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The photographic archive in contemporary art (2012-2022) : unpacking visual experiences in the works of Taryn Simon and Evan Roth

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The Photographic Archive in Contemporary Art (2012-2022): Unpacking Visual Experiences in the Works of Taryn Simon and Evan Roth

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Thèse de doctorat de Langue et cultures des sociétés anglophones

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Title: The Photographic Archive in Contemporary Art (2012-2022): Unpacking Visual Experiences in the Works of Taryn Simon and Evan Roth.

Abstract:

This dissertation explores the utilization of photographic archives in the realm of contemporary art photography, with specific attention directed towards the long-term archival art projects conducted by two American conceptual artists, Taryn Simon (b. 1975) and Evan Roth (b. 1978). Centering on these two case studies that bridge the divide between physical and digital archival contexts, this analysis aims to examine the manner in which Simon and Roth navigate a spectrum of photographic and archival formats, materials, and conceptual frameworks in both tangible and virtual domains.

My argument, based in a monographic approach, is firmly anchored in the selection of Simon and Roth as central figures of study. These artists skillfully harness the concept of the photo-archive not only to contemplate memory and historical narratives but also to expand the parameters of contemporary art photography. In doing so, they make substantial contributions to the ongoing discourse surrounding “post-photography.” This becomes particularly relevant in an era characterized by the ubiquity of photographic imagery, driven by the pervasive influence of digital transformations on our daily lives.

This dissertation aims to elucidate how the artists’ unique methodologies in curating and presenting photo-archives as contemporary art result in distinctive visual and performative experiences for viewers in exhibition contexts. Through this analysis, it explores the experiential dimension of photography within the framework of Simon and Roth’s creative works and exhibitions. It is my contention that Simon and Roth’s artistic projects serve a dual purpose, effectively engaging audiences through aesthetically compelling photographic compositions and elaborate site-specific installations while also provoking intellectual and critical contemplation. Their projects prompt reflection on contemporary aspects of our image-centric culture, spanning

visual knowledge creation, categorization, preservation, and distribution, as well as the shaping of collective memory and identity through photographic archives. Additionally, their artworks explore the material and immaterial aspects of photography and archives, illuminating these dynamics within our visual culture.

This dissertation examines selected archival artworks by Simon and Roth in the context of their curatorial and institutional settings. It emphasizes the significant impact of these factors on the audience's reception of the works and concludes that these institutional and curatorial contexts greatly contribute to our understanding of the multifaceted expressions and possibilities of photography within contemporary art practice.

Keywords: Contemporary art photography, archive, post-photography, Taryn Simon, Evan Roth, curation, museum experience.

Titre: L'archive photographique dans l'art contemporain (2012-2022): décrypter l'expérience visuelle dans les œuvres de Taryn Simon et Evan Roth.

Résumé:

Cette thèse explore l'utilisation des archives photographiques dans le domaine de la photographie contemporaine, en accordant une attention particulière aux projets d'art archivistique à long terme menés par deux artistes conceptuels américains, Taryn Simon (née en 1975) et Evan Roth (né en 1978). En se concentrant sur ces deux études de cas qui comblent le fossé entre les contextes archivistiques physiques et numériques, cette analyse vise à examiner la manière dont Simon et Roth naviguent à travers un spectre de formats photographiques et archivistiques, de matériaux et de cadres conceptuels, tant dans les domaines tangibles que virtuels.

Mon argument, basé sur une approche monographique, est fermement ancré dans le choix de Simon et Roth en tant que figures centrales d'étude. Ces artistes exploitent habilement le concept de la photo-archives non seulement pour réfléchir à la mémoire, à l'identité et à l'histoire, mais

aussi pour élargir les paramètres de la photographie contemporaine. Ce faisant, ils apportent une contribution significative au discours en cours sur la « post-photographie ». Ceci devient particulièrement pertinent à une époque caractérisée par l'ubiquité de l'imagerie photographique, sous l'influence prédominante des transformations numériques dans notre vie quotidienne.

Cette thèse explore comment les méthodologies des artistes dans la présentation muséographique des archives photo en tant qu'art contemporain génèrent des expériences visuelles et performatives distinctes pour les spectateurs. Elle examine la dimension expérientielle de la photographie dans les œuvres créatives et les expositions de Simon et Roth. Leurs projets engagent le public à travers des compositions photographiques esthétiquement captivantes et des installations élaborées tout en suscitant une réflexion intellectuelle et critique. Leurs projets incitent à la réflexion sur les aspects contemporains de notre culture centrée sur l'image, couvrant la création, la catégorisation, la préservation et la distribution des connaissances visuelles, ainsi que la formation de la mémoire collective et de l'identité à travers les archives photographiques. De plus, leurs œuvres d'art explorent les aspects matériels et immatériels de la photographie et des archives, éclairant ainsi ces dynamiques au sein de notre culture visuelle.

Cette thèse examine en détail certaines œuvres sélectionnées de Simon et Roth dans le contexte de leurs cadres muséographique et institutionnel. Elle souligne l'impact significatif de ces facteurs sur la réception des œuvres par les spectateurs et conclut que ces contextes muséographiques contribuent à notre compréhension des différentes expressions et des possibilités de la photographie au sein de l'art contemporain.

Mots-clés: Photographie contemporaine, archive, post-photographie, Taryn Simon, Evan Roth, muséographie, l'expérience muséale.

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Introduction

In the summer of 2017, at the outset of my doctoral career, I shared a memorable conversation with the late Prof. François Brunet, my Ph.D. supervisor for the first fourteen months of my degree. When he inquired about my research direction, I responded, after some reflection, “The future of photography.” Prof. Brunet, with an insightful smile, observed, “It’s an intriguing avenue, though perhaps somewhat too ambitious and expansive in scope.” He was right. Throughout this journey, I have refined the parameters of this dissertation and its core arguments many times. Nevertheless, that early conversation has remained a guiding force, shaping my broader research framework. Going into more depth, it is crucial to clarify that my objective was not to make predictions about the future or exclusively concentrate on the technological progress of photography or new modes of image dissemination. Rather, my primary aim is to attain a deeper comprehension of the convergence between art historical influences, current visual-culture dynamics, and potential future trajectories in both practice and curation within the domain of art photography in the digital age.

Photography has an indisputably commanding presence in our daily lives, profoundly shaping our perception of reality, molding our identities, and serving as a crucial means of communication in the twenty-first century. In the past two decades, its pervasive influence in present-day visual culture has grown even further, firmly establishing its pivotal role within contemporary art. As a result, the lexicon and horizons of possibilities associated with photography in the domain of contemporary art have expanded significantly.¹

¹ Charlotte Cotton, *World of Art: The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2020), 8.

While the assertion that photography and visual culture are deeply intertwined may seem well-established, it is essential to acknowledge that the curators of the recent “New Photography 2023” exhibition at MoMA have actively emphasized the growing importance of images within contemporary culture. In the exhibition text, they state, “In our interconnected world, images are crucial. No longer mere records of our surroundings, pictures now serve as prisms through which we share and experience our lives.”² Some scholars have suggested that photographic images have become the predominant medium of exchange in our contemporary visual economy, serving as vehicles for conveying and circulating narratives, viewpoints, and personal experiences. This concept of visual “currency” was notably underscored by the “Give and Take - Images upon Images” exhibition held at Hamburger Kunsthalle in 2022. As the catalog introduction states: “With digitization, images have gained tremendous significance. They transcend geographical, cultural, and social boundaries, shaping our worldview and, more so than texts, have become the central currency for capturing attention and fostering discourse.”³ These statements made in recent photography exhibitions highlight a persistent effort made by artists, writers, and curators to reevaluate and redefine the contemporary landscape of photography in response to evolving cultural dynamics in our engagement with images. The recognition of the multifaceted nature of photography, a medium that encompasses a diverse range of expressions, underlines the ongoing quest for redefinition within the field.

In our current visually saturated culture, we are not only inundated with a deluge of digital images but are also driven by an insatiable desire to amass and structure visual information. Technological changes, such as increased possibilities for data storage and sharing, the influential

² Oluremi C. Onabanjo, Kaitlin Booher, and Samuel Allen, “New Photography 2023,” MoMA, accessed August 15, 2023, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5525>.

³ Leona Marie Ahrens, Stephanie Bunk, and Petra Roettig, *Give and Take - Images Upon Images* [exhibition booklet], (Hamburg: Hamburger Kunsthalle, 2022).

role of popular media, the proliferation of smartphones, and the rapid evolution of image manipulation technology, have further propelled archival practices.

In today's interconnected world, people from diverse backgrounds actively participate in the processes of generating, collecting, curating, adapting, and archiving visual content. Alongside traditional practices like maintaining family photo albums, there is a noticeable contemporary trend: the enthusiastic creation of digital archives on popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. It appears that collectively, we are on a mission to establish a secure repository, preserving our daily experiences and traces within the ever-evolving digital landscape. Supporting this perspective, media theorist Jussi Parikka argues that "In this era of information, each individual functions as a quasi-archivist," suggesting that the term "information management society" might more precisely characterize this current phenomenon.⁴

With the exponential rise in the number of photographs and archives in the digital age, contemporary artists have been increasingly driven to scrutinize the present-day roles, functions, and effects of photographic archives.⁵ The conceptual and historical interconnections between photography and the archive are considerable. As writer and curator Okwui Enwezor declared, "Because the camera is literally an archiving machine, every photograph, every film is a priori an archival object."⁶ Furthermore, as some scholars argue, the advent of the modern archive aligns with the emergence of photography (Batchen 2004; Company 2008; Foster 2004; Respini 2015, van Elphen 2014). Photography possesses inherently archival characteristics and organizational principles. The intrinsic ability of photography to capture and preserve moments in time makes

⁴ Jussi Parikka, ed., "An Introduction to Wolfgang Ernst's Media Archaeology," in *Digital Memory and the Archive*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

⁵ I elaborate on the concept of the "archival turn" in contemporary art photography in Chapter One.

⁶ Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York: International Center of Photography; Steidl, 2008), 12.

the medium indispensable for documentation, classification, and record-keeping. Therefore, archival photographs traditionally serve to verify factual information, “whether it pertains to specific aspects of a crime scene or the physical attributes and dimensions of an archaeological object.”⁷

Prominent contemporary artists, including Walid Raad, Christian Boltanski, Tacita Dean, Sophie Calle, Zoe Leonard, Thomas Hirschhorn, Jeremy Deller, Susan Meiselas, and Gerhard Richter, have been central figures in scholarly discussions and curated exhibitions that address the complex relationship between photography and archival practices. They employ diverse concepts, aesthetics, and methodologies, often repurposing and reinterpreting existing archival content. Their work is known for critically examining how photographic archives influence collective memory, identity formation, and historical representation.

In this dissertation, I focus on the practices of American conceptual artists Taryn Simon (b. 1975) and Evan Roth (b. 1978). My investigation centers on how photo archives play pivotal roles in, and exert significant influence on, contemporary art photography. Simon and Roth emphasize processes of image compilation, preservation, and classification in their work while highlighting themes surrounding materiality, accessibility, memory, and representation. I consider how their involvement with diverse forms of image archives, both physical and virtual, gives rise to unique visual and performative encounters for exhibition audiences.

This doctoral research is motivated by a keen interest in understanding the strategies employed by Simon and Roth when engaging with archival concepts and materials. It asks how the artists translate these concepts and materials into the realm of contemporary art exhibition spaces, where the reception of archival images is intrinsically linked to spatial, contextual,

⁷ Eva Respini, “The Archive – Rewriting Histories,” in *Photography at MoMA: 1960 to Now*, eds. Quentin Bajac et al. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2015).

curatorial, and relational factors. The following chapters therefore explore the institutional settings and curated exhibitions that have featured the photo-archival projects of the two artists. I contend that Simon and Roth harness the concept and aesthetic of the photo archive while expanding the scope of contemporary art photography.

As I demonstrate, Simon and Roth employ physical and virtual photographic archives, alongside various imaging techniques, as integral components of their mixed-media artistic practices. They engage in hybrid explorations of photography, challenging conventional divisions between digital and analog realms, online and offline experiences, and images and physical objects. Moreover, their distinctive installations, encompassing diverse media and incorporating elements reminiscent of painting and sculpture, push the boundaries of the photographic medium. Beyond analyzing the formal characteristics of the artworks, this research will investigate how these projects engage in an examination of the social and cultural dynamics inherent in photography. The archival projects reflect on the circulation, reception, and consumption of images, offering a reflexive analysis of the medium's status in the current image economy.

The rationale for selecting Simon and Roth as the central case studies extends beyond their influence on contemporary art photography. My choice is rooted in their distinctive approaches and methodologies for presenting both tangible and digital photographic archives, driven by a fusion of aesthetic and conceptual motivations. Accordingly, both artists employ photographic archives as a lens for exploring broader issues in contemporary image culture. They encourage viewers to engage in a profound reflection on systems of knowledge and power, involving critical examinations of how photographic images are collected, organized, and accessed, as well as issues of representation and the dematerialization of archives in the era of cloud storage. Furthermore, they explore the impact of photo archives both historical (in the case of Simon) and contemporary

(in the case of Roth) on the formation of memory and identity within the context of present-day society.

As evidenced by their artistic practice and the process of installing their exhibitions, Simon and Roth demonstrate a profound comprehension of the impact that the presentation and curation of photo-archives within an exhibition setting can have on viewers' perception and interaction with photographic material. In the works scrutinized in this dissertation, these artists naturally embrace the active role of curators.⁸ Inherent in the concept of "curation" is the notion that the artists assume a distinct responsibility, encompassing the materials they employ, the institutional context within which they operate, and the audience they engage in their work.⁹

The artists' photo-archival work and their curated exhibitions are both inherently performative. In this analysis, the concept of performativity plays a central role, particularly within the context of contemporary art photography and archival practices. In the realm of art theory, it is important to distinguish between the term "performance," which relates to the physical act of artistic presentation, and "performativity," a theoretical framework that delves more deeply into the transformative effects brought about by artists' works and their display. Informed by the concept of the "performative" in language, first articulated by J.L. Austin (1955) and further developed by Judith Butler (1990), this approach, when applied to contemporary art photography,

⁸ Simon's active involvement in the installation and oversight of her exhibitions is well-documented in various videos. For instance, she discusses her Tate Modern exhibition installation, "A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters," in a video titled: "Taryn Simon, We're All Ghosts of Another Time," filmed by Tate Shots, June 3, 2011, YouTube video, 6:03, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBatcfT7iFo&ab_channel=Tate.

⁹ For further discussion on the contemporary "artist-as-curator" see: Alison Green, *When Artists Curate: Contemporary Art and the Exhibition as Medium* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018) ; Boris Groys, "Politics of Installation," *e-flux 2* (January 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/politics-of-installation> ; Natalie Musteata, "The 'I' of the Artist-Curator" (PhD diss., The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2019) ; Lucy Soutter, *Why Art Photography?* (London: Routledge, 2013), 105.

underscores the dynamic role of photographs in “activating” the viewer emotionally or intellectually.¹⁰

In the context of Simon and Roth’s archival projects, I contend that the term “performative” holds a dual significance when applied to the analysis of the artists’ practices. It encompasses not only the artists’ performative actions and interventions within photographic archives but also the active, performative engagement they facilitate for the audience with archival images and narratives presented in exhibitions of their work. Thus, extending beyond the visual and formal analysis of Roth and Simon’s works, this dissertation also considers the diverse modes of performative experience evoked by their photo-archival projects. This includes considerations of emotional and conceptual effects, material transformations of the images, as well as the relational engagements instigated by their artworks and curated exhibitions.¹¹ Consequently, I explore how Simon and Roth’s interactions with photographic archives generate unique visual narratives and construct enriching experiences for audiences within the context of contemporary art exhibitions.

The following chapters engage in a detailed exploration of multi-year archival projects created by Simon and Roth. Simon is a multidisciplinary artist based in New York. Through her synergistic use of photography, text, sculpture, and performance, she illuminates the tension between images and knowledge, revealing hidden narratives and dynamics within recognized systems. Roth, a Berlin-based American artist, navigates the intersection of technology and visual culture. With a portfolio encompassing street art, prints, videos, installations, and websites, Roth’s work is deeply influenced by web technologies and hacker philosophies. He examines their

¹⁰ I will expand further the theoretical distinctions between “performative” and “performance” later in this introduction.

¹¹ In discussions of contemporary art, the concepts of relationality and social engagement are closely aligned with art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud’s influential theory of “Relational Aesthetics.” Bourriaud’s theory places a strong emphasis on the social and interactive dimensions of art, prioritizing the relationships that art facilitates among individuals over conventional readings of static art objects. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002).

application across both digital and non-digital materials and exhibition displays, probing the nuanced relationship between online and offline realms.

In addition to providing a thorough examination of particular archival art projects and the contextual background of their exhibitions, this research adopts a monographic approach, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the artists' creative processes. It unveils the sustained presence of the archival theme throughout their careers. The case studies under examination are Taryn Simon's *The Picture Collection* (2012-2021) and Evan Roth's *Internet Cache Self-Portrait* (2012-ongoing) and *Internet Landscapes* (2016-ongoing). Simon's project is an intervention into the established Picture Collection's archive at the New York Public Library, repurposing its analog images and investigating how visual information is classified and presented in the framework of a tangible image archive. Though the work is not inherently digital, *The Picture Collection* reflects the challenges faced by tangible photography archives in a contemporary media landscape marked by digital databases and online search engines. Conversely, Roth confronts the loss of the archive's physical form, re-using Internet-based image and focusing on kinds of information storage that manifest both online and as gallery installations.

Given the considerable number of contemporary artists engaging with archives across the globe, this study has deliberately confined its scope to practitioners working within the Western tradition, namely in the United States and Europe. Many studies have been conducted on the close connection between photography and archives. However, this dissertation narrows its focus to a specific intersection within this broader landscape. It explores how contemporary art photography converges with the archival, with particular attention to issues of performativity in both the curation and the visual experience of photo-archival artworks. This specific intersection has

received relatively limited attention in academic discussions on this topic, presenting a compelling area for investigation in the field of visual studies.

As the literature review in Chapter One will examine in greater detail, the archive—as a concept, an artistic practice, and a curatorial approach—has taken on an increasingly prominent role in the art world of the past three decades. The concept of the archive has structured a vast tract of contemporary art production in recent years, found at the center of some of the most highly regarded exhibitions and biennales of the past decade.¹² The archive has emerged in this context as both a conceptual framework and a methodological and curatorial approach. This shift, often referred to as the “archival turn,” involves the incorporation of archival practices and aesthetics into art production. This paradigm has been identified by Hal Foster (2004) as an “archival impulse” in contemporary art. Drawing on the philosophical insights of Foucault (1969) and Derrida (1995), artists, scholars, and critics have engaged in an intellectual exploration of the archive’s role in shaping memory and knowledge construction. These discussions have been prominent not only around contemporary art but also across various fields within the humanities and media studies. Importantly, the advent of the digital era has fundamentally altered the nature of archives, transforming them from a comparatively static state into ever-evolving entities. This transformation, as emphasized by theorist Terry Cook in his essay “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts” (2000), marks a significant paradigm shift in our conception of recordkeeping. Archives are no longer perceived as passive receptacles of

¹² Notable exhibitions that foreground the “archival turn” in contemporary art include Ingrid Schaffner’s “Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art” (1998) at MoMA PS1, Okwui Enwezor’s “Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art” (2008) at the ICP in New York City, “All the World’s Future” (2015) Venice Biennale, and Dieter Roelstraete’s “The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology” (2013). These exhibitions have significantly contributed to archival practices and discourses in contemporary art. See Chapter One for further details and examples.

knowledge but as dynamic platforms that play a pivotal role in constructing and asserting memory, identity, political authority, and influence.

In recent practices, artists have engaged with archives either by exploring their formal and functional aspects or by creating entirely new archives as integral components of their work. As Hal Foster asserts, contemporary “archivally driven art” has emerged as an international phenomenon with “a distinctive character of its own.”¹³ In “archival art,” creators typically engage with a wide range of archived materials. They intervene within established and unofficial archives, create projects informed by archival strategies and concepts, and integrate specific archival forms into their works. These forms may include inventories, storage modalities, boxes, and labels. Additionally, some artists craft their own fictive archives. These artists are known for researching traces and testimonies from the past and present and re-purposing personal or found objects and images, converting them into active materials.

Archival artists like Simon and Roth are acutely aware of the dynamics surrounding contemporary visual culture and the archive. Chapter One elaborates on how the digital age has precipitated a significant reconfiguration of the archival paradigm. Simon and Roth actively invoke the photo archive’s capacity to mediate and institute a semblance of structure and authority within our chaotic image-centric culture. As art critic Boris Groys aptly observes, confronted with this deluge of digital data, our most effective coping mechanism is to establish an archival domain. This archive becomes a sanctuary, guaranteeing the preservation of historical and visual knowledge, even when the physical objects themselves become obscure.¹⁴ In their exploration of twenty-first-century image culture, Simon and Roth utilize the archive not just as a theme and an

¹³ Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 4.

¹⁴ Boris Groys, *In the Flow* (London: Verso, 2016), 22.

artistic medium but as a critical instrument. They thereby raise questions about the impact and continued relevance of the photographic archive through their creative endeavors.

I am particularly intrigued by how these artists use, curate, and present image archives to reflect not only the current state of photography but also the nuanced complexities of our archival culture. Simon and Roth navigate the dualistic nature of photo archives, appreciating them as both conceptual media and as entities with a physical, material presence. Their approach to the archive extends beyond archival methodologies and practices, touching upon its metaphorical dimensions. Through their work with visual collections, they weave complex narratives that bridge the past and present, juxtaposing individual and collective cultural memories and allowing unseen narratives to resurface. Importantly, they share an understanding of artistic practice as an idiosyncratic probing into the obscure operational architecture that scaffolds our visual culture.

Another reason for my close examination of Simon and Roth's oeuvres lies in their adept use of the photo archive to push the boundaries of contemporary art within the context of "post-photography."¹⁵ The ascent of digital technology and the prevalence of social media have brought about a profound transformation in the role of photography within contemporary culture. In the digital age, the medium has undergone substantial changes in its production, distribution, consumption, and valuation. Digital photography, no longer a recent innovation, has become an integral and widely adopted practice within contemporary art. Artists who actively engage with a wide range of digital technology practices within this context also demonstrate a keen awareness of the significant impact of networked image culture on the contemporary art photography landscape. However, it is important to note that the digital revolution initially elicited mixed reactions. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, artists and photographers raised concerns

¹⁵ I have dedicated a subchapter to elucidating the term "post-photography" and its related theory in this dissertation (see Chapter One, pages 52-60).

about the potential erasure or eradication of analog photography, including its associated processes and historical significance. These concerns extended beyond questions about the truth value and authenticity of digital photography; artists also worried that their craft might become overly automated and devoid of creativity due to digital manipulation.

Along the same lines, some art critics and scholars have speculated that photography has reached a point of depletion as an artistic form.¹⁶ Moreover, the introduction of smartphones equipped with advanced cameras democratized the form, making it accessible to nearly everyone. As stated by photography writer and curator Charlotte Cotton: “we are all more invested, and more expert, in the language of photography than ever before.”¹⁷ Indeed, this democratization of the medium and its increased accessibility have given rise to an unprecedentedly image-centric culture in which billions of visuals circulate continuously and dominate various aspects of our lives, with social media and online platforms becoming the primary venues for encountering and sharing these images.

Within the art world, responses to these changes have varied. Some viewed these developments as potentially “deskilling” photography and thus diluting its artistic value.¹⁸ These commentators worried that widespread access to smartphone cameras might erode craftsmanship and diminish photography’s status as a fine art. Others, however, celebrated this development, seeing smartphones and digital technology as tools that expand creative possibilities for

¹⁶ In Lucy Soutter’s essay on recent developments in contemporary photography, she mentions that in 2010, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art organized a conference titled “Is Photography Over?” During this event, many of the presentations delivered by experts in the field asserted that photography is experiencing a period of crisis or decline. See Lucy Soutter, “Expanded Photography: Persistence of the Photographic,” *Photo Researcher* 26 (2016): 36-43.

¹⁷ Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2020), 276.

¹⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the term “deskilling” in relation to contemporary art, see John Roberts, “Art after Deskilling,” *Historical Materialism* 18, no. 2 (2010): 77-96. See also John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007).

photography. The contemporary visual landscape is multifaceted, driven by the digital era's ability to enable compelling experimentation and the amalgamation of analog and digital photography.

The ongoing shifts in art photography in the digital age are influenced by a number of pivotal factors. These include issues of materiality, authenticity, value, originality, dissemination, consumption, and the rapidity and ease of reproduction. The overpowering nature of vernacular image circulation and consumption online, significantly influences viewers' interactions with photography as contemporary art. The situation therefore calls for innovative approaches to the presentation and curation of art photography. As photo critic Lucy Soutter notes concerning the contemporary state of the medium, "new technologies demand new literacies [...] Paradigms are shifting, ideas are on the move."¹⁹

The commercialization and monetization of photography, particularly on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, are now intricately intertwined with influencer culture, advertising tactics, and consumer strategies.²⁰ Collectively, these factors have led to the emergence of what has been defined as a "post-photography" era. The term "post-photography" was coined to encapsulate the complex image culture that dominates our lives in this time of visual overabundance. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, the post-photography condition requires a profound engagement with the medium, demanding an ongoing reevaluation of photography's aesthetic and conceptual paradigms as well as its reception as an art form within the current ubiquity of digital photography and the Internet. Accordingly, post-photographic

¹⁹ Lucy Soutter, "Photography in Flux," *1000 Words: 10 Years*, Nov. 2018, http://www.lucysoutter.com/writing/photography_in_flux.htm.

²⁰ See Katrina Sluis, "All I Know Is What's On The Internet," exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery, London, 25 Oct 2018 - 24 Feb 2019, <https://thephotographersgallery.org.uk/whats-on/all-i-know-is-whats-on-the-internet>. See also Jose M. Alvarez-Monzoncillo, *The Dynamics of Influencer Marketing: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Taylor & Francis, 2023).

discourses not only consider photography's changing status but also address the agency of the photographer and the viewer within our hyper-documented world.²¹

Another aspect of the present age that warrants consideration in discussions of photography is the "post-Internet" moment, which receives a dedicated subsection in the third chapter of this dissertation (see subchapter 3.1). "Post-Internet art" acknowledges the pervasive presence of the Internet, using the web both as a "meta-archive" and a medium for artistic expression and the creation of interactive experiences. The category includes artworks that recognize and critique the all-encompassing nature of the Internet and the digital interconnectedness that characterizes our present era.²² The "post" prefix in "post-Internet" should not, however, be interpreted chronologically, as "after the internet." It instead signifies a condition in which the Internet is assumed as an omnipresent backdrop against which experiences and cultural production unfold. As elucidated by Karen Archey and Robin Peckham, it "refers not to a time 'after' the internet, but rather to an internet state of mind – a way of thinking in the fashion of the network."²³ This perspective underscores the profound impact of the Internet on our collective consciousness, shaping the way we perceive and engage with contemporary culture.

In the post-photography and post-Internet era, artists have repositioned the boundaries that conventionally define the medium of photography. Many have adopted an expansive approach characterized by hybridization, effectively blurring the distinctions between various forms of imaging, artistic media, subject matter, and expression.²⁴ This hybridization often takes the form

²¹ Robert Shore, *Post-Photography: The Artist with a Camera* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2014).

²² Michael Connor, "Post-Internet: What It Is And What It Was," in *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*, ed. Omar Kholeif (Manchester: Cornerhouse and London: SPACE, 2014), 61.

²³ Karen Archey and Robin Peckham, "Art Post-Internet," UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, March 2014, <https://ucca.org.cn/en/exhibition/art-post-internet/>.

²⁴ Some scholars argue that contemporary art forms have collapsed into one another. Art critic Peter Osborne suggests that transglobal capitalism is leading to the convergence of all art forms into a single "generic" art. This shift, driven by neoliberal economic policies, marks a transition from a craft-based understanding of artistic media

of blending traditional photographic technology with cutting-edge digital imaging methods. These artworks bridge the gap between online platforms and physical gallery spaces, effectively merging digital and tangible domains. As they embrace experimentation, contemporary artists operating within post-photographic and post-Internet modes venture into diverse materials and employ a wide array of image-making techniques.

A noteworthy aspect of hybridity in the context of post-photography is an increased focus on the physicality and material elements of images. This is marked by a renewed appreciation for the tactile and sensory dimensions inherent in the interaction with photographic as material objects. This renewed interest in photographic artworks that underscore their material nature and the inherent tension between image and object, is also closely linked to a visible emphasis on process-oriented artistic practices and the physical encounters and experiences they offer.²⁵ Contemporary artists, including Simon and Roth, have ventured into an extensive exploration of photography's intersection with various art forms and materials. These investigations extend beyond traditional boundaries and involve the convergence of photography with other forms, from painting to CGI (computer-generated images) technologies. Artists have also incorporated three-dimensional media, including sculpture, installation, and architectural forms. Charlotte Cotton aptly describes these developments by characterizing "contemporary art photography as multiform."²⁶

Importantly, a renewed emphasis on materiality, often referred to as the "material turn" in the contemporary era, has not only found expression within contemporary photography but has also resonated more broadly across various academic disciplines, including archival discourse.

to a post-conceptual and trans-categorical approach to materialization. This transformation is evident in global art fairs and Biennials, where artists often incorporate a diverse range of art forms within their works. See Peter Osborne, "The Fiction of the Contemporary," in *Anywhere or not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 28.

²⁵ See Sandra Plummer, Harriet Riches, and Duncan Wooldridge, "Photography's New Materiality," *Photoworks Magazine*, May 2012, <https://photoworks.org.uk/photographys-new-materiality/>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

Scholar Anneli Sundqvist characterizes the “material turn” as a shift in scholarly focus towards the investigation of artifacts, objects, bodies, spaces, and technologies.²⁷ One can argue that this shift is also linked to the concept of performative experiences in contemporary art photography, which will be further explored in the subsequent section. Within this context, there has been a growing scholarly (as well as artistic) interest in comprehending the ways in which human relationships are molded and engaged by their material environments, the reciprocal influence between individuals and material objects, and the material dimensions of the human body.²⁸ More specifically, concerning photographic archives, art historian Costanza Caraffa’s description similarly underscores the material aspects of photography in conjunction with the interactive and dynamic potential of archives. She asserts that, “Photographs are three-dimensional material objects that exist in time and space and move through various social contexts [...] From the perspective of the *material turn*, photo archives can be understood as ecosystems: open, dynamic, and complex structures formed by various elements that act and interact with each other and their surroundings.”²⁹

Throughout this dissertation, I employ the term “contemporary art photography.” This is distinct from “fine art photography,” which is rooted in the modernist tradition and emphasizes the aesthetic, formal, and expressive qualities unique to the medium, aiming to produce artworks unsullied by the forms of commercial or industrial photography.³⁰ Conversely, “contemporary art photography” refers to photography-based works that are in fact inseparable from broader discourses in contemporary art and visual culture. In the current digital landscape defined by the

²⁷ Anneli Sundqvist, “Things That Work-Meditations on Materiality in Archival Discourse,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 8, no. 1 (2021): 2.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Costanza Caraffa, “Photo Archives,” Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, Accessed, Sep 29, 2023, <https://www.khi.fi.it/en/forschung/photothek/photo-archives.php>.

³⁰ David Bate, *Art Photography* (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 7-11.

proliferation of images and the fluid nature of contemporary art, the demarcation between “art” and “non-art” photography has become increasingly blurred. At the same time, authorial intent and the contextual frameworks within which photographic artworks are conceived and presented continue to play a paramount role in defining contemporary art photography. This echoes the spirit of Marcel Duchamp’s influential ready-mades, which posed the fundamental question of what constitutes art. The response, per Duchamp: whatever the artist designates as art.³¹

The “multiform,” multifaceted artistic approach to contemporary art photography presented in this dissertation reflects the transformative nature of art photography in the digital age and its intersection with broader cultural and technological shifts. As articulated by Soutter, “The current climate of eclecticism gives artists/photographers permission to cross ever more fluidly between analog and digital modes, between photographic genres, between artistic mediums, and between commercial and personal work.”³²

Significantly, Simon and Roth might not readily align themselves with the conventional identity of the photographer. In fact, the two artists are not typically classified as photographers, given that their works operate within the broader realm of contemporary art and are not intended for an audience exclusively interested in photography.³³ Like many of their contemporaries, Simon and Roth are regarded as multidisciplinary artists, harnessing a diverse range of subject matter and media, including photography, video, computer software, sculpture, painting, writing, performance, and installation.

³¹ See David Bate’s discussion on conceptualism and art photography in Bate, *Art Photography*, 86-7.

³² Lucy Soutter, “Photography in Flux,” in *1000 Words: 10 Years*, 2018, http://www.lucysoutter.com/writing/photography_in_flux.htm.

³³ Soutter reminds us that the designations “artist” and “photographer” are shaped by institutional frameworks and academic dialogues. “While these labels can be perceived as mere cynical categorizations, they do possess inherent value. They provide a framework for understanding and contextualizing various artworks, offering insights into the intended interpretations of such works – even if we opt for alternative readings.” See Soutter, *Why Art Photography?*, 4.

However, this dissertation firmly situates the artists within the domain of post-photography, a conceptual framework that carries profound significance on two levels. Firstly, it entails a thorough and nuanced analysis of hybrid aesthetic forms and the inherently performative dynamism that pervades their creative work and exhibitions. On a more conceptual level, I contend that Simon and Roth’s deliberate and methodical explorations, along with their experimentation around photo archives, serve not merely as a critical cultural commentary on the prevailing image economy but also as an expansion of the photographic medium—that is, as post-photography.

The concept of the “performative,” which originated in the linguistic theories of British philosopher John Langshaw Austin, has gained prominence in contemporary art and aesthetics. Austin introduced the concept in his 1955 Harvard University lecture series, “How to Do Things with Words.” He proposed that certain linguistic statements, known as “performative utterances,” do more than describe—they actively perform or bring about an action. These utterances, exemplified by phrases like “I now pronounce you man and wife” or “I christen this ship the HMS Victoria,” illustrate how language has the power to shape and actualize reality, possessing a “reality-producing dimension.”³⁴ Subsequent theorists, including Judith Butler, have further developed the concept of performativity. While Austin focused on speech acts and their capacity to perform deeds, Butler extended the notion to the construction and expression of gender.³⁵

When applying the concept of performativity to the realm of contemporary art, defining what constitutes a performative artwork can present difficulties. There is a temptation to categorize

³⁴ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

³⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

any artwork that involves elements of embodiment, enactment, staging, or the production of meaning as inherently “performative.” Consequently, performance and performativity are at times erroneously regarded as interchangeable, leading to methodological ambiguities and conceptual stretching.³⁶ To clarify the distinction between these two terms, it is crucial to understand their specific usages. “Performance” conventionally refers to actions intended for an audience. The activities of the performing individual or group, occurring at a specific place and time, constitute the work. This understanding of the term is often associated with disciplines such as theater or dance. On the other hand, in discussions of contemporary art, “performativity” is not only used in reference to live performances. It can be applied to various media, including objects, digital actions, and processes, wherein the artwork is interpreted as an act or statement in and of itself. In this context, the term performative implies a transformative or consequential aspect based on the artwork (or exhibition) being read as an act or call to action.

Art historian Dorothea Von Hantelmann posits that “performativity,” when applied to contemporary art, serves as both a conceptual framework and a methodological approach for examining how meaning is generated within art. This approach is particularly relevant when considering the impact of artworks on the viewer and their relationship with the exhibition context. In her 2014 article “The Experiential Turn,” von Hantelmann argues that the notion of the performative in art underscores the idea that artworks have a contingent and somewhat elusive influence and impact on viewers, both situationally and relationally. This influence mainly operates in two ways: within specific contexts, where art interacts with its surroundings and

³⁶ Hans Rudolf Velten, “Performativity and Performance,” *Travelling Concepts for the Study of Culture 2* (2012): 249.

ongoing discussions (situationally), and in relation to individual viewers or the broader public, recognizing that art can have varied meanings and effects on different people (relationally).³⁷

This use of the concept signifies a shift in the production of meaning within art, moving beyond a singular focus on what an artwork depicts or represents. It acknowledges an artwork's ability to elicit emotional or intellectual responses that actively involve the viewer. This transformation in art spectatorship and interpretation moves viewers from a passive role to an active one, aligning with Austin's shift in analyzing language "from what it says to what it does."³⁸

This perspective emphasizes that artworks are not passive entities; rather, they behave as active agents capable of influencing or questioning viewers' perceptions, emotions, and understanding of reality. In other words, they participate in the ever-evolving cultural dynamics of contemporary society. Additionally, performative artworks influence viewers' visual experiences within the realm of contemporary art. As my analysis demonstrates, Simon and Roth's extensive archival projects exemplify their dynamic nature, evolving and undergoing changes over time. As I will illustrate, these changes further impact how viewers interpret and engage with their work.

In response to the notable shift in contemporary art towards prioritizing viewer engagement and the sensory, emotional, and physical impact of artworks, von Hantelmann introduces the term "experiential turn." This concept describes the prevailing trend of placing greater emphasis on the emotive, embodied aspect of the viewer's engagement with art, moving beyond traditional aesthetic concerns.³⁹ Von Hantelmann posits that this shift signifies a transition within the art world

³⁷ Dorothea von Hantelmann, "The Experiential Turn," in *On Performativity*, ed. Elizabeth Carpenter, Vol. 1 of *Living Collections Catalogue* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2014), <http://walkerart.org/collections/publications/performativity/experiential-turn>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Von Hantelman acknowledges that the experiential turn is not new, but has been an ongoing process since the 1960s, exemplified by the works of artists like Robert Morris, whose Minimalist sculptural installations aimed to heighten our physical and perceptual encounters with objects in real space. See Von Hantelmann, "The Experiential Turn."

“from an aesthetic of the object to an aesthetic of experience.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, she underscores the importance of situating this shift within the broader context of cultural, social, and economic transformations that have taken place in Western societies during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In this context, it is also noteworthy to mention the influential work of Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, the authors of “The Experience Economy” (2011). In their book, the authors argue that businesses must skillfully engineer memorable experiences for their customers. In the current landscape, these experiences are held in higher regard than traditional goods and services, signifying a fundamental shift in economic value from commodities to experiences. Pine and Gilmore emphasize the paramount importance of emotionally engaging customers as a pivotal strategy to gain a competitive edge.⁴¹

The societal shifts towards prioritizing experiences as sources of meaning and personal fulfillment, characteristic of Western societies under the influence of consumer capitalism, have prompted a reevaluation of the concept and cultivation of ‘experiences’ within the domain of contemporary art.⁴² Along the same lines, art historian Veerle Thielemans highlights the crucial role of performative experiences in artwork interpretation, emphasizing the artwork’s impact on the viewer and its contextual significance. Thielemans argues that these experiential encounters

⁴⁰ Von Hantelmann, “The Experiential Turn.”

⁴¹ B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (United Kingdom: Harvard Business Review Press, 2011). Also see, Steven Miles, *The Experience Society: Consumer Capitalism Rebooted* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

⁴² Von Hantelmann mainly references the theories of German sociologist Gerhard Schulze who discusses the shift from a traditional industrial society to what he calls the experience society in his publication *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1992). [Published in English as *The Experience Society* (London: Sage, 2005)]. Schulze argues that in consumer-driven Western society, there is a significant shift away from the traditional focus on material goods towards a greater emphasis on seeking and cherishing meaningful and emotionally engaging experiences. This shift is propelled by factors such as increased affluence, leisure opportunities, and the abundance of material possessions in society. As a result, people are no longer content with mere material wealth; they are actively pursuing experiences as a means to discover meaning, personal satisfaction, and a sense of identity in a world marked by material abundance.

transform the viewer from a passive “disembodied eye” into an active and engaged “embodied spectator,” highlighting the corporeal nature of engagement with contemporary art.⁴³

The writings of photography critic Lucy Soutter have also influenced interpretations of “performativity” in discussions on contemporary photography. Taking her cues from Austin, Soutter articulates a key distinction: while some photographs simply represent, depict, others partake in a more active, performative interaction with the world. As Soutter inquires, “If photographs have the agency to ‘do things,’ to what ends might we deploy them?”⁴⁴ In this formulation, we can categorize specific types of photography based on their apparent function and intended objectives – “what they set out to do.” Soutter then distinguishes between different photographic genres to illustrate their varied functions. She classifies them into three main categories: documentary photography, which seeks to uncover, expose, challenge familiarity, or offer critiques; narrative photography, focused on creating dramatic narratives or entertainment; and performative photography. Within this framework, contemporary performative photography, as Soutter contends, serves a unique purpose that extends beyond mere representation or storytelling. Its primary goal is to “activate” the viewer, to move or irritate, provoking responses and eliciting feelings of empathy and imagination.⁴⁵

In this performative context, “photographs could be understood as actions, rather than being decoded as meanings.”⁴⁶ This perspective situates the role of photography within the social context and suggests that understanding a photograph does not necessarily depend on deciphering the author’s intention. Rather than solely attributing meaning to individual artists/creators, this

⁴³ Veerle Thielemans, “Beyond Visuality: Review on Materiality and Affects,” in *Perspective Actualité en histoire de l’art 2* (2015): 1.

⁴⁴ Lucy Soutter, *Why Art Photography?* (London: Routledge, 2013), 84.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

approach directs our attention to the broader socio-cultural influences and power dynamics at work in the creation and interpretation of photographs. The importance of social dynamics in relation to performativity in photography has been similarly examined by Susan Ash in her 2005 article titled “The Barnardo’s Babies: Performativity, Shame, and the Photograph.” In this context, Ash delves into the concept of photographs as performative agents that shape social power dynamics and identity narratives. Drawing upon the Barnardo’s Children campaign as an illustrative case, Ash convincingly demonstrates how photographs can function as catalysts for action, particularly in response to situations involving human suffering.⁴⁷

In an exhibition context, the performative aspect of photography can extend beyond individual images to include curatorial decisions, the organization of the images, and the interaction among various material elements and with the audience. Such all-encompassing narrative and spatial configurations create performative experiences in which the audience actively engages in navigation, interpretation, and the construction of meaning. This interaction transforms the viewer into both a spectator and a participant, who therefore acts as a kind of “co-producer” or “co-author.”

Drawing upon the aforementioned theories regarding the performative photography, when analyzing the works of Simon and Roth, I assert that their photo-archival artworks provide a compelling illustration for discussions centered on interactivity and performativity within the realm of contemporary art photography. In the context of the projects discussed within this dissertation, it will be demonstrated that the artists share a common approach involving a performative process of intervening in and creatively engaging with image archives, thereby presenting them as contemporary art.

⁴⁷ Susan Ash, “The Barnardo’s Babies: Performativity, Shame, and the Photograph,” *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2005): 507–521.

For both Simon and Roth, the generation and actualization of unique experiences occupy a central position in their conceptual, aesthetic, and curatorial pursuits. Furthermore, as I contend, their archival projects encompass not only aesthetic visual experiences but also provide viewers with opportunities for critical reflection on the evolving role of contemporary photography and the broader dynamics of visual culture related to both tangible and digital image archives. Indeed, both artists contemplate the influence of digital and Internet technologies on the how we perceive, disseminate, categorize, and preserve images, narratives, and memories. Hence, I will thoroughly investigate the incorporation and presentation of their artworks in diverse exhibition spaces. My analysis will delve into how their photo-archival installations effectively engage the audience, resulting in the creation of distinct performative experiences.

The sources for this research include a rich tapestry of scholarship, exhibition essays, critiques, press briefings, artist and museum websites, multimedia presentations, and video excerpts, as well as first-hand interviews I conducted with Evan Roth and other knowledgeable stakeholders. As I argue, it is essential to adopt a holistic approach when examining these art projects, acknowledging the diverse ways in which Simon and Roth engage with both physical and virtual photo-archives. These engagements encompass multiple dimensions, which encompass the physical materiality of photographic archives as contemporary art, the conceptual frameworks at play, and the interactive and immersive qualities embedded within their artworks' displays when presented in an exhibition context.

Despite their widespread recognition in the art world, including the presence of their works in solo and group exhibitions and permanent museum collections, as well as frequent references to their practices in publications on contemporary art, Simon and Roth's significant contributions

to archival art and post-photography practices have received comparatively little scholarly attention. Nonetheless, Simon and Roth are prominent figures in contemporary art photography. Their active presence is often noted in exhibitions and survey publications dedicated to topical reflections on the medium of photography, as well as digital art and net-art.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the expansive nature of such anthologies often relegates their contributions to brief overviews. While this frequent inclusion highlights their importance in the realm of contemporary art, it also limits a potential re-examination of their approaches and practices and a deeper analysis of their specific works. Despite Simon and Roth's evident prominence, a dedicated and comprehensive academic exploration of their work within the framework of contemporary art photography and archival art remains notably absent from the scholarship. Aiming to bridge this gap, my research provides a comprehensive and multifaceted examination of how the artists enable performative experiences by strategically utilizing both the physical and conceptual dimensions of the photographic archive. I argue that their deliberate use of the photo archive as a critical instrument and medium actively contributes to the ongoing expansion and redefinition of photography within the digital age (that is, the "post-photographic" era).

This dissertation adheres to a thematic-monographic structure and has been systematically organized into three core chapters. Chapters Two and Three provide in-depth explorations of the biographies and artistic trajectories of Simon and Roth respectively. In addition to analyzing the key artworks under investigation, the two monographic chapters also delve into other related projects by these artists. This approach aims to provide a comprehensive contextualization of the

⁴⁸ See Charlotte Cotton, *Photography Is Magic* (New York: Aperture, 2015) ; Jennifer Blessing, *Photo-poetics: An Anthology* (United Kingdom: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2015). Notably, the group exhibition, "Give and Take - Images Upon Images" at the Hamburger Kunsthalle (2022) featured archival projects by both Simon and Roth.

archival and taxonomic threads found within their oeuvres. Accordingly, each of the chapters offers a detailed analysis of projects and exhibitions associated with each artist, thereby facilitating the development of my interpretations in conjunction with the relevant theoretical frameworks.

Chapter One presents an extensive review of art historical and visual culture research that has contributed to the emergence of the “archival turn” in contemporary art. It underscores the inherent relationship between the archive and photography within a changing cultural landscape influenced by digital advancements. My review of this literature investigates the broader influence of digitization on the nature of archives and archival processes, as well as its relevance for art production and related aesthetic experiences. The chapter also incorporates examples of significant exhibitions and artists related to the contemporary shift towards archiving in the “post-photographic” age. This addition is intended to provide a contextual background against which the subsequent discussion of Simon and Roth’s works will be framed.

Chapter Two explores Taryn Simon’s project based on the Picture Collection archive at the New York Public Library (NYPL). In this artwork, Simon delves into the institutionalized mechanisms of archiving, investigating the methods of ordering and classification associated with visual information and objects. Her engagement with this official image collection led to the discovery of under-explored socio-cultural and photographic narratives.

Spanning a period from 2012 to 2021, Simon’s project, originally titled *The Picture Collection*, critically engages with a tangible, analog image archive and its distinctive subject-based cataloging system, originally established in 1915.⁴⁹ As discussed in the chapter, the Picture

⁴⁹ The historical Picture Collection is known as the largest circulating picture library in the world. It contains 1.2 million photographic prints and images organized according to a unique cataloging system of over 12,000 alphabetical subject folders. The Collections files are labeled according to generally straightforward topics like *fashion, airplanes, cats, mirrors, handshakes, oxygen, swimming pools, explosions, and food*. The archive has been described as a precursor to Google Images.

Collection became the central focus of Simon's conceptual investigations into the notion of a collective American visual memory as well as a source of appropriated images for her practice. Her work illuminates not only the intricate organizational framework of the Picture Collection but also the significance of tactile engagement with a photo archive in the digital age. Moreover, the project highlights the often-overlooked individuals connected to this collection. Most significantly, the artist pays tribute to Romana Javitz (1903-1980), the influential superintendent of the Picture Collection, in the latest iteration of her project.

In Simon's artistic interpretation of the Collection, she engages in a meticulous process of re-photographing physical images sourced from the archive. She presents these archival images in carefully framed arrangements organized into grid-like rows, creating visually compelling photo collages. Each of her artworks contains multiple image reproductions thoughtfully curated from specific categories or subjects within the Picture Collection. This chapter also delves into the various curatorial perspectives that shaped the presentation of these compositions and considers how exhibitions of Simon's work foster performative experiences for the audience. I therefore explore the presentation of Simon's archival project at the Gagosian Gallery franchise in New York as well as its iteration as a site-specific installation at the NYPL.

Expanding outward from this analysis, I examine the interplay between the project's inception, objectives, and evolution, framing it within the larger context of the relationship between the New York Public Library (NYPL) and the practice of art photography. Focusing on the nine-year arc of the *Picture Collection* project, which underwent various iterations, this chapter goes beyond a straightforward visual analysis of the artwork, exploring the institutional and historical contexts from which the project emerged. It includes an exploration of the motivations that led the NYPL to endorse a contemporary archival art project as well as an artist-curated

exhibition drawing upon its rich historical collections. As the chapter unfolds, it becomes evident that the final iteration of the project, titled *The Color of the Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection* (2021), serves multiple purposes for the library. It aimed to revitalize its historical archives and collections and emphasize their contemporary relevance. At the same time, it firmly anchored the Collection within the discourse of American art and photography, aligning it with the older, more established conventions of the photographic medium and art history.

In Chapter Three, the dissertation undergoes a significant shift, moving from Taryn Simon's exploration of historical, physical photo archives to Evan Roth's compelling investigation of archives and archiving in the online sphere. In this context, the Internet is perceived as a meta-archive, a vast repository of contemporary history and cultural memory. My analysis thus shifts from Simon's examination of photography as a form of historical documentation to Roth's forward-looking approach, oriented towards the ever-evolving virtual realm and the archiving of our personal and collective memory. This approach acknowledges the rapid transformations that are shaping our archival memory and the ways in which we access, store, and retrieve information. The third chapter reveals how Roth's works traverse the transitional zone between virtual image storage and the physical presence of photographic images in the gallery space. As I contend, his distinctive installations prompt viewers to confront and contemplate the fleeting quality of our current digital landscape and the potential necessity for its conservation. These installations involve performative participation, compelling the audience to critically engage with the questions they raise as well as the visual materials presented.

This chapter pursues three primary objectives. Firstly, it examines Roth's early career, during which he actively participated in activist art collectives and directed his focus toward

graffiti and street art. This analysis seeks to elucidate the development of Roth's identity as an artist and "digital hacker," particularly in relation to his engagement with archives and technology.

Secondly, the chapter scrutinizes certain works from Roth's early portfolio to underscore the persistent archival impulse inherent in his practice. It provides an in-depth examination of key concepts and practices in Roth's art, such as "hacker philosophy" and post-Internet art. Notably, these foundational concepts continue to influence Roth's current artistic practice, shaping his identity as a digital/Net artist. Moreover, the chapter emphasizes Roth's early immersion in hacker culture and the open-source movement, illuminating how these formative experiences have imbued his approach to artmaking with an ethos of collaboration and accessibility. This philosophy advocates for the free dissemination of information and encourages active audience participation, fostering a sense of collectivity within the online realm. Finally, the chapter investigates Roth's transition from activist art practices to more conceptually and technologically challenging projects that also have an aesthetic appeal suitable for contemporary gallery and museum audiences. This examination encompasses a contextual analysis of Roth's recent archival artworks, including the *Internet Cache Self Portrait series* (2012-ongoing), *Since You Were Born* (2016-ongoing), and *Internet Landscapes* (2016-ongoing).

In the first two series, Roth utilizes images extracted from his personal archive of online browsing history, i.e., his web cache.⁵⁰ These web-based images are printed on wallpaper and inserted into gallery-spanning installations, enveloping viewers with monumental image panels that stretch from floor to ceiling. These installations display the results of Roth's inquiry into his

⁵⁰ A web cache is a temporary storage system meant to speed retrieval of frequently accessed online content. When a user revisits a webpage or requests specific resources, the cache recalls these elements from local storage, reducing load times and network usage. PCMag Encyclopedia, "Web Cache," accessed November 8 2023, <https://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia/term/web-cache>.

personal online archive. They prompt questions about how these accumulated collections of cached images, stored on personal computers, actively shape and authenticate individual identities.

In the *Internet Landscapes* series, Roth documents his journeys to the physical locations of Internet submarine fiber-optic cable landings, aiming to uncover and archive the tangible aspects of Internet connectivity. Within the exhibition space, Roth seamlessly combines the physical and virtual realms, resulting in a visually captivating installation that includes screened infrared images, videos, and cables. The compositions thus visualize the intricate nature of the Internet. Additionally, the project explores the concept of post-photographic hybridity, as the installations and images can be perceived as amalgamations of multiple media, such as painting, installation, photography, video, and sculpture.

In this sub-chapter, I examine and compare two exhibitions that featured Roth's *Since You Were Born* installations – one held at Jeu de Paume, Paris (2020), and the other at Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg (2022). My aim is to highlight the artist's ability to create immersive experiences with his large-scale photographic installations. Roth's works, derived from his virtual web-cache archive, synthesize many internet-sourced images into a unified tactile and spatial encounter that compels viewers to navigate a vast expanse of visual data. This experience encourages an exploration of how the Internet can influence and mold our collective memory and individual experiences. It prompts viewers to engage in a reflective and contemplative manner, fostering an examination of the complex facets of our digital interactions and our personal roles in curating, disseminating, and shaping our personal image archives.

As I will explore in more depth in the forthcoming chapters, it is crucial to adopt an interdisciplinary perspective when analyzing the photo-archival pursuits of Simon and Roth. This approach, as delineated in Chapter One's literature review, facilitates a comprehensive

understanding of their unique engagements with the photographic archive. It encompasses not only the archive's physical presence but also its conceptual foundations, its role as an aesthetic and curatorial element, and its function as a framework for visual experience within the domain of contemporary art photography.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

This chapter serves as a crucial step in establishing the theoretical underpinning for my doctoral research, which delves into the functions and effects of photo-archives in contemporary art photography. As previously outlined in the introduction, Simon and Roth's artworks amalgamate aesthetic with performative engagement, effectively rendering both the conceptual and material dimensions of the photo archive visible. This fusion yields a profound and multifaceted interpretation of the archive's role within the domain of contemporary art photography.

Archives have traditionally been regarded as essential repositories for memory, the past and its representation. However, over the past three decades, the role and conceptualization of archives have undergone notable transformations, acquiring more nuanced and multifaceted dimensions within visual culture. In the realm of contemporary art discourse, various practitioners—including writers, critics, artists, and curators—have been increasingly engaging in theoretical explorations of the archive and delving into archival materials sourced from institutional, national, personal repositories, or domains of popular culture.

Contemporary artists have been modeling their artworks on typical archival practices such as collecting, arranging, describing, classifying, and preserving. Through diverse media, they navigate and interrogate intricate themes related to societal modes of remembering, forms of identity, power structures, and the archival imaginary, revealing complex historical and contemporary narratives. These explorations are manifested in multifarious ways, spanning both exhibition spaces and the digital domain, prompting deeper contemplation and reinterpretation of the archival in contemporary artistic practices.

This literature review endeavors to illuminate pivotal dialogues surrounding the role of archives in contemporary art and visual culture, synthesizing insights from both foundational texts and the latest scholarly contributions. Moreover, given that this dissertation predominantly employs formal and contextual analyses of the exhibitions of Taryn Simon and Evan Roth, the literature review accordingly incorporates examples of notable exhibitions that are relevant to the archival turn in contemporary art and photography. This inclusion aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding and contextual backdrop against which the subsequent discussions are framed.

The intricacies and depth of art practice and theory in relation to archives, are vast, necessitating a more thorough examination than what is feasible within this chapter. Nonetheless, a compressed overview of the trajectory of reading and theorizing archives in the humanities and contemporary artistic milieus is vital. Delving into the unique shift towards archival tendencies in contemporary art, this chapter delves into the roots of the “archival turn,” exploring the underlying motivations for artists’ profound involvement with archival concerns as they assume the roles of performative investigators. Additionally, as elucidated in this review, the archival turn extends to artists utilizing archival practices as a medium of artistic expression. In this context, the acts of collecting, preserving, researching, and presenting are integrated into the essence of the artwork itself.

The literature review is organized thematically rather than chronologically. It first offers a detailed elucidation of the terms ‘archive’ and ‘archival’ within the context of this dissertation. This sets the foundation for an examination of the archive in the contemporary era, shedding light on the transformative effects digital reproduction, the Internet, and smartphone media has on archival processes and perceptions, and moreover, on the loss of the

archive's physical location. The scholarship reviewed herein probes how advancements in media technology and the dematerialization of photographic imagery have not only altered our valuation of archival materials but also reshaped our comprehensive understanding of archives and the unique production of archival art. This thematic exploration provides insights into the intricate interplay between digital technology, contemporary art, and archival practices.

Subsequently, this review delves into a rigorous examination of theories highlighting the 'archival turn' in contemporary art, with the aim of clarifying the nuanced roles of archives as both subjects and mediums. This involves exploring their utility as artistic tools and as critical apparatuses, given the ongoing artist investigations into the contentious nature of archives, shaped by diverse social, historical, political, and technological dynamics. This exploration will also entail an examination of Hal Foster's main perspectives on art influenced by archival impulses.

A dedicated section will explore the 'archival turn' cross multiple humanities disciplines, with particular emphasis on the pivotal contributions of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Their insights into the "archives as the nexus of knowledge, power, and history,"¹ coupled with Derrida's accentuation of the transformative influence of digital media on our understanding and utilization of archives, lay the groundwork for formulating research questions pertaining to contemporary engagements with various forms of photo-archives in the context of contemporary art. This encompasses an examination of how the archival and curatorial methodologies employed by Simon and Roth correspond with the

¹ Jennifer S. Milligan, "What Is an Archive?" in the History of Modern France," in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005), 177.

wider issues prevalent in our extensively interconnected digital society, portraying diverse dimensions of identity, memory, and cultural dialogue.

Given that this dissertation focuses on contemporary art practices rooted in the photographic archive, both as a strategic artistic and curatorial approach and as an aesthetic form, the subsequent section emphasizes the inherent bond between the archive and photography. This discussion showcases diverse perspectives through which the archive, especially the photographic-archive, has been critically engaged with by a spectrum of practitioners, including artists, art critics, philosophers, and exhibition curators, further emphasizing the profound resonance of the current cultural production centered on this topic.

1.1 Laying the groundwork: Essential Definitions

According to the standard dictionary definition, an archive is described as a place where individuals can access firsthand facts, data, and evidence from various primary sources such as letters, reports, notes, memos, and photographs.² In this context, “archive” refers to both the substance of recorded documents and the tangible location where these records are safeguarded.

These meticulously curated and preserved collections are sources of information as much as they are places of preservation offering a tangible link to history. For historians of the 19th century, the archive fundamentally served as an institution that facilitated the access to “immobilized” segments of past times.³ Hence, archives traditionally serve as custodians of

²“What’s an Archives?” National Archives, 15 Aug. 2016. Accessed, 19 Oct. 2019.
<https://www.archives.gov/about/info/whats-an-archives.html>.

³ Eivind Røssaak, “The Archive in Motion: An Introduction, in *The Archive in Motion: New Conceptions of the Archive in Contemporary Thought and New Media Practices*, ed. Eivind Røssaak (Oslo: Novus Forlag, 2010), 12.

memory, with archivists acting as guardians. These stewards face the responsibility of determining which elements from history warrant preservation, often making these choices based on anticipated future significance.⁴ However, scholarly discourse readily acknowledges that an archive does not simply serve as a conduit offering unmediated access to the past or to undistorted memory. Contemporary intellectual engagements with the archive conceptualize it as both a theoretical entity and a political construct, capable of functioning simultaneously as a repository of knowledge and memory and as a manifestation of claims to hegemony and institutional authority.⁵ As Michel Foucault observed, archivists enact a proactive and pivotal role in the practice of memory preservation, converting mere documents into enduring “monuments.”⁶

The modern archive, rooted in 19th-century scientific systemization and linear temporality, serves both as an instrument for organizing information and as a register for “time in flux.”⁷ Accordingly, its evolution is inextricably linked to the rise of the modern state. By the mid-19th century, archives, primarily state-sponsored, became integral to national administrative frameworks, underscoring their pivotal role in reinforcing national identities and preserving collective memory.⁸ The establishment of national archives underscored their vital role in reinforcing national identities and safeguarding collective memory. Scholar Marlene Manoff notes the significance of archives in crafting authoritative historical

⁴ Sue Breakell, “Archival Practices and the Practice of Archives in the Visual Arts,” *Archives and Records*, no. 36:1 (2015): 1–5, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/09/perspectives-negotiating-the-archive>.

⁵ Ariella Azoulay, “Archive,” *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon* 1, no. 5 (2011), accessed October 15, 2019, <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/archive-ariella-azoulay/#ref1>.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1972), pp. 6-7.

⁷ Susanne Østby Sæther, “Archival Art? Negotiating the Role of New Media,” in *The Archive in Motion: New Conceptions of the Archive in Contemporary Thought and New Media Practices*, ed. Eivind Røssaak (Oslo: Novus Forlag, 2010), 78.

⁸ Ernst van Alphen, *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 109. Also see, Mike Featherstone, “Archive,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2–3 (2006): 591–596, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276406023002106>.

narratives, emphasizing their foundational importance in democratic societies.⁹ Historically, in the 19th century, both European and U.S. governmental institutions utilized archival practices, including the strategic collection and preservation of records, to shape societal perceptions, demarcating ‘normative’ from ‘deviant’ behaviors and appearances. Interestingly, photography was instrumental in this, often marginalizing groups like criminals, the impoverished, and the mentally afflicted.¹⁰ Indeed, photography’s inherent attributes, such as its evidentiary role, ability to provide forensic detail, commitment to authenticity, taxonomic characteristics, and limitless reproducibility, align seamlessly with the archival objective of recording, cataloging, and structuring knowledge.¹¹

Correspondingly, in *Photo Archives and the Idea of Nation* (2014), art historian Costanza Caraffa and photography scholar Tiziana Serena argue that photo archives function as “repositories of national narratives,” where individual photographs relay national “truths.”¹² In the same volume, photo-historian Joan M. Schwartz posits that photographic archives are not just passive storages but active conveyors of national ideologies, suggesting that photographs construct “a visual coherence” that fosters a sense of community and reinforces national identity.¹³

⁹ Marlene Manoff, “Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*. Vol. 4, No. 1. (2004): 9.

¹⁰ For essays investigating photography as a tool of social control see: Elizabeth Edwards, ed. *Anthropology and Photography 1860-1920*, ed. by, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press in association with the Royal Anthropological Institute, 1992) ; John Pultz, *Photography and the Body*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995) ; Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. by Richard Bolton, (Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 1989).

¹¹ Eva Respini, “The Archive – Rewriting Histories,” in *Photography at MoMA: 1960 to Now*, edited by Quentin Bajac et al. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2015).

¹² Costanza Caraffa and Tiziana Serena, *Photo Archives and the Idea of Nation* (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2014). Also see: Scott Palmer, “Photo Archives IV: The Photographic Archive and the Idea of Nation,” *Visual Resources* 28, no. 3 (September 2012): 277–82.

¹³ Joan M. Schwartz, “Photographic Archives and the Idea of Nation: Images, Imaginings, and Imagined Community,” in Caraffa and Serena, *Photo Archives and the Idea of Nation*, 20.

In the current contemporary context, characterized by swift progressions in information technology, the acceleration of digitization, and the burgeoning capacities for online storage, the conception of the ‘archive’ has inevitably undergone extensive transformations and expansions. Digital archives, in essence, are permanent storage systems for digital information, whether on a computer or online. They blend digital technology with storage, accommodating various electronic documents.¹⁴ Consequently, the modern archive is intrinsically connected to two foundational elements: a “physical site,” delineated by its tangible structural boundaries, and an “imaginative site,”¹⁵ marked by its perpetually shifting conceptual and creative limits. Indeed, the concept and substance of archives are continually evolving and transforming.¹⁶ Likewise, Marlene Manoff points out that the term ‘archive’ has grown to ambiguously include a vast array of concepts across diverse practices.¹⁷

Additionally, the conceptualization of archives has undergone significant transformation under the lens of postmodern critique, particularly through its deconstruction of “grand narratives.”¹⁸ Historically, archives have been conceived as repositories safeguarding the overarching narratives of a nation and a society. However, within a postmodern context characterized by skepticism toward such unified narratives and a focus on multiplicity, the alleged objectivity and authority of archives have undergone rigorous deconstruction. As such, the postmodern critique of archives underscores the imperative for a critical reassessment of

¹⁴ David M. Levy, *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2001).

¹⁵ Paul J. Voss and Marta L. Werner, “Toward a Poetics of the Archive: Introduction,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1999): i.

¹⁶ Gaeun Ji, “Mapping the Sisyphian Archives: Archival/Anarchival Performativity of Repetition and Failure in Contemporary Archival Art,” (PhD dissertation, Goldsmiths University of London, 2018), 10.

¹⁷ Marlene Manoff, “Theories of the Archive,” 10.

¹⁸ I am referring to the theoretical frameworks of postmodernism and poststructuralism, as elaborated and advanced by thinkers such as Jean François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. See Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Paris: Les Editions du Minuit, 1979). And Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

the foundational principles underlying archival practices and representation of and information. Accordingly, contesting the concept of the archive as a fixed reservoir of history, anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler articulates contemporary archival critique as “a rethinking of the materiality and imaginary of collections and of what kind of truth claims lie in documentation.”¹⁹ In other word, postmodern critique underscores the significant role played by power dynamics, ideologies, and subjective interpretations in shaping the content contained within image archives and determining the accessibility of archival information.

In the context of this dissertation concerning photo-archives, it is pertinent to observe that within the sphere of photography, postmodern theory has brought to the forefront the significance of context, perception, and interpretation in influencing our comprehension of images. This challenge to the conventional idea of an objective photographic truth involves a fundamental questioning of concepts such as ‘truth’ ‘authorship’, and ‘authenticity.’ Postmodernism has emphasized the inherent characteristics of photography, including reproducibility, construction, ambiguity, and fabrication.²⁰

Despite arguments that postmodernism made a relatively belated entry into archival discourse, its impact was undeniably prominent in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, broadening the conception of what can be deemed an archive.²¹ Archival theorist Terry Cook illuminates this transition, highlighting a paradigmatic shift “from viewing records as static physical objects, and towards understanding them as dynamic virtual concept”.²² Cook together with archival theorist and art historian Joan M. Schwartz have been significant in facilitating

¹⁹ Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (2002): 94.

²⁰ See Andy Grundberg, *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography Since 1974* (New York, NY: Aperture, 1999) ; Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: Guilford, 1997).

²¹ Anneli Sundqvist, “Things That Work-Meditations on Materiality in Archival Discourse,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 8, no. 1 (2021): 7.

²² Terry Cook, “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts,” *Archival Science* 1, no. 1 (2000): 3-24, accessed February 1, 2020, <http://www.mybestdocs.com/cook-t-postmod-p1-00.html>.

this paradigm shift in archival theory. In their theories both writers advocate for a departure from an understanding of records as mere static physical entities, emphasizing instead their nature as fluid concepts that should be understood within their specific cultural, social, and historical contexts, and in relation to other materials. Based on the insights of Cook and Schwartz, archives “are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed. By extension, memory is not something found or collected in archives, but something that is made, and continually re-made.”²³

The transition to digital mediums, coupled with the advent of the Internet (as well as smartphones), has facilitated a democratization of archival methodologies. This shift has led to a proliferation of both public and private archives, reshaping contemporary understandings of archives and enhancing the agency of everyday individuals within this realm. In her significant article, “Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines” (2004), Marlene Manoff delves into the changing nature of our relation to archives amid digital advancements and digital materiality. As Manoff notes, the digital age presents both opportunities and challenges for archival methods. A core observation she makes is the diminishing importance of physicality in archives. Historically, the tangible nature of archives lent them credibility. However, with the emergence of digital archives, this tangible aspect is absent. This absence prompts questions regarding the authenticity and sustainability of digital records, especially when distinguishing between primary and secondary sources becomes more complex in a digital setting. Consequently, as digital archives grow in prevalence, it prompts a rethinking of traditional archival definitions and of the significance of materiality in archiving.²⁴

²³ Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, “Archives, records, and power: From (Postmodern) theory to (Archival) performance,” *Archival Science* 2, nos. 3–4 (2002): 172.

²⁴ Marlene Manoff, “Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*. Vol. 4, No. 1. (2004):10.

This paradigm change in archival thinking is also related to the archive user, as maintained by scholar Annet Dekker, who suggests that “In today’s context, everything might be considered an archive, and every individual an archivist.”²⁵ In a noteworthy citation, Dekker draws upon a prior assertion by Eric Ketelaar, a professor of Archivistics at the University of Amsterdam. In 2006, Ketelaar pronounced, “Everyone an Archivist,” underscoring the profound impact of the digital transition on the conceptualization and use of the archive. As Ketelaar points out, the concept of the term ‘archive’ has undergone significant evolution, to the extent that it has taken on a somewhat “feral” quality. According to Ketelaar this shift in the understanding of the archive and the role of the archivist is mirrored in the burgeoning realm of online culture. Here, ordinary individuals have begun to assume the functions traditionally associated with archivists, actively engaging in activities such as uploading, sharing, and utilizing online archival platforms for various forms of media, including images, videos, and music.²⁶

The transition to “dynamic archives,” especially virtual ones accessible to all, has fundamentally transformed our interaction with materials that were previously restricted to specific archival locations.²⁷ As various institutions, including national archives, libraries, and museums, embrace digital information technology, there has been a marked progression in making digitized collections accessible to a broader audience, utilizing the online sphere as a primary interface. This phenomenon has prompted some scholars and commentators to dub the World Wide Web as “the archive of archives.”²⁸ Accordingly, in the current digital landscape

²⁵ Annet Dekker (ed.), *Lost and Living (in) Archives: Collectively Shaping New Memories* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017), 15.

²⁶ Eric Ketelaar, “Everyone an Archivist,” in *Managing and Archiving Records in the Digital Era: Changing Professional Orientations*, ed. N. Butikofer, H. Hofman, and S. Ross (Baden, Switzerland: Hier+Jetzt, 2006), 9-14.

²⁷ Manoff, “Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines,” 10.

²⁸ Dekker, *Lost and Living (in) Archives*, 20.

of documentation and cataloguing, the terms “archive” and “special collection” have transcended their traditional definitions and are now fluid, overlapping concepts. An “archive” now often refers to any systematic collection of records, digital or physical, public or private, designated for preservation and access. With the emergence of new media and innovative archival approaches, the distinctions between archives and collections have been increasingly blurred. As archivist Sue Breakell points out, many of today’s so-called archives are merely intentional collections of materials, underscoring the evolving dynamics of these terms in our current cultural milieu.²⁹

To elucidate Breakell’s insights, an archive is traditionally considered an organic entity. Here, the items within it come from a shared source or theme, thus reflecting a cohesive history or cultural narrative. This mutual background provides each item in the archive with evidential significance. As an example, within such an archive, one might discover a sketchbook, complemented by pertinent correspondence, diaries, and photographs, all of which collectively provide a richer context. Consequently, from Breakell’s perspective, an archive is a comprehensive unit made up of interlinked components. Contrastingly, a “special collection,” as Breakell outlines, is a carefully curated set of items. Although these items are of value, they may not stem from a singular origin or history. Instead of a naturally accumulated assembly rooted in mutual backgrounds, these items are grouped based on distinct criteria, such as rarity or thematic pertinence. When individual items, devoid of a shared historical connection, are pooled together, they form what Breakell defines as a “Special Collection.” This collection is essentially the outcome of the act of collecting.³⁰

²⁹ Breakell, “Archival Practices and the Practice of Archives in the Visual Arts’.”

³⁰ Ibid.

In delving into the subtleties of archival terminology, it is crucial to recognize that Taryn Simon's focal point in her project analyzed in this dissertation, namely the New York Public Library's 'Picture Collection,' is uniquely positioned at the intersection of varied classifications of archives. Even though the extensive assemblage of visual materials in the Picture Collection does not originate from a unified source, it is reasonable to assert that its foundation and cataloging methodology are grounded in archival principles. This assertion gains more weight from the Collection's mission statement, which defines it as both a "circulating collection" and a "reference archive."³¹ Conversely, Jessica Cline, the Supervisor Librarian of the Picture Collection, maintains a more conventional perspective. She argues that due to its lack of a cohesive thematic orientation and the absence of materials situated within a singular historical context, the Picture Collection does not fulfill the criteria to be considered a true archive.³²

As this review demonstrates, contemporary academic and artistic discussions surrounding archives and collections, traditional conceptions of the archive are perpetually scrutinized and reshaped. This dissertation transcends rigid delineations, advocating a more expansive interpretation of both archive and its metaphorical counterpart, archival. Through this conceptual approach to the archive, artists delve into not only the physical or pragmatic functions of archives but also the intangible dimensions of memory, identity, and representation, offering imaginative interpretations and critiques of how we perceive, interact with, and construct our understanding of the past and present. As such, this PhD research investigates artistic projects that engage with both official and unofficial archives –

³¹ See "Picture Collection - The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs," New York Public Library, accessed Sep. 25, 2023, <https://www.nypl.org/locations/schwarzman/wallach-division/picture-collection>.

³² Jessica Cline, in discussion with the author, NYPL, New York, April 2019.

encompassing a wide range of images that are documented, aggregated, preserved, and made accessible for various purposes. Accordingly, the ‘archival’ designation is conferred upon artworks that manifest archival aesthetics or materials, or that embrace methodologies reminiscent of archival practices and research. Furthermore, this categorization encompasses works that engage symbolically with archival themes, with various modes of collecting and organizing visual information.

Crucially, in the context of unofficial photographic archives in our digital age, archives aren’t solely repositories for intentional accumulation; they also passively exist on our various devices, capturing endless moments and data often without our explicit intent. Indeed, given the ubiquity of smartphones and the rapid progression of technology, individuals universally find themselves deeply involved in generating, curating, adapting, and archiving visual content. As posited by Costanza Caraffa and Estelle Blaschke, “while these diverse collections might elude orthodox definitions of the archive, archival systems and methodologies have emerged as integral facets of the post-digital milieu.”³³

Before delving into the interpretation of archives in contemporary art and photography, it is imperative to underscore several key theories pertaining to the profound influence of digital technology on archives, archival art, and the resurgence of the term ‘post-photography.’ These theoretical foundations will provide a solid framework for comprehending the evolving landscape of contemporary visual culture and the ways in which Taryn Simon and Evan Roth engage with archival materials and concepts.

³³ Estelle Blaschke and Costanza Caraffa, “Photo Archives VIII: The Digital Photo Archive. Theories, Practices and Rhetoric, 5-7 May, 2022,” accessed August 6, 2023, <https://www.khi.fi.it/en/forschung/photothek/photo-archives.php>.

1.2 Navigating the Digital Turn: Transformations and Implications

In his seminal 1995 lecture on *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida keenly observed the profound influence of media technologies on human memory and our perceptions of “the archive.” Derrida was notably prescient in highlighting email, even more than the fax, as the avant-garde medium of the time that was drastically altering “the entire public and private space of humanity.” He shed light on the process of “archivization” – his term for technical archiving methods. These methods, he argued, didn’t merely blur boundaries between the public and private spheres; they significantly reconfigured our notions of history and memory. In contrast to traditional archives, which emphasize spatial storage, digital archives function in real-time, recalibrating our perceptions of archival temporality and physicality. Derrida asserted that the very act of archiving and the archive itself inherently “produce as much as they record the event.” Derrida’s intuitions regarding the early stages of the digital shift are undeniably relevant to contemporary web archiving. The instantaneous and easily accessible nature of the web has transformed the dynamics concerning archives, granting individuals the capacity to generate, upload, and tag their own digital archives. Consequently, they possess the capability to impact pre-existing content and contribute their unique perspectives.

Adapting Derrida’s observations to our current digitally saturated context, curator Katrina Sluis argues that “‘Archive Fever’ has long evolved and been replaced by ‘Database Fever’.”³⁴ Significantly, the ways in which we engage with and accumulate digital imagery and archival content are shifting. Scholar Matthew Ogle posits that the confluence of archival processes and digital technology is subtly morphing each Internet user into an archivist,

³⁴ Katrina Sluis, “Accumulate, Aggregate, Destroy – Database Fever and the Archival Web,” *Lost and Living (in) Archives: Collectively Shaping New Memories*, ed. Annet Dekker (2017): 28.

thereby democratizing, and enabling diverse voices to wield archival agency.³⁵ Indeed, the practice of archiving has become ubiquitous, with individuals routinely engaging in the act of preserving daily traces of their existence, whether through photographs, audio recordings, videos, lists or documents. These ‘archival objects’ are typically stored, organized, and potentially disseminated across various devices, cloud services, and social media platforms. Furthermore, contemporary digital storage techniques enable the accumulation of data on unprecedented scales. Whether for personal, commercial, or scientific purposes, the duplication, extraction, amalgamation, and organization of images and metadata occur continuously, resulting in the creation of various feeds, clusters, and databases.

Notably, Scholars Oliver Grau, Janina Hoth, and Eveline Wandl-Vogt highlight a resurgence in interest in archive theory, encompassing both online and offline archival practices. In their 2019 publication concerning the archiving, collecting, and preserving of digital art, they argue, “with digital technologies and online data storage, a novel archival dynamic is unfolding, shaped by the inherent procedural nature of these technologies and their evident ‘archive-ability.’”³⁶ It is within this rapidly evolving digital landscape that I delve into the archival projects of Taryn Simon and Evan Roth.

Moreover, Eivind Røssaak, a scholar in media studies, underscores the profound influence of digital technology on archival content. He contends that the alterations within technological and communicational paradigms inherently reshape the essence of archived documents. Thus, it is imperative to recognize that the transformations observed in the archive

³⁵ Matthew Ogle, “Archive Fever: A Love Letter to the Post Real-Time Web,” 16 December 2010, accessed 1 September 2023, <https://mattogle.com/archivefever/>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

as a whole are intrinsically linked to the changes – particularly digitization – occurring within the archival document itself.

Amid continuous data transfers, frequent updates, and instantaneous communications, our perception of the temporal nature of archival documents in digital archives has undergone significant modifications.³⁷

In a somewhat heightened tone, Eivind Røssaak posits that “the advent of computers and the birth of the Internet fundamentally challenge our traditional notions of archives. Archives, as we’ve understood them, will be forever transformed.”³⁸ In a 2010 anthology edited by Røssaak entitled, *The Archive in Motion: New Conceptions of the Archive in Contemporary and New Media Practices*, Røssaak explores the notion of an “archive in motion.” He asserts that the advent of the digital era has transformed the traditionally static nature of archives, imbuing them with a newfound dynamism. Accordingly, Røssaak serves as a reminder that conventional archival framework is fundamentally founded upon four interrelated principles: storage, preservation, classification, and access. In light of evolving societal and technological structures, Røssaak posits that these transformations necessitate the adaptation of traditional archival principles to ensure their continued relevance and efficacy within an ever-changing milieu.³⁹

In *In the Flow* (2016), art critic and media theorist Boris Groys employs the metaphor of “flow” to depict evolving and dynamic attributes of the Internet and digital media as well as the ceaseless stream of images and information, thus illustrating the transformation of art

³⁷ Eivind Røssaak, “The Archive in Motion: An Introduction, in *The Archive in Motion: New Conceptions of the Archive in Contemporary Thought and New Media Practices*, ed. Eivind Røssaak (Oslo: Novus Forlag, 2010), 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

representation and dissemination in the digital age. His exploration serves as a profound reflection on how digitalization is altering the landscapes of art and archival preservation. Importantly, often the Internet is likened to an archive or perceived in an archetypal, metaphorical sense “archive of archives”, attributed to the seemingly direct access it offers users to a vast array of data, spanning multimedia content to academic literature.⁴⁰

In *In The Flow*, Groys delivers a detailed examination of archives and museum, portraying them as influential entities within contemporary societal and cultural structures. He delves into ways in which digitization of archives also the “Internet as archive” has expanded access to archival materials and reshaped the ways artists interact with these resources, consequently democratizing the artistic process while challenging traditional notions of authorship, authenticity, and permanence in art.⁴¹ Unlike a traditional archive, Groys argues that “the most interesting aspect of the internet as an archive is precisely the possibilities for decontextualization and recontextualization through the operations of cut and paste that the internet offers its users.”⁴²

Expanding on this dialogue regarding the influence of technologies on traditional perceptions of the permanence and stability of archival documents, the 2017 publication “Lost and Living (In) Archives: Collectively Shaping New Memories,” edited by Media Studies scholar Annet Dekker, in collaboration with various contributors, explores the ephemeral

⁴⁰ Oliver Grau, Janina Hoth, and Eveline Wandl-Vogt, eds., *Digital Art through the Looking Glass: New Strategies for Archiving, Collecting and Preserving in Digital Humanities* (Krems: Edition Donau-Universität, 2019), 15-19.

⁴¹ Boris Groys, *In the Flow* (London: Verso, 2016). For additional writings by Groys on this subject, namely the intersections of archives, art, media, and politics, see: Boris Groys, “Art Workers: Between Utopia and the Archive,” *e-flux Journal* 45 (2013), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-workers-between-utopia-and-the-archive/>; Boris Groys, “Entering the Flow: Museum between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk,” *e-flux Journal* 50 (2013), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/50/59974/entering-the-flow-museum-between-archive-and-gesamtkunstwerk/>.

⁴² Groys, “The Truth of Art,” *e-flux journal* 71 (March 2016), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/71/60513/the-truth-of-art/>.

characteristics of digital archives. This anthology delves into the myriad ways technologies are reshaping our interactions and understandings of archival materials, illuminating the transient essence of digital preservation within contemporary archival practices. Given the prevalent digitization of culture, Dekker suggests that archives are shifting from fixed entities to more fluid constructs, contending with a large influx of data and the unpredictable nature of digital materials. As a result, the foundational concept of archives is changing, moving from static entities to dynamic, and even more specifically, adaptive systems. Dekker labels this evolution as “Living Archives.” She notes, “The typical state of the digital archive emphasizes re-use over storage, circulation over centralized memory, and ongoing adaptation over stasis.”⁴³

Dekker also suggests that the very idea of a digital archive might appear contradictory to some, even likening it to the “anarchival.” Drawing from Derridean thought, an “anarchive” can be seen as that which challenges conventional archival logic: it eludes established categorizations, sidesteps formal documentation, and questions archival authority.⁴⁴ Media theorist Wolfgang Ernst further connects the concept of anarchive to the digital domain, describing the digital archive as an ‘anarchival’ structure that cannot be easily ordered or cataloged due to its continuous repurposing, distribution, and expansion, making it more of a metaphorical archive.⁴⁵

Exploring the complexities inherent in both analog and digital archival methodologies, the aforementioned propositions, along with insights from several other scholars featured in

⁴³ Dekker (ed.), *Lost and Living (in) Archives*, 17.

⁴⁴ Annet Dekker, “Between Light and Dark Archiving,” in *Digital Art through the Looking Glass: New Strategies for Archiving, Collecting and Preserving in Digital Humanities*, ed. J. Hoth and E. Wandl-Vogt (Edition Donau Universität, 2019).

⁴⁵ Elvind Røssaak refers to Wolfgang Ernst as ‘media archeologist,’ emphasizing Ernst’s instrumental contribution to the archival turn in the humanities. See Wolfgang Ernst, “Between the Archive and the Anarchivable,” *Mnemoscape: The Anarchival Impulse*, ed., Elisa Adami and Alessandra Ferrini, no. 1 (September 2014), <https://www.mnemoscape.org/single-post/2014/09/04/between-the-archive-and-the-anarchivable-by-wolfgang-ernst>.

this section of my literature review focusing on the digital metamorphosis of archives, centralize discussions around the authenticity and resilience of digital archives. They shed light on pivotal questions surrounding the dependability and endurance of materials stored in digital formats, necessitating a profound reconsideration of the implications involved in the preservation of digital information for prospective usage and scrutiny. As articulated by scholar Gaeun Ji, “Digital data featured as immateriality tend to be easily stored and easily forgotten. The boundaries between remembering and forgetting seem to be more and more blurred under these digital conditions.”⁴⁶ This contemplation on the digital archival paradigm emphasizes the subtle interplay between remembrance and forgetfulness in the digital sphere, highlighting the challenges and nuances in maintaining the integrity of information within digital archives.

Given the ongoing relevance of challenges arising from unparalleled online access to visual material and substantial concerns over digital information loss, it is unsurprising that these issues remain pivotal in both artistic and academic discussions. This is highlighted by a recent conference specifically focused on exploring related topics in digital archiving. In May 2022, the University of Basel played host to the conference entitled “Photo Archives VIII: The Digital Photo Archive. Theories, Practices and Rhetoric.”⁴⁷ This symposium delved into the intricacies and ideologies of digital photo archives, contextualized within the framework of modern advancements in archiving methods and photography. According to the conference organizers, one of the primary theoretical objectives of the conference was to interrogate the notions of documentary values tied to photography and archives in an epoch where visual

⁴⁶ Gaeun Ji, “Mapping the Sisyphean Archives,” 148.

⁴⁷ In May 5-7, 2022, the University of Basel held the conference, marking another installment in the ongoing “Photo Archives” series that began in 2009. This conference was the result of a collaboration between the Department of Media Studies at the University of Basel – Estelle Blaschke, and the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, led by Costanza Caraffa. The series has previously convened in several global locations, including Florence, London, New York, Los Angeles, and Oxford. More information about the series: <https://www.khi.fi.it/en/forschung/photothek/photo-archives.php>.

imagery is wholly malleable and prone to alteration. The conference traversed various themes, encompassing the economic and ecological aspects of digital photo archives, the inherent politics of metadata, diverse interpretative paradigms, and discussions regarding scale and user interaction.

In the past decade, the world of contemporary art has delved deeply into crucial inquiries regarding the profound impact of the digital sphere. Significantly, a multitude of thematic group exhibitions have engaged in introspective assessments, considering the multifaceted impact of information technology, specifically the Internet and social media, on various aspects of the art world. These assessments encompass areas such as the production and the valuation of art, its dissemination and presentation, and the overall experience of consuming art. At a broader level, these exhibitions have investigated the manner in which artists and viewers navigate and interpret our dominant image-centric culture, marked by the omnipresence of the Internet and an inundation of visual content. This focused exploration of such topical issues underscores the imperative of understanding present-day cultural dynamics and, within the art domain, the intricate relationship between technology, archival practices, contemporary photography, and various artistic expressions in our age of connectivity.

While three exemplars will be highlighted in the context of this literature review, it is vital to recognize that other exhibitions, particularly those examining the works of Roth and Simon, will be discussed in detail later in this dissertation. These exhibitions also align with the overarching trend of attempting to define ‘the current state of affairs.’ Specifically, these are “The Supermarket of Images” at Jeu de Paume, Paris (2020) and the “Give and Take - Images Upon Images” group exhibition at the Hamburger Kunsthalle in Hamburg (2022). Both of these exhibitions featured archival projects, either by Taryn Simon, Evan Roth, or both of

them. Their analysis and relevance will be revisited and explored more extensively in subsequent sections.”⁴⁸

The 2012 exhibition “Collect the WWWorld: The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age,” curated by Domenico Quaranta, explored the interrelation between art and our information-centric society. It tackled the democratization of online archives and the blending boundaries between private and public within what he defines as the “digital wilderness.”⁴⁹ The exhibition highlighted themes and practices related to the ‘artist-as-archivist,’ including ‘appropriation art’ and the ‘postproduction’ of online data. It underscored the current trend of investigating, gathering, blending, archiving, and reutilizing cultural materials from the digital popular culture found on the Internet. Furthermore, the exhibition delved into diverse expressions of Net Art and the evolving role of the artist in a digital context. It proposed that the advent of digital technology has redefined artists as filters, collectors, archivists, and adaptors of pre-existing cultural content. Evan Roth was among the artists whose work was showcased, exemplifying these themes and the transformative dialogue between art and technology.⁵⁰

“I Was Raised on the Internet,” an extensive exhibition held at The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, from June 23, 2018, to October 14, 2018, scrutinized the

⁴⁸ Other exhibitions that can be included within this trend: “Ocean of Images: New Photography 2015” at MoMA, New York (2015), curated by Roxana Marcoci and Kristen Gaylord; “Send Me an Image – From Postcard to Social Media” at C/O Berlin (2021), curated by Felix Hoffmann and Dr. Kathrin Schöneegg; “All I Know Is What’s On The Internet” at The Photographers’ Gallery, London (2019), curated by Katrina Sluis; “A Trillion Sunsets - A Century of Image Overload” at The International Center of Photography, New York (2022), curated by David Company; “Modern Love (or Love in the Age of Cold Intimacies),” EMST - The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens, Greece (2023), curated by Katerina Gregos.

⁴⁹ Gene McHugh and Domenico Quaranta, *Collect the WWWorld: The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age* (Brescia, Italy: LINK Editions, 2011), 6.

⁵⁰ “Collect the WWWorld” was an exhibition initially produced by the Link Center for the Arts of the Information Age. It has been displayed in different iterations: first at Spazio Contemporanea, Brescia (Italy) in September 2011, and subsequently at the House of Electronic Arts Basel (Switzerland) in March 2012.

transformative impact of the internet on societal perceptions and experiences from 1998 to the present. Curated by Omar Kholeif, the exhibition featured nearly one hundred diverse artworks, encompassing various mediums such as photography, painting, sculpture, film, video, and new technological mediums. The exhibition delved into the intricacies of internet-induced practices in everyday life, shedding light on new forms of entertainment and representational modes. This exploration highlighted how these technological advancements have significantly influenced and revolutionized human interaction, a theme relevant to the context of archiving as it addresses the evolving ways in which contemporary culture and artifacts are documented and preserved. Interestingly, the curator of the exhibition emphasized the provision of an immersive encounter, prompting viewers to actively participate in interactive and networked activities, both within the physical gallery setting and in the virtual online environment (See for example Ill. 1.1 demonstrating Jon Rafman's participatory installation). It was organized into five thematic sections: "Look at Me," "Touch Me," "Control Me," "Play with Me," and "Sell Me Out," each exploring various aspects of internet-driven and social media transformations.⁵¹

⁵¹ Omar Kholeif, "I Was Raised on the Internet," Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago, June 23 - October 14, 2018, <https://mcachicago.org/Exhibitions/2018/I-Was-Raised-On-The-Internet>.



Ill. 1. 1 Jon Rafman, *Transdimensional Serpent*, 2016. Oculus Rift VR headsets, custom-built personal computers, VR program 4 min, 30 sec. Installation view at the exhibition “I Was Raised on the Internet”, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2018. Source: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/jon-rafman-transdimensional-serpent-2>.

A more recent example, the exhibition “Songs of the Sky: Photography & the Cloud,” held at C/O Berlin from December 11, 2021, to April 21, 2022, delved into the transformative effects of digital technology on photography, emphasizing the profound role of the digital cloud storage and visual data banks. The exhibition, curated by Dr. Kathrin Schöneegg, spotlighted the intricate infrastructures that underpin and organize contemporary photographic networks, drawing attention to the new archival practices shaped by cloud-based systems and artificial intelligence. Among the pieces showcased, “Internet Landscape” by Evan Roth stood alongside works by twenty-three other artists. In the exhibition, one could encounter contemporary visualizations of the concept of the cloud juxtaposed with historical photographs of clouds (Ill. 1.2). According to the curators, the primary aim of the exhibition was to provide a comprehensive examination of the various ways in which digital technologies intersect with

the notions of photographic memory, legacy, and preservation, while also considering the implications of cloud computing technology on climate change and geopolitics.⁵²



Ill. 1. 2 Installation view of the exhibition “Songs of the Sky. Photography & the Cloud,” Dec. 11, 2021 – Apr. 21, 2022, C/O Berlin. Source: David von Becker for C/O Berlin.

In chapters 2 and 3 of the present dissertation, I elucidate how the archival practices embodied in Taryn Simon and Evan Roth’s works offer incisive insights into the metamorphosis of photography and archiving amidst the digital epoch. Their works foreground the dialectic tensions between digital and analog methodologies in categorization, accessibility, and preservation of information. Rather than mere commentary, their archival actions also serve as a visualization of the relevance, appeal, and aesthetic attraction of physical photographic artifacts, even as digital content continues to surge. By crafting material artworks with enduring resonance, they not only emphasize the fleeting nature of our digital exchanges

⁵² Dr. Kathrin Schöneegg, “Songs of the Sky: Photography and the Cloud,” C/O Berlin Foundation, Berlin, July 17 - September 26, 2021, <https://co-berlin.org/en/program/exhibitions/songs-sky>.

but also spotlight the ephemerality of archives – encompassing both the displacement of tangible images and the potential vanishing of digital ones.

1.2.1 Beyond the Lens: Navigating the “Post-Photographic” Landscape

In an era characterized by the pervasive prevalence of digital photography and the incessant proliferation of images, it can be posited that we have transitioned into a ‘Post-photographic’ epoch. The term post-photography has indeed gained traction in recent years, especially within academic discourse and art practice, to refer to the myriad ways in which photography has been transformed and redefined – underscoring its pivotal role as a powerful communication tool in our digital era.⁵³ It is imperative to acknowledge that post-photography is not merely indicative of a technical transition from analog to digital; rather, it embodies the creative and societal implications inherent to this technological epoch. This signifies a comprehensive transformation in the methodologies of creation, interpretation, and interaction with images and photographic entities within the contemporary visual culture spectrum.

In ontological contexts, the transition to post-photography is perceived as necessitating a reconceptualization of contemporary photography methodologies, thereby serving as an ‘umbrella term’ that underscores the importance of developing new frameworks and

⁵³ For an early usage of the term “post-photography” see W.J.T. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992). In recent years, academic conferences have further examined the term “post-photography.” The 2018 Helsinki Photomedia conference at Aalto University was themed “Reconsidering the ‘Post-truth Condition’: Epistemologies of the Photographic Image.” Additionally, in May 2021, I had the opportunity to present a paper on one of Evan Roth’s archival projects, framing it within the context of post-photography, at the AFEA conference at The University of Lille. This conference was centered around the theme “Post-America,” and my presentation was part of a panel discussing “Post-Photography? Rethinking the Uses and Practices of 21st Century American Photography.” Furthermore, in June 2023, the European University at St Petersburg hosted the international conference titled “After Post-Photography 8 – Presence and Absence.” This conference, which began in 2015, has since served as a platform for professionals worldwide, fostering a growing community dedicated to discussions on visual studies, as well as the history and theory of photography.

instruments to navigate photography's continuous evolution.⁵⁴ In his exhibition catalog titled "La condition post-photographique" (2015), photographer and curator Joan Fontcuberta expresses this idea by emphasizing the inseparable connection between art and its broader socio-cultural context. Fontcuberta posits that "post-photography is a rerouting of visual culture, with both ontological, aesthetic, as well as social implications that challenge image production and consumption in various ways."⁵⁵ Fontcuberta characterizes the post-photographic condition not merely as a style, movement, or historical period, but as a "transcendent" concept that extends beyond the conventional boundaries of traditional photography. Importantly, he underscores post-photography's ontological distinctiveness in relation to the digital turn, arguing that post-photography "introduces us to the dematerialized, pre-eminent image, consisting of disembodied information [...] transmitted and circulated in a frenetic, incessant flow."⁵⁶ With this, contemporary artists in the post-photographic landscape navigate the redefinition of photographic images in a technological context, addressing the saturation of virtual images, digital reproduction and dissemination paradigms, and the dynamics affecting photographic materiality longevity.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that post-photography remains a slippery term. As stated by scholar and curator Wolfgang Brückle "post-photography has been evoked to address a growing range of phenomena. It remains equivocal and will often leave us confused; there's too much in the term 'post-photography' and too little."⁵⁷ Indeed, the notion

⁵⁴ Wolfgang Brückle and Marco de Mutiis, "Post-Photography: What's in a Name?" *Spectrum – Photography in Switzerland*—Expert's Essay, Winter 2020, accessed Sept. 8 2022, <https://photography-in-switzerland.ch/essays/post-photography-whats-in-a-name>.

⁵⁵ See Joan Fontcuberta, "The Post-photographic Condition," in: *Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal*, exhibition catalog Montreal 2015, pp. 10–15.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Wolfgang Brückle and Marco De Mutiis, "Post-photography: What's in a Name?," *Magazin der Hochschule Luzern Design & Kunst*, Nummer 10, 2021, 13.

of ‘postness’ inherently possesses contentious implications. It may insinuate that the era of photography has come to an end and is now part of our past, or it presupposes the existence of a once cohesive and unified field. Considering the term “post-photography” and its ambiguous implications within contemporary culture, scholars Wolfgang Brückle and Marco De Mutiis, who initiated a collaborative research group titled ‘Post-Photography’ at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts in 2018,⁵⁸ anchor their analysis in the "post-medium" condition, which refers to the evolving, multi-disciplinary nature of the medium. They contend that post-photography not only challenges the specificity of the medium but also encourages the inclusion of diverse practices beyond traditional ‘Photography.’ This, in turn, propels our discussions past established disciplines and conventional photographic theories. Brückle and De Mutiis assert that post-photography challenges medium specificity and allows for the inclusion of diverse practices beyond traditional ‘Photography’ in our discussions, enabling a move beyond established disciplines and conventional photographic theories. “It allows us to move beyond disciplines and traditional canons of photo theory and prepares the ground for making sense of the diverse eco-systems of image production and consumption that we live in today.”⁵⁹

The ‘post-photographic’ has indeed been associated with contemporary art’s ‘Post-Medium’ condition following Rosalind Krauss’ well-known use of the term,⁶⁰ in which now more than ever art objects exist in flux and are unfixed to a specific mode representation, and

⁵⁸ The Post-Photography research project merges insights from various disciplines to explore a photographic culture shaped by myriad factors, including technological advancements and visual economies. The study further examines the integration of image practices with evolving software dynamics and online platforms. See Wolfgang Brückle and Marco de Mutiis, “Post Photography: What’s in a Name?” *Spectrum – Photography in Switzerland – Expert’s Essay*, December 2020, <https://photography-in-switzerland.ch/essays/post-photography-whats-in-a-name>.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

artists move freely among diverse media, art forms, concepts, and configurations. Art practitioners have come to recognize the importance of moving beyond medium specificity as a way of rethinking the traditional frameworks and overall ontology of photography.

Lucy Soutter, who has extensively researched photography in a post-medium condition, uses the term “expanded photography.”⁶¹ Soutter’s work builds on George Baker’s 2005 well-known essay, “Photography’s Expanded Field,” where Baker articulated that contemporary photography has transcended its autonomous existence and has begun to coexist and interlink with diverse art forms.⁶² Essentially, Baker and Soutter suggest that photography now interacts and overlaps with various forms of artistic expression, reflecting a change in how we understand and categorize it.

Following Rosalind Karuss’ “post-medium,” Lev Manovich has proclaimed the arrival of ‘Post-Media Aesthetics’ in 2001. Here, Manovich’s usage of the term comes to categorize different types of art in an environment (what he also referred to as “Post-net culture”) without traditional notions of medium.⁶³ Further, visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff appropriately designated post-photography as “photography for the electronic age,” that is, the pervasive existence of manipulated images online and their ongoing exponential growth, which according to Mirzoeff, can no longer claim to picture or ‘index’ the world. Instead, he says, post-photographic practices venture to explore the possibilities of the medium.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Lucy Soutter, “Expanded Photography: Persistence of the Photographic,” *Photo Researcher* 26 (2016): 36-43.

⁶² George Baker, “Photography’s Expanded Field,” *October* 114 (Fall 2005): 120-140.

⁶³ Lev Manovich, “Post Media Aesthetics,” *Art Margins*, 17:12, 25 October 2001.

⁶⁴ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Psychology Press, 1999), 79 ; 85. To be sure, not all ‘post-photographic’ activities are necessarily of digital nature, in fact numerous artworks that can be labeled as ‘post-photographic’ deliberately take the form of painting, sculpture and installation. With this, artists who work in the ‘expanded’ field are highly conscious of all the active choices they make in response or in opposition to the overproduction of digital images and the ubiquity of screen culture.

Similarly, in the chapter “Post-Photography” from his book “Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History,” art historian Geoffrey Batchen explores the transformations and implications of photography during the inception of the digital era around 2000. Batchen prognosticated the evolving challenges to traditional notions of photography’s materiality, representation, and indexicality due to emerging digital processes. He introduces the term “post-photographic” to describe a transformative period in which traditional photographic practices and values were becoming obsolete, overshadowed by the proliferation of digital technologies.⁶⁵

In the 2014 publication *Post-Photography: The Artist with a Camera* Robert Shore similarly emphasizes the importance of the Internet in the relation to the expansion of post-photography, stating that “the Internet is serving as a laboratory for major experimentation in image-making. The online environment is a key hunting-ground for acts of creative, transformative borrowing.”⁶⁶ Given this context, it can be contended that artists working within the ‘expanded’ field of photography are acutely aware of the choices they make, either in alignment with or in defiance of the prevalent digital dominance and the omnipresence of Internet and screen culture. Accordingly, this dissertation posits that the works of Taryn Simon and Evan Roth have emerged from this particular mindset.

Embedded seamlessly into our quotidian experiences, digital photography has become a pervasive presence, prompting numerous contemporary artists and photographers to thoughtfully accentuate the tangible, material aspects of photography, namely within exhibition spaces. As Charlotte Cotton, writer of the widely recognized reader *Photography as*

⁶⁵ Geoffrey Batchen, “Post-Photography,” in *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (London: MIT Press, 2000), 82-107.

⁶⁶ Robert Shore, *Post-Photography: The Artist with a Camera* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2014), 22.

Contemporary Art, reminds us, in the context of the present image environment, “the act of rendering a photograph as a material form is currently more an exception than a standard practice within the medium.”⁶⁷ This conscious shift towards highlighting image materiality in the post-photographic age has been adeptly foregrounded in various contemporary exhibitions, embodying a material (re)turn in the photographic domain. For instance, back in 2009 “The Photographic Object” exhibition at The Photographers’ Gallery in London explored the limits and potentials of photographic materiality. The exhibition “Back to the Future - The 19th Century in the 21st Century” at C/O Berlin in 2018 concurrently showcased contemporary artists who not only experiment with analog technologies but also engage with methodologies and processes characteristic of 19th-century photography, integrating new technologies such as computers and 3D printers. This shift toward emphasizing the physical photographic processes and materials underscores a forward-thinking and expansive approach to photography, where present and future potentials are explored with a nod to historical inspirations.

Adding to the discussion on the evident material presence in contemporary photography, Lucy Soutter maintains that a predominant segment of post-photographic artistic outputs, also termed ‘expanded photography’ are marked by a distinct shift towards mixed-media or hybrid photographic expressions. Moreover, many photographic works noticeably transforming into the three-dimensional realm and more process-based works that foreground their own materiality. These works seamlessly assimilate elements from a diverse range of disciplines, spanning painting, sculpture, installation, architecture, video, and various computer technologies, as well as analog technologies and chemical processes.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 19.

⁶⁸ Lucy Soutter, “Expanded Photography,” 36.

This current questioning of photography's materiality and its physical presence, deeply ingrained in the evolving technological matrix, is characterized by the inherent malleability and ephemerality of visual imagery. Some see this "longing for the stuff and matter of the photograph"⁶⁹ in contemporary photography as nostalgic condition. Lev Manovich similarly characterizes this affinity as an inherent nostalgia, positing that the fate of the photographic image in our digital age is innately tethered to an indeterminate pursuit of reality, reflecting an implicit desire to retrogress to a "pre-digital," arguably "pre-post-modern, era."⁷⁰

Alternatively, a number of contemporary scholars, curators, and practitioners interprets this renewed emphasis on materiality as a gesture towards the hybrid exploration of a photographic medium, which remains ripe for experimentation in our image-saturated reality. This perspective foregrounds the medium's vast potential for interplay with other mediums while also resisting the overwhelming dominance of the digital realm.⁷¹

Certainly, the integration of photography into hybrid, mixed-media artworks, emphasizing the objecthood or sculptural qualities of photography, isn't a novel concept. As Soutter points out, the origins of such artistic endeavors can be traced back to the 1960s, encompassing both fine art photography and conceptual art. While we acknowledge this rich history of photographic experimentation, it's crucial to recognize that many of today's

⁶⁹ Sandra Plummer, Harriet Riches, and Duncan Wooldridge, "Photography's New Materiality," *Photoworks Magazine*, no. 18 (May 2012), accessed September 27, 2023, <https://photoworks.org.uk/photographys-new-materiality/>.

⁷⁰ Lev Manovich, "The Paradoxes of Digital Photography," in Florian Rotzer, et al, *Photography After Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age*, (Amsterdam: G+B Arts, 1996), 5.

⁷¹ In the ongoing analog versus digital debate, American photographer Sally Mann fervently champions analog methods over digital technologies. She underscores the significance of the act of making an analog photograph as opposed to merely taking a digital image. See Sandra Plummer, et.al, "Photography's New Materiality," *Photoworks Magazine*, no. 18 (May 2012), accessed September 27, 2023, <https://photoworks.org.uk/photographys-new-materiality/>.

expressions, rooted in the digital age, are distinct evolutions of these earlier practices.⁷² Nevertheless, what differentiates today's post-photographic landscape is its engagement with the profound transformations and opportunities presented by digital technologies. As Sandra Plummer, Harriet Riches, and Duncan Wooldridge suggest, the current focus on photographic objecthood and material experimentation echoes past tendencies. However, contemporary "self-referential photography" sets itself apart from earlier introspective practices by delving deeper. It transcends the inherent boundaries of the photographic medium, approaching photography through a hybrid/mixed-media lens, and underscoring the renewed cultural and aesthetic relevance of photographic materiality and physicality.⁷³

In the museum setting, there have been several group exhibitions that have profoundly addressed the ontology of contemporary photography featuring works that reflect on photography current condition as a medium in an increasingly digitized sphere. The 2014 exhibition "What is a Photograph?" at New York's International Center for Photography, curated by Carol Squiers, was one such instance. It brought to the forefront contemporary artists' sustained exploration of photographic materiality and the representation of objects in an increasingly ephemeral age. The show featured works that reconceptualized photographic principles through a painterly or sculptural lens, seeking to challenge and redefine what constitutes a photograph. Moreover, it showcased artists from varying timeframes that

⁷² Soutter mentions the mixed-media photographic works of Robert Heinecken from the period of 1960-1980. See Soutter, "Expanded Photography," 39. Other artists known for mixed-media photographic work during the 1970s and 80's includes Barbara Kasten, Betty Hahn, James Welling, to name a few.

⁷³ Sandra Plummer et.al, "Photography's New Materiality". Therein the writers investigate contemporary hybrid photographic works of Wolfgang Tillmans, Catherine Yass, and Walead Beshty.

combined conventional and digital techniques to craft unique, process-driven photographic objects.⁷⁴

Following closely in 2015, the Guggenheim Museum in New York presented “Photo-Poetics: An Anthology,” organized by curators Jennifer Blessing and Susan Thompson. It critically examined a significant shift in contemporary photography. By focusing on artists that hinged their practice on a studio-based approach to still-life, particularly emphasizing objects like printed materials – books, magazines, and record covers – the exhibition encapsulated the intersection of Conceptualism’s legacies and contemporary inquiries. The curators coined the term “photo poetics” to describe the artists’ practice, delineating their conscious investigation into the laws of photography, the essence of photographic representation, and the very nature of photographic objects.⁷⁵ Collectively, such exhibitions underscore the evolving dialogue and dynamic redefinition of photography in contemporary art discourse. Demonstrating that in the post-photographic age “although digital photography seems to have made analog obsolete, artists continue to make works that are photographic objects, using both old technologies and new, crisscrossing boundaries and blending techniques.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Carol Squiers, “What is a Photograph?” The International Center for Photography, Jan 31, 2014, <https://www.icp.org/exhibitions/what-is-a-photograph>. The exhibition featured twenty-one emerging and established artists: Matthew Brandt, Marco Breuer, Liz Deschenes, Adam Fuss, Owen Kydd, Floris Neusüss, Marlo Pascual, Sigmar Polke, Eileen Quinlan, Jon Rafman, Gerhard Richter, Mariah Robertson, Alison Rossiter, Lucas Samaras, Travess Smalley, David Benjamin Sherry, Kate Steciw, Artie Vierkant, James Welling, Christopher Williams, and Letha Wilson.

⁷⁵ Jennifer Blessing, and Susan Thompson, “Photo Poetics: An Anthology,” Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum New York, November 20, 2015, <https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/photo-poetics-an-anthology>. This group exhibition comprised more than 70 artworks created by ten artists: Claudia Angelmaier, Erica Baum, Anne Collier, Moyra Davey, Leslie Hewitt, Elad Lassry, Lisa Oppenheim, Erin Shirreff, Kathrin Sonntag, and Sara VanDerBeek.

⁷⁶ Carol Squiers, “What is a Photograph?,” International Center of Photography, accessed Sep. 22, 2023 [https://www.icp.org/exhibitions/what-is-a-photograph.?](https://www.icp.org/exhibitions/what-is-a-photograph.)

Upon exploring the concepts and exhibitions discussed herein, related to post-photography, there emerges a notable emphasis on the materiality and physicality of photographic artifacts. The focus in this subchapter on materiality and the hybridity of media and forms, as central facets of post-photographic practices, accentuates the complex dialogue between the analog and digital, the two-dimensional and three-dimensional, and the tangible and virtual within contemporary photographic discourse and practice. Importantly, this is the context within which Simon and Roth operate, as I will elucidate. By drawing a parallel between the formal and conceptual explorations of post-photography undertaken by Simon and Roth, my intention is to underscore their profound engagement with visual materiality as a distinctive art form. As I argue, their artistic endeavors provide valuable insights into the potential perceptions and interpretations of photography's physicality and materiality within the context of contemporary art.

1.3 The Archival Shift: New Directions in Contemporary Art

Numerous scholars date back the genesis of the “archival turn” to the mid-1990s, identifying it as coinciding with the moment when artistic endeavors started to extensively integrate archival materials, methodologies, and notions. Having been prominent for the past three decades, there is a contention that the archival turn might have reached its apex in recent years. Nevertheless, the topic retains its pertinence, as evidenced by the consistent flow of scholarly publications and affiliated artworks, archival projects, thematic artist residencies, and exhibitions produced each year.⁷⁷ For example, in her recent publication, *Art + Archive: Understanding the Archival Turn in Contemporary Art* (2022), stemming from her doctoral

⁷⁷ Sara Callahan, “Depletion of Identity, Productive Uncertainty, and Radical Archiving: New Research on the Archival Turn,” *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 86, no. 4 (2017): 330-338.

research, art historian Sara Callahan offers a comprehensive exploration into what she defines as the “archive art phenomenon.” Therein she meticulously delves into the question of how the archive (and archival terminology) has become an omnipresent reference in art discourse and practice and discerns the nuanced functions and implications it carries within the artistic realm. Callahan further positions the archive as a “travelling concept,” emphasizing its fluidity as it traverses various disciplines and contexts. Hence, this work rigorously charts the transformation and role of the archive in art theory and criticism spanning two pivotal decades, from 1995 to 2015. The second chapter, in particular, showcases an array of contemporary archive art exemplars. Through her methodical consolidation of the multifaceted components of the ‘archive art phenomenon’ in recent decades Callahan has crafted a significant resource that thoroughly contributes to research into archival art as both an artistic and a discursive, museological, and academic entity.⁷⁸

In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the “archive art phenomenon” and its significance, it is imperative to explore the diverse perspectives that elucidate the driving forces behind this prevalent tendency in the arts. Additionally, we must delineate the defining characteristics that set archival artists apart in this context. It is noteworthy that the shift towards conceptual engagement with archives extends beyond the domain of visual arts; it also holds a prominent position within the broader discourse of the humanities. Therefore, prior to delving into the specific issues pertaining to the concept of the archive in contemporary art and photography, it is essential to provide a succinct overview of the “archival turn” as it manifests within the humanities.

⁷⁸ It is pertinent to note that I became aware of Callahan’s recent publication while in the advanced stages of finalizing the concluding chapter of my dissertation. Consequently, this work did not inform the research and analysis conducted within this dissertation.

One of the most quoted texts in this discourse is Jacques Derrida's *Mal d'Archive - Archive Fever* (1995), coupled with Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), stand as cornerstones in the theoretical discourse surrounding the nature and function of archives. These influential texts have not only shaped current understanding of the archive as an intellectual concept but have also ignited sustained critical art practices that question the archive in contemporary art. In a departure from traditional understandings, Derrida and Foucault extricate the archive from its concrete physical confines, choosing instead to investigate it as a metaphorical construct. For them, archives transcend mere repositories of artifacts; they become emblematic of knowledge, power interplays, and historical narratives, prompting a far-reaching exploration of the intricate nexus among these facets.

In his re-evaluation of the conventional understanding of the archive, Derrida delves into its etymological roots, tracing the term to the Greek "arkhe," signifying both "the commencement and the commandment."⁷⁹ Derrida explains that the concept of the archive involves the notion of "domiciliation" or "house arrest."⁸⁰ In this context, the "arkheion" is a place where things begin, and it is under the command of the "archons," who are the custodians of the documents. It is within this space that authority and social order are upheld, and where directives and orders are issued.⁸¹ Expanding on this, Derrida examines the modern fascination with archives through a psychoanalytic lens, attempting to fathom the innate human urge to amass, safeguard, and structure information. Drawing inspiration from Sigmund Freud's writings, Derrida discerns parallels between archival processes and psychoanalysis, both of which delve into narratives and recollections.

⁷⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Presnowitz, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2-3.

⁸⁰ Derrida, 2.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

Within Derrida's theoretical construct, the unconscious is construed as an archive, intrinsically molded by the dual forces of "archival desire" and the "diabolical death drive."⁸² In Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the "death drive" is predominantly correlated with destructive impulses, representing a relentless compulsion towards dissolution and, ultimately, a return to a nonliving state. Hence, Derrida propounds that the archive, analogous to the unconscious, operates according to a twofold paradigm: it acts as a repository and simultaneously as an agent of oblivion; it preserves and conceals, while concurrently revealing and obliterating. This ambiguity accentuates the paradoxical interplay between the impulse to preserve knowledge and experiences, emblematic of archival desire, and the counteracting impulse towards destruction and suppression, represented by the death drive. This dichotomy is of the essence of archives, reflecting the simultaneous existence of conservation and loss that underpin them.⁸³

In exploring the nexus between discourse and power, Michel Foucault draws parallels between archival processes and archaeology, underscoring their role in revealing past knowledge through tangible remnants. As such, Foucault situates the archive not merely as a repository of the past but as a significant "system of discursivity" – Foucault's archive is a set of rules that govern the range of what can be legitimately spoken, written, or thought in a given society at a given time. In Foucault's conceptualization, the archive emerges as an active entity intertwined with prevailing power structures, governing which narratives and memories are legitimized and preserved and which ones are marginalized. It is a guiding framework shaping the formation of knowledge, history, language, and cultural values. As he notably stated, "The archive is the first law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements

⁸² Ibid., 9.

⁸³ Ibid., 14-15.

as unique events.”⁸⁴ Essentially, Foucault’s perspective offers a profound redefinition of the archive, characterizing it as a meticulously structured system of discourse. Within this framework, archives emerge as active agents in the construction of socio-cultural views on history, knowledge, and truth. These archives delineate the boundaries of societal recognition and collective memory, all while operating within the constraints imposed by prevailing power dynamics. This active involvement of archives in shaping both knowledge and power resonate with the theory of performativity, as elucidated by J.L. Austin earlier in the introduction of this dissertation. In this regard, just as language and speech perform actions and produce effects that extend beyond mere representation, archives, too, perform pivotal roles in influencing and molding the socio-cultural landscape.

Informed and invigorated by the insights of Foucault and Derrida, scholars across various domains have begun to interrogate prevailing conceptions of archives. The notion of the “archival impulse” and its varied conceptual and physical embodiments has commanded the attention of historians, especially regarding the tangible experiences engendered by interactions within archival spaces and direct engagements with primary historical documents. For example, historians such as Carolyn Steedman and Arlette Farge approach the archive as a substantive entity – a space where physical objects and documents are not merely housed but are also subjects of active interaction and exploration. This perspective, influenced by the “material turn,” is sharply contrasts with Derrida’s more theoretical construction of the archive as a representation of power and authority. Steedman articulates a critique against Derrida’s metaphorical representations of archives, arguing that such abstract renderings may

⁸⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (1972): 129.

inadvertently skew perceptions of actual, tangible archives and subsequently impact the endeavors of archivists and historians who interact with these materials.⁸⁵

Simultaneously exploring the materiality of archives, historian Harriet Bradley perceives them as abundant reservoirs laden with dormant significances, ready to be uncovered and interpreted through the discerning touch of a historian. Bradley's article, "The Seductions of the Archive: Voices Lost and Found" (1999), is an exploration of the sensory and experiential dimensions inherent to archival interactions, highlighting the exhilaration found in resurrecting obscured archival gems.⁸⁶ However, the inherent "charm of the archive" is juxtaposed with its darker, more tangible realities. Carolyn Steedman presents a less romanticized view of the archive, observing that the accumulation of dust and detritus within these spaces poses potential health risks – thus bringing into focus the more material and less explored consequences of "archive fever."⁸⁷

The tangible aspects of archival research, encompassing both its physical implications and conceptual allure, are significantly elucidated in the writings of historian Arlette Farge. Her reflections extend to the emotional and physiological impacts experienced when interacting with archival materials. In her seminal work, *Le Goût de l'Archive (The Allure of the Archive)* (1989), Farge draws from her extensive engagement with eighteenth-century judicial archives housed within the French National Archives in Paris, offering profound insights into the multifaceted nature of archival research. Farge's perspective on archival documents views them as tangible artifacts with their own distinct history and material

⁸⁵ Carolyn Steedman, "Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 4 (October 2001): 1165.

⁸⁶ Harriet Bradley, "The Seductions of the Archive: Voices Lost and Found," *History of the Human Sciences* 12, no. 2 (1999): 107-122.

⁸⁷ Steedman, "Something She Called a Fever," 1167.

characteristics, which are influenced by the context of the very archive where they are preserved. She emphasizes the substantial and emotionally charged aspects of this scholarly endeavor, advocating for a thorough investigation of the archive to bring to light concealed historical accounts, particularly those concerning marginalized communities, such as women. Therefore, according to her perspective, when working with archival documents, one should extract an “excess of meaning” that goes beyond their mere evidential value to reveal the complex emotional tapestry and concealed narratives of the past. Through this approach, she offers an interpretation of archives that harmonizes their role as evidence with the material and emotional depth they carry.⁸⁸

1.3.1 Archival Subversions: Artists Reading Archives Against the Grain

As we delve into the nuances of archival art, it becomes evident that ‘archival artists’ go beyond mere thematic or aesthetic considerations. They are distinguished by their self-reflexive and critical approach to the archive, actively examining the fundamental knowledge systems that underpin archival practices. Charles Merewether, in his 2006 anthology *The Archive*, suggests that it is within the domain of contemporary art where some of the most profound questions have emerged regarding the very nature of archives and their authority.⁸⁹ Similarly, visual culture scholar Ernst Van Alphen observed that the contemporary artist’s use of the archive as an artistic instrument is not purely for aesthetic purposes. Rather, archival

⁸⁸ Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁸⁹ Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006). Merewether’s anthology provides an important perspective, compiling various discussions and critical notions on ‘the archival’ in modernity and its relationship with contemporary art.

artists frequently “read archives against the grain.”⁹⁰ Through the appropriation and repurposing of its elements—whether genuine or fabricated images, objects, documents, or digital databases—they challenge and expand upon conventional archival practices and structures. They not only question the veracity and authenticity of documents and images but also challenge the foundational principles and functionalities of the archive itself.⁹¹

Scholar Kate BrettKelly-Chalmers also notes that the archive, viewed by various contemporary artists “as a critical target”, presents an intriguing dichotomy. It has traditionally served to reinforce distinct timelines anchored in prevailing historical narratives, while simultaneously proposing a non-hierarchical system of data organization that challenges established ‘truths’ and the conventional understanding of history as a straightforward linear progression. In this view, contemporary artists leverage this inherent dichotomy in archives to present innovative perspectives and methodologies, enabling audiences to decipher significance in new, enlightening ways.⁹²

Over a decade ago, writer and curator Dieter Roelstraete highlighted an ascending artistic propensity, evident in the preoccupation with historical reflection, research, archiving, amnesia, memoirs, memorials, nostalgia, oblivion, re-enactment, remembrance, reminiscence, and retrospection – “in short, with the past.”⁹³ One of Roelstraete’s primary contentions in his article, “The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art” (2009) is that the archival impulse in art emerges from wider global transitions, leading to a rejuvenated cultural

⁹⁰ Ernst Van Alphen, *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 31.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Kate BrettKelly-Chalmers, “Beyond the Clock: The Aesthetics of Time in Contemporary Art” (PhD diss., University of Auckland, 2016).

⁹³ Dieter Roelstraete, “The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art.” *e-flux Journal*, no. 4 (March 2009), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/04/68582/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/>.

and philosophical interest in history, memory, and temporality. This inclination has inevitably drawn artists towards engaging with archival materials, methodologies, and diverse historical collections. The article by Roelstraete references several artists engaged in archival practices, including Gerard Byrne, Tacita Dean, Felix Gmelin, Joachim Koester, Goshka Macuga, Deimantas Narkevicius, and Mark Dion.

Interestingly, he argued that what he referred to as the “indulgence in historiography” was noticeable in the melancholic atmosphere following the events of 9/11 and during the Bush era’s “war on terror,” which contributed to the somber mood of the first decade of the 21st century.⁹⁴ In this context, Roelstraete critically observes that the art world’s preoccupation with the past, known as the “historiographic turn in art,” can be seen as a form of retreat from the present or an escapist strategy. In Roelstraete’s own words: “After all, art’s obsession with the past, however recently lived, effectively closes it off from other, possibly more pressing obligations, namely that of imagining the future, of imagining the world otherwise (‘differently’).”⁹⁵

Importantly, art historian Kathy Carbone suggests that the prevalence of this ‘obsession with the past’ and incorporation of archives in art is a reflection of a broader preoccupation with memory that has been prevalent since the mid-1990s. This concern spans both individual and collective spheres, focusing especially on elements that are either preserved or excluded from shared consciousness – “what is remembered or forgotten in society, and what is knowable and who has the power to make knowledge – has brought the

⁹⁴ Dieter Roelstraete, “After the Historiographic Turn: Current Findings,” *e-flux journal*, no. 6 (February 2009), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/06/61402/after-the-historiographic-turn-current-findings/>.

⁹⁵ Dieter Roelstraete, “The Way of the Shovel.”

archive into wider views and discussions.”⁹⁶ The symbiotic relationship between archives and memory is a prominent aspect of the archival turn. David Bate, an artist and theorist, highlights this interconnectedness in the context of memory, archives, and photography. He underscores that archiving and photographing are closely linked to memory processes. The impulse to archive originates from a desire for knowledge and remembrance or, paradoxically, from the fear of forgetting. Bates further elucidates that “The retention and registration of impressions within photographs (i.e., the indexical character of photography) has come to be associated with the idea of remembering.”⁹⁷

With this, memory stands as a pivotal subject within academic discussions, expressed across a variety of disciplines such as history, archival studies, media studies, religious studies, sociology, psychology, and literature, emphasizing its interdisciplinary significance and relevance. In her article “Archival Art: Memory Practices, Interventions, and Productions,” Carbone posits that while archival artworks serve as pivotal mediums for reminiscence and reflection on bygone times, they also push the limits of imagination. They do this by addressing contemporary issues and envisioning possible futures, thereby demonstrating the multifaceted impact and potential of such art forms.⁹⁸

Concurring with other scholars, Sara Callahan recognizes the mid-1990s as the starting point of the archival turn, suggesting that the emergence of “archive art” began in this period and reached its peak with the onset of the twenty-first century. According to Callahan, this development is unambiguously global, ignited by the availability of archives from places such as post-apartheid South Africa, post-Soviet Eastern Europe, and several former colonial states.

⁹⁶ Kathy Carbone, “Archival art: Memory practices, interventions, and productions,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 63, no. 2 (2020): 257-263.

⁹⁷ David Bate, *Art Photography* (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 119.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

These pivotal transitions in history unearthed a multitude of ethnic and national memories and sparked diverse truth and reconciliation processes. Furthermore, initiatives to memorialize the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, along with advancements in media technology and increased connectivity and access to information through the Internet, have also played significant roles in propelling this trend.⁹⁹

Contemporary artists, in their roles as archivists or “historiographers,” actively engage with the past to explore the dynamics of memory and representation. “They either create artworks that aim to remember or counteract the erosion of memory, or they produce art centered on the themes of remembering and forgetting, a mode we can refer to as the ‘meta-historical mode.’”¹⁰⁰ Archives become a vital tool for challenging official narratives and ideological representations. Some artists also aim to revise historical accounts by shedding light on the experiences of marginalized and overlooked individuals at the peripheries of history. Art historian Kathy Carbone suggests that archival artists frequently emphasize “obscure traces” within the archive, scrutinizing aspects such as knowledge organization, authenticity, and authority assertions. These actions manifest through the examination of knowledge hierarchies and dominant power structures, the contestation or reshaping of historical narratives, and the recognition of silenced or marginalized voices.¹⁰¹ Similarly, with a focus on social, ethnic, and identity aspects, historian Philippe Artières highlights the unrelenting engagement of the contemporary art world with different dimensions of the archive and collective memory. This fascination is deeply intertwined with the vigorous demands of

⁹⁹ Sara Callahan, *Art + Archive: Understanding the Archival Turn in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

¹⁰⁰ Roelstraete, “The Way of the Shovel,” web.

¹⁰¹ Kathy Carbone, “Archival art: Memory Practices, Interventions, and Productions,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 63, no. 2 (2020): 261.

various groups – spanning political, ethnic, professional, and gender identities – who have pursued access to, and preservation of, past records as a means of affirming their identity and illuminating previously obscured or overlooked narratives. Consequently, such societal needs have catalyzed a surge in attention towards artworks that scrutinize the nature and inherent truths of archives.¹⁰²

Notable artists undertaking these endeavors include Fiona Tan, Carrie Mae Weems, Michal Heiman, Hito Steyerl, Anri Sala, Renée Green, Akram Zaatari, and Lorna Simpson, among others. In fact, Taryn Simon is a prominent figure within this context, as indicated by the analysis featured in the chapter devoted to her project at the NYPL’s Picture Collection. Simon’s archival endeavors are deeply rooted in the exploration and tribute to the frequently overlooked legacy of Romana Javitz, who served as the influential superintendent of the Picture Collection from 1929 to 1971. Through her work, Simon unveils and pays homage to Javitz’s significant contributions, which have often gone unrecognized within the broader context of twentieth-century American art.¹⁰³

Accordingly, beyond merely aligning with thematic or aesthetic considerations, archival artists are known for developing in a self-reflexive or critical approach to the archive as they consciously examine the foundational knowledge systems of archives. Charles Merewether suggests in his 2006 anthology *The Archive* that perhaps it is within the realm of

¹⁰² Philippe Artières, “Preface: The Art of Archiving,” in *Curatorial Archives in Curatorial Practices*, ed. Michela Alessandrini (Istanbul: SALT Galata, 2018), 12.

¹⁰³ Simon’s “The Innocents” (2000–2003) series is relevant in this context as it documents the stories of individuals who were imprisoned for violent crimes they were subsequently exonerated of. The primary focus revolves around the role of photography in acting as a dependable witness and a factor influencing the administration of justice. Additionally, Simon’s “A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters” (2008–2011) reflects on the historical representation of the ‘silenced’ or marginalized. It is a photographic and textual project that explores bloodlines and related stories, often involving individuals declared dead by authorities. It takes an archival and taxonomic approach, presenting narratives in a structured, catalog-like format, highlighting the complexities of identity, inheritance, and the influence of societal structures on individual lives.

contemporary art where “the most probing questions have been raised regarding what constitutes an archive and its authority.”¹⁰⁴ Similarly, visual culture scholar Ernst Van Alphen observed that the contemporary artist’s use of the archive as an artistic instrument is not purely for aesthetic purposes. Rather, archival artists frequently “read archives against the grain.”¹⁰⁵ Through the appropriation and repurposing of its elements—whether genuine or fabricated images, objects, documents, or digital databases—they challenge and expand upon conventional archival practices and structures. They not only question the veracity and authenticity of documents and images but also challenge the foundational principles and functionalities of the archive itself.¹⁰⁶

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Informed by critical (also postmodern) approaches emphasizing integration and self-reflexivity, wherein the archive and its organizational structures become subjects of negotiation and interpretation, artist and writer Oriel Orlow, in his essay “Latent Archives,

¹⁰⁴ Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006). Merewether’s anthology provides an important perspective, compiling various discussions and critical notions on ‘the archival’ in modernity and its relationship with contemporary art.

¹⁰⁵ Ernst Van Alphen, *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 31.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ BrettKelly-Chalmers, “Beyond the Clock,” 54-55.

Roving Lens” (2006), delineates a tripartite categorization of contemporary artists engaging with archival practices: ‘archive makers,’ ‘archive users,’ and ‘archive thinkers.’ ‘Archive makers’ (e.g., Christian Boltanski, Zoe Crosher, Zoe Leonard, Sophie Calle, and “The Atlas Group” by Walid Raad) craft fictive archives influenced by existing ones, meticulously amassing and cataloging materials. ‘Archive users’ (e.g., Susanne Hiller, Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan, Carrie Mae Weems, Tacita Dean) immerse themselves in pre-established archives, challenging and reassessing historical narratives using available materials. And, ‘Archive thinkers’ navigate the conceptual dimensions of the archive, reflecting on its inherent evanescence and malleability.

Orlow places particular emphasis on the latter group whose endeavors are not primarily focused on the formation of new archives or the examination of existing ones, but rather are more inclined towards deconstructing or destabilizing the inherent concept of the archive itself. Although they frequently function as both ‘archive makers’ and ‘archive users,’ ‘archive thinkers’ typically observe the gaps within the archive, and the hidden nature of archival content and its governing systems.¹⁰⁸ In accordance with my argument, the conceptual framework of Taryn Simon’s and Evan Roth’s archival projects demonstrates a clear correlation with Orlow’s classification of ‘archival thinkers.’ Additionally, their work can be situated within the category of ‘archival users.’ Moreover, according to Orlow, within this archival paradigm, artists – whether as makers, users, or conceptual thinkers of archive, are typically not constrained by conventional archival responsibilities. This freedom grants them a heightened capacity for innovative interventions and explorations of the archival framework.

¹⁰⁸ Uriel Orlow, “Latent Archives, Roving Lens,” in *Ghosting: The Role of the Archive within Contemporary Artists’ Film and Video*, ed. Jane Connarty and Josephine Lanyon (Bristol: Picture This Moving Image, 2006), 34-35.

As scholar Gaeun Ji similarly notes, “Archival artists do not necessarily aim to produce a tangible and complete product after navigating through an archive.”¹⁰⁹

In light of these explanations, it becomes evident that within the multifaceted domain of contemporary art, marked by its fluidity and diversity, a definitive consensus on the precise definition of ‘archival art’ remains elusive. Drawing upon this perspective, archivist Neal White posits that contemporary art practices, which engage with archives in an unconstrained manner, can be construed as “research within an expanded field.” In other words, this heightened archival engagement could pave the way for novel networking or mapping strategies that extend beyond traditional cultural institutions.¹¹⁰ Similarly, Sara Callahan deliberately chooses not to provide a concrete definition of ‘archival art,’ describing the term as elusive and versatile.¹¹¹ Central to her theory is a deliberate non-definition of ‘archive art,’ serving as a pivot around which various artworks and concepts revolve. Therefore, Callahan opts for the notion of “prismatic approach” which emphasizes the layered and accumulative aspects of the meaning and function of the archive within contemporary art writing and practice.¹¹²

1.3.2 The Archival Turn: In Theory and Practice

In the context of discussing archival art from a museological standpoint, it is noteworthy that the previously discussed article titled “The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art” by Dieter Roelstraete (2009) was featured in a catalog that coincided with an exhibition he curated at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in the

¹⁰⁹ Gaeun Ji, “Mapping the Sisyphean Archives,” 10.

¹¹⁰ Neal White, “Experiments and Archives in the Expanded Field,” in *All This Stuff: Archiving the Artist*, ed. Judy Vaknin et al. (Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing, 2013), 47-61.

¹¹¹ Callahan, *Art + Archive*, 6-7.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 292.

fall of 2013. The exhibition bore the same name as the article, namely, “The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology,” and was held from November 9, 2013, to March 9, 2014. The exhibition explored the growing emphasis on history, archaeology, and archival studies in artistic endeavors over the recent decade. Interestingly, “The Way of the Shovel” symbolizes the processes of excavation and discovery, applicable both in a literal archaeological sense and in a figurative context. The displays (including painting, sculpture, photography, film, and installation – see Illustration 1.3) explored concepts of excavation, research, archiving, and the passage of time – what the curator calls “the archaeological imaginary.” By examining the connections between art and archaeology, “The Way of the Shovel” proposed a new way of thinking about the role of art in shaping and experiencing historical narratives.¹¹³

¹¹³ Dieter Roelstraete “The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology,” The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago MCA , 2013, accessed Oct. 1 2023, <https://mcachicago.org/Exhibitions/2013/The-Way-Of-The-Shovel-Art-As-Archaeology>. Other significant exhibitions which have devoted to the concept of the archive: The “Interarchive” project at the University of Luneburg (1997-1999), steered by Hans Peter Feldmann and Hans Ulrich Obrist, explored the amassed curatorial archives of Obrist. Massimiliano Gioni furthered the archival theme with biennales like “10,000 Lives” (2010 Gwangju Biennale) and “The Encyclopaedic Palace” (2013 Venice Biennale). Universal Archive curated by Jorge Ribalta (MACBA, Barcelona 2008) explored the concept of a document in the history of photography in the 20th century. Additionally, Okwui Enwezor’s exhibitions, notably “Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art” (2008) at the International Center of Photography (which I will discuss more in detail in a dedicated subchapter) as well as Enwezor’s “All the World’s Future” which have also delved deeply into the archival discourse and practice in contemporary art.



Ill. 1. 3 Installation view of the exhibition “The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology,” Nov 9, 2013–Mar 9, 2014, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Source: Nathan Key for MCA Chicago.

A significant exhibition that emphasized the importance of the archival in contemporary art is Ingrid Schaffner’s pioneering “Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art,” showcased at MoMA PS1 in 1998. First unveiled in Munich in 1997, it illuminated the role of storage in art and probed the continual digital evolution of archives and their shift away from tangible locales and physical entities. The exhibition delved into artists’ inclinations to accumulate objects, images, and artifacts, highlighting their multifaceted roles as archivists, historians, and collectors (see for example the archival work of Karsten Bott in illustration 1.4.). The exhibition featured artists such as Ute Weiss-Leder, Rob Moonen, George Legrady, Piero Steinle, and Joseph Beuys, it showcased the dynamic interplay between innovative archival methods and artistic expression, enhancing our holistic understanding of the contemporary art world’s archival turn.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Museum of Modern Art, “Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving, MoMA PS1, July 5 – Aug 30, 1998,” accessed Aug. 28, 2023, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/4631>.



Ill. 1. 4 Karsten Bott, *Von Jedem Eins (One of Each)*. Installation view at the exhibition “Deep Storage,” MoMA the P.S. 1, July 5 - August 30, 1998. Source: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/4631/installation_images/42652.

As already stated, Roelstraete’s exhibition illustrated a significant shift in contemporary art towards methodologies centered around extensive research. In this paradigm, as highlighted by the curator, artists assume roles similar to those of historians, archaeologists, archivists, or detectives, integrating them within their artistic practices. This shift was also observed and analyzed by art critic Hal Foster, who noted a movement towards the “ethnographic” in the art of the 1990s, with artists adopting roles akin to ethnographers, embedding themselves in specific cultures or groups and creating art that was reflexive or critical of their observations. Foster recognized this phenomenon as the emergence of the “artist as an ethnographer,” characterized by diverse material practices influenced by the developing tenets of social anthropology during that era.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 302-308 ; Alex Coles, ed., *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000).

Expanding on Foster and Roelstraete's depiction of the artist as a researcher or investigator—embodying roles of archaeologist and ethnographer—art critic Mark Godfrey asserted the persona of “The Artist as Historian” in his article of the same title. He posits that historical research and representation are integral to contemporary art. According to Godfrey, contemporary artists, who engage in varied degrees of historical research and representation, can be aptly identified as de facto historians, utilizing history as a medium for critical engagement with the present. As Godfrey suggests:

There are an increasing number of artists whose practice starts with research in archives, and others who deploy what has been termed an archival form of research (with one subject of inquiry leading to another). These varied research processes lead to works that invite viewers to think about the past; to make connections between events, characters, and objects; to join together in memory; and reconsider the ways in which the past is represented in the wider culture¹¹⁶

In Godfrey's analysis, the impetus for this historical shift is closely tied to the widespread use of photographic media and the looming threat of digital obsolescence in contemporary society. These conditions drive artists to urgently delve into the past through archival methods out of a fear of “erasure.” This suggests that artists may have become more attuned to the unique characteristics of photographic media precisely when the concept of indexicality is at risk. He argues that “perhaps it is the approaching digitization of all photographic mediums that sensitizes artists to the way in which such mediums used to serve as records of the past – and this sensitivity provokes artists to make work *about* the past.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Mark Godfrey, “The Artist as Historian,” *October*, 120 (2007): 142-143. In his essay, Godfrey explores several artistic approaches to contemporary art's representation and re-staging of history. He analyzes the works of Steve McQueen's *Carib's Leap* (2002), Anri Sala's *Intervista* (1998), Santu Mofokeng's *The Black Photo Album/Look at Me* (1991–2000), Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), and Walid Raad's *Atlas Group* (1989-2004).

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

Certainly, any consideration of the archival shift in contemporary art necessitates a reference to Hal Foster's pivotal essay. In his widely recognized piece, "Archival Impulse" (2004), Foster identifies a marked trend in contemporary art, one deeply influenced by archival aesthetics and notions – a trend he insightfully labeled as the "archival impulse."¹¹⁸ Foster notes that this "impulse" is not about the return to the past but about its reinvention for the needs and concerns of the present. As he famously noted, artists with archival tendencies "seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present."¹¹⁹ Foster acknowledges that the trend is not novel; however, he emphasizes that the early 21st century has introduced a fresh and distinctive perspective to archival practices. According to Foster, the specific sociopolitical, technological, and cultural contexts of this era have imbued these methods of contemporary archival art with a unique nuance, justifying the need for a thorough and separate examination.

Historically, the early 20th century, avant-garde movements, such as Dadaism and Surrealism, used everyday items like typewriters and stamp cards in their art. These choices reflected the growing bureaucracy in daily life. Art historian Sven Spieker suggests that these artistic decisions aimed to highlight and question the ordinary nature of the archive and institutional taxonomic systems. Illustrating the early archival impulses in art, prominent Surrealists like André Breton and Antonin Artaud were central figures at the "Bureau de Recherches Surréalistes" in Paris. This wasn't merely a gathering place; it was a systematic hub where they meticulously captured, organized, and interpreted facets of the unconscious, supplementing their findings with a plethora of notes and manuscripts. Sven Spieker insightfully identifies a bureaucratic undertone to this Surrealist archive, emphasizing its

¹¹⁸ Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* no. 110 (Fall 2004): 3-22.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

paradoxical mission: to safeguard the elusive, the overlooked, and the unrecoverable.¹²⁰ Marcel Duchamp's *La Boîte-en-valise* (1935–41) is a significant commentary on museum and archival practices, marking one of the earliest curated archival art pieces. Ruth Rosengarten highlights how Duchamp's work explores the museum's role as both an institutional framework and an archive. Moreover, *La Boîte-en-valise* serves as a miniature retrospective and meta-commentary on Duchamp's own career and the artist's agency in curating his own archive of selected artwork. It functions as both an artwork and a portable archival project, showcasing Duchamp's avant-garde approach to art's democracy and accessibility as well as his strong desire to control the preservation and presentation of his artistic legacy.¹²¹

Likewise, photography critic David Company adds that Pop Art, Minimalism, and Conceptualism – arguably the three most pivotal movements of post-war art – hold the archive or the archival grid in high esteem, considering it their paradigmatic form. According to Company, this is evident in Warhol's screen prints, the sculptures of Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre, the installations by Sol LeWitt and Hanne Darboven, as well as the photographic endeavors of Christian Boltanski and Bernd & Hilla Becher. Company further posits that “the archival grid operates as art's quasi-bureaucratic mechanism, mirroring and estranging the prevailing frameworks of image representation.”¹²²

While Foster duly acknowledges the above-mentioned historical precedence of artistic engagements with archives, he posits that contemporary “archivally driven art” manifests as

¹²⁰ Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2008), 88.

¹²¹ “La Boîte-en-valise” is Marcel Duchamp's portable monograph, produced between 1935 and 1940, encompassing 69 objects including miniature replicas, photographs, and color reproductions of his oeuvre. For a detailed exploration of “La Boîte-en-valise,” see Ruth Rosengarten, “The Mobile Archive: The Artist as Travelling Salesman,” in *Between Memory and Document*, ‘Untitled No.6’ (Lisbon: Museu Coleção Berardo, 2013).

¹²² David Company, “Thomas Ruff: The Aesthetics of the Pixel,” IANN Magazine No. 2 (2008), accessed on September 3, <https://davidcompany.com/thomas-ruff-the-aesthetics-of-the-pixel/>.

an international phenomenon with its own inherent characteristics. He further argues that this present-day archival inclination warrants recognition as a discrete and notable tendency within the artistic milieu.¹²³ The ‘artists as archivists’ Gerhard Richter, Christian Boltanski, Thomas Hirschhorn, Tacita Dean, Marcel Broodthaers, Susan Hiller, Pierre Huyghe, Douglas Gordon, and Sam Durant are highlighted by Foster for their inclination towards art practices that exhibit an archival impulse. Characterizing their practice, archival artists are in favor of found images, found objects, and the installation format, which “propose new orders of affective association.”¹²⁴

Following up on the application of the installation format in archival art, David Houston Jones, a professor of visual culture, in his more recent publication, *Installation Art and the Practices of Archivalism* (2016), delves into contemporary artistic responses to the archive, emphasizing art projects manifested in the installation format. According to Jones, “some artists explicitly depict the archive (Boltanski, Walid Raad), while others are preoccupied with archival materials and practices (Bałka, Godard, Kolbowski, Egoyan).” Jones interprets such artworks as embodiments of the prevailing contemporary nostalgia for archival media, including analogue photographs and film. He elucidates this concept through an exploration of five distinct types of archival practice: “the intermedial, testimonial, personal, relational, and monumental.” Each demonstrates the ways in which diverse forms of archival practices have been reconceptualized within the realm of installation art.¹²⁵

¹²³ Foster, 3.

¹²⁴ In the essay, Foster centers his discussion on artists Thomas Hirschhorn, Sam Durant, and Tacita Dean. He posits that the three artists collectively view artistic practice as a distinctive exploration of specific figures, objects, and events in modern art, philosophy, and history. Foster, *An Archival Impulse*, 3.

¹²⁵ David Houston Jones, *Installation Art and the Practices of Archivalism* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3.

In addition to the prominence of the installation format in archival art, Foster emphasizes the tangible nature of archival materials – “found images, objects, and text” and the importance of the medium itself. As such, these artworks essentially embody the archival through their utilization of such discovered materials and the tangible display thereof. The act of selection and positioning such information within a new context allows for varied viewer experiences and interpretations, highlighting the dual nature “of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private.”¹²⁶ This perspective becomes especially relevant in considering the contexts of photography and archives at the time his article was published, a period characterized by the emergence of digital databases and the transition from analog to digital photography.

Foster extends this thought to include the curation and exhibition of the work. Archival art, he says, “often arranges this material according to a quasi-archival logic, a matrix of citation and juxtaposition, and presents them in a quasi-archival architecture, a complex of texts and objects [...]”¹²⁷ In this context, the artworks that Foster analyzes are acknowledged as having archival qualities not solely because they include discovered materials. Their archival nature also arises from how these materials are used, that is, the performative methods employed in how they arrange, curate, and transform these materials, particularly within their formalistic dimensions – formally following the organizational principles and procedures of the modern archive.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Foster, 5.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Susanne Østby Sæther, “Archival Art? Negotiating the Role of New Media,” in *The Archive in Motion: New Conceptions of the Archive in Contemporary Thought and New Media Practices*, ed. Eivind Røssaak (Oslo: Novus Forlag, 2010), 81.

When considering Taryn Simon and Evan Roth in light of Foster's perspective, their artworks and installations are similarly recognized as archival, extending beyond the mere inclusion of found materials. Accordingly, what distinguishes them as archival artists is their distinctive performative approach to structuring and transforming these materials. Notably, they also draw attention to the photographic materiality of their found images. As we will see later, Simon reshapes and forges new connections among archival images sourced from an institutional archive – the New York Public Library's Picture Collection. Roth, on the other hand, adopts a distinct approach by manipulating and materializing images sourced from the internet. This process aligns with Foster's concept of working with familiar sources "drawn from the archives of mass culture."¹²⁹ Roth actively recontextualizes these digital images within the physical space of an art gallery, essentially transforming them and giving them new meaning. In essence, both Simon and Roth's photo-based archival works go beyond mere presentation of found visual materials; they encompass intentional actions and creative processes that imbue these materials with fresh meanings and connections.

Finally, criticizing Foster's limited list of archival artists, Ruth Rosengarten notes several omissions. She suggests that Foster could have included artists such as Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Roni Horn, João Penalva, Francis Alÿs, Vivan Sundaram, Zoe Leonard, and Taryn Simon, among others.¹³⁰ Further informed by my own interests and avenues of investigation, a few additional archival artists whose work emerged prominently during the course of this research include: Sara Cwynar, Zoe Crosher, Dor Guez, Ronit Porat, Erik Kessels, Ania Dabrowska, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, Taiyo Onorato & Nico

¹²⁹ Foster, 4.

¹³⁰ See Ruth Rosengarten, *Between Memory and Document, Untitled No. 6* (Lisbon: MuseColeção Berardo, 2013).

Krebs, Stefanos Tsivopoulos, Ilit Azoulay, Carmen Winant, and Hanne Darboven to name a few.

It is pertinent to explain that my fascination with archival art, particularly in connection with contemporary photography, originates from my Master 2 thesis. In this scholarly endeavor, I explored Zoe Crosher's *The Michelle duBois Project* (2004-2013), an extensive photographic archival project that obscures the boundaries between fantasy and reality. Through this project, Crosher reinterpreted the personal photographic collection of a potential fictive feminine figure named Michelle duBois. In a series of exhibitions and artist's books, Crosher delves into the persona of duBois, presenting her as a flight attendant and occasional escort during the 1970s and 1980s (duBois is depicted in various images within the installation in Ill. 1.5). Crosher's work is rooted in an extensive archive of nostalgic vintage amateur photographs and mementos, which she claims were personally given to her by duBois.

My analysis emphasizes Crosher's intricate experimentation with photographic media and materials, particularly analog technologies, and her use of archival methodologies, including collecting, researching, and recontextualizing. By foregrounding duBois' snapshots, Crosher not only critiques how femininity and fictional identity are culturally represented but also questions the traditional criteria for what narratives and materials are considered significant enough for archiving and commemoration. The thesis contends that Crosher's archival project is less concerned with revealing the persona of Michelle duBois and more focused on positioning her images within a unique archival and contemporary art framework.

This structure, in turn, becomes a potent platform for introspection and self-discovery, facilitated by a (re)constructed photographic fantasy.¹³¹



Ill. 1. 5 Zoe Crosher, *The Unraveling of Michelle duBois*, 2010. Installation view at DCKT Contemporary, Jan. 8, 2010 - Feb. 14, 2010, New York. Source: Zoe Crosher, <https://www.zoecrosher.com/the-unraveling-of-michelle-dubois>.

The presence and influence of the archive in contemporary art discourse and creation are undeniably prominent and pervasive. The diverse conceptualizations of the archival, both within the artistic domain and in other disciplines, underscore the evolution and expansion of archival concepts and engagements. They also illuminate the myriad possibilities for artists to reconceptualize, reinterpret, and innovate using archival concepts, materials, and methodologies in our digital era. Interestingly, this dynamic interplay between archival art and curatorial or institutional frameworks has fueled a significant interest in the methods artists employ to approach, utilize, and transform archives. This rising interest is exemplified

¹³¹ See Yonit Aronowicz, “Going Beyond the Photo-Archive - The Significance of Fantasy and Photo-Reflexivity in Zoe Crosher’s *The Michelle duBois Project*,” Master’s thesis, (Université Paris Cité, 2017).

by the surge in artist-in-residence programs in renowned art and archival institutions over the last decade. One exemplary initiative is the “Artist meets Archive” program, part of the Photoszene-Festivals in Cologne, Germany. This project, inaugurated in 2018, aspires to highlight the diverse and exemplary attributes of photography within the cultural landscape of Cologne by offering international artists the opportunity to engage with the city’s extensive photographic archives and collections housed in various institutions. It serves as a platform for artists to explore and interact with archival mediums, encouraging them to create interventions that are subsequently displayed at the Photoszene Festival.¹³²

1.4 The Archive in Contemporary Photography

The nexus between photography and archival practices has consistently piqued the intellectual curiosity of scholars and practitioners. Conceptually, both photography and archiving feed into the innate human impulse to remember and, intriguingly, to forget. The imprint of memories captured within photos, epitomizing the indexical nature of photography, becomes synonymous with the act of recollection and archiving. A notable contention, posited by many, aligns the genesis of photographic methodologies with the advent of archiving. This interrelation is further underscored by the observations of Hal Foster and curator Okwui Enwezor who traced the exploration of the archival in art to the very origins of photography.¹³³ Reflecting a parallel perspective, photography critic and curator David Company asserts:

¹³² See “Artist Meets Archive,” Internationale Photoszene Köln, Photoszene, May 2023, <https://www.photoszene.de/en/artist-programme/artist-meets-archive/>. Another recent instance of artist residency and archival intervention is artist Massimo Ricciardo’s project at the Photothek of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz. There, he engaged in a dialogue with the photographic documents of this art-historical photo archive through his intervention and installation. See Almut Goldhahn and Massimo Ricciardo, “Objects of Migration—Photo-Objects of Art History: Encounters in an Archive,” *Visual Anthropology* 34 (2021): 339–367.

¹³³ Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” p.11-12 ; Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalog (New York: International Center of Photography; Steidl, 2008), 12.

All photographic images come from archives. The very idea of the archive shaped how photography developed from its invention in the 1830s. The standardization of cameras and film formats, the standardization of printed matter, the standardization of the family album, the picture library, the computer image file, the press agency and even the modern art gallery – these are all archival forms of, and for, the photographic image.¹³⁴

Ernst Van Elphen posits that, historically, the advent of “archival fever” aligns with the emergence of photography by Nicéphore Niépce in 1826. This novel invention amplified the archival impulse, establishing photographs as crucial tools for documentation. Van Elphen argues that this progression echoed the 19th century’s focus on scientific categorization, authenticity, and empirical knowledge. As a result, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a collaboration of photographers, scientists, and historians worked to systematically arrange photographic images into archives, meticulously cataloging individuals, geographies, and distinct phenomena. This rigorous documentation became a foundational element for bureaucratic, institutional, and societal classifications.¹³⁵

Building on this historical intersection between photography, social structures and archival memory, Benjamin Buchloh, in his 1999 essay “The Anomic Archive,” explores the complex interrelationships between archives and photography. He extensively examines the inherent organizational principles of photography as a form of montage and deliberates on the role of memory as a fundamental archive. Buchloh provides an in-depth analysis of the artistic methodologies and theoretical frameworks utilized by Gerhard Richter in his influential and continuous project “Atlas,” initiated in 1962.

¹³⁴ David Company, “Thomas Ruff: The Aesthetics of the Pixel,” IANN Magazine No. 2 (2008), accessed on September 3, <https://davidcompany.com/thomas-ruff-the-aesthetics-of-the-pixel/>.

¹³⁵ Ernst Van Alphen, *Staging the Archive*, 22.

Utilizing Foucauldian paradigms, Buchloh posits that Richter's "Atlas" operates as a complex, subversive "counter-archive," questioning and dismantling entrenched notions of memory and representation within photographic archives. Buchloh emphasizes that within Richter's extensive archival work, photographic conventions are inverted to challenge themselves; his images prompt reflections on the relationships between past and present and between image and referent, examining photography's indexicality. Buchloh argues that the photographic archive encapsulates divergent processes of remembering and forgetting. While seemingly offering a means to re-encounter the past through images, "Atlas" concurrently disrupts mnemonic experiences, giving rise to an anomic archive where "amnesia and repression are socially inscribed."¹³⁶ In this context, Buchloh suggests that Richter's "Atlas" mirrors how societal structures and power relations shape collective memory and repression, highlighting the interplay between societal inscription and the representation and interpretation of the past.

Intertwining photography with archival modalities, another significant dimension in Buchloh's analysis is his juxtaposition of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1927–1929) with Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* (1962–2013) as both 'Atlases' employ the photographic montage or grid as a distinctive form. Importantly, the designation "atlas" generally pertains to a compendium of geographical maps or a series of images, systematically or poetically portraying a plethora of entities, thereby symbolizing a "visual form of knowledge."¹³⁷

Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* stands as a pioneering cultural, archival, and art historical project, pivotal for delving into the nexus between art, archives, imagery, symbolic

¹³⁶ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's Atlas: The Anomic Archive," *October*, Vol. 88, (1999): 134.

¹³⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, "Atlas: How to Carry the World on One's Back?," in Georges Didi-Huberman (ed.), *Atlas. How to Carry the World on One's Back*, exhibition catalogue, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid 2010.

implications, and historical backdrops. Comprising 79 panels and 2,000 photographs, this colossal image collection embodies Warburg's endeavor to decipher the iconographical interpretation of images and trace recurring aesthetic motifs over time. His objective was to construct a 'visual form of archive' to survey European cultural history. By methodically arranging a vast set of visual materials from antiquity through the twentieth century on wooden panels, Warburg identified and presented uncharted relationships among images that traversed various cultures and eras. His innovative arrangement strategies offered a fresh way to analyze art reproductions, marked by creative non-linear sequencing and associative visual groupings, underscoring the persistence of visual themes across varied timeframes and cultures. Such an approach laid the groundwork for a revolutionary, non-hierarchical art history methodology – iconology – inspired by Warburg's unique montages.¹³⁸

Highlighting the contemporary relevance of Warburg's *Atlas*, art historian Molly Kalkstein notes that while there's a noticeable academic reengagement with the *Atlas*, its interplay with contemporary debates on digital image migration and the complexities of digital archives is yet to be fully understood. In essence, Warburg's ideas about the dynamic interpretation of images, the transformative role of photography in visual culture, and the establishment of vast visual archives continue to hold significance in comprehending our interaction with and navigation through extensive image collections within the contemporary, image-saturated digital landscape.¹³⁹

As examined later in the case studies, Simon's distinct non-hierarchical image compositions, derived from a physical archive, and Evan Roth's dense installation of visual

¹³⁸ Christopher D. Johnson, "About The Mnemosyne Atlas," Cornell University Library - The Warburg Institute, accessed Oct. 2 2023, <https://warburg.library.cornell.edu/about>.

¹³⁹ Molly Kalkstein, "Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas: On Photography, Archives, and the Afterlife of Images," *Rutgers Art Review: The Journal of Graduate Research in Art History* 35 (2019): 50-73.

clusters, sourced from internet-based images, both find resonance with the themes of Warburg's atlas. This is particularly evident in their exploration of memory, cultural transmission, the interrelations between images, the narratives they form, and the ensuing visual experience.

Inspired by Warburg's groundbreaking project, philosopher and curator Georges Didi-Huberman orchestrated the 2011 exhibition "Atlas: How to Carry the World on One's Back?" at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid (Ill. 1.6). In Didi-Huberman's view, the *Atlas* serves as an "endless archive" where significance is derived from the principle of montage.¹⁴⁰ The exhibition showcased both historical and contemporary artworks that resonated, either conceptually or methodologically, with Warburg's project, thereby underscoring Warburg's significant influence on contemporary artistic thought and practices. Notably, the exhibition probed concepts such as image taxonomies, photographic montages, and an archival or encyclopedic fervor for investigating visual clusters, employing the Atlas as a visual medium to weave art history narratives, and thereby fostering novel interpretations and storylines. Didi-Huberman's curatorial approach was integrative, intertwining insights from various disciplines such as art, philosophy, and history. Instead of presenting the actual artworks of the selected artists, Didi-Huberman curated a collection of their research, documentary materials, and conceptual visualizations, offering an enhanced comprehension of artistic processes and methods. His objective was to shine a light on the artistic, curatorial, and

¹⁴⁰ Georges Didi-Huberman, "Atlas: How to Carry the World on One's Back?" in *Atlas. How to Carry the World on One's Back?*, ed. Georges Didi-Huberman (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2010). Didi-Huberman, drawing inspiration from Warburg's Atlas, co-curated another exhibition centered on the theme of the Atlas in 2014, this time in collaboration with the artist Arno Gisinger, at Palais de Tokyo in Paris. The exhibition was titled "Nouvelles histoires de fantômes" or "New Ghost Stories." For further details, refer to the exhibition website: <https://palaisdetokyo.com/en/exposition/georges-didi-huberman-and-arno-gisinger/>.

intellectual explorations into Warburg’s Atlas, subsequently forging new pathways for visual narratives and experiences.¹⁴¹



Ill. 1. 6 Installation view of the exhibition “Atlas: How to Carry the World on One’s Back,” 25 November– 28 March 2010, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. Source: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/exhibitions/atlas-how-carry-world-ones-back>.

Aby Warburg’s exploration of images as symbols embedded in collective cultural memory, where their significance derives from interconnectedness within diverse cultural contexts, resonates with curator and writer Okwui Enwezor’s inquiries into photographic archives. Enwezor’s influential 2008 exhibition, “Archive Fever: Exploring Documents in Contemporary Art,” held at the International Center of Photography in New York, shares common ground with Warburg’s ideas, as it delved into the multifaceted meanings of visual archives across various historical and cultural frameworks. Enwezor also published a book under the same title, drawing inspiration from Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, which underpinned both the exhibition and the written work. Through this thought-provoking

¹⁴¹ Scholar Gaeun Ji provides a comprehensive analysis of Didi-Huberman’s exhibition and curatorial strategy in “Mapping the Sisyphean Archives: Archival/Anarchival Performativity of Repetition and Failure in Contemporary Archival Art” (PhD dissertation, Goldsmiths University of London, 2018), 33-44.

exhibition, Enwezor illuminated the diverse ways in which contemporary artists actively challenge and enrich our understanding of history, memory, trauma and visual documentation.

Drawing from Derrida and Foucault's theories, Enwezor delved deeper into the conceptual underpinnings of archiving and photography and their implications (and limitations) for understanding reality, truth, memory, and power. Importantly, Enwezor posited that both photography and film are primary mediums in archival-based artistic practices, while also acknowledging them as foremost forms of archival content. The camera, in his view, serves as a tool to document, preserve, and archive moments in time, embodying a form of "archival apparatus."¹⁴² Hence, each image, described as "documents and pictorial testimonies of the existence of a recorded fact, an excess of the seen," possesses an inherent archival quality.¹⁴³

The exhibition underscored a potent focus on the materiality of archival documents through the works displayed. As demonstrated, artists employed various manipulations to emphasize the tactile and tangible nature of archival materials, whether paper, photograph, or film, using the archive as a material site of intervention in some instances. It could be argued that, as photography increasingly becomes dematerialized in the digital age, some artists leverage the archive to reintroduce a sense of materiality in the medium.

In Enwezor's theoretical framework, deeply influenced by Foucault's critical examination of the power dynamics and knowledge hierarchies inherent in traditional archival practices, archival materials are not passive repositories but rather active tools for critiquing official histories, contesting dominant narratives, and amplifying the voices of marginalized

¹⁴² Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalog (New York: International Center of Photography; Steidl, 2008), 12.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

perspectives.¹⁴⁴ As such, Enwezor's curatorial approach brings attention in his "Archive Fever" exhibition, to artists who have embarked on the endeavor of creating what he refers to as "counter-archives." This concept is influenced by Foucault's idea of "counter-memory," which involves a persistent interrogation of the accuracy and reliability of historical narratives as sources of true knowledge.¹⁴⁵ These 'counter-archives' represent alternative compilations of images, documents, and narratives deliberately designed to subvert or resist prevailing historical discourses. As Enwezor argues, these "counter-archives" create room for the inclusion of marginalized voices and histories that have often been overlooked, thereby challenging established hierarchies of knowledge.¹⁴⁶ This inclination is also apparent in the works of previously mentioned artists such as Christian Boltanski, Walid Raad, and Lorna Simpson, all of whom were featured in Enwezor's 2008 ICP exhibition. Indeed, these artists embody the contemporary spirit of the 'counter tendency,' as discussed earlier in this chapter, actively engaging with archival materials to shed light on previously obscured or overlooked narratives, offering alternative perspectives that expand our understanding of history, representation, and memory.¹⁴⁷

Enwezor's curatorial strategy is particularly noteworthy, characterized by its integrative and reflexive approach. He combined theoretical underpinnings with a broad spectrum of artistic expressions, delving deep into the complex interplay between archives

¹⁴⁴ Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever*, 14.

¹⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 76-100.

¹⁴⁶ Enwezor, 22.

¹⁴⁷ Participating artists in the "Archive Fever" 2008 exhibition: Christian Boltanski, Tacita Dean, Stan Douglas, Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Jef Geys, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Craigie Horsfield, Lamia Joreige, Zoe Leonard, Sherrie Levine, Ilán Lieberman, Glenn Ligon, Robert Morris, Walid Raad, Thomas Ruff, Anri Sala, Fazal Sheikh, Lorna Simpson, Eyal Sivan, Vivan Sundaram, Nomeda and Gediminas Urbona, Andy Warhol.

and photography (See Ill. 1.7). The exhibition showcased video and photographic works from over twenty visual artists. These artists deeply engaged with themes of memory, time, history, and identity, as well as probing the structural and functional essence of the archive while appropriating archival materials and documents. Enwezor's selection featured a rich tapestry of artists working across varied mediums and hailing from diverse backgrounds. This provided a comprehensive and global vantage point, shedding light on how the practices of archiving and photography both influence and reflect multifaceted cultural, social, and political contexts. With this, Enwezor ambitiously aimed to challenge conventional understandings of photography, prompting viewers to consider how archival practices influence perceptions of historical truth and societal narratives, and the extent to which both archives and photography intersect with representation of power.



Ill. 1. 7 Lamia Joreige, *Objects of War* (1999 – Ongoing). Videos & Objects. Installation view at “Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art,” Jan 18 – May 04, 2008, International Center of Photography, New York. Source: <https://lamiajoreige.com/exhibitions/archive-fever-international-center-for-photography-nyc/>.

Interestingly, Enwezor's noted exhibition at the ICP premiered in 2008, a moment in history marked by the proliferation of digital technologies – a year post the inception of the first iPhone and amidst the burgeoning presence of social media. Despite these landmarks in technological advancement, it is noteworthy that Enwezor opted to foreground the technological ambiguities and transformations surrounding photographic archives less prominently. Fast forward fifteen years, and one might contemplate how Enwezor's exhibition could evolve and incorporate the intricate web of networked imagery and dematerialized archives that characterize today's digital landscape. In this context, the questions surrounding image authenticity and reliability have become increasingly pertinent. Therefore, any examination or reevaluation, whether in theoretical, artistic, or curatorial realms, of the photographic archive must take into consideration the cultural transformations driven by advancements in photography, its widespread dissemination, and the technologies for image manipulation, including CGI and AI. For example, curator and writer Katrina Sluis adopts a critical perspective, delving into the implications of social media culture on our perception of visual knowledge and the formation of collective memory. In her text for the 2019 exhibition "All I Know Is What's On The Internet" at the Photographer's Gallery in London, she observes that "visual knowledge and authenticity have become inextricably entwined with a 'like' economy, subject to the predominantly imperceptible operations of bots, crowd-sourced labor, Western tech conglomerates, and 'intelligent' machines." With this, Sluis's analysis underscores the profound impact of contemporary digital landscape on the construction and validation of visual information, posing crucial questions about the evolving dynamics of knowledge and authenticity in this context."¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Katrina Sluis, "All I Know Is What's On The Internet," The Photographers' Gallery London, 25 Oct 2018, <https://thephotographersgallery.org.uk/whats-on/all-i-know-is-whats-on-the-internet>.

In a manner comparable to Enwezor’s intricate examination of photo-archives, photographer and writer Allan Sekula discerns the archive as a realm saturated with power and authority. In his significant article, “Reading an Archive: Photography between Labor and Capital” (2002), Sekula investigates the complex relationships intertwined between photography, labor, and capital. He articulates, “photographic archives by their very structure maintain a hidden connection between knowledge and power.”¹⁴⁹ He underscores that photography has traditionally served as a vehicle to consolidate existing power hierarchies and social control; a role archives can further facilitate. Conforming to a postmodern critical interpretations of archives, Sekula interrogates the ‘truth’ in photographic archive – emphasizing the inherent biases and power dynamics in the procedures of selection, organization, and interpretation within an archive, reflecting and often reinforcing prevailing societal structures and ideologies while marginalizing disparate voices and narratives.¹⁵⁰ Consequently, the explorations of Sekula, reminiscent of Enwezor’s conceptual frameworks as manifest in his ICP exhibition, encourage viewers to engage in critical reflections and interrogations of the foundational presuppositions and inherent biases that exist in photographic archives.

Importantly, as Sekula observes, “The model of the archive, of the quantitative ensemble of images, is a powerful one in photographic discourse. This model exerts a basic influence on the character of the truths and pleasures experienced in looking at photographs [...] we might even argue that archival ambitions and procedures are intrinsic to photographic practice.”¹⁵¹ This observation supports the proposition – articulated by Enwezor and other

¹⁴⁹ Allan Sekula, “Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital,” in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2003), 214.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

writers – that the modalities integral to archiving are not mere supplements to photography; they are fundamentally ingrained within the essence of photographic practice. Thus, Sekula contends that the act of generating photographs is innately linked with the impetus and methodology to archive, categorize, and contextualize them. Furthermore, Sekula integrates the audience’s reception of images into the discourse, underscoring the substantial influence of the archival model in shaping the experiential and interpretative dynamics of engaging with photographs. This implies a consequential impact of archival methodologies on the perceptions, interpretations, and emotional resonances of the viewer, affecting the truths discerned and the pleasures experienced.

Through scrutinizing and elucidating the intrinsic connections between archiving photography, Sekula, like Enwezor, enriched the discourse on the implications of archiving in understanding and interpreting photographic representations and their underpinning socio-cultural and economic realities. In alignment with their critical observation of photographic archives, a myriad of publications in recent years have engaged with the archival turn in contemporary artistic practice and discourse, particularly interrogating themes of dominant power structures, historical truth-claims and decolonial methodologies. Amongst these, notable contributions include Kate Palmer Albers’s *Uncertain Histories: Accumulation, Inaccessibility, and Doubt in Contemporary Photography* (2015) and the anthology *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, edited by Anthony Downey (2015). Another recent contribution is the 2021 issue of Foam Magazine titled *Histories –The Archival Issue*, focusing on similar thematic strands. Each of these works probes the multifaceted interplay between contemporary visual culture

and archival practices, exploring contemporary approaches to engaging with the archive and archival images as a means for critical analysis.¹⁵²

The following two chapters in this dissertation will offer an in-depth exploration of the archival projects of Taryn Simon and Evan Roth. As I will elucidate, these projects not only align with, but also expand upon, some elements in the analytical paradigms proposed by Enwezor and Sekula. Their works also resonate with the diverse theoretical discourses evoked in this chapter, especially those centered on the ‘artist-as-archivist’ paradigm, the intricate nexus between post-photography and archival practices, and the transformative influence of digital technologies and the Internet on our understanding of and engagement with archives and images. Through these examinations, this literature review chapter shed some light on the multifaceted theories through which archival art practices critically engage with issues of digitality, materiality, cultural memory and identity, as well as reflect on the very conceptual underpinnings of the archive, all within the intricate landscape of contemporary art photography.

This dissertation assimilates insights from a range of scholarly precedents discussed in this chapter, contributing a perspective to the existing body of knowledge. This study adopts a more concentrated scope in contrast to preceding research. Where previous studies and anthologies have delved into archival art and theory as a widespread, comprehensive phenomenon, characterized by its own evolution and theoretical perspectives across various disciplines – such as art history, philosophy, sociology, and political science – this

¹⁵² Kate Palmer Albers, *Uncertain Histories: Accumulation, Inaccessibility, and Doubt in Contemporary Photography* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015) ; Anthony Downey, ed., *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2015) ; Henri Badaröh, Katy Hundertmark, and Elisa Medde, eds., *Foam Magazine*, no. 59: Histories (Amsterdam: Foam Fotografiemuseum, 2021).

investigation concentrates on the individual practices of two pivotal artists and a formal analysis of their distinctive archival projects and exhibitions within the sphere of contemporary art photography. In the upcoming analysis chapters, I will demonstrate how the artworks of Taryn Simon and Evan Roth serve as exemplary instances of contemporary artists who utilize various forms of photo-archives, including both tangible and digital formats, along with their unique aesthetic approaches to visual arrangement and display. Through these methods, they craft distinctive visual and experiential narratives for audiences within the context of the exhibition space.

Chapter 2: The Archival Space - Taryn Simon and The Picture Collection

In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Jacques Derrida introduces his conceptualization of the archive by exploring its physicality – that is, the concrete space of constitution which transforms the archive into a single entity. Derrida refers to the process of giving an archive an actual place as its “domiciliation.” He argues that only after the archive is given a space in which to “dwell” does it become “public:”

It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place. The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks this institutional passage from the private to the public, which does not always mean from the secret to the nonsecret.¹

Taryn Simon’s archival art practice takes Derrida’s concept of the archive’s “domiciliation” as its starting point. In the *Picture Collection* project, Simon worked with archival images situated in a monumental building, taking the New York Public Library’s institutional operations and vast collection of photographs as the focus of her conceptual investigation and source of appropriated images. By delving into these historical documents, Simon imbues the archive with her own perspective while also shedding light on the individuals who curated it. As this chapter demonstrates, Simon’s project not only investigates the history and other factors that shape the organization of the New York Public Library’s vast image archive, but it also materializes a reflective experience around the ongoing transformation of photography, thus broadly reframing our relationship to images and to the culture in which we live.

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Presnowitz, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2-3.

Simon's *Picture Collection* project presents an ideal case study of a contemporary artist who uses the archive as a creative source while operating within a regulated institutional context. Simon's intervention in the NYPL's photography archive is distinctive in the context of this dissertation, as she created highly aestheticized compositions of re-photographed physical images taken from a well-established archive. In this chapter, I will conduct an analysis of Taryn Simon's "The Picture Collection: The Color of a Flea's Eye" 2021 exhibition at two distinct venues: the Gagosian gallery in New York and the New York Public Library. Within this analysis, I will argue that Simon's work and curatorial approach effectively reanimate the archival images sourced from the Picture Collection. This 'revitalization' is achieved by placing these images within the framework of contemporary art photography presentation and interpretation. Through deliberate contextualization, Simon promotes a performative experience (also interaction) with the historical picture archive, potentially leading to a renewed interpretation of the Picture Collection as a whole.

Accordingly, Simon's archival project does not only demonstrate a deep engagement with the archive and its images. The outcome of the project is also crucial for a contemporary understanding of the unique character of this analog archive, as Simon foregrounds the relevance of the Picture Collection at a time marked by an unprecedented dissemination and circulation of images through digital media. As noted by Mary Panzer, "In this era of digital collections, when photographs have lost all physical properties aside from those conveyed on a glowing screen, the Picture Collection offers important lessons about the way pictures work."² Similarly, in working with one of the largest circulating analog picture libraries in the world, Simon also reflected on the Collection's unique role in presaging the ubiquity of the online search engine, as well as image tagging and reposting on social media.

² Mary Panzer, "Pictures at Work: Romana Javitz and the New York Public Library Picture Collection," in *The "Public" Life of Photographs*, Thierry Gervais, ed. (Cambridge and London, MIT Press, 2016): 130.

Moreover, while Simon's multilayered project invites viewers to pay closer attention to the networked visual culture of our present moment and the ways in which powerful social media platforms and systems of visual classification like Google Images "increasingly structure our visual public sphere,"³ her artistic intervention within the institutional archive, and her appropriation and presentation of the Collection's physical images exposes viewers on a conceptual level to art historical conversations around the aestheticization of photography and the constantly changing status of the medium. Hence, to better understand the context out of which Simon's project emerged, one must first turn to the origins of the New York Public Library Picture Collection. Through an analysis of that institution's collecting history and consideration of recent developments in the artistic and commercial landscape of art photography, I will also demonstrate how Simon's *Picture Collection* project has more recently been harnessed by the NYPL for the promotion of its institutional interests. The library has thus sought to present its historical collections as more "contemporary." I contend that the formal endorsement of an art project by an esteemed practitioner like Simon was largely driven by the NYPL's need to make its unique analog picture archive more attractive and relevant to a wider and increasingly sophisticated audience.

This chapter will therefore place a close analysis of Simon's project and its context alongside a cultural history of the Picture Collection. As Simon's most recent iteration of the project demonstrates, her interpretation of the Collection's images has been amplified by the larger history of the Picture Collection and its operations. Consequently, a direct line is drawn between the Library's photo-archive, which is over a century old, and contemporary art photography practices.

³ Diana Kamin, "Total Recall - Diana Kamin on the New York Public Library's Picture Collection," *Artforum International*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/diana-kamin-on-the-new-york-public-library-s-picture-collection-86403>.

2.1 The Picture Collection as Contemporary Art

The historical Picture Collection of the New York Public Library, established in 1915, is known for being the largest circulating picture library in the world. It contains 1.2 million physical images from a range of sources, including photographic prints, newspaper clippings, postcards and posters as well as images culled from illustrated books, encyclopedias, magazines, and other printed ephemera. All of these items are organized through a unique cataloging system of over 12,000 alphabetical subject folders and are further sorted under many thousands of subheadings. Files are labelled according to generally straightforward topics such as *fashion*, *airplanes*, *cats*, *mirrors*, *handshakes*, *oxygen*, *swimming pools*, and *explosions*. The pictures are available for browsing and lending through open shelves found in room 100 – the official “headquarters” of the Picture Collection at the NYPL.



Ill. 2. 1 Taryn Simon, *Folder: Rear Views*, 2013. Archival inject print, (120x474.3cm). Source: <https://www.icaboston.org/art/taryn-simon/folder-rear-views/>.

Inspired by this overwhelming archive and its unique, subject-based classification system, Simon selected about fifty folders from the collection and laid each folder’s contents out in a series of artistic arrangements, re-photographing the resulting compositions. These re-photographs were then printed and mounted on white backgrounds and encased in large silver frames suspended on wires (Ill. 2.1-2). Each framed composition consists of several reproductions of images that Simon

selected from a given archival category/subject e.g., Interestingly, once these archival images are meticulously surveyed and styled as artful objects by Simon, another way of interpreting them emerges. Arranged in grid-like rows, the images overlap, partially concealing some of their contents. The photographic compositions could similarly be read as geometric patterns or abstracted color schemes. From yet another perspective, Simon's large-scale photographic collages featuring the contents of the Collection's different folders appear as an online search result, referencing the continuous acceleration of image production in our increasingly digitized world.



Ill. 2. 2 Installation view of Taryn Simon's exhibition, "Rear Views, A Star-Forming Nebula, and The Office of Foreign Propaganda," February 24 – May 17, 2015, Jeu de Paume, Paris. Source: <https://www.galleriesnow.net/shows/taryn-simon-rear-views-star-forming-nebula-office-foreign-propaganda/>.

Nevertheless, Simon's curiosity for and engagement with the Collection's unique materials is not new or unique to this project. Over the course of its history, the Picture Collection has gained a national reputation for being a highly practical and idiosyncratic image archive, serving and inspiring many researchers, and journalists, as well as creative figures in the art, fashion, cinema,

and advertising industries. In the 1930s, Diego Rivera became a frequent visitor to the collection during the period in which he was working on his murals in New York City. American visual artist and experimental film maker, Joseph Cornell,⁴ frequently used the Collection for his famous assemblages, and Andy Warhol notoriously “borrowed” a few folders related to advertising (for example, he had a particular interest in the file “Advertising – Soft Drinks”. See Ill. 2.3). The materials Warhol found were surely inspirational for the artist—so much so that he never bothered returning the files to the Picture Collection.⁵



Ill. 2. 3 Collages by Andy Warhol of advertisements bearing the stamp of the NYPL Picture Collection (recto: Coca-Cola advertisement; verso: Campbell’s Soup cans), c. 1962–62, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh. Source: <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2021/06/10/essay-new-york-public-libraris-picture-collection/>.

⁴ Cornell became a friend of Romana Javitz (the Collection’s superintendent), as did many well-known photographers. Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, Paul Strand, Lewis Hine, and Dorothea Lange were all charmed by the respect Javitz accorded their work. See Arthur Lubow, “Hands Off the Library’s Picture Collection!” *The New York Times*, August 3, 2021, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/03/arts/design/new-york-public-library-picture-collection.html>. Also see Joshua Chuang, “The New York Public Library’s Picture Collection,” *Gagosian Quarterly*, June 10, 2021, <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2021/06/10/essay-new-york-public-libraris-picture-collection/>.

⁵ Many of the Picture Collection images that were never returned were stored in Warhol’s Time Capsules and are currently housed in the archives of the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. See Chuang, “The New York Public Library’s Picture Collection.”

Intrigued by the immense picture archive at the NYPL since her youth, Simon returned to the Collection years later as an experienced artist, conceiving her Picture Collection project in 2012. The archival project was first exhibited under the straightforward title, *Taryn Simon: The Picture Collection* in 2013 at the Davies Street branch of the Gagosian Gallery in London (Ill. 2.4).⁶ According to my research, Simon's project, when first displayed in 2013, was not institutionally endorsed by the official Picture Collection of the New York Public Library (NYPL). Nearly a decade later, in 2020, Simon showcased another phase of the project, which was now nine years in the making. This iteration emerged as a collaborative effort between the artist and the NYPL. The bifurcated exhibition debuted in the summer and fall of 2021. The first part took place at the Gagosian Gallery's 976 Madison Avenue branch in July 2021, and the subsequent segment in September 2021 was presented as a special installation at the NYPL's flagship Stephen A. Schwarzman Building. The show, entitled "The Color of a Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection," was organized and curated by Simon in collaboration with Joshua Chuang, the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Associate Director of Art, Prints, and Photographs, and Robert B. Menschel, the Senior Curator of Photography at the NYPL. Accordingly, "The Color of a Flea's Eye" exhibition was accompanied by a comprehensive monograph of the same title, published by Cahiers d'Art in December 2020.⁷ This publication situates Simon's extensive nine-year exploration of the Collection within a broader framework. It offers readers the opportunity to closely examine her

⁶ The 2013 exhibition of *Taryn Simon: The Picture Collection* was also presented at the Almine Rech Gallery, Paris (Nov. 16 - Dec. 21, 2013) and at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Krakow (May 15 - June 15, 2014). The project appeared in a similar format in Simon's larger retrospective museum shows. See: *Taryn Simon: Rear Views, A Star-forming Nebula, and the Office of Foreign Propaganda*, Jeu de Paume, Paris (Feb. 24 - May 17, 2015); *Taryn Simon*, Galerie Rudolfinum, Prague (April 27 - July 10, 2016).

⁷ The hard-cover monograph includes 460 pages, with 370 illustrations, gatefolds, and 57 hand-tipped color plates. Joshua Chuang, Tim Griffin, and Taryn Simon: *Taryn Simon: The Color of a Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection* (Paris: Cahiers d'art, 2020).

artistic compositions and gain a deeper comprehension of the history and characteristics of the Picture Collection archive.

Given the many exhibitions of Simon's project that took place at different times and locations, the following analysis will narrow its focus to three particularly significant spaces of display: the exhibition at the Gagosian art gallery in New York; the exhibition of Simon's photo-collages in the New York Public Library's main branch; including the official Picture Collection room at the Library.



Ill. 2. 4 *Taryn Simon - The Picture Collection*, February 12–March 28, 2013. Installation view at Gagosian Gallery, Davies Street, London. Source: Gagosian. <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2013/taryn-simon-the-picture-collection/>.

2.2 The Artist-as-Archivist

Taryn Simon, a highly regarded American artist based in New York City, engages in a multi-faceted artistic practice that integrates various mediums, including photography, text, sculpture, performance, sound, and installation. In 1997, Simon earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in art semiotics from Brown University, concurrently pursuing photography courses at the Rhode

Island School of Design.⁸ Much like an archivist, she is renowned for her commitment to thorough research and documentation processes. In several of her works, Taryn Simon explores the intricate systems employed in the organization of photographic images. Her approach encompasses archival procedures that encompass collection, categorization, and interpretation. Frequently, these procedures are complemented by in-depth textual analysis and explanation. She reflects on her approach, stating, “I have been operating with data collection and image-making from a very early age, primarily influenced by my family. My grandfather and father were actively engaged in consuming the world in that form.”⁹ Indeed, her practice often revolves around visual organization and photographic taxonomies, as she mines troves of images or compiles her own special inventories of items aimed at producing engaging reinterpretations of the source material. One can argue that Simon’s conceptual work reflects the very human inclination to collect, categorize, edit, and caption objects and images.

The methodological rigor of this archival/typological approach serves as the foundation of her conceptual practice, allowing for the development of intellectually intricate and aesthetically captivating artworks. Often described as “labyrinthine,”¹⁰ Simon’s extensive research process is carried out in various institutions, as well as “unusual” spaces like JFK airport or the New York Animal Import Center. As writer and curator Kate Fowle observes, “She [Simon] is first and foremost a storyteller of facts, a chronicler of truths that are hard to believe.”¹¹

⁸ Taryn Simon has showcased her work in the US, Europe, and China, with notable exhibitions such as the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. Her photographs have found a permanent home in prestigious collections like The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Tate Modern, Whitney Museum of American Art, Centre Pompidou, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. She has earned recognition as a Guggenheim Fellow and was honored with the 2017 Photo London Master of Photography award.

⁹ Taryn Simon, “Taryn Simon Interview: Where the Secret Goes,” November 8, 2016, YouTube video, 12:56, Louisiana Channel - Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ensgmn2AfX8&ab_channel=LouisianaChannel.

¹⁰ Kate Fowle, “Survival of the Fittest,” in *Taryn Simon: Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, ed. Aliza Watters (New York: Hatje Cantz, 2016), 6-15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

At times considered unconventional, she intentionally directs our attention towards narratives that are often overlooked, peculiar, or suppressed in the course of her artistic endeavors. For instance, in 2013, Simon produced *Birds of the West Indies*, a two-part archival project inspired by American ornithologist James Bond's taxonomy (Ill. 2.5). The first part is a visual catalog of women, weapons, and vehicles from the James Bond film series, exploring the repetition's economic and emotional impact in fantasy production. The second part involves Simon identifying, photographing, and categorizing every bird in the first twenty-four James Bond films, focusing on these unexpected moments outside the main narrative.¹²



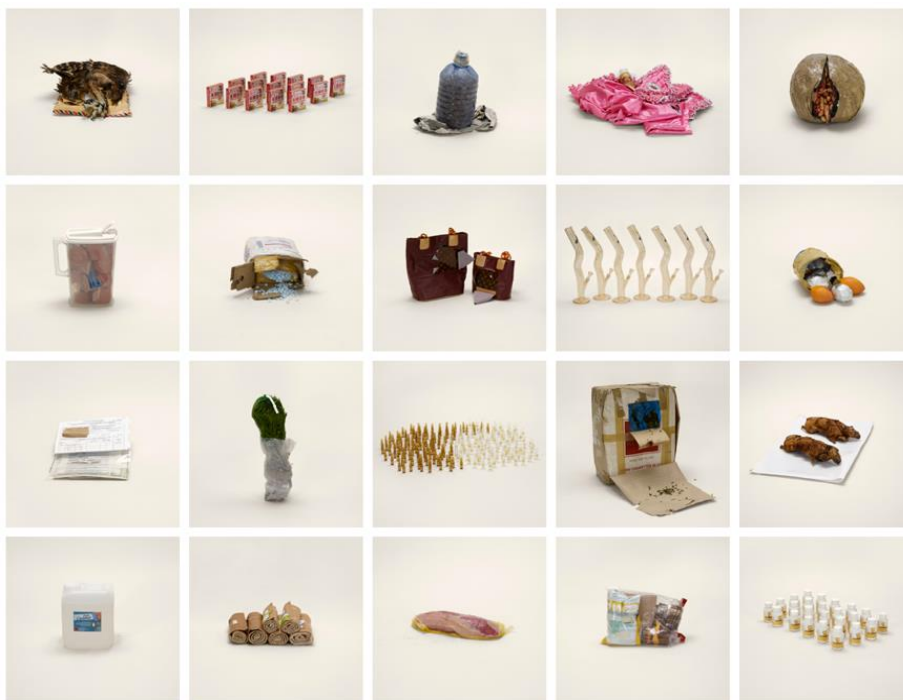
Ill. 2. 5 Taryn Simon, *Birds of the West Indies – Switzerland*, 2014 (Part 2). Framed archival inkjet prints and text, (482 x 101.3 cm). Source: Gagosian, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2014/taryn-simon-birds-of-the-west-indies/>.

Simon's taxonomic works, characterized by their precise and nearly scientific presentation, where images and text are seamlessly integrated, actively engage the audience to immerse themselves in the processes of meaning making. Viewers are encouraged to establish connection between the cropped images of various birds and the broader photographic and filmic concepts they convey, particularly in their relation to notions of 'action' and 'fiction', as these images are,

¹² "Taryn Simon," Gagosian, accessed Sep. 17, 2021, <https://gagosian.com/artists/taryn-simon/>

in fact, ‘film stills’ taken from the James Bond film series. Moreover, this performative experience also mirrors the exploratory nature of navigating and browsing through an image archive, adding a dynamic layer to the encounter with Simon’s art.

In another typological example, assuming the dual role of “shrewd informant and collector of curiosities,”¹³ in one notable instance, Simon spent a week at JFK International Airport in New York photographing over a thousand items as they were confiscated by the authorities from either express mail or passengers entering the US from abroad. The resulting series, titled *Contraband* (2010), is an impressive archive of the very contemporary phenomenon of worldwide trafficking in counterfeit and prohibited goods (Ill. 2.6).



Ill. 2. 6 Taryn Simon, *Contraband, MISC. (Prohibited)*, 2010 (From the series “Contraband,” 2010). Source: <https://smallsight.wordpress.com/2010/07/31/contraband-by-taryn-simon/>.

¹³ “Taryn Simon: An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar, March 9 - June 24, 2007,” Whitney Museum of American Art, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/taryn-simon>.

By accentuating a grid-like structure reminiscent of an archival system, Simon established a dynamic interplay between the realms of visual aesthetics and informative (also ‘forensic’) content. This deliberate approach intricately nurtures a dialogue between the detained objects and the well-crafted photographic representations. As each object is documented in isolation, viewers are invited to immerse themselves in the intricate web of connections among these items, which transform from mere personal belongings into an artwork in itself. Moreover, according to Simon, the project is presented as a collection of worldwide dreams and desires, capturing the universal yearning for prestigious brands and luxury products that transcends geographical limits.¹⁴ Observing this overwhelming accumulation and thorough documentation of 1,075 random objects and products, curator Hans Ulrich Obrist wonders:

Who would have imagined the litany of stray items, the ‘redundancy of garbage’ in Simon’s strange collection? Pork (Mexico), syringes (Indonesia), Botox (Indonesia), chicken and duck, chicken, duck, beans and nuts, beans, nuts, beef, bird’s nest, booze, gastro meds, GBL date rape drug, heroin, hydrochlorothiazide, imitation Lipitor, Ketamine tranquillizer, Klonopin, Lidocaine, Lorazepam, locust tree seed, ginger root, deer tongues, cow urine, Cohiba cigars, toy AK47 and protective goggles, toy AK47, Egyptian cigarettes (24 cartons).¹⁵

Having already established herself in the role of the artist-as-researcher or “artist-as-historian,”¹⁶ Simon could just as easily be considered an ‘artist-as-secret spy,’ photographing and indexing images from difficult-to-access institutions across the United States. In her well-known project *American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007), Simon undertook the task of

¹⁴ “Taryn Simon: Contraband,” Gagosian, accessed Nov. 15, 2022, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2010/taryn-simon-contraband/>.

¹⁵ Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Ever Airport - London Heathrow, May 2010,” in *Taryn Simon, Contraband* (Göttingen: Steidl/New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2010), unpaginated.

¹⁶ Mark Godfrey, “The Artist as Historian,” *October* 120 (Spring 2007), 140-172.

recording and cataloging a range of locations and items that are typically regarded as off-limits or unattainable within the confines of the United States. Traveling from the C.I.A. headquarters in Langley, Virginia, to the Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility, Cherenkov Radiation in southeastern Washington State, Simon's investigative work functions, according to Geoffrey Batchen as "a collective portrait of the American psyche through a documentation of its repressed places."¹⁷ For this unique project, Simon was given access to a range of clandestine settings, including a nuclear waste facility, a little-known U.S. government sponsored Arabic-language television station (Alhurra TV), the CIA's Abstract Expressionist art collection, and a storage facility for a black bear in hibernation.¹⁸ Through the creation of this distinctive archive encompassing the "unexplored" and the "unseen," Simon's objective extended beyond mere revelation of the idiosyncratic operations of diverse American institutions. Significantly, she sought to reexamine the boundary separating public and expert access, truth and imagination, and reality and the fantastical within the United States. As articulated by photography curator and writer Charlotte Cotton, "Simon's photographs are remarkable in their portrayal of the concealed inner workings of American systems, processes, and phenomena."¹⁹

Another series by Simon, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital* (2015), demonstrates her interest in the construction and representation of historical moments via photography. In this unique series of sculptural photographs, Simon investigates how political power is created, performed, marketed, and maintained through the construction and visualization of unique flower

¹⁷ Geoffrey Batchen qtd., in Roxana Marcoci, "Between The Image And The Word," *Aperture | We The People?*, Winter 2012, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://issues.aperture.org/article/2012/4/4/between-the-image-and-the-word>.

¹⁸ "An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar," Taryn Simon, accessed, Oct. 19, 2021, <http://tarynsimon.com/works/aihu/#1>.

¹⁹ Charlotte Cotton, *World of Art: The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2020), 85.

arrangements (Ill. 2.7). Simon’s insistence on revealing the hidden procedures behind the seemingly banal is likewise apparent in this project.



Ill. 2. 7 Taryn Simon, “Paperwork and the Will of Capital,” Sep 8 — Nov 5, 2016. Installation view at Almine Rech Gallery, Brussels. Source: <https://www.alminerech.com/exhibitions/689-taryn-simon-paperwork-and-the-will-of-capital>.

Employing a blend of rigorous research processes and elaborate photographic techniques, Simon delves into the dynamic nature of representing historical accounts through archival images and texts. In this particular series, she ventures beyond the visually captivating, large-scale images of floral centerpieces to explore the undercurrents of significant political narratives. Her exploration delves into archival photographs capturing historic moments of accords, treaties, and decrees across the globe. Intriguingly, her research unveils the recurring presence of floral arrangements as symbolic elements during meetings among influential male leaders. Guided by her fascination with taxonomic systems, Simon embarked on a comprehensive journey. She collaborated with a botanist to carefully identify every flower within each image. Armed with

this ‘botanical knowledge,’ she reconstructed and photographed all thirty-six bouquets. Subsequently, she captured these floral arrangements against abstract, colored backgrounds. To complement these arresting visuals, she framed the series in substantial wooden frames and augmented them with descriptive texts recounting the specific accords. Furthermore, each specimen underwent a detailed taxonomic labeling, enhancing the series’ multidimensional narrative.²⁰

As mentioned in chapter 1, Simon’s approach aligns with that of numerous contemporary artists who share a deep concern for historicity (see p. 93). These artists embark on ambitious research endeavors that, as articulated by art historian Mark Godfrey, culminate in works that beckon viewers to contemplate the past. These works encourage viewers to forge connections between events, individuals, and objects, to engage in collective memory, and to critically reassess the prevailing representations of history within the broader cultural context. Significantly, as Godfrey underscores, the practices of photography and filmmaking offer artists limitless opportunities to revisit and reimagine history in innovative and thought-provoking ways.²¹

Simon’s interest in representations of marginalized narratives and interrogating the traditional use of the photograph as evidence that an event took place is manifested in one of her best-known early projects, *The Innocents* (2002). In this series of portraits, Simon documented individuals who served time in prison for violent crimes they did not commit. Wrongfully convicted, the individuals who gaze directly at Simon’s camera bring photography’s use as a form of “eyewitness account” into question. Acknowledging photography’s inherent duality is key to

²⁰ “Paperwork and the Will of Capital,” Almine Rech Gallery, accessed 11 Nov. 2023, <https://www.alminerech.com/exhibitions/689-taryn-simon-paperwork-and-the-will-of-capital>.

²¹ Mark Godfrey “The artist as historian,” *October* (2007): 140-172.

this work. By highlighting the instability of memory, Simon challenges the very idea of photographic truth, insomuch as “the photographs replaced the memory of the actual perpetrator,” consequently leading to wrongful convictions.²² According to curator and writer Tim Griffin, “All of these individuals were wrongly identified by those accusing them based on photographs, implying a precarious connection between how they were portrayed and the actual reality.”²³

In this regard, Simon’s body of work may also be viewed in conjunction with the concept of “Critical Realism.” Art historians Hilde Van Gelder and Jan Baetens delineate Critical Realism as more of a practice and a research methodology than a specific artistic style. It represents an approach aimed at comprehending social reality by documenting and critically annotating it, utilizing a combination of visual and textual elements.²⁴ This chapter elucidates how Simon’s *Picture Collection* project intricately interlaces aesthetic and performative experiences as well as sociological and historical narratives. The official NYPL Picture Collection functions as a reflective prism, capturing the evolving landscape of photography and visual culture throughout the twentieth century. Notably, Simons photographic work unveils the Picture Collection as an expansive repository of both collective and cultural memory, also shedding light on its pivotal role in documenting the evolving social norms and unearthing the latent power dynamics linked to issues of race and gender.²⁵

²² Taryn Simon and Brian De Palma, “Taryn Simon and Brian De Palma in Conversation,” *Artforum*, Summer 2012, 251.

²³ Tim Griffin, “An Unlikely Futurity: Taryn Simon and The Picture Collection,” in *Taryn Simon, the Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection* (2020), 7.

²⁴ Hilde Van Gelder, “Photography Today: Between Tableau and Document,” *Recherches Sémiotiques* 28, no. 1-2 (July 2010): 74.

²⁵ “Taryn Simon: The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection,” Gagosian, June 11, 2021, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2021/taryn-simon-the-color-of-a-fleas-eye-the-picture-collection>.

2.2.1 Working in the ‘Expanded Field’

Simon defines herself as a multi-disciplinary artist who has chosen photography as her preferred medium for making conceptual and visual arguments. She departs from the idea of photography as a narrowly defined artistic discipline, a stance shared by many of her contemporaries who adopt a versatile, concept-driven approach. While Simon embraces the element of contingency in her work, it is important to emphasize that each of her projects primarily finds its foundation within a thematic research-based framework. Explaining her approach in her own words:

My medium is text, graphic design, and photography, combined and equally important. I spend a lot of time on the research, this invisible process that lies behind what you see. But I always start with an idea. I’m not going around looking for images. It’s much more about the concept, and then I use whatever means I need to promote that concept. Right now, I’m working on a performance piece that has absolutely no photographic element.²⁶

Taryn Simon situates herself within the expansive domain of contemporary art photography,²⁷ aligning with a cohort of artist-photographers who traverse diverse media and conceptual realms within the paradigm of ‘post-photography.’ Drawing from precedent influences, her work is grounded in postmodernist and conceptualist practices, evoking resonances with the ‘Pictures Generation,’ a movement known for producing images that challenge conventional notions of authorship and originality while interrogating prevailing media representations.²⁸ As Art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau articulated this shift in the 1980s, arguing that a significant body of postmodern art rooted in photographic practices is driven by a “critical or deconstructive

²⁶ Kenneth Baker, “Taryn Simon - ‘The Picture Collection,’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 1, 2013, <https://www.sfgate.com/art/article/Taryn-Simon-The-Picture-Collection-4243330.php>.

²⁷ See George Baker, “Photography’s Expanded Field,” *October* 114 (Fall 2005): 120-140 ; Lucy Soutter, “Expanded Photography: Persistence of the Photographic,” *PhotoResearcher* 26 (2016): 36-43.

²⁸ Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009).

impulse.”²⁹ One could argue that, similar to artists like Sherrie Levine, who employed appropriation and re-photography, or Martha Rosler, known for her distinctive montages, Taryn Simon consciously adopts a critical approach to photography and the archive through appropriation as well as “postproduction.”

Appropriation art, historically rooted in challenging concepts like authenticity and authorship, found prominence in the 1980s through artists of the Pictures Generation.³⁰ Notably, Sherrie Levine adopted this approach, re-contextualizing existing popular culture images and objects akin to Marcel Duchamp’s readymades. In doing so, these conceptual artists critiqued the idea of artistic originality and responded to postmodern skepticism towards direct reality representations.³¹ Levine’s appropriation art also carried a feminist critique, where she reproduced renowned works by male artists like Claude Monet, Kasimir Malevich, and Walker Evans, presenting them as her own creations. This approach aimed to infuse familiar images with fresh meaning and a broader range of interpretations within a renewed feminist context.

Expanding on the practice of appropriation art from the 1980s, Nicolas Bourriaud introduced the concept of “postproduction” to describe a contemporary artistic trend that aligns with the information age and globalization. This trend, which also resonates with practices in archival art, involves a notable tendency in the creation of artworks that build upon existing works and found material. According to Bourriaud, contemporary artists are increasingly engaged in

²⁹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Winning the Game When the Rules Have Been Changed: Art Photography and Postmodernism,” *Screen* 25, no. 6 (1984): 88-103. Further reading on the intersection of photography and postmodernism see Andy Grundberg, *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography Since 1974* (New York, NY: Aperture, 1999).

³⁰ For a thorough discussion of the origins of appropriation in art as rooted in movements such as Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and Pop Art, see, David Evans, ed., *Appropriation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2009).

³¹ Craig Owens, “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: New Press, 2002), 57.

activities such as interpreting, reproducing, remixing, re-exhibiting, or incorporating works produced by others or readily available cultural products into their artistic creations.³²

As many of her projects suggest, Simon's ongoing intervention in various bureaucratic sites, including archival systems like that of the Picture Collection, is driven by a persistent critical question: "Where are the boundaries in terms of what the public or myself can access or do within those limitations?"³³ Consequently, Simon conducts a comprehensive exploration of various structures of authority and governance across her body of work. Through thorough practices of research and postproduction including appropriation and re-photography of archival materials, she reveals concealed layers beneath subjects that might initially appear mundane or neutral. Therefore, her art is often interpreted within the context of a postmodernist and poststructuralist critique of power dynamics and societal structures.

Commenting on the contemporary state of art photography and its relationship with earlier influential movements, art critic Lucy Soutter suggests that within the permissive and eclectic atmosphere of contemporary art practice, photographers have the freedom to draw upon the precedents of earlier conceptual and postmodern practices, as well as the theories that shaped them. However, they also possess the liberty to lightly incorporate their conceptual influences, creating works that resist easy verbal categorization.³⁴ In this context, Taryn Simon expands upon the foundations established by previously discussed art movements. As curator and art critic Michal Nanoru argues, Simon's art does not capitulate entirely to pure conceptualism.³⁵ Instead, she

³² See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002).

³³ Rachel Donadio, "In Taryn Simon's Paris Show, a Look at How a Hidden Hand Organizes Reality," *New York Times*, March 18, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/19/arts/design/in-taryn-simons-paris-show-a-look-at-how-a-hidden-hand-organizes-reality.html>.

³⁴ Soutter, "Conceptual Photography," *Source* 71 (Summer 2012), 22.

³⁵ Michal Nanoru, "A Pocket Companion to the Epistemology of Taryn Simon," curatorial essay for the exhibition "A Soldier is Taught to Bayonet the Enemy and Not Some Undefined Abstraction" (Prague: Galerie Rudolfinum, 2016) Unpaged.

integrates the critical dimension of conceptualism into meticulously composed formal works. Additionally, she emphasizes the materiality of photography and its intersections with various art forms, a defining characteristic of “post-photographic” practice.

A notable example of Simon’s skill and insight as both a conceptual artist and photographer can be found in her 2015 project, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital* (discussed on page 123). In this project, Simon presents a series of large-scale, vibrant images of flower bouquets. Her artistic talent is evident in her ability to create visually appealing and maliciously framed photographic prints. However, what distinguishes her work is its ability to delve deeper, as these visually captivating images simultaneously engage with socio-political histories and complex narratives. Thus, Simon’s work not only captivates with its aesthetic appeal but also encourages critical reflection on various contemporary dynamics. As Simon characterizes her own process, it combines visual appeal with critical conceptualism: “I guess I am always functioning in almost a schizophrenic form, where I’m thinking about the content but I’m simultaneously thinking about making a very seductive and effective image.”³⁶

Ultimately, as I argue, Simon integrates her roles as both an experimentalist photographer, and a conceptual artist who employs photography and photographic archives as a tool for researching and mediating intricate socio-political and cultural realities. The unique formalism and visual allure of her images are integral components of their post-photographic underpinnings. In her own words, Simon acknowledges her work’s inherent fragmentation, often embodied in single images where she endeavors to maintain a delicate balance between her conceptual and aesthetic interests: “I was always working in a fragmented form – a single image in which I’m

³⁶ Matt Black, “Reflections: Taryn Simon’s Photographic Truth,” Nowness, December 7, 2011, video 5:48, <https://www.nowness.com/series/reflections/taryn-simon-shot-true>.

constantly trying to keep both my conceptual and my visual interests alive. And sometimes one is failing and one is succeeding.”³⁷

2.3 Going Back in Time: Institutionalizing the Picture Collection

The Picture Collection, located in the New York Public Library’s iconic Stephen A. Schwarzman Building on 5th Avenue and 42nd Street in Manhattan, is renowned as the world’s largest circulating picture library.³⁸ It houses an extensive collection of 1.5 million original prints, covering a wide range of subjects, making it easily accessible and suitable for exploration. The Picture Collection was first established as a practical solution to the overwhelming number of requests for various printed images from the New York Public Library holdings.³⁹ In 1915, the library’s annual report announced: “...a picture collection for lending was desirable... for a ‘new’ sort of reader.”⁴⁰ This was a modern reader who was also literate in the visual language of widely circulated images and valued the significance of their multiple uses and meanings. When the collection officially opened, it held about 18,000 pictures (most of which came from old books and magazines). The collections were formed as part of the Circulation Division at the library, a crucial choice that meant the images could be borrowed, much like books. As writer and librarian Anthony Troncale stresses in his study on the evolution of the Picture Collection:

Historically, the development of the collection illustrates the way in which effective approaches to service and cataloging for visual materials evolved, and how the cataloging

³⁷ Taryn Simon and Brian De Palma, “Taryn Simon and Brian De Palma in Conversation,” *Artforum* 50, no. 10 (Summer 2012), <https://www.artforum.com/features/taryn-simon-and-brian-de-palma-in-conversation-200246/>.

³⁸ In this context, ‘circulation’ means that the Picture Collection is readily available for patrons to browse and borrow images upon request, facilitating their use for reference and research purposes.

³⁹ According to Chuang, among the earliest requests made by patrons visiting the Picture Collection were depictions of ballot boxes, girls playing basketball, and, quite strangely, the act of suicide. See Chuang, “The New York Public Library’s Picture Collection.”

⁴⁰ Anthony T. Troncale, “Worth Beyond Words: Romana Javitz and the New York Public Library’s Picture Collection,” originally published in *Bibliion: The Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 4, no. 1 (fall 1995), accessed April 3, 2021, <https://nypl.org/locations/tid/45/node/62019>.

of pictures came to diverge from the traditional bibliographical orientation of descriptive cataloging, emphasizing instead the maximum number of access points to a picture's subject content.⁴¹

The modern longing for visual material was driven by many factors, such as immigration into New York City at the beginning of the twentieth century, advances in printing and publishing, the developing graphic arts and advertising industries, as well as increased innovations in photography (making amateur photography a widespread practice) and other novel reproduction technologies that facilitated the dissemination of high volumes of printed and visual material. As Troncale observes: "Soon, the American public was bombarded with graphically oriented media. This created a huge demand for illustrations and eye-catching layouts in advertising, magazines, newspapers, and movie and theatre posters, as well as for textile, architectural, and industrial designs."⁴² Advancements in film and photography in the early twentieth century, coupled with the increased use of pictures as a means of cultural communication and entertainment, produced the demand for an accessible image bank at the NYPL.

Furthermore, this historical juncture marked the emergence of what is now considered a fundamental concept: the act of sharing and circulating images as well as drawing inspiration from visual references. Viewed from a contemporary perspective, this period underscores the idea that we interpret images by referencing other images, and as a result, we repurpose what Bourriaud refers to as "objects that have already been influenced by other objects" in contemporary visual culture.⁴³ Consequently, each image or object contains a multitude of layered meanings and underlying significances, ready to be (re)interpreted by the observer.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Anthony T. Troncale, "Worth Beyond Words."

⁴³ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, 8.

Importantly, unlike a museum or a special collection, the Picture Collection's image folders are located in open stacks for free browsing and are organized by subject in an alphabetical index. Users can search not only by the names of artists or time periods but by everyday terms.⁴⁴ For example, Joshua Chuang, the former senior curator of photography at the library, highlighted how the production designers of the TV series 'Mad Men' turned to the Picture Collection to authentically recreate a 1950s shopping bag. According to Chuang, this resource uniquely unlocks concealed facets of visual culture, providing an unparalleled opportunity to access its hidden layers.⁴⁵

According to a recent publication by media-studies scholar Diana Kamin, her book explores how image collections, organized and made available for public consumption, came to define a key feature of contemporary visual culture during the twentieth century. She notes that The Picture Collection, along with other image archives, played a pivotal role in shaping the public's perception of photographic images while also establishing extensive collections with aspirations of universality.⁴⁶

Founded in 1915, the Collection is constantly growing, "because creative people always need new ideas".⁴⁷ Consequently, the archive was pieced together by requests from the public, such

⁴⁴In 1911, the library had already collected a substantial number of fine art prints and book illustrations. However, both the Print Room and the library's Art Division were unable to meet the increasing demands of the public. This was because the existing collections consisted of rare and delicate images that couldn't be loaned for use outside the library premises. Furthermore, these collections were organized based on the artist's name rather than by subject matter. This highlighted the clear necessity for a specialized collection of images organized by subject headings, making it easier for people to find, search, and retrieve the images they needed. See Troncale, "Worth Beyond Words."

⁴⁵ Arthur Lubow, "Hands Off the Library's Picture Collection!," *The New York Times*, August 3, 2021, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/03/arts/design/new-york-public-library-picture-collection.html>.

⁴⁶ See Diana Kamin, *Picture-Work: How Libraries, Museums, and Stock Agencies Launched a New Image Economy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2023). Therein Kamin examines three institutions: the New York Public Library, the Museum of Modern Art, and the stock agency H. Armstrong Roberts Inc.

⁴⁷ NYPL, "The NYPL Picture Collection Behind the Scenes," November 17, 2015, YouTube video, 2:17, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uagmNkFD70>.

as, “I need a picture of a solar eclipse” or “people treading grapes.” The librarian would file the request and let the library user know when they had found a corresponding picture.⁴⁸ As previously highlighted, this extensive collection comprises 12,000 curated folders, each bearing labels that span a wide spectrum of themes, from the profoundly significant and historically relevant (such as Abortion, Israel, Voting, Americanization, Weapon, Black History, Unemployment, Vaccine) to the lighthearted, whimsical, or even mundane (encompassing categories like Food-Sandwiches, Turkish Baths, Fantastic Architecture, Children-Punishments, Soda Fountains, Candles, Mermaids). Additionally, it ventures into the realms of human experience, delving into the physical and emotional states of individuals, encapsulating concepts like Sadness, Yawning, Kissing, Fear, Pain, and Emotions (Ill. 2.8).

This varied classification system serves as a testament to the collection’s dedication to the comprehensive collection, documentation, and categorization of diverse facets of human culture and history within its continually expanding picture archive. Consequently, the comparison to Google Images is inevitable. Indeed, numerous writers have drawn parallels between the Picture Collection and Google Images, or similar contemporary online databases. Taryn Simon herself has referred to “this extensive archive of images as a precursor to Internet search engines.”⁴⁹ The curator of Simon’s exhibition, Joshua Chuang sees the entire history of the Collection as an insightful counter-narrative to that of Google Images.⁵⁰ Scholar Diana Kamin succinctly describes the Picture Collection as “like Google Images but in paper and folders.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Jessica Cline, in discussion with the author, NYPL, New York, April 2019.

⁴⁹ “Taryn Simon: The Picture Collection.” Almine Rech Gallery, November 2013, <https://www.alminerech.com/exhibitions/2817-taryn-simon>.

⁵⁰ Chuang, “The New York Public Library’s Picture Collection.”

⁵¹ Kamin, “Total Recall.” See also: Illustrator Chris Raschka’s remarks on the so-called uselessness of the Picture Collection in the digital age: “Nowadays you don’t need any of this, of course; you just Google it. We are no longer in the Stone Age.” Raschka quoted in Billy Parrot, “The Google Challenge: Google Images versus The Picture Collection,” The New York Public Library, October 11, 2012, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2012/10/11/challenge-google-images-vs-picture-collection>.

The unparalleled uniqueness of its well-ordered and highly diverse classification system was emphasized by the curators of the 2015 exhibition celebrating the centennial of the Picture Collections: “In fact, pictures of New York City alone are broken down into more than 300 different categories. Whether you are looking for pictures of people and objects seen from behind (“Rear Views”) or cats wearing clothes (“Animals as Humans”), the Picture Collection has you covered.”⁵² In alignment with Panzer’s astute observation regarding the Collection’s curated taxonomy, it becomes evident that these very categories themselves have evolved into historical artifacts. For instance, consider the intriguing category of “Parties,” which encapsulates a rich tapestry of visual narratives.⁵³



Ill. 2. 8 The Picture Collection: “Folder Example.” Source: <https://libguides.nypl.org/picturecollection>.

⁵² “100 Years of the Picture Collection: From Abacus to Zoology,” The New York Public Library, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/100-years-picture-collection-abacus-zoology>.

⁵³ Panzer, “Pictures at Work,” 132-33.

Panzer's rhetorical question naturally begets another, equally pertinent inquiry that underscores the unparalleled nature of this collection: In a contemporary landscape where photography has predominantly transitioned into a digital and immaterial medium, where else can one readily encounter such a vast repository of tangible images? Furthermore, where else can one freely and physically engage with these images, treating them as material artifacts, with the liberty to borrow up to sixty of them at a time and carry them back to their own space for personal exploration and contemplation? This distinctive accessibility and materiality further solidify the unique position of the New York Public Library's Picture Collection in today's digital visual culture.

Moreover, in considering the relationship between the Picture Collection and contemporary online visual databased like Google Images, it is crucial to acknowledge both their similarities and distinctions. Former Picture Collection head curator, Billy Parrott, underscores these distinctions and addresses a pertinent question that arises: "Why maintain a collection at the library when a similar resource is available remotely on any internet-enabled device?"⁵⁴ According to Parrott, Google Images indeed offers rapid access to a vast repository of images, but the Picture Collection possesses a unique capability. It can provide specialized, high-quality images related to specific subjects, often unavailable through online searches. Parrott further points out the limitations of Google Images, particularly in terms of image availability and image capacity. He concludes that the Picture Collection stands as a repository of "quality and expertise."⁵⁵ Utilizing it ensures that searches remain particular and free from amateurish clip art and unrelated results based solely on keywords. Therefore, for those who prioritize quality over quantity, the Picture Collection

⁵⁴ Billy Parrot, "The Google Challenge: Google Images versus The Picture Collection," The New York Public Library, October 11, 2012, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2012/10/11/challenge-google-images-vs-picture-collection>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

maintains its relevance and value in the digital age. As Parrott articulates, “Google can bring you back one million images, but the Picture Collection can bring you back the right one.”⁵⁶

2.3.1 Librarian Romana Javitz and the Picture Collection

Romana Javitz (1903-1980), the Russian-born curator who led the Picture Collection from 1928 to 1968, played a pivotal role in shaping its character and mission. She envisioned the collection as a utopian venture, uniting images and text to provide a unique informational resource to the public. Long before the advent of our current image-saturated society, Javitz strongly believed that “pictures are now a universal form of communication.”⁵⁷ With a commitment to accessibility and inclusivity, Javitz oversaw a significant expansion of the collection, amassing over six million images at its peak. She continually refined the cataloging system, documenting diverse subjects, including often-overlooked themes like folk art, documentary photography, and African American life.⁵⁸ Javitz’s background in the arts made her receptive to artists and cultural figures, and she fostered relationships with renowned photographers like Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and others.⁵⁹

Throughout her influential tenure, Javitz firmly opposed the prevailing aesthetic discourse that sought to elevate photography to the status of ‘fine art,’ a modernist viewpoint dominant in

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Javitz quoted in Griffin, “An Unlikely Futurity,” 5.

⁵⁸ Going to great lengths to expand this unique image bank, Javitz had the audacity to destroy books and periodicals (within the framework of a library at that) specifically for the purpose of cutting out the plates and illustrations to enhance the Picture Collection in various subject areas that might have previously been under-documented. Apparently, while fellow librarians were horrified by Javitz’s deconstruction methods, she was quite proud of her practices. “To her thinking, dismembering a book not only allowed for redistribution of its pieces toward other, perhaps better, purposes, but also demystified the book as an object.” See Anthony T. Troncale, “Worth Beyond Words.”

⁵⁹ Javitz graduated from Hunter College (NYC) at the age of sixteen. She studied art at the Art Students League and spent a year studying anatomy and zoology at Columbia University. She began working at the New York Public Library in 1920 and joined the Picture Collection in 1926. See Panzer, “Pictures at Work,” 136.

the early twentieth century.⁶⁰ Instead, she consistently championed the idea that photographs primarily functioned as factual documents, serving as tangible records of reality while also reflecting societal and historical transformations. Crucially, Javitz held the belief that a photograph transcends being a mere “unmediated copy of the real.”⁶¹ In her view, it embodies a valuable source of information that should be easily accessible, comprehensible to a broad spectrum of users, and adaptable to various purposes. This pragmatic and ‘anti-aesthetic’ approach to photography had a profound and enduring impact on the collection’s character. Javitz’s emphasis on photographs as practical documents meant to assist the library’s patrons reshaped the collection’s mission. Her conviction that images “needed to be put into work” motivated users to actively employ visual materials for diverse objectives, leaving an indelible mark on the collection’s ongoing evolution.⁶²

At the same time, Javitz held a somewhat “romantic” belief in the inherent truthfulness and objectivity of photography and, consequently, in the potential of the Picture Collection to facilitate

⁶⁰ Javitz’s conviction in the capacity of photographs as functional documents, capable of serving purposes beyond mere aesthetic appreciation, contrasted sharply with the contemporary stance of Beaumont Newhall, the inaugural photography curator at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Newhall was dedicated to advancing photography as a fine art and situating it firmly within the realm of art history. In 1937, his exhibition “Photography 1839-1937” at MoMA, followed by the publication of “The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present Day,” left an enduring mark on the recognition of photography as a legitimate art form. By the final edition of his work on “The History of Photography” in 1982, Newhall’s approach, conceived as a history of aesthetic concepts, had become a canonical reference and a standard text in art history. Advocating for a modernist interpretation of photography as an art form distinguished by its aesthetic qualities and unique craftsmanship, Newhall championed a specific lineage of photographic masters. As described by photography historian François Brunet, this lineage included practitioners such as Peter Henry Emerson, Alfred Stieglitz, and Paul Strand, celebrated for the formal expressiveness of their images and the technical excellence of their prints. See, Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present Day*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1964) ; François Brunet, “Robert Taft in Beaumont Newhall’s Shadow – A Difficult Dialogue between Two American Histories of Photography,” *Études Photographiques* 30 (2012): 3.

Newhall’s history has also received a great deal of criticism over the years. It came under attack for its selective readings and for canonizing modernism through an exclusive group of male photographic masters. This critique was formulated most sharply by Christopher Phillips in a landmark *October* article which targeted MoMA’s growing power as a formative museum of photography under curators like Newhall and John Szarkowski. See Christopher Phillips, “The Judgment Seat of Photography,” *October*, no. 22 (Autumn 1982): 27–63.

⁶¹ Allan Sekula, “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” *Artforum*, 13:5, January 1975: 36-45.

⁶² Panzer, “Pictures at Work,” 151.

human communication. As expressed in a 1942 essay, she regarded the collection as an all-encompassing and impartial repository of visual aspects within human knowledge. It was consulted and borrowed for addressing specific inquiries for “factual data.”⁶³ Javitz’s perspective portrayed each image within the Picture Collection as a catalyst for boundless ideas, creative endeavors, and reinterpretations. She firmly believed that the power of images resided in their capacity to have multiple meanings and enable broad and unforeseeable modes of understanding and interpretation.⁶⁴ Ultimately, Javitz took pride not only in the functionality and accessibility of her picture archive but also expressed open criticism toward the art museum’s aesthetic approach to pictures, which she regarded as limited and exclusive. She drew a comparison between the dynamic nature of a “living” library and the more static nature of a “dead” museum, where the majority of its collections remained out of public view or reach. From her perspective, libraries possessed the unique ability to continually infuse photographic images with new meaning and vitality through their accessibility, circulation, and distribution—a capacity that surpassed the institutional prestige of museums.⁶⁵

Javitz’s pioneering approach to image collection and archiving, coupled with her determined opposition to the prevailing aesthetic and curatorial norms of photography (largely shaped by MoMA at the time), can be interpreted as an act of feminist defiance. Consequently, Javitz’s relative obscurity within the historiography of photography stands as one of the unfortunate consequences of her defiance within the predominantly male-dominated realm of art

⁶³ Javitz, quoted in Griffin, “An Unlikely Futurity,” 5.

⁶⁴ In 1940, Javitz noted that photographs consistently amazed those who worked with them due to their astonishing versatility. For instance, she cited an FSA photograph, possibly one like “Wife and Children of Sharecropper in Washington County, Arkansas,” taken by Arthur Rothstein in 1935 or a similar image by Ben Shahn with a nearly identical title and date. This photograph, originally created for the FSA, served multiple purposes: a religious organization used it for fundraising, a birth control group employed it for propaganda, a visiting European critiqued democracy with it, and a mental hygienist used a detail of the mother’s face to demonstrate the link between insecurity and mental illnesses. See Javitz quoted in Panzer, “Pictures at Work,” 150.

⁶⁵ Kamin, “Total Recall.”

photography and curatorship.⁶⁶ The debate between Javitz's Picture Collection and MoMA's perspective on photography can be seen as emblematic of a larger dialectical debate within the field of photography. As Panzer aptly characterizes it, this can be likened to a conflict between two factions: one that prioritizes images as conveyors of information and another that places greater emphasis on the aesthetic role of photographic images within the context of art history.⁶⁷

Further, in my interpretation, Javitz's pragmatic approach to photography aligns with the theoretical framework of the 'performative,' which serves as the overarching lens through which the contemporary case studies in this dissertation are visually analyzed. According to Javitz's philosophy of "pictures at work," the images within the Picture Collection are dynamic entities whose meanings and significance are inherently intertwined with their use and interpretation in specific contexts. Therefore, these archival images are not solely meant for passive observation; instead, they are crafted to encourage active engagement and utilization for various purposes. As scholar Diana Kamin asserts in connection with Javitz's approach, "It shifts a philosophy of the image from an ontological plane that declares what images *are* to a pragmatist mode that seeks to understand how they *operate*."⁶⁸

Indeed, one could posit that Javitz's approach to using and learning from images may have been influenced by the philosophical underpinnings of philosopher John Dewey's pragmatism, particularly his emphasis on "instrumentalism," "experience," and "action" in the context of translating ideas into practical applications and generating knowledge through active problem-solving. Significantly, Dewey's aesthetic theory also holds relevance in this context, as it underscores art as a distinctive mode of experience capable of facilitating novel insights through

⁶⁶ Panzer, "Pictures at Work," 135.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Kamin, "Total Recall."

a dynamic interaction between the observer and a work of art.⁶⁹ Within this framework, Javitz's approach highlights the central role of performative interactions within the Picture Collection archive. It underscores the image's influence on the viewer and emphasizes the potential for viewers to actively engage in interpreting and utilizing these images for various purposes.

By highlighting the communicative power of photography and the myriad potential uses of any given image and adopting a non-hierarchical, socially oriented approach to archiving, Javitz and her team of librarians strategically positioned the Picture Collection as a diverse and easily accessible visual resource that evolved in response to user requests. This user-driven approach was underscored by the fact that subject headings were primarily inspired by public input, rather than preselecting images based on their perceived quality. Javitz and her successors deliberately refrained from solely curating what they deemed as the finest examples to fill their folders.⁷⁰ As a result, the Picture Collection symbolized "a working metaphor for democracy"⁷¹ in their eyes, signifying the incorporation of democratic principles into America's national identity.⁷²

The Picture Collection also assumed a patriotic function during World War II.⁷³ In times of war, touting the ideals of American democracy was even more useful for promoting Javitz's mission: "As in peace, so deep in wartime, The daily calls on this picture service emphasized the Library's role as a great tool for democracy, where all facets of each subject were freely included

⁶⁹ See John Dewey, "Art as Experience," in *The Richness of Art Education: Reflective Thinking Through Collaborative Inquiry*, ed. Howard Cannatella (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2008), 33-48 ; John J. McDermott, ed., *The Philosophy of John Dewey, Volume 1: The Structure of Experience and Volume 2: The Lived Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁷⁰ Joshua Chuang, "Pictures at Work," in *Taryn Simon: The Color of a Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection*, ed. Joshua Chuang, Tim Griffin, and Taryn Simon (Paris: Cahiers d'art, 2020), 19.

⁷¹ Panzer, "Pictures at Work," 129.

⁷² Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Why the United States Should Spread Democracy," *Discussion Paper*, no. 98-07, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, March 1998.

⁷³ Panzer, "Pictures at Work", 146. According to Javitz's reports, the Collection served the war effort mainly by fulfilling the demand for visual information related to the war, including a variety of maps, images of the "enemies," army posters, government manuals, and home-front propaganda.

and available for everyone's use."⁷⁴ Javitz and her staff were known for being open to requests from both curious "nobodies" and famous artists like Warhol and Cornell.⁷⁵ In practical terms, the democratic principles that underpinned the Picture Collection emphasized accessibility and active involvement. The collection's formation was the result of a collaborative effort involving the research conducted by librarians, user queries, and the requests made by the general public. Javitz underscored this point in 1954 when she reminded her staff that "every subject in our collection evolved because someone requested it." She emphasized that the collection expanded solely in response to the public's desire for growth and its corresponding needs.⁷⁶



Ill. 2. 9 "Browsing the Picture Collection at the New York Public Library's Stephen A. Schwarzman Building."
Source: Artforum International, <https://www.artforum.com/columns/diana-kamin-on-the-new-york-public-librarys-picture-collection-250502/>.

⁷⁴ Javitz quoted in Panzer, 146.

⁷⁵ Lubow, "Hands Off the Library's Picture Collection."

⁷⁶ Javitz quoted in Diana Kamin, "Total Recall."

This notion is equally applicable to Simon’s artistic intervention into the Picture Collection, as the curator of Simon’s exhibition Joshua Chuang observes “Simon’s improvised compositions feature only the images that have endured the evolving interpretations of a specific subject by librarians and patrons.”⁷⁷ The active role of the public and its collaborative influence with librarians in shaping the Picture Collection, and by extension the shaping of collective memory, persists today. In fact, the Picture Collection stands as a unique and enduring institution—an extensive photographic archive of tangible images that remains freely accessible for borrowing, perhaps the last of its kind (Ill. 2.9).

2.3.2 Internal Circulations: Historical and Contemporary Analysis

Given the number of artists who made use of the Picture Collection’s holdings, one could argue that the Collection had an essential role in the broader narrative of American art and photography. This significance is underscored by historical instances: In 1936 photographers Ben Shahn and Walker Evans of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) actively sought guidance from Romana Javitz concerning their organization’s picture library. Noteworthy supporters of the Picture Collection, including Dorothea Lange and Lewis Hine, joined their initiative. Together, they were eager for their director, Roy Stryker, to personally witness the practicality and value of a documentary picture file in action.⁷⁸ This proved to be a fruitful relationship. Javitz advised Stryker and the FSA on various issues relating to the organization and classification of its picture archive. During the 1930s, original works by artists such as Evans and Lange were introduced into the collection alongside mass-produced illustrations. Ultimately, Stryker donated approximately

⁷⁷ Chuang, “Pictures at Work,” 19.

⁷⁸ Javitz quoted in Panzer, “Pictures at Work,” 143.

40,000 FSA images to the Picture Collection, as he feared that the Library of Congress might disapprove of the photographs' content and discard them.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the FSA photographs, alongside over 80,000 original prints, were relocated to the newly established Photography Department within the NYPL's Art Division, also known as the Wallach Division's Photography Collection.⁷⁹ The institutional status of the Photography Department is akin to that of a collection dedicated to fine art prints and drawings.⁸⁰ This reclassification of the FSA images as valuable, 'non-circulating' works of art, positioned within the established canon of photography, was a direct response to the increasing prices of these artists' works and photography as a whole in the art market.⁸¹

Interestingly, in email correspondence dated 2013 between Taryn Simon and art critic and curator Tim Griffin, Simon articulated her critical perspective concerning the internal circulation of the FSA images, their removal from the Picture Collection, and their subsequent repositioning within the library.⁸² Simon stated that "Those works that later became 'valued' were mined out of this public collection and relegated to an exclusive space, despite the artists' express wish for their images to be democratically available."⁸³

⁷⁹ The NYPL's Photography Collection was established in 1980 under the stewardship of photo curator and librarian Julia Van Haften. She concurrently oversaw the allocation and transfer of original prints from the Picture Collection to the Photography Collection within the library's art department.

⁸⁰ Panzer, "Pictures at Work," 132.

⁸¹ Griffin, "An Unlikely Futurity," 5. In his article, Griffin brings forward some compelling evidence supporting the commercially driven orientation of the NYPL in its decision to remove the original FSA prints from the Picture Collection and transfer them into the Art and Photography Division. See Griffin p. 13, footnote 20: "A memorandum from the Picture Collection's Mildred Wright notes that the FSA images are 'works of art' and are not only of significant historical importance but are of monetary value as well. Many of them are worth several thousand dollars in today's photography market. With continuing budgetary cuts, it becomes increasingly difficult to plan a future for these photographs within the Picture Collection." Memorandum from Mildred Wright to Robert Foy, January 13, 1992, Picture Collection records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.

⁸² In "The Color of a Flea's Eye" exhibition monograph, Simon also included a long list titled "Photographs Removed From the Picture Collection and Transferred to The Photography Collection of The New York Public Library 1982-2020." The list includes the names of practitioners followed by a selection of images of works by Henri Cartier-Bresson, Nadar, Berenice Abbott, Ansel Adams, Helen Levitt, Brassai, and Walker Evans, among others. See Taryn Simon et. al, *Taryn Simon: The Color of a Flea's Eye*, pp. 365-411.

⁸³ Griffin, "An Unlikely Futurity," 5.

Simon was certainly not the first to articulate such criticism regarding the compelled reassessment of aesthetic value and subsequent removal of archival images from the Picture Collection. In his 1989 essay titled “The Museum’s Old, The Library’s New Subject,” art critic Douglas Crimp criticized the establishment of the Photography Collection at the NYPL as emblematic of the institutionalization and heightened aestheticization of photography at the time.⁸⁴ Crimp argued that this development coincided with a period when photography’s market value was rapidly rising, prompting the NYPL to recognize the unique and highly valuable collection of original photographic material it possessed. Consequently, as he asserted, “these materials are thus to be reclassified according to their newly acquired value, the value that is now attached to the ‘artists’ who made the photographs.”⁸⁵ Crimp openly expressed his concerns about this transition, contending that reclassifying numerous images as legitimate aesthetic art within the library’s new photo department would compromise the original context and multifaceted functions of photography, as initially conceived by Romana Javitz and her team within the framework of the Picture Collection. With this institutional repositioning, Crimp argued that photographs, previously prized for their informational content, would now be predominantly assessed for their “style of expression.”⁸⁶ This aesthetically driven shift, he contended, isolated photography from its wider social and cultural contexts.

When it comes to Simon’s criticism, I find her assertion concerning “accessibility” and “inclusivity” to be paradoxical, especially in the context of Simon’s own artistic engagement with and repurposing of images from the Picture Collection archive. These aesthetic interventions have undeniably situated the Collection’s images, in their repositioning as contemporary art, within a

⁸⁴ Douglas Crimp, “The Museum’s Old/ The Library’s New Subject,” in *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993), 66-83.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

more exclusive realm – that of the renowned ‘mega’ art gallery franchise owned by prominent art dealer Larry Gagosian.⁸⁷ As an artist frequently commissioned by commercial galleries and featured in major museum exhibitions, Simon is intricately connected to the privileged institutional system. As much as contemporary aspires for inclusivity and democratic engagement with art, this system tends to exclude a substantial segment of the general public, whether intentionally or inadvertently.⁸⁸

Another, more recent case of ‘meta-circulation’ of the circulating Picture Collection occurred in 2017, when it was relocated from the third floor of the Mid-Manhattan branch of the NYPL. This transition to the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, the Library’s main branch, carries its own significance, as well as consequences for the Picture Collection. Having been relocated to the central building, also known as the iconic flagship branch of the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue, the Picture Collection was now part of “the library’s premier research center, renowned for its extraordinary historical collections.”⁸⁹ As the Collection’s visibility and significance evolved, library administrators and conservators opted to restructure its service approach. William P. Kelly, the director of the research libraries, articulated this shift when he remarked in an interview with the New York Times, “It is either ephemera and ephemera and doesn’t belong in a research library, or else it is an archive that should be preserved. We’re trying to move it from being an outlier and satellite to being an integral part of the collection.”⁹⁰

⁸⁷ See Jonathan Jones, “Why Gagosian Is the Starbucks of the Art World – and the Savior,” *The Guardian*, March 24, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2014/mar/24/larry-gagosian-art-galleries>.

⁸⁸ According to sociologist Kathleen McLean, cultural institutions such as museums and major art galleries, whether publicly or privately funded, open for a small fee or free of charge, strive to maintain the illusion of democratic access while, in reality, often catering primarily to the interests of benefactors and specific social groups, inadvertently excluding many others. See Kathleen McLean, “Museum Exhibitions and the Dynamic of Dialogue,” *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, no. 3. (Summer 1999), 128.

⁸⁹ “Stephen A. Schwarzman Building,” The New York Public Library, accessed November 12, 2021, <https://www.nypl.org/locations/schwarzman>.

⁹⁰ Lubow, “Hands Off the Library’s Picture Collection!”

Initially, the decision leaned towards prioritizing “archival preciousness” and conservation, ultimately favoring these aspects over circulation and democratic accessibility. However, by early 2022, a significant shift occurred, whereby access to the collection would be granted to visitors only by special request. This represented a complete reversal of the Collection’s initial ‘democratic’ and ‘pragmatic’ philosophies, which emphasized accessibility, inclusiveness, spontaneous interactivity, and creativity. As noted by New York Times journalist Arthur Lubow, “without providing the jolt and tickle of serendipity, however, the Picture Collection will be drained of its élan.”⁹¹ In an *Artform* opinion article, art critic Diana Kamin criticized this shift as excessively traditional, asserting that it reflects a “classic materialist epistemology of the museum and library conservator,” wherein the objects’ meaning and value is deemed contingent on the preservation of their original physical integrity.⁹² According to Kamin, the paramount concern should not solely be the images themselves but also the social interactions and human engagements facilitated by the Picture Collection, which remains the sole circulating, browsable, and ever-expanding image collection in the U.S. (and perhaps globally).⁹³

Similarly, Taryn Simon, alongside numerous artists and devotees of the Picture Collection strongly opposed the library’s decision to fully archive the collection. These pertinent issues and debates revolving around the Collection underscore the significance of Simon’s artistic intervention exhibitions that delved into the Collection’s socio-cultural context at that specific juncture. Her aesthetic photo-collages, utilizing the archival images, could be seen as an additional reflection of the internal debates pertaining to archival concerns, encompassing conservation, value, and accessibility. In fact, Simon’s final iteration of the project, the “The Color of a Flea’s

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Diana Kamin, “Total Recall.”

⁹³ Ibid.

Eye” exhibition in 2021, coincided with a critical phase when the Collection faced an uncertain future.⁹⁴

2.4 Re-Archiving the NYPL’s Picture Collection: Taryn Simon’s Interventions

When evaluating this project as a whole, we should keep in mind that there are two archives at work: the original Picture Collection at the New York Public Library and the new, morphing archive—Simon’s artistic project, which consciously carries the same title (*The Picture Collection*). Ultimately, this project could be interpreted as an archive of an original archive that retraces a history of (mostly American) photography and image collecting/archiving from 1915 to the present.

One of the initial issues that piqued my interest in Simon’s project was the evolving significance of the archival images based on their institutional context. Is a visit to Simon’s gallery exhibition at Gagosian somehow akin to the experience of exploring the monumental Picture Collection at the New York Public Library? A productive approach to addressing this question is to consider Simon’s multi-year project as both a reconstruction and an extension of the Picture Collection, essentially a ‘performance’ of intervention within the official archive. From this perspective, it becomes evident that Simon is motivated by a mission to extract the Picture Collection, along with its distinctive history, from the confines of the library’s reading room and make it accessible to new audiences. In the process, she intentionally blurs the conventional boundaries of the archive, facilitating wider access to its contents and narratives.

⁹⁴ At the time of writing, the protest against the NYPL’s decision to archive the Collection has prevailed. The NYPL has chosen to abandon its previously announced plan to archive the Picture Collection, opting to retain its current approach based on patron feedback, which underscores the critical importance of the Collection’s continued circulation and browsability. Anthony Marx, the president of the library, issued a statement confirming this decision. See Arthur Lubow, “New York Public Library to Keep Picture Collection Browsable,” *New York Times*, Sep. 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/17/arts/new-york-public-library-picture-collection.html>.

Indeed, mirroring the practices of an archivist, Simon engages in various archival and archival and museological procedures. These encompass the collection of images/objects, documentation, and cataloging of these items, the establishment of an archival framework, the selection of specific works re-photography and for exhibition, and the curation of the show. In a reflexive manner, Simon's work can be perceived as an "archive of an archive," a collection that has momentarily ventured beyond its institutional confines only to be recontextualized as contemporary art, examining the essence and functioning of the Picture Collection.

Artistic interventions in institutional archives or collections are certainly not a new practice. Andy Warhol's 1969 "Raid the Icebox 1" exhibition at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art is considered a key reference point for artist-curated exhibitions and museum programs with a similar objective of inviting contemporary artists to experiment with museum holdings.⁹⁵ Indeed, artists working with museums and similar cultural institutions, operating in their spaces and curating their collections, have become an increasingly common phenomenon. As scholar and curator Natalie Musteata argues, this practice is a staple of the contemporary art world, with new series and exhibitions of this kind emerging regularly.⁹⁶ Along the same lines, scholar

⁹⁵ According to scholar and curator Natalie Musteata, Warhol's 1969 commissioned museum intervention marked the beginning of a proliferating trend known as the artist-as-curator phenomena. Some noteworthy artist-curated exhibitions and museum programs with artists' interventions from recent decades include: "The Artist Eye" (1977-1990) at the National Gallery, London; "Artist's Choice" (1989-ongoing) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Fred Wilson – "Mining the Museum" (1992) at The Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore; Susan Hiller – "From the Freud Museum 1991–6" at the Freud Museum, London (also exhibited at Tate Modern); Sophie Calle's interventionist exhibitions include "Appointment" (1999) at the Freud Museum in London, "Sophie Calle and her guest Serena Carone" (2016) at the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature in Paris, and "Sophie Calle and her guest Jean-Paul Demoule: The Ghosts of Orsay" (2022) at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris ; Tacita Dean, "Monet Hates Me" (2021) – (exhibition and monograph based on the artist's interventions in the archives and special collections of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles while Dean was an artist-in-residence 2014-15); "Carte Blanche" (2007-ongoing) Palais de Tokyo, Paris; "Contemporary Art in Versailles" (2008-ongoing); "Artists Meet Archives," (2018-2019), Photoszene, Cologne. For a detailed analysis of the history of contemporary artist-curated exhibitions and interventions in museums and art institutions, see: Natalie Musteata, "The 'I' of the Artist-Curator"(PhD diss., The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2019). See also: Alison Green, *When Artists Curate: Contemporary Art and the Exhibition as Medium* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018).

⁹⁶ Natalie Musteata, "The 'I' of the Artist-Curator," (PhD diss., The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2019), 12.

Simon Stephens describes museums as being “awash with artists,” listing a number of significant projects in which museums large and small invited contemporary artists to collaborate with their collections and audiences.⁹⁷ These projects are described by Stephens as “fresh and innovative” perspectives on collections and displays, implying both that permanent museum displays might be lacking something crucial and that artists possess a particular capacity for working with a museum’s holdings in ways that curators and exhibition designers might not.⁹⁸ In the context of archival institutions, scholar Kathy Carbone has observed a notable trend over the past decade. There has been a heightened interest in the archival field regarding “how artists engage with, utilize, and reinterpret archives.” This trend has spurred a growing movement within professional archival practice and scholarship, advocating for the implementation of artist-in-residence projects within these institutions.⁹⁹

An influential “interventionist project” worth mentioning in relation to Simon’s work is American artists Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel’s 1977 *Evidence* project (Ill. 2.10), a key early example of, and highly conceptual artistic intervention in, various official photo archives. The artists’ influential photobook, also entitled, *Evidence*,¹⁰⁰ was the result of an ongoing, tedious archival project in which Sultan and Mandel sifted through some two million photographs in the files of hundreds of American corporations, including government agencies (e.g., a local NASA office in California) and educational, medical, and technical institutions. Searching for the bizarre and chaotic, as well as the aesthetic, in institutional photography archives, Sultan and Mandel selected fifty-nine pictures and sequenced them into an artist’s book. Their idiosyncratic

⁹⁷ Simon Stephens, “Artistic Merits,” *Museums Journal* 112 (2012): 22.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁹⁹ Kathy Carbone, “Archival art: Memory Practices, Interventions, and Productions,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 63, no. 2 (2020): 257.

¹⁰⁰ Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel, *Evidence* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1977, reprinted 2004).

sequencing of uncaptioned, black-and-white images forms an allusive and somewhat surreal visual narrative that challenges the perception of documentary photography and archival findings as hard evidence. As the artists explained in the press release for the San Francisco exhibition, “By definition these found objects are records and by implication they are cultural artifacts. This is a poetic exploration upon the restructuring of imagery.”¹⁰¹ Interestingly, *Evidence* seems like the proper conceptual precursor to Simon’s *American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007) inasmuch as the artists sought to gain access to various official institutions and expose, through the medium of photography, that which is usually unseen or unknown within American culture.



Ill. 2. 10 Image from artists’ book *Evidence* by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel (New York: D.A.P, 2017, reissue of the 1977 publication). Source: <https://moom.cat/en/item/evidence>.

For *The Picture Collection* project, Simon likewise worked critically inside a cultural-artistic institution, questioning the very infrastructure of the picture archive as well as creating a dialogue between her own artworks and the official archive. Certainly, Simon’s intervention, as well as those of the artists mentioned earlier, are rooted in the principles of “institutional critique.” This approach engages in a counter-dynamic, offering both criticism and resistance against

¹⁰¹ Sandra S. Phillips, “A History of the Evidence,” *The Paris Review*, May 3, 2017, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/05/03/a-history-of-the-evidence/>.

dominant cultural and institutional power hierarchies and ideologies. Institutional critique emerged during the late 1960s, heavily influenced by the societal changes and protests of 1968. It constitutes a multifaceted conceptual art practice focused on examining the ideological, social, and economic functions of art institutions. Furthermore, it seeks to uncover the power dynamics that underlie the prevailing discourses and presentation of art. In essence, it critiques how museums, as sites of investigation, wield and sometimes misuse their presumed authority.¹⁰²

More specifically, one could argue that Simon's interventionist action is in accordance with the "second wave" of institutional critique, which expanded its reach during the 1980s and 1990s to include institutions and issues beyond the art museum or gallery. As art historian James Meyer posits, once the "first wave" had become institutionalized, or an art world trend in its own right, other sites (e.g., natural history museums, historical societies, zoos, parks) have become the center of such artistic investigations.¹⁰³ Therefore, it can be argued that Simon's *Picture Collection* project serves as an exemplar of a notable facet of contemporary art practice. Specifically, it involves active participation in and intervention within cultural institutions, physical spaces, collections, and archives.

In her archival intervention, Taryn Simon not only repurposes and reuses the contents of the collection's circulating folders but also integrates the collection's existing classification system into her own artistic compositions. It is worth noting that Simon made minimal alterations to both the images and subject headings of the files she borrowed from the Collection. Her work serves as a profound reflection on the materiality and structural aspects of archival practices, highlighting

¹⁰² For formative texts on institutional critique in modern and contemporary art see the following: Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology, or: What's 'Contemporary' in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (London: Koenig Books, 2014); Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Gail Andersoned, *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift* (Lanham: Alta Mira Press, 2012).

¹⁰³ James Meyer, *What Happened to Institutional Critique?* (New York: American Fine Arts, 1993).

their inherent propensity for unpredictability. This critical involvement within the archive also serves to highlight the inherent gaps and limitations present within these spaces and systems. As Simon herself observed in her contemplation of archival work within the Picture Collection, there exists a significance in the unspoken or hidden narratives found within the archive: “something is said in the gaps and shifts among all the information that’s collected.”¹⁰⁴

Viewed as a whole, Simon’s archival project and her unique framed photo compositions, reflect her attempts to find elucidation via compilation, underscoring the traditional model of the material archive as a vehicle for achieving stability and control over visual organization and interpretation of various taxonomies. Art critic Naomi Itami similarly argues that Simon’s collages suggest a fundamental human desire for organization in the midst of disorder and an attempt to exert control over randomness.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, as these precisely arranged compositions bring the straightforward subject headings assigned to each folder by the Library staff to the forefront, they also bring to light the occasional humorous limitations of language.¹⁰⁶ For instance, one observes the double meaning or visual dissonance created by a subject heading like *Rear Views*, which includes images showing a view from behind, but mostly consists of people’s buttocks. This instigates a critical examination of the principles guiding the manual categorization and organization system employed by the Picture Collection librarians.

Indeed, Simon’s exploration into the Collection’s folders raises inquiries regarding the apparently straightforward subject-based classification system of the Collection. She notes, “It is also interesting to see how something that fits into the *Yellow* folder could also be in the *Hair-combing* folder, could also be in Sunlight, could also be in *Men*, so how do these decisions and

¹⁰⁴ Simon quoted in Griffin, “An Unlikely Futurity,” 11.

¹⁰⁵ Naomi Itami, “The Picture Collection,” *Photomonitor*, Feb. 28, 2013, <https://photomonitor.co.uk/exhibition/the-picture-collection-2/>

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

ways of categorizing occur? Whereas online now you could have it correspond to all of those terms.”¹⁰⁷ To illustrate this further, Simon cites another instance in which an image of a car accident is juxtaposed with images of spilled ketchup on a white shirt or a cat knocking a vase off the table, all within the Accidents folder. With this, Simon’s aesthetic photo collages highlight a significant limitation - as physical objects, each image must be assigned to a single folder within the archive (Ill. 2.11). More conceptually, Simon’s work reaffirms a fundamental truth: that images are ambiguous and intricate, defying easy categorization akin to words in a dictionary.



Ill. 2. 11 Taryn Simon, *Folder: Accidents*, 2012, Archival inkjet print, (119.4 × 157.5 cm). Source: Gagosian - <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2013/taryn-simon-the-picture-collection/>.

Additionally, it raises critical questions about the continued relevance and future utility of photo archives in light of the rapid evolution of search engine technologies and the emergence of advanced digital methods for managing image collections. As Simon observes, the traditional practice of mining the Picture Collection for visual information is being supplanted by the

¹⁰⁷ Taryn Simon, “The Picture Collection - In Conversation: Taryn Simon and Evan Sharp,” interview by Evan Sharp, Nowness, video 4:38, March 2013, <https://www.nowness.com/story/taryn-simon-the-picture-collection>.

convenience and possibilities offered by online searches. Consequently, as she maintains, it seems to have lost some of its utility.”¹⁰⁸ While Simon may express criticism of the archival site she engages with, her work also cleverly alludes to, or references the potential implications of, current image management technologies. Specifically, the mention of Object and Scene Recognition in AI algorithms points to their capacity for image analysis, object identification, and scene categorization. These advancements offer possibilities for enhanced searchability, automated tagging, and the organization of extensive image collections based on their content. While Simon’s work may not directly employ AI technology, it may draw attention to the broader societal impact and cultural implications of its use.¹⁰⁹

Concerned with the complexities and ambiguities inherent in institutional systems of image gathering and classification, Simon enacted a form of institutional critique, questioning the classification hierarchies, values, and authority of the Picture Collection. As she argues, “archiving systems impose an illusory structural order on the radically chaotic and indeterminate nature of everything.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, millions of images found their way into the archive from a diverse range of sources. Throughout its century-long existence, the Collection’s files have consistently been organized through manual processes. Various librarians and curators who have overseen the Collection’s growth during this period have been responsible for clipping, labeling, and cataloging these materials according to subject headings. This process is still being carried out today (Ill. 2.12).

¹⁰⁸ Taryn Simon, “The Picture Collection - In Conversation: Taryn Simon and Evan Sharp,” interview by Evan Sharp.

¹⁰⁹ See Giovanni Colavizza et. al, “Archives and AI: An Overview of Current Debates and Future Perspectives,” *Journal on Computing and Cultural Heritage*, 15, no.1 (2021):1–15.

¹¹⁰ “Taryn Simon: The Picture Collection (Exhibition at Gagosian),” Gagosian, February 2013, accessed Feb. 2, 2020, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2013/taryn-simon-the-picture-collection/>.

Through artistic intervention, appropriation, and unique arrangements of the Collection's images, Simon reveals the extent to which archival processes of inclusion and exclusion, classification, and captioning of the images are inherently arbitrary, or more specifically, reactive to human contingency. The subjective choices or tastes of the library's staff, along with the public's requests and interest in specific topics, guide the formation of the archive.¹¹¹ In specific folders, one may encounter instances of duplicate images (for example, in the folder titled "Abandoned Buildings"). Within the collection, there are folders characterized by a limited number of images, often linked to a one-word title for the file, while others boast an extensive compilation containing hundreds of pictures.¹¹²

Indeed, these observed gaps and inconsistencies in the Collection's collecting policies and curation can be attributed to its somewhat serendipitous development. Romana Javitz openly acknowledges that the institution did not initially adhere to a predefined plan; rather, it evolved organically in response to public requests for pictures. Furthermore, she notes that "the type of picture included in this Collection and the subjects represented have both depended upon the accident of the gift."¹¹³ Javitz's words underscore the distinction between the Picture Collection and a conventional archive, typically guided by "specialists." The Picture Collection, in contrast, expanded organically, driven by a more intuitive approach that prioritized social inclusiveness. According to Javitz, the Collection's development was influenced by public input, as unfilled requests were meticulously documented, and librarians, and occasionally users themselves, actively worked to address these identified gaps through acquisitions and donations.¹¹⁴ Being

¹¹¹ Romana Javitz expressed the view that the subject headings of the Collection should align with the demands or needs of its users. See Griffin, "An Unlikely Futurity," 13.

¹¹² Taryn Simon, "The Picture Collection - In Conversation: Taryn Simon and Evan Sharp."

¹¹³ Javitz quoted in Griffin, "An Unlikely Futurity," 7, 13.

¹¹⁴ Kamin, "Total Recall."

attuned to a changing public's requests when formulating subject headings is a core value of the Picture Collection's philosophy to this very day. Current Supervisor Librarian of the Collection, Jessica Cline, stated in an interview I conducted with her in April 2019 that the enhancement of the collection is still mostly informed by a subject's popularity among the Collection users. For example, at the time of the interview, Cline indicated that subjects related to fashion and design were currently the most in demand by library patrons.¹¹⁵

This condition of contingency and the dynamic nature of the photo-archive, resonates with Allan Sekula's conceptualization of the archive. Sekula posits that archives represent a "territory of images" characterized by a paradigm where the principles of exchange and the availability of meaning take precedence, even when ownership of the images may not necessarily belong to the creator. Sekula observes that the inherent nature of archives involves the prioritization of utility and the logic of exchange. Consequently, not only are the images within archives made available for purchase, but their meanings also become subject to appropriation. In Sekula's words, "Thus, not only are the pictures in the archives offered for sale, their meanings are up for grabs. New owners are invited, new interpretations are promised."¹¹⁶ Accordingly, through her critical engagement with the archive, Taryn Simon encourages viewers to reflect on their own perceptions and thoughts when interacting with systems of classification and visual databases. She underscores a key concept, as elaborated in Chapter 1 within the context of contemporary archival theory (Cook 2013, Schwartz 2014, Enwezor 2008), that archives and their materials should not be perceived

¹¹⁵ At the time of my visit, the Collection's librarians were working on enhancing the Indian royalty fashion file, selecting the images that most ideally depict or represent the subject matter. Jessica Cline, in discussion with the author, NYPL, New York, April 2019.

¹¹⁶ Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive - Photography between Labor and Capital," in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London, Routledge, 2003). Importantly, when it comes to the "commercial" aspect of the archive, one should bear in mind that beyond the original Picture Collection's ongoing circulation, Simon's project literally invites new ownership (and interpretations), as it is being displayed and sold as highly valued, luxury artworks to different buyers and collectors at the Gagosian gallery.

merely as impartial repositories of information. Instead, one should remain mindful of the dynamic shaping and influence exerted by the diverse individuals who engage with and contribute to these archives. Consequently, as mentioned previously, archives can function as active carriers of significant cultural and national ideologies.



Ill. 2. 12 Recently clipped images awaiting cataloging (left image) into designated (right image) drawers in Room 100, The Picture Collection at the NYPL, 2019. Source: photo by author.

2.4.1 The *Atlas* paradigm :

Simon's interest in questioning the supposed neutrality or 'innocence' of classification systems, consequently exposing the ways in which visual information is consumed and administrated by powerful organizational systems and their algorithms, is a significant thread throughout her work. Another archival project worth mentioning in this context is *Image Atlas* (2012), in which Simon collaborated with the late computer programmer Aaron Swartz.¹¹⁷ In fact,

¹¹⁷ Aaron Swartz was a computer programmer, and fervent political and social activist committed himself to the principles of the free and open-source movement. He played a significant role in shaping the RSS web syndication specification, which standardized the distribution of regularly updated content such as blogs, news articles, and multimedia. In 2008, Swartz co-authored the Guerilla Open Access Manifesto, championing the

some argue that the *Picture Collection* was born out of *Image Atlas*,¹¹⁸ or conversely, that *Image Atlas* functions as an online response to the physical *Picture Collection*, as the two projects were developed simultaneously.¹¹⁹ Importantly, both *Image Atlas* and the *Picture Collection* projects look at the ways in which we view, tag, index, and interact with databases of images. Furthermore, both projects highlight the influence of visual organizational systems on viewers' comprehension and visual experiences. Taryn Simon's persistent exploration of how meaning is visually generated and communicated, particularly her examination of the interplay between images, visual symbols, text, and the process of constructing meaning, can be traced back to her earlier academic studies in semiotics. Regarding conceptual photography that utilizes the pairing of images with language, exemplified in Simon's *Image Atlas* and the *Picture Collection*, Lucy Soutter argues that such works "locate most of their pleasure in the mind; they are thought experiments carried out in the space between words and pictures. They are completed in the viewer's imagination."¹²⁰

Simon and Swartz's *Atlas* echoes Aby Warburg's influential image project, *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924-1929), especially in its allusions to encyclopedic or archival obsessions for researching visual clusters. Just as Warburg practiced repetitive reading of archival images as a methodology for developing "a visual form of knowledge"¹²¹ and history through photographic montages, Simon and Swartz were interested in mapping recurring visual themes and symbolic patterns within

release of information held by corporations and publishers. Notably, he founded Demand Progress, an organization at the forefront of the campaign against Internet censorship bills (SOPA/PIPA). Swartz's life was cut short by his untimely death in January 2013. See, Justin Peters, *The Idealist: Aaron Swartz and the Rise of Free Culture on the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016) ; Elizabeth Day, "Aaron Swartz: Hacker, Genius...Martyr?" *The Guardian*, June 2, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/jun/02/aaron-swartz-hacker-genius-martyr-girlfriend-interview>.

¹¹⁸ Lale Arikoglu, "Taryn Simon: The Picture Collection," *Whitewall*, February 28, 2013, <https://whitewall.art/art/taryn-simon-the-picture-collection>.

¹¹⁹ Griffin, "An Unlikely Futurity," 9.

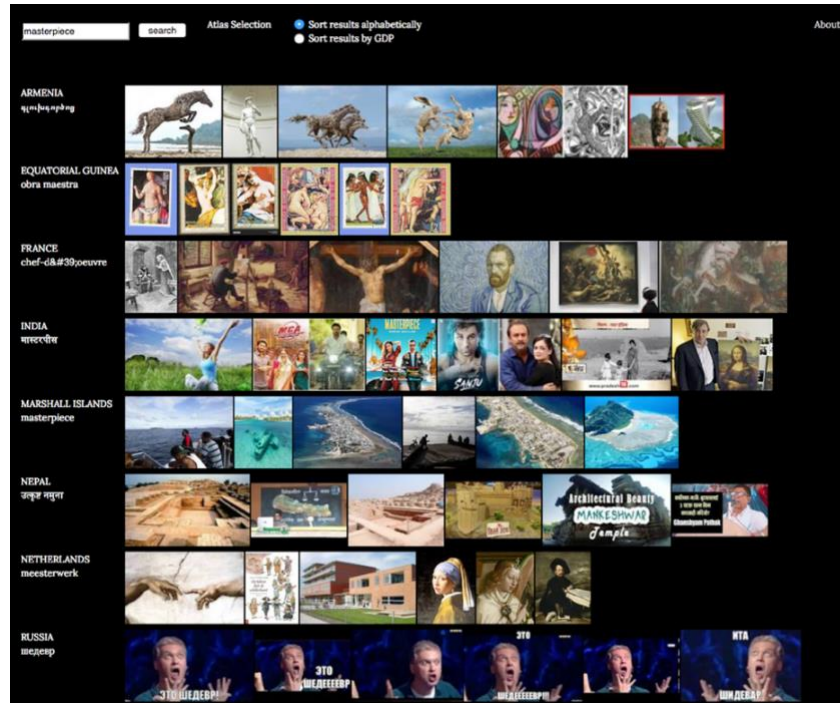
¹²⁰ Soutter, "Conceptual Photography," 1.

¹²¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, "Atlas: How to Carry the World on One's Back?" in Georges Didi-Huberman, ed., *Atlas. How to Carry the World on One's Back* (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia: Madrid, 2010).

digital systems of visual classification. Simon and Swartz created an easy-to-use search engine interface that highlights the correlations between terms and images across various languages, nations, and cultures. Enacting a methodology marked by rigorous gathering, comparison, and analysis of data, Simon and Swartz's digital *Atlas* project further alludes to Warburg's complex image montages, through which Warburg sought to map European visual culture and symbolism, using documents ranging from the ancient Greek myth of Helios to Renaissance artworks to images from contemporary media.¹²²

In more practical terms, Simon and Swartz's *Image Atlas* is a website featuring a unique method of retrieving and comparing search results from different countries, enabling users to search for images by entering keywords of their choice, which are then translated into the relevant languages by Google Translate. The translated word is then inserted into regional algorithms, which subsequently present the top six images associated with a given word/term across different countries (including Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Iran, New Zealand, North Korea, Russia, and the United States and many more). For example, one can infer each country or culture's different perception of the term "masterpiece" from the results – from Vermeer's venerated art in the Netherlands to a popular Bollywood movie in India (Ill. 2.13).

¹²² Christopher D. Johnson, "Mnemosyne: Meanderings through Aby Warburg's Atlas – About the Mnemosyne Atlas," Cornell University Library, accessed Feb. 16, 2022, <http://warburg.library.cornell.edu/about>.

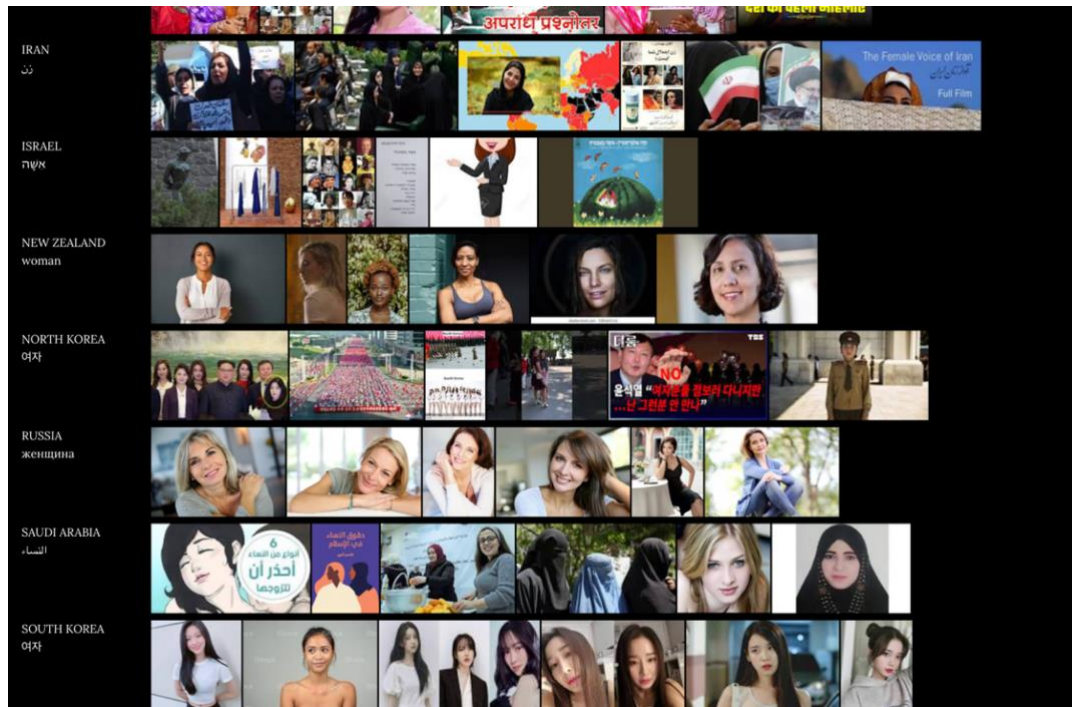


Ill. 2. 13 Taryn Simon and Aaron Swartz, *Image Atlas*, 2012. “Masterpiece,” 11/16/18, 4:04 PM (Eastern Standard Time). Website view, dimensions variable. Source: Net Art Anthology, <https://anthology.rhizome.org/image-atlas>.

Typing in a keyword like “woman” would simultaneously present an image of feminist foundations in Haifa, Israel and a portrait of a woman next to Kim Jung Un in North Korea (Ill. 2. 14). “Accordingly, searches might well give rise to similarities, but they will just as often generate highly divergent results for even the most banal of terms.”¹²³ Moreover, as results are reshaped by algorithms, the same search might produce different images depending on the given time and day (as Simon notes, “the ‘top results’ for any search often grow more powerful as more new users are guided to top results”).¹²⁴

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Griffin, “An Unlikely Futurity,” 9.



III. 2. 14 Taryn Simon and Aaron Swartz, *Image Atlas*, 2012. “Woman,” 6/12/20, Website view, dimensions variable
 Source: https://tarynsimon.com/works/image_atlas/#1.

Indeed, the contingent relationship between image and text has been a subject of discussion in photography studies for many decades. What capacity does language have to describe an image? How are we to understand an image without a caption? How does the contextualization of a caption or a tag condition our reading of an image? As Walter Benjamin wrote in his seminal 1932 publication, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*: “For the first time, captions have become obligatory. And it is clear that they have an altogether different character than the title of a painting.”¹²⁵ In this passage, Benjamin highlights how a caption can endow an image with the power to shape knowledge and visual culture. And so, just as the subject headings of the folders at the official Picture Collection at the Library are bound to change according to use and demand,

¹²⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 226.

the *Image Atlas* makes visible the popular taste of a nation as it is shaped by political and cultural events and trends.¹²⁶

Importantly, *Image Atlas* and the *Picture Collection* materialize the practice of signification. They foreground the act of associating an image with a word, as the viewer is given a kind of agency in the task of signification (more so in the *Image Atlas* project, as the public is invited to independently experiment with the search interface via an open access website).¹²⁷ In other words, *Image Atlas* is an interactive digital artwork that is constituted by viewers as participants. It is activated by the viewer-user who enters a term into the search engine and scans for differences and similarities across the results. By unveiling the algorithmic system behind image search engines, the viewer is prompted not just to compare images and thus reconsider socio-cultural differences and similarities, but also to reflect on the contingent nature of these technological systems. The work underscores that these systems, far from being scientifically objective, are molded by the data they process and the algorithms they utilize. Indeed, the Google search engine offers a reflection of reality, one that is influenced by the priorities and preferences of online publishers and users, emphasizing what they deem to be noteworthy and compelling.¹²⁸

As Aaron Swartz points out, there is a growing awareness of how seemingly neutral tools like Facebook and Google, which claim to offer an unfiltered view of the world through statistics, algorithms, and analyses, when in reality, these tools “are [both] programmed and programming

¹²⁶ See Lauren Cornell, “On *Image Atlas*: An Interview with Taryn Simon,” *New Yorker*, Aug. 2, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/08/on-image-atlas-an-interview-with-tarynsimon>.

¹²⁷ See: <http://www.imageatlas.org> (accessed Feb. 19, 2022). Users can refine or expand their comparisons from the 57 countries available and sort by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or alphabetical order. Since Swartz’s death in 2013, Simon has continued to develop the work, expanding it to include all 195 countries recognized by the UN.

¹²⁸ “Search Engine Bias and the Problem of Opacity/Nontransparency,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, first published August 27, 2012; substantive revision August 11, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-search/#SearEngiBiasProbOpac>.

us.”¹²⁹ In other words, the information presented on these platforms undoubtedly infuses and shape our perceptions. Moreover, according to Simon and Swartz’s *Image Atlas*, despite claims of a homogenized culture or the potential emergence of a universal visual language facilitated by the Internet and globalization, words and images continue to acquire varied meanings across different temporal, cultural, and linguistic contexts. In essence, both the *Image Atlas* and *The Picture Collection* projects underscore the ongoing evolution of photography, wherein the significance and relevance of contemporary images remain consistently contingent, contextual, interconnected, and structured.

2.4.2 *The Picture Collection* Project: Expanded and Remodeled

Unlike many past projects and exhibitions organized by artists at the official invitation of an art museum or institution, Simon’s *Picture Collection* did not begin at the behest of the official Picture Collection. The project is instead a product of Simon’s own desire to intervene in a photographic archive that had intrigued her since childhood (she was introduced to the Collection by her father, an avid photographer).¹³⁰ When Simon began her study of the Collection in 2012, she realized the extent to which her “private” intervention is in fact part of a history and belongs to a lineage of artists who, throughout the years, freely used the Collection’s image bank for

¹²⁹Aaron Swartz and Taryn Simon, “Aaron Swartz & Taryn Simon in conversation,” New Museum of Contemporary Art, Rhizome Seven on Seven Conference, April 14, 2012, <https://tarynsimon.com/essays-videos/docs/Aaron%20Swartz%20%26%20Taryn%20Simon%20in%20conversation.pdf>.

¹³⁰ During a 2019 conversation with Jay Vissers, a chief librarian at the Picture Collection, I discovered that the institution was largely in the dark about Simon’s project during its inception. Intriguingly, Vissers first became aware of Simon’s work with the Collection upon encountering the October 2012 issue of *Wallpaper* magazine. This issue featured Simon’s *Picture Collection* project, spotlighting the subject file “Rear Views” on its cover. Jay Vissers, Interview by Yonit Aronowicz, New York Public Library, New York, April 2019. Further, during my visit to the Picture Collection, none of the librarians or staff I spoke with mentioned the then-upcoming (later rescheduled to 2021) exhibition “The Color of a Flea’s Eye” or any ongoing collaboration with Taryn Simon. To gain a better understanding, I reached out to the exhibition’s curator, Joshua Chuang, seeking details about the collaboration and the nature of Simon’s work process with the Picture Collection. Regrettably, I did not receive a response from him.

inspirational source material (Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, Paul Strand, and Dorothea Lange, to name a few). When asked in an interview: “Where did you get the idea to find the collection and examine it”? Simon replies, “I’ve actually been going there since I was quite young, just to look at it, it’s always been really inspiring, and there is a history of artists going there: Diego Rivera did a lot of research there, Andy Warhol stole a bunch of folders from the Picture Collection famously [...]”¹³¹

Simon examined the archive’s 12,000 subject headings, finally isolating forty-four and choosing about one hundred images from each of those files. When asked how she approached the daunting task of selecting specific files from a such a vast archive, Simon answered: “I actually started with the words, looking at their list of folders and selecting some that interested me [...] And then I would go to the folders and see what they contained, and then decide if I still wanted to work with the visuals.”¹³² Interestingly, although Simon is known for her meticulous research process, her intervention in an established archive such as the Picture Collection did not conform to predetermined procedures: “I always have too many rules. I was trying to let myself be a little freer with this one. I’m going into a system that’s already ruled.”¹³³

When Simon’s project was first exhibited in 2013 at Gagosian gallery, London (under the title *Taryn Simon: The Picture Collection*), it was not presented as an official collaboration with the Picture Collection (or as receiving the support of the NYPL). However, more recently, the NYPL became very involved in Simon’s ongoing archival project, publicly endorsing her work by inviting her to collaborate in a two-part exhibition that opened in the summer and fall of 2021. Simon presented the first section of “The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection by Taryn

¹³¹ Taryn Simon, “The Picture Collection - In Conversation: Taryn Simon and Evan Sharp.”

¹³² Kenneth Baker, “Taryn Simon- ‘The Picture Collection’,” 2013.

¹³³ Ibid.

Simon” exhibition at the 976 Madison Avenue branch of the Gagosian Gallery (opened in July 2021) (Ill. 2.15), followed by the second part in the form of a special installation at the NYPL’s flagship Stephen A. Schwarzman Building at 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue (Ill. 2.16).



Ill. 2. 15 Installation view of Taryn Simon’s exhibition “The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection,” Gagosian Gallery- Madison Avenue, July 14 – September 11, 2021. Source: Gagosian, Gagosian Gallery <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2021/taryn-simon-the-color-of-a-fleas-eye-the-picture-collection/>.

What started from Simon’s independent activity in the archive, based on her own fascination with the Collection’s classification system and the discovery of its visual treasures, has turned, in its latest iteration, into a collaborative intervention between Simon and the curators at the NYPL. This state of affairs has undoubtedly re-shaped the project and its presentation in accordance with the institutional and intellectual agendas of the library. As stated in the NYPL’s exhibition site, ‘The Color of a Flea’s Eye’ “foregrounds the history of The New York Public Library’s Picture Collection, whose storied contents have been available, for more than a century, for patrons to sift through in search of visual references of every conceivable kind.”¹³⁴ In this respect, Simon’s exhibition is more than just an artistic intervention into its collections; it is also

¹³⁴ “The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection,” The New York Public Library, accessed November 26, 2021, <https://www.nypl.org/press/press-release/september-24-2021/color-fleas-eye-picture-collection>.

a manifestation of the NYPL’s agenda to promote its unique visual resources and attract contemporary audiences (and artists) to engage with those collections, as well as tout the enduring relevance of the Picture Collection at a time when similar online resources are far more easily available and accessible.

Moreover, from the library’s perspective, an institutional endorsement of a well-known contemporary artist’s project, resulting in an elegant, multi-part exhibition, was an appropriate way to render the Picture Collection more contemporary—that is, more appealing and relevant to audiences versed in the vocabulary of contemporary art or Simon’s work in particular. According to art historian Terry Smith, one of the primary concerns for museums and other cultural institutions is the “contemporization” of their offerings and historical collections.¹³⁵ In this context, “The Color of a Flea’s Eye” can therefore be viewed as a powerful means for “contemporizing” the one-hundred-and-seven year-old historical Picture Collection, shedding new light on both Simon’s artwork as well as the artist’s idiosyncratic perspective on the Collection and its history, thereby allowing audiences to see this image archive anew. As the exhibition curator explains about Simon’s project in the exhibition’s accompanying catalogue:

As it turns out, the present monograph is not only an epic paean to The New York Public Library; it is also an astonishing testament to the institution’s openness to its own layered history, and to the ways in which the Picture Collection both mirrors and shapes the vast and inextricably intertwined cultures that it simultaneously culls from and feeds.¹³⁶

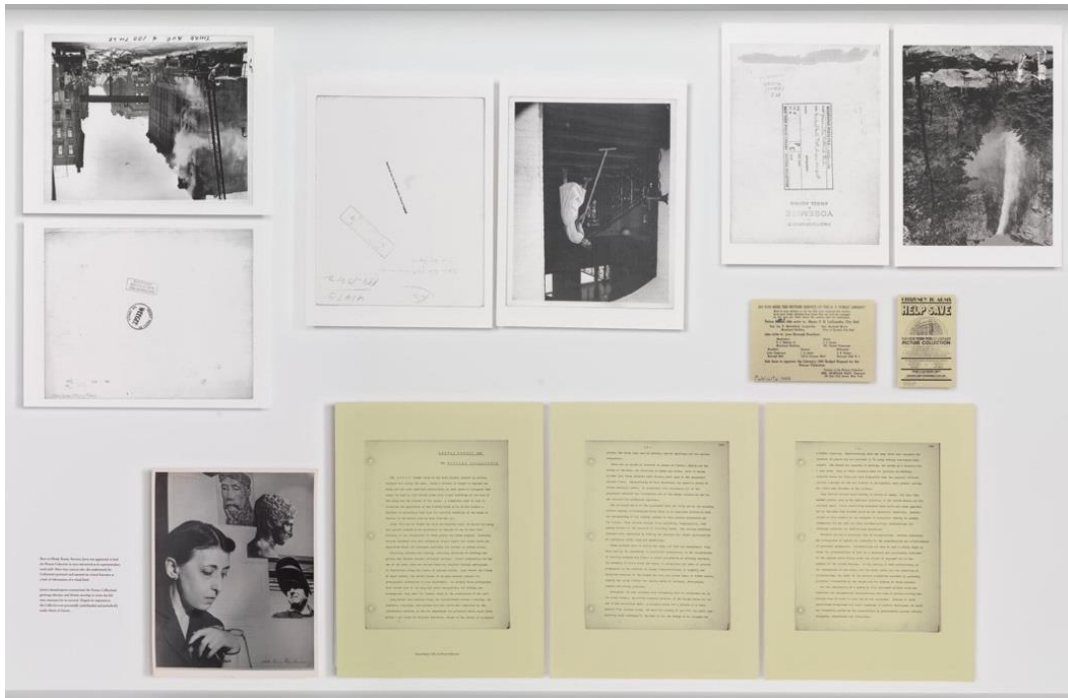
¹³⁵ Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 71.

¹³⁶ Joshua Chuang, “Pictures at Work”, *The Color of a Flea’s Eye* (Paris: Cahiers d’art, 2020), 21.



Ill. 2. 16 Artist Taryn Simon at her exhibition, “Taryn Simon, *The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection*,” September 18, 2021–January 9, 2022, New York Public Library, Stephen A. Schwarzman Building. Source: *Gagosian Quarterly*, <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2021/06/10/essay-new-york-public-librarys-picture-collection/>.

Since 2013, when the *Picture Collection* were first showcased, Simon has continued her research into the institutional history of the *Picture Collection*. In the presentation of “*The Color of a Flea’s Eye*” at Gagosian Gallery in 2021 Simon’s photographic compositions were accompanied by her selections from the historical archives of the *Picture Collection*. This additional layer of archival material essentially highlights the existence of two archives in her work. The original archive of the *Picture Collection*, which is the source of her archival materials, and the artistic reinterpretation of this unique collection, which is archival art in itself.



Ill. 2. 17 “Taryn Simon, *The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection*,” Gagosian Gallery Madison Avenue, July 14 – September 11, 2021. Installation view of archival materials featuring a photograph of Romana Javitz and her annual report from 1942. Source: New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/03/arts/design/new-york-public-library-picture-collection.html>.

The selected artifacts, including archival letters, memos, annual reports, and Romana Javitz’s correspondence with key figures (Dorothea Lange, Joseph Cornell, Andy Warhol, and Walker Evans, among others) were sequenced by Simon and displayed in archival glass vitrines in the gallery space (Ill. 2.17). Aligning Simon’s project with other major American artists like Warhol and Evans, one could argue that, beyond the library’s objective to contextualize the Picture Collection in American visual culture, the exhibition also contributes to the institution’s desire to demonstrate how the Collection was, and still very much is, an ongoing source of influence for contemporary artists. As Chuang contends, “Taryn Simon has suspended the Collection in its flux, providing a panoptic view of its hidden histories while pointing to the seemingly limitless range of possibilities ahead.”¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Chuang, “Pictures at Work,” 21.

Beyond making the Collection appear more appealing and “up to date” through Simon’s interventionist project, the overarching narrative of “The Color of a Flea’s Eye” exhibition was similarly re-adjusted to foreground Romana Javitz’s central role in the evolution of the Collection. One can interpret this move as driven by institutional interest as well as Simon’s feminist tribute to an allegedly forgotten woman now credited with the shaping of the Collection’s identity. As mentioned in the previous section, for many years, Javitz remained a largely unknown figure in the history of photography. This updated version of *the Picture Collection* exhibition (and accompanying publication) is a fitting attempt to amend this history.¹³⁸ As Chuang states: “Simon’s project is also a paean to Javitz’s underrecognized legacy in twentieth-century American art.”¹³⁹ Moreover, in their collaboration, Simon and the NYPL curators incorporated Javitz’s story within that of the Picture Collection as a whole. They thus suggest that the project is in fact a woman artist’s re-evaluation of the Collection’s (mostly “unfamiliar”) socio-cultural impact in addition to a “revelation” of an uncharted story of images and the “forgotten” characters related to it.¹⁴⁰

Finally, by presenting Javitz’s correspondences with established artists and photographers within the context of “The Color of a Flea’s Eye” exhibition, Simon does not merely foreground the institutional life of the Collection, but proclaims the Library’s ambition to institute the Collection’s vanguard status in American art history, “demonstrating the Picture Collection’s

¹³⁸ The story of Javitz was not a focal point of the earlier versions of Simon’s *Picture Collection* exhibitions between 2013-2016. The NYPL and Taryn Simon are not alone in their mission to revive Javitz’s story; librarian and scholar Anthony T. Troncale has recently published a book on Javitz entitled, *Words on Pictures: Romana and the New York Public Library’s Picture Collection* (New York: Verso Publications, 2020).

¹³⁹ Chuang, “The New York Public Library’s Picture Collection.”

¹⁴⁰ Griffin similarly implies that the Picture Collection has been considered an “over-looked” department of the NYPL. See Griffin, “An Unlikely Futrurity,” 3. Diana Kamin refers to the collection as “one of New York City’s great underknown treasures.” See Kamin, “Total Recall - Diana Kamin on the New York Public Library’s Picture Collection,” *Artforum International*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/diana-kamin-on-the-new-york-public-library-s-picture-collection-86403>.

critical role in the history of twentieth-century image-making, and that of American photography in particular.”¹⁴¹

2.5 The *Artification* of the Picture Collection: Gagosian and the NYPL Exhibitions

Simon’s most recent exhibition, “The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection”¹⁴² at Gagosian gallery, New York (Madison Avenue 976, July 14–September 11, 2021), was displayed in the two main rooms of the gallery’s ground floor, where about twelve of Simon’s *Picture Collection* compositions were on display. In this iteration of the project, Simon integrates her interpretation of the archival images into the broader narrative of the Picture Collection, with a particular focus on the era of Romana Javitz’s leadership. The installation features large-scale frames on the walls, accompanied by a dedicated display case.

Within this case, visitors can explore a diverse array of materials, including requests from patrons, archival objects, photographic prints, and correspondence between Javitz and prominent figures from the twentieth century, such as Cornell, Warhol, Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange, and Walker Evans. Additionally, a comprehensive list of the Collection’s folder subject headings is on display. However, it is important to note that within the context of the art gallery installation, the project functions differently than the official picture archive at the library. It conveys distinct values and offers a unique experiential perspective of an archive within an archive. Within the official Picture Collection archive, there exists a historical archive of letters and records that

¹⁴¹ “Taryn Simon: The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection,” 976 Madison Avenue, New York, July 14–September 11, 2021.” Gagosian, June 11, 2021, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2021/taryn-simon-the-color-of-a-fleas-eye-the-picture-collection/>.

¹⁴² “The color of a flea’s eye” is in fact a whimsical citation of a request made by a visitor to the Picture Collection in 1930.

essentially document the evolution and procedures of the Picture Collection throughout its existence.



Ill. 2. 18 “Taryn Simon, *The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection*.” Installation view at Gagosian Gallery- Madison Avenue, NYC, July 14 – September 11, 2021. Source: Gagosian Gallery <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2021/taryn-simon-the-color-of-a-fleas-eye-the-picture-collection/>.

In the archival exhibition vitrines showcasing Javitz’s biography and other archival items, visitors are encouraged to contemplate both the professional journey of this influential photography librarian and the distinct art history as well as social history associated with the archival system of this vast image collection. Furthermore, it is evident that Simon’s careful selection of archival items plays a crucial role in maintaining a balance between the archive’s unique narrative and visually appealing archival objects (Ill. 2.18-19). These selected items form Picture Collection’s own archive of papers the serve to reinforce and elucidate the underlying narrative.¹⁴³ In this regard, it becomes apparent that Javitz’s legacy and the unique role of the Picture Collection in influencing collective memory, or as the exhibition curators maintain, in

¹⁴³ Emma Howgill, “New Methods of Analyzing Archival Exhibitions,” *Archives and Records* 36, no. 2 (2015): 179-194.

“shaping twentieth-century image-making,” particularly within the realm of American photography.¹⁴⁴ not only served as the foundation for Simon’s art project but also became an integral and essential component of the 2021 exhibition.



Ill. 2. 19 Taryn Simon, “The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection,” Gagosian Gallery- Madison Avenue, NYC, July 14 – September 11, 2021. Installation view of archival materials form the Picture Collection. Source: Gagosian Gallery <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2021/taryn-simon-the-color-of-a-fleas-eye-the-picture-collection/>.

When stepping into the white cube gallery, one is immediately struck by the effect of the archival aesthetic, as Simon presents an artful, minimalist display drawn from an immense archive. As Tim Griffin puts it, Simon’s presentation of the Picture Collection’s material, “is relatively straightforward...redolent of the archival impulse prevalent in art shortly after the turn of the millennium”.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, when viewing Simon’s installation of the Picture Collection’s contents, one might ask what effect the shifting frame of reference of contemporary art has on the original purpose and value of the archival images and the viewer’s perception of them. From a perspective related to the ‘performative,’ Simon undeniably enacts a transformation upon the archival images through her curated presentation at the Gagosian art gallery (Ill. 2.20). These photographic works command an imposing presence, as Simon’s artful treatment of the prints give the archival images a new purpose—display on the walls of museums and art galleries. Indeed, this presentation

¹⁴⁴ “Taryn Simon, The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection” July 14–September 11, 2021, Gagosian, accessed Nov 19, 2023, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2021/taryn-simon-the-color-of-a-fleas-eye-the-picture-collection/>.

¹⁴⁵ Griffin, “An Unlikely Futurity,” 1.

effectively encapsulates prevailing trends in contemporary art photography. The stylized compositions, with a focus on visual typologies and taxonomies, align with the prevalent large format aesthetics of the “Deadpan” tradition.¹⁴⁶

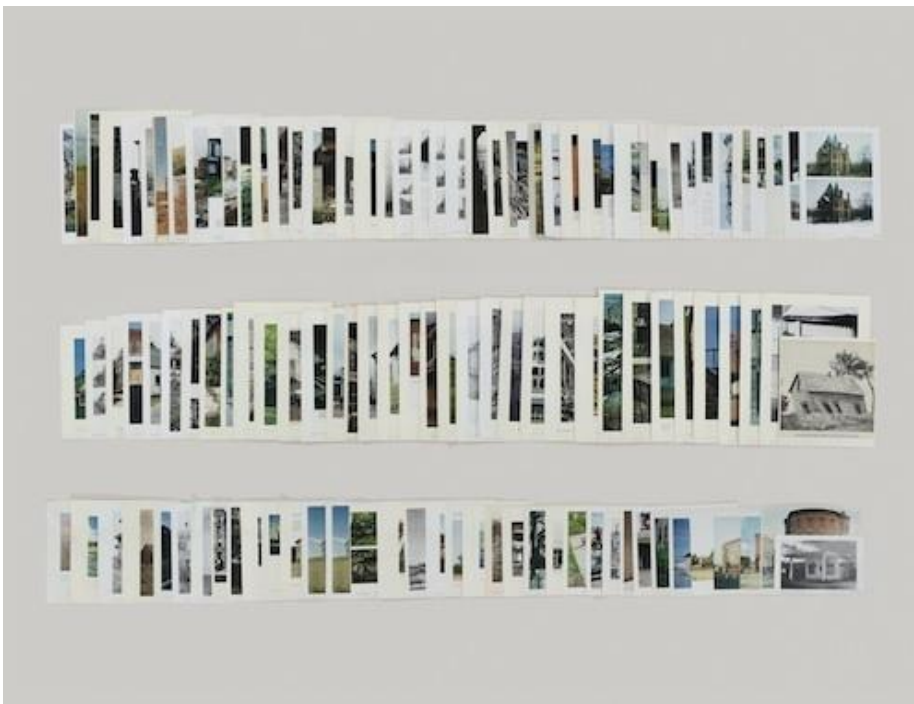


Ill. 2. 20 “Taryn Simon, *The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection*.” Installation view at Gagosian Gallery - Madison Avenue, NYC, July 14 – September 11, 2021. Source: Gagosian Gallery <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2021/taryn-simon-the-color-of-a-fleas-eye-the-picture-collection/>.

The gallery walls are occupied by large-format, silver-framed compositions suspended by visible wires. Each composition is made up of one to four horizontal rows of images that Simon selected from a particular archival folder, such as “Explosions,” “Broken Objects,” “Financial Panics,” and “Waiting Rooms.” Simon then re-photographed these images and printed and mounted them on a white backdrop. Like an archivist or librarian, Simon has made her own conscious selections and arrangements. As one can notice, the images are laid atop one another, in some instances partially occluding the view of other images and leaving only the picture farthest to the right or left in the row fully available to view (See Ill. 2.21). Simon’s deliberate act of

¹⁴⁶ Deadpan is a term originally used to describe an expressionless face. The emergence of the deadpan aesthetic is often linked to the German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher in the 1960s. It was then popularized in the art world in the early 1990s by former students of the Bechers at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art, such as Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer, and Thomas Ruff. This dispassionate, patient, keenly sharp version of photography, cold and pristine in its presentation and commanding presence, heralded the medium’s acceptance as contemporary art. Photographs in this mode are typically made with large-format view cameras and displayed as very large prints, as if specifically intended for the walls of museums, commercial galleries and the spacious homes of collectors. See Charlotte Cotton, “Deadpan” in *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 82-120.

concealing significant portions of the photo archive within her overlapping compositions can be interpreted as a commentary on the seemingly insurmountable challenge of comprehensively observing and digesting the vast array of images within the Picture Collection. This approach, as art critic Courtney Malick astutely observes, also serves as a homage to the enigmatic nature of this extensive archive – “reminding us how rarely we find anything so enigmatic in our accessibility-driven age of online search engines.”¹⁴⁷ Similarly, it can be argued that the grid-like rows of images and overall visual clusters allude to both historical archival grids (such as Warburg’s and other modernist movements as discussed in Chapter 1) and the rapid inundation of visual imagery that characterizes our media-saturated era.¹⁴⁸



Ill. 2. 21 Taryn Simon, *Folder: Abandoned Buildings and Towns*, 2012, Archival inkjet print, (119.4 × 157.5 cm).
Source: Artsy - <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/taryn-simon-folder-abandoned-buildings-and-towns-1>.

¹⁴⁷ Courtney Malick, “Taryn Simon,” *Artforum* (blog), February 9, 2013, <https://www.artforum.com/picks/taryn-simon-39309>.

¹⁴⁸ Also see Naomi Itami, “The Picture Collection”, *Photomonitor*, Feb. 28, 2013, <https://photomonitor.co.uk/exhibition/the-picture-collection-2/>.

Unlike Evan Roth's work, which we discussed in Chapter 3 and directly incorporates the Internet and digital technologies, Taryn Simon's approach doesn't involve such digital tools. However, one can recognize what might be described as a "database aesthetics"¹⁴⁹ as a significant reference point in her practice. As Griffin maintains, "it is all but impossible not to view [Simon's work] through the prism of search engines" and other online trends.¹⁵⁰ Viewed through this lens, Simon's decision to organize the archival images into distinct vibrant image clusters, grids, and juxtapositions, can be linked to art historian David Joselit's theory, which identifies "nodes" and "nets" as prevailing aesthetic formats in contemporary conceptual art. Joselit refers to this phase as "Conceptual Art 2.0," drawing parallels with the terminology of Web 2.0. Therein, Joselit identifies two major trends in recent contemporary art: a growing emphasis on interactivity and dynamic view engagement, influenced by social media, and an increase in the translation and re-mediation of artistic content across different formats, akin to the principles of the internet.¹⁵¹

In this conceptual framework, "nodes," which bear similarity to artistic traditional techniques like collages or montages, serve as convergence points for a diverse array of image streams. These streams are interwoven in overlapping and sometimes contradictory configurations, resulting in visually captivating collisions. In contrast, "nets" describe the intricate web that connects these nodes. According to Joselit, nets arrange components (nodes) across a uniform field, much like a system of interconnected roads, with varying levels of significance or meaning attributed to each component. It is essential to note that both nodes and nets are closely intertwined within this artistic paradigm. As Joselit suggests, they operate as both intensive and extensive

¹⁴⁹ See Victoria Vesna, ed., *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2007).

¹⁵⁰ Griffin, "An Unlikely Futurity," 9.

¹⁵¹ David Joselit, "Conceptual Art 2.0," in *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, eds. Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson, (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2012): 164.

elements, much like “freeway interchanges” or a complex “system of roads.” They function as points of exchange and re-routing for images, mirroring the dynamic and interconnected nature of the internet.¹⁵² Interestingly, the concept of “freeway interchanges” finds a literal depiction in one of Simon’s compositions depicting the contents of *Folder: Express Highways* (Ill. 2.22).

Significantly, as discussed in Chapter 1, the prevalent tendency to exhibit the multitude of images through aggregated visual sequences, clusters, constellations, and montages represents one of the central forms of contemporary archival art and contemporary art photography. Taryn Simon’s incorporation of the structure of an aggregate visual database as both an aesthetic and conceptual strategy aligns with her enduring fascination for the ‘Atlas’ as both a “visual form of knowledge” a taxonomical system for order and organization. This interest is evident in numerous of her previous works, as discussed in this chapter. In addition, this approach employed by Simon offers her a means for freely arranging and reconfiguring the various materials found within the Collection. It serves as a mechanism for conjoining disparate data, encompassing a wide spectrum of styles, media, geographical origins, and historical eras, thereby creating unexpected connections between them. This aligns with the concept articulated by Georges Didi-Hauberman in relation to Aby Warburg’s Atlas of images, which involves the endeavor of effectively assembling complex visual elements of information into manageable, comprehensible components so as to “provide legibility to the underlying relations [among these elements].”¹⁵³ And further, as I interpret it, by presenting her photographs in patterns resembling ‘nodes’ and ‘nets’, Simon facilitates a non-hierarchical sequencing and interconnections of images that fosters multiple novel relationships between them. These visual juxtapositions encourage viewers to consider these images beyond

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Georges Didi-Hauberman, “ATLAS: How to carry the world on one’s back?,” exhibition press release, November 25, 2010, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/sites/default/files/notas-de-prensa/2010-004-dossier-en.pdf>. Unpaged.

their conventional context, fostering new perspectives and interpretations of potential analogies. As Didi-Hauberman characterizes the conceptual methodology of contemporary archival artists, “They bring together things outside of normal classifications, and glean from these affinities a new kind of knowledge which opens our eyes to certain unperceived aspects of our world and to the unconscious of our vision.”¹⁵⁴



Ill. 2. 22 Taryn Simon, *Folder: Express Highways*, 2012, Archival inkjet print, (119.4 × 157.5 cm). Source: Gagosian, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2013/taryn-simon-the-picture-collection/>.

Beyond the influences of the digital database aesthetic, one can also discuss Simon’s compositions in painterly terms. In a work titled *Folder: Paper-End Papers* (Ill. 2.23), one can observe a highly abstract yet visually compelling depiction that illustrates various patterns and colors of paper. Notably, only the three photos on the far right and left of the frame are fully visible. The resulting effect of this overlapping presentation is not merely photographic; it can be perceived

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

as a meticulously curated installation of abstract color fields. In my interpretation, while some images partially obscure others, they are not necessarily intended for individual scrutiny. Instead, these arrangements suggest intriguing juxtapositions of colors, patterns, and themes. This arrangement harkens back to the modernist experiments with color and geometric patterns found in minimalist sculptures or the works of artists like Frank Stella, Joseph Albers, and Theo van Doesburg. This serves as a compelling illustration of Simon's hybrid approach to photography, incorporating elements of mixed-media and process-oriented art. Her creations integrate components from various artistic disciplines, including painting, printmaking, photography, as well as sculpture.



Ill. 2. 23 Taryn Simon, *Folder: Paper — Endpapers*, 2012. Archival inkjet print, (119.4 × 157.5 cm). Source: NYPL - <https://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/tarynsimon>.

Unlike sculptures that physically occupy space, Simon's compositions consist of two-dimensional framed images affixed to the gallery walls. However, they align with the minimalist

sculpture tradition, which emphasized the direct perception of an artwork's materiality, as articulated by Soutter's notion of an "emphasis towards the literal, the direct perception of the actual stuff of the work."¹⁵⁵ In Simon's works, there is a palpable sense of immediacy (as well as straightforwardness), which is further underscored by her choice to retain the unaltered, literal subject headings from the original collection folders as the title for each composition. One can contend that Simon's serial arrangements, as seen in compositions such as *Folder: Paper — Endpapers*, evoke minimalist sculpture and serve the purpose of elevating the photographs to autonomous objects. Notably, the notion of image tangibility and human involvement in the archiving process is further emphasized through the inclusion of penciled captions, accompanied by cataloging numbers, found at the lower part of each archival image within the Picture Collection. Furthermore, it is worth noting that each image is marked with the ownership stamps of the New York Public Library (see Ill. 2.24).

Simon's formalistic experimentation serves as a tangible expression of the inherent tension between text and image, as well as between a visual representation and the archival image as a physical object. Moreover, her work delves into profound questions about the potential and purpose of a physical photographic archive in an age characterized by the transformation of photographs into virtual entities due to digital technologies. As a deliberate artistic choice, Simon engages with analog archival photography within the context of the digital age, serving as a reminder of the continued existence of physical collections of information and imagery in printed form. Her investigation into the substantial historical heritage of analog photography aligns with the interests of many of her contemporaries who similarly find inspiration in creatively addressing the prevailing tendency of dematerialization in the post-photographic era.

¹⁵⁵ Lucy Soutter, *Why Art Photography?* 38.

As I argue, Simon's deliberate focus on the materiality and physicality of her photo-collages within the exhibition offers an immersive encounter for the audience, reminiscent (to an extent) of the experience of exploring the official Picture Collection archive. Despite being encased in glass frames, the palpable presence of archival images, their grand scale, and the overlapping arrays of images encourage viewers to metaphorically 'sift through' them in search of visually intriguing references. This approach invites active engagement with the Picture Collection's contents and encourages the interpretation of its historical layers through the archival documents and correspondence of Romana Javitz that was presented at the latest exhibition. As Simon expressed, "I almost wanted it to be as if you are there [at the Picture Collection], pulling these things out."¹⁵⁶ Combining visual and textual material, Simon's exhibition apparatus at the Gagosian Gallery functions in a manner that actively encourages viewers to navigate and explore the gallery space. This navigation involves moving between the individual compositions displayed on the walls and the archival glass vitrines positioned at the center of the room, thereby placing a significant emphasis on the historical and social context of the institutional archive and the resurfaced narrative of Romana Javitz. In this way, the viewer engages in a dual movement, one that extends in two symmetrical directions, as articulated by David Joselit – moving both "from the internal logic of the artwork to its framing network."¹⁵⁷ This approach underscores the curated interplay in Simon's exhibition between the artworks (i.e., the compositions) and their contextual archival framing within the gallery space.

Simultaneously, through her reframing of the images, Simon underscores the aesthetic distance that separates us from them. It is evident that the experience differs from the tactile engagement one would encounter in the official Picture Collection room at the NYPL. Therefore,

¹⁵⁶ Baker, "Taryn Simon-'The Picture Collection'".

¹⁵⁷ Joselit, "Conceptual Art 2.0," 166.

before delving further into my analysis of Simon's archival project, it is pertinent to briefly examine the visitor/user experience in the official Picture Collection at the NYPL. This contextual exploration will provide valuable insights into the transformative nature of Simon's archival artworks.



III. 2. 24 Taryn Simon, *Folder: Broken Objects* (detail), from the series *The Picture Collection*, 2012. Framed archival inkjet print (119.4 × 157.5 cm). Source: Gagosian, <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2021/06/10/essay-new-york-public-librarys-picture-collection/>.

2.5.1 Exploring Room 100: The Heart of the Picture Collection

There are multiple layers of performative experience to be found in Simon’s *The Picture Collection* project. These layers center around three significant spaces: “The Color of a Flea’s Eye” exhibition at the Gagosian gallery; another portion of the same project placed on display in several rooms in the NYPL’s main building; and the physical space of the official Picture Collection in Room 100 (currently relocated to a new space in Room 119). In order to better understand Simon’s aestheticized gallery presentation of the Collection, one must turn first to the actual site of the Picture Collection at the New York Public Library.



Ill. 2. 25 “Jessica Cline, Current head of the Picture Collection, with the open files in Room 100, where there are more than 12,000 rubrics.” Source: Gus Powell for The New York Times.

When entering room 100 at the Stephen A. Schwarzman building, a nostalgic sense of the past is conjured up, both by the way the Picture Collection files are ordered and displayed in the room, as well as the actions carried out by archivists, librarians, and users/visitors. Journalist Dana Stirling articulates her encounter with the collection in a manner that aligns with my own

perspective and experience: “for me visiting the collection was like stepping into a time machine, going back in time to visuals that are no longer a part of our visual culture in the same way.”¹⁵⁸ The multitude of images similarly evokes a sense of pastness, dating from 1915 to the present, sitting in wait to be chosen and used. Altogether, the Picture Collection generates a unique atmosphere, invoking a sense of reverence for the wealth of knowledge stored in the photo-archive and curiosity for what may appear as a timeless domain of tangible images.

During my visit to the Picture Collection in the Spring of 2019, I found myself both intrigued and contemplative as I wandered through the archive’s aisles (Ill. 2.25 and 2.28). The shelves were brimming with picture folders, constituting the collection’s extensive holdings, ready to be retrieved and examined. The experience felt akin to stepping into a sort of time machine, and more specifically, having the privilege to handle the tangible materials of the archive, and even borrow select images to take home. It was an experience that left a profound impression. Suddenly, one becomes acutely aware of the physical presence of the photographs and the archive/database, as well as the aura of order and permanence that envelops the collection.

In Foucault’s conception, archives, like museums and libraries, are spaces that exhibit a “perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place.”¹⁵⁹ The unique atmosphere of the Picture Collection brings to mind Foucault’s concept of “heterotopias,” which are spaces that both mirror and diverge from the external world. In contrast, Foucault argues that utopian spaces, which are entirely idealized, do not actually exist. He thus distinguishes between utopian and heterotopic spaces, with the latter being real and possessing some of the mythical qualities associated with utopia. Foucault provides various examples of such spaces in everyday life,

¹⁵⁸ Dana Stirling, “Interview with Billy Parrott,” *Float Magazine*, April 15, 2018, <https://www.floatmagazine.us/interviews/billy-parrott>.

¹⁵⁹ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 7.

including cultural and institutional sites like museums and libraries, as well as places like cemeteries, brothels, prisons, ancient gardens, fairs, and Turkish baths.¹⁶⁰

In this context, the official Picture Collection can be seen as an example of a heterotopic space. It essentially represents a self-contained world within the larger context of the New York Public Library. Within this unique space, images maintain a sense of order and their physicality, distinct from the chaotic mess of digital overload outside. Here, in the words of Foucault, there is a strong “will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes.”¹⁶¹ Furthermore, heterotopias are also heterogenous. As Foucault writes, they are “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that in themselves are incompatible.”¹⁶² In this sense, the Picture Collection serves as an ideal example of a heterotopic space. It provides a glimpse into a highly diverse yet classified and organized visual universe. In its vast collection of 12,000 picture files, housing nearly two million images spanning various geographies, periods, cultures, and a spectrum of artistic styles from “high” to “low” art, one can stumble upon intriguing juxtapositions. For instance, a Northern Renaissance Flemish portrait might coexist with an American fashion advertisement from the 1990s, all within a single folder. Furthermore, seemingly unrelated subjects like “Dolls: Regional–French” and “Dominican Republic” could be placed side by side on the same shelf. This apparent neutrality, encompassing subjects from “Abacus to Zoology,”¹⁶³ coupled with the occasionally unconventional arrangement, encourages users to discern connections between subject headings and images, and to craft their own narratives from the discovered images.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid., 22.

¹⁶³ This was also the title of an exhibition held at the NYPL in 2015 celebrating the centennial of the Picture Collection. See: “100 Years of the Picture Collection: From Abacus to Zoology,” November 14, 2015–May 15, 2016, NYPL, accessed Nov. 20, 2022, <https://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/100-years-picture-collection-abacus-zoology>.”

As I see it, a visit to the Picture Collection archive room, consistently highlights the concept that users are engaging with these historical archival materials through the contemporary lens of the omnipresence of the digital realm and online platforms for image sharing and redistribution, all while considering the inherent materiality of photography. Indeed, when exploring the Collection's contents, visitors are provided with the opportunity to engage with images as physical artifacts – a rare experience in today's technological age. As *New York Times* journalist Arthur Lubow remarks, "Usage has declined in the age of the internet, but for [the Picture Collection's] devotees, the tactile experience of touching paper images is even more powerful now that it is a novelty."¹⁶⁴ Photographer Peter Kayafas, who brings his Pratt Institute students to explore the Collection, similarly maintains that "There is no substitute for that excitement of discovery around the physicality of something in a room that you hold in your hands."¹⁶⁵ Former Picture Collection director Billy Parrot further elaborates on the user's experience, highlighting that "The Picture Collection fosters the serendipity that occurs when browsing large quantities of materials. The Picture Collection allows you to select and hold images in your hand, comparing them with others while your ideas start to form, expand, and take shape."¹⁶⁶ (See Ill. 2.26–2.27).

¹⁶⁴ Lubow, "Hands Off the Library's Picture Collection!"

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Parrot, "The Google Challenge."



Ill. 2. 26 “Visitors digging into the files of the New York Public Library’s Picture Collection, in the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building.” Source: Gus Powell for *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/03/arts/design/new-york-public-library-picture-collection.html>.

Introducing younger audiences to this unique tangible photo-archive is of particular significance to the Collection’s librarians. In an interview I conducted with Supervisor Librarian Jessica Cline, she emphasized that one of the Collection’s key objectives is to engage younger generations by offering them a distinct experience with tangible images. To achieve this goal, the Collection employs various strategies, including leveraging social media platforms such as Instagram. The Picture Collection maintains an active presence on Instagram, periodically inviting artists and photographers to curate their account for a few weeks. These guest curators select a theme and curate a selection of images from specific subject files based on their preferences.¹⁶⁷ Cline sees Instagram not only as a promotional tool for the Picture Collection but also as a means

¹⁶⁷ See NYPL Picture Collection (@nyplpicturecollection), <https://www.instagram.com/nyplpicturecollection/>.

of encouraging people to visit the library and engage with these archival images as tangible artifacts in person.¹⁶⁸



Ill. 2. 27 “Images from the “Transgenderism” folder on the Picture Collection tables.” Source: Gus Powell for The New York Times.



Ill. 2. 28 “Jay Vissers, a Picture Collection librarian since 1994.” Source: Gus Powell for The New York Times.

¹⁶⁸ Jessica Cline, in discussion with the author, NYPL, New York, April 2019.

2.5.2 Aestheticization and Curation of the Photo-Archive

Returning to the art gallery presentation in “The Color of a Flea’s Eye” at the Gagolian Gallery, the experience of walking through Simon’s minimalist installation is imbued with an aesthetic intensity that elicits a response that actively engages the viewer. As curator Simon Baker describes her art, “Simon’s work relies, in part, on the precision of her deeply seductive aesthetic presentation of ideas, along with the ideas themselves.”¹⁶⁹ In my interpretation of the project, Simon’s photographic compositions are visually appealing and undergo an artistic treatment that demonstrates significant formal and technical skill. This approach not only enhances the aesthetic qualities of the archival images appropriated by Simon from the Picture Collection, but also strengthens the photo-archive as a tool for the artist’s experimentation within the realm of contemporary art photography, also known as ‘post-photography.’

Taryn Simon perceives the official Picture Collection at the Library as a work of art in its own right, even without her artistic intervention. She remarks: “It is kind of like the map, this beautiful way of organizing that becomes an art form in itself because it’s no longer practical.”¹⁷⁰ In another interview, Simon also emphasizes the experiential and performative aspects of the Picture Collection as a work of art, stating that it is “so multidimensional. It just keeps swirling. I think of it as a performance piece or an installation.”¹⁷¹

Through the careful selection and refined arrangement of the archival images, the resultant compositions allude to avant-garde practices of collage, montage, and modernist assemblage, all of which demonstrate striking visual juxtapositions that contribute to the aestheticization of the Picture Collection. As an illustration, consider the photo-collage within *Folder: Express Highways*

¹⁶⁹ Simon Baker, “A Refusal to Float Free of Origin or Destination,” in *Rear Views, a Star-Forming Nebula, and the Office of Foreign Propaganda* (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 3.

¹⁷⁰ Baker, “Taryn Simon - ‘The Picture Collection’,” unpaginated.

¹⁷¹ Lubow, “Hands Off the Library’s Picture Collection!”

(Ill. 2.29). It is structured in a manner that reveals an intricate pattern of interwoven, swirling junctions and motorway overpasses. At first glance, the artwork simulates an abstract composition, characterized by a strong sense of formal and chromatic coherence.



Ill. 2. 29 Taryn Simon, *Folder: Express Highways*, 2012. Installation view, “The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection” at Gagosian Gallery NYC, 2021. Source: photo by author.

Beyond the formal properties of the collages, Simon also highlights the compelling *mélange* of “high and low” art that one might find in a particular folder. For example, in a composition titled *Folder: Costume—Veil* (Ill. 2.30), one might recognize a famous Edward Steichen photograph of Gloria Swanson appearing next to more generic advertisements of female models wearing glamorous veils, which are in turn juxtaposed with images of Middle Eastern women draped in elaborate burkas. *Folder: Beards and Mustaches* (Ill. 2.31) includes several

the collection's accessibility.¹⁷³ In contrast to many museum institutions that primarily directed photography towards aesthetic objectives, Javitz exhibited a different, more practical sensibility in her approach to collecting images. Her vision encompassed not only the photography of renowned practitioners like Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange but also a diverse array of pictorial forms and ephemera, including postcards, printed illustrations, advertisements, and cartoons, sourced from various anonymous origins. In the Picture Collection, both fine art photography and vernacular imagery had the potential to acquire fresh meanings and enhance knowledge production through their unrestricted circulation in the public domain, resembling the current unrestricted non-hierarchical exchange of images on the internet.



Ill. 2. 31 Taryn Simon, *Folder: Beards and Mustaches*, 2012. Archival inkjet print, (119.4 × 157.5 cm). Source: New York Times, <https://archive.nytimes.com/tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/27/the-original-search-engine/>.

¹⁷³ Diana Kamin, "Total Recall." Also see Tim Griffin discussion on the "tensions of hierarchies" visible in Simon's photo collages. "An Unlikely Futurity," 5.

Simon's approach to photographic archival image clusters (also grids), characterized by their non-hierarchical nature of the Picture Collection images, provides viewers with an opportunity to engage in a conceptual and imaginative exploration. In a manner similar to perusing a variety of online images with different themes and significance, this approach allows them to unpack and rearrange the varied archival contents in various arrangements, potentially revealing fresh perspectives.

In their 2012 article titled "When is Artification?" sociologists Roberta Shapiro and Nathalie Heinich investigate the process by which ordinary objects or practices are transformed into works of art, as well as the specific conditions under which this "artification" occurs. One of the significant forms of artification they identify is the practice of "extracting or displacing a production from its initial context."¹⁷⁴ Shapiro and Heinich argue that this displacement is a fundamental step in the artification process and point to historical examples where it has occurred, such as "when jazz music was transcribed into musical notation, when film transitioned from fairground exhibitions to dedicated cinematic venues, when graffiti art was captured in photographs and published in books, and when breakdancers transitioned from street performances to stage presentations."¹⁷⁵

Shapiro and Heinich's observations are highly relevant to Taryn Simon's performative approach. Simon strategically employs the process of "displacement," aligning with Shapiro and Heinich's concept of "artification," as she appropriates and removes the images from the New York Public Library's Picture Collection from their original archival context, thereby transforming them into art objects in her curated installations. Significantly, as Chuang reminds us, many of the

¹⁷⁴ Roberta Shapiro and Nathalie Heinich, "When is Artification?" *Contemporary Aesthetics* 4 (2012): 9.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

Picture Collection's vernacular images were never originally intended to be art; their primary purpose was simply to visually convey information or ideas.¹⁷⁶

By subjecting the images to an "artification" process, Simon effectively restores their capacity to evoke "aesthetic pleasure," thereby assigning them a renewed role as contemporary art. Essentially, Simon's curated clusters of images infuse the appropriated archival photographs with heightened visual (also emotional) impact and expanded imaginative potential, thereby transcending their original purpose within the confines of the Picture Collection's archival folders. Importantly, this transformation also exemplifies photography's performative nature, in accordance with J.L. Austin's original notion. Signifying that photography "does" something and actively engages viewers and accomplishes a particular action or effect at the moment when we observe or interact with it.¹⁷⁷

Simon's actions of selecting, appropriating, and reworking images that had already undergone decontextualization (as a reminder, these images were initially removed from their original context upon entering the Picture Collection and were subjected to archival organization) undeniably inflect the usage, value, and meaning of the original archival pictures. They transitioned from the obscurity of the archive's folders to a well-curated gallery presentation, undergoing a profound transformation in both their aesthetic significance and functional role within a contemporary art photography exhibition. As Charlotte Cotton contends in the context of contemporary art photography, the seemingly ordinary can attain the status of "extraordinary" when subjected to the artist's photographic, framing, and exhibition presentation processes.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Joshua Chuang, "Pictures at Work," 17.

¹⁷⁷ Contemporary understandings of 'Performance' and 'Performativity' in photography have been explored in Allan S. Taylor, "Performance, Photography, Performativity: What Performance 'Does' in the Still Image" (PhD diss., University of the Arts London and Falmouth University, 2017).

¹⁷⁸ Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 121.

Examining the large-scale framed compositions Simon created from the selected Picture Collection folders, one can also consider her “artification” process within the context of what art historian Jean-François Chevrier describes as the “tableau.” The tableau, as a contemporary photographic form, transcends mere representation. According to Chevrier, it is “an autonomous, free-standing image that declares its own artfulness through careful composition.”¹⁷⁹ Simon’s compositions featuring the Picture Collection images share similarities with the tableau aesthetic. The expansive and carefully framed compositions create a visually captivating and aesthetically pleasing experience. More precisely, these compositions possess an aestheticized physical presence that significantly distinguishes them from their original presentation and utilization within the Picture Collection archive. In the archive, these images are encountered as tangible objects that one can physically handle while perusing the Collection’s files.

From a performative perspective, as Chevrier suggests, the scale and formal characteristics of the tableau establish a distinctive interplay between the image and the viewer. Viewers are not passively observing the large-scale image; they are compelled to immerse themselves in contemplation of a fictional realm depicted within the image. This performative outcome prompts Chevrier to characterize the “tableau” as a prototype of an experiential dimension.¹⁸⁰ Similarly, Simon’s meticulously crafted ‘tableau-like’ compositions go beyond static presentations of archival images by highlighting unexpected associations between them. Hence, the compositions engage viewers in contemplating the sequencing and correlations between images, as well as their

¹⁷⁹ Chevrier quoted, in Soutter, *Why Art Photography?* 56. The work of many of Simon’s contemporaries, such as Jeff Wall, Gregory Crewdson, Andreas Gursky, and Thomas Demand, has often been associated with this term, as they create large-format, high-definition photographs reminiscent of grand tableau painting.

¹⁸⁰ See Soutter analysis of the Tableau as a significant photographic form in contemporary art photography in *Why Art Photography?* 56 -58. Also see Jean-François Chevrier, “The Tableau and the Document of Experience,” in Thomas Weski (ed.), *Click Double Click: The Documentary Factor* (Cologne: Walter König, 2006), 51–61. And Jean-François Chevrier, “The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography,” in Douglas Fogle (ed.), *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960–1982* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2003), 113–127.

content, color, and form, in relation to the composition's subject title (such as *Folder: Handshake*, *Oxygen*, *Police-US*, *Cats*. To name a few of Simon's works). This engagement with Simon's aesthetically composed expansive compositions may also act as a poignant reminder of our contemporary experience of predominantly viewing imagery on screens, lacking the tangible or three-dimensional aspects. As such, they can be seen as "a shift away from dematerialized conceptual or digital art, back towards the fullness and pleasure of the traditional art object."¹⁸¹

The incorporation of the *Picture Collection* project into Simon's solo exhibition at Galerie Rudolfinum in Prague in 2016 serves as a pertinent example of the tableau aesthetic, which is also an integral facet of the curatorial concept underpinning Simon's presentation of the works and the selection of space. The overall arrangement of Simon's wire-hung compositions on the gallery walls commands a remarkable physical presence. Additionally, they create an intriguing juxtaposition with Simon's contemporary compositions in silver frames against the classical backdrop of the dark wood paneling and the ornate ceiling in the elegant gallery of the 1885 Neo-Renaissance style Rudolfinum building (Ill. 2.32)

¹⁸¹ Lucy Soutter, *Why Art Photography?* 56.



Ill. 2. 32 Installation of the exhibition “Taryn Simon,” Galerie Rudolfinum, Prague, Czech Republic, 27 April 2016 - 10 July 2016. Source: <https://www.artrabbit.com/events/taryn-simon>.

The tableau aesthetic, combined with the curatorial practice of placing contemporary art within a classical, ornate exhibition space, was also prominently featured in Simon’s recent bifurcated exhibition, “The Color of a Flea’s Eye,” presented at the Gagosian Gallery and The NYPL in 2021. In the specialized installation at the NYPL’s Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, Simon’s framed compositions were displayed in Room 100, where the Picture Collection is housed. Additionally, these compositions, along with the archival vitrine tables displaying Javitz’s biography and other archival items from the history of the Collection, were exhibited in the Edna Barnes Salomon Room located within the building. This space, originally designed by architects Carrère & Hastings as a Beaux-Arts picture gallery, was initially intended for the exhibition of paintings donated to the library by its founders (Ill. 33-34).



Ill. 2. 33 “Taryn Simon: The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection.” Installation view at The New York Public Library, September 18, 2021–January 9, 2022. Source: NYPL, <https://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/tarynsimon>.

This Library presentation of Simon’s project is noteworthy in that it aligns with what art critic James Lawrence describes as “heightened aesthetic consciousness” cultivated by environments such as libraries, galleries, and museums, shaped by a fusion of “physical conditions and social conventions.”¹⁸² Consequently, the preexisting aesthetic heritage of the Salomon Room, originally conceived as the Beaux-Arts painting gallery of the NYPL, provides the contemporary artist with a context in which spectators are predisposed to engage with the space in a manner attuned to aesthetic sensibilities. In this iteration of the project, Simon’s artistic intervention takes on a circular dimension as the materials she borrowed from the Collection when she initiated the project nine years earlier return to their place of origin. Nevertheless, it is essential to emphasize

¹⁸² James Lawrence, “Cast of Characters | James Lawrence Explores How Contemporary Artists Have Grappled with the Subject of the Library,” *Gagosian Quarterly*, Summer 2019, accessed March 3, 2022, <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2019/summer/essay-libraries-cast-characters/>.

that these images were not merely reintegrated into the Collection’s archival folders. Instead, within this installation, the process of ‘artification’ is advanced as Simon archival compositions have been repositioned art pieces comparable in stature to 19th century classical American paintings, thereby strengthening the analogy to the aesthetic concept of the “tableau.”¹⁸³ The juxtaposition of large-scale traditional paintings with Simon’s contemporary photographic compositions underscores the interplay among distinct artistic conventions, concepts, crafts, and visual expressions. This deliberate juxtaposition fosters a compelling visual dialogue, encouraging viewers to delve into the dynamic contrasts and interconnectedness that exist between the visual languages of the painting and photography, as well as between the realms of presentation and representation.



Ill. 2. 34 “Taryn Simon: The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection.” Installation view at The New York Public Library, Sep. 24, 2021- May 17, 2022. Source: Gagosian, <https://gagosian.com/artists/taryn-simon/>.

¹⁸³The Salomon Room features paintings by artists James Peale, Rembrandt Peale, and Samuel F.B. Morse, among others. “The Edna Barnes Salomon Room,” NYPL, accessed Nov 21, 2023, <https://www.nypl.org/node/177>.

From an institutional perspective, the intentional placement of Taryn Simon's compositions within one of the NYPL's most esteemed galleries and reading rooms serves as a compelling affirmation of the library's dedication to preserving the classical "Beaux-Arts" tradition, which is inherently intertwined with the style grandeur of the Library's main branch landmark building. Simultaneously, it demonstrates the library's commitment to remaining in tune with contemporary art practices that draw inspiration from the Library's extensive collections.¹⁸⁴ The continued collaboration with Taryn Simon appears to reflect the Library's intent not only to introduce a fresh, experimental perspective into the Picture Collection but also to forge a direct and meaningful link between the Library's nineteenth-century artifacts and the more recent output of contemporary artists.

Accordingly, select compositions from Simon archival project have also been strategically displayed in Room 100 of the Picture Collection (Ill. 2.35). This decision underscores the curators' deliberate efforts to establish an unmediated connection between the historical picture archive housed within the room and contemporary art photography. In this endeavor, both the exhibition curator, Joshua Chuang, and Taryn Simon actively foster a meaningful connection that bridges the historical and contemporary realms. This connection enhances the viewer's engagement within Simon's self-reflective presentation of her *Picture Collection* art project within the official Picture Collection space at the NYPL. As a result, the curatorial approach encourages a dynamic experience not only with the archive itself and the tangible images within its folders but also with its transformation into contemporary archival art displayed on the walls of the archive in Room 100.

¹⁸⁴ The New York Public Library maintains an extensive exhibition program, consistently offering free major exhibitions and special displays at three of its research library locations: the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, the Library for the Performing Arts, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. See "Exhibitions," NYPL, <https://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions>.



Ill. 2. 35 Simon's works hang on the wall of Room 100. They include *Folder: Costume—Veil* (2012) and *Folder: Oxygen* (2012). Source: Gus Powell for *The New York Times*.

Finally, this reflexive installation of Simon's work encourages visitors to view the Picture Collection with a renewed perspective, inspiring exploration of the intersections between historical and contemporary contexts. As a result, it enhances the viewer's experience and potentially fosters a deeper understanding of the Picture Collection's significance in contemporary art and visual culture more broadly. Moreover, it offers library patrons a firsthand opportunity to observe how the images within the Collection can ignite creative processes and serve multiple purposes – thus further affirming Romana Javitz's original conviction that “a true picture has many lives.”¹⁸⁵

Much like the work of other archival artists mentioned in the present dissertation, Taryn Simon's *Picture Collection* project manifests an intrinsic human need for visual organization and

¹⁸⁵ Javitz quoted in Chuang, “Pictures at Work,” 19.

permanence amid the endless flow of dematerialized, elusive images that we produce and consume daily. As Simon explains:

To me [the Picture Collection] shows this consistent impulse to categorize, and set up ways of indexing, controlling, and understanding information before we had the possibilities that technology allows. So that being a kind of human instinct to seek order and to find some way of comprehending the mess or chaos that surrounds us.¹⁸⁶

In her gallery presentations, Simon attempted to momentarily stop the stream of images and accumulating information by imposing an aesthetic order in her neatly arranged selections from the immense image archive. Nevertheless, her aesthetic and conceptual framing of the archival images ironically manifests a futile attempt to impose any kind of structure or boundaries on the contemporary barrage of images and information. In this context, Taryn Simon employs a method akin to what Hal Foster characterizes as an archival “détournement.” This approach disrupts or challenges dominant, singular historical narratives, while highlighting the inherent instability of the archive as a supposedly objective tool for preserving history and memory.¹⁸⁷ As Simon’s project unfolds, the act of “diversion,” accomplished through the reappropriation of pre-existing materials, can enable the creation of alternative knowledge, reminiscent of Michel Foucault’s concept of “counter-memory.” Indeed, Simon’s research into the Picture Collection and her resulting aesthetic compositions and archival discoveries rely on the establishment of novel connections and associations among preexisting historical data. Through her systematic examination of the Collection’s classification system and its socio-cultural history, Simon’s project and its distinctive curation shed light on the influence of this unique photo-archive on American visual culture and the construction of collective memory.

¹⁸⁶ Taryn Simon, “The Picture Collection - In Conversation: Taryn Simon and Evan Sharp.”

¹⁸⁷ Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” 4.

The role of archivist/collector/curator/photo-editor assumed by the artist is pertinent to her research-based practice. In the re-photographing and re-organization of the source material, Simon not only offers fresh creative connections between images within the Collection but also distinctly highlights the constructed or pre-meditated nature of archiving, along with the interplay between words and imagery. Simon's questioning of the organization and cultural impact of the Picture Collection brings forth an acute awareness of the categories and hierarchies that mediate and classify visual materials in contemporary culture.

By embedding her artistic intervention within this established archive, Simon compellingly unveils the human intricacies, and occasional disarray, inherent in the organizational system of the Picture Collection, and by extension, other archives. Ultimately, Simon's work seeks to further demystify and question the presumed objectivity or neutrality embedded in the photo-archive. As she suggests, "the works point to the invisible hands behind seemingly neutral systems of image-gathering."¹⁸⁸ By delving deep into the Picture Collection, Simon not only uncovers overlooked narratives and striking visual juxtapositions but also critically engages with the act of archiving itself. She underscores the significance of choices made in what is preserved, what is omitted, and how these selections are presented to the public.

This chapter focused on the arc of Simon's nine-year long archival project based on the Picture Collection. Beyond the aesthetic analysis of Simon's archival artwork, the chapter demonstrated how the origin of the project, its purpose, and development are inextricably tied to the New York Public Library's complex relationship with the medium of photography. I have also focused on the institutional and historical backdrop from which Simon's project emerged, including the current motivation of the NYPL to endorse a contemporary, artist-curated exhibition

¹⁸⁸ Taryn Simon, "The Color of a Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection," accessed Nov. 21, 2023, https://tarynsimon.com/works/picture_collection/#1

based on its historical collections. As this chapter elucidates, “The Color of the Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection” (2021) exhibition underscores the Library’s aspiration to reinvigorate its historical archives and classic art collections by establishing a direct link between the historical picture archive and contemporary art photography. In doing so, it aims to enhance the Picture Collection’s contemporary relevance while simultaneously anchoring it within the realm of traditional art history and American art photography discourse. Importantly, Simon was not solely fascinated by the collection’s distinctive classification system and its potential as an analog predecessor to digital search engines.

The latest version of her project highlights how the social dimension of human stories and interactions plays a significant role in shaping the Picture Collection and contributes to the core of Simon’s conceptual artwork. This is further reflected in the performative nature of her curated exhibitions. Thus, “The Color of the Flea’s Eye” exhibition underscores Simon’s unique archival investigation, culminating in a comprehensive tribute to the overlooked narrative of Romana Javitz and her socially inclusive and pragmatic approach to photography. Drawing from Javitz’s concept of image democracy, Simon has crafted an interactive exhibition experience that prioritizes accessibility and encourages relational engagement. Instead of enforcing interpretations, her curated arrangements of images, alongside the archival materials/documents displayed on the dedicated glass table that showcases the history of the Picture Collection, aim to encourage independent interpretation and inspire viewers to create alternative connections and meanings. The interplay among various images and archival materials, including their framing, sequencing, and placement within a designated exhibition space – whether it be a contemporary art gallery, an elegant reading room within the NYPL, or the library room housing the Picture Collection – significantly influences the performative dimension and immersive experience of the exhibition.

Therefore, I argue that Simon's engagement with the Picture Collection transcends simple re-contextualization or reframing of archival images. Her transformative process of "artification" reanimates the archival images, presenting them in visually captivating arrangements that can generate alternative narratives and perspectives. As demonstrated, Simon's curatorial approach accomplishes more than elevating archival images to the status of valuable art objects; it also orchestrates a performative encounter that effectively bridges the realms of the gallery space and the historical significance of the Picture Collection.

Finally, although Simon's work centers on a distinctly localized narrative of a New York-based institutional photo archive, it is undeniably intertwined with its broader cultural visual context. As archivist Sue Breakell notes, "any archive is a product of the social processes and systems of its time, and reflects the positions and exclusions of different groups or individuals within those systems."¹⁸⁹ In her attempt to reevaluate the Picture Collection through a contemporary lens, I assert that Simon engages in a reflection on the medium of photography, its pervasive circulation, the diminishing materiality of photo archives, and its intersection with other artistic mediums.

By situating the archival images from the Picture Collection within a contemporary art photography framework that seamlessly combines aesthetic appeal with conceptual inquiry, Simon actively encourages viewers to engage in a critical reflection upon the cultural power dynamics and institutional decision-making processes inherent in systems of classification and archival presentations. This examination takes on heightened significance in our contemporary era, where dominant information systems, search engines, and social media platforms such as Google, Facebook, and Instagram employ substantial influence over contemporary visual culture and our

¹⁸⁹ Sue Breakell, "Archival Practices and the Practice of Archives in the Visual Arts'," *Archives and Records*, no. 36:1 (2015): 2.

daily interactions with images. Given this context, the subsequent chapter delves into the artistic practice of Evan Roth, offering a comprehensive exploration of how Roth utilizes the concept and practice of the photo-archive to strategically navigate and respond to our prevalent digital environment and the serendipitous character of image archives in the online sphere.

Chapter 3: Images out of Space – Evan Roth’s Internet Archiving

As discussed in the previous chapter, Taryn Simon explored elements of the past by examining a traditional picture archive. Her objective, as I have argued, was to draw attention to the ongoing transformation of the cultural status and reception of photography while repositioning and aestheticizing the images found in the Picture Collection at the New York Public Library. Simon’s project offers a valuable perspective on the history and evolution of the Picture Collection, shedding light on our contemporary experience of archival images and image collections as works of art, particularly in the context of the ever-evolving landscape of digital imaging technologies.

As I asserted, Simon re-presents (and re-animates) the Picture Collection images, thus creating a performative experience of the historical picture archive and, potentially, a new understanding of the Picture Collection as a whole. Given that Simon intervened in a large-scale photo archive that in many ways reflects the evolution of photography and visual culture throughout the twentieth century, it seems a fitting segue to turn in this chapter to the work of Net artist Evan Roth (b. 1978), who engages with yet another “mega archive”—the Internet— that similarly operates as a perfect reflection of twenty-first century image culture. Indeed, the Internet has become a significant repository of our recent history and visual heritage. In the present era, any cloud space or hard drive could easily be considered an archive. As information technology scholars Elisavet Christou and Mike Hazas observe, “The web is the most complete and extended archive of our culture that has ever existed while being a storehouse of cultural connections at the same time.”¹ Since the advent of digital media in contemporary art, artists have appropriated found

¹ Elisavet Christou and Mike Hazas, “It’s Just the Internet! Appropriation in Postinternet Art,” in *ARTECH 2017: Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Digital Arts* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2017), 127-133.

“objects” from the expanding archive of the Internet and remixed them to create novel content, thus producing an unofficial, endless archive of Internet data.

Roth is an American artist who lives and works in Berlin.² Consciously locating his practice across the boundary lines of photography, new media, digital, and Net art, Roth engages with both still and moving images, computer programming, and hacking practices while imaginatively using more traditional genres such as painting, sculpture, and installation.³ He earned a BS in Architecture from the University of Maryland and an MFA from the Communications, Design, and Technology Department at Parsons School of Design in New York. He co-founded the art organizations/collectives Graffiti Research Lab and the Free Art & Technology Lab. The latter is an Internet-based art-and-technology collective dedicated to the intersection of open-source hacking and popular culture. Recalling Roth’s academic and professional work in architecture before fully transitioning into the art world, his net art still looks to architecture, both formally and conceptually, for inspiration. His meticulously structured gallery installations also reflect his investigations into the “architecture” of the Internet. “Eventually, I quit architecture to dedicate myself to that world,” Roth confesses.⁴ It is thus fitting in the context of this research to focus on the work of an artist who has dedicated his career to the close observation of present-day rapports with a rapidly changing technology. Roth has channeled these observations into the creation of archival, Internet-based artworks that exist in a liminal space between the virtual domain and

² Roth previously lived and worked in Paris and Hong Kong.

³ Roth’s work has been exhibited at the Tate and the Whitechapel Gallery in London, the 2016 Sydney Biennale, and Mona Bismarck American Center in Paris. His work is in the public collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Israel Museum. In 2012, he was awarded the Cooper-Hewitt Smithsonian’s National Design Award, and in 2016 the Creative Capital Emerging Fields Award. His work has been exhibited recently at *The Supermarket of Images* at Jeu de Paume (Paris, 2020), *Songs of the Sky* at C/O Berlin (Berlin, 2021), and *Give and Take: Images Upon Images* at Hamburger Kunsthalle (Hamburg, 2022).

⁴ Evan Roth, “A Net Artist on Why the Cloud Is a Bad Metaphor for the Internet,” interview by Zachary Small, *Hyperallergic*, November 9, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/460796/a-net-artist-on-why-the-cloud-is-a-bad-metaphor-for-the-internet/>.

museum/gallery walls. His œuvre thereby underscores a crucial aspect of post-internet art: the juxtaposition of physicality and ephemerality.

Viewed in this light, Roth's work epitomizes a post-medium, post-photographic interplay between the tangible and the virtual, as well as between offline and online dimensions. This duality has emerged as a defining factor in dialogues on contemporary art and within the framework of twenty-first-century museum practices.⁵ By intertwining these spheres, Roth encapsulates the fluidity and interconnectedness that characterize our digitized era, serving as a poignant commentary on the complexities and nuances of these overlapping realms.

I contend that Roth's archival works make a significant case for conversations tied to interactivity and performativity in contemporary art photography. While Taryn Simon works with archival images that have been meticulously collected, managed, and organized by an institution (i.e., the librarians of the NYPL's Picture Collection), Roth takes a different approach. He chooses to rework and re-present web-based images that have been passively collected and saved on his personal computer by an algorithm through daily Internet browsing. In this manner, Roth bridges the gap between the abstract digital data hidden or forgotten in the computer cache and its visible manifestations by presenting it in the gallery space. Roth mediates the abstract through tangible forms as well as considering the nature of remembrance and forgetfulness.

Seeking to visualize and question the cultural dynamics of twenty-first-century image culture, both Roth and Simon conduct uncompromising research into the hidden operational structures underlying visibility. While Simon's *Picture Collection* project uncovers suppressed socio-cultural narratives and institutional decisions tied to an image classification system, Roth's artistic interventions and transformations of digital visual material expose the obfuscated

⁵ Yves Evrard and Anne Krebs, "The Authenticity of the Museum Experience in the Digital Age: The Case of the Louvre," *Journal of Cultural Economics* 42, no. 2 (2018): 353-363.

infrastructures of the Internet. As Roth explains, “My practice visualizes what is often unseen or unacknowledged in our interactions with technology.”⁶ Although Simon and Roth’s art practices exhibit certain conceptual parallels, it is essential to emphasize that this chapter will place less emphasis on the photographic material organized by an official image archive. Instead, the primary focus will shift towards examining the digital turn, which entails the exploration, appropriation, and generation of informal image archives within the online sphere.

This chapter aims to provide a contextual analysis of three prominent projects by Roth. Through an investigation of these projects and their exhibition contexts, the chapter highlights the artist’s profound engagement with archival concepts and his distinctive visual language. I will first discuss the *Internet Cache Self Portrait* series (2014-ongoing) and its extension, *Since You Were Born* (2016-ongoing). The third project under examination is *Internet Landscapes* (2014-ongoing).

In the ongoing series *Internet Cache Self Portrait* (Ill. 3.1), Roth offers an introspective perspective on his own internet activity through a presentation of his browsing history. Consisting of a large-scale compilation of images extracted from the artist’s computer cache (i.e., the computer’s memory archive), the work reveals Roth’s idiosyncratic interests and intimate interactions on the web, providing a visually saturated representation—a *self-portrait*—of his online persona.

⁶ Evan Roth, “Evan Roth Red Lines Winner of Artangle’s International Open Call - Interview,” by Paul Carter Robinson, Artlyst, September 10, 2018, <https://www.artlyst.com/features/evan-roth-red-lines-winner-artangels-international-open-call-interview-paul-carter-robinson/>.



Ill. 3. 1 Evan Roth, *Self Portrait: July 17, 2012, 2013*. Vinyl print (150cm x 1300cm). Source: Evan Roth, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~/works/internet-cache-self-portrait-series/#hemisphere=east&strand=108>.

In *Internet Landscapes* (Ill. 3.2), Roth features his journeys to submarine Internet fiber-optic cable landing locations around the world. Searching for the physical basis of the Internet, the artist created an intricate interplay between tangible and virtual realms in the exhibition space. Through a visually captivating installation, Roth transforms the Internet into an alluring art object. These works utilize a sophisticated system of infra-red landscape images and videos that highlight the intricacies of the Internet.



Ill. 3. 2 Evan Roth, *Internet Landscapes*, 2017. Installation view at Carroll/Fletcher Gallery at The Armory Show, March 2 - March 5, 2017, New York City. Source: Evan Roth, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~/works/landscapes/#hemisphere=west&strand=133>.

As I will demonstrate, Roth's archival projects are not only open invitations for viewers to peer into the artist's private life as manifested on the Internet, but also offer a heightened physical experience, suggesting that digital information flows into and penetrates our material world. Therefore, while the project places the artist at the center of the work, it also holds a universal appeal that resonates with all of us in an era where our internet activities are intricately woven into the fabric of our everyday lives. As writer and curator Omar Kholeif maintains, the Internet "has evolved from passive browsers on large desktop computers, into much more holistic connective interfaces that span numerous personal devices, wired into every aspect of human life and experience."⁷

⁷ Omar Kholeif, quoted in Anna Souter, "Post-Internet Art: The Search for a Definition," *Roman Road Journal*, Aug. 22, 2017, <https://romanroadjournal.com/post-internet-art-the-search-for-a-definition/>.

Working as a Net artist within a fluid image environment, Roth not only uses the Internet as a “meta-archive” and inexhaustible visual source from which he appropriates and manipulates images to generate his own archives, but as a medium in and of itself. In borrowing from the ubiquity of the Internet, Roth uses the web as his principal medium and utilizes its technology to stage and present his work. On a more conceptual plane, in the hands of Roth, the Internet becomes a reflexive artifice that prompts contemplation of the network’s ontology and its effect on our relationship to images—their production, circulation, and presentation in the face of evolving technology.

Like the work of many of his contemporaries, Roth’s art is characterized by a simultaneous celebration and critique of the Internet and contemporary digital visual culture. In this sense, his work also demonstrates net art’s capacity, in the context of Nicolas Bourriaud’s relational paradigm, to “create the awareness about the particular life patterns that reflect our civilization.”⁸ Bourriaud uses the term “relational aesthetics” to define “[a] set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”⁹ Fundamentally, relational aesthetics underscores interactions and connections involving artists and viewers, as well as among viewers themselves. Within this framework, artists act as catalysts recreating social environments for active engagement. Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics” aligns with the performative experience framework used in this dissertation, namely in emphasizing dynamic interactions between viewers and artworks and human relationships in art production and exhibitions. Importantly, relational

⁸ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 85. Also see Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 51–79.

⁹ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 113.

artworks often manifest as immersive environments and interactive situation in art galleries (as well as public spaces) promoting connections and audience participation.¹⁰



Ill. 3. 3 Evan Roth, *Since You Were Born*, 2019. Installation view at MOCA Jacksonville, Florida, USA, 2019.
Source: <http://www.evan-roth.com/~shows/since-you-were-born-2019/#hemisphere=east&strand=31>.

Roth's installation, *Since You Were Born*, unveiled at MOCA Jacksonville in 2019, embodies Bourriaud's theory. The exhibit (Ill. 3.3), spanning the entire expanse of the gallery from floor to ceiling, created a captivating, immersive environment that facilitated active participation. Echoing Bourriaud's conception of art as a "social interstice," Roth's approach encourages the development of interpersonal relationships within the space. The exhibition invites visitors not just to observe but to document and share their experiences via social media or a dedicated website. By turning spectators into active participants, Roth positions the artwork as a shared, communal

¹⁰ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 45.

endeavor for interpretation. As a result, the exhibition tangibly enacts a form of relational aesthetics, underscoring the function of Internet-based art as a catalyst for dialogue and shared experiences.

Roth, as I have noted, possesses considerable coding and web-design skills and some of his well-known art projects exist entirely on the web. Describing this facet of his practice, he notes, “this is work that is inspired by and created just for the Internet browser.”¹¹ Other works have adopted a physical form as they migrated to the museum gallery space. In addition to traditional art spaces, Roth has been experimenting with another, less official, exhibition format as well as a more relational approach to viewing and experiencing his art outside institutional settings. In conjunction with his ongoing *Internet Landscapes* project, which involves the mapping and archiving of submarine data transmission cables and the visual recording of the coastal landscapes where the cables have been laid, he has created a parallel project, titled *Red Lines*, which will be explored in the concluding section of this chapter.

Red Lines is a peer-to-peer sharing network that can be easily accessed and streamed to viewers’ smartphones or computers. It therefore offers another way of experiencing his work in a domestic context. Roth refers to this project as an “online performance,” as it took place over the course of two years (from September 10, 2018, to September 10, 2020) and brought together all the individual pieces in the *Internet Landscape* series to be viewed synchronously online. During this period, the “peer-to-peer artwork” (available on a designated website which can be viewed from any location or device) connected viewers/users from diverse locations and invited them to

¹¹ Evan Roth, “Artists are Hackers: Evan Roth at TEDx Pantheon Sorbonne”, filmed December 2012 at the Pantheon, Sorbonne, Paris, TED video, 15:24, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DSe4o45i3o&t=1s&ab_channel=TEDxTalks.

participate in the online sharing and viewing of eighty-two individual video pieces from the *Internet Landscape* series.¹²

Significantly, Roth's work transcends a simple archiving of images that the artist finds online. At a meta-level, his artistic methodology embodies the acts of recording and preserving digital culture. Each piece he produces materializes and thereby conserves his interactions, gestures, and experiences in the online sphere. He aims to capture a dynamic history – specifically, the ongoing evolution of technology – as he attempts “to archive moments in the evolution of tech.” Moreover, as Roth puts it, “The impetus for wanting to archive these moments is driven by the feeling that we are living in times of rapid change.”¹³ As such, the artist considers digital preservation on a larger timescale, where his online art is preserved for the future and stands ready for a new relationship with a future audience. Indeed, he has repeatedly mentioned in interviews his passion for imagining how, fifty or one-hundred years from now, people will interpret today's digital culture.¹⁴

Interestingly, Roth's archiving of his own online activity can be seen as echoing the objectives of the “Internet Archive” digital library.¹⁵ The Internet Archive is renowned for its comprehensive preservation of web pages and various online content, thus sharing a purpose in

¹² Over a span of two years, the Red Lines network engaged with 120,000 individuals across 166 countries.

Remarkably, the average viewing duration per person exceeded one hour, a notable achievement considering that most internet users typically spend only a few minutes on a particular website or video. See: Evan Roth, “Red Lines,” accessed July 27, 2023, <https://redlines.network/>.

¹³ Evan Roth, “Infra-Red Wuthering Heights: Interview with Evan Roth,” by Filippo Lorenzin, *Digicult*, July 28, 2016, <http://digicult.it/news/infra-red-wuthering-heights-intervista-con-evan-roth/>.

¹⁴ Evan Roth, “A Net Artist,” by Zachary Small.

¹⁵ Commonly known as the “Wayback Machine,” the Internet Archive is a non-profit digital library specializing in web archiving. Established in 1996, it provides a valuable service that allows users to access historical versions of websites and other digital content. Visitors to the Wayback Machine can enter a URL, select a date range, and explore archived versions of the web. The Internet Archive regularly captures and stores web pages, enabling users to access previous versions of sites that may have changed or disappeared. It serves as a vital resource for researchers, historians, and the general public interested in tracing the web's evolution and accessing digital artifacts. See “Wayback Machine General Information,” Internet Archive, accessed May 2, 2023, [https://help.archive.org/help/wayback-machine-general-information/..](https://help.archive.org/help/wayback-machine-general-information/)

common with Roth's work of documenting digital culture and history. Both his projects and the Internet Archive exemplify a recognition of the imperative to capture and preserve the rapidly evolving landscape of the Internet, whether through extensive archival initiatives (digital libraries) or artistic interventions. Wondering whether net art will withstand the test of time, Roth remarks, "My hope is that the work will become more interesting over time as things (myself, society, technology, etc.) continue to evolve."¹⁶ In this manner, Roth's unique form of "future-archiving" takes its cue from Boris Groys' observation on archives:

Archives are often interpreted as a means to conserve the past – to present the past in the present. But at the same time, archives are machines for transporting the present into the future. Artists always do their work not only for their own time but also for art archives – for the future in which the artist's work remains present.¹⁷

For more than a decade, Roth's art has been circulating within three distinct yet correlating spaces and frameworks. The first context can be identified in the early portion of his career, which revolved around collaborations and interventions into the public sphere, working with graffiti writers and street artists through various arts organizations. The second context consists of the traditional art gallery and museum spaces where Roth presents his work in the form of prints, paintings, sculptures, and installations. The third is the virtual space of the Internet. Importantly, the Internet, with its rapid, continuous changes in content and format, is itself a performative space. It is also a space of ongoing connectivity and interaction between diverse cultural content, various economies, and individuals. From the early days of the publicly available Internet in the 1990s,

¹⁶ Evan Roth, "Infra-Red Wuthering Heights: Interview with Evan Roth."

¹⁷ Boris Groys, "Art Workers: Between Utopia and the Archive," *e-flux Journal* 45 (2013), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/45/60134/art-workers-between-utopia-and-the-archive/>.

artists have been using it as a highly accessible distribution platform in which to unfold their work, staging online interventions and performances on the web.¹⁸

Roth's art reflects this performativity and interactivity through his highly aestheticized installations based on the Internet's own mechanisms and contents. As I contend, Roth does not merely create visually striking immersive environments but also cleverly confronts the temporality and fluctuations of the web with the preconditioned permanence of the official museum space. This chapter will then focus on Roth's artworks that move fluidly between spaces, appearing sometimes on a screen, at other times in a gallery. I will also explore how those different exhibition formats, namely his networked environments and site-specific installations, are being employed as models of experience for the audience.

The purpose of this chapter is threefold: first, I examine Roth's development as an artist and digital "hacker"¹⁹ during his early career, when he was involved in activist art collectives and deeply interested in graffiti and street art as it related to archives and technology. Secondly, by analyzing some of Roth's earlier works, I reveal an insistent archival impulse in his oeuvre and elaborate on concepts and movements significant to his practice, such as "hacker philosophy" and post-Internet art. Importantly, the aforementioned concepts found in Roth's earlier work still

¹⁸ A well-known example of early web-based art is Olia Lialina's "My Boyfriend Came Back from the War" (1996), which uses HTML frames and hyperlinks to create a narrative unfolding across nested windows. Another notable early work in this genre is Shu Lea Cheang's "Garlic=RichAir" (2002), an interactive online trading game and performance where garlic serves as currency in an imagined postcapitalist future. Alexei Shulgin's "386DX" (1998) is an example that resonates with Roth's methodology, as it took place both online and in physical spaces. This net artwork featured "the world's first cyberpunk band," with live performances on city streets and in nightclubs. The performer was an old, singing PC running Windows 3.1, equipped with a vintage sound card, loaded with MIDI files for drums, guitar, synth, and accompanying lyrics. All these early net artworks have been cataloged into an online archive by the art organization Rhizome and are accessible through the Net Art Anthology website: "Net Art Anthology," Rhizome, accessed Jan.19, 2023, at <https://anthology.rhizome.org/garlic-rich-air>.

¹⁹ Roth has defined himself as an artist and hacker whose work is informed by philosophies from hacker communities, namely "the misuse of seemingly rigid structures," which he has applied to both digital and non-digital systems. See Evan Roth, "About," accessed October 1, 2023, <http://www.evan-roth.com/about/index-OLD.php>. I will elaborate on Roth's relationship with hacking practices and ideas in a dedicated subchapter.

resonate with his current practice and identity as a digital/Net artist. Insofar as Roth has been informed by hacker culture and the open-source movement since the very early stages of his career, he has adopted a collaborative and accessible philosophy of art-making that promotes the free sharing of information and participatory practices that forge a sense of online collectivity. In the context of this research, Roth's socially performative online projects can be viewed as analogous to Romana Javitz's democratic approach to the sharing of visual information at the Picture Collection. As discussed in the previous chapter, Javitz's "image philosophy" was primarily based on granting New York Public Library Patrons the ability to freely access, participate, and utilize the images in the Picture Collection. Similarly, Roth's unique "peer-to-peer" digital artworks and performances center on the viewer's dynamic and participatory experience. Lastly, I will examine how and why Roth abandoned his activist art practices in favor of conceptually and technologically challenging projects that are also aesthetically appealing to contemporary gallery and museum audiences. Therefore, the final section of this chapter will offer a contextual analysis of Roth's simultaneously virtual and curatorial presentations of his more recent archival artworks: *Internet Cache Self Portrait* series (2014-ongoing) and its extension, *Since You Were Born* (2016-ongoing), as well as *Internet Landscapes* (2016-ongoing) and its extension, *Red Lines* (2018-2020).

In this final section, I will illustrate how the cache projects center around the archival processing of identity and the creation of selfhood through Internet-based images, what I describe as "digital self-portraits." However, *Internet Landscapes* and *Red Lines* also have a broader objective of demystifying the intangible nature of the digital realm and its underlying infrastructure. These works delve deeply into the ways in which communication technologies impact and shape our perception of daily life. Moreover, as durational images, they offer a unique, immersive experience, encouraging viewers to slow down, disconnect from social media, and

engage in long periods of reflection on the portrayal of the physical environment of the Internet. Throughout this chapter, I will argue that the hybridity of Roth's visual language, particularly its imaginative combination of still photography and moving images with traditional genres such as landscape painting and self-portraiture, is indicative of broader contemporary trends shaping post-photography.

In the course of this examination, which focuses on Roth's immersive installations and interactive environments, I contend that the materialized Internet images utilized in these archival projects function differently than their online counterparts. This difference can be accounted for not only by the new dimensions and aesthetic value given to the images but also by the opportunities they offer viewers to engage in a more participatory and performative experience on both physical and conceptual levels.

Drawing a parallel between Roth's photographic work and J.L. Austin's theory of performativity, one might contend that Roth's distinctive installations transcend mere representation of digital image archives. Much like Austin's performative utterances extend beyond mere factual statements, I argue that Roth's archival artworks manifest a performative transformation. As this chapter will illustrate, his process of appropriating, materializing, and reinterpreting web-based images, originally discovered online and passively collected and stored through algorithms, constitutes a performative artistic act. By transporting the artist's digital footprints from the ephemeral realm of the virtual to the tactile domain of a gallery, Roth realizes a profound transformation. From the viewer's perspective, Roth's archival art can be analyzed in terms of its capacity to generate a unique visual and immersive experience within the exhibition space. His work does not merely present his own digital traces but makes viewers aware of their unconscious participation in the digital archiving process, forcing them to confront and

contemplate the pervasive and often unseen influences of the online realm in the shaping of self-perception and identity. This call to self-reflection can be seen as a performative action initiated by the artwork, where the image serves not just as a static form but as a dynamic entity that actively “engages and re-engages a viewing subject.”²⁰

3.1 The Transformative Potential of Post-Internet Art

As this chapter centers on the role played by the specific materiality and physicality of online images (as well as the Internet more broadly) in Roth’s practice, his work must be considered in relation to such art world phenomena as net art (also net.art), Internet art, and its more recent iteration, Post-Internet art.²¹ Indeed, within the last decade, “Post-Internet” has become a popular term attached to artworks, artists, and exhibitions dealing with the online and offline domains, fluid materiality, and the creation of projects that bridge the digital and physical domains. To some commentators, “Post-Internet” designates an artistic movement that includes artists like Petra Cortright, Parker Ito, Artie Vierkant, Amalia Ulman, DIS collective and Jon Rafman, to name a few.²² Moving beyond the term’s use in an art world context, digital artist Artie Vierkant speaks more broadly of “Post-Internet culture” and “Post-Internet climates.” Vierkant’s writing highlights the shifting frame of reference for the term, the use of which has expanded beyond the

²⁰ Sara Callahan, “Depletion of Identity, Productive Uncertainty, and Radical Archiving: New Research on the Archival Turn,” *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 86, no. 4 (2017): 4.

²¹ Referencing media-art scholar Elisavet Christou’s extensive research on Post-Internet art, the term *Internet art* is used in this context when referring to art based on or heavily influenced by the Internet in general. Early Internet art is referred to as net.art and contemporary Internet art as Post-Internet art. See Elisavet Christou, “Dimensions of the Post-Internet Condition. An Exploration through Post-Internet Art” (PhD diss., Lancaster University, 2022), 15. The various terms employed to describe this artistic domain, ranging from “Net art” to “Post-Internet art,” exemplify its fluid and adaptable nature. On the problems of defining Internet art, see Josephine Bosma, *Nettitudes: Let’s Talk Net Art* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures/Nai Publishers, 2011).

²² See Adrian Chen, “The Agency,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html>.

art world to describe an all-encompassing contemporary condition.²³ The Post-Internet condition refers to an era of human history characterized by the pervasive and integrated nature of Internet technology. This period is marked by the Internet's immense influence and indispensability, such that all aspects of existence are interconnected with and reliant upon it.²⁴ Numerous artists, critics, and curators have actively debated the term and its definition, with some identifying Post-Internet art as a significant artistic movement, loosely connected to the period from 2010 to the present. Nevertheless, the designation of "Post-Internet art" continues to resist a stable definition and is both embraced and rejected within the contemporary Internet art community.²⁵

Importantly, regarding the prefix "post," it does not simply imply that we have moved beyond the Internet. Rather, the prefix indicates a profound awareness of the Internet's imbrication in and saturation of our social, cultural, and political lives. It designates a world in which the Internet, and digitality more broadly, have become the dominant "state of mind."²⁶ Likewise, Post-Internet art does not declare the obsolescence of the web but instead refers to the drastic changes that have taken place in the Internet in the past two decades, resulting in new cultural, symbolic, and material forms. As scholar Elisavet Christou writes, "Post-internet art ultimately helps describe a condition that is defining our historical present as a state of *being post-Internet*."²⁷

²³ Artie Vierkant, "The Image-Object Post Internet," Jst Chillin, 2010, accessed Sep 19, 2022, https://jstchillin.org/artie/pdf/The_Image_Object_Post-Internet_us.pdf

²⁴ Christou, "Dimensions of the Post-Internet Condition," 16.

²⁵ Ibid., 59. See also the essay written to accompany the Art Post-Internet exhibition at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing (2014). According to the exhibition curators, Post-Internet art "seeks nothing less than a definition of art in the Internet age." Karen Archey and Robin Peckham, "Art Post-Internet," UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, March 2014, <https://ucca.org.cn/en/exhibition/art-post-internet/>.

²⁶ Kevin Tavin, Gila Kolb, and Juuso Tervo, *Post-Digital, Post-Internet Art and Education: The Future is All-Over* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2021), 5.

²⁷ Christou, "Dimensions of the Post-Internet Condition," 18.

After the emergence of Web 2.0,²⁸ the Internet has become deeply intertwined with our daily lives, primarily through the widespread use of smartphones and other technological devices that facilitate the creation and sharing of user-generated content, particularly on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. The traditional demarcation between online and offline realms has become blurred as the Internet has become an intrinsic part of our daily routines. Post-Internet art has emerged as a response to a world “where the line between artist-made, user-generated, and commercial content is decidedly blurred.”²⁹ In embracing the hybrid characteristics of the digital era, Internet artists actively challenge conventional perceptions of art and the visualization of content. Through deliberate oscillation between the virtual and physical realms, they critically reflect on the pervasive presence of the Internet in society, thereby redefining the parameters of art consumption, presentation, and experience.

One artist of particular note in this context, akin to Evan Roth’s practice, is the digital artist Artie Vierkant. Vierkant’s work blurs the line between the online and offline realms and frequently gives rise to projects that span both digital and physical forms. His ongoing project titled “Image Objects” (2011-ongoing) is a well-known example of Post-Internet art as well as post-photography. This project (Ill. 3.4) consists of hybrid photographic and works installations that occupy a space between physical objects and digitally mediated images. Each piece begins as a digital file, which is then transformed into a UV print on aluminum material. These prints are precisely cut to create photographic prints with a three-dimensional, sculptural quality.

²⁸ Web 2.0 (also known as the “participatory web” and the “social web”) is a term used to describe an improved version of the Internet, characterized by the increased use of centralized services rather than independent websites to share and access content online. It is also seen as a major technological turning point, associated with the introduction of cloud computing, social media, and interactive websites where users could be active participants as well as passive viewers. See William L. Hosch, “Web 2.0,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Sep. 7, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Web-20>.

²⁹ Michael Connor, “Post-Internet: What It Is and What It Was,” in *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*, ed. Omar Kholeif (Manchester: Cornerhouse and London: SPACE, 2014), 61.

Subsequently, the sculptural photographs are digitally manipulated and shared online.³⁰ Accordingly, highlighting the significance of the viewer's experience as an integral aspect of the work's inception, Vierkant explains, "The viewer's experience becomes split between the physical encounter in a gallery setting and the countless variations of the objects circulated in prints, publications, and on the Internet."³¹



Ill. 3. 4 Artie Vierkant, *Image Objects*, 2015. Prints on aluminum composite panel and vinyl. Installation view at Untitled Gallery, New York, 2015. Source: Artie Vierkant, <http://artievierkant.com/imageobjects.php>.

From early in his career, Roth has engaged with the Internet as a creative material, a space and environment for diverse artistic activities and collaborations, and a theme for exploration in and of itself. In the words of net artist and curator Marisa Olson, he employs "the internet self-reflexively – to both celebrate and critique the internet."³² Olson provided the first comprehensive

³⁰ "Image Objects – Artie Vierkant (2011- ongoing)," Net Art Anthology, accessed November 24, 2023, <https://anthology.rhizome.org/image-objects>.

³¹ Artie Vierkant, "Image Objects," Artie Vierkant, accessed June 22, 2023, <http://artievierkant.com/imageobjects.php>.

³² Marisa Olson, "Postinternet: Art After the Internet," *Foam Magazine* 29 (November 2012): 59-63.

definition of the term ‘Post-Internet’ (as well as the phrase “art after the Internet”) in an interview she gave in 2008 to the website “We Make Money Not Art.”³³ According to Olson, Post-Internet art refers to practices that draw on raw materials and ideas found or developed online. As she remarks in reference to her own artistic output: “What I make is less art ‘on’ the Internet than it is art ‘after’ the Internet. It’s the yield of my compulsive surfing and downloading. I create performances, songs, photos, texts, or installations directly derived from materials on the Internet or my activity there.”³⁴

In 2010, artist and curator Gene McHugh elaborated on the concept introduced by Olson. McHugh’s blog, titled “Post-Internet” (2009-2010), describes Post-Internet production as art created with a heightened awareness of the networks in which it operates. This awareness extends from the conception and production of the artwork to its dissemination and reception, reflecting the increasingly profound influence of the Internet on contemporary artistic practices.³⁵

As McHugh puts forth:

Post-Internet is a term I heard Marisa Olson talk about somewhere between 2007 and 2009. The Internet, of course, was not over. That wasn’t the point. Rather, let’s say this: what we mean when we say ‘Internet’ changed, and ‘post Internet’ served as shorthand for this change...On some general level, the rise of social networking and the professionalization of web design reduced the technical nature of network computing, shifting the Internet from a specialized world for nerds and the technologically-minded, to a mainstream world for nerds, the technologically-minded and grandmas and sports fans and business people and painters and everyone else. Here comes everybody.³⁶

³³ Marisa Olson, “Interview with Marisa Olson,” by Régine Debatty, We Make Money Not Art, March 28, 2008, http://we-make-money-not-art.com/how_does_one_become_marisa/.

³⁴ Olson quoted in Lauren Cornell, “Net Results: Closing the Gap 8 Between Art and Life Online,” *TimeOut New York*, February 9-15, 2006, 69. A well-known example of Olson’s art “after” the Internet is her 2005 collaboration with artist Abe Lincoln, *Abe & Mo Sing the Blogs*, an album in the form of a blog with songs available to download as Mp3s.

³⁵ Karen Archey and Robin Peckham, “Art Post-Internet,” UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, March 2014, <https://ucca.org.cn/en/exhibition/art-post-internet/>.

³⁶ Gene McHugh, “Post Internet,” September 10, 2010, <https://122909a.com.rhizome.org/>.

In the Post-Internet era, artists view the Internet (along with its diverse range of applications and associated technologies)³⁷ as yet another tool or medium among many for creating art, similar to traditional forms like painting or sculpture. Unlike many artists of the preceding net.art generation, contemporary artists no longer romanticize the Internet's novelty. Responding to the significant growth of the web and new media art in the 1990s, the first wave of Internet artists utilized then-novel communications technologies to create "medium-specific" works. These artworks focused on self-referential content such as hyperlinks, programmed websites, computer coding and hacking, as well as the errors and glitches encountered in early Internet technology. This form of art offers a unique experience that cannot be replicated through other means. The immaterial artwork is shaped by the Internet, encompassing its specific location, and its purpose is tied to its existence within this digital realm.³⁸

In the late 1990s, when Internet access was limited to only a few million computers worldwide, Internet art remained a specialized, marginal field. Net artworks and manifestos circulated within a limited sphere of mailing lists and electronic bulletin boards.³⁹ As artists were utilizing the Internet as an unrestricted and autonomous domain, "Net art came to symbolize a subversive and anti-institutional attitude and seemed to offer the promise of a new dematerialized, de-authored and unmarketable reality of collective, collaborative and participatory culture."⁴⁰

³⁷ The incorporation of internet technology in contemporary (post-internet) art spans various practices and forms, encompassing domain names, web hosting, protocols, web applications, coding in HTML and CSS, embedded technologies, online advertising, e-commerce, email, chat, social media, search engines, online gaming, and a wide range of interconnected information resources, services, and devices through computer networks. See Elisavet Christou, "Dimensions of the Post-Internet Condition," 19.

³⁸ A key reference for Net art's history and growth is Net Art Anthology by *Rhizome*, one of the most prominent journals in the field of digital art. The *Anthology* is an extensive database and online exhibition of Net art curated by *Rhizome's* digital preservation department. The collection features more than one hundred "born-digital" artworks from the 1980s to the 2010s. Available at <https://anthology.rhizome.org/>.

³⁹ Rachel Greene, "Web Work: A History of Internet Art," *Artforum* 38, no. 9 May 2000, <https://www.artforum.com/print/200005/web-work-a-history-of-internet-art-465>.

⁴⁰ Paolo Magagnoli, *Documents of Utopia: The Politics of Experimental Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 125.

Nearly three decades later, the technological landscape has undergone a profound transformation, resulting in a fundamental shift in the perception of the Internet. No longer conceived of as a distinct and autonomous realm detached from reality, it has become intricately woven into the fabric of diverse social, cultural, and economic spaces. This transformative process has given rise to the “Post-Internet turn,” an artistic response to a paradigm wherein the Internet has transitioned from a state of novelty to one of banality.⁴¹ Therefore, in today’s context, Internet art faces a critical challenge, as the omnipresence of the Internet brings its very essence into question. As such, creators of Internet art find themselves repositioned within the broader contemporary art landscape.⁴² Accordingly, critic Michael Connor suggests, “the idea of making art ‘after’ the internet [following Olson] was no longer applied in the same way. There was no ‘after’ the internet, only during, during, during.”⁴³ Olson herself felt compelled to reformulate her original definition of the Post-Internet condition in art, claiming that the term refers “to art that couldn’t/wouldn’t exist before the internet (technologically, phenomenologically, existentially).”⁴⁴

Within this contemporary context, artists continue to assume a role that is closely aligned with that of critical observers of Internet culture. As Vierkant writes, the artist in this scenario functions as “the interpreter, transcriber, narrator, curator, and architect.”⁴⁵ However, it is more appropriate to characterize the altered position of contemporary Internet artists, including Roth, as one of conscious and fully implicated participation in the digital systems of contemporary culture. Michael Connor suggests that currently both the artist and art itself are considered to be fully

⁴¹ Magagnoli, *Documents of Utopia*, 127.

⁴² Christou, “Dimensions of the Post-Internet Condition,” 76.

⁴³ Michael Connor, “Post-Internet,” 61.

⁴⁴ Olson quoted in Anna Souter, “Post-Internet Art: The Search for a Definition,” *Roman Road Journal*, July 28, 2017, https://romanroadjournal.com/post-internet-art-the-search-for-a-definition/?utm_source=pocket_mylist.

⁴⁵ Vierkant, “The Image-Object Post Internet,” unpagged.

integrated into networked culture, thus they can no longer maintain a perspective of passive observers.”⁴⁶

Post-Internet artists have responded to shifts in the medium of photography by utilizing digital technology in creative ways. This has led to the emergence of new mixed-media photographic art that overlaps with other forms, such as video, moving image, installation, performance, architecture, painting, and sculpture. Photography critic Charlotte Cotton describes the Post-Internet tendency in the context of photography as “a catch all term for artists working across the medium’s terrain” – from experimentations with dark room analogue forms to the application of various kinds of software; from explorations of 3D technologies to the use of online images as a material source for contemporary photographic artwork.⁴⁷ Similarly, artist Jennifer Chan highlights several defining characteristics of Post-Internet practices. These include the combination and hyper-mediation of existing genres, a focus on activities facilitated by digital platforms, the blurring of boundaries between digital and physical spaces, and the strategic utilization of web surfing.⁴⁸

Evan Roth’s Internet-based work takes our changed relationship to the world “after the Internet” as a given, delving into the ongoing transformations that shape our lives in the digital era. At the same time, as I will elaborate in the following sub-chapters, Roth negotiates a complicated relationship with the web, as his view of and approach to the Internet as a medium has significantly changed in the last decade. As the artist observes:

⁴⁶ Connor, “Post-Internet,” 57.

⁴⁷ Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2020), 280.

Accordingly, in Cotton’s 2016 publication, *Photography is Magic*, she identifies the correlation between “Post-Internet fluidity” and post-photographic mixed-media practices. See Cotton, *Photography is Magic*, (New York: Aperture, 2015), 3.

⁴⁸ Jennifer Chan, “Notes on Post-Internet,” in *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*, ed. Omar Kholeif (Manchester: Cornerhouse and London: SPACE, 2014), 110.

I think I am making work from a certain perspective like every artist does, but I think my perspective is of someone who knew the world before the internet. I'm making work that comes from those two places: knowing what the world was like before and after the internet and trying to make work that deals with this flood of data that is all going on right now.⁴⁹

3.2 Archiving the Street

Charting the development of Roth's art in the context of this research, his archival/taxonomic impulse becomes apparent as early as 2004. At this time, he was developing his project, *Graffiti Analysis*, as part of his thesis research on graffiti and technology at Parsons School of Design in New York City.⁵⁰ Growing up in Michigan, Roth was heavily influenced from a young age by the graffiti, hip-hop culture, and street art found in Detroit. Roth's interest in graffiti and street art intensified after his move to New York City from Los Angeles. It was there that he realized that he would not be able to fully dedicate himself to the craft of graffiti writing. Roth instead took on the position of a graffiti researcher and archivist: "I love graffiti writing, and I have a lot of respect for graffiti writers so the name [*Graffiti Analysis*] is intentional to indicate that my experiment into graffiti digitization was not an attempt to create graffiti, but rather to document and archive it in a new way."⁵¹

Both *Graffiti Analysis* and *Graffiti Taxonomy* are research projects that draw connections between urban culture, archiving, and technology. They undertake a meticulous examination of the movement and stylistic diversity of graffiti tags from major cities across the world, including

⁴⁹ "Artist and Hacker Evan Roth," Creative Mapping, November 19, 2014, <http://www.creative-mapping.com/bad-ass-mother-fucker-hacker-artist-evan-roth/>.

⁵⁰ After his graduation from Parsons in 2005, Roth co-founded the Graffiti Research Lab (GRL) with fellow artist James Powderly. A non-profit, tech-design studio/art group, the GRL allowed the two artists to further their explorations of technology-oriented graffiti and street art.

⁵¹ Evan Roth, "Evan Roth: Graffiti Taxonomy. Writing Between Research Documentation," Interview by Claudio Musso, *DigiMag*, no. 54, May 3, 2010, http://digicult.it/hackivism/evan-roth-graffiti-taxonomy-writing-between-research-documentation/?utm_source=pocket_mylist.

New York, Detroit, Hong Kong, and Paris.⁵² Recognizing the inherently transitory nature of graffiti, susceptible to removal or alteration at any moment, Roth's projects strive to preserve the artform by constructing the world's largest open-source online archive of graffiti art. This archive serves as a collective repository for graffiti artists to store their work and tags. Significantly, Roth presents the archive in response to critiques against the institutionalization and commercialization of graffiti art.⁵³ He has justified his approach by asserting that the movement of this initially rebellious art form from outdoor urban spaces to institutional settings offers an opportunity to reintroduce graffiti to the public as a contemporary art form. As Roth contends, "by displaying and breaking down different forms of graffiti for gallery goers, I am really giving people the tools to understand a language that's all around them." In this manner, Roth aspires to move beyond the simplistic dichotomy of perceiving graffiti either as criminal act or artistic expression.⁵⁴

For *Graffiti Taxonomy* (2009), Roth conducted a comprehensive study of graffiti characters extracted from a collection of graffiti tags he documented within a specific city or geographic region. For instance, in the Paris iteration of the project, Roth meticulously photographed over 2,400 graffiti tags across the city's twenty districts. All of the photographs were then digitally archived, tagged, and organized by letter to construct intricate typographic charts. The resulting work, featuring a curated selection of 180 letters authored by 180 graffiti artists, was presented in a minimalist grid format, showcasing solid black graffiti letters against a white background.

⁵² The word "tagging" refers the practice of crafting a tag in graffiti writing and typography, which serves as an artist's signature or emblem, typically utilizing the artist's name or an alias. It stands as one of the most prevalent and foundational forms of graffiti art. The practice entails the repeated use of a single symbol or series of symbols to mark territory within the graffiti/street art community. See, Emma Russell, "Writing on the wall: The form, function and meaning of tagging," *Journal of Occupational Science* 15, no. 2 (2008): 87-97.

⁵³ See Tania Di Brita, "Resilience and Adaptability through Institutionalization in Graffiti Art: A Formal Aesthetic Shift," *Graffiti, Street Art & Urban Creativity Scientific Journal: Changing Times: Resilience* 4, no. 2 (2018): 9-10.

⁵⁴ Kate Abbey-Lambertz, "Evan Roth Shows 'Welcome to Detroit' at Eastern Michigan University," *HuffPost*, March 17, 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/evan-roth-noah-stephens-welcome-to-detroit-people-of-detroit-art-shows_n_1351562.



Ill. 3. 5 Evan Roth, *Graffiti Taxonomy: AEIOU*. Site-specific installation, Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, 2009. Source: Evan Roth, <https://evan-roth.com/~/works/graffiti-taxonomy-series/#hemisphere=east&strand=115>.

Unlike the vibrant large-scale installations in Roth's more recent practice, the minimalist black and white typographies in *Graffiti Taxonomy* evoke associations with Japanese calligraphy or the classic Snellen eye-testing chart. The presentation of *Graffiti Taxonomy* has also embraced different scales, enabling dynamic exploration and visual engagement with the artwork.⁵⁵ Notably, Roth is aware of the potential for the loss of social and political context from graffiti art when it is removed from its urban environment and presented within a vast online archive. He acknowledges that the archive cannot capture the experience of the art form in its original urban context. As Roth explains, "there exists an inherent limitation when it comes to documenting graffiti, as viewing a photographic or cinematic representation of a tag can never encapsulate the same essence as stumbling upon the genuine article within the urban setting."⁵⁶

⁵⁵ In the 2009 Paris exhibition, the documented graffiti letters were displayed across the entire façade of the Fondation Cartier, while in other presentations of the work, the characters were shown in the more conventional format of wall-mounted silkscreen prints. Roth's site-specific installation at the Fondation Cartier was part of the exhibition *Born in the Streets – Graffiti / Né dans la Rue – Graffiti* (July 7, 2009 – January 10, 2010) curated by Leanne Sacramone. See, "Born in the Streets – Graffiti," Fondation Cartier, accessed 25 Oct. 2022, <https://www.fondationcartier.com/en/exhibitions/ne-dans-la-rue-graffiti>.

⁵⁶ Evan Roth, "Evan Roth: Graffiti Taxonomy," by Claudio Musso.

Underscoring the power of the archival model for organizing and interpreting visual data, Roth's extensive research on the international taxonomy of graffiti tags uncovers intriguing parallels with Taryn Simon and Aaron Swartz's *Image Atlas* (as referenced in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp.49-54). These projects share a common "archival impulse" aimed at tracing, mapping, comparing, and analyzing recurring visual themes and symbolic patterns embedded within aggregated visual data. Whether exploring online search engines or the visual language of graffiti, both projects place their aesthetic emphasis on the act of signification, focusing on the correlation between a word/letter and its visual manifestation. Much as *Image Atlas* brings to light diverse search results from different countries, Roth's alphabetical taxonomies encourage readers to compare different forms of the same letter and to look for repetitions, differences, and commonalities in the lettering styles of graffiti communities from around the world.⁵⁷

Graffiti Analysis 2.0 (also 3.0) represents another early instance of archival tendencies in Roth's work. Originally conceived as his MFA thesis project at Parsons, it eventually evolved into an extensive study of graffiti motion. For this project, Roth designed sophisticated motion-tracking techniques and custom software that analyzes and records the hand movements of graffiti writers over time. The motion data of the graffiti tags – a result of an extensive collaboration between Roth and various influential graffiti artists – was studied and archived in a free and open database which is still available online.⁵⁸ Additionally, as another facet of the performative project, Roth created a unique series of live performances of digital projections, using laser technology to write graffiti on various buildings, including iconic architectural landmarks such as the Brooklyn Bridge,

⁵⁷ For example, in *Graffiti Taxonomy* (2009), Roth's process involved a selection of what he determined to be the ten most commonly used letters by Parisian graffiti writers: A, E, I, K, N,O,R,S,T and U.

⁵⁸ The online archive is available at "000000book – An Open Database for Graffiti Markup Language (GML)," accessed October 1, 2023, <https://000000book.com/>. Also see, Evan Roth, "Graffiti Analysis," accessed Aug. 17, 2022, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~works/graffiti-analysis/#hemisphere=east&strand=39>.

MoMA, the Colosseum in Rome, and Tate Modern in London, as well as locations in Los Angeles and Hong Kong (See Ill. 3.6). The primary objective was to exhibit graffiti on these historic monuments while avoiding any physical damage, instead focusing on providing a visual encounter.⁵⁹



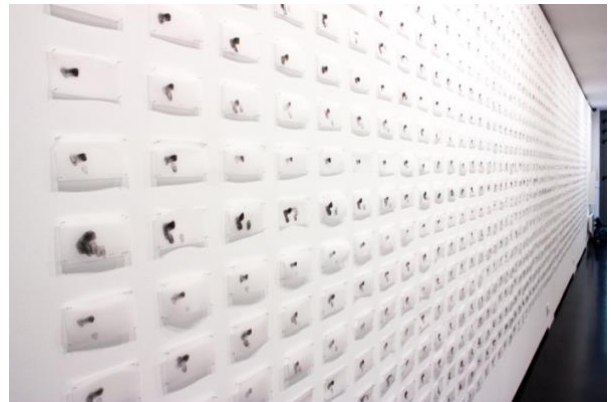
Ill. 3. 6 Evan Roth, *Graffiti Analysis – Writing by graffiti artist HEL*. L.A.S.E.R Tag technology. New York (Washington Square Park), 2010. Source: Evan Roth, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~works/graffiti-analysis/#hemisphere=east&strand=99>.

⁵⁹ Some of the laser projections were made in collaboration with Graffiti Lab, where Roth co-developed L.E.D.-driven light art as well as graffiti projection applications like L.A.S.E.R Tag (a laser pen with which one can draw entire buildings, with the help of a large-scale projector, allowing artists to write in spray-paint letters and drawings) and LED throwies – small lights that, when tossed at ferromagnetic walls or signs, become attached like luminescent sprinkles. The laser projections enable artists to create art from a safe distance, avoiding the risks associated with illegal graffiti and street art, such as trespassing and vandalism charges. Roth and his team aim to decriminalize graffiti through this project. In an interview, Roth stated that the Graffiti Research Lab aims to change the negative perception of graffiti, making it more appealing to parents by avoiding nightly arrests. Geeta Dayal, “High-Tech Graffiti: Spray Paint Is So 20th Century,” *New York Times*, June 25, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/25/arts/design/25daya.html>.

In another taxonomic project titled *Multi-Touch Paintings* (2011-2014) (Ill. 3.7), the artist rendered the intangible tangible by documenting and archiving diverse gestures and finger swipes on a smartphone. Using simple materials like tracing paper and ink, the smudged color gestures are scanned, enlarged, and printed on canvas. Routine technological behaviors that are regularly done on a touchscreen are recontextualized into framed artworks, with the artist's fingerprints and actions represented through indexical marks that also allude to the photograph's status as an indexical trace. Touchscreen technology is rematerialized through the twenty-seven representations of fingerprints, patterns, and actions the artist made on his devices.



Ill. 3. 7 Evan Roth, *Zoom In Zoom Out*, 2013. Lambda print face mounted on acrylic, dibond backing (diptych) 130cm x 120cm. Source: Evan Roth, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~works/multi-touch-paintings-series/#hemisphere=cast&strand=55>.



Ill. 3. 8 Evan Roth, *Angry Birds All Levels*, 2012. Ink on tracing paper. Source: <https://digicult.it/news/infra-red-wuthering-heights-intervista-con-evan-roth/>.

In a whimsical extension of the project, Roth used the same method to document every swipe of his finger while playing the popular mobile game *Angry Birds*. The resulting artwork, titled *Angry Birds All Levels* (2012), consists of three hundred small sheets of white tracing paper, with fingerprints made in black ink representing the game's many levels (Ill. 3.8). Beyond capturing touchscreen gestures, Roth intended to archive the transformative moment when

formerly unfamiliar gestures become ubiquitous.⁶⁰ Ultimately, Roth’s digital graffiti projects and “multi-touch paintings” are material examples of his ongoing aspiration to create and preserve visual, tangible testimonies to our present-day engagement with networked culture. The archival works are also made with their future reinterpretation and context in mind. As Roth remarks:

It is interesting to imagine what people 50 or 100 years from now will think about net culture, but just last week I struggled to get a computer from only 10 years ago to boot up and run something online. Part of what interests me is how to preserve something like this.⁶¹

This archival impulse becomes even more apparent in Roth’s recent artistic endeavors, which will be explored in the following sections.

3.3 The Synergy of Open-Source and Appropriation Art

Roth’s archiving of graffiti and contemporary digital culture goes beyond the simple impulse to freeze specific moments in time. His approach also entails a socially performative and interactive dimension. This tendency is evident in his practice of programming online archives as collaborative open-source databases that encourage a diverse range of users, including artists and computer programmers, to engage in sharing, experiencing, and generating new content. Such digital archives (exemplified by works like *Graffiti Analysis*) serve as platforms for users to delve into and visualize the amassed data. The projects also foster a sense of community among graffiti artists, facilitating knowledge exchange through the sharing of artworks.

⁶⁰ See Emily Gera, “How Angry Birds Influenced the Art of Artist Evan Roth – Art for Game’s Sake,” Polygon, November 23, 2012, <https://www.polygon.com/2012/11/23/3681632/how-angry-birds-influenced-the-art-of-artist-evan-roth>.

⁶¹ Evan Roth, “A Net Artist” by Zachary Small.

Commenting on the social/participatory aspect of his work in relation to hacking culture,

Roth remarks:

My relationship with technology is more a fascination with the people writing code. The hacker communities. I'm not talking about phone scandals and e-mail hacking. When I look at graffiti artists, I see hackers. I see a community of people who are making their own tools and subverting systems to tell stories.⁶²

Roth's art embodies the fundamental principles of idea-sharing, freedom, and empowerment made possible by the Internet. Informed by hacker culture and the free-software movement, his practice disrupts conventional concepts of copyright and authorship, advocating for decentralization, transparency, democratized participation, and the unrestricted sharing of information online.⁶³ In a 2012 *TEDx* talk, Roth described himself as both an artist and a hacker, emphasizing that these two identities are inextricably intertwined.⁶⁴ It is worth noting that, hacking practices and the free culture/open-source movement, which have served as inspirations for Roth, are closely aligned, as hackers have effectively transformed open-source methodologies into powerful tools within the computing world. Consequently, hackers have been united by a shared objective: the creation of great software that is freely accessible to everyone without restrictions.⁶⁵

In practical terms, free or open-source software refers to software for which the source code is freely available for use and modification and developed through collaborative efforts in a

⁶² Steven Kurutz, "Evan Roth, an Award-Winning Man of Many Tags," *New York Times*, May 2, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/03/garden/evan-roth-an-award-winning-designer-and-artist.html>.

⁶³ The notion of the 'free Internet movement' was also evoked in the context of Aaron Swartz, who collaborated with Taryn Simon on the *Image Atlas* project. Swartz, whose activism coincided with Roth's active promotion of free culture online, emerged as a prominent advocate for the open access movement and the principles of unrestricted access to knowledge online. See pages 51-52 of this dissertation.

⁶⁴ Roth, "Artists are Hackers: Evan Roth at TEDx Pantheon Sorbonne."

⁶⁵ Vivek Shangari, "Hackers and the Open Source Revolution," Open Source For You, June 29, 2016, <https://www.opensourceforu.com/2012/02/not-crackers-but-hackers-open-source-revolution/>.

public program.⁶⁶ Roth has recognized that the guiding ideas behind the open source movement extend beyond software development and can be applied in various domains. Embracing this approach, Roth and his collaborator James Powderly (of the Graffiti Research Lab) have provided free, detailed documentation of their graffiti laser projection projects, allowing the public to follow and even replicate their laser art.⁶⁷ In a similar vein, Roth and Powderly founded the F.A.T. Lab (Free Internet and Technology Lab) in 2007. This interdisciplinary group, which is no longer active, consisted of artists, hackers, engineers, designers, and musicians engaged in the research and development of media and technology. F.A.T. Lab embraced the principles of free culture and hacktivism, describing itself as “the unsolicited guerrilla marketing division for the open-source revolution in art [...] We have no meetings, no rules, no hierarchy and everyone has all the passwords to everything. F.A.T. Lab is an experiment in a friendly collaboration based on respectful anarchy.”⁶⁸

Roth’s commitment to freely disseminated information, collective engagement, and fostering a sense of online community establish a significant connection to my analysis of Taryn Simon’s work with the Picture Collection. I argue that Roth’s philosophy of collaborative and unrestricted sharing of information online resonates with Romana Javitz’s democratic practices concerning the free accessibility and increased availability of visual information within the Picture Collection. Both Javitz in the past and Roth in the present acknowledge the transformative

⁶⁶ Kevin Carillo and Chirou Okoli, “The Open-Source Movement: A Revolution in Software Development,” *Journal of Computer Information Systems* 49, no. 2 (2008):1-9.

⁶⁷ By accessing the GRL’s website, graffiti artists were able to buy or borrow the laser tag equipment and software. In some cases, the team donated the equipment to various graffiti groups around the world. According to Roth and Powderly, the technology was purposefully designed to be cheap and user-friendly. See Adriane Quinlan, “Writing on the Wall,” *TIME Magazine*, Dec. 6, 2007, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1691618,00.html>.

⁶⁸ Evan Roth, “Artist Hacker: From Free Software to Fine Art,” in *The F.A.T Manual*, eds. Domenico Quaranta and Geraldine Juárez (Brescia: Link Editions, 2012), 16. On August 1, 2015, the F.A.T. Lab announced that it would be shutting down operations, with the F.A.T. website remaining online as an archive of its projects.

potential inherent in the “collective experience” of utilizing, sharing, disseminating, and encountering images. From the early stage of her tenure as head curator of the Picture Collection, Javitz championed a pragmatic concept: the enduring relevance of images relies on their utilization by the public and their ongoing circulation. Just as Javitz insisted that the Picture Collection should be democratic – that is, made “available to all for any reason, and used without limit,”⁶⁹ Roth’s free, peer-to-peer artworks, such as *Red Lines*,⁷⁰ effectively embody the democratization of art, as the availability and experience of such works extend beyond the institutional confines of museums and galleries.

Roth’s commitment to the principles of open-source philosophy, which endorse copyright-free distribution of information and software, along with his deliberate interventions in diverse systems, whether physical or virtual, can be interpreted as a playful attempt to question traditional concepts of artistic ownership and originality. Significantly, Roth’s practice also evokes the concepts of appropriation and “postproduction” art, highlighting their significance and reflexivity in the digital age, where a ceaseless flow of visual content and information is continually repurposed, shared, and disseminated. In another parallel context, commonplace contemporary art practices such as hacking, replication, reproposing, and the sharing of exiting material are intrinsically tied to the foundational principles of the open-source movement which champions the distribution of software without copyright restrictions.⁷¹

The pervasive influence of the centralized Internet (web 2.0), characterized by the ubiquity and fluidity of a digital culture that encompasses user-generated websites and social media platforms, has made appropriation an inescapable facet of the online practice and experience. As

⁶⁹ Mary Panzer, “Pictures at Work,” 151.

⁷⁰ See page 9-10 for a short description of *Red Lines*.

⁷¹ Elisavet Christou and Mike Hazas, “It’s Just the Internet! Appropriation in Postinternet Art,” 2.

Internet users, we all actively participate in practices such as copying, quoting, commenting, sharing, and remixing existing content, exercising creative expression within the parameters permitted by online platforms. As described by Boris Groys, we use “the copy-and-paste operation that defines the functioning of digital media.”⁷² In response to this widespread participation in the online culture of appropriation, artists have consciously experimented with the continuous dissemination and re-usage of images, words, memes, videos, and music within the digital landscape. As a result, appropriation plays a fundamental role in Post-Internet art.⁷³

As I will demonstrate, Roth’s artistic process encompasses appropriative methods that involve extracting, recombining, and manipulating pre-existing elements from the extensive repository of the Internet. One can argue that he treats web content as found objects or readymades, thereby recontextualizing them with new meaning and significance. This aspect of his practice will be further explored and illustrated through an analysis of *Internet Cache Self-Portrait*. Interestingly, beyond its visual content, Roth also appropriates Internet technology itself. For example, in his *Red Lines* project, which I will discuss later in this chapter, he utilizes ‘peer-to-peer’ networks to facilitate participatory synchronized performances online. Altogether, Roth’s artworks embody the act of appropriating web content and technology “in ways that shape the concept, structure, and nature of the artworks.”⁷⁴

In a reciprocal manner, Roth’s art is open to unrestricted (re)appropriation and re-circulation by anyone with internet access. This mode of distribution positions Roth as a proponent of net.art’s utopian vision for art on the Internet, which revolved around the principles of sharing and collaboration, the creation of “a world where intellectual property is part of a commons, where

⁷² Boris Groys, *In the Flow*, 136.

⁷³ Christou, “Dimensions of the Post-Internet Condition,” 81-82.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

authorship is synonymous with viewership, and where distinctions between art and everyday life are fluid.”⁷⁵ Indeed, most of Roth’s digital artworks and related content can be freely viewed and downloaded from his websites.⁷⁶ In collaboration with F.A.T. Lab and Graffiti Research Lab (GRL), Roth has actively made these collectives’ coding tools and methods accessible for appropriation and replication by all individuals.⁷⁷ As Roth admits:

I also share everything digital that I can so even though a lot of the physical pieces in the studio I’m not going to give away because I don’t have enough time or money to make more of them. But digital content, I believe that it wants to be free. Its nature wants to be free. I’ve heard the analogy of it being like water flowing down a mountain.⁷⁸

Marisa Olson has likewise made use of appropriative as well as ‘postproduction’ practices within the realm of contemporary Internet art. She identifies a distinctive aspect of the work produced by “pro-surfer” artists who extensively appropriate cultural materials derived from online popular culture and advertising. Their artistic materials include animated GIFs, memes, data, YouTube videos, manipulated images, web design, and blogs. Embracing a “copy-and-paste aesthetic,” the “pro-surfer movement” represents a simultaneous celebration and critique of the Internet and contemporary digital visual culture, according to Olson.⁷⁹ Roth’s Internet appropriations closely align with the ethos of the “pro-surfer” artist. He simultaneously celebrates

⁷⁵ Brad Troemel, “Art After Social Media,” in *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*, ed. Omar Kholeif (Manchester: Cornerhouse and London: SPACE, 2014), 37.

⁷⁶ In the context of conducting the research for this dissertation, I also noticed a difference between Simon’s official artist website and her gallery, Gagosian, where images could not be easily downloaded and reused. However, on Roth’s website, all images are downloadable as high-resolution JPEGs, evidently showcasing a different philosophy of information sharing.

⁷⁷ Another notable example of Roth’s openness to reciprocal appropriation is a hack in the form of a sticker he created for the exhibition “Intellectual Property Donor” (2012) project bearing the inscription: “In the event of death, please donate all intellectual property to the public domain.” See, “Intellectual Property Donor,” Evan Roth, accessed 11 Sep. 2022, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~shows/intellectual-property-donor/#hemisphere=east&strand=17>.

⁷⁸ “Artist and Hacker Evan Roth,” Creative Mapping.

⁷⁹ Marisa Olson, “Lost not Found: The Circulation of Images in Digital Visual Culture,” *Words Without Pictures* 18 (2008): 274.

internet culture while critically exploring his changing relationship with the Internet and everyday use of technology more broadly. As I demonstrate in the analysis of his *Self-Portrait* series in subchapter 3.6, Roth extracts images from the perpetual flow of online content and imbues them with new aesthetic meaning as they are re-presented in the gallery space and enter a new economy of contemporary art. In doing so, he constructs a uniquely reflexive space in which Post-Internet art reflects our current networked reality and its underlying power structures.

3.4 Hacktivism as a Performative Act

Roth has consistently expressed his engagement with open-source, collaborative culture through artistic practices akin to “hacking.” The concept of the “hack” runs deep throughout Roth’s practice, from hacking the city through explorations of graffiti and the laser tagging of buildings and other urban infrastructure,⁸⁰ to hacking established artistic media in the *Internet Landscapes* and *Red Lines* series and his personal computer’s archive for the ongoing *Internet Cache Self Portrait* project. However, Roth is not alone in deploying this strategy. The hacking activities engaged in by Net artists during the nascent stages of the movement in the 1990s have been associated with “a ‘subversive’ and ‘anti-institutional’ attitude that seemed to offer the promise of a new dematerialized, de-authored and unmarketable reality of collective, collaborative and participatory culture.”⁸¹

⁸⁰ Roth’s long held fascination with graffiti can also be linked to hacking as an artistic expression of self-empowerment and deliberate misuse of rigid systems. For him, the value of a work of graffiti lies less in its aesthetic qualities than its physical location and the systems it subverts.

⁸¹ Paolo Magagnoli, *Documents of Utopia: The Politics of Experimental Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 124.

Traditionally, the term hack is defined in the context of computing as “to devise or modify (a computer program), usually skillfully.”⁸² Roth sees the hack as a means of circumventing limitations and finding simple solutions to complex problems. He interprets it not only as a clever, whimsical intervention, but also as a disruption and of existing spaces, structures, or systems subverting their original purposes. Humor plays a significant role in hacker culture, as hacktivists often employ critical satire to convey their message.⁸³ By applying hacker philosophy to various contexts in and outside the realm of computing, Roth harnesses it as a transformative creative practice, generating unexpected outcomes from rigid preexisting systems.⁸⁴ As the artist explains, “hacking is like the judo fighter using his opponent’s weight to his own advantage, a hack alters a system’s intended purpose and turns it into something new... [just as] Graffiti writers hacked the subway system to move art around New York City (and later the world).”⁸⁵

He further emphasizes that the brilliance of a true hack is not only measured by its impact but also by the apparent simplicity with which it is executed. Roth’s embrace of hacking simplicity is evident in his public intervention titled *How To Keep Motherfuckers From Putting Their Seats Back* (2008). In this brief video tutorial, Roth creatively employs a zip tie to secure two airplane seats together, preventing the passenger in front of him, in the economy section of an airplane, from reclining and encroaching on his personal space (Ill. 3.9). Roth documented this practical solution and shared the video on his website, presenting it as a “lifesaving” tip accessible to anyone

⁸² Collins Dictionary, s.v. “hack,” accessed June 15, 2023, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/hack>.

⁸³ Alexandra Whitney Samuel, “Hacktivism and The Future of Political Participation,” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2004), 2.

⁸⁴ Evan Roth, *Free Speech*, 2012, Vienna (Single Channel Video – 9:47), is a representative example of Roth’s engagement with “hacking” practices outside the online realm. The work is a recorded performance centered on a van which circulates around various neighborhoods advertising a hotline number. Pedestrians who choose to call the number find their voices projected through a megaphone on top of the van. The van thus serves as a tool for collaborative freedom of expression, combining the privacy of a personal phone call with the art of public speaking. See the artist’s website: <https://www.evan-roth.com/~works/free-speech/#hemisphere=east&strand=76>.

⁸⁵ Evan Roth, “Artist Hacker,” *The F.A.T Manual*, 16.

with an Internet connection. In this regard, the performative projects in which Roth employs technology as a tool for collaboration and activism align with the principles of hacktivism:

The marriage of political activism and computer hacking. It is the nonviolent use of illegal or legally ambiguous digital tools in pursuit of political ends. These tools include web site defacements, redirects, denial-of-service attacks, information theft, web site parodies, virtual sit-ins, virtual sabotage, and software development.⁸⁶



Ill. 3. 9 Evan Roth, *How To Keep Motherfuckers From Putting Their Seats Back* (A micro intervention for economy class discomfort), 2008. Single channel video, 00:35. Source: Evan Roth, [evan-roth.com/photos – seat back](http://evan-roth.com/photos-seat-back).

Fusing hacking, activism, politics, and technology, hacktivism has been defined by some as “the new civil disobedience.”⁸⁷ Prevalent misconceptions categorize all hackers as “online criminals,” engaged in illegal activities that exploit computer network security systems for personal gain or nefarious purposes. In response to this stereotype, Roth and his fellow hacktivist collaborators contend that their endeavors are not centered around illicit activities (such as code

⁸⁶ Alexandra Whitney Samuel, “Hacktivism and the Future,” iv.

⁸⁷ See Candice Delmas, “Is Hacktivism the New Civil Disobedience?” *Raisons Politiques* 69 (2018): 63-81.

theft or credit card fraud). Rather, they promote a hacking philosophy rooted in principles of collaboration, participation, freedom of information, and open access to online information systems and practical tools. As Roth stated, it is ultimately “a gift-giving culture that has to do with sort of the playful, clever interventions into existing systems.”⁸⁸

The public intervention titled, *How to Build a Fake Google Street View Car* (2010), is another playful example of Roth’s artistic hacktivism, combining technology, performance, humor, and the artist’s ongoing critique of the power of the corporate Internet.



Ill. 3. 10 F.A.T. Lab, *How to Build a Fake Google Street View Car*, Transmediale Berlin, 2010. Source: F.A.T Lab, <https://fffff.at/google-street-view-car/>.

The “Google” car (Ill. 3.10) which appeared to be spiraling “out of control” on the streets of Berlin and New York, was, in fact, a playful prank/performance that Roth and his colleagues referred to as a form of “social hacking.” Viewers’ reactions to and experience of the hack constituted an integral component of the artwork. On a more conceptual standpoint, by placing the

⁸⁸ Evan Roth, “Hacker-Artist’s Mantra: ‘Fun Makes the Politics Go Down,’” interview by Jacki Lyden, *NPR*, August 24, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/215193376?t=1655313246858>.

Google car in situations that are awkward, such as getting lost and seeking directions, drinking and driving, or running over traffic cones,⁸⁹ Roth and his collaborators at F.A.T Lab sought to foster critical reflection regarding the invasive nature of Google as a monopoly platform and to prompt viewers to question the prominent role that such tech companies assume in our daily lives.⁹⁰

3.5 A Transitional Phase

While Roth previously engaged in a series of amusing and provocative hacks, his recent projects signify a shift towards a different, less playful phase of online hacktivism, which may correspond to the current mid-career stage of his artistic trajectory. Roth embarked on his artistic career in the early 2000s with an intense enthusiasm for the Internet as a decentralized, open, and democratic space for information exchange and collaboration. Like many of his contemporaries during that period, Roth saw the Internet as a liberated, alternative artistic realm, inspiring boundless creativity and enabling individuals, regardless of institutional or art market constraints, to assume the role of independent art makers.⁹¹

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Roth has demonstrated his commitment to the transformative and revolutionary potential of the Internet, what art historian Paolo Magagnoli refers to as “the utopian rhetoric surrounding the digital utopia.”⁹² This commitment is evidenced by his active involvement in various collaborative and activist endeavors within the online domain since the early 2000s. As per Roth’s insights presented in the F.A.T. Lab manual, individuals in

⁸⁹ Evan Roth, “Hacker-Artist’s Mantra.”

⁹⁰ Roth’s other provocative hacks aimed at Google include tricking the Google algorithm into ranking his name as the top search result for the query “bad ass motherfucker,” and developing a browser plug-in that eliminates images of Justin Bieber from the Internet. See Nadja Popovich, “Evan Roth: The Badass Artist Hacking Popular Culture,” *Guardian*, August 20, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/aug/20/evan-roth-badass-hacktivist-artist>.

⁹¹ During the Web 1.0 era of the mid-1990s, the Internet was depicted in some works of science fiction and digital art as its own separate realm, presenting an exhilarating departure from a dystopian reality perceived as oppressive. See Magagnoli, *Documents of Utopia*, 123.

⁹² Magagnoli, 125.

both the free software and arts communities are primarily driven by the act of creation and a desire to make valuable or functional contributions to society, rather than solely by financial motivations.⁹³

A decade later, Roth reassessed his perspective on the Internet as a “force of pure good in the world,”⁹⁴ relinquishing his activist artistic practices and discarding the utopian rhetoric he had previously employed. Ultimately, he had to confront the realization that his aspirations and hacking activities now appeared naïve, given the overwhelming corporatization of the Internet. Moreover, just as the network itself underwent transformation, digital and net art gradually became integrated into the mainstream art world.⁹⁵ Roth’s art practice naturally drifted in other directions, taking the form of conceptually and technologically challenging projects that also resonate aesthetically with contemporary gallery and museum audiences. This transition aligns with Jennifer Chan’s observations on the institutionalization of net art. As she remarks, “it appears that even if net art’s original impetus was to create art outside of institutional control, new media artists today are re-prioritizing the role of physical exhibitions as career moves and meeting grounds.”⁹⁶

Moving beyond considerations of the art market, Roth’s artistic and hacktivist practices also underwent significant changes parallel to the evolution of the Internet in the early 2000s, when it became an integral component of our everyday lives. Likewise, as the Internet and Web 2.0 culture experienced a move towards greater centralization and regulation by prominent tech companies such as Google, Microsoft, and Facebook, as well as increased governmental control, Roth became disenchanted with “the monetization, commercialization, and centralization of the

⁹³ Roth, “Artist Hacker,” *The F.A.T Manual*, 17.

⁹⁴ Evan Roth, “A Net Artist,” by Zachary Small.

⁹⁵ Paolo Magagnoli further argues that the original distinction between high art and new media/net art has become significantly blurred as more digital art appears in galleries and museums. Magagnoli, *Documents of Utopia*, 12.

⁹⁶ Jennifer Chan, “Notes on Post-Internet,” 58.

internet.”⁹⁷ This disillusionment raised critical questions regarding the distribution of power within the online landscape, as well as concerns related to data ownership, user privacy, and censorship, among other pressing issues. The critical sentiment was further amplified by the infamous NSA spying scandal and other online surveillance controversies that exposed the imbalanced geopolitical and economic power dynamics governing the Internet.⁹⁸ These events had a profound impact on Roth and his fellow net artists, leading them to view the web with suspicion, no longer perceiving it as a socially empowering and revolutionary tool, but rather as an apparatus of mass surveillance. Roth characterizes this situation as a “breach of trust” and views the erosion of the Internet’s identity as a free and open space as a catalyst for introspection and self-examination. He reflects on this shift by stating, “I was at a crossroads in my practice, as the Internet felt increasingly unsuitable for my creative work. This occurred one year after the revelation of the NSA spying scandal and several years into the corporate dominance of the web.”⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Evan Roth quoted in Carey Dunne, “A Pioneering Net Artist Mourns the Unfulfilled Promise of the Internet,” *Hyperallergic*, March 28, 2016, https://hyperallergic.com/283973/a-pioneering-net-artist-mourns-the-unfulfilled-promise-of-the-internet/?utm_source=pocket_mylist.

⁹⁸ Following the tragic events of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the American National Security Agency (NSA) initiated warrantless surveillance activities, encompassing the illegal surveillance of individuals within the country, including U.S. citizens. These activities involved the gathering of intelligence through wiretapping phone calls, monitoring text messages, and scrutinizing internet activity as part of the Terrorist Surveillance Program. In May of 2013, Edward Snowden revealed classified information from the U.S. federal government, shedding light on global surveillance operations carried out by the NSA and other intelligence agencies, targeting vast swathes of the Internet. The disclosure exposed the comprehensive collection of metadata through PRISM, a global surveillance system operated by the U.S. government, as well as the collaboration of the government with major social networking companies like Facebook and Google+. This revelation sparked a worldwide controversy, fueling intense debates concerning the legality of such surveillance practices and raising significant concerns about online privacy. See Blake Covington Norvell, “The Constitution and the NSA Warrantless Wiretapping Program: A Fourth Amendment Violation?,” *Yale J.L. & Tech* 11 (2009): 230-260; Kai Wittig, “Privacy in Social Networks After the Global Surveillance Disclosures,” in *Facets of Facebook*, eds. Kathrin Knautz and Baran S. Katsiaryna (Boston: De Gruyter, 2016): 146-171.

⁹⁹ Roth, “Infra-Red,” by Filippo Lorenzin.

Paolo Magagnoli, echoing a similar critical perspective, adds:

Now, 25 years since it went public, the web seems to have betrayed many of the promises that related to its development. The medium appears to be increasingly subservient to corporate and military interests; it looks less and less like a tool for the free circulation of information and the empowering of individuals and more like a gigantic shopping mall, a narcissistic platform and an instrument of surveillance.¹⁰⁰

Forced to reevaluate his complex relationship with the Internet, both as source material and a platform for his art, Roth, like many of his contemporaries, came to recognize its ubiquity as a creative opportunity rather than a hindrance. His reservations about the medium encouraged him to literally explore the composition of the Internet itself, unveiling the sites and mechanisms of its connectivity. Through *Internet Landscapes* and *Red Lines*, projects which I will turn to in subchapter 3.7, Roth documents his travels to submarine fiber-optic cable landing sites across the globe, seeking a more visceral connection to the body of the web by capturing and archiving its physical infrastructure. In this context, the archival impulse serves to produce a sense of visual and physical reassurance amid the prevailing instability, fluidity, and power imbalances of the digital realm. As Roth remarks: “I had to question the system in jeopardy, and where specifically the dangers of this network were. I became interested in visiting the internet *somewhere*.”¹⁰¹ Ultimately, his work considers the personal and artistic dimensions of internet archiving and digital memory making, shedding light on the evolving nature of the Internet and his own shifting perspective towards it over the past decade. The following subchapter will delve into Roth’s exploration of the concepts of identity and self-representation online. This exploration is manifested through his examination of the structural and visual elements of virtual image archives,

¹⁰⁰ Magagnoli, *Documents of Utopia*, 16.

¹⁰¹ Evan Roth, “A Net Artist” by Zachary Small.

as well as his engagement in the re-appropriation and materialization of Internet-based archival images.

3.6 Archiving the Cache

Internet Cache Self-Portrait (2012-ongoing) and *Since You Were Born* (2016-ongoing) explore the inner workings of the Internet and can be viewed as distinct manifestations of a shared fundamental concept. Roth uses these projects to visualize the intricate nature of online image archives and highlight how our relationship with the web is intertwined with our socio-cultural identity. In this post-Internet era, we all participate in various forms of archiving, whether intentionally or inadvertently. Through our engagements with the Internet and our devices, we not only generate archives but also become subjects of archival processes.

The *Self Portrait* series involves the performing and questioning of Roth's own notion of selfhood through the lens of his online archiving, as well as an invitation for viewers to consider what part Internet browsing plays in their own identity formation. This series can also be understood as a form of self-critique through symbolic introspection within the digital realm. That is, these artworks can be read as meta-commentaries that extend Roth's practice of illuminating and reflecting on online experiences, employing the medium's own tools and content as a critical prism. On another reflexive level, while the project revolves around the artist's self-portraits and personal life, the work simultaneously creates a portrait of the Internet itself at a particular moment in history.¹⁰² As Roth remarks, "I began to recognize the rapid pace of change, and I found it

¹⁰² Evan Roth, "Internet Cache Self-Portrait Series," accessed May 8, 2023, <http://www.evan-roth.com/~works/internet-cache-self-portrait-series/#hemisphere=east&strand=108>.

compelling to capture a snapshot of how the Internet appeared at a specific moment, how I appeared, and where our evolutionary paths intersected.”¹⁰³

Internet Cache Self-Portrait and *Since You Were Born* (throughout this subchapter, the two series are referred to as the “computer cache projects”) present an introspective view into Roth’s browsing history, his idiosyncratic interests, and interactions on the web in the form of images which have been extracted from his computer cache.¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, in common parlance, the term “caching” is often analogous to “archiving,” as it involves storing something, typically in a concealed manner, with the anticipation of its potential future use.¹⁰⁵ In the context of web browsing, caching refers to the automated process by which a computer’s browser saves fragments of web pages on the hard drive, enabling quicker, more seamless access to the website on subsequent visits. Nonetheless, Roth’s artistic methodology of working with immaterial archives encapsulates a subversive “performance” of archival principles.¹⁰⁶ His interpretation of the computer cache (a byproduct of internet browsing disregarded by most users) as an archive deviate from the traditional norms that shape official archives. By doing so, Roth’s work challenges standard boundaries and reimagines what qualifies as an archive. This approach resonates profoundly in our post-Internet era, in which daily life is tightly entwined with digital exchanges and the gathering and sharing of digital images have become standard practices.

¹⁰³ Evan Roth, in discussion with the author, Berlin, Germany, July 24, 2023.

¹⁰⁴ A cache is a storage area on a computer’s hard drive that includes data that is temporarily stored on the device when its user visits a website for the first time. Web caching is the activity of storing data on one’s web browser for reuse. In this manner, future requests for the same data can be more quickly fulfilled, improving the responsiveness of websites by reducing the load on backend resources and network congestion. Cached data include images, scripts, logos, and other media, such as HTML files. Over time, these temporary files and bits of information will use up more memory space. It is therefore advisable to clear one’s cache on a regular basis. See Ivana Cirkovic, “4 Types of Web Cache (And When to Use Them),” ManageWP, January 10, 2023, <https://managewp.com/blog/types-of-web-cache>.

¹⁰⁵ See “What is Browser Cache and Why is it Important?” BigCommerce, accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.bigcommerce.com/ecommerce-answers/what-browser-cache-and-why-it-important/>.

¹⁰⁶ See Ernst van Alphen on the notion of transgressive archives in, *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 10.

In this section, I demonstrate the artistic and curatorial processes undertaken by Roth in his web cache projects. Importantly, the cache projects serve as a precursor to the *Internet Landscapes* series, as they lay the foundation for further explorations of alternate forms of art making. Overall, these projects mark Roth's reevaluation of his role as a net artist and his engagement with art history, bringing added conceptual and material complexity to his work.

In the *Self-Portrait*, *Since You Were Born*, and *Internet Landscapes* series, Roth intentionally blends traditional genres like self-portraiture, sculpture, and landscape painting with photographic elements drawn from the Internet. My analysis will accentuate how Roth's work materializes abstract online image archive, transforming them into immersive installations within gallery spaces. In subsection 3.6.3, I will conduct a comparative analysis of the artist's installations at Jeu de Paume (Paris, 2020) and Hamburger Kunsthalle (Hamburg, 2022). This analysis will underscore the artist's ability to craft unique relational and performative experiences by incorporating photography into a broader spectrum of art forms and media. Moreover, it emphasizes the artist's close attention to the specific museum space and the interactive engagement of the audience within these settings. With this, I interpret Roth's archival art as contextualized performative acts, where performativity extends beyond the images to the curatorial decisions, spatial arrangement of photographs, didactics, and synergy between disparate visual elements, creating a narrative and an environment that guides the navigation, interpretation, and meaning making of the audience in the exhibition space.

In conducting a comparative analysis between the site-specific installations featured in two distinct exhibitions, I will outline commonalities and disparities within the artistic and curatorial approach employed by Roth in both the Jeu de Paume installation and the Hamburger Kunsthalle counterpart. This assessment will consider various factors, the curatorial paradigms set by the

exhibition curators, the scale and spatial organization of the displays, and the visual techniques implemented, along with my firsthand experiences from visits to both exhibitions. This comparison will bring attention to how each component contributes to the audience's interpretative journey within the environment curated by Roth, highlighting the multifaceted layers of interaction and interpretation of the digital photo-archive embedded in his work.

Prior to embarking on the analysis of these specific exhibitions, I direct my focus towards an exploration of Roth's *Self-Portrait* series, examining its connection to the notions of digital identity and the utilization of materialization as an archiving methodology.

Roth began working on the *Internet Cache Self-Portrait* series in 2012. This year marked an important turning point in the artist's career, as his utopian attitude towards the Internet was starting to shift. As Roth notes: "That was when we were coming to understand how much of our interactions with the internet were being tracked and monetized. We were learning that those cat videos had some more malicious things embedded underneath them."¹⁰⁷ As Roth's perspective on the Internet evolved, his perception of it as a creative medium became more cautious and mistrustful. This shift in perspective is reflected in the *Self-Portrait* series, which serves as a formal manifestation of his increasingly critical stance towards the profound impact of the Internet on his identity. Consequently, Roth found himself reconsidering the degree to which he wanted the web to play a central role in his artistic practice: "I experienced the world both pre- and post-internet, and the disappointment comes from having an overly optimistic view, in its infancy, of what it was and could be."¹⁰⁸ Therefore, Roth employs the notion of selfhood as a means of critiquing the

¹⁰⁷ Lila Thulin, "Is Online Search History Art? Evan Roth Uses His Internet Cache to Form a Distinctly Modern Self-Portrait," *Washingtonian*, Nov. 5, 2018, <https://www.washingtonian.com/2018/11/05/evan-roth-online-search-history-art-national-portrait-gallery/>.

¹⁰⁸ Roth quoted in Carey Dunne, "A Pioneering Net Artist Mourns the Unfulfilled Promise of the Internet."

pervasive intrusion, user monitoring, and data collection carried out by influential tech giants such as Google and Facebook.

These invasive digital monitoring systems form the infrastructure of what scholar Shoshana Zuboff refers to as “surveillance capitalism.”¹⁰⁹ In this pervasive system, surveillance has become omnipresent, and the notion of online privacy has largely eroded. As such, Roth’s balancing act between using the Internet as an artistic medium while also being suspicious of it forms a significant part of the *Self-Portrait* series. As Roth explains:

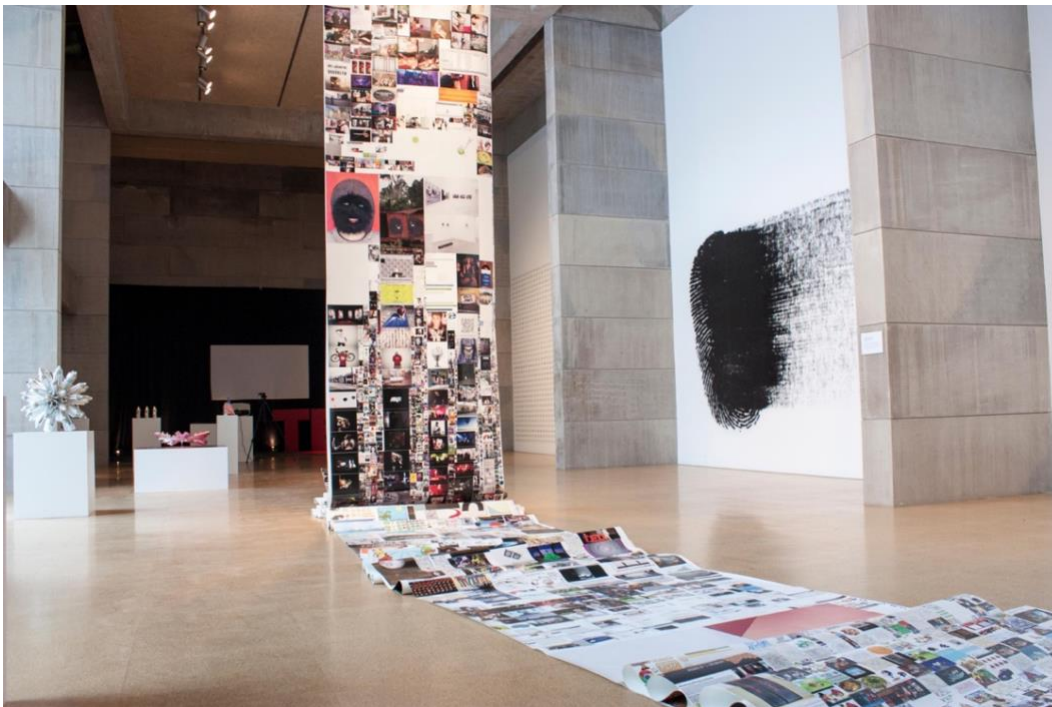
That’s a huge part of the project, and it speaks to the culture of security with the Internet. We all have a sense that we’re being watched, but even when you have nothing to hide, it does affect the decisions you make... As soon as you realize all of your data is being stored, it is like living with a security camera [pointed at you].¹¹⁰

As I will discuss in the following subchapter, the advent of the technological age has significantly broadened and complexified the concept of ‘self-presentation’ and ‘self-transformation’ through an extensive array of interactions occurring across various online platforms such as social media, online communities, and digital communication tools. Consequently, as Roth also highlights in the previously mentioned argument, this contemporary phenomenon has given rise to concerns regarding the authenticity, manipulation, and distortion of our digital identities, along with the potential erosion of our control over our online personas due to pervasive surveillance. In alignment with this perspective, Christou observes that “the unlimited

¹⁰⁹ In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Zuboff describes how global tech companies such as Google and Facebook persuaded users to give up their privacy for the sake of convenience, and how personal information gathered by these companies has been used by various actors not only to predict our behavior but also to influence and modify it. See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019). One of Roth’s *Self-Portraits* has been showcased in a group exhibition titled “The Security has Been Approved” (2019), which similarly focused on the much-debated subject of surveillance and the invasion of online privacy.

¹¹⁰ “Evan Roth Reflects on ‘Since You Were Born,’” MOCA Jacksonville - A Cultural Institute of UNF, June 21, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190802055557/https://mocajacksonville.unf.edu/blog/Evan-Roth-Reflects-on--Since-You-Were-Born-/>.

versions of a mediated self, post-Internet, are constantly expanding, bringing with them wider implications relating to privacy, freedom, and control.”¹¹¹

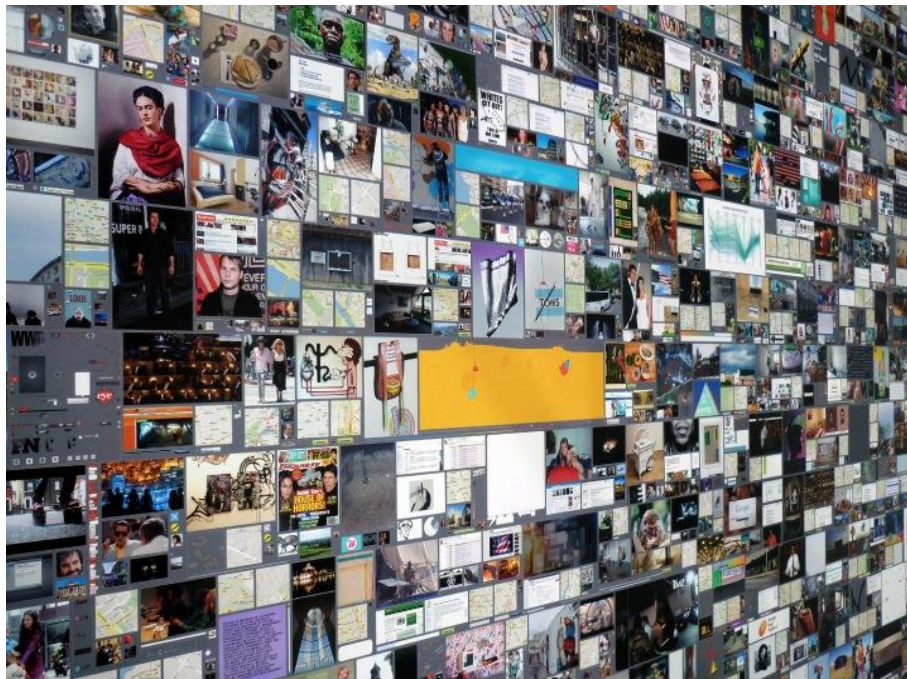


Ill. 3. 11 Evan Roth, *Internet Cache Self: 3/2013 - 6/2013*. Vinyl print, (150 x 4224 cm). Installation view at Wesleyan University, Connecticut, USA., 2013. Source: Evan Roth, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~works/internet-cache-self-portrait-series/#hemisphere=west&ratio=0.177&strand=55>.

When considered within the framework of an exhibition, as exemplified in Illustration 3.11, Roth’s artwork demonstrates how abstract visual interactions on the Internet can be transformed into a vivid and palpable artistic encounter. A closer examination of a *Self-Portrait* print (Ill. 3.12) reveals a multitude of images which have been collected and passively organized by the web browser’s default settings. The visually saturated installation encompasses family photographs, web addresses, snippets of Google Maps, logos, screen captures, faces of social media acquaintances, shopping items, and online advertising banners. These images have been gathered through an algorithm and stored in the web-cache of Roth’s personal computer for possible later use. The images are printed on a long, vertically oriented vinyl scroll that stretches from floor to

¹¹¹ Christou, “Dimensions of the Post-Internet Condition,” 112.

ceiling. With a total length of approximately sixteen meters, a significant portion of the artwork extends across the gallery floor. Despite the abundance of visual content and information, Roth arranges the images in a way that allows us to perceive them all simultaneously, creating a scopic onslaught. However, this accumulation and layering of visual material and data, spanning the entire length of the print, also underscores the impossibility of comprehending Roth's labyrinthine web-cache image archive as a complete and cohesive entity. As can be discerned from Roth's installations of the elongated scrolls, certain sections of the photographic print are intentionally folded in an apparently arbitrary manner, resembling the output of a malfunctioning printer. Although many images are concealed or hidden, others remain clearly visible (Ill 3.13). As art critic Ginger Gregg Duggan remarks with reference to this work, Roth is showing us "what the internet actually looks like is a non-sensible jumble."¹¹²



Ill. 3. 12 Evan Roth, *Self Portrait: July 17, 2012*. Latex saturated wet strength wallpaper (154 x 121cm), 2012.
Source:<https://www.evan-roth.com/~works/internet-cache-self-portrait-series/#hemisphere=east&strand=36>.

¹¹² Ginger Gregg Duggan and Judith Hoos Fox, "Evan Roth," Curator Squared Virtual Views, accessed January 2, 2023, <https://curatorsquaredvirtualviews.com/evan-roth>



Ill. 3. 13 Evan Roth, *Internet Cache Self Portrait: July 27 to November 4, 2013*. Vinyl print, (150cm x 1560cm). Installation view at Niklas Belenius Gallery, Stockholm Sweden, 2014. Source: Evan Roth, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~/works/internet-cache-self-portrait-series/#hemisphere=east&strand=129>.

Indeed, the visually dense aggregations of images, further underscore the complexities and endless visual layers of the online environment, and perhaps the impossibility to truly grasp its abstract magnitude. Moreover, the profusion of images in the *Self-Portrait* installations seems to resonate with the notion of the “anarchival” inherent to the digital archive and virtual database. Hal Foster has characterized the “anarchival impulse” as favoring elusive traces over definitive origins, accentuating the intrinsically incomplete nature of such records. This inherent incompleteness, as Foster articulates, sets the stage for novel interpretations, or “points of

departure.”¹¹³ Building on this notion, scholar Annet Dekker posit that, in contrast to traditional archives, which are methodically arranged and catalogued, the “anarchive” remains in perpetual flux and instability. Digital archives, particularly those hosted on the web, function less as ordered storage facilities and more as dynamic hubs, resisting complete systematization. The materials within these archives are continuously on the move – constantly repurposed, circulated, and augmented.¹¹⁴

Roth’s *Self-Portrait* series from 2012 might be considered ahead of its time. While research was being conducted for this dissertation, the popularity of NFT art was on the rise, with many in the art world and tech community considering it a new paradigm for acquiring, trading, and collecting digital art.¹¹⁵ In April 2021, I noticed striking similarities, both visually and conceptually, between Roth’s *Self-Portrait* series and the work of American artist Mike Winkelmann, also known as Beeple. Around this time, Beeple’s artwork, titled *Everydays: The First 5000 Days* (Ill. 3.14) was sold for a staggering sixty-nine million dollars at a Christie’s auction, setting a record for an NFT artwork at the time.¹¹⁶ “Everydays” is a vibrant collage comprised of all the digital images created and posted online by Beeple every day since 2007. In a manner that evokes Roth’s visually dense clusters and Internet image constellations, Beeple’s

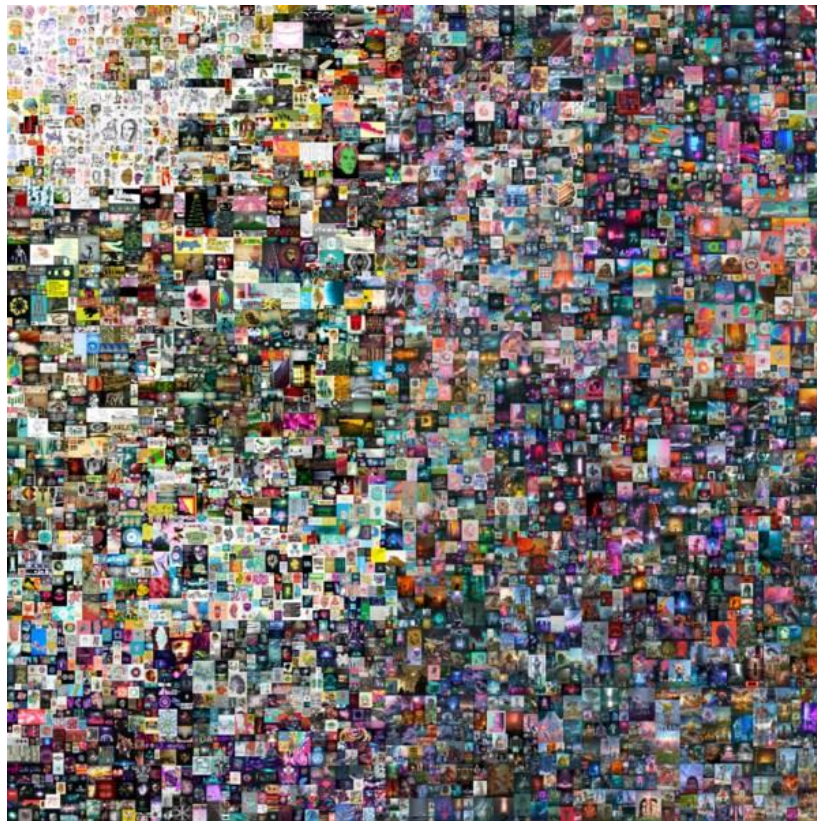
¹¹³ Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” 5.

¹¹⁴ Annet Dekker, “Between Light and Dark Archiving,” in *Digital Art through the Looking Glass: New Strategies for Archiving, Collecting and Preserving in Digital Humanities*, eds. J. Hoth and E. Wandl-Vogt (Krems an der Donau: Edition Donau-Universität, 2019).

¹¹⁵ NFTs, or non-fungible tokens, are unique digital files that live on a blockchain and can verify ownership of a work of digital art. Minted (or tokenized) on the blockchain service, each NFT has a cryptographic signature or digital identifier corresponding to the digital file (which can take the form of an image, artwork, article, piece of music, or even a meme). The files are difficult to copy, which allows an individual to have clear ownership of the signed content. As NFT art is non-transferable, buyers typically receive limited rights to display the digital artworks the NFTs represent. The sole owner can also transfer and sell this media on secondary markets. In many respects, NFTs can effectively be viewed as ownable and transferable digital certificates of media files. See, Leon Pawelzik and Ferdinand Thies, “Selling Digital Art for Millions—A Qualitative Analysis of NFT Art Marketplaces,” in *Proceedings of the Thirtieth European Conference on Information Systems (ECIS 2022)*, Timisoara, Romania, 2022.

¹¹⁶ See “Online Auction 20447 Beeple – The First 5000 Days,” Christies, March 11, 2021, <https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/beeple-first-5000-days/beeple-b-1981-1/112924>.

digital work functions as yet another ‘self-portrait’ as well as an ongoing archive of the a contemporary artist’s online creative output.¹¹⁷



Ill. 3. 14 Beeple, *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, 2021. non-fungible token (jpg)
21,069 x 21,069 pixels (319,168,313 bytes) Minted on 16 February 2021. Source: Christies
<https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/beeple-first-5000-days/beeple-b-1981-1/112924>.

¹¹⁷ In May 2007, Beeple embarked on a project to create and share a new artwork online every day. Spanning over fourteen years and still ongoing, this endeavor has garnered a significant following, with approximately 2.5 million followers distributed across the artist’s various social media channels. One notable outcome of this project is *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, a collage that brings together all the digital images created by Beeple over the course of the titular 5000 days. This digitally crafted collage showcases recurring themes, chronology, and color schemes, resulting in a visually cohesive and thought-provoking composition. Examining individual pieces within the collage unveils a range of abstract, fantastical, grotesque, and personal imagery, encompassing both current events and deeply intimate moments.

See, “Beeple’s Opus,” Christies, accessed June 22, 2023, <https://www.christies.com/en/stories/monumental-collage-by-beeple-is-first-purely-digital-artwork-nft-to-come-to-auction-0463a2c0f3174b17997fba8a1fe4c865>

3.6.1 Performing and Curating the Digital Self

Designed as a site-specific installation, the *Internet Cache Self-Portrait* undergoes variations in size, particularly in length, for each exhibition, adapting to the specific venue and context.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, the images themselves change with each installation, as they are sourced from a specific web browsing period, ranging from a single day to several months. The dynamic nature of the artwork creates a constantly evolving archive based on the continuous updates in the computer cache database resulting from new online searches. Metaphorically, it can be interpreted as an evolving, shape-shifting self-portrait or a depiction of an individual's multifaceted online personas intricately intertwined with their diverse interactions in the digital realm. This amalgamation forms an immersive archive of personal expression and experience.

Through performative archival actions encompassing collecting, reserving, repurposing, and curation, Roth offers a distinct presentation of how his artistic subjectivity becomes encoded and molded within the sphere of the Internet. Consequently, while his image compilations rendered as self-portraits may not exhibit identifiable features of Roth's physical appearance, they can serve as a window into his mediated online identity and reveal his preferences and inclinations as manifested through the cached image files.

¹¹⁸ The *Internet Cache Self-Portrait* series has been exhibited in numerous galleries and museums worldwide. The work featured in the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery's "Eye to I: Self-Portraits from 1900 to Today" (2018, Washington DC, USA) and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago's "I Was Raised Om The Internet" (2018, Chicago, USA). During the same year, it was also showcased at the Museum of Art, Architecture, and Technology in the "ELECTRONIC SUPERHIGHWAY" exhibition (2018, Lisbon, Portugal). The work also appeared in the Whitechapel Gallery's "Electronic Superhighway (2016-1966)" (2016, London) and NRW-Forum's "Ego Update" (2015, Dusseldorf, Germany). Concurrent exhibitions in 2015 included "#NEULAND" (with Aram Bartholl and JODI) at Kunsthaus Kaufbeuren in Germany, "F.A.T. GOLD: San Francisco" at Gray Area Foundation in California, and "Intellectual Property Donor" at Foosaner Art Museum in Florida, Knoxville Museum of Art in Tennessee, and the Ulrich Museum of Art at Wichita State University in Kansas. The work was included Roth's solo show "Memory" at Gallery Niklas Belenius (2014, Stockholm, Sweden).

Traditionally, self-portraiture has been considered an intimate and introspective genre of art, often referred to as “the mirror of the artist.”¹¹⁹ Artists engage in self-reflection to capture their subjective essence at a specific moment in time. Art historian Shearer West, in her book “Portraiture” (2004), notes that self-portraits have historically allowed artists to convey ideas about their private lives and societal status, a concept she calls “deliberate self-fashioning.” This intentional self-fashioning serves as a declaration of the artist’s public persona and societal role.¹²⁰ Additionally, self-portraiture provides a platform for exploring various aspects of identity and human subjectivity through role-playing and performance.

In the realm of photography, self-portraits adhere to the tradition of “objective photography,” aiming to visually present a distinct subject to the viewer. Photography scholar David Bate, drawing from Freud’s theory of scopophilia, argues that recognizing a human face in a photograph and the subsequent feeling of dominance over another’s identity provide intrinsic pleasure.¹²¹ Scholar Ina Loewenberg highlights the voyeuristic excitement inherent in observing a portrait, further amplified by the presumed “truth value” of photography.¹²² Consequently, the persuasive power of traditional photographic self-portraiture resides in its capacity to concretize the identity of the subject, eliciting a profound response from viewers who can identify with and potentially empathize with the depicted individual.

In an age marked by the pervasive trend of self-photography, colloquially known as “selfies,” Roth offers a ‘provocative’ interpretation of self-portraiture. Instead of emphasizing his recognizable physical likeness, Roth purposefully breaks away from portraying a solidified

¹¹⁹ See Danielle Knafo, “Egon Schiele and Frida Kahlo: The Self-Portrait as Mirror,” *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis* 19, no. 4 (1991): 630-647.

¹²⁰ Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 173.

¹²¹ David Bate, *Photography: The Key Concepts* (Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), 79.

¹²² Ina Loewenberg, “Reflections on Self-Portraiture in Photography,” *Feminist Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 400.

external self. His distinctively mediated portraits comprise various streams of internet-sourced images, resulting in multidimensional pictorial representation that challenges the conventions of traditional self-portraiture and as well as that of selfie culture.

Using the concept of ‘the self’ as a means of presenting critical commentary on issues of identity is not a novel approach, as it has been extensively employed as a postmodernist strategy to question cultural norms and hegemonic discourses. Postmodern theories of identity and selfhood repudiate essentialist conceptions of subjectivity, advancing the proposition that identity constitutes a constructed and inherently adaptable entity. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall has elaborated on the complexities of representing identity in postmodernity. He argues that the postmodern understanding of selfhood rejects the idea of a fixed personal essence, as identity is constantly molded and reshaped through cultural and societal influences. The postmodern subject is therefore “conceptualized as having no fixed, essential, or permanent identity [...] it is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent *self*.”¹²³

In the *Internet Cache Self-Portraits*, Roth draws upon postmodern conceptions of identity and hybridity to underscore the evolving and multifaceted character of self-perception in the Post-Internet era. The artist’s approach extends beyond merely using the Internet as source material; he leverages its technology and conceptualization as a ‘meta-archive’ to publicly recount his personal memories and encounters within the expansive global online sphere.

As articulated on the artist’s website, this *Self-Portrait* series aims to unveil a human and intimate aspect of ourselves by exploring the forgotten narratives that accumulate in our online

¹²³ Stuart Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” in *Modernity and Its Futures*, eds. Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 274–316.

interactions.¹²⁴ Roth's motivation to document and exhibit his Internet browsing history through an image archive, aligns with Boris Groys' argument concerning identity formation in the digital era. Groys suggests that in the digital realm, every display of information and every generation of a digital copy-image also serves as a means of crafting one's self-image and engaging in self-visualization.¹²⁵ Moreover, by actively archiving his own digital traces in the form of art and sharing them in a public space, Roth engages in a contemporary form of "self-archiving" or "lifelogging," which involves recording, narrating, analyzing, and sharing personal data. These practices related to personal archiving, as described by visual culture theorist David Houston-Jones, have become prevalent in the digital age, facilitated by the Internet's accessibility.¹²⁶

Indeed, the advent of the digital era, especially within the online realm, has introduced substantial alterations to the conception of the self. As an increasing number of our daily interactions have transitioned to the virtual sphere, our identities are no longer exclusively molded by physical, embodied experiences but are also subject to mediation through digital interactions across numerous virtual environments. As observed by Kathy Cleland, the online expression of the self facilitates notable transformation, encompassing a spectrum of facets, including visual representation, behavioral patterns, and actions. This signifies our active agency in crafting the perception of our digital selves. These transformative processes thus pave the way for the potential emergence of an almost boundless array of self-representations and iterations.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Evan Roth, "Internet Cache Self Portrait series," accessed June 22, 2023, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~/works/internet-cache-self-portrait-series/#hemisphere=east&strand=24>.

¹²⁵ Boris Groys, *In the Flow*, 137.

¹²⁶ David Houston-Jones, "All the Moments of Our Lives: Self-Archiving from Christian Boltanski to Lifelogging," *Archives and Records* 36, no.1 (2015): 29.

¹²⁷ Kathy Cleland, "The New Face of Portraiture in a Digital Age," *Face to Face: Portraiture in a Digital Age*, (Sydney Australia: d/Lux/MediaArts, 2010), accessed August 5, 2023, https://www.kathycleland.com/wp-content/uploads/F2F_Catalogue.pdf.

Emphasizing the complexity and fluidity of our mediated online identities, Christou delineates the additional contemporary dimensions of selfhood, including “the self as data, the self as avatar, the self as image.” These facets of contemporary identity contribute to novel perspectives on self-perception.¹²⁸ Roth’s work builds upon these ideas, suggesting that web caches – the digital memory archives on our devices – are not just functional tools but might also serve as “extensions” of the self. By viewing the visual data saved in his computer cache as a form of self-portrait, Roth illuminates how even mundane digital activities, like browsing the Internet, intertwine with and influence processes of memory and self-understanding. Furthermore, Roth’s declaration that the contents of the cache could constitute a ‘self-portrait’ created by the artist of himself underscores an essential point: the contemporary capacity that each of us possesses to actively exercise control over, archive, manipulate, and curate the representation of our online identities.

In a project similar to Roth’s *Self-Portraits*, Internet artist Dina Kelberman curates a continually growing archive of images sourced from Google image search and YouTube videos. This collection is part of her Tumblr blog, *I’m Google* (2011-present). By adopting the name “I’m Google,” Kelberman creates a personal affiliation with the search engine. She characterizes the work as embodying a stream of consciousness within the vast sea of information on the Internet.¹²⁹ “I’m Google” encapsulates the artist’s immersive experience, akin to a performance, of delving into Google Images for extended periods while actively seeking obscure information and serendipitously encountering unexpected discoveries. As the viewer scrolls downward on the page, an interconnected grid of images and videos progressively unfolds. This typological arrangement

¹²⁸ Christou, “Dimensions of the Post-Internet Condition,” 112.

¹²⁹ “I’m Google,” Archiver Le Present, accessed Nov. 30, 2023, <https://archiverlepresent.org/fiche-de-la-collection/im-google>.

of google images provides an evolving, dynamic archive of visual elements that exhibit shared characteristics in terms of their form, subject matter, or thematic content.¹³⁰

Similar to Roth's selection of a vertical scroll to exhibit his *Self-Portraits*, Kelberman's project presents a continuous vertical display of image clusters, generating a visual multiplicity (Ill. 3.15). The interlinked images form an ever-expanding grid, reminiscent of Roth's vinyl scrolls, offering an exploration of identity through an extensive collection of internet-based images. Both artists utilize these extensive image grids to visually represent their explorations through the limitless layers of the digital realm. Additionally, one could argue that Kelberman subtly references Taryn Simon's reflections on material photo-archives in contrast to contemporary image search engines. Furthermore, Kelberman shares Simon's artistic inclination towards crafting visually captivating, taxonomic image compositions.

These investigations into the digital self are emblematic of a wider phenomenon in contemporary art, where the development and articulation of online identities have assumed a prominent role. Notably, artists have been deeply impacted by and actively involved in the proliferation of blogs, social media, and various digital platforms over the past two decades. This proliferation has fostered a culture of confessional communication. According to Kholeif, this development has led to what he terms "the rise of the superego across different forms of networked culture."¹³¹ Provided with the opportunity to mediate themselves in many complex contexts

¹³⁰ The artwork is available at: Dina Kelberman, *I'm Google*, accessed, June 18, 2023, <https://imgoogle.dinakelberman.com/>

¹³¹ Omar Kholeif, ed., *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*, (Manchester: Cornerhouse and London: SPACE, 2014) 12.

throughout the Internet, contemporary artists have harnessed the concept of selfhood as a critical tool to examines ways of presenting, seeing, and understanding the self within the online sphere.¹³²



Ill. 3. 15 Dina Kelberman, *I'm Google*, 2011- ongoing. Tumblr blog of found images and videos. Available at: <https://imgoogle.dinakelberman.com/>.

Contemporary artist Amalia Ulman's acclaimed artwork *Excellences and Perfections* (2014) (Ill. 3.16), serves as a pertinent illustration of the pervasive digital self-performance in our contemporary networked society. It underscores the near-obsessive processes of constructing and validating one's identity in this digital sphere. Ulman's online performance involved the creation of an archive of images of semi-fictionalized persona, documented and shared through Instagram

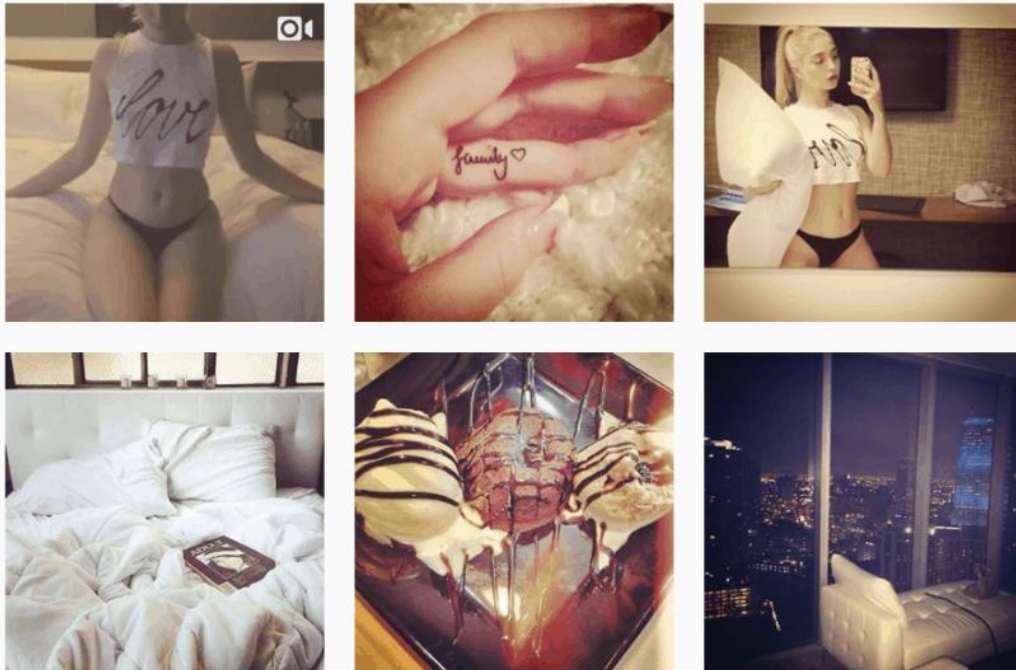
¹³² According to curator Omar Kholeif, new media and technology has further popularized the practice of self-performance in Post-Internet art. Kholeif highlights artists such as Kirstin Lucas, Lucky PDF, Rafael Rozendaal, and Jeremy Bailey, who have gained recognition for their self-presentation across different digital platforms. See Omar Kholeif, *Goodbye, World! Looking at Art in the Digital Age* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 127.

and Facebook posts. Adopting the stereotypical guise of a young and seductive actress seeking fame in Los Angeles, Ulman artfully crafted her virtual alter-ego's story. By employing carefully designed sets and props in her images, she immersed herself in the fantasy of a social media lifestyle, featuring elements like flowers and food-related experiences, luxurious lingerie, glamorous interiors, exotic travel destinations, and even a scripted narrative about undergoing breast augmentation. Throughout the four-month duration of the performance, Ulman's social media account attracted significant attention, inviting vulgar compliments and abusive comments, both predominantly from male followers. Ulman's unique performance piece utilized the constructed self as a means of confronting gender stereotypes, the objectification of women's bodies on social media, and the problem of online bullying and aggression.¹³³

Unlike Ulman, Roth does not adopt a semi-fictional persona. Nevertheless, similar to Ulman's conceptual project, he also reflects on the rapid blurring of boundaries between reality and the fiction created by the ubiquity of social media and digital technologies, considering its impact on contemporary culture. Moreover, his multidimensional pictorial representation, as seen in the messy cacophony of internet images in the *Self-Portraits*, can also be interpreted as a deliberate and ironic critique aimed at the artificially curated personal narratives and stylized selfies that have become a pervasive visual language in contemporary social media culture. As articulated by Jennifer Chan, "This particular cultural moment is defined by digital identity formation that vacillates between two extremes: careful self-curation and 'indiscriminate over-sharing.'" ¹³⁴

¹³³ "Amalia Ulman: Excellences & Perfections," New Museum, accessed July 19, 2023, <https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/amalia-ulman-excellences-perfections>.

¹³⁴ Chan, "Notes on Post-Internet," 110.



Ill. 3. 16 Amalia Ulman, *Excellences and Perfections*, Various Instagram Updates, 2014. Source: <https://alicefryart.wordpress.com/2017/02/19/artist-inspiration-1/>.

By engaging with the concept of identity as performative, we can also connect Roth practice to Judith Butler’s theoretical writings on the subject. Butler argues that identity is essentially a performance, shaped both by societal influences and individual choices. As she says, “To say that gender is performative is a little different, because for something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman.”¹³⁵ These effects not only enforce societal norms and expectations around gender roles, but also perpetuate power structures and gender hierarchies.¹³⁶

Thus, Roth’s transformation and remediation of a stored web image archive as his ‘self-portrait’ constitutes a performative interaction, encouraging viewers to actively interpret the

¹³⁵ Judith Butler, “Your Behavior Creates Your Gender,” February 19, 2013, Big Think, 3 min, video, <https://bigthink.com/videos/your-behavior-creates-your-gender/>.

¹³⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

expansive composite portrait created through algorithms and the abundance of web-based images. Conceptually, it prompts the audience to contemplate fundamental questions concerning the extent to which online interactions can synthesize an impression of an individual's identity. Therefore, I also made reference to the concept of "remediation," originally articulated by media theorists David Bolter and Richard Grusin. This context serves to emphasize how Roth's digital Post-Internet art consistently incorporates and transforms content and concepts from traditional art genres like self-portraiture. This purposeful inclusion of (also homage to) "older art forms" enriches the overall experience of his digital art, in line with Bolter and Grusin's principles of mediation in new visual media. They argue that in remediation, "what is in fact new is the particular way in which each innovation rearranges and reconstitutes the meaning of earlier elements."¹³⁷

Roth's *Self-Portraits* have been characterized as an "unwitting archive"¹³⁸ representing a fortuitous accumulation of digital data from the artist's computer. Nevertheless, in my perspective, it is crucial to scrutinize Roth's deliberate curation process, including his choices regarding the inclusion and exclusion of specific elements within his project. Indeed, the images that make up his digital *Self-Portraits*, although initially sourced from the artist's web cache where they were automatically archived, undergo Roth's intentional curatorial intervention when presented within the context of museum and gallery spaces. However, Roth maintains that his process of selecting and curating installations has been predominantly intuitive and informal, given that the collection of cached images has been an ongoing endeavor spanning several years.¹³⁹ As he elaborates, "I try

¹³⁷ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 270.

¹³⁸ See Johanna Hornauer, "Give and Take Images Upon Images Since You Were Born (2022)," Evan Roth, accessed July 16, 2023, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~shows/give-and-take-images-upon-images-since-you-were-born-2022/#hemisphere=west&strand=22>.

¹³⁹ Roth executed a programmed script that instructed his computer to recognize the cache directories and generate compressed zip files containing the images.

not to scrutinize the imagery too closely because the more I do, the more I am inclined to censor it, which contradicts the essence of the project – refraining from censorship... I have spent years deliberately detaching myself from the awareness that I am capturing this data.”¹⁴⁰

Ultimately, it seems like Roth navigates the contrasting perspectives surrounding the influence of the Internet as the “archive of archives” on one’s self-image. In one regard, he demonstrates a measure of assurance in the capacity of his computer’s archive of cached images to encapsulate personal interests and experiences derived from a day’s web browsing, effectively mirroring an individual’s online memory or subconscious. Conversely, his response to an interview question concerning the impact of online activities on identity exposes a more skeptical perspective, prompting consideration of whether the visual data amassed and archived through one’s browsing behaviors genuinely reflects an authentic self-image. As Roth puts it: “I like that debate: what Google knows about me from reading my email and tracking my browsing habits in an effort to serve up advertisements to other companies—is that an accurate portrait?”¹⁴¹ Undoubtedly, in the highly automated realm of the Internet, our interests and experiences are no longer completely our own. What individuals choose to view or read is presently influenced by influential search engines and algorithms. These algorithms continually customize content to align with our individual preferences, desires, and political inclinations, based on collected data and targeted advertising. Moreover, within an individual’s web or computer cache, one may come

¹⁴⁰ “Evan Roth Reflects on Since You Were Born,” MOCA.

When I inquired of Roth regarding the curation process of the datasets of cached images showcased in his exhibitions, his reply resonated with the sentiment expressed in the aforementioned quotation, underscoring his commitment to refraining from altering the visual output generated from his web cache. Nonetheless, he did acknowledge that the only content subject to censorship was sensitive information, such as banking details or other highly sensitive data, which he was unwilling to jeopardize. (Evan Roth, in discussion with the author, Berlin, Germany, July 24, 2023).

¹⁴¹ Lila Thulin, “Is Your Online Search History Art? - Evan Roth Uses his Internet Cache to Form a Distinctly Modern Self-Portrait,” *Washingtonian*, November 5, 2018, <https://www.washingtonian.com/2018/11/05/evan-roth-online-search-history-art-national-portrait-gallery/>.

across images encountered inadvertently during internet browsing, even when not actively seeking them. Nonetheless, as Roth emphasizes, these serendipitous images ultimately become part of the image archive and find their place in his *Self-Portraits*, again prompting contemplation about whether this random aggregation of Internet images can be considered dependable or significant reflections of one's identity.¹⁴²

These considerations compel us to engage in a critical examination of the increasingly indistinct boundaries between our authentic identities and the mediated digital representations of ourselves shaped by the pervasive impact of social media and consumer digital culture. As Leila Christine Nadir, an artist and writer, raises a thought-provoking question, “are we the sum of our clicks and searches?”¹⁴³

3.6.2 Matters of Re-materialization

In the *Self-Portrait* series and its subsequent extension, *Since You Were Born*, Roth deftly engages with internet-based images as both conceptual entities and tangible artifacts. By amalgamating conventional pictorial techniques such as painting and sculpture with digital strategies, Roth embarks on an exploration of the hybrid inquiry into the medium of photography within the framework of post-photography. As previously noted, this approach not only expands the possibilities for image mediation and presentation but also transcends the confines of traditional formats such as framed images on walls or in printed publications. Moreover, it signifies a movement in contemporary art photography towards objects-based work that physically occupy

¹⁴² Evan Roth, in discussion with the author, Berlin, Germany, July 24, 2023.

¹⁴³ Leila Christine Nadir, “Hunting and Gathering in the Digital Wilderness,” Furtherfield, November 9, 2012, https://www.academia.edu/2336032/_Hunting_and_Gathering_in_the_Digital_Wilderness_Furtherfield_org_Art_Review.

three-dimensional space, actively involving the viewer's physical presence in the exhibition environment.

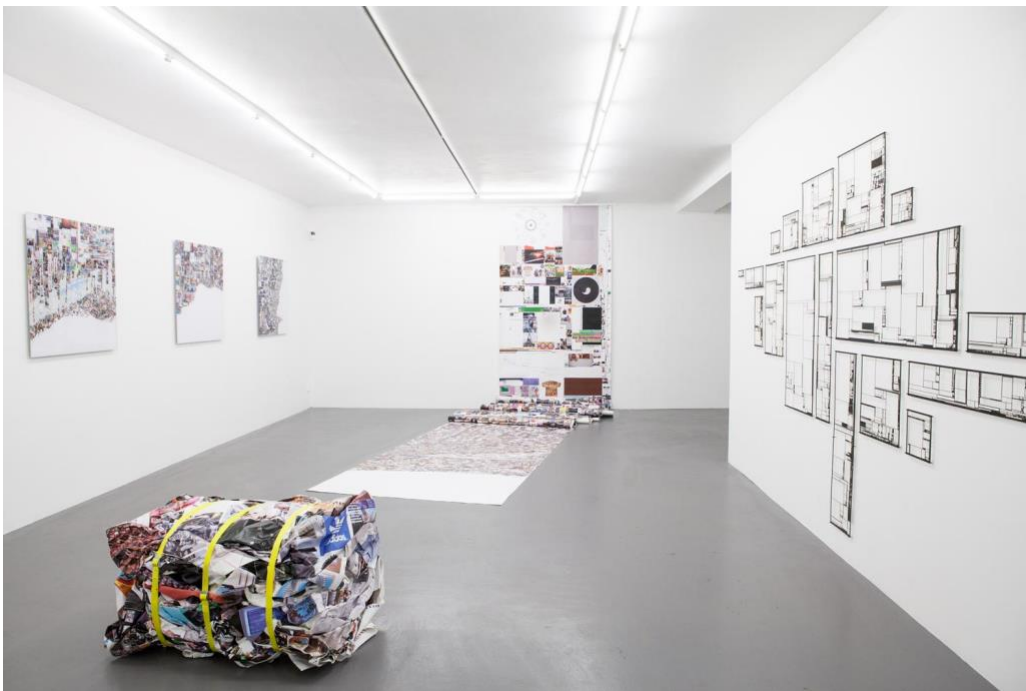
Within the context of his artistic exploration, Roth endeavors to transcend the confines of both media and spatial limitations. He achieves this by reworking and printing web-based imagery, thereby constructing immersive gallery wall installations. The resulted interplay between the image and the object, as well as the exploration of the dynamics between the offline and the online, has emerged as a prominent thematic in Roth's body of work as well as within the broader realm of Post-Internet photographic practice of the past two decades.¹⁴⁴

As I argue in this chapter, by materializing (and archiving) the intangible through his gallery installations, Roth challenges the notion of virtual impermanence and invites contemplation of the relationship between physical and digital realms, as well as that between Internet-based images and their photographic/material counterparts. Furthermore, upon closer examination of the expansive vinyl scrolls within the *Self-Portrait* series, it becomes apparent that Roth purposefully seeks to extend the boundaries of photography into three-dimensional and formalistic dimensions in the presentation of his artwork. This approach not only highlights the dedication required for producing large-scale color prints and complex photographic installations but also emphasizes the materiality inherent in the exhibited pieces.

Forgetting Summer (2017) serves as a key illustration of Roth's continued investigation into the fluid interplay of contemporary photography between two and three dimensions, as well as the inherent tensions between image and object. Transforming the cached data sets into sculptural objects and installations, this work exemplifies Roth's recent practice, which is marked by a process-oriented approach. It underscores the significance of experimenting with alternative

¹⁴⁴ See Cotton, "Photographicness," in *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 279-310.

forms, materiality, and methods of presenting images within the realm of contemporary art photography. *Forgetting Summer* presents an intriguing embodiment of the process of clearing cached data and deleting computer memory in the form of a sculpture, thus giving tangible form to intangible images. To produce this work, Roth intentionally eliminated four months of his browsing history, which he then transferred onto a long vinyl printout. The printout was then crumpled and compressed using an industrial compactor, creating a vibrant and chaotic cube. The act of crumpling the printed images is an integral part of the artwork. The cube was then neatly bound with a cord and exhibited on the floor of Gallery Niklas Belenius' "white cube" space (Ill. 3.17 – 3.18).¹⁴⁵



Ill. 3. 17 Evan Roth, *Forgetting Summer*, 2013. Compressed vinyl print, (75cm x 56cm x 76cm). Installation view at Gallery Niklas Belenius, Stockholm, Sweden, 2014. Source: Evan Roth, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~/shows/memory/#hemisphere=east&strand=121>

¹⁴⁵ The work *Forgetting Summer* was exhibited in the group exhibition "Archeonauts" at Galerie Charlot Paris in Spring 2017. An earlier version of the work, titled *Forgetting Spring (March to June 2013)* was exhibited in 2014 at Roth's solo exhibition *Memory* at Gallery Niklas Belenius, Stockholm, Sweden.

Roth's work presents a sculptural reinterpretation of photography, displaying the photograph as an object and emphasizing its material properties beyond its representational content. Particularly in *Forgetting Summer*, the transformation into a sculptural form arises from deliberate modifications to and distortions of the printed photographic image, resulting in a degraded and compacted three-dimensional cube. The metamorphosis of the cached images into a tangible form further obscures their original representational content, while the merging of the images with other artistic modalities, such as sculpture and installation, crafts a distinctly hybrid photographic piece. This investigation into materiality and the photographic "objectness"¹⁴⁶ within contemporary photography aligns with Geoffrey Batchen's notion that we currently inhabit a period "after but not beyond photography." As he further argues, the repercussions of this "post-photographic" era find eloquent expression in artworks that center on the inherent physicality of the photograph and not.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, this reflexive artwork prompts contemplation about whether a hybrid, compressed photographic cube – encapsulating a visual manifestation of four months of private online searches and experiences – can be classified as traditional sculpture or photographic art within the framework of an increasingly digital and dematerialized artistic landscape.

In its form, the piece induces a sense of familiarity, echoing the condensed packaging commonly observed in supermarkets when goods have been received from a distributor. The allusion to delivered goods and the aggregation of recycled materials in commercial settings enrich the interpretive layers of the artwork, namely it prompts consideration of the appropriation and exchange value of recycled (i.e., re-contextualized or rematerialized) web-based images, contributing to

¹⁴⁶ Geoffrey Batchen, "Post-Photography," in *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (London: MIT Press, 2000), 109.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

its multidimensional, post-conceptual ethos.¹⁴⁸ By blending elements of both “high” and “low” culture, the integration of the compressed cube into Roth’s artwork skillfully taps into art historical allusions. This deliberate choice resonates with the creative aesthetics of influential sculptors, notably César Baldaccini, who was closely associated with the Nouveau Réalisme movement and renowned for his transformative approach to compressing everyday consumer objects.¹⁴⁹ The compressed cube of *Forgetting Summer*, also brings to mind the colorful crushed car sculptures created by John Chamberlain, which are crafted from flattened automobile components. By referencing these artists, Roth establishes a connection to a broader art historical context and engages in a dialogue with their innovative approaches to expressive sculptural forms.

Working across various exhibition domains, including both online platforms and traditional art galleries, Roth has expressed that his physical artworks displayed in a museum or gallery context typically enjoy a more enduring presence compared to those encountered online., he acknowledges the limitations of the web in terms of preserving content over time.¹⁵⁰ For Roth, the transformation of web-based images into tangible installations or sculptures is intrinsically linked to the act of archiving. As he asserts, “Often, my motivation for exhibiting in a gallery is rooted in the concept of archiving. Works that exist within that realm tend to endure for a longer time than those found on the street or online.”¹⁵¹

With this, one can argue that Roth’s web-cache projects (e.g., *Self-Portrait*, *Since You Were Born*, as well as *Forgetting Summer*) question the online realm’s reliability as an archival medium for record-keeping. Hence, Roth’s commitment to preserving digital culture and transforming web-

¹⁴⁸ For recent publications on post-conceptual art see, Peter Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition* (London: Verso, 2018).

¹⁴⁹ See Joseph Nechvatal, “Post-Internet Artists Crack Open Our Technological Past,” *Hyperallergic*, May 16, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/379345/post-internet-artists-crack-open-our-technological-past/>.

¹⁵⁰ Evan Roth, “A Net Artist on Why the Cloud.”

¹⁵¹ Evan Roth, “Interview: Evan Roth,” by Daniel Gray, *Totally Dublin*, May 21, 2013, <https://www.totallydublin.ie/arts-culture/arts-culture-features/interview-evan-roth/>.

based images stored in computer caches into tangible artworks displayed within physical gallery spaces represents as a profound statement. It not only highlights the ephemeral quality of digital image archives but also demonstrates the continually evolving and impermanent nature of Internet technology in the digital age. Consequently, Roth aims to challenge the transient nature of the virtual realm by creating formalistic artworks that extend beyond the fleeting online moment. These works compel viewers to recognize the ephemerality of our digital footprints and the potential implications of their preservation. Within the context of the ongoing web-cache projects and their various iterations, the resulting gallery presentations of Roth's work can be seen as an "archive of the digital archive." In other words, they serve as a material and more permanent manifestation of the immaterial and disembodied digital archive found in the temporary storage space on Roth's computer. As Roth notes, "The prints, composed of memories that were never intended to be saved, are archiving the seemingly incidental into something permanent."¹⁵² This statement reinforces the prevailing notion that digital databases, as immaterial archives, are characterized by flexibility and instability. In contrast, material archives are oriented towards the pursuit of control and stability.¹⁵³

From a metaphorical standpoint, the title of the work *Forgetting Summer* carries symbolic significance, particularly when considering that archiving and collecting inherently driven by the act of memory-making or paradoxically, by the potential to forget. As Pierre Nora aptly argues, "modern memory is, above all, archival."¹⁵⁴ Similarly, David Bate underscores how photography is inherently driven by the prospect of forgetting: "The act of retaining and recording impressions

¹⁵² Evan Roth, "Internet Cache Self Portrait," accessed July 6, 2023, <http://www.evan-roth.com/work/internet-cache-self-portrait/>.

¹⁵³ See Ernst van Alphen's examination of the purported inherent characteristics and methodologies of physical and digital archives. Ernst van Alphen, "Transgressive Archiving with Ernst van Alphen - Database, Archive, and Art," Nica Institute, March 8, 2012, <https://www.nica-institute.com/transgressive-archiving-with-ernst-van-alphen/>.

¹⁵⁴ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 13.

in photographs has become closely linked with the concept of memory [...] the apprehension of remembering lies in the inevitability of forgetting.”¹⁵⁵ Moreover, the interplay between remembering and forgetting, as facets of archiving, resonates with Derrida’s concepts of “archival desire” and the “death drive.”¹⁵⁶ Derrida’s writings unveil a paradoxical relationship between the instinct to preserve knowledge and past experiences, represented by archival desire, and the contrasting inclination toward obliteration, suppression, and transformation inherent in the acts of archiving and remembering, as exemplified by the death drive. This juxtaposition encapsulates the simultaneous urges for preservation and disappearance of materials that are intrinsic to the nature of archives.

With this in mind, when examining *Forgetting Summer*, it becomes evident that Roth has confronted conflicting intentions concerning the images archived within his computer’s browser history, particularly in the cache. To reiterate, cached images possess an ephemeral quality, as they are not designed for long-term storage or considered reliable sources. They serve as temporary copies of data, primarily intended to enhance performance and minimize the necessity of frequent retrieval from the original source. We are usually indifferent towards (or wholly ignorant of) these automatically saved images, as they remain hidden away in our hard drives or web browser. As a result, they represent traces of data that were not originally intended for our observation or remembrance. Personally, I had never been fully aware of the cached images stored on my devices, nor had I considered the idea of either erasing or preserving them.

In the production of *Forgetting Summer*, Roth accentuates not only the physical but also the conceptual aspects of the creative process. He faced the deliberate choice of either deleting and

¹⁵⁵ David Bate, *Photography: The Key Concepts* (Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), 119.

¹⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Presnowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 14-15.

discarding an apparently unremarkable (and easily forgettable) image archive or perpetuating it indefinitely through the transformation of virtual images into tangible sculptures displayed within an art gallery. Ultimately, Roth's inclination towards archival preservation and stability triumphed, elevating the seemingly unremarkable images into a captivating and enduring piece of art.



Ill. 3. 18 Evan Roth, *Forgetting Summer* (March to June 2013). Compressed vinyl print, (75cm x 56cm x 76cm). Installation view at Gallery Niklas Belenius, Stockholm, Sweden, 2014. Source: Evan Roth, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~shows/memory/#hemisphere=east&strand=121>

One can argue that Roth's artistic practice, exemplified by works such as *Forgetting Summer* and *Self-Portrait* series, along with the subsequent subchapters delving into his other archival projects, underscores the importance of the material qualities inherent in photographic imagery. It also recognizes our persistent inclination for engaging with photographs through tactile objects, despite the prevailing era of ubiquitous digital image consumption. It is noteworthy that even contemporary technological devices (e.g., smartphone and tablet) continue to promote a physically immersive approach to interacting with visual content. As posited by Sandra Plummer

(et.al), “However displaced and fetishized by the shiny gloss of the screen, touch-screen technology encourages that haptic gaze.”¹⁵⁷

Roth’s focus on physically interacting with images, along with his exploration of mixed-media techniques and considerations of space and scale in both creating and showcasing his photo-archival art, encourages us to reflect on our capacity to understand and engage with the material aspects of photography. This reflection is especially pertinent within the context of the contemporary post-photographic networked era, where digital transmission is the dominant method for processing and disseminating images, and the dematerialization of photographic images has become prevalent. In the context of Roth’s web-cache projects, the process of actively engaging with physical photographic prints, as well as three-dimensional shapes, is made possible through Roth’s performance of transforming an immaterial image archive – his web-cache directory – into tangible and aesthetic form.

In this context, it is noteworthy that discussions pertaining to concepts such as dematerialization and the immateriality of the object have been prevalent in the realm of abstract and conceptual art since the late 1960s. In 1968, curator Lucy Lippard and art critic John Chandler introduced the term “dematerialization” (“The Dematerialization of Art”),¹⁵⁸ highlighting the departure from materiality and the increasing importance of artistic concepts. They identified two tendencies– “art as idea” and “art as action,”–which respectively emphasize the conversion of sensation into concept and the transformation of matter into energy and time-motion. In other words, dematerialization can be regarded as an action or process of distancing from matter – as the process of something losing a materiality it once possessed. However, art critic Melissa

¹⁵⁷ Sandra Plummer, Harriet Riches, and Duncan Wooldridge, “Photography’s New Materiality,” *Photoworks Magazine*, May 2012, <https://photoworks.org.uk/photographys-new-materiality/>.

¹⁵⁸ Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” *Art International* 12, no. 2 (1968), 31-36.

Gronlund argues that “immateriality” should be distinguished from “demateriality.” Immateriality implies a consistent, inherent lack of materiality in a medium, as exemplified by visual metadata, algorithmic computer structures, as well as video games, avatars, and virtual reality.¹⁵⁹

The 1985 exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, curated by Thierry Chaput and philosopher Jean-François Lyotard at the Centre Georges Pompidou, is significant in this context, as it anticipated current debates on contemporary art, immateriality, and technology. In this pioneering exhibition, Lyotard aimed to showcase the “new materiality” emerging in an era of expanded communication, digital technologies, and new media. He emphasized that immaterial art engages all the human senses and involves interactive and communicative processes. Moreover, *Les Immatériaux* explored novel approaches to audience engagement, making it a pivotal event for the theorization of art’s relationship with the immaterial realm.¹⁶⁰

As I will illustrate in the upcoming subchapters, which will focus on the analysis of Roth’s *Since You Were Born* series and the *Internet Landscapes* series, Roth aims to elucidate the dialectical relationship between materiality and immateriality, providing a more profound comprehension of the inner workings of the Internet, both visually and conceptually. The interplay between the physical and the digital is contingent upon the audience’s engagement with Roth’s work within the exhibition space. Remarkably, since 2016, Roth’s web-cache projects, particularly

¹⁵⁹ Melissa Gronlund, *Contemporary Art and Digital Culture* (London: Routledge, 2016), 115.

¹⁶⁰ “Les Immatériaux” was regarded as an unconventional exhibition upon its unveiling, curated in a manner more akin to a singular art project or event, rooted in philosophical inquiries and staged within a theatrical setting. This approach distinguished it from prevalent museum norms for presenting artworks in the 1980s. Some scholars interpret the exhibition as Lyotard’s “inauguration of the postmodern.” Eschewing conventional museal structures, the exhibition was organized interactively. Instead of guiding the viewers through a linear trajectory of visual artworks, the curators constructed “a labyrinth of questions that elicits a feeling of being lost and an incapacity to exhaust the possibilities for connections and meaning.” This setup encouraged viewers to engage in potentially rich sensorial experiences that could involve all their senses. See Christina Grammatikopoulou, “Shades of the Immaterial: Different Approaches to the ‘Non-Object’,” *Interartive*, 2012, accessed July 20, 2022, https://interartive.org/2012/02/shades-of-the-immaterial#_ftn6. See also Andreas Broeckmann and Yuk Hui, *30 Years After Les Immatériaux: Art, Science and Theory* (Lüneburg: meson press, 2015).

the *Since You Were Born* series, which will be discussed in the subsequent section, have expanded in scale and intensified their material presence.

3.6.3 From Object to Environment: *Since You Were Born*

In *Since You Were Born*, Roth has continued to “excavate” his computer, sourcing all the visual data that had been automatically collected and stored on his cache by an algorithm, which the artist then printed onto large swathes of wallpaper that occupy the entire gallery space. The work functions not only as an introspective portrait but as a cultural snapshot taken through the web’s lens at a particular moment in time.¹⁶¹ Therefore, the work might be best described as a multilayered picture of the Internet, mediated through a massive physical installation that encapsulates the perpetual flux of the digital realm and the prevailing culture of image overload.

Upon entering the exhibition space of Roth’s *Since You Were Born* installations, viewers are immediately immersed in a visual experience. In the Atrium Gallery at MOCA Jacksonville, Roth was invited for the first time to create a large-scale, site-specific installation based on his web-cache projects. The exhibition featured towering image panels that extend from the floor to the ceiling, enveloping the viewer in a captivating visual environment (see Ill. 3.19).¹⁶² In the *Since You Were Born* series, the scale is not the only difference from the earlier *Self-Portrait* series. This work marks a significant shift in context, reflecting an important period in the artist’s private life.

¹⁶¹ See Heather Schatz, “Internet Meets Art in ‘Since You Were Born’ MOCA Exhibit,” *WJTC News*, March 15, 2019, <https://news.wjct.org/first-coast/2019-03-15/internet-meets-art-in-since-you-were-born-moca-exhibit>.

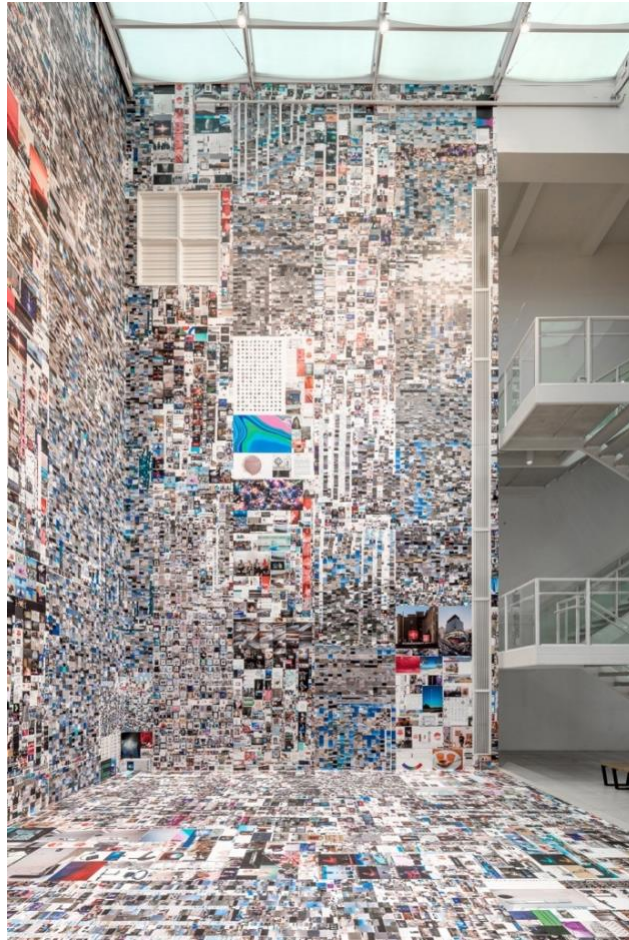
¹⁶² The *Since You Were Born* series has been showcased in various museum venues worldwide. Notably, it was displayed at the Hamburger Kunsthalle in Hamburg, as part of “Give and Take. Images Upon Images” in 2022, and at the POCHEN Biennale 2022 under the theme “The (new) Measuring of the World” in Chemnitz, Germany. In 2021, it was included in “The Supermarket of Images” exhibition at the Jeu de Paume in Paris in 2020. The latter exhibition later traveled to the Red Brick Art Museum in Beijing, China. The series was also the focus of a solo exhibition at MOCA Jacksonville (Florida, USA) in 2019, and was part of “The Security Has Been Improved” exhibition at the Coreana Museum of Art in Seoul, Korea the same year.

It reveals all the images the artist had seen on the Internet (and were automatically saved in his web cache) from the day his second daughter, Aya, was born (June 29, 2016) through the following six months. For Roth, the drive to archive these moments is rooted in his recognition of the swift changes taking place in his personal and artistic life as a net artist, the growth of his newborn daughter, and the ever-evolving landscape of the Internet and its technology. *Since You Were Born* embodies a sense of duality, interweaving intimate experiences with the overwhelming multiplicity of Internet visuals exhibited in a public space. The installation not only reflects the essence of the Internet at a particular moment but also captures the evolving relationship the artist maintains with it as a medium. As Roth notes with reference to the dual nature of the project:

I see *Since You Were Born* as a portraiture piece, it is me, it is my data, so on the one hand it is supposed to be about me, but I am more interested in it being a snapshot of the Internet at a given time. It is maybe more a portrait of the Internet than it is necessarily about me. And that is one thing that I hope is part of the viewing experience of people.¹⁶³

Importantly, the concept of scale and space has been thoroughly examined and pushed to its utmost boundaries in the various site-specific installations of the series, surpassing the dimensions of their predecessors in the *Internet Cache Self-Portrait* series. This increased scope allows Roth to showcase a more extensive compilation of visual data from his web cache. Additionally, this transformation turns the work into a comprehensive installation rather than an isolated art object (e.g., the vinyl scrolls in *Self-Portraits* and the compressed prints in *Forgetting Summer*). Consequently, the images take on the quality of tangible, spatial forms, inviting an interactive encounter where the viewer's physical presence navigates the visual landscape.

¹⁶³ Jeu de Paume, "Le supermarché des images | Evan Roth – Since you were born," April 20, 2020, YouTube video, 2:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEtmGDFIJIQ&ab_channel=JeudePaume.



Ill. 3. 19 Evan Roth, *Since You Were Born*, 2019. Installation view at MOCA Jacksonville, USA. Source: <https://www.evan-roth.com/~shows/since-you-were-born-2019/#hemisphere=east&strand=84>.

The series title also redirects the focus from the self-portraiture of the artist to a broader context that viewers might relate to.¹⁶⁴ Evidently, Roth is acutely aware of how the audience may perceive him as an artist who unveils his private life in his work. He is also conscious of the fact that some individuals might be searching for embarrassing discoveries within his visual browsing history. Nevertheless, this work transcends being a mere summation of his digital life or a collection of puzzle pieces about his personal identity for the viewer to piece together. By repurposing his personal data, Roth not only fosters a sense of connection with his audience but also encourages viewers to reflect on their own digital identity and involvement in the prevalent

¹⁶⁴ Evan Roth, email message to the author, April 28, 2022.

practice of accumulating and archiving visual data in the modern digital era. Simultaneously, Roth raises a significant inquiry about our online agency concerning the archives we amass, questioning, “Who genuinely asserts ownership over these extensive personal online image archives?” As he points out, “These are not even archives that we own; they are owned by entities like Facebook or Google.”¹⁶⁵

In 2019, Roth was invited to participate in the “Le Supermarché des Images” (“The Supermarket of Images”) group exhibition, which was hosted at Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume in Paris from February to June 2020. The exhibition was a wide-ranging exploration of the changing economy of visual culture in the digital era, with a focus on the production, valuation, and exchange of images. Under the curatorial direction of Peter Szendy, Emmanuel Alloa, and Marta Ponsa, the exhibition featured an extensive array of contemporary artistic expressions, including photography, videography, and multimedia installations.¹⁶⁶ The exhibition aspired to stimulate a critical examination of contemporary practices related to image consumption and exchange, including themes such as surveillance, the ubiquity of digital imagery, the commercialization of visual content, and the challenges of image storage and management.

Set against the conceptual framework of what Peter Szendy has termed the “iconomy,”¹⁶⁷ the exhibition investigated the ways in which images have transcend their traditional role as representational media to become commodities, imbued with tangible (including economic) value

¹⁶⁵ Evan Roth, in discussion with the author, Berlin, Germany, July 24, 2023.

¹⁶⁶ A total of thirty-nine artists and artist groups participated, presenting over 50 artworks across various mediums. Among the featured artists were renowned figures such as Andreas Gursky, Sophie Calle, Maurizio Cattelan, Robert Bresson, Victor Vasarely, Beatrice Gibson, Yves Klein, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Sylvie Fleury, Femke Herregraven, Kevin Abosch, William Kentridge and others.

¹⁶⁷ The term “iconomy” was introduced by philosopher Jean-Joseph Goux to refer to the monetary function of painting when it transforms into an “idealized standard of values” and a “capitalizable treasure” within the contemporary art market. See Jean-Joseph Goux, “L’art et l’argent: vers une nouvelle ‘iconomie,’” *Art Press*, no. 165 (January 1992). Szendy has developed the concept in his publication, *The Supermarket of the Visible: Toward a General Economy of Images*, trans. Jan Plug (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

and functioning as a potent form of currency. Szendy's concept of the "general iconomy" pertains to the relational significance of contemporary images in the age of accelerated circulation. As he articulates, "An image is never solely an image; its value is contingent on its connections with other images."¹⁶⁸ Reflecting on our present globalized image economy, marked by the hyper-exchangeability and overproduction of images, particularly facilitated by the pervasive utilization of the Internet, mobile phone technology, and social media platforms, Szendy asserts that images no longer maintain an isolated existence but rather manifest as interconnected networks of images, being shared and experienced as such. Crucially, Szendy's perspective goes beyond merely pointing at the interconnectedness of images "within a global system of exchanges." He contends that the increased speed of visual circulation in today's fast-paced environment distinguishes the present situation from past (slower) patterns of image exchanges to the extent that this rapid pace begins to eclipse the impact, stability, and significance of each individual image.¹⁶⁹

Another central aspect to his argument is the concept of "iconomic" relationships among images, underscoring the influential capacity that images possess in shaping both cultural perceptions and economic behaviors. Therefore, according to Szendy's framework, "how we perceive – see, hear, feel – is said to be the product of reflection of underlying economic and social relations."¹⁷⁰ He additionally emphasizes that the meaning of images undergoes a perpetual state of deferral due to their swift exchange, circulation, transportation, and the fluctuation of their value within the contemporary visual culture.

Therefore, it is a considered curatorial choice that Szendy, along with his fellow curators, has decided to feature Roth's *Since You Were Born* installation (Ill. 3.20 – 3.21) at the entrance of

¹⁶⁸ Peter Szendy, *The Supermarket of the Visible*, 40.

¹⁶⁹ Peter Szendy, "Toward a General Iconomy," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* Vol. 30 No. 61-62 (2021): *The Changing Ontology of the Image*, 202–205.

¹⁷⁰ Szendy, *The Supermarket of the Visible*, 5.

the exhibition at the Jeu de Paume. In addition to its intended impressive aesthetic impact, the work serves as a manifestation of Szendy's overarching theories. It effectively illustrates how the continuous proliferation of interconnected constellations, primarily composed of virtual images, has become the dominant visual language in the Post-Internet era.¹⁷¹ Relatedly, within the context of this visual language of image constellations, it is worth noting that Terry Smith's recent publication, titled *Iconomy: Towards a Political Economy of Images* (2022), similarly employs the concept of "Iconomy" to delve into the contemporary politics and (mis)management of image-based culture – which he also refers to as "Iconopolitics." Smith's exploration encompasses the nature and cultural impact of a wide range of contemporary visual representations: "viral imagery of the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. Presidents Trump and Biden, Black Lives Matter, as well as the rise of a "black aesthetic" in white artworlds."¹⁷² In doing so, he emphasizes the ubiquitous presence of experiencing streams of visual imagery constellations in various facets of contemporary life.

In the context of the site-specific installation of *Since You Were Born* at the Jeu de Paume, Roth employed a monumental format to present his assemblage of images, sourced from his web cache files. These internet-based images were subsequently rendered onto expansive sheets of wallpaper, enveloping the walls of the staircase and the primary public spaces within the Jeu de Paume museum. Notably, several reviewers of the exhibition have highlighted the strategic positioning of Roth's site-specific installation within the context of local art history. For example, writer Ginger Gregg Duggan draws a compelling formalistic parallel between Roth's blurred and colorfully saturated wallpaper prints of accumulated Internet images and the aesthetics found in

¹⁷¹ Also see exhibition catalogue, Peter Szendy, Marta Ponsa, and Emmanuel Alloa, eds., *Le supermarché des images* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020).

¹⁷² Terry Smith, *Iconomy: Towards a Political Economy of Images* (London: Anthem Press, 2022).

Impressionist paintings – viewing his work as a “modern-day translation of Impressionism.”¹⁷³ This art historical perspective establishes an intriguing connection between Roth’s contemporary installation, and the context of Claude Monet’s renowned site-specific installation of *Water Lilies* (1914-1926) exhibited at the Orangerie Museum, which is situated opposite the Jeu de Paume in the Tuileries gardens. As Duggan further observes, “just as Monet’s nebulous brushstrokes build an image of a specific place, Roth’s amalgamation of specific images presents an expansive self-portrait.”¹⁷⁴



Ill. 3. 20 Evan Roth, *Since You Were Born*, 2020. Installation view at the exhibition “The Supermarket of Images,” February 11 - June 7, 2020. Jeu de Paume, Paris. Source: Jeu de Paume, by François Lauginie.

Since You Were Born serves as testament of Roth’s continual investigation, not only into his identity but also into the interrelationship between the physical art space and the expansive digital realm. Through the repositioning and transformation of an extensive archive of virtual

¹⁷³ Ginger Gregg Duggan and Judith Hoos Fox, “Evan Roth,” Curator Squared Virtual Views, accessed Jan. 2, 2023, <https://curatorsquaredvirtualviews.com/evan-roth>.

¹⁷⁴ Ginger Gregg Duggan, “Evan Roth.”

images into a physical installation, Roth's work creates a palpable sense of visual saturation within the museum space. This effect not only to mirrors but also to materialize the visual language of the digital sphere and online platforms. Furthermore, drawing from Cotton's interpretation of the work of another net artist previously discussed in this chapter,¹⁷⁵ one could contend that Roth similarly "monumentalizes the visual lexicon of our screen-centric daily existence into tangible sculptural artifacts,"¹⁷⁶ thereby offering viewers a dynamic experience that bridges the material and virtual realms.

According to the curators of the "Supermarket of Images" exhibition, Roth's *Since You Were Born* installation was designed to materialize the vast array of images we encounter daily, emphasizing their prevalence and enabling viewers to truly comprehend their magnitude.¹⁷⁷ In other words, the grand scale of the installation was intended to amplify the visual impact, enhance the immersive quality of the viewer's experience, and potentially influence the viewer's interpretation of the images. Nevertheless, despite Roth's stated intention to establish a dedicated museum space where visitors could fully engage with his artwork and contemplate the visual experience in the context of the digital age, the ultimate realization of this goal, in my assessment, fell short due to the influence of curatorial choices and spatial limitations.

Rather than allocating a distinct environment in the museum that would enable viewers to physically enter the artwork and fully engage with the "magnitude" of the continuous image flow, the installation appeared to be integrated into the building's architecture – specifically within the staircase leading to the main exhibition space. Hence, rather than actively encouraging viewers to

¹⁷⁵ Cotton refers to Artie Vierkant's ongoing project *Image Object* (2011-). See Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 294-5.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Peter Szendy, Emmanuel Alloa, and Marta Ponsa, *Le Supermarché des Images*, [exhibition brochure], (Paris: Jeu de Paume, 2020), 5.

pause and engage in contemplation of the underlying concepts within the artwork, the curation of the installation primarily guided visitors as they entered the museum, ascended the staircase, and proceeded into the exhibition galleries.

Ultimately, as I argue, the decision to situate the installation within the museum’s lobby did not fully exploit its grand scale and visual richness as a performative visual spectacle. As Roth revealed in an interview I conducted with him, “We had bigger plans and I wanted to include even more images in order to encapsulate the viewer, but some things didn’t work out. For example, we wanted to make the staircase part of the installation by placing prints on the steps, but we were unable to do that.”¹⁷⁸



Ill. 3. 21 Evan Roth, *Since You Were Born*, 2020. Installation view at the exhibition “The Supermarket of Images,” February 11 - June 7, 2020. Jeu de Paume, Paris. Source: Jeu de Paume, by François Lauginie.

¹⁷⁸ Evan Roth, in discussion with the author, Berlin, Germany, July 24, 2023.

On a more conceptual level, I argue that the positioning of the *Since You Were Born* installation in the Jeu de Paume’s lobby, a space frequently traversed by visitors in haste, might have inadvertently implied that the web-cached images were essentially devoid of distinguishing features or visual interest. This, in turn, might have suggested that this Internet-based image archive, composed by the artist, held lesser significance, potentially diminishing the attention that this unique photographic installation deserved. This contrasts with the work’s conceptualization. Indeed, Roth’s aim was not to devalue the visual fragments from his archive of web browsing history. Instead, his objective was to transform them into an immersive and aesthetically engaging experience, thereby emphasizing the materiality and vastness of images typically encountered on screens. In Roth’s own words, he wanted to encourage viewers to briefly “pause and actively interact with the artwork.”¹⁷⁹ In my assessment, the enveloping experience highlighting the visual impact of Roth’s *Since You Were Born* found more effective realization when given its own monumental space during the subsequent “The Supermarket of Images” exhibition, held a year later in 2021 at Beijing’s Red Brick Art Gallery (Ill. 2.22).¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ Evan Roth, in discussion with the author, Berlin, Germany, July 24, 2023.

¹⁸⁰ It should be noted that, unlike the exhibitions in Paris and Hamburg (which I will discuss on the following page), I did not personally attend the exhibition in Beijing. My impression is solely based on the images of installation views.



Ill. 3. 22 Evan Roth, *Since You Were Born*, 2021. Installation view, "The Supermarket of Images," May 5 - August 1, 2021, Red Brick Art Museum, Beijing, China. Source: Evan Roth, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~/shows/since-you-were-born-2021/#hemisphere=east&strand=108>

It is also worth noting that the concept of commonplace Internet-sourced images, in a broader sense, resonates with the perspective of artist and writer Hito Steyerl's concept of the "poor image." This term was introduced within the context of the hierarchy of images in the digital age. In Steyerl's framework, she draws a distinction between high-resolution "rich" images and their low-resolution, degraded counterparts, which she refers to as "poor images."¹⁸¹ Often discovered online, these poor images are typically stripped of their original context or associated information. Steyerl characterizes these poor images, which emerge as by-products of audiovisual production or remnants from digital economies, as digital waste, and she refers to them as the "contemporary Wretched of the Screen."¹⁸² Interestingly, Roth's work can be interpreted as a commentary on the

¹⁸¹ Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux* 10 (2009), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

frequently overlooked status of an archive of cached Internet images as ‘poor’ digital imagery or ‘digital waste.’ However, in my interpretation, the Paris installation of *Since You Were Born* fell short in fully conveying the conceptual significance and visual impact of these images as a unique contemporary art photography installation.

In 2022, Evan Roth’s *Since You Were Born* assumed a new manifestation as a site-specific installation within the context of the “Give and Take - Images Upon Images” group exhibition, held at Hamburger Kunsthalle in Hamburg, Germany. The exhibition, curated by Petra Roettig, Stephanie Bunk, and Leona Marie Ahrens as part of the Eighth Triennial of Photography in Hamburg, revolved around the themes of appropriation, exchange, and archiving of visual materials in contemporary photography. Possibly drawing inspiration from Szendy’s theory concerning the current economy of images, the curators of this exhibition also allude to images as the “currency” of 21st-century visual culture. Therefore, the exhibition was named “Give and Take,” symbolizing a visual exchange that reflects the deluge of images within the continuously evolving context of the digital age. The exhibition featured twenty-one artists whose works delve into the processes of image circulation and migration across geographical and social contexts, engaging in a self-reflective exploration of the medium of photography and film by employing its inherent mechanisms and devices.¹⁸³

The exhibition was strategically positioned within the contemporary exhibition space on the first floor of the Galerie der Gegenwart at the Hamburger Kunsthalle (Ill. 3.23 – 3.24). This location, notable for its expansive windows offering panoramic city views, became an integral part

¹⁸³ The exhibition featured work by: Viktoria Binschtok, Josephin Böttger, Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin, Irene Chabr, Sara Cwynar, Katharina Gaenssler, Mathilde ter Heijne, Sabine Hornig, Louise Lawler, Matthew Muir, Frida Orupabo, Max Pinckers, Walid Raad, Volker Renner, Sebastian Riemer, Martha Rosler, Evan Roth, Thomas Ruff, Taryn Simon, and Johannes Wohnseifer.

of the curatorial concept for the show. The exhibition, in its entirety, accentuated the boundary between the museum's interior realm and the surrounding external environment. This deliberate spatial arrangement facilitated the presentation of artworks that could be appreciated not only from within the gallery but also from the outside. As elucidated by the curators in the exhibition brochure, "the exhibition becomes a platform for the various forms of presenting the photographic in the exterior and interior."¹⁸⁴

In the context of this specific iteration of the *Since You Were Born* series, Roth's installation was thoughtfully positioned within the gallery space to harmonize with the square windows of the museum. This purposeful integration of city views into the artwork offered viewers a unique visual encounter. Beyond its aesthetic appeal, the windowed space introduced an additional layer of meaning and contemplation, invoking symbolic concepts related to art photography as well as the internet, such as browser windows, framing, perspective, representation, and reflection. This fusion of the physical world outside the windows with Roth's artwork inside invited viewers to engage in a more conceptual exploration of the external reality and its artful (digitally produced) replication within the confines of the museum. Importantly, Roth's interactive photographic installation spanned the entirety of this spacious gallery, allowing viewers to traverse it, even extending to cover the gallery floor. This unique visual setting distinguished by its vibrant colors, immersive ambiance, and captivating forms. Similarly, the comprehensive presentation, which allows multiple visitors to engage concurrently, encourages an interactive and relational audience experience. This engagement involves the process of deciphering and interpreting the extensive array of imagery. Similarly, during my visit to the exhibition and exploration of the installation, I found myself deeply engrossed, with my attention

¹⁸⁴Ahrens, Leona Marie, Stephanie Bunk, and Petra Roettig, *Give and Take - Images Upon Images* [exhibition booklet] (Hamburg: Hamburger Kunsthalle, 2022).

drawn to the substantial scale and intricate details. I documented the experience through photography and made an effort to closely observe the multitude of images, aiming to fully grasp the entirety of the work.



Ill. 3. 23 Evan Roth, *Since You Were Born*, 2022. Installation view at “Give and Take – Images upon Images,” May 20 – Aug 28, 2022, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany. Source: Photo by author.

Indeed, as one moves through the installation space, the saturated images encompassing their entire field of vision, it becomes evident that our interaction with these web-based visuals, once materialized and integrated into the curated environment conceived by Roth, offers a markedly distinct embodied experience in contrast to the fleeting abstract encounters we typically have with them on screens.

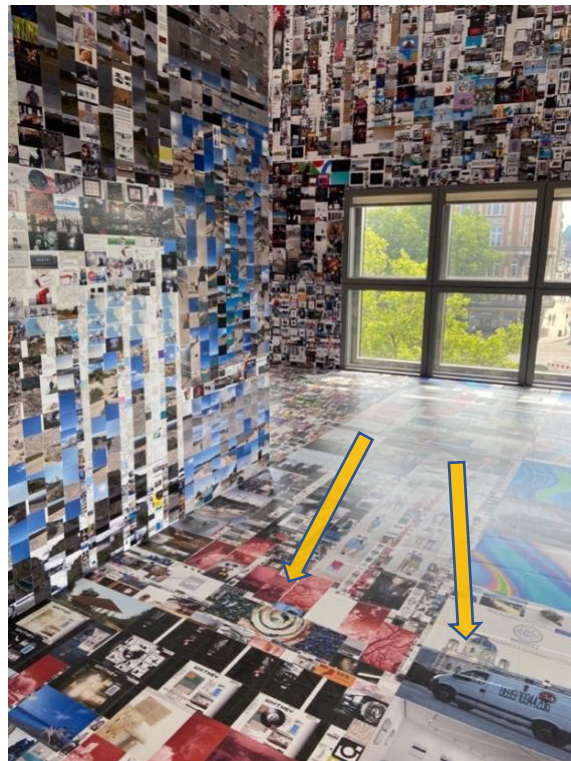


Ill. 3. 24 Evan Roth, *Since You Were Born*, 2022. Installation view at “Give and Take – Images upon Images,” May 20 – Aug 28, 2022, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany. Source: Photo by author.

As shown in the provided illustrations, Roth’s installation employs large prints that span the entire gallery floor, encouraging visitors to walk upon them. This artistic decision serves the dual purpose of actively engaging in an appealing performative experience, while underscoring the perpetual flow and movement of online imagery, even as materialized images within the confines of a static museum environment. Relatedly, according to writer and photographer Andreia Alves de Oliveira, when photographs are presented on the screen, they acquire not only a temporal dimension (as screens can be switched on and off) but also create an illusion of movement through their existence in multiple repetitions. These reiterations (just like Roth’s dense image archive), often form sequences, series, arrangements, and grids, where each image appears to prompt a transition to another, resulting in an endless and continuous flow of visual engagement.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ Andreia Alves de Oliveira, “Post-Photography, or Are We Past Photography?” In *Post-Screen. Intermittence + Interference*, ed. Ana Moutinho et al. (Lisbon: Faculdade de Belas-Artes da Universidade de Lisboa, 2016), 73.

to Duchamp's famous self-reflexive archival work, one can argue that Roth's creation can be seen as his own digital version of *La Boîte-en-valise*.¹⁸⁶ Given his substantial online involvement in promoting his art and maintaining its digital presence, it comes as no surprise that these artworks, specifically tailored for online dissemination, find their place within his web cache archive. A web cache, designed to record all digital interactions, inherently captures facets of Roth's artistic trajectory. Consequently, the web-cache projects emerge as a comprehensive overview or metacommentary on Roth's ever-evolving portfolio. They establish a profound sense of reflexivity and intertextuality within his body of work. For example, in illustration 3.26, infra-red images from the Internet Landscapes series, as well as a snapshot from Roth's 2012 performance piece, *Free Speech* (Vienna), can be observed, as indicated by the arrows.



Ill. 3. 26 Evan Roth, *Since You Were Born*, 2022. Installation view at “Give and Take – Images upon Images,” May 20 – Aug 28, 2022, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany. Source: Photo by author.

¹⁸⁶ See page 53 of this dissertation, where Marcel Duchamp's work is referenced in the context of the history of archival art.

Consequently, despite the vast number of images presented, the large-scale visual installation only displays a minute portion of the archive accumulated in a web-cache through online interactions. As Roth critically observes, particularly in reference to online surveillance and data ownership: “the display is merely a ‘small portrait’ reflecting the vast data entities like Google and Facebook have on us. The visible segment in the installation is but a fraction of a colossal archive (also portrait) that remains largely unseen by most of us.”¹⁸⁷ In this context, the artwork transcends being a mere snapshot of the artist’s digital footprint, evolving into a reflection of our networked culture at a precise juncture in history. As posited by Fontcuberta, the impact of images in the era of post-photography lies in their capacity to guide viewers toward a philosophical inquiry that goes beyond the superficial aspects of the image. Instead, it delves into the profound ramifications of our digital existence.¹⁸⁸

Thus, the experiential dimension of *Since You Were Born* lies in its capacity to prompt viewers to engage in contemplation beyond the quantitative scale and aesthetic aspects of the overall installation. It invites viewers to consider how this archive of internet images can personally resonate with them. In other words, it fosters critical self-reflection on one’s personal online browsing data and the online archival processes that individuals engage in, prompting contemplation of the data’s accumulation and dissemination. In addition, this serves as a reminder to viewers that they play a passive role in becoming archives themselves. This is because virtual archival processes often take place autonomously, with the computer automatically documenting all action users undertake, even without their deliberate involvement or awareness. As Roth

¹⁸⁷ Jeu de Paume, “Le supermarché des images | Evan Roth – Since you were born,” (video).

¹⁸⁸ Joan Fontcuberta, “The Post-photographic Condition,” in *Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal* (Montreal: Kerber Verlag, 2015), 10-15.

articulates, “When you’re surfing the web, this project prompts you to question: Can you ever truly escape the sensation that you’re being archived, in essence, monitored or observed?”¹⁸⁹

Another intriguing performative facet of Roth’s presentations of the *Since You Were Born* series concerning the audience’s experience is its manifestation of a visual language that aligns with the contemporary “Instagrammable” aesthetic. As defined by Cambridge Dictionary, the term “Instagrammable” refers to something “attractive or interesting enough to be suitable for photographing and posting on the social media service Instagram.”¹⁹⁰ Accordingly, as evident from numerous illustrated installation views of Roth’s recent exhibitions, including my own visit to his show in Hamburg, his installations have garnered recognition as appealing ‘Instagrammable destinations.’ They have piqued the interest of exhibition attendees who actively participate in social media engagement (Ill. 3.27-28)



Ill. 3. 27 Visitors at Evan Roth’s *Since You Were Born* site-specific installation at MOCA Jacksonville, USA, 2019. Source: MOCA Jacksonville, <https://www.facebook.com/MOCAjacksonville/posts/thank-you-to-everyone-who-joined-us-last-night-for-the-preview-of-project-atrium/10157407645384589/>.

¹⁸⁹ Evan Roth, in discussion with the author, Berlin, Germany, July 24, 2023.

¹⁹⁰ See Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. “Instagrammable,” accessed March 20, 2023, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/instagrammable>. See also Subur Karyatun, et. al, “Between Instagrammable Attraction and Selfie Tourist: Characteristic and Behavior,” *South Asian Journal of Social Studies and Economics* 12, no. 4 (2021): 314-324.

When visitors document themselves (in the form of ‘selfies’) and their interactions with Roth’s art on social media, they shift from being mere spectators to active contributors, curating and disseminating their personal memories, selfies, and interpretations of the installation. These individual narratives, juxtaposed with Roth’s personal image archive, contribute to a broader dialogue surrounding the *Since You Were Born* series – a conversation that explores the continuous interplay between the private and public spheres, personal and collective memory, as well as the juxtaposition of Roth’s own self-portrait against the wider “portrait” of the public and Internet at a given moment in time.

In the context of the presentation of Roth’s ‘attractive’ installations by art institutions, it is noteworthy that increased interactivity and impact in an artistic experience often enhance the likelihood of visitors retaining that experience, engaging in discussions about it, and potentially revisiting the exhibition or recommending it to others. Additionally, in a contemporary culture driven by social media marketing, when an exhibition garners significant attention through visitors’ shared experiences on platforms like Instagram or TikTok, it possesses the potential to increase the number of museum visitors significantly.¹⁹¹ Hence, Roth’s immersive and ‘Instagram-friendly’ installations can be examined in light of the theory of the “Experience Economy,” which is also mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation (See p. 27). This theoretical framework highlights the importance of designing memorable and engaging experiences as a unique economic offering for participants or customers.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ For further study on public engagement with museum exhibitions through social media see Kylie Budge and Alli Burness, “Museum Objects and Instagram: Agency and Communication in Digital Engagement,” *Continuum* 32, no. 2 (2018): 137-150.

¹⁹² B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (United Kingdom: Harvard Business Review Press, 2011).

In my discussions with Roth, he expressed an ambivalent, critical attitude regarding the “Instagrammable” allure of his installations. While he acknowledged that certain viewers might be initially drawn to his work primarily for its aesthetic appeal or as a “cool backdrop for selfies,” the artist also recognized and appreciated the open, interactive environment and the relational experiences that *Since You Were Born* has engendered for its visitors. As Roth states:

The other thing that was new for me with *Since You Were Born* is that I’ve never had an art piece with so much interaction and engagement of people through social media. And so, it was a wonderful surprise that I could follow along with the daily updates visitors were posting. And there will be a really nice moment at some point in the future when I make a new piece, and all those photos people posted on social media will show up as bits and pieces of my browsing data.¹⁹³



Ill. 3. 28 Visitors at Evan Roth’s *Since You Were Born*. Site-specific installation at MOCA Jacksonville, USA, 2019. Source: Evan Roth, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~shows/since-you-were-born-2019/#hemisphere=east&strand=125>.

¹⁹³ “Evan Roth Reflects on ‘Since You Were Born.’”

3.7 The Changing Landscape of the Internet

Throughout this chapter, Roth's commitment to the materialization, classification, and re-archiving of various facets within the online sphere, with the explicit aim of elucidating both personal and collective visual memory, is evident. In alignment with his extensive, career-long exploration of the Internet as a medium, this archival approach enables Roth to conduct in-depth examinations of the contemporary epoch characterized by ongoing technological (and photographic) transformations. In another web-based project, *Internet Landscapes* (2014-2020), Roth again visualizes the often-invisible facets of the digital domain, bringing them to life within a three-dimensional gallery space. Through this work, Roth endeavors to unveil elements typically concealed from our view, inviting us to perceive the unseen dimensions of our digital landscape. As the Internet has evolved, Roth has shifted his focus to its tangible substrates. Curator Domenico Quaranta aptly described this series as Roth's "coming-of-age story," representing his personal journey and maturation within the digital space.¹⁹⁴

Connecting *Internet Landscapes* to the earlier works discussed in this chapter, Roth elucidates: "On one level, all three of these projects (*Internet Landscapes*, *Since You Were Born*, and *Internet Cache Self Portraits*) represent my efforts to achieve a deeper visual and conceptual understanding of the network's essence and its impact on us, both individually and collectively."¹⁹⁵ In this project, Roth employs a unique visual language that creatively blends photography and digital media with traditional art forms like landscape painting and installation.

While the *Internet Landscapes* are less focused on the concept of the archive than the *Self-Portrait* and *Since You Were Born* series, it is nonetheless crucial to conclude this chapter with

¹⁹⁴ Domenico Quaranta, "Internet Landscapes. A Journey in Space and Time," in *Evan Roth, Kites & Websites*, ed. Belenius/Nordenhake Gallery (Stockholm: Belenius/Nordenhake Gallery, 2016), unpagged.

¹⁹⁵ Roth, "Infra-Red," by Filippo Lorenzin.

this series. *Internet Landscapes* act as a focal point for several themes discussed in this chapter, including open-source philosophy and accessibility, adaptability across media and formats, the contrast between the dynamic web and static museum/gallery spaces, the interplay between private and public domains, and the relationship between dematerialized images and tangible photographic objects in immersive gallery installations. As Roth's research process unfolded, the project underwent a natural division into two parts: firstly, a series of gallery installations that manifest an intriguing relationship between the landscapes and the structure of the exhibited displays (Ill. 3.29 – 3.30) and secondly, an online component dedicated to providing open access to the artwork through a special website.¹⁹⁶



Ill. 3. 29 Evan Roth, *Internet Landscapes*, a series of network located videos, 2022. Installation view at the exhibition “Songs of the Sky: Photography & the Cloud,” Rencontres d’Arles, (July 4 - September 25, 2022), Arles, France. Source: Evan Roth, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~shows/songs-of-the-sky-photography-the-cloud-arles/#hemisphere=east&strand=46>.

¹⁹⁶ The artwork is available at <https://redlines.network/>.

Crucially, while many interpretations of the *Internet Landscapes* project highlight its painterly aspects, aligning it with the broader art historical traditions of landscape painting, Romanticism, and the associated notions of the wanderer and the sublime, my emphasis is on the distinct aesthetics and hybrid nature of the installations. I have a particular interest in examining how this work is situated within the framework of the archival and the interactive experiences it provides to viewers, particularly within the realm of contemporary art photography. Instead of concentrating on a single exhibition, I will make reference to several iterations of the project.

In 2014, Roth undertook an unusual expedition to discover the tangible manifestations of the Internet. This pursuit led him to secluded coastal areas where undersea Internet cables emerge from the water and connect to the ground, commonly referred to as “fiber optic cable landing locations.” These pivotal junctures form the backbone of our global digital communications. Roth’s inaugural journey led him to Cornwall in the United Kingdom, a region underpinned by vast networks of fiber optic cables channeling a considerable volume of global telecommunications. This revelation propelled Roth to further investigate the Internet’s physical underpinnings, prompting visits to strategic global sites including, but not limited to, Australia, Argentina, Hong Kong, New Zealand, the USA, Sweden, France, and South Africa. The concept of place is central to this project. Firstly, it pertains to the physical landing locations from which the Internet originates. Secondly, it references the location of the artwork’s display in the gallery as well as its online platform. Roth underscores three key facets of place in this work: the landscape (where it is filmed), the network (where it is shared), and the home (where it is viewed).¹⁹⁷ The work can be engaged with in two separate settings: within an exhibition space and in a viewer’s own home through a peer-to-peer network.

¹⁹⁷ Evan Roth, “Evan Roth: Red Lines with Landscapes: Portugal,” Interview by Silvia Gomes, *Umbigo Magazine* 72 (2020): 101.



Ill. 3. 30 Evan Roth, *Landscapes (Red Lines)*, 2019. Installation view at the exhibition “Ways of Connecting,” 24 April - 17 May 2019, iMAL, Brussels, Belgium. Source: <https://www.evan-roth.com/~/works/landscapes/#hemisphere=east&strand=41>.

To illuminate the underlying infrastructure supporting the digital world, images were captured using a camera modified to operate within the infrared spectrum. Interestingly, this approach resonates with the material properties of the Internet, given that data moves through fiber-optic cables as infrared laser light. By employing infrared photography, Roth provides a reflective experience, allowing viewers to perceive the network landscape in the very light spectrum used by the Internet’s own transmissions. The resulting photographic and filmic documentation of infrared coastal landscapes form the basis for Roth’s compelling gallery installations, known as *Internet Landscapes*, and the peer-to-peer network entitled *Red Lines*. The complete project currently comprises eighty-two individual network-located videos, filmed in eleven countries across six continents. The duration of these videos ranges from three minutes and

twenty-six seconds to nineteen minutes and forty-eight seconds, amounting to a total of over twenty hours of footage.¹⁹⁸

The *Internet Landscapes* series was developed at yet another juncture when Roth was reevaluating his perspective on the Internet as an artistic medium, especially with relation to issues of privacy and security. As mentioned earlier, he had personally observed the Internet's transition from a space of liberation to a more commercialized and restrictive platform. Roth had therefore wondered, "How can I rejuvenate my connection with the medium I work in?" This reflective "reset," as he termed it, led him to seek an alternative method for engaging with the web as an artist.¹⁹⁹

During this period of reevaluation, Roth drew inspiration from discussions pertaining to the Internet's infrastructure and its material aspects, as well as debates regarding ownership and governance of the internet. His perspective was notably influenced by Andrew Blum's 2012 work, "Tubes: A Journey to the Center of the Internet." In this publication, Blum elucidates the enigmatic nature of the Internet by delving into its tangible constituents and systems. Blum embarked on a global journey, personally observing the intricate infrastructure that sustains the Internet, encompassing undersea cables, data centers, and internet exchange points.²⁰⁰ Blum's journey has unquestionably resonated with Roth's own expedition to the origin of the Internet. As Roth observes: "Part of the *Internet Landscapes* project for me was about reducing one layer of abstraction in our conception of the Internet. It serves as a means to understand that the Internet is

¹⁹⁸ The images can be accessed either through specific URLs designated for each video, such as n50.141279w5.692645.co.uk (depicting a landing location in the UK), or simply by visiting the website <https://redlines.network/>.

¹⁹⁹ Evan Roth in discussion with the author, Berlin, Germany, July 24, 2023.

²⁰⁰ The title of Blum's publication references former United States Senator Ted Stevens' humorous description of the Internet as "a series of tubes." See Dwight Garner, "He Has Seen the Internet, and It Is Us," *New York Times*, June 19, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/20/books/tubes-by-andrew-blum-explores-physical-reality-of-the-web.html>.

something we can physically map onto the globe and actually visit.”²⁰¹ Therefore, through the monumental installations of this series, Roth brings to light the materiality of communication technologies that are largely unseen, such as the undersea cable infrastructure. By documenting (and materializing) the locations where Internet connectivity originates, his aim, among other things, is to debunk the misconception that the Internet lacks materiality and exists solely in an intangible “cloud” or floating Wi-Fi dimension. In reality, “Wi-Fi is only truly wireless as far as the nearest antenna or cell tower.”²⁰² Significantly, while the *Landscapes* project strongly manifest the pervasive nature of the Internet and is an exemplar of Post-Internet and digital art, Roth has concurrently situated himself in this project in a manner akin to that of a traditional photographer, thus presenting a deliberate contrast. In doing so, one could argue that he has taken on the persona of a ‘classic’ researcher, wanderer, or photojournalist, crossing the globe with his camera to chronicle the story of the Internet’s physical landscapes.

Although not explicitly framed as an archival project, the series effectively emerges as a unique image archive. It functions as a form of continuous documentation, highlighting the tangible facets of the web’s infrastructure by charting the worldwide dispersion of Internet cable landing sites on remote coastlines. Indeed, at a reflexive or symbolic level, Roth’s archival work encompasses the Internet, which in itself have been conceptualized as a ‘meta-archive’ of archives. Roth’s archival undertakings in the *Landscape* project invite viewers to contemplate segments of the Internet they have likely overlooked or of which they were unaware. Through the act of recording and presenting these facets of the Internet within a contemporary art framework, the artist consciously preserves a portion of our shared digital memory, presenting it in both material

²⁰¹ Evan Roth, “Artist Talk,” The Photographers’ Gallery, London, Aug. 22, 2019, YouTube video, 1:05:02, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVSc43Q0vOg&ab_channel=Artangel.

²⁰² Silvia Gomes, “Evan Roth: Red Lines with Landscapes: Portugal,” *Umbigo Magazine* 72 (2020): 101.

and experiential dimensions. Certainly, in the context of our continually evolving technological era, this archival effort serves as an important means of ensuring the remembrance of these aspects of web technology. From another archival perspective, Roth's artistic research journey to international internet cable landing points, can be viewed as a sprawling archive of diverse locations and experiences and their unique visual representation.

The *Internet Landscapes* installations, marked by their closely arranged LED screens and interlinked cables, bear a resemblance to Taryn Simon's dense grouping and clustering of images appropriated from the Picture Collection. Additionally, Roth's work can be situated within the framework of "nodes" and "nets" as aesthetic formats in contemporary conceptual art, as outlined by Joselit in his 2012 article, "Conceptual Art 2.0." This framework was previously discussed in the context of Simon's *Picture Collection* project in the second chapter of this dissertation. To reiterate, according to Joselit's terminology, "nodes" represent specific points of significance, which can encompass individual artworks, images, or digital files. On the other hand, "nets" refer to the intricate web of connections that interlink these nodes. This conceptual framework emphasizes the balance between individual artworks or images and the expansive digital landscape they inhabit. Roth's *Landscapes* installations effectively embody and illustrate this theoretical construct by emphasizing networked interactions between images and viewers. Each of the *Landscapes* can be interpreted as a "node" within various "nets," spanning from their physical presentation in a gallery to their presence on servers located in the depicted regions, on a dedicated website, and within a peer-to-peer network, as elaborated upon in the conclusion of this chapter. Indeed, these interconnected touchpoints collectively contribute to the creation of a dynamic presentation of the work, exerting a significant influence on the immersive experience of the viewers.

3.7.1 Mixing Realities: Exploring Hybrid Imagery



Ill. 3. 31 Evan Roth, *Internet Landscapes*, 2021. Installation view at “Songs of the Sky, Photography & The Cloud,” Dec 11, 2021 – Apr 21, 2022, C/O Berlin. Source: <https://www.evan-roth.com/~/works/landscapes/#hemisphere=east&strand=41>.

Upon first glance at one of Roth’s *Landscapes* installations, one might perceive a compilation of painterly still images. However, closer inspection reveals them to be slow-motion videos displayed on high-resolution LED monitors. This innovative format melds both still and moving visuals with authentic audio recordings from the fiber optic cable landing sites. Crucially, the concept of hybridity lies at the core of this project, as the images can be perceived as amalgamations of traditionally separate media, such as painting, installation, photography, video, and the Internet. These media are approached through the lens of post-photography, highlighting diverse and mixed-media practices. One can argue that Roth’s deliberate choice of video screens over printed photographs ensures that the images remain as ephemeral and dynamic as the Internet itself. Similarly, in each iteration of the project, the installation prominently includes an intricate network of cables and routers. This visible cable system emphasizes the real-time processes

associated with data transfer through Internet fiber optic cables. It highlights that it is the Internet medium that enables the display of images in the exhibition space.²⁰³ Without an Internet connection, the artwork cannot be experienced.

The unique interplay between motion and stillness is also highlighted by curator and writer Charmian Griffin, who describes Roth's infrared images as "monochromes so seemingly static that they might be mistaken for photographs, until a subtle breeze stirs the tranquil scene, whether it be a tree, the ocean, or the sky."²⁰⁴ Undoubtedly, Roth's hybrid moving images challenge conventional expectations associated with landscape photography. Rather than offering standard documentations, his remediations of the Internet as landscape paintings unveils an unexpected dimension for viewers within the exhibition space. These landscapes embody a blend of juxtaposed elements: stillness and motion, the traditions of photography and painting, digital and tangible realms, and nature and technology. The amalgamation of various formal and conceptual elements creates a layered and immersive visual encounter for the audience, particularly as they engage with the large-scale three-dimensional installations of the artwork.

As demonstrated in the accompanying illustrations of different gallery installations (Ill. (3.29–3.31), Roth creates site-specific displays by experimenting with tightly grouped constellations of flat screens of various sizes, predominantly in portrait mode. Within each unique gallery or museum setting, the displays are meticulously tailored to resonate with the architectural nuances of the space. The vertical orientation of the screens is meant to mimic the natural position of electronic devices like smartphones and tablets. Though these details may sound somewhat technical, the formal outcome is a collection of captivating and expressive images in striking

²⁰³ "Evan Roth, Internet Landscapes: Sweden," *Digicult*, March 14, 2016, <http://digicult.it/articles/art/evan-roth-internet-landscapes-sweden/>.

²⁰⁴ Charmian Griffin, "exhibition text" in *Red Lines with Landscapes: Portugal* (Lisbon: Fidelidade Arte, 2020), unpagged.

shades of red and pink. While a few images showcase the actual Internet cables emerging from the water, most pictures in the series depict recognizable elements of nature, such as skies and clouds, cliffs, ocean waves, deserted lands, trees, and bushes. By evoking a feeling of familiarity, the infrared photography enacts an eerie transformation of the landscapes, imbuing them with both painterly and semi-abstract qualities. As Roth poetically explains, “from the beginning, I always had this vision in my mind of the lonely tree in an uncomfortable landscape.”²⁰⁵

Drawing from Roth’s prior engagement as an artist-hacker, I perceive Roth’s *Landscapes* project as a deliberate “hack,” strategically challenging established norms within traditional genres like self-portraiture and landscape painting. In doing so, he expands the boundaries and redefines the conventional meanings associated with these genres. By employing conventional artistic tools, such as an old camera,²⁰⁶ in unconventional manners, Roth’s use of infrared visuals disrupts the established conventions of landscape photography.

Accordingly, when reflecting on the ontological and technological relationship between still and moving images, Roth’s slow-motion looping videos can be seen as “durational photographs” that capture both static and dynamic moments.²⁰⁷ Despite the continuous motion depicted in the videos, Roth’s camera remains fixed, requiring prolonged stillness from the operator. The resulting images, displayed on high-resolution screens, possess a photographic quality while conveying a sense of time and duration. These “filmic photographs” of the infrared

²⁰⁵ Evan Roth, “Domenico Quaranta: Interview with Evan Roth,” by Domenico Quaranta, in *The Black Chamber: Surveillance, Paranoia, Invisibility & the Internet*, eds. Bani Brusadin et al. (Link Editions and Aksioma, 2016), <https://mefsite.wordpress.com/2016/05/17/domenico-quaranta-in-conversation-with-evan-roth/>.

²⁰⁶ Roth developed his own infrared camera by hacking an ordinary camera, which allowed him to adjust it to his aesthetic and conceptual needs. The camera shoots near the 1550 nanometer range of the electromagnetic spectrum, which is a common modulation for infrared data transport through fiber optic.

²⁰⁷ Artist Owen Kydd is known for his wall framed videos, which he refers to as “durational photographs.” See discussion in Charlotte Cotton, “Interview with Owen Kydd,” *Aperture*, April 2, 2013, <http://www.aperture.org/blog/interview-with-owen-kydd/>. Also see, Walter Ben Michaels, “The Force of a Frame: Owen Kydd’s Durational Photographs,” *Nonsite.org*, March 14, 2014, <https://nonsite.org/the-force-of-a-frame/>.

landscapes draw viewers into an immersive form of observation, prompting them to identify precisely still moments within the continuous motion.²⁰⁸ Indeed, with prolonged observation of the infrared videos, subtle changes in light, passing individuals, shifting clouds, and water patterns gradually reveal themselves. The “durational photographs” thereby highlight the slower rhythms of nature, standing in stark contrast to the speed of modern digital culture. As the artist remarks: “These aren’t *actions* as we are used to in a typical Internet experience, but actions in nature.”²⁰⁹

Time and duration are pivotal in this project, especially in the context of the performative experience it provides to its viewers. From the artist’s standpoint, the research process, which involves extensive global travel and prolonged periods dedicated to capturing footage of landing sites, often requiring a long duration of absolute stillness, brought about feelings of boredom, self-doubt, and solitude. Roth articulates the sense of duality he encountered during this process:

And what was most striking to me when I started this process was not “omg, this retreat into nature and being away from screens is amazing!”, it was more, “wow, this is boring!” As I continued with the project, however, this perception of time became one of the most interesting aspects of the work.²¹⁰

Having had this realization, Roth designed his eighteen-minute-long moving images to resonate with nature’s gentle pace, sidestepping the frantic edits typical of today’s online content. Therefore, paradoxically, Roth’s infrared digital images, symbolizing the swift nature of the Internet, foster a reflective engagement with nature. They accentuate the significance of prolonged contemplation, a stark departure from the rapid pace associated with digital sphere. Consequently, this may encourage viewers to interact with the moving-images with a deeper and potentially more

²⁰⁸ See Cotton’s discussion of durational photography in *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 302-303.

²⁰⁹ Quaranta, “Internet Landscapes. A Journey in Space and Time.” Unpaged.

²¹⁰ Evan Roth, “Domenico Quaranta: Interview with Evan Roth.”

contemplative level of attention, emphasizing sustained examination of the images over the hurried pursuit of transient moments.



Ill. 3. 32 Evan Roth, still from *Internet Landscapes: Sydney* (<https://s33.844228e151.144557.com.au/>), 2016.
Source: <https://www.evan-roth.com/~frames/landscape-pieces/#hemisphere=east&strand=75>.

Interestingly, Roth adds a layer of reflexivity and connectivity to his durational landscape images by hosting each on a server situated in the same country or city where it was filmed. Therefore, the medium of these images is described as “network located videos.” Each landscape is assigned a unique URL title based on the GPS coordinates of its filming location, underscoring the significance of its network placement. For example, the URL “<https://n48.879773e2.367629.fr/>” corresponds to footage showcasing an Internet cable landing point in France. The displayed images in any given exhibition/installation of the work are streamed from servers located in the places/countries that appear in the landscapes. This setup ensures that viewers are observing, in real-time, the very cables that support the flow of data, causing Roth’s images to appear on the LED screens in the exhibition space (see Ill. 3.32 depicting internet cables emerging from the water).

From a performative standpoint, Roth's installations establish a conceptual and visual loop, facilitating a direct connection between geographical landscapes and the gallery space, while simultaneously bridging the gap between the online and physical gallery or museum space. This integration serves to enhance the overall experiential quality for the audience. This engagement with hybrid images surpasses passive observation, immersing viewers in the flow of the Internet and of visual data exchange from its source to their current location. The combination of real-time connectivity, deliberate video deceleration, and the distinctive visual palette dominated by red and pink hues across the multiple screens, which encourage viewers to shift their gaze from one screen to another, possesses the ability to completely captivate viewers within the depicted scenes. This results in a viewing experience, where the act of observation evolves into an immersive journey through the expansive physical infrastructure of the Internet (See Ill. 3.34 - p.310).



Ill. 3. 33 Evan Roth, *Landscapes*, 2017. Installation view of “Landscape with a Ruin” exhibition October 20 - November 10, 2017, Mona Bismarck Foundation, Paris. Source: Vinciane Lebrun-Verguethen for Mona Bismarck Foundation.

Finally, there is an intriguing aspect of reflexivity not only in the hybrid images themselves but also in Roth's installation and curation strategy, which relates to the visibly intricate network of cables linking the screens to a black network switch positioned on the gallery floor (Ill. 3.33). With this, it becomes evident that Roth's work extends beyond the mere presentation of the physical attributes of the Internet. By openly displaying the installation's technical composition, Roth endeavors to replicate the physical cable connections of the Internet while simultaneously revealing the constructed nature of the exhibition itself. In his essay "Curating in the Post-internet Age," Boris Groys discusses a trend in contemporary art wherein exhibitions reveal their own operational methods, what he terms the exhibition's "Gestell."²¹¹ Groys suggests that these exhibitions do not simply display artworks but also explain the means by which they are shown – a revelation of their own conceptual strategies. In line with this tendency, Roth's arrangement of the *Landscapes* installations, complete with screens and cables, serves two purposes. It accentuates the frequently overlooked material components of the network and explores the potential physicality of photography in the digital age. Simultaneously, it provides transparency and "open access" to the curatorial conceptualism behind the artist's post-photographic display of these hybrid landscape images. In accordance with Groys' observation, contemporary exhibitions frequently unveil their own processes and underlying principles prior to presenting the artworks themselves. To quote Groys directly, "The exhibition exhibits itself before it exhibits anything else. It exhibits its own technology and its own ideology."²¹²

²¹¹ Boris Groys, "Curating in the Post-Internet Age," *e-flux Journal* 94 (2018), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/94/219462/curating-in-the-post-internet-age/>.

²¹² Ibid.



Ill. 3. 34 Evan Roth, *Landscape*, 2020. Installation view of “Red Lines with Landscapes” exhibition, October 3 - December 6, 2020, at Culturgest do Porto, Porto, Portugal. Source: Alexandre Delmar for Culturgest do Porto.

Around the time of Roth’s early explorations of the global submarine fiber optic cable network in 2015, Eric Schmidt, then CEO of Google, proclaimed that “the internet will disappear.” Schmidt was not suggesting the Internet’s demise but was rather speaking to its anticipated ubiquity, predicting it would become so integrated into daily life that it would go unnoticed. He envisioned an Internet that would be seamlessly woven into our existence.²¹³ In light of this apparently imminent “invisibility,” Evan Roth has become deeply committed to making the Internet tangible and raising awareness about the materiality of the digital realm. At this juncture,

²¹³ Thomas Tamblyn, “Google Chairman Says the Internet Will Become So Big It Will ‘Disappear,’” *HuffPost*, January 23, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/01/23/eric-schmidt-internet-will-disappear_n_6530574.html.

the Internet transcends its role as a tool, medium, or muse for Internet artists. The Internet has undeniably attained a ubiquitous presence, and specific dimensions of contemporary art (i.e., Post-Internet art) conscientiously acknowledge and critically assess its far-reaching influence on our culture. This artistic examination manifested, as demonstrated in this chapter, through practices such as appropriating, collecting, archiving, manipulating, and thoughtfully aestheticizing extensive visual data derived from the vast realm of the Internet.

As emphasized in this chapter, the persistent interconnection of online and offline domains, material and immaterial imagery, has been a distinguishing feature of Roth's artistic practice. Through the utilization of hybrid formats and the fusion of digital photography and the visual language of the online sphere, within recognizable mediums and genres such as self-portraiture, landscape painting, and sculpture, Roth's art serves as an exemplary representation of 'expanded photography' and Post-Internet art.

As I have demonstrated, since the early stages of his career, Roth's artistic vision reflects his profound comprehension of a contemporary form of categorizing and archiving, especially when set against the backdrop of the transient nature of the digital sphere. As such, Roth's diverse Internet-based art projects shed light on critical discussions pertaining to the implications for the photographic archive in the digital age. While the web by its very nature serves as an extensive archive, Roth adopts a meta-approach, documenting the web as it continually evolves using the platform's own tools. He does not only aim to produce visual objects through his interactions with the web but seeks to safeguard – to archive – physical records of our visual culture deeply enmeshed in digital technology. All the while, Roth remains forward-looking, contemplating how future generations might interpret and contextualize these archived visual records.

Viewed through the lens of the performative in post-photography, this chapter also demonstrated how Roth's photo-archival art effectively encourages viewers to closely engage with hybrid images and the materiality of online archives, prompting them to transcend mere interpretation of the subject matter. As previously noted, Roth's works prompt viewers to explore his distinctive installations and ponder matters related to online surveillance, data ownership, and the preservation and archiving of their own digital footprint, often without their awareness or consent.

Rather than employing a traditional photographic approach, Roth's distinctive photo-archival projects function as self-reflective visual commentaries. He employs the tools and visual language of the Internet to contemplate his own identity through his online interactions while also encouraging a broader understanding of our place in a networked culture. This particularly pertains to our control over the visual content we generate, collect, preserve, and distribute in a Post-Internet culture greatly focused on visual imagery.

Through the creation of three-dimensional installations that incorporate numerous Internet-based images, Roth transforms transient moments and digital traces into enduring, visually compelling and expansive photographic environments. These immersive environments provide a unique bodily experience for viewers, distinct from the fleeting and abstract encounters we typically have with images on screens. As argued, through the analysis of two distinct installations of the *Since You Were Born* series in group exhibitions held in Paris (2020) and Hamburg (2022), it becomes evident that the contextual and curatorial dynamics in which an artwork is showcased can significantly influence, and at times even dominate, the artist's intended vision and the artwork's experiential impact.

At the same time, Roth's emphasis on the reception of his work by the audience in an interactive exhibition space, aims to redefine viewers from passive observers to active participants, effectively assigning them roles similar to 'co-producers' or 'co-authors' of the work. These participatory and interactive dimensions are further evident in Roth's peer-to-peer "network performance," *Red Lines* (2018-2020).²¹⁴ As an extension of the *Internet Landscapes* project, Roth presented a new performative layer that expands beyond the original site-specific work, making it available to a broader audience via a dedicated website. This online venture linked users from geographically distinct areas, enabling them to share and view eighty-two pieces from Roth's *Landscapes* series. The peer-to-peer platform allowed users to stream, download, share and distribute all the infrared videos crafted by the artist.²¹⁵ In doing so, the artwork was activated, drawing its essence and significance from viewers/users' interactions and interpretations within the *Red Lines* network, thereby making the viewers an integral part of actively performing the online artwork. As Roth explains the essence of peer-to-peer, "when the video is playing there is data flowing in both directions (upload and download) to other viewers in the network and to the landscapes that they are seeing on screen."²¹⁶

In this context, *Red Lines* harks back to Roth's early career as a hacktivist, paying homage to the Internet's "optimistic" beginnings, marked by an emphasis on artistic freedom and unrestricted sharing of software. While it could be interpreted as a nostalgic reminiscence, the utilization of the peer-to-peer format also serves a critical purpose. It functions as a decentralized

²¹⁴ Roth himself describes the online work as a performance due to its specific duration, which spans two years, and its participatory nature as a peer-to-peer network. See Evan Roth, "Red Lines," accessed Nov. 2, 2023, <https://www.evan-roth.com/~works/red-lines/#hemisphere=east&strand=16>.

²¹⁵ Importantly, the p2p network does not rely on a central server, as it consists of participants (nodes or peer) and a series of servers located in the same countries where the videos were filmed. Each peer can share information, files, and other sources with other peers on the network.

²¹⁶ Evan Roth, "Evan Roth Created a Net Artwork That You Can Live with for Free," Interview by Alex Teplitzky, Sep. 10, 2018, <https://creative-capital.org/2018/09/10/evan-roth-created-a-net-artwork-that-you-can-live-with-for-free/>.

alternative to the prevailing corporate web model, often referred to by Roth and his contemporaries as the “Silicon Valley ecosystem.”²¹⁷



Ill. 3. 35 Evan Roth, *Red Lines* - displayed in a user's home, 2018. Source: <https://creative-capital.org/2018/09/10/evan-roth-created-a-net-artwork-that-you-can-live-with-for-free/>.

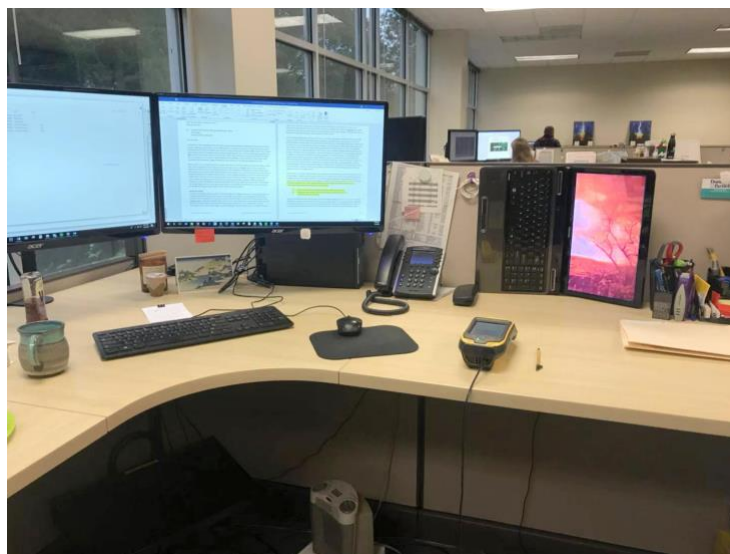
Over two years, the *Red Lines* network performance drew 120,000 participants from 166 countries, with individuals spending an average of over an hour immersed in the content.²¹⁸ Another intriguing facet of this project is that it not only fostered interconnectivity among participants within the expansive network but also granted viewers the liberty to engage and cohabit with the artwork over prolonged periods. This nurtured a unique relationship between the observer and the art exhibited within the personal spaces they occupied, such as homes or offices (see Ill. 3.35-6). Indeed, such prolonged and intimate interactions contrast sharply with the fleeting

²¹⁷ See also Simon Blend, “Interview,” Artangel: Extraordinary Art - Unexpected Places, accessed May 3, 2023, <https://www.artangel.org.uk/red-lines/interview/>. For examples of other artists who employ peer-to-peer web technologies critically in their practice see: *Ways of Connecting – An Exhibition with Evan Roth, Raphaël Bastide, and Louise Drulhe*, April 27 to May 17, 2019, iMAL, Brussels, <https://legacy.imal.org/en/expo/waysofconnecting>.

²¹⁸ After the peer-to-peer performance concluded in 2020, *Red Lines* was archived in a digital repository which houses all eighty-two “network located” images featured in an uninterrupted twenty-hour loop of the *Red Lines* cycle. It is available via <https://redlines.network/>.

engagements typical of art consumption on social media platforms. *Red Lines* is designed primarily for viewing and interaction on electronic devices such as smartphones, tablets, or computers, highlighting the screen's pivotal role in our everyday lives. In this context, the online platform of the artwork and its interactive interface collectively present an intriguing alternative. This alternative is characterized by a more inclusive and democratic approach to experiencing art, serving as a stark contrast to the conventional museum and gallery spaces traditionally designated for the observation of and appreciation of art.

Once more, the interplay between the virtual and the physical, as well as between image and object, emerge as a significant aspect in the framing and presentation of Evan Roth's Internet art. In the case of *Red Lines* performance, the artist actively prompted viewers to take on the role of curators, urging them to repurpose obsolete devices, such as disused smartphones and laptops, which in turn became integral aesthetic components of the overall art project. This performative approach also has the potential to foster an environmentally conscious perspective. Consequently, viewers and users embarked on their unique creative journeys, transforming their personal spaces and devices into frames for the (re)mediation of contemporary art photography.



Ill. 3. 36 Evan Roth, *Red Lines*, displayed in the office of Kelly Roth, Durham, North Carolina, USA, November 2018. Source: <https://www.evan-roth.com/~/works/red-lines/#hemisphere=east&strand=117>.

Conclusions

As we approach the concluding remarks of this dissertation, it is imperative to once more acknowledge the significance of the current global cultural context in which contemporary photography resides. This conclusion was written against the backdrop of deeply impactful events, notably the horrific acts of terror against innocent Israeli civilians that occurred in Israel on October 7th, 2023, and the subsequent war that ensued. These events have had devastating repercussions not only for Israelis and Palestinians but have also reverberated globally. These tragic occurrences, coupled with ongoing conflicts like the war in Ukraine, draw attention to the enduring problems of instability and chaos, reflected in the ongoing prevalence of violent conflicts, humanitarian emergencies, and wars that persistently disrupt our world.¹

Rather than advancing a political agenda within the context of this dissertation, I aim to emphasize how, amidst these turbulent circumstances, photography as a way of engaging with and narrating recent history has once again demonstrated its profound importance. In a contemporary landscape defined by the “post-truth” tendencies of the proliferation of fake news and the spread of manipulated imagery across social media platforms, the relationship between reality and fiction has become increasingly pertinent.

In the aftermath of the events of October 7th, social media became a battleground characterized by the nonstop proliferation of imagery and information.² Disturbing visual content

¹ See Yuval Noah Harari, “We Need a Post-Liberal Order Now,” *Economist*, September 26, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/09/26/we-need-a-post-liberal-order-now>. In this essay, historian Yuval Noah Harari discusses the collapse of the “global liberal order” in the past decade, which he attributes to the resurgence of nationalist and religious ideologies that prioritize the interests of particular groups over global cooperation. He draws attention to policy changes such as immigration restrictions, which undermine the fundamental tenets of the liberal order, rooted in shared ideals of humanism, democracy, and global collaboration. These developments, he argues, have contributed to current trends of global instability, chaos, and radicalization.

² While I am committed to maintaining objectivity and critical thought in the framework of this dissertation, it is essential to acknowledge that the tragic events of the October 7 massacre have had a profound personal impact on me, given my identity as an Israeli woman with family and friends living in Israel.

inundated online platforms, accompanied by a multitude of documented narratives, testimonies, and discussions from various perspectives, engaging viewers both emotionally and intellectually. Concurrently, an outpouring of critical opinions emerged, with some labeling certain visual content as propaganda and casting doubt on the credibility of many images. Concerns regarding the sourcing, impartiality, and authenticity of images took center stage. Given the emergence of AI and “Deepfake” technologies, the absolute power to determine what is “true” or “verified” remains uncertain, yet of paramount importance, in this politically fraught moment.

The profound impact of the extensive and rapid circulation of images, videos, opinions, and (mis)information became unmistakably evident during this period. The “image-saturated society” and the “age of information overload,” frequent topics of discussion in this dissertation, manifested as tangible realities. Across various online platforms, one could become immersed in an incessant flow of visual information, a phenomenon that led to feelings of frustration, distress, and physical exhaustion. David Company’s insights on the concept of “image overload” prove particularly relevant in this context.

We often hear it said that images make us numb to the content if we see too many images, that we are no longer able to respond either intellectually or emotionally. But maybe that feeling is self-defense. If we tell ourselves we feel numb, then we feel numb. But maybe the excess doesn’t have anything to do with the number. Perhaps the issue of excess lies within each image, as they contain too much information, too much ambiguity, and too many possibilities. It might not be about quantity, but about the nature of each photograph.³

In my perspective, the artists whose works have been analyzed in this dissertation play a pivotal role in addressing some of the aforementioned issues. They compel us to recognize the

³ Alan Goverar, “Curating Imagery – Interview with David Company,” *Truth in Photography*, accessed July 9, 2023, <https://www.truthinphotography.org/curating-imagery.html>.

complexity of images and highlight that their significance fundamentally depends on the contextual frameworks in which they are situated. Taryn Simon and Evan Roth emphasize the multifaceted nature of image archives and their capacity to shape perceptions, construct, or deconstruct identities. Inherently imbued with subtextual hierarchies and ambiguities, they show us that photo archives, remain susceptible to a multitude of interpretations.

As this research has demonstrated, the confluence of contemporary art photography with the multifaceted concept of the archive and the curation of immersive image displays consistently pervades the photo-archival endeavors of artists like Simon and Roth. This dissertation embarked on an exploration of institutional settings and museum exhibitions, showcasing the photo-archival projects of the two artists. It was driven by a deep curiosity about the strategies artists employ when engaging with archival concepts and materials and how they transform these materials into art. The central aim of this investigation was to critically examine archival dynamics, formalistic experimentation, and performative experiences within the realm of contemporary art photography.

Significantly, I chose to focus on the distinct projects of Taryn Simon and Evan Roth, as they utilize the concept of the photo archive to expand the horizons of contemporary art within the context of “post-photography.” Their works, I contend, serve as paradigmatic examples of how contemporary artists are revisiting the past, not only to connect with history, time, and memory, but to critically examine and actively engage with timely socio-cultural issues while expanding the horizons of photography. Furthermore, the artists’ projects purposefully bring to light the often invisible complexities and inherent disorder within archival systems. While Simon provides insights into the complexities of categorization by critically examining the ambiguous relationship between images and text, Roth’s work unveils the hidden material infrastructures of the Internet.

This infrastructure includes centralized power structures and surveillance mechanisms that form the foundation of how images are circulated, preserved, and categorized in the digital era.

This dissertation therefore asks the question: What insights can be drawn from the widespread “Archive Fever” in contemporary art, particularly concerning our engagement with photographic material in an age saturated with images? As the dissertation has evolved, my research honed in on issues of visual experience and performativity, specifically addressing how the mediation and presentation of photographic archives in Roth and Simon’s projects enhance the viewer’s visual engagement within the confines of museum and gallery exhibitions.

This dissertation conducted a comprehensive examination of selected exhibitions in which Simon and Roth’s artworks were displayed within specific venues and institutional settings, including the Gagosian Gallery (NYC), The NYPL’s reading rooms, Jeu de Paume Museum, and Hamburger Kunsthalle. The study highlighted the substantial influence of these spaces and curatorial considerations on the reception of the artists’ photo-archival works. Additionally, it is asserted that the diverse institutional contexts in which the artists’ works have been presented, along with their numerous iterations and evolution over the past decade, have substantially contributed to an enhanced comprehension of the multifaceted possibilities of photography and its mediation within contemporary art.

I have also concluded that recognizing the performative dimensions of photography in the context of Simon and Roth’s creations fosters a more engaged and participatory interaction with the medium. The artists’ meticulous research methods and elaborate presentations prompt the audience to observe, decode, and interpret their works, making viewership an active process rather than a passive form of reception. As previously discussed, this inherently performative quality stems from the artists’ deliberate use of archival methods and their strategic arrangement of

images, objects, and textual components to craft immersive and experiential environments within the confines of exhibition spaces. Their exhibitions serve as catalysts for introspection, evoking emotion and memory, compelling their audiences to become active “embodied spectators”⁴ engaged in the critical interpretation of the visual images on display in the space. This dynamic, in turn, broadens the scope for active modes of visual perception and the processes of meaning construction.

As I have highlighted, Simon and Roth’s archival projects serve a dual purpose. They captivate audiences through visually compelling material compositions and unique site-specific installations while also prompting critical introspection. Going beyond mere aesthetic appreciation, viewers are encouraged to contemplate a range of contemporary dynamics. These include the production of knowledge, cultural power structures, the nature of digital memory, the transitory and immaterial aspects of digital content, issues of appropriation and authenticity, forms of individual and collective identity, and the convergence of physical objects and virtual images.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the lack of access to the nuanced subtexts and art historical vocabulary that underlie multifaceted, complex artworks of this kind can lead viewers to acquire only a superficial comprehension of their experiences.⁵ Though the exact impact of the works on viewers cannot be empirically measured within the confines of this dissertation, I would like to posit that when individuals immerse themselves in Simon and Roth’s installations, they

⁴ Veerle Thielemans, “Beyond Visuality: Review on Materiality and Affects,” in *Perspective Actualité en histoire de l’art* 2 (2015): 1.

⁵ For further scholarly discussions concerning the interpretation of contemporary art, see: Helen Charman and Michaela Ross, “Contemporary Art and the Role of Interpretation: Reflections from Tate Modern’s Summer Institute for Teachers,” *International Journal of Art & Design Education* 25, no. 1 (2006): 28-41. Also see Hans Maes, “Intention, Interpretation, and Contemporary Visual Art,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 50, no. 2 (April 2010): 121–138.

initiate a process of introspection regarding their own day-to-day engagements with images and the commonplace archival practices of an ever-evolving digital culture.

As my dissertation research progressed, the multi-year projects pursued by Simon and Roth also underwent development and expansion. Consequently, my comparative analysis experienced significant adjustments in response to the evolving iterations of Simon and Roth's archival projects, with their diverse museum/gallery presentations and accompanying publications, particularly in the years 2020-2022. This fortunate timing afforded me the opportunity to attend their respective exhibitions, enabling me to explore different versions of the artworks in my case studies. This invaluable firsthand engagement with their work greatly enriched my research, particularly with regard to the experiential aspects of reception.

Moreover, these encounters have prompted a more profound examination of the artists' mixed-media, which can also be described as hybrid experiments within the realm of contemporary art photography. As I illustrate, these artistic practices give rise to a distinctive exploration of photographic materiality and three-dimensionality, qualities of particular importance for providing a tactile experience within our ubiquitous digital environment. Simon and Roth's compositions and image clusters seamlessly blend elements of analog and digital technology, incorporate found imagery and moving images, and integrate them with traditional art genres and mediums such as painting, sculpture, installation, tableau, collage, self-portraiture, and landscape art.

It becomes evident that the two artists do not perceive photographic archives merely as imaginative or metaphorical constructs but as tangible entities with a physical presence within the exhibition space, thus consciously highlighting the materiality of photographic archives. As I have demonstrated, for Evan Roth, the very transformation (materialization) of web-based images into tangible image constellation or three-dimensional installations is intrinsically connected to the act

of archiving. His hybrid installations, therefore, provide viewers with a dynamic experience that bridges the physical and virtual realms. For Simon, the emphasis on the materiality and physicality of her photo-collages, along with the inclusion of archival materials linked to the history of Romana Javitz, aims to create an immersive experience for the audience, reminiscent of exploring the official Picture Collection archive at the New York Public Library.

Through the integration of traditionally distinct artistic genres within contemporary photographic contexts, I contend that the artworks of Simon and Roth harness the photo-archive's potential to forge connections among the present moment, past narratives of art and photography, and their future interpretations. Simon establishes a direct link between the century-old photography archive of the New York Public Library and contemporary art practices, while Roth strives to preserve collective online memories as a momentary snapshot of digital culture for future generations. This aligns with Okwui Enwezor's emphasis on the archive's significance, which extends beyond mere curiosity about its holdings to reveal art's deep-rooted connection with and active involvement in historical contemplation.

The fascination with the archive, the inimitable madness of the archive, the constant return to it for verification, inspiration, and source, suggest not only a profound interest in the nature of the archival form found in photography and film but art's relationship to historical reflections on the past.⁶

This research began with a panoramic objective, aiming to investigate several contemporary artists who engage with photographic archives in diverse ways. However, a deliberate decision was made to adopt a monographic approach, necessitating an in-depth examination of the biographies and artistic journeys of individual artists, along with a

⁶ Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York: International Center of Photography; Steidl, 2008), 35.

comprehensive analysis of specific, multi-year archival projects. Due to this deliberate shift in focus, the research attained a deeper and more profound comprehension of the photo-archival practices and curatorial framing employed by Simon and Roth.

Beyond the scope of this dissertation, it would be enlightening to turn to other artists who are exploring potential future directions for photography by harnessing the power of the archive. This expansion of my research could achieve a more comprehensive understanding of how contemporary art photography is evolving and adapting in response to changing artistic and cultural landscapes. These new developments in the medium might in turn foster new ways of seeing, thinking about, and interacting with images.

In this concluding section I therefore suggest a prospective path for future research. This path emphasizes artists whose inventive video installations align with the themes introduced at the outset of the conclusion. These artists address the ubiquitous and overwhelming sensation of visual saturation stemming from the unceasing “battlefield” of images found on social media and diverse online platforms. A compelling representation of this contemporary condition appears in the works of Canadian artist Sara Cwynar (b. 1985). Her mixed-media approach echoes that of Simon and Roth, while her distinctive projects push photography into a realm of video, sound experiments, and extensive image editing.

Cwynar became known for her alluring, colorful photographic collages composed of collected objects and found images. These works mix “high” and “low” forms, combining staged, clichéd portraits of women with video installations and artist books. Her large scale collages offer a critical examination of contemporary culture of visual inundation, emphasizing issues of connectivity, consumer-driven image culture, beauty, image/object accumulation, and construction of

online identity. In these multilayered works, the boundaries between digital and analog, and virtual and actual realities, become indistinct.

Expanding upon Roth's conceptual and formal exploration of the act of self-archiving through internet browsing, Cwynar's video installation *Glass Life* (2021) serves as a medium for navigating the visual language embedded in our daily culture of networked images. Similar to Roth and Simon's practices of image appropriation, Cwynar highlights our pervasive online visual experience, where "everything gets recontextualized, reposted, and recaptioned every ten seconds."⁷

In another intriguing parallel with Roth and his critique of contemporary Internet culture, Cwynar's choice of exhibition title, *Glass Life*, alludes to a digital existence lived as though encased in glass, where constant surveillance prevails, and privacy becomes unattainable.⁸ One can also interpret the large eye in the center of the photo-collage in illustration 4.1 as a symbol of online surveillance on top of the various layers of Internet sourced images. For the production and installation of *Glass Life*, Cwynar utilized her personal archives of screenshots, photos, videos, objects, and texts found on her devices. The repurposing of these archival images highlights the collective archival compulsion of the digital age and prompts us to consider to what extent the myriad digital archives and collections we create have an influence on our self-image and real-life experiences.⁹

⁷ Chandra Glick, "Sara Cwynar - On Finding Desire in the World of Images," *Artforum*, September 21, 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/columns/sara-cwynar-on-finding-desire-in-the-world-of-images-250626/>.

⁸ The title of the artwork is drawn from the writings of Shoshana Zuboff, whose work was mentioned earlier in the dissertation in relation to Evan Roth's online practices. Zuboff aptly characterizes our digital age as a life lived behind glass, where self-reference is frequently obscured. See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

⁹ See Chandra Glick, "Sara Cwynar - On Finding Desire in the World of Images," *Artforum*, September 21, 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/columns/sara-cwynar-on-finding-desire-in-the-world-of-images-250626/>.



Ill. 4. 1 Sara Cwynar, *Glass Life (Louis Vuitton Jeff Koons Rubens Bag)*, 2021. Pigment print, (50.8 × 81.3 cm).
Source: <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/sara-cwynar-glass-life>.

I had the opportunity to experience Cwynar’s video installation at the “Give and Take: Images Upon Images” exhibition at Hamburger Kunsthalle. Taryn Simon’s *The Picture Collection* project, and Evan Roth’s *Since You Were Born* installation were also featured in this exhibition. Once more, it proves intriguing to consider the specific curatorial and institutional context within which the three artists—Simon, Roth, and Cwynar—are positioned, marking them as leading figures in contemporary art photography. This positioning also prompts a consideration of their relevance within the ongoing discourse on the current state of the medium, particularly in the era of post-photography. Accordingly, the exhibition’s title, “Images upon Images,” is deliberately crafted as a reflexive contemplation on photography and film, employing the mediums’ own techniques and devices.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Ahrens, Leona Marie, Stephanie Bunk, and Petra Roettig, *Give and Take - Images Upon Images* [exhibition booklet] (Hamburg: Hamburger Kunsthalle, 2022).



Ill. 4. 2 Sara Cwynar, *Glass Life*, 2021. Still Six channel 2K video with sound, 19:02 min. Source: <https://www.phototriennale.de/events/give-and-take-images-upon-images/>.

When observing Cwynar's six-channel *Glass Life* video installation, one witnesses our visual culture filtered through a montage of scrolling images from the artist's computer. These images include mundane photos, videos, selfies of the artist, emojis, cartoons, various objects, reproductions of Old Master paintings, advertisements, fashion clips, and news segments. At times, the video briefly zooms in on pieces of footage: a speech by Margaret Thatcher, an enlarged image of Kim Kardashian. The profusion of layered images and information echoes Simon's collages as well as Roth's visual cacophony, subverting conventional classifications and aesthetic hierarchies (See Ill. 4.2). By re-appropriating her personal archive in this way, Cwynar underscores the fast transition in meaning – and value – from incidental online visuals to intentional assemblages displayed on high-resolution screens in the context of a contemporary art exhibition.



Ill. 4. 3 Sara Cwynar, *Glass Life*, 2021. Six channel 2K video with sound, TRT: 19:02 min. Installation view, “Sara Cwynar: Apple Red/Grass Green/Sky Blue,” Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, February 5–May 29, 2022. Source: <https://www.theicala.org/en/exhibitions/88-sara-cwynar-apple-red-grass-green-sky-blue>.

What I found particularly intriguing about Cwynar’s work in relation to the themes explored throughout this dissertation was her ability not only to immerse viewers in vivid imaginative worlds but also to seamlessly integrate the virtual realm into the physical gallery space. This integration places a strong emphasis on the role of the viewer and their reception of the work, actively involving them and holding their attention. This performative interactivity is further accentuated by the introduction of avatars that assume the role of virtual spectators within the gallery room (Ill. 4.4).



Ill. 4. 4 Sara Cwynar, *Glass Life*, 2021. Six channel 2K video with sound, TRT: 19:02 min. Installation view, “Sara Cwynar: Apple Red/Grass Green/Sky Blue,” Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, February 5–May 29, 2022. Source: <https://www.theicala.org/en/exhibitions/88-sara-cwynar-apple-red-grass-green-sky-blue>.

In addition to the three large screens displaying an abundant array of images and input, three smaller screens are positioned behind the viewer, adding another visual register. Each of these screens features a digital avatar of a woman dressed in an elegant blue swimsuit and swim cap, seemingly engaged in a synchronized swim. As I sat in the room, I had the sensation of being both an observer and a participant, passively watching the avatars but also actively shifting my gaze between the six screens to follow the movement of the images. At the same time, there was a sense of being observed by the avatars, possibly alluding to the omnipresence of online surveillance. Overlying this visual montage are two voices reciting a wide variety of quotations, ranging from literary figures like William Shakespeare and Virginia Woolf to feminist cultural historian Luce Irigaray.

My embodied engagement with *Glass Life* generated a sensory experience reminiscent of navigating a social media platform. In many ways, Cwynar’s work serves as an intensified (and

enlarged) representation of the sensations linked to frenetic web scrolling or swift transitions between Instagram stories. At the same time, participants also have the opportunity to engage in a performative experience within the gallery of the installation. They are free to move among different screens, choose seating on benches, or stand, all while retaining the option to maintain a degree of distance and objectivity for critical assessment and interpretation. Encountering ‘waves’ of color-saturated images moving from various directions accompanied by sound may present a challenge for some in terms of comprehensive absorption. Nonetheless, the installation remains visually appealing and aesthetically engaging.

From a photographic standpoint, Cwynar’s distinctive video installations adeptly navigate a complex web of tensions, encompassing the dichotomies inherent in image and object, the interplay between static and dynamic visuals, the evolving dynamics of observer and observed, and the dance between the online and offline realms. Her mix-media work transcends the traditional confines of photography, which conventionally restricts images to frames, prints, or smartphone screens. Instead, Cwynar offers a unique and immersive experience which also proposes a “new model of vision,” overwhelming viewers and stimulating not only their visual and conceptual faculties but also their auditory perception.

Finally, Sara Cwynar, along with Taryn Simon and Evan Roth, employs the photographic archive not solely as a tool for historical reflection but as both a concept and a medium that effectively redirects our attention toward the intricate fabric of our contemporary visual culture. This engagement with the archive closely aligns with Kate Eichhorn’s interpretation of the archival turn in contemporary culture. Eichhorn contends that

“A turn toward the archive is not a turn toward the past but rather an essential way of understanding and imagining other ways to live in the present [...] an attempt to regain

agency in an era when the ability to collectively imagine and enact other ways of being in the world has become deeply eroded.”¹¹

In the realm of contemporary photography, the present is undeniably marked by a relentless cycle of transformation, shaping how we create, perceive, disseminate, accumulate, and preserve both photographs and digital traces. In addition to contemplating technological advancements and the current widespread distribution of images, this ongoing evolution is also rooted in the profound influence of photographic archives. They not only shape our understanding of the complex facets of the present but also serve as a means to convey the present into the future. The aim of this dissertation has been to encapsulate a momentary glimpse into the ever-evolving artistic and photographic dynamics, with a specific emphasis on the role of the photo-archive in contemporary art over the past decade. This moment is marked by continuous exploration of new avenues for the future while also consciously maintaining a connection to the traditions of art and photography’s histories. The artists whose works I have examined serve as influential catalysts, urging us to embark on an experiential visual journey that offers an enhanced connection with the vast realm of visual culture. Additionally, their work encourages us to engage in critical self-reflection concerning our sense of agency within an ever more digitalized and interconnected society.

¹¹ Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 9.

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Résumé substantiel

Cette thèse analyse les différentes utilisations des archives photographiques dans l'art contemporain dans une finalité artistique et muséographique mais aussi en tant que support esthétique. La présente recherche s'appuie sur deux projets d'archivages des artistes conceptuels américains Taryn Simon (née en 1975) et Evan Roth (né en 1978). Ces artistes se livrent à une réflexion sur le rôle et la portée des photos d'archives dans la photographie d'art contemporaine, en mettant l'accent sur des thèmes liés à la compilation des images, au classement, à la matérialité, à l'accessibilité, à la mémoire et à la représentation des images d'archives. Cette étude démontre comment leur utilisation de différents types d'archives, issues d'univers aussi bien physiques que virtuels, aboutit à la création d'expériences et de performances visuelles uniques pour les visiteurs d'une exposition. Cette thèse propose donc non seulement une critique approfondie de projets spécifiques d'archivages artistiques dans le cadre d'une exposition mais témoigne aussi de l'état actuel de la photographie dans l'art contemporain. Cette recherche prend une dimension particulière à l'heure où l'image photographique, révolutionnée par le numérique, est omniprésente dans nos vies.

Au cours des trente dernières années le monde de l'art a été témoin de l'importance croissante des archives aussi bien en tant que concept, qu'en tant que mode d'expression artistique, avec une approche muséographique. De nos jours, les artistes utilisent les archives comme outil pour interroger des représentations historiques, une identité, le temps qui passe et la mémoire. Cette approche artistique souvent qualifiée d'impulsion archivistique dans l'art contemporain a été décrite par le critique d'art Hal Foster (2004). Il y a aussi eu une recherche universitaire considérable sur l'influence des archives sur la mémoire et la construction du savoir d'après les idées philosophiques de Foucault (1969) et Derrida (1995). D'une certaine mesure, on peut

postuler que la thématique des archives a ouvert la voie à une multitude de productions dans le monde de l'art contemporain ces dernières années. L'archivage a ainsi été au coeur des certaines des expositions et des biennales les plus estimées de la décennie passée.¹ Ce constat soulève une question: Que révèle cet engouement pour les archives dans l'art contemporain sur notre rapport au contenu photographique à une époque où les images sont omniprésentes ? Aussi, en regardant de plus près les projets d'archivages de Simon et Roth, on peut se demander à quel point leur utilisation des archives photographiques ainsi que leur manière de les présenter favorise l'implication visuelle des visiteurs d'un musée ou d'une galerie d'art. À travers cette question, cette thèse a pour ambition de mieux comprendre les stratégies adoptées par Simon et Roth dans la création de concepts d'archivages à l'aide de matériaux spécifiques. Nous nous demanderons comment ils les utilisent de manière pertinente dans le cadre d'un lieu d'exposition dédié à l'art contemporain. Pour tenter d'y répondre, cette thèse met en perspective les cadres institutionnels et les expositions organisées autour des travaux artistiques d'archivages photographiques de Simon et Roth. Je postule que Taryn Simon et Evan Roth font le lien entre les concepts et l'esthétique de la photographie d'archive puisqu'ils contribuent à l'ouverture de la photographie d'art contemporaine sur de nouveaux horizons.

Nous verrons dans cette thèse que Taryn Simon et Evan Roth utilisent les archives photographiques physiques et virtuelles, parmi d'autres techniques iconographiques, dans leur pratique artistique qui repose sur l'utilisation de médias divers. Simon and Roth se livrent à une exploration hybride de la photographie, en questionnant les limites habituelles entre les univers

¹ Les expositions remarquables qui mettent en avant le « tournant archivistique » de l'art contemporain comprennent "Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art" (1998) d'Ingrid Schaffner au MoMA PS1, "Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art" (2008) d'Okwui Enwezor à l'ICP de New York, "All the World's Future" (2015) à la Biennale de Venise, ainsi que "The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology" (2013) de Dieter Roelstraete, qui ont tous contribué de manière significative à la pratique et au discours archivistiques dans l'art contemporain.

analogiques et numériques, les expériences en ligne et hors ligne ainsi que l'image et l'objet physique. De plus la singularité de leurs installations amène ce médium à un niveau proche de la peinture ou de la sculpture. Cette recherche postule que leurs créations à base d'archives dépassent non seulement le cadre de la photographie classique mais contribuent aussi activement à redéfinir ce médium. À travers le prisme des archives photographiques, les deux artistes font face à de nouvelles problématiques engendrés par l'omniprésence de la photographie numérique dans le monde complexe de l'internet et de la culture des réseaux sociaux. Leurs projets explorent les dynamiques culturelles de la photographie en s'interrogeant sur la manière dont les images sont catégorisées, diffusées et perçues dans le cadre contemporain des nouvelles technologies.

Cette thèse, centrée sur Taryn Simon et Evan Roth, ne se limite pas à leur influence dans la photographie d'art contemporaine. Elle se concentre en particulier sur la singularité de leur approche des archives photos classiques mais aussi virtuelles dans un souci de combiner des motivations esthétiques et conceptuelles. Comme en témoignent leurs travaux, les modalités de présentation et la muséographie des images d'archives dans une salle d'exposition sont déterminantes pour Simon et Roth. Elles impactent directement leur interprétation par les visiteurs. Nous verrons dans cette thèse que les projets d'archivages photographiques de ces artistes sont en soi une performance.

Dans le contexte de la photographie d'art contemporaine et au sein des différentes pratiques en matière d'archives, le concept de la 'performativité' décrit par John Langhsaw Austin en 1962 joue un rôle central. Alors que la notion de performance se réfère à l'expression physique d'une présentation artistique, le performer puise son inspiration dans l'impact et les transformations ressentis par les spectateurs au contact de l'oeuvre des artistes. Ceci met en avant le rôle essentiel des artistes pour faciliter la compréhension et l'implication des visiteurs d'un musée ou d'une

galerie d'art. Ma recherche va au delà de l'aspect esthétique des oeuvres de Simon et Roth. Elle met l'accent sur leurs différentes manières de susciter des expériences visuelles, de provoquer des réactions émotionnelles et intellectuelles, d'utiliser des matériaux différents avec un souci permanent de la manière dont les visiteurs circulent, décodent et construisent du sens . Cette thèse étudie dans quelle mesure les rapports de Simon et Roth aux archives photographiques génèrent des narratifs visuels uniques et des expériences immersives dans des expositions d'art contemporain.

En plus d'analyser des projets spécifiques d'archivages artistiques et leurs présentation muséographique, cette thèse est une étude de type monographique, avec une exploration en profondeur des processus créatifs des deux artistes. Elle révèle l'omniprésence du thème des archives tout au long de leur carrière. Elle met aussi en évidence l'élan donné par l'archivage dans leur travail centré sur l'image. Les travaux présentés dans cette thèse sont *The picture Collection* (2012-2021) de Taryn Simon et *Computer Cache Self-Portrait* (2014-à aujourd'hui) et *Internet Landscapes* (2016-à aujourd'hui). Le projet d'archivage de Taryn Simon consiste à utiliser la banque d'images de la bibliothèque municipale de New York en réutilisant ces images argentiques et en déterminant comment les informations visuelles sont organisées et archivées. Bien que le projet de Simon ne soit pas à proprement parler numérique, son travail reflète le paysage actuel des médias caractérisé par des bases de données organisées de manière numérique et des moteurs de recherche d'images. À l'inverse, Evan Roth s'intéresse à la baisse de l'espace physique disponible consacré à l'archivage. Il se focalise sur des images trouvées sur internet, qu'il utilise comme matière première pour réaliser une catégorisation de l'information aussi bien en ligne que dans des installations physiques dans des galeries d'art. Une des raisons principales qui a motivé mon étude des projets de Taryn Simon et Evan Roth réside dans leur utilisation habile du concept

d'archivage photographique pour repousser les limites de l'art contemporain dans le contexte de la « post-photographie ».²

Cette recherche met en évidence que l'importance des archives dans l'art contemporain n'est pas un concept nouveau. En même temps, vu le nombre d'artistes contemporains qui travaillent avec différents types d'archives à travers le monde, cette étude se limite volontairement aux artistes contemporains qui travaillent dans le cadre des traditions occidentales à savoir les États-Unis et l'Europe. Dans le domaine de la photographie et de l'art contemporain, des études approfondies ont évidemment déjà été faites sur les liens particuliers entre la photographie et les archives. Cependant, cette thèse se concentre sur leurs connexions particulières au sein d'un champ artistique plus ouvert. Elle analyse le lien entre la photographie d'art contemporaine et les archives avec une attention particulière au domaine de la performance qui comprend aussi bien la muséographie que l'expérience visuelle provoquée par une oeuvre d'archive photographique dans un lieu d'exposition. Cette combinaison précise a été peu étudiée dans le monde universitaire, c'est donc un sujet intéressant à traiter dans le domaine de la culture visuelle.

Cette thèse suit une structure de type thématique-monographique. Les chapitres deux et trois proposent une biographie détaillée des deux artistes ainsi que leurs cheminements artistiques respectifs. Les deux chapitres de cette recherche sont de type monographique. Ils présentent des oeuvres spécifiques des deux artistes de manière détaillée ainsi que plusieurs autres de leurs projets. L'objectif de cette approche est de contextualiser au mieux les archives ou les logiques taxonomiques dans les travaux de Taryn Simon et Evan Roth. Pour y parvenir, chaque chapitre propose une analyse approfondie de différents projets et d'expositions de chaque artiste afin

² Dans cette thèse, j'ai consacré une sous-section à fournir une explication complète du terme post-photographie et de son cadre théorique associé. Chapitre 1, pages 25 à 34.

d'étayer mes interprétations par des exemples pertinents. La recherche s'organise de manière méthodique en 3 gros chapitres.

Le premier chapitre propose une compilation exhaustive d'articles issus des recherches sur l'histoire de l'art et la culture visuelle qui ont contribué à l'émergence du «tournant des archives» dans l'art contemporain. Il met en évidence le rapport étroit entre les archives et la photographie au sein d'un paysage culturel changeant influencé par les avancées numériques. Cette variété d'articles récents est aussi organisée de manière à comprendre l'influence plus large de la révolution numérique sur la nature des archives et les procédés d'archivages, de même que leur pertinence dans le contexte de la production artistique et des expériences esthétiques en rapport.

Le chapitre 2 se concentre sur le projet artistique d'archivage de Taryn Simon présenté depuis 9 ans à la collection d'images de la bibliothèque municipale de New York. Simon travaille sur les processus d'archivage et de classification des informations visuelles dans cette collection d'images officielles, traitant des narratifs photographiques et socioculturels moins connus. Sur une période de 2012 à 2021, le projet de Simon, intitulé à l'origine The Picture Collection, est centré sur cet archivage concret d'images et son système de catalogage débuté en 1915. Son travail interroge le concept de la mémoire collective américaine, en mettant en avant l'importance du toucher pour les photos d'archives à l'heure du numérique. Elle rend aussi hommage aux personnes liées à la collection telles que Romana Javitz (1903-1980), la surintendante influente de la Picture Collection. Ce chapitre présente les différents choix muséographiques retenus pour créer une présentation esthétique à partir de ces compositions ainsi que la dimension participative des expositions d'archives de Simon pour le public. J'étudie en particulier la présentation du projet d'archives de Simon dans la succursale New-Yorkaise de la galerie Gagosian et ses installations spécialement conçues pour l'une des plus grandes salles de la bibliothèque publique de New York.

Je postule que l'approche artistique de Simon redynamise non seulement les images de la Picture Collection mais les recontextualise aussi dans le monde de l'art contemporain. À travers cette démarche, elle apporte une compréhension enrichie du narratif historique inhérent à cet archivage unique d'images. Cela favorise une nouvelle interprétation pour une meilleure compréhension de l'ensemble de la Picture Collection.

Dans le chapitre 3, la thèse aborde un nouvel aspect, qui va de l'exploration de photos historiques palpables de Taryn Simon à la recherche d'Evan Roth sur les archives et l'archivage dans le monde numérique. Dans ce cas précis, internet est perçu comme une méta-archivage, un vaste dépôt d'histoire contemporaine et de culture mémorielle. La tendance actuelle à la dématérialisation des images et des archives photos, illustrée par le transfert rapide des images dans des écrans à l'heure du numérique, représente un tournant dans la manière où nous concevons l'archivage photo en le libérant de son carcan habituel. Cette évolution redéfinit notre interaction avec ces images dématérialisées et la manière dont les percevons. Elle influence profondément la manière dont nous les voyons en tant qu'oeuvres d'art contemporaines. Ce chapitre se consacre aux séries d'Evan Roth intitulées: Internet Cache Self Portrait (2014-à aujourd'hui), Since You Were Born (2016-à aujourd'hui), et Internet Landscapes (2016-à aujourd'hui). Roth dévoile des aspects souvent omniprésents de la technologie et de la connectivité sur internet en utilisant des images issues de ses archives personnelles, prélevées dans son historique de navigation et récupérées sur son cache internet. Il se réapproprie ainsi ces images et les intègre dans des installations artisanales élaborées au sein des galeries. Dans le même temps, Roth se livre à une réflexion sur les concepts d'archivages de la culture numérique qui englobent aussi bien les identités numériques personnelles et collectives que la préservation de la mémoire dans le monde numérique. Cette réflexion se matérialise dans des installations immersives qui proposent une

expérience tactile avec un domaine pourtant habituellement insaisissable. Partant de ce contexte, j'étudie dans quelle mesure la mise en place par Roth de présentations virtuelles et physiques d'images d'archives crée aussi une expérience visuelle unique et conceptuelle pour les visiteurs d'un lieu d'exposition. Je postule que ses installations multimodales uniques incitent les spectateurs à contempler et à se confronter au caractère évanescent de nos traces numériques et à prendre conscience, par conséquent, de la nécessité de leur préservation.

Dans sa série *Internet Landscapes*, Roth présente des voyages à travers le monde vers des destinations réelles desservies par des câbles de fibres optiques sous-marins. Son but est d'archiver des éléments palpables de la connectivité sur Internet. Dans l'exposition, il fusionne les mondes réels et virtuels en créant une installation visuellement engageante incluant des images infrarouges diffusées sur des écrans, des vidéos et des câbles. Cette assemblage évoque visuellement la complexité d'Internet. De plus, le projet s'inscrit dans la lignée du concept d'hybridation post-photographique dans la mesure où les installations et les images combinent différents supports tels que la peinture, les installations, la photographie, la vidéo et la sculpture.

Dans la partie ultérieure de ce chapitre, je fais une analyse approfondie et une mise en perspective de deux expositions qui ont présenté les installations foisonnantes de Roth dans *Since You Were Born*. L'une a été présentée au Jeu de Paume à Paris en 2020 et l'autre à la Hamburger Kunsthalle à Hambourg en 2022.

Comme je l'explorerai plus en profondeur dans les chapitres à venir, il est essentiel d'adopter une perspective interdisciplinaire lors de l'analyse des démarches photo-archivistiques de Simon et Roth. Cette approche, telle que décrite dans la revue de littérature du chapitre 1, favorise une compréhension complète de leurs interventions uniques et de leur réinterprétation d'archives photographiques spécifiques. Elle englobe non seulement la médiation physique et la

présence esthétique de l'archive dans l'espace d'exposition, mais également ses aspects conceptuels et socio-culturels, ainsi que sa fonction en tant que cadre (matériel et conceptuel) pour des expériences engagées dans le domaine de la photographie d'art contemporaine.