

Jan Robert Leegte

Selection

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The language of the digital

On the work of Jan Robert Leegte

In *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), the semiotician Roland Barthes examines the formalism of language. He focuses on the properties of language other than those of a means of communication and a direct form of expression. Words become building blocks that recur in different constellations and with different meanings. Barthes is also the famous advocate of the death of the author, which emancipates (a written) text beyond its author. In his view, a text is an object between sender and receiver, and is therefore subject to different interpretations. A text can acquire a more autonomous status after its conception, separate from its creator. These two ideas have found a home in the visual arts, for example in the search for medium-specificity in painting in the 1950s and beyond. Here, artists set out to show a painting for what it is: nothing more than paint on canvas, without illusion. 'Painting Degree Zero' even recurs as a literal reference to Barthes in the practice of the French artist Daniel Buren. The meaning of a cultural artefact shifts from a single 'intended' meaning by a creator to an ever-changing field of meaning, a triangular relationship between creator, artwork and viewer.

In his practice, Jan Robert Leegte has been exploring the materiality of everyday digital and online environments and cultures since the 1990s. He strips the elements of these virtual realities of their original context and meaning. Like a semiotician of the digital age, he reduces the digital to a building block and delves deeply into the functioning of its various elements. In his ongoing series *JPEG* (2022 onwards), Leegte presents not the image as JPEG, but the JPEG itself, as compression method and image file type. And then there is the scrollbar, which has recurred in many contexts and forms in Leegte's practice since 1997 - in both the virtual and physical realms; as a website and as a sculpture. The scrollbar is a transformative everyday object, like the separate words in Barthes's analysis, that constantly takes on new meanings - and appearances - in different constellations. A cultural construction with no identifiable author. Words also exist outside the literary realm, just as the scrollbar - and the pixels or ones and zeros of which it is composed - functions outside the field of art. The unveiling of materiality and the stripping of meaning, in turn, seem to be reserved for the realms of literature and art.

The comparison between language and digital art is often made; language, through programming, is at the heart of the digital domain. But there are more similarities: both language and digital material have functions outside the artistic context, much more so than classical visual art forms such as painting. They are not primarily a means of artistic expression. They are, first and foremost, a means of communication that is explored and expanded through art, including both visual art and literature. Or as Barthes puts it in *Writing Degree Zero*: 'Literature is no longer experienced as a socially privileged medium of

communication, but as a language of consistency, a language full of hidden depths, which presents itself as a dream and a threat at the same time. These words apply directly to digital art and Leegte's practice. Digital means are used here not as a means of communication, but as a form of artistic expression, as a language with its own rules and laws. The utopian and dystopian sides of the Internet, the communication medium that also functions as an artistic medium, also resonate in Barthes' description.

Leegte looks for everyday objects and concepts in the digital domain and moves them to something else - and vice versa. This 'drag and drop' - words that have also gained meaning with the introduction of the virtual - creates a transformation from one semantic reality to another. By isolating digital elements, Leegte removes them from their ever-changing environment and quietly monumentalises them. Through the JPEG, the scrollbar, the button and the NFT, he takes the visitor on a journey through art historical references and methodologies. Leegte explores the digital as an artistic language that has myriad meanings, both in physical and online realities.

Sanneke Huisman

Jan Robert Leegte (born 1973, The Netherlands) is one of the first Dutch artists to work on and for the Internet since the 1990s. In 2002, he shifted his main focus to implementing digital materials in the context of the physical gallery space, aiming to bridge the online art world with the gallery art world, making prints, sculpture, installations, drawings, and projections, connecting to historical movements like land art, minimalism, performance art, and conceptualism. As an artist Leegte explores the position of the new materials put forward by the (networked) computer. Photoshop selection marquees, scrollbars, Google Maps, code, and software are dissected to understand their ontological nature. The networked computer is the central muse in my work, exploring all its wonders and peculiarities. "I don't use software to make art, I make art about software".

His work has been exhibited internationally (Whitechapel Gallery, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, van Gogh Museum, ZKM Karlsruhe, Centre Pompidou, Museum Ludwig Budapest). Jan Robert Leegte lives and works in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.