



FLORENCE DECLARATION

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PRESERVATION OF ANALOGUE PHOTO ARCHIVES

31st October 2009

Premises

The main role of photo archives, like that of every archive, is to guarantee the conservation and future accessibility of documents from the past for their possible future use for research purposes.

The introduction of digital technologies has made new, powerful tools available for conservation and access requirements. Almost all photo archives are currently involved in electronic cataloguing and photographic print and negative digitization projects and new methods of online consultation have been developed.

The digital technologies applied to the archive have thus undisputed advantages. However, for this very reason, there is a tendency to consider the consequences of these processes too superficially. In particular, the debates on digitalization imply that once digitally reproduced, the original artefacts can be removed from consultation or even dispensed with altogether. The Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut on the other hand, supported by the other subscribers to these recommendations, believes that it is essential for the future of studies in historic, human and social sciences to generate a greater understanding of the inescapable value of photographs and analogue archives.

The conviction that it is useful and necessary to preserve the analogue photo archives is based on two simple considerations:

- the technologies not only condition the methods of transmission, conservation and enjoyment of the documents, but they also shape its content;
- the photographs are not simply images independent from their mount, but rather objects endowed with materiality that exist in time and space.

An analogue photograph and its digital reproduction are not the same thing

From the premises it follows that:

- an analogue photograph and its digital reproduction are two distinct objects and they are not interchangeable. In fact, each process of translation from one format to another is not neutral as regards the content of the object, but rather creates a new object that is different from the original;

- the consultation of an analogue photograph is a different experience to the consultation of its digital reproduction, as technology alters the methods of consuming and using the information.

Materiality of the photograph

In light of the current research interests we must overcome the traditional equivalence between photographs and images. The photographs must be considered material objects in time and space:

- as objects, photographs have a biography that manifests in various aspects: the moment, technological conditions and aims of their production; placement in the context of a certain archive; assignment of one or more meanings through inclusion in a systematic order and cataloguing; possible changes in function and meaning over time. Information on these aspects is increasingly important for research;
- in particular, the photographic object is characterized by tactile aspects that are indispensable for reconstructing essential moments of its biography like the technique, production period and history of its uses through time (through the state of conservation, for example).

Limitations of the digital format

The digital reproduction of photographic objects runs into some important limitations:

- digital technologies can provide valid instruments for the reconstruction of some issues regarding the photographic object, but they cannot reproduce its entire biography;
- in particular, the tactile aspect of the photographs cannot be reproduced in digital format;
- digitalization tends to reduce the photographs to just one visual aspect;
- consequently, the idea of total accessibility connected to the digital format is illusory: if internet access is ideally independent of place and time, it is also limited to a single component of the photographic object: the image.

The complexity of the photographic document

Both the visual and the material aspects represent the complexity of the photographs as documents, namely objects that convey information. Transposition from the analogue format to the digital format, that is to say from the continuous to the discrete, always involves a reduction of complexity. As regards the photographs, this manifests on various levels:

- the loss of quality of the photographic object (tactility, resolution, details, surface);
- the reduction of the photographs' biographical traces to the only elements recorded in that specific cataloguing programme; in fact, every database or digitalization project is conceived of to satisfy a finite (no matter how high) number of questions.

The conditioning of the interpretative possibilities is in itself inherent in each cataloguing instrument, even in the analogue arena. But it becomes risky if the digital format replaces the analogue, rather than completing and integrating it.

The archive as a place of research

The study of photographs cannot be extrapolated from the context they are conserved in: the archive. The archive is in its materiality an autonomous and unique structure, not simply the sum of the single photographs that constitute it.

The photo archive, as is true of every archive, occupies, for human and social sciences, the role of a laboratory, namely a place for the production and interpretation of knowledge. Photographic archives preserve and guarantee access to the photographs as instruments, but also as objects of research. The structures of photo archives are simultaneously the product and mirror of the history of scientific research. Thus:

- for research purposes it is not enough to guarantee access to single analogue photographs; it is the photo archive as a whole, with its structures and functions, that must be preserved as a place and also the object of all potential present and future scholarly investigations;
- the physical context of an analogue photo archive is quite different from the context of a database that allows the online consultation of digital reproductions of single analogue photographs.

The digitized archive: selection and reduction

The selection of documents considered worthy of being conserved is implied in the nature of the archive. The digitization of an analogue archive implies a further selection: in fact, contrary to what is argued, digitization is extremely onerous in terms of cost, time and human resources. Thus the selection becomes reduction:

- no matter how much money is invested in digitization, it is not realistic to think that in the future all the photographic objects present in the analogue archives will be converted into digital format with all the meta-data connected to them;
- the reduction is irreversible if after digitization the analogue archive is removed, with its complexity, from free consultation.

Therefore, digitization offers new paths of interpretation, but it precludes others; it promotes new ways of conducting research, but hinders others. Digital photo archives generate different research questions than analogue photo archives.

The obsolescence and instability of the digital format

Faced with justified enthusiasm for new technological instruments, it is still necessary to recall the still unresolved question of the obsolescence and instability of the digital format, with both technological and structural problems such as:

- the long-term archiving of digital information;
- the long-term stability of platform and internet functionalities.

Conclusions

The responsibility of guaranteeing the integrity of the historic documentation entrusted to them, independently of the format in which it has been transmitted, naturally falls to photo archives. The digital format cannot be considered a "modern" equivalent to the analogue format. Only integration between the analogue format and the digital format can guarantee the correct conservation of the photographic heritage for future studies and at the same time the implementation of digital instruments.

The preservation of analogue photo archives is also affected by the scholars who conduct and will conduct research on history, history of art, the history of photography, the history of science, the history of education, social sciences, anthropology, visual studies, Bildwissenschaft and so on. Not only the current, but all future potential scientific uses of the photographic documents must be respected, so that future generations of scholars are not faced with limitations that restrict or prevent their research possibilities.

We are therefore confident that these recommendations are supported and respected by representatives of both the photographic collections and university and academic research.

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Here, you will find a regularly updated list of subscribers and the German, English, Italian and French versions of the Florence Declaration.

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