

Nickas, Bob. "Kelley Walker. Collision's Course." In *Theft Is Vision*, 208–215.
Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2007

Kelley Walker. Collision's Course

Text first published in *Purple*, Spring 2003.

Just when I thought I didn't have time for another new artist, these odd posters started popping up in shows. From the first one I saw, with part of a house and most of a swimming pool precariously dangled from a hillside in Maui, I was hooked. An image of "the good life" as so much wreckage came with the slogan: "fight capitalism: reappropriate."

The title sent it into another unexpected direction: *Then We Joked That We Had Always Wanted a Sunken Living Room*. The hill had fallen out from under the house, and the joke had fallen out from under the poster. Politics with a punch line? What kind of agitprop was this anyway? And what other collisions had Kelley Walker happily set into motion?

As more of his works appeared—whether architectural or photographic, handmade or found—there was one thing they had in common: they were all self-aware. Each piece seemed a reflection on its own status as an object, on its own circumstance

as exhibited, and contradictions formed an important part of the investigation. Sculptural works would provide a surface for yet another surface; posters would refer to a space outside themselves, a potentially infinite space. The work was conceptual yet revolved around an over-saturated image-world, with an almost giddy taste for opticality and the psychedelic. When Kelley began to exhibit mirror pieces, his own hand-cut Rorschach patterns in color, even the idea of reflection had been turned in on itself. It was time to find out what he had to say for himself ...

BN *A freeway collapsed in an earthquake, a hotel on fire, an airplane with part of its fuselage blown away, a flooded town. These are just some of the images in your poster work. The pictures you recycle put me in the mind of a line by Tom Verlaine: "I love disaster ... and I love what comes after."*

KW Lately the images of disasters I really like are of buildings that retain some definitive architectural character and, due to the disaster, acquire something more. An image I found of The Ronan Point Tower collapse of 1968 is an example. The Tower was one of hundreds of prefabricated structures to go up in Europe after the war. In this building a woman hooked up a gas line incorrectly and when she lit the stove one morning to brew some tea it exploded, blowing out an exterior wall and causing the floors above to fall.

Then all the floors below collapsed.

Right. And most people were asleep at the time. They were abruptly awakened to find that their living rooms and kitchens were gone. The image I found shows the building mostly still standing with only a section collapsed. I like thinking about it as a perverse collaboration between the engineer who builds for the anonymous and the individual who actually inhabits the space.

Pictures like that can be fascinating, but you're always at a real remove. None of that fell on me ...

Right, I'm safe and I have the photograph as guilty pleasure.

You've recently grouped posters together in a grid. It reminded me of a display of TVs in a store window, with some horror story played out on every channel. You added an overlay of intensely-colored bubbles, as if we were somehow at a child's birthday party ... It reminds me of how people describe something as pretty horrible ... pretty ugly ... pretty disgusting ...

When I made those I was actually thinking about the color dots as similar to printing dots, like you see in Lichtenstein or Polke, which I think of as the "root" of the printed. Instead of applying something to its opposite, like the word "ugly" to "pretty," I was interested in applying the root to its potential realization, in this case the represented image, and present that as representation. I also thought about Op as having a visual quality similar to images of disaster. When I see one or the other I can't stop looking. So I wondered what would happen if I brought Op and disaster together in one image.

For someone who also builds objects, in your attraction to images of bridges, roadways, and buildings that have been destroyed, you seem to be saying something about sculpture ...

I think of my posters as sculpture. I went to art school in Tennessee and I basically learned about sculpture through images in books and art magazines. Now I realize that I always had to imagine what the back of an object looked like. When I started making my own objects they would usually consist of flat planes in space. Likewise, during any attempt at photographing my sculpture I would end up feeling frustrated. So I began to work with an image of an object, skipping the physical object altogether. At times starting with the sculpture as representation makes sense to me and there's no back to worry about.

You made a piece with a slightly smashed car windshield. It was bought by a collector who came home and found it had fallen in on itself. The car had an accident, and then the piece had an accident. The piece looked even better like that, but the collector didn't exactly agree. I like that collecting is a kind of disaster, too.

The windshield had been in a car wreck, and when I got it I smashed it up some more with a two by four. Someone



Kelley Walker, *Schema: Aquafresh Plus Crest with Whitener*, 2003
Originally produced as a poster with CD Rom

bought it and within a week called and said that it had collapsed and could I come get it. In this case, the act of rendering the object useless/worthless made it valuable, and for the collector it had to retain the exact shape my violence randomly forced onto the windshield. The pull of gravity actually made it worthless in the end. So I brought the piece home and smashed it up even more. Later it was sold to another collector. As of yet, I haven't received a call to tell me the piece is broken and could I take it back.

Your posters almost always have inserted slogans, "resist capitalism," for example, followed by lines like "support failure" or "interrogate spatial relationships" or simply "reappropriate." What's going on here?

The poster format itself is important for me. It functions as an object, initiating an interaction between itself and the viewer, which is closer to sculpture than photography. The poster acknowledges the viewer via text, borders, graphics, etc. and sets up a one-on-one relationship. This is the same sort of relationship one encounters when approaching an object in space. With this understanding I relate the poster to the other and its image to sculpture, and often I play out advertisement or propaganda strategies on the surface, not in an attempt to market but to investigate a phenomenology of that image.

These images are all contained on disks, and you state that "nothing besides the signed disk is considered to be a saleable work of art ..." Meaning that posters hung in galleries or eventually collectors' homes are really only posters, like the souvenir you might bring back from a concert. You have your memory of the music, just like a computer has the memory of the image that can now go out in the world.

In this way my posters do function like a souvenir in that they refer to an object and experience which is physically outside themselves, but intrinsic to their construction. I see these disks as architectural, like a museum, in which the art object is housed. But with the disk the art object is also locked away, and it's within this virtual space that the art object is directly experienced and manipulated.

You encourage the sharing of this work. "The disk and the image it contains can be reproduced and disseminated as often as the holder desires. Whoever receives a copy of the disk or image can likewise reproduce/disseminate either as desired ... " As far as I know, none of the appropriation artists of the '80s, even acknowledging the importance of their strategies, were that free with their work.

I've recently decided to change the conditions of the posters. I still allow for the complete dissemination/reproduction and altering of the image itself, but now I'm making each poster as an edition of one. I think this makes clearer my intent, and the role the collector plays in the production of the art object is more active. The collector is allowed to physically define the outcome of the art object: is it going to be unique or disseminated and transformed? I also think by allowing the image to potentially lose the context I've defined, through the exact same process that I've used in an attempt to resuscitate it—through Photoshop—my own fallacies become implicated.

Which artists from that time are important to you?

Warhol, Richter, Polke, and of the '80s appropriation artists it would be Richard Prince and Cady Noland ... but I think everyone is an appropriation artist.

Although you allow for the images to be manipulated by those who receive them, you lay claim to whatever follows. "All forms of reproduction/deviation derived from the image on the disk signed Kelley Walker perpetuates a continuum correlating to the artwork ... " In effect, you reappropriate your own work!

Yes. This is really interesting to me. Once my work has entered the field of spectacle and representation I feel it's up for grabs for new versions. Maybe this relates back to something you once said: "Is everything today tragic?" Maybe it is, and by reappropriating my own work there is an attempt to rescue it, reinvent it, or resuscitate it somehow.

Lately you've been using images of turntables, suffusing them with incredibly florid, psychedelic patterns, as if this was some sort of strange music flowing from them.

I was interested in the poster not only as art and the representation of art—itself—but also as the apparatus that sells the art, so starting with ads of a designer good made sense to me. With the psychedelic I was interested in vibrancy, the decorative and the frivolous, as an immediate visual experience without any object at all. The turntable images became a site where I thought this could occur, and music seemed like a good analogy for this idea. Also the stereo is a multiple that becomes specific when someone plays a record—which ironically is also a multiple.

What music do you listen to in the studio?

All sorts. This morning I listened to Smog, Wire, Prince, and some country gospel. My Grandma was an old-time country gospel singer and I got turned onto it when I was a kid.

You've made a number of Rorschach mirror pieces. It's funny that no one had ever thought of that before—make a mirror image of a mirror. Although yours are made up of four pieces: two side-by-side, and another two over those. So they do and don't mirror each other. When I hung one next to a dot painting by Kusama it was as if her picture had been moth-eaten. Your mirrors create complex reflections, but can also destroy anything in their path.

The mirror pieces are not only aggressive but also passive. You mention the Kusama appearing eaten through, but it also seemed to me that Kusama's dots had infected my mirror.

That she would have liked.

Nickas, Bob. "Support Failure!" In *Kelley Walker*, 71–78. Grenoble, France: Le Magasin with JRP Ringier, 2007.

SUPPORT FAILURE!

Kelley Walker with Bob Nickas

BN — The very first work I ever saw of yours was in 2001, a poster piece which has an image of a swimming pool that's partly collapsed down a hillside. There's a slogan in the upper right corner: "Fight Capitalism. Reappropriate." You had me immediately. First, I'm a bit obsessed with swimming pools, and I love modern ruins. But then there's the text, which can be read on its own as the declaration/command of a modern-day Robin Hood. To retake—to reappropriate—as a means against being relegated to the pathetic role of consumer. There are any number of ways to reappropriate. Some people rob banks. Some exchange goods and services without any cash changing hands—the barter system. So there is an element of theft suggested, as well as a refusal to perpetuate systems which only serve to alienate and control us. And that of course brings us to art, to the appropriation of images and objects. You obviously found and reanimated this particular image. Can you talk about these early poster pieces, particularly to how the image and slogan interact, and how you came upon this idea?

KW — These were some of the first works I made when I moved to New York. I found images of natural disasters and added propagandist political slogans as a response to trying to find a reason to be an artist and to make work here. The images were arbitrary in that they were ambiguous pictures that I randomly came across on the Internet and in old magazines and almanacs like LIFE: THE FIRST 50 YEARS. I was also choosing them based on how good they looked as mediated images. The slogans were pieced together from various texts I was reading at the time. Whenever I came across words or phrases that I liked I would write them down.

BN — Does this include the jokes that are part of the titles? The collapsed swimming pool has a great one.

KW — Right. "We joked that we had always wanted a sunken living room." That came from a book on commercial photography. One of the photographers recalls a personal experience he had while shooting that image. The abstract graphics added to the image were generated in Photoshop using the Magic Wand and the Stroke/Fill tool, first by tracing (using the Lasso tool) the rocks that were on the ground below the house. The colors are standard Photoshop colors. When I made this first image I was interested in presenting a kind of wish fulfillment and the illusion of a hypothetical viewer who is able to safely participate within a consumer culture. On this level, I was mimicking advertising and engaging with an interest in the use of canned language.

BN — But advertising wants to sell a product, to seduce someone. Even if this piece was instantly seductive to me, you were doing something else entirely.

KW — What's different from advertising is the closed system I attempted to construct around these images, first by illustrating the arbitrary nature in which the images, graphics, and slogans were generated, and then combining them with the use of

a propagandist commercial language. The relationships between the scanner, the computer, and the printer, along with the ability of images to endlessly flow into one another and to be repeatedly pumped through this system, provided the original structural logic. After being printed, the image could then be scanned again. If these images are pointing towards something else—as an advertisement often does—that something else is the CD containing the digital file of the same image on the poster. These CDs were offered as limited editions with a certificate defining their limitations, although there really were none. One motivation for signing CD certificates was to expropriate the receiver's relationship to their home computer. The general makeup of the posters came from the cover of the New Order album *POWER, CORRUPTION AND LIES*, designed by Peter Saville. His simple structure of superimposing a found image with text and a color strip was a basic premise that I then changed considerably in my own work.

BN — The certificate says, in part: "The disk and the image it contains can be reproduced and disseminated as often as the holder desires. Whoever receives a copy of the disk or image can likewise reproduce/disseminate either as desired ..." This seems to refer directly to that sense of wish fulfillment you were speaking about. Have you seen any re-appropriations of these works of yours?

kw — I have. From time to time collectors will email me images showing the different ways that they have altered my image, sometimes in the computer. More often, they come up with ways of displaying my images as I never would. However, it's not only collectors, but also people working in various art institutions, galleries, magazines, and with the Internet.

BN — When you say that your work is sometimes displayed in ways you wouldn't have shown it, are these ever of interest to you? Or do you find this somewhat disturbing? The fact that there is an openness to the alteration of the image seems to give license to other kinds of, shall we say, participation on the part not only of owners, but people who simply encounter images and actual works. Of course, ideas around the circulation and recycling of images are implicit in what you do.

kw — I usually don't find the alterations disturbing. Like I mentioned earlier, collectors have been sending me images of how they've displayed or altered my work and I have been showing some of these images whenever I am asked to talk about my work. I find these images interesting in that they allow me to see something that I had thought about in certain ways during the process of making the work, and either possibly misunderstood, or realized and represented in a completely foreign way. At the time I was making the poster pieces and editioning them as digital files, I was aware that through repetition, an artwork reflects various alterations—framing, display, or actual physical change—and these random alterations seem to affect the intended register of the artwork. When I first came to New York I was working as an art handler, and I was learning about art from its existence in situations very different from a gallery or an institution.

BN — I know what you mean. I learned a lot from Louise Lawler's photographs of art in collector's homes, on display at auction, in museum storage—almost exclusively arranged by someone besides the artist. You told me that one time when

you delivered art to a collector's house you saw a Lichtenstein painting in the living room, and on a table in front of the painting was a Lichtenstein book opened to the page on which the painting was reproduced. You would think that the painting already validates itself, that it doesn't need the reproduction, which is merely a printed image that almost anyone can have.

I'm reminded of your lightbox piece that brings together a number of images that refer directly to your work and to your methods, and that for me functions as a kind of visual index. The first time I saw it I immediately noticed the image of one of your RACE RIOTS paintings hanging in a collector's home. We see this explosive, violent image in relation to the impeccably designed interior. By incorporating this image in another work, there is a clear acknowledgement of the artwork's displacement, and at the same time you've retaken possession of the painting ... at least on the level of the image.

kw — When I first conceived of silkscreening the Civil Rights image with chocolate, I was trying to find a way to explore the relationships inherent in the creation, dissemination, and display of an image or an artwork. I began this investigation by first melting chocolate, and then proceeded to make images of the melted chocolate itself by allowing it to act out its material properties—dripping, splattering, running—on paper. After these images had dried, I scanned them and translated them into silkscreens. By silkscreening the chocolate—allowing it to be both an image or representation of itself and its physical self at the same time—onto the photo document of the Civil Rights protest image, I tried to anticipate how the resultant art object would be framed as both an object in space and, eventually, as a mediated image in the future. The photograph of the race riot in the collector's home or in the ARTFORUM ad for the show that Saatchi curated was somehow already anticipated by and present in the BLACK STAR PRESS works from the very moment they were conceived, although chance, seduction, and attraction directed the flow of these works. On this level, the MAC light box acts as a collective register of the process. On another level, the light box problematizes the possession of the BLACK STAR PRESS image.

BN — I wanted to talk about the life of an image, particularly in terms of how we can trace its movement. But the notion of an object that, as you say, anticipates its future image, is really compelling. I was thinking about your first light box, which has the image of a horrific airline disaster used in a Benetton ad. The image exists originally as a wire press photo seen in newspapers. Then, years later, it's used as an ad for Benetton, appearing on glossy posters, in magazines. More time passes, and then you enter the picture, altering the Benetton ad to become one of your poster pieces on CD. Then a cropped version of the image from the poster appears as a cover of ARTFORUM. Finally—or maybe not—you alter the ARTFORUM cover as a new image and present it in a light box. The image, now in its fifth incarnation, can be traced back to the original. We see not only its movement across time, but realize that the space between one incarnation and the next has been accelerated.

kw — ... and/or compressed, which heightens the feel or illusion of acceleration. The image in the ARTFORUM/Benetton light box is of a 1988 plane crash caused by the roof ripping off during a flight to Maui. I like the relationship of this found image to my process of recording-by-collecting-through-marking, followed by

disseminating, and then waiting for the image to be co-opted in a new way. This process resulted in a light box that literally represents an accident and expresses itself as accelerated due to, I think, my process of recording through compressing.

BN — And of course this idea of compression relates to the fact that there is a compressed image on, or contained within, the CD. But these images of disaster that occur early on in your work have always registered for me in relation to the idea of failure. I know that he can be incredibly perverse, but when asked what art was about, Olivier Mosset once said: "Failure. Failure on top of failure." Are we at a point within the history of picture-making, and object-making, where it's inevitable that the image or object has a direct or at the least an indirect relation to the idea of failure? And not only in terms of art, but if we think of art as a mirror to the world, and the very basic notion that art equals truth, then in a world where fabrication and truth easily trade places, art can't help but reflect this condition.

KW — I wasn't thinking of these early works as being a mirror, reflecting the world. I was thinking about advertising's seeming ability to reflect the desire of any random viewer or group, but I wasn't attempting to simply state this idea, as much as I was trying to harness that power in the form of the digital print as a means and not an end. This was why I built into these images the potential for continual mutation. From the beginning I was trying to make a work that didn't derive momentum from the play of fixed binaries or dialectics, although they do exist in my work. The slogans do not add up to anything specific. I think of the slogans as empty in any literal sense. I was aware that there would be some attraction from potential viewers to the provocation: "Fight Capitalism: Support Failure." With irony, this work deals more with the marketability of failure than it does with failure itself.

BN — The statements, like the images, are reanimated, and in this sense can't possibly be taken at face value. This practice of reanimation or recycling is central to what you do. The BLACK STAR PRESS works, most prominently, register immediately as Warholian for most viewers. The image echoes his RACE RIOTS paintings of the early 1960s. And yet I don't see them as quotations or homage. Maybe it's because you're from the South, and this is still such charged imagery more than 40 years after the fact. There is as well the way that you magnify the violence in the image with the silkscreened explosions of chocolate on the surface of the canvas. And then there is your use of chocolate. Three different kinds: milk, white, and dark chocolate. Has a material ever been so racially-charged?

KW — I moved from Columbus, Georgia, at the end of my eighth grade year and even then, in 1984, I was bused to what was labeled a progressive junior high school located in a predominantly all-black area. In regards to your question about chocolate, I like to think that if it becomes charged for the viewer it is because I work to find ways to expand how one might understand my use of it.

When I made the first recycling signs, I took the sign off a cereal box, enlarged it on the computer, and had it digitally laser cut out of steel. I then made a couple of different kinds of skins to cover the signs.

BN — Some of these skins included gold leaf and an image of the cereal box packaging itself.

kw — Right. Applying these skins allowed the sign to be marked out and/or packaged, and in doing this the signs could then begin to operate in a way that interested me—as a kind of naturalized logo that I could work with and respond to. I wasn't thinking of literally recycling when I lifted the sign from the cereal box.

BN — As you continued to produce paintings with the Civil Rights image you turned the canvas in one direction, then another, and another. Can you explain the various rotations?

kw — With the BLACK STAR PRESS works, the four rotations come from the four standardized rotations in design programs like Photoshop and InDesign. These programs give four options for rotation: 90 degrees clockwise, 90 degrees counter-clockwise and 180 degrees. The zero degree is implied as a starting point. I was playing with the image from the Civil Rights movement in Photoshop, and by rotating it I became aware of the different social tensions within the document's composition and cropping. For instance, when rotating it 90 degrees clockwise, the protester seems to be held in suspension by the police officer and the two police dogs, and when rotated 90 degrees counter-clockwise the police officer seemed to be thrusting the protester aloft, which I liked in relation to holding up a painting in order to hang it on the wall. I was also attracted to the de-synchronization between the kind of mathematics that Photoshop uses to perform standardized operations like rotating an image, and the physical gesture of rotating an image or canvas in one's mind or in the viewer's physical space. One reason that I developed this more open way of displaying the work—and then attempting to document it as a mediated object—was because I was thinking about the possibility of a social performance.

BN — In your most recent series of paintings, the brick wall and cinder block images, you have designated that they can be hung any way the curator or collector wants. That there is no ideal orientation for the paintings. Obviously, some may look best hung one way or another, but you still leave the final decision up to someone else. Can you talk about that, and about how you put these images together?

kw — These new works start with my scanning individual bricks and cinder blocks and importing them into Photoshop, where I lay them out much like a bricklayer stacks bricks when building a wall. Then that file is color separated into four silkscreens, one for each of the four process colors: cyan, magenta, yellow, and black. The four screens are printed on top of each other using transparent ink to build an almost photographic image of bricks and cinder blocks. However, I don't use an offset machine that applies the ink with equal and calibrated pressure as is standard in the commercial printing of process colors. Instead, I print the silkscreens on canvas with uneven, uncalibrated hand pressure. This results in a mostly off-color photographic image, with infinite unforeseen variations. The canvas is then stretched so that the image wraps around the edge of the painting. With the installation of these works, I think of the canvas as having a mimetic relationship not only to the wall the painting might be displayed on, but also to the structure of the bricks and cinder blocks in the urban cityscape of New York. Outside my studio window, I see various ways these building materials are used—structurally as well as decoratively, stacked both horizontally and vertically.

BN — And what about the newspaper and magazine pages that create the trompe l'oeil effect of holding the bricks and blocks together, seeming to be in the background but actually sitting on top of the surface. There is also an added element with the newspaper paintings: on the back of the canvas you attach the front page of the paper. This marks the painting in time, and has a clear relationship with the "date" paintings of On Kawara. Every "date" painting of his comes in a box with a newspaper from the day the painting was painted.

kw — The newspaper and magazine pages are hand cut and make up the area between and around the brick and cinder block images, causing an optical layer that represents the mortar, and reinforcing the physical sense of the stretcher having been wrapped. The collaged newspaper and magazine pages also help to inspire in myself—and, I imagine, in other viewers—an impulse to lash out or cut the canvas, to graffiti it. I put a page from the magazine or newspaper I use in making the painting on the back for several reasons. One reason is to record the source of the collaged pages. All the pages used to make one canvas come from the same magazine or newspaper. I imagine that On Kawara puts the newspaper page in the box with the "date" painting in order to record the day the painting was made, and to implicate world events reported on that day as part of the makeup of the painting. I think of my activity as locating the type and source of the cultural material I used, which is but one small example from the broader network of printed material. Also, I think of this as marking the point in time when the painting was begun and helping the canvas point toward itself as simply a fragment.

BN — The newspapers that accompany Kawara's "date" paintings are from the city in which he made the painting that day, so they locate the painting in terms of time and place. In a sense, the world is his studio. All of your paintings are made in your New York studio, and yet you use newspapers and magazines from different countries. Why is that? And in terms of a viewer interacting with these pieces, tagging a painting or defacing one, this goes far beyond the openness you've incorporated in your earlier work—the potential for someone to alter one of your poster pieces. And finally, this idea of a painting that acknowledges itself, as you say, as simply a fragment, how do you see this? And does this relate to other works?

kw — The process of silkscreening with large screens does demand that the paintings are made in my New York studio, and obviously New York City gives me access to an entire global network of printed information. One reason to use printed material from around the world is to develop a structure that can perform both arbitrarily—the information found within the printed source is secondary—and critically—as a way to deal with specific situations that might develop around the representation of my work. One example that I have experienced was a critic's attempt to dismiss my practice, which is fine; however in this particular case I felt hypocrisy was repressed by the language used to form this critic's writing. This structure depends on context, and also on other works that I or someone else might install in relation to these particular brick and cinder-block paintings, etc., allowing for certain conceptual concerns, interests, or attitudes to materialize in a given context and to disappear once disseminated. This is one way I see these particular works not only as autonomous but also as fragmentary, and this relates to how I approach making art. The studio itself figures as an important element in that I feel it marks

these works with something tangible, something physical, that is a necessary counterpoint to the difficulties I encounter when working more conceptually. The brick and cinder block canvases require an assistant. It takes two people to pull the squeegee for the silkscreens because they are too large for one person to handle. Working with an assistant obviously extends the artist's studio environment into other networks like business, for example. For me, this physical environment serves as a necessary counterpart to the uncertainty and anxiety inherent in the mental activity of making artworks.

BN — Over the years you've moved from the more overtly conceptual, photographic poster/CD works and objects to what appear to be, and I emphasize, "appear to be," conventional paintings. Even if they are screened and printed, these works register to the public as Painting with a capital P. But your notion of them as fragments is fairly radical, and I don't use the word lightly or very often. Are there historical figures, artists who are important to you, that you see as producing works that are, as you say, both autonomous and fragmentary?

KW — Yes, but in different ways, and I am not at all sure that the artists would agree with what I get from their work.

BN — Can you talk about your interventions with toothpaste and mouthwash over various images, first the Civil Rights pictures, but more recently, and on a very large, wall-size scale, the hip-hop magazine covers.

KW — When I first squirted toothpaste on my Epson Photo scanner, scanned it and then layered it in Photoshop on top of the KING magazine covers and Civil Rights images, I was not thinking about this activity as an intervention, but as creating a second layer suspended above the visual fields of the found images I had collected. I was interested in attempting to deal with aspects of appropriation—one aspect is the seemingly democratic logic that the term appropriation can imply—while trying to keep some distance from all that it might mean to evoke an institutional understanding of Appropriation today.

BN — Now that Appropriation is behind us, and already becoming part of history, I don't even know what post-Appropriation means anymore, or whether these terms even matter. We are permanently in a world where almost everything is bound to remind us of something already known. I see the exchange of images as a building upon and critique of what came before, and so I see it as entirely positive. Your reference to appropriation's democratic logic certainly bears this out. I also registered the squirted toothpaste as sexual, and relating as well to performance—as we might observe the trace of activity across the surface of a painting by Jackson Pollock, for example.

KW — When I first started working with toothpaste and the scanner, I was very aware of art-historical writings on the relationship between Warhol's silkscreens and Pollock's drip paintings, specifically that they both worked with the canvas on the floor as opposed to the vertical position of traditional easel painting. I was also aware of the famous image of Pollock dripping on a plate of glass while a photographer shot him from below.

BN — That's Hans Namuth. And just as Warhol and Pollock worked on the ground, the processes involved in the making of your paintings necessitate a tabletop surface, rather than the conventional vertical painting orientation, as do works involving the scanner.

KW — Right. To me, squirting toothpaste on the flatbed scanner seemed like a slapstick sort of gesture, and very camp. I wasn't sure, and am still not sure, whether camp can exist today, and this uncertainty and curiosity was part of the motivation. I was also aware of Robert Rauschenberg's use of the printing press. These works of mine do relate to performance and can be read as sexual. I think the overly obvious gesture of squirting in response to an overly obvious, sexualized female stereotype, for example, was a way of acknowledging or signaling that this work is dealing with sex, while at the same time marking out the obvious in an attempt to deal with more complex and abstract aspects of sexuality, like sadism or camp, along with larger cultural concerns, such as violence.

BN — Sadism and camp. Sounds like we should end with the cast chocolate disco ball, which I've always thought of as John Miller at Studio 54. Here is a revolving, mirrored object that is meant to refract all the lights and action and glamour of the nightclub, to spin as endlessly as the partygoers, and you've turned it into an almost mute object—although you can hear the little motor running. It has no clear purpose, since the mirror now reflects nothing, and casts no light on the walls below. It is a pure, totally interior, negation. It's as if you've created an object from the idea that, inevitably, the party's over.

KW — Mirror balls date back to the 1920s, and I remember seeing them used as cabaret décor in early black-and-white films. The form later became known as a disco ball. More recently, I have seen the mirror ball used a lot in contemporary art in the form of a readymade, which seems to refer more to the history of disco or the Western art tradition. By translating the mirrored surface into the solid opaque surface of dark chocolate, I was aware of what seems almost like an ending. However, I feel these new sculptures are working outside that in part due to the different explorations of chocolate within the larger body of my work and to the cultural climate within which they are produced.

BN — Like Martin Kippenberger's multiple with the disco ball in a plain cardboard box. By removing it from its usual place above our heads, the object is debased—lowered to the floor. The mirror balls of the "roaring" 1920s in America and in Weimar Germany, in particular, announce themselves as beacons of decadence, just as they would later in the disco 1970s.

KW — Yes, except I'm not sure if art is ever truly debased.

Nickas, Bob. "Kelley Walker." In *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting*, 332–335. New York: Phaidon, 2009.

Louise Lawler's *Not Lizard* (2002) is a rare instance of the artworks in one of her photographs eluding easy recognition; it appears to be an abstract image, and for an artist who is always holding a mirror to art, this is a particularly compelling picture. In the photograph, a Yayoi Kusama "dot" painting is reflected in one of Kelley Walker's intricately cut Rorschach mirrors. When told that his work seemed to have eaten through Kusama's canvas, Walker said that he thought hers had infected his. The entwined state of reflection and disruption is one way of looking at Walker's project, which encapsulates digital images on CD-ROM and the posters generated from them, Plexiglas mirror pieces, sculpture, lightboxes, wallpaper, installation, and silk screened and printed canvases, along with works made in collaboration with Wade Guyton as Guyton\Walker. With the scanner, computer, and printer as his primary tools, Walker appropriates images from art, advertising, books, and magazines, layers them with other information – visual, textual, or material – and interrupts and redirects our field of vision. His interest in the circulation of images, in the lives of images and objects – "lives" plural – is at the center of a practice that questions art in terms of its production, dissemination, and display, an inquiry that is paramount for Lawler as well. Her photograph unknowingly anticipated the works on canvas that Walker would begin to make two years later, setting in motion a series that would, without having been painted, occupy the space of painting, taking on its status. Like Lawler's photograph, Walker's work can be seen as a disrupted reflection on the act of picture-making. In 2004 Walker took as his subject a 1963 wire photo of a race riot in Birmingham, Alabama, similar to the one that Andy Warhol used for his *Race Riot* paintings forty years earlier. The images in Walker's series, *Black Star Press*, are printed on the canvas with an explosive gesture silk screened on top, a kind of convulsion that emphasizes the violence of the image. But Walker's gesture, no matter how painterly or spontaneous it appears, how much it might remind us of action painting, is a doubly mechanical image, involving not a drop of paint. Walker melted three types of chocolate – milk, dark, and white – let it splatter, drip, and pool on sheets of paper, waited for it to dry, and then scanned the images to create his silk screens. To overlay an Abstract Expressionist sign and a Pop-associated image is to conflate Pollock and Warhol, active and passive engagement, a duality that Walker has identified as operating within his work. In this series, the circulation of images would be literalized, as Walker, mimicking the basic "rotate" function of Photoshop, would turn the image clockwise by 90 degrees, then counter-clockwise 90 degrees from its original orientation, and finally flip it 180 degrees. The relationship between the figures, seen sideways and upside-down, shifts and reorients our perception. When the policeman is at the bottom, his arm seems to be pushing the protester upward, a movement Walker has likened to how a painting is held to be hung on the wall. While the use of chocolate has been related to the figures in the picture, to the skin tones of a black man and a white man, Walker sees the material as a commodity, one that gives the surface a tactile corrosiveness, and with the odor that we normally associate with paint replaced by the smell of chocolate, we are repulsed and attracted in the same moment.

After having produced brick-patterned wallpaper in 2003, Walker began a series of works on canvas using the images of bricks and cinderblocks in 2006, which he has continued to elaborate. While the *Black Star Press* paintings only took on abstract qualities depending

on their orientation and the level of interference caused by the silk-screened chocolate, these new works, while clearly identifiable by the images with which they were constructed, skew their representational affinities. Working again with the reproduced/printed image, Walker places bricks and cinderblocks on the scanner bed, and inputs their images into the computer. Repeated use of the scanner has left it scuffed and scratched (reflecting his proclivity to misuse technology), and the scanner can be thought of as a window through which the brick was thrown. For Walker, the stacking of bricks points to real estate, value, and maintenance, and in the way that he piles one on top of another to build the image, there is a parallel to construction as well as to repetition. With the bricks serving to block the image, one can't but help think of the windows of an abandoned building that have been bricked up; Walker's image is that of an abandoned painting, or at least an image that registers a sense of loss. The visual "mortar" that holds the bricks together is a finely cut latticework made from a single newspaper or magazine, or on occasion a Japanese comic book, which holds the bricks and cinderblocks in place in an illusionistic space, seeming to be both behind and around those objects. While the contents of the written and visual information are to various degrees accessible, and while it's not important that they are legible, Walker identifies his sources – *The New York Times*, *Interview*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *L'Uomo Vogue*, *Domus*, and so on – and in so doing implicates the world of news, style, celebrity, entertainment, design, fashion, and finance in a flow of mediated images that can neither be trusted nor ignored. In an exhibition setting or in the homes of collectors, Walker presents us with an image of walls upon walls. In recent exhibitions he has built walls that are sculptural/architectural repetitions, what he calls a construction in space, but they were never meant to carry one of his paintings; they lead independent lives and reinforce the idea of the paintings as fragments of a larger picture. To print his images, Walker creates four silk screens that are based on the CMYK process – cyan, magenta, yellow, and black – and they are printed one on top of another with transparent ink, but manually, resulting in many overlapping color variations, which would never occur in commercial printing. Walker's unpainted paintings enter the world by means of mechanical and handmade procedures. Affixing the front page of the newspaper or magazine to the back of the canvas – a marker most likely seen only by those who install the paintings – Walker locates the work of art in a particular time and place, admitting to a fugitive authorship as the consumer, interrogator, supplier, and denier of the image.

- 1 *Untitled* 2008
four-color process silk screen on canvas with *Flaunt*, Spring 2008
60 × 96 in (152 × 244 cm)
- 2 *Untitled* 2008
four-color process silk screen on canvas with the *New York Times*,
Sunday, October 19, 2008
96 × 132 in (244 × 335 cm)
- 3 *Untitled* 2008
four-color process silk screen on canvas with *The Guardian*,
Thursday, July 17, 2008
83 × 74 in (211 × 188 cm)



Kelley Walker



