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Lilly Lulay

Soft Errors, Hard Truths

Curated by Jutta Brendemühl

Centered on the digital era, the photo-based works in German artist Lilly Lulay's exhibition *Soft Errors, Hard Truths* reach beyond, into both the past and future, to highlight the broken (or pending) promises of the age of Tech. As connection is eroded in favour of fragmentation, disorientation, and distortion, Lulay's work examines the influence of digital technologies on photography and invites viewers to question their own engagement with digital media.

Bodies in Digital Fog

Born in Frankfurt in 1985—the year the first email was sent between Germany and North America—Lilly Lulay belongs to the generation that consciously experienced the transition from the analog to the digital age. She remembers life before the Internet, printed city maps, and the feeling of being “off the grid” on holiday. Her first mobile phone came at age 14, her first smartphone at 31, and since then it has been her daily companion, alarm clock, office, camera, and storage space for endless personal data.

Photography is the emotional glue that binds us to our smartphones. Through messaging apps and social networks, we exchange images while delivering invaluable data to tech giants. They mine information about our locations, preferences, human contacts, political views. Historically, there has never been an institution with as much knowledge about us as today's tech corporations. During Lulay's art studies in the

early 2000s, digital cameras conquered the market. In photography classes, discussions about the truthfulness of digital images were central, tinged by a skepticism reminiscent of today's debates about AI-generated images and deepfakes. Yet this question has accompanied the medium since its inception. In the 19th century, photographs, though monochrome, were considered radically realistic. Then and always, however, they represent only a fragment of the space-time continuum. Photographs conceal as much as they reveal.

Algorithmic Aesthetics

The photo-based app Instagram embodies this contradiction, having developed into one of the world's largest social networks. But is it actually the images, or rather the algorithms, that captivate us? A sophisticated measurement and evaluation system determines what is shown to each individual user. Reward systems of “hearts” and growing numbers of followers create addiction and revenue models. Lulay's series *Into the Instagram Galaxy* (2026) explores the app's “discovery” page—that algorithmic control center that supplies users with supposedly suitable content, tailored to their interests. Lulay prints out and paints over screenshots with black acrylic paint until only fragments remain visible. Between these information islands, quotes from neuro-marketing tutorials appear, examples of the alluring barrage of “feel-good experiences.”

As writer/scholar/activist Shoshana Zuboff describes, we live in the age of “surveillance capitalism.” Everything we do online—searching, sharing, archiving, commenting—is recorded, analyzed, converted into profit. We become walking databases while simultaneously working for free for platforms that profit from our attention and creativity. Lulay's *Liquid Portrait – fbarchive19012016* (2016) addresses Instagram's big older sister, Facebook. Consisting of video and sculpture, this body of work uses every image from one person's profile (a friend of Lulay's), but reveals only central elements and outlines of people. Between selfies, travel shots, and cultural references a portrait emerges—a portrait less of the individual user than of the aesthetics and entangled logic of the platform itself.

Photography as Mirror and Storage

In the series *Time Travelers* (2011–ongoing), people from the “analogue age,” captured in black-and-white vernacular snapshots, meet the pixelated structure of the present. Their once-clear gaze into the camera is transformed and obscured by abstract colour fields. These works ask: How will our images and stories live on? In a future where private photographs are no longer stored in physical albums but on servers, how will people—or machines—view, analyze, and evaluate visual messages? In *Ghosts@Work / Text as Key* (2023), the “whole” body appears fragmented again. Only the gestures of manual labour of the people originally photographed remain visible. Green squares mark the spots that an AI recognized as “relevant” during the process of content recognition. The human as we know it disappears, leaving behind algorithmic outlines. What is made visible or invisible in the age of AI? To what extent do machine visions already influence our understanding of reality and of ourselves?

Lulay’s *Soft Errors, Hard Truths* is an exhibition of works made in the past decade but which look well beyond, into both past and future. They confront us with an ever-growing paradox: The supposedly seamless digital networks that promise connection also deliver division, misinformation, and outright lies—and this transformation now often happens faster than we can learn to see anew. Soft errors in our daily interactions reveal hard truths about our algorithmic present.