

Toward non-objects.

(For the abstraction issue of European Photography)

To abstract is to withdraw. The question is: to withdraw wherefrom whereto? This used to be a mute question, but it needs to be articulated at present. Until a short while ago our surroundings consisted of objects. They were what was "concrete" in the world, and people could hold on to them. To abstract meant, at that time, to move away from such concrete surroundings. It meant a motion which stepped back from objects. A motion back from objects and toward non-objects. The non-objects aimed at by abstraction were the "forms", (such as concepts, models, symbols). This permitted a graduation of abstractions: the farther a form is from an object, the more abstract, "theoretical" it is. The highest abstractions were the most general, (i.e. the "emptiest" forms. For instance the symbols of logics. The purpose of abstracting was to get hold of the objects in our surroundings, to "grasp" them. To have "information" concerning the objects. Thus, the obvious answer to the question implied in abstraction: "wherefrom and whereto?" was this: "away from objects and toward non-objects". "Away from objects and toward information". This is no longer the obvious answer.

Our surroundings are going through a revolutionary transformation. It is pregnant with a new way of life. The hard objects in our surroundings are being pushed back by soft non-objects: hardware by software. The objects recede from the center of interest, and our interest begins to concentrate on information. We can no longer hold on to object in life; they are no longer "concrete". This is why "to abstract" can no longer mean "away from objects". The question which needs to be articulated at present is precisely this: "what is meant by abstraction?".

There can be no doubt that the objects interest us less and less: symptoms for this turning of our interest abound all over. The majority of society is no longer busy with the production of objects, but with the manipulation of information. The working class, those producers of objects, is becoming a minority, and the majority is composed of those who are employed in administrations and services, which means in producing non-objects. What people demand is not so much one more pair of shoes or one more piece of furniture, but rather one more holiday, or a better school for the kids. One does no longer ask for ever more objects, but instead for ever more information. The "object ethics": the production, the possession and the accumulation of objects, is giving place to a new one: the acquisition of enjoyments, of experience, of sensations, of knowledge, in short: of information. Life within a world which is becoming non-objective acquires a new flavor: not the shoe, but the enjoyment of the shoe is what is concrete in life. Not the objectivity of the shoe, but the information contained within the shoe, is what counts. Value is transferred from the object toward the information: transvaluation of all values.

This transfer of interest from objects to information may be explained by the automation of object production. Machines are being informed to spout objects. All those razors, lighters, fountain pens and plastic bottles are practically value-less. What is valuable is the information, the "program" within the machine. As we learn to inform robots, each and every object will become worthless, (even houses, vehicles, pictures, poems, musical compositions). The high tide of objects which bathes

us, this object inflation, is precisely the proof of our growing loss of interest in objects. They are, all of them, becoming gadgets, they are becoming despicable. By the way: this is the new meaning of "imperialism": mankind is being dominated by those groups which hold information concerning the construction of atomic weapons, and of atomic power plants, concerning genetic operations, concerning administrative apparatus. He who holds nothing but objects like raw materials or food stuff is condemned to submit to those informations which grow ever more expensive. It is not the object, it is information which is what is concrete in an economical, social and political sense.

Our surroundings is growing ever softer, more nebulous, more spectral. One cannot grasp with one's fingers all those informations, all those non-objects like the pictures on the TV screen, the data stored in computers, the programs built into robots, the microfilms and the holograms. They are, all of them, "unconceivable" in the true sense of that term. It is true: the word "information" says "formation within" objects. Informations need an objective support. Like cathode tubes, like chips, like rays. However: hardware grows ever cheaper, and software ever more expensive. Although the remnants of objectivity which still adhere to the new informations may be indispensable at the present stage, they may, even now, be disregarded. It is not the chips, it is the bits which command our attention. This spectral character of our surroundings, this unconceivable nebulosity, is the climate in which we must live. We can no longer hold on to the objects, and we do not know how to hold on to informations. We must live without a foothold. It is in such a situation that we must ask the question about the wherefrom and the whereto of abstraction. The purpose of every abstraction is to grasp the concrete surroundings from a distance. This was never more urgent than it is at present. The surroundings from which we must take our distance is the nebulous world of informations which program us. It is they which are what is concrete, and it is from them that we have to abstract. And it becomes evident in which direction we must aim our abstractions: to speak with Husserl, we must "go back to the matter of fact". To abstract must mean, at present, to find one's way back to the matter of fact.

In order to understand this new and inverted meaning of "abstraction", we must try and imagine the concrete life within an non-objective surroundings of the future: the life which our grandchildren will lead. Because it is from this sort of concreteness that we will have to abstract. It is easy to imagine this kind of life: the "new men" about us who drug themselves and play with electronic gadgets are living, even now, the non-objective life of tomorrow. The aspects which must be accentuated in this new life form is that the hands will atrophy. The future man, who is no longer interested in objects, will have no needs of hands, because there will be nothing left for him to handle. He will program apparatus to do all the handling for him. The only part of the hands that will survive are the finger tips. The man of the future will use them to press buttons, in order to play with symbols, and in order to provoke audiovisual information from out of apparatus. This fingering handless man of the future will no longer act, but he will fumble. His life will no longer be a drama with an action, but it will be

a play with a program. The new man will no longer want to act and to have, but he will want to enjoy the program. His concrete life will be characterized, not by work, not by praxis, but by contemplation, by theory. Man of the non-objective future will not be a worker, "homo faber", but he will be a player with forms, "homo ludens".

Let us interrupt this futurological fancy of ours for a moment. Who is the man we are talking about? What sort of man did we describe in the non-objective future? It was the photographer whom we were describing. That handless, button-pressing creature, which plays with forms that are contained in the program of an apparatus, that creature which is exclusively interested in information, in contemplation, in theory, that creature is the photographer, (and all those other "producers of technical images"). In order to visualise the man of the non-objective future, we need not look into the future and try to imagine system analysts, computer programmers or scenario modellers. All we need is to observe the gestures of photographers. It is they who are the men of the future at present. It is they who show, even now, and concretely, the meaning of a non-objective life. It is they who are most advanced in the direction of non-objectivity. And it is from this concreteness of theirs that we have to abstract, if we want to find our way within this new world which is coming.

This is why "abstract photography" must mean to take one's distance from this concreteness of the photographic gesture. To photograph is, concretely, to play with forms, with views, with symbols. To photograph is, concretely, precisely that which used to be called "abstract". Each and every photograph is an abstraction from the objective world, in the old sense of the term "abstraction". And each and every photo is a non-object: it is interesting exclusively as regards the information it carries, and in as far as it is an object, it is practically worthless. But by now non-objects of the type "photo" have become what is concrete in our surroundings. An "abstract photo" must be a picture which turns its back to this non-objective concreteness, as it characterizes every usual photo.

It is now becoming evident where abstract photography has to turn to: back to the matter of fact. It is becoming evident that the way toward the new abstraction must be the way of phenomenology. If we want to find our way within the world of non-objects which is becoming ever softer and ever more spectral, we must find our way toward the phenomena. "To abstract" must now mean "to abstract matters of fact out of the non-objects". "Matters of fact", and not "objects". The objects have become devoid of interest for ever. The hard objects have definitely dissolved into fields, into relations, and the "objective world" which could be trusted and held unto, has definitely fallen apart. Nobody can really believe that the hard desk upon which I am writing is not a swarm of electrons, and therefore "empty". No abstract photography of any kind will be able or willing to abstract the hardness of the desk out of the non-object of the world which surrounds us.

The difference between an object and a matter of fact is this: The object

pretends to be objectively there, and the matter of fact admits that it is a meeting place of human intentions. The desk, taken as an object, is a resistance, a "problem" which stands in my way. The desk, taken as a matter of fact, is a place where I meet somebody's intention. The desk, taken as an Object, is a piece of matter, but the desk, taken as a matter of fact, is part of a general convention. I can no longer believe in the materiality of the desk, but what I can believe in is that I participate in a convention which contains matters of fact like desks. The reason why I can sit down in front of a desk and write upon it is that I participate in a convention, and that I therefore exist. Both the desk and myself are part of that convention. The desk would not be over there, and I myself would not exist, if there were no such convention. Not the desk by itself, and not I by myself, but the relation "I-desk" is the matter of fact. And it is precisely this intersubjective matter of fact which abstract photography will have to abstract out from the nebulous non-objects in our surroundings.

The usual photos are abstractions from objects. For instance from hard desks. Or from hard, objectified faces. The usual photos are documents of an objective world. But this objective world has become devoid of interest. Interest has shifted toward the documents. It is the documents, the forms, the models, which are becoming what is concrete in the world. The purpose of abstract photography must be to abstract matters of fact out from this concreteness of the documents which program us. And the matters of fact, all of them, may be reduced to a common denominator: we are not alone in the world, there are always others with us, and everything we experience, know and evaluate is due to our convention with those others. Abstract photography must try and render visible this convention, this consensus, those codes which hide within the informations. The way of the new abstraction must be away from information and toward the others. This is what is meant by "back to the matter of fact". To render visible the codes, is to emancipate oneself and the others from information. Abstract photography is an emancipation from information.

"Abstraction" in the old sense of the term is an emancipation from objects, in order to find one's way in the objective world. "Abstraction" in the new sense is an emancipation from informations, in order to find one's way in the codified world. If one keeps this in mind, one will be able to judge which among those photos at present available are documentary, i.e. "concrete", and which among them are "abstract" in the new sense. The documentary photos point the way toward non-objects, and the abstract photos take their distances from such a way. The point toward the others.