

Call for papers for

Transbordeur *photographie histoire société*

Issue 7, “Composite Images”

What if the history of photography was ultimately less a history of recorded images than a history of images *composed* from recorded elements? The rise of assemblages and hybridisation practices in digital cultures prompts us to ask this question. Indeed, within digital photography, a whole spectrum of techniques of re/composition is deployed. What we today call memes juxtaposes elements that are willingly heterogeneous and whose contrast typically produces satirical effects. In another realm, we notice the proliferation of automatic image generation software that synthesises and combines real or fictional elements with a strong photorealistic charge, sometimes using deep learning technologies. Between these two poles, there’s a need to examine the wide range of practices which overturn the idea of photography as a capture of the real.

These practices are not, however, solely due to digital technology. They draw upon a long history of the composite image that issue 7 of the journal *Transbordeur* intends to explore. As a recent book by Bernd Stiegler and Felix Thürlemann has shown, composite photography is almost as old as photography itself, and its uses in the nineteenth century cover a vast field of application (science, portraits, architectural views, artistic compositions, humorous tricks and even spirit photography).¹ If we turn to today’s digital culture, we again notice the pervasiveness of images in which photographic elements are readily recombined and rearranged, or even combined with other imaging techniques made available by image processing software and smartphone applications.

Talking about composite images rather than photomontages allows us to turn away from a narrative influenced mainly by the twentieth-century avant-gardes (Dadaism, Constructivism, Surrealism) and to broaden our point of view beyond the Arts. The modern Western discourse employing the industrial metaphor of the mechanical assembly of pre-existing elements does not cover all the ranges of photographic manipulation. Faced with the rise of new, more fluid practices of composition and hybridisation, Sabine Kriebel and Andrés Mario Zervigón, editors of a special issue of the

¹ Bernd Stiegler and Felix Thürlemann, *Konstruierte Wirklichkeiten. Die fotografische Montage 1839-1899*, (Berlin: Schwabe Verlag, 2019). See the book review by Catriona MacLeod published in *Transbordeur*, 5 (2021): <https://transbordeur.ch/fr/2021/bernd-stiegler-felix-thurlemann-konstruierte-wirklichkeiten/>

journal *History of Photography*, have indeed questioned the very notion of photomontage.²

What would be the benefits of giving up the notion of photomontage, which was informed by the ideological context in which it appeared, in favour of that of composite image? Firstly, the notion of the composite image makes it possible to think together different techniques of photographic manipulation (photocollage, overprinting, double-exposure, retouching) which are sometimes impertinently separated for the purposes of an avant-garde genealogy of processes, allowing certain artists to claim authorship of some of them.³ Through the category of the composite image, we aim to question the borders between the mechanical juxtapositions of confrontational montage and the harmonious and fluid synthesis of integrative montage. Secondly, to speak of composite images rather than photomontages is to put the reference to (successive) cinematographic editing in the background in favour of a reflection on the (simultaneous) composition of elements. To compose is to put together (from the Latin *componere*), on the same plane. Rather than the narrative logic of cinema, the composite image would then more readily refer to the visual rhetoric of allegory, in which visual elements form the equivalent of linguistic signs or abstract concepts. Finally, the notion of composite image allows us to consider not only the techniques of image production, but also the composition on the figurative level itself, i.e. the figuration of composite, hybrid or even chimerical beings (human-animal, human-object, animal-object).

We encourage authors to articulate theoretical questions and empirical research. Indeed, even though the theory of photography has, in the past years, largely challenged the so-called “indexical” approach, which made photography a sign produced by direct imprinting of its referent⁴, it has ultimately taken little account of the overwhelming mass of manipulated, edited and retouched images. Public debate has generally focused on the ethical problems posed by retouching, particularly in the fields of photojournalism or fashion photography, or within the legal framework of advertising.⁵ In our common understanding, photography remains synonymous with the raw recording of a visual field captured at a given moment. However, the history of composite images shows that photography has always been manipulated in such a way as to construct meaning from supposedly neutral or apparently documentary images.

For the 7th issue of *Transbordeur*, edited by Laura Truxa, Max Bonhomme and Christian Joschke, we are therefore looking for contributions that examine the relevance of the notion of composite image for the history and theory of photography, as well as in the wider field of visual and media studies. Particular emphasis will be placed on the tools and practices of the image, so as to question the limits between retouching and editing,

² *History of Photography*, 43:2 (2019): special issue ‘Is Photomontage Over?’ edited by Sabine Kriebel and Andrés Mario Zervigón.

³ Clément Chéroux, ‘Les discours de l’origine. À propos du photogramme et du photomontage’, *Études photographiques*, 14 (2004): 34-61.

⁴ André Gunthert, ‘Une illusion essentielle. La photographie saisie par la théorie’, *Études photographiques*, 34 (2016), <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3592>.

⁵ Since 2017, French law requires the mention of ‘retouched photography’ on photographs for commercial use showing ‘models whose body appearance has been modified’ (Decree No. 2017-738 of 4 May 2017).

including software such as Photoshop, which plays a central role in our contemporary visual culture. We may distinguish three main themes, which do not however cover the whole issue. A proposal that does not fit directly into one or other of these themes may therefore also be considered.

- *Gestures, professions and techniques of composite images*

This theme focuses on gestures, crafts and techniques, particularly in relation to the editing practices specific to professions of print and visual communication: press, publishing, advertising, and graphic design. Already in the 1920s, avant-garde practitioners of photomontage regularly emphasised its importance for advertising imagery. In a seminal article, Sally Stein further highlighted the role of advertisers in the development of modern photomontage, alongside its artistic uses.⁶ Recent scholarship on the history of photography has focused more on the press and publishing professions, revealing the role of intermediaries (layout artists, editors, graphic designers) in the development of photographic compositions, with no apparent link to the avant-garde. The aim is to question the gestures, trades and techniques of the reproducible image, in order to reframe the role of print culture in the development of new photographic forms.

The digital tools of Desktop Publishing (DTP) have opened up new possibilities for publishing practices and deserve our attention as well. Photoshop, for example, was analysed by Lev Manovich in his book *Software Takes Command* (2013), as part of a questioning of the continuity between analogue image processing tools and new digital practices. Proposals in line with this reflection would make it possible to build a bridge between the history of photography and software studies.

- *Uses of composite images: production of knowledge and prospective representations*

The use of composite images often aims to compensate for a lack of visibility. The use of editing and manipulation could be explained either by a desire to make visible phenomena that escape direct recording, or to preview something that does not yet exist or exists only virtually. The first case describes many of the scientific or parascientific uses of composite imagery. A famous example is provided by Francis Galton's composite portraits, developed in the 1880s. Designed to display the physical features of the "typical criminal" by merging a multitude of individual portraits, these composite portraits go beyond the logic of objectivity associated with photography to achieve, through composition, the representation of a supposedly universal "type". How have these uses of photography evolved with time and the invention of new technical means? What

⁶ Sally Stein, 'The Composite Photographic Image and the Composition of Consumer Ideology', *Art Journal*, 41 (1981): 39-45.

transformations has the digital management of masses of scientific images brought about in the “composition” of scientific imagery?

We propose to call “prospective” those practices that seek to pre-visualise something which is not visible yet. In this sense, the use of composite photography would make it possible to give added realism to something that still exists only in a virtual state. These prospective uses of the composite image could be apprehended through the techniques of architectural visualisation, as already illustrated in the photographic collages of the Bauhaus school in the 1920s, particularly by Mies van der Rohe.⁷ These practices have been revived in the digital age, thanks to “rendering” software that aims to give a photorealistic treatment to synthetic imagery. In addition to the field of architectural rendering, one may also think of scientific projections of climate change, in which case images generated by algorithms serve as an anticipation of reality.

- *Play and satire at the origin of photographic compositions*

A third theme of reflection concerns play, humour, satire and irony in the work of photographic composition. Historiography has pointed to the relevance of the satirical tradition of caricature to understand political photomontage. John Heartfield's work is exemplary from this point of view, with its way of transforming photographs through effects of caricatural exaggeration, of visually transposing puns, or of summoning a whole teratological imaginary in the service of political satire.

This taste for play and satire can be found today in the culture of Internet memes. Cultivating a biting irony, a viral mode of dissemination and a subversive practice of appropriation, memes can be considered as worthy descendants of the political photomontage that developed between the two world wars.⁸ However, although photography is very present in memes, it is not a necessary condition for their existence. We must therefore question the fluidity of the boundaries between the graphic image and the photographic image within this mode of visual communication. As Limor Shifman has shown, the satire and irony of memes with a photographic component targets the theatricality of press photography – whose tricks are thus revealed – as well as that of stock photography.⁹ The culture of memes thus testifies to an acute awareness of the image as construction, undermining photography's claims to objectivity. At the

⁷ Andreas Beutin, Wolf Eiermann, and Brigitte Franzen (ed)., *Mies van der Rohe: Montage, collage* (Londres: Koenig Books, 2017).

⁸ Sabine T. Kriebel, ‘Sparks of Discomfiture: On the Promise of Photomontage (or Back to Suture)’, *History of Photography*, 43:2 (2019): 221-226.

⁹ Limor Shifman, ‘The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13:3 (2014): 340-358.

same time, many of these composite images take advantage of photographic “accidents”, or at least the unintentional recording of certain expressive forms (facial expressions, gestures) which become the template for future reiterations of the meme.

The publication of issue 7 of the journal *Transbordeur* is preceded by a one-day conference in February 2022, which will bring together the future authors and will allow for an exchange between the participants and the editors.

Direction

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Calendar

September 15, 2021	Abstracts
End of September, 2021	Response to authors
January 30, 2022	First version of the articles
End of February, 2022	One-day conference
April 30, 2022	Second version of the articles
February 2023	Publication

Information

Texts can be submitted in French, English, German or Italian. Abstract should not exceed 600 words. It is accompanied by 6-10 images, a brief bibliography and biographical information.

In submitting a manuscript for review, authors agree to the journal's [Publishing Terms and Conditions](#).

Please send abstracts to Laura Truxa (truxa.laura@gmail.com), Max Bonhomme (maxbonhomme8@gmail.com) and Christian Joschke (christian.joschke@gmail.com) before September 15th 2021.