

VISIONS OF SYNTHESIS

(The Photography of Elias Wessel)

The images of the artist-photographer Elias Wessel form a highly personal and polyvisual sense of photography as a cultural practice. Yet within their initially distinct and serialised diversity there emerges at the same time an underlying sense of a resolved aesthetic visual synthesis. In a somewhat dialectical manner Wessel's photographs bring together their singularity and visual character within the actual viewing process, as photographs of perception, and further they do so in a manner that fuses together surprising nuances of time, through use of digitalised exposure, and the varied use of subtle acts of experimental and/or editorial intervention. From the earliest period of this artist-photographer's creative development there has been a psychological disposition towards the visual language of painting, and how that pictorial material idiom can be re-articulated and redirected by means of the photographic image. In other words when we speak hereafter of the trace, the palimpsest, the displacement of the mark, the elision of visual reality for some greater reality, we are directed towards two convening aspects. The first is that the temporality of painting is always hermeneutic, a visual evocation, and second the notion that a photograph today is able not only simulate this process, but is able to bring it to some greater state of meaningful completion. These two aspects ground the photography of Wessel from the outset,

since he is seeking to generate a new aesthetic reality that is commensurate with Gerhard Richter's expressed view "to make a photograph is already the first artificial act."¹ Therefore an image incised from the world of reality possesses a potential artifice that carries forward the creation of a new reality.

Working in series the photographic language of the images is not a modernist approach, as the use of a serialisation might seem to suggest.² Instead Wessel's images reflect the new hybridity of a postmodern practice, which is to say they proffer examples of temporal layering and pictorial synchrony.³ The focus in the current publication is on the last three years (2014–2017) where the work has taken a more conceptually synthetic sense and schematic in its development. By beginning with the series called Landscapes of 2014 and the Cityscapes of 2014–15, we immediately engage with the conceptual and phenomenological or sensory aesthetic thread that runs much of the subsequent production in the years after Wessel abandoned commercial forms of photography. The Landscapes idea was first initiated as part of a residency project in Russia and of the suburban and neglected periphery viewpoints of the City of Kursk near the Ukrainian border.⁴ Within the residency project the artist was urged to produce documentary material in relation those areas designated, prior to their subsequent demolition and future

commercial development as shopping malls and offices. The simple documentary idea gave the artist considerable aesthetic anxiety, and he undertook to take one hand movement image each day at an elevated distance of one or two kilometres so that the images possessed a sense of a semi-aerial viewpoint. The artist's concerns with creating a pictorial (hence painterly) effect in these images expunged the immediacy of human presence and the images took on the character of abstractions.⁵ Hence the current abstract cityscapes were developed from these first works, whereby the artist opened numerous screen windows with images of megacities on his computer, and following the effect of image fragmentation and the crashing of the system they were excised through an experimental procedure from the screen. The overall effect is of an informal pictorial image abstraction, yet with emergent fragmented detail synthesising abstraction and reality, painterly reality and the photographic real.⁶ In other words from the basis of overload and saturation, the excesses of reproduction, a new approach to aesthetic abstraction was brought into being. The site of social cacophony becomes the basis for a hidden form of aesthetic dissimulation, which is itself an conceptual extension of the photographic use of pictorial artifice.

The idea of the conceptualisation of phenomenological perception, while it was evident through movement and controlled chance (the

setting of a frame of photographic experimentation), found in the Cityscapes and movement image Landscapes, is just as apparent in another series that pre-occupied the artist in 2014. In the series of forty-two works sub-titled Sprung in die Zeit (Leap into Time) coloured gels and foils were placed on top of one another, rested on an artist built light box and then photographed backlit in black and white. The effect is one of subtle layering that opens up the artist's practice as another distinct aesthetic point of engagement, that is with the idea of the palimpsest and the trace, as well as the self-generative informe or formlessness of chance discovery.⁷ Each image in the series works visually through subtle variability notwithstanding the initial conceptual point of departure. And this idea has recently been similarly expressed in another three extended series called Die Summe meiner Daten/History of Touches (2017), where Wessel has taken the immediacy of traces and marks, fingerprints, smears, etc., from the surface of touch screen surfaces and photographed them. As a result human presence as trace through aftermath also touches upon issues of phenomenological sentience, though in this instance as a form of a suggestive absent presence.⁸ The innovation being that the artist has manipulated and conceptualized yet another area of chance discovery. At the same time the extended length of these series manifests a valorisation and diversity of expression realised through the various uses of mark and gesture. The aesthetic of the trace, palimpsest,

erasure and gesture, is also the result that is achieved by the series called *Feral* (2015–16), which derive ultimately from the walls of places like New York subway tunnels, their unseen abraded surfaces, limescale traces, and hidden neglected areas of organic mould that Wessel chose to capture in a photograph. An initial intention was that of revealing these places as simple sites of the indexical, of hidden visible(s), and in this respect they are not dissimilar to works by earlier photographic masters documenting ephemeral traces like Brassai, and the Abstract Expressionist associated American photographer Aaron Siskind.⁹ But Wessel was dissatisfied with the literality of his images, so he started to play around and manipulate them in the studio by superimposing images on top of one another, using double exposure and applying an experimental sense of spontaneous creative layering. Again, it might be said, we touch upon the aesthetical role of the residual palimpsest, the notion of pictorial over-inscription and forms of reiterative expression. The *Feral* series are but another extended example that represents a continuous broadening of areas of conceptual process and experimentation, an personal set of aesthetic approaches that has come increasingly to characterise this innovative artist-photographers' expansion of his material practice.

As regards the artist's recent use of colour photography the motivation is less that of trace, so much as a strategy of aesthetic displacement and the use and capture of optical reflection. As the

trace by its nature betokens that which is residual, the aftermath and the ephemeral, the use of displaced reflection is a manipulative engagement with what is elusive and transitory. The *Jeune* (2016) experimental series of colour negative photographs, that Wessel sometimes calls his “photographic sketches”, represent new experimental approaches and indicate what is transitional in this respect. However, the *Liebst* (Love, 2016), extends these ideas into subtle areas of greater elusiveness. Light has been the central cosmological polemic of photography, particularly in its analogue history, but Wessel manages to achieve the same role of dialectical indefinable and evasive qualities within his use of digital means.¹⁰ As said the short *Liebst* series is produced through the capturing of light reflection on various surfaces, the studio wall, cast onto black paper surfaces, or the imagined effect of water as when seen with reflective aspects of a darkened swimming pool at night, on walls, on ceilings, the shimmering and elusive capture of a transitory moment and affect. Therefore the use of the word capture seems critically appropriate to these usually ungraspable moments of sentient experience.¹¹ Wessel’s inspirational interest in light was furthered by contact with the late German master Otto Piene the Zero artist, one of the founders of light at MIT in the 1970s.¹² The effect of the *Liebst* photographs is one of overlapping and enveloping abstract veils of light on black grounds, fallopian spirals or tunnel-like voids, revealing subtle gradations and

optical shifts that are imbued with a sense of pictorial and fleeting transience. In a certain sense they stand in visual contrast to the artist's most recent works *Hinter den Dingen* (Behind Things, 2017), whose metaphor extends the chosen simile of the hidden visible found in so much of Wessel's photography. In a series of eleven images the artist has returned again to his early fascination and pre-occupation with painting at the interface of the abstract and the real. These latest also re-articulate the use of reflection through sources that derive from the photographic real, that is to say images of Times Square in New York, the Catskill Mountains, and various historical locations in Germany and elsewhere. The effect is created by the use of reflections cast upon tinfoil and like the *Liebst* series they are the assimilation of fragmented aspects edited and reconfigured to create a sense of the pictorial. The extraordinary accomplishment is how remarkably painterly the images have by now become, a sort photographic informel that is all but commensurate with painting save its material facture. In the exemplified sources of the ephemeral and transient (chance reflections), the artists' photographs have become substantively expressed as painterly images of vivid colour—a visual paradox of material immateriality.

It is self-evident that the aim of the artist-photographer Elias Wessel is to broaden and extend the language of photography, and to do so with a particular sense of renewed synthesis as it relates to painting. In

this respect his work embodies a dialectical discourse that has been continuing between painting and photography since the 1960s.¹³ To do this he has undertaken the aesthetic aims and strategies of displacement, and by this means has expanded the language of the potentially unseen or not previously imagined from within the photographic medium itself. Beyond the actual execution and selection of the works, however, thought has also been given to the issue of the necessary representative scale of each image in the respective series and their reciprocal compositional relations with other works and series. Similarly, the question of producing different installations and configurations furthers an understanding of the works, and is aimed at synthesising the aesthetic with the new emergent expressive contents. The artist Wessel has expressed that one of his main anxieties in relation to his earlier commercial and fashion works was between a desire for an aesthetic input and its conflict with commercial contents. The current conceptually motivated aesthetic photography of the last years has become the creative means of reconciling and resolving these differences. Yet his ideas are seen by the artist as a starting point, a continuing quest in pursuit of creating an experimental form of photography that open to an ever expanding field and creative practice.

ENDNOTES

¹ Gerhard Richter: Interview with Rolf-Gunter Dienst (1970), Peter Selz & Kristine Stiles (eds.), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1996 (pp. 314–316) p. 315 (the text first appeared in German in *Noch Kunst*, Düsseldorf Editions, 1970, and was reprinted in the Gerhard Richter catalogue, Venice Biennale, in 1972)

² Working in series is a primary trope of modernism, and reached its logical outcome in Minimalism and Concrete Art in the 1960s. See Mark Gisbourne, "A Sense of the Serial" *The Serial Attitude*, New York, Eyken – Maclean, 2016

³ For an historical overview of the various stages of postmodern development as it relates to contemporary visual and textual culture, see Brian McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015. The term 'hybridity' is often attached to globalisation, and as a result is commonly linked to a contemporary post-postmodern phase of cultural development.

⁴ The city is renowned for the famous tank battle that took place there during the Second World War, a battle that halted the German advance in Russia, see Dennis E. Showalter, *Armor and Blood: The Battle of Kursk: The Turning Point of World War II*, New York, Random Houser, 2013 By Dennis E. Showalter

⁵ One of the founders of Russian 'Suprematism' Abstraction Kasimir Malevich (1878–1936) had lived in Kursk prior to his departure for Moscow in 1904, see chapter "The Origin of a Painter," Rainer Crone and David Moos, *Kazimir Malevich: The Climax of Disclosure*, London, Reaktion Books, 1991, (pp. 49–62) p. 51

⁶ In pictorial terms the images recall many of the art informel abstract paintings of post-war Europe, and not least the idea of the semi-mono-coloured aerial cityscapes of Gerhard Richter in the 1960s. See Jean Paulhan, *L'art Informel (Eloge)*, Paris, Gallimard, 1962: for Richter see Uwe M. Schneede, Ortrud Westheider, and Michael Philipp (eds), *Gerhard Richter: Images of an Era*, Berlin, Hirmer Verlag, 2011.

⁷ The twentieth century aesthetic of informe (formless), was a term first coined by the French philosopher and critic Georges Bataille in the late 1920s, see Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, New York, Zone Books, 1997.

⁸ The aesthetic of the trace and the palimpsest has become an important postmodern simile for how the intellectual and historical past might be assimilated, and is distinct from diachronic forms of history and narrative literature, see Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*, London: Continuum, 2007. See also Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1997. (Fr. *Palimpsestes. La Littérature au second degré*, 1982)

⁹ For Brassai, see Alain Sayag and Annick Lionel-Marie (eds.), *Brassai: The Monograph*, Boston, New York, London, Little, Brown and Company, 2000. For Aaron Siskind see his website that lists publications and reproduces many of his <http://www.aaronsiskind.org>

¹⁰ The use of a cosmological language of light entering darkness has been with photography from the very beginning, though in the context of digital developments the language is shifting from the cosmos to the body (language uses such as infected files and viruses), see, Mark Gisbourne, "Michael Wesely: Cosmology to Epidemy, Photography Changes Language," *Michael Wesely: The Epic View*, Mies Van der Rohe Haus, Berlin, 2017, np.

¹¹ The term "capture" has become particularly associated with the new digital technologies, see Glenn Rand, David Litschel, and Robert G. Davis, *Digital Photographic Capture*, London, Focal Press, 2005.

¹² For a recent extended overview of the use of light by the late Otto Piene, see Hermann Arnhold, *Otto Piene Licht*, Bielefeld, Kerber Christof, 2015.

¹³ Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2008. Also Michael Fried, *Another Light: Jacques-Louis David to Thomas Demand*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2014