, networks, and infrastructures have impacted on both theory and practice – and have led

to a radical shift in contemporary aesthetics and visual languages. And the ideological stakes brought to bear by visuality today are entangled with pernicious forms of social control: from the perils of consumer capitalism to the dangers of political propaganda. As scholar Alexis Boylan reminds us, 'the visual surrounds us, some of it invited, most of it not.'

Susan Hansen: The interlocking fields of visual studies and visual culture have often been concerned with how images can be both weaponised as a tool of manipulation, or alternatively, utilised empathetically as a form of social engagement. But there needs to be a greater understanding of how the very notion of an image has changed. With this in mind, we have assembled a synchronous Roundtable of leading scholars and practitioners to address a number of questions about the nature of images today. This mirrors the questionnaire we sent to a selection of key thinkers in the

Invited Roundtable Participants:

Gillian Rose is Professor of Human Geography and Head of School of Geography and the Environment, at the University of Oxford. Her more recent work has explored the visual mediation of urban spaces, particularly by digital technologies. The fourth edition of her influential book *Visual Methodologies* was published in 2016.

TreaAndrea M. Russworm is Professor in the Interactive Media & Games Division at the University of Southern California. She is also a Series Editor of *Power Play: Games, Politics, Culture* (Duke University Press) and was one of the first Associate Editors of Outreach and Equity for the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*.

Paolo Favero is Professor in Visual and Digital Cultures at the Visual and Digital Cultures Research Center (ViDi), University of Antwerp. He's also Vice-Head of Dept. of Communication Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Chair of the MA in Film Studies and Visual Culture at the University of Antwerp and Co-convenor of the Visual Anthropology Network of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (VANEASA).

Oraib Toukan is an artist and scholar affiliated with EUME at the Forum Transregionale Studien. Her current research addresses 'cruel images' and the question of how to treat them as both object and subject through artistic practice.

Crystal Abidin is Professor, Principal Research Fellow, and ARC DECRA Fellow in Internet Studies at Curtin University. She is an anthropologist and ethnographer of internet cultures, focusing especially on influencer cultures, internet celebrity, online visibility, and social media pop cultures, mostly in the Asia Pacific region.

Ace Lehner is Assistant Professor in Art and Art History at the University of Vermont. Ace is an interdisciplinary scholar and artist specialising in critical engagement with theory and criticism of modern and contemporary art. They are currently working on a book entitled *Trans Representations: Decolonizing Visual Theory in Contemporary Photography* and co-editing (with Chelsea Thompto).

field. Our roundtable participants are Gillian Rose, TreaAndrea M. Russworm, Paolo Favero, Oraib Toukan, Ace Lehner and Crystal Abidin.

To get things started, we'd like to ask each Roundtable participant to give a brief opening statement about their work in relation to the overarching question of 'what is an image?' Gillian, would you like to start?

Gillian Rose: Thank you, Susan. I'm a geographer, and I'm interested in urban spaces and cities, and that's how I'm going to approach this rather huge question of 'what is an image'. My starting point is urban spaces. We know that many cities are now saturated with various kinds of digital technologies – with screens, with sensors, with the infrastructure that carries digital data through urban spaces. And much of that produces many kinds of images of urban spaces, but also of the people who inhabit those spaces. I think it's really critical that we keep the bodies that are doing the imagery and being pictured by images central to our investigations.

Historically, this kind of visualisation of urban spaces and their inhabitants isn't new. Cities have always been visualised in different ways, and there's a whole scholarship around what's often called the urban imaginary, which suggests that our experiencing of urban spaces is always mediated in some way or another by visuals, by literatures, by technical accounts of what urban spaces are, and so on. For me, the critical thing is that many of those accounts are productive. They produce certain accounts of what it is to be urban, what it is to live in a city, and normative ways of thinking about that. You know, who is doing the right things in the right kinds of city spaces. And of course, there's all kinds of concerns about how digital surveillance is ramping up power dynamics in urban spaces. I'm interested in how the digital mediation of urban spaces is shifting our multiple and different experiences of urban spaces, but also how that then might be changing how we think of the city itself. So, there's a dual dynamic going on there.

I'm at the beginning of what I hope is a more sustained and empirically grounded investigation into those sorts of questions. But I think there are some particular elements of digital imagery that make a difference to that starting point of thinking through urban space. One of which is that digital images are of course data. They're not pictures. They are digital data files, which means that a digital image is a lot more than what we can just see. The image itself is a lot more than just the data that produces the image. There's also lots of other data that might be part of it, where it takes all the technology that created it, and all the ways in which this connects with

other kinds of software and hardware, to actually become materialised as an image at any particular moment for a particular viewer. So, an image is now a kind of assemblage of all sorts of different things, many of which are not visible to us, and I think that really produces some methodological and conceptual challenges to how we think about what it is to visualise anything, including urban spaces.

Assemblages of data, different kinds of data code, software, and digital images are also highly editable and manipulable. And that poses a real challenge to the idea that images can be categorised into historically meaningful genres or types. Many of these images are also now animated and they are becoming much more pervasive than the still images that were historically so important for picturing urban spaces. So, I think the traditional guideposts of genre or media are starting to become increasingly less useful as ways of thinking about how a city might be mediated digitally.

These images are also highly mobile, which means they get materialised in different ways and different places and in different contexts. So, although these images circulate, they also land and do things in particular places with particular viewers, or users – not all of which are human anymore. And I think there's something there about having to think quite carefully about the specificity of the digital image. So, in terms of trying to think more carefully about the visual mediation of urban life, what that all combines for me then is the way that the organisation of spatiality and temporality – the kind of grids and perspectives that we use to interpret urban space and urban experience – are being reconfigured quite radically by this labile infrastructural atmospheric and very intimate and embodied constellation of digital mediation. If images of cities are now so often digital, then the city itself is changing shape with them.

TreaAndrea M. Russworm: I enter this conversation about the possibility of a shifting definition of the image as an American humanist and a cultural theorist who was trained in cinema media studies, but who also spent the last thirteen years in an English Department. These days my research is on different aspects of digital media, especially video games. So, I was intrigued by the IVSA's virtual conference platform and the gamification of the conference space. I can't believe that none of the gaming conferences I have attended have used this kind of software. One of the other things that intrigues me that is related to our topic today is how images work in a game. When you are moving your character or avatar around is that a single image? What about the in-game assets and objects that you interact with? How do image and interactivity correlate? Is the totality of the frame itself

an image? What about the playability of the image? These are a few questions I would like to circle back to as a part of our conversation.

After Crystal Abidin's insightful keynote, I was left thinking about the ways in which she framed gamified practices as a part of refracted publics, and this makes me also wonder if the future of the image will itself be gamified. I would certainly love for us to think more about this together. For some context, the way I think about games is heavily influenced by theories and discussions of where representation and mechanics, where function and image, intersect. For instance, in the book *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (with Co-Editor Jennifer Malkowski) I argued that the dominant exclusionary and dismissive attitudes regarding race, gender and sexuality in game studies, and in public discourses about games, have misunderstood both the nature and the importance of representation in the medium. In debunking the commonly held suspicion that humanities-based approaches to game studies that centralise discussions about representation and identity are somehow less relevant to our tech savvy and tech-oriented society, we argued that representation and identity are similarly complex systems that are always relevant to the ways in which games, codes, platforms – indeed, all technologies – are constructed. The book's central, interdisciplinary intervention modelled a way for game studies scholars across fields to treat representation as a system itself that functions as akin to, rather than as a distraction from, the discipline's more celebrated, so called 'hardcore' objects of study.

Since *Gaming Representation*, I have been working more on how games relate to practices of speculation and the speculative imagination. This new work connects games and their images to different processes of sensemaking, futurity and world making. And I've argued that digital games as objects and as an industry have always been about the future. They depict what the future will look like, how we can navigate this, and because so many narrative games are dystopian, games also imagine how we will survive new conditions and systems of harm and inequity.

Games, like other constellations of digital images, require active speculation. Because of their evidence stakes in the future then I wonder if there are novel ways in which games, as a medium can help us think about the present and future of the image? Games, and their mediated images are, of course, also connected to other trends in digital culture, like NFTs (non-fungible tokens) and the metaverse. So, some of the ways I'm thinking about the image also have to do with these

developments. When is an image a token? When it comes to NFTs, how does their popularity enhance our understanding of the meaning and value of the image? I think where NFTs and games intersect is an especially interesting case of overdetermined simulations, mediations, and speculations, because although we know that the digital image is eminently reproducible, blockchain-stored and verified NFTs insist on a seemingly arbitrary understanding of a spawn point or origin point for digital images for their originality and for their exclusive ownership.

When we think of networks of images then, we also have to think about the transactional nature of things like blockchains. What will be the place of the image in the metaverse? Since we are already apparently there right now, between our simultaneous existence here in real time on Zoom and in Gathertown [the virtual conference venue] perhaps we can reflect and report together from the future. So, that's the main territory where I enter this conversation. I'm looking forward to making some of those connections together, especially around representation and games.

Susan Hansen: Thank you, TreaAndrea. The question of whether the future of the image will be gamified certainly seems pertinent, especially given our current co-location. Paolo, what were your thoughts on the question of what is an image?

Paolo Favero: I have difficulty in dealing with the question of *what* is an image. I think that most of the time we end up talking about what images do to us. So, I ended up side-lining that question by asking myself instead, *when* is an image? This reflects my interest in temporality, and I structure this here as four short provocations, hoping that they may feed something into the discussion.

For me, the first *when* resonates as a now. Some years ago, when I was looking for a title for a short book that I wrote on the subject of images in the passage from analogue to digital, I found myself struggling. I discovered that I was less and less interested in the discussion between the digital and the analogue itself. So, from an original title that contained the word pixel, I ended up choosing the new title, *The Present Image*. Here 'present' for me had a twofold meaning. On the one hand, it indicated the actual moment in which I was addressing the phenomenon, so it roughly stood for the contemporary, or the images of that specific moment, of today. But at the same time, it also made a different claim that had crafted itself vis-à-vis the events that were unfolding in my life at that time – the appearances, losses and prospective presences that somewhat anchored

themselves, and made themselves present in and through images. In one of the chapters of the book I address the role that images – mainly photographic ones – have in our ways of relating to that thin border between life and death, and how they function as presences.

This takes me to my second *when*. This is a historical when. In my explorations for the book, I journeyed back and forth in time, addressing the extent to which many of the ways of engaging with images today through digital technologies are in fact nothing else but avatars of previous practices. Just to give one example, the immersive visuality of virtual and augmented reality replicates the principles of viewing that inform the making of Byzantium religious icons. Despite being conventionally flat, these icons, through their combination of design, modalities of sensory engagement, and choices of materiality, tend to throw their viewers inside the image, wrapping them in, rather than kicking them out of the image – as a perspectival painting would do. So, paradoxically, my explorations of the world of theologians, mystics, and historians – figures like Pavel Florensky – and my engagement with icon painters – among them my aunt, who is an 84 year old nun – and my referral to parallel epistemologies, specifically to Buddhist epistemologies – proved to be more useful than much literature on digital media. This is the *when* intended as the value of journeying back in time.

The next *when* has to do with simultaneity and chimes with togetherness. I tend to agree with Scott McGuire, when he suggests that regardless of the ways in which it is produced and distributed, a picture, especially a photographic picture, remains much the same for viewers; but it is also true that what I like to call the interstitial capacities of images have grown enormously due to the temporality through which they enter our lives today. This also resonates with what Gillian was saying. The possibility of sharing images in real time made possible by smartphones has caused a new form of time–space compression. Mizuko Ito was the first to label this as visual co-presence, I believe, back in 2005, when Nokia launched its first MMS.

This sense of co-presence has today become a proper form of visual coexistence, which also has possible civilizational consequences. So, if image systems are constitutive of communities and craft civilisations across time, and possibly do so more powerfully than even words can, then we are even more than ever forced to consider the political significance of this ephemeral interstitial membrane between us and the world that we call the image. And if it is true, as contemporary neurosciences seem to suggest, that human

consciousness is not something individually owned, but rather a kind of a network, then maybe the act of sharing images on such media as Tik Tok, Instagram, et cetera, is not as banal as it may seem.

The last few lines go to the last and more complicated version of *when*, and it's when as arising. An old meditation practice consists in staring at an object at regular intervals. Maybe some of you have practised it. Meditators have to first keep their eyes open in front of an object, then they close them and have to reconstruct the shape of what they have seen. And as they move on in this exercise, they progressively discover how the image continuously grows into them, both in size and density of information, but it also keeps morphing into something new, all the time something known, but simultaneously also unknown, that responds to the changing conditions of light, feeling, memory, and so forth.

It is in this progressive play of presence and absence, of remembering and forgetting, that the perception of an object is shaped. The act of seeing is constructed across the physical and the mental, across what is perception of visual stimuli and the memory thereof. Also, it builds on the overlapping of the boundaries between the senses, because smell, touch, sound, and that ambiguous perception of time that we don't have really good words to address, all contribute in giving us a sense of what we actually see.

The image is caught in between these different aspects. So, when is it born? Where does it reside? And eventually, what is it?

Susan Hansen: Thank you, Paolo. *When* is an image is such a productive reframing of the question. Oraib Toukan, can you give us your thoughts on this question?

Oraib Toukan: It is as an artist where I engage with these kinds of questions. So, 'what is an image' to me is a trajectory of the past fifteen years of the same constant question I am asking images myself. I realise that actually a distance from the contemporary moment – or thinking outside of contemporaneity where possible – is where we might be able to yield more answers. I work a lot with archives, and the question of analogue doesn't exist any longer for so many of us. There's practically nothing we work with that's not digitised. But in this sense, I am able – as are many practitioners now who work with images both in film and photography – to really sit inside the interiors of an image. And the fact that I can navigate it on a much deeper axis, and move within it, has allowed for a reimagination of many more possibilities. It's only there, inside the meeting of four perpendicular lines – inside a pixel, that we realise we are still bound by the

frame. Because whatever image we are working with, and however it is rendered, in the end this rendition is about the meeting of those four perpendicular lines – about frames. And more and more, I started to think through (what Laura Marks would call haptic visuality) – through the grain of an image – coming to closer realizations about what an image is, and what an image can be today.

As such, thinking through it ontologically too, we can better understand the knowledge an image offers as a form of *turbah* – soil grain in Arabic. Here the image is a haptic enabler of knowledge stemming from its material texture of being touched at its every grain (as though it can be). This approach pushes the haptic potential of digital noise, and the blur as potential for knowledge. Very generally, my work has been, for at least the past five years, focused specifically on what I came to term ‘cruel images’. And this came from the frustration of the scrolling function, which does not allow us to arrest an image. It’s not meant to be this way, where we can stop an image and step inside it. So, this sort of resistance to how images move is also where I begin to think of what they are.

Susan Hansen: Thank you Oraib. Crystal Abidin, could you contribute some of your thoughts on this question?

Crystal Abidin: Thanks for having me. I hope you will oblige me by allowing me to read you an excerpt from Deleuze and Guattari. This is one of my favourite segments from anything ever written by dead white men. It says, ‘a child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath. He walks and halts to his song. Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself with his little song as best he can. The song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilising, calm and stable, centre in the heart of chaos. Perhaps the child skips as he sings, hastens or slows his pace. But the song itself is already a skip: it jumps from chaos to the beginnings of order in chaos and is in danger of breaking apart at any moment.’

I really enjoy this excerpt, especially in moments where, prior to the pandemic, I was lost in airports. When airplanes had abandoned me, when as a grad student, I would turn up to my accommodation and realise the Airbnb was not a real place, in many parts of my life where I realised that the Internet is my home, because it takes a lot of effort to navigate space outside of your habitus – outside of your comfort zone. In the same way, I want to propose that an image is what is inside your brain as a personal asset, that only your heart can see. Because if we think about the four big A’s, when we think about visual imagery today, none of them are coherent or personal enough that it can be shared.

No one can come to the inside of your mind or the inside of your heart, in order to see what your mind perceives it to be.

Now the first A is *authenticity*. It’s one of the very big issues that a lot of academics seem to be concerned about. Whenever think about the ‘visual’, we think about manipulation, whether it’s selfies or filters, we think about the augmented – when things are edited, especially in the age of misinformation, or maybe even the virtual, where cyborgs and bionic beings are now being interspersed with everyday life, like virtual influencers. But in this authenticity, regardless of what this quality is to you, you might have your own opinions over whether or not something is complete or acceptable. I think filtered selfies are perfectly fine, but someone else might contest the authenticity of filtered selfies and discredit them.

Number two I’ve talked a lot about. This is *automation*. What does a machine think is an image versus what do I think is an image? These days, the machine needs to recognise a thing – code, ones and zeros – as an image before it even delivers it to me and my feed or my inbox, or a jpeg or an attachment. So, there is really an intervention and interruption, a policing of what I can access based on automation.

Number three is an *Alt*. These days we are learning to attach alt text to images. So, while there is an image for us to see and interpret, every one of us when we are tagging or writing up a description is assigning a singular, authoritative way to read the image, so a screen reader can do it, so a blind person can imagine what we have seen, and already there’s so many different levels of mediation, down to the number of letters the text box allows you to put in there. But in a similar vein, tagging, and SEO codes in the ways that we are linking websites, and uploading journal articles with key terms – all of this is already intervening with what these machines are coding and then putting up for us to see or to even access.

On the note of access, the last A is *accessibility*. Keeping in mind that a lot of what we’ve talked about seems to imagine the default human body – the body that can see, a body that can perceive. But sometimes it’s not even an issue of equity or disability, but an issue of culture. In Japan, before the 1990s, there were no two different words for blue and green. So even today, if you were to go to many of the suburbs, some of the traffic lights are red, amber and green; some are red, amber, and blue, and if you to tap the shoulder of anyone over sixty, and ask, ‘what are these two colors?’ for them it’s green – green is green is green. There is no differentiation,

because there was no Japanese word, for the longest time, between green and blue. So, accessibility can also be about culture. And it is on this note that I want to offer again that an image is what is in your mind that no one else can see and that only your heart can perceive.

Susan Hansen: Thank you, Crystal. Ace Lehner, could you share your thoughts on this question of what is an image?

Ace Lehner: As the last one to go, I'll try to keep it brief. What I'd like to share about myself and my own interest in thinking about images is that recently, in my current book project, I'm thinking about trans embodied methodologies in relationship to photography. I am both a scholar and an artist, and I often work in photography and performance. And so, I've been thinking in particular about the ways that trans methods, in conversation with visual studies, can work to begin to decolonise the ways that we've inherited of thinking about photographs and representation in particular, and locations descended from the colonial project. For me, trans methods are mobilised as a way to call attention to embodied experiences – privileging the embodied experience rather than the representation. In so many discourses, we talk about representations having almost a relationship to semiotics in the way that the surface of the image is a sign, and it relates to some idea of authenticity or interiority or truth, and trans rejects that as a premise.

These are some of the things that I've been thinking about with regard to images. In my own work, I often work in photo and video and performance as sustained spaces for being able to think about and intervene in these discourses of representation to challenge the assumptions that we might make when looking at others. And so, in this way I'm also thinking about the body or the site as an image, and some of the artists that I write about also think about the body as an image, as a site, as an intervention. I'm trying to keep it brief and to foreground some of the things that I'm interested in, so that we can get into the discussion and dig into some of these questions. But that's where I'm approaching this question from.

Susan Hansen: Thanks so much for your thoughts, Ace. It's vital to include some consideration of embodied experience in our discussion.

John Grady: Keeping in mind the background questions, we'd now like to create a discussion between our panellists and the audience.

MC Cambre: For me, I just have a problem with even asking, *what* is an image? I think it's a tired question. I

don't think it even makes sense. It assumes an image is a thing. So, we really need to start changing these questions. I'm happy that Paolo asked, *when* is an image as a question. But how about *how* is an image? How about saying, what are these relationships? In what times and spaces does something congeal and begin imaging? Can we switch it to a verb? Because as long as we keep thinking this way, we're going to keep assuming that an image is a thing. So, that's a provocation.

Oraib Toukan: I'm going to quickly react to that. It will always be a relevant question. When I think about 'what is an image', I think about its relation to language, and I have only just begun to explore the Arabic language for these answers. Of course, a lot has also come from understandings of 'mental image', from W. J. T. Mitchell and so many others since.

But I think the relevance of the question is central, and I would hope so, because it is within this space that we might get close to consciousness itself to begin understanding knowledge, more ecologically too; to explore other sensory organs of the body and their relation to the grain of an image, as soil grain, and in more ontological and intuitive terms. Honouring subjectivity in these experiences, submitting to its occasions, and its counter-intuitive prospects, somewhat against the epistemic grain, will be the beginning of generating other types of knowledge about what images are.

Paulo Favero: I wanted to add to what CC [MC Cambre] said, and to link back to Crystal's point. I think there's one answer to this question which is technical, so we can start distinguishing a picture from an image. But that's a technicality. I loved it when Crystal was talking about the fact that an image is in the heart – and that means we're already doing exactly what CC was saying. We look at an image from what I call different *whens*, different moments of perception. But I think this can be the terrain for a beautiful encounter between neuroscience, psychology, and the social sciences, because we all have very different views on this – and we can also find points of conflict.

Gaby David: Like CC, I also feel that the question is also somehow nonsensical. I could parallel it to the mobile studies sphere, where I am based. We tend to ask many times, what is intimacy? What is a private image? What is privacy? What is a public? I feel like at every single symposium the same question is asked. But then, just as the boundaries and the limits of intimacy keep on changing, the question of 'what is an image', or *when* is an image, might also be interesting to keep on asking, to keep the question rolling, to try to understand.

John Grady: I was thinking about the piece that Jon Wagner did for the 'What is an Image?' exhibition at the IVSA conference. And he really talks very much like Crystal, in that images are in our brain, and only the heart knows what's there. But what happens is that we use everything else at our disposal – our words, our hands – to create objects of one kind or another, and those things, as they are embodied in the world, those are the objects which express what's in the images, and so all these objects, for the most part, except for language, are almost always intended to be visually seen. So that's the basis of visual culture. And I would argue further that I think that the major transformation probably took place in the last gilded age in the 1890s. Since then, there's been a flurry of innovations. But basically, the central problem is there, of creating a kind of virtual reality that seems real and that has real consequences, and that people struggle to successfully or not successfully manage. We're living through another flurry of what new technologies have made available, but the essential problematic is the same. And that we don't create the images. We create these things, these objects, as a way of, in fact, expressing the images that we need to communicate to others, and we have found a gazillion different kinds of ways of doing that.

Tania Rossetto: What is an image is an ontological question. Object-oriented ontology suggests that a thing is never exhausted or dissolved by relations and processes. It always withdraws. In this sense an image is perhaps a thing, a never exhausted and never totally knowable entity.

TreaAndrea M. Russworm: I was thinking that these questions come up in every field, and that it's interesting when they arise in interdisciplinary spaces. The how and the what kinds of questions. What is the film? What is an image? What is a game? How do these questions resonate? Because in more insular spaces, let's just say in game studies or in game design, the question is constantly asked, what is the game? Often, I think that these questions are posed in order to narrow and exclude, so that when something deviates from whatever sort of canonical or agreed upon definition of X is, then we don't have to think about that. So, I think that the spirit in which those questions are asked really does matter. Are they asked in a gatekeeping spirit? Or to get to other kinds of answers or other kinds of discussions? Are they asked with the intention of being generative and opening? Or are they being asked to close off discussion?

And so, when I think about the question, what is an image, I think that sometimes that question is asked to narrow and reify these distinctions between truth and

distortion. Whereas again, is the truth am I here? Am I physically in my office? Versus the image of myself being in that space, and the images of all the people here on Zoom. Sometimes that question is asked to differentiate between those things – the real, the unreal, or the physical and the representative, for example. And so, I wonder if there's a way of conceding. I agree and concede that returning to this territory of What is this? What is that? isn't always productive. But I think the spirit in which that question is asked really determines where we go from there. We could go to a place that is generative and exploratory. It may open up new possibilities. When you're in an interdisciplinary space, I think that energy tends to be in that vein; whereas in my experience of more insular spaces, that question is often asked with a more narrow intent.

Ace Lehner: Thank you so much for that TreaAndrea. I love the way that this conversation is building, and I wanted to build off that as well. I was just thinking about this question of how we frame this question of what is an image? If it's going to be a generative question, or if it's going to be a policing question is really important, and it got me thinking about, when we set parameters around defining certain things and asking questions about why we're defining things in certain ways for me.

I've been interested in selfies and how those have sort of pushed a redefinition of self-representation and have challenged self-portraiture. And so, as someone who's studied as an artist and studies art history and visual culture, you know, some people have tried to define selfies as being *out* of self-representation to define them as *out* of being portraiture. And I'm really interested in what that definition does? How that devaluing of selfies is political. And so, I'm really interested in thinking about this question, and how the policing and the boundary setting of these things are always political. And so, in this example of selfies, allowing selfies to be considered as an important form of self-representation is really crucial, because they've allowed a real variety and diversity of different self-representations to come into visual culture. So, I think this idea of thinking about how we're defining, policing, articulating even the question of what an image is, is really a critical one.

Gillian Rose: It's also critical to frame the question of 'what is an image' in terms of what asking that question does. I completely agree with everything that TreaAndrea and Ace are saying, but to be practical, we should remember that the answer to that question creates a push towards a particular kind of research method. So, the idea of an image always being contextually performed suggests the really in-depth ethnographic approach that Crystal has been

exemplifying. But there are other versions of what an image might be. There's an amazing list that's been produced in the chat [see [Figure 1](#), below] that might produce very different kinds of methodological implications, and I think that some of the qualities that are often seen in the digital image by more materialist accounts do pose some quite important challenges to

some of the conventional research methods that historically we've been used to using.

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What/when is an image?

1. Data – pixel
2. Haptic, soil (turbe), grain
3. Materiality
4. Manipulable
5. Authenticity
6. playable
7. Animated
8. Constellation
9. Gamification
10. Norms, Culture
11. Depict, speculate => dystopia
12. Absence-presence = Time space compression: visual copresence
13. Togetherness, simultaneity
14. Interstitial capacities
15. NFT
16. Religion icons, meditation support
17. Automation
18. Alt, tagging,
19. Accessibility
20. Embodiment of experiences vs representations
21. Intervene and challenge



FIGURE 1. Chat comment from Gaby David.