Prof. Dr. Stephan Berg, Artistic Director of the Kunstmuseum Bonn, November 2019

The Trace of the Body

In a reality increasingly determined by digital structures, the status and meaning of the body and of corporeality in general is becoming ever more important. The ephemeral quality of all things digital tends to prompt the easy conclusion that digitization makes the body disappear. However, arguably the opposite is the case. Every act of digitization and every digital process always contains a substrate of the physical. We activate digital space with our bodies — to be precise, with our fingers and hands that glide across touchscreens and keyboards. The sending of digital data, too, still requires material memories and sensors that receive the signals of physical motion and use algorithms to translate them into electrical signals, which then store all the things that can be clicked into life by physical bodies.

Thus, the state of affairs is more complex than it seems at a glance. The body does not vanish in digital space but is subjected to total and unprecedented digital quantification, classification and profiling, which reduces the actual complexity of the physical to algorithmically measurable data. This potentially tasks us with the key need to formulate the design of a body that gains its resilience from being not completely quantifiable and classifiable — a body that insists on remaining structurally indetermined and indeterminable.

Since 2013/14, Elias Wessel has been developing photographic concepts that transform social themes into abstract images strongly reminiscent of painting. For instance, in *Landscapes* (2014), he made use of a fellowship residency to transform the Russian city of Kursk, located near the Ukrainian border, into pure striped abstraction by means of hand-held camera pans, thus upending the hosts' expectations: they were hoping for a classic photographic documentation of their city that could be used for advertising purposes. In *Cityscapes* (2014/15), Wessel loaded so many images of megacities onto the screen that it broke down under the flood of data and began generating corrupted, glitchy visuals, which he then photographed, creating a metaphor for the collapse of ever-expanding metropolises.

Wessel's photographic work to date has found its most compelling form in the large-scale 2017 project *Die Summe meiner Daten* (The Sum of My Data), in which he finds both intentionally beautiful and enormously revealing images for the relations between the body and digital data space.

The starting point for each part of the project is the smartphone or tablet — one of the digital all-purpose tools with which we now organize our lives to such an extent that losing

or even misplacing the little rectangular magic box brings many of us to the brink of nervous breakdown: witness digital detox programs. Especially now that Apple has turned the smartphone into a sexually charged instrument, to be caressed by swiping fingers, the device has become akin to a universal legal drug that we are as hooked on as any junkie. Indeed, the consequences of this prettily packaged digital addiction can be as serious as addiction to narcotics. Most alarmingly, the dependence of our bodies on the smartphone is, in a sense, inevitable in a world dominated by digital streams: after all, access to many areas of life from finances to leisure activities would be considerably impeded, if not rendered impossible, without this device. The smartphone is thus the first drug that not only directs our social life to a great extent but also serves as a politically indispensable tool for organizing and monitoring our individual and collective coexistence.

In three interrelated groups of works, Elias Wessel approaches this wonder box. He explores how it permanently records, logs, and calculates our behavior, creating data that enable it to anticipate some of our future actions. We might assume that we control this process, but actually, it controls us. In *Off-Series*, the artist photographs the screens of his own or other people's smartphones when they are turned off, capturing details such as fingerprints. The color photographs are then enlarged to a 135 x 223 cm format. In *On-Series*, Wessel loads the images created for *Off-Series* onto various smartphones (including his own) and photographs them again, now with new fingerprints. In the process, he works with different, sometimes colored light settings. The enlarged final photographs vary in size between 199.8 x 164 cm and 222.4 x 164 cm. For *B/W-Series*, Wessel transfers the process to black and white photography. With sizes ranging from 204.6 x 164 cm to 231.9 x 164 cm, all the resulting works strive for a monumental effect. The size is crucial here, because it greatly affects the way we physically relate to these images. The physicality that they (re)present washes over us as viewers, making us aware of our own physicality.

This group of works unfolds its most abstract effect in black-and-white, and its most painterly and colorful radiance in *On-Series*. As for *Off-Series*, here the images emit an almost magical glow in a deep shimmer of bronze, copper, and sepia. Wessel deliberately uses the photographic process to achieve an eminently painterly effect. This makes sense: after all, the displays of smartphones and tablets have the form of a panel painting; besides, digitization fundamentally turns everything into images. At the same time, all objects in Wessel's works are above all powerfully convincing proof of the physical in the digital. The enormously enlarged marks left by swiping fingers authenticate the physical touches of the picture surface — indexically in every sense — while also calling to mind broad brush strokes. The images draw attention to the original meaning of the term "digital": *digitus* means "finger", and *digitalis* is the corresponding adjective. After all, the earliest operation of calculating and quantifying, and thus the first step toward the computer, was finger-counting.

The photographic appropriation of digital interfaces gives rise to painting-like images that are strikingly reminiscent of postwar abstraction as employed by Art Informel. This is all the more remarkable considering that Informalism meant a commitment to total formlessness, born not least from the devastating experiences of the Second World War and the horrors of Nazism, which appeared to contaminate all previous aesthetic approaches. It is thus not without irony that Wessel transforms the physical traces of our incessant desire to be informed into an expression of the non-informable, the informal.

Gazing upon these shimmering, formless tableaux, one realizes more and more that the user interfaces we use to swipe our way through the world ultimately function differently than promised: not as a portal that leads us to something within, but as a smooth hermetic surface whose glassy hardness is impenetrable. Seen in this light, the concept of the user interface promises not the sovereignty of the user but quite the opposite: his or her profound powerlessness vis-à-vis the black-box technology. Behind the shimmering beauty of the seductively glowing panels, aesthetically reminiscent of the 1950s, there is ultimately a disillusioning finding: following the labyrinthine superimposed wiping and swiping movements of the anonymous users in the images, one gains the distinct feeling that everyone, including oneself, has become hopelessly lost in the process. What remains is our physical, greasy residue, left behind on an impenetrable surface while our fingers were making contact with infinite streams of data. A puny remnant of the sum of our data, long since stored elsewhere.