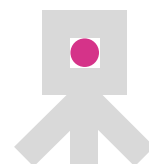


# PhotoResearcher



ESHP European Society for the History of Photography

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# Editorial

## Migration as Agitation

### The Photographic Beyond the Image

Since their inception, photographs have been taking possession of numerous fields of activity. They define our everyday life and the arts, structure our knowledge and our view of the world. They contribute to research, impact upon politics, influence our memory. We generate photographic images with analogue or digital apparatuses: as documents, as messages, as objects of observation and exchange. But they do not achieve their effectiveness solely through the way we handle them; their impact also depends on techniques of reproduction, modes of social intercourse, and also cultural and iconographic codes. Ever since photographic images, translated into algorithms, have been circulating through the Internet, there has been frequent talk of an uncontrollable flood of images and the suspicion that users are overwhelmed by or uncritically addicted to this visual excess. In contrast to this pessimistic perspective in terms of culture, visibility, and the media, the essays in this issue direct their focus towards intermedial, as well as inter pictorial, forays along the borderlines of the photographic and examine the potentials inherent to these explorations: for example, their ability to theorize about photography beyond dual conceptual systems (Ulrike Blumenthal/Astrid Köhler), to shift fixed geographic and media-specific notions of delimitation (Helen Westgeest, Lucy Soutter, Katharina Sykora), or to dynamize (re)orderings of photographic images – not least in the field of the arts (Kristin Schrader/Katja vom Stein, Zoe Leonard, Ilka Becker).

The mobilizing power of the photographic beyond the individual image and its representation has been laid out by theorists of photography, developed further by theorists of the various media,<sup>1</sup> and used creatively by photographic artists. In these investigations, a particularly activating power is ascribed to the photographic moment.

#### The explosive power of the photographic moment in theoretical investigations

Philippe Dubois considers the photographic instant to be synonymous with a “unique and singular slice of space-time.”<sup>2</sup> He characterizes it as an abrupt detachment of the photographic image from the flow of lived time and as an extraction from the spatial context of the referent. According to Dubois, this occurs both in the “mere” act of vision and its decision to direct the eyes toward something specific, and in the view of the picture taken with the support of a technical apparatus. Dubois considers both “operations” to evince connotations of loss. Thus he asserts the cancellation of “a chronicled, real, evolving time,” the death-resembling rigidity of the photographic subject, and the disempowerment of the photographer who, once he has clicked the shutter, “can no longer intervene in the image *in the process of constituting itself*.”<sup>3</sup> Dubois’ examination is implicitly based on the thoughts of Roland Barthes, who also conjures up the photographic image as thanatography and considers the viewing of photographs to be an animistic summoning of a “return of the dead.”<sup>4</sup>

1. Guido Isekenmeier (ed.), *Interpiktoralität. Theorie und Geschichte der Bild-Bild-Bezüge*, Bielefeld 2013. Jörg Helbig (ed.), *Intermedialität: Theorie und Praxis eines interdisziplinären Forschungsgebiets* (1998), London 2009. Joachim Paech, Jens Schröter (eds.), *Intermedialität Analog/Digital. Theorien - Methoden - Analysen*, Munich 2008. Andrea Seier, *Remediation: Die performative Konstitution von Gender und Medien*, Hamburg, Münster 2007. Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge MA., London 1998.

2. Philippe Dubois, *L'acte photographique et autres essais* (1983), Paris 1998, 153.

3. Dubois 1998 (reference 2), 159–160.

4. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* (1980), New York 1981, 9.



Figure 1  
Ori Gersht, *Pomegranate*, 2006,  
digital photography.  
Courtesy Ori Gersht.

Both authors, however, do not content themselves with this negative attribution with regard to the photographic moment. Instead they also search for the “power of mobilization inherent to the tiny block of the here-and-now.”<sup>5</sup> “In the cut itself, there is no cessation of flow,” writes Dubois and continues: “I would like [...] to pursue the temporal paradox even further and dynamize even more whatever ‘fixed’ quality there may be in the concept of a definite stopping of the image. In effect, I would like to show that, in the instant that is seized and fixed by the device, in this infinitesimal fraction of time, a crack, a slit, an irreducible abyss inserts and installs itself. In other words, within this simple fixed point there is opened and deployed an entire space of authorization and even creation, an internal movement, a flow that never ceases to impact upon the photographic ‘subject’.”<sup>6</sup> Dubois identifies a mobilization potential as inherent to the photographic element in the fact that the distance between referent and photographic image, this infinitesimal yet categorical contingency, asserts itself as an incisive disruption with regard to the indexical and mimetic power of photography. This gap requires that viewers engage in a constant gesture of closure which, however, is doomed to failure. “[C]onfronted by two universes that do not stick together, the subject—at first surprised, intrigued, then disturbed, anguished, finally frantic, more and more overwhelmed by a vertiginous spiral—begins to come and go ceaselessly within the image, then between the images, then from the image to the object, from the object to the image, *within the apparatus*, as if he were chasing after an impossible equivalent [...]”<sup>7</sup> According to Dubois, the dynamizing effect of the instantaneous immobilization achieved by photography ends in an aporia of perception. But the same observation could receive a different evaluation: If the momentary

5. Dubois 1998 (reference 2), 167.

6. Dubois 1998 (reference 2), 165–166.

7. Dubois 1998 (reference 2), 167.

nature of the photographic act draws attention to the contingency inherent to every perception and hence to the incoherence of the perceiving subject, then we are drawing close to its emancipatory potential: It releases viewers from the referential illusion suggested by the photographic image and undermines the (self-)empowerment of the viewer as the sovereign authority behind a perspective that believes itself capable of fully comprehending the world (especially through the aid of photography) in visual and semantic terms.

#### **Time bomb and pictorial fragment: Ori Gersht's *Pomegranate***

Ori Gersht (Tel Aviv, 1967) stages this explosive power of the photographic moment literally, as a disturbance inflicted on viewers and as the moving force behind a complex media-related and pictorial movement of transference. This is illustrated by a group of still lifes which the photo- and video-artist created in 2006/07 and to which the work-complex entitled *Pomegranate* belongs (fig. 1).

In the photographic film still of the same name, Gersht displays objects to us in the manner of Spanish still lifes from the seventeenth century: brightly illuminated, they are placed in a flat niche that is delimited on three sides by a stone frame and in the background by a black surface. The arrangements and objects, however, are more than simply the reference to an art-historical genre. Questions arise concerning potentials of the objects that work against the genre or expand it. Thus the surfaces of the fruit are made to appear like plastic through the interplay of high-definition photography, spotlight, and digital editing. Moreover, the black background and the shadows cast in sharp relief create the impression of a space “void of air.” They cause the vegetable and fruit to appear “dead” in another manner than we are familiar with in a *nature morte*. Here, it is not the objects themselves that predominate by showing themselves as corruptible or decaying. Instead this ultimate momentum is opposed by an obvious effect of artificiality. In Ori Gersht's cabinet of wonders, the pomegranate and cabbage have detached themselves from the group of *naturalia* and shifted into the *artificialia*.

But not only is artificiality demonstrated to be something created; immobility is staged through the fruit and vegetable as a process. The bringing to a halt proves to be an artistic and theatrical balancing act: the tightly extended strings on which the objects hang like marionettes both induce and indicate the motionlessness of the pomegranate and cabbage. But who pulled or is pulling the strings? And from where is this entity acting? No unambiguous answer can be given, because no backstage area can be identified: the black background oscillates between an impenetrable surface and a depth receding into infinity. And the fixation of the hanging fruit remains open because of the omitted frame along the upper edge. Moreover, the extension of its surface shifts the black background optically into the foreground and causes it





Figure 2  
Ori Gersht, *Pomegranate*, 2006,  
video still.  
Courtesy Ori Gersht.

to become one with the material surface of the photographic object. This drives the spatiality of the still life into a game of deception and renders our standpoint precarious. We shift from a position in front of the photograph into a position in front of the niche in the photograph, and vice-versa. The frames of the niche operate in a similarly ambivalent manner. In the front, they extend right up to the invisible fourth wall of the photographic image and constitute an illusionistic elongation of the peep-show principle of the camera. This renders the material border of the pictorial surface optically permeable. In distributed roles, the background of the picture and its frame bring to light the invisible, instrument-based arrangement of the photograph and demonstrate how the camera constructs our perspective.

The photograph *Pomegranate* thereby summons up a host of questions that concern not only the objects presented in the picture and the deciphering of their concrete and symbolic significance, but also the complex act of photography and its multilayer agents.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Ori Gersht has occupied himself with the migration of the photographic into other media-specific and artistic fields. Thus, in parallel to the photograph, he also treated the scenario of *Pomegranate* in a video (fig. 2). Initially, the video image completely resembles the photograph. It remains still for a while and lays claim to the calm manner of viewing inherent to photography and painting. But the contemplation is fiercely interrupted when, shot from the off, a bullet passes through the pomegranate as well as across the video image. This occurs in slow motion, because the human eye could not consciously register the trajectory of the bullet. The event is accompanied by a piercing whistle and dull sound of impact which are then succeeded by an eerie silence.

8. Joseph Caputo, *Still Life Explosions*, Smithsonian Magazine, March 2009, vol. 37, no. 7, <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/still-life-explussions-51144950/?no-ist>> [3.7.2016]. Johannes Janssen, "Ori Gersht - Film and Photography," *Ori Gersht, Forces of Nature - Film and Photography*, Museum Sinclair-Haus, Bad Homburg, March 15<sup>th</sup>-June 14<sup>th</sup> 2015, Munich 2015, 33-44. Kerstin Jäger, *Freezing History. Die Stilleben-Inszenierungen von Ori Gersht*, Thesis Master of Arts, University of the Arts, Braunschweig 2012.

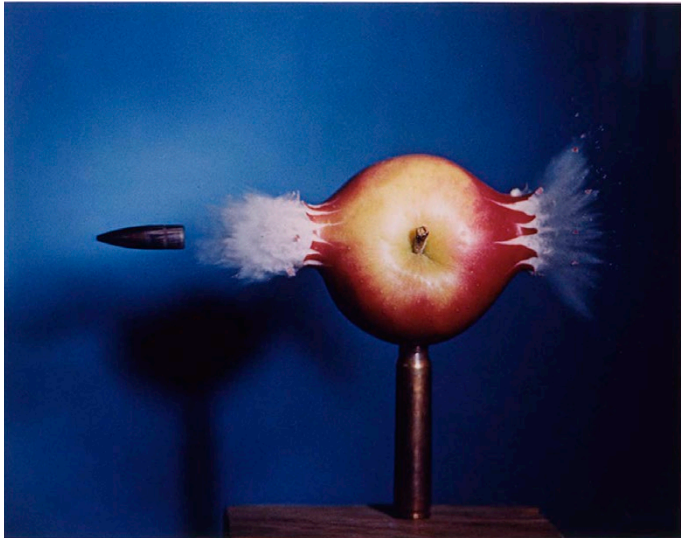


Figure 3  
Harold Edgerton: Bullet piercing an Apple,  
1964, photograph, reproduced in:  
Estelle Jussim, *Stopping Time*.  
The Photographs of Harold Edgerton,  
New York 2000.

In the framework of a photographic concept of migration as agitation, many questions arise. For example, whether the complex stacking of the offs of still life, photograph and video enhances or reduces the vehement shot; or what impacting power proceeds from the edge of the video screen, inasmuch as it marks the specific nature of the filmic off out of which action can intrude into the picture, in contrast to the irrevocably detached off of photography. The additional question could also be raised as to how the space between stage and camera reconfigures itself when we see how the split pomegranate disperses its seeds both inside and outside the niche and clearly moves back and forth in front of the stage. Which externally and internally induced activities should be assigned to this principal object when – both activated and pierced – it performs its unrepeatable swaying and rotating movement which we nonetheless can look at again and again in the video? Furthermore, one could ask what the photographic *nature morte* does with the moving image when, for a certain duration, the video imitates the silence and immobility of the still life. And finally, what happens with the main object of the pomegranate when it becomes the main protagonist of a theatrical occurrence during which it literally disseminates its contents? These are questions upon questions with which Gersht sends us in search of the borders between media, only to usher us into a *mise en abyme*.

Furthermore, Gersht plays with numerous allusions to media. In selecting his subject, arranging the action, and utilizing a technical apparatus, he refers to a series of photographic experiments in the fields of electrotechnology: for example, Harold Edgerton's stroboscopic experiments with which he measured time in fragments of a second and made things visible that had previously been invisible, such as the course of a projectile upon impacting and penetrating an apple (fig. 3). Or one can even go back further in media history to ballistic-photographic experiments conducted in 1886 by the physicist Peter Salcher at the suggestion of Ernst Mach in order to render visible the compression waves of air which a bullet moving faster than the speed of sound draws after itself. Is Gersht hereby endeavouring to direct our attention primarily to the technical potential of his medium, or is there also a critical aspect at play here which scrutinizes Salcher's photographic experiments in their function as war-promoting research?<sup>9</sup>

What is more, *Pomegranate* summons up modalities of the inter pictorial migration of the photographic; in other words, the provenance of its most striking characteristics from other pictures and their wandering into other pictures. Gersht has never denied the

9. The fact is that there is reason to suspect that the compression of air behind a projectile fired at high speed was also responsible for the gravity of the injuries of wounded soldiers.



Figure 4  
Juan Sanchez Cotán,  
Stilleben mit Quitte, Kohl, Melone und Gurke,  
1602, 69 x 85 cm, oil painting on canvas.  
San Diego Museum of Art  
(<http://www.TheSanDiegoMuseumofArt.org>).

art-historical references of his still-life, but he has also never explicitly articulated them. In the case of Juan Sanchez Cotán, it is a matter of an unusually unambiguous reference (fig. 4). In which way does Cotán's painting become an accomplice of Ori Gersht's photographic act? Fundamental parameters of the photographic were already anticipated in the long tradition of the painterly still-life: for example, reflection upon immobilized time and the materiality conserved within it; or the detachment of objects from their context, and their configuration in a new visual order. In particular reference to Juan Sanchez Cotán, there is the specific variant of the early Spanish still-life whose specialty was a purely additive placement of the food items. The early photographers of objects were also interested in trying out and presenting new arrangement patterns. Thus, in their successions of similar objects, Henry Fox Talbot, Hippolyte Bayard and Louis Jacques Mandé

Daguerre conformed to parameters of typological classification. These early photographers wanted to present not only the objects themselves, but also the patterns of knowledge inherent to their photographic arrangements.

These sorts of (re)arrangements continue on a vast scale in the World Wide Web. With a view to Gersht's work, the question presents itself concerning the degree to which the particular configuration of Cotán, Gersht and *Pomegranate* deliberately activates the multi-referentiality of the Internet and is then released into the "autonomous activity" of its algorithms. But in any case, with reference to *Pomegranate* the Internet is part of the photographic act, inasmuch as the photograph and the video appear there in quite different contexts. Arising from the quantitative dispersion are numerous shifts of meaning. Linear references are transformed into a rhizomatic referentiality,<sup>10</sup> i.e. into a process of decoding and recoding that is permanently continued by the user.

And last but not least, Gersht uses *Pomegranate* as an agent within the exhibition system for amalgamating the media-specific borders of painting, photography, and video. Thus he partly plunges the surrounding space of the video into darkness, so that there is a sort of cinema effect. Or he frames photographs and video like paintings and attaches them to the wall. In the case of the video, viewers accordingly believe themselves to be standing in front of a photograph, only to be unexpectedly confronted after one minute with an

10. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, 'Introduction: Rhizome,' in: *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis MN, London 1987, 3–26.

explosive moving picture. The White Cube of the museum and the Black Box of the cinema are merged here.

Ori Gersht's *Pomegranate* demonstrates in an exemplary manner how the perspectivation of photographic migrations summons up expansions of the point of view on theoretical, analytical, and artistic levels. The concept comes to provide an impulse for considering the photographic act in terms of its distributed agencies and its media-specific, cultural, and historical dispersion. The present edition of *PhotoResearcher* is a step along this path.

### Photographic migrations as aesthetic and political acts

The inter pictorial migrations in Gersht's work point to a concept that includes media-related and political aspects. Thus Gersht, who comes from Israel, effects an important replacement of a fundamental element in his still life: not a quince as in the original painting, but a pomegranate is shattered by a bullet. In Jewish culture, this fruit is a symbol of life and fertility. Hence its being shot through the middle is legible as an expression of experienced violence, while the dispersion of its countless seeds may be read as the possibility of continued existence – which in turn, in its space-encompassing self-affirmation, allows ambivalent conclusions.

In this respect, aspects of migration involving geopolitics and media history are repeatedly interwoven with current political issues. Coming to light here is a facet of migratory movement that evokes manifold meanings and calls for an alert and critical attitude and perception. These qualities could be characterized as “agitary,” inasmuch as they assert sharp opposition to monolithic positions. This space of agency in pictorial, media-related and social-political terms is the theme investigated by the essays in the present issue – from concrete, contemporary motifs of the migratory all the way to the transformation of this concept of migratory images through theories of the media and perception.

Something new in this edition is the contribution of a contemporary artist in the form of a photo spread: the American photographer **Zoe Leonard** is publishing here for the first time new works in which she links aspects of the processuality of identity and viewpoint with a media-related and pictorial concept of migration. The photographs are based on a project realized over many years whose point of departure consists of Leonard's family photos made in the period after the Second World War. Leonard rephotographs the pictorial material with a *migrating* perspective which gives rise to varied croppings and margins as well as to a shift in the accentuation of contents. The family photo as a document promising a genealogical classification and an affirmation of identity is thereby subjected to a potentially never-ending revaluation.

**Ilka Becker**'s essay is based on the thesis that, in Leonard's work, the migratory as a movement of dislocation creates an open agency which affects both subjects and images.



Becker evaluates Leonard's act of appropriation as a gesture that, to an equal extent, is *photographic* and *destabilizes photography*. To make a photograph always means "to appropriate the thing photographed."<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Leonard's new framing relativizes and annotates the "original" cropping of the family photograph.

**Katharina Sykora** focuses on a contemporary geopolitical context. Her essay examines three bodies of journalistic, artistic and private photos, each of which is related to recent influxes of refugees in the Mediterranean region. In addition to works by Julian Röder, who brings to light the ambivalent technologies of border monitoring, and by Marco Poloni, who assembles diverse photographic material from Lampedusa Island with its mixture of inhabitants, tourists and refugees, a further pictorial complex comes into view: "brought-along photographs," i.e. pictures that along with further objects were washed ashore onto Lampedusa between 2011 and 2013 after several boats containing refugees capsized in the waters off the Italian island. These found objects document the cultural diversity of the migrants, who saw them as both self-representations and gifts to the potential host countries showing their hope of a free existence.

**Lucy Soutter**'s essay, on the other hand, proceeds from positions of contemporary art that are photographic in a wider sense. On the basis of the practices of Dominic Hawgood, Alix Marie, Lorenzo Vitturi and Mariah Robertson, she reveals ways in which supposedly fixed borders between the photographic and the sculptural, the installational etc. can be negotiated, challenged and shifted. This gives rise to the question as to what role is played by digital techniques in current theory and practice: Soutter argues that the concept of the photographic has not lost relevance or received less attention. On the contrary, it perhaps attains its very potential where the material, two-dimensional print is no longer the dominant photographic form.

The investigations made by **Kristin Schrader** and **Katja vom Stein** are linked to further modes of appearance and experience of the photographic. Kristin Schrader identifies *paraphotographic* qualities in the practice of Pierre Huyghe, in which he endeavours to transform the format of the exhibition and to treat it as artistic work and site of photographic actions. These paraphotographic actions arise as metaphors of the photographic, for example as dusty footprints, living and dead flies, bright and dark spaces. In addition, the exhibition induces viewers to engage in paraphotographic actions like a heightened perception of the spatial-temporal status of the rooms. Katja vom Stein focuses on the *postphotographic* in its connection to the photographic print. The photogram created without a camera appears as a pure form of the photographic, even though it remains marginalized in terms of media history. Against this background, Thomas Ruff's *photograms* are investigated as a special digital-emulative form. They are in fact less a photographic print than its artistic simulation and

11. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York 1973, 4.

aesthetic imitation. Freed from the limitations of analogue technology, algorithms are used to create a new generation of digital photograms which camouflage their virtual provenance in a photo-chemical materialization and generate a new sensory impact with their coloration and large format.

Aspects of light-induced referentiality, as well as spatial order, addressing of the viewer and temporality of the photographic are investigated in the essay by **Ulrike Blumenthal** and **Astrid Köhler**. They focus on special constellations of mirrors in pictures or pictures in mirrors, with respect to the interweavings between various media. Whereas Ulrike Blumenthal examines the studio photographs of Brassai in their temporal context, Astrid Köhler extends the investigation to abyssal processes of reproduction that range all the way over to contemporary art. In multiple mirror-picture formations, she examines how the reference to reality and the modes of recognition ascribed to the photographic and the filmic are destabilized, scrutinizing at the same time definitions of media boundaries.

Finally, the essay by **Helen Westgeest** reflects upon the photographic through a comparison with a medium which – in contrast to film – tends to be only seldom correlated with the photographic: it seems as if television and photography share only the fact that they are both lens-based media. Nevertheless, Westgeest presents case studies in contemporary art in which intersections and synergy effects between television and photography are probed. Emmanuel Van der Auwera's *Video Sculptures* (2015-2016) are juxtaposed in this study with Ola Lanko's *Photogenic Installation: Mountain* (2015-2016). Whereas Lanko's photographic project evokes the televisual gesture of zapping and watching, Van der Auwera changes the electronic flow of images associated with television and Internet channels back into material objects. Both artists summon up a decelerated reception or an aesthetic of slowness. Westgeest ascertains the degree to which the migratory photographic has apparently found a home in other media.

The idea of *Migration as Agitation – Photography beyond the Image* has been developed within the scope of the PhD program *The Photographic Dispositif* at the Braunschweig University of Art, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), in cooperation with the editors of ESHPh. The guest editor would very much like to thank the scholars of the PhD program Ulrike Blumenthal, Astrid Köhler, Kristin Schrader and Katja vom Stein for their outstanding input both in the conception and organization of this issue. The editors would also like to thank all contributors for their inspiring texts and images that start a stimulating dialog in the framework of this issue.

Katharina Sykora, Ulla Fischer-Westhauser, Uwe Schögl  
Vienna, October 2016