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Unsubstantiated Presence

Can Elias Wessel's "*Textfetzen*" Be Read?

In popular accounts of physics since the beginning of the twentieth century, one encounters a memorable image describing the emergence of order through random processes. One of the first to use it was the French mathematician Émile Borel in 1914, in a small but remarkable treatise on the place of chance in the sciences: "Let us imagine that a million monkeys have been trained to strike at random on the keys of a typewriter and that, under the supervision of illiterate foremen, these monkeys typed tirelessly for ten hours a day on a million typewriters of different manufacturers. The illiterate foremen would collect the blackened sheets and assemble them into volumes. Then, at the end of a year, those volumes would turn out to contain the exact copy of books of every kind and language, as kept by the richest libraries in the world. Such is the probability that for a very brief moment there would arise in the composition of a mixture of gases in a container A a variation of the order of one hundred thousandth."[1] The "*miracle des singes dactylographes*," as Borel called it, was intended to illustrate that even a world of elementary particles, the dynamics of which are entirely governed by chance, does not behave in a completely unpredictable way, but still follows the laws of nature, even if only within the framework of certain statistical distributions. This probabilistic conception of reality only entered the realm of art when Claude E. Shannon's mathematical theory of communication provided an instrument for mathematizing cultural semiotic processes in this way. Thus, in the late 1950s, the physicist and philosopher Max Bense regarded Shannon's communication theory as a suitable bridge between the natural sciences and the humanities, with the help of which aesthetic processes could also be described as selective and interspersed with chance. Because of its statistical nature, however, a "work of art" conceived in this way, as Bense said, "would have no definitive reality, but only probability."[2] The only thing of interest about it would be the structure of signs, in which a certain amount of information would be realized, which would therefore be more or less surprising. With Bense, art and its analysis had thus been given the task of practicing an intellectual attitude appropriate to the (scientific and technical) abstractness of modern everyday worlds.

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[1] Émile Borel, *Le hasard*, new revised and expanded edition (Paris: Presses universitaires de France 1948), p. 124 [translated].

[2] Max Bense, *Aesthetica. Einführung in die neue Aesthetik*, 2nd expanded edition (Baden-Baden: Agis, 1982), pp. 264f. [translated].

At first glance, the *Textfetzen* (Scraps of Text) brought together in this art book by Elias Wessel pursue a very similar goal. They correspond to an aesthetics of abstraction that disrupts the common, meaning-oriented approach to printed texts and directs attention to the material arrangement of the signs. The semantic fragments that one encounters while reading still suggest contexts, albeit without clear contours. Coherent phrases appear partially torn apart and scattered across the page. However, the texts stem from an everyday, unartistic process: reading newsfeeds on the social media platform Facebook. *Textfetzen. It's Complicated: Texts from an Anti/Social Network 2019-2021* is the lengthy title of the present volume, which is the result of an elaborate artistic concept and also part of a more extensive series of works. Thus, in a first step, Elias Wessel captured the individual scrolling behavior on the screen photographically by means of long exposure. The resulting superimposition of texts, images, videos, and graphics has the appearance of colorful abstract paintings. They are exhibited under the ironic title "It's Complicated," which simply quotes Facebook's own taxonomy of private forms of relationships, but at the same time refers to a state of loose and thus boundlessly variable couplings, on which the platform's entire business model is based. "What is actually the social action in the social network?" Elias Wessel asks and provides the answer in his artistic work: It is the incessant movement of establishing and dissolving connections, which also makes the ambivalent talk of an "anti/social network" plausible. What for Bense was thus the characteristic of aesthetic (and microphysical) processes alone has here shifted to the field of networked, platform-based everyday communication, the technical principle of which is the storage and processing of all available user data. As a result, *social networking* on the Internet itself becomes a resource that can be exploited. According to the sociologist Armin Nassehi, "Big Data does not generate social groups, but rather statistical ones."[3] And it is this level of abstract, constantly changing, and at the same time invisible creation of form that the artistic concept of *It's Complicated* aims at. And despite the fact that, in the end, there are no photographs in the strict sense, one must indeed speak of a photographic process. The core of the photographic image, as the literary theorist and semiologist Roland Barthes has put it, is "the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid," it is "the *Tuché*, the *Occasion*, the *Encounter*, the *Real*, in its indefatigable expression."[4] In this sense, the images of the *It's Complicated* series, like screenshots, store events lying in the past, but at the same time transfer them into an abstract spatial configuration.

The audio work preceding the *Textfetzen* is titled *Is Possibly Art*. Here, the text fragments contained in the images of the *It's Complicated* series are filtered out with the help of

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[3] Armin Nassehi, *Muster. Theorie der digitalen Gesellschaft* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2019), p. 302 [translated].

[4] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 4 (emphasis in the original).

standard software and made audible as voices. And insofar as the result draws attention to the aesthetic structure of what is spoken, there is something here that, like a computer-generated poem, is reminiscent of art, albeit without being art in itself. In a third step, the work shifts once again from the field of the visible and the audible to the field of the readable. Here, one encounters German, English, and Arabic texts in which small squares, explained by a glossary at the end of the volume, remind one of the electronic origin that is otherwise made invisible. These are icons and pictograms that cannot be translated into text and thus protrude into the linearly printed volume as symptoms of the original hypertext structure. "The hybrid or the meeting of two media," the Canadian literary and cultural scholar Marshall McLuhan described in 1964 the premises of his own analysis of contemporary media culture, "is a moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born. [...] The moment of the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses."[5] This also applies to the artistic process in Elias Wessel's *It's Complicated* series, both in terms of the aesthetic encounter between photography and painting and in terms of the use of image-to-text and text-to-speech software. Above all, however, it also applies to the *Textfetzen*, the prefixed motto of which is "For a New Enlightenment" and which, in the transformation of hypertext into a printed book, raises the question of the reading appropriate to these texts. We are dealing here with strings of characters, the entropic structure of which attains readability only selectively. The titles of the individual sections or "poems" each pick out words or short phrases such as: "*Lügenpresseeinrichtung*" (Fake News Institution), "*Mutterliebe*" (Motherly Love), "*Kommentierer*" (Commenter), "*Marktaustausch*" (Market Exchange), "*Botschaft Transit*" (Embassy Transit), "*Stimmbezirke*" (Constituencies), "*Kalter Krieg*" (Cold War), "*Bitte ignorieren*" (Please Ignore), "*Grenzgänger*" (Border Crossers), "*Feierabend für immer*" (Holidays Forever), "*350 Millionen Jahre in einem Bild*" (350 Million Years in One Image). In their structural decay, the *Textfetzen*, as records of past readings, point to the unsubstantiated presence of a reading that sees everything it recognizes disappear in the very next moment.

It was above all the invasion of living rooms by televisions that made McLuhan speak of "The End of the Book Age"[6] in the early 1960s and prompted him to draft a history of media culture. In view of today's situation, however, one should probably rather speak (with the theologian and philosopher Ivan Illich) of the end of the "Epoch of Bookish Reading."[7] Illich formulated his diagnosis at the very moment when the physicist and

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[5] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* [1964] (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), p. 55.

[6] Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962). [Translator's note: The subtitle of the German edition of the book is *Das Ende des Buchzeitalters*, which translates as *The End of the Book Age*.]

[7] Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text. A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 116.

software specialist Tim Berners-Lee at the European nuclear research center CERN near Geneva started to make public his concept of a distributed hypertext system for linking heterogeneous memory contents. Shortly thereafter, it was to become the basic diplomatic order of the *World Wide Web* in the form of a hypertext transfer protocol (*http*). As the historian of technology David Gugerli recently pointed out, this "web between machines, data, organizations, and protagonists"[8] was initially a technical response to the pressing problem of information loss in computer networks, i.e., the increasing confusion of the constantly growing data stocks. As a result, a completely new way of dealing with texts was established, in that they became part of an interactive graphical user interface, which made it possible to navigate through the data stocks of the *World Wide Web*. The new reading practice that emerged with this was very much in line with what Vannevar Bush, the legendary American engineer and science administrator, had already outlined in 1945 under the title "As We May Think" as the future of storing and ordering knowledge: the replacement of books and libraries by an associative linking of data sets according to the model of neural information processing. Looking back to the beginnings of bookish (or scholastic) reading in the twelfth century, Illich spoke of the mind today being shaped by a "new kind of text" that "has no anchor." "Like the signals from a phantom schooner, its digital strings form arbitrary font-shapes on the screen, ghosts which appear and then vanish." For scholastic reading, the book functions as a "harbor of meaning."[9] With the text's new electronic mode of existence, reading becomes akin to navigating between legibility and illegibility on the open sea of global data traffic. This includes the fact that the turning of individual pages is replaced by "scrolling," which metaphorically borrows from the older practice of inscribed papyrus and parchment scrolls. In the encounter between book and hypertext, the *Textfetzen* not only bring this cultural-historical caesura sharply to the fore, but at the same time make it possible to experience how technical-mathematical data structures today permeate the reality of everyday communication.

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[8] David Gugerli, *Wie die Welt in den Computer kam. Zur Entstehung digitaler Wirklichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2018), p. 191 [translated].

[9] Illich 1993 (see note 7), p. 118.