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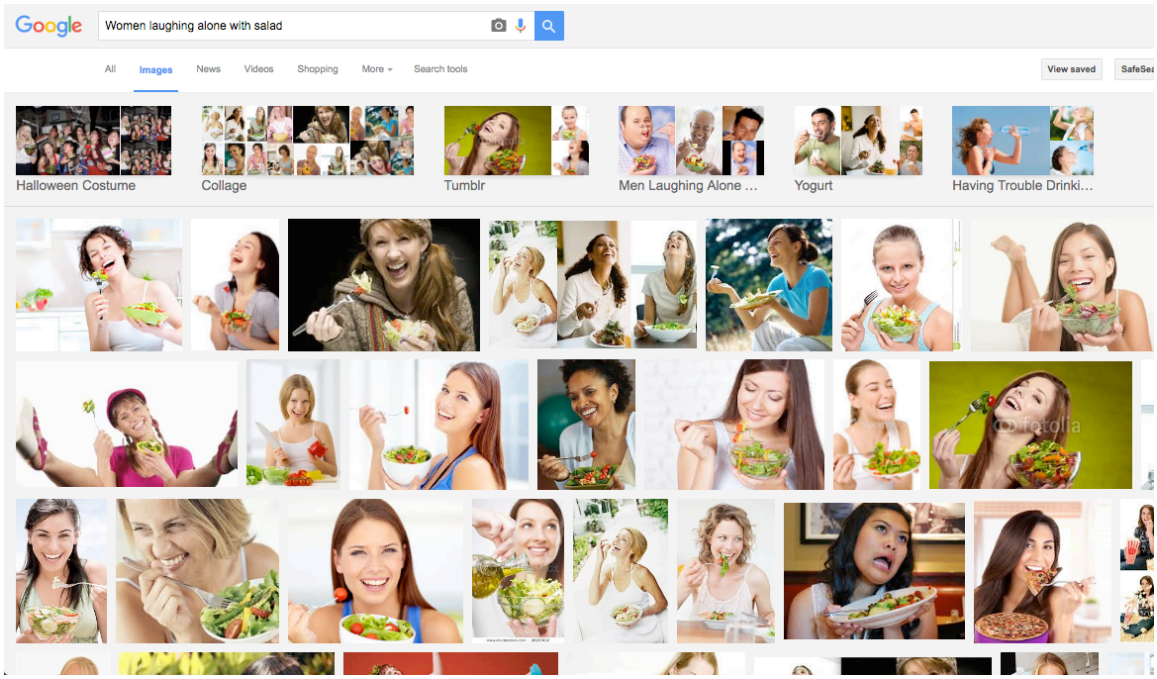

Google image search, "Women laughing alone with salad" (screenshot)

This, This, This, This
by Noah Dillon

We find out what a medium is only in retrospect, never in prophecy.

One should always be skeptical of claims (including this one) made about how technology is changing mankind, bearing in mind that such announcements have, historically, been exaggerated, poorly forecasted, and are often applicable mostly to wealthy, white westerners. A lot of what we do with new technologies is merely a recapitulation of what we already do with old ones: communicating, traveling, fucking, buying, sharing. Many recent technologies (telephony, computing, television, cars, etc.) far exceeded expectations of the breadth and durability of their usefulness. Others—consumer rocketry, domestic nuclear power, airships, pneumatic tubes, Malthusian doom, etc.—fell far short. If we can't predict which technologies will survive, evolve, or fail, how can we possibly predict the ways in which a given tool will be used or understood? How can we say, after only 15 or 25 years, how the Internet is affecting

us?[1] And how can we tell that it will be different where similar expectations for TV, radio, novels, and other technologies fell short?

In an interview with *Longform*, journalist Adrian Chen (who often writes on the interstices of the digital and the social) said, "I think everybody understands how [social media] works," referring to the fact that few readers need Twitter or Facebook described to them as tools. But that familiarity doesn't mean that we understand how these things actually work. Although many adults in the developed world know how to operate such platforms, our conceptualization of them as functions remains murky and open to speculation of the basest kind: fear mongering, scientism, hysteria, utopianism, etc. etc. etc.[2]

The Internet is an inchoate thing. People are still developing it, and experimenting with those developments. It will take a long time (perhaps forever) for humanity to understand it fully.[3] That hasn't stopped pundits from making predictions about what it is and how it works and how it will change everything for everyone forever.

That sort of soothsaying includes a line that can sometimes be heard in conversations about contemporary culture: that the ubiquity and easy transfer of images, the decreasing cost of digital storage, will transform people into sophisticated curators of digital content, and more. Poet and artist Jonathan Harris summarized the view with asinine brevity: "Curation is replacing creation as a mode of expression," he proclaimed in 2012 at CreativeMornings, a kind of TED knock-off lecture series, in which

[1] How does the novel affect us? How radio? How tempera paint?

[2] And, again, this is "many adults in the developed world," not all of them, and not broad swaths of the planet's people. The number of Internet users is growing quickly, but is still only at about 40% worldwide (80% in the developed world). It seems doubtful, though, that people in the developing world will use the Internet in significantly different ways than people in the developed world currently do.

[3] I'd argue that we still don't understand print, but that's a whole other thing.

spiels/platitudes on creativity are served with breakfast.[4] This is a talking point among pseudo-intellectuals and data cherry-pickers, which often neatly sidesteps the problem that curation requires creations to stage, present, contextualize, and so on.[5] The idea has escaped seminars and editorial posts and made a beeline for design and marketing gurus flogging tutorials for using "content curation" to help self-promoters and businesses maintain the social media visibility of themselves or their brand. And according to Google search trends, "curator" has begun to climb in social interest (with its presumed glow of sophistication and acculturation), as Net 2.0 terms like "aggregator" and "blogger" or even "avatar" have slipped.[6] A 2012 survey by Pew asked respondents whether they're a "creator" or "curator," by which they meant do they share pictures they made, or do they repost found images.[7] Curation is a term in vogue.

It's unclear, though, how much curation, as a methodology, enters the conscious thinking of ordinary people sharing photos of their food, travel, work, or play.[8] What happens when the proletarian controls of the means of propagation?

What does that term "curator" mean more commonly? The name comes from Latin, curare, meaning "to take care." Curators were originally stewards and managers: custodians of Rome's public works, of medieval church congregants, and of modern institutions and of their collected artifacts. They're cultural bureaucrats, cultivating

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[4] Choire Sicha, before completely castigating Harris's ideology in a June 2012 essay for *The Awl* called "You Are Not a Curator, You Are Actually Just a Filthy Blogger," used as an epigraph a tweet by designer Tina Roth Eisenberg (CreativeMornings' New York organizer), which repeated Mr. Harris's nonsense.

[5] Incidentally, as Harris was sloganeering, in 2012, not only were other propagandists spouting the same nonsense, but a slate of articles pushing back on such sloppy use of the term "curation" were published in the New York *Times*, *ArtInfo*, and *The Awl*.

[6] This isn't to say that "curator" matches those other terms in search popularity, only that its own popularity is rising at about the rate that theirs has diminished.

[7] Incidentally, the responses were 41 and 46%, respectively, with the remainder saying they do both. How much that kind of self-reporting tells you about anything, I don't know. It seems stupid and likely highly inaccurate.

[8] "Ordinary people" as in "not a brand."

people and managing norms. The contemporary curator, in a world with proliferating civilizing institutions and exhibited specimens of history and human activity, performs multiple functions for a respective institution: they oversee collections, develop exhibitions from conceptualization through research and execution. They organize shows and design the way they're hung. They liaise with conservators, administrators, and education staff, and they aid in developing ancillary materials, such as publications and didactic texts. Not all curators peform all these roles all the time, and obviously some of these are not relevant for the blogger-curator imagined by people like Harris, but the upshot of their work is the organization of cultural artifacts intended to ask questions and make arguments, to draw complex webs of signification, and to give a view of their subject that will engage a cross-section of viewers, and push them to think.

Although many people are, it seems, anxious about what they post or rebroadcast, and about the semiotics and social relations of their comments, selfies, and playlists, they don't appear to be curating. Rather than provide an argument, they offer a list of favorites and preferences, or sometimes plain facts: I ate this, I am here, I like this, I saw these things, I experienced this, this happened, I am here, I am here.

Some programs have tried to take advantage of the new ability and agility of the Internet to curate. The now-defunct vvork.com curated short series of formally, conceptually, or culturally related images and objects as a form of rhetorical comparison. So too the archive of art and critical theory resources at the document-sharing site *monoskop*, The Kadist Foundation which commissions and hosts site-specific online projects by artists, and others. (Wikipedia and, say, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy kind of get it both ways: they're completist if unevenly selective.) But actual curatorial projects are few and far between, relative to the abundance of indifferent/undifferentiating streams of data. Rather than offering a curated view of the world more broadly, Tumblrs and blogs and Instagram feeds and other social media sharing—even by actual professional curators, critics, and art advisors—seem geared more toward expressing personal favorites, branding oneself, or capturing a snapshot of daily activities. Those are RSS feeds, not curation.

There is, however, a seemingly obvious response to the torrent of imagery: not as curator, but as collector. The urge to amass is embedded in pre-Internet culture: baseball cards and Happy Meal toys; the parodic, endless slide carousel of vacation photos; forgeries and replicas; fetish porn; Kennedy assassination ephemera; and so on, with excessive accumulation focused on a narrow band.

Sites and services such as Tumblr and Instagram have become public repositories of enormous, repetitious collections, variously (dis)organized. There are tons of these virtual clearinghouses for culture. They suction up Uber driver selfies, sets of artists making visually similar work, variations on a meme, awkward family photos, cute cats, every punk band that ever recorded anything, photos of contrails and flat earth propaganda, tweets automatically generated by bots, and so on ad nauseum, all streaming in columns. A few people analyze them, such as the quasi-anthropological *Know Your Meme*. Others just stock up: the Cheezburger conglomerate, *Buzzfeed*'s lists, and thousands of other anonymous depositories.

It's really telling to scroll through various databanks and see what's presented by the mindless algorithms at Instagram's search page, Google's reverse image search, or on diddly.com/random, which generates random image searches. It's a view into the hive mind, or, if tailored recommendations are on offer, a skewed vision of oneself in a hazy mirror.[9]

Seriality has been a staple in art for eons.[10] It's the basis of modern consumption and

[9] Does this analogy suggest that bots are more sophisticated curators than typical human users? They draw from and recontextualize one's own personal reservoir of signification, or from the whole world's. Is that unfair, and if so, then to whom? And does it extend to museum boards and other strategists crafting blockbuster exhibitions for the same kind of attention-grabbing effect that Search Engine Optimization is intended to exploit, trying to maximize user interaction?

[10] For example: the iterative use of standardized signifiers and scenes in religious and bureaucratic artifacts from around the world, Lucas Cranach the Elder's repeated depictions of Judith and Holofernes, copies of famous artworks, the recurrence of almost identical images of

production. And repetition is deeply ingrained in the human psyche, as a source of both education and relief for children and adults. Speaking with David Lipsky about formulaic TV in 1996, David Foster Wallace observed, “the predictability in popular art [...] is profoundly soothing.” I think it’s fair to say that you can discover some really revealing things about what humanity (or a slice of it, such as White Men Wearing Google Glass, or people brought to tears by Marina Abramović) watches over and over and over without thinking about it. For example, whole Roland Barthes-like treatises could be written on the redundant images of Women Laughing Alone With Salad, or the urge by some Redditors to compile registers of DeepDream Porn, or GIFs of baby elephants, and how these pictures are similarly or differently constructed, clipped, cropped, contextualized, and how they account for their disparate sources and their narrow but intense (and probably brief) popularity.

One of the really new things that the Internet provides is indexing on a massive scale, including, more and more, the indexing of images, videos, and music. We can see and contrast and evaluate similar diverse sources of information. We can analyze the relative utility of comparable news articles at The New York *Times*, *RT*, and *Buzzfeed*. We can find the perfectly funny cat image in a sea of millions. We can trawl iterations of, say, Harlem Shake videos. We can feel some relation to humanity by the way that we agree or disagree with the choices our fellow humans are making publicly, merely by watching the number of views or likes or memetic iterations click upward.) We can riffle through billions of folders from around the world simultaneously and line up in tumbling rows the best possible choices from each. One way to read these repetitious archives is as an attempt to stave off the seeming inevitability of disappearing data, however briefly. These archives will vanish someday—they’re recognized as being temporary, and their status as cultural artifacts is typically demoted for that reason. These dumb libraries of contemporary mundanities are all destined to burn and burn and burn. It should then be no surprise that rather than curating selectively to form a complex thesis, many people would instead respond to these recent technologies by repeating the same word over and over again: this, this, this, this.

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the whaling industry over nearly 400 years, Cézanne’s paintings of Mount Sainte-Victoire, and on and on.