The Event of Art

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Daniel Coffeen: The Medium is the Machine: The Post-Media, Post-Relational Work of Marc Lafia
Marc Lafia has been making images for over 40 years but only started creating what we call art 20 years ago. Trained as a filmmaker, Lafia worked in Hollywood for the likes of David Fincher and Ed Pressman, working on fashion and music videos, writing screenplays based on graphic novels, and directing his own feature.

And then, as he hit 40, the Internet blossomed, introducing a fundamental shift in how images are created, disseminated, and enjoyed. And Lafia found himself at the helm of two back-to-back Internet ventures. First, there was The World Clock – cameras streaming from every time zone, all viewed at once on your desktop, enacting a spatial splaying of temporality, introducing what Marshall McLuhan calls the allatonceness of the electronic age.

And then there was ArtandCulture.com, a multidisciplinary guide to the arts – visual, literary, performance, design, film and TV – across time and place. The site won a series of awards (SXSW Best of Show, Art Directors Award, Comm Arts) for its striking interface. Down one side of the screen, there was a hierarchy of all the arts, each distributed according to the logic immanent to it. At the same time, the page was dominated by a Thinkmap-like navigation system. In the middle was your chosen artist, movement, or keyword around which circulated related artists, movements, and keywords. This allowed users to move either vertically into a discipline or horizontally across the arts according to associative logics.

In these details, we begin to see Lafia’s modus operandi. As he traverses media, he is interested in its circulation as much as its affect, content, or materiality. For Lafia, an image is rarely still. His eye moves from the moving frame of the image to the moving apparatus of imaging, of the image-event, of how images come into being and make their way through the world. It’s as if the network took up Lafia – and he took up the network with emphatic vim.

But even before his involvement in network culture, he was moving towards a reckoning of the movement of images. Look at his feature film, Exploding Oedipus, in which the main character, Hilbert (Bruce Ramsay) checks into a fleabag hotel in San Francisco with nothing but his suitcase of home movies. Hilbert hangs a sheet on which he perpetually screens these movies of his troubling childhood before deciding to explode Oedipus by making his own movie (much as William Burroughs writes himself out of the horror of killing his wife).

Film, here, lives in a suitcase, moving with Hilbert and has the power to rearrange socio-familial dynamics – to explode Oedipus. In fact, the original title of the movie was Suitcase. Isn’t Hilbert carrying reels of film the analog version of carrying our smart phones? Lafia was already trying to wrest the image out of the monumental theater and its univocal screen – even though
he was doing so via a feature film projected in theaters. But that would soon change as he left such monumental filmmaking behind, choosing a guerrilla approach to image-making, diving head first into the network apparatus in which viewer and viewed, subject and object, art and everyday image begin to blur at near-infinite speed.

Lafia, then, did not shift from traditional media to new media. Rather, he was always already playing in the electronic age, in the network, where images will never have been tethered to masters and their auditoriums are enmeshed in complex, affective engines of dissemination. Lafia was always and already operating with(in) the event of imaging.

This is where we find Lafia’s vastly varied body of work: operating with the terms of image making, re-engineering how images move and perform, playing with the terms of production, dissemination, viewing, and enjoyment. (I want to be careful, however, in saying this. From one perspective, Lafia is a theorist of the image. But his theory and his practice are one and the same just as it is for Paul Klee, Jeff Wall, Andy Warhol. Lafia’s work is rarely didactic and is almost always something to behold.)

But I want to suggest that such are the conditions of making art today. The digital network has superseded and redistributed the analog terms in which there is an artist, a medium, and a subject (however abstract, expressive, or conceptual). We now live within a techno-social infrastructure in which everything is recorded – on smart phones, surveillance cameras, credit card transactions – as our identities are quantified and commoditized in likes, purchases, and tweets.

We are no longer inundated with media; we have become media. This is not Guy Debord’s Society of the Spectacle; this is the Society of Karaoke. We don’t see media; we perform media. Our behavior – our identity – has become the product.

This inaugurates a radical shift in the machine of image-making in general and art in particular. The way desires are hooked into the technological apparatus, the way the image-maker – we are all at once image and image-maker – stands towards the world, the way we all stand towards each other: these now run along digital, plastic lines of circulation and force. For the artist, the image is no longer a means of expression in search of a medium; the image is itself a site of identity creation and relation. Images are no longer a way to explore social relations – they’re no longer comments, critiques, or expressions. They are themselves events of social and relational (re)distribution.

Lafia is well poised for this world, coming from film before entering art through the network. He is a truly contemporary artist, operating with what McLuhan calls the environment of today’s world – the very structures in which images are created, circulated, indexed, and consumed. So while Lafia may not have a traditional medium – I will argue that there is no such thing anymore – he does in fact have one consistent medium: imaging making itself, its apparati of creation, consumption, and circulation.
II. Disappearance of the Medium

Feature films, fabrics, a series of loosely narrative long films shot on the fly on video, command-shift-4 snapshots, oil paintings, an algorithmic reworking of *The Battle of Algiers*, an award-winning immersive website, multi-screen computational projections, 3D metal totems, videogame-scapes, re-photographs, participatory installations. While Marc Lafia is perhaps best known as a network and computational artist, it's hard to pin any medium on him.

Of course, lots of artists have spanned media. But most of the time the work is underwritten by a visual style – Picasso's paintings, prints, and sculptures are all of an ilk. We can see it – his faces, composition, lines, motifs, and subject matter are all something that makes us say, “Hey, I know that! That's Picasso!”

Lafia doesn't have such a visual style. We can't find it in his line or even his subject matter. He has a style, of course, a way of operating with media. But that style isn't situated at the juncture of hand and material.

Such is how we imagine art, artists, and style: it lives in the relationship between individuals, materials, and a will to expression. We take this so for granted that it can seem odd to even say it. But this is how we imagine art: artists have great things to express – depths of emotion, experiences, critiques of the world – and they're just looking for a medium to carry their message.

This discourse of art, this imagining of art, is premised on a certain architecture of experience in which artist (a person), expression (ideas, experiences, feelings), material (paint, code, camera), and viewer (me and you!) exist within a prescribed set of relations. The artist has things to say, feelings and ideas to express. The materials carry the message to us.

Our museums, galleries, and websites assume this model in which artists seek a medium to express themselves to an audience. We call know our place, our role. As viewers, we stand a certain distance form the work and look. Then, if not first, we read the placard next to the work that follows a template – title, date, materials, owner, and perhaps a little biographical or historical information. While we might not like or understand a work (whatever that means), we do know it is indeed a work of art and that it's our job to decipher and judge. The whole experience of art, we believe, is an act of expression in which the medium carries the message from artist to us. The medium remains a medium, carrying meaning, feeling, or perspective.

The styles and materials may change but the architecture of the experience remains the same: artist < > materials < > viewer. We see different stories and different materials but we know our role, we know the role of media, we know the role of the artist.

Lafia's work unsettles this architecture. For Lafia, the medium is not, in fact, a medium at all: it was never a carrier of messages. But even this is not necessarily radical or new per se. For instance, when Duchamp put a urinal
in a gallery and entitled it Fountain, he wasn’t expressing himself through a material. The porcelain was not his medium. No, the material of Fountain is the discourse of art – what it is, how it comes to be, how we experience it. We are not seeing Duchamp express himself through porcelain. And, unlike Picasso, Duchamp’s style does not exist at the intersection of artist and material. Duchamp shifts the very architecture of the art experience – the distribution of bodies and set of expectations.

Now, all artists manipulate discourse, reconfiguring the experience – whether it’s content, posture, form, or perceptive relations. In fact, I want to say that the history of art is a history of the shifting terms of the art experience – from the role of the artist (master, DJ, conduit) to medium (paint, carcass, code) to what counts as content (noblemen, prostitutes, moods) to the role of the audience (viewer, participant, dupe) to modes of perception (negative space, delirium, synesthesia). This is all that art is rarely content to just be expression; at some point, in myriad ways, art (re)casts relations within the very experience of art.

The art critic Nicolas Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics as art that involves

“a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (Bourriaud 113)

In Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics, art does not demand an artist expressing herself through material. Rather, art at once disrupts and creates a set of social relations.

Bourriaud invokes Rirkrit Tiravanija’s 1992 show in which Tiravanija cooks Thai food for visitors. The art is not the food; the food is not the medium; and Tiravanija is not cook as artist. In this case, art is the event of communing of and between visitors, shuffling the architecture of the art experience. There is no object to be viewed, no signature or style to be perceived. And rather than sight being privileged, Tiravanija democratizes the senses as smell, taste, sound, and touch are all equally important – a recasting of perceptual relations. Meanwhile, the artist is no longer a master expressing his great ideas and feelings; he is now a facilitator of relations in which there is no master or central term. This, in turn, recasts the role of the viewer who is no longer a viewer at all but is at once constitutive and constituent of the event – a participant, as much an object as a subject. (As a side note, Burning Man with its mantra of “no spectators” has to be considered one of the more concerted movements within relational aesthetics.)

Bourriaud’s relational art is not just confined to event-based works. He considers Andrea Zittel as she recreates everyday spaces. If Duchamp’s Fountain folds the discourse of art into the work, Zittel folds the environment of everyday living – housing, objects, space – into her work. In her own words, her art is
For Bourriaud, Zittel and Tiravanija shift the purview of art. It is no longer the stuff, the medium: it is now the social relations that the stuff hedges and reorganizes. Those relations are not just an effect of the work; they are the work.

In this sense, we can consider Marc Lafia’s work to be relational aesthetics. In his 2011 installation *Eternal Sunshine*, at the Minsheng Museum of Art in Shanghai, visitors found themselves in a room with a faux pool and toys, beach chairs, a drum set and guitar, a karaoke machine, ping-pong table, and a chalkboard where visitors were asked to share their desires. This enacted or, better, “put on” the presumed utopia of social media. This work focuses on social relations – how we understand ourselves in the social as we exist within different mediascapes.

But while Lafia’s work overlaps with “the whole of human relations and their social context,” he is up to something else – something that is at once Duchampian and relational and neither: he takes up the very precise yet sprawling mechanics of how images are created, disseminated, consumed, enjoyed, and valued. Human desire, human understanding, human relations – not to mention history, power, desire, along with non-human forces – are, for Lafia, the very stuff of the image, necessarily.

For Lafia, the image is not a way to question art as it is for Duchamp. Nor is it a way to explore social relations, as it is for Bourriaud. No, for Lafia, the image is itself an assemblage of relations and forces of every sort. The image is not first and foremost expressive of something; the image is performative – it does things.

Lafia’s work puts on the imaging apparatus – history, technology, semiotics, economics, perceptive architecture – as one might put on a costume. If Zittel’s art is a way to understand human needs, Lafia’s art is not a means or a method to understand precisely because the image is not outside of human relations. We don’t use images, at least not anymore. We are images. For Lafia, the image today is necessarily a (re)casting of relations – social, aesthetic, financial, discursive, perceptive, institutional. Art is not a way to unpack or reveal these things; it is itself a nexus where history, culture, the social, money, and desire are assembled and (re)distributed.

For Lafia, art doesn’t have a medium because there is nothing to mediate. Art is no longer a messenger of feelings or ideas; it is the massage, working us – and the world – over (pace Marshall McLuhan).

In the media age, art relies on a certain model in which the artist is not art, is not an image – much as a scientist is not part of experiment. Our media artist has something to say – a feeling, an idea, information, a critique. She is drawn to a certain tool – oil paints, a 35 mm camera, computer code – which she then uses to convey what she wants to say. She creates an image as her expression, as a means to an end.

But in the post-media age, these distinctions are superseded by a different logic and a different set of operations – a Bergsonian world. The early 20th
For Bergson, this is not an esoteric or provocative claim. Everything is image in that everything is perceived – my body, your body, my blood, nerves, brain, the planets, these words. The universe is an aggregate of images. For Bergson, the fact that we have ascribed a special value to certain things, such as the brain, has caused us to ask “false” questions of the world to which we end up answering with the magic or divinity of the soul, of human being. And then we’re perplexed at how these things that are so different – the brain, the soul – can conceive of the physical, sensual word. For Bergson, however, perception is not a crossing over of different things – stuff and soul; rather, it’s all stuff going with stuff. In which case, the image that is the artist interacts with other images – say, oil paint, canvas, landscape, the history of art – and their interaction creates another image, namely, a painting. It’s all images going with images.

The contemporary techno-social infrastructure – network-surveillance culture – has made Bergson’s claim an everyday, explicit fact of life. Every moment is a moment of and for social media. We no longer record special events – parties, kids walking, ball games – as a way to remember. Photography has becomes so ubiquitous, so pervasive, we no longer await the camera. Today, we are already performing for the camera before there’s a click and cheese.

Suddenly, the medium – the always-on camera of network-surveillance culture – is no longer a way to explore social relations: it has fundamentally shifted social relations. For instance, as Lafia has performed and argued, there is no more photography. That is, there is no more artist-camera-object architecture, no discrete practice and set of behaviors that involve the camera capturing something for a viewer to later see. No, the camera has enmeshed itself within the very fabric of identity. It’s not what we use to capture the world. The camera, our medium, has become an element in the classical sense, like fire and air, that shapes personal and collective identities. We wear our cameras as we do a physical appendage, an extension of our eyes and ears.

And an image is no longer just something we make and look at. We are image. Life in this new world, this post-media age, is all moving image, cinema, an immediate experience of images going together according to prescribed algorithms driven by profit, inherited notions of sense, and enculturation’s many bigotries. We don’t use images; we circulate with images, an element of algorithmic distribution.

And these algorithms are image, too. We are enmeshed in them, at once constitutive and constituent, much like participants in Rirkrit Tiravanija’s Thai food art show. We consume and are consumed and our consumption changes the way we are consumed and the way we are consumed shifts our consumption. It’s a fractal feedback loop, endlessly rewriting itself. We are neither the object “the brain is only an image among other images” (Matter and Memory)
nor the subject of the camera: we are defining elements within the imaging apparatus. There is no longer any mediation. Stuff is no longer conduit of expression. The stuff of expression has taken us up until we are the stuff of expression along with camera, film, screen, paint, software, discourse. There’s no gap between artist, material, and viewer that requires a medium: we are all elements within the imaging apparatus. It’s all immediate! It’s all this life happening now (and before and later!)

For Lafia, the image is not a medium, not a means. Rather, as Jacques Rancière argues, an image is itself a distribution of the sensible (as long as we understand the sensible to incorporate the visible and invisible, material and incorporeal). The image distributes material, percepts, affects, and concepts. An image is an assembling, a local nexus of a variety of forces – financial, libidinal, physical, social. While relational aesthetics uses and enacts the image to explore and perform social relations, Lafia operates with images that always already include, reorient, and redistribute social relations. I understand that this distinction may seem pedantic. But in this seemingly subtle shift an entirely new order of things emerges with rippling implications for how we make sense of art and each other. In any case, it helps us understand the artist at hand, Marc Lafia.

In Fountain, Duchamp displaces the material object as the focus of the work; we are instead confronted with our own notions of art. Tiravanija, too, displaces the object as art become the emergent event. In both cases, what we call the work is more than the object. But, unlike them, Lafia is a materialist taking up the thingness of the imaging apparatus. A cursory glance at the images in this book lets you know that Lafia relishes the stuffness of stuff, the sumptuousness of perception. He’s not just making us think; he’s giving us something to sensually enjoy.

And most of the time Lafia’s work is not participatory in the common sense. Unlike, say, Marina Abramović’s The Artist is Present, Lafia’s work doesn’t await visitors. His work is more akin to a traditional painting in that it persists with or without viewers. Critiquing the limitation of relational aesthetics, Claire Bishop argues that Thomas Hirshhorn’s work is

“no longer tied to the activation of the viewer, or to their literal participation in the work” (78)

Like Hirshhorn, Lafia doesn’t forge events via happenings; Lafia proffers objects that are themselves events – events that redistribute an imaging apparatus that includes the social, history, and desire.

Lafia’s medium – not his focus, not his content – is the very mechanics of the imaging apparatus. It is this sense, Lafia’s work is what Félix Guattari calls post-media in that there is no longer any issue of a carrier of expression, no question of a go-between, of a medium. For Lafia and post-media artists, the image is not a means. Nor does it stage events. Rather, the image is an event of assembling the world, of (re)making the world, taking up and distributing bodies, history, concepts, and affects, what Deleuze and Guattari would call
re- and de-territorializing, undoing some identities and relations, fucking with others, all while creating a new, different territory.

Unlike Zittel, Lafia is not interested in using art to understand human nature or human needs. Nor is he “political” in the sense of engaging “issues” in the news – which doesn’t mean he’s not political. As Rancière argues, and Nietzsche before him, art is always already political in that it distributes the sensible. What could be more political than that? Art becomes the very stuff of the political, arranging and re-arranging bodies and their relations. Hito Steyerl writes

“A standard way of relating politics to art assumes that art represents political issues in one way or another. But there is a much more interesting perspective: the politics of the field of art as a place of work. Simply look at what it does – not what it shows” (93).

From this perspective, Lafia is a Nietzschean for whom art is neither means nor ornament but is itself world making. Art needs no justification. It is a creative, distributive event. For Nietzsche, art is the original act of man. All this other stuff – science and the great edifices of knowledge – is art that’s forgotten it’s art and decided to call itself truth. Art is the ever-shifting event of sense making; the image is a moving site that takes up the social, semiotic, affective, financial, and libidinal economies into a localized assemblage that declares: Here. This.

So while Lafia has been called a network or .net artist, that label relies on the concept of medium as a tool of expression. The contemporary moment, this post-media condition, demands and enacts a different relationship between artist, medium, and audience.

Bourriaud was no doubt going after just such a thing in his invocation of relational aesthetics – it’s not the object or the artist that matters but the event. But, for Bourriaud, art is still a distinct, discrete practice that plays with the world, explores and understands the world. Lafia, however, operates with a different premise: art is an operation performed from within the always-on imaging apparatus, within a world that is relentlessly making itself as image. The image is both a condition and producer of relations.

But before we abandon this word medium, I want to pause for a moment and consider it. On the one hand, a medium is a means to an end, a tool that mediates an experience, taking us from here to there. We use paint, clay, or code to express something such as emotion, understanding, or a worldview. This is often how we figure art: it is not intrinsic to the world but is a way to expresses something about that world. This assumes that there is the world, there is us, and then there is image.

But in today’s always-on ubiquitous imaging, this distinction no longer holds. The technology infrastructure has realized Henri Bergson’s vision in which everything is image (“You may say that my body is matter, or that it
is an image: the word is of no importance . . . . So the body is but a privileged image . . ."). The post-media era is not, as Guattari suggests, an era of any-medium-whatever. It’s an era in which there is no longer any medium, any mediation: we are all always already image, always putting on the image, always at once imaging and being imaged. From social media to surveillance cameras to credit card transactions, the line between world and image has been effaced.

“The human race, misled by burlesque heroes made of deceptive electromagnetic substances, lost faith in the reality of life, and started believing only in the infinite proliferation of images” (Franco Berardi, Steyerl, 6).

The very structures of the world are the terms of imaging. The Internet is a vast always-on camera, imaging to infinity. This is not a Society of the Spectacle in which the image pervades our emotional economy, co-opting the pleasure principle; it has become a society of the performative in which we are always already putting on the world, always imaging, the line between identity and image effaced once and for all. A better figure than Guy Debord’s Spectacle is karaoke in which we become the spectacle as we perform the spectacle.

This is not to say that this disappearance of the medium means there are no great painters, printmakers, photographers working today. That would be as absurd as it would be both insane and false. It is to say, however, that painting, printmaking, and photography are no longer media per se. Each has the power to become a technology that takes on, puts on, and re-engineers the imaging-event from within the image-machine. Using digital technologies does not make one post-media as that would still ascribe to the category of medium. Lafia’s relentless movement between media does not make him post-media. Peter Wiebel, writing of the “post-media condition,” says

“no single medium is dominant any longer; instead, all of the different media influence and determine each other.

But that is an operation of the post-media condition, not its condition. The rise of the digital, the computational, and network has radically transformed the very nature and possibility of media.

A medium is no longer something an artist uses to express herself, to tell a story, to portray the world. Not only is mimesis moot – having been supplanted decades ago by the hyper-real – the very existence of a medium has vanished. We now live in an always-on imaging-event as the network relentlessly records, disseminates, and displays our every move. The imaging-event is not a discrete act; it is the very conditions of life. We no longer make images; we perform as image; we operate with images. The image is no longer an expression of; it (re) makes the world.

Post-media is the condition of art no longer being, or needing, a medium. Lafia operates within the contemporary conditions of always-on imaging in
which art doesn’t seek the real, understanding, revelation, or even expression. To make art in the post-media age is to move and operate within a machine, reworking and rewiring from within the world of images and their production precisely because there is no outside.

Look at his film, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (shot according to instructions with the so-called director mostly absent). We encounter scenes – or, better, we encounter encounters – that have only come into being because the camera was present. We see sense emerging. We see faces and people and love and the social emerge not just for the camera but with the camera. (Warhol understood this well; his screen tests are an incredible testament to this post-medial reality.) In the exquisite scenes of the women alone recording themselves – scenes that are private, exhuming, creative, peculiar – we come to understand that the camera is a presence, a kind of face that grasps and inspires. The recording event – which, in this digital world, is a playback event, as well – does not just record: it creates events.

It is in this sense that Lafia has no medium other than the imaging apparatus – camera and paint, yes, but also the desktop, the network, the history of art and imaging, the surveillance camera along with the complex financial and libidinal economies. It is in this sense that Lafia is a post-media artist: his images have no need to mediate anything. They are world making.

But the word medium has another and related sense: being in the middle, between here and there. And this is precisely where we find Lafia operating – in-between. He doesn’t look through a camera lens to capture something. He situates himself within the imaging apparatus itself, neither behind the camera nor in front of it but in the middle. In this sense, Lafia does have a medium: that medium place between canvas and object in which the image emerges and becomes the fray of life.

Using this notion of medium, his work is indeed relational, perhaps nothing but. It flourishes in the middle, in the connections between elements. Lafia might call this the imaging-event – the very act of assembling, and disassembling, the imaging apparatus so that new possibilities and relations emerge.

Take his aptly titled work, *Pictures* – a deadpan title that speaks to Lafia’s relentless sense of play. He takes up images from the history of global art and layers them in different ways with different degrees of bleed and intensity, images inflecting each other across time, a ricochet of affect, representational modes, and media creating an ever-shifting conversation – in a word, an event. If Tiravanija’s work facilitates an event in which visitors become participants, Lafia creates an event – equally open-ended and emergent – at the site of the image.

In a move that supersedes both Duchamp and Bourriaud, Lafia – in *Self-Portrait*, one piece within the *Pictures* collection – incorporates what seems like his reflection into the body of the image. The result is a kind of origami that folds artist as creator, artist as subject, the technology of reflection, and multiple images from the history of art into the frame. Mind you, Lafia’s work is never willy-nilly. I use “origami” here intentionally as his work is highly technical. He
carefully, though playfully, folds the history and technology of art into a new image, a new kind of image, using the imaging apparatus to create more images that operate along new lines of force and intensity and modes of sense making. As in Duchamp’s *Fountain*, we don’t just see the image; we see a particular angle on the image-machine. And as in relational aesthetics, we experience an emergent event – only the emergence takes place at the site of the image, as the image.

### III. Reprogramming from Within

In the media world, the artist takes up materials as a way to say what’s on her mind then displays it for the viewer. The artist and the viewer exist in their respective worlds and may or may not come together at the site of the image. In the post-media world, however, conditions are different: there is no outside the image apparatus – not for the artist, the viewer, the material, or the art. They are all produced, and constitutive of, an elaborate image-machine. This is Bergson’s argument: everything is image. Or, better, *everything is imaging: the endless production, repetition, and mutation of images*. Images are no longer neutral conveyors of information from artist to viewer. Artist and viewer are images. Art is images. Blood, brain, ideas, sky, news, these words here are images. Everything happens from within the imaging apparatus. There is no place where we frolic happily until we decide to make an image. *We are always already images being produced, morphed, inflected, enjoyed (or not!). There is no outside the image-machine just as there is no inside. Image production is the very condition of existence.*

One way to view this is to consider Google image search, your Facebook feed, and a museum. All three function as a way to make sense of information and to display it. They are how images and information are processed and played back. There is no way outside of these algorithms of creation, selection, and display; we are always looking at images that have been processed and placed here or there. The same goes with our friends, our work, life on city streets: it seems random, perhaps, as just the way things go. But it’s all been processed, all played back according to more or less complex algorithms of labor, trains, consumption, culture, class, race. As we make our way through the city, we are not outside these algorithms: we are at once constitutive and constituent, making and being made. We all live within the apparatus – the techno-capitalist apparatus, the sense-making apparatus: the image-machine.

If we all live within the imaging-machine, as constitutive of the imaging apparatus, the artist is no longer a genius who sees differently and comes to share it with us. She is now an engineer-hacker who, like Neo in the Matrix, hacks the terms of the imaging-event from within the imaging-event.

Consider *This Moment Always Already Recording* in which Lafia spends days on the infamous ChatRoulette.com, interacting and recording his interactions. Who is artist? What is the content? Who is the audience? What is the product—
documentary photography? Film? Portraiture? It is all and none of this: it is a re-wiring of the imaging-event from within the imaging-event, taking up photojournalism, confession, Gonzo, performance art, the peep show, and social media in order to create new flows and interconnections, new modes of imaging – how images are taken, framed, perceived. This is not an exploration of the “whole concept of identity” or the beauty and/or horror of social media, even if those are byproducts of the work. No, Lafia creates a new kind of imaging-event, grabbing images and their semiotic, libidinal, and economic value as he himself is an image with semiotics, libidinal, and economic value. He does not sit outside and comment or inflect. He is within the art, always and already, another term within the image economy and, from the vantage, creates new flows of images.

Or take another post-media work, Christian Marclay’s *Video Quartet*. There are fours screens side-by-side, each playing a clip from an existing movie – the screech of Steve McQueen’s car, the famous banjo plucking of an inbred Southern boy from *Deliverance*, Jessica Lange singing as Patsy Cline all somehow working together to form a new piece of music. If you shut your eyes, you can hear the piece coalesce as if it were a traditionally composed symphony.

Marclay situates himself within the image apparatus, within the proliferation of images, and re-engineers from there. He grabs all these images, assembles them, DJ’s them into a new emergent shape that redistributes the architecture of the art experience – how we look, how our senses are distributed. The piece is impossible to see: How can you even view four screens at once? How is this piece to be viewed? How is it be listened to? There is no right way. We make it up as we go along, different flickers seizing our attention here, then there, then there. All those propitious collisions of found clips belying the mastery of our eyes yet cohering in the ear, an accident at a time. It’s delirious! There will never have been any mastery – not by Marclay, not by viewers, not by any theorist. There is no outside: we’re watching images we know redistributed according to different terms and hence creating new sense – the algorithm being rewritten in front of us.

In his *Permutations* Lafia deploys a multi-screen as well, literally creating a new kind of projector as part of re-engineering the imaging apparatus. While Marclay creates new kinds of image events by distributing images according to the logic of symphonic music, Lafia creates a series of rules, re-engineering the dominant algorithms of image display and circulation – whether at work in social media feeds, search engines, museums, or movie theaters – according to set of instructions:

1. All images are created on the same day (in this case, an image is a video clip).
2. There is no post-production – no editing of the images, no filters, no sound added.
3. The artist chooses which images will appear in the final form; he is not obligated to choose all the images from that day.
Marclay immerses himself in the stream of public images – film and TV. Lafia, however, grabs clips from everywhere and anywhere – his family, movies, books, street scenes – creating a different flow of images, a different hack of the image algorithms we know. Lafia blurs the line between private and public image: a Modigliani painting as it lies in a book; kids laughing at a party; shadows cast on some wall, somewhere; a black workman speaking French; disembodied hands scrubbing a wall. It all belies and recasts expectation. These images are not markers of memory or records of events. They are sense-affects ricocheting off each other, forging strange new alliances. In a world in which everything is image, here we experience radical juxtapositions in which images read images, ricocheting off each other, harmonizing with each other, to create new senses, new histories, new libidinal value, new cultural value. *Permutations* is dizzying yet immanently coherent.

*Permutations* is not expressive *per se*. It’s not a diary or manifesto. Like the writing of Georges Perec from whom Lafia’s title is taken, this work is groundless – there is no master term, no truth to which the art is beholden. Lafia is not behind the images, outside of the images. Even within the terms of the piece, there is no master as the relationship between the visual and the aural has been severed, ensuring that neither explains the other. The sound does not function as a caption to the visual; the sound is neither explanation nor ornament. For instance, we see a page turning as we hear music: is there a relationship between the two effects and affects? The music does not tell us how to feel; the visual is not an illustration of the music. The relationship is not one of conceptual conspiracy. And yet there is necessarily a relationship between the visual and the aural in any given image as well as between the aural of one image and the visual of any other image. This is an event, sense emerging rather than being packaged and delivered. If Marclay’s images are organized according to the logic of music, Lafia’s *Permutations* are organized by a sense that emerges within each instance.

In *Permutations*, we can’t separate this blur of sense at the content level from the blur of sense at the consumption level. Yes, the relationship between these images is emergent and complex, belying readymade categories of private and public, memory and art, found and created. The question is: *How are we to even watch these films?* Not only has the sense of the content been reconfigured; the very apparatus of consumption has, as well.

In the monolithic screen of TV and cinema, we know just where to look: the screen is the stage where all the action unfolds before our eyes. But *Permutations* scatters the gaze. Our eyes scan this way and that, at once focusing

4. The images are displayed in a grid of 1, 3, 6, 9, or 12 screens.
5. While all the images move simultaneously, we only hear the sound of one playing at a time. When the sound of the first image is done, we hear the sound of the second; then the third, and so on. The film ends when the sound of the final image is done.
on particular moments, gestures, sounds, sentiments, while taking in the whole. These *Permutations* are not just gestalt (although the role and function and relative priority of the gestalt shifts from film to film, from permutation to permutation); the radical particularity of this or that image within the film resists general consumption. We become fixed on this or that image, even as our vision is inundated from the periphery. Or else we keep scanning, focusing for a fleeting moment here then moving on, trying to get a perspective of the whole, a perspective that rarely coalesces (it depends on the film).

*Permutations*, then, radically reprograms the architectonics of film and the algorithmic flow of images we know within the everyday imaging algorithm. The reel has been consumed by the computational. One of Lafia’s great discoveries is that we don’t have to run films through univocal projectors, through a technology that begs for linearity. This is not to say that all projector-run films are linear, that there aren’t great films that move in multiple directions even as they wind their way through their reel. There are hundreds of great examples, from Welles to Antonioni to Greenaway to Lynch. But Lafia’s work marks a disjuncture, a lateral leap, a fundamentally different way of thinking film as well as the image – its creation as well as its consumption.

The reality is we are fed images every day according to logics we don’t question until the algorithm annoys us and we complain to Facebook or Twitter. Lafia’s *Permutations* offers us a feed of images distributed according to new algorithms of immanent sense rather than according to the logics of targeted marketing, timelines, individuals, or even meta-image themes. That is to say, today’s image apparatus packages images according to a predominantly capitalist logic, algorithms driven by profit-motive, bourgeois sentimentality, and quantified activity. Operating within this image-machine in which photos of family stream alongside famous works of art and ads, Lafia hacks the algorithm, redirecting the flow of images, creating sense that tears at the capitalist frenzy of our image feeds. As we experience *Permutations*, we are inside the image apparatus as it is re-cast around us as new ways of making sense continuously emerge.

One way to view Lafia’s *Permutations* is as an alternate algorithm – different from a Facebook feed, TV shows, movies, and ads. After *Permutations*, all of those things become image-machines, too. They are no longer the norm to Lafia’s art. They are all potentially art; they are all image apparatus. The artist’s job in this post-media world is not just to make new images but new kinds of images with new modes of production, consumption, and sense.

There is not outside anymore – not for the artist, the material, or the viewer. All images (re)constitute the apparatus from within the apparatus, as the apparatus. Most images flow according to prevailing algorithms. There used to be the algorithms of network television, the disturbingly uniform manner in which images were created and disseminated to America. Andy Kaufman was an early post-media artist who sought to re-engineer those terms of image making, the basic architecture of perceptual relations, the algorithms of
sense. Today, we have FAANG – Facebook (and Instagram), Apple, Amazon, Netflix, and Google all using disturbingly similar algorithms of sense to create and distribute images. To be an artist today, then, demands rewriting those algorithms from within the network, reprogramming the machine, writing new instructions for image making, consumption, and sense.

IV. The Image-Machine

Programmatic art and instructions aren’t new. Hans Ulrich Obrist’s Do It: The Compendium from 2013 presents a series of such artists. Yoko Ono’s exquisite gossamer instructions, Brion Gysin and William Burroughs’s cut-ups, Raymond Queneau and Oulipo: the 20th century saw interest in taking on the terms of art production rather than the content of the art. As Marshall McLuhan argues, the medium rather than the content became the message: it’s no longer about what’s on TV but the TV itself, the behaviors it coerces and enacts. Rather than operating in given terms of production, these artists seek to reprogram the terms themselves. The medium is no longer a means of expression: the medium has become the machine – the image-machine.

I use the word machine purposefully. It’s not just a code or an algorithm. A machine is materialist, even if inclusive of concepts, ideas, forces, and affects. A machine is productive: it includes the selectivity of an algorithm, the logic of code, the materials and technology of a factory, the conceptual and semiotic mechanisms of history, geography, and culture. A machine is the manner in which all of these things work together to hedge and direct forces this way and that to such and such an effect. (I am not suggesting a Hobbesian mechanistic view of the world. Machines prehend mechanisms but are not mechanistic per se.)

But while a machine produces, it is not a means by which something in particular is made such as, say, a paper clip. A machine is a specific set of interconnected operations that interrupt, hedge, and direct flows. There is no purpose or end point, no telos; the paper clip is not the final product as there is no final product. All there is is the process of making, a kind of autopoiesis. Machines are ever moving, in-flux distributions of forces and bodies. Every artist today reengineers some aspect of the machine.

Machines are akin to what McLuhan calls environments, the very structures of behavior and sense making that saturate, architect, and coerce our experience. There is no outside the machine. There are only new machines, add-ons, new directions of flows, new ways to hedge and direct forces, new instructions, hacks of code. The goal is not to get outside as there is no outside (pace Derrida’s il n’y a pas de hors-texte but also Merleau-Ponty’s flesh and Nietzsche’s life); the practice is to re-engineer the workings from within the churning of the machine.

As a way to understand what I mean by machine, let’s consider hunger. Clearly, our bodies are little machines that take in, process, and distribute food.
Now pan back and hunger becomes a force that flows in, from, and through our bodies and is directed by a combination of factors that work in ever-shifting terms of conjunction – knowledge (kale is good for you), aesthetics (being skinny is rewarded), industry (the subsidizing of corn), economics (organic costs more), and biology (palate, gut biome, anus).

There is, then, a food-machine that can’t be separated from hunger. Yes, there is some kind of force – let’s call it appetite – that exceeds any machine, exceeds any local stipulations. But these stipulations simultaneously steer, define, hedge, transform, and produce effects of all sorts that link this food-machine to other machines – health-machines, sex-machines, war-machines.

The will to image is an appetite – it is a force that is taken up, interrupted, hedged, and directed in different ways at different times by different peoples. There is not one image-machine just as there is not one food-machine. Consider two different image-machines working today – graphic design and fine art. The finances, institutions, means of production, criteria of assessment, terms of success, histories, and libidinal intensity all vary in significant ways. And within each of these machines there are different flows at work.

The rise of digital technology and network culture has created new conditions of image-machines – the technology, of course, but the significance and role of the image has changed dramatically in the process. The ubiquity of image production, sharing, and consumption have forced machines that were once more or less discrete – personal memories, advertisements, and fine art – into a shared arena where the terms of their interexchange has approached near chaos, a schizo image-machine in which art, ads, communication, technology, and identity are so intimately meshed.

Take the Facebook feed: it is a movie made of personal moments shared by others and recorded and distributed as the product. Image, identity, and commodity are one and the same. As the editors of Hito Steyerl’s *The Wretched of the Screen* write in the preface,

Abandoning the safety and certainty provided by centralized optics fast-forwards us to the present, where a condition of groundlessness begins to describe a moment when politics and representation, exploitation and affect, twist around each other in unforeseen ways, bursting apart at their seams, coming back together, and bursting apart again.

There is no pre-defined artist, medium, and viewer; in this post-media image-machine, these elements collide and blur at near-infinite speed.

So is there still art? In a world in which everything is image, what distinguishes the art image from an Instagram post, surveillance camera footage, a billboard, a website, a painting in a museum, a doodle on the street? Post-media and post-relational aesthetics don’t rely on institutions or provenance to justify or define art. An Instagram photo of little Lola’s first day of fifth grade, a billboard for some ridiculous app, a bumper sticker, a painting
in the Louvre: all or none may be art. This is where we find Lafia’s work – in
the schizo world of the image where private and public, doodle and art, past
and present, advertising and identity are always already intertwined. Warhol’s
Factory understood this. If most images we see follow the prescribed terms of
bourgeois propriety, art is the introduction of the novel hack, a redirection of
the flows of technology, expectation, desire, perception, commodity.

In analog times, the terms of an image-machine were more clearly
stipulated – you could see, and everyone knew, how images came to be, what
they signified, what value they contained. But in an age of the ubiquitous,
always-on camera, the terms of the image-machine have proliferated in every
direction. There has not only been an explosion of different image-machines;
the ways they link with each other and other machines – capital-machines,
desire-machines – have exploded, as well.

Consider something as seemingly simple as posting a picture on Instagram.
That act, which happens millions of times every day, is one moment within
an elaborate set of conditions, levers, causes, effects, and flows – in a word, an
image-machine. What even counts as something to post in such a venue? Why
do you post that image and not the other one? Why is it ok to post pictures of
your baby? Why is it ok to post a picture of a late night Mission District alley?
Whence these criteria? Whence these desires? And whence those filters that
seem to emerge from a history of image making? Of course, there are some
prohibitions around nipples and nudity. But those proscriptions aside, we
can begin to glimpse the apparatus that has one post this or that image, the
unwritten and pervasive rules that emerge among users that nudge, and are
nudged, by the ways images are monetized and how they circulate within a
social and sexual economy.

For some, especially those of a certain generation, it would never occur
to them to post images whereas for youth, of course they post pictures of
themselves mugging this way and that, usually with an ambivalence that
wavers between self-deprecation and self-celebration – a kind of image-karaoke,
playing celebrity with a sense of the goof. Which is all to say, creating images
for social media is a learned behavior constitutive of a certain image-machine
that hedges and takes up from libidinal, social, financial, and technologic
economies. Just look at how people position themselves for an image – and
then how they inflect it with filters and comments. And then what happens to
that image with comments, likes, reposts, hashtags; we can’t separate an image
from its social and informational indexing. They are literally constitutive of the
image. That one image is the site of a variety of psycho-sexual-economic forces,
what Deleuze and Guattari call an assemblage. The image can no longer be
separated from its indexing.

In Tumblr Room, Lafia takes images from the eponymous social platform –
along with its indexing of likes and notes – blows them up, and frames them.
There is something Duchampian about this gesture as it asks us to consider:
is it, in fact, art? And there seems to be a hint of Richard Prince here, a kind of
rephotography. But Lafia is up to something different. “The image repertoire,” he writes, “can be seen today not as the image alone, isolated, but as a social currency that forms collectives and shapes desire and identity. In the milieu of social media, visual imagery is attended by annotations and exchanges. They are the currency of networks and social relations that form around them. In the tendrils of the network images of fashion, celebrity, pornography, anime are circulated to express a great many feelings of desire, abjection, fear, loathing, joy and a great many networks and social relations formed.”

What radically distinguishes Lafia’s *Tumblr Room* from Prince’s own Instagram portraits, is that Lafia is not just putting the apparatus in a frame for us to see. This is not a commentary on social media. Nor are they portraits. Lafia takes up these Tumblr posts as a painter approaches the canvas – as so much affective material. Which is to say, the distribution and circulation of images on Tumblr becomes, for Lafia, the very material of his work. It’s not rephotography or recontextualization (although, technically, it is also those things). These Tumblr posts are to Lafia what apples and paint are for Cézanne: affective thingness part of the natural world (the images, like Cézanne’s paintings, become part of that natural world).

For Lafia, photography is no longer a practice of artist, camera, object. Today, the photographic image cannot be separated from its indexing, its circulation, its participation in the social and libidinal economies. We no longer separate image from views and likes; those hearts and thumbs up are constitutive of the image. Tumblr and its ilk are the channels not just of image sharing but of identity creation – and the affective resonance that forms in its wake.

Today, we don’t need art to *explore* or *understand* social relations. We need art to *(re)construct* social relations. All images are relational, whether they like it not. Indeed, post-Foucault, we understand that everything – babies, identities, books, rocks, serums, apps, images, monies, art – is always already enmeshed in a variety of relations that are constitutive of the object produced.

The question, then, is not whether a work of art is relational. The question is what relations it forges – and what we want from those relations. As Claire Bishop suggests, what Bourriaud calls relational aesthetics is a certain definition of relations – usually open-ended, participatory works, pieces that smack of “democracy” in which no term is privileged. But all images situate the viewer, if viewer is the right word, in some relation to the work, to herself, to others. One could argue that the open-ended participatory works of, say, Tiravanija are more dictatorial than a painting, demanding the viewer participate in order for the art to even be activated. Looking at a painting on a wall, a viewer can come and go. In fact, I’m tempted to say that the painting is more generous. But perhaps that’s Bourriaud’s own political bent: democracy, after all, is quite demanding – by definition, it demands participation. *Eat my curry! Be part of the event!*

Anyway, Foucault gives us the useful figure of “discourse” – those set of things we can and can’t say about something. Discourse, Foucault argues, doesn’t just delimit identities and utterances: it *produces* them. Discourse defines
what is “in the true” and what isn’t – and how institutions such as medicine and the law punish and reward these different utterances. When Duchamp suggested a urinal be in an art exhibit, he was purposefully running into art’s regime of truth – what is “in the true” of art.

Machines supersede discourse. A machine is made of all sorts of levers, pulleys, and contraptions that are both visible and invisible, a moving distribution of intersecting flows and forces (and always overflowing, bleeding). Like discourse, a machine produces identities and things, including images. It produces limits of what is true and what isn’t. But it does so much more. While discourse accounts for utterances and their institutional prowess, machines are material – they include the means of production, the technology and gadgets along with the conceptual apparatus, the affective economy, financial and semiotic modes of valuation, diverse histories.

And while in Louis Althusser’s language, a machine hails you – it says, “Hey, art” and then we know what’s art – a machine is not in and of itself the ideological state apparatus. Machines, while situating subjects and their relations, supersede ideology and the state. The ideological state apparatus, as Althusser would have it, is one element within a machine; it often puts machines to work for its own end, tweaking the machine to serve its purposes. But the reverse is true, as well: a machine puts the state apparatus to work (modern American capitalism, for instance). A critic can reduce any machine to the ideology it serves but there will always be excess, a bleed of forces and contraptions at work – cosmic, libidinal, affective, institutional.

A machine, then, supersedes Foucault’s discourse, Marx’s means of production, and Althusser’s ideological state apparatus. It is closer to what Bataille calls the general economy, the flow of bodies and forces that include the sun, plants, oceans, wind, desires, buildings, cloth, animals, eggs, emotions, words, faces. But whereas Bataille’s general economy is totalizing and general, Guattari’s machines are always material and specific.

All image making is part of a machine – from painting, cinema, sculpture, photography, and performance to all-pervasive brand images to everyday smart phone snaps. They all take place within machines that include technologies of creation, dissemination, and viewing; different economic markets; particular and ever-shifting aesthetic criteria; different semiotic economies that emerge through class, geography, age, gender, and history.

These machines overlap and inevitably intersect, taking up the other’s mechanisms – consider how Warhol, Richard Prince, Banksy, Barry McGee, and Lichtenstein use the mechanisms of the image-machine of graphic design for use in the art image-machine, although they each do so differently.

From one perspective, all art today is post-media, operating on the terms of the image-machine, all re-engineering image flow. Post-media is a condition, not a practice. So when we see Richter paint the blur we expect from photography, he is fiddling with the art image-machine – redirecting the flow of photography into the flow of paint. When we see Matthew Ritchie’s paintings wrestle the
complexity of information, we see new kinds of images, new relationships between image, information, and representation, new postures of the painter, new castings of the canvas. Post-media is a way to make sense of art today.

V. Engineering the Image-Machine

To see how image-machines operate, witness the transformation of Lafia’s recent work as it moved from being strewn around his brownstone in *In What Language to Come* to being framed in a gallery for *Making Sense*. In this shift, we see the workings of the machine, how conceptual, economic, and libidinal economies comingle with the technologies of image making. Together, they are an art image-machine – the very medium of Lafia’s work.

*In What Language to Come* was staged in the artist’s Park Slope brownstone where he lives with his wife and two teen children. It’s not unusual to view artists’ work in their home. I’ve done plenty of studio visits over the years and more often than not, I’m in the artist’s bedroom or laundry room – a reality of the economy in general, the art economy in particular, and the housing market. These facts are not irrelevant. They are, to varying degrees of intensity, constitutive of the art event and certainly of the art image-machine.

Viewing art in an artist’s home or at a high-end gallery enjoys the same configuration of perception. In both cases, the space is a container laid out to maximize the viewing of images. This basic architecture of walls, people, and images rarely changes. Of course, the ambience is quite different – the sound of people milling, the food and drink served, the expectations of viewers, the relationship each viewer has to other viewers.

But *In What Language to Come* proffered a different image-machine at work. The art was not displayed to be viewed. That is to say, art in a studio or gallery is usually arranged to facilitate seeing, one image after another along a wall or floor, the lights arranged so we can peruse the images in all their glory. The image is the thing, a fetishized commodity. The space of the gallery mimics the frame, stipulating the limits of a work, giving it clear form we can physically and conceptually hold. It is more or less neutral, trying to get out of the way of the viewer’s view.

In Lafia’s home, however, the art was intimately intertwined with its environment, occupying – not displayed in – a vast living room that runs the length of the house. Textiles of various textures and colors all arranged, sewn, and cut in a variety of manner were everywhere, at once purposeful and haphazard, hanging from clothes lines strung at different angles; from windows; draped over couches, objects, paintings, chairs, knick knacks; and, if you could peek through the windows, lying over bushes.

People mingled, talked, drank much as they would at any art opening. But here there was no possibility of gathering in front of a piece to admire
or discuss it. There were no placards to read, no titles to ponder, no list of
materials. This scene did not privilege viewing singular pieces hung and lit just
so to maximize the viewer’s view. Something else was going on.

This show reorganized the very architecture of the image experience,
recasting the relationships and dynamics between and among these images,
between these images and the space around them as well as space in general,
these images and viewers, between these images and the history of images,
between these images and light, between these images and the everyday
objects of life, between these images and our senses, between these images
and their creation and dissemination, recasting their participation in economic
flows, in media coverage, in the affective and practical experience of living.

This work, like all of Lafia’s work, does not just present images: it presents
new architectures of the image experience. Artists are of course applauded
for forging new technique or content. Heroically dripping paint over a canvas
forces us to reassess, and recast, the role of chance as it displaces the artist as
master and the eye as the artist’s dominant sense. By sitting stoically on stage
while audience members cut her dress, Yoko Ono re-architects the relationship
between viewer, artist, and art. When she splayed a car through an atrium
with whimsical abandon, Sarah Sze created a sculpture for outer space, free of
fixed orientation, untethering viewers from our place on the ground. When
Paul McCarthy puts a sculpture of Santa Claus holding an enormous butt plug
in Rotterdam, he shifts the assumed sanctimony of statues, introducing humor
into the experience of art.

When we enter a museum or gallery, or even when we hang a piece in our
homes, we assume that we are subjects while the art is object, something to
be seen. In fact, we take it so for granted that it sounds absurd to even say. The
entire art economy – the art world of museums and galleries, of hooks and
fishing line – performs this subject-object dynamic.

But Lafia’s show proffers art that operates with a different relationship to
vision, light, and the viewing body. The experience is not one of the eye taking
in an image – a subject taking in an object – but of an affective body being
draped in a certain ambience of light and material. The viewer is not subject and
seeing is not the active verb. This art *drapes* us. It doesn’t contain itself to the eye;
it flows all around. Its folds and pleats seem to make it sculptural. But sculpture
tends to reenact the architecture of painting: it is something to be seen. Lafia’s
work is of a different order than sculpture *qua* visual monument. This work is
haptic as sight and touch are entwined and, at times, interchangeable. In any
case, to see this art in this way is not to view it but to be draped in it.

Neither viewer nor art is master. The viewer can’t just pass by this piece in
order to see the next. And the art does not demand you see this one this way.
The art is everywhere, inflecting the light, space, experience, almost as a co-
visitor looking at you as much as you’re looking at it. The experience breaks
down the subject-object dynamic, taking place in the middle voice, between
subject and object while offering neither subject nor object. Gilles Deleuze
might call it a bloc of becoming. And the great French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, might call this a chiasm, an intertwining in which seer and seen live in a common material – what Merleau-Ponty calls the flesh – the two swapping places at near infinite speed.

Light, in this work, places a different role than it does at a museum. Here, light does not illuminate the image, allowing us to see more clearly. On the contrary, light shifts the image itself – and vice-versa. And yet it’s not light art à la James Turrell in which the material facilitates an experience of seeing. For Turrell, the object is light that he hangs just so like a painting. Lafia’s work does the opposite: it doesn’t present light but insistently presents materials that metabolize light. If for Turrell, material serves light, for Lafia, light serves material.

An effect of this perceptive and physical architecture is that there is no clarity as to what constitutes an image. This is not an experience of discrete experiences, each in its frame or room. These works bleed, essentially. They can pick up and go elsewhere and find themselves comported in an absolutely new way – what was once on a clothesline may now be over a window or bush, covering, filtering, and making new sense of itself and the world around it. This work is not a series of works. Nor does any one piece have a definitive way to display itself.

Meanwhile, as this is a living space where signs of everyday life abound, it’s not even always clear what’s art and what isn’t. That coat hung over the chair? Those rolls of paper in the corner? That old painting against the wall? As in his Permutations, the line between art and everyday objects blurs: it’s all potentially art. Which calls to mind Nietzsche on the Greco-Romans for whom, Nietzsche argues, everyday objects were art as much as they were a utility. Indeed, for most of history and most of the world, art participated in the everyday and the sacred – in both cases, art lived a very different life that it does in Chelsea, not to mention on the walls of our homes.

In What Language to Come is looking for a new language to articulate this re-engineering of the art image-machine. This machine doesn’t make discrete objects; it doesn’t ask to be viewed; it mingles indiscriminately and happily with everyday objects. There is really no composition to critique. There’s no real object to buy (as both the artist and gallerist recoil in horror!). It takes up many of the mechanisms we know – installations, performance, fashion – but deploys them according to new rules, new mechanisms, new modes of operation from its terms of creation, dissemination, and economic participation to its semiotic significance, affective distribution, and very thingness.

So when the curators of the 1GAP Gallery at Grand Army Plaza on Prospect Park in Brooklyn agreed to show this work, I wondered how they’d display it. I imagined the gallery’s vast glass walls lined with textures and fabrics, the space not just inhabited but ravaged by this work.

But this gallery is interesting in that it occupies, and moves through, a residential building. Only the residence is not the artist’s; it’s occupied by owners and paying tenants, many of them with kids. And it’s curated as a
gallery that is, lest we forget, a seller of art. Both factors – residents with kids and objects to sell – call for a certain discretion. The fact that these two factors align in their intention is not a coincidence: both are bourgeois institutions.

The gallery had the odd task of turning this bleeding drape into discrete objects, works that could be hung alone, titled, and sold as it turned Lafia’s work into “art” – into an institutional commodity, framed and poised for consumption. At the 1GAP gallery, the fabric pieces were just that – pieces, with titles and placards announcing their provenance, plugging the work into a machine of flows of expectation and commodity.

Architecture of perception and sensate distribution, the role and play of light, viewer expectations, the way a work is framed and hedged, the way it enters financial transactions: in the two shows of the “same” work, we witness two very different image-machines at work – and two different art experiences.

When Lafia first started showing his textile work, many people, including Lafia, thought it was a move in a different direction, away from the screen, from the computational, from film. And no doubt, from the perspective of image making, Lafia is no doubt getting his hands dirtier. But from the perspective of his so-called oeuvre and the post-media condition, I don’t see these works as a divergence at all. On the contrary, they mark a condensation of his work, a thorough reworking of the art image-machine from within the material of the machine itself.

VI. The Event Before You

And then there’s this book you hold in your gaze right now, a book that rewires the image-machine. It is itself an algorithm that (re)distributes images and their sense. To move through it is to experience the way of the image in the post-media era. To cite a film of Lafia’s, this book operates as a confession of the image, as confessions of images, as a kind of cry, scream, whisper, manifesto of the way of the image in today’s techno-social imaging infrastructure.

When you flip through it, you can’t distinguish between document and art, between so-called found images, rephotography, and what we like to think of as “original” work. That’s because, in the post-media era, there is no fundamental difference. This is not to say all images are art. On the contrary, most images are not art as they recapitulate the dominant image-machine or what Deleuze and Guattari call a major language. Art is the event of rewiring the machine, hacking the algorithm, rewriting the code from within the code. Or, rather, from one perspective it is itself code, a set of instructions à la Brian Eno’s Oblique Strategies.

In some sense, this book is a documentary recording the dynamics of the image-machine. But in a post-media world, recording is productive, forging new ways of assembling the image and its sense. The recording of the event
is an event. Explanation is performance. Explication is a put on. Display is creation. This book is a (re)distributive event, alternately and simultaneously performing gallery, work, apparatus, and code.

Lafia is tricky to write about. He jams the major or familiar mechanisms of the art-machine. He doesn’t have a clear style or signature that we can see. I can’t say that Lafia’s work explores questions of identity or the network, even if it does both. I can’t just refer to his gentle, meandering line or bold brush strokes as he may or may not have one or the other but, in any case, they don’t carry over to his other works.

And now here we are in the introduction to an artist’s book where it is presumably my job to do what most artists do: frame the work. Make it discrete. Make it something, a commodity that is able to circulate in different economies – social, financial, aesthetic. Make it something we can understand as this or that. This is what gallery owners, critics, and collectors demand: What’s your shtick?

So I will say that Lafia is, in many ways, a traditional artist in that he has one medium he’s stuck to over his long practice. That medium, however, is not a material or concept but a machine: he is constantly re-engineering the image-machine itself, re-architecting the very mechanisms, levers, concepts, economies, and positions within the event we call art. This book is of and for the post-media era where art books are no longer surveys recording work: they are events themselves recasting, rewiring, rewriting the very terms of art.