

Sleutelen as Photographic Gesture

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, the photographic gesture has been understood through the analogy of hunting. However, this analogy fails to capture important characteristics of photography such as coexistence and chance. Through a close examination of my artistic practice, this paper revises the 'hunting analogy' and proposes the Dutch verb 'sleutelen' (a specific kind of tinkering) as an alternative way of understanding the photographic gesture. By emphasizing the process of creation and coexistence with the subject, 'sleutelen' offers a new, more social perspective on the photographic act. 'Sleutelen' as a photographic gesture aims to question our social and cultural perceptions of ourselves and others.

Introduction

This text is part of my artistic research that analyses the situation of making photographic portraits. (I suggest ‘making’ a photograph rather than ‘taking’ a photograph because I see the photographic situation as a social entanglement rather than a hunt). The research examines each of the human actors in this situation (sitter, spectator, and photographer), how they act individually and in dialogue with each other when making a photographic portrait. The aim of this research is to create an understanding of what photographic portraits are by analyzing how they are made. The research is constructed in and through my artistic practice. This specific text is part of the research that focuses on the role of the photographer and how they act: the photographic gesture. The objective is to reformulate the photographic gesture, revise the photographer as hunter, and formulate a more appropriate analogy. The proposed ‘sleutelen’ as photographic gesture offers photographers and theorists a new way of thinking about the photographic gesture and offers photographers new directions to expand their practice.

Hunting as photographic gesture

This text is about the photographic gesture. It is about what the photographer does when making a photograph. A photographic gesture is more than the concrete handling of the camera. It is, as the Brazilian Czech-born philosopher Vilém Flusser explains in his book *Gestures* (1991), “doing with meaning” (p. 6). When thinking about photography, we have become very familiar with the perception of the camera as a weapon and the photographer as a hunter. As American social and cultural theorist Susie Linfield concludes in her article “Why Do Photography Critics Hate Photography?” (2011), this perception of photography has become so entrenched in the general thinking about photography, for example through American writer Susan Sontag’s comparison of photography to assassination in *On Photography* (1977) or Flusser’s use of the verb “stalking” to describe the photographer’s movements, that it is hard to imagine the photographic gesture as anything other than a hunt (Flusser, 2000, p. 35). This is why, standing in a camera shop some time ago, I could not deny thinking of a certain ‘photographer-as-hunter mentality’ seeing six men of different ages leaning against the counter, discussing the specifics of the latest equipment like hunters in a gun shop. But these cowboys were not the only ones in the shop. There were

other customers too. People who did not brag about the size of their lens or the number of pixels on their frame (bigger, larger, more). People with a different demeanor, silently observing the other customers, patiently waiting for the moment to ask the price of the lens duster they were holding. And I wondered, would it be possible to follow Dutch conceptual artist Jan Dibbets’ bravura and say, “photography has always been misunderstood” (Dibbets, 2023, 8:04), to look at photography with fresh, unbiased eyes, and to think beyond the hunter’s tunnel and warm up to the possibility that photography is more than capturing and hunting? Would it be possible to invite a more social understanding of photography, as described by the American sociologist Nathan Jurgenson in his book *The Social Photograph* (2019), or, instead of focusing on photography’s prey, to think about its failures and its capacity to surprise?

My photographic gesture

The first thing to do was examine my own behavior as a photographer. What was I doing when making a photograph? What was my own gesture? And was it different from hunting? During two consecutive photographic sessions I compared my own gesture. Whereas in the first session I came to the studio relatively unprepared and reacted with my camera to what I liked visually, such as the light coming through the window, in the second session I forced myself to follow rules that I had decided on beforehand. This second session made my gesture less hunter-like. The formulation of rules and restrictions had influenced my photographic gesture.

Rules and restrictions

Many artists and designers have formulated rules for their practice. Practices that became particularly well known when practitioners gathered a group of like-minded people and formulated a name, often accompanied by a manifesto. Such as “Dogme 95,” founded by Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, or the Amsterdam based collective “Conditional Design” formed by graphic designers Luna Maurer, Edo Paulus, Jonathan Puckey, and Roel Wouters. Collectives such as “Dogme 95” and “Conditional Design” evaluated their respective fields as well as their own specific role within that field as they felt times had changed and they could no longer continue doing as they did. Rules were formulated to break conventions.

In “Conditional Design,” for example, the traditional role of the graphic designer as the sole creator of a product is replaced by co-creation. Instead of a single person dictating the outcome, rules were formulated, and ‘players’ were asked to respond to each other’s actions, for example by forming a perfect circle or filling in a white sheet of paper by taking turns to place a dot on the emptiest part of the page. Similarly, rule number four of “Dogma 95’s” “Vow of Chastity” (1995) restricts filmmakers to the available light, forcing them to focus on traditional cinematic values such as acting and subject matter rather than effect. These practices combine a conscious and critical approach with commitment. It is neither an external critique nor a cynical retreat. In the visual arts, too, there have been many artists who have used rules and restrictions to create their work, such as American conceptual artists Ed Ruscha and Douglas Huebler in their use of photography.

Ed Ruscha’s *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), a book of photographs of gasoline stations along Route 66, began as a play on words, Ruscha explains to John Coplans in one of the interviews in the book *Leave Any Information at the Signal* (2003). He liked the words gasoline stations and the number twenty-six, and after a while began to imagine them as the title of a book. Eventually it became a fantasy rule in his mind that he had to follow. He calls his method: “premeditated, self-assigned and just a matter of following through with a feeling of blind faith that I had from the beginning... The books were easy to do once I had a format... Each one had to be plugged into the system I had” (Ruscha, 2003, p. 23).

When this strategy of following instructions, which originated from conceptual artists who used verbal scores to guide their performances, was used in combination with photography, it had an interesting effect on photography itself. As Liz Kotz explains in her book *Language in 60s Art* (2007), “the notational systems removed photography from the reproductive logic of original and copy and repositioned it as a recording mechanism for the specific realization of general schemata” (p. 194). The self-imposed rules and systems ‘liberated’ photography from the reproductive logic of ‘original and copy.’

Rules and instructions allow for a different role for the photographer and a diminution of the hunter’s gesture. One could even argue that conceptual artists who use photography are not hunting at all. But

this had not yet given me a new term for the photographic gesture. So, I started a little word game to formulate the opposite of hunting, which led to phrases like a meeting that is reciprocal, unknowing, uneventful, unknown, and unpredictable. This is when the verb ‘sleutelen’ came to my mind.

Sleutelen, a special kind of tinkering

The Dutch translation of the verb ‘to tinker’ is ‘knutselen’ or ‘sleutelen’. Knutselen is playing around with materials that are often used. ‘Sleutelen’ is what you do with your moped on a Saturday: taking all the elements apart and putting them back together again. The word ‘sleutel’ comes from ‘slotel,’ which means the tool used to open or close a lock (slot). This is why the Dutch word for key is ‘sleutel.’ But ‘sleutel’ is also the name for a wrench. And the verb ‘sleutelen’ does not refer to opening a door, but to taking something apart and putting it back together again. ‘Sleutelen’ is close to, but different from, bricolage and engineering. In his essay “Structure, Sign and Play” (1978), the French philosopher Jacques Derrida responds to the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s description of the bricoleur and the engineer in his book *The Savage Mind* (1966), in which Lévi-Strauss claims that the engineer creates a total system from beginning to end. This is not possible, Derrida argues, because no one can be the “absolute origin of his own discourse” and thus every finite discourse is bound by some bricolage (1978, p. 285). Rather, according to Derrida, every engineer is also, to some extent, a bricoleur. But apart from this nuance, Lévi-Strauss and Derrida draw the same picture of bricoleurs and engineers. The bricoleurs are seen as the ‘wild minds,’ not restricted by the purity, stability, or ‘truth’ of a system they use, while engineers are portrayed as people who design buildings that must be solid and have little or no play. Engineers are presented as people wanting to create stable systems who see themselves as the center of their own discourse, the origin of their own language.

‘Sleutelaars’ are not wild minds like bricoleurs, creating new and unbound connections between unrelated objects. Instead, ‘sleutelaars’ work within a specific context. ‘Sleutelaars’ engage with one thing. But ‘sleutelaars’ are not engineers either, because ‘sleutelaars’ do not see themselves in the middle of their own discourse, at the center of things. ‘Sleutelaars’ are more modest and stand on the side-lines, in coexistence with the things they ‘sleutel.’

‘Sleutelaars’ engage with their object in an attentive encounter. They look, examine. Their hands gently follow the contours of the object they are working with. The object is lifted and examined from different angles. At a certain moment, gentle pressure may be applied to feel its construction and openings. The ‘sleutelaars’ then take a tool and begin to dismantle the object, taking apart the various elements. The elements are carefully placed within reach. When this is done, the ‘sleutelaars’ begin to reassemble the object. Carefully retracing their steps backwards, feeling their understanding of each piece they hold grow as they turn and twist. They relate each little piece to the next. And when all the different elements have found their original position, the objects of study may look the same from the outside, but they have changed because they have been taken apart and all the pieces have found a new flexibility. They can now move. And ‘sleutelaars’ will indeed move the pieces as the process continues, because this time ‘sleutelaars’ begin to amplify their interventions. This time a certain part will be positioned differently or held back during the reassembly. The ‘sleutelaars’ patiently watch the rest of the reassembly with a sense of anticipation. When all the pieces are in place, the ‘sleutelaars’ hold their breath and watch. And if what appears is not interesting, the process continues.

‘Sleutelen’ as a gesture is one that is careful, investigative, observant, creative, and not passive. ‘Sleutelaars’ engage with their subject in a fundamental way. They position themselves close to the original construction and look for ways to make slight changes. They work with what is there and try to understand the mechanism. They try to get behind the visual appearance, partly to understand and partly to change the object they are working with in order to evoke something new, an alternative. ‘Sleutelaars’ do not take all the elements apart to reassemble them with other unrelated elements, nor do they take the individual elements out of context. ‘Sleutelaars’ stay with their object. They work together. In addition, ‘sleutelen’ is not solemnly directed towards an imagined result. While ‘sleutelen’ may ultimately repair something that is broken, ‘sleutelen’ itself addresses the ongoing act of taking apart and putting back together to see what happens. It is not a one-off event or decisive moment, but an act that aims to create knowledge and possibly an unexpected outcome.

Sleutelen and photography, practices of coexistence

‘Sleutelen’ thus works in dialogue with its object. In the same way, photographers work in dialogue with the outside world. Photographs cannot exist without the world. They are bound to it in their conception and, once materialized, they begin to inhabit that same world. In his book *Camera Lucida* (1982), Roland Barthes describes the feeling of being touched by the radiation that first met a real body and then reached him via the photograph, which he compares to an umbilical cord that connects the photographed to his gaze (1982, p. 81). Photographs, according to Barthes, become “mad images, chafed by reality” and he calls them “a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time (“it is not there” on the one hand, “but it really was” on the other)” (1982, p. 114). In addition to these inherent links between photographic images and the outside world, the making of a photographic portrait is a very direct example of ‘working with.’ Because in the portrait situation, photographers meet their collaborators, the sitters, face to face, and enter a social dynamic of self-presentation, role-playing, and identity-forming involving sitter, photographer, and spectator. Starting with the fact that the making of a photographic portrait is not only about photographers capturing, but also a means of expression and part of the sitter’s identity formulation, as Nathan Jurgenson argues in his book *The Social Photograph* (2019). It is a situation that is much more complex than the simple hunter-prey binary. As is also expressed in the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s nuanced concept of “ex-position” that he explains in his book *Portrait* (2018) which does not understand the subject in a (painted) portrait as solely the construct of the painter or the direct expression of the sitter, but rather as the outcome of a middle-voiced occurrence, a collaborative event that involves the artist, model, and spectator. Translated to the situation of making a photographic portrait, what photographers do in this situation is best described in terms of working or being-with, rather than simply taking.

A mood, or gesture, of being-with is expressed in so-called deadpan photography, argues Aron Vinegar in his article “Ed Ruscha, Heidegger and Deadpan Photography” (2009). Ed Ruscha’s photographs are often described with terms like ‘deadpan’ or ‘restrained,’ and the photographer’s gesture is described in terms of coldness and objectivity. But, Vinegar argues, deadpan photography is not an ironic distancing, but rather the opposite, and

he suggests that withholding should be understood as a hyphenated ‘with-holding,’ like Heidegger’s “being with” the world (2009, p. 859). He proposes a with-holding that cultivates a sensitivity to the world and heightens our responsiveness to it by withholding judgement in an “open-minded, non-judgmental investigation of it,” as Denise Scott Brown suggests in *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972, p. xi). ‘Deadpan’ photography is not interested in some kind of objective representation of things in the world, Vinegar argues, but “situates itself at the edge of the world, alongside its surfaces, as a way of ‘being with the world’” (2009, p. 896). Ruscha did not take over the image, nor put his subjective opinion or preference or signature on his subject. Ruscha was on the side-lines, going out with instructions and curiosity about how his plan would work out. Ruscha followed his rules and presented the images together in a book. What he did was ‘sleutelen’ with his and our perception of the Los Angeles landscape and gasoline stations.

Sleutelen and photography, practices of not-knowing

‘Sleutelen’ places emphasis on the process rather than on the result. While ‘sleutelen’ is sometimes used to repair an object that is broken, the term ‘sleutelen’ mostly refers to an ongoing act of taking elements apart and putting them back together again. It is not a one-off event or decisive moment, but an act that aims to create knowledge and possibly an unexpected outcome. So, while something always happens in the end, it is not fully anticipated in advance. What happens, happens because of the act of ‘sleutelen.’

Photography, as a technical medium with the ability to create images without the photographer, called “human functionary” by Vilém Flusser in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (2000, p. 31), having full control, shares this element of surprise. As the American photographer Walker Evans eloquently put it, the camera excels at “reflecting rapid chance, confusion, wonder and experiment” (Trachtenberg, 1980, p. 185). Much like ‘sleutelaars,’ photographers have an intention and a direction. But they never fully know what will happen. So, the photographic camera has the capacity to invite the unknown and unintended. At the same time, the “inhuman aspect” of photography (Ruscha, 2003, p. 170), as Ed Ruscha calls photography’s ability to record without making qualitative judgements, makes the photographic camera a very suitable tool for

documenting actions that Margaret Iversen calls “performative photography.” In her essay “Automaticity: Ruscha and Performative Photography” (2010), Margaret Iversen writes that in performative photography, instructions can make something happen rather than describe a given situation. The use of instructions in the context of photography implies a partial relinquishment of authorial control in favor of chance, coincidence, or unforeseen circumstances. Instructions dictate the initial conditions of an experiment, but they do not determine the outcome. In this way, Iversen argues, instructions become a device for circumventing authorial or artistic agency, generating chance operations and unexpected outcomes, which she links to what Marcel Duchamp called “canned surprise.” (2009, p. 840)

As the American conceptual artist Douglas Huebler describes his practice:

I set up a system, and the system can capture a part of what’s happening in the world - what’s going on in the world - an appearance in the world, and suspend that appearance itself from being important. The work is about the system. (Alberro & Novell, 2001, p. 147)

One such set of instructions led to the work “Variable Piece #105” (1972), in which Huebler set himself the task of taking a photograph of a mannequin in a shop window, followed by a photograph of the first person of the same sex to pass by on the street. Huebler does not mention the visual results but focuses on the system itself. Like the ‘sleutelaar,’ he trusts the system and knows that changes to the system will help new things to emerge.

‘Sleutelen’ and photography thus share characteristics of coexistence, of being and working with, and of surprise. But what would a ‘sleutelende’ photographic gesture be in practice?

Sleutelen as a photographic practice, an experiment

I am currently working on a project called “Les Clichés sont conserves” about the making of the photographic portrait. To ‘sleutel’ in this project would be to take the elements apart, examine them carefully and put them back together in a slightly different arrangement. How can one ‘sleutel’ the making of photographic portraits? What are we unquestionably doing when we make

a photographic portrait? I am thinking of the fact that a photographic portrait usually consists of a selected moment, captured in a fraction of a second. Would it be possible to ‘sleutel’ with this temporality? I am not immediately enthusiastic because it seems like a gimmick. But I say to myself, the whole idea of an experiment is to find out something, it does not have to result in something interesting.

The evening before the planned photo session, I write down three instructions for the session on a piece of paper. All three instructions will force me to use time differently. There are long exposures inspired by Sugimoto’s cinema’s, double exposures inspired by Marcel Duchamp’s experiments, and multiple images inspired by Muybridge’s horses and David Hockney’s photo collages.

In the studio

As soon as Winnie and I arrive at the studio, I start making photographs. I must force myself to follow my own rules, as it feels very counterintuitive to double-expose a portrait I have just made. Looking through the camera, looking for an image that feels good, and then immediately ruining it by exposing the film again. The long exposures give me a similar sense of distance. But I follow the rules and finish the film. The idea of the second roll is to see what happens if the portrait does not consist of one selected image, but of all the photographs made: the contact sheet would be the result, not a selected image. I forget to wind the film properly, so the first few frames are lost. The last part is a variation on the second, but this time I decide on the spur of the moment to ask Winnie to sit still for the whole session, because I suspect that seeing all her portraits together without her moving will bring me, as the photographer, into the work. Were you uncomfortable? I ask her after we are finished. “No” she answers, “I just sort of drifted off.”

That evening, I realized that in these experiments I directed the ‘sleutelen’ at a very concrete aspect: the functioning of the camera. And that this is the source of my discomfort. There is a lot to tinker with the camera itself, and there are plenty of books about it, with titles like Luca Bendandi’s, *Experimental Photography* (2015), for example. But the camera is the tool, I tell myself. Just as the ‘sleutel’ is the tool for ‘sleutelen’ your moped. So, in the experiments I ‘sleutel’ the ‘sleutel’. But what about the moped?

I do feel that the second and third experiments also moved a little beyond this, as they address something outside the functioning of the camera: our need to see an image, an icon, and my role as a photographer in the portrait. And later, when I look at the images of the last role together, I feel that something interesting is happening. All twelve photographs of Winnie in the same position and me, the photographer, circling around her. I realize that “Figure 1. Sleutelen–studio experiment 3” is a series of images that, in their accumulation, next to ‘sleutelen’ with the technical aspect of time also seems to address the impossibility of capturing.

And I wonder, what if, instead of the technical aspects, you were to ‘sleutel’ something more abstract? Could you use photography to ‘sleutel’ with social portrait culture, for example? Could a photographic gesture of ‘sleutelen’ open the door to examining the social and cultural aspects of the making of photographic portraits and reassembling them in a slightly different way to create a better understanding and new meaning, as others have done when proposing tinkering to rethink our relationship to health care, like Lynn Berger in her book *Zorg* (2022).

Sleutelen with the social aspect of photographic portraiture

I think of Douglas Huebler and how, in “Variable Piece #105” (1972), his system of collecting and organizing photographic portraits of mannequins in window displays, paired with photographs of women on the street, is ‘sleutelen’ with our understanding of the photographic portrait’s claim to represent individuality. Or Richard Renaldi, who asked strangers to hold each other in the street, using his camera to ‘sleutel’ with the connotations of photographs of people taken in public space. Because it is common behavior to pose for a camera holding a person you know and are close to, but strangers you would keep at a distance. Or my own project *MyFamily*, a series of images, like seen on “Figure 2. MyFamily, Ilil & me,” which ‘sleutels’ with our understanding of family portraits by asking strangers to pose with me as siblings. I am getting more and more excited about ‘sleutelen’ as a photographic gesture.

The photographic ‘sleutelen’ I have in mind is not limited to ‘sleutelen’ with the technical aspects of the camera, but also includes ‘sleutelen’ with the social and cultural (situation of photographic



Figure 1. Sleutelen–studio experiment 3.
Photo: Judith van IJken



Figure 2. *MyFamily, Ilil & me.*
Photo: Judith van IJken

portraits). And this is where photography has the potential to challenge our social and cultural perceptions of ourselves and others. When photographs show us something we know, ‘sleutled’ with and with a slight alteration that makes us aware of our preconceived notions of, for example, family, and family photographs, or our assumptions about public and private space, and behavior.

Will Sleutelen save the world?

Of course, ‘sleutelen’ is not the holy grail either. Critical questions about ‘sleutelen’ as a photographic gesture can of course be asked, such as: can ‘sleutelen’ be radical? If ‘sleutelen’ has the intention of changing or opening conventions, how radical can it be if you are bound by the conventions themselves (because ‘sleutelen’ works with the elements that are present)? Or, can ‘sleutelen’ become an ironic game just to frustrate spectators or participants? A question that could be illustrated

by Lars von Trier’s film *Five Obstructions* (2003), which can be seen as brilliant in the way it exposes the fundamentals of filmmaking, but also as an unnecessary torture of one director trying to break down the other. And then there is the attitude that it may not be possible to escape the analogy between photography and hunting. For some, the mere push of a button is enough to make a camera resemble a gun, and photography resemble hunting. End of discussion. And is my ‘sleutel’-experiment of photographing Winnie not an example of hunting, at least to some extent?

But I would like to respond to such criticism by saying that no photographic gesture will be able to describe the whole field of photography. There is more than enough room for different photographic gestures, side by side or in combination. And while many photographers may be satisfied with their hunter’s gesture, there have been many other photographic practices for some time now. Practices that deserve to be properly described.

Conclusion

The purpose of this text is to argue for a different understanding of the photographic gesture and to formulate an analogy for it. I have looked at the conventional understanding of the photographic gesture as a hunt, examined my own practice and looked at other practices and their use of rules and instructions. Searching for a different way to describe the photographic gesture, the use of photography by conceptual artists led me to descriptions such as being with the world and withholding. A play on words brought forward the concepts of 'sleutelen'. I tested 'sleutelen' as a photographic gesture with an experiment, which brought the insight that while 'sleutelen' the technical aspects of photography have been explored theoretically, to 'sleutel' with the social aspects of making a photographic practice, is still unexplored territory. And this is where 'sleutelen' as a photographic gesture can challenge and question how we perceive ourselves and others. There is no doubt that hunting as an analogy for photography resonates with many aspects of photography. However, the photographic field is wide and there is enough space to formulate further photographic gestures. One of these, I propose, is 'sleutelen'.

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