

Search Engine

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Artmaking, at least in my case, is an erotic endeavour. Assuming that erotics consist primarily of a heightened and focused form of attention, making art, to me, is an expression of the arduous desire to take in the world with all the facilities given to me as a human being, to rearrange my internal furniture accordingly, and to turn this interior outward, back into the world.¹ We are showered with information every waking second—whether first-hand sensory information or second-hand data such as image- and language-based representations—and it’s easy to go numb. I don’t mean “taking in” as a form of passive absorption or a registering of what is presented as neutral or authoritative fact in a conclusive or solely rational way. To me, comprehension is not fixed or given; it shimmers and rotates, encircling objects of interest, material and immaterial, revealing ever new dimensions and forms in both its objects and the cognizer.

In religious iconography, a ring of light or flames often surrounds the heads or entire bodies of saints and other significant figures; they appear less commonly around objects, like the rings surrounding Saturn. Usually, when we speak of an object or a person possessing an aura, we imagine it as something attached to the thing, or the person, like a halo. But what if it is not the object that possesses the aura but instead there is something that *possesses us* in the face of an object?

I propose that this possessing force is attention. Today, in an era of capitalist subsumption and in the oversaturated, highly competitive markets of the so-called attention economy, attention is not only fungible but is perhaps this economy’s most valuable commodity. Conversely, it is a radical position to produce or claim attention without the goal of material gain. This is a roving kind of attention that is radically open to the new, or to the old to be newly understood. It consists of a paradoxical operation: in order to comprehend things, I need to assess, sort, and compare them to what I already know, and as I resort to such arrived knowledge, the latter is subtly reconfigured.

These lines of thought, on the nature of artmaking as a way of acquiring knowledge, are closely related to the ways in which we use an index. It’s the reason that this book celebrates the index as a form: it can meet a reader’s itinerant attention by directing it without prescribing its course. The publication’s title, *Search Engine*, also sums up how I understand the nature of my art practice, by articulating it as a tool, a perpetuum mobile even. It is an engine that seeks and whose purpose, the search, is also what powers it. In name, it corresponds to the online tool that is not called a “find engine,” after all, which would suggest a more conclusive enterprise.

The index that can be found here is an old-fashioned one, appropriate to the old-fashioned medium of the book. And while printed books may become less and less ubiquitous, the importance of an index, particularly in the era of big data, has risen immensely.² While any index guiding us through the infosphere is biased—whether because of the vested interests of the human indexer or the algorithms that prioritize search results to maximize profits—we rarely think of an index as a story, or as something authored. The entries in an index are not exactly narrative, or don’t seem to be: their principal guiding structure is the alphabet. What could be more disinterested than this seemingly level playing field, an equalizing plane? A plane, meaning, according to the dictionary, both “a level of existence, consciousness, or development” as well as “a level surface.”³

The image of a level surface has my mind drift toward that plane constantly at hand and that we so regularly touch and fondle, the mobile screen. There, information condenses like dew between atmospheres of varying temperatures, between analogue and digital, inside and outside. As Henriette Huldich points out in her essay, referring to Giuliana Bruno’s writing, the screen can be seen as “a site of material transformation.”

As we scroll (hello, antiquity!) through oodles of information, an index, or something like it, acts as a guiding light through this overwhelming thicket, yet also articulates a realm in

¹ For the term “Eros,” see the glossary on page 182.

² For more information on the term “index,” and a particular type of index called “concordance,” see the glossary on page 182.

³ *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, s.v. “plane,” accessed September 19, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/plane>.

which phenomena have not yet taken up their roles as either trivial or existentially important. In fact, entries innocently sit side-by-side, demonstrating how the boundaries between evaluative categories—such as fake or real, meaningful or irrelevant—can easily shift. As Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure taught us, signification arises from context, from a term’s place in a given system. The index’s system, the fundamental A to Z of the alphabet, assumes neutrality, yet our minds can’t help but build relationships between entries beyond this simple structure.

The index thus offers a kind of deception. Since it gives the illusion of objectivity while imposing a hierarchical structure, it suggests the ability to readily find information even if it is hidden or missing. As Katharina Rein discusses in her essay on magic boxes, illusions in stage magic may be bent on baffling and ultimately deceiving a willing audience for purposes of entertainment, but their mechanics of disappearance and misdirection also strikingly mirror state-of-the-art technology and cultural concerns, now as much as in the nineteenth century. This type of magic relies on an audience’s willingness to be seduced by what they know to be staged, resulting in a kind of “social magic”—the collective belief in such an illusion. This social operation strikingly echoes how Elena Filipovic characterizes the museal staging of an artwork and thereby the creation of art’s ideal and monetary value.

Search Engine makes the index its marquee attraction. It is not an afterthought, however useful, tacked onto the end of this publication to be used sporadically, when needed. This index invites you to read it, and not just as disconnected bits of information. Take it as a type of meta-text—allow its seemingly fragmentary elements to shimmer and rotate, its fleeting paths to now and then coalesce into sense.