

Glitch, Camouflage and In-betweenness

Since around 2005 a growing community of artists have been engaged with the potential of the glitch – with processes and aesthetics stemming from visual errors in digital technologies. As one of the key practitioners and theorists, Rosa Menkman states: “Glitch artists make use of the accident to ‘disfigure’ flow, image, and information, or they exploit the void – a lack of information that creates space for deciphering or interpreting the process of creating (new kinds of) meaning. They reveal the machine’s techne and enable a critical sensory experience to take place around materials, ideologies and aesthetic structures.” (Menkman 2011: 33) In relation to photography the glitch not only proposes new ways of understanding the digital photographic image but also invites us to reconsider the meanings of analogue, material photography. Glitches are effects of human-machine interactions, and their causalities can be understood as new photographic indexicalities (Pasek 2017). Furthermore, the glitch, as both method and metaphor function as a deliberate failure, disruption, and friction (Grundell 2016) to systems of knowledge, classification, and power. Thus, glitches point to normalized and naturalized flaws as well as structures and positions that do not sit comfortably in the societies we’ve created. As an activist and artistic approach, glitch can be interpreted as a forced hesitation and a failure to conform to legibility (Schneider 2021). This two-part paper introduces a new collaborative research project on photographic glitch in terms of in-betweenness and camouflage.

Media theorists track the history of the glitch to the first computer bug, which was literally an insect (a moth) discovered inside a Mark II computer at Harvard University 1947 after continuous errors. The first part of our presentation (by Louise Wolthers) centers around the moth as metaphor in non-human agencies and interferences – from both the machinic and the natural realms. As Grundell states, the power of glitch (as bug) lies in its minuteness – but the effect can be immense (breaking a whole system). The figure of the camouflaged insect will be traced in a selection of contemporary art works while pointing to systematic limitations and concepts such as virus, passing, protest, and environmentalism.

In a performative reading, using Homi Bhabha’s (1994) concept of ambivalence and camouflage and glitch “as a mode of nonperformance” (Russell 2020: 29), the second part of our presentation (by Nina Mangalanayagam) problematizes racial constructs of the body. “Glitched bodies – those that do not align with the canon of white cisgender heteronormativity – pose a threat to social disorder” (Russell 2020: 27). One example is the hybrid, as a body that cannot be defined as black nor white, yet at the same time is both black and white. Through using the shifting points of identification of the mixed subject Nina explores the potentialities of glitching European perceived whiteness.