

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PHOTOGRAPHY AS ARCHIVES AND CULTURAL MEMORY

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## ABSTRACT

*This research was conducted by using textual, qualitative approach while looking closer at the significant of the information that was produced in the form of photography. The aim of this research was to take a stance of the importance of photography as archives and cultural memory in its ability in promoting truths. Photography was observed as three forms; they were singular, plural, and archival. Singular forms suggested the selective association between the photographers and the photographs were taken. Plural formed resonance ideas and overall aspects in what sets of photography could bring. Archival forms offered memories as references. The result of this research shows that photography, despite its ability or inability in promoting truths, is a great pool of resources of gaining information and tracing history. Further to this research, looking closer to current social media applications that put photography forward can be one option to explore within this topic.*

**Keywords:** *photography, archives, cultural memory, truths*

## INTRODUCTION

Photography dated as cameras started to be available to general public and became more available once the process was improved during the 1890s (Busselle, 1983). Today, thanks to the advancement of technology, more photographs are taken, saved, and shared on a daily basis. Busselle (1983) also points out the reasons why people would want to make a photograph because of something is visually appealing, and there is the need to record. The need to record by photography seems to be taken less seriously. The activity of taking photographs is said to be taking the moments away instead of restoring them. And the photographs produced are taken for granted due to extensive ability to save and have hundreds to thousands of digital pictures at once. In the light of the importance of photography, this research wants to discuss that photography is significant as archival materials and cultural memory.

In reading photography, archives, and cultural memory, some researches have been conducted due to give more definition to the understanding of the interlocking sense. Kuhn (2008) is looking at the singularity of a photograph, investigating the forms, and its role in the production of memory. She uses family photography across a range of contexts (private and public) and finds that the value of this memory works as self-evident. Cross & Peck (2010) has stated in the very first line that photography, archive, and memory are intimately connected. They conclude the relations out of these three based on the process of recording images that may be used to recall the past.

The archive itself, according to Foucault (1969) has stated that the archive cannot be described in its totality. He argues that archive is the compilation of shards of memory which can be good as the representation of the time; yet does not promote totality that cannot explain an event as a whole. Here,

therefore, the representation of the truth is what is questioned. Despite the inability to tell complete stories of events, Foucault then continues by stating how the presence of archive is unavoidable. Based on these two complete opposite issues, this research would like to have a closer look at photography in the meaning of recording and documenting what has happened, and the truth might possess, to then argue on its worth as having the archival trait. This research is hoped to give more definition to the discussion of photography as archives, its ability to represent truths, especially in today vast developing technology of the world we live in.

## METHODS

In supporting the research question, the discussion is divided into three main points. It starts with the photograph as a singular, then plural, and lastly as an archival form. The study is qualitatively approached whereas all the data are observed in their textual forms. Foucault's view on the archive (1969) becomes the foundation of the topic research which then having photography as the research object with Busselle's (1983) understanding and view of importance. Enwezor (2008) acts as the bridge and argumentative support between these understanding photography and archives.

Photography as the research object will be discussed in the order of its singularity, plurality, and archival traits. The basic characteristics of a single photograph will be discussed in the first point by looking at Sekula's (1986) works in *Fish Story*, before then moving on to the second point where photographs will be discussed as a group/compilation and taking Richter's *Atlas* as the example. In the last point, the archival trait of photography will be discussed by putting forward the questions of truth and the importance of photograph in archives whilst having to try answering the ultimate research question.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Photography in its singularity is its product itself; a photograph. A photograph is an image that is taken with a camera. As it is mentioned earlier, there are two reasons why photographs are taken, which are as aesthetics and memories/records (Busselle, 1983). On contrary, Busselle (1983) then states that many photographers, which he is defined as people who take photographs, not the occupational one, do not aware that what they do is actually making a record. He continues by stating that the term of record a photograph appears in the derogatory sense because it implies that the picture's only value is to provide the visual record of something and not the beauty of it. Regardless the aesthetics, when talking about making memories, it is always related to the sense of time. This sense of time, which is thought or still in the argument of whether it is to be lost or to be gained while photographs are taken. In relation to the sense of time in the singularity of the photograph, Busselle (1983) has mentioned about the world's rapid and dramatic changes, which then suited with the sense of uniqueness. When a photograph is produced, it is the only record makes on that specific time and place; as every of the image produced holds the principle of uniqueness (Enwezor, 2008). This can be what Foucault (1969) meant by a system of historicity and disappearance, where everything changes as we speak. Thus, every moment experienced and captured is unique.

Apart from its uniqueness, a single photograph also has a selective trait. This implies that the totality of a photograph is questionable because it has something to do with the photographers' subjectivity and the objects' objectivity. The border between the two is unclear for it is illogical to encapsulate the entire more of thinking the world framed within a picture (Enwezor, 2008). On this selective trait of a photograph has, the researcher would like to take an example from Sekula's work,

*Fish Story* (1996). In the first chapter, the second photograph is picturing a boy who is standing by a mounted binocular. This picture captioned as “Boy looking at his mother. Staten Island Ferry. New York Harbor. February 1990.” This shows that there are other parts of this world that are not presented in the picture which makes this photograph holds a selective characteristic (in either during the production or the compilation). It can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1 One of the Photographs from Allan Sekulas's Work (1996)

A photograph as a singular is unique and selective, while photographs in plural form are the abundance of uniqueness and selections because indeed a photography compilation is made of many single photographs. But it is much more than that. According to Tagg (1993), photographs appear as essential ingredients of his social rituals. Busselle (1983) implies the same idea stating that the family album is a good example. Further to this argument, he states the importance of it as it holds countless of photographs that might be insignificant at the time but will be valuable to look at in far future (1983). The more significant example of photography compilation is Richter's *Atlas* (1962-present). *Atlas* is a Gerhard Richter's open-ended project of formal procedures that accumulate both found and intentionally produced photographs that are arranged in grid formations (Buchloh, 1999) as a reflection on the relationship between the photographic and historiographical (Enwezor, 2008). In the light of *Atlas*, Cooke (1995) quotes Richter who stated that there are no individual pictures at all anymore. This sums the understanding of photographs in a plural form which is valuable in terms of social, photographic, and historiographical agenda while putting aside the individuality of a single photograph. To complement, Buchloh as cited in Enwezor (2008) implicitly acknowledges that the principle of collectivization has been integral to photography. Figure 2 shows the installation of Richter's *Atlas*.



Figure 2 Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* Installation

Some of the earliest uses of the photograph, which applied the archival trait, are the documentation of possessions (William Henry Fox Talbot) and documentation of prisoners (Photograph & Phrenology – Identification) (Sekula, 1986). These pictures are the representation of photography as an archive. Enwezor (2008) points out that the desire to make a photograph, to document an event, to compose statements as unique events, is direct to the aspiration to produce an archive. This statement is heavily based on Foucault's view (1969). In relation to this, Enwezor (2008) also claims that a camera is then an archiving machine and thus its products are archival objects. These statements seem to be unquestionable, but in relation to Richter's *Atlas*, Cooke (1995) does not seem to agree to see these collections of found and produced photographs that have been on-going for more than 50 years as an archive. Although Richter does not seem to any longer recognize individual photograph, his effort of compiling needs to be acknowledged for this can be seen as the hardship of archiving that he has said organizing and making sense of them in any kind of standard unity is today impossible (Enwezor, 2013). Cooke then implies the definition of photography as an archive by rejecting *Atlas* as a form of archive, stating the need of having a coherent and systematic compilation of an identifiable body of material or what Benjamin Buchloh (1999) has claimed as the anomic archive.

When it comes to the question of truth, it goes back again to how selective an individual photograph can be. Even so, the understanding changes when these single photographs belong to a set that makes them lose their individuality. Foucault (1969) also mentions that the archive of society, culture, or civilization obviously cannot be described comprehensively, not to mention a whole period of certain thing or time. It might be based on this idea that Buchloh (1999) seems to dismiss the effort of *Atlas* as an open-ended project by forecasting its archival impasse; impossible to progress (cited in Enwezor, 2013). Again, stating Foucault's (1969) argument of archives that the archive cannot be described in its totality, its presence, and it is unavoidable. It suggests that photography can play a significant role in archiving because photography does not guarantee a totality of a picture to represent the world as a whole. Moreover, the existences of moments and the machine (the camera) to grab those moments are without doubts unavoidable.

However, in *Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument*, Enwezor (2013) tries to discuss what there is of an archive towards photography and film today. In archive as medium sub-chapter, he has stated clearly that the society is confronted with relationships between

archive and memory, public information, trauma, ethnography, identity, and time. The emergence of what Hal Foster called as The Archival Impulse involves technology to allow the manipulation of photography even though he does not decline that the manipulation has animated modern art since the invention of the photograph. This acknowledgment of the existence of photo manipulation (e.g. photomontage) in the early days leads to a question how does one know it from? The answer is, of course, back to the set of reference which is called the archives. It allows people to refer and gain a chunk of information, a form of memory, or a piece of history.

## CONCLUSIONS

People live in a visual world (Pozzer-Ardenghi & Roth, 2005) where everything exists to end in photographs (Sontag, 1973). This statement goes well with Busselle's (1983) argument on why people would want to make a photograph; it is for the sake of aesthetic and recording. The researcher discusses photography and archives to argue the chance of photography acting as an archive. My argument is whether or not photography promotes the truth; it is still worth the archival trait. This article has started from the photograph as a single entity. The findings are it is both unique and selective at the same time. These findings go along with Foucault's (1969) view on archives that every second passed is unique for one different moment and also selective for the totality that is unobtainable. Although there is a possibility for a single photograph to lose its individuality once they are compiled, the photographs compilation still carries the value of collectivization which is an important function of museum and archive (Buchloh cited in Enwezor, 2013). Gerhard Richter's Atlas is discussed with mixed reviews whether or not it can be referred as an archive. The discussion is finally closed to win Atlas and see it as one for the sake of importance of the archival trait of photography. It is also argued that the totality can never be obtained (Foucault, 1969).

Whether the photographs promote the truth because of its selective characteristic or not, the moments are captured, and the products exist. It can be valued as an archive that can be referred to after years passing. These all make photography undoubtedly deserve the archival trait. Even though the truth is sometimes questionable because of the existences of fast-growing technology, the archive impulse, every single event captured, found, made, produced is still unique and deserves to be archived. The main idea of keeping everything in the record is the reference for it in promoting knowledge and memory. People can refer to the archives to learn from the past, live the present, and expect the future, and photography is one way to see it. Further possible research in this particular field of photography and culture would be in relation to the existence of software or applications-based photo augmentation or manipulation. Therefore the possibilities of having interdisciplinary discourses are as well open for Information Technology, especially the significant of clouds as storage and archival material.

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