DAZED DIGITAL

DISTORT THE MATERIAL!
Rhizome on Clement Valla & Erik Berglin, who make digital artefacts that dissolve centuries

Giampaolo Bianconi, June 2013

At first glance, it might look like a group of particularly rowdy archeological artifacts have been unleashed and, in their newfound freedom, discovered a form of inhuman copulation – with spectacular results. Produced for the most recent Art Hack Day @ 319 Scholes, *Iconoclashes* is a series of hybrid images by Erik Berglin and Clement Valla. They feature artifacts culled from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's online archive; specifically those images tagged "God" or "Religion." Using a piece of code, these images have been automatically combined to produce records of nonexistent deities, as fantastic as they are impossible, converging various histories and cultures into a collection of undeniably false idols.

Berglin and Valla have exploited the spaces between technological standards – here, the crisp photographs of the Met's collection and the rigorous execution of an Adobe Photoshop algorithm – to service a remix both purely digital and completely historical. The images from *Iconoclashes* distort material objects in a decidedly immaterial fashion. Even the artifacts themselves have the tension between stoney solidity and imagined deities. The contrast evokes Valla's celebrated *Postcards from Google Earth*, which finds the nonsensical moments of disintegration that are the logical result of the Earth's Google-digitization. The artists emphasize that their project works smoothly because of Photoshop stitching script's collaboration with the Met's uniform archival photographs (which are evenly lit against a neutral gray background). The system's rational construction allows for its ultimate confusion.

Berglin's series from 2012, *Blinded from the Light*, collected images from automatic, motion-triggered cameras installed to record the presence of deer – records of hunters' surveillance installed in nature. There, authorship is abandoned, left to the camera mechanism: the images are wanton, messy traces that nonetheless fulfill their purpose, indicating whether or not a certain area is suitable for hunting. Yet their thoughtlessness also makes them appear almost human. The *Iconoclashes*, by contrast, have the clean functionality and database aesthetic of stock photography.

Other works by Oliver Laric have also emphasized the link between the possibilities afforded by new technologies to the concepts of art, authorship, and subjectivity from ancient cultures. Ancient attitudes towards cultural production have become legible and culturally relevant in the 21st century. *Iconoclashes* intensifies that link, its archeological mashups slyly indicating that any combination that could be, should be. Images—and in this case, the artifacts themselves—are oceanic, full of alternate available images and constructions. Everywhere—even within the guarded walls of the museum—media collapse into each other and mutant forms emerge.

As indicated by Berglin and Valla's choice of epigraph by Bruno Latour, we might not be as modern as we think. I like to think that one day, even if it is forgotten, our society too will become ancient: an updated version of the past, but an ancient one nonetheless. And the images we worship today—whether technical, economic, or cultural—may come to resemble *Iconoclashes* more than anything else.

This is part of a series of articles about creative online subversion, #HackYourFuture, on Dazed Digital. A different guest-editor will discuss a different discipline everyday. This is part of online art magazine Rhizome's Heather Corcoran's comment on artists, hacking and action.