

THEMENSCHWERPUNKT ARCHIVAL ABSENCES: TOWARDS AN INCOMPLETE HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

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Archival Absences: Towards an Incomplete History of Photography

In his story “Del rigor en la ciencia” (“On Exactitude in Science”),¹ first published in 1946, Jorge Luis Borges spun a tale focused on an outsized idea: that a truly comprehensive land map should record every detail and ultimately be just as extensive as the territory to which it refers. However, as the story reveals, such a degree of precision would produce a document so unwieldy as to defeat the purpose of a map. Its functionality depends on what it represents but also on what it excludes. Omissions and gaps are essential to cartographic logic; only with a balance of each does a map become a valuable instrument for orientation. Borges’ tale of cartographic excess reveals truths equally relevant for another form of surveying: archives.

Archives are often extensive, yet they are never comprehensive. Creating an archive necessarily begins with acts of selection, with decisions

about what should be preserved, but also about what should be excluded. In Borges’ narrative, the significance of such choices becomes immediately apparent. Without them, the archive is merely an unfiltered and unwieldy collection of materials, loosely organized at best and consistently too large to be dealt with pragmatically. The discipline of archival science has set itself the task of regulating such work by developing criteria for selection, organization, and administration, and by mandating critical reflection even as one is making these choices.² In past and present ages, archives count among our most powerful institutions.³ Questions of inclusion and exclusion, that is, ultimately of presence and absence, are among archives’ essential functions and their exercise of power.

Without sorting and excluding, archives cannot function. As Arlette Farge has asserted, the immense, seemingly unfiltered abundance of materials stored in an archive can be simply too much. The archive, she writes, is “excessive and overwhelming, like a spring tide, an avalanche, or a flood. This comparison with natural and unpredictable forces is not arbitrary. When working in the archive you will often find yourself thinking of this exploration as a dive, a submersion,

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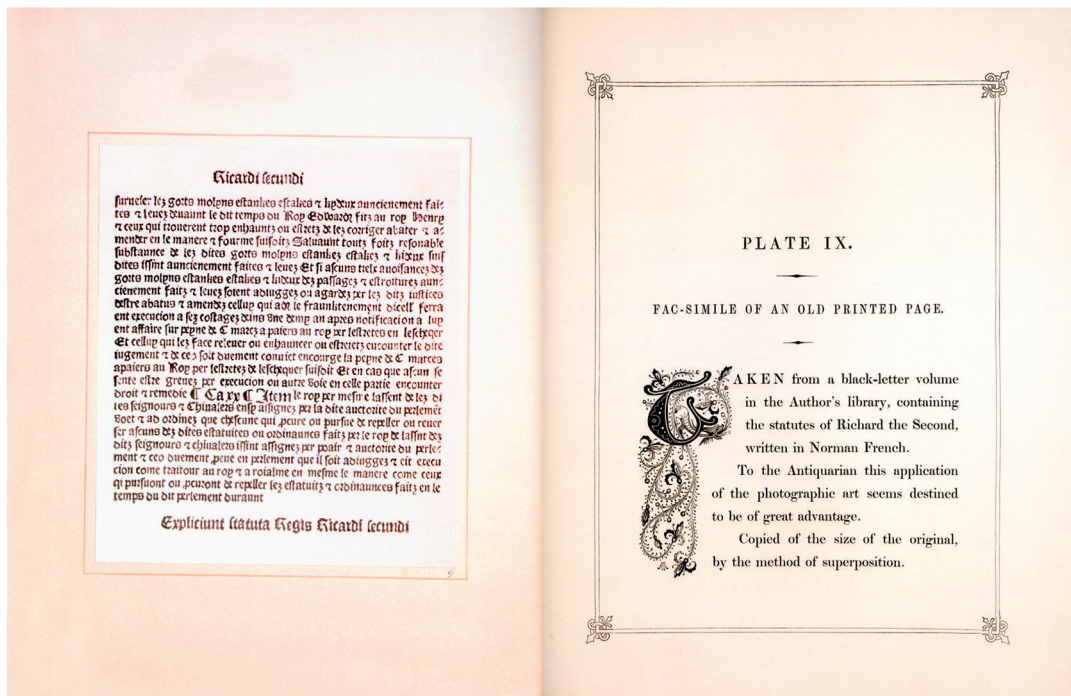
perhaps even a drowning... You feel immersed in something vast, oceanic.”⁴ Such deep immersion can be pleasurable or threatening. The abundance of material can also have an addictive and even “infectious” effect. Jacques Derrida took it as the starting point for an entire philosophy of the archive.⁵ Even as our dealings with archives are determined by the gifts of their offerings, our interactions with these institutions depend as much on their negative spaces—the shelves and drawers left empty or taken up by some collections but not others—that must be addressed as absence.

“The essence of the archive,” Georges Didi-Huberman emphasizes, “is its gap, its perforated nature.”⁶ When contemporary researchers encounter such gaps, they may feel irritation, outrage, and even despair. Even if omission is essential to the building of any archive, all selection processes are themselves thoroughly political, driven by interests and ideologies. As Saidiya Hartman observed in her essay, “Venus in Two Acts,” “the archive is inseparable from the play of power.”⁷ Thus, while asking *if* something is missing from an archive is rarely productive, asking *why* it is not present often is. Whose interests are served by those constitutive gaps of which Didi-Huberman and Hartman write? Taking up Wolfgang Ernst’s terms, we can state that, when working in the archive, we should not only listen to its “rumblings,” but also its silences, which can be just as audible, marking the boundary between the archive and the “anarchive.” An anarchive is not a physical collection but a concept that explores the excessive and supplemental aspects of preserving and memorizing. It focuses in unconventional ways on the potential for new meaning and creative processes that emerge from engaging with archives and what is absent from them. Such “gaps in the archive repudiate its image of historical amplitude.”⁸ With them “the question is raised as to how representative archival holdings can be and how they can be defined as an informative resource.”⁹

Given the archives’ notorious inconsistencies, it should be an essential task of historical work to first reflect on the presence of a source in the archive before analysis and interpretation can begin. As we critically question the presence of sources, we must also foreground the roles that chance and coincidence, as well as power and powerlessness, play in the winding paths of all historical transmission.¹⁰ Thus, archival work should occur only in the full knowledge of the absences created by things not saved. In light of this, Ernst describes no small methodological challenge: “History’s *absence* [...] is reflected in the archive, which despite its floods of paper is not a hoard of wealth but an unforgettable lack, which never stops updating itself: this state of going missing is what the use of the archives transforms into research questions.”¹¹ As Farge so vividly emphasizes, in its boundlessness, the archive continues to fascinate. In the face of its observable abundance, we may forget the flipside of this bounty. Yet, the cause of just history calls us to pose new questions: How can we detect the silence also present alongside such abundance, such audible rumblings? How can we arrive at an argument from such silence?¹²

“Collections of Every Genre”

Questions of archival presence and absence are especially charged in relation to photography, the form and status of which has been in nearly constant flux since its advent nearly two centuries ago. Elizabeth Edwards has recently engaged the question of how historical research has changed since photographic images could be counted among the historian’s tools.¹³ Edwards finds that, indeed, a remarkable amount has changed. Camera images open up a profoundly new relationship to time, and they create a unique form of immediate historical experience—or, at least, they claim to do so. As photography has deeply impacted our perceived ac-



1 Spread from William Henry Fox Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature*, London 1844–1846, plate IX, *Fac-Simile of an Old Printed Page*, 1844. Salted paper print, mounted on the book page, 16.5 × 14.2 cm (size of the photographic print)

cess to historical events, so it has also profoundly shifted the strategies of forming archives.

The promise of such change dates to the medium's formative period. In the autumn of 1838, the French theater entrepreneur Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre set about marketing the daguerreotype, a photographic process he had developed and named after himself. He created an advertising brochure to summarize the main advantages of his invention. Chief among them was the possibility of archiving the visible world. "People will create collections of every genre," he wrote.¹⁴ The last three words of his sentence, in particular, emphasize the almost limitless potential scope of photographic capture.

Within a few years, the British scientist William Henry Fox Talbot developed a similar argument in *The Pencil of Nature* and demonstrated it in several pictures.¹⁵ On more than a quarter

of the book's total of twenty-four plates, Talbot showed the use of photography as a mechanical process for faithful reproduction of collections of books, porcelain, glassware, sculptures, prints, and manuscripts; he describes its merits in creating a "fac-simile of an old printed page" (fig. 1) or a "copy of a lithographic print." Whether addressed as a collection, facsimile, or copy, such images make new, information-laden sights easily available.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, photography's potential as an archival technology began to take hold.¹⁶ One of the earliest undertakings in this vein was the French "Mission héliographique" whose very name expressed its campaign-like intention.¹⁷ In 1851, on behalf of the national "Commission des monuments historiques", five photographers attempted to capture France's national cultural monuments for a

planned image archive of architectural treasures. This “mission” found numerous imitators in various fields.¹⁸ As the close of the nineteenth century neared, a tremendous range of administrative and scholarly fields relied upon photo-based recording strategies, including disciplines as diverse as anthropology, ethnography, geography, geology, criminology, psychiatry, archaeology, and art history. As this list suggests, a wide range of fields began to create and depend upon photographic archives; all were united in the belief that their subjects could be captured visually and that standardization was possible and necessary. Thus, as photography developed in archival potential, it became increasingly complicit in new possibilities for surveillance, coercion, and even violence.¹⁹

Indeed, photographically based archival practices are rooted in a fantasy of control that ultimately proves to be an illusion, as Joan M. Schwartz has argued.²⁰ An additional problem arises soon after the creation of photographic archives: the ease of production and the reproducibility of photographic images may promise an omnipresence and completeness for which various metaphors have been coined—from “image inflation” to “image flood.”²¹ As these metaphors suggest, as a technical visual medium, when we use photography as an archival tool, the medium’s potential abundance is both its strength and its Achilles heel.²² In speaking of inflation or flooding, we indicate the limits of any fantasies of control.

When Daguerre wrote of photographic “collections of every genre,” he clearly could not foresee how far such collections could proliferate. In the wake of the advent of the digital age, which occurred a century and a half after Daguerre was writing, photography’s proliferations began to enter nearly every profession; now their infiltration seems to be nearly complete. Equally as profound are the alterations to everyday life, in which each individual, through their cell phone, has the potential to capture,

archive, and research their own life. But how do we organize or even curate such collections? And which measures should we apply to preserve images that are, most often, valuable only to ourselves and may not survive some future technological improvement? Even those of us who maintain only modest personal photographic archives cannot escape essential questions and tasks of archival care that inevitably arise and beg of our mental and financial resources. Our relationship to photographic presence and absence may seem merely historical and theoretical. But these are also everyday challenges that confront us individually.

This fundamental relationship between presence and absence is central to any consideration of the diverse logics, functions, and uses of photographic archives, in short, to their overall organization.²³ Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert has described the archive as an ecosystem.²⁴ This metaphor allows us to perceive archival structures as dynamic processes subject to instabilities and threats, which are in some ways related. As archival objects, photographic images are subject to the fourfold formula identified by Beate Fricke and Aden Kumler: “destroyed, disappeared, lost, never were.”²⁵ While photographic research is informed by this broader context of cultural history, there are particular circumstances and traits that apply most specifically to photographs. In order to parse the question of photographs and archives, we distinguish among three essential perspectives: institutions, disciplines, and materialities.

Institutions

In contrast to most other cultural historical objects, photographs only came to possess a particular institutional framework quite recently. Texts have been preserved in libraries for several millennia. We might see films as a parallel case, since these have likewise been stored—in

their case in cinematheques—for a much shorter time; yet, their archival situation stands in stark contrast to that of photography. For much of photography's lifespan, it has been collected not for its own sake but because of what it could do for other disciplines and collection types. In general, photo libraries have existed as specialized matter for disciplines as diverse as art history, archeology, and biology in the form of slides or cardboard-mounted prints.²⁶ The undeniable intrinsic value of these and all similar analogue collections has recently been recognized in such statements as the "Florence Declaration."²⁷ And yet, it is precisely such instrumental photo archives that, over time, through their obsolescence in their original purpose, struggle to justify the space and care that they require. Slide libraries, largely made up as they were of reproductions of reproductions, have now clearly outlived their usefulness.²⁸ Even the many analogue photographic archives comprised of unique material have now only limited utility because, in comparison with digital formats, they offer feeble organizational and representational standards.

While archives devoted exclusively to photographs are a relatively new invention, the call for creating such archives is anything but new. Already in the mid-nineteenth century, Oliver Wendell Holmes contemplated the establishment of an "Imperial, National, or City Stereographic Library."²⁹ He sketched a state institution that, like libraries for texts, would also operate at various levels—from national to local—and be systematically committed to the collection of and access to images. Such ideas were realized in those easily accessible picture collections that still exist today in the New York Public Library or the Library of Congress, for example, but without fulfilling standard archival requirements in the strict sense. The establishment of national photographic archives has remained an exception. We can look to role models such as the Fotostiftung Schweiz in Winterthur, founded in

1971, or the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam, which has existed since 1989. More typical are the ongoing, years-long debates on the foundation of comparable institutions in Germany or Austria that appear destined to come to naught.

Disciplines

More than a century ago, in 1900, Alfred Lichtwark formulated a sentence that was as astonishing as it was far-sighted when positing that "a history of photography will have to form a chapter in a future art history as a department of the graphic arts anyway, and if the material is not collected from today onwards, it will no longer be available when science, which always wakes up a day too late, longs for it."³⁰ Lichtwark, then the director of the Hamburger Kunsthalle, was a man of word and deed: he pioneered the opening of such institutions to temporary photo exhibitions. It remains remarkable how Lichtwark assumed already then that it would be primarily his own academic discipline, art history, that would engage the history of photography. Further developments proved him right. In terms of curating and publishing, such work began in the 1930s and reached universities as a subject of art-historical teaching by the 1970s.³¹

At least indirectly, the disciplinary anchoring of photographic research as a branch of art history also provided an answer to a question that has dogged the history of photography since its earliest days: can photography be art? An affirmative answer to this question seems largely a settled matter. Yet, as early as the 1980s, scholars like Abigail Solomon-Godeau advocated strongly for the development of critical research methods specific to photography and independent from those of art history.³² Around the same time, Carl Chiarenza proposed working on an "Integrated History of Picturismaking" that would take artistic and non-artistic photographs equally seriously.³³ Freeing photography at least

to some extent from the methods and concerns of art history has supported the collection of photographs of many types, rather than only those with aesthetic merit or interest. Furthermore, it is precisely because photographic production—especially everyday production—can quickly lead to overabundance that new critical tools are essential for considerations of archiving.

Artistic photography is distinct by nature from what is often called “vernacular photography.”³⁴ However, a comprehensive narrative of media history must be based on an engagement with both types, even though the collective archive of our photographic heritage lacks the kind of archival infrastructure that has long been provided by art museums, for example. Research into the history of photography, an academic endeavor for many decades now, continues to take place in a field of visual studies that draws from many adjacent disciplines. Like photography itself, as John Tagg emphasized, the research dedicated to the medium cannot be pinned down to one disciplinary focus: “Its history has no unity. It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces.”³⁵ In many ways, such a positioning also extends to the archival transmission of the “material” that Lichtwark was already committed to systematically collecting.

Materialities

Institutional and disciplinary infrastructures are constitutive of both the photographic archive’s material presences—since any collection must be housed—and, because selections must be made, of those essential gaps identified by Didi-Huberman. Given the fact that the medium has manifested through a dizzying array of technologies and processes over its almost two-hundred-year history, it is surprising that we speak of “photography” in the singular at all. Yet photography’s diverse forms share the fact that they are all highly vulnerable and require

particular curatorial, conservational, restorative, and archival care.³⁶ Many types of photographs require regulated temperatures and minimized light exposure to ensure their longevity. Stylianou-Lambert’s conceptualization of photo archives as ecosystems aptly captures the precarity of these vital equilibriums.

Histories of photography are constantly reshaped by the volatile nature of the objects taken into consideration. As Kate Palmer Albers writes, with every photographic object, we should keep in mind not only the transition when developing a negative that leads from a latent image to full visible information but also the transformation that eventually causes erasure and, thus, loss of a visual presence.³⁷ Whether Polaroids and colored prints in a family album or the elaborately produced and framed C-prints on a museum wall, all photographs are witnesses to the regrettably ephemeral character of their own medium. Perhaps Joanna Sassoon was exaggerating only slightly when she compared working in the photographic archive to ghost chasing.³⁸ The provisional and always evolving processes that defend against photographs’ material vulnerability are central to how or whether we consider photographs in histories, how we care for them, and even how we plan for their eventual loss. Thus, any archival consideration of photographs—including digital photographs—as material objects is centered on delaying but also anticipating these objects’ ultimate demise. In caring for them, we are thus always thinking of their current presence through anticipation of their future absence.

Incomplete Histories

As the articles in this special issue of *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, “Archival Absences: Towards an Incomplete History of Photography,” make clear, photo-historical research is conducted on an extremely broad range of collec-

tions. Certainly, archives play a vital role in determining and making available what is studied. But, as Tagg has pointed out, photographic history is unique in its undisciplined relationship to and relative independence from institutionalized archives. Flea markets and antiquarian bookshops still play a remarkably significant role, as do press publications and books. In recent years, online research, often far beyond academic archival portals, has taken on ever-increasing importance. These unintended collections and wild archives all belong to a widely branched ecosystem of historical photography that serves as a repository for the material tradition, and it has a history of its own. The eventful history of photography includes a no less eventful history of its various forms of archives.

Research is also a major force in the creation of archives, as Edwards has argued. Her own interest lies in the collected photographs held in scientific institutions and museums. Edwards describes a particular shift of status that such photographs undergo. Over time, they lose the utility for which they were initially gathered, at which point they take on a new role, as historiographically informative documents. “Non-collection,” Edwards’ term for such collections, underlines, in its peculiar negation, their marginal status.³⁹ Today, such non-collections often count among the essential sources for researching forms of image-based knowledge production. This is just one of many similar revaluations to take place recently, especially during the last five decades. Along these same lines, many libraries have begun to realize that they are in possession of valuable photographic collections in the form of books with original photo prints tipped in.⁴⁰

When Geoffrey Batchen called for systematic research into what he dubbed “vernacular photography” a quarter of a century ago, he had a reassessment of photo archives in mind.⁴¹ The question was—and still is—which institutions should be responsible for collecting the everyday photographic tradition that is not, or at least not

yet, covered by collecting strategies of museums and archives. To mention just one example: anyone who wants to research the history of global tourism from its mid-twentieth-century roots will be unable to do so without recourse to the slides and snapshots produced in the millions by private individuals. But who felt or now feels responsible for systematically collecting such private documents? They often do not represent an attractive subject for institutions more used to collecting the artistic and the extraordinary. But it is precisely the generic and repetitive character of vacation slides that makes them quintessential products of mass tourism. The current dominance of digital forms of image production has only increased the problems of archival organization and storage suggested here, with no solution in sight.

Like any other historiography, photographic histories are, of necessity, always incomplete. We may regret losses and gaps, but at the same time, as Borges reminds us in “Del rigor en la ciencia,” they are compulsory for any orientation. Often enough, however, they are the result of very different types of authorship: traditions, canonizations, institutional and disciplinary frameworks, and, not least, a multitude of decisions made by well-meaning individuals working in the archive. These multiple authorships have a political core: the relationship between presence and absence reflects powerful hierarchies. Therefore, the essential task of writing the project of an “Incomplete History of Photography” is to address such forms of authorship, to criticize them where necessary, and, wherever possible, to advocate and pave the way for alternative forms of archival presence.

Contributions to this Special Issue

The contributors to this special issue of *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* on “Archival Absences: Towards an Incomplete History of Photography”

take on the challenge of photography's archival absences in myriad productive ways, through case-study essays that sample across the medium's historical and geographical span. The issue begins with a pair of essays that engage astonishing archival losses relating to the two best-known inventors of the medium. In "Absent Pictures, Present Images: How Time Reshapes the Photographic Archive," Steffen Siegel investigates the case of one of photographic history's greatest disappearing acts, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre's iconic *View of the Boulevard du Temple* (1838), to query the ontological nature of extant photographic evidence. Francesca Strobino, by contrast, in her essay "Experimental Metallic Surfaces and Absent Images: On the Materiality of William Henry Fox Talbot's Photomechanical Practice," utilizes new conceptual lenses to engage photographic materials so devoid of any recognizable imagery that, even as the creations of one of photography's pioneering inventors, they fail to appear in almost any photographic histories to date.

Colonialism and genocide in part account for the failure of archives to collect some images from the first half of the twentieth century. With "Postal Profusion and Archival Scarcity: Jacob Vitta's Photographs of Mining in the Gold Coast Colony as Prints and Postcards," Malte Radtke brings to light a body of colonial-era West-African photographic work that circulated globally as postcards but currently has so little archival presence that its maker's oeuvre and even his identity are almost untraceable beyond the fact that he was almost certainly African. In "Atrocities Absent from the Archive: Bauhaus Photographer Fritz Heinze, from Anti-Nazi to Conformist" Elizabeth Otto contextualizes a pair of pictures taken in the early 1940s by a former Bauhaus member, images are so out of keeping with what is known of his work—and what is understood as belonging to this modernist movement—that, until recently, they were kept from the public. These photographs documenting a

massacre of Jews in Ukraine survived only in a private family archive.

Histories of anti-gay and neo-colonialist violence are also behind other archival erasures, as we see, first, in Max Böhner's "Absent Essentials: Queer Visualizations of Outlawed Nudity and Sex in Mid-Twentieth-Century Physique Magazines and Photographs." The Lavender-Scare Era suppression of gay men's desires and their very existence resulted in publicly and privately circulated magazines and albums—only a small percentage of which ever made it to archives—that toggle between sexually explicit imagery and self-censorship, particularly when it came to individuals' identities, an erasure for protection. Blanca Serrano Ortiz de Solórzano and Juanita Solano Roa place two very different archives into conversation in "Absence and Repair: Encounters Between the Photographic Archive of the United Fruit Company and *Banana Craze*'s database of Contemporary Art of the Americas." The United Fruit Company's internal archive was created to deploy photography to document the good life of its well-paid white, US-born employees in Central and South America. *Banana Craze*, Ortiz de Solórzano and Solano Roa's online contemporary-art archive answers back to the company's colonialist, whitewashed histories by representing the structural and individual violence meted out to local UFC workers.

How do the personal and the archival interface in recent and contemporary photography? Madison Brown probes the creation of family histories and the management of memory through self-designated amateur archivists who curate—through selection and disposal—family photo archives in "The Garbage Bag Archive: Disposal and Disposability in Family Photo Collections." Tracy Stuber's essay, "Present or Absent? Reframing Photographic Discovery and Interpretation with Computer Vision," moves us to the contemporary moment, in which archived images—particularly images of people—have to be legible not just to us, but to our computers.

Taken together, the essays in this special issue surface new approaches to the photographic archive and to questions of presence and absence—or even deliberate erasure. The authors of these essays turn to new questions, methods, and indeed archives to do photographic history differently. They explore diverse means of knowledge production and methods for probing, mitigating, bridging, and challenging archival absences of many kinds. And, ultimately, they offer a fresh history of photography focused unblinkingly on the limits of the archive and how we might enact repair to exceed its limitations and bridge its gaps.

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