

# Brand Immersion

**“I think clinging to ‘indie culture’ or avoiding commercialization is outdated. That kind of cultural capital can be quickly traded in [...] With the Internet, there’s almost nothing so inaccessible that it can preserve its supposed authenticity.”<sup>1</sup> — Greg Parma Smith**

**With the rise of Web 2.0, the context of art – its currents and networks – has changed. The circulation of images has intensified, and categories and labels proliferate in the flattening, accelerating streams and feeds of social media sites, where images accumulate**



**Pierre Lumineau, Mit Weleda und Bluetooth, 2010**  
Digital image, courtesy of the artist

**visual capital through shares and likes, regardless of where the images are from, who made them, and what purpose they initially served. Artists who insert their works in these online image streams**

engage with a non-specific art context – a space that Jessie Darling has compared to suburban strip malls and shopping centers.<sup>2</sup> Platforms such as Facebook and Tumblr accumulate images within their regulated frameworks and display ever-new images at a rapid speed, collapsing all kinds of contexts into one big media feed. In order for images to survive, they need to be reblogged and spread by being adapted and manipulated. The buzz of the reblog has, according to David Joselit, replaced the aura of an artwork: “the status of being everywhere at once rather than belonging to a single place [...] now produces value for and through images.”<sup>3</sup> Against this backdrop, artists who reflect and work with the current online culture seem increasingly interested in commercial strategies and images: brands, consumer goods, and logos play an important role in their work.



Anne de Vries, *Steps of Recursion Tuned*, 2012  
Stainless steel construction with photo prints on  
PETG plastic, courtesy of the artist

Looking at the digital image and comparing it to the rules according to which brands function, this affinity comes as no surprise. Like digital images, brands can exist in different, potentially infinite versions. They are reproduced through modularity, much in the same way that digital content evolves and gains popularity through modulation and adaptation. Their evolution is dependent on gaining visual capital, by being spread and adapted. Like the organisms of digital visual culture, they build a structure of references that is embedded in the DNA of the current active version of the image of the branded good. Within this process, affect – being emotionally recognizable and alluding to a specific feeling – plays a key role as a relational force through which brands circulate and nestle themselves in our collective unconscious. Online images and brands thus both have the same agendas, needs and desires when it comes to living and flourishing online.

At the same time, the logics of the art system also affect the economy at large. The artist has become a model for the creative entrepreneur well beyond the art world, and artistic labour is valued and used by companies as a creative way to tackle problems. Moreover, it can be argued that branded goods have essentially borrowed the economic tactics that art employs, emphasizing symbolic value over use value.

Artists like Anne de Vries, Timur Si-Qin and Pamela Rosenkranz comment on and celebrate the surfaces, visual regimes and aesthetic potentials of branded goods: they work with visual identities of logos; rework, assemble and collect images of branded goods, and turn consumer goods into sculptures. In Anne de Vries' sculpture series *Steps of Recursions Tuned*, a pair of Nike Air Tuned seems to have liquefied, multiplied and subsequently solidified into sculptures, estranging and at the same time intensifying the visual impact of the surface of this consumer product. Moreover, the work highlights the ease with which images are translated into different material aggregations in our current material and visual culture.

Commercial strategies and tactics are currently employed with a heightened intensity in contemporary artistic production.<sup>4</sup>

**Andrew Norman Wilson's project *Sone*,<sup>5</sup> in which he produces stock footage, is one example of this entanglement. Noticing a lack of images that represent people's fears and anxiety in the available stock imagery of today, the artist aims to bridge this gap in the market with his own image production company. Pitching to investors using short texts about the videos and images he wants to create, he finances the production of new material by raising funds. The videos and images produced are then sold on commercial stock image sites such as Getty Images, Pond 5, iStock as well as in art galleries. The resulting profits are divided between the artist and the investor. With such a practice, the artist has thus appropriated commercial strategies to produce and sell images that are both commercial products as well as art objects.**



Andrew Norman Wilson, Moping drunk CEO on a thick fur rug wearing unbuttoned Theory dress slacks and wrapped in a KLM airplane blanket receives a call from HSBC Bank and gradually begins to sob while taking their automated customer satisfaction survey, 2013, HD video, sourced from iStock, part of the project *Sone*

**Several recent exhibitions have looked at the entanglement of consumer product and art object, such as *DISown – Not For Everyone*, an exhibition that took place in New York this year.<sup>6</sup> The curator Agatha Wara commissioned artists to create product lines based on existing artworks, to investigate how artworks can work as high-end retail goods and in a gallery set up as a luxury store. Similarly, the contemporary art space Nest in den Haag stylized its last exhibition that took place this spring as a Concept Store and employed its presentation strategies to showcase works as products.<sup>7</sup> And this article itself is a continuation of the exhibition I curated at S.A.L.T.S. in Birsfelden in 2014 entitled *Brands –***



*Concept / Affect / Modularity*, which looked at the entanglement of branded imagery / internet culture and art objects.<sup>8</sup> Commerce and art seem increasingly attracted to each other.<sup>9</sup> This entanglement was also evident before the emergence of Web 2.0, even with artists who engaged with the internet in its older forms. The artist collective/corporation etoy<sup>10</sup>, the self-declared “market



Kari Altmann, Ttoshibaa website, screenshots accessed in July 2014

leader in contemporary art” that has been working with and on the net since 1994, is an example. In the climate of economic hype that surrounded the internet in the late 1990s and that later resulted in the burst of the dot-com bubble, etoy embarked on what they called a *Toywar* with the multinational corporation eToys. The war was fought over the domain etoy.com that the artist collective occupied and still occupies today. After an unsuccessful

attempt to buy the domain from the artist collective, eToys threatened etoy with a lawsuit. etoy's *Toywar* response included selling "shares", online protests and sit-ins, counter suits and an extensive media campaign. The artist collective was victorious and the lawsuit was eventually dropped.<sup>11</sup>

Today, however, with the increasing commodification of every aspect of our lives, the collapse of contexts as it occurs online, and the imperative to share artistic production at a rapid speed – Brad Troemel has coined the term "Athletic Aesthetics"<sup>12</sup> for the kind of self-branding overproduction required to stay visible online – art seems to engage with commerce at a heightened intensity.

By building on the visual capital of branded images, artists work with an image currency that has already been tested and was carefully crafted to be successful on the market. Neoliberal market strategies are already embedded in them. This leads to the question of whether using branded images and the fetishizing consumer goods such as sneakers is simply a quick way to intensify the value of their own visual capital. This critique is intrinsic to working with commercial images, and is connected to the question of whether critique is possible with appropriation. How much distance and transformation is required to make a statement beyond the appropriated image/object itself in order to say something about the imagery employed?

Looking at the history of appropriation in relation to critique, Isabelle Graw traces the roots of appropriating images to the postmodern culture of the 1980s, with the readymade and Pop Art as precursors of this development. Appropriation Art in the 1980s built on these traditions, by also – just as with Pop Art – drawing on commercial images, except for the fact that at that time "the clearly visible artistic manipulation of media images, such as Warhol's screen prints that he later printed over were no longer a criterion or more to the point, were no longer supposed to be a criterion."<sup>13</sup> Appropriation could thus be more literal and didn't need an obvious transformation. It was, however, only an accepted technique as long as the artist was "subversively infiltrating" the image system he or she used, to use the common lingo of the time.

An artist needed to “intervene.” In Graw’s words: “Every time a work of art seemed to suggest that an artist could also perhaps be fascinated or even be overwhelmed by his or her material, then this was seen as a danger, perhaps even the greatest danger of appropriation. The appropriation artists who allowed themselves to be overwhelmed by their own material had given up and joined the enemy camp.”<sup>14</sup> In line with Graw and contrary to the concept of appropriation which prevailed in the 1980s and lives on in art criticism today, I suggest that appropriation is not a process in which the artist is in full control of the material he or she manipulates. Rather, it should be seen “as a process of mutual influence in which the dynamic of the appropriated material is transferred to the appropriator. Thus I propose an interpretation of artistic appropriation that allows the appropriated material a certain momentum and in which the possibility that the artist is enthused by this dynamic is feasible. [...] The object infects the person and something transfers from it to the person.”<sup>15</sup> Graw furthermore suggests that it should be thought of as a complex, interactive relationship.

Departing from this, I argue that the visual capital introduced by branded images is indeed intensifying the image-value of an artwork by alluding to an emotionally charged image that comes already pre-packaged to these artworks. But then the artwork also intensifies, re-directs and complicates the appropriated images. These artworks highlight a contemporary condition, the condition of hyper-commodification. The artists mentioned here are aligning themselves with these images, by building on the image-value ubiquitous brands have accumulated and using this potential. But then there is more to it too. Instead of resisting the lure of these images, artists rather intensify – or to use the fashionable term – accelerate their capacities. This sense of complicity is a given when working with appropriated images. This becomes especially clear when looking at the work of Kari Altmann. Branding strategies have informed her work in various ways, leading to her series *Soft Brand Abstract*<sup>16</sup> – an investigation of how brands mutate and shape their appearance over time. By looking at brands and drawing on their affinities with digital images, Altmann explores the status of the digital image and traces the evolution of visual content in today’s image culture.



Kari Altmann, *Ttoshibaa: 10,000 Impressions*, 2009–ongoing  
 Blanket, monitor, slide-show, dimensions variable, installation image Brands –  
 Concept/Affect/Modularity at S.A.L.T.S. 2014. Photo by Gunnar Meier

An interesting take on critique and complicity is provided by Altmann's work *Ttoshibaa: 10,000 Impressions*, a visual feed on which she has been working since 2009 and in which she continues to aggregate, accumulate, re-purpose and re-brand images. This work essentially consists of a group of pictures Altmann found online. The images are shown on a Facebook page<sup>17</sup> and a webpage<sup>18</sup> on which they form a layered environment through which visitors can move. The work has also been exhibited as an installation consisting of a blanket onto which one of the pictures was printed as well as a slide show with other images from the feed.<sup>19</sup> This feed functions in its totality as a visual organism, a brand with a distinct identity which is at the same time hard to pin down. Altmann named this group of images after the technology company Toshiba, so appropriating the feelings evoked in her by the Toshiba brand. In Altmann's words: "When I see Toshiba ads they look like they come from a distant world, and working with these things is a way of playing with the divide between super distance and total intimacy."



Toshiba is a part of my mental landscape, it's made impressions on my mind."<sup>20</sup> Using this emotional framework that she has borrowed from a brand which is on her mind, or rather at her fingertips as she scrolls through image feeds online, she then explores its essence by accumulating and re-appropriating images.

The appropriated brand works as a point of reference, an emotional framework, and an underlying current for the evolving archive. Altmann doesn't intervene in the Toshiba branding cosmos; she is fascinated by it and inhabits it as a method, a strategy to create her work. The dynamic of the appropriated brand becomes an actant, a thing that acts in her work, much in the sense as Graw describes it. Looking at these images and the ways in which they display surfaces, textures and materials is seductive because of the commercial halo that surrounds them. At the same time, there is always more than this attractive, luring quality, an element that escapes the viewer's eye when these images are looked at together as an image feed, or individually. This feeling of a subtle dissonance has to do with the coherence of the image archive, which is wilfully inexplicit – a meme that builds on a very personal image sensibility rather than a branding strategy that reveals itself as a clear concept. The work thus complicates the legibility of memes and image feeds, and questions the often overly present branding strategies used within the art world. To me, this also becomes apparent in the images themselves: by cropping them, partially blurring them, or otherwise subtly manipulating them, the images still possess a commercial halo, but also evoke a feeling of unease. It is crucial to point to the fact that “intervening” in the commercial realm, as Graw described it for the appropriation art in the 1980s, and as it is often still used today, to demarcate a critical approach towards working with commercial images, fails to acknowledge our contemporary reality. In Altmann's words: “Things aren't as simple as ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the larger structures of what pop culture and corporate culture are. Instead it's about finding forms of work that can survive in a blended climate without sacrificing the difference, without being aggregated by a different intent. Every image gets a deeper read, gets multiple breakdowns, as it flows through different environments. Context is key.”<sup>21</sup>

**Brands provide powerful image structures that are attractive to work with. In the “blended climate” of our contemporary reality, commerce and art have become increasingly interwoven. Contexts collapse and artworks nestle and travel through the non-specific art contexts of the current online environment. It is necessary to acknowledge this entanglement and to realize that the boundaries have become blurry – that there is a mutual influence, an “infection”, in Graw’s terms, that very much thrives on fascination, lure, and emotional engagement. It is this acknowledgment that locates contemporary critique.**

- 1 Greg Parma Smith in an interview with Brienne Walsh, *Art in America*, February 7, 2012 <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/greg-parma-smith-balice-hertling-lewis>
- 2 Jesse Darling, *Arcades, Mallrats and Tumblr Thugs*, *New Inquiry*, February 13, 2012, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/arcades-mallrats-tumblr-thugs/>.
- 3 David Joselit, *After Art*, 2013, p. 16.
- 4 See also Christopher Kulendran Thomas' article on this topic: Christopher Kulendran Thomas, *Art & Commerce. Ecology beyond Spectatorship*, *DIS Magazine*, March 7, 2014 <http://dismagazine.com/discussion/59883/art-commerce-ecology-beyond-spectatorship>
- 5 <http://www.andrewnormanwilson.com/Sone.html>
- 6 <http://disown.dismagazine.com>
- 7 <http://nestruimte.nl/nl/nu>
- 8 [www.salts.ch](http://www.salts.ch)
- 9 This also leads to questionable/rather absurd endeavours, such as Marina Abramovic's latest collaboration with Adidas to produce a video based on one of her performances with the sport brand in support of the FIFA World Cup in Brazil [http://showstudio.com/project/adidas\\_x\\_marina\\_abramovic](http://showstudio.com/project/adidas_x_marina_abramovic)
- 10 <http://www.etoy.com/projects>
- 11 Fiona Raby and Anthony Dunne, *Design Noir. The Secret Life of Electronic Objects*, 2001, p. 61
- 12 Brad Troemel, *Athletic Aesthetics*, *The New Inquiry*, May 10, 2013 <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/athletic-aesthetics>
- 13 Isabelle Graw, *Dedication Replacing Appropriation. Fascination, Subversion, and Dispossession in Appropriation Art*, p. 55 in: *Louise Lawler and Others*, edited by Philipp Kaiser, 2004
- 14 Isabelle Graw, *Dedication Replacing Appropriation*, p. 52
- 15 Isabelle Graw, op. cit. p. 54
- 16 <http://lunch-bytes.com/platform/archive/soft-brand-abstracts/>
- 17 <https://www.facebook.com/pages/ToshibaA/126394714078035>
- 18 <http://ttoshibaa.org>
- 19 As part of the exhibition *Brands – Concept! Affect! Modularity* at S.A.L.T.S. on view from April 12 until May 18 2004. [www.salts.ch](http://www.salts.ch)
- 20 E-mail exchange between the author and Kari Altmann, April 15, 2014.
- 21 Kari Altmann in an interview with Jean Kay on aqnb, June 5, 2014 <http://www.aqnb.com/2014/06/05/an-interview-with-kari-altmann>