Photographica, Issue 8: On the value(s) of photographs

Deadline: May 22, 2023
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Photographica journal

Call for papers, Photographica issue 8 (Spring 2024): On the value(s) of photographs: production, mechanisms, sources.

What is at stake when we talk about the value(s) of photographs? Following after anthropologist David Graeber, it would be sound to differentiate between the value of photographs as relative to the "economic price-mechanisms" (p. 78), which for Marx was original of capitalism, as "the only system in which labor – a human being's capacity to transform the world, their powers of physical and mental creativity – can itself be bought and sold" (p. 55), and "values" as "conceptions of the desirable" (p. 78), which may vary according to the contexts of uses and exchange of photographs. As Graeber pointed out in his anthropological theory of value , "Whenever one examines the processes by which the value of objects is established (and this is true whether one is dealing with objects of exchange or wealth more generally), issues of visibility and invisibility almost invariably seem to crop up" (p. 92). This oscillation between visibility and invisibility of valuation, between objectifiable value and symbolic values, further complexifies the analysis of photographs' value, since such value is set by extremely diversified economic, social, and cultural uses. To conduct such an analysis seriously, then, implies not only paying attention to the fluctuations of these valuation processes, but also engaging with an issue perhaps insufficiently addressed by the history of photography: that of the price and cost of photographs—a fundamentally economic history of photographs, and not simply of the market for already produced-images, but of the valuation of photographic production. In other words, under what conditions is photography considered and valued as a commodity in Marx's sense, and how, as cultural goods, are photographs valued? What kind of commodity is photography and what is its ecosystem of valorization?

Towards a Long History of Prices of Production and Consumption of Photographs
If the value granted to photography seems to command a large part of its early history, it is also because, from its origins, this question encompassed the two ends of its accessibility: its accessibility as a practice and its accessibility as an object of consumption, both conditioned by its possible industrialization .Since its invention, the value of photography, though seen as a poor and low-quality image, has been directly related to the cost of the equipment and raw materials necessary to its production. So while the distinction drawn between late 19th century elite, or at least expert, practices of photography, and later popular practices introduced by the launch of the Kodak n°1 in 1888, remains valid, what is known, really, about the conditions of photographic accessibility in its artisanal phase, and about the influence of the dry emulsion processes on its economic accessibility? Even before becoming a large-scale enterprise producing images at decreasing costs (and

quality) as its dissemination grew wider, photography arose first and foremost from a market for cameras and raw materials necessary to practice it, initially limited to studios, but also accessible to a clientele often deemed upper-class. Thus, dry emulsion, by granting (relative) possibility to everyone to produce their own photographs, deeply modified the photographic economy moving from studios to mass produced, standardized, and normalized material, sometimes distributed by the said photographic studios themselves. But at what price? And when referring to the “accessibility” of photography for amateurs, who are these amateurs? What do we know about the price of photographic equipment at given moments in history, and about the influence of competition on both the rationalization of the market and its expansion? What do we know about the market for the material itself, the cost of supplies, plates, frames, then film, but also the display and presentation modes of photographs: albums, boxes, frames, cases? And how have these questions of cost weighed in on the accessibility of a practice of photography first reserved to an elite, then popular? From distinction to mass consumption, how have these matters oriented and directed practices? In other words–and to use up an observation often raised by historians of the expansion of bicycles at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries–, since when and under what conditions have cameras become accessible to workers in camera factories?

Fluctuating Values

Besides the accessibility of the material, the history of its production, its marketing and its value(s), the constitution of a market for photographs has been, from the onset, key to its development, through the establishment of a sector of production for these images, notably for portraits. The trade in photographic images, sold from 1839 onwards, developed into a complex and multifactorial economy which, in addition to the price of photographs, also depended on the price and uses of raw materials and equipment, as well as on the valuation of a given work, increasingly based on the (over)valuation of an artist's profile, as it was the case with many photographers at the end of the 19th century. At the same time, long before the industrialized mass production of photographs, firms oversaw the standardization of portrait-making, rendering them accessible for a few francs. However, as the forgery lawsuits of the 1860s easily demonstrate, the value of photographic images also fluctuated depending on the “value” ascribed to its subjects. Thus, the development of a market for photographic images, increasingly becoming "mundane goods," i.e., objects of consumption, derived from both material and symbolic valuations that should be evaluated in the context of a fluctuating economy that radically merged with capitalism under the Second Empire.

Photography market and heritage value

Parallel to these objective valorization operations, other efforts in valorizing photographs took place, particularly within institutions and through institutional events, such as the Société Française de Photographie’s (the SFP, French society of photography) recurring exhibitions in the 19th century. The first French market for photography emerged in this context, from the joint action of photographers and members of the SFP, from the 1850s onwards. Little is known of this early history, as well as of the subsequent emergence of photographic collectors. The latters nevertheless did, by navigating contemporary and patrimonial dimensions of photography, and the relative fluctuations of rarity, beauty and fame, weighed heavily on photography’s, but also photographic material’s value, in a first iteration of the photographic market. But it is in the interwar period, around new collectors figures, and with the boom of exhibitions displaying historical and modern photographs; the sale of studio collections from photographers to photographers, or from

companies to companies, or from photographers to institutions; and the general multiplication of transactions related to photography, that its value, notably patrimonial, was established: what have been the asking price(s) for vintage images or photographic material? What value has been attributed to them by professionals, and in turn by the public? Is there a fundamental shift in the value ascribed to photographs from the moment they are exhibited or appear in book histories of photography? What do we know of these re-evaluations of the value of photography, from the constitution of such a market to the revolution of the market for photographic prints from the 1970s onward?

This upcoming issue of Photographica wishes to interrogate and broaden the history of photographic value(s) and prices over a long timeframe, proposing to consider it a chapter in a materialist and material history of photography, through its consumption as image and practice, in France as well as all the territories where it expanded. We welcome contributions that question the sources and methods for a history of the value granted to values photography (in a broad sense, including but not limited to notarial archives, equipment sales catalogs, advertisements and announcements, insurance contracts, etc.), or that trace its developments and/or fluctuations, from consumers to producers. We will similarly be interested in contributions focusing on cases when photographs are imbued with historical value, presenting under what circumstances and through which operations, such as scholarly writing, the valorization of old collections, as well as reproduction for publishing purposes.

Schedule:
- Deadline to submit articles: May 22, 2023
- Committee response date: June 30, 2023
- Publication date of Photographica (# 8): Spring 2024

Articles should be submitted in French or English.
They should not exceed 30,000 characters (spaces and notes included).
They should also be anonymised.
Co-authored articles are welcome.
Suggested illustrations (15 max.) with captions and credits can be joined. Article submissions will be evaluated in double-blind peer-review. They may be accepted, accepted with modifications, or refused.
In a separate document, please include name, e-mail address, position, and institutional affiliation (university, research unit), along with a list of publications for the author(s).

Submissions should be sent to: redaction[at]photographica-revue[dot]fr

For further questions / inquiries, please contact: contact[at]photographica-revue[dot]fr

For the call in French see: https://univ-paris1.academia.edu/photographica

Reference:

CFP: Photographica, Issue 8: On the value(s) of photographs. In: ArtHist.net, Feb 3, 2023 (accessed Nov 24, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/38480>.