

The Order of the Camera Michael Wesely's Photographs

All over the world the term "camera" is used to designate an apparatus for taking photographs. Who in Hong Kong, New York, Cairo or London is aware of the fact that when buying a "camera" one also buys a room, a living-room in fact. Anyone who has holidayed in Italy is familiar with the hand-written signs hung up along the streets and bearing the words "affittasi camera", "room to let". The term camera is derived from the camera obscura, the pinhole camera. Thus the photographic apparatus was initially described as a room, admittedly a very small room, except of course for those camera dollies used by nineteenth century photographers as small photographic studios that were drawn by a horse and were so spacious that the photographers could "live" in them.

Michael Wesely's artistic preoccupation with the medium of photography began in 1990 in Salzburg with the project entitled "Camera Controversa", for which he worked with a pinhole camera. His attempt to come to grips with the medium of photography at that time focused initially not on the photographic image, but on the conditions under which the appliance functioned. The question of the genesis of the "exposures" preceded any consideration of the technical quality of the photographs. Wesely's approach differed in principle, therefore, from that of the previous generation of artists in particular to that medium. They analysed photography at the level of the image and its meaning, and integrated their findings into their works.

The Salzburg project deals with the "camera", the small dark room into which the ray of light enters, leaving behind the image of an external reality on the light-sensitive carrier. Each camera is constructed in such a way that the lens or the simple opening is positioned in line with the middle of the image carrier, in accordance with the laws of central perspective. Thus photography continues the tradition of central perspective painting developed in the Renaissance, except that the vanishing point is no longer in the depth of field of the depiction but in the focus of the rays of light, that is to say, in the opening in front of what is to be reproduced as an image. This reversal of the vanishing point was already a decisive factor in the family portrait of the Lenbachs, done in 1903, for which the artist used a photograph he himself had taken as a model for the painting. In this painting, the group of persons seems not only to be forcing itself into the picture plane inside the frame, but even to be somewhat out of place, as it were. In this reversal, the vanishing point – as a principle of concentration within the order of the image, which latter organises the spatio-physical on a plane – dissolves, giving rise to an unusual dispersion.

When considering photography, the space between the focus of the penetrating light and the level of the image carrier is usually not given any thought at all. This question of the photographic image that emerges in the space behind the opening in the apparatus, that is to say, within the actual camera, is the one raised by Michael Wesely. In the Salzburg work he began by asking what would happen if instead of the surface plumb opposite the lens, the side walls of the camera were covered with light-sensitive emulsion. With this he also raised the theoretical question of what would happen if the light entered not in the middle plumb to the image surface, but off-centre. The result would be distortions and anamorphosis, much as they were used by artists both in the Renaissance and the Baroque not just in their extreme depictions of the human body, but especially in their illusionist rendering of buildings in the Baroque "heaven" of churches and palaces.

Wesely's idea for Salzburg was to redirect and reinterpret the gaze from the obvious to the incidental; from the flat rear wall of the camera to its side walls, from the centre to the edge or periphery. In a city in which the monuments are constantly exposed to snap-shooting tourists, the familiar buildings seem to suffer from a certain wear and tear. The pictorial motifs seem tacky, as if they have been physically man-handled by countless curious visitors. Everything seems to have already been fixed in the long tradition of pictorial reproduction; the gaze is jammed and scarcely allows any changes or new views. The

picture postcard had dealt the death blow to any more dynamic treatment of the monument, building, or beautiful landscape. The spectator is required to reconstruct the cemented view. This is how the world's numerous "famous" sights came about, and we tourists seek them out, as it were, in obedient fulfilment of the rules of a huge parlour game.

Michael Wesely directs our gaze to the already familiar and at the same time bends it around what is happening in the vicinity of the central motifs. He does this by covering the side walls of his camera with light-sensitive film, thereby moving the edge, the sides, up in the hierarchy of what is worthy of being seen, displacing the familiar and boringly rigid. With the discovery of the apparently incidental, his photograph conquers the space of the camera.

From this starting point, Michael Wesely then goes on to ask about the "lost time" of the rays that penetrated the darkness of the camera. What does the time factor alter? What distinguishes a take lasting just a fraction of a second from one lasting hours, days, even a year? If the bundled rays of light penetrating the space of the camera through a small narrow hole are able to depict the world in front of that hole, then inside a day, month, or year this camera can also gather all the changes that take place in front of it, assuming that daylight or artificial light can fall on them. Unlike a film document that reproduces reality at the same speed as it takes place and yet is also dependent on the projection technique of 16 images per second (as in, for example, Andy Warhol's films "Sleep", 1963, which is six hours long, or "Empire" of 1964, which last eight hours), Wesely's image reproduces even greater spaces of time. His "Bahnhofs-Bilder" (Station Images) show us great halls with deserted platforms and clocks on whose faces the hands seem to have melted away, having moved too fast compared to the overall space of time of the take. The time required to take these Bahnhof photographs was determined by the length of the train journey from departure to destination. One particular result of this long exposure time is that due to the duration the ephemeral disappears, granting the constant an undiminished presence. What moves into the foreground again are phenomena that get lost or simply concealed by the fidgetiness of the fast movement – after all, a station is an apt symbol for what is passing: departure and arrival. The still, static, peaceful shakes off the dust of frenzy. The station halls appear as huge architectural structures with no people and only mere hints of trains that stopped there for any length of time. The big changes come into view in the photographs taken over a whole year: The buildings on Potsdamer Platz in Berlin grow and gradually conceal one another; offices and exhibition halls breathe the calm air of change, which at the same time means life.

Wesely's photographs therefore are recordings that erase and reduce at the same time as they register, though in a different way to film. One key to the secret of Wesely's images lies in this reduction. In these views life finds expression on the "edges", in the blurred areas. Only the inalterable, the dead, remains rigid and immobile; life revolves around these immobile elements, partially clouding and concealing them, but always remaining elusive in its physicality and concrete form. Its centres blur, causing the rigid to vibrate and apparently dissolve.

As all photographs are taken on the basis of a constant precondition, namely, that light is bundled at one point, they reproduce external reality in a similar way to the human eye. The camera "imitates" the relationship between the human eye and the focussing lens, the light entering through the pupil and the projection of the rays onto the retina. The fact that this is only a random reproduction of reality, literally a "light=photo" "drawing=graph" which exists alongside any number of other technical methods of representing reality, raises the same question as Michael Wesely asks of his photographic apparatus: What would the image look like if instead of a hole, the camera had a different opening for the light? A slit lengthwise through the lens produces images which are no longer directly comparable with the usual photographs. The series "Palazzi di Roma" and "New York" were taken in swift succession in 1995, and the photographs were all taken with a slit camera. These vertical stripes no longer reproduce a drawing of reality, but more the light and colour shades of the situations photographed. The palaces in Rome are kept

in green, ochre and grey tones with slight hints of yellow and red, while the neon-lit localities in New York are loud in tone and dazzlingly gaudy. Both the sunlit Baroque buildings in Rome, which seem to give off their shimmering pearly tones with diffidence, almost hesitance, and the neon advertising signs of the New York fast food restaurants, glowing alongside each other in bands of extreme colour, communicate the mood, the sound of the respective real situation. The unconscious, sensed or imagined atmosphere comes across more intensely when the aim is not to reproduce a copy. As spectators with "normally" working eyes, we now see the world through the eyes of a stranger; a creature subject to different conditions. We sense and feel; the colours in the photographs seem to resound; we remain in the realm of the uncertain. Here these photographs meet up again with the long exposures in which the fleeting but vivid moments disappear and are replaced by something more general.

Michael Wesely's new photographs show us landscapes taken with the same slit camera. These new landscape views were taken in 1999 and 2000 in the west of the United States, some of them at famous tourist venues. The astonishing thing about them is how easily the spectator forms the impression of a landscape. A horizontal line would seem sufficient to suggest the horizon; the brighter part on top the sky, the darker part below the earth. There are no corresponding connotations for the vertical images. Sky and earth seem more familiar to us than what is standing, upright. Many of these landscapes resemble the view of the rising sun from an aeroplane window. What veils reality seen from an aeroplane is the diffuse light over the earth, still enveloped in the darkness of night, whereas in Wesely's photographs the blurredness comes about by the undifferentiated light in the foreground. As the depth of space increases, his lines seem to become more precise, then spread out in the sky to form a broad uninterrupted plane. This gives rise to colour fields with subtle transitions which, unlike the Roman palazzi, do not flow together on the pictorial surface but spread out beyond this, expanding, breathing. Despite their colourfulness and the wide range of their palette, these pictures are not bathed in the beautiful glow of the New York neon world, but seem instead to have something of the sensitivity and reticence of romantic landscape painting. They render our world, our world of speed, as visible as a sentimental tone is perceptible, a tone we are unable to abandon for all our rationality. Sometimes these photographs resemble the fleeting views from the window of a speeding car or train, then again our gaze is captured, in thrall to the peace and concentration of the image, and we begin to make out things in the landscape. We associate the green on the ground with meadows and the blue with water – be it a lake or river; the darker green in the distance with forests and the deeper blue with mountains. Yet because of the blurredness, this all remains in the realm of intimation and apprehension, that is to say, in the realm of the vital, the open. Observing these photographs does not result in the recognition of a specific object or a definite landscape, but always revolves around a puzzle.

Helmut Friedel 2000