

History of Photography special issue: In the service of photography

Deadline: Sep 15, 2024

Nina Lager Vestberg

Abstracts are invited for an upcoming special issue of History of Photography journal:

"In the service of photography"

Since its invention in the 1830s, photography has been conceptualised as a service technology. Early writers on the medium, including Lady Elizabeth Eastlake (1857) and Charles Baudelaire (1859), considered photography's rightful function as that of a servant to art and science. Baudelaire famously identified photography's "true duty" as being "the handmaid of the arts and sciences", while Eastlake compared its position to "that of the bondwoman", whose mechanical performance of representational drudgery would liberate time for the "freewoman" of art to realise her creative potential. These gendered tropes, articulated when photography was still an emergent medium, formed part of early debates on whether or not photography should aspire to, or be accorded, the status of art.

Both Eastlake and Baudelaire were soon proven wrong, in the sense that photography did achieve acceptance as an artistic medium by the late nineteenth century. At the same time, it also became the indispensable servant to any number of fields, from medical research via policing to geographic surveying, which found the mechanical production of fast, accurate visual records immediately useful. Furthermore, the production and circulation of photography, whether by fine artists or documentalists across various fields of practice, required the support work of a broad array of services, both before and after the camera shutter was released.

This special issue will take the category of the "service" work of photography seriously, by inviting contributions that privilege either the work photography does to service other fields, or the work done by various professionals to service photography. It will demonstrate that the forms of service performed by or to photography are as theoretical and consequential to the history of photography as the creative visions or political preoccupations of the photographers and critics that have so far shaped the contours of the field.

"In the service of photography" extends a field of research that has opened up in recent years, and which foregrounds what might be called the auxiliary trades of photography. Workers in these trades include photographic assistants, darkroom technicians, agents, archivists, librarians, editors, researchers, graphic designers, repro photographers, retouchers, photoengravers, printers, and probably many more. In other words, those workers tasked with the practical labour that enables the flow of pictures, from printing and manufacture to cataloguing and distribution. Adja-

cent to or in support of the photographers, curators, and critics who have historically narrated the theories, aesthetics, and values of photography, these workers create conditions of possibility for what photographs can do.

The various roles played by librarians, researchers, editors, and agents in the photography business have recently been explored in monographs by Diana Kamin (2023), Nina Lager Vestberg (2023) and Nadya Bair (2020), among others, while edited volumes such as *What Photographs Do* (2023), *Capitalism and the Camera* (2021), and *Picture Industry: A Provisional History of the Technical Image, 1844–2018* (2018) have further expanded conceptions of what kinds of work might count as serving the purposes of photography, or vice versa. These studies start from the insight that there is no neutral labour with regards to photography, that industrial conditions and information infrastructure shape meaning-making, and that workers in auxiliary trades enact a philosophy of the image that merits study.

Not least, this proposed issue is a logical extension of previous special issues of *History of Photography* on topics such as “The Slide Lecture” (vol. 47 no. 1, 2024), “Reproductions” (vol. 46 no. 1, 2022), “Circulating photographs” (vol. 45 no.1, 2021). It follows the calls in the pages of *History of Photography* by historians of photography such as Steve Edwards (2020) to incorporate approaches from business history into the history of photography. Broadly, this issue focuses on sites, practices, materiality, and labour as fertile ground for theorisations of photography.

We invite short abstracts of 200-250 words on topics that could include, but are not limited to:

- Intersections between class, gender, race, and labour in photography.
- History of photographic industries, including manufacture of photographic material and camera technologies.
- Technologies of automation in photographic labour.
- Cataloguing and classification of photography.
- Image markets, news agencies, and stock photography.
- Library collections.
- Paperwork and bureaucracy.
- Distribution networks and supply chains of photography.
- Ethnographic or historical studies of photographic labour including assistants, darkroom technicians, retouchers, and others.
- Interviews or translations of primary source material relevant to the topic.

Publication Timeline

15 September 2024, abstract due

30 September 2024, notification of editors' decision

1 June 2025, full manuscript due

If you are interested in contributing to this issue, please send an abstract along with a brief biography, in the same file, to both Dr. Nina Lager Vestberg (nina.vestberg@ntnu.no) and Dr. Diana Kamin (dkamin@fordham.edu)

Feel free to contact us with any questions.

Works Cited

Bair, Nadya. *The Decisive Network: Magnum Photos and the Postwar Image Market*. Berkeley, CA: UC Press, 2020.

Beshty, Walead. Ed. *The Picture Industry: A Provisional History of the Technical Image*. Geneva, Switzerland: JRP|editions, 2018

Colman, Kevin and Devin James. Eds. *Capitalism and the Camera: Essays on Photography and Extraction*. New York: Verso, 2021.

Edwards, Elizabeth and Ella Ravilious. Eds. *What Photographs Do*. London: Victoria and Albert, 2023.

Edwards, Steve. "Why Pictures? From Art History to Business History and Back Again", *History of Photography* 44, no. 1. (November 2020): 3-15.

Kamin, Diana. *Picture Work: How Libraries, Museums, and Stock Agencies Launched a New Image Economy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023.

Vestberg, Nina Lager. *The Work of Intermediation from Pre-Photography to Post-Digitization*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023.

Reference:

CFP: History of Photography special issue: In the service of photography. In: ArtHist.net, Jun 27, 2024 (accessed May 29, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/42228>>.