

3rd Essen Symposium for Photography (Essen, 4–6 Feb 26)

Essen Center for Photography, Feb 4–06, 2026

Deadline: Jul 31, 2025

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What Will Photography Be? An Invitation to Speculate (3rd Essen Symposium for Photography).

In 1826, Nicéphore Niépce successfully captured a view from his window in the French hamlet Le Gras, using physical and chemical means to produce a permanent image. Even though Niépce's earliest results predate this "Vue de la fenêtre" by several years, and despite the well-known fact that the Frenchman was not the only one who felt a "desire" at that time to embark on such novel forms of image making, the forthcoming year will initiate an extended period of commemorations. Beginning in 2026 and proceeding for almost a decade and a half, we will meet manifold occasions to celebrate the bicentenary of the "invention of photography."

Such dates, dictated by a somewhat questionable calendar of media history, can easily obscure the true complexity of photography. A remarkably broad spectrum of technologies, materialities, applications, and practices has emerged. The anniversary invites us to consider photography as an ever-evolving concept. Since the beginning of public interest in the medium, there have been widespread discussions on how to "develop" and "improve" such technologies. Thus, the idea of photography has been wedded to discourses that establish and guide our thinking about the future.

Raising the question "What Will Photography Be?", the third Essen Symposium for Photography in February 2026 aims at newly addressing interest in the medium's prospective forms and uses. We invite speculations that critically engage with recent developments in the open and much-diversified field of visual media and try to position photography's future role within such a realm. How will photographic media participate in the dynamics of current technological advancements? Furthermore, how can photography impact and promote such developments with respect to social, artistic, scientific, and everyday practices?

Some decades ago, the advent of digitally processed media stimulated widespread predictions of an "end" or even "death" of photography. In the meantime, such eschatology has proven to be misleading in understanding what photography is and will be. However, current debates on the impact of artificial intelligence, machine vision, and generative technologies revitalize such dire phantasies. In today's context of ubiquitous imaging technologies—from smartphone cameras to radiology, micro- and telescopes, via satellites, drones, CCTV, and missiles to the perceptual infrastructures of autonomous systems—photography continuously emerges as an operative function of planetary media ecologies. It spans techno-political systems and participates in the recon-

figuration of perceptual and epistemic conditions.

Competing perspectives on the future are inevitable, but every prediction ultimately implies a statement about the present. From where we stand now, we can only look ahead—or “speculate” in the word’s literal sense. We invite speculations that overcome ideas of an ending. Instead, we privilege dynamic models for reckoning with visual media’s evolution as complex remediation processes. They can help emphasize how the ecosystem of media has evolved as an ongoing process of recombining, merging, and integrating technologies and practices. How can we apply such an understanding to future forms of photographic media?

We are interested in ideas about photography’s future roles in social, artistic, scientific, and everyday realms. At the same time, we must return to the basic assumption driving such interests: What will we mean when we say “photography”? Will we discuss specific techniques, aesthetics, or practices bound to visual images? Keeping the lessons taught by “operational images” in mind, will we leave the idea of the visual behind us? In short, what will be our point of reference when we address something as “photography”?

We invite critical speculations that refer to three strands of interests:

1. Technologies and Aesthetics

- How will quantum computers change the status of the photographic through new (visually representable) causality?
- How will further nanofication of optical and computational technology extend, undermine, or change modes of perception?
- Nostalgia resurfaces in AI images that revive past aesthetics to legitimize their extractive modes of production. What role will photographic aesthetics play in relation to future image spheres?
- What metaphors do we use to describe current technological transformations, and what functions do they serve aesthetically, conceptually, and economically?

2. Theories and Methods

- What theoretical tools will we need to approach the expanding cosmos of visual media? How can established theories of photography make a meaningful contribution to discussions of novel forms of image-making?
- How will we learn from the ongoing migration of concepts from lens-based to virtual media?
- What will addressing an image as “photographic” mean and imply?
- How will we incorporate the lessons that “operational images” have taught us? Will concepts of the visual still be central to our understanding of photography?
- How will new forms of image production reshape how we conceive, address, and interpret the manifold histories of photography?

3. Politics and Agencies

- What will the impact of future forms of photography be on tomorrow’s societies and politics? When addressing this question, can we escape an exclusively dystopian frame?
- What forms of labor will future forms of photography enable?
- Will photography contribute to creating a public sphere where critical discourse is increasingly shaped and controlled by algorithms and corporate interests?

- Will photography serve as a critical tool of political resistance—and how?
- How do we tackle the ambivalent potential between enhanced surveillance and democratic participation?

We welcome proposals from an interdisciplinary field of research. Presentations should not exceed 20 minutes. Please send a title, 500-word abstract of the proposed presentation, and a brief CV.

Please email your proposal in one PDF by July 31, 2025, at the latest, to:

zentrumfuerfotografie@folkwang-uni.de

The Essen Center for Photography will provide lodging and reimburse the incurred expenses for economy-class travel.

For possible inquiries, please also contact the email address mentioned above!

On behalf of the Essen Center for Photography, the 3rd Essen Symposium for Photography organizers are Franziska Barth (Ruhr University Bochum), Vera Knippschild (Folkwang University of the Arts), Mona Leinung (Folkwang University of the Arts), Markus Rautzenberg (Folkwang University of the Arts), Anja Schürmann (KWI – Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities), Stefan Siegel (Folkwang University of the Arts), Jakob Schnetz (Folkwang University of the Arts, KWI – Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities), and Francisco Vogel (Folkwang University of the Arts).

Reference:

CFP: 3rd Essen Symposium for Photography (Essen, 4-6 Feb 26). In: Arthist.net, Jun 2, 2025 (accessed Jul 5, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/49407>>.