

Photo Op

BRIAN DROITCOUR ON ARTIE VIERKANT



Clockwise from top left: Artie Vierkant, (left) *Image Object Tuesday 4 October 2011 7:10 PM*, (right) *Image Object Monday 3 October 2011 4:11 PM*, version *Monday 16 January 2012 6:53 PM*, 2012, digital image, dimensions variable. Artie Vierkant, (left) *Image Object Sunday 10 July 2011 5:50 PM*, (right) *Image Object Saturday 9 July 2011 5:47 PM*, version *Wednesday 4 January 2012 5:49 PM*, 2012, digital image, dimensions variable. Artie Vierkant, *Image Object removed from documentation*, 2011, digital image, dimensions variable. All from the series "Image Objects," 2010–.

IN ARTIE VIERKANT'S EXHIBITION at China Art Objects in Los Angeles last October, he presented works from the series "Image Objects," 2010–, which consists of thick, wall-mounted Sintra PVC sheets imprinted with bright abstractions drawn in Photoshop. A few days after the opening, images of these works were posted to the gallery's website. You'd expect the exhibition documentation on a gallery's site to tell you transparently what a show looked like, but these files were not straightforward installation shots. Although the works are visible, they are clouded with Photoshopped pollutants, hazed by strange and obvious edits. In one image, the section where the wall meets the floor is repeated higher up, as a swath of white and gray striking through the artworks hanging on the wall. Another shows the photographer's arm holding a balance-calibration target,

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the tool used to standardize color in digital images. The squares of the calibration target's palette contort and bleed past its grid in jagged wedges. In all of the images, pale, woolly patches of color—one pink and one blue—float at the corners.

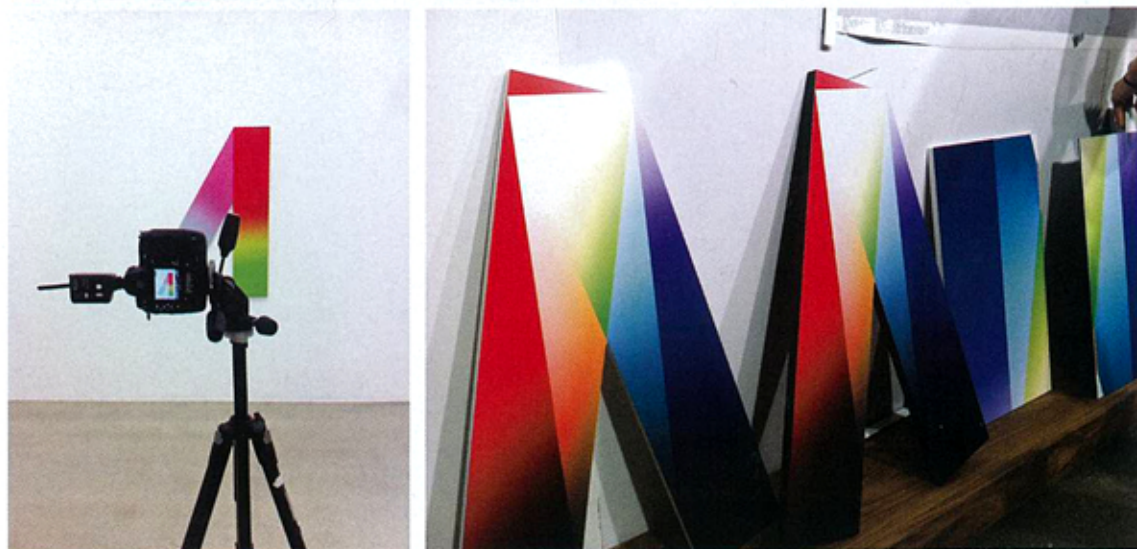
I have never been to China Art Objects. Although I hate to write about art I haven't seen—as common as that is with the online proliferation of images—in this case I can reassure myself that I did see at least half of the show.

The online images are members of the series rather than a record of it. In his disavowal of documentation, Vierkant goes beyond leveling the hierarchy of original and copy. He rejects the distinction altogether, recognizing the JPEG and the sculpture as equally important modes of representation. One behaves according to the operations available in Photoshop and Web browsers. The other is bound by the physical properties of Sintra. "Image Objects" thus tests the theses that Vierkant presented in "The Image Object Post-Internet" (2010), a manifesto-like essay distributed online as a PDF: "The work of art lies equally in the version of the object one would encounter at a gallery or museum [and] the images and other representations disseminated through the Internet and print publications."

When he goes on to write that "the world of 'the screen' is our communal space," the gallery, stuck to its street address, seems to fall behind. For the "Image Objects," at least, the white glow of a screen arguably makes a better viewing environment than the white cube of the gallery. That, after all, is where they origi-

nate. Each one is drawn by a process of accumulation, guided by Photoshop's tools and default settings. The Rectangle function produces the basic shapes. Gradient fills them with color, in a smooth transition between two points on the Photoshop palette. Layers, which divides the elements of an image into different registers of action, is here used to accrue rectangles in one window, automatically simulating a prismatic blending of color and light in imitation of stacked sheets of acetate or multiple exposures.

A substantive difference is introduced when the files become tangible objects. When I had the chance to see some test prints on Sintra of the "Image Objects" in Brooklyn, I was surprised by their thickness. They look so mercurial when photographed and altered. Relishing the mutability of the digital file, Vierkant has made dozens of images of the works, freely wielding Photoshop's Clone Stamp and Healing Brush—typically used gingerly to hide a blemish on a model's face by copying a better, adjacent part of skin. In one image, the works



Clockwise from top: Artie Vierkant, *Exposure Adjustment on a Sunset*, 2009, stills from a color video, 39 minutes. Artie Vierkant, *Daylight/Twilight*, 2010, stills from a two-channel color video, 122 minutes. Proofs and test prints for Artie Vierkant's "Image Objects," 2010–, New York, September 23, 2010. Camera documenting the exhibition "Artie Vierkant" at China Art Objects, Los Angeles, October 28, 2010.

have been erased entirely, and the signature patches of color in the two corners float in an empty gallery. These watermarks (added with the Airbrush function) are a way of keeping track of his images. If he comes across a photograph of "Image Objects" online without them, he'll know it was taken by someone else. And while Vierkant eschews the straight installation shot, he embraces copying and reposting as fluid movements inherent to the condition of the JPEG file. He collects anonymous modifications of his images and has endorsed altered versions of his work made by Los Angeles-based artist Jeff Baij, titled "Bootlegged Image Objects," 2011. Baij's images adhere to the principles of Vierkant's work, but in them the shapes are stripped down and washed out, and the sweep of Clone Stamp's brush is broader and more vigorous.

In 2010, Vierkant's investigations of digital tools resulted in *Daylight/Twilight*, which sequenced the frames of the titular two films (from 1996 and 2008, respectively) according to their brightness value. The movies' titles tug at the web of emotional associations connected to light, and their plots weave it into narrative. *Daylight/Twilight* coolly erases all that. The artist assumes a computer's understanding of brightness as a quantitative metric, not as a trigger for feeling, thus swapping out narrative for a ranking. For *Exposure Adjustment on a Sunset*, 2009, Vierkant adjusted the brightness of a video of the setting sun to keep it constant from beginning to end, even as the natural light waned. Vierkant was in art school at the University of California, San Diego, at the time, and this was, in a way, the ideal art school art: The works dissolve in speech, fitting neatly

in a few lines for a studio visit. The videos are puns on the doubled meaning of *brightness* as both a description of light's intensity and the name of a software operation that measures and adjusts it. By stripping away affect in *Daylight/Twilight* and the indexical representation of nature in the sunset piece, Vierkant teases open the gap between the software and the media he has fed into it.

While Vierkant used preexisting source material in these works, "Image Objects" begins with a blank Photoshop file. It is a significant turn for the artist. The software's given options guide the design of the objects, the installation shots of which then become the starting point for further modification in Photoshop and the open-ended unfolding of the series through the dissemination of altered images online. The wordplay of the earlier video pieces echoes the metaphoric logic that personal-computing interfaces traditionally follow, from "desktops" and "windows" to the browser's white field as a substitution for the white of the printed page or the gallery's white cube. "Image Objects," on the other hand, marks an attempt to exceed such metaphoric limits, to embrace the logic of the technology behind the interface. Conceptualism dematerialized the art object at a time when it had come to rely heavily on printed reproduction and critical language. A half century on, the conditions of art's dissemination have changed. Vierkant's work epitomizes an art etiolated by software rather than by discourse. In "The Image Object Post-Internet," he suggests that "the architecture of the Internet . . . helps facilitate an environment where artists are able to rely more and more on purely visual representations to convey their ideas and support an explanation of their art independent of language." Vierkant is one of many artists in their twenties thinking hard about what it means to use the Internet as a platform for artwork instead of a medium for disseminating documentation. This circumscription of sculpture with digital files in "Image Objects" shows what it means for software to be art's ground. □

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