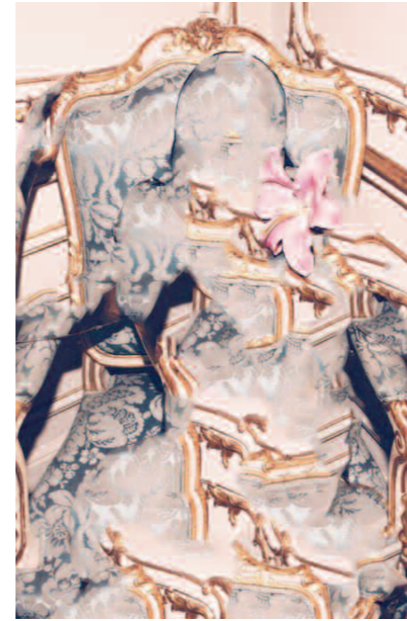


## Enrico Boccioletti Content Aware



## Content Awareness Domenico Quaranta

In recent months two incidents have fanned the flames of the ongoing debate on the concept of originality in art. The first was the legal ruling in March 2011 against the artist Richard Prince in a copyright infringement lawsuit brought by the French photographer Patrick Cariou, after Prince used a photographic reportage by Cariou on the Rastafarian community in some of his collages. The second was sparked by a phrase used by the English painter David Hockney in the manifesto of "A Bigger Picture", his solo show at the Royal Academy in London<sup>[1]</sup>: "All the works here were made by the artist himself, personally." This statement was immediately read as a criticism of Damien Hirst and all the other artists who, like him, often have their work done by assistants. The debate immediately forked into two opposing factions: "appropriationists" versus "original creators", "producers" versus "designers". In this battle contemporary art has acquired a reactionary, conservative guise: a world of rich, famous artists earning hundreds of thousands of euros from the labours of others, be they "original producers" (like the "poor" Patrick Cariou) whose images they have filched, or the underpaid interns slogging away on "their" works of art. Vice versa, the rebellion against the post-modern and the "old" notion of the artist-creator have acquired an avant-garde flavour. "Enough of Duchamp's idiot offspring! Revisitations are 20th century stuff. Fuck stupid pop art, Warhol and his stupid fucking soup! The new exists. Up with the Avant-garde!", a friend wrote to me commenting on the Prince affair. There are various holes in the way the debate has been framed. Diametric oppositions like this serve little purpose when we are dealing with a



Marianna Mazzanti, Via del Caggio, 128, 52020-Moncioni AR (2011)  
Thorsten Kuhn, Paderborner Strasse 52, 86570 Inchenhofen (2012)  
Absalón Varela Bueno, 68 Seaford Road, CUL-LIGRAN, IV4 1ES (2012)  
Digital print, 29x20 cm

phenomenon as ambiguous, multifaceted and complex as art. There have always been artists who view actually producing art as vitally important, and other artists who rely on helpers, collaborations and the skill sets of others to produce their works. Agnes Martin obviously felt it was crucial for her to trace her own grids, while Damien Hirst reckoned that painting thousands of coloured dots himself would have been a waste of time. Both options are legit, and hardly mutually exclusive. There is no such thing as then and now, old and new. Art is all of this and much more simultaneously. By the same token, it is becoming increasingly meaningless to oppose appropriationists and creators. Revisitations might well be the stuff of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as my friend points out, but there is nothing more 21<sup>st</sup> century than appropriation. Post modern is dead, but the final nail was not hammered into its coffin by "original creators" à la Cariou, or the law that still remains firmly on their side, but by a combination of three keys that can be found on

any computer keyboard: CTRL+C, CTRL+V. The explosion of copy and paste practices has done away with the ideological trappings of appropriation, which has become as natural and immediate as breathing. Previously existing material is not cited or revisited, but used as raw material. As the artist Stephen Frailey says: "For the generation that I spend my days with, there's not even any ideological baggage that comes along with appropriation anymore. They feel that once an image goes into a shared digital space, it's just there for them to change, to elaborate on, to add to, to improve, to do whatever they want with it. They don't see this as a subversive act. They see the Internet as a collaborative community and everything on it as raw material."<sup>[2]</sup> The reason this is still talked about is because, as the founder of Creative Commons underlines in his book *Free Culture*, the law is moving in the opposite direction, against art and artists.<sup>[3]</sup> This is result of pressure from music and film industry top brass, but also the claim-staking of those like Cariou, who want a piece of the action

– to garner a modicum of the success that their work, on its own merit, would never have achieved.

The reproducibility of digital data, and the ease with which it can be manipulated, have been common knowledge since the dawn of the information era, but the sweeping impact of this on the production and circulation of cultural artefacts has only become evident in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Production tools have become increasingly accessible, cheap and easy to use. To manage and display this vast cultural outpouring, a plethora of photo sharing platforms have sprung up, and the production tools have responded to this development by making publication easy and automatic. Ours is the "click and share" society: production is instantaneous and sharing comes immediately after. The licence we decide to use when sharing what we produce is of little importance: those who share take up, manipulate and re-share with equal ease. We break dozens of laws without even realising. All of this regards not only the generation that Stephen Frailey spends his time with: the same principle applies

Cover  
Connie K. Ford, 81 Williams Lane,  
Wichita, KS 67202 (2012)  
Digital print, 29x20 cm

equally to some of the incidents that have most impacted on the social life of the global community in recent years. Take Wikileaks, for example: in July 2010 the non-profit organisation published hundreds of confidential military documents regarding the war in Afghanistan, causing the US government and the entire international community more than a spot of bother. None of this would have been possible were it not for the principle that when a piece of information exists in digital form it can be copied (and therefore circulated). And take the “protester” hailed by *Time* magazine as person of the year 2011. The ‘Anonymous’ movement, that came into being in 2011, is a non-identity shared by hackers, activists and ordinary people who, when protesting against Scientology or global finance, wear a Guy Fawkes mask in honour of the English gunpowder plotter popularised by Alan Moore’s comic book and subsequently the Wachowski brothers’ film, *V for Vendetta* (2005). And it is an apt mask for a movement that was born on a forum, 4chan, where thousands of people converge to manipulate and comment on images, giving rise to the viral ideas otherwise known as memes.

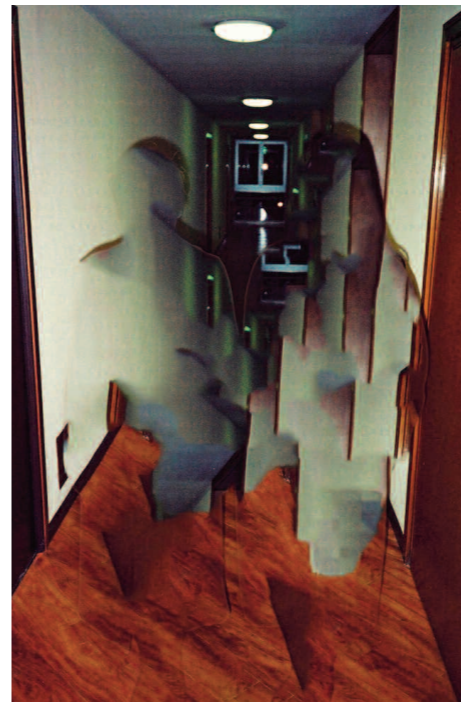
But if appropriation has become a natural thing, losing the ideological connotations that characterised the Appropriation Art of the 1980s, the conflict between “appropriationists” and “original creators” should be running out of steam by now. Indeed the most interesting work around at the moment is by artists who could be described, not without irony, as skilled in the craft of postproduction. Their modus operandi largely challenges the binary opposition we mentioned at the beginning.

Like David Hockney, they do their own work, but without making this a question of principle. They almost always start their work in front of a computer, fingers moving swiftly over the keyboard. They hardly ever stop there, but the origin is important, because it leaves an indelible mark. Even when the end result is an oil painting on canvas, painted by their own hand or outsourced to a Chinese painting farm. These are works that come to life in collaboration with one or more software programmes, at times used with a high level of professional skill and at others with nonchalant amateurism, merely deploying default options. They are works that, with equal nonchalance, encompass original creations and material found on the internet. They often arise from dialogue with others, as a response to the work of others. Some are based on collaborative platforms, others actually are collaborative platforms. Sometimes the original materials are left intact and the artist merely selects, collects, classifies and orders them into a collection; while in other instances they are reprocessed to such a degree that it is almost impossible to make out the source material.

Enrico Boccioletti is one such artist, highly skilled in the craft of post production. In his work both as a musician and performer, and as a visual artist, there are no pieces that do not originate elsewhere, in some pre-existing material produced by someone else. Yet it would be a mistake to see him as another Richard Prince. Take *One Month Forkast* (2011) for example, one of his simplest, most radical works. The work consists in an empty site dominated by a static image. Visually it could hardly be more insignificant. The image is the screenshot of a tiny detail of the address bar of a web page,



enlarged beyond recognition. What strikes us when we visit it is not the visual aspect of the work, but rather - especially if our computer’s speakers are on - the wall of sound, initially intelligible, that rapidly evolves into pure noise. The mechanism is a very simple one. The work consists in a piece of code that retrieves dozens of MP3s from the site of the music magazine Pitchfork, which publishes a podcast entitled Forkast. Specifically, *One Month Forkast* uses the tracks that were made available by Forkast in the month the work was created, namely from 25 January to 25 February 2011. All the tracks start up automatically, in random order, at a pace that varies according to a number of external variables: the time of access to the server, the speed of the connection. Although it uses archived material, the work is therefore a performance that takes place live in front of the viewer and that is always different, at every



access and to every viewer, though some things remain constant: we are faced with an empty page, following a sound as it is engulfed by an overfull abyss of unsustainable accumulation, generating a noise which results from a stratification of harmonies. Interestingly, Forkast is used purely as a tool. The podcast offers sounds from a robust server that can be accumulated, nothing more. The operation performed is one of disarming simplicity, yet we perceive a sense of violence, the desire to assault the spectator, rousing us from the state of distracted apathy in which we move from one webpage to another, and to assail music itself, turning it into something more than an irrelevant soundtrack to our everyday activities.

There is a similar brand of aggression, concealed behind a minimal gesture, in the series of prints *Content Aware* (2011). The series takes its name

Daniel A. King, 3361 Pratt Avenue,  
Stanwood, WA 98292 (2011)  
Domenica Zetticci, Via Santa Maria  
di Costantinopoli, 34, 46040-San  
Fermo MN (2011)  
Digital print, 29x20 cm

from a function introduced in 2010 in the latest version of Photoshop <sup>[4]</sup>, the well known photo editing software programme: an “intelligent” algorithm enables the user to remove an element, automatically replacing it with new content which is generated by the programme in accordance with the background. This is how the Photoshop site presents the function: “Remove any image detail or object and watch as Content-Aware Fill magically fills in the space left behind. This breakthrough technology matches lighting, tone, and noise so it looks as if the removed content never existed.” In other words the tool automatises a very complex process, putting it within the reach of any amateur. Boccioletti makes a fairly banal alternative use of this tool. He appropriates fashion photographs found on the net, selects the area corresponding to the figure or various parts of its anatomy and asks the software to fill in these areas at will. He makes no further modifications. Yet the large size of the selected area and its importance compared to the background creates some problems for the software, which is designed to deal with much smaller areas, causing it to make approximations and mistakes that Boccioletti accepts as surprising random side effects. In the best case scenario, what is left behind is a light trace, a ghost of the deleted figure, while in the most extreme cases the software generates monsters: bodies without arms or faces, replicated anatomical parts, clothes dressing an empty space, Cubist interiors, eyes staring at us out of wallpaper. Each of these identities annihilated or absorbed into the surrounding setting, yet still present in some way, is given a name, a credible and precise identity by Boccioletti, using a Fake Name Generator found on the internet <sup>[5]</sup>.

Yet again, extremely simple formal strategies are deployed to generate extremely sophisticated result. Boccioletti’s images are created for the web, for mass, rapid consumption, the same type of consumption that is the destiny of the fashion photographs he uses as his starting point. By introducing anomalies, the artist in some way rescues them from this brand of consumption, demanding greater attention be devoted to them. His artistic culture also comes into play, drawing bizarre parallels with Western visual art: Impressionist painting, geometric abstraction, hyperrealism, surrealism. He makes them meaningful once more. He forces us to think about their aberrant nature as entities that are part consumer image, part work of art. He adds content.

- [1] “David Hockney RA: A Bigger Picture”. London, Royal Academy, 21 January – 9 April 2012.
- [2] Cit. in Randy Kennedy, “Apropos Appropriation”, in *The New York Times*, 28 December 2011. Online at [www.nytimes.com/2012/01/01/arts/design/richard-prince-lawsuit-focuses-on-limits-of-appropriation.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/01/arts/design/richard-prince-lawsuit-focuses-on-limits-of-appropriation.html).
- [3] Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture*, 2004.
- [4] The Adobe Creative Suite CS5, launched in February 2010.
- [5] Online at <http://it.fakenamegenerator.com/>.

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**Content Aware**

Curated by Domenico Quaranta

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