

Unpaid Labour

Commissioned review of book and exhibition *The Hobbyist: Hobbies, Photography and the Hobby of Photography*

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Nudists, pigeon-fanciers, body-builders, YouTubers: these are the subjects of the 2017-2018 exhibition, *The Hobbyist: Hobbies, Photography and the Hobby of Photography* at Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland. Or are they? Despite the title, the show and accompanying publication is really concerned with artists' mediation of organised leisure. Images of hobbies dominate, with contributions by some well-known names (Kenneth Anger and Diane Arbus, for example), some of whom were themselves hobbyists (Chris Burden built a kit car; John Cage was a fungus forager).

What are hobbies anyway? The practices depicted range from sports (skateboarding, weight-lifting) and crafts (cake making, hot-rodding) to outdoor activities (hunting, camping). The word selected to describe such activities has fond but pejorative connotations, recognising enthusiasm and effort but also pointlessness. Donkey basketball, anyone? In Theodor W. Adorno's 1969 essay, "Free Time", reproduced in the publication, the critical theorist complains that hobbies are "pseudo-activities" and "misguided spontaneity". In the case of Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane, who revisit their Folk Archive project of 2005, this lack of purpose is what they cherish in the sandcastle building, regional wrestling and souped-up cars of British popular culture. Here the hobbyist is hero. A similar approach is taken in Thilo Koenig's opening essay on the meaning of photographic amateurs: "These snappers...whose ubiquitous images flood the Internet these days, have often served as guarantors of an authentic media practice 'from below'." A celebration of amateurism certainly pervades the exhibition catalogue, styled as a cross between a magazine for enthusiasts and one produced by them with simple Desktop Publishing software.

Such romanticism is destabilised elsewhere in essays that fiercely critique, for example, pet-keeping (and its YouTube documentation) as the management of "emotional livestock". In "Free Time for Sale", Olivia Baeriswyl shows how advertising photography creates "orchestrated scenes" of hobbyists as "identification interfaces" to sell associations of freedom and escape, ultimately shaping hobbies in commercial interests. Evgeny Morozov undermines the utopian claims made of and by hackers since the 1960s. Rather than representing the "democratisation of invention", he argues that the so-called "third industrial revolution" and the "maker movement", achieved through

the radical decentralisation of technology and the potential of 3D printers and apps, must be understood in parallel with the total commercialisation of its data.

Where is photography in all this? Those looking for analysis or examples of “the hobby of photography” may be disappointed to find little that addresses the subject directly although important threads of discussion emerge. Doris Gassert argues that photography produces the hobby as an image and a thing, abstracting it from practice. Through social media, hobbies become malleable, marketable products. Nicely illustrated by Jenny O’Dell’s photography series of screenshots from YouTube entitled ‘People Younger Than Me Explaining How to Do Things’, Gassert states that “everyday snappers” have become advertising photographers. Images of hobbies are status symbols and promotional tools. In the unpaid labour of social media, work and leisure are increasingly blurred. Adorno’s dismissal of the myth of free time as an “oasis of unmediated life within a completely mediated total system” still rings true.