

Variations on *Die Freude am Rest* (The Joy in What Remains)

Prelude

Elias Wessel's works from the series *Die Freude am Rest* (The Joy in What Remains) not only catch your eye, you cannot get them out of your head. There—much to the pleasure of the conceptual artist—reflection cannot be avoided. Barely recognizable objects, enigmatic remnants of images, overlaid with structures created from swiping movements: Thoughts try to encircle them, but they play hide-and-seek with the viewer, disappearing at times in the concrete, at other times in the abstract...

Experimental Setup

A random photo, one of the sheer countless images that people post day after day, is printed onto the glass pane of the smartphone display.

As the smartphone is used, finger movements increasingly blur the applied image (without the display having been prepared in any way).

After a certain time, the glass pane of the display is removed, placed on white paper, and photographed.

The resulting image is printed out greatly enlarged.

No comparison with the original image takes place.

For the project *Die Freude am Rest*, this process is repeated several times, leading to a series of large-format pictures, each of which depicts an image printed onto a smartphone display and blurred there, at best still recognizable in fragments.

Whether a picture is hung in the context of an exhibition in landscape or portrait format is up to the curator—after all, there are no dictates about how to hold a smartphone.

Tragic Existences

With a little empathy, we can perhaps imagine the tragedies that take place in the dark memories of computers and smartphones. There, digital images wait eagerly to be uploaded into visibility. They have all the necessary information; their files are undamaged. It is, however, important to bear in mind: *esse est percipi*—to be is to be perceived—and they are not visible, they cannot catch anyone's eye. Their status of being could be described as “existence on demand”: And if no one clicks on them, they remain invisible images, mute instruments. Only the grace of the beholder calls them into being, into a state of being “existent until further notice”; and then they are clicked back into the waiting loop of a merely potential existence.

It was modern information technology that created this strange form of existence by detaching visibility, a hitherto constitutive element of the image, from it and linking it only when necessary with the digitally stored image information. Where humans are considered only functionally, for instance existing only as employees capable of working, they come

threateningly close to this fate. The digital images are protected from the pain of their tragic existence only by the fact that they are without consciousness.

The Mortality of the Digital

Medially homeless, the digital images wander from smartphone to smartphone, are visible only for a moment, and then disappear—perhaps never to be seen again—into the memory. Safe from every blurring fingertip, they seem immortal. But appearances are deceptive. They are threatened with death from two sides: the death of never being retrieved again, of sinking into the endless sea of digital images, and the death of not being able to be retrieved again, because no program is capable of opening the image file. Both deaths are silent, reminiscent of the final lines of Schiller's *Nänie*:

*To be even a song of lament on the lips of the loved one is glory;
For it is the common lot to go down to Orcus unsung!*

The printed image escapes the fate that threatens digital images twice over, albeit at the price of becoming blurred, at the price of gradual decay.

A Suitcase Full of Slides

Many years ago, an impoverished former opera singer bequeathed me (as her only legacy) a suitcase full of vacation slides, taken decades before her death. Where the suitcase is now, I cannot say; nor have I looked at all the pictures. And yet these lost images seem more real to me than the countless digital images that lead only a pseudo-existence in the storage media. The mere thought of this suitcase triggers in me a *joy in what remains*—or for that matter, only a remnant of the joy in what remains...

Dematerialization and Medial Homelessness

Elias Wessel calls his project *Die Freude am Rest – Zur Entmaterialisierung der Bilder* (The Joy in What Remains – On the Dematerialization of Images).

The concept of dematerialization plays an increasingly important role, not only in photography. Nevertheless, one may ask whether completely dematerialized images exist at all. For the digital image also requires a material storage medium, and the cloudy concept of the *cloud* only deludes us into thinking that it exists in an immaterial state; but the *cloud*, too, cannot function without hardware.

What applies to the storage of the image also applies to its visible appearance on the display. Even if I do not hold a picture printed on paper in my hand, and even if the colors of the image visible on the display do not change when I run my fingers over it, this does not change the fact that the image needs the material medium of the display in order to be visible.

The core of what is meant by dematerialization is different. The decisive difference between a photo on paper and a photo on a display is that, in the case of the former, there is a permanent connection between the image information and the medium that makes it visible, while in the case of the latter this connection is only temporary. The image appearing on the display has borrowed its medium only temporarily; the same medium will be borrowed a moment later by another digital image. Thus, the digital image cannot call a material medium its own; therein

lies the justification for the term *dematerialization of images*. However, since they, as visibly manifest images, require a material medium, one could—instead of *dematerialization*—also speak of the medial homelessness of digital images.

In contrast, with the analog image printed on the display, we see a different, far more tangible dematerialization at work: The material of the image, the material of the color pigments, is removed, and the image thus disappears forever. Whereas, for the analog image, dematerialization means death, for the digital image it seems to be the guarantor of eternal, albeit invisible, life.

There may be yet another reason why Elias Wessel may have chosen the term “dematerialization,” for it also refers to an art movement that is very close to him: namely, conceptual art.

Borrow a Medium

Already with the slide, the screen onto which it is projected functions as a borrowed medium. Despite the fact that the slide is visible even without projection, which merely effects an enlargement, the projected image is the usual form of presentation. With the digital image, the borrowed medium of the display is the usual form of presentation—the printed image remains the exception.

Elias Wessel draws attention to this trend by reversing it. In doing so, he poignantly chooses a place for the printed image where the image normally borrows its medium: the display. At the same time, it becomes palpable that the manipulations possible with the digital image by finger movement do not apply to the image printed on the display; on the contrary, tactile contact gradually destroys the image by blurring it.

The Aura of the Destructible

Wessel’s approach is not without irony. On the one hand, he replaces the merely temporary connection with a borrowed medium with a permanent connection. On the other hand, he simultaneously undermines this permanence by not processing the medium of the display glass before printing. In doing so, he accelerates the process of destruction of the analog image—or, in other words, he demonstrates that even the seemingly permanent connection with a medium is in fact temporary. Nevertheless, an important difference remains: The printed image acquires the aura of something special, which does not suffer any damage when it is destroyed by blurring, and in fact becomes even more prominent. *Die Freude am Rest* is also determined by this aura of the unique; it is the joy in that which escaped destruction.

The Wooden Leg

Once, when we were children, we found a wooden leg in the attic. It turned out to be the wooden prosthesis of our great-grandfather, who had lost a leg in the war. We did not know anything about our great-grandfather at that time; it was a strange joy we felt in what remains, especially since this remnant was only a spare part. The fact that this remnant, of all things, would establish contact with his great-grandchildren, is something our ancestor would

probably never have dreamed of: no picture, no letter, no watch chain—a wooden leg. The images thus have no inkling of what will remain of them once they are obliterated...

A Parallel Action

There are things that you first borrow in order to eventually acquire them: a leased car, for example. A parallel project to Elias Wessel's could be developed from this.

One could think of an exhibition of smartphones, each of which displays an image and is no longer in use, thus becoming the permanent medium of the image displayed (and, at the same time, its frame). This would visualize that we are not dealing here with dematerialized images; and, incidentally, the weakening of the battery would ultimately lead to the destruction of the image. The thought of such a parallel project, however, also gives a clear indication of what strongly influences the effect of Wessel's works. They gain their aesthetic appeal also from their format, which is on a human scale: That which is too small does not touch us, that which is too large rushes past us, and that which meets us at eye level can go straight to the heart.

Plato Interferes

The concept of dematerialization lures Plato out of his cave. His realm of ideas is completely free of matter, for matter exists only in the realm of images. Is his idea (*eidos*) related to the digital image? Benjamin Jörissen presents in detail in his analysis that, on the one hand, *the abstractness of the Platonic ideas lacks any pictoriality and that*, on the other hand, digital images are *structurally pure codes*. The image files are thus—like Plato's *ideas*—*pure specification that can be transformed pictorially*. Digital images may thus be regarded as *the most "Platonic" form of image in the entire history of culture*. However, two things must not be overlooked here: Even if digital images are basically not yet images at all, but merely *specifications that can be transformed into images*, they remain images of objects, whereas Plato's *ideas* are completely autonomous. And what is more, digital images—unlike *ideas*—require a material storage medium.

Ceci n'est pas une pipe

In 1929, René Magritte painted his famous *La trahison des images*, which depicts a pipe with the words *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* written underneath. To the naïve question, "If it is not a pipe, what is it?", the painter is said to have replied: "The image of a pipe."

Let us imagine that someone visits the Los Angeles Museum of Art, photographs the painting hanging there with his digital smartphone camera, and sends Elias Wessel the image file under the title *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. It is still not a pipe, but it is not an image of a pipe either; rather, it is an image file that can be transformed into a picture, but does not necessarily have to be.

Let us continue the mental game: Let us imagine that Elias Wessel prints the image file sent to him as a picture on the display screen of his smartphone. Now it is once again the image of a pipe...

...but after a certain amount of time, it is completely blurred. And perhaps then a viewer might murmur: "This could be what remains of an image of a pipe and the statement "this is not a pipe"—and this viewer might possibly feel a sense of joy in doing so.

Our Mental Images

When contemplating the difference between digital images stored only as image files and those printed on the display screen of a smartphone, the question suddenly arises whether it might not be similar with our mental images, with the images of our memory. If we keep them to ourselves, they are in danger of being forgotten; but if we express them in some way (because we cannot print them), if we thus express them—as a narrative, as a painting, as a musical composition—we make them vulnerable. Perhaps it is we ourselves who blur what is expressed, touching it over and over again, until it becomes unrecognizable. And yet, faced with the alternative of which risk to take, we would rather choose to turn the inside out, even at the risk of eventually only being able to experience *the joy in what remains...*

Ruins

When Elias Wessel deliberately prints images onto a surface that has not been prepared for this purpose and thus surrenders them to accelerated destruction, this is reminiscent of the erection of artificial ruins in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Such undertakings are based on the special magic of what remains: In this, the experience of transience is revealed and at the same time the hope that not everything will pass away. *Ruins*, said Marcello Barbanera, curator of an exhibition on the subject, *are also metaphors of life. My point is to make it clear that ruins are among us and within us.*

Germinating Remnants

Ruins? The comparison could lead in the wrong direction. The pictures of the series *Die Freude am Rest* are the result of a complex operation: The swiping movements subtract part of the representation, but at the same time add abstract structures; and the product of the two elements makes that which remains germinate anew and produce the unexpected. The viewer's imagination does the rest and drives this growth forward to a blossoming in which representation and abstraction grow almost indistinguishably into one another.

The Big Sister

The joy in what remains has a big sister: the longing for what is lost.
We must make a journey around the world to see if a back door has perhaps been left open.
(Heinrich von Kleist)

In the End...

...perhaps what you read was not at all the text written for you; perhaps it was printed on the display of a smartphone and there gradually blurred...

In this case, you are left with only *the joy in what remains.*