

Mailing 1: **the Archive**

- accumulated memories

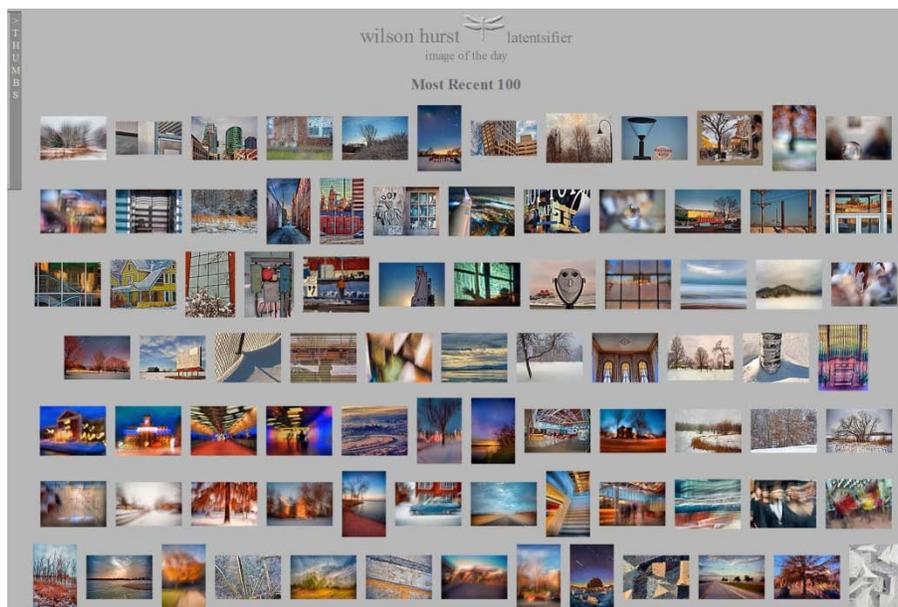
wilson hurst

“Everyone keeps asking you for pictures, and after a while you get tired of that. I always say, they are in the archives.” - Annie Leibovitz

Expository Preface

This document is a response to a formal six-week study of the archive as a source of artistic inspiration, undertaken to shed light on the vagaries of the creative process and my own intentions as an artist. The idea that art cannot exist in a cultural vacuum makes the archival record indispensable. Archives exist as repositories of experience in the form of information. A case can be made that the formation and use of archives is the characteristic which separates man from the rest of the animal kingdom. We are not confined by learning solely from individual experience, but can learn from the recorded and shared data of all those that came before. The archive transcends our accidental placement in time.

My interest follows two trajectories. The first understands the archive as the recorded accumulated knowledge of civilization, and considers how to draw from this to inform art production. In this regard, I build a storehouse of reference material that encourages imagination. The second and more essential, is concerned with establishing an archive of my creative output, and then using that repository to generate future inventive movement. This might be considered as a personal infinite feedback loop.



http://www.wilsonhurst.com/irontone/?page_id=29

Photographers always face the requirement of evaluating what to include and what to exclude in the frame. Regardless what the decision, a viewer might be liable to ask what was left out, considering the surrounds as perhaps more important than the embraced. It might be possible to extract a fine image at

a specific juncture in the space-time continuum, but it is always possible to extract any number of bad images at any time. Therefore, the creative question really comes down to the definition of desirability, and determining if such an evaluation is a conditioned response. In addition, if identification of desirable is a conditioned response, is that bad? As there is no absolute right in these matters, questioning the process is constructive.

The same situation applies to the archive. More is left out than is included. Every statement in the archive serves to limit the meaning to the fixed conception of itself. The cultural archival context that an artist works in and responds to contributes to the meanings found in the resulting creative work.

An inherent human behavior involves collecting things, both real and virtual (simulated reality for which there is no original). Is there a deeply significant explanation supporting this need to collect? The archive is the prime manifestation of the drive to collect information and knowledge. The archive facilitates long-term enduring connections perpetuating a partial and imperfect historical reminiscence. I think of my image archive as a personal history of ideas, as incomplete as it must be. Intense experiences of short duration can form enduring memory tracings.

Reflecting back on the subject, interior and exterior interface junctures remain focal points of interest. Placed into the archive, their representations become indexical references to past events projecting into the future. Pulling an image from the archive for rework, this image artifact becomes reinterpreted and recontextualized in ways not envisioned at its inception. The archive is a dynamic structure, which through its modification engenders new historical layering.

Conditions of existence, visual statements create a convention complex establishing what is meaningful. Each manifestation is only one possible descriptive iteration, neither displacing other views nor exposing them as invalid. The whole lot is ephemeral and finite, existing in the river of time.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977. Print.

I read "On Photography" way back in 1977 when it was originally published. At that time I was in my mid 20's and engaged as a pilot in the Navy, nurturing an interest in photography that was grounded in nature and fueled by my travels. I distinctly remember that reading the book was disappointing, and seemed to have little relevance to my imagery. What a difference thirty-four years can make, for on this rereading of "In Plato's Cave," I find the expressed ideas fascinating, although still not always in accordance. Here is a dramatic personal example of dynamic archive influence as it can affect a single organism over time. The distance between conception and reception is revealed on many levels.

Humans have an ambiguous relationship with reality. When first born, with no experience and thus no preconceived frame of reference other than that biologically inherited, we sense and perceive the external environment completely unaffected. However, this condition does not last long. As we build experience memory, those recollections inform our response to further stimulation. The older we get, the larger our experiential base and more preconceptions are unavoidably available to categorize our sensations. This conundrum makes extremely valuable those rare occurrences when an individual is confronted with something entirely new.

"Preconceived notions are the locks on the door to wisdom." - Merry Browne

Photographic images also serve to provide humans with a preconceived view of reality, representing tokens of experience captured. As culture continues to evolve, the number of images to which individuals are confronted grows exponentially. This archive of images changes our understanding of reality; the photographic visual code alters observational values.

“To collect photographs is to collect the world.” (OP 03) Photographic images provide most participants in modern inorganic society information regarding historical appearances and the “reach of the present.” (OP 04) Therefore, the idea presented here is that photographs can be best understood as culturally construed miniature statements of reality. Projecting a condition on the vast majority, this understanding is based at the level of the visually illiterate. All serious photographers know the photograph as an illusion, at best a deficient interpretation of reality. Sontag’s claims to recognize the perceptions of most participants in society are not creditable. From an absolute standpoint, it is impossible to know the perceptions in anyone’s mind but our own.

The number of photographs that can be extracted from any subject is unlimited. “In deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects.” (OP 06) Individuals must always make this unavoidable criterion, regardless of the decision-making realm. We always base action on an analysis of external sensations informed by experience. Moreover, civilization dictates that experience is formed by direct contact, and by indirect contact as educated by the archive. “A photograph is a thin slice of space as well as time. In a world ruled by photographic images, all borders (framing) seem arbitrary. Anything can be separated, can be made discontinuous, from anything else: all that is necessary is to frame the subject differently.” (OP 22) “Only that which narrates can make us understand.” (OP 23)

In establishing her position, Sontag is mostly addressing photography as an activity of amateurs, or as a product being consumed by the visually unsophisticated population at large. She considers the promise of photography’s wide spread use by mass consumers “to democratize all experiences by translating them into images.” (OP 07) It is apparent that Sontag does not approach her subject from the position of a serious practitioner. She, in fact, seems to hold great disdain towards art and artists. She makes the claim that artistry equals pretension, and even goes so far as to declare artistic activity as gratuitous. (OP 08) She seems to feel that art has no justification and is made without apparent reason or cause. Her elaboration on this is that mass art forms are not practiced by the mass as an art, but rather as “a social rite, a defense against anxiety, a tool of power.” (OP 08) Families construct photographic portrait-chronicles of themselves, presumably for themselves.

“Photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, ... to take possession of a space in which they are insecure.” (OP 09) The camera renders experience real, but also limits experience to only a search for the photographic as a souvenir. Souvenirs can become elements of collective memory imbedded in the archive. She expresses a rather pessimistic view that photography has converted experience into a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world that levels the meaning of all events. (OP 11)

As part of the ramblings, time is considered as a target of relation to photography. In this context, time is reduced to consisting of events remarkable only to the extent they are worth photographing. “Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.” (OP 11) In addition, the shock value of photography is inversely proportional to elapsed time. The distress wears off with repeated viewings. This reached saturation point forces the stakes to higher levels, as the novel must become more and more excruciating. This phenomenon seems operative in many other cultural domains, such as tattoos, piercings, and other physical body mutilations demonstrate.

Finally in reference to time, desirably is enhanced by distance: "Time eventually positions most photographs, even the most amateurish, at the level of art." (OP 11) Here Sontag seems to be striking a favorable note. But perhaps this is a misread, as the overall tenor of the rest of her essay is decidedly negative.

Industrial societies turn their citizens into image-junkies, the most irresistible form of mental pollution. Needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted. "Photography makes us feel that the world is more available than it really is." (OP 24) "Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it looks." (OP 23)

Merewether, Charles. *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: Whitechapel [u.a.], 2006. Print.

Michel Foucault, *The Historical a priori and the Archive*, 1969

Transcendental syncopation, the archive extends beyond the limits of its own rhythm. The certainty of a discourse characterizes its unity through time, by establishing a limited conceptual space for communication commonality. This space is more than just a domain of explicit argument, but rather a rule-base for discursive practice. A condition of validity for judgments is different from a condition of reality for statements. A discourse is comprised of a series of statements that have meaning and narration. The history encompasses statement dispersion, non-coherence, overlaps, simultaneity, and succession. This discursive practice operates by rules captive to the very things that they connect.

The archive is an organization of diverse statements identified or positioned as governed by specific rules and practices that cannot be violated. Thus, it is these rules that determine what is maintained and what is excluded, and determine the descriptive possibilities and impossibilities that are resident. "The archive is the first law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events." (TA 28) It differentiates discourses in their multiple existences and specifies relative importance. It is the general system of the formation and transformation of statements.

"It is the rules that limit the meaning of the archive. Older statements become more rigid. The archive is the border of time that surrounds our presence." (TA 30)

Jacues Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 1995

By way of questioning the effort to publish as expressed by Freud, it is proposed that an original invention is worthy of archival placement. The specific original invention here investigated is the "death drive," an instinct of destruction. This drive works in silence; leaving no record and destroying in advance its own archive. It devours even before producing.

"Death is the goal of life." - Arthur Schopenhauer

Freud's hypothesis is that there are two essentially different classes of instincts: the sexual instincts and the aggressive instincts, whose aim is destruction especially manifest outwards. Derrida argues that for an archive to exist, it must be constructed to exist in an external space. "There is no archive without

consignation in an external place which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression,” and then he associates this with the Freudian death drive. The archive is made possible by aggression, the death and destruction drive.

“There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside.” (TA 78)

Archives can only contain traces of what happened, not the events themselves. We will always desire to know what was lost, what “burned and disappeared with the ashes.” Archive fever is the destruction of the archive motivated by the death drive.

Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Gerhard Richter’s Atlas, The Anomic Archive, 1993

Atlas = any tabular display of systematized knowledge

anomie

1. Social instability caused by erosion of standards and values; socially disoriented
2. Alienation and purposelessness experienced by a person or a class as a result of a lack of standards, values, or ideals

This treatise starts with two quotes relating photographs to death. Next, it positions Richter’s Atlas with other similar grid-like photographic collections as enigmatic and thus difficult to historically categorize. In this context, Buchloh relates photography’s structural order to the archive:

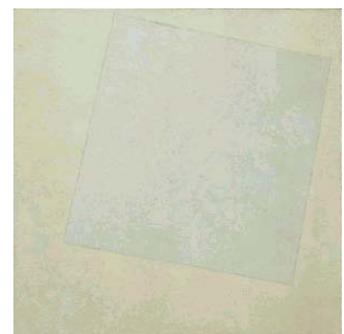
1. Infinite multiplicity
2. Serialization
3. Comprehensive totality goal
4. Formal organization



As a form of collective memory, the presentation structure of The Atlas is similar to instructive charts, teaching devices, technical or scientific illustrations, which might be found in textbooks. It embodies an archival organization of materials according to the principles of an unidentifiable discipline. Avant-garde history has few if any precedents for artistic procedures organizing information systematically within didactic models of display. Buchloh then proceeds to identify works that might be considered as such precedents.

By invoking a reference to the work of Kasimir Malevich as relevant, Buchloh launched me on a visual culture tributary investigation into **Suprematism**. “To the Suprematist the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth.”
- Kasimir Malevich

In a similar fashion, a mention of Hannah Hoch and her art of collecting found images presented in the “Media Scrap Book,” initiated a search for more information.



Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas assembled graphical materials from his research and lectures on various topics in a series of large-format panels. These panels present a clear model of historical memory and the continuity of experience.



Andre Malraux's legacy was the concept of "le musée imaginaire" ("the museum without walls"), which endorsed presenting art outside the institutional confines and constructs of the museum establishment. Graphic montage can be an assembly of meanings rather than the arrangement of forms.

Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project developing collage and montage as structural principles for a fragmented form of writing. Carefully constructed over thirteen years, this massive mnemonic project was never completed. **"To great writers finished works weigh lighter than those fragments on which they labor their entire lives."** - Walter Benjamin

The Arcades Project Project
The Rhetoric of Hypertext
Heather Marcelle Criskenberger

ABOUT ARTICLES CONVOLUTIONS ADDENDA SOURCES INDEX CONNECT

A Note on the Image: The background wallpaper for this page is an edited scan of the cover art used by McLaughlin and Eiland in their 1999 edition of *The Arcades Project*. Read more about the image and why it was chosen by clicking [here](#).

The Arcades Project

"Industry and utility are the angels of death who, with fiery swords, prevent man's return to Paradise. . . . And in all parts of the world, it is the right to idleness that distinguishes the superior from the inferior classes. It is the intrinsic principle of aristocracy." Schlegel, Lucinde (Leipzig), p. 32. (AP 379)

George Dillon points out some other projects that use *The Arcades Project* as their conceptual starting point in his essay "Montage / Critique: Another Way of Writing Social History." *PMC* 14.2, 2004. Here are

Sizable. Intimidating. Episodic. Unfinished. Seemingly ordered: **alphabetically**, arbitrarily. The "Overview" (or table of contents) reads much like a **guide** to Paris: "Fashion",

<http://www.thelemming.com/lemming/dissertation-web/home/arcades.html>

Using the nineteenth-century Paris arcades as metaphors, Benjamin presents a montage of quotations from, and commentary on, hundreds of published sources, arranging them in thirty-six categories with explanatory titles such as "Fashion," "Boredom," "Dream City," "Photography," "Catacombs," "Advertising," "Prostitution," "Baudelaire," and "Theory of Progress." His central theme is the commoditization of things, a process that defines the modern age.

In his, "Theses on History" Benjamin writes, "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably." This Arcades Project represents a documental archive of remembrance. It is incomplete and fractured, but reinforces the concept that all texts are fragmentary, and it is the reader that decodes and contextualizes.

Finally, we consider Richter's Atlas, started in 1961 and comprised of an archive primarily comprised of found photographs and printed materials that he collected as reference sources to support his creative practice. It is a work in progress and contains more than 5.000 images. The Atlas is a personal journal as

well as an cultural archive and includes snapshots of family and friends, concentration camps, pornography, cityscapes, flowers, news photographs, etc., as well as sketches and fragments of paintings. "In 1962 I found the first outlet; by painting from photos I was relieved from the obligation to choose and construct a subject."

The samples are arranged together on approximately 780 separate panels. Chronologically the images closely parallel the subjects of Richter's paintings, revealing his structured but evolving visual investigations.



As evaluated by art critics, this work may be a commentary on photography and its mass dissemination as a system of ideological authority. It certainly is a statement on the impact of photographic media acculturation on the process of painting. It also heavily explores the postmodern notion of authorship. The symbiotic relationship between photography and historical memory is such that it simultaneously

supports and destroys mnemonic experience.

The word mnemonic refers to any learning technique that aids memory. Mnemonics rely on associations between constructs that can be related back to the data that is to be remembered. This is based on the theory that the human mind more easily remembers spatial, personal, surprising, sexual, humorous, or otherwise meaningful information than arbitrary sequences.

A memory image is a mental construct of something previously experienced. A memory picture is a memory image that is similar to a visual perception. A photograph is a physical manifestation of a visual perception, which can actual replace the original experience.

Gerhard Richter is an important artist in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; his work spans nearly five decades. Here, you can view his work and learn about his life. Click on a work below to begin.



<http://www.gerhard-richter.com/>

Buchloh also investigates a “dialectic of montage,” defined as poles of opposition. The art or practice of arriving at the truth by the exchange of logical arguments, here he considers:

Perceptual shock
Principle of estrangement
Structural emphasis on discontinuity and fragmentation
Vs
The archive
Statistical collection
Mnemonic functions
Authenticity as empirical document

Hal Foster, *An Archival Impulse*, 2004

An international archival impulse is operative as contemporary artists explore idiosyncratic features, objects and events in modern art, philosophy and history. Much of this effort is directed towards making lost or displaced historical information physically present. Some participants use familiar sources drawn from the archives of mass culture; but others retrieve obscure alternative counter-memory sources of found objects, objects and text, or installation formats.

Nonhierarchical spatiality is otherwise rare in contemporary art. Complications of postmodernist originality and authorship are often pushed to the extreme. The ultimate medium of archival art might now be the mega archive of the Internet.

Archival art is as much about preproduction as it is about postproduction, unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects that might offer points of departure again. It not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well. All archives are found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private.

Archives develop through mutations of connection and disconnection -- to connect what cannot be connected. They assume anomic fragmentation as a condition not only to represent, but also to reveal. New affective associations turn excavation sites into construction sites.

Enwezor, Okwui. *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*. New York, N.Y: International Center of Photography, 2008. Print.

Documentation from an art show exhibited at the International Center of Photography, January 18 - May 4, 2008.

Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument Okwui Enwezor

Enwezor defines the archive as an active, regulatory discursive system. This show features contemporary artists who have appropriated, interpreted, reconfigured, and interrogated archival structures and archival materials. Photography and film are the principle vehicles of these artistic practices and also are preeminent forms of archival material.

The exhibition attempts to go beyond the archive as a record of mass media, but rather provide new aesthetic and historical experiences rather than the usual photographic assumptions. Along with the notion that a photograph is linked to an indisputable fact of its subject's existence, some other assumptions are:

- Analogue of the real
- Mechanical inscription
- Direct reference
- Accurate description
- Distinct relations of time and event

In short, a photograph is a knowledge system, a phenomenological account of the world as an image.

The terms *a priori* ("prior to") and *a posteriori* ("posterior to") are used in epistemology philosophy to distinguish two types of knowledge. *A priori* knowledge is independent of experience; *a posteriori* knowledge is dependent on experience or empirical evidence. Although a *a posteriori* justification refers to experience, the issue of import concerns how one validates the proposition or claim in question. In other words, what justifies its veracity?

The desire to make a photograph, to document an event, or to compose statements as unique events, is directly related to production of the knowledge archive. The photographic image connects to an anthropological space allowing observation and analysis in the way members and institutions understand their relationships to society.

We are now witnessing "a collapse of the wall between amateur and professional, private and public, as everyday users become distributors of archival content across an unregulated field of image sharing."
(AF 13)

The archive can be approached as a critique of the museum as an institution and artwork as an artifact.



Marcel Duchamp commented on this with “La Boite-en-Valise,” a miniaturization of his entire corpus as reproductions in a mobile museum suitcase.

Gerhard Richter’s Atlas becomes a relationship between the photography and history as an open-ended compendium of photographic panels and tableaux. The primary purpose was for his personal visual reference archive for art production.

The archive can be either discursive or digressive.

Discursive - order passing from one topic to another, usually in an unmethodical way

Digressive - order tending to depart from the main point or cover a wide range of subjects

The archive is an accumulated, tabulated, indexed, and organized form of representation occurring over time. As such, the archive is considered as:

A form - fundamental to its ability to create the “condition of validity of judgments”

A power structure - classifying information, data, or knowledge as a pervasive method of regulatory control

A medium - searching for a new types of rationality and its various effects. Archival legacies become transformed into aesthetic principles. Artistic models become historicizing constructs.

Mnemonic strategies relate to any learning technique that aids memory. Common mnemonics are often verbal; something such as a very short poem or a special word used to help a person remember something, particularly lists, but may be visual, kinesthetic or auditory. Mnemonics rely on associations between easy-to-remember constructs that can be related back to the data that is to be remembered. The photographic document is a replacement of the object or event, not merely a record of it.

“Without the photographic or filmic record of events of performances, the condition of reality on which their received effect as works of art depended would not have existed.” (AF 23)

Archives are meditations on time

“History is that which transforms documents into monuments.” - *Michel Foucault*

The artist Craigie Horsfield explored the time lag between the creation of the image and its realization a few years later. This identifies the break between two temporalities -- archive time and linear time.

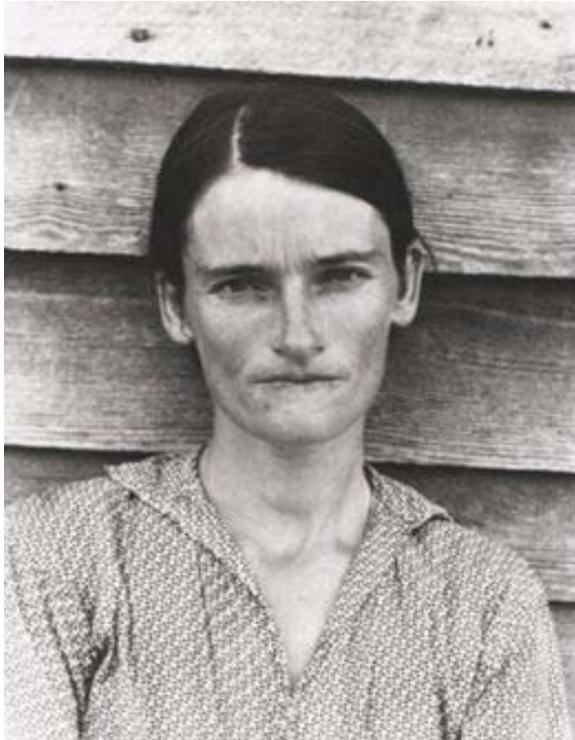
The project, “9/12 Front Page, 2001, 100 newspapers,” may be a work of art or public testimony. In either case, the archive measured as public memory provides new ways of thinking through historical events. It is possible to recalibrate the archive into new structures of interpretation. Photographs can function as an artifact of public memory -- either the early stages or first traces in the development of anything.



Several other artists' works from the show resonant.

Sherrie Levine

After Walker Evans - What would he think?



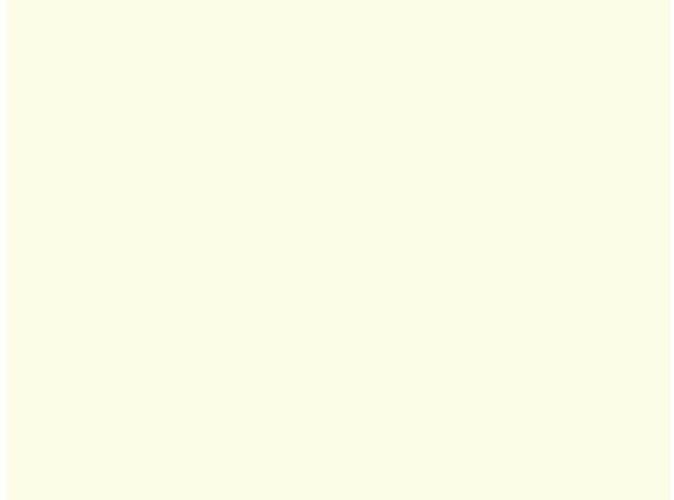
Sherrie Levine, *After Walker Evans*, 1981, gelatin silver print, 12.8 x 9.8 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Gift of the artist, 1995).

Levine's early work was formed under the legacy of American West-Coast Conceptual Art, and by the now ubiquitous experience of learning about art primarily through photographic reproductions. That work consisted of the appropriation of images of canonical male artists, often in the form of photographs taken from plates in art books devoted to the Modernist tradition. In this way she raised issues of plagiarism and property rights, which lurk in the margins of art's exchange value. Levine's present Statement itself mimics her strategy of appropriation. Commencing with a citation from the Expressionist painter Franz Marc (some of whose animal pictures she had also photographically appropriated), she ends her Statement with a variation on the oft-quoted conclusion from Roland Barthes's seminal essay, "The Death of the Author": "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author." Levine's statement was first published in the magazine *Style*, Vancouver, March 1982, p. 84, which formed the catalogue of the exhibition "Mannerism: A Theory of Culture", Vancouver Art Gallery, March-April 1982.

Ilan Liberman
 Lost Child, 2006-7
 Drawings of halftones



Walid Raad
 We can make rain, but no one came to ask, 2008
 Panoramic strips across the top



Guess who's coming to dinner, 2001
Gelatin silver prints under Semitransparent Plexiglas



Glenn Ligon
Framed text pages



The Sher-Gil Archive, 1995-97
Two lines of closely associated images, each with the same height but different widths. Top line longer than the bottom line.



“Excellence is the unlimited ability to improve the quality of what you have to offer.” - Rick Pitino