



Uncertain Images: Museums and the Work of Photographs

Elizabeth Edwards, Sigrid Lien

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Almost all museums hold photographs in their collections, and museum professionals and their audiences engage with photographs in a myriad of ways. Yet despite some three decades of critical museology and photographic theory, and an extensive debate on the politics of representation, outside art museums, almost no critical attention has been given specifically to the roles, purposes and lives of these photographs within museums. This book brings into focus the ubiquitous yet entirely unconsidered work that photographs are put to in museums. The authors' argument is that there is an economy of photographs in museums which is integral to the processes of the museum, and integral to the understanding of museums. The international contributors, drawn from curators and academics, reflect a range of visual and museological expertise. After an introduction setting out the range of questions and problems, the first part addresses broad curatorial strategies and ways of thinking about photographs in museums. Shifting the emphasis from curatorial practices and anxieties to the space of the gallery, this is followed by a series of case studies of exhibitionary practices and the museum strategies that support them. The third section focuses on the role of photographs in the museum articulation of "difficult histories". A final section addresses photograph collections in a digital environment. New technologies and new media have transformed the management, address and purposing in photographs in museums, from cataloguing practices to streaming on social media. These growing practices challenge both traditional hierarchies of knowledge in museums and the location of authority about photographs. The volume emerges from PhotoCLEC, a HERA funded project on museums and the photographic legacy of the colonial past in a postcolonial and multicultural Europe.

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