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At last, a Volkswagen improvement you

For 1971

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*MSRP. EXcludes tax, title, license, dealer fees, and optional equipment.

Kelley Walker

Kelley Walker: Permeable Boundaries

by Robert Hobbs

For his fourth show at the Paula Cooper Gallery, Kelley Walker has created several overlapping and interconnected types of work, ranging from sculpture to painting and collage. In my opinion, the overarching theme of this exhibition is permeable boundaries, an approach which impacts the epistemological, political, and formal power of the show's ensuing discrete yet related three sections. Each of these segments is predicated on newly conceived types of openness. The first presents sculptures created through new software alliances forged between formerly incompatible programs. The second rethinks silkscreen's architectural frame and its translucent pallet of polyester material as indexical and interstitial paintings rather than mere tools for achieving impressions on substrates, which have been considered the only works of art resulting from serigraphy. And the third reconstructs LP (long playing, 33½ rpm) vinyl records—analogue sound storage media—and their packaging, including digitally scanned and CMYK-printed pictorial covers, neutral sleeves, and allusions to mechanical turntables that together reference a range of music from traditional folkways to recent times,¹ all imbricated in layered, mutually reinforcing collages in which each element remains accessible to all the others. Every one of these separate parts of the exhibition resonates in a variety of ways so that the show's overall configuration—predicated, among other concepts, on the permeability of the works in this presentation—can be analogized in terms of one continuous Möbius strip.

In recent years the new problem termed "role boundary permeability" has become an important issue in the fields of sociology, industrial/organizational psychology, and management where it refers to persons transferring emotions from one place—such as home—to the workplace through the use of digital cell phones and personal computers that remove the former barriers once separating personal and professional lives. The problem of maintaining strict separations between these two spheres is related to spillover theory and its intended purview: understanding the phenomenon of how "the work microsystem

and the family microsystem significantly influence one another through a permeable boundary.”² As one might expect, the enhanced mobility afforded through new digital technologies has both positive and negative effects on behavior in the workplace. In addition to its current usage, role boundary permeability can be considered retrospectively as a means for characterizing the goals of such major social and political trends as ethnic and gender equality, which first achieved broad-based topicality in the mid-twentieth century, as well as the more recent focus on globalism, which can be defined in terms of the trans-national dispersal of capital, coupled with the enhanced surveillance afforded by the World Wide Web, which was inaugurated in 1989.³

Walker is no stranger to permeability in both its political and artistic spheres. In 2001, digitally enhanced accessibility served as a basis for his early series of nine *disasters* comprised of interactive digital image files, created only weeks after the 9/11 terrorist attacks when Walker used Adobe Photoshop to reconfigure scanned photographs of specific calamities selected from a collection of *Time-Life* photographs. In these works, as in his present exhibition, Walker found ways to undermine art’s traditional reified ontological views by making his pieces collaborative and thus open-ended works. Each *disaster* took the form of a poster—a token form of graphic output—accompanied by two CD-ROMs, one of which retained the work as the artist had conceived it, while the other was an open-ended invitation for future owners to contribute their own insights and thus participate in creating the art. In the text accompanying these pieces Walker delineated the open-ended protocols for collaborating in the ongoing creation of this work:

The disc and the image it contains can be reproduced and disseminated as often as the holder desires. Whoever receives a copy of the disc or image can likewise reproduce/disseminate either as desired and so on. Furthermore, anyone with a disc or reproduction can manipulate the image and reproduce/disseminate it in its altered state. All forms of reproduction/deviation derived from the image on the disc signed Kelley Walker perpetuate a continuum correlating to the art-work...⁴

Although I certainly understood these pieces at the time as remarkable instances of reconfiguring an individual artwork’s traditional and relatively static ontological status, I’ve only now come to appreciate how they positively reframed—in terms of their trusting, open-ended collaboration—the same global permeability that initiated only weeks before, the United States’ entry into globalism’s at times very negative side, which was catalyzed, in particular, by the horrific terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center Twin Towers. This change from nationalism to globalism was predicated on the recently constricted interplanetary world created by the World Wide Web’s linked global computer networks. Historically speaking, Walker’s *disasters* and their extraordinary openness to prospective collaborators could be considered a crucially important, early symbolic gesture after 9/11. They can be regarded as occasions of “globalism

[being enacted] from below” in order to begin working against the seemingly overwhelming juggernaut of both terrorist networks and hegemonic transnational powers. Walker’s works accomplish this psychological reframing by the extraordinary act of allowing others to collaborate on symbolically transforming images of particular and limited catastrophes, thereby forming one important early building block in the “subculture of resistance.”⁵

The first part of the exhibition of Walker’s most recent work at the Paula Cooper Gallery focuses on the digital hybridization the artist terms “*The Rhino and the Bug*”⁶ in which he has joined or crossbred two formerly incompatible software applications, making them bilingual. He has been able to do this because both programs use TIF and JPG image files, which served as common denominators enabling Walker to establish bridges between the two. The first program he employed specializes in drawing three-dimensional forms and is called “Rhinoceros 3-D”; it is particularly useful for CAD/CAM programs that are employed in offices for business, especially finance, and for realizing the virtual spaces architects require when designing a building. Walker associates this program with Dell and refers to this type of computer as “black”; he distinguishes it from silver Macs—long ubiquitous in the art world—because of the agility and ease with which their remarkable programs permit one to work with two-dimensional graphics. For his *Rhino-and-Bug* hybrid Walker employed Adobe Illustrator software to reproduce seven of the 140 notable and certainly once topical Volkswagen Beetle or “bug” magazine ads from the 1950s–1970s that he had collected and then scanned and printed. He also transformed images from this collection into a series of collages, mounted individually on colored mats, the smallest of which are the size of LP album covers. The entire group is then presented as one large piece in the exhibition.

Throughout his mature work Walker has preferred sourcing images from mainstream visual material such as ads, magazine covers, recycling motifs, and news photographs rather than focusing on material from the art world, even though his work innovates epistemological ways of re-positing art’s traditional ontology—its being—as distinct types of knowledge. Walker’s pieces are not just meta-works that comment on art’s traditional way of functioning by finding literal equivalents for aspects of it as one of Walker’s artistic heroes Robert Rauschenberg did when he responded to the question “what is a painting?” in his important combine *Charlene* (1954, Collection Stedelijk Museum) by providing literal equivalents in the form of actual reflectors, light bulbs, and an image of the Statue of Liberty for this art form’s respective traditional functions of representation, illumination, and symbolic transformation.⁷ Instead, Walker rethinks art’s traditional means by going a step further than Rauschenberg’s highly commendable analogues, which take painting’s customary way of functioning as a norm. Walker does so by considering art’s possibilities from the perspective of contrapuntal shifts—an approach first theorized by the late nineteenth-century French symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé—and by being aware of the enhanced role any object assumes when viewed in terms of the protocols and opportunities afforded by the act of looking at an object as art. Although Walker is not versed in Mallarmé’s poetics, he has intuited a

comparable *sine qua non* for art as constituting distinct shifts in the ways his source material is viewed. This is an approach Mallarmé equated with the contrapuntal meaning of the French word “ciel,” which cannot be articulated without connoting the two irreconcilable references of prosaic sky and spiritual heaven—a transformative set of definitions that can be understood as being updated in Walker’s art as a movement from the everyday realm of his visual culture images to the art world, with its very different modes of apperception.

The shift in the *Rhino and the Bug* also incorporates the permeable folding together of two types of software Walker describes in the following way:

Programs like this are used to render all kinds of things, from architecture to clothing and animation. The 3-D modeling process in Rhino is based on ‘nerves’ and ‘skins’—it’s interesting that key elements of the program adopt biological terms. What we did is fuck with the system and force the 3-D program to accept 2-D images as a ‘skin.’ And one thing that intrigues me about the sculptures is that usually how an object is made in the world is that the form is produced and then the surface is applied. Here, the surface—the ad that’s been silkscreened—has been layered and sandwiched within the actual [fabrication] process. First, the aluminum sheet is cut to size, the circles [excisions contradictorily representing L.P. label art, anticipating the records appearing in the third part of the exhibition, are] scored—[these sheets act] as points of registration for the CMYK silk-screening process—then the piece is shaped according to the precise rendering of the program. The machinists get really weirded out because they’re afraid to scratch the surface. They’re used to bending the metal, shaping it in relation to the computer diagram, and then putting the surface on. They’re really having to struggle to find new ways of folding without damaging the surface.

Crucial to Walker’s description is his reliance on the metaphor of Rhino as “nerves” and Mac Illustrator as its surrogate “skin” to establish a new hybridized cyborg (acronym for cybernetic organism), so that the work of art metaphorically becomes a new type of organic and mechanical amalgam as it enacts a Mallarméan shift between figuratively animate and literally inanimate forms. Notably the Rhino three-dimensional program compensates for the two-dimensional VW advertisement by reversing it on the back so that the ad occupies both sides of the metal sheet, in a sense becoming transparent to itself when it becomes three-dimensional sculpture. Unbeknownst to Walker, these sculptures, which rely on the actual size of the single page and double-page spread of the original ads, also correlate with Mallarmé’s emphasis on the white sheet on which his poems are printed as inextricable poetic components, which he figuratively references in his poetry—an idea Walker has discerned indirectly through modern art’s emphasis on realizing ideas both formally and thematically, an approach that owes an enormous debt to Mallarmé’s innovative thinking.

Since all art is far more than its tangible appearances—and Walker's is no exception—it is important to note the many associations ascribed to the VW Bug and his way of incorporating some of them in his sculptures that are summarized in the press release for this exhibition of his recent works:

The directness and humor of the VW campaign is largely responsible for the now iconic status of the Beetle and for rebranding a product that, only a decade before, was widely associated with the Third Reich (the "People's Car"). Working between different computer-based image and modeling programs, the flat surfaces of the magazine pages are converted into volumetric shapes. The campaign's pithy slogans ("we get the feeling we're being followed" and "how much longer can we hand you this line?") are partly reversed or truncated, peeking through scrambled forms. Merging and juxtaposing digital and analog technologies, the resulting grid-like grouping of silkscreened images teases out connections between advertising, branding, popular culture, and art as they have played out since the 1960s—boundaries that Warhol (who also borrowed images from the Volkswagen ad campaign for a series of "Advertisements") famously blurred in his own process.⁸

The reference to serigraphy both in Warhol's work and in Walker's *Rhino-and-the-Bug* sculptures, which incidentally references the prior incarnation of Paula Cooper's upstairs gallery space as a parking garage, thus making these works wryly site specific, are notable for the second stage of the exhibition, focusing on almost apparitional silkscreen paintings that cite images from the first part and anticipate those that will be found in the third section of this exhibition, in addition to reinforcing this show's ongoing permeable boundaries.

Caught like gossamer butterflies in the silkscreen pallet's tightly woven web, the delicate images in this second part of the show, which have a distant antecedent in Rauschenberg's *Hoarfrost* solvent-transfer and relief prints on silk (1974–76), directly testify to the labor involved in creating them and thus are highly articulated analogues. The frames and enclosed pallets comprising this second state of Walker's permeable boundaries exhibition incorporate, from the first part of the show, images of Volkswagens and portions of ads for them, as well as those of records, record covers, sleeves, and turntables, thereby anticipating the third part of this overall project. Their in-between status, taking the form of interstitial meshes illuminated with suspended cultural citations from Walker's other works in the show, together with silkscreened and sometimes collaged references to the actual silkscreened surfaces also found in the first and third parts of the exhibition as well as related popular culture printed material, makes these diaphanous screens particularly significant nexuses for all the other Walkerian components in this gallery presentation. In these pieces Walker has created a virtual orgy of overlapping and interpenetrating references by stenciling first images on one pallet and then, on a number of occasions, transferring them from one silkscreen to another, so the translucent polyester meshes register impressions both directly

from stencils and indirectly from their associates, oftentimes receiving visual material from both sides, making each iteration in the exhibition a preeminently liminal threshold through which the themes of the entire show are able to meet and interact. For Walker, these translucent pieces, together with their ability to register images from both sides, represent ways of commenting on the means by which people use computer technology to view themselves from their backs as well as their fronts and thus see themselves three-dimensionally in much the same way that *The Rhino and the Bug* permits three-dimensional realizations of VW ads, which heretofore, like most modern art and print advertisements, have only been able to be seen frontally and two-dimensionally.

Art historically speaking, Walker's use of silkscreen frames and pallets as interstitial works, reflecting operations from three dimensions instead of the usual two associated with serigraphy, updates Renaissance art historian and critic Leo Steinberg's concept of "the flatbed picture plane" as a mid-twentieth century ontological advance in art's history. Steinberg theorizes both Rauschenberg's and Warhol's works as inaugurating a new type of representation as they advance well beyond the traditional humanists' reliance on the Renaissance artist, architect, and theorist Leon Battista Alberti's vertical window/picture by innovating the use of horizontal printing press "beds" to accept reproduced images from the mass media.⁹ Instead of relying on this type of flatbed, which Walker has employed often enough in the form of optical scanners on which he has squirted toothpaste, dribbled chocolate, and placed fruit in order to convert reflections of these materials into digital image files in his earlier work and in his ongoing collaborations with Wade Guyton, Walker approaches in his new art an innovative combination of both frontal and back views, which he forces both his digital (Adobe Illustrator software) and silkscreened pallet spaces to accommodate. In this way Walker strays far from the type of two-dimensional surface modernist art critic Clement Greenberg extolled in the mid-twentieth century as painting's ultimate goal.

In his very useful book underscoring the conservative side of computers entitled *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, the former software designer, literature, and media studies specialist David Golumbia poses an important question that needs to be addressed when considering Kelley Walker's current work. Golumbia asks if the belief in the rationalizing tendencies of computers, based on the Cartesian metaphor of the mind as a ghost haunting a body/machine and capable of making the brain seem a mere computational faculty, has become such an accepted ideology that all efforts to combat or subvert its domination are doomed to failure.¹⁰ Golumbia terms this ideology "computationalism" and describes this concept as incorporating "a set of beliefs [that] underwrites and reinforces a surprisingly traditionalist conception of human being, society, and politics," thus serving entrenched forms of power rather than questioning and undermining them.¹¹ Any response to this question requires us to focus on exactly what type of critique Walker's permeable boundaries between digital and analogue worlds constitutes (1) when he morphs together two incompatible types of software, which are then silkscreened; (2) when he views the hardware for making silkscreens metaphorically as software; and (3) when he plays off

such modes of record keeping with actual records, punning them so to speak, while making analogue CMYK silkscreened versions of them. This leads me to the related question of whether Walker is glorifying software and thus has been coopted by the sense of limited mastery Golumbia describes individual software users to be experiencing.¹² My conclusion is that Walker has not allowed himself to be seduced by this restricted autonomy, and the primary reason for this view is the internal and ongoing dialectical critique his work advances between digital and analogue realms. I am referring here to the ability of Walker's art to provide a range of ways to rethink both digital and analogue modes of production and reproduction that can be creatively reworked, linked, and undermined so that each is able to critique the other.¹³ Moreover, Walker finds ways to keep various segments of his exhibition open, so that they set up ongoing and ultimately non-resolvable dialectics since each in turn opens to the other, creating a continuous Möbius strip, as I suggested at the beginning of this essay.

In this exhibition, Walker first morphs *The Rhino and the Bug* together to create a three-dimensional image that is then realized through both digital and analogue means: the bending, shaping, and cutting of the metal substrate for his sculptures as well as the silkscreened Volkswagen advertisements that are digitally programmed, even though the acts of completing these tasks are ultimately the responsibility of expert technicians' very analogue minds and hands. Walker then transforms serigraph frames and screens from simple tools for silkscreening into translucent works of art. They are predicated on the act of indexically recording as valences and mixed frequencies portions of the silkscreened imagery that he has created for the two other episodes in the exhibition. In this way he has made these mesh-like paintings evidentiary accounts of the labor involved in their creation, so that they can play the important role in the overall exhibition of foregrounding analogue techniques and tasks. When Walker concludes his show with groups of horizontal turntables comprising CMYK silkscreened LP records, together with digitally configured covers and commercially produced neutral sleeves, thereby mixing digital and analogue components in works punning the overall types of recording that the exhibition as a whole represents, he underscores the role of this type of analogue record-keeping device (pun obviously intended) and joins it with his ability as an artist to archive and thus arrange and rearrange this type of material in many intelligent ways. Even though Walker's art is obviously introjected into the various languages of advertising, software, serigraphy, and recordkeeping (signified by the LP 20-minute records), his work is not coopted by them, as the very permeable, ongoing dynamics of this exhibition make abundantly clear.

1 The selection of records is made from a collection of approximately 200 LPs belonging to the well-known New York author and curator Bob Nickas, who is one of Kelley Walker's long-term friends.

2 Noelle Chesley, "Blurring Boundaries? Linking Technology Use, Spillover, Individual Distress, and Family Satisfaction," *Journal of Marriage and Family* (67, No. 5 (December 2005): 1238. In her essay, Chesley, a sociologist at the University of Milwaukee-Wisconsin, cites the industrial/organizational psychologist Sheldon Zedeck, *Work, Families, and Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992) as well as the business management publication Blake E. Ashforth, Glen E. Kreiner, and Mel Fugate, "All in a Day's Work: Boundaries and Micro Role Transitions," *Academy of Management Review* 25, No. 3 (2000): 472-491.

3 In the beginning of my essay on Walker's long-term friend Meredyth Sparks I outlined strategic moments in the recent digital revolution that are still in the process of being understood. Cf. "Meredyth Sparks' Differentialism: The Art of Sublime Micrologies" in Robert Hobbs and Nicolas Bourriaud, *Meredyth Sparks* (Blau, France: Monograph Editions, 2009), 57-58. Since this overall history is surprisingly difficult to ascertain, I include it here:

If we look for paramount changes in the late twentieth century and new millennium that have had enormous impacts on human beings' self-image, near the top of the list, together with genetic research, cloning, and global warming, is the democratization, decentralization, and heretofore unheralded wealth of information afforded by the global index known as the "World Wide Web." Although the concept for globally linking computers into the overall structure called the "Internet" was originated in 1969, this network needed a complementary system or platform that could store and connect documents in a hypertext format so that the Internet could become widely accessible to non-specialists. Superimposed on the Internet's foundation, this platform is the World Wide Web [recognized by its characteristically abbreviated prefix "www."] that was initiated in 1989; it is the crucially important key and link that enables direct searches of documents and other resources through hyperlinks and Uniform Resource Locators (URLs). In 1991 America Online [AOL for DOS] made the Web more accessible, and in 1993 the graphical browser Mosaic [later renamed "Netscape"] began to enable Web users direct access to sites integrating texts with graphics, images, and other media so that they would no longer be forced to open a new file or window each time they needed to look at a different type of information. In 1994, access to material on the Web became demonstrably easier for non-specialists with the first directory and search engines that AOL and Yahoo provided. Working together, the triumvirate of World Wide Web, Mosaic browser, and AOL and Yahoo search engines made the Internet so user-friendly by the mid-'90s that individual PCs were regarded as valued home appliances, and the word "Internet" became a household term.

Even before the appearance of this trioka of innovations, the ground was being well prepared for utilizing computers as artistic tools. In the 1960s the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) devised ways to convert analogue images to digital (electrical impulse) signals so that the surface of the moon could be photographed and mapped; in addition, NASA found ways to employ computers to enhance shots of the moon's surface, which their space probes were relaying back to them. In 1990 Adobe produced the digital processing software, Photoshop, to facilitate the editing of graphics on computers. Then, in 1994 Apple released the first digital camera to employ a serial cable, which could be connected to home modems and in 1996 Sony's version appeared. The same year that Apple's digital camera was being marketed to nonprofessional photographers, Lexmark Printers produced the first color-computer printer; three years later, in 1997, Hewlett-Packard's user-friendly "PhotoSmart" system, consisting of a digital camera, printer, and film scanner, was put on the market. Computer artists were almost immediately able to avail themselves of many of these tools; only a

few years later ingenious mainstream artists [such as Wade Guyton, Meredyth Sparks, and Kelley Walker] were able to innovate ways to redirect the original functions of these new capabilities to unanticipated ends so that they could make ink-jet paintings and digital collages.

4 This text is also cited in Bob Nickas, "First Take: Bob Nickas on Kelley Walker," *Artforum* 40, No. 5 (January 2002): 123 as well as in Robert Hobbs, "Kelley Walker's Continuum: Consuming and Recycling as Aesthetic Tactics" in Suzanne Cotter, ed., *Seth Price/Kelley Walker: Continuous Project* (Oxford, UK: Modern Art Oxford, 2007).

5 Douglas Kellner, "Theorizing Globalization," *Sociological Theory* 20, No. 3 (November 2002): 293 and 295. These are two terms used by Kellner in his excellent essay that examines both the negative and the positive aspects of globalism.

6 Kelley Walker, *Conversation with the Author*, New York, 1 February 2014. Other statements and ideas attributed to Walker, unless otherwise documented, come from this three-hour conversation about his new work.

7 Cf. Robert Hobbs, *Richard Jackson: Expanding Painting's Limits* (New York: Yvon Lambert, 2007) where Rauschenberg's epistemological view of painting in *Charlene* is viewed in relation to Duchamp's *Tu m'* (1918).

8 Press Release: "Kelley Walker: February 22-March 29, 2014" (New York: Paula Cooper Gallery).

9 Leo Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," *Artforum* (March 1972): 42; rpt. Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria" in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 55–91.

10 David Golumbia, *The Cultural Logic of Computation* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1–27.

11 Golumbia, *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, 2 and 4.

12 Cf. Golumbia's chapter "Computationalism and Political Individualism" in *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, especially 181–190.

13 It is worth pointing out that setting up propositions and then finding ways to critique them has been a feature of Walker's work since his early years as an artist in Knoxville, Tennessee when he joined the newly formed art gallery A.I. in downtown Knoxville, initiated by his fellow classmates at the University of Tennessee Wade Guyton and Meredyth Sparks as well as a few other friends. The gallery was named for A.I., the steak sauce, no doubt a joke about art as a consumer product and perhaps also a reference to artificial intelligence. In order to involve the gallery in critical discussions, A.I.'s members formed a counter group based on the name of another consumable, M.I.L.K. (written as an acronym). M.I.L.K.'s function was to launch protests, attack A.I.'s policies, and even deface on one occasion the outside of the gallery with graffiti. In retrospect the M.I.L.K. acronym may have also been a way of honoring Harvey Milk, the first openly gay person to be elected to public office in California shortly before he was assassinated by his former supervisor Dan White, who received a reduced sentence from the original proposed conviction of first-degree murder to manslaughter because of a defense of depression and diminished capacity resulting from eating such sugary junk foods as Twinkies.