

UNSETTLED IN THE INTERSTICE:
ELIAS WESSEL'S
DIE SUMME MEINER DATEN

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Fig. 13.1. Exhibition view of *Elias Wessel: La somme de mes données* at Palais Beauharnais, Paris. 28.1.–28.12.2020.

Image left: Elias Wessel, *Die Summe meiner Daten—On Series, No. 5*, 2017, colour photograph, 213.6 x 164 cm (framed).

Image right: Elias Wessel, *Die Summe meiner Daten—On Series, No. 8*, 2017, colour photograph, 217.7 x 164 cm (framed).

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On entering the reception rooms of the residence of Germany's Ambassador to France in January 2020, visitors were serenaded by the dynamism of Elias Wessel's large-scale photographs from the series, *Die Summe meiner Daten* (*The Sum of My Data*, 2017, Fig. 13.1). Streaks of vivid colour, areas of intense red, green, and yellow in photographs that might be mistaken for

paintings, drew visitors inside the ballroom at the top of the stairs. Through the doorway, visitors were met with sensuous sepia splatters in another photograph, the details enchanting the crowd through their visual rhyme with the gold chains of a hanging chandelier. The works were surrounded by sparkles and soft reflections created by mirrors, animated by light streaming in from windows that gave out onto the banks of the Seine. Wessel's abstract images hanging on the walls of the Hôtel de Beauharnais in Paris were aesthetically compelling. Nevertheless, their surface beauty was among the first in a series of illusions that made *Die Summe meiner Daten* in turns, appealing, confusing, deceptive, and unsettling.

Wessel's photographs typically challenge their viewers' certainty of the distinctions that facilitate understanding of the physical world, particularly as it is known through digital and photographic images. In two more recent series, *Die Freude am Rest–Zur Entmaterialisierung der Bilder* (*The Joy in What Remains–On the Dematerialisation of the Image*, 2018) and *It's Complicated* (2019), the interstice between digital and analogue representations is overtly flaunted as an uncertain space occupied by the images. Either through the title's admission of the dematerialisation of the image in *Die Freude am Rest*, or the use of a digital media page as support for palimpsestic layers of colour in *It's Complicated*, Wessel doesn't negotiate the space between artistic mediums. Rather, he unapologetically brings different, often incompatible mediums together in the same image to inhabit the interstice. Texts and images, digital and analogue, and past and present are put into play on the surface of Wessel's images. In addition, even when the images are said to be photographs, they often insist on resembling a painted aesthetic.

Through this occupation of the interstice, Wessel's works question the assumptions of photographic realism, as well as provoke viewers to examine their relationship to photographs. In addition to the large-scale works erosion of distinctions between photography and painting, the analogue and the digital, the presence and absence of the subject of photography, the works blur the line between the presence and absence of the artist. Ultimately, the confounding of distinctions in Wessel's photographs points to a loss of certainty in a world in which seeing no longer automatically leads to knowing. Such unsettling revelations motivate continued and repeated reflection on the significance of his work. In this chapter, I focus specifically on the 2020 exhibition of the *Die Summe meiner Daten* series at the Hôtel de Beauharnais in Paris as illustration of this encounter between different visual mediums and the resultant viewer experience of uncertainty. Similarly, as the blurring of the stated distinctions becomes understood, the photographs that look like paintings unravel into a discourse on the role of contemporary practices of digital surveillance in everyday life. First, however, it is critical to examine

the images' appeal, particularly their aesthetic as that which draws viewers into engaging with the works.

On entering the exhibition at Palais Beauharnais, visitors could be heard whispering their surprise, "you know they are photographs, not paintings!" The images' deception as articulated by these viewers was a part of their attraction. In advance of the 2020 exhibition, I looked at the works digitally reproduced on Wessel's website.¹ Studying the reproductions, I was reminded of Gerhard Richter's (b. 1932) abstract paintings from the early 2000s. The resonance with Richter's paintings was obvious, or so I thought. The swathes of brightly coloured paint moving in apparently aleatory, but no doubt, carefully contrived directions, the revelation of some colours while others are simultaneously concealed, and the sensuousness of paint on canvas, are qualities we associate with Richter's paintings. I assumed that the varying width of paint strokes on Wessel's images could be explained by the brush used for application. I imagined that the tension of apparently competing layers of paint told of a process carried out over time. How long and in what narrative order the process unfolded, like Richter's paintings, remained ambiguous. This association with Richter's abstract paintings suggested that Wessel's photographs might be other than what they appear at first sight. Indeed, the profundity of *Die Summe meiner Daten* was underlined by the fact that Richter himself, together with eminent artists before him, such as Max Beckmann (1884-1950), have also enjoyed exhibitions on the walls of the German ambassador's residence in Paris.² For these reasons, I was keen to see these photographs that look like paintings in person.

After a few minutes inside the eighteenth-century private hotel named after Eugène de Beauharnais, the intrigue continued. The handful of images on display from *Die Summe meiner Daten* appeared to be without surface texture. They were indisputably photographs. Yet, even in their presence, at a distance, they continued to look like paintings. This playful obfuscation of medium specificity was the first of many layers of blindness and ignorance with which visitors were confronted in their presence.

Standing back from the images, it was striking to see Wessel's enormous abstract photographs hanging side by side with a portrait of Louis XVIII (1755-1824) and a Jacques Louis David (1748-1825) portrait of Prince Eugène Beauharnais (1781-1824), son-in-law to Napoleon (Fig. 13.2).

¹ <https://www.eliaswessel.com/>. See also the video of the exhibition made by The Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Paris: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f45NXaZAcN0>.

² For details of past exhibitions see the website: <https://allemagneenfrance.diplo.de/fr-fr/missions-allemandes/botschaft-seite/00-residenz-artikel/1375098>.



Fig. 13.2. Exhibition view of *Elias Wessel: La somme de mes données* at Palais Beauharnais, Paris. 28.1. - 28.12.2020.

Image left: Elias Wessel, *Die Summe meiner Daten—On Series, No. 8*, 2017, colour photograph, 217.7 x 164 cm (framed).

Image right: Elias Wessel, *Die Summe meiner Daten—Origin (On Series, No. 1)*, 2017, colour photograph, 204.6 x 164 cm (framed).

© VG Bild-Kunst Bonn for Elias Wessel.

It is an audacious move to place photographs by a young German artist next to a portrait of Prince Eugène Beauharnais executed by the principal proponent of French Neoclassicism. Even if the portrait was produced in David's studio, not by the master himself, the curatorial decision was daring. The young German's "portraits" inside the ambassador's residence, an establishment with a history coloured by surveillance and political manipulations, gives them what would once have been looked upon as an intolerable licentiousness. The significance of the photographs thus lies in their simultaneous appropriation of, conversation with, and satire on the history of their placement at this site of exhibition.

At first sight, however, the confidence of Wessel's photographs ensured that they were neither dwarfed by, and nor did they overshadow, the oversized, full-length portraits of great men in the opulent, mirrored setting. Rather, the photographs became swept up in the performance of grandeur, illusion, and affluence. Thanks to their continuation of the colours and gestures of the adjacent paintings, Wessel's photographs segued effortlessly into the

historical drama witnessed by and within the walls of this luxurious *hôtel particulier*.

On the right-hand wall of the ballroom, *On Series, No. 5 (Plate)* appeared to reach out to Prince Eugene's red sash in the portrait hanging to its left. The viewer's eye fell on the sash draped across Eugene's body which, in turn, directed attention away from the photograph into an anteroom. On the right-hand wall of the adjacent room, the intense red was picked up amid a varied brown field in *On Series, No. 3* (Fig. 13.3).



Fig. 13.3. Elias Wessel, *Die Summe meiner Daten–On Series, No. 3*, 2017, colour photograph, 217.7 x 164 cm (framed).
© VG Bild-Kunst Bonn for Elias Wessel

The bright red flashes in the photograph continued the dynamic sweep of Eugene's sash from the previous room. It was as if he had raced out of the painting and, in the photograph was seen through the window of a fast-moving train, running across a field whose grass has been burnt by the sun. In their bold claim for equality with the high art of centuries past, *Die Summe meiner Daten* photographs challenged the strict hierarchies and tightly adhered-to aesthetic principles of the acceptable in French painting.

Back in the first room, a bank of nine small-format photographs from the black and white series of *Die Summe meiner Daten* complemented the black and white floor tiles (Fig. 13.4).



Fig. 13.4. Exhibition view of *Elias Wessel: La somme de mes donnée* at Palais Beaulieu, Paris. 28.1.–28.12.2020.

Convolute: Elias Wessel, *Die Summe meiner Daten–B/W Series*

(selected works from the small format edition), 2017,

black and white photographs, each 46.6 x 36.6–38.3 cm (framed).

Image right: Elias Wessel, *Die Summe meiner Daten–On Series, No. 5*,

2017, colour photograph, 213.6 x 164 cm (framed).

© VG Bild-Kunst Bonn for Elias Wessel.



Fig. 13.5. Exhibition view of *Elias Wessel : La somme de mes données* at Palais Beauharnais, Paris. 28.1.–28.12.2020.

Image left: *Elias Wessel, Die Summe meiner Daten–On Series, No. 2*, 2017, colour photograph, 199.8 x 164 cm (framed).

Image right: *Elias Wessel, Die Summe meiner Daten–On Series, No. 3*, 2017, colour photograph, 217.7 x 164 cm (framed).

© VG Bild-Kunst Bonn for Elias Wessel.

Similarly, the patterns of both photographs and floor tiles continued into infinity in their mirrored reflections at the dado level.³ Wessel's black and white series photographs are like sketches, initial thoughts awaiting elaboration into finished, intensely coloured, oversized photographs. Alternatively, their appearance as vivacious abstract patterns or notations in black ink might recall Chinese calligraphy. From yet another perspective, the small black and white photographs could be seen to converse with Eugene and Louis: all are centred within, thus contained by their frames, and connected by floor tiles. The possibilities of multiple perspectives from which to see the works inside the glittering ballroom challenged the certainty of all knowledge of and about the images.

On the opposite wall hung a 2017 photograph, obviously executed well away from the surveying eyes of French royalty and Neo-classical artists. And yet, it was as if by design that the vigorous strokes of *Origin* (*On Series, No. 1*, Fig. 13.2) were in concert with the luxurious lining of Louis XVIII's cascading robes. Visually, the form of Louis's jewels and the flecks of colour on the white textured train of his robe were continued in the twisting and turning lines—easily mistaken as brushstrokes—of Wessel's photograph. Thus, photographs, paintings and furnishings generated visual relations and harmonies where they were least expected, across centuries and art forms.

In a departure from conventional contemporary exhibition of art, Wessel's photographs sat well above the line of viewers' eyes at the same level as the royal portraits, demanding that they raise their heads and look up to the paintings as if to revere them. Faced with this uncomfortable viewing position, visitors were invited to reflect on the juxtaposition with eighteenth-century portraits of French royalty; it was a precocious sidling up to the history of art.

Photographs have not always been as big as those in *Die Summe meiner Daten*. It is only in the last thirty years that the technology for large scale printing has been developed. The radicality of the late-twentieth century photographs produced by Bernd and Hilla Becher's (1931-2007 and 1934-2015) students at the Düsseldorf Art Academy was, in the first place, due to their scale. Their size literally pushed beyond the existing boundaries of the photographic medium. When photographers such as Andreas Gursky (b.1955), Candida Höfer (b.1944) and Thomas Ruff

³ The dado is the lower part of an interior wall is typically sculpted or, in the Renaissance was painted with illusory sculpted segments. In the High Renaissance, artists also painted secular narratives along the Dado, quite distinct from the mythical or religious scenes on the wall itself.

(b.1958) transformed photography in the nineteen-nineties by blowing up the image to the size of nineteenth-century history paintings, they forced reconsideration of the medium's status as an art form.⁴ Thus, the compositional, technical, and representational complexity of the large-format photographic image was challenged even before being placed on a wall. Gursky, for example, blew up the image in order to elevate the wiles of global capitalism as depicted in photographs such as his *Hong Kong Stock Exchange II* (1994) or more recently, *Amazon*, (2016). In his photographs, the consequences of capitalism were of the same magnitude as events that had always been reserved for history painting: war, revolution, and the coronation of kings. The size and format alone demanded new ways of looking at the photographic image. Moreover, through use of lenses and digital manipulations in the process of production, artists such as Gursky created works, the dimensionality, multiple and unstable perspectives of which meant that their aesthetic challenges could only be perceived, and thus, understood, in person. No longer could we know a photograph by seeing it as a reproduction in a book. By placing three-metre by two-metre photographs on walls, Gursky, Höfer, and Ruff pushed their viewers to question the ontology of the photographic image. "What am I looking at? How can it be a photograph?" were questions often asked of these images. After all, here were photographs that behaved in some respects, like paintings. In addition, these nineteen-nineties German photographs were often printed in small numbers, and each reproduction was slightly different. This gave the photograph a uniqueness otherwise reserved for painting. In this and other ways, the artists used photography to deny the historical and aesthetic assumptions about the mechanically reproduced image.⁵ No longer could the photograph be understood as being without a history, devoid of an aura, thus lacking in authenticity.⁶ Lastly, the scale of German photography in the nineteen-nineties required new strategies

⁴ On the increasing size of the photographs, see Peter Galassi, "Gursky's World," in *Andreas Gursky*, ex. Cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2001), 9-45.

⁵ On the loss of originality in the photographic image, see Rosalind Krauss's discussion of the indexicality of the photographic image, Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," in *The Originality of the Avant -Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1986), 1-19.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217-251.

and technologies of production, printed to the maximum size of a roll of photographic paper.⁷ These re-definitions of late-twentieth-century photography, particularly in Germany, pushed viewers to question long-held assumptions about the medium. To reiterate, it was not simply the modes of production and the aesthetic that were radically altered. How viewers look at images, particularly those in the mass media, was thrust into the foreground. In turn, the knowledge and experience of the world gleaned by looking at photographs was opened up for debate.⁸

According to the hierarchies of Europe's eighteenth-century academies of fine art, landscape, portraiture and history painting were the most important genres thanks to their substantial moral force.⁹ Thus, more than a century after artists such as Gustav Courbet (1819-1877) sowed irreverence towards these classifications, Gursky and his classmates created photographs that competed for identity and significance with history paintings. Their photographs might be said to fully overturn the hierarchy and categorization of the nineteenth-century academy. By extension, when Wessel places photographs that, as I explain below, turn out to be a portraiture of sorts next to neo-classical portraits, he goes further. His photographs can be seen to ridicule the rigidity and pomposity of the highest levels of French cultural production.

Wessel, whose work is printed in the same laboratory as the graduates of the Düsseldorf Art Academy such as Gursky and Ruff, creates similarly large format photographs.¹⁰ Like their photographs, Wessel's engage the aesthetic history of painting, albeit from a different approach. For artists trained in the lineage of the Bechers the challenge came to long established conventions of perspective, the creation of space, and the placement of the viewer within that space. To give one example, Gursky's *Bahrain I*, 2005, offers an impossible perspective on the landscape. The photograph places us, at one and the same time, looking down from on high at the racetrack winding through the sand dunes of Bahrain, and perpendicular to a diminishing perspective. The

⁷ Mary Warner Marien points out that the increased size of these photographs comes thanks to the digital production, enabling the all-over clarity of image of the earliest modes of photography. See Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002).

⁸ See Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to see the world: an introduction to images, from self-portraits to selfies, maps to movies, and more* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

⁹ Fae Brauer, *Rivals and Conspirators: The Paris Salons and the Modern Art Centre* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

¹⁰ Conversation with the artist at Palais Beauharnais 28 January 2020.

built environment at the top of the image, which might also be in the background depending on how we look at it, recedes towards a horizon marked on the precipice with a sky erased of all detail. The confusion is further underlined by the large format of the image. The scale asks viewers in the gallery to stand on their toes in the hope of seeing the ambiguous and shifting horizon from a clearer perspective. However, their efforts are always in vain. The simultaneous horizontality and verticality of *Bahrain I* suspend the viewer in a contradictory indecision about where to stand, and thus, how to look. This ambiguity is typical of Gursky's tendency to push representation up to the edges of abstraction.

Through the appropriation of the size, colours, and the very walls of the historic building, Wessel's photographs gave the impression of being conceived for the Hôtel de Beauharnais's ballroom. Furthermore, in keeping with their context, *Die Summe meiner Daten* sat inside decorative plaster mouldings designed for showcasing great works of art in the private residences of royalty and their relatives. Thus, on these walls, Wessel's works assumed an importance far beyond their ostensible status as machine made, reproduced and reproducible images. The abstract photographs were self-assured, imposing, and they demanded that viewer's look at them as equal in status to the paintings. In distinction to photographers such as Gursky, Wessel's abstract photographs engaged portraiture—as opposed to history painting. First, however, the ambiguity of what viewers saw unfolds to reveal further layers of deception as they moved closer to Wessel's *Die Summe meiner Daten*.

In Gursky's photographs, the technological manipulations of the camera are placed in the foreground, thus distancing any trace of the artist. Consequently, the viewer is made aware of their body through the photographs' forcing physical movement up and across the image surface.¹¹ In contradistinction, for Wessel, the artist is brought to the fore, up close and over time, revealing that tracings of his bodily fluids on the surface of the photograph. The body of the artist is, in fact, the very subject of these works. While at a distance, Wessel's works flaunt their abstraction, this is a deception. Over time, viewers become aware that these images are a representation. Specifi-

¹¹ The notion of the removal of the body in abstraction as negative form is explored in Minimalist art, particularly sculpture, in the 1960s, and in the discourse on the simulacra in aesthetic thought of the period. See James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

cally, they are a representation of the artist, a portraiture of sorts. To understand their so-called figurative dimension, it is necessary to expose the photographs' mode of production.

The photographic process is precise, and the technology put in the service of our ever-expanding deception is simple. Wessel begins by producing the *Off-Series*—the smartphone turned off—through a Hasselblad medium-format camera using a kitchen light. The resulting sepia-toned images are produced by photographing the screen of his and other people's turned-off smartphones, tablets, and electronic devices. The flowing streaks, and shorter hatched patches that, in reproduction and at a distance, are assumed to be the record of brushstrokes are, in fact, traces of the artist's finger having swiped, typed, and pressed the face of the powered-on device. The thirty *Off-Series* images—selected from one hundred and fifty photographs—were thus given their name from the process of the powered-off device face. We are looking at the residues of body oils and dirt, captured under the lights of the photographic process. The brightly coloured examples (the *On-Series*) are re-photographed from the smartphone screen images of blown up *Off-Series* examples, „over-written“ by more recent smears and fingerprints. For the *On-Series*, the device is turned on, the *Off-Series* on screen are then placed under different lights, using colour gels. It should be noted that between the first phase of *Off-Series* production and the period of making the re-photographed *On-Series*, the device was in regular use. Thus, layers of traces were added in the interim period of use, before being remade as the brightly coloured *On-Series*.¹² Effectively, the latter are multiple *Off* images reloaded onto the powered-on phone. The unpredictable and colourful results are, subsequently, blown up again into approximately two-metre by one-and-a-half-metre multi-coloured abstract photographs.

Accordingly, in what might be seen as the first of two direct challenges to the value of painting, there is no origin to the *On-Series* photographs. We know that a random selection of the *Off-Series* images is used as the first step in creating the *On-Series* photographs, but not precisely which ones. No single photograph is directly transformed into an *On-Series* photograph.¹³ This

¹² This palimpsestic image has prompted critics such as Jenny Graser to invoke Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) notion of the "Mystic Writing Pad" as an interpretative tool for Wessel's photographs. See Jenny Graser, "Abstrakte Realitäten," in *Elias Wessel. Die Summe Meiner Daten*, ed. (Paris: Botschaft der Bundesrepublik Deutschland).

¹³ The black and white small format ones have the same production process as the *On-Series*. The process is also confusing, but this sits well with the idea that what these photographs are about cannot be seen.

endless proliferation of unknown photographs without an identifiable origin, rendered abstract, and yet, representational, challenge the strict conventional notions of art as unique and auratic. The transgression is made more obvious when juxtaposed with the portraits of proud emperors and kings depicted by famous painters.

Second, when we realize that we are looking at the traces of the artist's bodily fluids, what, at a distance, is colourful and aesthetically pleasing, becomes too close for comfort. The traces of Wessel's body give the photographs an intimacy for which we are not prepared: the grain of fingerprints, spittle and perspiration, the scratch of a fingernail are the extreme opposite of what we had first seen as an intellectual exercise in abstraction. With this knowledge, the illusory textures of colour give the image a hapticity that, in turn, encourages us to imagine that we are smelling, tasting, and touching the artist's body.¹⁴

The sensory charge of Wessel's photographs reminds us of the outrage sparked by a work such as Andres Serrano's (b. 1950) *Piss Christ* in the nineteen-eighties in which the otherwise tabooed bodily fluids are made into an aesthetic display. The offense taken at being confronted with bodily fluids, in turn, recalls the insults poured onto works that tested the boundaries of the principles of the nineteenth-century Paris salons.¹⁵ Nevertheless, this outrage from centuries past has quietened today. In addition, the charge of offense is diminished because the abject corporeality made visible in Serrano's photograph has been hidden behind layers of aesthetic beauty and abstraction in Wessel's. That said, we may not visually recognize their content, but we are still unsettled by the knowledge of what the photographs document.

In the lavishly decorated mansion, bathed in the light of ostentatious and elaborate candelabras, we are not meant to be looking at bodily fluids or any other challenge to the containment and correctness of art. We are meant to be stiff and socially poised, observing formal codes of behaviour. Pictures on the walls of public spaces in such an establishment are meant to be ornamentation. Wessel's *Die Summe meiner Daten* confronts the visitor with what we least expect in such a space, leaving them feeling awkward and uncomfortable. Consequently, the very presence of such intimate portraits successfully questions the value of both the paintings either side of them, and painting in general. The history of art is pried open for discussion once photographs of

¹⁴ Wessel's photographs might be understood as activating a haptic visuality in which we draw on our knowledge of what we are seeing, experiencing it as a physical sensation. See Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Brauer, *Rivals and Conspirators*.

a young German artist's bodily fluids are given equal status as a portrait of Louis XVIII.

Michael David Barbezat and Anne M Scott reflect on bodily fluids such as tears and blood, as well as the fluidity of the body as a language for pre-modern artists to engage with a world in social, political and religious flux.¹⁶ They argue that the body was a common vehicle for understanding the world at large in the medieval times. While bodily fluids and the body as an unstable, unpredictable organism was most often represented through an expression of emotion in medieval art—typically grief, mourning, lamentation—Wessel's photographic representations of his bodily secretions engage more contemporary public discourses. Namely, those hinted at in the series' title. For it is not only that these are photographs posing as paintings. They are also more than bodily secretions hiding behind abstractions. In addition, the works challenge public discourses and practices of surveillance, observation, data collection, and the slow, daily degradation of personal privacy. Moreover, thanks to their materiality as traces of his interface with screens, *Die Summe meiner Daten* returns the viewer to the apparent erosion of individual choice as it is being affected through invisible surveillance mechanisms. As Jenny Graser says in her essay on Wessel's series, we leave our most personal information every time we swipe.¹⁷ *Die Summe meiner Daten* speaks directly to the uncomfortable fact that, although we know we are being watched by the invisible forces of digital surveillance, we happily divulge our most private details, such as our location, companions, and what we ate for lunch.

If representation in painting disintegrates visibly when the viewer is in physical proximity to the image, as we move closer to the photographs in *Die Summe meiner Daten*, the realizations are conceptual. Up close, viewers recognize that the analogue photographs are not only playfully occupying the interface with painting, but also the digital. Wessel claims in his text accompanying the exhibition, the “social divide no longer requires laboriously stolen documents from the trash. Personal data is continuously collected, and the individual is being made identifiable.”¹⁸ To explain the relevance of Wessel's statement, it is necessary to return momentarily to the exhibition context.

¹⁶ Michael David Barbezat and Anne M Scott, “Introduction,” in *Fluid Bodies and Bodily Fluids in Premodern Europe: Bodies, Blood, and Tears in Literature, Theology, and Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 1-12.

¹⁷ Jenny Graser, “Abstrakte Realitäten.”

¹⁸ Elias Wessel, Speech of the artist at the exhibition opening, Paris, 28 January 2020.

The Hôtel de Beauharnais's chequered history in Franco-German relations was once again in the public imagination in spring 2020. Roman Polanski's recently released *J'Accuse* (2019) reminded the viewing public that in this same building, in the waste basket of the onetime German Embassy, the maid found the letter which would become evidence for Colonel Alfred Dreyfuss's (1859-1935) imprisonment. This finding led to events that divided the nation between those who supported and those who condemned the anti-Semitism of the Third Republic. The Dreyfuss Affair began in the same rooms that in 2020 were watched over by *Die Summe meiner Daten*. Thus, in his statement, Wessel links the surveillance mechanisms carried out within the Hôtel de Beauharnais's walls across a hundred years: from the collection of material evidence on paper at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth centuries to the invisible collection of immaterial data in our own time. As Wessel says, and the title of his photographic series suggests, data no longer needs to be rescued from trash cans. It is stored in the memories and on the faces of everyone's digital devices in the form of invisible traces. And when swiping and scrolling, we nonchalantly leave our DNA, containing every detail of personal information able to be tracked and identified.

Most visitors who entered the lavishly decorated palace in 2020 stepped inside an otherwise inaccessible and mythical building said to have harboured treasonous activities. Inside the oasis of Belle Epoque Europe, it is not difficult to imagine the secret machinations of the coverup underway. Given the history of the location, we expect that *Die Summe meiner Daten* might offer access to a forbidden world that is no doubt under the eye of surveillance cameras. However, rather than exposing the collated personal data of the artist or anyone else, the photographs are records of something more intimate and individual: the artist's bodily fluids. Nevertheless, they can be at least twice removed through processes of photographing and re-photographing. Thus, Wessel's "data" is treated to layers of concealment simultaneous with its revelation. Wessel's photographs of his DNA, re-photographed, are then further masked as abstract paintings. The Janus-faced conceptual turns that come hand in hand with the invisibility and ultimate blindness of surveillance—nothing is seen, and everything is revealed, the absence of evidence in the presence of the trace—enables these photographic images to harbour a series of obfuscations. By extension, these confusions provide mysterious and unsettling journeys into the deceptions of abstract art more generally. Abstraction is always a representation of something, even

when it claims it is not.¹⁹ Simultaneously, the photographs might be said to reflect the contradictory processes of data collection that, nevertheless, feed into the circuit of dark holes of surveillance mechanisms. In the rush to access a website, we happily agree to the collection of our data without considering that, let alone knowing where, it will be stored and how it is going to be used. The multiple layers of information gathering are too dense for us to identify or negotiate. And so, we blithely click, “agree.” Like the flat shiny surface of Wessel’s photograph of his bodily fluids, then placed under controlled lighting, and re-photographed with coloured gelled light to reflect the smears and fingerprints on the glass-display, we swipe away our privacy, leaving nothing more than fingerprints on the screen as evidence. Thus, we give others the power and the ability to survey and identify us through the use of the very electronic devices that purportedly offer freedom and access.

While this double-edged process of deceit is most commonly activated through smart phones and credit card purchases, *Die Summe meiner Daten* documents the screen interface in general as the receptor of surveillance. Like the medieval context in which representations of bodily fluids lend themselves to an erosion of religious beliefs and political dictates, the photographs of *Die Summe meiner Daten* use the artist’s DNA to confront viewers with the social and political forces that weigh on them, usually unseen and typically unacknowledged. Perhaps ironically, while Wessel deceives the viewer’s eye and proceeds to reveal himself by making photographs about digital surveillance that look like paintings, the revelation, like most analogue visual surveillance recordings, remains superficial. Ultimately, what we see does not lead to any substantial knowledge.

Wessel is adamant that there is a dimension of social life that connects art, politics, the State, and mechanisms of surveillance.²⁰ Although he doesn’t explicitly acknowledge it, there is a history of French thought, particularly after Michel Foucault, that places the material human body as the focus of the State’s penetration of private life through surveillance.²¹ Moreover, it is the responsibility of art, and by extension the artist, to pull together the threads of seeing and knowing under surveillance. In particular, the visual arts, must expose the connections between art, the State, and the practices

¹⁹ The blurring of the line between abstraction and representation has been the project of modernist painting in the twentieth century. See my discussion in Frances Guerin, *The Truth is Always Grey*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), chapter one.

²⁰ Wessel, Speech of the artist at the exhibition opening, 28 January 2020.

²¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

and products of surveillance.²² However, we also know that since the order of things has changed, the human body, and the human subject are no longer the who or what of surveillance, and nor are they its representation in portraiture.²³ At least, when a “portrait” of an individual is produced through surveillance, there is nothing to see. The representation typically takes the form of data stored somewhere that has no location on a map.

Furthermore, like most of the documentation of visual surveillance mechanisms in use today, and the portraits of kings and princes from the French Third Republic, the traces tell us nothing about the person.²⁴ The documentation of Wessel’s presence on the technological screen confirms that he was there, the traces show that his body is missing from the image, but they do not describe him or give insight into his identity. Similarly, Louis XVIII’s costume has nothing to do with who he is as a person. It seems that neither historical portraits nor the data recordings of an absent presence give access to personhood, identity or personality of the one they depict. They merely demonstrate a trace of the past, a memory-event from which the physical person, place, and cultural moment have been erased.

Thus, confusion in the presence of *Die Summe meiner Daten* proliferates. To be sure, beautiful images that look like paintings, but turn out to be photographs, eventually discourse on the role of the digital in contemporary daily life. Moreover, the analogue traces of fingers and fluids override each other again and again. All recognition and identity is wiped away. Even if the glass of the smart phone or tablet is our interface with the world, the traces we leave telling the story of our adventures on the internet. When shopping and ordering online movies, our choices might reveal what we bought, what we desire, what we yearn for, but, what these actions and instincts really mean are open to debate. Even if these traces remain in the bowels of the internet archive, their connection to who we are in the present moment is likely remote.

Face to face with Wessel’s photographs, viewers can be overcome with a sense of ill-at-ease. In front of a single photograph, the mystery and magic, as well as two hundred years of changing relations between Germany and

²² John Rajchman, “Foucault’s Art of Seeing,” *October* 44, Spring, 1988, 88-117.

²³ This is Foucault’s discussion of Velasquez’s *Las Meninas* in which the relay of gazes ensures the constantly shifting focus, thus absence of the subject of the portrait being painted on the artist’s canvas. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).

²⁴ On the history of portraiture and its representation of social status and wealth as the marker of identity, see Joanna Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

France evaporate. The concerns of *Die Summe meiner Daten* could not be more diametrically opposed to the grandiosity and bourgeoisie self-certainty reflected in the lavish Empire style *hôtel particulier*. Nevertheless, the revelations are not to be mistaken as knowledge. Having become reconciled to the fact that we are looking at photographs not paintings and acclimated to the boldness of photographs keeping company with treasured painted portraits, visitors might be unnerved to discover that they are looking at photographs that represent the finger marks and bodily fluids of the artist. Potentially even more disconcerting is the deception, then confrontation, of photographs that verge into visual discourses on the invisibility of contemporary surveillance mechanisms and our blindness to them. Thus, standing in rooms that began as spaces defined by portraits of French kings and princes, over time viewers find themselves in the presence of Wessel's portraits. In turn, the narrative transforms to discourse on a portrait of the digitally defined contemporary moment. In a world in which secrets are held close, and treason is a common occurrence, Wessel's *Die Summe meiner Daten* is a prescient reminder that the invisible mechanisms of surveillance are everywhere, constantly undermining privacy, stealing a version of everyone's identity. This is a situation to which many acquiesce, choosing to use the technology of corruption. At the same time, we can only hope that the logical conclusions of Wessel's photographs in exhibition are accurate: that our stolen data tells nothing of the identity of the owner, even when those in possession of it claim the very opposite.

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