Future of the Image: Why disappearing pictures?
By Esther Hovers

I am writing this essay in response to 'Why nonhuman pictures?' by Trevor Paglen and Joanna Zylinska. I particularly want to elaborate on the points made about the future of the image, but from a different angle.

When I was eight years old I created my first website. The year was 1999 and my dad helped me develop a website with a topic of my choosing. I chose to create a web page called Esther's Studio, to which I would upload my 'artwork': i.e. Quirky drawings my father would scan for me. Little did I know, that my interest in creating turned into a life path. More importantly, I did not grasp the digital realm I was sending my drawings into. I still don't.

We refer to the internet as a place (as I referred to my website as a studio). We talk about the cloud, cookies, (fire)walls, surfing, masters, servers and branches. For a lack of understanding, we re-use everyday words to familiarize ourselves with the abstract digital realm. It helps to refer to the internet as a landscape, because we have only just started to understand what is happening to our personal data.
The drawings for my first-ever website would cover topics within the scope of my world, not extending far beyond the borders of our garden. I drew family members and chickens, but in essence – I laid the foundation for my art today. The website became my inspiration, not the drawings. 'Technology and place' have become the key interests in my artistic practice.

As I got older I was embarrassed to find my website easily pulled-up, even though it had been taken down years prior. It was not the kind of thing to be proud of as an insecure teenager. Now, the website makes me chuckle and marvel at the fact that I had such a determination to pursue art at such a young age. It does make me wonder; Does the internet ever forget?

This is when I learned about The Right To Be Forgotten. I was immediately struck by its poetic title, but this is the official term of a European Union law. As the name suggests, it deals with a person's right to have data removed from online searches. Mind you – removed from searches – not from the internet, full stop.
In my work, I look at how humans relate to technology. I am specifically interested in the unseen. How does a person that knows nothing about technology relate to it? I aim to provoke a feeling through my work, rather than give didactic explanations.

Inspired by these notions, I created work on The Right To Be Forgotten. I now finished a first chapter on portraiture.

I am reproducing a Google-found portrait of the first man to successfully claim his 'Right To Be Forgotten' in the European Court of Justice. His successful lawsuit made his quest to be forgotten very memorable. I look for reproduction techniques that simultaneously show and alter his portrait. The internet does not forget and so we are faced with ever-growing personal archives. For this body of work, I use photographic reproduction as a means to reflect on endless circulation; the resilience of the image.

The man in question is part of this project but the work is not about him. I am not interested in sharing the details of his story. He has rather become a symbol of the ambivalent balance between wanting to be remembered and wanting to be forgotten.

Individuals have very little understanding or control over their online image. However, there are two sides to every coin; namely the right to information. How do we remember and how does the internet remember?
The Austrian professor of internet governance and regulations (Oxford University) Viktor Mayer-Schönberger has very interesting thoughts on this matter. He compared the human brain to a large attic, full of memories and old belongings. Everything is there. Old information slowly moves to the bottom of each pile. Not completely forgotten, but not at the forefront of our memory either. This is at odds with the way the internet functions. On the internet old information remains forever swimming at the surface.

I mockingly titled this essay 'Why disappearing pictures?', because we slowly come to realize that they won't disappear.

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1. Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age (Princeton University Press, 2011)