

Digital Images Between Half-life and Timelessness

On Archiving and Digital Archeology in the Studio

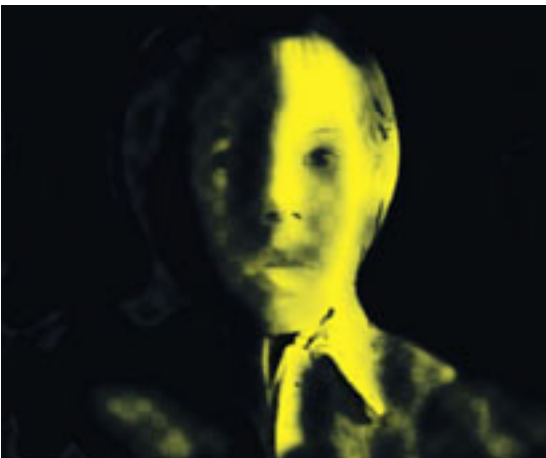
Diary

Spring 2000: I'm a painter. Since the end of 1989, about half of my oeuvre has been produced on the computer. Since the beginning of 1995, I have designed my images with a reliable IBM RS/6000. On May 23, the graphic adapter on the hard drive suddenly breaks down and plunges me into an unavoidable adventure. I am unable to immediately recognize the far-reaching collateral effects and consequences that the hardware damage will bring with it, but the agitation and disgust that overcome me the moment it occurs already provide me with an inkling of the arduous uphill climb and the heady downhill run between loss and rescue that stand before me.

Summer 2000: I get a new computer, an IBM IntelliStation, from my sponsor, and learn that I will be working with a PC from now on. Simultaneously, the whole resultant chain of consequences begins to manifest itself: the new operating system is incompatible with not only the Wavefront graphics software running on Unix/AIX with which I had been working until then, but also my previous Barco software. I enter the world of Adobe Photoshop (6.0). Of course, I realize that a computer program is a mental tool and that the images produced with it are thought out along the lines of this (already) internalized instrumentation, which one can also revise and adapt in the case of a new system, but at this point at the very latest, the fundamentally different set-up of the way I had previously gone about creating computer images in the world of graphic design became clear to me. I discovered the logical incompatibility between my new software and what I had been using before. Whereas the previous software, with its orientation on TV and video, defines a black and not a white screen as an empty graphic field and therefore makes a transparent color appear darker than the same opaque color (as long as there are no graphic layers shining through from behind), Photoshop-.psd files are the exact opposite. Transparency and opacity are set up in such a way that the universe of color that originates on the computer is basically compatible with that in the print media.

This is one of the reasons why the alpha channels of my Wavefront-.rla files, which are saved on the hard drive of the RS/6000 and have since been transferred to the new IntelliStation, cannot be converted. First of all, this means that there is no longer any difference between transparency and opacity in 2,000 graphic elements and approximately 250 completed images. The images have become darker and the transparent color elements opaque because they are actually being mixed with black. Continuing to work on the unfinished images is impossible.

Fall 2000: I nevertheless have to get access to my graphic components since I have built these up as my palette and my visual repertoire in a continual process that had been going on from the end of 1989 to early 2000. To accomplish this, I turn over the backup copies of the pre-1995 computer images to my dedicated team of helpers consisting of IBM staffers Th. Hinkel, M. Paier and Dr. G. Haberl, as well as IT specialists E. Schmidinger and M. Krottenhammer. The graphics from 1993-94 were created on a prior release of Wavefront, which also ran on Unix/AIX. But here as well, the conversion of the channels



8_I3I_YREST.PSD



9_I3I_YORG.PSD



10_ITALO13IREST.PSD



11_ITALO13IORG.PSD

The series *italo i3i* is the result of layers in the three primary colors. The restoration of the transparency channel brings to light a peculiarity that is inherent in software oriented on TV and video: *i3i y org*. The software differentiates between the black for marking transparent picture zones and the black of a drawing, e.g. in a (B/W) photo.

i3i y rest. This differentiation is lost in conjunction with the loss of the alpha channel and its transparency marking. In the .psd file, the drawing is processed by the gradient mask and gradually erased.

Die Serie *italo i3i* ist aus Layers in den drei Grundfarben entstanden. Die Restaurierung des Transparenzkanals fördert eine Besonderheit zu Tage, die die auf TV und Video orientierte Software mit sich bringt: *i3i y org*. Die Software unterscheidet das Schwarz zur Markierung transparenter Bildzonen und das Schwarz der Zeichnung z. B. in einem (s/w) Foto. *i3i y rest*. Diese Unterscheidung geht mit dem Verlust des Alphakanals und seiner Transparenzmarkierung verloren. Die Zeichnung wird in der .psd-Datei von der Verlaufsmaske erfasst und graduell ausgeradiert.

is impossible. Then Elmar Schmidinger tries to convert even older back-up copies: the images from 1992–93 were, indeed, also created with Wavefront, but as .sgi files on Unix/Irix on Silicon Graphics, and I produced my earliest computer images from the end of 1989 until 1992 with Barco Creator as .cre files on Unix/Irix on Silicon Graphics. But here as well, converting the files with the relevant channels remains impossible since the informational constellation of their origination stays permanently imprinted on these files (and on the back-up copies too) like a “genetic fingerprint.” There remains the hope of emulating the original data on a state-of-the-art system.

But the data storage media of the back-up copies are in the early stages of deterioration! And several thousand files and a few hundred completed images are still waiting to be transferred as soon as possible to a new storage medium. I had had the foresight to copy each back-up in different versions to different types of magnetic tape. The stock of data was stored on “qic” and “high 8” data cartridges in “tar” and “bru” formats. In order to remain at around the frequently-mentioned annual corruption rate of 15%, it became necessary to acquire and test many different old tape drives. In going about this, the tapes usually have to be run several times before they can even be read, and even then it takes a number of run-throughs before the maximum amount of data can be downloaded. The expenditure of effort on hardware and software is enormous since the system has to be downgraded to be made compatible with each and every older generation of back-up copy. Months pass before all system components from the particular time of each respective back-up copy can be located in the Internet or through other channels and rounded up. But without the compatible operating systems, the graphics software and sometimes even the old computer, the data saved on tape can no longer be displayed as a graphic image! To these complications can be added the fact that, in the meantime, storage costs for the version of the graphic adapter that is compatible with my RS/6000 have driven its price up to that of a new computer and the cost of sending it in for repair is positively astronomical. The pretty horizon of the timelessness of art is becoming gray and overcast.

Winter 2000/2001: I receive consolation and encouragement to start over, since, in state-of-the-art computer graphics, all individual tasks and systems—from scanning and printing to designing CD-ROMs and Internet sites to editing videos—have all been made totally compatible. I immediately begin new projects, but at the same time I am forced to acknowledge that the results and the level of my method—to engrave a palette derived from a few photographed objects that have yielded forms, structures, colors and glazes that have been developing, becoming more synthetic and growing more detailed and comprehensive over the course of many years—cannot be reproduced so quickly.

After all, when I developed the first computer graphic sequences in 1990 and edited my computer-aided video “Symbiosis between Film and Painting,” the computer image components that I used in this work were, as far as their appearance was concerned, almost exact reproductions of scanned photos and film shots. The early computer graphics had a documentary character that hinted at the origin of the image components and how they had been processed. It took quite some time for the computer processing to so strongly overlay my stock of images that this yielded individualistic and much more specific graphic component material, which of course enabled computer images (they are always build up in multiple strata) to attain a more synthetic effect and to conceal their origins. Thus, from an artistic perspective, I stand here today with, indeed, a new system and another level of experience, but at the very starting point of new research efforts.

Spring/Summer 2001: Meanwhile, Thomas Hinkel's hardware search efforts have succeeded in turning up a number of old, not-really-compatible graphic adapters that yield the parts which will enable the adapter for my RS/6000 to be repaired. This will allow me to again work with the original Wavefront-rla file format. Since then, Elmar Schmidinger has transferred all files to a new generation storage medium (CD-ROM), and also discovered in the Internet that the Barco Company, which we believed had gotten out of the software development business, has come out with a ColorTone retouching software. With the help of this program, we can “emulate” the .cre-file format of all old Barco Creator software versions, which previously were readable only on Unix/Irix, and, after 10 years, once again view and process the original files on WindowsNT on the IntelliStation.