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A Hidden History of Photography For Screenshot Photographers

Part 6: A Constellation of Photographies
By Eron Rauch

"Virtual Virtual Reality (Using 1800s Stereoscopic Viewer)" 2017, Eron Rauch

There are a multitude of photography histories we could tell. The history I have been recounting in the last five sections is often hidden, mostly because its constellation of divergent goals and techniques undermine the dogmatic view of photography as an iconic, singular medium. Reopening the conversation around photography in the digital age is a major part of why I wanted to write this series. As I've shown, even in the earliest dawn of photography, there have been many complex different relationships with photography, technology, and the "unreal." It isn't as though we landed in the HD virtual reality era and

suddenly started making images based on 2D screens and constructed places and people!

"The Iceberg" 2017, Giorgio di Noto

It is constantly frustrating to me that despite this rich history, glancing through the best-of-the-year lists for photography books in 2017 you'd swear it was still 1979. In these lists, the traditional photo world's conservative and parochial tendencies show themselves in a subtle but important way. Other than a few notable exceptions, such as *The Iceberg*—a unique project printed in UV ink documenting dark web drug advertisements—these institutional lists basically feature only three versions of photography: medium format cameras with color film, view cameras with film, and 35mm cameras loaded with grainy, high ISO black and white film.

In 2018, it is shocking to see such a vast void at the center of photography, with digital cameras, cell phones, social media, the internet, forums, memes, augmented reality, inkjet printing, screenshot photography, and the rest of the digital and multimedia landscape carved away. To me, these exiles are the most exciting photographies. They have a massive capacity for experimentation, allow exponentially more potential artists access to the means of production, and also providing a broader set of tools to talk about the current world. All of these "technical" changes, all of these challenges to the kingship of the camera, have not diminished photography—art is not a zero sum game, it is a conversation. Instead, they have added new modalities for making photography and brought it into community with much broader, richer, web of ideas and methods of making and thinking about images.

Photography must address the fullness of the world, including all of the virtual, digital, data, pixels, and algorithms. Yes, the process of breaking down out traditionalist notions of

photography and their legacy values will be messy, but unless we embrace this plurality of photography, it will continue its slide into snobbish, sentimental irrelevance to the wider conversation of art and culture.


"Dear Bill Gates (Detail)" 1999, Allan Sekula

But enough of my ranting polemics for moment. A big part of the acrimony over what is and isn't photography is actually quite understandable. It's a matter of status, which is always a fraught boundary. One major subject I didn't really cover in this series is the century long struggle of photography to be given the status of art. This is still a struggle in some more conservative corners of culture, and even holding an MFA with innumerable gallery shows I've certainly had more than few people complain at me how "photography isn't real art." But a major part of the manner in which photography gained status as art came from trying to reproduce a definition of itself that was as unified and elitist as modernist painting—a way of thinking that led to treating the work of cameras in the incredibly reductive formula of "shapes = feelings" (as Allan Sekula put it so drolly).

The advent of digital photography has radically challenged the idea that photography is a unified "medium" and has revealed that photography is more like a whole spinning galaxy of "photographies." This heterogeneity undermines the artificial fiction that has been used to claim legitimacy (however limited) for fine art photography. For people who have based their sense of worth on that restricted, homogenous, definition of photography, these kinds of conversations can feel like prodding an unhealed wound.
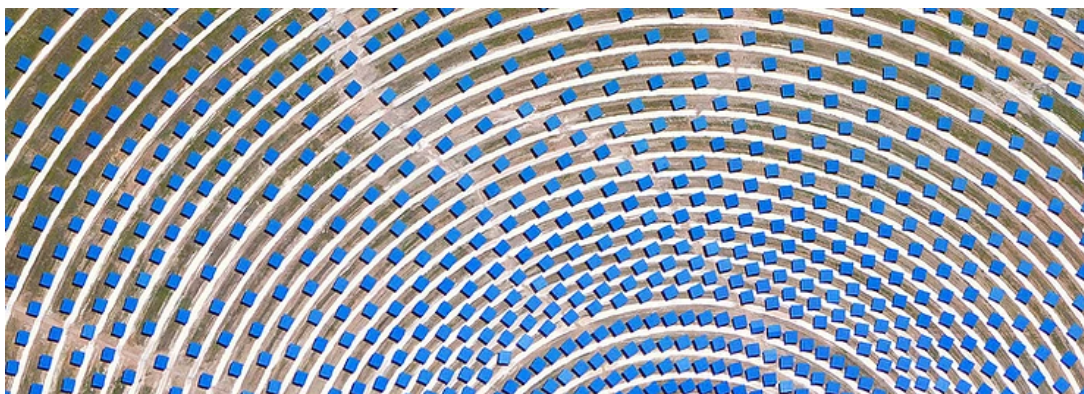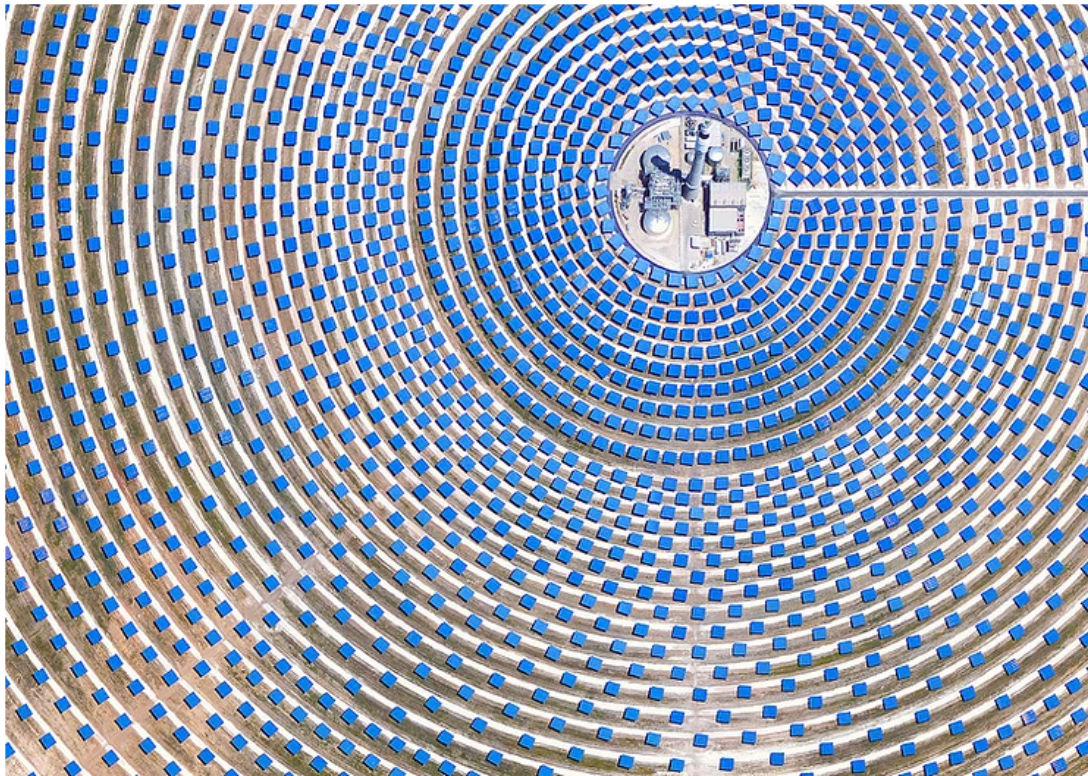
"The Gemasolar Solar Concentrator in Seville, Spain" 2018, Daily Overview/Digital Globe

We only covered a slim few types of photographies in this series, but there are a few more I want to touch on before we close out, since they are valuable as inspiration for thinking about and making screenshots. Some of you might already be familiar with Daily Overview, the Instagram account and now book, that features photographic images from satellites orbiting the Earth. Looking at the world through this radical perspective highlights one of my frustrations with videogames, and videogame imagery. Despite the fantastical worlds and computational miracles, it too rarely shows us a novel perspective nor anything truly awe-inspiring. We might be flying through an astounding hidden corner of space, spiraling amidst luminescent phenomena we can only dream to see through telescopes, but we're rarely shown more than a cut-scene close-up of bristling military tech that resembles the visual vocabulary of a luxury car commercial (think the endlessly repeated Argo drop ship cutscene in *BATTLETECH*) before slipping right back to the nuts-and-bolts ("Mechanics! Gun feel! Jumping puzzles!") of the game. That's one of the many reasons I think screenshot photography can be of deep reciprocal use to videogames—it represents a way of engaging with games that prioritize seeking awe-inspiring and novel perspectives that help us contextualize our experiences with these digital environs.
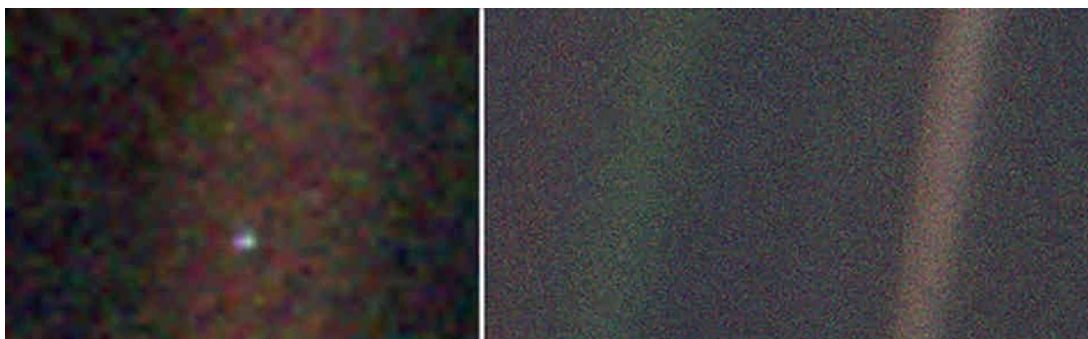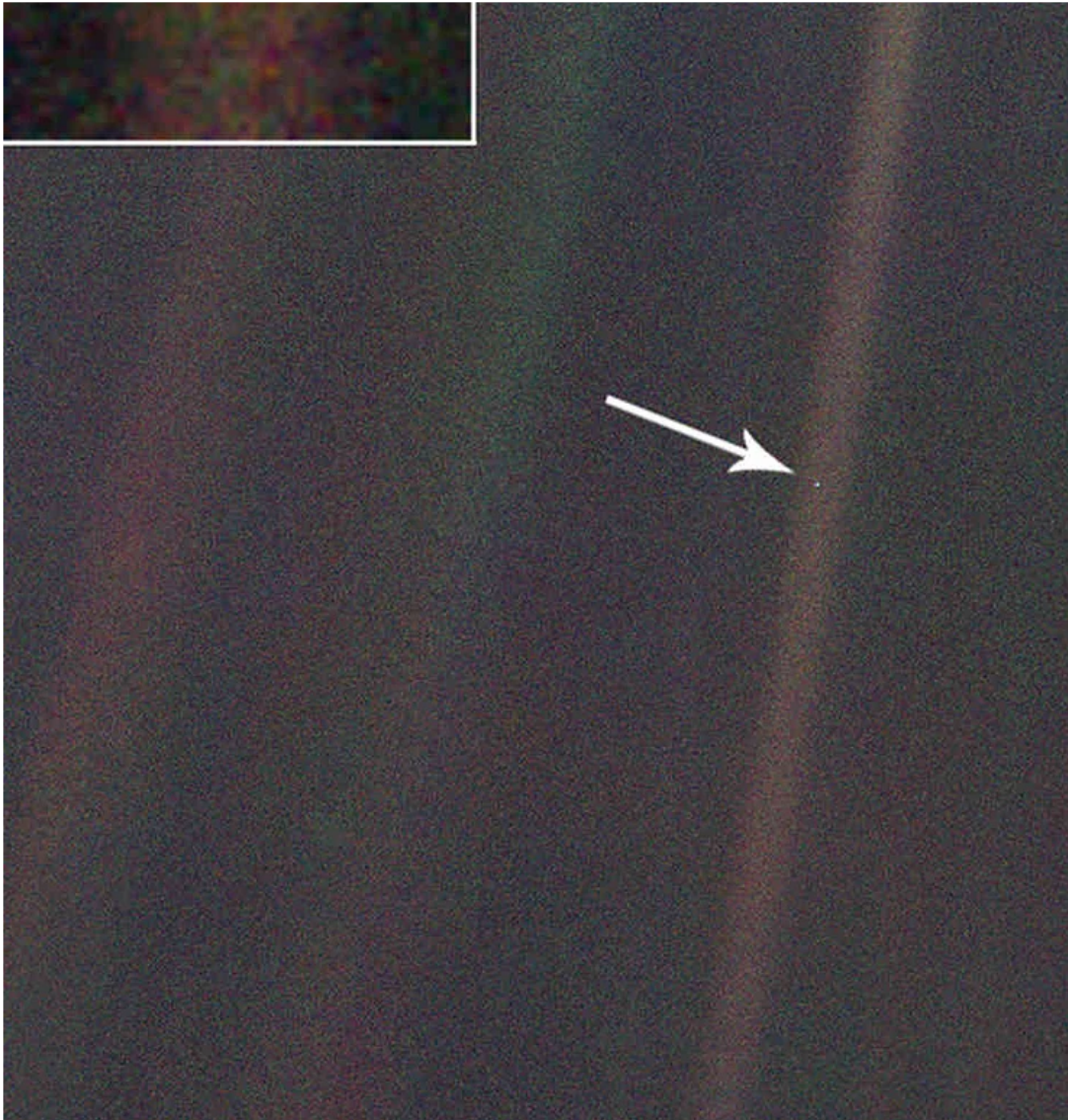
"Pale Blue Dot (With inset zoomed detail to show Earth)" 1990, NASA

One clear example of what I'm talking about with their being many kinds of photographies is the famous "Blue Marble" photograph of the Earth. In 1972, it was the first time anyone had taken a picture of the entire Earth. As a recent Long Now Foundation Seminar recounted, the photograph inspired awe, and became a symbol of a new consciousness about our place in the universe and our stewardship for our planet. This image was followed a few decades later by the less-known but even more mind-boggling "Pale Blue Dot" photograph, with Earth as a single pixel seen in the backward glance of the Voyager 1 satellite as it traveled toward the edges of our solar system.

These massive shifts of scale through satellite photography can help broaden our imagination of ourselves and our place in the universe, but are also useful inspiration for photography of videogame images. After all, if you play many videogames, you'll almost assuredly run across similarly dizzying vantages of seemingly endless space, your existence but one dot on a galactic minimap. What might be a successful screenshot photography of game maps, of a digital planet, of whole game universes contained within that pixel mote hanging in a render sunbeam?

"Fairies and Their Sun-Bath" 1917, Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths

Another fascinating vein of photography, so relevant in our age of machine learning video face replacement, celebrity porn, and the rest of the chaos of Photoshop editing, is the history of forgeries and fakes. Perhaps the most famous is the Loch Ness monster, and the most ridiculous is Bat Boy, but one of my favorites, a fake that I've engaged with in my project Arcana, is the infamous Cottingley Fairies. In the early 1900s, two young girls used a camera and some paper to make blurry, glowing images of their alleged encounters with fairies in the woods near their house. These images took the world by storm, with people like author Arthur Conan Doyle championing this as "proof" of fairies and spirits. We, as screenshot photographers, have access to infinite fairies and lake monsters, and in an inverse way, this photography of hoaxes can provide valuable insights to highlight the interesting and thought provoking parts of the shared unreality that we use as our subject.

"Antietam (Southern Battlefields)" 2000-2003, Sally Mann

Some of you might have seen the recent hack to attach a Canon lens to a Gameboy. Who wouldn't smile at 2-Bit photos of the moon? But using low-tech, hacked, or toy cameras has a long history. Toy camera photography can be a bit precious at times, a vehicle for a commodified nostalgia, but whether it is the ubiquitous Holga, the fanatics of the Diana, or the Polaroid revival these photographies are interesting because they have a very different set of values than mainstream photography. Alongside its sibling, "alternative process" photography which uses and misuses outmoded, often handmade, traditional techniques, these photographies reimagine "flaws" like distortion, uneven coatings, and light leaks, which cast wavering forms, frenetic splatters, and abstracted slashes of color, as something interesting and valuable in their own right. Like the embrace of the snarling sustain and spacious feedback of an overdriven electric guitar that powered rock—which sounded so unlike the dulcet tones of an acoustic guitar—these alternative, handmade, toy, and hacked photographies revel in the glitches and breakdowns of passive realism to highlight their unique, often intense, tactile qualities.

"Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Beer-Belly of the Weimar Republic" 1919 Hannah Höch

Another photography that overtly challenges the traditional value systems of art photography is the long history of collage. In our era filled with endless advertisements and memes, filled with overlapping slogans and exploded images, with forum sigs and video game mods that interject Macho Man into *Skyrim*, the explosive work of the dadas such as Hannah Höch seem fresh again. These artworks were considered bastardizations and violations of both good taste and high art in their era, but they were very much intended that way (and became a huge inspiration for the later punk rock movement). Coming from an era of apocalyptic political and social disruption, the World Wars, the dada collage artists built a photography vocabulary that spoke to their unique concerns and fear. It remixed and mashed up images from newspapers, propaganda, and advertising, to make a new visual vocabulary to express and try to combat the fracturing of society.


"Quiet as A Stone (Menu Detail)" 2016-2018, Game By Richard Whitelock, Image By Author

Similarly, while I strayed away from talking about the traditional artist-camera-genius

combination, I think we can't forget about one other important photography, which is the development of the gear (real and simulated) that we use. Especially with the increasing inclusion of photo modes, we need to be aware of the choices the developers are providing us. Whether it is a set of *Instagram*-style filters such as in Richard Whitelock's *Quite as a Stone* or a nigh-perfect simulation of the best Canon DSLR implemented in a racing video game, the developers are still making choices about what is and isn't in their vision of photography. After all, as we've seen, deciding between F2 through F22 are hardly the only options that make something a "good" photograph.
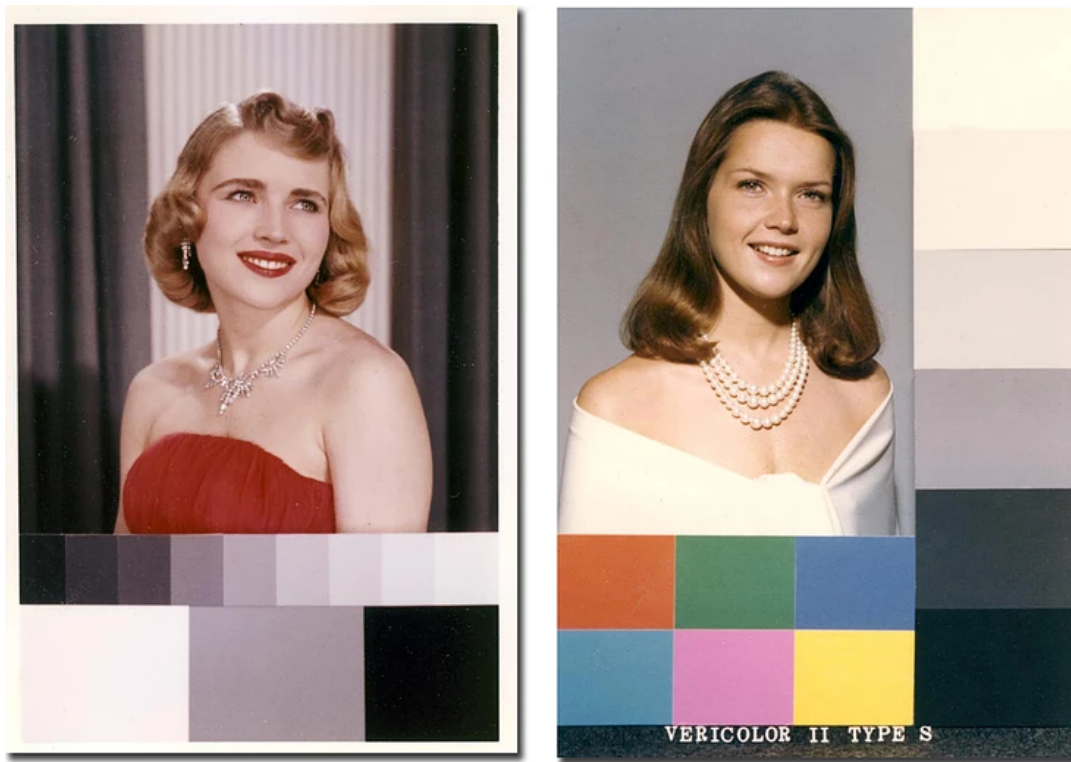
"Shirley Cards" 1963 and 1976, Kodak

Much like pop music has raced toward a certain kind of clinical-sounding perfection, the history of photography has been littered with many unstated delineation of value based on technological development that hide certain assumptions. *Waypoint* did a fantastic piece on the way videogames have unconsciously continued the fraught history of the technical testers that Kodak used to ensure color accuracy. These "Shirley cards" always featured a "standard" based on white skin, which led to distorted (or even nigh-invisible) rendering of skin tones for people of color. The creation of the tools, in and out of videogames, through which we view the world provide the foundation for much of our work, and these technological research photographies, whether chemical or code are hardly neutral. It is critical to remember that the version of photography constructed by paid technicians and consultants doesn't have to limit the photography we as artists put out into the world. But it does mean we have to stay aware of the effects and unstated constraints in the choices companies present to us in off-the-shelf photographic tools.

"Le Château, fin Octobre, le soir, effet d'orage, vue prise du Parterre du Nord" 1903, Eugène Atget

Maybe all of this sounds a bit abstract, so here is a very human-scale example of the complexity of photography and its history. One of the most beloved of photographers is Eugène Atget. He ran a theater troupe for a long time before settling into a career as a photographer in the late 1800s. As a photographer, he spent decades lugging a battered old view camera around the rapidly modernizing Paris, taking pictures of everything from close-ups of door handles to towering bridges, majestic palace gardens to street vendors pulling wagons by hand. One of the fascinating things about his work is the way many different groups have laid claim to parts of his body of work. Modern art museums showcase a subset of exquisitely reprinted cityscape works as formal genius. The Surrealists loved his storefronts reflections because they seemed like a perfect subconscious portrait of the absurdity of modern life. Historians scrutinize his work because it so thoroughly depict a place now lost to time. While documentary photographers laud his pedestrian, compassionate portraits.

"Lion head knocker, Hotel Monnaie, Quai Conti, 6th District" 1900, Eugène Atget

In his day, Atget's primary clients were painters, who bought his images like we now buy assets from the *Unity* store, using them as models to draw from elements of their paintings. Looking at all of these different aspects together, you see a deeply compelling body of work that uses many kinds of photography, from the most straightforward to the most experimental to explore, know, and generously share a unique, almost mythical, place in all its complexity. In this way, I really see Atget as somehow one of the most compelling trailheads for screenshot photographers working with MMOs and other massive, persistent places.

Rather than seeing photography as a singular technology or medium, even the multiplicity layered into the seemingly classic work of Atget shows how it is useful to start thinking of what we do in terms of "photographies," a series of more-and-less related but diffuse fields of artistic, social, and technological endeavor. There are so many photographic trailheads each of which can serve as a trajectory to discover new artistic values—for instance, we didn't even cover Niépce, probably the first, albeit unsuccessful, person to make a photograph—so rather than trying to trim away or hide aspects of screenshot photography that fall outside or contradict some of the tenants of the more common versions of photography, we must realize we're all participants in a very heterogeneous, wonderfully hybrid history.

In the end, as screenshot, virtual, in-game, and all manner of other videogame-related photographers, we're going to have to build our own photographies. They will likely resemble common definitions of photography in some ways, and are assuredly going to be radically different in others. We're only at the very beginnings of our field, and there are so many more histories and contemporary artists that can give us waypoints. The future will only bring us more screens, more virtual experiences, more hybrid and digital geographies. While that might seem daunting to some, to me, it is immensely exciting: there are so many ideas and techniques to uncover, so many unique and awe-inspiring places to visit, so many untested experiments to try, and so many other fellow artists to find as companions and collaborators as we explore and share these previously hidden places.

Thanks to all of you for spending time with my thoughts, and may you have many surprising discoveries on your photographic journeys! I wanted to give a special "Thank You!" to Callie for editing this sprawling series. Also Rainer Sigil and Kent Sheely deserve a major shout out for being incredibly generous with their time and letting me talk through this thicket of photography and videogames. Thanks to Carter Mull and Adam Feldmeth for finding a few

minutes in their ballistic schedules to talk through a few of the more theoretical essays that powered some of the big ideas around the changes in photography in the digital era. Thanks to all the fellow screen-based artists who took part in the incredible Screen Knowledges show in Los Angeles—with any luck, we'll find a gallery to host an even more elaborate version soon. Finally, thanks to Spiff and Rachel for giving me this opportunity. I've been floating this series around for over a year, and they did a fantastic job giving it a home.

Also, I didn't want to clutter up the essay with footnotes, so if you're intrigued to nerd out about some of the sources of my ideas, here's a [very] partial list of things that inspired my thinking on this series:

"On the Invention of Photographic Meaning" - Allan Sekula
"Are Video Games Bad At Images?" - Zolani Stewart
"Bad Images" - Emilee Reed
"Photography as Model?" - Matthew S. Witkovsky
"We Made Out Own Myths in 2017 Photo Modes" - Dia Lacina
"Helsinki Bust Station Theory" - Arno Rafael Minkkinen
"Video Games Are Boring" - Brie Code
"Images Without Viewers 1-5" - Jodi Dean
Heterotopias - Gareth Damian Martin et al
Known and Strange Things - Teju Cole
Wretched of the Screen - Hito Steyerl
Aperture Magazine (The last couple years have been incredibly open, despite formerly being a bastion of formalism.)
"The Erotics of Uselessness" - Lana Polansky
"Toward A New Prehistory of Photography" - Mary Warner Marien
After Photography - Fred Ritchen
"Fuck Mario" - Liz Ryerson

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