

Ernst Schmiederer

All power proceeds from the picture

Corbis. Or how somebody gives meaning to the motto of the New Economy and appropriates history by asking the right questions. For example: Why do we need an original when more money can be made with copies? A lesson from the books of the information producer, dealer and warrior, Bill Gates.

The whole thing began in a comparatively unspectacular way with the desire for a dwelling befitting his station. In 1989, whilst still single, but already rolling in money, Bill Gates founded his business "Interactive Home Systems". The business, which was situated in Bellevue in the American state of Washington, was going to purchase works of art and the rights to works of art in order to make digital copies from the originals. Gates wanted to present these on built-in screens in the walls of his house, should it ever actually get finished. However, because the development of the technology required for this took longer than expected, Gates soon had to modify the aim of his business. No longer should just he alone benefit from his idea and his collection; from now on America's school children should benefit, too. At Corbis, as the business has since been known, school children would be able to find digital copies of pictures which could be directly downloaded from the internet into homework, school papers or project work.

In the meantime almost a decade has passed and Corbis, the Latin word for "basket", offers more digital picture material via the internet than anyone else. The business has more than 23 million reproductions at its disposal; art, press photos, portraits, paintings. 1.3 million of them have already been digitalized in extremely high-quality form. Every month another 30 000 pictures are scanned and added to the well-assorted and well-organized treasure chamber. One has good grounds for speculating that Corbis will soon really be a "digital Alexandria". Just like the library, established in Alexandria by the ruling Ptolemaic dynasty in the third century before Christ, which was to contain the entire knowledge of the human race, Corbis wishes to offer a virtual home to our collective experience of life, in as far as it is documented in picture form, in the none too distant future. Whether it is a water colour or an oil painting, a drawing or a plan, a snapshot or an art photo, Corbis collects everything under one roof, or, more precisely, stores everything on a battery of hard disks. The list of photographers working for Corbis today, or whose life's works have either been entirely, or at least in part, bought by Corbis, is so extensive that it had to be placed in the appendix¹. It is a similar story with the list of museums² and archives³ whose collections have been secured by Corbis in a multitude of different contracts⁴. Nevertheless it is still worthwhile examining a few examples more closely. But first a brief digression. Anyone who would like to estimate the value of Gates' digital treasure—he is the owner of the private business Corbis—must refer to the fundamental principles of the New Economy, for at the very first glance a paradox becomes apparent. Through Corbis Bill Gates, who is accused of having "absolutely no taste" by the envious, does business with pictures which for the most part do not even belong to him—this is possible in the age of the copy.

Gates is banking on the fact that the old world is in the process of decline and can only be preserved (and milked) by using the means of a new world. Logically it is not atoms, but bits, which interest him. Why should he pay a lot of money for originals when he can earn even more with (digital) copies? So he has acquired the collections of some of the most important museums of the world only in digital form. The framed pictures stay where they are; Gates has the electronic rights to use them at his disposal. The London National Gallery, the Eremitage in St. Petersburg and the Detroit Institute of Arts have all given the tycoon access

to their most precious treasures. Goya or Cézanne, the pictures remain in the museum and Gates sells them in bit form throughout the world. In addition to this the relevant laws are a cause of great joy to him. In the USA, for example, works which were first published more than 75 years ago go directly into the public domain, i.e. they can be used by anybody without any copyright restrictions. In this way Corbis picture researchers visit the great collections, such as the Washington Library of Congress, and digitalize freely accessible picture material in order to incorporate it in the Corbis archives for later, profitable use. This does not mean, of course, that Gates is being stingy in his extension of Corbis land. Although it has not been made public how much the business has paid so far for pictures and rights, experts in this field estimated in the year 1997 that it must have been at least 100 million dollars up till then. Accordingly they do not understate in Bellevue, but rather wax rhetorical. Corbis, according to the ambitiously formulated business aim, wants to "redefine visual content for the digital age" and be "the world's leading provider of exceptional visual content and services in the digital age", and to ultimately become "the place for pictures on the Internet".

Up until now picture material and rights from more than 600 different sources have been collected. Just how much is available under the motto "CORBIS—Create Opportunity—Realize Beauty—Inspire Success" today, although only five or six per cent of the entire collection has so far been digitalized and correspondingly catalogued, can be seen with a glance at the Internet (www.corbis.com) or at the old media form of the printed Corbis catalogue. Divided into categories from "Accidents", "Acrobatics", "Acrobats", "Actors" to "Zebras", "Zoo", "Zookeeper" and "Zoology", every kind of visual material which the picture editors and buyers at Corbis believe to be saleable is on offer. If the customer finds the subject index too concrete, then they can let themselves be inspired by the concept index: from "Abundance", "Accuracy", "Achievement" through to "Violence", "Wealth" and "Weariness".

Under all of these headings you find pictures, pictures and more pictures. C-11 shows Uncle Sam pointing his finger at you ("I Want You for the U.S. Army"); C-19 shows an atomic mushroom rising over Bikini Atoll (Source: U.S. Department of Energy/Corbis). Anyone who wants to print out the black and white photo of the cinema audience wearing 3-D glasses should go to BE048012. Whoever needs a picture of spectacular asparagus heads for a cookery book illustration, for a kitchen designer's brochure, or to decorate a market stall could download SX002045. Corbis has the pictures of the roadsweeper by Alfred Stieglitz (Source: Library of Congress/Corbis) and the construction worker taking a break on an iron girder high above the streets of Manhattan in its programme. Corbis owns the picture rights to the history of the American West ("Panning for Gold", "Masked Gunfighter", "Nuns with Guns", "Farm in Dustbowl"). Corbis shows the grotesque face of natural and environmental catastrophes ("Passing Three Mile Island Plant", "Mount St. Helen's Eruption"). Corbis presents the wonders of the world—from "Stonehenge" to "Moai on Easter Island", from "North Section at Chichen Itza" to "Machu Picchu in the Andes". And naturally politics does not come off badly: from Winston Churchill's Victory Sign to Rasputin ("Pulling at His Beard"), to Josef Stalin; from "Khrushchev and Nixon" to "Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro Embracing". At Corbis you can find Albert Einstein poking out his tongue, Sigmund Freud with his cigar and Marilyn Monroe showing off her underwear. The naked girl fleeing from Napalm bombs in Vietnam, the Hindenburg exploding in the sky above New Jersey—all history owned by Corbis.

The business has under contract the historically valuable collection of the legendary photographer Horace Bristol—his pictures characterized the magazines *Life* and *Time*—and Corbis proudly draws attention to the fact that the majority of the pictures hadn't been seen for 40 years. Corbis buys only the digital rights from some photographers, as in the case of the

American Grand Master Ansel Adams. At the right opportunity it also buys "hard copies", but even here it is only in order to read them into the computer and distribute them amongst people in the form of digital copies. In 1996 the brothers Peter and David Turnley sold their collection to Corbis. One of them had received the "Overseas Press Club Award for Best Photographic Reporting from Abroad" and the other had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize. The Turnley reports now available from Corbis show everyday life in post-communist Russia, the protest movement in China, the destruction of Kuwait during the Gulf War and the legacy of apartheid in South Africa. The most extensive, and probably most lucrative department of the Corbis collection in the long run, consists of the life's work of Otto L. Bettmann: 16 million pictures from all fields of photography. The works of Alfred Eizenstadt and Robert Capa are included. The impressive archives of the photo agency United Press International (UPI)—a treasure within a treasure—are also a part of it. During his retirement Bettman, who fled the Nazis in 1935 and arrived in America with two trunks full of photo negatives, once said that his collection represented "the complete history of civilization". This is only a slight exaggeration, for hardly a name from Jesus to Stalin is missing from his collection, which was originally started for reproductions in newspapers, books and magazines.

Today Corbis can offer photographic material from practically all fields of life, from the world, from the past and from the present day. The section "Science and Technology" contains, amongst other things, the much-praised pictures of Roger Ressmeyer, whose scientific photography from the 1970s to the 1990s was published in *National Geographic*, *Life*, *Newsweek* and *Smithsonian*. Corbis managed to catch Lynn Goldsmith and her collection for the "Celebrities and Entertainment" section. Since the mid 70s her agency LGI has photographed Bob Dylan and Mel Gibson, Sting, Michael Jackson and almost every other known rock and film star. LGI represents approximately 200 photographers and has a compilation of a good million pictures. The works of the American star photographer Neal Preston show 20 years of Hollywood. David Münch has photographed every American National Park with his plate camera. Paul Souders has shot almost every kind of industry and work photo since he began in the early 80s. Galen Rowell's work enriches the section "Sports and Recreation" with action photos of mountain climbers. Adam Woolfitt has photographed the whole of Great Britain as Michael Yamashita has Asia; both of their works can be found in the Corbis section "Travel and Culture". Observers are struck dumb with amazement by the number of contracts and purchases made in the past few months alone.

— In November 1997 a contract was made with the French agency Sipa. This contract not only allowed Corbis access to one of the world's best news archives, it also integrated Sipa's network of photographers into the Corbis structure. This would ensure, according to the press statement at that time, that one could "be on the scene wherever history is being made".

— In February 1998 Corbis bought the company Digital Stock Corporation which sells CDs and internet digitalized visual material for a one-off charge and provides large parts of the optical industry ("graphic design, advertising, publishing and multimedia") with "market-proven commercial content" from the fields "business and technology, concepts and effects, history and culture, nature, people and lifestyles and places".

— In April a non-exclusive licence contract will be signed for the work of the photo journalist John G. "Jack" Moebes. Moebes documented the American South and the Civil Rights' Movement for the newspaper "The North Carolina News and Record" from the 1940s up till 1978.

— Finally, in May the agency Westlight, founded 20 years ago by the National Geographic photographer, Craig Aurness, will go into the basket. This is one of the world's best collections, and one of the most extensive "commercial image collections" with three million pictures.

In view of this continuously growing collection, it is easy to predict the near future: whatever we see, Bill takes a cut of it. The assertion that the information producer, dealer and warrior, Gates, has appropriated history hardly seems to be an exaggeration. With only a small stretch of the imagination one day Gates may determine whether schoolchildren perceive a former war as grotesque or farcical. Whether they perceive the environment as a challenge or a catastrophe. Whether they perceive the conquerors of the American West as heroes or clowns. Whether they perceive the world or the recent past as being black or white, as being beyond redemption or worth redeeming.

Gates himself can already enjoy the fruits of his collecting drive. "My house is constructed in such a way that it anticipates reality," he explained to the first amazed visitors to his recently finished high-tech palace last summer. The reference was to the omnipresent video screens built into the walls, those screens which had once been the very reason for founding Interactive Home Systems and which, today, show any work from the Corbis collection at the press of a button. Whether it is the Mona Lisa, Willendorf's Venus, a photo of Raquel Welch in black underwear, Matisse or Hitler—it's all the same.

Obviously the circle of takers has extended far beyond just schoolchildren and Bill Gates himself. A test search for "Corbis" in an electronic archive of American magazines shows that hardly any one has not drawn upon Corbis material. Within the period of a few months the name "Corbis" appeared as a credit beside photos in Time and Forbes, in the American Scientist and the Columbia Journalism Review, in People Weekly and Entertainment Weekly, in Sports Illustrated and in Fortune. Hardly any picture editor can resist the pictures on offer. In former days pictures had to be obtained by dint of arduous research, bargained for and then sent over the ocean, only to get stuck at customs. Nowadays pictures can be obtained within seconds on the screen. A few moments is all it takes for every reasonably experienced customer, whether they are a professional or a private individual, to find, buy and collect a picture which used to be far beyond their reach. In contrast to the traditional visual material agencies Corbis is no longer aiming at the traditional media industry, but at the private customers who want to decorate their e-mails with postcard motifs, decorate their walls with pictures from Bill's net, or cater for any of their other visual material needs. Corbis has its own "Online Print & Poster Shop" (www.corbistore.com) on the internet. There are 500 pictures ("from Degas to Dorothea Lange") to choose from and order for "decorating homes and offices". Freshly printed "hard copies" can also be ordered. There is a choice of five different sizes. You then have to decide whether the pictures should be framed or not (English walnut, pecan hazel, classic black, classic white and ebony and gold are available).

One of the Corbis slogans promises that "Users will find a new way of looking at the world". Ultimately it is Bill Gates who decides to what extent this impressive claim is met, for he not only has control over the selection of picture material. Corbis, naturally, also has control over the optical quality of the material on offer and, by extension, over the optical quality of the thing itself. In the process of digitalization pictures which are worn through age are restored. "We may find it necessary to color-correct the image precisely so the digital reproduction mirrors the original photographic quality" as it is frankly formulated in an article on the "Rights and Responsibilities in the Digital Age".⁵ The Corbis Law Department knows that some critics believe that this degree of manipulation violates the spirit of art in the interest of

bringing it closer to its original state. But whoever wants to pursue the business aim has to take this risk. In contrast to a museum, where art is simply on display, Corbis wants both to display and to sell art—on a huge scale and throughout the whole world.

Gates' advantage lies in the limitations of the museums. Most museum directors avoid the digital internet world because of their fear of cybercide. Anyone who presents digital copies of their pictures in the internet risks them being stolen and illegally printed on T-shirts or postcards and therefore also risks being charged with copyright infringement. Gates takes advantage of these fears to make money with Corbis. Anyone who would like to study Raphael, not only in the National Gallery, but also in the peace of their own home, should pay a visit to 'Corbis Land'. The picture editor who needs Raphael to illustrate a story can save himself dozens of telephone calls to museums by calling on Bill's digital world.

New ideas are constantly needed to ensure that Corbis loses nothing of its attraction. Corbis Trip (<http://trip.corbis.com>) has recently been created, a virtual travel shop with a magnificent selection of travel photography. The website has over 8 000 pictures of hundreds of exotic destinations which can also be used as e-Mail postcard designs. You can buy things in the Trip Store and even book a trip. There are links to BarnesandNoble.com, where you can order the appropriate guidebook, to the travel agency, Mountain Travel-Sobek, to Microsoft's encyclopedia Expedia, where you can find out about the different destinations and to Arthur Frommer's guidebook publishers, whose "Outspoken Encyclopedia of Travel" is online.

The best part about Corbis Trip is that it is all just a mouse click away. Because it runs as a "premier channel" on Microsoft's Webbrowser Internet Explorer 4.0, it can be summoned at the press of a button.

Two things can be learnt from the example of Corbis Trip. One is that Gates is an expert on the rules of the New Economy who knows that information is essentially an unlimited good on the "attention economy" market of the capitalist media industry at the end of the 20th century. Demand is no longer held in check by supply, but solely by the number of waking hours in a consumer's day. Corbis uses and abuses its photo treasure to create the most precious thing of all: a public, otherwise referred to as the "eyeballs for advertisers" in the *Wired Encyclopedia of the New Economy*.

Nobody knows how much BarnesandNoble.com pays Corbis for their privileged position over rival business at Corbis Trips. However, we do have comparative figures. Rumour has it that the bookshop rival Amazon.com was willing to pay America Online ten million dollars for their position. Gates is certainly in no doubt about how his pictures can produce a new kind of "surplus value" in the digital age.

The Corbis Trip example is also interesting as a kind of footnote to the current debate about the Anti-trust legal proceedings against Microsoft. As we all know, the issue at stake is whether Microsoft should be allowed to couple its Windows 98 system with its own Browser Internet Explorer. A glance at the extensive range of Gates' business productions reveals how the outcome of the proceedings will have a major effect, not just on Bill Gates. The Microsoft empire not only makes computer programmes, but also produces contents and internet deals. In addition to this the public often has no choice in the matter (see above). The Internet-News-Network MSNBC is produced with the TV corporation NBC. An internet travel agency is run under the name Expedia. Cars are sold by the Microsoft subsidiary 'Carpoin!'. The Microsoft range 'Sidewalk' has various city guides and magazines on the internet, and on top of all this there is Corbis. It is a fact that Microsoft dictates which picture first appears on the screen

when the user switches his computer on. Yet if this "first screen" is automatically programmed to show a premier channel for MSNBC, Expedia, Carpoint, Sidewalk or Corbis Trip ("a one-way digital ticket to exotic desktop destinations"), then it is only America's cartell watchdogs who are separating us from today's world and the total Bill world. Without their interference Gates would be able to profit when flights are booked, cars are bought or shares sold. His Windows system is standing at the entrance to this virtual shopping mall, and Gates has the power to decide who offers which products at what prices.

Let's return to Corbis. Bill's Photoshop is not unrivalled. On the contrary. Mark Getty, heir of the legendary Getty Oil, is engaged in direct conflict with Gates' Corbis with his own "Getty Images" (www.getty-images.com). There are 30 million pictures in the Getty archives. Getty got hold of the European Hulton Deutsch collection with 16 million pictures and renamed it Hulton Getty to compete with Gates' Bettmann collection. Naturally Getty does not want to hand over the world market for digital picture rights (the estimated value of this for the year 2000 is 20 billion dollars) to Gates without a fight. But in the race for total picture power Corbis has a significant advantage over Getty. For a start Getty is much more bound to the analogue world, as only a comparatively small number of his pictures have so far been digitalized and are available on the internet. More importantly, and here lies the connection to the cartell proceedings, Getty lacks the all-important backing which Corbis enjoys.

It is somewhat ironic that this battle is being fought between someone who amassed a fortune in the age of industry and someone who has amassed a fortune in the age of information. A comparison between the two picture giants does, however, clearly show how Gates secures his seat of honour in the New Economy. The richest man in the world once again shows the New Economy how he visualizes the transition from the industrial society to the information society. Now it is up to the world to show Gates how it visualizes this transition. Joel Klein, the Head of the Antitrust Department of the American Ministry of Justice, is one of Gates' opponents who has given a lot of thought to the guidelines of the New Economy. What should monopolies be allowed to do nowadays? How can one keep a check on, and who should keep a check on the markets under the changed conditions of an information society? It is clear that the regulations of the past, for example the approximately 100 year old "Sherman Antitrust Act", are not adequate. They may have been fine for dealing with Rockefeller's "Standard Oil" in the age of industry and for breaking down the "Bell" telephone monopoly in the 70s, but for dealing with Microsoft and the chip giant Intel (in which the cartell watchdogs are also interested now) they will have to be adapted to the new age.

"Information is easier to produce and harder to control than stuff you can drop on your foot," says the *Wired Encyclopedia of the New Economy* about the difference between the goods and products which once made the Rockefellers and the Gettys rich and those which Bill Gates and Getty's grandson, Mark, are now fighting over. Bill Gates himself is more aware of this than anybody else. With Corbis he has made the kind of cultural and philosophical contribution which updates Walter Benjamin's theories for the age of information. In the 30s Walter Benjamin drew attention to the fact that reproduction technology robbed works of art of their aura. In the same century Gates shows how originals have become completely irrelevant and that only the reproduction of originals counts in the age of bits.

That very man whose financial situation would have forced him to invest in originals in earlier times chooses to surround himself with copies even in the privacy of his own home. As a small souvenir of these earlier times he has Leonardo's original diary in the library of his Casa Digitalis, purchased for the sum of 31 million dollars.

In the article "Rights and Responsibilities in the Digital Age" (mentioned above) the Corbis Head of Department, Akiyama, draws on the film *The Postman (Il Postino)*. The village postman, Mario, explains to the Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, that he hasn't done anything wrong by claiming that one of Neruda's poems was his. Poetry, says Mario, belongs to the people. Akiyama comments: "We wish sometimes that things were just as simple in the Law Department at Corbis". The transparent idea behind this wish is enough to make even the most fervent monopoly supporter speechless: Bill Gates is the people.

¹ Source List of Photographers, provided by Corbis: Lucien Aigner, Ansel Adams, Roger Antrobus, Peter Arahamian, Adrian Arbib, Tony Arruza, Yann Arthus-Bertrand, Dave Bartruff, Morton Beebe, Annie Griffiths Belt, Joel Bennett, Richard Bikel, Jonathan Blair, Marilyn Bridges, Horace Bristol, Brandon Cole, Jan Butchofsky-Houser, Pierre Colombel, Perry Conway, Gianni Dagli Orti, Henry Diltz, Sergio Dorantes, Rick Doyle, Laura Dwight, Ric Ergenbright, Macduff Everton, Sandy Felsenthal, Marc Garanger, Kevin Fleming, Owen Franken, Stephen Frink, Arvind Garg, Mitchell Gerber, Lynn Goldsmith, Phillip Gould, Darrell Gulin, Dan Gurevich, Peter Guttmann, Chris Hellier, Jeremy Horner, Kit Houghton, Liz Hymans, Peter Johnson, Wolfgang Kähler, Layne Kennedy, Dan Lamont, Charles Mauzy, Richard Nowitz, Pat O'Hara, Tim Page, Douglas Peebles, Neal Preston, The Purcell Team, Steve Raymer, Roger Ressmeyer, David Samuel Robbins, Charles Rotkin, Neil Rabinowitz, Galen Rowell, David Rubinger, Phil Schermeister, Flip Schulke, Sean Sexton, Richard Hamilton Smith, Joe Sohm, Paul Souders, Michael St. Maur Sheil, Leif Skoogfors, Keren Su, Roger Tidman, David & Peter Turnley, Brian Vikander, Manfred Vollmer, Kennan Ward, Patrick Ward, Karl Weatherly, Stuart Westmorland, Nik Wheeler, Ralph White, Lawson Wood, Roger Wood, Adam Woolfit, Alison Wright, Tim Wright, Michael Yamashita, Robert Yin.

² Source List of Museum Collections, provided by Corbis: Academy of Natural Sciences, The Barnes Foundation, Bass Museum of Art, Bowers Museum of Cultural Art, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Contemporary African Art Collection Ltd., Corcoran Gallery of Art, Detroit Institute of Art, Kimbell Art Museum, Lake County Museum, London Aerial Photo Library, The Mariners' Museum, Medford Historical Society, The Military Picture Library, Minnesota Historical Society, Museum of Flight, Museum of History and Industry, Museum of the City of New York, National Gallery London, North Carolina Museum of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, Royal Ontario Museum, Seattle Art Museum, State Hermitage Museum, State Russian Museum.

³ Source List of Archive Collections, provided by Corbis: AISA, Almasy Phototheque, Archivo Iconografico, Austrian Archives, The Bergman Collection, The Bettmann Collection, Boys Syndication, E.O.Hoppé, Ecoscene, Edimédia, Historical Picture Archive, Empire State Plaza Art Collection, --frank Lane Picture Library, Hall of Electrical History, Hulton Deutsch, Library of Congress, Francis G. Mayer Art Slides, Medford Historical Society, Military Picture Library, MIT Architecture Dept., Oxford Picture Library, Pach Brothers, Pittsburgh Courier Photographic Archives, Profiles in History, Sakamoto, Science Pictures Ltd., Starlight Photo Agency, Vanni Archive, Werner Forman Archive Ltd., Brett Weston.

⁴ Corbis acquires pictures in 4 ways (see also footnote 5):

— Non-exclusive licence arrangements with museums, photographers, historic collections and other private archives (for example, the Eremitage of St. Petersburg). The copyright of the original remains with the owner, Corbis only possesses the licence rights.

— Sales contracts for the complete collections—such as the Bettmann archive or the photographic works of Roger Ressmeyer.

— Contract photography: Corbis gives contracts to and pays famous photographers for concrete photographic works. Corbis then has the copyrights to the pictures.

— Public Domain: Photo researchers work their way through all significant collections (such as the Library of Congress and the National Archives in Washington) for useful visual material which is no longer protected by copyright laws.

⁵ A more detailed discussion of the problems with copyright and the experiences of the business, Corbis, can be found in the Press Department of the Corbis website (www.corbis.com/press/point.asp). Karen A. Akiyama:

Rights and Responsibilities in the Digital Age. Akiyama is the Manager of Business and Legal Affairs at the Corbis Corporation.