The Digital Photo Archive. Theories, Practices & Rhetoric (Basel, 13-14 Jan 22)

University of Basel, Jan 13–14, 2022
Deadline: Aug 15, 2021

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We are living an 'archival moment' (Daston 2017). Applied to photography, this moment is characterised by limitless production and circulation and, at the same time, by deep concerns about the loss of information in both analogue and digital resources and the fragility of aggregated image clusters and fleeting collections. Given that digitisation and digital photography have been established practices for some thirty years, numerous methods and approaches to the storage and retrieval, indexing, interoperability and sustainability of digital image collections have been tested, debated, applied, expanded, questioned and discarded. This has led to unprecedented online access to visual material and a vast and uneven field of institutional, commercial and vernacular collections. Over the past ten years, in particular, with the emergence of the smartphone as an image-making device, image-centred social media platforms and increased processing and storage capacities, photography has gone 'off-scale' (Pollen 2015; Dvořák and Parikka 2021), producing more images than can ever be processed. These technological developments mean that more and more people all over the world are involved in creating, manipulating and collecting images. Scattered on phones, computers, servers and platforms, these new forms of semi-private or semi-public archives comprise sedimentations of applications as well as images that have been stocked for potential future use. Images and image data are copied, scraped, aggregated and rearranged in feeds, clusters and databases depending on their user's intention, including image and data mining for commercial or scientific purposes. Moreover, when organised and classified in database infrastructures, big visual data serve as the basis for computing on images and developing computer vision techniques. These, in turn, structure and help navigate the abundance of simultaneously unfettered and networked images (Henning 2018; Sluis and Rubinstein 2008). While these multifaceted collections and accumulations evade canonical notions of the archive, and the term archiving is used excessively to the point of unravelling, archival structures and practices have not merely become pervasive but are a nexus of the post-digital condition (Cramer 2014; Lison et al. 2019)

Building on the Photo Archives conference series, this gathering seeks to bring together scholars from a wide range of fields (e.g. history of photography, media studies, art history, visual culture studies, information sciences, history of science and technology) to examine and reflect on the practices and ideologies of the digital photo archive. It seeks to address the tensions between different, or rather opposed, notions of the archive: as a locus of power according to postmodern discourses; as a simple, transparently manageable repository; as a technology that facilitates the sharing and socialisation of (image) data; as a structure that perpetuates discrimination and con-

figures surveillance. The rhetoric of the archive, both analogue and digital, as a robust and authoritative body shall be discussed in relation to its ideological counterpart, the rhetoric of democratisation through digital practices, within the framework of the recent history of photography. Photography, here, is understood in its expanded sense as the 'historical totality of photographic forms' (Osborne 2010), which include digital photography and scanning technologies, mobilising the physical world and standardising objects and image resources. The conference thus seeks to challenge the idea of documentary values connected to photography and archives at a time when visual imagery is completely malleable; it aims at revisiting past narratives and speculating on future uses.
How can we describe the shifts and constellations in the redistribution of relevance and power in a productive way? How can we listen to the plurality of voices, including hidden or neglected actors? How can we grasp the noise of digital photo archives as a resource? In what forms does the utopian project of photography and the archival procedure of converting the infinite variety of the world into an order apply to contemporary practices? How can we learn from digital artistic and curatorial projects to imagine the archive without its institutional authority? Given that photography has become omnipresent and synonymous with the 'image', a critical discussion of the processes and imaginaries at play is important not simply to enhance the management of digital photo archives but also to help us gain a better understanding of the social, epistemological, cultural, political and aesthetic implications of contemporary practices.

Scholars at any stage of their career are welcome to submit their research. Please note that the conference will be in English. We encourage proposals from a broad range of subjects that reflect a diversity of geographies and may address one of the following themes and questions (though this list should not be taken as exhaustive):

1. Scale of the photo archive: Photo archives are, by nature, places of (often unruly) abundance, yet, with digital technologies, questions of scale and processability have become crucial. How do we conceptualise quantity as an asset, and not just in the sense of depth of information? How do the masses of digital photo archives challenge existing notions of what images are and do? How can our access to visual material go beyond 'searching' and become research?

2. Le goût de l'archive: What could the 'taste' or 'allure' (Farge 1997) of the digital photo archive be, when all the haptics and personal interaction with the material and its human intermediaries are absent, even though more 'voices' and 'raw' material from everyday life are stored than ever before? How do we establish a connection to the holdings contained in the digital archive?

3. Narratives and counter-narratives: How do the shifts that come with digital image archives allow for new narratives and counter-narratives? How can scholars, archivists, artists and curators work with these new forms given the plurality of scattered voices? If digital photo archives create new visibilities, what might condition new in-visibilities?

4. Politics of taxonomies and metadata: Taxonomisation is a cultural technique rooted in archival science in general and Western science in particular. Digital technologies seem to give classification systems greater flexibility, variety and combinability. To what extent are taxonomies, the digital grids that structure metadata, truly fluid and adaptable? To what extent are they an expression, instead, of the value and power systems that govern present-day societies? What can emerge from the messiness of taxonomies?

5. Economies and ecologies of the digital photo archive: Structured digital image collections have become assets in the logic of cultural heritage and science, and more importantly, in data capitalism, where data is the source of monetisation and the basis for the development of machine learning. This raises pressing questions about digital materiality, multifarious forms of labour and the environmental impact of maintaining and expanding archival infrastructures.

Proposals of 300–500 words, accompanied by a short biographical notice, should be sent by 15 August 2021 to the following address: jael.steiner@unibas.ch

Decisions will be announced no later than 31 August 2021.

The conference is a collaboration between the Department of Media Studies at the University of Basel (Estelle Blaschke) and the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut (Costanza Caraffa) and will take place on January 13–14, 2021 at the University of Basel.

It is part of the Photo Archives open conference series, which was launched in 2009 and has seen previous meetings in Florence, London, New York, Los Angeles and Oxford (https://www.khi.fi.it/en/forschung/photothek/photo-archives.php). Travel and accommodation costs will be covered by the conference organisers. We are considering the possibility of publishing the contributions presented at the conference.

Reference:

CFP: The Digital Photo Archive. Theories, Practices & Rhetoric (Basel, 13-14 Jan 22). In: ArtHist.net, Jul 1, 2021 (accessed Sep 17, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/34489>.