

Vintage Prints Conservation Room Fratelli Alinari Museum Collection, Florence  
(Alinari Archives, Florence)





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## hotoarchive: Photography, Memory and Creative Impulse for Art.

Photography is usually considered an instrument that helps men to recollect their past - such is the memory of photography - as though photography was a kind of aide-memoire machine. Is this the reason why the interest for archives and memory is now so lively? Is there an anxiety for memory?

Jacques Derrida, in his work *Archive Fever*, remarks that this anxiety for memory is always somehow connected with death, or self-destruction, with a feeling of "loss". This eagerness for archival knowledge has been triggered also by the new archival program.

Negatives  
Conservation

Store Room

Alinari Archives,

Florence

(Alinari Archives,

Florence)

What has photography done for memory, what has been its contribution to the practice of memory in human civilization? This is the question that David Bate focuses upon in his book *Photography of memory*.





## Photoarchive: Photography, Memory and Creative Impulse for Art.

Jacques Le Goff observes that photography of memory plays a significant role in the construction of modern collective memory. Photography transforms memory, as it may multiply and democratize memory. Photography provides visual memory with a degree of truth and precision never attained before. Photography preserves memory and allows its chronological evolution.

Pierre Bourdieu, in *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, considers the images of the past arranged in chronological order as “the natural order” of social memory.

One of the striking points that Jacques Derrida makes in *Archive Fever* is that an archive is not a question of the past, of “dealing with the past that might already be at our disposal or not at our disposal, an *archivable concept of the archive*”. Rather, “It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow”.

The photo archive is no longer a sole place of memory but is also a never-exhausted source for the elaboration of the present and of codes for the interpretation of history and reality. The very conception of archives has profoundly changed, both in its general understanding and as far as specific photo archives are concerned, thanks to a new awareness that in recent years has brought renewed interest in important heritage such as art photo libraries or industrial photo archives.

The scholarly approach to archival science considers archives as a systematic and well-ordered collection, resulting from the sedimentation of photo images sharing the same origins. Benjamin



Storage box with glass negative. Negatives Conservation Store Room Alinari Archives, Florence (Alinari Archives, Florence)



Buchloh has defined photo archives - in the general framework of the debate about contemporary art - as *a collection of individual photographs organized according to a more or less systematic criterion, which on the whole allows for a more or less coherent glance on the complexity of a given subject*. In this perspective, the actual photograph is indeed memory, but a curtailed memory - in other words, it represents a crisis of memory itself.

I agree with Buchloh that a photo archive cannot be always considered as an organic collection of separated "pieces"; in other words, it cannot be always represented as a geological "sedimentation". In fact, the establishment of a photo archive may be dictated by a variety of factors that cannot necessarily be described as accumulations and sedimentations. Oftentimes, an archive may originate in the photographer's industrial work. As in the case of the Alinari Archive, photographers would resort to a variety of professional profiles, such as archivists, historians of art, artistic directors, that in turn played a major role in organizing the archive. In many cases, such experts have completely subverted the composition and imposed a new observation perspective. For example, Vittorio Alinari, the second generation after the firm's founder of the famous studio in Florence, changed the number of negatives in the archive, imposing a new order for the archive's layers.

Sometimes, an archive may stem from the encounter of authors, materials, and subjects of various origins, according to the curator's choices, as in the case of museums and private collections. Alternatively, an archive may also result from the urge of collecting and gathering together different archives and photographers for the sake of their preservation.

Collodion Negative  
on glass in the  
Alinari Archive.  
(Alinari Archives,  
Florence)



Buchloh reflects upon an archive which may be more or less systematically ordered, and which may provide more or less coherent information. The knowledge derived from the archive therefore is not absolute or perfect; but it is thus open to diverse and stimulating interpretations. An archive is an informational instrument whose interpretative tools may change according to the users. Let me now discuss these interpretation tools.

First of all, the main instrument for the reading of a photo archive is its catalogue. The catalogue is thus the most important interpretative tool. Without a catalogue a photo archive may seem wordless, incapable of communicating any message or leaving any room for interpretation.

The main goal of digitizing and cataloguing any photo archive has always been to dominate the archive itself, and of giving voice to visual forms that would otherwise remain speechless. The urge to control such a complex archival material as photography has often lead to the obsessive quest for a "perfect entry" allowing for a perfect reading. Susan Sontag remarked that a perfectly exact caption is only one among all possible interpretations, necessarily limited, of the photograph with which it is associated. It is like a glove, easily worn and discarded.

The attempt of intellectually "possessing" an archive through a perfect cataloguing may easily turn into an obsession, as indicated by Umberto Eco (vertigo) or Okwui Enwezor (fever) or Jaques Deridda (a disease). However, a catalogue is created over time and must therefore be considered as a work in progress, open to future changes.

Today, a photo archive has become an object for reflection not solely about the past, but about the present. In fact, documents from the past help to acquire a clearer awareness of the present: an archive is therefore a "project". In contemporary debate the archive is no longer seen as a place for memory, but the opportunity to re-elaborate the present, a creative stimulation for renewed artistic production.

Consulting a photo archive is a journey into memories: an archive is memory's storehouse and a photograph is its mirror. They both dominate the past and at



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Fratelli Alinari  
Museum Collection,  
Florence  
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Florence)





the same time become a space for re-creating both past and present. Ernst van Alphen affirms that an archive makes possible a creative control of memory, as archival material opens new, and unprecedented, spaces of interpretation. The archive is no longer a collection of documents about the past and becomes a tool for a narrative of the contemporary condition.

Every archive confronts the observer as an enormous catalogue, which cannot be read immediately. All the objects although they may follow some kind of order appear mute or indecipherable without some kind of verbal reading medium, such as a catalogue entry, an inventory, a digital file.

Objects have to be organized as such; but a catalogue entry may follow a different criterion, quite independent from physical and material needs as it privileges the need for preservation. How is it then possible to re-connect different elements, such as negatives, modern positives, original documentations, which, although profoundly diverse, are still deeply bound to each other?

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Conservation Room  
Fratelli Alinari  
Museum Collection,  
Florence



An inventory, a paper, or electronic catalogue re-creates an order among all these objects, making it possible to consult, study and interpreting them.

A catalogue defines a new cultural Atlas, starting from Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* to culminate with Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*, which is a new archive that permits grasping the images' "electric charge". A catalogue connects different elements, drawing from images the inspiration to create new ties and cultural connections that may not have been fully revealed by an individual photograph.

Constructing a catalogue has always been a photographer's project. Photographers are moved by an unquenchable desire to own reality, and to organize it according to some kind of order. Portrait catalogues are a perfect example of such a desire, to begin with Nadar's *Pantheon* of contemporary celebrities, Alexander Gardner's repertoire of *Native Americans* in 1872, William Henry Jackson's *Descriptive Catalogue of Photographs of North American Indians in 1877*, or the incredible physiognomic *Atlas* by Paolo Mantegazza (1876) or Cesare Lombroso with his *Criminal Man* (1875) and his *Delinquent man* (1876), the new *Pantheon* by Mario Nunes Vais (1908), August Sander's *Antlitz der Zeit* (Time's face) whose starting date (1929) coincides with the exhibition of Warburg's *Mnemosyne*.

Eugène Atget's work, on the other hand, attempts a visual catalogue of Paris at the end of the 19th century; artists' *Scrapbooks* such as those of Hannah Höch may also be considered as catalogues, as well as the photo albums collected in the early thirties by Walker Evans and Jack Delano about America at the time of the Great Depression, up to the photo catalogues of Bernd and Hilla Becher. A culminating point is Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*, which may be considered as a new dictionary of contemporary visual culture, and Christian Boltanski's *Album de la famille D.* of 1971, as well as Thomas Ruff's portraits. German artist Joachim Schmid adopts a new and creative approach in his work of retrieving and re-organizing forgotten and discarded photographs.

The urge to document and record reality that is typical of photography has driven photographers to classify and list layers and layers of images: thus being, in itself, a catalogue. Therefore, whoever sets out to establish a catalogue is in fact cataloguing an already existing catalogue. When images coming from various archives are organized in a new website, a new interpretation tool is being created. In fact, the 2013 Art Biennale in Venice (*The Encyclopedic Palace*) pointed in the same direction, imposing a reflection on how images are organized and used, in view of expressing our experience of the world. Photography today is endowed with a new artistic project. Photo archives today are a crucial source for contemporary art, as indicated by art critics such as Okwui Enwezor and Hal Foster, and are in the forefront of cultural debates.

Photographs from the Alinari Archives provide us with the tools to read history, creating a storyboard, an illustration without a text, and lead us to read the present through the images of the past. The language of photography, therefore, is modern in itself: Alinari photographs correspond to the key words of a thesaurus that may open for our viewing the book of history.



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