

The Futures of Photography (New Brunswick, 8 Nov 24)

The Developing Room at the Center for Cultural Analysis, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, Nov 08, 2024

Deadline: Sep 20, 2024

Andres Mario Zervigon

The Futures of Photography. Ninth Graduate Student Colloquium.

"The idea of the future, pregnant with an infinity of possibilities, is thus more fruitful than the future itself, and this is why we find more charm in hope than in possession, in dreams than in reality." Henri Bergson

The future once buzzed with the excitement of potential, or at least the idea of destiny once did. Today, however, the prospects of what is to come rattle with doom in a way that modernist Henri Bergson may not have anticipated given his words of charm and hope. Climate change, brutal wars and reactionary politics gather pace in what strikes many to-day as a doom spiral into the future. Photography has not been spared these imaginings as digital imaging technologies from thirty-five years ago and now artificial intelligence seemingly foretell the medium's death. Or is this too pessimistic a forecast?

In the past two centuries, photography was characterized by an endless series of radiant futures that the technology afforded over its lesser imaging procedures. Daguerre and Talbot gushed that chateaus and manor homes could now depict themselves, while François Arago imagined the mass recording of Egyptian hieroglyphs with this new, far more accurate artificial eye. The charm of the future ultimately served as photography's historical locomotive, even when many visions for the technology (imaging spirits) never came to pass, or only did so many decades after being dreamed (color photography).

In turn, photography became not only part of cultural modernity, but also one of its driving forces forward. Thinking and writing about the medium has therefore always meant looking at what it will bring, as well as the historical significance of such innovations, making for a simultaneous futurity and historiography. Almost exactly a century ago, for example, László Moholy-Nagy asked a question that has not lost any of its relevance since: Where is photography developing?

With his query, the famous Bauhaus master addressed not only novel technological developments, but a whole spectrum of possible futures dealing with aesthetics, displays, usages, and social functions, each of which unfolded in direct relation to photography's past. Do today's innovations in photography offer the same charmed future, and can historical precedents help foretell their destiny?

With photography's closely linked futures and pasts as a frame, the De-veloping Room and the Essen Center for Photography invite presenters to reflect on the complex temporal positions of photography. We wish to discuss the medium's past and present in order to establish a more re-a-soned basis for thinking about possible futures.

The graduate student colloquium therefore welcomes papers that investi-gate the history of pho-tography's futures, both of the welcome and the menacing sort. It also invites students to inquire into our current dreams and nightmares of our photographic futures to come, particularly within a broader and global historical frame.

Examples of paper topics could include:

- utopian and dystopian projects, prospects, and outlines on photog-raphy's future, both fruitful and failed, from the medium's past two cen-turies,
- the unfolding of such dreams and menace in colonial contexts, or as instituted by indigenous and migrant communities,
- theoretical frameworks dealing with photography's implicit tendencies towards progress and pro-gressions, be they in the West or in struggles and cultural tendencies in the global South and East,
- photography's past and current futures within the broader realm of modern media technologies
- photography's relation to image production by means of artificial intel-ligence in diverse con-texts,
- critical considerations on how to employ new thinking around the temporal to reconsider and reshape the field of photography studies in academia, curatorship and beyond.

The Developing Room, a working group at the Center for Cultural Anal-ysis (Rutgers University) will run "The Futures of Photography" as its ninth graduate student colloquium, this time in collab-oration with the Essen Center for Photography, Essen, Germany.

The event is for Ph.D. students from any field of study who are working on dissertation topics in which photography—its histories and theories—plays a central role. Students selected to present will have the opportuni-ty to share their work with their peers and an official respondent who is a leader in the field. Students may be at any stage of dissertation research, but ideally presentations will consist of a dissertation chapter or a sec-tion, along with an account of how that chapter/sec-tion fits within the larger project.

The format involves a formal 25-minute presentation followed by 30 minutes of discussion. Beyond those five presentations, given at each colloquium meeting, the Developing Room always invites a large audi-ence of students to ensure a rich conversation and to build a constituency from which papers can be drawn in subsequent colloquia. Our preference will be for students who can present in person at Rutgers. In previous years, the event brought together an international group of researchers working across a wide range of topics related to photography.

This year's respondent will be Professor Steffen Siegel. He is a professor for the theory and histo-ry of photography at Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen, Germany, and the chairman of the Essen Center for Photog-raphy. This fall, he is a Max Kade Visiting Professor at Georgetown Uni-versity in Washington, D.C. Since 2019, he has been the host of a bi-annual international doctoral student's conference in Essen and at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, the Max Planck institute for art his-tory in Rome.

To apply, please email the following materials as one document (PDF) to developingroom@gmail.com by September 20, 2024, with the subject line "Ninth Annual Graduate Student Colloquium Application":

- An abstract of 250 words or less
- A summary of your dissertation progress, 250 words or less
- CV
- A short bio of 150 words or less

In collaboration with the Essen Center for Photography, Essen, Germany.

Reference:

CFP: The Futures of Photography (New Brunswick, 8 Nov 24). In: Arthist.net, Sep 7, 2024 (accessed Jul 1, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/42511>>.