

Email interview, October 2020

**Dieter Daniels, professor for art history and media theory, HGB Leipzig**  
**Viktoria Binschtok, Berlin-based artist**

**DD:** There are clearly several leitmotifs in your oeuvre that articulate themselves in various series of works, taking on new formats each time. These leitmotifs pursue linked issues of visual theory: you initially treat theoretical subjects in your pictures or series of pictures in a purely visual way, that is, not on the textual level. In your "pictures about pictures," these issues transform and renew themselves constantly, so that they are only revealed when looking over the past twenty years.

In my view, these leitmotifs are the following: the points of overlap between online and offline visual worlds, our view of images shaped by the cultural and social context, and thirdly, an interaction between figure and background, between the detail and the long shot. And your current exhibition "*NOT UNTIL TOMORROW*" formats entirely new constellations of these three aspects.

For our conversation, I would like to discuss several works along these lines. The intersections between the online and offline visual worlds provide a good point of departure. Already the work *Globen* (Globes, 2002) explores this point of connection by confronting images from the eBay platform with the actual globes purchased there, but still unpacked and thus not yet visible. For *World of Details* (2011–12) you pursue this issue further and it also seems to continue to play a role in *Cluster* (2014–2017) and *Networked Images* (2017–).



,*Globen*', 2002

**VB:** My interest in online-offline visual worlds began in the late 1990s, when digital visual data achieved nearly the same resolution as photography. This dramatically altered the status of photography. In my work *Globen*, I reflected on the character of the immaterial, intangible digital image using the example of the globe. These obsolete models of our world were photographed in private settings and offered for purchase on eBay around the world. I used the then new possibilities of interaction with the sellers in a targeted way to receive additional information about the image and its creator. Only by purchasing the objects was I given the information there had previously been anonymized online, for example the real names and addresses of the sellers. In addition, I wanted to create a photographic work without having to leave my own desk. I appropriated the globe images by photographing them on my screen. Global networking allowed for communication, consumption, and photographic practice without any bodily motion of my own in the physical world; that was a complex and new experience for me.

In *World of Details* (2011–12), I again started off by working from my desk with media images. In this case, I was fascinated by the new visual material that Google Street View provided of New York City. On these fully automated photographs, I repeatedly discovered astonished passersby turned toward the camera. They were captured by the passing device purely by accident. In addition, the street views triggered a longing to travel in me. So I took the collected referential images as an occasion to actually visit the places in question and to photograph a detail there. I didn't want to make a comparison between my photographs and the output of the Google Street View camera, but rather to create two entirely different views due to the technique, perspective, and timing of the shots. In this work, the journey, the physical movement to the found media images played an essential role.

With *Cluster* (2014–2017) and also in the more recent *Networked Images* (2017–), I take this a step further and no longer distinguish between my own photographs and appropriated ones. I mix both visual worlds with the help of image search algorithms that search for images of images. They allow me access to unsuspected visual data due to the visual analogies to my sought image. With this method, I could represent the abstract



from: 'World of Details' 2011/12

concept of the migration of images (image flow). By restaging the found jpegs, I transfer this fleeting data to physical space, freezing it there for a time.

We live in an age in which images move in all directions. On line, the classical division between sender and receiver no longer exists, for anyone can get involved in the act of communication and be consumer and producer at the same time. Image production, image circulation, and monopolistic structures that affect all of these images are key subjects of my interest.

**DD:** This background information is extremely interesting, for the "making of" the image series can in a certain sense be understood as part of the "message." The works perfect the game of the "chicken or egg" question: what came first, the photograph of the globe or the package with the globe, the photograph on the streets of New York or the photo from Google Street View? Finally, in *Clusters/Networked Images*: which of the photographs was the first one, to which an algorithm suggested the additional images? This process you describe gradually abolishes the difference between the prior image and the post-image, until ultimately only the artist knows where it all began.

And so we now come to the meaning of the cultural and social context for our view of images. Simply by using the form of "straight photography," *LVNY* (2003) already alludes to the fact that social experience of this kind defines our judgement of "real" or "fake" in terms of these luxury handbags or the women carrying them.



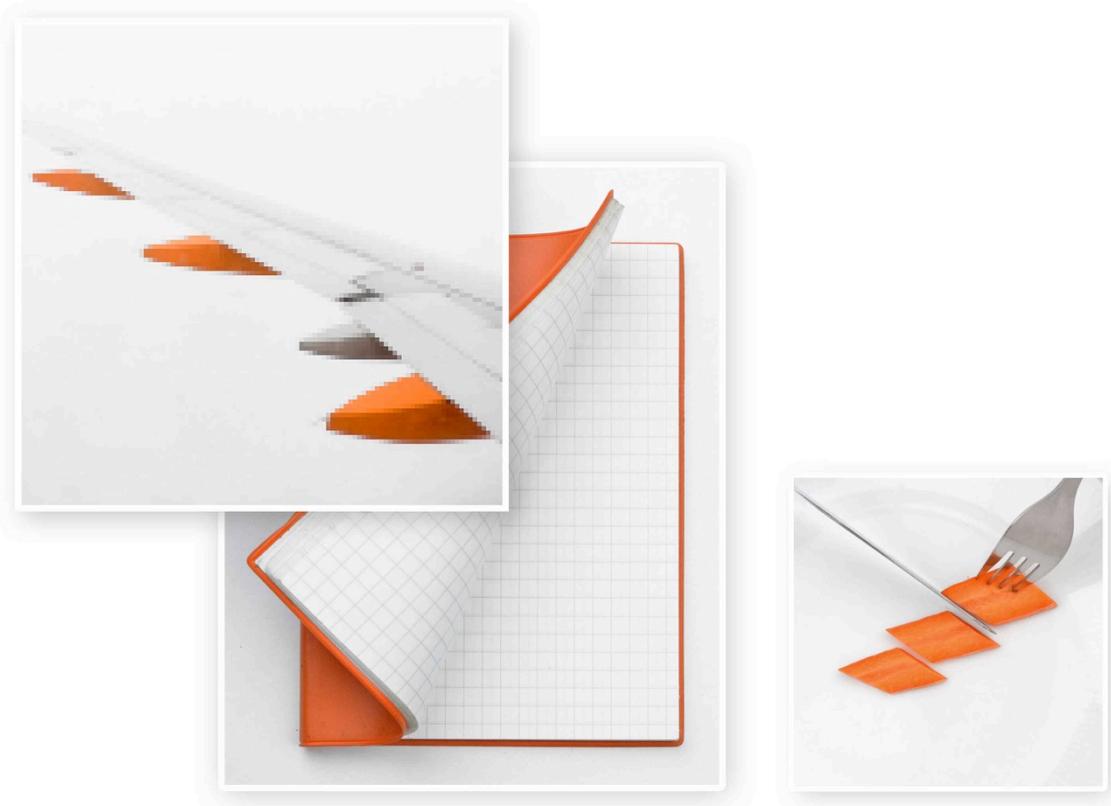
from 'LVNY', 2005



An algorithm would be overtaxed by this task, for it doesn't have the appropriate data at its disposal. The visual combinations in *Cluster* and *Networked Images* refer to this machine-based point of view that is based on purely optical criteria. To that extent, Google's Image Search algorithm produces virtually the very opposite of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Bilderatlas*: The Image Search offers us comparisons of the incomparable, because we miss the cultural contexts of these comparisons, the creative source for the goddess Mnemosyne.

While classical appropriation art of the 1990s works with the displacement of the cultural and social context of images, *Cluster/Networked Images* can be understood as an appropriation of non-human vision to manufacture non-cultural analogies. The decontextualization of the images thus goes in a very different direction than appropriation art. In *Cluster/Networked Images*, the trace of the photographic index is lost and thus the reference to the world of analog photography. Instead of the “analog” depiction (in a dual sense) of the one by the other, a mutual referential structure emerges that knows no beginning and no end.

Interestingly we are unable to formalize our own viewing of images like a digital image search, because we always have content and contexts in our minds. Could the purely optical comparison operation of the algorithm thus offer a new free space of visual thought through which our cultural codes could be turned off or at least subverted? And what role is played for the expansion and/or subversion of the comparative visual tradition by the artistic decisions in what you call a re-staging both of the spatial constellation of the images?



from 'Cluster': Orange Wings, 2016

**VB:** We clearly are not free of cultural and social codes even in a free space of visual thought. You already pointed out that we always also think of content and contexts, even if they are not provided. While viewing images, especially photographs, we are simply not able to turn off our associations. This is why some images say more to us than others, although in the case of my works their genesis is technically speaking the same. I show high-resolution photographic copies restaged according to the originals, whose origin and meaning is unknown. Even without background information, we try to interpret aesthetics and symbolism in a way that makes sense. The divorcing of thing and content by way of shifting context can perhaps contribute something to rethinking this reflex-like attribution of meaning or to questioning our own perspective. At issue here is not just the individual point of view, but also the collective and self-reproducing one. In the general online image canon, a Western view of the world dominates. I, too, am caught up in this perspective, since it is the location of my socialization, my actual physical location, and also the location of the technology that I use. After all, algorithms are also only developed by mere human beings and fed with the data they consider relevant. In so doing, a dominance of certain notions of the world and values results, despite the abundance of accessible information. This loop is amplified by the permanent mutual impact of those participating. With the smart phone, a kind of visual mouthpiece was introduced to our communication. Since then, a large portion of the networked population

interacts increasingly using photography. When it comes to this web of relationships, the “chicken or egg” comparison is quite fitting: for here it is not quite clear who is reacting to whom.



from 'Networked Images': Red Man Wine, 2019

As an artist, I translate my observations on the networked exchange of images in *Networked Images*. The use of artificial intelligence plays a role in the image search, but all decisions of visual appropriation and presentation are naturally up to me. I invent bodies and forms for “bodiless” appearances. This includes not just a restaging of the jpegs, but most of all the decision of how I see individual images in relation to one another. Often there are visual intersections between the images. In the presentation, I sometimes allow them to touch one another at the point or to overlap. But even without direct transitions, the relationships cannot be overlooked.

These linkages refer to our networked information paths online that lead us erratically from one subject to the next. My *Networked Images* are as it were accidentally isolated intersections, divorced from a hyperlink structure that is unbelievably complex.

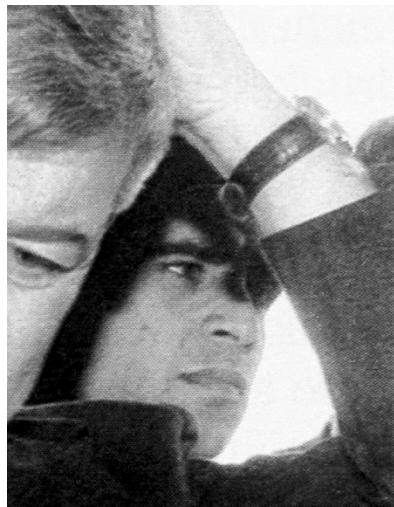
The work is a very exciting process for me that continues to develop, like the technology itself. When I began working on it, I still took my orientation largely from the original images; but now I work much more radically with the found material.

**DD:** The “collective and self-reproducing dynamics” of the digital online visual media go, as you say, beyond the classical model of sender and receiver. Sharing and liking images opens up complex interactions in which beginning and end, origin and goal of the message no longer can be clearly separated from one another. Instead your images are extracted from this dynamic and rendered still. In contrast to the stream of online images scrolling by, they invite us to engage in formally detailed inspection.

This brings me to the already mentioned aspect of the interaction between figure and background, between detail and the long shot. To discuss this, another comparison of different image series: in *Suspicious Minds* (2009)



from 'Suspicious Minds', 2009



figures (security employees) move to the foreground that otherwise keep to the background as part of their inherent function. In *Die Abwesenheit der Antragsteller* (The Absence of the Applicant, 2006) structures that usually remain unnoticed (traces of those waiting in the corridors of the Unemployment Office) move to the foreground and develop a variety of quite poetic associations. In *World of Detail*, two details from the online and the offline world encounter one another that were both shot against the same backdrop (a street scene in New York) in the space of the exhibition. In *Cluster*, in contrast, the entire constellation of the photographs acts as a "figure" against an empty surface (the wall or the exhibition space). And in *Networked Images*, in some cases interactions result between detail and long shot on two levels: within the images and also in the relation of the images to space. The spatial structures of *Cluster* and *Networked Images* can thus be read as visual metaphors for invisible acts of algorithmic information processing that were involved in the genesis of these visual constellations.

These spatial displays further promote the dissolution of linear narrative. As a form of presentation, they correspond to the immanent logic of the photograph that is not divided into pre-images and post-images, that allow different readings of the visual series, equal in status. When it comes to the "making of," in turn, the handmade aspect of the physical restaging of these photographs based on digital models plays a decisive role: in so doing, you transform online algorithmically found images and images you chose offline on your own on the same aesthetic level. This procedure results renders pre-images and post-images similar to the point of indistinguishability. Intersections between online and offline visual worlds inhere thus equally on the level of direct contrasts (*World of Detail*), on the spatial level of the display (*Cluster/Networked Images*), and in the temporal process of making (physical restaging of the digital). This temporal level remains invisible to the beholder, and yet the artist takes something like a "snapshot" in the online visual world, for as you point out in another interview, search results cannot be repeated even just a few days later.

Your display in the exhibition "*NOT UNTIL TOMORROW*" reminds me of a panorama or perhaps even a religious polyptych. These spatially referential forms of image also work with the interaction between figure and ground, between detail and long shot, but always in the service of narrating important historical events. In the spatial installation, you emphasize the simultaneity of digital visuality that no longer allows itself to be formatted in a linear way, which today tells a different story than tomorrow, which offers users their very own story depending on their own preconceptions. "*NOT UNTIL TOMORROW*" thus offers no telling of history, but perhaps an arrested moment of reflection on how in the digital dynamic of time detail and total find themselves in a constant interaction. The aforementioned "chicken or egg" comparison already placed the temporal level in question. The title and also the staging of the current exhibition seem to me to go further: from a comparison of the incomparable to the synchronicity of the non-synchronous?



from 'Networked Images': Pasta Lady, 2020

**VB:** By way of the dissolution of linear narrative, in *Networked Images* there is no difference between the essential and the inessential in the image: all can be important and equally unimportant. In some works, the detail of one image collides with the background of another, which is why the division in figure and ground does not apply to the question of their legibility. I think that the abundance and dense arrangement of the works in my presentation "NOT UNTIL TOMORROW" soon makes it clear that what is relevant are not the individual motifs, but the relationships between the images. The wide spectrum of themes also underscores the coincidence of the

illustrations. I use very concrete photographs to point to something very abstract. Your formulation of “visual metaphors for invisible acts of algorithmic information processing” sums up *Networked Images* perfectly. This does not mean that the works could not be read individually as well, on the contrary: the spectators cinema in their own mind is for me part of the reception. As far as my considerations on the display are concerned, the arrangement of a timeline inspired me. Depending on where you stand in the space, differently overlapping visual layers result that thus lead to variable overall views. There is no defined path through the frontally organized installation. Since the pictures hang in part on free-standing columns, the installation can also be seen from the back, not just from the front.

The title “*NOT UNTIL TOMORROW*” is as ambivalent as the visibility of digital images. They glow on displays then disappear again. They are not located in any one place, they can today be here, tomorrow there, in several positions at the same time or suddenly no longer visible. This fleeting movement is contrasted by the long-term storage, that allows for the data to be called up after the duration of presence. Some time ago, there was a trend on Instagram where users labelled their “embarrassing” pictures, usually selfies, with the hashtag #untiltomorrow, the idea being that they would disappear the next day from the flow of images. The idea of allowing our data to be visible for a limited time and then to delete them forever sounds like self-determination, but in the context of data storage is at the same time naïve, when we consider that there is no expiration date for data once it has been shared.

The pandemic now adds a different meaning to the title. We are experiencing the second wave at the moment and find ourselves in a collective state of insecurity when it comes to future plans. When we make plans for tomorrow, then it's without the self-evidence that they will actually take place. At the moment, all that happens takes place in a mode of “perhaps.” I am also working on an exhibition that might open publicly, but perhaps it won't. It is a special time during which “business as usual” simply does not work. Digital spaces are all the more important for communication. Truly the best time to reflect on the networked exchange of images.



*NOT UNTIL TOMORROW*, Simulation Klemm's Berlin, 2020