



Article: Can We Afford to Exhibit Our Valued Photographs?

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CAN WE AFFORD TO EXHIBIT OUR VALUED PHOTOGRAPHS?

By Grant B. Romer

Sept. 1, 1986

Douglas Severson's report, "The Effects of Exhibition on Photographs", brings into the open an obscured issue of great importance to the preservation of our most precious original photographs. Severson's findings confirm a fact that has long been suspected and dreaded, that is, that the exhibition of photographs is incommensurate with their preservation. If it is not possible to predict the individual behaviour of all exhibited photographs, if the environments encountered in display and transit can not be comprehensively monitored and regulated, if the entirety of the photographic artifact can not be constantly observed to record deleterious changes, then we are irresponsibly subjecting photographs to conditions which assuredly will result in their degradation. Perhaps this is not a significant issue for photographs which can easily be replaced or are of little artifactual or aesthetic value. But for those images which are irreplaceable it is extremely significant.

In recent years the exhibition of such material has proliferated. A review of the exhibitions listed in PICTURESCOPE will give only an inkling of the thousands of

valuable photographs of all types and vintages which are currently on exhibition in the world today. These exhibitions are mounted by a wide variety of organizers with a corresponding wide variety of knowledge, skills and resources. The best of them give considerable care to protecting the photographs during display and transit, while the worst give no care at all, the vast majority of exhibitors falling between the two extremes.

The exhibition Severson monitored was mounted at the highest level of practice and was of relatively short duration, yet dramatic changes were recorded. The few other monitoring projects which have been conducted show similar results. If one contemplates the probable effects upon the majority of photographs displayed for longer periods, under less controlled conditions without monitoring systems, the implications are sobering. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that the current exhibition vogue will continue to grow internationally, with the result that more and more photographs will experience accelerated deterioration, which, because it is usually too subtle to visually detect, will go unobserved and unchecked. Given the inadequacy of the best of current protection methods, the lack of general awareness of the extent of the problem and the complexity of the issue, we must accept the conclusion that we are squandering the largely unrenewable resources of our photographic heritage in an ignorant fashion. It is sadly

ironic that this is being done under the banner of promoting the appreciation of photographs.

If current exhibition practice accelerates the degradation of photographs new standards, philosophies and habits must be rapidly evolved and implemented by those responsible for setting the trends in using photography. In fact, it is an obligation for those influential entities to do so. However, there is good reason to doubt that this will happen rapidly or effectively since the prestigious and influential institutions which mount the most important exhibitions have too much vested interest in maintaining things as they are now. Exhibitions are the means by which careers are established and furthered, revenues generated, costs recovered and publicity gained. Hence, suggestions that exhibitions should be curtailed are met with considerable coldness. Practical inabilities, financial realities, and other obligations will keep many institutions from changing their established modes of behaviour. The only entities which have the flexibility to change are those that do not have an established policy for exhibiting photographs.

Certainly, the responsible caretakers of important collections have made compromises and have gradually employed more restrictive and cautious policies in regards to exhibiting and lending. However, the nature of the problem mitigates against the compromises being anything

more than conscience soothing illusions of effective response. The bottom line is that photographs must pay with their condition for the mistakes in judgement made by their caretakers. There are plenty of photographs that show gross exhibition damage, there are more that are damaged, just as deleteriously, but in ways too subtle for those without proper, but basic, conservation knowledge to notice and appreciate.

It is only fairly recently that certain photographs have acquired significant art market value, thus warranting the type of conservation attention traditionally reserved for fine art objects. The current appearance of high sophistication in regards to the appreciation, use and care of photographs is gained relative to the abysmal state of things in the not far distant past. Photographic historians, collectors, dealers, curators and conservators have borrowed heavily from the established methods developed for the traditional fine arts. Many of those methods have not proven entirely applicable to the special needs of photography. At best, these borrowings have served as efficient places to start evolving the appropriate methods required for photographs. At worst, they have given the appearance of sophistication and legitimacy to primitive and disreputable practices.

The discipline of photographic conservation is in a very nascent state of development. The few specialists in

the field would be the first to admit that they are merely students of a highly complex subject. If anything, the experience that has been gained in the brief period of high level focus on the issues of photographic preservation has contributed to a greater appreciation for the immensity of the problems being faced, rather than the generation of solutions to those problems. Photographic conservators and preservationists have found themselves delivering more bad news than good. Thus, it has been in their interest to keep their voices low. Those serving the needs of collections being heavily used for exhibition face a serious dilemma. On one hand, they are chronicling, aiding and abetting in the systematic destruction of the photographs they are charged to protect by supporting reprehensible exhibition practices. On the other hand, they largely owe their existence to those very exhibition programs. Since their knowledge is so incomplete and their methods of protection so limited, they can not reason effectively against exhibiting with curators and others responsible for organizing exhibitions. They have had to content themselves with slowing the probable degradation of the photographs by regulating light levels and limiting exposure time. (Which Severson's findings demonstrate are insufficient systems of protection.) Often conservators are very confused about which photographs should receive special protection. Frequently, prints in very poor condition are given special care while others, potentially more vulnerable, although in excellent

condition, are given less attention. It must be remembered, that most photographic exhibitions can not boast the vigilance of even a confused conservator.

Most of those responsible for the caretakership of photographs do not have a perception of the preservation problems of photographs beyond knowing that photographs fade and that light can be a major factor in their deterioration. Very few have the ability to perceive or differentiate between density loss, density accrual, color shift and the whole host of other deterioration manifestations likely to be encountered. Fewer still can adequately explain the causes of those manifestations. Thus, how can we expect a change in exhibition practices to occur rapidly, if the problem can not be easily perceived or understood?

Although many institutions have adopted more cautious policies for displaying and travelling their valued photographs, none can claim to be meeting the preservation obligations, simply because it can not be done. In a few notable instances, organizations with the technical and financial means have generated high quality facsimiles and reproductions to serve their exhibition needs. Most exhibiting entities do not have such means at their disposal. Thus, the only alternative is not to exhibit valued photographs in the numbers and for the durations common today.

Many of the purposes of today's exhibitions can be well met by publication programs. Modern photo-mechanical technology makes the reproduction of original print quality very viable. Certainly it is absurd to advocate the destruction of those qualities in the process of glorifying them. There are those who will argue that photographs are going to deteriorate anyway, so why not exhibit them while we can. To those I would answer that properly stored photographs will maintain their condition well. Poor storage conditions are not sound arguments to justify display. The traditional print-room methods of accessing delicate graphic artworks can be well applied to valued photographs. It must be recognized that photographs, particularly those of vintage, must be considered as vulnerable and delicate as watercolors and old-master drawings, and treated accordingly.

Perhaps those who are ignorant of the problem can be excused from blame. But for those who read the handwriting that Severson has placed upon the wall, no excuse is possible, let them conduct similar monitoring projects if they must have their own evidence of the display effects on photographs. Photographic exhibitions are undoubtedly a chronic and major conservation problem. The only thing that is hidden is the severity of the problem. For those caretakers who value their photographs a complete reevaluation of current practices is called for. To ignore the call is irresponsible. The current exhibition vogue

amounts to a systematic program of accelerating the degradation of our most valued and important photographs. This practice can and must be changed. No doubt there will be many who will claim that such an assesment is too extreme and that the problem is being exaggerated. They will say that we do not have enough information to change our ways. I would say we do not have enough information to maintain them.