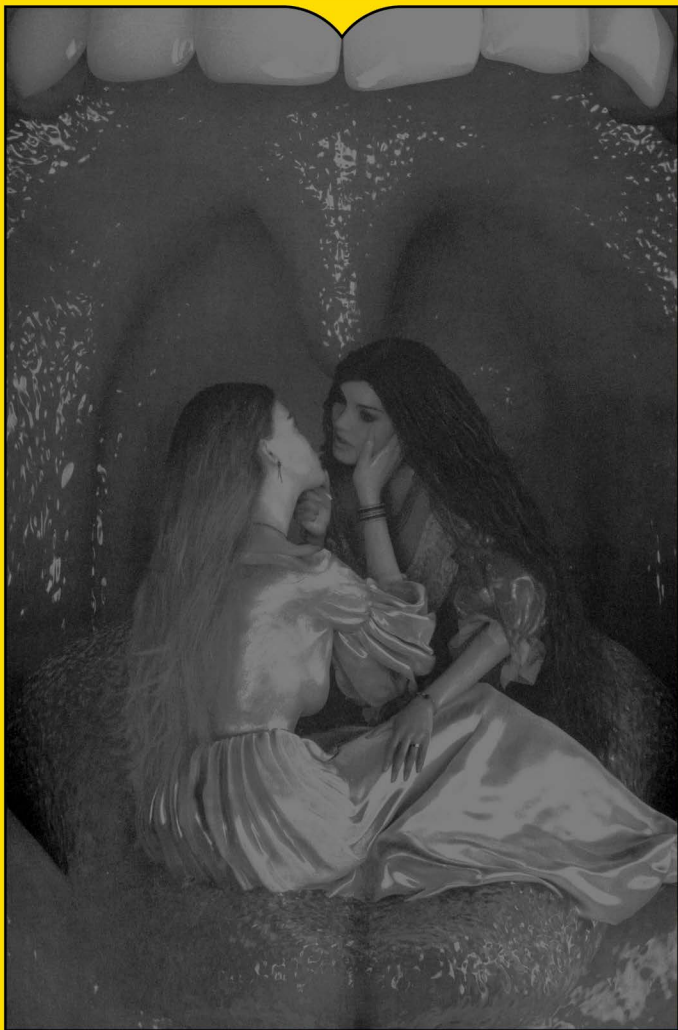


Nora O' Murchú
When Images Become Systems:
On Visuality, Affect and Platform Power



It's hard not to feel that everything begins and ends with a screen. Over the past few years, we have certainly grown accustomed to knowing the world through one. In our daily routines, we continuously consume images and narratives that not only connect us to desires, geopolitical crises or remote places but increasingly leave us feeling that the screen – the interface to our image-saturated present – is the site through which the immensity of the world can be felt and understood. Yet it's in this real-time organisation of images that the image itself has begun to shift. As the means for producing and circulating images have become so readily available, images have become a surface for not only representing reality but for organising it. Today we have become disconcertingly familiar with a new kind of image – affective, performative, decentralised, computational – one that reorganises perception while destabilising meaning in real time. These kinds of images circulate quickly, at scales and speeds beyond our comprehension, through technical infrastructures that enclose our lives, reinforcing affective economies,¹ where they operate as systems that track and orchestrate attention, administer emotion and choreograph what is possible. And in our current regime of visibility, there is nothing more powerful than an image that acts as a system – where the synthetic governs the real.

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1 Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective Economies. *Social Text* 22(2), pp. 117–139. Retrieved May 20, 2026, from https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-117

We have been told that to be visible is to matter – that recognition is a form of power and that virality and attention can stand in for agency. Yet visibility has never been neutral, and within the digital systems we inhabit, it has become a battleground – the primary condition through which the world is organised and acted upon. To be visible today is to be scanned, categorised and made legible within algorithmic systems that decide what circulates and what disappears. Visibility doesn't just show you – it formats you through demands for coherence, legibility and recognisability² on opaque terms set in advance, and across this organised form of scarcity, the image as system operates. Whether through political spectacle, celebrity culture, AI-generated imagery or platform circulation, the image as system works by aligning affect, narrative and visibility in order to produce regimes of perception³ and stabilise beliefs in real time. In this competition for visibility, what matters is not truth but sustained presence – even when the claims are weak, contradictory or statistically unsupported. Repetition, circulation, affect and infrastructural amplification then become mechanisms through which these narratives sediment into social reality. This is more than a transformation in visual culture – it marks a reorganisation of political space and, with it, the social relations it encodes. Under these conditions, visibility becomes a form of administration through which social, emotional and computational life is constructed and managed by atmospheric persuasion, algorithmic sorting, affective conditioning and aesthetic manipulation. What is

² Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press.

³ Crary, J. (1999). *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. MIT Press.

possible to feel, believe or contest in public life is not left open – it is formatted in advance, managed by the very infrastructures that deliver these images to us.

To understand the image as a system, it's worth remembering that an image is never just the visible surface of a deeper infrastructure – it is also shaped by the very processes that produce, circulate and operationalise it. To look at images today requires a shift in attention towards how technical and computational conditions produce perception, behaviour and social life. Image making has never existed outside these conditions of mediation: from perspective systems and photography to cinema, networks and computation, visual culture has always been entangled with the technical systems through which images are produced and seen. But with the shift towards images operating as systems, contemporary image-making practices turn towards the infrastructure itself: its operational logics, technical arrangements and social effects. Across simulation, AI-generated imagery, games, datasets and networked environments, artists are working from within the systems that shape how images are circulated, measured and made operative in everyday life. What emerges across these practices is a new kind of image making that reveals how images are no longer simply visual objects but arrangements of technical, social and affective operations that shape how reality is seen, felt and organised. What distinguishes these works from information or content is their ability to interrupt instrumental logics: to slow perception down, destabilise meaning, hold contradiction open and make infrastructures perceptible.

Over the past few years, I have worked alongside the practices of Simone C. Niquille, Bassam Issa Al-Sabah &

Jennifer Mehigan and Ayoung Kim, and it is through their works that these conditions can perhaps be most clearly traced. Though each approaches the image through their own set of concerns, their works move through the infrastructures that now organise visual culture – computational vision, platform aesthetics, simulation, logistics, affective performance and synthetic environments – exposing how images increasingly organise, condition and structure our daily life. It is through these practices that the infrastructural conditions shaping contemporary images begin to come into view.

The Image Is a Signal

The work of Simone C. Niquille has long engaged with the politics of machine vision, synthetic environments and the normative assumptions embedded within computational systems. Across her practice, Niquille explores how the world is rendered legible through datasets, classification systems and computer vision infrastructures. But in *duckrabbit.tv* (2023), this enquiry shifts towards narrative, character and synthetic worldbuilding to explore what Niquille describes as parametric truth⁴ – a reality produced and verified through software and synthetic data, where truth no longer emerges through photographic indexicality but through the composed environments, simulations and rendering systems through which computational vision learns to see.

Structured as a speculative cartoon series unfolding across seven short episodes, *duckrabbit.tv* moves through

rendering environments, calibration processes, optical tricks, architectural references and synthetic landscapes following a queer character – duckrabbit⁵ – as it struggles to navigate a computational terrain. Each short confronts a different condition of computational seeing: a floating chrome duckrabbit references the mirrored HDRI spheres used in CGI and VFX production to capture environmental light and apply it to virtual objects; within a Cornell box, duckrabbit's shadow no longer aligns with its body, destabilising assumptions around perspective, simulation and truth projection; elsewhere, the character rotates ninety degrees as perspective itself shifts, stretches across planetary geoid models or speeds between architectural “ducks” and “decorated sheds” borrowed from Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's *Learning from Las Vegas*. Throughout the series, duckrabbit continuously mutates between balloon, shadow, cartoon, traffic sign, chrome surface and game asset, refusing to settle into a machine-readable form.



4 Niquille, S. C. (2017, September). SimFactory. *E-flux*. Retrieved May 20, 2026, from <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/artificial-labor/153913/simfactory>

5 The duck-rabbit is a famous ambiguous optical illusion, popularised by psychologist Joseph Jastrow in 1900 and later used by Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) to illustrate how perception shifts between different interpretations of the same image.



[...]

The Image Is a Mood

In *Uncensored Lilac* (2024), Bassam Issa Al-Sabah and Jennifer Mehigan construct a heat-struck world saturated by visibility, performance and emotional excess. The film unfolds through drifting monologues, synthetic landscapes, digital textures, overheated colour palettes and hyper-stylised goddess figures whose bodies appear both fragile and ornamental. Characters speak constantly yet never seem to communicate with one another. Instead, the viewer is subjected to a constant stream of monologues delivered directly to the camera, while moods of desire, boredom, rage, contradiction and exhaustion saturate the film's atmosphere.



Set within a dreamlike landscape populated by goddesses, avatars, animals and synthetic companions, *Uncensored Lilac* imagines a world where climate collapse has eroded not only the environment but the very conditions of social relations. The goddesses are beautiful, highly aestheticised, veiny, glitching figures adorned with pearls, flowers and monumental forms. Their bodies shimmer as they drift

through the film hypervisible and emotionally exposed, shaped by the affective conditions of contemporary visibility. The characters occupy the same terrain yet never address one another, only the viewer. They remain trapped within continuous performance, competing for visibility, attention and circulation. Heat – both environmental and emotional – is everywhere, but it does not bind these figures together. Instead, it mirrors the atmosphere of platform culture itself: everything is oversaturated, overexposed and overexpressed.

The film captures a condition increasingly familiar within platform culture, where people are expected to remain continuously visible – performing themselves through emotional exposure, self-presentation and constant circulation across platforms and feeds. Public figures are increasingly maintained through the accumulation of conflicting images distributed across headlines, interviews, advertisements, scandals, performances and social media feeds. When Kim Kardashian appears in a Paris courtroom wearing €3 million in jewellery, and on the same day headlines announce her involvement in a Ryan Reynolds legal drama, it is not a coincidence. These events, though distinct in tone and setting, operate as networked images: distributed nodes within a larger visibility system designed to sustain attention across different registers at once. Each appearance performs something different – legal credibility, glamour, celebrity excess, intimacy, confession – yet together, they stabilise the persona through repetition, circulation and continuous exposure. Figures like Kardashian or Trump no longer circulate through singular images or a fixed narrative but through the ongoing management of visibility itself.



[...]

The Image Is a World

What distinguishes these new kinds of images is that they not only operate as systems but, for some, increasingly constitute the world itself, or at least the conditions through which it is navigated, experienced and understood. So, the question for me about images today is: how do images make real the infrastructural conditions of the image itself? It is perhaps for this reason that the worlds constructed by Ayoung Kim feel so uncomfortably familiar. In *Delivery Dancer's Sphere* (2022), Kim constructs a synthetic Seoul shaped by logistical systems, platform labour, predictive management and continuous recalculation. In this endlessly optimised world, there is never enough time. Every movement is tracked, measured and recalculated through systems of optimisation, prediction and logistical coordination. Here, survival is tied to systems of speed, ratings and visibility. Capturing the anxiety that haunts our technical present, where the pressure to keep up and the fear of falling behind saturate everyday life, Kim intensifies the pressures already shaping everyday life, exposing how movement, labour and time increasingly unfold through systems that never stop tracking, recalculating and updating the world around them.

At the heart of this saga is Ernst Mo, a food delivery courier managed by the Dancemaster algorithm, which continuously recalculates her routes through the city. Moving through highways, tunnels, logistical corridors and increasingly distorted urban environments, Ernst races against time itself. Nudged by the platform to continuously improve her speed and ratings, she is pushed into endless competition under the constant threat of disappearing from

the infrastructure sustaining her life. Kim captures the desperation of the labourer tied to an algorithmic clock, where optimisation extends beyond labour into everyday existence. The city unfolds through game-engine animation, synthetic imagery, live-action footage and warped architectural environments that feel both hyperreal and strangely unstable, as though reality itself is being continuously rendered, recalculated and operationalised in real time. Yet this world of perpetual calculation begins to fracture through Ernst's encounters with En Storm, her competitor turned shadow twin, whose appearance causes time to slow down, loop and fold back on itself. Rather than functioning as a backdrop to the narrative, the world behaves like an operational image: regulating movement, constraining behaviour and organising everyday existence through ratings, countdowns, navigational systems and continuous recalculation. The image here is something inhabited, navigated and lived through.





[...]

Most days, I feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of images moving through the world. Processed continuously through platforms, feeds, interfaces and networks, they often become difficult to grasp fully. These images – affective, performative, decentralised, computational – are not something to be understood simply through looking.¹⁵ Whether through the computational legibility of Simone C. Niquille's *duckrabbit.tv*,¹⁶ the emotionally saturated atmospheres of Bassam Issa Al-Sabah and Jennifer Mehigan's *Uncensored Lilac* or the operational image-worlds of Ayoung Kim's *Delivery Dancer* series, the image emerges as something that organises perception, behaviour and relation. These works show how images construct environments shaped through circulation, visibility and control.¹⁷ Each of the artists inhabits the visual language of computational culture – simulations, platform aesthetics, algorithmic visibility, optimisation systems, synthetic imagery – while pushing these systems towards instability, and with it, a new form of legibility. In *duckrabbit.tv*, computational vision drifts towards absurdity. In *Uncensored Lilac*, emotional saturation overwhelms communication and relation. In *Delivery Dancer*, logistical systems continue to operate even as routes collapse and time fractures.¹⁸ Across these works, systems remain functional while increasingly failing to stabilise shared meaning or collective reality. These are not simply aesthetic shifts but broader transformations in how reality itself is

increasingly organised.¹⁹ Perhaps this is also why images today can feel so unstable. They move through platforms and interfaces, actively participating in the production of narratives, affects and systems through which reality is experienced and understood. In our current regime of visibility, the image can be many things at once: a system, an atmosphere, a behavioural script, an infrastructure, a prediction, a simulation, a feed, a world.²⁰ And increasingly, it is through these operational forms that the synthetic comes to govern the real.

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