# "Some Pictures"

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On Brian Rideout's *Enfant Terrible* on view at MKG127, April 3-May 8, 2021

The *Bilderatlas Nmemosyme*, art historian Aby Warburg's herculean project of visually mapping the "afterlife of antiquity" never could have been completed. Unfinished at the time of his death in 1929, Warburg's collection included 971 art historical images; witnessed today, the project remains in a conjectural state of suspension. Preserved at the Warburg Institute in London, some images remain affixed beaux-arts style to panels while most others are filed in reference boxes, arrested in their future accumulation. Taken together and apart, the *Bilderatlas Nmemosyme* is best understood according to its ambition: to tell the frenetic story of Western history and ideology through a sequencing and juxtaposition of symbolic imagery, assembled according to its cyclical hold, reappearance, and afterlife, in and through time. Warburg saw generated in these pictorial relations evidence of a "*bewegtes Leben*" or "animated life," chaotically charting the energies generated in the transportability of images. A glimpse into a Western, post-classical world made in pictures, the *Bilderatlas* bespeaks a history of art as a story always told through reproduction, material unfixity and intervention, of a thing becoming yet *another* thing. What is art, within this vision, but a means to an end? And what is art's history, if not the history of context?
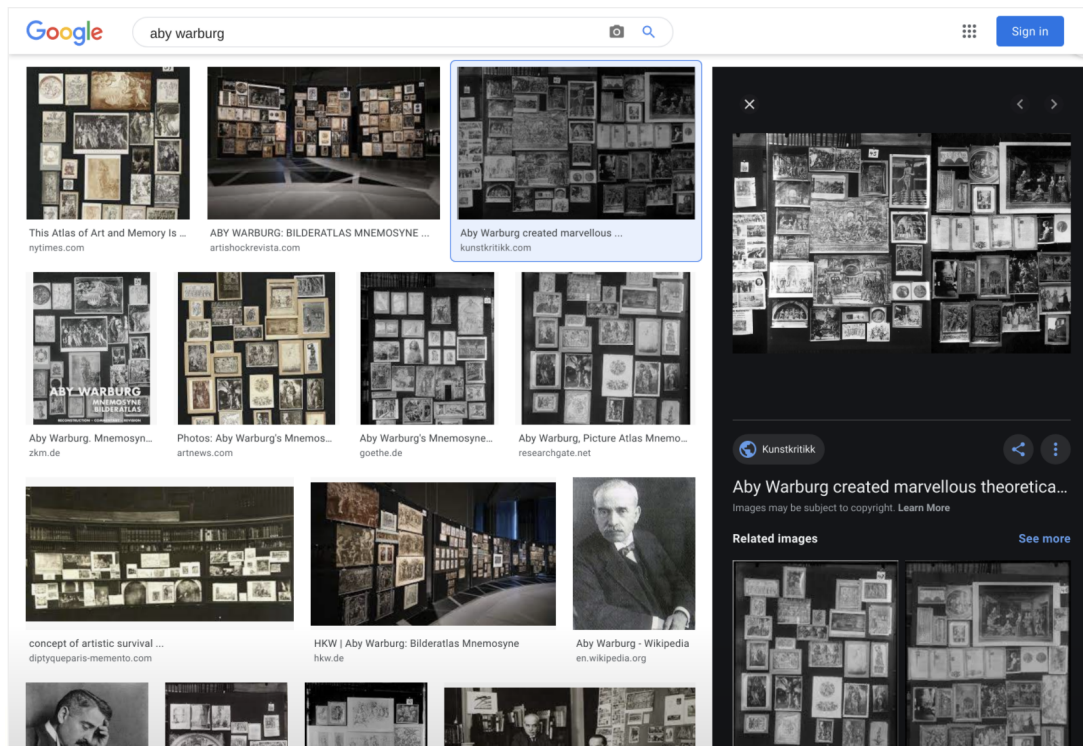
Our story here concerns the deceptively simple telling of the future's past. Over the twentieth century, forensic research into Greco-Roman art revealed that marble statuary preserved from the ancient Western world had originally been painted in bright hues of red, blue, and gold. A centuries-spanning narrative rooted in the stoic veneration of whiteness - literally and figuratively - had been all wrong. This exposure

disrupted the material devotion of Renaissance and Neoclassical artists who sought to emulate the aesthetic ideals of antiquity, forcing a kind of cognitive split between historical objecthood and its movement through time.

As imaged in *A Colour Reconstruction of a Marble Statue*, animated life at this juncture suddenly becomes uneasy. If, as argued by Vinzen Brinkmann, "the postwar generation, which took refuge in formalist approaches to ancient art, accepted the existence of polychromy, [...] refrained from actually picturing it" (2008, p. 22), Rideout's work offers a possible answer *why*. His picture depicts in full-colour a Roman statue from the First Century AD, rediscovered in 1863 and re-assigned its polychromy at the turn of the recent millennium, nearly two thousand years on. Here, there's a clownishness and vulgarity to the colour of Rideout's rendering of painted marble in hues of bright blue and red. What is arguably a more historically faithful reconfiguration arrives as a disfiguration, an affront to a classical art historical memory tending towards the cool transit of stone. The colour of ancient life becomes crass when plucked from its originary context and placed into our own, a visual gimmick of faithful proportions laying bare a history of valuation based in misinterpretation.

A Colour Reconstruction of a Marble Statue, 2021, oil on canvas, 58 x 32 in.

During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, repetition and replication were skills tantamount to originality and technical mastery; artists would figuratively - unless, of course, you were Caravaggio -

attempt to "kill" one another through acts of painterly inspiration, besting a rival or master's work through inspired acts of copying (Loh, 2004). But the terms and values involved in this game have changed significantly since the Industrial Revolution. Completed in 1851, South London's Crystal Palace was Joseph Paxton's paean to industrial technics, calling to mind an ethic of reproduction of quite another sort. Cathedral-like and made of plate glass and cast iron, the space reverberated with the power of modern, colonial industry. Such is the setting of *Pieta (After Bernini)*, a picture which collapses onto a foundation of stacked material signification. Here Rideout reproduces in paint Philip Henry Delamotte's image of a cast of Bernini's seventeenth century original housed at the Corsini Chapel in San Giovanni Laterano, Rome, then displayed in Paxton's temple of Western industrial power c. 1855. Witnessed in this image is a moment of transition, a crossing over of Christ's lamented figure once made in stone into the hands of Getty images, who now possess the rights to Delamotte's print. In an age of "poor images" (Steyerl, 2009) debased through endless digital reproduction and circulation, there is a thickness to this pictured scene. Our historical narratives are always made in the moment.

But there are *many* pietas and many acts of mark-making which differentially wield power and value. We ask ourselves next: how does contextual interpretation amount to an act of vandalism? So many decisions are made before and after we begin historicizing everything. On May 21, 1972, Pentecost Sunday, Laszlo Toth entered St. Peter's Basilica and struck Michelangelo's *Pieta* with a geologist's hammer, exclaiming "I am Jesus Christ — risen from the dead." He removed Mary's hand, dislodged a chunk of her nose, chipped her eyelid, and made several blows to her head, wrenching Christ from the historical frieze of St.

Peter's with his iron mallet. When Rideout pictures *Pieta (After Toth), Mary's Hand,* and *Mary's Head* are we observing an act of collaboration? Toth was, after all, working with Michelangelo's raw material, breaking marble down even further.

Pieta (After Toth), 2020, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in.

For centuries, marble has been mined at quarries in the city of Carrara in the Apuan Alps, the largest repository of the stone on earth. At the *Carrara Marble Mines,* all begins as block, where "[marble's] major value has always derived from its removal" (Locatelli and Anderson, 2017). From the moment stone is removed from the earth, its form changes – at Carrara, permission is not a condition of extraction. Michelangelo was obsessed with the region and worked its raw material extensively, making a literal mark on the land. Carrara marble has been used to build Trajan's Column, the Marble Arch in London, buildings of the Harvard Medical School, and the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi. Nowadays, stone hundreds of millions of years old is purchased in bulk to build malls, homes, and hotels across the globe, following trends in the shift of global capital. Work at the quarries is dangerous. One day the pace of extraction will outsize the availability of marble deposits.

Carrara Marble Mines, 2020, oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.

Dealing with the raw material of digital pictures, our considerations of time, form, and change shift. The smallest unique unit of a digital image, the pixel is nevertheless a hypothetical imaging element. A sample of an original varying in accuracy, pixels move in their intensity, density, and clarity. Pixels "mock the promises of digital technology" (Steyerl, 2009), made unstable in circulation. The high formalism of mid-century Abstract Expressionism was desirous of an essential state of material being – art at the beginning of its own hermetic world. These masculinist pursuits paired well with a post-war manufacturing boom and the increased purchasing power of an emergent US middle class alongside re-stated projects of US cultural imperialism. *Objectively*, this art was the best, and entered the home by way of television, postcards, and calendars.

In *Ab Ex (Reinhardt)* Rideout offers us mid-century formalism *après* YouTube. This picture's blur is intentional and its subject matter is not so much what we see on canvas. The work renders a screen-capture of a video he pulled from the streaming site in 2012, cataloguing a quick moment where one of Ad Reinhardt's "abstract paintings" comes into view in the back of a gallery storage area. Reinhardt described these works as "pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting[s]—an object that is self-conscious (no unconsciousness), ideal, transcendent, aware of no thing but art" (MoMA, 2007). Flattened into pixels and pictured by Rideout as an abstract monolith in obscure space, Reinhardt's work is anything but transcendent here, subject to a material degradation at the contextual hands of digital mediation.

This question of capture at the heart of Rideout's pictures returns us to the anxiety of "animated life" that Warburg hoped to observe via images. Documenting the world through paint involves an assignment of value which captures the physiology of objects according to questionably hardened ways of seeing. In

Objects Under A Table, we are given a raked, de Chirico-like perspective onto the picture's titular subjects. As a record of elemental form, we see with and through shape, beyond material and surface. With *First United Church, Waterloo*, nineteenth century architecture is made sculptural and block-like, its scale and form skewed to resemble a miniature. A restricted palette makes for unified objects in both scenes. Rideout's pictures are absent of humans while portraying evidence of their intervening presence. As pictures, they call attention to painting as a choice.

When the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in March 2020, museums and other cultural institutions quickly closed their doors. Such a response sided squarely on the side of human life: attempts to limit viral transmission required restricting access to objects routinely upheld as accessories of a greater public good. As an ethic of living through crisis and otherwise, programs of public responsibility and collective orientations towards mutual caregiving and support are the surest answers, undoubtedly. But such responses also raise questions about the lifespans of our prized originals, locked out of view: without physical witness, how do we value their being? Whenever wildfires flare in the Santa Monica Mountains of Los Angeles, incarcerated firefighters are dispatched as barely-paid employees of the State to perform the life-threatening work of protecting the Getty Center and its holdings from the rage of flames.

If there is *so much* artwork to begin with, and so much of it regularly unseen to us, how do we even begin to speak of hierarchies of aesthetic grief in such a stable way? In June, 2012, Andrew Shannon entered the National Gallery of Ireland and swiftly punched Claude Monet's 1874 *Argenteuil Basin with a Single Sailboat*, leaving a large rip in the center of the canvas. Rideout's picture *Argenteuil Basin with a Single Sailboat (After Shannon)* preserves this act of mark making. Named "a complete sociopath" by representatives of the Dublic Crown Court, Shannon was sentenced to five years in prison and served a fifteen month ban from all museums following his release. The Monet in question, valued at around $10 million, resembles many of the nearly hundreds of Argenteuil series paintings produced by the artist over his lifetime. Rideout's picture captures this brief aberration from a visual norm made specifically in time, since erased through restoration and seamlessly returned to the temporal freeze of gallery display.

Argenteuil Basin with a Single Sailboat, (After Shannon), 2020, oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.

Surely the museum is not a redundant space. But when a visitor casually lifted an Arkhip Kuindzhi work from Moscow's State Tretyakov Gallery in 2019, the institution's director general blamed the theft on the sheer popularity of the museum. The work's easy removal, she argued "[was] a result and consequence of today's incredible accessibility of museums, of vast numbers of people visiting our exhibitions. [...] Universal accessibility increases risks." The painting was later discovered by police at a construction site outside of the city and the thief was condemned to time in prison. Dressed in black and sporting a cropped haircut, he had apparently been mistaken by fellow museum guests for one of its young security staff members.

In *The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (After a painting was stolen)*, it's difficult to sense whether anything is indeed missing from Rideout's picture. Facing a corner, we are confronted with an experience akin to the spiral of looking in the museum, where gallery architecture risks being confused for intentional aesthetic display. Moving left from a wall text unaccompanied and barely perceptible, we are drawn towards two black vertical monoliths which jut out from a recessed wall. An electrical outlet is found low near the ground between them. Here one might easily mistake an abstract design feature for what we see in *Ab Ex (After Reinhardt)*, wall rendered aesthetic in the absence of stolen work. In an age post-conceptualism we have developed a position of suspicion, wherein everything outside of the frame within the context of the gallery holds the potential of being made (or reduced) into art. No museum-goers *look* in Rideout's picture, cordoned off here as a crime scene where the only evidence of human presence is found in the forensic dusting of footprints before an empty wall. There is so much to take in anyways. And it is a nice wall.

The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (After a painting was stolen), 2020, oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.

In the same month that museums closed their doors to the public last year, a large boat was deployed from a US Navy base in Norfolk, Virginia to New York City. A Mercy-Class hospital ship, the USNS Comfort (T-AH-20) was stationed at a cruise terminal in the Hudson River, where it was set to treat non-COVID medical patients. At that moment, New York was the global epicenter of the virus and had a hospital system overburdened by rapidly increasing caseloads. This alternative plan to expand available care space from land to sea was, however, short-lived. Seven days into its mission, nearly half of the Comfort's one thousand beds were removed in order to begin care for COVID-19 patients and soon afterwards members of its crew tested positive for the virus. The ship departed New York on April 30th, having treated fewer than 200 patients in a months' time. Its tour of service was described by an executive at the city's largest private hospital system as a "joke."

USNS Comfort (T-AH-20) , 2020, oil on canvas, 11 ½ x 24 in.

In Rideout's picture *USNS Comfort (T-AH-20)* the ship remains silent. Plucked from time and abstracted from meaningful surroundings, we can only wonder whether this is a vessel in a state of arrival or one of return. Witnessed within the context of a "joke," the Comfort appears here as a monolith wedged into a system, denatured through disuse. Once again, Rideout introduces a problematic of scale into his picture, where water becomes an empty signifier for size, direction, speed, and global states of transition. After all, the Comfort was first laid down as a commercial oil tanker under the name SS Rose City in 1975.

So many makings of history, so many images, so little time. In late May, uprisings raged across the US after George Floyd was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, less a response to a singular instance of anti-Black violence made in time than to the oppressive continuities of white supremacy and police brutality as dominant architectures of American statehood. Pictures proliferated in this moment at the same time that a wider public was being taught new rules about sharing: to scrub EXIF data, to protect the identities of protesters, to focus on documenting the unmasked faces and badge numbers of police, to communicate using encrypted messaging apps. As uprisings took place the world over, Twitter was taken as a more nuanced evidentiary resource than any major news outlet, its images circulated across user networks.

King Louis XVI (Off with Their Hands), 2020, oil on paper, 16 x 9 in.

Among these strategies of protest was the literal defacing and removal of monuments to the Confederacy and white colonial violence. In Louisville, a man in a crowd was documented triumphantly making off with the hand of a statue of Louis XVI, exposing the structural weakness of oversized symbols of empire. In a video circulated widely on Twitter, the man returns to a crowd below after removing the king's hand,

submerged in a swell of energy and something like the radiance of a commons being made among people in the street. In *King Louis XVI (Off with Their Hands)*, Rideout pictures the statue of the French king as a faceless object, reduced in the digital crackle and haze of footage re-captured and re-circulated along so many other images of protest. How do we witness such an act of symbolic transformation after Toth, Shannon, Moscow – where the stone hand of a ruler is destroyed not in the museum but in *public*? Here, tearing things down doesn't amount to an act of historical erasure but the making of a mark anew.

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