

Individual Project

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Thesis

Research question: How might the act of reworking photographic archives continue to reshape not only how we understand the past, but also who has the right to tell it?

Word count :

Abstract

This thesis explores how reworking photographic archives reshapes not only our understanding of the past but also who has the right to tell it. Bringing together theoretical perspectives and artistic practice, it examines photography's long-held association with truth and considers how archives are entangled with power, memory, and systems of authority. Drawing on writers such as Jacques Derrida, Antoinette Burton, and Charles Merewether, alongside the practices of artists including Jo Spence, Christian Boltanski, Zanele Muholi, Broomberg & Chanarin, and contemporary AI-based practitioners, the archive is approached not as a neutral container of history but as a contested space in which meaning is continually produced and revised.

Using found, family, and anonymous photographic materials, this research reflects on the creative and ethical implications of transforming existing images.

Recontextualising archival photographs becomes a means of challenging institutional authority, questioning ownership, and creating space for voices and experiences that have been marginalised or excluded. The inclusion of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence further complicates ideas of authorship, authenticity, and historical truth. Ultimately, this thesis argues that to rework the archive is to participate in an ongoing process of rewriting history, one that acknowledges absence, embraces multiple perspectives, and resists the idea of photography as a fixed or definitive record of the past

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Introduction

Photography has always fascinated me for the way it promises the truth while quietly hiding behind its own fictions. Every image appears to offer evidence of what once was, yet beneath the surface lies a series of questions; What is shown? What is left out? Who was behind it? What is the story? As writers like Michel Foucault and Allan Sekula point out, archives are tied to power they shape what can be known and how people and events are visually remembered. In recent years, however, artists, researchers, and communities have started to return to these archives, not just to preserve them, but to rework them. This shift changes everything. The photographic archive becomes less like a quiet storage space and more like a living site of reinterpretation, questioning, and resistance.

To rework an archive means stepping back into the visual record and actively reshaping it. It's a way of bringing attention to what has been overlooked or deliberately hidden, and of highlighting the biases that sit quietly inside institutional histories. This reworking can take many forms, rearranging old photographs, pairing them with new testimonies, digitally altering or reframing them, or sharing private family albums in public spaces. Whatever the method, the act of reworking pushes against the idea that the past is fixed or settled. Instead, it shows us that history is constantly being negotiated, built from the images that remain, the stories we attach to them, and the people who choose to revisit and reinterpret them.

Crucially, reworking photographic archives raises important questions about who gets to speak for the past. Whose memories are valued? Who is allowed to interpret or retell the stories held within these images? When communities take back

photographs that were once controlled by states, museums, or colonial institutions, they're doing more than filling gaps in the historical record, they're claiming the right to tell their own stories. In a similar way, when contemporary artists create fictional archives or reshape existing ones, they reveal just how constructed photographic "truth" actually is. Their work unsettles traditional ideas about expertise and challenges the assumption that only institutions can define what counts as legitimate history.

Today, as images travel faster and further through digital networks, the question of who gets to tell the past feels more urgent than ever. Digital platforms can open archives up, invite collective participation, and allow images to be reinterpreted in ways that were once impossible, but they also come with new risks. As photographic archives continue to be reworked in artistic, political, and technological ways, they change not only how we remember but also who is allowed to take part in shaping history. This essay argues that reworking photographic archives fundamentally shifts both our understanding of the past and the balance of narrative power. By looking at theoretical ideas, artistic approaches, and community-led projects, the essay explores how these acts of reworking turn archives into living spaces, where meaning is shaped collectively rather than fixed. Ultimately, it suggests that revisiting and reworking archival material opens the archive to broader participation, allowing new narratives and perspectives to emerge.

The archive

The archive is site of power;, the archive is seen as a place where things are stored but there is much more to it. They are places where people get to pick and choose what stories to be kept and stories to be discarded. Rather than being a passive place archives actively shape stories that are told. They frame the past in ways that align with cultural, political or institutional interests, and in doing so they influence how communities understand themselves.

“There is no political power without control of the archive.” (Derrida 1995, p.9)

Derrida’s point makes it clear that archives are never just passive storehouses of images or documents, they actively produce, stabilise, and reinforce authority.

Whoever controls an archive control not only what gets remembered, but also the very terms under which remembering can happen. In this way, the power of the archive extends far beyond simple preservation, it also involves excluding, categorising, and shaping how materials are understood. Choices about what is included, what is left out, and what is publicly highlighted directly influence which part of history feels “official” or trustworthy. As a result, the archive often operates as a gatekeeper, upholding dominant perspectives while pushing aside the voices and experiences that institutions have historically ignored.

Photography played a crucial role in shaping the modern archive. Allan Sekula’s influential essay *The Body and the Archive* show how photography became central to 19th-century systems of classification, especially those linked to surveillance, policing, and the regulation of bodies. These early photographic archives were never designed to celebrate individuality or preserve personal stories. Instead, they were

built to sort and categorise people, often along racial, social, or moral lines.

Mugshots, biometric photographs, and colonial portraits all contributed to visual hierarchies that helped justify unequal power relations. In this sense, the archive operated less as a neutral record of the past and more as an instrument of control.

As previously mentioned, archives have been long tied to power, what gets to be told and stored, whose are pushed aside, and how the entireties of history are shaped. But when people return to these images again and begin to work with them, something shifts. Reopening the archive becomes a way to question its authority and to challenge the narrative it has protected. Many artists use the archive not as a fixed record of the past but as a starting point for rewriting it, exposing what has been left out or misrepresented. Their work reveals that archives are not static at all. It is within this space of possibility that artists like Jo Spence begin to reshape stories.



Figure 1.

Jo Spence's work demonstrates how reworking the archive can fundamentally change who has the right to the past. Moving from commercial photography into politically engaged practice, Spence became deeply critical of the ways photographic histories, especially family albums, medical archives and institutional portraits shape how individuals come to understand themselves or how they are represented. In the project 'remodelling photo history' (1981-82) created with Terry Dennett, Spence deliberately stages and reconstructs images of herself to challenge the supposedly standard ways of photography. By using what she calls 'photo-theatre,' she exposes how even the most familiar photographic forms, family snapshots, studio portraits, documentary image are built on particular social and ideological assumptions. Her work reveals the archive is absolutely something to be questioned and rewritten. Crucially, Spence's work shows just how political this process can be. By reworking the archive, she finds a way to take back control over how her life is seen and understood, especially as someone shaped by class inequality, gendered expectations, and medical authority. Through re-entering and reshaping her own photographs, she demonstrates that people do not have to accept the versions of their past that institutions or traditional archives impose on them. Instead, her practice reveals how individuals can challenge dominant narratives and claim the right to represent their own histories on their own terms.

In John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. To quote him he says, "Men act women appear" (*Ways of Seeing*, p.47) This highlights the message that Jo Spence is conveying. She is pushing back the narrative of what is 'supposed to be.' Berger shows how women have historically been positioned as objects within visual culture rather than women

who control how they are represented. Spence's practice directly confronts this dynamic.

Through photo-theatre, self-staging, and the reworking of her personal archive, she refuses the passive role assigned to her by dominant photographic histories. Instead of "appearing" for someone else's gaze/the normal workings of photography, she constructs images on her own terms, exposing the power structures that shape how women are photographed, classified, and remembered.

By doing so, Spence not only challenges the visual language that traditionally reduced women to appearances but demonstrates how reworking the archive can become a way for marginalised subjects to reclaim authorship over their own past



Figure 2.

Another artist whose work powerfully demonstrates the potential of reworking the photographic archive is Christian Boltanski, particularly in his installation *Autel de Lycée Chases* (1987–88). The work is made up of enlarged, grainy class photographs from the Chases High School, a Jewish school in Vienna whose students later disappeared during the Holocaust. Boltanski did not know the identities of the children, and he couldn't recover their exact histories. Instead, he reconstructs a fragmented archive out of what remains: portraits enlarged and distorted, and framed by lights and bricks, almost like a memorial altar. He transforms a photograph of school portrait into a space of mourning and remembrance. A place to reflect on what was but also never known.

Following on from the way Spence reclaims her personal archive, Boltanski demonstrates the process of reworking archival material can also address collective histories and the absences created by institutional neglect or violence. While Spence rewrites her own visual narrative to reclaim power over her own body and identity, Boltanski confronts what the archive cannot preserve: the disappearance of students at Chases High School. Both practices reveal that the archives are not static, but are shaped by what is included, excluded and remembered.

Together, the work of Spence and Boltanski illustrates that reworking photographic archive is a method of challenging authority, filling silences, and creating new forms of memory and representation. These artistic interventions show that the past is not predetermined by the images that survive, rather, it is continually negotiated, interpreted, and redefined. As such, the act of revisiting and reshaping archival photographs opens the possibility for new voices, perspectives, and stories to emerge, directly addressing the central question of who has the right to tell history.

Authority

The question of who has the right to tell the past has become increasingly urgent. After all, who does have that right? Should people only tell their own stories, shaped by their own experiences? Or can someone speak on behalf of others whose histories have been silenced or forgotten? The argument cuts both ways. On one hand, there is a real risk of misrepresentation when people speak for lives, they have never lived. On the other, many stories would vanish entirely if others did not step in to preserve, retell, or honour them. Some individuals and communities have been so marginalised that they have never been given space to record their own histories. In those cases, insisting that only people can tell their “own” stories can unintentionally reinforce silence. The challenge, then, is not simply deciding who may tell the past, but understanding how stories can be told ethically, through collaboration, consent, and care, so that histories are shared rather than taken.

A key reason why questions about who has the right to tell the past have become so important is the rapid rise of digital technology. Archives that were once physically housed in public institutions, places people had to physically visit, consult, and navigate with the help of archivists, are now widely available online. This shift has dramatically changed how historical material circulates. While public archives were always technically open to anyone, they still required intention, context, and a degree of expertise. In contrast, digital archives can be accessed instantly, often without guidance. Images, documents, and personal histories can now be downloaded, reposted, or repurposed by anyone, anywhere. This increased accessibility is valuable, but it also raises ethical tensions: materials can be taken out of context, used without consent, or extracted from communities whose histories have already

been vulnerable to misrepresentation. As a result, the digital age has made the question of who gets to tell the past not only more visible, but more complicated.

Ariella Azoulay helps articulate what is at stake here. In *The Civil Contract of Photography*, she argues that “*photographs, unlike painted pictures, have no single, individual author; in principle, they allow civic negotiations about the subject they designate and about their sense*” (Azoulay 2008, p.13.) This idea reshapes how we understand authorship in the digital era. If a photograph is never truly owned by one person, neither the photographer, the subject, the viewer, then digital circulation only intensifies this shared responsibility. For Azoulay, photographs demand a kind of ethical co-authorship, where those who engage with an image must consider the rights and dignity of the people represented in it. In online contexts, where images move quickly and often without context, this “civil contract” becomes even more crucial. It suggests that telling the past is not simply about access to archives but about entering a relationship of responsibility with the people whose lives are captured within them.

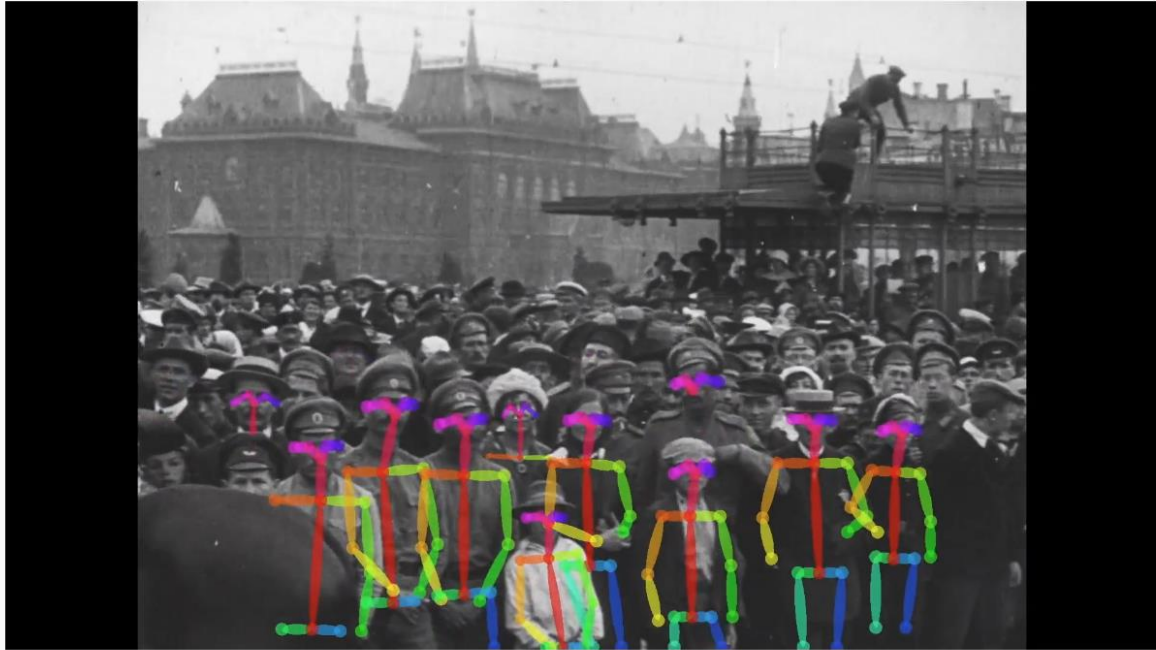


Figure 3.

Broomberg & Chanarin's *Anniversary of a Revolution (Parsed)* (2019) takes Dziga Vertov's 1918 film and brings it into the present. Vertov's original work, once believed to be lost, documents the political upheaval surrounding the Russian Revolution and is often described as the first feature-length documentary. Rather than treating this film as a fixed historical record, Broomberg & Chanarin rework it using contemporary machine-vision technology. Working with musician Peter Broderick and the studio The Workers, they track the movements of people in the original footage and overlay them with digital animations and colour coded pose-estimation graphics. These additions make the film feel both historical and unsettlingly modern, blending early revolutionary imagery with the visual language of today's surveillance systems.

By applying twenty-first-century algorithms to a Soviet-era archive, the artists make it clear that historical images are never neutral. They are shaped by the technologies,

ideologies, and systems of power that produce and reinterpret them. This directly connects to Ariella Azoulay's idea that photographs should not be understood as fixed evidence of the past, but as part of an ongoing civic process in which meaning is constantly renegotiated. *Anniversary of a Revolution (Parsed)* asks who has the right to reinterpret history when archives are reopened and reworked. It suggests that authorship of the past is not owned by the original image maker or the institution that preserves it but is continually reshaped by those who engage with it. In doing so, the work reinforces the central argument of this essay: reworking the archive changes not only how we see history, but who is allowed to speak within it.



Figure 4.

Zanele Muholi's *Faces and Phases* expands the idea of what an archive can be and who is allowed to appear within it. By photographing Black lesbian, queer, and transgender individuals from South Africa and beyond, Muholi builds a self-determined record of a community that has long been pushed to the edges of official history. Their approach is intentionally collaborative, the portraits come from a face-to-face meeting where each sitter has agency in how they want to be seen. Muholi has described this as "visual activism," a way of marking and preserving queer lives so that future generations will know, unmistakably, that "we were here." In this

sense, their archive is not simply about visibility but about survival, dignity, and the refusal to disappear.

Zanele Muholi's *Faces and Phases* challenges long-established visual traditions by building an archive from the perspective of those who have historically been excluded from it. Black lesbian, queer, and transgender individuals in South Africa have often been marginalised or misrepresented within institutional collections, and Muholi responds to this absence with what they call "visual activism." Each portrait is created through collaboration and mutual consent, allowing sitters to decide how they want to be seen.

John Berger reminds us that "the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe," and Muholi's work makes this particularly clear. Traditional archives have shaped public beliefs about which lives are worthy of visibility, often reinforcing stereotypes or maintaining silence around queer identities. By constructing an archive from within the community, Muholi shifts both what is seen and what is believed about these lives. Their portraits offer a new way of seeing, one grounded in agency, dignity, and self-representation, demonstrating how reworking the archive becomes a way of rewriting the past and reclaiming authorship over it.

Faces and Phases demonstrates how reworking and expanding the archive can completely shift who has the right to tell the past. Muholi creates a space where a marginalised community is not only represented but is able to define the narrative themselves. Their work makes clear that archives are not static repositories of truth, they are political tools that must be rewritten by those who were never included in the first place. Through Muholi, we see how the act of reimagining the archive

becomes a form of resistance, a refusal to let history be told only by those in power, and a demonstration that new stories can and must be made visible.

It becomes clear that authority doesn't sit comfortably within this question of who has the right to tell the past. Anyone can rework an archive, reinterpret images, or tell a story in their own way. Creative and historical practices aren't limited to those with institutional power; people constantly reshape the past from their own positions and experiences. At the same time, there is a tension here, because some stories do feel as though they should only be told by those who lived them. Yet if we strictly followed that rule, many histories would remain untold, especially those belonging to communities who have never been given the platform or resources to voice their experiences. Reworking the archive, therefore, becomes a way of opening space rather than closing it, allowing stories to be shared, expanded, and reimagined, even when the original subjects were denied the power to do so themselves.

AI

Another important point to consider is the growing presence of AI. It has become an increasingly common tool, built into most apps now, even something as everyday as WhatsApp. While AI can be genuinely helpful, its rapid development has created new problems around truth and authenticity. On platforms like Facebook, AI-generated videos circulate widely, and people often believe them to be real because

the technology is getting so convincing. Of course, fake videos and manipulated images have existed for years, but they still relied on real people and real footage. AI introduces something different: completely fabricated faces, voices, and events that never existed. This raises an unsettling question, how can we tell what is real anymore? And if we can't trust the images we see, what happens to the archive, which has always relied on the idea that photographs carry some connection to truth?

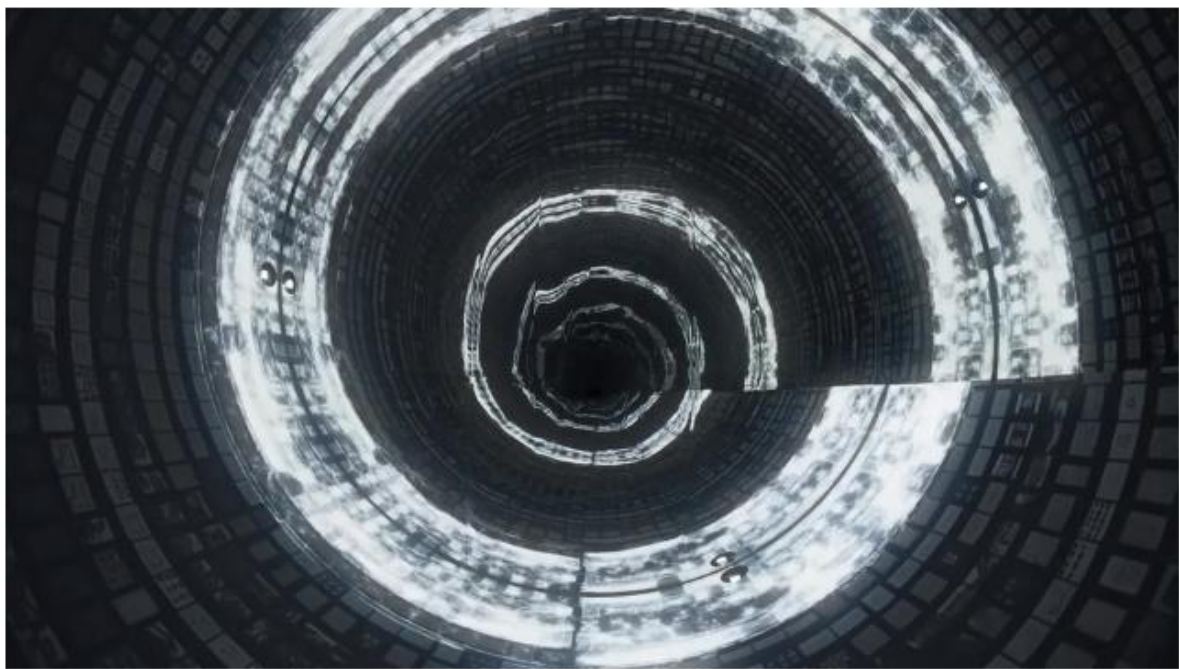


Figure 5.

Where Broomberg & Chanarin expose the political and ideological layers buried inside archival images, Anadol pushes this conversation into an entirely new space by letting a machine reorganise the archive itself. Broomberg & Chanarin show us how history has already been shaped, edited, and mediated by human power;

Anadol shows us what happens when non-human systems begin to shape it too.

Anadol, asks what it means for an archive to be reorganised not by a government or a curator, but by an algorithm that doesn't "know" history the way we do. When the machine begins to "dream," it invents new connections the original archive never held, which is exciting, but also unsettling. It raises a very important question: if AI can now remix the past, reshape memory, and visualise history in ways no one ever intended, then who is really telling the story?

In both works, the archive stops being a silent, authoritative box of evidence.

Instead, it becomes something alive, unpredictable, open to reinterpretation, and shaped by forces we can't fully control. This is where the two artists meet, they both reveal that archives have always been constructed, but Anadolu shows that they are now entering a phase where they can be reconstructed by tools far beyond our traditional understanding of authorship. It's exciting because it means new possibilities for creativity and for reimagining forgotten histories. But it's also a reminder that, just like the institution, AI has its own kind of power. And as viewers, we have to learn how to read these new forms of archival storytelling with the same care, attention, and scepticism we bring to every other part of the archive.



Figure 6.

Mario Klingemann is an artist who works with AI to see what happens when machines start creating images from huge collections of old photographs and visual archives. Instead of making pictures by hand, he trains systems on thousands of portraits and artworks so the system can learn patterns and then generate its own versions. One of his most known pieces, *Memories of Passersby I*, lets the AI continually produce new faces in real time, people who look real, but who never actually existed. What interests Klingemann is not just the final image, but the process, how a machine “thinks,” how it learns from the archive, and what it chooses to create. His work shows how AI can take historical material and turn it into something completely new, which raises questions about authorship, what counts as “real,” and how much we can trust images when they are no longer tied to actual

people. In this way, Klingemann shows that AI doesn't just use the archive, it transforms it, reshaping how we understand the past and how images can be made.

Overall, AI adds a completely new layer to the question of who gets to tell the past. It has become so advanced and so widely used that anyone can now alter, recreate, or completely invent historical images with almost no effort. This can be exciting, because it means the archive is no longer controlled only by institutions or experts, people everywhere can reinterpret old photographs, animate forgotten faces, or bring damaged images back to life. But the same technology also makes it harder to trust what we see. AI-generated images and videos circulate online so quickly that it becomes difficult to tell what is real and what has been produced by a machine. The archive, once thought of as a reliable record of what happened, becomes unstable and open to distortion.

AI's role in reworking the archive sits in a strange space, it offers enormous creative potential, but it also carries real risks. It can highlight hidden stories or revive forgotten ones, but it can just as easily overwrite them or create false histories that feel believable. What AI reveals most clearly is that the archive is no longer something fixed or authoritative, it is something constantly in creation, shaped by whoever chooses to interact with it. And as AI continues to evolve, the responsibility lies with us to question what we see, think carefully about how images are being used, and remain aware that the past is more easily rewritten than ever before.

My practice



Figure. 7

n the past two years of my own research and practice, one of the themes I keep returning to is the archive, particularly the family archive. My first project for my year one exhibition, *Playground*, was rooted in this idea, even if it wasn't archival work in a traditional sense. For this piece, I revisited the places I loved as a child, the ones most tied to memory, and returned to them with the people connected to those moments. What interested me was not simply the act of returning, but how the meaning of those places had shifted. When I think of them now, I picture myself there with my sister or my friends, aged ten, yet thirteen years later, they are places I no longer visit. Seeing how much they had changed, and how much of them still felt strangely familiar, allowed me to understand my own memory in a new way. In a sense, I was reworking a personal archive, taking an internal, emotional record and reimagining it as something physical. That process of translating memory into image

helped me realise how archives, whether personal or institutional, are never fixed; they can be revisited, reinterpreted, and reshaped through time.



Figure 8.

The next project I developed was for my second-year exhibition. This time, I became interested in how people are connected across time and space—how individuals who don't know each other can share unexpected links without ever realising it. At first, I tried exploring this idea with strangers, but I quickly realised that the work wasn't resonating with me. It felt forced, and I wasn't enjoying the process. So, once again, I turned closer to home. My partner is from Latvia, and I am from Wales, and suddenly the project found its direction. I began thinking about how two people from different countries, languages, and childhood cultures could still share parallel memories and experiences and eventually end up together. So, I gathered photo albums from both my family and his and began shaping them into a single book. The book unfolded as a pull-out structure: one side filled with his family photographs, the other with mine. Pairing the images this way allowed the similarities between our

childhoods to emerge visually, moments that mirrored each other despite being lived thousands of miles apart.

The photographs acted like quiet echoes, showing how two families who never met could still share gestures, traditions, or atmospheres. In bringing these albums together, I wasn't just comparing our pasts, I was creating a new space, where our histories could sit side by side, revealing the subtle ways our lives had always been connected long before we became one. How those two histories overlap to form something new. In a sense, this became another kind of personal archive, an exploration of the past not as something fixed, but as something that continues to shape who we are and who we become together.

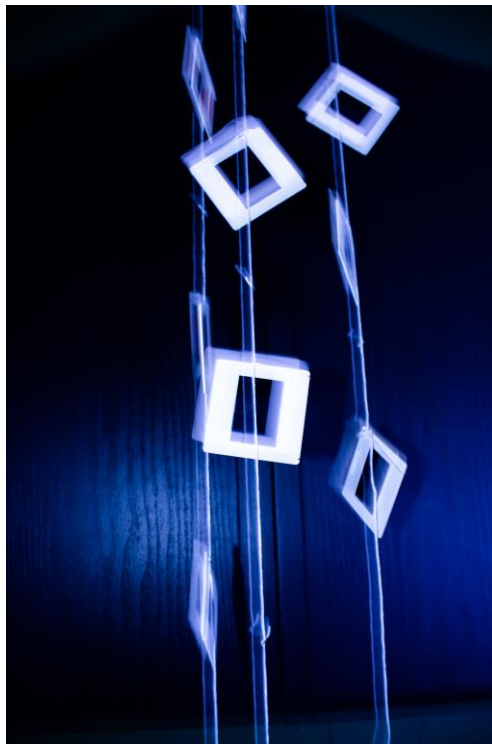


Figure 9.

Right now, I'm working on another archival project. This time I've been collecting old slides and anonymous archival photographs, and my aim is to rework them into an exhibition. Throughout this semester I've been experimenting with how far these

found images can be pushed or transformed, and one of the approaches that has felt the most exciting is turning the slides into a kind of mobile or hanging structure. I like the idea of them moving, shifting, catching the light, almost reminding viewers that the archive is never still. Alongside this, I've created a fast-paced video sequence made from the faces in the photographs I've purchased. The quick edits, the constant flicker of different expressions, make the images feel less like static relics and more like traces of real lives that once existed. Even though I don't know the people in the photographs, the act of reworking them, reanimating them, becomes a way of imagining their stories and giving the archive a new form. In that sense, this project continues my interest in showing that archives aren't fixed or finished, they're something we can move through, reshape, and experience in new ways.

A large part of why I'm drawn to archival work in my own practice is because it gives me a way to reconnect with the past while also reshaping it. Working with family albums, found photographs, and old slides lets me take something that already exists, something filled with memory, emotion, or even mystery, and turn it into something new. I like the feeling of stepping into an image that wasn't originally mine and imagining the lives or stories behind it or revisiting a place from my childhood and realising how differently it feels now. There's something really grounding about transforming memory into a physical form, whether that's a book, a mobile, or a fast-paced video sequence. It allows me to make sense of how the past lives inside the present, and how personal histories can overlap, connect, or evolve. I think I'm drawn to archival work because it never feels finished, it's always a conversation between what was and what could be.

Reworking these images gives me a sense of agency, curiosity, and connection, and it lets me create art that feels meaningful, not just to me, but to the stories and people behind the photographs.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have explored a wide range of artists who return to archives, rework them, and create new stories from material that already exists. My own practice has also shown me how powerful this process can be. Even though

much of the discussion has focused on how the archive is not static, and it isn't, what becomes clear is that there are countless ways artists engage with archival material, each producing something meaningful and entirely their own. And because of this variety, the question I posed at the beginning of this essay almost resists a simple answer. *Who has the right to tell the past?* I'm not sure it is a question that can ever be fully resolved.

There will always be debates about whether it is ethically right for someone to reinterpret or retell a story that isn't their own, or whether they are doing justice to the people or histories involved. These tensions are part of what makes archival work so compelling but also so controversial. No one is ever going to agree completely, on art, on ethics, or on how history should be remembered. That disagreement is inevitable. What we can say, though, is that art will always return to the archive. Artists will always find new ways to reuse, rethink, and reshape what already exists. And perhaps that is the point: the archive stays alive not because it is preserved unchanged, but because it is continually reimagined.

But if the question cannot be neatly resolved, that doesn't mean it cannot be answered at all. What this essay has shown is that the right to tell the past is not something fixed or owned; it is something negotiated, shared, and constantly reshaped. Reworking the archive, whether through photography, performance, AI, or personal memory, reveals that authorship is far more fluid than we often assume. Institutions no longer hold the only authority over history. Artists like Jo Spence challenge medical and social narratives imposed on their bodies; Zanele Muholi builds a self-determined queer archive; Christian Boltanski uses absence to expose what official histories fail to document; and contemporary digital artists use AI to

show how technology now participates in rewriting the past. All of these examples demonstrate that the act of reworking is itself a form of claiming space within history.

So perhaps the more productive way to think about “who has the right” is to focus on responsibility rather than ownership. Anyone can engage with the past, anyone can pick up an archive and reimagine it, but the ethics of how they do so matter.

Reworking an image does not automatically grant authority, but it does create the possibility for new understandings, new voices, and new connections. The right to tell the past is not exclusive, it expands with every thoughtful reinterpretation, every critical intervention, every attempt to bring overlooked stories into view.

In this sense, reworking the archive becomes an act of democratization. It opens history to those who were never included, allows artists to speak back to systems of power, and acknowledges that the past is not a closed chapter but a living material we continue to shape. The archive survives and becomes meaningful. because it can be revisited and reimaged. And maybe that is the closest we can come to an answer: the right to tell the past belongs to anyone who approaches it with care, curiosity, and a willingness to understand that history is not fixed but always in the process of changing into something new.

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