

Lighting the Archive

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LA: The Düsseldorf-based initiative around Andreas Gursky has outlined a proposal for a new 'German Institute of Photography'. Among other things, it argues that in addition to providing exhibition spaces, the institute should also establish standard requirements for the new production of prints.¹ One effect of this has been the recent growing inquiries about the technical practices of the medium being negotiated, as well as including a stronger emphasis on photo restoration in the debate about the institute. Questions relating to conservation were also addressed in the paper commissioned by the Minister of State for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, for example, which was produced by the group around Thomas Weski.² Essen is currently emerging as a new 'centre for photo restoration'; two new positions have been created there.³

WT: At Museum Folkwang?

LA: Yes, at Museum Folkwang, in association with the Folkwang University of the Arts, the Krupp Historical Archive and the Ruhr Museum Foundation. This is independent of the issue of the institute. But it underlines Essen's credibility as a potential future location for an institute of photography.

WT: I find it striking that there seems to be little networking between individual conservators. And that there is a great reluctance to consult me as an artist and producer for example, even when it directly concerns my own work. There are times when I realise my work has been stored incorrectly. My unframed inkjet prints must be rolled inwards, for example, whereas with paintings, a canvas is always rolled outwards during conservation and when being stored. My works always arrive at the museum rolled inwards, with precise written instructions for how they should be installed. If a picture is later taken down however, it becomes the sole responsibility of the conservators, and their rules are sometimes different. Someone also told me about a museum that found a way to store the works flat in their full size, which is unfortunately also not correct, as my prints require a certain amount of paper tension and curvature for hanging on the wall. And they only have this if they are stored rolled inwards. That is just an example of how such a detail behaves in my practice.

LA: Gursky's initiative might be understood as expressing

a desire to find new ways of handling sensitive materials. Many situations in the past have made it clear that new and binding standards are needed. That alone is made difficult given artists have very different ways of working.

WT: My position is special insofar as I have considered certain aspects of impermanence and fragility in my work from the beginning. As early as 1993 I'd started exhibiting unframed inkjet prints, the reprinting of which was conceptually included in the certificates, as they still do today. Since then, collectors and institutions who purchase an unframed inkjet print receive a corresponding certificate, along with the original print from which the inkjet print was produced – today, this is the original file and a colour sample. These can then be stored together in a cool and safe environment. The certificate contains instructions on how and with which printer the print can be enlarged, or how this should be handled using future technologies. The originally purchased print must then be destroyed and handed over to the studio or the galleries named in the certificate. Therefore, this replacement requires the destruction of the original print. This tension, essentially a contradiction to the logic of collecting, has interested me since the 1990s. However, I do not share the idea that reprinting now offers a universal solution for all colour photography; it certainly doesn't make sense with my unique pieces or my sculptural *Lighter* works.

LA: Has such a reprint or replacement ever happened?

WT: Of course! I've been doing this for 30 years now. Not only for conservation reasons, but I also found it conceptually highly interesting. The large unframed inkjet prints all exist in an edition of one. I originally produced them on a large photocopier, the Canon Bubble-Jet Copier A1. It had an A1-format glass panel through which the image was scanned, with a first-generation inkjet printer underneath. That was a crazy machine. I would enlarge the image in two parts on a 59 cm-wide roll of paper, then glue them together. It was clear from the start that the works would not last long. But for me, the point was to see the mechanics exposed, the feeling of seeing the ink being applied to the paper before my eyes. That is why the works are hung unframed. Therefore, it is important that collectors can always have the print reproduced in case a gust of wind blows it off the wall, for example. Equally, it was important for me to be able to travel to another city with just a box

of templates and then make the enlargements there at a copyshop. There is a photo of me from 1996, taken by Jochen [Klein], where I'm travelling to Heathrow airport with a tube sticking out of a courier bag on my way to hang my pictures for *New Photography* at MoMA, New York.⁴ This roll contained two 180 × 270 cm prints and two at 120 × 160 cm, which together weighed two kilos at most. This whole idea of impermanence and also that of light-weight shipping was already present in this early phase of my work.

LA: What is the template then with which the original is restored from?

WT: That is the [original] C-print itself that I enlarged. In 1999 I bought my first freestanding inkjet printer, which replaced the Bubble-Jet copies. Since then, each inkjet print came with its own C-print, a scan on CD and the certificate. In the early 2000s it became clear that C-prints don't maintain their colour stability over time, and that inkjet prints are more durable. From that point on I no longer included the original but rather the datafile instead, which in any case constitutes the 'negative' since I switched to using digital photography in 2010. It will still be possible to use a TIFF file in 30 years or to upgrade and convert it. Nevertheless, it is essential that there is a binding colour sample. Therefore, for roughly the last 15 years, it has been my standard practice to give an archival inkjet print that shows how the image should look. I have continued to develop this system over time, which means these works are intended – conceptually – to always look 'new'. By contrast, there have been great efforts within photo restoration in recent years to approximate the feeling a picture had at the time it was originally produced. And yet it's often the case that this doesn't really work using the technologies of today. And so now, when new prints are made of old photos, they try to give them a certain aged character. I am now also working with these techniques in order to hang a 25-year-old C-print alongside a reprint from this year in a wall installation.

Incidentally, photocopies last the best. There was a print from 1987 in my exhibition at WIELS in Brussels last year – 33 years later – it hadn't changed at all. I printed all my C-prints myself by hand on Kodak paper until 1995. I was living in New York then, and I heard about a specialist who evaluated the stability of colour photos. His name was Henry Wilhelm. He clearly concluded that Fuji paper has the best durability, and so I switched to Fuji. I have always dated my C-prints with both the date the photo was taken and the print date, and my initials, if the print was produced by me or my studio.

In the late 2000s, it became clear that certain prints – early '90s Kodak – were yellowing along the white borders. Some of them even developed cloudlike patches of pink discolouration, known as 'dark fading'. The yellowing is a discolouration of the paper itself, of the plastic

support. I say this because I experienced a brief moment of shock in 2012: it was in that year that I began talks with Roxana Marcoci regarding an acquisition of my work for MoMA in New York. She told me that their collection of contemporary photography requires two identical copies of any print. That's the condition. No colour photograph enters their collection without there being two identical prints. I explained to her that I had been holding onto a 61 × 51 cm print of *Lutz & Alex sitting in the trees* since 1992 because I always thought: this should go to MoMA. So now there was this very well-preserved vintage print (even if I don't consider vintage to be a very precise designation), with fantastic colours and a light-cream background. Not all Kodak papers from the early '90s changed for the worse, some of them just developed a pleasant 'cream' tint – which, incidentally, one wouldn't hold against a drawing on paper. In the end, I had to produce two new digital C-prints, where a laser is exposing the image onto paper rather than a lamp shining light through a negative. When I moved my studio from London to Berlin in 2011, I carried out intensive print experiments around this with my assistant at the time, Simon Menges. Of course, the picture then had this new bright-white border, which gives many pictures a nice quality, whereas with others, I can easily see that they haven't been optically enlarged. There is a slight texture, a surface quality, the digital origins of which can be recognised. And so, the new digital prints of *Lutz & Alex sitting in the trees* went to MoMA. That was easy to justify, since the picture was to be hung as part of an entire unframed installation. Speaking of which, it was by 2002 at the latest in which I actively told museums that they must tape my prints to the wall. Even though I understand, of course, that you *can't* do this, since it's tricky and isn't in the restorers' handbook.

LA: What do you mean by taping them?

WT: Attaching them to the wall with Scotch Magic Tape, my installation tool of choice since 1993. I also told them: so that you do tape the pictures, I'll give you a set of identical exhibition copies free of charge. These then presented a huge challenge during an acquisition by Tate London as to how to classify them correctly because their system doesn't include a category for a set of unsigned original photographs meant to be used up eventually. An original photograph is handled the same whether it's signed or not, and must be preserved 'full-stop' and therefore, may not be 'consumed'. In turn, if you declare the installation [exhibition] set to be documentation material – not art – it enters the archive and is preserved differently, yet again cannot be 'reactivated' in order to hang on the wall.

LA: Hasn't it now become standard practice in photography acquisitions to always provide two prints?

WT: Yes, the U.S. museums defined this standard. For me,

it was just astounding that according to this logic, the vintage print no longer had any value.

LA: Where's the vintage print now?

WT: I use it now as an exhibition print. The numbering and signature have been crossed out.

LA: So you can do that. You can cross out the edition details.

WT: Yes, then it's just a work-print. Or an exhibition copy that I use for exhibitions. Such prints can be exhibited, but under no circumstances can they ever be sold. There are never more pictures in circulation than those that I defined on the first day an edition was created. I make no exceptions to this; it is very important that the size of an edition can be trusted.

LA: How does it work in the production of editions: do you work it out directly [at the same time]? Is that already factored in during production?

WT: That became definitively clear with the second set for the Tate in 2003. It was then that I realised I had to actively force the issue, without additional costs to the museums. Done right, one can tape the prints on, and remove them from the wall again afterwards. That is why I work with Scotch Magic Tape, using this adhesive technique on the back and the front. But then I realised that these [works] will never again hang in museums unless I actively make it possible. If a photograph enters into a collection under conditions that essentially deem it never to be shown as the artist intended, then for all intents and purposes it no longer exists. And so that is why I've always produced a few extra prints, since it's only natural that one will fall off the wall now and again, or a house will burn down. I've had some bizarre things returned to me in the past. That simply happens when there are hundreds of your pictures in the world. The first set of prints I gave to the Tate was signed, the second set was unsigned. I don't want to say it's of higher quality than the exhibition copy, but the fact it was produced in the darkroom means...

LA: ... always an approximation.

WT: I use a clear grading system on the back of my prints. There is the edition size and number. There is also XA – the extra copy – beyond the three or ten edition prints. The A means that the print is of absolutely equal quality [to that of the editioned prints]. And then there is XB, which means slightly different, maybe the last two or three enlargements before the perfect filtration was achieved. I see these as being of almost equal quality. XC is noticeably different – not terrible – but inferior to XB. I wouldn't upgrade and sign an XC. Finally, XF means

faulty and these are destroyed. Now that I am preparing for my exhibition at MoMA, I'm discovering that with certain older works there no longer remains an intact XA or AP copy – a lot can happen to a print over 25 years, through mechanical means alone. This leaves me with a choice: do I make a new print? Or do I use this XB, whose colour might have been a tiny bit different at the time, but is [actually] completely fine today, given all the parameters that have changed? What I have not done, to return to the question, is duplicate everything immediately. I don't really believe in the possibility of absolute protection or in the inferiority of a slightly altered print – one can work with it – you can still hang it, if you do it right. Rather, I believe in the attention and care that goes into producing these prints.

I started producing large framed works in 1999. Separate editions, conceptually completely different works, always in an edition of one and one artist proof. Since making this decision, I've had many people express their surprise that I allow the works to be framed. I have always responded that it is also about enabling an alternative experience of the picture. And I can only guarantee the purity of a print for six months if it's taped to the wall. After that, the likelihood that a fly will shit on it just becomes too great, not to mention air pollution that gets absorbed into the gelatine. The framed photograph is significantly better protected, and after a few years is therefore more pure than the unframed picture taped to the wall. These oppositions have always fascinated me. A lot of people are irritated by them; they want a template. The moment I realised that the unframed works were expected of me – around 1999 – I actively incorporated frames into my work.

LA: Beyond the content that you deal with in your pictures, you repeatedly allow yourself new approaches, which greatly factors into the reception of your work.

WT: Since the MoMA acquisition in 2012, the quality of these digital reprints has become so good that I am able to live with them quite happily. From this point on, I have also exchanged heavily yellowed pictures for collectors upon request.

LA: For institutions too?

WT: That depends. As I said, the idea of replacement has been conceptually embedded in my unframed large-format inkjet prints since 1992 – with them it's a totally normally procedure. Therefore, the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart hangs these types of works of mine in its painting hall under full lighting, as a matter of course. The pigments are so highly lightfast that there is never a need to reprint an image due to discoloration, but only because of mechanical damage to the unprotected paper. I have developed a structure where a replacement is provided in return for its production costs being covered. By contrast, if there is damage to the C-prints, which do not include this conceptual

replaceability, but which have their own formal appeal, there is no right to a replacement. Of course, I'll help out there too, if it's not a result of negligence. But as I said, I want the C-prints to retain their original process as such; I can live with these changes, they're just part of life. These are two coexisting approaches.

LA: The framed works are all editions of one?

WT: Yes, and always with an AP, which I hold back for institutions or other special purposes. Again, back to this coexistence. In the last ten years I've continued to make large-scale exhibitions with pictures that already toured in the 2000s – the South American tour of four museums, various exhibitions in Japan and Europe. Sometimes I would find that I only had one remaining print, and the question arose: do I really want to take this with me on the tour? So from 2012, I started to increasingly exhibit reprints – digital C-prints used for exhibitions – alongside original C-prints. As early as the 2000s I created new analogue enlargements of pictures from the 1990s. However, the paper was still different in the 2000s, higher in contrast. So, I've gone through three decades [in this process]: first there was only the 1990s print; then the 2000s darkroom reprints of the '90s pictures; then, in the 2010s, a mix, including some originals from the '90s; and finally new darkroom reprints as well as digital reprints. With the MoMA exhibition⁵ I entered into a huge project: what belongs in a retrospective? Which print of a picture should end up on the wall? What is it exactly that defines a picture? So a year and a half ago, I started to take another closer look. It became clear to me that in some cases I find discoloration absolutely acceptable, in contrast to some of the digital reprints. That is why I would now like to hang these early prints alongside other, newer ones at MoMA – the exhibition has been postponed to September 2022 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This increasingly pervasive practice of just completely reprinting everything new and only populating exhibitions with exhibition copies does not suit me; I like this unique mix.

LA: This also provides a history of the works' different materialities. And yet to some extent, it also raises the question of which version is the final one, even if only for posterity's sake.

WT: I don't see it that way. Even with August Sander, you have pictures he printed 20 years later hanging alongside others that were produced by his son 30 years after that. Just because a print was the last to be produced doesn't make it worthless; it is what it is.

So I came up with the idea of producing new digital enlargements of those prints that are too yellowed, but with a light paper tone. There was a specialist lab that would do this in London back in the 1990s: minimally pre-exposing images in order to give them a tone. I then

visited the printers at Recom, the Berlin based specialist lab, and I was really pleasantly surprised to learn that the discussions and the subsequent practice are now about emulating certain impressions, i.e., simulating particular tonal ranges of older papers on new papers.

LA: I imagine this is also aimed at communicating the historicity of an image – by using processes that convey its original appearance at the time it was created. Is that right?

WT: The decisive factor was when I closely re-examined some of the digital C-prints from the early 2010s and discovered a digitality – a certain noise in skin tones, for example – that I didn't like. This isn't the case with prints made from digital photos, but there were difficulties in translating the analogue grain, for example. What we're talking about here, by the way, 99 percent of people don't even see, but of course, what we're working on is situated at the margins of what is technically possible. At that time, the technology still didn't exist to recreate the original quality of an analogue photo – that's one aspect. Whereas today, there are methods that ensure a print looks as if it had been enlarged from a negative. Then the question arises: on which carrier? There really are no rules when it comes to the historicity of an image and whether you have to simulate it or not. Some people say, 'That's the same white as there was back in 1996, and it'll look just as creamy in ten years'. Others say, 'I want to freeze it in time in its current state and print it on the new Fuji paper'. Maxima is the name of the first photo paper to be produced for the art sector, and exhibits a completely different stability. I started using it this year, and now I'm suddenly noticing that there's an increased level of quality, along with new considerations. Work is being done to ensure that the images look like they're from the time they were originally produced.

LA: Are there some sort of notes for each of your motifs, for each work? Do you keep a record of the steps you took, so that they can be recreated by others?

WT: In my head, yes – and again and again, I make a record of this 'oral history', also for myself. I had a really good conversation with Sven [Schönauer] and Markus [Paul Müller] from Recom. Markus said that restoration work today should actually entail preserving the exact impression, condition, appearance and presence of an image as delivered to them. So that one still has references in 30 years. They were so convinced of this, they argued that old colour photographs cannot and do not need to be restored. As much as I agree with the first observation I don't see it that way in his conclusion.

LA: That sort of approach is good for their business, of course.

WT: It's fascinating, everyone has different priorities! The desire of some artists to have everything reprinted, for example, is connected to the issue of white borders. If they are not white, this can become a technical problem in the market. In my work, the print plays a completely different role, its physical presence is decisive and that naturally includes aging. I have described this many times: the moment the perfect print comes out of the developing machine and is lying before you on the table, it is clear – from now on, things can only go downhill. The sheet is perfect, then I carry it over to the studio and immediately dust particles begin to settle on it, which shift around microscopically and work their way into the emulsion. That's just how it is, and how life is. For me, the print is an intuitive picture for life, a conscious allowance.

LA: And yet, time and again, there are also revisions in your work...

WT: Another important aspect might be the fact that I sold a wall as an installation for the first time in 1994; and from then on, larger walls as well, including L-formations. Then, around 2000, I sold an entire 9 × 18-meter room, and have repeatedly sold whole room-sized installations ever since. There is the original Buchholz & Buchholz room from 1993,⁶ for example, which was recreated in 2017 and is now in the Museum Brandhorst. The point here was clearly to try and give everything as consistent a tone as possible. Accordingly, I treat these rooms differently than I do a new installation with pictures spanning 25 years, where I can choose how I want it to look.

LA: That leads us to another question: do you have complete documentation of all your exhibitions and the various constellations of images that came together in them?

WT: Luckily, I was very conscious of this from the beginning. I've actually photographed and documented everything precisely since the first exhibition. Since 1995, I measure my exhibitions and draw them exactly on graph paper at a scale of 1:10. Since around 2010 I do this in digital plans. All exhibitions are recorded in their entirety using an XY coordinate system, and can therefore be rebuilt exactly as they were at any time.

LA: This doesn't only document your works and exhibition history, it is also a history of your specific installation practice. That is sure to be interesting for future research, to see where and in which contexts your pictures continue to appear, and which alliances were created between them in each case.

WT: Collating the provenances of every motif from every exhibition is a huge task, and, time allowing, there are a few assistants who work on this in the studio. The goal of this work is to link the installation views and plans with the

inventory sheets for each work. I began producing these by hand in 1993, and then in 1999 I transferred them to a FileMaker programme written by my assistant at the time, Toby Wales. This contains the records of every edition – where it was sold and/or where it was beforehand.

LA: Do you have one person working on this at a time, or how does it work?

WT: Between one and three people. I've now got 30 years of work behind me, depending on how you want to define it. The work I see as No.1 [*Lacanau (self)*] was produced in 1986, that is now 35 years ago. At the moment, I feel the need to bring things together again in order to make visible the whole path. And this also then produces something new. I would like to make the most of this moment right now, when my renewed interest is so strong again, and to record all the knowledge I can. Perhaps I am in a unique position overall given that I gave a lot of thought to this early on, and just recorded and preserved so much so it's not like it's now all suddenly crashing down on me at once. Working with the archive has always been a central part of how I work. It is not about looking back; but rather arises from the recognition that the present is always destined to become the past. And so the past always contains traces of the present – only it's the present of that time. And since I only have one life, within which these two 'presents' are separated by time alone, they are both strongly connected within me.

LA: We viewed your most recent exhibition at Galerie Buchholz,⁷ and we had the impression that, amongst other things, it is a reflection on the shift from analogue to digital. With some of the pictures, you've tried to print them as large as possible, including photos taken on mobile phones. It seemed like you had a particular engagement with the various technologies used and the different qualities of the images they produce.

WT: Totally.

LA: In your sound installation *I want to make a film*, you reflect on new technologies that you want to penetrate and understand. Do you ever find yourself plunging into a crisis over the rapid changes in digital technologies? You're not just a reflective person, you also like to be in control. Your sound piece had a contemplative character – there were moments that resonated a sense of alienation with regard to the medium or the processes therein, which can no longer be 100 percent controlled.

WT: Yes, but you describe this with a melancholic tone that I don't really feel myself. There is a total affirmation and fascination for new forms of digital photography in my own use of it from 2009 onwards. Since completing my three-year period of research into this technology, which

I finished in 2012, I've found it to be extremely expansive and freeing. From that point on, I've thought: now I can speak this language. In part, because I was able to visualize the specific way in which many millions of pixels are read, in order that they can then be printed as millions of dots of ink. One reason I'm able to imagine this so easily is that at the very same moment I first became interested in photography, in 1986, I also began working with the early laser copies. And so even then, there were works of mine where images would be scanned, digitalised and dissolved into dots. What I do feel is very different today, though, is this disembodiment, the dematerialization of images and films. How is it possible that millions of people can simultaneously watch films in HD on Netflix, when it's all just a stream of zeroes and ones flowing side by side through data cables? In this respect, all of us here over 40 are in the lucky position of having our formative digital experiences behind us and are able to tell stories about them. Like how my sister could proudly boast about her first PC in 1987 having a 20 MB hard drive. In the late '90s, when we heard our modems chirping away, we could still easily imagine data flow. That is why I feel this incredible sense of awe at what is happening today, when a crystal-clear image just appears on your screen and you can facetime for three hours for free. Of course, those born into this situation have a completely different understanding, or not even an awareness, of what it actually means for data to be perpetually transmitted at this high density and frequency. And you can talk about the archive here, too. Like in my song *Device Control*, which contains the line 'live stream your life': if everyone is live streaming their life, who then has time to watch that, the lives of others, themselves – and how can you even store it? Who's thinking about what to do with all this? What does this mean for server farms with immense electricity bills? And of course, I also have to ask myself if I have the right to have my pictures preserved. Do I even want to criticise this absolute democratisation of photography? Who has the right to what? It is really unbelievable that our medium is now so central to human culture. I mean, I could have ended up studying the flute. We are now really at the exact point where a new language has emerged along with the medium.

LA: If we understand photography in terms of a language with which we now use to communicate, then it is all about the moment, the moment in which it happens. Doesn't that contradict the archival idea of preservation? At the same time, there is an interesting paradox at work here when, on the one hand, we feel alienated from media – in the sense of understanding how they function – and on the other, routinely use them as a familiar language. Wolfgang Ullrich has published a series of books on digital image cultures in which he argues that we need a science of images, comparable to linguistics.⁸ He identifies the emergence of these new digital image cultures as a significant moment in cultural history, which needs to be deciphered like a language.

WT: I have often noticed that a real language about photography doesn't exist. I've always paid close attention to how my pictures are described. Similarly, there are probably painters who think that the essays that are written about them, for example, never really capture the essence of their use of colour. There's an enormous need for improvement in this respect, if only to describe how photography feels. How is it that we can immediately recognise a photograph by Nan Goldin?

LA: Well, there is now constant talk of how digital image culture is shaping us all and beginning to replace language. But then always forgotten that we still haven't learnt how to talk *about* these photographic images. The question of how we recognise Nan Goldin as Nan Goldin isn't accounted for in this model. It merely observes that the use of this medium is growing exponentially and what that means for our society. It is less interested in *how* photographic tools are used.

WT: People use the medium, but without really knowing what it is. This functions differently than, say, linocut, letterpress or black-and-white darkroom printing, which millions of young people have yet to master. The perfection of today's mobile phone photos represents an alienation of which people are not even aware – their brains certainly do not know what they are really looking at and how it came about. It's insanely effective, but there's no longer any personal connection. Here I am a bit culturally pessimistic at times.

LA: In terms of Wolfgang Ullrich's argument – as important as it may be – it might be said that it continues to frame the history of photography largely independent of photographers and artists who work with the medium. Rather, it is the amateurs who continue to write photographic history. There is no place for expertise and close engagement with the photographic image in this reflection. This also creates a sort of deficit – or lends new visibility to something that was already lacking.

WT: It also has to do with people's shyness and reluctance to acknowledge their own lack of understanding, or their inability to capture something in words. This is how books are written that ultimately miss the point [of their discussion]. Perhaps it is not so important to compare the algorithms in a Samsung Galaxy with those in an iPhone, or to try and understand what sort of technological developments have taken place in the last five years. But it fascinates me. In 2004 I bought my first Leica digital camera with six megapixels. After two weeks, I put it away because the images looked flat and synthetic. Five years later, the Canon 5D came onto the market – a moment that, in my opinion, represents a minor cultural turning point. It was then that I realised: this is a language, and I want to learn how to speak it. This camera was portable, it no

longer weighed as much as a brick, and its pixels outnumbered the grains on 35mm film. Incidentally, in the years that followed, there was a rapid improvement in the image quality of photos taken in low light conditions both in that camera series and, simultaneously, in those of other manufacturers. I always thought that the material, the sensors, were physically different and had improved. Until one day I was able to meet a camera developer at Sony in Tokyo, who explained to me that nothing had actually changed with the chip itself, its photosensitivity was the same. The only thing that had changed was the processing power used at precisely this margin line that decides whether something is information or just noise. This processing has become more and more intelligent in the way it eliminates noise, and is able to collect more information from the same 'raw material', the sensor chip. What is really unbelievable, however, is that it then took less than five years for the technology developed for this perfect SLR camera to enter our mobile phones, so that now you can shoot a 4K film on your phone that could be shown in a cinema. And all because processing power keeps increasing.

LA: Our first conversation was with the artist Beate Gütschow, who you probably know yourself. Talking about a possible institute for photography – and this was quite remarkable, in that we hadn't yet thought about it ourselves – she said that any such institute should also map the technological history of the medium.

WT: Absolutely!

LA: Her argument was that without this, it would no longer be possible to convey certain phenomena. Formats like Instagram would have to be preserved here [the institute] in order to be able to describe them – both now and in the near future, when they may no longer exist in the same form. Another example: she is trying to conserve the use of Lambda prints at her university, since she sees this technology as marking an important stage of development in the transition to digital. There's nothing about this in the concept papers put forward so far.

WT: We simply lack a language [for describing these things]. This might be developed by, for example, illustrating certain aspects of technologies – like how an Imacon scan looks compared to a drum scan, or how a digital camera from 2004 produces skin tones that just appear as flat surfaces. Archives are full of materials that the archivists are meant to preserve, but they may not actually know why these materials look the way they do. And yet this can be clearly formulated within photographic history up until the late 1990s, when people stopped using analogue technologies. For a long time, of course, colour photography was not regarded as art, and therefore not described in any great detail – we've still got some catching up to do in that respect. And then what about now?

The question of what has changed with the arrival of digital technologies comes into play even when works from the 1960s or '70s are reproduced. I recently viewed prints from newly issued old colour portfolios by Joel Meyerowitz, printed much larger than they were originally. There is an uncanny shift taking place, above all in the impression these images make. I would passionately support Beate [Gütschow] in this matter. And I would again quote Markus from Recom, who has stated that actually, the work of the restorer consists precisely in delineating the technical properties of the present, in order to obtain the most accurate record possible of what was technically going on at the moment when the work was [originally] produced. Those of us who come from the medium itself should be interested in documenting how these technological changes unfold, and what effects they have on our medium. And naturally, this escapes a lot of people, who just don't see these at all.

LA: To this day, there is still no science of photography or anything similar. There is film studies, there is literary studies, there is linguistics...

WT: There is merely photo restoration as a subdivision of [art] conservation.

LA: One other question, on the archive: an archive needs to be accessible, certainly once it's been made public. This usually involves keyword indexing. How do you handle this? Many of your pictures appear in various exhibition contexts, constellations and installations. Beyond this, most of them also have titles that can help you to find them. How do you yourself navigate your way through your archive? How have you organised it – your image archive, I mean? Do you use a keyword index?

WT: As I mentioned earlier, I began filling in a form for each of my works in 1993/1994, before establishing a FileMaker database in 1999. This has two search fields, which you can use simultaneously and across one another. For example, you could enter Portrait as the first category and Nightlife as the second.

LA: Ah, okay, and then this finds all the portraits that were taken in nightlife.

WT: Do you know the book from my exhibition at Tate Britain, *if one thing matters, everything matters*?⁹ There is a diagram on the back cover that shows all of the different work groups connected in a sort of mind map. It's not possible to read any categorisations of my works within my exhibitions, in part because I don't work in series. But in order to work so freely, there is a clear underlying system of categories.

LA: Take the cover of *if one thing matters, everything*

matters – it shows a bunch of keys, right? What would be the keyword there?

WT: 'Still Life'. I only have five first categories: Portrait, Still Life, Landscape, Abstract and Other. And then there is the second level, with Portrait, for example – so Portrait Portrait. Quite simply, Portrait means anything with people in it. These are then divided into Portraits, Friends & Family, Nightlife or Crowd/Strangers. Still Life is very broadly conceived and includes interiors and everything situated indoors, but also anything situated outdoors, as long as it has been photographed from close up; as soon as the angle widens, it becomes a landscape. If a landscape has people in it, then it falls under Crowd/Strangers. This allows me to cover everything with five main categories.

LA: Architecture?

WT: Architecture is treated specially in Lightroom, the program I use to organise my works – this contains every picture I have ever taken. It has had around 20 subcategories for Architecture since I was working on *Book for Architects* in 2014. In FileMaker, the room we are sitting in right now would be under Interior. Whereas Cityscapes, by contrast, are listed under Landscape. Astronomy also falls under Landscape. Interestingly, animals are listed under Still Life [laughs].

LA: All the conversations we've had confirm that everyone follows their own logic in these systems.

WT: Using Lightroom since 2011 has radically changed my use of keywords. Furthermore all digital images are naturally indexed by date. I can instantly see what I photographed on 18 August 2012, for example.

LA: And that means everything, right? Not just those photos that are classified as works?

WT: Exactly. The keyword system I just described for FileMaker applies only to works that have been exhibited in some form or another. Beyond this, all analogue negatives and digital images are sorted by date in Lightroom, with the negatives always including the film number, which is a number that starts with 1 in the beginning of January and runs to however many films I exposed that year. Usually 100–250 per year in the 1990ies. The program also allows you to create collections, of which there are now more than a hundred. One of the largest collections is 'Sittings' – portrait sittings – but everything else is possible. Obviously, I'm not doing this to then make it available to others. Nor is it intended to allow you to find every animal I've ever photographed. Actually, it's exactly that, this form of 'search' that image databases provide. But using this system since 2011 has enabled me to do things that simply weren't possible before. I am interested

in categories, but up until then I had to gather everything together individually. In 1999, for example, I made the small artist's book *Total Solar Eclipse*,¹⁰ for which I painstakingly trawled through years' worth of paper envelopes searching for astronomical pictures. By contrast, my 2015 book *The Cars*¹¹ was only possible since every photo that features a car in any way is indexed under this term. This sounds simple, but this system of relevant keywords I established together with Carmen Brunner from 2009, involved a lot of detailed work and conceptual considerations. It was then carried on and maintained by Jonas Raam and now for several years by Federico Gargaglione.

LA: Keyword 'small artist book', how does it work with all the ephemera? Do you collect them too? I mean, artist's books are not ephemera of course, in the best case they are works in their own right. But correspondence, invitation cards, posters – how do you handle these?

WT: My work and my life are both intertwined with certain collecting activities. While everything I do aims to describe the here and now – whether this is staged or found – and I do everything I can to achieve this, I trust myself to also be able to simultaneously care about the past, without it impacting my awareness of the here and now. For example, I never throw a piece of writing away. Regarding correspondence, which also used to include faxes, there is a box at my desk, the so-called 'File dead'. All of my assistants have File-dead boxes at their desks. There are no wastepaper bins. A Post-It note isn't scrunched up and thrown away, it's just thrown into the File dead. This produces a kind of archaeological stratification. The combined entire studio's File dead takes in around under a cubic meter of paper over the course of a year, which is really not a lot. Digital materials will be partly lost, unfortunately – I no longer have any emails from before 2002, for example. They start in 2003. So I am very conscious of this paper trail. I think that my specific position between England, America, Germany and other countries and the wide and diverse range of contacts, has resulted in a constellation that's quite rare in cultural-historical terms. Whether it's the LGBT movement, American *Vogue* or a Japanese museum that gets added into this mix, it's one you don't find very often. That's why I said to myself, come on, just do it, save it. I also collect all the ephemera that I myself generate, of course. The archive contains a sample of every piece of printed matter I've ever produced or been involved in. These are called *Belege*, specimen copies. Then there's the Extras, extra copies.

LA: That means you are actually the perfect candidate for a Getty Research Institute in Germany, since everything is there and has been kept together. If we imagine there were some sort of institute for photography in Germany, could you see yourself operating within this context? In part, this

question stems from the fact that for a lot of artists who work with photography, the question of where their work belongs and in which contexts it should be read is a significant part of their practice. Could you see yourself within an institute whose only concern is with photography, where you would have to accept that your work may well end up alongside that of a sports reporter, or other commercial photographers? There is also the question of where you see your work as being based. Is that now Germany, or are there perhaps other places you are interested in?

WT: The word 'German' appeared far too often in the Düsseldorf paper, in my opinion.¹² Is it really necessary? The name Getty may be unambiguously connected with an American billionaire, but when you think of the Getty Institute, you think of global culture above all else. I don't see any need to emphasize the German aspect so strongly in an EU made up of 23 countries, where most of the photographers in question most likely think in pan-European terms. From today's perspective I still have spent the majority of my active working life in London, the UK. I don't feel British but I'm certainly still a Londoner.

LA: Monika Grütters clearly stated that the purpose of founding a photo institute is to preserve our nation's visual heritage.

WT: It's also a question of funding. And if it is paid for with federal resources, this has to be justified.

LA: Conversely, the paper certainly does address the question of international artists living in Germany.

WT: As it should be: 'Lives and works in' is the decisive factor. I was the first artist born outside Great Britain to win the Turner Prize for British Art, back in 2000. But to come back to the question of archives, I think photographs that arise from a deep involvement with a similar subject are usually interesting to be kept together for one reason or another. Of course, there is the question of whether it makes sense to bring all these different specialist archives together in one place – an LGBTQ+ archive might be better off at another location, for example, or a regional archive situated locally, or an industrial archive where the industry itself is based. A cultural landscape that is as saturated with overlapping cultures as Europe cannot be centralised. To this extent, I would argue that any institute of photography should make the medium more describable on the one hand, and on the other connect those cultural institutions that already exist in Germany, Europe, and elsewhere. That could be really powerful. It's not enough just to save an archive, since we always need to think about what means and opportunities are available. I spent five years on the Tate's Board of Trustees as an artist, four of which were within the Collection Committee. They were repeatedly offered artists' estates, and so it had to

be decided whether it was even responsible to take these works into the collection, only to then stick them in an underground archive somewhere. An institute needs must be networked, it has to operate in a decentralized manner, that is crucial. At the same time, it needs a specific location, and so it also has to be central. What this institute needs are storage spaces! What it doesn't need is a prestigious gallery in the museum district in Düsseldorf.

LA: It's hard to escape the impression that the Düsseldorf initiative, especially with the exhibition spaces proposed, wants to control its reception history.

WT: Düsseldorf is about more than just reception history, it's rather about world-photo-art history. It's as significant as it gets. If you write a thousand words about the history of photographic art across the world, the word Düsseldorf has to appear.

LA: Okay, let's return to museums. The idea of the photography institute is to create a specific home for those materials that need it, for the reasons you just stated: namely that they'd otherwise disappear into storage somewhere since museums lack the capacity. This would make it possible to conduct extensive research on a work, beyond the five well-known work series that are held in museums. Therefore, an institute as a research facility distinct from a museum. This inquiry also highlights the divisions between the different initiatives.

WT: I don't see exhibitions as the primary concern of any such institute. You can always exhibit in all of the great places that make up the German cultural landscape.

LA: Perhaps, given the reunification of Germany 30 years ago, it's also necessary to be conscious of what sort of signal it would send if Düsseldorf were to be chosen as the home of the institute. This would just further direct the focus to that which is already very well known. German photographic history is bigger than Düsseldorf.

WT: I don't think one can say that. The Rhineland is central to photography. Renger-Patzsch, Sander, Agfa. Why Leipzig, why Hamburg, why Dresden? I think it would make total sense to have the institute in North Rhine-Westphalia. But it is also clear that there are questions to be clarified regarding photography's technical aspects and developments that the institute would need to address. There are also estates that need to be secured, keyword family albums and so on – these are at far greater risk than the estates of well-known artists. Who is taking care of Elmar Batters' fetish archive? From Instagram to fetish photography collectors, all are part of the cultural history of photography, and this needs to be preserved and documented. On these grounds, Düsseldorf and Essen are good options. I would almost argue that there

should be locations in both cities.

LA: In Düsseldorf and Essen you have artists who can safely hand over their archives in a well-prepared and organised state. Beyond the regional connection, this is a good reason to take them up and give them priority. But how can it be ensured that a wide range of work is considered and acquired?

WT: I think the question of what an institute would take in or not is the same question every museum faces.

LA: A museum has a director with a focused interest for the collection and the power to make decisions.

WT: And likewise represents itself as a form of contemporary history. It's a general thing: who is collected, who is forgotten and so on? This process must constantly be reconsidered. Today, it is more urgent than ever to think this through anew from various perspectives, but the discussion can't be determined by these terms alone. Because the significant story is that these initiatives even exist, that people are even proposing to found an institute! It is a huge step forward, and one for which a state is prepared to provide millions of euros to fund – I see this as a great opportunity above all else. Rightly so, efforts will be made to ensure that it is not only white men that are included. It is about preserving our cultural memory, and that is necessarily an inclusive story. Otherwise, the only things that will be preserved are those that are expensive. In my view, the only way to do this is to preserve things at the public level, and thereby create a sort of culture of memory. Only then will it be free of private interests. I feel very hopeful about this.

LA: First things first, then.

WT: Yes, then everyone's guaranteed to get on board. Today, Francesca Woodman is getting a large-scale exhibition at C/O. 25 years ago, she was a new discovery that got maybe four pages in *Artforum* – and now her work is simply there. The whole mood regarding photography as a medium and as art is much more relaxed than it was. In the big picture, photography won. There is no need to argue over it anymore, that's just how it is. This success is a thorn in the eye of some people, which is why it is so important that it is now institutionalised.

LA: Okay, so the question of inclusion and diversity you don't see as the main issue at this moment in time. Rather forms of interconnectedness and developing a language to discuss the medium are central themes for you.

WT: Yes, to develop a language from various different directions. How the image object feels, how it looks, what makes it special. But also: how can we conduct research

around the medium and address the problems caused by this lack of language? These are very, very important matters. Because behind each sheet of paper is a whole range of technical and material parameters with which photography can be discussed. For me, the question of what I want to do is always shaped by the question of what is missing. And what is missing is in fact a language to talk about the medium – and the interconnection. We have this magical medium to work with and yet we are still largely unable to talk about this magic.

We need to know exactly what is happening, because the course being set now will have far-reaching consequences – and later, we may no longer be in a position to set the course.



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An initiative by Heinz Peter Knes, Kristin Loschert, Maren Lübbke-Tidow,
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Notes

- 1 See the concept put forward by the Verein für Förderung und Gründung eines German Photo Institute e.V., <http://deutschesfotoinstitut.org>; see also <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/andreas-gursky-und-moritz-wegwerth-so-wird-die-fotografie-unsterblich-a-00000000-0002-0001-0000-000168892074>.
- 2 See the concept paper on the possible establishment of a Federal Institute of Photography, commissioned by the Minister of State for Culture and the Media, Prof. Monika Grütters, and produced by an expert commission, available since 10 March 2020: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/bundesregierung/staatsministerinfuer-culture-and-media/federal-institute-for-photography-1729478>. A feasibility study was subsequently commissioned that examined Essen and Düsseldorf as possible locations, and which suggested the former as the home of a future federal institute. See <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/machbarkeitsstudie-liegt-vor-1876084>.
- 3 See https://www.museum-folkwang.de/fileadmin/_BE_Gruppe_Folkwang/Dokumente/2020_Pressemitteilungen/2020_Fotografische_Sammlung/MFolkwang_Presseinformation_Fotorestaurierung_0102__2021.pdf.
- 4 *New Photography 12*: Richard Billingham, Thomas Demand, Osamu Kanemura, Sophie Ristelhueber, Georgina Starr, Wolfgang Tillmans, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 24.10.1996–04.02.1997.
- 5 Planned exhibition dates: Wolfgang Tillmans, *To look without fear*, September 2022, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 6 Wolfgang Tillmans, Buchholz + Buchholz Gallery, Cologne, 22.01.–20.02.1993.
- 7 Wolfgang Tillmans, Buchholz Gallery, Berlin, 27.11.2020–27.02.2021.
- 8 Cf. Wolfgang Ullrich, *Selfies*, Berlin 2019. Published as part of the *Digitale Bildkulturen (Digital Image Cultures)* series, ed. by Wolfgang Ullrich and Annkathrin Kohout.
- 9 Wolfgang Tillmans, *if one thing matters, everything matters*, London 2003.
- 10 Wolfgang Tillmans, *Total Solar Eclipse / Totale Sonnenfinsternis*, Cologne 1999.
- 11 Wolfgang Tillmans, *The Cars*, Cologne 2015.
- 12 The reference here is to the 'Concept for the foundation of a German Institute of Photography / Deutsches Fotoinstitut (DFI) in Düsseldorf', which was published on 4 June 2020 and can be accessed here: http://deutschesfotoinstitut.org/wp-content/uploads/EN_Concept_DFI.pdf.