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Original Copies: Images in the Zero Dimension

by Joanna Fiduccia

In October 2007, the digital imaging firm HAL 9000 published a 16.1 Gigapixel image of Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper,* then the world's largest image to date. Translating the immensity of a master-work into a magnitude of pixels, HAL 9000 seemed to actualize the term "file size" and with it the manifest destiny of the entire computer lexicon: a virtual heavens, vaster and far more precise than the shadow world of its images. Increasingly, artworks exist foremost in this ether, as digital files to be printed on paper or on canvas. Their advents create a condition in which, as Boris Groys writes, each copy becomes an "original presentation of the absent, digital original"[1]—original copies, in other words, each with an equivalent yet distinct relationship to the file that yielded it. Walter Benjamin's prognostication that "the work of art reproduced [will] become the work of art designed for repro-ducibility" is satisfied to the point of its inversion: reproductions, and in particular their technological means, have designed the work of art as reproduction, establishing a distinction between original and origin, authenticity and uniqueness.[2] The picture has retreated into the zero dimension of the digital image.

Opening spread: Guyton\Walker, installation detail, LAXART, Los Angeles, 2008. Courtesy Greene Naftali Gallery, New York. Photo by Joshua White

Above: Kelley Walker, *Black Star Press; Star Press Star, Black Star, Black Press,* triptych, scanned image and silkscreened white, milk, and dark chocolate on digital print canvas (36 x 84 in.), 2004. © Kelley Walker. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Left: Wade Guyton, *Untitled,* Epson DURABrite Inkjet print on book page (8 1/4 x 7 3/4 in.), 2005. Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York

SUNLIT, 1981/82 (1983) 51 x 56 x 48.5 cm, Messington

art on paper

Original copies are a natural development in the application of relatively recent technologies—scanners, inkjet printers, sophisticated silkscreens—to centuries of printing. Though they might be serial, they are not merely a digital extension of previous processes, for they're defined not by any actual multiplicity but rather by their *potential* for boundless replication. Though generational trends like "postproduction" (see Nicolas Bourriaud's tract by the same title) are also germane, these suggest only the symptomatic use of sampling and editing in contemporary art. Original copies channel more than just the democratization of imaging and editing technologies and present more, when applied to painting, than simply the next skirmish in the battle to "keep the death of painting alive."[3] They are the focus of their own inauthenticizing energies, simultaneously extruding and liquidating aura. The use of scanners, Photoshop, printers, and above all digital files destabilizes the locus of the work by creating an absence at its origin.

Unlike its analog parentage—the state proofs, monoprints, and monotypes that could be called the original "original copies"—the origin of the original copy has not only no physical basis (i.e., no negative or plate), but also no fixed identity.

The digital file that engenders the copy is a bodiless entity, paradoxically as untouchable as it is indefensible to corruption, alteration and eventually, obsolescence. It's befitting, then, that these copies so frequently appear on paper, that site where facsimiles are most often incarnated.

In New York, the earliest identifiable proponent of original copies is Christopher Wool, who, in the last decade, began scanning and Photoshop-ing his paintings, then silkscreening them in quadrants on to paper and canvas. Wool's digital actions are not easily distinguished from his painterly ones: an athletic spate of spray-painted arabesques, wiped out by wet rags, followed by more paint, followed by more rags, actions that are redoubled in Photoshop. What results is less pictorial flatness than a depth created by the continuous withdrawal of expressive content—a withdrawal that is subsequently transmuted into digital givens (data), moving from a painting that is composed only of background to an image that is uniformly foreground.

This digital flatness is, in fact, not so distant from the flatness of the flatbed picture plane, Leo Steinberg's coinage for the heterogeneous, horizontally organized compositions of Robert Rauschenberg and others. Both planes execute a leveling of content sufficient

to democratize its selections, in other words, to incorporate everything. In the flatbed picture, the horizontal plane echoes the sprawling organization of the city (i.e., "everything"); in the flatbed scanner, the digestion of an image into pixels and codes reflects a kind of bottom-line homogeneity to visual experience. But whereas the flatbed picture plane "lends itself to any content that does not evoke a prior optical event,"[4] the digital picture plane presents all content as it has, is, or can be converted into the Esperanto of the .tiff or .jpg. The new "angulation" of the picture plane for Steinberg responded to the new urban consciousness, evoking garbage dumps, studio floors, switchboards. The new dimension of the original copy reflects a mind that lives primarily not within congested city grids, but along vast, virtual, rhizomatic networks, in the zero dimension of digital images.[5] We've traveled from flatbed paintings to zero dimension images.

New York–based artists Kelley Walker and Wade Guyton traffic in this zero dimension, deploying dashing yet treacly motifs that bridge consumer advertising

Above: Kelley Walker,
Black Star Press
(rotated 180 degrees);
Press Black Star, digital
print with silkscreened
chocolate on canvas,
two panels (104 x 83 in.),
2006. © Kelley Walker.
Courtesy Paula Cooper
Gallery, New York

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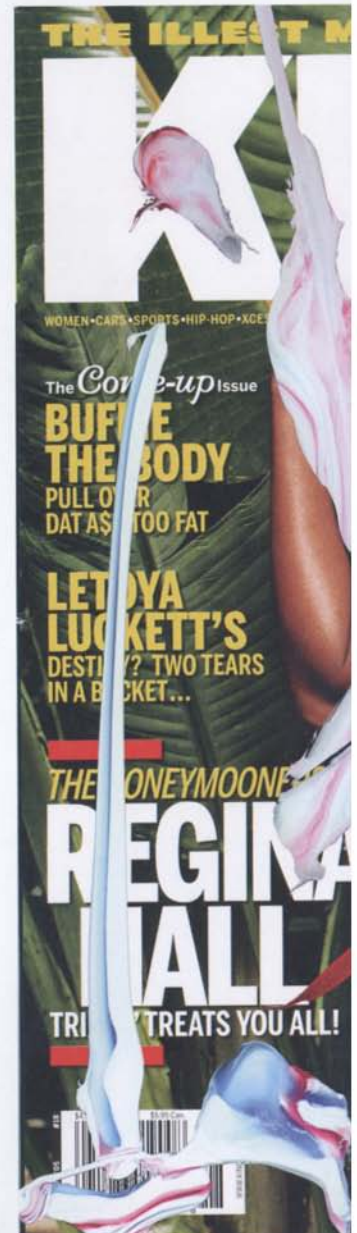
Below: Kelley Walker, *schema; Aquafresh plus Crest with Whitening Expressions (Regina Hall)*; CD ROM, scanned image, and toothpaste, digital print on archival paper [dimensions variable]. 2006. © Kelley Walker. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

and end-game painting. Guyton's untitled series of works on paper (2005–7) features pages torn from art history texts and magazines, fed through his Epson stylus inkjet printer where they are overlaid with computer graphics, stripes, or oversize *U*s and *X*s. His monochrome canvases are muscled through an indus-trial-size printer to produce fields of striated black ink, many from the same file, the formidable "bigblack.tiff." Similarly, Walker's signature works traffic in processed images, from R&B magazine covers (which he gobbed with toothpaste and rescanned) to shots of natural disasters to the photos from the Birmingham civil rights protests—already culturally reprocessed through Warhol's *Race Riots*—that he silkscreened with choco-late as if to literalize the tackiness of the contemporary image. Tim Griffin writes, "In this branded space, freedom can only ever be a performance, if it can exist at all. Hence Walker's scanned gestures openly, even flagrantly perform their own inauthenticity."

When Walker and Guyton band together as the collaboration Guyton\Walker, this performance of inauthenticity and unconstraint is pushed to all-new levels. For a 2008 exhibition at the MAMbo in Bologna, the duo assembled towers of screenprinted aluminum cans alongside prints and canvases, presided over by Jorge Pardo-esque coconut chandeliers.

Wade Guyton, installation at Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York, 2007. Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York

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Kerstin Brätsch, installation view of *Untitled 1* from "Psychics" series and *Bookshelfing unit 1*, both 2007. Courtesy the artist

A gray-scale checkerboard motif, the tabula rasa of the Photoshop composition (representing a transparent background), popped up occasionally like a "stamp of inauthenticity" on the doctored images.[6] The sheer quantity of their production—the recycling not merely of art and design (Swiss design annuals or Fischli & Weiss's photograph *Outlaws*, 1984–85) and literal *déchets* (halved fruit, chicken bones, and so forth), but of the artists' "signature styles" in themselves—indicated the boundlessness of their production, the limitless, and nearly irrepressible potential for its reproduction.

Seth Price, an ardent sampler himself and collaborator with Wade Guyton, among others, for the publication *Continuous Project*, locates the roots of an infinite production in the "extension of the digital into every sphere of life."[7] He continues, "Each reproduction is an original, each sample a new beginning, the first in an infinite sequence of beginnings. . . . There is no longer such a thing as

a copy." If there is something millenarian to his tone, there is also a note of quietus: the end of the copy, which, to follow Benjamin's reasoning, implies the end of the original as well.

For Benjamin, the missing element in even the most perfect reproduction was "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."[8] Benjamin's exception (notably identified as the rule that would transform the very nature of art) is film, which he argues exists *by virtue* of mechanical reproduction—much like the original copies at hand.[9] Its illusion takes place at the level of technological manipulations (editing), comparable with the level of today's digital manipulations (scanning, transferring, and converting). The illusion is the creation, in the first case, of a place in which the scene occurs, assembled from a series of filmed fragments and, in the second case, of a space in which the singular originary image exists, culled from an array of different file formats and resolutions.[10] The copy thus masks the fact that the image is deprived, even in the digital ether, of a "unique existence."[11] Unstable digital originals engender unstable copies; each output thus has the potential to be unique in its apparition. The authenticity, or the aura, of an artwork is no longer secured by its unique possession of a unique context; instead, everything is uniquely inauthentic (or equally authentic), as discrete, flawed transcriptions of invisible data.

For Boris Groys, this raises the possibility of "re-auratizing" the copy[12]—a possibility long practiced in museums, and more recently, in the art-without-art program of Triple Candie in Harlem (founded and run by the co-publishers of this magazine), whose 2006 survey of Cady Noland reconstructions fomented auratic unrest, and whose vast lending collection of high-quality reproductions—Museo de reproducciones fotográficas—propagates the valorization of the

Kerstin Brätsch, *Untitled 13* from "Psychics" series, oil and crayon on paper (7 x 8 ft.), 2007. Courtesy the artist

copy. Likewise, the work of Guyton, Walker, Price, and Wool could be said to glean aura from its cameos in the space of the gallery or museum and from the nimbus of market value that subsequently attends it.
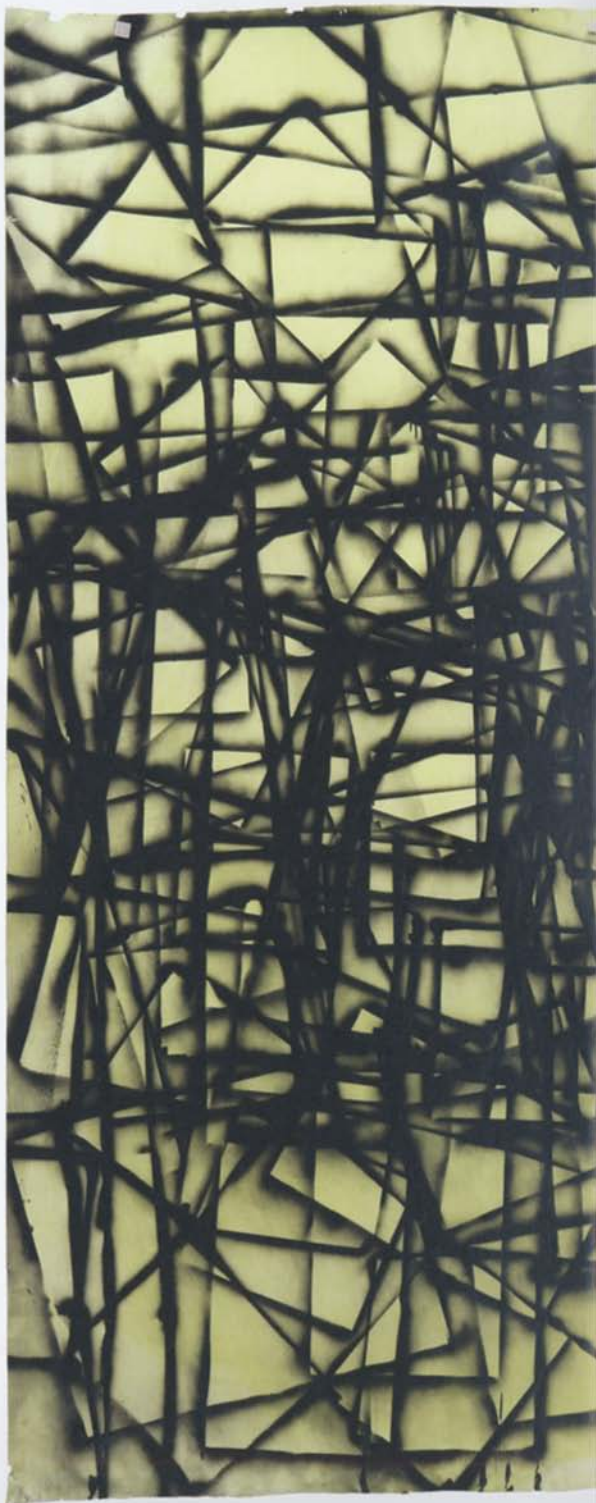
Black Aura Box (2007) by Kerstin Brätsch poses a keen and dialectical take on these postscripted auras. Inside the box are 200 double-sided color prints: copies of small oil-on-paper paintings scaled down to fit the standard page size, featuring various unnamable avatars. The box is exhibited on top of a "tablecloth," a large digital print assembling photocopied pages from one of Brätsch's other book projects, along with an "instruction manual," a kind of reversible flip book of a font grid reprinted in successively shadowy (or successively brighter) photocopies. The completeness of this compendium of auras is undermined by the ambiguity of its "instructions": either a two-way narrative of accumulation and attrition or a mute index describing an arcane allegory (perhaps that an image, like a font, exists only once it's reiterated). The box is as much a container as a sarcophagus for auratic works that once were. The copies, however, also serve as "originals" for a series of large oil-on-paper paintings, all *Untitled* (from "Psychics" series), with which the artist attempts to "stage" her belief in painting "by painting these illusive powerheads"[13]—drolly mystic forms whose "aura" has already been undermined, if not preempted by the *Black Aura Box.*
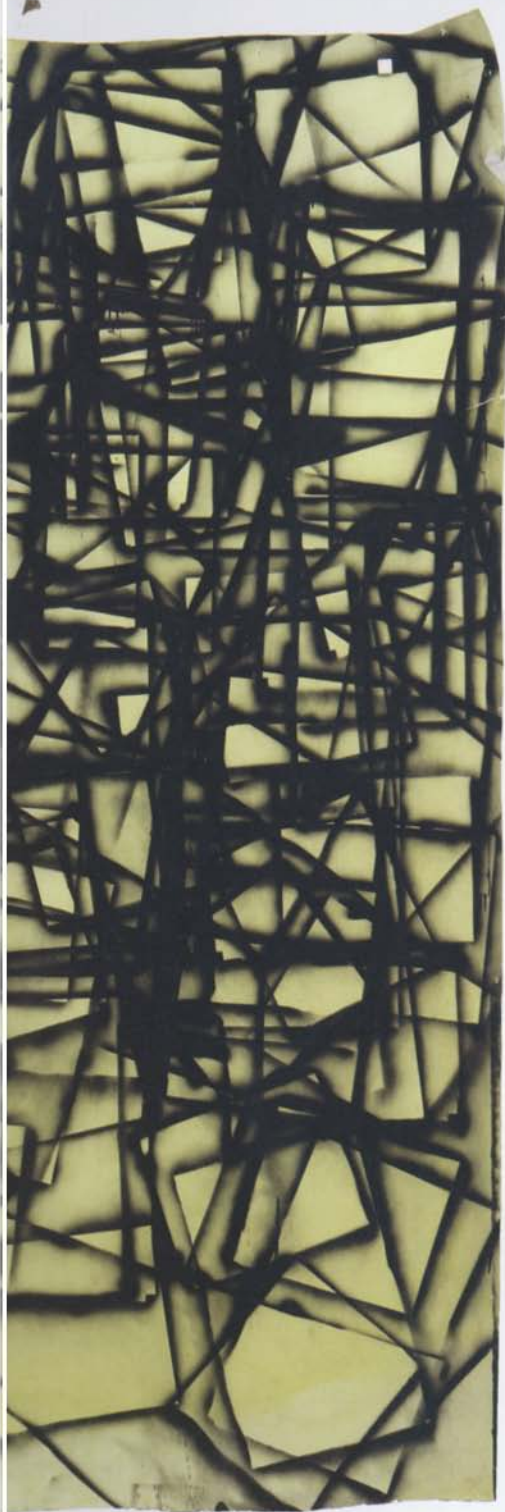
For Paris-based artist Clément Rodzielski, aura almost never had a chance. Rodzielski's inkjet prints appear provisionally between one digital invisible and another, confirming, like Brätsch's index, the will of images to incarnate themselves

This page: Kerstin Brätsch, *Untitled 20* from "Psychics" series, oil and spray paint on paper (7 x 8 ft.), 2007. Courtesy the artist

Opposite, top: Clément Rodzielski, *Untitled (A)* (detail), spray paint and gaffer's tape on B&W photocopy (31 1/2 x 48 in.), 2008. Courtesy Cardenas Bellanger, Paris

Opposite, bottom: Guyton\Walker, installation view, LAXART, Los Angeles, 2008. Courtesy Greene Naftali Gallery, New York. Photo by Joshua White

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through their repetition. Culling images from home design magazines, archives, or the web, Rodzielski produces crisp prints, fuzzy blow-ups, and, finally, diminutive, true-to-pixel-size printouts—a minimum-level intervention that shows a predilection for images not as they are, but as they cannot help but being: caught in a tide of reproductions and translations, in which the artist's move is but one of many. However, the image, Rodzielski writes, "learns something from its contradictions [of format]. It happens here or there by default, in a very relative nothingness."[14]

If original copies are always an enfeebled version of their digital source, they often distinguish themselves by incarnating their own provisional nature.[15] Even the monumental stacked cans of Guyton\Walker seem, as anyone familiar with slapstick knows, stacked only for the purpose of being knocked down. The re-auratization of the copy—the achievement of its originality in the absence of a physical origin—is by nature short lived and, perhaps for that reason, relatively unimportant. Zero dimension images retreat from aura and from context, leaving only questions in their wake.

Clément Rodzielski, from *Miroirs Noirs*, B&W photocopy (47 x 33 1/2 in.), 2008. Courtesy Cardenas Bellanger, Paris

For how exactly do you see a picture in the zero dimension, when all that will eventually be left are the vestiges of an original source file, plunged from the virtual heavens into the purgatory of technological obsolescence?

1. Boris Groys, "From Image to Image File—and Back: Art in the Age of Digitalization" in *Art Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008), 91.
2. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations* (New York: Schoken Books, 1968), 221.
3. Johanna Burton, "Rites of Silence: On the Art of Wade Guyton," in *Artforum* XLVI, no. 10, 366.
4. Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria" in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 90.
5. For a discussion of this zero dimension, see Bettina Funcke's "The Risk of Images" in *Guyton, Price, Smith, Walker* (exh. cat.) (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2008).
6. Chris Sharp, "Shows: Guyton/Walker," Frieze.com, http://www.frieze.com/shows/ review/guyton_walker/, published February 29, 2008.
7. Seth Price, "Unique Source/All Natural Suicide Gang" in *New York Twice* (exh. cat.), ed. Bettina Funcke (for "New York Twice," curated by Fabrice Stroun, Air de Paris), 12.
8. Benjamin, op. cit., 220.
9. Ibid. See note 7, 244.
10. As Benjamin observed of film, the mechanisms have so deeply penetrated reality that the image they create is free of all equipment. Film thus produces the illusion of a plausible, unmediated reality—which is the very "height of artifice." Original copies produce the illusion of a plausible *original artwork*, hovering intact in the ether (it is, in fact, only more to the point that the edits

in these copies—unlike the edits in films—are visible and even emphasized by the artist, in a gesture of showing his hand in the digital manipulations; the more textured the copy, the stronger the illusion of its singular origin). As such, Benjamin's claim that film represented the greatest paradigm shift in the nature in artworks may at last have been directly realized—seventy years after the fact.
11. These "digital file copies" are either clones or translations; their reproduction only increases the possibilities of variation in the physical copies. But though they affect the output of copies, they can hardly be said to fall under the same concepts of originality. The space in which a unique file is uniquely "stored" is only metaphorical; the file, indeed, has identity and integrity only so long as there are machines to read it.
12. Boris Groys, "Politics of Installation" in *E-Flux Journal*, no.2, January 2009.
13. Kerstin Brätsch, personal correspondence with the artist, March 2, 2009.
14. Clément Rodzielski, press release for "Grands a" at Cardenas Bellanger, Paris, February 23–March 22, 2008. "Elle apprend quelque chose de ses contradictions. Elle se tient ici ou là par défaut, dans un très relatif néant." [Author's translation.]
15. There are exceptions to this—Wool's handsomely framed impressions, for instance—but even these appeal to precariousness: printed on paper, like most of the works mentioned here, only their frames seem to shield them from the ravages of time, etc.

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