

Nikolaus Kratzer, February 2022

Images Through an Algorithmic Lens. On the Visualization of Reality

Inseparably linked to the invention of photography is the search for possibilities of photographic image manipulation. Particular ingenuity was demonstrated by artists—that is to say, photographers—who strove to create art with their images and fought for the recognition of the artistic potential of their medium. In the course of the nineteenth century, they defended themselves above all against the criticism that cameras were machines that produced nothing more than mechanical copies of reality, thus allowing no scope for artistic creativity, and therefore could in no way be called art.

One of the first attempts to combat the lifelessness of the photographic image was to add color in daguerreotypes by hand. This seemed like a logical solution insofar as the lack of color was a determining factor in the competitive relationship with painting. Subsequently, photographers such as Gustave Le Gray moved on to manipulating not only the final product, but the process of creation itself. One of the most well-known examples of the early editing of negatives are Le Gray's iconic seascapes. Capturing spectacular cloud formations on the one hand and dramatic waves on the other required different exposure times. For this reason, Le Gray made two negatives, which he assembled into one negative to then create a composite image in the final print. Two photographs taken at different times ultimately formed one image that was perceived by the recipients as a real existing scene—as a visualization of reality.

One could compile a long list of the various possibilities of manipulating analog photography. In the context of Elias Wessel's *Images Through an Algorithmic Lens*, however, this example already demonstrates that photographic manipulation has a tradition, and that this tradition was closely connected with the aspiration to produce art. And it is precisely the linking of fundamental histories of the problems surrounding photography with the latest technologies and current social debates that can be described as the core quality of Elias Wessel's working methods.

With the present series, the artist deals with the panorama mode installed on conventional smartphones, which, via an algorithm, allows users to easily create a panoramic image in just a few seconds by slowly moving the camera while activating the function. The algorithm “mounts”—to stay with the image of Le Gray’s negative montage—an infinite number of image sequences into a wide strip of images. The final product is a computer-generated image which, by its very nature, differs significantly from what the human eye is capable of perceiving in terms of perspective and sharpness of focus.

Elias Wessel challenges the algorithm to a duel, as it were, tries to subvert it, to counteract its programming. The images he then produces are not panoramas, but rather abstract compositions that are only distantly reminiscent of the original motif. What is decisive here is that Elias Wessel does not merely adapt a photographic technique artistically. Rather, he is concerned with the psychophysiological dimension of visual perception. The “perfect” and omnipresent smartphone image is not seen as an evolutionary feat but is involved in a game that ultimately aims to push aside the compulsion to optimize and to open up a view onto “sensuality” (Wessel).

This lack of sensuality, which had already served as the principle argument against the artistic potential of the photographic medium in the aesthetic discourse of the nineteenth century, is in turn closely linked to the history of abstract painting. For—according to a popular line of argumentation—the ability of the photographic apparatus to copy nature perfectly is said to have been one of the reasons why certain tendencies in the field of painting turned to non-objectivity. In other words, painting devoted itself—so as not to appear overly technical—to the sensuality of abstract color compositions. According to this line of reasoning, abstraction served as a kind of cut, caesura, or turnaround to rethink the notion of what stimuli an image can trigger in the recipient. Similarly, Elias Wessel counters the omnipresent spectacle of images with vibrant blurring.

Today, photography has established itself an undisputed medium of the fine arts. What has not changed in the field of artistic photography since the nineteenth century, however, is the constant examination of basic technical conditions and the question of how these can be

manipulated. In this context, Elias Wessel succeeds in creating highly sensual photographs by combining technical resourcefulness, compositional skill, and reflexive thinking.