

Akvis SmartMask

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Most image-editing programs allow you to move an object from one image to another fairly easily. Once you use a selection tool to define the area you want you can Copy it, open another image and Paste that area into the new image. Once it's there, though, seems like that's when the problems begin, usually because the pasted-in part doesn't blend well with its new background.

Actually, the problems begin with the selection. A good selection will make or break the results. Why? Because in a photograph there aren't any sharply defined edges between different elements. It's hard to "grab" one area without picking up pixels from the background, and then when it's added to another image they're noticeable to some degree.

If photographers would only shoot against plain high-contrast backgrounds my life would be considerably easier. But since they don't, I may wind up spending an hour or two just making the selection. No matter what tool, feature or technique I use in *Photoshop*, some photos remain a challenge. So I asked to review *SmartMask* because I'm still looking for the perfect result – preferably with the least amount of work.



During installation, *SmartMask* correctly identified and was willing to install itself as a plug-in to all my image-editors (Corel *Painter*, and three versions each of *Photoshop* and *Photoshop Elements*). I graciously allowed this and following installation fired up *Photoshop CS4* to see how it worked.

Because it is a plug-in it's loaded under the Filter menu, in a sub-menu named Akvis. I opened a challenging image of a woman I've been using for some time to test my selection skills.

SmartMask works on an image in one of three Modes: Sharp, Soft and Complex. To begin with, I used the outlining tools and roughly designated

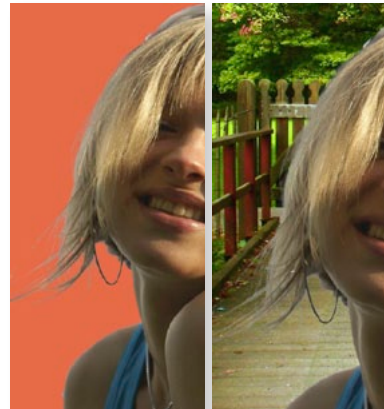
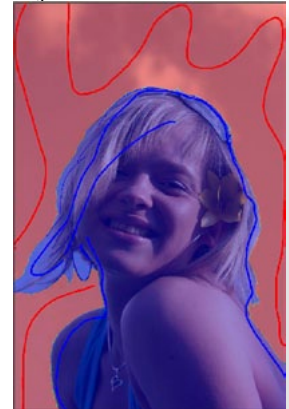
which area to keep and which to lose. I pressed the Process button, waited, and then saw the image with a red overlay.

The hair really wasn't satisfactory, so I went to the "Soft" mode. Here I used a green marker to define transitional areas – places where the background showed through the strands of hair. I pressed Process again, waited, and this time the results were better, but not quite there. So I moved on to "Complex" Mode.

In "Complex" mode I used blue and red eyedroppers to define what color(s) I wanted removed, and which to protect. Then I used a "Magic Brush" and painted out the blue background. I was really impressed with how it worked.

The final result looked really good. I pressed the "Apply" button, and the processed image reopened in *Photoshop*. I created a blank layer below the image and filled it with a contrasting color, then I replaced that with another photo. In both cases, I have to say I'm pleased with the results.

Let me hasten to say that I was working with an image 2200px x 1500px. You do not generally have results this good with smaller images, ones used on the web, for instance. They just don't have enough pixels. I worked on another photograph of a woman with very curly hair against an office background (furniture, cabinets, walls). There was absolutely no way to



break her hair out no matter what I did, mainly because the colors of the background and the hair were almost identical in places. What the human eye sees can't always be "seen" by our tools.

I also worked with a tree photo I use in my classes for dropping out backgrounds. In this case, *SmartMask* didn't do as well as *Photoshop*. This tree has a rather homogenous background so in class, we use Layer blending options to drop out the blue sky. Another method is to use the Color Range tool, selecting by color. The graphic shows the results. At far right is the *SmartMask* version, the center and left were done in *Photoshop* alone with Layer blending options and Color Range respectively.

In the end, it all comes down to the image. And your patience. I'm impressed enough with the results I got that I feel comfortable recommending this product. Their website offers several tutorials and examples that I found very useful.



About: *SmartMask 2.5*

Vendor: Akvis

<http://akvis.com/en/index.php>

Price: \$120

Requires: Photo-editing program such as Adobe's *Photoshop* or *Photoshop Elements* or Corel *Photo-Paint*

Member Article

Windows Office – AutoCorrect Options

John Kamper

Many of you may be acquainted with a feature of Microsoft Office programs called AutoCorrect. AutoCorrect automatically replaces common misspelled words with the correct spelling. For example, type "teh," hit the space bar, and "the" is inserted. Type (c) to automatically get ©, the copyright symbol.

In *Office 2003*, click **Tools > AutoCorrect Options**. To find this helpful tool in *Office 2007*, click the **Office Button**. For those who may not be familiar with *Office 2007*, it's that round button in the upper left-hand corner of the screen.

At the bottom of the *Office* menu is a button labeled **Word Options** – click on it. In the next screen click the **Proofing** button at left. The first line at top is the **AutoCorrect Options** button. Click on it. The resultant dialog box lists those AutoCorrect Options that are automatically applied, such as capitalizing the names of the days of the week.

At the bottom is a **Replace With:** option that contains a list of misspelled words that are automatically corrected. Scroll down to see the entire list. The best thing about this feature is that you can add your own, what I call "abbreviations."

Think of words or phrases you type frequently – your name, your company name, etc. For example, in the **Replace:** box type your initials. In the **With:** box type your name as you want it to appear. Press **Enter** or click the **Enter** button.

Now typing your initials in a document results in your name being inserted. However, be careful. If your initials are "cat," for example, typing "cat" at any time will insert your name. (Use the **Exceptions** button (upper right) to enter your own.) Imagine how this can best help you. Note the other tabs at the top – don't forget to check them out.

