

Farewell Photography



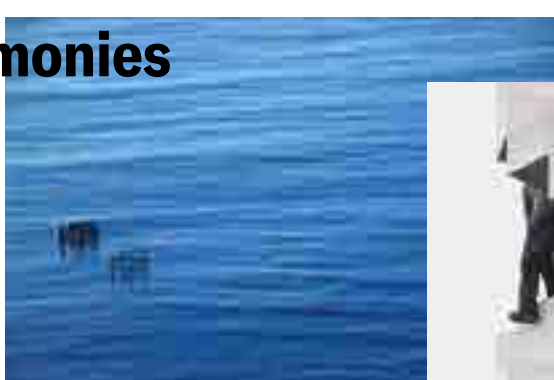
No Image is an Island



Resisting Images



Other Testimonies



Global Players



Intro

Prefaces	16
Foreword	19
Farewell Photography	20

Exhibitions

How Your Camera Works	22
Leaving the Still Image	52
Who Are You? That's You!	80
No Image Is an Island	102
Journal	132
Newsroom	150
Resisting Images	154
Other Testimonies	180
Global Players	208
Ghost Stories	230
Glossary	250

Appendix

List of Exhibited Works	242
Imprint	248
Acknowledgements	248
Sponsors	249

Farewell Photography

When virally distributed images constantly haunt us, when deleting pictures has become more important than uploading them, when the phenomena and grotesques of our time can only be accentuated as memes, and when our devices know what kinds of images we prefer, then it is clear that the conditions governing our lives are in a state of upheaval, and it is time to examine the changing world of photography.

Photography is ubiquitous and is in a constant state of transformation. Not only is it a medium of democratic expression and participation but also a tool of surveillance, propaganda, commercial appropriation, and self-promotion. Whereas in the past it was a tangible object in the form of a paper print, today it is shared in digital form a thousand times over at lightning speed. It is in perpetual motion, migrating from our screens to the walls of cities, and from the street back to the online environment.

How is art responding to these many faces of photography and to the “liquefaction” of images? How is our understanding of the history of photography changing in light of the current upheavals? What images have we overlooked and should be considered anew, or from a different perspective?

Taking *Farewell Photography* as the title of the first *Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie*, we turn our attention to the materiality and new functions of photography, to its fields of application and modes of usage. We examine how the various farewells to classical photography are influencing social, journalistic, and artistic practices. The digital storage of data, too, has changed the nature of the image: instead of recording, we are increasingly seeing the processing and generation of technical images. The growing tendency to intervene in the image has been accompanied by interventions in reality: performative or constructive methods of working have long been a part of artistic practice. The increasing amount of work being done with found images and the editing of analogue archives and digital forms of image have fundamentally expanded the concept of authorship.

The eight exhibitions and projects in the public space juxtapose contemporary works with historical images and artistic photography beside discoveries from the regional archives in Mannheim, Ludwigshafen, and Heidelberg. In this respect, the focus at the biennale is not on auteur photographers or on the icons of documentary and journalistic photography, which have shaped so many photo festivals. Instead, other, new ways of working can be seen,

sceptical and critical views, images of noncompliance rather than images of certitude, along with some very playful approaches. This includes images by authors who have been forgotten or are (still) unknown, drawn from family archives and the realms of science, medicine, and criminology.

Farewell Photography is, therefore, not a requiem for photography but rather an attempt to depict the diversity of the photographic and propose an expanded understanding of the medium. Some will find this provocative, as it represents a new, unsettling way of thinking about the medium, which is no longer simply a window on the world. It is, however, the ambition and expectation of a biennale to confront the present, all the more so when its title includes the words *aktuelle Fotografie* (photography of the present): “aktuelle”, that is, in the sense of a quality that connects today with the past.

To help elaborate the biennale concept, we invited in Fabian Knierim, Boaz Levin, Kerstin Meincke, and Kathrin Schöneegg, four colleagues who are active both as curators and as artists and have diverse research and work interests. As a collective of six curators, we set out to create a space for reflecting on photography at the exhibition venues in Mannheim, Ludwigshafen, and Heidelberg. This will be accompanied by a journal in the catalogue featuring contributions from scholars, artists, journalists, and curators. In this way, we define various fields of the photographic and attempt to produce a survey of a medium on the move and of a particular attitude to the world—just as importantly, we see the biennale as a chance to examine the fascinating medium of photography with a critical eye.

At this point we would like to say a huge, heartfelt, collective thank you to all those who have made it possible to bring this edition of the *Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie* to fruition and to present the works on display there.

Florian Ebner and Christin Müller

How Your Camera Works

What does the material promise, what does it miss?

- Cuthbert Bede
- Kilian Breier
- F & D Cartier
- Sara Cwynar
- Joseph Maria Eder
- Olafur Eliasson
- Philipp Goldbach
- Vesko Gösel
- Jochen Lempert
- Rosa Menkman
- Peter Miller
- Floris M. Neusüss
- Adrian Sauer
- Wolfgang Tillmans
- Gaston Tissandier
- Louis Vignes & Charles Nègre
- Hermann Vogel
- Max Wolf

Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen

¹ Albert Bernsohn: *Developing, Printing and Enlarging*. Chicago 1939. Bradford Shank: *Filters and Their Uses*, Chicago 1939; Wallace E. Dobbs / Charles A. Savage: *Your Camera and How it Works*, Chicago 1939.



Wallace E. Dobbs / Charles A. Savage, *Your Camera and How It Works* (Cover), Chicago, 1939

pp. 32/33

pp. 32/33

Image technology

In the late 1930s the American publisher Ziff Davis put out a series of books focused on photographic practice. The *Little Technical Library* included titles like *Developing, Printing and Enlarging*, *Filters and Their Uses*, and *Your Camera and How It Works*¹. The slim volumes provided an introduction into the process of photography: from buying a camera and choosing motifs through image composition and lab equipment all the way to the manual skills required in the darkroom. Interested amateurs were to be given tips on developing their own photos, a process that had been industrialized since the advent of roll film and carried out by photo labs.

Nowadays photographic lab work has disappeared from our everyday reality. Instruction books of this type have all but vanished too. Comparable manuals now have titles like *How to Edit Pictures* or *How to Use Photoshop*. They concentrate on digital photography, which has become a regular part of everyday life as one of the features of the mobile phone. The focus is no longer on camera technology and how to shoot pictures but on software-supported image editing. This shift in consumer photography is also a subject of art: in his series *New Photographic Pleasures* (2007–09) **Vesko Gösel** makes reference to the first book of cartoons and caricatures on photography from the year 1855. While his historical model, Englishman **Cuthbert Bede**, lampooned the mania for photography that the new medium had sparked, Gösel's drawings home in on its ubiquity in the digital age. Image programs like Flickr and the sharing of pictures on social networks are also addressed along with the changing world of photo technology: the camera has been replaced by the computer screen, which Gösel's photographer works in front of under a cloth, as was customary in the nineteenth century when taking pictures with a large-format plate camera. The manipulation of existing photographs has now replaced the recording of new images.

Exposure

The analogue process can be divided into different phases: besides the preparation and sensitization of the material, exposure and recording as well as development and post-production were key steps in the creation of photographs. If the light-sensitive medium is exchanged for delicate sensors that transpose our images onto screens and displays, the pre- and post-production work on paper materials falls by the wayside. What seemingly remains of key importance, though, is the exposure—that phase of the image process which formed the basis for photography's auratic promise that it is capable not only of reproducing reality but also of giving it material form through a process of physical transcription in the

film's sensitive layer. Photographic theory has translated this paradigm of materialization into metaphors, viewing photography as a shadow image, an imprint and trace of the real.² In the puristic, camera-less practice that began after 1960, these prototypical photographic images were interrogated by **Kilian Breier** and **Floris M. Neusüss**, among others. They are currently experiencing a renaissance. Thus, just as Breier put a pristine piece of photographic paper out in the open in the spring of 1986 to preserve in the form of a chemical reaction the radioactive rain that fell after the nuclear catastrophe in Chernobyl in Ukraine, **F&D Cartier** are now reverting to unexposed photographic material for their installations. The artist duo gleans its black-and-white paper from flea markets and Internet portals like eBay. The sheets of paper react to the light in the exhibition rooms and gradually develop from variegated to dark monochrome surfaces. Photographic history can be experienced as a narrative of formats and materials in an age in which the paper print has turned into a modifiable data set without any fixed form. This shift also brings down the curtain on the phantasm of a direct connection between a photographed object and its material-based rendering. The light falling on the sensors of the memory cards can no longer be seen as a natural—because physico-chemical and therefore irreversible—reaction. Today, conversely, the value of the digital image lies in the fact that it can be deleted and overwritten because this enhances its capacity for quick distribution.

Recording

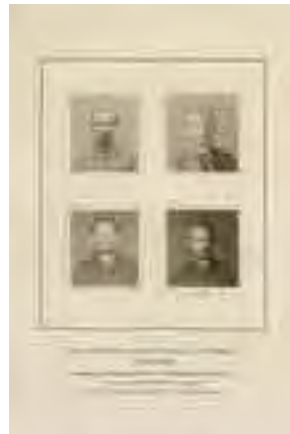
Yet the belief in objectivity, which was buried two decades ago along with the print paradigm, was always a theoretical construct. Photo manuals are a revealing source of information about this. They are a fund of diverse glitches written into the photographic process: a slight variation in the incident light produced different results and revealed the supposed veracity of the photographic image as an illusion. Although it was possible to consult the original in portrait pictures, there could be no comparison with nature in other area of application. This presented problems for a scientist like **Max Wolf**, the Heidelberg pioneer of astrophotography, who concerned himself with invisible objects of research. In order to be able to assess whether his photographic search for minor planets was successful or whether his picture showed not an asteroid but rather just a similar-looking defect in the gelatin layer, the “planet hunter” introduced various control mechanisms like the simultaneous exposure of two photographic plates and their subsequent comparison in the stereo comparator in the recording process. When contemporary artists engage with the practice of modern astrophotography, the question of defects and glitches is

2
See, by way of introduction and with classical references, Peter Geimer, “Das Bild als Spur: Mutmaßung über ein untotes Paradigma”, in: *Spur: Spurenlesen als Orientierungstechnik und Wissenskunst*, ed. Sybille Krämer (Frankfurt a. M., 2007), 95–120.

p. 47

pp. 30

pp. 34/35



Loescher/Petsch, Four Shots of the Same Person in Different Lighting Conditions, mounted albumen prints, before 1891 (Frontispiece from Hermann Vogel, *Handbuch der Photographie*, vol. 4, *Photographische Kunstlehre, oder die künstlerischen Grundsätze der Lichtbildnerei für Fachmänner und Liebhaber*, Berlin, 1891)



Unknown, Stereo Comparator, undated, 12 x 15 cm, Heidelberg University Library: Max Wolf Estate, inv. no. Heid. Hs. 3695/U,130 digital facsimile at <http://heidicon.uni-heidelberg.de/id/86983>

pp. 40/41

pp. 42/43

p. 51

p. 1 p. 31 p. 36 pp. 48/49

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The poetic text of *The Letter* is accessible on the homepage of the artist: <http://www.petermiller.info> (accessed on 23 July 2017).

less a technical issue and appears more in the form of a critique of the media. In his *ESO* series **Wolfgang Tillmans** reminds us that our view of the universe is not a true representation of the stars but rather merely an interpretation of the image of the heavens. The series was produced at the European Southern Observatory in Chile, where astronomers work with what are currently the world's largest optical telescopes. Tillmans presents the technical system, the researchers' apparatus, and computer screens, together with raw data sets, which show the technological limits of photography. Here the logic of analogue recording is transferred to the new image technology: dead pixels take the place of the defective gelatin layer and add a new vocabulary to photography. Then, as now, the significance of the image only emerges after it has been recorded, when it is retrospectively subjected to various processes of manipulation and interpretation.

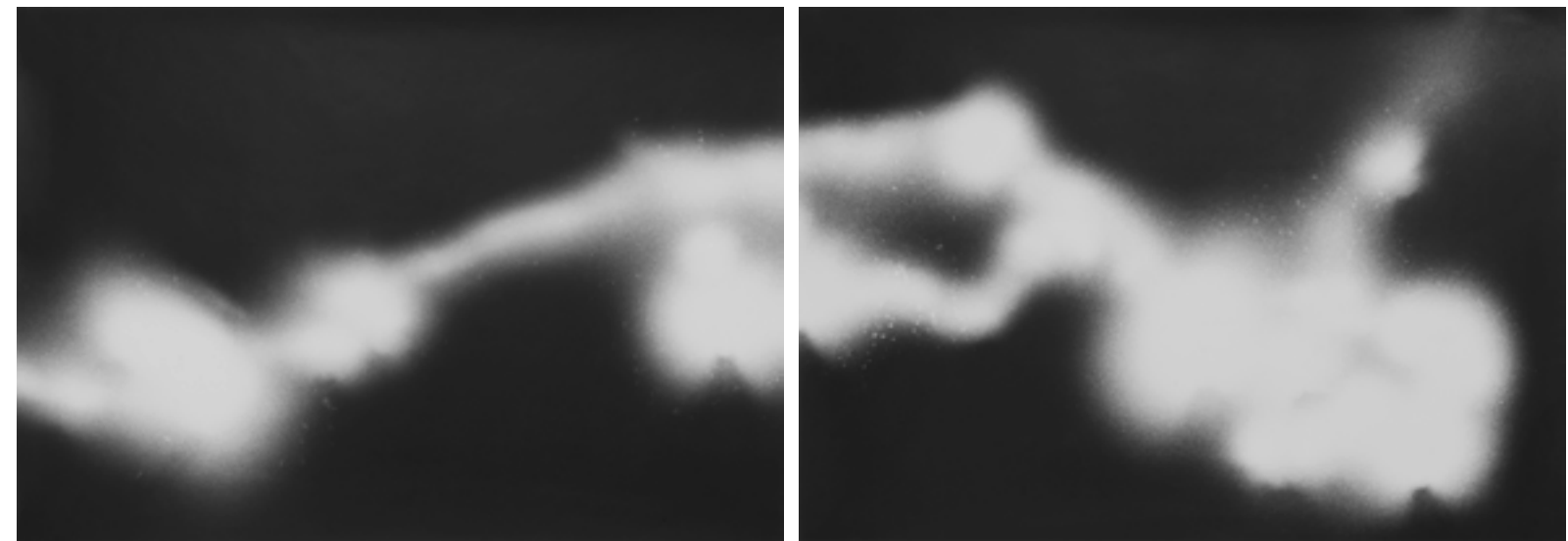
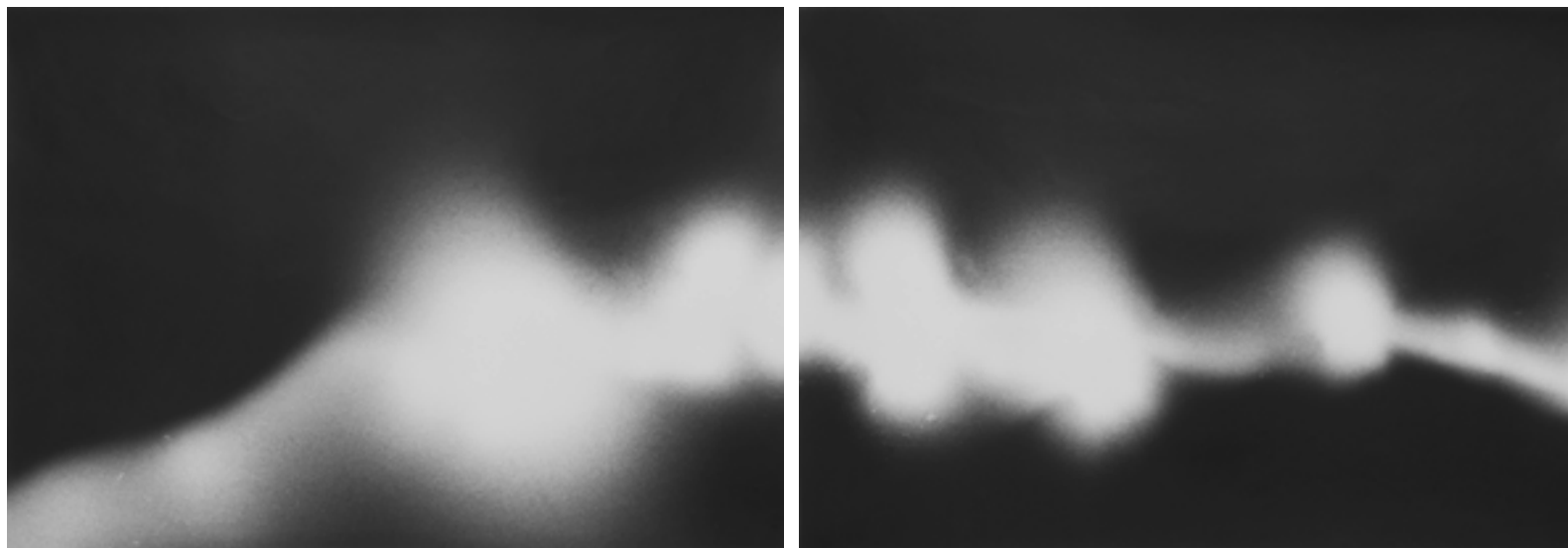
Development and output formats

While the defect may appear as a criticism of photography, it is nonetheless put to productive use. Media art, with which digital photography has now fused, gives visibility to the technical fault as a subversive potential that promises free spaces of artistic expression in an age of total media control. Unexpected interruptions in media transmission—so-called glitches and noise artefacts—are crucial³. As a pioneer of this young genre, which has, however, already been declared dead,⁴ **Rosa Menkman** focuses on phenomena that shed light on media transmission from its edges and disruptions. Her work *Dear Mr Compression* (2010) shows a plainly defective film self-portrait of the artist, whose likeness, together with the superimposed text of the poem, repeatedly eludes legibility. In this act of compression, Menkman addresses a central dimension in her working process that is not perceptible in glitch-free transmission. Here the focus of debate is on the working steps after the recording, and thus the fluctuating output formats of today's images, which can supposedly be transferred at random from RAW to PNG to JPEG to TIFF and back again. And even though the digital shift creates a fundamental break in a number of respects, similarly unalterable structures can be found in the analogue development process. Likewise, **Peter Miller** wrote an intimate letter to an authority that plays an indispensable role in analogue work. *The Letter* (2008) was composed on twenty-four DIN A4 pages, which Miller photographed in sequence before sending the negative film to be developed.⁵ His letter is addressed to the technical specialist at the industrial lab, whose influence he questions in the post-industrial age in which the chemist has long since been replaced by machines that will surely soon disappear themselves. Miller uses the development of the negative

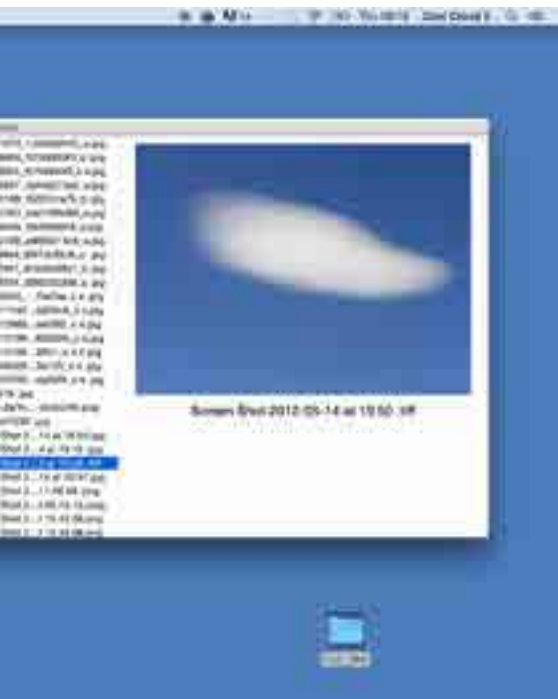
material as a means to examine the analogue equivalent of compression. And his work shows that photography's shift to become a black box is not a recent phenomenon. The material and technical factors that have an influence on the photographic outcome have always been obscure and multi-faceted.

Appended to the classical photo manuals we now find a flood of new instructions, whose form speaks of the opening of photography to other media. For these days books are hardly ever used in self-study; instead, people are increasingly turning to videos that are freely available on YouTube channels, which offer a platform to self-styled experts, who explain "How to Take a Perfect Selfie" or "How to Capture Better Photos with Your iPhone." Smartphone photography and selfie culture are only some examples of new image practices that are having a lasting influence on our everyday lives. The heralding of this new age of photography has only occurred through the changes that have taken place in the material.

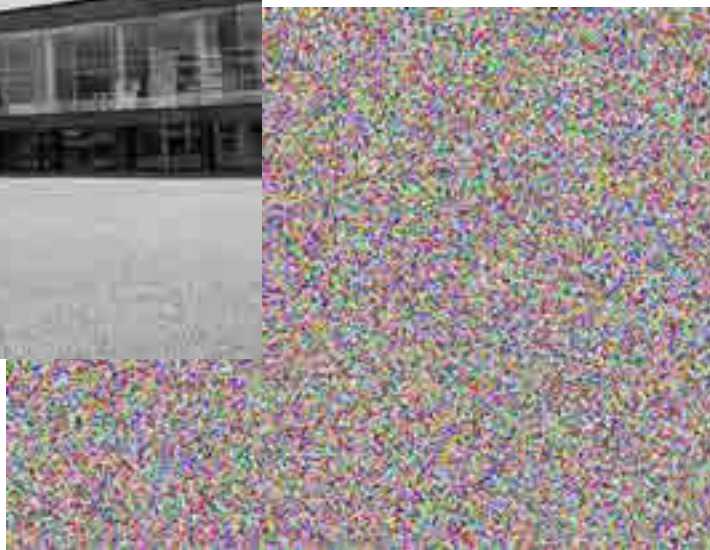
Kathrin Schöneegg (*1982 in Konstanz) is a photography historian and independent curator. She currently holds a Thomas Friedrich Grant for research in photography at the Berlinische Galerie.



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Ghost Stories



Newsroom-Editeure

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