New York-based artist Antek Walczak (b. 1968) is a former member of the thornily multifarious and categorically elusive Bernadette Corporation. Since its formation in 1994 the collective has operated in such diverse media as fashion, photography, film, publications, sculpture, and installation. The organization’s variant objectives—destabilization of individual artistic authorship, cross-pollination within the culture industry, and disruption of systems in which art is assumed to function—have proven immensely influential. So much so that Bernadette Corporation’s multifaceted, “authorless” strategies have ushered in what is now a viable, if not fully recuperated, critical model employed by many artist collectives today.

Though Bernadette Corporation has collaborated with disparate individuals and factions, Antek Walczak—who since 2012 has not worked with the group—along with Bernadette Van-Huy and John Kelsey comprised its trifecta core. Walczak is assumed to have been heavily involved with BC’s published output, such as its fashion magazine *Made in USA* (1999-2001), as well as the filming and editing of the its noted filmic works, such as *The BC Corporate Story* (1997) and *Get Rid of Yourself* (2003), though due to the group’s collective nature, individual authorship is intentionally undefined. During his time with Bernadette Corporation Walczak made a number of self-authored videos—four to be exact—that incorporated nuanced handling of traditional filmic techniques a means of investigating and problematizing 20th century cinematic tropes.

With such an expansive history of working both collectively and individually within structurally diverse mediums, it’s important to highlight that Walczak’s solo practice has been
chiefly committed to multiple approaches towards painting and its socio-critical discourses. How does one interpret a heretofore-total abstention from and eventual adherence to painting, as would appear necessary to properly unpack Walczak’s recent solo efforts?

The history of the serious joke\(^2\) that is Bernadette Corporation reveals certain overlapping concerns with Walczak’s solo work: scrutiny of social scenes, metropolitan clout, art world hierarchies, and the flows of content, commerce and power in an increasingly globalized and digitally networked society. Nonetheless, if Bernadette Corporation fabricates social value and cultural currency by dint of a knowing, mercurial posturing, Walczak’s endeavors instrumentalize the possibilities of self-implication within a technologically minded picture plane production. Ultimately, the artist’s former dedication to filmic enterprise and eventual assumption of painterly pursuits ultimately does not denote a single, thematic preoccupation that drives these disparate endeavors; rather, it is the opening up and operation within accepted historical and stylistic tropes linked to these respective mediums that has enabled him to “soften the edges around the old.”\(^3\) Beginning in 2010 and moving through the tail end of 2016, Walczak squarely modified his occupancy within wall-based work, series by discrete series.

Even so, why specifically seek out and operate within the framework of painting? With the unending distrust of its critical viability, wariness towards the medium’s inherent commercial significations and supposed inefficacies, favoring such an utterly conventional route to probe his interests in technological omnipresence, value-generating circulation, and cosmopolitan ambition would suggest manifesting themselves in appropriately “emulated” methods of contemporary execution. Walczak’s adherence to painting could lie within the belief that it “finds itself most fully only where it is most deeply in question,”\(^4\) for painting, the historically sanctioned material signifier that it is, continually calls for the reinvention of “space
inside a space already created, already invented.” Yet this, as Walczak knows all too well, is painting’s foregone conclusion, which is precisely why his contradictory and problematic relationship with the medium has not been a career-spanning pursuit, but a potentially finite means to an end—a planned obsolescence. This mentality is echoed by the fact that each of his series is initiated and, after having served its purpose, is abandoned.


_Empire State of Machine Mind_, the artist’s 2010 solo exhibition at Real Fine Arts in Brooklyn—which can be seen as Walczak’s first serious foray into painting—consisted of four large-scale canvases that spelled out via Lempel-Ziv-Welch compression schemes lyrics plucked from the Jay-Z hit “Empire State of Mind.” The hymn to New York City’s fabled capacity for social and economic transcendence provided the perfect conduit for Walczak to subjugate legible medium and immediate social context to a similarly systematized compression: that of the
networked painted object. Using the material constructs of painting to point away from and eventually “back on to its own conditions” was not his goal; instead, he assumed the baggage of systematized painting as a way to not only meet his jagged inclinations towards the medium but to also hold up an antagonistic mirror to itself, calling to mind the inherent shortcomings and problems that lie within this activity—including his very own participation within it. The resulting nimble and diagrammatic *Machine Mind* compositions bear the impression of having been screen-printed or produced otherwise mechanically; in fact they were traditionally realized by brushing acrylic onto canvas. It’s apparent, then, that this trace of the hand harbors premeditated significance as an index of material labor, its employment seeming initially like a contradictorily value-generating rejoinder to its very obsolescence but which effectively functions as the synapse between the haptic and the digital—that is to say, the digitally generated action of message compression was met with a defiantly analogue application of linguistic signifiers. As these and later works attest, the ratio-constant found within virtually all of the artist’s non-durational output is a semiotic breakdown symbiotically existing alongside a grounding image-factor—tension between symbol (language, glyph, icon) and ground (gesture, material, shape, color).

Within *The Lead Years*, Walczak’s solo at House of Gaga in 2012 in Mexico City, this relationship was more materially navigated than in the previous solo. These paintings, for which the artist jettisoned the prototypical elements of paint and canvas, continued this symbol/ground methodology through the process of silk screening spam emails onto lead, highlighting the toxic malleability of art and technological systems alike. Walczak’s panels, again acting as agents for concepts and realities that exist outside the art object, suggest that what the spam text says is less important that what it concedes about content circulation and financial systems, as well as our parallel dependence upon and wariness of technology. Much in the same manner as the *Machine
Mind paintings, these works were serially installed variations on a single theme that outwardly varied little in terms of individual composition yet similarly acted as a cinematically montaged\(^8\), durational sequence within the installation that forged formal relationships and linguistic meaning within the movement from one end to the other. It is here, also evident in subsequent installations, that Walczak’s painting practice reveals most directly the influence of his former filmic practice.\(^9\) More specifically, the overlapping allusions to film techniques, digital communication and art history—all functioning within the sign of “painting”—has Walczak continuing his entropic risk of paradoxical engagement with networked painting.\(^10\)

View of “The Lead Years,” 2012, House of Gaga, Mexico City.

It’s not uncommon for artists to keep a safe distance between the concepts explored in their work and direct allusions to the hierarchal system of circulated production, validation and wealth that is known as contemporary art—pulling the curtain back too far on its social, financial and intellectual conditions jeopardizes viability. In many ways this is the core of Walczak’s work: the laying bare of the inescapable problematics of being an artist today. New Transbohemian States, his 2013 solo at Real Fine Arts, found the artist enmeshing himself
within these matters more overtly than ever before. The series executed for the exhibition took the form of monochromatically grounded, square paintings of state transition diagrams, each in the shape of a familiar Disney or Warner Bros. cartoon characters—Mickey Mouse, Daffy Duck, et al. (Having only recently stopped working with Bernadette Corporation, it warrants pondering Walczak’s prototypical return to a medium not once exploited by the collective as a way to not only brood upon his solitary efforts but to artistically diverge from them completely.) The use of the cartoon imagery was a self-reflexive nod to the *Machine Mind* paintings as well as an acerbic unspooling of art’s socially dependent systems and painting’s “transitivity.” The connect the dot-esque diagrams have a single word inserted between each number that eventually form full sentences. Each begins with “I want to be a contemporary artist” but then becomes a choose-your-own-adventure kind of reading. For instance, in *Lust* (2013), whose composition takes the form of Woody Woodpecker, number 3 points sequentially to number 4, but additionally points to number 13, forming instead “I want strategies of critique against neoliberal dispersion via author death thru appropriating collectives.” Effectively, the texts are a road map of the artist’s simultaneous drive to operate within and vexation towards the system of art, revealing their author to be by turns competitive, revelatory, smug, trite, humble, and downtrodden. This series, perhaps more than any other, has Walczak heeding the plea for contradictory behavior, pushing the conflicting (not, it should be noted, ambivalent) stances of self-implication, sincerity and mockery to a cathartic edge. Even their brushwork, so pristine in the *Machine Mind* works, has a performatively reworked smudginess—i.e. “painterly”—application.
Throughout 2014 and 2015 Walczak continued working within “proper” painting, mounting a solo project at the FIAC art fair in Paris with Real Fine Arts, while also working within the collective exhibition strategy War Pickles, which staged three variant projects in Mexico City (2013), Paris (2014) and Tokyo (2016). Yet, in mid-2016 a fundamental shift in Walczak’s output occurred when he removed any presence of physical gesture in his work. For a self-titled solo at Dominique Lévy in New York the artist presented several hexagonally shaped dye sublimation prints on metal. Installed in modular triads, conjuring chemical formulas and honeycombs alike, the works incorporated the artist’s ongoing use of glyph/ground relationships, but departed from previous working methods in virtually every way. While these works are arguably not paintings in a traditional sense, they could “count as” such in their tableau (picture plane/viewer) engagement. Each of the panels’ computer-generated compositions is populated
with digital icons (rooks, knights, hearts, clubs, swords, dice, “eject button” arrows, etc.) that coexist on a segmented monochromatic plane, creating visually differentiated but conceptually linked constellations. The layouts were digitally designed by utilizing a mosaic patterning feature that allows random content population within any given field, resulting in splayed and overlapping imagery that recalls that of early video games. Perhaps having exhausted the use of his work as a means to implicate himself and others within the circuitry of art production and consumption, these new works appear to be a direct conduit to delve into the issues of “cybernetics, compression, patterns and probabilities,” that had been present in his wall-based output from the very beginning.

View of “Neanderthal Interface Guidelines,” 2016, Jenny’s, Los Angeles.

View of “Neanderthal Interface Guidelines,” 2016, Jenny’s, Los Angeles (detail).
Right on the heels of the New York project, Walczak mounted a second iteration of the series at Jenny’s in Los Angeles. The exhibition, entitled Neanderthal Interface Guidelines, was comprised of 36 works, again embodied in hexagonal dye sublimation prints on thin metal, though here all were installed on a single wall in a tessellated rhythm. As in the show at Dominique Lévy, these works also employed myriad signs, glyphs and symbols, all contemporary shorthand language that will eventually morph due to trends in graphic design, culture, social rupture or fatigue. Their use here is emblematic of the continuing evaporation of written language in favor of a universal, egalitarian approach to the sign, signifier and signified mode of Saussurean linguistics. Prolonged viewing of the segmented hexagonal formats allows for the vacillation between a flattened hexagon and a conceptually constructed cube—the former makes for immediate legibility of the two-dimensional glyphs, while the latter allows the flat figures to float in imaginary three-dimensional space. Toggling between the two produces a kind of gestalt image that makes for enthralling viewing. Unlike the east coast manifestation of the series, the symbols that reside within each panel break free and roam into other panels, which in effect makes the 36 part installation a single, undulating artwork, flowing from deep blue on the upper left (Ocean, all works 2016) to a mustard yellow on the lower right (Crater). The titles allude to naturally-occurring phenomena (Fjord; Delta) or specific geographic locations (Dasht-e Lut; Sibillini Mountains), successfully imbuing the works with the concept of “nature”, as opposed to nature itself. Though the press release for Neanderthal Interface Guidelines makes plain the artist’s frustrations with the art world’s rampant, complicit consumption of “trending” production, that is to say its growing propensity towards a “no critique, no discourse, no stakes” state of being, he is in essence creating a legible critique—a caustic screenshot—of those very propensities. For ultimately systemic critique (external and internal) is at the very
heart of Walczak’s work, which is here occupying a form that is thoroughly his, that is, until he renders it obsolete.

Notes

1 Dynasty, 1998, 49:52 min, color, sound; Paris From Behind, 1999, 25 min, color, sound; Run With Zeros, 1999, 9 min, color, sound; Risques du métier, 2000, 56:14 min, color, sound.

2 See Bernadette Corporation, “Corporate Responsibility and the Swine We Are,” Purple Prose, No. 12, Summer 1997, p. 141, in which BC (credited here to “D’Antek”) describes their enterprise as "emulating a corporate image through 'joke' forms of business that are serious."


5 Voice-over text taken from Antek Walczak’s film Run with Zeros, 1999, 9 min, color, sound.


8 Ibid.


10 See David Joselit, “Painting Beside Itself,” October 130 (Fall 2009), pp. 125-134, for an analysis of painting’s relationship to external networks.
See press release for *Empire State of Machine Mind*, October 23 – December 19, 2010, Real Fine Arts, Brooklyn, which it states, “The paintings are a cartoon-like example of encoding.”


12 David Joselit, “Painting Beside Itself,” *October* 130 (Fall 2009), pp. 128.


15 See Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 516, for a reading of Francois Morellet’s attempts to systematically remove subjective judgment from his painting process. An intriguing comparison can be made here between Morellet’s systematic activity and the removal of gesture and subjective choice found in Walczak’s *Neanderthal Interface Guidelines* works—whereas Morellet’s work was realized by analogue means, Walczak’s operations here are imperatively digital.


