Non-Descript Food Manifesto
by Clippy

Before we start, let's consider these two ideas that are alive and well today. The first is that there are a hierarchy of images, or at least, a set of rules that ranks images within a system. The second is that a segment of culture is now produced through free or cheap labour that serves as a foundation for network culture. These two ideas are intertwined in the avenues through which we experience the world, not only digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Yelp, Google Books etc., but also through physical, 'in-real-life' (if we can indulge that distinction for a second) avenues – from film festivals, advertisements, exhibitions to print. To talk about the ubiquity of these two ideas is pointless, what we need to examine is what these ideas produce, and from there what possibilities we have around it.

Food photography of course is the perfect culprit. Let's throw out the complaints that networked food photography is banal, or is a symptom of social media oversharing and egotism. Looking at boring, overworked things is what helps you look past the obviousness of what has become familiar to us – what Louis Althusser calls an "elementary ideological effect", and that's what makes food photography so interesting in network culture. The problem that has emerged through food photography on the internet is that as a consequence of its design, only a certain type of images are allowed to exist. Now, note that I am not crying at the loss of culture, because that culture is not dead. But what I want to do is to use this consequence – that only certain types of images survive – as a way to try to change what we do as users as well as developers, if such a distinction exists.

We will see how this manifest specifically on the realm of amateur food photography. On a commercial level – that is, professional food photography – this effect is obvious. From Ditte Isager's pastorally melancholic photography for Noma's cookbook to food stylists' efforts in creating a 'photo' version of a dish by chilling herbs and cooling pasta, professional food photography is immediately identifiable from amateur food photography. We do not take pictures of food in the way we eat them. In Indonesian, the phrase "eating with your eyes" is synonymous with excess. The hard shadows and the busy countertop spread set the standard for what food photography should look like in 2019, but they disappear and become banal as soon as you can pinpoint its popularity. But what does 'setting the standard' really mean? That is – through what mechanism does this aesthetic spread? I believe this question is not cultural but also technical and open-ended, which means that we can identify specific ways that a photograph of food becomes a food photograph. The amateur food photograph, I will argue, is one loser, an artefact designed to be an outcast, that we should become more familiar with.

So let's return to that first idea, that there is a hierarchy in images. If so, what could this hierarchy be? Hito Steyerl suggests that an image hierarchy based on resolution should be re-examined as a hierarchy based on speed and intensity. Steyerl laments the insistence of the high-resolution image, a dream of seductive and pristine visuality, and proposes that we should revalue poor images due to its latent potential for virality. The

poor image thus rejects the fetishization of high-resolution images yet allows itself to be circulated in the postmodern form of platform capitalism. Steyerl finds light in this by stating that this has created an "alternative economy of images", those that disperse marginalized voices within that same platform. But the issue here is that the politics of virality of course is not neutral, that the mechanisms of dispersion itself creates new forms of and artefacts different from how the "poor image" is supposedly spread. Software, as both an allegory to ideology and also ideology critique according to Alexander Galloway and Wendy Chun, resolves these contradictions within its own logic. That is – images from marginalized communities may, as "poor" as they may be, only ever rises when it has reached a high valuation in the system of virality, and this virality is feeds into and is dependent on the aforementioned platform capitalism. Although the concept of the "poor image" considers the substandard, deteriorated image as opposed to the fetishistic high-resolution image, the mechanism of that system means that there will always be "losers" that are just as poor that move much slowly.

That's why I'm calling for a movement toward the non-descript food image. These images, with unclear subjects, uncorrected dim restaurant lighting, presenting a pixelated topography of food, act as a personal archive than an active participant in the food network. In a casual interaction within the food network, the images formed are limited, and there are at least three reasons for this. For this, let's take Instagram's ecosystem as an example. First, there are the technical constraints of Instagram. For instance, as of June 2019, pictures uploaded onto the feed has to fit into one of three aspect ratios that it provides – the 1:1 ratio, the landscape ratio (600 x 337 px), and the portrait ratio (480 x 600 px). All images uploaded must fit into one of these three sizes. Second, is the recommendation system that serves as a feedback loop into the incentive system – for Instagram, being liking and commenting – that teaches users what images become popular. The aesthetics of popular images is deeply linked to the mechanism of gratification. Last is the promise of a community on the platform. The fact that these platforms – from Instagram to Yelp to Foursquare – depend on community participation for it to operate suggest that sharing is one of the core functions through which users might derive value. Since on these platforms to produce is to participate, and to participate is to exist, the non-descript food image gives us a new way to exist.

However, this is not an inescapable regime, as suggested in the work of some media or technology theorists. The structuralism inherent in Phil Agre's 'grammars of action' or the dystopically 'strong interfacial regime' of Benjamin Bratton forgets that software's boundaries, as with any machine-human relations, are constantly reconstituted and therefore is not stable. For amateur food photography, what this means is that since users are just as much part of the software, non-mainstream usage of sharing platforms like Instagram or review platforms like Foursquare constantly redefines what this software is, and what amateur food photography can be. One example of this unclear boundary: software updates respond to how users interact with the platform. Second: there is no 'user' of the Google Books OCR and image-processing software, since the human operators merely interact with the foot pedal that captures the image, yet this software requires these human operators to run. Third: the use of Instagram as a personal archive, rather than a social network, such as the @__succ plant archive. All in all, since

this boundary is unstable, this means that our actions constantly redefine what this specific software is, and that is something to celebrate and *do*.

Using Instagram as a personal archive becomes a corollary to artworks that examine the virality of constructed online personas – from Oobah Butler's fake Yelp restaurant *The Shed at Dulwich* to Amalia Ulman's now-canonical performance through *Excellences & Perfections* (2014). Note how both these works are performances that not only examines how virality is achieved, but also the importance of the temporal element in its virality, in that becoming this popular in this short amount of time was what called the authenticity and mechanisms of social media into question. In making non-descript food objects, we can start to forget this form of competition and start to embrace the 'losers' of food photography. It doesn't end there of course, and it shouldn't. What we should aim towards is of course not just only pixelated pictures of food – this is exactly what happened with the aestheticisation and homogenization of glitch art when really it was about the process. What we need then is to continue to find new ways of participation in today's network culture that doesn't take the production of digital artefacts for granted.