

From compression to the ability to differentiate

*A note on the process of formation and preservation in the work of Jiří Šigut*¹

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Jiří Šigut is the kind of artist that the philosopher Albrecht Wellmer was thinking of towards the end of his essay “On the Dialectics of Modernism and Postmodernism,”² where he referred to them as “seekers.” A seeker is someone who, by his steadfast creative work, activities, or undertakings breaks through into an area where we discover something unknown, something that shows us a path to follow that had previously seemed closed off, exhausted, or completely used up and drained by earlier generations. In the mid-1980s, Wellmer wrote of the need for the “self-transcendence of reason” in art, and of the dialectic (i.e., conflicting) relationship between vital art (“energetics” = e.g., activism, performance) and semiotic art (“semiotics” = art formulated in an objective medium using signs and their structures).³ Vital art without semiotics is as one-dimensional as an objective artifact lacking “energetics.” Both are important, both are a part of one whole, one wholeness. In order for contemporary art to be authentic and not lose vital contact with its contemporaneity, Wellmer argued, it must overcome this menacing and expanding one-dimensionality. It doesn’t have to be a question of output (i.e., of the final artifact or work), but it involve a change in thinking, for — as has been shown through the development of new technologies and their widespread application, which has had a reductive influence on human consciousness — thinking as such is a far more complicated and complex process than it seems. Forms of thinking can include even those ways of internalizing experiences that in the past were artificially separated from this thinking and integrated into other areas of human expression. Not coincidentally, when writing about Jiří Šigut’s work in 1993, Jiří Valoch spoke of “the sphere of art and time” and “the sphere of art and nature” where new horizons open up for journeys of discovery (“seeking”) that move away from the well-beaten paths of art understood in the narrow aesthetic sense.⁴

The work of Jiří Šigut thus transcends the boundaries of mere aesthetic experience and is far more closely associated with the broader realm of the universal study of knowledge, epistemology. Šigut’s initiation into this realm was through the medium of photography — not through photography as an artistic discipline characterized by genre depictions, but through the actual mediality of photography, i.e., its ability to use a specific form of impersonal description to capture a processual performance and thus preserve the multifaceted reality of an action as it happens and as it is experienced or lived out. It is something like a temporary “live broadcast” of an experience that becomes a processual situation compressed into one single format and one single frame of film. The important thing is that the *a priori* of

¹ The first version of this text was originally written as the introductory word to the exhibition *Without Differentiation* at Ostrava’s Galerie Dole. An abridged version was later published in *Fotograf* magazine; see Petr Vaňous, Jiří Šigut. Hledačství a význam schopnosti rozlišovat v éře umělých světů. Úvaha nad půdorysem současné tvorby Jiřího Šiguta, *Fotograf (Umělé světy)* 13, no. 23, 2014, pp. 36–43.

² Albrecht Wellmer, On the Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism, *Praxis International* 4, January 1985, pp. 337–362, translated by David Roberts. From the German original *Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne. Vernunftkritik nach Adorno*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 1985, pp. 48–114.

³ Like Wellmer’s text, Šigut’s earliest photographic works and artistic activities date from the mid-1980s. See note 2.

⁴ This involves the artist’s movement away — both in his thinking and his form of expression — from art in the narrow modern sense and towards the broader Greek meaning of *techné* as a diverse approach to one and the same act of revealing and uncovering. See Marie Pětová, Heideggerovo tázání po bytnosti uměleckého díla, in: Martin Vrabec et al., *Filosofické reflexe umění*, Prague, Togga 2010, p. 167.

this compression, this “condensed continuance,” lies in who creates the situation — i.e., in who projects it in the space and time of its realization. This actor-performer, and simultaneously the physical “medium of observation,” is the artist himself. He takes on the role of someone who to a certain extent decides on the space and time of a record — i.e., when and where it starts and when and where it ends. At the same time, however, there is still room for unexpected and random influences. We could say that the artist constructs, experiences, and records the ongoing situation all at once, but at the same time he is also surprised by it. He is its immediate participant, observer, viewer, and appraiser all at the same time.

It is in this context that Šigut developed his famous experiments involving touch (short-term) and contact (longer) with the landscape (including the urban landscape). Above all, he discovered the interrelationship between experienced (going into town, riding public transport, riding an elevator, etc.) and recorded existence (photographic records as a form of articulation) — two pillars of the same experience that together form an arch leading towards an awareness of a kind of extra-personal belonging and connectedness of place and time with the actor (i.e., the seeker, the archeologist of time) and the terrain (the database of non-personal time). It is in this “arch” (Heidegger’s essence) that Šigut find both connectedness and relationships.

It is interesting that this “seeking” also brings forth ritual behavior in the “seeker,” while at the same time the “seeker” and the “explored environment” disappear from the proscenium of the final output, meaning from the photograph. It is almost as if, when I want to communicate with the space of the landscape and to delve beneath its phenomenal surface, I begin to subconsciously behave in a ritual fashion — I regularly inspect, walk about, and circle my place of interest, but in so doing I am possessed by it. Figure and ground temporarily touch or become one within the established field of movement. The resulting photographs record mere traces or imprints of chronological or overlapping events. Despite its morphological concreteness, the form taken by Šigut’s photographs exceeds the ability of the language of everyday experience to provide a description of the lived world.

The technical objectification of a time-limited process through the medium of photography (compression) causes the “lived world” (*Lebenswelt*) to lose its contours. Photographs present something “alien” that nevertheless, like a substrate or sub-structure, hides and at the same time reveals a derivative of experience as the revelation of essence. It is a record of experienced reality without differentiation between object and subject.⁵ Within the context of this entire process, both subject and object are generally augmented by the artist’s accompanying (or better said, parallel) textual interpretation, whose objective descriptiveness is occasionally marked by emotions and feelings of agitation. The text is a project and confirmation of the action and also an open-ended message for the “unknown,” an engaging commentary on what the artist has realized and what is and is not present in the strangely alien forms of the photographic output. It is the realization of distance in nearness, a compression that technologically unifies things that are *separated* but that presents this new form of unification in an incomprehensibly homogeneous quality, a form of “raw” depiction that is not inhabited but merely “commented on.” In other words, the technology of

⁵ In this context, it is highly notable that in his examination of the origin of the work of art the philosopher Martin Heidegger, whom Jiří Šigut references in several of his texts, also passes over the duality of artist and audience in the relationship to the work of art. For instance: “Heidegger’s interpretation [...] does not work with the duality between the artist, meaning the specific author who uses the work to express something, and the viewer or listener, i.e., the ‘consumer’ of art.” In: Marie Pětová, Heideggerovo tázání po bytnosti uměleckého díla, in: Martin Vrabec et al., *Filosofické reflexe umění*, Prague, Togga 2010, p. 161.

photography behaves differently than human consciousness, since it is a pure record without self-reflection. As a record that has erupted forth, the resulting photograph remains as distant from the subject as a hospital x-ray from the patient's body; the x-ray merely diagnoses the patient's state of health prior to being interpreted by the attending physician and by the consciousness of the person whose body is being examined. It is an evocation of nearness and distance, intimacy and objectivity, memory and non-memory, calmness and danger all at once. Šigut's photography is a place of tension arising from the undifferentiability of the components of space-time. The moment of irritation is the roughly determined time of exposition, which has a retroactively quantifiable beginning and end that could be considered Heideggerian parallels for birth and death. This is also the manner by which Šigut subconsciously involves the viewer in his activities when he uses this predetermined length of time to refer to his own essence in time, which for the human consciousness has the inviolable quality that it is ineluctably finite. One telling thing in this regard is Šigut's concept of "total, or integral photography" involving the liberation of subjective perception from visual illusion in order to find a form (or intermediate form) existing beyond the limits of the visible. Šigut speaks of the "inner quality" of the photograph. But what does this "quality" as a value-based category relate to? Bare reality, he answers, to which we add that it is a part of epistemology (i.e., understanding) as well as ontology.

In Šigut's latest works using the tools of digitalization, the things that were clear in his work with the landscape (*Úlišťe*) or genetics (e.g., *My Dearest Ones*, 2002, or *Spermagrams*, 2004 – 2010) and that were clearly associated with ways of human *existence* in the world, are translated into other areas, but here, too, the key element is his concern regarding the dimension and meaning of human existence. Jiří Šigut throws himself into the study of a modern tool enabling the digitalization of data — a tool that, besides offering a modified way of storing memory, generates and constructs a new techno-aesthetic that it uses in combination with sight to "communicate" with human consciousness, which it thus helps to shape and modify. The tool of digitalization is thus a human project that rationalizes one of our most fundamental concerns, memory, while ignoring, reducing, or even erasing other concerns and the ways in which they are nurtured. Digitalization fixes one dimension of people's ability to "remember." It is thus by its nature one-dimensional, and that is how it becomes a part of human practice. Digitalization is both familiar and distant for people. Its starting point is in a mechanically designed and operating program. The camera (the means by which the technology functions) has been pre-prepared by man as a *product*; it is a platform for distinctive but *self-enclosed* communication that also generates and multiplies this communication. This platform is based on a consensus of understanding; it neither seeks out nor opens up new possibilities, but specifies and totalizes verified forms of communication that we might call socially acceptable — i.e., harmless. They contain no contradiction and allow for no deviations, and are thus devoid of any possibilities for resistance. They remain programmatically one-dimensional — "functional." Digital tools thus reduce human experience to model situations, to an automatism consisting of diagrams of behavior (adaptability), seeing (techno-aesthetics), and perception (memory storage). In his most recent work, Šigut follows the logic of this reductive language of the digital image to create a paradoxical situation — he takes the reductive abilities of the digital medium to the extreme (1 pixel) in order to find a solid foundation for his original exploration of this medium. He takes compression to the extreme so that it will reveal its hidden *mysteries*.

On the level of techno-aesthetics, the reduction inside the technological product (the tool of digitalization) is pre-set for standard operations, for typical user functions — it enlarges, shrinks, specifies, formats, manipulates the color of the original, etc. But Jiří Šigut works with the medium outside of these user demands. He asks it to do something else. What? He is

interested in how the digital transcription of data works with memory, archiving, databases, image compression in memory, etc. He systematically adapts to the digital tool, on whose basis he reflects on the *intersectionality* of the human ability to “remember.” He thinks in terms of the disintegration of the image into numbers — ones and zeros — in order to again, but differently, touch on a “form existing beyond the limits of the visible.”⁶ This involves working with a program created by human consciousness far more than it involves working with the programmed aesthetics of the final outcome, which merely designs the world and thus transforms the original creative input into a mechanical, easily accessible *service*. The present would seem to play out on a kind of playing field where the original human genome equipped with revealed and still-hidden abilities related to the diversity and variety of the world in all its essence competes with pre-prepared operational technologies originally designed to merely ease people’s concerns regarding (among other things) memory but that at the same time began to use technological processes and the new “graphic language” of compression to regulate, reduce, and standardize human experience, and, what is more, to model the possibilities for and ways of reflexively thinking about and critically coming to terms with the “experienced.”

This situation raises the question not only of how to resist the reduction of thinking, imagination, and perception, but above all how to turn this reduction against itself and thus to reveal its negative connotations in their currently present hiddenness; how to turn around this directional self-motion and bring it back to its original goal of liberating the human potential that is dangerously lost or weakened under this “operational practice.” How to prevent the operators of technology from merely functioning within a machine culture (as criticized by Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Albrecht Wellmer, Vilém Flusser and others)? How to reveal and name the things from which man is alienated by machines, how they dehumanize him, what they rob him of, how they change his behavior and actions, and why this is so?⁷ Šigut, it would seem, uses his art to endeavor for a renewal of the *values* that, in this contactless digitalized and mechanized consumer *culture*, are disappearing or have become banal and semantically weakened. These are the values of touch, contact, and understanding outside the framework of conventional language subject to social control. This is how Šigut touches (short-term) and makes contact (longer) with the landscape — he touches time, stored as in a database, in the terrain of the landscape (*Úlišťe*).

Let us look at two key examples that can be used to illustrate my interpretation above. Šigut’s “unimaginable silence” and his black square and white square (*Record of One Day, 29 March 1986; 12 Minutes of Rain, 25 June 1986*) are commentaries and statements that automatically relate to what is visible / seen / experienced — and yet at the same time there exists a certain difference: The unimaginable silence of nature is by definition different than the

⁶ Cf.: “Vilém Flusser calls the coming era the era of numerical codes in which our alphabetical code is gradually replaced by a numerical one, and thus (from our point of view) images created using computing technology are numerical icons. It is probable that we now find ourselves at a place characterized by the commingling of alphabetical and numerical coding, and we can see that ‘numerical icons’ are qualitatively different than earlier ones.” Milena Slavická, K pojmům malba a obraz, in: Jiří Ševčík – Jarmila Kovandová (eds.), *Podoba a smysl malby v současném umění*. Sborník symposia, Akademie výtvarných umění, Praha 1994, p. 71.

⁷ Compare this with Martin Heidegger’s reflections on *techne*: “For Heidegger, the essential origin of technology is not in what we today consider ‘technological,’ but in the original Greek concept of *techne*. But *techne* also included art; it was one single, diverse bringing-forth. That is why, in a situation of extreme danger – which he sees not in technology in the sense of machines and devices but in the denial and blurring of our ties to original bringing-forth – Heidegger can turn our attention towards art as a realm in which we must come to terms with technology. It is a realm that is both related to technology and entirely distinct from it – art as the more initially provided bringing-forth.” Marie Pětová, Heideggerovo tázání po bytnosti uměleckého díla, in: Martin Vrabec et al., *Filosofické reflexe umění*, Prague, Togga 2010, p. 167.

unimaginable silence provided by an image or reflection of any form of technology, including digital. Despite what they look like as a result, the black square and the white square can be created in different ways, through a whole range of conscious or random approaches, operations, programs...

And somewhere here is that moment of fundamental differentiation that must be constantly renewed and fortified in order for Heidegger's "undifferentiated space" to be properly understood and not become a basis for a directive and programmed machine culture in which writing over an "old program" destroys the possibility for its ritual transcendence and for returning to the consciousness of our ancestors, towards the continuity, meaningfulness, and *strengthening* of human existence.

Just as in his older works Jiří Šigut tried (in an almost Wittgensteinian manner) to avoid anything that might be linguistically superfluous or misleading, that might shift the meaning of or overshadow his efforts at integrating experience and at recording it into the consciousness, in his works with the digital image he touches on the same issue, but from the other direction. He explores the *equivalent* of digital technology capable of unifying the diversity of the world (the method of ones and zeros) as a *tool* that preserves memory but erases human deviations from it, which are always dissimilar and unique. It is no longer just a question of compression, but of the contemporaneous covering up and leaving out of details that erase the contours of memory literally on a human scale. The heterogeneous is homogenized. It is no longer an attempt at a depersonalized (i.e., objective) record of a subjective experience, as it was with Šigut's earlier work, but an attempt at preventing subjective experience itself from disappearing, however peacefully and painlessly, into a programmed pattern or into the operational ambitions of enlightened individuals who merely want us to benevolently forget why we are here — for then we would lose an awareness of our finality, and with it room for error, mistakes, and poor decision-making; man himself would cease to exist with his essential contradictions, which are a precondition for the development of his creative abilities. All that would be left is someone who fulfils, with greater or smaller deviations, the tasks assigned to him, and who follows a predetermined path at a predetermined time. Someone who doesn't have the time to question his deeds because he is not given the space to do so. Someone who releases himself or is released from *authentic existence*.

The question remains as to whether Jiří Šigut is a conceptual artist. And this question will remain unanswered until conceptual art attempts to redefine its objectives in today's advanced age⁸ when new media tend to aestheticize problematic phenomena instead of asking important but difficult questions. Still, we can say with certainty of Jiří Šigut that he responds sensitively to things that are difficult to talk about (in the sense of understanding), because the language that we use is growing weaker. It is increasingly less capable of fully encompassing the new experience that is rolling towards us and flowing through us, and that we would like to critically share. That is why we need to constantly observe, study, develop, test, but also maintain (in the sense of *to preserve*)⁹ this imperfect language, including the *language of art*

⁸ "Advanced age" entirely in the sense as analyzed and described by Václav Bělohradský in *Přirozený svět jako politický problém. Eseje o člověku pozdní doby*, Prague, Československý spisovatel 1991.

⁹ Cf.: "But in order for a work to be truly a work, it requires 'guardians' and 'protectors' – those who 'preserve' it (Heidegger calls them the *Bewahrenden*) [...] He who preserves a work is not guarding or protecting an object, but a certain certainty of being and the openness of the world in which we live. By the preservation (*Bewahrung*) of a work, Heidegger understands letting a work be a work – a stage for the bringing-forth of being, not an object of cultural production." Marie Pětová, Heideggerovo tázání po bytnosti uměleckého díla, in: Martin Vrabec et al., *Filosofické reflexe umění*, Prague, Togga 2010, p. 161.

or *techne*, even if it might sometimes seem like *techne* has taken control of us and that it casts a shadow over and questions our familiar paths and the paths that have led us, each of us separately, from early childhood all the way here to this time and these days.

Translation: Stephan von Pohl