

Envisioning a heightened situation of reality: On the Works of Moritz Wegwerth

by Lisa Long



NEWS, 2018, 230 x 153 cm, framed Inkjet Print

The first time I visited Moritz Wegwerth in his studio, a dark purple print with a seemingly fuzzy, grainy, and textured surface caught my eye. I inquired about the piece and Wegwerth laughed, as it wasn't a work he would ever consider showing. Still, he appreciated this print as it reminded him of the camera's failure. He had taken the picture on a moonless night in rural Maine. The camera, pointed at the surface of a lake with almost zero reflection, continuously searched for some light source and ended up taking a picture of itself, or rather its inner mechanics. Without enough light, the camera wasn't able to do what it was programmed to do. What we see is the camera's failure at "seeing" anything. Formally, this photograph is not representative of Wegwerth's artistic practice yet it underlines the importance of the artist's approach to the (digital) camera as an apparatus: know your device and work against it, test it, bring it to the limits of what is possible and then take it one step further. Envision what it fails to do. Ultimately, this means turning "an automatic apparatus against its own condition of being automatic."¹

The word "envision" here refers to Vilém Flusser's definition of the term in relation

1) Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 19.

to “technical images.” According to Flusser, the technical image is an “envisioned surface,” a computation and a concept with a hallucinatory power that has lost faith in rules.² “Technical images arise in an attempt to consolidate particles around us and in our consciousness on surfaces to block up the intervals between them in an attempt to make elements such as photons and electrons, on the one hand, and bits of information, on the other hand, into images.”³ To do so, the photographer must rely on an apparatus, which makes the “stuff to be envisioned” visible and graspable through keys.⁴ Flusser writes: “The apparatus does as the photographer desires, but the photographer can only desire what the apparatus can do [...] Technical images result from a gesture that is doubly self-involved, from an intricate opposition and collaboration between the inventor and the manipulator of the apparatus and an opposition and collaboration between an apparatus and a human being.”⁵

As the anecdote in the introduction suggests, this doubly self-involved gesture runs through Wegwerth’s practice. First utilizing the possibilities of the apparatus, the artist works with and against the coded information transferred from the digital memory of the camera to the digital memory of the computer. Once framed by the computer screen, Wegwerth begins to intervene, layering, copying, pasting, extracting, and exchanging elements of the image until the composition is complete. This composition process culminates in a composite image, which, as William J. Mitchell argues, is more like a painting than a photograph. According to Mitchell, digital images are characterized by their mutability; therefore, “computational tools for transforming, combining, altering, and analyzing images are as essential to the digital artist as brushes and pigments to a painter.”⁶ Although a painterly process can be attributed to Wegwerth’s approach, taking a closer look reveals that he uses historically rooted, photographic means. He begins with a documentary impulse, which he then abandons in favor of a manual construction of images within and against the limitations of the digital apparatus.

In his examination of digital cinema, Lev Manovich explains that the manual construction of images found in digital media is not new nor an exception in the history of visual representation. Instead, it is the concept of the indexical image – the assumed document of reality recorded by an automated apparatus, namely the camera, – that is the exception. For Manovich, digitally composited images are the continuation of a process already established in nineteenth century forms of combination printing, in which two or multiple photographs were smoothly joined to create one image.

2 Ibid., 10.

3 Ibid., 16.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 20.

6 William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-photographic Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992), 7.

The works of Henry Peach Robinson, William Notman, and Oscar G. Reijlander are prominent examples of this composite techniques.⁷ According to Jeanne Willette, these photographers—like painters were “making” images, and were therefore working toward the idea of the photograph as a work of art.⁸ In the following twentieth century, this claim of “making images” was discredited as artificial trickery by many photographers and theorists alike. Their claim to truth emphasized photography’s objective and indexical or documentary character. For example, German photographer August Sander insisted on photography’s documentary nature, stating he hated nothing more than “sugary photographs with tricks, poses and effects.”⁹

For Wegwerth, compositing is not a sugary trick but a consequence of working with a digital apparatus and a means to produce images, making no claim to simple or mimetic depictions of lived experience but rather investigate the world of the image. Through digital composite techniques, Wegwerth first breaks apart and then combines and superimposes potentially endless visual layers, envisioning a heightened situation of reality. Through a long period of experimentation, perpetual (re)combination eventually leads to the final image. The result, as seen in *NEWS, 1540*, and *LYRIC THEATRE* (2018 – 2019) enables the viewer to experience a simultaneity and compression of time and space, meaning and expression. On the one hand, this has to do with the multi-perspectival collage of different visual layers, determined by the computer as an apparatus that acts as both screen and frame. On other hand, it has to do with the visual thickness of signs within the images as document.

As stated by Anne Friedberg in her seminal book *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*, “the computer ‘window’ shifts its metaphoric hold from the singular frame of perspective to the multiplicity of windows within windows, frames within frames, screens within screens.” Therefore, “[...] the vernacular ‘space’ of the computer screen has more in common with surfaces of cubism—frontality, suppression of depth, overlapping layers than with the extended depth of Renaissance perspective.”¹⁰ In Wegwerth’s compositions, frontality, suppression of depth, and overlapping layers are clearly visible, reminding us of the multi-perspectival and fractured modernisms of cubism, dada collage, and other avantgarde movements. *Windows Open Simultaneously (First Part, Third Motif)* (1912) by Robert Delaunay or *Estate* (1963) and *Archive* (1963) by Robert Rauschenberg quickly come to mind. While Wegwerth’s digital production process emphasizes this multiplicity, his photogra-

7 Lev Manovich, “To lie and to act: Potemkin’s villages, cinema and telepresence – notes on Checkpoint 95,” in *Mythos Information – Welcome to the Wired World* (Vienna/New York: Springer Verlag, 1995), 9.
<http://archive.aec.at/media/assets/bf0dc199484de169715de059f1b02e05.pdf>,

8 Jeanne Willette, “Composite Photography in Victorian Times,” last modified September 18, 2015,
<http://arthistoryunstuffed.com/composite-photography-in-victorian-times/>

9 Robin Gillanders, “August Sander,” in *Professional Photographer*, April (2011), 82.

10 Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 3.

phic approach is grounded in the idea of documenting a situation from multiple perspectives; an approach stemming from adapted forms of New Objectivity found in the works of Hilla and Bernd Becher known for their typological series of German industrial architectures. The photographic series exhibited by the Bechers, in which only one perspective of each building is depicted, are actually the result of a process beginning with a 360° documentation of their motif from up to eight different points. “Abwicklungen,” as they are called, can be translated as “phases” or “processes,” and they precede the final mono-perspective image. Bringing the digital and documentary together, Wegwerth’s approach can, to a certain extent, be considered post-indexical. One might even go so far as to say it is post-Cartesian.

In addition to the multi-perspectivalism of Wegwerth’s works, he further complicates our viewing experience by intentionally obstructing the horizon line. Obscuring the horizon not only undermines our depth perception, flattening perspective, but also alludes to the viewer’s physical position in the world. Unless we are looking out across a vast flat landscape or are elevated up off the ground by a support system, rarely are we humans able to discern the horizon in the distance. Yet, in most photographs, it is annoyingly present.

1540 is part of a group of new works in which various perspectives or “scenes” of



1540, 2018, 220 x 147 cm, framed Inkjet Print

Times Square have been photographed and combined. Each image is made up of multiple shots. For the most part, the different layers and elements do not reveal themselves to the viewer. The photographs were taken around 2 a.m. on November 9, 2016 moments after Donald Trump won the 54th US presidential election. Wegwerth, who had participated in the Skowhegan School of Art summer program, remained in New York City to witness the election spectacle.

In the work *NEWS*, an ABC News stage in the middle of Times Square is being deconstructed by a group of ten men on an otherwise already evacuated site. Although the image is extremely dense—filled to the brim with architectural glass and screen surfaces, stage elements, lights, signs, cranes, barricades, tents, containers, news and surveillance cameras, there is a sense of vacancy or uncanny uncertainty. This uncanny state is heightened by the illusion of daytime; the lights and screens of Times Square produce a perpetual, artificial day. Surrounded by New York's looming towers and by the endless flow or scroll of moving images, flashing signs, and billboard advertisements, these men seem minute compared to the colossal architecture and flood of information, of ideology, swirling around them.

Like Wegwerth's artworks, Times Square – one of New York's most sought out sites with up to 330,000 visitors everyday – is an assemblage of different types of surfaces, screens and (moving) images. Its current architectural and infrastructural makeup is a result of the Walt Disney Company take-over, who bought the New Amsterdam Theatre and "disneyfied" the area in the mid-1990s. Times Square has been transformed by the screen into an "architecture of spectatorship," a term taken from Friedberg's writings. "As an architectonic element, the screen negotiates the paradoxical relations between mobility and immobility, materiality and immateriality.¹¹ Similarly, Wegwerth is also trying to find a balance between materiality and immateriality, the virtual and the concrete. When the composition process is finished, the work is printed, fixing the previously still exchangeable pixels to a material surface. In doing so, the digital image becomes concrete. And, subsequently transferred to the gallery or museum wall, the digital space of the camera and computer is embedded into the real space of the exhibition.

For Wegwerth, the composited, final image is more important than the modernist dogma of photograph as document. Yet, this does not mean his works are fully constructed in digital space and therefore "fake." In fact, they are snapshots and

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

fragments of our world combined. In this way, Wegwerth uses the apparatus of the digital camera and computer to create a work of art, reflecting the virtual, abstract, and concrete states of its media and existence.

Coming back to the idea of the technical image coined by Flusser: “The abstract particle universe from which we are emerging has shown us that anything that is not illusory is not anything. This is why we must abandon such categories as true–false, real–artificial, or real–apparent in favor of such categories as concrete–abstract. The power to envision is the power of drawing the concrete out of the abstract. Perception theory, ethics and aesthetics, and even our very sense of being alive are in crisis. We live in an illusory world of technical images, and we increasingly experience, recognize, evaluate, and act as a function of these images. We owe these images to a technology that came from scientific theories, theories that show us ineluctably that ‘in reality,’ everything is a swarm of points in a state of decay, a yawning emptiness.” With these words in mind, Wegwerth’s honest appreciation of the camera’s failure is reassuring indeed.



LYRIC THEATRE, 2019, 235,7 X 157cm, framed Inkjet Print