CARLOS/ISHIKAWA

On Ed Fornieles: *Associations*
by Ben Burbridge

Ed Fornieles' new series links together images based on formal and conceptual associations. Arranged as square tiles in interlocking rows and columns, the 'maps' initially look like crossword puzzles. When we think about how the patterns were produced—how image begat image begat image—the geometric forms are more akin to traces or trails, like a game of snake played on an old Nokia. It is fair to assume that the majority of images were chosen based on resemblances to previous images, creating a rhythmic temporality that shapes present in terms of past. The occasions when lines loop back, to re-join the paths from which they grew, must have required some planning and pre-emption, however: how to get from a pile of laundry to the US woman's football team in just two moves? As the resulting maps can be read from any point and in any direction, it becomes impossible and ultimately futile to try to separate those possibilities.

The specific associations between images and the recurrence of particular motifs bring thematic concerns into focus: apocalyptic destruction; biological and/or technological reproduction; the interplay of nature and culture; literal and figurative forms of patterning; the consumption of food, bodies, images and/or commodities; the playing of games. At times conscious and considered, at others trance-like, intuitive, and unthinking, the strings of association speak at once of subjectivities, individual and collective, the networked condition of contemporary images, and—again—the inseparability of the two. Formal and cultural hierarchies are flattened; the network made legible as a chain of infinite yet strangely circumscribed possibilities, simultaneously navigated and constructed through the desires it shapes and is shaped by.

The series made me think about two things. First, a real-life anecdote lent semi-fictional form in a project by artist Sebastian Schmeig, about the time that Google image recognition algorithms identified a picture of the X-Factor contestant Chris Maloney as an aubergine. That judgement was the cumulative result of numerous, similar judgements, made by numerous human observers, paid almost nothing to tag pictures in the datasets used to train Google's algorithms. For machines to 'see' and 'understand' images like humans, they have to learn first to separate one form from another—to read tonality and colour in terms of contours and edges—then to link concepts to forms (a teddy bear, the sun, a mushroom cloud, Britney Spears, Travis Bickle, Paris Hilton).

The second was an installation photograph, shared by a curator friend on Facebook earlier this year, showing a restoration of the last documented version of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1929). Through the sprawling installation of photographs, Warburg had attempted to map the 'afterlife of antiquity', tracking how images of symbolic, intellectual, and emotional power emerge and then reappear in the art and cosmology of later times and places. Clustering like-images together, the combinatory experiments followed what Christopher D. Johnson calls, a 'metonymic, intuitive logic...propelled by decades of rigorous scholarship'. Warburg's interest was not only in the recurrence of specific forms, but in the symbolic and metaphorical possibilities this created.

Fornieles' series refuses clear distinctions between formal and conceptual associations. As we move through stacked folders, stacked credit cards, a credit card suspended above a hand, an opaque orb suspended above a hand, a bubble above two hands, the images riff visually through subject matter and through resemblances in colour, composition, and tone. When forms are interpreted as objects, and those objects are assigned meanings, they acquire symbolic potential: finance, bureaucracy, technology, what Hito Steyerl calls 'bubble vision'

(among any number of alternative possibilities). The indeterminacy that results, both from the constant slippage between formal and conceptual associations, and the metaphorical associations implied but never confirmed, point to more fundamental truths that bind Google's image recognition algorithms to Warburg's cultivated reading of art's histories.

The suggestion that Chris Maloney's head looks like an aubergine highlights not only that machines are reliant on humans to link forms to concepts, but that any process of visual association is always essentially cultural. To read parts of an image as specific forms still requires the input of humans. It is conceivable that something visually similar to Warburg's Atlas could be generated via a Google reverse image search, but the algorithm would know nothing of the intensity of thought and feeling that drove the associations forged within the 1929 assemblage. The systems according to which two images can be linked together is never intrinsic to those images, but relies instead upon processes of learning and socialisation performed through, with and around our experiences of images. Even when systems of association resemble each other, this does not guarantee they are the same.

For curator Katrina Sluis, we are living through 'a paradigm shift in which there is less value to be extracted from individual images than from relations between them'. Our networked interactions with images in the past and present are reprocessed in statistical terms to shape the probability that any particular image will become the subject of our attention in the future. Images become embedded within the individual and collective subjectivities that determine our future interactions within the network: what we search for, what we click on, what we share and save. 'Associations' is a product of, and reflection on, that process (Fornieles discovered that it is the Russian search engine Yandex, rather than Google or Bing, that retrieved and/or conjured the types of images he was looking for with maximum levels of efficiency; where the desires encoded in his textual search terms were lent most compelling visual form).

With remarkable economy, 'Associations' highlights how images today exist in a space that is at once human and non-human; are constituted via a fluid, ongoing dynamic that lacks beginning or end. The experience of tracing the connections that power through the series, as one image morphs into the next, and then the next, makes it clear that any effort to break, or even halt, that process is arbitrary and probably pointless. It is instead through an immersion doubling as an acute form of awareness—a kind of attentive, meditative state—that we can knowingly inhabit, and so better understand, the processes through which we become images, and images become us.