

# Artie Vierkant

Photography Stef Mitchell Interview Thor Shannon, NYU

As an artist, writer, and teacher, Artie Vierkant has worked throughout his career to give meaning to the diffuse digital network that is the ground for much of contemporary existence. Vierkant's seminal text "The Image Object Post-Internet" (2010) delineated the various cultural and artistic practices that have developed in society following the Internet's popularization. His artworks, meanwhile, have helped frame the individual trajectories that objects now take as they fluctuate between physical and digital formats.

**TS:** *Hi Artie. Tell me a bit about your artistic practice. What elements of culture, society, and the arts in general do you investigate in your work?*

**AV:** I think the central things that I'm most invested in when I approach art making are how authorship, ownership and objects themselves have changed after the transition to what is basically now a digital society. Everyone is now essentially an author. I like to think about what that means for individual artists today. The traditional artist myth up to this point has always been that artists (or at least those who get historicized) have been seen as extraordinary people who create extraordinary things and are, in turn, supposed to be seen as amazing markers of any given generation. That myth has fundamentally changed today, though. Now anyone who uploads a YouTube video can be just as culturally relevant as someone showing work at a blue-chip gallery—or indeed, they're probably even more so. Our relationship with art objects (actually, with all objects) is fundamentally changing. The so-called digital revolution hasn't exactly hit the art world in any truly meaningful way yet, though. It's interesting to look at things like film distribution or music distribution or publishing (e-books etc.), all industries that have had to significantly grapple with the effects of the network revolution, and have only been able to do so by trying to enforce artificial scarcity on what are essentially limitlessly reproducible objects.

*I know what you mean. With a simple right-click or two-finger tap, anything can be replicated online in endless quantities. As soon as something is digitized and made into a .jpeg or a movie file or a sound file, it takes on a new dimension, and exists within a new dimension that has completely different rules.*

Exactly. I've spent a lot of time recently trying to figure out how one can create work that kind of straddles those two spaces. My *Image Objects*, for instance, start from digital files and then become physical objects. They're transmitted primarily through installation views, the appearance

of which I then deliberately alter. I want my work to acknowledge the conditions of digital space—that these replicable objects are susceptible to modifications.

*One of the reasons why I've always loved your work is that it seems to be an acknowledgement of context, of how people view art today. So many artists are still making work that is purely for the gallery or the museum setting, and do not take into account how viewers are actually approaching their work, which in most cases is now on a screen.*

Yeah, exactly. I'm trying to acknowledge that screen space, as well as the accessibility of the artworks themselves. I've always been a believer in different strains of art fodder, particularly traditions inherited by various members of the historical avant-garde or later conceptual artists, which try to find ways to help art become democratized. I don't mean democratized in the sense that everyone can own it or something like that—although that is a factor, don't get me wrong. Rather, I mean it in regards to art that's open and understandable. I would hope that you can look at one of my .jpegs and instantly acknowledge there's something going on in this image that turns it into something else, that it doesn't completely sync with its physical surrounding. I just did a show in Germany at a gallery called Exile, and one of the major pieces in the show was a curated arrangement of things I purchased from Ikea. I think somewhere like Ikea is interesting because it's a place where one can go to in what seems like almost every country in the world, and find the same objects in each location, endlessly replicated and in such great amounts that the preciousness of that individual object is ultimately destroyed. They become endlessly copy-and-pasted, iteratively produced design objects. With this piece, I took the objects that I had purchased, made sculptural arrangements out of them, and then photographed them. The title of the work is simply a list enumerating all the objects that were used to create it. Conceivably, then, anyone could see this image that I made and, with this title, go to the local Ikea, purchase the objects constituting it, and recreate it. I think that particular way of approaching things is interesting to me because it tests the boundaries of what one can do in a physical space that is increasingly modeled after the digital.

*Because of Ikea's relative affordability and ubiquity, so many people's homes are now completely Ikea-designed. It seems as though, as a result, we are left with fewer and fewer site-specific homes and locations anymore. Instead, we live in spaces that are entirely site-generic.*



Site-generic! I like that term.

*It's because lived, middle-class spaces now are all so similar! I see a parallel in this regard to screen-space. Even though the Internet is literally site-specific (in the sense that we visit distinct web-sites), it's ultimately more site-generic than it is the other way around, because everyone has access to the same sites, and they are uniform the world over—in the same way that Ikea is uniform the world over.*

That's what's also interesting about art being made today. From the *Contemporary Art Daily* crowd to kids on tumblr—members on both sides of that spectrum seem to function in kind of the same way. Sure, there are definitely regional strands of art practice going on. If you look at something just like the “Internet scene” or whatever you want to call it, there are these regional interests, based probably largely on the education of those artists on a local level. But there is also this sort of global image dialogue going on. A friend of mine, an artist named Michael Jones McKean, put these issues in an eloquent way. He was telling me how it's kind of amazing that somebody can go and to Berlin and see an exhibition, with images of the show ultimately ending up on, say, *Contemporary Art Daily*. That same person can then go to a studio visit in Nebraska, for example, and another artist, in the middle of nowhere, can have made essentially the same thing. It's not even that it's stolen or a direct copy, but rather that this artist has been following the same kind of visual strands as the artist with the show in Berlin. They might check the same blogs, and thus articulate their work with similar formal means. Even though the second artist is essentially in the middle of nowhere—sorry, Nebraska—the concerns that they're dealing with are universal. The work might even be about something quite different, but they speak a shared visual language. How many artworks have you seen just last year that have MacBooks as part of the image, for instance?

*I know! Or indeed any part of the Mac OS...*

Yeah exactly. An Apple logo, a Samsung logo.

*Anything ripped from the aesthetic of an iPhone, really. Computer interfaces like the iPhone have created a visual language in which we've all become fluent. We all recognize the aesthetic vocabulary constituting this new visual means of communication.*

And it's not only young people, either. Even David Hockney is making iPad paintings, you know?

*Yeah. Do you think the art world will ever evolve to properly account for all these changes—these new strategies and aesthetics, I mean?*

If the art world is good at one thing it's evolution. Or, what I might say more specifically is that it's good at colonization. For example, the film industry has very concretely had to deal with the changes the Internet has issued. Right now, as we're speaking, it's Oscar season, and so I have *Lincoln*, *Django Unchained* and *Zero Dark Thirty* all on my computer with Oscar-screener copies. There's this beautiful watermark on these versions, which is also something that is very inspirational to me and to my work (inspirational might be a bit florid, but you know what I mean). Anyway, you have all these things on the screener, like the words “For Your Consideration” appearing on the screen every so often, which makes what you're seeing a totally different image. They've made an actual change to the product that they're releasing to account for the fact that people might share these copies online. They've had to very concretely deal with that. On the other hand, that hasn't really been as much the case in the art world. There are some things that have happened, like Seth Price selling bootleg copies of his own work outside of his gallery Friedrich Petzel, for instance. I think that's a beautiful gesture. I can't tell how the system will otherwise evolve to figure out the Internet and what it's done to distribution networks, though. Traditionally, if an artist has wanted to create something, while wanting to

push the conversation in a different direction—bring it into a different place, a different arena—oftentimes that artist creates something that the gallery and museum system hasn't figured out how to recuperate yet. They're things that are just so far afield and not recognized as traditional art practice, not recognized as things that someone might be desirous of collecting... What ultimately ends up happening in all of those cases is, while the intention might be that the artist is trying to push the limits of art and create something that take's art outside of its ivory tower and puts it into the realm of everyday life, in a certain way it's also this colonizing gesture where, instead of expanding the ivory tower to incorporate aspects of everyday life, they're instead just asserting territory. That might be a negative way of reading it, but not necessarily so outlandish. Even though the kind of art practices that you and I art talking about are still new and somewhat radical, there are people actively seeking to recuperate these movements and these different ideas, which thereby neutralizes them.

*You have this real interest in, and knowledge about, nascent strands of artistic practice and theoretical engagement with the Internet, digital culture, etc., but even you are making work that has an actual, physical component. Even though it engages the network, you're still making work that physically exists within galleries, museums, and traditional art spaces. I'm wondering if you think that circulating within the traditional, physical art world—as opposed to purely in digital space—is necessary in order to find wider success and validation in the art world.*

As opposed to the early conception of the Internet that saw it as a totally different space where we forge new identities and do things that are exclusively for that world, ultimately this digital world and life that we now inhabit is in many ways just an extension of the physical world. It is a literally new space, but it's also built on existing infrastructures and objects. To put it in other words, for instance, Occupy Wall Street wouldn't have been anything if it had just been people talking about the financial crisis on Twitter—there had to be physical bodies there. I wonder a lot about the divide between the physical and digital in this sense.

*A lot of your work does seem to do with physicalizing digital objects...*

I wouldn't say “physicalizing” exactly. I would say that I'm more interested in where the physical and digital worlds meet, how each of them can be expanded from a conversation with the other. We have a pretty developed relationship with digital objects at this point, and yet these things are still evolving. I'm interested in that intersection. I think that I bristle at that definition of it—where I'm just physicalizing digital objects—because that makes it seem like too much of a one-way conversation, when instead there's actually this flow going back and forth.

*I agree, I think both worlds are definitely in conversation with one another. That makes me wonder, though, how you think our physical space is being affected by digital space. Or, to put it another way, how is digital space, which was initially influenced by the look and feel of physical space, now influencing the physical world in turn?*

It's funny, that kind of question makes me think again about Ikea. The logistics of Ikea and the design of Ikea— and not only Ikea but really all international brands—all have a kind of digital mindset. It might be slightly different on a local level, slightly modified to be appropriate to that local area, but at the same time, Ikea design is basically just an endless reproduction of the same thing the world over. As a “Digital Native” yourself, you must see everyday instances of these kind of digital metaphors overtaking ones that were formerly “actual” all the time. You know, there are probably a bunch of physical Yelp or Twitter stickers on the window of this very restaurant asking us to Like it—“Yelp loves us!” or something. Facebook and Twitter, and even Foursquare, Reddit, and Instagram, are all controlled by private interests, and yet they all also provide public space to their users. We interact every day in these new public/private spaces.





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*Your well-known essay "The Image Object Post-Internet" highlights some of these same conditions. In that text, you also discuss how most often the stylistic movements that emerge online are visual ones. People don't linger online to contemplate the conceptual meaning of images anymore—they just want to rapidly digest them. I'm wondering if you think this is still the case, or even more the case since you wrote that essay in 2010.*

I'd say it's more the case than ever, probably. For centuries, we've had textual communication and verbal communication, and though we have also had active forms of visual communication as well, it was usually secondary to those other forms of communicative production. I think that visual communication will now develop at an ever faster rate than what McLuhan had already prophesized back in the sixties. I think you see this in the billions of memes shared and reproduced every day, for example.

*Yeah, which are designed to be seen and understood in just a moment.*

Exactly. They're designed to be seen and understood and related back to another idea. You know the 'Deal with it' .gif-meme of the dog wearing sunglasses? It started out as a relatively low-tech, pixelated version of a dog, but it was quickly replicated into a ton of different figures, icons, other people, etc. However, it's still always the same visual action of the sunglasses dropping down on the face with the words "deal with it" flashing onscreen, or some variant that still visually references the original directly. That image has a relationship back to the whole sequence of other images it influenced. I've been thinking a lot recently about a book by Vilém Flusser, originally published in 1985, but translated into English only last year. Flusser writes about what we're experiencing now as the Age of Telematics. He identifies it as a moment when—as opposed to the preceding centuries when human culture was a culture mostly devoted to linear texts—this era is the opening-up of visual communication, of intertextual, relational communication, what we would maybe call "intersubjective." The book is a kind of treatise for visual communication itself, related to what we see now with memes, or even in the form of contemporary art itself seen as a kind of meme. This type of world is hugely fascinating, and its bearing on art is enormous. Art is created and exists within an entirely new space, and the ethics driving its users/creators are similarly changed. Now we can have a media experience with the screen in which one is constantly refreshing

a page, chatting with a friend on a G-chat on the side, checking Facebook, doing some research, checking Instagram... This whole context is really interesting. This is a very different kind of information-intake than reading a book, say. The book is a little monument to a strain of thought or something; it's a linear text, it's there. The reason I use the word monument is because, like Foucault says, "History is that which transforms documents into monuments." I like the idea that documents are not singular monuments anymore.

*Because they've been torn apart by the Internet?*

More that Digital culture—or whatever it is that we're living in now—can change our relationship to any single thing that we learn from or experience. So with a book, for example, you have interpretations of it, the editions it's gone through, comments about it on Amazon, your friends' comments about it when you post a quote from it on Facebook. It seems demonumentalized in that way. Or maybe I'm wrong, and it's actually more monumentalized than ever! I'm not even sure. There's that Angelo Plessas work, "Every Website is a Monument." Maybe it's just a changing monument. Or maybe I just like that these things can shift over time, that they aren't so stable anymore.

*An object seems completely destabilized by its trajectory in and out of the screen. It's constantly in flux. A physical object can be digitized, edited and reformatted in the digital sphere, and then it can pass back into the physical world, bearing the trace of its encounter with the digital. Sometimes this can even occur back and forth several times. Your art seems to engage this kind of trajectory, that of the object as it passes through these circuits.*

Every single image can be an object, and vice versa. And every image and every object can be part of a succession of different images and objects thereafter. I think that notion of the object was probably the primary motivating factor that I was thinking about while I was trying to frame the *Image Objects* for myself. When you have an object, even a mass-produced object, it doesn't really have a fixity anymore. You can take an image of it and do something else with it, you can take an *object* and do something else with it... You can perform a bunch of different DIY operations on either: scan it, alter it, make it your own. Acknowledging that lack of fixity is very interesting, and important, to me, and to the work I create in turn. ○