

“The borderline dividing what is a work of poetry from what is not is less stable than the frontiers of the Chinese empire’s territories. Novalis and Mallarmé regarded the alphabet as the greatest work of poetry. Russian poets have admired the poetic qualities of a wine list (Vjazemskij), an inventory of the tsar’s clothes (Gogol’), a timetable (Pasternak), and even a laundry bill (Krucenyx).” [1]

Roman Jakobson

For her second solo exhibition at Capitain Petzel, Natalie Czech presents *to icon*, a new body of works, alongside new works from her on-going series *Poems by Repetition*. In *to icon*, Czech introduces icons — simple graphic shapes such as a pen, a sheet of paper, a house, or a clock — that belong to the field of computing, software, digital applications, and social media, into the framework of photography and poetry. This new photographic series playfully demonstrate how much computer icons proliferate, and the way each icon produces multiple significations, superimposing layers of meaning. The title of this new series points to a verb, a specific act through which Czech finds the shape of an existing icon within pieces of clothing or other branded objects. She also introduces a text as poem, constituted by different possible meanings of the icon in different applications, software, or websites, within the photographic image. In the context of digital culture, the icon can immediately be identified both as a specific image as well as a word or a straightforward instruction, and a function. Czech selects words among the possible significations of each icon and rearranges them in a poem that is inserted as a note on the image. With *to icon* Czech enlarges once more the poetic scope of reference that she calls on in her work. Czech exposes the polysemy of the computer icon and also alludes to its history as a form of language that responds to specific need and function in the context of the development of new technologies, creating an interface accessible to users who did not have any specialised knowledge in computing or technology. Czech proposes that their captions can be read as poems on their own, isolated from the images and icons, and makes them available in a poetry book for the exhibition.

To reveal the icon that she sees in the object, or its image, Czech glues its shape made of 3D milled Plexiglas onto the object photographed — finding for example the shape of a pen in the stitches of a garment. Her intervention on the print, which is an essential motif in her practice, launches a dialogue between the texts and images in and on the photo, identifying photography as not only an archival site but also a site of juxtaposition and transformation.

With *to icon* Natalie Czech delves into specific visual cultures, more specifically in relation to fashion and advertising, drawing from their iconic value and histories as well her own history as spectator and consumer. Czech’s selection of words within the available meanings of each icon resonates with the possible significations of the pieces of clothing, or objects, she singles out. In *Globe / Election* (2017), the significations of the globe icon — *Network / Intro / Public / Web / Hide*

*Private Results / Language / View Translation* — are printed on a plastic tag placed next to a pair of Converse style vintage sneakers which were specially designed in the context of the 1988 presidential election campaign in the US. A round shaped Velcro fastener placed on the outer sides of the sneakers awaited the face of one of the two candidates, Democrat Michael Dukakis or Republican George Bush, yet Czech noticed a mould stain on the Velcro of the unused sneakers: perhaps the owner of the object did not choose to “run” for any of the candidates, keeping both possibilities open. Czech saw in the remaining stain the shape of a globe. In *Speech Bubble / Richard Hell* (2017) another iconic piece of clothing is used by the artist: the t-shirt worn by artist Richard Hell photographed by Roberta Bailey for the LP cover of *Richard Hell & the Voidoids’ Blank Generation*. Czech reproduced Hell’s t-shirt based on Bailey’s photographs, slightly modifying the round shape to make the icon of the speech bubble emerge. Hell’s gesture of appropriation through ripping the shirt finds a parallel in Czech’s gesture of modifying the image. The notion of message, which is central to the icon, resonates with the role of clothing in the production of subjectivity.

In this new body of work, Czech draws visitors into registers considered more popular like those of fashion, music, advertising and technologies, while also anchoring her work in the field of conceptual poetic practices. She produces connections between visual cultures and histories that are habitually kept apart, and rooted in fixed identities. The particular sense of circulation and transformation that arises from Czech’s works can be more specifically identified in works that are constituted by two or three images. For *Check / Chart / Cross – After Hermès* (2017) Czech photographed a series of men ties from the brand Hermès on three different coloured beach chairs. This specific staging echoes an advertising campaign by Hermès that had caught the artist’s attention. In this work, Czech kept on the ambiguous message she read in the original campaign and pushed it further, exacerbating the sense of pleasure and confidence through the combination of motifs and colours. Three poems come out of the triptych based on the combination of the check, chart and cross icons, whose significations also circulate between the fields of work and of leisure.

For the new *Poems by Repetitions* presented in the exhibition, Czech works with images as different as an ad for *Levolor Riviera blinds* in two different issues of *Vogue* magazine, John Lennon’s *Imagine* LP record cover, or a permanently changed painting by Picasso in Georges Clouzot’s movie about the artist. *Poems by Repetition* have consisted in finding a text within a text in relation to an image, and yet in *A poem by repetition by Eugen Gomringer* (2015) Czech only marks images to reveal the poem, reflecting on the relationship between the visual and the verbal in the field of poetry. to icon continues to develop the attempt to find an image within an image in relation to a text, further exploring the complex relationships between reading and seeing. In *Poems by*

*Repetition*, as in *to icon*, the artist intervenes in regard to the objects, artworks, or texts she collects with untiring attention and precision, modifying them while remaining faithful to their singularity, and brings out the poetic, political and aesthetic aims of these juxtapositions and slippage from one register to another.

The poetry book *to icon – poems* by Natalie Czech can be purchased at the gallery.

[1] Roman Jakobson, “What is poetry?” in selected writings (Volume 3), Mouton publishers, 1981, p. 741

Text: Vanessa Desclaux, March 2017

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