The History of Reprinting Photographs at MoMA
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Speaker
Sarah Meister, Curator of Photography, MoMA

00:05: SARAH MEISTER: Hello. Thank you. As Erin mentioned, I’m Sarah Meister. Good morning. I want to thank Erin and all the SFMOMA colleagues for the opportunity to speak here today. I’d like to thank the Mellon Foundation for their generous support that makes these conversations possible, and to Lee Ann Daffner, who’s somewhere out there—I can’t quite see where—but whose intelligence and collegiality really is so central to everything I’m about to say that I couldn’t even begin to know what to credit to her. I would also like to acknowledge the essential research assistance of two of my MoMA colleagues, Tasha Lutek and Jane Pierce, whose work allows me to speak with a specificity that I hope propels this conversation forward.

00:49: When the SFMOMA team visited us in New York last summer, we quickly realized that any discussion of reprinting color photographs could productively begin with a conversation of reprinting black and white ones. This has been happening at MoMA since the 1930s. And then in the next thirty minutes, I’ll sketch this history of reprinting publicly for the first time, pointing to some productive parallels between then and now. But when I gave this talk to my father and he yawned and sort of fell asleep, I thought perhaps I should also begin with the question of why does this matter. And I didn’t have access to what Erin just said, so forgive me; there’ll be points in which it sounds like we’re repeating each other, and then a few actually interesting divergences.

01:36: But I believe that one of the important reasons that we’re talking about this is because this is a medium in which infinite multiplicity is possible. And it’s important to recognize the difference between a photograph, which I would argue is something that
has an object with specific, often but not always fixed material characteristics and a size, the difference between that and an image, which as Corey was saying, is something that can be experienced across platforms and continents. So while we as museums collect or exhibit photographs, this materiality is significant. And that's why we're talking about it today. This is intimately related to an artist's intent, even in the case, I would argue, of conceptual practices, when what we collect might be a surrogate for an idea.

02:32: In November, 1938, the photographer Edward Weston wrote this letter to Beaumont Newhall, who was then the librarian at the Museum of Modern Art. He wrote, quote—and I'm going to abbreviate a tiny bit—“I was a bit disturbed when my son Brett told me that he had just shipped to the Museum of Modern Art, my photographs from the Albert Bender Collection. Albert had told me that I could check through the prints and see if any should be reprinted or discarded. Brett did not understand. I naturally want you to have only the best, and I am sure that some of the work sent to you was not my best. Perhaps the best solution would be for you to list them for me, if you would be so kind. I have improved my printing so much the last two years that with time, I would like to reprint for you all of the photographs you have of mine.” So that's 1938.

03:27: This raises one topic for us to consider today: How can we work most effectively with artists in determining what needs to be reprinted, and what should be the character of those reprints? Sure enough, the cataloging cards, or as you might notice, scraps of paper—You might notice the obsolete list visible through the verso of this thin sheet. So the cataloging cards reflect the fact that although these works by Weston were accessioned in 1939, they were not actually printed until 1941. Alfred Barr, the museum’s founding director, declared his commitment to modern art in design, film, and photography, as early as 1929. Yet it would be more than a decade before he
was able to establish a department of photography. Placing Newhall in the library was Barr’s interim solution to this problem. In late 1940, Barr at last succeeded, and Newhall’s title changed from librarian to curator of photography. Newhall had organized *Photography: 1839-1937* as that prior role. But his first exhibition as curator was *Sixty Photographs: A Survey of Camera Aesthetics*. It included both vintage prints and a good number of modern reprints: Berenice Abbott, of Eugène Atget; Ansel Adams, from Edgerton and Genthe’s negatives; Edward Steichen, from an original Henri Le Secq calotype. So from the very start, reprints were an integral element of the exhibition program, even for a purist like Newhall.

05:05: There are two early print-on-demand stories that I adore and will mention briefly here, just because they’re good. The first is an exhibition that opened just days before Pearl Harbor in 1941, called *American Photographs at $10*. The intent was to, quote, “encourage the collecting of photographs for decoration and pleasure.” And it included ten new prints that had been made by Berenice Abbot, Ansel Adams, Walker Evans, Helen Levitt, and others. No one blinked that it had been twenty-five years since Charles Sheeler exposed the negative for Bucks County Barn, which was what he chose to submit for that, and the sale was an absolute failure. Or as Newhall would write to László Moholy-Nagy when returning nine of the ten prints that he had sent from the Radio Tower Berlin, quote, “Frankly, an experiment.”

06:04: The other story points also to the fluidity of the field at that time. In Nancy Newhall’s 1946 Edward Weston retrospective, a sign by the entrance read, “Most prints in this exhibition are for sale at twenty-five dollars each. Inquire at front desk.” The idea of multiple prints was woven into the heart of the program. One final example of the Newhall era reprinting. In 1941, Charles Sheeler made replacement prints of images that Lincoln Kirstein had given to the museum in 1935. The museum had deaccessioned two of these in 2001 and 2002, a point I make while wanting to respect Erin’s request to
acknowledge Sotheby’s exceptional research around these works and to encourage continued partnership with auction houses and galleries. While we may not want to talk about it today, I think it’s correct to acknowledge that we can’t dissociate the market from these conversations.

07:07: Edward Steichen was named the director of the department of photography—Oh, sorry. Let me just say for framing purposes, I’m going Newhall era, Steichen era, Szarkowski era, just to try to tell this history and keep it moving along. So Edward Steichen was named director of the department of photography in 1947, ushering in an era of prints made to suit the demands of exhibition design, without respect to the photographer’s preference in terms of scale or materiality or, frankly, anything else. When his official title was lieutenant captain, US Navy, he organized such propagandistic exhibitions as Road To Victory, in 1942, and Power in the Pacific, in 1945. These exhibition display practices persisted even after Steichen assumed his position at the helm of the department, and he began organizing exhibitions of creative photography to distinguish it from the unattributed work of most of his wartime exhibitions. In and Out of Focus was the first of these, in 1948. And of course, you all know well the pinnacle of this genre, The Family of Man, which opened to the public in January, 1955. I recently read Dorothea Lange’s account of the eleventh hour exhibition preparations, where she said of the prints at the opening, quote, “You put your hand on them and the paste would squeeze out.” So while it is fair to associate Steichen with these walk-in illustrated magazine-like practices, working with Herbert Matter and Paul Rudolf, among other notable exhibition designers, he was not deaf to the importance of vintage prints, perhaps best expressed in his penultimate exhibition as director, Steichen the Photographer. Nothing like organizing your own retrospective to remind you of how much you love the objects you made as a young man.
09:05: John Szarkowski’s first exhibition as director of the department of photography is fairly characterized as a rebuttal to *The Family of Man*. In the press release for *Five Unrelated Photographers*, he wrote, quote, “The exhibition does not include their work; it is of it. No attempt is made to link them together with a central theme or idea.” And yet just as black and white photographs are very rarely only black and white, it is helpful to remind ourselves of the shades of gray that more appropriately define Steichen and Szarkowski’s respective tenures. The idea of making exhibition prints did not end with Steichen’s departure. Again and again through the 1960s, Szarkowski followed similar display protocols: Lartigue in 1963, Lange in 1966, Cartier-Bresson in 1968, and Brandt in 1969. And here, I will pause to mention our more recent practice of purchasing vintage prints, for which we had owned one of these exhibition reprints for forty, fifty years. There are some wonderful exchanges between Steichen and Brandt regarding the evolution of his printing style, that I hope someone will ask me about later.

10:28: But returning to Szarkowski and exhibition prints, by the 1971 Walker Evans retrospective, there were a handful of mural-scale enlargements; but there were also a good number of new prints made by Jim Dow from Evans’ original negatives, prints that Evans claimed to prefer to his own, and that in an exhibition context, were virtually indistinguishable from prints by Evans. Or as he might say, even better. I have argued in the past that the museum’s 1968 acquisition of the Abbott-Levy Collection of Eugène Atget’s prints and the ensuing study of Atget’s work triggered a seismic shift in Szarkowski’s attitude toward exhibition prints. The prints that the museum asked Chicago Albumen Works to make from Atget’s glass plate negatives are distinguishable to the cognoscenti. But like Dow’s prints of Evans’ work, they integrate seamlessly with vintage prints. I realized more recently that Lee Friedlander was making printing out paper prints from Bellocq’s original negatives at precisely this same moment. So the plot might be a bit thicker than even I had believed.
11:41: But more central perhaps to our concerns today are the conversations that began while the work of Atget was on view when Szarkowski was still director, but a young curator named Peter Galassi presented various options for color storage to the committee on photography. So this is beginning in May, 1982. By October, the committee had approved the purchase of a home refrigerator—I believe a Kenmore, probably from Sears—and the minutes noted, “Mr. Wilhelm”—and that’s Henry Wilhelm, who we’re fortunate to have with us today—“recommends this as a very good solution. And the cost is $1,000 instead of $100,000. This solution extends the life of the photographs stored in it by at least thirty times.” By March, 1984, the museum issued this statement, drafted by Galassi, I’m sure with Wilhelm’s input, to photographers who work in color. And I’m going to quote it because I think it’s an important moment for us to be able to refer to later. Quote, “It is now well known that with a few exceptions, color print materials show a noticeable fading or color shift within as little as ten to twenty years when stored under normal room temperature and humidity conditions, even in the dark. Most such works in the museum’s collection, prints up to twenty by twenty-four inches, are stored at about thirty degrees Fahrenheit and 35% relative humidity.” That’s a standard refrigerator. “These conditions will substantially increase the life of the prints. However, these same photographs also fade or change color when on exhibition, they are exposed to light. Since it is our purpose not only to preserve, but also to show the pictures we collect, we propose the following. When we decide to purchase a color print in unstable materials, we will ask to buy two prints: one at the artist’s price, the other at a presumably much lower lab price, or what it costs to make the print. The museum will agree to regard the two prints as equivalent versions of a single work of art, and will so record them. Neither print will ever be sold. Both prints will be placed in cold, low-humidity storage. One will be available for exhibition and loan; the other will be kept, in effect, as a backup until such time as the first is judged to have faded significantly. This solution is not perfect, but it will help resolve
the conflict between our goals of preserving the collection and making it known through exhibition here and elsewhere.”

14:31: So I wasn’t at MoMA, so I think I can say this was a pretty watershed moment in the preservation of color photographs. And as a consequence, the museum began acquiring duplicates of chromogenic color prints; first by David Hanson—that was number one—in March, ’84, and then by Richard Misrach, in May of ’84. But photographers whose color work had been acquired recently were also paying attention to this statement. So the museum had purchased a chromogenic print of this work by Joel Sternfeld in 1979, and accepted this dye transfer print from the same negative in 1984, as gift of the photographer, accessioned as an independent object. The meeting minutes include this observation. Quote, “In terms of quality and beauty, the Ektacolor print is perhaps superior. The process produces a more plastic, fluid, and natural result. Unfortunately, the process is quite transient, and the more permanent dye transfer print represents a very close representation of the original concept.”

15:42: So throughout Szarkowski and Galassi’s tenures, the museum began to develop better protocols for replacing prints in both black and white and color. Conversations regarding swaps and reprints with gelatin silver prints continued, as they had since the 1930s. Steichen had purchased three prints from Stephen Shore, black and white, in 1962, when Shore was fourteen years old. Two years later, at the ripe old age of sixteen, the museum accepted a reprint of this image and allowed him to replace the other two images with prints from different negatives entirely. By 1984, the museum was beginning to recognize the need to control this process, leading to this mention in the acquisition meeting minutes. Quote, “Helen Levitt came to the department to survey some of her work that the museum owned. Dissatisfied with the quality of some of her prints, she offered to make new, quote, ‘better’ prints.” And it puts quotes
around the word better in the minutes. “Better prints to replace those in the collection. Mr. Szarkowski explained that this was not satisfactory from the museum’s point of view and a compromise was agreed upon. Miss Levitt agreed to make new prints of the work she perceived as ‘inferior,’” in quotes in the minutes, “and the museum could keep both versions.”

17:12: But what about when the prints themselves exhibited signs of deterioration and it wasn’t just a matter of a photographer preferring a new printing style? Each circumstances, I would say, is unique, although in the interest of organizing my thinking in this talk, we came up with three buckets of options. The first, exemplified by this work by Robert Heinecken, is to do nothing. And this, I think, is important. On February 7th, 1985, Szarkowski wrote to Heinecken, quote, “I must take your advice on the condition of the Sontag piece. It is, in some areas, yellowing quite severely. My own opinion is that it looks wonderful, and may be the first photograph ever made that will become a great ruin. But it is possible that you will hate it.” Heinecken responded a few weeks later, “The first notion—” And I love this letter. Forgive me for reading a little more than I should. “My first notion regarding your observation on the condition of the Sontag piece is to clarify that the gradual aging, yellow process was conceived by me and built in as an integral part of its eventual context. By this I mean that the dichotomies listed in the texts—words versus pictures, relevant versus arbitrary, craft versus feeling, casual versus research—will be resolved by one’s careful noting of which picture yellows most, and at what rate. If the left one yellows most, then the right one is correct, and vice versa. I carefully treated—” and here, he’s of course making fun of all of us—“I carefully treated the materials in such a way that the full yellowing process will take ten years. This number is related to the zone system ten.” [laughter] Thank you. God, it’s so great to have an audience that— My dad was like— [laughter] “Therefore, sometime in the year of our Lord 1988, the truth will be revealed, and Susan Sontag’s actual role in the history of photography will be ascertained, finally.” Oh, God, this is
great! Heinecken had clearly thought this through. Although it bears mentioning that many artists from the sixties and seventies were either ignorant of or indifferent to the specific material characteristics of the photographs, in black and white or color. The museum’s more recent acquisitions of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection or the Daled Collection of conceptual art include scores of examples of work in which the photographic materials might be appropriately described as being in sub-pristine condition. And we’ll get back to that.

19:55: So if the first option is to do nothing, the second option is, of course, to make a replacement print, the core of what we’re talking about today. Once you have a replacement print, you must decide what to do with the degraded original. And here, I see this a little differently. Because in our experience at MoMA at least, the most extreme, true, but also most typical solution is to destroy the original. The museum had extensive conversations about this with Jan Groover in 1994, at the time of a major acquisition. After establishing that the, quote, “fridge print” would not violate the terms of limited editions, which we may want to get to, and that they would be stamped to differentiate them, she continued, quote, “I would also like to sign the real prints,” parentheses, “(replacement for the ones that have turned) on my next business trip. And I would like about five square inches of the ones which have turned and are to be destroyed.” Galassi responded, “Once the new prints are made and approved by you and by us, and once the museum has paid for the purchase, I will be happy for you to destroy the corresponding discolored prints in my presence, and to carry away any and all shards.”

21:08: I had considered including a slide here of our Preparators taking a table saw to a face-mounted work—and we have tons of documentation of this happening—but that seemed perhaps more sensational than the circumstances demand. Suffice it to say that this happens regularly. And while each conversation is a bit different, in my
experience, when the artist’s and the institution’s goals are aligned, it’s not that difficult to arrive upon a mutually agreeable solution. Of course, it is also possible to make a replacement print and keep the degraded original, typically for research and reference purposes, as is this case with a work by Jan Dibbets from the Daled Collection. Whether or not the original is destroyed, trust is of the essence here, and good record keeping. And it’s critical to involve the artist or estate in these processes.

22:02: A third option is really more of a spectrum of options, working in consultation with conservation to determine just how cautious we ought to be with a work that we know to be particularly fragile or fugitive. We are constantly discussing the various steps we can take in these circumstances: low light levels, abbreviated exhibition periods, physical covers outside of public hours, prohibiting all travel, and in the most extreme cases, retiring a work from view, as we have done with this work by Günter Brus, seen here with before and after pictures, which you can’t really tell. But without exception—and Lee Ann felt this was very important for me to mention—works should not change while they are on view. Conservation at MoMA uses spectrophotometric evaluation to monitor any potentially vulnerable works, and we remove them if any change is found to have occurred.

22:57: So this brings us to the Galassi era. Peter Galassi had been chief curator for about a decade when the museum last expanded. And in close partnership with Lee Ann Daffner, our Andrew Mellon conservator of photographs since 1999, he took advantage of that opportunity to build a state-of-the-art storage area for photographs immediately adjacent to the curatorial offices on 53rd Street. And this includes both the main space, which is kept at about fifty-five degrees and 45% relative humidity; and on the top right, a reach-in unit that’s really kept almost at freezing. And so when we take something out of the reach-in unit, it climatizes overnight in the main collection storage, and then we can bring it out into the office space without condensation and
such. Galassi presided over an era in which digital technologies became a widespread integral element of many artistic practices, which has also dramatically expanded the preservation options available to us. The museum’s first digital acquisition arrived in 1991, this work, by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. But digital technologies have analog precedents, of course. And I’ll point to Yoko Ono and George Maciunas’ Fluxus Wallpaper, which was conceived in the pre-digital era, but now produced today from a digital file. Digital technologies are also central to our current slide preservation protocols, which fall perhaps outside of the area of our focus today, but still deserve mention because with every technology that become obsolete, the question of how to make replacement works becomes more complex. We have spent a lot of time developing this protocol for the preservation of color slides. We’d be happy to share at another time.

So I could spend the whole day talking about the museum’s acquisition of Paul Graham’s A1, The Great North Road and the fascinating conversations we had throughout that process. But very briefly here, Paul hand processed a stunningly beautiful set of chromogenic color prints in 1982. And attentive to the conversations around the long-term preservation of color work, he placed them in a refrigerator at that time. Thirty years later, these prints are every bit as gorgeous as the day he made them, and to say we were keen to acquire them is a gross understatement. But we also knew we wanted to protect them, and that every time we put them on view chips away at their life. So we began a conversation with Paul before we even acquired the work, about acquiring a second set of pigmented inkjet prints made from scans of the original negatives. Not surprisingly, when we compared the first round of the pigmented inkjet prints against the vintage prints, there were noticeable differences. Skies were brighter, colors more vibrant, shadows more penetrable. And to my mind, the mood—which is to say the meaning—of the series had changed. And while Paul agreed with some of my assessments, he raised an interesting counterargument. If he could have
printed these differently in 1982, he would have. Against the backdrop of the limitations of the analog technologies, he asked if I was recommending that he, quote, “dumb down” the new prints. Which—Anyway. Several rounds later, we settled on a compromise. Without attempting to make a slavish facsimile, he made a set that preserves the foreboding mood of the original. And appropriately labeled, of course, we can use the pigmented inkjet prints in most instances, and save the vintage color prints for when they are truly needed. And we’ve done that. We’ve exhibited the pigmented inkjet prints, and I’m just waiting for exactly the right moment to put those color ones on view for a day. Just kidding. It’ll be a little longer, I promise.

26:59: One final cautionary note about digital images. As you all know, they can be wildly misleading. So misleading, in fact, that we considered using a different pair of images here; but then decided that the strange muted cloudiness that infuses that scan of the pigmented inkjet print on the right proves this point perfectly. The print simply doesn’t look like that. So we’ve established a set of procedures that we follow when considering the possibility of making a replacement print. And of course, one of these is to compare the proofs against the original objects and/or a reliable reproduction.

27:36: Okay. So this brings us to the Bajak era, one that technically ended in February, when Quentin left MoMA to become the director of the Jeu de Paume. In the six years of his tenure, we continued to refine our protocols and to tend to the preservation of the collection. But more and more, as we had done with Paul Graham, we have been anticipating the long-term needs from the moment of acquisition, beyond the practice, as noted in 1984, of acquiring duplicate chromogenic prints. Here is an example of our recent Donna-Lee Phillips acquisition, where we purchased an original set of resin coated prints—which had heretofore been a cause of concern—onto which the text had been typed, as well as a set of pigmented inkjet prints made from those originals. I suppose once upon a time, we would’ve called these copy prints. But that terminology
seems ill-suited to this practice. And to the list of topics I hope we discuss later—Oh, add that to the list of things I hope we discuss later. But the point I’d like to make here is that the notion of acquiring duplicates prints now extends beyond objects that are, at least initially, interchangeable, to complementary iterations that may derive from the same matrix, sometimes one generation removed. The more I think about it, the more confident I feel that this is the key to framing the fundamental impact of the digital era on the history of reprinting photographs. We are now at a place where the technology can produce a duplicate or facsimile that sufficiently resembles an original made through other methods. Which, upon reflection, is not all that unlike the relationship between Joel Sternfeld’s dye transfer print acquired in ’84 and its chromogenic cousin acquired in ’79.

29:24: So what does this mean for us today? It means that when we acquire a print by Alvin Baltrop and Lee Ann raises concerns about its stability, we are now ready to contemplate going back to the artist’s estate—again, I know we’re talking about living artists, but still—and using the negatives in that estate, to make new, more stable gelatin silver prints. And in instances when the negatives cannot be located, we are also contemplating scanning the existing print and making a facsimile or exhibition copy from that file. But it also means that there are times, as with this unique collage by Gordon Matta-Clark, or this maquette by Dan Graham, or this photogram by Sue Weil and Robert Rauschenberg, about whose stability we are also concerned, but we know it is impossible to make a duplicate that would adequately represent the original—And in these instances, we must take a very conservative approach to exhibition. These works at MoMA are often jointly acquired by two different departments. And bringing our colleagues who work in other media into these conversations is critical if we’re going to be successful in these efforts.
30:39: We also want to be a part of the dialog when it comes to acquiring modern prints, when it is either not possible or not desirable to have a vintage version. Colleagues in other departments are less attuned to the subtleties of photographic processes, often, and we can be helpful to them in this regard. I was able to work closely with Herman Sifontes’ Foundation for Urban Culture, regarding the production of modern prints by Alfredo Cortina that we acquired in 2014. It was important to them, and it seems responsible and worthwhile to me, to keep the small vintage contact prints in Caracas. Well, perhaps not Caracas right now, but in principle, in the country in which they were made and rightfully live. And we are pleased to be able to represent this achievement in a slightly larger, more exhibition-friendly recent print, which upon reflection, is not all that different than John Szarkowski’s exhibition of modern prints by Lartigue in 1963. So it is now fairly commonplace when we do a major acquisition or a systematic collection evaluation or a retrospective of work by a particular photographer—let’s take Stephen Shore, for instance—that we use it as an opportunity to reflect on the current condition of the prints in the collection, some of which we may have had for decades, and to work to determine a long-term preservation strategy, which may include acquiring work that is not, strictly speaking, a duplicate of what the museum had held, either in terms of scale or process. Occasionally, these conversations are triggered by external forces—an artist finds a negative that had previously been missing or decides to reprint for an upcoming exhibition unrelated to the museum. But Lee Ann evaluates our exhibition history for every single photograph that goes on view, either at MoMA or requested for loan. And with certain works that are in high demand, she’ll say, ‘Enough. This work has been exposed too much.’ Reprinting is occasionally a solution, in which cases, we approach the artist or estates to begin a dialog that we know is all of our best interests. We are more and more acquiring artists who penchant for vulnerable display strategies, euphemistically phrased, has led to our acquisition of supplementary material along with finished prints. We call these digital files, guide prints, exhibition prints, duplicate prints. An analog example is the
gelatin silver print by Liliana Porter, which is laminated, yes, but still pinned against the wall to complete a hand-drawn graphite circle. More common than the analog ones are digital ones—examples of work by Wolfgang Tillmans and many others around the world, including this recent acquisition by a Cuban artist, Leandro Feal.

33:40: But I’d like to conclude with this example of a work by Carmen Winant, whose installation was featured last summer in Lucy Gallun’s Being: New Photography 2018, and then acquired by the museum. My Birth consists of nearly 3,000 photographs from a variety of sources—found photographs, mostly printed publications, such as Our Bodies Ourselves—trimmed and adhered to the wall with blue painters tape. We know that this tape will stain the sheets of paper in time. So while our conservation department is working to stabilize what they can of the materials—and there are some great day-long sessions in our study center doing this—we are locating, also, additional copies of the books, from which many, but hardly all, of these prints were made. Carmen is adamant that the museum not make any facsimiles. Which come to think of it, brings us back to Heinecken and the Sontag piece that Szarkowski described as a, quote, “great ruin.” History has a way of repeating itself. And my hope, in art as in life, is that we take advantage of opportunities to learn from it. Thank you. [applause]