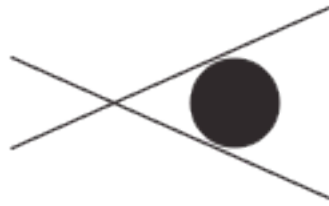


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## Swiping at Pictures

By Christopher Y. Lew

*This essay is one of a series of online-only texts commissioned to accompany Aperture's Spring 2013 issue, "Hello, Photography," which examines the state of the medium in a time of great change.*

As smartphones and tablets become enmeshed in our daily activities and everything from the flat-screen TV to the kitchen fridge becomes connected to the cloud, our relationship to technology and to the Internet has changed dramatically. It is no longer a matter of yes or no, Luddite or first adopter, online or off. Rather, life entails a range of interactions that combine direct encounters with information that is pulled from the ether. Everyday experience is a triangulation of three points: first, what is physically in the world; second, what is on the touch screen in one's hand; and third, how the mind processes it all. It is as common as meeting a friend over coffee while texting another and then checking which celebrity has been spotted where by the Daily Mail. These types of interactions have changed—in big and small ways—how we engage with one another, how we process images and information, and how we regard the world at large.

I do not propose that technology alone has radically reshaped contemporary life, but rather that recent innovations have facilitated tendencies that began with the rise of advertising and media culture in the first half of the twentieth century and continued through the explosion of images in the 1970s and '80s. Art has always attempted to bring new meaning to the rapid changes caused by technology. Pop Art, which emerged in the late 1950s, and the Pictures Generation of the '70s and '80s examined and made use of images that held currency in their respective times. A new generation of artists is now utilizing early-twenty-first-century images and exploring what they mean. Unlike in previous decades, today's pictures circulate in an increasingly interactive and participatory manner, and the distinction between original and copy has been rendered more and more inconsequential.

Helen Marten fully acknowledges the circuitous life of images. In a 2011 interview with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, she says, “There is a viral mentality that borrows from a mass of known imagery, from accessible and generous vocabularies, but does so understanding that it will become dispersed, boot-legged, pirated.” Her sculptures and videos are populated with logos and brands—known forms that she draws together, alluding to rebus-like meanings—and yet comprise a shorthand that frustrates direct communication. By featuring BMW logos, bottles of Campari, and Oakley sunglasses, Marten takes advantage of the status and desirability companies have tried to impart to their products. Tracing the history of modern advertising in his 2002 BBC documentary *The Century of the Self*, Adam Curtis notes of this phenomenon, “irrelevant objects could become powerful emotional symbols of how you want to be seen by others.”



Michele Abeles, Publicity Photograph, Artist Michele Abeles, Rob Pruitt 2010 Art Awards, 2011. Courtesy Roger Kirsby.

The circulation of images and a sense of visual literacy is made explicit in the work of Michele Abeles and Lucas Blalock, two artists who are steeped in photographic tradition and attuned to image dissemination. In her recent photographs, Abeles has incorporated details of previous compositions, making explicit the meme-like replication and development of images. In a performative mode, Abeles had actress Paz de la Huerta take her place at Rob Pruitt’s 2010 Art Awards, for which the photographer was nominated as New Artist of the Year. The hot downtown actress stood in for the emerging artist like one stock photo swapped for another. Blalock riffs on commercial images, still lifes, and architectural shots in humorous photographs made

with a large-format camera and a computer. He takes pictures of ordinary objects like erasers, fabrics, and drinking glasses to create an archive of images that he later manipulates in Photoshop. One image may be layered onto another, or sections of a picture can be duplicated or erased; each manipulation is blunt and visible, as if the images had gone awry. Adept at moving between various styles of photography—a skill that goes beyond mimicry—his works make apparent the highly constructed nature of images and, at times, offer backhanded compliments to other artists mining similar ground.



Margaret Lee, installation view of *New Pictures of Common Objects*, MoMA PS1, New York, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Hanley Gallery. Photograph: Joerg Lohse.

Margaret Lee creates lifelike sculptures of fruits and vegetables by casting them in plaster and then hand-painting them with acrylic. Lee aspires for the perfect fruit, one that never rots and appeals both to the eye and camera. Composed like ads, the photographs she takes of these objects often include hand models or decorative elements like ferns and furniture. In exhibitions the photographs may be presented with the sculptures they depict, as well as with furniture and objects reminiscent of those in the images. This is not to suggest a photo shoot, but rather to bring closer together the object and its image. The photograph—through the language of advertising—creates a context for the object that is related to, but different from, the sculpture in the same space. The eggplant's marble base may differ from the one depicted in the image. The plant in the gallery does not match the photograph. And yet the work and

its image seem to serve the same aims, in particular to narrow the gap between objects and images, a divide that is currently bridged by fingertips and touch screens.

Describing an attempt to sculpt clay, artist Mark Leckey says, “it was as if my body, the instinctual part of it, couldn’t grasp why I couldn’t just copy, paste, and flip the other half [of the material].” We are all babies learning when it is appropriate to pinch and swipe. A sense of this familiar but strange space, in which it is difficult to distinguish between the physical world and video images, is evoked in Trisha Baga’s installations. Her works bring together video projections, found objects, paintings, and other elements created by the artist. Video footage—a combination of material she shot herself and culled from pop-culture sources—is projected onto a field of objects to produce an array of shadows that nest themselves within the video images. For Baga, the shadows represent the space between the physical object and video—a gradient of light and dark she taps to treat unwieldy topics like American history.

Another artist who points towards future ways of making is Josh Kline, who has utilized 3-D scanners and printers to create sculptures of the hands and feet of creative workers. By scanning footwear designers wearing their own creations and the hands of tastemakers—writers, artists, and designers—holding bottled drinks of their choice, Kline has made fragmentary portraits that double as product displays. Presented on metal shelves with custom lighting, the metonymic works evoke the seemingly limitless supply of a convenience store; they become a shop that holds the promise of copies tailored for each customer. Additionally, Kline’s titles explicitly identify by name and profession the individuals whose feet and hands were scanned. By doing so he metaphorically point towards the social networks that connect us professionally and personally. Kline has taken the visual language of advertising and commercial display—a language in which he says we are not only literate but fluent—and uses it to do something other than push products.

Similarly playing against expectations, Darren Bader has been known to include the work of other artists, and even non-artists, in his solo exhibitions. Exhibited without attribution or marks of differentiation, Bader fosters a space of equivalence. A framed movie poster can be regarded alongside a French horn filled with guacamole or a live snake improbably accompanied by mittens and a dildo. How Bader’s work is presented in publications is just as surprising. He generally prefers that his images to run without captions; one is never sure if the images he

submits are of another artist's work or sourced elsewhere. Bader does not aim to trick the viewer. Instead, his published images suggest a placeholder or stand-in, an acknowledgement that these have been and will continue to be subjected to what Marten calls acts of dispersion, bootlegging, and piracy.



Josh Kline, *Tastemaker's Choice*, 2012. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal. Photograph: Joerg Lohse.

Within Pop Art, Hal Foster sees a politics “centered on its commitment to what is held in common, including our shared image world understood (perhaps perversely) as a newfangled commons.” The Internet has made manifest our shared image world. Despite the fact that much of it is colonized by corporations, it serves as a digital commons that exerts a force of equivalence. Minority voices like conspiracy theorists and Holocaust deniers are as easy to find as traditional sources of journalistic information. Because you can Google it does not make it true. In his essay on the role of journalism today, *Der Spiegel* reporter Ullrich Fichtner writes, “In the ever-chatting grinder of the web, facts can look like just opinions; and opinions can wander around like facts.” Such commingling of fact

and fiction allows for notions untethered to reality to grow in popularity and furthers a frame of mind that blends news and entertainment—as seen on twenty-four-hour news channels. It also gives rise to the bizarre scenes in which acting and real life are nearly indistinguishable. How does one parse Sarah Palin's bid to be vice president from her showdown with her *Saturday Night Live* impersonator, or Charlie Sheen's “winning” meltdown and his role on *Two and a Half Men*? On their own, such incidents may not seem of consequence, but in times of climate

change and political upheaval the difference between fact and fiction is one we cannot fail to see.

*Christopher Y. Lew is assistant curator at MoMA PS1. He joined the museum in 2006 and has organized numerous exhibitions, including Clifford Owens: Anthology, Nancy Grossman: Heads, and New Pictures of Common Objects, on which this essay is loosely based.*

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