

## Unit 2 - Positions through Contextualising

### Written Component

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#### Line of Enquiry

How does a meme drift from an image with a clear original context into a reusable and recognisable visual structure through online circulation?

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#### Project Overview

Meme Drift is a design research project about online image circulation, semantic change and visual residue.

In this project, I treat memes as unstable visual objects rather than fixed internet jokes. When memes circulate online, they are screenshotted, compressed, reposted, remixed and recontextualised. During this process, the image may become degraded, the original context may become weaker, and the narrative may be simplified. However, new forms of recognition can also appear, such as a gesture, a layout, a visual rhythm, or a reusable format.

My final outcome consists of two parts: a publication and an interactive website. The publication works as a visual archive. It records and analyses the outcomes of meme drift. Through categories such as Name, Mechanism, Context, Loss and Residue, I examine what is lost, what remains, and how each meme changes through circulation. The interactive website focuses on the process of drift. It explores different visual mechanisms. The first connects two unrelated images with a soft stretched band, showing how memes create forced associations between different contexts. The second expands and merges image pixels, allowing the viewer to experience how an image moves between recognisable object and abstract pattern through mouse interaction.

Through this project, I argue that meme circulation is not only a process of visual degradation. It is also a process of contextual transformation, functional change and structural recognition.

## Bibliography

1 · Hito Steyerl — *In Defense of the Poor Image*

### Citation

Steyerl, H. (2012) 'In Defense of the Poor Image', in *The Wretched of the Screen*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, pp. 31–45. (Originally published in *e-flux Journal*, 10, November 2009.)

### Quote

The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution.

### Annotation

This essay reframed the technical problem I had been treating as an engineering challenge. In Week 1 I was authoring compression, selecting parameters, comparing outputs. Steyerl's description of the poor image as "a copy in motion, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed" made visible the compression I had been ignoring: the kind performed automatically, continuously, by every platform an image passes through. This shifted my position from designer-of-compression to observer-of-compression. The Week 2 iterations are no longer filters I apply to a photograph but stages I document in the passage of a photograph through real networks. Steyerl also turns the question of image quality into a political one: resolution is not a neutral property but a distribution of visibility. An image that is "poor" is also an image that has travelled, been seen, survived. This is the framing that now organises my work.



**Citation**

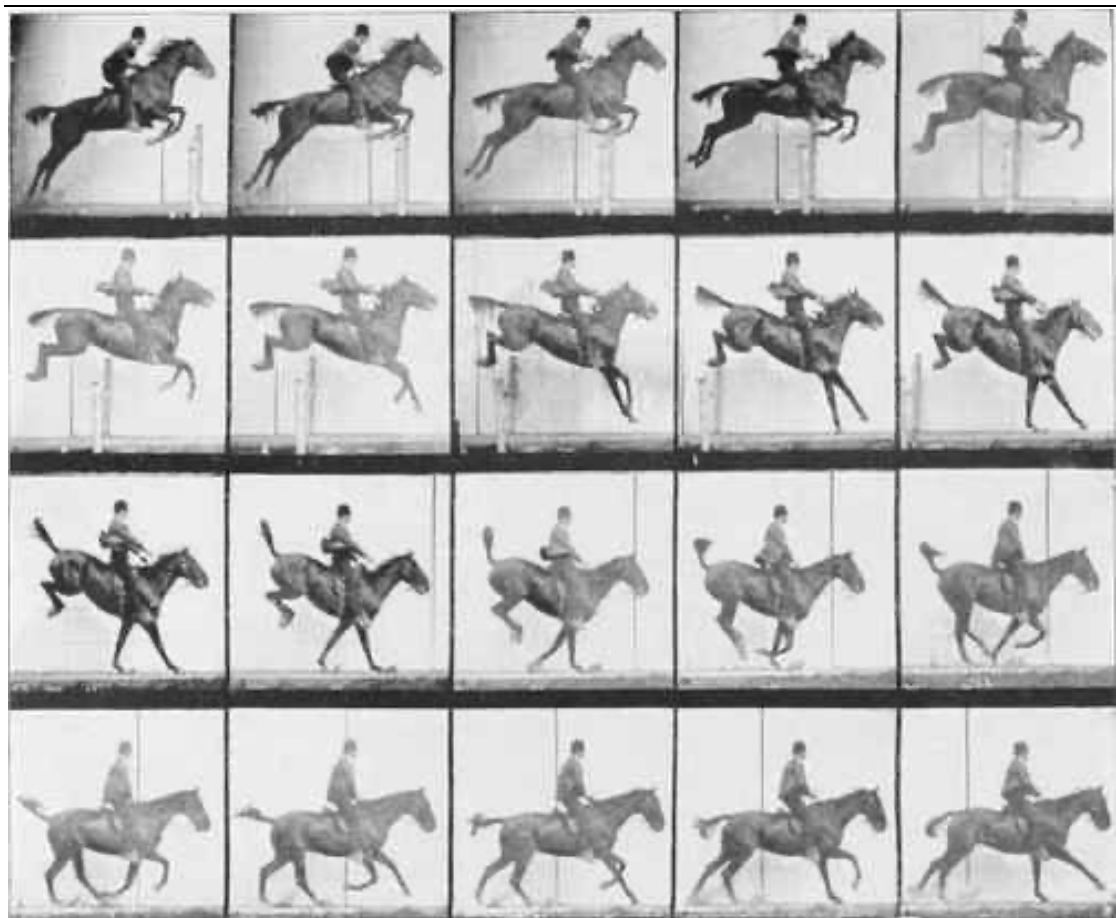
Benjamin, W. (1969) 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Arendt, H. (ed.) *Illuminations*. Translated by H. Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, pp. 1–26. (Originally published 1935.)

**Quote**

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.

**Annotation**

Benjamin describes mechanical reproduction as the historical event that emptied the artwork of aura — the specific weight of being one thing in one place. My project starts where his ends. The image-objects I work with have no original to lose: a meme is born already as a copy. And yet they are not aura-less. What collects on them is something else — a record of having been handled, screenshotted, cropped, reposted, run through one platform's compression and then another.



3 · Daniel Rubinstein & Katrina Sluis — *The Digital Image in Photographic Culture: Algorithmic Photography and the Crisis of Representation*

**Citation**

Rubinstein, D. and Sluis, K. (2013) 'The Digital Image in Photographic Culture: Algorithmic Photography and the Crisis of Representation', in Lister, M. (ed.) *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge, pp. 22–40.

**Quote**

The distinction between photography as an archive of memory and photography as an image of time in crisis allows us to suggest that the technologies that create interactive image systems also threaten photography's representational paradigm through the production of a computational image. As we will explain in this chapter, the digital image is an image/software machine that operates on several levels at once, some visual, others computational, operating within media ecologies involving both human and non-human actors.

**Annotation**

Rubinstein and Sluis argue that the photograph, in the era of networked computation, has become less an index of the world and more a product of algorithms. The "crisis of representation" they describe is not about image quality but about what an image now is: a computational event subject to continuous processing. This reframing supports the move I am trying to make in my project. When I send a photograph of a CSM lamp through WeChat, the file that arrives on my friend's phone is not simply my photograph slightly degraded; it is an image that has been reconstructed by the platform's compression algorithm. Rubinstein and Sluis help me articulate why it is insufficient to treat this as a technical nuisance: the algorithm is producing the image, not merely transporting it. My iterations document this production.



### Citation

Shifman, L. (2014) *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

### Quote

Shifman defines an internet meme as “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users.

### Annotation

Shifman’s definition is the one I am taking the most operational use from. Two things in it matter directly to the archive. First, the meme is not a single image but a family of items — which is why my fossils sometimes preserve a lineage rather than a single specimen. Second, Shifman’s three modes — circulated, imitated, transformed — give me a vocabulary for the soft tags I attach to each fossil.



### **Citation**

Menkman, R. (2011) *The Glitch Moment(um)*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures (Network Notebooks 04). Available at: [https://networkcultures.org/\\_uploads/NN%234\\_RosaMenkman.pdf](https://networkcultures.org/_uploads/NN%234_RosaMenkman.pdf) (Accessed: 23 April 2026).

### **Quote**

A glitch is a wonderful interruption that shifts an object away from its ordinary form and discourse, towards the ruins of destroyed meaning.

### **Annotation**

Menkman takes a clear position: the compression artefact is not noise to be eliminated but a site of critical attention — the moment where an otherwise invisible infrastructure becomes readable. This is the position my documentation also takes. I am not recording platform circulation to lament quality loss, nor to aestheticise it. Menkman lets me distinguish my project from two nearby traps I kept sliding into during Week 1: the nostalgic “degradation is beautiful” move, and the technical “compression is a problem to optimise” move. My position is closer to hers.



### Citation

Dean, A. (2016) 'Poor Meme, Rich Meme', *Real Life Magazine*, 25 July. Available at: <https://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/> (Accessed: 23 April 2026).

### Quote

Like the poor image, the meme finds its home only in this circulation — its true content is the many bumps and bruises that have occurred along the way. It is a copy without an original — a copy of a copy of a copy, and so forth. For better or worse, a meme asks instead to be considered as its total sum presence in circulation.

### Annotation

Dean extends Steyerl's argument from the art image to the meme, a form whose visual language is shaped directly by the infrastructure of repeated compression, screenshotting, caption-editing, and re-upload. Her essay gives me a vocabulary for a specific visual register I keep encountering in my iterations: the "deep-fried" register, where colour saturation over-boils, JPEG blocks surface as texture, and the image appears to have eaten the history of its own distribution. Dean lets me treat this register as content rather than aesthetic accident. A deep-fried image of a CSM lamp is not a failed image; it is an image that has accumulated the traces of every platform it has passed through.



### Citation

@unexpected\_sports (2018–ongoing) Grottesque (After the 'gram). Instagram. Available at: [https://www.instagram.com/unexpected\\_sports/](https://www.instagram.com/unexpected_sports/) (Accessed: 20 May 2026).

### Quote

"Grottesque (After the 'gram)."

### Annotation

Over several years, this account has posted more than 1,300 iterations of what seems to have started as a single photograph of a horse. Through repeated processing, the original subject gradually dissolves into colour fields, textures, and abstract grids. Compared with my Week 1 experiments, which only tested five or ten generations, this feed shows what happens when one image is pushed through a much longer cycle.

What surprised me is that the result is not simply "more degraded." The image moves in and out of recognisability. Clarity breaks down into noise, noise begins to form patterns, and those patterns sometimes become almost figurative again. This made me rethink drift as something more unstable than one-way loss. In Grottesque, drift works more like an oscillation, where recognition disappears and returns across the iterations.

This directly influenced my website. Instead of making the viewer watch a single direction of degradation, I let them scrub backward and forward through pixel expansion. That interaction comes from the rhythm of this account: the feeling that an image does not only decay, but repeatedly shifts between content, pattern, and possible meaning.



### Citation

Kelberman, D. (2011–ongoing) *I'm Google*. Web-based artwork. Available at: <https://imgoogle.dinakelberman.com/> (Accessed: 20 May 2026).

### Quote

"An ongoing blog in which I post videos and pictures that I find on the internet in long visual streams. The images are connected to one another in some visual or contextual way, creating an extended exploration of related ideas." — Dina Kelberman, artist statement.

### Annotation

*I'm Google* is the closest reference for the first interactive mechanism in my website: the soft stretched band that brings two unrelated images into the same space. Kelberman connects images through visual similarity. One image leads to the next through colour, shape, texture, or composition, even when the subjects have no real relationship. A sliced orange can sit beside a basketball or a brain scan, and the viewer still reads a connection because the eye recognises a visual bridge.

This helped me understand what my own mechanism was doing. My project is not only about how images become connected through circulation. It is also about how visual recognition can push the viewer to create meaning. Once the eye notices a similarity, the mind starts to build a relationship between images that may not actually belong together.

The difference is that Kelberman keeps this process inside a smooth scroll. The connection feels natural and continuous. In my website, I expose the joint itself. The stretched band makes the act of connection visible, almost like a soft membrane between two images. *I'm Google* helped me see that the work of the project can come from framing and arranging images, rather than producing new ones.



### Citation

Warburg, A. (2020) *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne: The Original*. Edited by R. Ohrt and A. Heil. Berlin: Hatje Cantz. (Originally compiled 1924–1929.)

### Quote

The Mnemosyne Atlas was Warburg's attempt to map the *Nachleben der Antike* — the afterlife of antiquity — through the migration of pathos formulas: gestures, postures and visual figures that survive and recur across cultures and centuries.

### Annotation

Warburg arranged photographs of artworks, advertisements, postage stamps and astrological diagrams on black panels not by chronology, geography or subject, but by visual rhyme — the recurrence of a gesture, a posture, a compositional pattern across millennia. He was eighty years too early to call this a study of memes, but it is one of the earliest serious attempts to take the lateral migration of visual forms as a primary object of study. The Atlas matters to my project for two reasons. First, it gives my publication a methodological ancestor: an archive organised by Mechanism / Context / Loss / Residue is structurally closer to a Warburgian panel than to a library catalogue. Second, Warburg held a conviction that my project tries to inherit — that visual forms possess their own life, independent of the intentions of those who first produced them, and that following these forms across their migrations reveals something cultural research alone cannot. What I am identifying as "structural recognition" in meme drift — the moment an image becomes a re-usable formula — is the contemporary, networked case of what Warburg called the *Pathosformel*: the formula that survives because it can be re-used.



### Citation

Berger, J. (1972) *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin Books.

### Quote

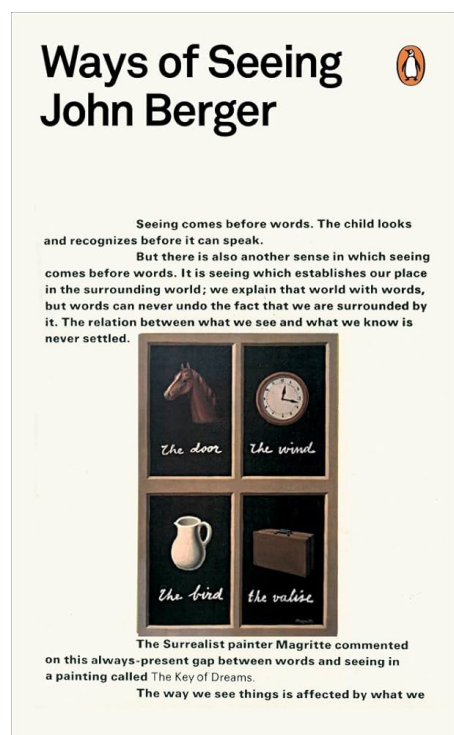
The meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it. Such authority as it retains, is distributed over the whole context in which it appears.

### Annotation

Berger's idea helps me clarify what the soft stretched band in my website is doing. In the first interactive mechanism, the viewer brings two unrelated images together and sees a visual connection form between them. Once they appear side by side, each image starts to be read differently.

This connects to Berger's argument that an image's meaning changes according to what appears beside it or after it. My website turns this idea into an action: the viewer can control the juxtaposition and watch the relationship appear visually.

This also helps me avoid treating meme drift only as a question of audience or platform. What matters more in my project is how meaning is produced through placement, pairing, and context. Memes make this process especially visible because they are constantly reposted, reframed, and placed beside other images. Berger gives my project a wider frame, so it can be understood as part of a longer discussion about images and context, not only as a study of internet culture.



### **Citation**

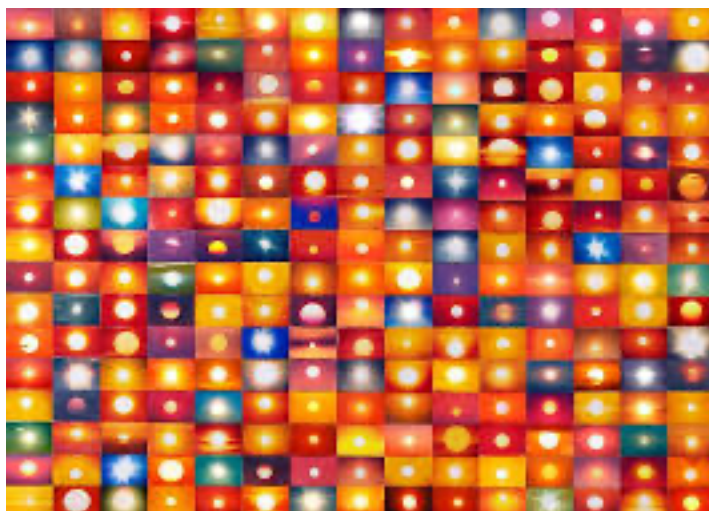
Umbrico, P. (2006–ongoing) *Suns (from Sunsets) from Flickr*. Inkjet print installation, ongoing series. Documentation available at: <https://www.penelopeumbrico.net/index.php/project/suns/> (Accessed: 20 May 2026).

### **Quote**

I extracted 2,303 suns from sunsets posted on Flickr on January 23, 2006. By 2014 it was 8,730,221. The number grows with the popularity of the gesture. The piece is a portrait of collective image production — the sun once unique becomes a repeating texture in the field of online imagery.

### **Annotation**

Penelope Umbrico's *Suns from Flickr* is an important reference for my project because it shows what happens when a familiar online image is repeated at a large scale. Instead of taking new photographs of sunsets herself, Umbrico collects thousands of sunset images that other people have uploaded to Flickr and arranges them into grids. When seen together, the images no longer feel like individual photographs. They begin to appear as a pattern, a texture, or a shared visual habit produced by many anonymous users. This is useful for my project because it relates to what I call structural recognition. In meme circulation, there is a point where an image is no longer mainly read for its original content. It starts to be recognised as a format. The viewer sees the structure first, before they think about the specific subject inside it. Umbrico's grid makes a similar shift visible. A personal image of a sunset becomes part of a larger graphic system through repetition.



### Citation

Li, M. (2024) Memeville. Web-based hyperlink fiction. Available at: <https://memeville.glitch.me/> (Accessed: 21 October 2024). Postgraduate project, MA Visual Communication, Royal College of Art.

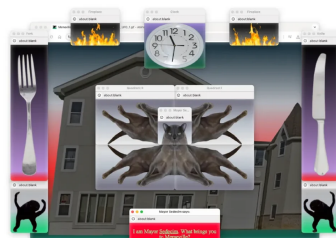
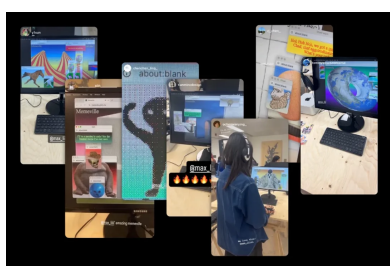
### Quote

A hypertext text-game exploring the recursiveness of internet meme culture. Players navigate Memeville through Frankenstein-like characters assembled from various memes, uncovering the town's hidden secrets. The game examines, in a playful, absurd yet critical way, how memes mutate and distort through endless iteration and circulation, and the loss of source and ownership in the digital age.

### Annotation

Memeville is an important contemporary reference for my project. It also comes from an MA Visual Communication context at the RCA, and it takes memes seriously as objects of design research. Its decision to use a website as the final form is especially relevant to me, because it shows that meme research can work through interaction, navigation, and digital space, rather than needing to become only a book or a video.

However, the way Memeville approaches meme culture is different from mine. Li presents meme culture as a fictional world that the viewer can move through. He uses characters made from stitched-together meme fragments, almost like Frankenstein bodies, to explore ideas of recursiveness, remixing, and the loss of authorship. My project focuses less on building a fictional space. It is more concerned with how meaning shifts between images. The basic unit in my work is not a character, but the relationship between two images.



## Critical analyses

### *John Berger — Ways of Seeing (1972)*

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger argues that an image does not carry meaning on its own. Its meaning is produced when it is seen, especially through the things placed around it. As he writes, “The meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it. Such authority as it retains, is distributed over the whole context in which it appears.” Berger uses this idea to question the belief that an image has one stable meaning that can simply be passed from one place to another. For him, this belief is a kind of mystification, and mechanical reproduction makes that problem visible. Once images are removed from their original context and repeated across magazines, postcards, television, and other forms of media, they begin to collect new meanings from each new situation. Although Berger mainly discusses art images, his argument can be applied more widely. Meaning is shaped through relation, placement, and sequence.

One thing I find important about *Ways of Seeing* is that the book does not only explain this argument through writing. Its form also demonstrates it. The project first existed as a four-part BBC television series in 1972, and the printed book keeps some of that visual and sequential logic. Three of its seven chapters are made entirely from images, with no written explanation. The other chapters combine photographic montage with short, direct prose. The typography is a simple sans serif, rather than the more traditional serif style often associated with academic art history. It was also published as a small Penguin paperback, which makes it feel closer to mass culture than to a specialist art-history text. These design choices matter. By placing images beside one another and allowing the reader to make connections, Berger shows that juxtaposition is already a way of producing meaning. The layout is not just supporting the argument. It is part of the argument.

This approach is useful for my own project because it gives me a way to think about images in circulation without treating myself as a fully authoritative commentator. Berger does not simply tell the reader what each image means. Instead, he creates conditions where meaning appears through comparison, sequence, and visual contact. This is especially relevant to memes, because memes rarely exist as isolated images. They are constantly placed next to other images, captions, interfaces, comments, and reposts. Their meaning changes through these encounters.

Berger’s argument also connects to a wider discussion in graphic design about whether design can ever be neutral. It reminds me of the debate between Wim Crowel and Jan van Toorn, especially around objectivity and the designer’s role in shaping meaning. If an image’s meaning depends on framing and context, then design decisions are never passive. Layout, sequence, categories, captions, and visual proximity all affect how the image is understood. This is important for my publication. The archive structure I use, Name / Mechanism / Context / Loss / Residue, cannot be treated as a neutral system of classification. These categories already suggest what kinds of relationships are

important. They guide the reader toward certain forms of loss, transformation, and residue.

Berger's influence is most direct in my website. The soft stretched band between two unrelated images is my attempt to turn his idea of juxtaposition into a visual action. Berger describes how meaning changes when one image appears beside another. In my website, the viewer can actively create that situation by choosing two images and watching a third meaning appear in the connection between them. However, my project also responds to a different media condition from Berger's. He was writing in relation to printed reproduction, television, and the gallery wall, where image sequences were more deliberate and slower. Today, online circulation makes juxtaposition constant. Every scroll, repost, screenshot, and algorithmic recommendation creates a new context for an image. In this sense, my project does not move away from Berger. It tries to bring his argument into a digital environment where juxtaposition has become one of the main ways images are experienced.

### ***Dina Kelberman — I'm Google (2011–ongoing)***

I'm Google is a continuous web-based artwork by Dina Kelberman. In the work, she collects images and short videos from the internet, mainly through Google Image Search, and places them into one long downward-scrolling stream. The project began in 2011, first as a Tumblr, and later moved to its own website. It has no clear ending, chapter structure, or fixed route through the material.

The stream is organised through visual connection rather than topic. Each image shares something with the previous one, such as colour, shape, texture, composition, or surface. Because of this, the viewer starts to read the images as connected, even when their subjects have nothing obvious in common. A sliced orange may lead into a basketball, then into a brown circle, then into a planet, and then into an aerial photograph of a quarry. The subjects change completely, but the visual chain continues. As the viewer scrolls, they begin to construct the relationships that Kelberman has carefully arranged.

What I find important in I'm Google is how much of the work happens through its structure. There are no titles, captions, visible source links, or explanatory texts. Kelberman's editing is clearly present, but it is not directly shown. The page is simple: a single column on a white background, using ordinary web typography that almost disappears. This makes the act of scrolling feel continuous and automatic, with no strong beginning or ending. The website format is important because the work uses the same environment where its source images already circulate.

These choices are not just aesthetic. They remove many things that image curation usually depends on, such as metadata, attribution, explanation, and narrative order. By taking these away, Kelberman makes the viewer rely more heavily on visual pattern recognition. The viewer is not told how to read the images. Instead, they start to notice how quickly their own eye creates links between unrelated things. In this sense, the

work reveals pattern-matching as an active process, rather than a neutral way of seeing.

For graphic communication design, I'm Google is useful because it suggests that the designer does not always need to make new images. Sometimes the designer's role is to decide how existing images are placed, sequenced, and encountered. This feels especially relevant in the context of platforms, feeds, and meme circulation. Aria Dean makes a related point in *Poor Meme, Rich Meme* when she argues that a meme's content is "its total sum presence in circulation." Meaning is not only produced by the original author. It is also shaped by the ways an image is repeated, moved, reframed, and placed next to other images. Kelberman's work shows this very clearly. The sequence itself becomes the work.

This has influenced my own project, especially the first interactive mechanism on my website. The soft stretched band that connects two unrelated images began as an attempt to explore something similar to Kelberman's image chain. However, my version focuses on a slightly different moment. In I'm Google, the connection between two images is hidden inside the smooth flow of the scroll. The viewer feels the connection, but the moment where the link is made remains almost invisible. In my website, I wanted to expose that moment. The band becomes a visible joint between the two images. It acts like a soft membrane that can be stretched, tightened, or released by the viewer.

This is not a rejection of Kelberman's method. I see it more as a related response. Kelberman shows that visual pattern-matching is constantly happening as we move through images online. My project tries to make that process more visible. I want the viewer to become aware that they are not just passively looking at two images. They are also producing the connection between them.

My publication takes a different approach from I'm Google. Kelberman uses a continuous stream, while my publication uses an archive structure with fixed categories such as Name, Mechanism, Context, Loss, and Residue. At first these seem like opposite methods, but I think they can work together. The stream shows drift as a flow, while the archive shows drift as something that can be paused, classified, and compared. Reading Kelberman helped me understand that these two forms do not need to cancel each other out. They can reveal different parts of the same process. In my project, the website shows how meaning moves between images, while the publication records what is changed, lost, or left behind.

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