

Ruth Horak

The Screen Is Never Empty

Privacy. One word is enough. The topic of data protection had previously been fought out in society and the media with many words. With **Privacy.**, Apple reacted succinctly in terms of effective advertising, adding a shackle to its logo so that the apple mutated into a padlock. Every user who grapples with cookie settings instead of simply clicking on the “agree” button knows what is meant. “Privacy is a fundamental human right. At Apple, it’s also one of our core values.”¹ The billboard campaign in New York City in 2021 was more dominant than any other, especially since there was little audience to reach with advertising during the Covid winter months due to restrictions on non-essential travel. The pandemic-induced retreat into the private sphere had further fueled the privacy debate, and the privacy campaign signified a purported deliverance from the excesses of the sea of digital data, such as deepfakes, among others, for the increasingly mistrustful “transparent citizen.” The faces of those portrayed were hidden behind their cell phones. “You don’t see my screen any more than you see my face,” one seemed to hear, “my iPhone keeps me covered and you at a distance.”² I alone decide who I show my pictures and videos to.” Apple privacy promises: “The Photos app uses machine learning to organize photos right on your device. So you don’t need to share them with Apple or anyone else.” Whereas, in the past, it was human stalkers, as in the thriller *One Hour Photo* (2002), where the technician of an express photo lab (Robin Williams) always developed his own set from the negatives of the idolized customer, today it is “only” artificial intelligences that know my data, sort my private photos, tag them with coordinates and time, and play them back just in time for the anniversary.

Incidentally, the first motion-picture exhibition device, Thomas Edison’s **Kinetoscope** from 1891, was designed in such a way that a **single** viewer—bent over a peep box—could see short films, or better “animated photography,”³ **alone**. In contrast, Antoine Lumière championed the idea of taking the images out of the box and projecting them onto a screen. It was less lucrative⁴ because each person had to pay separately for the Kinetoscope, but the **Cinématographe** that his sons, the Lumière brothers, subsequently developed offered films to an audience as a **shared** experience in a projection room that would later become known as the cinema.

¹ www.apple.com/privacy [last accessed on March 21, 2022].

² As a vis-à-vis, however, you might shy away from the three camera lenses directed at you.

³ See the documentary film directed by Stefan Cornic, *Auge, Pinsel und Kinematograf - Wie das Kino entstand*, ARTE, France, 2020.

⁴ See: *ibid.*

As I write, a message reaches me that Meta is threatening to “stop offering its services in Europe should there be further regulations on the transfer of data on the continent.”⁵ So much for **Privacy Period**.

Screen. Everyone uses one. It is never empty. Not when it has been wrecked (*Schöne neue Welt* [Brave new World]) and not when it is turned off (*Die Summe meiner Daten* [The Sum of My Data] - *Off Series*). It is also never white, but always RGB. White only works because its pixels are small enough to fool our eyes. It is rectangular because it has been adapted to the circumstances—to rectangular houses, windows, tiles, televisions, pictures, books. Panels are laid under the glass screen, ready to broadcast any image, without distinction, without editing. Even after publication, censorship bodies intervene only when there are moral violations, but never establish quality standards. The number of images we see on screens has replaced those of printed images and exposed photographs. Their authors are primarily amateurs—whereas, up until the invention of photography, making pictures was a task reserved for artists. The reactions to the ubiquity of images reflect this: Artists respond, on the one hand, with an **increase, exaggeration, accumulation** of images—the accumulation of layers in the works of Hubert Blanz, for example, who assembles hundreds of screenshots into one image—and, on the other hand, with **reduction or negation**. Günther Selichar suggested *Screens*, cold and switched off the screens; with *Lament of the Image*, Alfredo Jarr staged, among other things, a wall-filling, glistening white field of light from which visitors to *documenta XI* (2002) had to turn away, blinded as they were by the light; Hiroshi Sugimoto’s long exposures erased the images from the feature films and left a white rectangle of light in the *Theaters*. “**Select all and then delete**,” seems to be one way to escape the mass of images.⁶ A file is deleted faster than a print is torn or burned. Similar responses by artists to questions about whether art is obliged to reproduce nature can be found throughout the twentieth century: monochrome paintings, blank canvases, erased drawings,⁷ or no materialization at all because the idea is enough. But “even that which is non-existent needs a form if it is to be perceived.”⁸ Finally, in 1994, Yasmina Reza staged the destructive potential of **emptiness** in the form of a conflict between friends, triggered by a picture in which nothing but white could be seen. At the same time, there is always a “provocative” silence inherent in emptiness and thus a

⁵ Jakob von Lindern and Johannes Süßmann, “Meta-Konzern bringt Aus von Facebook und Instagram in Europa ins Spiel,” in: *Zeit Online*, February 7, 2022, www.zeit.de/digital/internet/2022-02/meta-facebook-instagram-drohung-europa-datenschutz?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F [last accessed on March 23, 2022] [translated].

⁶ “**Select all and delete**” (Ruth Horak) was a text written in the context of the exhibition (*Not*) *a Photograph*, in which the reproduction capacity of photography was called into question and juxtaposed with other parameters, such as absence, immateriality, reflection, and self-reflection. (*Not*) *a Photograph*, curator: Vasja Nagy, Obalne Galerije Piran, 2008.

⁷ Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning*, 1953.-

⁸ Ruth Horak, “**Select all and the delete**,” in: (*Not*) *a Photograph*, ed. Vasja Nagy, exh. cat. Obalne Galerije, Piran, 2008, n.p. [translated].

productive potential: the white field on a firewall on Broadway that Elias Wessel installed there in 2021, the blank sheet of paper, or the empty, boundless, and radiant white space, like the one in which Morpheus explained the Matrix to Neo in 1999: “This is the construct. It’s our loading program. We can load anything, from clothing, to equipment, weapons, training simulations. Anything we need.” The initially empty space then begins to fill up bit by bit. “Your appearance now is what we call residual self-image. It is the mental projection of your digital self,”⁹ fed with impressions that reach your senses but never your body.

Screens are the basis of Elias Wessel’s current works. Screens in various roles, entrusted with unusual tasks, and brought into unexpected forms testify to a remarkable mutability. Thematically, Elias Wessel follows phenomena of everyday media and their future position in art history as part of the discourse around abstraction and media reflexivity. The geometric compositions of the series *Deepfakes - Privacy* are thus not only reminiscent of hard edge painting (Ellsworth Kelly) or early avant-gardes (Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian), but are also a homage to concrete artists who draw their motifs from the repertoire of conditions immanent to the image, for example, repeating parts of the image construction, such as lines, angles, edges, surfaces, contrasts, etc. In art history, this reference to a model is described with many different terms, such as copy, plagiarism, homage, quotation, appropriation, re-enactment, remake, found footage, sampling, and so on. Each of these terms has a definition attached, whereby these are less concerned with what **shift in content** occurs in the course of adaptation. In literary studies, such “text-text relations” are analyzed in a more differentiated way, because it is assumed that “under every text surface, traces of another, foreign text”¹⁰ can be found. Among the numerous models of the relationship between a text and its pre-text—Gerard Genette, for example, cites the tearing out of a few pages from a book as an example of simple transformation¹¹—Renate Lachmann’s approach best fits that of Elias Wessel: She proposes a contiguity-intertextuality,¹² a “writing as continuation, writing as rejoinder, and rewriting.” The quotation calls up the pre-text as a whole, thus explicitly establishing a reference (for example, by naming it in the title). At the same time, a transformation takes place in the process of writing as continuation, writing as rejoinder, and rewriting. The work is transferred to another time, and the original idea is rewritten using

⁹ See the excerpt from the film *Matrix* (1999) on www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGZiLMGdCE0 [last accessed on March 23, 2022].

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Séméiôtiké: recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris 1969), p. 183. Quoted in: Schamma Schahadat, “Intertextualität: Lektüre - Text - Intertext,” in: Miltos Pechlivanos, Stefan Rieger, Wolfgang Struck, and Michael Weitz (eds.), *Einführung in die Literaturwissenschaft* (Stuttgart 1995), p. 366 [translated].

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

¹² See: *ibid.*

contemporary means and taking developments into account. **Emptiness** means something different in each medium. The gap between fullness and **emptiness** is extreme in an image medium that can instantly and endlessly load, display, enlarge, reduce, alter, or close images. If, today, one of our screens appears white, we expect the empty image field to fill immediately—it is only a matter of a stable network connection.

There is, furthermore, another topic that begins with **emptiness**: Why is a work created? With what intention? With what motivation? For what reason? *Höhere Wesen befahlen: rechte obere Ecke schwarz malen!* (Higher beings commanded: Paint the top right corner black!) What Sigmar Polke formulated as a young, twenty-nine-year-old artist is not only a parody of his American artist colleagues of Color Field painting (whose pictorial immanence disturbed him), but also an allusion to the reality that artists have to face who do not work on commission or for exhibitions, concerts, performances, and the like: Every artistic act is committed to its own impulse, a source of inspiration, a confrontation with the everyday on a non-ordinary level. As I type the German title of Polke's work on the keyboard, the word processing program's spellchecking suggests writing "*schwarzmalen*" without spacing—i.e., to paint a black picture of something; that is to say, to be pessimistic about it.

Two other decisions are striking in the course of the series **Deepfakes - Privacy**: first, the frames that break out of the unwritten law of the right angle. The slanted mounts and moldings are not an afterthought, but rather an integral part of the works. And second, the increasing number of screens in the image—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. They are placed ever more densely, at an angle or offset to each other, irregularly arranged, jumping and wrestling with the crooked frames. Only #7 is committed to the "higher beings" that Polke had already summoned (but, at that time meant neither Apple, Google, nor Meta) and is thus an exception to the exception.

With **Deepfakes - Image Swap**, Elias Wessel continues the "misuse" of the screens. The term misuse, introduced in the course of the project **Reset the Apparatus**,¹³ describes the use of image-generating apparatuses in a way that is not intended by the manufacturer, but is largely free. In this sense, Elias Wessel also uses the screens in this case not as intended, but rather reduced to a few characteristics: Set up and photographed in a darkened studio, the shape and color of the tablets, laptops, pods, smartphones, and smartwatches are essential. The original rectangle changes shape with the angle of view, can taper in perspective to a trapezoid, distort to a convex quadrilateral, or is photographed from such an oblique angle that it becomes a blue line and rewrites Barnett Newman in 2021. In the close-up, another aspect emerges: the "raster" of the screen panels that house the red, green, and blue pixels, but also injuries to the screens. While

¹³ Edgar Lissel, Gabriele Jutz, and Nina Jukić (eds.), *Reset the Apparatus! A Survey of the Photographic and the Filmic in Contemporary Art* (Vienna 2019).

the glassy surface of the screens cannot be compared to the materiality of paintings, these “internal drawings” are certainly equivalents to brushstrokes, irregular lines (because drawn by hand), or color fields frayed in the printing process. In both cases, those means that normally serve the purpose of representation and remain invisible are brought to the foreground and become autonomous motifs—far from being “empty.”

Deepfakes - Dismantled provides a glimpse of how many images still remain in empty, closed, destroyed, or dismantled screens. The mirror films taken from smartphones seduce as previously unseen ready-mades with their aesthetic charms: an intimate format, a dense network of scratches, a serial number, and countless reflections. If one applies “Dismantle” to the essay you are now reading, its end could be open, like the prospect of a sequel to the works of Elias Wessel.