

Book Reviews



Archivaria

Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expressions of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art. MARTHA LANGFORD. Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2007. 368 p. ISBN 978-0-7735-3211-3.

The photographic witness says, 'This is what I saw', while the photographic memory-worker says, 'This is how I remember it' (p. 289).

Martha Langford's recent publication entitled *Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expressions of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art*, explores the role memory plays in photography and the methods utilized by artists to create images that resonate between fact and fiction. At first glance, *Scissors, Paper, Stone* appears to be a scholarly text intended for an audience educated in art theory and well practiced in visual analysis. Upon further reading, however, it becomes clear that Langford's new work addresses the interests of a much wider audience, one that includes archivists. By employing an interdisciplinary lens, she analyzes the nature of memory and art, applying theories and methodologies from social history, philosophy, and cognitive psychology. At the centre of Langford's examination is her incorporation of the spectator's experience into the context of the photograph. By highlighting the relationship between an image and its viewer, she touches upon the challenges of identifying content and interpreting context in photographs, issues that many archivists face when describing photographs, and when accurately presenting and preserving photographic holdings. Langford explains that the photographic art she discusses in *Scissors, Paper, Stone*, visually prompts in the spectator a mental shift from perception to memory (p. 8). It is this shift that Langford pursues, exploring how individual and collective memory is communicated through the medium of photography.

In *Scissors, Paper, Stone*, Langford delves into the many ways that photography functions in an era of pliability, mediation, and false truths. The book is divided into three sections: "Scissors" addresses the tension between remembering and forgetting; "Paper" discusses the intersection between memory and imagination; and "Stone" examines the relationship between memory and history. Of these three sections, it is the latter that is the focus of this review because it explores photography both as a social document and an

instrument of historical record, concepts of interest to archivists working with photographic holdings. As an archivist and photographer, I find Langford's approach to analyzing how meaning is constructed in a photograph stimulating; however, familiarity with the key concepts regarding photography in the critical works of theorists Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, and Geoffrey Batchen is suggested as a prerequisite to reading this book. Within each of the sections, Langford presents a number of essays and case studies introducing artists and their work, citing not only critical reviews of their art but also the ideological and sociological underpinnings that have influenced their artistic processes. To provide further context, she incorporates comments by the artists about their own work. As a result, many of the images are transformed into stories that reveal the intersection of biography and historiography, situating the artist and their work within a much larger frame. This review will explore Langford's assumption "... that photography is not an equivalent for memory, or even its faithful servant" (p. 287).

Langford is currently an associate professor of art history at Concordia University in Montréal where she teaches the history of photography, theories of representation, and the nature of the art museum. In her introduction to *Scissors, Paper, Stone*, she comments on the absence of a Canadian photographic canon (p. 10). If one considers the range of existing publications that address Canadian photography, it is apparent that two genres dominate: the glossy image-laden book devoid of critical analysis, and the exhibition catalogue. Scholarly publications that examine social documentary photography usually focus on projects and photographers in the United States, such as the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and the work of Lewis Hines. Thus, *Scissors, Paper, Stone* and Langford's prior work, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*, published in 2001, are major contributions to the foundation of scholarship in Canadian photographic history.¹ Her experience working in the Still Photography Division of the National Film Board for eighteen years prior to founding the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography in 1985, establishes Langford as an important voice in the discourse on visual literacy. Years of working with photographs produced by artistic and government activities, have informed Langford's understanding of how photographs function as tools to construct a

1 Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal, 2001). *Suspended Conversations* grew out of her McGill doctoral thesis on amateur Canadian photography, and relied heavily on the photographic and textual archives held by the McCord Museum of Canadian History. Archival materials sourced for *Suspended Conversations* span the years from 1860 to 1960. The holdings of the McCord Museum include two hundred linear metres of textual archives and 1,250,000 images in the Notman Photographic archives. See McCord Museum of Canadian History, "About the Collection," <http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/info/collection/> (accessed 5 January 2008).

vision of a nation and, retrospectively, as objects that form a national identity. *Scissors, Paper, Stone* extends her reach beyond archival photographs to include photographic work by Canadian artists. The result is a dense read, illuminated by images of more than twenty-five emerging and established artists. The depth of Langford's knowledge on the topic of Canadian photography and how it has shaped our modern memory is impressive. In her capacity as practitioner, curator, critic, historian, and theorist, she has experienced the majority of photography in *Scissors, Paper, Stone* first-hand: "In selecting the artworks to be discussed, I have looked for evidence that the activation of memory was anticipated by the artists and felt by others besides myself" (p. 8). This latest publication not only exposes readers to contemporary photographic art produced in Canada, it also reveals the degree to which Canadian artists are engaging in a praxis that draws attention to the social and political dynamics beyond the photographic frame.

The book's third section, "Stone," presents essays and case studies that are specific to the relationships between photography, history, and memory. In some cases the artists deal with events that span generations, drawing attention to the differences between individual and collective memories, and the drama of remembering and forgetting. Langford frames the essays in "Stone" by saying, "... my choices will be seen to reflect not just on my arguments about photography and memory, but also on my views on Canadian history, culture, and identity" (p. 198).

In the first essay presented in "Stone," Langford commences her discussion with the career of French historian Pierre Nora (b. 1931), whose early work explored how ideas, places, and images can fuse to create a construct of culture that is accepted as the natural order of things. Langford posits that photography has been central to Canadian cultural expression, and has served purposes to educate, investigate, and witness; as a "document of memory," however, it is misleading. As archivists, we understand that the reproducible nature of the photographic medium enables an image to be created in one context and used repeatedly in others. As such, the message or meaning of a photograph does not always correlate to content. To illustrate this point Langford considers the work *Scouting for Indians* (1998-2000), by Aboriginal artist Jeff Thomas, a member of the Onondaga Nation of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy, as a key example of "the photographic reinvention of a statue" (p. 191). Thomas's series of works involve reinterpreting monuments (e.g., the Samuel de Champlain sculpture in Orillia, Ontario) through the use of photography, performance, and written statements. Thomas presents a contemporary counterpoint to the official history by creating a new image of an existing monument. The new image offers an alternative interpretation of Canadian history that challenges accepted notions of race and power. Langford points out that a result of Thomas's photographic interventions is a shift in viewer perception of these "cultural products" and an inevitable ques-

tioning of the process of history making (p. 192).

The five essays that follow (“Agit-prompters,” “Repossession,” “Pictures That We Have,” “Flashbulb Memories?,” and “Markers,”), provide further development of Langford’s interest in artists who focus on exposing the existence of multiple historical narratives and producing photographs that express layers of meaning. The featured artists all work within the conventions of representation (i.e., image maker, subject, and spectator); however, the stories they tell focus on events that Canadian society might otherwise forget, such as Canadian labour union activism, residential schooling for Aboriginal children, Doukhobor persecution, and gay sexuality. They rely on interviews, hand-drawn maps, found objects, and archival documents to inform and contribute to the production of their art. In some cases the artistic process involves visiting archives only to discover a lack of photographic documentation within their holdings (p. 215).² Langford concludes that many of these artists explore subjects that are not represented in institutional holdings because the persons/places/events were not part of a government mandate to document. Alternatively, the images held and preserved within archives become, by default, the official record regardless of their accuracy.

Langford summarizes the complicated development of documentary photography in Canada, pointing out such influences as the government-funded National Film Board, nineteenth-century ethnographic surveys, and the growth of national photographic collections, including those of the Canada Council for the Arts, and Library and Archives Canada (pp. 221–35). She also provides the theoretical framework upon which these actions rested, explaining how Marxist and post-colonial, cultural theory critique the blunders of earlier Modernist portraiture and Euro-centric representation.

The artists discussed in “Stone” recognize photography’s attachment to the real and its service to history as an instrument of record, which is why they choose to work with it as a medium. Langford points out in her introduction that the photographic document exists in an awkward state – accepted as both truth and fiction. Her case studies indicate that artists often work with photography as an expression of a mental process, and in many instances, their photographs invite viewers to experience a familiar event or location in an entirely different way. The artists challenge accepted modes of “knowing,” using photography – a medium traditionally accepted as a form of visual evidence of an event – to alter constructs of time, authority, and place. In studies where individual recall is compared against photographic documentation, the incongruities reveal the existence of unofficial and official histories, the personal and the collective, and cultural and political agendas. In *Scissors, Paper, Stone*, Langford effectively demonstrates that photography is not an

2 See in particular the experiences of artists Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge.

equivalent for memory, but that it can be an art of memory . The artists in this book reveal that the power of photography is its ability to serve many masters: “It smiles on history while slyly proposing that alternative accounts are being overlooked” (p. 287). Langford reminds readers that the context in which a photograph is discovered has a great deal to do with the way it is received. There is no denying that society has become wary of claims to photographic authenticity, but when the photograph is placed within a specific context, such as an archives, it appears trustworthy. That is why it is important for archivists to recognize the layers of meaning bound within a single image, and to continue exploring new approaches to reading photographs. *Scissors, Paper, Stone* provides archivists a unique opportunity to exercise their visual acuity and to discover the creative breadth of contemporary Canadian artists working with photography.

Jessica Bushey
UBC Museum of Anthropology