

From Generative Toward Concrete Photography

The University of Nottingham, June 30, 2007

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Gottfried Jäger: From Generative to Concrete Photography

Introduction

(a) The question raised by the Alchemy Project is whether to choose between representation and presentation, between reproducing and producing objects for the purpose of photography. I represent a qualified presentative, in other words: productive photography that stands as an expression of freedom – against an ‘apparatus’ that was invented as a functional means of exact reproduction. Therefore, the terms Generative and Concrete Photography are central to my art, in practice as well as in theory. The terms and their meanings have determined my professional life as a photographer, as well as a theorist and lecturer of photography.

(b) One of the first proposals for an appropriate term to describe the Sun-Pictures of Mr. TALBOT was ‘photo-genic’; (French: ‘photo-génie’). ‘Photography’; (‘photographie’;) was introduced only later and referred to showing the visible rather than generating visibility. Therefore, I propose to reanimate the term ‘photogenic’; to refer to all procedures which concern the process of image-giving and which have to do with the self-referential (namely, the presentative and productive, not the ‘photo-graphic’;, as you said). The term ‘photogenic’; is not an ‘ideology’;, it includes the wide spectrum of all known stylistic aspects from constructive to informal, from mathematical to spontaneous gestures.

(c) This means that I do not speak of a ‘photo-medium’; as such, but of a ‘photo-system’; –;
(Fig. 2 –; Diagram)

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–; including all the facets of photography that we know today: From appropriating the external reality to conveying an internal, subjective reality, or the creation of a new autonomous reality in which photography loses its status as a medium to gain the independent status of an autonomous object. The term ‘photo-system’; also includes the newer post-modern aspects of analysis and reflection of the reality of the medium itself. This approach to our discipline opens a wide perspective on a technical system of images –; based on light and optics which has emancipated itself and is now at the forefront of new technical and aesthetic challenges.

(d) Within this area, my special field is called Generative and Concrete Photography: nonfigurative, self-referential, image-giving photo-processes that are based on a systematic, constructive foundation.

(e) The following four photographs should illustrate the historical marks of photography as:

- • reproduction Fig. 3 –; NIÉPCE, 1826
 - • projection Fig. 4 –; ROBINSON, 1858
 - • production Fig. 5 –; COBURN, 1917
 - • reflection Fig. 6 –; MULAS, 1970
- Fig. 7 –; Generative Fotografie –; Invitation card

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(1) I introduced the term Generative Photography 1968 (40 years ago!) to describe the photographic process not as a reproductive, but as a productive system. Its underlying idea lies at the point where three developmental trends in art and photography intersect:

- • ‘experimental’; photography, from COBURN’s Vortographs to the contemporary concrete tendencies;
- • ‘apparatus art’; from the kaleidoscope to the computer –; and
- • aesthetic theory, in particular, the Exact Aesthetics from PYTHAGORAS to the informational, ‘generative’; and apparatus aesthetics of today.

The medium photography has assimilated and developed each of these trends in its own specific way.

Fig. 8 – Generative Fotografie – Faltblatt

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(2) In January 1968, I brought together four young photo artists to exhibit at the Museum of Art, Bielefeld. These included PIERRE CORDIER,

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a Belgian who showed Chemigrams, and the Germans KILIAN BREIER, who showed 17 Permutational Luminograms and HEIN GRAVENHORST,

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who showed Photomechanical Transformations and I myself presented Pinhole Structures, based on the principle of the camera obscura. At the time, all these image-making techniques were classed as ‚experimental’. However, contrary to the products of experimental photography which were considered more coincidental and spontaneous, our methods were based on logical and specific thinking that was exact and rational in its approach. In order to characterise this, a new term – ‚generative photography’ – was necessary.

(3) With his text for our exhibition catalogue, entitled Cybernetic Aesthetics, HERBERT W. FRANKE, Austrian physicist and researcher of science and art, formulated the background theory for our logical approach while the German philosopher MAX BENSE introduced the term Generative Aesthetics, an echo of NOAM CHOMSKY’S Generative Grammar.

(4) A central sentence of the last chapter summarising MAX BENSE’S paradigmatic book Aesthetica – Introduction to The New Aesthetic, published in 1965, was:

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„The generative aesthetic is an ‚aesthetic of production’ (not an aesthetic of interpreting beauty, G. J.), allowing for a methodical production of aesthetic conditions and structures by dividing the production into finite, distinguishable and recordable steps.“ (p. 335)

(5) With his theories, texts and poetry, MAX BENSE was increasingly regarded as the ‚father’ of the art-and-computer movement. Some of his students, FRIEDER NAKE, GEORG NEES, HELMAR FRANK and others represent the first serious computer artist generation, with a rich theoretical background in mathematics, informatics and computer sciences. We have all been friends throughout this time, and it is very interesting to see that – after a time lag of more than forty years – today these first steps hold great historical significance. Today they come under the term Algorithmic Art – and the Art Museum of Bremen has become a new German centre of this tendency where FRIEDER NAKE was a long-standing university professor for mathematics and informatics.

(6) I mention all of this to communicate something about the background of the term Generative Photography, and the field in which this phenomenon could unfold and exist up until today. The field could be named Toward Apparative and Computer Arts (so the title of the exhibition held at GOETHE-Institutes worldwide, from 1970 to 1976, curated by HERBERT W. FRANKE, which included a number of generative photo artists). In 1973 I co-published, together with Herbert W. Franke, the book Apparative Art – From the Kaleidoscope to the Computer,

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in which we gave insight into this fascinating new area, also showing important contemporary generative photographs.

(7) In this field, Generative Photography has developed its own independent artistic program. Seven years after its first exhibition in Bielefeld I published – together with my friend and colleague KARL MARTIN HOLZHÄUSER – the programmatic book Generative Fotografie (Fig. 14, 15)

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– history, aesthetics, technique – with numerous artists in this field. We presented

Generative Photographs as intrinsic images of a pictorial system between man and machine, focussing on the competition between both of them on a highly symbolic level. Some examples from the book and the group Generative Photography:

Fig. 16 – BREIER Luminogramm, 1960/1965
 Fig. 17 – CORDIER, 1957 – in: Generative Fotografie
 Fig. 18 – CORDIER, 1957 – in: Sammlg. RUPPERT
 Fig. 19 – CORDIER, 1966 – Photo-Chemigram “Yves”
 Fig. 20 – GLÜHER + CORDIER in Gmunden, 2006
 Fig. 21 – GRAVENHORST, 1967
 Fig. 22 – GRAVENHORST, 1967
 Fig. 23 – GRAVENHORST, 1967
 Fig. 24 – Optical principle of Pinhole Structure, 1967
 Fig. 25 – Pinhole Structure, 1967
 Fig. 26 – Pinhole Structure, 1967
 Fig. 27 – Pinhole Structure, 1967
 Fig. 28 – Pinhole Structure, 1967
 Fig. 29 – Pinhole Structure, 1967 – Color

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(8) 15 years later I discovered the photo material as its own, in particular the photo baryta paper (Fig. 30 – Square)

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– I did’nt saw it longer as a medium to carry any information. I saw it as an own independent aesthetical object. With this strategy I left the strong dertermined mathematical structures and searched for the individual expression of my tools. Square and triangle became fractal outlines (Fig. 31 – Triangle)

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At the same time my work goes out of the studio and the gallery (Fig. 32 – Gallery Jesse)

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and stood in contact to the external world. The ‘photo’ left the frame, and was to seen in numerous situation-related installations.

Fig. 33 – Photo Corner, 1985
 Fig. 34 – Washington, 1983 / 2001
 Fig. 35 – Handling mit dem Papier, Foto: Kräussl
 Fig. 36 – zwischen, durch, 1986
 Fig. 37 – Kniff, 2006

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(9) Works like this are closely related to ‚concrete’ photographic tendencies. The similarities and differences between Generative and Concrete Photography was the topic of my last lecture at Dresden University 2006, published in my newest book (Fig. 38– F. als gen. System):

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Photography as a Generative System, edited by ANDREAS BEAUGRAND, 2007.

(10) Both, Generative and Concrete Photography share more similarities than differences. Generative Photography is a phenomenon of a small avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s, based and limited in time. Concrete Photography includes generative tendencies (mathematical programming), but represents a more global term for all approaches based on a self-referential syntax of photography – with a wide variety of styles from constructive to informal.

(11) The history of Concrete Photography began in 1916 with COBURN’S idea of an exhibition of photographs that should only show ‚form and structure’ for its own sake, without any external motifs, and with COBURN’S Vortographs one year later. At the time, the term ‚concrete’ was unusual, as it did not exist in the context of art. Therefore, the first results

were initially called, 'abstract' (as in KANDINSKY'S Abstract Watercolour of 1910, truly the first 'concrete' work of art).

(12) Meanwhile, one began to realise that abstraction and concretion should be seen as two distinct or, rather, opposite ways of approaching and interpreting the 'world'. In short: Abstraction is a kind of idealization of reality – concretion is the realization of an idea. Abstraction gives a complex reality an 'ideal' form (a diagram, for example) – by concretion becomes a vague idea real (so as in a physical photopicture, for example). Questions like this was discussed in the book Concrete Photography, 2005 (Fig. 39 – Book Concr. Photogr.).

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(13) The term 'concret' characterizes photography that purposely dispenses with depicting external objects and makes itself its theme: its medium, light, its unique materials, their generative processes, the apparatus. The results are pure light images, photographs of photography, an image genre of a special kind. Concrete photography visualizes itself by means of autogenesis.

(14) The term 'concrete', as used in an artistic context, was coined in 1930 by THEO VAN DOESBURG in his famous manifesto of Concrete Painting. From that time on, the term 'concrete' has made eminent headlines: in Concrete Poetry (by GOMRINGER and others), Concrete Music (by SCHAEFFER and others) and also in Concrete Photography, which has finally discovered and refined its own style.

(15) The double-term Concrete Photography in fact emerged exactly one year before the exhibition of Generative Photography was held in Bielefeld in 1968. A show, entitled Photographie concrète/Konkrete Fotografie (Fig. 40 – Karte),

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opened in the 'Galerie aktuell' in Bern, the capital of Switzerland in which four young photo artists presented their latest works (Fig. 41 – Doppelseite)

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(16) ROGER HUMBERT (top left) showed Light Structures, RENÉ MÄCHLER (top right) showed Luminograms, FREDERICK SCHNYDER (bottom left) presented Geometric Patterns, and ROLF SCHROETER (bottom, right) spontaneous Photograms. – Later, both groups, the German and the Swiss ones, collaborated in activities organised by KÄTHE CLARISSA SCHROEDER and her first German photo gallery CLARISSA, located in Hanover. Its special collection, called Foto–Grafik, now forms part of the collection of the Sprengel-Museum, Hanover (Fig. 42 – Foto-Grafik Katalog).

Fig. 43 – HUMBERT, 1959

Fig. 44 – HUMBERT, 1960

Fig. 45 – HUMBERT, 1965

Fig. 46 – MÄCHLER, 1967

Fig. 47 – MÄCHLER, 1971 + 1997 – Doppel-Abbildung

Fig. 48 – MÄCHLER, 1978/1981 – halbseitig strahlend

Fig. 49 – MÄCHLER, 1994 – Cliché papier

Fig. 50 – SCHROETER, 1954–1956

Fig. 51 – SCHROETER, 1956–1960

Fig. 52 – SCHNYDER, c. 1968

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(17) To show the rich history of Concrete Photography, both in theory and practise, I will present a second diagram (Fig. 53 – History Steps)

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(18) So we can summarise:

Concrete – including Generative Photography – does not aim to depict the visible (like straight, documentary or scientific photography);

it does not aim to represent the non-visible

(like pictorial, subjective or fatastic photography);

it does not aim to reflect views or enforce perspectives

(like analytical, conceptual or demonstrative photography).

Instead it establishes visibility. It is only visible, only-visible.

(19) In conclusion, it should be said that the first permanent museum exhibits of Concrete Photography – including its generative aspects – have been on display in the Wurzburg Art

Museum since 2002, showing a small selection of approximately 50 works. The collector is PETER C. RUPPERT who built up an excellent collection entitled Concrete Art in Europe after 1945 (Fig. 54 – RUPPERT mit Bild von HAJEK-HALKE)

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(20) Some of his last purchases include artists from Britain such as John HILLIARD, ADAM FUSS (living in USA) and RICHARD CALDICOTT.

Fig. 55 – Wurzburg – RUPPERT Collection with HAJEK, CALDICOTT…

Fig. 56 – Wurzburg – RUPPERT Collection with BREIER (from 1968: Permutational Series)

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(21) The PETER C. RUPPERT Collection, however, is international and includes the Austrian artist INGE DICK, the Hungarian DORÁ MAURER, the Italian LUIGI VERONESI, Swiss artists such as THEODORE BALLY, ROGER HUMBERT and RENÉ MÄCHLER (who received a grand retrospective last year at the Swiss Foundation of Photography in Winterthur with a wonderful catalogue entitled Am Nullpunkt der Fotografie (Photo Zero). Most artists of the RUPPERT collection are Germans, such as the famous PETER KEETMAN, OTTO STEINERT, HEINZ HAJEK-HALKE, and the first generation of the group of Generative Photographers with KILIAN BREIER, PIERRE CORDIER, HEIN GRAVENHORST as well as myself. However, it also includes its second generation as represented by KARL MARTIN HOLZHÄUSER, a former student of KILIAN BREIER.

(22) KARL MARTIN is my best friend and colleague as professor of photography at Bielefeld Photo School (Fachhochschule Bielefeld, University of Applied Sciences) for more than 30 years, and I appreciate his work greatly. – Unfortunately he was unable to accept your friendly invitation; but he suggested me as his speaker, and I am happy to show some examples of his fascinating work in the last section of my lecture.

Fig. 57 – Mechano-Optical Research, 1971

Fig. 58 – Light Painting, 1991

Fig. 59 – Light Painting 1, 2002

Fig. 60 – Light Painting 2

Fig. 61 – Light Painting 3

Fig. 62 – Light Painting 4

Fig. 63 – Light Painting 5

Fig. 64 – Light Painting 6

Fig. 65 – Light Painting 7

Fig. 66 – Light Painting, 2003

Fig. 67 – Artist with Light Brush, Light Raket

Fig. 68 – Light Painting, 2005

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