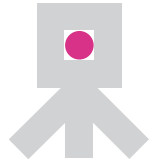


PhotoResearcher



ESHPH European Society for the History of Photography

Playing the Photograph

Guest Editors: Matthias Gründig, Steffen Siegel

- 4 Matthias Gründig
**If This is the World at all
Approaches to the Relationship
between Photography and Play**
- 18 Steffen Siegel
**Inheriting Bayard, or: How to Play
Serious in Front of a Camera**
- 30 Sabine T. Kriebel
Germaine Krull's Shadowplay
- 42 Andrés Mario Zervigón
The A-I-Z at Play with Photography
- 56 Susan Laxton
**Shannon Ebner's "Strike":
Conflict and Play in the Age
of Electronic Information**
- 68 Alise Tifentale
Rules of the Photographers' Universe
- 78 Lev Manovich
**"Find Your Own Filter"
Creating Instagram Photography**
- 90 Markus Rautzenberg
**Dissolving into the Frame.
Ludic Mediality in Computer
Games and Photography**



If This is the World at all Approaches to the Relationship between Photography and Play

Matthias Gründig In the middle of the year 2016, throughout the world, it was possible to witness a strange spectacle in public spaces of large cities in particular. Mainly young people, who seemed to be in search of something and had their eyes focused on the displays of their smartphones even more than usual, crisscrossed city parks, streets and squares. They met up with each other at seemingly random locations without taking their eyes off their glowing devices. Looking through it, they appeared to see something that was not visible to the naked eye. In their movements, their incessant “search for a place”¹ one could clearly recognize the gesture of photographers.

The only difference: They were not photographers. Media reports and their own experience had made all of those taking part aware that they were actually playing a game. However, not only the gestures made the game something thoroughly photographic: In *Pokémon Go* (Niantec, 2016), the players not only make their way through virtual worlds to catch tiny imaginary monsters, they also make use of the cameras in their smartphones to achieve this.² By means of so-called Augmented Reality, the figures they wanted to catch on the display could be projected into real space. Of course, there was no lack of a screenshot function to capture this oddity (fig. 1). The real players moved physically in a reality permeated by virtuality. Looking through the camera, their eyes were opened to a different – changed and changing – world of play.

The short-lived hype around *Pokémon Go* is a particularly striking example of the close relationship existing between the practices of photography and play that is in no way a new phenomenon.³ From this viewpoint, play describes a potential of photographic practice. For this reason, the concepts of photography and play should not be aligned here. It is not a matter of photography as play, especially as both terms describe their own interminable theoretical complexes. Based on mainly well-known examples, which were chosen for precisely that reason, the following essay will not give priority to questioning what photography and play are. Instead, the author’s aim is to illustrate how their intersections can appear. Looking through the magnifying glass of play at photography means, in this case, questioning the ludic potentials of photography, the *playability of the photograph*. For that reason, this contribution does not consider itself a conclusive systematic observation but a first approach to a fascinating relationship.



Figure 1
Mancoos (Pokémon Go-user), *Dragonite*,
Prague Castle, Prague 2016, digital screenshot.
Collection of the user.

When the Daguerreotype was introduced to the public as the first photographic process in the late summer of 1839, the possibility of playing with it was not one of the declared uses

1. Vilém Flusser, ‘The Gesture of Photographing’, trans. Nancy Ann Roth, *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 10, no. 3, December 2011, 282–293, here 287.

2. Nintendo, the developers of the Pokémon series, were well aware that a parallel exists between catching a Pokémon with a virtual ball and the gesture of photographing. The game *Pokémon Snap* in which the player steers a photographer whose task is to make the best pictures possible of all the Pokémon in the game, was already released in 1999.

3. For example, precisely that relationship is becoming more intense in terms of so-called In-Game-Photography, the production and development of digital

screenshots from video games. It is noteworthy that, although the screenshots are taken in the game, today there is also a larger reception context of these images in the fields of digital and photographic art. The graphic card producer NVIDIA recently introduced the software Ansel for precisely this purpose. The relevant website states: “The very best screenshots from famous game photographers like Duncan Harris, James Pollock, Leonardo Sang and Joshua Taylor are shown in exhibitions, printed and framed, and admired by millions of gamers online.” Andrew Burnes, NVIDIA Ansel: Revolutionizing Screenshot Capture For GeForce GTX Gamers, <<http://www.geforce.com/whats-new/articles/ansel-revolutionizing-game-screenshots>> [15.12.2016].



Figure 2
 William Henry Fox Talbot, Nicolaas Henneman,
 Antoine-François-Jean Claudet (attributed),
Chess Players, pre 1847, calotype 19,5 × 14,4 cm.
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
 The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha
 Whittelsey Fund, 1973.

– hardly prevented photographers of both sexes of the early and earliest generations from dealing with various kinds of games. Especially the game of chess, which had been in fashion in Europe since the 18th century, developed into a popular subject for daguerreotypists and calotypists and later for wet-plate photographers. An early picture of the game makes it clear why: The calotype with the title of *Chess Players*, which has been accredited to William Henry Fox Talbot, that was intended to act as the last plate in the unpublished photo book *Talbotypes or Sun Pictures* by Nicolaas Henneman, shows two gentlemen sitting opposite each other in front of a chessboard (fig. 2).⁶ The theatrical situation that is an integral part of the game of chess, and which gives it a privileged position as a photographic motif, is consciously interrupted here by the diagonally positioned bamboo chairs that invest the scene with a considerable sense of the dynamic.

Although the spatial configuration initially appears to be quite simple, it is actually extremely meticulous. While the to date unidentified man in his tailcoat and top hat stares at the chessboard in great concentration with his right index finger placed thoughtfully on his rook, in order to take in the game, his blonde opponent on the right, leaning on the backrest of his turned-around chair, looks straight out of the picture at the viewer. In a mannerist gesture, his index finger points back towards the board not as an indication of his own thought process but as an invitation to understand and take part in the game. Here, in the same way

of this new technology. Dominique François Arago, the Parisian astronomer and representative in the French Parliament, where he acted in Daguerre's interest, was more concerned with the following when dealing with the technology and its investigation: "Whether this invention will be able to provide services of its own value to archaeologists and the fine arts; whether it will be useful; finally, whether one can be allowed to hope that science will be able to benefit from it."⁴ The supposed uselessness of play could find no place in this logic of usefulness, of *the use for* – meaning for something outside of playing itself. Although playing is similar to scientific experimentation in many aspects – in particular on account of its repeatability – the two differ precisely in this (non)-orientation on something outside of themselves. As Kelley Wilder states: "Experiments exist to test theories."⁵ On the other hand, strictly speaking, games only test themselves.

However, this fundamental difference to anything useful – photography was also only intended to *be of use* to the arts

4. Dominique François Arago, 'Bericht' [der Parlamentssitzung vom 3. Juli 1839] [Report of the Parliamentary Session of 3 April 1839], in: Steffen Siegel (ed.), *Neues Licht. Daguerre, Talbot und die Veröffentlichung der Fotografie im Jahr 1839*, Paderborn 2014, 266–278, here 267. The translation will be published as Steffen Siegel (ed.), *New Light. Writings from the Beginning of Photography*, Los Angeles 2017.

5. Kelley Wilder, *Photography and Science*, London 2009, 52.

6. While working on the William Henry Fox Talbot Catalogue Raisonné, Larry J. Schaaf dealt with the *Chess Players* and stressed the unclear authorship. See: Larry J. Schaaf, 'The Puzzling Chess Players' (3.6.2016), in: *William Henry Fox Talbot Catalogue Raisonné* <<http://foxtalbot.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/the-puzzling-chess-players/>> (12.9.2016).



Figure 3
Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson),
Henrietta Mary and Margaret Anne Lutwidge,
Croft Rectory, Yorkshire Summer 1859,
print from wet plate negative.
Morris L. Parrish Collection, Department of
Rare Books and Special Collection, Princeton
University Library, Princeton.

as chess players alternate between distanced observation and contemplative hesitation, the drifting of the gaze of the viewer causes him to become more and more involved in the game although he must remain removed from it. By observing, he becomes part of the game. In addition to the view of the one player that penetrates the fourth wall, the bent elbow of the other addresses the aesthetic limit of the image. What initially appeared to be a clear separation from the space of the image and that of the viewer is interrupted and negotiated anew in a fascinating way. It is probably not without intention that the scene is composed in this way: The man on the left, Antoine Claudet, was actually one of the most famous daguerreotypists of his age and a friend of Talbot's, who designed polished, multi-figure depictions of games himself.⁷

The calotype of the *Chess Players* takes up the rhythm of the game itself, makes it its subject, and can therefore be described as a meta-image of the relationship between play and seeing. On the other hand, in a rather static portrait of his aunts Margarete Anne and Henrietta May Lutwidge, Lewis Carroll stresses the sensual qualities of the game more than the structural (fig. 3). The dress of the player on the right repeats the checked pattern of the board while the massive, dark bracelets and the decorations on the bottom of the table reflect the plasticity of the elaborate chess pieces. Carroll's depiction is more concerned with addressing the visual excess that is not part of the system of the game but which develops unpredictably during play itself than with a visual depiction of the game of chess in the sense of an abstract, regulated activity. Carroll focuses on the game as an aesthetic event. Undisturbed by the gaze of the players engrossed in the game, the viewer is able to concentrate entirely on the various fabrics and ornaments of the dresses, the lace collars and elaborate hairstyles. In this way, the composition develops into a double argument of social distinction: on the one hand, the intelligence⁸ and high-level of education of the women shown and, on the other,

7. See, for example: Stefan Richter, *The Art of the Daguerreotype*, London 1989, 56–57.

their affluence that is offset by the simplicity of the worn out cardboard chess board. The major question of the game only makes itself noticeable once again in the background: black or white?

While the photographer Carroll was especially attracted to the aesthetic qualities of playing chess, he was also interested in the mathematical complexity and pronounced symbolical content behind it in his functions as mathematician and writer. In the sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, with the title of *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, the game of chess imbues the world behind the mirror with structure and logic:

“For some minutes Alice stood without speaking, looking out in all directions over the country – and a most curious country it was. There were a number of tiny little brooks running straight across it from side to side, and the ground between was divided up into squares by a number of little green hedges, that reached from brook to brook.

‘I declare it’s marked out just like a large chessboard!’ Alice said at last. [...] ‘It’s a great huge game of chess that’s being played – all over the world – if this *is* the world at all, you know. Oh, what fun it is!’”⁹

II

Although the differences between various games – from the technological, as well as aesthetic and structural point of view – may sometimes appear to be incompatible, they are – at least potentially – similar in their poetic transformation of the world, of time and space, as Alice formulates incredulously: “if this *is* the world at all”.¹⁰ The first to make a comprehensive study of the play-world and play in general was the Dutch cultural scientist Johan Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens* from 1938. Huizinga not only fundamentally recognized a “well-defined quality of action which is different from ‘ordinary’ life”¹¹ in play and the culturally constructing strength of human life per se but also found in it what he – in keeping with philosophical tradition – called ‘mind’:

“But in acknowledging play you acknowledge mind, for whatever else play is, it is not matter. Even in the animal world it bursts the bounds of the physically existent. From the point of view of a world wholly determined by the operation of blind forces, play would be altogether superfluous. Play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of *mind* breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos. The very existence of play continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation.”¹²

Seen from this point of view, there is a close connection between play as an abstract concept with its liberation from any kind of causality and necessity and the existentialist category

8. See: Anne Higonnet, *Lewis Carroll*, London 2008, Plate 21.

9. Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* [1871], New York 1907, 38–39.

10. At the same time, this ontological doubt is quite characteristic for the early history of the theory and discourse on ‘magic mirror’ photography. See: Siegel 2014 (reference 4).

11. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Boston, Henley, London 1949, 4.

12. Huizinga 1949 [reference 11], 3–4.

of the absurd as formulated by Albert Camus.¹³ Huizinga found it absolutely positive that, in spite of the fact that play follows no worldly determined use – or maybe precisely because of this – “it creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection.”¹⁴ It is surely not coincidental that, in these words of his, we hear an echo of the well-known Nietzsche fragment on the aesthetic: “The truth is ugly: we have art so as not to perish from the truth.”¹⁵ However, Huizinga does not mix up play with art and the aesthetic,¹⁶ just as little as he places it in opposition to the truth, even though traces of Nietzsche can also be felt in the following citation: “Play lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally inside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil. Although it is a non-material activity it has no moral function. The valuations of vice and virtue do not apply here.”¹⁷ One of the beauties of Huizinga’s consideration lies in this just as absolute as absurd localization of play.

The order of play Huizinga speaks about – and which is less function than effect – results from a spatio-temporal warp: “Play is distinct from ‘ordinary’ life both as to locality and duration. [...] It is ‘played out’ within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning.”¹⁸ He stresses this using a series of examples of various play areas:

“The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.”¹⁹

Although one might not necessarily completely share this view, it is still worthwhile to take the magic circle – that, especially in videogame research, has become a much discussed topos²⁰ – seriously as an attractive idea and to compare it with Foucault’s concept of the heterotopos.²¹ Huizinga understands this strange localization as an integral part of play. “All play moves and has its being within a playground marked out beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course.”²² This coincides with the temporality of play in which Huizinga identifies a certain syntagmatic: “Play begins, and then at a certain point it is ‘over’. It plays itself to an end. While it is in progress all is movement, change, alternation, succession, association, separation” and, as he later remarks, “[i]t is transmitted, it becomes tradition.”²³ In this repeatability as a result of a temporal discontinuation, he recognizes – similar to Walter

13. See: Albert Camus, *Der Mythos des Sisyphos*, Reinbek 2015, especially part 3, “Das absurde Werk”, 111–138. “Die Eroberung oder das Spiel, die unermessliche Liebe, die absurde Auflehnung — derartige Huldigungen bringt der Mensch seiner Würde dar in einem Feldzug, in dem er im Voraus besiegt ist. [The conquest or the game, the immeasurable love, the absurd rebellion – man offers obeisance of this kind in a campaign that he has already lost.]”, 113.

14. Huizinga 1949 [reference 11], 10.

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Achte Abteilung, Dritter Band: Nachgelassene Fragmente. Anfang 1888 bis Anfang Januar 1889*, Berlin, New York 1972, 296.

16. “For although the attribute of beauty does not attach to play as such, play nevertheless tends to assume marked elements of beauty. Mirth and grace adhere at the outset to the more primitive forms of play. In play the beauty of the

human body in motion reaches its zenith. In its more developed forms it is saturated with rhythm and harmony, the noblest gifts of aesthetic perception known to man. Many and close are the links that connect play with beauty.” Huizinga 1949 [reference 11], 7.

17. Huizinga 1949 [reference 11], 6.

18. Huizinga 1949 [reference 11], 9.

19. Huizinga 1949 [reference 11], 10.

20. See: Stephan Günzel, *Der reine Raum des Spiels. Zur Kritik des Magic Circle* in: Matthias Fuchs, Ernst Strouthal (eds.), *Das Spiel und seine Grenzen. Passagen des Spiels II*, Vienna, New York 2010, 189–202.

21. Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, Spring 1986, 22–27, here 24.

22. Huizinga 1949 [reference 11], 10.

23. Huizinga 1949 [reference 11], 11.



Figure 4
 Julian Wasser,
Duchamp Playing Chess with a Nude (Eve Babitz),
 gelatine silver print. Duchamp Retrospective,
 Pasadena Art Museum 1963,
 reproduced in Rebecca Peabody, et. al. (eds.),
Pacific Standard Time.
Kunst in Los Angeles 1945–1980,
 Ostfildern 2012, 135.

Benjamin – a fundamental characteristic of play. Benjamin demanded from a theory of play – which was non-existent at the time – that it should “explore the great law that presides over the rules and rhythms of the entire world of play: the law of repetition.”²⁴

III

It is hardly surprising that a large number of photographs, taken by many different authors, of Marcel Duchamp, who was not only one of the 20th century’s great artists but also a gifted chess player, exist in which he is shown playing against just as great a variety of opponents. However, one of them is something very special (fig. 4). The American photographer Julian Wasser captured him playing against the then unknown Eve Babitz at the major Duchamp retrospective exhibition held in Pasadena in 1963. While the obviously aged Marcel Duchamp has come to the table in a black suit, the young woman opposite him is completely naked. Her dark, shoulder-length hair covers her face making her anonymous to the viewer. In a visual chiasmus, which is doubled by an overcrossing form in the middle ground, the light-skinned woman plays black and the dark-suited artist white.²⁵

The puzzle of what originally seems to be a principally sexist dress code is only solved by the perspective manifested by the photographer.²⁶ A replica of Duchamp’s unfinished masterpiece *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* from the year 1923, better known as *The Large Glass*, can be seen in the exhibition hall behind the two opponents. The title and the complicated pictorial content it interprets make the game of chess recognizable as a quotation, staging and performance. The photograph not only documents this, it alone in its specific visual configuration makes the scene as it is presented decipherable in such a specific way. In the doubled dispositive order of the space of the museum and photographic recording, the image of a “magic circle”, which temporarily suspends the “world” becomes

24. Walter Benjamin, ‘Toys and Play. Marginal Notes on a Monumental Work’ [1928], in: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 2: 1927-1930, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., Cambridge (Mass.), London 1999, 117-121, here 120.
 25. See: Ken D. Allen, ‘Duchamp in Pasadena’, in: Rebecca Peabody, et. al. (eds.), *Pacific Standard Time. Kunst in Los Angeles 1945–1980*, Ostfildern 2012, 135.

26. For example, in his *Anthropométrie de l’époque bleue* (1960), Yves Klein consciously made use of a very similar prefiguration of the female nude and clothed male.

recognizable; and not only for the players. The seemingly scandalous – but actually rather cheeky – nakedness is in no way justified by this; quite the contrary seeing that the playing field is, in its essence, amoral. There is no scandal in this game seeing that all of those involved are aware that they are in a temporal space of “pretending”, that everything is “only for fun” as Huizinga describes.²⁷ The play in front of, and with the camera creates a heterotopos, in which – to quote Foucault – “the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.”²⁸ The perspective makes the difference. When the game takes itself seriously, it must appear from the outside – that is, as an image – as sophisticated nonsense.²⁹

Duchamp made the following much-quoted statement at the 1952 meeting of the New York Chess Association and, in doing so, demonstrated the intellectual proximity between play and art:³⁰ “From my close contact with artists and chess players I have come to the personal conclusion that while all artists are not chess players, all chess players are artists.”³¹ Continuing in his speech, he stressed that the artistic value of the game was not limited to the simple perception but that its beauty could be better compared with that of poetry.

“[T]he chess pieces are the block alphabet which shapes thoughts and these thoughts, although making a visual design on the chessboard, express their beauty abstractly, like a poem... every chess player experiences a mixture of two aesthetic pleasures, first the abstract image akin to the poetic idea of writing, second the sensuous pleasure of the ideographic execution of that image on the chessboards.”³²

Although the leap from Duchamp’s art-chess or chess-art appears to be a great one, his comments actually encapsulate how the exiled German Hans Bellmer wanted his photographic puppet plays to be interpreted. These were collected in the book *La poupée*, which was published in 1957 followed by the German version *Die Puppe*³³ in 1962 (fig. 5). In the text preceding the images, *Erinnerungen zum Thema Puppe*, he actively attempted to embed his suggestive photographs in a context of personal memories and childlike innocence. “Life is merely tried out on the playing field of the child and Bellmer’s puppet plays can always pretend to take place in the sphere of the ‘as if’ – in both cases, however, existential experiences are lived and imparted.”³⁴ Just as calculatedly, he uses the concept of the anagram for his – sometimes obscure – combinations of young female puppet bodies and, in this way, draws his photographs into the poetic realm. The photographs were accompanied by short texts by Paul Eluard. Bellmer thought of the individual parts of the body as letters of the “body alphabet”³⁵ that, in the coloured images, are arranged to form ever-new poetic inventions. “Due to the anagrammatic

27. Huizinga 1949 [reference 11], 8.

28. Michel Foucault 1986 [reference 21], 24.

29. Cf., Huizinga’s considerations of the relationship between play and seriousness; Huizinga 1949 [reference 11], 8.

30. In their article on modern photographic mirror-games in the last issue of *PhotoResearcher*, Ulrike Blumenthal and Astrid Köhler – not entirely coincidentally – arrived at Leorna Simpson’s video work *Chess* (2012) by way of Duchamp. See: idem: ‘Luring Reflections, Photographic Aberrations, and Disruptive Visions: On the varying Relations between Mirrors and Pictures’, *PhotoResearcher*, vol. 26, 2016, 58–69.

31. Cited after a handwritten note by Duchamp, reproduced in: Fuchs, Strouthal 2010 [reference 20], 144.

32. Cited after: P. N. Humble, ‘Marcel Duchamp: Chess Aesthete and Anartist Reconciled’, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 32, no. 2, Summer 1998, 41–55, here 43.

33. On the complex genesis, editorial history and structure of the book, see the comprehensive study: Marvin Altner, *Hans Bellmer: Die Spiele der Puppe. Zu den Puppendarstellungen in der Bildenden Kunst von 1914–1938*, Weimar 2005, especially 7–13.

34. Altner 2005 [reference 33], 12.

35. Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*, Berlin 1962, 59.

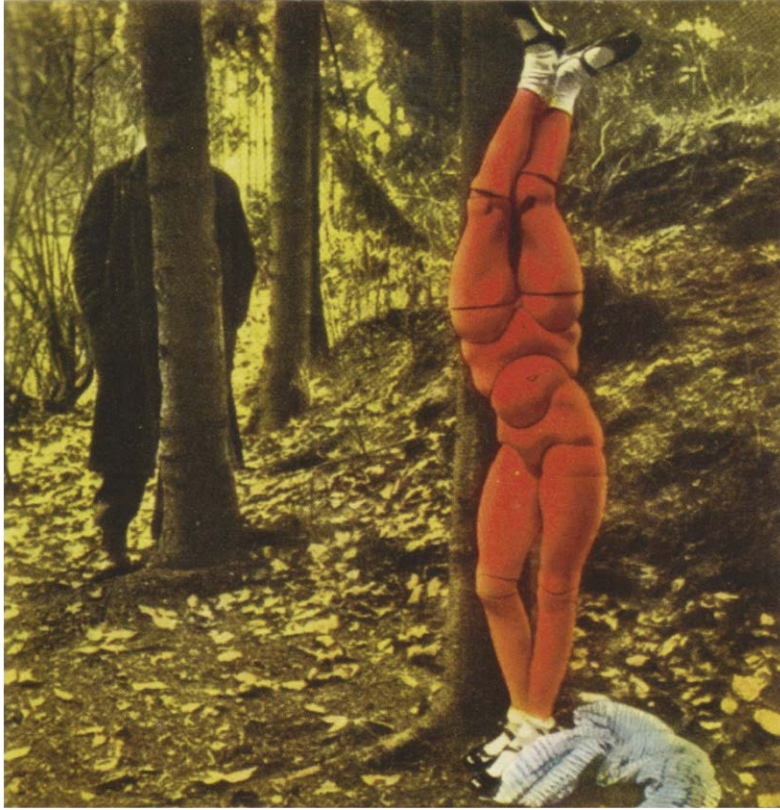


Figure 5
Hans Bellmer, *Die Spiele der Puppe*
[The Games of the Doll], photograph VI of XIII,
1935–1937, handcoloured gelatine silver prints,
published in: idem, *Die Puppe*, Berlin 1962.

clear where the “magic circle” of the photographic game ends if one feels the need to stick to this somewhat idealizing concept at all. Therefore photographic play is never an isolated realm of its own. Quite the contrary, play marks a fundamental component of *diverse* photographic practices.³⁷

In the early 1970s, American concept artists such as John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha and others dealt with the relationship between photographic media and art in a completely new fashion. In a manner of speaking, the cards were reshuffled and play took on a central position in connection with the understanding of art. Baldessari in particular, strongly influenced by Duchamp’s work, found new strategies for artistic creativity in play.³⁸ Play concepts offered him the possibility for simplicity and spontaneity – calculatedly, he made the camera a toy. This concept of the camera as a toy would later become a central aspect of Vilém Flusser’s philosophical work: “The camera is not a tool, but a toy, and the photographer is not a worker as such, but a player: not ‘homo faber’, but ‘homo ludens’. Except: the photographer does not play with, but against, his toy.”³⁹ He specified this relationship in the following way:

potential of the puppet picture, Bellmer’s portrayals are, simultaneously, body, image and script.”³⁶

The gloomy scene shown here from the second series of photographs, *Die Spiele der Puppe*, which was created as early as in 1935–1937, could therefore be interpreted as a palindromic body-language game. Or, in Duchamp’s words, through which the moral ambiguity of Bellmer’s puppet picture remains more strongly preserved, as “a mixture of two aesthetic pleasures, first the abstract image akin to the poetic idea of writing, second the sensuous pleasure of the ideographic execution of that image” – here, in one that is photographic. From this viewpoint, Bellmer’s photographic work becomes intelligible through the experience of a chess player.

IV

What has so far been stated shows that playing in the photographic sphere always means more than a playful subject presenting itself to the camera. The subject “play” monopolizes; it involves the photographer and viewer to the same extent. It can never be absolutely

36. Birgit Käufer, *Die Obsession der Puppe in der Fotografie. Hans Bellmer, Pierre Molinier, Cindy Sherman*, Bielefeld 2006, 55.

37. As has been shown by others especially the history of the avant-gardes is particularly rich with examples that, however, do not come to discussion here. Recently published on this matter; the volume by Clément Chéroux, *Avant l’avant-garde. Du jeu en photographie, 1890–1940*, Paris 2015; and idem,

Ute Eskildsen (ed.), *Frankierte Fantastereien: das Spielerische der Fotografie im Medium der Postkarte*, Göttingen 2007.

38. See: Robin Kelsey, *Photography and the Art of Chance*, Cambridge 2015, 284–310.

39. Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Göttingen 1984, 19.



Figure 6
John Baldessari,
Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts), detail, 1973, colour reproductions from 35mm-negative-film, published under the same title, Milan 1973.

“Although cameras are built according to complex scientific and technical principles, they are quite easy to handle. They are structurally complex toys, but functionally simple. In this, cameras are the opposite of chess, a game that is structurally simple and functionally complex. It is simple to learn the rules of chess, but difficult to play it well.”⁴⁰

In his works,⁴¹ including the best-known in this regard *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)*, Baldessari consciously removed the camera and photographer from a documenting function and gave them the privileged status of players in a game (fig. 6). The title is identical to the concept of the work: While one player, Baldessari, throws three balls into the air in front of the blue sky of the American west coast, a female player – his wife – attempts to photograph them so that they create a perfect line.⁴² The “Thirty-Six Attempts” are an indication of the use of a standard commercial 35mm film that provided the play with its syntax. In its published form,⁴³ the viewer was presented with a supposed “best of” in the form of twelve unbound colour plates – however, in no specific sequence. The “Straight Line”, which is ultimately not achieved in the photographs, remains solely a latent intellectual ideal behind the images. Anybody attempting to evaluate the photographs from this point of view after the first perusal, misses out on the actual aesthetic

40. Flusser 1984 [reference 39], 41.

41. Other examples from this period include *Pier 18* (1971), the series *Choosing [A Game for Two Players]* (1971), *Floating: Stick [With Two Figures To Get Various Triangles]* (1972), two versions of *Trying To Photograph A Ball So That It Is In The Center Of Picture* (1972–73), as well as two versions of *Cigar Smoke To Match Clouds That Are Different* (1972–73).

42. “Baldessari’s acknowledgment that his wife took the photographs for *Throwing Three Balls*, however, introduces its own problem of sexual politics. A game for two players ended up as a work signed by the one with balls.” Kelsey 2015 [reference 38], 299.

43. John Baldessari, *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)*, Milan 1973.

spectacle of the photographic game. As the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote so tellingly shortly before: “Thus the child gives itself a task of playing with a ball, and such tasks are playful ones because the purpose of the game is not really solving the task, but ordering and shaping the movement of the game itself.”⁴⁴ In this sense, Baldessari’s photos are not documents of events taking place outside of them but, as new visual orders, the manifestations of the game being played. The ‘goal’ of a straight line only exists in the view through the viewfinder; it is only secondary for the images themselves.⁴⁵ Here, artistic subjectivity ultimately takes second place to the game and its photographic incidents. In it, the player exists in the form of the “*interest* in the original sense of the word; as an ‘in-between’ or ‘being present’, that in a strange way, remains between the ‘subject’ and ‘object’”;⁴⁶ as Hans von Fabeck formulated.

In his chapter on the ontology of the artwork in 1960, Gadamer devoted himself to this super-subjective and super-anthropological dimension of play.⁴⁷ His theory, which can only be given in a highly abbreviated form here, is constructed – in many points – on Huizinga’s considerations. Gadamer not only ‘adopts’ the concept of the mind but also understands play just as fundamentally as movement, as a back-and-forth. However, he inverts the perspective: “[A]ll playing is being played. The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players.”⁴⁸ In Gadamer’s thoughts, the players do not play with the game; the game plays with the players. They can therefore only be a part of a greater whole that they can never completely understand. He writes something that becomes understandable in the light of Baldessari’s photo play: “that performing a task successfully ‘presents it’” and comes to the conclusion that “play is really limited to presenting itself. Thus its mode of being is self-presentation.”⁴⁹ Seen from this position, it is always “representing for someone”⁵⁰ – even in the absence of viewers – and continuously presses outwards towards being observed. Gadamer understands the mode of existence of art in general in this movement of play’s self-presentation. In his considerations of the viewer, he notes that he has

“only methodological precedence: in that the play is presented for him, it becomes apparent that the play bears within itself a meaning to be understood and that can therefore be detached from the behaviour of the player. Basically the difference between the player and the spectator is here superseded. The requirement that the play itself be intended in its meaningfulness is the same for both.”⁵¹

V

The gradual arrival of the digital led to completely new potentials in respect to photographic games. For example, in 1998, the following persuasive criticism of the analogue was expressed

44. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London, New York 2004, 107.

45. See also: Kelsey 2015 [reference 38], 290.

46. Hans von Fabeck, *Vom Sinn zum Spiel. Ein Leitfaden in die Postmoderne*, Vienna 2015, 92.

47. See also: Matthias Flatscher, ‘Das Spiel der Kunst als die Kunst des Spiels. Bemerkungen zum Spiel bei Gadamer und Wittgenstein’, in: Reinhold Esterbauer

(ed.), *Orte des Schönen. Phänomenologische Annäherungen*, Würzburg 2003, 125–154.

48. Gadamer 2004 [reference 44], 106.

49. Gadamer 2004 [reference 44], 108.

50. Gadamer 2004 [reference 44], 108.

51. Gadamer 2004 [reference 44], 110.

Figure 7

Ian T. Edwards (Flickr-user), *Gameboy Camera*, 2007, digital photograph. Creative Commons.



in a rather unusual environment: “Photography is fun, but not when you’re buying film, waiting for pictures to develop, or wondering if your snapshots will even turn out.” The *Nintendo Power* magazine, published by the video-game producer of the same name, that mainly targeted young and youthful players until 2012, made use of this criticism for purposeful advertising:

“The Game Boy Camera solves all these problems by enabling you to compose and retouch your photos on your Game Boy screen. By adding a Super Game Boy, Game Link Cable, or Game Boy Printer, you’ll be able to set up your own Funtography studio, where you’ll have the darkroom tools you’ll need to doctor, develop, print and trade your photographs.”⁵²

What is explicitly advertised here in the context of fun and play anticipates the software of modern smart-phones as they became available to the public with the first iPhone in 2007 – almost ten years later – including the possibility of sharing pictures with other people (fig. 7). Significantly, the Game Boy Camera could be turned 180 degrees so that the clear differentiation between player, game and viewer could be dissolved in a kind of selfie – in a pre-selfie era, however.⁵³ The up-to-30 pictures that could be stored could be given a variety of frames and manipulated in a number of ways. In particular, (self) portraits could continue to be used like playing figures in small video games such as a juggling game. Of course, with its resolution of 128 × 112 pixels or 0.014 megapixels and four shades of grey, the camera was no alternative to ‘real’ digital cameras (fig. 8).⁵⁴ Instead, the poor quality of the image stressed the fact that, fundamentally, photographic games lay outside of the aesthetic “disjunction” of good and bad, of beautiful and ugly, as Baldessari had already shown in his highly-enlarged 35mm pictures that purposely contravened the rules of photography in the artistic context. Finally, the advertising text once again drew attention to



Figure 8

Weegee's three-eyed selfportrait from the book *Naked Hollywood* (1953) as seen through the Gameboy Camera, 2016, digital photograph. Collection of the author.

52. Anonymous, 'Game Boy Camera. Funtography Studio', *Nintendo Power*, no. 109, June 1998, 84–87, here 84.

53. "The selfie suggests a new form of materiality that is constructed, plural and multiple, rather than based in the rigid opposition between the subject and the object that underpins all of metaphysical thinking. The selfie does not get rid of the subject and the object, but it destroys the notion of fixed and stable identity and the opposition between it and the world. In each and every selfie

the self is reinvented anew and because it has no pre-established identity, the self is being articulated purely in terms of style." Daniel Rubinstein, 'Gift of the Selfie/Das Geschenk des Selfies', in: Alain Bieber (ed.), *Ego Update*, Cologne 2015, 162–177, here 166.

54. Additional information on camera technology can be found under: The Digital Camera Museum, 'Nintendo Pocket Camera [1998]' <<http://www.digicammuseum.com/en/cameras/item/nintendo-pocket-camera>> [20.9.2016].



Figure 9

PhotoshopBattle: Obama wearing a VR Headset, original image by Official White House Photographer Pete Souza via Instagram (top), White House, Washington August 24, 2016, digital photograph, manipulated image by Reddit-user Kweeven (bottom), August 25, 2016, digital image, <https://www.reddit.com/r/photoshopbattles/comments/4zjej1/psbattle_obama_wearing_a_vr_headset/>.

ware.⁵⁷ Users upload their own or appropriated photographs here and, in this way, make them available to other users for free association and image manipulation. The usually humorously processed images, which frequently quote pop culture, are then given titles and commentaries before being uploaded and thereby put up for discussion and further manipulation. There is nothing for the partaking user to win except the possibility of his own contribution being positively rated (upvoted) and shown in a prominent position on the site. The focus is placed on the purely collective fun the group has over the – preferably unpredictable – new combinations of the images and the comments made. In this way, an – already rather strange – picture of Barack Obama with a VR headset soon becomes a picture of the Marvel comic hero Cyclops in the White House (fig. 9).⁵⁸

the fact that play could actually only be play in the full sense of the word outside of material constraints: “since you don’t need film for capturing images, you can take and delete photo after photo, opening up the possibility for experimentation.”⁵⁵

In the Game Boy Camera, one can find the photographic game with the self pre-formulated in a childlike fashion that, today, in an age of uninterrupted digital networking, plays an important role within the social procedures of everyday life. It comes as no surprise that – especially in digital social networks – games are played with photography seeing that – according to Gadamer – play is fundamentally an activity that aims at being seen (by others) that, in keeping with this principle, could also be considered a basic constituent of social networks. Today, this theoretical overlapping of play and the social forms of the digital not only represents a utopian potential as Flusser predicted in his book *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder (Into the Universe of Technical Images)* in 1985, but has manifested itself in the Reddit.com network for example.

Reddit is a social network that was established in 2005 and, ostensibly, is less concerned with the personality of the user than with what he or she provides over links of all kind. An average of 80,000 of the eight million registered Reddit-users come together every day in the so-called Subreddit *Photoshopbattles*.⁵⁶ The group description states laconically that this is: “A subreddit for people to create new images with image manipulation software.”

55. Game Boy Camera 1998 [reference 52], 84.

56. On 20 September 2016, the average number of individual accesses to the Subreddit *Photoshopbattles* daily was given as 80,785. Cf., *Photoshopbattles*, ‘Traffic Stats’ <<https://www.reddit.com/r/photoshopbattles/about/traffic/>> [20.9.2016].

57. Reddit, ‘Photoshopbattles’ <<https://www.reddit.com/r/photoshopbattles/>> [20.9.2016].

58. See: PsBattle, ‘Obama wearing a VR headset’ <https://www.reddit.com/r/photoshopbattles/comments/4zjej1/psbattle_obama_wearing_a_vr_headset/> [20.9.2016].



Figure 10
Results of Google Image Search for
Lying Down Game, digital photographs of
different provenance and dimensions.

In the Photoshopbattles – which are much more like games than real battles, more with than against the others – the ideal of a *telematic society*, as described by Flusser, becomes reality. In this utopia, the person is occupied with synthesizing information in dialogue; meaning “unpredictable, improbable computations”.⁵⁹ Flusser sees dialogues as “controlled games of chance. They allow information that is already stored to be combined in all possible ways to construct new information.”⁶⁰ In this sense, they are both *datum* (die) and *factum* (throw). The members of the *telematic society* are consequently “players with prior information; only they, in contrast to the world, play with a purpose to produce information.”⁶¹ Similar to Camus, Flusser considers play an ‘absurd activity’ in which the person defiantly confronts his own looming death.

Of course – as the viewer – one is tempted to question the significance of information that has been produced in this way, to ask what comic figures in the White House are supposed to signify or what the profound meaning of the diverse internet hypes such as the so-called *Lying Down Game* or *Planking* could be, in which internet users have themselves photographed – stiff as a plank – in the most unusual places possible (fig. 10).⁶² At the best, one could question the reasons behind these activities psychologically: what exactly the purpose of these games is would, however, remain unanswered. The question is asked incorrectly; quite simply because the “real purpose of the game is not the solution of the task”. Then, *why* photographic games enrich the world visually is not really important; *that* and *how* they do it is.

The approach to concepts of play, as they occur in this contribution, remains a purely intellectual one. In order ‘to understand’ a game, it has to be played. This statement cannot be explained out of some kind of romantic anti-intellectualism but because what seems to be a paradox is an integral property of the game: although playing can represent the ‘spirit’ of being human, this significance must always stand outside of the game; if not, precisely that

59. Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth, Minneapolis 2011, 91.

60. Flusser 2011 (reference 59), 90.

61. Flusser 2011 (reference 59), 89.

62. See: David Bate, ‘The Social Network Game’, *Philosophy of Photography*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2012, 28–35. Many other examples of so-called *Photo Fads* in social networks have been assembled under: KnowYourMeme, ‘Photo Fads’ <<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/photo-fads/>> [20.9.2016].

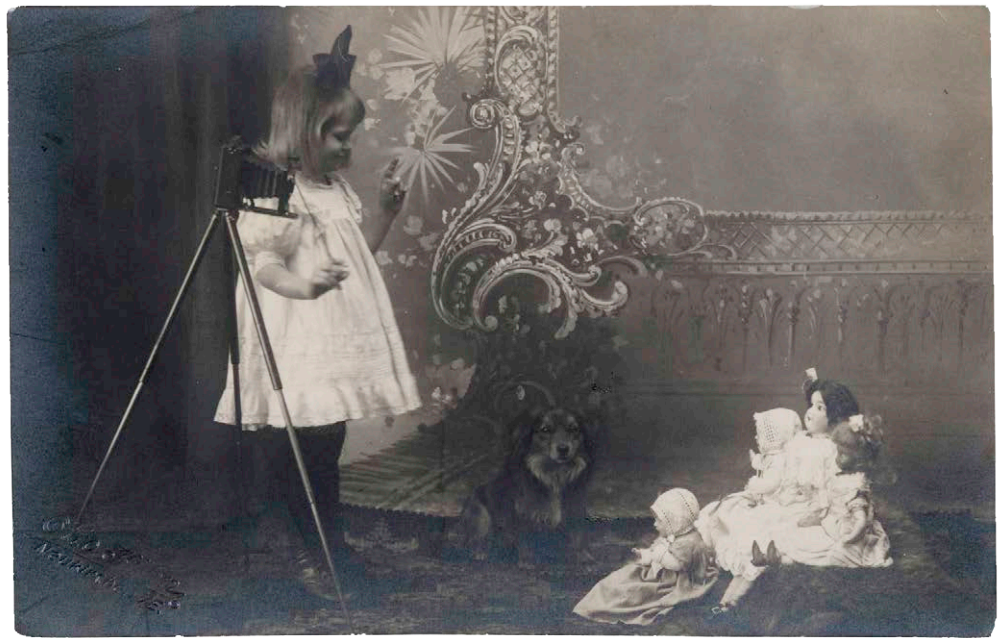


Figure 11
 Studio Otto Kühn,
Girl with a Toy Camera, Neukirchen ca. 1900,
 gelatine silver print 8,7 × 13,5 cm.
 Deutsche Fotothek, Dresden.

spirit of uselessness would degenerate into a use. Herein lies a gap that can make it so difficult to talk about games of any kind. The significance one imbues them with is logical and thereby unable to properly address their illogical quality. Following Huizinga, Camus, Gadamer, Flusser and the others, one can only ponder over play in a philosophical-absurd sense without comprehending what it means to play. Absurdity cannot be understood.⁶³

In his letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Friedrich Schiller coined a motto that it has been impossible for anyone dealing with play to ignore up to the present day: “Man only plays where he is man in the complete sense of the word and he is only completely man where he plays.”⁶⁴ Although, his concept of ‘play’ is principally concerned with artistic creativity, he also saw the realization of human liberty subsumed in it.⁶⁵ Not in the sense of a goal but, understood procedurally, Flusser is concerned with the same thing. “A *telematic society* would be a dialogical game in systematic search of new information. This disciplined search can be called ‘freedom’ and the direction of the search ‘purpose’. [...] If we define human beings by their negentropic tendency, then this is when they will become truly human for the first time, that is, players with information.”⁶⁶

Playing with photography, in dialogue with others, creating new images with oneself and the world, therefore means realizing the utopia of one’s own liberty on a large or a smaller scale. However, disregarding all of that, one must not forget that playing often and first of all means childlike fun; something that can be easily forgotten when absorbed in theory about it.⁶⁷ Fortunately even the ultimate theory reaches its limits when faced with this fun (fig. 11).

63. In his autobiography, Flusser points directly to this when he says of the groundless, which he derives from the absurd: “Man kann die Erfahrung der Bodenlosigkeit in Literatur, Philosophie und Kunst nicht niederschlagen, ohne sie zu verfälschen. [One cannot subdue the experience of groundlessness in literature, philosophy and art without falsifying it.]” Vilém Flusser, *Bodenlos. Eine philosophische Autobiographie*, Cologne 1992, 11.

64. Friedrich Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen. Briefe an den Augustenburger, Ankündigung der ‚Horen‘ und letzte, verbesserte Fassung*, Munich 1967, 131.

65. A footnote in the first publication of the text states: “Es gibt ein Kartenspiel

und ein Trauerspiel; aber offenbar ist das Kartenspiel viel zu *ernsthaft* für diesen Namen. [One can play cards and there are tragic plays but, clearly, playing cards is much too *serious* to be called this.]” Schiller 1967 (reference 65), 130, footnote 1. Schiller illustrated his considerations on freedom with examples from Greek mythology and art.

66. Flusser 2011 (reference 59), 94.

67. The French sociologist Roger Caillois used the term *paidia* to express the childlike-free dimension of play while considering *ludus* a description of a highly-structured, systematic form of play. See; Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash, New York 1961.