The reblogged Image

Networks of curation in aesthetic blogging on Tumblr

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Introduction

When scrolling through the #*aesthetic* tag on social media platform Tumblr, a collection of images, gifs and text posts shows up. Through their captions and tags they communicate a variety of aesthetic labels to the viewer. A photoset of a forest landscape is #*fairycore* and #*cottagecore*, while a quote by James Baldwin is #*dark academia*. Images of old video game controllers are tagged #*retro.* Clicking on any one of these tags leads to a new screen, this time entirely focused on posts tagged as fairycore or retro. Clicking on the url of any of the users these posts belong to takes the viewer to the user's blog, featuring a gallery of similar posts in a digital environment themed entirely around a certain aesthetic, or set of aesthetics. These blogs, generally referred to as "aesthetic blogs," may seem indistinguishable from Pinterest boards or Instagram feeds at a glance, but through the spaces created by the networked collaboration between Tumblr's unique features as a platform and the habits of its users, a unique form of digital visual culture can be identified within these blogs and their surrounding spaces. This thesis will explore the aesthetic blog, the culture of aesthetic blogging and the images that become "aesthetic," moving through the spaces and interfaces of Tumblr.

Tumblr is a social media platform, accessed through a website and app. Founded in 2007 in New York City, it first gained a significant increase in users in 2011, with 21 million users being measured in June of that year.[1] Despite concerns about profitability, Tumblr was bought by Yahoo in 2013 for $1.1 billion, expanding advertising and branding of the platform through 2013 and 2014. In January of 2014 Tumblr claimed to have amassed over 166 million users, and was reported to be one of the five most popular social media platforms in the United States.[2] Targeted advertising was less successful on Tumblr compared to other platforms, as Tumblr does not track demographic information of its users. In 2017, as Tumblr and Yahoo as a whole were struggling financially, it became clear that Tumblr was not reaching

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[1] Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, and Indira Neill Hoch, "You Must Be New Here: An introduction." in *a tumblr book*. ed. Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, and Indira Neill Hoch (University of Michigan Press, 2020), 7.
[2] Yi Chang, Lei Tang, Yoshiyuki Inagaki, and Yan Liu, "What is Tumblr: a statistical overview and comparison." *SIGKDD Explor. Newsl.* 16, 1 (June 2014): 1

its advertising goals. This led to Verizon acquiring Yahoo, including Tumblr.[3] In December of 2018 Verizon announced a ban on sexually explicit content on Tumblr, citing primarily financial reasons related to the difficulties of selling ad space on a website featuring pornography. Less than a year later, in August 2019, Tumblr was sold to Automattic, the company behind blogging website Wordpress, which owns Tumblr to this day.[4]

Tumblr features a variety of mechanics that differentiate it from other social media platforms that are relevant to point out when talking about Tumblr. As a microblogging platform, Tumblr functions similarly to its closest comparison, Twitter. When logged in, users can post from their account and see posts from accounts they follow on the dashboard, or "dash," both in the website and app environments. The dash has, by default, historically featured every post uploaded by the accounts a user follows, shown in reverse chronological order in endless scrolling format. Currently there are three additional versions of the dash users can switch to, the algorithm-based "For you" page, the "Your tags" page featuring the most recent posts made in followed tags, and finally the "Blog subs" page, featuring all posts from blogs the user has turned notifications on for in reverse chronological order like the dash.

Posts on Tumblr can feature text without a character limit like on Twitter, which can be edited with basic html code, and feature up to thirty images, gifs, links, audio, video and the most recent addition in interactive polls. In addition to this content in the post body, a post can also contain a set of tags shown below the rest of the post. These tags consist entirely of text, and unlike other platforms can contain spaces and thus multiple words. On top of the post body the URL and icon of the blog it was posted to are displayed. Users can interact with posts in a variety of ways. "Reblogs" are the main distinguishing feature of Tumblr compared to other social media. Like Twitter's "retweet" it allows users to share a post made by someone else to their own blog, placing it on the dash of all of their followers. Tags do not carry over between reblogs however, and new tags can be added to any reblog of a post. A feature unique to reblogs is the way they allow users to add on to posts with their own blogs, showing the original post as the top of a chain inside the post, with every subsequent addition adding a new section with its own post body, featuring text, images or anything else.

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[3] McCracken, Cho, Stein and Hoch, "You Must Be New Here: An introduction," 8.
[4] McCracken, Cho, Stein and Hoch, "You Must Be New Here: An introduction." 9.

Besides the dash, Tumblr features a variety of other spaces. A space relatively unique to Tumblr is the "blog," where all posts by a single user are visible. In the mobile app the blog is displayed in a similar way to the dash, with all posts on the blog shown in a reverse chronological order. These mobile blog pages can feature a customizable header, icon and bio, and the background color can be changed by the blogger. A version of this mobile blog page is also accessible via the website, but on the website user URLs can also lead to separate blog environments, which can be viewed completely separately from the Tumblr environment. These blog pages are customizable using html code, and feature a much higher degree of creative freedom compared to the mobile blog page. All of these spaces contribute to the unique environment of Tumblr, allowing for the creation of communities and cultures also unique to Tumblr.

A variety of "cultures of Tumblr" or types of blogs can be identified when observing the dash of a Tumblr user. As Tumblr experts Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein and Indira Neill Hoch describe in the introduction to *a Tumblr book*, the dash functions as a space that juxtaposes types of content, using the example of fandom and social justice posts informing and reinforcing each other through the dash.[5] Besides these categories of the fandom blog and the social justice or politics blog, the aesthetic blog also fills a different unique role within the ecosystem of the dash. "Aesthetic blogging" is Tumblr vernacular for a variety of practices around the posting and reblogging of posts, mostly featuring images that are associated with some type of aesthetic response by users. A certain type of blog is associated with these practices of aesthetic blogging, here referred to as an "aesthetic blog." McCracken et al describe the practices of these blogs as featuring feeds of various images without text captions, often presented in the shape of a nine image "moodboard."[6] When the text caption is often absent, and the featured images could seemingly be anything, what unites these posts as aesthetic posts is their presence on aesthetic blogs, and their identification as aesthetic posts through tags such as #aesthetic and its derivatives. Aesthetic blogging can be compared to other online communities (e.g. #cottagecore is not unique to Tumblr), but the structure and communities of Tumblr, like for instance the usage of the reblog button and the

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[5] McCracken, Cho, Stein and Hoch, "You Must Be New Here: An introduction." 10

[6] Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, and Indira Neill Hoch, "#myAesthetic" in *a tumblr book*. ed. Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, and Indira Neill Hoch (University of Michigan Press, 2020), 327

tagging system, allow for a different kind of space of digital curation and visual culture. These unique forms of digital curation that can be found in aesthetic blogging on Tumblr can give insight into ongoing discourses of digital curation, where perspectives about popular digital visual cultures have long been undervalued compared to perspectives of artists or "traditional" curators working with the internet in relation to the institutional art world.

Tumblr is often characterized as a platform of the past that has been losing money and users since 2014, but especially since the ban on explicit content in 2018. In December of 2018, when this ban on explicit content happened, causing many people to predict a mass exodus off the website, Tumblr reported having 450 million blogs.[7] Despite these predictions, Tumblr's total number of blogs has had significant growth in the years following 2018. In March of 2023 Tumblr reported having 571.029.911 blogs, 58.311 of which were created per day.[8] Tumblr under Automattic has also recognized that there is an influx of both new and returning users in recent years, providing extensive guides on how to get started on Tumblr, as well as adding a large amount of new features to the website.[9] This period of 2019 to 2023 has gotten very little attention by researchers of social media, with most research about Tumblr either being written before 2019, or being framed as a retrospective of Tumblr before 2019. What this shows is a lack of knowledge and analysis of Tumblr as it exists now, which is different from the way it existed before 2019. To show the ways Tumblr has been covered in scientific literature since 2019, and the gaps that have been left in this literature that this thesis aims to partially fill, a short review of this literature is relevant. Take as an example Oliver L. Haimes et al.'s "Tumblr was a trans technology" from 2021, which assumes December 2018 to be the end of Tumblr's time as a "trans technology," directly related to the banning of explicit content.[10] In a similar vein, Elena Pillipets and Susanna Paasonen's "Nipples, memes, and algorithmic failure" from 2022 focuses specifically on the period directly

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[7] McCracken, Cho, Stein and Hoch, "You Must Be New Here: An introduction." 2
[8] "About," Tumblr, accessed 9-3-2023, https://about.tumblr.com/#quick-facts
[9] "Getting Started on Tumblr," Tumblr, accessed 9-3-2023, https://help.tumblr.com/hc/en-us/articles/115001572547-Getting-Started-on-Tumblr, the exact date of origin of this page is unknown, but no records of it exist before May of 2022, long after the acquisition of Tumblr by Automattic.
[10] Oliver L. Haimson, Avery Dame-Griff, Elias Capello & Zahari Richter, "Tumblr was a trans technology: the meaning, importance, history, and future of trans technologies." *Feminist Media Studies, 21:3* (2021), 345

after the ban on explicit content, but before the acquisition of Tumblr by Automattic.[11] One of the most extensive recent examples of research into Tumblr is Alison McCracken et al.'s "a tumblr book" (2020), which features a variety of articles almost all written before December 2018, with the exception of the introductory chapter, specifically outlining the choice to take December 2018 as an end point for their history of Tumblr in the 2010s.[12] In delineating the history of Tumblr into a before and after, both sides of this history can become topics of research, but so far most research has ignored the after. One recent article that defies this delineation, and instead looks at Tumblr before and after 2019 as a single continuation is Federica Guccini and Gerald McKinley's ""How deep do I have to cut?" Non-suicidal self-injury and imagined communities of practice on Tumblr" (2022). Guccini and McKinley identify cultures that are still active on Tumblr despite content bans and waning popularity, in their research into non-suicidal self-injury communities on Tumblr in 2022. Depictions of self-injury have been banned on Tumblr since long before December 2018, but these communities are still active on the platform, with Guccini and McKinley noting the combination of relative privacy and anonymity with possibilities for non-normative communities on Tumblr as features that attract these communities.[13] Where these communities have been affected relatively little by the porn ban, as their type of posts had not been allowed since before the ban, a parallel can be made with aesthetic bloggers, whose content has also been affected relatively little, mostly being allowed both before and after the ban.[14]

Out of these texts, only "a tumblr book" directly deals with the topic of aesthetic blogging, in its seventh chapter titled #myAesthetic, though the articles featured in this chapter cover a variety of topics related to visual cultures on Tumblr, rather than being limited to the specific visual cultures of aesthetic blogging.[15] Earlier texts do cover aesthetic blogging as a set of practices, but often focus on specific types of images within aesthetic blogging, like Lisa Ehlin's "Reblogging Fashion" (2014) which describes the creative curation of images on Tumblr, but limits itself to

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[11] Elena Pillipets and Susanna Paasonen, "Nipples, memes, and algorithmic failure: NSFW critique of Tumblr censorship." *New media & society,* 24(6) (2022), 1459
[12] McCracken, Cho, Stein and Hoch, "You Must Be New Here: An introduction." 3
[13] Federica Guccini and Gerald McKinley, ""How deep do I have to cut?" Non-suicidal self-injury and imagined communities of practice on Tumblr." *Social Science & Medicine 296* (2022), 3
[14] The distinction between aesthetic blogs and "porn blogs" is not always as clear cut as presented here, but the majority of aesthetic blogs featured very little content that would be restricted by the 2018 porn ban.
[15] McCracken, Cho, Stein and Hoch, "#myAesthetic," 327-382

images of fashion.[16] Sumin Zhao and Michele Zappavigna's 2018 article "Digital Scrapbooks, everyday aesthetics & the curatorial self: Social photography in female visual blogging" discusses visual cultures on Tumblr, and to a lesser extent on Instagram and Pinterest. The article refers to the blogs as "digital scrapbooks," but the practices described are not incompatible with the concept of the aesthetic blog. Once again, the article puts a larger focus on a specific type of image, in this case the selfie, or "fake selfie," rather than the larger breadth of images found in aesthetic blogging.[17]

Aesthetic blogging on Tumblr is a very under-explored topic within discourses about digital aesthetics, online platforms and the mobility of digitally mediated images. What makes aesthetic blogging unique within these discussions is the way it is a visual culture situated on the edge between art and popular culture, while still existing in a more niche, marginal part of social media. Aesthetic blogging is democratized, with very little barriers to entry, and it is not insignificant in its influence on curatorial and artistic trends, but both its possibilities and history are often dismissed because of the way it exists on the edges of art and "trash." An analysis of what this culture is, and how it interacts with images in various ways, situated in the current mechanics of Tumblr as a platform in 2023 is vital to fill this gap in these discourses, which is what this thesis will attempt to do.

In focusing on the visual culture of aesthetic blogging on Tumblr in 2023, I aim to answer the question of how the visual culture of aesthetic blogging interacts with and is shaped by the current digital spaces of Tumblr, specifically focusing on the mobility of images within these spaces, and how this mobility allows images to become part of these "aesthetics." To answer this question, a few other questions need to be answered first. The first chapter of this thesis will be about the digital spaces of Tumblr, asking what spaces and interactions between spaces can be identified on Tumblr, and comparing in what way these spaces resemble or contrast other visually focused digital spaces, like those on Instagram or Pinterest. The second chapter will put a bigger focus on the concept of the aesthetic blog, what is understood with this term, how aesthetic blogs function and how other blogs interact with aesthetic blogs through practices of aesthetic blogging, and how these practices

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[16] Lisa Ehlin, "Reblogging Fashion: Participatory curation on Tumblr." *NMEDIAC* (winter 2013-2014), 1
[17] Sumin Zhao and Michele Zappavigna, "Digital Scrapbooks, everyday aesthetics & the curatorial self: Social photography in female visual blogging." in *Multimodality and Aesthetics* ed. F. Forsgren and E.S. Tønnessen (London, New York: Routledge, 2018), 218

constitute creative acts of curation that are mediated by the spaces of Tumblr described in the first chapter. The final chapter builds on top of the first two chapters, using concepts developed in these chapters such as social media as a social space and networks of mediated curation in aesthetic blogging, asking how images gain mobility within the spaces and through the culture and practices of aesthetic blogging on Tumblr.

To answer the question of the first chapter I will be describing, analyzing and categorizing the various spaces of Tumblr and their interactions using a theoretical framework around the concepts of space, platforms, interfaces and curation. The framework for the concept of space I use here is based upon French marxist theorist Henri Lefebvre's work on social space, where space is not just geometrical, location-based or architectural, but is positioned as possessing a dual nature. On the one hand individuals situate themselves in the center of social space, and with this become a subject in space, and on the other hand space serves a role as mediator, turning into a transparent medium.[18] Martin Beck's expansion upon Lefebvre's work on space in his writing on alternative art spaces adds a valuable perspective into spaces for visual culture as simultaneously being spaces for the creation and curation of art but also spaces of community, which allows artists as well as curators to participate in these spaces.[19] Gwen Allen expands upon this even further in her work on artist's magazines, showing how a magazine can be a space, and function similarly to architectural, or "real," spaces.[20] Though many of the texts I use here focus on alternative spaces, I am less concerned with their discussions of alternativity than with their discussions of spaces. Using these perspectives, a framework of space can be made that is not necessarily based in location or geometry, but that presents space as something that functions as a social mediator with its own allowances and interferences that incentivize or marginalize certain relations and actions, creating the conditions for production and curation.

Parallel to this framework of spaces, a framework of discourses about interface and platform is necessary for this analysis of Tumblr's spaces. In platform studies there are a variety of definitions of what a platform is, from technical

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[18] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford/Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 183

[19] Martin Beck, "Alternative: Space" in *Alternative Art New York 1965-1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective* ed. Julie Ault (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 256

[20] Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: an Alternative Space for Art.* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 123

platforms to platforms of dialogue. As Tarleton Gillespie points out, understanding the intersections of these different concepts of the platform allows us to examine the roles these platforms play.[21] I use Brendan Hookway's concept of the interface defined as a relation with technology, through which human interactions with technology are mediated.[22] Another useful part of this framework of the interface is Alexander Galloway's notion of the interface as a relation effect, not just between the user and the technology but also between relationships within an image or technology.[23] The final piece of framework for this methodology for my first chapter can be found in Annet Dekker and Gaia Tedone's concept of networked co-curation, their way of looking at how the structure of the web influences the digital curator, like how on Tumblr the aesthetic blogger as curator is influenced by Tumblr's recommendation algorithms that can determine what posts are seen by the blogger, and thus become possible subjects of curation.[24]

To answer my second question, about what aesthetic blogs are and how the practices of aesthetic blogging function, I will be reviewing the limited literature on aesthetic blogs on Tumblr, and use this literature to analyze my own case studies: a group of currently active and seemingly popular aesthetic blogs on Tumblr. The way these twenty blogs were selected was through creating a completely new, empty tumblr blog, in a new browser connected to a completely new email account, to remove any possible interference from previous cookies or search history. When creating a new tumblr account and blog, Tumblr asks the user to follow a set of tags related to their interests. One of the suggested tags from the start is #aesthetic. To proceed, the user must follow five distinct tags. I chose to follow the #aesthetic tag, and the first four tags that were suggested as "sub-tags" of the aesthetic tag. These tags are #grunge, #pastel, #kawaii and #vintage, all popular tags with aesthetic blogs. Based on your choice of tags, Tumblr then shows the user ten blogs related to the earlier chosen tags to follow. I chose these ten blogs as the first ten blogs to use as a case study. After setting up the account, I went into the page of the aesthetic tag, and followed the first ten blogs whose posts showed up on the top posts page of the tag. Through choosing these two ways of encountering algorithmically selected

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[21] Tarleton Gillespie, "The politics of 'platforms'" *new media & society 12, no. 3* (2010), 347
[22] Brendan Hookway, *Interface.* (Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 2014), 9
[23] Alexander R. Galloway, "The Unworkable Interface." *New Literary History,* 39, no. 4 (Autumn 2008), 941
[24] Annet Dekker and Gaia Tedone, "Networked Co-Curation: An Exploration of the Socio-Technical Specificities of Online Curation." *Arts,* 8, no. 3 (2019), 1

blogs to follow, I tried to simulate a natural way in which a new user might find blogs to follow in a variety of ways. A third way that is unfortunately not explored here is finding blogs through other blogs one already follows, a process that would inherently involve a more biased selection process.

I looked at a variety of variables for each blog, like amount of posts, amount of posts not related to aesthetic blogging (like answered questions, calls for donation or political posts), amount of reblogs and original posts and whether the images had been created by the user or not, all within the time period of February of 2023. (See appendix A) These twenty blogs are not necessarily representative of all of Tumblr's aesthetic blogs, but do provide a useful snapshot into blogs that are relatively popular, active and actively interacting with the communities of aesthetic blogging by tagging their posts as #aesthetic, as well as a variety of related tags. A limitation of this method is for instance the exclusion of unpopular blogs, and the exclusion of aesthetic blogs that do not tag their posts for various reasons.[25]

For my final question I will be building upon the framework set for the previous two chapters and expand upon my own concept of the mobility of images in aesthetic blogging introduced in the previous chapters. To do this I will be engaging with previous discourses of images in motion, and supplementing these with my own analysis of images in aesthetic blogging. Hito Steyerl's concept of the "poor image," which she uses to describe low quality digital copies of images and specifically films, which allow for an alternative mobility and economy of images beyond capitalist distribution.[26] Alongside this I use Brad Troemel's concept of "image anarchism," his description of an ideology that he recognizes in online curation, including on Tumblr, which strips art of its authorship, status as property and context as art.[27] In addition to these discourses on the movement of images I incorporate ideas about curation of images on the internet. Besides Dekker and Tedone's networked co-curation, Omar Kholeif's work on how online platforms, and specifically recommendation algorithms, which Dekker and Tedone also write about, affect curatorial strategies is also relevant.[28] A final piece to this framework is provided in combining the concepts of

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[25] Aesthetic blogs with a slightly more subversive or edgy touch often do not tag their posts, for examples see blogs like @thatbitchsimone or @xvisualtrash09x.
[26] Hito Steyerl, *Wretched of the Screen.* (e-flux, 2012), 31
[27] Brad Troemel, "Art after Social Media." in *You are Here: Art after the Internet* ed. Omar Kholeif (Manchester: Cornerhouse, 2014), 39
[28] Omar Kholeif, "The Curator's New Medium." in *You are Here: Art after the Internet* ed. Omar Kholeif (Manchester: Cornerhouse, 2014), 84

movement of images and curation of images through discourses on collage, like Eduardo Navas' concept of both the blogger as well as the curator as remixer in a society that is based around the reuse and recirculation of materials and ideas.[29] David Banash also expands on this with his work on collage culture as a way of creating meaning and identity within consumer culture.[30] These perspectives together inform my own framework of the mobility of images, which will be supplemented with my own analysis of the affordances and spaces of Tumblr in relation to aesthetic blogging, which will ultimately help me answer the question of how aesthetic blogging in 2023 interacts with and is shaped by the spaces of Tumblr, which work in order to recontextualize images into being "aesthetic."

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[29] Eduardo Navas, *Remix Theory.* (New York: Springer, 2012), 120-146
[30] David Banash, *Collage Culture.* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2013), 14

Chapter 1: The blogosphere

Exploring digital space

This chapter zooms in on the digital spaces of Tumblr as they exist in early 2023.[31] The first part of the chapter will function to explain and build a theoretical framework that is necessary for the analysis of these spaces, covering concepts such as social space, digital space, interfaces and platforms. The second part of the chapter contains descriptions and analysis of the spaces of Tumblr using the framework created in the first part. Then the final part of the chapter focuses on posts and the ways users can interact with them, while situated within the spaces described in the previous part, showing that the spaces of Tumblr govern the means of production of posts, and the means in which these posts gain mobility.

Space refers not just to location, to a physical area with tangible borders, to geography or to architecture. In the 1970s in New York, the concept of alternative spaces for art gained a lot of traction. Spaces like the artist-run restaurant "Food," opened by Caroline Goodden, Gordon Matta-Clark, Tina Girouard, Suzanne Harris and Rachel Lew in 1971 in SoHo, existed not just as physical spaces, but provided a support network for artists beyond the tangible boundaries of the building it was located in. Through offering inexpensive food, as well as secure jobs, to a community of artists, spaces like Food allowed participating artists to work outside of traditional art spaces. In this sense, the space was not just a building, and not even just a community, but also, as art historian Martin Beck states in his analysis of these spaces, an alternative means of production.[32] Expanding upon this notion, it is possible to arrive at a discussion of spaces that has been fully separated from buildings, geography and location. In *Artists' Magazines, an alternative space for art,* professor of art history at San Francisco State University Gwen Allen argues that in this same time period alternative artist's magazines functioned in parallel to physical alternative spaces, with the pages of the magazine functioning just as much as an alternative exhibition space as the walls of a building could. These magazines were not just supplements to these physical spaces, but provided the same challenges to

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[31] Descriptions of the features of Tumblr were written between February and June of 2023, but they should be accurate to the way Tumblr looked specifically in May and early June of 2023, when this thesis was finalized. I accessed Tumblr from the Netherlands, which accounts for the absence of certain US-exclusive features like Tumblr Live in these descriptions.
[32] Beck, "Alternative: Space," 256

the economies of art in mainstream spaces as a space like Food.[33] These views of space suggest an expansion of space into the social, rather than just the physical, and in this social space certain affordances and interferences can be recognized.

According to marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre, space functions as a mirror, providing a dual existence where the body relates to space as a subject, but also interacts through space with another object, and hence space serves as a mediator of these relations. Objects and bodies in space are both visible and invisible. When these objects are mediated through changes in space, light can shift and another object can come to light.[34] Social spaces, in Lefebvre's work, are not socialized versions of natural or geographical spaces that appeared on top of nature by themselves, but are shaped by socializing forces of a previous social space. Lefebvre takes the example of the space of work, which is not just a space occupied by the concept of work exclusively, but is a result of the framework of production in which it was produced. The networks that govern the means of production are part of the space of work just as much as the work itself, creating the space of work through the actions of labor, but also through the division of labor.[35] Expanding upon these theoretical explorations of space, a framework of social space as a mediator of relations that is produced by the structures of the space can be applied to different contexts as well.

In defining space as not a thing or place in itself, but the relation between things, a magazine could be a space, but so could a web page. An easy comparison between the New York based alternative spaces and spaces on the internet can be found in early net.art communities in the 1990s, which provided an alternative space for community and exhibition just like Martin Beck's alternative spaces or Gwen Allen's alternative magazines. Within net.art communities spaces could take the form of curated websites like äda'web, where artists were invited to experiment with the features of the internet, or the form of mailing lists like the Rhizome mailing list of www.rhizome.org, which allowed for a non-hierarchical spread of information about new media art.[36] These online spaces allowed for a large amount of relations between things, forming networks of spaces through both visible and invisible connections. Though initially decentralized and anti-institutional, with net.art spaces

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[33] Allen, *Artists' Magazines,* 7
[34] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* 183
[35] Ibid., 191
[36] Rachel Greene, "Web Work: A history of internet art." *Artforum* (May 2000), 163

on the internet being largely free from influences from the institutional art world as well as commercial interests, the internet has quickly morphed into a much more centralized and commercial set of spaces forming our current web 2.0 environment.[37] Looking at these online art spaces as social spaces that allow for the production and curation of art outside the institution, just like Beck's alternative spaces did in New York, the structures that allowed for the creation of these spaces become visible. The non-hierarchical shapes and relatively low barriers to entry of the early internet allowed for the creation of these networks outside commercial economies of art, where the current spaces of the internet feature very different structures.

With this background it becomes possible to look at social media in this current online environment through the lens of spaces. When both a magazine and a mailing list are a space, a social media page can also be analyzed as a space. The Tumblr dashboard, for instance, becomes the relation between the user and the social media, but also between posts. The dashboard introduces a spatial relationship to posts and blogs, by placing them into a sequence of posts, placed on top of each other in an infinitely scrolling feed. This sequence is not created by the user viewing the dashboard, or the bloggers creating or reblogging the posts, but exists where these actors meet up on the space of the dashboard. Two posts encountered together form a dialogue, one that is unique to the space of a single user's dashboard.

The spaces of social media, as well as most other online spaces based around user-generated content like video sharing websites or blogging websites, are increasingly referred to as a "platform." Referring not just to the concept of the computational platform, the metaphorical architecture of the software, but using the platform as a structural metaphor for the entire space, media technologies scholar Tarleton Gillespie identifies four different definitions of the platform that all work in tandem to create this structure. Along with the computational meaning of the term, these definitions include the architectural, figurative and political meanings of the term. Whereas the computational definition relies on an infrastructure of software, the architectural definition refers much more to an infrastructure beyond the technical, the platform being something that something else can be placed on. The figurative definition, as a platform to build upon but also to reach higher than, also

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[37] Greene, "Web Work," 163-164

defines itself as being in service to something else placed on top of it, in a spatial as well as a hierarchical sense. The political definition, initially referring to the stage but now also to the beliefs espoused on that stage, shows a certain level of perceived neutrality to the term. In presenting an online "platform" as a platform, it enforces the idea that it is not the platform presenting ideas or beliefs, it is just providing a physical, computational, metaphorical platform for those ideas and beliefs to be presented by the user.[38] This presentation of the platform as a neutral, open space suggests a freedom by the user to use this platform in any way they want, without interference from the platform. This feigned neutrality functions, whether intentionally or not, to hide not just the implicit affordances of the platform, but also the direct interventions of the platform into the space of user generated content.[39] These interventions can take the shape of for instance the Tumblr porn ban, removing content that is deemed to not be in line with the platform's terms of service, but also of the Tumblr radar, a feature on the dashboard where a staff-selected post is displayed for all users, regardless of who they follow. These interventions take place where the limits of the platform show, or as Tarleton Gillespie identifies it, on the edges of the platform.[40]

Where these edges show is where the concept of the interface proves useful. As media theorist Alexander Galloway states in "The Unworkable Interface," the interface can be found on these edges, not being a thing in itself, but being the *effect* or state of being on the edge, when one aspect of something is understood as being different from another.[41] Using this definition, the interface can be seen as being a point of transition between spaces, or platforms. Galloway finds the internal interface within a medium, not just as the frame, or door or window, for the medium, but as the presence of the outside within the inside of the medium, identified by him as the "intraface." This "outside" on the inside indicates the presence of the social within the medium, revealing itself in the aesthetics of the interface.[42] Where the screen is an interface between the user and the platform, the various spaces and features of the platform are linked through internal interfaces, both visible and invisible. In the spaces of Tumblr, this internal interface can be seen in for instance the interaction

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[38] Gillespie, "The politics of platforms," 350
[39] Ibid., 358
[40] Idem
[41] Galloway, "The Unworkable Interface," 939
[42] Idem, 947

between a post and the image included in the post, where the post is a frame for the image, an interface between the user and the image, but the post also features buttons for interaction with the image, an interface between the frame and the image.

As Brendan Hookway states, the interface is not a technology in itself, but a relation with technology. Hookway's interface can sometimes be a space itself, but it is more accurately described as "governing spaces," it occupies the space where systems and networks come together to initiate action.[43] The interface allows the blogger to act on the platform. Like the platform, these acts are defined not by the user, but by the affordances of the space or platform, accessible through both the interface and intraface. What the platform allows the user to do, and also what is more or less easy to do for the user, can show something about the way users are likely to interact with the platform. These affordances and interferences of the structure of the platform then inform the social space of the platform, the computational architectural platform carrying the metaphorical platform of Tumblr.

Spaces on Tumblr

The structures of Tumblr are centered around a few specific sets of spaces, which influence the ways in which Tumblr users interact with each other, their posts and the platform. When opening the Tumblr app, or going to the Tumblr website, the very first space the user encounters, as long as they are logged in already, as one would expect from a regular user, is the dash or dashboard. The dashboard allows for navigation to most other spaces within the Tumblr environment, but central to the dashboard are the two most important parts of the Tumblr platform: creating posts and seeing posts. It is important to make a distinction in the differences between the Tumblr website and Tumblr app here. Though all accounts are available on both the website and app, the way Tumblr and the content on it is presented differs in some important ways between the two.[44] On the website, the dash first presents a menu for making a new post, categorized into seven types of post; Text, Photo, Quote, Link, Chat, Audio and Video. When one of these types of post is selected, the New Post interface is opened as an overlay on top of the dash. Regardless of post type, the user can choose to add any type of post content to the post, including types of

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[43] Hookway, *Interface,* 9
[44] There are minor differences in the Tumblr app for Android and Apple devices, though they are generally mostly similar. For consistency I will only be describing and referring to the environment on an Android device.

content not included in the types of post, like interactive polls. The types of content users can add to any post besides text, which every post type already includes a field for, are images, gifs, links, audio, video, polls and read-more links that hide part of the post body behind a link to a separate page. Posts can include multiple types of media at the same time, and multiple images or videos in the same post (see image 1).

Users can also add up to thirty different tags to the bottom of the post, rather than to the post body as is regular on other social media platforms. These tags are designated through the #-sign preceding them, and can feature up to 139 characters of plain text, including spaces and punctuation, following the #-sign. The first twenty tags on an original post are indexed by Tumblr, meaning they can lead to a post showing up in search or tagged pages for those tags, with the last ten possible tags not having this function, but still being usable for organization within a blog or communication.[45] The new post page also provides options for designating mature content, which can be filtered by other users, and options for drafting or scheduling posts at a later time. In the mobile app, these different post types are not presented, with just a single new post button, which otherwise contains the same features. On the Tumblr website, the new post menu disappear when the user scrolls down far enough, though a small button that also allows the user to make a new post remains on the banner above the dash, while the button on the app scrolls down with the user, providing a more present prompt to create a new post compared to the website. In both environments, creating a new post is done from a central position on the "home page" of the dash, showing that creating new posts is central to Tumblr's structures.

The dash looks relatively similar on the website and app, with the website showing slightly more information. Besides the links leading to different spaces and alternate dashboards, which will be explored more later, the dash mostly functions as an interface between the user and posts. These posts are presented in an endless-scroll format, interrupted by advertisements in various forms. The posts seen here are mostly posts by blogs the user follows, presented either chronologically with the most recent posts at the top of the dashboard or in a "best stuff first" format decided by a recommendation algorithm based on interaction.

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[45] Tumblr, "Appearing in search results," accessed 16-03-2023,
https://help.tumblr.com/hc/en-us/articles/223857628-Appearing-In-Search-Results

Users can choose between one of these two modes for the dashboard in their settings, with the chronological dash being the default historically, and the "best stuff first" being the default now. The posts by followed blogs are occasionally interrupted by different other posts depending on the user's settings, like posts based on the user's likes, posts in the user's "orbit" and posts that are "blazed," Tumblr's term for sponsored posts. On the website exclusively, the dash also presents a list of recommended blogs and the "Tumblr Radar," a space for a specific staff-selected post that changes daily (see image 2). Though Tumblr has often been characterized as a space that mostly or entirely lacks recommendation algorithms, an overview of the dash as it functions now shows that, using the default settings for a new user, these algorithms have become increasingly present as interferences into the dash, influencing what posts are more likely to be seen. "Algorithm," a concept central to the analysis of these spaces, is an incredibly broad term, an abstraction referring to all activities of computer science.[46] The way I use the concept of the algorithm here, and in the rest of the text, is to refer specifically to the systems of recommendation that take user data in order to select, or curate, website or app content for the user, which is a definition of algorithm that has become very common in discussions of social media.

From the main dashboard, or the "following" page, users can switch to three alternate dashboards: the "For you," "Your tags" and "Blog subs" pages. The "For you" page, similar to the "For you" page on the short video based social media platform Tiktok, contains algorithmically recommended posts based on the user's previous behavior on Tumblr. The first iteration of this page was introduced in November of 2021, on the mobile version of Tumblr first, and was presented as a personal, algorithmically curated alternative to the original dash.[47] This alternate dashboard functions not just as an alternative to, but as an extension of, the endless scroll of the main dash of Tumblr. Although the user can scroll endlessly through the feed of posts by followed blogs, without having to enter a new page at any point, at a certain point the user will reach posts they have seen before the last time they were online. Switching to an alternate dashboard then allows the user to continue this

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[46] Andrew Goffey, "Algorithm," in *Software Studies: A Lexicon,* ed. Matthew Fuller (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 15
[47] Tumblr, "Keeping…tabs…on your dashboard 😏," posted by Tumblr staff to the @staff blog on November 16th 2021.
https://staff.tumblr.com/post/668044535467851776/keepingtabson-your-dashboard

endless scroll, showing a supposedly endless amount of more posts not yet seen on the main dash, algorithmically selected to fit the content on the main dash. The two other alternate dashboards were added after the "For you" page, first the "Your tags" page, followed by the "Blog subs" page.[48] The "Your tags" page displays algorithmically selected posts and blogs relating to the tags the user follows. The "Blog subs" page functions similarly to the normal dash, but only shows posts by blogs the user has turned on push notifications for in reverse chronological order, and nothing else. This allows for a more selective alternative dashboard, where users can see a specific portion of their followed blogs, rather than all of them at once. Exclusively on the Tumblr website, a fifth tab is shown, titled "Manage…" which leads the user to a settings page.[49]

From the dash, a variety of other spaces can be accessed through a menu. The "Search" and "Explore" pages are separated into two different sets of pages on the website, while on the app they are both accessed through the same screen. The explore pages can be characterized as a set of spaces that feature both staff-curated and algorithmically curated content. These pages are separated into five tabs the user can switch between. Next to the content of the various tabs of the explore page is a sidebar with the user's followed tags and a set of recommended blogs (see image 3). The first tab users land on is the "Today" tab, populated exclusively by posts posted by and reblogged to the "todayontumblr" account, a staff-run blog that creates and reblogs posts about current developments on Tumblr, as well as posts referencing current events or memes related to a specific date.[50] The second of these tabs is another link to the previously mentioned "For you" page. The third of these tabs on the website is the "Trending" tab. This page first shows four currently trending tags, based on unknown criteria, sometimes with related tags, accompanied by an image taken from a popular recent post with the tag. Below these four tags is a feed of posts, supposedly currently trending too. In the sidebar the recommended blogs are replaced by a selection of "Trending Blogs" instead. Posts featured on the

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[48] Changes on Tumblr, "Friday, August 19th, 2022," posted by Tumblr staff to the @changes blog on August 19th 2022. https://changes.tumblr.com/post/693032084117372928/friday-august-19th-2022
[49] Throughout this article Tumblr is mostly described as it exists without the use of any modifications, whether through Tumblr's own settings or external add-ons like xKit.
[50] On April 19th 2023, the blog reblogged a variety of posts about bread, based on a quote found in Pompeii that reads: "On April 19th, I made bread." See posts like https://www.tumblr.com/todayontumblr/715037476209688576/vinceaddams-purrpleberrie-vinceaddam , while on April 20th 2023, the blog reblogged posts based on a screenshot of The Simpsons about it being Thursday the 20th. See posts like https://www.tumblr.com/todayontumblr/715128197415632896

trending page range in notes from a few hundred to hundreds of thousands and range in timestamps from a day ago to a month ago, and feature all types of posts.

The fourth tab on the explore page is a "Staff Picks" page, featuring staff-curated posts, this time not reblogged to any staff-run blog but placed on the page on their own. No explanation of the curatorial decisions is given by Tumblr staff. Most featured posts are digital illustrations, both fanart and original art, or photography. Some ads and posts by staff-run blogs like "notpikaman" are also included. The final tab is titled "More" and features an arrow pointing down. When clicking on this tab, a menu folds out showing eight options, all correlating to types of posts or content included in posts. These options are: Text, Photos, GIFs, Quotes, Chats, Audio, Videos and Chats. When one of these options is selected, the page presents a feed of exclusively that type of post, presented in an order that is not elaborated upon by the page. The posts are not chronological, and heavily vary in amount of notes. Inside the app, the explore page shares a screen with the search page and only features recommended tags and the content of the trending page on the website. All of these pages represent spaces that are not curated by users of Tumblr, but by Tumblr as a platform, which could be by algorithms or human staff. Many of these pages are recent additions, added since the acquisition by Automattic, and show the increase of interventions into the direct networks of curation between Tumblr users. Where in the past, following blogs was one of the only ways of finding posts, now the newer additions to the dashboard and the explore page provide a multitude of spaces where posts can be found, the majority of which feature algorithmic or staff curation alongside or instead of user curation.

Through the search bar a variety of pages can be accessed. Users can search by typing into the search bar, which leads to the main search page, or search for a specific tag by adding the tag sign (#) to their query. The search page features a set of posts, excluding reblogs, containing the searched word or words either within the body of the post as text or in the tags, presented in one or two rows. A sidebar of "Related Tags" shows a link to the tag for the search prompt. When the user searches for "aesthetic" this sidebar shows a link to the "#aesthetic" tag. A second sidebar contains "Related Blogs." These two sidebars and the row of posts are arranged into three different tabs within the app environment, with the "Posts," "Tags" and "Blogs" tabs. The "Tags" tab here shows besides the main tag a set of related tags that often go together with the search prompt, but the tags and blogs

tabs here function the same as the sidebars on the website otherwise. Both on the website and in the app the posts, whether in the "Posts" tab or on the website, can be filtered through three different sets of variables. These are a filter to switch between top posts and new posts, a filter by time and a filter by type of post (see image 4).

Searching for a specific tag leads to the page for that tag, which mostly resembles the search page. This page can also be accessed from any other space where the tag can be clicked, like on posts on the dash. This page exclusively shows original posts featuring the searched tag. This page can be "followed," which will add posts featuring the tag to the "My tags" dash and occasionally also on the main dash. The tag page can be filtered by most popular posts or by latest posts (see image 5). The tag and search pages present a space that is partially curated by groups of users, and partially by recommendation algorithms. Especially the tag page is intentionally added to by users tagging their posts, with the intention of other users finding these posts in the tag, as a way of extending the reach of the post beyond just the blog's followers. These posts are then sorted and presented by an algorithm when presented as the "top posts" of the tag or search query.

The blog itself also functions as a space on Tumblr, one entirely curated by the user. When accessed from within Tumblr, the blog opens as an overlay on top of the dashboard. This overlay shows a page with a username, a follow button, an image header, icon, title and bio, followed by three tabs: posts, likes and following. These tabs show the user's own posts, their liked posts and the blogs they follow (see image 6).[51] This page can be customized through the images and text added, as well as through changing the background and accent colors. Returning to the dashboard from these blog pages can be done with a single click, both on the website and in the app. This is also true for most other spaces on Tumblr. Social media scholars Nicholas Proferes and Katherine E. Morrissey also recognize this in their article for *a Tumblr Book.* They point out that when on the dash, focusing specifically on the website, the interfaces the user is able to interact with all lead to pop-ups on the dash which also lead back to the dash in one or two clicks, in order to keep the user from moving away from the dash. An example of this would be the activity button on the top of the dash, which shows a small version of the activity

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[51] The likes and following tabs can be made private by users, which is a common practice.

page, rather than leading directly to the more in-depth activity page outside the dash.[52]

There is one type of page on Tumblr that does not easily lead back to the dashboard, however. Beyond the dashboard version of the blog, a different, more separate, page exists for the blog. From the dashboard blog, or by using a direct link, users can access the external blog page, which opens in a different browser tab, and cannot be accessed from the app. To disambiguate between the two different blog pages I will be referring to this type of page as the "blog page" and to the earlier mentioned page as the "dashboard blog page." Blog pages are entirely customizable, giving users full access to the html code of the page, allowing for completely custom interfaces and designs (see image 7). Having one of these pages used to be mandatory, but users are now able to turn their blog page off, their blogs now only existing within the dashboard environment. Blog pages can be accessed without logging in to Tumblr, or even having a Tumblr account at all, allowing people to interact with Tumblr blogs without being a Tumblr user. This allows for a mostly separate environment, both visually as well as in ways of interacting. Through incentivizing the dashboard blog page when already on the dashboard, Tumblr makes it more likely for Tumblr users to interact with each other's blogs mostly through the dashboard environment, while someone who is not a Tumblr user, or someone not currently within the Tumblr environment, is more likely to be shown a Tumblr link that leads to the blog page instead.

This network of spaces on Tumblr, which can be seen as a social space itself, centered around the dashboard, incentivizes users to stay on the Tumblr website or app, without switching to another platform. This can be seen in the way visiting spaces on Tumblr outside the dashboard environment is made as unnecessary as possible, with every space having a counterpart near the dash, but also in the way algorithmic curation allows the user to scroll through an endless amount of posts, without ever reaching the end. Despite these incentives and algorithmic interventions, the user-curated spaces that attracted users to Tumblr over the years are also still present on these pages.

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[52] Nicholas Proferes and Katherine E. Morrissey, "Lost in the Dash" in *a Tumblr Book* ed. Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, and Indira Neill Hoch (University of Michigan Press, 2020), 28

Posts in motion

What is consistent across Tumblr's pages is the posts. The post forms a type of frame for its content, including images, video or audio but also text in the post body and tags, providing an interface that allows the content to be interacted with, allowing for a certain amount of mobility for this content. There are a variety of ways to interact with posts on Tumblr, with the means most directly incentivized through the post interface being sharing, replying, reblogging and liking.[53] All of these, except sharing, add to the "note count" of the post by one. Sharing works similarly to the way it does on other social media like Twitter or Instagram, allowing the user to copy a link to the post, or immediately send this link via direct messages or through a shortcut to supported other websites and apps. Replying allows the user to add short text to the replies section of a post, similar to comments on Instagram or replies on Twitter, but these replies will not be displayed on the blog of the replying user. Liking adds the user's username to the list of likes on the post, and adds the post to the "liked posts" section of the user's blog. Both liking and replying are linked to the user's username, and can only be done with the username of the account's "main blog," not with any of the user's "side blogs."[54]

The means of interaction that most sets Tumblr apart from similar platforms is the "reblog." Superficially similar to Twitter's "retweet," the reblog allows users to share a post from a different blog to their own blog, after which it appears on their followers' following feeds. The biggest difference between the reblog and the retweet is the ability to add onto the post in the reblog. When reblogging a post, users can add new content, including text, images, video and audio, as well as tags. This new content is presented under the previous content, and with new reblogs this process can be repeated to add even more content to the post (see image 8). Tags are, unlike the content in the post body, not retained in reblogs. This system shows a difference between the reblog and the "quote retweet" on Twitter, where users can create a new tweet that links back to the original tweet. These quote retweets take a

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[53] Different examples of interactions are reporting the post, blocking the user who made the post or "blazing" the post, which refers to sponsoring the post, allowing it to be shown as an ad on other users' dashboards. Most of these functions, with the exception of "blaze," are identical or similar to functions on other social media, and are generally not very relevant to the way users interact with posts.

[54] Side blogs are secondary blogs on the same account as a "main blog," which are mostly indistinguishable from main blogs and have their own url and blog page, but cannot be used to interact with other blogs beyond reblogging.

very different shape compared to reblogs with additions, as the new content added is in the foreground on Twitter, while on Tumblr both the new addition as well as the original post are presented at the same time, as part of the same post. The quote retweet creates a hierarchy, where the quote is necessarily given more importance than the original tweet, while the reblog allows for the recontextualization of the original post without minimizing it.

Within the context of aesthetic blogging, what is most relevant about the reblog function is the ways it can be used as a tool for curation. The reblog allows for a certain mobility of posts, not just the images or other content contained inside them. This mobility allows users to easily share, as well as transform, specific posts, contrasted with the more static posts of a platform like Instagram, which lacks an equivalent of the reblog. These ways of sharing posts between blogs through reblogging allow for the creation of a network of blogs, that all link back to each other through mutually reblogged posts. Comparing the reblog function to means of curating on Pinterest, a more direct comparison for cultures of aesthetic blogging and a platform almost entirely based around images, reblogging can be seen as a more public equivalent of similar practices on Pinterest. Pinterest allows users to upload images, or "pins," which, beyond the images themselves, can include a title and caption as well as a source link. These pins can then be added to boards, which are often based around a singular aesthetic theme, which are in this comparison the equivalent of the blog. Users can search for public boards or pins with specific themes, and then "re-pin" the images from these boards to one of their own boards, while retaining the original title, caption and source. Where Tumblr would then allow for users to add new content or tags publicly, on Pinterest the equivalent would be adding personal notes, which are only visible to the user who left them. Adding tags to a reblogged post on Tumblr allows for a secondary level of both self-expression as well as categorization and curation. A Pinterest board based on nature aesthetics cannot distinguish between different themes on the same board, where a Tumblr blog with the same theme could tag one post as "#forest" and a different one as "#field," or distinguish between the different "vibes" of "#fairycore" and "#cottagecore." These tags are then visible for the blog's followers, and can serve as organizational markers on a blog both for the blogger as well as their followers. When looking at "tumblr.com/[username]/tagged/[tag]" users can access a version of the blog with just the posts tagged with that specific tag. These pages can often go

back years in time with little indication, as Tumblr posts do not feature timestamps by default.[55]

This is one of the ways in which the structures of Tumblr allow for older content to recirculate and regain mobility, through users finding old posts in blog archives and tags through networks of reblogs and tagged posts. Whether the original poster has deactivated or become inactive, the post can live on in new reblogs. Digital culture studies scholar Milena Popova describes this unique temporality created by the structures of Tumblr as a "simultaneous timelessness and ephemerality."[56] This mobility across time and spaces on Tumblr allows for posts to be curated in a way that is unique from any other platforms. Tumblr does not just allow for more variety in what posts are allowed to be made: compared to Twitter's character limit or Instagram and Pinterest's restriction of just being able to post images or videos with a caption, Tumblr allows users to insert multiple types of media into posts in any order and with less restrictions. It also allows for more variety in the ways these posts can be shared, and thus curated. In these ways, Tumblr gives its users more access to the means of production of posts, as well as the means for the curation of these posts. What is important not to ignore about this curation, however, is the agency of algorithmically curated spaces, as described in the previous part of this chapter, in the practices of curating found on Tumblr. Scholars of networked images Annet Dekker and Gaia Tedone describe this agency of the algorithm in online curation as one of the nodes in a "networked co-curation," a wider ecology involving not just the curator but also the machine, the object and the user.[57] The machine here is the algorithm, but also includes the larger structures of Tumblr as a platform, the curator is the (re)blogger, the user the follower and the object the post. These identities are not fixed, as the follower is often also a blogger, and the blogger is also a follower.

Through followed blogs, followed tags and other personally curated aspects of the dashboard, Tumblr users curate their own communities, while also being influenced by the algorithmic curators around them. This creates a network of interactions, affordances, interferences and spaces through which posts and blogs

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[55] It is possible to add timestamps to Tumblr posts, via the blog settings, and many Tumblr users including myself do use this feature, but as the default option is to have timestamps off I will continue with the assumption that the majority of users are not using this feature.
[56] Milena Popova, "Tumblr Time" in a Tumblr Book ed. Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, and Indira Neill Hoch (University of Michigan Press, 2020), 81
[57] Dekker and Tedone, "Networked Co-Curation," 85

are mediated. Returning to the framework of spaces as presented in the first part of this chapter, the "platform" of Tumblr as the relation between the interface, users/curators, algorithms and posts governs the means of production, deciding what is allowed to be produced and how it can become mobile in this space. Zooming in on specific elements of this platform, the dash, the search page, the blog or even a singular post could be analyzed as a space in itself too, part of the larger network of spaces on Tumblr, but a layer of space exists across, below and above these digital spaces as well, in the form of the social spaces of Tumblr's communities.

Chapter 2: Aesthetic blogging

Framing the aesthetic blogger

Scrolling through an aesthetic blog, you might see nature photos, fashion illustrations or even inspirational quotes. Some more niche aesthetic blogs might present images of gore or violence, while another aesthetic blog posts stills from pornography. What unites these blogs beyond a focus on visual content, though posts without images can still be "aesthetic," can be hard to determine. To many Tumblr users, what makes something an aesthetic blog is not based on clear criteria, but something you know when you see it. The aim of this chapter is to clarify what is meant with the concepts of the "aesthetic blog" and "aesthetic blogging," and what aesthetic blogging on Tumblr does. In the first part of the chapter I look at previous definitions and descriptions of aesthetic blogging, and compare these to my own case studies of aesthetic blogs, centered around the aesthetic tag. The second part of the chapter is centered around the concept of aesthetic blogging as networks of blogs, through which tastes and identities are expressed and created.

To take a previous definition of aesthetic blogging, McCracken et al define aesthetic blogging on Tumblr in the section of *a tumblr book* dedicated to aesthetics as "the poster's use of an evocative image or images (such as the popular nine-frame 'moodboard') to represent a set of stances, identities, or feelings."[58] This definition is more accurate to the practice of reblogging from aesthetic blogs rather than the running of the aesthetics blogs themselves, which is an important distinction to make here. Many Tumblr users follow and reblog from aesthetic blogs, and thus participate in aesthetic blogging, without having an aesthetic blog. This does not make these non-aesthetic blog users merely an audience to aesthetic blogs, but active participants in the curatorial practices of aesthetic blogging.

In the same part of *a tumblr book*, Christine Goding-Doty describes a specific type of aesthetic blog, defined by her as the "pale blog," and the ways users engage with these blogs. What sets these types of engagement apart from other areas of Tumblr according to Goding-Doty is the way questions of authorship or direct relationships between users are focused on much less in this culture of pale blogging, instead prioritizing participating in these aesthetic norms by liking,

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[58] McCracken, Cho, Stein and Hoch, "#myAesthetic," 327.

reblogging and posting.[59] What unifies these blogs is participation in blogging the pale aesthetic, through posting, liking and reblogging posts associated with the aesthetic, marked by the #pale tag.[60] Popularity and fame can be achieved in pale blogging, as in other types of aesthetic blogging, but these networks of blogs are not centered around specific tastemakers or popular bloggers, with popular blogs springing up and disappearing or becoming inactive soon after, rather being created as collaborative, semi-anonymous networks.[61] Although Goding-Doty's work focuses on a specific subset of aesthetic blogging, and a specific subculture that is much less present on Tumblr in 2023, this description of the ways of engagement that are prioritized in pale blogs can be seen in aesthetic blogging as a whole as well. Two distinct types of blogs can be recognized in these types of engagement: the aesthetic blog that posts and is reblogged from, which may also reblog and like, and the other types of blogs that reblog from and like. Any blog can take the place of this second actor, be it a "personal blog," a "politics blog" or a "fandom blog." The question of how the aesthetic blog itself can be defined or recognized leads one to the site of this interaction between blogs. The aesthetic blog has to be found by the other blog, within the structures of Tumblr as a platform. The primary means through which users can find aesthetic blogs is through tags. Central to this is the *#aesthetic* tag, a tag that can be found on almost any post that is meant to be reblogged as someone's aesthetic.

This tag is also central to my selection of case studies of aesthetic blogs. As described in the methodology section, all blogs were selected after being presented by one of Tumblr's algorithmically curated spaces based on the #aesthetic tag, as well as four suggested tags based on the #aesthetic tag: *#grunge*, *#pastel*, *#kawaii* and *#vintage*. Looking at these blogs, certain observations about blogs using the #aesthetic tag and its related tags can be made. For all twenty blogs, the period of time that was analyzed is February of 2023. A variety of variables were recorded for each blog (see appendix A), as well as general, less quantitative, observations. For each blog I noted whether it was found through the account set-up process, or through the top posts section of the #aesthetic tag, in case the two groups seemed to contain very different results. I then counted the amount of posts made by blog

[59] Christine Goding-Doty, "Beyond the Pale Blog," in *a tumblr book*. ed. Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein, and Indira Neill Hoch (University of Michigan Press, 2020), 344.
[60] Ibid., 347
[61] Ibid., 353

within the month of February as a point of reference for the rest of the variables, which ranged from a single post in one case to nine hundred and twenty two posts in another.[62] The next variable I looked at was the amount of "not aesthetic" posts, which I define as any post that intentionally does not fit into the process of building the "aesthetic" of the blog. Examples of these types of posts are personal text posts, answers to questions sent by followers, memes and jokes that are not explicitly on theme for the blog, promotion of products or blogs and polls. Occasionally the boundary between the category of aesthetic and not aesthetic can be vague, and in these cases I decided to count the post as aesthetic more often than not. Out of the twenty blogs, eleven of them featured non-aesthetic posts in the surveyed month. Most of these posts account for a small amount of the total posts, with only a single example of a blog featuring more non-aesthetic posts than aesthetic posts.[63] Part of what makes a blog recognizable as an aesthetic blog is a majority of the posts on it being recognizable as "being aesthetic," as subjective as that can be, compared to other types of blogs that just feature aesthetic posts alongside a majority of other types of posts.

I then counted the amount of reblogs of aesthetic posts, including posts by other users as well as self-reblogs, a term referring to reblogging your own posts. Only eight of the blogs did not include any reblogged posts, and not a single blog only included reblogged posts. For four blogs the reblogged posts were more than half of the total posts, while the rest included less than half reblogged posts. Both self reblogs and reblogs from other aesthetic blogs allow blogs to increase their number of posts more easily than by just creating new posts, but out of the three blogs with more than three hundred posts in a month, only one included a majority of reblogged posts, suggesting that creating new posts is also a viable way of increasing the number of posts on an aesthetic blog. The blogs without any reblogs can still be connected to practices of reblogging aesthetic posts, as their own posts do get reblogged by other aesthetic blogs. The last category of post left are original aesthetic posts, posts that are not reblogged but posted directly by the blog itself. Every single blog surveyed had at least one of these posts in the surveyed period of

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[62] The blogs were analyzed in May of 2023, which means certain posts that were made in February may have been deleted before May, and were not counted.
[63] This blog, @8pxl, provided the most difficult decisions in deciding whether or not a post was aesthetic, as a lot of the posts were discussions of or promotions for products featuring images that were also otherwise posted as aesthetic images. In this case I decided to count any post that was made for the sake of promotion or tutorial as not-aesthetic.

time, and these are also the only posts that can show up in tag pages, making them the posts most likely to attract followers to a blog. These posts were much more likely to feature a large amount of tags, compared to reblogged posts, and a few blogs only included tags on these posts, and not on reblogs. The amount of tags on these posts suggests that all of these blogs are relatively public-facing, compared to more private blogs that usually avoid these types of tags, and that these posts are intended for circulation through reblogging. The presence of these original aesthetic posts, as opposed to just reblogs, is also something that makes a blog recognizable as an aesthetic blog specifically, rather than just a blog that participates in aesthetic blogging.

This last category of post, the original posts, can be divided into two different categories of post again, based on the source of the content in the post. One part of these posts consists of "reposts," images, quotes or whatever other content taken from a different source and posted to Tumblr. Sometimes these posts include a source, often a link to Flickr, Instagram or other online spaces where photographers and illustrators post their work directly, or in the case of older images and quotes like seventeenth century paintings or quotes from classic literature just the name of the artist or author and the title of the work in the caption. Often the content is not sourced at all, however, in which case a caption is generally entirely absent. The other category consists of original art and writing, made by the blogger running the aesthetic blog. This could include, for example, visual art, illustration, photography, poetry or prose. Out of the twenty blogs, only seven included original work, with two of those only including a single original work compared to thirteen and 383 reposts respectively. Only a single blog, based on poetry, included multiple posts of both reposts and original writing. The remaining four blogs only included their own work in their original posts, with two of them not including any reblogs either. Whether these blogs that only or mostly post their own artwork can "truly" be considered aesthetic blogs can be questioned, with many of them resembling another type of blog recognized by many Tumblr users; the "art blog." The art blog refers to a type of blog where the user predominantly or exclusively posts their own artwork. The blogs surveyed here that most resemble the concept of the art blog are "@8pxl," "@colormush" and "@dualvoidanima." The "8pxl" blog creates pixel art illustrations, and the blog primarily posts these illustrations as well as discussions of and products based on the illustrations. The aesthetic reblogs on this blog are mostly self-reblogs

of these illustrations, and work by other pixel artists inspired by this blog. This is the blog that least resembles the idea of the aesthetic blog, but some of the original posts by the blog are tagged with the #aesthetic tag, showing a certain level of engagement with aesthetic blogging and aesthetic blogs. Whether this is an example of an art blog that engages with aesthetic blogs, or an aesthetic blog that is also an art blog, these tags are a reason to include this blog in an analysis of aesthetic blogging. The "colormush" blog exclusively posts gifs of moving color gradients generated by an algorithm written by the blogger. The lack of captions, use of tags and the very consistent visual content resemble other aesthetic blogs very much, with the one exception being that all the content is created by the aesthetic blogger. The same goes for the "dualvoidanima" blog, which posts "vaporwave" style gifs and images created by the blogger. This makes the blog largely indistinguishable from other vaporwave aesthetic blogs that do not create their own art. The way both the "colormush" and "dualvoidanima" blogs present their art does not present the authorship of this art as a primary part of the posts, often being hidden in a signature or within a large set of tags. Questions of art and authorship are here hidden by the presentation of the work as aesthetic primarily. Through this resemblance to other aesthetic blogs, it is possible for these blogs to function simultaneously as art blog and aesthetic blog.

Out of the twenty blogs, five of them are visibly side blogs. For some of them this is visible because their main blogs are directly linked through Tumblr, showing a small icon linking to the main blog while on the dash on top of the side blog's icon. Others link to, or refer to, the main blog in a post or the bio. Seven of the blogs I counted as definitely not being side blogs. This was the case when a blog has links to other social media, but not to another Tumblr blog. Some of these blogs include more personal posts, and are thus used as a personal blog as well as an aesthetic blog, like the "@lionfloss" and "@ancientsstudies" blogs. Others, like the "@colormush" and "@fuzzyghosts" blogs provided no personal information at all across platforms. The remaining eight blogs do not directly link to any other profiles, giving no indication of being side blogs or not. Though the aesthetic blog is often framed as being entirely separate from both the personal blog and the art blog, these examples show that there is more of an overlap than this assumption takes into account, though many of these blogs still present as largely or entirely anonymous, something often associated with aesthetic blogs, but also with Tumblr as a whole.

As an extension of the visual focus of many aesthetic blogs, custom themes, which is what Tumblr calls the customizable aspects of the blog page, for the blog page can be used. All of the blogs surveyed matched their dashboard blog page to their aesthetics in some way, though customization on this page is limited. Twelve of the twenty blogs use a custom theme for their blog page, where customization has more options, with levels and types of customization differing heavily between blogs. Two of the blogs used the default blog theme, only editing the colors, icon, header and text. The remaining six blogs lacked an external blog page altogether, only being available to view within the dashboard environment. The custom themes allow for different ways of presenting the posts, allowing for the creation of some kind of unified style or aesthetic both in the posts as well as the structure of the blog. Some blogs use the default single row of posts and display posts in a way similar to the dashboard, while others move away from these defaults more by for instance using multiple rows of posts or only displaying the images of a post, with all other information and content hidden at first, centering the images more than the other information presented in the post. The blog page allows for greater visual incorporation of a blog's aesthetic or theme, but, as discussed earlier, the structures and spaces of the dash disincentive visiting this page. Seeing how some of the surveyed blogs have chosen to not create a custom blog page suggests that for aesthetic blogs currently less importance is put on the custom blog theme compared to the dashboard blog page, despite the aesthetic possibilities of the custom blog theme, because of the way Tumblr's affordances and interferences privilege the dashboard blog page.

Some conclusions about aesthetic blogs can be made from these examples, such as the idea that aesthetic blogs generally primarily post content that can be identified as aesthetic, through its resemblance in form to other aesthetic posts on the blog or through being tagged as aesthetic, or that aesthetic blogs are connected to each other through reblogs, which create links between blogs, through which a network of aesthetic blogs can be found. Aesthetic blogs are generally relatively public-facing, using tags as a way of connecting to other blogs via tag pages where unfamiliar users can find these blogs, while also remaining partially or entirely anonymous, often excluding any personal information like names, locations or selfies from their blogs.

Tagged networks

Looking at the tags used by the blogs analyzed here, some patterns can be found. Certain tags are used regardless of blog theme, like "*#aesthetic*," which is used by every surveyed blog, or tags like "*#curators on tumblr*" and "*#moodboard*" which are used less, but are still used by multiple blogs with different themes. Besides these general tags referring just to aesthetic blogging as a whole, there are more specific tags that are still related to aesthetic blogging, which can be divided into two categories: first there are tags that are exclusively descriptive of the content of the post, like a photoset of flowers being tagged as "*#flowers*" and "*#floral*," or a photo of a landscape being tagged as "*#landscape photography*" and *"#nature*." The other type of tag is one that refers to an "aesthetic" that the post supposedly fits into. Examples of tags like this are the same photoset being tagged as "*#flowercore*," and the landscape being tagged "*#fairycore*" and "*#cottagecore*." These terms are not descriptive in the same way as the other tags, but link the post to a body of posts, not necessarily just on Tumblr, all associated with this term or aesthetic. These associations between posts with the same aesthetic tags are another way in which networks between aesthetic blogs are formed. These aesthetic terms can originate from a variety of places, both on or off Tumblr, with their exact background often being untraceable because of the relatively anonymous and ever-changing nature of aesthetic blogs, though many of these terms intentionally resemble and reference each other. When a tag like "cottagecore," which has become incredibly popular across the internet, gains more usage in these communities, the -core suffix also starts being used for other aesthetics like "grandmacore" or "fairycore," which also resemble "cottagecore" visually. Aesthetic tags like "dark academia," "light academia" and "chaotic academia" also have obvious similarities, sometimes even being used simultaneously on the same posts by for instance the "ancientsstudies" blog. Looking at the tag pages for these specific aesthetic tags, sub-communities of aesthetic bloggers focused on these aesthetics and tags appear. Where the aesthetic tag itself has 10 million followers, some of the bigger aesthetic tags also have significant

amounts of followers.[64] The "cottagecore" tag has 866 thousand followers, while the dark academia tag has 432 thousand followers.[65]

It is these specific communities that both McCracken et al and Goding-Doty center in their discussions of aesthetic blogging mentioned earlier. Goding-Doty focuses on the "pale blog" aesthetic, which peaked in popularity around 2013.[66] Currently the tag has two thousand followers, with most of the recent top posts only having between thirty and one hundred notes.[67] The pale blog aesthetic has since 2013 left the confines of Tumblr's spaces, and has been identified as being foundational to many trends in design. The color central to these blogs, a pale pink, is also characterized as defining a new generation of design, being baptized "millennial pink."[68] In this way the aesthetic leaves the aesthetic blog, while still carrying its associations and implications. As Goding-Doty describes, pale blogging did not have any particular thought-leaders, but rather existed as a culture of collective actions, with many pale blogs quickly gaining popularity and then disappearing just as fast, forming a multitude of communities at different times.[69] In the same way, none of the case studies discussed here are unique tastemakers, instead being nodes in a network of blogs that together constitute communities of specific aesthetics, that then again form nodes within a larger network of aesthetic blogging as a whole, as well as networks across platforms. These networks take shape as a type of social space, existing on top of the structural spaces of Tumblr.

Tumblr aesthetic blogging influences aesthetic trends outside of Tumblr, like in the case of the pale blog leading to millennial pink, but other websites and apps influence aesthetic blogging on Tumblr too. Looking at the reposts, both credited and uncredited, posted to Tumblr by aesthetic blogs, different sources for these images become apparent. Many of the credited images are photographs linking back to sources on image uploading platform Flickr, mostly used by photographers to show their photographs. Photography and visual art are similarly also sourced from

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[64] #Aesthetic tag page on Tumblr, accessed May 23th 2023, https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/aesthetic?sort=top
[65] #cottage and #dark academia tag pages on Tumblr, both accessed May 23th 2023, https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/cottagecore?sort=top and https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/dark%20academia?sort=top
[66] Goding-Doty, "Beyond the Pale Blog," 347.
[67] #pale blog tag page on Tumblr, accessed May 23rd 2023, https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/pale%20blog?sort=top
[68] Goding-Doty, "Beyond the Pale Blog," 351.
[69] Ibid, 353.

Instagram accounts, and gifs are created from Youtube videos. Many of the unsourced images can not be easily tracked down to a singular source, with the same image being reposted again to different platforms and by different users. Using reverse image search for one of these images can lead to a Pinterest page, or often multiple, or another repost on Tumblr or Instagram, generally also without source. Other images are found in the depths of public archives, on museum websites or scanned from physical books. Literary quotes, also a recurring element of aesthetic blogs, also have a variety of sources ranging from classic literature to trending Netflix shows. These quotes are then often transformed into images, either by the aesthetic blogger or by someone else and then reposted to the aesthetic blog. By reposting these images in the context of the aesthetic blog, they are recontextualized within the space of the aesthetic. What is a nature photograph on Flickr can be "fairycore" on Tumblr, and then be recontextualized as "flowercore" by a different Tumblr blog or a Pinterest board where the image is reposted again.

As Lisa Ehlin describes in Reblogging Fashion, the next step of reblogging these images adds another layer on top of this. Ehlin notes that reblogging is not just passive or uncreative engagement with images, but is a creative act in itself. Reblogging, as well as reposting or posting original work, contributes to the creation of a curated blog, an expression and creation of taste, represented in the aesthetic.[70] Part of the way this act of curation transforms the image is found in the unique aspects of Tumblr's reblog. Posts are transformed by adding new content in the reblog, but what is more common in aesthetic blogging is just adding tags. These tags, and the context of the rest of the blog, are what allow the image to be read as being part of a specific aesthetic. Tagging an image as "cottagecore" immediately creates an association between the image and the aesthetic, but so does reblogging the image in between other images associated with cottagecore. Returning to McCracken et al's definition of aesthetic blogging, another part of this network of reblogs are the people reblogging from aesthetic blogs to different types of blogs. These audiences of aesthetic blogs engage in aesthetic blogging, but primarily post other types of content. These are the blogs that use evocative aesthetic images to represent a set of stances, identities and feelings.[71] What these individual aesthetics represent in building identities and political stances is explored further by

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[70] Ehlin, "Reblogging Fashion," 13
[71] McCracken, Cho, Stein and Hoch, "#myAesthetic," 327

Goding-Doty and others, but is beyond the scope of this article.[72] The way these identities are communicated, however, is through reblogging from aesthetic blogs. Through the same process in which images get recontextualized into the aesthetic, they are given new meaning. An example of this Goding-Doty gives in the context of the pale blog is adding textual elements about ownership to images of supposedly empty landscapes to suggest a desire for empty land, recreating "terra nullius" ideology through aesthetic blogging.[73] These stances, identities and feelings are not just expressed and represented by aesthetic posts, but are created through the creative processes of curation found in aesthetic blogging.

Beyond definitions of evocative imagery representing identities and participation in aesthetic norms by liking, reblogging and posting as given by McCracken et al and Goding-Doty, a few other characterizations of both aesthetic blogs and aesthetic blogging can be made by looking at the examples explored here. Aesthetic blogging can be centered around visuals, but both prose and poetry, presented as plain text or part of an image, can also be the content of an aesthetic blog. Aesthetic blogging is organized around a network of blogs, tags and spaces both on and off Tumblr, between which posts and images and texts move. The practice of aesthetic blogging consists of creative acts of curation, specifically reblogging and liking posts from and following blogs and tags related to specific aesthetic categories or communities, which share similar characteristics not just visually, but also in how they are characterized by aesthetic bloggers, identified through tags such as "#cottagecore" or "#pale blog." This process is influenced by the spaces and algorithms of Tumblr, which influence the options presented for curation. Aesthetic blogs can be characterized as blogs primarily focused on curating a space focused specifically on one or more of these aesthetic categories by recontextualizing a variety of images (or texts) into the context of the aesthetic blog, both through posting and reblogging, with the sources of content ranging from original works of art to "stolen" images from the internet. The aesthetic blog can take a variety of shapes, allowing it to be recognizable simultaneously as both an aesthetic blog and a different type of blog, like an art blog or a personal blog.

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[72] Goding-Doty, "Beyond the Pale Blog," 344
[73] Ibid, 349.

Chapter 3: Image mobility

Image transformation

This chapter deals with the ways in which images on Tumblr are in movement, in this first part focusing on how the affordances and interferences of Tumblr allow for the mobility and transformation of images both in and outside of posts, building upon the context of previous discourses of the mobile and networked image. These images are transformed materially, but also contextually, through their movement between the spaces of aesthetic blogging. The second part of the chapter then focuses on the new or alternative economies of images that can be recognized within this circulation of images through the structures and cultures of aesthetic blogging.

When an image is reblogged, it is in movement. So is an image that is reposted, or shared. This movement can change the image, whether it is changing the context of the image or the actual image file. The reblogged image moves from one blog to another, possibly through spaces like the dash or the tag page. The reblog can transform the post the image is a part of, by adding additional images or text onto the post or using tags, and sometimes even change the way the post or the image looks through the html of the blog page, adding filters to the image or changing the shape of the post body. When shared the image and the post move from one blog and its location on the page, whether dash, blog, search or tag, to the direct message, or link on another website. When reposted the image moves from its original online location, wherever that is, to a new context of the new post and the blog the image is posted to. Additional content such as other images and text can be added, while tags and the blog also provide a different context for the image that transforms it. Through the process of reposting, the actual image file can also be changed. When downloaded as a lossy compression format, such as JPEG, the data of the image file is compressed to take up less space while storing or transmitting the file, which reduces the quality of the image and permanently removes specific information from the file. Even when downloaded as lossless file formats, such as PNG and GIF, the image can still be transformed while being reposted. The process of reposting can often involve minor or major image editing on the part of the reposter, with practices like cropping or color grading having obvious utility in aesthetic blogging.

This reposted image is an example of what artist, writer and filmmaker Hito Steyerl calls a "poor image." She describes the poor image as a low quality, accelerating and deteriorating copy of an image in motion. Images become poor through being spread and experiencing movement and transformation, again through processes such as lossy file compression, cropping, remixing.[74] These processes can be recognized in many reposted images on Tumblr. Of the surveyed aesthetic blogs, the most obviously poor images can be seen on the "@fuzzyghost" blog, which posts blurry, often cropped, gifs and images of old movies, television shows and advertisements, ripped from VHS tapes and television recordings. In the movement from the original film these images were shot on to the fragmented, blurry, soundless still images and gifs they appear as on Tumblr, through an untraceable amount of steps, these images transform completely. As Steyerl describes, the poor image is often divorced from its original source, just as these gifs and images circulate with no acknowledgement of their original context, or even their original title or source. The poor image is removed from the cinema or the archive, and leads its own new life through digital technology.[75] This new life, or resurrection, is not just an inferior version of the higher quality original, but, as Steyerl states, something that becomes part of a new economy of images. The poor image is marginalized in a commercial hierarchy of images, but its new life in an illicit or marginal sphere allows it to reincarnate through circulation within these spheres. When an image has nowhere left to go in the commercial sphere, life as a poor image, reuploaded, compressed and fragmented, often becomes the only way for the image to remain in circulation.[76]

Looking at the actions of reposting and reblogging in the context of the poor image, an interesting distinction appears. Reposting is an essential part of the process of images becoming poor, through lossy compression but also through the ability to edit the image manually between downloading or ripping and reposting. Reblogging then becomes another way for the reposted poor image to circulate, but through the process of reblogging the image file itself does not change, having no opportunity to become "more poor." A way in which the poor image does get circulated while also being transformed after first being reposted is in the network of

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[74] Steyerl, *Wretched of the Screen,* 32
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid., 38

reposts across and within different platforms, a network inhabited by an untraceable amount of actors, both human and machine. Trying to reverse image search one of these images ripped from a VHS on the "fuzzyghost" blog reveals no link to a source, something that likely does not exist online, but does often reveal another repost of the image on Pinterest or Instagram. Which of these reposts is the "original" becomes hard to track down, while also being mostly irrelevant within the context of aesthetic blogging. This network of reposts, reblogs and additional reposts becomes a way of movement and circulation of images where new associations, auras and translations are added onto the image. Even without changing the image file itself, the reblog can change these associations, auras and translations with new captions or even just the context of a new blog.

Aesthetic blogs, with their various images from a variety of acknowledged and unacknowledged sources, become primary actors in this network of circulation, reviving poor images by curating their blogs. Despite a focus on visuals, many aesthetic blogs still post and reblog these imperfect, poor images, not just because of a lack of alternatives but sometimes because of these imperfect visuals. The use of the "#retro" and "#VHS" tags on for instance the "fuzzyghost" blog indicate an aesthetic preference for these transformed images, complete with compression artifacts and static. Aesthetic blogging becomes a network of spaces where the otherwise marginalized image can be circulated, exhibiting a resistance to dominant political systems of image hierarchies, whether through the infrastructure of the social networks of aesthetic blogging or (un)consciously political personal tastes. A critical note that should not be forgotten in this discussion, however, is that not all marginal images are allowed to circulate in these spaces. Many poor images across the internet are pornographic or otherwise sexual in nature, which is often against specific websites' terms of service, something that can be seen in Tumblr's 2018 "porn ban" or Instagram and Pinterest's general bans of sexual or explicit content.[77]

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[77] Despite these rules, of course sexually explicit images still exist on all of these platforms, especially in the form of poor images. These images have a much higher chance of being removed by the platform, however, limiting their reach and possibilities for circulation.

Image economies

Artist and writer Brad Troemel writes in "Art after the Internet" about a concept of the mobility of images similar to Steyerl's ideas about the poor image, but focuses more on the relationship of this mobility to the concept of property. Troemel looks at the mobility of images on the internet, and expands upon David Joselit's framework of image fundamentalism and neoliberalism with his new term "image anarchism." Within Joselit's framework, image fundamentalism refers to a vision on art, or images, that is inseparably tied to its place of birth, claiming that a work of art not in its place of origin loses its aura, advocating for an immobility of art. Image neoliberalism instead refers to a vision of art, or images, where art is mobile, but only through the mechanisms of the free market and commercial exchange. Troemel's image anarchism then rejects the idea of images as property entirely, allowing for completely unrestricted mobility of images.[78] Troemel identifies in this position three "historical norms" of art that are challenged by image anarchism: The attribution of authorship, art being a form of property and the placement of art in a context that declares it to be art. These three norms mutually reinforce each other, with authorship allowing for ownership and ownership being recognized through its context.[79] This image anarchist position can be recognized in the practices of aesthetic blogging, with images being removed from their place of origin without a commercial exchange. The attribution of authorship is often absent, or at least not expected, in aesthetic posts, though as mentioned before it often is included still. The more an image is reposted, the less likely it is to feature any attribution to a specific author. This lack of authorship also leads to a lack of ownership. The context that declares the image to be art is also absent on the aesthetic blog, as this context is replaced with one that declares the image to be "aesthetic" instead, in a way devaluing the image, while also allowing the image to regain a type of value in the spaces of aesthetic blogging, which rely on the redefinition of images as aesthetic.

The aesthetic blogger claims no ownership over the image, but no other owner is identified. Troemel characterizes the removal of these images from their original contexts as a liberatory type of mobility, but this same mobility can also be interpreted as a type of displacement, a removal of aura alongside the removal of context. Aesthetic bloggers also engage with this question, with two major

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[78] Troemel, "Art after the Internet," 39
[79] Ibid., 37

differences in approaches being recognizable, and not uncontroversial, within aesthetic blogging communities on Tumblr. The first of these approaches is the fully image anarchist position that a blog like "fuzzyghost" takes, appropriating images from other sources without any need for attribution or permission. A second approach can be seen in blogs like "lionfloss," which still appropriate images from other sources, but who believe that attribution of these sources, and sometimes permission to repost, are a necessary element of these posts.

Troemel describes the redefinition of context of reposted and reblogged images as one of the features of a rapidly mobile image. These mobile, online images allow for a multitude of contexts, overshadowing a place of origin, as if there never was an origin at all. This rapid mobility removes information, and the original context, from the image, sometimes unintentionally through the process of multiple reposts, but sometimes, as Troemel describes, intentionally to create an in-group of people who recognize the image without description.[80] The mobile removal of context from images in aesthetic blogging allows for these images to become ways of creating and reinforcing community identities, through methods like recognizing the context-less image as Troemel describes, but also by creating new contexts for the image, a scene from a movie becoming a "#VHS #retro #aesthetic" post ready to be shared by rebloggers who have never seen the original movie.

This creation of new contexts happens through reblogging as an act of curation, which as Ehlin claims in "Reblogging Fashion," is an active and creative act that adds meaning and identity to the image, not unlike practices like collage and remixing.[81] Theory on the topics of collage and remix has been used to talk about tendencies to reuse things, both material and immaterial. As Eduardo Navas explains in *Remix Theory,* blogging allows the reader to exercise more influence on what is written, and even become a writer herself. The blogger here becomes a hybrid reader and writer, with blogging providing a type of gift economy which is able to function alongside capitalism without being capitalist.[82] Navas uses the term "reblogging" to refer to a type of "metablogging," blogging about other blogs, rather than to the reblog of Tumblr specifically, though reblogging on Tumblr is also a way of blogging about other blogs. The constant updating of blogs requires, according to

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[80] Ibid., 40
[81] Ehlin, "Reblogging fashion," 13
[82] Navas, *Remix Theory,* 122

Navas, a repetitive remixing of other content, what Navas calls a "regenerative remix."[83] Aesthetic blogging exemplifies this process of curatorial remixing as a practice that combines the regenerative remixing of metablogging in general with a creative appropriation of images and texts through reposts and reblogs, "remixing" these images and texts through placing them in a new context.

Another perspective on economies of reuse relevant to aesthetic blogging can be found in David Banash's *Collage Culture,* describing how the consumption of ready-made objects becomes a way of expressing a personal identity. As Banash emphasizes, the collage artist uses ready-made objects of capitalism in the same way the consumer uses these objects, speaking a language of capitalism. Collages then mirror the processes of production and consumption of capitalism, but through these mirrors they can also possess a more critical form. Through collage, images, texts and contexts are broken apart, exposing the construction of totalizing ideologies. A relatively subtle example of this Banash describes is the way collage resists the imperative to dispose of goods, recontextualizing what is or is not waste.[84] Aesthetic blogs, and sometimes individual aesthetic posts using multiple images, can be looked at as a type of collage through this lens, which also reproduces ready-made images to express personal identity, and with that reproduces the production and consumption of those images to some extent. The critical potential of collages can also be found in aesthetic blogs, especially when returning to Steyerl's concept of the poor image, providing an alternative view of what images are allowed to be circulated and imbued with aesthetic value. The alternative economy of images within blogging, as described earlier within the frameworks of both Steyerl and Navas, allows for aesthetic blogging to appropriate images from a capitalist economy, and recirculate these within an alternative economy even when they have been transformed to a point where these images have no home in capitalist circulation, functioning inside, below and beyond capitalism.

The mobility of images within aesthetic blogging is perpetuated by acts of curation like downloading and then reposting, reblogging and sharing, but aesthetic bloggers are not the only actors in these acts of curation. Returning to Dekker and Tedone's networked co-curation, algorithms form another actor that influences these networks of mobility and economies of images, and the way these networks can be

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[83] Ibid., 124
[84] Banash, *Collage Culture,* 17

curated. Images on Tumblr are not just mobile when they are reblogged, but also when they are selected algorithmically, or manually by Tumblr staff, to appear within any of the spaces curated by Tumblr itself, like the search or "For you" pages. Aesthetic bloggers, as users of Tumblr in conversation with these algorithmic curators, have to deal with what Dekker and Tedone describe as the "tensions in online curation." These tensions appear in the contradictions between the ease of use of these algorithmic features and the often hidden implications of cooperation with these features.[85] An aesthetic blogger in cooperation with Tumblr's algorithms can easily find posts to reblog through for instance the top posts on a search or tag page. This side of cooperation with the algorithm is easy, and often even instinctual, but for their own posts to be recommended in the same way a deeper understanding of the algorithm is necessary: how many tags are ideal, which tags get the most traffic, what type of behavior is most likely to get your blog on the "for you" page? In "The Curator's New Medium" artist and curator Omar Kholeif suggests that the functionality of these "recommended for you" type algorithms can entirely replace human curatorial strategy without the user even noticing it.[86] Taking these theories at face value, if the aesthetic blogger develops their curatorial strategy, or more specifically, their "aesthetic," through the lens of these recommendations, it can be said that this aesthetic was actually developed by these algorithms. This would suggest that these algorithms, and with that their developers, have a larger agency within the economy of images of aesthetic blogging than the human bloggers.

While Kholeif warns against the adoption of these practices in art spaces, they are already entirely present within the social media platforms that form the network in which aesthetic blogging is situated. Dekker and Tedone take a less pessimistic perspective towards this topic, arguing instead for a potential of actual cooperation between human and machine curators within these spaces, for which more knowledge of the workings of these algorithms is necessary. This knowledge, as Dekker and Tedone emphasize, is about more than just knowing about code, but also about different means of thinking like critical analysis, imagination and speculation.[87] Aesthetic bloggers, like many other online communities on social media, can exemplify one of these alternative ways of creating knowledge about

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[85] Dekker and Tedone, "Networked Co-Curation," 9
[86] Kholeif, "The Curator's New Medium," 79
[87] Dekker and Tedone, "Networked Co-Curation," 10

algorithms, with bloggers figuring out methods of cooperating with the algorithm through experimental and playful means, despite little technical transparency about Tumblr's algorithms. Information about the best ways to promote posts through these algorithms spreads via posts sharing urban legends about the inner workings of the algorithm, often playful or exasperated in tone, or by copying the way other blogs use tags, or instead by circumventing the recommendation algorithms entirely by creating networks of following blogs. For an example about the first type of response, a post by the "@mariaiscrafting" blog posted in 2021 that has since gained over thirty thousand notes explains, though not necessarily entirely accurately, how reblogging and liking impact the visibility of a post in different spaces on Tumblr in different ways.[88] These word of mouth explanations of recommendation algorithms and the technical features of Tumblr as a platform as a whole along with user experimentation of these features allow for the building of knowledge necessary for the cooperative curation seen in the image economy of aesthetic blogging on Tumblr.

      While the presence of more commercial agents such as Tumblr's recommendation algorithms, staff interventions and advertisements suggests a level of conflict with the concept of an alternative economy of images, this alternative economy does manage to exist alongside these commercial processes within the social spaces of aesthetic blogging. Two different systems of exchange can be recognized in these spaces, the first being an alternative economy of marginal images that functions to create networks of tastes, identities and aesthetic categories, driven by the curatory practice of aesthetic bloggers, which lacks a profit motive. The second system of exchange is about the commercial interest of Tumblr as a platform, most significantly expressed in the presence of advertisement space on Tumblr. As discussed earlier, the structures of Tumblr incentivize users to stay within the Tumblr environment as much as possible, maximizing the amount of advertisements that can be encountered. These two contrasting economies of images depend on each other to function, with the alternative circulation of images in aesthetic blogging depending on the structures of Tumblr, and these structures depending on the possibility of revenue from advertising to users, and thus exist alongside each other.

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[88] @mariaiscrafting, "Here's a little lesson in the Tumblr algorithm," Tumblr post, February 13th 2021, https://mariaiscrafting.tumblr.com/post/643048262914473984/heres-a-little-lesson-in-the-tumblr-algorithm

The circulation of images on Tumblr across networks of blogs within the social spaces of aesthetic blogging transforms these images both in content and in context. Reposting and reblogging allow for the mobility of images within aesthetic blogging, with reposting allowing for the transformation of the image file, through active editing or passive file compression. Both reposting transforms the context of the image, removing it from its original context, and with that also removing its authorship, its aura and sometimes also its status as art or cinema. A new context is then added through the space of the aesthetic blog and practices like tagging, this new context being the aesthetic. Within this new context, the image gains a new type of mobility through the networks of circulation within aesthetic blogging, through reblogs, but also through user cooperation with algorithmic recommendation. This new network of curatorial circulation forms an alternative economy of images, where images otherwise marginalized in commercial image economies gain mobility, providing resistance to hegemonic systems of image hierarchy. This alternative economy then interacts with the commercial economy of images created by the structures of Tumblr, designed for the creation of revenue for Tumblr as a commercial platform, without these separate economies necessarily being positioned antagonistically.

Conclusion

By analyzing the structures and spaces of Tumblr in relation to aesthetic blogging, this thesis has shown how the visual culture of aesthetic blogging is made possible through the affordances and interferences of Tumblr as a platform, and how images gain mobility through these same affordances and interferences, creating an alternative economy of images based on curation and the creation of tastes and identities. In doing this, I have shown how this unique visual culture can be of importance to a variety of ongoing discourses about images in digital spaces, and how aesthetic blogging has been overlooked unjustly as an object of study within these discourses. I have shown that Tumblr is structurally centered on the dashboard, around which there are a number of other spaces, curated algorithmically or cooperatively by users, that allow users to find new posts and blogs. Through practices of reblogging and tagging, two of the unique structural elements of Tumblr, these blogs then form networks and communities, such as the networks and communities around aesthetic blogging. These networks exist within a social space, informed by the structures of Tumblr as a platform, which controls the means of production of posts. In attempting to define aesthetic blogging, I have found that aesthetic blogging constitutes a visual popular culture of creative curation, performed in cooperation with algorithmic agencies on Tumblr, centered around aesthetic blogs, a type of Tumblr blog that primarily posts images and text contextualized as being part of a specific type of "aesthetic," identified through tags and the context of networks of aesthetic blogs. Then in defining what aesthetic blogging does, I have shown that aesthetic blogging allows for the recontextualization of images and texts through processes of creative curation such as (re)posting, reblogging, tagging and liking in order to both represent and create tastes, identities, stances and auras. Within these networks, images gain mobility and are transformed materially and contextually through processes of movement between the structural and social spaces of Tumblr. This transformation allows for the recontextualization of the image into the concept of the aesthetic, while removing the original "aura" of the image, but also removing a certain amount of commercial value through processes of reposting and reviving poor images. Within the sphere of the aesthetic, different standards for images are allowed to exist, allowing the circulation of images within aesthetic blogging to function as an alternative economy

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of images, where marginalized, transformed images are allowed to be revived, resisting commercial standards of image hierarchies while existing alongside capitalist image economies on Tumblr.

As an understudied subject, there are still many aspects of aesthetic blogging that deserve further elaboration that are outside the scope of this thesis. In this thesis I did not address the identities of aesthetic bloggers, or say much about the contents of specific aesthetic blogs. Neither have I featured any analysis of the visual elements of specific aesthetics, be it in posts or blog themes. Much more could also be said about cross-platform exchanges of images and language within aesthetic blogging, which could vastly expand upon my own work on the mobility of images in aesthetic blogging in this thesis.

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Appendix A

	Blog URL	found	total posts	non-aes posts	aes reblogs	original aes posts
1	nikswonderland	account setup	83	1	52	30
2	8pxl	account setup	63	44	12	7
3	uroko	account setup	25	0	4	21
4	fleur-aesthetic	account setup	170	0	19	151
5	colormush	account setup	234	0	0	234
6	valentina-poem	account setup	12	1	0	11
7	fuzzyghost	account setup	386	1	301	84
8	thearmyofgrunge	account setup	1	0	0	1
9	wedarkacademia	account setup	26	5	7	14
10	mayonezli	account setup	17	3	1	13
11	vangoghcore	top posts	13	0	0	13
12	lionfloss	top posts	922	164	374	384
13	thoughtkick	top posts	397	5	28	364
14	pinkfairiesteaparty	top posts	84	0	0	84
15	ancientsstudies	top posts	29	2	21	5
16	apoetsparacosm	top posts	50	16	7	27
17	dualvoidanima	top posts	13	0	0	13
18	rainie-is-seasonchange	top posts	196	6	165	25
19	kitsunetsuki	top posts	120	0	0	120
20	fine-arts-gallery	top posts	42	0	0	42

	reposts	own art	side blog	custom theme	common tags
1	30	0	unclear	mobile theme only	#cozycore, #naturecore, #warmcore, #cottagecore
2	0	7	yes	yes	#pixel art, #artists on tumblr, #aesthetic, #cross stitch
3	21	0	yes	yes	#nature, #curators on tumblr, #japan, #fog
4	151	0	unclear	yes	#flowers, #floral, #pink, #white, #yellow
5	0	234	no	default theme	#stimming, #color, #soothing, #abstract, #net art
6	11	0	unclear	yes	#poetry, #quotes, #deep
7	84	0	no	yes	#vhs, #retro, #80s, #vaporwave
8	1	0	unclear	yes	#black and white, #grunge, #dark, #quotes
9	13	1	no	yes	#words, #dark academia, #text, #quotes
10	13	0	unclear	mobile theme only	#cottage aesthetic, #couple gif, #lostonyoubabe
11	13	0	unclear	default theme	#curators on tumblr, #flowercore, #naturecore, #space
12	383	1	no	yes	#nature, #photography, #liminal, #moodboard
13	364	0	no	yes	#motivation, #quotes, #poetry
14	84	0	yes	yes	#pastel, #food, #pink, #delicious
15	5	0	no	mobile theme only	#alternative, #dark, #dark academia
16	20	7	yes	mobile theme only	#chaotic academia, #dark academia, #light academia, #romanticism
17	0	13	no	mobile theme only	#trippy, #psychedelic, #retro, #vaporwave
18	0	25	yes	mobile theme only	#photographers on tumblr, #landscape, #cityscape, #flower aesthetic
19	120	0	unclear	yes	#fashion photography, #beauty, #vintage, #retro
20	42	0	unclear	yes	#painting, #portrait, #dark academia, #art history

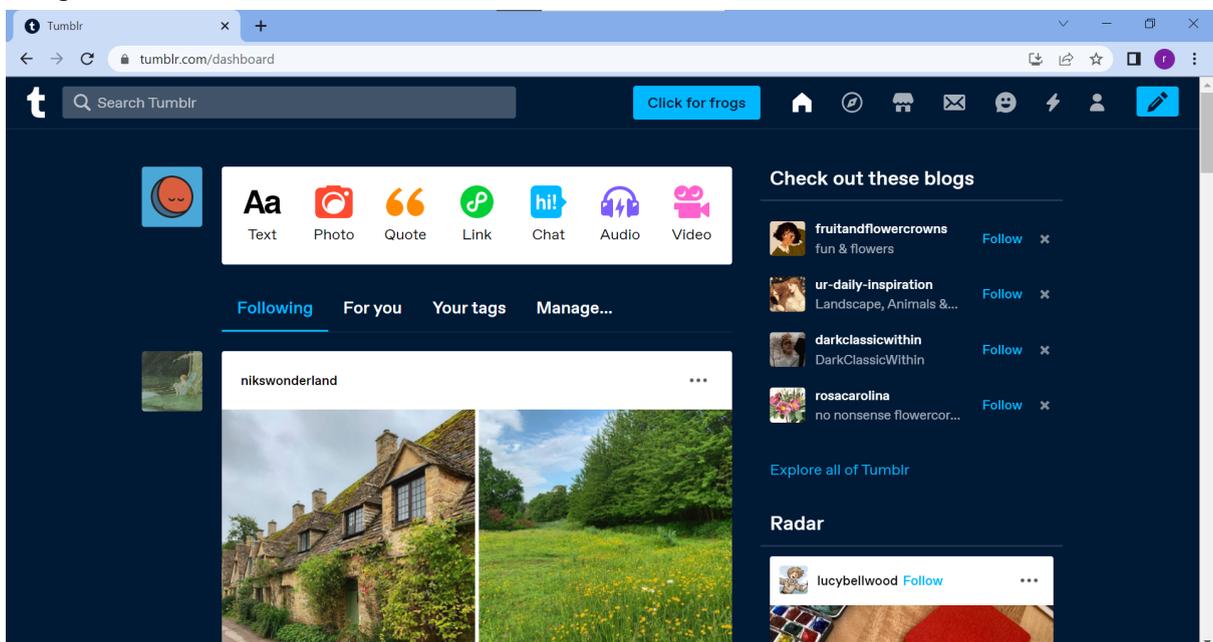Recorded data about case studies, all posts analyzed were made in February of 2023
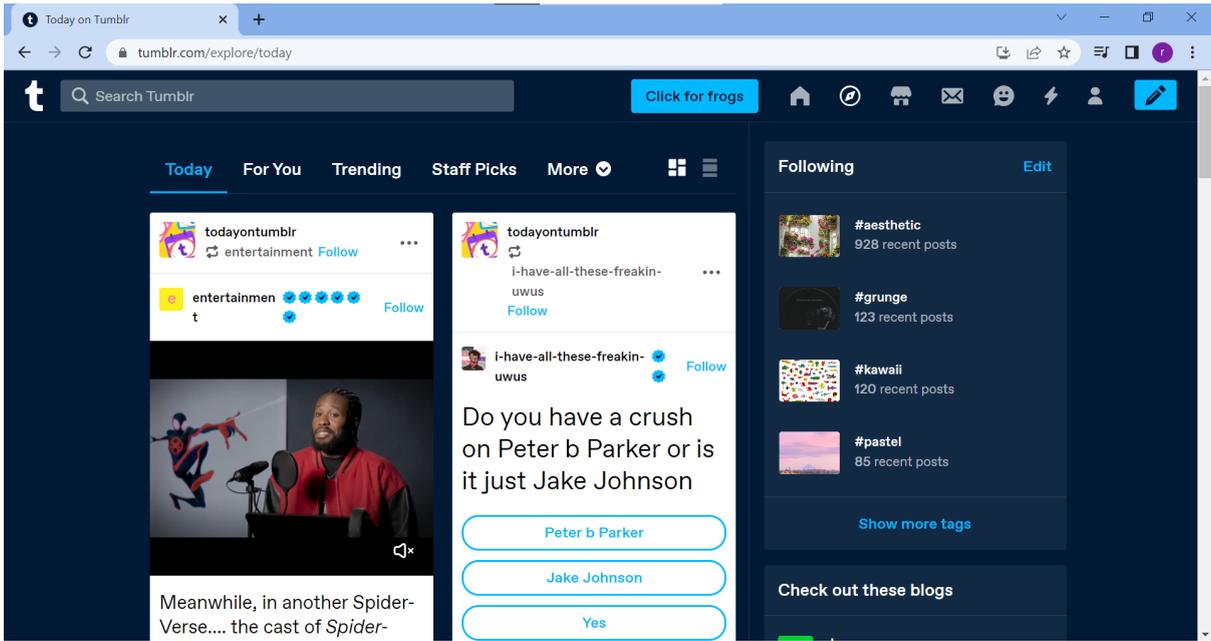
Images

Image 1.
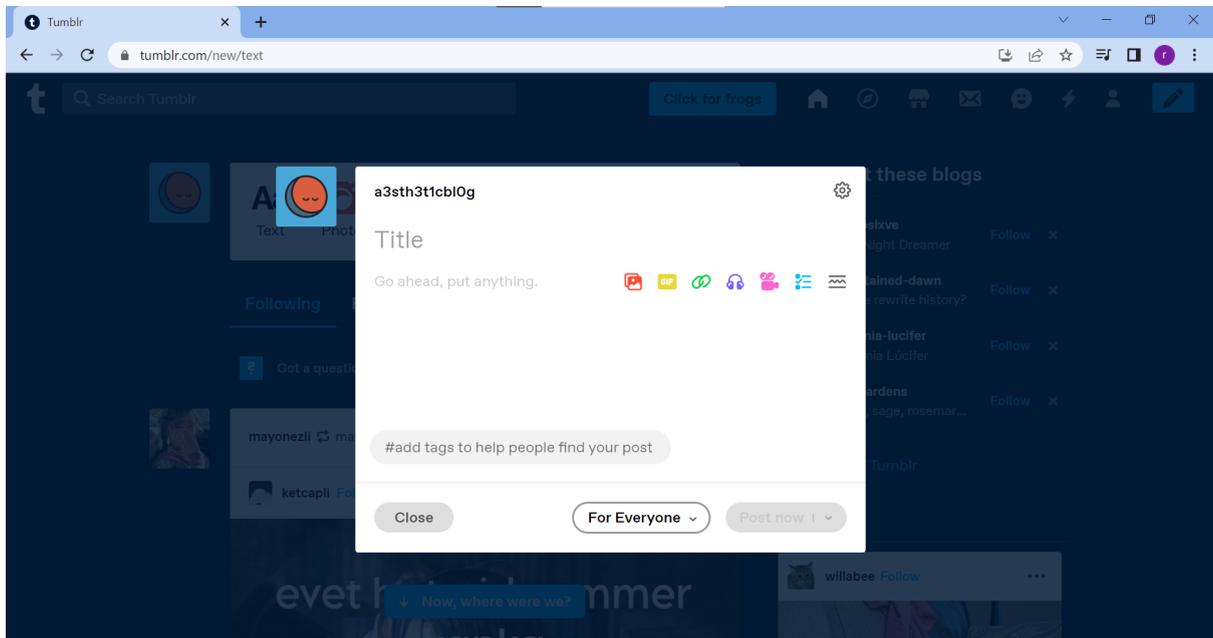
Tumblr, "text post," new post page on the Tumblr website. Screenshot by the author, taken 2-6-2023.
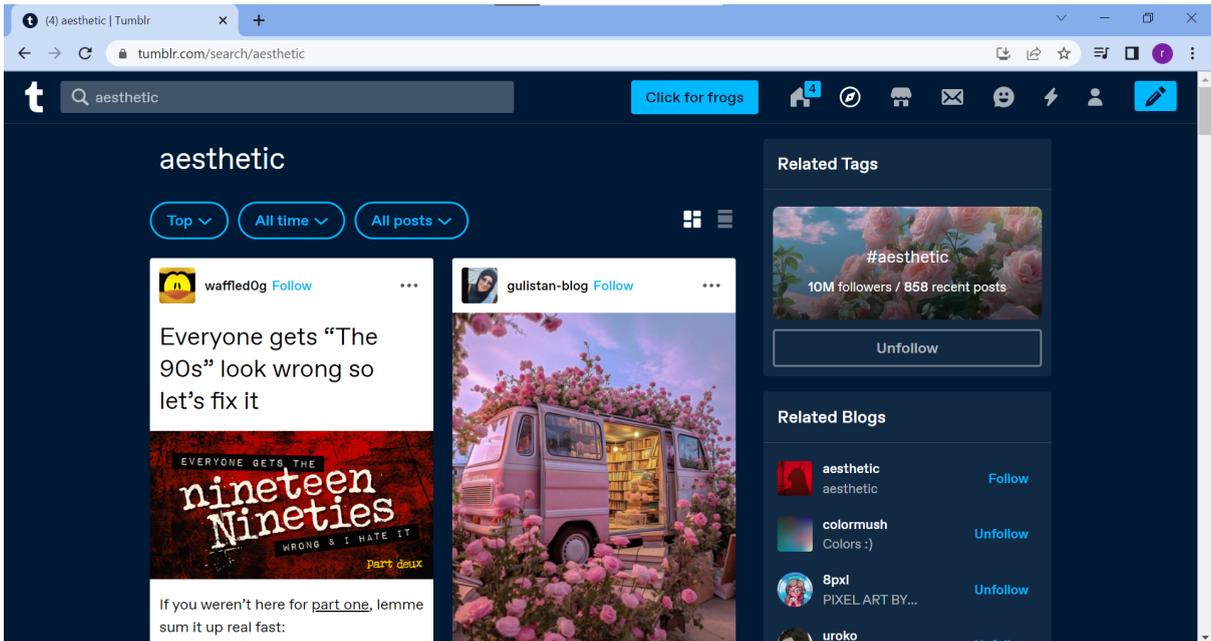
Image 2.

Tumblr, dash on the Tumblr website. Screenshot by the author, taken 6-6-2023.
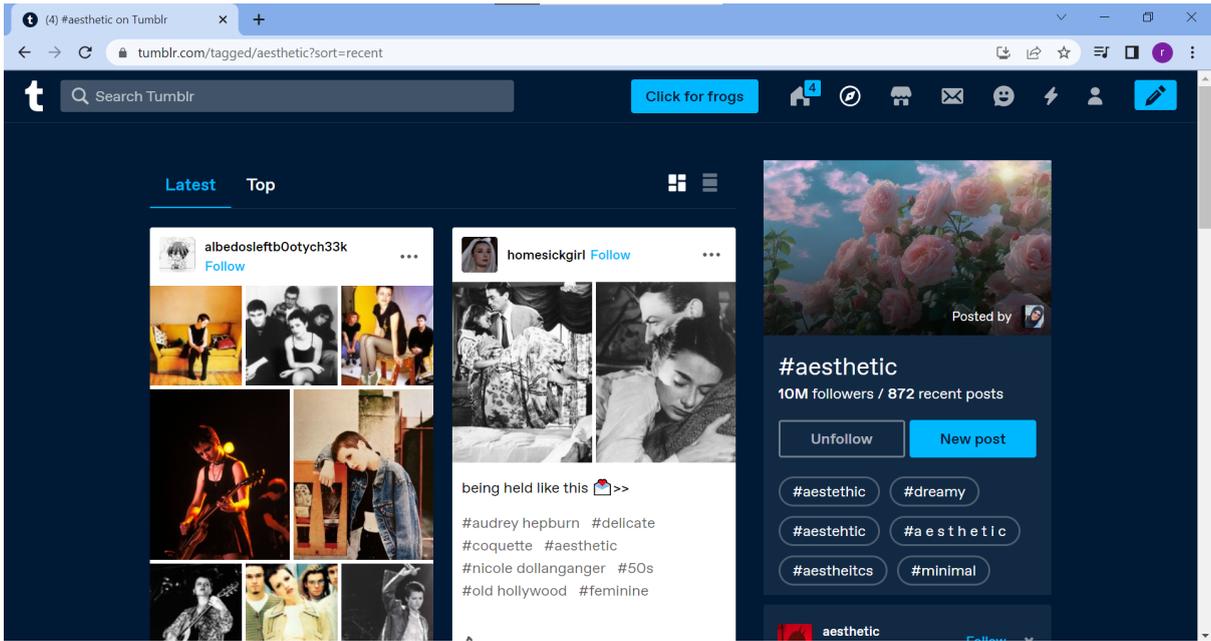
Image 3.

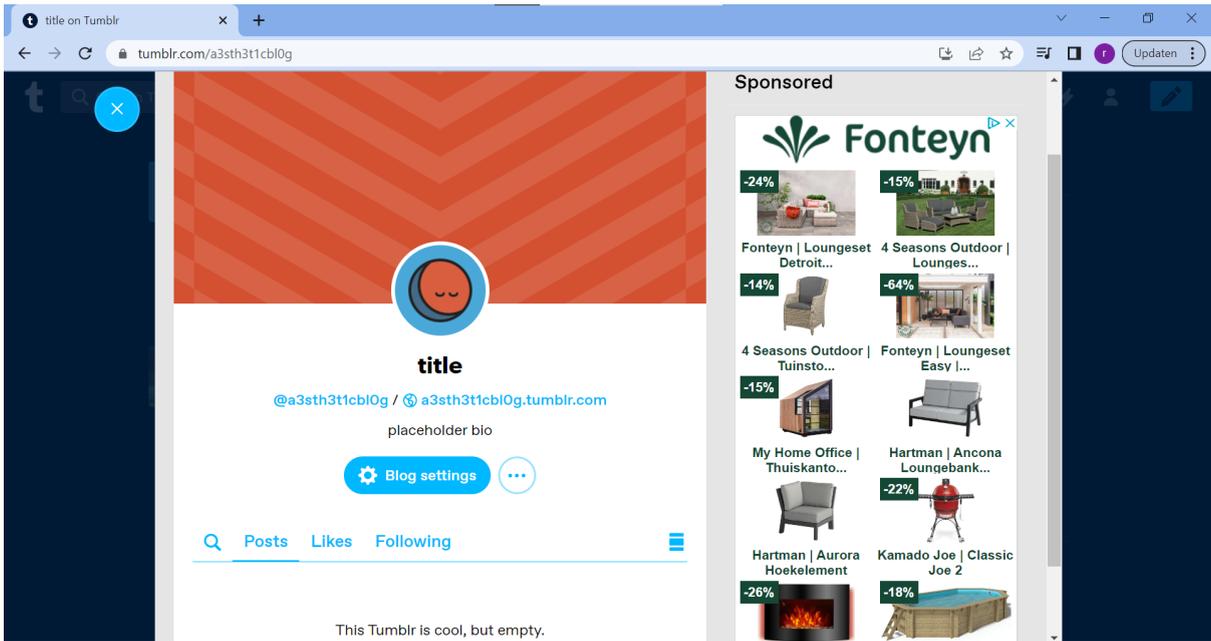Tumblr, "Today," explore page on the Tumblr website. Screenshot by the author, taken 2-6-2023.

Image 4.

Tumblr, "aesthetic," search page on the Tumblr website. Screenshot by the author, taken 7-6-2023.
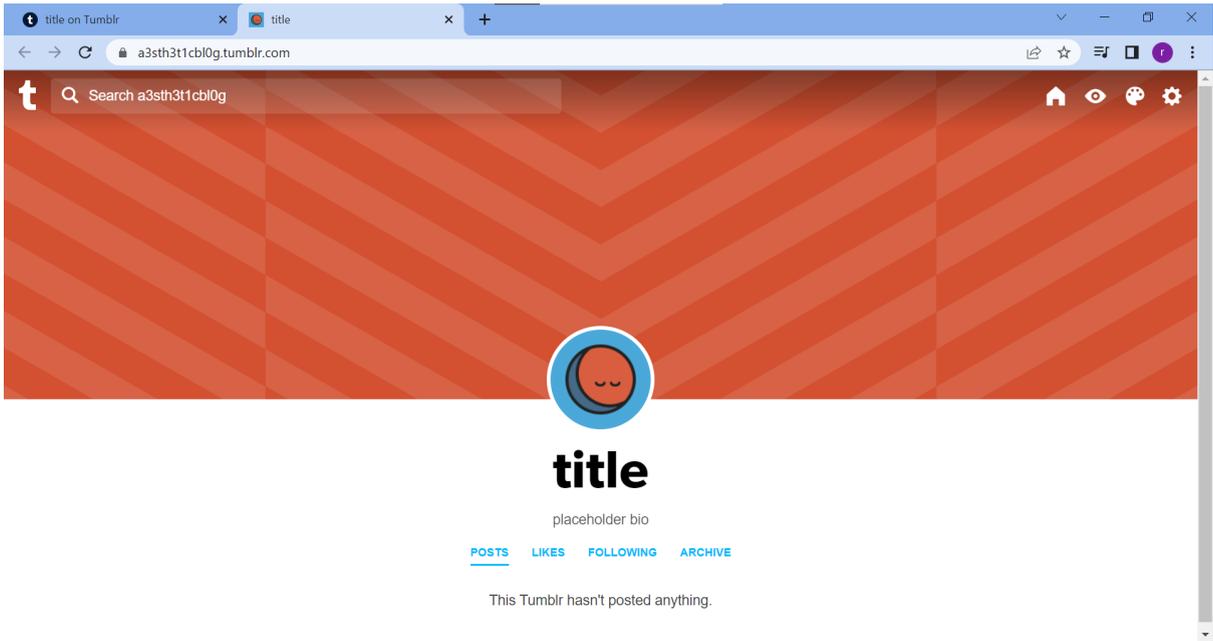
Image 5.

Tumblr, "#aesthetic," tag page on the Tumblr website. Screenshot by the author, taken 7-6-2023.
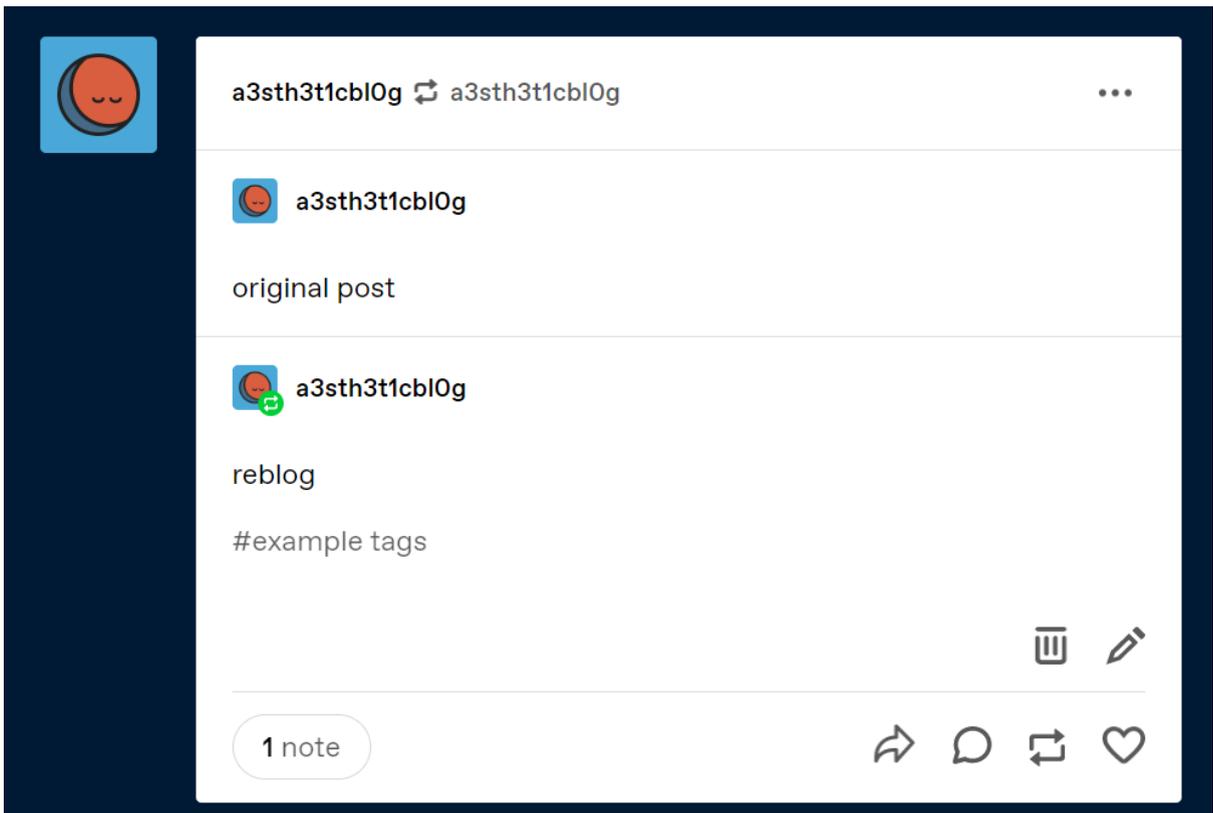
Image 6.

Tumblr, "a3sth3t1cbl0g," blog page on the Tumblr website, featuring an advertisement. Screenshot by the author, taken 4-6-2023.

Image 7.

Tumblr, "a3sth3t1cbl0g," external Tumblr blog page with default theme. Screenshot by the author, taken 4-6-2023.

Image 8.

Tumblr, example post on the Tumblr website with reblog and tags. Screenshot by the author, taken 6-6-2023