

Public photographic spheres (Reflections on the making of historical photographic exhibitions today)

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In my curatorial work in the last few years, I have used the notion of a “public photographic sphere.” Here, I want to explore the various overlapping meanings of this idea—namely the poetic, the epistemic, and the political—by reflecting on two of my recent exhibition projects: *Universal Archive: The Condition of the Document and the Modern Photographic Utopia* at the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA) in 2008, and *A Hard, Merciless Light: The Worker Photography Movement, 1926-1939* at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, in 2011.

The first meaning is the poetic one.

The rise of documentary discourses in the 1930s was determined by the new optical unconscious resulting from new visual technologies for propaganda, advertising, and the construction of public opinion, circulating in illustrated press, exhibitions, and cinema theaters. In the context of the *Universal Archive* exhibition, we made a reconstruction of the Soviet room at the 1929 *Film und Foto* exhibition in Stuttgart, designed by Russian artist and designer El Lissitzky. This part of the exhibition was precisely called *Public Photographic Spaces* and opened with the Soviet room reconstruction and continued in a second room presenting large-scale projections of twelve propaganda exhibitions: from Lissitzky’s *Pressa* exhibition in 1928 to Edward Steichen’s *The Family of Man* in 1955. In his designs, Lissitzky inaugurated the paradigm of a photographic exhibition producing “total vision” aimed at an active spectator or collaborator.¹

According to the Productivist principles,² Lissitzky’s psychodynamic exhibition space was actually fabricated in the mind of the viewer. The

architectural display was a perceptual instrument or a bodily machine for the new “spectator-as-producer,” paraphrasing Walter Benjamin. Diffused quickly across Europe from the 1930s, starting with the designers and architects of the Bauhaus, this simultaneously spatial and photographic idea became the ground for new advertising methods. Quickly thereafter, it was adopted as a generalized communicative and opinion-making tool in large institutional exhibitions. The idea had totalitarian reinterpretations in 1930s Italy and Germany and arrived in the United States through Bauhaus designer Herbert Bayer in 1942. It was elaborated in various MoMA exhibitions during Edward Steichen’s tenure as director of the Department of Photography and culminated in *The Family of Man* in 1955. Until his retirement in 1962, Steichen was an unsurpassed virtuoso of exhibitions designed on these principles.

So, part of the *Universal Archive* exhibition at MACBA was the history of this utopian architectural and photographic idea involving a new kind of spectator, from revolutionary Russia to Cold War America. The section ended with some of the pictures taken by Steichen himself in 1959, when *The Family of Man* opened in Moscow. Steichen photographed quite factually and literally the utopian fusion of the Muscovite audience with the *Family of Man* photo-murals. He seemed to be documenting how the idea of the utopian photographic space emerging from the poetic experiments and innovations of the Soviet revolution culminated quite far from its origin—brought to its historical conclusion precisely by him, the enemy. So the revolutionary idea returned to its birthplace, but transformed into Cold War humanist and counter-revolutionary propaganda. What Steichen photographs is a kind of historical revenge.

What we see in Steichen’s pictures is that public space is a poetic construction; following the words of theorist Michael Warner (himself referencing Nancy Fraser): the construction of a world. Warner speaks of a “lyric transcendence” in the concept of the public, describing how public speech addresses its public both as already existing persons but also as a poetic construction that may not already exist.³ This simultaneously factual and fantasmatic (or futuristic) prospective dimension of the public is particularly well translated into a photo-spatial condition by this utopian idea of the Modernist propagandistic exhibition.

The second meaning of the public photographic sphere is the epistemic or, more precisely, historiographic one. How do we translate or represent

“paradigms,” those culturally shared and unconscious structures that are produced collectively and anonymously? How do we translate them into the factual imperatives of an exhibition space? The Modernist history of photography has been concerned with the history of a technology and its heroes and masterworks, not so much with a cultural history of photography’s social uses and public life. How do we historicize those paradigms (such as that of the total-vision exhibition) and re-trace the links between artistic innovation and social innovation, since the erasure or the de-politicization of that link is precisely the unconscious motive of traditional formalist historiography?

This operation demands a history of art, a history of photography in this case, not made of authors and images but of public spheres. An epistemic approach to a public photographic sphere requires a history of modes of circulation, debates, and antagonisms; a history of collective forms of production and of the public life of photographic objects.

From the curatorial and historiographical viewpoint, photography also poses a problem regarding the status of the photographic object and its multiple potential forms. One image can have different sizes and appear in public through different means, producing a multiplicity of photographic objects. These different public embodiments of photography involve specific forms of circulation and have decisive consequences in the meaning of images, and we need a historiographical method that helps to illuminate those multiple, unstable, precarious and relational conditions of photographic meaning according to the specific materialization of the specific photographic objects.

In the *Universal Archive* exhibition, I used a spatial and discursive structure based on constellations of micro-histories that kept commenting and disputing each other, producing overlapping continuities and discontinuities. Sometimes the same or closely related images appeared in several different contexts having different meanings. The case I mentioned of Steichen is representative of that. *The Family of Man* reappeared indirectly in a later section of the exhibition, and under a different and unexpected light. It reappeared through the work of American anthropologist Margaret Mead, particularly her photo-books: the last one was called *Family*.⁴ Mead appeared as the organic intellectual of the humanist ideology, which was constitutive of the liberal documentary project. The prevalence of the humanist-anthropological foundation of

documentary discourse over its revolutionary and proletarian roots was a construction of the Cold War era.

Through these kind of complex relations between the objects in the *Universal Archive* exhibition, I was trying to trace the movements of history and a “history in movement” – the continuities, anachronisms, and dislocations of historical temporality. Or, following German art historian Aby Warburg (also present in the exhibition, close to Margaret Mead), I was trying to trace the persistence of the ancient in the modern and the modern in the ancient. I tried to make visible how there is not a single historical flux but a simultaneity of historical forces acting in dialogue, producing tension and antagonism between them.

Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* is a contribution to the material production of the idea of a “psychic” public space constituted purely through photographic images, and producing meaning through montage or editing relations of these images. My argument is that this very idea was produced through a number of simultaneous practices at the time: Warburg, Lissitzky, and the birth of the Worker Photography project. Such complex simultaneity of the same idea, produced from different backgrounds and intellectual positions, illuminates a historical shift in the psycho-cultural structure produced by photography in the rise of a new public visual culture in the late 1920s.

Contemporaneous to Lissitzky’s photo-architectural ideas and Warburg’s *Mnemosyne* was the German communist magazine *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (Workers Illustrated Journal). While the term “documentary” was famously first used by John Grierson in a 1926 review of Robert Flaherty’s film *Moana*, in 1926 the *AIZ* magazine also published a well-known call to readers and amateur photographers for photos of workers’ lives, signaling the constitutive moment of the Worker Photography movement.⁵

My research for *A Hard, Merciless Light: The Worker Photography Movement, 1926-1939* was an attempt to historicize another of those unconscious photographic ideas of the interwar period—the photographic idea of a new public—emerging from the new visual-culture regime produced by the pages of illustrated magazines. Documentary iconography is about the self-image of the public, the visual production of a shared “we.” The birth of documentary discourses between the wars was the result of the political need to visualize the new protagonism of the working class in the

new media culture corresponding to the era of mass democracy. In this context, Worker Photography was an attempt to produce a proletarian or counter-public sphere against bourgeois paternalism by means of the self-representation of the workers.

Documentary methods emerging during the 1930s were key in the production of a poetics of dispossession, contributing not only to social struggles for justice and democracy but also to the democratic imaginary of a universal citizenship, which finds precisely an iconic historical source in the Worker Photography project. The iconography of a fragile and precarious life is constitutive of the project of a proletarian documentary and is also at the root of the poetic construction of democracy and the idea of justice. Egalitarianism is based in this poetics of all being equally vulnerable to poverty and abuse. Documentary poetics is about the production of the “common man” who constitutes the new political subject of mass democracy and is on the ground of the modern notion of popular sovereignty.

And this brings me to the third meaning of the idea of a public photographic space: the political one.

I used to be head of public programs at MACBA, where we tried to reinvent the role of the museum in the city by producing spaces of confluence between the institution and new social movements. The point was to reinvent the museum as an experimental public sphere. This involved rethinking and redefining the public and the conditions of the public institution from the contributions of feminism and deconstruction, queer theory, agonistic democracy theory, and the experiences of new social movements. This also involved understanding publics as transformers and not as reproducers, thus overcoming some of the limits of traditional political representation based on a Habermasian, bourgeois concept of the public sphere.

The critique of the falsely classless, genderless, raceless conditions of citizenship articulated by Jürgen Habermas in his seminal essay on the public sphere dates back to the late eighties.⁶ Now we can understand publics in an antagonistic way, or, following political theorist Chantal Mouffe, according to “agonistic pluralism.” Mouffe’s model states that democratic politics consists of the re-signification of social antagonism into “agonism”: no longer a struggle between enemies but a struggle

between adversaries. This means recognizing that there is no consensus without exclusion and that conflict, controversy, and dispute are inherent to democracy.⁷

Two of the most important recent contributions to photography theory deal precisely with the public role of photography and give new vitality to the documentary idea. Ariella Azoulay proposes the notion of “civil contract” for redefining the fact that photography continues to be a key political instrument of emancipation in current social struggles. She stresses that photographic meaning is produced in the articulations between different agents involved in the production and circulation of photographic discourse (the camera, the photographer, the photographed subject, and the spectator), with none of these granted the power to control meaning alone.⁸

If Azoulay speaks of a “citenry of photography,” Blake Stimson, on his part, writes about “photography and its nation,” meaning a specific sort of shared public space produced by photography. In his book *The Pivot of the World*, he devotes one chapter to Steichen’s *The Family of Man* and describes how the exhibition produced a collective perceptual and emotional experience that was constitutive of a new model of communality or global citizenship, before modes of social inclusion were determined by access to consumer goods in the following decade. *The Family of Man* represented, according to Stimson, the last moment when the aesthetic experience was political in such a collective way, the last moment of the *homo politicus* before being replaced by the *homo economicus*. It was also the last moment of the hegemony of photography in the media before the arrival of television.⁹

I think there remains a potential in the modernist utopian photo-architectural spaces to be explored. Those visual and architectural spaces remain somehow constitutive of what we understand as the modern demos, the democratic public sphere: the shared space of communality but also of confrontation with otherness.

I see my exhibition projects as both historical research and as imaginary museums, as archaeologies of the future. To me, the exhibition space and the museum seem to be the place still today for a debate on the current and changing conditions of the meaning of the democratic public sphere.

¹ This part of the exhibition is documented in the book *Public Photographic Spaces: Propaganda Exhibitions, from Pressa to The Family of Man*, MACBA, Barcelona, 2009.

² Productivism was a movement formed in post-revolutionary Russia that advocated for the social and practical uses of art as a branch of industrial production.

³ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Zone Books, New York, 2002, 82.

⁴ Margaret Mead and Ken Hyman, *Family*, Ridge Press-MacMillan, New York, 1965. Mead's ethnographic photo-books start with the groundbreaking *Balinese Character*, The Academy of Sciences, New York, 1942.

⁵ See Jorge Ribalta (ed.), *The Worker Photography Movement (1926-1939): Essays and Documents* (Madrid: Museo Reina Sofia, 2011).

⁶ Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992) from a conference held in September 1989.

⁷ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).

⁸ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

⁹ Blake Stimson, *The Pivot of the World: Photography and its Nation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006)

This text accompanies the exhibition *Habitat* by Luis Jacob at Gallery TPW, May 5 – June 10, 2017.

Co-presented with the Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival

Habitat Conversations

Gallery TPW has commissioned three short texts in response to artist Luis Jacob's explorations of place-making, the visual regimes of the city, and the force of photographs.

On Saturday, June 10, 2 – 4pm, join us to discuss this text by Jorge Ribalta in a public conversation facilitated by Luis Jacob and Kim Simon

Jorge Ribalta is an artist, researcher, editor, and independent curator. He has made solo shows at, among others, galleries Zabriskie (New York and Paris), Casa sin Fin (Madrid), and angelsbarcelona (Barcelona). He was curator of exhibitions: *Universal Archive: The condition of the document and the modern photographic utopia* (MACBA, Barcelona, 2008), *A Hard, Merciless Light. The Worker-Photography Movement, 1926-1939* (Museum Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2011), and *Not Yet: On the Reinvention of Documentary and the Critique of Modernism* (Museum Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2015). He was Head of Public Programs at the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art between 1999 and 2009.

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