

The Hidden Visible: Transformation and Annihilation  
in the Photography of Michael Wesely

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*Those hours, that with gentle work did frame  
The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell,  
Will play the tyrants to the very same  
And that unfair which fairly doth excel;*

Shakespeare. Sonnet V.....first quatrain

The power of poetry has always been that of evocation, the conjuring up and the projection of the 'not here', or, at least, that that is not there is arguably only made present through an act of imagination. And yet this seems for most of us far too simple an explanation. For as we all know, poetry is the mother and father of all the arts, literally *ars poetica*, and it has the possibility of making things present in many other respects also. Because more than mere presence, it 'makes real' the substance that lies hidden beneath the insubstantiality of words. Poetry evokes feelings, and feelings register themselves within actual substance itself, the substance that is quite literally the organism of our own body. These feelings may be elaborated through the affective conditions that pertain to emotions and language, but first of all comes the natural impulse of feeling a propensity towards something. Similarly, like those affects brought about by feelings, projection is usually taken to engage with the world from within to without, something emitted towards something else, an initiated becoming, or as the dictionary in psychological terms puts it 'the reading of one's own emotions and experiences into a particular situation'. In distinction, an evocation is literally 'to call out, to draw out or bring forth, to call up or awaken in the mind', a sense of that which is being actually experienced. It is within this complex alliance of evocation and projection that the photography of Michael Wesely has to be understood. It is thus a twofold active and self-reflexive condition, that allows simultaneously a pregnant presence, read as both the there and the not there, and that affords an extended meaning to an absent presence.

The hidden visible

The history of photography has been plagued by the debate around the truth and verifiability of the arrested image through the means of technical description. It suffers from the now age old mechanistic supposition that if you know how the camera works, you will also come to know why the photographic image reveals as much as it does. Hence conveniently the long-term exposures of Michael Wesely have almost invariably been read through the veil of the pre-determined mechanism of the camera, how it works, technical application, and simple exposure time. But the ontology of a photograph goes far beyond these simplistic assumptions, and I do not intend to dwell particularly on these technical issues here; for this essay is more about implication than mere application. And also by another means I wish to contest the easy and literalist assumptions placed on the role of mechanism. The reading of a photographic image is an exegesis, though it always reveals what is there, it sometimes has the ability to inflect what is not there, to evoke the might have been or even should have been. Nowhere is this truer than in the long exposure photographs of Berlin and New York made by Wesely.

Like serialised and communicating vessels of optical consciousness, taken from the fixed and neutral standpoint of the camera, Wesely's photographs present a complex understanding of both the viewer and what is being viewed. For that which is being viewed is simultaneously a record of architectural transformation experienced in diachronic time, and general duration

expressed through human endeavour. Which is to say human efforts are encompassed within the process even when not made manifest in the final image. In the long photographic exposures of Potsdamer Platz, and the recent New York exposures of the rebuilding of the Museum of Modern Art, Wesely reveals the component parts as well as the human hidden visible at work in forms of architectural transformation. We thus confront the pre-life, living processes, and the final architectural development of building(s). This conceptual positioning stands in direct opposition to the theorisation of the 'decisive moment' previously argued for in the production of a photograph. Hence rather than a *punctum we are presented with polyvalent levels of time-based accumulation*.

While Wesely has long been interested in the processes of photography, it is not the mechanical potential of a mechanised system so much as the aesthetic and narratological potential (conceptually grounded) of long term exposures that most interests him. In short this includes the incipient or nascent means by which a sense of pregnant presence (human or object) is revealed through existent and changing forms either captured or implied. The long exposure photographs therefore infer not just the narrative implications of time, though that is clearly important, but they also aim at describing the narrative-specific system of rules presiding over intellectual narrative production and emotional processing. While framed within a concept these are the hidden structures and events made manifest outside of spoken or written language, but which reside in the pictorial outcome. But it also needs to be made clear that these cannot be accessed through any conventional system of visual semiotics, for that that does not signify cannot produce a sign. Yet an implication of human presence is always evident in Wesely's photography, if only because architecture, train stations, and even the time-based abstract colour exposures are located in sites of human socialisation, or, allude to journeys in which he has taken part either proactively or metaphorically.

If for example we take the long-term exposures of Potsdamer Platz and Leipziger Strasse, Berlin (1996-98), what one is immediately struck by is not just the differing degrees of diagonal registration and repetition on the negative, namely the source of light driven by the diurnal solar cycle as it passes through the sky by day and at the different times of the year. Or, even the spectral or ghostlike transformation of the buildings as they are taking shape through the eventual length of time of the exposure. But rather it is the aspect of visible omission, or minimal registration, of the human and industrial means, in fact that that makes an architectural transformation possible. Hence it is the omission of things you would expect to see in the photographs that gives the images their sense of pathos and oft-times their quality of visual melancholy. It is this inevitable impulse that leads to our feeling and desire to find hoped for traces of an ephemeral and/or transient presence, to scrutinise the photographs for objects and entities that afforded little or no possibility of visual record, either due to the fact of transient human motility or the shortened time objects were accessible to the camera exposure. In other words we are drawn into the interiority of the photograph, their usual large-scale format only further magnifying the strange feeling that if we look ever more closely things will begin to emerge.

The general neutrality of the fixed camera viewpoints, though we know these were carefully chosen by Wesely, evokes a search for those aspects that reveal the contents of hidden visibility. They become (an important verb) as a result, photographic images that lend themselves to near endless microscopic inspection. One might even become exhausted in pursuit of that which is not immediately apparent, but hints at some sort of obscured sedentary existence. We confront a sort of 'not there' as a hoped for presence that appears in the form of a possible residual trace, but which may lead in turn to either a faint actual evocation, or simply an imagined projection. And, like the fixed aperture of the large format wide-view camera, self-built and

conceived by the artist, we are similarly drawn into the paradox of the panoramic view on the one hand (an encompassing overview of generality), and the hunt for details and magnification on the other. Thus we can say we gain insight from the photographs only in direct proportion to the degree of time and investment we place in looking at them.

### The human and architectural anthropology of buildings

The planning of buildings, their architectural design, the engineering, and their eventual fabrication are in theory and practice designated to serve human needs. The issues of utility, form and function, and decoration are implicit to all architectural endeavours. In most instances the design stage and the engineering planning provides a systematic documentation of the projected building. Less attention is usually paid to documenting the fabrication process itself, since it is understood as transitional and the day-to-day realisation of the architectural project does not evoke any immediate aesthetic or public interest. Indeed, it is only when budget issues and delays are forecast that anyone seriously engages with a documentation of a building's realisation. The daily human participation in fabrication rarely comes to the public mind, unless that is (and it is usually the case with large scale projects) industrial mishaps such as injuries and deaths take place. Though even in these cases it is usually seen as grist to the mill of the final greater aim that is the completion of a building or complex of buildings.

In this context Wesely's documentation and aesthetic projections seem remarkably singular, not least because they add a series of aesthetic implications to those of straightforward archival documentation, but at the same time, they distinguish themselves from the arrested images of the photographic instant in a regular exposure; moments that could be decisive or otherwise. Perhaps, in order to fully comprehend aesthesia, which means feeling or sensitivity, we are led to understand that the mere incising or extracting an image as *punctum*, negates a single moment that can be only limited to the immediate poetic evaluation that might be read into it. Alternatively, one is reminded of those famous nineteenth century images of sitters that purported to be the 'face of madness', as if such an extracted moment codified the true condition of a human life. If there were such a thing it could only exist in the greater duration of that life as lived, and not as some physiognomic example that was simply incised from the world at a given moment. Indeed, Wesely's early fascination with August Sander began from the premise of taxonomic documentation, and his use of 'the concept' in certain respects is still indebted to it. The word *documentum* means, quite literally 'evidence', and evidence becomes ever more forceful through its time-based accumulation. And, as Wesely has found, with the extended or long exposure, he was able to incorporate a sense of greater duration in the photograph, something that can and has to be called the anthropology of human and architectural transformation.

As regards anthropology it needs to be understood as the human-centred motives at work in photography and the recording of information, the need to grasp an internal sense of structural transformation over time and in space. Wesely's recent project for the rebuilt Museum of Modern Art in New York (2001-04), conceived by the architect Taniguchi, mirrors precisely such a structural transformation within the urban space. What is aesthetic about it is that it 'brings art into life', a primary characteristic of modernism, stressing the unique, and in this particular case the unrepeatable. The actual fabrication, or building of a building, allies itself to a form of industrial performance. A building has its stages and schemata (its 'acts' if you like) of realisation, the pre-planning and the day-to-day execution, the time-lines of each component

element and its completion. Though things can in theory be replicated as to the human contents of the processes they can never be exactly repeated; no more than a repetition of the countless cars that passed down 54<sup>th</sup> street over the three years of the New York project's duration. Strangely, human presence is everywhere implied, but it is present only in direct congruity to its visible absence. The stage by stage structures, the floor levels, the vertical stanchions, the climatic variations all leave their traces on the inverse photographic negative of the museum's daily development. That which is complete and fixed and does not move is registered clearly, as in the sign 'Connolly's Pub & Restaurant', that which was in place periodically appears in faint outline, while that which was motile carries little or no registration. And, as has been pointed out "by layering billions of individual moments, one on the other, the buildings which are in the process of coming into being appear to have become transparent."

The relationship between transience and transparency, that that passes unnoticed in distinction to that which is seen through, evokes another set of complicated affective meanings in the extended exposure photographs. If the social is the transient dealing with the day-to-day interrelationships within a social group that operated in the building of the new museum, the anthropological must be said to be the transparent. The anthropological remains present because anthropology (in the widest sense the science of man), can never deny in the photographs the sense of man. In composition the human content that brought the building into being from its conception through to its realisation. This is the paradox of all architecture inasmuch as when it presents itself as an abstract science-humanity. We have yet to enter a world whereby an artificial intelligence and technology-based robots conceive and construct buildings. Hence if I refer to annihilation (to reduce to nothing) it is done to challenge a simple mechanistic and materialist reading of Michael Wesely's extended exposure photographs, which would be to reduce them to a superficial analysis of their immediately apparent contents. Thus it is not just the material aspect of what we see that provokes, but stress must also be placed on the resulting evocation and projection that is implied by the act of looking.

### The twofold principle of time

As the Anglo-American poet T.S. Eliot once defined it "time present and time past, are both perhaps present in time future, and time future contained in time past. If all time is eternally present, all time is unredeemable." He goes on to say "what might have been is an abstraction, remaining a perpetual possibility only in the world of speculation." The poetic quality of irredeemable time is central to an understanding of Wesely's long exposure photographs. Simultaneously, in the nature of our human being it has long been known that living experience creates a doubled sense of time. The first is an obvious diachronic time (chronological time), the time of the watch or clock, the cycle of the seasons, a time that can be measured and contained in consciousness. Conversely, there is the sense of time we call 'duration', which we feel we are part of but cannot fully comprehend with the same sense of measurement and/or simultaneous consciousness. Indeed, as we know human memory itself acts in a completely a-diachronic manner, and we can evoke through the extraordinarily complex neuro-physiological functioning of the brain, a whole series of events without an apparent ordered time or sequence to them at the moment of, or in the action of their recalling.

The extended photographic exposures of Wesely, are always framed (the double play on the word is intended) in chronological time, namely they have a beginning when fixed viewpoint cameras are set up, and an end when the exposure is eventually brought to conclusion. However, the registration of the different stages of exposure are as embedded in the photograph almost as densely as the "one hundred billion nerve cells or 'neurons' which is (are...sic) the basic structural and functional units of the nervous system." But it is not only to contemporary

neuroscience that we can turn to for intellectual vindication, the same discursive pattern of argumentation is found in Henri Bergson's writings on the foundation of psycho-physiology and phenomenology. There are also analogies in film if we imagine all the frames of a filmed location from a fixed viewpoint laying on top of one another in a single moment. What is being suggested here is that apart from the hidden visible I have alluded to, traces of forms in the photograph, there is also a literal embodiment or doubled sense of temporality made present to us.

If we take a simple example, Wesely's one year long exposure of *Office of Helmut Friedel*, and I have chosen this because the Potsdamer Platz, New York, or Munich exposures, have interactive temporalities too difficult and numerous to immediately assess, we can consider an easily circumscribed case study. This work brings clearly to the mental foreground the pictorial fixity of time as chronology, and yet at the same time there is a non-definable flux that is duration. Following on from a similar project (his first one-year exposure) at Kasper Koenig's office at Portikus, in Frankfurt (1995), the project was undertaken at Helmut Friedel's office in the Lenbachhaus in Munich a year later (1996-97). The intense and unpredictable relationship people have with their workplace is soon revealed in this photograph. We find the structural and architectural framing used by Wesely as his point of fixity, and that these structures over the period of the exposure reveal those general parameters that remain lucid and clearly transcribed onto the photographic negative; the walls, windows, the radiators, the bookshelves, etc. Conversely, and in many varying states of transparent manifestation, the other peripatetic objects within the space show themselves only to the degree that they were in sedentary situation for any length of time. There is exceptionally in this photograph a ghostly suggestion of Helmut Friedel at his desk (his upper torso and right shoulder), something that picks up (indirectly) and refers back to Wesely's extended exposure portraits of the late 1980s and early 90s. The figure is almost certainly revealed by the fact the light source lies immediately behind Friedel's chair and desk. One might even say one is tempted and amused to think what a time-management consultancy could make of it. However, the books, papers, and objects on the desk appear and disappear as an incandescent blur, and the straight-back chair beyond the desk was in several positions during the period of the exposure. In the course of the year long exposure things were clearly in a constant state of being moved about on the desk's surface area. Several striations and white marks also appear registering intermediary movements, as with Friedel's chair behind the desk, or near the side-table to the right. It is an extraordinary image of the annual life of a room, an eerie daily diary of a space and its inhabitant(s), conveying a sense of near invisible (but not quite) pictorial motility that took place in the space. However, there is no clearly identifiable representation of the man who worked there. Unless that is the bookshelves suggest a type of intellectual portrait by another means.

In purely metaphoric terms *Office of Helmut Friedel* reveals the transience and transparency of an office, a feeling closely linked to a room's lived experience. Hence the photograph is able to generate an anthropological life for the workspace at a functional level, to reveal an environment as a lived-in space of temporality, and bring out and forge together a conceptual abstraction alongside an imaginative speculation as to the daily human events that took place in the room. It is the irredeemable nature of a year that has passed away, a reflection on 'lost time', and it tells us that it could never be exactly repeated or lived again. This of course implies for the viewer personal references to those irretrievable years we have all lived, and which we know can never be reconstituted or reconstructed. Such things lie within the ontological contents (the essential meaning) that I alluded to at the beginning of this essay, and why a photograph can extend its contents far beyond the limitations of mere mechanism. The outcome is that within Michael Wesely's extended exposure photographs time is experienced quite literally as a form of loss and displacement, of which only residual elements can be grasped and defined, retained and provisionally fixed. However, the important remainder is left to the aesthetic sphere,

the poetry of that which is implied, or alternatively has to be intuited in our actual experience of the photographs.

### Summarisation

To many the path I have taken in this essay may seem fettered to circumlocution, and an unfamiliar approach as to describing exactly what is seen. But as I claimed at the beginning my concerns are with that which is evoked and projected by Michael Wesely's extended exposure photography. I therefore have to make no apology for not following the road of merely describing contents. Contents will become apparent the moment you look at the photographs, and their elements become revealed commensurate to the attention you pay to them. The reader must make his/her own way as regards the evocation and projection that is generated. What I have tried to do in this essay is push you towards an interpretative reading based on the contemporary aesthetics of life. Those aesthetics are human for they could never be anything else. The implied interiority of Michael Wesely's photographs, while they may draw upon a modern-day interest in the document and the archive, a particularly contemporary aesthetic concern, they do so in a markedly Benjamin-ian sense "the twentieth century, with its porosity and transparency, its tendency toward the well lit and the airy, has put an end to dwelling in the old sense," which in turn means it has forged a new link between anthropology and architecture. If you like photography, architecture, and anthropology, have begun to possess an evolving and necessary mutuality of form and function. In summary it is a new relationship between the maker, the making, and the made, things recorded as they unfold, and which has become essential to our present aesthetic concerns and understanding of what constitutes late modernity.

The technical elements of photography have become as a result no more than utilisable embedded elements, which draw analogy with the painter if only to the limited extent that the painter does not have to think self-reflexively about 'look I am making a mark', every time he approaches a canvas with his materials. Hence the technical aspects of the camera have also become no more than an internalised instrument and a means to an end for the artist-photographer today. Technical knowledge accrues to every artist as practitioner, and it is no more than the first principle of their professionalism. It is true that there is some degree of determinism in Wesely's work, but that is evident within photography in general (after all you can only photograph what is there). Determinism is and was always implicit to any artistic practice that begins from the premise of concept and mechanism. There is certainly no need to apologise for that. Michael Wesely's extended exposure photographs over the last ten years or so, have opened up a new and developmental realm of aesthetic experience. They pose the question as to whether we are as yet open and emotionally adapted to the demands of that experience. And what is extraordinary is that he has done it by using the simplest technology, expanding and revitalising the traditions of self-generated camera technology, and its adaptation for use in newer alternative applications. In a world that is increasingly swamped by industrial digital technology and image manipulation, it is remarkable how the instruments and principles of early photographic technology are still able to generate such a radical innovation. The answer lies, if it lies anywhere, perhaps, in the human poetic imagination, in what it can project and evoke within the viewer when looking at a photograph, and returns us to exactly the same point where I began this essay. We should not be surprised that the word image and imagination share the same etymological root, and while the image may be made through the mechanical means of a camera, it still requires the human imagination to bring it to completion.

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