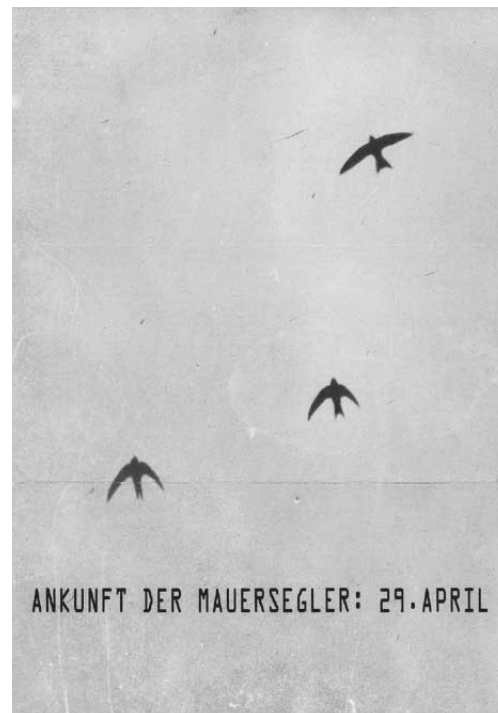


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Jochen Lempert, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 2010
(exhibition flyer)



365 Tafeln zur Naturgeschichte, Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, 1997 (invitation card)

The Ephemeral, the Morphological, the Amorphous, and the Hybrid Elements of a New Photographic Aesthetic—Jochen Lempert in the 1990s

Florian Ebner

Let's start with the mundane, with something that comes fluttering into your house. The word "ephemera" is derived from ancient Greek and means "lasting only one day, fleeting." In biology, it refers to a genus of insects belonging to the order of Ephemeroptera, which includes mayflies and dayflies. In the world of museums and collections, it constitutes a class of printed matter relating to a specific day or valid for a short time only, such as letters, postcards, tickets and invitation cards, or posters and bills. Artist Jochen Lempert is familiar with both usages: not only is he a trained biologist specializing in insects, but he also attaches great importance to any artistic form of printed matter, collecting samples of it himself and selecting and designing the motifs for his own invitation cards and posters with the utmost care. If we examine this printed matter as a point of entry into Lempert's photographic work—which spans a period of almost thirty-five years—its diversity is striking, playing in one way or another with the actual function and meaning of "ephemera."

Ankunft der Mauersegler: 29. April (Arrival of the Swifts: April 29) is written in orange lettering on the publicity materials for Lempert's first major solo exhibition at Bonner Kunstverein, in 1997: it is positioned below the three swifts flying across the photo. As a matter of fact, the birds did indeed return to Bonn from Africa on April 29 of that year, the day of the vernissage. (p. 2) The 2010 flyer for the Museum Ludwig in Cologne contains a similar, albeit unintended (and therefore more prophetic), coincidence: Lempert's image shows a cloud of black ash above the active volcano Stromboli, and the exhibition's opening week happened at the same time as the eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland. (p. 2) Other invitation cards and posters, in turn, address scientific or social issues that were politically relevant at the time, such as an invitation from the year 2000/2001 featuring a device like a gun that can transfer genetic material, similar to the instrument used by US biochemist Craig Venter's team to sequence an entire human genome that year. (p. 5) Then there's the historical photograph showing a man who bears a strong resemblance to Joseph Beuys hitting a car with an axe, accompanied by the subtitle *Henry Ford*

demonstriert im Jahr 1941 die Stabilität einer auf Sojabohnen-Basis hergestellten Autokarosserie (Henry Ford Demonstrating the Resilience of a Soybean Car Body in 1941)—both text and image were used as the motif for the invitation card for an exhibition (produced together with Jürgen Stollhans at Kunstverein Ulm in 2007) entitled *Was wärest Du ohne Chlorophyll?* (What Would You Be Without Chlorophyll?; p. 5).

Lempert's ephemera of the last three decades often constitute parallel narratives to the works he has exhibited, the idea behind them a mix of subtle irony and poetic reflection on the ephemeral quality of the flyer and invitation card as media: for example, the motifs that actually show *Ephemera*, the small insects that have left their mark on the photographic image, be it in the form of a fly captured as a photograph on light-sensitive paper or the shadow of a butterfly on pale-colored asphalt (p. 5). In many ways, Lempert's aesthetic manifests as a particular kind of photographic "redemption of physical reality," to quote the subtitle of Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film*. But this is not, for example, a realism that has dropped out of time (as will be discussed below) but rather an idiosyncratic and singular approach that unites the questions of a naturalist with reflections on the medium of photography.¹ Taking Lempert's printed matter as its starting point and primary source, this essay on the early works of the 1990s begins by drawing on the first major body of work from those years.

The morphological and the typological

If we were to look at twentieth-century German photography a hundred years from now, we would speak of a typological turmoil, beginning with the publications containing Karl Blossfeldt's *Urformen der Kunst* (Art Forms in Nature) and August Sander's *Antlitz der Zeit* (Face of Our Time) and proceeding via the industrial buildings of Bernd and Hilla Becher to the systematic series of works produced by the Düsseldorf School. If we focused on the early 1990s, the period in which Lempert's photographs were first appreciated and exhibited, we would find—for instance, among the award-winning positions fostered by the Krupp fellowships for contemporary

German photography—a series of industrial assembly lines by Andreas Gursky and Ulrich Gambke’s typologies of agricultural machinery.² Set beside these razor-sharp color images representing a style based on objectification, Lempert’s untouched-up black-and-white prints of sponges and stuffed animals initially seem like UFOs, and yet they subtly take their place in the history of photographic typologies in a way that is both subversive and dissident.

Published in 1997, Lempert’s first book, *365 Tafeln zur Naturgeschichte* (365 Plates on Natural History), opens with the three typological series, *Oiseaux* (Birds), *The Skins of Alca impennis*, and *Kapitänsbäume* (Captain Trees). While the first two series are actual portrait galleries, in the last, which likewise consists of stuffed birds—in this case sitting on a section of a branch—Lempert has laid the specimens out side by side and one above the other in such a way that they each yield up an image of a (handcrafted) tree for the photograph. The series of pictures devoted to the great auk (*Alca impennis*), a giant, flightless North Atlantic seabird, is actually conceived as a typology comprising all seventy-eight examples of this extinct penguin-like bird that have been preserved by means of taxidermy: by 2017, Lempert had photographed a total of fifty-two specimens in natural history museums around the world.

Yet the visual motifs on the bindings of the book—butterflies, moths, and flies on a light cloth background (front cover) and a mysterious specimen of a lizard carrying a parasol (back cover)—suggest that Lempert’s atlas of *365 Tafeln zur Naturgeschichte* is not a classical work of scientific taxonomy. (p. 6) At the beginning, the series mentioned above are followed by the chapters entitled “Symmetrie + Körperbau” (Symmetry + Architecture of the Body), “Genetical Resources,” “Physiologus,” and “Uexküll.” It quickly becomes apparent that although Lempert is fully committed to the mode of morphological observation inspired by his original discipline and takes a serious view of the narrative(s) of natural history, he also questions and augments this in a form that is at once aesthetic and Dadaist.

Lempert dissolves the boundaries limiting our perception of natural science and crosses his finds from natural history museums, zoological gardens, aquariums, and the “wild” with curious objects drawn from our everyday world and consumer culture along with exotic artifacts that attest to our (often bizarre) cultural projections onto the animal kingdom. His special narrative form of montage—the intersection or intercutting of kindred images—brings together the methods of biology and artistic experimental film, which Lempert had previously practiced during the 1980s as part of the film collective Schmelzdahin (Melt Away).³ Accordingly, the photograph of a dolphin-shaped

comb is placed on a page above a photo of a live glass catfish in an aquarium: the bones of the transparent fish chime with the plastic bones of the comb, whose smiling dolphin face is designed to induce young children to suffer its torments. (p. 6)

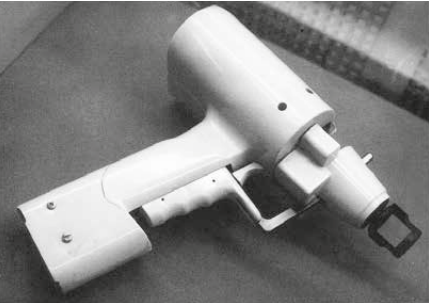
The formal associations and equivalences that Lempert establishes across the pages of the book highlight the human domestication of the animal kingdom, its thoroughgoing utilitarian exploitation, and the grotesque excesses of kitsch. Despite the bizarre nature of his finds, the morphological analogies are also highly instructive: the photo of an object placed next to the portrait of a marabou sitting with its legs stretched out in front of it shows a bottle opener screwed into an animal paw, which serves as its handle—these are both tools with a mechanical function, one produced by evolution, the other by popular culture. (p. 6)

Seen thus, Lempert’s *365 Tafeln zur Naturgeschichte* reveals to us all the different aspects of human projection and cultural construction that go into creating our image of flora and fauna. The sense of ambiguity in the juxtaposed plates and their openness to interpretation are part of what makes them art. The photographs of the great auk referred to at the start of this essay are shot in such a way that they appear as aesthetic objects—accentuated by the white patch between the eye and the bill—while the profile view asserts their individuality as different members of their species. In the case of the *Oiseaux* and other stuffed animals in the natural history museums, there is an even stronger sense that what we are looking at are portraits. Does the fact that we encounter them as individual creatures have something to do with the fragmentary quality of the photographic image, which gives the impression that the animals are alive or have been brought to life? While these exhibits seek in vain to stop the species they preserve from disappearing, the photographs of them work in the opposite direction, capturing a moment that contains something verging on the ephemeral. Lempert’s subsequent images of living animals, at least those that have the character of a portrait—such as the shots of a pigeon in his *Martha* series—also play with the ambiguities of how to read them. Is the artist confronting us with our anthropocentric viewpoint, which projects all-too-human qualities onto the world of animals, or does he want to bring out the very things we have in common with them, rather than what separates us? Isn’t it remarkable how detailed the programs must be that are running in the heads of birds as they coordinate long intercontinental flights or organize a complex social life?⁴ Lempert’s photographs of physiognomies and morphologies in the animal and plant kingdoms reveal a different conception of the terms “taxonomies” and “typologies” than that entertained by modern science and contemporary art, at least in the 1980s

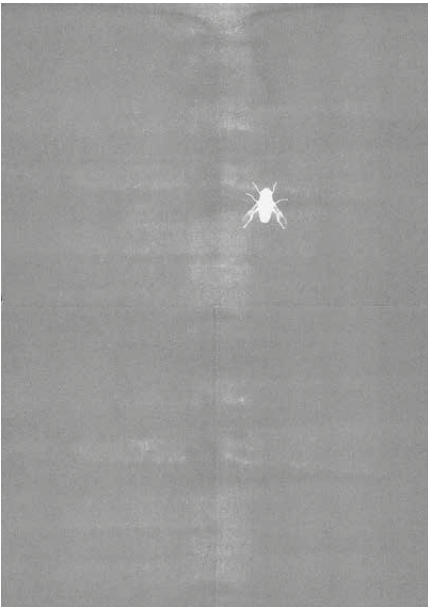


Henry Ford demonstriert im Jahre 1941 die Stabilität einer auf Sojabohnen-Basis hergestellten Autokarosserie.

$6\text{ CO}_2 + 12\text{ H}_2\text{O} = \text{C}_6\text{H}_{12}\text{O}_6 + 6\text{ H}_2\text{O} + 6\text{ O}_2$,
(with Jürgen Stollhans), Kunstverein Ulm, 2007
(invitation card)



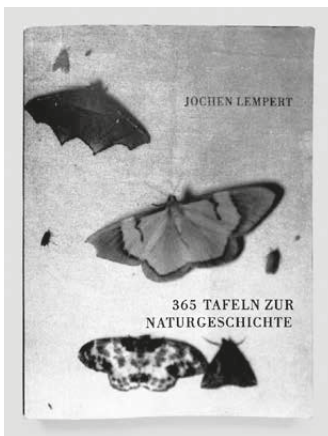
Craig Venter, Sabine Schmidt Galerie, Cologne, 2001 (invitation card)



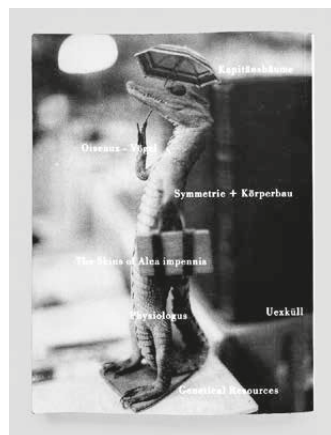
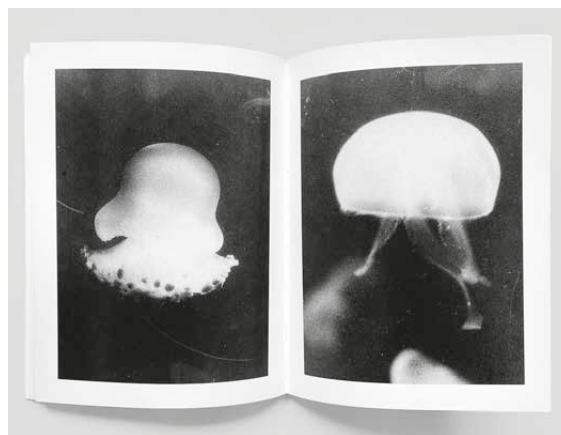
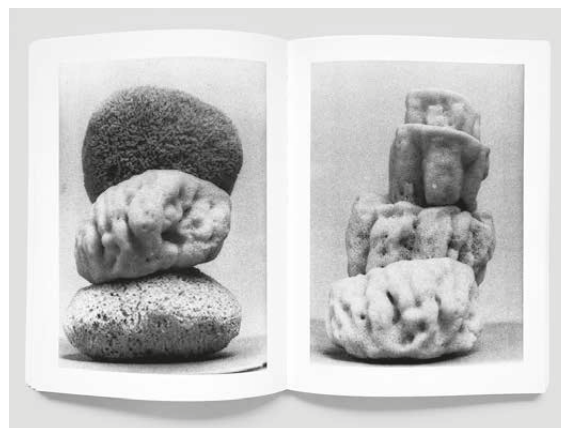
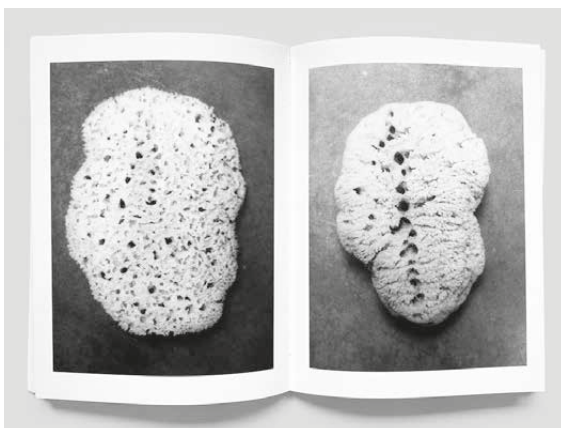
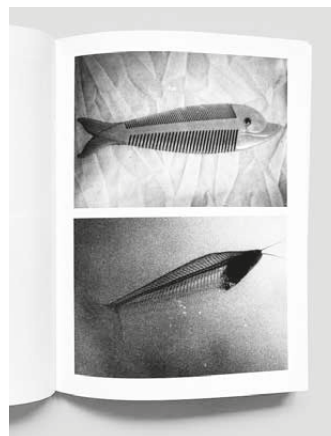
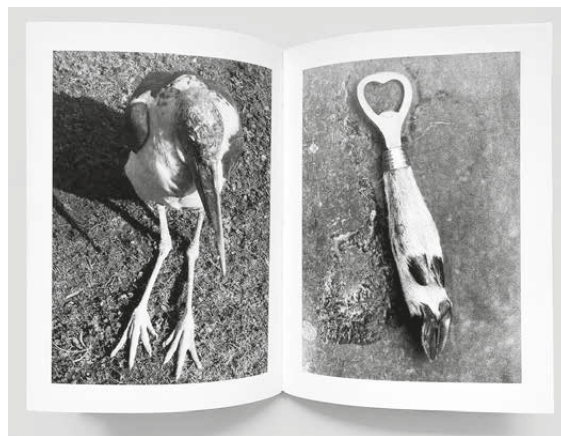
Blauer Planet, ATP Bahrenfeld, Hamburg, 2017
(invitation card)



Jochen Lempert, Between Bridges, Berlin, 2015 (invitation card)



365 Tafeln zur Naturgeschichte,
Bonner Kunstverein, Kunstverein Freiburg,
1997 (catalog)



and 1990s. In this respect, he is a pioneering figure, for his early works are less concerned with establishing a clear demarcation between the plant and animal kingdoms and representations of them than with violations of this line; in the course of the book, it becomes increasingly apparent that he is also interested in the amorphous, the hybrid, and those that are “different.”

The amorphous and the hybrid

Lempert’s work was already being treated as something unique in the 1990s.⁵ This is probably due in part to his unusual mode of visual comparison, with its particular focus on amorphous forms in the animal and plant kingdoms. Jellyfish and sponges have a special place in his early pictures—both are primitive creatures, yet remarkable in their ability to adapt to their environment. However, Lempert is interested in them, above all, as visual objects. In the eye of Lempert’s simple 50 mm lens, jellyfish are transformed into abstract light forms. (p. 6)

The interest Lempert takes in sponges, meanwhile, relates to their different kinds of “facture”—to use a modernist term originating from the Bauhaus—determined by the particular ecosystem and biotope they inhabit. The actual difference between these seemingly formless objects is only apparent when we look at them side by side. Lempert’s arrangement of them on the pages of the book or on the exhibition wall transforms something supposedly amorphous into a substantial form: accordingly, the chapter “Symmetrie und Körperbau” includes three double-page spreads with a total of six sponge images that correspond to one another—a radical and provocative configuration of things that are thought of as identical and mundane. (p. 6) An installation photograph from the Frankfurter Kunstverein in 1995 shows a wall tableau comprising thirty-two photographs. Consisting of four rows of pictures that taper in length as they climb the wall, the tableau is hung in a way that recalls the taxonomic model of biological species, with the bottom row exclusively made up of pictures of sponges, as if Lempert were suggesting that these primitive creatures are the basis for all other forms of life (and his own artistic process of form finding). (p. 9) Even the vitrine table we can see in the installation photograph references the language of the cabinet of curiosities rather than that of a photography exhibition from the 1990s. Lempert was thus one of the first people in the realm of German contemporary photography, beside Wolfgang Tillmans, to introduce the table as a presentation element.⁶ Lempert’s sponge towers are another variant, representing his artistic attempts to create order directly in the place the photograph is taken. Here, the artist stacks three or four similar-looking sponges on top of one another to produce mysterious objects reminiscent

of pillars, pyramids, or totem poles from a far-off culture: besides the sculptural quality and plastic beauty they evince, the structures display an overt sense of Dadaist humor. (p. 6)

Another important element is Lempert’s handling of film and photographic paper, which helps bring out the aesthetics of the amorphous. His work has a special material presence underscored by his use of enlargements, which he produces with very simple homemade developers, his conscious embrace of dust and lint and of blurred or torn edges, and the immediacy with which he presents the images, fixed unprotected on the wall. What might have been viewed thirty years ago as a kind of anti-aesthetic has long since gained wide acceptance in art circles and is now firmly entrenched as part of the formal vocabulary of a new photographic “arte povera.” If Lempert’s work consistently centers on the relationship between nature and culture, it also examines—and this merits an essay all of its own—the way culture relates to counterculture and subculture in the photography of the 1990s.⁷

Lempert’s special technique of viewing morphologies (and amorphous forms) in comparative terms can be aptly related to the cinematic idea of intercutting. The “Genetical Resources” chapter, on the other hand, features numerous constellations of images that go beyond the formal to explore instead the “demiurge’s workshop”—to reference the title of one of his very early exhibitions, *Werkestatt des Demiurgen*—the arbitrariness of nature, crossbred and hybrid creatures from very different realms, and the transformation of human cognition as it has evolved over the centuries. At the end of the book, we find animal photos that are somehow different from the rest: black lambs, pigs mating, and fighting dogs, all looking like the creatures described a few pages later in excerpts from Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and the early Christian text *Physiologus*. According to early Latin texts, the term *hybrida* is presumed to mean a cross between a wild boar and a domestic pig, something that is called to mind by the Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs that Lempert puts on the last pages of images in his book and on one of his invitation cards.⁸ His “Genetical Resources” represented his first forays in the 1990s into the formally and semantically precarious terrain of the hybrid, which plays a key role in art discourses today. From a present-day perspective, this seems to be related to the 1990s’ great artistic interest in the idea of the preternatural in our culture, as discovered by people like Mike Kelley and Zoe Leonard in the sculptural depictions of humans found, for example, in museums devoted to natural history and anthropology.

The poetological

If you wanted to pick out two motifs to signify the way Lempert’s work has evolved since the early

1990s, you might select the stuffed monkey, frozen in terror, from the *365 Tafeln zur Naturgeschichte* (p. 9) and the owl whose gaze is turned within (*Owl*, 2017, p. 9)

For one thing, there is the frisson, described above, at the culturally constructed abysses that have opened up between humans and animals in the places where our knowledge is on display, a sense of astonishment that in the later works increasingly gives way to wonderment, a fascination with nature's accomplishments. As the frame becomes increasingly empty in Lempert's photographs, questions of perception and of what can be perceived take center stage, tied in with a meditative reflection on what a photographic recording is (or once was). While the stuffed animals of the old natural history museums still acted as a means to redeem the biodiversity of the past, this function has now been taken over by the eye of the camera. It may be that the ideas of Siegfried Kracauer which we mentioned at the beginning are honored here in a different way. Kracauer's theory of film and photography is a materialist aesthetic. It postulates a special affinity that camera-based media have—in contrast to painting and theater—with what he variously calls "material reality," "physical existence," "actuality," "nature," or just "life."⁹ Kracauer describes this kinship in terms of the special conditions that apply to recording with a camera (the close-up, for example, and the contingency that it registers). Above all,

however, camera images do not completely consume the subject of their art (as is the case with a painter's inspiration); some element of this external reality is always preserved. "Leaves, which they [nineteenth-century writers] counted among the favorite motifs of the camera, cannot be 'staged' but occur in endless quantities. In this respect, there is an analogy between the photographic approach and scientific investigation: both probe into an inexhaustible universe whose entirety forever eludes them."¹⁰

At first sight, however, Lempert's photographs have nothing to do with Kracauer's focus and the messianic quality of the camera in media terms.¹¹ The irony contained in many of his invitation cards runs counter to any reading that leads in this direction. And yet, in the new and completely different climate of our digital age, we find external reality redeemed in the photographs Lempert takes showing the delicate constructions of spider webs, the creative energy of leafcutter ants, or the camouflage and mimicry of insects. These stunning phenomena of a physical world that we commonly refer to as nature, and which Lempert explores from the secular standpoint of a trained biologist, appear today as the building blocks of an alternative blueprint for reality, beyond all the virtual modeling of modern science. They constitute, the frozen quality of a photographic still notwithstanding, an art of life.



ars viva 1995/96, Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1995 (installation view)



Owl, 2017



365 Tafeln zur Naturgeschichte, Bonner Kunstverein, Kunstverein Freiburg, 1997 (catalog)

1

See Kathrin Schöneegg, "Finding ways to have nature record itself: Scientific Photography and Cameraless Image-Making in the Work of Jochen Lempert," pp. 27–31 in this volume.

2

See Ute Eskildsen, ed., *Stipendien für Zeitgenössische Deutsche Fotografie der Alfred Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach-Stiftung 1990 bis 1992*, exh. cat. Museum Folkwang, Essen (1993).

3

See "Jochen Lempert: Aus der 'Werkestatt des Demiurgen'; Ein Gespräch von Christiane Fricke," in "Kunst und Literatur II," *Kunstforum International* 140 (1998), in which he talks about the importance of montage for his books and wall pieces. Available online at www.kunstforum.de/artikel/aus-der-werkestatt-des-demiurgen/, accessed April 29, 2023.

4

Lempert's work raises questions that coincide with issues being reflected on by philosophers like Vinciane Despret, whose publications in recent years have sought to redefine the relationship between humans and animals.

5

See the epilogue by Annelie Pohlen and Stephan Berg, in Jochen Lempert, *365 Tafeln zur Naturgeschichte*, exh. cat. Bonner Kunstverein and Kunstverein Freiburg (1997), n.p.

6

For more on the works shown in the Frankfurt vitrine, see Jochen Lempert, *Natürliche Ressourcen* (Cologne: Container Goods, 1998).

7

It was with good reason that Jochen Lempert and Wolfgang Tillmans were two of the four recipients of the 1995 ars viva Prize, having exhibited their work together with Barbara Probst and Thomas Demand at the Frankfurter Kunstverein that year.

8

See Wikipedia, "Hybrid (biology)," last modified April 2, 2023, 05:49 UTC, de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hybride.

9

Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality?* (1960; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 28.

10

Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 20.

11

On the messianic role played by camera-based media in Kracauer's work, see Gertrud Koch, *Kracauer zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 1996), esp. 125–47.

8

9



Airplanes in the Gymnosperm Forest, 2013



Slight Breeze in the Rhône Valley, 2010



Wind, 2015

Visible Night, or As the Night Stirs

Frédéric Paul

There are three ways I can walk between my home and my office, and each route is of roughly equal length. In the morning, I never really make a conscious decision about which I will take, and when I'm coming back, I usually go a different way, without any great deliberation. On one of these paths there is an enormous tree; it's the kind of tree that is considered "noteworthy" (a so-called *arbre remarquable*), though I had never taken note of it myself until recently. Yet I only needed to look up to register it—at the risk of being blinded by the sun, which was shining brightly that day. If you keep your head down, you can see the dogs and rats passing by and, in the process, avoid catching the eye of your fellow humans. But if the shadow of the trees on the pavement moves with the wind, it can also induce you to look up. That morning, however, the trees had not yet broken into bud, and sunlight was pouring through their bare branches. In fact, the sun easily dominated the scene as I passed in front of the tree, a disproportionately large presence in the corner of the small square. There are so many beings living in the city, how can we pay attention to all those whose paths we cross, particularly when they are standing motionless and silent, or if not unmoving, then unseen: trees, grasses, birds, or insects, too high, too low, furtive, forced into stealth by a hostile environment?

Jochen Lempert has spent years tracking down these stealthy characters from the world of animals and plants, mostly in Hamburg, where he lives, as well as anywhere he travels to—and sometimes even in places where wildness gnaws at itself at the heart of the city: in the zoo. If he photographs a doe, as in *From Symmetry and Architecture* (Deers) (1995), he will show it moving on concrete paving that contrasts with the animal's natural grace. He even repeats the shot and presents the two images as a symmetrical pair, offering them to our jaded eyes—one for the left, one for the right—as the deer turns its head.¹ He does not aspire to the spectacular immediacy of a specialist wildlife photographer. By the same token, where these "image hunters" tend to freeze the surging movement of a big cat or an eagle, Lempert will follow the flight of a bee, the shadow of a butterfly ... or the fall of a dandelion seed. When he points his 35 mm reflex

camera upwards into the air, it is usually to take long shots of birds in flight, though it can also serve to invert the feeling of furtiveness, such as in *Airplanes in the Gymnosperm Forest* (2013, p.10), where, through a gap in the foliage, a jet can be seen flying by in the vicinity of an airport. Which brings him to the following reflection: "Still wide-spread in the form of conifers, gymnosperms were the dominant plants of the Mesozoic."² The Mesozoic (or "secondary") Era, also gave birth to the dinosaurs and to birds—their descendants—thus bringing the wheel full circle.

Lempert is just as interested in the leaves that have fallen from trees of greater or lesser note as he is in the foliage diffusing and diffracting the light—the living leaves that let the rays of the sun shine through or momentarily obscure our view of it as they sway in the wind. There are some of these to be seen in *Slight Breeze in the Rhône Valley* (2010, p.10), lying on the ground beneath the Drôme sun, sated with the warmth and light of summer, before a sudden squall causes them to stand for a moment. Natural light may have seasonal characteristics, but isn't it an exaggeration to say that it has local characteristics, that its quality, as people often say, is truly unique in a particular region, at a particular latitude? And yet I did recognize the light of Valence in this photograph with its paucity of clues ... though, admittedly, I knew that Lempert had spent time there!³

Leaves are jostled by the wind in a number of other works. The quadriptych *Wind* (2015, p.10), for example, seems to repeat an identical shot of the same bush, until we notice that its leaves have changed shape, tossed around by a gust of wind. The four images have the same framing, despite the fact that the pictures were taken without a tripod, something that Lempert eschews in the interests of spontaneity.

A large vertical-format print titled *On Photosynthesis* (2009, p.13) can be regarded as a manifesto. It combines three different material states: at the bottom, dead leaves are being whipped up by a blower, a noisy wind-making device. At the top, the same type of leaves can be seen on branches running across the frame. In between, in the background, the shadow of a tree is picked out against

a pale brick wall. There is so much glare that the tree’s foliage is atomized by this projection of light, which moves in the same direction as the leaves being blown at the bottom of the picture. The overall tone—as is typical of the artist’s work—is gray, a pale gray without any black, even for the shadows, with a dazzling white in the spots where the sun has carved its way through any obstacle between the branches of the tree, which we can only see in outline as if looking at an X-ray. In this way, the image conveys the dazzle of the tree’s invisible foliage—an ineffectual aperture made ragged by the profusion that spurred its growth.

When Lempert is not capturing the things that pique his curiosity on his outdoor wanderings, his interest may turn to other leaves that have been detached, albeit less naturally, from the branch that bore them. He brings these back to his laboratory, where he makes photograms of them—contact prints on light-sensitive paper—or slides them through the film holder of his enlarger to obtain what he calls “foliograms.” Either way, the photographer works without a camera—even if the enlarger, which is also equipped with a lens, is a close relative. In the first instance, the piece of plant matter acts as a screen and stands out in white on the exposed surface of the paper, which turns black when it is developed. In the second instance, the artist’s intervention, a practice he began in 2006, is akin to making a microscopic preparation with a stained-glass effect, although there is no sectioning involved. Beneath the leaf veins, which are visible to the naked eye, a multitude of cells is revealed.

As a photographer, Lempert is drawn to that which is all but invisible. We can illustrate this by taking a fresh look at *Man from Acre* (2013, p.13), seemingly one of the most “inconsequential” and “banal” images he has produced—at least in the minds of those who are unable to recognize in it the expression of a certain world view. It is worth noting that the artist follows up his work about the wind by tackling another phenomenon that photography is supposedly blind to: heat. Incidentally, what Lempert saw and what led him to take this rarely shown picture cannot actually be seen in it.⁴ Moreover, the caption written for it in the book *Phenotype*, where it is reproduced in a double-page spread, is more of a stimulus to the imagination than a visual revelation: “A visitor from the tropical state of Acre, Brazil, forms hundreds of delicate drops of sweat on his hair after just a few minutes in the sun. I interpreted this as a thermoregulatory adaptation.”⁵ When asked about it several years after the picture was shot and published, the artist acknowledged that “without these words you do see nothing.”⁶

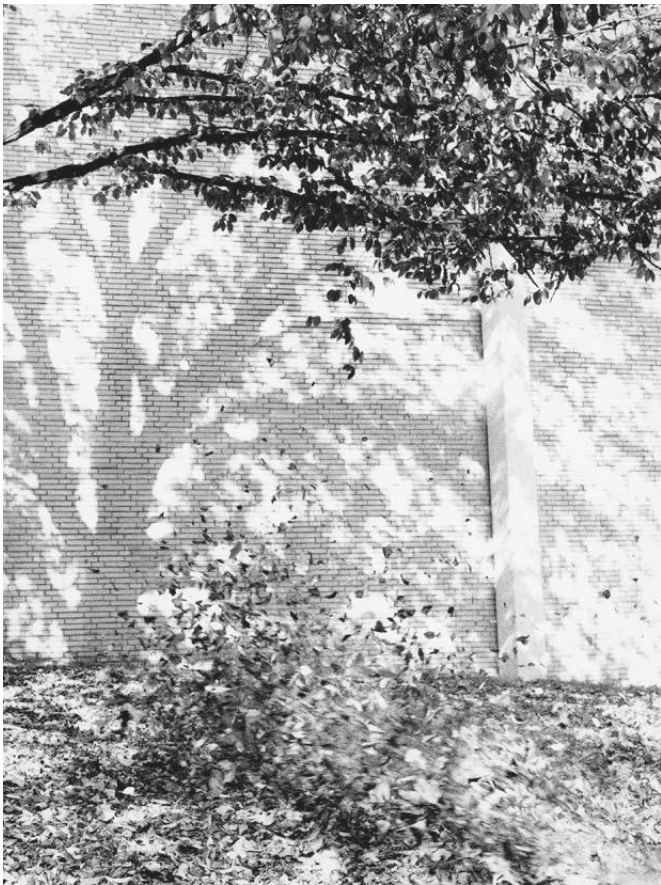
Is there always a causal link between heat and light? I wouldn’t chance my arm on such an assertion, but the pate of this tropical inhabitant is

plainly lit and if he turned around, he would surely be dazzled. Lempert is interested in the light that makes things visible and the light that blinds. This is a natural focus for a photographer. But for Lempert, light is not only a functional element—a factor that is as indispensable to his art as it is to the action of chlorophyll—it is also the object of repeated studies and the medium for illuminating metaphors and metamorphoses.

Its possibilities are explored in the eighteen-piece *Visible Light* ensemble (a tautological title if ever there was one), which was presented together for the first time at the ProjecteSD gallery in 2021 (p.14). Insects act as projection screens. Spiders’ webs are illuminated. Flying birds are photographed contre-jour. The corolla of an epiphyllum flower takes the shape of a lantern. A handful of berries glisten, their serried clusters of spheres shining inky black. The stem of a grafted vine is crushed beneath a scorching sun. Its rays filter through with greater or lesser intensity, penetrating the layer of clouds or foliage of different kinds and finally making the most of an open window to enter a room that could be the artist’s studio.

Two of the eighteen works in this series, however, stand out from the rest. And it is not just that the difference adds spice to the thematic conformity, but the experience shifts from the observation of natural events and creatures, which is associated with scientific culture, to the observation of aesthetic artifacts pertaining to artistic culture. Yet this does not result in ordinary photographs of existing objects. And while these pictures are not distinguished by extraordinary framing or other signs of “creative photography”—which is never Lempert’s concern, as is evident, for example, in his almost exclusive use of the visually neutral 50 mm lens—they do attest to an individual approach that seeks to be faithful to a fleeting sensation rather than to an object from the past.

The first photograph I would like to mention here shifts away from the usual gray halftone treatment in favor of an extreme paleness. The ambience is so “snowy” that one might wonder whether the shot is overexposed or lit from behind, whether the print that gives the work its final form has been solarized or whether it is a negative. Is this impression of unreality heightened by the fact that what we see is a detail: a hand pulling at thigh level on an item of stretch clothing? Lempert typically keeps explanations to a minimum; he wants to draw the viewer into his quest rather than leading them straight to the goal. Feelings are ephemeral, difficult. Lempert practices a photography of allusion. In some cases, though, the title at least is crucial. *Kore* (2020, p.14) refers to a certain type of female statue from Greek art of the Archaic period (sixth century BC). Unlike the *kouros*, its male counterpart, who is often depicted stepping forward, the *kore*



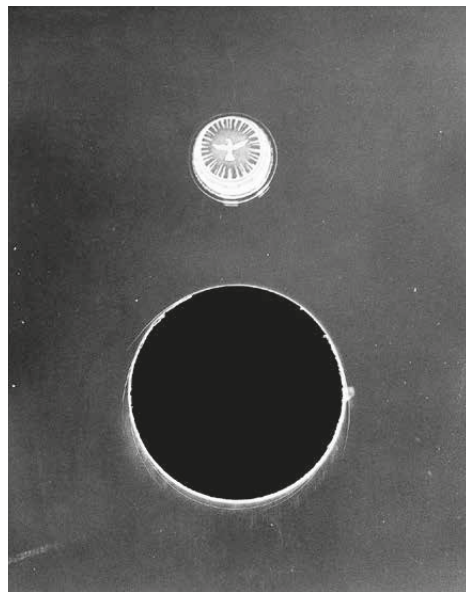
On Photosynthesis , 2009



Man from Acre, 2013



Visible Light, ProjecteSD, Barcelona, 2021 (installation view)



Accidental Hole, 2021



Kore, 2020

stands planted on her two legs, motionless, a hieratic figure whose hand gesture, as captured by Lempert, is described by scholars as typical of the genre. The Greek sculptor who fashioned the work could never have imagined that another artist could, in a fraction of a second, capture this hand, which has been idle for more than two thousand years,⁷ and latch onto this idleness as a “signifier”/“insignificant detail.”

The second photograph is also difficult to decode. Aligned like two opposing principles, you can clearly make out a large black disc whose circumference is glowing (an eclipse?) and above it, in another disc—pale-colored this time—there is a rather poorly delineated bird with outstretched wings at the center of what turns out to be the oculus of a dome: that of the baroque church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, which is best known as the home of Bernini’s *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. Lempert describes this image, *Accidental Hole* (2021, p.14), as “a kind of miracle or rare event: during the year, there was one film which had three holes in it as the result of a production mistake—but of course you can only see this after development ... In Rome, I took pictures inside the cupola with the Holy Ghost dove—this coincided with the hole in the film.”⁸ His remarks obviate the need for any further commentary.

Finally, as we have all been filled with wonder (and are still amazed) by a glowworm or a firefly, an emotion that, like many marvels, is typically connected with a childhood memory, these insects become highly prized collaborators in Lempert’s art—once he has managed to find and catch them. It is a process that usually happens the other way around in an artist’s mind. Finding an aid, an intellectual catalyst, yields an intuition of how to use it. As an entomologist specializing in the *Odonata* order, Lempert used to set traps for dragonflies⁹—a ploy he had no need of in conducting his experiments with these luminescent beetles.

Whether you are dealing with an animal or a plant, its origins marine or terrestrial—the artist’s initial forays in 2002 involved collecting phytoplankton with similar properties—you have to get out of the city to catch these bioluminescent phenomena. In 2009, while preparing an exhibition at Domaine de Kerguéhennec, a remote chateau in Brittany, he rediscovered the fecund night he needs for a different kind of photogram, or luminogram, as he terms it. Not only are these images made without a camera, this time there is no artificial light either—simply placing *Lampyrus noctiluca* or *Luciola lusitanica* on light-sensitive film or paper is sufficient.

In the Brittany exhibition, *Lampyrus noctiluca* was used to create a positive frieze, over two meters in length, based on the enlarged print of the 35 mm paper film that the creature had walked

across. The frieze can be read as an astronomical phenomenon on account of its size, the nebulous image and the black “background” on which the trail of light is registered. The scale is skewed by the enlargement, while the space that has been left between each of the four prints not only serves to separate the different images but also emphasizes the sequencing effect, thereby accentuating the sense of movement.

Luciola lusitanica has been on Lempert’s radar on and off since 1991. It makes an appearance in a series of four 27.5 × 21 cm negative images dating from 2015.¹⁰ There, we can follow the errant paths taken by the bug, which is accommodating enough to limit itself to the area of each sheet of paper, where it describes arabesques whose “fluidity” may bring to mind the movements of a microscopic creature in water, garlands of plants tangled by the wind, or the chaotic rebounding of a geometer as it collides with the glass globe of a burning lamp, which will have attracted this moth, before ultimately making it sizzle ... I asked whether there is a causal link between heat and light. The sun and the old incandescent light bulbs would suggest that there is, but the LED lighting tends to minimize this feeling. And it is here that we encounter another harmful effect of light pollution, namely that certain fireflies are attracted by the particular wavelengths of this energy-saving technology.

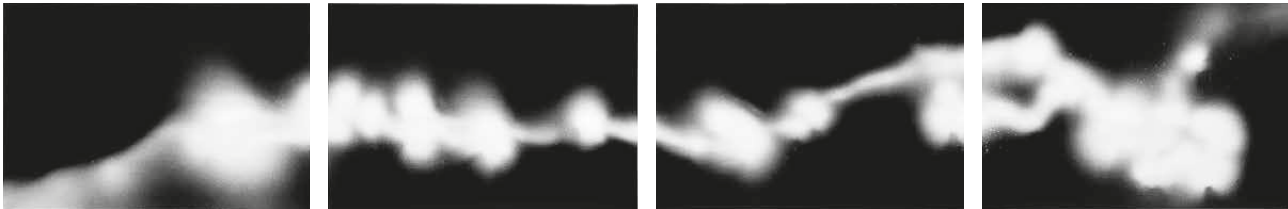
You may hesitate to follow me on what might seem a deviation from our topic, but these three comparisons barely constitute a digression here. The same experiment is reproduced on each sheet of photographic paper, but the trajectory of the individual luminous creatures is different in each case. The repetition draws attention to the uniqueness of the images, which are all exposed by means of direct contact, and not, as in the frieze, by the projection of a single negative. This, in turn, makes it possible for the image to be reproduced ad libitum. In both cases the negative—the film and the paper—is unique, and the old processes of silver chemistry mean that the negative support can justifiably be said to have a greater proximity to the real experience, whereas the positive is only superficially more faithful, and its involvement merely secondary. Thus, the concept of a “print” implies the idea of “transfer,” in both senses of the word, both temporal and spatial. Unmediated by a print, the direct photogram has this other sort of fidelity, namely that of reproducing the experience at a scale of 1:1 in the manner of an impression; this phenomenon is touched on by William Henry Fox Talbot, who called it “The Pencil of Nature.”

The tree I mentioned at the start of this essay—the tallest in Paris that the curious reader can go and gaze at—is located in Square Léopold-Achille, in the Marais district.¹¹ A few weeks before I noticed it, a strong gust of wind toppled another

large specimen in the same park further down the Rue du Parc Royal. This accident damaged the railings, but having registered that, I paid no further attention to what had happened. The giant tree remained there unnoticed, but it must have been shaken during this storm and I can imagine that some passers-by might have been alarmed by its height, fearing the danger it posed. So, for the

faint of heart, it's sometimes best to close your eyes and only open them now and then to gaze in wonder. This is literally what Lempert attempted with his photograph of the space contained in the blink of an eye: *A Blinking* (2013, p.13).

One tree can hide another. Eliding an eclipse, turning it into an ellipsis, is perhaps one way of bringing it to fullness.



Glowworm (movement on 35 mm film), 2010

Frédéric Paul is curator of contemporary art at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. He curated the exhibition *Jochen Lempert: Field Works* at the Domaine de Kerguéhennec in 2009. His first essay on the artist, “What Happened to the Seven-Coloured Tanager,” was published in the book *Jochen Lempert: Phenotype* (Cologne: Walther König, 2013).

1 A certain amount of time can elapse between the photograph being taken (here in 1993) and the print being made. Lempert usually dates his works to the year in which they were first shown. And it was in 1995 that these two images, forming a diptych, were shown for the first time. Something else is incongruous about these two images: in the park in Japan where the

scene was shot, this species of deer, *Cervus nippon*—which is considered sacred and is prized as a national treasure—is so well protected that its unchecked reproduction is having a devastating effect on the environment.

2 *Jochen Lempert: Phenotype* (Cologne: Walther König, 2013)—only the pages of the essays appearing at the end of the book are numbered.

3 He did a residency with the art3 association in Valence (Drôme) in 2010. The photograph in question was first shown in 2013.

4 Just once to date, at the Hamburger Kunsthalle in 2013, in the very modest 18 × 24 cm format.

5 *Jochen Lempert: Phenotype* (see n. 2), 21.

6 Correspondence with the artist, March 23, 2022.

7 National Archaeological

Museum, Athens, ref. 4889, found at Merenda, Attica, 550–540 BC.

8 Correspondence with the artist, March 30, 2022.

9 See *Waiting for Dragonflies* (n.d.), in *Jochen Lempert: Phenotype* (see n. 2), 20.

10 Lempert corrected the record for me on April 8, 2022: the images were made in the US (while he was an artist in residency at Cincinnati Zoo prior to an exhibition at the Cincinnati Art Museum)—the firefly that was invited to collaborate was not a European species.

11 A surreptitious supplement: “Who would imagine that in the fifteenth century the small site where Square Léopold-Achille now stands was part of the splendid Royal Park, which covered almost 2,000 m²? It was part of the Maison Royale

des Tournelles, the royal estate that was occupied in succession by all the kings of France from 1432 on and extended across what is now the Place des Vosges. It was destroyed at the behest of Catherine de’ Medici, with the park gradually given over to vagabonds. The acreage was reduced to virtually nothing with the construction of the numerous private mansions that are now the source of the neighborhood’s charm.” This quote is taken from the Ville de Paris website: while the photos on the site are credited, the texts are anonymous—equality is relative in the realms of copyright!



A Blinking, 2013



Jochen Lempert, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2022



Visible Light, ProjecteSD, Barcelona, 2021



Honeyguides and Milkteeth, MACS, Grand-Hornu, 2023



Natural Sources, Huis Marseille, Amsterdam, 2022



Lingering Sensations, C/O Berlin, Berlin, 2023



Ankunft der Mauersegler, BQ, Berlin, 2024



Jardin d'hiver, Centre d'art contemporain d'Ivry – Le Crédac, Ivry-sur-Seine, 2020

The Refrain

Claire Le Restif

Jochen Lempert's images are minimalistic black-and-white silver gelatin prints that are hung unframed, giving them a formally conceptual appearance. They make reference to the world of plants and animals and to the fleeting traces of natural phenomena. Birds, humans, the leaves of trees, tortoises, rainy landscapes, dragonflies, swarms of flies, grains of sand, freckles, rocks eroded by the wind, and stuffed specimens leave abstract lines and furtive signs on the photographic surface.

The process of printing his images, carried out in his studio lab in Hamburg, is an important part of Lempert's work, on an equal footing with the shots he takes each day, the way he hangs his exhibitions, and the layout of his lavish publications. He prepares his own formulas to develop his photographs, and the unique quality of his images derives not only from this but also from his use of light-sensitive paper, which he allows to ripple, accepting the defects in a negative or a print. Some images are out of focus and grainy and may look flawed or exhibit peculiar contrasts. In a few cases, they are even produced without film: one way Lempert achieves this is by floating leaves on top of the photographic paper in the developer bath. Sometimes he also feeds them into the enlarger as they are, creating blow-up images of the plants as if they were in a microscope. Lempert's photographic practice is thus at once very free and very restrained.

The artist views the relationships between things with precision and sensitivity. Yet his art is not limited to the production of images: he operates with analogies and symmetries both in the pages of the books he produces and in the spaces used for his exhibitions, where he unfurls his work before our eyes in a kind of flatplan process—the stage in the publishing process that allows the rhythm of a story and the graphic form of a book to be determined. We can thus say that Lempert quite literally progresses toward the layout of his exhibitions.

This technique of correlating images calls to mind the approach of his celebrated compatriot, the German art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929), who is known for having laid the groundwork for iconology. In 1926, Warburg embarked upon his famous *Atlas Mnemosyne* in Hamburg, which is also where Lempert lives.

Warburg invented iconology, a form of knowledge about imagery that is mediated by the images themselves. His atlas was intended first and foremost to be displayed on the walls of his library, without any imposed or definitive order, which is very much Lempert's approach too. Like Warburg, whose work was chiefly concerned with memory, Lempert creates visual narratives by playing with free conceptual or formal associations. Regardless of whether his work is hung on the wall or laid out in table display cases, each exhibition allows him to establish new symmetries between his images and reveal hitherto unseen sequences in a collection of photographs that seems capable of infinite expansion.

As Cécilia Becanovic writes, the context in which his photographs are shown is of primary importance. "Each time my gaze alights on one of Lempert's photographs, I observe a complicity between the wall and the work akin to the relationship between moss and a rock. Moss has no roots, but its anchoring is no less important for that."¹

The exhibition areas in the contemporary art center Le Crédac have large picture windows connecting them to the world outside. In technical terms, these glass walls are not particularly appropriate for exhibiting photographs, but they do provide a wonderful backdrop. This is one of the reasons we invited Lempert to present his work in the winter, a season when the light is softer and gentler on the prints. It is also a season when the sky fluctuates between white and pale gray, like one of the artist's images.

On the first day that Lempert's *Jardin d'hiver* (Winter Garden) exhibition is to be hung, the space is bathed in a beautiful January light. The artist is barefoot and has put on some music in the background, the dreamlike, repetitive work of the American writer, philosopher, and musician Henry Flynt (who was born in 1940). Listening to Flynt's trippy minimalist piece "Celestial Power" (1980), Lempert settles on his procedure for the setup. At his request, we have had a number of photographs sent from his studio lab: these will serve as material for constructing a route through the spaces. Without any plan or list of works agreed in advance between us, the hanging "performance" can begin unencumbered.

The visual score created by Lempert’s images is ready to be “recorded” on the walls. The artist is doing all he can to ensure that a dialogue takes place between the space, which he has yet to master, and the images, which he knows by heart. Little by little, he also takes on board the suggestions, wishes, and different options that I put forward. At the end of the hanging, I tell him that I would like to see him reworking the last wall in the style of his older exhibitions. While remaining in control of the situation, he is intrigued by the proposals prompted by his way of working. So, the two of us throw ourselves into selecting the images and are soon joined by his steadfast associate Alexander Mayer. Lempert entrusts us with bringing *Jardin d’hiver* to completion.

Along with Jochen Müller and Jürgen Reble, Lempert used to be part of the Schmelzdahin (Melt Away) trio, and it is surely the performer in him that resurfaces, as it were, when he is hanging the exhibition. This experimental film group, which was active between 1979 and 1989, went to extremes exploring all the different possibilities that celluloid film and chemical processing methods offered for creating new images. They used found footage or material they had shot themselves to make films with a strong sculptural sense that relied on chromatic distortions, revelation, obliteration, and corrosion. Together they carried out a number of actions in public.

The psychedelic, polychromatic images created by the group have given way in Lempert’s work to the slow sobriety of still images and the monochromatic qualities of black and white. One consistent feature is his absolute mastery of the process of montaging a large number of images. Lempert comes from the world of live performance, and his appetite for improvisation leads him to dispense with any preliminary mockup for his exhibitions.

In concrete terms, Lempert begins the work of orchestrating his images by putting them on the floor en masse before trying them out, slowly and patiently, on the walls. He experiments with multiple combinations until he settles on the ones that look just right to his exacting eye. The fact that some of his works exist in several formats makes the game so much more absorbing and complex. Each combination is put to the test, either on the wall or set against the white background of the display cases, which act as a kind of horizontal wall. A true experimental artist, Lempert goes so far as to resize his photographs using a ruler and picture cutter. He undertakes these reframings on the spot if he finds it necessary to trim off a few centimeters that interfere with the harmony of the whole. It is easy to see, then, why he is so adamant about leaving his pictures unframed. All these compositional acts, moving the image into a vertical or horizontal format,

are consistent with the process of designing a book. Lempert does not feel compelled to produce exhibitions that rely exclusively on unpublished work. Quite the reverse. His penchant for repetition—harping on a refrain, as it were—allows him to keep playing the game over and over. He constantly adds new images to the body of work that has been shown as an ensemble on numerous occasions, and he keeps a close eye on their process of integration.

The way Lempert walks up and down for hours on end, surveying the spaces at his disposal while producing dozens of possible combinations and listening to serial music, reminds me again of this motif of the refrain. This is a musical term used to refer to circularity in songs, to the movement back and forth, returning to the same theme, the idea of eternal renewal and recapitulation.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, which he co-authored with Félix Guattari, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze defined the concept of the refrain as something beyond the realms of musical terminology.² This complex form has resonances in music, but its origins lie in ethology, the scientific study of the behavior of animal species (including humans) in their natural environment or in an experimental setting. The two philosophers use the idea of the refrain as a focal point, around which they set up a whole framework of concepts such as territory, lines of flight, and codes.

To my mind, their evocation of the song a bird produces to mark out its territory corresponds to Lempert’s method of appropriating a space. As we jointly worked through the process of setting up his exhibition at Le Crédac, I was impressed by his unique approach, his subtle and discreet way of familiarizing himself with the space. Is it the ethological nature of Lempert’s work that prompts this comparison? Like a bird, the artist physically marks his territory, drawing a strict line around himself, a singular mooring where his images can nest.

Of course, the exhibition space is not the only arena in which his relationship with the construction of territory is played out. It is also present in a literal sense during his numerous perambulations as he explores urban and natural settings with his camera at the ready. But there is another aspect, one that is more enigmatic. When I first visited his home in Hamburg, we went for a walk along the Elbe near where his studio is located. At one point, he drew away from me. He then pulled out something from the depths of his pocket that I could not discern at a distance and bent to plant it in an empty flowerbed. When I asked him about it, he explained that it was some *Leonurus cardiaca* seeds. This plant—motherwort—established itself in Hamburg in around 1850; although still known to a few local people, it has now more or less disappeared, eradicated by the misplaced zeal of weeders. For some years now, Lempert has been busy reintroducing

it to his neighborhood on his walks through the city. He claims that it has now reasserted itself and even says that he can draw a fairly precise map of where it can be found. This action in the service of “diplomacy with living beings” is a way of caring for his local area.³ Lempert could document what he does, but that is not what it’s about for him. By using his seeds to re-establish the plant, he is helping to preserve the ecosystem that makes it possible—and this is probably the key factor for him—for insects to survive. As he pointed out to me, *Leonurus cardiaca* is the plant of choice for bees and bumblebees. There too he maps out an invisible line through the city, a discreet but real manifesto in support of living beings. His ramblings bring us back to the motif of the refrain. Lempert certainly performs these gestures as an artist, but they allow the scientist, the historian, and the ecologist within to emerge.

His photographs contain imperceptible clues: when we find no trace of human presence in his images, we must try to find out more about the species or the place we see in the picture. For example, if he takes a picture of a modest plantain on a path, what does this signify? The plant is spread by the trampling of human feet and was nicknamed “white man’s footprint” by the Indigenous peoples of North America, where it had been accidentally imported by the first settlers. We know that the artist took the picture in Vancouver, on one of the

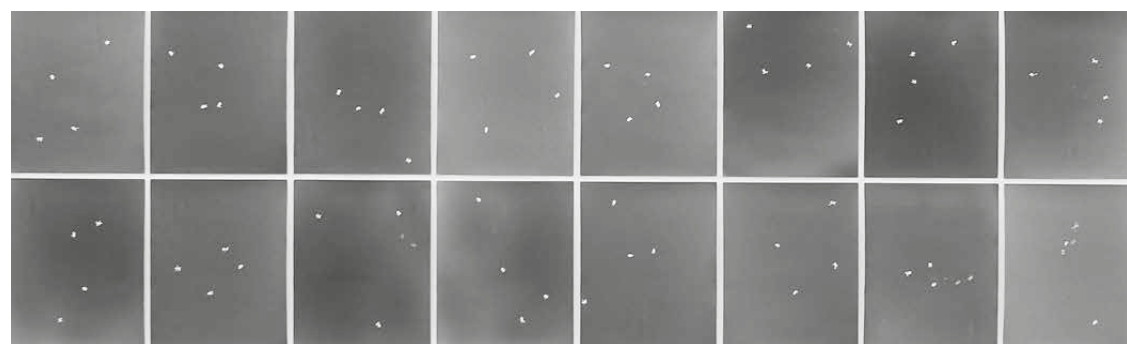
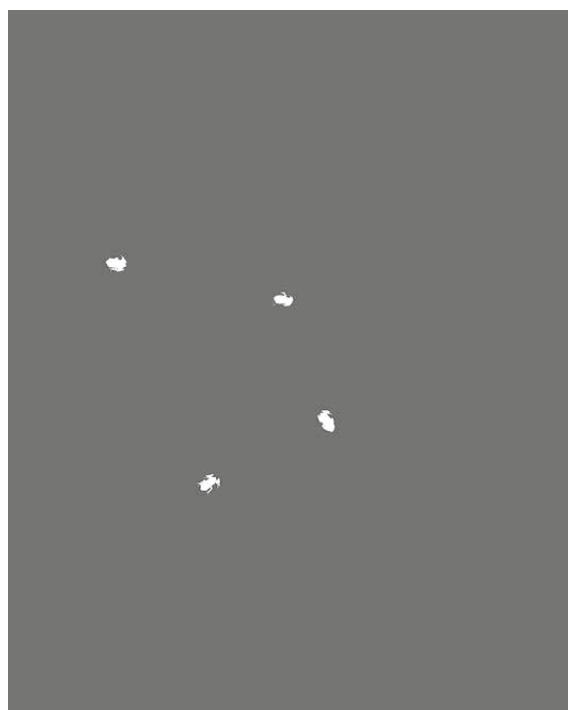
colonial trails. The story conveyed to us by the image is both political and botanical.

The exhibition space, as we know, is a laboratory in which artists and curators can share with visitors what is amenable to the senses and the intellect. When circumstances forced us to close *Jardin d’hiver* at the start of the pandemic, the exhibition was put to the test in a different way—being unexpectedly abandoned perforce by visitors to the show. After a few weeks, I went back to Le Crédac on my own and tended to the exhibition. As a precaution and in the interests of conservation, I covered each image by cutting out pieces of kraft paper to fit over the photographs. I also covered the display cases. Having carried out this act of preservation, the “syntax” of the hanging implicitly revealed itself to me. This was a very different kind of revelation from that conveyed by the interactions between the images. Putting the exhibition to sleep in this way allowed me to get an even better sense of the rhythm that Lempert had tapped out on the walls—another form of refrain. When I later removed all these protective coverings in preparation for the return of visitors, I had a feeling that was both touching and new for me: the sense of reliving the moment when the works were hung, but in fast-forward mode, of literally taking *Jardin d’hiver* out of the developer bath and swooping it up vertically in a single, summery gesture.

Claire Le Restif is director of the Centre d’art contemporain d’Ivry – Le Crédac and curator of the exhibition *Jochen Lempert: Jardin d’hiver* (2020).

1 Cécilia Becanovic, *Une fleur qui dort*, commissioned for the Le Crédac website in 2020.
2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis:

University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
3 Baptiste Morizot, *Les Diplomates: Cohabiter avec les loups sur une autre carte du vivant*, Domaine sauvage (Marseille: Éditions Wildproject, 2016).



Four Frogs, 2010

“Finding ways to have nature record itself”: Scientific Photography and Cameraless Image-Making in the Work of Jochen Lempert

Kathrin Schöneegg

Upon closer inspection, what look like bright blobs on a dark background turn out to be the outlines of small frogs. The outstretched limbs reveal that the images are snapshots and that the animals were moving while the photographs were being taken from above. With their color values inverted, the creatures’ white shadows now lead a spectral life as ghosts on a gray surface, long after the animals themselves have disappeared.

Jochen Lempert’s *Four Frogs* series (2010, p.26) was made without a camera. Thus, in terms of the technology used to produce them, the images are examples of the photograph’s earliest variant, the photogram—which, as a contact image, is unique in each case, with no possibility of the size being scaled up or down. It is created in daylight or in the lab when objects are placed directly on photosensitive paper. Because the artist’s choice of subject was living amphibians, which moved while the picture was being taken, their outlines are somewhat unclear. The result is that the title of the work also seems to contradict the eye’s testimony: instead of the four frogs mentioned, observant viewers will count five of them in various places on the paper. This is because whenever a frog leapt up in the air during the exposure, which lasted for a number of seconds, its outline was reproduced twice, albeit less sharply. This series is a prime example of the artist’s twin interests in the phenotypes and physiology of fauna and flora and in the specific ways that the medium he works with can be used as a representative tool. Populated by natural phenomena, animals, and insects, Lempert’s world verges on the photographic: for it is a world that is seen through the inherent logic of photography.

Poised midway between the scholarly and the artistic, between encyclopedic research and associative arrangement, the work of the trained biologist refers to various photographic traditions in order to combine representations of nature with art. His views of nature and wildlife are not, strictly speaking, scientific—they are not geared, that is, to the epistemic acquisition of knowledge. Rather, in documenting, classifying, and visualizing phenomena from the world around us, they draw on the idioms of scientific photography. They have a stylistic kinship with the detailed realism and typology of New

Objectivity, as well as the cameraless experiments of the historical avant-gardes. Moreover, they recall 1970s conceptual photography—its contentions articulated in sequences and tableaux—whose serial thinking Lempert assiduously finds his own forms for. As a “gifted outsider” in the arena of contemporary art, he moves between categories: not just within art history but also within photographic history.¹

Lempert’s approach has overlaps with recent trends in photographic art, inasmuch as he is interested in analog materiality and an installative practice that generates meaning between the individual images. For him, it is all about comparative seeing, about “feeling the moment of seeing itself.”² Drawing on a body of photographic work that now spans thirty years, Lempert produces an anachronistic combination of typologies and photograms, series and individual images, and shots that are spontaneously captured and creatively staged: he is thus constantly working on his oeuvre, and the individual images that comprise it seem strangely timeless. His arrangements of them in exhibitions and books allow them to unfold in ever-new constellations. Like older generations of photographers, Lempert works in black and white as a matter of course, cherishing the process of making prints by hand, of regulating the effect of the image by means of contrast, grain, and format—the very essence, that is, of darkroom practice. However, here there is nothing nostalgic about the analog aspect of his photographs, nor should it be seen as a distinct thematic focus as per the “analog turn.”³ Similarly, it should not be understood as a corrective to what is “obsolete” or “outmoded”—in other words, as a critical counter-image to the high-gloss aesthetics of the world of digital images.⁴ In its analog form, photography is simply the medium in which the relationships between culture and nature ideally unfold—perhaps because analog photography is itself a product of these two worlds, a fusion of the camera obscura’s construction of images as mathematically rendered optical phenomena and of ancient chemistry experiments with light-sensitive silver salts. And quite likely too because Lempert’s work also reflects on ways of depicting the photographic beyond the particular subject in question. In one image, the body of a

bird in flight is duplicated through its reflection in the water (*Barcelona Pavilion*, 2007, p. 29). In another, clouds cast their shadows on the sea as they roll by (*Meeresoberfläche 2*, 2019, p. 29). In a third work, a transparent spider’s web glistens in the sun, only becoming visible when the light is reflected on it (*Full Spiderweb*, 2015, p. 29). These images capture natural light phenomena, while at the same time directing our gaze to photography’s basic parameters, to the contrasts between brightness and darkness, light and shadow, positive and negative.

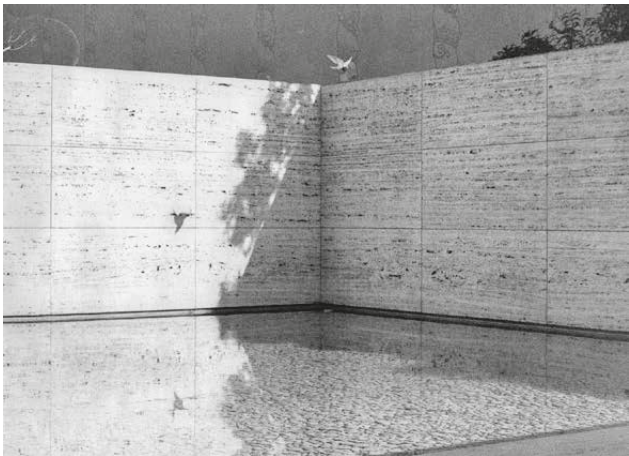
Besides documenting ephemeral natural phenomena, captured in urban spaces, recreational areas, and coastal regions, Lempert opts for methods that border on the experimental. He places the camera on his own chest as he lies in the dark and focuses on the firmament so that the open aperture takes in the starlight and translates his own breath into an intricate trail of light with the rising and falling of his ribcage (*Subjektive Fotografie*, 2010, p. 29). Instead of negatives, he inserts plant leaves into the developing frame so that light will shine through them, causing their natural pattern to be projected directly onto the sensitive photographic paper (*Transmission*, 2009, p. 31). He also uses the computer screen as a light source, allowing him to make photograms of his monitor (*Anna Atkins*, 2011, p. 31). Techniques of this kind focus on the nature of photography as a medium and the elements that define it: the exposure, whose duration determines whether stars or trails of light are registered in the material; the photographic grain, which is visibly apparent as noise when negatives are greatly enlarged but is absent in cameraless photography and can thus be used here to precisely reproduce the fine patterning of the leaf cells; the principle of reversal that was the basis for analog photography in the decades before the shift to digital largely made the positive/negative process redundant. However, the photographer’s focus is not solely on the medium here.

Lempert’s many pictures of our plant and animal kingdoms have been routinely interspersed with photographic works referring to art and cultural history, such as an image of Antoine Hercule Romuald Florence’s (1804–1879) glistening sea painted on transparent paper. These borrowed motifs are transposed into the artist’s own work, thereby providing his visual narratives with context, points of comparison, and added depth. The photograms in the *Anna Atkins* series—which are images taken from computer screens—also follow this approach. The pictures combine the logic of copying that is inherent in the analog process, references to the early days of the medium, and the context of scientific photography. They invoke the “experiments” (*Pröbeln*⁵) that were carried out with the medium in the 1830s, when the eponymous

English botanist and photographic pioneer Anna Atkins (1799–1871) produced hundreds of photograms of ferns, leaves, and algae using the cyanotype process, thereby inventing a new medium, a chemically based variant of natural instances of self-printing. Lempert’s interpretation applies specific modifications to vary and refine the prototype. The photograms show a computer screen on which a search engine displays Atkins’s illustrations, but with the tonality reversed. They are positive shadow images that present copying as a key procedure in photography, while highlighting its application in the scientific context. The historical reference invokes the representational conventions of scientific photogrammetry, yet Lempert’s views of inflorescences, leaves, and stems are not subsumed by these conventions. As a scientist, Atkins presents images of whole plants and singles out individual parts of the plant by duplicating them: she photographs both sides of the leaf, depicts sections of the root, and includes captions in the picture.⁶ Lempert, meanwhile, works freely and is not bound by the rules established for scientific illustration, which have changed over time while invariably remaining strict.

For a long time, photography had two functions in the scientific context. Its capacity for reproduction lent itself to the realistic illustration of nature, while its ability to record made it useful for research.⁷ Lempert’s use of long exposures and his direct illumination of parts of plants to enlarge them without graininess are an invocation of the second tradition. His practices recall the (para)scientific experiments of the Swede August Strindberg (1849–1912)—who attempted to record the true appearance of the moon and stars using exposures that lasted for hours—or evoke the photomicrography of the 1890s, whose exponents photographed cell structures and then kept enlarging their pictures until the graininess resulted in the medium itself displacing the image. They echo the experimental sciences of the late nineteenth century, when photography was employed as a research tool that could be used to visualize what had (once) been invisible: sequences of movement that fell below the threshold of human perception; small, distant objects that could be vividly rendered with the help of a microscope or macro and telephoto lenses; and rays that lay outside the optical spectrum. Photographic processes could be utilized to translate these phenomena into images that yielded up unfamiliar forms and defied the categories of natural similitude.⁸ Lempert’s work as an “artist-researcher” also includes groups of images that likewise use photography as a recording tool, thus keying into the resonant epistemological space of cameraless photography before it was discovered by art.⁹

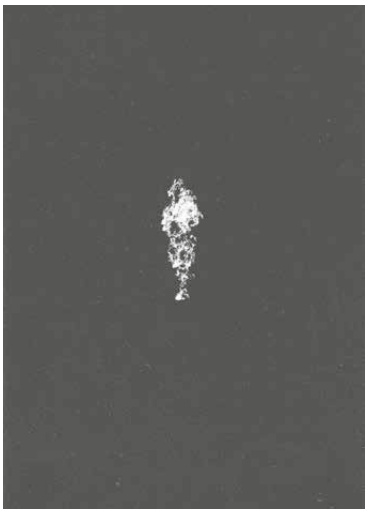
In addition to ferns, petals, and parts of plants, Lempert brings a variety of living creatures—frogs,



Barcelona Pavilion, 2007



Meeresoberfläche II, 2019



Subjektive Fotografie, 2010



Full Spiderweb, 2015

lizards, and assorted insects—to the darkroom, allowing images of them to emerge through a process of direct exposure. No camera is used in the process, and the images that are produced cannot be described as naturalistic or a realistic likeness, in marked contrast to Atkins’s botanical photograms in her day. This is because the photogram yields results by imaging thin, flat objects at rest, and Lempert’s work does not always follow this recipe. An experimental setup like the one that precedes the *Four Frogs* series described at the beginning engages with a discourse that goes beyond mimesis, in which the artist-as-subject is eliminated. In the darkroom, the photographer limits himself to specifying the conditions governing the genesis of the image and—aside from triggering the light stimulus—leaves the visual configuration to the living bodies. This generates images that are to some extent unpredictable and often seem surreal, such as when a lizard exposes itself twice over, turning it into a many-headed hydra or a creature with a double tail (*Lizard I* and *II*, 2009, p. 31). While in formal terms this addresses an in-between space, the images tend toward abstraction in cases where the exposure is also left to nature. Entire series of the artist’s work deal with such self-illuminating entities—glowworms, fireflies, and the microscopically small bioluminescent sea creatures that are found in ocean waters—which come into contact with photosensitive film and paper, setting in train a chemical reaction. These luminograms happen more or less of their own accord, auto-poietically, through the biological rhythm of luminescent matter and following Nature’s precepts.¹⁰ They emphasize the type of recording that has been associated with the discourse of referencing, which, besides imaging and mimesis, constituted a second visual system within scientific photography that relegated the image aspect of the medium to the background. Key to this was the paradigm of non-intervention, which achieved objectivity by canceling out the subject and gave rise to formally abstract images that nevertheless provided information about nature.¹¹

Lempert’s poetic images are both analytical and playful, contributing to a nuanced understanding

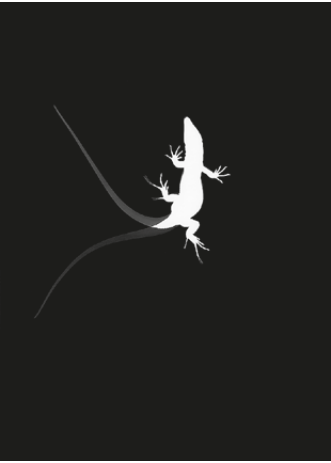
of the photographic medium that does not come down on the side of either representation or abstraction to the exclusion of the other. His works show that visual outcomes are decided by a range of different conditions. The material that is used, the objects depicted, and the physical setting determine the form the photograph will take and the way it connects with nature to direct our attention to the small things, to the fauna and flora that surround us. Lempert’s practice has a kinship with scientific photography. However, this relationship is not defined by a channeling of inspiration but rather by a “similarity after the fact,” which derives from his understanding of the medium, his interest in biology, and his thematic focus on nature.¹² Lempert’s distinctive approach extends the vocabulary of contemporary photographic art to include new forms. While this art has recently returned to the experimental methods of the avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes, Lempert explores the way photography relates to natural science: his installations and books are conceived as a kind of “artistic interpretation of this discipline.”¹³ On the back of his explorations, Lempert’s work places processes such as cameraless photography—which was discovered as an artistic technique by the historical avant-garde movements and has now become an integral part of contemporary photography—on a firm footing within the history of science. The photographer enables us to rediscover experimental spaces outside of art that help us to reassess fixed concepts of the medium today, for the technique of cameraless photography is still mainly associated with conceptual and formal parameters that locate the photogram on the side of art and abstraction, while camera photography falls on the side of documentary recording and representation. This two-world theory is not only predicated on a standardized idea of the medium that can lay scant claim to validity today, it also fails to consider the many contexts in which (cameraless) photography is used outside of art—primarily in science as well as for the purposes of decoration and amusement.¹⁴ Lempert reminds us that artistic photography would subsequently draw on nineteenth-century photographic applications.



Transmission, 2009



Anna Atkins, 2011



Lizard I and II, 2009



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- 1 Yasmil Raymond, “A Terrain of Correspondence: Jochen Lempert’s Naturalism,” in *Jochen Lempert: Paare/Pairs* (Amsterdam: Roma, 2022), 100–104, here: 102.
- 2 Jochen Lempert in conversation with the author, April 25, 2022.
- 3 See Ruth Horak, “The Analog Turn,” *EIKON: International Magazine for Photography and Media Art* 88 (November 2014): 49–58.

- 4 See Gabriele Jutz, *Cinéma brut: Eine alternative Genealogie der Filmavantgarde* (Vienna: Springer, 2010), esp. 54–74.
- 5 Herta Wolf, “Pröbeln und Musterbild: Die Anfänge der Fotografie,” in *Bilder: Ein (neues) Leitmedium?*, ed. Thorsten Hoffmann and Gabriele Rippl (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), 111–27.
- 6 Katharina Steidl, “Meeresblaue Abdrucke: Anna Atkins Cyano-typien als visuelle Medien- und Klassifikationskritik,” *Fotogeschichte: Beiträge zur Geschichte und Ästhetik der Fotografie* 156 (Summer 2020): 7–18, here: 13.
- 7 Historically, a distinction has been made between the “simple méthode de reproduction” and the “véritable méthode de

recherche de d’analyse scientifique.” See Rodolphe Koehler, *Les applications des la photographie aux sciences naturelles* (Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1893), 5.

- 8 See Kathrin Schöneegg, *Fotografiegeschichte der Abstraktion* (Cologne: Walther König, 2019), esp. 52–149.
- 9 Stefan Berg and Annelie Polen, epilogue to *Jochen Lempert: 365 Tafeln zur Naturgeschichte*, exh. cat. Bonner Kunstverein and Kunstverein Freiburg (1997).
- 10 In addition to the photogram (object-related contact process), chemigrams (chemical-based) and luminograms (light-based) have also become established as distinctive techniques: the latter is a “primary means of creating with light.” See Gottfried Jäger, *Bildgebende*

Fotografie: Fotografie, Lichtgrafik, Lichtmalerei; Ursprünge, Konzepte und Spezifika einer Kunstform (Cologne: DuMont, 1988), 120.

- 11 See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).
- 12 Jochen Lempert, email to the author, July 30, 2022.
- 13 Catherine Peter, “Fotokünstler Jochen Lempert: Ein zarter Blick,” *Weltkunst*, March 22, 2022, last accessed May 26, 2022, www.weltkunst.de/ausstellungen/2022/03/jochen-lempert-portikus-frankfurt-ein-zarter-blick.
- 14 For a more detailed analysis, see Schöneegg, *Fotografiegeschichte* (see n. 8).

