

Matt Saunders

Connoisseur of Chaos: Wessel's Broken Picture Space

I am looking at the images of *Schöne Neue Welt* on my phone and also my laptop on the train, bouncing in jittery motion thanks to the poor quality of the Amtrak rails. The lighting is bad and keeps picking up dust and greasy fingerprints on my screen, and it's only getting worse as the sun dips towards the horizon. I see a spot of something that I absentmindedly scrape off the screen, while I contemplate a new mark on the track pad. Is that a dent? My fancy digital tools are so used, so grimy, they distract me as I try to focus on the images I've opened.

I keep returning to this folder of pictures that Elias sent, savoring the lovely screen-glow colors and all-around elegance, not to mention (I'll say it) the beauty of these images. All the while I'm frustrated by the compromise of seeing them this way, longing to engage with the scale, the surface, the material qualities of this work, and every time I see my reflection on the dirty screen, overpowering a subtle, dark image (*Schöne Neue Welt* No. 7, for instance, or No. 11) I curse both the disembodied nature of our modern tech viewing and the too-physical indignities of the device.

"Device," to my analogue painting mind, is a word that the artist Jasper Johns taught me. In works like *Device Circle* (1959) and *Device* (1961-1962), the "device" is perhaps the piece of the painting—a wooden slat, for instance, or a ruler or a broom—that disrupts the whole, messing up its surface with a scrape or a scour or a swoosh. Or else "device" is the whole work, an object that marks itself, enacting its own making while damaging its own surface—a radical literalism, denied illusion. Smearred paint is what it is: both a new mark and an erasure of the old. After a number of famous paintings and drawings with this subject, the "device" in Johns' work migrates to a number of prints, where the object that drags and the drag itself are both rendered as image, a flattened sign of the creative/destructive double act.

I digress, but not entirely. One of the uncanny qualities of looking at the *Schöne Neue Welt* works on a screen is how much we're looking at the visual artifacts of damaged screens. As plumes of digital distress edge out from uncomfortably evident cracks, I keep tilting my own device back and forth, troubled by the illusion of real damage. This reciprocity I'm experiencing, trying to write about the work, reminds me of one of the other great works indebted to Johns' devices: Robert Morris' 1961 *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*. Wessel's battered iPhones and iPads are devices that create images out of the marks of their own breaking—images of an emergent abstraction, intimately tied up with erasure and disruption. A huge difference of course is that Wessel's devices are not of sturdy wood and canvas, like Johns used, and however difficult to destroy as his Apple products were (indeed Elias described to me his persistent and strenuous effort just to do real damage) the results can't help to call to mind technological failure.

Aspects of this series reminds me of formative work from the early 2000s in New York: Trisha Donnelly's objects rolled on scanners, Seth Price's videos effacing themselves through simple digital effects, Wade Guyton's plotter printed paintings laced with breakdowns of the machines and materials, and even Takeshi Murata's early "videoslime" experimentations. What these diverse practices seemed to share was the promise of generative malfunction, a kind of sublime of the consumer tech breakdown. Tech has only gotten more consumer and now delivers most of our content, so we probably all know these breakdowns intimately. That's why, in a realm of arguably total abstraction, passages within the imagery of *Schöne Neue Welt* seem completely familiar, not so much representational as simply matter-of-fact (and a bit like Johns' literalism). Although much of the imagery is quite otherworldly—the glorious, brave frontier of a truly messed-up device—suddenly there's the unmistakable striation of a failing refresh, missing pixels, or the notched-in dying edge of a screen. Perhaps you recognize the curving rainbow patterns or visual air bubbles as the layers within a screen start to pull apart. Within visually rich fields there are repeated moments that clue us in to scale and familiar technology and malfunction. Just as Guyton's paintings derive some of their power from their absolutely matter-of-factness—he does nothing to conceal or finesse the familiar awkwardness of poor ink jet printing—so Wessel keeps his images productively connected to something clear and relatable in how they were made. These are broken pictures, and those breaks are beautiful.

The brave new world, in Elias Wessel's work, is always distressed and disarrayed. What does it mean to so emphatically display the destruction of technology? To some extent, it's the familiar. The lived experience of new technology is also an acclimation to new times of break-down, new types of damage and failure. (The violence inherent in Wessel's process is the flip side of the protectiveness we feel around our expensive devices, new types of bodies requiring new types of care.) There is spectacular breakage in Wessel's devices but also the minor, constant interference with which I started: dust on the screen, low grade anxiety, and the surface itself as a constant, bodily presence in our lives. What does it mean to harness the energy of these experiences into an elevated type of picture making? It strikes me that there is a glee in Wessel's process, but also something fundamentally redemptive. His phone has died to relieve us of our cares, to displace our trauma at an expensive slip or crack and let us see the random beauty that erupts in the malfunction. I recognize familiar effects (like those listed above) but also take pleasure in trying to decipher others. The meaning of these images does not come only from the visual lushness of color, structure and luminosity, it lies in the productive tension between those appealing aesthetics and the way you can read some of the transformative damage. (I react to this with a certain shudder and awe.)

Thus far I've been careful to call these pieces vaguely as "works" or "images," because I am writing about them in screen space. Which of course is *not* what Wessel is truly giving us. What do these do outside of the screen? Let us return to Wade Guyton's practice, which often hinges on the failures connecting digital space to a material object. For his most essential works, the *Black Paintings* series (2007-2008),

Guyton instructed the printer to output a simple black square to canvas, which it repeatedly failed to do without accident. The work's meaning derives from these failures: the scuffs, scrapes, striations and misalignments as printer grapples with heavy primed canvas. A Guyton painting is nothing if not an obvious material struggle.

Wessel's work goes in a different direction. Photographing the effects on his shattered screens and printing those images as large color photographs, he sidesteps Guyton's imperfect printer for a more reliable output. In fact, if anything, this approach homogenizes, smooths and denatures the image from its violent origin. We can read the signs of the damage in the images, but some of the information (not to mention the haptic quality) is flattened as a kind of seamlessness of surface is reinscribed. What we're given falls quintessentially in the formats of contemporary photography: scalable, flawless, back-mounted. So, what are we to make of Wessel's claim that this has something to do with painting?

Is there more to this idea than their at-times painterly scale and unframed presentation? Neither quality seems intrinsically un-photographic in this day and age. Yet I do find Wessel's work provocative and interesting as "painting." There are obvious connections in the rhetoric of the images. Shapes and colors; edge relationships; dynamics and balance; and especially the presence of visible mark-making—these speak to many of the conventions in abstract painting. (I find the "presence of the hand" especially surprisingly and linger over the nervous scratches in *Schöne Neue Welt Nos. 2, 5, 6a and 6b.*) But I do not think work is automatically interesting because it passes for something else. If one were to merely mistake one of the photographs for a painting that would not be enough.

What I find potentially painterly in the *Schöne Neue Welt* is not the look of painting, but paradoxically the flattening of image and materials into one composite body. With his device's screen as an intermediate conduit from pixel to photograph, Wessel finds a place to introduce the manual and fold it into the fabric of another kind of space, just as painters work in the balance between intentional gesture and what materials do on their own.

In this age of changing technology and numerous possibilities for fabrication it is interesting to consider how an expanded definition of Painting can migrate and stay true to some lineage. So often, attempts to expand "Painting" have relied entirely on the format, taking stretchers and canvas to be ontological. Often this is just as shallow as the "look" of painting. I'm much more interested in the way aspects of Painting can be invigorated by taking root in other practices.

Wessel's works are composites in which signals (firing pixels) and marks fold together. There is a productive resonance too between the space of the digital screen and the embodied picture space of a painting, though it is not always evident, given how we treat our screens as windows, delivery systems for content, and overlook their physicality. Screen images rely on a structure not unlike the warp and weft of canvas—hence I call it "fabric." Does that grant an object in that space a body? A streaming

signal can glitch or be interrupted, but can it bruise? *Schöne Neue Welt* suggests yes, as, by cracking the seamless body of the device, Wessel draws out the interaction of signal and diode with physical forces. It is commonplace for painters to talk about the “body” of the paint. The qualities of a painting are inseparable from qualities of its ground. And it is these relationships that make the medium, not specific formats. (Think of a tiny Sieneese panel painting and a giant Anselm Kiefer. We accept both as Painting, but they have very little in common except a relationship of materiality to image and mark to whole.) Wessel’s work, recognizing the painterliness of the images he conjures, participates in the broadening definition of Painting for a world that increasingly renders its traditional materials obsolete. We don’t need a genre of old traditions on life-support, we need a new and nimble painterly intelligence that understands that the space in which painting operates is any in which a matrix of materials can be coaxed into image—not as image alone, but as embodied, compound form.

As a painter in the old school sense, it’s not lost on me that Wessel breaks into this space through the screen. The surface qualities of photography—the sense of an image behind and inside that surface—have always struck me as different from those of painting, where the surface of the canvas is a topography and an open point of contact between the painter and the work. Wessel literally hammers on the closed glass of the screen to open it up.

The other thing he does, which interests me a lot, is put these works into time. The video work in the series arguably participates in a long tradition of hand-drawn, abstract moving image (e.g. Fischinger, Richter, Belson, Lye) often grouped as animation but close kin to painting. Interestingly, the visual incidents in Wessel’s *The Moving Images* (2021) are not direct marks, but rather reactions to his “drawing.” The screens respond to the damage he’s done, in and on their own time, by flickering, pulsing, glitching. These are unmistakably digital effects, but why does it strike me as so uncannily bodily? Like a breathing thing.

Setting aside any anthropomorphism of the videos, I do believe they underscore the connection Wessel’s work has to something like a practice of painting. The pulses passing through the videos explore the fabric of that space, not as an undifferentiated, immaterial field, but as a material and structured terrain. I’m back to worrying about my own fragile screens, but now I’m thinking about them differently. Where else, in the digital world, have we felt such tooth to the canvas?