

“Camera Memoria” – seminar on the histories of photography

Du 27 septembre 2018 au 7 juin 2019, Université Paris Diderot

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- 1 “Camera Memoria”, a seminar on the histories of photography organized by Camille Rouquet and Carolin Görden at the LARCA (Research Laboratory on English and American Cultures, UMR 8225, University Paris-Diderot), closed its third season last summer. Based on a format of two speakers per session, whose communications in French or English were followed by a discussion, this seminar has brought together researchers (doctoral students, professors, museum professionals) from various backgrounds and geographic areas in Europe and the United States to study the uses of photography in the English-speaking world as well as their global impact.
- 2 From its inception, photography has been an instrument of memory-making as well as an artistic endeavor; it has become a versatile practice allowing to capture historical moments in the form of unique prints or, on the contrary, to expose them as comprehensive documentation or at least as material traces. The attribution of new spaces granted to photography in museums and archives has contributed to its institutionalization which, in turn, has reinforced the process of collective memory-making through images. When entering these institutionalized – allegedly objective – spaces, photography becomes subject to critical examination. Its contemporary practices are at times considered immemorable or even iconoclastic when the life of an image is ephemeral, its content limited or perhaps immoral.
- 3 While the main focus of the seminar has been on the function(s) of photography in the construction – or the deconstruction – of memory, the contributions adopted cultural, historical, sociological, esthetic, rhetorical, political, anthropological, or economic approaches to the medium: a large methodological perspective fostered by the emergence of a cultural history of photography and the rise of visual studies. The first two seasons of “Camera Memoria” in 2017 and 2018 questioned for example the role of photography in identity conscience and the construction of images of the nation, its relation to the concept of agency and the emancipation of minorities. The various

communications also explored ways of revisiting photographic archives, of rethinking photographically natural or urban territories, of reframing categories such as pictorialism and theories of photography.

- 4 In preview of the third season in 2019, and coupled with François Brunet's seminar "Photography between art and history", Elizabeth Edwards (Professor Emerita and founder of the Photographic History Research Center, De Montfort University) gave a conference on September 27, 2018, entitled "Folded in History: some thoughts on reading a photographic album". Partly discussing some ideas developed in Martha Langford's *Suspended Conversations* (2001), Edwards approached the photographic album as a material object able to generate historical imagination. She thus questioned what photographs do socially and culturally, their contribution in understanding historical questions and narratives, as well as the impact of a material turn or way of thinking in history and in the field of cultural studies.
- 5 Then the seminar adopted its classical format of two speakers per session. The first meeting, "L'art et la promotion en photographie" on February 15, hosted Amélie Macaud (Université Bordeaux Montaigne) – with a communication on photographs in the public space, focusing on the professional and amateur reception of Charles Bukowski's image from its promotion in the French press in the 70s and 80s to its online diffusion – and Chloë Théault (Musée Bourdelle), who talked about Henry Moore's sculptures photographic representations. If the first presentation highlighted the contemporary integration of images and texts in the web, quoting W.J.T. Mitchell's notion of "imagetext" (*Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, 1986), the second one explored the English sculptor's versatile usage of photography for keeping the memory of the artworks during their creation, for promoting his oeuvre, or for shaping his artistic identity.
- 6 On March 29, the second session on "Photography and Expressions of the Vernacular" featured Élodie Grossi (Université Paris Diderot), who presented her research on the social history of racialized psychiatry in the segregated South, focusing on the administrative documentary photography published by medical institutions, and in particular on a corpus of pictures taken between 1870 and 1920 in different asylums in Virginia, North Carolina and Louisiana. Federica Soletta (the second speaker from Princeton University) took a collection gathered from boxes of family photographs (partly found on eBay) to investigate on the American porch as the main place and symbol for family portraits. Following Geoffrey Batchen's argument that family photographs challenge our way of talking about photography (*Forget Me Not. Photography and Remembrance*, 2004), the porch has been considered as a metaphoric or liminal space for the creation of a personal and national identity or memory, as both a privately intimate and a socially public space expressing a sense of belonging to the American landscape.
- 7 The third session on April 19 was titled "Vietnam Photography under Review" and saw the participation of Barbara Kowalczyk (Université Bordeaux Montaigne), who revisited the « My Lai » massacre some 50 years after focusing on a corpus of photographs by Ronald L. Haeberle, and the contribution of Camille Rouquet (LARCA), on the use of classic photographs in Ken Burns's recent 18-hour documentary *Vietnam War*. Iconic photographs used to be deemed influential and which have deeply impacted the social memory of the war are here reinserted into history to contribute to

a new educational approach, developing a documentary modern view of old pictures and of their symbolic meaning.

- 8 On May 17, the fourth session explored "American Photography in the Global Context" through the communications of Stella Jungmann (University of Zurich) – on the concept of aesthetic experience in Robert H. Pruyn's photographs of Edo (Japan, 1862) – and of Laura Katzman (Terra Foundation Visiting Professor), on the relationship between photography and modernity in the context of the Office of Information for Puerto Rico. While the first talk also stressed the role of these pictures circulation in the United States for the construction of the image of Japan, the second one drew from an archival research to focus on photographs as documents of social conditions as well as of government activities.
- 9 The last session, "Photographic Representation and the Legacy of Race Relations" (on June 7), closed the third season of the seminar with the presentations of Emma Stein Lewis (Elmhurst College) – on the photographic representations of Indians and Indian wars – and of Véronique Ha Van (Université Le Havre Normandie/LARCA), exploring some photographic practices related to American Civil War monuments. The first talk set out to use Rebecca Schneider's conflicting terms of embodied and archival logic to examine photographs from three separate yet connected points in time, as well as the concept of reenactment applied to photographic events (*Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, 2011). The second communication focused for its part on the case study of the "Make It Right" project (committed to taking down Confederate monuments and addressing American historical truths) to reveal the power of photography in changing the monuments perception. Indeed, their displaced and bi-dimensional photographic exhibition pushes us to reframe our visual perspective and historical knowledge, moving from W.J.T. Mitchell's "what sculpture wants" to his "what do images want" (*What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and loves of Images*, 2004), and in particular to what photographic images want.
- 10 Accompanied by a website (<https://camemoria.hypotheses.org/>) the "Camera Memoria" seminar has investigated photography through the lens of art, illustration, press and other media coverage, through a variety of researches on its functions in museums, archives, memorial and discursive forms, as well as in private or public places, collective or individual uses, communal or universal spaces. It has therefore offered a wide spectrum of materials and perspectives to consider the many histories of photography as evolving constructions of practices in constant interaction with theories or theorizations, to be understood as part of a larger cultural history.

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Chiara Salari has just completed her PhD on landscape photographic practices in contemporary visual culture (focusing on the United States, Italy and France) at the LARCA (Research

Laboratory on English and American Cultures) at Paris Diderot University, and in co-tutelle with Roma 3 University in Italy (PhD program "Landscapes of the contemporary city. Policies, techniques, and visual studies"), where she previously obtained a Bachelor's degree in "Visual and performing arts" and a Master's degree in "Cinema, television and multimedia production".