Gursel, Zeynep D. Gursel; University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
The Stakes of a Medium: Photography from Document to Personal Vision

Based on fieldwork conducted at the largest annual celebration of documentary photography – a festival titled Visa Pour L’image – this paper investigates the stakes involved in journalistic photography. How and why does it matter whether what is celebrated at a gathering of professional photographers is the precision and authenticity of an image or a particular photographer’s personal vision? How do the stakes involved change depending on whether the point of reference is the subject of the photograph or the photographer’s authorial signature?

I will focus on one particular example drawn from two years of anthropological fieldwork in international photojournalism industry: a differentiation made between local photographers who document specific news events and cosmopolitan photojournalists praised for their masterful storytelling. The 2004 festival was haunted by those amateur documents that threatened the value of professional visual journalism by clearly emerging as the photos of the year – those taken of prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison. Yet against this amateur threat, the festival celebrated artistic and subjective vision and the belief in an indisputable visual truth-telling simultaneously. How might this example from the world of professional documentary photography challenge us to rethink technicity and aesthetics as components of regimes of value in photography?

Hodge, James J.; Duke University
Glitching Chronophotography

The chronophotographic motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey exert a profound influence on contemporary digital aesthetics. Citations of Muybridge and Marey appear in a variety of forms, from blockbuster Hollywood cinema to commercial advertising, dance, and experimental media and cinema.
At once attentive to the temporal registration of the photographic image as well as the supra-human content of that registration, chronophotography represents a valuable resource for new media artists to articulate digital media’s operation at supra-sensible timescales. Artists such as Tatjana Marusic, who “glitch” chronophotographic aesthetics, effectively highlight the underlying software that makes such images possible. More importantly, they express a critical-historical relation between contemporary aesthetics and chronophotography that expresses the creative exteriority of technics beyond its embodied framing, i.e., in the service of an expansion of the photographic frame and framing of time in digital technics.

Chronophotography’s influence has gone far from unnoticed yet its revival remains something of a critical mystery. To put the matter succinctly: why chronophotography and why now? This paper argues that chronophotography provides new media artists with critical-historical traction in their efforts to address the specificity of digital media’s engagement with time.

hoogland, renée c.; Wayne State University
Art-Work: Neo-Aesthetics “Post-Photography”

As early as 1936, Walter Benjamin, in his in/famous exploration of the role of mechanical reproduction in the artistic domain, foresaw that the new medium of photography would not only empty art out completely, but also put an end to the very idea of the independent medium, including that of photography itself. Benjamin therewith turned photography into a theoretical object, whose obsolescence as an autonomous medium was inscribed in its very history. Its early demise has not prevented art/photography critics since to insist on photography’s critical function in, precisely, media-specific analyses of the visual, especially of visual “fine”arts.

In this paper, I will focus on the ambivalent genre of so-called art photography to question, first, a medium-specific investigation of
visual cultural production in the age of digitization, and, second, propose a theoretical aesthetics that at once inscribes the singularity of photography at our current, “post-photographical” moment, and that nonetheless allows for an inquiry into the encounter with a work of art, to ask after the work it does in the world, as organized activity, as artistic event, irrespective of its medium and the material of its expression.

Richmond, Scott C.; Wayne State University

On Harold Edgerton’s “Rapatronic” photographs and Bruce Conner’s Crossroads (1973)

Theoretical accounts of photography typically turn on an ontology of reference (read: indexicality). By virtue of its optical and chemical—i.e. technical—procedures, photography’s ontology is doubly determined: by the object itself, and by a technological process of reference. In this paper, I sketch an alternative to dominant accounts of photographic reference by expanding what we consider to be photography’s technicity.

My examples in this are Harold Edgerton’s “Rapatronic” photographs of above-ground nuclear tests, and Bruce Conner’s 1973 experimental film Crossroads, which rearranges declassified footage of “Operation Crossroads,” a nuclear test at Bikini Atoll in July 1946. Both Edgerton’s photographs and Conner’s footage were commissioned by the U.S. government for the purposes of scientific and technical documentation. Moreover, Edgerton’s company was responsible for engineering the timing system for many such tests.

In these images, reference has become singularly emphatic, and therefore has gone weird. These images are not “of” nuclear tests in the way photographs are ordinarily “of” their objects. They are emanations of the massive technological assemblage of nuclear testing. They do not disclose a world already there. They are emphatically referential, but also creative: because of their origin, these images bring something new into the world.