

# Stock Piles

Informed by the online debris of stock photography, many artists – including **Aleksandra Domanović, Oliver Laric, Helen Marten, James Richards, Hannah Sawtell** and the **Yemenwed** collective – are exploring the ‘off-world’ of digital imagery with a new fluency *by Isobel Harbison*



The ‘stock image’ is a relatively new phenomenon that is proliferating daily. It is so-called because it’s stored in bulk by multinational agencies that sell to commercial clients for advertising, editorial, branding and websites. Crucially, today’s stock images are dependent upon the Internet for accumulation, circulation, distribution, remuneration and regulation. Photographs are rarely taken or commissioned individually in this context. Now they are generated en masse by professional and amateur photographers, converted digitally, and consigned to agencies. In 2009, Getty Images – which was founded in 1995 to ‘bring the fragmented stock photography business into the digital age’ – acquired Flickr, a website for uploading amateur photography from which they now openly source material for commercial sale. Getty is now the largest agency of stock images in the world and on their website clients may browse categories such as ‘Simple Pleasures’, ‘Office’ or ‘Dads’. The costs of images rise in relation to greater exclusivity of use, from the moderately priced ‘Royalty-Free’ to the expensive ‘Rights-Managed’; none from this particular agency are entirely free of charge. The images are routinely policed through online visual search engines like Google Images, and fraudulent image-grabbers are heavily penalized for copyright infringement.

Aside from the developing economy of stock, an increasingly generic visual register of photography is appearing so as to appeal to the greatest cross-section of clients from a range of industries, demographics and territories. Images are digitally retouched, tinted, made to glisten. Airbrushed bodies, places and things are continually sifted and stocked online only to reappear on billboards, websites, product labels and television screens in a seemingly endless feedback loop. The material distinction between the physical thing and its digital counterpart is subtly skewed.

In Pixar’s digital sci-fi animation *Wall-E* (2008), the eponymous robot is programmed to dispose of the debris spoiling Earth’s surface. Beeping with poignant optimism,

**Opposite page:**  
**Oliver Laric**  
**‘Kopienkritik’**  
(Copy Criticism)  
2011  
Installation  
view  
Skulpturhalle,  
Basel

**Left:**  
**Aleksandra**  
**Domanović**  
**Untitled**  
(30.III.2010)  
2010  
Inkjet print on  
A4 paper stacks  
Installation  
view  
Max Hans  
Daniel, Berlin,  
2011



Wall-E transfers scraps of paper and plastic from one pile of rubbish to the next, mounds that have filled the city and forced out the traffic of human life. In the film, Earth's displaced citizens are confined and suspended in large spacecrafts monitoring the robot's progress by satellite. In his book *Capitalist Realism* (2009), Mark Fisher writes about Wall-E's humans in 'off-world exile', watching the rot from pseudo-safe havens. As suspended earthlings signing in to daily life from our computer screens we might recognize Fisher's 'off-world'. We might also sympathize with the animated robot, blocked in by stockpiles of debris in a digitally animated world much resembling planet Earth. As stock images clutter our online landscapes, we too are hemmed in by junk.

*Wall-E* is useful here for several reasons. It might illustrate the stock-world's dependence on 'the off-world', or Internet. Furthermore, the relationship between stock image and its online host is represented digitally and, as film, is projected from cinema, television or computer screens, into its viewers' tangible, physical, three-dimensional space. As an analogy, it might help to identify a tendency in art that explores the visual and economic phenomenon of the stock image and its impact on physical perceptions, with works that themselves vacillate materially between the digitally modified image and the resolutely sculptural.

Obviously, working with the complexities of online images is not an entirely new development. British artist Mark Leckey has for some time addressed the Internet as a vast online image repository with almost animistic qualities in his performance and lecture, *In The Long Tail* (2009), which responded to the Internet as if it were an expanding organism; as does his video, performance and installation, *GreenScreenRefrigerator.Action* (2010). Leckey often uploads works to Vimeo – the video-sharing website – as a means of feeding back into the Internet's growing body of moving images. Relatedly, Martin Westwood has, for some time now, rendered the flat didacticism of corporate pie-charts, the abbreviations and emoticons of email exchanges and the cold surfaces of technological equipment into punchy, colourful sculptures and installations or, in his words,

## What's new is the almost bilingual fluency between sculpture and image among a generation of artists for whom dropping and dragging are physical gestures *and* digital commands.

'physical environments'.<sup>1</sup> Hilary Lloyd has worked extensively with the texture and fabric of the digital image, meditating upon its incumbent technologies and the fleeting surfaces it skirts to powerful effect. The list goes on. In fact, it's difficult to imagine many artists remaining unaffected by or disinterested in the expanding stock of digital images.

What is new is the almost bilingual fluency between sculpture and image among a generation of artists for whom glomming and grabbing, dropping and dragging are simultaneously physical gestures and digital commands. For some artists, installations have materialized from experiments in programming, such as the sculptural works of Berlin-based artists Aleksandra Domanović and Oliver Laric, both of whom have independent practices while collaborating

together on Vvork.com, an online art blog and exhibition platform. Domanović's *Untitled (30.III.2010)* (2010) is from a series of 'printable monuments to the abolished .yu domain' – '.yu' being the Internet identification string of former Yugoslavia, a virtual domain that dissolved in 2010, seven years after the Republic's dissolution. Domanović's sculpture comprises three stacks of 7,500 pieces of A4 paper, their margins printed to reveal cropped, colour images: a violent crowd at a football match between Serbia's two most popular teams. Sourced from Flickr, the outlines of the images have been Photo-shopped to trace the billowing smoke from the hooligans' flare guns. This sculpture, as if materializing from this vaporous digital image, serves as an apt monument to Yugoslavia's recently defunct political and viral domains.



**Left:**  
James Richards  
*Not Blacking  
Out, Just Turning  
the Lights Off*  
2011  
Digital video  
Installation  
view Chisenhale  
Gallery, London

**Above:**  
Mark Leckey  
*GreenScreen-  
Refrigerator*  
2010  
Digital video  
Installation view  
Gavin Brown's  
enterprise,  
New York



Laric's digital animations and sculptural installations compare recent technology's capacity for copying and appropriation with art historical modes of reproduction, aligning the threat of contemporary copyright laws with historical recriminations of 'image-breaking' iconoclasm. This was most explicit in his 2011 installation at Skulpturhalle Basel, 'Kopienkritik' (which translates as 'copy criticism' and refers to the evaluation of now-lost ancient Greek sculptures through existing Roman reproductions). Here he re-cast in polyurethane some of the museum's extensive collection of these 'original' Roman sculptures, or sculptural stand-ins. Laric also projected his digital animations onto the surfaces of the group of figures, some of which were stood on monitors. Re-cast Greek heads in vivid polychrome stripes were strewn on the floor, as if beheaded in retribution for copyright infringements, old and new.

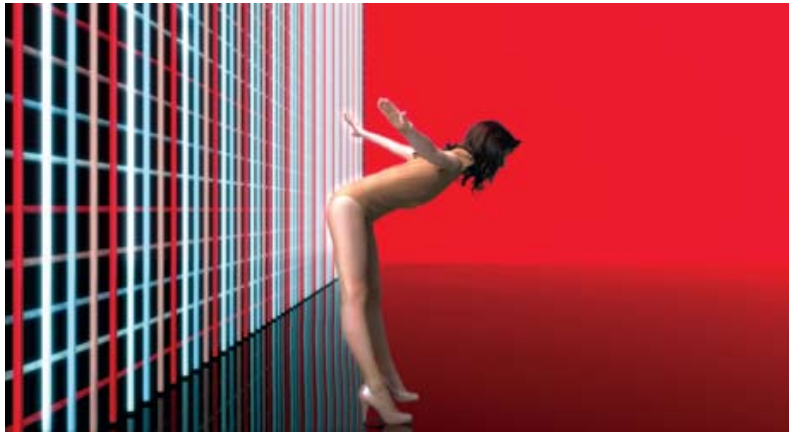
*Not Blacking Out, just Turning the Lights Off* (2011) was a dual-screen video installation by James Richards shown at London's Chisenhale Gallery late last year. The stock background image of a light-bulb (taken from a screen-saver), X-rays found on a medical advice website and his own low-grade camera-phone footage of a friend bathing were digitally distorted using Adobe After Effects. These abstracted

body images are accompanied by a remix of atmospheric noises and the intimate, rhythmic intonation of poet and activist Judy Grahn reciting her 2008 poem, 'Slowly: a plain song from an older woman to a younger woman': 'Will you be proud to be my version?' To offset the virtual-corporeal aspect of the work, the gallery was clad with a mint-green carpet and light green walls, a white speaker system and white primary-school benches laid between screens; sanitized colours and wipe-clean surfaces found in quasi-social spaces, from estate agents' offices to hospital wards. This combination explored how the digital camera lens might comfortably touch the surface of its subject, but also, in Richards' words, how this edifying trope of being 'for the body but not of it', is extending even towards architecture.<sup>2</sup>

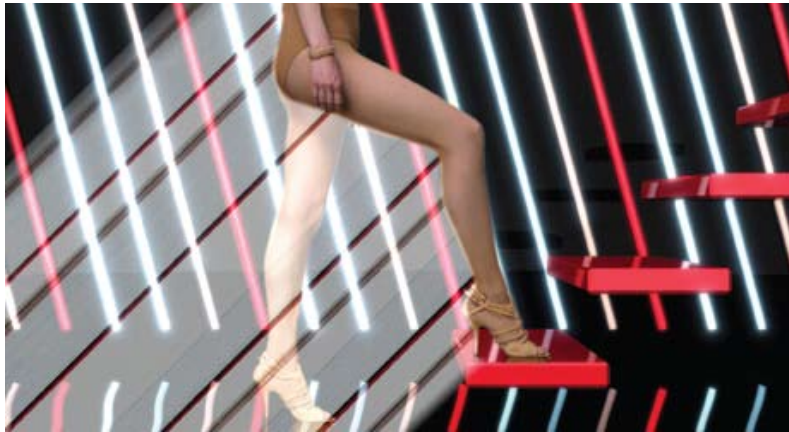
Encountering work by British artist Helen Marten feels like parachuting into a virtual landscape of faintly familiar graphic symbols. This effect is oddly consistent in both her sculptural installations and video works. In a recent installation at FIAC Paris, the exhibition space was animated with an assortment of strikingly coloured and textured sculptures, reliefs and wallpaper. Seemingly interested in the distribution of information through the changing tinctures of industrial, architectural and

graphic design, Marten plays with the nuances of their recently outmoded details. Crucially, her works are not readymades: whether cast in aluminium or animated on screen, they are made from scratch to resemble recently branded stock. In the sculptural installation *No juice about it* (2011), a rubbery-looking pineapple – a historical heraldic symbol more recently employed for branding contemporary 'tropical' products – sits on the gallery floor, wearing a pair of Oakley sunglasses, an anthropomorphism as reliably entertaining as it is clichéd. The pineapple is positioned beside a bamboo fence, itself propping up a patchwork quilt and a Hawaiian lei garland, each curiosity an emblem of the organic-turned-kitsch through anachronistic branding. However, the pineapple and bamboo are not as rubbery as they first seem. Wrought by Marten in aluminium and welded steel and powdered in matt monochrome, they look deceptively supple and shadow-less as if cut and grabbed straight from the digital. The unfamiliar weight and texture of her sculptures boldly accentuate the material confusion brought about by digital modification. Redundant emblems from civic, social and virtual spaces fill the installation's digitally printed wallpaper, *Parabolic eyebrow tack-on (rather than a signature)* (2011). The vernacular font of a clock, outdated by smart-phones

**Above:**  
Hannah Sawtell  
*Swap meet (biomis) Optic*  
2011  
Lacquered bent steel, toughened glass, window decal, cork dividers and fixings  
76×71×24 cm



**Left:**  
Yemenwed  
*Aero* from  
the series  
*'No Image,  
Commercial  
Breaks'*  
2011  
Digital film  
stills



**Below right:**  
Aleksandra  
Domanović  
From the series  
*'Person, laptop'*  
2009–ongoing  
Digital stock  
images

television advertisements for women's cosmetics and starring Busy Gangnes as the typically young, attractive female consumer (also, significantly, the murder victim on stage-left). The videos comprise the same stock-image medleys as 'real' advertisements, with lustrous environments, slicked-down surfaces, scientific illustrations, slow-motion clarifications and gradually warming female expressions. Although pointedly brand-free, Yemenwed's three short videos assume the formula of cosmetics adverts so seamlessly they could easily sell any silky potion. What they reveal instead is the familiarity of stock images and the predictability of their arrangement within a particular format. As this culture of digital modification is represented on stage right, the spiritual attempts to reconcile it plays out on stage left. The series title 'No Image, Commercial Breaks' suggests the rare glitch when a search description yields no results; here the relationship between what we are and the image we could be collides.

Elsewhere, a recent series of sculptures and videos by British artist Hannah Sawtell forges together the processes of manual labour and digital remastering with steely precision. Sawtell treats commonly available computer programmes as she might an analogue camera. Using her screen as a lens, she directs our attention towards the generic stock photography she finds online. Selecting pairs of stock images, Sawtell runs 'transitions' on them using software that is readily available online. Transitions are applications typically used by digital filmmakers to blend images together. In her videos 'Entroludes

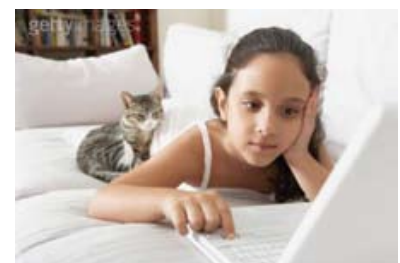
and digital watches, is scattered in a random horizontal sequence also containing pixelated palm trees and a rudimentary animation of an Art Nouveau symbol.

Design flourishes recur throughout Marten's installations and videos, stripped of their original material contexts and forced to play together as sculptures in their own right. In conversation, the artist quotes Charles Jencks's writing about domestic architecture in Los Angeles, where 'styles cohabit almost at random, with permissive coupling that may look more like a multi-ethnic orgy than a simple case of intermarriage'.<sup>3</sup> There is certainly a sense of debauchery to Marten's configurations, where every sculptural element seems to goofily eyeball the next while vying for the viewer's complete attention. As sculptural derivatives of pared-down logos – rather than naturalistic representations – these works are perplexing when encountered in the flesh. Circulating around them, the aesthetic tactics of the digitized image are tacitly disclosed and its material oddness wholly intensified.

Yemenwed, the New York-based collaborative group of 14 artists, spotlight physical encounters with the digital image somewhat differently. *No Image, No. 1* (2011) combines sculptures, paintings, videos, narrative voice-overs and dance in a performance that restages 'the templates of crime drama, the justice system, chain restaurants, and commercial advertising'.<sup>4</sup> At Bard College's Olin Theatre in 2010, *No Image, No. 1* took place on a divided stage where

the set's functions changed as the narrative developed. The living room became a murder scene where a workplace became a deathbed, a restaurant booth became a courthouse and later a morgue. Large sculptures by Shawn Maximo and Paul Kopkau suggested domestic furniture, the functions of which switched between décor and props, while a tabletop of interwoven belts became an inquisition stand for the murder trial. Two mounted paintings by Gloria Maximo represent an American flag and Yemenwed performer, Melissa Ip; both compositions render their subjects' outline in bold, graphic blocks. On stage, four female performers dressed in Constructivist-style costumes performed the prelude and aftermath of a woman's suspicious death through dance. The choreography by Megha Barnabas used the repetitive actions of everyday life – slouching over a laptop, folding laundry, talking on a mobile phone – to update an ancient classical Indian temple dance called Odissi, where day-to-day movements are repeated to reveal how the human body and universe coalesce. The Yemenwed version of this dance is set to an electronic score, and appears like a repatriation ceremony where real people attempt spiritual communication with their quotidian off-worlds.

This choreographed narrative was broken intermittently by a series of Yemenwed videos, projected on a screen to the right of the stage. 'No Image, Commercial Breaks' (2011) are glossily produced short videos made to resemble



**Manifesting as both sculptural and digital media, the substance of these works seems to oscillate as fluidly as we do.**

**Below right:**  
**Helen Marten**  
*No juice about it*  
 2011  
 Mixed media  
 Dimensions  
 variable

1 – 6' (2010) these transitions become the work's focal point, rather than a hidden device. Accompanied by stock audio found online, she also remixes and highlights its various sonic glitches. This process reverses the more typical digital procedures of retouching and remixing sound and images into slicker, more appealing units to be consigned as online stock.

In Sawtell's 'Swap Meet' sculptures (all 2011), the same basic principle is applied. But here, the artist stops the transitions mid-flow to create her own hybrid image, as if taking a photograph. Stock images for desktop backgrounds (water droplets upon glass, broken glass, a close-up of soil) have been digitally bled through others she finds online, such as pictures of empty work-spaces, technological storage units and airplane seats. In each sculpture, a pair of images are printed and applied onto two glass struts, joined laterally to a steel grid structure and mounted on the wall in horizontal pairs. The struts have hinges allowing them to rotate, as if physically reiterating the digital rotation they have just undergone. Ghostly marks of manual labour are visible upon the sculptures' dystopian images and cold materials, with the padded tacks of their local fabricator remaining crudely stuck to their glass surface.

Sawtell's sculptures allow physical rotation, but something in the texture and timbre of her images wards off the touch of curious fingers. The glass panes remain resolutely still. In her work – as in that of Domanović, Laric, Marten, Richards and Yemenwed, and a generation of artists around them – the phenomenon of the digitized stock image and its dependence on the Internet's off-world are presented to us in the broad relief of our physical one. Manifesting simultaneously as both sculptural and digital media, the substance of these works seems to oscillate as fluidly as we do, marking the switch from our physical surroundings, straight to off-world exile. ●

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- 1 Martin Westwood, interviewed for 'Art Now', Tate Britain, 9 October 2005, <http://tinyurl.com/7ht6qzd>
- 2 James Richards in conversation with the author, January 2012
- 3 Charles Jencks, *The Daydream Houses of Los Angeles*, Rizzoli, New York, 1978, and Academy, London, 1978, quoted by the artist in conversation with the author, London, 3 December 2011
- 4 Email from the artists to the author, 12 December 2011

