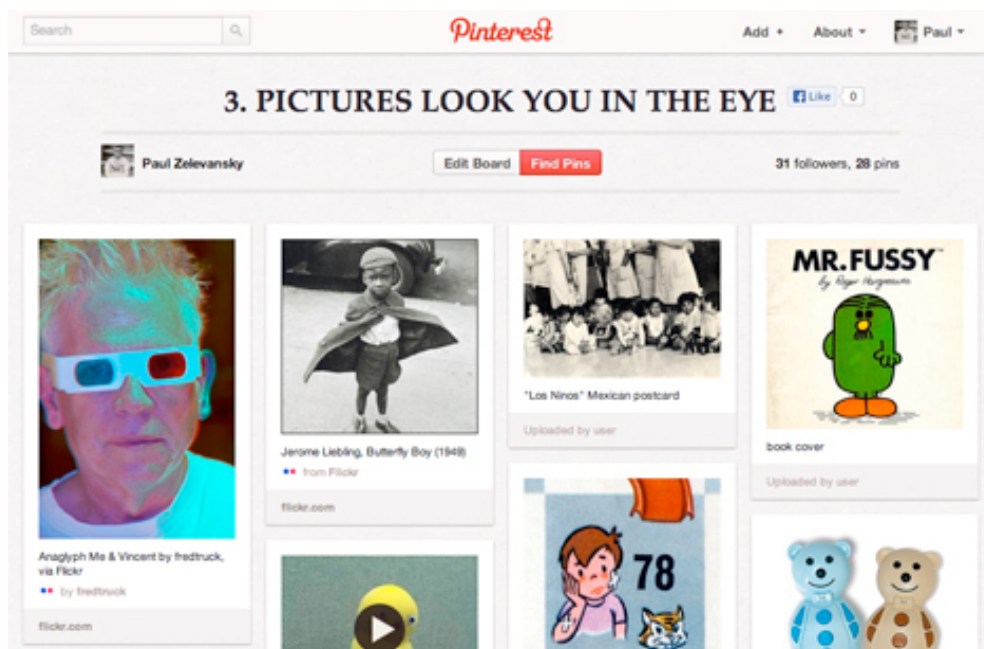


GETTING PINTERESTING

“Identification rests upon organization into entities and kinds. The response to the question “Same or not the same?” must always be “Same what?...”

Pictures represent specific goals and communication strategies that unfold in particular contexts. This is one of the implications of the above quote from Nelson Goodman about “entities and kinds.” Once you identify the details of a picture, idea, or thing, distinctions about categories and comparisons with other things become paramount. That is, the meaning of a picture is a product of what it appears to be, what it is not, and finally what the artist or designer wants you to believe it is.



“Pinterest is a tool for collecting and organizing things you love.”--Pinterest

Pinterest is a social networking web site established in 2010, which allows participants to collect and attach (pin) images of products, scenes, artworks etc. to personal pin-boards that can be presented and shared with both friends and strangers. While it draws on contemporary expectations of on-line shopping, networking, and commentary, Pinterest relies upon much older models of design and communication.

A variant of collage, the creation of Pinterest boards draws it close to the amateur hand-made scrapbook or bulletin board in which memories and experiences are evoked through photographs, souvenirs, maps, advertisements etc. Whether gathered from commercial websites around the internet or from personal collections, the Pinterest user curates a selection of images under the heading of a chosen title or theme. The mix of examples represents what could be called an affinity group: pictures of things sharing common traits and sentiments—foods, scenes, celebrities, graphic design—a doubling

down on the whole internet notion of LIKE—as in I LIKE this, but also this is LIKE that, the desire for consensus that underlies so many aspects of social networking.

**Check out the retrograde motion,
Kill the notion,
Of biting and recycling and
Calling it your own creation.**

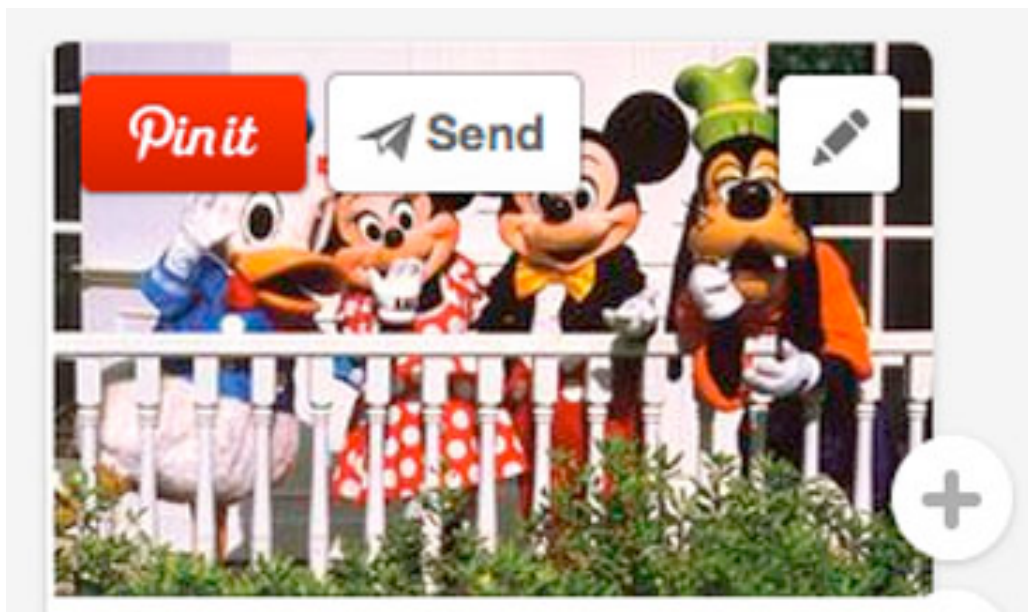
(“Zealots,” Fugees)

The hip hop group Fugees wrote “Zealots” in 1996 and it epitomized an approach to musical collage or sampling in which fragments of sound—lyrics, beats, or melody—were brought into a mix that became its own coherent piece of work while still referring back to its roots. With both the Fugees and Pinterest, you could say that the creation is personal, while gathering material and audience outreach is communal. In “Zealots” the Fugees are criticizing the idea of “biting” (stealing or ripping off another person’s style) and “recycling” musical sources in a banal way rather than reimagining their use. In contrast to the Pinterest ethic, the song is not about sharing and being liked uncritically--but competing against other performers at producing the best results. The Fugees explore the creative friction between the elements of a song--samples which alternatively challenge and embrace a distinct musical history--and the expectations of different audiences. A devoted fan base is the ultimate victory.



A Pinterest board, while arguably no more a mix of disparate elements than a page in a stamp album, makes the notion of SOCIAL and NETWORK concrete, facilitating graphic sampling, all apparently copyright free. By installing a “PIN” button in the Bookmarks Bar of one’s web browser, you can travel to any website, click the pin button, and choose from various selected images automatically separated out from the web page. This means that you cannot only copy images from many sites, but when the picture is

attached to your own boards it carries its url address with it. Therefore you or anyone looking at your boards can click back to the source for basic information or even to purchase what it displayed.



Further, once you are registered on the site and begin to browse other people's collections, the interface makes it extremely easy to select any of their images for re-pinning or circulating. You roll over the chosen image and choose "PIN IT," or "SEND" then are asked where you want it located on your boards or beyond. When someone in turn makes a selection from your boards, Pinterest sends you an email telling you the name of the person and providing a link to their boards. In this respect, announcements of "re-pinning" reinforce the Pinterest social contract, while marketing the Pinterest brand.

"Hi Paul!"

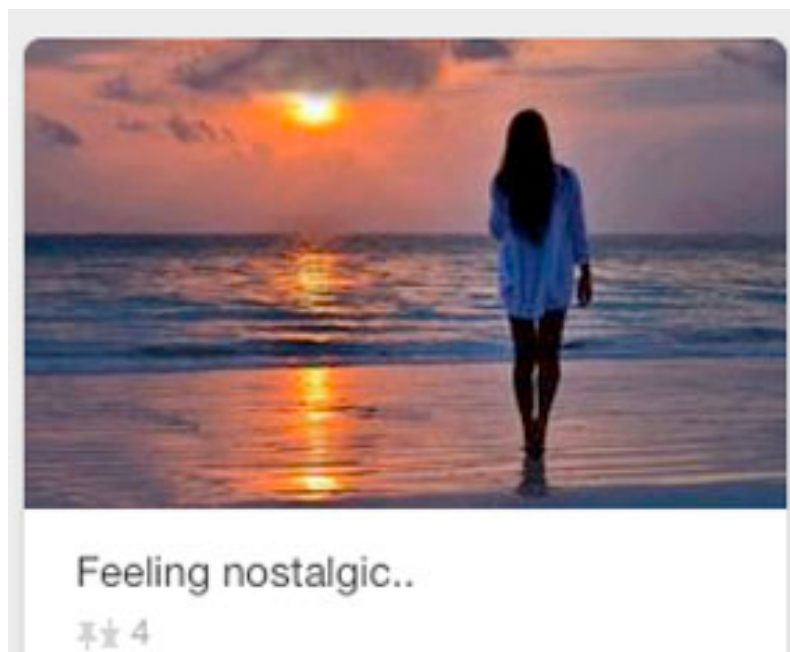
The Pinterest corporate voice—the one that delivers text instructions about how to create boards, suggests boards to look at, and makes announcements of re-pinnings and likes that accrue to your own boards—is open and friendly: "Hi Paul! So and so re-pinned or liked your pin ____." Thus to be told by Pinterest that someone is "following" your boards can be experienced as flattering, as opposed to invasive, and supportive, because you can believe that Pinterest.com filters out anything but good intentions.

But wait—stop the presses, as they used to say about print newspaper—for some surprise headlines:



Promoted Pin advertisements for Bank of America on Pinterest

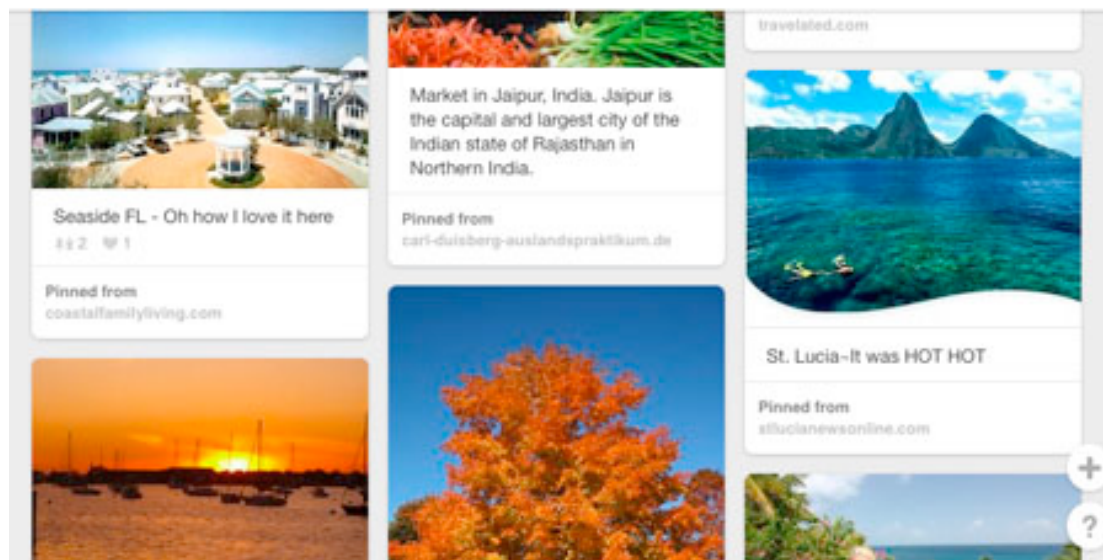
In a 12/28/2014 article in the New York Times, it was reported that Pinterest would begin inserting targeted corporate advertising from companies like Kraft Foods and Bank of America. Given the initial pinboard, scrapbook ethos of the site, this might seem an awkward fit. But since many Pinterest boards are composed of recipes, party favors, stock travel photos, and home decorating tips, it actually makes perfect sense. An analyst with an e-marketing firm is quoted as saying: "Pinterest definitely has a lot of potential, because the nature of the activity is totally commercial." Again this would seem to undermine the DIY sensibility of many boards, yet many pinners are also in the business of using commercial images to encourage consumption, so inviting Kraft foods into your scrapbook with Pinterest's help is a frictionless move.



There are now millions of image collections on Pinterest, and in my experience so far, they are overwhelmingly concerned with notions of style, charm, humor, and beauty

(really prettiness, in contrast to ideals of refinement or the sublime). While there is no established set of standards for what these values might mean on Pinterest, some creators of boards express a passion for aesthetics whether through examples of popular stereotypes (photographs of children, weddings, fashion, travel) or stylish product design (computers, music players, housewares) or scenic or culinary pleasures (national parks, nostalgic views of world cities, Nutella muffins).

While the elegant Pinterest interface requests both a title for each created board, and individual descriptive captions for pictures, what is rare is any apparent interest in being explicit about the terms of collection beyond a version of “These are a few of my favorite things” or an informal caption like “Perfect!,” or “Highly decorative.” Where the pinner was when the beautiful or admired thing was seen, experienced, or eaten, is not usually indicated either. Therefore, a sense of time and space, and the pinner’s presence, is marked by where a picture ends up in a given set, each one serving like a neutral coordinate on a map that never defines a coherent territory. Seaside, Florida is next to Jaipur, India, which is next to St. Lucia. Same or not the same?



“Hi Walter!”

This kind of visual catch-bin blog has become disconcertingly common, for reasons that a cultural theorist like Walter Benjamin would be hard pressed to explain. Who knew there was such a large, mainstream market for artfully arranged pictures of other people’s stuff?

(Carina Chocano, New York Times Magazine, 7/22/12)

In the essay, “Being Addicted to Longing for Something,” Carina Chocano credits Pinterest with inviting users into a communal experience that goes deeper than the uninflected recitation of “news,” likes, and dislikes that fuel a site like Facebook. Because the products and places celebrated on Pinterest, and other self-curated sites like Tumblr, may be beyond our experience or means, they become instances that signify unrequited desire, or infatuation: “the feeling of being addicted to longing.”

This is in contrast to available products on Amazon.com that have prices, ratings by other consumers, and may be aligned with other products that are “Frequently bought

together.” While Facebook users add to the relentless scrolling news feed in a version of real time, Pinterest boards remain static and accessible until they are changed, or restocked, just like supermarket shelves. So when a Pinterest user curates a selection under a heading like “You’re My Obsession,” “Crafty for Kids,” “Places I’d Like to Go,” “La Vie en Rose,” she creates a cumulative record of what she cares about during the time it took to create and maintain the board.

Different so-and-sos may be the same such-and-such...

While Pinterest and Facebook users share with artists and designers the inclination to use pictures to communicate in public, the selection process does not require the editing and transformation that professionals might apply to their work. But this limit is also a product of the Pinterest interface. When a new image is added it always appears top left in the grid (usually rows of three across), and pictures are reduced to a uniform width, although there can be some variance vertically. As for composition, there is no easy way to create specific juxtapositions, unless one deletes images and then adds them at the top left of the sequence. The pinner’s world in this respect is not so much reconsidered or reimagined, as catalogued and assembled, like a diary but without chronology or self-reflection. Yet if we did contact Walter Benjamin, as Chocano suggests, he might say the following:

Today the most real, the mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement. It abolishes the space where contemplation moved and all but hits us between the eyes with things, as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen.

(Walter Benjamin, “This Space for Rent”, *One Way Street*, 1979)

Despite the relatively small screens of smartphones and tablets, contemplation is not required to immerse oneself in the image. The mercantile gaze continues to be more than enough.

24 IDEAS ABOUT PINTEREST

24 IDEAS ABOUT PICTURES is made up of 24 visual/verbal propositions about the grammar, meaning, and metaphysics of pictures. Utilizing a step-by-step structure in which each lesson builds on those that precede it, 24 IDEAS considers what makes pictures—in collusion and competition with words—alternatively powerful and unreliable as representations of reality.

(Paul Zelevansky, *24 IDEAS ABOUT PICTURES*, 2008)

In 2008 I published a book about visual thinking called 24 IDEAS ABOUT PICTURES that lays out a phenomenological approach to looking at and interpreting pictures. The analysis turns on three broad questions: What is the picture asking me to consider? How is it doing the asking (that is, what is its form, style, technique, media)? And, how does the picture’s context and use affect what it means? (Where am I seeing it, what happens when I move it to another situation?) In 2012, after reading Carina Chocano’s article, I decided to join Pinterest in an effort to

understand how my approach to visual thinking might apply in a social media context. I created a set of 24 boards corresponding to the 24 propositions that structure my book. Initially these boards were built of all the images from the book.



Further, by organizing the sets around propositions (i.e. 1. A PICTURE IS IN FACT A LESSON, or 12. PICTURES ATTRACT AND REPEL) as opposed to an image type (object, scene, theme) there was the hope that viewers could reflect on the rhetorical qualities of the pictures: what they speak of and how they reflect on others in the set. To emphasize this, while 24 IDEAS is heavily reliant on verbal analysis of individual images and the relationship between adjacent ones on the same page, I chose to leave most of the text off the boards. This was an attempt to test whether the essential nature of the

discussion would remain without the formal critique. Here is a link to one of the boards to which I have added over time:

<https://www.pinterest.com/pzelevansky/3-pictures-look-you-in-the-eye/>

While both Pinterest and 24 IDEAS invest in pictures as the central language of communication and exchange, it is with ideas like *collusion*, *competition*, and *unreliability* that the projects split off on very different tracks. While I have seen boards that express political or religious sentiments or ideologies, and one could suppose that putting forward one's preferences and desires on a board is by implication an assertive act, the Pinterest ethic is built on the eschewing of judgments other than those of pleasure and familiarity. So "different" does not mean inferior, as there is no hierarchy of value: i.e.; "I like this, not to distinguish it from what you like, but because my choices express my equally valid sense of taste."

...what we point to or indicate, verbally or otherwise, may be different events but the same object, different towns but the same state...

Since, in the spirit of social media, each board is both personal and public, I can also have faith in the assumption that browsers and followers on Pinterest might share in my choices, and even view this sharing as an act of generosity. Therefore a notion like *unreliability*--the idea that an image might be designed to confuse, dissemble, or manipulate a viewer's sentiments—is either besides the point, or the expression of a pre-social media frame of mind.



After many months of building my boards, and getting almost no comments from visitors who re-pinned or liked my choices, I decided to provoke a response by inserting reflective questions about looking at images. Designed as posters built around the Pinterest stick pin logo, this was an effort to speak with a loud graphic voice, but again nothing happened. Maybe I have asked the wrong questions, but I had a similar lack of response when I first began using Facebook. Posting singing videos about “friendship” which were meant to play with the illusion that we were all digital friends sharing the same stage at the same time was equally unsuccessful. No meta-analysis for old men?



As for the notion of *collusion* between words and images—the acknowledgment that the photographer, designer, artist, or writer who created the pictures that you have pinned to your boards would have made formal and editorial decisions meant to manipulate and enhance your response—well, that is an unacknowledged concept in the Pinterest world.

THE DECISIVE MOMENT:

The decisive moment, it is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as the precise organization of forms which gives that event its proper expression.

(Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Images a La Sauvette*, 1952)

The renowned French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004) took his pictures with a 35mm camera, a tool which provided the flexibility and speed essential for street photography. Like most photographers of his generation, Cartier-Bresson relied on two basic approaches to editing and presentation: first a scene would be framed through the camera lens to present a set of facts, suggest an idea or narrative, or assert a point of view. And second, many pictures would be taken and then winnowed down in order to arrive at an ideal result guided by aesthetic values like beauty, vision, or truth. Cartier-Bresson's concept of the "decisive moment" presupposes a strategy through which rigorous attention to composition, light, and precise looking will produce an image that not only freezes an essential moment in time, but points to emotional and perceptual truths that reach beyond it.

Collage is the noble conquest of the irrational, the coupling of two realities, irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which apparently does not suit them.

(Max Ernst, "Beyond Painting," 1948)

The surrealist Max Ernst's notion of collage, while speaking of "irreconcilable" things "coupling" in reality, is still based on the belief that different points of view or perceptions are meant to combine in some coherent, even if problematic way. A collage can be "decisive" when it is more than the sum of its parts. By engaging contradiction, we may see something new. On Pinterest, one can assume that some of the pictures will show us things that we don't already know on our own. Therefore why would there not be some effort to fill in more details, provide a context for one's passions, no less ask questions of other browsers about their own experiences and responses? But perhaps all images on Pinterest are equally present and appealing: "rational" side-by-side sets of things in agreement, collections without acknowledged distinctions but variously appealing qualities? In this respect then, there are no decisive moments on Pinterest.

...different members but the same club or different clubs but the same members...

This raises the question of whether any idea of the "decisive moment"—whether defined by an accepted hierarchy of value, or the expectation of an artist's access to an unassailable vision—is still culturally salient. In this respect, it is appropriate to think of a Pinterest board as more like a playlist than a coherent album of songs that build towards

some artistic statement or conclusion. For the most part, consumer choice and accessibility now trumps the idea that any artist or musician has the truth at their disposal across 10 songs and accompanying liner notes.

That said, even Cartier-Bresson has a fan base on Pinterest. If you do a search you will find an extensive selection of his pictures under the subject heading of CARTIER-BRESSON. Because this selection is gathered collectively, not on personal boards, the names of individual pinners and the titles of their boards are attached below each photo. Here the personal scrapbook turns into a more public bulletin board, suggesting that Pinterest can also be seen as a democratically assembled collective quilt of cultural fragments; a celebration, in Carina Chocano's words, of liking things that someone else likes.

THREE COKE BOTTLES:



ANDY WARHOL



CILDO MEIRELES

<https://www.pinterest.com/pzelevansky/1-a-picture-is-in-fact-a-lesson/>

On my Pinterest board, 1. A PICTURE IS IN FACT A LESSON, I inserted a picture of the 1962 Andy Warhol painting "Three Coke Bottles." While I admire the painting, I pinned it to suggest a "same or not the same" relationship with another image of three coke bottles, a 1970 conceptual photo by Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles. Warhol was appropriating pop culture images to reflect on the nexus of art and commerce. "Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca Cola Project," was an agit-prop work, conceived during the years of a brutal military dictatorship in Brazil. Meireles attached political messages in the form of white decals onto empty glass Coca Cola bottles. The messages would only become visible when the bottles were recycled and filled with Coke. In marked contrast to Warhol's embrace of capitalist consumption, this strategy was a sub-rosa attempt to bypass the eyes and terror of the military. It was also designed to avoid any direct identification with the artist, and the formal art market.

Whenever I receive the “Hi Paul!” greeting from Pinterest indicating that one of my pictures has been re-pinned, I usually visit the boards where the image has been relocated, and try to understand the pinner’s tastes and motivations by where they place my picture among their collections. The Meireles has in fact been re-pinned six times so far, set within either art or design collections or Coca Cola memorabilia. Since I included a link to the Tate Modern gallery in London, where Meireles had been given a large retrospective in 2008, it was easy for a browser to understand the particular context for the work, yet if anyone chose to look there was no indication of it.

To pin the Meireles photo on a Pinterest board is arguably an ironic insertion of an image of an insertion into an “ideological circuit.” Yet the transfer and displacement of a picture from one context to another is also the central Pinterest gesture, guided by the purposeful sorting of “entities and kinds.” That these visual postings are friendly, informational, and obsessive only reinforces the ethic of happy sharing, a form of show-and-tell with the emphasis on the showing.



Perhaps more surprising to me was the response to the Warhol painting which has now been re-pinned 155 times and counting (with 14 likes and 5 comments). I embrace this as a kind of validation, given that I don’t know any of the re-pinner, but out of approximately 520 pins on my boards, why this consensus about Warhol? The bulk of the Warhol re-pin destinations are divided between boards of Warhols, collections of Coca Cola memorabilia, with a few located on favorite art boards. It would be fair to say that Warhol now has a presence in the popular imagination of what a great artist is, along with van Gogh and Picasso. But while van Gogh bears the mantle of artistic genius and madness, and Picasso prodigious invention, Warhol is the master of coolness. The Warhol brand, which he astutely cultivated throughout his career within the professional art market and across various media platforms, has become a highly recognized sign of benign rebellion and savvy entrepreneurial thinking.

In this respect, Warhol is a perfect figure for an age of do-it-yourself social networking and on-line buying and selling. He is also an exemplar of the power of image reproduction and multiplication, so Pinterest, Tumblr, and Instagram et al are his graphic children. As for his Pinterest fan base, is the re-pinning of Warhols a way to form a style identification with a cultural celebrity or brand? Coolness by association, likes with benefits?

Who controls the life of these pictures? Anyone with an internet connection and the time and the desire to compile a personal set of images. The democracy of the visual code: whether we read it, create it, or collect it, we are entangled in the same semiotic game of exchange.

...different innings but the same ball game.”

(Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 1979)