

## Photographic Communities (Rome, 15–19 Mar 27)

Rome, Bibliotheca Hertziana, Max Planck Institute for Art History, Mar 15–19, 2027

Deadline: Aug 31, 2026

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Photographic Communities: How People Collaborate with Images.

With our everyday practices of viewing, making, using, and circulating, photographs, we continually renew an experience that has shaped the history of photography since its inception: photography is fundamentally a collective endeavor. Even a cursory glance at nearly two centuries of photographic practice reveals countless instances in which the interplay of multiple actors has proven constitutive for the production, circulation, reception, and social efficacy of the medium. Such constellations range from the complex divisions of labor characteristic of commercial studio photography to the dense social networks formed by learned societies, amateur clubs, and photographic associations.

Contemporary photographic culture—shaped by digital platforms, participatory media, and globally networked image circulation—has only intensified the collaborative dimensions of photography. The collaborative production, distribution, interpretation, and archiving of photographs generate a distinctive social, aesthetic, and epistemic surplus that continues to define the medium in remarkable ways.

On the occasion of the photo-historical seminar *Photographic Communities: How People Collaborate with Images*, to be hosted at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in March 2027, we invite participants to examine these questions and dynamics. Several perspectives may be distinguished within such debates; we particularly foreground three of them:

- First, photographic communities play a decisive role as subjects of representation, that is as photographed communities. In group portraits of families, circles of friends, school classes, professional associations, political movements, or other social formations, photography has developed a broad spectrum of iconographic conventions, oscillating between standardized formulas and highly singular visual articulations.
- Second, the history of photographic production can itself be understood as a history of manifold collaborations, whether in the commercial studio, the scientific laboratory, ethnographic and social-scientific fieldwork, journalistic production, or the making of photo books and exhibitions. Such collaborative constellations invite us to reconsider traditional notions of artistic autonomy and individual authorship that have long structured media historiography.
- Third, we seek to address the significance of photographic practices for the formation, negotiation, and representation of communities. Within manifold forms of collective life—and especially within marginalized and minority groups—photography frequently functions as a crucial medium

of collective self-fashioning, historical memory, political visibility, and social cohesion, thus actively contributing to an understanding of such communities.

As a social practice, collaboration can assume a wide variety and demands sustained critical analysis. It begins with informal interactions within families, among friends, or between photographers, assistants, editors, curators, publishers, and technicians. Collaboration also encompasses official circles, collectives, associations, institutions, and organizations that have each shaped the history of photography in distinct ways.

Only recently, the volume "Collaboration: A Potential History of Photography" (2024) reminded us that the historiography of photography itself must not be exempted from such collaborative practices. The editors Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, Wendy Ewald, Susan Meiselas, Leigh Raiford, and Laura Wexler invited more than one hundred authors to contribute to a publication that advances new and critically engaged approaches to photographic history while insisting that the complexity of the medium can no longer be adequately addressed through exclusively single-authored scholarship. In this sense, the study of photographic communities also calls for a reflection on the methodological and institutional conditions under which knowledge about photography itself is produced.

Over the course of one week, we hope to work with an international community of doctoral and postdoctoral researchers from various disciplines that contribute to the theory, history, and criticism of photography. We invite contributions that deepen our understanding of the dynamics of photographic communities from the nineteenth century to the present and that critically engage with social, aesthetic, political, and epistemological dimensions of collaboration in photographic cultures.

Contributions may attempt to address the following questions:

- How does the concept of “community” change when applied to photographic practices across different historical periods and media environments?
- How does photography actively constitute, stabilize, or transform communities?
- How can collaborative forms of photographic production challenge traditional notions of artistic authorship, originality, and creative autonomy?
- To what extent do collaborative practices underpin community formation, and how do collaborative practices and communities reciprocally influence and inform each other?
- Which forms of labor within photographic production have historically remained invisible, marginalized, or unacknowledged, and how might they be reintegrated into photographic historiography?
- In what ways do photographic communities produce inclusion and solidarity, but also exclusion, hierarchy, and mechanisms of social control?
- What role does photography play in the formation of political, activist, or minority communities, particularly in contexts of resistance, migration, or social marginalization?
- How do collaborative photographic networks negotiate tensions between individuality and collectivity, authorship and participation, visibility and anonymity?
- How can we critically analyze the institutional frameworks—clubs, archives, museums, publishers, online platforms, and academic networks—that structure photographic communities and regulate access, visibility, privacy, or legitimacy?

– To what extent does the increasing complexity of photographic culture require new collaborative methodologies within the discipline of photo-historiography itself?

We welcome proposals from Ph.D. students in the dissertation phase and recent post-doctoral scholars (maximum of three years since degree) in art history and related disciplines with a strong photo-historical component. The seminar language will be English. All participants will present some aspect of their current research projects, which must relate to the program's subject matter. Visits to several photographic archives in Rome will be an integral part of the seminar.

The Bibliotheca Hertziana will provide lodging and reimburse the incurred expenses for traveling economy class up to 500 euros. Please upload the following application materials as PDF documents by August 31, 2026 on <https://recruitment.biblhertz.it/auth/Apply/0/Position/21299206/Step/0>

- Title and a 500-word abstract of the proposed topic (all participants will give a 30-minute formal presentation)
- Brief CV (maximum 3 pages)
- Brief summary of your dissertation or postdoctoral project
- Names and contact details of two references (but no letters at this point)

The photo-historical seminar is organized and will be led by Tatjana Bartsch (Bibliotheca Hertziana), Christian Joschke (Beaux-Arts Paris), Johannes Röhl (Bibliotheca Hertziana), and Steffen Siegel (Folkwang University of the Arts, Essen). It is generously supported by the Alfred Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach Stiftung, Essen.

Questions and queries may be sent to: [fototeca@biblhertz.it](mailto:fototeca@biblhertz.it)

The first seminar (2019) was followed by the publication of "Circulating Photographs," a special issue of *History of Photography*, vol. 45, issue 1, 2021, co-edited by Antonella Pelizzari and Steffen Siegel:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/thph20/45/1?nav=tocList>.

The second seminar (2023) was followed by the publication of "Archival Absences: Toward an Incomplete History of Photography," a special issue of *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 88, issue 4, 2025, co-edited by Elizabeth Otto and Steffen Siegel:

<https://www.degruyterbrill.com/de/journal/key/zkg/88/3/html>

A publication of the third seminar (2025) on "Centers and Peripheries: Photography's Geography Lessons" is currently in preparation.

Reference:

CFP: Photographic Communities (Rome, 15-19 Mar 27). In: ArtHist.net, Jun 14, 2026 (accessed Jun 14, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/52712>>.