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The Getty Center & The Huntington, Los Angeles / San Marino, February
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Carolin Görgen



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Symposium "Photo Archives V: The Paradigm of Objectivity"

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Carolin Görgen

- 1 Given the fairly recent material and digital "turns" in our discipline, photo historians are increasingly confronted with the question of how and where to preserve, appreciate, and disseminate our primary sources in the most efficient way. Starting in 2009, the conference cycle "Photo Archives" has addressed these and other interdisciplinary questions in a series of symposia, the fifth of which was organized in Los Angeles at the Getty Center and The Huntington on February 25 and 26, 2016. Sponsored by these two institutions as well as the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence, Italy, the organizers Anne Blecksmith (The Huntington), Costanza Caraffa (Kunsthistorisches Institut Florenz-Max-Planck-Institut), and Tracey Schuster (Getty Research Institute) brought together a considerable number of renowned scholars to discuss the "promise" of the archive in its material and digital forms. After various preceding symposia on the function of photo archives in art history and in the shaping of national discourses,¹ this two-day conference examined the paradigm of objectivity which has been attributed to both the photographic medium *and* the archive, and has dominated discourses on the two from the mid-XIXth century onward. In a time when the future is widely advertised as digital, we need to re-evaluate the function and uses of photographs in the archives and ask ourselves what their materiality means to us. Considering the actors involved in the process of archiving, the agency of the archive is just as undeniable and urgent a matter to confront as the agency of the photographers themselves.
- 2 Given the variety of thought-provoking sessions, it goes without saying that there was no clear-cut judgment on whether or not to embrace the digital. The question was articulated more subtly through a series of heated debates examining which aspects of the photograph's materiality are vital, I daresay indispensable, to our research. The sheer variety of subjective (and valid) viewpoints on how to allow the visual potential of images

to unfold in the purest, most transparent way made the paradigm of objectivity appear redundant right from the start. Even though objectivity might be a perfectly legitimate—perhaps even noble—goal for academic research, it is not a helpful concept when confronting a medium which, by its very nature, is not objective. Given the historically-charged conceptualization of both the photographic medium as “truthful” and the archive as “guardian of memory,” we need to move beyond these conceptual layers and get to the core of these overlapping discourses on the medium and its storage locations. As recently suggested by scholars such as Costanza Caraffa and Elizabeth Edwards, there is a need to acknowledge and to embrace the subjectivity of photographs and their preservation contexts as they allow us to re-approach them as autonomous “objects that exist in time and space” (Caraffa, 2015, vii) rather than mere visual representations on a material or digital support. Concentrating on exactly these temporal and spatial dimensions, the participants set out in four debating sessions to retrace the cultural, socio-political, and disciplinary repercussions of this new contextualization. These discussions sought to shed a new light on photographic and archival practices, the intersections of private and public memory, and more importantly, never failed to connect them to the concrete challenges posed by our digital age.

“Photographic Objectivity?”

- 3 The first session, entitled “Photographic Objectivity?” (with a question mark), was inaugurated by the Canadian historian Joan M. Schwartz (Queen’s University, Ontario) who was quick to point out the “shared vocabularies” of photography and archives as representing “facts” and being “mirrors” of memories. Mastering the deeper lexical meanings of these vocabularies, Joan M. Schwartz stimulated the participants to question these outdated concepts. Because mirrors verge on magic, illusion, and fragility, shouldn’t they be handled with care? Joan M. Schwartz stressed the persistence of this terminology even beyond the postmodernist attempt to destabilize concepts such as “objectivity” and “neutrality.” Continuing in the same linguistic vein, Schwartz proposed to re-think the paradigm of objectivity in lexical terms: rather than qualifying photos and archives as *being objective*, we should switch from the adjective to the noun and consider them as *having objectives*—which is synonymous with goal, aim, aspiration, and desire. This useful shift in perspective allows us to discern more clearly how a canon is constructed through the archives and which actors are involved. As the burdensome “objective” paradigm has transcended the analog-digital divide, its roots need to be traced in order for us to deduce the discourses around such repositories of memory.
- 4 This theoretical basis set by Joan M. Schwartz connected seamlessly with the next paper by the art historian Hilary Macartney (University of Glasgow) whose case study on the photographic reproduction and digitization of Spanish art works revealed the practical dimension of some of Schwartz’s earlier suggestions. Hilary Macartney reminded the public of the recurring criticism concerning visual reproduction, for example in Goya’s XVIIIth-century etchings which were reproductions of Velazquez’s work but in fact came to be considered as art works in their own right. Goya, by re-interpreting the oil paintings in his etchings, through a different medium, sought the essence of the work. Today’s digitization projects confront the same logic, especially in the case of the 1848 publication *Talbotype Illustrations to the Annals of the Artists of Spain*, on which Hilary Macartney currently works. In this case, an attempt was made to digitally reproduce the album by

creating an "ideal facsimile" which would combine the best surviving copies of this rare book. The idea is here to assemble the best material remnants of various albums for digitally reconstructing the images as a coherent sequence. The album would then exist anew, yet in a digital form which is inherently different from any of the remaining material copies. Participants were then right to ask—"Do we know what we look at?" when confronted with this digital version. This project certainly reveals a positive interpretation of the digital which seeks to tap its full potential by creating something new from the material remains—a hybrid digital object with its very own esthetics. This case study not only showed that the intrinsic reproducibility of images had been an issue long before Walter Benjamin and stretches out into our times, but it also helped the public to grasp the long-lived concern with "objectivity" in the reproduction process, be it through etchings, photographs, or digital images.

- 5 This paper was followed by a series of interdisciplinary questions revealed by Melissa Renn's (Harvard Business School) presentation which explored the idea of a "truthful" representation of World War II in *Life* magazine. In the early 1940s, *Life* hired several painters as "war artist correspondents" who were to depict scenes of the front on canvas. As camera work on site was partly restricted, the painters' work was strongly endorsed due to its intensity and vividness. However strange it may sound to us as hyper-connected XXIst-century viewers, painting was championed over photography here, as it would, again, reveal the *essence* of the scenery. By omitting unimportant details and benefitting from a complete color palette, the painters' coverage was believed to capture the momentum of specific scenes more intensely. Highly aware of photography's subjectivity, *Life*'s editors pursued a multifaceted "graphic approach" which would offer their viewers a vast array of visual coverage. Here, the creation of a "visual reality" is not necessarily motivated by a technical medium but rather by the belief in the sensory experience of the picture-maker. Acknowledging the various channels of visual depiction as truth-telling, *Life* allowed for a full-fledged subjective experience to unfold on their magazine pages.
- 6 Given the variety of discourses evolving around pictorial truthfulness and reproduction, this first session allowed the public to consider the paradigm of objectivity in its historical dimension. Retracing the diverse forms and processes of reproduction, it becomes clear that the crux of the matter is here to stay: Whether they be etchings, paintings, or digital images, these visual sources are most often shown to us in their representational function, i.e. from an essentialist perspective. The way we approach these sources today is informed by our access to them—in a library or on a digital platform. Even if the digital is capable of creating something new from the remaining scratches, participants agreed that our sensory experience of the source still differs tremendously from the original: flipping through the color reproductions on the pages of *Life* magazine is not the same as clicking through Google Books on your laptop. And yet, the essence of what we seek—the representation of an object, an event—is nonetheless transmitted.

Using Photographs

- 7 These historical explorations provided food for thought for the second session entitled "Using Photographs." Drawing on a long-term academic project based exclusively on digital images from, among others, the Library of Congress, historian Paul Conway

(University of Michigan) sought to highlight the largely underestimated benefits of this digital material. He proposed three forms of academic research (landscaping, storytelling, and discovering) which, by relying on digital source material, would allow to uncover new connections concerning the socio-cultural and geo-temporal frameworks, emotional associations, and hitherto undiscovered details of images. Focusing on the latter aspect, Paul Conway emphasized the discoveries made thanks to digitization through which under-appreciated details come to the fore. More importantly, the digital functions as a booster of the original as it allows the intrinsic quality of the source to unfold. Here, Conway embraced W.J.T. Mitchell's idea of images as having a meaning in time and space and thereby transcending the status of the picture object.² A digital image would then be remediated through the screen and gain a quality of its own. In acknowledging that the digital is different from the original, we move beyond the representational paradigm discussed in the previous session. Digital images are not mere copies of something—they are new sources which need to be examined as such, including all the data and meta-data they provide us with. In order to unlock the full potential of such research, however, it would be necessary that digital images be available in their best quality, including all the necessary features. Appealing to public institutions, Paul Conway underlined the necessity of available images in archives to be made accessible digitally. Only under these admittedly idealized conditions, the representational status of digital images could be transformed into a more valuable, autonomous source.

- 8 This presentation was followed by a more critical paper by art historian Glenn Willumson (University of Florida). Taking photographic campaigns of architecture for art-historical research as a point of departure, Glenn Willumson exposed the enduring belief in the neutrality of photographic reproductions, especially in the form of mathematically calculated, accumulated masses of images. The sheer amount of photographs from all kinds of perspectives would create a neutral distance to the object on which the researcher could rely. Yet, having conducted research with such sources himself, Glenn Willumson was quick to discover the shortcomings of this objectifying approach. In attempting to neutralize the visual experience of an architectural site (for example by systematically photographing its facade), these series of images would alter the personal viewing experience and thereby disconnect the images from their "object biographies." In other words, the images hide the subjectivity of the site they depict—a subjectivity which cannot be denied. Such calculated, "neutral" series of images would thereby "stage" their content and function. In this, we need to consider the role of the researcher himself whose motivations may lead to new performances of archival material. Therefore, Glenn Willumson stressed the necessity to embrace the inherent subjectivity of images and benefit from these object biographies. Considering his insistence on the work on site, Glenn Willumson was more reluctant to praise the digital in the same way as the previous speaker had done. His focus was clearly set on the contextual and the cognitive experience of the source material in their original storage location in order to fully disentangle their functions—as research objects, physical objects, and objects of history at large. The viewer and his individual reception play an equal part in this process.

9

- 10 In this second panel, the Benjaminian "aura" loomed large, especially when the ambivalence of the digitization process was confronted. In a positive stance, we may see the digital as more than a mere copy and thereby embrace its technological possibilities; and yet we should be alert when divorcing the material object from its original context.

The replacement function of photographs is remarkable here in its recurrence: photographs were used as surrogates for art historical objects in the archives of the XIXth and well into the XXth century, while today, the screen serves as surrogate for photographs as objects of historical studies. Perhaps we simply need to re-consider the projection surface for our research—be it on photo paper or in a grid of pixels. In the subsequent debate, Paul Conway re-iterated that the move from analog to digital is challenging exactly because of our expectations of the referent to *represent*. In abandoning the delegate, stand-in function of digital images and shaking off the fear of obsolescence, we may truly be able to discover something new. In this process, the speakers agreed—or at least hoped to consent—that the digital will not make the original redundant. Rather than labeling the digital as a threat to the material object's existence, it may simply be considered an extension, an enrichment.

11

Series and Archives

12 After the first day's debates at the Getty Museum on the expected functions and the practical uses of photographs and their storage, the second day at the Huntington Library in San Marino, east of Los Angeles, centered on the involvement of the public. The symposium was inaugurated by Huntington curator Jennifer Watts who, hinting at the irony of the location, asked how we could possibly discuss objectivity under the roof of an institution founded by robber baron Collis P. Huntington. Acknowledging, still, Huntington's deep interest in photography and stressing the importance of the photographic collection in this very location, the public found the time to familiarize themselves with its rich offerings throughout the day.

13 The participants of the morning session entitled "Series and Archives" examined the popular reach of reproduced photographs, especially in the form of albums, in the late XIXth and early XXth centuries. Starting just like the day before with an art-historical case study, the art historian Friederike Maria Kitschen (Gerda Henkel Stiftung) examined a series of popular gallery albums published by the editor Gustav Schauer between the 1860s and the 1890s. Inspired by the idea of a "museum at home," Schauer had sensed the unquenchable thirst for graphic reproductions of art works by an increasingly cultivated and educated public and seized the occasion to "bring all the museums of the world into the hands of the working man." His series included photographic reproductions in rigidly designed albums, focusing on "old masters" and famous European art galleries. What is striking about this visual approach is not only the belief in photography as the most apt medium to reach a larger public (thanks to its fairly economical reproduction) but also the formation of an art-historical canon through these publications. Serving the art-historical scholar and the layman alike, such albums instilled the public with a visual understanding of which genres and schools were to be considered "masterpieces." The function of photography as a fairly new and certainly not uncontested medium is especially noteworthy in this process of art-historical canonization.

14

15 Given the public reach of photographic reproductions, the second paper by art historian and curator Casey Riley continued chronologically in the same vein by examining Isabella Stewart Gardner's museum in Boston, which opened to the public in 1903 showcasing her

vast personal collection of fine and decorative arts from Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and the United States. In a total of eighteen gallery spaces on three stories and a central courtyard, the multitude of works was exhibited in the arrangement of an enjoyable "visual tumult." In this setting, the photographs of her art objects and showcases as well as her personal photo collection served various purposes, one of which was her "strategy for self-commemoration," for example in a series of guest albums. Consisting of informal snapshots of herself and her friends, this more personal arrangement revealed her social network and community, available in a portable visual format. In preserving these albums for posterity, Gardner showed a sensitive awareness of the album as a commemorative vehicle allowing to retrace her legacy. On a larger scale, this case study equally reveals her institutional ambitions as a woman opening a museum in early XXth-century America. Photography would play a major role in the diffusion of her private and public memory, as can be witnessed in the museum even today.

- 16 Exactly this overlap of the private and the public was taken up in the third presentation by the historian Issam Nasser (Illinois State University), who examined the political undertone and historical repercussions of such albums in Palestine in the early XXth century. Focusing on the example of the young musician Wasif Jawharriyeh who compiled seven albums retracing social, political, and cultural life in Palestine in the early 1900s, Nasser drew the public's attention to the rarity of such sources as Palestine's photographic legacy is largely shaped by its architecture—making the people somewhat invisible. Lacking an official national archive, Palestine as depicted in these few surviving albums has become a reference for researchers of the period before the diaspora. The albums perform the function of an archive in this case, mixing the documentation of public events with the subjective gaze of an active participant in the vibrant community life. These albums reiterate the attempt of an individual mapping out his place in the community by placing himself in the midst of historical events. Most of the time invisible in the pictures, Jawharriyeh becomes very much present in the captions which allow to backtrack his activities at the time. In consulting these albums, the viewer becomes keenly aware of Jawharriyeh's agency in assembling the album and turning himself into the historical point of reference. Conceived as if they were public records, these albums represent a new kind of archival activity blending personal experience with public events. Eventually, by acknowledging his archival agency, we uphold Jawharriyeh's albums as an act of individual subversion in a period of increasing suppression seeking to establish an official form of objectivity.

17

- 18 This third session effectively showed the impact of photography on a late XIXth-century public which massively consumed but also produced its own images. Albums as a tool for public education as well as blank albums for personal creations allowed the public to realize its increasing share in visual culture. In these personal albums, a desire to have impact, to leave an imprint, becomes tangible. The purposeful creation and preservation of the sources place them in a historical narrative directly shaped by its users. Here, private and public memory intersect and reinforce each other mutually, resulting in precious historical sources counting just as many interpretive layers as numbers of pages.

19

Photographic Evidence?

20 This dense discussion of public narratives and personal historic sensibilities was prolonged by the fourth and last panel on "photographic evidence?", closing the cycle of controversies addressed with a question mark. Concentrating on her role as a user of the archives, the American historian Martha Sandweiss (Princeton University) resumed Glenn Willumson's critical approach to employing photographs for historical research in the digital age. Granting photographs an autonomous status means to detach them from their illustrative function--especially in the historical discipline--and connecting them to their own histories. The material context of photographic production, its circulation and reception, are indispensable elements to our research, although they seem difficult, to say the least, to retrace in a digital format. The visual content of the image, what it *represents*, must be enriched by its history as an object in its own right. Therefore, the challenge of the digital archive is a double challenge to the historian: not only does he need the physical object, but he also needs the accurate background information. This step is what Martha Sandweiss labeled our "encounter" with the image--an expression which grants a privileged status to the object itself. In the context of a specialized research library, these elements are all adequately furnished, whereas on a digital platform they are far from being granted. Again, in this, we need to identify the actors behind the digitization process and their potential motivations, their "objectives"--to cite Joan M. Schwartz. Judging from her own problematic experiences as a researcher, Martha Sandweiss voiced her criticism on several levels, taking into account the physical transformation of an old object into something new. In the digitization process, the material difference between say a daguerreotype, a cyanotype or a Kodak photograph would be made obsolete as they would all be flattened out by the screen on which we perceive them. The subject--its content--rather than the object itself would be thus placed at the center. Martha Sandweiss went as far as to reproach those who champion the digital over the original for "visual illiteracy" facing the complexity of our primary material sources. This criticism was enriched by the challenge of dealing with XXIst-century "born digital" images whose "original" and whose location are equally difficult to grasp. In disseminating these digital images, online archives such as Corbus would amass visual data yet without any clear structure or coherence. Not only did Martha Sandweiss criticize the sloppy documentation (caption, size, author) of the original source, but she also denounced the invisible organizational structure of such platforms. In creating an "illusion of access to everything," digital archives rely on the sheer amount of accessible material to prove their universality--another all-to-familiar hallmark of "objectivity."

21

22 In addressing these decisive issues for historical researchers, Martha Sandweiss provided a compelling set of questions, which was prolonged by historian Jennifer Tucker (Wesleyan University) who dared to take on a more optimistic outlook on the future. In demanding the same critical awareness of the agency of the archive itself, Jennifer Tucker drew the attention of the audience to the construction of corpora in the archive through donations and acquisition policies. The number of actors involved in the process of corpus construction, documentation, and conservation informs the shape of the archive; so do the users themselves who carry their specific desires and expectations to the place, and whose knowledge of the collections is required in order to tap the full amount of

sources. The desire to keep everything alongside the XIXth-century belief in history as made by the people is still very much palpable in archival institutions—especially in the seemingly more ‘democratic’ digital format. Jennifer Tucker urged us to renew this dimension with our XXIst-century technological possibilities which, as Costanza Caraffa suggested in a closing comment on this panel, moves beyond a simple division between the material and the immaterial. It is more about the practices of users in archival spaces.

23

24 The closing keynote of the conference was delivered by historian Kelley Wilder (De Montfort University, Leicester) who sought to fuse the diversity of views on objectivity voiced thus far. In focusing on the *thing*, Kelly Wilder re-enlarged our viewpoint to photography itself. In considering a photograph as “a group of things,” we naturally widen our perspective to the material as well as the contextual offerings of the source. As opposed to Nagel’s *View from Nowhere*,³ and the notion of objectivity being implanted as soon as the private moves into the public realm, Kelly Wilder proposed a “view from everywhere” when approaching photographs. Instead of having expressions of subjectivity straightened out by the weight of a neutralizing public sphere, we admit a multiplicity of viewpoints. Kelly Wilder appealed to our embracing of this abundance of points of view inherent in the photographic medium with numerous visions of the self and the world—not only in the photographs themselves but also in their storage locations. Instead of trying to neutralize their content, we should understand objectivity as a cultural and social construct and react critically to this *mise-en-scène* of archival corpora. The desire for objectivity would then be (somewhat reduced to) one aspect of the various subjective views inherent in the photograph and its history. We should see it as a process of constant re-negotiation dominated by our own practices, uses, and desires of projection as researchers.

25

26 Kelly Wilder’s keynote not only provided ample food for thought and future research endeavors but also gave way to an inspiring closing panel in which the speakers acknowledged that our understanding of the past is always a selection process—in which we actively participate. One way of preserving and literally envisioning the past is taking photographs—not only of concrete sites but also of documents, records, and letters. Photography as a medium is therefore instrumental in shaping our understanding of the past and needs to be embraced in this totality. Yet, our search for completeness and fixity—for example in the stalwart clinging to material forms of archiving rather than digital formats—at times blocks our awareness of new research possibilities. Agreeing, as Martha Sandweiss suggested, that “we love the original thing,” we should nonetheless open up to new data provided to us thanks to the internet and its recent phenomena, such as clouds. Our own desire to have impact, to use this impact and channel our knowledge—be it through the various forms of photo albums or digital-born reproductions—is always a non-objective process, and our very awareness of this non-objectivity should be seen as an enrichment. Digitization can be acknowledged here as a starting point, a pull factor for researchers to explore the original location and remedy some of the aforementioned shortcomings of digital resources. And yet, digitization may also come in the shape of a push factor, allowing to create something new and tapping unexpected data. Embracing these new horizons, the speakers of the conference have come to terms with the vexing notion of objectivity and have, in turn, allowed for all participants to re-think their own *objectives*.

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Resources

Link to program and description:

http://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/events/photo_archives_objectivity.html

NOTES

1. Published in two volumes: Costanza Caraffa, ed., *Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History* (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2011) and Costanza Caraffa, Tiziana Serena, eds., *Photo Archives and the Idea of Nation* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).
2. W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
3. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

AUTHOR

CAROLIN GÖRGEN

Université Paris VII Denis Diderot & École du Louvre