

## Ulrich Loock: Photography and Non-Portrayability - James Welling

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James Welling himself has commented on his 'Light Sources': "I was looking for things I couldn't decipher quickly."<sup>1</sup> This is in reference to the making of a single photograph, 'Brussels' (1996). In fact it is the artist's intention that all 'Light Source' photographs stand as isolated, individual works. However, if the image in an individual shot is not immediately self-evident, then unexpected groupings of pictures only compound the difficulty of reading individual works. Welling has also described his recent works as much more lyrical than his earlier output – with specific reference to his photographs of a Volkswagen plant in Wolfsburg (1994)<sup>2</sup> and lace manufacturing in Calais (1993).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless – and contrary to first impressions – Welling's comments should not be understood to mean that the 'lyrical' character of the 'Light Sources' derives from their individual 'encipherment.' Indeed one might argue that the search for equivocal images has been a driving force in all of his output so far.

### Equivocacy

This equivocal aspect of Welling's work does not involve making subjective photographic praxis. In the comment cited above he makes the 'I' of the recipient the creator of the work. Motifs are not deliberately obscured, it is rather that motifs are sought out which are not, of their own accord, instantly and unequivocally readable. Right from his earliest days as an artist, Welling adopted a documentary stance, distancing himself from 'subjective photography' and 'Pictorialism'-in short, from all those approaches that place the artist's personal standpoint in the foreground and are aiming above all at an unrepeatable 'successful image' that manages to capture the 'perfect moment.' Yet, at the same time, his images have equally little to do with staging and theater. Welling follows instead in the tradition of factual registration of a given subject, albeit without such stark documentary economy as has been practiced by other photographers since the 70s. Bernd and Hilla Becher's work may be taken as an outstanding example of the separation of praxis from all the photographic conventions-lighting, composition, choice of subject and so on-that mark out a shot as the individual, unmistakable 'view' of a particular photographer. These photographers choose to exclude all features that might prevent them portraying their subject matter in a neutral way: an approach to photography that seeks to make the medium-the picture-as 'transparent' as possible for the subject matter, minimizing the resistance of the former to the latter. The photographed subjects are then displayed as objects for conservation, for study, for constructive scientific comparison. This kind of picture production corresponds to Barthes' notion of 'writing degree zero,' namely the indifference of the authorial subject.<sup>4</sup> This is in keeping with Welling putting the photographer-himself, that is-in the position of the recipient. At other times he talks of his intention to pursue a "discourse on the world."<sup>5</sup> The aim is to bring the world to the point where it shows itself, and here Welling's intentions are in accordance with the being of photography, which is no more than the registration of light on a light-sensitive surface. On the other hand, the claim to be pursuing a discourse "on the world" is so vast that it can only be hollow-in fact, unlike many documentary photographers, Welling does not restrict himself to a few major themes which he then endeavors to exhaust by whatever means. Although his methods are fundamentally documentary, his work is not oriented towards the paradigms of the archive, with its insistence on standardization and completeness. The hollow quality of this claim to a discourse on the world, however, corresponds entirely to the essence of photography, that is to its mechanical receptivity, which without exception registers anything and everything that reflects sufficient light. Photography is understood here in terms of an inscription of light (the literal meaning of the word

'photography' would have to be light-writing) which obeys the laws of physics alone. The effect (image) produced is so clearly dependent on the cause (light) that Roland Barthes describes the relationship of photograph to photographed object as deictic.<sup>6</sup> This view regards the intervention of the photographer as secondary, even insignificant: in other words a zero degree of authorial intervention is regarded as the appropriate *modus operandi* for photography. Decisions regarding the view, conscious composition, choice of subject and the selection of certain aspects such as particular circumstances of light and shade—all these things which are normally accepted as the actual work of the photographer alter nothing in the fundamental deictic function of the photograph as a signifier and could prove to be no more than an attempt to introduce the manifestations of an authorial standpoint even where the medium resists it. Thus if it is accepted that it is not the photographer but rather the object which is the subject of photography then it becomes the task of the photographer to find a form for the primacy of the object. Zero intervention on the part of the author does not lie in the absence of the author but in his neutralization. This does not mean that the indiscriminate snapping of anything that reflects enough light to be photographed is the shortest route to the essence of photography. Explicit choices must be made: the subject, the ways and means of the shot, the standpoint and so on—in order to clearly demonstrate the lack of authorial intervention.

#### Photography of Photography

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The manner of focusing on the medium and conditions of creative visual praxis lies at the heart of artistic activity in the modern era. In Welling's work so far, reflexivity has taken on a variety of different forms. In the 1986-90 and 1994 'Degradés' he works without using a camera, in both color and in black and white. These works were created entirely in the darkroom by means of certain manipulations concerning the way the photo paper was exposed to light. In these works, elements and possibilities of the overall photographic process are isolated and used to synthetically create images that are complete in themselves. The essence of the photographic—in the above examples restricted to enlargement—is exposed photographically, by the structured exposure of photo paper.

However, this process also gives rise to the possibility that the 1985 'Tile Photographs' which resemble photographs may bring to mind thoughts of the chance distribution of individual elements across some defined surface while the 'Degradés' may be linked with notions of landscape. In this situation analytical, self-reflexive photographic praxis generates images that transcend and progress beyond itself. It may well be that James Welling fully intends to stimulate those associative faculties in us that inevitably tend towards identifying and finding a name for pictures in terms of earlier pictures. In other words, in these primarily analytical, distinctly self-reflexive works Welling is also interested in that perceptual complexity which may indeed be reduced and suppressed, but may never be entirely excluded.

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With his photographs of locomotives and railroad architecture<sup>7</sup> Welling has focused on a decisive means and object of industrialization as we know it since the beginning of the 19th century. The railroad was the most crucial element in the taking of the North American continent, a means of displacing and destroying the indigenous people, the prerequisite for the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of those who controlled the processes of industrial production. It is no coincidence that the railroad and photography were invented at much the same time: if the railroad is the medium of the industrial appropriation of real space, then photography is the medium of the industrial appropriation of pictorial space. In a sense it is intriguing that the principle of

perspective-which is an automatic and essential part of the photographic process-is scarcely so vividly demonstrated as in a straight railroad track disappearing into the distance. Thus Welling's railroad photos reflect both the technical features and the cultural implications of photography, and the common origins of photography and the railroad mean that there is nothing arbitrary about the choice of the railroad as a motif.

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On the one hand, self-reflexivity in Welling's work can place the infrastructure of the medium so firmly in the foreground as to wipe out any other subject matter, while on the other hand it can adapt other specific cultural and historical "writing" to the extent that the subject matter is subjugated by some foreign, adopted point of view. This form of self-reflexivity is part of an approach, where a photographic "discourse on the world" is accompanied by an awareness of the structures that determine this discourse, independent of the reality of that same world. One could say that Welling's work is a pictorial, extensive and inductive formulation of a photographic uncertainly principle. In particular this sculpture also have their sphere of operation. In 'Light Sources' Welling takes as the subject of his photographs precisely that element whose inscription is the actual business of photography. However, in keeping with his approach so far, he does not work with light, as such, but with the particular light emitted by specific light-bodies. It is not about illustrating a principle, but about relating to and taking hold of the world, whose elements-his subjects-are chosen according to their inner-real or metaphorical-kinship with photography itself. To be precise: 'Tota Lamp' (1996) is a picture of a photo-lamp; while the picture of a Josef Hoffmann lamp in 'Paris' (1996)-with reflecting metal balls for feet-self-consciously references Bauhaus photography.

In effect, every photo of a functioning light-body is taken against the light. At the same time, Welling takes care to minimize any dazzle that could obscure the light source and (in most cases) creates trenchant contrasts of light and dark. Sometime these are so strong that only the light bulb is identifiable, not the fixture itself. In fact, the comment by Welling (cited at the opening of this essay) that he was looking for things that he could not quickly decipher was made with reference to just such an image ('Brussels', 1996). A tendency to break down objective legibility in favor of alien, trenchant, light-dark images goes hand in hand with a marked formalization of configurations and with a distinct interest in limitations of the visual field. In 'Paris' this goes so far that a framed print in the image reflects the cropping and framing of the photograph itself. With respect to conventions of pictorial composition, Welling creates images that could be described as equivocal in terms of their representational content, but not in terms of their abstract construction. Alongside images of light-bodies, 'Light Sources' also contains other works with a variety of subjects, whose inclusion in a series with this title only makes sense in so far as any light-reflecting body may be a light source to the light-sensitive coating of the film. As far as the photo-chemical registration of traces of light is concerned, it is irrelevant whether the light itself derives from a primary or a secondary source; all that matters in the creation of an image is purely and simply the strength of the light as it reaches the film. The title, 'Light Sources', used for such diverse photographs thus reflects the utterly physical character of photographic registration: it could hardly be more different from human seeing which is always a matter of 'perception'-that is to say, never independent of an interpretative processing of what is seen.

'Light Sources'

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On the other hand it is noticeable that many of the 'Light Sources' which do not show a light-body do portray the sky, a bare branch in front of the sun, or views of the landscape. Unlike the strict

compositional structures of the pictures of light-bodies, in these works the distribution of motifs bears no obvious relationship to the picture format. Limitlessness is part of the rhetoric of the sublime. The sublime is a paradigm for images of the uncertainty of that which has no clear outline, which can be looked at but not absorbed, which exceeds the sensual faculties of the subject. Welling takes up subjects which are photographable but which are not concretized as objects in the sense of an opposite number, subjects where the automatic construction of perspectival pictorial space to a certain extent goes nowhere. Parts of a light-reflecting 'given' are registered, yet the resultant images show above all that this 'given' resists representation because it is too large, too broad, too extensive: what may be grasped conceptually and linguistically exceeds the possibilities of representation. Here Welling constructs an intriguing paradox, in that he makes photography the medium of non-portrayability, while all the time photography is in essence a guarantor of faithful portrayal.

With the title 'Light Sources' Welling activates two different, intrinsically contradictory modes of undermining trust in the realism of photography, without offering any compensatory subjectivization of the images: images of light-bodies that are for example hard to identify because they are photographed against the light, with their 'non-representationalism' emphasized by more or less strict formalization of the pictorial inventory; and (amongst other things) images that picture no more than details of overwhelmingly extensive circumstances. Welling's 'photography of photography' proves to be the portrayal of non-portrayability. In this sense he sets his photographic "discourse on the world" free from pictorial determinacy. At the same time, however, this also opens up the way to experimental picture production which, free of fixed reference, operates on the level of the medium and of the signifier. Taking up a distinction made by J.-F. Lyotard, one could describe the 'Light Sources' - Welling himself calls them "lyrical" - as nostalgic and melancholic, colored by the withdrawal of reality from the images themselves; by contrast, the Draperies, images of the photographic grain, or the earlier 'Tile Photographs' and 'Degradés', could be described as experimental and nihilistic in the sense that non-portrayability becomes the subject of actual pictorial invention, and the central issue in all things photographic.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Carol Squires, 'A Slice of Light', in: Artforum, January 1998, p. 78

<sup>2</sup> James Welling, Wolfsburg, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg 1994

<sup>3</sup> James Welling, Usines de dentelle, Le Channel, Scène nationale de Calais 1993

<sup>4</sup> See Roland Barthes, Writing Degree Zero, transl. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, New York 1977

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Ulrich Loock, 'Introduction' in: James Welling, Photographs 1977-90, Kunsthalle Bern 1990, p. 93

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography, transl. by Richard Howard, London 1982, pp. 5ff.

<sup>7</sup> James Welling, Les voies ferrées: St. Etienne et la Plaine du Forez, Maison de la Culture et de la Communication, St. Etienne 1990

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, 'Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist postmodern?' in: Tumult 4, 1982, pp. 141ff.