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Source: *MoveableType*, Vol.3, 'From Memory to Event (2007)

DOI: 10.14324/111.1755-4527.024

MoveableType is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

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Archiving the Collection

The Aesthetics of Space and Public Cultural Collections in Candida Höfer's Photography

by Patience Graybill

In his seminal essay 'The Ontology of the Image', André Bazin writes, 'The aesthetic qualities of photography are to be sought in its power to lay bare the realities'.¹ For Bazin, this means that the photograph's indexical link to the object world allows it to image external realities indiscernible to the human eye, itself clouded by psychological or emotional perceptions.² While he means to affirm photography's objective qualities over the role of subjective, artistic genius in painting, Bazin also implicates the medium's fundamentally paradoxical nature: it is both *objective*, or bound to the Real through chemical processes and able to depict 'realities' never fully imitated by humans, and it is *subjective*, or directed by the human hand and framed by the photographer's ordering vision, which can often deviate from factuality. This dually objective and subjective condition has made photography a friend to the empirical sciences, which rely on photography's documentary attributes in historical archives or scientific studies, and to the fine arts, which exploit the medium's more subjective aspects to make fictional, narrative images illustrate abstract or social concepts through their concrete subjects.

Contemporary German photographer Candida Höfer employs these two sides of photography in the construction of her own photographic oeuvre. For her, the medium's representative power manifests itself in an ability to record space and lay bare its structures as

witness to historical contexts. Höfer catalogues the interiors of cultural institutions and displays a particular interest for public collections such as archives, libraries, and museums. These ‘portraits of archival spaces’, as I call them, function in two ways: they document individual rooms, uncovering structural personalities, and they query the way societies order, and thus relate to, their cultural heritage. In fact, Höfer’s own photographic project behaves like an archive, a survey in depots of cultural knowledge. Her evocative, strangely empty pictures invite viewers to immerse themselves in a global diversity of collection spaces. But while she appropriates photography’s factual premise in order to depict novel spaces, Höfer also draws attention to her own frameworks, highlighting her subjects’ abstract qualities to make them metaphors for cultural memory.

In this paper, I would like to investigate the aesthetic at work in Höfer’s pictures, as well as the dialectic between her individual photos and the entire ‘collection’ of cultural archives. For efficiency, I will focus on Höfer’s library pictures but with the understanding that these libraries, though specific in their function as book depots, can represent the general cultural storage function of archival spaces. Indeed, just as each of Höfer’s pictures depicts unique space, the group explores how archival spaces behave as cultural-memory sites. In these efforts to research public collections, Höfer offers viewers a unique vision—one that allows us to see banal spaces as exceptional objects and to read these spaces as signs of the cultures that built them.

Background: ‘The Becher School’ and the Typographical Approach

Most known for her association with the Düsseldorf Art Academy and the so-called ‘Becher School’ photographers,³ Höfer shares the group’s serial approach to cultural space and architecture. Her teachers, Bernd and Hilla Becher, made their name in the 1960s with typographies of Europe’s ageing industrial structures. Researching variations of the same building type, the Bechers photographed subjects according to a uniformly objective and distanced perspective, using black-and-white film to render details with clarity and precision. Individual pictures were then arranged in a series on typological

grids, enabling anatomical comparison between buildings; on the grid, each subject appeared both unique and generic, as an individual and categorical universal-in-one. Influenced by straight photography and Minimalism, it was an aesthetic designed to decontextualise the subjects and to create a taxonomic system of industrial architecture. The system made it possible to collect infinite class types and variations as the Bechers built their photographic archive. But while the project mimicked an anthropological survey of forgotten buildings, it was also a self-reflexive study in aesthetic form. The grid format pointed back to the Bechers's frameworks, drawing attention to their subjects' material shape and sculptural qualities as archetypal figures. The 'anonymous sculptures'⁴ emerging from the Bechers's studies were to be viewed as aesthetic objects and cultural monuments representing their era.

To be clear, the Bechers saw their project as a historical one: they used photography's documentary basis to record and preserve endangered building types, but they also embraced the artificiality of their subjective frames in order to render buildings visible as abstract objects and cultural artefacts. Though removed from their specific contexts, the conceptual building models had representative value as cultural metaphors. In one sense, they were found objects, symbolising an era's socioeconomic context as functional structures; in other sense, the buildings' aesthetic qualities made them iconic renderings of the industrial imagination.⁵ The Bechers's attitude, almost Benjaminian in nature,⁶ might be gleaned from Hilla's admiration of object-metaphors in nineteenth-century art: 'In the 19th century, you have both the object and the metaphor and if you use them in the right way it becomes so fascinating that in the end you can really say: this is a certain object, it has a name and so on, but it also stands for a certain historical condition'.⁷ Contained in the typological approach, then, was a historical way of seeing, a visual means to chart out an era through its architectural objects and to uncover the social values embedded in their structures. Rendering those structures visible was a way to allow viewers to read the social codes contained on the objects' surface.⁸

Höfer's work, along with that of her fellow students at the Art Academy, has retained elements of the Bechers's methodology, including their topical approach to cultural objects. One of the Bechers's oldest

students—she attended the Art Academy from 1976 to 1982—Höfer credits the Bechers with teaching her good picture-making,⁹ and she carries on their tradition of ‘sustained categorization’.¹⁰ The younger photographer has sought, however, to distinguish herself from her teachers’ typologies with her individualised portraits of public space. While the Bechers constrained subjects to disciplined viewpoints and categorical grids, Höfer has opened her perspective to the unique structure of each room. She prefers to picture her spaces from the sidelines and to capture banal idiosyncrasies invisible in frontal views. Her images strive to describe a room’s personality, whether through specific details or an overall impression of ‘aura’,¹¹ and she employs a combination of photographic realism and romantic portraiture to do so.

Yet, despite efforts to distance herself from the Bechers, Höfer’s work stays fundamentally close to their methodology. She has retained their interest in photographic handiwork, rendering subjects with extreme precision and making images that could be read as both photographic documents and aesthetic constructions. The paradoxical mix of realism and abstraction continues to be a primary means to depict her subjects’ social significance. And though she admits only a subconscious impulse to conduct serial studies, Höfer’s photographic oeuvre constitutes a virtual archive or cultural history of public cultural spaces. But whereas the Bechers used outbuildings to signify an era and its values, Höfer’s interiors have the potential to penetrate much more deeply into the psychological interiors of their respective societies. Choosing archival spaces as her topic aligns Höfer with sites inherently linked to cultural memory or the process by which societies negotiate their collective cultural inheritance. Höfer addresses these spaces as culturally sentient locations, using her archive to explore the social role of collection sites as they manifest themselves across the Western world and map the relationships we build with our arsenals of memory.

Individual Portraits, Institutional Models

If we begin with one of Höfer’s early library pictures, like *Stadsbibliotheket Stockholm 1993*, we see how Höfer draws on her rooms’ inherent structures to portray singular space. These pictures tread the line between document and abstraction as they record a

room's specific qualities at a particular historical moment and imagine its more ethereal nature as public space. In *Stadsbibliotheket Stockholm*, Höfer aligns her camera with the library's rotunda to give a clear view of the room's layout, its details, and user activities. It is, in one sense, an architectural study of the room's idiosyncrasies, highlighting curved bookshelves, warm lighting, and a vaulted ceiling. It is also a snapshot of an institution's everyday existence and shows banal structures put to use by human visitors. And while this picture depicts human interlopers, later pictures, like *Bibliothèque nationale de France XIII, 1998*, are completely bare of human figures, which reduces the portraits to pure images of spatial personality—although Höfer does contend that users are made more present through their absence.¹² Beyond their particular details, Höfer's portraits also capture a subtle atmospheric tone, a mood generated through the room's lighting and the reflective distance of Höfer's camera position. Here, emotive images pull viewers' gazes into the space to experience its distinctive climate. In this way, Höfer achieves the paradoxical effect of pragmatic realism and moody animation in her pictures. By constructing these document-portraits, Höfer thus freezes time on the picture plane to 'collect' the libraries as a spatial personality and structural anomaly.

If one occupies Höfer's distanced perspective long enough, though, Höfer's portrait begins to abstract itself into an emblematic image of the idea 'library'. Details meld into amorphous shapes, humans take on sculptural qualities, and a formalist portrayal of spatial order emerges. On one hand, this formalism hardens the space into a structural figure, enabling Höfer to collect the room as a specific architectural type. On the other hand, the abstraction allows viewers to see the space as a generic institutional model, revealing as Catharina Manchanda has suggested, 'the dialectic between [the] architectural interior and the content [it] frames'.¹³ In the case of *Stadsbibliotheket*, the picture becomes a sculptural meditation on Stockholm's relationship to its books and libraries; spatial order allegorizes how the city organises its textual universe, and human figures depict their active interaction with that cosmos. Höfer, therefore, not only represents a novel library space, she makes it an allegory for the library's role as cultural institution and public-knowledge site.

By taking on archival institutions, Höfer implicates the epicenters of cultural memory and the process by which societies work through their cultural history to negotiate collective identity. Edric Caldicott and Anne Fuchs write, ‘cultural memory can be understood as *a repertoire of symbolic forms and stories* through which communities advance and edit competing identities’.¹⁴ The ‘repertoire of symbolic forms and stories’ is particularly important for the creation of collective identity, since it externalizes shared values and norms and gives citizens access to a common cultural history while imparting it to future generations.¹⁵ As official or elevated sites where communities institutionalise their ‘cultural repertoire’, archival spaces play a key role in facilitating this discursive process. Höfer’s documents of spatial order record a society’s contemporary interaction with collective cultural heritage as it is marked out on the archive’s functional structures. As Manchanda’s statement implies, the pictures’ narrative potential lies in the contrast between the space’s institutional identity and its particular order at a particular moment in time. This dynamic not only shows how space changes over time but also how the institution’s role is adapted and reorganized by its respective users.

The beauty of Höfer’s specific, yet symbolic, images is that they may refer to one geographical-historical setting or to modern archives in general. Individual rooms behave as artefacts of certain societies while also suggesting more universal notions about the state of the modern archival space. Motifs in *Stadsbibliotheket Stockholm*, for example, schematise the city’s relationship to the library in 1993 and the way it constructs its textual institutions. But Höfer’s abstraction also shows the library as a closed, symbiotic system, where human users depend on and preserve their library as a textual resource. The single image thus renders a uniquely systemic library space in order to reflect on the universal library as a living social microcosm.

I would like to suggest, however, that although Höfer’s portraits suggest their rooms’ particular historical contexts, they have only *limited* ability to postulate on the social significance of modern archival spaces. Höfer’s emphasis on specificity, for one, makes it difficult to allow a single picture to represent all archives. The documentary pictures foreground individual structures in order to make visual records and to

reference social environments, but they could also stand independently as neutral documents or aesthetic images. They do only little to narrate complex ideas about the archive's social status and leave viewers to puzzle out Höfer's ambiguous pictures for their symbolic gestures and subtle implications. Placed within the context of Höfer's entire collection, however, single images gain tremendous potential to reflect on the practical and symbolic functions of archival spaces in modern societies.

Ordering Institutions, Humanistic Temples

A display of a few of Höfer's portraits together draws out some general notions about the library as they appear in the 'collection'. Höfer's serial interests generate several leitmotifs regarding the library-archive's social roles. The collection yields archetypal images of the library while retaining individualized versions of similar themes. These groupings of her images display various leitmotifs or themes to be found in Höfer's work. There is the library as the place we keep our books (*Bibliothek ETH Zurich III 2005*, *Bibliothek ETH Zurich II 2005*), the library as an archive or a vault (*Sächsische Landesbibliothek Dresden IV 2002*, *Sächsische Landesbibliothek Dresden VIII 2002*), or the library as a solitary reading spot and workspace (*Allgemeinelesegesellschaft Basel 1999*, *Kunigliga Bibliotheket Stockholm II 1993*).

A series of workspace portraits, as I group them here, delineates public libraries in their task as cultural storehouses and ordering institutions. *BNF Paris VIII*, for example, images the library's cataloguing and storage function. It is a rendering of order and human labor at the service of collective culture. Catalogue boxes hint at the way libraries structure our cultural knowledge, and a poster hanging over the room suggests this all as part of maintaining collective cultural history. *MOCA Los Angeles 2000* shows a basement workplace serving the collection, but in a darker, more cluttered section of the library. If *BNF Paris VIII* represents the archive's higher task of ordering knowledge, then *MOCA's* subaltern space might represent the library as a subconscious environment, containing a society's cultural unconscious. The disheveled workspace in *Villa Medici Roma 2001* depicts individual scholarship at the pursuit of knowledge. Here, an anatomy skeleton stands over

the desk and points toward the windows, as if to hint the scientific enquiries of its absent user. Like an intellectual patron or guide, this figure seems to represent the library's cultural authority pointing the scholar toward enlightenment. Though very different interpretations of space, these pictures make the library-archive a place where societies preserve cultural knowledge and negotiate relationships to a collective intellectual heritage.

A final leitmotif is the temple-like library space, found in *Rijksarchief Limburg Maastricht 2003*, in *Rijksmuseum Amsterdam II 2004*, and in *Universiteitsbibliothek Utrecht 2003*. Höfer frequently depicts church windows over capacious library spaces, such as in *Rijksmuseum Amsterdam II*, where the library becomes a sanctuary or a place of worship. The church-like atmosphere in *Universiteitsbibliothek Utrecht*, for instance, alludes to libraries as temples of academic pursuit. An empty desk chair indicates an academic's scholarly activity, while church windows shine a godly light over the desk. This constellation imbues scholarship with divine meaning and implicates the semi-religious, humanistic values that modern societies invest in their research spaces. However, I would like to argue that Höfer's church windows are not just religious indicators, but reminders that these rooms are idealized spaces, bearing, in both spatial order and architectural design, traces of the values that societies invest in their public spaces. Before Höfer's camera, these windows and other spatial features become monuments to the ideals, desires, and expectations of past societies.

Archival Space as (National) Monument

If the power of Höfer's collection lies in its ability to unveil archetypes and general concepts about archives, then the collection's revelation that space typifies cultural ideals is particularly relevant for Höfer's individual pictures. Focusing on public libraries, for example, allows Höfer to uncover national ideals embedded in architectural structures. Facilitated by political authorities, the public archive serves a national collectivity and is subject to a state's regulatory power. Knowledge kept in these institutions plays a significant role in defining a national cultural identity, and while Höfer's pictures never directly address the archive's link to political power, she does explore how archival

spaces materialise or advance notions of collective cultural history. The picture *Anna Amalia Bibliothek Weimar 2004* depicts an architectural gem, a Rococo-style library that has also become a symbol for Classical Weimar Germany. Opened in 1766, the Anna Amalia houses one of the world's largest collections in Classic and Romantic German literature and music, and, even after a disastrous fire in late 2004, remains one of the most important research destinations in these areas. Beloved for its architectural beauty as well as its collection, the Anna Amalia is national treasure, representing an intellectual boom period and the German contribution to Enlightenment thought.

Höfer references the library's cultural significance when she aims her camera down the great hall, toward iconic pictures, sculptures, and architectural features. Portraits of Duke Carl August, the library's founder, and Goethe, *the* Classical German writer and an early administrator of the Anna Amalia,¹⁶ imply, on one hand, the library's political role in educating the nation, and on the other hand, its historical position within the German Enlightenment. Busts of Classical thinkers along with the Rococo design further situate this space firmly within eighteenth-century visual culture, and Höfer adopts a reverent sort of low-camera position before them, as if to magnify the space as a historical monument and cultural athenaeum. Here, Höfer images the weight of cultural history and makes the image a dioramic view into the inheritance of the German eighteenth century. Before her camera, architectural design and visual objects typify the imagination of an age and illustrate foregone ideas and fancies with spatial structures.

But Höfer's reverent stance also imitates that of contemporary Germany and acknowledges its efforts to uphold the Anna Amalia as a paragon of collective history. The impulse to preserve national culture appears in *Anna Amalia Bibliothek Weimar VIII*, where Höfer focuses on busts of intellectual figures lining the balcony and the white power strips nestled in its corners. As symbols of venerated thinkers, the busts evidence Germany's efforts to remember and canonise its intellectual heroes through the archive. Power strips, on the other hand, imply the practical efforts made by present societies to modernise cultural archives and keep them culturally significant. This somewhat ironic allusion to the work of keeping national treasures timely also discloses a society's

efforts to remember its collective past and incorporate it into a present understanding of self. Here the library's spatial features not only figure a shared cultural inheritance, they evidence Germany's hopes to transmit its past accomplishments to future generations. Spatial structures behave in Höfer's work, then, as physical carriers of collective memory, and archival space, in its institutional and symbolic functions, symbolises the very process of retaining collective cultural memory.

As spatial metaphors for a society's cultural memory and its relationship to collective knowledge over time, Höfer's archive portraits might also be deemed Höfer's excavation project, a slowing of vision in order to uncover temporal layers embedded in space. For Höfer, rooms entail generations of human users and their cultural expectations. Like palimpsests, the rooms bear traces of those who have negotiated relationships to a collective cultural history. With her camera, Höfer maps layers of history in the rooms. Architectural structures or banal objects reference social users, and Höfer finds places where the marks of different eras intersect. Old constructions encounter a modern society's interpretation of space, as in *Rijksarchief Limburg Maastricht 2003*; present societies leave their marks on historical structures; and current users pass through timeless spaces. In *BNF Paris 1998*, Höfer contrasts the quiet age of a nineteenth-century hall with its modern users' busy activity. Card catalogues, computer screens, and blurred figures remind us that contemporary users pass through and change the space, while the hall's silent immobility affirms its steadfastness in the onslaught of time. Here the archival space appears both changeable and timeless; the space is subject to contemporary needs and whims, but also endures as a safeguard of intellectual treasures and cultural negotiations over time.¹⁷ These abiding vessels not only embody the collections defining a society's shared cultural identity, they offer themselves as monuments to cultural history, imparting collective ideals to future generations.

Höfer's pictures, which chronicle these spaces, propose to do the same. They stop time on their surface to 'collect' modern archival spaces and record our relationship to cultural heritage. These spatial registers offer rooms as historical artefacts, evidencing particular historical contexts or a society's cultural negotiations over time. With her portraits, Höfer asks us to see her rooms in a dual manner:

realistically, as documents of unique architecture, and abstractly, as types representing the archive's social condition. These pictures are an act of confirmation and approval; Höfer embraces archival spaces for their architectural integrity, for their role in the humanistic endeavor, and for their durability in the face of time. Indeed, by contrast to the work of other contemporary artists like Christian Boltanski¹⁸ or Sophie Calle, whose visual archives question memory, institutional forms generating cultural memory, and even photography's reliability as a representative medium, Höfer's portrait-documents seem to eschew these doubts in favor of an aesthetic preservation of spatial personality. In building her photographic collection, Höfer employs photography's representative potential to capture the auratic and timeless quality of her spaces, asserting their continued significance in present societies. And it is perhaps in these obsessive efforts to monumentalise and conserve archival spaces that Höfer reveals a subtle fear that they too might disappear into the forgotten annals of history.

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Endnotes

1. André Bazin, ‘The Ontology of the Image’, in *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*, ed. Philip Anderson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 277–80 (p. 279).
2. See Bazin, p. 279: ‘Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love’.
3. This group includes Axel Hütte, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky, and other photographers who studied under the Bechers at the Düsseldorf Art Academy.
4. See the Bechers’s first catalogue: *Anonyme Skulpturen. Eine Typologie technischer Bauten*, trans. by Périne Macherey and Richard Bairstow (Düsseldorf: Art-Press-Verlag, 1970).
5. See Catharina Manchanda, ‘The Architecture of Images: Photographic Perspectives’, in *German Art Now*, Saint Louis Art Museum exhibition catalogue (New York: Merrell Publishers, 2003), pp. 105–11 (p. 106): ‘The resulting photographs, arranged on typological grids, transformed the gritty industrial structures into iconic objects’.
6. Their use of architectural artefacts as evidence for a social imagination recalls the historical materialism of the Frankfurt School and Walter Benjamin, who in texts like ‘Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian’ and the so-called Arcades Project, turns to commercial goods and everyday objects as manifestations of the modern experience and finds evidence there of the social collective’s capitalist fantasies and values.
7. Quoted in Marc Friedus, ‘Typologies’, in *Typologies: Nine Contemporary Photographers*, Newport Harbor Art Museum exhibition catalogue, ed. by Marc Freidus (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), pp.10–25 (p. 16), from ‘Conversation with Jean-Francois Chevrier and Thomas Struth—21/1/89’, in Jean-Francois Chevrier and James Lingwood, *Another Objectivity* (Milan: Idea Books, 1989), p. 58.

8. For more on this topic, see Friedus, 'Typologies', pp. 17–19, 24, for a discussion about the Becher-School's mode of uncovering the ideologies and social values embedded in architectural structures.
9. Compare Manine Haase, "'Ich Empfinde Es Als Vortheit, Dass Ich Mir Treu Geblieben Bin.'" Interview with Candida Höfer', *Kunstforum International*, 166 (2003), 214–18 (pp. 285, 288).
10. Compare Constance W. Glenn, 'Candida Höfer: Absence in Context', in *Candida Höfer: Architecture of Absence*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Aperture, 2004), pp. 15–21 (p. 19).
11. See, for example, Bibliothèque nationale de France XIII, 1998. See also Höfer's statements in Susanne Boecker, 'Candida Höfer: "Ich möchte etwas zeigen, das eigentlich nicht modern ist, das eine Langlebigkeit hat"', *Kunstforum International*, 153 (2001) 280–91 (p. 289): 'What always fascinates me, of course, are rooms with a strong personality, like the reading room in the old Paris National Library [...] I look for rooms that have a certain aura and have some kind of effect on me' [my translation].
12. See Haase, p. 218.
13. Catharina Manchanda, *Models and Prototypes*, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum exhibition catalogue, ed. by Catharina Manchanda (St. Louis: Washington University in St. Louis, 2006), p. 57.
14. Edric Caldicott and Anne Fuchs, 'Introduction', in *Cultural Memory: Essays on European Literature and History*, ed. by Edric Caldicott and Anne Fuchs (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 1–32 (p. 18) [my emphasis].
15. See Jan Assmann, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique*, 65 (1995), 125–33. The work of Egyptologists Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann has been pivotal in expanding Maurice Halbwachs's work on collective memory to define cultural memory as something created in a society's elevated cultural sphere. Whereas Halbwachs's 'collective memory' is local, often oral, with a lifetime of about three generations, the Assmanns's 'cultural memory' is removed from the everyday, fixed cultural objects and rites that stabilize collective memory and transfer it to future generations.
16. Goethe was librarian of the Anna Amalia from 1797–1832.
17. See also Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen, 2001.
18. For more on Boltanski, see Richard Hobbs, 'Boltanski's Visual Archives', *History of Human Sciences*, 11 (1998), 121–40.



Above: Candida Höfer. *Stadsbibliotheket Stockholm 1993*. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Used with permission.

Below: Candida Höfer. *Bibliothèque nationale de France Paris XIII*. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Used with permission.





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