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“Both Sides Now”: Images of a Museum’s Life From Up and Down

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In recent times, both among scholars and museum professionals, an increasing amount of attention has been paid to the long-neglected, but truly vast corpus of photographs existing in museums outside formal museum collections. These are usually understood and used in museums as mere tools with different functions within the institutional ‘ecosystem’,¹ as items which are ‘just there’.² In the environment of Croatian institutions, the tendencies that cast light on the ‘non-collection photographs’³ have manifested in two fields of academic and professional interest. More specifically, it has turned out that, in addition to lesser-known private collections, it is precisely this mass of orphaned photographs in museums that is often a bountiful supplement for the national photographic canon.⁴ On the other hand, these photographs are increasingly becoming a subject of interest in the context of perceiving the ‘epistemological potential’⁵ of photographic collections/non-collections/archives within the framework of scholarly disciplines relied on by individual museums.⁶ Via the same mechanism, they contribute to the reconstruction of the history of museums and prevailing institutional discourses and practices.⁷ I will reflect on a specific segment of museum photography, which is, so to speak, lowlier than ‘lowly’ in a museum.⁸ The examples used match the definition of a snapshot by all their characteristics:⁹ subject matter banality, conventionality of expression, technical shortcomings, usage of

- 1 Edwards, “Photographs: Material Form and the Dynamic Archive,” 49.
- 2 Edwards and Lien, “Museums and the Work of Photographs,” 4.
- 3 Edwards and Ravilious, “Museum cultures of photography,” 10. On the term, see also Edwards, “Location, Location.”; Edwards, “Thoughts on the ‘Non-Collections’.”
- 4 Gržina, “Fotografija kao muzejski predmet ili dokumentacijski izvor,” 82. See Gržina, *Obiteljske fotografije iz ostavštine Bele Csikosa Sesije*; Gržina, “Gradine, umotvori i prirodne ljepote.”
- 5 Caraffa, “From ‘photo libraries’ to ‘photo archives’.”
- 6 See Kolonić, *Renesansa i barok na staklenim pločama*; Gržina and Šamec Flaschar, *Tragom baštine*.
- 7 See Gržina, “Angažman minhenske tvrtke Franz Hanfstaengl.”
- 8 Crane, “Photographs at/of/and Museums,” 493.
- 9 Cf. Batchen, “Snapshots”; Pollen, “Objects of Denigration and Desire.”

simple equipment, and the anonymity of the author, probably a member of staff. Predominantly taken in a casual atmosphere, they eloquently point to social, gender and emotional relations. At times in contradiction not only with the tone but also with the narrative of official recordings from the life of the museum, and preserved in the museum for sentimental reasons or by inertia of the heritage institution's logic, they complete the picture of everyday museum life and institutional history (Fig. 1).

Geoffrey Batchen wrote:

Today, looking back from our digital age, it has to be conceded that snapshots are themselves historical objects, remnants of an earlier, industrial phase in modernity's development. [...] As I have suggested previously, the advent of digital technologies means that this kind of photography has now taken on an extra memorial role, 'not of the subjects it depicts, but of its own operation as a system of representation'. This suffuses snapshots with the aesthetic appeal of a seductive melancholy, whatever their actual age or the particularities of their subject matter. Certainly, it's hard now to see these rectangles of gelatin silver or vivid color, with their white edges and glossy sheen, except through a distorting haze of modernist nostalgia.¹⁰

In this paper however, it is not my intention to be guided by the logic of aestheticizing this type of photography, which in the words of Annebella Pollen "in popular publishing and museum exhibitions operates on one of the three levels": "an 'accidental masterpiece' model of celebration; one that cherishes the 'good eye' of the collector rather than the work collected; and finally, the alignment of amateur photographs with art-world tastes for a so-called snapshot aesthetic or surrealist *objet trouvé*."¹¹ My review of two dozen amateur photographs taken during every-day museum life, on the contrary, is guided by another Batchen's reflection from the same seminal text: "[...] what makes a snapshot a snapshot is its function, not its pictorial qualities, and this function is determined by the network of social relationships of which it is a part."¹² These are, on all counts, photographs characterized by stereotyping and conformity in content and expression; many of them are in a technical sense failed to the extent that the image is blurred (Fig. 2), but they were nevertheless preserved within the museum as, to quote Batchen again, "indexical trace of the presence of its subject, a trace that both confirms the reality of existence and remembers it, potentially surviving as a fragile talisman of that existence."¹³

10 Batchen, "Snapshots," 130.

11 Pollen, "Objects of Denigration and Desire," 296.

12 Batchen, "Snapshots," 135.

13 Ibid.

In this paper, I refer to the Strossmayer Gallery of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, an art museum, which is relatively small, although by virtue of a part of its core collection, the collection of Old Masters, not insignificant even from a global perspective. It operates within a larger institution with a broader mission and field of activity, which is, in addition, quite conservative and inert in its habitus, therefore often hindering the development of this museum in terms of strengthening the personnel and infrastructural capacities. The museum operates continuously for a century and a half within the same space, with a virtually unchanged volume of exhibition and office rooms, while over time the storage rooms have somewhat increased. Another constant is the relatively small staff, which in the first decades consisted of only one or two professional employees, with the help of an equally small number of technical staff playing the role of the guards, watchman, janitor and cleaner. The curators, many of whom were also active university lecturers, performed basic administrative tasks in addition to their regular work connected to the collection. Only from the middle of the 20th century did the personnel increase to some extent, and at that time the first women obtained the positions which required the highest qualifications. The fact remains, however, that a more balanced gender ratio of employees has only been achieved in the past twenty years. From the 1980s onwards, the museum has also had a librarian, who, however, simultaneously worked as a typist and clerk; a fact which was reflected on that employee's professional status in the eyes of the rest of the highly educated personnel. Even more unenviable was the position of an employee of the museum's technical service, an occupation that has been professionalized in Croatia for decades. As a rule, we are talking about skilled craftsmen of various narrow specializations, on whom the daily functioning of the institution and the actualization of exhibition projects were contingent upon, but who are practically invisible in the public perception of the museum. Two university-educated women, who have in the meantime established themselves as experts in the field of museum studies and art conservation respectively, performed in their day this work at the Gallery, as a kind of initiation into the heritage protection sector. It is superfluous to talk about the invisibility of the lowest-ranking staff members, cleaners and janitors, who are actually employees of the Academy's shared services.

Ana Baeza Ruiz writes that the museum archive, being "an intrinsic part of the museum's governmental apparatus through its record-keeping practices and the institutionalization of its history", is a key source for researching museum histories.¹⁴ It is, however, just like any other institutional archive, even the ones in well-organized and large systems, in reality merely a fragmentary simulacrum of the history of an individual museum. This applies in particular to the history of museum everyday life, that is, to everything that is assessed as excess from a bureaucratic perspective or

14 Baeza Ruiz, "Museums, archives and gender," 1.

as a result of political conformism. In the case of the museum which is the focus of this paper owing to unsystematically and incoherently managed documentation about personnel, infrastructure, work, exhibition and storage rooms, but also about the exhibitions that had been organized, such “knowledge gaps”, as Baeza Ruiz calls them,¹⁵ also include information that would typically be considered a part of a museum’s official history. Considering that Gallery never had its own photographer, but was condemned to rely on the shared photographic service of the umbrella organization or on occasional services by outsourced professional practitioners, the corpus of what Susan A. Crane in the broadest sense encompasses with the term *museum photography*¹⁶ is very deficient with regard to the photo-documentation of various activities involved in the functioning of the museum, including “the construction of displays, renovation, storage, transport, and routine clerical and maintenance jobs”¹⁷. In a documentary sense, the most diverse photographs produced for mundane purposes by members of museum staff, which are both in form and content different from photographs recording the collections by skilled professionals or official photographs of ceremonious events created under the auspices of an umbrella organization, are, for this very reason, precious. In addition, unlike the grand narrative of institutional history, which emits an image of the museum as a confluence of knowledge, power and representation, they provide—to paraphrase the words of Eva-Maria Troelenberg—a behind-the-scenes insight into the internal mechanics and social dynamics of the museum,¹⁸ drawing bona fide micro-histories contributing to the weaving of a less porous view of a museum’s past life. The majority of such photographs preserved in the museum had been created in the period from the mid-1980s to the end of the first decade of the new century, when the first digitally recorded photographs appeared in the museum; those, however, are not the subject of this paper. They are respectively silver gelatin prints and chromogenic color prints, with two exceptions of a Polaroid instant print and a chromogenic color slide, which may or may not have been taken by one of the employees. As it is known that one of the long-serving curators, employed in the mid-1980s, used to take photographs regularly, it is likely that quite a few of these shots are his. I learned orally from the museum librarian, who has been working in the Gallery since the mid-1990s, that she had taken some of the color photos with her camera, but is today no longer able to recognize her work. Only part of the prints has handwritten inscriptions on the back, which somewhat facilitate the identification of people and situations. For this occasion, I chose photos whose content could be confirmed by employees who remember the details passed down to them by word of mouth by the older generations of staff.

15 Ibid.

16 Crane, “Photographs at/of/and Museums,” 494.

17 Born, “Public Museums,” 226.

18 Cf. Troelenberg, “Images of the Art Museum,” 14.

Although the more recent documentation in the museum attests to the rebuilding and remodelling of the Strossmayer Gallery in a more detailed way than the archival documents and the Academy’s *Annals*, visual sources on these interventions are very scarce; therefore, the shots recorded by the museum staff on such occasions are quite interesting. One such example is a photograph taken in one of the exhibition halls at the end of the 1990s, when the gallery space was thoroughly remodelled, and the lighting system was changed. Even more interesting is a shot from the beginning of the 2000s, where we see an improvised inter-repository established in order to facilitate the transfer of artworks from the storage rooms to the exhibition space while changing the layout. In the same picture, we can see that at that time outdated devices were still being used to ensure the microclimate stability of the exhibition halls; a fact which would have been difficult to ascertain from the data preserved in the museum archive. The corpus of museum snapshots also contains a series of very bizarre gelatin silver prints and a Polaroid instant print from the mid-1990s, which I later realized record the restitution of the permanent display, which took place after the war when the artworks that had been evacuated to safety four years earlier were returned. In these photos one can see the only member of the museum’s technical staff, whose identity is known to us only from dry administrative records and from photos taken by other employees, because official photos of ceremonial events in the museum never show workers from the lower echelon of personnel. The shots demonstrate that alongside him, the curators also perform physical tasks—and we will notice this practice, understandable when it comes to such a small museum, also in some later examples—and that this collaboration takes place in intimate spirit, solidarity and a good mood (Fig. 3). From those same photographs, one can infer to what extent the dedication to heritage protection requires so much more from museum professionals than the mere installation of exhibitions and the publication of representative museum catalogues, by means of which, ironically, they are primarily recognized by the public (precisely due to the mediation of the grand narrative).

In small museums with limited budgets, even routine work often takes place in difficult conditions and is sometimes maintained solely by the dedication of its employees, who in so doing have no choice but to resort to improvisation. A shot taken in the late 1990s, showing two men in informal summer clothes who are outside in very unusual conditions taking photos of paintings lined up on a stone wall, provides us with an account of this (Fig. 4). Those men are the then director and the curator who at that time, having insisted for many years on regulating the status of a dislocated museum collection, fragmented between several keepers due to various legal, managing and political reasons, finally gathered the artworks into an indivisible assemblage, conducted their thorough revision and initiated the renovation of the run-down building where the collection had originally been housed. The same duo can be seen in a shot from the 2000s relocating an artwork from one building to another, and the action was

obviously done in a hurry because neither of them has the gloves usually used when handling museum objects. We are provided with fascinating insight into the poorly documented practice of preparing exhibitions in the Gallery from a series of photographs taken in mid-1980s on one such occasion. This cycle is the only such example within the entire section of museum photography in the Gallery. These shots document the work on installing the exhibits, but also moments of respite during which all the actors are in a relaxed mood (Fig. 5). Curators are on ladders hanging objects, we see them sitting on the floor together with members of the technical staff, in one shot one of them is even sitting on the then director's lap. In one of the photos, we even see a cleaning lady, who is actually an employee of the Academy's shared services and who seems rather distant in relation to the museum collective. What is interesting is that everyone is drinking coffee, even smoking in the exhibition area, which is unthinkable by today's standards! Such casual shots are very interesting if we compare them, for example, to a photo taken at the end of the 1990s on the occasion of the opening of an exhibition, where the employees of the Gallery were photographed together with their colleagues from the administration of the umbrella organization, in a completely banal representation with a clichéd impostation of the actors and the obligatory forced smile.

Of a completely different character are the shots of office holiday and birthday celebrations, which, judging by the preserved photographs, were often attended by friends from artistic and cultural circles. Some of them we continuously encounter on shots taken on such occasions and over several decades! Although the then director seems a bit wooden in some photos, the closeness between the various staff members is clearly visible, which is not evident during ceremonious public events and about which nothing can be learned from the official history of the museum (Fig. 6). The Gallery also retains preserved photographs of their socializing outside of working hours, even during family gatherings in weekend homes. Such a friendly relationship is also fostered with students employed as part-time co-workers in the role of ticket seller, museum guard and guide. In one picture, the doyen of Croatian art history and a distinguished member of the Academy, known for his cordiality, is shown explaining something to a group of female student-guides in a relaxed atmosphere in the Gallery office. These part-time employees, apart from being present in some administrative documents and these photographs, have de facto been erased from the permanent memory of the institution. A similar scenario happened with the librarian working at the museum until the mid-1980s. Her appearance is known to us only from one shot preserved in the Gallery, and her work is known to today's employees only by word of mouth. She is presented in an office she shared with the curators, behind a typewriter, which sheds light on her additional administrative duties and general working conditions (Fig. 7). Later photos of the same office, in which in the meantime computers also appeared, show how, in effect, that space has not changed in decades. At the end of the last century, the

first qualified librarian was employed, although the scope of her tasks, just like the location of the library's reference collection, remained the same as at the time of her predecessor, of whom we only know from the aforementioned photo. One photograph evidently taken in an attempt to document an educational event in the Gallery also dates from that time, and it, despite its technical shortcomings, is important for gaining insight into the development of that segment of museum activities, which, due to its unrepresentativeness and apparent lack of ambition, is essentially irrelevant in the context of the grandiose conception of institutional history.

In conclusion, let it be said that the photographs included in this review are a touching tribute to the day-to-day silent work that eludes a gaze focused on big themes, decorum and the related rigorous narrative. A considerable number of the selected examples are not in congruence with the traditionally understood ideal of self-representation due to their various characteristics analysed earlier. In fact, they are unintentionally building a slightly different identity of the museum, thus offering us a more nuanced image of its past.

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1. Unknown, untitled (The curator with artist friends on the roof of the museum), 1980s, gelatin silver print, 8 x 13 cm. The Photo Archive of the Strossmayer Gallery of Old Masters, Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts.
2. Unknown, untitled (A curator with two female students – part-time guides), 1998, chromogenic color print, 12,7 x 8,8, cm. The Photo Archive of the Strossmayer Gallery of Old Masters, Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts.
3. Unknown, untitled (Two curators and a member of the museum technical staff unpacking artwork during the preparation of the new permanent display after the war in the 1990s), 1990s, Polaroid instant print, 7,8 x 10,5 cm. The Photo Archive of the Strossmayer Gallery of Old Masters, Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts.
4. Unknown, untitled (Curators revising a dislocated museum collection), 1998, chromogenic color print, 9 x 12,7 cm. The Photo Archive of the Strossmayer Gallery of Old Masters, Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts.
5. Unknown, untitled (A break during the preparation for one of the exhibitions at the Strossmayer Gallery), 1980s, gelatin silver print, 9 x 13 cm. The Photo Archive of the Strossmayer Gallery of Old Masters, Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts.
6. Unknown, untitled (The Christmas party in the Strossmayer Gallery), 1998, chromogenic color print, 8,7 x 12,8 cm. The Photo Archive of the Strossmayer Gallery of Old Masters, Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts.
7. Unknown, untitled (The librarian-administrator working in her office), 1980s, chromogenic color print, 9 x 11,2 cm. The Photo Archive of the Strossmayer Gallery of Old Masters, Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts.