# Filters + *Frames*

Developing meaning
in photography and beyond
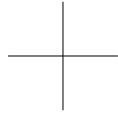
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**FILTERS AND FRAMES**

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# *Photo Dynamos*, or The Mobilisation of Margins and Surfaces

"Margins and additions round off, place, redeem. They reinforce the work's coming together as a whole […]. At the same time, the margin is permanently changing from enclosure to opening passage, and keeps the work in flux."[1] —

The publication *Filters and Frames* is released within the 'frame' of the DFG's PhD program *The Photographic Dispositif*. The contributions put into practice what they are about: They rethink photography from its margins, thus focussing on the photographic core. Going to and fro between Ergon and Parergon[2] lends a fresh momentum to research perspective and opens up new horizons. —

In this sense, the PhD program focusses on the manifold operations in which the photo plays a central part, not only as depiction and object, but also as an effect and catalyst of processes that reach far beyond photography. The photographs are 'framed' by these photographic acts and imbued with a meaning that may not be inherent in the photo as such. Thus the focus is turned on peripheral agents and agencies: On the photographic apparatus setting the technical frame for a certain kind of rectangular, 'transparent' picture. On the agents in front of and behind the camera anticipating what is to be displayed within the given format. On deciding which photos to develop or save, often on the grounds of a successful relation of depiction and format. On showing photos, sharing photos, or making them disappear, often following a certain image or aesthetics policy. In short: Certain socio-cultural and image policies are framing each act of the photographic process, and have an influence on what will be represented in the actual photographic image field. Thus the actual frame of a photograph is always an echo

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of complex actions, while also having an impact on the actions framing it. The image field and the actions surrounding it semanticize each other in a perpetual dynamic process.

On a perceptive level, this processual nature is inscribed in photography sui generis. The dynamics is created by their heightened iconic difference: The central perspective implemented in the recording apparatus opens up a space of illusionary depth in the picture that at first glance is not counteracted by the seemingly transparent surfaces of photo prints and electronic screens. We are drawn into the depth of the photographic space, with the subjects seemingly moving towards us into the viewer's space. But at second glance, the frame appears to act as an opponent. The margin of the photo sets a hard boundary between representation and environment, it encloses the shot in a rectangular format and thus defines a limited media surface. It lets us see the photo as an object, and makes the eye oscillate between the subject *in* the image and the surface *of* the picture. This infinitesimal, almost invisible margin is anything but inactive. Interacting with the photo's surface, it helps to turn our perception into a permanent alternation of "seeing as recognition" and "seeing as seeing".[3]

A photograph's surface and frame thus act as 'dynamos' of the photographic act. They keep up our aesthetic and academic pleasure in photography.

Katharina Sykora

1 —— Rike Felka, *Vorläufig Beiseitegelegtes* (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 2000), pp. 28 and 29 [trans. TB].

2 —— Cf. Gérard Genette, *Paratexte. Das Buch vom Beiwerk des Buches*, trans. by Dieter Hornig (Frankfurt/Main, New York: Campus, 1989).

3 —— Cf. Max Imdahl, "Cézanne – Bracque – Picasso. Zum Verhältnis zwischen Bildautonomie und Gegenstandssehen", in *Max Imdahl: Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 3: *Reflexion – Theorie – Methode*, ed. by Gottfried Boehm (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), pp. 300–380.

# *Filters and Frames.*
# Developing meaning in photography and beyond

Developing a photograph means the process of treating print material with chemicals in order to create a visible image. The fixing bath ensures that the image stays visible. Whether that image, be it analogue or digital, will be seen in public or in private, and how it will be received, is influenced by processes of selection, presentation and contextualization — by filters and by frames. This publication explores the entanglement of medial visibility and invisibility of photographic images in both form and content, and the ensuing production of meaning. The tag "Developing meaning" refers to the performative character of photography as an involved complex of actions that is never static.

Filtering and framing techniques have been part of photography ever since it emerged. They take concrete form as optical systems for changing light incidence or instrument-based devices. Corresponding to today's ubiquity of optical filters in social media, the idea of filter now en vogue sometimes obscures that term's culture-theoretical and political dimensions. As a process, "filtering" refers to acts of sorting, absorption and separation — joining up with the "frame", which combines aspects of support and enclosure as well as those of demarcation and exclusion. The isolating / highlighting moment appears as an attempt to extract what is important and meaningful, as a form of production of knowledge, or deictic gesture.

*Filters and Frames* grew out of the eponymous show at the HBK Braunschweig's exhibition space, and collects four image sections of the participating artists which are accompanied by texts that take up the issues addressed by these

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works. Eight additional articles expand and further explore these themes by referencing concrete case studies. Filters and frames are discussed as concrete phenomena, but also in their dimension of influencing, structuring and conditioning our selection and reception of images, revealing the interlacing of subject and process beyond the confinement of the photographic image. The articles inquire into the instrument-based conditions and the discourses that shape the selection and framing processes of photographic images, and explore which narratives, interpretive patterns and prerogatives of interpretation are being served, upheld or questioned.

The passport photograph has a notably small frame. The standard biometric headshot that nowadays serves, pars pro toto for a person, as a marker of identity in state-approved documents measures no more than 35x45mm. So as not to confuse facial recognition scanners, even smiling was ruled out in the official regulations. "Grins banned from passport pics," ran an August 2004 headline in the BBC News.[1] The set of ID photos that artist Tomoko Sawada took in a photo booth in the late 1990s seems like a pre-emption of today's biometric passport photo regulations that confine the head to a clearly restricted space. These pictures showing Sawada with a pointedly sober expression, no smile, no clothes, no jewelry, no hair even, form part of her work *ID 400*, in which she explores this kind of standardized portrait. She took no less than 400 self-portraits in a Kobe photo booth for this project, each time transforming herself with the help of make-up and styling. In her playful self-experiment, she also explores how to create identities through photographic mise-en-scène.

　　In her article, Madoka Yuki places Tomoko Sawada's work in the context of a photo trend in 1990s Japan: A generation of young female photographers attracting attention by way of provocative self-portraits and pictures of their everyday lives. In Japan's up to then very male-dominated photography scene, Japanese photo critic Iizawa Kotaro and others coined the controversial term *onnanoko shashin* translated as "girly photography" for this phenomenon. Yuki demonstrates how Sawada's work lines up with this generation, while simultaneously playing

with and violating its codes and conventions. The passport photo is generally considered an identity image. In view of Sawada's 400 identity photos Yuki asks: Can we use photography to create self-images?

A completely different relationship between photographer and photographic subject is explored in Amadou Chab Touré's contribution. In his literary essay, he takes us on an imaginary journey to Bamako / Mali. It is a journey in time as well, reaching back to the years before 1960, before the Mali Federation gained its independence. Touré traces an arc covering the portrait photography originally shaped by colonial powers, via the 1950s and 1960s studios of Seydou Keita, Malick Sidibé and others, up to the present. In his text, he describes the scene of a street photographer whom he names Napoléon. "Napoléon takes identity photos…." — this is about more than the relationship of photography and identity. The setting described is not located in a studio, but outdoors in a central square, referring back to the mobile practice of travelling photographers, which was restricted to the locals before some of them started to open their own studios in the 1950s and 1960s. Before then, they used to roam the villages equipped with a box camera, and would take portraits of the inhabitants in front of the wall of a house or a piece of cloth. In Touré's fictional setting, self-image and public image interlace, raising the question of how clear that distinction can be in the context of colonial and post-colonial discourses?

The creation of a setting with a cloth background in the street also describes a project of Malian photographer Fatoumata Diabaté. *The Street Studio (Studio Photo de la Rue)* is the title of the work she started in 2013, which deals with the studio photography of the 1950s and 1960s. After test running a minimalist version in front of a house in her neighborhood, Diabaté later set up her mobile studio in various countries. Like in the early photo studios, her photographic setting resembles a stage. There is a background cloth, and numerous props and clothing or costumes at the clients' disposal. They can also bring their own accessories. Potted plants, clocks, telephones, radios, cassette recorders and more refer to an inventory of signs well-established in West African studio photography. They also served to "put the photograph's subject in a mimetic relation to the higher social

classes (in colonial times, to the Europeans)."[2] But these signs are transformed in Diabaté's photographs, with the clear codes negated by the changed framing. In bringing the studio to Europe, she extends its mobility and creates spaces of encounter. Just like the predecessors' she refers to, the photos Diabaté takes in her street studio are black-and-white.

However, the desire to photograph the world 'like it is', i.e. in color, is as old as the medium itself. 'Natural color' is an important reference here. From the 1940s, photo labs have been using the color reference photos developed by Kodak, representing the photo industry's ideal standard, to calibrate their printing machines. The so-called Shirley Card (named after the model) shows a young woman, usually framed by color and gray scales. Modern reference images still refer to the standards developed back then. In her work *Testreihe*, artist Katrin Kamrau explores the default settings of this 'natural' color rendering and interrogates the framings that go with the developed standards for calibrating photo cameras and other image processing equipment. She translates such reference images into installations in the exhibition space with which the visitors are invited to interact and take Shirley's place. Marking the blind spot by the blank space, Kamrau points to the 'nature' of those 'natural colors', and thus the underlying constructions and conventions of photo practice. These also form the subject of her work *Das Objekt*. *Das Objekt* is based on the illustrations used to explain optical laws in various photography manuals published in Germany (Weimar Republic, FRG, GDR, …). The series of depictions cut from the frame of the manuals shows up their alleged neutrality and reveals the positing of what or who is an "object" fit for depiction. These photo manual illustrations are not photographs themselves, yet they prefigure countless photographs.

Starting out from  a critical approach to Shirley Cards in media studies informed by gender and post_colonial studies, Ulrike Bergermann examines the vital question if "algorithms can be racist," and problematizes the naturalization of the cultural and the ensuing depoliticization of the technical. Referring to media scientist Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, instead of addressing racism and sexism as a matter of "defined parameters" or "personal attitudes" alone, Bergermann proposes a

consideration of distributed complicity — a performative character of networks and media modes of functioning. She concludes: "Users, bots, and lines of code alike must recalibrate their *Likes*."

Today, algorithms are also deployed to support selection processes in photo desks. Miriam Zlobinski's article examines the hierarchizing practices in photo journalism, and throws light on the principles and structures that make for visibility or invisibility of press photographs. Zlobinski describes the changed conditions for photo editors in the age of digital photography and how they deal with the masses of photos. Only rarely do newsrooms still employ their own photographers. Zlobinski points out the resulting changes in the processes of selection and editing, and explores the influence of photographers on the reading of their pictures, as well as photo editors' practices within the structures of photojournalism.

Artist Andreas Langfeld visited the photo agencies and desks of international media for his photo and video project *Newsroom Editors*, and sheds light on the filter processes at work within the enormous mass of produced images. Langfeld photographed and filmed at the AFP photo desk in Paris, as well as in the newsrooms of dpa, taz, Libération, and the French magazine L'OBS. He focusses on the processes behind the photographs by way of which current world affairs are visualized and made tangible. This also points up the interlacing of image selection and image processing. Photo editors are revealed as operators who adapt or change the effect of a photo. In his photo and video images, Langfeld takes these operators into his sights from different perspectives, circling the workstations where press photos are selected and edited, and condensing them into a mise en abyme — a picture within the picture.

A work touching on the threshold between photojournalism and artistic research is the subject of Sarah Frost's contribution. It deals with US photographer and photojournalist Jerry Berndt's project from 1980/81 about a religious group employing polaroid pictures as a spiritual medium. The focus is on Berndt's unpublished photomontages and their intermediality. While Polaroid pictures are marked by

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their distinctive frame that emphasizes the picture's boundaries and thus the demarcation line between picture and non-picture, Frost demonstrates how Berndt starts to dissolve the clear line between the visual and the imaginary by interlacing his photographs of the pictures with believers' quotes.

Katharina Sykora's essay also revolves around the photographing of photographs. These are pictures that artist Ulrike Ottinger took in Beijing, Shanghai and outer Mongolia between 1984 and 1996. They show photographs "behind glass" in the shop windows of photo studios and in an altar inside a yurt. Sykora looks at the multiplied and nested framings of the shop window situation, functioning not only as a display but also as a resonating space and mirror of a social order.

Two further texts focus on other formations of the (shop) window and in very different ways deal with moments in which opacity becomes disrupted.

In Saul Leiter's 1960 photograph *Untitled*, which Elena Skarke analyses by way of example, a windowpane almost bars a clear view of what lies behind. The fogged-up window becomes a filter instead. Skarke examines these 'found' filters in Leiter's work, fogged-up or reflecting windowpanes as picturesque diffusing lenses, and their transformation into the presentational form of the diaphanous slide.

Dörthe Wilke-Kempf deals with diorama photography in her contribution, building a bridge from the glass negative as image carrier to the glass pane as mediator between the viewer and the dioramatic spatial image. She points towards the intersection between the cutting out and framing of photograph and diorama, where the frame reveals itself in both the physical and the metaphorical sense, as a frame of interpretation. Both media, the diorama and the documentary photograph, are linked to a promise of authenticity, which is sometimes thwarted in diorama photography. Wilke-Kempf shows how cracks and imperfections in the glass negative may in turn contribute to the effect of authenticity.

Far from the glass negatives of early analogue photography, Lena Holbein's article leads us towards issues of image selection in the digital age. With a view to conceptual art, where selection assumes the mantle of an artistic gesture, she discusses processes of digital image selection, inquiring into the relationship of subjective selection and the parameters set by the search filters of image data-

bases and photo-sharing platforms, and thus also examines the artistic subject's own status.

Searching for the same tags, Flickr and other platforms filter out photographs and in turn point to the reproduction of endlessly similar photo subjects. The reproduction of body images that are always the same, and the queering of those images in current net feminism is the subject of the text by Katrin Deja. She devotes herself to photographic works that get extremely close to the body and describes these fragmented nudes and their subversive potential. Deja points to the incessant reiteration of established staging modes as a recognition mechanism of the digital constitution of the subject, raising the question what could constitute a "female gaze" in this set-up, and how it articulates itself.

Lea Hilsemer's contribution inquires into the relationship of gaze and frame. She examines the photographic practices of exhibition visitors and investigates taking photos of artworks as a form of subjective gaze. Using exemplary field research, she sheds light on the motivations and strategies of the photo-taking visitors who create frames of their own.

The selection, presentation and contextualization of artworks in an exhibition display is an important part of the work of a curator. Starting out from current research that links up curation and digital display, Agniezska Roguski investigates curatorial action in digital self-representation. Turning the established role of the curator into a creative subject, she asks to what extent this role "acts as filter, reducing all online activities to its individual, unique self?"

The exhibition display of the Filters and Frames project is the HBK Braunschweig's gallery, a White Cube — and thus exhibition architecture that tries to retreat behind the artworks as 'neutrally' as possible. The presentation of the artistic works extends beyond the White cube to the foyer, thus pointing to the gallery space as a system of reference and frame itself.

Katja Böhlau and Elisabeth Pichler

1 —— "Grins banned from passport pics", *BBC NEWS*, 6 August 2004 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/
hi/uk_news/politics/3541444.stm>.
2 —— Jean-François Werner and Erika Nimis, "Zur Geschichte der Fotografie im frankophonen Westafrika",
in *Snap me one! Studiofotografien in Afrika*, ed. by Tobias Wendl and Heike Behrend (Munich:
Prestel, 1998), pp. 17–23 (p. 18) [trans. T.B.].