

Elias Wessel

It's Complicated, Is Possibly Art

Exhibition at 1014, curated by Alina Girshovich

New York, September 7–23, 2022



Intro

»» We all know that we're changing inside our heads. Quickly. Too quickly. Until recently people were simply people. Now we're turning into something else. We all feel it. We all know it.« (Obrist, Basar, Coupland, *The Extreme Self*)

It's Complicated, Is Possibly Art presents a series of works by Elias Wessel that invert the digital space, playing with the seemingly non-corporeal and magical forces shaping our experience. Through images, text, sound, and technology, the exhibition gives visible, audible, and physical form to the orchestration behind the scenes, and the resulting fragmented nature of language, communication, and identity. Can our perception of reality and ourselves really be trusted?

Fig. 1
ELIAS WESSEL
It's Complicated – No. 5
(detail), 2019–2021
Color photograph
171,7 × 154 cm

1 About

1014, Exhibition Space

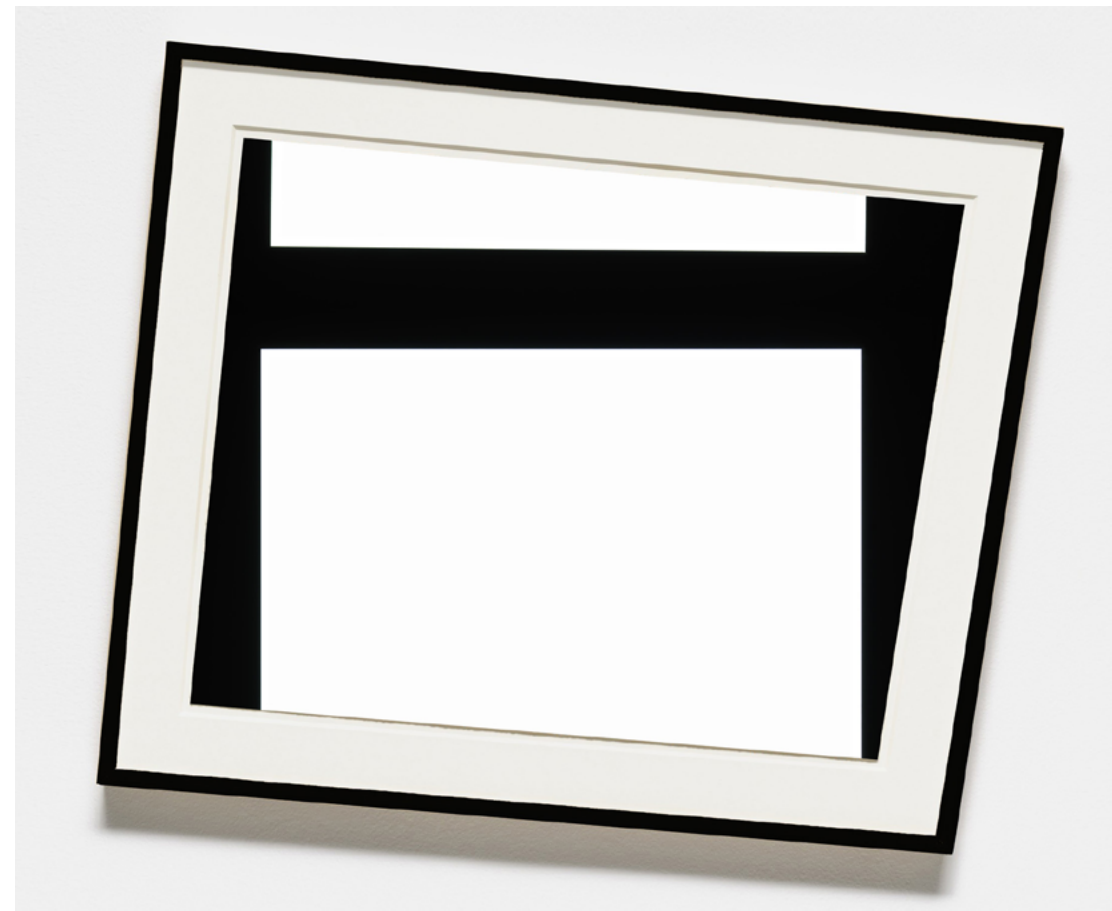
»1014 Inc.« is an independent US not-for-profit organization, founded in 2017 upon the initiative of the German Federal Foreign Office and the Goethe-Institut. In an interconnected world, it offers a space to build partnerships across the Atlantic. Throughout the year, 1014 functions as an inclusive platform for dialogue and art, opening the door for creatives from around the globe to stage exhibitions and programs on key societal topics. Located across the street from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1014 is in the heart of New York City but reaches beyond its borders. Supporting collaboration between experts, 1014 is a space to explore ideas across the worlds of culture, science, politics and society.

Alina Girshovich, Curator

Alina Girshovich is an independent curator and cultural strategist originally from Latvia, now based in New York. She works with artists, institutions, and spaces across cultures and disciplines — from Columbia University and the arts in New York to Myanmar and Cuba. Alina is a co-founder of the art collective, Assembly Required, and holds a degree in art history and international relations from Columbia University.

Fig. 2
1014 Fifth Avenue, New York.
The six-storey, Beaux-Arts townhouse is nestled tightly between two much larger blocks on Fifth Avenue. In 1960, Germany purchased the building from the estate of James W. Gerard, the U.S. Ambassador to Germany until 1917, and a strong believer in the transatlantic partnership. During the following 50 years, the building served as the Goethe-Institut, and saw renowned artists, politicians and public intellectuals, such as Willy Brandt, Andy Warhol, and Susan Sontag.





Above left; Fig. 3
ELIAS WESSEL
It's Complicated – No. 8
(Tabloid Edition)
2019–2021
Color photograph
56,5 × 47,2 cm

Above right; Fig. 4
ELIAS WESSEL
Image of the artbook publication *Elias Wessel, Textfetzen. It's Complicated: Texte aus einem a/sozialen Netzwerk 2019–2021. Ist möglicherweise Kunst*. With essays by Christoph Neuberger, Axel Gelfert and Hans-Christian von Herrmann (Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2022).

Below; Fig. 5
ELIAS WESSEL
Deepfakes – Privacy, No. 2
2021
Color photograph
46,6 × 59 cm

Elias Wessel, Artist

Elias Wessel (*Bonn, Germany) is committed to developing photographic concepts that reflect contemporary discourses within society. The works function as both an important contribution to the conversation on current sociopolitical issues, and the historical dialogue between photography and painting. Over the past several years, Wessel's practice has been increasingly focused on investigating the effects of digitization and the digital tools themselves. He has been developing new photographic processes that bring us closer to seeing what actually lies beneath the screen – whether the screen of our devices or that which keeps the world of deep tech hidden from view. The aesthetically accessible abstract images draw the audience in to examine what has been captured, and question what they know. Wessel uses the digital space in order to return the viewer to the physical and face the changes taking place in our world.

Wessel studied Art History at the University of Heidelberg, Visual Communications at the University of Mannheim – Faculty for Art and Design, and received his diploma in Fine Art Photography and Theory of Perception from the University for Art and Design Offenbach am Main in cooperation with the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste – Städelschule Frankfurt am Main. His work has been exhibited widely around the world, including Art Basel, Basel, Switzerland; Exhibition Hall of the Art Fund Kursk, Russia; Deutsches Haus at New York University, NYU Arts & Science, New York, USA; Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany, New York, USA; Goethe-Institut, Frankfurt am Main, Germany; Museum of Contemporary Art – MoCA Taipei, Taiwan; Museum Heylshof, Worms, Germany; NRW Forum Düsseldorf, Germany; Palais Beuharnais, Paris, France; and Spallart Collection Salzburg, Austria. Wessel participated in group exhibitions along with Thomas Demand, Andreas Gursky, Axel Hütte, Adolf Luther, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth and Günther Uecker, among others. He has been a guest lecturer at the City University of New York (CUNY), Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), New York University (NYU) and other academic institutions. Wessel's works are included in private and public collections, including the Kunstsammlung des Deutschen Bundestages. Since 2008, he lives and works in New York.

Natalia Kiës, Musical Artist

Natalia Kiës has been always communicative, her main language is music: While her contemporaries mauled their flutes, melodica and glockenspiel to create some sound, four-year-old Natalia sat out of her own free will in front of the piano at home to practice classical music with childish enthusiasm. This idyll was cut off after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, as her family moved from Upper Silesia to Germany and Natalia was forced to leave her beloved piano behind. At first she was forced to take a break from her passion for music, but the urge to dedicate her life to music only grew.

Natalia Kiës first studied classical piano at the Folkwang University of Arts in Essen, Germany, followed by vocal studies at ArtEZ University of Arts in Arnhem, Netherlands, focusing on Jazz and Pop. Today she composes her own music in various languages which are characterized by her unique piano playing and voice, revealing a whole new world of distinctive soundscapes.

Poster series of the exhibition
It's Complicated, Is Possibly Art, designed by the artist.



2 Exhibition

Concept

»We all know that we're changing inside our heads. Quickly. Too quickly. Until recently people were simply people. Now we're turning into something else. We all feel it. We all know it.« (Obrist, Basar, Coupland, *The Extreme Self*)

It's Complicated, Is Possibly Art presents a series of works by Elias Wessel that invert the digital space, playing with the seemingly non-corporeal and magical forces shaping our experience. Through images, text, sound, and technology, the exhibition gives visible, audible, and physical form to the orchestration behind the scenes, and the resulting fragmented nature of language, communication, and identity. Can our perception of reality and ourselves really be trusted?

The exhibition title is taken in part from Wessel's work cycle, *It's Complicated* (2019–2021), which includes a series of images, audio, and text produced using social media, the photographic process of long exposure, and AI-based recognition technology. The works on view at 1014 bring into focus the overlapping, obscure fragments of information floating through our lives, blurring our ability to construct clear meaning. The accompanying audio and text pieces (*Textfetzen*) from the work cycle are interwoven through the 2-story exhibition space, giving a multi-dimensional view into the changing structure of language and communication. Works from Wessel's series, *Deepfakes*, *Quick Response* and *Schöne neue Welt–The Moving Images*, also on display, ask the viewer to re-examine the digital tools we use daily. Musical artist Natalia Kiës presents a work commissioned for the exhibition, composed from the computer-generated audio material of *It's Complicated*, staged at 1014 as a sound installation.

It's Complicated, Is Possibly Art gives the viewer that which is now rare in our world – a moment to pause and observe the digital space we inhabit.



Fig. 6
ELIAS WESSEL
Deepfakes – Public Privacy
2021
Emulsion paint
600 x 1600 cm



Empty Space?

Above; Fig. 7
ELIAS WESSEL
Site-specific installation of
the 11 audioworks from *Ist
möglicherweise Kunst* (*Is
Possibly Art*, 2021).

Opposite above; Fig. 8
ELIAS WESSEL
Installation of the series
Deepfakes – Privacy (2021)

Opposite below; Fig. 9
ELIAS WESSEL
Installation of *It's Complicated*
(*Tabloid Edition*, 2019–2021)
and the accompanying audioworks
from *Ist möglicherweise Kunst*
[*Is Possibly Art*] (2021).

The exhibition greets the viewer on the ground floor (Fig. 7) with the physical and audible form of what usually remains hidden – the vast infrastructure of the Internet and the algorithmic data tracking, running on auto behind the scenes. Descending from an imperceptible source are suspended cables that do not end – instead they each transform into a sound piece, perpetually permeating the space of the viewer. *Is Possibly Art* (2021), the audio works accompanying each of the images in Wessel's series, *It's Complicated*, are heard as one indistinguishable mass. The title of the work comes from the verdict, »is possibly art,« pronounced by the AI behind the optical character recognition technology (OCR) used to translate Wessel's images into words.

As the viewer ascends the staircase towards the source of the sound, images from the *Privacy* series, part of Wessel's work cycle *Deepfakes* (2021),

Below; Fig. 10
 ELIAS WESSEL
 From time to time fragments
 from *Ist möglicherweise Kunst*
 [Is Possibly Art] (2021) and
Textfetzen (2021–2022) will be
 audible coming from heating
 units and other areas of the
 1014 architecture



Above; Fig. 11
 ELIAS WESSEL
 Installation of *Schwarzes datais-
 tisches Quadrat* [Black Dataistic
 Square] from the NFT series
Quick Response (2021)

Below; Fig. 12
 ELIAS WESSEL
 View from the opposite direction
 of the parlor with installation of
 the *Quick Response* series (2021)





Fig. 13
ELIAS WESSEL
Installation of the series
*Schöne neue Welt – The Moving
Images* (2021)

come into view (Fig. 8). A project that extends into the city (Fig. 6), it is an interrogation of the methods of synthetic media – the various digital means of imperceptibly transforming ‘real’ into ‘fake’. The images from the series on view at 1014 (Fig. 8), bring into question the ideas of privacy and the purported neutral, protective white space.

A familiar, computer-generated voice is heard from the adjoining room (Fig. 10). Inside, instead of the speakers, the viewer comes face to face with a surround-image display of 11 works from *It’s Complicated* (Fig. 9). Each is a blurred depiction of something familiar, yet remains suspended in the in-between, the space where we spend most of our time in the digital era – consuming fragments of knowledge and information, incomplete, fleeting, source unknown; never in full, transparent view. Installed in the serene space overlooking The Metropolitan Museum of Art, shown front and back, in printed, overlapping form, the works stop the mindless scroll through relentless social feed updates, and invite the viewer to reflect on the mechanics of the experience from a different view. Next to each work, the viewer finds a set of headphones and is invited to »listen« to each image, adding an audible dimension to the re-examination of digital media.

The exhibition segment asks the viewer to consider the relativistic, incomplete worldview engineered by synthetic and digital media: how can we find meaning without a clear, trusted source? How can we separate what is real from what is fake? What really belongs to us? What thoughts, ideas, images, voices can we truly claim as our own? What does it mean to be an »individual« and a »human« in our digital age?

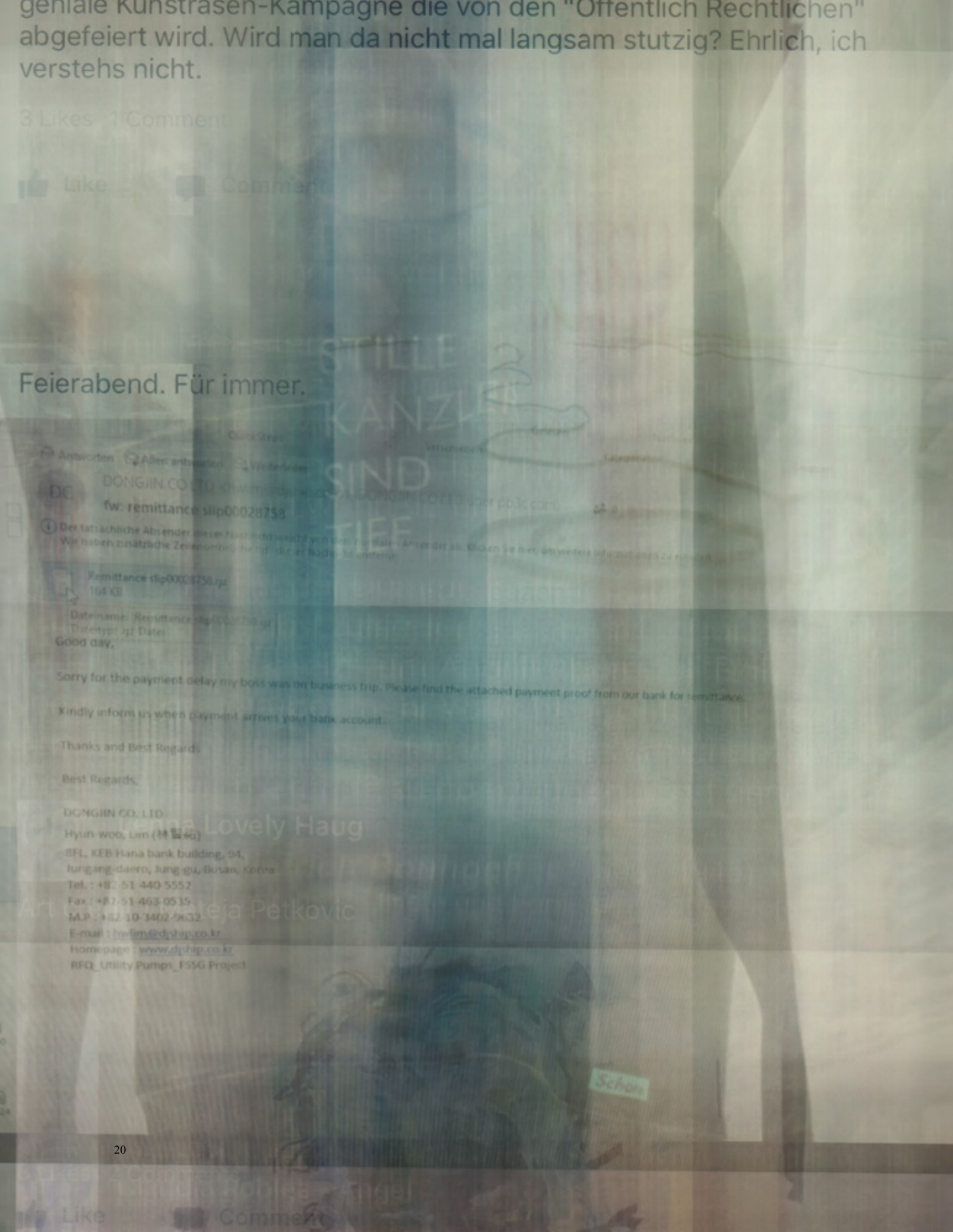
Contemplative Time In Between

The in-between space on the second floor transforms into a pass-through between the physical and the digital. It offers the viewer a chance to steal a contemplative moment of time and experience Wessel’s NFT work, *Quick Response* (2021, Fig. 11 and 12), in analog, physical form. Created as an inevitable, yet reluctant artistic response to the maelstrom of NFT art in 2021, it is a work in three parts: three slightly asymmetrical QR codes, each presented on a white background, and each linked to an orchestrated Google search. The medium is an echo of the original intent of QR – »quick response« – technology, developed in Japan in the 1960’s



Above and opposite; Fig. 14, 15
 NATALIA KIËS,
 ELIAS WESSEL
 Installation of »Systems at
 Play« (2021-2022), including
 sound composition (Kiës) and
 video-work (Wessel)

to answer the desire of an expanding consumer society for automated, shorthand access to more information. In his *Quick Response*, Wessel's clever use of the technology is a triptych inquiry which, when scanned, takes the viewer to a corresponding page of dynamic search results based on the artist's programmed command and the algorithm's knowledge of each viewer. *Schwarzes dataistisches Quadrat* [Black Dataistic Square] (Fig. 11) searches for the words, »Netz, du hast das Bild gestohlen, gib es wieder her!« [Net, you stole the picture, give it back!]; *Rotes Quadrat* [Red Square] leads the viewer to the results for »Dass dich färbt die rote Tinte und dann bist du tot.« [So, you're tinged with red and then you're dead]; and *Schwarzes Quadrat* [Black Square] links to the results for the phrase, »Nimm, du brauchst nicht alles haben, mit der Maus vorlieb.« [You do not have to have everything, be content with the mouse.] Together, they form Wessel's adapted verses of »Fuchs, Du hast die Gans gestohlen« [Fox, You Stole the Goose], a 19th century German nursery rhyme that teaches children about the repercussions of stealing from the human race. In both form and title, the three parts of *Quick Response* are a direct reference to Kazimir Malevich and Suprematist ideals of pure art, creating a space for unmediated feeling and perception. Wessel's *Quick Response* is an intervention in the fragmented, oversaturated digital space, asking the viewer to take a pause from incessantly consuming online, reclaim contemplative time, and perceive the changes taking place in our world.



Opposite; Fig. 16
ELIAS WESSEL
It's Complicated – No. 10
(detail), 2019–2021
Color photograph
185 × 154 cm

Below; Fig. 17
ELIAS WESSEL
Textfetzen (detail), 2021
Enlarged section

What Lies Beneath the Screen

Schöne Neue Welt (Brave New World) is a series that started in New York City shortly before the outbreak of the pandemic and was finished in late 2020 in Germany. It re-examines the role of cell phones in our lives, and what lies beneath the screen we know so intimately. In the process for the series, smartphones were being destroyed in every conceivable way – run over by a bus, thrown against walls, maltreated with a hammer, drowned, set on fire, burned. The displays were shattered and unrecognizable, yet the photographs of the demolished devices rendered aesthetically beautiful images. In making the series, Wessel started thinking about how it becomes psychologically difficult to destroy these »magic boxes« that seem to be like living creatures or, perhaps more accurately, extended parts of ourselves. This led to the video installation on view, *Schöne Neue Welt – The Moving Images* (2021), for which Wessel documented the seemingly organic, moving shapes he witnessed during the destruction process. Is destruction an integral part of beauty? Or, can destruction turn into something beautiful? What is our relationship to the digital tools we use?

Systems at Play

The experience of the exhibition culminates in play: the instruments of observation, the algorithmic digital fragments that dictate what we see and hear, become the manipulated, performative material instead. Musical artist, Natalia Kiës, presents a commissioned piece composed using the computer-generated raw audio of *It's Complicated*, displayed as a sound installation with works from *Textfetzen*.

The audiovisual installation gives the viewer a chance to hear and see the absurdity of the information we consume, and the disorienting, changing structure of language and communication. Do I read it right to left? Top to bottom? Is there a beginning, middle, and an end?

3 Programs

Exhibition Program

The exhibition will be on view from September 7 - September 23, 2022, taking place during Armory Week New York 2022. Throughout the course of the exhibition, 1014 will host receptions, VIP previews, a media event, a performance, virtual-physical artist and curator tours, and a program of talks on topics related to *It's Complicated, Is Possibly Art*.

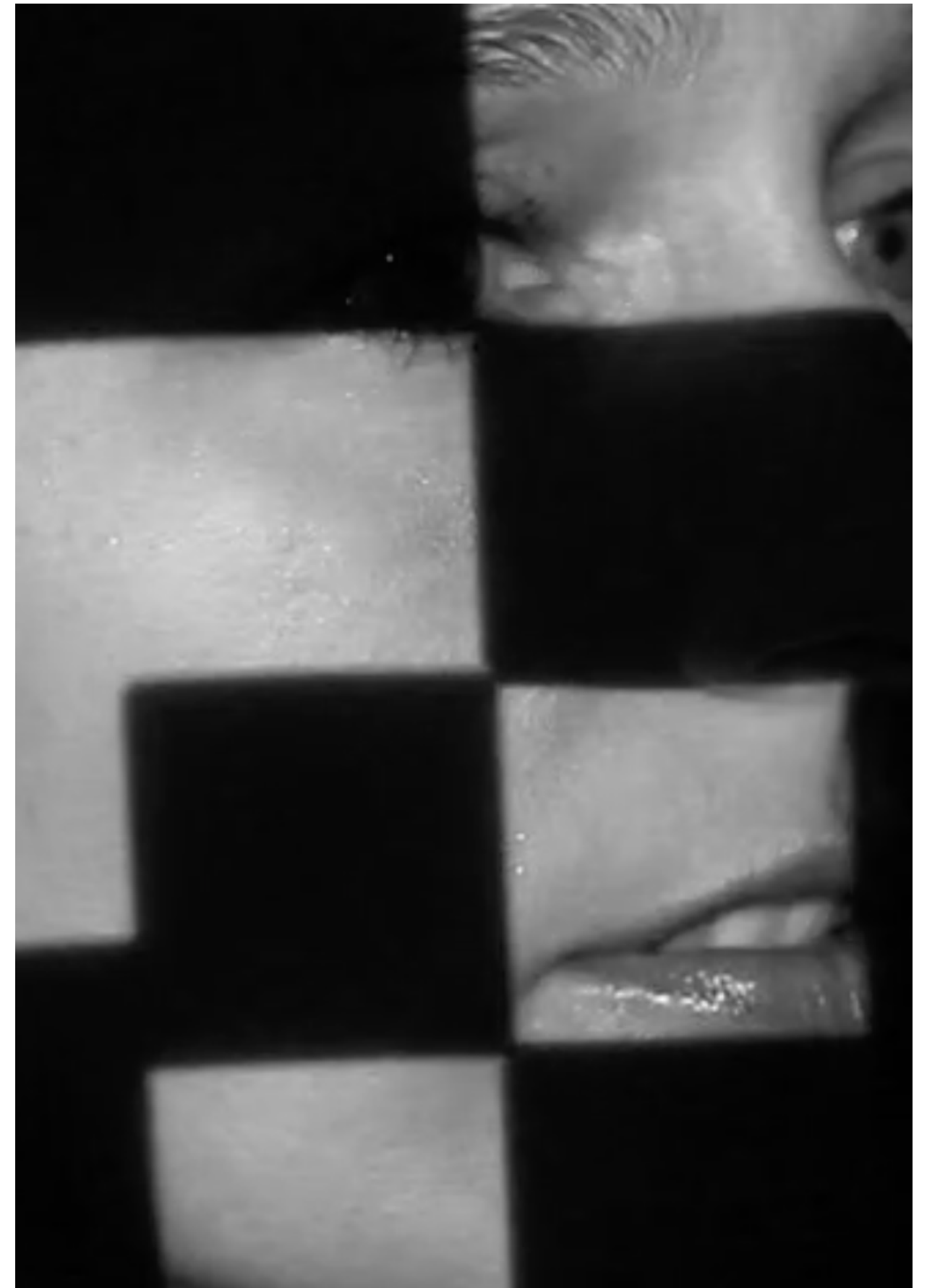


Fig. 18
ELIAS WESSEL
Systems at Play (2022)
Infinite video visualizing face
recognition patterns for site-
specific installation
Film still

Fig. 19
ELIAS WESSEL
It's Complicated – No. 3
(Tabloid Edition)
2019–2021
Color photograph
56,5 × 47,2 cm

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Links

Artist website: www.eliaswessel.com

1014 upcoming events: www.1014.nyc/events

Exhibition film *Elias Wessel: The Sum of My Data* by the Embassy of the
Federal Republic of Germany in Paris: <https://youtu.be/f45NXaZAcN0>

Artwork checklist for *It's Complicated, Is Possibly Art*:
www.eliaswessel.com/s/1014-artworks-checklist.pdf

