

## Joachim Coucke: Ne dites pas que je ne l'ai pas dit \*

By Wim Waelput

When in 1936 Walter Benjamin discussed the shifting perception and the meaning of the artwork in the age of mechanical reproduction, he argued that in this age of printing techniques, photography, film and audio recordings, the artwork lost its “aura,” gave up on its uniqueness, and abandoned its historical tradition. Instead, the cult value of unique artwork shifted to an exhibition value, and reproductions provided a more individualised viewing experience. The advent of the digital age saw this process accelerate and intensify, but, at the same time, a disconnect emerged between the image and its medium. While in the mechanical era—with techniques such as prints, photographs, and film—the physical medium formed an inherent element of the (re)produced work; once it had been replaced by binary codes, a physical medium was no longer necessary. Against this background, there was a growing schism between the image and its medium; the notion of the “display device,” the data and image carrier, rose to the surface. For Joachim Coucke, such data carriers are the starting point for his archaeological media practice, in which he explores the widening gap between image and reality, and how this increasingly challenges our critical abilities.

Although the shift from the analogue to the digital era cannot be traced back to a specific point in time, but manifested and integrated itself in our daily life—for example, with the introduction of the modem, which could make a dial-up connection to the internet via an analogue telephone line. The characteristic beeping and crackling sounds of these first modems formed the basis for Joachim Coucke’s Transfer (2012), an installation consisting of a portable tape-recorder playing the dialling sound of a 56K modem recorded on an audio cassette. The work reveals itself both as a poetic manifestation and an allegorical scene: with its last remains, the analogue empire announces the dawning of the digital age and thus carries itself to the grave. Because of rapid technological development and the constant introduction of new storage systems, obsolete media almost instantaneously gain the status of a cultural artefact. The discarded equipment might lose its functional value, but it simultaneously gains value as a relic, acquiring emotional significance as a witness to a lost world of cultural experience.

Nevertheless, with his anachronistic media confrontation, Joachim Coucke does not so much intend to place these media in a vague past as hope to point out the remedial function of new media. Popular culture is continually being equipped with new instruments able to convey messages even more effectively, thereby constantly reconfirming and exploiting the spectator’s role as a passive consumer. The growing distance between image and reality, and the associated social repercussions, such as the stultifying passivity and condition of alienation— notions that Guy Debord anticipated in his thesis on the society of the spectacle (1967)—continue undiminished. After all, any information medium potentially propagates the view of reality expressed by the mass media. The hazy boundary between authentic message and false, manipulated information thus becomes more and more vague. The mass media are increasingly putting the human powers of discernment and critical examination to the test. The Photoshop montage What do U really want to see on the internet? (2012), a composed image using both analogue and digital media, reads as an abstract rendering of our fragmented visual culture. We see DVDs, browsers, scroll bars, traces of digital photo editing software, and a thumbnail of the Google logo. In the montage, we can also identify an assortment of white, plastic letters

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\* Transl. “Don’t Say I Didn’t Say It.”

familiar from black, grooved attendance boards. The artist introduces these out-of-date boards in the photographic work Luck Staging Manipulation (2009). The work refers chronologically to the various stages of development of the medium of photography and its influence on visual culture. While photography relying on coincidental registration (luck) could once be considered as the most authentic form of representation, we have now left behind the (post)modern era of staging reality. With the disappearance of analogue media and the advent of endless, highly accessible technological possibilities for digital editing, plus the possibility of rapid distribution, manipulation in all its gradation is gaining the upper hand in our visual culture.

Like other residues of the analogue age, the black attendance boards have been relegated to the scrapheap. Nevertheless, their tactile qualities make them a rewarding material for recent works in which they function as a display for text. Some of these works, such as The Age Of The Screen (2012) and The Society of the Copy (2012), resonate with Benjamin and Debord's famous discussion of representation and the inherent danger of image manipulation. Referring to the present digital context, the artist reminds us of the constant friction between truth and untruth. Yet other works refer, in caricature and with a wry nod to their own artistic activity, to the way that Marshall McLuhan's phrase "the medium is the message" (1964) is borne out. In Today I made nothing (2012), the artist draws our attention to the fact that social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, clearly influence the form of the message. Yet in Like Share Act (2012), a reference to the role of social media in the Arab Spring, the artist shows the equally liberating potential of digital media once we abandon their initial utilitarian use by the mass media.

In his most recent project, Joachim Coucke places the classic binary antithesis between reality and representation in the image in relation to the content generated by new media. Internet Archivist (2012) is the result of a systematic internet search and comprises an intuitive collection of found images. It is a hybrid catalogue of images ranging from dry, business-like pictures, marketing and product photography, mythological and art historical references, popular culture, internet hypes and consumer culture, to the documentation of the true impact of new media technology on our physical and social environment. The archive is a series of random images of electronic components and hardware such as cables, modems, hard discs and server rooms, of the public and private space occupied by this technology, such as the tangle of overhead network cables in offices and public space; and of the refuse of discarded equipment. Other images refer to human interaction with technology such as the CAPTCHA, the online security test with a series of letters designed to ensure that a user is human. We equally find images that draw our attention to the blurring of boundaries between public and private life, such as the self-portraits taken with mobile phones which young people in their millions post on the internet, or Vladimir Putin's iconic "holiday snaps." And finally there is a reference to what is perhaps the oldest motif in our visual culture: the cult of the body, from the prehistoric fertility statue to its most extreme and utterly mannerist expression such as the Russian internet hype Valeria Lukyanova, the human Barbie doll.

In everyday internet surfing behaviour, endless images are viewed and downloaded, and continually stored in a random, rather intuitive and non-hierarchical order. One might wonder whether in contemporary image production, the personal archive is not being reduced to a kind of Sisyphean task, and is thus losing its significance in the collective memory and its value as a source of historical knowledge. During the research he undertook for Internet Archivist, the artist came across a black and white photo of a small boy posing with a parrot. Coucke's choice of this work betrays his fascination for the work of Marcel Broodthaers, who used the parrot

symbolically in his mimetic play with reality and its representation. The artist was not able to determine the origin of the photo and what it depicts. The image thus appears entirely detached from its original historical meaning and merely functions in its respective appearance, taking on meaning only through subjective interpretation. Such an image appears refer metaphorically to the loss of any objectivity in contemporary visual culture. It clearly prompts the artist, by analogy with Marcel Broodthaers, who used fiction in his work as a means to approach hidden reality, to orientate his artistic practice around the problematic relationship between reality and fiction in a digital and therefore virtual environment.

In his work Joachim Coucke rises awareness of the true potential impact of digital reality, the way it influences our thoughts and actions, and shows us the mechanism employed. Ultimately, because cumulative effects of visual culture and manipulative strategies of the mass media are actually becoming more visible, so at least we will once more be able to bring the boundary between image and reality into focus.

Wim Waelput was born 1979 in Ghent. He is the director and curator of KIOSK, a venue for contemporary art in Ghent, affiliated with the School of Arts. He currently works as project and exhibition coordinator at the School of Arts (KASK & Royal Conservatory) at the University College Ghent.

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