

[PB]A.2 THE LURE OF THE IMAGE IN NETWORKED VISUAL CULTURE

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Nadine Wietlisbach
Director Fotomuseum Winterthur

The Lure of the Image explores the seductive powers of photographic images online, investigating how attraction and desire, affect and drive are embedded in contemporary visual culture. The project comprises an exhibition, a printed publication and an online platform, but also follows and builds upon years of constant institutional engagement with digital transformations in photography.

Fotomuseum Winterthur has strategically focused on the development of digital images and the role they play in our networked and algorithmic culture since 2015. Underlying this move is the uncompromising conviction that a contemporary photography institution has a duty to stay attuned to the evolving roles and manifestations of photographic images. The transformations that digital technologies have brought to the photographic medium are not just technical in nature, but also increasingly pervasive social, cultural, political and economic shifts that shape the production, circulation and consumption of photographic images. From digital manipulation to internet image exchange, from smartphone photography to machine vision, from photorealistic computational graphics to algorithmic agency in AI systems, digital images have become the dominant forms of visual culture today. They play a crucial role in shaping economies of attention on social media, move the emotions of global viewers across networks and screens at unprecedented speeds, and have become powerful tools for political propaganda shared across the internet.

These changes in the medium ultimately throw into question and reshape the notion of the museum itself, including ways of exhibiting and collecting images, and Fotomuseum Winterthur has actively embraced an engagement with their impact. As printed photographs leave the pages of books or the walls of exhibition spaces to inhabit social media feeds, game software and AI processes, how can the institution rethink its physical form? And how can the institution itself adapt to the shift of images to digital and online spaces? Over the years, Fotomuseum Winterthur has developed various strategies and experimented in a number of different formats, thereby drawing on the idea of the museum as a site for knowledge production – both through exhibitions and publication channels, but also by creating online spaces dedicated to the research, production

and presentation of the mutating properties of all things photographic.

The experimental format *SITUATIONS* (2015–21) played with the possibilities of a media lab and exhibition format within the museum, where the physical rooms of the institution ran in parallel with a dedicated online platform (situations.fotomuseum.ch) – working as complementary and intertwined domains that brought together artworks and vernacular positions, events and exhibitions, photographic history and contemporary image culture. It also set out to find experimental ways of merging exhibition with discourse, inspired by the writings on Fotomuseum Winterthur's blog *Still Searching* (2012–23), a discursive online platform that hosted some of the most relevant and timely conversations around photography, its networked and computational forms, and increasingly complex representational politics. *Screen Walks* (2020–25), created in collaboration with The Photographer's Gallery in London, engaged the format of the livestream as a medium where artists, researchers and curators could explore the digital spaces in which their core practice takes place. It used the possibilities of screen-sharing functions and live video streaming to investigate digital and online image spaces that it would not be possible to experience physically within the museum: from images on online marketplaces to profile pictures on dating apps, from photorealistic game worlds to photography on social media. Last but not least, from its engagement with networked images, Fotomuseum Winterthur has developed a unique focus on image and media literacy, expanding its educational offers to include knowledge-exchange around the most recent image phenomena through dedicated formats for teenagers and young adults.

All of these projects and experiments were conducted by combining a critical approach to the investigation of the photographic medium with a creative and playful attitude. This allowed Fotomuseum Winterthur to recontextualise its understanding of itself as an institution for present-day photography, structurally incorporating discursive processes and research within a cultural institution and an art museum. The year 2025 marks the tenth year of this strategic institutional focus on 'post-photography', networked images and algorithmic imaging systems: ten years of asking what photography

is or has become or will be; ten years of disassembling and reassembling every brick and every pixel of Fotomuseum Winterthur. 2025 is also the year in which the bricks of its building have literally been taken down and put up again, namely in a process of renovation as well as the creation of a new and expanded exhibition space. And the museum is set to re-open its doors with *The Lure of the Image*, confirming its unwavering commitment to exploring contemporary digital and networked images.

The Lure of the Image is an ambitious project that, through its multiple physical and online components, investigates the contemporary conditions of algorithmic and networked images and their abilities to create affective and emotional relations as they circulate online: from building systems of belief and shaping political identities, to driving economies based on viewer attention, engagement and reactions. Such themes are the central focus of the upcoming re-opening exhibition at Fotomuseum Winterthur. These powers of the image are having a global impact, yet at the same time are becoming increasingly hard to resist or even to notice. If traditional photography has always been able to attract, lure and capture our gaze, to subtly seduce us and influence our views on the world it portrays, contemporary digital and networked images seem to have created a different, if not totalising relation with the viewer.

Thirst traps, cursed images, sludge content, ASMR, hatewatching: a whole new vocabulary surrounds the world of contemporary image phenomena that have incorporated mechanisms of lure, capture and control. Through their algorithmic properties and the platforms on which they circulate, these images create attachments we depend on, despite their fragility and ephemerality. Images offer intimacy, promises of comfort and community. They help solidify and circulate ideological views. And they shape and envision lifestyles and identities for us to aspire to, envy, enact and live vicariously. Their affective dimensions stir desires, compulsions and obsessions. Due to their circulatory processes, they become enmeshed in algorithmic environments that are driven by a capitalist attention economy set out to exploit the ambiguous properties of photographic images and meanings. It is here, where the representational layer of images is combined with image operations encoded in their software, that the lure shifts from a surface level to the

non-representational and often undetectable side of the image: data extraction and the analysis of our online activity tailor what appears on our feeds to individual preferences, crafting a personalised experience that is designed to sustain engagement and drive consumption. Desire is manufactured through seductive narratives and aspirational worlds, inviting viewers to imagine themselves within these carefully curated frames that are first and foremost crafted to generate value. In digital economies, value is increasingly measured in terms of visibility and engagement: viral images influence trends, shape collective identities and seamlessly translate cultural capital into economic value. Brands and creators leverage visual content to monetise attention, reinforcing a competitive cycle where attraction, manipulation and consumption blur. Images are therefore increasingly instrumentalised to ensnare viewers in a cycle where they are subtly guided toward specific actions, emotions and opinions.

In her 2019 hit song *7 Rings*, pop star Ariana Grande sings 'I see it, I like it, I want it, I got it'. These four moments, apart from making a catchy chorus that hooks the listeners, also articulate the cycle of the lure of the image. Exploring the complex dynamics of attraction ('I see it'), emotion ('I like it'), desire ('I want it') and value extraction ('I got it'), *The Lure of the Image* invites a closer look at the mechanisms that shape our perceptions, emotions, desires and choices within a landscape where images are both inescapable and transformative. The fourteen artistic positions presented in the exhibition and assembled in this publication all interfere in this attention-seeking and capitalist-driven cycle to critically investigate, creatively or humorously subvert, or to actively resist the lure(s) of the image.

Sara Cwynar's *Scroll 1* (2020) draws us into the contemporary landscape of networked images circulating online as fragments stripped of their original contexts, compiled in media environments that are designed to provide a dense and continuous flow of images. Mimicking our social media feeds, the viewer experiences the platform logics that keep us glued to our screens, as well as a sense of overwhelm and disorientation caused by the online visual abundance. The instability of photographic meaning in such online environments is explored by Viktoria Binschtok, who investigates the

ubiquitous role of emoji in digital communication in her series *Digital Semiotics* (2024–25). Binschtok traces how digital symbols enhance messages, shape public discourse or circumvent political censorship, all the while emphasising how these simplistic, easy-to-use codes shape and nurture complex conversations through sharing, sequencing and context, and so potentially foster solidarity and activism.

That photographic images online considerably shape the way we see and present ourselves, capitalising on and therefore defining what is considered beautiful, desirable and appealing, is at the centre of the works of Jenny Rova and Éamonn Freel x Lynski. Rova's *A MILF DREAM – My Matches on Tinder* (2024) humorously exposes the tension between personal desire and the increasingly algorithmic curation of self-image in online dating. Her hand-crafted collages weave together photographic elements from her resulting Tinder matches, transforming them into projections of potential physical and romantic connections while at the same time revealing the standardised visual language with which we aim to maximise our own desirability and social appeal. In their video work *In the Future, Everything Will Be a Trend for 15 Seconds* (2024), Freel x Lynski further explore this dynamic, exposing how beauty culture is caught between the desire to conform to globalised ideals and the simultaneous urge to stand out through niche trends. Freel x Lynski envision a dystopian loop, where individuals endlessly adopt and discard trends, performing them in real-time through augmented reality (AR) filters. Their work comments on the blurring of the boundaries between identity, performance and the capitalist systems that perpetuate this cycle.

While exploring themes related to beauty, Joiri Minaya's artistic practice focuses on the colonial legacy embedded within its cultural conception, further exposing the racial and gendered biases that are encoded within technological systems and reinforced through online databases and search results. Logics of voyeurism, exoticism and objectification specifically affect the bodies of women of colour, as Minaya's exploration of Caribbean identity, stereotypes and body politics demonstrates. Both *#dominicanwomengooglesearch* (2016) and *Divergences* (2020–22) aim to subvert a racist and sexist gaze encoded within visual technologies, in order to

break free from the oppressive constraints of photographic representation that has rendered these bodies appropriable, consumable and exploitable to the desires of a *white* gaze. This bias is also at the core of Michael Mandiberg's project *Taking Stock* (2024), which examines millions of stock photographs and their commonly generic, stereotypical representations using machine learning. As these images form the foundation of datasets used to train AI image generators, their uniformity and embedded biases are inherited by AI systems. The ghostly portraits that surface in Mandiberg's densely layered prints and hypnotic video sequences expose our contemporary visual culture as one that is haunted by a capitalist ideology that dictates norms, values and the dominating politics of visibility.

A capitalist haunting is also reflected in Simone C Niquille's *Chair Motion Studies* (2025), in which the artist deconstructs the effects of photorealistic mundanity to reveal how a seemingly inconspicuous object like a mass-produced IKEA chair exerts influence by blending seamlessly into the imaging of everyday life. By imagining a speculative evolution of the virtual Bertil chair, Niquille exposes a quiet yet pivotal transformation whose authority lies not in spectacle but in its ability to remain unnoticed.

What is the power, then, to resist these hauntings that shape our perception, emotions and desires? Hito Steyerl's *Strike* (2010) offers the most radical form of resistance: the complete withdrawal from systems of representation altogether. In this short but powerful video work, we witness the artist as she shatters the surface of a screen using a hammer and chisel. With one simple yet deliberate gesture, Steyerl reminds us of the hidden structures and power dynamics of visual representation, urging us to reclaim agency and push back against the lure of the image. An altogether different and collective form of resistance is at the heart of Zoé Aubry's *#Ingrid* (2022), which artistically captures and archives a hashtag movement that unfolded on social media in response to the femicide of Ingrid Escamila Vargas. In protest at how the press sensationalised photographs of the victim's mutilated body, activists not only took to the streets, but also flooded social media with beautiful images, using the hashtag of Ingrid's name in an attempt to rid the internet of the gruesome photos.

Dina Kelberman's *The Wave* (2025) is something of a transition into the last section of the exhibition, which explores the darker underbelly of visual online culture. For this immersive installation, the artist collected thousands of ASMR sponge videos from Instagram, organising them from 'soothing' to 'abrasive'. The resulting cacophony of sounds and visuals amplifies the original ASMR experience, exposing the complex tensions lurking within this audiovisual phenomenon that captivates our senses through its aesthetic allure, sonic landscapes and hypnotic repetition.

Jon Rafman's video triptych *Egregore I, II and III* (2021) delves into the disturbing and equally fascinating allure of 'cursed images': authorless, unsettling images that distort the familiar through a surreal displacement of objects into unthinkable contexts, glitches or optical errors. Sourcing them from the internet and animating them, Rafman exploits their power to simultaneously attract and repel, luring the viewer into an unsuccessful search for meaning and context.

Shifts in meaning and context are also at the centre of the artistic investigations of Sara Bezovšek and Ellie Wyatt. Bezovšek's ongoing series *A Life of Its Own* (2023-) highlights how memetic content seamlessly blends entertainment, ideology and politics, reinforcing the slippery nature of digital narratives. Exploring how popular movies transform online into memes, GIFs and remixes, Bezovšek tracks how scenes are turned into memetic fragments that gain a life of their own as they leave their source context and circulate online – where they not only take on new meanings but are easily repurposed for various social and political agendas. Wyatt's *cherry picker* (2021), in turn, explores how photographic images circulating in low resolution shape belief systems and become the foundation for conspiracy theories, apocalypse myths and celebrity cults. The work shows how blurry, manipulated images direct viewers' attention through seemingly scientific graphic elements, creating spaces for 'alternative truths' through their poor quality and unstable interpretation.

Perhaps the most unsettling revelation comes in Noura Tafeche's *Annihilation Core Inherited Lore* (2023-), where the aesthetics of cuteness – pastel plushies, manga fan art, doe-eyed characters, and viral content such as memes or online dance challenges – become vehicles

for military propaganda, violence and alt-right ideology. Drawing on an extensive archive of over 30,000 files, Tafeche exposes how seemingly innocent imagery can be weaponised to disguise and disseminate harmful narratives.

From the very beginning, the question of who – or what – the lure is, which mechanisms it implements and which (image) forms it assumes has shaped the core of this research, which unfolded over the course of three years and over different spaces and formats, among them the online platform permanentbeta.network. Created in 2022, the [permanent beta] platform served as a vessel for the curatorial and artistic research around *The Lure of the Image*. Hosting reflections by the curators of Fotomuseum Winterthur, essay contributions from theorists and work in progress by invited artists, it also features creative and experimental series of online posts that played with the possibilities of the online space. *Cheated by an Image*, for example, is a compilation of short audio contributions from artists, curators, researchers and experts from the field of photography and visual culture, sharing their personal stories and intimate confessions about how images lure, seduce and deceive. Each voice message – incorporated into this publication as transcripts – is accompanied by a soundtrack composed by the musicians Maria Chiara Argirò and Riccardo Chiaberta. The series of *Accidental Discoveries* is a collection of screenshots of definitions that help map the territory of the contemporary lure of the image, identifying the terms, vernacular neologisms and phenomena, spanning from widespread to hyper-niche, that are connected to it. Rather than attempting to define a coherent glossary, the curatorial team intuitively gathered terms, short reflections and quotes from various sources – from academic contributions to popular culture. The series *The Conversational Image* presented conversations on messaging apps between curators, artists or theorists that take an image as its starting point. The format engages social media platforms not only for circulating images, but also for sharing thoughts and having conversations around them. It acknowledges the fact that all practices of photography have been transformed by smartphones and apps – from how we take images to how we encounter them, speak about and contextualise them. Another example was the series *Sponge Project*, where artist Dina Kelberman was invited to vi-

sualise her work in progress for the final artwork *The Wave*, which contains all of her weekly live streamed ‘office hours’. Every Friday, for about six months, the artist shared her process of categorising more than 5,000 ASMR sponge videos appropriated from Instagram, while inviting viewers to interact with her through a chat. More contributions from artists and researchers are available on the online platform (permanentbeta.network), for readers who wish to further explore broader reflections surrounding *The Lure of the Image* project.

Over time, we have come to define and accept our ‘lead suspect’ and ulterior protagonist of the show as a slippery shapeshifter – not least thanks to the variety of the invaluable and significant investigations from all the contributors navigating the complex terrain of contemporary visual culture. Due to its ability to slip into endlessly different (in)visible roles, while donning various masks, the lure inherently defies conclusive categorisation. Similarly, our research remains in an intermediate state, shaped by subjective and collective perspectives, and with the knowledge in mind that it will continue to evolve as long as images circulate online. *The Lure of the Image* is therefore meant as a provisional mapping of the typologies, practices and phenomena of the digital lure in contemporary visual culture, providing the reader and viewer with a set of investigative tools to engage in their own hunt for the lure as they critically and creatively examine the visual material they are immersed in online.

Marco De Mutiis, Gwendolyn Fässler,
Doris Gassert, Alessandra Nappo