

# Encompass Everything

The photographic Encyclopedia as Anti-Database



Janou Munnik

## **Encompass Everything, the Photographic Encyclopedia as Anti-Database**

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## **Acknowledgements**

The curiosity to research the topic of this thesis stems from an inherent condition that I experience. As I grew up I have found myself picking up things from sidewalks, collecting grocery lists, categorizing stones, purchasing stamps, piling up on colour slides and flipping through old photo books. Naturally, I thought this was something everyone held themselves occupied with, which as I later understood, is not really the case. Nevertheless, in the field of photography, I was able to find artists that shared the same fever to collect, list and categorize. In a world where more and more objects, documents and photographs are stored digitally, a question that has been on my mind is why artists and especially photographers (myself included) resort to the figure of the archive in developing their photographic work, and by doing so, provide a different perspective on the figure of the digital database.

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## Abstract

The main purpose of this thesis is to investigate in how and why encyclopedic projects by archival based photographers, challenge and counter the figure of the digital database. The yearning for collecting or ‘archive fever’ (as defined by Jacques Derrida) is still found in some contemporary art projects. Consequently, in a world where more and more objects, documents and photographs are stored digitally, the question remains why some photographers resort to the archive as their working method and continue to display their works through analogue techniques such as the book and the installation. In order to understand the working method these artists adopt, this thesis shares them under the position of ‘the-photographer-as-archivist’.

This thesis considers two case studies, firstly *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* (2007) by Batia Suter (1967) and secondly *The Universal Photographer* (2018) by Anne Geene (1983) and Arjan de Nooy (1965). Their projects are assessed visually as well as theoretically, using the method of visual research as proposed by Gillian Rose. This method bases itself on the three modalities of technology, composition and social elements that surround visual imagery. The research has shown that both of the explored works, contain anti-database characteristics such as physicality, materiality and narrativity as their most prominent features. This means that in terms of discourse they comment on the structure, active accumulation, the usage and functioning of the digital database.



## Introduction

Everybody collects. Something. Anything. Again and again. Sometimes consciously and with a long-term strategy, other times without thinking much. (Matthias Winzen, “Collecting So Normal, So Paradoxical”)

What if it would be possible to capture the world into a set of photographs, texts or documents? Who would have made these records? What would they look like? Who would store these images and texts and who would have access to them? And most importantly, would it actually represent the world to the one who views it? In a fictional world, this would be possible, yet we all know that in real life there is no such thing as being able encompass the whole world.

In a contemporary view, the desire or drive to collect is referred to as “archive fever”, a term coined by philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose ideas will return in the progression of this thesis. This desire to collect is still commonly visible in the art world. As art critic Hal Foster notes, already before the first World War it had become a tendency for artists to create so-called archival artworks.<sup>1</sup> Examples are, Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas*, Christian Boltanski’s artist book *Catalogue* and Walid Raad’s *Atlas Group*. Because these artists work with already existing photographs and documents and look actively for missing information, they can be considered as fulfilling the position of “the artist-as-archivist”<sup>2</sup> The existence of the previously named projects not only point to a commonly felt drive to collect and store documents, photographs, texts and objects, they also point out that there is a need to actively engage and construct new meanings from this collected information.

Yet, in the same article Hal Foster notes that through the introduction of the internet, collecting has been democratized to the extent that digital information processes such as sampling and sharing have also become included in working methods of artists.<sup>3</sup> An example is the exhibition *Collect the WWWorld: The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age* (2012, Basel) curated by Domenico Quaranta. This show includes artists like Jon Rafman and his work *The Nine Eyes of Google Street View* (2008-ongoing), in which screenshots of Google Street View comprise a collection of ephemeral moments in time. Similarly, *The Internet Cache Self Portrait* (2012) by Evan Roth shows that even when one does not collect on purpose, the internet will still collect the websites one visited for you. Similar to archival collecting, the possibilities of internet collecting are endless.

<sup>1</sup> Hal Foster, “Archival Impulse,” *October* (2004): 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Additionally, in the digital age, not only artists, but institutions are also employing digital collecting in order to encompass a vast number of images and order them into new collections and databases. To illustrate, the database ImageNet, which collects images for academic use, currently contains over 14,197,122 images.<sup>4</sup> In the same way, each minute 400 hours of YouTube videos are uploaded to the platform.<sup>5</sup> Although these large data-storages may seem difficult to grasp at first, they are generally more accessible and adaptable than the physical information saved in archives. Moreover, the functioning and structures of these databases stimulate the evolving (visual) discourse surrounding digital preservation.

With the introduction of the internet came the realisation that the archive as a dark and dusty place does not hold stance anymore. Rather, in a reaction to the constant flow of information, archival studies in academia have become a popular department, moving more and more towards a focus on digital preservation. More specifically, they adapt themselves to a discourse on information studies.<sup>6</sup> Current research into (digital) archives, their owners and their power structures involves amongst others, investigating the relation of the archive to new media. For instance, literary theorist Ernst van Alphen notes that the archive has become a popular figure to employ by artists, especially because they fill up the decreasing narrative of the digital world.<sup>7</sup> Above all, it cannot be forgotten that the archive and the database as institutions naturally exercise power over their information. Therefore, focus has also been on the institutional consequences of archiving.

To illustrate, a large part of archival science rests on the so-called silence of the archive (i.e. the process of leaving things out, active forgetting and gaps in the archive). Two influential French philosophers, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, offer the foundational arguments to this debate. They note that the archive is inherently paradoxical, it cannot be fixed to certain characteristics and standards. Rather it relies on multiple interpretations.<sup>8</sup> So there exists no consensus over an existence of ‘the’ archive. Gabriella Nouzeilles follows along these lines of “the archival paradox” in arguing that the archive reveals, as much as it covers up. That is, archival material can aid us in remembering the past just as well as it can aid us in forgetting specific pasts. Not only on the basis of which photographs are included, but also on the fact that on the one hand archives are seen as static and authoritative entities, while on the other, they can be easily altered, moved or even erased.<sup>9</sup>

Exactly this inherent altering and movement within the archive is a place of departure

<sup>4</sup> Stanford Vision Lab. “ImageNet.” *ImageNet*, 2016, [image-net.org/index](http://image-net.org/index). Accessed 12 May 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Brouwer, Bree. “YouTube Now Gets Over 400 Hours Of Content Uploaded Every Minute.” *Tubefilter*, 26 July 2015, [www.tubefilter.com/2015/07/26/youtube-400-hours-content-every-minute/](http://www.tubefilter.com/2015/07/26/youtube-400-hours-content-every-minute/). Accessed 23 June 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Hermann Rüschötel, “The Development of Archival Science as a Scholarly Discipline,” *Archival Science* (2001): 153-154; Karen F. Gracy, “Preface,” *Emerging Trends in Archival Science* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018) 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst van Alphen, “Introduction,” *Staging the Archive* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014) 1.

<sup>8</sup> Adina Arvatu, “Spectres of Freud,” *Mosaic* (2011): 152.

<sup>9</sup> Gabriella Nouzeilles, “The Archival Paradox,” 41.

for this thesis. In reaction to the former sketched out debates, this text would like to consider the archive not as static place of preservation but rather as an active place of production. For this reason, a similar view with Hal Foster will be shared. That is, to view the archive as a place of creation. To regard the archive not as fixed but moving, not as an “excavation site, but rather as a “construction site”.<sup>10</sup> This thesis does not investigate so much into the specific characteristics of ‘the’ archive. Instead the goal is to view the archive much more as a working method, a way of producing art projects.

The discipline of archival studies has freed itself from the restrictions of its own domain and has entered an interdisciplinary sphere. In the same way, photography and the visual arts have also found their way into the questioning and commenting on the notion of the archive and the database. Where indeed some artists refer back to the information society and jump into the new opportunities of internet collecting, there are still artists who choose to stick to more established models of the archive. In other words, in a world where an excess of photographs is stored in online databases and where some artists cleverly use these digital ways of collecting to display their projects, the question is why some photographers still resort to the archive as their working method and display their works in analogue ways, such as the encyclopedia and the installation.

Taking Hal Fosters idea of creation rather than depletion of the archive, this thesis will address the idea that perhaps artists who employ the figure of the archive feel the urge to return to this model exactly because in this way they can offer a different view on the database and its strategies in acquiring new data. It could be that the position of the photographer-as-archivist offers a counterweight to a world in which active acquisition of information is the norm instead of employing already existing material to construct new narratives. The main question addressed in this thesis is therefore: *To what extent do photographic encyclopedias that stem from the position of the photographer-as-archivist challenge the figure of the digital database?* The goal is to understand why some artists stick or return to the figure of the archive in the production of their artworks. Additionally, an inquisition into the visual arrangement of these artworks will help to discover possible characteristics that point to a re-assessment of the database.

In order to explore the projects of artists who match the tendency of archival art and to review the implications for the field of photography and archival science, this thesis aims to draw attention especially to artists who employ the position of the-photographer-as-archivist. In line with this position, two case studies will be assessed. The first one considers work by Batia Suter (1967) and the second one considers work by Anne Geene (1983) and Arjan de Nooy (1965). Their encyclopedic projects *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* (2007) and *The Universal Photographer* (2018) fit the scope of this thesis specifically because both of the projects stem from the position of the photographer-as-archivist. Both artists employ found

<sup>10</sup> Hal Foster, “Archival Impulse,” *October* (2004): 22

photographs to constitute their projects and accordingly fill some of the gaps that are part of this material, likewise, both projects rely more on process over end-product and include an active handling and construction of imagery. Because the creators of these projects adopt a working method that stems from the archive, archival characteristics such as physicality, categorizing and materiality rise to the surface. These elements challenge the figure of the digital database and foster anti-database characteristics

In the following chapters this text will explore the physical and visual manifestations of the analogue archive, and in specific the encyclopedia, in relation to the digital database through cultural geographer Gillian Rose's method on researching visual materials. Her idea of visual research rests on three modalities, namely:

1. Production, including technological elements.
2. The image itself, its composition.
3. Social aspects such as its distribution, the image's reception and relation to institutions and a discourse.<sup>11</sup> (Henceforth I will name this distribution).

These three main elements each correspond to a different research method. For example, researching the image itself could be exercised through compositional interpretation while social aspects rely more on a discourse analysis. Although all three pillars can be found in the works under analysis, this thesis will not treat them necessarily in equal attention. As Gillian Rose notes, the three mentioned modalities often overlap and are sometimes hard to distinguish from one another.<sup>12</sup> She therefore advises to choose which pillar is of most importance in describing the meaning and effect of a specific work.<sup>13</sup> For example, it could be that for a specific case study, the images' distribution is of more importance to be addressed rather than its production.

Before closely examining these artworks, it must first be clarified what the structure of the archive and the database encompasses, how they came into being and which historical tendencies they rely upon. Accordingly, the first chapter of this thesis focuses on the structure of the archive and the database, their theoretical embeddedness and how artists employ the archive as a working method. Following from that, chapter two discusses the project *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* by Swiss artist Batia Suter. Through a focus on Suter's working method and employing compositional interpretation of the photographs, this chapter examines to what extent the categories and linear narrative of this work, challenge the digital database. Moreover, the question will be whether *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* functions as an anti-database. Finally, chapter three considers *The Universal Photographer* by Anne Geene and Arjan de Nooy. Through a focus on its production and distribution, the chapter considers how this work denies a 'universal' definition of photography and to what extent it comments on the aspiration of people to create a 'total database' through excess photographing.

<sup>11</sup> Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies* (London: Sage Publications, 2016) 17.

<sup>12</sup> Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies* (London: Sage Publications, 2016) 188.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 29.



## Chapter 1. Aspiring to Encompass Everything

The desire to make a photograph, to document an event, to compose statements as unique events, is directly related to the aspiration to produce an archive. (Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever*)

Archiving by individuals is not something new, it could be said that everyone at some moment in time has had the urge to collect, categorize or list. According to art historian Matthias Winzen, “collecting is the imaginative process of association turned material” He states that the gathering of objects is not only present in the human being but also in nature at large. Think for instance of bees and squirrels.<sup>14</sup> In fact, archive fever could be seen as a common condition instigated by multiple factors. Archivist Sue Breakell ponders in her article ‘Negotiating the Archive’ on what might be the reason that people return to the archive in general. One reason might be that we desperately clasp onto archival objects because in our minds they represent our fleeting memories. Alternatively, from a capitalist viewpoint, it could be argued that we privilege the archive because it mirrors our drive to obtain objects, even if one does not know what to do with them.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Breakell points out that the archive provides us with an illusion of mastery or some sense of “authority and apparent truth” while in reality it is rather deceiving us.<sup>16</sup>

This mastery is visible in our contemporary society, which urgently seeks to gather information, photographs and data to comprehend the world in all its facets. Yet, when this existence of archival collecting is approached historically, it becomes clear that the notion of a so called ‘archival impulse’ already took shape in the nineteenth century as mentioned by literary theorist Thomas Richards.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps even before that, the cabinet of curiosities played a significant role in the encyclopedic gathering and ordering of objects, before museums did.<sup>18</sup> In contemporary terms, the figure of the archive is mirrored in that of the database. Hence, from tracing back the history of archival collecting, it seems that archive fever is not necessarily only a current yearning for the past but rather something that has been there all along.

<sup>14</sup> Mathias Winzen “Collecting So Normal, So Paradoxical,” in *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art*. (Munich: Prestel, 1998) 2.

<sup>15</sup> Sue Breakell, “Negotiating the Archive,” *Tate Papers* (2008): 1.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Richards as cited in Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever* (New York: Steidl, 2008) 19.

<sup>18</sup> Christel Vesters, “The Anti-Encyclopedia from Poetic Disorder to Political Anti-Order (and Back Again),” *Features*, Metropolis M (2013). [www.metropolism.com/en/features/23282\\_the\\_anti\\_Encyclopedia](http://www.metropolism.com/en/features/23282_the_anti_Encyclopedia). Accessed 9 May 2019.

Yet while the figure of the archive and that of the database mirror each other, there are enough differences to be discovered. Likewise, the working methods that archival artists include in their projects could be based on either of these figures. Accordingly, the questions that will be explored in the following chapter are: how does the digital database function as a structure or device and in what ways does it differ from the structure of the archive? And additionally, how do these figures relate to the position of the photographer-as-archivist?

## 1.1 The Figure of the Archive

The consequence of an inquisition into the model of ‘the archive’ is that it immediately brings up a myriad of questions and dilemmas. It instigates for example, the question whether it is possible to even speak of ‘the concept’ of the archive. Similarly, it spurs up the debate on the archival paradox which states that the accumulation of materials preserved in archives also contributes to the accumulation of materials that get excluded.<sup>19</sup> According to literary theorist Adina Arvatu, when one regards to the figure of the archive, he or she has multiple ideas about what this archive entails. Arvatu comments on the initial ideas by Jacques Derrida, who notes that there is no such thing as ‘the’ archive. Rather the archive is a complex figure that can be treated differently by what one attributes to it. Consequently, the ideas that spur from the figure of the archive do not reach a general theoretical consensus.<sup>20</sup>

As explained before, the archival impulse finds its basis in the ideas of two French philosophers: Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Both philosophers critique a form of ‘encyclopedism’ in their works, *Archive Fever* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* respectively. Their critique rests on the point that this encyclopedism seems to favour the archive as a ‘thing’ rather than as a method or figure.<sup>21</sup> This might be where Derrida and Foucault agree. They state that we can view the archive only as an impression to which it is not possible to ascribe specific contents or elements. Then for Derrida as well as Foucault, an archival object never has a ‘fixed meaning’, its value is only appropriated because it is stored in the archive, which is an institution that exercises power.<sup>22</sup> Because these points consider archives included in larger apparatuses of power, such as the government, libraries and museums, they are rather political. For instance, they consider the power these institutions have over the individual body. In contrast, Hal Foster, as stated before, adopts a point of view which considers the archive in a context of production. He takes into account in which ways artists creatively move forward from the figure of the archive and develop a working method. The latter view proves to be more useful in the development of this thesis. Moreover, it is helpful to view the two addressed case studies in this way, because both case studies adopt characteristics from more models than just ‘the’ archive.

<sup>19</sup> For more information, see the essay “The archival paradox” by Gabriela Nouzeilles in *The Itinerant Languages of Photography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Adina Arvatu, “Spectres of Freud,” *Mosaic* (2011): 152.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever,” *Diacritics* (1995): 18



This thesis is not aiming to start a phenomenological discussion on what the figure of the archive does or does not entail. However, the discussion surrounding inclusion, exclusion, active accumulation and forgetting lies at the basis of the archive for a good reason, they should not be set aside. Therefore, the following text does not necessarily focus on what constitutes the concept of the archive but rather on which working methods derive from it. In light of the two case studies that will be addressed, the thesis will narrow its focus toward the model of the encyclopedia.

## 1.2 Narrative and the Database

In today's society the archival impulse has evolved into the digital universe, which now offers an almost total view of the world and its belongings. Not only has the speed of collecting increased, the speed of finding the right resources has increased as well. By using meta-data (for example integrated in digital photographs), keywords, filters and algorithms, one can find what one is looking for, much faster and with more precision. The archive has grown out to be an institute with more power than one would assume from its implementation, not only through its rich collections but also through the embedded narratives it encapsulates. To clarify this, it is helpful to elaborate on how archival practice came into being in the first place and how it relates to a more contemporary archival structure, namely that of the database.

Formerly, trying to understand the world meant one was commonly basing his or her view on narrative stories. Whether these stories were told by the church or embedded in the political world, directions were given through universal truths which were morphed into stories. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century narrative is falling into crisis. Where there used to be all-encompassing universal tales people would tell each other orally, in our contemporary western society the tendency is that these stories emerge from (and are embedded in) institutions such as the museum or the archive.

In fact, as literary theorist Ernst van Alphen argues in his introduction to the book *Staging the Archive*, narratives embedded in institutions are rather meta-narratives. This means they try to encompass and explain the world into one piece.<sup>23</sup> Stories are not anymore told through all-encompassing narratives, rather they have been transformed into the database or the archive.<sup>24</sup> We are thus left with smaller narratives, that focus more on cause and effect. Consequently, it is possible to note that narrative has taken on a different form and place in our current society. Especially because databases such as online libraries, and image-banks present us with a 'list or collection of items' that make up a view on the world. This change from narrative to database, means that the archive embeds the smaller narratives that formerly were all-encompassing stories. Yet these narratives are not self-evident, just as they are not complete. They have to be actively searched for, for example by archivists or artists.

<sup>23</sup> Ernst van Alphen, "Introduction," *Staging the Archive* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014) 8.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 9.



Because of the dispersion of the database and the attention to multiple narratives there is no longer the assumption that there exists such a thing as a universal history. Universality becomes an urgent notion when brought into relation with the archive since it problematizes the archive's aspirations to collect the 'whole' world. As Michel Foucault would note: we have moved from a 'global knowledge to a general history'.<sup>25</sup> With which is meant that where the aspiration was first to create a continuation of history, we now notice that history (or knowledge) can be divided into parts and is actually fragmented. Naturally, for something to be universal there has to be a sense of completeness. However, the archive (and history) as it is known nowadays is never able to reach this state of being. Though, as will be elaborated later, contemporary archival artists, in this case Batia Suter and Anne Geene, still strive to find some kind of universality or level of completeness in their projects.

The feeling of archive fever is inherently connected to the aspiration of writing a different narrative or history. Curator Priscila Arantes introduces the idea from philosopher Walter Benjamin and notes it as the 'Crisis of History', which puts the ultimate narrative that used to be communicated at stake.<sup>26</sup> With the rise of digital databases, it could be said that the same phenomenon becomes reinforced. Where formerly the digital archive involved one narrative, now, through the internet, new media objects and perhaps also through social media its contents become distributed.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, citizens living in advanced economies (generally in western societies) where internet access is normalized, are able to create their own (visual) archives, for example on Facebook or Instagram.<sup>28</sup> Users classify the photographs that are posted through hashtags as these are becoming the new taxonomic structures of the digital era<sup>29</sup> (see fig. 1 for an example of a taxonomy in a digital database). To clarify, a taxonomic order derives from biology in which it is used to name, define and describe the different species for example in the order of birds. For instance, the order of birds can start out with the kingdom of animals, follows up with its class: Avata, its order: Passeriformes, its family: Corvidae, and finally it can be specified to the species name *Coloeus Monedula* (the western jackdaw). This way of identification is executed through looking at shared characteristics, in this way it is possible to make different classifications. The same can be done for naming categories in archives and databases. Hence this term will return when the figure of the database and the archive are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Having addressed some of the basic elements regarding narrative and the figure of

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault "Archaeology of Knowledge," *Social Science Information* (1970): 181.

<sup>26</sup> Priscila Arantes, "Contemporary Art, the Archive and Curatorship: Possible Dialogues," *Curator* (2018): 451.

<sup>27</sup> The archive has to adjust to the same archaeology as that of the internet. It moves from a centralized network to that of a distributed one. Lev Manovich. *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002) 55.

<sup>28</sup> Jacob Poushter, "Internet access growing worldwide but remains higher in advanced economies," *Pew Research Center* (Feb, 2016). <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/02/22/internet-access-growing-worldwide-but-remains-higher-in-advanced-economies/>. Accessed 13 June 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Instagram even offers an 'archive' function where posts can be hidden from view to other users, but kept online for the owner.

the archive, it is important to turn to an investigation of what the figure of the database encompasses. With a specific focus on how (or if) its structure of classification differs from that of the archive. At first sight, the way in which images and information are stored digitally differs a lot from the analog way.<sup>30</sup> According to new media theorist Lev Manovich, the database manifests itself best on the internet. Naturally, the open structure of the internet prohibits a linear narrative when adding extra data to the database. Rather, a linear narrative model can be found in that of the archive. In consequence, the database functions best not in linear form but rather as a list of items because its structure is from its basic principle, just not as compatible to a narrative.<sup>31</sup> So what would be some of the other prominent differences from that of the archive?

When regarding the Oxford Dictionary, it differentiates the two structures as following:

Database: A collection of data stored on some permanent medium which is structured in order to show the relationship between individual items within the database.<sup>32</sup>

Archive: A collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people.<sup>33</sup>

As these definitions show, both aim to provide structured information, but the one holds a more physical and location-specific relation to its documents, where the other seems much more virtual and fleeting. Or as Ed Folsom aptly comments in his essay ‘Database as Genre’, “Archive suggests physicality, idiosyncratic arrangement, partiality, while database suggests virtuality, endless ordering and reordering and wholeness.”<sup>34</sup> By employing the term ‘digital database’ I do not necessarily mean the active acquisition of analogue photographs that physically become digitized and fed into a database. I am much more interested in how the figure of the database, its characteristics as logical structuring, completeness and supposed ‘death’ of narrative are commented on by archival and encyclopedic projects.

In order to differentiate between the archive and its digital counterpart it is necessary to question the database on the basis of its production, its taxonomic structure and its accessibility. To specify what a digital database entails, I will use the example of the dataset or database by *Common Objects in Context*. This is a dataset created in 2014 by a team of researchers supported by Facebook and Microsoft, and intends to recognize scenes in photographs from Flickr. Flickr is a platform where one can share photos and videos in which tagging photographs creates a non-hierarchical taxonomy. The images that are classified prove to be helpful in demonstrating how a digital database can work, since this dataset predominantly stores everyday photographs. These vernacular scenes point to the accessibility

<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey Yeo, “Archivists and the emergence of records management,” *Records, Information and Data* (London: Facet Publishing, 2018) 21.

<sup>31</sup> Lev Manovich, “Database as Genre of New Media,” *AI & SOCIETY* (2000): 178.

<sup>32</sup> Ince, Darrel. “Database,” *A Dictionary of the Internet*, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Lexico, Powered by Oxford, “Definition of archive in English,” *Lexico*, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/archive>. Accessed 15 June 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Ed Folsom, “Database as Genre,” *Pmla* (2007): 1576.

of CoCo's contents but also to its availability on the internet. In general, a dataset only contains data without any way of managing it, while the database provides an organizing structure to the dataset. Because CoCo provides the tools with which one can search within the dataset, it is possible to claim that cocodataset.org is not only a dataset but also a database (see fig. 1).

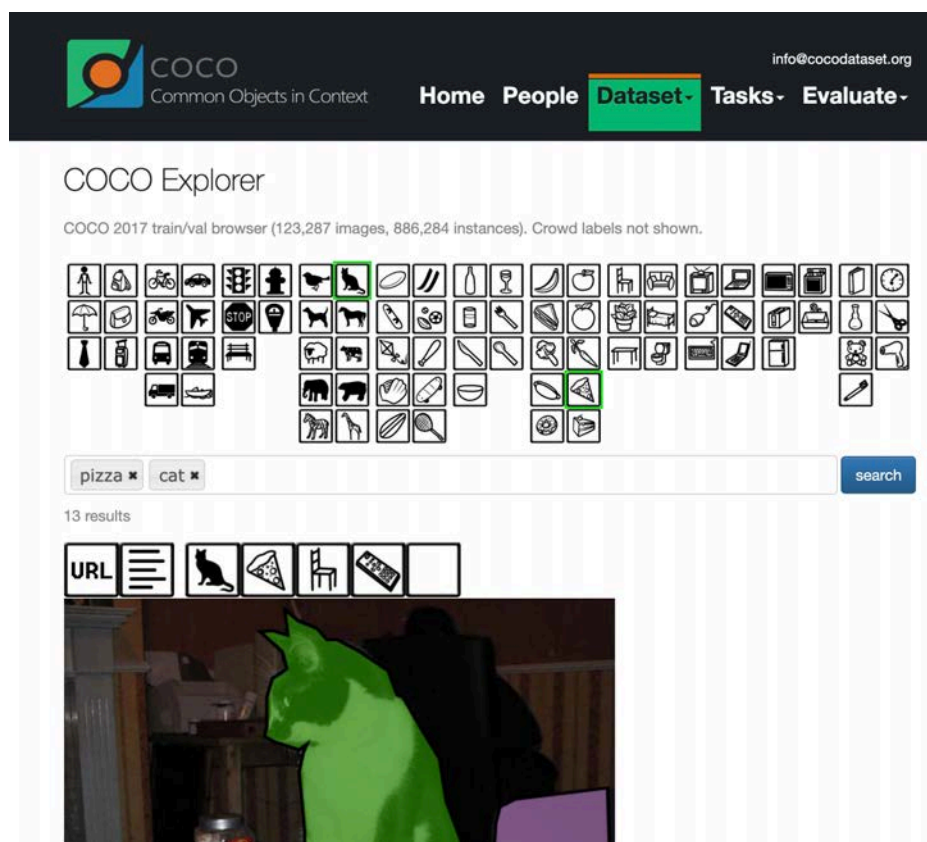


Figure 1. A screenshot of the searchable area in COCO Dataset.

The main goal of *Common Objects in Context* is to classify and categorize everyday images uploaded by Flickr users.<sup>35</sup> The makers of CoCo note: “We introduce a large, richly-annotated dataset comprised of images depicting complex everyday scenes of common objects in their natural context.”<sup>36</sup> The photographs from Flickr are classified by means of object recognition and the scene or context of the concerned photograph. Ultimately, the goal of categorizing objects within photographs is to mechanically understand which objects are part of a specific scene.

COCO’s taxonomy includes 91 object categories. The categories are based on everyday objects that are regularly and generally used by humans.<sup>37</sup> The 11 overarching categories are: Person & Accessory, Animal, Vehicle, Outdoor objects, Sports, Kitchenware, Food, Furniture, Appliance, Electronics and Indoor objects. A user of the database can combine multiple categories in order to search for a specified photograph. For example, ‘cat’ and ‘pizza’ bring up only photographs that contain a cat as well as a pizza (see fig. 2 and 3). Currently the database contains 123,287 images. Furthermore, what is interesting is that they do not only offer scenic everyday photographs with certain objects in them, but they also provide a textual description or caption with that same photograph.

Thus, COCO’s database rests on two important characteristics that usually get associated with the database:

1. The ability to add new information, or new data at any time, in this case through the hashtags that are accompanied with user photographs in Flickr.
2. The power of accessibility. In this case COCO is based online, it is not hidden in an institution, but accessible through the web. Moreover, COCO’s contents are also everyday photographs since they stem from real users who upload them. This also speaks for some kind of approachability.

<sup>35</sup> Flickr itself also equips an interesting taxonomy, which bases itself on the tags that users connect to the photographs they upload. This phenomenon is called ‘Folksonomy’. A form of collaborative tagging. This term was coined by Thomas Vander Wal, <http://vanderwal.net/folksonomy.html>

<sup>36</sup> Lin TY. et al, “Microsoft COCO: Common Objects in Context,” *Computer Vision* (2014).

<sup>37</sup> The researchers based these categories (among other reasons) on how children describe their surroundings.



Figure 2. An example of how COCO analyses objects in an image, in this case a cat and a pizza.





Figure 3. An example of how COCO analyses objects in an image, in this case a cat and a pizza.

### 1.3 The-Photographer-as-Archivist

Counterintuitive to the active accumulation of materials in a database, the analogue storage of materials and photographs in archives, museums and libraries, can result into the contemporary artistic position of the-photographer-as-archivist. Within this position, artists actively search for existing archival material in order to constitute new projects. The following paragraphs will consider why photography as a medium is so suitable for archival practice and what the position of the-photographer-as-archivist entails.

The medium of photography is inherently connected to the archive because we perceive it to truthfully capture events as moments in time. In short, its referential nature to the photographed object, makes that we credit the medium of photography suitable to the model of the archive.<sup>38</sup> Art historian Okwui Enwezor points to the fact that the camera is an “archiving machine”. Every product that gets produced by it can be categorized, stored or listed in an archive.<sup>39</sup> Think for example of the power we give to the camera and consequently to the photograph. Photography is currently one of the main media used as evidence in jurisdiction procedures. For instance, the speeding ticket one receives for driving too fast, are based on the photographs of one’s car and license plate. And once there is a case of physical abuse, photographs of the inflicted injuries can serve as evidence.

According to new media theorist Gabriella Giannachi, the first archival practices began during the French Revolution in 1790.<sup>40</sup> Especially institutions such as museums, schools and libraries functioned as prominent places where documents and photographs were stored. During that time, preservation of materials was important, because these documents expressed a significance to individual nations, their cultural values and their people. As Ernst van Alphen explains, archival practice possesses a drive to structure the world, sometimes also in such a way that the world (or more specifically colony) becomes like the archives that we maintain of it.<sup>41</sup> Up until this point this thesis considered archival practice mostly as a unified practice carried out by large institutions. However, throughout history there have always been people and artists who collect privately and individually as well.

When considering the position that artists adopt in the making of archival works, it is possible to notice a transition from ‘the-work-of-art-as-archive’ to ‘the-museum-as-archival-institution’, which consequently creates space for the position of ‘the artists-as-archivist’ (and in this case the-photographer-as-archivist).<sup>42</sup> Within the ambition of artists to add new narratives to existing archival material, the general intention is to bring the photographs and texts retrieved from archives into a more tactile and prominent sphere, for example to that

<sup>38</sup> Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever* (New York: Steidl, 2008) 11.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>40</sup> Gabriella Giannachi, “A brief history of the archive,” *Archive Everything* (Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016) 5.

<sup>41</sup> Ernst van Alphen, “Emergence,” *Staging the Archive* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014) 43.

<sup>42</sup> Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever* (New York: Steidl, 2008) 14.

of the physical object or the installation.<sup>43</sup> This position not only signals a move from total to individual, but also recalls, “A move from excavation sites to construction sites.”<sup>44</sup> With which a passive, maybe even static understanding of the past is brought into a much more active handling and contemporary recognition of photographic images.

In conclusion, the database and the archive differ not only in their technique to store documents and images, but also in their relation to physicality. Where the former is more accessible and adaptable, the latter is more institutional and static. The database on the one hand strives to find some sense of completeness or universality, while the archive is rather incomplete and contains gaps. This incompleteness is what attracts artists to work with the existing material in order to either complete it, or transform it into a new project or narrative.

Hence, within the position of the-photographer-as-archivist, rather than actively searching for new information, data or photographs one is aspiring to build new contexts and relations from already existing information.<sup>45</sup> The next chapter will enquire into such a project called: *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* by Batia Suter. It will elaborate on the question to what extent Suter’s position and working method as photographer-as-archivist influences her project, and what the implications of encyclopedic categorization are for a possible commentary on the database.

<sup>43</sup> Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever* (New York: Steidl, 2008) 4.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>45</sup> What must not go unnoticed is the fact that the *photographer-as-archivist*, relates naturally to other positions that artists adopt. For instance, to the position of the curator or the ethnographer. Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever* (New York: Steidl, 2008) 40.





## **Chapter 2. An Incomplete Mirror: Parallel Encyclopedia #1 as (Anti)-Database (3412)**

The ordering of objects collected and archived is ultimately a form of association, that is, a form of connecting and joining together. (Ernst van Alphen, *Staging the Archive*)

The practice of archiving and collecting starts out with noticing differences and similarities, a skill that most people are acquainted with. Think of the child who plays with a shape sorting cube that contains several holes for a range of shapes. The child learns that a heart shaped block does not fit through a square opening. Though in the case of the archive, the categories in which documents and photographs are placed are not 'given', rather they are actively constructed by society. The categories of the archive shape the world, but it must not be forgotten that archivists shape these categories in return, in a process called classification.

The former chapter addressed to what extent digital and analogue archiving differ from each other. This chapter will concern a particular case study, called *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* by Swiss artist Batia Suter. This case study will function as a stepping stone towards a discussion on how this work relates to the figure of the database and digital archival practice. Through examining this case study based on its production, its images and its distribution from Gillian Rose's method for visual research, this chapter will seek to clarify whether and how *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* critiques and challenges the digital database.

In short this chapter will argue that the three pillars of production, image and distribution each link this case study to three figures in which this work finds its foundation. Special focus will base itself on the image itself through compositional interpretation. The modalities relate as follows:

1. The projects' production and technology connect to the figure of the archive (through its working method and inclusion of found imagery).
2. The image itself connect to the model of the encyclopedia (through the projects' completeness and structuring).
3. The modality of distribution connect to the model of the database (through its paradoxical relationship and the inclusion of narrative).

This chapter will address the following questions: in what way does the working method, structuring, and linear narrativity as inherent part of *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* play a role in challenging the figure of the digital database? And to what extent can we view *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* as an anti-encyclopedia or even an anti-database?

The following paragraphs will sketch out what *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* entails and continue to explore the reason why this case study is of importance in relation to the figure of the archive. Batia Suter is a Swiss artist based in Amsterdam who generally works with found imagery from which she produces new sequences, categories and associations.<sup>46</sup> Suter started her project *Parallel Encyclopedia* in 2004. Since then she has published two volumes, the first in 2007 and the second in 2016. Both of the projects are also presented in exhibitions, for example in MuHka in Antwerp (2008) and The Photographers Gallery in London (2018). Due to the size of both books, this chapter will consider Suter's first volume only.<sup>47</sup> All photographs in *Encyclopedia #1 and #2* are archival material and taken from books. Suter scanned the images and started to make combinations. She states herself:

In my work, I collect groups of images based on various themes and characteristics, and I investigate how they can manipulate each other, depending on where and how they are placed. In the process of making this book, narrative lines unfolded before my eyes as I shifted images around.<sup>48</sup>

The narrative lines Suter addresses above will return later in assessing the structure and categories of this case study. First this chapter will enquire the relation of *Parallel Encyclopedia* to the model of the archive.

## 2.1 The Archive: Production

Taking into account Suter's working method, one is able to include her into the position of the-photographer-as-archivist, because she employs existing archival imagery in such a way that it spurs the making of a new context. In this way, she adds a new purpose to photographs that would otherwise be overlooked. Moreover, it is possible to recognize the connection to this position also in the descriptions of Hal Foster in his essay 'An Archival Impulse'. One of the last pages of this essay comments on the desire to "connect what cannot be connected". Foster argues that this desire does not necessarily stem from a drive to sketch out an overview of the past, rather it has to do with a particular way of making connections (even if these connections at first make no sense at all).<sup>49</sup> Suter's working method stems from an imaginative and intuitive practice which stimulates associations between photographs (for the artist as well as for the viewer of the work). Yet as will become clear in the following paragraphs her work cannot do without a certain kind of structuring.

<sup>46</sup> Batia Suter, "Biography," *Batia Suter*, <https://www.batiasuter.org/> Accessed 3 May 2019.

<sup>47</sup> *Parallel Encyclopedia #2* follows up the first, both volumes are rather similar, yet the second volume also includes some color photographs whereas the first is totally black and white.

<sup>48</sup> Roma Publications, "Parallel Encyclopedia," *Roma Publications*, [www.orderromapublications.org/publications/parallel-encyclopedia-2/114534](http://www.orderromapublications.org/publications/parallel-encyclopedia-2/114534). Accessed 20 May 2019.

<sup>49</sup> Hal Foster, "Archival Impulse" *October* (2004): 21.

## 2.2 The Encyclopedia: Composition

Ironically, one of my first physical encounters with Batia Suter's *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* could not take place without making a digital request of this work in the online database of the Royal Library in The Hague. I viewed *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* in the same institution that offered some of the sources it was trying to mirror. Surrounded by other catalogues, encyclopedias, dictionaries and reference works I browsed through the 592 pages that constitute this body of work.

At first glance *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* comes across as a large book containing a random collection of found black and white photographs. One can observe empty rooms, portrait busts, geometrical figures, tornado's, measuring instruments and animals. Some photographs are accompanied by observational captions (in Dutch, German and English) such as "Bedroom decorated with Yağcibedir pure wool carpet" or "*Het oplaten van een weerballon. Let op de enorme afmeting in verhouding met de mensen op de voorgrond.*"<sup>50</sup> Aside from the captions, the other textual information available is the title: *Parallel Encyclopedia #1*. This title could suggest that the work serves as an alternative, running alongside another encyclopedia or even a different archive. To illustrate, in mathematics it is clear that when two lines run parallel to each other, they never meet. The same could be said for this work in relation to other encyclopedia's. *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* adopts the same formal characteristics (shape, categories, layout) from other encyclopedias, but it does not necessarily mimic their contents.

Nevertheless, a reader of this work could be confused by a title that suggests a system, a way of ordering information as is usually the case in an encyclopedia, while on the surface, these pages, each arranged with multiple photographs, seem to have no immediate connection to each other. However, the more time one invests in reading the multitude of pages in more detail, the more it becomes clear that there is in fact some categorization amongst the pages. After analysing some of the spreads and their captions the encyclopedia can be divided into the following fifteen possible categories (see table 1 for categories and page numbers).

<sup>50</sup> These captions originate respectively from page 268 and 131. Translation: Releasing a weather balloon. Note the enormous size in comparison to the people in the foreground.

| Possible categories by page numbers in Parallel Encyclopedia #1 |   |                  |
|---|---|------------------|
| Page Nr.  | Category  | Example Spreads  |
| 0-45  | 1. Round and organic shapes and structures<br>(meteors, stones, eggs)   | 26-27, 34-35     |
| 46-93   | 2. Death and destruction<br>(dead bodies, deathly threats such as hurricanes)   | 52-53, 92-93     |
| 94-121  | 3. Landscapes<br>(glaciers, mountains, coral reef, extra-terrestrial<br>landscapes)   | 108-109, 114-115 |
| 122-134   | 4. Aerial footage and aircrafts<br>(aircraft machines, balloons, ufo's)   | 126-127, 130-131 |
| 135-211   | 5. Buildings and their frameworks/skeletons.<br>manufactured vs natural.<br>(ladders, skeletons, bee hives, church interiors, spider<br>web, shipyards) | 158-159, 180-181 |
| 212-237   | 6. Tables, tableware and kitchenware<br>(pots and pans, dishes, cooking instructions, eating people,<br>table-sets)                                     | 218-219, 232-233 |
| 238-259   | 7. Room interiors<br>(community rooms, control rooms, tea rooms)  | 240-241, 248-249 |
| 260-269   | 8. Tapestries (fabrics, carpets bedsheets, linen)   | 260-261, 268-269 |
| 270-299   | 9. Things to sit on or seated persons<br>(chairs, beds, thing that have four legs, seated statues)  | 276-277, 292-293 |
| 300-319   | 10. Horses (horse carriages)  | 300-301, 308-309 |
| 320-349   | 11. Machines and Transport<br>(boats, vehicles, cars)   | 328-329, 346-347 |
| 350-373   | 12. Human and machine<br>(robots, photographers, watches and typewriters)   | 358-359, 368-369 |
| 374-42  | 13. Natural sciences<br>(measuring instruments, natural phenomena, animal<br>kingdom)   | 396-397, 410-411 |

|         |  |                  |
|---------|--|------------------|
| 422-499 | 14. Human Anatomy<br>(heads, skulls and portraits)   | 472-473, 494-495 |
| 500-585 | 15. Human social and relational activities and behaviour.<br>(dancing, playing, sports, warfare) | 506-507, 562-563 |

Table 1. Possible categories by page numbers in *Parallel Encyclopedia #1*.

1. Round and organic shapes
2. Death and destruction
3. Landscapes
4. Aerial footage and aircraft
5. Buildings and their frameworks
6. Tables, tableware and kitchenware
7. Room interiors
8. Tapestries
9. Things to sit on or seated persons
10. Horses
11. Machines and Transport
12. Human and machine
13. Natural sciences
14. Human anatomy
15. Human social and relational activities and behaviour

In any case, these categories are not equal in size and/or scope, some consider larger and more abstract themes (round and organic shapes) while others remain specified to a small group of collected imagery (horses). Some categories are spread out over multiple pages, while others only stick to a smaller number of pages. To figure out how these categories relate to each other, the following paragraphs will visually analyse some of the photographs that they contain, using the method of compositional interpretation by Gillian Rose. Since the previous paragraphs already considered the general content and structure of *Parallel Encyclopedia #1*, these paragraphs will focus on colour, spatial organization and rhythm.

All of the images in *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* are black and white.<sup>51</sup> While colour can be equipped to point something out, with an absence of colour the photographs are reduced to a kind of sameness. Not surprisingly, the figure of the archive works in the same way. Through the amount of images, no particular image is of interest anymore. Each photograph bases its identity on the photographs with which it is surrounded. Any significance concerning colour is ruled out in these photographs, which makes that its individual significance should come from somewhere else, perhaps from its spatial organization.

First, spatial organization can be used to discuss the outside position of the spectator who views the image and the arrangement or composition inside of the image. I consider one spread presented in Suter's encyclopedia as a whole image, since it is valuable to consider the interaction of multiple images together.

<sup>51</sup> The second volume of *Parallel Encyclopedia* does contain some instances of colour.

Because *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* is a book, a viewer is most likely positioned viewing the images from top-down. According to Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen this position calls for some kind of mastery over the image.<sup>52</sup>

We have seen the notion of mastery before in chapter 1, concerning Sue Breakell's argument that the archive provides us with a false sense of mastery or ownership. In this case, *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* could be offering the viewer with a false sense of totality or ownership over these images, since it provides the viewer with the physical manifestation of a book which has to be viewed top-down. Aside from that, a lot of the spreads' compositions spark a visual engagement or comparison between the images. The following examples give some insight into the arrangement that takes place inside of the image.

Figure 4 shows that a vertical arrangement of objects can be seen inside the photograph of the dogs for example, but the placement of the photographs on the pages 'on top of each other' adds to this vertical composition as well. If one glances quickly the dogs on the left page could just as well be the same glaciers as presented on the right page. Conversely, figure 5 demonstrates some of the connections that emerge when diagonal lines are traced between photographs, in this case between that of a beehive (natural building) and sheds on a mine shaft (manufactured building). Whereas figure 6 connects images through visual similarity. The skeleton of a bat, a frog and a dinosaur on the right side run parallel to the 'skeleton' or framework of buildings on the left hand.

The visual dialogue on these spreads is enhanced by a certain rhythm or montage (the way in which these pages flow into each other). Flipping the pages of a book suggests a movement in time, but more important in this case are the 'breaks' where the pages dissolve from one category into the other. Take, for example, the spread from Figure 7. This spread is the first from the category of tapestries and fabrics, but it follows directly from the category room interiors. The photographs on the left hand contain tapestries while they could also be seen as room interiors. Consequently, these photographs could fit into both categories, which makes them suitable to present on the edge of two categories in order to indicate a fluidity throughout the book.

<sup>52</sup> Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images the Grammar of Visual Design* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006) 146-8.



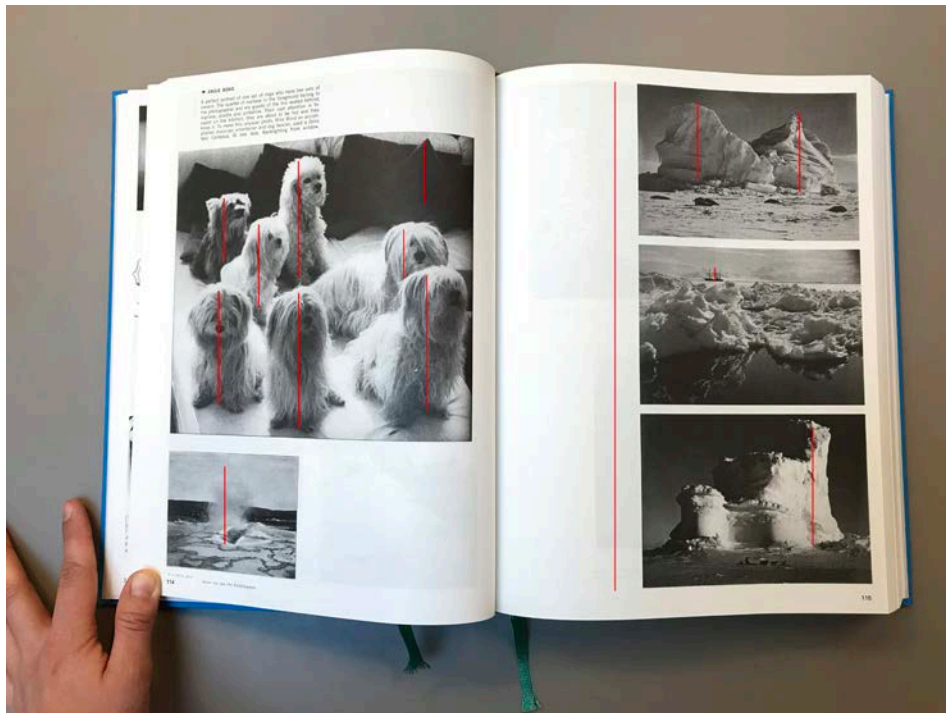


Figure 4. Vertical arrangement, pages 114-115, category: landscapes.

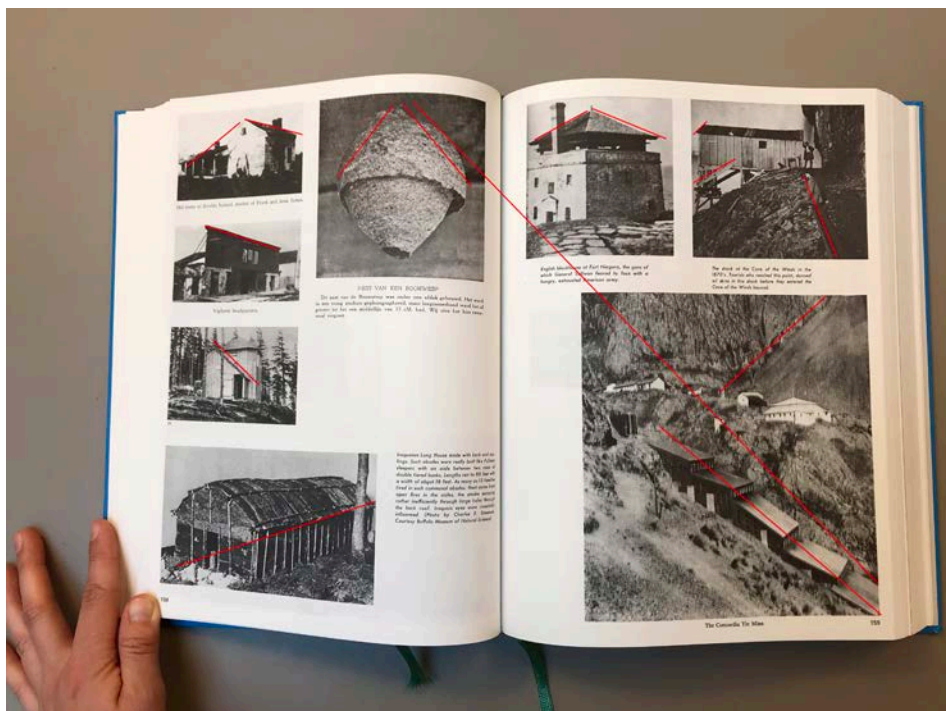


Figure 5. Diagonal arrangement, pages 158-159, category: buildings and their frameworks.

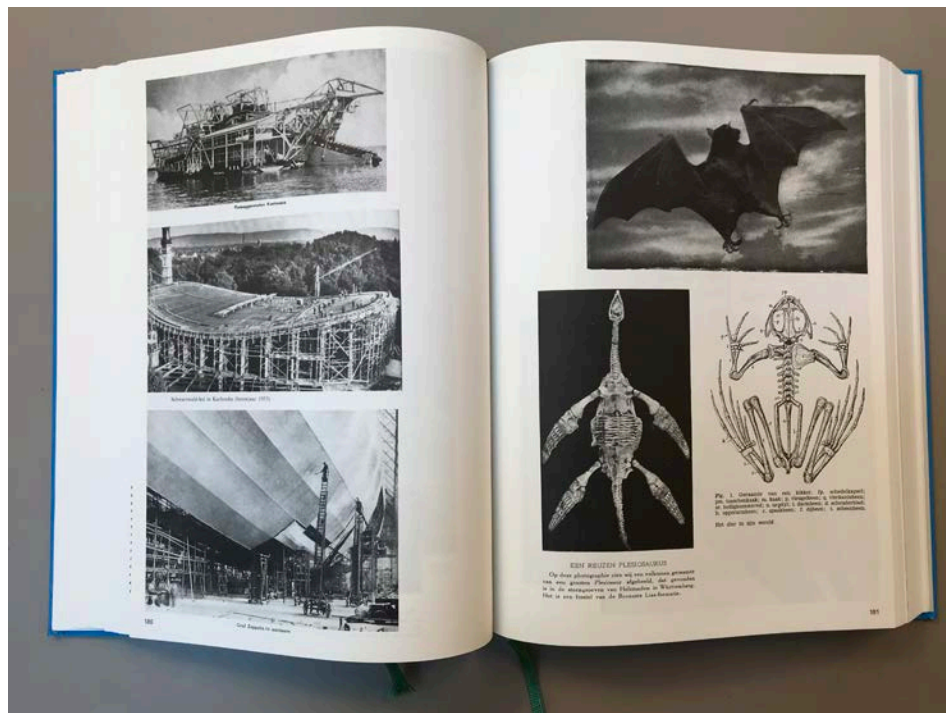


Figure 6. Visual similarity, pages 180-181, category: buildings and their frameworks.

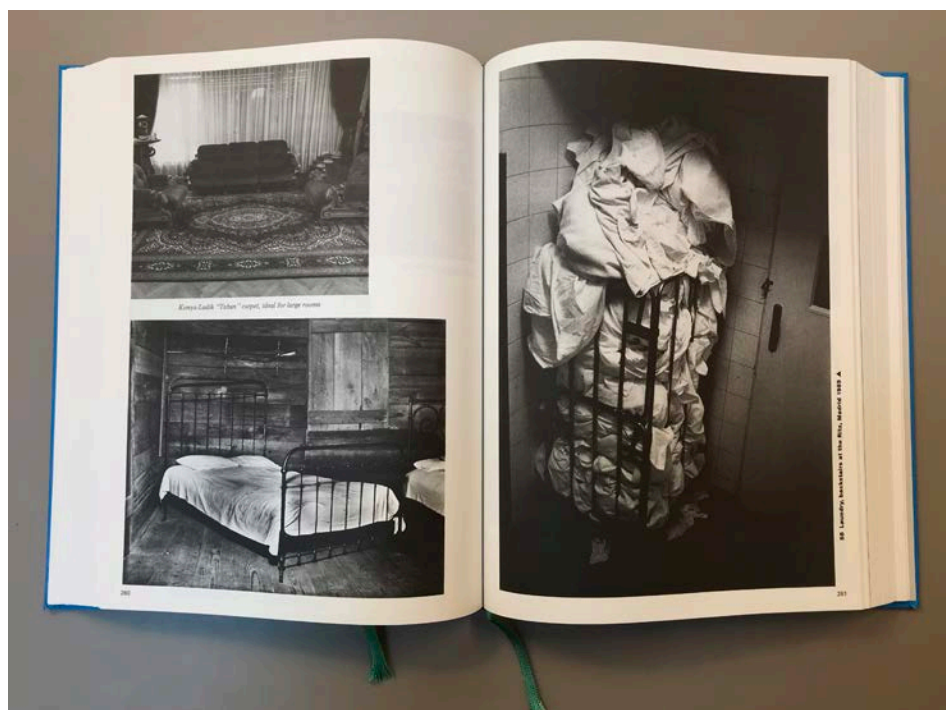


Figure 7. Pages 260-261 category: tapestries.

The variety of categories that constitute *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* remind of a similar example with a rather arbitrary classification. This example also involves an encyclopedia and was written on by essayist Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986). Later the example got referenced to in the preface of Michel Foucault's well known work "The Order of Things, an Archaeology of the Human Sciences". Borges mentions 'A certain Chinese Encyclopedia' in which animals are classified as:

(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.<sup>53</sup>

When taking a closer look at this taxonomy it appears to actually be rather disorganized. There cannot be found any coherence from one category to the other, or how Ernst van Alphen views it: "It is the kind of disorder that suggests a possible order, but one that at the same time cannot be thought."<sup>54</sup> The number of arbitrary categories provide that the similarities between the classification in *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* and the Chinese Encyclopedia seem striking. There is however one big difference and this has to do with the order in which the categories in Suter's Encyclopedia are presented.

Batia Suter's Encyclopedia starts with the category 'round and organic shapes' and ends with 'Human social and relational activities and behaviour'. Evidently, there happens a lot in between, but what is most significant is that once the categories progress, it seems as if they become more related to the human body. The pages go through some sort of evolution in which we start out with the 'big bang' category of 'round and organic shapes' from which life develops into 'landscapes', 'objects', 'animals', 'natural sciences' and finally 'human anatomy' and 'human behaviour' (see fig. 8). Naturally, this order offers a linear development in time and space, which is one of the main characterizations of a book. However, another consequence of this presentation and montage is that we reach an end point, the encyclopedia reaches a closing.

<sup>53</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010) 16.

<sup>54</sup> Ernst van Alphen, "Classification," *Staging the Archive* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014) 139.





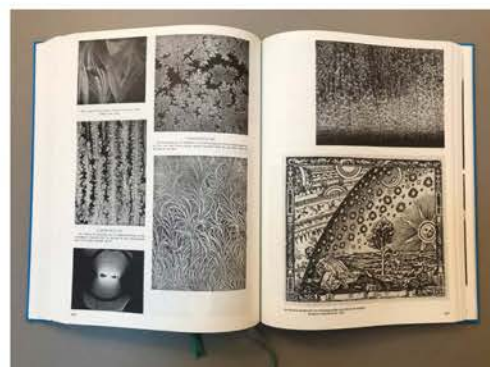
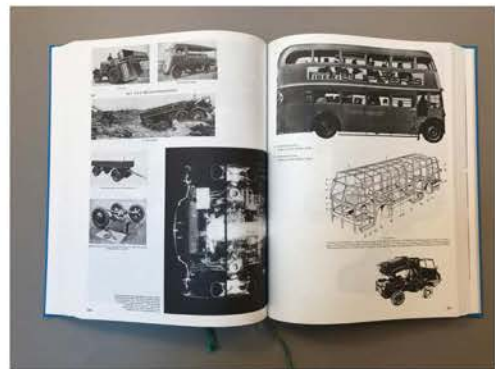
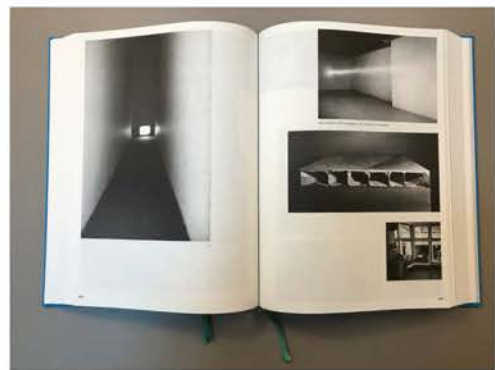


Figure 8. Example pages from *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* that show an evolution from left to right and from top to bottom.



### 2.3 The Database: Distribution

Exactly the presentation of this work as encyclopedia, as a book form, is one of the reasons why it problematizes its relationship to the figure of the database. The linear structuring of this encyclopedia puts a finite structure to its archival practice, whereas the database presupposes an endlessness in its abilities to add new information and data. Hence, where Suter started with open-ended and multi-interpretable material taken from books, she contained the material in such a way that it naturally reached a conclusion, that is, the conclusion ends with the human body/human society. Moreover, as we have seen from the example spreads before, this encyclopedia is based on a combination of visual association between images and categories. In contrast to a classification by rationality, numbers or keywords which is more in line with the figure of the database. For instance, the anomic and randomized structuring of the contents of *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* are the complete antipode from that of the ordered database.

Yet, a paradoxical thought that draws attention is that this work could not have been brought into existence without having a relation to digital technology. The photographs had to be scanned, the spreads had to be digitally composed. Not to mention, to bring out such a large number of imagery in a digital age is a big leap and perhaps counterintuitive to the stream of images we are already acquainted with. Finally, the book itself could not have been distributed without some sort of logistic database.

In fact, employing the finite structure of the ‘book-as-archive’ also problematizes its relationship to the archive itself. Ernst van Alphen notes that the archive, unlike the book does not possess a narrative in itself. The archive does not start from somewhere, just as it has no conclusion. It runs along a myriad of openings. Consequently, taking into account the former points, Suter’s Encyclopedia remains stuck between a critique on the world of the archive and that of the database. On the one hand it fosters the physicality from that of the book, the encyclopedia and the archive, on the other in its production and distribution it is dependent on the logistics of the database. As “The Best Dutch Book Designs” aptly describe: “A book like this can only be made thanks to the computer, but it is actually an anti-computer book.”<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> De Best Verzorgde Boeken, “Batia Suter – Parallel Encyclopedia #2,” *De Best Verzorgde Boeken*, [debestverzorgdeboeken.nl/en/books/parallel-encyclopedia-2-2/](http://debestverzorgdeboeken.nl/en/books/parallel-encyclopedia-2-2/). Accessed 9 May 2019.

In conclusion I would like to claim that, on the one hand, *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* relies on the figure of the database, but on the other hand rejects it at the same time. As the former paragraphs have tried to set out, *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* rests on multiple figures. Not only does Suter's working method stem from the archive, the materials she uses originate from there as well, thus in its gathering and production of images it rests on the model of the archive. Secondly, since the categories that can be discerned find their origins in classic encyclopedic structuring, its imagery and categorical structuring rest more on the model of the encyclopedia. Finally, as the last paragraphs of this chapter will emphasize, in its distribution and reception *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* rests mostly on the figure of the database.

Naturally, *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* carries a paradoxical relation to the database. It has long been believed that the database completely excludes narrative and thus excludes the archive. But literary critic Katherine Hayles argues that, because the database is becoming more prominent in everyday life, we also need more ways to make sense of this gathered information. Thus, the model of the database in this case fosters narrative (archival and encyclopedic) forms like *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* to sprout. The main argument could consequently be that this work exists not in spite of the database but rather because of the exponential growth of the database.

Indeed, it would be possible to agree that in part *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* adopts anti-database characteristics such as physicality, narrative, a finite structure and its seemingly arbitrary categories. Yet, the database is also the instigator for the kind of projects that this Encyclopedia is part of. So even in adopting characteristics that counter the digital, *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* still relies on the database, whose reinforcement of the call for narrative cannot be unheard. The hybrid ambiguity of models that *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* relies on is why its title suits this project so aptly. It does not try to counter the models it builds from, rather it runs next to them side by side as a parallel world. In line with this, the next chapter will shed light on another case study in which a parallel world can be discerned. Yet in this case it is possible to speak of an evolution of the personal photographic world of one person, instead of an evolution based on the movement from organic shapes to humanity.



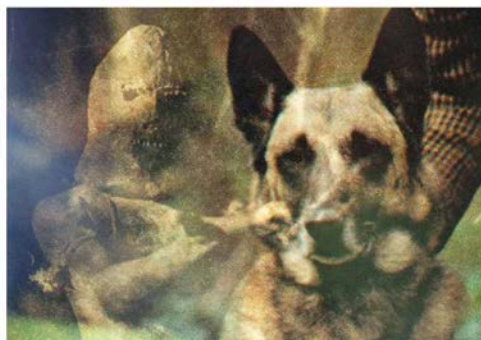


### Chapter 3. Complete Copies: The Universal Photographer as Mirror

“I photograph to find out if I am still looking, I am looking to find out if I am still photographing”

(U. in *The Universal Photographer*)

It is possible to envision the 384 pages counting volume *The Universal Photographer* as the embodiment of archive fever. It dwells on the analogue image, contains it into chapters and classifies photographers and their theories. In short, it is a quest for a possible universal truth towards photography and the world around us. In contrast to *Parallel Encyclopedia #1*, *The Universal Photographer* has a less obvious connection to the model of the encyclopedia. However, when examining the inspiration for creating this project, the visual language of the images and the classic usage of archival listing, it is possible to envision this work as an encyclopedia, or at least as a commentary on encyclopedic collecting. The contents of *The Universal Photographer* move from ordinary wedding photographs, to stitched together photographs of grass, from voyeuristic snapshots of women sunbathing to notebooks full of mountain landscapes. Together they represent the fictional oeuvre of a photographer called U. He wanders from his birth till his death through different genres and techniques such as pictorialism, Dadaist collages, voyeurism and vernacular photography (see fig. 9).



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V.

COLLAGES



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Figure 9. An example of a spread with Dadaist inspired collages.

*The Universal Photographer* (2018) is a project by artists Anne Geene (1983) and Arjan de Nooy (1965). Both artists have worked together since 2012 on similar projects, where elements such as archival material, classification and the encyclopedia are recurring objects of research. To illustrate, in their project *Ornithology* (2016), they compose a pseudo-scientific bird guide based on flight patterns and feather camouflage. Individually, Geene also worked on a project called *No. 235 Encyclopaedia of an Allotment* (2014). This work revolved around photographing and documenting everything that can be found in her garden. Not surprisingly, *The Universal Photographer* builds upon these pre-existing works. It expands on the model of the encyclopedia and comments on the ambition to collect. Next to its existence as a book, the project has also been displayed in an exhibition in the *Gemeentemuseum* in The Hague (October 2018 until March 2019). The protagonist in *The Universal Photographer* is an obsessive photographer called U. His personal quest is to copy everything that surrounds him through the medium of photography.

The aspiration of U. to obsessively photograph his observations, not only connects to the notion of archive fever, but after further consideration also comments on the ambition to individually create an all-encompassing database. Accordingly, the questions that will be addressed in this chapter are: in what way does *The Universal Photographer* comment on the possibility of an all-encompassing database and the feverish collecting it brings with it? And to what extent does the return of artists to (a fetish for) the analogue image challenge the multiplicity of images in the digital database?

In order to be able to answer these questions, it will be useful to assess the case study with the help of Gillian Rose's pillars for visual analysis, especially because this method aids to discern between the contents of the photographs made by U. and the discourse it speaks to. Once again this chapter will consider the production and technique of *The Universal Photographer*, next it looks into the composition of the pages and the images itself and finally it examines their reception and distribution. The analysis will draw its focus mostly to the modalities of production and distribution in this work. Especially because both of these are able to show how *The Universal Photographer* functions in the discourse of photography. Moreover, analysing these enables one to view how this work to comment on our own handling of images.

The first page of the book *The Universal Photographer* by Anne Geene and Arjan de Nooy reads the text: "*Pas de réflexion! Copions!*" (No reflection! Let's copy!). The reader soon realizes from the following pages that this quote derives from the novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881) by French novelist Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880). This particular work happens to be the inspiration from which Geene and de Nooy developed their project. To illustrate why this novel could offer insight into *The Universal Photographer*, it is helpful to know a bit more about its origin. In short, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is about two men who are copiers as their profession, but after receiving an inheritance they assign themselves the task to obtain all knowledge they are surrounded with. The two go on a quest to read about every

topic available, from medical science to philosophy. After they fail to do so, they return to their former profession as copiers.<sup>56</sup>

Through writing *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Flaubert criticizes the feverish way of gathering knowledge in the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, because Gustave Flaubert found himself in the midst of a mass circulation of media, he ridiculed newspapers at the time. He in fact believed that reading these made people ignorant. This ignorance inspired Flaubert to create a side work that could function as a supplement to *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. He produced an encyclopedia called *Encyclopedia de la Bêtise Humaine* (1911) (The Dictionary of Accepted Ideas). The connection to his earlier novel is noticeable, since Flaubert claimed that the subtitle of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* could be “The encyclopaedia of human stupidity.”<sup>57</sup> By adding this work, Flaubert means to create an encyclopedia that aspires to overthrow the sole purpose of an encyclopedia. It therefore tries to criticize the aspiration to obtain as much knowledge as possible. This satirical take on the encyclopedia could also be called the making of an anti-encyclopedia.<sup>58</sup> The commentary on obtaining everything the world has to offer, is also something *The Universal Photographer* implicitly incorporates, as will become clear later.

Not only is *The Universal Photographer* linked to the encyclopedia through its outlook (a large volume, using universality as its key element) it is specifically because of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* that one is able to draw a connection between the figure of the encyclopedia and this work. The following paragraphs will examine what it means for this case study to adopt an encyclopedic approach and how it deals with the concept of universality. This chapter will consequently argue the following: As Gustave Flaubert in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* and in *Encyclopedia de la Bêtise Humaine* ridicules a possible ability to reach a ‘total’ knowledge, this chapter will show that Geene and de Nooy through their work *The Universal Photographer* aim to counter and comment on a ‘total’ definition of photography and (perhaps less obvious) on the aspiration by men to create a ‘total database’ or total view of the world through:

1. Production: A fetish for the analogue image and a focus on haptic visuality.
2. Composition: The comparison of U. to other photographers and photographic techniques, which ends up in the creation of a universal genre.
3. Discourse: A categorization of photographs through the archival structure of listing. The inclusion of multiple photographic theories which in return creates a reflexivity to its own medium.

<sup>56</sup> Karolien Knols, “Het Oeuvre Van Fictief Fotograaf U. Weerspiegelt De Visie Van De Kunstenaars Op De Kunst Van Het Fotograferen,” *De Volkskrant* (23 Oct. 2018) [www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/het-oeuvre-van-fictief-fotograaf-u-weerspiegelt-de-visie-van-de-kunstenaars-op-de-kunst-van-het-fotograferen~bd0bdde0/](http://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/het-oeuvre-van-fictief-fotograaf-u-weerspiegelt-de-visie-van-de-kunstenaars-op-de-kunst-van-het-fotograferen~bd0bdde0/). Accessed 3 May 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Gustave Flaubert, “Introduction,” *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*. Edited by Jacques Barzun (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1954) 9.

<sup>58</sup> Christel Vesters, “The Anti-Encyclopedia from Poetic Disorder to Political Anti-Order (and Back Again),” *Metropolis M*, (12 Aug. 2013) [www.metropolism.com/en/features/23282\\_the\\_anti\\_Encyclopedia](http://www.metropolism.com/en/features/23282_the_anti_Encyclopedia). Accessed 9 May 2019.

### 3.1 A Fetish for the Image: Production

First of all, it is clear that the photographs in *The Universal Photographer* are fostered through a certain fetish for the analogue image. This is for instance, visible in the nostalgic wedding photographs and the obsessive use of the typewriter (see fig. 10 and 11). According to media historian Jason Sperb and archival theorist Marlene Manoff, nostalgia or longing for the archive and the analogue image could be a reaction to fast paced changes in society and technology (in this case digital technologies).<sup>59</sup> Since *The Universal Photographer* is published in our digital era, but chooses to only display analogue photographs, it naturally connects to debates surrounding the introduction of digital technologies and possibly that of the digital way of storing and collecting.

This nostalgic take on reissuing analogue photographs into the present is exactly what Hal Foster shares under the position of the-artists-as-archivist. That is, “to turn belatedness into becomingness”.<sup>60</sup> It is thus a different form of nostalgia than only the admiration for past photographs. Rather Geene and de Nooy employ a more active form of nostalgia, it gives livelihood and material existence to (mostly vernacular) photographs that would otherwise be left aside. Documented pasts are not mourned over, they are celebrated as active present day material to be experimented with, to rearrange and to re-photograph. For instance, figure 12 shows how U. re-photographs his archival material in an attempt to bring older photographs into new connections and relationships.

For some it might be hard to recall, but before we stored images in Google Drive, before we daily updated our ‘feeds’ on Instagram, the photograph was first and foremost, a physical object. Therefore, next to the implementation of ‘active nostalgia’, what must not be forgotten is that the photographs in *The Universal Photographer* also stem from physical archival practice. Geene and de Nooy started each chapter of the book with a search in their own archives consisting of found photographs. When they still lacked specific photographs for certain chapters they produced these themselves.<sup>61</sup> Yet they always aimed for a resemblance to the other photographs in the book, so they altered and edited the outlook of their self-made photographs.<sup>62</sup> The effect of this coherence is that the total outlook of the photographs brings a certain haptic sensation to the photographs.

The notion of hapticity is often equipped in film studies, however it can be related to photography as well. In short, hapticity concerns touch, it literally means “to come into

<sup>59</sup> Jason Sperb, “Specters of Film: New Nostalgia Movies and Hollywood’s Digital Transition,” *Jump Cut A Review of Contemporary Media* (2015) [www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc56.2014-2015/SperbDigital-nostalgia/text.html](http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc56.2014-2015/SperbDigital-nostalgia/text.html). Accessed 15 June 2019; Marlene Manoff, “Archive and Database as Metaphor: Theorizing the Historical Record,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* (2010): 389.

<sup>60</sup> Hal Foster, “Archival Impulse” *October* (2004): 22.

<sup>61</sup> Karolien Knols, “Het Oeuvre Van Fictief Fotograaf U. Weerspiegelt De Visie Van De Kunstenaars Op De Kunst Van Het Fotograferen,” *De Volkskrant* (23 Oct. 2018) [www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/het-oeuvre-van-fictief-fotograaf-u-weerspiegelt-de-visie-van-de-kunstenaars-op-de-kunst-van-het-fotograferen~bd0bdde0/](http://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/het-oeuvre-van-fictief-fotograaf-u-weerspiegelt-de-visie-van-de-kunstenaars-op-de-kunst-van-het-fotograferen~bd0bdde0/). Accessed 3 May 2019.

<sup>62</sup> For instance, for the chapter ‘voyeur’ Geene and de Nooy did not have enough photographs so they went to beaches to photograph topless women who were sunbathing.

contact with.”<sup>63</sup> In the article “Video Haptics and Erotics”, media and art theorist Laura Marks distances herself from the dominant western idea of optical looking, i.e. the idea that by viewing an image one would be able to grasp and obtain a form of mastery over this image. However, this sense of mastery distances the viewer from the viewed subject. This signals the start of a vital paradox, the closer the position of an image in relation to the viewer, the less mastery he or she has over the image. For instance, in the case of an extreme close up, the viewer can only guess what the actual contents of the image are, this is not immediately graspable.<sup>64</sup> Rather than optical looking, Marks makes a case for embodied looking, tactile looking or as she would call it “haptic visuality” (especially in video works). Hapticity in video, according to Marks can be defined by grainy imagery, decay and alteration of the image.<sup>65</sup> Although *The Universal Photographer* is not a video work, it is still possible to make a case for a certain hapticity of the images.

Haptic imagery can especially be observed in the copying, stitching and re-photographing in the later chapters: ‘Theories’, ‘Collages’, ‘Corrections’, ‘A trip to Italy’, ‘Towards Completeness’, ‘Notebooks’ and ‘Copying the World’. For example, the chapter ‘Corrections’ where U. appropriates photographic work from others and manually alters the image to his liking. He punctures, shoots, cuts and pastes the photographs, which only enhances the physical materiality of these images (see fig. 13 and 14). Take for instance the three photographs that are edited through the use of a passport photo cutter. Vital identification parts like faces are cut away, one can only try to imagine what these faces would have looked like. The manipulation of these images draws a viewer in to look ever more closely at what ‘is’ visible, the clothing of one person, the skin of the other, the fur of a dog. By censoring these images from some of their recognizable contents, a viewer is unable to immediately grasp the contents of the image and he or she has to put more effort into the viewing process.

Apart from haptic characteristics of the photographs in the book, *The Universal Photographer* also manifests itself as a physical exhibition. Because of the physicality and tactility the book and the exhibition have to offer, they are mostly affiliated to an offline experience of photography. Rather than scrolling through a multitude of photographs online, this work manifests itself as something with a physical presence (see fig. 15, 16 and 17).

<sup>63</sup> Oxford Reference, “Haptic Aesthetics,” *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 16 Jan. 2017, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199747108.001.0001/acref-9780199747108-e-354>. Accessed 25 June 2019.

<sup>64</sup> Laura Marks, “Video Haptic and Erotics,” in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) 12.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 9.





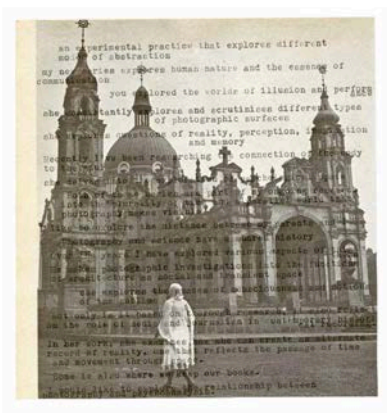
76

III.

WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHER

77

Figure 10. Wedding photographs, pages 66-77.



94

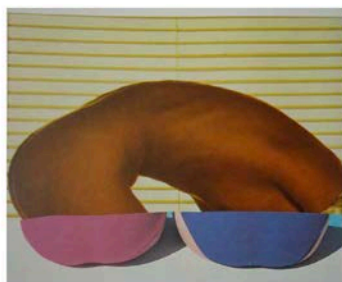
IV.

THEORIES

95



Figure 11. Photographs from the chapter 'Theories', pages 94-95.



154

V.

COLLAGES

155

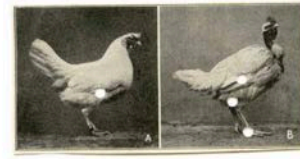
Figure 12. Photographs from the chapter 'Collages', pages 154-155



I started to make corrections of other people's work. No distinction was made between high art photos, snapshots or advertisement pictures he found in magazines.



166



CORRECTIONS

167

Figure 13. The opening spread of the chapter 'Corrections', pages 166-167.



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VI.

CORRECTIONS

177

Figure 14. Photographs that seem to be manipulated with a passport photo cutter, pages 176-177.



Figure 15. Exhibition view of *The Universal Photographer* in *Gemeentemuseum* The Hague.

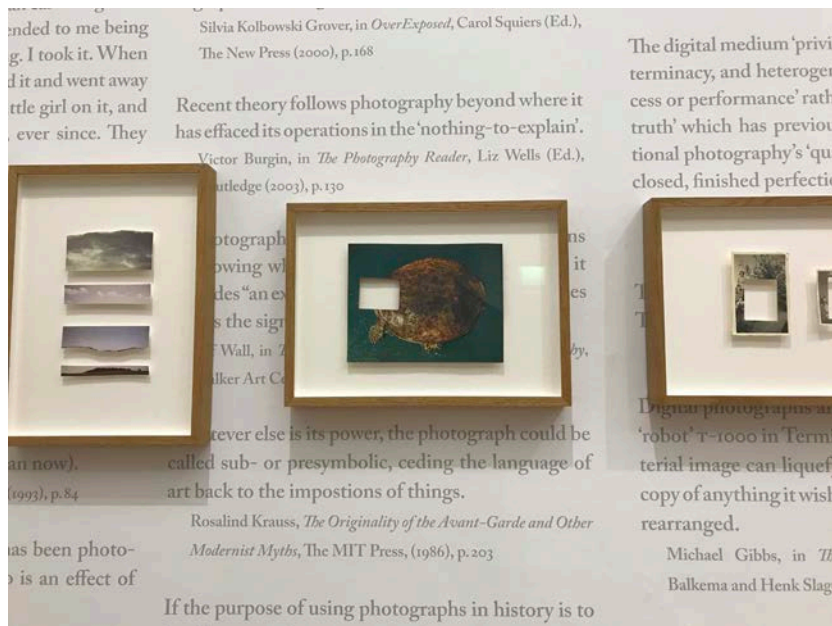


Figure 16. Exhibition view in *Gemeentemuseum* The Hague, original photographs from the chapter 'Corrections'.

Moreover, haptic viewing can (perhaps even better than in the book) be observed in the spatial display of *The Universal Photographer*. To illustrate, fig. 17 shows a close up of one of the collages that is also included in the book. However, in the exhibition it is shown as the original. The layering of images, the staples, and the rugged edges of old photograph are clearly visible. Most of the photographs are not shown in their totality, but hidden under other photographs. The physical material makes itself present towards any spectator. Now, more than ever, it is possible to see the decay in some of the photographs, the discolouration, the overexposing, the scratches.

For a visitor, it would be very tempting to touch some of these photographs, feel how they are connected, perhaps even remove some of the staples to examine which photograph is hidden underneath. In regards to the audience of *The Universal Photographer* one can pose the question as to how different it is to view these works as the original photographs, rather than in a book. Evidently, in most museums one is not permitted to touch the displayed artworks. Similarly, the unwritten rule is to remain quiet when one visits an exhibition. Hence, a museum equips its own language, one is asked to look rather than to touch. On the contrary, books are objects to be read and touched. We take books with us when we travel, we read books when we eat, we display them on our coffee-tables. On the one hand the most physical, touchable and original materials of *The Universal Photographer* are displayed under glass and in frames in the *Gemeentemuseum* in The Hague (see fig. 15). Whereas all the copies of these originals are included on flat pages in the model of the book.

Assessing *The Universal Photographer* according to its technique and production shows that the work stems from an active practice of nostalgia for analogue photographs. These, often haptic, photographs are shown in a physical form. The discrepancy between the two models of display and their contents not necessarily create a disengaged viewer. Both models offer a way of haptic looking. The one asks for more physical distance, but offers more material details in return. The other can be viewed from up close, but offers less depth in the photographs. Not only do these points emphasize the notion of physicality in the work of Geene and de Nooy, these characteristics also implicitly point to a preferred offline experience of photography. That is, this work still provides the possibility to view a myriad of photographs outside of the internet and the database. As will follow in the following paragraphs, through the use of multiple genres and techniques, the project places itself in the discourse of photography.





Figure 17. Close up of one of the tactile collages made by U.

### 3.2 Universal Genre: Composition

The introduction of *The Universal Photographer* equips the reader with a list of entries on artists, photographers, theorists, themes and genres with which U. is compared. For instance, Geene and de Nooy create a comparison to philosopher Walter Benjamin and artist David Hockney, but also to modernism and nature photography. The entries base themselves on similarities and differences. For example, U. shared a similar life ending as Robert Capa, they both died in action. U. got involved in a car crash and Capa stepped on a landmine. Whereas in another entry, U. does not seem to bear any relationship to the portrait because these are not included in his oeuvre. Some entries even seem humorously far-fetched, U. is compared to Rineke Dijkstra because they both made photographs of young people at beaches and he is compared to Andreas Gursky because they were born on the same day.

Defining the genre of a particular photograph or work is one of the first strategies in compositional analysis as defined by Gillian Rose.<sup>66</sup> Yet the opening pages of *The Universal Photographer* prohibit one from defining any of U.'s photographs into a specific category. The randomness of the given analogies provide the reader with the impression that indeed U. is a universal photographer, he can be related to almost any concept, genre and style. Not only does this way of comparison in the introduction refer back to the provenance and foundation of U's work and oeuvre, it also places him in the field of photography, surrounded by other genres (postmodernism), techniques (collage) and photographers.

### 3.3 Photographing Reality: Distribution

What does this anomic introduction imply for the embeddedness of *The Universal Photographer* into a (visual) discourse? The following paragraphs will explore how this work provides a commentary to the excess of images that get produced every day. In short, the structure of the book, the notion of universality, its relation to reality and theories of photography together constitute the final modality of visual research (distribution and discourse).

First of all, because the entries in the introduction are in alphabetical order and state similarities and differences on various topics, it is possible to view the structuring of this introduction as a method of listing commonly used in encyclopedias. As Ernst van Alphen notes, the practice of listing is ultimately a practice that is connected to time, especially because once a list is made, it is already dated whenever it becomes published.<sup>67</sup>

Similarly, an encyclopedia is also already outdated once its knowledge is brought into existence. Moreover, because a list is usually made to provide understanding and a certain order or context, the list in the introduction might add a framework with which one is able to approach U.'s oeuvre.<sup>68</sup> In this way, already from the start of the book, it poses limits to

<sup>66</sup> Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies* (London: Sage Publications, 2016) 19.

<sup>67</sup> Ernst van Alphen, "Listing," *Staging the Archive* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014) 107.

<sup>68</sup> Ernst van Alphen, "Listing," *Staging the Archive* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014) 94.



what U's quest (photographing everything) is trying to expand upon. Universality in *The Universal Photographer* thus reaches as far as the photographers and keywords to which U. is compared. Because the book opens with this way of structuring it might accordingly be interesting to find out whether it is possible to view the photographs of U. as a list as well.

The title of *The Universal Photographer* bears a slight paradox. To photograph is to individually capture something with the help of an apparatus, while to make something universal is to cover everything and anything. The introduction proves that by naming all these photographers and elements to which U. relates, he also relates to nothing in specific. By aspiring universality, nothing becomes specific, U. can be anyone, because he does not really contain a specific identity. U. could just as well represent the audience who reads or views this book. He could resemble anyone who recognizes oneself in the same obsession of capturing everything.

U's photographic ambition is to be all-round and universal, while paradoxically his photographic subjects are in no way classifiable. As a result, *The Universal Photographer* contains structured chapters, but their content is mostly random. This anomic way of photographing or maniac way of archiving is best seen in the chapter called 'Towards Completeness', where U. desperately tries to grasp an object in such a way that he needs to photograph it from every angle. He puts these photographs into grids (see fig. 18). However, in his ambition to be complete U. chooses random and arbitrary objects to photograph, such as a table tennis ball.

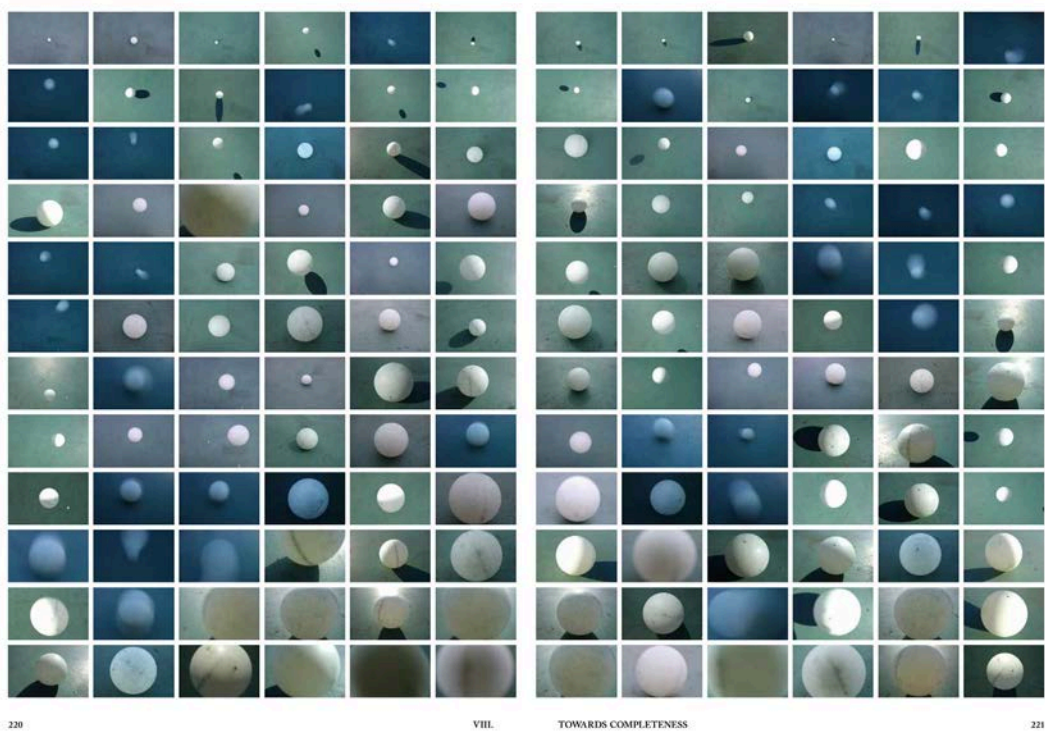


Figure 18. A table tennis ball photographed from all angles possible.

Just as it is possible to discover a paradox in the title and contents of *The Universal Photographer* it can also be found in the practice of listing itself. While listing can be time bound, it is at the same time expandable. There can always be added something new to the list. However, in this figure of endlessness, one perhaps tries to cover and include everything and strive for some sort of universality. Yet, the crux is that “the more a list tries to encompass everything, the less specific its referentiality becomes”.<sup>69</sup> This means that, the more entries one adds to the list, the less specific the individual entries become, in the end they refer less and less to what they originally were based on because they are included in a whole. The same counts for U’s photography, in trying to include everything, the individual photographs lose their specificity.

When one assesses the large quantities of collected photographs by Geene and de Nooy, it is possible to draw a parallel from the chapter ‘Notebooks’ to the work *Atlas* by Gerhard Richter (see fig. 19 and 20). Both works derive from a long-term process of collecting and present a repetition of imagery that is equivalent to the images it is surrounded with. This repetition can be seen as a form of visual listing.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, as Benjamin Buchloh argues, Richter made *Atlas* partly in response to the upcoming mass production of photographs, as a questioning on the photograph as ‘singular object’.<sup>71</sup> The multitude of photographs presented in *The Universal Photographer* provide an equal form of critique, since the internet and the database are similar places that contain such large amounts of photographs. This time the critique of *The Universal Photographer* is aimed more towards the (digital) excess of producing large quantities of photographs.

<sup>69</sup> Ernst van Alphen, “Listing,” *Staging the Archive* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014) 102.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>71</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, “Gerhard Richter’s ‘Atlas’: The Anomic Archive,” *October* (1999): 138.



Figure 19. Gerhard Richter *Atlas “Sils-Maria”* (2006).

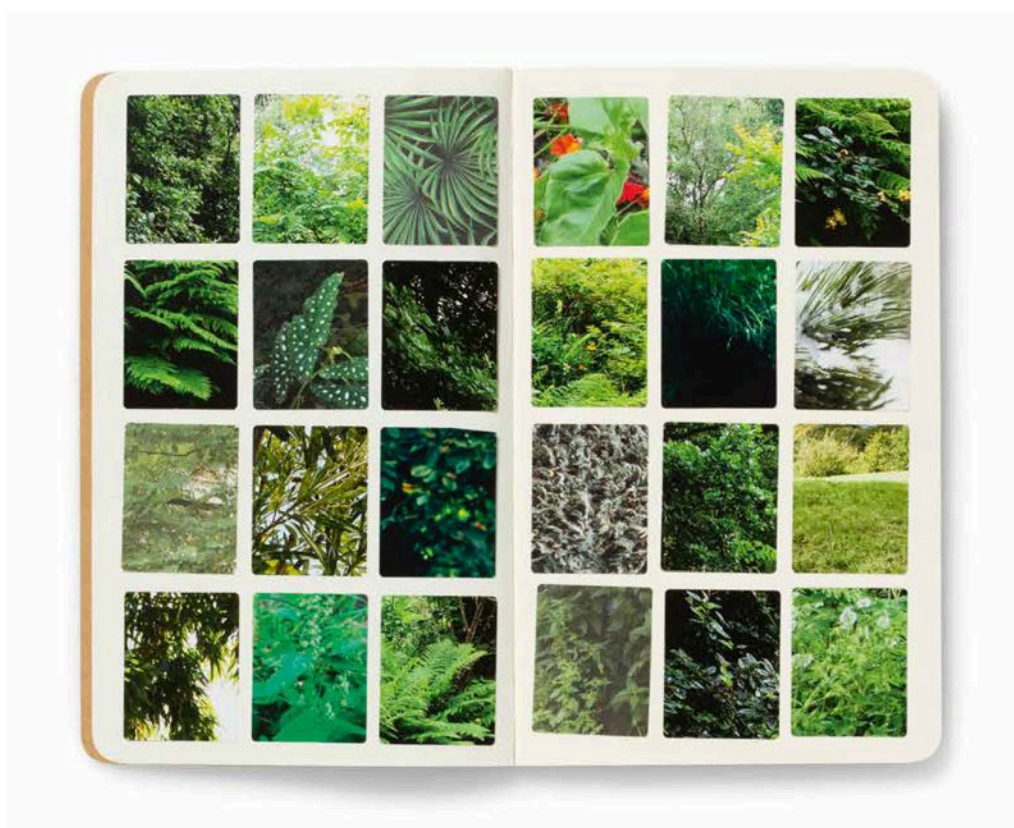


Figure 20. Dummy from the chapter ‘Notebooks’, pages 278-279.



In contrast to the former case study, *Parallel Encyclopedia #1*, in *The Universal Photographer* a reader does not get lost in this excess of photographs, but is rather given a structure (see fig. 21). Just like in the novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, *The Universal Photographer* comprises ten chapters. These follow the life-span of the protagonist U. in a chronological order. Each chapter resembles a stage in U.'s life or in his photography. For instance, 'early work' is a chapter with black and white photographs that were taken by U. as a child, therefore they show photographs taken from low vantage points. Similarly, U. became a wedding photographer after he graduated from school. Finally, the book ends with the chapter "Copying the World" in which Geene and de Nooy state:

Only later in his career, after the turn of the millennium, U discovered the portable scanner. He was thrilled with its directness and with the literal, actual-size images it produced; this was what he had been looking for. His last years were devoted to obsessively scanning surfaces and objects around him. In 2016, while he was scanning a zebra crossing, he got hit by a car and died on the spot. He left kilometres of scanned material.<sup>72</sup>

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Figure 21. The content page of *The Universal Photographer*.

<sup>72</sup> Anne Geene and Arjan de Nooy, *The Universal Photographer* (Rotterdam: De HEF Publishers, 2018) 304

From the chronological order provided in *The Universal Photographer* it is possible to view these chapters as a temporal listing of U.'s total lifespan, from the moment he was born until his death. Compared to the former case study *Parallel Encyclopedia #1*, which uses the linear development of evolution (from abstract shapes to becoming more and more human). *The Universal Photographer* follows a similar development in time, yet in this case it is the evolution of a human being through his photographic oeuvre. Another striking visual cue is that throughout U.'s work there is a visual perspective shift. He starts out his life and photographic career by taking low-vantage point shots in the chapter 'Early Work'. In this chapter, he is a child with probably a new and fairly open view on the world. The images reflect this vision, they show U. is looking up and he is taking mostly wide-shots of the sky, trees and clouds (see fig. 22). In the last chapter 'Copying the World' U. ends his career by taking very close-up scans of surfaces for which he must be looking down. In his ambition to photograph everything, U. assumes that getting closer to the photographed subject and directly scanning it, is offering him more 'reality' of that subject. While in fact, through his focus on photographing, he paradoxically becomes blind for his surroundings. Consequently, he tragically dies while scanning a zebra-crossing (see fig. 23).

Not only do the images of U. express the notion of hapticity as stated before, U himself also experiences a haptic evolution in his working method. It develops from distance to closeness, from the wide-shot photographs as a child to the detailed imagery as U. nears his death. This literal way of getting close to the photographed subject is perhaps a way in which Geene and de Nooy refer to our own handling of photographs. The supposed realness and indexical qualities of photography provides us with the illusion that our surroundings are graspable. The photographs in *The Universal Photographer* could just as well serve as a kind of memento-mori, reminding the viewer that once one aspires to become this machine-like obsessive capturer of reality, it is bound to fail.

After the former paragraphs it is easier to recognize that in fact U. could represent our own handling of images. The perspective shift visually signalled in *The Universal Photographer* could serve as a proposal to shift the perspective of the audience of this work as well. Perhaps U.'s obsession of capturing the world, thus functions more as an advice or proposal to the reader or (viewer). Since U. photographs everything that surrounds him, except himself he could be seen as a photographer that can represent the photographer that resides in us all. Moreover "Part Two: On Photography" which can be seen as an index or epilogue to this book, lists theories on the definition of photography, just as the 'introduction' lists different photographers, artists and genres to which U. can be related. In this regard, *The Universal Photographer* not only resembles the photographer in us, but also the general debates in the discourse of photography. "On Photography" contains multiple pages filled with theories on photography divided by the following categories:

as art, authorship, camera, chance, character, colour, context, copy, correlations, culture, death, difficult, digital, ease, Flaubert, genre, infinite, invention, meaning, memory,



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I.

EARLY WORK

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Figure 22. Photographs from the chapter 'Early Work', pages 28-29.



378

X.

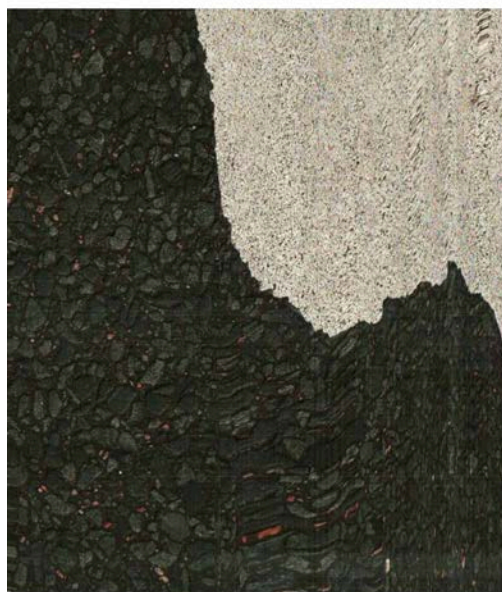
COPYING THE WORLD

379

Figure 23. Scan from the chapter 'Copying the World', pages 378-379.

miscellaneous, moment, neologisms, ontology, opinions, photographic seeing, style, subject, truisms, women (see fig. 24).<sup>73</sup>

This anomic categorization of theories on photography reflect a way in which *The Universal Photographer* aspires to critique its own medium, namely as a way of meta photography. By showing the multitude of interpretations on photography, it shows that neither of these have to be ‘the true’ (and universal) interpretation of photography.



| 385   | NOTES   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>AS ART</b></p> <p>Photography is not Art. It is not even an art. Art is the expression of the conception of an idea. Photography is the plastic verification of a fact. The difference between Art and Photography is the essential difference which exists between the Idea and Nature.</p> <p>Mariano De Zayas, in <i>Classic European Photography</i>, Abel Trachtenberg (Ed.), Loew's Island Books (1968), p. 103</p> <p>Of those who say that photography is too mechanical to produce works of art—and this category includes many otherwise competent art critics—is may be safely said that such an attitude denotes a lack of knowledge.</p> <p>Paul Oronoledge, in <i>Photography Special</i>, Brooks Johnson (Ed.), Aperture Foundation (1994), p. 100</p> <p>Has it led you to the conclusion that photography is an art? Or is it simply a means of recording? I'm glad you asked that. I've been wanting to say this for years. Is cooking an art? Is talking an art? Is even painting an art? It is artfulness that makes art, not the medium itself. Of course photography is an art—when it is in the hands of artists.</p> <p>Anne Schaefer, <i>Creative Camera</i> (October 1985), p. 138</p> <p>Photography is an artisan's field of work. A métier for which one shows more or less talent, like all craftsmanship.</p> <p>Gerrit Kroll, in <i>Photography Special</i>, Brooks Johnson (Ed.), Aperture Foundation (1994), p. 108</p> <p>Photography does not permit the same freedoms as painting. Pierre Bonnard painted his wife Marthe for almost forty years—but always as she looked at the age of twenty-five. Stieglitz faithfully photographed O'Keeffe as she changed and aged.</p> <p>Geoff Dyer, <i>The Ongoing Moment</i>, Counterpoint (1995), p. 109</p> <p>The camera is a means of expression with virtues and limitations of its own; the photograph which looks like a drawing, crickling of painting, is not a real photograph.</p> <p>Annette Crounswan, quoted in <i>Truth and Photography</i>, Jerry L. Thompson, from R. One (1995), p. 10</p> <p>Now, I do not mean to say decidedly that this photographic view is incorrect. It is quite possible that it is literally correct. But artistically it is absurd. At any rate, if it is correct, it destroys all feeling of size, impenetrability, and dignity.</p> <p>Joseph Pennell, quoted in <i>Anne Schaefer, Art and Photography</i>, Penguin Books (1985), p. 103</p> <p>It supposes that there are artists who use photography as their medium and then there are photographers</p> | <p>who aspire to make art. The former group would be considered the hotpots while the others would be viewed as basically pathetic.</p> <p>Joan Fontana, <i>Conversations with Contemporary Photographers</i>, Outrage Editions (1995), p. 30</p> <p>Photographers presenting their work in an art context prefer to call themselves artists, lens-based artists, artists working with photography, and so on.</p> <p>Taco Hilde Bakker, <i>Culture Magazine</i>, Issue 1 (1994), p. 18</p> <p>Fifty photographers who call themselves 'artists' who take photographs and not photographers, are morons says. If a photograph is labeled a mere photograph it is only worth \$3,000; if a photograph is labeled a conceptual piece, it fetches \$300,000—semantic sleight of hand.</p> <p>Danese Michels, <i>Five Follies</i>, Thames &amp; Hudson (1996)</p> <p>In short, while photography may be seen as an art, it is only ever a minor art. Hence, in this area, barbarism and incompetence are of no more consequence than virtuosity, reserved attachment or abject refusal are two similar ways of expressing the limited value conferred upon photography, a cheap form of expression reserved for talentless people.</p> <p>Peter Boudier, <i>Photography—A Middle-brow Art</i>, Stanford University Press (1994), p. 89</p> <p>To identify 'art' as the preferred territory for their images is near the aspiration of many photographers.</p> <p>Charlotte Corcoran, in <i>Photography at Contemporary Art</i>, Thames &amp; Hudson (1994), p. 7</p> <p>He (Weigee) would have laughed all the way to the bank being called an artist.</p> <p>Leonard S. Neufeld, <i>A History of Photography</i>, Cambridge (1986), p. 10</p> <p>For half a century photography has been the 'art form' of the untalented. Obviously some pictures are more satisfactory than others, but where is credit due? To the designer of the camera? To the finger on the button? To the law of averages?</p> <p>Gus Veldt, <i>photomaps.com</i></p> <p>I am not saying there that one must be an expert at painting or drawing in order to become a good photographer, but what I am saying is that one must be an artist.</p> <p>Adrian Corcoran, in <i>Photography Special</i>, Brooks Johnson (Ed.), Aperture Foundation (1994), p. 48</p> <p>Photography has never been about money, it had always been about photography. Now that the Haute Kintessen have deemed it art, it's all about money and not about photography.</p> <p>Danese Michels, <i>Five Follies</i>, Thames &amp; Hudson (1996)</p> |

Figure 24. First page of ‘Part Two: On Photography’, pages 384-385.

<sup>73</sup> Anne Geene and Arjan de Nooy, *The Universal Photographer* (Rotterdam: De HEF Publishers, 2018) 385-457.

In conclusion *The Universal Photographer* could be seen as offering a dual critique. Not only does it contribute to a commentary on the medium of photography, but also to the technologies that make it easier to disseminate photographs, the database and the internet. The world of photographer U. could run parallel to the fast-paced digital photographic world. It is as if Geene and de Nooy would like to express that, in the end there is no 'one true' photograph, no one true interpretation of photography, that is exactly why we supply/provide/ bombard you with a multitude of photographs, theories and genres.

Like Flaubert tried to make a 'shadow' encyclopedia (the encyclopedia of accepted ideas) to his novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Geene and de Nooy try to make a visual 'shadow' encyclopedia to the novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. On the one hand *The Universal Photographer* is aware of its own position within the field of photography, since it reflects on the multitude of theories that exist and try to define this medium. On the other hand, it still expresses a fostering of the analogue image, analogue techniques, vernacular photography, hapticity and materiality of the image.

Therefore, it seems more likely that the production of this book is not meant as a mnemonic device to Geene and de Nooy, but rather to us as viewers. Reminding us that once one aspires to capture the world around us in such an obsessive way as U. it is bound to fail. In the end, rather than making an explicit reference to the database, what is invoked are the aspirations of database collecting (and the aspirations in ourselves), namely that of establishing an endless collection of the world. U. represents the photographer in us all and therefore makes us conscious of our role in capturing the world. Viewing the photographs in *The Universal Photographer* allows us to reflect on why we still photograph in a world that already contains an excess of imagery.



## Conclusion

In line with a yearning for collecting, or an archive fever that is present in many people, this thesis set out to understand why some artist adopt the position of the photographer-as-archivist, and especially whether and how their encyclopedic projects contribute to a questioning on the figure of the database. Thus this thesis explored to what extent artist encyclopedias like *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* and *The Universal Photographer* challenge the figure of the digital database.

Through analysing the chosen works, this thesis has shown that the database indeed can be seen as a model that is to a greater or lesser extent reacted upon by archival art. This is visible in the following ways: the position of the-photographer-as-archivist gives rise to projects that include intuitive, association based working methods. Archival material in itself is incomplete, therefore the narratives inside archives are incomplete. The gaps in these materials are exactly what inspires artists to come up with new (sometimes fictional) narratives. Rather than the database method of adding and acquiring more material, these projects signal that one should not aim to acquire more information, data or photographs. Rather we need more narratives to make sense of this information. In fact, this is also what the database implicitly signals. Through the rapidly growing amount of documents, records and photographs, the need arises for new ways to make sense of this material.

The analysed works offer methods of categorizing, listing and classifying that could inspire other people to rethink their approach in acquiring, capturing and ordering of photographs. The classifications within both projects are anomic, random, non-hierarchical, intuitive and fictional, exactly the opposite from the structured and predominantly ordered taxonomy of the database. Next to that, both case studies possess inherent qualities of materiality and physicality which calls for attention to an offline experience of analogue photography.

The first chapter set out to investigate to what extent the figure of the database and the archive differ and moreover, what their connection to the-photographer-as-archivist entails. Exploring theories in archival science and art history, has shown that the archive can be seen as a static and authoritative figure, but once it is equipped by artists, it enters a sphere of mobility and evolvment. Although some theorists state that the database cannot include 'one encompassing and linear narrative', the database is still prone to the aspiration to encompass everything. It is only that the database does not necessarily offer an interpretation of the material that it contains. Rather these large (and smaller) narratives have become embedded in institutions such as the museum or the archive. Yet since these institutions equip their own language, these embedded narratives might lack information or leave things out. The signalled gaps in these narratives and its material are the inspiration for positions like the-photographer-as-archivist, since it provides options to adjust, give new interpretations and

come up with new (and perhaps even better) narratives.

The second chapter has shown that naturally, *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* offers an intuitive categorization to a wide arrangement of photographs. However, after analysis, it has become clear that this work contains a linear narrative which starts out from the creation of the universe and ends in the introduction of the human body. Suter's working method includes scanning and structuring photographs according to specific themes such as 'tapestries' or 'landscapes'. Formerly these photographs would be embedded in different narratives, Suter takes them out of their context and arranges them into a new world. What stands out is the arrangement of the photographs on the spreads. This is either based on their visual similarity or based on a shared perspective (vertical, diagonal).

*Parallel Encyclopedia #1* bears in its outlook and ordering a similar relationship towards other forms of encyclopedias and even to other forms of containing information in large quantities of imagery, such as the database and the archive. Inherently it carries a paradoxical relationship to the database. On the one hand the work could not exist without the necessity of new narrative forms promoted by the database. On the other, the characteristics of a closed narrative, anomic classification and its physical existence as a book, opt more towards anti-database elements. Consequently, *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* positions itself in between the archive and the database.

Conversely in chapter 3, *The Universal Photographer* provides the reader with the fictional oeuvre of an obsessive photographer who clearly develops a fetish for the analogue image. His working method cherishes the materiality of photography and its versatile ways of capturing the world. In its striving for a universal or total view on the world, the photographs in *The Universal Photographer* have a similar aim to that of the database, namely encompassing everything. However, through the structural implementation of arbitrary archival and encyclopedic listing, Geene and de Nooy succeed to offer a different view on the endless gathering of an excess of images. A viewer of *The Universal Photographer* can easily identify oneself with the protagonist U. He is never personally visible and equips multiple genres through time. The inclusion of multiple photographic definitions and theories point to the impossibility of the creation of one ontology on photography. In the end, Geene and de Nooy present their audience with an advice. The tragic end of protagonist U shows that universality is not something to be strived for. Rather, the question posed to the reader is: why does one still aspire to photograph in an era of active image accumulation?

It could seem that visually these projects look almost identical. They both use archival material, they both show a large collection of images, they both employ random categories and they both present themselves as books, while in their effect, they both address very different discourses. If one would have to differentiate, *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* comments more on the database, its structure, its functioning, while *The Universal Photography* comments more on the people who would employ a possible database, the photographers, us (the people who

aspire to be like U. and capture the world they are surrounded with).

Therefore, in general it seems that *Parallel Encyclopedia #1* and *The Universal Photographer* can be viewed neither as totally archival, anti-database, nor as completely encyclopedic. Since these projects are inherently already stretching their definition on photography and the archive, they resist such a blunt definition. It can be futile to try to fit these works into a specific category, while in reality that is exactly what these projects are trying to escape from (and why they are probably so interesting to dive into).

In the end, the fever is spreading. Not only archives foster collecting, the world around us does, the internet, its databases and our shopping streets. One could try to step out of this drive, yet do we really want to be cured? Rather it is best to be aware of this inner yearning. So, in line with the explored works I would like to finish with expressing my gratitude to the failure of capturing everything.



## Further Research

Just like protagonist U. failed to capture everything he wanted to photograph, this text also knows its limitations. Since this thesis considered two relatively new case studies from contemporary art, it makes the findings of anti-database characteristics less generalizable to a wider variety of archival projects. In spite of this, both case studies have shown that in questioning the digital archives of the future, it is helpful to view archival artwork from a place of production.

The existence of positions like that of the-artist-as-archivist and the-photographer-as-archivist point to the need for an interdisciplinary approach towards archival science as well as to the visual manifestations that follow from this discourse. Moreover, what needs to be determined are not only the power relations that exists within the archive and the database, but also the dominant models that exist outside of these. For instance, the art world (where archival art is naturally part of) equally adopts itself to models of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion. Hence, this provides another possibility to be considered in future research.

Finally, especially in times of image accumulation, future studies should focus more on the visual elements of artworks that bring established models, like that of the archive, into new spheres. Literature to be considered is for instance *Feeling Photography* which partly focusses on the topic of affect and the archive and the transmitted effect of archival institutions onto the visitor. Researching projects that evolve from the photographer-as-archivist and taking their implications for new figures of acquiring imagery seriously, could just as well be the key to maintain a critical stance towards the digital archives of the future.

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