

Play Time

palavras-chave

fotografia
pintura
apropriação
história da arte

keywords

photography
painting
appropriation
art history

RESUMO

Um negativo de gelatina e sal de prata, de 9 × 12 cm, encontrado e adquirido num mercado de rua da cidade do Porto, é o ponto de partida para uma reflexão sobre a influência que a fotografia publicitária de produtos fotográficos, exerceu na fotografia vernacular praticada pelos amadores no período após a segunda Guerra Mundial. Procura-se demonstrar também uma influência estilística no sentido inverso, nas últimas décadas do século vinte, em que as 'imperfeições' da fotografia amadora começam a ser apreciadas e incorporadas nos discursos estéticos da fotografia contemporânea.

O negativo aqui analisado é um registo profissional para um catálogo, representando molduras metálicas que contêm reproduções de imagens fotográficas. Os conteúdos destas fotografias sugerem leituras políticas e económicas, no seu contexto histórico, transformando este negativo encontrado numa espécie de micro-atlas (uma tentativa de representação de uma totalidade) da história da arte e da humanidade, do século dezoito até ao presente.

ABSTRACT

From an analysis of a found 9 × 12 cm silver gelatin negative, depicting frames with photographs inside, this work aims at demonstrating ways in which, in post second World War times, vernacular photography was influenced by the style and composition of professional advertising photography, which in turn started to incorporate the 'imperfections' of amateur photography in later twentieth century.

The negative presented here as an object of research, is a professional photographic record primarily intended to promote commercial products, but the content and historical times of the images it holds, suggest a deeper reading of their political and economical implications. It becomes a kind of micro-atlas (an attempt at a totality) of the history of art and humanity from the eighteenth century up to the present.

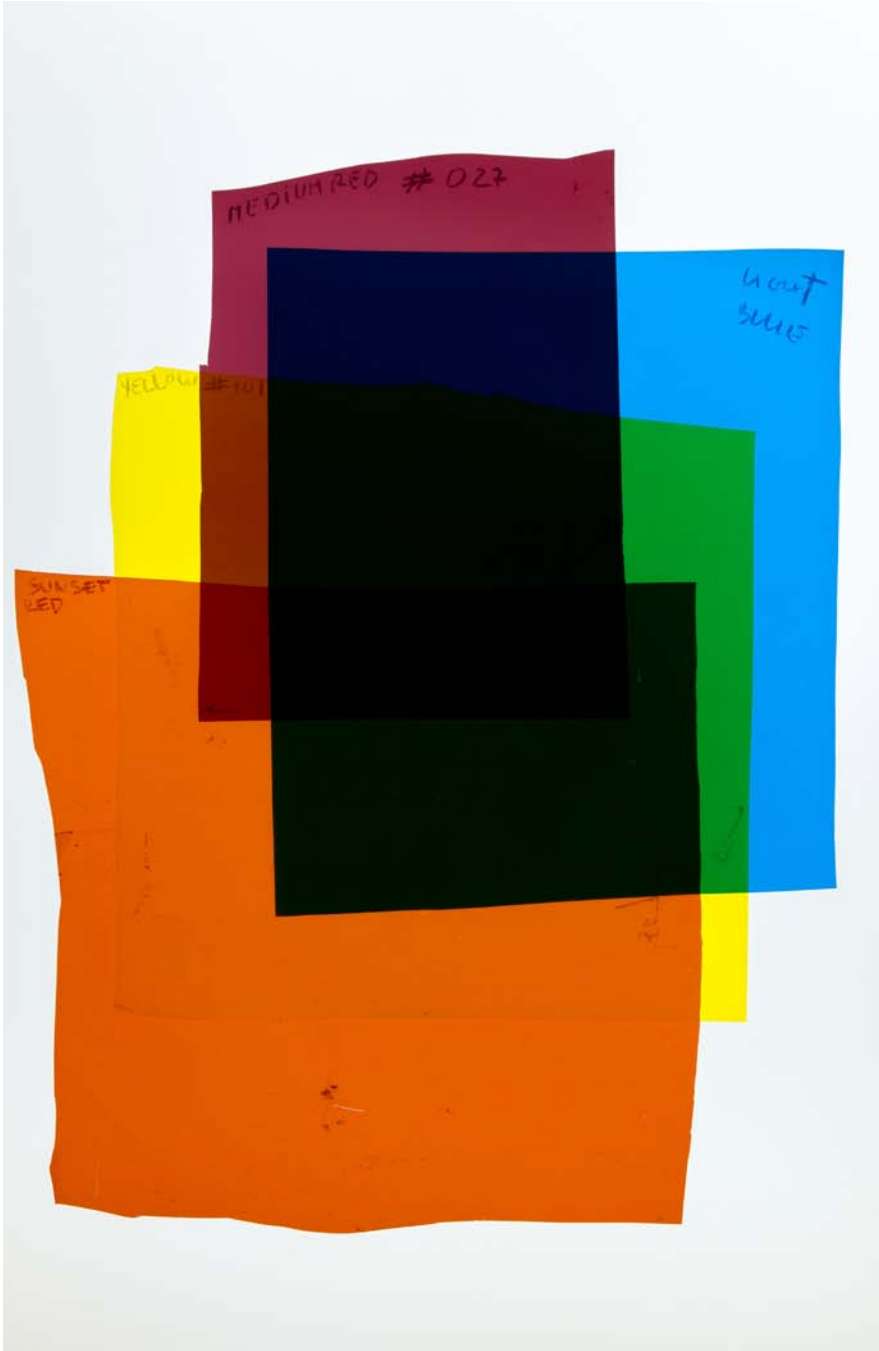
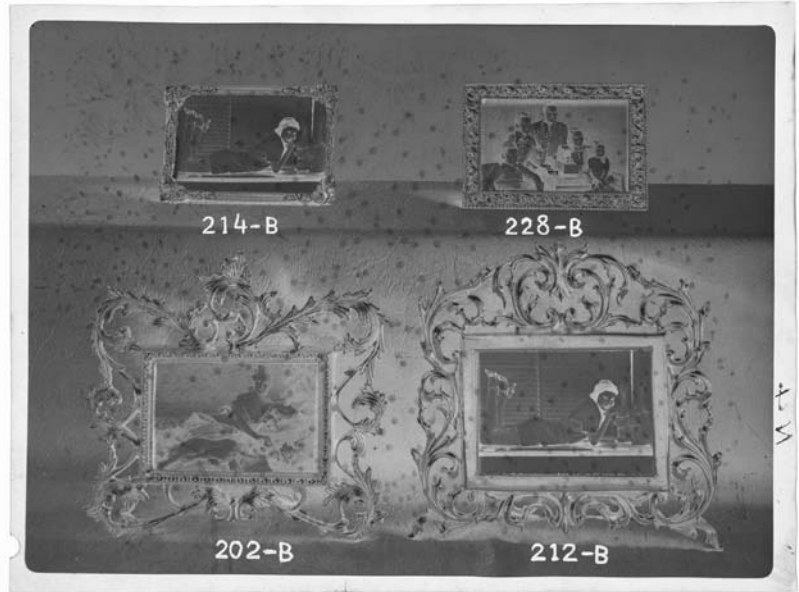


Fig. 1 Play Time, digital capture, 2015, Cesário M. F. Alves.

Fig. 2 9 x 12 cm found negative.



(...) To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. (...)

— SUSAN SONTAG

This essay begins by revealing one 9 x 12 cm silver gelatin negative, bought in a street market in Porto, Portugal. It was found among a set of the same format depicting cast metal objects of several kinds (picture frames, mirrors, chandeliers). Numbers related to each model engraved in the negative, indicate that we are probably facing a photograph for a catalogue, a professional job commissioned by a maker or dealer of this kind of products.

The negative releases the typical smell of acetic acid which plagues plastic cellulose acetate (a kind of plastic introduced by the photographic industry in early twentieth century), revealing a form of degradation known as the ‘vinegar syndrome’. It is encrusted with chemical crystallizations of plasticizer additives, taking the shape of small round eruptions on the film surface. They have conquered visual space over the silver grains, as if the photograph is inside a glass dome that has just been shaken.

Cellulose acetates were developed and perfected from the 1920’s onwards², intended to replace nitrate film, (a much more unstable and flammable material), but it was soon discovered that the failure to preserve acetates under strict temperature and relative humidity control, would accelerate its deterioration.

Rather than submitting this negative (the specimen) to a rigorous process of stabilization in a controlled environment, as could have happened in the hands of a conservation scientist, in this work it will be the subject of a poetical visual analysis, where the chemical degradation is assumed as a pictorial layer of the image. This work is therefore about arresting an instant of the mutating state of this negative.

¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin Books (1979), p. 4.

² A Short Guide to Film Base Photographic Materials: Identification, Care, and Duplication, could be found in: <https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/5-photographs/5.1-a-short-guide-to-film-base-photographic-materials-identification,-care,-and-duplication>

On her influential work 'On Photography', from the 1970's, Susan Sontag (1933–2004) asserts:

The real difference between the aura that a photograph can have and that of painting lies in the different relation to time. The depredations of time tend to work against paintings. But part of the built-in interest of photographs, and a major source of their aesthetic value, is precisely the transformations that time works upon them, the way they escape the intentions of their makers. Given enough time, many photographs do acquire an aura. (...) For while paintings or poems do not get better, more attractive simply because they are older, all photographs are interesting as well as touching if they are old enough. It is not altogether wrong to say that there is no such thing as a bad photograph – only less interesting, less relevant, less mysterious ones. (...) (Sontag, 1979, p. 140).

Despite being a black and white negative it reproduces (re-photographs) other images inside frames, which seem to be Offset print reproductions of color and/or black and white photographs. These were probably licensed from a commercial image bank, the kind that could be seen in calendars and other products of the printing industry. Generic multiples, which may have been reproduced thousands of times, for different purposes.

We are facing three different photographs inside four frames (since one is repeated). The lower left one is a technical reproduction of a painting, a photograph made invisible by faithfully reproducing a work of art. In this case the disappearance of the photograph is only possible because of a good performance³ of the photographer. The other two photographs have more in common: They were obviously fabricated and shot professionally, with a careful production, lighting and framing. Both employ models, which look very convincing in their artificial roles. They have the quality and refinement demanded by advertising.

Inside this catalog photograph, those images become accessories and byproducts of the business of making and selling frames. They inform the potential buyer about the function of this product, while at the same time suggest idealized models of what could be displayed. They are varied in subject and intended audience.

In organizing four models of frames in one shot, the photographer allows their comparison while saving time and film. Furthermore, by reproducing the set in black and white, he levels and attenuates the impact of each photograph inside of it. This serves perfectly well the purpose of selling frames (if not the images inside of them).

Besides the photographer who made our 9 × 12 cm negative, there must have been a different photographer for each of the other photographs, reflecting specific formal and technical concerns, as well as intent. The pictures inside this particular photograph contain at least another three different narratives and a multitude of meanings radiate from them.

Frame 202-B includes a painting dated from 1742, clearly a photographic reproduction of an allegorical portrait of Anne Henriette of France (1727–1752) as Flora (deity of Roman mythology). Anne Henriette, the older daughter of king Louis xv of France, a prominent young woman interested in music and the arts, made herself a model to several portraits by Jean-Marc Nattier (1685–1766) and other painters.

³ The term performance alludes to the way Walter Benjamin used it in the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility":

"To photograph a painting is one kind of reproduction, but to photograph an action performed in a film studio is another. In the first case, what is reproduced is a work of art, while the act of producing it is not. The cameraman's performance with the lens no more creates an artwork than a conductor's with the baton; at most, it creates an artistic performance." (Benjamin, p. 29)

Fig. 3 Portrait of Anne Henrietta of France (Versailles, 1727–1752) in the guise of Flore, 1742, painting by Jean-Marc Nattier (1685–1766), oil on canvas 94 × 128 cm. Florence, Palazzo Pitti.

Screen capture retrieved from Getty Images website (<http://www.gettyimages.pt/detail/fotografia-de-not%C3%ADcias/portrait-of-anne-henrietta-of-france-in-the-fotografia-de-not%C3%ADcias/164083612>).



This reproduction of an eighteenth century painting is held on a frame with a floral baroque arrangement, suggesting a closer relationship of the painting style and the decoration of the frame. Interestingly the painting depicts the figure reclined on the slope of a hill, while arranging a crown of flowers, with a distant, dark landscape behind. The pose is carefully staged and the whole scene looks like a theatrical diorama. The light falls brightly on the woman's body and helps to the effect, like a sunbeam that escapes through a hole between dark clouds, leaving everything else in an un-natural obscurity. Loose clothes, exposure of the shoulders and chest, as well as the direction of the look, suggest a flirt with someone outside of the frame (the place of the painter and the viewer), to whom the eyes of the model are directed.

This unique portrait, commissioned and owned by powerful patrons, must have been envied and admired by the privileged few, who may have seen it in its time (and could only preserve a fleeting memory of it).

On the reception of painting over time Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) wrote in 1936:

(...) Painting, by its nature, cannot provide an object of simultaneous collective reception, as architecture has always been able to do, as the epic poem could do at one time, and as film is able to do today. And although direct conclusions about the social role of painting cannot be drawn from this fact alone, it does have a strongly adverse effect whenever painting is led by special circumstances, as if against its nature, to confront the masses directly. In the churches and monasteries of the Middle Ages, and at the princely courts up to about the end of the eighteenth century, the collective reception of paintings took place not simultaneously but in a manifoldly graduated and hierarchically mediated way. If that has changed, the change testifies to the special conflict in which painting has become enmeshed by the technological reproducibility of the image. And while efforts have been made to present paintings to the masses in galleries and salons, this mode of reception gives the masses no means of organizing and regulating their response. Thus, the same public which reacts progressively to a slapstick comedy inevitably displays a backward attitude toward Surrealism. (Benjamin, p. 36).

In the era of photography and the modern means of technological reproducibility, every owner of an affordable metal frame can own a copy of Anne Henriette's portrait,

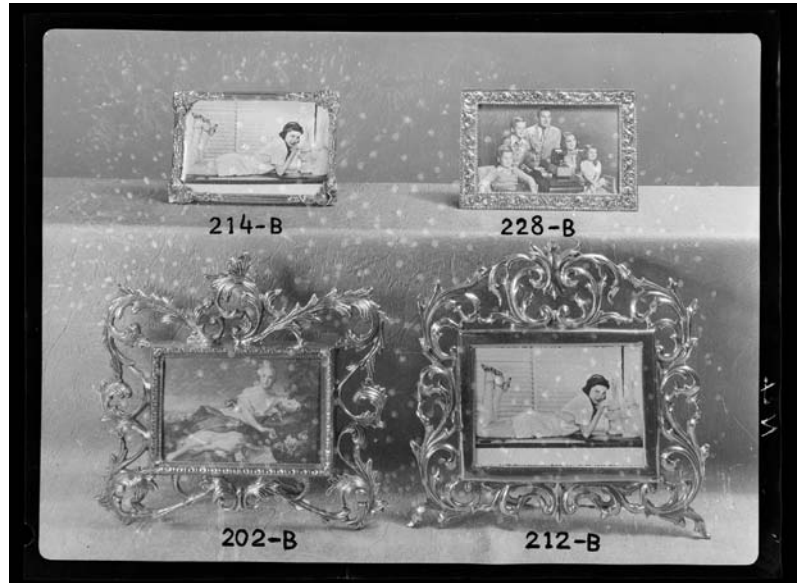
Fig. 4 The original found negative inverted to positive.

4 (...) The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it. Since the historical testimony is founded on the physical duration, the former, too, is jeopardised by reproduction, in which the physical duration plays no part. And what is really jeopardised when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object, the weight it derives from tradition. (Benjamin, p. 23). (...) What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. (Benjamin, p. 23).

5 The concept and history of the Pin-up is very interesting and revealing of how erotic photographs of women may have been understood (accepted or rejected, especially by women) throughout the twentieth century, adapting to tragic circumstances like the first and second world war. A good introduction to this subject can be found in the Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pin-up_girl

6 Despite not having a date or any other information on this photograph, the style and clothes of the model point most likely to the second half of the twentieth century.

7 There's at least one well-known case of a popular Pin-up model turned into a photographer: Linnea Eleanor "Bunny" Yeager. Coincidentally her artistic name "Bunny" is also related with the Easter iconography. More info in: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bunny_Yeager



even if only a multiple, deprived of value and authenticity. The emancipation of the work of art came at the cost of the aura⁴.

The photographs in the frames 212-B and 214-B depict a young woman laying down in what doesn't seem to be a bed (looks more like a table or a kind of platform). The woman poses in a slightly erotic way in front of a couple of toy rabbits and faces the viewer with a smile. Everything looks very much like a constructed studio scene and every object in the photograph seems to be a fake adornment.

Although this particular image could not be identified yet, a web search for images with women and rabbits returns a great amount of old photographs depicting these subjects in a variety of staged scenes, in what seems to have been (throughout most of the twentieth century) a popular way of representing the commercial iconography of Easter with an erotic charge, the so called Easter Pin-up girls⁵.

If we compare this portrait of a twentieth century woman with the eighteenth century painted representation of Anne Henrietta of France in the role of a roman fertility goddess, one might find some intriguing similarities and differences. Both women are laying down in a relaxed erotic stance and both are facing (and challenging) the viewer. The presence of rabbits in the twentieth century photograph could also symbolize fertility, eroticism or simple naïve playfulness. It is well known that a man painted the portrait of Anne Henrietta, in an era when (almost) all painters were men. Over 200 years afterwards⁶, the Pin-up photograph was very likely also made by a man and probably meant to become the object of the male gaze (although this is merely the assumption of a male)⁷.

On the upper right side of the negative we find the last picture (228-B). It uncovers a group photograph, depicting a family gathering around a 1950's slide projector.



Fig. 5 The original found negative inverted to positive (detail 214-B).

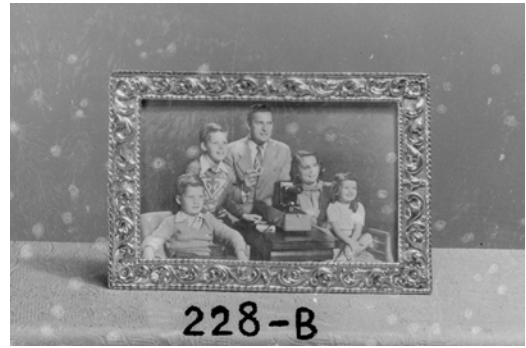


Fig. 6 The original found negative inverted to positive (detail 228-B).

Unlike the other images, in this one the gaze of the models is not directed towards the viewer. All five people (representing parents and children) look convincingly in the same direction as the projector, towards the outside of the frame, and all of them are synchronized in their smiles. For a moment we may even forget that a slide projection implies a darkened room to be seen properly.

Slide projectors, the natural evolution of the pre-photographic Magic Lantern, became necessary and popular with the spread of color 35 mm positive film, from the 1930's onwards. Kodachrome film appeared in 1935 and was initially used mainly by photography and cinema professionals, relying on its detail and richness of colors, but soon Agfa developed their own positive transparency film (followed by color negative film), and steadily color processes were perfected and marketed globally throughout the 40's and 50's. The period after the Second World War in the United States of America and Europe, was of a considerable growth of vernacular photography, a consequence of an aggressive industrialization and advertising directed to the amateur market.

The amount of brands and models of slide projectors we can find from the 50's and 60's in the second hand market today, is astonishing, as are the advertising pages produced for them. They always represent beautifully arranged sets and extremely well dressed models around this machine, suggesting it is very suitable for social events and family reunions.

Photographs in advertising for photographic products (as in the majority of advertising photography) are always elegantly produced, representing idealized concepts of happiness and well-being, therefore they're most of the times deceiving. Despite that, they certainly helped shape a general appreciation of color photographs, even if the ones from most amateurs cannot compare with those advertising pages in full color.

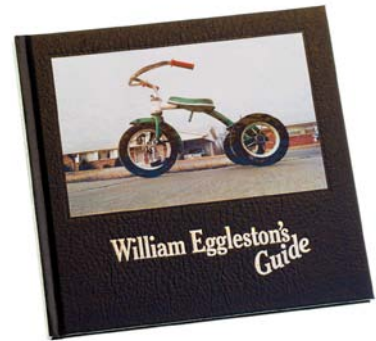
Curiously, it's only from the seventies onwards that we may verify a clear recognition of color photography in the art world.

William Eggleston's book and exhibition in New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1976, is a moment of acknowledgment by a very important historian, photographer and curator, John Szarkowski (1925–2007), of the specificity and status of color photography in the panorama of art (despite the revelation of Eggleston's vision and craft, being seen by the critics of the day as a failure).

Fig. 7 Advert of the Kodak Cavalcade projector, introduced in 1958. Retrieved from: <http://www.mrmartinweb.com/projector.html>



Fig. 8 William Eggleston's Guide.



In early seventies, William Eggleston (1939) was pushing forward our aesthetic notions of photography, refusing the established black and white art photography tradition, although learning from it in order to oppose. The selection for the 'Guide' is of a very local and private nature, assuming the character of a diary. One can easily sense an autobiographic relationship of the photographer with his subjects. Eggleston's work resembles in subject matter as well as in form (the use of color) that of any amateur of the time shooting Kodachrome slides on holidays and family events. In this, both the "Guide" and Szarkowski's essay at the beginning of the book, are precursors of a kind of democracy of photography, which opens the door to the appreciation of the vernacular. This idea can be inferred from Szarkowski's words:

The world now contains more photographs than bricks, and they are, astonishingly, all different. (...) To make matters worse, some of the pictures are likely to be marginally interesting. Even the automatic cameras that record the comings and goings in banks describe facts and relationships that surprise mere eye-witnesses. (...) (Szarkowski, p. 6)

John Szarkowski's text for "William Eggleston's Guide" accounts for the massive production of photographs in the seventies, but if one thinks about the exponential growth associated with the transition to digital in photographic technology in the first decade of the twenty first century, the numbers can be overwhelming. We can now observe that there has been a true democratization of photography and one of the consequences of this phenomenon is that the availability of lost and discarded photographs of the previous century is also exponential.

In the first post of the blog 'Still Searching, An Online Discourse on Photography',⁸ Bernd Stiegler (1964), describes how photography has become committed to inaccuracy, through an overview of some key moments in photography history, suggesting a discussion of a history of imperfection in photography. Stiegler claims:

Imperfection is the new ideal of contemporary photography, even if celebrated, staged, and represented in a kind of perfection. (...) These tendencies are not merely concerned with mistakes and their productive application but also with the discovery of photography as a visualization process of the unexpected. (...)

⁸ An initiative of the Fotomuseum Winterthur, in Switzerland, started in 2012. The blog can be consulted in: <http://blog.fotomuseum.ch/2012/01/1-imperfection/>

Imperfection is a prevalent characteristic of vernacular photographs, where the error was unintentional and resulted from the lack of specialized knowledge. In fashion editorials, advertising and all sorts of contemporary popular film and music culture, the idea of imperfection has been appropriated from the vernacular and explored aesthetically as a kind of pictorial layer with a nostalgic artificial aura.

The negative presented here as an object of research, is a professional photographic record primarily intended to promote commercial products, whose function could be to display and preserve the imperfect vernacular photographs made by amateurs. Ironically the images it transports inside, are meant to encourage the making of more photographs and teach what a good picture can be. The content and historical times of the images it holds, suggest a deeper reading of their political and economical implications. It becomes a kind of micro-atlas (an attempt at a totality) of the history of art and humanity from the eighteenth century up to the present.

“Play” is what all the photographs included in our 9x12 cm negative are about. They show actors (models) playing roles, which are about leisure and taking a time out from reality. The frames are meant to hold the photographs of the times of play: no decorative frame was ever meant to display images of terror and no vernacular photographs ever aimed to reveal but the instants of pleasure that could be found in times of suffering.

Play Time becomes the title of this essay and the photograph with which it begins (and ends). It is about the colors that are suggested but also denied by the black and white negative under observation. Colors that need to be desired and imagined again, as they were throughout the first one hundred years of the history of Photography.

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