CHRISTIAN DE LUTZ: EKPHRASIS.

PHOTOGRAPHY BETWEEN PAINTING AND MONTAGE

By Regine Rapp

Christian de Lutz (*1965) has worked as a photographer and visual artist since moving to Europe in 1994, after having worked in painting and video in New York during the late 1980s and early 1990s. During these years de Lutz has built up a considerable photo archive, which he has used as the basis to create his current images. The original analogue photographs have been processed through digital imaging software; some information has been taken away, while new information has been added. In the last seven years the artist has increasingly worked at the periphery of image and text. By means of a digital montage of photography and source code or algorithmic texts his pictures have generated a palimpsest-like layering of pictorial and literary signs. As part of the exhibition series "Art and Text", *Art Laboratory Berlin* is presenting a selection of de Lutz's most recent *Source Code Images*.

In ancient times the term **ekphrasis** (*Gr., description*) meant description in the broadest sense. In modern times it means a literary visualisation strategy in the form of the rhetorical description of an artwork. Ekphrasis can also mean the verbal representation of visual representation; thus a double intermediation of the real, as a depitction of the depicted.[1] It is in this very sense of ekphrasis that Christian de Lutz operates on the manifold character of references within his Source code Images, in which the collaged text often refers ironically to the images. Already the manipulation of the original photograph into what resembles a painting marks the moment of *depiction of the depicted*.

The works of the **Source Code** series are based on a digital collage of text and image. The appropriated texts have been HTML or Java script, or in recent works excerpts from the source code of computer viruses. The commands and syntax of these computer languages, sometimes even single characters, are ripped out of their original context. In this correlation of image and text we often find subtle metaphors and indirect puns. In their resemblance to tableaux paintings these photographic images refer to the traditional medium of painting, which they then put into question.

The work **untitled (damagestuff)**, 1998/2006, shows a person, standing before the façade of a house, looking through a camera at the viewer. On the picture are solitary words, letters, numbers in small and capital white letters: "306h ; March 6th/ je damagestuff/ retf ; return control/ to original/ bootblock @ 0:7C00h/ damagestuff: xor." At first sight this loose graphically structured web of shortened word combinations seems to float over the image. Read from left to right, above to below, these pieces resemble a set of instructions. De Lutz has used source code from the Michelangelo virus, a worm which works its way through whole hard disks. The word "damagestuff" functions as a 'tag', an encrypted signature of the hacker who wrote the virus.

"I am also intrigued by the use in virus source code of non functional language, tags that the hacker has put in that have no functional use in the running of the virus, but are little hints or signs left behind for other hackers to discover," remarked de Lutz in an interview. "And in the picture there is graffiti on the building, also a medium with 'tags'."[2]

The visualised form of a computer program refers here in turn to the transformation of the analogue photograph from 1998 into the digitally reworked photograph of 2006, whose own existence is also system of co-ordinates. The medium of photography, here hidden by means of the process of printing on canvas, becomes even more complex when we become aware of the photographed person who is focusing her camera on us: our gaze is captured and the genesis of the image is mirrored – photography answers with photography. Over the person's head are the words "remote control". In the digital context these words are a 'command'; here they function as an ironic reference to the power of the gaze.

Besides *untitled (damagestuff)* there are other recent works such as **Temp Path**, 1998/2005, in which the correlation of image and language as well as the typographically liberated form from linear text structures bear resemblance to visual poetry. In **Global-free**, 1997/2005, the lone words, taken from the source code of the My Doom virus, come together to form a new, independent rhythm with phonetic qualities. The work **Avebury/Kournikova 1**, 2004/2005 couples the image of a field of bronze age stone megaliths in Avebury with a text layer appropriated from the Kournikova virus, which perpetuates itself via email.

In a talk about his use of sources de Lutz said: "I use the source codes or algorithms, that would normally function on a computer, but they are then taken out of the digital world and printed on to this canvas. Then they lose their functional purpose, but become representations of the digital world. My combination with the visuals is sometimes metaphoric or connotative – such as the weather forecast. But very often I also play with metonymical relations between image and text."[3]

In **Weather 3**, 2004/2005, from the **Weather Project** series we find a further form of the visualisation strategy of image and text. The picture shows the sky with drifting cloud formations. The sunlight breaks through from below into the picture. The starting point of the image, the view of the sky from a Berlin roof, has been changed by means of a strong blue filter and the addition of text. The text corresponds to algorithms which were designed for use by programmers of weather forecasting software. De Lutz develops a special moment of Ekphrasis here: the text of a meteorological computer program meets a picture of clouds. The verbal representation (the meteorological algorithms) of a visual representation (the cloud formations) can be understood as the *depiction of the depicted*. The algorithms of the meteorological program also refer in turn to the algorithms which the artist has used to transform the photograph of a cloudscape into what appears, at first glance, to be a painting.

In **Weather 1**, 2004/2005, also from the *Weather Project* series, the text turns out to be 'traces' of text placed like white shadows against the cloud formations. The white text presents itself more as the gesture of text, as it isn't so much read as viewed. This moment between the read and the viewed demonstrates a basic synaesthetic periphery in de Lutz's collages. Finally the algorithmic text material also refers to the fundamental structure of the digital image itself. Furthermore it leads the painterly effect of the images, which are digitally altered and then printed on the traditional medium of canvas, ad absurdum.

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[1] James Heffernan: *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery.* Chicago and London 1993, p. 191.
[2] Christian de Lutz, in conversation with the author, August 2007.
[3] Ibid.