

Elephant & Castle, No. 38: Photography and/as Network

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Camilla Balbi (Institute of Art History - Czech Academy of Sciences), Giorgia Ravaioli (Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna)

Photography and/as Network: Circulation, Latency, Convergence.

Edited by Camilla Balbi and Giorgia Ravaioli.

The theory and history of photography have long been shaped by the succession—and frequent intersection—of shifting interpretative paradigms, marked by selective trajectories and strategic erasures, and developed in response to the intellectual and cultural demands of specific historical moments.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, art-historical approaches foregrounded photography's aesthetic qualities and technical evolution, often through formalist and iconological approaches. From the 1980s onward, methodological revisionism broadened the field's horizons, moving beyond the reduction of photography to a static, two-dimensional representational surface, and situating it within a broader matrix of visual and material culture. The medium thus came to be understood as a discursive and ideological construct embedded in political, theoretical, and social relations. Over the past two decades, this scholarly trajectory has gained new urgency, as the rise of digital media, platform economies, and connective cultures has necessitated closer attention to the mobility and circulation of photographs, as well as to the transhistorical configurations of photographic networks. Recent scholarship has increasingly moved beyond established paradigms—such as authorship, photographic indexicality, or linguistic models of interpretation—to focus instead on circulation, latency, convergence, and the logistical movement of images, as well as on the infrastructural, technical, political, and economic conditions that enable, shape, or constrain these flows.

This shift reconceptualises photographs as concrete, plural entities that exist within specific spaces and times (Edwards, 2004; Batchen, 1997). They are objects that are used, preserved, transported, and dispersed—dynamic participants in continuous streams of data, attention, and meaning, often moving more rapidly than their authors' intentions or viewers' interpretative frameworks.

In doing so, it not only highlights the work of intermediation between producers and consumers of images (Lager Vestberg, 2023), but also prompts a reconsideration of agency itself. Feminist theory has long challenged models of authorship grounded in autonomy, mastery, and individual intentionality, proposing instead relational and distributed forms of action emerging through networks of dependence, care, and mediation. From this perspective, distributed agency functions not merely as a description of the technological condition of contemporary images but as a critical tactic:

a way of rethinking photographic production and circulation beyond hierarchical models of control, and of foregrounding the collaborative, contingent, and often invisible processes through which images acquire meaning and efficacy. Such perspectives have been widely taken up within art-historical discourse, contributing to critiques of singularising narratives centred on genius and individual creativity.

This issue aims to offer the Italian scholarly public an overview of the perspectives opened by infrastructural and relational approaches to photography. We invite contributions that examine photography as an active agent within distributed networks (Latour 2005), comprising both human and non-human actors (Bärnighausen et al., 2019), and interrogate their agency within past and contemporary artistic and visual cultures. In this regard, we encourage the analysis of case studies that offer 'networked' interpretations of photography, bringing historical-critical analysis into productive dialogue with network theories.

Taking the network itself as a methodological point of departure, we argue, can radically reconfigure the significance of images by shifting attention from their content or objecthood to the visible and invisible forces governing their circulation—forces through which the “stubbornly local” (Schwarz 2017) may become globalised, the concept of “influence” mediated, and technologies, infrastructures, and “mediators” reframed as decisive meaning-makers.

This perspective opens up a range of questions that remain largely underexplored. The present call encourages contributions that engage with, among others, the following areas of inquiry:

- Forms of social, political, and geographical relations enacted by images as they circulate through infrastructures such as postal systems, institutions, and digital or algorithmic networks.

- The often-overlooked actors involved in photographic circulation, including couriers, servers, software, cables, ink, printing clichés, paper industries, and other material and logistical agents sustaining image mobility.

Historical practices of image transmission and their dialectical relationship with the logics of contemporary networked mobility.

- Distributed agency as a feminist strategy for rethinking authorship, responsibility, and visibility in photography.

- Historical or contemporary case studies that bring photographic theory into dialogue with network theories and media relationality (actor-network theory, social network analysis, media archaeology, platform and infrastructure studies, circulation studies, and STS perspectives), as well as with ecological, systemic, or computational models applied to visual culture.

- Art-historical perspectives that approach photography as a relational and infrastructural node—one that activates connections among artistic practices, exhibition contexts, economies of circulation, and regimes of visibility.

- Theoretical approaches that foster a networked conception of photography, foregrounding its implications for understanding practices of digital and non-digital resignification within contemporary regimes of post-truth and misinformation.

Submission Guidelines

Proposals must include a short abstract (max. 800 characters, written both in the language of the article and in English), a brief biographical note, and five keywords. The required materials must be sent no later than May 15th to both of the following email addresses: giorgia.ravaioli@unito.it;

elephantandcastle@unibg.it

Notification of acceptance will be communicated by the editors by May 30th. Selected articles, which must strictly adhere to the editorial guidelines of Elephant & Castle, will undergo a double-blind peer review process in accordance with the journal's policies. To encourage greater internationalization, submissions will be accepted in English, French, and Italian. The length of contributions must not exceed 35,000 characters (including spaces and bibliography). Articles must be uploaded to the journal's website by September the 1st. Publication is scheduled for December 2026.

Reference:

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