PhotoResearcher

ESHPh European Society for the History of Photography

Playing the Photograph

Guest Editors: Matthias Gründig, Steffen Siegel

Editorial

Figure 1
Henry Fox Talbot, 'The Ladder',
salted paper print from paper negative,
in: *The Pencil of Nature*, Plate XIV.
British Library, London.

It may sound strange at first; the combination of words just doesn't seem to fit properly: *Playing the Photograph.* And it is supposed to. How does one play a photograph? Like playing cards maybe, the ace of spades or even the joker? But then, what are the rules and are there rules at all? What would it mean to cheat while playing a photograph? Maybe photographing is to be understood more like throwing dice — whatever one tries to capture, in the end it's often pure luck that decides upon success or failure and how decisive the moment actually is? Unlike "Photography and Play", our interest in "Playing the Photograph" does not suggest having a definite answer to the multitude of such questions. Playing, here, is not supposed to point to a self-contained field of study that intercepts with that of photography. Instead, the articles in this issue direct our gaze to the diversity of sometimes rivalling understandings of play — be they aleatoric or strategic, childish or subversive — and they ask what practices of photographic play could look like.

Playing is a serious issue. At least it is now more serious than ever. The evolution of the video game industry, which has long surpassed movie industries financially, and the so-called gamification of different spheres of our reality, of economy, marketing as well as work-lives have merely underlined the need of understanding not only contemporary ideas of playing and gaming. Today, it is hard not to play in one way or another, willing or not. Ideas of play are, however, historically entangled with those of leisure, subversion and freedom. And once again, it is William Henry Fox Talbot who can be regarded as an important forefather of such an interest. Opening his *Pencil of Nature*, we find on plate XIV (fig. 1) not only the group portrait of three men assembled next to a ladder that Talbot shows in the centre of his photograph. Somehow it looks like the photographer has made use of these three men like pawns in a game, moving them left and right, up and down, hereby treating this odd scene as a chessboard. We shouldn't be surprised that in the years to come it will be Talbot who, several times, photographs people playing a game.

In his article **Matthias Gründig** tries to render a first introductory view at examples from the history of photography through the lens of familiar positions of game theory. He retraces its connections to art and art-theory to finally ask, how photographic practices touch upon the problem of freedom and what a utopia of technical images would look like.

Play, as **Sabine Kriebel** indicates, signifies processes at the heart of modernity. Reflecting on Germaine Krull's diverse photographic shadowplays, she highlights various epistemological and aesthetic implications at play not only in Krull's work. Today, compared to Krull's time, photography is embedded in a different medial landscape.

In different ways, the articles by **Andrés Mario Zervigón** and **Steffen Siegel** examine photographic play as a means of education. Andrés Zervigón investigates the intriguing relation between the printed word and photographic image in the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung.* In Weimar Republic Germany, the *AIZ* not only used photo-montage as a weapon, but also organized competitions involving photographic snippets among the readership to actively engage them in a critical reading of images and further their understanding of photography as a tool of propaganda. Steffen Siegel on the other hand retraces playful techniques of

acquiring photographic knowledge represented through illustrated manuals back to photographers such as Bayard who used trick photography to visually duplicate themselves and others. Photographs, he argues, do fudge.

Susan Laxton shows that the conceptions of 'homo ludens' and 'homo politicus' do not have to exclude each other. In her in-depth analysis of Shannon Ebner's *Strike*, a complex photographic word-play, she therefore calls to attention Benjamin's notion of the 'Spielraum' as a room-for-play in a broader political sense, a technological space for imagination and action — potentially for subversion — not determined by utility.

Even though they're not always visible as such, social networks like Instagram today serve as a photographic playground for many. In his article **Lev Manovich** not only brings to light the different aesthetics at play there but also describes the specific rules that structure the pictorial discourse of 'Instagramism'. As **Alise Tifentale** reminds us, social photographic networks – and, with them, competitive photography – are not an invention of our digital age. On the contrary she calls to attention the International Federation of Photographic Art (FIAP), active from 1950 to 1965, as an example of a 'Photographers Universe' and a prehistory of networked photography in its own right.

Markus Rautzenberg philosophically ventures into today's very different medial landscape composed of photography as well as video games and contemporary TV-series (fig. 2). Based on this multitude of media he emphasizes the role of uncertainty in what he calls ludic mediality.

Matthias Gründig, Steffen Siegel, Ulla Fischer-Westhauser, Uwe Schögl
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