

Nadine Olonetzky

ABOUT LIGHT

As if stepping from a brightly lit living room into the pitch dark night, not recognising anything – this is the feeling we get when we first look at Andri Stadler’s images with similar probing eyes. His large formats from the series *Surface* unevenly fixed to the white surface of the wall, give the perception of lightness, their dark surfaces shimmering and gleaming.

First of all one seems to recognize oneself and the lamp on the ceiling of the exhibition space. Somewhat distorted and fragmented, but yes: this is the lamp and one’s own body reflected in the black. It is only later, as one’s eyes adjust to the darkness, that one sees, say, a blue sheen, growing bigger and rounder perhaps, making one think of a dimly lit stone. And, as if taking a big step forward, one steps into the picture’s depth, all of a sudden standing on the coast of an ocean as it seems. A deception? It is night, and the stones illuminating the picture as if they were some sort of blue and purple shimmering light source quasi emanating their own light, appear cool and mossy green. The sky stretching above these stones must be painted with ink, so we believe, and so infinite that one could easily be absorbed into its bluish blackness. In any case, what we see cannot be but a tiny part of an immense expanse that only really begins beyond the picture’s edge. In these images there is an element that is at the same time irritating and beautiful: that which is recognisable, localisable and identifiable is inextricably bound up with the pure experience of colours. It is this inextricability that fuels Stadler’s photographs.

Andri Stadler, who is a quiet thinker working unpretentiously and precisely, shot the series *Surface* in 2014 while on a journey through Scotland. He was travelling alone, and his images convey the feeling of existential exposedness anyone outside in a vast dark landscape is prone to be overcome by. Even if it does belong to life’s basic conditions and is subliminally always present – this feeling of being lost, the uncanny, the unfathomable; this feeling is obscured as it were by the light of day or the light illuminating a room. At least most of the time. Similar in the series *Remain* from 2013, shot in Sicily. The images make one aware of something just visible, left over perhaps, on the verge of disappearing. Slipping from one’s grasp? Here too one is reminded of a feeling; how much in fact is out of our control, how many things ultimately remain a mystery.

INSIDE AND OUTSIDE In the landscape – en plein air – Andri Stadler works without a tripod, using long exposure times to capture the surroundings’ (residual) light reflections. He responds to the things that “jump at him” as he puts it, forcing the world’s richness into further reduction. He compacts impressions to the point of invisibility, or until they dissolve into blackness. Standing in front of the pictures we find ourselves in a border zone where things are still perceptible, or maybe just becoming so; a reality that can only be realised pictorially but which touches on questions of one’s own reality.

The series *Blended Light* (2013/14) and *Shade* (2014/15) work the other way round: although they were created in the studio, we are in fact dealing with an undefined space; somewhere, anywhere – timeless and placeless. Andri Stadler does not respond to a found situation, a landscape or a lighting atmosphere in these pictures, but works in the opposite direction instead: Using two sources of light and sometimes, as in *Shade*, forming shadows with his hands, he creates something out of nothing in the darkness of his studio. Stadler dispenses with an object lens, so that the light hits the sensor directly. The camera is thus a small room in a room trapping the light and creating an image by transferring it directly onto the memory device. Instead of working towards reduction, Andri Stadler feels his way to something perceptible. Be it *Surface*, *Remain*, *Blended Light* or *Shade*: In all these works Stadler uses two different approaches to create the same effect. He pushes reality to the point where it remains in a dazzling state between abstract construct and the reproduction of reality, even if this reality is “only” made of light. Look-ing at them automatically triggers the questions: where am I? What do I see exactly? And: not knowing what I see – what does that imply?

ABSTRACTION IN PHOTOGRAPHY Since its inception photography has been considered a confirmation of reality, rendering what was once in front of the camera’s lens. The invisible strands connecting photography with three-dimensional reality – its objects, creatures and scenes – are strong and seemingly

credible. Photography’s ability to cut through the timeline and freeze what was in front of the lens at that very moment has always been a very seductive way of proving things. In Andri Stadler’s case also one clings to what one seems to recognise – a road, stones on the beach, a hill, shadows, a ray of light as if from another planet. The fact that each picture is a construct and the result of an optical-mechanical, chemical-physical (or digital) technological process, that it also depends on point of view and thus the photographer’s intentions, and that it may be heavily retouched and edited – it is easily forgotten. Someone was here, they took a photograph, it must be true! But photographers have always been fascinated by the construction aspect of photographs, by the reality created by photographic technology. From the very start they experimented with the possibilities offered by the camera (a simple camera obscura at first) as well as the light-sensitive emulsion recording light when spread onto a glass plate, metal surface, or paper. Boston born Alvin Langdon Coburn (1882–1966) for example, who moved to England in 1912, tried to create abstract photographs. In England he had joined the Vorticists, and it was under their influence that he succeeded to free himself from his pictorialist landscapes and portraits. Vorticism, an artistic movement flourishing parallel to French Cubism and Italian Futurism, fought against the realistic depiction of things, holding up the autonomy of the picture in art. This is a concern as topical today as it was then, and very much applicable to Andri Stadler’s works.

INTROSPECTIONS In 1917 Langdon Cuborn, to whom abstract photography is often ascribed to (despite the fact that his compatriot Paul Strand (1890–1976) showed photographs using the term *abstract-ion* in their title as early as 1916), started to create a series of photographs called vortographs. They are abstract images he made using an arrangement consisting of three mirrors that created non-representational compositions by means of kaleidoscopic multiple reflections. Materials and surfaces were distorted beyond recognition, freeing photography from its function of depicting the visual world. Even if the result is of course quite different from Andri Stadler’s works *Blended Light* and *Shade*: Creating something new with light instead of representing things has concerned photography almost from the very start, along with the much more obvious task of showing and (allegedly) proving reality.

In fact, even in this early phase of abstract photography there was talk of working without a camera at all. The photogram was one of these cameraless photo experiments, rendering the objects placed onto the photographic paper as white shadows, as in the plant images of Victorian photo pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot (1800–1877). The chemogram, created by the reaction of different chemicals with a light-sensitive emulsion, is another. The *Shadographs* by Christian Schad (German Dada artist, 1894–1982) and Man Ray’s (1890–1976) *rayographs* are also photograms, while Lazlo Moholy-Nagy’s (1895–1946) *luminograms* are the result of light falling onto the paper from various sources, captured with or without a camera. Broadly speaking, Andri Stadler’s *Blended Light* and *Shade* could be called luminograms. They demonstrate light phenomena that do not only fundamentally question the perception of visual things but also examine the genesis and essence of images. Point of view, perspective, veracity of perception; these are all up for discussion. Where am I, what do I actually see? Where do I turn to, why do I know that this is the right thing to do? And: who am I to see what I see?

The early fascination for abstraction and the not immediately recognisable towards the end of the 19th century was based on an interest in something optically unconscious in the broadest sense, and this was being explored like uncharted territory: the discovery of X-rays in 1895 allowing us to look at the body’s invisible interior, the then fashionable enthusiasm for spiritualistic seances that provoked numerous attempts to capture ghostly appearances on camera and thus prove their existence, as well as the rise of psychoanalysis – all these things encouraged the development of abstract photography. It became evident that people are (strongly) influenced by things that remain invisible to the human eye. Even in those days’ mysterious images that had their very own reality or referred to nothing but themselves were expressions of a shift towards an inner or spiritual reality.

REFLECTING THE MEDIUM For some photographers examining the possibilities of abstract photography was but one area among many – as with Edward Steichen (1879–1973) who between 1923 and 1931 worked on *Equivalents*, a series of cloud studies tending towards the abstract. To Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy this was of infinitely greater importance. In the 1920s both created numerous photograms, many of them unique prints. They are photographic constructs that invariably refer to themselves. But abstraction in photography is not just a play with shapes and colours, light and shade. It can also constitute an intellectual rebellion against social, political, ideological and above all artistic conventions. To this day it is based on an in-

tensive examination of the medium’s technological and aesthetic possibilities fuelled by a fundamental doubt as to the definiteness of photographic messages. Even though abstract photographs such as Andri Stadler’s delight by the beauty of their composition, contrasts of light and dark, or colours, there is something recalcitrant about them. They refuse to give us something (which is supposed to be easily) recognisable in response to a world that is confusingly complex, contradictory and difficult to read. A world where we are left in the dark with nothing but assumptions, searching for light, groping for recognisable shapes. This is why pictures such as Stadler’s *Surface series*, although conveying a certain degree of the world’s surface, reflect much more than the experience that orientation can be difficult at times, that the world can be an inhospitable place, beautiful but uncanny, where one has to fight the existential feeling of being exposed. Above and beyond that, however, these dark pictures reflect the process of their own creation: without light there are no photographs. After entering the black box like camera, the light is captured by the negative or memory device, where it remains latent, a mere possibility lying dormant in the dark of the film role or chip. Only when the image is developed, converted and enlarged does the captured light reappear in the form of an object made of paper. A photograph thus always comes from the darkness at least once (an analogue photograph passes through the darkness twice, once in the camera and once in the dark room), but it is light that gives it its existence. How then is pictorial reality created, and what does it consist of? When does a photograph represent, when is it a construction?

PICTORIAL RESEARCH Like Andri Stadler many other artists and photographers have recently tackled the question of pictorial representation and construction of reality. Thomas Ruff (*1958), Wolfgang Tillmans (*1968) and Shirana Shabazi (*1974) are but a few examples. Wolfgang Tillmans’ series such as *Freischwimmer* (2003–2013) and *Silver* (continuing since 1998), created without a camera, are virtual studies on light. Tillmans produced them in the darkroom by exposing the photographic paper to coloured light. Shirana Shabazi uses an analogue camera to photograph colourful geometric bodies in her studio, the result of which we might call still lifes, if it wasn’t for the fact that these extremely colourful abstract compositions (such as *Komposition-01-2011* or *Komposition-13-2011*) are more reminiscent of concrete painting, and it is difficult to identify any spatiality that might have originally been present. Thomas Ruff proceeds in the opposite direction, deconstructing existing digital pictures. Whether he takes photographs from mass media as for the large-scale *JPEGS* (2004–2007), pornography pictures found on the internet for the series *Nudes* (2000–2012) or Japanese Manga comics for *Substrat* (2007): he uses them as his starting material, enlarging them, moving pixels or breaking them down into individual pixels until all that is left – or revealed – are abstract colour fields and colour clouds.

What used to be an unambiguous visual sign is disintegrated beyond recognition. Again the result is reminiscent of abstract painting, but actually it is the photograph’s structure, not visible to the naked eye, which has been exposed; the basis of the picture come to light. In short: photography is always a construct, the result of technological possibilities as well as creative decisions. What we are dealing with is an increase in density of silver salts, of pixels, their concentration resulting in something recognisable. In this respect all photographs, analogue or digital, are always translation, manipulation, and interpretation – in essence: abstraction. An essence which, however, remains optically unconscious. It is surprising how often we still naively see through a photograph as if it was a window into reality, believing it as reality itself. Especially when it comes to documentary photography; drawing on objects and occurrences of the visual world, it offers ever so many instances of recognition, thus seemingly affirming the real.

IDEA AND EVIDENCE Andri Stadler’s pictures do not exactly invite this kind of affirmation. Their glossy uneven surface – or its representation behind glass – is enough to throw us back on our own existence, evoking the room one is standing in. One has to move in front of the picture and eliminate the reflection of one’s own person to see the complete picture. The things depicted and the ones we recognise interact with each other, raising questions: where am I, what do I actually see? And again: where do I turn to, why do I know that this is the right thing to do? Who am I that I see what I see? Questions about the origin of the phenomenon one recognises or believes to recognise. Questions concerning the unambiguity of one’s own perception, the reliability of evidence. Questions also about the principles or certainties we comply with and on the basis of which we take decisions. Existential questions.

Thus, it is rather unlikely that someone might take these photographs for windows one can look through.

Too obvious that they only present a small part of a vast space. Too strong the feeling of being thrown back on oneself, as one is immediately haunted by hunches, suppositions, memories. They make us realise the difficulties of perception by night and in daily life: The more inexplicable the motif, the vaster and more infinite the space, the stronger we sense these uncertainties. This is not, however, simply uncanny and frightening! In *Blended Light* for example coloured light sources shimmer and glow seductively in the darkness of the pictorial space – even if they do not explain anything. Is this the light of a distant star? A mundane light source close by? But the things possibly presented in these images remain but hints and suggestions, colour being the only evident entity.

Not knowing what I see – what does that imply? We can only trust in colour, shimmering and glowing like a promise. For all their darkness, Andri Stadler’s images are reflections on light, confirming above all one thing: light does exist, wherever it may come from, no matter where it is going. And that something becomes visible through light. Even if only for a short time, and sometimes as a mere hint. And that also the unidentifiable can be a ray of hope.

Nadine Olonetzky born in Zurich in 1962, writes on photography, art and cultural-historical subjects for, amongst other newspapers, NZZ am Sonntag. She has written and edited several books and is a member of kontrast (www.kontrast.ch), Zurich. Recently published: Daniela Keiser and Nadine Olonetzky, *bergen*, The Green Box publishers, Berlin, 2015; Meinrad Schade – Krieg ohne Krieg, ed. by Nadine Olonetzky, with texts by Nadine Olonetzky, Fred Ritchin, Michail Schischkin and Daniel Wechlin, Scheidegger & Spiess publishers, 2015.

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ANDRI STADLER At a first glance all we see in Andri Stadler’s works is a jet black shimmering surface. Knowing that they are photographs we feel confused at first, searching in vain for a recognisable representation of reality, be it familiar or unknown. At the same time these opaque images exert a strange pull on us. Whoever gives in to this pull, seems to discover outlines, traces, hints of a tactile reality, only to be thrown back on themselves almost instantly, doubting this apparent certainty. Andri Stadler (*1971), who grew up in the canton of Thurgau and currently lives in Lucern, confronts today’s excessive flood of images with his radical and unpretentious experiments in the medium of photography.

1971, grew up in Aadorf in the canton of Thurgau. He lives in Lucern. 1996–1999 studied fine arts at the HSLU D&K. 2011 studio scholarship, Cité des Art Paris, Visarte Central Switzerland, 2013 sponsorship prize canton of Thurgau, 2014 Pfeifermobil travel grant to Scotland, 2016 studio scholarship Berlin, canton of Lucern. Member of the Alpineum Poduzenten Galerie Luzern since 2010.

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