



*How History enters Photography*. Frankfurt am Main: Astrid Erll; Sissy Helff; Stefanie Michels, 28.06.2012-30.06.2012.

Reviewed by Daniel Thorpe

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## How History enters Photography

From the 28th till the 30th of June 21 academics from various countries and a local audience from the University of Frankfurt scrutinised *how History enters Photography*.

Photography can constitute an everyday-experience for one person and a powerful tool that attracts *historical research* and *academic reflections* for the other. Thus, the conference aimed at providing interdisciplinary perspectives towards the medium, bringing together scholars from the Global South, America and Europe – hence strengthening a postcolonial perspective on photography. In order to intensify a dialogue between aesthetic and historical perspectives, photo-artists presented the way they work with photography in dialogue with archivists and historians, scholars of Memory Studies and of Visual Studies. One of the key concerns of the conference were the specific challenges that different uses of photography face. Where are the limits of disciplinary methodologies? What are the constraints of academic and artistic contexts? How can we describe the 'properties' of a notoriously elusive medium, which is nevertheless one of our most powerful media of approaching history?

Following the welcome address and introduction by Sissy Helff, Stefanie Michels and Astrid Erll, it was Jens Jäger's (Cologne) turn to present his keynote, entitled "Elective Affinities? History and Photography". Jäger pointed out that photography has not always been considered a serious academic source, stressing the heterogeneous valuation of photography since its announcement in 1839.

The first to annex his history to the conference was the director of the *Maison Africaine de la Photographie*, Moussa Koanté (Bamako), who talked about "[c]onstructing African Imaginary through Photography". Konaté began his presentation by stating that in its early years, the camera became an instrument that came along with descriptions about colonial *Africa*, providing the image with a difficult essence – *the other* –. However, during the years of independence movement, local photographers documented different social constructions. In the context of political changes some photographers were brought to a global *art* market. Konaté, however, emphasised that there are many like "Malick Sidibé", who helped history to enter photography through earning a living and not through *art*.

That photography is powerful, was shown by Marie-Hélène Gutberlet (Frankfurt/Main) who studies South-African monuments and their visual reproduction. Gutberlet talked about "(...) Thabiso Sekgalas Work 'Homeland' ". Sekgalas' photographs of objects and houses, with references to landscapes, that for long had been the backdrop of the black populations' exclusion from urbanity, construct history on a collective level. In this context the Hektor Pieterse memorial became an iconic site, where people give themselves the status of eyewitnesses by posing in front of the memorial, hence creating the history of a place.

Concerning place and placelessness, the conference participants discussed how these terms are related to the indexicality of photographs by not only referring to the geographical location but rather to other vectors such as

the classification of photographs.

In his presentation, JÜRIG SCHNEIDER (Basel) carefully challenged the category of *colonial photography*. Schneider suggested “[e]xploring the Atlantic Visualscape” Schneider referred to Anthony Giddens and Arjun Appadurai. rather than a narrowed field of research, in which one could not track the camera, the photographs, the photographer and the photographed, who not only left for Brazil and the Caribbean but who also returned to the west coast of the African continent. The real value of photography during the colonial era is uncertain. With reference to Bourdieu, Schneider argued that photography has always been cultural *capital*.

The second day offered an extension to the Indonesian Archipelago, after the conference participants had discussed the disjunctive indexicality of photography and historicity in a visual-scape, reaching as far as the Atlantic. PAMELA PATTYNAMA (Amsterdam) offered an additional approach to public memory through “Family Photographs from the Netherlands-Indies”. Over 60.000 photographs – a legacy from postcolonial migrants and Dutch soldiers – including picturesque family snapshots without signs of violent colonialism, are archived in the IWI-collection at the Amsterdam Tropenmuseum. With the new collections, museums are places of amnesia and nostalgia, where the loss of the colonial territories is negotiated against the backdrop of more photographs than only the *official* ones.

In this context PAULUS BIJL (Utrecht) spoke about “the Memorability of Indonesian Colonial Photography”. Bijl began his presentation by offering an insight into the indexicality of a photograph which in 1947 had been published in the book *Met de Mariniersbrigade In Oost-Java*, way before the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant* used the same photograph on June the 19th 2012 in order to discuss a colonial amnesia. The photographs have always been public, but there has not been any language to give them meaning, making them thus non-memorable.

Bijl and Pattynama have revealed that *photographs from the colonial era* – in order to seize on Schneider’s criticism – have travelled along disjunctive paths and have not always made it into public memory. In this context, SONJA FESSEL (Bern) held a presentation about photographs from “[a]bandoned Battlefields”, such as Verdun, where most people will rather see the sign of “McDonalds” than a sign of atrocities. The last reference actually is the landscape itself, perhaps a *non-place* if Marc Augé would build an airport on the battlefields, ‘(...) [as one of the] spaces which are not themselves anthro-

pological places and which, unlike Baudelairean modernity, do not integrate the earlier places. Marc Augé, *Non Places*, London 2008, here p. 63-64.

JOHANNES HEPP (Munich) captures the ongoing history at *such* places of terror (Belfast, Oklahoma etc.). Hepp shows people on a single photograph (synchronic-presentation), who have actually never met at the sites that have lost all their terror or have received iconic status. Hepp, however, had not only been interrogated, but once even been forced by a government official to delete the evidence of his own short history on the spot. With this in mind Hepp’s statement that politics and the symbolic power of images are mutually dependent, gains momentum. Hepp offered a wonderful illustration of how unperceived history enters photography by presenting a photograph (Thomas Ruff), showing long-extinct stars whose light still causes physical reactions inside the camera.

Following Hepp’s presentation STEVEN D. HOELSCHER (Austin) spoke about “Magnum’s Geographies”. Hoelscher argued that *Magnum Photos’* archive comprises complex geographies, in which the sense of place depends on the photographer or the photographed. Hoelscher spoke of geographical tropes such as the *Insider-/ Outsider Relations* between, for example, the public and the private. Hoelscher also cautioned against forgetting that Magnum is powerful in creating history because of its reputation.

CHRISTOPH RIBBAT (Paderborn) introduced the concept of gender. Ribbat offered some quite amusing, but also disturbing stories about “American Fathers”, who inadvertently have become mascots of photography criticism, imputing fathers with ulterior motives in comparison to the sacrificing mother. Ribbat provided insight into the different constraints of *documentary* photography in combination with the negotiation of social structures.

Not less noteworthy in the context of *documentary* photography are photographs of events “[w]here the Public Meets the Private”. In his presentation JENS RUCHATZ (Erlangen) showed that in the case of royal weddings, photography may help to imagine national belonging. Private weddings, on the other hand, are deeply shaped by social memory through the ways in which they are photographed. According to Ruchatz and from the perspective of memory studies, photographs always function as both, *externalization* and *trace*. They are a construction of historical moments while at the same time retaining their documentary function.

That the task of letting a couples' history enter photography is not easy at all, was remarkably visible in JOHN NASSARI's (London) presentation, who clearly stated that he *constructs* moments, when he works as a wedding photographer, through the interplay of what Ruchatz described as externalization and trace. History does not simply enter photography but is rather constructed in an intimate space between the photographer and the photographed. The couple looks for emotions, a story and proof. Concepts of "good wedding photography" therefore may diverge considerably between artist and clients.

Concerning the relation of photography, history, and art, MARK DURDEN (Newport/ UK) discussed how the history of two Jewish refugees in Lisbon enters photography through the artistic works or rather "Memory Works" of their grandson Daniel Blaufuks. At the place where his grandparents had lived, Blaufuks negotiates his own identity through photographs and films. Documents become formats of memory storage; for Durden, thus, "we are all living archives".

While the case of Blaufuks reveals the hidden histories of his grandparents, the London-based artist SALLY WATERMAN (London) negotiates her own fragmented histories by "[r]e-[i]maging the Family Album through Literary Adaptation". It is part of Waterman's work to identify a poem's *cultural* structure, like in T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" and to accordingly work with her own family's photography archive, such as through re-taking of photographs.

In her presentation VERENA KUNI (Frankfurt/Main) talked about how little of history actually enters photography. Kuni stated that archives aim at maintaining public memories and thus have a lot of power. However, the selective process of what enters the archive also creates amnesia. Kuni referred to Antonio Muntadas' art project *The File Room* that since 1994 provides an open online database concerning censorship, or rather "(...) of how the suppression of information has been orchestrated throughout history in different contexts, countries and civilizations." Antoni Muntadas, Introductory Notes to the File Room, <<http://www.thefileroom.org/documents/Intro.html>>, accessed 17.07.2012.

The third conference day opened with concrete examples of archives. MARGIT PRUSSAT (Bayreuth) talked about "Photographic Collections in Academia". Prussat works for the DEVA project (Digitalisierung- Edition- Vernetzung in den Afrikawissenschaften) that aims at archiving photographs for the humanities and making

them available online. Challenges are posed by selection criteria, information sources, rights management, long term preservation, sustainable software solutions and public interest.

RICHARD KUBA (Frankfurt/Main) in turn presented the visual online database of the *Frobenius-Institut* in Frankfurt/Main that holds mainly "Portraits of Distant Worlds". In his presentation Kuba demonstrated that once a photograph is available on the internet, it is also available for abusive agendas. In contrast, the Institute works on the appropriate presentation of photographs and even on their repatriation, or in other words on giving back history.

The last presentation by KOKOU AZAMEDE (Lomé) not only referred back to Konaté's presentation, but helped to provoke a final discussion. Historical photographs – as presented in online databases, such as the one of the *German Colonial Society* (DKG), are often without any description that could help to depict the actual local circumstances. Azamede thus spoke about "[h]ow to use Colonial Photography in Africa Sub-Sahara for Educational and Academic Purposes" and urges to reinterpret photographs from the colonial times. Here, Schneider's approach concerning the term *colonial photography* seems helpful.

The FINAL ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION ended in a lively debate concerning the properties of the medium photography – if existent –, the photographs' difficult indexicality, history's difficulties in entering photography as well as the practical consequences for artists, archivists, and cultural historians. Kuba for example urged to go to the archive and to see the original rather than online *versions* and Sissy Helff prompted the question of how a historian can work with photography in an aesthetical way; while Stefanie Michels insisted on considering a photograph's actual production, the concrete historic situation and the agency of the interpreter when asserting genealogical readings.

All in all, the conference has reached its aim to generate lively discussions. It was generally agreed that history faces many challenges in entering photography that can only be examined through interdisciplinary lenses. Describing the 'properties' of photography is however limited by time and space, setting up the intellectual scope for both, academics and photo-artists. The decision making process prior to taking photographs and the subsequent archiving process is often as irreversible as the uneven importance that has been ascribed to photographs in different times and public spaces. Thus, also

the memorability of *Colonial Photographs* depends on contemporary public discourses. Nevertheless, classifying photographs as *Colonial Photography*, with reference to their often unknown concomitant circumstances, did not go unchallenged; all conference participants confront themselves with the difficulties of negotiating amnesia, also in landscapes that seem rather disconnected from past events, be it by means of interdisciplinary methods or photo-artistic approaches.

#### Conference Overview:

##### Welcome and Introduction

Jens Jäger (Köln): Elective Affinities? History and Photography

##### *African Photography*

Moussa Konaté (Bamako, Mali): Constructing African Imaginary through Photography

Marie-Hélène Gutberlet (Frankfurt/Main): Presentness, Memory, and History in Thabiso Sekgalas Work „Homeland“

Jürg Schneider (Basel): Exploring the Atlantic Visualscape: Photography in West and Central Africa, 1840 – 1890

##### *Indonesia through a Colonial and a Migrant Lens*

Pamela Pattynama (Amsterdam, The Netherlands): Family Photographs from the Netherlands-Indies: Post-colonial Memory and Nostalgia

Paulus Bijl (Utrecht, The Netherlands): The Memorability of Indonesian Colonial Photography

##### *Locations of History*

Sonja Fessel (Bern, Switzerland): Abandoned Battlefields: The Absence of the Historic Moment in Contem-

porary Photography

Johannes Hepp (München): It's Light, NoTruth

Steven D. Hoelscher (Austin, USA): Magnum's Geographies: Toward a Global Sense of Place

*Archive I: Private and Public Dimensions of Family and Wedding Photography*

Christoph Ribbat (Paderborn): American Fathers

Jens Ruchatz (Erlangen): Where the Public Meets the Private. Royal Weddings, Photographs and Memories

John Nassari (London, UK): Configuring History: Wedding Photography and the Art of Story Telling

##### *Archive II: Intermedial Usage of the Archive*

Mark Durden (Newport, UK): Memory Works: The Art of Daniel Blaufuks

Sally Waterman (London, UK): Re-Imagining the Family Album through Literary Adaptation

Verena Kuni (Frankfurt/Main): Against Amnesia: Appropriation and/as Ars Memorativa

##### *Archive III: Visual Archives in an entangled world*

Margrit Prussat (Bamberg): Photographic Collections in Academia

Richard Kuba (Frankfurt/Main): Portraits of distant Worlds: Frobenius' pictorial Archive and its Legacy

Kokou Azamede (Lomé, Togo): How to Use Colonial Photography in Africa Sub-Sahara for Educational and Academic Purposes: The Case of Togo

##### *Final Round Table*

Jens Ruchatz, John Nassari, Sissy Helff, Stefanie Michels

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

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