

Contributor Guidelines

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What we're looking for

Critique over coverage. The difference matters. Coverage reports what happened, who exhibited where, which prize went to whom. Other publications do this well, and we have no interest in repeating their work. Critique asks what something means, what's at stake in it, and what photography gains or loses by taking it seriously. That's the work we want.

Controversial questions are welcome when they engage photographic or artistic substance. Photography has real disagreements worth working through who counts as a serious artist and on what grounds, what distinguishes serious photographic work, what the medium owes to the people in front of the lens. Pieces that take a clear position on questions like these, defended with care, are exactly what we are for. Controversy pursued as a goal rather than as a consequence of serious argument is not.

Long-form is the default register. By long-form we mean producing a piece with room for an argument to develop across the piece, with a conclusion earned rather than declared at the top. A reader should leave a piece having moved somewhere, not having been informed. The practical range is 1,500 to 2,000 words, which supports a thesis, two or three structured movements, and a landing. Shorter pieces are welcome. Some are exactly the right length for what they're doing. Others are the start of something longer, whether the contributor expands them later or we pitch a related idea back.

Articles are organized by category. The categories are how readers find their way around the publication and how contributors find their place inside it. Choose the category that best fits the work you're proposing, and pitch from there. A piece that

doesn't fit any current category is still worth pitching. It may be the one that opens a new one.

Submission process

Pitching an idea

A short pitch is the preferred first contact. A pitch of two or three paragraphs describing the idea, the angle you intend to take, and why it fits the publication is enough to start a conversation. Expect a response within a week. If we are interested, a discussion follows about scope, category, and timing before you commit to developing the piece.

Submitting a finished draft

Finished manuscripts are also welcome. Read time on a full draft runs longer than on a pitch, so plan on a response within two weeks rather than one. The same review process applies once we have read the piece.

What to send

With a pitch: the two or three paragraphs described above, and a short contributor bio of 60 to 100 words. With a finished draft: the manuscript, the bio, any images intended to accompany the piece with captions and reproduction rights status, and the optional abstract. Send everything through the [contributor form](#).

After submission

We will be in direct communication with you within the response window. Once a piece is accepted, the publication date depends on the editorial calendar, which is still settling. We will give you a target window, and any changes to that window will be communicated as they arise.

Compensation

We do not currently pay contributors for open submissions. Submissions through the contribute page are volunteer contributions to an independent editorial space, and we want to be direct about that from the start. Copyright remains with the contributor. Republication elsewhere is free.

Reprints and simultaneous submissions

If a piece has been published elsewhere previously, please let us know at pitch or submission and include the original publication details. The reprint will be noted at the start of the article when published. Simultaneous submissions to other publications are accepted. If a piece you have submitted is accepted elsewhere while still under consideration here, or after publication here, please let us know. This is for the contributor's benefit as much as ours: notification allows for proper attribution and the technical handling that supports both publications appearing without penalty in search results.

Manuscript specifications

Length

Articles run 1,500 to 2,000 words. Word count means the body of the article. Abstract, section titles, footnotes, and references are not counted against it.

Title

Concise and free of abbreviations. A title should give the reader a clear sense of what the piece argues or examines. Witty and creative titles are welcome where they fit the work. We may propose an alternative when a title risks being misread.

Abstract

Optional but highly encouraged. A short abstract of 50 to 100 words helps us place the piece and supports promotion when the article is published. Submit it with the manuscript.

Sections

We do not prescribe a section structure. Most critique benefits from an introduction that sets up the question, a body that develops the argument across several movements, and a closing that lands the piece. How that gets organized, and how many subheads it takes, is a question of what the argument needs. We may suggest structural changes during review.

References

Include references for sources you draw on. We do not require a specific citation style, since sources for photographic critique come from books, gallery catalogs, exhibition reviews, interviews, archival material, and many other places that do not fit

a single template. The working standard is that each reference should be complete enough for a reader to find the source: author, title, publication or venue, date, and page or location where relevant. Consistency within a single article matters more than adherence to a particular style guide.

Images and accessibility

Reproduction rights

Contributors are responsible for securing reproduction rights for any images included in their submission and for supplying proper attribution. We are not in a position to clear rights on a contributor's behalf and cannot assume liability for images submitted without them. If you are uncertain whether an image is cleared, treat it as not cleared until you have written permission from the rights holder. Public domain and Creative Commons material is welcome, with the appropriate notation included in the caption.

Captions

Every image should be accompanied by a caption that includes the title of the work, the copyright date, and the copyright holder. Where the photographer is not the copyright holder, credit the photographer separately. Where the image is reproduced courtesy of a gallery, estate, archive, or licensing agency, include the appropriate courtesy line. For AI-generated or AI-assisted imagery, credit the human creator honestly and note that copyright in fully AI-generated work is not currently available under U.S. law. Our working view on the broader question is set out in *Made With or Made By*.

Image specifications

Submit images at 300 dpi at final size, in RGB color mode. Accepted formats are TIFF (.tif/.tiff) and JPEG (.jpg). Check resolution by enlarging the image to 150 percent. If the image looks blurry, jagged, or stair-stepped at that size, the resolution is too low.

Alternative text

Include alt text with every image. Alt text is a short visual description of an image's content. It is not the same as a caption. A caption tells the reader what the image is. Alt text tells someone who cannot see the image what it shows. Good alt text is specific and concise, and it includes any essential text or data that appears in the

image and would otherwise be lost. Harvard University maintains a useful [reference guide on writing alt text](#).

Why this matters

Alt text makes the publication accessible to readers using screen reading technology, and to anyone whose images do not load. It also helps search indexing. For a publication that takes images seriously, accessibility is part of the work rather than an addition to it.

Guidelines for AI and related technologies

On AI as a tool, we take the same position we take on AI in image-making. What matters is the work itself: articulate, accurate, engaging, and unmistakably authored. The tool used to draft a sentence or create an image matters less than the thinking behind it.

Substantive involvement covers four things: the contributor conceives the article, drives the research, edits, and checks the facts. Research has a particular shape here. Preliminary research, the work of testing whether a hypothesis is supported and by whom, belongs to the author. Deep research, the work of finding additional or adjacent sources, can be done in conjunction with AI. The final pass, reading everything found to see whether it supports or contradicts the original hypothesis, returns to the author. A tool that helps phrase a paragraph more cleanly is a tool. A tool that does the conceiving, framing, or final judgment has produced something other than the author's article.

Tools also shape the work in less visible ways. A summarization tool changes how a contributor approaches summaries. A model fluent in counterargument changes how a contributor structures tension. This is true of every tool, not only AI, and it isn't a problem to be eliminated. It is worth being aware of in your own work.

If AI helped with any part of the process, please add a short disclosure note at the end of the article describing how. This is currently optional. As our style standard settles, disclosure may move from optional to required. For now, an honest line at the end is enough.

This section will likely evolve as we develop a fuller style standard. Until then, the working principle is the one above: the contributor owns the substantive work, and honest disclosure is welcome.

Inclusive language

We think carefully about the language critique uses and ask contributors to do the same. Critique is the work of describing what something is and arguing for what it means, and the words chosen at each step carry assumptions about who counts as a default reader, whose work counts as universal, and whose context needs explanation. These choices are not neutral. They shape what the contribution makes visible and what it makes invisible.

The practical question is whether a descriptor is doing work the argument needs. Naming a photographer's gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, religion, disability, or socio-economic background is appropriate when the argument turns on it. It is less appropriate when it functions as decoration, as a marker of difference from an unstated norm, or as a substitute for engaging with the work itself. The same test applies to the subjects of photographs.

Language that frames one culture, tradition, or perspective as the default is the most common pattern to watch for, and the hardest to see in one's own work. It often shows up in what a piece treats as needing explanation and what it treats as obvious. A contributor assuming that Western photographic history is the reference point against which everything else is measured is making a choice, even when the choice is invisible to them. We do not require that every piece work against this pattern, but we do ask contributors to be aware of when they are reproducing it.

Insulting, profane, or derogatory language directed at people or groups is not welcome. This is not a question of register or strong opinion, both of which are welcome. It is a question of whether language is being used to make an argument or to dismiss the people the argument concerns.

These are working principles rather than rules. We trust contributors to apply them with judgment, and to push back where they think a particular case calls for a

different reading. The conversation around inclusive language in critical writing is itself unsettled, and we are interested in contributors who can think well about it.

Start with a short pitch or send a manuscript if you're ready.

Begin at the-illuminatum.com/be-a-contributor.php.