

## The Revenge of the Photographic Archive

There are at least two reasons why photography has been recognized by museums of fine art. Both of these two reasons are connected to photographic archives.

On the one hand, we know that the historical avant-garde, from the Futurists through the Dadaists and up until the Surrealists, used photography as part of their impetus to transform life, or even society, into an autonomous medium. Hence, artists such as Alexandre Rodchenko, Hanna Höch or László Moholy-Nagy used the camera in order to produce works, but also collected all sorts of photographs, and made their own archives of photography found mostly from within the mass media.

On the other hand, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, photography came out of the cellar – where it was the slave of art history, faithfully reproducing paintings and sculptures for inventories – and entered the noble stage of the museum. It is through these projects, by photographers who aimed to establish archives of their work, that photography was promoted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If Eugène Atget was the first in this line at the beginning of the century, he was followed by Walker Evans, Berenice Abbott, August Sander and, in contemporary times, Bernd and Hilda Becher.

It was in the 1970s that photography began to find acclaim within museums of fine art. Douglas Crimp wrote in “The Museums Ruin” that although photography was invented in 1839, it was discovered in the 1970’s. It was at this time that other artists, in contrast to the Bechers, began to put together photographic archives of existing photographs. In addition to this, curators and historians began to revisit photographic archives in search of certain prints that would be a supplement to works of art.

Douglas Crimp recalls how Mrs. Julia van Haften recast the definition of photography in the collections of the New York Public Library, on occasion even tearing images out of books, to create an “art department” at the NYPL. Even representations of the pyramids were taken from the classification “Egypt” and reclassified in the domain of the “art department” under “Du Camp” or “Firth”.

Olivier Lugon remembers in “Le style documentaire” that the Security Farm Administration (FSA) took the NYPL as its example when aiming to construct larger public photography archives representing poverty in the rural areas of the southern United States of America in the ‘30s. The work of Mrs. Romana Javitz, head of the Picture Collection of the NYPL to collect - in a few years - more than 1 million photographs from all over the world, had a great impact on Walker Evans – who took the NYPL as his model when making the FSA archives.

Hence the New York Public Library became a model for a large-scale archive project and also was one of the first places where a photographic document was transformed into a work of art. It must be said that it was usually in libraries that public photography archives first saw the light of day.

Just as the theories of Douglas Crimp and Olivier Lugon crossed over at the New York Public Library, photographic archives are still the places where low and high culture intersect today – photography and contemporary art.

As retracing happenings (recording events?) by the medium of photography is (by definition) their proper function, photographic archives are in direct contact with political, social, economic, scientific (etc) realities. To make a photographic archive, or to work from photographic archives, is an act of direct or indirect political engagement. It is an act that also engages with the dynamic of the historical avant-garde to change lives, or society.

“Archivism” has been a consistently recurring trend in contemporary art for over ten years (“Deep Storage”, Munich 1997; “Interarchive”, Luneburg 1999), perhaps seen as the fruitful prolongation of contextual art, or the institutional critique which, from its beginnings around 1990, risked closing in on itself, which is to say the system of art (Kunstsysteem). Exhibitions

that can be traced to photographic archives have only emerged recently (Recherche – Entdeckt”, Esslingen 2004; “Archive Fever”, New York 2008; “De Orde der Dingen”, Anvers 2008; “Archivo universal”, Barcelona 2008).

**The Revenge of the Photographic Archive** is completely differentiated from the exhibitions cited above by its political approach, and, in continuation of the spirit of the avant-gardes, by the promising aspect of a better future than the past, and a clean slate going forward. **The Revenge of the Photographic Archive** will also be distinguished from the other exhibitions by its expansion into categories other than contemporary art, including militant politics (Angel Ricardo – who has unfortunately just passed away, and Meir Wigoder), the fight against racism (Jacob Holdt), anthropology (Claudia Andujar) or photo journalism (Susan Meiselas).

The project **The Revenge of the Photographic Archive** is not limited to the exhibition. We plan to invite artists and photographers to work with or from Geneva’s archives. With this aim, museums and institutions in Geneva are being invited to work in a close collaboration with artists on specific projects, Above and beyond the exhibition, these partnerships can result in a printed publication, websites, conferences etc. Already confirmed collaborations include artists working with institutions headquartered in Geneva such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), The Commission for Human Rights, and the Red Cross (CICR). **The Revenge of the Photographic Archive** reflects an intrinsic continuity in the programming that the Centre de la photographie Genève has presented over the past eight years (Becher, Feldmann, Nothelfer, Odermatt, Proteor and others).

As a result, the CPG would also like to produce a book based on the exhibition “Toutes les photographies d’une personne” (“All the Photographs of One Person”) by Myriam Bäckström and Carsten Höller. (THIS DOESN’T MAKE SENSE HERE)

A catalogue / book is planned, to present the artists who will participate in the project, as well as complimentary texts discussing the phenomenon of photographic archiving in the domain of “Visual Culture”.

Joerg Bader  
Summer 2009