

## **New York in Stripes**

New York is an eldorado for photographers. Skyscrapers and street ravines, grandiose bridges and streams of people rushing toward them, the nightly sea of lights on the Hudson River – here a sheer indescribable multitude in a fascinating metropolis offers itself to the eye of the camera. It is hardly a coincidence that many famous photographers have worked in New York and, with their photographs, have not only erected a memorial to the city but also have created milestones of photographic history: For instance, Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Lewis W. Hine, and Berenice Abbott.

Like artists and photographers before him, Michael Wesely, too, went to New York in 1995 for the purpose of photography. The titles of the photographs he produced there also promise something typically "New York": an excursion into the colorful world of New York culinary culture. Titles of his photographs include "French Bakery", "B'Way's Best Gourmet Farm", "Hot Food Salad Bar", or "Best Chinese Grill", which immediately make one think of mountains of food, colorful neon signs, polystyrene cups, and masses of "busy" New Yorkers. Of scenes, in other words, that grant a glimpse into the pulsing rhythm of life and the international flair of this city, which, according to its unofficial anthem, "never sleeps".

With one crucial exception: The photographs of Michael Wesely do not record any of these places that are assumedly depicted. Instead of scenes of New York gastronomy, one sees only stripes: vertical stripes of varying widths and in variably bright colors. Stripes that now and then show bends, but mostly are as straight as if they had been drawn with a ruler. Stripes that often thicken toward the center of the image, yet produce no definite symmetries. Stripes whose vibrance suggests a colorful light, without ever revealing where such a light might have originated. Stripes that not only leave the viewer wondering how they were produced, but also provoke the question of how they are still actually connected with New York – this eldorado of photographers.

The photographs here obviously deny what their titles promise – a glimpse into the mega-metropolis of New York. By doing so, they deny that which serves as the domain of photography: the depiction of visible reality. At the same time, however, they claim by their titles to be based upon precisely this reality. This presents a puzzling situation, because if reality is actually supposed to be depicted here, then clearly it is presented in a strangely encoded way. This is comparable to bar codes, the internationally used stripe imprints on products whose contained information can only be deciphered with a scanner. However, not even a scanner will help to explain Michael Wesely's stripes. His photographs no longer reveal the original subject.

Change of location: In 1990, Michael Wesely was in Salzburg, the city of Mozart, photographing the sights there: Mozart's birthplace, the cathedral, the festival theaters, Cafe Tomaselli – the subjects that adorn postcards and souvenirs. Yet here, too, the resulting works do not contain what their titles promise, because Salzburg's sights are nowhere to be found in them. Instead, the viewer is confronted with boxes whose four inner side walls contain photos of the shadowy and distorted facades of buildings and outlines of the pavement. Where the indicated subject should be, however, there is a glaring, vacant center: an apparently fragmented and distorted reproduction of reality in which the main point is omitted.

Change of theme: In 1988, two years before the Salzburg work, Michael Wesely made portraits of artists, a largely classical genre of photography that has in Hugo Erfurth's famous portraits of Otto Dix, Paul Klee, or Marc Chagall a prominent representative. One of Michael Wesely's models was, for example, the Italian painter Emilio Vedova. In the tradition of 19th-century romantic artistic images, he is photographed in front of an open window – so blurred, however, that he is no longer recognizable. Accordingly, the central moment of identifiability is again denied, and that which usually makes up the

substance of the portrait – the exact reproduction of the physiognomical characteristics of the person – is no longer there.

The themes are in all three cases classic for photography: famous cities and famous people. Herein Michael Wesely's work is clearly distinguished from the photographic work of artists such as Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, or Axel Hutte, who prefer largely unspectacular subjects, yet present these in well-constructed, quite picturesque large formats. How Wesely deals with his subjects is less classic. Instead of reproducing them via documentation, he jumbles them by a disconcerting means, transforms them into blurs, distortions, and colorful stripes – in the same way as a critical media skeptic, so it would seem, who no longer believes in the traditional depicting function of photography.

However, if one pursues the question of how these works came to be, one reaches, surprisingly, the opposite conclusion: in every photograph it is simply a question of pure depiction, because all of them owe their production to the original instrument of all photography – a Camera obscura. Its principle, which was already known to Arabic astronomers of the 10th century and which found use by artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Jan Vermeer, is conceivably simple: a closed hollow body with a small opening through which light penetrates and hereby projects the external image inward. It is, after all, thanks to the inventors of photography that this projection can be fixed through a chemical process. – Already in 1978, Michael Wesely made his first portrait with a self-constructed Camera obscura. Since 1987, it stands at the center of his photographic works.

In light of the formal differences between the striped New York, the distorted Salzburg with its missing center, and the blurred portrait of the artist, the questions nonetheless arise: which type of usage of the Camera obscura forms the basis of each, and what conclusions can be drawn from this. – The most obvious is the procedure with the artist's portrait. Here already the title, "8 min. Emilio Vedova", says how the indistinctions resulted: through a long-term exposure. The characterization of Vedova, therefore, does not serve the single moment or capture a single gesture, but rather the sum of moments in which numerous gestures melt into one blurred movement. What is thus documented in the photograph is not only the apparently active Emilio Vedova, but also this timely dimension. – The Salzburg work is a different matter. Here Michael Wesely has changed the position of the film in his self-constructed Camera obscura. Instead of on the back wall of the hollow body, he installed it onto the four side walls. Hereby the film no longer registers the subject across from the light opening, but rather only its surroundings, whose perspectives are distorted. The boxes in which these border appearances are ultimately presented are, therefore, precisely the ones in which they were created. What is actually documented here is not only the surrounding area of the Salzburg sight, but also the process of image creation. – Meanwhile, in the case of the stripe images, the process appears somewhat more mysterious. Here the viewer is no longer capable of guessing how an actual New York restaurant might have metamorphosed into such colorful stripes. In fact, these works represent to date Wesely's most radical form of the production of an image, in which the apparatus rather than the eye of the artist now controls the process. As in the Salzburg work, the solution to the mystery lies in an examination of the Camera obscura. This time, however, it is no longer a matter of the position of the film, but rather the opening through which light penetrates into the Camera obscura. Instead of a round opening that allows an equally spreading beam of light, Michael Wesely inserted a vertical slit in the front of his Camera obscura. The longer this slit becomes, the more the incoming beams of light overlap, so that the horizontal components of the original subject dissolve further and further until they ultimately disappear altogether. What the viewer sees, therefore, is in the truest sense of the word "photography": light registration.

The assumption stated earlier that Michael Wesely is a critical media skeptic is far too narrow. The production of "pure" photography (New York) and the visualization of the process of origination

(Salzburg) prove him to be someone who analyzes the elementary characteristics of the medium itself. A validation of this lies in the use of the Camera obscura, which not only is the actual origin of photography, but which also facilitates results that are subject less to the aesthetic calculation of the artist than to the camera's technically autonomous rules. The single-mindedness with which Michael Wesely pursues specific problem areas of photography also speaks for such an analytical procedure. This is apparent, for example, in the theme of time, which was briefly mentioned in relation to the portrait of Emilio Vedova.

The writer and critic John Berger defined time as the actual, if invisible, component of photography. What is crucial is not that which is photographed, but rather when it is photographed – an argument that becomes clear immediately when one thinks of the photographs taken before, during, and after the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Michael Wesely analyzes this invisible component of photography in several works by different means. There are, for example, photographs of large European cities, that were produced in varying lengths of exposure with a Camera obscura. The results show irritating effects of alienation. The well-known central perspective is contorted, and the typical, large-city theme with its streams of cars and masses of people can be assumed. At times, however, it is dissolved into cloudy, ghostly appearances. The less specific the lengths of exposure, the less specific the places appear.

In two series carrying the title "Reisezeit" [Travel time], Michael Wesely has put into concrete form the problem of time by establishing a logical connection between the subject and the duration of its exposure. In the first series, train stations of various European capital cities were photographed precisely for the length of time that it takes trains departing from each station to arrive in Munich – Wesely's hometown. The precision that now determines the time frame is also reflected in the sharpness of the image, because here a Camera obscura with its physically determined lack of clarity was not used, but instead a precision instrument – a large-format camera. In the second series, by contrast, a single train station – the main station of Prague – was repeatedly photographed. The gauge of exposure length was the travel time of the trains departing from here for other cities. Like a scientist, Michael Wesely has shifted the terms of reference: Now the photographs concentrate exclusively upon the difference between each depicted time frame. Accordingly, the viewer, too, is invited to use the analytical eye of a scientist, for which the fascinating train station motifs obviously provide rich rewards. Michael Wesely also pursued the question of where the time boundaries lie in a long-term exposure. For portraits he determined this through an experiment on himself for the duration of a normal workday: in 1989 he undertook an eight-hour self-portrait. With locations, his procedure was different. His to date longest long-term exposures have lasted exactly one year. The places he selected for this suggest an intriguing logic – art museums. Unlike train stations, here the change in occurrences is not measured in a rhythm of minutes. Here, where exhibits are shown for many weeks at a time, the durations are protracted and more lasting. Above all, however, in art museums photography plays a central role in the documentation of the installation of exhibits. Wesely thus utilizes a classic function of photography in an unfamiliar way. The long-term exposures took place in the "Städtischen Galerie im Lenbachhaus" in Munich (1993/94) and in the "Portikus" in Frankfurt (1995/96). In each instance, two cameras were installed: one in the office of the director, the other in the area of the exhibits. Thus the sum of occurrences in the business of exhibition are captured in the photographs: the preparations in the office, the installation of the exhibits, the exhibits themselves, the openings, the visitors, the dismantling of the exhibits. All this is indeed captured complexly in the photographs, but in such a way that it is no longer visible. For the curious viewer this means that he or she must forego a glimpse into the work of famous art museums. To compensate, however, time – the invisible component of photography – becomes perceptible, since that which is actually visible, the single occurrence, has become invisible.

Time as an invisible component of photography, the technical eye of the Camera obscura as a basis for photographic image discovery, the visualization of image processes, light as the prerequisite of

photography – like an explorer, Michael Wesely works on an analysis of the medium itself, plumbing the depths of its bases, its specific means, its possibilities, and its boundaries. Whether allowing New York restaurants to appear only in the form of colorful stripes or committing himself to an eight-hour long-term exposure, radicality – the fundamental nature of his approach – becomes evident.

Two things are worth noting about this photographic research:

First, it becomes clear that photography already enjoys the autonomy for which painting has striven for over a century. Now that the old discussion of the extent to which photography could be art has been surpassed, it can no longer define itself solely according to its distinction from painting. At the same time, however, photography can no longer call upon its traditional function as a depiction of reality. Digitalization now allows a perfect manipulation of photographic images to the extent that proving its origin and substance becomes impossible. Here it is no longer simply a matter of understanding that even seemingly objective photography in the end represents a subjective interpretation of reality. Now the point is that it can no longer be determined to what extent photographs present facts based in reality or a computer-generated fabrication thereof. With the loss of originally valid functions, the autonomy of a medium grows – a fact that is long known from the history of painting. And with it grows the necessity of its own identity. This – also evident from painting – is accomplished through a reflection into the medium itself and through a radical examination of its specific means. In other words, through pure research.

On the other hand, it is precisely (photographic) images that increasingly determine the perception of reality. American scientists even suspect that the models of language valid until now, upon which the interpretation of reality is based, have seen their end. According to this thesis, it is no longer the laws of language but rather the laws of images that govern reality. The problem lies, therefore, in the fact that these laws are difficult to eradicate when one can no longer base images upon the proven models of semantics. Several film critics, in any case, confirm such a development. They are amazed to discover that they are incapable of deciphering the sophisticated pictorial worlds of the latest Hollywood productions. – It is in light of this background that Michael Wesely's rigorous exploration of matters concerning photographic images becomes captivating.

Martina Fuchs 1995