

How to Win at Photography: Image-Making and Play

Peter Buse

NECSUS 11 (2), Autumn 2022

<https://necsus-ejms.org/how-to-win-at-photography-image-making-and-play/>

How does one win at photography? The Photographers' Gallery in Soho, London is a very good place to ask this question, since it hosts one of the world's most prestigious photography competitions: the Deutsche Börse Prize, whose past winners include Andreas Gursky, Rineke Dijsktra, Anna Gaskell, Juergen Teller, and Luc Delahaye. But it is precisely this dimension of photographic play that is excluded from *How to Win at Photography: Image-Making as Play*, which was originally curated by Marco De Mutiis and Matteo Bittanti at the Fotomuseum Winterthur in Switzerland in 2021 and is brought to London in collaboration with Anna Dannemann. The Deutsche Börse may be a competition, with winners and losers (or runners-up), it may even have elements of a game about it, but for the purist it is not ludic, not a form of play. In the words of its most prominent theorists, play is 'an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it'[1] and from the playful 'nothing has been harvested or manufactured, no masterpiece has been created, no capital has accrued.[2] From photography competitions, careers are launched, artefacts multiply in value, and canons are formed. Play in photography, then, must lie elsewhere. This exhibition's understanding of play is capacious, even loose, but its core lies somewhere between the inter-implication of photography and video games, and the gamification of photography in social media and culture more widely. The answer to the question it poses: that one wins by not winning, by declining to play the game, or by inventing a new game within the existing one.

The Photographers' Gallery opened in 1971 as the first public gallery in the UK dedicated solely to photography. As well as hosting the Deutsche Börse Prize every year, over its four floors of galleries on Ramillies Street it puts on exhibitions of individual photographers and themed shows like *How to Win at Photography*, and it also runs a regular programme of talks and workshops with photographic education a core part of its mission. In recent years it has championed the work of women photographers, and in 2011 was the first gallery in the UK to appoint a Curator of Digital and Networked Image. Accordingly, it does not define photography narrowly, but sees it in its continuity with a larger image ecology that cannot be separated from technological developments, and specifically from photography's embeddedness in online networks. *How to Win at Photography* aligns well with this focus, with very little of its content conventional photographs, much of it born-digital or generated, and many of the individual works multi-medial and/or including moving images.

There are 32 artists or artworks represented in the show, and half of them allude to, draw on, or interact with video games, most commonly, but not exclusively, 'first-person shooters' such as *Grand Theft Auto* or *Tour of Duty*. They all ask the question, one way or another, what does it mean to play (with) these games without following their rules? This does not mean cheating, which as Huizinga says, simply robs the game of its play-character,[3] but rather continuing to play, but not along the strictly prescribed rails laid out by the game. Even if the worlds they inhabit grow increasingly complex and layered, immersive first-person shooters (and their predecessors, maze and platform games) provide their player with a strictly limited set of goals: kill, survive, advance to the next level. Against this narrow teleology, perhaps the most expansive, contemplative foray is Harun Farocki's four-channel video installation *Parallel* (2012-14), a driftwork that explores three decades in the development of video game graphics, narrative, character construction, and world-building. It does this through edited recordings of the games being played – not in order to win, but as explorations of the game architecture, all in the mode of testing the programme(s) and their limits. One long sequence takes the repetitiveness of video games to its logical extreme, by guiding its characters to bump repeatedly into minor figures populating the 'background' of the game in order to see what the programming has prepared for such

eventualities. It is a curiosity-led investigation that strays far away from the putative aims of the game, but always from *within* the game. The urban setting of so many of these games makes even stronger the sense that Farocki's investigation is a situationist *dérive* made virtual.

There are other practitioners of the *dérive* in *How to Win at Photography*, artists who wander through the game allowing themselves to be distracted by elements of the architecture at one or more remove from playing the game as the programme requires. And this is where photography begins to come in. Drawing on the fertile sub-genre of gaming screenshots, artists like Lorna Ruth Galloway and Justin Berry seize on aspects of the gaming landscape that might otherwise only be experienced in passing as atmosphere or background. Galloway, in homage to Ed Ruscha's *TwentySix Gasoline Stations* (also in the show), takes screenshots of filling stations found in *Grand Theft Auto V* and creates charcoal silkscreens from them, while Berry generates Escher-like environments based on memories of landscapes he travelled through on *Call of Duty*, treating them as if they were real experiences, sights seen on his travels. Alan Butler, meanwhile, searches through game environments for texture files of trees and plants, plucks them from the software and produces a series of *Virtual Botany Cynaotypes*, in allusion to Anne Atkins' *Cyanotypes of British Algae* (1843). Staying within the game world but working on a principle of subtraction rather than extraction, Cory Arcangel in *Super Landscape 1* hacks the software of *Super Mario Clouds* to remove all characters, sounds, and other play elements to leave only landscape elements running on a loop.

To bypass the game 'itself' and to avoid the goals that it has set its players is not necessarily an abandonment of play. As Bernard Suits says of the 'lusory attitude': 'in anything but a game the gratuitous introduction of unnecessary obstacles to the achievement of an end is regarded as a decidedly irrational thing to do, whereas in games it appears to be an absolutely essential thing to do'.⁵⁴ Along these lines, what we encounter in *How to Win at Photography* is second order play that delays the accomplishment of the game's goals and thereby prolongs the game, but in a new direction. To extend the comparison with situationist tactics, we might see the ways in which other artists in the show take up and repurpose

video game elements as modes of *détournement*. In *Videogame Color Fields* (2006-), for example, Joan Pamboukes pulls colours and aesthetic principles from violent games such as *Kill Zone* and *Metal Gear* in order to create abstract sky and cloud formations divorced entirely from their violent origins. Similarly, Tabor Robak makes use of video game production software to create verisimilar (photographic) images with no direct relation to gaming, in this case a series of 198 ambiguously real stones abstracted from any natural environment. Equally ambiguous is *The Unreal* (2019-), a digital video by Gloria López Cleries and Sive Hamilton Helle that takes us through an idealised game landscape whose utopian sweep gradually gives way to a despoiled mining scene, with no clear guidance to the viewer on how to interpret what we are seeing, and no help from the ambient music and soothing voice over that may or may not parody corporate mindfulness discourse. A more direct intervention in the gaming world can be seen in the work of Danielle Udogaranya, who designs avatars for people whose skin colour and appearance are often ignored in simulated environments such as *The Sims 4*.

In video games the rules of play are generally spelled out or can be reliably learned by a player. In the broader gamification of culture, in contrast, a set of algorithmic principles is often at work, submerged and never to be disclosed. This is the case with the online networked image, which is by some margin the dominant vernacular experience of the photographic today. This experience has been chronicled and analysed under various rubrics. André Gunthert writes of the shared, dematerialised, and hyper-connected *image partagée*; Hito Steyerl diagnoses the 'poor image', the image subject to 'swarm circulation, digital dispersion'[5]; and Rubinstein and Sluis and many others map the ubiquity of the web-based image. Given the absolute pervasiveness of the networked image, it is predictable that a number of works in the show engage with the element of play in the socially mediated image, with Instagram looming large in the gallery, as it does in life.

For all their apparent playfulness though, these platforms are the opposite of play, since they put their users to work, as Dena Yago has shown in her analysis of the 'content industrial complex'. It is now a commonplace that media platforms with their 'likes' and 'followers' cultivate competition among their users in an attention

economy, and some work in the exhibition does not progress much beyond simple critique of this state of affairs. What this cluster of works collectively muses on is the old preoccupation with what Kim Beil calls ‘good pictures’ and the sometimes written (in how-to guides) and sometimes unwritten rules that govern their production and appreciation. Some, like Emma Agnes Sheffer, show us what makes a ‘successful’ picture by presenting an infinite regress of most-liked and most-shared images on a hashtag-able theme (person in front of waterfall); while others, like Cibelle Cavallia Bastos, challenge the normative image canons in claiming corporate platforms for trans-activist and anti-racist causes. Since ‘success’ in photography is now determined algorithmically, it makes sense to look for the secret formula for good pictures within the swamp of big data. This is what Dries Depoorter and Max Pinckers have done with their project *Trophy Camera* v0.9 (2017), a photographic AI apparatus that has ‘learned’ all the winning images from the World Press Photo of the Year since 1955. Armed with this data set, when it takes photos it rejects and automatically deletes any image that fails to match with the orthodoxies contained in the data set. No more need, then, to read Roland Barthes – here is a machine that will evaluate for you the mythological fit of any image with contemporary canons, a semiosis machine that will never know why semiotics emerged in the first place.

The rest of the works in *How to Win at Photography* do not fall so neatly under the narrow rubric of the exhibition’s main title. Not quite a miscellany, they are accommodated by the subtitle and the five themed sections that recognise how difficult it is to restrict ‘play’ as a concept to competition and games alone. This leads to a lack of coherence overall, with no strong guiding thread holding the sections together. In this context, it is instructive to place *How to Win at Photography* alongside two earlier and more focused accounts of ludic photography: *Avant l’avant-garde: Du jeu en photographie 1890-1940* (2015) by Clément Chéroux, and *For the LOL of Cats: Felines, Photography and the Web*, curated by Katrina Sluis at the Photographers Gallery in 2012-13. Chéroux chronicles the development of what he calls *photographie récréatif*: the array of tricks that became available to amateur photographers in the late nineteenth century, allowing them to produce amusing photographs of men in bottles, heads on platters, and all manner of comic doubles. Chéroux then demonstrates how this

répertoire ludique – photography as a form of diversion or entertainment – was taken up enthusiastically by the avant-gardes who were drawn to the distorting effects and absurdities that could be produced through photographic manipulations and juxtapositions. In this way photographic jokes were elevated to the level of art. *For the LOL of Cats* is important because it showed this popular and avant-garde tradition brought into the epoch of the internet, with the cat meme the computational version of what was once achieved with distorting lenses or darkroom superimpositions. The exhibition projected on the Photographers' Gallery Media Wall, images harvested from websites devoted to celebrity cat photoblogs, nineteenth-century cat photography, and instructional tutorials on how to best photograph your kitty, and in the spirit of Web 2.0, invited gallery users to contribute to the ever-changing feline content on the Media Wall. In other words, Chéroux provides a genealogy of one particular strand of photographic play, while Sluis concentrated on a single contemporary manifestation of that strand.

Examples of the tradition of trick and joke photography are scattered around *How to Win at Photography* – a tacit acknowledgement that an exhibition on photography and play cannot ignore this mode, even if the territory has been thoroughly covered elsewhere. It can be found in the facial contortions of Coralie Vogelaar's *Random String of Emotions* (2018), and in Ai Weiwei's middle finger to monumentality in *Study of Perspective* (1995-2011), as well as in Roc Herms' virtual recreation of this middle finger within the San Andreas gameworld of *Grand Theft Auto V*. But even though there is a deliberate link established between Weiwei and Herms, there is no sense of an historical argument being made in the show. In the room devoted to 'Role Play', two old standbys face diagonally across from each other: Claude Cahun on one wall, Cindy Sherman on the other. They are here because they play with identity, using photography to show how gender is fluid, or contingent, or unstable. But they are many other places as well, since we have seen these pictures in plenty of other contexts, conveniently recycled because they are recognisable crowd pleasers. Cahun is in fact one of the artists represented in Chéroux's text as illustrative of the wider avant-garde appropriation of trick photography, finding her place in a more secure chronology than the one that connects her with Sherman on the other side of the room. This

does not mean they are not great pictures and suitable to the theme, but their presence here adds to a feeling of belatedness. When the Photographers' Gallery mounted *For the LOL of Cats* in 2012 the networked image was still in its infancy, or at least its adolescence, but a decade later it is well into its middle age.

Author

Peter Buse is Dean of the School of the Arts and Professor of Visual Culture at the University of Liverpool. He has published widely on the history of photography.

References

- Beil, K. *Good pictures: A history of popular photography*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020.
- Buse, P. 'On Ludic Photography', *photographies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 6 October 2021: 421-441;
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17540763.2021.1957003>
- Caillois, R. *Man, play, and games*, translated by M. Barash. New York: The Free Press, 1961.
- Chéroux, C. *Avant l'avant-garde: Du jeu en photographie 1890-1940*. Paris: Textuel, 2015.
- Gunther, A. *L'Image partagée. La photographie numérique*. Paris: Textuel, 2015.
- Huizinga, J. *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. Kettering: Angelico Press, 2016 [orig. in 1938].
- Rubinstein, R. and Sluis, K. 'A Life More Photographic: Mapping the Networked Image', *Photographies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 2008: 9-28.
- Steyerl, H. 'In Defense of the Poor Image', *e-flux journal*, 10, November 2009:
<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.
- Suits, B. *The grasshopper: Games, life and utopia*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1978.
- Yago, D. 'Content Industrial Complex', *e-flux Journal*, 89, March 2018:
<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/89/181611/content-industrial-complex/>.

Notes

- [1] Huizinga 2016, p. 13.

[2] Caillois 1961, p. 5.

[3] Huizinga 2016, p. 52.

[4] Suits 1978, p. 39.

[5] Steyerl 2009.