

Research in practice

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Illustrations

Figure 1. Raad, W. (1996–2001) *My Neck is Thinner than a Hair: Engines*. [image] Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/91530>

Figure 2. Akomfrah, J. (2012) *The Unfinished Conversation*. Three-channel video installation. Tate, London. © John Akomfrah / Smoking Dogs Films. Image courtesy of Tate. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/akomfrah-the-unfinished-conversation-t14105>

Introduction

In contemporary photography, the act of image-making no longer ends with the click of a shutter. Increasingly, artists are engaging with photography not by producing new images,

but by collecting, arranging, and recontextualising existing ones. This is something I have personally been working with.

The archive was once seen as a place to store historical records, but today it has become an active tool for artists. This change raises new questions about who controls a story and what counts as original or true. In this essay, I explore how artists use existing photographs to create new meanings and tell different stories. Focusing on the ideas of **archive**, **recontextualisation**, and **authorship**, I look at how artists work with found images and memory, leading to a research question about storytelling and the role of the photographer in shaping the past and present.

The Archive

Traditionally, an archive is seen as something that simply stores the past, a place for historical records and forgotten moments. But it can be much more than that. An archive can become a space for reflection, learning, and transformation. The act of holding onto things, photographs, objects and memories is more meaningful than we often realise. These fragments of the past can later be revisited and reshaped, taking on new forms while still carrying the weight and emotion of their original meaning. However, some things will never see the light of day again, they've been lost, discarded, or deliberately left out of history. Archivists decide what is preserved, often selecting items deemed most valuable or historically significant. While this makes practical sense as archives can't hold every single thing from history. It raises important questions: what was excluded, and who made that decision? What stories, voices, or perspectives were left behind, and what does that say

about whose history gets remembered? There are many gaps in history where people and places have been marginalised, but as we progress as a society, Artists are responding to these gaps by treating the archive not as a sealed vault, but as a living, open space. They enter it critically, pulling things apart and reassembling them into new stories. This isn't just about preserving history, it's about rewriting it. The archive becomes a place to return to, reflect on, and reimagine.



Figure 1.

One artist who interrogates the archive as a tool for their work is Walid Raad. In *My Neck is Thinner than a Hair: Engines* (1996–2001), Raad assembles one hundred photographs of car engines collected from Lebanese newspaper archives. These engines were all that remained after the detonation of car bombs during Lebanon's civil wars, a conflict in which over 245 such bombs were deployed. Rather than create new images, Raad scans both the front and back of each found photograph, presenting them with translated annotations and

original dates. What emerges is a systematic, almost forensic, record of devastation, but also a reflection on the way violence is visually consumed and documented. By isolating the engine, Raad takes the overwhelming chaos of Lebanon's civil wars and refines it into a single repeated image, the car engine, allowing one small detail to carry the weight of a much larger and more complex history.

In doing so, he reframes the archive as not only a collection of information but also a tool of selective memory and power. His work challenges the notion of photographic truth, asking us to consider who controls the images we inherit, and how narratives are built from fragments. Raad's practice exemplifies how the archive can become a creative medium in itself, one that both preserves and critiques history.

Raad's use of archival imagery also speaks to the notion of absence in the archive. While the photographs of war-torn engines might be seen as physical remnants of violence, the broader political and human stories behind these images are often left untold or obscured. Through his work, Raad forces the viewer to confront the unseen dimensions of history, challenging the conventional understanding of the archive as straightforward facts.

Recontextualise

Recontextualise - 'to place (something, such as a literary or artistic work) in a different context' (*Definition of RECONTEXTUALIZE* [no date]). Recontextualisation involves the reuse, rearrangement, or reinterpretation of existing images and documents. It's not simply

about printing out an old photograph, it's about giving that image a new meaning through how it's placed, what it's paired with, or the story it becomes part of. An old collection of forgotten or ordinary images can suddenly take on a new life, forming a narrative we may never have imagined before. This process allows us to see the past differently, asking new questions and uncovering hidden connections.

When artists recontextualise archival material, they invite viewers to find their own emotional connection within the image. 'A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).' (Barthes, 1982, p. 26). Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, called this the *punctum*: the detail in a photograph that "pricks" the viewer, creating a personal response beyond the photographer's control. This idea highlights how even found or reused images can carry deep, subjective meaning depending on how they're framed, sequenced, or juxtaposed.



Figure 2.

British artist John Akomfrah demonstrates this approach in his film installation *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012). The work explores the life and ideas of cultural theorist Stuart Hall through a multi-channel film made entirely of archival footage, images, sound, and voiceovers. Rather than presenting a conventional documentary, Akomfrah constructs a poetic, non-linear narrative that reflects Hall's own view of identity as fluid and continually evolving. By reordering and layering archival materials, Akomfrah creates a space where historical fragments are not fixed but open to interpretation.

In this work, recontextualisation becomes a way to engage with absence as much as presence. The original footage was never meant to tell Hall's story in this way, but through Akomfrah's editing and sequencing, it gains new emotional and intellectual weight. The

viewer is not simply informed but invited to reflect, question, and feel. The archive turns from something fixed into a place where new stories and meanings can be explored.

This method of working offers a powerful way to reflect on collective and personal histories. It also invites us to consider who controls the narrative and how stories can be retold through existing materials. Akomfrah's work demonstrates how recontextualisation can be both an act of resistance and a form of care, a way of understanding the past but being open to the ongoing opportunities.

Authorship

As artists increasingly build work from existing images, the questions of authorship and ethics become deeply personal and complex. When we take a photograph from the past, whether found in a family album, a public archive, or discarded on the street. We're not just borrowing an image, we're touching someone else's memory, someone else's story. This act brings a certain weight with it. Who owns that image now? Who gets to decide how it's seen, and what it means in a new context?

Artists who work with archival photographs are not just image-makers, they become editors, curators, and storytellers. Their role shifts from creator to re-interpreter. But in doing so, they must constantly ask themselves: am I honouring this material or taking it out of context? The line between appropriation and reinterpretation can be a fine one, especially when dealing with deeply personal or culturally significant images.

Ethically, artists must navigate the tension between visibility and respect. When working with family photos, found images, or sensitive historical material, there is a responsibility to the subjects, even if they are absent or unknown.

Sophie Calle's *The Hotel* (1981) exemplifies this tension. By photographing the belongings of hotel guests without their knowledge, Calle constructs intimate portraits from traces left behind. She does not show faces, but she reveals lives. Even though Sophie Calle is taking these images herself, she is photographing people's personal, private belongings without their knowledge. This raises questions: is it acceptable? Has she crossed a line, or is she simply documenting what's in front of her? Her work forces us to consider where the boundary lies between observation and intrusion, between art and privacy.

Sherry levine – After Walker Evans

Sherrie Levine's work presents a direct challenge to traditional notions of authorship in photography. In her iconic series *After Walker Evans* (1981), Levine rephotographed well-known images taken by Evans during the Great Depression and presented them as her own. By doing so, she questioned the very idea of originality, asking what it means to create something "new" in a world when so many imageries already exist. Her practice confronts viewers with a provocative question: if the photograph already exists, what is the role of the artist who reuses it?

Levine's approach is not merely about copying, it is a conceptual gesture. She deliberately recontextualises the work to critique the values placed on authorship, authenticity, and

ownership in the art world. In re-presenting Evans's images, she also brings attention to the social and historical contexts in which those photographs were originally produced.

As John Berger notes in *Ways of Seeing*, "the relation between what we know and what we see is never settled," (Berger 1972, p.7) emphasising how meaning is fluid and context dependent. Levine's recontextualisation of Evans' photographs highlights how images, once removed from their original contexts, can take on new meanings, destabilising the idea of the photographer as the sole creator. Through this act, Levine asserts that the meaning of an image is not fixed, but rather, shaped by its placement and context, allowing the artist to reshape historical narratives and challenge traditional authorship.

The work doesn't belong to Levine, but she made it hers. Does this mean anyone can do this? By simply rephotographing images? Where is the line drawn about authorship, creativity and being an artist? These are the questions that need to be resolved but are also what makes her work engaging.

In the context of my own work, Levine's approach reminds me that working with existing photographs carries both responsibility and possibility. It is not about ownership, but about dialogue, how we can create new meanings by re-seeing the images of others, and in doing so, reflect on our shared visual culture.

My practice

My own practice is rooted in the idea that photographs are not just images but objects that carry memory, touch, and emotion. I often work with family photos, found prints, and physical materials like string or folded paper to create tactile, layered narratives. I am drawn to the ways in which people are connected across time and space, not always visibly, but through shared experiences, emotions, or places.

One current project explores how people from different countries share a connection through migration, memory, or parallel experiences. I use my own family archive alongside photographs from my partner, layering them to create a sense of both distance and closeness. My use of book structures that unfold or overlap reflects this idea of memory as non-linear. Like the archive, a photo book allows for reordering and reinterpretation. It invites viewers to pause, to reflect, to consider the emotional weight of a trace left behind. The idea of creating something new with something old is something that I am going to be using more in my work as a photographer. Especially something that can be both personal and something to share with others to connect with.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have examined how contemporary photographers and artists engage with the archive in ways that move beyond traditional uses of preserving and storing images. Instead, they use it as a dynamic tool for storytelling, critique, and reflection. By recontextualising existing photographs, they challenge conventional

narratives and reveal new layers of meaning. This practice not only reimagines the original intentions behind the images but also opens a space for questioning the nature of memory, identity, and history itself. These artists demonstrate how the archive, rather than being a passive collection of past records, becomes an active site of engagement, transformation, and interpretation.

Recontextualisation in art and photography allows for a disruption of the boundaries between original and derived, truth and fiction. The act of working with pre-existing images, whether personal, historical, or public, raises important questions about authorship. Who has the right to reframe an image? Can an image retain its original meaning when it is placed in a new context, or does it take on a new life? These questions are central to understanding the ethical implications of working with photographs that belong to others, whether they are part of an archive, a personal collection, or a public domain.

My research question emerges from these considerations: **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?**

This question is not merely theoretical; it is something I engage with in my own work. As I continue to explore how photographs can connect people across different times and spaces, I find myself drawn to the potential of the archive as a creative and emotional space. In this space, the past is not static or fixed but is instead open to reinterpretation, offering the opportunity to reframe history and personal narratives in ways that reflect the complexities of contemporary experience. This type of work is complex and potentially

controversial, as some people may question whether reusing existing images can be considered truly creative. There are ongoing debates around originality, ownership, and authorship, especially when working with found or archival materials. However, I believe that creativity can also lie in how images are selected, arranged, and reinterpreted. This is something I want to explore further in my own practice, to understand where the boundaries lie and how I can work respectfully and thoughtfully with existing imagery while still creating something meaningful and new.

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