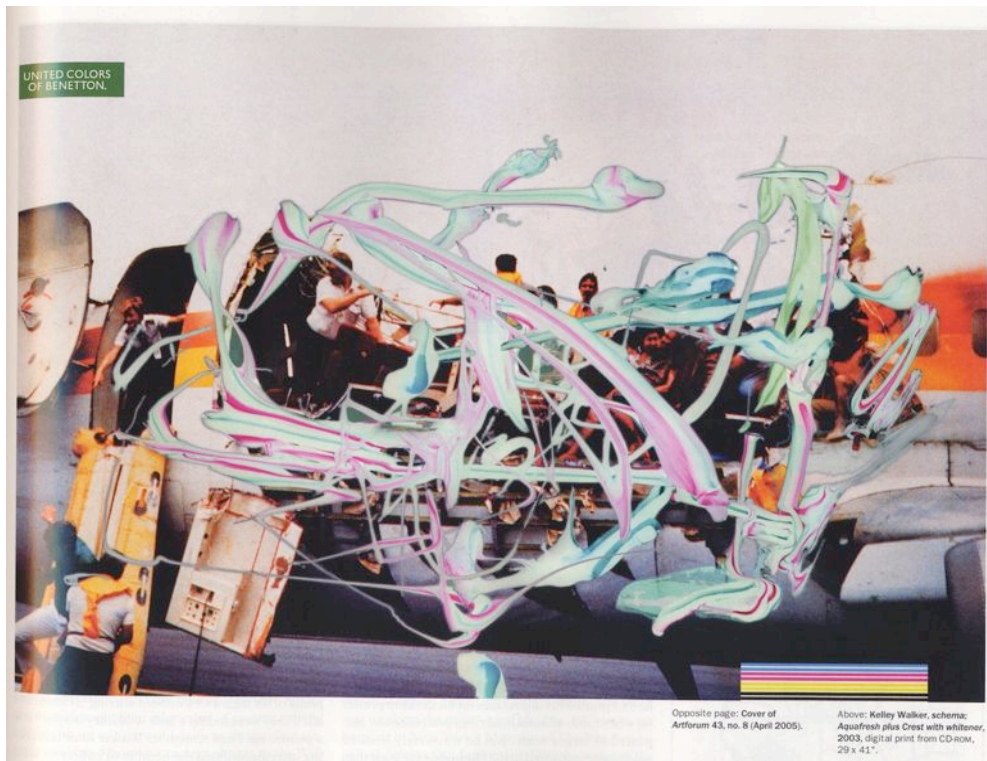


THOMAS DANE GALLERY

“File Sharing: Scott Rothkopf on Kelley Walker’s *Untitled*, 2006”, *Artforum*, Vol.51, No.1, September 2012.



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OVER THE PAST DOZEN OR SO YEARS, the artists who made the most of new technologies were often those who least knew how to use them. I count Kelley Walker among this group. Around the turn of the millennium, he, like many of us with a Mac, a scanner, and a printer, was trying to get his head around how such tools were quietly revolutionizing our contemporary image culture by making pictures easier to produce and reproduce than ever before. At first he used his scanner as it was intended, to capture words and pictures on paper. He would import images from advertising and photography year-books, then add simple digital marks in Photoshop,

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a program he employed with greater curiosity than skill. Before long, he came to think of the scanner as a new kind of camera and proceeded to assault its glass bed with skeins of toothpaste, heavy bricks, and blots of chocolate, images of which might wind up superimposed atop still other images on his screen. At a time when many artists were using new technologies to slicker ends, Walker's often clumsy handling of his tools imparted to the works they generated a lively sense of quotidian discovery and an air of folksy invention. Vernaculars are always changing, but it takes a fine radar to catch them as they do.

Despite Walker's low-key techniques, many of his sources had a high-key charge, picturing disasters wrought by nature, man, or some combination thereof (mudslides, race riots, and plane crashes, for example). He was drawn to taboo, often toxic, subjects that the media had rendered troublingly banal or even chic, such as an image of a plane wreck on Maui used by Benetton on the cover of its magazine *Colors* in 1995. Leaving the fashion label's logo intact, Walker nodded to the image's prior appropriation and commodification, while reanimating it with smears of scanned toothpaste that suggested an antiseptic body eerily at odds with the traumatized ones exposed

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Kelley Walker, *Untitled*, 2006,
light box with Duratrans,
61 1/2 x 106 x 4".

Whatever one does to Walker's work files, they always seem somehow cooler and smarter than their most resourceful interpreters, the greatest of whom remains the artist who made them in the first place.

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within the mangled fuselage. This work, *schema; Aquafresh plus Crest with whitener*, 2003, took the form of a Photoshop file that Walker distributed on a CD-ROM as part of a series begun in 2000. At first, he had printed his digital files on his desktop printer or, when funds allowed, had them professionally out-putted at larger scale. But he ultimately became much more interested in the Photoshop file itself than in any one of its physical manifestations. Or, rather, he was interested in how this malleable file contained traces of an image's prior life—an offset-printed dot screen, for example—while also suggesting limitless lives to come. To encapsulate these concerns, each CD (the works were sold in editions of five) was accompanied by a signed certificate stipulating that its owner could do whatever he or she wanted with the file: One could print it, change it, copy it, or pass it on to others. "I'm just signing my name to the computer structure you already have," Walker once remarked, "and if you can open this file, then you immediately have all of the tools that I had to make this image; all of the options are right there in front of you."

Having options is different from exercising them, however. This distinction was clearly demonstrated by most of the collectors and curators of Walker's early work, who generally displayed straightforward prints of his digital files without altering his images at all. If they were feeling a little wild, they maybe blew a picture up. I can remember Walker once remarking incredulously on the number of collectors who asked his permission to output a file at a certain color or scale, when the whole point of his gesture was to stress a digital image's mutability and to challenge his authorial prerogative. Perhaps this idea was a little ahead of its time—or his collectors' Photoshop skills. Still, a few intrepid owners of his discs took the bait. Art dealer Carol Greene peddled bootleg CDs, which made explicit the artwork's latent connection to burgeoning debates over digital file sharing and piracy. (Walker conceived of his CDs, one should note, the very year Napster peaked.) Megacollector Charles Saatchi had the inspired nerve to print Walker's files monstrously enlarged on canvas or, in one instance, as a photograph face-mounted on

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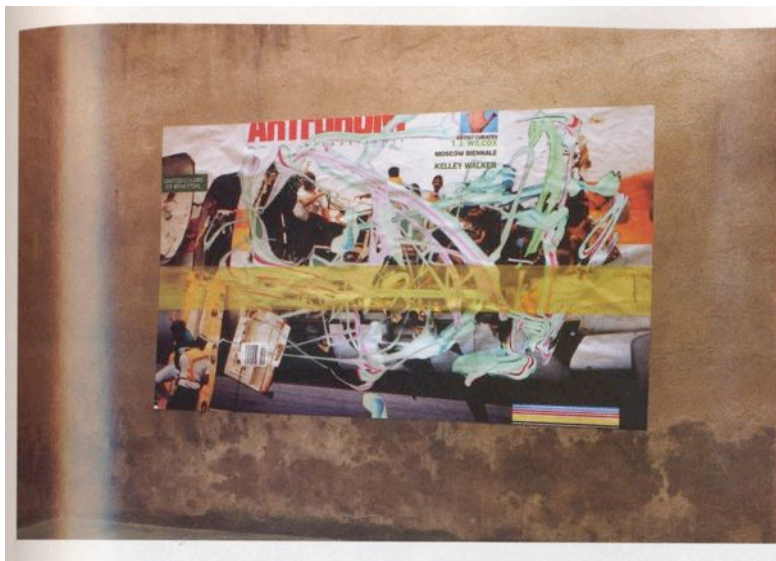
plexiglas, turning them into garish trophies that reflected current market tastes. Pushed beyond their ideal resolution, the images looked sort of awful, but they powerfully channeled their owner's ego and crystallized their movement through the tangled networks of money, technology, reproduction, and desire that ensnare much art today.

This passage grew only more circuitous when in 2005 the staff of *Artforum* took a crack at one of Walker's files by reproducing the Aloha Air image on the publication's April cover to accompany editor Tim Griffin's pioneering survey of Walker's work. I was a senior editor of the magazine at the time, and I remember how difficult it was to proof the image, since the dot screen of Walker's offset-printed source kept generating a moiré effect, while the scanned toothpaste maintained its minty crispness. It was as though these different kinds of visual information couldn't be flawlessly amalgamated despite their digital consistency, and this tension seemed to mirror the now almost quaint admixture of excitement and confusion we experienced daily as images increasingly circulated from our camera phones to the Web to our printers and back again. We fancied ourselves rather clever when we sandwiched a smear of Crest between the words ARTFORUM and INTERNATIONAL on the magazine's cover. Although it was hardly the first time that an artwork had crept above the banner, it was certainly the first time an artwork had invited such treatment by virtue of its inherent technological and conceptual structure. Still, whatever one does to these files, they always seem somehow cooler and smarter than their most resourceful interpreters, the greatest of whom remains the artist who made them in the first place.

Walker indeed did us one better. A year later, he took our cropped image and reinserted it back within

the original file to produce a glowing light box, *Untitled*, 2006, which he presented that year at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York. By scanning the actual magazine cover, Walker introduced yet another visual disjunction, because the detail couldn't quite connect seamlessly with the whole, especially since the additional round of scanning and printing created further discrepancies between the various CMYK dot screens now embedded in the file and the most recent dot pattern with which the file had been printed. Walker hung the light box in exactly the same spot where, two years prior, he had exhibited a modest poster printed from the original file. Now the image returned more glamorous and problematic than ever, self-reflexively advertising its ascent—and Walker's—within the art system. It was gutsy of him to trumpet his cover-boy status in his own show; the act felt both vain and vulnerable. At the exhibition's opening, an artist told me she'd like to throw a rock at the piece, which seemed a rather high compliment. The work was working the room—and all of us. As I write, it's hanging in New York's Museum of Modern Art, an august context that further amplifies the status of the image and the artist and seems a strange fulfillment of the humble Photoshop file's predestiny. Looking at the lambent display recently in the company of enthralled tourists, I remember thinking we had been a little craven to crop the Benetton logo out of the image when we put it on *Artforum's* cover, as well as a little timid in not meeting the work's dare to make it more our own. But then again, Walker's art cannily reminds us that images today are never really ours, just slippery emblems that keep moving and morphing as they pass from one incarnation to the next. □

SCOTT ROTHKOPF, A CURATOR AT THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART IN NEW YORK, WAS A SENIOR EDITOR OF *ARTFORUM* FROM 2004 THROUGH 2009.



Kelley Walker, *Untitled*, 2005, digital adhesive print. Installation view. La Salle de Bains, Lyon, France. Photo: André Morin.