The Economist

Form is henceforth divorced from matter. In fact, matter as a visible object is of no great use any longer, except as the mold on which form is shaped. Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing, taken from different points of view, and that is all we want of it. Pull¬ it down or burn it up, if you please.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, the Stereoscope and the Stereograph, 1859.

It is a given that photography's use value is derived from its ability to divorce the image from the physicality of its referent. Once form is separated from matter, through the transformation of solid substance into its image on a negative, the image can be transferred in efficient, low-friction movements through networks of display and consumption.

Photographs share this quality with banknotes, which also mediate a relationship to the value system they represent. In the same way that currency has become dissociated with the reality of the gold reserve, so have (digital) photographic outputs become wholly separated from their material foundations.
Ours is a world marked by radical innovations – techniques that change the root of things: the case in point being the capability to generate a (potentially) infinite number of photographs and the capacity to put them to a (potentially) infinite number of uses. Paradoxically, these two phenomenon stand in an inverse relationship: the greater the number of photos, the less the commercial functions they can fulfill.

The Economist works start with the analysis of the original half tone image. The half tone image represents an age-old analog output. The ink is liberated from its paper substrates by brushing it with acrylic medium, then the photo content is digitized, and, finally, the fluid images are reconstituted and printed seamlessly as photographs onto wood. By removing these images from their material base, the computer is digesting only the image, and not its material: the light passes friction-free through the ad hoc negative in the digital darkroom. The enlarger's digital wand slides across the negative pushing coded light through its transparent body effortlessly.

Ultimately, the network of production consumes the material base in its entirety. The re-purposed images are un-bonded: their ties to both the events and crises captured in the articles have been dissolved, just as has the bond between the ink and the paper. There is no longer any assurance of meaning being provided by the context. The image is backed by nothing. The new image's only link to the past is the trifecta of material variables that played a role in constituting the original image: the paper substrate (now thrust into a crisis situation through the soluble); the ink's materiality (which affirms its presence only after the fact); and the unstable material perversion (which both lends and obscures meaning through its granular effect).

Historian Joel Snyder estimates that Timothy O'Sullivan, working in the American West during the wet-plate era, might have shot a maximum of three locations on a good day. A shift in subjects would demand the migration his entire outfit: dark tent, chemicals, water, and bric-a-brac. Preconditions demanded he coat his plain glass plate with a collodion emulsion, sensitize the emulsion with a solution of silver salts, expose his plate in the waiting camera and return it to the dark tent for development before its emulsion had begun to dry. In the present time, the burden of photography's material foundation has been lifted: O'Sullivan today would effortlessly wander the world with a digital camera, connected to networks capable of sharing its malleable content instantaneously: 7,800 photos are uploaded to Instagram every minute, a small portion of the 880 billion photos that will be taken in 2014.

As increasingly fractured units of time waste away, the proliferation and consumption of images increases. While the apparatuses of production and our identities, which are inextricably tied to them, decrease at an almost more alarming rate, a mountain of antiquated media forms, formats, and tools is relegated to the dust bin of history.

Expired billboards are purchased online, folded and rolled into neatly bundled units. These are then sent through networks of transportation for final display in the gallery. These heavy images, their photographic content now obfuscated, present only their material mass. Once weightless, these .tiff files now demand significant infrastructure to facilitate their movement through the world: FedEx, Pallet, Forklift, Tape, Petrol, Workers. The effects of their transience on the ecology is as ineffective as their material presence in the world.

The antecedent image can no longer exist as numeric information; it has become a solid substance, dependent on a complex external infrastructure to give it meaning and value. Once insubstantial, these digital algorithms have, through this process of development, display and distribution, been inflated into heavy images, existent only in their material mass.

Consider the history of currency. The first iterations of this exchange medium were minted in precious metals that held (inherent) value across any network of commerce. Freed from the burdens of regional economic systems these tokens of value flowed across the globe. Fast forward to the circulation of the promissory note, form became detached from substance, and its value rested in the note's (tenuous) relation to the gold reserves. What matters is no longer materiality, but trust.

At one time, the authenticity of coins could be assessed through a direct test of their physical material. Paper currency and other promissory notes were, subsequently, secured from attempts at counterfeiting by optical inks. Now, they are secured with a substrata of algorithms that clash on an information platform

deep in the bowels of Photoshop, the scanner, and the photocopier. These incognito algorithms prevent the unauthorized use of circulating bills. What is to be said of bit coins? And, extrapolating from this point, what is to be said of the use value of images utterly abstracted from reality?

Screentone, a Lertaset product, is an adhesive material artifice designed to aid non-professionals in importing the affect of photo-mechanical reproduction into their illustrations, effectively transforming human labor into that of a machine. The material has been removed from the shelter of its protective base, and exposed to the elements of an architectural surface in the studio. The resulting graphic represents a random and contingent sampling of matter. This application strays radically from the material's intended use. These now defunct transparencies are enlarged with a negative scanner and printed onto panels with UV-curable inks.

The material has been co-opted in the production of the new image, leaving a debt to be repaid, a hole to be filled on the studio surface. While they owe their content to the collection of contingent refuse on the surface, they are equally indebted to the constellation of data that scanning them has generated. In the end, the eye unable to reduce the image to its mode of graphic inscription: its abstraction and alienation remains as an allusion to the industrial conditions of its production.

If the organizing principle for labor dynamics during the industrial revolution centered on machines, it is clear that our relationship to these new organizing principles is rapidly changing. As time collapses and our tools enter and exist within our bodies, the products we create become more and more oblique. Abstraction is the outcome of this new form of authorship.

If time and categorical differences contribute to the metrics we employ to quantify the relative use value of the materials we use and tools of productive labor we employ, then the emergence of High Frequency Trading (HFT) and the push towards Nano-Info-Bio-Cogno (NIBC) technologies signal a significant erosion of our ability to relate to these apparatuses and materials. Even more so, they make it almost impossible to find a reflection of ourselves in the specters they produce. No one should be more concerned at this prospect than the artist.

Their impact on the ecologies of labor and authorship, as illustrated in the diverse fields of financial speculation (i.e., HFT) and tool development (i.e., NIBC), highlight the emergence of a fixation on a new micro-scale, one which is abstracted from the heretofore gold standard of comprehensible empirical measurement, i.e., a referent to external reality. These new materials and tools literally transform our abilities and, thereby, enter our bodies.

The networks and applications around both HFT and NIBC have a low tolerance for the "heat" caused by the friction of cumbersome actors moving through

them. Hence, in the race to efficiency and higher returns on investment, solid substances are cast aside – a casualty of war in the retreat from the real world to the digital world.

HFT is a subsection of financial transactions driven by carefully engineered algorithms designed to replace traders, who were once sent on stage to perform in the interest of future speculation. Can the contemporary artist be likened to the contemporary hedge fund manager, employing engineered actors in place of their own active contributions?

The insatiable appetite for transactions and their associated commodities reminds us that the dominant culture of our time is consumerism. William Henry Fox Talbot's radical innovation of photo-mechanical reproduction, ironically, blurred the previously sharp distinction between "image as art" (meeting an aesthetic impulse) and "image as an object" (in the service of the commodities market). This new technique erased the barriers of cost, on the one hand, and permanence, on the other, which had previously segregated aesthetics from commodities – lasting images could now be generated for next to nothing. Regimented ink dots on paper, which once were possible only through an artistic processes, became common currency.

The half tone image is formed through the blurring of unique dots of color, organized by an optical filter that is driven by a machine. It becomes a representation of some solid substance, abstracted into 'the sentimental "greenbacks" of civilization'". The fluid image information is translated to individual units all of which work in the service of capital. In this way, the image becomes an extension of capitalist desire. Is there a connection between the obsolescence of analog media, and the increasing obsolescence of the artists' relationship to the work they make?

Just as the development of images has changed radically, so has their distribution. The practice of carefully selecting and displaying limited number of photographs to a schooled audience has been replaced with mass production and distribution of essentially countless ink dots to a whole universe of people.

A result of increased consumption (fed willingly by the online retailer), the cartons and cartages of an amazon.com distribution facility, with whom I share a hall, spills into the building's common space. The images are blind snapshots of this hallway, born as my finger kisses the glass touchscreen of my iPhone. The images capture the materials that exists on the periphery of these distribution processes. They blur the lines between products and process. The jpegs are frivolously printed onto a material whose initial use value was found in the production of architectural models. This material's potential for productive activity is now wholly mediated by the image grafted onto its textured surface.

While entirely contingent in their origins, these images are deliberately printed onto textured styrene, a prosumer material typically employed in the production of architectural model making. This maquette material is photographic, and it provides an image of a texture (and, like all plans, the promise of something more that might come to be). The hallway images are framed and displayed in packing materials, true to their origins. They represent the frame of the space: the hallway and its speculative flow of random goods. They capture a transient moment (literally and figuratively); and like their source material, are merely products in a larger process, products whose use values evolves depending on what point in that chain they happen to be place. The only constant in this dynamic process is the speculative value assigned to it by the various middlemen as the products flow through the transient system.