

Abstract - 2018

Shadow Machine Project



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A train window, 2017
Damien Henry

<https://twitter.com/twitter/statuses/861334725750816768>

In 2017, artist Damien Henry produced an hour long video by feeding a single image into machine learning software that uses predictive algorithms to generate each next image in the moving image sequence. The completed video resembles a view from a train window where the landscape passing is smeared, it is nevertheless, compelling to watch. This provides a clear example of how photography is changing; images provided by humans, are being expanded upon and interpreted upon through networks of computation.

But what is Photography now and why would we care? Does it matter if what we have known as Photography has evolved into an automated processes of machine vision fed by images provided by social networks? What if we where to ask what is photography in a much larger and long term context? What has it been and what will be for the future other than at the service of technological innovation.

The predominant conversation around current Photographic Practice is around its relationship to neural networks and the activities of the computational networked image and associated with machine vision. Although this condition is well suited to the prevailing social climate of the time, Photographic practice has always been strongly aligned with personal human visual communication. Photography is as significant as it has always been, but it is now presenting itself in other possible forms that are as yet to be recognised.



Lace, 1845
William Henry Fox Talbot

This project looks at the longer and wider context of Photographic Practice and seeks to find where its tradition is now, and in doing so, where it may be headed for the future. The starting point for this investigation is the inception of photography itself. In 1844 the Photographic pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot proposed a photographic method by which '*nature would draw itself*'. His inadvertent invention of the reproducibility of the photographic image has been at the core of photography's continued relevance and success. The title of his first publication on Photography was '*On the Art of Fixing a Shadow*' and the relevance of both light and shadow to his work and the photographic process is obvious. For the purposes of this project, and in keeping with an originally stated intention of its primary inventors, Photography will be regarded from the point of view of the Shadow.

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*Drawing a Silhouette by Johann
Rudolph Schellenberg
(1740–1806)*



*Nosferatu 1922
Friedrich Murnau*



*Slow pixel - Ballet for 176 snails
Cyril Leclerc & Elizabeth Saint-
Jalmes, 2018*

The fascination of speaking with or through shadows is one that has been a common and pervasive character throughout the history of visual communication. It features in caves paintings, the myths of Plato and Pliny, and has continually articulated throughout literature, painting, architecture, theatre, film and of course, Photography.

So where is the Shadow now? With such a long and deep tradition, it seems highly unlikely that it would no longer exist. So where, how and why is the Shadow now and how is it represented in current visual communication? If we can identify how and where the Shadow is operating currently, this will indicate to where Photographic practice may be heading. By asking different questions of Photography, ones from the point of view of on an originally stated intention of the fixing of shadow, instead of a technological inquiry; new notions may be determined.

The purpose of the project is not only to identify a notion of Photographic practice that is relevant to the prevailing current conditions, but one that make sense from a historical perspective. This line of reasoning and investigation will broaden definitions and expand the field of Photographic Practice.

The forms of Photographic Practice of endeavour that may be presented may or may not resemble what is thought to be conventional Photography. They may include other existing practices to be newly considered within the realm of an expanded Photographic Practice.

This investigation offers a new combination of two overlapping historical narratives; The history of the Shadow, and the history of Photography. Contrasting these in relation to a contemporary context will generate a relevant and original interpretation. By observing from conceptual standpoint, as opposed to a technological or social one, new notions of Photographic Practice will be proposed.

Not only does this project seek to provide insights that identify a place for Photography in a continuing historical narrative, but also to identify a place for the Shadow within its own historical narrative.
