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Estelle Blaschke and Armin Linke: Image Capital

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# Estelle Blaschke and Armin Linke: Image Capital

by Matthias Gründig • 30.11.2022

A camera films orchids as they are smoothly carried along a conveyor belt and rotate in front of a nondescript grey background; photographic flashes lend rhythm to this strange choreography. The video *Ter Laak Orchids, camera sorting technology, greenhouse production line, Wateringen, Netherlands, 2021*, by Armin Linke (b.1966), transports viewers to a Dutch plant nursery where eight million orchids are grown every year. To determine its quality and market value, each orchid is captured by twenty-four sensors and analysed using machine learning technology. This process is not structured around human workers; on the contrary, 'the human hand assists the machine in these highly automated environments', as an accompanying text informs us. 'It corrects the sporadic errors of the machines or is used where particularly delicate procedures are required, such as attaching the peduncles to plant sticks. Manual labour – here performed by female workers – is used wherever it is more accurate or cost-effective than using robots'. As such, the dance-like process of photographing the orchids takes place on a stage of globalised production, between the art-historical trope of still life and operational imagery and between human labour and seemingly unceasing computational productivity.

The video is one of many included in *Image Capital*, an interdisciplinary research project that comprises a travelling exhibition, an online database and a printed book. Co-authored by Estelle Blaschke (b.1976), a photography historian, and Linke, a photographer and film-maker, the project tells an alternative history of photography, which differs both in terms of its subject-matter and the manner in which it is told. Whereas traditional histories of photography most often adhere to a chronological model that highlights inventors and artists, *Image Capital* focuses on the role played by photography in the history of commerce, science and the archive. The project is divided into six chapters, each made up of photographs and video works by Linke, as well as texts, archival images, found footage and interviews with researchers, scientists and engineers. The titles, 'Memory', 'Access', 'Protection', 'Mining', 'Imaging' and 'Currency', introduce different yet inextricably linked perspectives on the history of photography and its uses as an information technology. The bilingual (German/English) project asks its viewers what the word photography can mean in capitalist societies beyond a history of art and technology, or, more precisely, how images and capital are

intimately intertwined. It is fitting therefore that the exhibition opened at the Museum Folkwang, Essen, an institution committed to photography that established an independent department in 1978 and helped to shape myriad histories of the medium.

At the entrance to the exhibition, which has been carefully and challengingly curated by Thomas Seelig, visitors are greeted by a small forest of screens suspended between floor and ceiling [FIG.1](#). They show clips of microfilm readers, industrial 3D-modelling environments, scanned insects and scenes from the making of the video game *Assassin's Creed Unity*. The orchids also make their first appearance in this introductory space, before returning later in 'Mining' in the form of large-scale photographs [FIG.2](#) and the aforementioned video. The short clips, which serve as teasers for the diverse material shown in the subsequent rooms, confound expectations of what an exhibition concerned with photography might address. Throughout, footage by Linke is combined with online video clips, commercials are juxtaposed with scientific imaging technology, and critical texts and quotations both contextualise the images and interfere with them. Blaschke's introduction underlines the seeming discrepancy among the objects: 'photography has moved into every sphere of society, infiltrating science, art, politics, the news and social media, as well as all kinds of trade and industries. It has become a core element [dispositif] in our visual relationship with the world'.<sup>1</sup>

Following this introductory space, the exhibition chapters are organised into individual rooms of varying sizes that make up a circular tour. Viewers are free to begin with 'Memory' to the left, or 'Currency' to the right and work their way through the others – Blaschke's and Linke's narrative, which emphasises disparity and heterogeneity instead of a linear history, allows for readings from both directions. According to which path they choose, viewers first encounter either Linke's photograph of a worker at the Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin [FIG.3](#), nearly lost among an array of conveyor belts and photographic equipment as he digitises its Entomology collection, or a compelling black-and-white image from c.1955 of a smiling woman advertising a small roll of microfilm [FIG.4](#), surrounded by a huge pile of bound paper cheques. The caption reads: 'All those checks in a 100-foot roll. That's economy'.

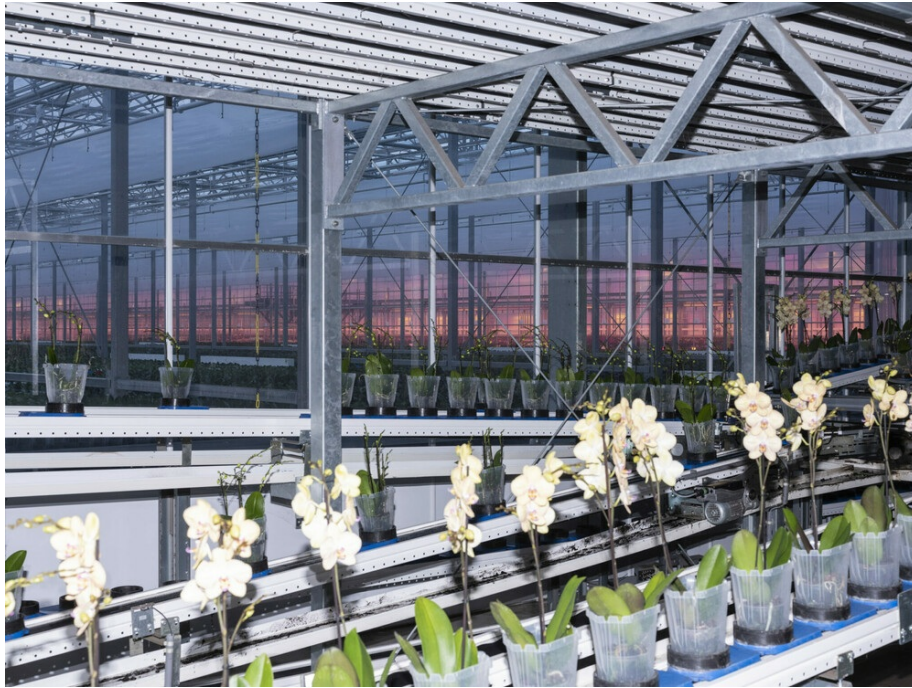
This is the third collaboration between Blaschke – who has devoted much of her work to the history of microfilm and image economies, in particular the elucidation of the history and inner workings of image agencies – and Linke, who uses film and photography to pursue an interest in the infrastructures and make-up of modern technological societies.<sup>2</sup> For *Image Capital*, Linke has contributed sober yet intricate photographs and videos of various subjects: the trading floor of the French bank BNP Paribas [FIG.5](#), the inside of Iron Mountain, a physical and digital asset preservation and archiving service [FIG.6](#), CERN's Large

Hadron Collider **FIG.7** and industrial greenhouses. The images align with the exhibition's wider collaborative nature in their direct human encounter with such places and institutions. Linke is interested in their infrastructures and internal systems, their desktops and server rooms and their software as well as their hardware. In this mode of open exploration, his photographic views always leave room for aesthetic readings as much as critical ones. It is clear that Blaschke's and Linke's work together depends on further collaboration with, and access to, many different institutions and people, such as the Istituto Geografico Militare, Florence, and art students from the Royal College of Art, London.



**Fig. 1** Installation view of *Estelle Blaschke and Armin Linke: Image Capital* at Museum Folkwang, Essen, 2022. (© Armin Linke).

The 'authors' – as Blaschke and Linke list themselves in the lengthy colophon – use quotations throughout the exhibition, a key curatorial strategy that generates numerous conceptual links while also leaving gaps. Admittedly, as Blaschke notes, 'the exhibition does not exhaust the possible definitions and practices of what constitutes value in photography' and, without naming it directly, this specific mode of self-reflexivity can result in an experience akin to inhabiting some sort of exhibition essay. Linke's large-scale photographs are presented alongside quotes by well-known photography theorists, such as Susan Sontag, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Allan Sekula. The photographs themselves are exhibited in standardised wooden boxes **FIG.8**. They recall art shipping boxes; shown vertically they become means of advertisement, whereas arranged horizontally, they make for display cases or archival boxes.



**Fig. 2** *Ter Laak Orchids, camera sorting technology, greenhouse production line, Wateringen, Netherlands, 2021, by Armin Linke. 2021. Photograph. (© The artist; exh. Museum Folkwang, Essen).*

By displaying his work in these diverse manifestations, Linke subjugates it to the exhibition argument that images circulate under terms of standardisation, used and framed by institutions and companies. This is reflected in the material aspects of the exhibition: in addition to printed texts and encased images, the authors make use of a wide range of analogue displays, such as Hantarex CRT monitors, a microfilm reader **FIG. 9** and projectors, as well as tablets and flat screens. They also incorporate archival material, including photographic reproductions, advertisements, magazines and photo-objects, such as albums and leporellos, from different institutions, including the Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence, and the Historisches Archiv Krupp, Essen. Archival materials are printed on clear film material, which alludes to the micro-photographic archival and accounting systems that are of central interest to the project as a whole.

*Image Capital*, which has grown from a series of seminars and events that took place in 2018, has already opened its second instalment at Fondazione MAST, Bologna (22nd September 2022–8th January 2023), and will travel to the Centre Pompidou, Paris, and the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation, Frankfurt (dates to be announced). As part of the wider project, the exhibition is accompanied by a website, which figures as an online publication as well as an archive. As the project develops, the different chapters will be complemented by theoretical articles, and together these material and digital building blocks will be compiled in a thematic reader to be published in 2023. In the meantime, the compound of a physical exhibition and its digital



archive proves to be a most fertile ground – situated at a surprisingly fruitful intersection of theory and art – for the thinking about an ecology of images that Sontag asked for at the end of *On Photography* (1977).



**Fig. 3** Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, *Picturae, the Entomology Conveyor*, processing and digitizing insects, Berlin, Germany, 2022, by Armin Linke. 2022. Photograph. (© The artist; exh. Museum Folkwang, Essen).



**Fig. 4** Photograph for a Recordak advert labelled 'All those checks in a 100-foot roll. That's economy'. c.1955. (Kodak Historical Collection, University of Rochester; exh. Museum Folkwang, Essen).



**Fig. 5** BNP Paribas, headquarters, trading floor, Paris, France, 2012 , by Armin Linke. 2012. Photograph. (© The artist; exh. Museum Folkwang, Essen).



**Fig. 6** Iron Mountain preservation facility, Boyers (PA), USA, 2018, by Armin Linke. 2018. Photograph. (© The artist; exh. Museum Folkwang, Essen).



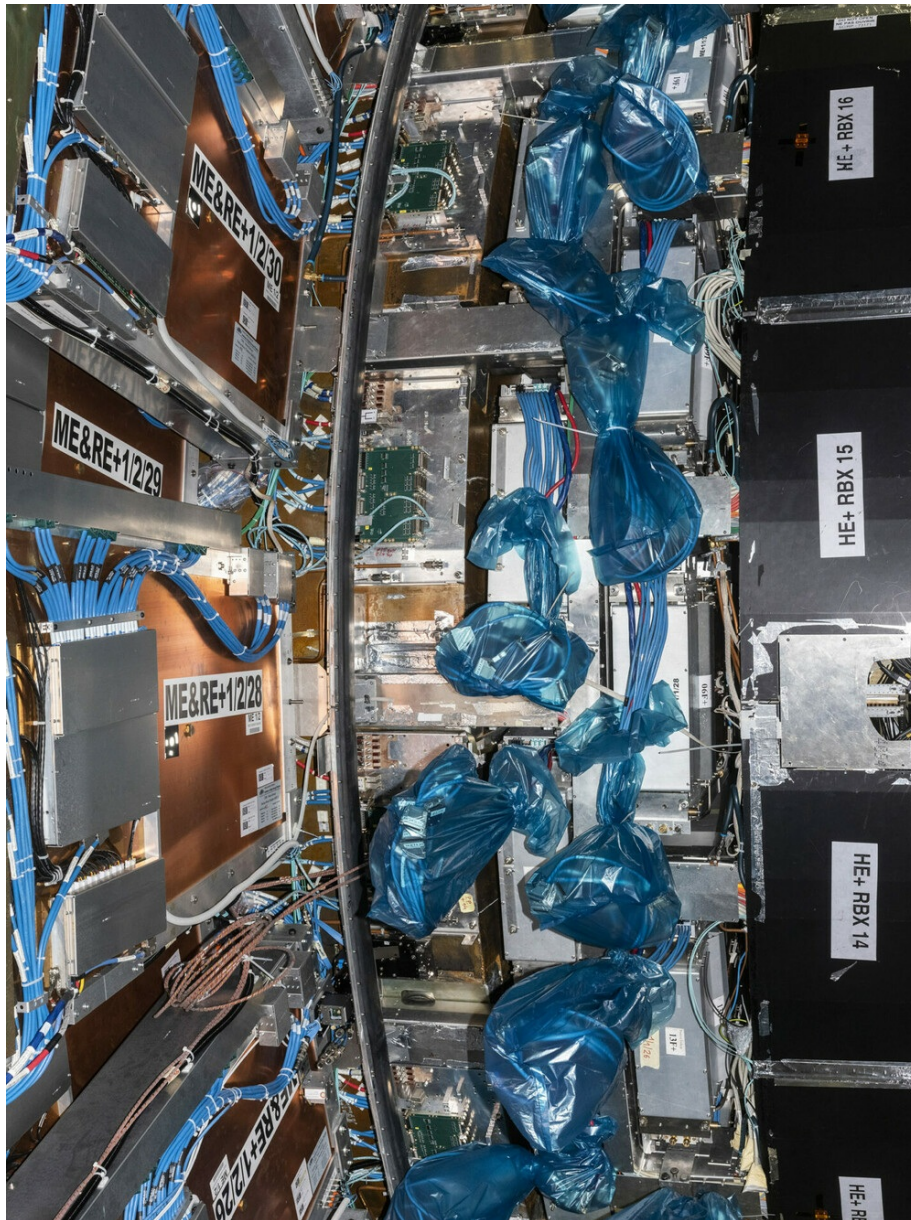


Fig. 7 CERN, Large Hadron Collider (LHC), Geneva, Switzerland, 2019, by Armin Linke. 2019. (© The artist; exh. Museum Folkwang, Essen).



**Fig. 8** Installation view of *Estelle Blaschke and Armin Linke: Image Capital* at Museum Folkwang, Essen, 2022. (© Armin Linke).



**Fig. 9** Installation view of *Estelle Blaschke and Armin Linke: Image Capital* at Museum Folkwang, Essen, 2022. (© Armin Linke).

**Exhibition details**    **IMAGE CAPITAL: Estelle Blaschke and Armin Linke**  
Museum Folkwang, Essen  
9th September–11th December 2022  
[image-capital.com](http://image-capital.com)

## Footnotes

- 1** E. Blaschke: 'Introduction', [image-capital.com](http://image-capital.com), available at [image-capital.com/intro](http://image-capital.com/intro), accessed 21st November 2022. All quotations in this review are taken from the project website.
- 2** See, for example, E. Blaschke: *Banking on Images: The Bettmann Archive and Corbis*, Leipzig 2016. For previous collaborations, see E. Blaschke, A. Linke and D. Mende, eds: exh. cat. *Doppelte Ökonomien: Vom Lesen eines Fotoarchivs aus der DDR 1967–1990 / Double Bound Economies: Reading an East German Photo Archive 1967–1990*, Leipzig (Zentrum für zeitgenössische Kunst, Baumwollspinnerei), Geneva (Centre de la photographie) and Zurich (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology) 2012–13; and Migrant Image Research Group, eds: *Lampedusa: Image Stories from the Edge of Europe*, Leipzig 2017.

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