

# A Midterm Plan: Petar Dabac and His Initiative to Establish a National Museum of Photography

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## A Midterm Plan: Petar Dabac and His Initiative to Establish a National Museum of Photography

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“We will be able to contemplate the future of photography only when we have saved its most significant achievements from destruction.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1986, Petar Dabac, a photographer, cultural worker, and promoter of photography based in Zagreb, published a paper titled “Establishing a National Museum of Photography: Proposal for a Medium-Term Work Plan of the Photography Section of ULUPUH” in the journal *Informativa museologica*. His aim was to emphasize the need for establishing a national museum, as he believed that we, as a society, would be able to contemplate the future of photography “only when we have saved its most significant achievements from destruction.”<sup>2</sup> His text represents the culmination of sixteen years of experience managing a photography studio at Ilica 17 and the archive of his uncle, Tošo Dabac, who, thanks in no small part to Petar’s efforts, is considered one of the most important Croatian photographers. This paper aims to present Petar Dabac’s proposal, contextualize it in relation to its time, discuss the problems and difficulties he encountered when taking over his uncle’s legacy, and explore his understanding of the museum’s function. Ultimately, we will consider the relevance of this proposal in today’s context.

### I

Following his uncle’s unexpected death in 1970, Petar Dabac found himself at a crossroads. At that time, he was an amateur involved in artistic photography while studying at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Shipbuilding. However, in the face of his uncle’s passing, he made the decision to take care of Tošo’s studio and legacy, and to dedicate himself professionally to photography. The task at hand was immense, as he had to figure out how to preserve over 150,000 items, including Tošo’s photographic production and equipment, books and catalogues, correspond-

1 Dabac, “Osnivanje nacionalnog muzeja za fotografiju,” 54.

2 Ibid.

ence, administrative papers, and other documentation. While Photo-Club Zagreb seemed like an option,<sup>3</sup> it became apparent that it wouldn't suffice to adequately protect and value both the artistic production and the other photographic material, such as photographs made for clients. The legacy needed a specialized institution to ensure its complete preservation. Consequently, the heirs, led by Petar Dabac, concluded that the best course of action was to continue running the studio, thereby safeguarding Tošo's legacy.

Recognizing the cultural and artistic value of the legacy, it was granted preventive protection as a cultural asset in 1970. The recommendation was for the collection to remain in situ, with the studio protected as a place of cultural significance.<sup>4</sup> Despite these efforts, taking over the studio presented challenges. The steady flow of commissions, which had previously been the studio's main source of income, relied heavily on Tošo's reputation and the proven quality of his photographs. Although the studio resumed its operations (until 1973, Enes Midžić worked there alongside Petar Dabac), Petar needed time to establish his own client network, leading to financial strains for a period of time.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to high-quality photographs, the studio was known as a gathering place for artists, cultural workers, and intellectuals, who continued to visit after Tošo's death. In their countless conversations, the preservation of the photographic legacy was a frequent topic of discussions. These included, among others, Ivan Picelj and Radoslav Putar, and it was through the exchange of opinions with them that Petar Dabac shaped and formulated the course of his further action. By assuming responsibility for the studio, he not only physically preserved Tošo's legacy, but also transformed it into an archive. Today, these two terms are often used interchangeably and there is a tendency to call every legacy an archive. However, establishing the Tošo Dabac Archive was a deliberate and conscious process, shaped by Petar's knowledge and possibilities. Through

3 The information comes from Petar Dabac himself, who said it in one of the many interviews on the Tošo Dabac Archive.

4 "Rješenje o preventivnoj zaštiti br. 02-620/1-1970.; Predmet: Atelje umjetničke fotografije Toše Dabca - rješenje o preventivnoj zaštiti." [Decision on preventive protection no. 02-620/1-1970; Subject: Artistic photography studio of Tošo Dabac - decision on preventive protection]. The proposal on the basis of which the Decision was adopted was submitted by the Association of Fine Artists of Applied Arts (ULUPUH) shortly after Tošo's death on May 9. Quoting the text of the Proposal, the Decision states, among other things, that "the archive and the studio are a unique document of Tošo Dabac's work and production, and as such an outstanding document of our culture. /// Therefore, we suggest to the Regional Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the City of Zagreb that the studio and the archive be declared a cultural monument and placed under protection."

5 Petar Dabac and Enes Midžić mentioned power cuts, pressure to leave the premises, and a decline in the number of commissions.

this endeavour, he developed as a promoter of his uncle's photography and became an expert in the field of preservation and restoration of old photographs. His efforts have left a lasting impact that is still felt today.

Preserving a photographic legacy and structurally transforming it into an archive<sup>6</sup> is a process demanding continuous work that is neither simple nor quick. It requires knowledge in the field of photographic material protection and archival science, along with specific spatial conditions for storage. Regardless of the scope and value, this can be achieved either by prompt institutional intervention (at the state and/or city level) or, in case of private property, by investing years of hard work and finances on the part of an individual or an interested group (family, etc.). In either case, it is necessary to keep the legacy "alive", that is, to invest efforts in promoting the work of the late artist in order to keep their work visible and present it in the environment to which it is important. As for the indisputable artistic and cultural significance of the person and work of Tošo Dabac, this process took place over years of Petar's work accompanied by continuous learning. Based on the knowledge gained while assisting Tošo, he attended a series of workshops on photographic techniques in the 1970s, and he kept collecting scholarly literature on the protection and conservation as well as restoration of photographs until the end of his professional career.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the physical protection of the photographs, Petar also worked on organizing the materials and on creating and collecting the documentation. He actively promoted Tošo's oeuvre, realizing that the presence of the old master in public was extremely important for ensuring the overall protection of his legacy. The earliest preserved trace of this effort is a document from 1976, a letter in which Petar applied for some funds needed to repurpose the studio hallway into an exhibition area for Tošo's photographs and to arrange the collection of negatives.<sup>8</sup> Although the addressees of the letter are not known, the first sentence tells us that they included "business contacts and friends," while as a motive behind writing the letter Petar cited the fact that Tošo's photographs, which he had been showing in the hallway of the studio since 1970 in the form of a memorial exhibition, continued to attract attention and that the studio was visited even by people he did not know, who "simply rang at the door" with the desire to see the exhibition. This clearly shows that at that time, Dabac's intention was for the legacy to remain in private ownership, but it is difficult to assess whether this was a conscious decision or resulted from his realization that he could not expect assistance from the state. It is also important to note that at the end of the decade, on his initiative,

6 This primarily refers to the organization and searchability of the materials.

7 In the 1990s and 2000s, he held workshops on these topics himself.

8 Dabac, "Plan".

preparation of the first and still only monograph on Tošo Dabac began. It was the book *Tošo Dabac as a Photographer*, published in 1980 with a foreword by Radoslav Putar.

We can only speculate about the importance of Picelj and Putar, but conversations with Dabac and the correspondence preserved in his archive have revealed some details. For instance, Picelj suggested the name for the studio, the TD Archive, under which Dabac managed it until he left the premises at Ilica 17 in 2006.<sup>9</sup> However, it remains unclear to what extent the choice of the word “archive” in the name reflected the understanding of the difference between legacy and archive at the time, and whether the term “archive” was chosen with an awareness of the formal-legal definitions.<sup>10</sup>

Putar’s contribution to the understanding of photography and the development of the medium is a segment that deserves a more comprehensive study. From his professional activity, it is evident that he was equally interested in both older and contemporary photography and visual studies. Putar spent his working life at the Museum of Arts and Crafts (as a curator 1962–1972 and its director 1979–1983), an institution that owns an impressive photographic collection and hosted a large retrospective exhibition of Tošo Dabac in 1968, and at the Galleries of the City of Zagreb (as director 1972–1978), where a Centre for Photography, Film, and Television (CEFFT) was established in 1973. He was also the editor-in-chief of *Spot*, a magazine for photography (1972–1978)<sup>11</sup> published by the Galleries of the City of Zagreb, which was designed in Dabac’s studio and whose editorial board included Petar Dabac. Putar was also an art critic, writing about photographic exhibitions.<sup>12</sup> From the preserved correspondence in the Private Archive of Petar Dabac, it is evident that Putar and Dabac exchanged letters discussing Tošo’s legacy and the promotion of both his

9 This is known from Dabac’s description of the work of the Archive TD Gallery from 1998. Cf. Dabac, “Arhiv TD”.

10 The Croatian Language Portal defines the term *arhiva* as denoting: “1) written documents, charters, texts, clippings, etc. that someone collects and preserves; archival material; 2) *administrative use*: a department and service in a company or institution that manages documents”; while the term *arhiv* is defined as “1) a collection of written records related to the activity of a specific person or institution; 2) a: an institution for housing, keeping, and studying documents and files that are defined by regulations as archival materials [state archive; city archive; chapter archive]; b: a room in an institution or company where archival materials are kept.” Although Dabac chose the latter term, *arhiv*, we are of the opinion that *arhiva* would have been more appropriate. The definition of *ostavština* (“legacy”) reads: “1) material and spiritual goods that remain after someone’s death; 2) *metaphorically*: something left to the future as inheritance.”

11 More on the *Spot* magazine in: Križić Roban, *Na drugi pogled*.

12 This is evident from his rich bibliography listed in: Putar, *Likovne kritike, studije i zapisi, 1950-1960*; Putar, *Kritike, studije i zapisi*.

work and Petar’s. They also discussed the financial requirements of maintaining such a collection: “In your letter you are again mentioning the difficulties and the heavy financial burden that you have to bear while maintaining Tošo’s atelier. I am convinced that the ‘TD Archive’ is a very important ‘institution’ primarily because of its great capacity to encourage creative work in photography, particularly in an environment with a relatively low standard of photo-culture, which poses a significant burden on the system of visual communications in society. – We need to talk more about it, Pero. We need to find a clever journalist who will agree to trumpet two or three times in public that the ‘TD Archive’ is in danger.”<sup>13</sup> Dabac himself acknowledged Putar’s contribution in the cited text, stating that, in addition to his concern for the legacy, it was these conversations that encouraged him to think more seriously about the “problem of preserving photographic documents.”<sup>14</sup>

## II

In 1980, Dabac and his friends established the photo gallery of the TD Archive in the hallway of the studio,<sup>15</sup> marking the direction of their further activities and formalizing their efforts from the previous decade. With this initiative, the studio at Ilica 17 grew into an organization that acted as a distinct (legal) entity. Its activities encompassed an exhibition programme at the gallery (with the clearly defined concept of featuring only photographic exhibitions of domestic and foreign authors) and a photography studio (Petar’s own artistic and commercial work, managing Tošo’s legacy, developing and distributing Tošo’s photographs, and promoting his work). The TD Archive also acquired its own visual identity, work of the graphic designer and Dabac’s friend Ranko Novak, who designed the logo, posters, flyers, letterheads for memos, and envelopes. Initially, in addition to Dabac, his friends and colleagues, including writer and editor Albert Goldstein, artist Ivan Picelj, editor and publisher Nenad Popović, and photographers Slobodan Tadić and Mladen Tudor, were involved in the work of the gallery.<sup>16</sup> While the studio operated on commercial principles, the gallery relied on volunteer work and invested its resources primarily in production.<sup>17</sup> This model of running the gallery functioned well for the

13 Putar, “Pismo”.

14 Dabac, “Osnivanje nacionalnog muzeja za fotografiju,” 54.

15 The name of the gallery was written in lower case, which was often the preference of designers at that time.

16 Dabac, “Arhiv TD”.

17 Dabac refurbished the hallway by himself to make it suitable for exhibiting photographs. They arrived by mail or the authors brought them personally. For the part that was developed in Zagreb, Dabac’s own equipment and materials were used. Part of the exhibition was financially supported by the Austrian Cultural Forum in Zagreb. Posters and flyers were mostly printed with the help of collaborators and/or from Dabac’s own resources.

first six years, during which most of the exhibitions were realized, as many as 42 out of 48. However, it soon became apparent that this approach was not sustainable in the long term, especially as the preservation of Tošo's legacy was financially extremely demanding and its protection required a series of urgent procedures. The ongoing activity of the photographic emulsion caused partial or permanent fading of images on the negatives, highlighting the inadequate storage conditions of photographic material. Moreover, the rapid advancement of photographic technology rendered the original films and other equipment used by Tošo (needed for restoration and conservation) increasingly scarce. These challenges prompted Dabac to think about a new and more efficient model for preserving Tošo's legacy and that of other photographers. His paper titled "Establishing a National Museum of Photography: Proposal for a Medium-Term Work Plan of the Photography Section of ULUPUH," published in the scholarly journal *Informatika museologica*, was a result of this process. His intention was to encourage the creation of an institutional framework for the preservation, study, and advancement of photography while resolving the formal-legal and physical protection of Tošo's legacy. One of the conclusions he reached was that future photographic production should not be isolated from the past, and that the treatment of one was linked to the treatment of the other. Both mirrored the general awareness of the significance of photography, distinguishing artistic from commercial and propaganda photography, and depended on the level of education of the photographers themselves, museum experts, and art historians.

Dabac's text is clearly structured and comprises two main segments: one in which he explains the context, need, and motivation for encouraging the establishment of an umbrella institution to care for photography, and the other in which he describes the tasks of the museum, its structure in terms of spatial capacities, and the stages of its establishment and construction. His choice of terminology is intriguing: he uses the term "photographic documents" to encompass the entirety of photographic production, perhaps to avoid narrowing it down only to photographs categorized as artistic.

He identifies the main problems as the lack of social awareness and education, as well as inadequate financial and technological investment. Some collections have "completely vanished" due to the negligence of their owners or a lack of funds for acquisition. Others were lost during World War II or destroyed because of inadequate storage conditions – which was often the fault of the photographers themselves, since they "paid insufficient attention to proper film and image processing."<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the most striking and sharply intoned part of his analysis concerns the retrospective exhibition of Tošo Dabac held in 1968 at the Museum of Arts and Crafts. Dabac here criticizes the inadequate technological processes, which resulted in the loss of negatives during the development of large-format pho-

18 Dabac, "Osnivanje nacionalnog muzeja za fotografiju," 54.

tographs ("dozens of the most valuable negatives from the archive, partially destroyed as victims of large enlargements") and the production of photo-panels that were unsuitable for preservation ("Large enlargements could not be sufficiently fixated or washed, and they have no archival durability") and transportation. He attributes these and other shortcomings – and one should note that he himself participated in the realization of the exhibition as Tošo's assistant – to the ignorance of museum experts. Furthermore, he expresses disappointment that the exhibition primarily catered to "art historians and designers," showing "how big mistakes can be made with a lot of amateur enthusiasm and money."<sup>19</sup> He substantiates this conclusion by highlighting the inadequate and incomplete selection of photographs ("some valuable archival shots were not shown or used at all") and with the decision to reframe photographs in a way that sometimes deviated from the intentions of their original author.<sup>20</sup>

Dabac's own work experience, as well as the experience of other institutions and his conversations with fellow photographers, led him to indicate economic reasons as the main problem in addition to the lack of education,<sup>21</sup> concluding that this problem could only be solved by establishing a specialized institution managed by the state: a National Museum of Photography in Zagreb. He thereby listed the following tasks for the Museum: 1) (primarily) the collection, preservation, and copying of photographic documents; 2) collection of literature on photography and photographic equipment; 3) organization of exhibitions, maintenance of a library, and establishment of a permanent exhibition; 4) distribution of archival material to interested parties; 5) stimulating the production of top-quality photographic works by purchasing such photographs and carrying out photo-projects; 6) setting criteria for the inclusion of photographs in the museum collection. This clearly shows that in addition to the conventional responsibilities of a museum, Dabac emphasized the need to conduct educational and promotional activities and maintain openness in dissem-

19 Ibid.

20 This problem proved to be a permanent "legacy" in the posthumous treatment of Tošo's oeuvre. Even Petar Dabac exhibited some of Tošo's photos that the old master never developed or exhibited, and which Petar framed at his own discretion during development. When the Tošo Dabac Archive was institutionalized in 2006 (which will be discussed later in the text), a series of exhibitions were held that showed his previously unknown or lesser-known photographs in full frame, i.e. as direct scans of negatives developed in the negative format.

21 Dabac mentioned the fact that, in addition to the ignorance of curators, even photographers did not always have the needed awareness and education, since there was no higher education institution for photography, so that most photographers were "recruited from various other professions, both related and unrelated." He also addressed the lack of good "practical and theoretical literature," as there was only a minor number of monographs on individual photographers and no comprehensive history of "our" photography. Dabac, "Osnivanje nacionalnog muzeja za fotografiju," 54.

inating materials. He also advocated active participation in stimulating the creation of high-quality works of art. Notably, the issue of criteria is particularly intriguing. Dabac here references Jean-Claude Lemagny's essay "Photography and Criticism."<sup>22</sup> Lemagny, who died in early 2023, was a renowned French curator and historian of photography who spent his career at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, curating the collection of contemporary photography from 1968 to 1996. He founded La Galerie des photographies at the same institution in 1971, where he, in addition to exhibiting contemporary artists, regularly organized exhibitions of works from the Library's holdings, which reflected his vision of the development of the photographic medium. Lemagny was also known as a theoretician of photography, sharing his ideas at conferences and other gatherings, writing articles, and publishing books. He is perhaps best known for his classification of photography in four categories, known as the "horloge esthétique." It is therefore not surprising that Dabac was inspired by his work in his own search for a formulation of (strict) criteria that would be suitable in the local context. At the beginning of his text, he stated: "I do not believe that there can be photographic naivety (as in painting); I can tolerate kitsch in photography, but I cannot allow us to be surrounded by photographic trash."<sup>23</sup> He shared Lemagny's view that in our times, one should be "militant" in photographic criticism, that photography as art is in the photograph "as such," and that a work of art is "something contemporary that reveals the truth about ourselves and the world."<sup>24</sup> Dabac believed that, "As long as photography explores itself, as long as it is in search for its identity, it should be distinctly separated from the kind of photography that serves solely to manipulate the masses and be an instrument of economic and political interests."<sup>25</sup>

Dabac divided the establishment and development of the Museum into stages, emphasized the proactive work and commitment of individuals and professional associations, along with the personal engagement of ULUPUH members as prerequisites. He proposed linking the Museum's initial operations to an established institution, such as the Museum of Arts and Crafts or the National and University Library. For the first phase, he envisioned creating a project for the Museum's work and content, conducting research on the current state of photographic collections and archives in the country, developing plans for a permanent display, searching for suitable premises, and engaging external experts to address the issues of

22 Unfortunately, no text with this title could be found in Lemagny's bibliography, so presumably it is either an unfortunate translation of the original or this particular essay has not been filed.

23 Dabac, "Osnivanje nacionalnog muzeja za fotografiju," 54.

24 Ibid., 55.

25 Ibid. It would be interesting to investigate the consequences of this attitude in terms of Dabac's exhibition programme at the TD Archive Gallery, as well as in terms of his possible evaluation of older and recent photography.

protecting and storing photographic materials. The second phase involved employing a curator to manage the temporary storage facility and work on collecting materials that would form the foundation of the Museum. Additionally, work on the plans for organizing the venue and finding suitable personnel would continue. The third and final phase involved achieving independence for the Museum and further employments, including two curators in addition to the administrative and management staff, as well as a photo lab technician. One curator would be responsible for the collection, the permanent display, and old photography, while the other would oversee temporary exhibitions, the projection and lecture hall, and the collection of contemporary photography. Dabac even drafted an organizational plan for the Museum rooms, including their required size.

Analysing the main tasks of the Museum and the staff needed for their realization, it becomes evident that Dabac applied a programme similar to the one he used in the TD Archive, albeit on a larger scale. The difference for him between an archive and a museum lay mainly in the possibilities and conditions for acquiring and working with the collection. Private enterprises like the TD Archive had limitations, whereas Dabac had the conviction that the state (still) possessed the necessary power and finances to address all the identified problems.

### III

As mentioned earlier, Dabac's initiative stemmed from his 16-year involvement with Tošo's legacy. The late 1970s and early 1980s were generally a crucial period for the development and promotion of photography as a medium, both technologically and in terms of theoretical considerations.<sup>26</sup> International organizations and institutions emerged during this time, significantly influencing European photography in the following decades. Dabac's efforts can be understood in a broader European context due to his early establishment of an international network of contacts and connections with photographers and theoreticians of photography. This network was built through his exhibition work<sup>27</sup> and his monitoring of foreign productions, publications, and specialized periodicals (as evidenced by the rich library he has left behind). His linguistic abilities in German and French, along with his participation in various educational formats and specialized courses, further facilitated his European interactions. Regarding the process of affirmation and institutionalization of photography through specialized galleries and magazines, it is worth noting that already in the early 1970s, Dabac established a connection with the collector and gallerist Lanfranco Colombo in Italy.<sup>28</sup> Colombo

26 More details in: Dubois, "Trace-Image to Fiction-Image."

27 In those years, he exhibited in Milan, Bologna, Leibniz, Graz, Vienna and other places.

28 Dabac shared this information during our numerous conversations.

had started the magazine *Il Diaframma* and opened an eponymous gallery in the late 1960s, making it the world's first specialized photography gallery.<sup>29</sup> During the same period, Dabac also established contacts with Fotoclub in Graz, led by Erich Kees, where he attended lectures in philosophy and art theory. There he met Manfred Willmann and then Christine Frisinghelli.<sup>30</sup> In 1975, Willmann and Frisinghelli launched the exhibition programme of the Forum Stadtpark photography gallery, and in 1979 an annual international symposium on photography featuring prominent photographers and theorists. In 1980, together with Seiichi Furuya, they founded the association Camera Austria and launched a journal of the same name, entirely dedicated to photography.<sup>31</sup> Dabac also had close ties with Živa Kraus, a painter, curator, and gallerist who ran her own Ikona Photo Gallery in Venice from 1979.<sup>32</sup> And he met the Belgian photographer Georges Vercheval, who, along with his wife Jeanne, founded the organization Photographie Ouverte in Charleroi in 1978. After a series of successful exhibitions, they obtained a city-owned venue in 1980 and opened a photography gallery.<sup>33</sup>

Our focus here is on the founding of the TD Archive Gallery, but it is interesting to mention the efforts made in Austria and Belgium towards further institutionalization of photography in the form of museums. As a member of Forum Stadtpark and a close friend of Willmann and Frisinghelli, Dabac participated in many of their activities, including professional and private gatherings of photographers and photography theorists. Therefore, it is important to note that Frisinghelli and Willmann were part of the team that participated in an initiative to establish a national photography museum in Austria in 1984. Their proposal emerged from a project concerning the history of photography in Austria, which began in 1979 and culminated in 1983 with the major exhibition “Geschichte der Fotografie in Österreich” at the Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts in Vienna. The concept and preparation of the exhibition and the catalogue involved photographers, art his-

Also, in his archive there is abundant material connected to Colombo including a portrait of him that Dabac took in the late 70s. After Colombo's death, his estate became a part of the Fondazione Museo di fotografia contemporanea in Milan. As part of it, there are several Dabac's photographs in the collection, as was revealed by museum's curator Matteo Balduzzi.

29 <http://www.mufocosearch.org/fondi/FON-10110-0000001>, accessed November 30, 2023.

30 This was confirmed several times by Dabac as well as Willmann and Frisinghelli during an interview in October 2021.

31 Interview with Willman and Frisinghelli, October 2021. [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camera\\_Austria](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camera_Austria), accessed November 30, 2023.

32 Conversations with Dabac. Also, there is abundant material in his archive confirming this connection including photographs and letters.

33 Conversations with Dabac. <https://www.museephoto.be/en/LeMusee-en.html>, accessed November 30, 2023.

torians, curators, and journalists.<sup>34</sup> It is not known to what extent their proposal for establishing a museum differed from Dabac's, but it certainly indicates that establishing new institutions of this type was conceivable at the time. Realization of such a colossal project did succeed for Vercheval. The Musée de la Photographie, which houses a rich collection of photographs and negatives, was opened in Charleroi in 1987.<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, Dabac's initiative did not succeed and the National Museum of Photography in Zagreb was never established. The economic crisis in the country during the 1980s, the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and the subsequent war in the first half of the 1990s certainly influenced this outcome. Despite these challenges, Dabac continued his efforts in the second half of the 1990s, when, in accordance with the new political order and legal regulations, he founded the non-profit association Tošo Dabac Archive together with art historian Branka Slijepčević. The programme of this association included caring for Tošo's legacy as well as organizing exhibitions and educational formats to advance and promote contemporary photography. But even this association had limited success as it lacked financial resources. Despite this setback, Dabac managed to preserve and institutionalize Tošo's legacy. The Tošo Dabac Archive was registered in 2002 as movable cultural property, and the preserved material was purchased by the City of Zagreb in 2005, remaining in its original location and entrusted to the professional management of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. Four years later, Petar Dabac left the premises at Ilica 17. After 49 years of work and 36 years of managing the photography studio, he separated and took with him his own archive, which had grown over the years alongside Tošo's.<sup>36</sup>

#### IV

Eventually, one should ask the question whether Dabac's initiative remains relevant today and, if so, why. During the time I worked with Dabac, from 2017 until his passing in 2022, we extensively discussed his work with Tošo's legacy and the future of his own archive, which he had been building since 1967. He organized it into logical units and arranged it in his apartment to facilitate access and search across individual parts. The result was an extraordinary private archive encompassing artistic,

34 In addition to the aforementioned Frisinghelli and Willmann, participants included Anna Auer, Peter Dressler, Monika Faber, Hans Frank, Otto Hochreiter, Leo Kandl, Margarethe Kuntner, Michael Mauracher, Timm Starl, and Peter Weiermaier. The exhibition was opened in December 1983, and after Vienna it was shown in Graz, Linz, Klagenfurt, Salzburg, and Innsbruck. [https://www.peter-weibel.at/wp-content/uploads/pdf/1984/0211\\_DER\\_DISKURS\\_DER\\_FOTOA.pdf](https://www.peter-weibel.at/wp-content/uploads/pdf/1984/0211_DER_DISKURS_DER_FOTOA.pdf)

<https://www.photolit.de/book/608>, accessed November 30, 2023.

35 <https://www.museephoto.be/en/LeMusee-en.html>, accessed November 30, 2023.

36 For four years he was consulting the newly appointed curators and helping them to get acquainted with this vast collection.

documentary, and reportage photographic material with accompanying documentation. Additionally, it included a collection of photographs by other authors, a library of catalogues, monographs, scholarly literature, and magazines, as well as a considerable number of paintings, graphics, and sculptures.<sup>37</sup> Dabac's growth as a photographer and collector in Tošo's studio, along with his self-awareness, analytical approach, and attention to detail, were likely vital in shaping this comprehensive archive. Even a cursory examination of its contents reveals that it goes beyond his own artistic journey and provides a remarkable overview of an entire epoch, making it highly valuable.

Dabac belonged to a generation of European photographers who, unlike their predecessors,<sup>38</sup> had relatively easy access to photographic material both within their countries and abroad. They also had the opportunity to travel, resulting in an explosion of photographic production and the generation of legacies and archives of unprecedented magnitude. Today, in Croatia and other European countries, we face the challenge of valuing and preserving the work of this generation of photographers who worked with the analogue techniques of their time, techniques largely abandoned due to the digital revolution at the turn of the century, which resulted not only in the loss of the techniques themselves, but also of knowledge associated with them. Encouraged by my work with Dabac's archive, I have engaged in a series of conversations with other artists and experts in the field of photography, both in Croatia and in Austria, Poland, and France, who share the same concern: how to preserve this precious heritage and to what extent.

More generally, can our society envision the establishment of a photography museum today, and what would be its role? Should it aim to preserve and archive everything, including negatives, proofs, and final photographs, or should it focus solely on what we consider to be artistic achievements deserving of attention of the history of art and photography? What are the advantages and disadvantages of digitizing analogue photographic material, and what is the overall significance of digitizing and creating digital equivalents of physical archives? Each society must find its own answers to these and similar questions, tailored to its needs and possibilities, while always considering the broader European perspective. In any case, a crucial aspect is the need for social awareness and consensus among all stakeholders, with a particular emphasis on the perspectives of photogra-

37 On the archive's structure, see: Lovrenčić, "The Petar Dabac Archive".

38 In Yugoslavia after World War II, acquiring photographic equipment and materials was not easy since the domestic industry was still in its infancy, while travel was expensive and logistically demanding. Therefore, photographers often relied on the state, which procured materials in a planned manner and distributed them in accordance with the requirements of the time and its priorities. Cf. Lovrenčić, "Tošo Dabac unutar okvira".

phers whose legacies we seek to preserve. In this context, Germany offers a good example with its extensive national debate about the necessity and role of establishing a national photography museum today. The ongoing dialogue has led to several noteworthy projects and discussions, such as the "Lighting the Archive" initiative launched in 2020. The project states in its description: "Das analoge/digitale Bild ist in eigener Un/Ordnung. Es gibt nicht die eine Fotografie – kann es für sie dann das eine Institut oder Archiv geben, eines, das die unterschiedlichen technischen, aber auch sozialen Gebrauchsweisen des Mediums und seine diversen Erscheinungsweisen zusammenführt?"<sup>39</sup> It further includes a series of interviews with photographers and curators about their views of this problem and their thoughts about whether the museum is an adequate institution today considering the multiple meanings of photography.

Of course, Germany is not the only country that addresses these issues in the present context. In Austria and Poland, the work of museums is complemented by that of smaller (and swifter) organizations and associations that are primarily focused on organizing legacies, digitizing and promoting the work of artists. Thereby they create digital repositories of images, giving new visibility to artists who might otherwise be known only in the local circles. Work strategies and funding differ based on the goals and coordination with state institutions, with most initiatives relying on individual enthusiasm.

In Croatia, Dabac's text from 37 years ago remains painfully relevant today. While some progress has been made, such as the existence of a study programme in photography at the Academy of Dramatic Arts and improved standards for storing and preserving photographic material in museums and archives, due to a number of experts, curators, and photographers continuously working to promote photography and raise knowledge and awareness about its importance, challenges persist. Private collections and archives continue to vanish, and there is no comprehensive overview of their existence or coordinated guidelines to protect and preserve photographic material. Monographs on photographers are still scarce, and a comprehensive history of the medium is still unwritten. The fate of photographic archives and legacies transferred to museums and archives varies widely, depending on the available space, human resources, institutional policies and priorities, and the dedication of curators and archivists, often more than on financial resources. Accessibility to external researchers and public visibility depend on the same set of circumstances. Meanwhile, private initiatives and non-governmental organizations lack a reliable and regular source of funding from the state budget, leading to additional problems.

39 "The analogue/digital image is in its own disorder. There is no one photography - can there then be one institute or archive for photography, one that brings together the different technical but also social uses of the medium and its diverse manifestations?" (Translation by the author.) <https://lightingthearchive.org/>



The idea of establishing a national photography museum only occasionally arises as a topic of individual projects or photographic events. There is currently no strong initiative that can create awareness and drive systematic measures and actions at the level of state institutions.

Petar Dabac died in September 2023 and left behind an archive that requires at least a fraction of the attention he gave to the legacy of Tošo Dabac. It is a far more complex legacy in terms of the variety of objects it contains and the knowledge and information about the time in which it was created. It holds potential as a core element for considering what we as a society want and need today in order to protect our most significant photographic achievements from destruction.

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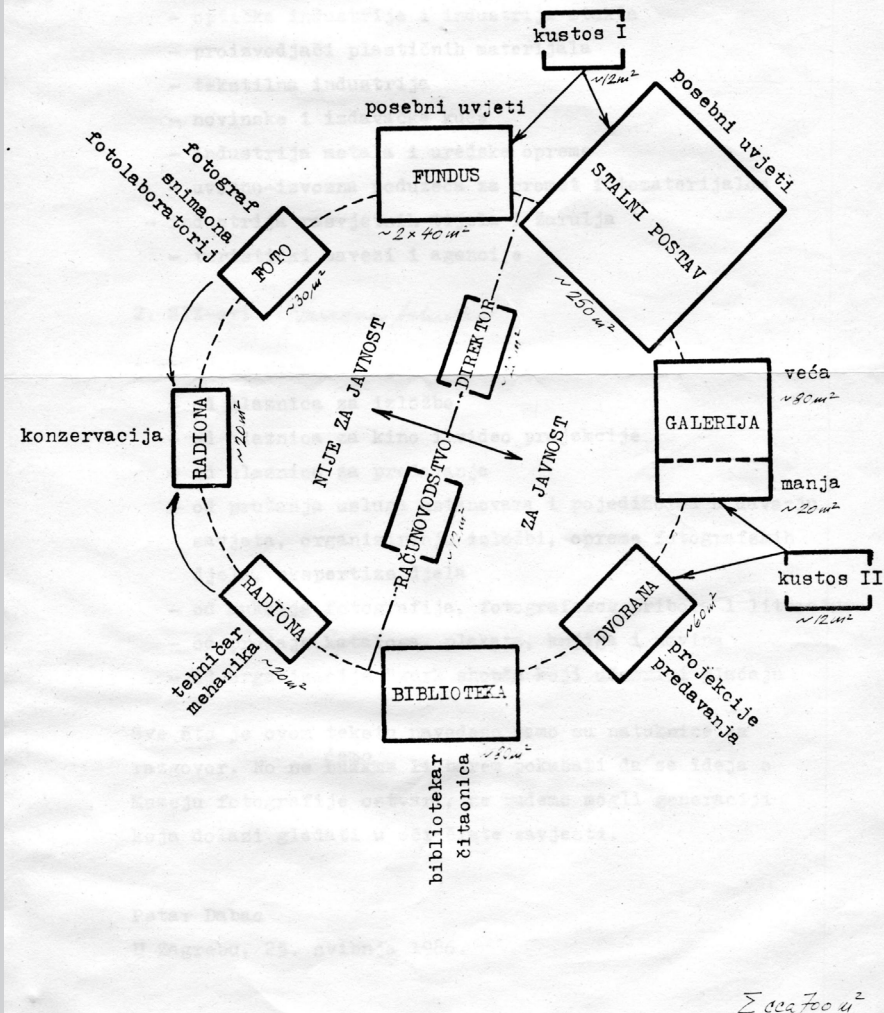
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