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ARTICLE

PERFORMING THE PHOTOTHEK RHETORICS OF VALUE IN PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES

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I

The history of art as an academic discipline was formed in close correlation with the emergence of photography. Since the mid-nineteenth century, more or less systematic campaigns for the photographic documentation of what is now called artistic and monumental heritage began in Europe. Photographs soon became the main tool of art-historical research. Art scholars, museums, the first university departments, and monument protection bodies began to accumulate photographs. Photographic archives have been the laboratories in which scientific and scholarly methodologies have been shaped since then.¹

The value of these photographic accumulations resided in the idea of the veracity of the photographic medium, as well as the belief that archives were also neutral organisms dedicated to the pure preservation of photographic documents. This rhetoric of the presumed objectivity of photography was completely deconstructed by post-modern critics in the 1980s, but tends to perpetuate itself in traditional uses of documentary photographs, and has been recently renewed with the advent of digital technologies.

The rhetoric of the so-called digital revolution had a huge impact on photographic archives, that seemed to be destined for obsolescence, but it also started a process of reviewing their function in both research and contemporary societies. Today, post-digitality grants an environment more conducive to the value

of material assets against so-called dematerialisation; nevertheless, analogue photo archives continue to fight for their legitimacy. Since 2007, the Photothek of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut has been actively contributing to this process. Moreover, in recent years it has provided fertile ground for a series of artistic projects. In this paper, I will first present theoretical and methodological approach, before focusing on the different ways in which artists, archivists, and researchers have been ‘performing’ the Photothek.

The Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (KHI) was founded in Florence, Italy in 1897 by a community of scholars from the German-speaking cultural area who were committed to the study of Italian art and architecture. Since joining the Max Planck Society in 2002, this research institute has been expanding its scope to the histories of art and architecture in a transcultural perspective. The Photothek, together with the KHI specialised Library, was created from the very beginning with the aim of providing scholars with photographic documentation of the works of (Italian) art that are the objects of their studies. Its constantly expanding holdings comprise, as of early 2025, over 640,000 photographs, most of them mounted on card boards. These are accessible to scholars in boxes in open shelves in the facilities of the Photothek; a digitisation initiative is ongoing.

When I arrived in Florence in 2007 as the Head of the Photothek, I was confronted with the challenge of making productive and, in the end, legitimate a photographic collection that was seen by many as a tool of the past. Describing the reactivation strategies adopted since then results in a kind of autoethnographic account that follows a temporal pattern. In this account, I will alternate between the first person singular and the first person plural, as the work we are doing at the Photothek is the result of my interaction with the entire team and the specific skills of individuals. The archival practices I will discuss below are performed by a group of people with different tasks and competencies. In this collaborative sense, I am an archivist, but I am also a scholar and this shapes my own attitude. This positioning at the intersection between archival practice and research, I argue, is one of the strengths of the Photothek’s approach – which is firmly rooted in the intellectual agenda of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz.

The first way to reactivate the Photothek and its holdings has been to acknowledge its historical depth. The photographs collected here since 1897 comprise donations and bequests; the metadata annotated on the card boards, in inventory books and card indexes allows us to track the provenance of many photographs and to connect them to individual scholars. The archival fonds cover a time span from the 1850s to the present day, and thus a correspondingly wide range of photographic technologies, right up to the digital. This archive offers excellent opportunities to investigate the use of photographs in the history of art over time. From a repository for working *with* photographs the Photothek expanded into a laboratory for working *on* photographs. Exploring the epistemological potential of art-historical photo archives means not only research on the Photothek’s holdings and archival practices, but also the engagement in collaborative projects

and the organisation of conferences, with the formation of an international and transdisciplinary network of archivists and scholars. The production of a shared knowledge about photographic archives implies the emphasis of their value(s).²

A discourse about the functions of scholarly and scientific photo archives in twenty-first-century research and societies is indeed a discourse on value. Taking the Florentine Photothek as a case in point, different systems of value are at stake here. Photographic 'reproductions' of works of art stay at a very low level in the hierarchies shared by the history of art, the museum system and the art market, based on authoriality and uniqueness. The value assigned to these photographs in the moment of collecting them is a documentary value, which remains valid even after the presumed neutrality of photography was dismantled in the 1980s.³ Be they analogue prints or digitised pictures, they continue to support research on the works of art and their changing over time. Very often, there is a tendency to apply to archive fonds the paradigms of art history: 'documentary' photographs are promoted to the rank of 'works of art' and thus new 'artists' are created where before there were professional, often unidentified photographers. This mode of photographic value creation corresponds to processes of canonisation that in turn feed the art market (see Vivian Maier or Seydou Keïta). This path towards the acknowledgment of a presumed artistic value of single photographs in an archive, I argue, is not productive because it reinforces existing hierarchies and privileges few photographs to the detriment of the masses. Referring to Nina L. Vestberg, I rather emphasise the archival value of the Photothek's holdings⁴ that unfolds within the photographic ecosystem.

Building on research into photographic archives within anthropology, post-modern archival theory, and a post-colonial / decolonial approach, I consider photographs not only as flat images, but rather as three-dimensional, material objects existing and acting in time and space, in social and cultural contexts, shaped by technologies, which bear the traces of their different uses over time.⁵ Despite being aware of the critique of the term 'object' that recently emerged in the context of ethnographic museums, I still consider the material approach heuristically very useful: it helps to dismantle established hierarchies, to appreciate photographic objects as autonomous, and to focus on their trajectories, also within the archive. Photographic archives too are not neutral repositories of pictures, but rather material conglomerates, dynamic ecosystems⁶ in which photographs act and interact with other nonhuman and human agents such as boxes, shelves, labels, captions, card indexes, inventory books, classification systems and database schemes – as well as photographers, archivists, and scholars. Archivists are not simple custodians of photographic and archival truth, but they also shape and continuously transform the photographic documents and objects.⁷ Emphasising the agency of archivists further questions the presumed objectivity of photographs and archives, thus challenging the art-historical canon that is embodied in these institutions.

This process of deconstruction of art-historical certainties leads to a reflection on possible ways of making the archive available to society and opening

it up to contemporaneity. This meets a rising interest of contemporary artists to engage with archives and photography. However, before giving an account of the artistic collaborations initiated by the Photothek, I shall exemplarily introduce one of its photographic objects.

It is a pale green cardboard of the kind used in the Photothek as a mount. Its standard size (34 x 24 cm) fits our photo boxes [Figure 1]. This object comes from a box labeled 'Fehlende Fotos', literally 'missing photographs' – however, a box cannot contain missing photographs, precisely because they are missing. In fact, it contains cardboard mounts from which photographs have been removed and stolen over time. Archivists finding such a piece of cardboard in the holdings put it in the box labelled 'missing photographs' to document the loss; they often write down the date on which they found it and other circumstances. In this example, the photograph once pasted onto the cardboard has not been ripped off, as in most cases, but cut out. We can't see anything but a hole. Focusing on the visual content of the picture is simply impossible: the picture is not there anymore. This hole could be read as a reference to framing as an inherent part of photographic technology; it also frees the photographic object from 'the burden of representation'.⁸ I'll respond to the affordance of this imageless cardboard by focusing on the other traces [Figure 2]. The inventory number stamped in the upper left corner reads 108339. According to the inventory book, this photo-object was produced on February 26, 1936. The (now missing) picture was pasted onto the cardboard, stamps and captions were positioned according to the standard of the Photothek: a codified layout centered around the represented works of art, serving the 'mission' of art-historical photographic documentation. The stamp of the KHI is visible in the middle below the photograph. On the left, there is the name of the artist, Benvenuto Cellini, and just below a short title of the represented object, a drawing for a salt cellar ('Disegno p. saliera'). On the right we read 'Vienna – Mus. d'Arte industriale', today the Museum für Angewandte Kunst, in which the drawing is preserved. A green stamp in the bottom right corner, 'LVFB', refers to Luigi Vittorio Fossati Bellani, a private collector, patron and connoisseur who, between 1926 and 1943, donated over 50,000 photographs to the Photothek. Fossati Bellani aimed for a systematic expansion of the Photothek, procuring rare and valuable – and often difficult to access – photographs through his wide network and financial means. His advice also concerned questions of arrangement and classification. The material donated by him arrived at the KHI already processed, with the cards inscribed and stamped; it only remained for Oreste, the factotum, to perform the final step of gluing each print onto the corresponding cardboard. The reasons of Fossati Bellani's commitment to the Photothek, as well as his role in the Florentine network around the KHI, are still to be investigated.⁹ However, the inscriptions on the cardboard 108339 are from his hand. We still have to decipher one of them: 'v. Ill.^{ed} London News / 7.VII.34'. A look at the popular magazine *Illustrated London News*, issue July 7, 1934, reveals on page 18 an article entitled 'Long-lost Goldwork Designs by Holbein and Others. From Vienna'. It relates to a corpus of Renaissance

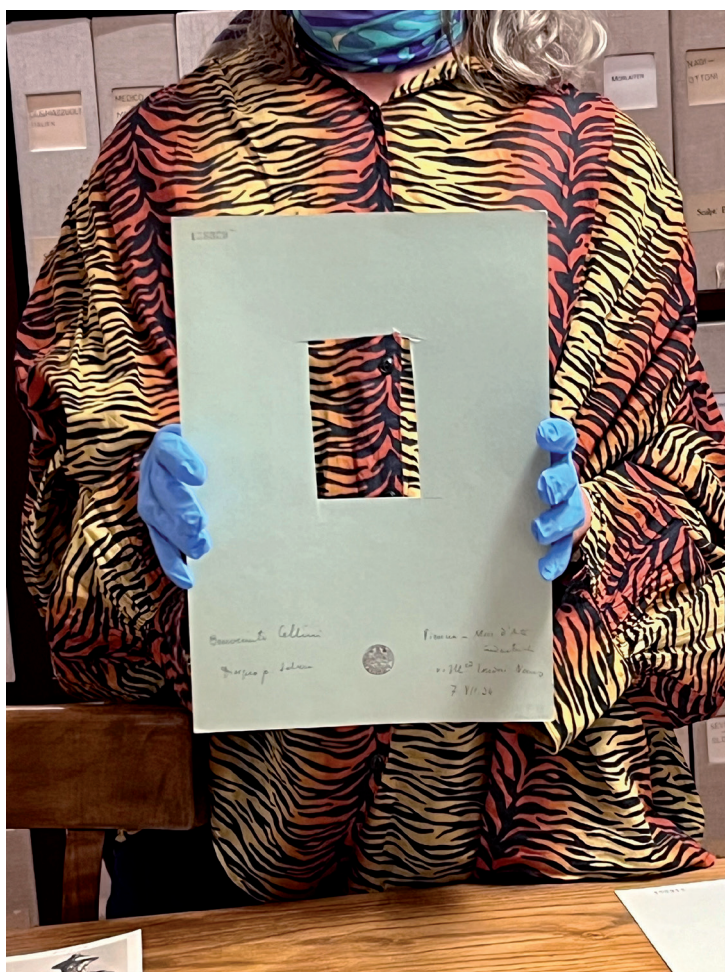


Figure 1.

Cardboard from the box "Missing
photographs" with pencil inscriptions
and ink stamps,
KHI inventory no. 108339, inventoried
on February 26, 1936,
34 x 24 cm, performed during a
presentation of the Photothek on
December 15, 2023.
Anna-Luise Schubert.



Figure 2.

Cardboard from the box "Missing
photographs" with pencil inscriptions
and ink stamps,
KHI inventory no. 108339, inventoried
on February 26, 1936,
34 x 24 cm.
Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz –
Max-Planck-Institut.

drawings that had been recently rescued from the sample collection used by generations of goldsmith students at the Vienna Academy for Applied Arts, once connected to the museum. The page of the *Illustrated London News* displays several illustrations with drawings by different artists – only one of them shows a work by an Italian master, Cellini. The drawing had been published only a few weeks earlier by the Viennese curator, Karl Oettinger, in the prestigious London journal *Old Masters Drawings*.¹⁰ Hence, the picture that has been violently taken from 108339 was a clipping, which also explains why it was cut out and not ripped off the cardboard – the thief would have destroyed it. Incidentally, on the MAK website one could retrieve a modern digital scan of Cellini's drawing.¹¹ To close the circle, it would be interesting to look at how this photo-object was catalogued in the Photothek's database, but this would go beyond the scope of this chapter.

This close-reading sanctions the 'infinite recodability'¹² of a photograph – even *in absentia*. It reminds us that metadata always already existed. It confirms Terry Cook's 'intellectual paradigm' for archives as places where not only information can be retrieved, but knowledge and meaning(s) are sedimented.¹³ It spotlights the agency and affordance of this photo-object, the invitation to concentrate on aspects other than the image, and also to literally look through the hole and out of the window. Even without resorting to Leon Battista Alberti's metaphor for paintings, the hole can be interpreted as an open window to the different stories that just started to emerge from this photo-object: stories about Cellini's drawing, Fossati Bellani, the 'missing photographs' box, the codified cardboard layout, as well as the many staff members of the Photothek who applied these rules for generations and still apply them today. In the end, stressing the agency of objects is a way to underline the agency of humans.

II

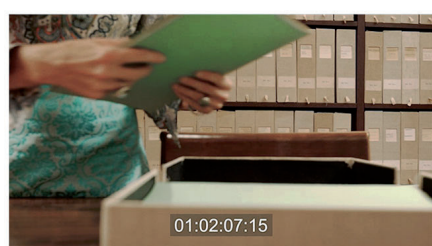
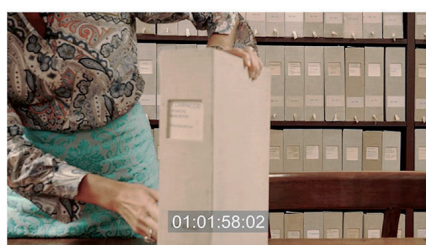
In a seminal double essay of 2002, after conceptualising the inextricable interconnections between archives and power, 'the always-opening narratives within archives, the never-ending history of the record before and after it arrives in an historical archive', Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz recommend to 'look at archivists more directly as performers in the drama of memory-making'.¹⁴ Archival practices, they argue, comprise a set of actions that archivists literally *perform* in their daily work following a 'script' – for instance, the codified cardboard layout described above.¹⁵ These actions and scripts are central to the artistic collaborations in which the Photothek has been engaged. These mostly feature people doing things with photographs within an archival context. Archivists appear for instance in the video installation 'An den Rändern, rau'¹⁶ that Johannes Braun and Toby Cornish realised for the exhibition 'Unboxing Photographs: Working in a Photo Archive' (Berlin, Kunstbibliothek, 2018).¹⁷ The video installation concentrates on the materiality of photographs as well as on the gestures of the archivists/

researchers involved in the project. A playful exercise with archival practices and a creative application of standardised classification procedures were at the centre of two workshops with artist-photographers Antonio Di Cecco in 2018 and Armin Linke in 2019, which helped to challenge and disrupt the Photothek's taxonomy from within.¹⁸ In a photographic essay resulting from this project,¹⁹ Armin Linke stages the hands and bodies of Photothek staff members while they perform their script – the 'naturalized norms' that, through ritualisation and repetition, have gone on to form the archivists' professional identity and thus legitimacy.²⁰ Linke subtly invites us to question these routinised gestures and the 'tacit narratives'²¹ that still tend to convey the idea of archivists as passive guardians of evidence.

Parallel to his photographs, in 2018–19 Armin Linke directed a series of interviews in which he and Estelle Blaschke asked me to speak about the many levels on which the making of meaning and value interlace in the Photothek's daily routines [Figure 3].²² Acting in front of Linke's camera and then listening and seeing myself in the video again and again was a revelation. It triggered a reflection on this form of presentation, the Photothek's most effective communication strategy. Using the photo archive as a setting; moving around the spaces and inviting different audiences to become aware of archive structures such as boxes and the classification system; examining together the photo-objects carefully arranged on a table, sometimes taking them in my hands and gently handling them to underline

Figure 3.

Armin Linke: Interview with Costanza Caraffa in the Photothek of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz at Palazzo Grifoni, September 14, 2018, videostills. Armin Linke (post-production: Giulia Bruno).



my argument.²³ While presenting, I am in fact re-enacting daily archive operations and practices, and this re-enactment is deliberately addressed to a public. The energy thus produced resonates with the audience, generally (although not always) persuading interlocutors – who may never have been to a photographic archive before – of the value of the Photothek's holdings and the research carried out here. At the same time, the presentation creates a space for questions and critical discussions. The audience may include researchers from the KHI, guest scholars, student groups, stakeholders, journalists, but also an advisory board, members of civil society or bureaucrats from the Max Planck Society on whom our funding may depend. Thus, in some cases the success of the presentation might have a vital relevance for the future of the Photothek. The reflection on this kind of presentation, whether performed by me or, more and more often, by one of my colleagues, was amplified during the Covid period, when the Photothek was obviously forced to forego in-person events. More recently, this issue has become topical again following the move of the Photothek to a new building in Spring 2024 and the need to adapt the choreography of our presentations to the new spaces. However, it is not only a reflection of our communicative strategy, but also a chance to become further aware of our agency as archivists – a double way of *performing* the archive, in our everyday practices and in their re-enactment, able to stimulate 'a critical re-evaluation of the scripts we are performing'.²⁴ In accordance with Cook and Schwartz: 'once we acknowledge "archival practice" as a form of "performance" of archives, we will be better able to become "performance conscious", and then recognize our "special signatures."' ²⁵

This 'performance consciousness' arose from Linke's video and my interaction with the artist, but also from my encounter with dance and photography scholar Isa Wortelkamp,²⁶ who suggested that I think about the work in a photo archive as a form of choreography. Taking choreography as, literally, a set of rules for the organisation of movement in time and space,²⁷ means to emphasise that the 'script [...] on the stage of archival practice'²⁸ is performed by individuals with their bodies. Elsewhere I already applied this idea of analysing and describing the Photothek's daily archival practices in terms of dance notations and choreographed movements in the organised space of the archive.²⁹ I shall now elaborate on Linke's video and my presentations. Very useful is Corinne A. Kratz's definition of 'cultural display', which involves, but is not limited to, museums and exhibitions, rituals and performances, photography and communication. In an article published in 2011, as well as in her new book,³⁰ Kratz connects museum exhibitions and other designed forms of cultural displays with the capacity to produce 'rhetorics of value'. In the case of my presentations, cultural display consists of acting and re-enacting, be it in front of a public or in front of Linke's camera, the serial gestures of archiving. The designed space is the Photothek with its shelves and boxes. Design includes the arrangement of the photo-objects on the tables as well as the itinerary with my audience through the ordered spaces of the Photothek. The performative component emphasises the value of photographs and archives,

and also the Photothek's own narrative and projects. This rhetoric is based not only on the staging of the photographs but also on my *eloquentia corporis* in the sense of ancient rhetoric as a complement to speech (because of course I also say something). In this choreography, my hands, my body and my voice mediate and communicate value. They create the conditions for an appreciation of the photographs' materiality beyond their visual content, for a shared awareness of the constructedness of photographic documents, for a recognition of the absences that result from archival practices and especially from appraisal.³¹ Moreover, my performance enables a process of a storytelling about the photo-objects.

The aim of challenging archival structures has been shared for years by a large number of contemporary artists. They often propose 'alternative forms of archiving and archival knowledge [...] that question the material, formal aspect of an archive and its immaterial, informal procedures of archiving'.³² As Anthony Downey puts it, 'these artists are not simply questioning veracity, authenticity or authority, or, indeed, authorship; rather, they interpose forms of contingency and radical possibility into the archive'.³³ This 'materialist work of friction, a rubbing with and between documents',³⁴ propagated also by art curators, would benefit greatly from a stronger exchange with post-modern and critical archival studies, which are rooted in a deep knowledge of archival processes from within the archive.³⁵ My presentation as a form of cultural display also comes from, and is performed within, the archive; it is therefore different from an exhibition in a public space. Nevertheless, recent literature on archive exhibitions offers critical clues for a better understanding of what I am doing in Armin Linke's film. In his book on *Exhibiting the Archive*, Peter Lester focuses on the 'experience' of archives in exhibitions, on the 'encounters' between visitors and archives, and how these encounters 'trouble and unsettle established narratives and histories'.³⁶ Writing about 'Archives on Show', curator Beatrice von Bismarck emphasises the separation between the space 'inside' the archive, basically intended for assembling and preserving documents, and the space of the exhibition 'outside' the archive, in a public environment in which the mediation of the archive takes place.³⁷ Quoting performance scholar and curator André Lepecki, she speaks 'of the body in dance as an archive whose movement within the archive can result in its rewriting',³⁸ but she implicitly assumes that this rewriting cannot be done by the archivists. Yet, I do acknowledge a problem in my own presentation, which by an excess of self-reflectivity and positionality might suggest the opposite, namely that the rewriting of narrative is *only* possible from within the archive. Of course, an archive must always stay open to multi-perspectivity, to a polyphony of voices and possible interpreters; I will come back to this point later. However, in my presentation, the rearrangement of the archive is staged in the space of the archive itself, which nevertheless becomes public during the moment of my guided tour or through Linke's interview. And here I agree with Bismarck that 'the transfer into the public sphere threatens to weaken the legitimacy and binding force of the order created in the archive with its legislative effects. The claim to evidence associated with the presentation of documents is

relativized here'.³⁹ Biases and tendentiousness cannot be erased in an archive, also because this would mean destroying historical traces, but it is imperative to speak loudly about them in any possible context and to develop critical interventions. On 26 April 2015, Elizabeth Bentley and Jamie A. Lee with FARR, too, brought archival records outside the archive threshold, though not into an exhibition room, but rather in Tucson's public space, as a 'pop-up archive that centered upon the *performance* of archival materials – namely 1970s lesbian feminist oral histories – outside of the traditional archival space where they are otherwise stored'.⁴⁰ This collaborative and interdisciplinary initiative chose the pop-up format explicitly to challenge normative archival habits. Bentley and Lee stress 'the socially transformative – that is, rhetorical – capacities of multimodal artistic practice and performance'.⁴¹ Combining together ideas from queer, feminist, and cultural rhetoricians and performance-studies scholars, they argue for an approach to *rhetoric* as *movement* and dislocation and for 'the theory-making power of performance'.⁴² 'Through the "repertoire" of bodily gestures and felt senses, performers were able to intimately sense and experiment with the lesbian feminist oral histories in ways that might not have been accessible through static written texts',⁴³ the same could be said about my performing photo-objects and telling their stories in the Photothek.

Corinne A. Kratz, once again, may help to define even more precisely the nature of my presentations in relation to museum exhibitions. Both formats communicate, narrate, offer an immersive experience to visitors who arrive with their own expectations. Meaning and value are mediated: an 'intersubjective encounter via the medium of the exhibition' or of my presentation takes place.⁴⁴ Meaning and value are co-constructed by visitors and makers, though the audience in the Photothek is guided in a more assertive, but also openly declared, way than in most exhibitions. The 'performative designed space' of the exhibition⁴⁵ corresponds to the performative designed space of the Photothek. This is an ordered space governed by the classification system that determines the 'right' place of each photograph in the right box in the right room. This place, however, is dynamic because the archive itself is in continuous transformation. I argue this in front of my audience in a setting that, with its rigorous shelves and boxes, seems rather to embody archival power in a Foucauldian sense as well as the authority of the institution; this contrast contributes to the effectiveness of my narration. Rhetorics of value are embedded in the location itself: the piano nobile of a Renaissance palace, Palazzo Grifoni in which the Photothek had its seat until Spring 2024, or the freshly renovated new building of Via Modena with its beautifully designed shelves. As in exhibitions, a number of partly unexpected stories are provided. Yet, what really makes the difference between exhibitions and the Photothek's presentations is my mediating role, which prevails over the designed exhibition interface as a mediator between visitors and exhibition makers. The concepts of performance and dance are thus crucial to fully understand this format.

In Linke's videos and in other pictures [Figure 1], too, my agency is underlined by the use of archive gloves. The communicative power of hands wrapped in

gloves acting in an archival context has been staged by Akram Zaatari in some of his films such as 'On Photography, People and Modern Times' (2010) as well as 'On Photography, Dispossession and Times of Struggle' (2017).⁴⁶ In the most recent video Linke shot during his last visit to the Photothek in February 2025, the gestures of my hands pointing to details on the photo-objects seem to allude to the indexicality of photography [Figure 4]. Hands play an important role in a recent book by Jamie A. Lee, which challenges us 'to look closer at the bodies – human and non-human, as well as bodies of knowledge – that produce and are produced by archives'.⁴⁷ Lee combines in their person multiple expertise and points of view from critical archival studies, the production of socially engaged documentary films, and the founding and supervision of LGBTQ+ 'community archives'. An important component of this practice is relational storytelling. Lee's approach emerged from this experience of 'to tell and listen' with their own body: 'I became aware of the body in the telling and how nuanced gestures might relate to the archival record, including to influence and shape what I call the archival body. The archival body is comprised of multiples histories, stories, and bodies of knowledge. These, together, constitute the archives. I am especially interested in the everyday experiences that are so often overlooked in documentation efforts'.⁴⁸ This approach further expands the postmodern understanding of the archive as a place of order and power, as already proposed by authors such as Terry Cook, Elizabeth Edwards and Joan

Figure 4.

Armin Linke: Presentation by Costanza Caraffa in the Photothek of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz in Via Modena, February 14, 2025, videostills. Armin Linke (post-production: Martina Pozzan).



M. Schwartz. For Lee, archival documents are ‘alive and in continuous motion’, while archives as ‘bodies of knowledge’ appear recalcitrant and ‘as tools of both oppression and liberation’.⁴⁹ In order for archives to unfold their inclusive potential as sites of multiplicity, it is appropriate to rethink archival practices from the point of view of the body. The starting point for this critical awareness is a broad and elaborated concept of the body, ranging from the human and the corporeal to the entire corpus of archived documents, memories, and histories that together form the ‘archival body’,⁵⁰ including technologies and cultural techniques as prosthetic body amplifiers. Postmodern archival studies had already questioned the alleged objectivity of archivists. Lee extends this critique by focusing on the bodies of archivists, whose hands have been erased from classical archival theory, while it is precisely the serial, automatic repetition of the learned gestures of ‘correct’ archiving that contributes to their supposed professionalised neutrality.⁵¹ For Lee, a phenomenological analysis of repeated and habitual actions in the archive shall ‘introduce uncertainties in everyday archival practices that are oriented in time, space, and the body’,⁵² with the ultimate goal to flow into an emancipatory practice:

Archivists must question the *scripts* – the tacit knowledges – that inform the stories being told and those that we subsequently tell ourselves. [...] Interrogations of the archival body might, therefore, elucidate the scripts and normalized archival practices and practices of embodiment in order to highlight the somatechnical *capillary* spaces through which transdisciplinary methodology can emerge.⁵³

Lee gifts me with the added value I was looking for in my ruminations about Armin Linke’s videos and my presentations: a new awareness of one’s own bodily actions as archivist and scholar, as well as of the everyday collective handling of photographs by the Photothek’s team, can start a creative, interactive process that makes it possible ‘to reimagine what the records could do’.⁵⁴

‘To reimagine what the records could do’: this happened in fact within the project by artist Massimo Ricciardo, ‘Encounters in an Archive: Objects of Migration, Photo Objects of Art History’. This installation, co-curated with Almut Goldhahn and supported by the entire Photothek’s team, has been repeatedly displayed in the Photothek between 2017 and 2023. Here the artist created a dialogue between photographic objects from the Photothek and objects of migration collected on the shores of Sicily and Lampedusa: things functional to the journey, but also to identity and memory, such as passports and nautical charts, family photographs, diaries, a sample of the homeland. They bear material witness to the often tragic experience of migration, but also incorporate a critique of the power of the archive; in the setting of the Photothek with its shelves and boxes, these fragile objects developed a disruptive force. The temporary installation provided a protected space with performative and social features. During their encounters, the artist, the curators, and the audiences discussed the ethics of displaying these objects. The project stresses the connection between the taxonomisation of photographs that document works of art and the taxonomisation of human ethnicities, too.

Every classification system produces categories, groups, boxes – or, in the case of human beings, ghettos, refugee camps, segregation. Taxonomisation on ethnic grounds produces discrimination, slavery, abuse, and conflict, ultimately leading to migration.

Here again, speaking about things has been a way to speak about people – especially about the migrant people who owned the objects and whose destinies are not known to us. A series of workshops involving mediators with personal experience of migration from the Amir project in Florence⁵⁵ and other scholars and curators started a participatory process that featured the archive as a place for the collective production, transformation, and negotiation of memory. These conversations were merged into the resulting book.⁵⁶ The process of participation culminated in reiterations of the installation in Spring/Summer 2023, in which the artist and the curators stepped back, while Pinto M. Francisco, Edson A. Manuel and Ibrahima Saïdy from the Amir group took the floor. They narrated and performed the objects in their own way, in an intense moment of reactivation and symbolic restitution [Figure 5]. The performative nature of the installations and connected workshops reinvented the archive space as a laboratory of encounters, opening it up to the contemporary. This is, indeed, an alternative way to use the archive and therefore to establish its value, as suggested by the South American collective Red Conceptualismos del Sur.⁵⁷ Their manifesto⁵⁸ invites us to focus on the frictions

Figure 5.

Pinto Manuel Francisco performing Massimo Ricciardo's installation "Encounters in an Archive. Objects of Migration/Photo-Objects of Art History" in the Photothek at Palazzo Grifoni, April 14, 2023. Bärbel Reinhard.



produced in an archive: starting from a critique of the capitalist system (including the internet), RedCSur associates the production of value not with the property of the archive, but with its use. Not *exchange value*, but *use value* – a multilateral use able to foster new collaborative forms of production and circulation of knowledge. The use of archives requires the responsible involvement of operators and users. Making an archive available for use generates *co-responsibility*. In Ricciardo's installation, this becomes manifest in the gestures of all the participants, a choreography that partially recreates, in the setting of the Photothek, the caring gestures of archivists. Co-responsibility stems from collective acting in the archive. This is potentially the 'transgressive performance' to which we were first urged by Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz.⁵⁹

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- 1 Among the seminal publications: Anthony J. Hamber, *A Higher Branch of the Art. Photographing the Fine Arts in England 1839 – 1880* (Gordon and Breach, 1996); Geraldine A. Johnson, ed., *Sculpture and Photography: Envisioning the Third Dimension* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); Costanza Caraffa, ed., *Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History* (Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2011); Sarah Hamill and Megan R. Luke, eds., *Photography and Sculpture: The Art Object in Reproduction* (The Getty Research Institute, 2017).
- 2 For these projects and publications see: <https://www.khi.fi.it/en/photothek/index.php> (accessed February 26, 2025).
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- 5 Julia Bärnighausen et al., eds, *Photo-Objects. On the Materiality of Photographs and Photo Archives in the Humanities and Sciences* (Max Planck Society – Edition Open Access, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.34663/9783945561409-00>. Seminal writings: Joan M. Schwartz, "'We make our tools and our tools make us.'" Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics and Poetics of Diplomats,' *Archivaria*, no. 40 (1995): 40–74; Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (Berg, 2001); Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, eds., *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (Routledge, 2004) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203506493>.
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- 10 Karl Oettinger, 'Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571) – Design for a Salt Cellar,' *Old Masters Drawings*, vol. 9, London (1935): 11–12, plate 12.
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- 13 Terry Cook, 'From Information to Knowledge. An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives,' *Archivaria*, no. 19 (1984-1985): 28–49.
- 14 Cook and Schwartz, 'Archives, Records, and Power', 172.
- 15 Ibid., 183–184.
- 16 The installation was site-specific, the video is partially visible online: Johannes Braun and Toby Cornish, 'An den Rändern, rau', <https://vimeo.com/510742598> (accessed February 27, 2025).
- 17 The exhibition was the final outcome of the collaborative project *Foto-Objekte: Forschen in archäologischen und kunsthistorischen Archiven* (together with the Antikensammlung, the Kunstbibliothek and the Institute for European Ethnography of the

Humboldt University in Berlin) and included works by Ola Kolehmainen, Joachim Schmid, Elisabeth Tonnard, and Akram Zaatari. See <https://www.smb.museum/en/exhibitions/detail/unboxing-photographs/> (accessed March 5, 2025); Julia Bärnighausen et al., eds., *Foto-Objekte: Forschen in archäologischen und kunsthistorischen Archiven* (Kerber, 2020); Stefanie Klamm and Franka Schneider, 'Unboxing photographs: Foto-Objekte ausstellen,' in *Foto-Objekte*, ed. Bärnighausen et al., 244–263.

18 On the two workshops see Costanza Caraffa, 'Archival Transformations and the Value of Photographic Objects,' *Život umjetnosti – Journal for Modern and Contemporary Art and Architecture*, 111 (2022): 38–39, <https://doi.org/10.31664/zu.2022.111.03>.

19 Matteo Balduzzi, ed., Armin Linke. *Modalities of Photography* (Silvana Editoriale, 2020).

20 Cook and Schwartz, 'Archives, Records, and Power', 173, grounding on Judith Butler's 'theory of performativity', see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).

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23 On the table see Anke Te Heesen, 'Surface and Contemporaneity,' in *Rooms with a View. Aby Warburg, Florence and the Laboratory of Images*, ed. M. Faietti et al. (Giunti 2025), 320–321.

24 Cook and Schwartz, 'Archives, Records, and Power', 184.

25 Ibid., 185.

26 Isa Wortelkamp, *Bilder von Bewegung: Tanzfotografie der Moderne* (Jonas, 2022).

27 Kai Van Eikels et al., "Bewegung," in *Metzler Lexikon Theatertheorie* (J.B. Metzler, 2005), 33–42; Gabriele Brandstetter, 'Choreographie,' in *Metzler Lexikon Theatertheorie* (J.B. Metzler, 2005), 52–55.

28 Cook and Schwartz, 'Archives, Records, and Power', 179.

29 Costanza Caraffa, 'Choreografien des fotografischen Archivs II: Notationen und eloquentia corporis in der Photothek,' in *Tanz in Bildern. Plurale Konstellationen der Fotografie*, ed. Isa Wortelkamp (Transcript, 2022), 49–66, <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839464625>.

30 Corinne A. Kratz, 'Rhetorics of Value: Constituting Worth and Meaning through Cultural Display,' *Journal of the Society for Visual Anthropology*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2011): 21–48, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-7458.2011.01077.x>; Corinne A. Kratz, *Rhetorics of Value. Exhibition Design and Communication in Museums and Beyond* (Duke University Press, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478060598>. The book was still in press while writing this text, I was only able to read the introduction.

31 Terry Cook, "'We Are What We Keep; We Keep What We Are:' Archival Appraisal Past, Present and Future,' *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 32, no. 2 (2011): 173–189.

32 Anthony Downey, ed., *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East* (I.B.Tauris, 2015).

33 Ibid. See Okwui Enwezor's fundamental exhibition and catalogue *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (Steidl, 2008), and among others: Simone Osthoff, *Performing the Archive: The Transformation of the Archive in Contemporary Art from Repository of Documents to Art Medium* (Atropos, 2009); Ernst Van Alphen, *Staging the Archive. Art and Photography in the Age of New Media* (Reaktion Books, 2014); Ernst Van Alphen, ed., *Productive Archiving. Artistic Strategies, Future Memories, and Fluid Identities* (Valiz, 2023); Stefano Graziani and Bas Princen, *The Lives of Documents – Photography as Project* (Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2023/2024).

34 Fernanda Carvajal and Mabel Tapia, 'Grasping the inappropriate: Disputes over the use value of archives,' in *Archives of the Commons II. The Anomic Archive*, ed. Fernanda Carvajal et al. (Ediciones Pasafronteras – Red Conceptualismos del Sur, 2019), 38–39,

https://redcsur.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ArchivoAnomico_Ingles_PDF_lectura-1.pdf.

35 About theory building within archives see as *pars pro toto* Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan and T-Kay Sangwand, eds., 'Critical Archival Studies,' Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.50>. For a radical, decolonial perspective see Saidiya Hartman's 'critical fabulation' (started with Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts,' *Small Axe* 12, no 2 (2008): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>).

36 Peter Lester, *Exhibiting the Archive. Space, Encounter, and Experience* (Routledge, 2024), 208.

37 Beatrice von Bismarck, 'Archives on Show: An Introduction,' in *Archives on Show. Revoicing, Shapeshifting, Displacing* (Archive Books, 2022), 15.

38 Ibid., 48.

39 Ibid., 69.

40 Elizabeth Bentley and Jamie A. Lee. 'Performing the Archival Body: Inciting Queered Feminist (Dis)locational Rhetorics Through Place-Based Pedagogies,' *Peitho Journal*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2018): 188. FARR is a coalition of feminist scholars and activists, based in Tucson, Arizona.

41 Ibid., 186.

42 Ibid., 193.

43 Ibid., 196.

44 Kratz, *Rhetorics of Value*, 8.

45 Ibid., 21.

46 See Akram Zaatari, *Against Photography* (MACBA, 2017), 53–81 and 83–97.

47 Jamie A. Lee, *Producing the Archival Body* (Routledge, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429060168>, 1.

48 Ibid., 9.

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50 Ibid., 116–117.

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52 Ibid., 19.

53 Ibid., 126.

54 Ibid., 28.

55 'Amir – Alleanze Musei Incontri Relazioni', <https://www.amirproject.com/> (accessed March 5, 2025).

56 Costanza Caraffa, and Almut Goldhahn, eds., *Massimo Ricciardo. Encounters in an Archive. Objects of Migration / Photo-Objects of Art History* (Viaindustriale, 2023)..

57 Red Conceptualismos del Sur seeks to supervise the (digital) future of a series of archives of Latin American artists. <https://redcsur.net/> (accessed March 5, 2025).

58 Carvajal and Tapia, 'Grasping the inappropriable'.

59 Cook and Schwartz, 'Archives, Records, and Power'.