What is Contemporary?
Art in the Age of the Internet, Amnesia, and the Anthropocene

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Abstract

What defines contemporary art is a hotly debated question. This article argues that contemporary art is foremost defined by a superabundance of information: data upon data upon neverending data. The contemporary artist no longer needs to create anything new; there are already so many ideas, so much information, that the problem is a matter of the re-presentation of the ideas that have already been had, the information that has already been collected, the knowledge that has already been known, to the audiences that need to be exposed to that information at the relevant time. The role of the contemporary artist is closer, then, to the librarian or the curator, a figure who connects audiences to the resources they need, even if the audiences don't necessarily know what questions need to be asked.

Keywords: Contemporary Art; Anthropocene; Environmentalism; Global Warming; Art Criticism

1. Introduction

"To want the new is old-fashioned. What is new is to want the old."—Bertold Brecht

Contemporary art makes a mockery of us art historians, critics, curators, connoisseurs, and gallery-goers alike. It has been toying with us ever since Marcel Duchamp put a urinal in an exhibition and Andy Warhol started selling plywood replicas of soap boxes. As it laughs with us, at us, because of us, we ask of it—again and again—that age-old categorical question: what is contemporary art? Is *this* art? How should we judge it? What (Brillo) box do we put it in (Warhol, 1964)? Of course, many would argue the challenge of the contemporary began much earlier than the 20th century. These

questions have plagued critics since the renaissance. They are nothing new. Richard Meyer would have us remember that questioning the contemporary has been an essential aspect of art criticism since Modernism (Meyer, 2013). "Contemporary with what?" Paul Virilio and Tom McDonough ask (Virilio, 2003). For these age-old questions, I turn to the age-old answers: "Why?" *Because.* "What is art?" *Art is anything made by humans* or *art is that which makes the invisible, visible.* "What is good art?" *Good art makes the invisible, visible—and worth looking at.* Few definitions have been better than that one. That's the rub, I suppose: how can we describe what we cannot perceive? The problem, in part, is our total immersion in it, which recalls David Foster Wallace's parable of the fishes:

> There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way. He nods at them and says,
>
> "Mornin' boys. How's the water?"
>
> And the two young fish swim on for a bit and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes,
>
> "*What the hell is water?"* (Wallace, 2005)

Like fish, we are immersed in a sea of contemporary art, ideas, and information. The sea surrounds us, pervades us, penetrates us. We eat, breathe, think, and live within this temporal ether called "contemporary," and it is as invisible as water is to fish. If it is possible to describe that with which we are part and parcel of, then it is that very ability that separates the good art historians from the great ones. The greatest theorists of art history, such as Giorgio Vasari, Walter Benjamin, Leo Steinberg, Linda Nochlin, managed (by luck or by genius) to distance themselves from their own contemporary aether. However this separation or transcendence occurs, such vision allowed these critics to achieve an Archimedean standpoint, to see their contemporary moment as a whole—paradoxically, to look inside from the outside while still remaining inside. Only with such comprehensive vision can a theorist see what pervades the contemporary moment, what makes it all move, and, having understood the *primum mobile* structuring the present, find a way to communicate such a vision in spite of normative conventions. *Eppur si muove,* protested Galileo.

2. Contemporary Revelations

Perhaps it is easier to answer this question of what contemporary art is by considering what it reveals: what does the contemporary show us that we didn't know was there? What permeates us? What, to paraphrase Paul Klee, does contemporary art, in its many shapes, media, and permutations, reveal to us about what we as a global society cannot see? What is this water in which we swim?

Leo Steinberg was bedeviled by Jasper Johns and the Neo-Dada movement in the 1960s. His essay "Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public" reflects his time of troubles wrestling with the fact that he was no longer "getting it." This was an encounter with contemporary art that shook the very core of his identity. He wrote of his experience:

> I am alone with this thing, and it is up to me to evaluate it in the absence of all available standards. The value which I will put on this painting tests my authenticity as an individual. Here I can discover whether I am man enough to sustain an encounter with a completely original experience. Am I escaping it by being overly clever? The things that I see—are they really me, or have I been eavesdropping on conversations? I have been trying to formulate certain meanings seen in this art; are they designed to demonstrate something about myself, or are they really an inward experience? Do the things I have just written seem very good to me? This threat of vanity is more serious than the mere rise of nonsense; and yet I wonder—ten years from now, will I look silly if it should become universally obvious that all this was junk? Or have I failed myself already in asking these questions, being overly conscious about myself, instead of surrendering to the experience which is reaching out to me? (Steinberg, 1962).

He realized—in a moment of remarkable emasculating humility, the sort of humility that can be a type of genius, with proper reflection—that the fault of the misunderstanding was entirely his own:

> I was angry at the artist, as if he had invited me to a meal, only to serve something uneatable…I was irritated at some of my friends for pretending to like it—but with an uneasy suspicion that perhaps they did like it, so that I was really mad at myself for being so dull, and at the whole situation for showing me up (Steinberg, 1962).

The art, Steinberg realized, antiquated him. It had made him old, boring, no longer "with it." Steinberg here describes his encounter with contemporary art metaphorically as an inedible meal, but I can't help

but think of the bottom right panel of Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, in which the seated devil gulps down souls (perhaps of art critics). Eat or be eaten. Leo Steinberg is neither appetizer nor entrée. Steinberg watched in horror as a generational rift erupted before his very eyes and threatened to swallow him whole into the chasm of obsolescence. And here is the lesson of Steinberg's essay (a lesson everyone would do well to remember): Leo refused to be swallowed up. The whale spat up Jonah and Leo alike. Steinberg understood that it was not the art that was on trial, but rather, himself. Instead of turning his back on this new thing which he didn't understand (a decision that would have doomed him to march headlong into obscurity), Steinberg chose to wrestle longer with these works, like Jacob wrestling with an angel, even if they might defeat him, or turn him lame. He ruminated over them again and again and, in turn, allowed the art "to conjugate him, [though] he is a sluggish verb, eager to carry out the weight of meanings but not always up to it.").

The same problem is occurring in the field of contemporary art history today: a generation of art historians is not "getting it." The contemporary eludes them. For example, Pamela Lee's *Forgetting the Art World* uses intensive analysis of four well-known contemporary artists in order to come to some conclusion about a few qualities of contemporary art, such as scalability, ether, superflatness, and immanence. Her greatest addition is the realization that each individual work of art creates its own story, community, reception, and its own "artworld" (Lee, 2017). Yet by scrutinizing these four trees, she misses the contemporary forest. Paul O'Neill analyzes how curators become artists themselves, how the medium of art can be the exhibition (O'Neill, 2012). His book, a fascinating expansion of O'Doherty's *White Cube* (O'Doherty, 1986), limits itself to curated art—which so much of contemporary art is not. Richard Meyer historicizes a series of contemporary moments prior to our own, but his anyalsis of past contemporaries are far more interesting than any of the few conclusions he puts forward for the present contemporary (Meyer, 2013). Julian Stallabrass would have us believe that the glue bonding all contemporary art is economics. He is certainly correct, in part—but there is more that bonds contemporary art than simply the reflection and propagation of neoliberal capitalism (Stallabrass, 2004). Plenty of contemporary art is totally free and unassociated with capital, or tries its best to be. David Joselit wends his way toward a direct confrontation with the contemporary by creating an entirely new set of vocabulary to describe the way art and ideas are now transmitted and relayed. His expansion

of Benjamin's famous essay into the present has the most influence on my theorization of the contemporary (Joselit, 2012). The problem of defining the "contemporary" is generational. Just as Leo Steinberg puzzled over Jasper Johns, contemporary art is vexing a generation of art historians who simply cannot grasp the profundity of a technological shift so pervasive and transformative that its effects would justly be compared to the printing press, the steam engine, or the nuclear bomb.

An aside: On May 7th 2013 at 8:40pm (EST), the New York Yankees played against the Denver Rockies at Coors Field in the first game of a series of three. The stadium was packed, the game was filmed, and thousands of pictures were taken and uploaded to the internet. One picture in particular ended up taking a fascinating road into the contemporary—from a seat high up in the nosebleeds behind first base, an anonymous person captured a photograph of the gameplay on their camera-phone at the moment a sublime lightning strike crookedly detonated some distance from the stadium. He uploaded the image to a popular aggregative website, Reddit.com, several hours later (nearly exactly at midnight, May 8th EST). [See Fig. 1] Coincidentally—even more coincidentally than capturing the bolt in the first place—another photographer on the other side of town, having climbed to a strikingly dangerous height near a construction zone, captured in nearly the same instant the very same lightning bolt. The shots couldn't have been taken more than a split second apart. He uploaded his image on May 7th at 9:41 EST, probably almost immediately after he captured the shot. [See Fig 2].

It took merely twelve minutes after the Coors Field photo was posted (at midnight) for a third person to recognize the amazing simultaneity of the two photographs. From there a discussion broke out in the comments section. How can we be certain these pictures are authentic, and not simply a trick of Photoshop? By 1 a.m., less than hour later, miscellaneous commentators from around the internet had proven that the coincidence was in fact authentic using triangulation, Google Maps, and Photoshop overlays. [See Figs 3 and 4] "What are the chances of that?" one redditor asked. "8 billion?" opined another. "…Considering that it happened, the chances are now 100%" a third quipped.

Such unfathomable coincidences are more common than we suppose. I found, through a quick search, that some nine months previous (August 9, 2012) a different lightning bolt had been serendipitously photographed from more than one position simultaneously. This is, in part, my point. This sort of coincidence is an illustration of the power of the internet. We have reached the hyperbolic

extension of Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Now, because of the omnipresence of the internet, the all-seeing ubiquity of camera phones, video cameras, dashboard cameras, security cameras, more and more of the world is filmed, replicated, uploaded, constantly. Bentham's panopticon has peaked. I cannot overstate the importance of the internet (nor do I aim to), the way it seems to, more and more, record and preserve everything as it happens. People's entire lives are uploaded on the internet: their streams of consciousness are on Twitter; their hobbies and wishes on Pinterest; their daily sights on Instagram; their social networks through Facebook; their dances on TikTok; their livestreams on Twitch. A person's entire psyche (regardless of how mundane), their experiences (regardless of how quotidian), are preserved, "embalmed" in digital form. For eternity? — perhaps. Surely the longevity of these digital manifestations of ourselves will not outdo the Egyptians. We film, snap, upload, download, record, comment, upvote, like, heart, subscribe, to such a spectacular degree that it is no longer possible for an instantaneous lightning strike to retreat into the sky without being immortalized in photography from multiple different angles. Every instant is eternal. The fleeting cannot flee. Every flashing, jotting, tittling moment is redundantly recorded from the multiplicity *ad naseum*. The internet is the closest thing we have to omnipresence and omniscience—and even, from certain perspective, omnipotence. We swim the internet sea like fish in water and we cannot escape it. For most, it is totally invisible, fully engrained into our daily habits. We've reached the millennial age in which, when the proverbial tree falls in the forest, it *does* make a sound, and you can listen to it on YouTube, should you be so interested, or even remixed samples on Soundcloud.

What an unimaginable amount of (mostly useless) information stored! A frivolous, never-ending wasteful redundancy—there is simply so much information, too much information. There will soon be a time when the problem of maintaining football-sized warehouses of servers and hard drives whirring with our collected data will become so inefficient and wasteful that we will be forced to economize our databases or collapse under the weight of our servers. Why should it be that every person must have his own, individual digital copy of Kendrick Lamar's latest album? Can't we all just share one copy, if it is all the same? Across how many cloud servers have you backed up the same snapshots from your phone? The problem of the redundant and the unnecessary is a major one, both technological

and artistic. Having managed to find a way to replicate nearly everything, we will eventually have to make decisions about what isn't worth keeping. Art, we might hope, will help us make wise decisions.

Is there a limit, a threshold of saturation or superfluousness? At what point do we protest that there is simply too much information? This condition of superabundant data is a condition of superexcess, a condition that makes us like bees downing in our own data-honey (a sweet death, perhaps), a condition that creates the need for a new sort of contemporary artist. The contemporary artist is no longer one who makes more art (though certainly this is still possible). The contemporary artist simply rearranges what already exists into new collages relevant to a group, a situation, space, event, or time (an "artworld" in the words of Pamela Lee). The contemporary artist is what James Joyce called a "scissors and paste man," but his materials are seemingly immaterial: digital (Joyce, "Letter to George Antheil", 1931). This artist re-presents information that was already recorded, that was already known—what wasn't known was that the information was *relevant*. The artist rescues data from superfluousness, snatches information from the gaping maw of amnesiac obsolescence and restores it to relevance. The contemporary artist works in a digital medium, but their artistic logic, their genius, is one of relevance, of connecting information to people who most need it, and didn't realize that it already existed. The artist is something like a historian, studying the past, made relevant by rhyming with the present.

Consider the material artist who eschews the internet. She intentionally refuses to have any of her work reproduced digitally. She continues to exhibit ceramics, play music, paint landscapes, construct sculpture, or perform dances at various venues and galleries. Without digital propagation of her work, however, she is doomed to anonymity, or something close to it. But such anonymity is unlikely if not impossible; if this artist shows her work to a public audience, she has no choice but to allow it to be photographed, filmed, reproduced, and incorporated into the internet. If she is excellent or lucky, or interesting, her work will likely become a sensation simply through the infinite distributive propagation of images of her work. Or she can choose to have some control over the process of her digital reproduction and put it on the internet herself, say, on a personal website. It is nearly impossible, however, for her to avoid digital reproduction entirely. Even if she forbids cameras in the gallery, people will still find a way to take pictures if they feel compelled—the proscription against photography might

even encourage picture-taking all the more. The contemporary artist, whether she likes it or not, is a digital artist. One question is of agency—does the audience choose the artist? Does the artist choose their audience? Or does the artist conform to the medium of internet as the judge of relevance? Who decides where relevance is or is not? In any case, we cannot free ourselves from the internet any more than fish can free themselves from water. Benjamin's "Age of Mechanical Reproduction" has transformed into the contemporary age of unconsensual digital reproduction. The social contract necessitates submission to the digital panopticon. Digital reproduction is simply part of our human condition.

3. New vs. Renew

Contemporary art is not necessarily about making something new, though it certainly can be. We can always push the borders of human knowledge further. Originality still exists. Science still has its discoveries. New technologies, new materials, and new conditions will continue to shape our world and invent new ways to re-plicate, re-create, re-new and digitize our embodied selves. There will always be a specialized few experts expanding the brink of knowledge, discovering new unknowns and new media to be played with. May this continue. But the world can no longer naively rely on the promises of science, technology, and modernity to create some new *deus ex machina* to save humankind from the excesses of the previous generations. We have all the information in front of us now. In fact, we have far, far too much of it—unsorted, horrifying masses of it. We've known, for example, since Charles Keeling's climate data begun in the 1960s of the increasing CO2 in our atmosphere (Naomi Oreskes called this the most important data set of the 20th century, and she is right). In fact, never before in history has humankind had more *data* about global warming, about the apocalyptic future we doom ourselves to asa result of our collective addiction to fossil fuel economies. Yet we still do nothing. Information, data, discovery, none of it is not enough. Technology, research—even experienced "natural" disasters, none of it is enough. What is needed is the *curator*, the re-presenter of this data at the right time, in the right place, to the right audience, in the right way, to effect meaningful change. That will be the mark of genius in the contemporary artist.

Art must be about reorganizing and reformatting the old information, the old ideas, the information which we already knew, have known, forgotten, or failed to pay attention to. Of all the

conditions of the modern world, the foremost of them is the condition of forgetting. Forgetting is the fundamental condition of being alive, and it is tightly tied to the disease of nostalgia (Boym, 2001). We are all individually and collectively forgetting everything we have ever known. We are generationally forgetting everything we have ever known and remembering bits and pieces as time folds upon us. The bits and pieces are not necessarily the right ones. Good contemporary art is a process of strategic anamnesis. The best contemporary art is the art that presents to us the information that we already knew, but didn't know we had forgotten, and the moment when we most need it. It is not about new information or new art anymore. It is about re-knowing or renewing the old information. We have it written down and stored somewhere, but we no longer know where we left the metaphorical Post-it note to remind us. We have it indexed. And that index? —we indexed that too (indices of indices!), but we can no longer remember the first layer once we have abstracted to the third, or fourth, or fifth indexical layer. We have learned all these lessons and we must re-learn them eternally. It is about reconnecting nodes of seemingly obsolete information that happen to be uniquely useful to the present moment. The contemporary artist will be a genius of presenting what we do not know we desire at the moment when we least expect it.

4. Need vs. Desire

Desire is the dangerous word. Meretricious contemporary art will focus on the desires of communities and feed those desires with the art that will sell. We might call this propaganda—sweets offered to the public when vegetables are necessary to stave off cardiac disease. In America, we see this in the pernicious feeding of nativist fantasies, "Make America Great Again," in which one embraces sweet denial—*no, the world isn't changing. No, I don't need to change. It is the world that needs to regress to what it was in my nostalgic fever dream.* This also is nothing new. Art has always responded to the desires, the sellable whims and wishes of communities (one thinks of Stallabrass, again). We can only hope such art will be exposed as bad art, given the test of time.

Good art, however, might reveal to communities things that they do not desire to see but need to see. *Need* is a better word: good art delivers messages that we need; the medicine may be bitter but it nonetheless cures the symptoms. Here is where the art critic comes in. Rather than simply being a

critic of art and the art world, the contemporary art critic needs to understand communities and reception more than ever before. Recognizing good art for what it is will be a matter of knowing the community and recognizing what a given community needs. Art critics are in a position to interpret this for communities.

I do not mean to suggest that we need more examples of lightning bolts photographed from different angles. We've been there; we've done that. So far I've been speaking abstractly and providing little in the way of concrete examples. What is an example of what I am trying to get at when I describe the contemporary artist as a "connector of lightning bolts"? What sort of information do we most need (or desire) to be connected to at this moment?

An example: A recent trending meme put side-by-side images of pictures taken from the same angle on different models of iPhones, mocking Apple's "Shot on my iPhone [Insert Model Number]" advertising campaign (See YouTube for examples of these advertisements). The ubiquitous iPhone advertising campaign attempts to convince consumers that they ought to purchase the latest iPhone in order to take advantage of the new camera on the newest model of the iPhone 14/15/16/etc. The pictures are of Lone Rock Beach, Utah; Briksdalsbreen Glacier, Norway; Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe; and a fish market in Hamburg, Germany (Figs 5-8). Though each photo is shot at the same angle, the photos are shot years apart (ranging from three to eleven years). Each of the more recent photos demonstrates mild technological improvements of the iPhone camera. The rub is that the material conditions of the pictured landscapes have steeply declined: the Briksdalsbreen Glacier has receded significantly; Victoria Falls has dried up; the Hamburg fish market has flooded; Lone Rock Beach has parched into a desert. The contrast: stark; the message: scathing—the relatively insignificant technological advancements of the upgraded iPhones, the endless cycle of planned obsolescence and the feverish consumerist push to purchase the latest phone, has come at the expense of the environment. The forces driving the endless upgrades to these cameras are indirectly responsible for the degradation of the landscape. Apple would sell us improved cellphone cameras at the price of the exploitation of the landscapes, inviting the would-be photographer to trade the subject of their art for the tool itself. The best photographer, then, does not create the best photos; he simply owns the latest camera. Ecology, once again, has come at the expense of ecology, or, in the words of Aldo Leopold, "We are remodeling Alhambra with a steam-shovel, and

we are proud of our yardage" (Leopold, 1949). This meme achieved what I argue is the role of the contemporary artist: a connector of the relevant information, virally distributed, in an easily legible language, in this case, a simultaneously blunt and complex critique of one aspect of the capitalist mechanisms that have compelled us collectively to sacrifice the planet for a commodity. The artist has made visible the terrible fact that with every purchase, we choose to sacrifice the environment for the iPhone, we choose to sacrifice ecology for the economy, we choose to sacrifice the thing itself for the simulacrum/simulation (Baudrillard, 1994). What strange, perverse logic is expressed by these iPhone ads: we'd rather have a better tool for photographing the environment than have the environment which we purportedly value photographing.

5. Conclusion

There is no end to the amount of data that has been collected on global warming. The evidence is clear and the data continues to accumulate. Yet it is also clear that no amount of accumulated data has any effect on compelling meaningful interventions from the major actors (such as the United States and China) that have the power to do anything about it. The brilliance of this meme comes from the succinctness with which this message is conveyed in a visual language. This is all the more legible to the average citizen than are so many hundreds of thousands of pages of bleak, mind-numbing scientific literature from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. This example grapples with the capitalist chains that have bound us to our Anthropocene catastrophe—careening as we are, towards this seemingly inevitable environmental disaster of our own creation. Is there any art that can shake us from the condition of being both the source and destination of the asteroid of our own demise? Probably not. But we must try. The role of the contemporary artist is closer, then, to the librarian or the curator, a figure who connects audiences to the resources they need, even if the audiences don't necessarily know exactly what it is they are looking for, or even what question needs to be ask.

As Richard Meyer explored in *What Was Contemporary?* and Leo Steinberg heroically struggled with, contemporaneity has historical precedence. What is new is the technology, which reframes our thinking and imagination of the world around us as surely as the printing press, the photograph, and the video camera did. The internet has connected us and pooled everything we've ever

known and experienced. What shall we call this age? It will surely be named by whoever has the stickiest, most pithy, citable title, or whichever name gains the most buzz. Shall we call it the Anthropocene?—that has been an endless tedious argument. Doubtless, whoever manages to create a name that sticks will have to use the internet to make it stick. Perhaps the Internetocene? The AI-cene? I don't know. But I do know that the contemporary moment which we have been a part of will be named in a way that reflects the revolutionary transformation of art and thought by the internet. Most art historians settle on 1989 as the approximate beginning of the contemporary age—I think this date will likely be revised to reflect the age in which the internet began reaching millions and millions of people, perhaps around 1994. And as for artists in the age of digital reproduction: They will be geniuses of relevance, connectors of lightning bolts; their art will be reminders delivered at the right moments to the right people; these artists will leave us stunned by these ideas that were right in front of us, utterly flabbergasted by these things we already knew.

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Figure 1. A sublime lightning strike crookedly detonated some distance from the stadium

(Cited from: <https://www.reddit.com/r/Denver/comments/1dxs0s/it_was_a_shocking_day_at_coors_field_xpost__from/>)

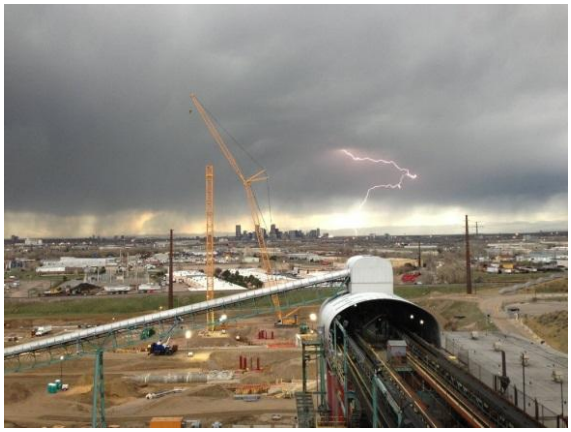

Figure 2. On the other side of town, captured in nearly the same instant the very same lightning bolt

(Cited from: <https://www.reddit.com/r/Denver/comments/1dwjp4/maybe_the_tree_will_finally_turn_green/>)

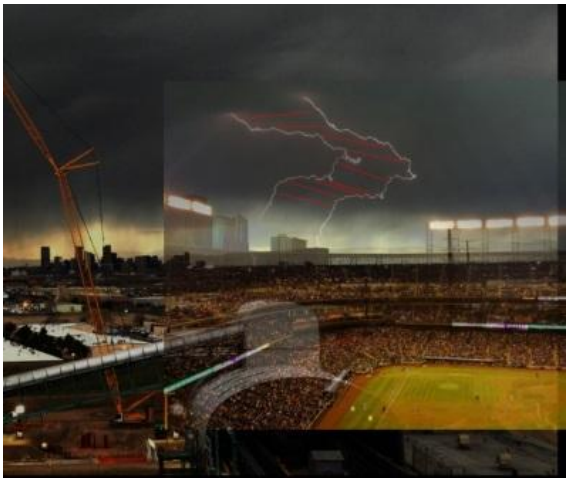

Figure 3. Proven that the coincidence was in fact authentic using triangulation

(Cited from comments linked in Fig 1 and Fig 2)

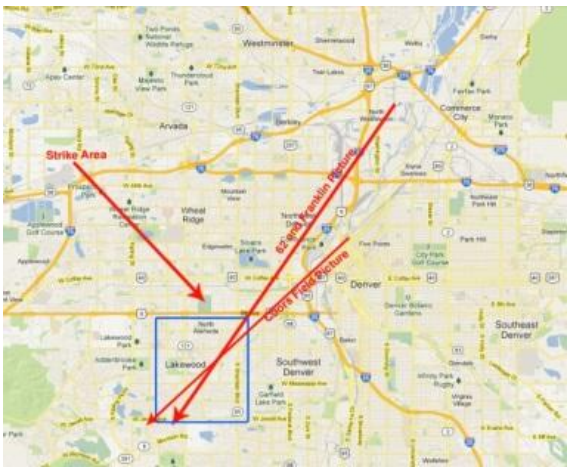

Figure 4. Using triangulation, Google Maps, and Photoshop overlays

(Cited from comments linked in Fig 1 and Fig 2)

Figure 5. Back Market. (n.d.). *Reuse, repair, refurbish campaign*. [Promotional image]. Back Market. <https://www.backmarket.com/en-us/about-us> and <https://www.backmarket.com/en-us/end-fast-tech>.

Figure 6.
Ibid.

Figure 7.
Ibid.

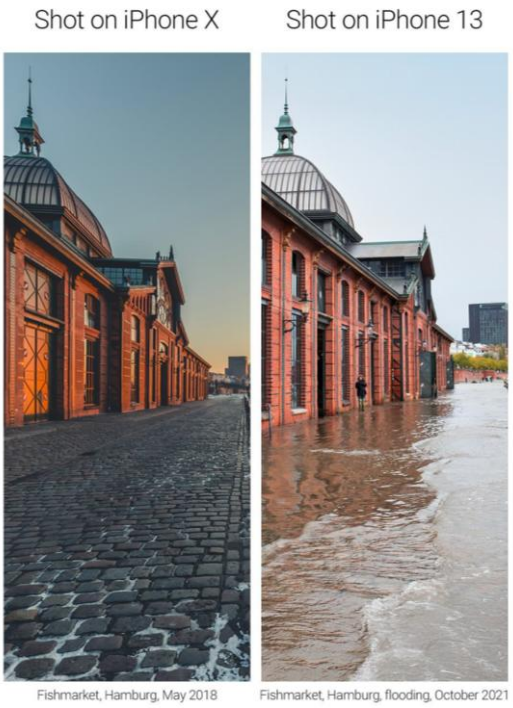

Figure 8.
Ibid.