

Andreas Brenne

“Moving Images”—Photographs for the Next Society

Studien zur nächsten Gesellschaft (Studies on the Next Society)—the laconic title of a key publication by Dirk Baecker¹—refers in all sobriety to a state of affairs that does not so much describe a status quo as seek to design a utopian space of possibility. It is a draft of a future society based on the media transformations of the present, which will obviously be characterized by digitality, whereby this turn evokes new communicative possibilities—not, however, as an addition of technical potentials, but rather as a media-based transformation movement that also shifts traditional media into a new context and transfers broadening perspectives into the present. What is meant here is a space of possibility that seeks to dissolve every form of temporality in the present, and in which the future functions as a reserve of past worlds of experience. Everything is lived, dynamic present, as times and possibilities are condensed in the new medium. The bodily dimension of existence, in all its frailty, gives way to a technological hybridization of the body, which still functions as a reference point of movements and transitions, but superelevates it technologically. The techno-imaginary becomes a space of immanence that suspends hopes and longings insofar as all temporality is contracted to the moment.² Everything is possible in principle, and individual desire is transferred into collective wish machines.³

This formlessness is principle—not in the sense of a total negation, but rather as a dynamic, disembodied potentiation of a lucid materiality that promises everything, holds everything, and smooths caesuras.

This utopian fantasy is not a chimera but is rather founded by the reality of an actually existing post-digital society. That is to say, the dichotomy between analog and digital has been eliminated, and the living environment is almost naturally constituted by hybrid structures. Orientation through space and time, the development of preferences, as well as the shaping of a social constitution are

¹ Dirk Baecker, *Studien zur nächsten Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main 2007).

² See: Hans Ulrich Reck, *Singularität und Sinnlichkeit. Die Kunst Aldo Walkers in bildtheoretischer und medienphilosophischer Perspektive* (Würzburg 2004), p. 205.

³ See: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus [Capitalism and Schizophrenia, vol. 1]* [1972], trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London and New York 2004).

deeply interwoven with algorithms communicating via numerous interfaces. An exit from this systemic imprinting is absolutely impossible and would lead to a comprehensive exclusion. This exit would be absolute and would make communication impossible.

Now, however, the question must be raised as to whether these shifts run tension-free, or whether this leads to disruptions, also beyond conjunctive differences. In my opinion, there is a tension between digital representation and collaborative or collective production of meaning in the context of this “next society.” What does this mean for the individual’s search for positioning and identity, when this can actually only be thought of collectively? The individual “informal” gesture, the coincidence, as well as the calculation of the past present themselves entirely differently in this new present, as the constant subcutaneous effectiveness of digitality almost imperceptibly overlays or permeates the experience of reality.

In this context, the question arises as to the reality of images and their adequate use, especially with regard to the complex reference systems of the next society. These are always bound to interfaces or with easy-to-handle end devices that link software and hardware and incorporate themselves in the user. The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty once convincingly demonstrated that the limits of the sensory organs cannot be the limits of perception and referred exemplarily to a blind person with a white cane.⁴ This is equivalent to a body extension—that is to say, the tip of the tactile device is an extended threshold of perception. It is no different with the use of a smartphone, whereby its limit extends almost multiplicatively into the infinite and its functionality depends only on the energy supply and the availability of WLAN networks.

Elias Wessel explores this connection with his experimental photographic works, which deal with the surfaces of smart image carriers, uncovering palimpsest-like layers that investigate both the haptic complex of operating modes and the superimposition of complex pictorial signs. The wiping and swiping movements of the hand, with which images, text, and moving images are arranged, called up, and shared, leave a subtle structure on the glass surface of the devices, which is a central theme of the works. Analogies are drawn to the classical development process within the framework of the traditional darkroom, which, in contrast to the

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945], trans. Colin Smith (London and New York 2005), p. 165.

digital image, cause something to appear through manual and chemical processes, whereby the manipulation becomes indistinct in the clarity of the image, and the image produced appears almost monumental.

The inescapable aura of a photographic original makes it clear that references have a valid structure, since the photographer's gaze uniquely sets an individual perspective into the image. Paradoxically, the principle of "vintage" stands as a counterpart to an incipient perspective of digital image distribution and transformation that meanders into infinity. Nevertheless, the individually created single image is still highly valued today, just as an egg tempera once was.

In contrast, the time-related communication of and through images is different. The quick image generated in milliseconds is rapidly distributed and fed into various contexts as an information carrier by means of algorithms. Connected to this is the multiple creation of meaning that arises in the context of dynamic and constantly reconstituting image constellations.

The photomechanical reproduction of light reflexes on a flat background has given way to illumination on glass monitors. The post-digital image exists only in the plural, and it is constituted by the user, not the photographer. Despite all the lucidity of this continuous image production and interaction, the body has not completely disappeared. However, it is not so much the grand gesture, but rather the tactile traces and abrasions on the surfaces of the end devices. This dimension of corporeality becomes conscious by means of cleaning procedures that are intended to restore the status quo with the help of polishing emulsion.

Elias Wessel makes these interventions of moving, swiping, and sharing visible in his works, yet the dynamics of life overlay the palimpsests of the pictorial worlds. If you look at them more closely, you can easily lose yourself in these depths, as if in a hall of mirrors that makes you forget time and space. And yet it is these practices that give the viewer a foothold and transform these implicit disturbances in a way that lends meaning—a provision of meaning through the singular gesture that interacts almost desperately against and with the flood of images. The almost delusional state of the image transformations is subverted physically and breaks through. The long-believed lost sensuality, which, below the image-driven search for meaning, exemplifies the bondage of the body to the phenomena. In the work of Elias Wessel, the images appear as multi-layered signposts to forgotten dynamics of the body, the micro-gestures of which superficially interrupt the flow of images as an obsolete

disturbance but mark it as a sign of the foundation of history in a time with no history. This phenomenology of movement is an artistic gesture transferred into the collective, which, in the sense of Heidegger, puts the truth of a time into the work and thus founds history.⁵

Wessel's photographic works thus create atmospheres that subtly stage traditional subjects. The idyllic and the sublime have their place here as much as the dreary. People look at the viewer without this contact being substantiated; what remains is an elegiac reminiscence. Yet despite all the ostensible forlornness, the furrowed surfaces offer a stopping point and counteract the melancholy.

The images are borne by romantic irony; they are complex and multidimensional folding figures that are perpetuated into infinity in their inversion in accordance with Schellingian perspective.⁶ At this point, the question arises as to what extent these images represent markers of the memory of a lost age of the experience of presence. Are they melancholic picture puzzles of a lost *Aetas aurea*, in which a radical change could be initiated by means of artistic intervention? Do they, like the early paintings of Gerhard Richter, shift the images of everyday life into an uncertainty relation, so that the purportedly fixed point of observation is abandoned without anything new emerging.⁷ I think not—because despite all reminiscences of the past image, Wessel's works contain moments of persistence. Although there is little to oppose the compliant play of the omnipresent algorithms, the palimpsests of images, through their attachment to corporeality, point to the resistant production of innovations that create meaning through action. The body is and remains an inescapable element of image genesis beyond digital modes of production and distribution. It is thus not a promise, but rather a vital practice in the creation of image references.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in: idem, *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York 2008), pp. 143–212.

⁶ See: Myriam Bienenstock, "Über die Ironie der Kunst: Hermann Cohen und Karl Solger," in: *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2011, pp. 94–99.

⁷ See: Martin Henatsch, *Gerhard Richter. 18. Oktober 1977. Das verwischte Bild der Geschichte [Kunststück]* (Frankfurt am Main 1998), p. 80.