

Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics



Special Issue – The aesthetic significance of the everyday

From mistake to event: Poor images for transforming the everyday of displacement

Author

BREOGÁN TORRES
GUTIÉRREZ

Affiliation

UNIVERSITY OF SANTIAGO DE
COMPOSTELA

Abstract: This Arts & Artists contribution addresses the concept of ‘poor image’, coined by the German artist Hito Steyerl. I intend to link it with the development of artistic practices based on the use of ordinary materials and images, which are not created with the pretensions of becoming artworks but as a result of a social context. For this, I will delve into the ability to speculate with alternative scenarios in the work of authors such as Jon Mikel Euba or Erlea Maneros Zabala, but I will also review my own activity as an artist. In fact, more than simply describing the use of poor images, I propose to relate them to a situation of displacement: my own, living in Sweden but researching the minoritization of Galician culture in Spain.

I. WORKING WITH NO BUDGET: THE EVERYDAY AS AN OUTCOME ITSELF

As a starting point for this paper, I would like to focus on artists who work with a zero budget. It is crucial for an artist to turn a possible limitation into an alternative possibility. Thus, I have in mind *An Imperfect Cinema* (1976), the manifesto of Cuban director Julio García Espinosa.¹ It begins by associating a technically perfect way of filming with something almost reactionary, linking in that historical moment the artist's resources to the audience for whom the result is addressed. The current context and technological progress make this type of relationship more complex, as higher-resolution images become ever more accessible. Nevertheless, I think it is relevant to bring Espinosa's text to the forefront to remind us that technology, a content in itself, is not free of wills and intentions. The most economically inaccessible artwork is tied to a factor of exclusivity.

But the same thing happens when we work with media that does not require a lot of money: they also have an inheritance that must be taken into account. Espinosa's text was one of the historical bases in this sense, since it put into play the role of these practices with respect to the artist's own intentions. He emphasised that 'what happens is not only an act of social justice: the possibility that everyone can make films; but a fact of extreme importance for the artistic culture: the possibility of rescuing, without complexes, without any sense of guilt, the true meaning of artistic activity'.²



Figure 1: Images from the series 'Petrol Noire' (2006) by Jon Mikel Euba

The first time I began to think about the possibility of purposely working without a budget was thanks to a workshop I followed with Basque artist Jon Mikel Euba. He, who looks for open and unfinished processes, explained that not needing money took a lot of pressure off his shoulders. There was a certain freedom in knowing that the actions of his pieces did not entail economical losses if they did not work, since no one would claim anything from him. This also led to very unusual and sporadic works, very lively and at the same time simple. They were photographs and videos without necessarily high-image

quality that focused more on the action taking place behind them than on their own result. This fact allowed his images to talk about an alternative everyday, undiscovered spots, and gestures that could not be visible there at first sight.

Euba's series of photographs 'Petrol Noire' (2006) plays with potential, desire, and what can be there without the need to make it explicit. The tools he has at hand, such as the implications of the actions he shows and the environment that surrounds them, are enough for this plastic expression, since they don't require complex editing processes afterwards. What there is is what there is, and that is enough to open new spaces. 'The image is not constituted from the camera but from the situation'.³

The value of Euba's 'Petrol Noire' series does not lie in its technical excellence or in its seeking to create a concrete representation, or even in its having created a discourse around it. They do not require cultural or economic capital with which to seek optimum quality according to the norm. Their richness lies in their function as a gesture, in their having left open the possibilities of what may or may not have happened before and after the photograph was taken. The curator and critic Peio Aguirre explains this as follows, 'This is how Euba enhances the interest in looking: he works in the emptiness'.⁴

I interpret Aguirre to mean that these pieces are an example of working on 'possibility' as a medium by focusing on the action and its processes. Aguirre later notes how Euba's photographs and videos serve as 'action-images' (a term that he borrowed from the Gilles Deleuze's cinema course). 'The action-image is performative. It is not only a fragment, something cut out and static, but something compressed that moves. It is born from a nature of blurred images'.⁵

Euba himself has spoken of his latest solo exhibition, 'Animals that bear the weight of mysterious loads in environments created by opposing forces' (2023) at CA2M, as a call to act. With his latest installation, two decades after the above series, he is still concerned with conceptualising ways to increase the viewer's autonomy. 'Everything is finished and at the same time is to be done'.⁶

Another interesting case to cite as an example is the series of photographs belonging to Erlea Maneros Zabala's exhibition 'Norustra' (2021) at San Telmo Museum, San Sebastián, ES. There, Maneros Zabala reacted to an early 20th century lithograph that unnecessarily sublimates the coast of Lekeitio, where the artist is from. To generate alternative images of that place, she travelled along the coast by canoe, shooting photographs of her trip as poorly as she could. The force of the waves, the precariousness of the vehicle she was handling, as well as the physical limitations encountered en route transformed any effort to enter the coastal area, let alone observe it. The photographs are shaky. Instead of a stable horizon line, there is a diagonal one. Many parts of the picture are blurred by the violent movements of the



Figure 2: Installation view of Jon Mikel Euba, ‘Animals that bear the weight of mysterious loads in environments created by opposing forces’, 2023, CA2M, Móstoles, ES

light. As she recalls, ‘There were technical limitations and I was fighting against them all the time. In the end, I thought it was not so important to get a clear or perfect image of the place, but images that reflected the very process of their making’.⁷

In the simple act of physically visiting the spot, she left her body at the mercy of the environment, thus generating a new space. Using the very natural circumstances that surround the coastline, she produced a work that speculates on a new relationship between the population of the area and the area itself.

II. THE POOR IMAGE AS A TOOL TO ADDRESS A DIFFERENT FUTURE

What interests me about Hito Steyerl’s ‘poor image’ is on one hand the capacity of the term to reflect on the images with which we intuitively relate on a daily basis. While on the other hand, our selecting images of low quality that initially have little cultural value effectively questions these hierarchies within the visual realm. I see both paths as possible tools to construct new narratives of the everyday and the future. To follow is Steyerl’s definition of a ‘poor image’.

The poor image is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen-

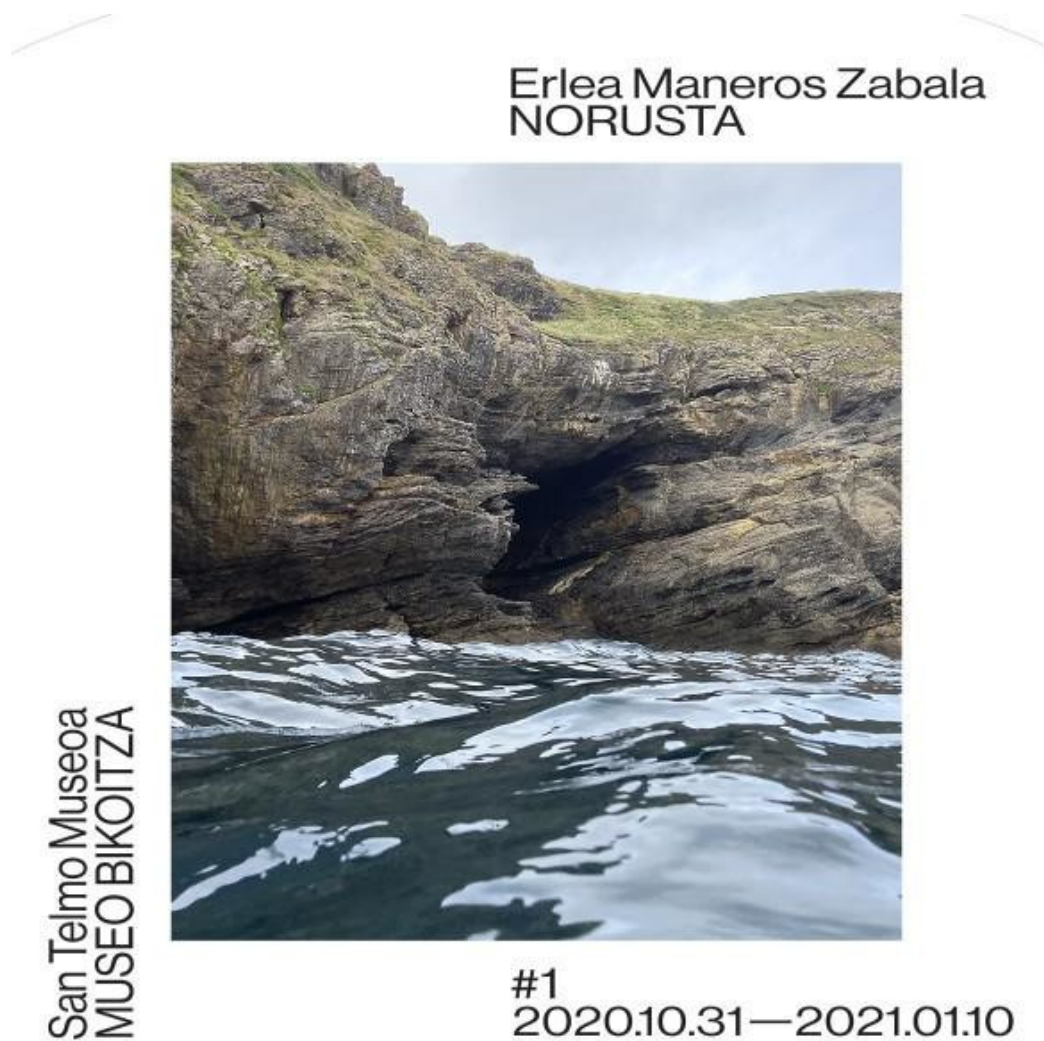


Figure 3: Poster and photography for Erlea Maneros Zabala, ‘Norustra’ (2021), San Telmo Museum, Són Sebastián, ES.

proletariat in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution. The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited. It transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction. The image is liberated from the vaults of cinemas and archives and thrust into digital uncertainty, at the expense of its own substance. The poor image tends toward abstraction: it is a visual idea in its very becoming.⁸

To make it clear, I consider the ‘poor image’ an image that was not born with the intention of having an aesthetic value, of being any type of artistic manifestation. It is reproducible and reproduced. In the first instance, it has nothing special beyond its movement and our relationship with it. This is



Figure 4: Installation view of Erlea Maneros Zabala, 'Norustra' (2021), San Telmo Museum, S n Sebasti n, ES.

one of the characteristics that makes it useful for telling alternative futures. Therefore, they are images that we come across by chance, yet we share them not because they are good or bad, but because these photographs capture something we find curious. They are either found in a cell phone file received via our social network, bad recordings of an event, a pirated version of an artwork, or something completely different. Either way, they are a real part of our present-day life that can be intervened upon to generate fictitious times.

As Steyerl puts it, 'poor images are poor because they are not assigned any value within the class society of images -their status as illicit or degraded grants them exception within this criterion. Their lack of resolution provides the opportunity for appropriation and displacement'.⁹ They are images that we would ordinarily consider ugly, yet their appearance is either an accident or the result of some other end.

III. HIERARCHIES WITHIN IMAGES: CIRCUITS, REALITIES, AND DISPLACEMENT

This text not only analyses the capacity of the notion of 'poor images' to imagine new futures through an outcome of the everyday, but it also serves to educate us regarding these possibilities. That is to say, the mechanism itself can be seen as a transmission tool, a vehicle to generate alternative scenarios together, from the collective. That is why I consider it important to mention the logics it seeks to subvert.

In Steyerl's text 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective', she uses the example of a constant fall as a medium to find new perspectives. She also uses it to talk about the importance of the horizon line in the construction of a legitimised image in a professional artistic circuit. She analyses how ever since the appearance of the traditional perspective the horizon has played the role of stabiliser, the glue that makes a visual construction coherent or not.¹⁰ She uses this as the basis for studying the hierarchy of images, as the main factor to alter in order to investigate what happens if we distort this hierarchy, or at least if we do not take it as a given. That is why she fantasises about the idea of avoiding a horizon line, with a constant fall in which the subject frees himself from a hegemonic and normalising way of looking in order to experiment with new points of view.

In addition to the subject of perspective, Steyerl discusses the relevance of focus and resolution in this hierarchical vision with which we are educated about images. She remarks, 'The lack of definition is also a material problem. The focus is also identified with a class position, a position of ease and privilege, while the lack of focus - or being out of focus - diminishes the value of an image as an image. The contemporary hierarchy of images, however, is not only based on sharpness, but also and primarily on resolution'.¹¹

As a third rank in this line of hierarchies among images, we should mention the idea of creating a complete image, with a complete reading, as opposed to one that appears intentionally fragmented and that will also be transmitted in this way. This includes an interest in another type of communication, more interpretative and fast; closely linked to the person who receives the image.

Here I would like to dwell on two aspects. On the one hand, the poor image has the capacity to produce changing realities from the most intuitive representations. On the other hand, there is practicality of its techniques for artistic practices that are born from displacement. What I mean regarding the first point is better expressed by the Basque sculptor Asier Mendizábal who notes that 'the most assumed presentations of reality try to generate truth'.¹²

I am not concerned with the question of whether an image and its qualities are real or not, but whether they do in fact produce reality. The formal qualities of a poor image and its movement generate the perception that it functions as a physical fragment of the place from which it emerges, which, in turn, has the capacity to modify. Thus, to work from them to build the speculative is to work from the circumstances of a present to articulate a future that challenges it from its own logics.

Regarding the question of displacement, I see value in what the poor image offers as a reference, as a point of support with which to approach a place when you are not there. 'The poor image no longer deals with the real thing [...] On the contrary, it deals with its own real conditions of existence. [...] In short: it deals with reality'.¹³

IV. TO SEE THE SEA, IT IS SOMETIMES BETTER TO CLOSE ONE'S EYES

I moved to Sweden because it was the first place where I could develop an artistic practice of my own. Curiously, this was specialised in the context of the minoritisation of the Galician culture and language, and how this process is transmitted to its landscape. There was a forced and paradigmatic distance in the process. I needed to investigate the places I left, without being physically in them. Then I became interested in the idea of place as a multiplicity of potential relationships. 'We recognize space as the product of interrelationships, as being constructed through interactions, from the global to the intimately small'.¹⁴

Thus, I investigated my absence from the place I had left, not as a lamentation but as a way of speculating on alternative methods of inhabiting a space; of wanting to build from the imaginable, in the void. For this reason, I resorted to basic concepts of the poor image and decided to exhibit only images stored on my cell phone, recorded before I left without artistic pretension.



Figure 5: screenshot, 'To See the Sea, it is Sometimes Better to Close One's Eyes' (2023)

The result was the video installation 'To See the Sea, it is Sometimes Better to Close One's Eyes', shown in the group exhibition 'Mejan Internationale: Home to Home to Home to Home to Home to Home to' (2023) at Mint ABF Stockholm. To create a nightmare about never leaving a place, I mixed digitally-altered images of the remaining mosaics of the abandoned Massó cannery factory in my mother's village with still images of that place's industrial landscape. A slowed-down zoom shot away from the sea, which I extracted from my cellphone, acts as the film's glue.

Mendizábal once said that ‘we often think of techniques -and art is that- as tools to build an imaginary [world] when, in fact, they are also an imaginary themselves’.¹⁵ What I find interesting about this point is that the conditions in which a photograph is taken or a video is recorded articulate a discourse in themselves. Beyond what these results show visually, there is the context of the medium used and the use of it with the ambition to enter one circuit or another.

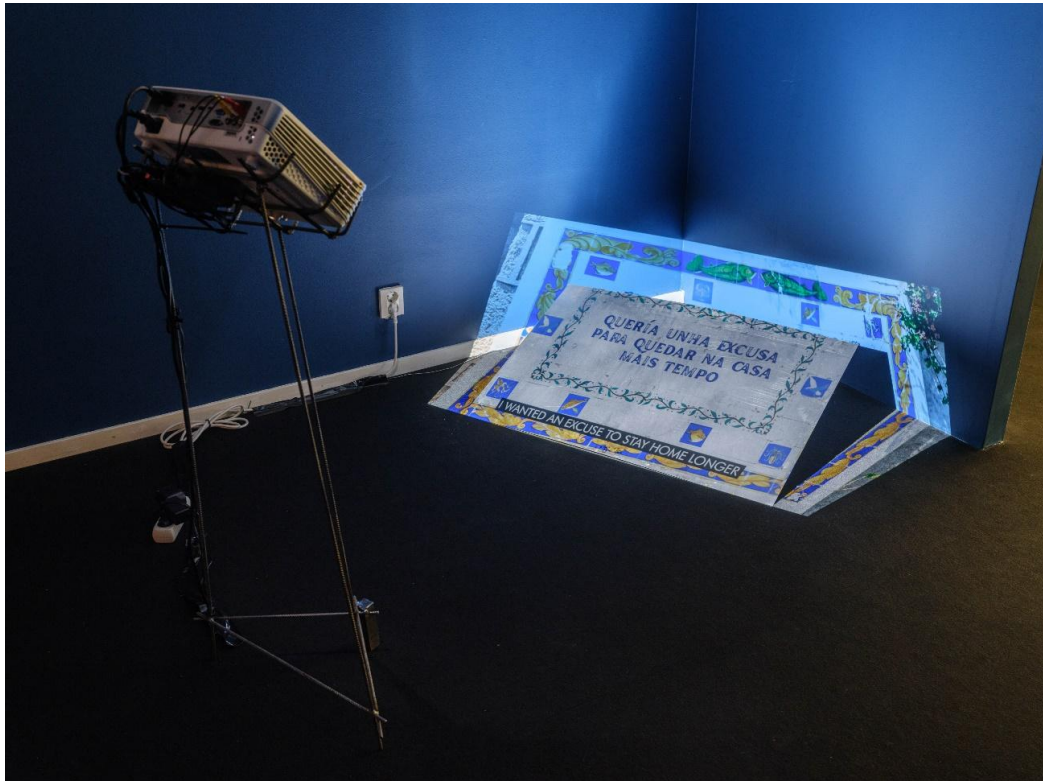


Figure 6: Installation view of ‘To See the Sea, it is Sometimes Better to Close One’s Eyes’ (2023), Mint ABF Stockholm, photograph by Jean-Baptiste Berenguer.

My video’s technique involved using poor images, either moving or static, for a narrative that appropriates the real. At its most practical and visible, it takes a text that is part of the history of a place and alters it, frame by frame, so that it tells a story contrary to the interests of whomever installed that mosaic there in the first place. The shots are reevaluated from the gesture from which they are born, also from their possible displacement and communication.

As Steyerl puts it:

In this light, perhaps you have to redefine what is the value of an image or, more precisely, create a new perspective for it. In addition to resolution and exchange, we can imagine another form of value defined by speed, intensity and circulation.¹⁶



Figure 7: Artistic alteration (left) of the original mosaic (right), abandoned Massó Cannery Factory, Cangas do Morrazo, Galicia, ES. ‘To See the Sea, it is Sometimes Better to Close One’s Eyes’ (2023).

Restructuring the value scale of an image necessarily implies subverting its circuits as well. It is not just that the work itself can weigh less, move faster through networks, or be more easily pirated. It is about incorporating these dynamics within the proposal, as something organic. Many of them flee from the dynamics of industrial production or professional artists to embrace with fondness amateurism, both aesthetically, and politically.

In the essay ‘The Age of Amateur Cinema Will Return’ (2010), the director Jia Zhangke complains about artists who seek an idea of professionalism that ends up always being linked to commercialism. He observes that ‘they pay too much attention to whether the film is good enough to reflect their professional competencies’. Against this type of proposal, which he associates with a certain stagnation, he seeks to value the figure of the amateur artist, which for him has a positive connotation. Those creators who ‘ignore the so-called professional methods [...] have more chance to be innovative. They refuse to follow the standardised principles, so they acquire more diverse ideas and values. They free themselves from conventional customs and restraints to an infinite space for creation’.¹⁷

As a conclusion, the poor image, once distinguished from the intentional as ‘not produced’, requires no less a commitment from the artist and their circumstances. Many times, this is simply a matter of accepting one’s situation. What is interesting and powerful is that the use of poor images has encouraged creative developments, despite their unfavorable circumstances and lack of hegemony, as they occur far from the margins that such displacements entail.

breogantogu@gmail.com

ENDNOTES

1. García Espinosa 1976.
2. 17.
3. Aguirre 2006b, 13.
4. Aguirre 2006a, 31.
5. 15.
6. Revista Mercurio 2023.
7. EITB Kultura 2020.
8. Steyerl 2012, 32.
9. 38.
10. Steyerl 2011.
11. Steyerl 2012, 33.
12. Castaño 2020.
13. Steyerl 2012, 444.
14. Massey 2005, 19.
15. Castaño 2020.
16. Steyerl 2012, 41.
17. Zhangke (2003) 2010.

REFERENCES

- Aguirre, Peio. 2006a. "Conducir un coche no es lo mismo que mirar un paisaje." In *Wiro – Containment*, 102–103. Vitoria-Gasteiz: Eusko Jaurlaritzaren Argitalpen Zerbitzu Nagusia (Servicio Central de Publicaciones del Gobierno Vasco).
- . 2006b. "Construyendo la imagen-acción." In *Jon Mikel Euba*, 11–17. Paris: Actes Sud.
- Castaño, Jesús. 2020. *Entrevista: Asier Mendizabal*. Accessed: 28th December 2024.
- EITB Kultura, prod. 2020. *Norusta. Erlea Maneros Zabala*. Accessed: 28th December 2024. <https://www.eitb.eus/es/television/programas/eitb-kultura/erreportajeak/videos/detalle/7671171/video-norusta-erlea-maneros-zabala/>.
- García Espinosa, Julio. 1976. *Por un cine imperfecto*. Madrid: Miguel Castellet, D.L.
- Massey, Doreen. 2005. *For space*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Revista Mercurio. 2023. *Jon Mikel Euba: todo está por hacer*. Accessed: 24th December 2024. <https://www.revistamercurio.es/2023/02/01/jon-mikel-euba-ca2m/>.
- Steyerl, Hito. 2011. "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective." Accessed: 28th December 2024, *e-flux Journal* (24). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/>.
- . 2012. *The Wretched of the Screen*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Zhangke, Jia. (2003) 2010. *The Age of Amateur Cinema Will Return*. Translated by Yuqian Yan. Accessed: 28th December 2024. <https://www.dgeneratefilms.com/post/jia-zhangke-the-age-of-amateur-cinema-will-return>.

COPYRIGHT:

© 2024 Breogán Torres Gutiérrez

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Aesthetic Investigations is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Dutch Association of Aesthetics.