Princeton Global Collaborative Research Fund
Project: The Itinerant Languages of Photography: Images, Media, and Archives in an International Context

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Overview

This proposal requests support for a photography research network in collaboration with scholars from DiTella University (Buenos Aires, Argentina), the Universidade Federal de Rio de Janeiro and the Center for Photographic Research at the Instituto Moreira Salles (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), the Centro de Historia Gráfica at the University of Puebla (Puebla, Mexico), and the University Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona, Spain).

The project will help initiate and develop new forms of international interdisciplinary collaboration between programs, departments, and research centers at Princeton and abroad, in dialogue with disciplines such as literary and cultural studies, media studies, cultural history, art history, and anthropology. The scope of the research we are envisioning will cover a wide range of fields of expertise, and will bring together scholars from Latin America, Europe, the United States, and potentially other areas of the world involved in international circuits of image production, giving preference to the examples of Latin American and Hispanic archives and regions which have been traditionally neglected by the dominant versions of the history and analysis of photography as a transnational cultural practice. The proposal is therefore also a response to an increasing demand in media studies to pay attention to alternative histories of photography, beyond the canon of American and European photographers, and to the transnational dimension of technological traffic and image production at a time when photography is at the center of current debates on the role of representation, authorship, and reception in global contemporary art and culture. If put into place, the new research network not only will enhance greatly the internationalization of Princeton University’s academic units, but it also will encourage dialogue and collaboration among programs and centers that very seldom work together, such as is the case of Spanish and Portuguese and the Program in Latin American Studies with English and Art History. In addition, this project provides an unusual and rare opportunity for scholars from Spain and Latin America to work together with scholars from the States on issues that are at once archival, historical, and theoretical. In facilitating and supporting this work, Princeton would not only take a leadership role in the development of this kind of project—we know of no similar project anywhere in the United States—but it also would play a leading role in facilitating and enhancing the chance for collaborative work for scholars and universities in other countries. Given that the project also would culminate in a photographic exhibition that would bring together materials from rarely opened collections in Latin America, it also would provide a rare opportunity for the Princeton community to encounter materials that have remained mostly unseen until now.
Description

The project will study what we are calling the “itinerant languages” of modern photography, and how they operate in international and global networks of collaboration and exchange. By “itinerant languages” we refer to the various means whereby photographs speak and move across historical periods, national borders, and different media. While photographs have been exchanged, appropriated, and mobilized in different contexts since the second half of the nineteenth century, such movement is now occurring at an unprecedented speed, especially given the new technological and political configurations that now facilitate this movement. We would even say that such movement belongs to the signature of our modernity. Indeed, what is at stake in the itinerancy of photography are the questions of artificial memory and of the modern forms of archivization which today affect, with a speed and dimension that have no common measure with those of the past, every aspect of our relation to the world. Tracing the movement of photographs within and between different national photographic traditions, and especially within the Latin American and Hispanic context, we will hope to understand not only the shifting and always-changing contours of this modernity, but the role and place of images within it.

Because the focus of this project is the itinerancy of photography, it is appropriate and necessary that the project include scholars from different countries and from different disciplines (that is, that the principal investigators themselves embody a certain itinerancy). We believe that it is only this kind of international collaboration that can begin to address the questions raised by this project. In addition, the project will permit scholars and graduate students to have access to enormous and rich archives from different countries that only recently have begun to be explored, and to view them through the lens of a new set of questions. It also may enable us to begin to develop a set of methodologies for historicizing photographs and photography, something that has not yet been formalized in the way that, for example, the study of cinema has been (which is surprising, given that cinema is itself photogrammatically-based, since it depends on the twenty-four still images that move through the film projector every second).

The project begins in the conviction that photography, as a practice and as an ever-expanding archive, resists being fixed in a single location. While it travels around the globe, it constantly redefines itself whenever it is re-contextualized and reread. What happens, for example, when the photograph taken by Susan Meiselas of a Nicaraguan rebel as he is about to throw a Molotov cocktail during the Sandinista uprising against Somoza’s rule in 1978-79 is later appropriated and re-circulated by different artists and political groups—in murals, posters, and even matchbox covers commemorating the first anniversary of the Sandinista revolution—for sometimes opposing agenda? What makes the responses to the circulation of “Molotov Man” (as he came to be known) possible—from Meiselas’ initial acceptance of some of the image’s uses to her eventual filing of a cease and desist order on the basis of her copyright of the image and of her wish for the image not to be de-contextualized, to the increased reproduction and distribution of the image across the internet in response to her filing? What happens when Meiselas herself
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returns to Nicaragua twenty-five years after taking the photograph and, in a kind of repatriation of the image, reinstalls the photograph as a mural-sized image in the same place in which it was taken? What kinds of questions are raised here about the way in which we perceive the relation between the past and the present, about how the future views the past, and about a photograph’s relation to the context in which it was produced? What is it about a photograph’s capacity to be reproduced, in other words, which enables it to be distributed and exhibited across the globe and how is its significance altered or preserved in this movement? If, on the one hand, it is the photograph’s universally (yet variably) perceived “self-evidentiality” that contributes to its potency as a language of suasion across national and linguistic barriers—this is part of the reason that Meiselas’ photographs of the Nicaraguan Revolution were so powerful as they made their way around the globe—its portability (its capacity to be reproduced and distributed in relatively affordable ways) also means that it easily can appear in contexts very different than the one in which it was first taken. This is why, Walter Benjamin explains in his 1931 “A Small History of Photography,” in the long run, it is the caption of a photograph that becomes its most important feature. This also is why it is in photography—rather than in painting or other modes of representation—that the most fundamental questions in the last few decades about the limits of representation and the limits of the critique of representation have been raised.

To delineate another aspect of the itinerancy of photography, we might consider a second question: what happens when the Argentine photographer Marcelo Brodsky goes to Spain in the early 80s to study photography with the Catalonian photographer Manel Esclusa? In what way does their respective photographic practice change because of this encounter? Can the photographs that either one produces after this encounter continue to belong to a specific national perspective or tradition or does the very fact of the encounter influence or alter the way in which each of them views the world—or views a particular detail or set of details of the world? Does such influence subsequently prevent their practice from being identified solely with this or that particular national photographic practice or history? Does Brodsky’s photographic practice, in other words, become less Argentine because it is partially formed through a “Catalonian” lens, and what happens when such influences involve more than one other country (this question is relevant to any photographer who has a sense of the history of photography, since that sense inevitably will inform the pictures that he or she takes)? How does photographic influence affect the way in which we understand a photograph’s provenance? How can we begin to describe the life and afterlife of photographs as they get circulated and inserted into different contexts? What do these questions about influence suggest about a practice of citationality within photography that has its counterpart in textual practices and how do visual and linguistic languages relate to, or differ from, one another?

We have evoked the examples of Meiselas, Brodsky, and Esclusa simply to suggest the range of questions with which this project will concern itself. Within this set of questions, we will be particularly interested in three aspects of what we are calling “the itinerant languages of photography”: i) the circulation and exchange of images beyond cultural, social, ethnic, and national borders; ii) the dialogue between photography and other media such as literature, cinema, theater, and art in an international context; and iii) the
relationship between photography and the archive in relation to memory, history, justice, and photographic poetics (in regard to this latter issue, the mobilization of images drawn from the visual aesthetics and archive of the Holocaust in discussions of human rights in Latin America is just one more example of the re-appropriation and re-contextualization of images in which we are interested). We would like to suggest the contours of the issues that each of these three rubrics raise for us:

i) From its beginnings, photography has been associated with the movement and circulation of images. Unlike its predecessor, the camera obscura, the photograph separates the viewer in time and space from the objects or subjects that generated the image. As a secondary image, the photograph has the capacity to bring to a multitude of potential viewers the trace of a past and perhaps lost event. Photography’s historical association with travel is equally relevant to its itinerant condition. Not only was the invention of photography a leap in the evolution of types of image-making long associated with traveling, but also its mode of production facilitated the fast flow and mass consumption of images by lowering their price and multiplying their number exponentially. If the proliferation and traffic of representations achieved a spectacular global magnitude under capitalism, photography’s contribution to the elaboration of this image-economy was crucial. Nineteenth-century photographs functioned as a type of currency that unified all subjects within a single global network of valuation and desire. For our project, we would like to invite our international network of scholars and students to think about different configurations of the moving dynamics of photography in relation to their particular “national” archives. We are interested in how these archives are produced, affected, and transformed by the circulation, appropriation, and reinterpretation of images by different political and cultural agents, including, among other forms of agency, local and foreign photographers, artists, and writers. The unforeseeable transformations of Meiselas’ “Molotov man,” mentioned above, or the contradictory uses of Alberto Korda’s famous photograph of Che Guevara, “Guerrillero heroico,” are good examples of the malleability of the itinerant photography image.

We also are interested in the impact of traveling photographers who, with different aesthetic and political agendas, have helped define the visual iconography of whole regions, continents, societies, and cultures, and whose pictures continue to intervene in international debates on human rights, development, and ecology (the high visibility and wide circulation of Brazilian photographer Sebastiao Salgado’s work on displaced peoples and exploited workers from all over the globe immediately comes to mind here). Finally, we also wish to think about images that were produced in order to be circulated, beginning with the invention of postcards in the context of national and international tourism and the economic and symbolic transactions associated with it and continuing all the way to the radical transformations in image production and exchange that have emerged in the aftermath of new electronic and technological developments such as the FAX, the internet, facebook, cell phones, and so forth.

ii) Since 1839, when the invention of the daguerreotype was made public, photography established itself in dialogue, and in opposition, with other media, borrowing, adapting, and incorporating traits of these media, but also questioning the logics of representation
put forward by them. At the same time that it struggled to distinguish itself from painting, for example, it continued to share many of its compositional rules and generic conventions. Confronted with the ubiquity of photographs, nineteenth-century modern writers were both fascinated and disturbed by their realism and democratic appeal, devoting many pages to their interpretation and valuation. The construction of the modern writer as a public persona owes much of its success to the adoption of photography as a means of self-representation. From Baudelaire to Beckett and Borges, and from Breton to Bolaño, the photographic portrait has helped define the theatricality of writing as a public practice. Born from photography, cinema separated itself from it by establishing a different relationship to narrative, perception, and the experience of time, even while it remained anchored on the theoretical underpinnings of the photographic image, between the stillness of the isolated image and its continuous dissolution into others.

Taking as a starting point the contemporary debates on inter-media, or the post-medium era—debates that seek to describe the crossing the borders between traditional media and contemporary media—our project opens the question of the itinerant languages of photography as it approaches, engages, and intermingles with literature, cinema, theater, art, architecture, and hypermedia, paying particular attention to the developments and technological changes that have taken place in the last fifty years. It is our contention that, when different types of images and languages are correlated and merged with each other on the borders of photography, the interrelationships of the distinct elements cause a shift in the nature of the image itself. Among many other possible approaches, we will encourage thinking about the ways in which literature, as in the case of the work of Spanish writer Javier Marías or the Mexican media artist and writer Mario Bellatín, frames, resists, or adapts photography through language and the written word, and how through captions, quotations, and para-texts, photography keeps emulating or interrogating writing and the literary world in the work of photographers and artists such as the Argentine Marcelo Brodsky, the Mexican Pablo Monasterio Ortiz, the Brazilian Cassios Vasconcellos, or the Catalanian Manel Esclusa. We also are interested in films that incorporate photographs as triggering signs through which they critically discuss the nature of time, memory, and identity. Brazilian filmmaker Joao Moreiras Salles’ critically acclaimed documentary Santiago (2008) and Spanish filmmaker José Luis Guerin’s film Photos in the City of Silvia (2007) are exemplary of the radical possibilities of such a collaboration. Finally, we are particularly interested in analyses and case studies dealing with how the emergence and spread of new technological forms of communication have rearticulated and transformed the production, circulation, and de-codification of photographic images at large.

iii) Finally, the project also is interested in the archival uses of photography, and in the photographic uses of the archive as a contradictory system that holds and stores information in place, even as it is always in the process of re-arranging itself (as more materials are added, or as they are reorganized or reconfigured). As Marcel Duchamp so wonderfully put it in his work “La boîte-en-valise,” the portable authorial museum that he carried in a suitcase, the content of the archive is always on the move. In this way, the archive always is caught in a kind of double bind: it is simultaneously defined as an inert, rational repertoire of historical artifacts and as an active, delirious machine, a Borgesian
labyrinth.

From its inception, the photograph has been understood to be an archival record. The camera’s capacity to link its act of mechanical inscription to the allegedly indisputable fact of its subject’s existence constitutes the basis of our understanding of photography as a mode of representation. The capacity for accurate description and the ability to establish distinct relations of time and space have come to define the terms of archival production. Because the camera is literally an archival machine, every photograph is *a priori* an archival object. Since Kodak enabled commercial processing, photography has not only generated endless streams of realistic reproductions, but it also has encouraged a feverish pace of pictorial generation and archival accumulation, no less ambitious than the massive archival structures put together by the state and its disciplinary apparatuses. The role of the photographic archive as an aspect of public memory has retained its power over a wide range of artists and intellectuals, who continue to deploy archival images of media as documentary responses to historical events, and especially traumatic ones. In this context, we would like to encourage the network’s participants to explore and study the archival uses of photography as a means of producing a legal, historical, or anthropological record, and the photographic uses of the archive as a principle of organization, paying particular attention to those articulations that stress the archive’s unstable economy of production, exchange, and transmission of images. Among these, we especially are interested in the conspicuous use of archival photographic materials among artists, photographers, writers, and activists preoccupied with issues of human rights violations, ethnic genocide, or social injustice, for whom the photographic record represents both the physical trace of a forced absence, the building stone of a collective monument, the sign of mnemonic ambivalence, and the fragility of memory. Argentine photographer Marcelo Brodsky’s art of memory represents perhaps one of the most brilliant articulations of this epistemic and political tension and we will consider the way in which, as a Jewish activist, he also has drawn from the discourses and archival images of the Holocaust to memorialize the disappeared in Argentina. Of particular interest here might be his collaborations with the German memorial artist, Horst Hoheisel, who, in turn, also has worked on memory projects in Chile, Brazil, and Argentina. Even though Hoheisel has warned that it is not possible to “instrumentalize the formula for every mass-murder in the world,” it will be important to measure the role and place of photography in these projects, and the itinerancy that permits it to draw and erase relations between traumatic historical events in Latin America and elsewhere. The use of photography in controversial state-sponsored projects of collective and/or historical memory in Argentina, Chile, Perú, and Spain, among others, are good examples of the same trend, even if in these instances the photograph is sometimes put to different use. Finally, we also will be interested in scholarly projects involving massive photographic archives whose study has triggered the re-reading of foundational historical events such as the Mexican revolution (a revolution that mostly was photographed by American photographers). In each instance, what will be of utmost importance is to investigate the shifting role of photography within these mnemonic and archival projects.
As we have suggested, because such collaborations, exchanges, and re-contextualizations have occurred since the beginnings of photography, the project would explore these itineraries in early photography, but also would focus on movements within the last fifty years, and especially since the advent of such technological developments as the xerox, the fax, and the internet. In what way have such developments accelerated and complicated these exchanges? Does the crossing of borders that we have come to associate with globalization have its analogue in the movement and translation of photographs from one context to another? These questions are perhaps more important than ever given the centrality of images within our everyday life and, if these transformations point to a change in how we understand photography’s place within contemporary culture—its privilege or lack of privilege in relation to other, newer image technologies—we would argue that they already belong to what makes photography what it is.

The network of scholars and archives that will be formed by this project can only enhance Princeton’s remarkable archival and scholarly resources for the study of photography, including the library’s impressive collection of catalogues and theoretical works, and the outstanding collection of photography housed at the Princeton Art Museum. It also will take advantage of the increasing number of faculty, graduate students, and artists in residence with a strong interest in photography in particular, and media and modernity in general. But what it will add, as an important instance of the itinerant character of photography, is its particular focus on Latin American and Hispanic archives.

Although we are aware that we are leaving aside many other potential rewarding intellectual and scholarly exchanges, we have chosen as our partners research institutions located in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Spain. There are several reasons that explain our choice. First, in the context of what we see as the impressive self-assertion of “World Photography,” which is already questioning and expanding —by, among other things, revealing that there is not one Archive, but indeed innumerable archives, all of which deserve to be studied in situ and through mutual conversation—Latin America has been at the forefront of the development of new aesthetic paradigms in modern and contemporary photography; the creation of international centers of research for media studies such as the Centro de Historia Gráfica in Puebla, Mexico and the Centro de la Imagen in Mexico City; the formation of outstanding national photographic collections such as those housed at the Instituto Moreira Salles in Rio, Brazil, which holds more than 550,000 photographs by Brazilian and foreign photographers, the Fototeca Nacional in Pachuca, Mexico, which holds more than 800,000 images, and the Archivo General de la Nación, which holds over a million images; and the organization of international festivals and biennales such as the Festival de la Luz in Argentina, with the participation of photographers from all over the world. Second, many of the research centers and photographers in Latin America already are engaged in international collaborative projects with institutions, artists, and scholars from other countries and continents, as is the case with the Instituto Moreira Salles. Third, a research project in collaboration with these research centers will give Princeton’s faculty and graduate students access to large and extraordinarily rich archives that still remain unexplored and understudied (that this is a field of growing interest can be seen in the fact that the Museum of Latin American Art will present the very first survey exhibition of Latin American photography and photo-based art in the Los Angeles area this coming
year). Finally, since one of our main objectives is to look at the exchanges between different photographic traditions in an international context, we thought that it was better to include international archives and networks with which we already were more familiar. Professor Cadava, who is well-known for his work on photography, recently has participated in the collaborative photographic project *Visual Correspondences* with photographers from Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Spain, and he is currently working on another long essay on the Catalonian photographer Esclusa’s work with clouds (themselves an aleatory figure for the movement across borders). In the case of Professor Nouzeilles, she has been working on the political uses and reappropriations of written and visual images since her doctoral project on medical and literary articulations of the pathological female and racial body in Argentina, and later in her book on the role of landscape and photography in the modern invention of alternative geographies. She is currently involved in a project on documentary visuality with scholars from the Universidade Federal de Rio de Janeiro and the DiTella University.

A grant from the Princeton Global Collaborative Research Fund will help support a three-year series of international workshops and conferences that will bring together scholars mainly from but not restricted to Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Spain, and the United States. Since the world of photography and photographic practice will be a critical component of our project, we also plan to co-curate, along with Joel Smith, the Curator of Photography at the Princeton Art Museum, an exhibition in the final year of the project. The exhibition itself would be an enactment of the photograph’s itinerant capacities, since it would bring together images from various collections across Latin America and Spain—and thereby be another instance of the de-contextualization that takes place in any photograph (indeed, one of the things that every photograph does is to remove a person, object, event, or landscape from a larger context, which is why it is so critical to develop methodologies for historicizing images). Moreover, in resituating the images within the parameters and insights of the project, it would revise and expand their significance in relation to one another and in relation to the project itself. The exhibition would permit, in ways that essays or books could not, a kind of analytic performance of everything the earlier discussions will have produced. It would take advantage of our partnership with, among others, the Instituto Moreira Salles and the Centro de Historia Gráfica. Among the many very tangible results that we hope to produce through this multi-leveled project, we also would work together with Joel Smith, the Art Museum’s Curator of Photography, to create a catalogue for the exhibition. The catalogue itself would seek to archive not only the exhibition, but also the intersections and crossings that will have been enacted and produced by the act of bringing these various materials together. We also plan to put together a volume of essays that would draw from the very best essays produced by the participants in the project in relation to our proposed topics. We believe that this collection would be the first of its kind and we are excited to see what the project will produce.

In addition, the yearly workshops would bring together scholars from Latin America, Spain, and the United States, and photographers—from Susan Meiselas to Joan Fontcuberta, from the photographers involved in the *Visual Correspondences* project to photographers such as Eduardo Gil from Argentina and Graciela Iturbide from Mexico—to
introduce the Princeton academic community and scholars and students from nearby universities to the Latin American and Hispanic photographic archives. Finally, in order to make our project more inclusive and more pedagogical, we will organize yearlong interdisciplinary working groups on the itinerant languages of photography here on campus, with the participation of faculty and graduate students from different programs and departments. These groups will meet once a month throughout the year for discussions organized around shared readings and issues.

We have gathered letters of interest and commitment from the different institutions involved in the project, which we are including in the appendix to this proposal. In addition to the enthusiasm expressed in these letters, it is clear that, in regard to the meetings that will take place in Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and Spain, our partners will be willing to help raise monies to support them, although we do not yet have firm figures. We also have received a grant of up to $15,000 from PIIRS to support an exploratory seminar during the 2010-2011 academic year and we plan on using this grant to help support one of the project’s first workshops next year. What follows, then, is the list of the scholars we expect to participate in the project, a year-by-year budget of events and costs, and an appendix that includes the letters from our partner institutions expressing their commitment to the project. We also have included a letter of interest from James Steward, the Director of the Princeton Art Museum.

We thank you for your kind consideration of this proposal and we hope that, like us, you will see the benefit of such a project, not only for the ongoing effort to internationalize our research and teaching but also for the establishment of an international network of scholars that, together with faculty and students at Princeton, will be devoted to continuing the research and investigations that are initiated by the project.

I.

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