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All images painted in the 16th century

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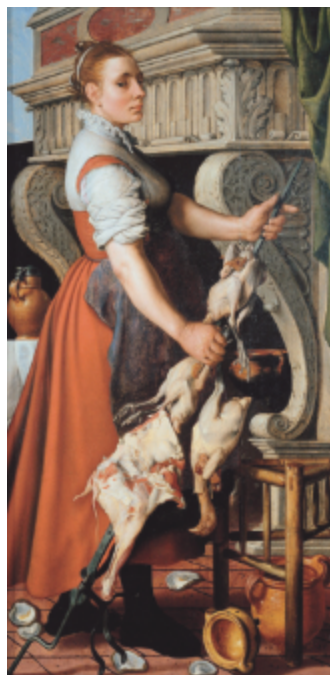
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1. Pieter Aertsen, *The Cook*



2. Joachim Beuckelaer, *Kitchen Piece, with Jesus in the House of Martha and Mary in the background*

Learning begins with mimicry. Novel recombination is the foundation of creativity. We might scale this general operation to encompass communication as a whole—a mimetic exchange mediated by an open market of abstract symbols and images. If communication might be modeled as market exchange, composite images are only one abstraction anchoring our common discourse. As you weigh these very assumptions and parse my logic, my words are transformed inside your head. The narrative echo is continuously reshaped by repetition. Mimesis is our most tactile building block—as our technological dependence on the copy confirms.

In classical painting however, appropriation has not been celebrated beyond the deliberate “master copy,” studiously executed by an eager apprentice. The copy once marked the preeminent manner of learning for a pre-industrial age, so it wasn’t morally suspect. Subsequently, an emergent modernist vision entrusted artists to generate content from within, like Nikola Tesla suspending fully functioning mechanical systems in his imagination. This recent creative liberation of post-industrial man, given to render superior aesthetic preference over standard mechanical stamping, seems like an outlier to the gradual accumulation of a culture industry. Taken in sum, knowledge has been produced, conquered, divided, and ultimately redistributed to silent machines and specialized tools. Such mechanical advantage becomes especially apparent when you stack the history of painting on a timeline to try and determine who used a camera obscura (See Hockney and DeFalco’s *Secret History*). Some folks weren’t just better painters, or better draftsmen—they were quite simply better copyists.

I look to Flemish painter Joachim Beuckelaer (c. 1533 to c. 1570/4) as one of the first to truly own appropriation, because he doesn’t appear to have hassled with the trade secret of intimately staged, light-controlled, proto-photographic projections. Instead, his compositions are a bit odd—the foreground sits precariously balanced as if it were about to fall out of the image, while the background recedes vaguely, in miniature. Yet it’s the construction of his figures that present the most distortion. There you can read Beuckelaer’s appropriations directly, as his paintings are populated by doppelgängers. Were it not for the costume changes, you might think you were seeing double.

Beuckelaer was born in Antwerp at the Mannerist waning of the Northern European Renaissance, to a family of painters, more than a century after Jan van Eyck had left his mark upon the Netherlandish region. The young Joachim was apprenticed to his uncle Pieter Aertsen, to whom he owes his stylistic conventions—the genre scene turned monumental.



3. Joachim Beuckelaer, *Kitchen Piece, with Jesus in the House of Martha and Mary in the background*

Aertsen himself is credited for the inversion of traditional still life symbolism, elevating the “lower” subject matter to dominate the image, while simultaneously pushing religious scenes into the background. Meanwhile, a bigger question concerning religious representational imagery was hanging in the air during the 1600s, spurned by reactionary conservatism against Martin Luther’s direct interpretation of the divine word. One might be tempted to suggest that the subversive concept of interpretation had been ripened by Luther, and artists took full permission. Meanwhile, traditionalists interpreted the Biblical word more literally—with the Calvinist ire directed squarely at sacred artworks. Many of Aertsen’s altarpieces were destroyed by the *beeldenstorm* (statue storm) of 1566 in Antwerp.

Although consistently present throughout art history, still life hadn’t become focused as a genre until after this destructive wave of 16th century Iconoclasm. The sweeping threat only served to escalate the misdirection of painterly symbolism, yet perhaps no more sharply than for a seemingly innocuous specialism of still life. Beuckelaer was trained in such an atmosphere, where the act of



4. Pieter Aertsen, detail from *A Kitchen*

interpreting the divine word became institutionalized. Through painting, the age old tradition of speaking with a forked tongue ascended to religious subversion, bringing a fresh directness to Low Country painting.

The double-speak operated on a parallel circuit, bound to the compositional staging, yet often read independently of their archetypes. In Beuckelaer’s era of premodern painting, mimicry participated in a very specific form of knowledge—the articulation and recirculation of religious themes. In parallel, subversion was secular. Over time, given the natural lossiness of intent, plus the distribution of works into private collections, derivative paintings began to shed their divine charter, and could be read more directly.

With Beuckelaer historicized as the natural derivative of Aertsen, could it be said that he is the godfather of copy-paste for unabashedly plying the Aertsen derivatives as unique works? Does this qualify him as an Ur-appropriationist? Beuckelaer's monumentality first and foremost created new possibilities for still life, but the designation of visionary seems incredibly ironic for a copyist. In blunt terms, fish are probably the last thing I would want to paint—or smell—while working out a still life. I smell a motive behind the copies.

We all know still life as a training exercise, but most museum-goers are unable to read through the layers of archaic subversion. The double-speak has simply been lost to contemporary culture. Would you ever guess that a chicken was symbol of copulation? Consequently, still life doesn't pack quite the same punch today as it once did. If appropriation were to be pedagogically underwritten and institutionally endorsed, every art student would know about Joachim Beuckelaer. Then we might begin to understand the grammar of the copy in relation to still life.

Beuckelaer rendered his scenes with extreme focus on the staged props, seemingly to cover up his apparent awkwardness with figuration. A simple analysis follows. One, he didn't use a camera lucida, which had been employed in the Netherlandish region more than a century earlier by Jan van Eyck. Two, Beuckelaer wasn't dynamic with figuration, nor incredibly inventive with faces. Three, he didn't have many friends. Or at least the kind of friends who might want to be immortalized in a painting. Hence the doppelgängers.

So what did Beuckelaer do? Comparatively, he became obsessed with static objects. It would be a stretch to conclude that the grand theater of still life was the only accommodation of his abilities. Neither would I suggest that Beuckelaer found still life as an anti-social adaptation. Instead, the overall strategy of his work merges a studious type of mimicry with copy-paste figuration—harmonized by a small dose of obfuscation.

The apparent bountifulness of his market scenes hold the depth of a composited Andreas Gursky tableau—and yet Beuckelaer's figures feel like automatons from a serialized fashion ad campaign.



5. Joachim Beuckelaer, *Still Life*

We already know that they borrow heavily from his mentor Aertsen, who himself was a liberal borrower. When you scan between Beuckelaer's public market scene and his domestic interiors, it's the statuesque characters who seem to be denying a naturalistic narrative. You can't help but feel like his scenes are staged by paper dolls, with strings attached to hinged joints. As a whole, the compositing of derivatives seems to conceptually point towards something non-academic, as the subversions play out through layers of interpretation. Perhaps the figures are arranged to literally point at the hyperrealist symbols.

What seems critical to Beuckelaer's practice here is the deprioritization of narrative synthesis (better dramatized by his contemporaries), to instead re-puzzle the interactions of a more subtle iconography. Is this a brow beating? It's not so much *which* items are on the table, but which ones are being activated by the characters. Somewhere between the neatly arranged vegetables, sidelong glances, and coy gestures, the actors glare glassy-eyed from the stage, imploring narration. They make little effort to interact with each other, instead hoping to engage with the viewer.

One simple alternative to the above critique is that Beuckelaer's compositional brashness was economically motivated. Perhaps the elevation of the "lower" subject matter appealed much less to traditional cultural stewards (collectors) than Beuckelaer's actual subject (servants). History confirms that Beuckelaer never

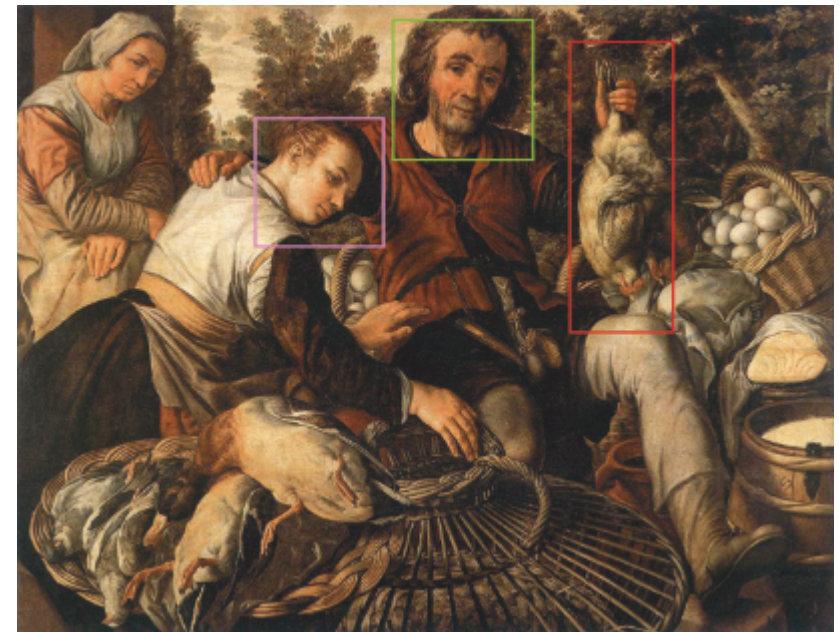


6. Joachim Beuckelaer, *Unknown*

commanded high sale prices in his lifetime, so necessity forced him to produce in volume. Copying would have been an obvious shortcut.

Market demands aside, the question of historicization stands. Can we call still life appropriation? Should we? This is an altogether grey area, but my grizzled life drawing professor would say that drawing from the real world is all about the spatial translation from 3D to 2D—which always felt like an old fashioned excuse for prohibiting optical tools. Instead we used a pencil as a scale, measuring and mapping proportion with our thumbs. I suppose life drawing is mostly designed to teach one how to look, not how to think.

It seems that Beuckelaer was naturally the type who could sit still for long periods of uninterrupted focus, and stare, unflinchingly, at vegetables. I on the other hand, cannot. To me, what is most incredible about the proposed godfather of copy-paste, is that he didn't hallucinate like Arcimboldo. Everything was rendered directly as is, despite how concretely it may have meant something else entirely. This reads as complete showmanship, knowing full well that many viewers, contemporaneous and future, would be none the wiser.



7. Joachim Beuckelaer, *Tastes Great*



8. Joachim Beuckelaer, *Free Sample*



9. Joachim Beuckelaer, *The Four Elements - Earth*



11. Joachim Beuckelaer, *The Four Elements - Fire*



10. Joachim Beuckelaer, *The Four Elements - Air*



12. Joachim Beuckelaer, *The Four Elements - Water*

Beuckelaer is undeniably a skilled painter, but the work is so deadpan that it's nearly conceptual. This is a dead fish. This is another. These are all the fish I see at the market. Do you want a chicken?



13. Joachim Beuckelaer, *Wait, There's More!*

Wikipedia suggests that Beuckelaer in fact “employed pat terns of clustered items through tracings to compose new pictures with apparent variety.” Which effectively means his compositions were collaged, as the traced copies reappear slightly repositioned within familiar scenes—common domestic situations, such as that of the kitchen, or the social space of the market.

Fast food tracing was the economy of scale for an artist that wasn't collected until after his death. Whether he was banking on surplus to edge his way into institutional collections is anyone's guess. If creativity seems lacking, at least we read industriousness in the work today. Beuckelaer reworked the familiar fish and familiar faces, and kept on cranking out the relatively large, ostentatiously fettered paintings. Appropriation will always be a shortcut, but the question of intent remains with the activation of symbols.



14. Joachim Beuckelaer's doppelgänger

Beuckelaer's real-world environments were layered with another type of familiar scene—those mentioned in the Bible. Yet his (and Aertsen's) particular maneuver was to push this cultural necessity into the background. How did Beuckelaer's compositional distancing shift the meaning of the background allegories? Depends on who you ask. Obviously the fish were allegorical. And then the chickens. But beyond that, it's totally lost on me what tomatoes and potatoes represented in 16th century Flemish slang. The sexual undertones, though mildly quizzical, have likely been lost by institutional stewardship. The meaning we're presented with today is inevitably whitewashed.

If we take Beuckelaer's oeuvre at face value instead, we can't ignore the religious themes presiding over the background. Certainly this must register an important a moral barometer. Perhaps checking that box for religious overtones? Yet Jesus is distant. Perhaps Beuckelaer is honoring the humble devotion of everyday laborers. Yet their environment reads as ground zero for indulgent pleasures of the flesh. Is it too far of a jump to conclude that Beuckelaer made little attempt to veil his subversions?

You could answer all the above questions with “yes” and not be in contradiction. This is the advantage of a derivatives market—offset a loss with a win through hedged bets. Painter gets his bread. Collector gets his laughs. The composition is held in a delicate balance. Indulgence is mediated by the teachings of Christ. Humble drunken servants tending to the fire will win a ticket to Hell. Did I mention that we, 500 years down the road, get confused?

Conceptual art needn't be mechanically proscriptive. Such complex subversions and counter subversions would naturally implode over time. However quite unexpectedly, the subsequent development of the still life genre only consolidated Beuckelaer's place in art history. And the what-you-see-is-what-you-get compositions remain for posterity to scratch their heads over.



15. Joachim Beuckelaer, *Fish Fry*

The staying power of these indirect appropriations may in part be fueled by such wild speculation of symbolic relationships. Meaning is distorted, doubled, inverted, collided, colluded, and ultimately reshaped, if not entirely lost and reconstructed in the process. You might even say that meaning is itself liberated by the recirculation of secondary interpretations.

Drawing back to my introduction—that appropriation and mimicry stand at the foundation of communication—these appropriations we fail to reinterpret in Beuckelaer's works are precisely the accelerated dilemma museums face with their stodgy placards. From a wall text, the uninitiated can read into the religious monotony with little difficulty. But as culture changes, the unscripted innuendoes will always be lost. And soon you're back to square one. Cut-and-paste. From a contemporary vantage, we have an internally consistent picture, with untapped symbols aplenty. A veritable feast. The nuance of representation starts all over again.

In looking at historical appropriations nearly 500 years on, my conclusion is that appropriation performs exactly opposite as



16. Joachim Beuckelaer's *Fast Food*

you'd expect it might. The current dissonance between copy-paste culture and institutional coda such as copyright will be totally unrecognizable in the distant future, much like the meaning of Beuckelaer's poultry. Whether or not we know *where* appropriated content was sourced, the only thing that will matter is how discrete works function internally, such as within these monumentally mundane paintings of Joachim Beuckelaer. This will be the future for digital images.

Would it make any difference if I told you that the people in Beuckelaer's paintings were once royalty, first sourced by his mentor Aertsen, from paintings by the likes of portraitist Cornelis van Dalem? Probably not. But at least you'll remember that appropriation owes its relevance to still life.



17. Joachim Beuckelaer, *Joachim_Beuckelaer_001.jpg*

MJRobertson: There's been a huge resurgence of interest in your work following the British National Gallery's purchase of your quadriptych *The Four Seasons* in 2005. Are you enjoying this recent success?

Joachim Beuckelaer: In my time the polyptych was almost always physically connected with hinges. You may think of the seasons as such—hinged. Although the works were sized the same, they were not constructed to unfold in the traditional manner. But first of all I should say that it's amazing that any of the works have survived the *beeldenstorm* ("image storm" or literally, "statue storm" —ed.). The relative success of surviving the Iconoclasts can be pinned down to two things— subject matter, and paradoxically, the scale in these works. Our Northern Renaissance has always been trying to escape the shadow of Grünewald, by which I also infer Dürer, the far more widely circulated one. Where Dürer made you see with sharpened clarity, Grünewald made you feel... (pause)...weak in the knees. Perhaps it was a bit over the top. Grünewald was, as you know, friends with Martin Luther.

MJR: So they say...

JB: Meanwhile the Iconoclasts only wanted to intellectualize religious themes. Failed painters, all of them. Too bookish to understand the power of image. Incapable of feeling. You might even take Bosch as the antithesis of Grünewald's pious empathy. If Grünewald made you fall in supplication, Bosch's approach was to scare you shitless. His witchcraft was intended to avert the eyes from sin. Both painters here placed the viewer in the anti-intellectual position of feeling—much easier said than done. I should know.

By contrast, I aimed for base sensations, a far less perverse version of Bosch. Food was a simple tool. If you see a fresh fish, you can't help but smelling it. Or food cooking in the kitchen, you salivate. It's incredibly difficult to trigger these psychosomatic reactions from mere words, as in a Biblical tale. Hence the highly symbolic fish, bread and wine. Escape the symbolic terms and you'll have an immediate audience.

I used the food to work on your base senses, then let the Word slip into the background. Oldest form of brainwashing. You might say that this foreground was all the Iconoclasts saw—an illustrated pub menu. Surely they cringed as if they

were looking at a Bosch—and were divinely inspired. They saw the work for what it was, got hungry, perhaps sought their fill, yet moved on. I think they totally missed the underlying content. The mob can't be too discerning.

And even if they did read the subtext, regarding scale, my foreground had enough going on that you could easily overpaint Jesus with a head of lettuce and no one would be the wiser. It simply wasn't worth the energy to destroy the work when you could cut it into fragments for reuse. But most didn't read past the opulence.

MJR: You're certainly no stranger to reusing content. But let's start at

the beginning. You were born into a family of painters, and trained under Pieter Aertsen.

JB: Yeah, Aertsen got the worst of the storm. Even my brothers. You should be careful of putting me on the pedestal knowing where it came from. The first subversion was to bring these religious symbols into the household, where they held no meaning. A different meaning perhaps. From there we can expound the corrupt mythology of the common man. I wouldn't be the first to recognize it.

MJR: Please say more about your composition.

JB: Pieter didn't care so much



18. Joachim Beuckelaer, *Joachim_Beuckelaer_002.jpg*

about geometry. What you'd call perspective. Composition needn't be structured, because perception doesn't follow structured rules. Just place the symbols and let the viewer do the contextualization. It doesn't take much. You go to the market. Walk the same streets. Buy the same things. Eat the same food. Life is monotonous. Predictable.

Likewise, painting is a highly specialized trade. There's a limited stylistic range that collectors will actually buy. They buy works that look like what they've already seen. Composition is just a strategy for reorganizing the familiar.

MJR: You are, if my information is correct, one of the few of your contemporaries to have not traveled to Rome to study the masters.

JB: I think you must be confusing me with someone else. I traveled. But in truth I already had everything I needed for painting.

MJR: Aertsen became your master.

JB: The ability to reconstruct an image of the world, in pigment, cannot benefit from travel. The hand's only master is the eye. Going to Rome to study composition, or optical devices, wouldn't have benefitted the cabbages. To use a bit of a farming metaphor, the harvest of ripened fruit is only borne of sweat and toil. Cabbages don't paint themselves.

MJR: Or fish.

JB: Have you ever seen a fish flopping about in a boat? I'd like to think they would paint themselves on a canvas rather than in a net. Alas the headless ones are the best sitters. You should know a thing or two about fish.

MJR: I hate fish. I had a school-teacher with the brilliant idea to paint the fish, a dead fish mind you, and print it on a shirt.

JB: Like a woodcut?

MJR: Basically. I protested and instead drew an anatomically accurate still life from a plastic fish.

JB: You'd take the position of the Iconoclasts?

MJR: I'd take the position of common sense.

JB: Art is more a mirror of itself than the world. They say Dürer put his plate in the pond and traced the reflection. You should see the fake food they make these days. Same thing!

MJR: Or Chinese takeaway. I'll have #17.

JB: I've invented the menu.

MJR: The Rosenquist version. The billboard.

JB: Well is a miniature hock going to satisfy anyone? Jan Steen, maybe. All piss and hot air, Havickszoon. Anyhow, regarding scale, it seemed like the only solution to make the food... well, seem appetizing.

MJR: By trading places with miniature Jesus?

JB: You'll have to ask Aertsen about that. I'd guess he'd rather have miniature scenes than sculptures in rubble. Personally I'd rather have a full gut. There's a tradition for miniatures in devotionals. But with food there can only be a 1:1 correlation.

MJR: There's something of Zeuxis in your works. Did birds ever take a swoop down to eat at them?

JB: I think the birds were far more likely to swoop at Bosch's miniature people. Easy targets.

MJR: "There's an old saying in Tennessee—I know it's in Texas, probably in Tennessee—that says, fool me once, shame on—shame on you. Fool me—you can't get fooled again." Classic George Bushism. Why the doppelgängers? It hardly seems that you're trying to master their expressions.

JB: As I've said, life is monotonous. But people aren't. Predictable, yes, but I can't get anyone to sit still. Only paintings succeed at that.

MJR: A bit paradoxical, that. Life existing between monotony and fidgeting.

JB: I'm content to fill in the blanks of their anatomy rather than pose them perfectly as Caravaggio would. I could spend all day looking at a cabbage. Just so, I'd rather spend my time looking than correcting the misalignments of projections upon a representational space.

MJR: Like the hand in his (Caravaggio's) *Supper at Emmaus*...

JB: The hand outstretched in the foreground is at the same scale as the hand receding into the dark. It's clearly an artifact of focussing the camera lucida. A kind of warped flatness.

MJR: Hockney would agree. You raise the focussing error, but what about your composited backgrounds?

JB: Foregrounds, yes. Backgrounds, no. Never had the time to invent a proper background. It's more like a stage set. Flip the tree around and there's a building on the back. Or a wardrobe. Just a setting. It doesn't really activate your senses. There's no specific triggers in the background. All copies.

MJR: Meanwhile your countrymen have made careers out of framing scenes through the back door.

JB: They're far more pious than me. Mathematicians also have these Iconoclastic tendencies. I can't stand the geometry. Bring me gluttony or bring me death.

MJR: This statement could read as a critique.

JB: Of course it is both. Pile the spoils at the front door. Draw back the curtains. Let the Zeuxis' birds have at it. Both indulgent and essential. We're all just animals.

MJR: Or vegetables.

JB: Ah, the semiotics of the kitchen.

MJR: Teach a man to fish.

JB: Amen. Teach a man to fish with a paintbrush...

MJR: Where are the Iconoclasts these days?

JB: Ask Aertsen. Probably doing interviews. They prefer words.

MJR: Fishing?

JB: You have this phrase, phishing.

MJR: Yes, the copy redeployed as a spoof login page, hoping to trick the user into compromising their login and password. People are always the weakest security link.

JB: Sounds just like the food vendor. And fake news?

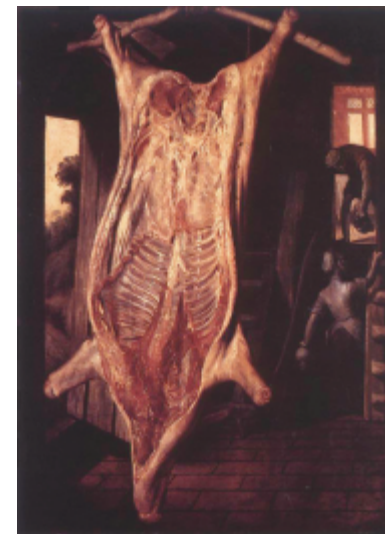
MJR: A bit of collage going on in there, some calculated editing. At some point however, almost within the past four years, the narrative has entirely detached from the image. So now you might look at an image, for example of the Washington mall during the 2016 inaugural address, and hear our Commander in Chief declare the largest crowd ever. Packed. And you see a lot of grass back there towards the monument. You know, bright green, a veritable green screen. Everyone loved him.

JB: But this isn't all that different than my own background narratives. I sure passed as pious.

MJR: But if you have the scene of Jesus going fishing, behind a market scene with piles of fish, you aren't directly correlating the two in time.

JB: Of course, the painting isn't a press photograph, it's a story unfolding. Time exists within the painting. Impossibly. You might say that any still life is a memento mori. This is what the Iconoclasts couldn't see.

MJR: It's a difficult argument to stage with digital media. What I'm trying to raise here is how you aren't making declarative statements in your work, as statements of fact. Your copies are benign. I hope you can see where this has led. Copies aren't benign anymore. Today the same copy is circulated under entirely oppositional headlines.



19. Joachim Beuckelaer, *Flayed pig*

JB: It's lost the storytelling?

MJR: It's merely forensic.

JB: Once I painted a flayed pig. I'll never forget the smell.

MJR: I think artists once copied from the world to better understand how nature worked. Now it seems that headlines can push any narrative with just the right stylistic production values.

JB: This manner of recirculating production values is in itself a security vulnerability. Like the religious content in my works, there are too many latent emotional triggers for a visual culture hold an authentic response. Color is associative. Cue the soundtrack. I

had to find a way around the same old stories.

MJR: Well said.

JB: Even authorship in my time was a type of branding, because it sets expectation. My critique, through hyper-realism, is an attempt to override those trained responses to authored compositions, and set the carnal truths apart from religious devotion.

MJR: We have plenty of fast food adverts. But you see the copy as a sort of liberation from constructed narrative?

JB: Perhaps only if it is amplified ad nauseam. Is this not the condition of the so-called fake news you refer to? The copy must be returned to the populus, it is the model of their equality. A pliable tool.

MJR: Perhaps the equality is what adverts would have us believe. Equality through consumption.

JB: Ah, but this is where the carnal image thrives. There might be any number of innuendos stemming from an institutional type of composition, but what other than carnal fact will cut through symbol? Is it not painted black and white? Still life is fact.

MJR: Bosch save us.

JB: He tried.

If you were to annotate each and every appropriation with a bibliographic hyperlink, the simple pleasure of “reading” an artwork would be instantly undermined by data. Let this be a metaphor for the information age. Why bother citing the permutations of visual culture?

By silencing their sources, classical painters privileged new meaning over compositional provenance. Today, we freely wield the decontextualized copy through screen capture and cropping. Yet given the breadth of digital capture and redistribution—the tools for manipulating found material have become so ubiquitous that transformation has likewise become meaningless. This brings us back square one—the original source. Meaninglessness.

For contemporary artworks to fully grapple with appropriation, they must be fully diffused of transformative content. Meaning can then be reconstituted by a derivative market. The copy initiates this diffusion of meaning.

Transformation has been the vestige of the industrial state. We know better than to think that technology will save us.

—MJRobertson, 2021

Proof