ARTICLE

AFTERLIVES OF A SOCIAL MEDIA ARTWORK. THE HAUNTED MEDIA ECOLOGY OF *OUR DAYS OF GOLD*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how a social media artwork exists as a digital object within and beyond the platform it inhabits and the changing infrastructures on which it depends. It asks how *Our Days of Gold*, an Instagram-based artwork unfolding for the past 9 years through anonymous, daily repeated posting of analogue photographs from a personal archive, is recursively called into being through modest yet persistent follower engagement, how it survives infrastructural transformation, and how it endures through distributed forms of memory that linger within followers extended cognitive systems. Drawing on philosophy of technology, infrastructure studies, and theories of distributed cognition, the article argues that the persistence of social media artworks cannot be reduced to the continued storage of and access to networked digital objects. Instead, *Our Days of Gold* endures through recursive engagement, followers' practices of maintenance, and distributed memories that continually reconstitute the work.

KEYWORDS

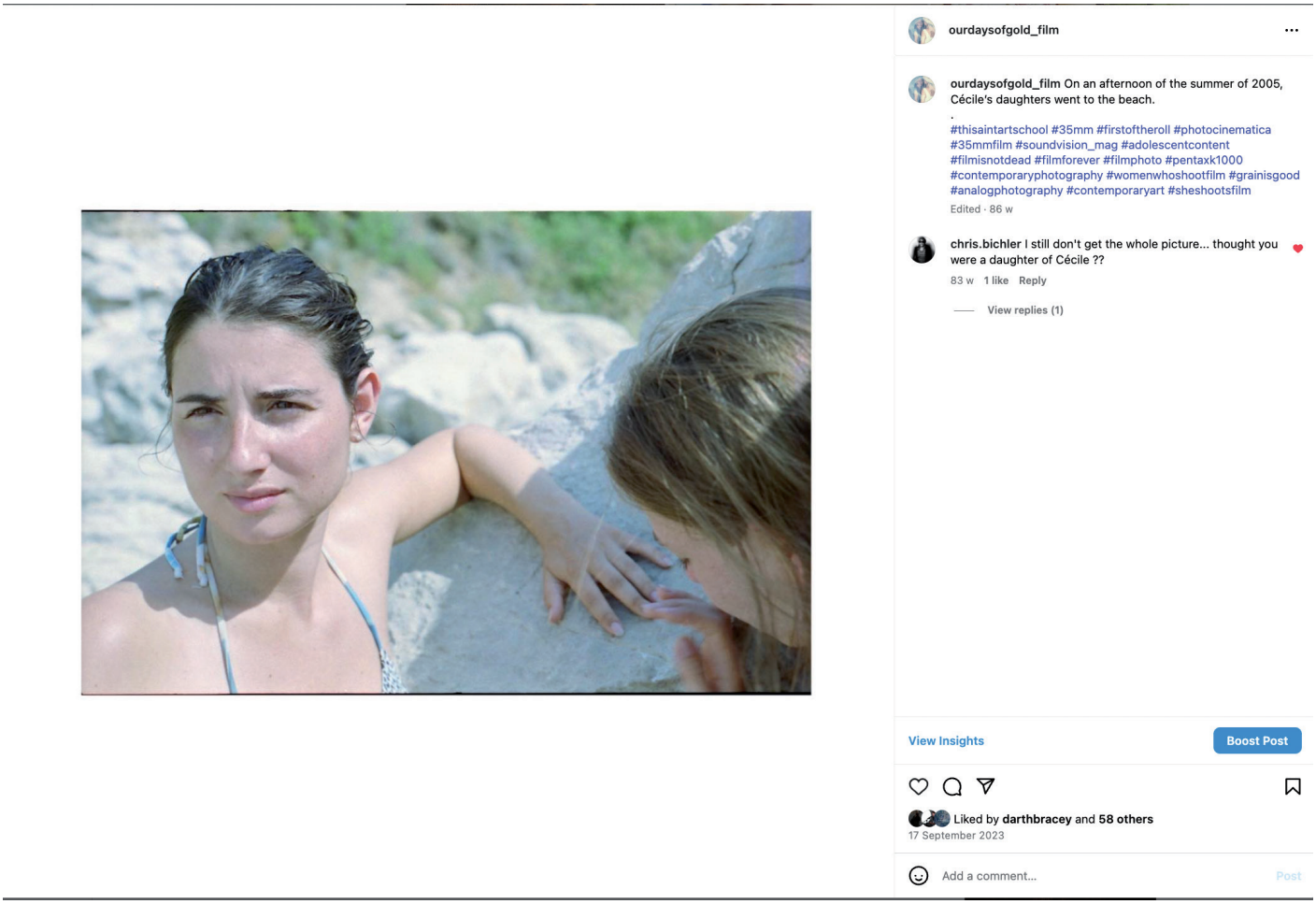
Haunting, Digital Afterlives, Media Ecologies, Media Archeology, Social Media Art.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines *Our Days of Gold* (2017–ongoing), a long-duration Instagram-based artwork that reanimates an analogue photographic archive through the daily posting of digitised photographs on the anonymous account @ourdaysofgold_film. Drawing on media ecology, philosophy of technology, infrastructure studies, and theories of distributed cognition, the article investigates how a social media artwork can persist within, and beyond a continually changing digital environment. It argues that *Our Days of Gold* (hereafter, ODOG) operates across three interdependent ecologies: recursive, infrastructural, and cognitive: the work is continually reconstituted through recursive follower actions, its persistence depends upon practices of maintenance that sustain it within an unstable environment characterised by continual updates, shifting interfaces, and changing regimes of visibility; the artwork extends beyond Instagram itself through an ecology of distributed memory in which computational memory and the embodied memories of its followers continually reactivate one another.

Drawing on the work of Yuk Hui, Gilbert Simondon, Shannon Mattern, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, and N. Katherine Hayles, the article proposes that *ODOG* could be understood as a metastable digital object whose persistence depends upon ongoing relations between technical systems and human participants.

Figure 1



Through practice-based analysis, the article reconceives the networked existence of this analogue archive as a process of re-connection and salvage. Persistence is made possible through the continual reactivation of the work across changing infrastructures, archival traces, and embodied acts of recollection.

ODOG began in 2017 as a durational intervention on Instagram: one analogue photograph is digitised and posted each day from a cache of negatives made in the early 2000s. Over nine years, this process has transformed a private analogue photographic archive into an ongoing social media artwork. Centred around the mysterious figure of Cécile, the project is haunted by her absence and by the instability of the platform that hosts her images.

The terms in the article's title, afterlives and haunting, identify a mode of persistence, that recurs across media theory: in Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's formulation, information is undead, "neither alive nor dead, neither quite present nor absent."[1] The work endures while being neither fully present, given its dependency on an algorithm that can withhold it from view at any moment, nor fully absent, as it is still being added to, and still recoverable by followers through their memories and intentional navigation.

Earlier writing and presentations have explored *ODOG* as an archive of mourning,[2] as spectral cinema,[3] and as a polyphonic environment of distributed authorship.[4] They have also situated the project within an art historical genealogy of photography, moving image, archival practice, and conceptual art.[5] Here, the focus shifts toward the work's recursive, infrastructural, and cognitive life.

The discussion unfolds across three interrelated ecologies. Section 1 examines how *ODOG* is continually reconstituted through recursive interactions between followers, platform algorithms, and digitised archival images. Section 2 explores how the work persists within an unstable platform environment through practices of maintenance, adaptation, and infrastructural care. Section 3 investigates how *ODOG* extends beyond Instagram itself through distributed forms of memory, recollection, and attention.

Three research questions guide the analysis:

1. How does *ODOG* exist as a digital object continually reconstituted through recursive relations between platform automation and followers' repeated acts of attention and return?
2. How does *ODOG* persist within a platform infrastructure characterised by continual change, and what forms of maintenance does it depend upon to endure?
3. Where does *ODOG* exist beyond the boundaries of the social media platform?

Methodologically, the article draws on a practice-based media-ecological approach in which artistic and analytical processes are interdependent. The archive is not treated as a fixed object of study but as a live phenomenon continually reshaped by acts of posting, viewing, interaction and digital/embodied

recording. The methodological approach combines iterative creative practice (daily digitising and posting photographic negatives, caption writing), digital ethnography (via follower testimonies collected both through publicly available comments and a survey circulated in early 2025, screen recordings, and documentation of interface changes), and theoretical analysis drawing on the philosophy of technology, infrastructure studies, and theories of distributed cognition.

The research is informed by Yuk Hui's understanding of recursivity as the operative logic of digital systems, where human and technical agents participate in self-conditioning loops that exceed individual comprehension,[6] and by Gilbert Simondon's concept of the technical milieu, which situates technological endurance within processes of adaptation and relation.[7] In addition, the article will engage with Shannon Mattern's account of infrastructural maintenance and care[8], and N. Katherine Hayles's account of distributed cognition.[9] Together, these perspectives provide a framework for understanding how social media artworks are recursively produced, materially sustained, and cognitively distributed across human and technical systems.

Most of the theoretical perspectives activated here, were formulated before, or during the early years of *ODOG*, and none of these theoretical accounts was developed in relation to a social media artwork observed across nearly a decade of continuous social media platform inhabitation. The artwork's sustained duration therefore provides an opportunity to revisit these sources retrospectively, asking how concepts developed prior to or alongside Instagram's contemporary platform ecology can illuminate an artwork that has survived through nearly a decade of rapid algorithmic, infrastructural, and cultural transformation. The article argues that the existence of social media artworks cannot be explained solely through the continued storage of digital files on remote servers. Their fragile persistence within a social media milieu in transformation exemplifies how digital artworks endure through cycles of maintenance, memory, and decay, revealing the ecological dimensions of contemporary media life, neither purely technical nor wholly human, but maintained in precarious, metastable equilibrium.

METHODOLOGY

This article is grounded in a practice-based approach in which artistic process and critical reflection are inseparable. Following Bulley and Şahin's account of practice research as occurring when practice constitutes the significant method conveyed in a research output,[10] *ODOG* functions as both method and object of inquiry: performing the iterative, daily work of scanning, posting, and maintaining the archive is itself the means through which understanding is produced, rather than a phenomenon described from outside.

The research combines practice-based enquiry with digital ethnography and close reading. The material analysed includes the author's ongoing maintenance of the Instagram account (2017-present), publicly available follower

comments, screenshots and screen recordings documenting platform change, and a survey of followers conducted in 2025 (University of Lincoln ethics reference 2024_18749), which received 75 responses. The research is informed by a digital ethnographic perspective in which online interactions are understood as situated communicative practices.[11] As fandom and media scholar Nicolle Lamerichs puts it, building on Markham, "in online contexts, the body of the researcher facilitates social experiences. The Internet cannot easily be separated from one's habits or home. Like any other ethnographic undertaking, it involves journeying towards a field and taking notes on it. Studying the web is a journey with real consequences for the researcher."[12] This is even more applicable where the body is that of a practice-researcher. Public comments and survey responses are approached as forms of participation in the ongoing life of the artwork rather than external observations about it.

This body of material is analysed through close reading. Although traditionally associated with literary analysis, close reading also lies at the heart of Marshall McLuhan's approach to media analysis, through which, Jessica Pressman argues, he helped establish the field now known as media studies.[13] Close reading has been employed in a variety of contexts beyond literary studies since the early 2000, and yet it has gone through phases of decline since the advent of the digital humanities.[14] Barrett and Bolt briefly note that close reading can be used within practice research exegeses to examine the outcomes of creative practice.[15] Skains advocated for close reading of digital fiction in her *Discourse on Methodology* for creative practice research.[16] Sophia Kier-Byfield has recently argued for reclaiming close reading for intersectional feminist scholarship, as a method for reading where "one can acknowledge and even apply one's full self and circumstances to an act of critical reading. The life of the reader, be that manifest in relationships, interests, or experiences, plays a role in drawing one's attention to parts of a text and dwelling there."[17] While thematic analysis, including practice-led adaptations such as Lin's,[18] proceeds through the coding of responses into stable categories, close reading allows individual statements to be examined in relation to the specific practice-related interpretive concerns of the project. Following Ohrvik, in this article, attention is given to the texture and particularity of each *ODOG* follower response, while situating it within broader questions of recursivity, maintenance, and memory.[19] Attention is paid to how followers describe recognition, uncertainty, attachment, recollection, and return, and to the ways in which practices such as scrolling, recording, and remembering contribute to the persistence of the work. Quotations are reproduced verbatim, and social media handles are included where comments were public or explicit permission was granted.

The work of sustaining *ODOG*, both its technical upkeep and its affective resonance, is itself part of the analytical process. The archive's persistence depends on ongoing interactions between the author's actions as artist-researcher and the gestures of followers who remember, revisit, document, or

reinterpret the work. Examining these interactions from within the daily practice of maintaining the account makes it possible to analyse questions of persistence, platform change, memory, and attention as lived and ongoing processes rather than externally observed phenomena.

SECTION 1
THE MODES OF PERSISTENCE OF A DIGITAL OBJECT: RECURSIVITY AND INDIVIDUATION

Media ecology asks us to consider how media environments shape attention, relation, and memory. Nystrom defined media ecology as "emerging metadiscipline": "the study of complex human communication systems as environments," concerned with "the transactions between individual and reality, between one person and another, between individual and group, and between group and culture."[20] These formulations establish media not as neutral channels but as environments that actively shape the ways in which meaning, attention, and relation are produced.

ODOG can be read through this media ecological lens. Following Nystrom, it inhabits a symbolic environment that arranges relations among users, images, and temporal experience. Taina Bucher describes algorithmic social media platforms as co-producing social participation through programmed sociality: "Platforms act as performative intermediaries that participate in shaping the worlds they only purport to represent."[21] In *ODOG*, the Instagram algorithm determines what appears, when, and to whom. This 'programmed sociality' is contrived by dynamic mechanisms connected to the platform's deployment of "algorithmic power."[22] Yet followers respond with recognition and anticipation, shaping their individual experience of *ODOG*. Survey respondent Anonymous 1 noted, when asked what kind of moment it is when they encounter *ODOG*, "I recognise the work and am interested to see the images. I'm familiar with many of the subjects now and wonder what the new images may be, and what might be happening." Their expectation of recurrence exemplifies the recursive temporality through which the project persists: each new image reiterates familiarity while subtly altering the conditions of recognition. David Shaw described his experience as one where "each post is another puzzle piece that helps tell Cécile's family's story […] I feel a unique and strong bond with Cécile's family through following the storytelling through the years." His reflection captures the way followers actively piece together a narrative from algorithmically dispersed fragments. Anonymous 6 recounts habitually encountering *ODOG* while on a social media scroll: "Whenever I see an *Our Days of Gold* image/post…I take pause to see the image and absorb it before scrolling again." Bromuro de Plata similarly describes how a fleeting encounter in the feed generates a recursive return to the archive itself: "When I spot Cécile... in my IG feed I can't help visiting the profile, the grid..." The encounter exceeds the individual post, expanding into renewed navigation of the work.

Philosopher Yuk Hui provides a useful conceptual language for understanding this feedback process in *On the Existence of Digital Objects* and *Recursivity and Contingency.*[23] For Hui, recursivity is not 'mere mechanical repetition' but a process through which a system repeatedly returns to itself, mirroring itself in order to self-determine, while remaining open to contingency.[24] Extending the concept beyond computation, Hui describes recursion as a dynamic operation that can characterise software, technical systems and living beings in relation to their milieus.[25] Digital objects are not autonomous entities but emerge through networks of relations, technical infrastructures and human activity; they are continually constituted through interactions between users, systems and other objects.[26] Hui borrows the term individuation from French philosopher of technology Gilbert Simondon, who used it in relation to living systems, to name this constitutive process: a digital object does not pre-exist its relations as a finished thing but comes into being only through this ongoing process.[27]

ODOG could be said to be undergoing this process of continuous individuation within such a recursive digital milieu. Each post, repeating the established schema as a new recurrence, returns the work to itself while simultaneously altering the conditions of its future development. Uploads, comments, shares, algorithmic recommendations and acts of remembering become part of the work's ongoing individuation.[28] Simondon's concept of the 'associated milieu' offers a way of understanding these relations. Developed

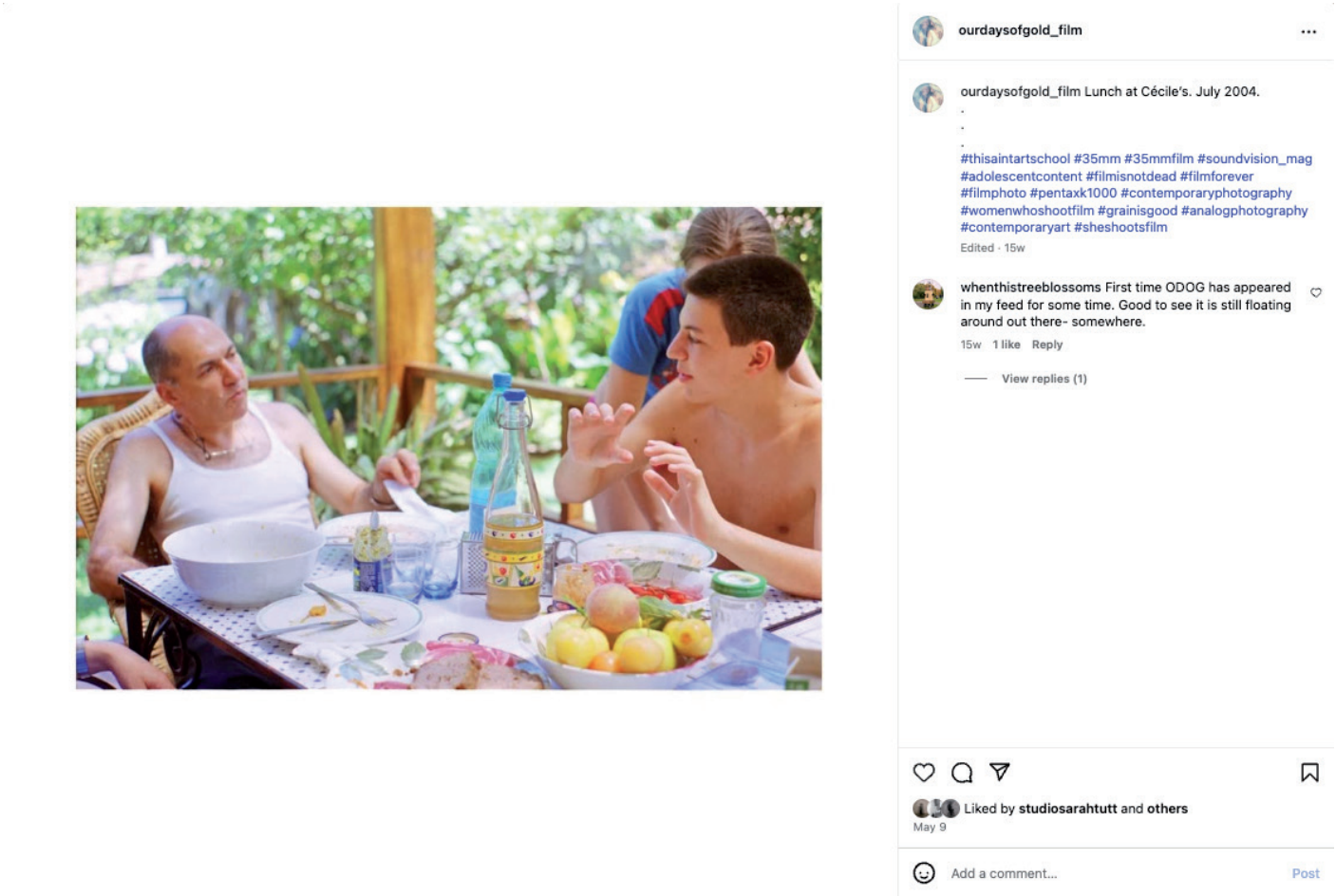


Figure 2

in relation to technical objects, the associated milieu describes the network of conditions through which a technical object sustains its 'modes of existence'. As Simondon writes, "it is this associated milieu which is the condition of existence of the invented technical object."[29] For *ODOG*, this milieu includes platform infrastructures, algorithmic processes, follower interactions, acts of posting and viewing, and the ongoing work of remembering.

Simondon's concept of metastability further clarifies how such a digital object persists over time. Rejecting the idea that systems tend towards a final state of equilibrium, Simondon argues that processes of 'individualization' of technical objects proceed through successive metastable states, each temporarily resolving tensions while preserving the potential for further transformation.[30] Metastability therefore describes a condition of ongoing becoming rather than completed form. *ODOG* remains metastable in this sense. While it is still ongoing, each post, comment, screen recording or act of recollection creates a provisional coherence without bringing the work to completion. New interactions do not merely accumulate around a stable archive. They modify the conditions through which the archive is encountered, interpreted and remembered. The work persists precisely because it remains open to further reconfiguration. Jason Bystrom describes his engagement through affective recursion: "Nostalgic? intimate? wistful? forlorn? […]I recognise that collectively these (images) are part of a larger project, but some images connect with me more than others." Followers repeatedly describe *ODOG* as a process: Martin Siegel likens it to "a sequel novel" whose story continually develops, Nick @nicky_nacks recognises in every image a "a clue to an overarching narrative," while Gorka Beunza speaks of "a story [that] continues, that it is alive and evolving." Although expressed in different ways, these responses converge on a shared understanding of *ODOG* as a digital object caught within a process of individuation. Rather than encountering a fixed archive, followers repeatedly experience the work as an object that at the same time mirrors and repeats itself, while acquiring new determinations through each recurrence.

As Hui theorises, a digital object cannot be understood as a stable artefact that simply persists through time. Its continued existence depends upon recursive operations that repeatedly reconstitute it. Each encounter with *ODOG* therefore does more than access a pre-existing archive. It becomes part of the process through which the archive is continually remade. Followers do not merely receive the work; they summon it, call it into being. Receiving a post within the algorithmic flow, pausing over an image, liking it, lingering, reading the caption and comments, commenting, or navigating from the feed to the profile grid constitute recursive operations through which the digital object individuates itself. The work does not precede these encounters as a stable entity waiting to be accessed. Rather, each encounter becomes one of the relations through which *ODOG* temporarily comes into existence within its digital milieu. Taken together, Nystrom's symbolic ecology, Bucher's co-produced programmed

sociality, Hui's recursivity, and Simondon's understanding of associated milieus situate *ODOG* as a recursive system in which human perception and algorithmic operation co-produce the conditions of persistence. The recursive dynamics traced here, between automation and human action, establish the groundwork for the next section's focus on maintenance and infrastructural care. If recursivity explains how the work repeatedly reconstitutes itself, maintenance concerns the intentional practices through which those recursive operations are performed by followers within an unstable technical environment.

SECTION 2
INFRASTRUCTURAL ECOLOGIES: MAINTENANCE AND METASTABILITY

If the previous section asked how ODOG is recursively produced, this section will focus on the question of how the work survives within a platform that is constantly changing and creating a less and less hospitable environment for it.

The recursive operations through which *ODOG* is continually reconstituted take place within a platform environment that is itself unstable. Already in 2016, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's account of new media gave this formulation of a foundational instability: digital media persists through continual updating rather than stable preservation, "to be is to be updated."[31] Updates sustain systems by overwriting what came before, so continuity depends on transformation rather than permanence. Chun located this instability at a deeper structural level still, in an argument written nearly a decade before ODOG's 2017 launch: "memory, with its constant degeneration, does not equal storage," and digital media complicates the relationship between the transitory and the permanent "by making the permanent into an enduring ephemeral, creating unforeseen degenerative links between humans and machines."[32]

Chun argues about storage, that the word itself carries a promise it cannot keep: to store has traditionally meant to furnish, to build stock, an orientation toward future permanence. Yet "in computerspeak, one reverses common language because one stores something in memory," a reversal that "glosses over the impermanence and volatility of computer memory. Without this volatility, however, there would be no memory."[33] And yet what sustains memory is not stability but its opposite: "degeneration - not regeneration - makes memory possible, while simultaneously threatening it."[34] Data storage, in Chun's account, is the continuously maintained, refreshed, rewritten. *ODOG*'s images, however stably they appear to rest within Instagram's servers, persist in exactly this manner: never permanently congealed, constantly regenerated against an underlying volatility the platform's infrastructure's apparent dependability conceals.

Shannon Mattern's writing on infrastructure illuminates this volatility: "Infrastructures fail everywhere, all the time," she writes, and what deserves attention is "the everyday work of maintenance, caretaking, and repair" that keeps systems functioning despite constant breakdown.[35] Infrastructures also,

in her account, "carry in them the residue of all media technologies past," layering communicative, sensory, and social histories within their material and digital strata.[36] *ODOG*'s iterative posting enacts this kind of layering: each upload folds analogue negatives into a technical milieu that is itself a sediment of earlier platform decisions, interface conventions, and algorithmic regimes, few of which remain visible once superseded. Sustaining any infrastructure, Mattern argues, "requires the maintenance of an entire ecology: attending to supply chains, instruments, protocols, social infrastructures, and environmental conditions."[37]

Mattern's account of Twitter's collapse under new ownership shows how quickly an apparently durable social digital infrastructure can be withdrawn by decisions made against the grain of its networked communities. Within a year of Elon Musk's 2022 acquisition, Twitter use had dropped by thirty percent, and what was lost included, in Mattern's words, "vast archives of journalism and activism, poetry and humor," collections and relationships built over a decade. What remains, she argues, is an anti-monument: "the empty pedestal, the plundered platform, the ruin."[38] *ODOG* has not suffered a collapse on this scale yet, but it has experienced similarly imposed infrastructural erosion. Following the introduction of Instagram's algorithmic timeline in 2019,[39] static image content was systematically deprioritised in favour of video,[40] limiting *ODOG*'s visibility. In May 2023, Meta extended its verification system, previously reserved free of charge for recognisable public figures, into Meta Verified, a paid subscription requiring government identification.[41] An anonymous account like *ODOG* is excluded from this algorithmic orchestration: too obscure for the older notable-figure badge, and because of its anonymity, structurally incompatible with a system that makes legal identity the price of legitimacy.

Simondon's concept of the associated milieu offers a way of understanding the conditions under which such persistence against the grain of constant updates becomes possible. We have seen in Section 1 that technical objects do not exist in isolation but emerge together with the environments that sustain them. As Simondon writes, "it is this associated milieu which is the condition of existence of the invented technical object."[42] For *ODOG*, this milieu includes not only Instagram's unstable platform infrastructure, algorithmic systems, and interface design, but also the artist's ongoing labour of scanning and posting, and followers' repeated acts of engagement.

This relational understanding of digital persistence is further clarified by Simondon's concept of metastability, which was also introduced in Section 1. Simondon describes individuation as proceeding through successive metastable states rather than through movement toward a fixed end point. Critiquing Gestalt theory's assumption that systems tend toward a stable equilibrium, Simondon insists on a distinction: "stable equilibrium, in which every potential would be actualised, would correspond to the death of any further possibility of transformation," whereas "living systems, precisely those that manifest the greatest spontaneity of organisation, are systems of metastable equilibrium."[43]

A metastable system has not, and cannot, fully resolve: "the system continues to live and evolve; it is not degraded by the appearance of structure; it remains under tension and capable of modifying itself."[44]

This metastable condition requires, according to Simondon, sustained attentiveness. Technical activity extends beyond invention or use to include the observation, maintenance, tuning, and continual refinement through which a technical object evolves. It is in maintenance that the technician is closest to the machine, developing what Simondon describes as a "coefficient of attention" to its operation.[45] This follows from his critique of the hylomorphic model of production, in which materials are understood, contra Aristotle, not as passive matter awaiting form but as already worked upon and continually transformed through technical activity.[46] The daily labour of scanning negatives, adjusting images, composing captions, and posting is performed in direct response to a platform that is never fixed. Each interface redesign, algorithmic shift, or alteration to Instagram's affordances demands continual recalibration of a digital object that is always becoming.

The survey responses reveal how followers participate in this metastable ecology. Several participants described routinely checking for missed posts, scrolling backwards through earlier material, or revisiting images encountered months or years previously. For example, Nick @nicky_knack reports on encountering *ODOG*: "I am excited to see the images posted […] For each post I can receive more insight into the subject featured in frame. Sometimes I even leave my feed to scroll Our Days of Gold's page to ensure that I have not missed any posts to search for further context." Other followers made screen recordings that preserved previous versions of the Instagram interface and viewing experiences that no longer exist.[47] These practices of intentionally navigating to it and recursively conjuring it into being, even when it is not visible, not only protect the work against disappearance, but maintain it by generating new archival forms through which the work continues to exist beyond Instagram.

Maintenance therefore emerges as one of the conditions through which *ODOG* persists. The work survives thanks to a distributed ecology of technical systems, archival traces, and human practices continually reconstituting it. Persistence and transformation are not opposing conditions but rather become mutually dependent. *ODOG* endures because it remains open to successive reconfigurations, sustaining itself through the metastable relations that connect platform infrastructures, archival materials, and follower practices.

SECTION 3
LIVING ARCHIVES AND DISTRIBUTED MEMORY

If Section 1 traced how *ODOG*'s modes of existence as continually individuating through recursive relations within the platform, and Section 2 examined the infrastructural conditions and practices of maintenance that enable its

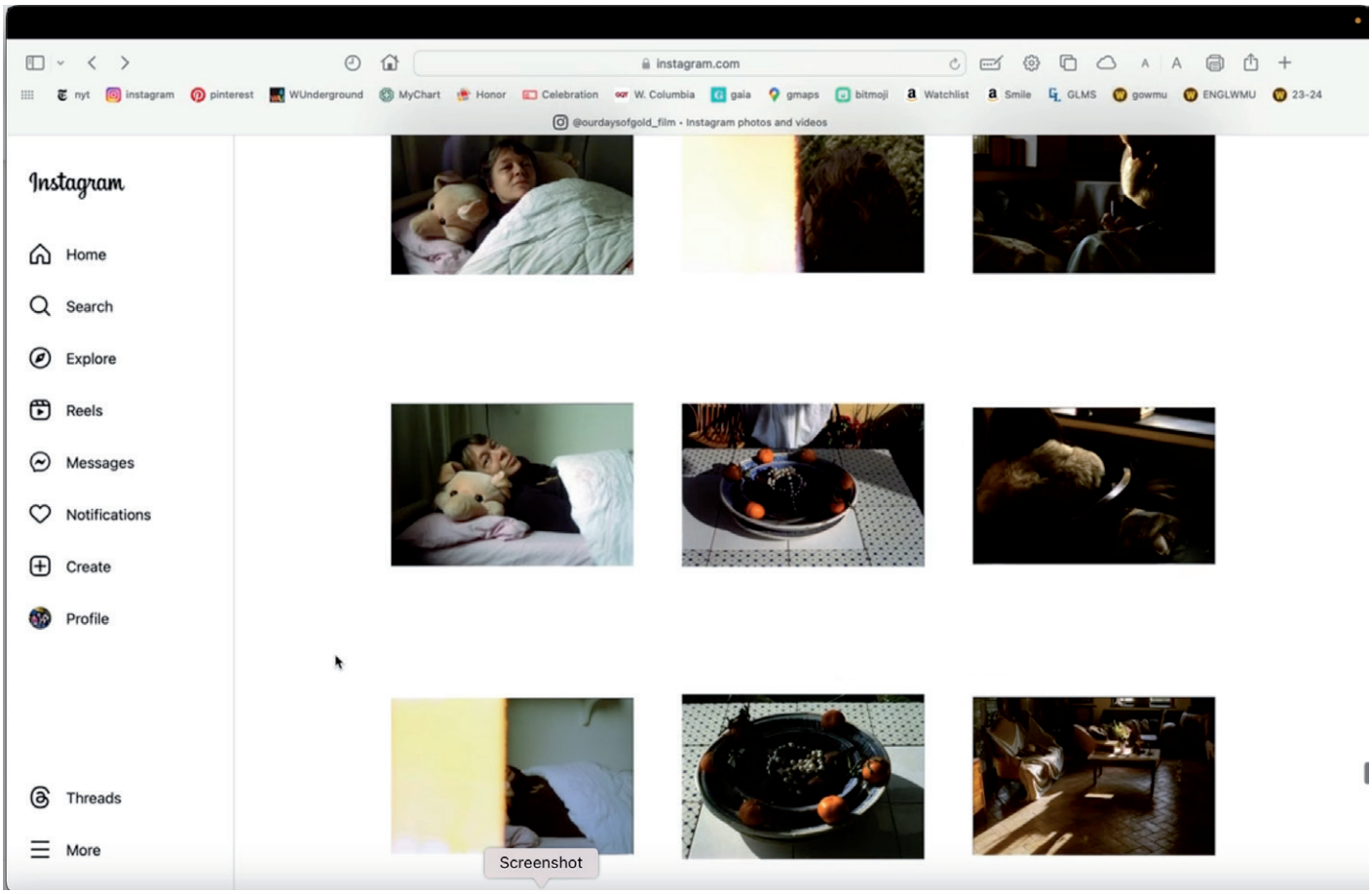


Figure 3

persistence, this section turns to a domain the platform cannot fully contain: memory. Hui's claim that a digital object does not pre-exist its relations as a finished thing but comes into being through a dynamic and energetic process of individuation, whereby "a digital object is also constantly in the process of reestablishing and renegotiating its relations with other objects, systems, and users within their associated milieux. Digital objects also take up the functions of maintaining emotions, atmospheres, collectivities, memories, and so on"[48] does not restrict that relational field to behaviour on the platform, but rather suggests that these relations extend beyond Instagram's technical architecture; on "a social networking website, digital objects are not able to function on their own without the activities of human beings, who create and modify them. Without this intervening creation and modification, machines would have nothing to process."[49] Part of where *ODOG* exists, this section argues, is not on Instagram's servers at all, but in the recollections, associations, and affective attachments that followers carry between encounters, a substrate the platform has no access to and cannot undo. In this way, the work may propagate through distributed forms of memory and inhabit followers' cognitive systems, individuating as an ecology of distributed memory in which computational memory and the embodied memories of its followers continually reactivate one another.

As mentioned before, Chun cautions against conflating memory with storage, arguing that software's apparent capacity to remember depends instead

upon continual processes of regeneration and recursive execution rather than passive preservation. "Memory" according to Chun, "links together the man and the machine."[50] N. Katherine Hayles's account of distributed cognition systems provides a framework for understanding how these technical operations become entangled with human cognition. Hayles defines cognition as "a process that interprets information within contexts that connect it with meaning,"[51] extending cognitive activity beyond conscious thought to distributed assemblages of human and technical agents.[52] Her theory built on Andy Clark's model of extended cognition, which in contrast with a model that imagines cognition happens only in the brain, examines the ways in which "objects in the environment […] support and extend memory, combine ideas into novel syntheses, and in general enable more sophisticated thoughts than would otherwise be possible."[53] Within such assemblages, I would argue memory cannot be understood either as data preserved on remote servers or as something contained solely within individual brains. Instead, it emerges through ongoing interactions between computational storage, platform infrastructures, and embodied acts of recollection. Anonymous 12's reflection, in response to being asked when they started following *ODOG*, captures how this distributed cognition affects how temporality is experienced: "I'm not sure now. *Our Days of Gold* has been a constant in my Insta feed for such a long time. Was it before the pandemic? Possibly, though I'm not sure. Maybe. Time bends now, and moves in strange ways." *ODOG* persists through precisely such a distributed arrangement, in which followers, interfaces, algorithms, archived images and embodied recollections participate in the ongoing production of meaning and memory. When asked what he knows about Cécile, @drbattiloca replied "I don't know much about Cécile, only that she was a mother of three and died unexpectedly in her sleep in 2017." This piece of information is not contained within each encounter with *ODOG*; it is mostly withheld, only surfacing each year on the anniversary of Cécile's death. It is remarkable that @drbattiloca retained it, even though not completely accurately. @fibrebased's description of the encounter as "a transportation to a time that was not my own" makes the same point: the work persists as a felt residue rather than retrievable data, a "peripheral belonging." Louis @re_gan says for them it's "A moment of nostalgia that doesn't belong to me. It feels as though I am looking into someone's memory, but at the same time it feels familiar." Remembering someone else's memories, as if they were one's own, a feeling of familiarity carried beyond the immediate moment of viewing, is an example of how "digital objects also take up the functions of maintaining emotions, atmospheres, collectivities, memories, and so on."[54]

Remembering *ODOG* therefore becomes a collaborative process involving followers, platform infrastructures, and the artwork itself. Katja @studiorenner reflects in her survey response that she believed she had followed *ODOG* "almost from the beginning," but only realised she had already liked images in 2018 after checking Instagram itself. The platform here functions not simply as a repository but as part of a distributed cognitive system through which autobiographical

memory is verified and extended. Rather than merely storing images, Instagram participates in the recollection of encounters that would otherwise remain uncertain or forgotten. Katja's survey response continues:

> What kind of moment is it for you when Our Days of Gold images flash onto your screen? It is always a break in my timeline. The images have something calm and quiet. They are static, almost like paintings, contrasting the contemporary, somehow "excited" imagery. There is an intriguing story behind it, something (sad) happened, and I get a very strong feeling of nostalgia. [...] The photographs reflect a certain feeling I have about the passage of time, and they reflect contradictory feelings I have about looking back at souvenirs or even about the meaning of photography in them. The fact that all pictures of a roll are posted, even the "failed" ones, creates an authentic and honest feeling. Like I was looking through a stack of pictures with a friend. And as *ODOG* is one of the accounts I followed actively for the longest, it feels like hearing from an acquaintance. And I am still impressed by the seemingly endless dimensions of this body of work.

Katja's response suggests that, over years of repeated encounters, *ODOG* ceases to function as a sequence of individual posts. Instead, it becomes woven into the temporal and relational fabric of everyday life. The work interrupts the ordinary flow of the feed yet simultaneously acquires the familiarity of an ongoing relationship. Looking at the archive is experienced less as consuming social media than as sharing photographs with a friend or hearing from an acquaintance. These observations support Hayles's argument that cognition emerges through distributed interactions rather than remaining confined to individual minds. Here, the persistence of the artwork resides not only within Instagram's technical infrastructure but within a milieu where repeated encounters continually renew social relations, memory, and recognition. When asked what she knows about Cécile, Allison Adlard remembers:

> In my memory, Cécile was the central focus or main character of the *ODOG* project. I know she was a mother and seemed to have a close relationship with her adult children. Many times, I felt this tenderness between them. I think she may have gotten divorced or gone through some personal difficulties at one point in the project's timeline. This may be inaccurate, but I remember a picture of her lying on a bed, maybe with someone consoling her as if she were sad or depressed. I sensed there was more to Cécile than met the eye. Complexity. At the same time, she exuded elegance. I remember the locale of *ODOG* was particularly romantic, full of rich light and shadows, greenery, and everyday beauty, which I always attributed to Cécile.

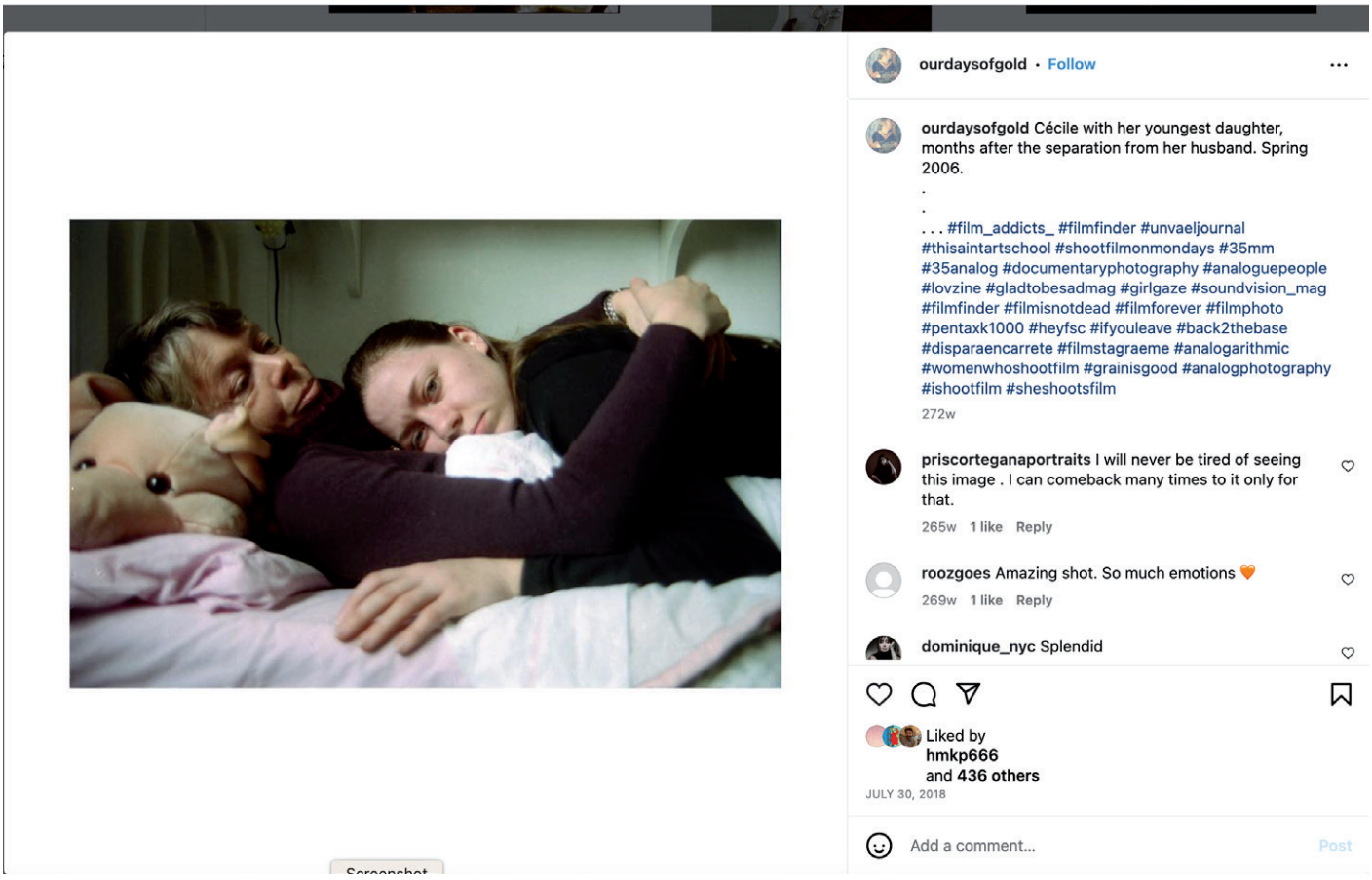
The remembered figure of Cécile emerges through accumulated encounters, Adlard's speculative reconstruction, and the lingering trace of a single image-event

whose details remain uncertain and yet memorable. Adlard had left Instagram since more than 5 years when she was able to give this account of her experience of *ODOG*.

This distributed persistence carries ethical implications as well as ontological ones. Ariella Azoulay argues that "the photograph is never the testimony of the photographer alone and the event of photography, unlike the photographed event, continues to exist despite all other considerations."[55] Once aspects of *ODOG* become embedded within followers' memories, followers become not only spectators, but participants in the continuing life of the archive. Their acts of witness, recollection, interpretation and return are not supplementary to the work but constitutive of its existence.

@47n.120w's experience is of a nostalgia detached from its object: "These days, it's an odd sense of comforting familiarity. I've seen some photos come and go several times, so there's a kind of nostalgia that doesn't make a lot of sense, because I don't actually know who the people depicted are. But they are familiar. And whenever I stop to think about it, the original mystery that drew me to the account in the first place comes back. I don't actually know what the project depicts or means, but the feeling it evokes is strong. I suppose that's why don't try to find out. The feeling is enough." Hayles's account of technogenesis, as positing "a strong connection between ongoing dynamic adaptation of technics and humans,"[56] helps illuminate a process by which repeated exposure to image

Figure 4

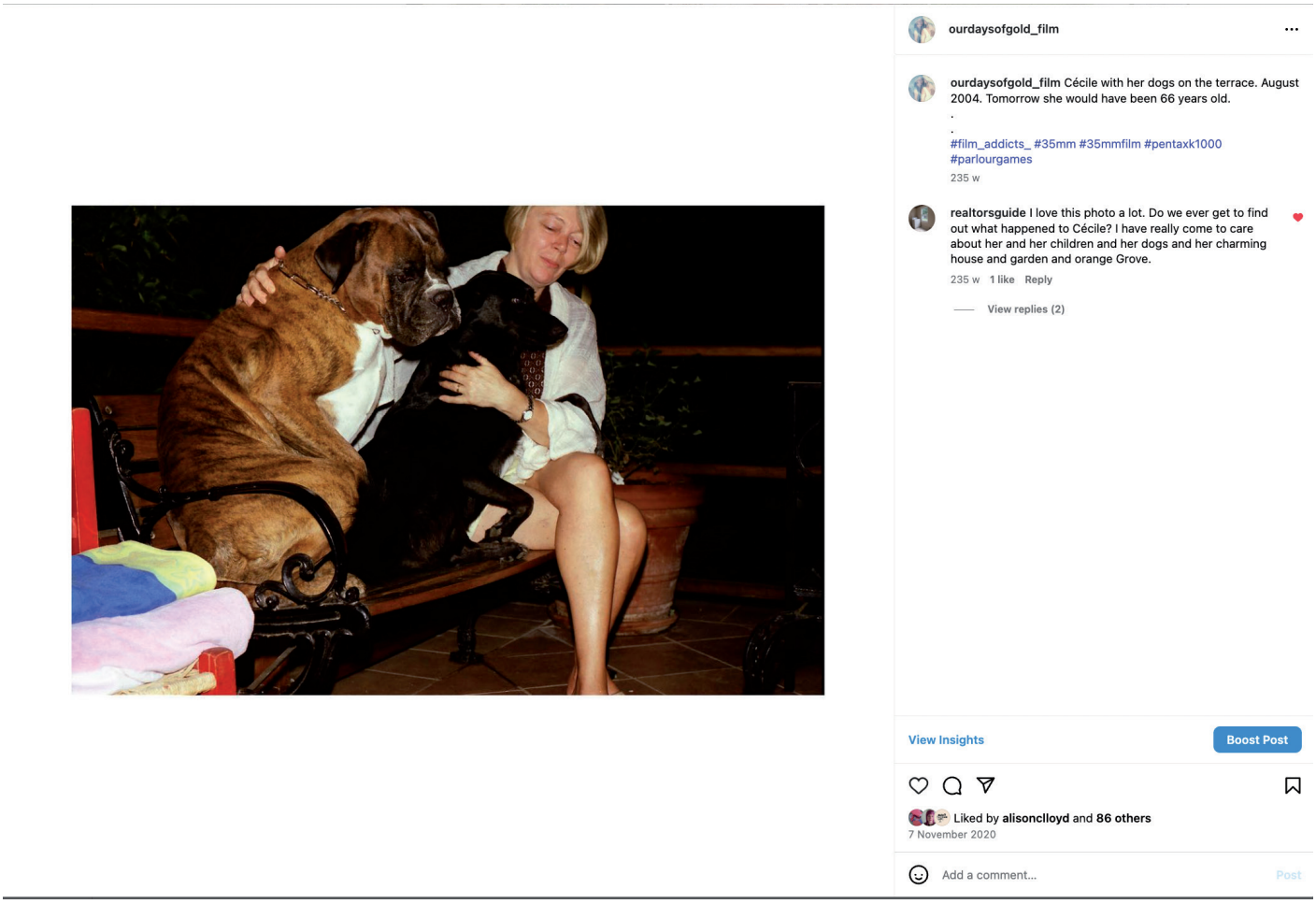


data sediments into feelings of connection within what Hayles describes as a cognitive assemblage.[57]

Anonymous 12 expresses this distributed persistence even more directly. Asked what they know about Cécile, they replied: “Relatively little. Cécile is to my mind an absent presence, a missing centre around which things revolve. Fundamentally unknowable and mysterious.” The work’s persistence therefore does not depend upon complete information or narrative resolution. Instead, repeated encounters with images and captions generate a durable relation to a figure who remains only partially knowable. What is distributed across followers is not simply memory of events but an enduring orientation towards an absence that continues to organise attention, interpretation, and recursive returns.

Hayles’s theory of distributed cognition develops Simondon’s philosophy; she describes Simondon’s conceptualisation of potential energy’s metastable states, and how he “called this flow “information” and thought it is inherently connected with meaning.”[58] Like Simondon’s technical objects, Hayles’s distributed cognitive systems remain metastable, sustained by continual exchanges between their human and machinic components. Hayles’s framework clarifies why memory in *ODOG* cannot be located in either human consciousness or digital storage alone: each complement each other and allow the work to persists through recursive operations that re-individuate it as a digital object.

Figure 5



CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined how a social media artwork exists as a digital object within and beyond the platform that it haunts, and its ever-changing environment. Informed by followers engagement and written contributions submitted to an online survey in 2025, it asked how *ODOG* is recursively called into being by follower behaviours, how it survives infrastructural transformation, and how it may propagate through distributed forms of memory and haunt followers' distributed cognitive systems.

We have explored three interrelated lenses in examining the work: recursive modes of existence, infrastructural persistence, and distributed memory. Section 1 asked how *ODOG* exists as a digital object recursively reconstituted through relations between followers, platform operations, and archival images. Drawing on Hui's account of recursivity and Simondon's theory of individuation, the analysis showed that the work is not simply accessed by followers but continually produced by those who summon it via recursive acts of attention, interpretation, anticipation, and return. *ODOG* persists as a digital object because it is evoked through ongoing processes of re-individuation. Section 2 examined a second question: how the work survives within a platform environment characterised by continual change. Through Chun's account of updating, Mattern's work on maintenance, and Simondon's concept of metastability, the analysis demonstrated that persistence depends upon practices of maintenance and adaptation. *ODOG* endures thanks to artists and followers continually actively negotiating changing interfaces, algorithms, and conditions of visibility. The third section explored where *ODOG* exists outside of the platform. Drawing on Hayles's theory of distributed cognition, and Chun's machine-memory, the article argued that the work extends beyond Instagram through acts of recollection that inhabit followers' distributed cognitive systems. Followers are not simply spectators of the archive. They participate in its ongoing life by carrying fragments of it into memory, conversation, screenshots, recordings, and speculative reconstructions alongside their own embodied memories.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the persistence of a social media artwork cannot be reduced to the continued storage of digital files within platform infrastructures. The image files may lie, temporarily 'undead', within servers, but the work itself persists through ecological relations that exceed storage: recursive encounters and invocations, practices of maintenance, and distributed acts of remembering.

Understanding social media artworks in this way requires moving beyond models of digital preservation centred on storage and permanence. Instead, persistence emerges as relational, produced through recursive participation, infrastructural maintenance, and distributed cognition across human and technical milieus. While *ODOG* persists in a state of partial presence, repeatedly disappearing and reappearing across feeds, memories, screenshots, and acts

of return, what endures is not only the photographic images, or their networked digital ghosts, made up of 'undead' information, but the dynamic relations through which they are continually reconstituted through recursive, infrastructural, and cognitive interventions that assemble human and technical participants into a unique ecology.

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