

## Art Issues November 1999

### Stefano Arienti

By Claudine Isè

Italian artist Stefano Arienti is what you might call an "image hasher". With ruthless precision, he wreaks havoc on mass-produced images, invading their internal operating systems and permanently altering their signifying codes. The thirty-eight-year-old artist often uses found materials like comics stripes or posters of famous artworks or celebrities. Through various quirky yet systematic methods, he erases, defaces, manipulates, or in some way re-processes these familiar images, rendering them strange and oddly seductive.

Arienti's idea of methods stem directly from the Situationist International, whose members believed that creativity thrives, even in the midst of consumer culture's dispiriting limitations, whenever artists usurps the quotidian and re-contextualize it for their own subversive ends. Arienti first exhibited work in the mid nineteen eighties, the heyday of appropriationist art, and fifteen year later he continues his efforts to "battle" commodity capital and his presumably deadening culture of pre-processed imagery. What differentiates him from many of his Situationist forbears is the fact that he remains an admitted iconophile and an avid collector of images (many of which are postcards or snapshots taken by himself or his friends), which are archives according to theme and later recycles for his own use.

Arienti most recent series consists of spray-painted depictions of animals and flowers. Taken from his snapshot collection and projected in slide form onto crisp white sheets of vellum, the artist has traced the images with spray-paint, working quickly so as to prevent dripping and achieve a matte surface that recalls painted frescos. The resulting blurry, dreamlike images, hung casually from the wall with pushpins and metal binder clips, seem to emerge as if from cumulous clouds of red, rust, and magenta. Picture of water lilies, orchids, a reclining figure, a double self-portrait, and an infant and an elderly man appear to develop before your eyes. Yet, each refuses to coalesce into something visually coherent and recognizable, in part because Arienti refuses to tamper with the nozzles of his spray cans, a technique used by graffiti artists to adjust the emission of paint and allow for more detailed surface treatments. Instead, he substitutes clumsy human gestures for the camera's mechanical precision.

In the exhibition brochure, Arienti describes his fascination with the capabilities of certain organisms to "proliferate and multiply, to invade a territory and deform it, to transform a surface by degrading or, depending on your point of view, conferring new value upon it." References to the ways in which viruses invade the body or the hard drives of computers - often with destructive or even deadly consequences - are not far behind Arienti's words. He employs a similarly single-minded approach to his appropriated images, often smearing, scratching, ripping, erasing, tracing over, or puncturing their outlines in order to make the familiar suddenly seen unheimlich. For example, in a series from the early nineteen nineties, Arienti erased portions of posters of famous personalities like Albert Einstein and Marilyn Monroe. The

monstrously distorted faces that result look as if they've been brutally beaten. The sadistic and violent impulses that inform Arienti's efforts to "rub out" or puncture these famous icons are thus made undeniably apparent: by physically altering the images, he reclaims his power over them. At the same time, he makes us see each image as something other than itself. As opposed to the positive principle upon which photographic "truth" is assumed, Arienti's spray-painted drawings throw perception into question. Photographic authority is based upon the medium's evidentiary status as proof that a person, place, or situation actually existed. In contrast, memories, like dreams, shape-shift according to our fears and desires. Both dislodge images from their original contexts; they are by nature mutable and imprecise, floating signifiers that refuse to be chained to a set of verifiable facts. In this way, when Arienti "draw" a photograph using imprecise and chance-based methods, he attempts no less than to uncover the unconscious "dream life" of images. Attacking the surface to get to it, he reveals the potentially limitless alternative that lie within.