

The Invisible Image: Photography and the Unseen (Liverpool, 18–19 Jun 26)

Liverpool, UK, Jun 18–19, 2026

Deadline: Jan 30, 2026

Michelle Henning

A single-stream 2 day International Conference hosted by the Centre for Culture and Everyday Life, School of the Arts, University of Liverpool.

Instagram: @ccel_uliverpool

Bsky: cceluliverpool.bsky.social

Hashtag: #invisibleimageLiv

Website: www.ccel.uk

Keynote speakers:

Prof. Jordan Bear (University of Toronto)

Prof. Estelle Blaschke (University of Basel)

This conference investigates theories, histories and methodologies relating to photographic images that are, for different reasons, unseen or unseeable. In the past twenty years, theorists and scholars across disciplines have raised the idea of the invisible image in various ways: discussing “operational” images intended for machine-reading rather than human viewing, and “invisible” images that appear in aggregation and in which the visual qualities of the image are less significant than the metadata they carry; the legal and political processes that have restricted the viewing and distribution of certain types of images; the images that provide the ‘training’ for AI image production; latent photographic images that have been exposed and may never be developed, and the traces of erased, damaged and faded images. Writers concerned with archival photographs of racialized subjects appeal to senses other than the visual: to the rhythms and tactility of pictures. And for a long time now, photographers and artists have found creative ways to visualise absence, and especially, to make present subjects “disappeared” by dictatorships and through war.

The conference will address, both theoretically and methodologically, how we might study and account for images that are inaccessible, whether through censorship, destruction or other interventions. What methods can be used to account for images in their absence? Historically, lecturers used ekphrasis to discuss images that they could not show. What techniques and approaches now might help us to analyse invisible, inaccessible or undiscovered images? Conversely, how might photographic techniques be used to represent or express the invisible? How have photographers attempted to use the medium to visualise the unseen? What can this teach us about the nature of the photographic media or about ocularcentric cultures? What are the institutions and

their internal processes that restrict certain types of images? How might we respond when archival research yields nothing but absence? When should researchers refuse to show images and why? How and why might we bring unseen images to light and what are the ethical and theoretical dilemmas surrounding this? How are unseen images produced and stored, for what purposes and by whom?

Other possible topics include:

Photographic latency

What photography can 'sense' which is invisible to human eyes

Operational and "invisual" images

The "invisible" labour behind digital images

The judicial status of images

The ethics and aesthetics of unseen images

Censorship and political interference in image production, consumption, and circulation

The use of visual technologies by law enforcement, military, and the surveillance industrial complex

Photographs of absence/invisibility/missing referents/spectres

Institutions and image oversight

Accessing and assessing absent images

The affective power of inaccessible images

Methodological inventions into unseen images

The manipulation, redaction and destruction of images

We welcome abstracts for 20 minute presentations that address any of the issues above, or that relate to questions of invisibility and photography in ways we have not anticipated. Please send abstracts of 250 words (maximum) with an indicative bibliography of up to 5 texts and a short bio of up to 100 words, to:

CCEL@liverpool.ac.uk by 30 January 2026.

Additional Information:

Conference fee: £90

Unwaged/ PhD students: £45

(fee includes lunches and refreshments across both days and a drinks reception, a conference dinner will also be organised which will be charged separately for those who wish to participate)

We are unable to offer fee waivers.

Reference:

CFP: The Invisible Image: Photography and the Unseen (Liverpool, 18-19 Jun 26). In: ArtHist.net, Jan 24, 2026 (accessed Feb 20, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/51566>>.