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Photography and Its Conservation: Continuity and Changes in the Digital Era

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The emergence of digital photography and digital technology, in general, illustrate the principle of “creative destruction”, coined by the economist Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950) (Schumpeter 1942). During the 20th century, the photography industry regularly introduced innovations that have contributed to its growth. Improvements in appearance combined with lower costs for consumers increased the availability of photographs to the general public. Photographs are now a popular commodity. However, at the end of the twentieth century, the introduction of digital photography provoked a discontinuity and historic structural transformations. The market moved from the chemical to the electronic sector. This major shift initiated the progressive destruction of the traditional photographic market. The leaders in this former field, including Kodak, Agfa, and Fuji are weakening. As well as economic challenges, this has impacted the photographic artwork and photograph’s materiality. We press a button, an image is captured and subsequently presented to us. In contrast to the processes of the past which include a chemical process, the development of the image is replaced by an electronic process that we do not need to be involved in. However, is a photo still a photo? More so than any other visual art, digital technology has induced a paradigmatic historical shift. While the public appreciates the ease and quickly adapts to this new digital media, the field of photography has been subjected to a profound disruption and our photographic heritage is facing an important change. This paper will review some of these changes in order to demonstrate how we moved from a culture of photographic prints to an imaging culture; we have shifted from memorial photography to fast consumption photography. The transformation has impacted cultural institutions in what they must conserve and how they conserve it.

1. Towards an Image Society

Nowadays, the number of photographs produced is growing in an exponential way: every two minutes we are generating more photographs than were produced during the whole of the nineteenth century.¹⁾ More than one trillion photographs are made in 2017.²⁾ This growth is the result of the technological evolution that has occurred within the field of photography since 1839. There have been a series of technological steps that enabled images to be produced in a more efficient and cost effective way. This technological

advancement has not only had an impact on the quantity of photographs produced but also on the aesthetics.

The daguerreotype (1839–1850s) was a unique and costly image with a long exposure time. The lengthy exposure time resulted in archetype poses very similar to the miniatures of the period: mainly a bust portrait from the front or three quarters. It was a once in a lifetime experience. Collodion negatives and albumen prints (1851–1890s) were probably used as the first social media, particularly with the famous *carte de visite* format introduced by A. Disderi in 1854 and produced in many samples.³⁾ It became a way for the wealthy social class to picture themselves elegantly dressed and to represent this image to the world. The prints began to circulate; they were exchanged, sold, and exhibited.

The Gelatin silver process (1880–2000s) was the start of photography as a mass product, as the photographic industry developed at speed. It allowed anyone the possibility to produce photographs in a cheap and easy way. “You press the button, we do the rest” was the Kodak advertising.⁴⁾ Photography became a profitable, industrial business. This was the beginning of famous companies such as Kodak, Agfa, Ilford, and Lumière. If we examine the profits of Lumière from 1884 to 1896, which mainly correspond to the sale of glass plate negatives, the growth of the photographic market during this period is evident. Within twelve years, the sale of photographic plates reached eight million French francs, which corresponds to approximately twenty-five million US dollars. Clearly, photography is a large consumption market that reaches all the social classes. Snapshots, images of daily life, and important life events can be recorded using this new popular medium. Photography is now used for its memory values by families, storing tangible memories for the future: I was there, I was like this, and I made this. Photographs are placed in albums and boxes, to be “store and forget” after a while.

2. Photographs: From Tangible to Intangible

At the end of the twentieth century, an even more powerful mass product appeared, which greatly impacted the practice of photography: digital photography. Digital photography is an instant media: it is no longer “I was”, but “I am”. I am here, I am like this and I am doing this. As André Gunthert (Gunthert 2014) stated, this is “conversational photography”, which has an instant value and likely no remembrance significance. This “fast-food photography” is made to be shared immediately on social media. Its shelf life is very short and its life expectancy, from the point of view of conservation, is unfortunately also brief.

Aligning the photographs from past and the ones produced today creates an illusion of linearity, a continuous evolution derived by technological improvement. In this vein, Henri Cartier-Bresson commented that “photography has not changed since its origin except in its technical aspects” (Cartier-Bresson 1999). However, this linear representation is hiding a paradigm shift: an important discontinuity. There is a change in the nature of the photograph itself. Twenty years ago, when someone said they were going to send you a photograph, what were we expecting? Certainly to receive by postal mail, in an

