SEAN RASPET

Interviewed by Jessica Silverman

The images that you use often have digital origins, whether combined and assembled into a single image, transformed through layering materials or edited digitally. What is the importance of using digital images? From where are your images culled? Would you explain your systems?

The majority of images we encounter have been translated into a digital version. There is no discernable difference between many "digital" and "non-digital" images. But, I do think that the digitally based platforms of image production and consumption have accelerated certain tendencies already inherent in photography and image culture.

One aspect of digital image circulation that interests me is stock photography and online image banks. These image banks also existed in various pre-internet forms, but to my mind they have come to reflect the nature of images in the present paradigm: encapsulation within expansive archives, accelerated circulation, increased interconnection and flexibility, and the fragmentation of images into their searchable keyword content. I'm especially interested in the uncanny qualities of stock photographs—how they seem to congeal into semi-autonomous image archetypes or genres. To me they seem to be moving towards an increasingly interconnected and codified system with its own self-referential logic—a kind of strange parallel universe.

After working directly with stock photography for many years, I started on a different project where I began to treat my own photographs as a kind of reusable image bank. I started from an arbitrary group of analog photographs that I had taken in a Burger King restaurant in San Francisco. I then began a process of fragmenting and recombining the digitized negatives. At a certain stage, I would have the resulting image arrangements printed—usually on printable office-type coffee mugs. The resulting mugs would then be arranged and documented as an artwork/installation. This photo-documentation would then be added back into the system of folders of images to be further fragmented and recombined with the other images, which would then be printed on other coffee mugs, etc.

I envisioned the overall process (which is ongoing) as a kind of feedback loop. As the process continued, the image fragments that had resulted from several generations of cropping and recombining became easier to fit into new arrangements with minimal editing. They reached a kind of stasis and lost a certain friction. They also seemed more "aesthetic" and pleasant.

How would you describe your relationship to abstraction?

There are a lot of different ways to think about the term abstraction. I'm particularly interested in it as an economic or informational sense—abstraction through financial derivatives or data-mining for example.

But as images become increasingly codified through keyword systems and search algorithms, and as they become increasingly self-referential, they have more to do with informa-

tional abstraction. Instead, they move towards a condition where they are primarily referring to other images (which in turn are also referring to other images) in a kind of recursive chain of association.

So, in this sense, one could say that the most clearly recognizable images—the ones that most effectively reference a particular image-concept or genre—are in fact the most abstract. I'm very interested in these processes, and as a side note, I think it's interesting how, along with the term "abstraction," the term "autonomy" also gets redeployed within this new context in a way that is almost a complete reversal from, yet possibly somehow still parallels the way these terms were used to refer to early 20th century developments in art.

You mentioned your interest in legal language. What about it intrigues you and how do you see it being an important influence on your work?

This relates to abstraction in a different sense. Legal language often represents a desire to completely define and anticipate all potential variables of a subject or situation. To leave nothing unstated, or where there is ambiguity, to use it as a precise tool. In a sense, that is, to fully reconstitute a subject within the language of the law—and thus to abstract it into this frame. But the resulting abstraction has a materiality and friction that arises from the medium of language and legal language specifically. And this materiality is another kind of entity with its own effects.

I often compare it to programming code, which is another interest of mine. They are both operational languages in that they accomplish something by stating that it is so. Their statements and definitions are self-enacting. In my own work, I've been working with the idea of writing "programs" that exist on paper without any sort of hardware basis, which the reader executes in the process of reading. It is a blurring of the line between legal language and programming code.

Who are your key artistic influences?

I always find this question difficult. I feel like I'm influenced by an overall climate, and I find it hard to trace that to particular artists. There would be too many to list. But a few artists/groups that I often revisit are Mondrian and Art & Language.

I think both of these artists/groups deal with the problem of overproduction and pointlessness in art, which maybe becomes a metaphor for the economy at large. The "endgame" of art can't be to endlessly produce something new, or even to produce at all. For Mondrian it requires boiling down the medium into its minimum necessary components, which can then be reshuffled ad infinitum.

Art & Language do something similar in their shift of emphasis towards the discursive and administrative. I think it's telling that they resisted the term "dematerialization" in art, since everything that exists has to have some sort of material basis, even if it is fleeting and hard to fathom.

Details from Arrangement 63 (OBSCENITY TRIAL (2)), ((2007)-2012) 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery.

A Modest Proposal, detail of Klecksographie III, 2007. Plexiglas, hair gel, acrylic paint, and mixed media. 28 x 28 x 36 cm / 11 x 11 x 14 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery