Photography, Archive, and Political Imagination (online, 23-25 Sep 26)

Online, Sep 23–25, 2026
Deadline: Jul 15, 2026

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Visual Thinking and Futures of Democracy. Photography, Archive, and Political Imagination.

7th edition of REFRAMING THE ARCHIVE: International Conference on Photography and Visual Culture.

How do images shape democratic life? Not only as records of politics, but as forces that constitute visibility, authority, and participation?

This conference examines photography and archival practices as contested sites where democracy is made, negotiated, and disrupted: between evidence and control, memory and exclusion, protest and institutional power.
We invite contributions from researchers, artists, and practitioners engaging with photography, archives, activism, and visual culture across historical and contemporary contexts.

KEYNOTE & GUEST SPEAKERS
DR NONI STACEY, Cultural Historian, United Kingdom
DR TOM ALLBESON, Cardiff University, United Kingdom
DR ÖZGE ÇELIKASLAN, Visual Artist, Researcher, Activist, Turkey/Germany
MARCELO BRODSKY, Visual Artist, Argentina

This conference proceeds from the premise that photography and archival visual practices do not simply document democratic life, but actively participate in the production of its conditions. Rather than treating images as representations of political reality, it approaches visual practices as sites in which subjects relations of recognition, authority, and participation are constituted and contested. Photography is thus understood not as a neutral medium of documentation, but as a dispositif through which subjects are rendered visible, legible, and governable, while simultaneously sustaining forms of civic address and political agency (Azoulay, 2008, 2019).

This ambivalence is not incidental. Since its emergence, photography has been bound to competing and often contradictory political functions: as a technology of exposure and a mechanism of control; as a means of rendering injustice visible and as an instrument in the administration of populations; as a vehicle for democratic communication and as a support for imperial, colonial, and capitalist orders. The persistent alignment of photography with accessibility, transparency, and evidentiary truth has contributed to its enduring association with democratic ideals, even as

these same attributes underpin its authority within regimes of surveillance, classification, and governance (Mirzoeff, 2011, 2017).

Central to this problem is the epistemological status of the image. Photography has historically operated through an assumed equivalence between visibility and knowledge, whereby seeing is aligned with knowing and presence with recognition. This equivalence underwrites the image's authority as evidence while obscuring the conditions of its production, circulation, and interpretation. It is precisely this instability that enables photography to function simultaneously as a site of political claim-making and as an instrument through which such claims are regulated, mediated, or foreclosed.

Within this framework, archives cannot be understood as neutral repositories of the past. They are epistemic and political infrastructures that organise what becomes historically legible, delimiting the field of visibility within which subjects and events acquire meaning. As systems of selection, classification, and preservation, archives structure the conditions under which recognition is granted or withheld, and thus play a constitutive role in the production of political reality. Their apparent function as guarantors of memory and access is inseparable from their role in stabilising authority and reproducing regimes of knowledge.

At the same time, visual practices operate within sites of conflict, dissent, and uprising. Images do not simply represent political struggle; they participate in it. They condense and transmit gestures of resistance, circulate affects, and intervene in the temporalities of political action, reactivating past struggles within present contexts (Didi-Huberman, 2016). Yet these same images are also subject to processes of capture, circulation, and institutional framing that re-inscribe them within dominant visual orders. The political force of images thus resides not in their capacity to reveal truth, but in their unstable position within competing regimes of visibility.

In recent decades, this dynamic has become particularly visible in the convergence of artistic practice and activist mobilisation. From the visual cultures of uprisings and occupations to ongoing movements such as Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall, images have circulated across streets, networks, and institutions, often exceeding or displacing conventional sites of artistic display. These practices not only mobilise visual forms but reconfigure the spaces in which they operate, challenging the authority of museums, galleries, and archives while exposing their entanglement in broader political and economic structures. In this sense, activist aesthetics does not simply intervene in existing regimes of visibility, but calls into question the institutional and spatial frameworks through which such regimes are sustained.

Alongside these dynamics of conflict and contestation, recent forms of practice have foregrounded the role of participation, imagination, and collective engagement in reconfiguring democratic life. Participatory and socially engaged artistic practices increasingly operate as sites in which publics are not only represented but constituted through processes of interaction, collaboration, and shared authorship. Such practices extend beyond institutional or policy-driven models of participation, cultivating dispersed and open-ended forms of engagement that unfold across everyday spaces and mediated environments. In doing so, they contribute to the formation of a reflective and imaginative public sphere, in which alternative social and political possibilities can be articulated, negotiated, and rehearsed (Cunningham & Hammond, 2026). This shift raises the question of whether democratic transformation emerges not only through opposition to existing structures,

but through the creation of new forms of collective experience and political imagination.

This instability is further intensified in contemporary conditions, where digital infrastructures and algorithmic systems reorganise the circulation, visibility, and legibility of images at scale. The promise of expanded access is entangled with new forms of extraction, surveillance, and control, raising renewed questions about the relationship between visibility, power, and democratic participation. At stake, then, is not only how images function within democratic contexts, but how particular understandings of photography have been historically bound to the very idea of democracy itself. Visual media have played a central role in shaping the terms of political recognition, in constituting and fragmenting communities, and in mediating both consensus and conflict within contemporary democratic formations (Stacey, 2020).

The conference invites contributions from researchers, scholars, visual artists, practitioners, and cultural professionals at any stage of their careers, that critically engage with photography and archives as sites in which democratic relations are produced, mediated, and contested. Particular attention is given to practice-led artistic and curatorial work, as well as collaborative and community-based projects, that engage archives and visual media as sites of intervention, reworking historical materials and visual regimes in ways that challenge dominant narratives and open alternative political imaginaries.

We welcome proposals for 15-minute theory, practice-led, and performative presentations (followed by 15-minute panel discussion) from various disciplines, including: photography, art history and theory, anthropology, museology, philosophy, cultural studies, visual and media studies, and related areas. These presentations should offer an in-depth investigation into the conference topic. Please note that the conference will be conducted in English.

Submissions may address, but are not limited to, the following lines of inquiry:

1. ARCHIVES, POWER, AND THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE
Examines how photographic archives organise regimes of visibility and historical knowledge, shaping political recognition, belonging, and exclusion.

2. COUNTER-ARCHIVES, ACTIVISM, AND PRACTICES OF REPAIR
Focuses on practices that mobilise images and archives to intervene in dominant visual orders, including reappropriation, restitution, removal, and repair.

3. REACTIVATING THE ARCHIVE: AESTHETICS, ETHICS, POLITICS
Addresses artistic and curatorial engagements that reconfigure archival materials and raise questions of authorship, ownership, and responsibility.

4. IMAGES AS EVIDENCE, IMAGES AS POLITICAL ACTION
Considers the role of images as evidentiary forms and as instruments of intervention within legal, civic, and political contexts.

5. DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURES AND ALGORITHMIC VISIBILITY
Explores how digital platforms and algorithmic systems reorganisation of regimes of visibility, access, and circulation.

6. AESTHETICS, ACTIVISM, AND POLITICAL IMAGINARIES
Investigates how images operate within protest, dissent, and participatory practices, and how they contribute to the formation of collective imaginaries and forms of democratic engagement.

7. MUSEUMS, INSTITUTIONS, AND THE POLITICS OF DISPLAY
Examines how museums, galleries, and cultural institutions shape regimes of visibility and public memory through exhibitionary and curatorial practices, and how these processes are contested, reconfigured, or displaced by artistic and activist interventions.

SUBMISSION
Applications must be sent via email to info@reframingthearchive.com no later than July 15, 2026, by 11:59:00 p.m. WEST.
Applicants should submit one proposal only, in English.
Presentations have a duration of 15 minutes and should adhere to one of the following formats:

INDIVIDUAL PAPERS
Applicants are required to submit the information listed below in one PDF file:
— Author information (name, email, affiliation, ORCID)
— Paper title, abstract (300 words max), and keywords (maxi 5),
— Bibliographical references (max 5),
— Author short biographical note (written in third person, 100 words).

This information must be gathered into one PDF document with the filename saved as: Firstname-Lastname-RTA2026.pdf. The applicant should indicate in the subject line: IND Application for RTA 2026 Conference.

PRE-CONSTITUTED PANELS
Submission of proposals for pre-constituted panels should consist of three papers. The corresponding candidate is required to submit a panel proposal that includes:
— Panel title and abstract (250 words)
— Information regarding the three speakers and their individual papers, as described in the guidelines for individual papers above.

This information must be gathered into one PDF document with the filename saved as: Firstname-Lastname-RTA2026.pdf. (name of the corresponding applicant)
The applicant should indicate in the subject line: PAN Application for RTA 2026 Conference.

SELECTION PROCESS
The submitted proposals will undergo a peer-review process, and candidates will be notified of the results of their proposals by September 4, 2026.
Selected speakers must confirm participation in the conference and complete registration within one week of receiving the selection notification.

PUBLICATION
Extended versions of the presented papers should be submitted for publication by 17 Oct 2026 via Archivo Papers manuscript system at www.archivopapers.com.
Following a double blind peer-review process, the papers will be featured in an edited volume of

Archivo Papers, co-edited by Ana Catarina Pinho, Laura Singeot, and Jane Simon, to be published in 2027.

IMPORTANT DATES
Deadline for submission: Jul 15, 2026
Notification of selected speakers: Sep 04, 2026
Deadline for speakers registration: one week after confirmation of acceptance
Conference: Sept 23-25, 2026 (Online)
Manuscript submission for publication: Oct 17, 2026

Org. Committee
Dr Ana Catarina Pinho, IHA, Nova University of Lisbon, Portugal
Dr Laura Singeot, Tours University, France
Dr Jane Simon, Macquarie University, Australia

Reference:
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