Calypso Cave #itsatrap: Instagram vs Reality

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"When distant things step too close, closeness becomes remote or blurred, when the phantom becomes real, reality attains a phantomlike quality" (Anders 123).[1] It is with this short equation that Günther Anders seeks to document one of the profound ontological confusions that begins to set in as technologies of image capture allow for reality to be photographically reframed, stored, owned, distributed, and sent elsewhere. "Reality," he notes, writing in the mid-1950s, "turns into the copy, into the likeness [*Abbild*] of its images" (202).

To illustrate the extent to which reality is transformed into a template for images, Anders has us imagine how tourists remake the cities and landscapes they pass through. Irritated by the uniqueness and frustrating non-transportability of the encountered sites, they each carry a device, "a kind of syringe" that can be magically applied from afar to "correct the nature" of these sights and make them exist in an open-ended series of copies that can be owned and transported elsewhere (204). The "real" St Mark's Square, the one that really counts emotionally, is now no

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[1] All references to this source are my translations.

longer located in Venice, but in the photo album under the bed at home in "Wuppertal, Sheffield or Detroit" (205), and with this the captured image also transforms the lovely sight into an attribute of the self.

Yet it is here that photographic trickery also turns into a curse. For once the snapshot becomes our prey, the dislocated landscape begins to blur with "the museum-principle of curation" and even with the autobiographical one: "everyone now encounters and experiences their own life as a series of images, as a kind of autobiographical gallery" (206). With this, Anders concludes, life itself attains a phantomlike quality: it is no longer primarily lived but predominantly projected, for it has become entrapped in the plane of images, which only ever arrests past instants to ensure that they remain displayable and present. And the more this plane prevails, the more life is only ever encountered in the "Future Perfect," it is lived as if it were already a memory, as if it were nothing but an insta-gram.[2]

There is a place on the Maltese Island topographical and biographical transformation our cameras can effect has become uncannily literal, empirical, and real: Calypso Cave. The absurdity of course already starts with its name, which wrote the myth of Odysseus into the landscape of Gozo long before the camera turned its image into a trap. For on one of the cliffs flanking the beautiful red sands of Ramla Bay, there is a cave "alleged to be the one referenced in The Odyssey," "the cave where the nymph Calypso kept Odysseus prisoner for seven years after his ship was shipwrecked after a fierce storm." "Calypso's Cave," Wikipedia continues, "is currently closed to the public for fear of collapse" and "is commonly confused with Tal' Mixta Cave [sic] which is located on the other side of the bay" ("Calypso's Cave").

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[2] This opening section condenses key aspects of the short "excursus about photography" found in §22 of "Die Welt als Phantom und Matrize." For a detailed discussion of this aspect of Anders' work, see Kerstin Putz.
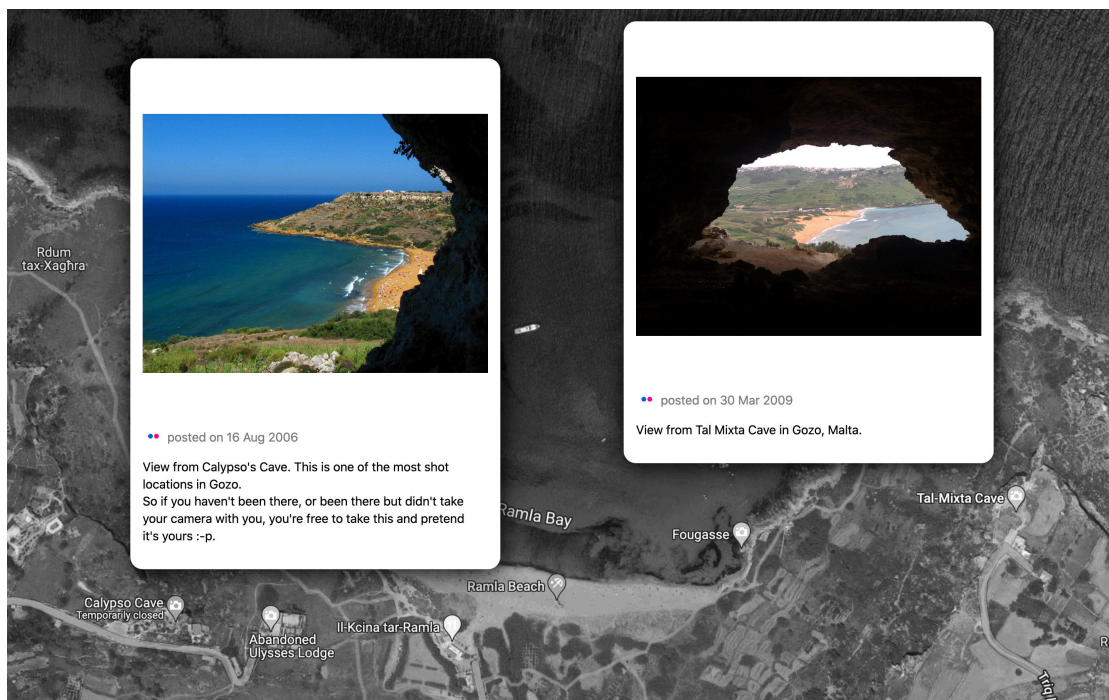
Fig 1. Stefan Karrer, *Calypso Cave #itistrue*, screenshot.

What the short, factual Wikipedia entry does not reveal is that Tal-Mixta cave opens

onto a breathtaking view, one that the cave mouth itself frames with an enigmatic, perfectly

mythical silhouette. With the rise of digital photo sharing platforms in the early 2000s, and the

massive intensification of the lure of images these newly public albums create, the two caves

begin to blur into one. And the blur through which Tal-Mixta cave morphs into Calypso's lair

and into what one user calls the "Instagram Cave" (see fig. 4) seems geologically primed: in

2010, just as Instagram emerged to intensify and square off the lure of Tal-Mixta cave's

captivating view, the original cave began to disintegrate and collapse. Stefan Karrer's browser-

based work *Calypso Cave #itistrue*, developed with the curatorial input of Christopher John

Müller, documents the gradual relocation of Calypso Cave to the other side of the bay and the
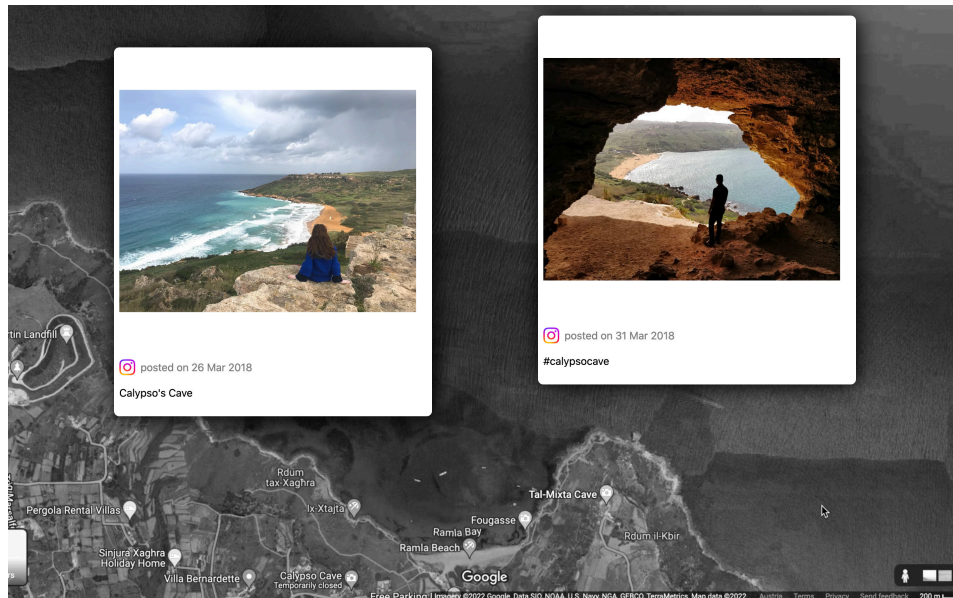
blur of two caves into one.

Fig 2. Stefan Karrer, *Calypso Cave #itistrue*, screenshot.

In terms of internet ethnography, *Calypso Cave #itistrue* tracks the emergence of a curious, geotagged meme that associates a (mistaken) location with a myth, thereby providing a platform for a set of open-ended commentaries through which "moment after moment, representation after representation, dialogue after dialogue—public participants memetically make their world" (Milner 32). Karrer's artwork reveals that, at Ramla Bay on Gozo, the figurative process of participatory world-making Ryan Milner gestures toward has literally rewritten the map.

Drawing from a database of over 4000 found images and their captions that were uploaded to digital platforms between 2004 and 2021, the work tracks the association of the cave with the Odysseus myth, and its gradual relocation to the more instagrammable spot. The

resulting confusion has become part of the meme itself, with many posts declaring that they had

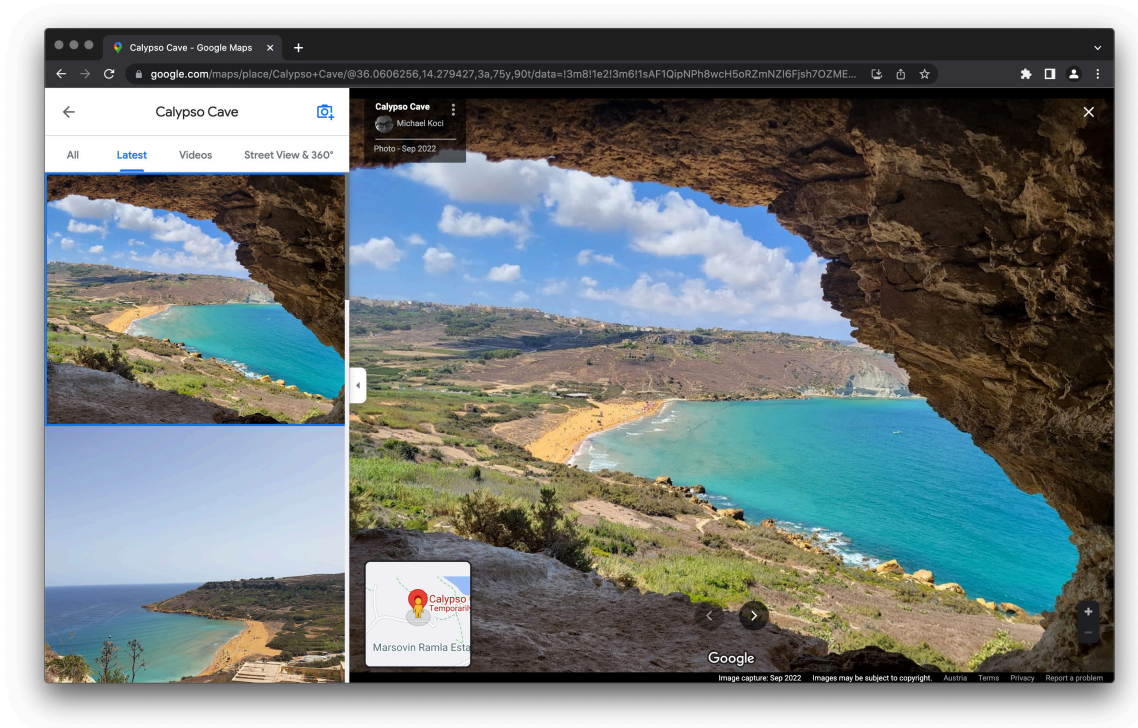found the real cave or else questioning the location.

Fig 3. Google Maps images for the location "Calypso Cave," screenshot, Sep. 2022.

The confusion is so profound, that the caves are now also misidentified and conflated on

Google Maps (see fig. 3), with images taken from Tal-Mixta cave displaying as Calypso Cave

alongside images taken from the correct cave on the far side of the bay. "I found Calypso Cave!"

a post in March 2020 notes: "Every review I read says this iconic site is caved in and no longer

accessible, but I still decided to check it out and I am so glad I did." So, the databases and

algorithms that automatically match map locations with user-generated images further confound

the confusion of humans who are trying to figure out if they are in the right cave. For although

they find the "real" cave they associate with Calypso (i.e., the cave that counts emotionally),

Google Maps also informs them that Calypso's cave is "temporarily closed" on account of being
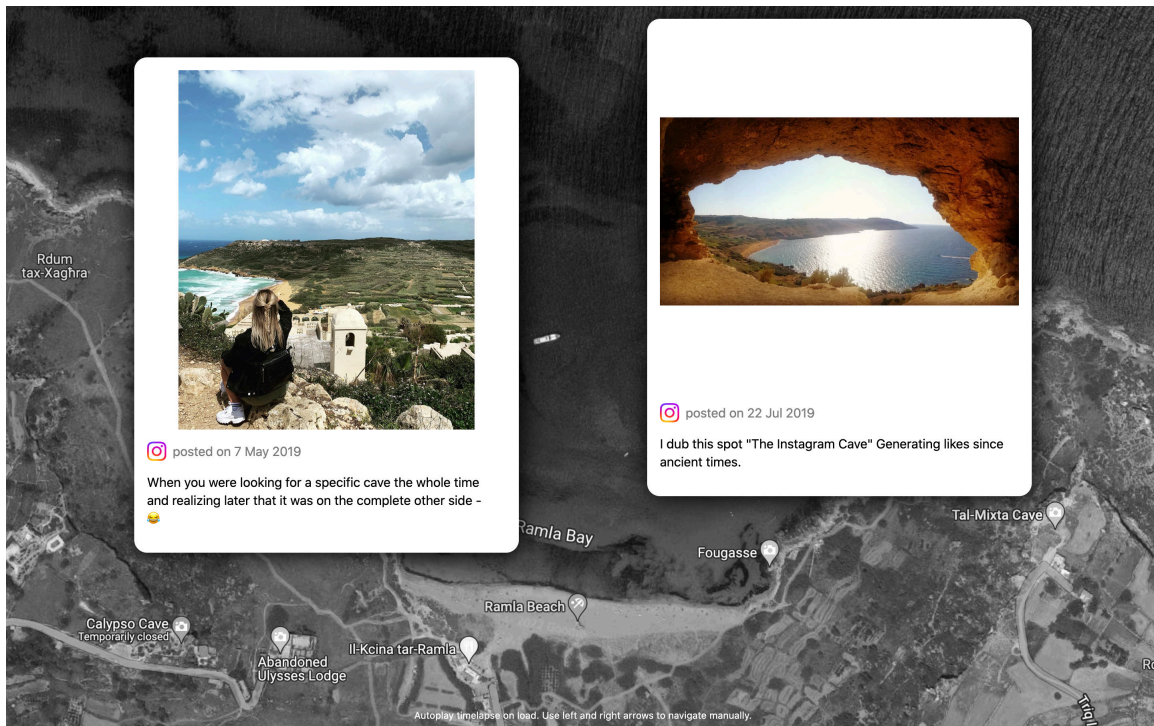
collapsed (*#itistrue*).

Fig 4. Stefan Karrer, *Calypso Cave #itistrue*, screenshot.

About the Artwork

Calypso Cave #itistrue (calypsocave.stefankarrer.net/itistrue/) was developed by Stefan Karrer

for this edition of *MAST*. It translates the artist's book *Calypso Cave #views on #views* into an

interactive browser-based artwork. As a conceptual development, it seeks to document and

dramatize the emergence of the Calypso Cave(s) as a topo-graphical meme that is linked to its

own location ID. The work consists of a website with a screen capture video and a selection of

over 60 social media posts[3] that have been arranged in an accelerating, roughly chronological

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[3] As a living work, the number of posts vary, and the work will continue to evolve.

timelapse spanning the years 2006–2021. The timelapse can be interrupted using the arrow keys,

giving users the opportunity to move through the sequence at their own pace.

Like earlier works such as *Cool clouds that look like they should be spelling something,*

but they don't, Calypso Cave #itistrue is the product of an artistic practice that tracks evolving

patterns of meaning with the help of content that is posted to the internet. While *Cool clouds*

hinges on the often-repeated phrases and sentiments with which users caption images of "cool,"

"crazy," or otherwise affecting clouds, *#itistrue* isolates two photographic motifs that are

connected to some of the Maltese Islands' "most shot locations" (see fig. 1).

Because the two motifs are widely shared online, these images exist in an ever-growing

series of highly similar shots that are continually replicated, distorted, commented on, and shared

on various platforms in ways that allow us to intuit multiple often divergent motivations. By

exposing how individual posts are consciously and unconsciously echoing others through

repetition, variation, self-reflective commentary, and a number of further actions, Karrer's

artistic approach seems to tap into an effect that Henri Bergson describes as follows: "If I notice

[repetition at work]" then "involuntarily I laugh," whereby Bergson adds that the resulting turn

of attention calls out and exposes how some "alien" machine automatism has taken hold of life

(32).[4]

It is this blurring of seemingly spontaneous and unscripted action with a machine-like

script that is perfectly encapsulated by the phenomenon of the hashtag itself. As Andreas

Bernard notes, "The keyword attached to a hash sign is not simply a classification added later on;

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[4] "The comic," as Bergson expands on this logic in an often-cited passage, "is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing": it is "that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. Consequently, it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events" (64).

often enough the relationship is inverted; […] pictures uploaded onto Instagram are often a reaction to a popular hashtag" (35), i.e. the image is only taken, the cave is only sought-out, because the hashtag #calypsocave already exists, and because it has accrued enough visibility to turn the prospect of applying it into a lure and powerful incentive to look for the cave. Yet rather than pitching the user against the platform or the human against some machinic other, Karrer's work makes the formatting power of digital media visible in ways that convey a lived sense of joy and excitement and the at-once intimate and impersonal modes of togetherness that digital platforms act as conduits for. His work thereby opens a view onto the ongoing, affective "intensification" (Sampson 99) of our captivation by the aesthetics, interfaces, and promise of digital platforms, but Karrer here also productively breaks with academic paradigms that mobilize *The Odyssey* in discussions of the extractive and exploitative quality of digital platforms. Shoshana Zuboff, for instance, opens her book on surveillance capitalism by having us picture Odysseus' exile and imprisonment by Calypso to ask if the "digital future can be our home?" (3).[5]

The perspectives opened by Karrer reveal that digital technologies are inhabited by their users in ways that find expressions in many different forms, and they track and reveal emerging connections to place, modes of togetherness, and constellations of feeling that are hard to intuit in the language of theory alone. As such, Karrer's approach, and its particular staging of a collective entrapment in Calypso's Insta-Cave, exemplifies how creative and artistic research practices, in the words of Anna Madeleine Raupach, can explore the "intrinsic merging of human and machine expression" (278) and "remediate experience" (286). In doing so, they can open us

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[5] The introduction uses the following quote from *The Odyssey* as its epigraph*: "I saw him crying, shedding floods of tears upon Calypso's island, in her chambers. She traps him there; he cannot go back home."*

to the way technological possibilities and automatisms intersect and blur with individual

creativity, spontaneity, and feeling, and can thereby help us contemplate how mediation is

intrinsic to these heavily idealized "human" traits.

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