

# DAS FOTO GRAFISCHE DISPOSITIV

BRAUNSCHWEIG UNIVERSITY OF ART | JOHANNES-SELENKA-PLATZ 1 | D-38118 BRAUNSCHWEIG

## RESEARCH PROGRAM

The medium of photography has significantly influenced our perspective of the world over the course of its almost two hundred year history. The PhD program expands the view of photography as image to include the photographic act. This understanding of the photographic extends back into the pre-photographic era with the development of technologies like the camera lucida and the camera oscura, perspective apparatuses, still life iconographies, the conceptual imaging method of Alberti's Window, and ways of seeing detail and close-up.

Along with theories central to film and media studies, the program will also draw on other approaches to the notion of the dispositif from philosophy, sociology, and philology, correlating them with more recent thinking on performance and agency in order to elucidate the agency of the act-centered approach to the photographic dispositif. The goal of this is to determine the relevance of these theories in terms of the photographic, to elaborate upon their differences, and to develop an operational understanding of the photographic dispositif. In doing so, a narrow or purely mechanical thinking of the dispositif which understands the photographic image and its perception as an automated apparatus of normative power, without taking into account the subjects in front of and behind the camera, nor their discursive context, will be avoided.

The research perspective of the program assumes that the creation, manipulation, perception, and exhibition of photography, together with the surrounding discourses, constitute a complex act that unfolds a specific rhetorical, theatrical, and scopic power. The power of the image, perspective, and discourse should appear not only as a repressive means of discipline or a flexible strategy of self-normalization, but also as disruptive potential and creative image-play.

The program therefore understands the photographic *dispositif* to be an “act under photographic conditions” which can, but must not necessarily, produce both photographic images and imagery. Thus, the photographic can effectively function as a *dispositif* in acts which do not lead to the production of images of objects in the sense of analog photography, such as in film, electronic and digital media, in painting and graphic art, or in Literature.

In order to more thoroughly investigate the alleged transfer of photographic particularities to other media, certain minimal conditions of photography must be identified. These structural features can include the physical-chemical referentiality (there is no photograph without a referent), the retroactiveness of the referentially generated image (“that there has been”), the synchronicity of memory in photographic perception (“it was now”), the interface through space (there is always a relational “outside” of the photograph), as well as the interruption and freezing of time.

This structure is not identical to the photographic *dispositif* in the envisioned sense, however. Rather, it is to be understood as the functional determination of an image act. This is thus in addition to what a photograph means, as well as to what it actually “does”, in the sense of what it brings with it, how it operates and structures, what its aim is, and what it changes. The photographic *dispositif* is therefore always a “matrix for potential interaction”, which draws the reciprocal modifications of the actors towards it, for example between the referent and the photographer/photography or between the photographic object and its observer/user.

This dynamic and relational determination allows us to grasp the paradoxical system of the photographic *dispositif*: it activates a latent fissure within the normally closed system of photography, opening up to an immense number of interactions and the resulting transformations. The photographic *dispositif* distinguishes itself primarily through the function of the “dis”, which causes the crack in the photographic structure to become virulent.

Because of this, the possibility exists that the photographic structure does not necessarily lead to a *dispositif* of normative rhetoric or iconic power, but can also generate other practices apart from what is anticipated because of its fragility. It is from this perspective that the dual potential for action emerges: in the mode of pliable adaptation, the photographic falls into place within the *dispositif* of power, but as a

creative, politically subversive agent continually subjects this power to the test, and often it is involved in both roles.

Alongside its functions of disrupting, activating, and opening, the photographic dispositif takes on a reflexive level as well. The juxtaposition of the stabilizing tendency of the photographic structure with the destabilizing potential of the dispositif continuously tests its dynamic qualities while putting it in a framework which is always new. This (self)display of the photographic dispositif keeps the performative (re)performative character of the photographic image act present, making it theatrical. Through this it becomes a starting point for critical reflection, opening up possibilities for consciously affirmative or “rebellious” practices.

It is in this complex sense that the program will develop and make useful the term dispositif for the photographic, not as a fixed characterization, but as an epistemic guide. Approaches to research on the dispositif should therefore be comparatively discussed, specified, and questioned with regards to their benefit for the photographic.

The program’s range of content opens a space for the inclusion of dissertation projects with photo-theoretical and/or photo-historical focuses, or which trace the hybrid migrations from the photographic to the non-photographic.

Also welcome are dissertation projects in cultural theory or art history which deal with specific photographic objects, collections, artists, and their contextualization, as are media studies or philological projects that deal with photography, the photographic, or the inter- and trans-medial movements of photographic work from a theoretical or object-based perspective.

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