

- 1 "Homeless images", P. Monk, *Disassembling the Archive*
- 2 Schlak, T. *Framing photographs, denying archives: the difficulty of focusing on archival photographs*. Arch Sci 8, 85-101 (2008). doi.org/10.1007/s10502-009-9081-6

The image shifts, moves, turns around. It represents, encompasses, informs and holds. It is exchanged, traded, destroyed and upgraded. The image adjusts to, adapts to, responds to and mirrors. It is composed by a toner or cartridge, firmly transferred onto paper. It is broken down into hundreds of thousands of pixels and then carefully reassembled. It moves from one folder to another. The image is everywhere at once and never definitive. The image moves.

For me, images are always in motion. In a constant flux, they move from their production to an application. Through reproduction the images nestle in our media and our retinas. Especially in the seemingly all-encompassing world of the internet, images play the leading role. They tell stories, mirror, create illusions and activate. They illustrate our social media and keep us captive on the platforms. We share and communicate through images, and we laugh with, cry over, are startled by and distrust the image. Often within seconds of each other. The image moves itself but it also moves us.

There is power in the image. For media, companies, power holders or seekers, in education, and for the artist. For the artist, an image is often a reference, inspiration, source or even material. By looking at existing images, a personal language forms that the artist needs to create their own images. Collecting visual material has always been an important part of the visual artist's process. With the rise of media and since the publication of the first photo in the French newspaper *L'Illustration* in 1848, photographic images began to spread more quickly and were received by more and more people. And with the release of the first commercial camera in 1888, "private" images also began to wander more. First on a small scale through photo albums, slideshows and legacies. Nowadays through countless devices, platforms and social media.

But all this time, artists have been cutting out, saving, hanging, archiving, editing and appropriating photos. As inspiration, for reference or as material in the work itself. The role of existing images in the artist's process is often leading. As creators, we communicate through images. In images, we capture concepts and insights that cannot be captured in words. It is therefore not surprising that images often speak to us creators more directly than text. That images harbour essential data with which we can enrich our own visual language again.

Thus, we might even see the image as an archive in itself. As Ernst van Alphen writes in *Staging the Archive*, the photo, in relation to archiving, can be characterised as an 'archival record': "From that perspective, photographs are dealt with as pictorial testimonies of the existence of recorded facts." The photo is viewed as evidence that an event has taken place, where all the facts of that event are stored. But he also calls the photo inherently unstable. For photos are never just "records" of the past. Unmoored from their original context and references, they can always be read in different ways. The original data and context of a photo give us a certain lens through which we can read it, but once this reference is unknown or lapses, all the details within the frame can suddenly become significant. Our imagination can then interpret each element itself, resulting in variety of meanings.

Van Alphen points out that this contradiction, between factual document and unstable object with multiple meanings, creates a problem in dealing with photographs from an archival perspective. But this ambiguity of an image, in my view, nourishes the visual thinking of the viewer and can therefore significantly enhance the usability of images in an art practice. If we want to give our imagination complete freedom, we must make as much room as possible for all these different meanings of an image. And to achieve that, we must strip the image of its original information as much as possible. We should make the images essentially homeless¹ to fully experience their potential.

Stripping images of their context can be viewed as quite violent. But the violence is mainly done to the maker of the image. Their intentions are erased, leaving only what is actually seen in the image. This elimination of the author can certainly be violent and degrading in

some cases, but it can also offer liberation from a dominant narrative. By removing the author and their gaze, the power now lies with the viewer or user of the image. They can imbue meaning and intention in only what they see. The image becomes a shapeshifter that can adapt to each subsequent context, depending on its viewer or user. And it is this ability to shape-shift that makes images so interesting to artists. Unlike researchers or archivists, they do not necessarily have to relate to the source if they want to analyse or use the image. And often they choose not to do so.

It is therefore interesting to look at the intentionality of the artist in storing the image. Is the image stored because the context matters to them? Or is it more about the colour and shape of the depicted? Or does the image evoke a personal memory or another intimate feeling? The artist can attribute value to an image in all these areas, making it worthwhile to store it. And with this storage, they can create their own archive of visual material. This freedom in the process of archiving stands in stark contrast to all the rules and conditions that institutional archives must meet in dealing with visual material. Where the ambiguous character of the image provides freedom for the artist, it can cause problems for archivists. Tim Schlak says in his article *Framing photographs, denying archives: the difficulty of focusing on archival photographs*:

"Photographs compel us with their capacity to evoke rather than tell, to suggest rather than explain, so that they simultaneously allure and frustrate us with what we naively perceive in their content to be history and fact."²

He describes the photo as a deceiver, making us believe that facts are stored in its content but actually guaranteeing no truth. A document of reality that exists only in the viewer's imagination.