

GUYTON  
PRICE  
SMITH  
WALKER

# ON THE RISK OF IMAGES

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"The lighting and colors of everything have changed! We no longer fully understand how the ancients experienced what was most familiar and frequent because the ancients believed in dreams, waking life had a different light ... We have given things new color, we keep on painting them—but what can we nowadays accomplish in comparison to the splendor of color of that old master!—I mean ancient humanity."

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Sciences*, §152

## COLOR

40 Wade Guyton's graphic palimpsests are painterly—seductively, promiscuously so—but his positioning of them as such must be seen in the context of an era of digital imagery, the material existence of which is based on code, code describing a virtual image that every object carries, something which is neither its reality nor merely what it could have been, but rather what it is imagined to be. Digital techniques such as scanning, storing, and transmitting no longer have anything to do with procedures like drawing, painting, or etching, all of which require actual light and space. The virtual image is based on mathematics, on things we cannot touch or see, and we always are working with an abstracted representation of these processes, unlike even photography, where one works with chemicals, with substances that are tangible. Guyton's work has absorbed the light and space into itself; it discloses itself and hides itself and finds its own power within itself.

In Vilém Flusser's philosophy of media history, the first act of symbolic interpretation, which took place at some point in prehistory, consisted of deducing a three-dimensional sign from the four-dimensional continuum of space and time. An example would be the construction of pyramids: these monuments stood for the continuum of existence but were manageable and susceptible to human manipulation. The next step consisted of replacing this three-dimensional sign with a two-dimensional one: the point of crystallization becomes, say, a Pietà painting, which increases the possibilities for manipulation even more. The next step was the "one-dimensionality" of text, which has itself now been superseded by the zero-dimensionality of numbers, codes, and bits. Despite, or perhaps because of, its lack of material existence, this final form of representation is a dimension of total manipulation. TV, movies, reproductive and printed media, the internet; all are based on digital technology. Images based on binary code stand for the reduction of all dimensions to zero. Apparently the world is finally and entirely within our grasp.

Flusser's steps and reductions have to do with the evolution of the image, and can be seen as a steady process of distortion through abstraction, a simultaneous revealing and

The image displays a complex, abstract pattern composed of numerous 'X' marks. These marks are arranged in horizontal rows that vary in length and alignment, creating a sense of depth and texture. The 'X' marks are black and set against a white background. The overall effect is reminiscent of a woven fabric or a digital glitch pattern. The pattern is dense and covers most of the frame, with some areas appearing more crowded than others. The 'X' marks are of uniform size and are distributed across the entire image, creating a rhythmic, repetitive visual language.





concealing. An image represents something, but what is represented is always already distorted. In this paradox and gap is to be found the cause of many iconoclastic movements. But in our haven of zero dimensionality, no further reduction is possible. What is left for artists to do in such a space, when all options are open? This is where a reflection on abstraction is important, for it is a process through which not only nature is represented, but also culture and language, and the representation of culture and language.

Guyton usually begins with some kind of reproduction, which is to say, he builds on a stand-in for the process of symbolic reduction, a process that is only accelerated through the artist's manipulation of these unstable images: adding layers, inverting or inflating his source material, drawing attention to the shifting layers of meaning that images accrue as they pass from one context to the next. In 2003 he started to use a cheap consumer printer to print images over pages torn from art, architecture, and design magazines, auction catalogues, monographs, all dating from the 1920s to the 1980s, to yield "printer drawings." These works are loaded with source material that is forced to carry the historical weight of the reproduced, and therefore the concealed.

For a couple of years he has also been feeding both raw and primed linen canvas through a large-format, industrial inkjet printer. While he calls the results "printer paintings," much in the spirit of the "printer drawings," there are important differences between the series. Here he does not use pre-printed substrates but clean fabric: starting with the blank page of painting, so to speak. In these compositions his geometric signs are printed not over pages but images of pages, scanned and enlarged: striped endpapers, say, or photographs depicting tongues of flame taken from a book cover: Yves Klein's fire paintings, which joined art's material with its own worst enemy, have been turned into a virtual, non-threatening symbol.

There is a quiet excitement in leaving the hand out of the process of making art by, ironically, concentrating everything into the symbolic hand gesture that simply presses the button "print." This increased level of abstraction (in Flusser's sense) might seem to hand even more formal and gestural decisions over to the machine: after all, smears, blots, and misalignments are supposedly the printer's responsibility. However, Guyton, fascinated by the possibilities of the mistake, began to work with it; his tactics of physical manipulation provoke errors

and inaccuracies simply through the ways in which he feeds material into the printer. The painterly quality of these machine-produced works, the incorporation of drips and slipped registration as crucial elements, ones attraction to the beauty of effects: these are in fact the responsibilities of an artist who hasn't given up authorship at all. This is a tension, almost a paradox.

The machine does set some hard formal parameters, but there is always a workaround. The size of *Untitled* (2006) can be traced back to the physical limitations of the industrial printer, the width of which sets the size of the paintings, initially at 44 inches, and now, ever since Guyton realized that he could fold the canvas in half and make the piece in two parts, at double that. This new technique—printing first one side and then the other, feeding canvas through the printer twice in different folds – produces split wholes, not-quite aligned pairs, reminiscent of Warhol's late Rorschachs and Christopher Wool's splashes and stains silk-screened in off-sync pieces.

In 1859, American physician and poet Oliver Holmes, speaking on photography, as well as making an extremely early statement on the nature of all information media, predicted: "In the future, form will be separate from matter. In fact, matter is not of great use any longer in visible objects, unless it serves as a model after which a form is made." [1] He went on to suggest that we only need a few negatives of an object worth seeing, taken from different perspectives, and that's all. The object may then be destroyed.

Guyton explores this precarious relationship between form and representation, as demonstrated in one recent untitled printer painting. Rows of black symbols—each an X—are loosely aligned on a white ground. Upon closer examination, four of the Xs stand out for their sharp, clean lines, as against the more jagged diagonals of the others. The jagged diagonal is the sign of pixilation, a characteristic that also marks digital TV broadcasts. In Guyton's painting, the discrepancy between the Xs lies in their different sources: the analog and the digital, brought together through a common reduction to zero dimensionality. The artist scanned an earlier printer drawing depicting rows of Xs, and to this scanned image he added four more Xs executed in the realm of software. These digital Xs may be enlarged near-infinitely without losing their sharp contours, as they have always existed in binary code. They contain their own source within themselves; their internal illumination means they can never see a shadow.

Thinking about the formal complexities of technique and technical actions behind these paintings, one could almost forget both how beautiful they are and how (relatively) easy they are to make. This is the risk of images now, and it is a combination that poses quite a challenge. The tension held in Guyton's works at this moment, which balance thoughtfulness and criticality on the one side, and a hot and commercially successful power on the other, is a tension that few artists have been able to hold over the course of decades. How to keep the upper hand when playing with the image: this is one of Warhol's most valuable lessons. At the same time, Warhol's adventures into the beauty of art as design as lifestyle as décor, into painting as a commercial enterprise and a lonely journey into the heart of America: this is all now history.



## POWER

"But both [the semiologist and the theoretician] play with the same convertibility of two abilities of the image: the image as raw, sensual presence and the image as discourse that encodes a (hi)story."

– Jacques Rancière, *Politik der Bilder*, Zurich/Berlin 2006

Responding to questions for a magazine profile, Guyton stated his profession as "book collector," and there is a truth to that. He continually forages (be it in used-book stores or online, in the internet's ideal versions of the used-book store), and the material he brings home—books, of course, but also knocked-off Breuer chairs—often becomes the basis for his art. Researching, browsing, collecting, selecting, reading, archiving: these activities support Guyton's train of thought, and though his work might at the moment appear to be



based on painting, it is just as much about discourse of Conceptual art, much of which arose around these activities.

This process of reading and writing is reflected in his methodology. Whatever is laid on the glass bed of the scanner is optically analyzed, digitized, and imported, all in the manner of reading, working down the page, line by line, left to right. And at the other end, the movement of the printer head is a mirror image, stamping the paint onto book pages or canvases, putting the object back into the world line by line, now in reverse, and with an added layer from the digital realm, the place without shadows. This layer is a digital stamp that may take the form of Xs, Us, lines and circles, squares, thick stripes. Guyton's letters and forms are slippery. They don't

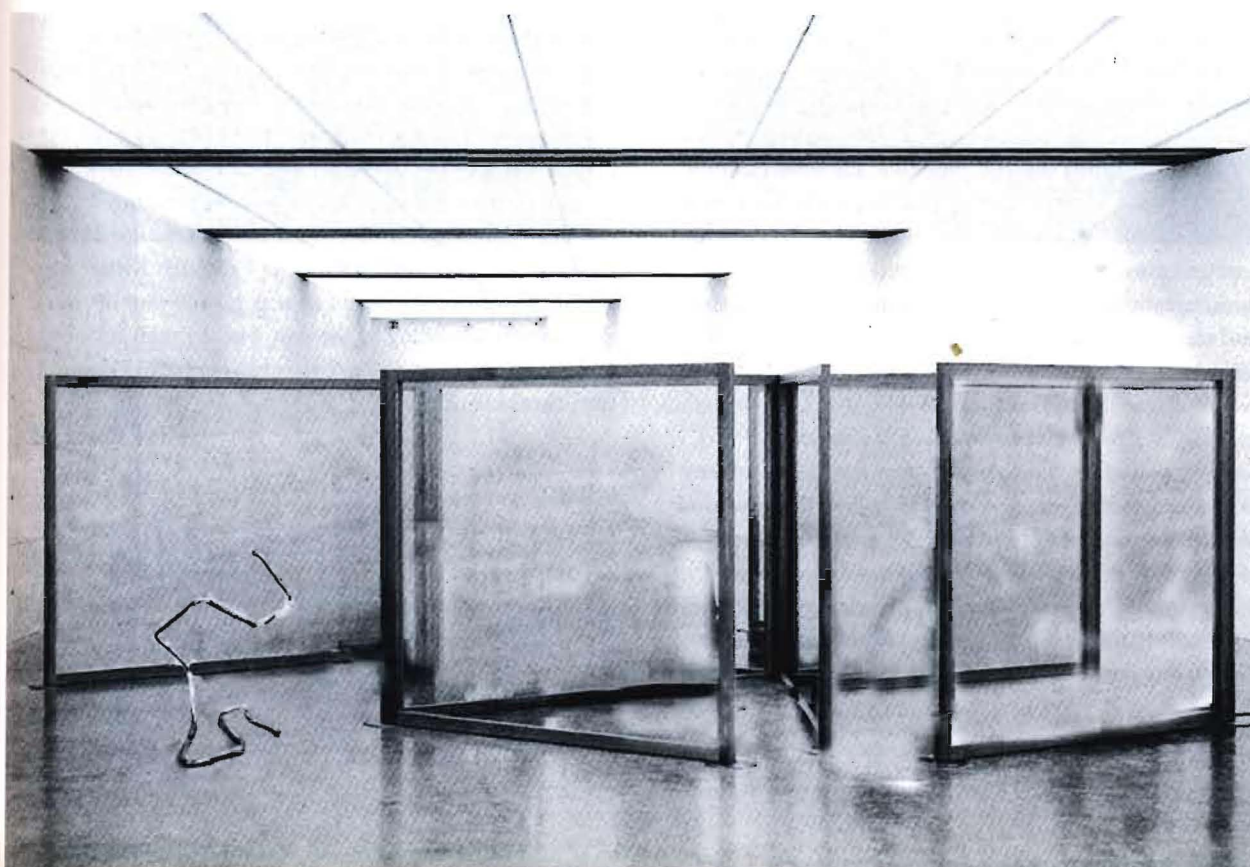
require the complexity of the advanced technology that carries them. They don't reflect today's digital aesthetics. Often simultaneously linguistic units and base graphical units, they oscillate between two poles: the stark geometries of the history of art and design as initiated by Constructivism and the Bauhaus, and the mundane status of reproduced letters, almost vulgar by comparison. To suddenly see them as letters, after perceiving them initially as marks of art, is to have the rug pulled out from under one's feet.

The same ambivalence marks Guyton's enormous wooden *X sculpture* (2003). It is simply made by nailing together two boards, bought in a hardware store, into an X-form, which is painted black, then to be placed in such diverse locations as the below-street-level outdoor space of the Whitney Museum, the desert of Andrea Zittel's *High Desert Test Sites* (2004), or a collector's home near New York City. The X absorbs and flattens the space in which it is positioned, crossing it out. This is especially apparent in reproduction, as in some of Guyton's early drawings of Xs, made to be placed in windows, where they block the perspectival view of the landscape as if it were merely a picture. The leveling effect of the printer drawings is latent in this gesture. The *X sculpture* was followed in 2005 by stainless steel Us, extruded as if in birds-eye-view perspective and produced with almost Judd-like perfectionism. Like the drawings, these three-dimensional pieces have a flattening effect, this time by mirroring and swallowing the space around them. At the same time, they enact a curious reversing gesture, going against Flusser by taking a two dimensional sign, the U, and turning it into a three dimensional monument.

The work sequence of writing, reading, erasing, writing anew, rereading, revising, ad infinitum, is arguably a technique that lies behind much recent art. Along with other artists of his generation, Guyton's references are not so much to be found in specific artists. For him, the processes of circulation at play within art, design, advertising, and politics are crucial. His strategies, colors, and imagery lean on the discourses of certain periods or movements: the historical avant-gardes of Constructivism and the Bauhaus, general con-

cerns of Modernism, positions of the 1960s and 1970s, including Conceptual, Minimalist and Pop art. These historical references point to moments not only of revolutionary political change, but also of great advances in the strategies of the image, be they industrial, commercial, or propagandistic. These moments include the corresponding reactions of artists, which usually accompany these times of political upheaval.

The tensions and complexities inherent in today's public images, whether in advertising or the entertainment industry, compete with those images employed by the artists, and this is part of the risky game artists must now play. All kinds of images seem to address people while simultaneously inventing the people they address, creating an audience through the illusion of an audience. The early 20th century gives us a model for this, as it was a time when design practices were first enabling new ways of positioning art within the public culture, through the mass production of commodities, their display and arrangement, their reproduction in print media and on billboards (practices, in both the Russian avant-garde and Bauhaus contexts, which famously included the use of abstraction, in situations from posters to buildings and furniture). At the same time such image practices reach further, touching the work of politicians, who encouraged community around certain institutions, approaches, and exemplary settings, determining what was visible in the culture and thus what was shared. A slogan from the time of the Russian avant-garde, "Electricity plus Soviet Power," makes apparent how ideological, historically fleeting, and subtly propagandistic these kinds of undertakings were. Within the historical moment, and thus without hindsight, it is much harder to grasp the elements that make up the visual commons of our everyday lives.





## STYLE

"an act of processing ..."

— Wade Guyton

Fifty years later, in the 1960s and 70s, within the Pop and Conceptual art traditions in particular, artists used appropriation, montage, and re-contextualization to experiment with an erasure of the difference between high and low, or the serious and the absurd, toying with the idea of opposing market domination while also enabling their own larger recognition. Since then, however, the market itself has entered an era of the absurd, of appropriation and re-contextualization. We have to admit that the amalgamation of everything with everything, which was considered subversive yesterday, is now more and more homogenous with a journalistic everything-is-in-everything. And now this twist has come full circle, since, as Guyton has noted, "with contemporary work the branding process is in full force, just like it is everywhere else in our lives. The magazines, the galleries, the art fairs, are all complicit. It's not even considered a problem anymore; it's simply accepted as the way things work."<sup>[2]</sup> Dan Graham famously asserted that art doesn't really exist until it appears in print, and perhaps it is true that things remain illegible until they undergo a process of branding. But what happens before that process?

Guyton has referred to his early sculptures as drawings in space. Shapes slice through space, or create a kind of negative space, as in *untitled mirrored sculpture (black gold bronze grey)* (2000), which consisted of columnar strips of black Plexiglas alongside mirrored acrylic in gold, smoke, and bronze colors. As Tim Griffin noted some years ago, the piece both consumes architectural space and disappears into it, offering the viewer an expansion and contraction of their surroundings, and a self-image mapped on this: the reduction of dimension into flat form, which conceals and manipulates its own representation. Maybe we can't make solid, inscrutable monuments any more. Modern forms might reflect the immateriality of today's image culture: screens, mirrors, and translucent film have replaced stone, metal, and plaster.

*New Design* (2003) copies the design of Dan Graham's *Interior Design for Space Showing Videotapes* (1986), but stripped of its video stations and the glass surfaces in which a viewer was supposed to realize the sensation of watching and being watched. We are left with the wooden frame; no reflection on inter-subjectivity and the public sphere, no immediately apparent "criticality," only a beautiful and taciturn structure, which, as Johanna Burton has noted, passively refuses the reflectivity (and

reflexivity) of the original, receding into the museum space of art. This may be an example of what some have declared as a recent "return to formalism," although the claim that such work is necessarily political is not entirely convincing. A work like *New Design*, however, could be read as a rebuff to much of the all-encompassing, interactive, experiential, and situation-based work prominent in the previous decade, a response to—or against—the projects of a generation that is just past its most fruitful period. Guyton steps back, proposing not an event but an individual object, removed from everyday life, utility, and popular culture, positioned once more in the space of its own historical discourse, a move that deliberately relegates all recent gestures toward the unification of art and life to the status of the past. His twisted Breuer chair is literally stripped to a skeleton, another object to de-socialize the experience of art, to withdraw from that immediate sphere of consumer and spectacle culture.

It remains to be seen what the appropriate response of artists will be to a new and particular risk of images. The zero dimension of the digital gives the power to manipulate to both the politician and the artist, to the terrorist and the activist, to popular culture and its critique alike. The flat glow of translucent screens, which emanate the light of mathematical images of manipulated realities, exemplifies their capacity to refer to that thing which every object carries, which is neither its reality nor merely what it could have been, but rather what it is imagined to be. Leonardo da Vinci, that citizen of Old Europe who already in the Renaissance was contemplating the implications of a visibility whose cause lies in itself, noted, "il sole non vide mai nessuna ombra," ("the sun never sees a shadow"). The sun is always positioned at the center of illumination and thus in a blind spot to see the dark side. If it attempts to look at darkness, it is no longer dark. A consideration of an artist whose work reflects contemporary media and the implications of a culture shaped by digital imagery might well conclude by praising the sun, that hermetic figure that not only gives light to all we see but that is also its own source. As Friedrich Kittler suggested, however, in a world in which everyday life is not determined according to the sun, but through science and technology, writing and art are always already situated on the other side of the light.

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### NOTES:

1. Sir Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Das Stereoskop und der Stereograph" 1859, in Wolfgang Kemp, *Theorie der Fotografie*, Band I, Munich 1999, p. 114–122, citation p. 119.
2. John Rasmussen (ed.), *Guyton/Walker, The Failure of Judgement*, JRP|Ringier, Zurich 2005, p. 45.