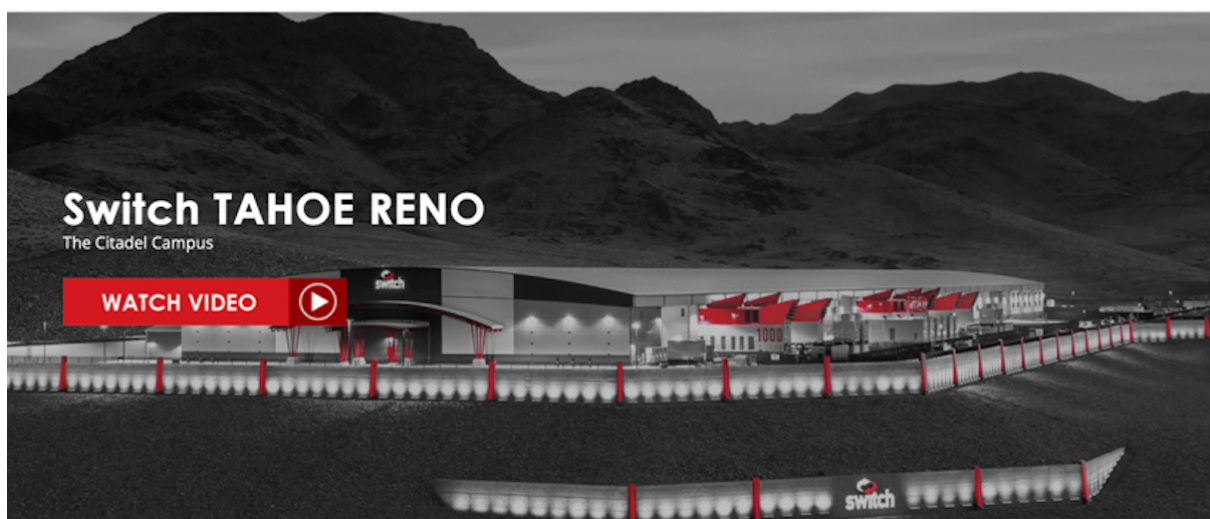


COLD CASE NO. 2. HERITAGE, HISTORY AND THE ARCHIVE: PHOTOGRAPHY'S MAUSOLEUM

It is undeniable that, in celebrating the pleasure of the here-and-now and the latest thing, consumerist society is continually endeavouring to make collective memory wither away, to accelerate the loss of continuity and the abolition of any repetition of the ancestral. The fact remains that, far from being locked up in a self-enclosed present, our age is the scene of a frenzy of commemorative activities based upon heritage and the growth in national and regional ethnic and religious identities.

– Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times* (2005)





Screenshots taken by the author from the promotional video for [The Citadel Campus](#): 'The [world's largest data center](#) has 20-foot-high concrete walls surrounding the campus. Furthermore, highly-experienced security staff patrol the site 24/7. Specifically, the security staff are ex-military or have similar backgrounds.'

Cold Case No. 2

Cold Case No. 2 is an investigation into the condition of the digitised photographic image from the perspective of forgetting photography. This is a very big case file, and this blog entry can only touch upon certain facts. I examine the question of photographic collections and archives and the problems of digitisation at greater length in chapter 6 of [Forget Photography](#). Here I extempore on some of that material.

Ordering the World

The world was already full of photographs, well before the ineffable rise of digital big data. Now the world is totally image saturated, but this saturation is of a different order. Over the course of the industrial, mechanical, analogue image age, photographs were aggregated according to a scientific taxonomy in which flora and fauna, topography and human life across the globe were catalogued. The objectifying project to photographically catalogue the world took place over successive periods tied in with the processes of European and North American colonial expansion. In what we might now conceptualise as a dynamic and relational world assemblage of photographic materiality and practices, it is possible to see that in the analogue era, photography – and the world it defined – was constructed, ordered and consumed as one of the functions of commercial, governmental, cultural, military and civil organisations, creating historical collections and archives. ¹In this sense, analogue photographic images in collections and archives were knowledge practices, belonging to specific material practices and discourses, whose meanings were reconfirmed in their selective use and specialist circulation. Constanza Caraffa reminds us that the physical presence of the photograph bears traces of its use. In this respect, Caraffa says that 'photographs lead a double existence as both pictures of objects and material objects in their own right,' ² and as objects they are accorded agency and played a role within the knowledge practices in which they were deployed. In 'Thoughts on the "Non-Collections" of the Archival Ecosystem', Elizabeth Edwards argues that through the materiality of photographic practices it is possible to discern an invisible eco-system, a 'non-collection',

beyond the bounds of the archive, operating as a hidden logic, which disturbs, ‘the hierarchies of value and categories that have created collections and performed photographs as certain kinds of things’. ³ The question for the archive, which will have to go unanswered here, is what world does the world assemblage of the photographic archive represent, what doesn’t it show, what remains secret and what is it incapable of showing? Allied to this question is, of course, the issue of who is asking the question and what they might be looking for. Together, the questions form the basis for a new and extensive research agenda. What can be said with confidence is that photographic archives repeat to infinity naturalised and naturalistic scenes, through the ocular mechanics and programme of the camera. ⁴ It can also be confirmed that the taxonomies and classifications of photographic archives and collections follow an order of political and social hierarchy.



[Nicolas Lkhoff, Social Pyramid, 1901](#)



Left: [Queen Victoria in Mourning for Prince Albert](#), photograph by Ghémar Frères, c. 1862/63. Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021 / Right: [Princess Elizabeth at Buckingham Palace](#), photograph by Cecil Beaton, 1945, England. Museum no. E.1361-010. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Digital Dreams

In 2000, three-quarters of the world's information was still in analogue form. By 2007, all but 6 per cent had been preserved digitally. 5



[Getty Research Institute's Photo Archive](#), which houses some 2,000,000 art history study photographs. Over 11 million Getty images are stored in Pittsburgh.



[Lulea green data centre located in Sweden](#), which handles European Facebook uploads.

The quiet departmental backwaters of analogue photographic collections and archives were irrevocably and steadily breached with the advent of digitised information storage from the 1980s, throwing serious doubt upon the systems of classification, accepted photographic taxonomies and the archival and curatorial practices associated with archives and collections. Besides the disruption and, in some cases, damage sustained by the analogue print in early attempts at scanning images, the equipment quickly became obsolete as technologies improved and file sizes changed as storage expanded in an environment without agreed protocols and standards. In the first period of digitisation there was a complete lack of understanding that the materiality of the digital data needed to be preserved itself. A report for the [European Commission's Comité des Sages on the 'The Cost of Digitising Europe's Cultural Heritage'](#), prepared by Nick Poole in 2010, found that European museums alone house 350 million analogue photographs suitable for digitisation, and that among the approximately 30 million individual photographs held in national libraries some 4 per cent had been digitised at the time of the report in 2015.

But the photography of the archive is not the photography of the collection, and in the museum the boundary between them is policed precisely because it can never be settled. With digitisation this boundary becomes meaningless as images are searched by algorithms and appear fleetingly upon screens. The digital-born representation of an object, scene or event is not another kind of photograph but an image temporarily realised in a data stream, belonging to a non-representational system. The materiality of the double existence of the analogue photograph – as a representation of an object or scene and as an object in a cultural system – changes with computation. The materiality of the screen image is distributed across and resides in electronic network apparatuses and transmitted as signals, manifested only temporarily on screens. This raises a fundamental question of what happens to the analogue photograph when it is digitised. Where is the photograph and what is there to look at?

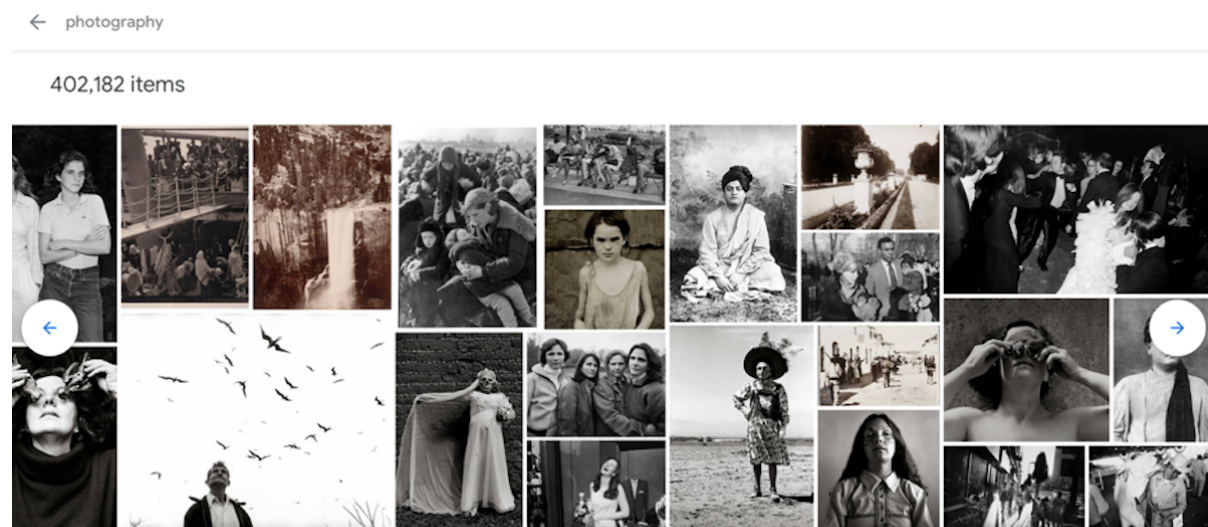
Heritage Is Not History

Over the past two decades, heritage has acquired a new, expanded dimension in European culture and society. This is a consequence of a general cultural commodification, global tourism, the financialisation of cultural organisations and the desire for commemoration. Heritage is a repackaging of the past for some purpose in the present. Every heritage object is accompanied by an intangible heritage, deduced through the language of interpretation and the context of social practice. As David Lowenthal points out, heritage is not history, 'it is not an inquiry into the past, but a celebration of it... a profession of faith in a past tailored to

present-day purposes'.⁶ The digitisation of heritage objects is an unwieldy and impossible project of the encyclopaedic imagination, which is nevertheless propelled by a dream of total data and information as the new currency of knowledge. The implication for digitised heritage is that with the projected scale of data, no human could encompass or comprehend such a deluge of information and therefore heritage data is ultimately designed for machines to read and see. For photographic cultures such problems impact upon how the historical collection of analogue photographs is made accessible, as well as the difficult question of how the museum will collect digital-born images in the future. It is in this context that photography as a medium, as well as the historical collections of analogue photographic images, now has the status of heritage, a medium of the past, but one that paradoxically still takes part in the representation of heritage, by means of digital reproduction. It might be said that this is photography as 'living heritage', a fitting term for photography's zombie condition, which can be discerned here, as an uneasy coexistence of the past and present, hovering between life and death, still sentient in its 'undead heritage' condition.

Photography and the Google Cultural Institute

Google Arts and Culture is an online platform which makes items of collection from leading museums and archives available in digitised form. Google state that their Arts and Culture project is a non-profit initiative, which originated from their policy of encouraging employees to develop projects of interest within work time. [Its mission statement is](#) 'to preserve and bring the world's art and culture online so it is accessible to anyone, anywhere', a slogan reminiscent of Coca Cola's marketing strategy in the aftermath of the Second World War, when the company committed itself to providing the US Army with Coke, wherever they were stationed and fighting in the world. The platform was launched in 2009 by the Google Cultural Institute with the participation of 17 international art organisations, including Tate, MoMA and the Uffizi. By 2020 Google Art and Culture was available in 18 different languages, with over 2,000 institutional partnerships.



Screenshot taken by the author from [Google Arts and Culture](#), search results for "photography"

The Promise of Technological Tools

The model used by Google is to offer its image capture technologies to museums to enable them to digitise their objects for free in return for partnership agreements allowing Google to host selected works. Google uses its technology – consisting of its panoramic street-view camera, lasers used to capture the distances to walls, motion sensors to track the position of the portable cart containing the camera, a hard drive for data and a laptop to operate the

system – to produce 3D navigable renderings of exhibition galleries. The data gathered was subsequently synced with Google Maps. In addition, Google used their Gigapixel camera to scan 2D works in large-file-size sections which were then stitched together using software to produce very high-resolution images that can be used with its zoom tool. The interface is adapted for mobile or desktop screens and can be searched by using 13 search terms as well as a selective navigation of ‘highlights’, showcasing the different technologies used. Photography on the Google Arts and Culture platform has much the same problem as museums do in classifying photography across different uses and contexts, appearing as a topic in its own right, as contemporary documentation of cultural heritage sites and events and as selective archival historical events. All the current 402,182 photographic items are displayed on-screen in the convention of photographic transparencies, in a media player interface, similar to the Netflix or content player interface. The interface makes content intelligible, browsable and searchable, tempting the user to stay on and return to the site by offering a constant stream of changing content in the form of tasters, places to visit, stories to be told and wonders of the world to be experienced. But the deeper problem with digitising analogue photography on the Google Arts and Culture site is with the appearance of the photograph on-screen and what it signifies.

Digitisation of the Photograph

The transparency of the on-screen image is designed for immediacy, to let the viewer experience the object shown by means of the cultural conventions of photographic representation. The mediation of this transparency – its digitisation, in fact – is not visible and not referenced, whereas the hypermediacy of the interface is present and conventionalised in now familiar graphic modes of content navigation. ⁷ There is no convention for registering the computer simulation of a photograph, which displays a transparent image. The transparency of the original photograph is not copied by its digitisation and appearance on-screen but reduplicated. In the case of the digitised analogue photograph, the object scanned is dissolved by the screen image unless the scan includes traces of the analogue beyond its photographic frame. Why does this intermediate compositing layer matter in the cultural reception of photographic heritage objects? Computing has developed technically on the cultural assumption that embedding ‘rich’ media content is a natural aim of transmission and reception, that music, film, television, text and photographs are piped through a digital converter. The digital channel is considered a technical tool and its development is aimed at greater immediacy, to get as close as possible to the experience of the object in the museum and of being in the museum, without being encumbered by or made aware of the technical media that gets you there. In 3D authoring software, which uses photographic rendered images, the surface of the screen and the screen’s image are fused in perception, functioning as a transparent window through which a perspectival world of objects is recognised. This effect of the screen’s embedded image producing transparency has an additional meaning for the digitisation of photographs, because analogue photographs operate on the same basis of the transparency of the image.

The Digital Remembrance of Photography

Whilst Google’s image algorithms are the engine of non-representational information, the Google Cultural Institute and Google Art Project naively simulate the photograph, thus ensuring the continued zombie state of the photographic image. The Google Cultural Institute shows us the obvious flaws in taking culture as a given and the interface as a transparent channel. To regard the technology as simply the channel or the tools is to ignore the fact that network interfaces are deeply encoded with cultural value as well as being mathematically coded. What the computational image shows us is that ‘the real’ is more occluded than ever.

The afterlife of the photograph stands in the place of private intimate life, on the one hand, and a negotiated public life on the other. Software and profit have sabotaged both. If the state of affairs I've described were to be granted, then it would require a reconsideration of what the digitisation of collection objects actually achieves for our understanding of history and what is being looked at. The arc of time along which the more singular idea of digital culture has travelled has itself been overwhelmed by the very practices it originally called forth, such that now there is a multiplicity and reduplication of image-knowledge hybrids, circulating in networks, which confound attempts to maintain linear historical accounts and singular objects. Such a situation – in which the digital itself has a history while also constituting the mode of production – makes it even more untenable to continue to regard photography as a contemporary medium that opens our eyes to reality, a position that not only produces confusion about the representation of photography's history but also adds to the uncertainty about the current status of the image in network culture.