

ZEBRAS, BLANKS AND BLOBS

How can we work with vast digital collections?
Artist **Fabienne Hess** explores the content and
scale of an online image database.

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IN EARLY 2015 I ASKED THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH TO SEND ME every out-of-copyright image from their vast digital archive. With this I made the work for my exhibition *Hits and Misses (from the archive)* for Talbot Rice Gallery in Edinburgh. I came to the 20,000-plus images as an outsider, knowing I was going to be overwhelmed. Roughly a third of the university's digital archive had never been accessed at all; clearly one wasn't meant to look at it in one go. But I wanted to find out what would emerge from this situation.

I spent months looking at the images over and over again. I say "looking," but it was more like wrestling with or trying to tame them. One needs patience and focus to repetitively scroll through thousands of medieval manuscripts without getting exasperated.

I didn't particularly look for trends, but accidentally stumbled upon groups of images that had similar formal qualities. At first I started to notice the blank pages, carefully photographed, sometimes with just a trace of an image shining through from the other pages. Then the many book covers bearing no information caught my eye, then the marbled endpapers, then triangular shapes, black and white stripes, black blobs, etc. I tagged the images according to these characteristics as I went along and later grouped them. My only constraint with these categories was that they couldn't be a search term the university had already indexed. At some point I could only look at the images with the categories in mind. The more I looked, the more I saw. These categories even transferred into real life; for example, I started noticing zebra textures in people's clothing, or in fences.

These basic formal characteristics were all I could register under this avalanche of images. Digging into the story behind the images or the objects they depict—how they came to be part of the archive, for example—would have been too much. But what

I could do is *see*. Seeing without asking questions, the way we see when drawing in perspective; a seeing that would just register a black square in Malevich's *Black Square* painting. A robotic seeing that in fact some computers are capable of already. The Rijksmuseum allows users to search its online collections by color; so does the British Library. The latter even indexes triangles, curves, and monochromes, but, alas, no black blobs. Incidentally, this was the category that caught my eye last.

Looking at the university's archive reminded me of surfing the internet, where I know there is always more around than I can grasp, where I am surrounded by alien and random information. This made me wonder, whether the way we look at images today—digitally, with an avalanche always at hand—prompts us to see like computers do, but without their capacity for indexation.

The formal approach I took on the university's archive made it possible to map out its enormity in a way a content-oriented approach could not. The random links formal criteria build between a mass of eclectic images creates interesting, unexpected connections. ■

FABIENNE HESS is an artist based in London. Documentation of the exhibition *Hits and Misses* and other projects can be seen on her website www.fabiennehess.com





