Adrian Sauer
Spektren

BRANDES

MUSEUM IM KLEIHUES-BAU

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Mirror Without a Memory

In the 19th century, Oliver Wendell Holmes described early photography as "the mirror with a memory". The mirror metaphor came from the idea that photography was an exact depiction of nature; the memory element from the medium's use of chemicals to fix those images permanently. When photo artist Adrian Sauer places steel mirrors in an exhibition space, with polished surfaces that reflect the color photographs on the wall, he is invoking the history of photography, which he interrogates anew in light of the digital revolution.

Since Isaac Newton's experiments in the 17th century, we have known that light is made up of colors. With the aid of a prism, white light can be refracted into a spectrum of colors. Newton recognized seven colors in the refracted light – red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet – the colors of the rainbow. Those spectral colors are not delineated; they flow into each other, forming a radial color gradient. That presents problems for digital imaging, since continuity and digital reproduction are mutually exclusive. A digital image is based on a binary code (1/0) that creates discrete elements. So the challenge is how to realize color and brightness progression with digital means. That conundrum is the subject of Adrian Sauer's monumental work *Gradient* (2012). When you look at the image from close up, you see pixels that are clearly distinguishable from each other – the arrangement is done using mathematical means to simulate a natural progression of colors. The picture contains all the spectral colors, but not in the same order as the color spectrum. The logic of the color sequence only becomes apparent when you view the picture in black and white. Using a computer program, Sauer has sorted the colors by brightness. The homogeneous progression from light to dark is only visible in greyscale.

Adrian Sauer is one of a generation of photographic artists who were students during the transition from analog to digital photography. Over the course of the 2000s, darkrooms disappeared from both the syllabus and from commercial photo studios. Photo processing was increasingly done at the computer, using software like Photoshop. Two decades after that radical change to the medium, the chemical-physical picture has been replaced by the calculated-computed picture, whose materiality and mediality remain arcane to us everyday users. The networked images that we snap with our smartphones and upload to the internet, that are shared thousands of times and deleted again, are therefore more reminiscent of a black box – an opaque system that masquerades as transparent, while actually being driven by algorithms. Adrian Sauer's work is an examination of those medial conditions in our digital world. He looks at the apparatus and software used today to generate images, and traces the myths and material of the new photography in visual, textual, and sculptural works. His artistic eye is not directed at the transparency effect; instead he tackles the mechanisms that lie behind it, which beguile us into confusing photographs with reality.

The digital revolution changed not only photographs and the way they are produced, but also the language. In *Glossar* (Glossary, 2017), Sauer used text to examine the new photography; black box and cloud, binary code and algorithms, sharing and undo/delete are just some of the words that the digital age has spawned or imbued with new meaning. That vocabulary is as fast-moving and mutable as the phenomenon that is our culture of imagery. Taken together, the texts in *Glossar* map the spectrum of meanings in the new medium. The arrangement of the texts was geared toward hyperlinks – a text form that follows the logic of a network structure and creates cross references between different terms. The digital age has produced a new linking structure that is no longer chronological and linear.

That shift is also the subject of the visual works in the exhibition, which deal with the new photography in terms of the color spectrum of a digital image. Several of the works are based on a computer program that Sauer developed to individually portray each of the shades in the 8-bit RGB color model in common use. The 8-bit RGB model is the foundation of how colors are represented by a computer, and of all digital photography. It is based on additive color synthesis, creating shades by a varying mixture of the three base colors red, green, and blue – in much

the same way that blending the spectral colors produces white. The technology of the 8-bit RGB model produces an exact number of colors, which Sauer explored in his work *16.777.216 Farben* (2010).

The large-scale picture, which at first glance appears a uniform grey, is revealed upon closer inspection to be the 16 million color squares that give the work its title. Every possible color tone that can be reproduced with the 8-bit RGB system appears exactly once in the work. The picture is a meditation on the possibilities, and the lack of possibilities of digital color mapping, because it shows that while the scope of the new media appears to be endless, in fact it isn't. Since only a bare minimum of those 16 million colors are actually in everyday use, Sauer's work is a utopian picture, presenting the entirety of the digital color spectrum. A version of the work, the triptych *16.777.216 Farben in Rot, Grün und Blau* (2018), makes visible the way in which each pixel of a digital image can be selected and modified. In the original 2010 picture, an algorithm arranged the colored pixels using random selection. In the more recent version, Sauer sorted the entire color spectrum according to the three base colors, and divided them among different pictures. The variation in content also produces a new format. The digital image is an image without shape.

Adrian Sauer works in the tradition of 1970s' photography – the generative, and that which analyzed the image or the media – all developments that deconstructed the medium in different ways and then declared that process itself to be the image. Sauer continues that systematic examination, now in the digital age. Even his two pictures of clouds, titled only with the date they were taken, take a self-reflexive approach to digital color, although unlike the previous works discussed here, they are based on photographs taken with a camera. An algorithm calculated the average color value of the sky and turned it to a medium grey. Sauer then took the idealized color spectrum of the first picture and used a computer to create a second image with inverse color and brightness values. The two pictures are reminiscent of the analog process of positive-negative copying, although they don't actually comply with its logic. Because a digital image is virtually endlessly variable, the idea of an original, a negative, and a copy do not exist. The fact that every pixel can be changed over and over again is the fundamental difference between the old and the new photography. In *Glossar*, Sauer puts it this way, *"analog photography is characterized by the fact that once a piece of film has been exposed […] it contains information that can no longer be eradicated. That process cannot be reversed, it is irreversible. Digital photography is utterly different […]. The process is completely reversible."*

Given all that, the sculptures that Adrian Sauer has placed in the exhibition space also represent an editorial view on photography in flux. The *Acrylwinkel* (Acrylic Angles, 2018) slightly change our perspective of the walls behind them. In this way, they demonstrate that the omnipresence of images in this day and age filters our perception, even when it is a physical object and not software programming that is steering the way we see things. Conversely, the six-foot high mirrors turn the reflexivity back on the viewers, by confronting them with a distorted image of themselves. Depending on where you are standing in the room, the reflections in the steel change or disappear. So the objects might be symbols of the new photography model, with an exposure process that leaves no permanent traces behind. That idea is countered by the idea of the internet as a permanent, unlimited storage space. Yet it brings force to the concept that photography in our age, unlike in the 19th century, is a mirror not with, but without a memory.

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