

Introductory comments at a panel discussion at CILS, San Francisco, on the occasion of the presentation of an exhibition of selections from En Foco's permanent collection, 2013.

I started to work with Miriam Romais and the staff of En Foco over five years the course of a few years to study their permanent collection and to develop this exhibition, and now that it's touring we've seen that it has had a strong impact – this is clearly work that needs to be seen and that demands a response. And moreover, it represents creative legacies that should be exhibited, studied, discussed, and preserved.

Tonight, I'd like to focus on my comments on a theme that is central to this exhibition – collecting, studying, and preserving aspects of a cultural record that might otherwise be neglected. Essentially what we are discussing is how Latino art history, Asian American art history, African American art history – essentially, all those bodies of work outside the mainstream – will be preserved, studied, and built upon.

I think it's helpful to frame this discussion in a key theoretical text, Jacques Derrida's 1990s essay, *Archive Fever*. In this book, Derrida offered a very important reading on the subject of the archive from a Freudian perspective. The archive can be understood in broad terms – it can be based on personal belongings, institutional records, the library, or the museum collection. Derrida looked at the archive from a Freudian perspective, proposing that the human impulse to create or maintain the archive is driven on the one hand by a primal urge to forget, or omit, and on the other, to conserve. He called this impulse *mal d'archive* which means "in need of archives" but which Derrida himself described as "to burn with passion" for the archive. Rather than seeing the archive as the dry receptacle for history, he posited it as an active force in contemporary culture.

The archive maintains a place of power because it shapes and controls the way history is read, which in turn shapes our social and ultimately political reality. One of Derrida's important points in this essay, and I'll quote, is that "There is no

political power without control of the archive, or without memory." The archive produces as much as it records events. It opens "the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow." These thoughts have been important to me in understanding the immense value of an art collection like En Foco's, and more broadly, any collection of body of work that others might, and indeed, have, overlooked.

The traditional scope of En Foco's collection has been work by African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American photographers. More recently it has grown to include photography reflecting newer immigrant communities in the United States. In fact, among the cultures and nationalities represented in En Foco's collection are East Asian, Tlingit, Vietnamese, and Iraqi, and such hybrid categories as Mexican/Irish and African/Native American. In its collection and programs, En Foco embraces cultural diversity in the broadest and best sense, because it's inclusive – and therefore it truly reflects the complex realities of American identity, often hybrid forms of identity, which increasingly define what it is to be an American.

The En Foco collection (and I should add here that what is on view here at CIIS represents only a small percentage of the collection) is extremely valuable because it - is - made up of highly accomplished, innovative work by photographers who remain largely absent from the "canon" – by which I mean, standard published histories of photography, major museum surveys, and significant public collections. These photographers bring issues to the table that others might wish to overlook and they significantly broaden the scope of contemporary art and image making. In fact, in my mind, this collection reveals a parallel history of photography from nearly the last half century, perhaps one that is incomplete, but that is tantalizing in its suggestion of a broader, richer history than has been largely presented so far by museums, curators, and historians. I should underscore that the picture in this regard varies greatly. For example, looking at the field of African American photography, there are now many significant institutional collections in museums and libraries in the United States of both historic and contemporary work. But looking at the field I know best – Latino photography – the situation is very different. Here, only very few

collections exist – En Foco’s is one, and that of the Lehigh University Art Gallery in Pennsylvania is another. Certainly, other collections hold some work, for example, the Mexican Museum here in San Francisco, or El Museo del Barrio in New York, but these are not comprehensive collections and the work in both these institutions tend to be kept in storage rather than on public view. In fact, I find that American museums have been willing to pay more attention to Mexican or Latin American artists than to Latino artists in the United States.

On the other hand, over the last couple of decades, it’s been easier to see exhibitions of work by culturally diverse photographers, whether at alternative spaces, photo galleries and centers, university galleries, and other kinds of venues in cities across the United States – as well as FotoFest, which is the largest photography festival in the country, held biannually in Houston. This of course is vitally needed exposure; photographers need these platforms and they offer opportunity for critical discourse, especially through the exhibition catalogues that often accompany these shows. But where I see a continuing lack, is with any kind of broad effort to acquire this work by museums for permanent collections, particularly by larger institutions that have the wherewithal to study and preserve it.

As the first significant generation of photographers from these communities – those who emerged in the late 1960s and ‘70s – mature and begin to pass, my concern is for the urgency in preserving their work and legacies. Some questions come to mind: Should culturally specific museums take the lead? Should we look to institutions like the Japanese-American Museum in Los Angeles, the Arab-American National Museum in Detroit, or El Museo del Barrio in New York, to take the lead in collecting bodies of work from the communities they represent? And how will the major collecting museums with significant resources, MoMA, SF MoMA, or the large urban museums up and down the west and east coasts, be compelled to broaden the scope of their collecting to truly reflect the communities in their midst? And will this work be collected if the photographers lack commercial backing from well-connected dealers and affluent collectors? While the commercial art market is somewhat out of the scope of this conversation, I think it’s also important to note that these photographers have

also been largely excluded from the commercial market, most notably the older, pioneering figures whose legacies could easily fall into obscurity without patronage and institutional support of an organization like En Foco. And finally, I think it's important to ask a fundamental question: what constitutes our archives? Perhaps they are not in the usual sources or forms and thus less accessible, but they do exist: I'm thinking of family archives, archives in Latino or African American research centers at universities, in local libraries, historical societies, or organizations like the United Farm Workers, which maintains a little studied but massive collection of Chicano photography from the 1960s. For me, these questions to a great deal of work to be done, as well as to the challenges in making our visual legacies accessible and better known.

The kind of work being done by Miriam Romais as a curator and arts administrator; by Deborah Willis as a teacher, curator and writer; and by Brendan Wattenberg through his work at such institutions as the Walter Collection and Autograph, are precisely the kind of efforts needed to insure the preservation of bodies of photography outside the mainstream. So I'd like to now turn to our panelists for their thoughts and comments.

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