Thinking Onto the Box: The Photographer's Archive as Instrument

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Abstract. Studies of photographic archives have tended to follow two distinct models: analyses of institutional archives as systems of knowledge and power, or close readings of objects informed by theories of material culture. Art historical research, in contrast, also seeks to determine intentional meanings behind images or artefacts. The archive of a photographer can thus be approached along three different angles: as a system for filing images and their meanings; as a collection of material objects; finally, as traces of use that correspond to specific intentional acts by the artist directed towards the production of artworks. In an art historical context, the archive can be read as a means towards an end. This paper presents a case study of Canadian photographer John Max (1936-2011) and his use of the archive to produce the landmark sequence *Open Passport* (exhibited 1972; published 1973). Using both documentary and material evidence shows how John Max's photographic artworks are specified through a process of materially realized editorial decisions more than by the moment of exposure. These decisions in turn are mediated by material features of the archive, such as traces of previous choices on contact sheets. Finally, this mediating role of the archive is also socialized, integrating both collaborators and existing ideas, pointing at the necessity of a networked narrative in monographic studies of photographers.
Keywords: John Max (1936-2011); Canadian photography; personal archive; sequence; contact sheets; boxes; performance; instrument.

[es] Pensar dentro de la caja: el archivo del fotógrafo como instrumento

Resumen. Los estudios sobre archivos fotográficos tienden a seguir dos modelos distintos: análisis de los archivos institucionales como sistemas de conocimiento y poder, o lecturas minuciosas de los objetos según teorías de cultura material. La investigación histórica del arte, por el contrario, también busca determinar los significados intencionales detrás de las imágenes o los artefactos. Así pues, el archivo de un fotógrafo puede abordarse desde tres ángulos diferentes: como sistema de archivo de imágenes y sus significados; como colección de objetos materiales; y, finalmente, como huellas de uso que corresponden a actos intencionales específicos del artista dirigidos hacia la producción de obras de arte. En un contexto de historia del arte, el archivo puede leerse como un medio con una finalidad. Este artículo presenta un estudio de caso del fotógrafo canadiense John Max (1936-2011) y su uso del archivo para producir la prominente secuencia *Open Passport* (exhibida en 1972, publicada en 1973). Utilizando pruebas documentales y materiales, muestra cómo las obras fotográficas de John Max se concretan a través de un proceso de decisiones editoriales realizadas materialmente, más que por el momento de la exposición. Estas decisiones, a su vez, están mediadas por características materiales del archivo, tales como las huellas de selecciones previas en hojas de contacto. Finalmente, este papel mediador del archivo está también socializado, integrando tanto a colaboradores como ideas existentes, enfocando la necesidad de una narrativa interconectada en estudios monográficos sobre fotógrafos.

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Palabras clave: John Max (1936-2011); fotografía canadiense; archivo personal; secuencia; hojas de contacto; cajas; ejecución artística; instrumento.

Sumario: 1. Introduction. 2. Principal discourses about the photographic archive. 3. Doings and artworks. 4. Unpacking John Max. 5. The mediation of the archive on the constitution of the work. 6. Conclusion and potential for future research. 7. Conflict of interests. 8. Support. 9. References.

1. Introduction

In April 2003, Canadian photographer John Max [John Porchawka] (1936-2011) stored at the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal some 125 boxes that constituted the better part of his archive. The Museum had agreed to house these materials in response to the emergency caused by his eviction[2]. Fifty years of negatives, contact sheets, exhibition prints, preparatory materials, holograph documents, books, and many artefacts were hastily packed in the state they were last in the photographer's house. They encompassed his work as photojournalist and exhibiting artist, the two practices that defined his professional career, in addition to his personal work. A summary arrangement was attempted, but nothing approaching a professional classification could be achieved, nor was there time and means to transfer materials to archival-grade containers. When the estate of the photographer granted me research access to them in 2018, most boxes had remained untouched since they were packed. Navigating the idiosyncratic organization of his materials proved challenging but also gave unique insights into Max's working methods. The boxes yielded many important documents and images that helped better understand the career of a major Canadian photographer of the twentieth century, reconstruct his major works, and identify his recurring themes and subjects[3].

Studies of photographic archives have tended to follow two distinct models: systematic analyses of institutional collections as nexuses of knowledge and power, or close readings of objects informed by theories of material culture[4]. They emphasize

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2   Block, I. (2003, 24 April). Noted Photographer Finds a Home. *The Ottawa Citizen*, A7.

3   For a full overview of John Max's career, see Hardy-Vallée, M. (2019). The Photobook as Variant: Exhibiting, Projecting, and Publishing John Max's *Open Passport*. *History of Photography*, 43(4), 399-421. https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2020.1771052 [Consulted: 26 June 2022].

4   For examples of the first approach, see Azoulay, A. (2019). *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. New York: Verso; Bate, D. (2007). The Archaeology of Photography: Rereading Michel Foucault and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. *Afterimage*, 35(3), 3-6; Krauss, R. (1982). Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View. *Art Journal*, 42(4), 311-319; Roberts, J. (2009). Photography after the Photograph: Event, Archive, and the Non-Symbolic. *Oxford Art Journal*, 32(2), 281-298; Sekula, A. (1983). Photography between Labour and Capital. In B. Buchloh and R. Wilkie (Eds.), *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton, 1948-1968* (pp. 193-268). Halifax, NS: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; Sekula, A. (1986). The Body and the Archive. *October*, 39, 3-64. The second approach is epitomized by Edwards, E., and Hart, J. (Eds.). (2004). *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*. London: Routledge, and has echoes in Baetens, J. (2018). How to Preserve Uno-

the study of usage, either at the strategic level of institutional policies framing acquisitions and cataloguing, or at the tactical level of materially encoded meanings accruing to artefacts over the course of their trajectory across contexts. Both approaches, having grown out of social science research using documentary corpora, leave relatively unexamined the role of the individual photographer in the meaning of images and the organization of the archive. Art historical approaches, in contrast, seek intentional meanings behind images or artefacts, for instance by studying provenance, establishing prime version, or defining the relationship of a work to an oeuvre. Intended meanings, while not exhausting the range of signification of a work, can nevertheless be correlated to both socio-historical concepts and material characteristics. The archive of an artistic photographer can thus be understood along three different angles: it constitutes a system for filing images and their associated meanings; it contains a plurality of material objects; finally, it carries traces of specific intentional acts, including those of collaborators, aimed at the production of artworks. In an art historical context, the archive can thus be read as a means towards an end. This paper offers a case study of the ways in which John Max's archive, a systematic and material construct, was an instrument in the production of his works, especially his landmark *Open Passport* (exhibited 1972; published 1973)[5].
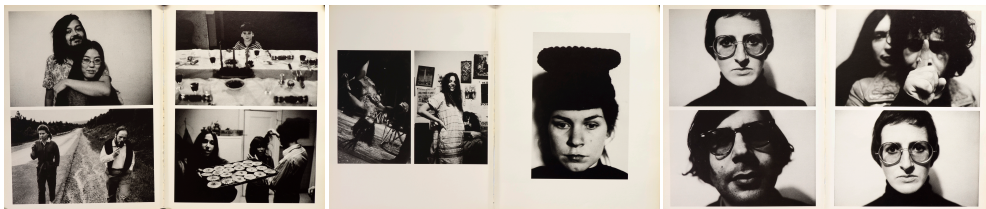

Figure 1. John Max, double-page spreads 09, 13, and 36 of *Open Passport*, Toronto: *IMPRESSIONS* 1973 (special double issue 6 and 7). Offset lithography on paper. Author's collection

An elaborate 161-print sequence, *Open Passport* tells the story of a couple broken apart by the dilemma opposing the pursuit of art to the responsibilities inherent to raising children (fig. 1). The narration is built through montage rather than mise-en-scène (as is the case, for instance, with photographers such as Duane Michals or Cindy Sherman). Photographs in *Open Passport* are organized in a succession of variable picture grids, the most common one being four pictures laid out in a square pattern. John Max selected photographs taken between 1960 and 1972 from his archive, and he assembled them to fit his narrative. The majority show people, some of them rather famous such as Janis Joplin and Leonard Cohen, but *Open Passport* is

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riginal Photographs? Some Questions of the Film Photonovel. *History of Photography*, 42(4), 392-404. https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2018.1541566 [Consulted: 26 June 2022]; Campt, T. M. (2012). *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394457 [Consulted: 26 June 2022]; Edwards, E. (2009). Photography and the Material Performance of the Past. *History and Theory*, 48(4), 130-150; Wilder, K. (2017). Not One but Many: Photographic Trajectories and the Making of History. *History of Photography*, 41(4), 376-394. https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2017.1359952 [Consulted: 26 June 2022].

5   The exhibition opened 5 October 1972 at the Photo Gallery in Ottawa, under the bilingual title *Open Passport = Un passeport infini*. It was published the following year as Max, J. (1973). Open Passport. *IMPRESSIONS*, special double issue – No. 6 No. 7.

entirely uncaptioned. The result can be considered a kind of visual novel, a graphic long poem rather than a retrospective exhibition or a gallery of portraits. Formally innovative, and challenging to interpret, *Open Passport* is a work that uses the possibilities afforded by a voluminous photographic archive.

After a summary of key ideas framing the study of photographic archives, I clarify the notion of instrument and relate it to the idea of artworks as doings. A brief overview of John Max's career leads into the case study of his archive and its role in *Open Passport*. Using both documentary and material evidence shows how John Max's photographic artworks were specified through a process of materially realized editorial decisions more than by the moment of exposure. These decisions in turn were mediated by material features of the archive, such as traces of previous choices on contact sheets, and by the input of collaborators, pointing at the necessity of a networked narrative in monographic studies of photographers.

2. Principal discourses about the photographic archive

Among early photographic writings, physicist François Arago's (1786-1853) inaugural discourse about the daguerreotype to the French Academy of Sciences urged Egyptologists to use this technology to reproduce the «millions of hieroglyphs» on temples, while inventor Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) demonstrated in *The Pencil of Nature* how his negative-positive process could be used to make facsimile of manuscripts[6]. While these writers understood photography as a powerful adjunct to existing archives, jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes (1841-1935) proposed stereoscopic photography as constituting a new kind of archive: a collection of forms divorced from their substance and thus more easily portable, like the skins of buffalo pulled from their carcasses. Knowledge about the world, rather than resulting from experience, could thus be acquired through an entire system of exchange of forms: promissory notes to ultimately be paid off in solid substance by the «great Bank of Nature» when necessary[7]. Holmes's Platonist interpretation is at the heart of the first major current of inquiry into photographic archives as systematic repositories of knowledge about the world.

«Archiving the world» appropriately sums up the purpose of many photographic projects, from the geographical surveys of the American West during the second half of the nineteenth century, through criminologist Alphonse Bertillon's (1853-1914) system of judiciary identification, to the expeditions sponsored by industrial Albert Kahn (1860-1940) in early twentieth century to photograph in color with Autochrome plates people across the globe. Holmes's economic metaphor can be aptly followed by the association between these projects and, respectively: colonization, the state police, and finance. His ideal stock exchange experienced hyperinflation during the modern era as did the real one, when the increasing appeal of photography and new portable cameras facilitated the mass production of images by individuals. The

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[6]   Arago, F. (1839). *Rapport de M. Arago sur le daguerréotype. Lu à la séance de la Chambre des Députés le 3 juillet 1839, et à l'Académie des Sciences, séance du 19 août*. Paris: Bachelier, imprimeur-libraire. https://galli-ca.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1231630 [Consulted: 26 June 2022]; Fox Talbot, W. H. (2011). *The Pencil of Nature*. Chicago, London: KWS Publishers. (1844)

[7]   Holmes, O. W. (1859, June). The Stereoscope and the Stereograph. *The Atlantic*.

decades between the two world wars saw the realignment of photographic industry to the flow of amateur production, and collections management became an integral part of photographic practice[8]. The New Objectivity movement in Central Europe grew from the confrontation of artistic culture to this proliferation of ready-made images[9], rejecting the High Art ambitions of the handcrafted unique images championed by Pictorialism. For a cultural critic like Walter Benjamin, photography (coupled to the printing press) had the potential to unseat art itself from its pedestal and usher in a new revolutionary world of representations[10].

As the study of photography developed into an academic discipline in North America from the 1970s onwards[11], the topic of photographic archives found its theoretical terrain on Michel Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, as epitomized by the work of Allan Sekula. In «Photography Between Labour and Capital», Sekula adds to Holmes's notion of photography constituting an imaginary economy a Foucaldian interrogation on the ideological conditions of existence for the archive[12]. Considering the mining photographs of Nova Scotian Leslie Shedden, Sekula draws attention to the structures of power that determine their meaning, especially those that frame their visual normality and ordinariness. By adopting an apparently neutral point of view, like that of Shedden on mining, photography can thus be complicit of normalizing capital to labour.

Sekula thus reminds us that «neutrality» or «objectivity» is a construct, not a pre-theoretical fact. Although no professional archivist would maintain the idea that an archive is a neutral repository of facts to be taken up by historians to create historical knowledge, the myth of archives as objective data has been surprisingly persistent outside the discipline. The persistence of the myth speaks to the weighty authority of photographic archives and the strength of the association between vision and knowledge. This myth pops up for instance in Jacques Derrida's widely discussed essay *Archive Fever*[13], in which he compares Freudian theory's insistence on the authority of the subconscious to that of the archive. Critic Hal Foster, reviewing works of art engaging with the trope of the archive at the beginning of this century, saw them in a postmodern context attempting to play with historical understanding, providing raw materials to an anomic society to encourage them to recreate new connections. He traced this «archival impulse» to the photographic work of Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956) and his modernist contemporaries, who played with montage, collage, and filing systems[14]. More recently, archivist and curator of photography Joan M. Schwartz defends her profession against academics who sees them as «hewers of wood and drawers of water»[15], while Margrit Prussat needs remind her

[8]   Lugon, O. (2008). 'Photo-Inflation': Image Profusion in German Photography, 1925-1945. *History of Photography*, 32(3), 219-234. https://doi.org/10.1080/03087290802018942 [Consulted: 26 June 2022].

[9]   Stetler, P. (2011). The Object, the Archive and the Origins of *Neue Sachlichkeit* Photography. Ibid., 35, 281-295. https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2011.579724 [Consulted: 26 June 2022].

[10]   Benjamin, W. (1968). The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (Tran. H. Zohn). In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (pp. 217-252). New York: Schocken. (Original in German, 1936)

[11]   Nickel, D. R. (2001). History of Photography: The State of Research. *The Art Bulletin*, 83(3), 548-558.

[12]   Sekula, A. (1983). Photography between Labour and Capital. In B. Buchloh and R. Wilkie (Eds.) op. cit.

[13]   Derrida, J. (1996). *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Tran. E. Prenowitz). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. (Original in French, 1995)

[14]   Foster, H. (2004). An Archival Impulse. *October* (110), 3-22.

[15]   Schwartz, J. M., and Cook, T. (2002). Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory. *Archival Science*, 2, 1-19.

audience that «the content and structure of an archive influences the perception and interpretation of the pictures»[16].

In a parallel line of argument, Sekula takes issue with art historians «rummaging» through archives to extract from them images they elevate to the status of masterpieces, as they fail to acknowledge the depersonalizing, commodifying process of archiving[17]. By the time Sekula was writing, intense skepticism about the nature, the value, and the apparent neutrality of the photographic image was accompanying its simultaneous meteoric rise in the contemporary art world. It had been by then a profitable strategy to cast formally interesting archival photographs in terms compatible with *auteur* theory[18], and Sekula takes exception to this practice because he argues for understanding the photographic archive within the specificities of culture.

In response to the commodifying understanding of photographs as data or as masterpieces, scholars have stressed their materiality, their physical being, and their objecthood. Early histories of photography tended to be divided in periods correlated to major technological developments[19], for instance the daguerreotype era, the collodion era, the silver gelatin era (and now the digital era). However, material determinism was heavily questioned by the study of the social usages of photography[20]. As a result, contemporary scholars generally tend to consider that the material characteristics of photographs or other artefacts participate to the resultant meanings produced by actual use, without strictly determining them. A key theoretical construct to do so is the biography of objects[21]. Studying the career and trajectories of individual people are valid methods of sociological and anthropological research that can be adapted to objects. Through changes in owners or location, a single object accrues new meanings over the course of its career –or, as Igor Kopytoff more forcefully argues: if slavery blatantly shows the commodification of people, then commodities can have a biography too[22]. For instance, by tracing the biography of the contents of a single box of photographs from an archive, Elizabeth Edwards examines the shifts in meaning of photographic artefacts across contexts, as nodal points for multiple institutional discourses[23]. Applying a comparable analysis to another box of photographs, she studies the container itself –an overlooked unit of study– for the way it consigns meaning and embodies in material form the social values of the individuals who organized its contents[24]. Biographies of things recapitulate broad themes of ar-

16   Prussat, M. (2018). Reflexions on the Photographic Archive in the Humanities. In S. Helff and S. Michels (Eds.), *Global Photographies: Memory – History – Archives*. Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Verlag.

17   Sekula, A. op. cit. A similar argument was made by Krauss, R. op. cit.

18   Especially by Szarkowski, J. (1966). *The Photographer's Eye*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art. Szarkowski, J. (1989). *Photography until Now*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

19   Gernsheim, H., and Gernsheim, A. (1955). *The History of Photography from the Earliest Use of the Camera Obscura in the Eleventh Century up to 1914*. Oxford University Press; Newhall, B. (1949). *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

20   See an overview of the debate in Nickel, D. R. op. cit.

21   Edwards, E., and Hart, J. (Eds.) op. cit.

22   Kopytoff, I. (1986). The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process. In A. Appadurai (Ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (pp. 64-94), 64. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

23   Edwards, E. (2004). Mixed Box: The Cultural Biography of a Box of 'Ethnographic' Photographs. In E. Edwards and J. Hart (Eds.) op. cit., 48-64.

24   Edwards, E. (2009). Photography and the Material Performance of the Past. *History and Theory*, 48(4), 130-150.

chaeological (one is tempted to say antiquarian) research: where an object come from; what its characteristics are; who are its successive owners; and what meanings it has for them[25]. By shifting the starting point of scholarly work from theoretical systems to concrete experience, the biography of things favors the inductive understanding of historical change, entanglements between sociological facts, and contacts between social groups.

3. Doings and artworks

Recent photographic curatorial and publishing trends highlight the materiality of photographers' archives. Preparatory materials (contact sheets, book maquettes, workprints) or auxiliary documents (photographers' notebooks, typescripts, or correspondence) are included in exhibitions or reproduced in publications[26], and they explain the genesis of specific works or their variants. Photographers are thus understood as the primary users of their personal archives, which they use like tools to produce artworks. Film theorist Siegfried Kracauer had noted early on the difference between the «aesthetic» (what they look like) and the «formative» (how they were made) aspects of photographs, distinguishing them from paintings because they are weaker in the formative, while being comparable in the aesthetic[27]. Kracauer's view echoes the vernacular understanding of photography as snapshot, instantaneous and de-skilled, but as Patrick Maynard has argued in response, photographers are doing something different from painters, something that we have not tried to understand[28]. What they are doing can be approached by reframing the object-based approach as the study of object-mediated actions. For philosopher David Davies, artworks are the twofold action of manipulating something so that it is meaningful –they are actions that count for something else. Ontologically speaking, a work of art for Davies is in the category of doings, not things[29]. Whereas some properties of artworks are directly visible, others involve the acknowledgement of a history of making, that Davies names a «generative performance»[30]. The generative performance consists in all the actions that brought the work into being, including dead ends and paths explore but ultimately not taken. To understand a work of art like a painting or a photograph is

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[25]   Ceserani, G. (2014). Antiquarian Transformations in Eighteenth-Century Europe. In A. Schnapp (Ed.), *World Antiquarianism: Comparative Perspectives* (pp. 317-342). Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute; Mardsen, R. (2020). In Defiance of Discipline: Antiquarianism, Archaeology and History in Late Nineteenth-Century Scotland. *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 40(2), 103-133.

[26]   Greenough, S. (Ed.). (2009). *Looking In: Robert Frank's* The Americans (Expanded ed.). Washington and Göttingen: National Gallery Of Art/Steidl; Koudelka, J., and Chéroux, C. (Eds.). (2017). *Josef Koudelka: The Making of* Exiles. Paris: Éditions Xavier Barral / Éditions du Centre Pompidou; Miller, S. M. (2020). *Documentary in Dispute: The Original Manuscript of* Changing New York *by Berenice Abbott and Elizabeth Mccausland*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. See also Batchen, G. (2020). *Negative/Positive: A History of Photography*. London: Routledge; which employs close readings of the negatives of photographs (rather than published positive images) to revisit canonical moments in the history of the medium.

[27]   Maynard, P. (1997). *The Engine of Visualization: Thinking through Photography*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

[28]   Ibid.

[29]   Davies, D. (2005). Précis of *Art as Performance*. *Acta Analytica*, 20(4), 3-9. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12136-005-1006-2 [Consulted: 26 June 2022]; and Davies, D. (2004). *Art as Performance*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

[30]   Ibid.

therefore not to study a material object, but actions that can be realized materially. Studying these actions can be done either as they happen, through fieldwork, or at a temporal remote, using artefacts and secondary sources to reconstruct them.

In the field, Eve Forrest has studied the bodily habits of street photographers, and the way their practice engages with everyday life[31], while Romain Guedj has mapped the practice of Canadian art photographer Michel Campeau according to its spatial, material, and cognitive aspects[32]. Such studies consider the relationship between photographers and images, rather than the one between images and their referents, or the one between images and audiences. Guedj studies, for instance, how Campeau constitutes an archive of photographs by acquiring lots of slides at online auctions that are then further manipulated for book and exhibition projects. His analysis draws from the discipline of ergonomics on the key notion of instrument, that is, an artefact considered in the context of its use[33]. This is meant as a counterargument to radical materialist approaches attributing agency to object themselves, giving them the power to influence behaviors and social norms[34]. Ergonomics attempts to understand mediated actions, such as human-computer interaction or the more pedestrian use of a hammer in hand to drive a nail. While the design of tools can shape the space of possible actions, they cannot fully determine the actions of individuals, as a screwdriver can be marshalled for the purpose of cutting a wood splinter. As a tool, the screwdriver is made to drive screws, but as an instrument in the hands of someone, it can be used like a chisel. To redraw the comparison with photographic archives, a carousel of vacation Kodachrome slides is a tool designed by its owner to entertain guests and relatives, but it can be repurposed in a work like Campeau's own *The Donkey that Became a Zebra* or a found-photography project like Tacita Dean's *Floh*[35].

Pierre Rabardel and Pascal Beguin call such instances of instruments used against their intended usage «catachresis», a term previously referring to improper linguistic use. Catachresis neatly encapsulates the scope of human-tool interaction: it integrates an individual and a material dimension, as well as a social dimension, defined by degrees of propriety and impropriety of schemes of use derived from conventions. The notion can also be extended beyond quotidian tool use. For instance, Abigail De Kosnik, in her study of fandom and non-professional practices of digital archiving, points at the importance of «rogue archives», paradigmatic of an anticanonical culture that embraces all media as a single archive from which to remix, reuse, and redeploy contents[36] – catachresis as the contemporary cultural activity *par excellence*.

[31]   Forrest, E. (2012). *On Photography and Movement: Bodies, Habits and Worlds in Everyday Photographic Practice* (Doctoral thesis). University of Sunderland, Sunderland.

[32]   Guedj, R. (2019). *La pratique photographique dans un contexte artistique: Étude de cas de la pratique photographique de Michel Campeau* (Doctoral thesis). UQÀM, Montréal.

[33]   Rabardel, P., and Beguin, P. (2005). Instrument Mediated Activity: From Subject Development to Anthropocentric Design. *Theoretical Issues in Ergonomics Science*, 6(5), 429-461. https://doi.org/10.1080/14639220500078179 [Consulted: 26 June 2022].

[34]   Most famously, Latour, B. (1992). Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts. Lnside Technology. In W. E. Bijker and J. Law (Eds.), *Shaping Technology / Building Society. Studies in Sociotechnical Change* (pp. 225-258). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; and Gell, A. (1998). *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

[35]   Campeau, M. (2019). *The Donkey That Became a Zebra. Darkroom Stories*. Paris: LOCO; Dean, T., and Ridgewell, M. (2001). *Floh*. Göttingen: Steidl.

[36]   De Kosnik, A. (2016). *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Likewise, projects that radically recontextualize or recirculate archival photographs, such as urban activist initiatives or visual repatriation projects, could also be understood as instances of catachresis[37].

If the biography of objects attempts to understand the meanings that accrete to objects, to analyze artistic performance is to understand this process of accretion as action, and not just its results. Fieldwork analysis of artistic performance can only be achieved with living individuals; however, its insights can frame the way we read what remains –Guedj has noted the discrepancy between artists' statements and their observable practice[38]. We must read the archive for the material traces of the doings it preserves, while remaining cautious about our inferences, since they involve a process of reconstruction rather than direct observation.

4. Unpacking John Max

John Max's archive was built as the photographer progressed through three successive, sometimes overlapping career models: amateur, photojournalist, and exhibiting artist. As a high school student, he attended day classes at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts School of Art and Design, which was established to serve the educational needs of the local community, especially children and aspiring artists. By the middle of the 1950s decade, he had begun using photography to shoot high school events, family, and friends. He stayed close to the arts milieu of Montréal, and took pictures of many artists in their studios, actors during rehearsals, in addition to street scenes and portrait sessions. Although his first recorded photo credit dates from a 1957 group exhibition[39], he began publishing images in newspapers and weekly magazines on a regular basis by 1960. At the same time, he also established regular contacts with curators of photography Nathan Lyons and Walter Chappell (fig. 2) at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York.

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[37]   In the Canadian context, see Langford, M., and Sloan, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Photogenic Montreal: Activisms and Archives in a Post-Industrial City*. Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, for a collection of case studies of activist practices employing or recontextualizing photographic archives dealing with urban heritage. Digitization has also had a major impact in facilitating the appropriation of archives by users, as shown by Conway, P. (2010). Modes of Seeing: Digitized Photographic Archives and the Experienced User. *The American Archivist*, 73(2), 425-462. For an introduction to visual repatriation, see Peers, L., and Brown, A. K. (Eds.). (2003). *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*. London: Routledge.

[38]   Guedj, R. op. cit.

[39]   Millet, R. (1957). *quelques uns des travaux exposés d'abord à l'université de montréal en février '57 par un groupe qui croit que la photographie est autre chose qu'un médium impersonnel de reproduction…*. Montréal: Société artistique de l'Université de Montréal.

Figure 2. Curator Walter Chappell examining a selection of prints by John Max, Rochester (New York), 3 November 1960. Detail from contact sheet no. 840[6]. Gelatin silver print. Fonds John Max en dépôt P18, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. © The Estate of John Max, courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery

Eventually, Max attracted the attention of the National Film Board of Canada, which acquired some of his images through its Still Photography Division. Lorraine Monk, executive director of the Division, helped promote him in Canada and abroad through assignments, exhibitions, and publications. In 1967, he was sent to the 5e Biennale de Paris by the National Gallery of Canada, and his career took a decisive turn towards an artistic practice. He practically abandoned photojournalism and became a teacher of photography at Loyola College in Montréal. If his first solo exhibition was put together in 1960 with the help of McGill University students and more goodwill than means, in 1970 he opened *Le soleil brilla toute la nuit* at the Société Française de Photographie in Paris, backed by the Department of External Affairs of Canada as a gesture of cultural diplomacy. Funds from the Canada Council allowed him to shoot images for the still-in-motion documentary *… to be INDIAN* (1970), about the life of Indigenous Peoples at a historical turning point in their relationship with the Canadian government[40], and to produce his third solo exhibition, *Open Passport* (1972). The latter's success won him a major grant he used to travel to Japan, but from which he returned *persona non grata*. Not bringing back the work he was expected to produce, deported from the country after overstaying the length of his visa, he lost much of the pre-eminence, visibility, and support he had gained. He continued exhibiting during the 1980s, but to limited audiences. Although he experienced a revival of interest in the mid-1990s, personal issues caught up with him, and he died in difficult circumstances. Despite these, he remains a well-known and relevant artist, who carved a distinctive figure acknowledged by many other Canadian photographers and artists[41].

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[40]   Nishihata, J. (1971). *…to be INDIAN* (16 mm), 54 min, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. In 1969, the Canadian government unilaterally proposed to abolish the Indian status of Indigenous Peoples with Chrétien, J. (1969). *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy*. Ottawa. Because Indigenous communities were not appropriately consulted, the proposal was widely and very publicly rejected.

[41]   Clément, S. (2005). *Hommage : John Max, Open Passport*. Montréal: Serge Clément; Cousineau, S. P. (1977). *Mona Nima*. Almonte, Ontario: Powys Press. Pichette, J. (Ed.). (2006). *Marc Séguin : Survol Overview*. Montréal: Les 400 coups. Ewing, W. A. (2009). Benoit Aquin: Fire & Ice = Benoit Aquin : de feu et de glace. *Ciel Variable : Art, Photo, Médias, Culture* (81), 25-31. Lamothe, M. (2010). *John Max: A Portrait* (digital video), 94 min. Les Films du 3 Mars.
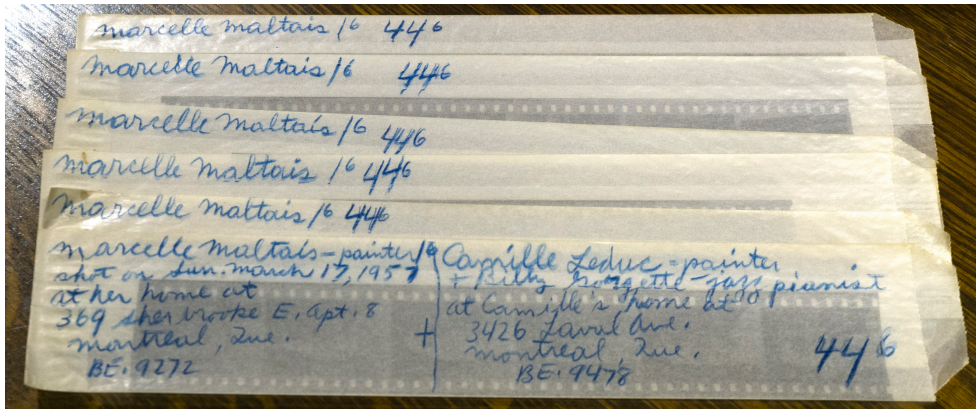
Figure 3. Annotated sleeves of negative 44[6]. 35 mm film in glassine. Fonds John Max en dépôt P18, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. Photograph by the author

As a result of his multiple career paths, John Max's archive shows an evolving organization. His preferred negative stock was black-and-white 35 mm Kodak Tri-X, complemented by Kodak Plus-X, both processed in D-76 developer[42]. Early in his career, he used normal processing times, but by the end of the 1960s, he often underexposed and overdeveloped film stock, a procedure known as «pushing» often used by photojournalists to compensate for low light situations[43]. This resulted in dense shadows and high contrast images but afforded fast shutter speeds to arrest subject motion. Processed negatives were cut into strips filed in individually numbered sleeves (fig. 3). It can be hypothesized that Max did not immediately number his first negatives: looking at them in numerical sequence sometimes shows anachronistic order. They would have been labeled only later, when his increasing pile of negatives required a more rational organization. By the late 1950s, his numbering system employed a sequential roll identifier accompanied by a superscript digit counting the individual strips: for instance, 1,280[6] would indicate that roll 1,280 was cut into six pieces. Numbers more closely aligned with chronology by that point, but occasional discrepancies suggest that Max processed film in batches, albeit regularly. He abandoned this system around 1968, when he started hiring assistants among his students and friends to process negatives. The numbering was restarted for each assistant and prefixed with their initials. For example, HG191 identified a negative processed by Herb Greenslade. Because of batch processing, the numbers stopped being chronological, so that HG190 may not have been shot prior to HG191.

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[42]   Tri-X is a film favored by photojournalists for its high sensitivity to light, its versatility, and its tonal qualities. Plus-X is less sensitive but affords finer grain, a characteristic appreciated by portrait photographers. D-76 is formulated for a good balance between grain, sharpness, and ease of use, thus widely used as a general-purpose developer.

[43]   Haist, G. M. (1979). *Modern Photographic Processing*. New York: John Wiley & Sons. Troop, B., and Anchell, S. (2020). *The Film Developing Cookbook*. New York: Routledge.
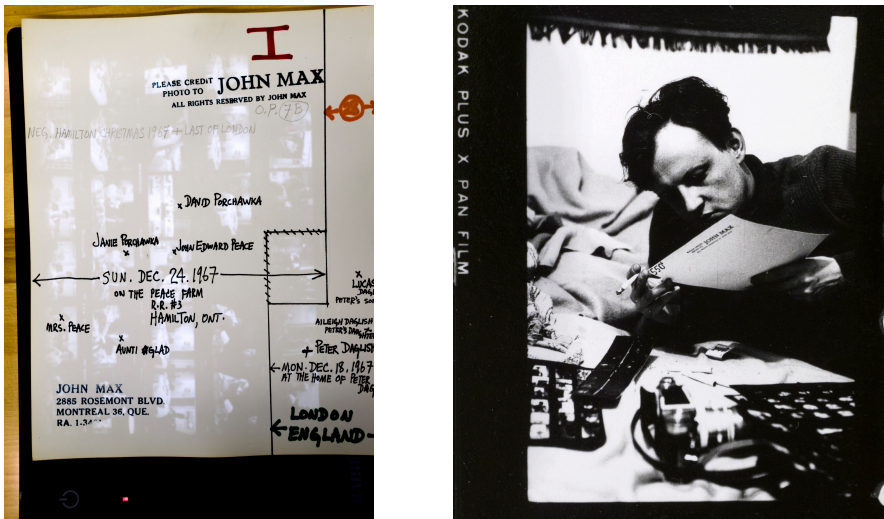
Figure 4. Left: Verso of 1967 contact sheet placed on light table, showing annotations aligned to the images on the recto. Photograph by the author. Right: Photographer and filmmaker Guy Borremans (1934-2012) examining a copy of contact sheet no. 550[6], 1961. Detail from contact sheet no. 1,072[6]. Gelatin silver print. Fonds John Max en dépôt P18, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. © The Estate of John Max, courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery

Negatives were contact printed, and the roll number was transferred to the verso of the contact sheet, alongside date and location information. Verso annotations could be quite extensive, and some marks were meant to be seen by transparency (fig. 4, left). Using ruled lines, Max could precisely delineate on the contact sheet different locations, days, or sometimes the provenance of negatives. He sometimes combined strips from other photographers when working on common projects, and he sent away specific frames he sold to the Still Photography Division. Grease pencil and ink pen was used on the recto to record editing decisions or cropping. Since projects such as *Open Passport* required multiple rounds of selection, each are recorded by way of different pen colors. Contact sheets also allowed Max to efficiently show his images to friends, collaborators, and other artists –an activity he also photographically recorded and thus reintroduced into his archive (fig. 4, right). Printed in duplicate and numbered accordingly using Roman numerals, a whole contact sheet could be sent to a magazine editor while another copy stayed in Max's archive. For negatives from the initial number sequence, strips were filed in numerical order into a cabinet, while contacts were filed in batches of 100, using empty boxes of photographic paper (fig. 5). After Max switched his numbering system to use assistants, contact sheets were still filed into sequentially ordered boxes, but negatives were not filed systematically into his cabinet anymore. To date, many have not yet been located. The system was designed like a simple database. This methodical, sequential order reflected photojournalistic ideals: factual value of the image, precise identification, and efficient retrieval. Two important catachresis characterize it: the use of annotations on contact sheets, and the use of paper boxes for long-term storage, handy methods employed by amateurs and professional alike to organize their materials at little expense.

Figure 5. Top view of two boxes, 1961 (left) and 1991 (right). Fonds John Max en dépôt
P18, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. Photography by the author

After John Max put aside his photojournalistic practice to spend more energies preparing exhibitions, his archival methods became more fragmented. He moved from a uniform numbering system to multiple ones as he favored a project-based organization. An increasing amount of contextual information was recorded onto the boxes, so that by the 1980s some of them turned into veritable diaries, while archiving fewer and fewer images. His initially uniform system of storage and retrieval of images had become an idiosyncratic series of particulars; a set of *hapax legomena* not smoothed over by taxonomies; in other words, a collection of catachresis. Between these twin poles, the work leading to the production of *Open Passport* best illustrates John Max's use of his archive as an instrument. No longer simply consigning images into an abstract structure, but not yet mired in particulars, the creation of his most important photographic sequence is a case study in the mutual interactions between artistic intention and archival practices.

5. The mediation of the archive on the constitution of the work

In-camera negative exposure is the action that has come to epitomize the work of photographers, whether referring to the amateur pressing the button and letting Kodak «do the rest», the photojournalist who catches in a split-second the apparent death of a soldier on the battlefield, or the artistic photographer who finds the right moment to convey the emotion aroused by a landscape or a portrait. As Nadya Bair has conclusively shown, this bias towards image capture has obscured an entire network of social practices and actors that made such «decisive moments» possible[44]. A reaction

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[44]   Bair, N. (2016). The Decisive Network: Producing Henri Cartier-Bresson at Mid-Century. *History of Photography*, 40(2), 146-166; Bair, N. (2020). *The Decisive Network: Magnum Photos and the Postwar Image Market*.

to this bias also accounts for the practice of post-photography, which employs exist-ing images and thus removes from the hands of photographer the act of exposure[45]. Following David Davies's notion of performance, to define a work of art, we must account for all the doings that have had a role to play in its specification: in the case of photography, this also includes the actions of material processing, the process of editing, discussions with other individuals about the meaning of the work, and so forth.

Stated authorial intentions provide a general narrative for the performance that specified *Open Passport*. According to Max, a poem he wrote, reproduced in the 1973 photobook, served as the premise to choose the first and the last photographs, and the rest of the editing work was dedicated to constructing a story in between[46]. He summarized the selection process as such:

> I started out by taking out my contacts and dotting off every image that I felt strongly pulled to… There was a designer of the exhibition … I asked him to build a model of the room, a scale model, and I saw what kind of wall spaces I had … I started blocking [images] into groups of four or groups of two. I knew that there were these pillars [in the gallery], and they would take only one or two images, and I knew I had a wall of about 20 feet, and somehow, I hit upon the idea of on one side having the twelve portraits with the two young children at the end. And also, I wanted the opening area to be black, and the walls to be painted a tone of gray with lengths of gray getting lighter … And it was only a short time before the opening, maybe a month and a half, two months, that the show got blocked out into groupings of four, and they were still scattered all over the floor of my kitchen upstairs where I work, and it wasn't until, maybe 3 weeks before the opening day, that I worked out the linear evolution of the show. To the extent that when the model was brought to Ottawa, I was still working it out in the Volkswagen truck on the way. I had also Polaroids done of all the shots, 5 x 7, and they were done to scale, ½" scale, so I could work with my model, so that I could see what a wall would look like, I could switch pictures around[47].

Retold in hindsight by the artist, the selection is here understood as a linear pro-cess: the winnowing down of candidate images towards a final set, which is arranged within the space of the gallery by trial and error. Along the way are discovered ideas about other aesthetic concerns, such as wall color.

Looking at extant materials used during the selection process however compli-cate that story. For instance, the number of marks besides photographs included in the final selection evidence multiple rounds of editing. Contact sheets, by virtue of accumulating annotations over the year, also show that Max's selection for *Open Passport* revisited many sheets he had marked during the preparation of previous projects. From the same roll of negative he had selected a portrait of his infant son for the 1967 5e Biennale de Paris, he would select another one to use in *Open Pass-*

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        Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

45   Moreiras, C. (2017). Joan Fontcuberta: Post-Photography and the Spectral Image of Saturation. *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 18(1), 57-77. https://doi.org/10.1080/14636204.2016.1274496 [Consulted: 26 June 2022].

46   Lamothe, M. op. cit.

47   Lyons, N. (1972). Transcript of Interview with John Max. Visual Studies Workshop Archives, Rochester, NY.

port. Going further back, he revisited negatives taken in 1961 in the Cree community living near Lake Mistassini in Northern Québec. He had sold the rights to some of these to the Still Photography Division, which disseminated them through exhibitions and publications, but some of the unsold images were used in *Open Passport*. Annotations on the recto readily distinguished between them. Boxes of contact sheets were also used to organize the selection. When revisiting older boxes, Max marked them on the cover with the mention «Blue Dotted» to indicate they had been considered for inclusion and had gone through the first round of editing. He also dedicated new boxes to different stages of process, maintaining for instance a box of contact sheets «For Very Last Consideration», while another one for the final selection consisted in annotated sheets and 8 x 10-inch workprints of chosen images. Finally, Max also documented the process of preparing his exhibition. These photographs show that pinboards installed in his kitchen were used to try out potential groupings of images using small 5 x 7-inch prints. The groups were in turn available for feedback from Max's assistants and friends who came to his house (fig. 6).

Figure 6. John Max (left), Herb Greenslade and Germaine Ying Gee Wong (right) in front of pinboards with selection of *Open Passport* in progress, 1972. Details from contact sheets RM6 and HG191, 1972. Gelatin silver prints. Fonds John Max en dépôt P18, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. © The Estate of John Max, courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery

Reconstructing the selection process for *Open Passport* based on both stated authorial intentions and material evidence suggests that John Max not only used the archive to consign and organize his images, but also as an instrument for the creation of artworks. The archive's structure facilitated the locating of images, but it was also the site where the performance that defines *Open Passport* was materially realized: marking, sorting, selecting were actions performed directly onto the contact sheets and the boxes. Like sedimentary beds, the contacts accumulated annotations each time they were used and thus interacted with editorial decisions over time (fig. 7). Between different projects, Max would return to the same contact sheets to select images, and on some occasions even reuse previously exhibited or published images. This suggests in turn that the selection of images was not only based on ideal criteria (subject, lighting, composition) but also because of other images. Looking at images he had previously thought interesting, he could consider their immediate surroun-

dings, in the same way he could test juxtapositions of workprints on his pinboards. Each image selected could lead to potential reconsiderations of previous decisions, requiring movements back and forth between the evolving sequence and the archive, the work altering the archive and the archive affording alternative possibilities to the work.

Figure 7. Contact sheet no 1,758[4], 1965, showing marks for 5e Biennale de Paris (bottom left) and *Open Passport* (top right). Gelatin silver print. Fonds John Max en dépôt P18, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. © The Estate of John Max, courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery

Producing the exhibition prints for *Open Passport* eventually severed the ties between the work and the archive. Max adopted a unique numbering system for the prints that made no reference to his negatives. Because prints were presented in groups and not as individual units, he employed a two-tier system: a unique number from 1 to 54 to identify the group in the order corresponding to the initial layout of the exhibition in Ottawa, and repeating letters identifying each print within the group. For example, 08C was print C from group 08, which goes from 08A to 08D. The first print of group 09 would restart the letter code at 09A, and so forth. Although prints were marked according to this system, no negative numbers accompanied them.

The performance –the sequence of actions– that constituted *Open Passport* shares many aspects with curatorial work. The archive is an instrument in John Max's process of creation, and it is subject to multiple catachresis, from annotating the contact sheets, recycling photo paper boxes for organization, and re-numbering the images, all the way down to jettisoning this system for the purpose of sequencing the prints into a meaningful order for the final exhibition.

6. Conclusion and potential for future research

Image profusion is a core feature of photographic archives, which can be approached as systems of knowledge or as material culture. Like people, archival artefacts have biographies, and they are nodal points where historical or sociological facts entangle and complicate each other. Photography has proved a challenge for art historical understanding, given the apparent facility with which images can be produced. However, field studies of photographic practice documenting the uses of objects as components of the creative process has shown them to be socially situated instruments. The picture-making moment is not necessarily the key to the entire set of actions that are relevant to the production of a photographic work of art –its generative performance. By extension, and within limits, these actions can be reconstructed for the purpose of art historical studies using extant material traces and critical analysis of documents. An art photographer's working archive can therefore be understood as an instrument of the doings that constitute artworks.

John Max built and managed a working archive as part of his professional and artistic activities. These efforts were subject to two forces going in opposite directions: on the one hand, organizing a set of images according to their potential value; on the other, adapting a perpetually growing physical collection to an evolving practice. In this sense, his archive was constituted by an intentionality that was in turn limited, though not fully determined, by material conditions. The archive used to produce a work such as *Open Passport* can thus be considered an instrument: an artefact that mediates action. Catachresis, or non-typical use, emerges as a key behavior of cultural work, as can be seen by John Max's multiple acts of repurposing, recycling, or adapting. He thus repurposed his primarily photojournalistic archive to prepare *Open Passport*. In doing so, he put aside the system that organized the images chronologically according to subject and place. Through editing, he thus carved new paths into his archive, new connections between previously unrelated images that were nonetheless sometimes influenced by previous editorial acts.

The working archive is a case that illustrates the role of individual, rather than institutional, agency. That many people beyond John Max left individual traces on the production of *Open Passport* further suggests that the appropriate collective structure is more a network of individual agencies than the policies of an institution. Photographs contained in the working archive are read by individuals both in their relationship to the world and through their potential for creative reinterpretation. In this sense, Max's archive may be compared to that of art historian Aby Warburg, who sensed a powerful vector for knowledge behind the de-territorializing power of photography and its ability to bring onto the same plane images across space and time to create new connections between them[48].

The importance of individual agency to archives is also manifest in cases where it was lost. Garry Winogrand (1928-1984) and Vivian Maier (1926-2009) each left huge bodies of work after their death with limited or absent authorial voice[49]. Since

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[48] Didi-Huberman, G. (2018). *The Surviving Image. Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art* (Tran. H. Mendelsohn). University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press. (Original in French, 2002)

[49] Philips, S. S. (2014). Garry Winogrand in L.A. *Transatlantica. Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal*, 2. https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.7218 [Consulted: 26 June 2022]; Coffee, K. (2014). Misplaced: Ethics and the Photographs of Vivian Maier. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 29(2), 93-101.

both mainly photographed in the street, the cultural value of their images could not be unequivocally determined according to the historical importance of the people or the situations they depicted. Although Winogrand was already an acclaimed photographer at the time of his death, the sheer volume of images he left made difficult the correlation of his later work to his authored output. Maier was completely unknown at the time of her discovery, and she quickly gained value because of her work's formal aspects and resemblance to existing canons of street photography, which defined her as an artistic figure, not a vernacular photographer. Yet both corpora suffered from conjectures and controversies, because audiences attribute a legislative value to photographers' intentions above that of curators to govern the meaning of images when the individual producing them is granted an authorial function.

Figure 8. Contact sheet no. 118[6]. Exhibition of non-figurative painters at Centre d'art de Sainte-Adèle, during Foire de l'Art et du Livre (24-26 August 1956). Among the attendees: writers Germaine Guèvremont (1893-1968), Gaston Miron (1928-1996), and Françoise Bujold (1933-1981); painter Jean-Paul Mousseau (1927-1991); bookseller Henri Tranquille (1916-2005); and photographer Robert Millet (1934-2021). Fonds John Max en dépôt P18, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. © The Estate of John Max, courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery

In the case of John Max, much can be known about his intentions, and he is no Vivian Maier. His archive contains intentional traces that can be correlated with others

https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2014.888817 [Consulted: 26 June 2022].

in media, in the archives of the institutions he collaborated with, or through interview with those who knew him. The sequence of his individual works has been established and correlated with extant prints; most of his collaborations to group projects are known; and his biography is well sketched out. Like Winogrand, John Max left at the time of his death many unclassified images, which fall outside the scope of the materials I have accessed for research. Made in Japan and Canada, they are currently in the process of being organized by his granddaughter, Valentina Perez-Vela[50]. Further research in his archive can therefore follow two possible directions: the first being a more extensive dating and captioning of individual images, while the second concerns a critical examination of his inscription within greater artistic trends and networks such as modernism or expressionism. From a curatorial point of view, the limited visibility of his works at the time of their release may warrant the need to recirculate them in publication or exhibition form to find a new, broader public. Finally, his archive may also afford further catachresis, such as curator-led selections of his unpublished images. As a visual record of the artistic life in Canada's metropolis during the 1950s and 1960s, his archive remains unparalleled for the breadth of its coverage and its pictorial qualities. Many inroads have already been traced by the photographer using his archive as an instrument; more remain to be seen.

7. Conflict of interests

None

8. Support

9. References

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