

Record of the International Symposium for the 20th Anniversary of the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum:  
Why Are Photography Museums Necessary?

# A Place for Photography

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**Filippo Maggia**

Director at Fondazione Fotografia Modena, Italy

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Instead of following the style of a normal lecture I'm now going to show a 50-minute video, since I have so many things I want to tell you. I want to introduce the institution I represent and what we do, and also cover why photography is so important today, namely why a photography museum is necessary.

Andrea Landi (President of Fondazione Fotografia Modena): The project implemented by Fondazione Fotografia is the result of the coupling of the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Modena (FCRMO) bank's experience in the art field and a number of favorable circumstances that led to the identification of photography as an area to explore in the field of culture. The Fondazione Fotografia project was launched by the FCRMO in order to include photography into the sphere of modern art.

I first met Filippo Maggia back in 2007, at the exhibition *Northern Lights: Reflecting with Images*, which he had curated. This was a meeting which I think left its mark on my experience, and his too. Together with Maggia and Angela Veresse, then director of the Galleria Civica di Modena, we discussed the possibilities of setting up a project which was not exclusively exhibition-minded, but which might also be characterized by training and research activities. Another key element is the fact that this project, though initially just one of the many projects of the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Modena, began to emerge as an ever more stable and organized structure within our activities. Indeed, at the end of 2012 it was turned into an instrumental company. This is not a mere formality: it is the first and only time the Fondazione has created an instrumental company, thus underlining the intention to make long-term investments in this project.

Filippo Maggia: The Fondazione Fotografia started out in 2007 at the behest of the FCRMO with the main aim of putting together collections of contemporary photography, both Italian and international. Since then, more than 1,300 works by contemporary artists have been collected, from the Far East to Eastern Europe, from the Middle East, Africa, India, South America, North America, Western and Northern Europe. Currently, there are still a



couple of areas left to be explored in the world: Oceania, Central America and parts of Europe — the collection plans to acquire works from these regions too.

The Italian collection, on the other hand, offers an account of the research carried out in our country from the 1980s right up to the present day. It ranges from photographers of the generation of Luigi Ghirri, Gabriele Basilico and Mimmo Jodice right up to today's thirty- and forty-somethings. The Fondazione Fotografia's exhibitions have been hosted in the rooms of the Sant'Agostino complex, currently undergoing restoration work; in the future, the Fondazione will be housed in Modena's Polo dell'immagine contemporanea (Polo Centre for Contemporary Imagery), along with other cultural activities from around the city. Exhibitions staged over recent years with works from the collections include *Asian Dub Photography*, *History Memory Identity*, *Breaking News*, and *North Tenth Parallel*, among others.

Alongside the collections, over the years a range of training activities have been developed, with the two-year post-diploma master's degree for young imaging artists, a course for curators, and numerous specialist workshops. The master's course in particular, which is now in its sixth biennium, brings together artists from all over Italy. It offers them the chance to come into direct contact with the world of art through lectures but also hands-on experiences, workshops and seminars with international artists, foreign residencies, commissions, and exhibitions (*The Summer Show*).

A few years ago, the Fondazione Fotografia began to host the archives of the Fotomuseo Panini, a historical institution within the city that houses the Panini Collection (with over a million images from the nineteenth century up to the post-war years), as well as works from other major public and private collections. Since then, the Fondazione has hosted both major historical exhibitions, such as *Robert Rive* and *Photography of the Andes*, and contemporary ones.

The Fondazione's work on historical photography also continues through the cataloging, conservation, and restoration of both its own archives and those of other public or private collections. As well as collecting works and contributing to contemporary research through its support for training activities — particularly for young artists and curators — it also promotes special projects with artists, including Axel Hütte and Daido Moriyama, Ahlam Shibli, Mitra Tabrizian, Zanele Muholi, and Claudio Gobbi. With Kenro Izu and Hiroshi Sugimoto, we currently have two different projects underway: Izu is busy photographing Pompeii and Sugimoto portraying Italian theaters.

Over the years, we have also put together a major video library, which may be consulted on request. It's home to around a hundred long interviews with

many of the artists in the collection, with unique testimonies of great value for those who wish to study and investigate the many ways images contribute to our understanding of the contemporary world. Contributors to the video library include Amar Kanwar, Nobuyoshi Araki, Gabriele Basilico, Daido Moriyama, David Goldblatt, Yasumasa Morimura, Roman Ondák, Adrian Paci, Hrair Sarkissian, Mladen Stilinović, and Artur Żmijewski, among others. On the occasion of the exhibitions, the Fondazione also offers a vast program of fringe events, from book presentations to small conventions and, best of all, meetings with the artists featured (such as Willie Doherty and Axel Hütte).

In March this year (2016), together with the international television channel Sky Art, the Fondazione launched two major photography prizes: an international one dedicated to artists whose research has made a significant contribution to the development of the photographic language, and a second prize for Italian artists under 40. Santu Mofokeng was the winner of the first edition: he won €70,000, a book deal, and a solo exhibition.

As this preamble has explained, the Fondazione Fotografia is not just a museum or a traditional exhibition space, nor has it ever set out to be one. The city of Modena has a long tradition of photographic culture and I myself was a curator at the Galleria Civica di Modena (the city's modern and contemporary art museum) for 10 years, from 1993 to 2003. The Fondazione aims to be a center, an incubator of ideas in support of research, in which the collections serve as the raw material with which to study, reflect, and consider how the language of imagery has been evolving — and how it has never been as universal as it is today.

In 1990, the front cover of the journal *Camera Austria* featured a work produced by two Austrian artists Michael Schuster and Hartmut Skerbish, emblematically titled *All Has Been Seen by All* (1989). Twenty-six years have gone by, and today we may realize just how contemporary this Hasselblad camera body with four lenses featured on the cover was. And yet judging by what the world of imagery — to which photography belongs — became over the following decades, we might be tempted to say that "all" is never enough.

In 2011 Flickr, the social network for image sharing, was uploading 4,733 images per minute — almost seven million per day. By 2014, almost two billion images had been uploaded to the site, of which 1.3 billion were also on Facebook. In October 2013, the social network Instagram had around 150 million active users, of whom 28% were aged between 18 and 29. Around 55 million photos were shared per day, totaling of 16 billion by October 2013. Over the course of the last two or three years, these remarkable figures have been increasing in a giddy exponential vortex. Rather than a language of images, we should talk about a Babel of images.

The question thus arises: is there still any sense in talking about a "language of imagery," an expression coined more than two decades ago by Thomas Ruff? What kind of distinction can we make today between images and photographs, if any? What dignity does the status of photography confer on an image?

And so, perhaps more than ever, it is now important to have a place to discuss photographs and images, be they still or moving, as part of other media. Installations like those by Nikhil Chopra or Ishmael Randall Weeks call upon the viewer to participate, to get inside the work so as to perceive its meaning, to share in the experience.

But what are these images trying to tell us? What do they offer? Clearly they constitute a language which, thanks to technology, has become universal; they travel through the ether and in the blink of an eye go "from the Apennines to the Andes," to paraphrase nineteenth-century Italian writer Edmondo De Amicis. In his time, this was a matter of daydreaming: the reader had to imagine everything. Now all you have to do is press the "send" button.

The power of these images is immense: communication through sharing, through "likes." But just what lies behind the "likes"? Do these images constitute visions or are they just a means to their own end? Do they encourage reasoning; do they open doors?

Never before has photography been so democratic. The problem is understanding what to do with it, and for artists this responsibility is even greater: it's not a matter of mere form or aesthetics, as Michael Schuster and Hartmut Skerbish aimed to demonstrate; there is no longer anything to discover; the sense of mystery may only be induced or perhaps evoked. All has been seen, experienced, consumed. Of course, every artist has his or her own style, through which he or she tries to emerge, to affirm himself/herself and his/her own poetics. And s/he does so, ever more often, by addressing "highbrow" themes. I would like to examine three of these themes, as I believe them to be central to current research: memory, identity, and genre.

Memory may be individual or collective, and it may even be both. The history of a person belongs to that person alone, but s/he may also be part of a group of people who, like him/her, feel they belong to a social body — a society, in other words — made up of relations, traditions, and customs. In photography archives, through the yellowing of yesteryear's photographs, we may reconstruct the history of a man or a woman, of a family group, of a village. (I am reminded here of the work of Vivan Sundaram, who elaborated images from his own personal family history in the work *Re-take of 'Amrita'*, or that of Marika Asatiani, produced in the Georgian province of Adjara, once a Soviet territory but culturally Islamic.)

We live in a moment of great transition, dominated by continuous migrations of peoples from one corner of the earth to the other. In such moments, many contemporary artists use photography to preserve memory, which is after all the great depository of history. (Just think of the silent photographs of the Armenian-Jordanian Hrair Sarkissian, or the moving *Larvae Channel 2*, a cartoon created by Wael Shawky telling of the lives of two Palestinian refugees — the story of an existence denied.) We might even state that the history we all learned from books at school is today handed down more through images than texts (take the History channel, which my students often quote as their primary source).

Have images replaced words? For several years now, almost all the most prestigious international papers have published photographs on their front page on a daily basis. The photographs are in fact the icons of the moment: essential moments that mark the passing of time. So many times, when we think back to a historical event, we first recall the image that represented it, even before the details of the event itself. Do you have any recollections of the Gulf War photographs or those from the Balkans in the early 1990s? We can all remember the shot of Peter Arnett on the terrace of a hotel, but if you ask people, few could tell you whether it was taken in Baghdad or Sarajevo.

Which brings me to another issue of *Camera Austria*. The cover and the inside pages were entirely black, as if in mourning — a strong gesture of protest. Against what? It was the year 2000, and the populist, xenophobic party led by Jörg Haider had taken control of the Austrian government. The editors of the Graz-based magazine, co-founded by Austrian photographer Manfred Willmann, opted for silence, and a deafening one at that. The artist is the filter of the period he or she lives through, and provides humanity with his/her testimony — we might almost say his/her version of the facts.

This is what Thomas Struth does when he tells us of China; Daido Moriyama in his endless pilgrimage from one end of Japan to the other; Iosif Kiraly and post-Ceausescu Bucharest; David Goldblatt and the recent history of South Africa; Svetlana Heger and East Berlin after the fall of the wall; or Robert Adams and the deforestation of the American West. And in an even more direct fashion — militant, we should perhaps say — so does Akram Zaatari with his collection of letters from the young imprisoned Palestinian Nabih Awada. Or Mounir Fatmi in his provocative video *Bad Connection*, in which the Moroccan artist questions the pre-constituted meaning of what we see: the video shows bomb belts typical of suicide bombers, which immediately evoke death and destruction, but which are here fitted out with books by André Gide and Guy de Maupassant, as if to say that the only real explosive charge is that of words, of culture.

And then for many artists, memory is something extremely young, still "in progress." We might look at the countries of the Eastern Bloc or North Africa,

or even those of the Middle East or South America: what memory are we talking about here? Over the last 30 years, everything has changed and is still changing in those parts of the world: the photographs from three decades ago already look tired. And yet, thanks to them, today it is possible to understand the reasons behind a present which often seems indecipherable, and of which photography continues to provide a faithful testimony.

From memory, it is a small step to identity. The defense of an identity, its affirmation through the work of an artist, is one of the most widely examined themes in the contemporary arena. Contemporary photography needs to recount the identities of places before that of those who populate them. Again, we have to go out to those parts of the world which photography has unveiled for us over recent decades: the Mali nightlife (by Malick Sidibé), the sea sailed by a messenger of peace (by the Israeli Yael Bartana), the much-tormented Palestine (by Ahlam Shibli), the colors of India (by the learned Raghbir Singh), China suspended between tradition and modernity (by Yang Fudong), even the pure and tribal South Africa (by Santu Mofokeng).

In other forms — in a sort of hybrid representation, lying between politics and social commitment — we find the Thailand of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, the Peru of David Zink Yi, the Turkey of Fikret Atay, the Romania of Călin Dan or the Croatia of Renata Poljak. Their work sometimes takes the form of reportage photography, but most of all it is photography with a sense of awareness, which aims to be a vibrant conscience and not just a mere testimony. Images that set out to force the viewer to stop and question things, aimed most of all at a Western audience that prefers to see these painful historical dramas recounted in television programs. Photographs that tell the stories of men and women, of peoples, populations, lives undergone and never lived.

The question of identity often leads to one of gender, of belonging, of recognition and self-affirmation, in which the emotion goes beyond reason, trying out different forms of narrative in order to give shape to profound emotions. In this territory, the West over the last few decades has set out precise yet initially very tormented positions.

Referring to the United States alone, I might cite New York photography of the 1980s and '90s: from Robert Mapplethorpe to Mark Morrisroe, Peter Hujar, Nan Goldin, and the very delicate William Gedney before them. As hard-hitting and decisive as Cindy Sherman was, or early Philip-Lorca diCorcia, only over the last decade have many other countries started to reason about this openly. Two artists who are undoubtedly fighting are Zanele Muholi, a leading figure in Africa's gay rights movement, and Samuel Fosso before her.

Yet I don't wish to reduce the gender issue to an exclusively sexual or

racial matter, however much both may be fundamental in the life of every individual. I believe that today, belonging to a genre of whatever nature means first of all defending an autonomy of thought; being rooted in one's own life — or a faithful mirror of it — this autonomy paradoxically emerges more clearly as a method, a *modus operandi et vivendi*, in those countries where the art system is not yet established enough to substantially compromise the contents. This is an approach that the latest generation of artists highlights today, especially females, due to a question of sensitivity and determination. The previously mentioned Ahlam Shibli, the intransigent Japanese photographers Lieko Shiga and Tomoko Kikuchi and the disarming Yurie Nagashima (from Miyako Ishiuchi onwards, female artists have played an ever greater role in Japan), Fen-Ma Liuming (the alter ego of the young Chinese artist Ma Liuming), the Argentine Laura Glusman, the Romanian Alexandra Croitoru, the Icelandic Hallgerdur Hallgrímsdóttir, and the ambiguous young Englishman Jonny Briggs are but some of the contemporary artists who live their art as a life mission — one from which they cannot be alienated, often making creative isolation a sort of defensive bulwark of their own independence.

The future will be a hotbed of comparison between different cultures, becoming more integrated, at times coordinated, other times piloted if not indeed forced, and I think rarely natural and spontaneous. And yet never before have these cultures been so close, by virtue of the rapid transmission of data, thoughts, and reflections transformed into imagery. That said, not all of these are shared or shareable; this is probably a further point of strength in this new challenge for photography. It is not enough to add a "like": we are asked to observe, reflect, and criticize. And what better place than the museum to host and feed this discussion! Today, the images that dominate the world and communication between humans may thus be discussed and analyzed by young artists, scholars, critics, and curators as much as by the general public who come across them in the morning papers or on the walls of museum spaces.

I believe that the artist who knows how to exploit art forms to express the great movements and the great issues of the contemporary world — and who therefore manages to offer a reading, an interpretation — may endow their own work with great power. Therefore I think those who manage to insert such art forms into contemporary issues are the ones who really can invest the artwork with great strength, insofar as they may help the viewer to question his/her own views, for it is a prerogative of the artwork to offer a synthesis and highlight aspects that the onlooker has not grasped, moving in to strike him/her emotionally.

The training of a critical generation, capable of interpreting the language of images, bringing it up to date from moment to moment, is a need to which this institution, before anyone else, is called to answer — if for no



other reason than that the wide-scale spread of imagery entails enormous responsibilities with regards to the potential conditioning of millions of people (for example, we might think of the risks minors run today through the use of smartphones). The programming of exhibitions, artist talks, seminars, and teaching activities are the elements that, on a daily basis, the institution weaves into its own fabric: the museum.

And that is not to forget its publishing activities and, most of all, its collections: a heritage which remains available to the community, and which helps us to understand how, all around us, the world is changing (“collecting photographs is a bit like collecting the world,” as Susan Sontag would say). In other words, that which photography set out to do right from the start.

(English Editing: Alex Dudok de Wit [Art Translators Collective])