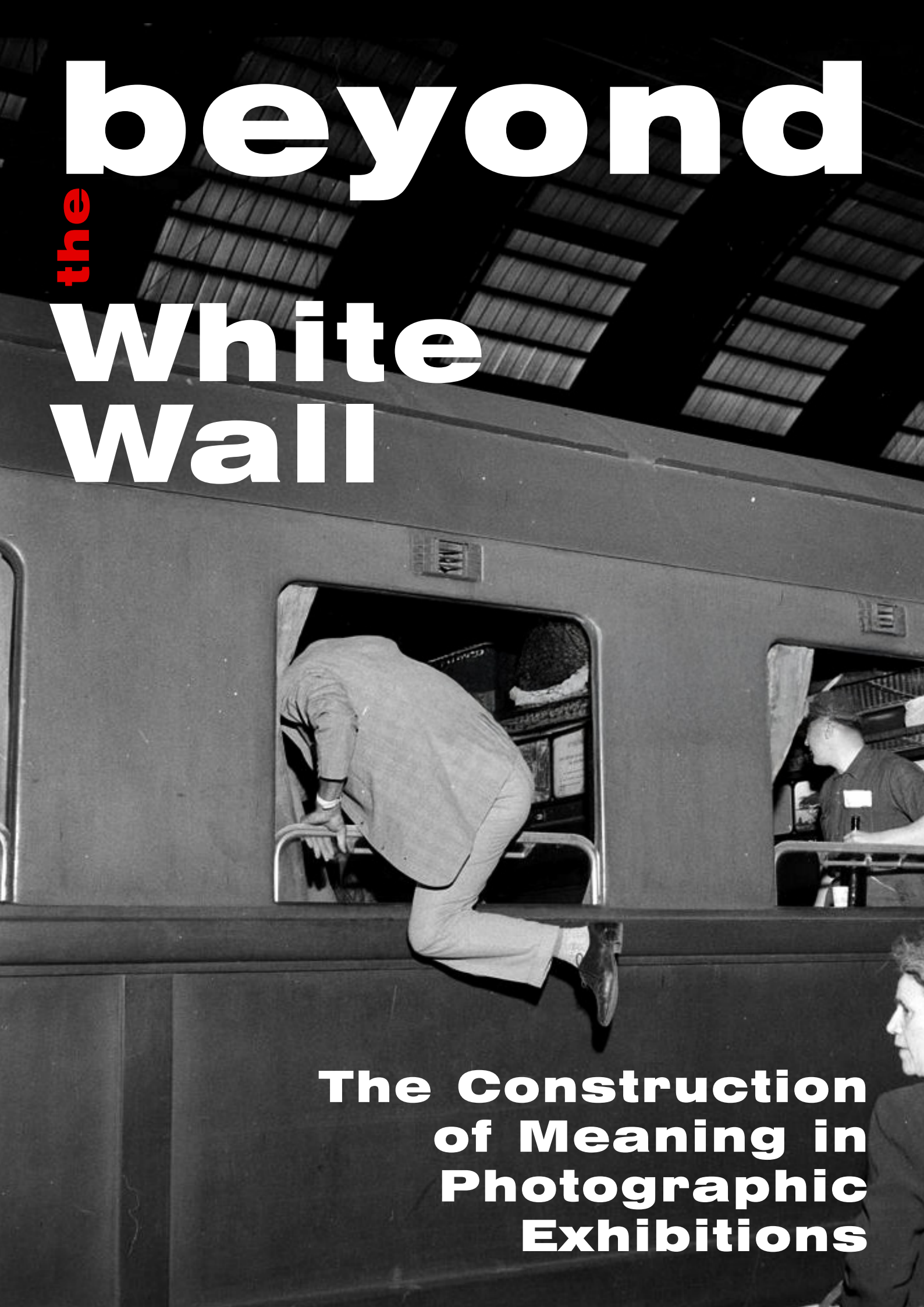
beyond the White Wall



The Construction of Meaning in Photographic Exhibitions

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Beyond the White Wall

The Construction of Meaning in
Photographic Exhibitions

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of the photographic exhibition space is closely linked to the very nature of the medium itself, which has historically been regarded as a form of expression that is difficult to classify, constantly suspended between artistic and commercial dimensions. Within the exhibition space, the image is repositioned in a context that seeks to isolate it from its original setting and transform it into an aesthetic object suitable for display within the museum environment. This operation is often achieved through the White Cube, a “non-place” founded on the neutralization of context and the contemplation of the exhibited object.

Photography, however, is rarely conceived as an autonomous object intended solely for aesthetic contemplation. Its production is deeply connected to the context from which it emerges, a context that shapes its meaning and significance. When relocated into the museum setting without reconstructing these relationships, a rupture occurs between the image’s original function and its new exhibitionary role. As a result, the image risks being reduced to a formal surface, stripped of its semantic depth and transformed into an isolated aesthetic object.

This research therefore investigates the exhibition design of photography and its tendency to isolate meaning, examining the effects of the standardized White Cube exhibition format on audience understanding and engagement. Through a historical and theoretical analysis of the relationship between photography and exhibition space, the study explores alternative approaches capable of restoring the contextual and narrative dimensions that are often suppressed by conventional display models. Exhibition design thus becomes an interpretive device, able not only to present images but also to articulate the cultural, social, and material conditions from which they originate.

The thesis develops a design proposal for a photographic exhibition in Turin. Conceived as a case study, the project translates the theoretical reflections into spatial strategies aimed at challenging the neutrality of the White Cube and fostering a more active relationship between image, context, and visitor. The museum is conceived not merely as a container for photographs, but as a space in which exhibition design becomes a critical tool for communication and meaning-making, enabling photography to be experienced as a complex cultural artefact rather than as an isolated aesthetic object.

Paul Nougé intitulée, La naissance de l’objet 1929-1930

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Introduction

1.

Fig 1.1: A photojournalist walks through the water with his camera during the flood in the Polesine countryside, November 17, 1951 - Publifoto Archive

Photography, Space, and Meaning

Since its invention in 1839, photography has occupied a distinctive position within the debate surrounding the visual arts. Oscillating between document, scientific tool, commercial product, and artwork, this medium has made the definition of its own nature particularly complex from the very beginning, positioning itself at the intersection of artistic expression and technological innovation.

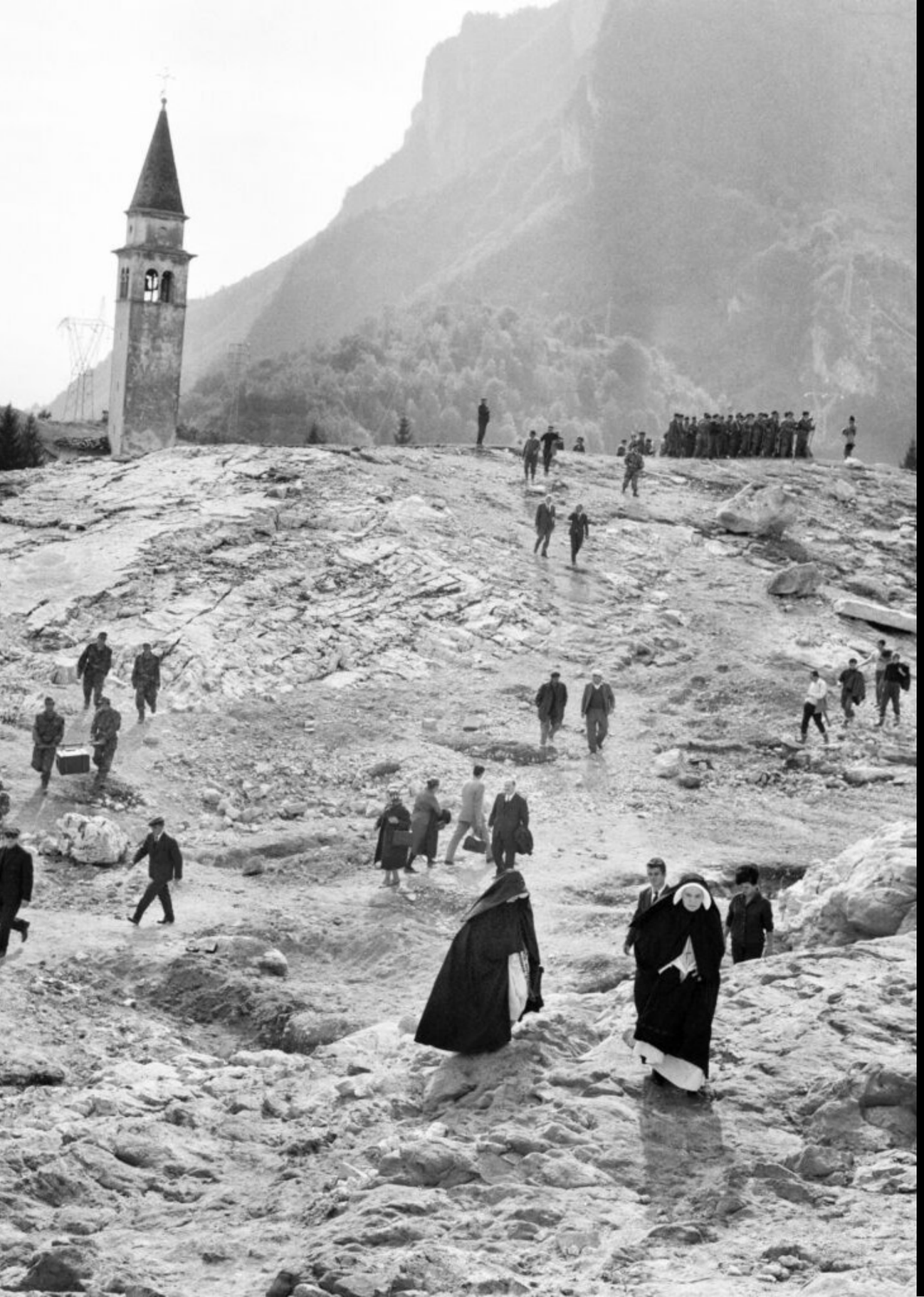
The process of photography's cultural legitimization is closely linked to the ways in which it has been exhibited and presented to the public. Throughout history, exhibition design has contributed to the construction of new narratives around the medium, shaping the perception of images and progressively guiding the viewer's gaze toward the understanding and appreciation of photography as an art form. The exhibitions of the historical avant-gardes, major documentary exhibitions, modernist experiments, and contemporary curatorial practices all demonstrate how the experience of photography has been consistently influenced by the ways in which it is situated within space.

A parallel examination of the history of photography and its exhibition practices highlights the central role played by the White Cube model in the institutionalization of the medium. Developed throughout the twentieth century, this paradigm was instrumental in consolidating the perception of photography as an art form, contributing to the establishment of an exhibition standard that would later influence the entire system of contemporary art.

Characterized by apparently neutral spaces, white surfaces, and the reduction of contextual elements to a minimum, the White Cube model is founded on the idea that artworks should be experienced in isolation, free from external interference. Presenting itself as a universal and neutral container, it seeks to focus attention exclusively on the exhibited object. However, from the second half of the twentieth century onward, numerous theorists, curators, and designers began to challenge this presumed neutrality, arguing that exhibition spaces are in fact cultural devices capable of shaping perception, influencing behavior, and constructing meaning. From this perspective, the White Cube appears not as a neutral environment but as a mechanism that removes artworks from their original context in order to place them within a cultural system that redefines both their value and the conditions of their reception.

This research stems from this critical perspective. If exhibition space cannot be considered a mere container but rather an integral component of the photographic experience, it becomes necessary to investigate how architecture, exhibition design, and curatorial practices contribute to shaping the relationship between image and viewer. Due to its reproducible nature and its historical ability to adapt to different contexts, photography provides a particularly fertile ground for exploring these dynamics and questioning established exhibition models.

Fig 1.2: A crowd of people heading off on the platform at Milan Central Station. July 1961 - Publifoto Archive



The aim of this thesis is therefore to analyze the evolution of photographic exhibition spaces and to examine the principal critiques directed at the White Cube paradigm, with the goal of identifying alternative strategies for the presentation of contemporary photography. Through a historical and theoretical reconstruction of exhibition practices from the twentieth century to the early decades of the twenty-first century, this research seeks to demonstrate how spatial design can play an active role in shaping the visitor experience, challenging the notion of neutrality that has characterized a significant part of modern museum culture.

The analysis of exhibitions and display strategies reveals different approaches to the relationship between photography and space, highlighting methods capable of reintegrating context into the exhibition experience. Several case studies are therefore presented, illustrating how contextualization can be achieved through spatial design, textual materials, audiovisual content, and the incorporation of objects and documents, thereby expanding the interpretative possibilities available to visitors.

Within this framework, the design project functions as a means of testing the hypotheses developed through the research. Rather than constituting an autonomous objective, it serves as an opportunity to translate the theoretical reflections into a concrete proposal, exploring the potential of an exhibition approach capable of establishing new relationships between images, architecture, and audiences.

Based on these premises, an exhibition project is developed within CAMERA – Italian Center for Photography in Turin. Characterized by exhibition spaces that largely adhere to the principles of the White Cube, the institution frequently hosts significant photographic exhibitions in which display strategies tend to favor an essential and restrained presentation of the works. The project adopts this context as an opportunity for experimentation, envisioning an alternative approach to the exhibition of archival photography.

The proposal focuses on a selection of materials from the Publifoto Archive, preserved in Turin, with the aim of restoring the historical, cultural, and production contexts of the exhibited images. Through spatial design and the integration of multiple interpretative tools, the exhibition seeks to emphasize not only the formal qualities of the photographs but also the network of relationships, events, and meanings from which they originate.

By bringing together theoretical research and design experimentation, this thesis aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the role of exhibition space in shaping the contemporary photographic experience. It proposes an approach that regards context not as an accessory element, but as a fundamental component in understanding and appreciation of photographic images.

Next Page, Fig 1.3: The Vajont Disaster: Survivors and aid workers near the bell tower of the Church of St. Thomas in Pirago di Longarone, Cctober 11, 1963 - Publifoto Archive

II.

From the “Quadreria” style to the “White Box” model: The Birth of a Standard in Photography Exhibition

Fig 2.1: Photograph by Frank Eugene, “Eugene, Stieglitz, Kühn and Steichen Admiring the Work of Eugene” - platinum print, 1907 , Yale Collection of American Literature.

II.1

FROM INVENTION TO EXHIBITION: THE PUBLIC EMERGENCE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Conventionally the year of birth of photography is set in 1839, though experiments with the medium start to appear already in 1816. The process of perfecting this art was long and arduous, marked by disputes over its origins and continuous technological improvements; for this reason, the convention dates the birth of photography to 1839, year in which the process was released from patent protection and entered the public domain.

In the first half of the 19th century two parallel processes emerged at the same time: Daguerre's daguerreotype in France, producing highly detailed but non-reproducible and expensive images, and Talbot's paper-based calotype process in England, which allowed for reproducibility at a lower cost.
Due to the deep rivalry between France and England, which had just emerged from a long war that led to an unstable peace, the heated debate over the authorship of the invention immediately became a matter of public concern.

Furthermore, the differences between the two processes were unclear, due to the lack of communication of the time and Daguerre's reluctance to disclose any details about the nature of his process, fearing that his discovery would be stolen. Therefore, in order to publicly establish the primacy of his invention, on January 25th, 1939, Talbot organized an exhibition at the library of the Royal Institution, where he presented his "photogenic drawings" for the first time. Some consider this event to be the first photography exhibition in history, even though it was open only to a small circle of Talbot's academic colleagues and peers. The aim of the report was mainly journalistic: to validate the English invention and assert priority over France in the development of the photographic process.
Daguerre's response came on 9th July 1839, when his photographs were exhibited for the first time at the Assemblée Nationale. Although contemporary journalistic sources mention the existence of around forty images in Daguerre's studio, only half a dozen were exhibited, as the artist's atelier had been destroyed by fire a few months earlier. Despite this, the images aroused great wonder and interest, being astonishingly detailed and of a unique quality, a far cry from the lack of precision of the English process, which proved to be entirely different and unsuitable for a faithful representation of reality.

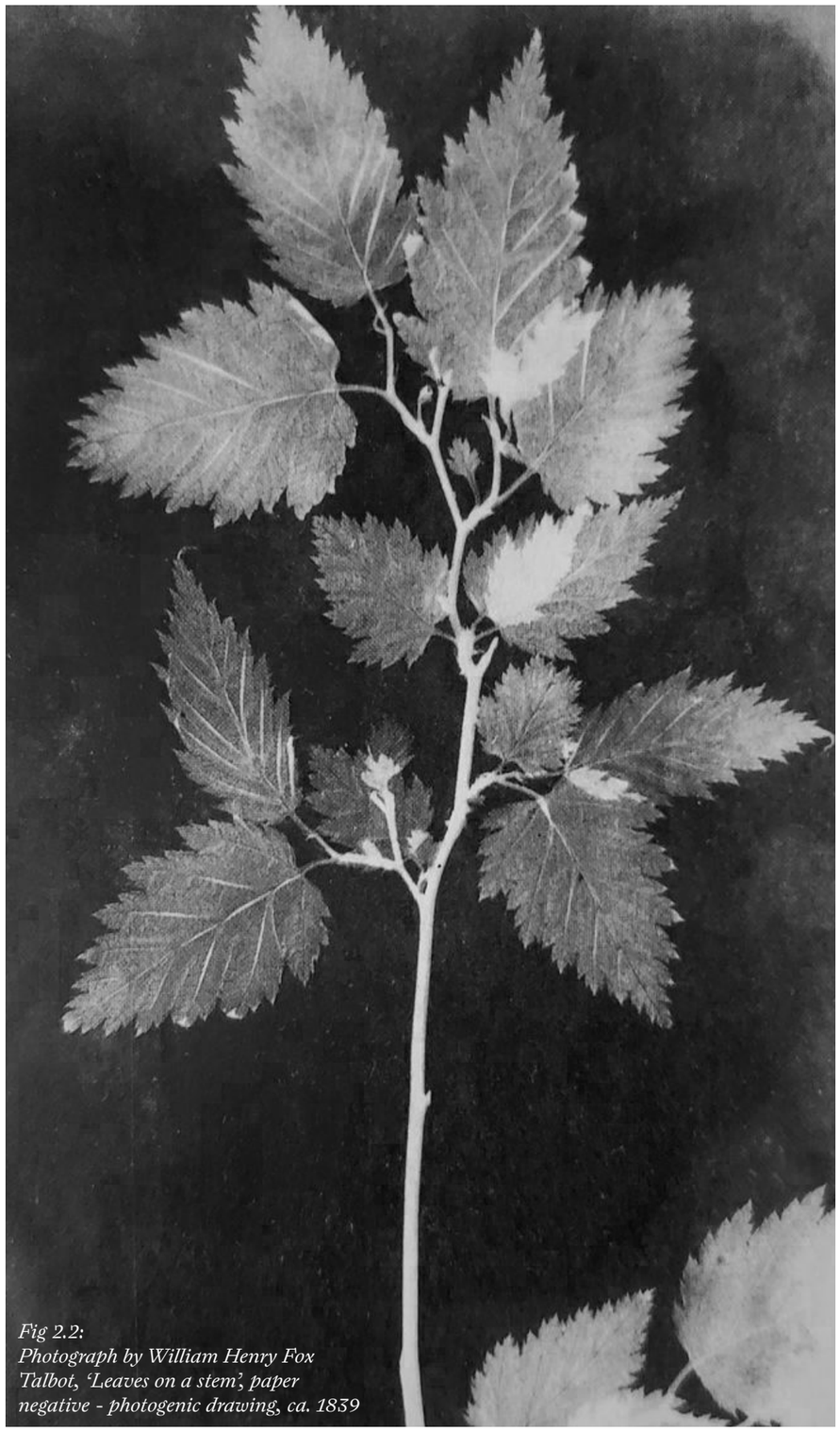
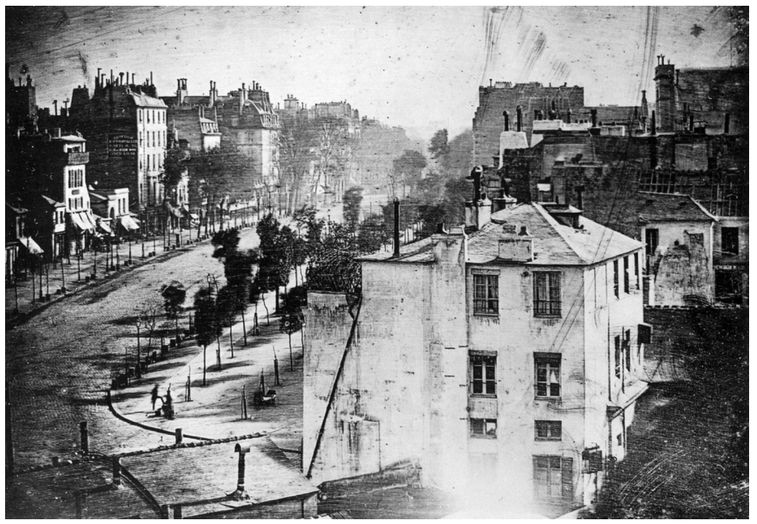


Fig 2.2:
Photograph by William Henry Fox Talbot, 'Leaves on a stem', paper negative - photogenic drawing, ca. 1839

Despite the significance of the discovery, for which Daguerre got a state pension, the public remained detached, viewing the invention as too intricate and difficult to grasp. Part of the indifference was caused by Daguerre's own attitude: he behaved like an inventor seeking to protect a patent, reluctant to publicize or explain his process and more interested in the invention itself than in its potential technical applications.

During the same years, another French inventor, Hyppolite Bayard, began to take interest in the recent discovery of photography. Following various experiments, he succeeded in developing a new process on paper, similar to Talbot's, which became known as the 'direct positive'.

Fig 2.3: Louis Daguerre, Boulevard du Temple, Paris, Daguerreotype, 1838



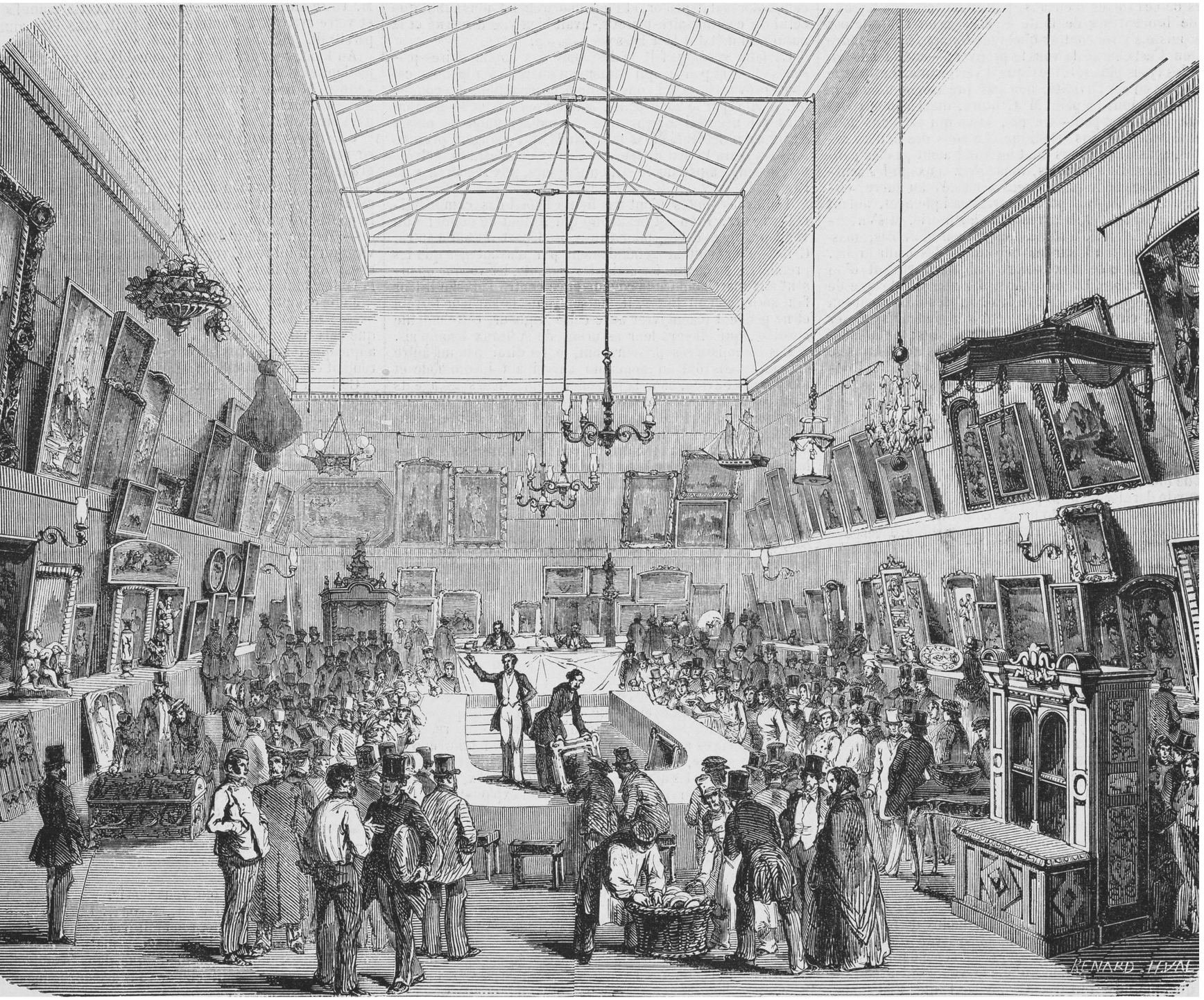


Fig 2.4: Edmond Texier, Auction Hall in the Auctioneers' Building on Rue des Jeuners, 1853

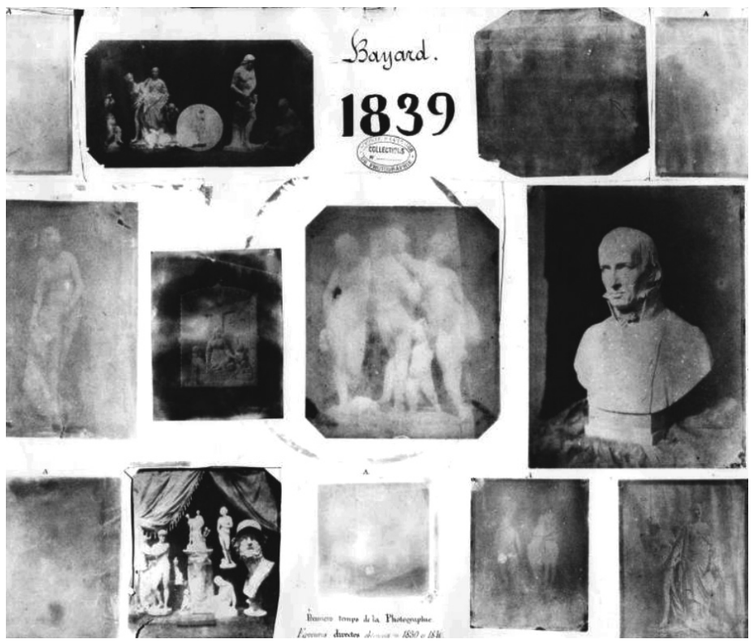
Unable to compete with the state support and institutional power of Daguerre, Bayard adopted an alternative strategy: setting aside technical precision in favor of authorship. His first opportunity to present his new process arose in early 1839, following an event that shocked the French public opinion: the earthquake in Martinique. Following the disaster charitable initiatives such as exhibitions, concerts and plays were organized to raise funds for the victims and displaced populations. During the summer of 1839, to raise funds, the committee for donations organized an exhibition of ancient and modern art. At the end of the exhibition, an auction of the works on display had been planned, with the aim of significantly increasing the number of donations to be sent to Martinican people.
The chosen sale room was located at 16 Rue des Jeuneurs, in a relatively recent building owned by two former auctioneers from the Place de la Bourse. This annex had been specifically designed to display and sell valuable objects, being conceived almost as a museum space in order to encourage contemplation and careful observation.

The exhibition opened on July 14th and brought together an eclectic display of historical works from major collectors and pieces donated by contemporary artists. In the "curiosities" section, entry no. 206 Bayard's artworks, arranged in large frames that emphasized their visual coherence, appeared under the title: "M. Bayard – Examples of photogenic drawings, obtained on paper by means of the camera obscura, using a new process different from that of Daguerre". On this occasion, Bayard exhibited thirty direct positives, benefitting from significant media exposure and attracting the attention of a broad audience. For the first time, photography was presented to a wide public, making the Martinique earthquake exhibition the first true photographic exhibition, since both Talbot and Daguerre had previously shown their works only within small circles, in temporary and limited displays.

In the Martinique exhibition the public experienced the inverse of what had occurred with the daguerreotype. In Daguerre's case, the process had been extensively described, yet few concrete examples were visible, while Bayard's works were presented with minimal explanation, allowing viewers to appreciate their aesthetic qualities while the technical process remained largely obscure.

“ A classroom, a library, or an auction house did not merely provide bare walls to hang images, nor can they now be viewed solely as part of the various strategies for disseminating the photographic process; rather, they exerted a specific influence on the public perception of the medium and even on the very idea that its pioneers intended to convey. Finally it is impossible to overlook the crucial role played by exhibition spaces in determining, through a dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, what could legitimately be considered art. Distinct ideas regarding the exhibition of the photographic image thus corresponded to equally distinct perspectives on the medium, its receptive context, and its applications; perspectives that, however, should not be viewed in an essentialist manner as naturally inherent to photography, but rather immediately situate the photographic exhibition within a culturally situated and ideologically oriented discourse. ”[1]

This exhibition marked an important step in the history of photography, as it legitimized the artistic potential of the medium against its emerging industrial destiny. It established a public dialogue between photography and the pictorial space. Bayard chose to leave his mark not as an inventor, but as a photographer, becoming the forerunner of a long line of figures who would fight for the recognition of photography as an artistic practice.



II.2

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY IN FRANCE AND ENGLAND

Fig 2.5: Hyppolyte Bayard, panel with 13 photographs, 1839, Collection Société française de photographie.

Next page, Fig 2.6: The interior of Crystal Palace, lithograph, 1851 Victoria and Albert Museum in London

Two centuries before the invention of the photographic process, France and England fought a great war for global domination, ended with Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo, in 1815. Although the war was now over, the two countries continued to compete in the fields of innovation and technological progress. The photographic process was therefore the perfect territory to continue this “cultural war” between the two nations. The first event resulting from this competition for technological supremacy was the Great Exhibition of London in 1851, the first major showcase of industrial works coming from nations all over the world.

The exhibition, held in Hyde Park, was promoted and organized by Queen Victoria’s consort, Prince Albert, together with a specially appointed royal commission. It brought together processes and products from all nations, yet it clearly functioned as a means of asserting England’s technological and cultural hegemony over the rest of the world.

The building constructed to house the exhibition, the Crystal Palace, was itself a source of wonder for visitors and stood as a grand display of British craftsmanship.

1. Daniel Borselli, “*The Exhibition as a Montage: Ideologies of Photography on Display*” Intrecci d’arte, n. 11, 2022, p. 92.

Designed by Joseph Paxton, it was conceived as a vast greenhouse, composed of modular units made of cast iron and glass. The structure was assembled at an astonishing speed, and once completed it became immediately clear that the building itself was one of the main attractions of the event. The greenhouse-like structure was also ideally suited for displaying large items such as the machinery and industrial objects selected for the fair: a self-supporting framework resting on slender iron columns, it required no additional internal supports, thus allowing for considerable freedom and flexibility in the layout of the interior space and providing diffused, natural light, ideal for viewing the exhibits.

At the time of the Great Exhibition of London, English photography was neither supported nor developed to the same extent as its French counterpart. Moreover, Daguerre had registered a patent for the daguerreotype in England, preventing the process from spreading freely within the country, unlike what was happening across the rest of Europe and America. In addition, Talbot had filed a series of patents that required a license for the use of the calotype process. As a result, the contribution to national photography in England was largely limited to Talbot and a small circle of those close to him, who made a significant contribution to English photography in the 1840s, through mass production of photographic prints for publication, which were capable of competing with traditional printing methods as sources of visual knowledge. However, calotypes tended to fade over time, and publications were often discontinued or cancelled. Despite the considerable efforts of Talbot and his followers, English photography did not advance as far as its French counterpart, which explains its limited and disjointed presence at the exhibition in London.

The Great Exhibition was the first major international exhibition to include photography, yet it cannot be considered a great success for this new form of expression. The classification system of the exhibition lacked clarity, and no specific section was dedicated to photography. As a consequence, works that would have benefited from being displayed together were instead scattered throughout the exhibition. Photographic images and processes were also separated from the machines: the former were placed within the category of fine arts, while the latter were assigned to that of instruments.

Overall, photography did not emerge as the main attraction, as it was overshadowed by large, spectacular machines and industrial processes. Nevertheless, the exhibition proved to be a valuable resource for enthusiasts in the field, who were, for the first time, able to see a concentration of photographs from different countries and produced through various applications of the main techniques.

The Great Exhibition offered an important lesson to England, making clear the need to invest in this field, in which other countries were then taking the lead.

Fig 2.7: Mounted Calotype depicting a scene from the Great Exhibition of 1851. From Henry Fox Talbot's presentation report, Spicer Brothers, Wholesale Stationers, W. Clowes & Sons, Printers, 1852

Driven by enthusiasm and a desire to prove their abilities, British photographers came together, founding the Photographic Society of London in 1852 and on December 22 of the same year they organized the first exhibition devoted exclusively to the art and technique of photography, held in the Great Hall of the Society of Arts in London.

The exhibition, Recent Specimens of Photography, was organized by Joseph Cundall, Philip Delamotte, and Roger Fenton, main supporters of the photographic society. The exhibition featured around 800 photographic prints, making it the first and only exhibition composed entirely of calotypes, as daguerreotypes had been excluded due to the strong commercial connotation they had acquired at the time, which made them consumer goods not worth to be exhibited in a gallery.

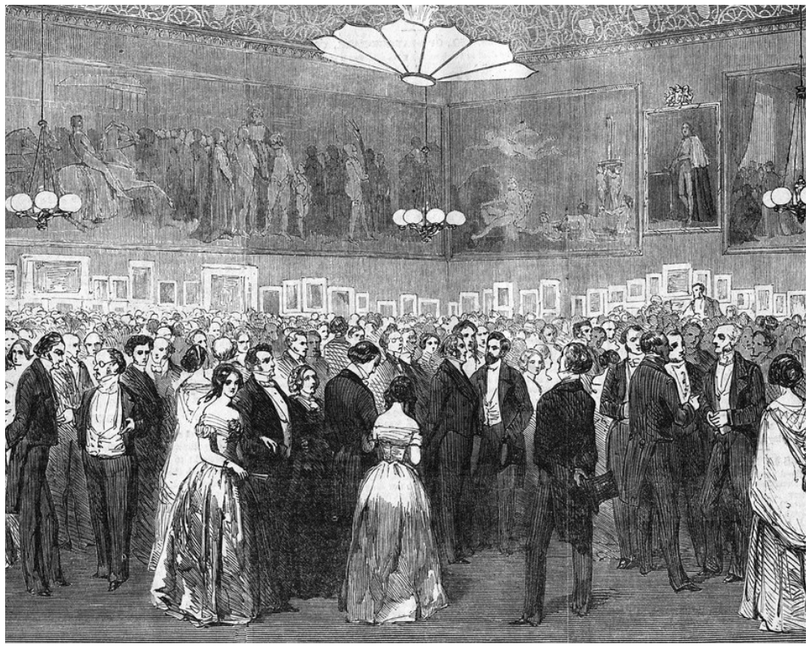
The works were displayed in frames that extended from floor to ceiling, following the model of the “Quadreria”. This style involved composing the canvases on the wall based primarily on aesthetic considerations, with occasional groupings by theme or artistic school. It drew inspiration from the private art galleries of nobles and wealthy middle class in the mid-17th century, who began collecting art for its intrinsic value rather than for decorative or devotional purposes. The “Quadreria” model remained popular until the early 20th century, being also adapted to small-format works, such as watercolor exhibitions, which served as the true inspiration for the layout of the first photography displays.
At the opening ceremony of Recent Specimens of Photography, an essay entitled On the Situation and Future Prospects of the Art of Photography was presented for the first time, marking a fundamental starting point for the debate on the artistic nature of photography, a theme that would remain central to the discipline for many years. From this perspective, the exhibition marked a crucial turning point, as photography was presented for the first time as an art form with intrinsic value.

Another significant event in the promotion of photography in England was the establishment of a museum of applied arts, funded and conceived by Prince Albert of England, consort to Queen Victoria, and Henry Cole, General Superintendent of the Department of Practical Art at the Board of Trade in London. The museum was primarily focused on science and the applied arts, placing particular emphasis on processes and manufacture; for this reason, photography fit perfectly within the framework of the exhibition. Cole’s intention was primarily pedagogical: to bring art and knowledge to the masses in order to raise the general level of education in England.
Waiting for the grand opening of the museum, in 1856 Cole appointed Charles Thurston Thompson as Superintendent of Photography.

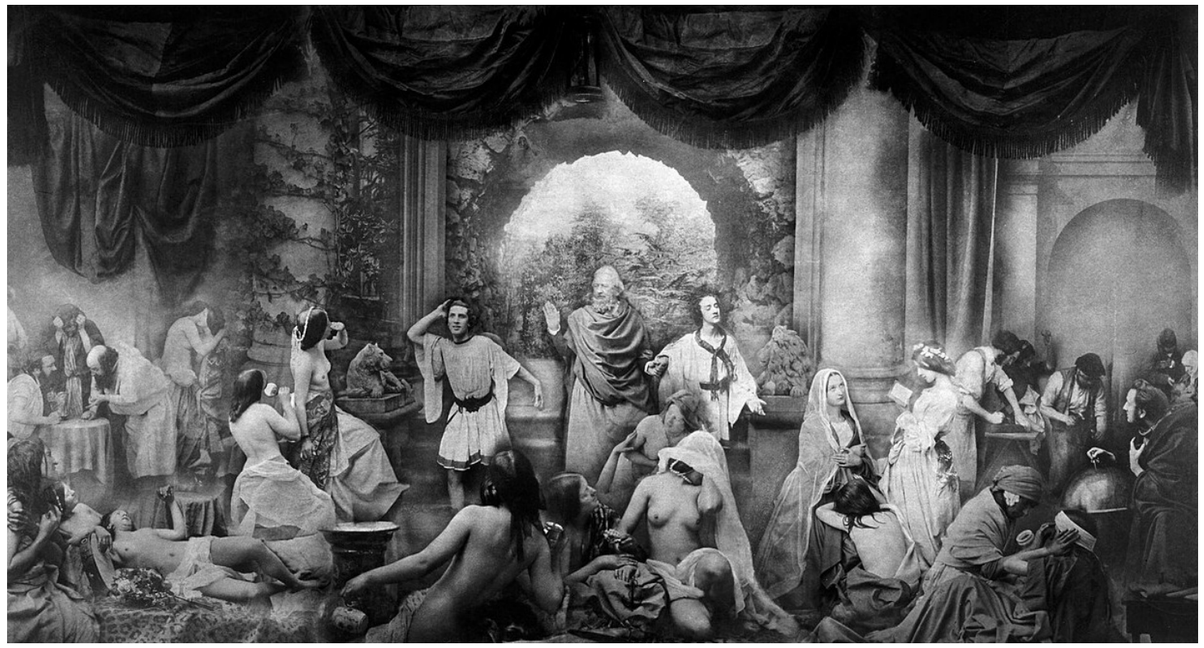
Thompson immediately began to search for and collect photographs, laying the foundations for what would become one of the largest and most important photography collections in the world. In the same year, the commission secured a site and construction began. The South Kensington Museum was inaugurated on June 22, 1857.

In 1858, the museum hosted its first photography happening, simultaneously presenting the annual exhibitions of the Photographic Society and the Société Française de Photographie. The event was held in the restaurant hall, the Upper Refreshment Room, and included more than 1,000 photographs from France and England. The extensive collection showcased a variety of approaches to photography, ranging from strictly technical to more artistic practices. A large portion of the exhibition was devoted to documentary photography, and it quickly became evident that photography could serve as a means to understand and collect the material world, and in a certain sense to “possess” it.

The most discussed photograph in the exhibition was Oscar Gustave Rejlander’s The Two Ways of Life, an image composed from more than thirty negatives, representing the dichotomy between a morally pure and upright life and a dissolute one. The image was considered scandalous by some, due to its provocative nature and the nudity in the indecent part of the photography, but it was highly praised for its moral value, and a copy was even purchased by Queen Victoria as a gift for her husband, Albert.



Left, Fig 2.8: Illustrated London News, Recent Speciments of Photography, Society of Arts, London, December 22, 1852



Right, Fig 2.9: Two Ways of Life, Oscar Gustave Rejlander, 1857

The display, documented in photographs by Charles Thurston Thompson, followed the same model used in nineteenth-century artistic salons for watercolor exhibitions. The room walls were densely covered with photographs of various genres and subjects, while in the center, several stereoscopes were arranged on tables (optical devices shaped like “goggles” equipped with lenses for viewing stereoscopic images, that create the impression of depth).

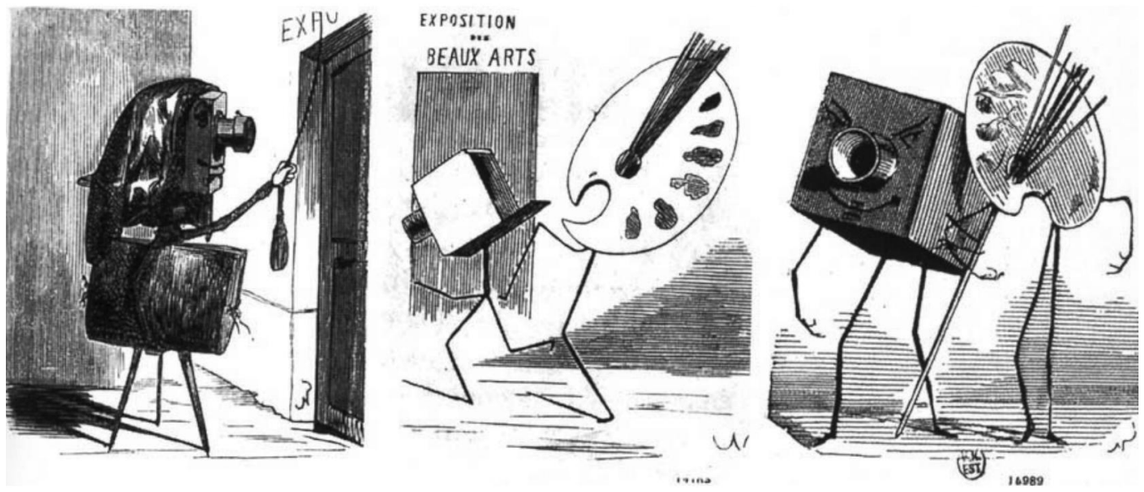
English photography reached full maturity in 1859. In the years between the Great Exhibition and the end of the decade, the medium underwent extraordinary technological and aesthetic development. The exhibitions held in London during this period contributed significantly to this progress. The lessons learned from the partial shortcomings of the Great Exhibition provided a strong impetus to the photographic community and the British administration, who increasingly supported the new medium, as demonstrated by the 1852 exhibition at the Royal Society of Arts and the 1858 exhibition at the South Kensington Museum.

Fig 2.10: Photographic Society of London and SFP at the South Kensington Museum, 1858

Meanwhile, in France the great utopia of the daguerreotype as a medium of artistic expression was soon overtaken by a far more widespread and commercial application: the photographic portrait. With the release of the process from patent restrictions and ongoing technological improvements, the technique became much simpler and more accessible, while exposure times were significantly reduced. As a result, numerous daguerreotype professional studios began to emerge, offering portraits that became the true symbol of the spread of photography at the end of the nineteenth century.

The urban environment was soon filled with photographers' displays, which through advertising panels and small street installations designed to attract clients invaded public space, producing a sense of omnipresence of the image. As demand grew, the daguerreotype became a mass-consumption object, present in every household as part of domestic interiors. This led to a rather monotonous and unoriginal form of production: studio portraits followed standardized models of lighting and posing, creating the impression of the same image repeated thousands of times, without any artistic gesture. In 1849, following the spread in France of a process similar to Talbot's, a new generation of photographers found a path toward a new medium of artistic expression. Although less precise, it allowed paper to be used both as a positive and a negative, making it possible to intervene much more directly on the photographic image and opening up new artistic possibilities. Photography was no longer seen solely as a commercial and consumer object, but as an artistic object in its own right. This new awareness would lead to strong conflicts and debates between photographic societies and the artistic circles of the time, which continued to deny photography's expressive value and to exclude it from the Salons of fine arts.

In 1851, a new group of photographers, with the aim of supporting and promoting the paper-based process, founded the Société Héliographique in Paris. The society soon established its own journal, La Lumière, the first periodical dedicated to the art of photography, where the public and other professionals could read articles not only concerning technique, but also on expression and aesthetics.



Left, Fig 2.11: Three engravings by Nadar published in the "Journal amusant", 1857–1859

Right, Fig 2.12: Photograph of the universal exhibition in Paris, 1855

In the journal, the art critic Francis Wey wrote:

> *"Photography is in a certain sense the trait d'union between the daguerreotype and proper art. It seems that, once transferred onto paper, the mechanism has come to life."* [2]

2. Francis Wey, "*De l'influence de l'héliographie sur les Beaux-Arts*," La Lumière, 1851

The members of the Société Héliographique therefore assigned two roles to paper photography: on one hand, to create a group of photographers driven by artistic aspirations rather than profit, and on the other, to educate the public in photographic matters, guiding their gaze toward higher-quality results.

In response to the artistic Salons, which denied them entry, in 1851 the members of the Société created the Albums. Each member was invited to contribute by donating their best prints, thus forming a kind of museum of contemporary photography, intended to present the new artistic horizons of the discipline and to refine the public's taste in the field.

The Société Héliographique was dissolved in 1852, but it laid the foundation for the French photographic ferment of the following years, leading to the creation in 1854 of the Société Française de Photographie (SFP).

In 1855, the society organized its first exhibition in its premises on Rue Drouot, held concurrently with the Paris Universal Exhibition. The organization of the Expo was once again insufficient for what concerned photography, that was once again relegated to the role of an industrial process and displayed in the least favorable conditions. The failure and disappointment of the Universal Exhibition made the SFP exhibition a true success, presenting a new and unprecedented way of seeing photography. The works were exhibited together for the first time, under optimal lighting conditions. This gave the public the opportunity to witness the progress of this new form of expression not only from a technical standpoint, but also from an artistic one.

Fig 2.13: Charles Michelez, SFP's fifth exhibition at the Palais de l'Industrie, 1863

In the following years, the SFP continued to pursue its ambitious program and positioned itself as mediator for all matters related to photography. Encouraged by photographers of great importance, such as Nadar, it also took on the long struggle to have the discipline admitted into the Salons of fine arts.

The second SFP exhibition, held in 1857, took place in the studio of the French photographer Gustave Le Gray and was open to foreign participants. The exhibition was highly appreciated both for the quality of the works on display and for the excellence of its installation. It played a fundamental role in restoring the status of the photographer in the eyes of the public, who, influenced by the advertising displays of studios along the boulevards, had come to see photographers merely as mechanical operators serving a process. Thanks to the SFP exhibition, the public was able to recognize the artistic quality that photography could achieve, as well as the importance of style and technical mastery in the creation of an image, which "even without a signature, can be perfectly distinguished from all others" as noted by the photographer Paul Périer in his report on the exhibition published in the Bulletin.

The third SFP exhibition, held in 1859, took place at the Palais de l'Industrie, in the same building and at the same time as that year's Salon des Beaux-Arts. This provocation, however, remained only partially effective, as the two exhibitions were kept entirely separate, with independent entrances and separate tickets. Once again, photography was ignored by the so-called "high" arts, to the great disappointment and frustration of those devoted to the medium.

The SFP continued its efforts to elevate and distinguish artistic photographic practice from commercial street photography until 1876, organizing regular exhibitions and producing publications aimed at establishing a recognized status for high-level photography.

These first exhibitions held in the second half of the 19th century in England and France were extremely significant for the future development of photography and exhibition design. These shows were not only the public's first encounter with the new form of expression, but they also established the initial guidelines for a more conscious photographic aesthetic and for the development of a more educational and accessible display. Furthermore, these exhibitions played a crucial role in elevating the status of the photographer-artist; despite general uncertainty about the nature of the medium, the creative drive and style of the individuals behind the camera began to emerge and become clear to the public.

II.3

THE WIENER CAMERA KLUB AND THE ARTISTIC RECOGNITION OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Fig 2.14: Victor Angerer, Members of the Photographic Society in 1877

The Vienna Exhibition of Artistic Photography of 1891 marked a major turning point in the history of this expressive medium, as, even though there was a contest between the pieces, the competition among artists was entirely absent for the first time, and many leading representatives of artistic photography from various nations were able to participate. Moreover the technique used to produce the images was set aside, giving space solely to the artistic expression of the photographer.

The exhibition, held at the Imperial and Royal Austrian Museum of Art and Industry, was inaugurated on May 4th, 1891, under the patronage of Archduchess Maria Theresa of Austria, an amateur photographer and great supporter of the artistic medium, who even contributed four of her own photographs to the exhibition (which were, however, excluded from the competition).

The exhibition was made possible by a society founded on March 31, 1887: the Vienna Amateur Photographers' Club. Shortly after its foundation, the club established a rich and extensive library and later founded its own journal, Photographische Rundschau. The first exhibition organized by the association dates back to 1888 and was held in the Imperial and Royal Austrian Museum of Art and Industry. Professional photographers also participated in that exhibition, presenting works that reflected the most appreciated style of the time: high technical quality and impeccable focus.

> "With this exhibition, the aim was not to compare the results of amateur photographers with those of professionals. It has long been known that the aims of these two categories diverge, and that they do not work with the same resources; for this reason, competition between them cannot take place. Rather, the works of amateur photographers can only be compared among themselves."[3]

The non-professional photographer was thus placed on a different level and would achieve results entirely distinct from those of professional photography, as they possessed different economic, technical, and temporal resources. This approach emphasized the distinction between professional and amateur, creating a narrative that would later be taken up again for the 1891 exhibition.

The 1888 exhibition also marked the first involvement of Archduchess Maria Theresa of Austria with the Club; the following year, she was appointed patroness of the organization.

The second international exhibition of the Wiener Camera Klub took place in 1891 in the same location, the Imperial and Royal Austrian Museum of Art and Industry (still exists today under the name MAK). For the first time, the selection of works was based exclusively on aesthetic criteria. The jury was composed entirely of artists, with the exception of the court photographer of Emperor Franz Joseph, who, however, did not have voting rights. This decision caused quite a stir in the photography community of the time, which argued that the absence of professional photographers was an outrage, and that artists were incapable of judging images from a technical standpoint. This very choice reflects the decision to set aside the distinction between amateur-artistic photography and professional photography, which was too immersed in technicalities and composition to leave room for the expressive value.

Fig 2.15: Carl Ulrich, Display of the 1888 Wien Klub exhibition, MAK Wien

3. "Photographische Rundschau," October 1888, p. 340.

Building on the experience of the 1888 exhibition, the members of the Club were able to better organize the registration and submission process, which allowed for a very high level of participation, even from distant countries, such as the United States.

❝ *The Vienna Amateur Photographers' Club intends to organize an international exhibition of photography at the Imperial and Royal Austrian Museum of Art and Industry, which will differ from the previous Viennese exhibition of 1888, in that only photographs recognized as having artistic value will be exhibited […]* [4] ❞

Unfortunately, none of the 600 photographs exhibited have been preserved. However, thanks to some photographs taken by Carl Ulrich for the 1888 exhibition and later published in Photographische Rundschau, it is possible to observe the display design, which would be adopted again for the 1891 exhibition.

The exhibition spaces are particularly interesting, especially when compared to the ones we see today, characterized by spacious layouts, white walls, high ceilings, and electric lighting, aligned with the White Cube model, which will be discussed later.

Works were displayed with or without frames and mounted on cardboard, then hung on the walls or on partitions that had been installed between tables for the occasion. Multiple display styles were present, as participants could choose whether to provide their own frames or rely on the organizers.

The example set by Vienna was quickly followed in England: in 1892, the Photographic Salon was founded in London and was subsequently held annually with great success, thus inaugurating a great season of experimentation not only in photography, but also in exhibition design. From this moment on, began a phase of strong renewal, during which Pictorialism developed, shedding the constraints of rigid technical tradition, while the desire for freedom and artistic expression came to the forefront. This had a profound influence on exhibition design, which, for the first time, began to be conceived in relation to photography and seek to establish a deeper connection between the artwork and the audience—one that went beyond mere aesthetic value to embrace the emotional sphere as well. The cultural ferment of the late nineteenth century would lead to major innovations in displays, starring a new, vibrant, dynamic, and disruptive nation: United States.

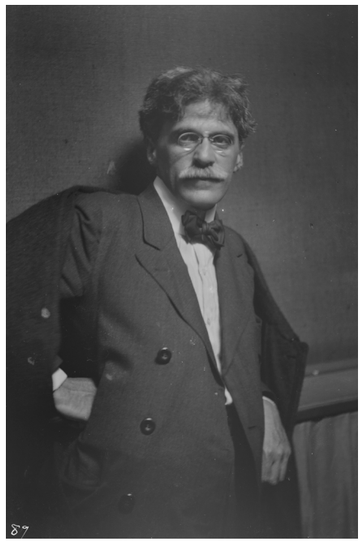
The 1891 display was instead characterized by a large central hall, lit only by two windows positioned on one side. The room was densely filled with photographs, arranged in distinct systems organized by country and by photographer, In the system that has been described as typical of nineteenth-century displays, the quadreria model. The center of the room was dedicated to a large sitting area where visitors could chat and rest while contemplating the works. The exhibition also included tributes to the imperial household, such as a bust of Franz Joseph and red draperies used to cover partitions and walls, serving as a homage to the Archduchess.

Fig 2.16, 2.17: Photograph of the interior of the 1904 exhibition of the Photographic Society in Vienna at the Imperial and Royal Austrian Museum

4. Announcement published in newspapers with the guidelines for participation in the exhibition, 1888

II.4

ALFRED STIEGLITZ AND THE GALLERY 291 EXPERIENCE



One of the most influential figures in the history of American photography is undoubtedly Alfred Stieglitz. After a brief period of studying mechanical engineering in Germany, Stieglitz chose to abandon his academic education to devote himself to courses in photography and photographic chemistry. During those years, in addition to taking photographs himself, he also wrote for various specialized journals, such as The Amateur Photographer and Photographische Rundschau.

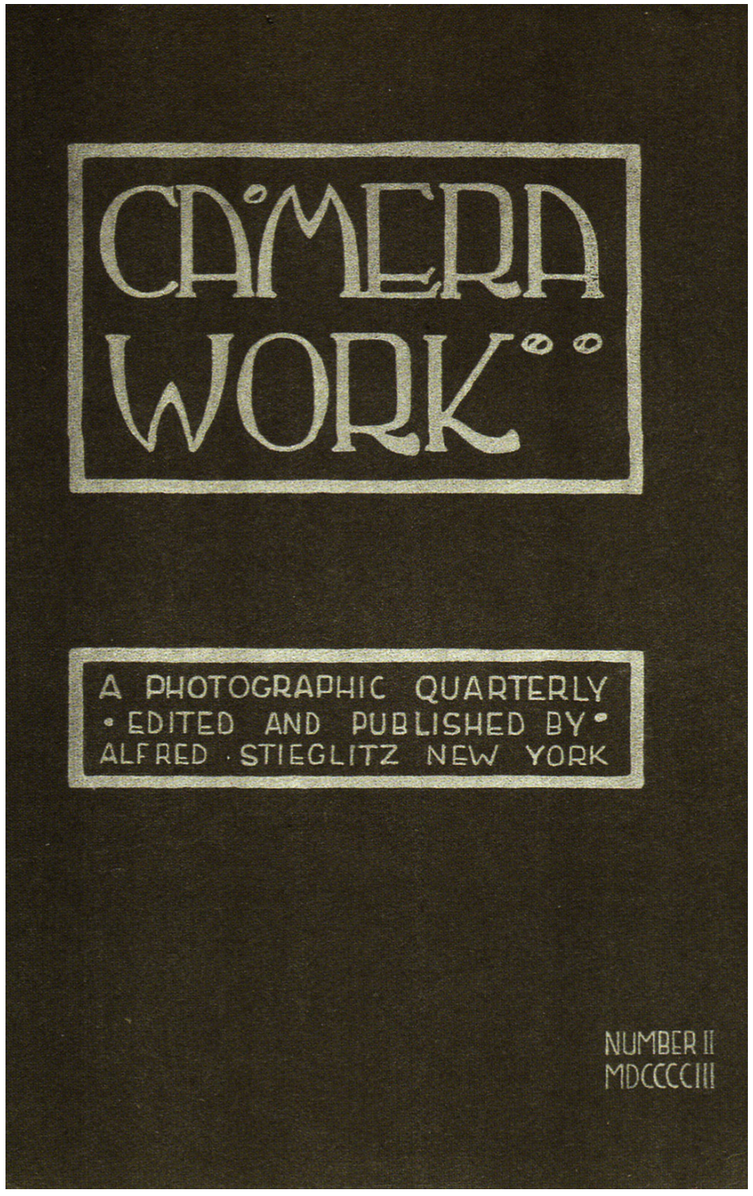
After returning to New York in 1890, he became a member of the Society of Amateur Photography and began experimenting with photo engraving, producing his first snapshots of the city in a fresh and innovative style. In 1893, he accepted the directorship of the society's journal, The American Amateur Photographer, and decided to organize the first photographic salon in the United States.

After a few years, however, he left the society, recognizing in photography something far greater than a simple pastime and seeking to make it the central focus of his life. He thus devoted himself to Pictorialist photography and began searching for a new working dimension. A few years later, he became president of a new circle founded to promote Pictorialism in America, the New Camera Club, and at the same time he began editing a new periodical journal, Camera Notes.

Stieglitz believed that American photography needed to free itself from amateurism in order to become a reflection of a rapidly growing nation, ready to engage with the European photographic world while maintaining its own autonomy and authority, and willing to explore, without prejudice, its relationship with other arts and forms of intellectual expression. Supported by important art critics and authors, he used Camera Notes to guide the gaze of both the public and American photographers toward the future he envisioned for authorial photography in the United States.

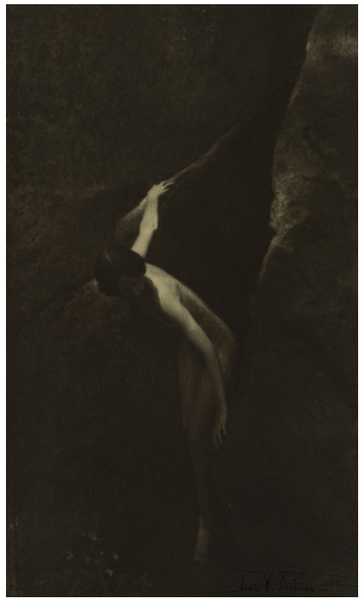
During these years, Stieglitz began to attract figures of great significance, capable of understanding and sharing his revolutionary ideas and exerting a strong influence on the artistic debate of the time. His impact was so far-reaching that it affected a wide range of artistic fields in America, spreading across multiple media, while maintaining photography as a field of experimentation and discovery. In doing so, he helped establish photography as a vehicle for a new expressive, social, and identity-based dimension of twentieth-century humanity.

In 1902, Stieglitz further distanced himself from conservative photography creating the Photo-Secession, with the aim of bringing photography into American art museums. In the process of legitimizing photography, it was necessary to provide the public with



a reference, a journal in which photographers' works and the most insightful essays on recent developments could be published. Thus, in 1903, Stieglitz founded Camera Work, a magazine distinguished by its refined graphic design and style, featuring superb photo engraved reproductions and contributions from both American and European critics. In Camera Work, everything was oriented toward dialogue and eliminating prejudices that still persisted between the arts, achieving a high level of coherence and integration among its various contributions.

The next step was to create a meeting place that could not only bring together the key figures of the new American photographic scene, but also exhibit their work, becoming a reference point for both artists and public. Stieglitz therefore rented a small space at 291 Fifth Avenue in New York and opened the "Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession".



Left, Fig 2.18: Front cover of the second publication of Camera Work, the magazine of the Photo-Secession, 1903

Right, Fig 2.19: Anne W. Brigman, The Cleft of the Rock, 1907 - The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1933

Shortly after its opening, in 1905, the gallery became the editorial office of Camera Work and began to be referred to by the street number of the building that housed it, becoming known as the 291 Gallery. Over time, the gallery would become not only a major reference point for international photography, but also a site of experimentation for a new concept of exhibition design, representing a starting point in the emergence and development of the standard model, that later became the “White Box.”

The gallery was also a place of remarkable openness and democracy among the arts. Its program skillfully connected photography, painting, drawing, sculpture, and the new artistic forms emerging from contemporary European and American movements. All the arts were placed on the same level and exhibited in ways that created relationships among them.

The Gallery’s first season opened on November 25, 1905, with an exhibition featuring 39 photographs by members of the Photo-Secession. The program continued with an exhibition of French photographers selected by Robert Demachy and a solo exhibition of photographs by Herbert G. French, which illustrated scenes from Tennyson’s Idylls of the King. This was followed by an exhibition of 61 images by Steichen, which were published in Camera Work shortly after the exhibition ended, in a remarkably forward-thinking process, compared to other galleries of the time. The season ended with an exhibition dedicated to German and Austrian authors, demonstrating a remarkable variety in both content and artists.

Fig 2.20: Front cover of the second publication of Camera Work, the magazine of the Photo-Secession, 1903

The gallery was further enriched by Stieglitz’s regular presence. He stayed on site every day to engage with the public and to encourage and educate people. Although it was a private initiative, the educational intent of the exhibitions was clear: the prevailing themes were spiritual enrichment and the search for a new truth, a new means of expression for human beings. This artistic exploration was carried out mainly through photography, identified as the primary medium for teaching individuals about beauty and aesthetics.

Stieglitz’s ideals reflected in the new mode of expression he conceived, which would serve as the starting point for the development of the “white box” model, a form of exhibition that, beginning in these years at Gallery 291, would become the standard for photographic and artistic museography evolving into the most widely adopted exhibition model, even to this day.
The exhibition design conceived by Stieglitz was the result of a radical shift in the way the Photo Secession approached the concept of art during those years. The artwork was no longer placed among a multitude of similar pieces, it was isolated to foster an intimate and personal experience, allowing the public to engage closely with the piece and the artist.

The gallery spaces were designed to be welcoming and comfortable, to attract art lovers, who could find not only works of the highest quality but also the finest international publications from art magazines.
The 291 gallery space was divided into small rooms illuminated by diffused light. The walls were covered with a raw fabric painted in soft colors, providing a neutral background that did not distract from the artworks. The installation space was framed by a wooden rail along the entire perimeter of the wall, from which a curtain descended to the floor.

In the center of the room stood a pedestal, which usually held a copper vase but could also be used to display statues and other works of art during exhibitions.

Exhibitions were organized by arranging works along the same proportional line. The intention was to give importance to each individual element on display, allowing it to be perceived as an object with its own intrinsic value, one that did not gain significance from its relationship with the surrounding context. This apparent neutrality of approach is what would later evolve into the main problematic in the White Box model, as will be analyzed in the following chapters.

At times, however, Stieglitz allowed himself to be guided by the spatial characteristics of the artworks, creating irregular compositions that derived their value precisely from their relationships with the surrounding pieces.

The balance and coherence of the display were also shaped by the uniformity of the small frames chosen by Stieglitz, who would decide, depending on the works exhibited, whether to leave them white, black, or to have them decorated by the artists themselves.

The new way of conceiving exhibition design introduced by Stieglitz completely transformed the relationship between the artwork and the viewer. The “quadreria” model, previously used in the Salon des Beaux-Arts and in museums, was characterized by densely packed walls, where works were hung on multiple levels, in tight, often confusing and disordered arrangements. Gallery 291 overturned this paradigm through an essential, distraction-free display, in which each work was presented in its individuality, fostering an intimate and direct relationship with the observer. The viewer was encouraged to abandon preconceptions and open themselves to the suggestions and reflections offered by the artwork. Within the exhibition space conceived by Stieglitz, light, atmosphere, composition, and the simplicity of the setting all contributed to a cognitive experience, bringing the public into an almost sacred relationship with the work.

Regarding the exhibition at the Little Galleries of Photo Secession, the editorial in issue no. 14 of Camera Work states:

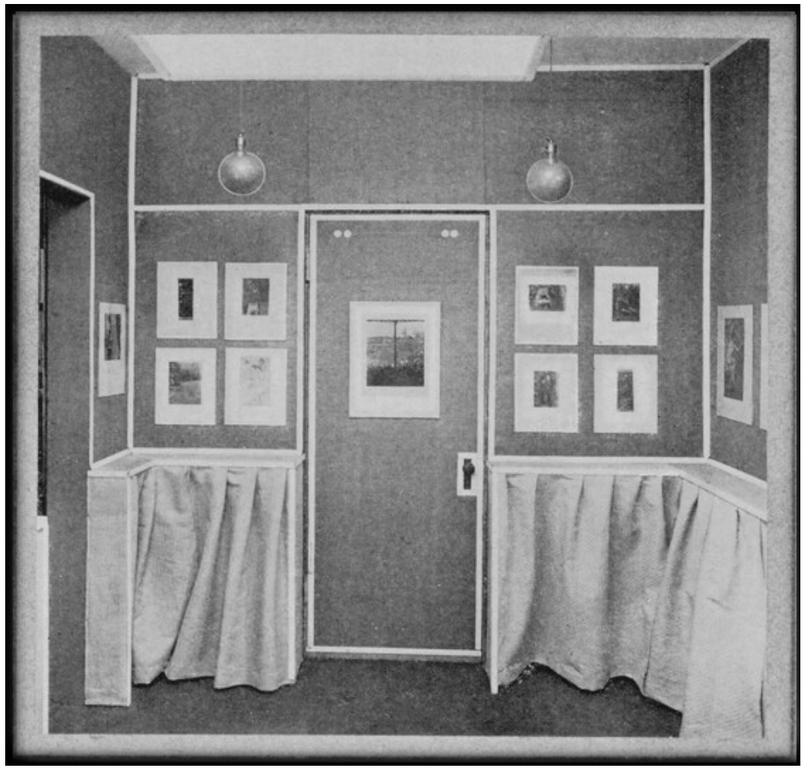


Fig 2.21, 2.22: Exhibition rooms at the 291 Gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue, New York City before 1913

“Heretofore, with but two or three exceptions, photographs have not been shown to their best advantage; the crowding of exhibits, the garish or, still worse, insufficient light, the incongruous color-scheme have certainly not helped in affording the public an opportunity of satisfactorily studying pictorial photographs. With these facts in mind, the Secession Galleries were arranged so as to permit each individual photograph to be shown to the very best advantage. The lighting is so arranged that the visitor is in a soft, diffused light while the pictures receive the direct illumination from a sky light; the artificial lights are used as decorative spots as well as for their usefulness. One of the larger rooms is kept in dull olive tones, the burlap wall covering being a warm olive gray; the woodwork and moldings similar in general color, but considerably darker. The hangings are of an olive-sepia sateen, and the ceiling and canopy are o f a very deep creamy gray. The small room is designed especially to show prints on very light mounts or in white frames. The walls of this room are covered with a bleached natural burlap; the woodwork and molding are pure white; the hangings, a dull ecru. The third room is decorated in gray-blue, dull salmon, and olive-gray. In all the rooms the lamp-shades match the wall-coverings” [5]

In 1907, while slightly distancing himself from the Secessionist group, though not from its founding principles, Stieglitz organized the first non-photographic exhibition at 291: a series of drawings by the artist Pamela Coleman Smith. For this exhibition, Stieglitz followed the same display principles, demonstrating great coherence and integrity in his belief that all arts should be treated as equal. In doing so, he showed how the principles of the Photo-Secession could be applied to other forms of expression, expanding the group’s influence across the broader American artistic landscape of the time and significantly shaping exhibition practices that would be adopted throughout the twentieth century and into the present day.

Smith’s exhibition was the first of many non-photographic shows that would bring prestige and success to the gallery, including those dedicated to Rodin (1908), Picasso (1911), and Matisse (1912), gradually creating distance from the Secessionist group.

However, within the experience of engagement offered at 291, the figure of Alfred Stieglitz himself should not be underestimated. The curator spent his entire day inside the gallery, welcoming visitors, engaging in conversation with them, and educating about the works on display. Stieglitz’s charisma thus became an integral part of the success of 291 and the relationship between public and art. Through dialogue with the curator, the works regained the context that the display itself tended to remove, aiming to present them as objects of reverence emerging from another reality. The balance between exhibition design and the figure of the curator-narrator captivated the public, creating an interdependent dynamic between display and mediation, one that has largely been lost in the modern adaptation of Stieglitz’s model.

The pedagogical role of the Gallery was indeed fundamental for Stieglitz, who was convinced that art could be the

5.The Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession,” Camera Work, no. 14, April 1906, pp. 48

most powerful means of shaping the new citizen, one aware of their own capacities and the union between expression, morality, and spirit. The photographic and artistic experience became a means of reflecting on and analyzing reality, providing the public with new lenses to interpret the world around them.

The financial difficulties, due to the limited attention given to the commercial aspects, forced Stieglitz to move the gallery to 293 of the same street, while maintaining its original name.
In the following years, the gallery became one of the central hubs of the American art scene of the period, establishing itself as a key center of modernism, while photography continued to play a central role, becoming one of the main pillars of the debate on the evolution of modern art.

Until its closure in 1917, Gallery 291 remained a site of lively artistic and exhibition experimentation, hosting shows dedicated to children's art, women's art, and so-called "primitive" art. The exhibition of African art in 1914 was particularly significant, as it was among the first in the Western world to present

Fig 2.23: Alfred Stieglitz, Negro Art Exhibition, 1914 - Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

African sculpture as true art, granting it the same attention and dignity reserved for European artists. In its final years, Stieglitz turned away from Europe, exhibiting exclusively American artists, and returned to photography with a show by Paul Strand in 1916.

The gallery closed permanently in June 1917, two months after United States entered the war. The conditions of the public and the city had changed too critically, and the effort required to keep the gallery open had become unsustainable. The photograph The Last Days of 291 vividly conveys the image of a weary warrior forced to abandon the battle for lack of strength to continue.

With ups and downs, Stieglitz continued his activity as a cultural agitator and promoter, dedicating himself almost exclusively to American art until his death in 1946. In a world in crisis and profoundly changed from the fervor of the early twentieth century, he continued to make his voice heard, though he would never again achieve the same success he had experienced with 291.

Left, Fig 2.24: Alfred Stieglitz, The Last Days of 291 1917

Right, Fig 2.25: Exterior view of The Museum of Modern Art, 1937

II.5

291'S HERITAGE: THE EARLY YEARS OF MOMA

Founded in 1929, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) almost immediately began collecting photography, a bold and surprising choice for contemporary art museums of the time, where a clear distinction between the arts still prevailed. The museum's turn toward photography was driven by its first director, Alfred H. Barr, who believed that visual arts were so intimately connected that they could not be studied individually. His vision of the modern museum was that of an institution capable of bringing together all artistic disciplines (architecture, design, film, photography, painting, sculpture, drawing, traditional printmaking…) in order to study human expression in its totality.

In 1932, MoMA hosted Murals by American Painters and Photographers, the first exhibition in which photography played a significant role and was placed on the same level as painting.
In the spring of 1936, Barr appointed the art historian and museum librarian Beaumont Newhall to organize the first major photography exhibition at MoMA, intended to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the invention.

Given Newhall's relative inexperience, the museum established an international advisory committee to lend credibility to the exhibition and compensate for the institution's lack of authority in the field. Alfred Stieglitz was clearly the first to be invited, but he categorically refused to be involved, arguing that MoMA's program was too heavily influenced by commercial, economic, and political considerations, and therefore distant from the ideal of public enriching that he had promoted with the 291 Gallery. He agreed only to allow the use of images previously published in Camera Work. The role was then offered to another important

member of the Photo-Secession, Edward Steichen, who accepted immediately.

In search of material, Newhall traveled to Europe and, moving beyond the question of photography's artistic legitimacy, engaged with the European avant-gardes, selecting works primarily from France and England (he was unable to travel to Germany due to the political situation). This marks the first time that the analysis carried out for years by German photographers and curators has been applied in America. Newhall's exhibition was in fact inspired by the series of major photographic exhibitions held in Germany between 1925 and the early 1930s, which placed the camera at the center of postwar aesthetics.

The selection of images and the curatorial approach of the exhibition were essentially didactic, constructing a path that followed the evolution of photographic techniques. For the first time in America, an exhibition is being held on the technological development of the medium, featuring a wide variety of images in the collection, ranging from prestigious sources such as rare prints to more common ones such as advertisements and film stills, with the aim of covering the full spectrum of this form of expression's potential. The decision not to focus exclusively on the aesthetic criteria was heavily criticized, as it was considered more appropriate for an industrial and scientific museum than for an art one. Other critics, however, recognized Newhall's intention: to present the history of photography through its technical evolution, to show how profoundly it has shaped the aesthetics of images.

The exhibition was spread across all four floors of the museum and included 841 images, often grouped in large panels, framed with mats and protected by transparent plastic covers. At the entrance was a life-size photograph of a man holding a camera, who seemed to be trying to capture an image of the visitors as they entered. The style and composition evoked New Vision Photography and advertising posters. The image was paired with an enlarged 19th-century illustration depicting a daguerreotypist with his equipment, previewing the historical and technical evolution explored within the exhibition. In a corner of the first room, was a reconstruction of a large camera obscura that projected an inverted image of the receptionist, a simple and intuitive way to help the public understand the basics of how a camera works.

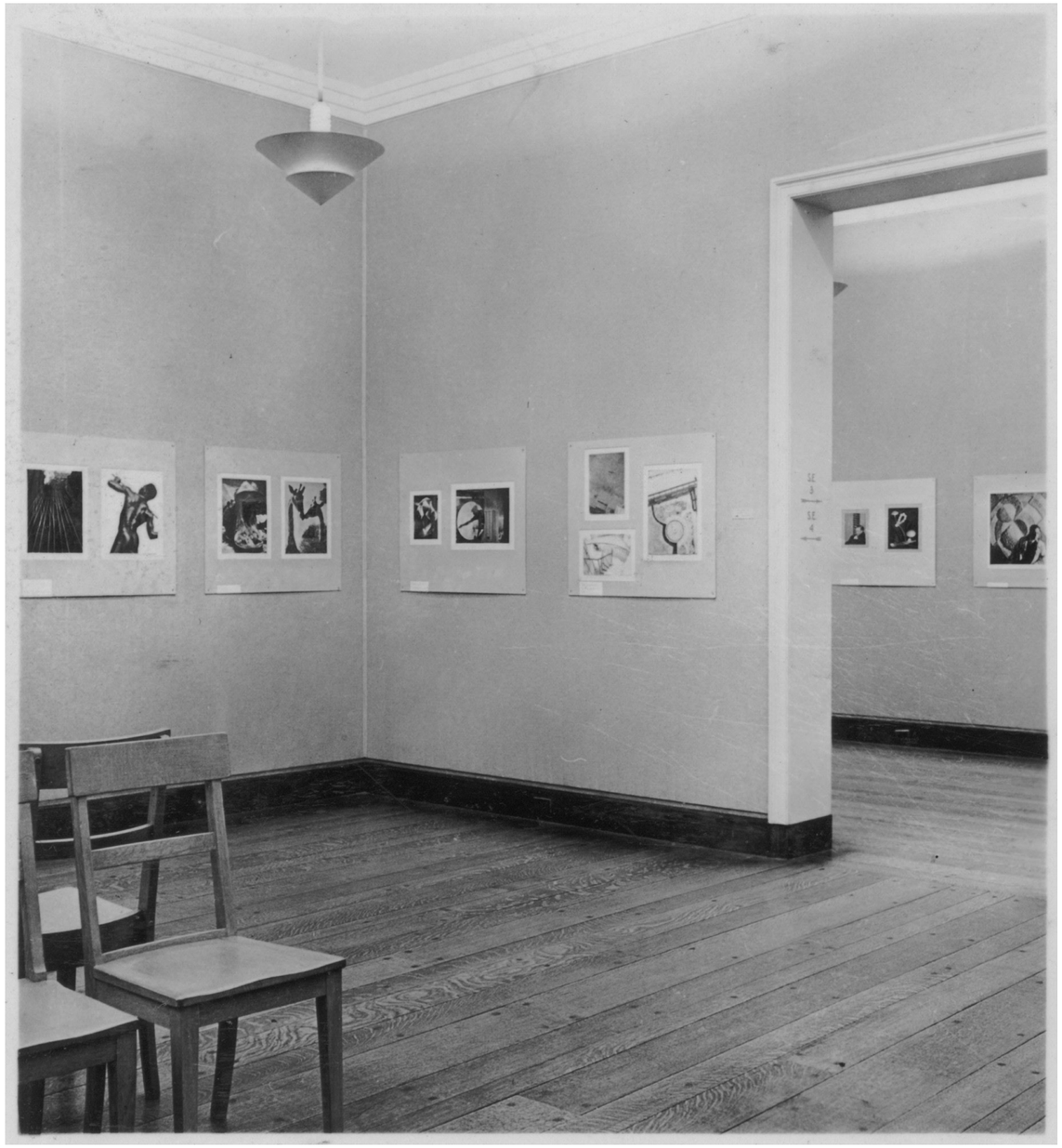


Fig 2.26: Entrance at the exhibition "Photography 1839-1937" at MoMA, New York, 1937

Fig 2.27: Installation view of the exhibition "Photography 1839-1937" in his second edition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Moving on, the exhibition traced the evolution of photographic processes, starting with daguerreotypes, displayed in glass cases suspended within a dimly lit room. The exhibition featured a constant display of cameras of every model and technique (dating back to 1835) as well as equipment for developing images.

Newhall believed that understanding photographic proces-

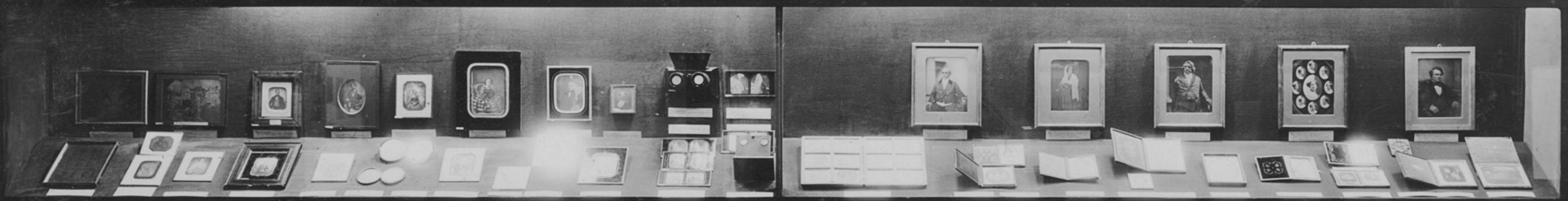


Fig 2.28: Dagherrotype installation in the exhibition "Photography 1839-1937"

ses was essential to understand the image itself, therefore images and objects were grouped according to technique and corresponding historical period. Within each sequence, photographers were arranged alphabetically.

When viewing the collection, the influence of one of Newhall's key advisors, László Moholy-Nagy, is strikingly evident. The Hungarian artist and photographer, former director of the Bauhaus, had in fact curated the most significant photography exhibition ever held in Germany up to that point: Film und Foto. Moholy-Nagy's theories on the need to place all fields of photography on the same level are extremely evident in the layout of Photography 1839–1937. In fact, the sequence of rooms is organized solely on the basis of technical processes, without questioning the artistic merit of the photographs on display, and the exhibition concludes with a room featuring contemporary photographic works labeled "non-artistic."

The exhibition design also included several "atmosphere rooms," conceived to evoke specific historical periods and to produce an effect of aestheticization, particularly for nineteenth-century photography. At the same time, it incorporated didactic and interactive elements, more typical of scientific displays than artistic ones. These sections were intended to explain the technical processes underlying the history of photography, maintaining a strongly educational dimension within the exhibition.

Many aspects of photography's history were overlooked, such as the narrative and serial elements typical of the medium, and no effort was made to contextualise it historically and socially. On the other hand, in his history of photography, conceived as an introductory publication for the exhibition, Newall identified two main criteria for assessing the quality of an image: the concept of detail and fidelity to tonal richness. This focus on the formal aspects of photography marked the first step toward the introduction of a formalist aesthetic within MoMA, which would help establish a canon based on printing and composition for evaluating image quality. Photography began a process of musealization that would gradually strip it of its original context, confining it to the role of an aesthetic object and depriving it of its historical and cultural value.

II.6

THE MASS MEDIA EXHIBITION: AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORICAL MODEL

When Edward Steichen succeeded Beaumont Newhall, the curatorial approach of MoMA changed course completely. Drawing on his experience as a fashion and advertising photographer for magazines such as Vogue and Vanity Fair, the new director was convinced that the principal value of photography lay in its communicative power. He firmly believed in photography's great narrative potential, seeing it as an exceptionally powerful mass medium:

> *The invention of photography gave visual communication its most simple, direct and universal language* [6]

Toward the end of World War II, this type of narrative exhibition became very popular, as it sought to convey a sense of solidarity and unity for country to a public that was demoralized and exhausted by the conflict. MoMA became a major vehicle for this message through a series of exhibitions from 1941 to 1947, which attracted a massive audience and were part of a complex system of government and private initiatives aimed at restoring a strong sense of American patriotism among the masses, which had severely eroded during the two World Wars.

The first of these exhibitions was "Road to Victory," which opened in the spring of 1942 at MoMA in New York. The curator, Edward Steichen, along with the designer Herbert Bayer, conceived the exhibition as a spectacular journey that focused entirely on emotional immediacy, compelling graphics, and the complete elimination of complexity.

Fig 2.29: Wayne Miller, Edward Steichen working on the model for "The Family of Man" exhibition

6. Edward Steichen, "On Photography," in Nathan Lyons, ed., Photographers on Photography: A Critical Anthology, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966, p. 107.

Herbert Bayer's installation, inspired by the theories of the Bauhaus New Vision and by El Lissitzky's exhibitions of the late 1920s - such as the Soviet pavilion at the 1928 Cologne International Press Exhibition (Pressa), where Russian photojournalism was presented through large photomontages covering the walls and enveloping the viewer - transformed the exhibition space into an immersive environment.

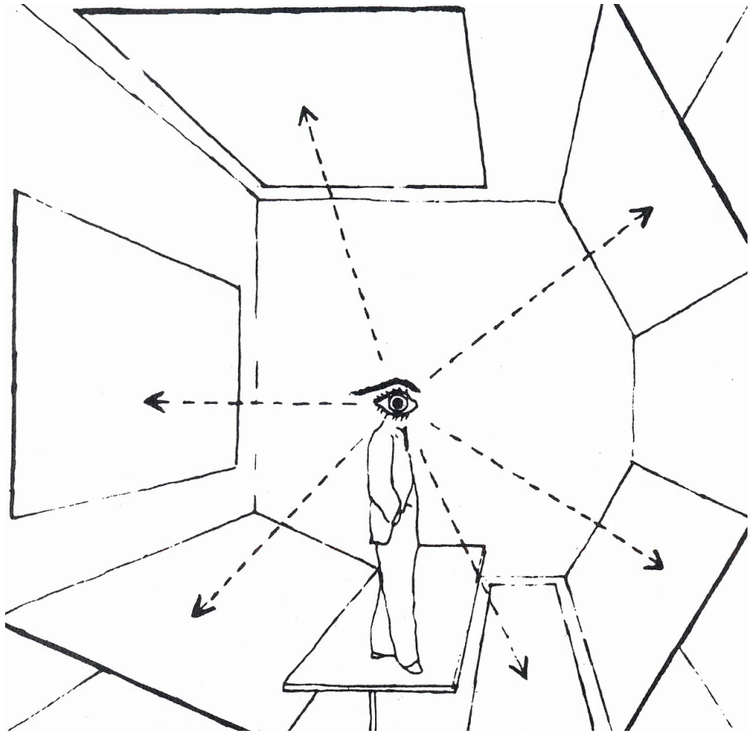


Fig 2.30: Herbert Bayer, Diagram of extended vision in exhibition presentation developed in 1930

Fig 2.31: Study model for the pathway of "Road to Victory" exhibition

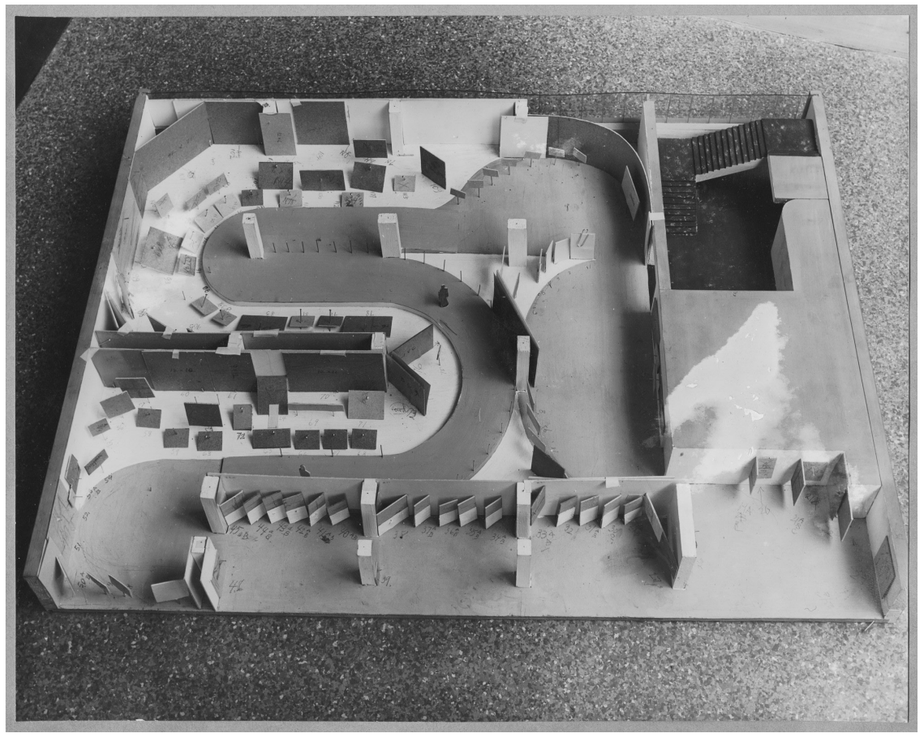


Fig 2.32: Installation shot of the pathway of the exhibition "Road to Victory"

Within Road to Victory, visitors moved among cut-out, enlarged, and manipulated versions of photographs from the collection, designed to convey a clear message of American victory through a climax of spectacular and theatrical images that followed the same principles of advertising graphics. Pictures were positioned at different heights according to Bayer's theories and schemes, which sought to encourage the active involvement of the public and to introduce an element of discovery into the exhibition.

The peak of this exhibition style was the 1955 exhibition "The Family of Man," the greatest attempt to achieve universality through photography. The exhibition was conceived in the postwar period, when it was necessary to rebuild trust in humanity and in the unity of people. Moreover, in the context of the Cold War, it was important to present the American way of life as the best and most universal possible, promoting the idea of a world stabilized by international law, as promulgated by the United States.

Steichen therefore conceived an exhibition with the aim of demonstrating that all cultures in the world share a common foundation, a human element that makes us all equal. In the end, however, the message turned out to be a universalization of the bourgeois, patriarchal nuclear family, suggesting a utopian and romantic family album in every corner of the earth. The thinking behind the exhibition was, in fact, heavily influenced by Talcott Parsons' sociological theories on functional structuralism, a concept that posits the nuclear family with clearly defined roles as the most advanced and efficient human system.

The exhibition also promoted a process of humanizing the "other," reshaping non-Western cultures so that they resembled American society, reproducing one of the characteristic mechanisms of neocolonial thought.

The exhibitions organized by Steichen between 1942 and 1961 achieved remarkable success with the general public. Their effectiveness lay in the combination of a simple and clear narrative, an engaging and spectacular installation, and emotional and poetic texts accompanying the images, all of which proved highly successful in attracting large audiences to the museum and to the

Department of Photography. However, the public was not being educated to appreciate the beauty and artistic value of photography; rather, it simply absorbed the narrative presented by the curator, in a manner typical of advertising agencies rather than museum institutions. The use of rhetoric surrounding the universal significance of photography was, in fact, nothing more than a political and social tool that conferred new pedagogical power to shape and influence public opinion.

In addition, the role of the artist-photographer was eliminated, completely supplanted by the curator's aesthetic choices, thus reducing the photographer to an illustrator at the service of another creative genius.

Not only were composition and style ignored, but the qualities of photographic printing, so dear to the artistic photography community, disappeared entirely, giving way to photo murals and enlargements of all kinds. While the general public was thus drawn in, photography amateurs and enthusiasts drifted away, creating an ever-widening gap and diminishing interest in the exhibitions, until Steichen's resignation in 1961.

Previous page, Fig 2.33: Photo of the entrance to the exhibition "The Family of Man"

Fig 2.34: Installation of the exhibition "The Family of Man" in the room dedicated to the act of playing. The images depicted children from all over the world playing ring-around-the-rosy, displayed on a circular platform designed to evoke this gesture

III.

The White Box Model

Fig 3.1: Installation view of Diane Arbus Room in the exhibition "New Documents"

III.1

THE STANDARDIZATION OF THE WHITE-BOX MODEL

When he left his position as director, Steichen appointed the photographer and writer John Szarkowski as his successor. The new head of the department's intentions were immediately clear: the curatorial approach of mass exhibitions had to come to an end, in order to restore prestige and significance to photography as a pure artistic expression. Szarkowski's analytical vision of the medium, which would create a new aesthetic and a new canon, would mark the culmination not only of photography's consolidation as an art form but also the development of exhibition standards that persist to this day.

During the 1960s and 1970s, public interest in photography grew steadily, and the number of exhibitions increased significantly. This allowed Szarkowski to expand the collection considerably (it quadrupled under his direction) and to place greater emphasis on monographic exhibitions and shows designed to demonstrate the extraordinary formal possibilities of the medium and to redefine the aesthetic nature of photography.

From his very first exhibition, Five Unrelated Photographers, Szarkowski made a decisive break with the eccentric and visually overwhelming displays of his predecessor, returning instead to the exhibition principles developed by Beaumont Newhall: white mats and backgrounds, light wooden frames, protective glass, and works hung at eye level. Szarkowski's curatorial approach, however, was innovative in relation to Newhall's. He believed in an aesthetic founded on less rigid and schematic criteria, maintaining that photography's highest qualities lay in the clarity of its message and the density of information it contained. Photographs could therefore be both read and felt at the same time, possessing both a literary-intellectual dimension and a visual-visceral one.

For this reason, the public had to engage with photography primarily through its artistic and aesthetic value, rather than through its narrative or historical significance. The exhibition design therefore returned to an essential form, making photographs protagonists of the gallery space. Enlargements were abandoned in favor of original prints and the extravagant compositions of earlier years gave way to more orderly and uniform arrangements, since nothing was meant to distract the viewer from the photographs themselves.

Fig 3.2, 3.3: Installation views of the exhibition "Five Unrelated Photographers."

Fig 3.4, 3.5: Installation views of the exhibition "New Documents"

From this point onward, exhibitions at MoMA were no longer subject to the personal flair of individual curators, but instead followed conventions that gradually established themselves as institutional norms. MoMA's approach was widely adopted by photographic institutions around the world, consolidating into the standard model of photographic exhibition that we still see today.

The educational mission of the museum remained extremely important to Szarkowski, who pursued it through a substantial body of publications. These texts, however, were increasingly addressed to collectors, gallerists, enthusiasts, and photographers interested in exploring the creative and expressive possibilities of the medium. The general public was thus gradually excluded, making room for a more specialized and informed audience, while the photographic world became increasingly elitist and institutionalized.

One of the exhibitions that most clearly embodied the shift brought about by Szarkowski was New Documents. Opened on February 28, 1967, the exhibition presented documentary photography in a completely new and unexpected light: as a more personal and subjective practice rooted in the relationship between photographer and subject. Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand, the three young photographers featured in the exhibition, were largely unknown before the show, which launched them as leading figures in a new generation of American documentary photography.

The exhibition was installed on the museum's ground floor and divided into two galleries: one devoted entirely to Diane Arbus, and a second presenting the works of Friedlander and Winogrand together. All the photographs were black and white and introduced the public to the evolution of mid-1960s street photography, offering a perspective on the city, hidden corners, and everyday life that had rarely been noticed before. Although the three photographers worked in distinct ways, they shared a radical sensibility that was redefining what was worth looking at.

The installation consisted of transparent plastic frames that enclosed the prints so seamlessly that they appeared to be mounted directly on the wall. The galleries were left empty, free of any visual or spatial distraction. Only the name of the artist appeared on the walls; the photographs were neither titled nor captioned, leaving viewers to interpret them and assign their own meanings.

III.2

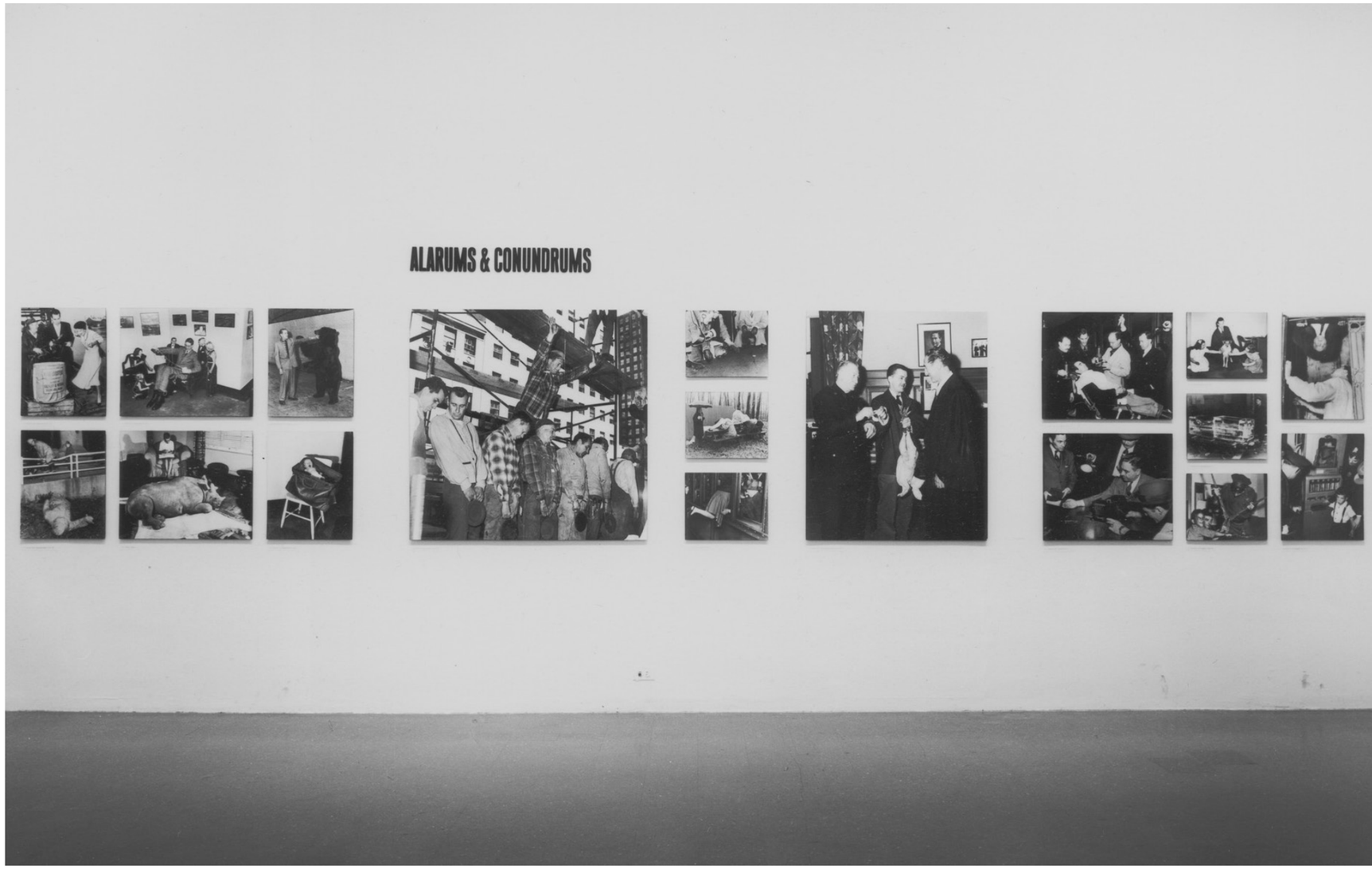
PHOTOGRAPHY'S AESTHETIC REPROCESSING

One of the central issues of the white box model, from its earliest formulations, concerns the aesthetic reprocessing of photography, particularly archival photography.

To understand this phenomenon, we can begin with one of the most significant exhibitions curated by John Szarkowski: From the Picture Press, which opened on January 30, 1973, at the Museum of Modern Art. For this exhibition, Szarkowski selected a series of photographs from the archives of the New York Daily News and other newspapers in order to investigate the formal and iconographic characteristics of images published in the press. The exhibition sought to highlight the visual coherence of photographs made in different places and circumstances by extracting them from their original contexts and organizing them into broad categories such as natural disasters, ceremonies, and news events. In doing so, Szarkowski aimed to demonstrate that photographs could be understood not only as informational documents, but also as images possessing their own formal and expressive autonomy. As he had already written in The Photographer's Eye:

> *If photographs could not be read as stories, they could be read as symbols.* [1]

This exhibition stands as an emblematic example of the institutionalization and aesthetic reinterpretation of archival photography, a practice that re-



Next Page, Fig 3.6: Entrance view of the exhibition "From the Picture Press"

Fig 3.7: Installation views of the exhibition "From the Picture Press"

1. John Szarkowski, The Photographer's Eye, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1966.

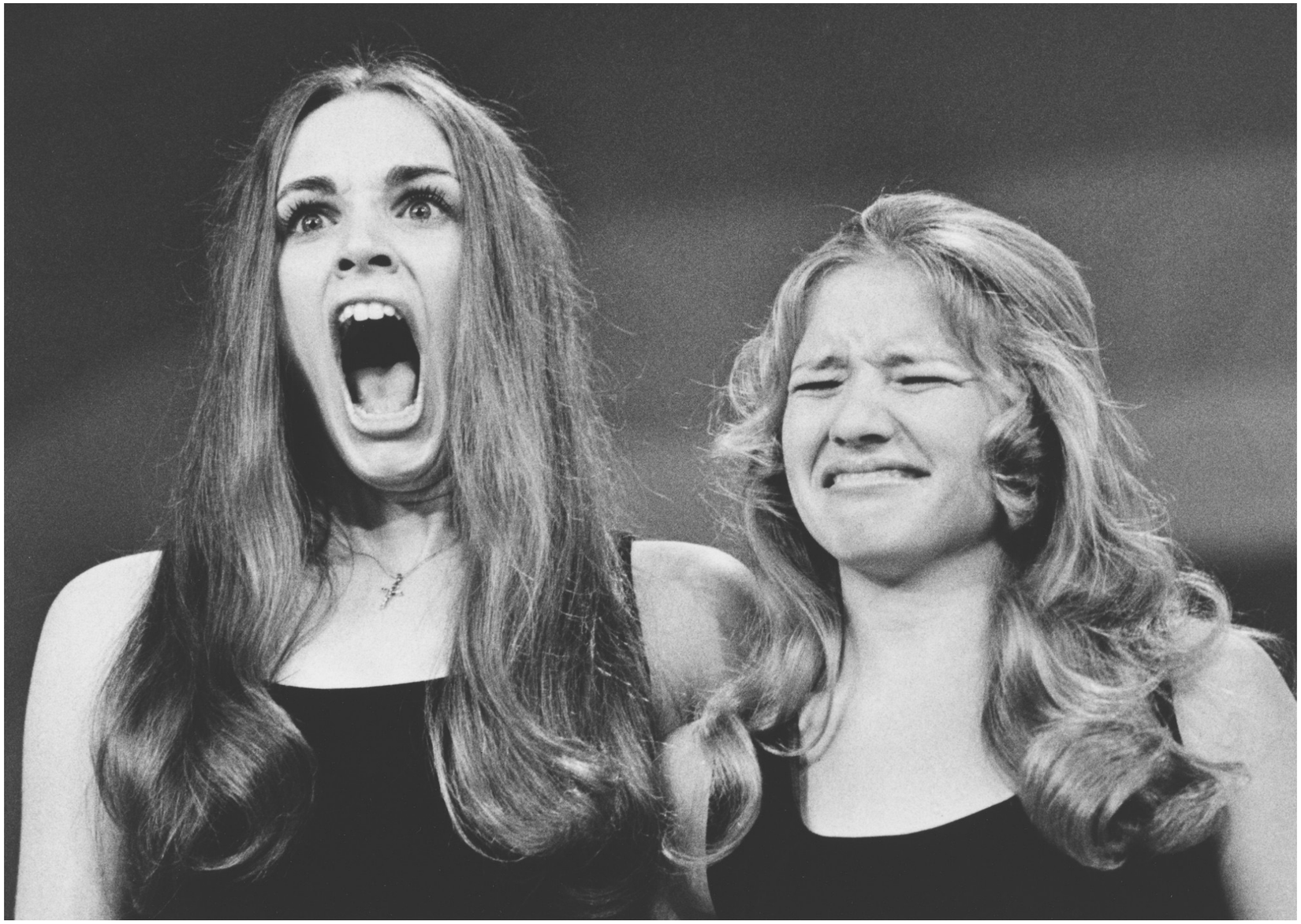


Fig 3.8: United Press International, "Miss Teenage America", 1971. Image from the installation "From the Picture Press"

mains widespread in the international photographic landscape today. Images are selected for their compositional strength and narrative ambiguity, extracted from archives, detached from their original contexts, and reorganized according to iconographic categories.

> *Like a short visual poem, they describe a simple perception out of context.* [2]

Museum institutionalization thus contributes to the construction of a new visual grammar based on fragment, detail, and the ephemeral. It is through in this process that the photographer is legitimized as an author, as attention shifts from the subject to the gaze that interprets it. This approach is entirely legitimate in the context of authorial photography, but it becomes more problematic when, as in From the Picture Press, images originally produced for journalistic or documentary purposes are transformed into artworks by stripping away the context that was integral to their meaning.

Photographs of great aesthetic quality can emerge from a wide range of fields, including fashion, journalism, science, and advertising, but exhibiting them in a museum with only minimal captions, not restoring the narrative and experience from which they originated, means removing an essential component of their communicative power.

A conception of photography focused exclusively on authorship and aesthetic value risks impoverishing the medium by neglecting one of its defining characteristics: its ability to preserve a fragment of the real world over time. Unlike other art forms, photography is rooted in a direct encounter with reality and locates its creative act primarily in the choice of framing and the decisive moment, rather than in a prolonged material transformation of the subject. As Jorge Ribalta writes in "Documentary and Democracy"

> *Photography's triumph as art means its complete defeat as document.* [3]

Restoring the original context of photographs does not mean denying their aesthetic dimension; on the contrary, it enriches it by adding depth to the interpretation of the images and by reaffirming what remains photography's essential specificity: its capacity to preserve traces of reality.

But why does this transition of photography from social spaces to museums occur through decontextualization?
To answer this question, we must examine the architectural and social models that inspired the white cube. As Brian O'Doherty argues in his essay "Inside the White Cube," this exhibition model derives primarily from religious buildings and worship spaces. The goal is to simulate a place of community and intimacy with the object, making it more of a simulacrum than a physical object.

The architectural model can be traced back to rituals even older than Christianity, to Egyptian tombs and Palaeolithic caves: places created to simulate the illusion of timelessness, of a world outside of time and physical space.

> *A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically, or carpeted so that you pad sound lessly,*

2. John Szarkowski, *From the Picture Press, New York*, Museum of Modern Art, 1978, p. 5.

3. Jorge Ribalta. Introduction to "*Public Photographic Spaces: Exhibitions of Propaganda, from Pressa to The Family of Man, 1928–55*", MACBA, Barcelona, 2008

Fig 3.9:
Church of the Light
Tadao Ando Architect & Associates
Ibaraki-shi, Japan
1999

Fig 3.10:
"Time Machine"
Hiroshi Sugimoto
UCCA, Beijing
Mar, 2024 - June, 2025

Fig 3.11: "An-My Lê: Between Two Rivers" MoMA, New York Nov, 2023 - Oct, 2024

Fig 3.12: "Expanded" GAM, Turin May, 2024 - June, 2024

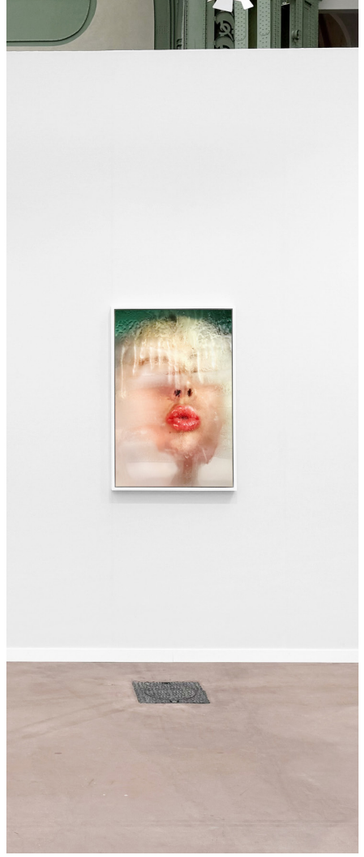


Fig 3.13: "Paris Photo" Grand Palais, Paris Nov, 2025

Fig 3.14: "Hiroshi Sugimoto Time Machine", UCCA, Beijing Mar, 2024 - June, 2025

Fig 3.15: "Don McCullin, Desecrated Serenity", Hauser & Wirth, New York Sept, 2025 - Nov, 2025

Fig 3.16: "Samuel Fosso Autoportrait" YOSSI MILO, New York Sept, 2025 - Nov, 2025

resting the feet while the eyes have at the wall. The art is free, as the saying used to go, "to take on its own life." The discreet desk may be the only piece of furniture [...]. Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial, the space is devoted to the technology of esthetics. Works of art are mounted, hung, scattered for study. Their ungrubby surfaces are untouched by time and its vicissitudes. Art exists in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of "period" (late modern), there is no time. This eternity gives the gallery a limbolike status; one has to have died already to be there [4]"

The gallery strips the artwork of anything that might cause it to be perceived as a non-artistic object; it is isolated from everything that might interfere with the evaluation of the artwork through its own artistic nature. The context must therefore be eliminated to facilitate the perception of non-artistic objects as such; this is the very condition for inclusion within the art museum.

This concept is theorized very well by the philosopher Walter Benjamin, who in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" discusses the distinction between two modes of art reception: Cult Value and Exhibition Value. The former has religious, magical, and ritual origins, which are synthesized in artistic practice. In this case, the presence of the artwork is dense and imbued with meaning, as can be the experience of a fresco or a mosaic in a place of worship. Exhibition value, on the other hand, comes into play when the artistic object becomes portable and reproducible, and therefore marketable.

The shift from "Cult" to "Exhibition Value" led to the replacement of religious mystery with the mystery of genius and artistic creation. This shift transformed museums into modern cathedrals, where the role of mediator between the public and art was assumed by the curator and the expert.

Benjamin believed that the reproducibility of photography and cinema would have the power to radically change the relationship between art and the public, creating universal and democratized access to works and their understanding. These tools were, in his view, fundamental to desacralizing art, as they allowed for a new perception of the work, one that was closer to and more understandable for the public.

Unfortunately, Benjamin's theories soon proved utopian, and following the theory of another great 20th-century philosopher, Theodor W. Adorno, photography and cinema conformed to the capitalist system, like all other arts, becoming themselves an "Exhibition Value."

The creation of a space outside of time and society promotes immobility in the real, non-ritual world, fostering a notion of the eternity of the status quo and artistic and social values. The aesthetic promoted in the white cube is that of timeless beauty and unchanging aesthetic values, which thus become a reiteration of the same, glorified sensibility. There is no room for new forms of expression. Art remains in the hands of the same groups who share that sensibility, leaving unexplored the possibility of greater social and artistic diversity, which could lead to new relationships with the public and society.

4. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999, p. 15.

III.3

THE WHITE BOX AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SPECTATOR

According to Irish art critic Brian O'Doherty, in order to enhance the timeless and placeless nature of the White Box, the public is relegated to the role of spectator, a not-too-sentient entity that experiences the gallery by occupying its space, yet is unable to truly grasp the meaning of the art it contains. In "Inside the White Cube," the author offers us a very clear vision of the spectator:

"*As we move around that space, looking at the walls, avoiding things on the floor, we become aware that that gallery also contains a wandering phantom frequently mentioned in avant-garde dispatches, the Spectator. Who is this Spectator, also called the Viewer, sometimes called the Observer, occasionally the Perceiver? It has no face, is mostly a back. It stoops and peers, is slightly clumsy. Its attitude is inquiring, its puzzlement discreet. He-I'm sure it is more male than female arrived with modernism, with the disappearance of perspective. He seems born out of the picture and, like some perceptual Adam, is drawn back repeatedly to contemplate it. The Spectator seems a little dumb; he is not you or me.*

Plunged into darkness, deprived of perceptual cues, blasted by strobes, he frequently watches his own image chopped up and recycled by a variety of media. Art conjugates him, but he is a sluggish verb, eager to carry the weight of meaning but not always up to it. He balances; he tests; he is mystified, demystified. In time, the Spectator stumbles around between confusing roles: he is a cluster of motor reflexes, a dark-adapted wanderer, the vivant in a tableau, an actor manque, even a trigger of sound and light in a space land-mined for art. He may even be told that he himself is an artist and be persuaded that his contribution to what he observes or trips over is its authenticating signature[5]"

However, another entity is accepted within the gallery, one for which the white cube was designed: the eye. It does not correspond to the actual visitor, but represents an abstract, disembodied, and idealized eye, capable of observing the artwork according to the codes of aesthetic contemplation. Unlike the Spectator, who brings their own body, subjectivity, and emotional reactions with them, the Eye can be "trained" to observe correctly and to focus exclusively on the formal aspects of the work, ignoring its content and any element extraneous to the aesthetic experience. It is to this pure and specialized eye that the white box is addressed: a space designed to eliminate anything that might disturb contemplation, including the physical and social presence of the viewer, considered a contingent and, in a certain sense, inferior element.

There is a strong inconsistency in the relationship between the eye and the viewer, as there is a sort of contradiction in

5. O'Doherty, Inside the White Cube, p. 39.

Fig 3.17:
"Making Visible", Ira Lombardia
Harlan Levey Projects, Brussels
Gen,2024 - Mar 2024

their interdependent existence. They are intended to be perceived as separate entities, yet one cannot exist without the other. The viewer's body is, in fact, what allows the eye to perceive the works in their entirety, adding the physical and spatial dimension that the eye, as an entity, lacks.

The gallery experience thus involves an abstraction, a detachment from the individual, who fragments into the role of observer and spectator, conventions that allow us to stifle the sense of meaninglessness we feel when visiting a gallery. The museum becomes hostile to the visitor, creating an experience that feels distant, enigmatic, and elitist, largely inaccessible to the public. Audiences may react by accepting a purely aesthetic and passive engagement with the work, becoming "eyes," or by distancing themselves from the artistic sphere.

The promise of the white box's universality and transparency thus translates into exclusion, into a weary, listless, and inattentive public observing art it does not understand. Once again, the failure of Benjamin's idea of the democratization of art through photography is keenly felt; instead of changing the system, it conforms to it, becoming increasingly abstract and decontextualized.

Fig 3.18: Martin Parr, Photographic Project "TuttaRoma" - Rome, 2006

Parr portrays tourists through the objects that define them, omitting the subjects themselves and leaving visible only what identifies them as visitors

III.4

IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL CIRCULATION

Nowadays, photography is not only experienced through books and exhibitions, it also exists concurrently in another space: the digital realm. The vast majority of images we encounter today come from the internet or social media, platforms that offer interactions and modes of access profoundly different from traditional ones.

In the essay "Understanding Photobooks: The Form and Content of the Photographic Book," German writer and photographer Jorg Colberg analyzes the main differences between the photobook, the digital format, and the exhibition. The first distinction concerns the consumption time, which is usually limited to a few months for an exhibition, but becomes virtually infinite in the case of books and digital formats, allowing for a return to and a constant relationship with the

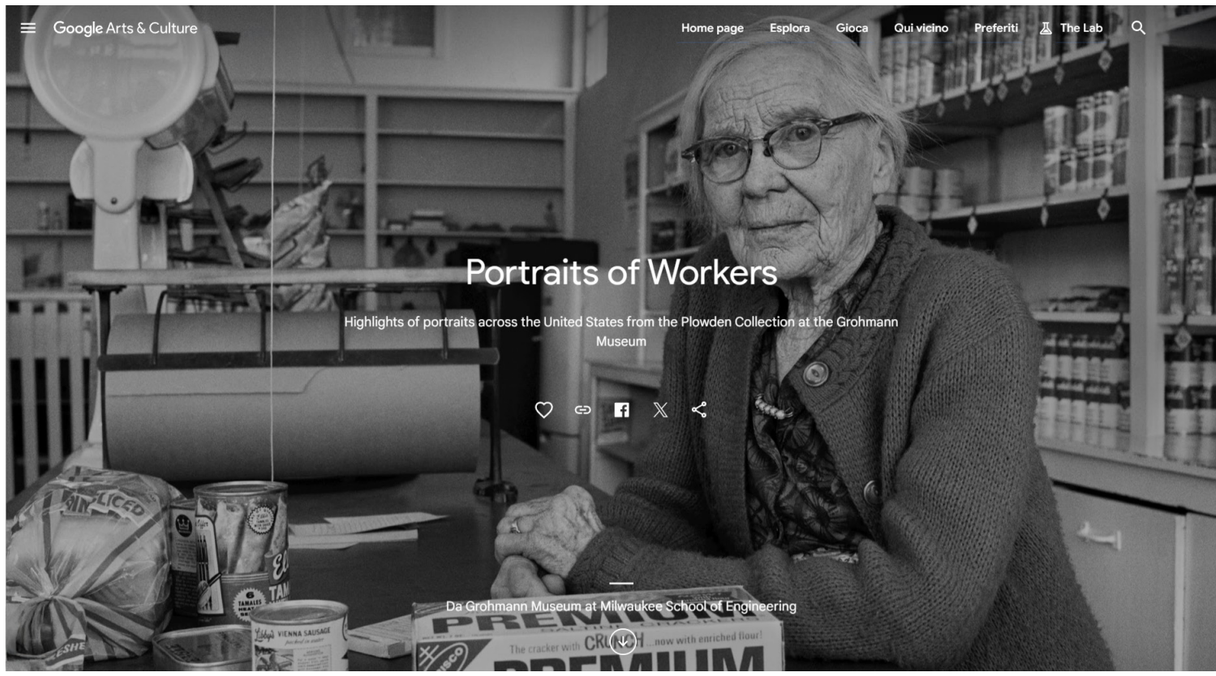


Fig 3.19: Google Arts and Culture "Portraits of Workers"

online exhibition that explores how photography has represented workers across different times and cultures. It reflects on themes of labor, identity, and social change. The digital format makes it accessible to a global audience.

work. Another fundamental difference is accessibility, both in economic and spatial terms. Access to the image via a book or the internet does not require an admission ticket and is not confined to a specific space; rather, it can be accessed from anywhere and at any time.
The greatest difference between digital media, books, and exhibitions lies, therefore, in the experience they are able to evoke. With a book, the relationship is more intimate, direct, and profound. This creates a lasting connection with the artwork, one based on repeated returns and constant consultation, a connection that can also emerge in the realm of digital exhibitions and publications. The social media experience, on the other hand, will be more casual, distracted, and fleeting, but it can still be useful for capturing the user's attention.
As for the act of exhibiting, however, as the French art historian Jean-François Chevrier argued, this creates necessary distance from the image-object for comparison and understanding. It thus proves to be the most comprehensive means of offering a complete perception of the artwork, one that arises through the physical and spatial relationship with gallery and image.

Visiting an exhibition is a collective experience that fosters reflection and dialogue. The philosophers Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge defined the public sphere as a place of meditation and social experience. The exhibition must therefore become a space for this mediation, which involves physical presence in a place and engagement with photography as a physical image, rather than as a reprint in a book or a digital format. Inside a museum, we view and absorb images simultaneously; this is why it is so important to develop these public spaces as sites for the production of culture, collective aesthetics, experience, and exchange.

The persistence of exhibition models like the White Box does not, therefore, foster the expansion of the art scene in an era when works are easily accessible through faster and free channels. Photography is particularly affected by this issue, as it can only partially benefit from the materiality and three-dimensionality that characterize other art forms. When it comes to photography, the layer added by an exhibition is precisely that of context and historical and social framing, as well as the comparison with other artists and other art forms.

The rise of social media and image-driven culture has further highlighted how the value of artistic photography no longer depends on its placement within a neutral museum setting. The distinction between artistic imagery and vernacular photography today stems primarily from the artist's conceptual, narrative, and formal choices, rather than from simply removing the image from its original context. Photography, therefore, no longer needs to rely on the "white box" to assert its artistic legitimacy.

Today more than ever, a photography exhibition must therefore offer the public an experience that goes beyond what is already available online: not merely the opportunity to view images, but to understand them through a curated journey, a narrative, and a direct relationship with the space and with other visitors. For this to happen, the museum can no longer simply present itself as a neutral and contemplative environment, but must be configured as an accessible and relational space, capable of establishing an authentic dialogue with the public. From this perspective, the limitations of the white box model are particularly evident.

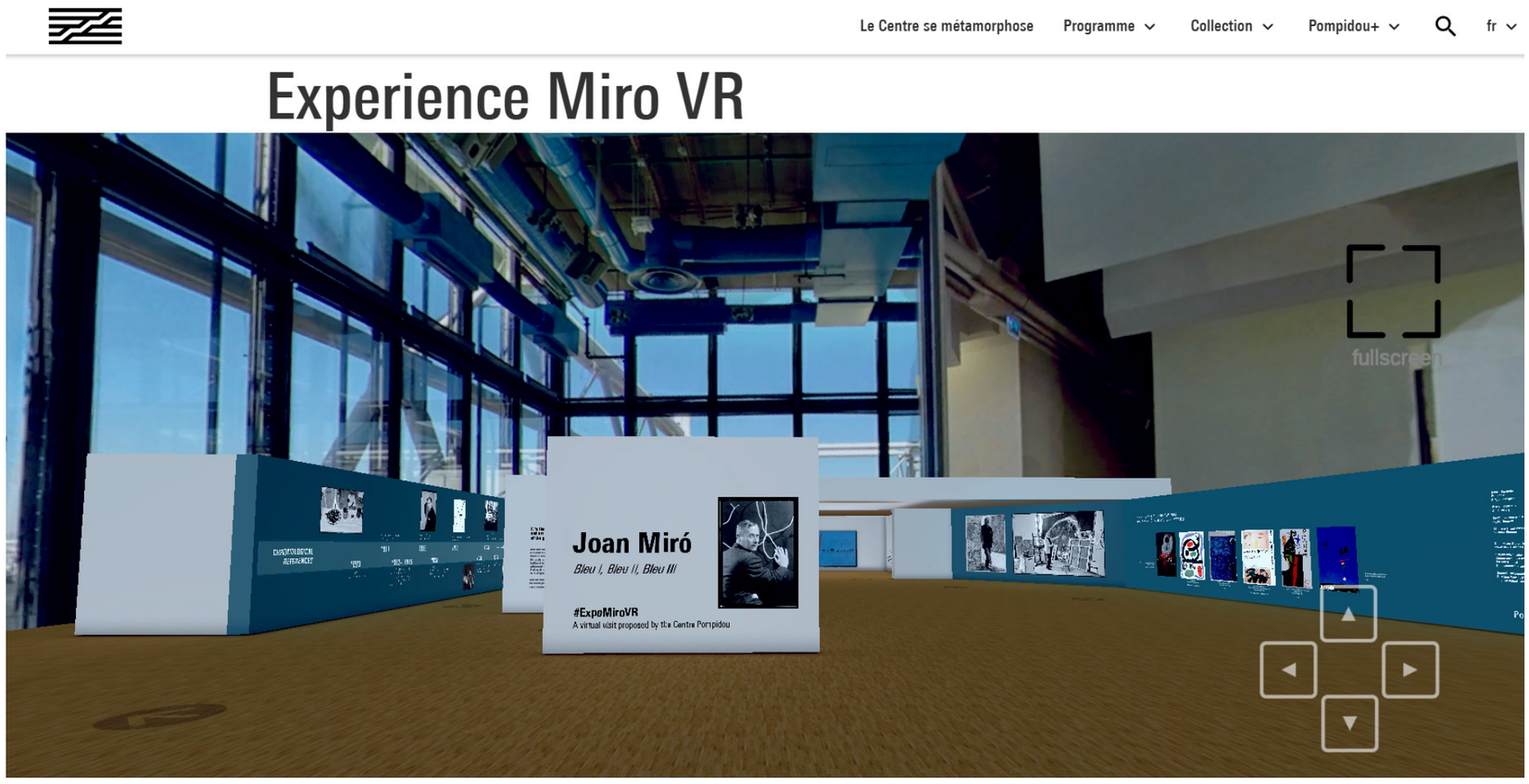


Fig 3.20: Centre Pompidou's online exhibition Les trois "Bleus" de Joan Miró

Visitors can virtually examine the three monumental canvases in detail while learning about Miró's creative process and the symbolic importance of the color blue in his work. The exhibition makes one of the museum's most iconic masterpieces accessible to audiences beyond the physical gallery space.

John Heartfield

Archiv
Frankfurt a. M.

IV.

Fig 4.1:
John Heartfield (Helmut Herzfeld)
The Hand Has Five Fingers
Poster for the German Communist Party shown in the Exhibition Film und Foto, 1928

Recontextualizing Photography: Case Studies

IV.1

CONTEXTUALIZE THROUGH SETTING

Film und foto

Städtische Ausstellungshallen, Stuttgart

18 May 1929 - 7 July 1929

The exhibition "*Film und Foto: Internationale Ausstellung des Deutschen Werkbunds*" opened in Stuttgart on May 18, 1929. Promoted and organized by the Deutscher Werkbund, the exhibition was held at the Städtische Ausstellungshallen and was the first major exhibition to explore photography without establishing any hierarchy among its uses and functions.

The exhibition was divided into thirteen rooms, each devoted to a different subject. Following an introductory section on the history and language of photography, visitors moved through a series of rooms dedicated to propaganda, scientific and, advertising photography, and photomontage.

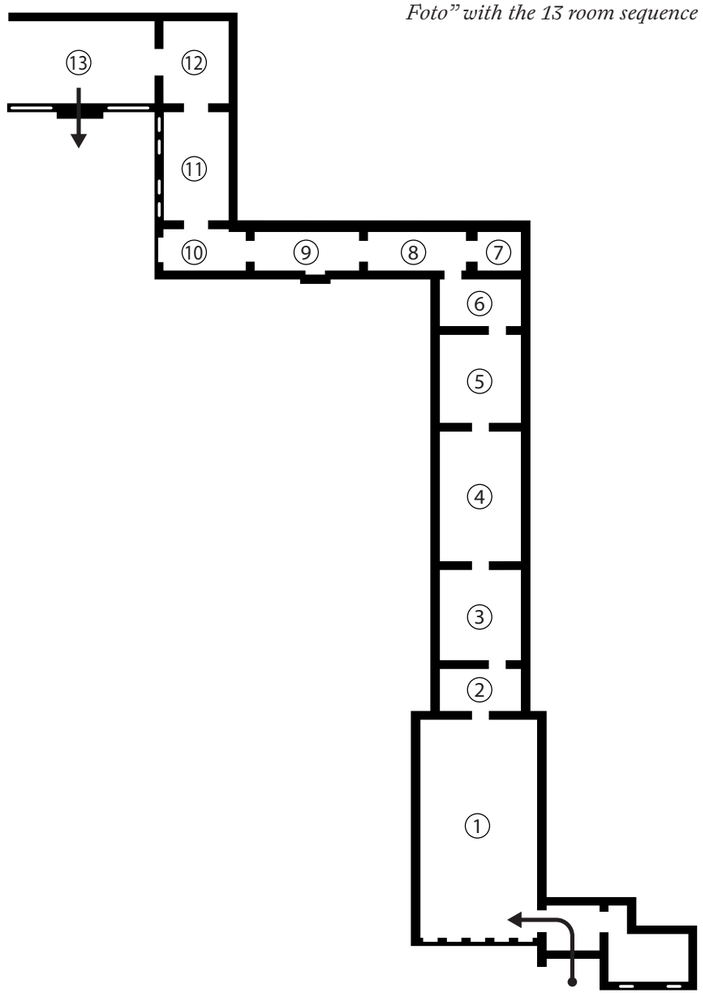


Fig 4.2:
Plan of the Exhibition "Film Und Foto" with the 13 room sequence

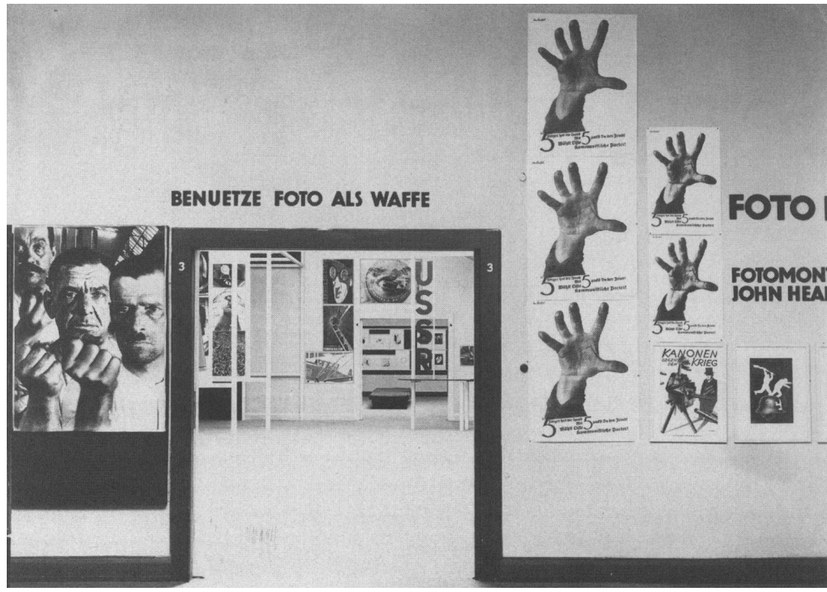
Fig 4.3:
Passersby on the street look at posters for the German Communist Party designed by John Heartfield

Fig 4.4, 4.5:
Display of posters and photomontages inside the Film und Foto exhibition

National sections were entrusted to widely recognized artists and scholars, including László Moholy-Nagy, Edward Steichen, El Lissitzky, and Man Ray.

A variety of curatorial styles coexisted within the exhibition, as different rooms were assigned to different designers. The introduction and first section were curated by László Moholy-Nagy, who presented the history of photography and the principles of the New Vision in an installation that still closely recalled the traditional salon-style hanging, translated onto freestanding supports placed in the center of the room. Its most radical innovation was the complete absence of distinctions among the various genres of photography, in accordance with the principle of the Found Photograph.

Particularly noteworthy were the rooms designed by John Heartfield, devoted to commercial photography and the technique of photomontage, which



was widely used by the Berlin Dadaists.

At the center of the room, Heartfield placed display cases in which he arranged some installations made using the publications that featured his images on their covers, in a manner typical of the display windows of commercial bookstores of the period. On the walls, manifesto photographs were repeated many times and combined with large slogans, recreating the powerful and immersive visual effect of street posters. One of the posters included in the exhibition was in fact one of Heartfield's own masterpieces: the five-finger poster for the German Communist Party, designed in 1928.
This room fulfilled exceptionally well the role of presenting photography as a medium of mass communication. Without the use of superfluous explanations, through the placement of images in space and their juxtaposition with a few essential elements, the photographs came to life without losing their artistic significance.

Another compelling approach to exhibition design was offered by the Russian room created by El Lissitzky. The photojournalism images on display were selected to present different aspects of everyday life among Russian people. Lissitzky combined these photographs within a complex light wooden structure that allowed them to be suspended at widely varying heights. This solution emphasized the boldness of certain perspectives and produced an overall composition reminiscent of the geometric structure of a Suprematist work, immersing visitors directly in the context represented. To further reinforce this sense of context, two large viewing devices designed by Sergei Eisenstein enabled spectators to watch excerpts from films, evoking even more vividly the original setting from which the images were drawn.

Fig 4.6: El Lissitzky Russian room, "Film und Foto exhibition"

Oliviero Toscani: Photography and Provocation

Museum für Gestaltung, Zurich
12 April 2024 – 5 January 2025

The exhibition, held at the Museum für Gestaltung in Zurich, showcases the entire Oliviero Toscani archive for the first time.

Photographer, creative director, and photo editor, Toscani revolutionized advertising, rising to fame with his campaigns for the Italian fashion house Benetton, which were as iconic as they were controversial. In Europe, he established himself as an advertising and fashion photographer who made visual provocation his signature style. The exhibition featured numerous enlargements, prints, publications, and interactive sections. Upon entering the central hall, visitors found themselves surrounded by enlarged photographs, displayed as if they were large billboards posted on the streets, a sort of evocation of an ideal Times Square, the perfect way to evoke advertising photography. A large number of images, varying in height, size, and angle, surrounded the visitor and invited them to explore.

Each of the surrounding rooms featured an in-depth look at one of Oliviero Toscani's campaigns, such as those on anorexia, AIDS, or the brutality of the Italian police. The rooms all displayed the final billboard, some of the images selected by the photographer for the campaign, and the magazines

Fig 4.7: Central roon of the installation "Oliviero Toscani: Photography and Provocation" with billboards

in which the advertisements appeared.

The room dedicated to the editing process was particularly interesting; it featured a large interactive installation consisting of a huge table covered with images that visitors could move around and arrange, allowing them to experience the process of selection and decision-making inherent in advertising photography.

Through positioning, a well-thought-out arrangement of the images, and interactive activities, the exhibition made the original context of the photographs extremely clear to the public. The result is a better-informed audience, which is not treated merely as a passive element but is welcomed by the museum with an open and proactive spirit.

Fig 4.8: Central roon of the installation "Oliviero Toscani: Photography and Provocation" with billboards

Fig 4.9: Room dedicated to editing, with images displayed on the table in the center of the room

Fig 4.10: Magazine room, with numerous editions displayed in the display case at the center of the room

Next page, Fig 4.11: Installation views of the exhibition "Auto-Photo: A Life in Portraits"

Auto-Photo: A Life in Portraits

RMIT Gallery, Melbourne

5 June – 16 August 2025

The exhibition Auto-Photo: A Life in Portraits brought together an eclectic collection drawn from the archive of Alan Adler, the world's oldest and longest-serving photobooth technician: for more than fifty years, Adler maintained a fleet of photobooths across Melbourne.

The exhibition presented the extraordinary breadth of Adler's collection: self-portraits taken to test the machines, photographs left behind by strangers inside the booths, and images of the photobooths themselves, made to monitor their condition. Through this archive, visitors were immersed in the world of a man who devoted his life to photography, through a perspective that was both playful and unexpected.

The exhibition opened with a historical introduction to the photobooth and its many uses, before turning to Adler his photographs. The walls displayed a combination of original-format prints and enlargements which, arranged in sequence, traced the course of the technician-photographer's life. The decision to present both formats simultaneously allowed visitors to appreciate the complete history of the images, as well

as their material origins alongside their formal qualities.

The third room was devoted to the found photographs—pictures abandoned by their sitters in the photobooths and later collected by Adler. The images on the walls were accompanied by albums and archival documents. Period documents and postcards were also included to demonstrate how photobooth portraits were mounted on identity cards and passports, but also exchanged as tokens of love and friendship.

The exhibition did full justice to Adler's work and to the artistic and collecting approach he brought to his practice. By carefully explaining the context and provenance of the images, the exhibition allowed the photographs to tell the story of a man's life and his enduring passion for photography.

Fig 4.11, Installation view. First room of the exhibition "Auto-Photo: A Life in Portraits"

4.12, 4.13: Installation view of the second room of the exhibition "Auto-Photo: A Life in Portraits": Room of found photography

Next Page, Fig 4.14: An enlarged version of a self-portrait by Adler displayed alongside the photos from the photo booth

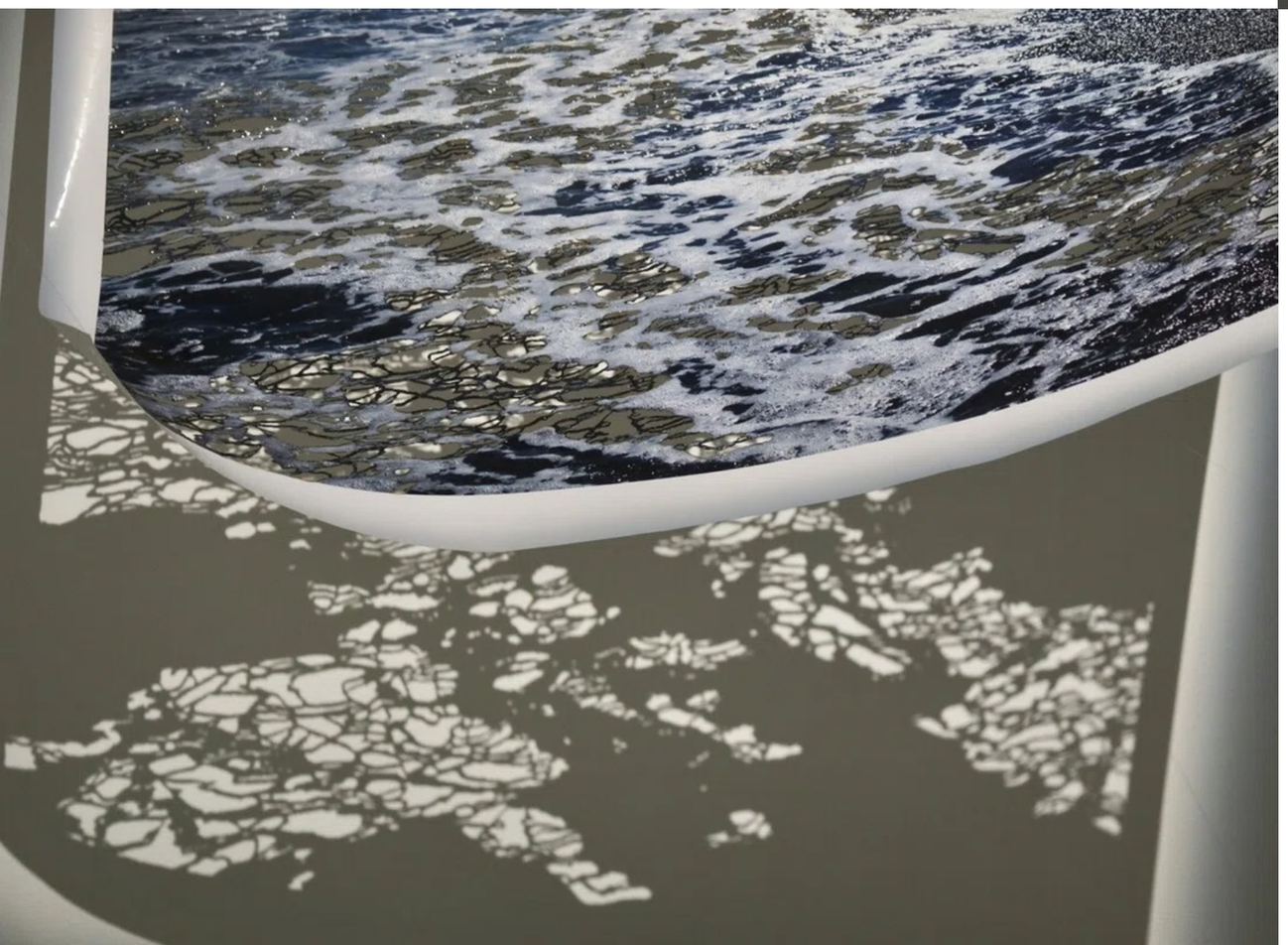
Seeing as though touching: Contemporary Japanese Photography vol.19

Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, Tokyo

2 September 2022 – 11 December 2022

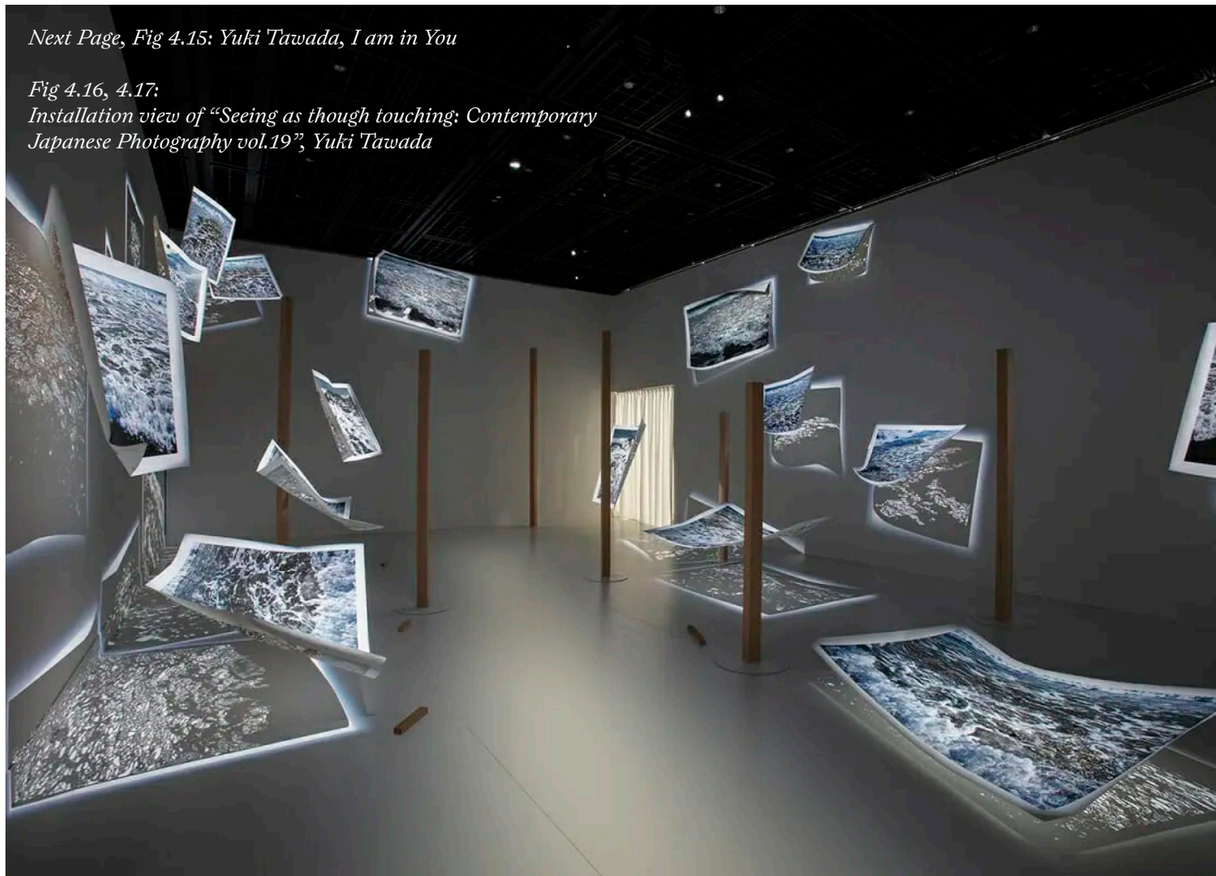
In the room dedicated to Yuki Tawada within the exhibition *Seeing as though touching: Contemporary Japanese Photography vol.19*, the installation was conceived as a rarefied and imaginative space, where the photographs of the sea seemed to emerge directly from the exhibition environment. The works were arranged along the walls in a slightly irregular pattern, as if they were being pushed or moved by the very waves depicted in the images. This installation choice suggested a continuity between the photographed subject and the exhibition space, making the photographs appear as living, moving presences.

The images, part of the series I am in You, depict marine surfaces that were printed and subsequently hand-burned by the artist: the sections corresponding to the water are perforated, while the foam and reflections remain intact, transforming the photograph into a fragile, three-dimensional object. The soft lighting highlighted the charred edges and the paper's translucency, accentuating its material quality. In this context, the photograph no longer appeared as a simple two-dimensional surface, but as a physical, almost sculptural body that established a direct relationship with the visitor and fully conveyed the exhibition's theme: "seeing as if touching."



Next Page, Fig 4.15: Yuki Tawada, I am in You

Fig 4.16, 4.17:
Installation view of "Seeing as though touching: Contemporary Japanese Photography vol.19", Yuki Tawada



IV.2

EXPLAIN WITH WORDS

Jens S. Jensen Public Exhibitions

In the mid-1960s in the Nordic countries, and especially in Sweden, photography had not yet become as established as in other countries; consequently, there were no institutions or preservation centers to regulate the circulation of photographs within a market where they were sold as valuable commodities. Photographers carried out commissioned projects, paid by books or magazines, and did not sell their prints.

In the early 1970s, things began to change, culminating in 1974 with the Fotografiska Museet, the first collective presentation of Swedish photography, which launched young documentary photographers, including Jens S. Jensen.

For Jensen, it was important to connect his projects to the people who were their protagonist, therefore he began showing the photographs in cafés and schools prior to his exhibitions. The layout of photographs was very different from the cold, conceptual presentation found in art galleries. The images were mounted on large white cardboard sheets, laminated for easy hanging, and accompanied by detailed explanatory texts describing the time, place, and, above all, the subject of the photograph.

The fact that the exhibition was guided by practical considerations, prioritizing the narrative of the image over its aesthetics, was typical of the politically engaged photography of the 1970s. The main goal was not to establish themselves as artists, but to address issues that were crucial to combating social injustice. Exhibitions were organized in public spaces teeming with ordinary people: cafes, schools, bookstores, and universities were thus filled with photography, designed to spark dialogue and catalyze change. Although the images often proved to be artistically significant, they were not viewed as objects to be monetized. Their value lay in the intermediary role they played, in their rapid reproducibility, and in their communicative immediacy, a practice that came very close to the utopian vision of engaging the public imagined by Benjamin.

After this brief interlude, photography in Swedenstarted to conform to that of the rest of the world, giving rise to an increasing number of institutions and centers that regulated its exchange as an art object, bringing an end to a great experiment in social change.

Fig 4.18: Opening of Jens S. Jensen's exhibition Hammarkullen, shown at the cafeteria in the local school, 1974

Kyoto world press Exhibition 2024

Kyoto Shimbun Building, B1F

30 November – 29 December 2024

World Press Photo Foundation is a non-profit organization that promotes and supports photojournalism and documentary photography around the world. Every year, World Press Photo organizes one of the most important and prestigious photography competitions in the world, followed by a travelling exhibition hosted each year in a different country.

The 2024 exhibition in Kyoto was particularly noteworthy and innovative for its exhibition design, which transformed photojournalism into a real and immersive experience. The exhibition was hosted in the basement of the Kyoto Shimbun Building, the former printing headquarters of Kyoto's historic newspaper. The industrial space was intentionally preserved in its raw and material character. Defined by exposed concrete, low ceilings, visible industrial systems, and large open surfaces, the environment contributed to create an atmosphere capable of amplifying the political and emotional weight of the images.

At the center of the exhibition stood a large rotary printing press that recalled both the history of the building and the nature of the photographs on display. A printed paper roll, designed like a newspaper, carried information about the exhibition itself.

The photographs were accompanied by extensive descriptive texts that clearly explained the context in which each image had been taken. The coexistence of text and image created an alternation between moments of understanding and more intimate contemplation, generating a visual rhythm that guided visitors through themes such as war, humanitarian crises, and environmental disasters. The absence of a rigid linear path further reinforced the sensation of moving through a living archive of the present, composed of visual fragments drawn from diverse political and geographical contexts.

Fig 4.19, 4.20: Kyoto world press Exhibition 2024

Fig 4.21: Photo of the Year: "A Palestinian Woman Holding the Body of Her Niece", Mohamed Salem

“The executions need to be carried out discreetly in the nearest camp”: Photos of the Soviet prisoners of war murdered in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp 75 years ago

Gedenkstätte Sachsenhausen Memorial, Oranienburg

6 November 2016 - 18 June 2017

The exhibition tells the story of Soviet prisoners murdered by the Nazis in concentration camps. Upon their arrival at the camps, the SS photographed the prisoners in order to use the images for wartime political propaganda. Sixty-nine of these photographs were preserved and secretly safeguarded by fellow prisoners. The Sachsenhausen Memorial and Museum later chose to revive the memory of these victims through an exhibition created in collaboration with the design studio chezweitz.

The exhibition space is dominated by the prisoners’ portraits, printed in large format on translucent gauze fabric and positioned so that the subjects’ eyes meet those of the viewer. This arrangement establishes a powerful sense of humanity and empathy between the audience and the victims. At the same time, the placement of the images evokes the presence of a ghostly army, suggesting the remains of a fragmented and fading platoon that was brutally annihilated.

The scenography seeks to counteract the dehumanization inflicted upon the victims’ bodies within the camp, restoring dignity and importance to those who were killed.

As visitors move deeper into the exhibition, a question inevitably arises: why? The exhibition therefore recounts the events and their historical context, including the perspective of the Nazis themselves, in order to ensure that the horror is fully understood and never repeated. Graphs, documents, letters, and additional photographs are displayed on long tables interspersed among the large portraits of the prisoners, encouraging visitors to engage with the material slowly and thoughtfully through reading and reflection. The exhibition also included audio stations where visitors could sit and listen to testimonies from survivors, becoming even more deeply immersed in the history being recounted

Fig 4.22, 4.23, 4.24: Installation from the exhibition “The executions need to be carried out discreetly in the nearest camp”: Photos of the Soviet prisoners of war murdered in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp 75 years ago

IV.3

CONTEXTUALIZE THROUGH COMBINATION

A Guide for the Protection of Public in Peacetime

Tate Modern - London

26 November 2014 – 15 March 2015

Curated by Timothy Prus and Ed Jones, the exhibition at the Tate Modern brought together an extraordinary and extensive collection of photographs and objects from the Archive of Modern Conflict, an organization dedicated to collecting and preserving vernacular photographs, objects, artefacts, curiosities, and ephemera. The exhibition adopted a highly eccentric and innovative display strategy, deliberately avoiding conventional museum practices. As Prus explained:

> “ One of the atmospheres we were trying to create was of a kind of private, outsider-like museum experience, as you would have in a garage or a garden shed, where a person has curated something without reference to current museum techniques of display ”

The gallery space was covered in various wallpapers and featured parquet flooring, creating the impression of a domestic environment, evoking the very context from which many of the photographs and objects on display originally came.

The collection combined photographs by renowned photographers like Robert Capa and Lee Miller, with images taken by unknown individuals, alongside objects drawn from family memories and personal keepsakes. Together, these elements formed a remarkably harmonious whole, constructing an alternative reflection on war that, rather than focusing on major historical events, explored what everyday life looked like while those events were unfolding. The photographs, hung on the walls as though inside a domestic interior, were combined with posters, postcards, and archival objects, creating new and compelling visual relationships inspired by the collage technique.

Suspended between an archival exhibition and a period room, the exhibition made the context from which the photographs emerged strikingly clear, presenting them not only as objects to be admired, but also as deeply personal artefacts and documents of historical significance.

Fig 4.25: Exhibition room “A Guide for the Protection of Public in Peacetime”

Fig 4.26: Detail of the exhibition showing vernacular pictures

Raymond Depardon

Power Station of Art - Shanghai

22 April – 23 July 2023

Bringing together around one hundred photographs alongside a feature film, La Vie moderne portrays the French rural landscape through the perspective of its inhabitants, while exploring universal issues connected to contemporary rural life, such as the survival of farms in a world where professions are becoming increasingly industrialized, and the impact of urbanization on the countryside.

“ In the beginning, there are these roads. At the end of the roads, there are farms ”

This quotation by Raymond Depardon, which opens his feature film La Vie moderne, perfectly summarizes the exhibition design concept, conceived as an open territory that invites visitors to walk through and explore the collection. Central panels rise throughout the space like spontaneous trees, alternately displaying photographs and excerpts from the documentary film that recount the lives and stories of the people portrayed in the images.

Cinema and photography thus become inseparable, mutually enriching one another by adding increasingly deep and intimate layers of understanding within a journey of discovery, where changes in scale, shifting points of view, and the representation of territory generate immersive pathways for the visitor.

Although the installation may recall the aesthetics of a white box gallery, the sense of decontextualization disappears in a display where the images are explained through the words of the subjects themselves. Their voices restore both their stories and their faces to the public, narrating not only the photographs, but also the roots and struggles of a place into which the visitor is gradually drawn.

Furthermore, the decision to project the videos on such a large scale helps visitors immerse themselves in the landscapes they are observing, according to an approach in which the documentary itself becomes a form of scenography. The exhibition path ends with a small amphitheater-like space where visitors can sit and watch the whole documentary, already feeling partially immersed in those places and with the awareness of encountering a story that has already become familiar to them.

Fig 4.27, 4.28:
A view of the “Raymond Depardon” exhibition, featuring a combination of photographs and related videos taken from the documentary “La Vie moderne”

Paolo Ventura: Carousel

CAMERA: Centro Italiano per la Fotografia - Torino

17 September 2020 – 28 February 2021

The exhibition Carousel presents the work of one of the most internationally acclaimed Italian photographers, Paolo Ventura. Suspended between art, photography, and theatre, Ventura's works recreate small fairy-tale and surreal worlds, which are then captured through the photographic lens.

The exhibition at CAMERA - Centro Italiano per la Fotografia features some of the artist's most evocative works from the past fifteen years, drawn from various collections as well as from Ventura's own studio. The display creates a continuous interplay of artistic languages, incorporating drawings, maquettes, stage sets, papier-mâché masks, and theatrical costumes.

Rather than following a chronological order or presenting a traditional retrospective, the exhibition path aims to stage the central themes of Ventura's poetics, including duality, memory, and fiction.

Throughout the galleries, the photographs are displayed alongside the objects and scenographic elements that appear within them, creating a compelling synergy between image and material presence. Visitors therefore do not simply observe the finished photographs, but are also invited to engage with their creative process, perceiving their physicality, artifice, and narrative dimension through the exhibition of the original sets and props.

The brightly coloured walls and spontaneous-looking inscriptions, seemingly painted directly onto the walls with a brush, further enhance the playful and theatrical atmosphere of the exhibition. In this way, the exhibition design becomes fully aligned with the imaginative universe of the works and with the artist's visionary poetics.

Fig 4.29:
A view of the "Paolo Ventura: Carousel" exhibition. The photographs are accompanied by portraits of the artist's models and quotes from the artist.

Fig 4.30: A view of the "Paolo Ventura: Carousel" exhibition. View of the hallway displaying the photo captions

Design Proposal

V.

Fig 5.1:
Publifoto Photo Set, March 1969, Elba Island.

V.1
DESIGN PROPOSAL

The initial project brief takes shape based on analysis developed in the previous chapters. The design concept stems from an examination of one of Italy's leading institutions dedicated to photography: CAMERA – Italian Center for Photography.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely disrupted Turin's museum system, and the opening in 2022 of the new Gallerie d'Italia museum in Turin, the institution has gradually shifted its programming toward archival exhibitions and major figures in the history of photography, leaving experimentation and contemporary photography to the newer center. This transformation has led to a gradual reduction in curatorial innovation, often limited to the use of the white-box exhibition model, with sporadic use of color as the sole element of spatial variation.

Exhibitions dedicated to archives thus tend to take on a highly uniform character: the same color schemes, the same types of frames, and similar methods of presenting the works recur. This standardization contributes to a limited critical understanding of the archives on display, even in the case of key figures in the history of photography. While maintaining a fundamental role in Turin's photographic landscape, the center seems to address mainly an audience of enthusiasts and specialists, assuming an increasingly marginal position with respect to a broader, more diverse audience.

The project therefore stems from the desire to overcome the strong spatial neutrality that characterizes the museum and tends to negate any form of active interaction with the photographic image. The goal is to conceive an archival exhibition capable of providing a more nuanced understanding of the works on display, engaging an audience that is not necessarily expert or a frequent visitor to the museum. As highlighted in the preceding theoretical analysis, the project aims to reconstruct the context of the images, moving beyond the traditional white-box paradigm, in which photography is presented exclusively as an object of aesthetic contemplation.

Selected images for the exhibition come from the Publifoto Archive. Acquired from the Intesa Sanpaolo collection in 2015, the archive constitutes one of the most significant visual records of 20th-century Italy, bringing together the photographic legacy produced by reporters from the Publifoto Agency, one of the leading photojournalism organizations of the last century.

Housed in Turin, the archive has long maintained a collaborative relationship with CAMERA – Italian Center for Photography, which has been overseeing its restoration, promotion, and exhibition since the years preceding the founding of the Gallerie d'Italia. The proposed exhibition thus also serves as an effort to make the strong bond between the two institutions visible to the public, highlighting a cultural synergy that helps consolidate Turin's role as one of the leading centers of photography in Italy.

Fig 5.1:
Immigrant from southern Italy, just arrived in Milan, 25 june 1962 - Image from the Publifoto Archive

V.2
LOCAL CONTEXT

The rebirth of Turin: from industrial city to cultural hub

Turin is often associated exclusively with its past as an industrial city, closely linked to the development of the automotive sector and the presence of FIAT. While this image is not entirely inaccurate, it does not fully capture the complexity of the role the city has played in the economic, social, and cultural development of contemporary Italy.

Following a period of gradual crisis in the traditional industrial model, Turin began, starting in the 2000s, a process of urban and identity reconfiguration aimed at building a new profile as a city of culture, research, and higher education. In this context, Turin's university system has taken on a central role in strengthening the city's cultural dimension, contributing to its transformation into an attractive hub on a national and international level. A decisive moment in this transformation was the 2006 Winter Olympics, which served as a significant catalyst for urban and cultural regeneration. During this phase, the city benefited from major infrastructure investments and the conversion of numerous abandoned industrial areas into public and cultural spaces, while also initiating a gradual repositioning within the international tourism circuit.

Some of the key initiatives to promote Turin's cultural heritage included the restoration of the Reggia di Venaria Reale, the launch of a renovation project for the Egyptian Museum, the consolidation of the National Cinema Museum, housed within the Mole Antonelliana, and the creation of the National Automobile Museum, which maintains a direct link to the city's industrial heritage.
In parallel with these initiatives, a process of converting industrial heritage into spaces dedicated to contemporary culture has gradually taken hold. Significant examples of this trend include the Officine Grandi Riparazioni Torino, a former railway complex transformed into a center for contemporary art, music, innovation, and photography, and the Lingotto complex, converted from a FIAT industrial plant into a multifunctional hub hosting trade fairs and cultural events, such as the Turin Book Fair.

In this context, Turin emerges as a "laboratory city," where the relationship between industrial heritage and cultural production is continually renegotiated through urban regeneration projects, cultural policies, and institutional investments. This process has fostered the development of a model based on the conversion of industrial infrastructure into cultural infrastructure and on the growing integration of historical heritage and contemporary culture.

Photography in Turin

Starting in 2015, Turin began to consolidate its role within the national and international photography scene, devoting increasing attention not only to exhibition programming but also to related activities such as conservation, restoration, education, and archival preservation. It was in this context that CAMERA – Italian Center for Photography was founded, an institution established with the aim of promoting photographic culture through exhibitions, educational activities, research, and outreach. From its opening, CAMERA has served as a hub connecting the city to the international photography scene, fostering ongoing dialogue with artists, archives, and cultural institutions in Italy and abroad.

That same year marked another significant milestone for Turin's photography scene: the Intesa Sanpaolo Group acquired the Intesa Sanpaolo Publifoto Archive, one of the most important historical archives of Italian photojournalism, comprising millions of images taken throughout the 20th century. Initially, the archive's collection was showcased through temporary exhibitions organized at CAMERA and other Italian museums. However, the public's growing interest in photography and photographic archives led Intesa Sanpaolo to launch a broader museum development project.

In 2022, the Turin branch of Gallerie d'Italia, designed by Michele De Lucchi through the renovation and expansion of Palazzo Turinetti in Piazza San Carlo, opened its doors. The museum was established as a space dedicated primarily to the preservation and exhibition of the Publifoto Archive, while also hosting temporary exhibitions focused on historical and contemporary photography.
Alongside the growth of these institutions, photography has taken on an increasingly central role within Turin's cultural landscape, becoming a permanent fixture in the programming of the city's museums, foundations, and exhibition spaces, including the GAM (Civic Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art), the OGR (Officine Grandi Riparazioni Torino), the Turin State Archives, and the Royal Museums.

The consolidation of this cultural network finds a significant synthesis in the birth of EXPOSED Torino Foto Festival, a widespread international festival that involves numerous city institutions and galleries, transforming Turin into an exhibition platform dedicated to contemporary photography. Through collaboration between museums, foundations, and galleries, the festival highlights the creation of a true urban "photographic network," capable of connecting heritage, curatorial research, and contemporary experimentation.

Museums offering photography exhibitions in Turin

1. CAMERA - Centro Italiano per la Fotografia
2. Gallerie d’Italia Torino
3. GAM - Galleria di Arte Moderna
4. OGR - Officine Grandi Riparazioni
5. Circolo del Design
6. Archivio di Stato di Torino
7. Musei Reali di Torino
8. JEST - Spazio per la Fotografia
9. CRIPTA 747 - Centro Culturale Indipendente
10. MuchoMas! - Artist-run space

Fig 5.2: Entrance to the Museum Camera - Italian Center for Photography. On the side, banners for the 2026 exhibition on Edward Weston

V.3

CAMERA – ITALIAN CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY

Since 2015, Turin has been steadily consolidating its role within the national and international photography scene, devoting increasing attention not only to exhibitions but also to the areas of conservation, education, and archival preservation. It is within this context that CAMERA – Italian Center for Photography was established, a foundation created through a broad public-private partnership with the aim of creating a center entirely dedicated to photography. Since its opening, CAMERA has positioned itself as an institution focused on connecting with the local and international cultural landscape, promoting exhibitions, educational activities, research, training, and the preservation of photographic heritage. The center's ambition is to become a leading institution for contemporary Italian photography, establishing an ongoing dialogue with artists, archives, and international institutions.

The museum's establishment was made possible in part by funding from the European Union through the Regional Operational Program of the European Regional Development Fund (POR-FESR Piedmont Region 2007–2013), as part of policies aimed at enhancing and protecting cultural and environmental heritage.

The site chosen for the new center is the former convent of San Giuseppe, located at 18 Via delle Rosine, within the Santa Pelagia block. The building, constructed between 1845 and 1870, once housed the operations of the Regia Opera della Mendicità, under which some of the first free schools in the Kingdom of Sardinia were established. Its location in the city's historic center, between Piazza Vittorio Veneto and Piazza Castello, a short distance from the Mole Antonelliana and Turin's main cultural hubs, underscores from the outset the intention to integrate the new museum into the city's cultural and tourist network.

In 2014, the project to restore and repurpose the building was entrusted to architect Benedetto Camerana (Camerana&Partners), a firm particularly active in Turin's contemporary architectural scene. The building's original layout consisted of a sequence of seven large rooms connected by a long vaulted corridor. The architectural intervention aimed to transform these historic spaces into a contemporary exhibition center capable of hosting not only exhibitions but also educational, archival, and design activities.

The primary design decision involves restoring the original 19th-century structure by removing subsequent additions deemed incongruous. The layout is thus preserved and reinterpreted to offer two distinct exhibition formats: on one hand, the long central corridor, which provides nearly seventy linear meters of exhibition wall space; and on the other, the system of side rooms, conceived as independent yet fluidly connected spaces. This spatial organization allows for the

Main attractions in Turin

1. CAMERA
2. Giardini Cavour
3. Giardini Balbo
4. Murazzi
5. Chiesa della Gran Madre di Dio
6. Ponte Vittorio Emanuele I
7. Piazza Vittorio Veneto
8. Via Po
9. Mole Antonelliana
10. Giardini Reali si Torino
11. Musei Reali
12. Palazzo Madama
13. Teatro Regio di Torino
14. Piazza Castello
15. Palazzo Carignano
16. Museo Egizio
17. Gallerie d'Italia
18. Piazza San Carlo
19. Via Roma
20. Porta Nuova Station

creation of a continuous loop, facilitating the management of entry and exit flows.

The spaces are also equipped with plasterboard false walls integrated into the architectural space, designed to ensure high flexibility in exhibition setup and, at the same time, the reversibility of the interventions. The space thus takes on a neutral and abstract character, clearly reminiscent of the contemporary White Box model.
As Camerana himself stated:

> *“The spaces have been painted pure white, a non-color universally associated with exhibition spaces, which focuses attention on CAMERA’s primary objective: the education of the gaze. […] The enveloping white is contrasted solely by the original graniglia flooring, renovated and polished, the only tangible and material element that connects the visitor to the history of the place, past and present”* [1]

The space was thus conceived from the outset as a neutral and flexible environment, designed to adapt to different modes of photographic exhibition. In this sense, CAMERA represents a significant example of the contemporary application of the White Box model to photography, presenting itself as an abstract space in which the visitor’s attention is focused almost exclusively on the exhibited image.

In its early years, this spatial neutrality was often reinterpreted through particularly immersive exhibition designs characterized by a strong visual identity. Exhibitions such as Paolo Ventura: Carousel, analyzed in the previous chapter, demonstrate how the White Box is temporarily “dressed” through scenographic and installation elements capable of radically altering the perception of space.

Particularly in the period following the Covid-19 pandemic and the establishment of Gallerie d’Italia Torino, a gradual redefinition of CAMERA’s role within the city’s photographic ecosystem appears to be emerging. The institution has, in fact, shown a growing focus on historical and archival photography, while its curatorial approach appears to be increasingly oriented toward more traditional and less experimental methods, further reinforcing the center’s identification with the White Box exhibition model.

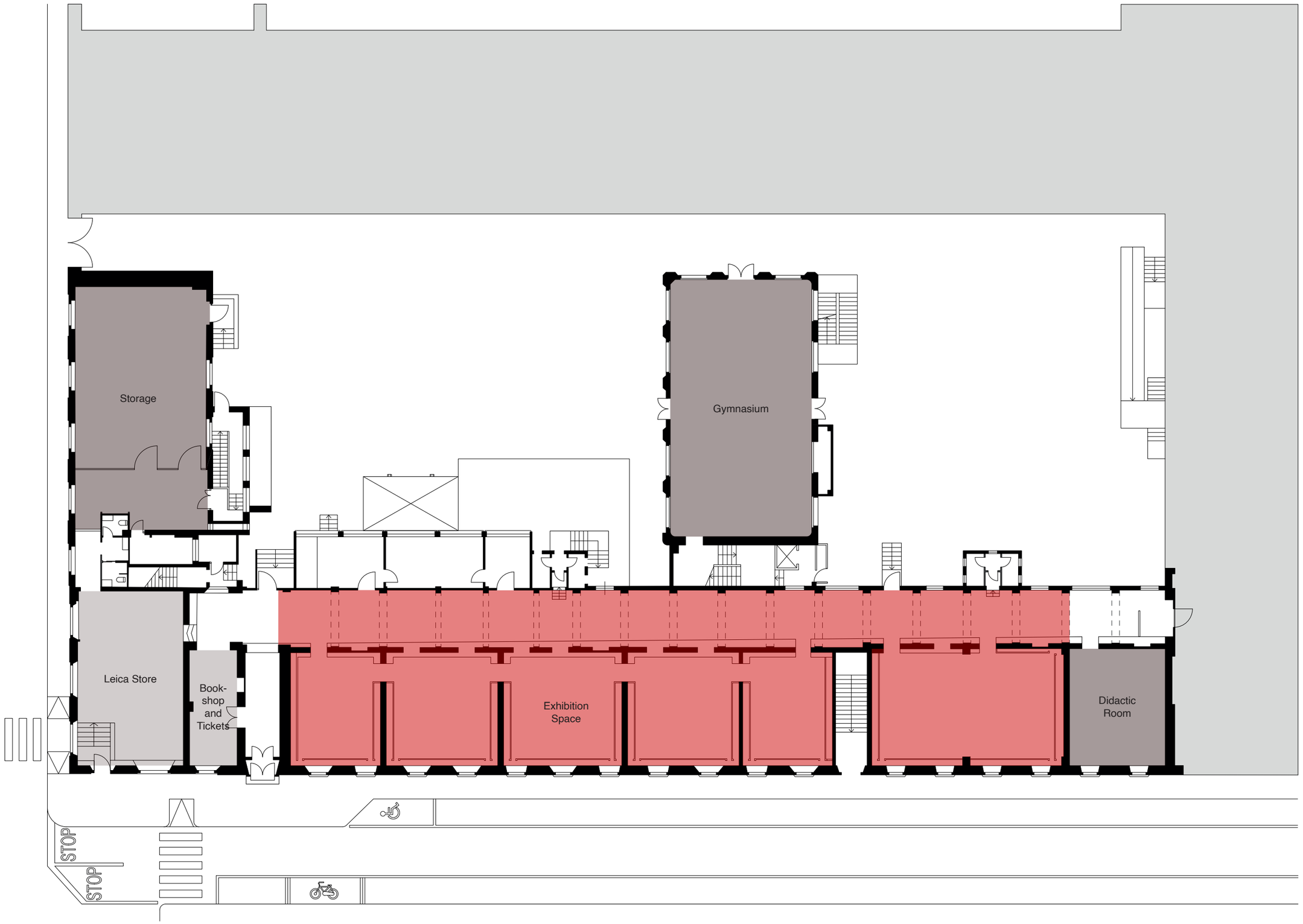
In 2023, the museum underwent a major renovation project designed by Studio Ata, aimed primarily at improving the physical and sensory accessibility of the spaces. The project also included the opening of a new exhibition hall, thereby allowing for the simultaneous hosting of two exhibitions. A central element of the project is the addition of a new structure made of light-colored wood, situated between the entrance and the bookshop. This architectural feature defines a new internal “room” that connects two previously separate spaces, expanding and brightening the entrance area. The new space serves simultaneously as a ticket office, bookstore, and retail area, streamlining the management of public services.

Although the renovation significantly improved the accessibility and quality of the common areas, it does not appear to have substantially altered the exhibition methods adopted in subsequent shows, suggesting that the center’s main limitations are not necessarily linked to architecture, but rather to

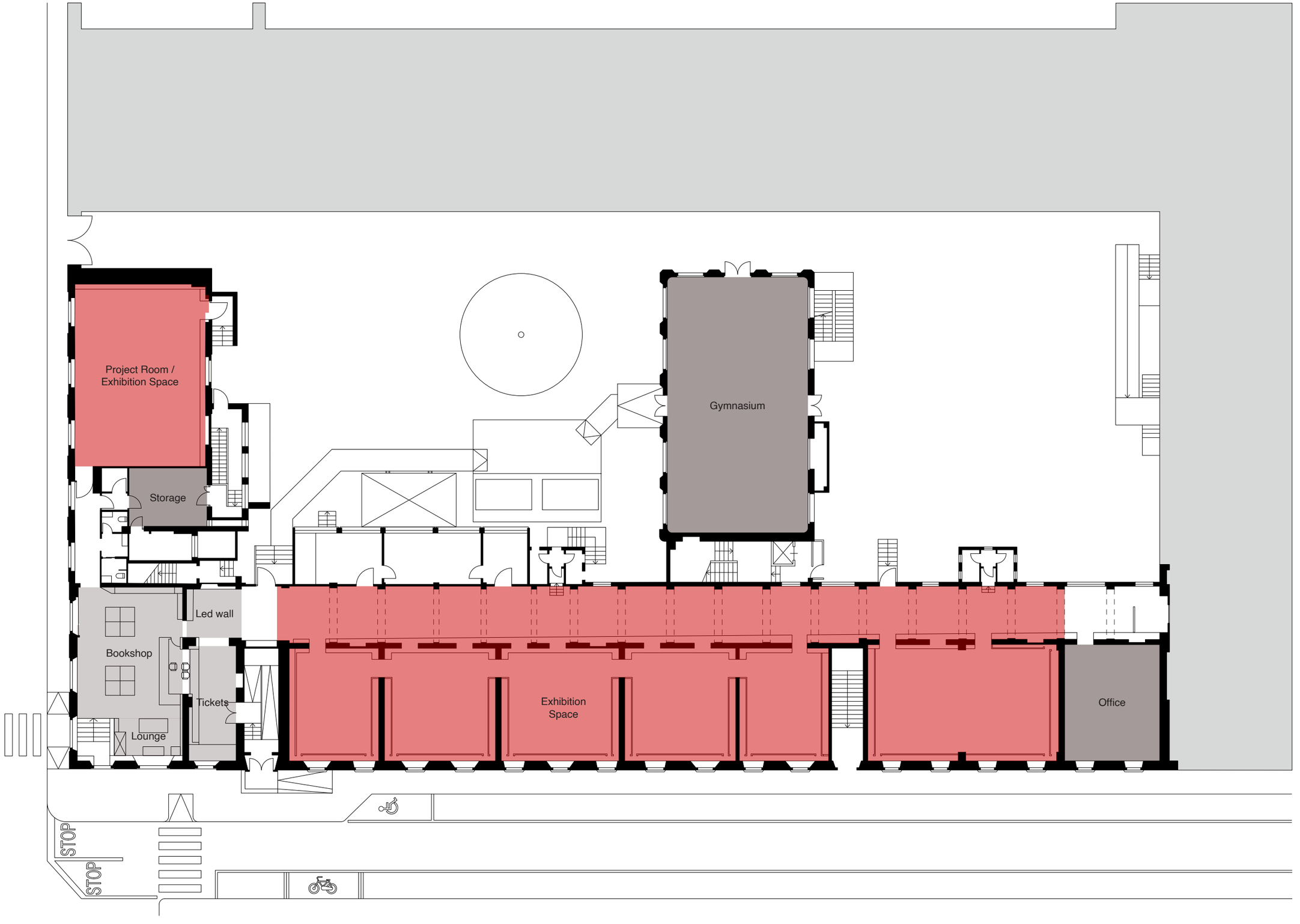
Fig 5.3: Central corridor of the Camera - Italian Center for Photography, set up for the 2026 exhibition on Edward Weston

Next page, Fig 5.4: Camera’s reception area and bookshop, integrated into the central element designed by Studio Ata

1. Benedetto Camerana, personal e-mail interview



Spatial layouts as designed by Camerana&Partners in the original 2014 project



Spatial layouts following the renovation carried out by StudioAta in 2023

curatorial and exhibition design strategies.

A potential turning point in this direction seems to have emerged with the appointment, in 2026, of François Hébel as director of the center. Internationally renowned for his leadership of Les Rencontres d'Arles, Hébel has stated his intention to reopen CAMERA to contemporary photography and more experimental exhibition practices, in an effort to broaden and diversify the institution's audience. Particularly significant is his reflection on the exhibition language of photography:

> *I would also like to introduce, in every season, a small aesthetic surprise: something that shows the 'behind-the-scenes' of photography, preventing it from always being just a framed image.*[2]

The new director's statements seem to suggest a possible rethinking of the center's exhibition methods, moving toward practices less tied to the neutrality of the White Box and more open to installation experimentation, the blending of artistic languages, and the creation of more immersive and narrative exhibition experiences.

This approach is particularly significant in relation to the themes addressed in this research, which critically analyzes the neutral exhibition model of the White Box and its applications in the field of contemporary photography. The theoretical reflections developed in this thesis find a concrete counterpart in the recent curatorial intentions expressed by François Hébel, which aim to move beyond photography understood exclusively as a framed image and toward the creation of more dynamic, experiential, and interdisciplinary exhibition formats.

In this sense, the case of CAMERA takes on a dual significance: on the one hand, it represents an emblematic example of the application of the White Box model to photography; on the other, it highlights the contemporary tensions that are progressively leading to a rethinking of this paradigm within contemporary photographic institutions.

Fig 5.4, 5.5: Italian Center for Photography, set up for the 2026 exhibition on Edward Weston

2. Il Giornale dell'Arte. Fotografi al centro: non perdere pubblico e ampliarlo, gli obiettivi di François Hébel da novembre ai vertici di CAMERA. s.d. Disponibile online: https://www.ilgiornaledellarte.com/Mostre/Fotografi-al-centro-non-perdere-pubblico-e-ampliarlo-gli-obiettivi-di-Francois-Hebel-da-novembre-ai-vertici-di-Camera

CAMERA'S Key Strengths

CAMERA is characterized by a series of elements that define its main strengths in terms of space and institutional structure. From an architectural standpoint, the exhibition system is organized into two large main exhibition spaces, arranged as a sequence of large consecutive halls, which ensure a high degree of flexibility in exhibition design and the ability to host large-scale exhibitions. Added to these is a further wing, significantly larger than the others, which can potentially host a third exhibition, further expanding the spatial layout's exhibition potential.

Alongside its interior dimensions, another key strength is the building's urban location, situated in an area particularly rich in cultural institutions and museums. Its proximity to major landmarks such as the National Cinema Museum and Piazza Vittorio Veneto, as well as the Mole Antonelliana, places CAMERA within an urban network strongly characterized by cultural and tourist attractions. This enhances its accessibility and integration into the city's cultural system.

A second key element is the presence of spaces that complement the exhibition itinerary, such as the bookstore and the café, which contribute to the creation of an integrated and accessible cultural environment.

On an institutional level, a significant strength lies in the system of educational activities, characterized by ongoing programming and strong engagement with school groups. Added to this is the presence of an Archives Department, which, despite the absence of a permanent collection, provides consulting and support services to public and private collections, reinforcing CAMERA's role as a center specializing in photographic culture.

Overall, the project presents itself as a coherent and multidimensional entity, in which exhibition space, educational activities, archival expertise, and urban centrality all contribute to defining the institution's identity.

CAMERA'S Weaknesses

Alongside its numerous strengths, the exhibition space presents certain critical issues that stem primarily from its architectural configuration and the building's historical condition. The conception of the museum as a "White Box" entails, in fact, an almost total neutralization of spatial characteristics, reducing the possibility of establishing a meaningful dialogue between the exhibition design and the architectural identity.

In addition comes the historic nature of the building, which dictates a rather rigid internal division of the spaces. While this layout ensures clear spatial clarity, it also limits design continuity and the flexibility of exhibition solutions. The presence of large exhibition spaces also fits into this same logic; while they are an undeniable strength in terms of exhibition capacity, they can simultaneously pose a challenge, as they make it more complex to design intimate and cozy spaces, which are often particularly effective for photographic exhibitions.

In particular, the central corridor represents one of the most problematic elements from an exhibition design perspective: its long, narrow configuration, while offering a significant exhibition area, tends to require specific design interventions to avoid a repetitive and static perception of the space.

Further challenges also arise regarding the building's urban identity, which is not easily recognizable from the outside. The restrictions imposed by the Superintendency limit interventions to purely graphic and communicative aspects, thereby reducing the possibility of strengthening the museum's visual presence in the public space.

Finally, it is worth noting an issue related to the composition of the audience, which currently consists largely of loyal patrons. This situation suggests a need to expand and further diversify the user base in order to enhance the institution's accessibility and cultural impact.

V.4

THE PUBLIFOTO ARCHIVE

The Publifoto Archive is one of the primary visual records of 20th-century Italian history. Established in 1937 with the founding of the Publifoto agency in Milan by Vincenzo Carrese, the archive grew through the work of an extensive network of photojournalists active throughout the country. Thanks to an organizational structure that was innovative for its time, featuring permanently employed photographers, an in-house darkroom, and rapid distribution, the agency was able to document daily events in news, politics, sports, culture, and society.

The archive contains hundreds of thousands of photographs, many of which were taken by renowned photojournalists such as Fedele Toscani, Tino Petrelli, and other leading figures in Italian photography. The images span a period from the 1930s to the 1970s, when growing competition from television and the crisis in traditional photojournalism led to a gradual decline in the agency's operations.

In addition to its documentary value, the Publifoto Archive is also a valuable tool for understanding the evolution of photographic language and the relationship between image and information. After various corporate ups and downs, and the sale of the agency in 1997, the archive underwent restoration and enhancement efforts that have made it a fundamental resource today for scholars, historians, journalists, and photography enthusiasts.

Fig 5.6:
Milan Entrance to the Agency in Via Bramante, 1967 - 1968. Photo from the Publifoto Archive

History

Publifoto is a photography agency founded in Milan in 1937 by Vincenzo Carrese, originally from Castellammare di Stabia. He began his career representing major foreign photography agencies in Italy, such as Wide World Photos and Keystone, and in 1934 he was called upon to direct the photography department of Corriere della Sera. This led to the idea of founding his own agency, which in 1939 took the name Publifoto. The agency stood out for its efficient organization, with photographers always available and an in-house printing lab that guaranteed speed. Among its first collaborators were names such as Fedele Toscani and Tino Petrelli.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Publifoto expanded by opening branches in various Italian cities and collaborating with newspapers such as L'Unità, L'Europeo, and Il Giorno. However, the 1950s also saw the emergence of the first competing agencies, prompting Publifoto to briefly ally itself with ANSA.
In response to the publishing crisis, the agency diversified by focusing on commissioned work and color photography, and in the 1960s it created two distinct branches: Publifoto Notizie (photojournalism) and Publifoto Commerciale (industry, advertising, fashion).

In the 1970s, the agency began to decline due to competition from television and changes in the market. After Carrese's death in 1981, the agency was run by his children until it was sold to Fotocronache Olimpia in 1997.

The Pictures

The Publifoto Archive holds around 7 million analog photographs taken between the 1930s and 1990s, including glass and film negatives, contact sheets, black-and-white prints, and color slides. The subjects documented range from news and politics to customs and society, as well as sports, culture, architecture, and landscape. The images come from both photographers within the Publifoto agency and other Italian and foreign photographers and agencies. The material has arrived in its original condition, with vintage filing cabinets and containers.

The archive is organized into numbered negatives recorded in over 200 volumes, contact sheets with editorial selection marks, files of prints divided by subject or person, and a card index to facilitate research. It also preserves vintage prints and a collection of publications and magazines used for documentation or containing images published by the agency.

The Archive's Mission

In 2015, the Intesa Sanpaolo Historical Archive acquired the Publifoto Milano Archive with the aim of safeguarding and promoting one of the most important photographic collections of 20th-century Italy, recognized as a cultural asset of national importance. The history of the archive is closely linked to the events of the country: in 1943, during the bombing of Milan, the headquarters of the Publifoto agency was severely damaged. At the end of the war, in 1945, founder Vincenzo Carrese began the painstaking task of recovering and reorganizing some 10,000 negatives documenting the Fascist period. In the 1960s, aware of the historical and cultural value of his archive, Carrese promoted its organization and preservation with the aim of passing it on to future generations.

Decades later, Intesa Sanpaolo took up the baton, breathing new life into the archive through a comprehensive project that involved not only purchasing the collection but also setting up a specialized storage space inside a former bank vault to ensure the best environmental conditions. The Bank's Historical Archive, with its consolidated experience in managing its photographic heritage, has carried out a thorough census and analysis of the state of conservation, identifying priorities and launching important restoration, cataloguing and digitisation projects, thanks in part to its collaboration with the "La Venaria Reale" Conservation and Restoration Centre in Turin.

At the same time, the Historical Archive has launched a plan to promote the cultural value of the collection, with educational and informative initiatives. These include collaborations with academic institutions such as the University of Milan, the organization of themed guided tours, the publication of editorial materials and, starting in 2019, the organization of photographic exhibitions open to the public. Thanks to these activities, the Publifoto Milano Archive is now an accessible, usable, and constantly evolving heritage, capable of recounting the history, society, and changes of 20th-century Italy through images.

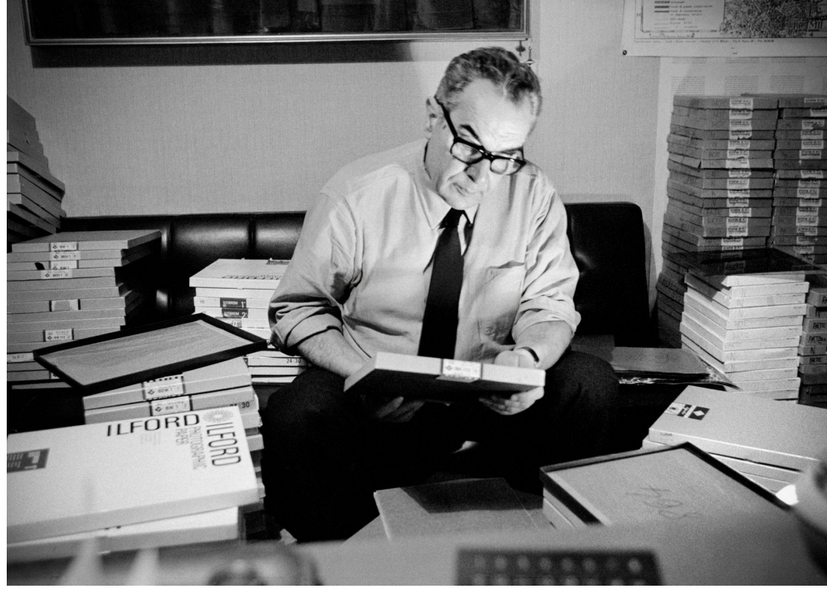


Fig 5.7:
Vincenzo Carrese working, 2 December 1972, Milan. Photo from the Publifoto Archive

Fig 5.8:
Negative retouching station at the Agency, 1967 - 1968, Milan. Photo from the Publifoto Archive

Fig 5.9:
Ettore Bianchi consults the Agency's archives, 1967 - 1968, Milan. Photo from the Publifoto Archive

V.5

“NEL MIRINO” EXHIBITION: THE ARCHIVE AT CAMERA

A visual journey through more than forty years of history, Nel mirino offered a broad overview of the photographic heritage of the Publifoto Agency, now preserved within the Intesa Sanpaolo Historical Archive. Held at CAMERA – Centro Italiano per la Fotografia, the exhibition presented 240 images documenting crucial moments in Italian and international history between 1939 and 1981: from the proclamation of the Italian Republic to the Beatles’ concert in Milan, from the tragedy of the Grande Torino to the construction of the national motorway network.

Curated by Aldo Grasso and Walter Guadagnini, the exhibition was conceived as a visual narrative inspired by the structure of an illustrated magazine. The material was organized into thematic sections dedicated to politics, current events, society, customs, culture, sport, and international news, emphasizing the close relationship between photography and the editorial world.
The exhibition opened with a section devoted to the daily activity of the Publifoto Agency, offering visitors a glimpse behind the scenes of photojournalistic production through paper archives, catalogued envelopes, vintage magazines, and photographs documenting the work of the agency’s reporters and the offices in Via Bramante, Milan. This introductory section highlighted the central role of photography within the printed press and demonstrated how the aesthetics of photojournalism shaped the visual culture of the twentieth century. The display unfolded through a thematic sequence distributed across the six rooms of the center. The photographs were presented according to the principles of the white box: the walls were left entirely white, the works were widely spaced, and each image was framed in a standardized manner, with black frames and white passe-partout. The installation minimized visual distractions and reinforced the autonomy of the photographic image. Rather than being accompanied by individual explanatory captions, the photographs were grouped under broader thematic sections, each introduced by a short curatorial text at the entrance of the room.

The only chromatic variations within the exhibition design appeared in the corridor spaces. One section recreated a timeline presenting the principal historical events represented in the exhibition, while further along the corridor the part of the collection dedicated to Pino Musi was displayed against a black background. Musi’s previously unseen works reinterpreted the Publifoto Archive from a contemporary perspective, emphasizing the continuity between historical memory and contemporary photographic practice.

Fig 5.10:
“Nel mirino” exhibition on the Publifoto Archive, Camera, 2019

Fig 5.11:
“Nel mirino” exhibition on the Publifoto Archive - Pino Musi Installation, Camera, 2019

Leaving Home

VI.

Fig 6.1: Rovigo flooded: evacuees. In the background, a fire department boat, November 17, 1951 - Image from the Publifoto Archive

VI.1
THE COLLECTION

The collection originates from a reinterpretation of the Publifoto Archive through the lens of migration, understood not as a singular historical phenomenon but as a recurring condition that has shaped the Italian society throughout the twentieth century. An analysis of previous exhibitions dedicated to the archive revealed that, although migration is extensively represented within its photographic holdings, it has never been explored as an independent interpretative framework.

The curatorial project therefore proposes a cross-sectional reading of the archive, constructing a narrative that connects different events, places, and historical periods through a shared experience: that of displacement. The selected photographs portray individuals and communities forced to leave their homes, territories, or countries for a variety of reasons, yet united by the uncertainty of departure and the search for new possibilities in life.

Rather than presenting a chronological reconstruction, the exhibition shapes as a reflection on the many dimensions of migration. The photographs are organized into five thematic sections that guide visitors through experiences of departure, loss, adaptation, and hope, highlighting migration as a structural component of Italian history.

The first section, A Place Not Quite Home, explores displacement caused by natural disasters. Through photographs documenting the Polesine flood of 1951 and the Vajont disaster of 1963, the section examines the sudden rupture between individuals and their environment, capturing the moment when home ceases to be a place of safety and becomes a space of memory.

With Far from War, the focus shifts to migration generated by conflict. Images of wartime Milan reveal the human dimension of war through everyday acts of escape: hastily packed suitcases, crowded railway stations, and families on the move. The devastated urban landscape becomes the visual backdrop to a shared condition of uncertainty and loss.

The following sections address migration as a choice—or, more accurately, as an economic and social necessity. In Crossing Within, photographs taken at Milan Central Station document the large-scale internal migrations that transformed post-war Italy. The images capture the moment of arrival, suspended between anticipation and disorientation, portraying the transition from an identity rooted in one's place of origin to a new sense of belonging still in the making.

With Work Calls, the exhibition examines labour migration beyond Italy's borders. The photographs reveal the impact of international agreements in shaping Italian migration flows while simultaneously emphasizing the personal dimension of departure: separation from family, adaptation to unfamiliar cultural environments, and the difficult living and working conditions often faced by migrant workers.

A Place Not Quite Home

The final section, Toward a Better Life, is dedicated to Italian emigration to Argentina. Here, migration takes on an even more radical character: not a temporary relocation tied to a specific job contract, but a profound redefinition of one's future. The photographs convey both the allure of the imagined "land of opportunity" and the courage required to embark on a journey marked by uncertainty and expectation.

The exhibition concludes with a section dedicated to photojournalism, inviting visitors to reflect on the role of photography in shaping collective memory. Through images drawn from different archives and historical periods, this section highlights photography's capacity to document events, make social transformations visible, and contribute to the formation of public awareness. The inclusion of photographs awarded by the World Press Photo establishes a connection between the stories preserved within the Publifoto Archive and contemporary migration crises, underscoring the continuity of themes and dynamics across different eras.

The photographic narrative is further enriched by a selection of documentaries and archival footage sourced from institutions such as the Archivio Luce and the RAI archives. Rather than serving a purely illustrative function, these audiovisual materials expand the historical context of the photographs and contribute to the creation of a layered and immersive exhibition experience.

Fig 6.2 - 6.4: Displaced people arriving at Milan Central Station due to the flooding in Polesine, November 1951

Fig 6.5: A woman and a little girl displaced by the flood in Polesine at Milan Central Station, November 1951

Fig 6.6: Displaced people arriving at Milan Central Station due to the flooding in Polesine, November 1951

Fig 6.7: Evacuees escape Rovigo after flooding, November 1951

Fig 6.8: Rovigo flooded: evacuees. In the background, a fire department boat, November 17, 1951

Fig 6.9: Military personnel and civilians on boats near the pumping station on the Canal Bianco in Rovigo during the Polesine flood, December 2, 1951

Fig 6.10: Rovigo flooded: some evacuees on boats, November 17, 1951

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Fig 6.2

Fig 6.3

Fig 6. 4

Fig 6.5

Fig 6.6

Fig 6.7

Fig 6.8

Fig 6.9

Fig 6.10

Fig 6.11

Fig 6.12

Fig 6.13

Fig 6.14

Fig 6.15

Fig 6.16

Fig 6.17

Fig 6.11 - 6.17: The Vajont Disaster: Survivors at the Site of the Flood, October 10, 1963

Fig 6.18

Fig 6.18: The Vajont Disaster: A woman sitting in the Pirago cemetery in Longarone, October 10, 1963

Fig 6.19

Fig 6.19: The Vajont Disaster: the interior of the Church of St. Thomas in Pirago di Longarone, destroyed by the flood, October 10, 1963

Fig 6.20

Fig 6.20: The Vajont Disaster: The Remains of the Pirago Cemetery in Longarone, October 10, 1963

Far From War

Fig 6.21: Aerial view of Piazzale Luigi Cadorna in Milan and the crater left by bombing in front of the entrance to the Ferrovie Nord station, August 1943

Fig 6.22: Exodus from the city of Milan following the bombings: on Via Carlo Farini, civilians with horse-drawn carts loaded with household goods or riding bicycles. On the wall to the right, a large mural advertisement for Wamar cookies, August 1943

Fig 6.23: A crowd of people, many carrying suitcases, jostles to board a van leaving Milan after the city was bombed. Others set off on bicycles, August 1943

Fig 6.21

Fig 6.22

Fig 6.23

Fig 6.24

Fig 6.25

Fig 6.26

Fig 6.24: A view of the main courtyard of the Ca' Granda in Milan, partially destroyed by bombing and severely damaged, littered with rubble, August 1943

Fig 6.25: The stages of Milan's Teatro alla Scala were severely damaged following the bombings that caused the roof and the underlying vaulted ceiling to collapse, partially destroying the fifth and sixth tiers of the galleries and damaging the proscenium and the stalls, August 1943

Fig 6.26: A horse-drawn cart filled with people in Piazza della Scala in Milan. In the background is the Palazzo della Banca Commerciale Italiana, August 1943

Fig 6.27: Exodus from the city following the bombing of Milan, with a horse-drawn cart at the Bastioni di Porta Venezia: the women on foot, the men on board. Many others are traveling by bicycle, August 1943

Fig 6.28: Passersby in Carrobbio, near Piazza Vetra, in the days following the bombing of Milan in August 1943

Fig 6.29: An evening exodus on foot following the bombing of Milan in August 1943

Fig 6.30: Interior of the chapel at San Giuseppe Hospital in Milan, destroyed by bombing; several monks among the rubble, August 1943

Fig 6.27

Fig 6.28

Fig 6.29

Fig 6.30

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Crossing Within

Fig 6.31

Fig 6.32

Fig 6.33

Fig 6.34

Fig 6.31: An engineer standing on an FS 740 steam locomotive; a puff of smoke billows from the chimney, 1937, Milan

Fig 6.32: A train engineer looks out from the locomotive of a train, Milan, 1937

Fig 6.33: Aerial view of people lining up at the ticket office of Milan Central Station, 1934 – July 1943

Fig 6.34: A crowd on the platform at Milan Central Station, July 1, 1961

Fig 6.35

Fig 6.35: Immigrants from southern Italy eating on the platform at Milan Central Station, June 30, 1962

Fig 6.36, 6.37, 6.38: Immigrants from Southern Italy at Milan Central Station, June 30, 1962 – July 12, 1962

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Fig 6.36

Fig 6.38

Fig 6.37

Fig 6.39

Fig 6.40

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Fig 6.39: A man is loading (or unloading) a suitcase through a train window, June 30, 1962

Fig 6.40, 6.41: Fig 6.35: Immigrants from southern Italy eating on the platform at Milan Central Station, June 30, 1962

Fig 6.42: A very young immigrant from southern Italy in Milan, June 30, 1962

Fig 6.41

Fig 6.42

Work Calls

Fig 6.43: Emigrants departing for the mines in Belgium from Milan Central Station. A sign on the train reads: "Federation des charbonnages, 66 Rue des Colonies, Brussels. Campine," August 11, 1948

Fig 44: Immigrants boarding a train at Milan Central Station, bound for Belgium. A sign on the train reads: "Federation des charbonnages, 66 Rue des Colonies, Brussels. Centre", August 11, 1948

Fig 6.43

Fig 6.47

Fig 6.44

Fig 6.45

Fig 6.46

Fig 6.45: Immigrants boarding a train at Milan Central Station, bound for Belgium. A sign on the train reads: "Federation des charbonnages, 66 Rue des Colonies, Brussels. Centre", August 11, 1948

Fig 6.46: Alfred Robens, the British Minister of Labor, along with others, waves goodbye to the emigrants, who are leaning out of the train car as it departs from Milan Central Station bound for the mines in Belgium. One of them is holding a sign that reads: "Federation des charbonnages, 66 Rue des Colonies, Brussels. Campine", August 11, 1948

Fig 47: A thousand Italian workers, along with their families, set off for the mines in Belgium, August 11, 1948

Toward a Better Life

Fig 6.48

Fig 6.49

Fig 6.48: Sia Viscosa. Workers depart for South Africa, August 5, 1954

Fig 6.50

Fig 6.51

Fig 6.52

Fig 6.53

Fig 6.53 - 6.54:
The Protopapa family, a family of Italian factory workers who emigrated to Zurich, Switzerland, photographed in their home, November 20, 1961

Fig 6.54

Fig 6.55

Fig 6.54: Italian emigrants in Genoa, awaiting their departure for Argentina, in front of the "Ministry of Labor and Social Security's Migration Service for Argentina" office, June 2, 1947

Fig 6.55: Italian emigrants in Genoa awaiting their departure for Argentina, June 2, 1947

Fig 6.57: Italian emigrants in Genoa awaiting their departure for Argentina—a man embraces an elderly woman, June 2, 1947

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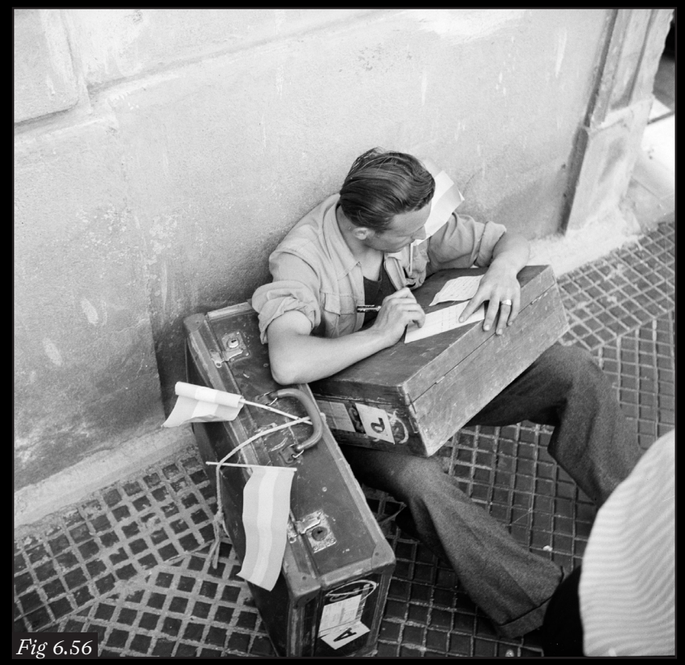
Fig 6.56

Fig 6.56: An Italian emigrant in Genoa, sitting on the ground next to his suitcases, writes on a piece of paper as he waits to leave for Argentina, June 2, 1947

Fig 6.57

Fig 6.58

Fig 6.59

Fig 6.61

Fig 6.60

Fig 6.62

Fig 6.58, 6.59: Italian emigrants in Genoa awaiting their departure for Argentina, June 2, 1947

Fig 6.60: Italian emigrants on the gangway leading to the ship that will take them to Argentina, docked in the port of Genoa, June 2, 1947

Fig 6.61, 6.62: Document check for Italian emigrants departing for Argentina aboard the steamship Santa Fe, June 2, 1947

Fig 6.63: Italian emigrants on the gangway leading to the ship that will take them to Argentina, docked in the port of Genoa, June 2, 1947

Fig 6.64: A little girl leaving for Argentina with a suitcase tied with string, Genoa, June 2, 1947

Fig 6.65, 6.66: Italian emigrants in Genoa awaiting their departure for Argentina, June 2, 1947

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Fig 6.63

Fig 6.64

Fig 6.65

Fig 6.66

Fig 6.67

Fig 6.68

Fig 6.69

Fig 6.70

Fig 6.71

Fig 6.72

Fig 6.67: A woman stands on the quay at the port of Genoa, where many Italian emigrants are departing for Argentina, holding small Argentine flags in her hands, June 2, 1947

Fig 6.68, 6.69, 6.70, 6.71, 6.72: Italian emigrants at the port of Genoa aboard the steamship that will take them to Argentina, Genoa, June 2, 1947

Fig 6.73, 6.74: Italian emigrants at the port of Genoa, about to depart for Argentina aboard the steamship Santa Fe, sing and play music, June 2, 1947

Fig 6.73

Fig 6.74

Photojournalism

Photojournalism emerged from the convergence of photography and illustrated journalism, which developed between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although attempts to document current events through images began in the years immediately following the invention of photography, it was primarily technological advances in photomechanical printing and camera manufacturing that allowed for the true integration of photography into newspapers and magazines.

Between the 1920s and 1930s, photojournalism took on a modern form, thanks to the spread of lightweight and portable cameras, such as the Leica, which allowed photographers to work directly in the field with greater speed and discretion. During the same period, illustrated magazines such as the Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung, Vu, and later Life helped define a new visual language based on the narrative sequence of images. Photography no longer served merely an illustrative function but became a tool capable of independently recounting events, constructing true visual narratives.
After World War II, photojournalism experienced a period of rapid expansion, coinciding with the growth of the periodical press and the rise of international photo agencies and cooperatives. The photojournalist came to play a central role in documenting contemporary reality—from wars to social changes—contributing to the formation of the collective imagination of the 20th century.

Starting in the 1990s, the advent of digital technologies and the internet profoundly transformed the sector. The progressive decline of print media and the proliferation of online platforms have altered the timelines for the production, distribution, and consumption of images. While digital photography has made news transmission more immediate, it has also exponentially increased the volume of images in circulation, creating new challenges related to source verification, the authenticity of photographic documents, and the economic sustainability of the profession.

In today's landscape, photojournalism continues to play a fundamental role in documenting and interpreting reality, even as it operates within a profoundly transformed media ecosystem. The images produced by photojournalists are no longer confined to the pages of newspapers but circulate through websites, social media, digital archives, and exhibition spaces. In this context, photography exhibitions are taking on an increasingly significant role, offering the opportunity to remove images from the rapid flow of information and to provide a critical and contextualized reading of events. The museum exhibition thus becomes a privileged space where the journalistic document can be reinterpreted as historical testimony, collective memory, and a cultural artifact.

Fig 6.76

Fig 6.76: Roger Fenton, Valley of the Shadow of Death (1855). This image is considered one of the earliest war photographs in history, as it demonstrates a desire to depict real events. At the time, exposure times were still too long to capture actual war scenes, so the war is depicted through its settings

Fig 6.77: Jacob August Riis, Bandits' Roost, 59 1/2 Mulberry Street (1888). This image represents one of the earliest forms of investigative visual journalism. The photograph is used to highlight the social problems faced by immigrants in the slums of New York in the late 19th century

Fig 6.77

Fig 6.78: Robert Capa, The Falling Soldier (1936). This image depicts a militiaman from the Civil War killed in action. Despite the doubts that later arose regarding the photograph's authenticity, it represents one of the earliest examples of war photography in history, marking a paradigm shift in which the photographer became a direct witness to events.

Fig 6.78

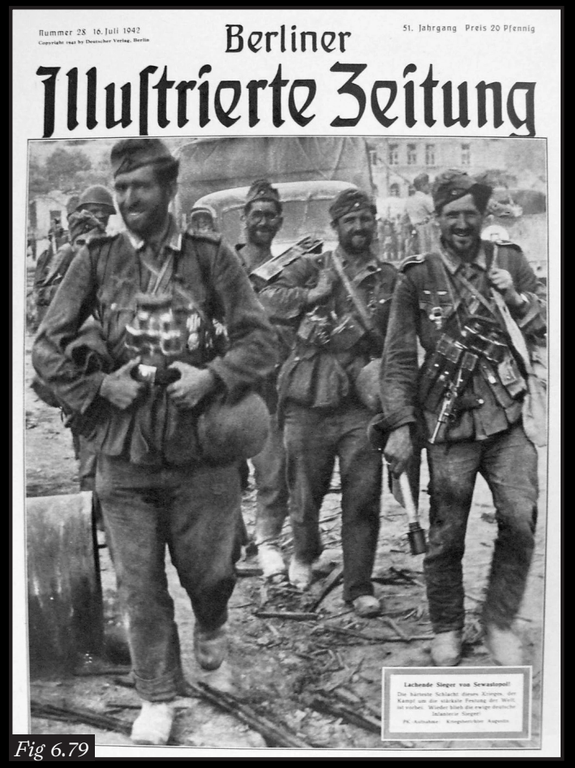

Fig 6.79

Fig 6.79: Weekly magazine "Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung" on the battle for the fortress of Sevastopol (Berlin, July 16, 1942). The Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung was a German weekly illustrated magazine published in Berlin from 1892 to 1945

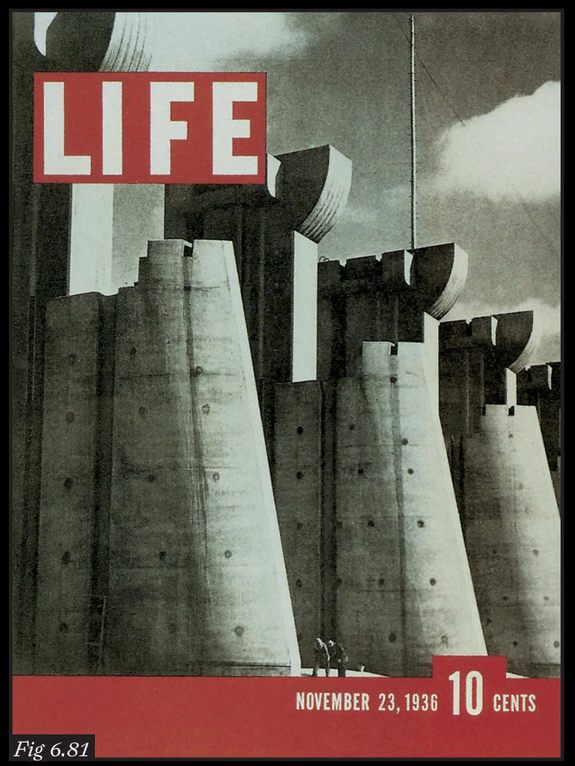

Fig 6.81

Fig 6.80: August 1929 issue of Vu, featuring a photograph by André Kertész. The French magazine VU, published in Paris from 1928 to 1940. It was innovative both for its dynamic layout and because it was the first to commission photojournalism for the publication

Fig 6.81: LIFE, November 23, 1936. LIFE was a renowned American photojournalism magazine. Launched as a weekly publication in 1936 by entrepreneur Henry Luce, it left an indelible mark on the history of global photojournalism.

Fig 6.80

Fig 6.84: Leica I, one of the first compact cameras created

Fig 6.82

Fig 6.83

Fig 6.84

Fig 6.86: Nick Ut, The Terror of War (1972), known as "Napalm Girl". This photograph, which influenced public debate on the Vietnam War, is a powerful example of the political power of documentary images.

Fig 6.85

Fig 6.83: Henri Cartier-Bresson, Gestapo Informer Recognized by a Woman She Had Denounced (1945).

Fig 6.84: Henri Cartier-Bresson, Games in a Refugee Camp at Kurukshetra, Punjab, India, 1947
Henri Cartier-Bresson was one of the most influential photographers in the field of photojournalism

Fig 6.85: Ihei Kimura, Henri Cartier-Bresson holding his Leica I in Paris (1954)

Fig 6.86

The photo agency

Photographers are the first link in the photojournalism chain. Sent out into the field to document news, politics, sports, and entertainment events, they produce images for publication. While in the 20th century their work relied on film and longer transmission times, today digital technologies allow them to produce and share photographs in real time, reaching a global audience in a matter of moments.

Fig 6.87: Publifoto Photo Set, March 1969, Elba Island.

Fig 6.87

Fig 6.88

In the past, film was developed in a darkroom, an essential step in transforming the negative into a printable image. Today, this process is almost entirely digital: photographs can be viewed, edited, and transmitted immediately after being taken, drastically reducing production and publication times.

Fig 6.88: Staff at work in the darkroom at the Publifoto agency headquarters on Via Bramante in Milan, 1967–1968

Retouching was used to improve image quality through manual adjustments to negatives and prints. In contemporary photojournalism, this process is carried out using digital software. To ensure the reliability of images, major news organizations now adhere to strict codes of ethics that limit the types of alterations permitted.

Fig 6.89: Nicola D'Alessio (right) at the workstation for retouching photographs and negatives at the Publifoto agency headquarters on Via Bramante in Milan, 1967–1968

Fig 6.89

Fig 6.90

The photographs produced by the agency were cataloged and stored in archives organized by theme, location, and person. These systems made it possible to quickly retrieve images for new publications. Today, the archives are primarily digital and allow for immediate access, greatly expanding the possibilities for access and dissemination.

Fig 6.90: The archives of the Publifoto agency at its headquarters on Via Bramante in Milan; in the foreground is Ettore Bianchi, 1967–1968

The editorial staff selected photographs and coordinated their publication in newspapers and magazines, helping to shape the visual narrative of events. Today, images are distributed through digital platforms and international networks, reaching audiences almost in real time and on a global scale.

Fig 6.91: Vincenzo Carrese at work at the Publifoto Agency, December 2, 1972

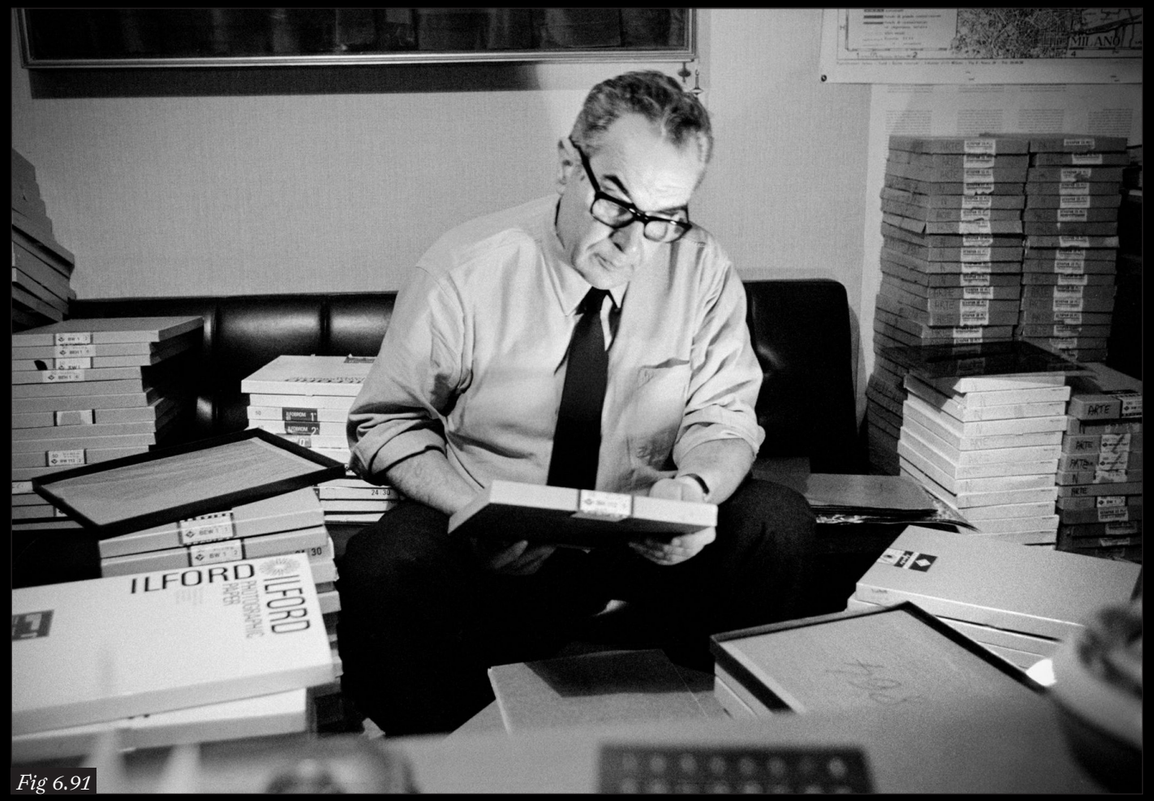

Fig 6.91

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World Press Photo, a Selection

Fig 6.92: Carol Guzy for Miami Herald, Separated by ICE (2026). Luis's distraught daughters cling to their father as ICE agents detain him after an immigration hearing in New York City, New York, United States.

Fig 6.92

Fig 6.93: Alex Kent for the New York Times, Columbia University Pro-Palestine Protests (2025).
Barnard College alumna Jesse Pearce is arrested outside Columbia University's graduation ceremony. Alumni and students gathered to protest the institution's financial ties to Israel and the University administration's bowing to federal pressure to crack down on campus demonstrations.

Fig 6.93

Fig 6.95: John Moore, Night Crossing (2024).
Chinese migrants warm themselves under a cold rain after crossing the US-Mexico border, in Campo, California.

Fig 6.94

Fig 6.94: Jan Sonnenmair, Portland Protests ICE (2025). Officers from the Department of Homeland Security and federal tactical units clash with demonstrators during a nightly standoff at a Portland ICE facility in Oregon, United States. These intense protests centered on opposing the administration's escalating mass-deportation agenda and its shift toward interior enforcement.

Fig 6.95

Fig 6.96: Saber Nuraldin for EPA Images, Aid Emergency in Gaza (2025). Palestinians climb onto an aid truck as it enters the Gaza Strip via the Zikim Crossing in an attempt to get flour, during what the Israeli military called a "tactical suspension" in operations to allow humanitarian aid through.

Fig 6.97: Nicole Tung for The New York Times, A Syrian City Rebuilds, Still Divided (2025).
Abdelatif Daham Al Hummada (right) sits with his sons and nephew on the street outside their heavily damaged home, where the family often sleeps, in Deir al-Zour, Syria.

Fig 6.96

Fig 6.97

Fig 6.98

Fig 6.99

Fig 6.98: Saher Alghorra for The New York Times, Witnessing Gaza (2025).
A woman screams for her son who was shot while trying to collect aid from a truck near the Zikim crossing, in the north of Gaza along the coast, and is being rushed to hospital on the same truck. Gaza City, Gaza Strip.

Fig 6.98: Diego Ibarra Sánchez, Hijacked Education (2025).
A destroyed classroom seen through a hole in a wall at Tell Ruman school in Al-Hasakah, Syria, closed since ISIS attacked it in July 2015.

Fig 6.100

Fig 6.101

Fig 6.102

Fig 6.103

Fig 6.100: Murat Şengül, Drone Attacks in Beirut (2025).
People glance anxiously upwards during an Israeli drone strike, as they take refuge away from buildings in Beirut's Dahiyeh neighborhood, Lebanon. Jets and drones often fly at low altitudes, causing fear and distress.

Fig 6.101: Ali Jadallah, Gaza Under Israeli Attack (2025).
People evacuate neighborhoods East of Rafah (a city split between Egypt to the west and Gaza to the east) due to increasing Israeli attacks.

Fig 6.102: Mohammed Salem, A Palestinian Woman Embraces the Body of Her Niece (2023).
Inas Abu Maamar (36) cradles the body of her niece Saly (5) who was killed, along with her mother and sister, when an Israeli missile struck their home, in Khan Younis, Gaza.

Fig 6.103: Ebrahim Noroozi for Associated Press, Afghanistan on the Edge (2023).
Children stare at an apple that their mother brought home after begging, in a camp for internally displaced people in Bagrami, on the outskirts of Kabul, Afghanistan.

Video Collection

Fig 6.104

Fig 6.104:
Alluvione 1951
Source: Archivio Luce Cinecittà

Fig 6.105:
Immagini dal Polesine Alluviuonato.
Source: Archivio Luce Cinecittà

Fig 6.105

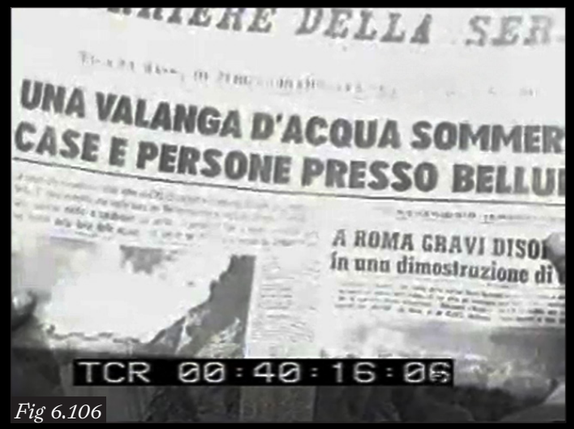


Fig 6.106

Fig 6.106:
Italia - Il paese in lutto per le vittime del Vajont
Source: Archivio Luce Cinecittà

Fig 6.107

Fig 6.107:
La tragedia del Vajont, Luigi Di Gianni, Produzione Unitelefilm, 1964

Fig 6.108

Fig 6.108:
"Milano dopo gli ultimi terroristici bombardamenti"
Source: Archivio Luce Cinecittà

Fig 6.109

Fig 6.110

Fig 6.109: Immigrazione a Milano 1962
Source: Archivio Rai Teche

Fig 6.110: The Journey of Hope 1964
Source: Archivio Luce Cinecittà

Fig 6.111: Storie di Migranti 1970
Source: Archivio Rai

Fig 6.111

Fig 6.112: Emigranti del Sud - 1970
Source: Archivio Rai

Fig 6.112

Fig 6.113

Fig 6.113: Luca Vullo, " Dallo zolfo al carbone"

Fig 6.114: Accordo italo-belga
Source: Archivi Rai

Fig 6.115: I Racconti della Boca "storie di genovesi e nostalgia", ELETTRA FILM Genova, 1986
Source: Città Metropolitana di Genova.

Fig 6.114: Emigrazione. Partenza per l'Argentina
Source: Archivio Luce Cinecittà

Fig 6.114

VI.6
EXHIBITION CONCEPT

The exhibition extends through the central corridor and six lateral rooms, tracing an itinerary of inquiry into photojournalism and the living heritage of the Publifoto Archive. At its core lies a fundamental ambition: to return to each photograph the context that once gave it meaning, the editorial pressures, historical urgencies, and human decisions that shaped both its making and its reach. Visitors are not simply invited to look, but to understand.

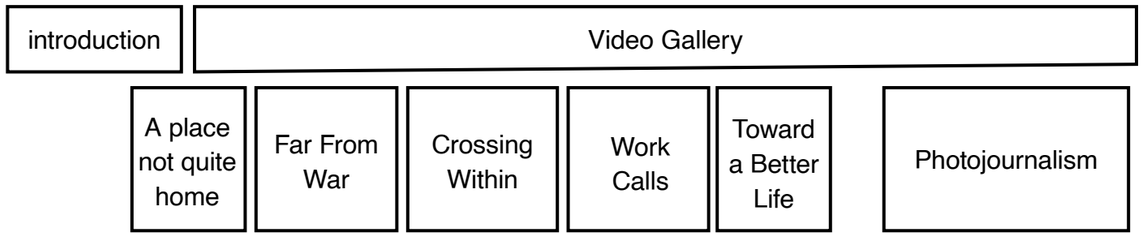
The layout unfolds as a loop, a circuit that breathes between corridor and room, image and document, past and present.
No strictly linear sequence is imposed. Instead, the space opens itself to free exploration, asking visitors to move with curiosity and a degree of investigative intent, assembling their own reading through an ongoing dialogue between photographs, audiovisual materials, written testimonies, and archival traces. Meaning here is not delivered, but constructed.

The central corridor operates as an audiovisual spine. Documentaries and newsreels from the period run continuously along its length, turning a space of transit into one of immersion. Sound, movement, and the textures of historical footage envelop the visitor, restoring the atmosphere in which these images once circulated and the world they were made to narrate.

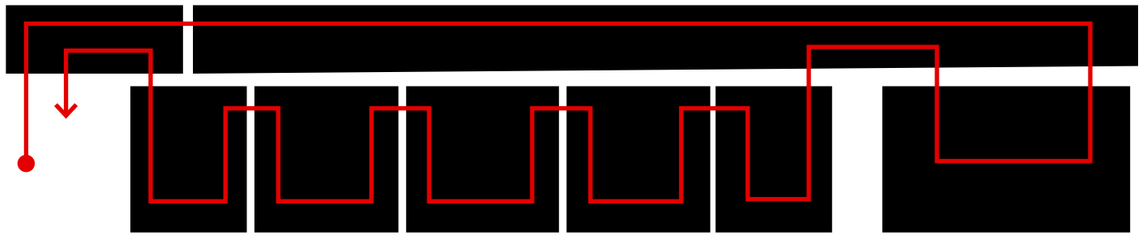
The first five rooms belong to the Publifoto Archive, each shaped around one of the narrative sequences identified in the research. Their design draws openly from the visual language of the illustrated press, the original destination of these images. Walls become pages: photographs, headlines, captions, and texts are composed together as in a layout, collapsing the distance between archive and publication. The visitor is placed, however briefly, inside the editorial logic that once determined how the world was seen.

The sixth and largest room widens the frame. From the particular story of the Publifoto Archive, the exhibition opens toward a broader history of photojournalism as a discipline: its defining moments, its internal economies, the agency structures that governed the flow of images across the world. A closing section turns to the present, bringing together a curated selection from World Press Photo. Here, historical and contemporary images enter into dialogue, revealing the deep continuities of the profession alongside its transformations. The tools have changed; the channels have multiplied. And yet photography endures as one of the primary means by which reality is given shape, and shared.

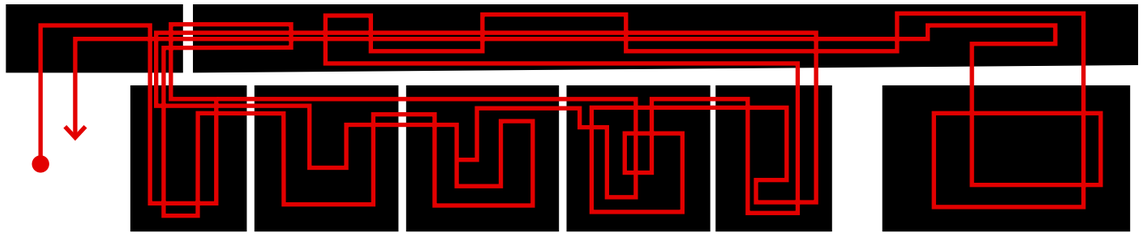
Spatial Distribution



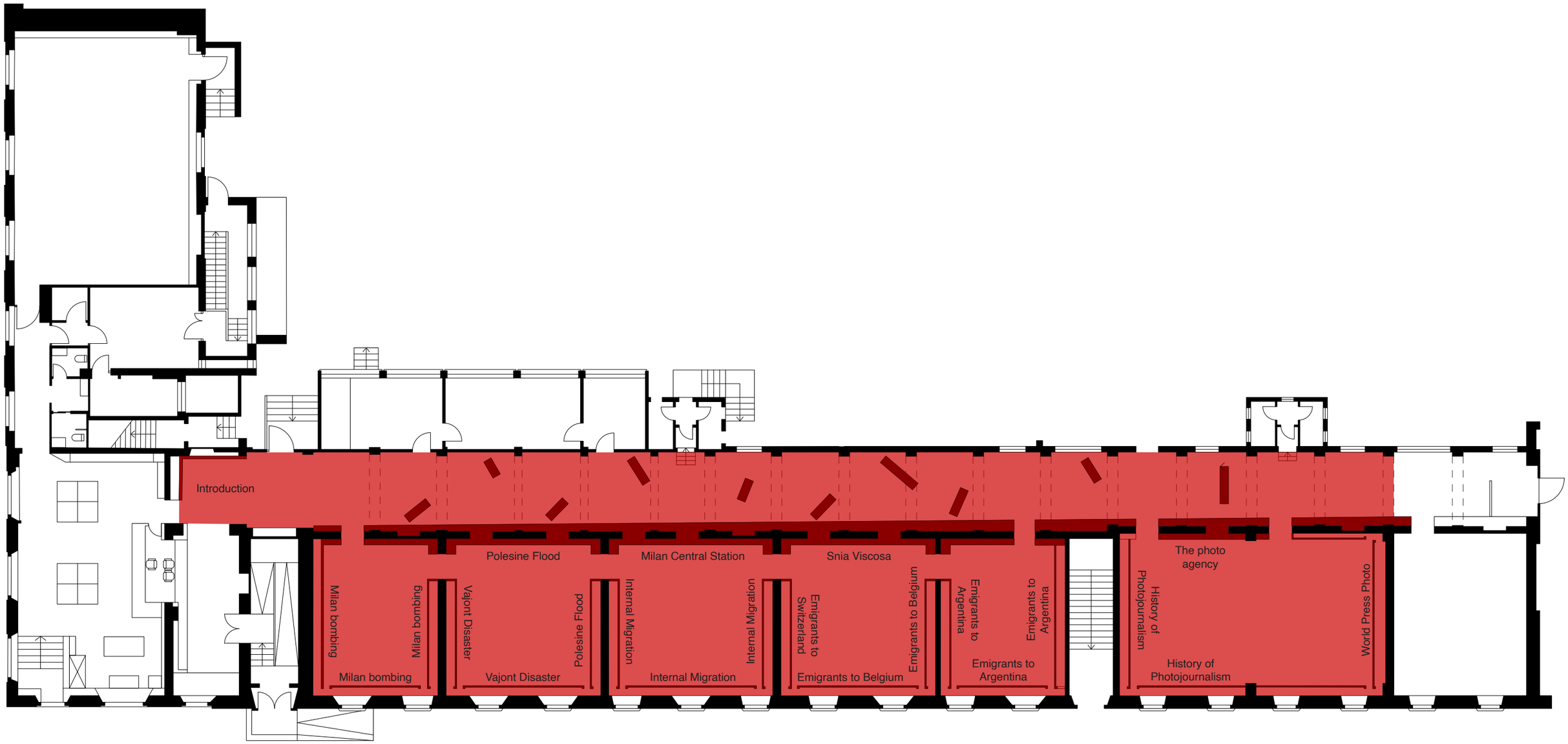
Ordered Flow Analysis



Random Flow Analysis

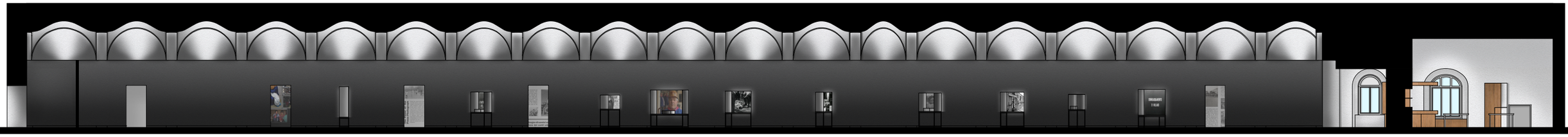


Exhibition Layout Plan



These two longitudinal sections illustrate the museum's corridor and the sequence of exhibition rooms that make up the visitor route. The corridor features a lighting design specifically conceived to ensure optimal visibility of the video projections while maintaining the lower part of the space in relative darkness. At the same time, the exhibition design seeks to preserve the dramatic character of this environment, which has become one of the museum's most iconic spaces. For this reason, the vaulted ceiling is illuminated with soft, low-intensity lighting that does not interfere with the audiovisual installations, while creating a subtle interplay of light and shadow that enhances the depth and architectural qualities of the space. The exhibition rooms, also characterized by low ambient lighting, display the photographs as if they were presented on large newspaper pages unfolding throughout the galleries. The panels that structure the exhibition are therefore graphically treated to provide context for the images, drawing on the visual language of the press through prominent historical headlines taken from contemporary newspapers, while also offering an in-depth narrative of the events and circumstances that led to the creation of the photographs on display.

Video Gallery Corridor Section

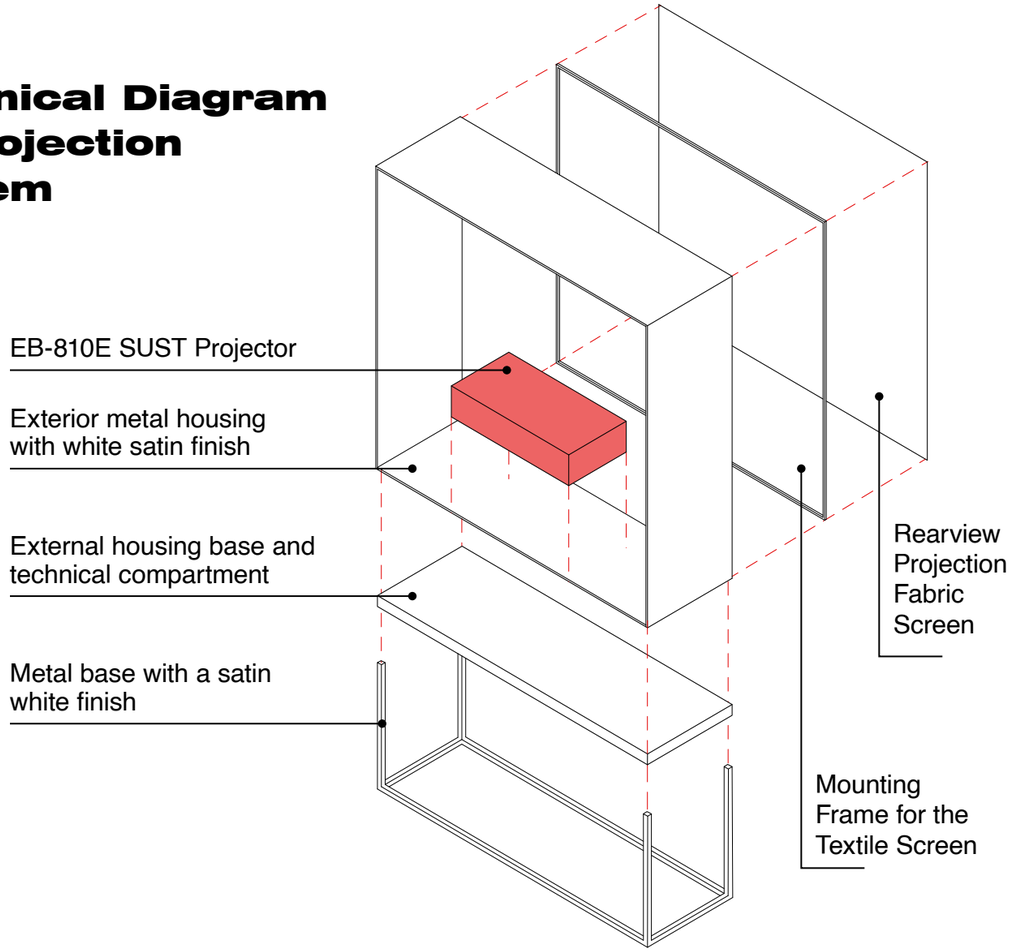


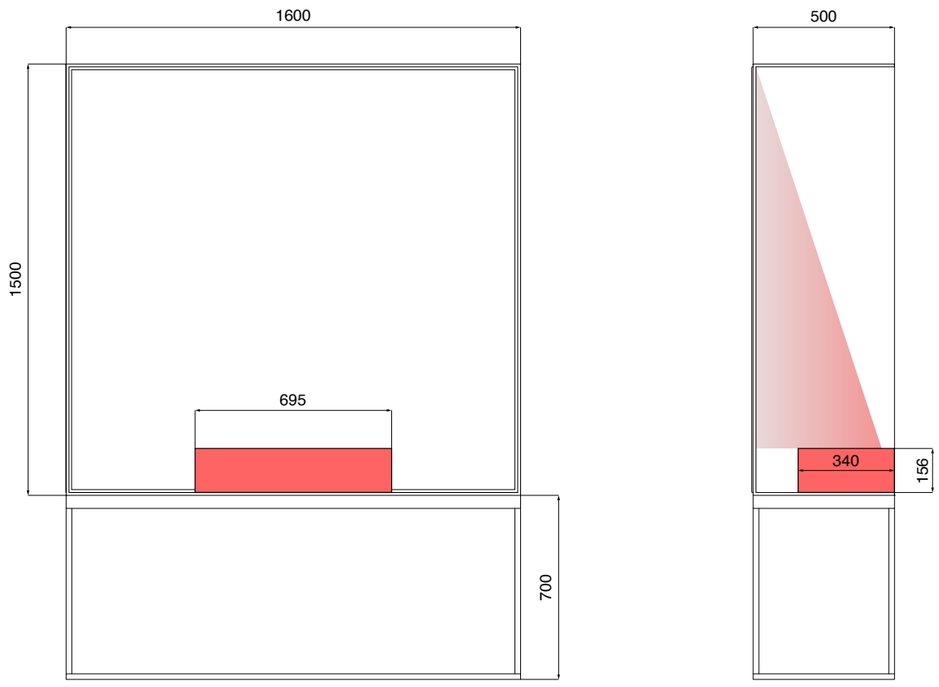
Exhibition Rooms Section

The cross section illustrates the positioning of the projectors installed within the corridor and the distribution of the lighting fixtures throughout the space. The drawing provides a detailed view of the location and orientation of the technical elements that make up the exhibition's lighting and projection systems. The section also depicts the final gallery of the exhibition, dedicated to contemporary photojournalism. This space is conceived as a spatial reinterpretation of a social media feed, where a large number of images are displayed on interactive touchscreens. Visitors are encouraged to follow their curiosity, approaching the photographs that capture their attention and engaging directly with the screens to learn more. Through touch, each image becomes a gateway to the story behind it, revealing the context, events, and narratives that surround the photograph. In this way, the gallery reflects on contemporary modes of image consumption while encouraging a more conscious and in-depth engagement with photojournalism.

Exhibition Cross-section

Technical Diagram of Projection System



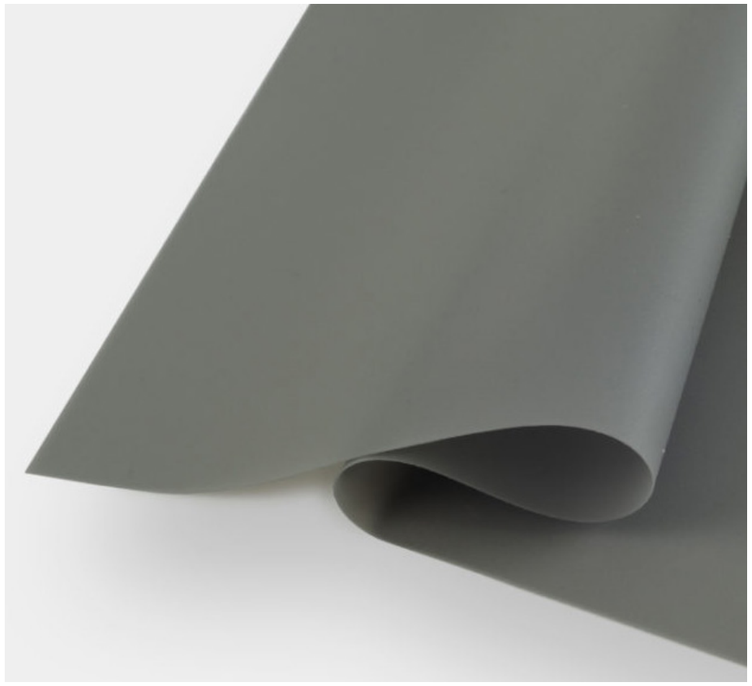


Rearview gray screen

by Strong MDI Screens

The RearView screen by Strong/MDI is specifically designed for rear projection applications, using a high-performance diffusion material to distribute light evenly across the surface. This ensures excellent image brightness, contrast, and wide viewing angles while preserving sharp details and accurate colors.

By hiding all technical equipment inside the exhibition structure, the system provides a clean and seamless viewing experience, allowing the projected image to become the primary focus of the installation.



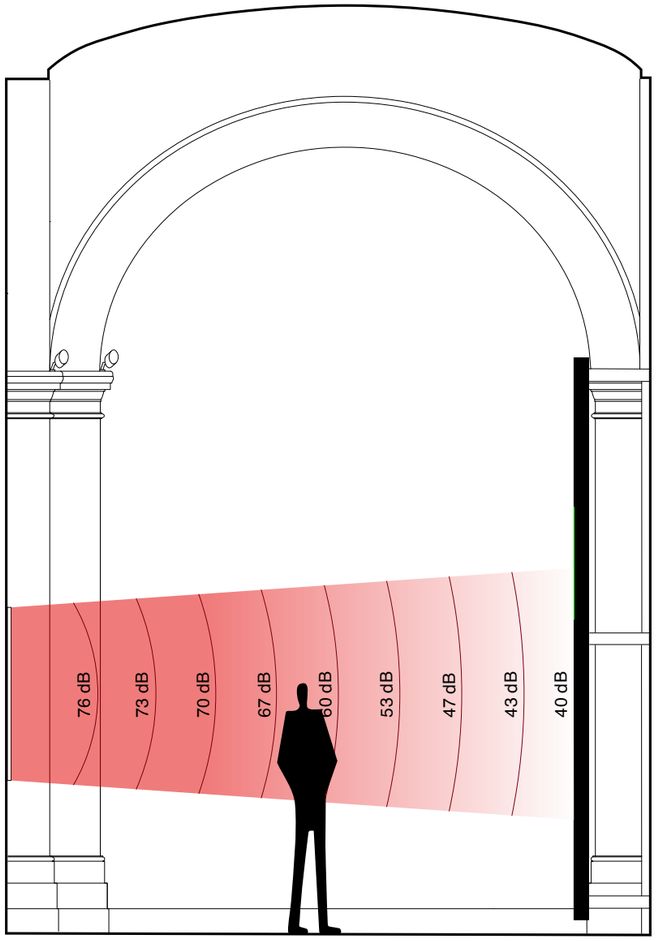
EB-810E Super-Ultra-Short-Throw Projector

by Epson

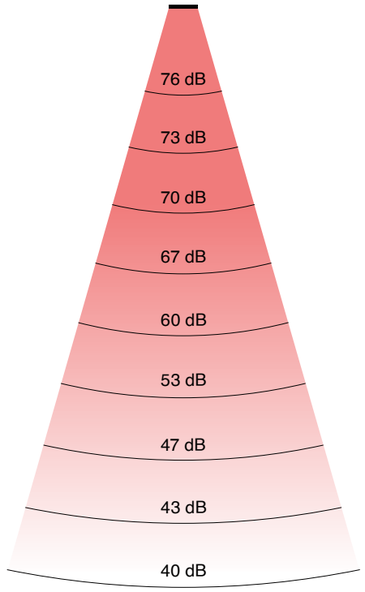
An ultra-short throw (UST) projector uses a folded optical system with mirrors and wide-angle lenses to project large, high-resolution images from a very short distance. Unlike conventional projectors, the optical path is designed to maximize image size while minimizing the required installation depth. This configuration reduces shadows, prevents viewers from interrupting the light beam, and allows the projector to be discreetly integrated within the exhibition structure, making it particularly suitable for museum installations and rear projection systems.

EB-810E Super ultra short throw projector

Technical Diagram of the Sound System



Sound attenuation and sound beam angles

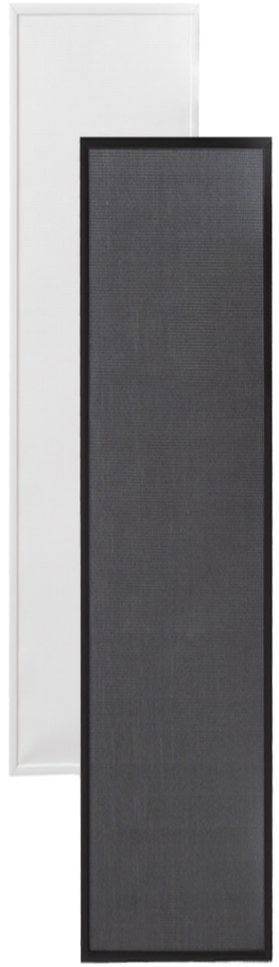


The exhibition's sound system is based on Panphonics Sound Shower directional loudspeakers, selected for their ability to generate highly localized listening areas. Unlike conventional loudspeakers, directional speakers concentrate the acoustic energy into a narrow sound beam, allowing audio to be perceived clearly only within a defined listening zone while significantly reducing sound dispersion into the surrounding space.

The slim model was chosen for both its technical performance and its minimal visual impact. Its slim profile and lightweight appearance allow the device to blend almost completely into the exhibition architecture, while its vertical installation perfectly complements the proportions of the corridor without introducing visually intrusive technical elements.

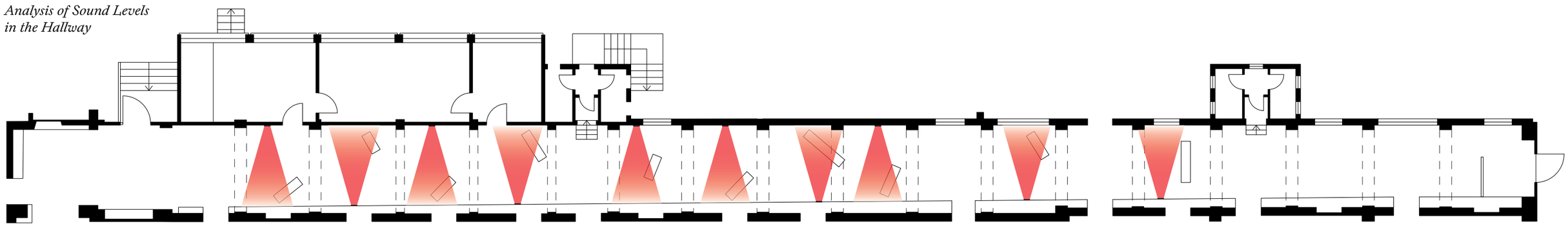
The use of directional audio technology made it possible to create a series of controlled listening zones along the exhibition path. Each sound source is confined to a specific area, ensuring that visitors can experience each audio narrative independently without interference from adjacent installations. This approach eliminates the need for headphones, preserving a shared exhibition environment while maintaining a high level of acoustic separation between the different contents.

The sound levels were carefully calibrated to achieve maximum speech intelligibility at the centre of each listening area, corresponding to the visitor's natural position within the corridor. Beyond this point, the sound pressure level gradually decreases, reaching values close to the ambient background noise near the rear wall. This controlled attenuation minimizes sound reflections and prevents acoustic overlap between neighbouring installations, ensuring a clear and comfortable listening experience throughout the exhibition.



Panphonics Sound Shower Passive, SSHP 120X20 model

Analysis of Sound Levels in the Hallway



Rendering of the ticket office with a view of the introductory panel for the "Leaving Home" exhibition

Rendering of the video gallery corridor
Next page: Exhibition rooms of the Publiofoto Archive

CROLLA LA DIGA di Vajont a Belluno MIGLIAIA DI MORTI

L'ONDA DELLA MORTE

QUATTRO MINUTI DI APOCALISSE NELLA VALLE DEL PIAVE

LE VITTIME SAREBBERO DUEMILADUECENTO

Sotto le acque della diga, nell'alto corso del Piave

Tremila morti nella fiumana

On the evening of October 9, 1963, at 10:39 p.m., one of the deadliest disasters in modern Italian history unfolded in the Vajont Valley. A massive landslide, estimated at around 270 million cubic meters of rock and earth, detached from the slopes of Mount Toc and plunged into the reservoir created by the Vajont Dam. The impact displaced an enormous volume of water, generating a wave more than 200 meters high that surged over the dam and swept through the valley below. Within minutes, entire communities were devastated, with the town of Longarone suffering the greatest destruction. Nearly 2,000 people lost their lives.

What makes the Vajont disaster particularly significant is that the dam itself did not collapse. At the time, it was considered one of the most advanced engineering achievements in the world, standing as a symbol of Italy's post-war modernization. However, the catastrophe revealed the limits of technological ambition when confronted with environmental realities. Geological studies and local testimonies had already raised concerns about the instability of Mount Toc, but these warnings were underestimated or ignored. The disaster was therefore not only the result of a natural event, but also of human decisions that failed to fully acknowledge the risks involved. The aftermath of the tragedy sparked intense public debate and led to investigations into the responsibilities of engineers, companies, and public authorities. Over time, the Vajont disaster has come to symbolize the consequences of placing economic and technological progress above environmental awareness and public safety. It remains a landmark case in discussions surrounding risk management, engineering ethics, and the relationship between human intervention and the natural landscape.

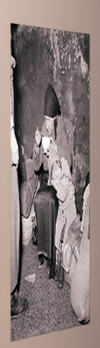
TUTTO E' IRRIMEDIABILMENTE FINITO

...iperato gli argini, dilaga ...vano e nel Polesine

...EDIA DEL POLESINE

...ga-
...de-
...lost

What makes the Vajont disaster particularly significant is that the dam itself did not collapse. At the time, it was considered one of the most advanced engineering achievements in the world, standing as a symbol of Italy's post-war modernization. However, the catastrophe revealed the limits of technological ambition when confronted with environmental realities. Geological studies and local testimonies had already raised concerns about the instability of Mount Toc, but these warnings were underestimated or ignored. The disaster was therefore not only the result of a natural event, but also of human decisions that failed to fully acknowledge the risks involved. The aftermath of the tragedy sparked intense public debate and led to investigations into the responsibilities of engineers, companies, and public authorities. Over time, the Vajont disaster has come to symbolize the consequences of placing economic and technological progress above environmental awareness and public safety. It remains a landmark case in discussions surrounding risk management, engineering ethics, and the relationship between human intervention and the natural landscape.



...evastazioni per l'infuriare

SITUAZIONE DRAMMATICA NELLE CAMPAGNE DELLA BASSA PADANA

QUATTRO MINUT... NELLA VALLE DE...

Sul Longarone vive...

On the evening of October 9, 1963, at 10:39 p.m., one of the deadliest disasters in modern Italian history unfolded in the Vajont Valley. A massive landslide, estimated at around 270 million cubic meters of rock and earth, detached from the slopes of Mount Toc and plunged into the reservoir created by the Vajont Dam. The impact displaced an enormous volume of water, generating a wave more than 200 meters high that surged over the dam and swept through the valley below. Within minutes, entire communities were devastated, with the town of Longarone suffering the greatest destruction. Nearly 2,000 people lost their lives.

What makes the Vajont disaster particularly significant is that the dam itself did not collapse. At the time, it was considered one of the most advanced engineering achievements in the world, standing as a symbol of Italy's post-war modernization. However, the cata-

Una Spaventosa catastr...

morti accertati, si cerca...

Rendering showing the room dedicated to modern photojournalism, featuring photos from the World Press Photo collection

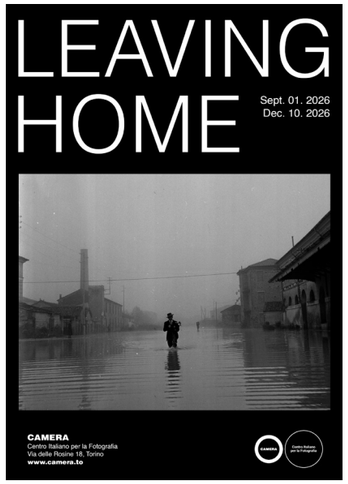
VI.7
COORDINATED IMAGE

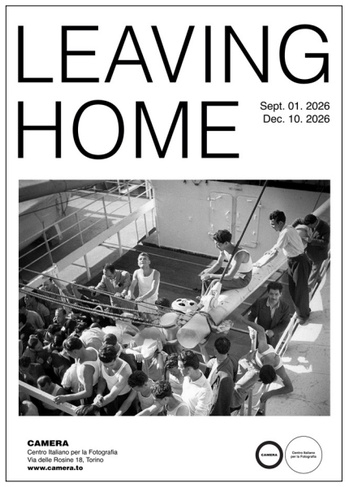
The exhibition's visual identity was developed in line with the visual language of the exhibition design, incorporating as a distinctive element the large typographic title inspired by newspaper front pages. The choice of a minimalist graphic design, characterized by large monochromatic surfaces, a palette limited to black and white, and large-scale typography, allows photography to play an absolutely central role. The image is therefore not merely an illustrative element but becomes the exhibition's primary communication tool, foreshadowing its themes and documentary value.

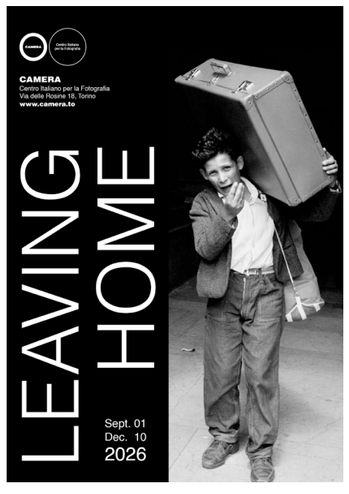
To ensure flexibility across various communication formats, two graphic templates were developed. The first features the title arranged horizontally at the top of the poster, echoing the traditional layout of a newspaper headline; the second, however, uses a vertical composition, with the text placed to the side, creating a more dynamic relationship between typography and photography. Both solutions have been adapted in both positive and negative versions, maintaining a visual identity that is consistent yet versatile enough to adapt to images with different compositions.

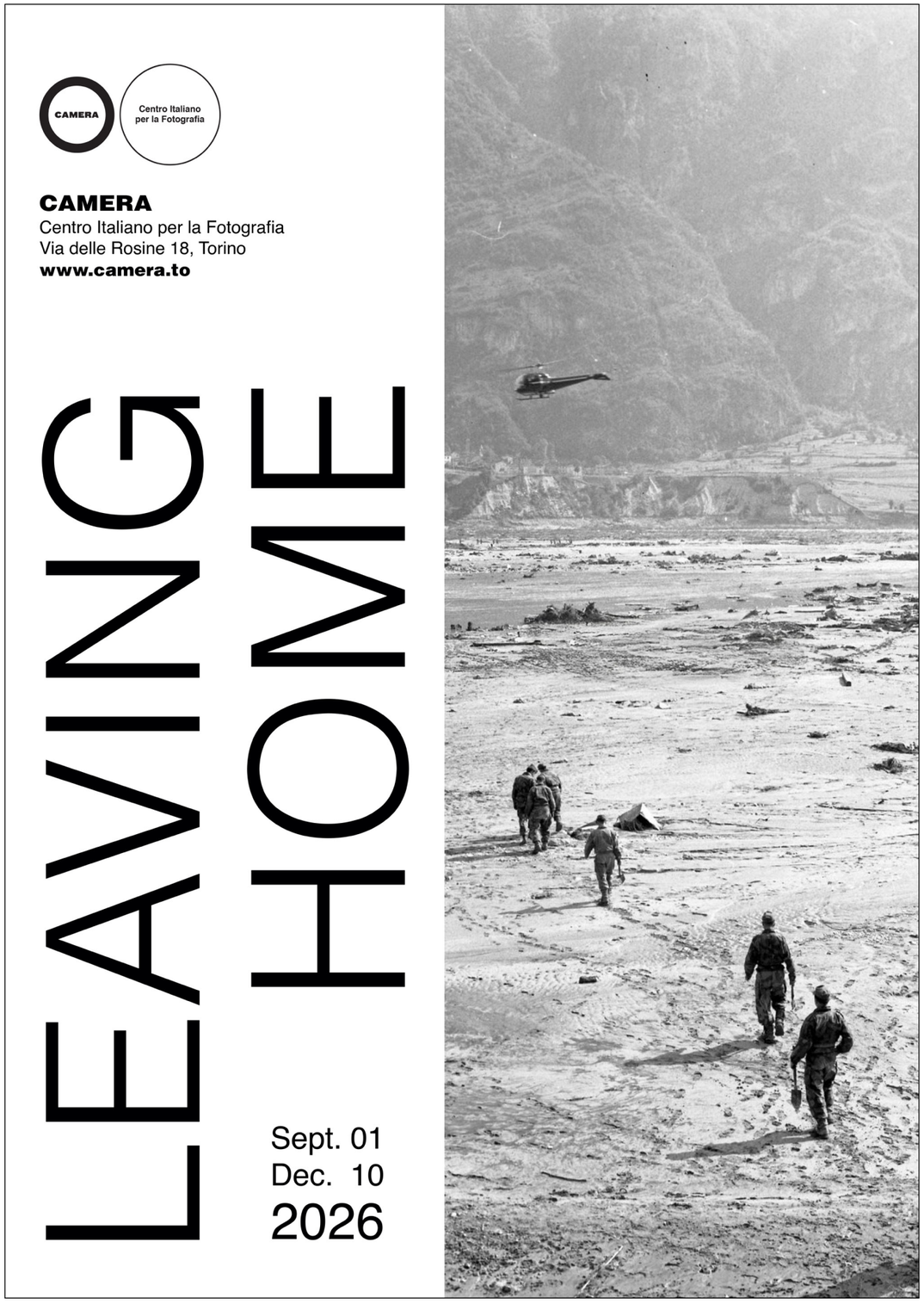
The photographs were selected from among the most iconic images in the exhibition, those capable of representing the variety of themes addressed by photojournalism. The images alternate between scenes of conflict, loss, and suffering and others that convey resilience, reconstruction, and hope, encapsulating the dual nature of photographic storytelling. This contrast, already evident in the promotional materials, sets the stage for the exhibition and conveys to the public that the exhibition aims not only to document historical events but also to tell the human stories behind each photograph.

Posters for the exhibition "Leaving Home"









LEAVING HOME

Sept. 01. 2026
Dec. 10. 2026

CAMERA
Centro Italiano per la Fotografia
Via delle Rosine 18, Torino
www.camera.to

LEAVING HOME

Sept. 01
Dec. 10
2026

STAGIONE 2026/2027

FATALE

CAMERA
Centro Italiano per la Fotografia
Via delle Rosine 18, Torino
www.camera.to

LEAVING HOME

Sept. 01
Dec. 10
2026

MUSEO NAZIONALE DEL CINEMA TORINO

eni 100

A SCHERMO PIENO

Eni nel cinema italiano

21.5 > 24.8.2026

MOLE ANTONELLIANA, TORINO

LEAVING HOME

Sept. 01. 2026
Dec. 10. 2026

CAMERA
Centro Italiano per la Fotografia
Via delle Rosine 18, Torino
www.camera.to

TEATRO REGIO TORINO

AMOUR
STAGIONE 2023/2024
TOUJOURS

Advertising banners for the exhibition "Leaving Home," displayed on the facade of CAMERA, Centro Italiano per la Fotografia, on Via delle Rosine

Fig 7.1: César Rodríguez Mexico, A Changing Image for Climate Norwegian Red Cross, SNCA, The New York Times

VII.

Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS

The research conducted throughout this thesis has highlighted the central role that exhibition design plays in the presentation of photography. Far from being a neutral support, the exhibition apparatus actively contributes to the interpretation, accessibility, and attractiveness of photographic works, shaping the relationship between images and their audience.

The study of photographic exhibition practices has shown how the white cube emerged within a specific historical context, in which photography sought institutional recognition as a legitimate art form. By isolating the photographic image from external influences, this model contributed significantly to the process of artistic legitimization. Today, however, photography no longer needs to prove its status as an artistic medium. Although the white cube still offers important advantages in terms of visual clarity and flexibility, its tendency to remove context can become a limitation, particularly when dealing with archival and photojournalistic photography. These images were often created not primarily as artworks, but as historical, social, and journalistic documents, whose meaning is deeply connected to the circumstances of their production and dissemination.

Starting from these considerations, the thesis project proposes an alternative approach to photographic exhibition design, based on the principle of contextualization. The exhibition “Leaving Home”, dedicated to the photojournalistic documentation of migration, seeks to restore both the historical context of the images and the editorial context from which they originate. This dual contextualization is achieved through a layered exhibition strategy: documentary materials and texts provide historical interpretation, while the graphic treatment of the galleries recalls the visual language of newspapers, emphasizing the original relationship between photographs and written narratives.

The final gallery extends this reflection to contemporary photojournalism, recreating the experience through which audiences most commonly encounter news photography today: digital platforms and online media. By adopting the form of a large-scale feed, the exhibition invites visitors to actively select, explore, and deepen the stories presented, transforming observation into participation.

The project does not advocate the abandonment of the white cube. Rather, it proposes understanding it as a flexible foundation that can be enriched through graphic design, spatial interventions, and narrative devices. The intentionally lightweight and temporary nature of the exhibition elements reflects this perspective: the neutral gallery space becomes a framework to be interpreted rather than a model to be rigidly preserved. Ultimately, this research aims to demonstrate that archival photography can be appreciated simultaneously for its artistic qualities and for its cultural and documentary significance. Rather than reinforcing the traditional opposition between photography as art and photography as document, the project seeks to reconcile these two dimensions. Exhibition design can become a tool not only for enhancing aesthetic appreciation but also to fostrer historical understanding and critical engagement.

The Publifoto Archive offers a particularly valuable opportunity to explore this dual nature. Its images combine remarkable visual quality with extraordinary historical relevance, documenting crucial transformations in Italian society throughout much of the twentieth century. Through the lens of migration, the archive has been interpreted not only as a repository of the past but also as a means of reflecting on contemporary realities, establishing connections between historical experiences and current global movements of people.

In conclusion, this research argues for a more dynamic and critical approach to photographic exhibition design. Rather than relying exclusively on standardized display models, it encourages the development of exhibition strategies capable of generating new readings of photographic works. The ambition is twofold: on the one hand, to invite photography enthusiasts and purists of photographic aesthetics to recognize that photography can be understood through an additional layer of meaning, beyond its formal qualities alone; on the other, to offer the wider public a more accessible entry point into photography, one that is less enigmatic than much contemporary authorial work and capable of fostering an aesthetic sensitivity toward the medium. In this sense, the project represents a proposal for an alternative path: one in which photographic exhibitions receive the same level of curatorial, spatial, and narrative attention commonly reserved for other artistic media, recognizing photography in all the complexity of its artistic, historical, and social dimensions.

This thesis does not seek to provide a definitive answer to the question of how photography should be exhibited, nor does it intend to propose a universal alternative to established exhibition models. Rather, it aims to contribute to an ongoing discussion

around a field that still holds considerable unexplored potential. Compared to other artistic media, photography remains a relatively young form of expression, and its exhibition language is still evolving. For this reason, the research should be understood not as a criticism of existing practices, but as an invitation to continue experimenting with new curatorial and spatial approaches capable of responding to the changing role of photography within contemporary society.

The need for such experimentation becomes particularly evident in a historical moment in which photography has become one of the most widespread and accessible forms of visual communication. Digital technologies have radically transformed the way images are produced, distributed, and consumed, making photographic content available to an unprecedented degree. As a consequence, the exhibition of photography can no longer rely solely on the uniqueness of access to the image itself. In many cases, the photographs displayed in museums and galleries are already available online, often in high quality and accompanied by extensive information.

Within this context, the value of the exhibition increasingly lies in its ability to provide something that cannot be fully replicated through digital viewing. The physical space of the exhibition offers opportunities for contextualization, narration, immersion, and critical interpretation that extend beyond the simple presentation of images. Exhibition design can therefore become a means of adding layers of meaning to photography, encouraging forms of engagement that require the visitor's physical presence and active participation.

Rather than competing with digital platforms, photographic exhibitions can embrace their difference, positioning themselves as spaces of deeper understanding and reflection. This shift opens new possibilities for both curatorial practice and exhibition design, encouraging the development of experiences that complement, rather than duplicate, the encounter with photography that already takes place online. In this sense, the future of photographic exhibitions may lie not in displaying images alone, but in creating meaningful frameworks through which those images can be understood, questioned, and experienced collectively.

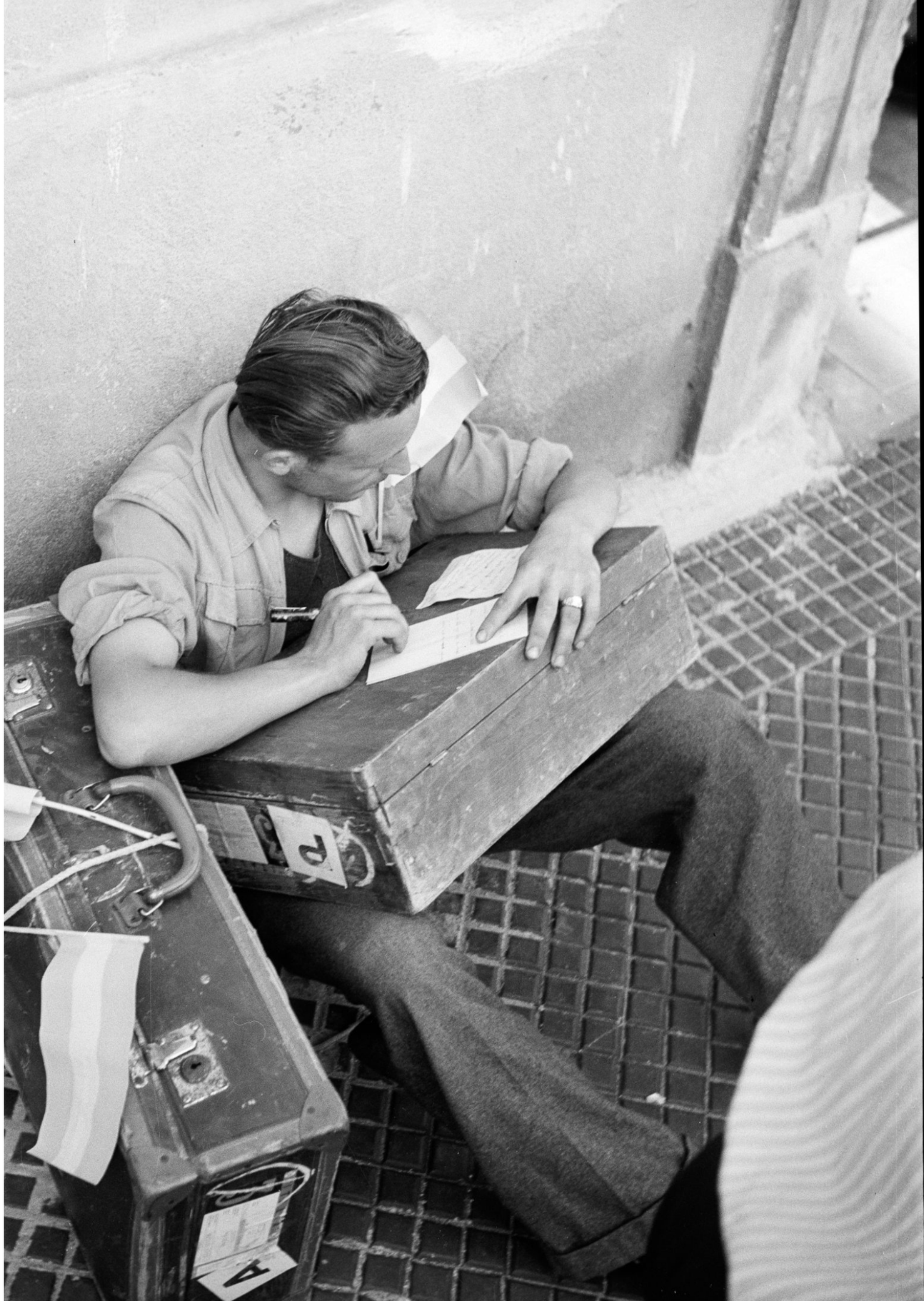


Fig 7.2: An Italian emigrant in Genoa, sitting on the ground next to his suitcases, writes on a piece of paper as he waits to leave for Argentina, June 2, 1947

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Beyond the White Wall

The Construction of Meaning in
Photographic Exhibitions

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