

Photography as experimental arrangement and thought process

Bärbel Kopplin, 2021 (translation from German: Alexandra Berlina)

Every work by Elias Wessel is first created in his head. At the beginning, there is always an idea, which is then followed by precisely calculated realization. Inspiration, artistic experimentation and creative exploration are essential for Wessel. Photographic "painting" with light and reflections along with the transformation of digital traces into "corporeal" images characterize the approach that Wessel continues to modify, forever searching for new ways of expression.

In the spring of 2014, in New York, Elias Wessel begins working on his most extensive series to date: 42 sheets, entitled *Sprung in die Zeit* ("Leap into Time"). By this point, Wessel has already long turned away from realistic photography and is searching for photographic means to return to painting. Since 2008, he has been living in New York. Trips to Egypt, Tunisia, Korea, China, Taiwan, India and Syria have broadened his view and brought new impressions. Another decisive encounter of this period is the one with the German ZERO artist Otto Piene, who has his studio not far from New York in Groton, Massachusetts. The dialogue with Piene, whose work had always been dedicated to the exploration of light, moves Wessel to also address this elementary theme. Wessel visited the German light artist three times starting in September 2013. On July 17, 2014, Piene, who was in his eighties, passed away in a cab in Berlin on route to his major German retrospective at the Gropius-Bau.

In the series *Sprung in die Zeit*, Wessel proceeds with the exploration of light that started in dialogue with Piene. However, another great figure in art history makes an even more prominent appearance here: the 42 sheets are a homage to Kazimir Malevich. For a while, the famous Suprematist had lived in the Russian city of Kursk, not far from the Ukrainian border - and it is there that Wessel participates in an artist residence in the fall of 2014. Preparing for his stay, Wessel studies the art-historical heritage of this region, taking a particularly close look at Malevich's work, which leads him to question the essence of the image.

Thus, for Wessel, the series begins with a black rectangle, a clear reference to Malevich's "Black Square". Then, however, his work takes on a new direction; a "switch" is flipped between past and future. *Sprung in die Zeit* becomes a leap into another era and a new creative period. Wessel describes this as follows: "More than ever, my thoughts were immersed into my different life times: the past, in which I had painted; the present, in which I was trying to break away from representational photography - and the future, when I would travel to Russia."¹

¹ From an email by the artist to the author, 31.03.2020.

Along with these meditations, which are captured photographically in the series, the title also alludes to the exhibition *Sprung in die Zeit*, which had taken place at the Berlinische Galerie in 1992 and which Wessel had intensively studied.² It is a leap through 100 years that lie between Malevich's 1915 work and the 2014 homage created by Wessel - who thus also leaps from his own artistic past into a new present and future. It is a leap into and through countless variations on a theme that has always occupied art - from Josef Albers to Ad Reinhard to Hermann Nitsch - and surely will continue to do so.

"Black Square" is Kazimir Malevich's most famous work. Not quite 80 x 80 cm in size, it actually does not depict a precise square - its outer edges do not run exactly parallel to the edge of the painting. In 1915, Malevich presented this mixture of nothingness and infinity to the public in St. Petersburg (then Petrograd). On the tabula rasa of his canvas, he dared to restart the history of painting. For him, it was an act of liberation. For the future, Malevich created a long-lasting, formative model that evokes important questions to this day.

The first sheet of the *Sprung in die Zeit* series is most clearly a bow to this icon of modernism. Accordingly, in most exhibitions, *No. 1* - the sheet with black overlapping rectangles - is placed in the upper left corner of the room, as intended by Wessel. He thus follows the programmatic hanging of Malevich's square in the so-called "red" or "sacred" corner, i.e., where the icon is traditionally placed in a Russian *izba*: across the corner of the room, in an oblique position below the ceiling.

The starting point for all the sheets in the series is the photograph. The final product is created in several steps: On a self-made light box, tinted foils are superimposed and photographed in black and white against the light in such a way that forms seem to emerge out of the brightness. In these see-through images, the fine overlays of paper and transparent foils condense into forms repeatedly rearranged by the artist. At this stage, chance, too, is allowed some space. Dust and moisture settle on the foils over time, changing structures and textures. The heat of the sun and the light box, too, becomes form-giving factors. What thus emerges are manifold variations of overlapping formations - rectangular, triangular, elongated and line-like, or densely contracted, or sprawling in all directions, like sheet *No. 21*, almost an arabesque. In constant change, an ever new order emerges, oscillating between fullness and emptiness. Several days often lie between the processing of the individual sheets; overall, the work on the series takes many months. One sheet is created, then another... While the artist still works on one, his mind is buzzing

² *Sprung in die Zeit: Bewegung und Zeit als Gestaltungsprinzipien in der Photographie von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart.* (*Leap into Time: Movement and Time as Design Principles in Photography from the Beginnings to the Present.*) An exhibition at the Berlinische Galerie, Museum of Modern Art, Photography and Architecture, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, Nov. 20, 1992 - Jan. 17, 1993; Berlin 1992.

with ideas about the next one. Finally, the series is completed shortly before the departure to Russia in September 2014.

The result is a work of high complexity and concentration, in which the principle of chance is superimposed on a precise conception of sequences and effects. These are quiet and at the same time very powerful images, with endless modulations and variations connecting all the sheets into a whole. They become abstract, moving, diffuse surfaces that captivate the viewer with their ever-renewing and changing arrangements. The manifold gradations from deep black to delicate shades of gray to dazzlingly bright whiteness open up all dimensions of space. Closed surfaces whose saturated matte tones swallow all light are contrasted with transparent and translucent sections. In the process, each sheet develops its own aesthetic and yet clearly remains a part of the whole.

An artist-researcher, Wessel circles around the theme of light and dark, form and surface, his series arguably constituting an experimental set-up. This impression is matched by the sober white background against which the forms and formations stand out with great clarity. The austere black and white coloring lends the sheets dignity and precision.

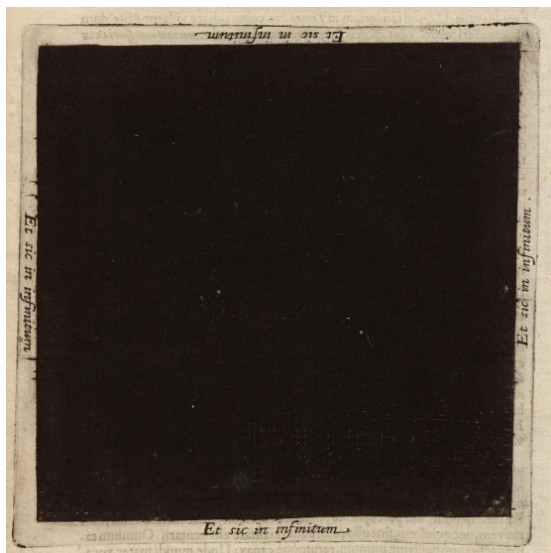
These works gain presence not least through their physical dimensions, which are often considerable. The format is always chosen with an eye to the overall artistic strategy. Measuring 152.4 x 101.6 cm, the 42 works in the *Sprung in die Zeit* series have an enormous impact: the viewer cannot help but interact with them. To create a field of tension and explore the contrast between formats, Wessel also decided to create an alternative, down-sized edition.

Chance and calculation, painterly effect and photographic execution are essential for the way Wessel works. In the 42 sheets, he does not only present his personal variations on Malevich but also explores the potential of photography in comparison to painting. With each sheet, he analyzes his medium in its technical and conceptual range, confronting the viewer with abstract yet painterly results and thus creating an unconventional bridge between painting and photography. Just as representatives of experimental photography from Eadweard Muybridge to Man Ray turned away from reality to play and experiment with photographic possibilities, Wessel, too, is looking for unusual images that challenge viewers to reconsider their perceptions.

"Et sic in infinitum" - and so on to infinity. No, it was not Malevich who said so. Rather, these words were written on the four sides of another black square: a copperplate engraving made in 1617. This lightly translucent form was intended to illustrate the beginning of creation from nothing, to depict the dark primordial substance. The engraving was created for a treatise on the origin of the cosmos written by the English theosophist

and physician Robert Fludd,³ who was referring to creation as depicted in Genesis. In a great time warp, this brings us back to the works of Elias Wessel, whose central theme is light. Light is the foil for all shades of color - from the most impenetrable blackness to the most delicate shades of white - while elsewhere, all things seem transparent, floating freely and visible through each other.

Sprung in die Zeit. Leap into Time. This title not only refers to an exhibition in Berlin but also opens a floodgate for far-reaching associations: time and space, the intangible dimensions that occupied ancient philosophers from Heraclitus to Plato and from Aristotle to Augustine. "Leap into Time" is also a leap into infinity - or, to stay with Heraclitus, a leap into an infinite river: "panta rhei" was his metaphor for time. With a leap like that, one moves in both space and a time. Space and time are unlimited in themselves - yet each of us has only a limited amount at their disposal. Thus, Wessel provides ample food for thought. In a very subtle way, his quiet, peaceful light paintings are unusually complex, tracing as they do threads in art history from Malevich to contemporary photography. They open up spaces for thought experiments and philosophical associations, with each sheet offering viewers new, sharpened perceptions. Wessel both explores and explodes conventions, crossing boundaries between photography and painting and finding his very own visual language in the interliminal space.



17th century representation of primeval matter, Robert Fludd

³ Robert Fludd (1574-1637), English philosopher, theosophist and physician. Representation of the primal matter. „Tractatus I, Lib I., S. 26, Caput V“, 1617. Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi Maioris scilicet et minoris Metaphysica, physica atque Technica historia im Duo Volumina : aere Iohan-Theodori de Bry, typis Hieronymi Galleri, (Oppenheim, Frankfurt) 1617.*