

Paris, January 28th, 2020

Mesdames et Messieurs,

Usually I don't do speeches, I prefer conversations. But I am very grateful about the invitation for this exhibition and had been asked so kindly to say a few words, that it was hard to say no. In my short speech, particular emphasis is placed on the circumstances in which the images are created and presented (rather than technical aspects).

In 1894 the cleaning woman Marie Bastian stole a torn letter from a wastebasket here in Palais Beuharnais and handed it over to the French intelligence service. This marked the beginning of the well-known Dreyfus Affair, a political scandal that divided the Third French Republic from 1894 until its resolution in 1906. Today - in the age of digitization - social divide no longer requires laboriously stolen documents from the trash. Personal data is continuously collected and the individual is being made identifiable. But even the Cambridge-Analytica-Scandal, where harvested data from millions of people's Facebook accounts were used without their consent, doesn't seem to be unsettling to most of its users. It is no secret that data is used as base to control election campaigns, as analysis on US election campaigns and Brexit vote indicate. „Die Summe meiner Daten“ (The Sum of my Data) began in 2015 when first essays about Cambridge Analytica appeared. The series comes from my frustration of the lack of understanding of the risks and societal challenges of digitization. I am very caught up in an extreme political and social moment of intense upheaval. To me, it doesn't seem important to photograph the landscape anymore, to photograph supermodels or to photograph a story. That's how radical that time feels in that moment in that break. Many parallels have been drawn between the moment of industrialization and our moment of digitization - neglecting the potential and power of manipulation through new technologies. I have a deep sense that something very foundational has to change in order to save the planet or the world or humanity. And I think I'm feeling that deeply along with many many other creative minds of our time.

In the midst of social change and political turbulence around the world in the 1960s and 1970s, artists brought their cameras onto the streets, finding photography to be an immediate and accessible means of responding to their surroundings. Today our surroundings are increasingly abstract. You're standing in the presages of this world that has been flipped upside down and you are an artist who works with photography: What tools do you have at your disposal? You have got the camera, you've got shapes, you've got light, you've got the world around you and you don't want to use the tools in the way that they have been

used before - you want to reinvent them. As a result I am committed to developing photographic concepts and processes that culminate into abstract images that reflect contemporary discourses within society. The works function as both an important contribution to the issues of social and political development and the historical conversation between photography and painting. Photographs that essentially appear as paintings but whose aesthetics are a result of their underlying creation method that comprises analogies to, inter alia, data collection or surveillance procedures. The traces marks and fingerprints in the photographs of „The Sum of My Data” result from a functional interaction between the human being and our todays communication devices. From the everyday use of smartphones and tablets, from typing and wiping, writing emails, texts or WhatsApp messages, booking train tickets or using other functional apps. Artistic strategies - within the limits of the medium of photography - make perceptible the seemingly hidden in a combination of photography and gestural painting. The superimposing structures on the displays culminate into palimpsest-like, painterly-appearing photographs that document the simultaneity of digitization, surveillance and identity.

It's that documentary aspect I'm completely addicted to. Integrating aesthetics in ethics simply allows me to enable greater access to the images - especially to a less academic audience. To some looking at the 52 images of the series maybe it looks just aesthetically sophisticated or brings up art historical references. But its aesthetic is about that capacity to reimagine. It's about that possibility. At a time where photography sinks into common graves, abstraction at least makes it necessary to pause for a moment to consider what the images mean, their genesis or process of creation. Therefore I understand the works as Trojan Horses, ideally fostering a broader dialogue - interest and hopefully awareness - about digitization and associated shifting reality of humanity. Since the first day of my research for „The Sum Of My Data” one thing has become crystal clear: This is the decade we were brainwashed into surveilling ourselves. I think what I needed to do was to respond in a visual language to the tension between fascination, wonder and anxiety generated by the technological development and its impact on the societal and political appearance of our time.

Photography is not only about seeing. It's also about reading. It's about listening and most of all about something to feel. And when I am telling you everything, what's left for you? Thus I will end my speech here but I am looking forward to carry on in conversations tonight and in the future.

Thank you

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Elias Wessel', with a long, sweeping underline.

Elias Wessel