

Photographs and Books as Research Objects. Enhancing and Expanding the Fotobibliothek of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz

Abstract

The Library and the Photothek of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (KHI) are collaborating to enhance and expand their special collection of books devoted to the theory and history of photography. The KHI Fotobibliothek features literature published from 1840 to the present day, selected following an international and transdisciplinary approach. The aim is to create a comprehensive and original collection that can become a key ‘reference library’, a sort of ‘one-stop shop’ repository for international studies potentially connected with all the leading libraries worldwide.

Keywords

ART HISTORY PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES; BOOK-OBJECTS;
PHOTOHEK; MAX-PLANCK-INSTITUT; PHOTOBOOKS; PHOTOGRAPHY
REFERENCE LIBRARIES; PHOTO-OBJECTS

Around the middle of the last decade, the Library and the Photothek of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (KHI) - Max-Planck-Institut collaborated to design the so-called Fotobibliothek, namely the Photography Reference Library. The main purpose of this project⁻¹ was to enhance and expand a section of the Library dedicated to photography, which was to be complementary to the activities of the photo archive. This contributed to establish a research unit on photography allowing users to consult photo-objects as well as the reference bibliography. Therefore, the Fotobibliothek aims to offer a comprehensive catalogue for photography studies, with an international and transdisciplinary approach.

The Fotobibliothek evolves in line with the academic and research profile of an Institute for Art History founded in 1897 and belonging

to the Max Planck Society since 2002. During the 125 years of its existence, the KHI Library has developed into one of the most prestigious libraries of art history, visited by an international readership, comprising over 300,000 monographs and 50,000 periodicals, plus over 2,500 licensed e-journals and 100,000 e-books. At the same time, the Photothek became a leading photo archive documenting Italian art and architecture with its over 630,000 photographic documents⁻².

Moreover, as a research laboratory, the Photothek plays a significant role in the international debate on photo archives. The notions of 'photo-object' and 'photo-archival ecosystem' provide the theoretical and methodological basis to its commitment to the study and preservation of photographic heritage. The importance of photographs as cultural objects has been emphasized in several projects developed by the Photothek, also in collaboration with other leading international scholars and institutions⁻³. These studies dismiss the perception that photographs are simply objective tools to describe reality, while considering them as research objects with an epistemological potential. The material approach in photography studies results from the fact that photographs have proved to be fundamental in meaning-making processes well beyond their visual content, since they are both pictures of objects and material objects in their own right. Hence, the concept of indexicality, which focuses on the referent associated with a photograph, needs to be combined with the analysis of the material aspects of the photo-object⁻⁴.

Besides, the photo archive should not be regarded as a neutral and passive space, but as an active ecosystem⁻⁵ where several elements co-exist in a dynamic balance and memory is constantly reshaped. These ecosystems grow without hierarchies: the various components do not compete, but always work together. In this context, archival practices and research activities intertwine, and archivists and users play an active role in the interaction with the objects of research, and viceversa. For these reasons, "perhaps the question is not only or simply what photographs do" in our institutions, "but rather what collectively we might achieve for them in the future"⁻⁶.

Enhancing and Expanding the Fotobibliothek

With the aim of providing an ideal ecosystem for research on photography, in recent years the KHI began to enhance and expand its special collection of books devoted to this field of studies. Consequently, the books on photography were taken in particular from Section Y, but also from other sections of the KHI Library, and relocated in an *ad hoc* and homogeneous section, physically located near the photo archive, now marked with the signature 'Ya' (fig. 1). Thus, the Fotobibliothek, namely the Photography Reference Library, was developed.

Thanks to special grants from the Max Planck Society, the KHI then decided to further expand the Fotobibliothek, not only with new acquisitions, but also through the purchase of two private book collections on photography⁻⁷.



The first one was purchased by the KHI in 2017 from Austrian critic and photography historian, Timm Starl, born in Vienna in 1939. The Starl Collection features about 5,200 books, mostly in German, published since the mid 1850s. The second one was purchased in 2018 from Italian critic and photography historian, Diego Mormorio, born in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1953, from Sicilian parents. The Mormorio collection features about 3,400 books, mostly in Italian, published since the early 20th century⁻⁸. These two private collections mainly feature books on photography, as well as, to a lesser extent, books on literature, history, architecture, philosophy, and other topics, which are thus placed in their relevant sections of the KHI Library. The acquisition of these two collections aimed at providing the Fotobibliothek with a large core collection to be enriched and supplemented by new acquisitions.

In addition, in 2022 the KHI received a donation from Lucia Borghese Bruschi, featuring about 100 books and pamphlets mainly dealing with photographic techniques, previously belonged to the Florence-born restorer Augusto Vermehren (1888-1978). These books used to be kept in temporary storage at the Opificio delle Pietre Dure (OPD) in Florence which, in agreement with Borghese Bruschi, decided to move them to the KHI⁻⁹.

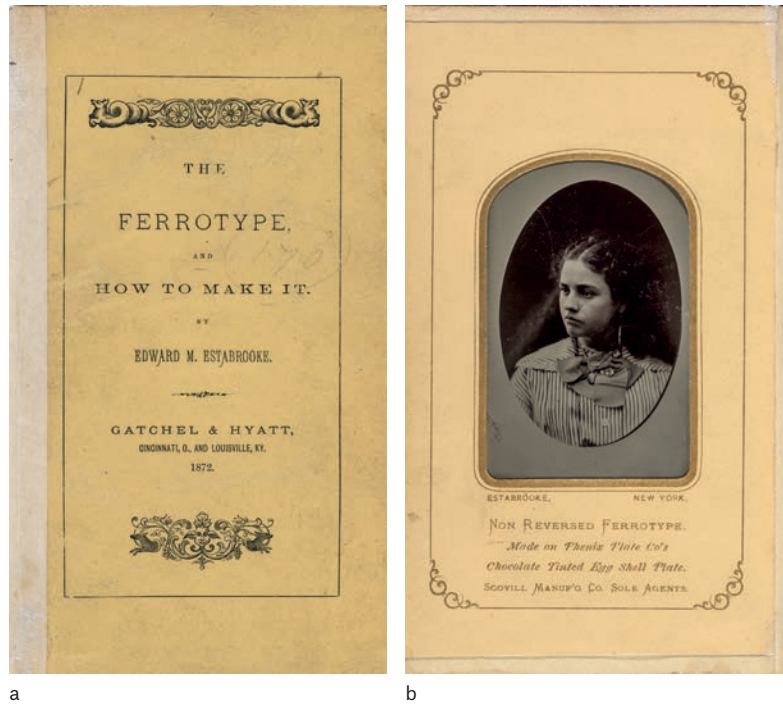
Currently, over 9,000 books are available for consultation in the Fotobibliothek, but this number is constantly growing due to new acquisitions, and because part of the items belonging to private collections

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Kunsthistorisches Institut
in Florenz (KHI) - Max-
Planck-Institut,
Photography Reference
Library, Section Ya
(formerly Y).
Photo credit: Bärbel
Reinhard

02a-b

Edward M. Estabrook, *The Ferrotypes, and How to Make It*, Cincinnati and Louisville, Gatchel & Hyatt, 1872, frontispiece and plate with ferrotypes. Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (KHI) - Max-Planck-Institut, Photography Reference Library, Rare and Antique Books Collection - Photography Incunabula. Photo credit: Stefano Fancelli



are still being catalogued⁻¹⁰. The Fotobibliothek thus comprises different types of publications providing a comprehensive catalogue on the theory and history of photography and of photo archives. It consists of international and interdisciplinary literature published from the second quarter of the 19th century until today, mainly in English, German, Italian, French and, to a lesser extent, in other European and non-European languages.

For historical reasons, Europe and the USA are the most represented regions. However, KHI's aim is to further extend the collection, also geographically, to books on photography from all over the world. For example, we have recently purchased several new books on the history and theory of photography in Africa, Asia, South America and Oceania. Moreover, not only recent titles are available for consultation, but also rare and highly valuable 19th century books, and even *photography incunabula* (fig. 2a-b).

The core of the collection consists of scientific writings on photography⁻¹¹ as well as conference proceedings. This constantly updated section is key for scholars because it keeps abreast with research progress in this field.

Just like the entire KHI Library, almost all Section Ya holdings are on open shelves. Conversely, rare books, *incunabula* and publications with special formats or conservation conditions are kept in climate-controlled cabinets and rooms. They can be consulted upon request and only under the supervision of librarians. Journals on photography

are kept in the Section B of the KHI Library, which is dedicated to periodicals in general.

The KHI offers scholars the opportunity to consult an extensive selection of documents and a constantly updated bibliography. It does so in an interlocutory manner, through open-shelf consultation, user-friendly software, and direct communication with librarians and scientific staff. We give information to our readers to better understand Fotobibliothek's classification and we guide them through the shelves.

The rationale for the organization of the Fotobibliothek is to systematically structure bibliography for research in the field of photography. Quite fittingly for a research library, this bibliography should include a wide variety of books for the historical and critical study of photography. I am referring here to dictionaries, monographs, essays, and a number of other types of publications that we will see in greater detail below.

This arrangement of the Fotobibliothek was also driven by the aim to offer a large and different selection of books from: the library of a museum on photography, where the collection might be based rather on rare and valuable books, to be preserved and exhibited; the library of a contemporary art centre, where the collection might be based in particular on a broad selection of photobooks in the narrow sense; a university library, where priority will most likely be given to the acquisition of encyclopedias, dictionaries, historical manuals, and scientific literature.

Given the size, complexity and growth prospects of the Fotobibliothek, it became necessary to classify the books according to their specific characteristics. A working group was charged with the task of finding ways to simplify the use of such a typologically heterogeneous collection. Therefore, the section on photography has subsections, identified by specific numbering for easier retrieval of the books, organized as follows ⁻¹²:

Book Series

Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

In addition to dictionaries and encyclopedias, this subsection includes biographic, bibliographic, and photographic repertoires, which analytically and systematically collect sources for research.

Manuals on the History of Photography

This subsection is divided into 'general history' and 'specific history', the latter organized in a topographical order.

Materials

This subsection includes iconographic publications highly valuable for research. They may contain essay-like or historiographical texts, but with a clear prevalence of pictures over written text. These 'Materials' are arranged topographically according to the country featured in the book.

Facsimiles of Photographic Albums

This subsection features facsimile books that do not carry any original photographs. Conversely, photographic albums proper are kept and catalogued in the Photothek, according to scientific criteria concerning the photo-object rather than the book-object.

Practical Manuals

This subsection is divided into: 1. How-To – Manuals Proper: manuals on photographic techniques from 1839 until today, hence from daguerreotype to digital techniques. They are manuals on taking and printing photographs, as well as on photographic retouching and other post-production techniques, for both amateur and professional photographers. Today, these manuals are a fundamental source of information for historians, critics, restorers, and photographers; 2. Manuals on Photograph Conservation and Restoration; 3. Manuals on Copyright Issues.

Anthologies

This subsection includes collections of pre-existing textual sources, i.e. essays and articles.

Essays

This subsection is divided into: 1. Essays written by 1-3 authors, which also include biographies and self-biographies on/by photographers; 2. Essays written by more than 3 authors, including conference proceedings.

Monographs and Monographic Exhibition Catalogues

This subsection includes books by/about a single photographer where images clearly prevail over the written text ⁻¹³. Consequently, monographic exhibition catalogues are those by/on one single photographer. This section also comprises all the books dedicated to photographic studios and agencies – e.g. Alinari, Magnum, Ostkreuz.

Photographers' Miscellany

This subsection includes books by/on more than one photographer.

Books on Photographic Books

This subsection includes books that list and describe photographic books – e.g. by type, country, author or by their textual, iconographic, or graphic contents.

Photo Archives and their Management

This subsection includes books on the history and theories of photo archives and their management issues.

Catalogues and Inventories

This subsection includes: 1. Sales catalogues and inventories of photographic companies and studios. They are catalogues proper, namely books listing the photographs produced by a specific studio; 2. Photographic catalogues of auction houses; 3. Photographic catalogues of institutions like museums, galleries, archives, public and private collections.

Collective Exhibition Catalogues

This subsection includes exhibition catalogues on the work by/on more than one photographer.

Rare and Highly Valuable Books

Rare and antique books, photography incunabula, oversized/undersized and very fragile books.

Another important collection of the Fotobibliothek features more than 400 sales catalogues published by photographic studios or individual photographers, the oldest dating back to 1865. These catalogues are repertoires proper for both researchers and archivists, and an essential tool for their work. They often feature a topographical subdivision and contain lists of photographs with historical subjects and inventory numbers. Therefore, these catalogues are essential sources for determining the *terminus ante quem* a photograph was taken or for collecting other information, if the photographs have incomplete captions⁻¹⁴.

In addition, researchers have the possibility to leave their comments on the books they consult by filling in 'Notes', which are then attached to the books (fig. 3). Also, a red dot is drawn on the book label to signal these 'Notes' that become valuable reading suggestions to future readers.

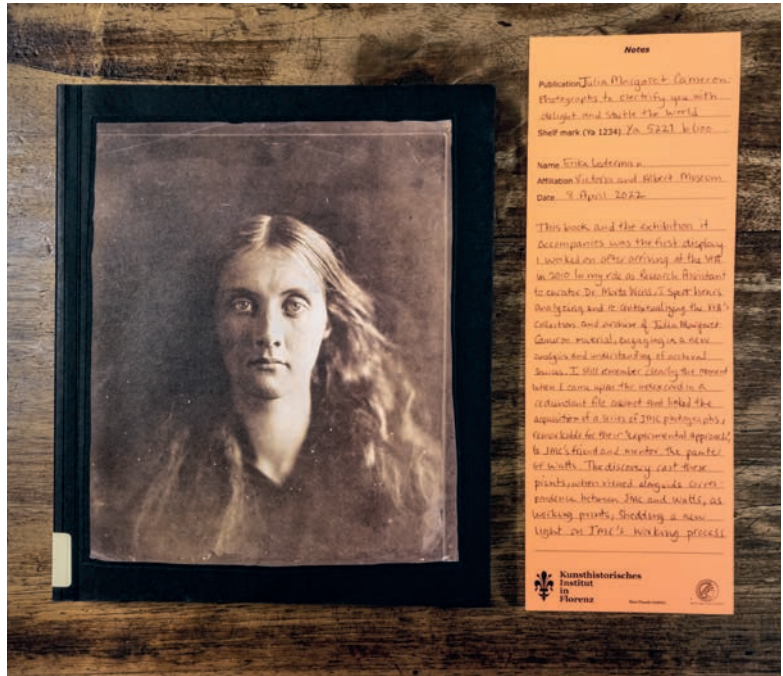
One more possibility for researchers is to submit their *desiderata* to the Fotobibliothek. Proposals can be made by those who come to the library in person as well as remotely. These requests are then vetted by the specialist staff; if deemed appropriate and if the books are available on the market, the requested books will be purchased.

Photographs and Books as Research Objects

As already mentioned, photographs are research objects dense with information and meaning. As such, they can be used in different contexts and disciplines and can become the subject of a book, or its focus of investigation. In this view, and in order to do extensive research on photography, it would be helpful to consult photo-objects, and, at the same time, a wide variety of books and journals on this subject.

Photographs can be published in books as photomechanical reproductions, but they can also retain their features as a discreet document, as is the case of *photography incunabula*. In these books, published after the release of the photographic process in 1839 and before

Martha Rachel Weiss,
*Julia Margaret Cameron:
 Photographs to Electrify
 You with Delight and
 Startle the World*, London,
 Mack, 2015, with
 corresponding 'Notes'
 card compiled by a
 researcher.
 Kunsthistorisches Institut
 in Florenz (KHI) -
 Max-Planck-Institut,
 Photography Reference
 Library.
 Photo credit: Bärbel
 Reinhard



photomechanical illustrations became the new standard, original photographs were mounted on the printed page. A notable example is the multivolume treatise *The Pencil of Nature* (1844-1846) by William Henry Fox Talbot. These *incunabula* are the oldest photographic books and primary sources for research⁻¹⁵.

A case in point, which over the last decade has inspired several publications, is represented by photobooks, so much so that it has led to the “photobook phenomenon”⁻¹⁶. The need for more in-depth studies on this type of materials was already emphasized by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger in their history of photobooks (2004), in which they highlighted that although photography had been circulating in books since its origins, historical and critical literature on this genre was not particularly abundant:

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 The story told here embraces the aesthetics and the technical, the art and the mass medium, yet it has hardly been considered by historians⁻¹⁷.
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Few years later, a similar point was made by Christoph Schaden in his article *The Photobook. Comments on a Medium that has been largely ignored by Photo-Historical Research*⁻¹⁸. Several significant contributions were made later on this subject⁻¹⁹. However, compared to the thousands of photobooks that are constantly being published, they have never been very numerous.

Parr and Badger also offer an important definition of the term “photobook”, pointing out that its use in the literature is fairly ambiguous. On the one hand, this term has been employed in a generic manner to indicate a book whose content is mostly represented and expressed by photographic images rather than a written text. On the other, the same word may be used to refer to a strongly authorial work, a sort of ‘artist book’, self-published at times, in which the photographer assumes a role similar to a film director or producer⁻²⁰. In this case a photobook – just like a painting, a play, a movie or a fine art photograph – can be considered like “an autonomous art form”⁻²¹. The importance of research on this subject is also dictated by the fact that

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Unlike exhibitions – or indeed mass-media journals – which literally come and go, photographic monographs are always around, convenient and portable expressions of a photographer’s work that have the potential for rediscovery and republication at any time, anywhere⁻²².
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Initiatives designed to enhance photobooks are ever more numerous. There are art book fairs and photography festivals where they are awarded and exhibited, as well as festivals fully dedicated to them. The *PhotoBookMuseum* – the first museum exclusively devoted to photobooks – was opened in Köln in 2014. A further interesting initiative is called *How We See: Photobooks by Women*, featuring a ‘traveling’ reading room, held in different libraries around the world since 2018 and focusing on historically significant and unappreciated photobooks by women⁻²³.

However, because of its broad and nuanced case history, more in-depth analysis could be performed in order to identify characteristics of the photobook proper. In this case, it is the book, and each single part of it, that must be considered. For instance, the photobook will be assessed not only for its iconographic and textual features, but also for the production chain that characterizes it – ‘photographer-director’, publisher, editor, graphic designer – and, last but not least, for its material aspects as a ‘book-object’.

Similarly to the observations on the ‘material turn’ in photography, even the book should be considered as an object with its own peculiarities. As a matter of fact, the project behind the publication of a book is often, and not only in the case of photobooks, the result of specific authorial choices, in every single detail. I refer to the expressive qualities of book design, format, paper, binding, covers, annexes.

The relations between photographic images and text or, even better, between images and “the different forms of paratextual – prefaces, introductions, title page, etc. – and paravisual – captions and explicative texts”⁻²⁴ need further investigations.

Also, just like photographs held in an archive, books too acquire marks and material evidence from library practices. Namely, they can get labels, inscriptions, stamps, signs of wear. Therefore, just like

photographs, books can also be considered objects of research, requiring ever new readings and re-readings.

Despite the growing presence of photography in research and institutions, no international map of the most important collections of books on photography has yet been drawn. Moreover, associations of libraries specially dealing with photography are uncommon⁻²⁵. This could be due to the fact that books on photography, which are generally available in greater numbers in art history libraries, are not necessarily kept in specific sections, but are sparsely arranged on shelves next to art books. In other cases, they may be in discreet or easily identifiable sections – e.g. the Dewey Classification, adopted internationally by many libraries, requires books on photography to be placed within a specific number range – or in homogeneous collections – e.g. as a result of donations and bequests. And yet, this does not necessarily coincide with an increased focus on this genre of books.

To conclude, well-organized and homogeneous collections of books on photography complementing photo archives are ideal ecosystems for research. In this regard, I would like to mention a publication on The Richard and Ronay Menschel Library, the internationally renowned research collection of books and periodicals on photography and moving images at the George Eastman House, in Rochester. Entitled *Imagining Paradise*, the book draws its title from Jorge Luis Borges' words: "I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library"⁻²⁶. I believe that, beyond this literary and somewhat playful reference, it is important not only to imagine, but whenever possible to arrange ideal settings for research, with a constant effort to expand collections, update librarians, and constantly improve the availability and efficiency of spaces and services.

It is hoped that the Fotobibliothek will be considered one such ideal place for research on photography, but there are quite a few institutions worldwide that hold extremely significant book repositories on this topic. As part of the 'Project Fotobibliothek', we are currently exchanging information with some of them on the composition of their collections as well as on strategies for progressive enhancement and expansion. In particular, apart from constant relations with Kubikat member libraries, we are in contact with several colleagues working in North American, European and Western Asian libraries holding significant collections of books on photography. We look forward to further expanding this current informal network to other countries as well.

For instance, it would be interesting to establish a connection with the largest library on African photography recently opened in Accra, Ghana, which confirms even more the growing relevance of the 'photobook phenomenon'. This library was founded by the photographer and film-maker Paul Ninson, who built up a highly diverse and comprehensive collection of African photobooks that today boasts more than 30,000 items⁻²⁷.

My belief is that – quoting a recent article by Isotta Poggi and Spyros Koulouris – *No Library is an Island*⁻²⁸, so more and more bridges could be built to connect us⁻²⁹. It might seem a utopian project, but, as a dear friend suggested to me, quoting in turn Daniel Birnbaum's words, "Those who seriously consider utopia impossible should not attempt to make it real"⁻³⁰.

⁻¹ I presented the 'Project Fotobibliothek' and a first part of this research as a keynote speaker at the International Conference *Formats of (Non)Seeing*, organized by The Institute of Art History - Cvito Fisković Centre, in Split, Croatia, October 27-29, 2022. The lecture was entitled *The Photographic Book as a Format of (Non) Seeing. A Bibliography for Research on Photography in the Holdings of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz - Max-Planck-Institut*.

⁻² These figures are constantly increasing through new acquisitions.

⁻³ See, *inter alia*: Caraffa 2017; Caraffa 2019a, 2019b and 2020.

⁻⁴ Vestberg 2008.

⁻⁵ Caraffa 2017; Edwards 2011, p. 49; Edwards 2019.

⁻⁶ Edwards / Ravilius 2022, p. 325.

⁻⁷ The full inventory of the Fotobibliothek is free for consultation in Kubikat, the library network joining four German scholarly research Institutes: the KHI, the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome, the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in Munich, and the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte in Paris. To explore the online catalogue of the Fotobibliothek, patrons can access the Advanced Search form,

select 'Shelfnumber KHI' from the drop-down menu, and enter 'Ya', the special signature for the photography section. Scholarly articles and essays are also indexed in Kubikat.

⁻⁸ Only three books of the Mormorio Collection were published in the 19th century.

⁻⁹ The OPD also holds other items – e.g. materials for restoration and sculpture, books and journals linked to Augusto Vermehren's work. For a complete list, see Mazzoni 2008, pp. 347-348. These other materials originate from a previous donation made to OPD by Alberto Bruschi, Florence-born art historian and antique dealer, heir to Vermehren's estate and Lucia's husband, who died in 2021.

⁻¹⁰ To check the inventories of Mormorio, Starl and Vermehren private collections, you may search on Kubikat. For instance, you can find the Starl Collection selecting the *Item note (Provenance etc.)* in the drop-down menu of the Advanced Search form, and entering *Sammlung Starl* using the German word *Sammlung*, because this language was used to first enter this information. From here, you may further refine your search. The same

procedure applies also for the other two collections.

⁻¹¹ See Fotobibliothek subsection "Essay", as detailed below.

⁻¹² The arrangement of Fotobibliothek subsections summarized here is taken from #Sardo 2018. Please note that sometimes books on photography may be classified under more than one category, so they will be assigned to the proper section following a case-by-case assessment. These first assignments are very useful for an initial book identification, but should not be considered to be final. Also, the situation described here might change in the future, depending on the evolution of literature on photography and the needs of the library.

⁻¹³ In this case the term 'monograph' is not applied in a narrow sense, but in a more comprehensive way to accommodate the Fotobibliothek's sorting needs.

⁻¹⁴ All these catalogues have been digitized and are now available at <<https://www.user.gwdg.de/~fotokat/internet/index-de.html>> (31.01.2023), where they can be downloaded in pdf format. See Goldhahn 2019.

⁻¹⁵ The Getty Research Institute launched an important digitization

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Notes

project to make *photography incunabula* freely available online on The Getty Research Portal. This project is also open to other institutions, which can contribute by uploading their own materials. See Schönegg 2016.

–16 Bertolo / Campany 2022, p. 5.

–17 Parr / Badger 2004, p. 6.

–18 Schaden 2008.

–19 Among the most recent publications, see: Dogramaci *et al.* 2016; Lockemann 2022; MSKG 2020; Schaden / Schaden 2021; Schürmann *et al.* 2021. Another significant initiative is the “The PhotoBook Review” supplement, which “Aperture Magazine” started to offer since 2011, with valuable contributions by critics, publishers, photographers, and collectors.

–20 Parr / Badger 2004, pp. 6-7.

–21 Ralph Prins, quoted in Badger’s introduction to MSKG 2020, p. 56.

–22 Parr / Badger 2004, p. 10.

–23 See Lederman / Yatskevich / Lang 2018, and the following publication on the same project Lederman / Yatskevich 2021. Since 2018, this ongoing initiative is open to all institutions which have substantial holdings in photobooks by women.

–24 Neves 2022, p. 11.

–25 An exception is, for example, the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA), which embodies a Special Interest Group on Photography.

–26 Foster *et al.* 2007, p. 1.

–27 Barnes 2022.

–28 Koulouris / Poggi 2021.

–29 I am quoting the Symposium *Building Bridges: Art Libraries between Venice and North America*, held in Venice c/o Ugo e Olga Levi Foundation on June 14, 2019. The Symposium was organized by Isotta Poggi (Getty Research Institute) and Spyros Koulouris (American School of Classical Studies, Athens), on the occasion of a Study Tour by the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) in Venice, and in collaboration with Giorgio Busetto, Director of the Levi Foundation. I also attended with a lecture entitled *The Photographic Collections in Venetian Libraries, Archives and Museums*.

–30 “Wer die Utopie als Unmöglichkeit ernst nimmt, sollte auch nicht versuchen, sie zu konkretisieren”: Birnbaum 2009 (my translation).

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