

The Turbulent Photographic Field

Križić Roban, Sandra

Source / Izvornik: **Formats of (Non)Seeing, 2024, 10 - 17**

Conference paper / Rad u zborniku

Publication status / Verzija rada: **Published version / Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)**

<https://doi.org/10.31664/9789533730530.01>

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:254:307716>

Rights / Prava: [In copyright](#) / [Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2025-04-02**



Repository / Repozitorij:

[PODEST - Institute of Art History Repository](#)

DOI: 10.31664/9789533730530.01

[Photographic] “Images are significant surfaces. Images signify—mainly—something ‘out there’ in space and time that they have to make comprehensible to us as abstractions (as reductions of the four dimensions of space and time to the two surface dimensions).”

Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*

Even though in everyday life we download and consume photographs without hesitation, rarely pondering their complex nature, the advent of photography as a medium profoundly transformed people’s relationship towards the phenomenon of images and visuality. This turbulent field of happenings, coursing with meaning and knowledge (Lyotard), in addition to visual content, is directly connected to the development of modern society and its culture, art, science and media, whereas photography earned its artistic status on a par with painting and sculpture only after the Second World War. It is embedded in the foundations of what we perceive as popular culture, but it seems that the consequences of photography are still not sufficiently recognised.

Thanks to the development of theory and criticism, photography has become a discursive field on an international level and an important driving force in the all-encompassing development of culture and society (Sekula), which has encouraged critics and theorists to consider it outside of standard frameworks. Over the years, it was observed that an interdisciplinary approach, that would allow a comprehensive and multi-layered—scientific, artistic and professional—valorisation and interpretation of the medium, was still lacking. Although photography is often considered a vital “tool” in a gamut of scientific fields, among other things thanks to its ability to “witness” the truth of the moment and the fact that, through visual content, it has the ability to shed light on certain phenomena, civilisational discoveries and various aspects of life, photography as a social practice, and the role of photographer as a social participant, have affected the perception of the photo-taking position, which is, according to Sekula, neither passive nor innocent. It is precisely for this reason that the historical material, until now considered primarily through the prism of historiography, or frequently as the development of specific techniques, has unavoidably been subjected to new readings.

And while, on a basic level, photographic images satisfy the desire for a clear sense of identity and belonging to a certain culture, interest group and/or community, contemporary critical approaches reexamine how photographic perception affects the ways of seeing and acquiring knowledge (Wells). In recent years, critics and theoreticians have approached photography not by interpreting it exclusively as a dispositive of the pictorial or a visible form (Rancière, Didi-Huberman), but by insisting on the realisation that these images might contain records about history and communication, about traditions, texts, testimonies and labels, all of which have the power to influence the construction of global knowledge. Certain theorists, including Liz Wells, are of the opinion that the critical interpretation of photography affected the political and social empowerment that began in the 1960s, while a series of images from the 1970s, would, for instance, attest to the importance and role of social groups that significantly influenced public opinion, the media and institutions, and indirectly also the audience, which was becoming increasingly better informed precisely thanks to photography.

Owing to these features, contemporary interpretation of photography requires networking and an amalgamation of analytical and interpretive approaches that broach it from different angles. And while the debate over the nature and manifold influences of photography is contemporaneous with the emergence of the field, and has developed since the 1830s, the current stance towards photographic images is becoming increasingly complex and requires careful consideration in order to comprehend the reality negotiated by the medium. This is precisely why we enter into dialogue with the “existing, found and visited” that photography records (Lübke-Tidow), and which enables new readings and interpretations, simultaneously requiring a different methodological disposition. Consequently, the scientific research project *Ekspozicija. Themes and Aspects of Croatian Photography from the 19th Century until Today* (HRZZ-IP-2019-04-1772) was from the start organised through a synergy of researchers and experts in the humanities, social, technical and natural sciences, as well as artists ready to explore and interpret the ambiguity and multi-layeredness of the medium of photography and the changes in its performative iterations with regard to the transition from the analogue into the digital age. A series of individual and group research initiatives conducted as part of the project do not focus on what photography shows (and what is visible at first glance), but through a combination of explorative, analytical, interpretive and performative approaches, pose manifold questions *what photography is, what it does, what it did yesterday, and what it can do tomorrow*. Given the wide range of manifestations and heterogeneity of photographic images, special attention was directed towards the contexts within which they were created, and the realities they themselves generate, in accordance with the “ways in which the discourse of photography has been produced and elaborated in different historical and cultural contexts” (Emerling), which is key to understanding both photography and our reflections on the medium and the roles assigned to it.

This publication, compiled on the basis of presentations at the eponymous conference organised by the Institute of Art History (Split, 27–29 October 2022), was formed around several theses which attempted to stimulate new critical interpretations of the medium through the inclusion of scientific, disciplinary discourses, interdisciplinary research endeavours, as well as from the perspective of artistic fields. We considered secondary knowledge, mediated by means of vernacular images, whose banality and “insignificance” institute a discussion on the unpredictability, but also the emancipation of the medium, as well as photography as a “pedagogical tool” aiding the construction and transfer of knowledge. Next, we considered photography through curatorial and museological practices, which, thanks to the changes in the perception of the old hierarchies of artistic mediums, have “embraced” the one that simultaneously exists in countless contexts. Finally, we observed photographic (de)territorialisation responsible for discursive shifts, accompanied by new ways of understanding the photographic phenomenon, and we observed photography as a strategy and practice of anticipatory contemplation about society, community, and the world, which are considered through a deconstruction and re-semanticization of the medium, alongside discussion of the documentational aspect of photography as means of reaching new discoveries.

These approaches were chosen without the necessity of being constrained by rules, chronology or any other kind of hierarchy. Inasmuch, the research process, guided (too) by personal interests, was considered from a subjective vantage point allowing the selected phenomena to be accessed freely, with time jumps across almost two hundred years since photography was first patented. Such an approach requires open-minded readers, willing to make intuitive connections between the texts and the topics they tackle. Divided into five chapters, the volume becomes a medium for slowing down and encouraging reflection that, regardless of editorial wishes, may be subjective and open to new views. The chapters are not a reflection of a need for inventorisation, but function as a loose guide allowing us to delineate the topics and interests engaging the authors. This is already visible from looking at the visual content that points to meanings and statements about photographic images. The images have, however, been placed in challenging relationships, forming a kind of (photographic) archipelago the parts of which are not necessarily interconnected.

In addressing photography, we do so by attending to the historical aspects of the medium. In Stella Fatović-Ferenčić and Martin Kuhar’s article “Photographs of Medical Casuistry in the Croatian Journal *Liječnički vjesnik* from 1877 to 1949”, the relationship between image and text is discussed on a representative sample of pioneering works of medical doctors and their contributions to clinical photography, which the authors connect to the humanistic field and critical considerations of documentarist and ethical implications. In the article “Skinny and Exhausted: Photographs of Underaged Labor Force in Interwar Yugoslavia”, Ana Rajković Pejić

discusses the complex topic of social and economic relations in the interwar period, whereby the camera portrays not only the workers' bodies at work, but also functions as a weapon in the social struggle for labour rights. Ante Orlović also tackles a specific political environment in his article "Photo Documentation of Alumina Factory in Obrovac—Rise and Fall of the 'Obrovac Giant'", presenting the little-known body of work of the renowned Zadar photographer, Ante Brkan. These are politically motivated documentarist scenes of one of the major "cases" of misdirected investment, while the scenes resemble a dystopian architectural model of a factory that over time became a symbol of party-political decisions. Ana Šeparović and Sandra Križić Roban's chapter titled "Photography in the Focus of Cultural-Critical Discourse: Critical Reflections on Photography in Croatia between 1941 and the 1970s", critically analyses the written materials on photography during the war and postwar period, offering information on diverse professional material, often lacking in critical discourse. Essentially historiographical, the review encompasses specialised non-fiction and reflects the socio-political changes that (also) influenced photographic content, mediated by images and texts.

Contemporary curatorial and museological practices are the focus of Ivana Gržina's contribution "'Both Sides Now': Images of a Museum's Life from Up and Down", dedicated to photographic eco-systems created outside of standard archival canons. She addresses vernacular photography, which in the local context rarely captures the attention of researchers, overly "relying" on its banality and ignoring the exceptional knowledge of social dynamics and contexts that such snapshots make possible. In the chapter "The Example of Photography in Print and Circulation—On the Historiography of Photography, Artistic Research and the Multidisciplinary and Practice-based Perspective.", Niclas Östlind emphasises the importance of a multidimensional perspective vital for the re-examination of research theses and dissemination. Through a series of historical examples, he introduces the issue of specialised non-fiction writing, promoting a practice-based orientation of artistic-photographic research. On the other hand, using the example of the schematic proposal for the establishment of a museum of photography, advocated in 1986 by Petar Dabac, Lana Lovrenčić, in the article "A Midterm Plan: Petar Dabac and His Initiative to Establish a National Museum of Photography", presents the specifics of one of the most important private photographic archives in the region of former Yugoslavia, highlighting the relationships between cultural workers, as well as the ways in which they championed photography.

The territories that photography "inventories" sometimes consist of perfectly ordinary, constructed landscapes, which are the focus of the exhibition considered by Alice Haddad in her contribution "The Landscape as Inventory Versus Impression: Exhibiting the Photography Commission of the Flemish Government Architect", focusing on a contemporary perspective that interprets the earlier pioneering, and equally ephemeral actions, of the

Flemish government in a new way. At the same time, the objectifying gaze of the photographer is realised as vernacular photography which, from today's perspective, helps to "reconstruct" the historical exhibition. In the article "Croatia in Color: Autochromes with Croatian Motifs in Albert Kahn's *Archives of the Planet*", Hrvoje Gržina analyses a specific archive created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thanks to the collaboration between geographer Jean Brunhes, photographer Auguste Léon and philanthropist Albert Kahn, who sought to shape a photographic image of the world, bequeathing it to the future. A portion of this unique photographic travelogue—whose scenes were shown at intellectual gatherings where photography served as a medium for transitioning into other, newly discovered worlds—was also created in Croatia. In the chapter titled "...ce phénomène photographique, la vie", through a parallel reading of Marguerite Duras' film *L'homme atlantique* and the works of Croatian artist Katarina Ivaniškin Kardum, Leonida Kovač presents a study on the specific cinematic syntax she encountered in the film, "instructions" not to attempt to understand *this phenomenon of photography, or life*, through the prism of which she considers the still frames of Ivaniškin Kardum's drawings and photographs, thus structuring a registered syntax in relation to diary entries, as well as the film.

The portion of the volume dedicated to the resistance and emancipation of the medium of photography comprises the contributions of four authors: Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans in "Commoning Photography. Grassroots and Community-based Photographic Archives in Eastern Europe and the (Non)Visibility of Everyday Resistances" addresses the collectives dedicated to collating vernacular photographs which they make available (online), in line with the intent of changing official historical narratives. These procedures contributed to new knowledge about small resistances and oppositional friendliness, allowing insight into the visual reality of the "uneventful" world and its anonymous actors. George Themistokleous' viewing apparatus, elucidated in the chapter "Automated Images, and 'Eye'-identities along Nicosia's Green Line Border", focuses on the green line that encircles and divides Nicosia. This so-called protection zone, where conflict and division into two closed systems have long hibernated, exists thanks to the author's writings and photography in line with Foucault's *panopticon*, based on Bentham's concept of prison architecture subject to surveillance and control. In "Photography as an Emancipatory Tool", Višnja Pentić goes beyond not only the dominance of aesthetics, but also the dominance that conditions class and other differences, advocating the establishment of emancipatory practices which make it possible to appreciate and understand photography. In "Tracing the Threads of a Relationship through Archival Artefacts: Perspectives on Otti Berger and Ludwig Hilberseimer", Alexandra Matz devotes herself to researching the archives of the two Bauhaus students and partners, in order to illuminate their relationship through multiple readings of a series of documents, letters, and photographs and the fate she reconstructs, building it as a kind of textual interpretative weaving.

The volume concludes with a chapter devoted to the construction and transfer of knowledge. The article by Tihana Petrović Leš, Tihana Rubić and Ivan Grkeš “Milovan Gavazzi’s Ethnographic Photography and Ethnological Research in Dalmatia in the First Half of the 20th Century” is based on extensive research into the photographic work of Croatian ethnologist Milovan Gavazzi. Photos from his photographic archive may be considered vernacular photography, while in this case, their “ordinariness” refers to a particular understanding of the customs, appearance and everyday life of the region of Adriatic Croatia. At the same time, photography itself becomes a research “tool” and a museum object that bears witness to social changes and their protagonists, while also participating in the preservation of national heritage. Heritage is also considered by Meri Kunčić in the chapter “A Distant City—Photos from the Past of the Island of Rab”, focusing on the importance of the relationship between image and text, which jointly participate in the transmission of the island’s oral, unwritten history. She focuses on the perspective of women’s and children’s daily life, shown in “long duration” photographs, particularly the scenes of human labour. Dominik Lengyel and Catherine Toulouse in “The Construction of Knowledge Through Virtual Photography of Abstract Geometry” translate verbal knowledge into its pictorial equivalent, using their transdisciplinary method—which they term virtual photography—based on the knowledge and “tools” borrowed from archaeology, art history and architecture. The resulting “snapshots” have the properties of perspective, frame and other fixed parameters, while constructing a virtual space aided by photography, which the authors treat as physical reality.

A significant portion of the contributions in the volume are related to the understanding of history and attempts of finding a new path, beyond the grand (and partly spent) narratives, which we have adopted over time and according to which we have tailored our understanding of the world. This path is envisioned as a response to the tendency of unreasonable acceleration of all aspects of our life and the ephemerality of photography, which, according to Stuart Hall, does not even exist as an original creation under this name. Guided by the ambition of realising this volume as the result of several years of systematic research into the relationships and ways of photographic representation of the world, as well as the knowledge produced by photographic images and their implications in power politics, the project *Ekspozicija* and this final publication aimed to outline the directions we had taken—the pathways of specific practices and situations in which photographs, seemingly, denote, signify, and perceive something. To that extent, this is a heterogeneous area in which opinions, knowledge and images “collide”, while textual discourse to which we necessarily resort demonstrates that this area is neither exclusively pictorial nor visual. Because it is with the assistance of text that the knowledge we mediate is produced and circulated.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images. Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024.
- Jae Emerling, *Photography. History and Theory*, Routledge, 2012.
- Vilém Flusser, *Towards a philosophy of photography* [Filozofija fotografije], Scarebeus naklada, 2007.
- Maren Lübbke-Tidow, “Archiving and Processing Dispositifs: Five Positions from Archives, Re-Assemblances, and Surveys”, in: *Archives, Re-Assemblances, and Surveys*, Camera Austria, 2014.
- Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester University Press, 1979.
- Jacques Rancière, “Notes on the photographic image”, *Radical Philosophy*, 156/2009.
- Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain. Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983*, Mack, 2016.
- Liz Wells, *Land Matters. Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity*, I.B. Tauris, 2011.