Before the age of museum shops peddling postcards and coffee tables groaning under the weight of books filled with color plates, aspiring artists who wished to acquire a visual reminder of a work of art resorted to the longstanding tradition of copying (which also provided a means of mastering skills). The establishment of public museums in the nineteenth century afforded art students even greater opportunities to set up easels directly in front paintings and sculptures. At the same moment, the advent of photography made possible the mass dissemination of images of art from all over the world, rendering nearly obsolete the need to make copies. In an influential essay of 1936 entitled “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin discussed the impact of mechanical reproduction on visual culture, weighing the gain in public accessibility against the loss of what he called the “aura” of the original. By the time Andy Warhol was turning out silk-screen paintings in the 1960s, making a copy by hand had become totally irrelevant. His Mona Lisa series was part of a larger artistic practice that mimicked the replication and distribution of photographic reproductions found in mass media. Warhol's line of inquiry continued in the 1980s with media savvy artists whose art incorporated images scavenged from television, film, and print media. Sherrie Levine, one of the best-known artists of this group, “appropriated” the work of Walker Evans, rephotographing his photographs, and of Joan Miro, painting watercolors of his paintings. She exhibited these as her own, an act of cultural critique that raised the issue of authorship in relation to the concepts of originality and gender.

A picture of Jan Brueghel the Elder’s Sense of Smell, provides the source for Suzanne Bocanegra’s All the Petals from Jan Brueghel the Elder’s Sense of Smell, 1618, 2002. Made with fellow Fleming Peter Paul Rubens (who painted the nude), the painting depicts a garden with a female figure inhaling the scent of a fragrant bouquet presented by a putto. A perfume factory in the background states the allegory in vernacular terms. Bocanegra chose to focus solely on the flowers. After counting the number of petals visible in the reproduction she cut each one out of paper she had painted to match the colors of the flowers in the reproduction. She then bundled the petals together on a fabric stem.
to the wall so that its placement corresponded to that in the reproduction. The result is a map of the arrangement of the flowers in the reproduction with the visible areas of white wall representing the absent figures and architecture. Bocanegra’s wall drawing reflects her desire to better understand the structure and composition of the painting and her interest in how things are collected, sorted and categorized.

Michael Cloud regards his abstract geometric paintings as “hard copies, printouts or mock-ups” of Old Master still-lifes he reconstructs from pictorial images, stated dimensions, and his experience of what constitutes a painting. First he stretches a canvas to dimensions identical to those given for the painting he wishes to copy in the source of his reproductions, a glossy coffee table volume devoted to still life painting. Then he divides the photographic reproduction into a sixteen-cell grid and transfers it to canvas using blue plastic fishing line to delineate the structure. The combination of the fishing line pulled tautly over the surface of the canvas and deep stretcher bars gives his paintings an object-like presence. Using thick color glazes, which he applies in layers, Cloud mixes eight numbered or lettered color swatches in every possible combination and arranges them algorithmically within the two hundred fifty-six cells on the canvas. Algorithms interest him because they are logical and vital to communicating instructions to computers. He feels that they provide a way to investigate how computers and programming affect our perception of the world.

On first glance, Marietta Ganapin’s colorful collages, all Untitled, appear to make references to architectural decoration or religious symbolism. A more careful second look reveals that the patterned circle is actually composed of multiple cut out images such as the head of a puppy drinking from a bowl taken from Paul Gauguin’s Still Life with Three Puppies, or the head of a woman with a shock of blond hair from Pablo Picasso’s Woman with Yellow Hair. Ganapin’s collages incorporate reproductions that appear in brochures and pamphlets offered to the public at museum exhibitions, as well as postcards and exhibition catalogues. An avid museum and gallery goer, she makes repeated visits to exhibitions, picking up handfuls of brochures each time. Selecting works of art she responds to strongly, she cuts many copies of the same section of an image and arranges the elements in the identical format of a circle on a square ground. The decorative motifs vary, as do the rich color combinations. Ganapin regards each collage as a visual diary and memento of her experience of standing before and studying the original work of art.

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Devorah Sperber’s After Chuck Close… 2002-03, comprises several panels of diminishing size, each reproducing an aspect of Chuck Close’s Self Portrait. Close’s paintings of the 1990s attracted her because the diamond-shaped units he used to fracture the image of the sitter reminded her of pixels, though he did not use a computer to make his work. Rotating an image of Self Portrait to a forty-five degree angle, the orientation of Close’s canvas when he made the painting, Sperber transformed the diamond-shaped cells into squares on a modular grid, which is the way they appear in her work. The largest panel magnifies a single cell; the smallest depicts a recognizable detail of Close’s features. Each panel is made up of a multitude of colorful chenille stems. Like pointillist paintings, Sperber’s panels slip between recognizable images and abstract patterns, depending on the viewer’s vantage point. Before she began the laborious task of assembling the panels, Sperber used computer programs to break down the image into a scheme of abstract elements and to create maps that indicated the placement of the colors and the order in which they were to be applied. Her desire to strike a balance between the individual panels as self-contained units and parts of an ensemble mirrors Close’s concern for the relationship of the cells to the entire image found in his Self Portrait.

While related to the practice of copying and the strategy of appropriation, the paintings, collages, and drawings presented in Art After the Age of Mechanical Reproduction occupy a unique position. By reinterpreting and remaking source material, they transform the originals into new works of art that are rich and rewarding.