
Archiving as a Political Act: Wilhelm Keller's Photographic Plates at the Swiss National Museum.

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Abstract

A current project at the Swiss National Museum deals with an inventory of 40'000 photographic plates. The archival material undergoes multiple working processes through which the meaning and function of an unknown photographer's work can be reconstructed.

This paper focuses on the political meaning of archiving, on the basis of Wilhelm Keller's photographs in the collection of the Swiss National Museum. Wilhelm Keller (1862–1947) was a Swiss engineer and amateur photographer who, between 1890 and 1940, took more than 3'000 black-and-white photographs and created around 300 autochromes. On the sleeve of most of his photographs he meticulously wrote down when and in which light they were taken. In fact, when looking through his whole collection, one recognizes that one of the main focuses of his pictures was light—the essence of photography.

On the basis of analyzing Wilhelm Keller's photographs the paper will demonstrate how the archiving process of the Swiss National Museum helps reconstruct this less well-known photographer's work. Through cataloging and archiving, the glass plates reveal a great deal about both the person who made them and about the time in which they were created. By archiving we give meaning to a photographer whose work was so far unknown. This represents the political act of archiving. The paper will elaborate on how through these processes significant information can be generated and on how the manner in which we catalog influences the way we contextualize both the artifacts and the photographer.

Keywords: history of photography, Switzerland, glass plates, autochrom, Wilhelm Keller, archive, contextualizing, photography

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