



CALL FOR PAPERS

**THE MEDIA OF PHOTOGRAPHY**

Special Issue of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*

GUEST EDITORS

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Three overlapping events occasion this proposal for a special issue of *JAAC* on the philosophy of photography. First, photography has matured as a visual art medium. No longer confined to specialist galleries, distribution networks, discourses, or educational programs, it has won mainstream institutional recognition – fine art museums increasingly mount major retrospectives of contemporary photographers’ work, and many of those museums now appoint curators of photography. Second, the boundary between photographic and non-photographic visual art has blurred, as lens-based technologies have found a home in a wide range of art practices from painting and theater through sculptural installation to conceptual art. Photography has become one more means at artists’ disposal; it is no longer just for photographers. Third, the rapid, ongoing development of digital imaging technologies is profoundly reshaping how photographs are made and displayed, and hence appreciated, while at the same time creating new venues for displaying photographs outside traditional art institutions. Taken together this conjunction of events raises fundamental philosophical questions about photography as an art and an aesthetic phenomenon.

The proposed special issue is intended to address these questions by bringing them under a unifying theme, “the media of photography.” Photography now includes a great variety of physical manifestations. Recent art photography alone encompasses: book works (Ed Ruscha); works for magazines pages (Dan Graham, Robert Smithson); archival projects too extensive to ever exhibit in their entirety (Bernd and Hilla Becher, Gerhard Richter); documentation of non-photographic artworks (a variety of conceptual and post-conceptual artists); individual artworks consisting of large numbers of related photographs (Douglas Huebler, Roni Horn); slide shows that only exist physically while the apparatus is powered-up (James Coleman, Nan Goldin); traditional or antiquarian forms of analogue photography (Craigie Horsfield, Sally Mann); re-photographings or manipulations of existing photographs and photographic imagery (Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince); light box installations (Jeff Wall); digitally manipulated unique prints (Andreas Gursky, Gregory Crewdson); images that do not derive from an original light exposure but are coded up from scratch on computers (Keith Cottingham) or show the computer code generated by scanning other photographs (Andreas Müller-Polhe); pixelated screen-grabs (Thomas Ruff); and images of environments created to be photographed and only credible as

such in photographic form (Thomas Demand). Add to this various and increasingly widespread popular or vernacular uses of photography disseminated in electronic form (flickr, lomography), as well as some non-artistic yet aesthetically interesting uses of photography and photographically-based imaging technologies in science, industry, and government (MRI, time-lapse, aerial cartography, astronomy, surveillance and identification). One may ask, of course, whether a unified theory of photography can or should be crafted to embrace such a variety of physical instantiations and artistic and non-artistic uses, but providing such a theory is not the principal purpose of the proposed issue. That said, it is important not to lose sight of the range of photography's non-artistic uses, even if one primarily wants to grasp its nature as art, in so far as the former clearly impacts on the latter.

Most mainstream philosophical reflection on photography since Roger Scruton's and Kendall Walton's influential early papers, has been largely, if implicitly, premised on something like the snapshot (or some other relatively automatically recorded image). How this selection of paradigm cases and examples has shaped the philosophy of photography is itself something that merits philosophical scrutiny, especially when the selection is made to bear the weight of discussions of the definition of photography, its ontology, its aesthetics, its art status, its malleability to artistic intention, its relationship to drawing and painting, and its epistemic capabilities. What one might call snapshot-oriented or automatic conceptions of photography have succeeded in founding a new sub-discipline of aesthetics and reaching important insights, notably into the epistemic privilege of photography vis-à-vis other forms of depiction. But it is far from obvious that every photographic medium, or every use of a photographic medium, comfortably fits existing philosophical conceptions of photography. Given that philosophers typically consult informed critical practice to determine the extension of other aesthetic domains, the proposed special issue seeks to broaden and enrich the existing literature by taking seriously a variety of photographic media and their uses as first-order data for philosophizing about photography as an art and as an aesthetic phenomenon.

The philosophy of photography is not yet thirty years old, and the first collection of essays in English appeared only last year. If approved, this special issue promises to advance the literature in a structured way, introducing the topics that deserve most attention and targeting the authors best equipped to address them. Advances in these areas are likely to be useful to philosophers, historians, and theorists specializing in photography, but they should also interest philosophers of art more generally, for whom the proposed issue would offer a case study for accounts of media in general and for accounts of digital/computer technology in the different arts in particular.

### **Suggested Topics**

The following list of possible topics for the special issue illustrates the kind of philosophical work that might address recent changes in the status, use, and technology of photography's artistic and aesthetic media. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, and contributions that answer the broader brief of the special issue would be welcome. However, the topics listed here

naturally build upon the existing literature and exploit the special expertise of leaders in the field.

### *1. The implications of new photographic technologies*

What are the implications of new technologies, notably digital technologies, for central arguments in the philosophy of photography – such as photographic transparency, the objectivity and epistemic privilege of photographs, the aesthetics of photographs, and the status of photography as an art? Once the information channel between input (exposure) and output (print or screen display) is permeable to the mental states of photographers and artists working with photography, is there a principled basis for distinguishing photography from other “manographic” forms of depiction, notably painting?

### *2. The ontology of photographic works*

The existing literature on the ontology of photography is noticeably thin. Moreover, it assumes that photography is a print medium, that it is autographic, and that the relevant comparison cases are therefore other autographic arts, whether unique or multiply instantiated, such as painting and print-making. Digital photography overturns such assumptions and raises at least two questions. Are digital photographs notationally encoded and hence allographic? If so, can there be a unified ontology of photographic works that applies equally well to digital and film-based works?

### *3. Digitalisation and medium specificity*

On one hand, digital photography can be closely integrated with traditional processes of image capture and display (e.g. lenses and printing methods). On the other hand, digital and film-based photographs may differ epistemically, aesthetically, and ontologically. This tension raises questions about photography’s unity and specificity as a medium. Is digital technology one implementation, output process, or means of dissemination of a broader photographic medium, or does ‘photography’ comprise a number of distinct media? Is digital technology itself a single, broad medium that includes some (but not only) photographs, or does it divide into several distinct media, perhaps individuated by the algorithms that process digital data to output, for example, sound and image files? By raising such questions, digital photographs bring into sharp focus some of the issues that have only just been sketched in existing theories of art media. Indeed, this is one place where philosophers of art might profitably engage with theorists of the digital arts who have greater knowledge and hands-on experience of the processes involved.

### *4. Scale and time as photographic media*

Scale has been a decisive factor in photography’s elevation from the photographic album, print, or book to the museum wall; and photographic works increasingly aspire to the presence, mode

of address, and scale of painting – history painting in particular. This is apparent both in the Vancouver School and post-Bechers Düsseldorf photography. Through their routine (and often undetectable) integration of multiple exposures in their finished works, these photographers also subvert standard philosophical conceptions of photographs as naturally counterfactually dependent on how things stood in the world for a particular duration of time, which they index. This topic provides a further opportunity to bring philosophers into dialogue with theorists and practitioners closer to the first-order issues involved in photography’s canonization as a mainstream fine art medium since over the last quarter century.

##### *5. Photography as art medium versus photography as means*

Not all means – hence not all technologies – are art media. Sometimes photography functions as a medium for art, but it is sometimes merely a means for documenting non-photographic artworks or for producing images in diverse contexts that are not art. Early conceptual artists used photographs to document otherwise ephemeral or inaccessible works, but they also sought to systematically subvert this distinction between work and its documentation. Photographs are also routinely used to document or create video games, landscapes, buildings, and film shoots; and scientific and medical images are frequently objects of aesthetic attention for scientists and non-scientists alike. Indeed, scientists have written about aesthetic factors in choosing colors to represent gases in Hubble images and brain activity in fMRI. Ever since Scruton argued that photography is never a medium but only a means, philosophers have focused on showing that photography is a medium, though we might better ask *when* it is a medium and what we can learn about photography from its use as a means.

##### *6. Folk and vernacular photography.*

Although philosophers of art now take “low brow,” “popular,” or “folk” art seriously, most attention is still devoted to popular music and Hollywood movies. This is a missed opportunity: photographs are made and viewed daily by millions of people who value them highly. Moreover, digital technologies, which allow for the relatively easy sharing and publication of photographs, have spurred the creation of new online communities of folk photographers. A striking example is flickr, where a distinctive aesthetic has been normalized outside the control of the photography establishment, while often drawing on a sophisticated understanding of art photography, and occasionally even included in international art exhibitions. Another is “lomography,” operating entirely outside the artworld, which brings together an international community of aficionados of the Lomo Kompakt Automat (a basic but robust automatic film camera originally produced by the Russian military) with their own society, ten (anti-art) “golden rules” of production, and web-distribution system. These specific developments, and photography’s vernacular significance more generally, have received little serious philosophical attention to date, despite their social and cultural significance.

Submissions should not exceed 7,000 words and must comply with the general guidelines for submissions (see “Submissions” on the *JAAC* website: [www.temple.edu/jaac](http://www.temple.edu/jaac)). Send submissions as e-mail attachments to both guest editors, indicating clearly that your submission is for the special issue.

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