Precarious Aesthetics: *Introduction to the conference 15.10.2015*

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A certain curiosity has brought us together here. A curiosity articulated by Wittgenstein in the form of the question:

Is it ... always an advantage to replace an unsharp picture by a sharp one? Isn't the unsharp one often exactly what we need? (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §71)

I imagine the actuality of this question to be there as long as humans use and engage with images.

Does the question have pertinence today? I think so.

Wittgenstein’s question gains pertinence in a culture where visual artists, filmmakers, cinematographers, photographers, Do-It-Yourself enthusiasts, Polaroid fans, Instagram users and others have partnered with film and television directors, executives and suppliers of analogue and digital technologies to explore imperfection, contingency and partial illegibility through a host of degrading techniques and strategies that thicken and foreground the medium and its materiality, so that it becomes more noticeable, more evidently the message (McLuhan).

The obsolescence of analogue media, along with a rapid succession of digital formats, has sensitized us to the mortality of our media. It has also spawned what Dominik Schrey has called ‘a golden age of nostalgia for these allegedly “dead media”’ that ‘continue to haunt a popular culture obsessed with its own past’.

Cultural analysts awake to these developments have responded with a series of productive interventions. Laura Marks has discussed our love for ‘a disappearing image’, as well as ‘haptic images’ and ‘analog nostalgia’. André Habib has analysed ‘the attraction of the ruin’, Francesco Casetti and Antonio Somaini have suggestively pointed to a surge in ‘low-resolution’ media, and Hito Steyerl has written about ‘poor images’. Pascal Martin, is conducting a major research project at Louis-Lumière, Paris, on what the French call
‘flou’ (out of focus) – and a host of strategies to counteract the sense of clarity and transparency offered by photographic media. Of course, transparency should here be understood in relative terms. The research examines a wide set of strategies including the use of old lenses, ripping off the lens coating that protect against flares, shooting against light sources, flashing pen-lights into the lenses, shooting out of focus and with shallow depth of field, and so on.

We should also take note of developments in the field of art.

Hal Foster started a commentary in *Artforum* in December 2009 with the words:

No concept comprehends the art of the past decade, but there is a condition that this art has shared, and it is a precarious one. Almost any litany of the machinations of the last ten years will evoke this state of uncertainty...¹

He offers multiple reasons for the present sense of precariousness, and the artistic works he mentions indicate a very wide conception of art which shares a precarious condition.

In an effort to bridge social, economic and the aesthetic concerns, much as Foster did in his 2009 piece in *Artforum*, the French art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud notes how endurance in current consumer society, ‘whether it concerns objects or relations, has become a rare thing’.¹ He draws on the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s characterization of the present period as one of ‘liquid modernity’.¹ Its ensuing life form,... according to Bauman, ‘is a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty’. Bauman outlines, according to Bourriaud, ‘a society of generalized disposability, driven “by the horror of expiry.”’¹ Bourriaud suggests that art has not only found ‘the means to resist this new, unstable environment, but has also derived specific means from it. A precarious regime of aesthetics is developing, based on speed, intermittence, blurring and fragility’, he proposes.¹ ‘The precarious represents a fundamental instability’, he adds, ‘...it inscribes itself into the structure of the work itself and reflects a general state of aesthetics.’¹ Bourriaud goes on to identify three main patterns in precarious aesthetics, namely *transcoding*, *flickering* and *blurring*.
Like Foster’s 2009 intervention, Bourriaud’s conception of what he calls ‘the iconography of the precarious world’ is suggestive, but also very comprehensive.

How do we intervene in this field to address the practices in question and the experiences they may help produce?

The call for papers for this conference was designed to do this by letting Wittgenstein’s question set the tone for a *media aesthetic* approach to the wider emerging field. While Foster had focused on art, that, in various ways, inscribed a precarious condition, and Bourriaud started to outline an iconography of the precarious world, the call for papers used the term *precarious mediation* to put in place a *media aesthetic perspective*.

This offered a substantial limitation of focus, by anchoring the investigation in processes of mediation. The call also widened the focus beyond the art world to include the wider field of cultural production which the Film and Media Department here at UC Berkeley and the Berkeley Center for New Media, as well as Film and Media Studies at University of Copenhagen is concerned with.

This made Wittgenstein’s questioning the obvious place to start:

Why is the unsharp picture often ‘exactly what we need’? What might we need such images for? How do they operate in various domains, media and genres? How can precarious mediation be deployed to rhetorical, aesthetic and political effect? How does it potentially inscribe forms of precarious existence – precarious life?

How do the transformative repercussions of a digitalized media culture come to inspire uses of precarious mediation?

How is the presence of the camera itself inscribed?

How does the surge in precarious mediation relate to more lasting negotiations of blindness and insight, vagueness and clarity, tactility and opticality, the visible and the invisible, perfection and imperfection?

If pictures want something, do they now want to hurt themselves, to stage the life and
death of their media materialities, to boost the lure of their ruinous decay?

If you think this question had the purpose of enticing the coming speaker [W. J. T. Mitchell, who will give the talk: ‘Salvaging Israel/Palestine: Art, Collaboration, and the Binational State’], you are absolutely right.

Now, where does this leave the connections between precarious life and precarious mediation? Some artists may use precarious mediation to thematize precarious life, but many instances of precarious mediation may have weak affinities to precarious life or none at all.

Perhaps they connect in the next talk. We will soon find out.¹

¹ This introduction draws partly on my article on Lana Del Rey to be published by NECSUS, in their Vintage-Issue, in the Fall of 2015.