

The photographs we keep Experiences of the SEPIA programme

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The SEPIA programme was born about four and a half years ago when we approached a number of institutions to embark with us on an uncertain adventure. The first proposal was prepared in great haste, but our partners must have believed in the idea for they joined the project enthusiastically. The series of activities that we developed together has now brought us to this conference, which our friends at the Finnish Museum of Photography undertook to organize in true SEPIA spirit, deciding to go ahead with it without asking too many questions –which I have been told is also a very Finnish way of doing things.

We are here in a part of Helsinki with a very special atmosphere combining the original industrial character of factories and harbours and work with the new cultural activities that take place around us. A combination that goes well with this conference where we are meant to do work by discussing part of our cultural heritage. I hope that this atmosphere and the space of water and sky that surrounds us will help to clear your heads for many fresh ideas.

I would like to give you a more or less personal account of four years of SEPIA, of what I learned from the project, against a background of the evolving world of photography and digitization. If I do not discuss all the activities at equal length, it is because other presentations will be devoted to them during this conference and I should leave it to those speakers to tell you more.

The aim of the SEPIA programme has always been to bridge the gap between preservation and digitization of photographic collections. Before SEPIA started, the ECPA had taken part in a project on digitization of photographs in archives, EVA¹, for which we made a survey of digitization and preservation in European institutions². From the responses to our questionnaire and working visits to institutions we got the impression that digitization and preservation were often considered separate activities and that very few people, if any, were familiar with both. Only a minority of institutions employed someone trained in photographic conservation, even though many preservation problems were mentioned. And most institutions were digitizing or planning to do so at the time, in 1998-99.

¹ EVA stands for European Visual Archive; it was a European project funded by the Info 2000 Programme from 1998 to 2001 and aimed to develop a model for bringing together digital images of photographs held by different European archives. The EVA partners were Antwerp City Archives, Telepolis, London Metropolitan Archives, Netherlands Institute for Scientific Information Services, Saillabs GmbH and the European Commission on Preservation and Access. See <http://www.eva-eu.org>

² The survey was published as *In the picture. Preservation and digitisation of European photographic collections*, by Edwin Klijn and Yola de Lusenet. European Commission on Preservation and Access, 2000. <http://www.knaw.nl/ecpa/publ/pdf/885.pdf>

That photographic conservators did not seem to be much involved in digitization projects and that digitization was done by staff that probably were not very familiar with photographic processes was, we thought, far from ideal. Shouldn't the expertise of a conservator inform digitization plans? Shouldn't digitization staff know about the vulnerability of photographic processes, handling, environment? Shouldn't preservation staff be required to look at the possibilities of digitization for preservation purposes? That became the basis for SEPIA: promoting both preservation and digitization, as related activities.

I remember that at one of our first meetings one of the photoconservators exclaimed in exasperation 'yes but digital images are not photographs!' A simple statement, perhaps, but the previous time we were in Helsinki we discovered there is something like 'the complexity of being simple'. This simple question too embodies a whole lot of others. Why are digital images not photographs? What is a photograph anyway? Why is it relevant that they are not the same? Are photographs more interesting or more valuable than digital images? For whom, how, when? Who cares whether digital images are photographs or not? Should we care?

Now, after four years discussing these issues and reading about the history of photography I am not sure I have come any closer to a definitive answer to any of this. Probably some other speakers will prove to have clearer views, but I am almost sure they will have **different** views. Which is good. For the aim of the SEPIA programme was never to provide definitive answers, as long as we could encourage everyone to keep looking for answers that best fit their situation.

That is why a lot of attention in SEPIA has been given to the training programme, which started in the first year and is still continuing, with some events taking place the coming month. By the end of this year, we will have organized 5 European workshops in 4 years attended by 100 people in total. Interest was overwhelming every time, so that we had to select participants, which was disappointing for those not admitted and frustrating for us, but it was meant to be an intensive course, which only works if one limits the number of participants.

Because European workshops can only be attended by those who can afford to travel and feel confident taking part in an event in English, we also developed a programme for national workshops to reach more people. We organized a seminar to discuss how this could be done two years ago. To support training initiatives we produced a CD with training materials³. A number of partners, as well as organizations not directly related with SEPIA, undertook to organize an event in their own country. This resulted in a series of twelve training events all over Europe which will have reached

³ The CD includes materials that can serve as guidance and inspiration when developing courses; it contains examples of course models, outlines for presentations, reference lists, case studies, and images illustrating processes and damages. Copies can be obtained from the ECPA.

approximately 300 participants when we finish⁴. Scope and topics are chosen by the local organizers, who have each developed the formula that best meets their needs. We sincerely hope that the experience gained so far and the network that has been created will help to keep things going, as trainign events like these are invaluable and can be a great inspiration to people who are often very much on their own in managing a photographic collection.

The second chunk of activities were the expert meetings and working groups. A great deal of work was done by the working group on descriptions, which met regularly over the course of three years and created the SEPIADES model for describing photographs⁵. **Torsten Johansson** gives an overview of their work in his presentation. The working group on scanners investigated how to measure light and heat generated by scanners⁶. The research on scanners was the basis for further discussion on preservation aspects of digitization in Helsinki in the fall of 2002. This discussion resulted in short and basic dos and don'ts for digitization staff, who often have limited knowledge of the materials they are working with, which is available as a printed colourful brochure and also on the SEPIA website. The document is intended for preservation staff who wish to instruct digital colleagues who need to be alerted to preservation-related issues in the digitization workflow, and of course it can be used by digital staff themselves.

The most recent SEPIA expert meeting was the one on ethics of digitization and digital photography that took place in London at the National Archives in May 2003. We wanted to find out whether ideas about ethical judgement similar to those in the conservation field also apply in the digital realm. Much of this revolves around the question 'what is the relationship between an original and a digital image'? When we make digital copies, should we represent the material as faithfully as possible, by showing the characteristics of the object as it is and refraining from image processing? Or should we aim to bring out the information in the photograph as well as is technically possible, improve the contrast in faded photographs or recreate the colours? Can we perhaps even digitally reconstruct photographs? What is acceptable, and when are we overstepping the boundaries of what can be justified? And so we come back to the question of what a photograph is: an object or an image, to be presented as information or as a historical artefact?

Other speakers will be discussing these issues as well, but I would like to make a few points here because the discussion is so central to the SEPIA programme. First of all, when looking for an answer to my simple questions I found no description of photography that applies to all things we call photographs. Most descriptions cover certain aspects or certain types of photography. Perhaps the best one can do is saying

⁴ Workshops took place during 2002 and 2003 in the following countries: France (twice), Norway, Poland (twice), The Netherlands, Slovenia, UK, Sweden, Germany, Italy, Russia.

⁵ For more information on the model and the accompanying software tool see <http://www.knaw.nl/ecpa/sepia/workinggroups/wp5/cataloguing.html>

⁶ The reports of this group can be found on <http://www.knaw.nl/ecpa/sepia/workinggroups/wp4/scanning.html>

photography is ‘any method of producing a visible image by the action of light’, the definition Jonas Palm quoted at the ethics meeting. This description may be too loose to the taste of some, as it would cover a lot which we don’t usually call photographs at all, like photocopies. It would also include digital photographs, which I think can be easily defended for, as Jonas Palm argued, there are so many differences between the various photographic processes that the difference with digital is not crucial for the way photography functions in the world.

I would like to focus for a moment not on the technical processes or the role of the maker of a photograph, but on this issue of how photographs function in the world. Many people seem to be worrying that by turning digital, the photograph has completely lost its privileged status as a reflection of reality, because any image can easily be created on a computer, also an image of something that never existed. They seem to fear that we will be easily deceived by digital images because we are so used to the reality factor of silver photography –although that was never very objective either- that we will not realize digital images can be seamlessly changed without much effort. Quite frankly I cannot see how digital imaging would bring about a radical change in the potential of images to deceive and manipulate. For this potential has always been there and is not determined so much on technical characteristics as on the way the photograph is presented and the way people look at it.

As I see it, our world is so full of opportunities to be manipulated, not only by images but also by words, that the introduction of digital imaging only makes things slightly more complicated than they already were. Everybody has to learn that we cannot blindly trust our eyes and ears to tell us what is true and real. Still, we choose to believe some things and not to believe others. On one end of the scale there are people who believe the voyages to the moon they saw live on tv were staged in a studio. On the other there still seem to be people who believe photographs of flying saucers and the Monster of Loch Ness show real, existing things.

In discussions of the reality factor of photography, in many cases blatant examples are presented of falsification of historical events. There is for instance a well-known print of the Chinese leadership showing a row of key figures with obvious gaps where there used to be leaders that have fallen from grace since the photograph was taken. But downright falsification is an extreme case and it is more relevant to consider that it starts much closer to home. We all deal with biased views and manipulation in photography, film, and television on a daily basis. At the most basic level routine actions like framing, the choice of an angle, and cropping can fundamentally change the content of a picture, and we are all well aware of this; when we make holiday snaps we choose an angle so that traffic signs and cars do not ‘spoil’ our record (?) of a picturesque group of houses.

And what about this: watching a so-called wildlife documentary of a species of New Zealand mice in their nest looking after their young you may think ‘Wow how did

they manage to film all this?’ Well, perhaps they didn’t, perhaps they recreated a mouse nest in a London studio and kept 25 mice to enact the life of father mouse and mother mouse and their 3 baby mice. I made this example up, but if you don’t believe ignorance is bliss and really want to know how nature is staged and manipulated for your enjoyment, you may wish to read Kenneth Brower’s article ‘Photography in the age of falsification’⁷. I promise you: watching *Discovery* will never be the same.

Deciding when a photograph depicts a real event on the basis of technical characteristics was always the domain of experts, for instance in criminal cases when photographs are used as evidence. Most of us however depend on the context to decide how the image relates to reality. When we see an advertisement showing a tiger lying on top of a motor car we know it wasn’t made to tell us a tiger jumped on a car somewhere. It was made because someone wants us to believe this car has the power, souplesse and beauty of a tiger. We would read the same photograph very differently if it occurred in a news item in a respectable newspaper. We accept the one is staged or manipulated somehow to present a fictional event, while we expect the other to be a record of a real event. Not because we **can see** it is digital or because we **know** it is manipulated, but because we use the context to classify the image as ‘real’ or not real. And I think we’re pretty good at doing this, generally, even though we keep making mistakes.

As my background is in English literature, I may perhaps be forgiven for borrowing a phrase from the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He introduced the term the “willing suspension of disbelief” when describing the state of mind of readers of poetry, who let themselves be transposed to an imaginary world by ‘a semblance of truth’⁸. Perhaps with photographs something similar happens. Their apparent connection to reality tempts us to believe them, but we also know photographs, digital or not, are not automatic recordings but created intentionally for a reason. So rather than take them at face value we approach them with this ‘willing suspension of disbelief’, and then use all kinds of clues external to the image to decide whether we indeed wish to believe them.

For most people ‘photography’ simply refers to images that use a suggestion of a direct relationship with reality. It is this supremacy of the image, of the thing depicted as opposed to the object, which leads the viewer to disregard the technical process by which the image was created. Not always, but certainly most of the time.

Digital may not so much affect the way we look at photographs, but the dominance of the digital does have all sort of consequences, of course. For example, an article in *Le Monde* 2 of last summer reviewed whether digital photography will result in the end

⁷ *The Atlantic Online*, May 1998 <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/98may/photo.htm>

⁸ “...a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure (...) that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith..”. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* Ch XIV, 1817.

of the family album⁹. Apparently in France 70% of the owners of conventional cameras stick their photos in albums, as opposed to only 32% of the owners of digital cameras, although the latter make twice as many pictures. Digital images seem to encourage instant use rather than the creation of a memory in a fixed format. The representatives of the industry in the article acknowledge that the fragility of storage media is a factor also for the consumer market. A spokesman of Kodak suggests easy-to-use internet albums may be the way to go but adds 'la mémoire électronique est encore à inventer'.

A similar development is that professional photographers no longer have negatives to keep and often delete lots of the digital images they made. Especially for press photography it will really mean a loss of potentially valuable information if only the images selected to be printed in the newspaper survive.

Now if we review this changing landscape, what does it mean for the collections we keep? There is the question of how collections will be built in the future if people don't think it worthwhile to save their digital photographs, or if they fail to do so given the problems in keeping digital files and digital prints in good shape. Organizations that take a long-term view may manage this, but for the collections of individuals there is no digital equivalent for the proverbial shoebox found in the attic. Perhaps websites for family albums as proposed by Kodak may act like a virtual attic 30 years from now with orphaned digital albums left for archivists to discover.

In contrast to average viewers who for an evaluation of the authenticity of images on the web and in the media rely largely on contextual clues, such as the authority of the organization presenting them, institutions always did derive some information from the photographic object itself to decide about truth and value. For one thing, because they had negatives, or because something was written on the back of a print. In the fluid digital environment images entering collections will have to be accurately and extensively documented if institutions are to trust them and to make sense of them. Provenance was traditionally very much a concern of archives but in the digital world it has become a central issue because it needs to be made explicit that we can trust the digital object is what we think it is.

Documentation is also a cornerstone of any responsible digitization project. You will hear more about metadata this afternoon but coming back to the ethics of digitization I would like to emphasize the need for documentation that tells us what the relationship is between the original and the digital image that we are seeing. Because users depend primarily on the authority of the institution be sure about the authenticity of an image which is itself silent about its history, institutions should be very explicit about where the image comes from and to what extent it may differ from the original. In one of the SEPIA expert meetings we heard of an organization that posted improved versions of old photographs on the web 'because people like to see nice photographs'. They

⁹ Michel Guerrin & Claire Guillot, 'L'Album photo @ l'ordinateur', *Le Monde* 2, July-Aug 2003

thought this was perfectly okay because they hadn't touched the original. But of course users only saw the digital copy and couldn't know the original looked very differently. In fact it concerned examples of a photographic process of which the specific characteristics were washed out by the image processing employed.

In the digital age, more than ever before, it is also the task of institutions to preserve and promote their photographic collections, not only as image collections but as collections of originals. Digitization is a necessity to preserve content for future use and collections must be moved into the digital realm in order to be kept alive. But even if digital copies take over many of the functions of the original photographs, they cannot simply take their place. Photographs that serve as evidence or historical records will have to be kept for research and to check authenticity, if only for the occasional specialist user, perhaps in cold storage.

That this may cause some controversy appears from the case of the Bettmann Archive, the 17 million photographs acquired by Bill Gates which were moved to an underground subzero vault last year. Corbis had then digitized only about 2% but the photographs were in such a bad condition that they would not have lasted the 25 years needed to scan them all. In the Corbis press release announcing the move Henry Wilhelm was quoted as saying "It is a wonderful thing that in the final chapter of the 150-plus years of traditional photography –now rapidly being replaced by digital imaging technology- such a major effort is being waged to preserve this large and important body of original material so that it will remain available in its original form for future generations". The latter point was exactly what researchers and historians expressed serious doubts about because such a small part has been digitized and anyway, they need to see the originals, not a digital copy¹⁰.

Apart from their importance as records and for research purposes, photographs also need to be preserved in their own right, as artefacts constituting our photographic heritage. The value of the photograph as object is what institutions need to convey especially in this digital age in which the image reigns supreme. I was astounded to read in recent guidelines on photographic preservation from a respectable organization a recommendation to use copies for display whenever possible as most people are only interested in the images. Yes, they are, but at the same time those holding valuable collections can only gain support for their preservation by showing people the real thing, to make them see there is more to a photograph than an image and it should be cherished for its own sake. With the present interest in photography there is enough fertile ground for sowing the seed, but then the copy should not come in between the user and the original and obliterate the direct experience of the

¹⁰ Corbis press release of April 16 2001 'Corbis to build premiere sub-zero photographic film preservation facility', and of April 2002 'Corbis opens new film preservation center that rescues and preserves access to America's most famous images'. See also Sarah Boxer, 'A century's photo history destined for life in a mine', *New York Times* April 15, 2001; Mary Battiata, 'Buried treasure', *Washington Post* May 18 2003.

photographic object. For “what is the point of conserving the photographs if no one can see them?” as a photo historian said about the Bettman archive¹¹.

In the SEPIA programme we have made some efforts to contribute to this, by open days organized by partners where people could learn more about photographic processes and bring their own photographs for advice on preservation. We also together created a Virtual Exhibition on the web, which obviously presents **digital** images, but which is accompanied by a Timeline of Photography based on the work of Herman Krone offering extensive information on the history of photographic processes. This emphasis on the technical aspects of photographic objects should make visitors understand photographs are different and encourage them to go and see the real thing in exhibitions. The real thing, not a copy!

So, to come back to the original simple question whether digital images are also photographs, and whether that matters, I have only one answer: ‘it depends’. They are all photographic images which are somehow, even if only in a subversive way, related to reality. Digital photographs are also a new type of images of uncertain ancestry and with a tenuous link to historical reality. And in terms of preservation digital images are most definitely not photographs and that matters a great deal. In fact they are not even images but digital files that need to be kept accessible for temporary manifestations on a screen or slightly more permanent representations as digital prints -which in turn may also need preservation.

Where does this leave those in charge of photographic collections? Probably in the same ambiguous position as before, as keepers of images and of objects, created with the help of new technology and technology that used to be new. And though we may feel that the technology is *overwhelmingly* new and in many ways an extra burden that we have to learn how to deal with, a lot of the issues that are brought to the fore in the digital world may not be so new after all. For those working with photographs topics like the relationship between object and image, between originals and copies, are familiar issues. If we can extend existing knowledge and understanding of these issues to the digital domain this will help us grapple with the new virtual reality. *Plus ça change...* SEPIA has tried to lay a foundation for such bridges between the old and the new world. In four years we could only make a start, and the SEPIA partners are exploring possibilities of keeping the work going. So you may well hear from us again.

¹¹ Sarah Boxer, ‘A century’s photo history destined for life in a mine’, *New York Times* April 15, 2001