Search for "California"

Caption

Inspired by the diverse and contradictory results of a Google Image search of "California," this photomontage represents toxicity by simulating the paralysis engendered by over-saturation. Google's algorithm turned up a siren-song representation of California nature and society as simultaneously idyllic and dangerous. Accordingly, the montage includes a glut of images of both devastation and opulence, of alarm and allure. Thus, it highlights the human ability to uphold and perpetuate contradictions and, at times, to act against what individuals think is best for themselves and others. By flooding the viewer with juxtapositions of the utopic and the dystopic, while also blurring any clear distinction between genres of fact, fiction, and fantasy, this image forces us to consider the near Sisyphean challenge of making a new, clear, and compelling visual statement within such an already saturated discourse. Hence the image's title, Search for "California", is both descriptive and imperative, simultaneously indexing the method of production and also compelling the viewer to grapple with the paradoxical tropes of the strange-yet-familiar places in which we live and die together.

Design Statement

This image simulates the anxiety and disorientation engendered by the veritable saturation of the contemporary with ambiguous and contradictory visual discourses. A cluttered montage of disorganized information, it is intended to visualize what James Clifford refers to as ethnographic surrealism, yielding an "odd museum [that] merely documents, juxtaposes, relativizes—a perverse collection" (1981, 552). Here, neither scientific diagrams or documentary photographs are privileged, but rather layered in with advertisements, memes, and other modes of visual rhetoric and representation. They are all in the mix, the visual milieu of the quotidian Anthropocene. I thus utilize paradox and antithesis, not to achieve further synthesis, to establish a new, even "truer" truth about the world, but to create an open space for thought and action that is "subversive of surface realities" (Clifford 1981, 548).

Project Statement

In this collection of images, I attempt to rethink post-truth and toxicity together, exploring visualization as a tactic for developing and representing a conception of epistemological "static" as a particularly toxic form of contemporary knowledge politics. Building off of Kockelman's analysis of "enemies, parasites, and noise" (2010), toxicity is here conceived as a particular type of third (a relation to a relation), one that is obstructive, corruptive, and/or corrosive to a previously established and effective channel of communication. Static, then, is a token of this type; it functions by flooding the channel with enough "alternative signals" that messages become unclear or distorted and the channel less effective, if not completely inoperative.

CENTER for ETHNOGRAPHY

Static
The Toxic Knowledge Politics of a Post-trust Era