

Making a Digital Research Project in the History of Modern Art and Photography

The Art and Photo Magazine *Camera Work*

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Abstract This essay enfoldes the conceptual and practical steps towards an open access project using the example of the digital version of the international art and photo journal *Camera Work* at the Heidelberg University Library. It problematizes digital publication in a time when clear transnational rules for digital projects are still lacking and gives suggestions towards possible solutions such as the practice of fair use for non-profit scholarly materials. The text also serves as the editorial for the journal's digital facsimile and opens up a new understanding of *Camera Work* on a global scale, as a material object on the threshold between analogue and digital photography.

Keywords *Camera Work*, Alfred Stieglitz, *Sturm*, Analogue Photography, Digital Photography, Open Access, Fair Use, Dirty Publishing, Japan, Modern Art, Avantgarde Art

Camera Work—a modern icon

The digital facsimile and open-access-version of *Camera Work* (Fig. 1) at the University Library Heidelberg has been available for researchers as well as art and photo enthusiasts around the world since March 2018.¹ All materials are strictly meant for non-profit use. But, first of all, what was *Camera Work*? And to what purpose has the task been undertaken to digitalise this magazine? The following essay will elaborate on these questions while also reporting on how the project developed from the very start.²

Let me quote from the *Camera Work*-project website at the University of Zurich:

The magazine Camera Work, published in New York from 1903–1917 and dedicated to the advancement of photography as art, enjoys the status of a modern icon in the history of photography and the history of art. Still, the quarterly has never been properly investigated with advanced methodological and technological approaches. For the first time, this project [the “Camera Work pilot project” and the research project called “Camera Work. Inside/Out”; B.G.] analyses Camera Work in its entirety as total work of

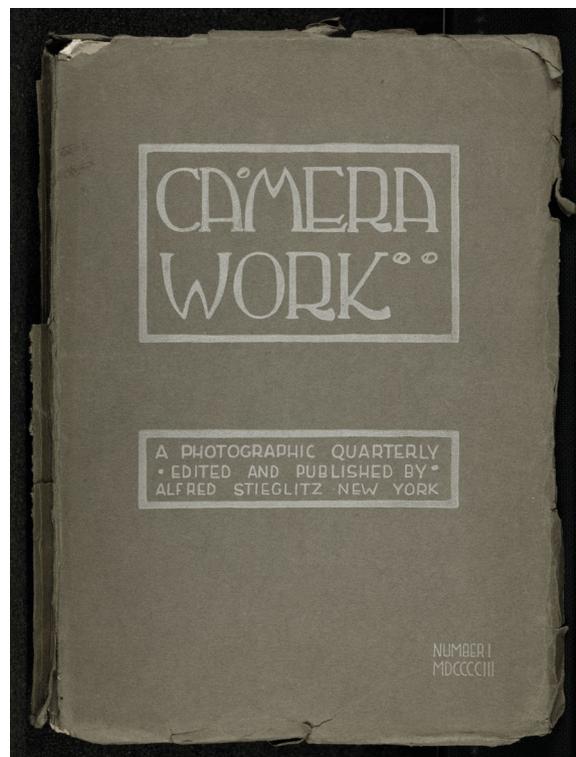


Fig. 1 *Camera Work*, Cover, 1903 (issue 1).



Fig. 2 Gertrude Käsebier: Alfred Stieglitz, 1902, dry plate negative, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs division, Washington, D.C. The first issue of *Camera Work* (1903) started with photogravures after photographs by Gertrude Käsebier.

*art, including imagery across various media, the specifically photographic interplay between original and reproduction, interrelations of image and text, and international networks of people and discourses.*³

To put it in more simple terms, one may quote an article from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published December 31, 2017 under the headline “1917 Geburt der Moderne: ‘Camera Work’ am Ziel” (“1917 Birth of the Modern: ‘Camera Work’ at its destination”):

“Es gibt kein bedeutenderes Fotomagazin als *Camera Work*, eine Vierteljahresschrift, so aufwendig produziert, dass jede Seite für eine Ausstellung taugt.”
 (“There is no photo magazine more significant than *Camera Work*, a quarterly journal produced in such an extravagant manner, that each page is suitable for an exhibition.”)

The editor of this magazine was Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946) (Fig. 2), a tireless promoter of photography as art, and, as we would say today, an international networker if not global player within the system of the arts. Would he have approved of the project, even if it does not characterise his persona as genius of avantgarde art but rather

attempts to bring the magazine into focus? I think: Yes, because it was his goal to act internationally and to let the texts and pictures of *Camera Work* speak for themselves in order to develop and establish a new art. (This incredibly influential endeavour of Stieglitz and his circle for the formation of modern art, and not only for photography as art, has been a research topic for a very long time.)⁴

The conference “Camera Work: History and Global Reach of an International Magazine” at the University of Zurich⁵ was one of the milestones of this digital research project that first began as an idea in the beginning of 2015, namely a vision to revive interest in and to develop new knowledge about *Camera Work* by making use of the tools of what has been called “digital humanities”. This project enabled us to invite international speakers to our conference in 2018⁶ and publish a short film⁷ on *Camera Work* on the beforementioned website.⁸

Unpacking *Camera Work*—a fragile object

In fact, all began with unpacking the issues of *Camera Work* in the rooms of Christie’s in Zurich in 2015, where the whole convolute had been sent from Paris. Why Paris? Because in the context of Paris Photo 2014, Christie’s organised a charity auction with photo-historical works from the collection of the former Swiss art gallerist Kaspar M. Fleischmann, and although this auction was all in all successful, he had decided in the course of that auction not to sell his *Camera Work* convolute at a time when prices for historical materials of photo history were (and still are) clearly in decline.⁹ I should clarify that the auction was meant to raise funds to support the research at the Center for Studies in the Theory and History of Photography at the Institute of Art History, University of Zurich.¹⁰—The purpose of unpacking the issues of the magazine back in Zurich was to check whether all materials, covers and pages of these highly fragile objects were intact and complete.

If you will, it was more or less just by chance at this moment at Christie’s, due to the failure in Paris to sell *Camera Work*, that I had the inspiration to develop something that had not been done before. Chance, failure and faults are often the great innovators in the history of knowledge.¹¹ And indeed, even the materiality of *Camera Work* would not have come to my attention with such clarity and without that special moment at Christie’s in Zurich, which initially seemed like a moment of failure in terms of fundraising, but was in reality the beginning of a research project. “Eureka” means, as Felix Philipp Ingold has pointed out, the expression of an effect of surprise.¹² And surprise not only, if I may add, of an idea emerging, but surprise to find a completely

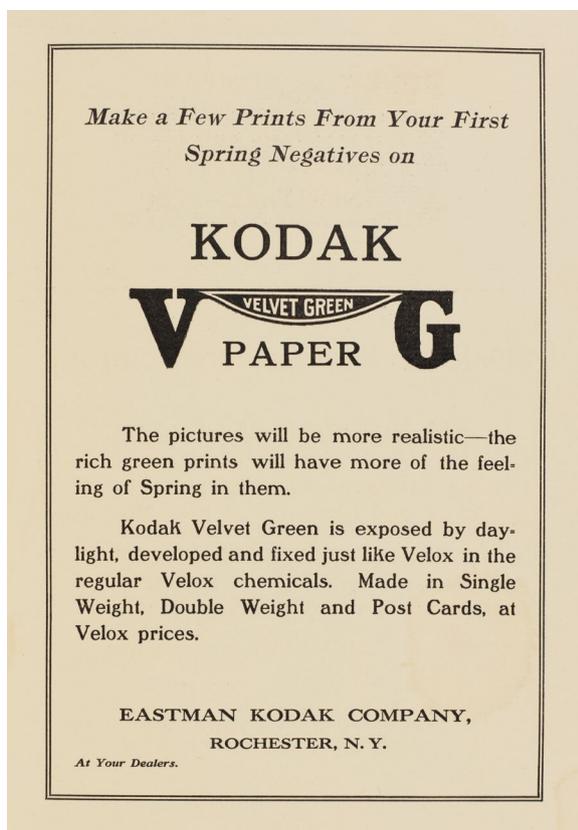


Fig. 3 Advertisement, “Make a Few Prints From Your First Spring Negatives on Kodak Velvet Green Paper”, Eastman Kodak Company, in: *Camera Work*, 1913 (Special Number), [page 69].

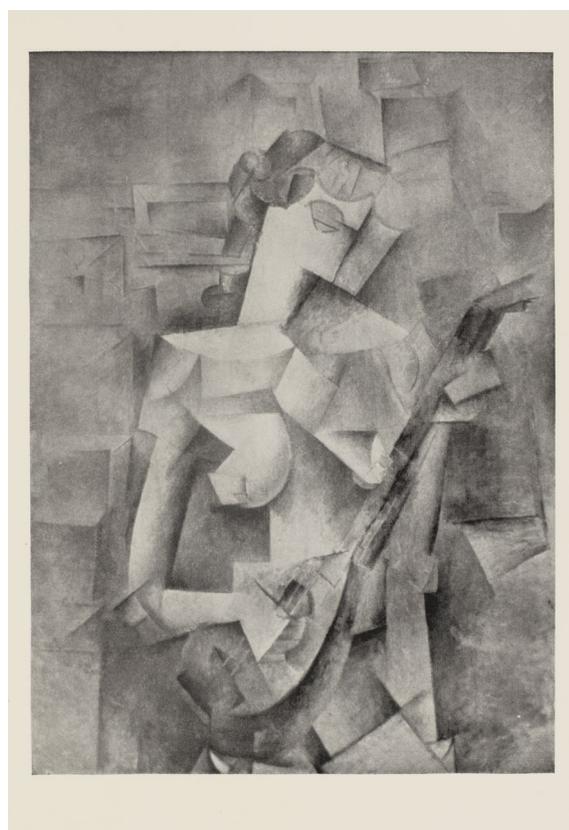


Fig. 4 Picasso: *Woman with Madolin*, halftone reproduction, in: *Camera Work*, 1913 (Special Number), [page 50a].

desolate situation. Some of the covers and pages crumbled under my fingers, the plastic covers of each issue did not seem to be suitable for diverse types of paper material, and the images were not protected by tissue paper; in short, restorative rescue and protection initiatives were long overdue. This indeed was the first proactive step: to find an expert who would secure the whole convolute in a state-of-the-art manner.¹³ In a short film, already mentioned above,¹⁴ made in Zurich in summer 2017, one can see how this journal is handled today, how the boxes, which “house” *Camera Work* look like, and also how the turning pages of *Camera Work* sound.

Research questions

In any case, it was not only the fragility of the journal as a material object alone that caught our attention. No, it was the tangible historical importance of that journal, and also the fascinating question of how we could with today’s research tools investigate all texts and images of this most significant art journal including the advertisements (Fig. 3) as mirrors of the material and

technological history of analogue photography. Moreover, as a classically trained art historian, my interest was to understand in what sense *Camera Work* could be considered a revolutionary beginning of photography as art, and how this claim compares to contemporary developments, since photography today plays a vital role in the concert of contemporary art on a global scale. Photography both as art around 1900 and contemporary art cannot be understood in its entirety without quoting, incorporating and referencing the avant-garde painters of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like the texts in *Camera Work* and their references to the “Old Masters”, the arts of the eighteenth century as well as to Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso (Fig. 4), today’s writing about art is still informed by the beginning of art critical writing in eighteenth-century France and England, namely the practice of comparing works of art with established historical positions of art, the practices of installing a discursive aesthetic judgment with repeated formulas and topoi, and last but not least the attempt to institutionalise the work of art for posterity.¹⁵ By now,



Fig. 5 Edward J. Steichen: *The Flatiron – Evening*, three-color halftone reproduction, in: *Camera Work*, 1906 (issue 14), [page 31].

the history and theory of art as a reference point in the system of art and photography is not fully understood, which is all the better, since it leaves us something to discover within *Camera Work* and beyond.

What *Camera Work* wanted and claimed in the age of analogue photography, namely to install photography as high art, sees its fulfilment or highpoint in the digital age and contemporary art of the 21st century, linking as such the analogue and the digital in many ways. This is but one theoretical and aesthetic aspect that allows us to understand that the paradigmatic “rupture” between analogue and digital, as it was frantically called in the 1980s and 1990s, was just another narrative element in the many beginnings and endings of photographic and art history,¹⁶ beginnings and endings that were and are soon to be revised. Indeed, the fact that *Camera Work* is digitalised does not mean that we discard the original. On the contrary: consulting the original for all its colours, haptic quality and even the sound of the paper (!), is indispensable for a researcher. However, the digital facsimile allows us to roam through all texts and images

when and how we wish, to divide it into intelligent parts and to put those parts together in order to better understand, to learn about an endeavour that meant so much for generations of photographers and photo and art historians alike.

There was also another, more personal and at the same time quite eager motivation to start this project. Since my time at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton—and even before, but without opportunities to address such longings—I was interested in widening my art-history-horizon towards Asian Art History. Thanks to Nicola Di Cosmo and Yve-Alain Bois (both are faculty members at the IAS) who initiated an ongoing, regular workshop together, my wish to expand the knowledge of “my” discipline found fodder. It could not have been more perfect timing when I received a call from an art history department with an established section on East Asian Art History—and that was and is the Art History Department at the University of Zurich. Thanks to this wonderful coincidence, I could devote myself more firmly to this subject—with excursions in collaboration with colleagues, with research projects, conferences and lectures all trans-passing the boundaries of the inner structures of art history.

To make a long story short, it was indeed this interest to expand my intellectual horizon that led to my interest in the global inherent themes as well as in the global impact of *Camera Work*. Not too surprisingly, I focused on Japan, because there is much of Japan and “Japonisme” inherent in the issues of *Camera Work*, a magazine that still plays a vital role in collections of modern art and photography in Japan. It is quite obvious, for example, that Edward J. Steichen’s (1879–1973) tonalist “The Flatiron – Evening” (1904) (Fig. 5), published in *Camera Work* in 1906, is informed by “Japonisme” and shows the impact of James McNeil Whistler (1834–1903), who transformed the Japanese formulas of composition and color into his “Nocturne”-paintings.¹⁷ Japan was, as we know, such a great inspiration of and for modern art. *Camera Work* in relation to Japan also draws the attention to an even more interesting aspect of the structures of diverse and multiple modernities: The United States of America and Japan were rather young nations at the time of their step into the history of art and the beginning of the history of modern art especially. How was it possible to become part of that history—made in Europe—and not only participate but make original contributions? Struggles and opportunities were clearly ahead—before and around 1900. And on board was photography—from the start of that challenging endeavour to become a part of the world’s diverse modern art community. It is as if

we could see much of the challenges of contemporary global art mirrored in the situation back then; and as such *Camera Work* becomes an important player in our thinking about phenomena and processes of our present.

The making of a research project: collaborations and copyrights¹⁸

The Swiss Institute for Art Research, or SIK-ISEA,¹⁹ was the perfect host for this project over the last years. Perfect because we, my research team and I, were looking for an institution that would be able to keep the originals—in fact over fifty issues of *Camera Work*, published between 1903 and 1917 (Fig. 6)—in good condition while at the same time allowing access to the originals for us as researchers.

Although there has been much focus on digital humanities, particularly in the last decade, the realizability of such a project was not at all guaranteed. Only very few institutions are able to provide a full workflow and competence for such an endeavour. With the assistance and advice from an international advisory board, I managed to find a collaboration partner at the Heidelberg University Library in the person of the chief librarian Maria Effinger.

This library has a special funded research focus on art history, particularly on international art magazines. Hence, I was quite enthusiastic when the chief librarian agreed to host *Camera Work* as a digital facsimile and, more importantly, offered to assist with our long and complicated workflow, in not only scanning all issues of that magazine but also, for example, to link texts and images to their international library system. This was time-consuming work (and still is an ongoing effort on a smaller scale), matched only by the work of my research team who delivered tables of contents for every issue.

If I could start this project again, I would insist on more and regular meetings between librarians and researchers, because that is the great opportunity of digital research projects: to bring expertise from all sides more firmly into contact in order to achieve new insights on all sides, for the humanities and for the international library system, as well as for advanced technological development. What is not well understood on all sides, but possibly especially on the side of political decision makers, is the fact that such projects need and produce a lot of handiwork, which means the need to fund not only researchers but also team workers in transnationally interconnected libraries.

To think that it is enough to install one “IT person” for a large digital project in the humanities, at universities or museums—be it a digital edition or a project on a global scale—is a huge misunderstanding of how “work” has been transformed in the digital age.

Despite all doubts and obstacles, it was possible to announce that this Zurich-Heidelberg made digital version is online, and it seems that we were able to solve all copyright claims. With this step, we share attempts in the United States and also in other countries to bring *Camera Work* to an international audience again. Some comparable projects like the one at the Brown University²⁰ have stopped working on their digital version, and other public and private initiatives have compiled their digital versions from all kinds of internet resources and different convolutes of *Camera Work*.²¹ All these projects have slightly different approaches, hence these various potentials should be linked together in the near future. Also, museums have strong holdings related to *Camera Work*, and it was one of our research ideas to link all such holdings around the world with the digital version, so that researchers and interested photo and art enthusiasts would be able to use the database as a window into international collections as well as insight into the oeuvres of all photographers and writers that were

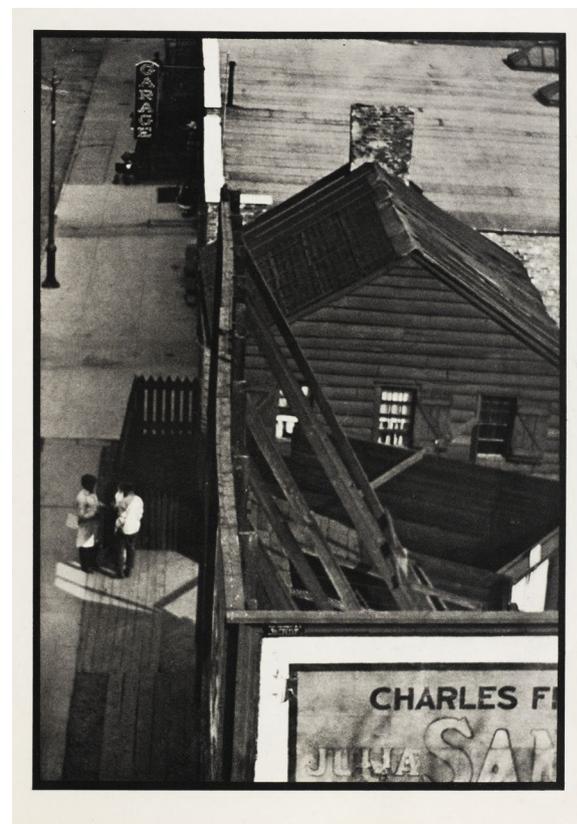


Fig. 6 Paul Strand: *Photograph—New York*, photogravure, in: *Camera Work*, 1917 (issues 49–50), [page 20a].

involved in making *Camera Work*. If this can be done in the near future, it could be a wonderful contribution to the global history of art and literature. The making of *Camera Work* and its afterlife in an international context would and could be fantastically visible through such a further developed database.²²

Some thoughts on the future—fair use

Some day in the future, such magazines will be a natural part of research for art and photo historians, while at the moment, this is still a rather new sector in our field. Without the digitalisation of the material of such magazines, texts and images would be overwhelming and difficult for an individual to grasp in its entirety. With the structured database, the control over this material is possible in many ways. There is still much to do, namely improving the current digital version, making it even more flexible, even more research-friendly. But for now, we have reached a step from where such refinements are possible, and I will certainly attempt together with the colleagues in Heidelberg and international scholars to work on that refinement in the future. Part of such future steps should be to connect the project to other ones that have recently emerged: one such project is the compiled digitalisation of the journal *Sturm*, an art magazine published in Berlin between 1910 and 1932, which is particularly interesting in comparison with *Camera Work*, because *Sturm* was like *Camera Work* much more than a magazine: Both were directly connected to galleries, exhibitions, networks of art critiques and artists; they were conglomerates in the realm of modern art. The reconstruction of all these ties and the digital building-up of interconnections of materials regarding the reconstruction of exhibitions, the digitalisation of correspondence around all of these initiatives to promote modern art will be a challenging and fruitful scientific endeavour for the future.²³

In the course of this project, I have come to realise that here in Europe we should try to develop something that has already been installed in the academia and museum world in the United States, namely fair use policy for historical materials such as texts and images for non-commercial, purely research-centred projects. At the moment, we have an all-too-complicated and also unreasonable copyright system that allows copyright holders to intervene in research projects, a practice that should be critically addressed. It is not enough that national funding institutions ask researchers how they will handle the issue. It would be far more practical not to leave this issue to individuals or research teams, but to find institutional solutions. Large funding institutions in Europe such as the Swiss National Science Foundation

and the German Research Foundation would be capable to find a transnational solution for the humanities.

This is in itself an insight that I would not have been able to formulate back in 2015. As such the project was an enormous learning-by-doing process for which I am very grateful, because this process has opened the horizon for all who were and are involved. At this point, it is also fair to admit that in the very beginning of this project, we, that is the research team as well as our collaborators in Heidelberg, did not anticipate that copyrights might be a possible and even severe problem; Heidelberg as well as the ETH (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich or the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology) who also handle complex digital projects, usually go online quickly, and see what and if something happens.

As the internationally famous pioneer for digital art history, Hubertus Kohle, said at our international In-house Conference at the SIK-ISEA in 2016,²⁴ this is “dirty publishing” in a time when clear transnational rules for digital projects and digital publishing are still lacking. I personally think that for now this is a better approach than automatically giving up on certain digital projects in the humanities, especially in the history of art and photography. However, this practice can only be an initial step in a longer process towards a fair use policy. Another aspect that has come to my mind is the question: Do reproductions like those in *Camera Work*, including the photogravures that we treat as originals, but which are in fact reproductions, really underlie a copyright, if we consider that a copyright can only be asked for on grounds of an original work of art? The digitalisation is in addition not a publication, but a transformation of an historical material object into a digital research object. I leave the reader with these thoughts, which hopefully have given some insights about the processes in which the humanities are involved in this age of digitalisation.

Figure List

- Fig. 1** *Camera Work*, 1903, <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.29887#0001>.
- Fig. 2** Gertrude Käsebier, 1903, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Stieglitz#/media/File:Alfred_Stieglitz.jpg.
- Fig. 3** *Camera Work*, 1913 (Special Number), [page 69], <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.31330#0089>.
- Fig. 4** *Camera Work*, 1913 (Special Number), [page 50a], <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.31330#0065>.
- Fig. 5** *Camera Work*, 1906 (issue 14), [Page 31], <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.30582#0041>.
- Fig. 6** *Camera Work*, 1917 (issues 49-50), [page 20a], <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.31462#0037>.

Notes

- 1 See <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/camera_work>.
- 2 This essay is a shorter and slightly updated version of the editorial that has been published for the digital facsimile of *Camera Work*. Many thanks to Stella Jungmann, assistant and doctoral student at the chair for history of fine arts at the Institute of Art History, University of Zurich, who kindly edited these texts and contributed important ideas.
- 3 See <https://www.khist.uzh.ch/de/chairs/bildende/tgf/Projekte_Publikationen/camera_work.html>.
- 4 Please refer to the international bibliography on our University website: <https://www.khist.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:460c5a34-5c37-49c2-bd82-4311c3c32b47/CW_Bibliography_in%20progress.pdf>.
- 5 See <https://www.khist.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:a254c9d7-9afo-4926-948e-e8b772a5f6bc/CW_Conference_Zurich_Program.pdf>.
- 6 For more details, see <https://www.khist.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:a254c9d7-9afo-4926-948e-e8b772a5f6bc/CW_Conference_Zurich_Program.pdf>.
- 7 <<https://tube.switch.ch/videos/5701a2de>>
- 8 The papers of this conference will be published in 2019/20. Recently a part of my evening lecture has been published in German and English under the title “The Photographic Persona and the Significance of Photography as Art” in the exhibition catalogue *Künstler Komplex: Fotografische Porträts von Baselitz bis Warhol: Sammlung Platen / Artist Complex: Photographic Portraits from Baselitz to Warhol: Platen Collection* (Heidelberg and Berlin: Kehrer 2018), 37–126 <<https://www.smb.museum/museen-und-einrichtungen/museum-fuer-fotografie/ausstellungen/detail/kuenstler-komplex.html>>.
- 9 For more information, see the auction in Paris in 2014, <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/kunsthandel-auktionen/fotos-fuer-zuerich-1.18429740>. See also the charity auction in 2011, <https://www.news.uzh.ch/de/articles/2011/erste-adresse-fuer-fotografie.html>.
- 10 For more information, see Dr. Carlo Fleischmann-Foundation <<http://dcff.org/>> and “Fotografiegeschichte in Forschung und Lehre – ein Sommernachtstraum” <<http://www.rundbrief-fotografie.de/archiv/hefte/rf-99>>.
- 11 See Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *Experimentalität: Hans-Jörg Rheinberger im Gespräch über Labor, Atelier und Archiv* (Berlin: Kadmos 2018).
- 12 Felix Philipp Ingold, “Das Glück des Zufalls: Die Muse küsst, wie und wen sie will”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 9 October 2018.
- 13 A big thank you at this point to Sophie Junge, who supported these first steps towards the making of a research project.
- 14 See note 7.
- 15 See Johannes Grave / Beate Söntgen, “Innerer Widerstreit: Kunst-kritik, von ihren Anfängen her gesehen”, *Texte zur Kunst* 87 (September 2012), 62–83.
- 16 Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1999).
- 17 For Steichen’s role in the Photo-Secession, see Malcolm Daniel, “Edward J. Steichen (1879–1973): The Photo-Secession Years,” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2000) <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/stei/hd_stei.htm> (November 2010). It was in fact Sadakichi Hartmann (1867–1944), a critic of art and photography, who decisively contributed to *Camera Work*’s connection with Japanese art and culture on an art theoretical level much appreciated by Stieglitz.
- 18 The following text is based on my introductory remarks for the above-mentioned conference in March 2018. It was due to the tireless work and enthusiasm of Maria Effinger and her team that we were able to announce that *Camera Work* was put online as an open-access source in time for the opening of the conference and thus in front of an international audience of scholars and interested guests from the wider public.
- 19 See <<https://www.sik-isea.ch/de-ch/>>.
- 20 See <http://modjourn.org/render.php?view=mjp_object&id=CameraWorkCollection>.
- 21 See, for instance the Art Institute of Chicago <<http://media.artic.edu/stieglitz/>> or the HathiTrust Digital Library <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=iau.31858045893595;view=1up;seq=1>>.
- 22 For the milestone that has already been reached, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the collaborators in Heidelberg, especially to Maria Effinger, chief librarian for art history, and to the *Camera Work*-research team (2015–2018). My thanks go to Nanni Baltzer, Catherine Berger, Laura Gronius, Nadine Jirka, Sophie Junge, Patrizia Munforte, Thilo Koenig and Marc-Joachim Wasmer. Almost all of these positions were partly or entirely financed by the resources from the two above-mentioned charity auctions initiated by Kaspar M. Fleischmann in collaboration with Christie’s in 2011 and 2014. Many heartfelt thanks go to him.
- 23 See the announcement on the website of the Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur Mainz: <<http://www.adw-mainz.de/nachrichten/artikel/der-sturm-geht-als-digitale-quelenedition-online.html>>; see also the link to the project website: <<https://sturm-edition.de/projekt.html>>.
- 24 See <https://www.khist.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:e25321ad-5f15-4f22-a2e3-d91bdb2d5b08/Flyer_Tagung_SIK_digEdition_web.pdf>.