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Ways of (not) seeing the blind spots in the photographic archive[1]

Federica Martini

There are records in the archives that are unclassifiable or are catalogued in such detail that they lose their way and visibility in the intricate web of key words and cultural practices of a given historical time. To this kind of potential archival aphasia belong silenced or silence-based gestures, as well as documents that are destroyed, forgotten, withdrawn or rejected from existing catalogues.

Seen through the lens of contemporary artistic practices, the discontinuity implicit in a document that eludes archival classification are reminiscent of (and sometimes cumulative to) forms of (im)materialism. These absences invite to inhabit the peripheries of the archive programmatically and to consider their developing constellations of meaning and material traces

as alternatives rather than voids. It is probably in this sense that Geoff Nicholson's narrative essay *Hunters & Gatherers* suggests that collecting objects and information is not only a matter of cataloguing criteria (Nicholson, 1991). The deviations, misunderstandings, oversights, remainders and gaps that emerge from reading the documents or from tracing their blind spots also produce narratives: "Dust collects. It falls on old moquette, on walnut veneer, on corduroy and melamine. It settles on picture rails, in the curves of porcelain shepherdesses, in the corners of junk-rooms; ground-in dirt unmoved by dusters and vacuum cleaners; […] it passes *through doors and windows*, lodges in our clothes and hair, collects in every crevice" (Ibid.).

Dust, which Nicholson treats as a paratext and mechanism for gathering the remainders of official narratives, echoes the complementarity between reading and non-reading that Pierre Bayard associates to Robert Musil's librarian in the novel *A man without qualities* (Bayard, 2007). Of the three and a half million books preserved in the library of the novel's fictional empire, Musil's librarian has read only the titles and synopses: his love for all publications, without priorities or hierarchy, incites him to remain in the periphery of each book and show no preference to one to the detriment of another.

Musil's insistence on his librarian's apparatuses enable an abstract and all-encompassing global knowledge, one that consciously oversees details in favor of a comprehensive official narrative. Furthermore, recalls Irit Rogoff, official histories also bring along a form of narrative dust (Rogoff, 1996). These fragmentary,

granular remainders point at the desire to reconstruct the interrupted circulation of information and speculation about the absent documentation. Along these lines, the missing record is as pregnant as the historical evidence corroborated by archival materials. It allows the "serious chronicle" to be infiltrated with subjective experiences capable of destabilizing the demands that art history addresses to historical realism. For Rogoff, it is not a question of imagining an "alternative factuality" but of "annulling the distance" that academic research establishes between "what is said, who says it and the person to whom the information is addressed" (Ibid.). A comparable dynamic also manifests itself in the photographic practices of the Sixties, according to a new type of vision that John Szarkowski clarifies in the context of the collective exhibition *New Documents* (1967). The show chronicles the passage from documentary photography with social impact to a personal cognitive approach. It emphasizes photography's attention to the "commonplace" of reality and the desire to represent it both with vision devices and with a theoretical framework (Meister, 2015). To this is added, in Susan Sontag's reflections, the desire to consider photography as a material document that can be "reduced, enlarged, cropped, retouched, manipulated, made up" and that, like any paper object, can "disappear, buy value ", and can be "sold and reproduced" (Sontag, 2004). It is at the crossroads between these dynamics that the visual research of the artists Noor Abu Arafeh, Maria Iorio & Raphaël Cuomo, Petra Koehle & Nicolas Vermot-Petit-Outhenin and Uriel Orlow on the blind spots in the photographic archive emerges.

The general question concerns the first part of my title: 'Personal Responsibility'.
– Hannah Arendt, *Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship*, 1964

In the case of *It Depends Entirely upon the Hue of the Lightin*g (2012–in-progress) by Petra Koehle and Nicolas Vermot-Petit-Outhenin, it is the material and immaterial reading of two 1944 color photographs that triggers research on the controversial Farbdiaarchiv zur Wand- und Deckenmalerei fund, now preserved at the Institute of Art History in Munich. As the title of the work suggests, the clarity of a historical photographic document "depends completely on the tonality of the light". The interdependence shows firstly on the material level involving the camera and the executor of the image, and eventually at the intersection between the commissioner and the photographer's responsibility.

Rosmarie Nohr and Hans Geissler, from the book Fuhrmeister, C. et al., *Führerauftrag Monumental-malerei – eine Fotokampagne 1943–1945*, Cologne: Böhlau, 2006.
Photo: Koehle&Vermot

Koehle&Vermot came upon these two photographs in 2006, while leafing through the conference proceedings *Führerauftrag Monumentalmalerei – eine Fotokampagne 1943-1945*, which focus on some 39.000 slides produced during a photo campaign between 1943 and 1945 (Fuhrmeister et al., 2006). The Führer had commissioned the campaign to the Reich Ministry of Public Propaganda in order to document the frescoes, murals and other artistically valuable wall decorations of 480 historical buildings dating from the 10th to the 19th centuries. The idea was to collect the photographs into a kind of time capsule that would be used to reconstruct the artwork destroyed during the war.

The two snapshots selected by Koehle&Vermot are featured in full page in the appendix. The one on the right shows wooden scaffolding framing various stucco decorations, mouldings and the fragments of a fresco. On the upper level of the scaffolding, a woman leans over the camera in the act of portraying three white cherubs. The page on the left presents a photographer, black coat and light blue jeans, standing on a precarious pile composed of a wooden box, a coffee table and an antique white chair. At his feet one can sense the presence of a tripod; moving back in perspective toward the left corner of the scene, a studio light directs his gaze toward a mural painting framed by stucco. The backstage of the photographic production points towards an episode of the myth of Cupid and Psyche chosen that develops across nine frescoes painted by Moritz von Schwind in 1838. The shot is by Rosemarie Nohr, born in Hirschberg in 1923, at that point a student at the Leipzig

Institute for Colour Photography founded in 1940 by her teacher Hans Geissler. It was the winter of 1944 and both were assigned by the Fürherauftrag Monumentalmalerei to the documentation of the Schwind Pavillon built in 1829 in Rüdigsdorf in the Leipzig area.

Petra Koehle & Nicolas Vermot-Petit-Outhenin, *Führerauftrag*, 2010 View of the installation at the Shedhalle, Zurich Photo: Koehle&Vermot

The slides taken by Nohr and Geissler balanced on scaffolding can be found today in the Koehle&Vermot-Petit-Outhenin archive in Zurich. Their status as informal and stealthy images clashes with the photographs of the murals portrayed for the Fürher's campaign. They show one relevant moment where the democratization of colour photography crosses path with the Reich political agenda. For Koehle&Vermot this history also reads in the materiality of the images, which prompts them to engage a series of conversations with Rosemarie Nohr to understand the intertwining of stories and the responsibilities that govern the production of images. In 2010, at the Shedhalle in Zurich, the installation *Führerauftrag* materializes the point of view

of photography through the enlarged image of Rosemarie Nohr bent over the camera. It is not a photographic installation, but an exact, three-dimensional photographic gesture in which there is a strong bond between reference and photography (Barthes, 2003). The central space of the installation, conceived as an empty scene, welcomes art and architecture historian Philipp Ursprung and media theorist Yvonne Volkart in conversation with images and history. Recorded and transcribed, the conversation at the Shedhalle enters the project's archives along with interviews with Rosemarie Nohr. The latter feeds the partition of the exhibition *It Entirely Depends upon the Hue of the Lighting* presented at the Galerie de Roussan in Paris in 2013. At the entrance to the exhibition, a series of monochromes reproduces the chromatic scales of primary and complementary colours on which the colour of photography is measured. This is followed by three colour still lifes created by Rosemarie Nohr during her studies at the Institute in Leipzig. What makes Nohr's photographs possible is, in principle, the ideological encounter between the new colour film that Agfa produced between 1935 and 1936 and Goebbels' partial aesthetic defection from the neoclassical monochrome dictates of Nazi architecture to support the development of "German colour photography" (Berghoff, Kolbow, 2013). Between 1943 and 1945, the group of German photographers hired in the Fürherauftrag Monumentalmalerei, of which Nohr was a member, will be equipped with this film. In the basement of the gallery in Paris, a thick curtain crosses the space in which the artists' interviews with Nohr

become a screenplay that alternates the voices of three roles, unidentified if not by the responsibility of those who take the floor from the memory of the conversation. The words in the performance situate the chromatic scales, still lifes and photos of Nohr and Koehle&Vermot in a broader historical scene. On the one hand, the responsibility of two individuals who accept to collaborate with the Reich People's Propaganda Ministry. On the other, the magniloquent and identity-related history returned by the works selected by the Reich heritage conservation agencies. In this field of forces, the two informal shots of Rosemarie Nohr and Hans Geissler offer a latent vision of an intimate and precarious act where the constellation of power relations contextualizes the existence of these images: the imbalance of power between the teacher Geissler and the student Nohr; Nohr's collaboration with a project of identity documentation of the Reich and, later, after the war, his involvement in the documentation of the first restorative exhibition of works that the Nazi regime had defined "degenerate art" (Koehle, 2020). The paradox of those who created the images as part of the assignment, recalls Petra Koehle, is that the blind spots and absences of the archives are historically linked to the version of history that was not in power.

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"The archive has become the deliberate and calculated secretion *of lost memory*".
– Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les lieux de Mémoire*, 1989

As an introduction to the essay *Latent Archives, Roving Lens,* artist Uriel Orlow quotes in epigraph historian Pierre Nora's reflection on the archive that "secretes" memory (Orlow, 2006). Orlow further describes archives that are swollen with information as part of the post-Industrial Revolution acceleration and the consequent perception of more intensely volatile memory. The question of who keeps the documentary material (institutionally and personally) enters into relation with the archive and the records' physicality, while also highlighting the subjectivities that produce and take care of memory. In the video *Les Veilleurs d'images* (The Guardians of Images, 2017) these interactions apply to the collection of stereoscopic images gathered by a certain Kostioukovsky between 1904 and 1939, and acquired in 2000 by the Mucem (Musée des civilizations européennes et méditerranéennes), Marseille. This institutional framework further relates to the subsequent digitalization of the images in 2013 with the help of a prisoner from the Maison Centrale prison in Poissy in northern France. Kostioukovsky, a former czarist soldier who repaired in France in 1915, became an entrepreneur and amateur photographer of stereoscopic images in Paris.
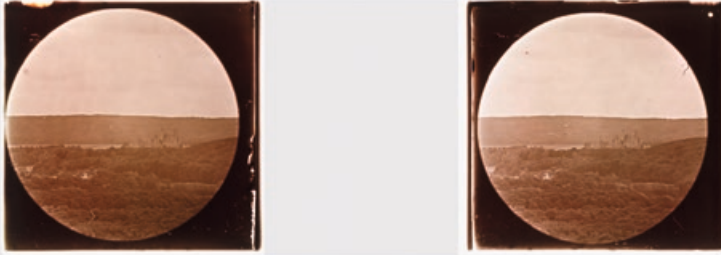
Starting from an in-depth reading of the collection, Orlow reconstructs Kostioukovsky's movements through France and Europe, traces back shifts in the ownership of the images, records the material traces of the archival regulations governing the classification into folders and cabinets. Through these abstract institutional entanglements, Orlow introduces flesh, bodies and materials that emerge from field research; information is collected and analysed, witnesses to the events are met. Aspects of care and conservation contribute to defining the images' visual field and their latent material history. If the photos could speak, the presence of the prisoner-guardian of images would be revealed, whereas his traces are erased by the quality of the images, as his presence "becomes completely invisible when the work is well done".

Les Veilleurs d'images focusses on the physical and sensory, material and latent shifts of the images in the Kostioukovsky collection. The camera watches the preparation and delivery of the photographic film slides from the "Arts de la scène" section of the Mucem archives to the arrival and digital treatment at the Maison Centrale in Poissy. The dual channel view echoes the stereoscopic nature of Kostioukovsky's camera while the wheeled doors of the archive shelves are opened, the documentation boxes are placed on the table, the images are discarded and then thrown back by the gloved hands of a woman in a white coat.

The following screens frame the door of a prison and follow the Kostioukovsky images to the digitizing room – computer, dual-screen, camera, the noise of capturing images – and the prisoner's gloved hands that dust and (re)photograph them. His voice, transcribed in subtitles, rememories his birth in the Paris region, son of workers, memories of summer family travels, of his grandfather reporter, and slowly gets to his present condition as a prisoner paid four euros per

hour to digitize images. In the video, the places photographed by Kostioukovsky are juxtaposed with the prisoner's personal reminiscences, and the repair of the archive is accompanied by the "construction, repair, restoration" of the living ("Archival work always involves the question of conservation and restoration. There is a link between this work and the repair of the living", says the prisoner).

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So even now that the novel is over, sometimes I dream of these three-black people – Edmonia [Lewis], Sarah [Parker Remond], and Frederick [Douglass] – walking around Rome. Three African Americans, three people who changed the world with their persistence, wandering around the Eternal City… but did the city know about them? That was the question that obsessed me. Did the city know about their freedom?
– Igiaba Scego, *La linea del colore*, 2020

Uriel Orlow's reference to stereoscopic images produces documentary alternatives

through engaging sounds, voices and visions on the double track of personal and historical memories. In the absence of archives, informal and collateral art historical narrations tend to take the form of rumours, anecdotes and, on an intimate level, become a secret shared by groups and art scenes. This anonymous knowledge is difficult to attribute to a precise historical time, but fundamental when investigating alternative situations to the given institutional context. As Irit Rogoff recalls, their fluidity disturbs our faith in official political and historical representations (Rogoff, 1996). Hence the necessity to review absent information to include these fragile and traditionally marginal data in academic research.

To deal with the total absence of traces that follows the archive's destruction or disappearance, Jalal Toufic proposes a levelling of historical and fictitious documentary sources on the ground that "fiction is a container of historical facts, economic facts and even aesthetic facts and an aesthetic fact is, ultimately, a fact like any other" (Toufic, 2017). Accordingly, objects and photographs in artist Noor Abu Arafeh's work contribute to perform the archive in an open speculative reading. The road is opened by Michel de Certeau, who expands on the notion of evidence: "Even objects have memory. The handle remembers who turned it, the phone remembers who answered. […] It is up to the investigator to learn the language of things, so that he can listen to them when they have something to say" (de Certeau, 1988). Hence, Noor Abu Arafeh's investigation follows the hypothesis that a photograph can record information or forget it and therefore hide it. In 2015, her

research into the absence of institutional archives for Palestinian contemporary art led her to explore the work of key artists such as Suliman Mansour, Nabil Anani and Tayseer Barakat. During her research, Abu Arafeh met Khalil Rabah's painting *Fourteen Men* from the series *Art Exhibition: Ready-made Representations* (2011) based on 54 photographic documents chosen by the artist and transformed into oil paintings in China. The referent of the painting is the group photo of the artists participating in the collective First Spring Exhibition organized in 1985 at the Al Hakawati Art Center in Jerusalem by the League of Palestinian Artists. Noor Abu Arafeh researches information about the thirteen artists, the exhibition and photography. In particular, one artist emerges in the research, Sager Al-Qatel, who died in 2004 in Holland, and on whom information appears inaccessible. To his vision of history, between 2014 and 2015 Noor Abu Arafeh consecrates a first video, *Observational Desire on a Memory that Remains* (2015). In the video's two voices, the past of Sager's memory is synchronized with the present of Noor Abu Arafeh's research. What speaks for Sager is his black and white photography, which completes in a speculative and sometimes fictitious way the account of the discoveries and memory lapses of the documents interrogated by Noor Abu Arafeh to reconstruct the details of the experience.

In 2018, Abu Arafeh returns to the group photo of the First Spring Exhibition after identifying another absence. The new research phase gives rise to the video *The Magic of the Photo That Remembers How to Forget* (2018). The video explores the portrait of the fourteen male artists participating in the First Spring Exhibition and attempts to identify a fifteenth artist who would have participated in the show although is absent in the snapshot. This absence points at a historical fact that has escaped the meshes of official exhibition history. Or, suggests Noor Abu Arafeh's voice, the lack of record results from the voluntary withdraw of history from the image and the exhibition reports. The group photograph of the Spring Exhibition flickers, appears and disappears at the sound of a photographic click. Then it recomposes itself in a sequence of vertical coloured bands pointing at a transmission error and a form of archival negligence that may have caused a loss of photographic memory in the visual document.

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Video and photographic memory losses
may also depend on the intertwine between
the material degradation of documents and
the opacity generated by the apparatuses
in charge of their preservation. At the centre
of Maria Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo's works
there is an archival practice that questions
ways of reading and accessing documents
along with the narration and words attached
to them. The time spans that identify their
videos' working dates imply lapses, intervals
and duration. *Chronicles of that time,* their
last video, is no exception, as its production
proceeds between 2004 to 2020. Through
the montage, the temporal gap between the
living moment when their camera recorded
the voices and images interplay with the
material degradation of the tape and memory
reactivation. "How do you tell a story with
little that was preserved? With the parts that
were left behind, the minute traces left in
the margins of events? Or with what was not
recorded?", asks the voice off.
        If the image cannot produce a complete
vision, it can equally function as a suspicion,
a clue to past material completeness,
offering a pixelated mnemonic view, like an
archeological fragment. Or again, missing
images and lacunae may otherwise refer
to imperceptible historical events. Just like
the migrants who land on Italian shores
and are made illegal by a law of the 1990s,
images can also be clandestine, invisible and
undetectable. Parallel to the hushed melodies
and fragments of interviews with expelled
migrants goes the story of the second,
third and fourth century mosaics in the
archaeological museum in Sousse, Tunisia.
Incomplete, in the process of restoration,

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Maria Iorio,
Raphaël Cuomo,
Chronicles of that time, 2014–20
Video still
Courtesy of the artists

they too take the form of a pixelated image that returns like a visual aftertaste or a song parasitising the memory. History writing here relies on a non-linear channel for storing and transmitting information, including personal memories, archaeological museums and media supports – videotapes or films.

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Along corridors and stairways, he presented his wife with the splendour of his beloved palace. Important and co-owner, his noble sinecura kidnapped, eager to emphasize the exciting official character, he proudly mentioned the gifts of the different countries: Persian carpets, Norwegian woods, tapestries from France, Italian marbles, paintings from Spain and all the other offers, explaining each time the exceptional quality.
– Albert Cohen, *Belle du Seigneur*, 1968

If the micro-stories of the visual document are absent or unintelligible due to their precarious nature, it is, however, their ephemeral character that predisposes them to be told and recounted. With each change in context and format, they constitute an archive of parallel oral and material stories that detail the occurrences of the initial macro-history. The issue is central when, in the fall of 2019, I started collaborating with artists Petra Koehle and Nicolas Vermot-Petit-Outhenin on the research "Institutional memory: political aesthetics of the gift to the Palace of Nations". The project began with the consultation of the archives relating to the work of the League of Nations between 1919 and 1946, and then
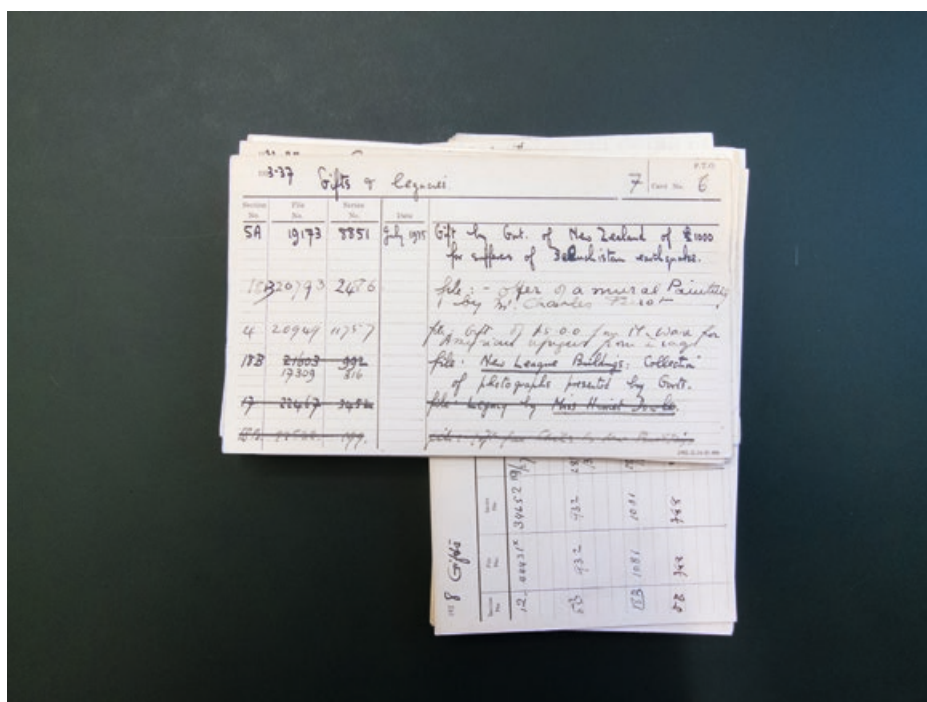
focuses on the Geneva Palace of Nations
and the idea that this building, in its pharaonic
materiality, is itself a document.

    Situated in the heart of the Parc de
l'Ariana in Geneva, where it was built

between 1929 and 1937, the legendary and monumental dimension of the Palace of Nations is poetically portrayed in in the quantitative catalogue of Albert Cohen's novel *Belle du Seigneur*: "And then one thousand and nine hundred radiators, twenty-three thousand square meters of linoleum, two hundred and twelve kilometres of electrical wires, one thousand and five hundred taps, fifty-seven hydrants, one hundred and seventy-five fire extinguishers!" (Cohen, 2013). Like other photographic documents discussed in this essay, the reading of the Palace and its archives requires overall views as well as out-of-the picture details. Alongside the official stories and archives of events, the daily practice of the spaces of the Palace of Nations and the spirit of international solidarity implied by the UN project has generated tacit knowledge and informal stories that function as "mediators between a succession of local events and an institutional strategy" (Greenblatt, 1992).

In 2014, on a visit to the Palace of Nations with UN archivist Jacques Oberson, Koehle&Vermot identify in the archives the records of a series of gifts from member countries that were solicited in 1932 to finance the construction of the building's interior furnishings. Through the letters and administrative records, our project is now reconstructing the creation and design of the rooms, the financial, aesthetic and political negotiations that accompanied their construction, and the national and international competition that animated them. We speculate on the unfinished rooms, on the rejected gifts. Between the lines of diplomatic rhetoric, the correspondence

shows us how aesthetic disagreement over a wooden decoration can be translated into political dispute, and vice versa. This is how the floors, curtains, chairs, wall decorations and entire rooms of the Palace of Nations reached a form of architectural consensus epochs and heterogeneous styles. This consensus is often overshadowed the geopolitical debates and the weightings underlying the aesthetic choices, that we attempt to bring into light.

There are therefore many ways to "disappear" from an archive. For this to happen, one must silence the stages that preside over the production of the document; erase the material and cultural history of its support; dim the individual and systemic circumstances that determine its creation and context of its reception. Alternatively, one can sever the link between the document and its real referent, reducing its credibility. The disappearance will be all the more effective if accompanied by a significant historical upheaval that suspends, diverts or modifies the forms of conservation and cataloguing. In other words, proposes Siegfried Kracauer, the completeness of the historical view depends on the angle of the shot and the ability, through camera movements, to link macro-events with the specificity of details, to create an overall view. However, Kracauer continues, the reverse movement is also true, and what the macro-historical viewer does not (can not) see is obscured mainly by what s/he sees.

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