

Michael Wesely and the Invention of the Invisible

The invention of photography – one might assume – brought with it an emancipation from subjective descriptions of the world, descriptions drawing exclusively on the human faculty of perception. Although the release of the shutter, the impetus for the image, continued to source from human beings, all of a sudden an apparatus was wedged between humanity and reality. From that point on images could be selected as opposed to being created from scratch, as in the case of painting. It is hardly coincidental that the camera was an invention of the technical revolution which, throughout its evolutionary advancement up until the present day, has always placed great faith in the possibility of achieving control over the world through the continuous refinement of automation. According to this idea, the machine is nothing less than the appropriate and universal reproduction of a world subjected, it would seem, to a set of exclusively mechanistic principles. The photograph, in contrast to imaging processes predating its invention, allows for an immediate comparison with the subject at the moment of its production. This one brief moment, at which the user needs to do no more than open the lens of the camera, is sufficient to capture reality. Logically, the authenticity of pictorial motifs rendered in this manner derives from this idea, even though direct comparisons are precluded by the passing of time. In the early stages of photography's development, it was not only the "retinal" credibility that stood out, but also the magical appropriation of real entities; photographic reproductions supplanted the act of seeing, as it were, of looking at and into reality.

With the emergence of photography as an art form, however, a significant development came to the fore, which was not without consequence for human sight per se: the invention of invisibility. In the twentieth century the principle of mechanical reproduction behind the automatic exposure device was transcended, whereupon both the device and the photographer were suddenly credited with the capacity to reproduce invisible movements in a manner that had previously been considered the innate and exclusive domain of fine arts.

Prior to that point, the mere act of looking through the viewfinder and activating the automatic lens opening seemed insufficient to warrant appraising the achievement of the photographer in artistic terms. The picture "painted" itself, so to speak; the selection of details was considered a pleasant episode, but not an artistic achievement as such. Photography was taught as an applied art at schools of arts and crafts. The development of the hand camera, which was available to the population at large – thus undermining any elitist associations – was welcomed enthusiastically by the masses, resulting in the mass production of "automatic" pictures. The democratic principle attributed to the camera effected a brutal withdrawal of power and control from the realm of fine arts over the production of images. Indeed, by the first half of the nineteenth century, the supremacy of visual artists in generating representations of reality had quite obviously been disrupted by a simple apparatus. Nevertheless, this development was in no way accompanied by the recognition of artistic photography as a conscious act borne by the compositional ideas of one individual. The constellation of a mental pictorial space and, moreover, the cultural recognition thereof – which only randomly succeeded in the face of widespread photographic amateurism – required the author as artistic subject. Even today, concealed within the myth of autonomy, of the automation (in the sense of the Greek word *autómatos* meaning "self-willing" or "self-acting") of the apparatus, is an underlying doubt as to the truly independent authorship of the photographer. The camera has never been cleared of the suspicion that its "subjectivity" is automated.

This principle of utilising the relative autonomy of mechanised phenomena and of integrating and deploying this autonomy within an individual artistic concept constitutes a major focus of photographer Michael Wesely's artistic practice. He oscillates between conceptual designs developed with extraordinary precision and an experimental exploration of the inherent unpredictability of the camera. For Wesely, experimenting with the camera is also a means of reinventing it, of recreating it as a primitive instrument, thus swimming against the tide of technology and the camera's advancement to a piece of high-performance digital technology. Wesely achieves astonishing results with the simplest of technologies, the pinhole camera. The only adjustment he makes is the substitution of the round opening with a narrow slit. Although his celebrated long exposures are the product of technical finesse, like his primitive equipment, they are consistently analogue. Here, whatever emerges has

everything to do with exposures and nothing to do with picture-calculating data banks. Wesely has tested the analogue system of the camera to its limits without ever abandoning his interrogation of the medium. Where his long exposures are concerned, it would be too simple to speak in terms of a reversal of the temporal factors distinguishing photography from other media. Counter to the widespread image of the photographer as a hunter tracking down the right moment is the question of how one might recognise what is “right”. The “right” moment, or that which stands out in a picture irrespective of the reality, is only indirectly related to speed. Thus, the issue of speed in long exposures is as uninteresting as after a hundredth of a second in a successful photo taken with standard exposure times. It remains an exploration on the level of secondary description.

Irrespective of the technical methods employed by the artist, of foremost importance is his decision to pursue the idea he has formulated in his mind beforehand. Even if the results seem to surprise the photographer himself, he nevertheless consciously works towards them. In 1971, for example, Düsseldorf-based photographer Lothar Wolleh carried out a photographic experiment at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm whereby Joseph Beuys, who was in the process of installing an exhibition at the time, was observed by a camera whose shutter was automatically released every 5–10 minutes. The “automatic” photographs that emerged from this project were astoundingly close to the intentions of that which Beuys considered the exemplary publication of one’s own biography as an artist. They deliver the appropriate visual material for the messianic self-interpretation that was Beuys’s artistic strategy. One can hardly presume that these are manipulated spiritistic photographs onto which invisible spiritual manifestations have inscribed themselves. Similarly, one can hardly infer that the camera adopted the role of the subject, so to speak. Every form of potential surprise is ultimately subject to the photographer’s decision to allow the image to exist or to withhold it from publication. The comparison between the picture developed from exposed film and reality invariably takes place within our pictorial imagination.

The decision to refrain from documenting processes – such as the construction of a tall building – that take place over an extended period of time in linear sequences, and to capture instead the entire process quasi-simultaneously in one single image, is based on an image previously imagined which concurrently serves as the sole impetus behind the realisation of the actual image. Yet equally, Michael Wesely’s motivation was to demonstrate the absurdity of the deciding moment.

When the length of exposure tends toward the extreme, sometimes spanning several years, it is literally impossible for the photographer to follow the action without interruption. Even if he were prepared to put in the time, he would almost certainly miss most of the phenomena visible in the photo. In order to be able to read and evaluate images that the great space telescopes “see”, astrophysicists similarly use photographs to capture details that the naked eye is incapable of seeing through a telescope. Here, however, the concept revolves around a purely technical extension of our sight, an “artificial retina”, as it were, reminiscent of the manner in which the invention of the photographic camera was viewed in the nineteenth century.

Wesely’s photographs featuring superimposed layers of building processes and sequences of movements do not serve scientific knowledge as such. Rather they describe something located beyond the bounds of rational discourse concerning the conditions of reality. The perceived irretrievability of time sequences we experience in relation to our own physical decline, the subjective perception of the irreversibility of processes advancing through time, is the central theme of these large-scale photographs by Michael Wesely. Yet they also treat the question of what it means to depict reality, the question of whether photography is in fact a medium that is able to capture on film the reality that surrounds us. Our immediate perception of objectively transpiring processes invariably occurs in linear phases which are singularly capable of recording events in a seemingly logical sequence. In his landscape photographs Michael Wesely embarks upon his most radical exploration of the photographic representation as a borderline experience of pictorial vision. However, Wesely’s experiment is difficult to comprehend without reflecting upon history – the history of American landscape photography for example.

Early American landscapes from the 1870s by artists such as Carlton E. Watkins, Timothy O’Sullivan or William Bell brought the New World to Europe as a paradisiacal migration incentive in the

immediate albeit ultimately mediated form of a photograph. The picture was not regarded as a representation per se, but rather as the realisation or establishment of sight in the physiological sense. The camera was merely the tool, and the photograph a compelling document of the eye's capacity for realistic perception. Impressive in their captivating realism, the early landscape photographs in the tradition of Ansel Adams, Edward Weston or Thomas Joshua Cooper have yet to be surpassed in their likeness to reality. For Michael Wesely, who studied American landscape photography in great detail during his stay in the United States, there was no sense in continuing the tradition, for the competition was too great, the theme already exhausted – and by art of the highest quality. Nevertheless, his perpetually changing experience of the American landscape, which he encountered firsthand on numerous extended journeys across the continent, has never ceased to pose a challenge. For the question remains: How can contemporary landscape photography be further developed? How can new unexplored ground be broken, different from the terrain marked out by the earlier greats with their monumental and heroic landscapes. This question motivated Wesely not to abandon his search. In recent times, trivial and commercially-oriented landscape photography has witnessed an inflationary distribution through the tourism industry. And it is true that our point of view has undergone radical changes as a result of the flood of poor-quality images to which we are constantly exposed. The distribution of electronic images as a result of mass telecommunications and digitalisation has considerably weakened our ability to engage with pictures. We scarcely have any idea of what it meant for people in the nineteenth century to view a mechanically produced “real-life” image. In today's times the internalised difference between photographic image and reality is even cultivated as a result of the influence of the mass media. What we are witnessing is an inverted form of vision, whereby nature is measured in terms of artifice, evaluated and ultimately reworked.

Michael Wesely's large-scale, wide-format colour beach photographs taken in 1996 (Santa Margarida, Roses) depict Spanish beaches replete with the customary monolithic hotel resorts of the tourist trade positioned to the rear of a sandy expanse leading down to the water. The subject of the photo undeniably ranks among the clichéd images used to market modern-day wanderlust, photos which typically focus on the tourists. In Wesely's pictures, there is little trace – at least in terms of pictorial realism – of the memento mori of human existence in the face of the endless, eternal sea that we typically associate with the beach photo in twentieth-century art. In place of the standard masses of people lolling about on beach chairs under the shade of their umbrellas, we see nothing more than a series of shadowy smudges whose presence strangely counteracts our anticipation of reality. Is it a realistic image or merely a manipulated effect that we are incapable of seeing with the naked eye? Or one that might never have occurred in reality? The photographs have an unsettling way of subverting our habitual way of seeing whereby the static image is only perceived as reality when the objects depicted are sharply contoured. We are inclined to regard a clearly contoured short-exposure portrait of a person, or in this case a group of people at the beach, as a document of a real event. Ironically, this conception could not be further from reality. Indeed, in reality all movements are characterised by blurriness and overlapping. It is only the inertia of the eye that prevents us from perceiving constant motion. Wesely's long-exposure portraits reveal nothing if not this. Like the beach pictures, they imbibe the incessant movements; they record sequences of movement which are invisible to us, which our eyes are incapable of taking in, as a static image. Through this registration of images, which we perceive as unrealistic, the photographs acquire a metaphysical dimension. Viewed philosophically, they deliver an alarming depiction of the “thrownness”, to use Heidegger's terminology, and fragility of existence. The human being as a transitory creature, as an individual journeying across the world becomes, in relation to the temporal dimension of nature, a subject at the mercy of short exposure times who is unable to escape this shockingly rapid self-destruction. Michael Wesely's experiments with a simple handmade camera, with which he is able to control the entry of light through a vertically or horizontally adjustable slit covering the lens, no longer explore the contoured figuration of the urban or natural landscape of the subject but rather the spectral reflection of light. Yet to speak in terms of abstract photography would be incorrect. For irrespective of the fact that, to a large extent, the images defy our habitual way of looking at things, the photography is nevertheless figurative. His photos of Roman Renaissance palaces divided into vertical strips of colour reveal nothing of the structure of the façade, nor its ornamentation, registering instead the colourful reflection of light created by the sun on the building's surface. Whereas a “realistic” photograph of the edifice would comprise predominantly narrative and characteristic elements, here its reflection is completely non-

material. The inner event of seeing as an optical process is thus objectivised, though not abstracted. Its translation back into a framework of familiar realism is an intellectual process, such that seeing is split, so to speak, into an optical part and an intellectual part which we classify as perception. The progressive incapacitation of the viewer though ever more perfect imaging processes, which seem able to fully capture reality, is, in a certain sense, revoked by Wesely's reductive approach, thus reenfranchising the imaginative and intuitive powers of the viewer.

In "Ostdeutsche Landschaften" (East-German Landscapes) Wesely takes up the same theme, once again questioning the phenomenon of recognisability and our image of the world. Using his self-designed camera, he photographs different landscapes in eastern Germany. Here, too, the camera produces images that are not manipulated but rather record the reality of a particular landscape using the same camera he used for the Roman palaces, although the slit covering the lens of the camera in the East-German landscape series was horizontal. The landscape-format photographs show nothing more than the colour gradations of the sky meeting on the horizon line alongside the characteristic landscape unfolding below. What at first glance gives the impression of a monochrome reveals upon closer inspection myriad shades of colour, a simplification tending towards the abstraction of that which extends before our eyes in rich detail, though we may not, and cannot see it. The landscape pictures capture the essence of a certain place, the unconscious and invisible substratum as it were of a geological and artificially constructed expanse. The inhabitants of this area, who over many years integrate these landscapes into their very being, would almost certainly recognise their familiar environment in these abstract compositions. The psychological notation of a person's native skies resembles a long exposure able to record the mental profile, the invisible side of life's landscapes. Obviously the psychodynamics of the situation cannot be translated back into the pictures, remaining an inner fantasy instead. But it could straight away declare itself in accord with Wesely's landscape photographs. Without prevarication it would be able to understand the invention of the invisible as a part of a probing realism, as a portrayal or reflection of reality.

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2005