

CV

Ulrik Heltoft (b. 1973) lives and works in Copenhagen. He is a graduate of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts (2001), and has also studied at Yale University School of Art in New Haven (1999-2001). In recent years he has exhibited at Gl. Holtegaard in Denmark, Secession in Vienna, as well as participated in the Whitney Biennial in New York. Heltoft is currently associate professor at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen.

EVENTS

Thursday 21 February 6-7pm

WALK'N'TALK

This evening, Ulrik Heltoft will in the company of Professor of Art History Jacob Wamberg elaborate on the ideas behind the exhibition with a special focus on image formation.

Thursday 14 March 6-7pm

CONVERSATIONAL ENACTMENT

With inspiration from the works in the exhibition, Ulrik Heltoft and artist Yvette Brackman will present a 'conversational enactment' that mixes elements of conversation and performance.

THANK YOU

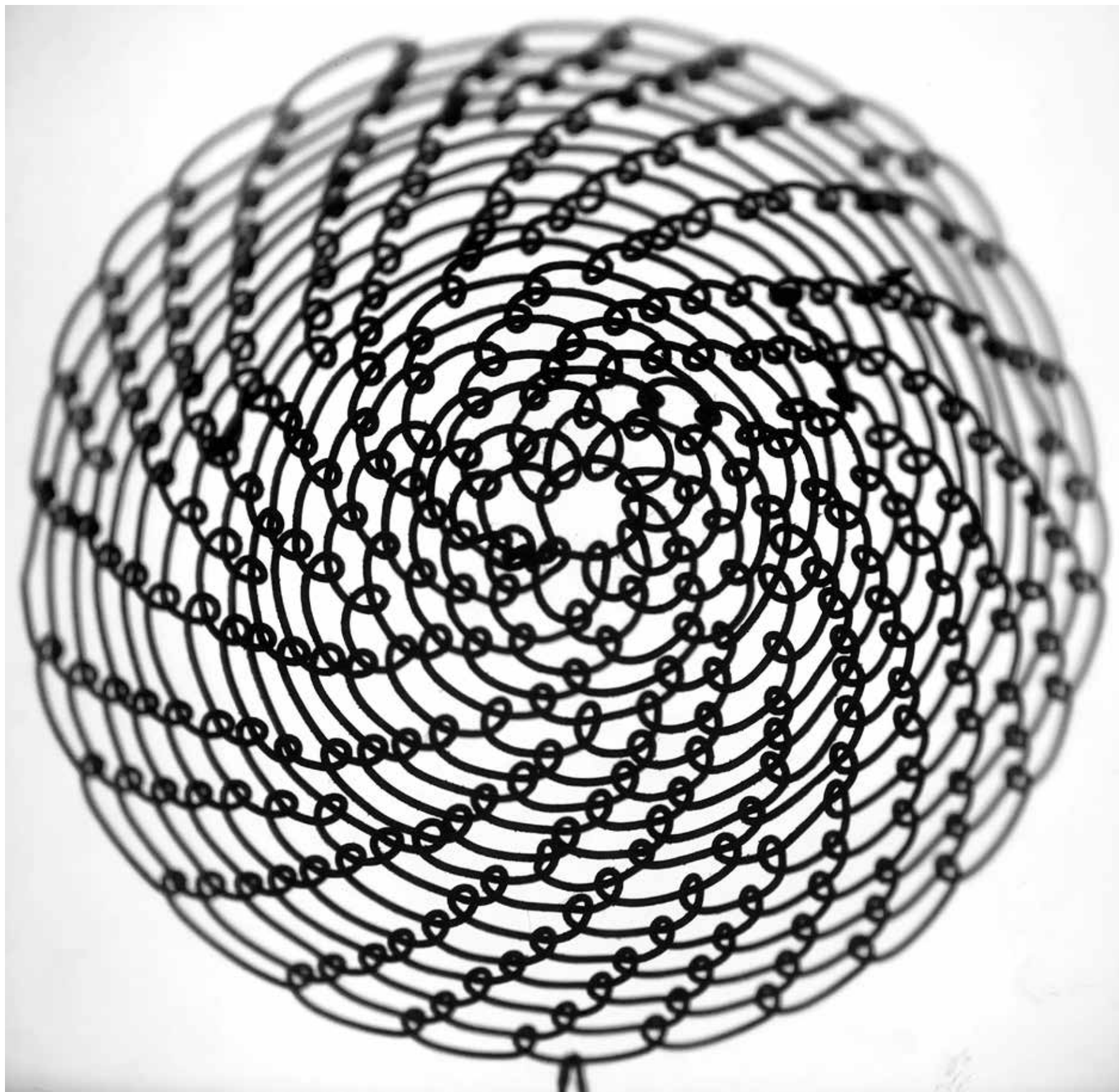
Ulrik Heltoft would like to thank Harold Bloom, Thomas Fleron Jørgensen, Ebbe Stub Wittrup, Tohono O'odham Nation, Claus Due, Ann Sophie von Bülow, Ane-Katrine von Bülow, Ole Ørsted, Datan, and Hasselblad Historical.

Image (front): Ulrik Heltoft, *Silver Shadow*, 2019.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from: overgaden.org

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DANISH ARTS FOUNDATION



Ulrik Heltoft
This little piggy lost its life
This little piggy lost its mind
This little piggy lost its faith
This little piggy went unscathed
26.01 – 17.03 2019

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Design: Anni's

Roussel's Method: New Works by Ulrik Heltoft

By Niels Henriksen

A projection shows a circular form made of a single thread bound in an intricate system of knots and loops. It is as if the coil of thread is rocking gently in the wind, which moves it in and out of focus. But is it a photograph, a film or an animation we are looking at?

If we define photography, film and animation in relationship to their photochemical or digital base on paper, glass and celluloid or in datafiles and compression formats, then the answer is *no*. What we are looking at is neither a .jpg, .mpg, slide nor 16mm film. It is the projected shadow of a thin silver thread tied using a method the indigenous people of North America use to weave baskets. The thread now hangs inside the slide projector, the fan of which makes the thread – and its image on the wall – move.

Thus, what we are looking at is not a photograph or film in any conventional sense. Yet this small piece of silver thread in the slide projector sums up something fundamental about the photographic medium in the shape of an idea or a principle. Consider for a moment that the photographic image, which has historically relied on a broad range of techniques and materials, is basically an image created by a form of reduction: a kind of silhouette.¹ The photographic negative – be it on paper, glass or celluloid, in black and white or colour – functions as a kind of filter that alternately blocks or allows the light to pass through. A digital projection or screen image basically functions in the same way.²

In the works of Ulrik Heltoft, such fundamental reflections on the medium of photography form the basis for a broader investigation of how to define the image in the photographic and the post-photographic age.

Small framed photographs show a series of motifs that seem simultaneously familiar and anonymous. We see a man listening for an echo in a mountain landscape, an alley with a street lamp, a starry sky from a high point, a ripped water container in the desert, and a large, old tree in four seasons. The images remind me of scenes in a novel, the plot of which I have already forgotten. They are based on illustrations in the French author Raymond Roussel's book *Nouvelles impressions d'Afrique*, which was published in 1932 after Roussel had spent more than fifteen years working on it. Rather than a traditional travelogue, *Nouvelles impressions d'Afrique* is a poem of 1,274 lines. The structure of the verses and parenthetical digressions in the poem form a carefully calculated pattern of symmetrical mirror images and repetitions, which some claim contain a secret message written in bilateral code. The illustrations for the poem were made by the painter and illustrator Henri

Zo. Roussel contacted Zo through a detective agency, who passed on a series of instructions along the lines of the descriptions above: a man listening for an echo, an old tree in four seasons, etc.

There is no apparent link between the subjects in Zo's illustrations and the content of Roussel's poem. Then again, there is no link between the illustrations and Roussel's intention with the poem as interpreted by Zo, since the illustrator did not even know he was working for Roussel. This is what is known as Roussel's Method.

In *Nouvelles impressions d'Afrique* Roussel reduces the illustrated travel novel to the most basic literary and visual codes a conventional travelogue would usually build on. A similar impulse runs throughout Heltoft's photographic works. The kind of sharpness of focus, spectrum of tones, and resolution of detail seen in his images can only be achieved through an almost fanatical attention to the technical details of the photographic process. Heltoft often makes his photographic works using methods he has invented himself, in which he combines analogue and digital techniques.

Despite the sharpness and high resolution of the images, the primary focus in Heltoft's works is not the outer reality they depict. Like Zo's illustrations and Roussel's poem, Heltoft's motifs (figurative and non-figurative alike) tend towards the abstract, paradoxical or nonsensical, which is all the more reason to distinguish Heltoft's practice from the abstract formalism of the post-war art and literature Roussel's works also inspired. In this respect it is worth noting how Heltoft, in his approach to the photographic and digital techniques so central to his work, positions himself in terms of current debates on what technology is and how it influences humans and their culture.

In the tradition of technology critique that originated with the Frankfurt School, there has been a tendency to retrospectively understand virtually every aspect of cultural history as determined by technological developments.³ Here simple procedures like swimming strokes and manual farming techniques have been analysed as knowledge technologies on the same level as, say, advanced algorithms and methods of data compression.

Conversely, another group of theorists, basing their work on rereadings of existentialism and phenomenology, have set about deconstructing the idea of anthropological difference, i.e. the idea that the human differs from the non-human. The hope is that in deconstructing this idea, they can dismantle the value judgements attached to theories of what is more (or less) human.

For this group of theorists, technology represents an opening to the non-human or post-human. Here the former group of theorists, whose positions are defined by their critiques of technology and their anti-humanism, protest that the ethical motivations behind the project of the post-human ultimately lead to the reinstatement of the anthropocentric perspective it was meant to deconstruct, i.e. that technology (or the merging of humans and technology) merely becomes a stand-in for a new and better kind of human.

Ulrik Heltoft can be seen to occupy a position between the two. His works are the result of extended and complicated processes in which various forms of manual, photochemical, digital, literary and artistic methods are used in new ways and new combinations. In working with such processes he not only investigates how specific artistic and literary forms influence specific technologies, and vice versa, he also poses a fundamental question about the relationship between humans and technology, which is: when and how does an action become a procedure become a technique become a culture become an image?

Niels Henriksen is an art historian and PhD student at Princeton University.

Translation: Jane Rowley

1. This is also the basic idea in the structuralist filmmaker Hollis Frampton's ground-breaking performance work *A Lecture* from 1968. In *A Lecture* Frampton manipulated the light from a 16mm film projector with his hands while playing a tape recording of his manifesto-like text on the film medium read by Michael Snow. In the text Frampton writes: "It is only a rectangle of white light. But it is all films. We can never see *more* within our rectangle, only *less*."
2. The specific technique used to tie the silver thread in a circle suggests that if photography is always a filter or reduction, then this reduction also always involves some kind of code.
3. The following summary draws on Geoffrey Winthrop-Young's "Cultural Techniques: Preliminary Remarks", *Theory, Culture, and Society* 30, no. 6 (November, 2013), pp. 3–19.

Ulrik Heltoft, 20. *A waterskin in the desert with water gushing from a hole seemingly deliberately made be a traitor's sword. No people*, 2007.

