

## FotoFocus Biennial 2018: *Open Archive*

Given the proliferation of photographs, past and present, archives are an essential aspect of photography and lens-based works. *Open Archive* explores the unlimited ways in which photographs are organized in archives and the great variety of stories and histories that are drawn from them. From historical archives—photographs in physical institutional archives—to contemporary archives—photographs in personal digital archives and available for open use on the web—*Open Archive* examines our fundamental need to preserve photographs and to construct narratives through their ongoing production, collection, and organization.

*Open Archive* also emphasizes photography's centrality to modernism in various artistic mediums. While individual photographs and photographic series have achieved art status through incisive portrayal of subject matter or formal acuity, or some combination of both, archives of photographs offering vast amounts of visual data have provided artists and designers with imagery and also impacted artistic styles and the conception of modern art itself. The sheer abundance of photographs housed in archives, both physical and digital, as well as the easy ability to manipulate, transfer, and appropriate photographs, has offered ample inspiration for artists conceiving of new artistic concepts and forms. From collage, montage, and mixed-media work, toward the rethinking of realism and representation in movements such as Dada and Surrealism, photographic archives have formed a basis for most of the largest innovations in visual modernism. *Open Archive* seeks to explore the significance of the photo-archive, past, present, and future.

### Points for discussion

**Photo archives are specific to the modern period.** This is not only because photography itself is a product of the modern period—invented 1839, photography sits squarely within the Industrial Revolution. But because the arrangement and preservation of photographs in archives expresses perfectly the modern period's rational and scientific impulses to classify all forms of knowledge, starting with the first encyclopedias, published in the 18th century (Diderot), to the institutions created to house everything from scientific specimens to tools and dress of various cultures and more (British Museum, Smithsonian, etc.). Photo-documentation and preservation has been an obvious contribution to this mass effort since the 19th century, when photography became an essential tool to researchers in all fields of study. Today's institutional photo archives are a testament to the modern era's confidence in the accumulation of knowledge through empirical observation and classification—the physical archives testify to all that has been learned.

**Photo archives have swelled radically since the advent of the digital age.** Kodak reported back in 2000 that their consumers around the globe had taken some 80 billion photographs; the forecast for 2017 is 1.5 trillion. Imagine storing (or, archiving) so many photographs, not just those useful to institutions and part of their established archival systems, but the personal photographs stored on iPhones and personal computers, and specially saved and sorted on apps such as Instagram, Facebook, and Pinterest. The amount of photography being made and saved is so overwhelmingly large that the established functions of photography—in the news media, as art, and as a means of personal memorial and exchange—are in danger of disintegrating as sheer volume dilutes focus and fosters exponentially larger numbers of confusing, competing narratives.

**Photography, in its abundance and preservation, has become an even greater point of reference to modern art in all mediums.** Since its invention, photography has been a source of inspiration for artists in other mediums. Painters in the 19th century used photographs as source material,

or “studies,” for their work and in some case (Degas) imitated the new, harsher, random vision promoted by the camera. Early 20th-century artists engaged photography as an aesthetic of mass culture, creating collages that commented on society and modern life. Today, photographic archives (both institutional and the extensive magazine record of the 20th century, where so many millions of photographs are also “archived”) have come to stand in for history itself, not just by representing specific figures and events, but by narrating histories in the very conception and organization of their archival presentation. Many artists today are finding the archive fertile ground for questioning the formation of received history and rethinking other possibilities as they appropriate or reference photographs and archival systems to put forth alternative or more nuanced visions of history.

**Open archive is a current term for free-use images from the internet.** Many images on the web are restricted and require licensing fees yet many are not: those specifically designated as free use constitute the “open archive.” This openness is largely due to the fact that copyright laws are still trying to adapt to the Wild West of the internet, where control seems to be more the exception than the rule.

***Open Archive* as a theme proposes a creative view of our ever-expanding, chaotic, global archive, inviting exhibitors to think both specifically and broadly on a wide range of archive-related questions:** What are photo archives and how are they formed? What narrative does the formation of a particular archive put forward? How do archives and their categories shape and restrict the way we ourselves comprehend our world? What does the organization of a particular archive say about a particular history being told? To what extent are individuals’ personal social media archives true to the life lived? And to what extent are personal archives manipulated to create an enhanced or improved vision of a life? How do artists engage archives and use photographs and lens-based works to address the present and past? How are both history and personal narrative being constantly rewritten through the manipulation and reorganization of archives? What is the future of archives with the impending tsunami of photographs on the immediate horizon? Can archives hold and shape knowledge as they once did or is the archive destined to become an obsolete form?

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FotoFocus Biennial 2018: October 1–31, 2018

FotoFocus Biennial Program: October 4–7, 2018

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