

***Uncertain Images: Museums and the Work of Photographs.* Elizabeth Edwards and Sigrid Lien, eds. Surrey: Ashgate, 2014. Pp. 266.\***

Reviewed by Corinne A. Kratz

Animated by work in the PhotoCLEC comparative project, *Photographs, Colonial Legacy, and Museums in Contemporary European Culture* (<http://photoclec.dmu.ac.uk/>), this book examines the diverse roles and histories of photographs in museums through case studies mostly from European cultural museums.<sup>1</sup> You might think it joins other volumes on the topic, but in fact it breaks new ground. As the editors note in their introduction, beyond a handful of exceptions, the multifarious roles and changing lives of photographs in museums have received little sustained critical examination. Their presence and use is often taken for granted and naturalized within daily processes of collection management, documentation, curation, display, marketing, and digital sharing, rather than photographs being taken as objects themselves with particular histories, potentials, constraints, and material characteristics. Many photographs used in museums are not catalogued as part of the collection, for instance, but seen simply as tools. To reorient attention to photography's full range of work in museums, Edwards and Lien propose seeing it as "a crucial museum ecosystem" (4). The notion of a visual ecosystem highlights connections, interactions, and synergies between photography and a range of museum features, functions, and practices as well as their shifts and adjustments over time. That concept's usefulness is borne out in the book's chapters as the museum's visual ecosystem becomes a thread lending coherence across cases. In other contexts, the photographic ecosystem approach could be usefully combined with analyses of visual economies.

After the introduction, the book divides 13 papers into six sections. In "The Affective Photograph," two papers focus on the ambivalence, anxieties, and complex emotional registers involved in working with colonial photographs in museums (Modest) and how photographs of civil conflict that resonate with visitors' personal histories in Northern Ireland are used and experienced in the Ulster Museum's exhibitions (Reming Jr.). Three sections, each with two papers, follow that are variations on the rubric "Curatorial Strategies." The first of these sections traces changing uses of photographs in ethnographic displays in the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo (Nielssen) and offers a fascinating history of photographic collections and disposals in the National Museums Scotland as a way to unpack museum history, knowledge systems, and assumptions about photographs (Knowles). In the next section, Lien develops a sensitive analysis of particular photographs displayed as art within a larger visual and political ecosystem in the Sámi Museum, while Sørensen examines the "haunted topographies" that represent key moments of World War II in an exhibit in Berlin's Neues Museum. The final "Curatorial Strategies" section emphasizes "Contested Stories." Pattynome's paper considers the photographic shaping of memories and histories of Dutch colonialism in the main exhibit of the community-based Centre of Indies Remembrance, while Aarekol considers photographic representations of polar exploration and encounters with Inuit across Norwegian museums.

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The penultimate section, “Working in the Real World,” contains a trio of papers. Two case studies from the United States offer reflections on the authors’ own curatorial projects. Odo examines conflicting assumptions around early Japanese photographs that emerged as he curated an exhibition at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard and shows how art-artifact distinctions permeated collection categories as well as display styles. For his part, Jacknis considers 15 years of curating visual anthropology exhibits in a dedicated photographic gallery at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology. Military history photographs are the focus for van Bruggen, offering an overview of collection history, uses, and the practicalities of display at the Dutch National Army Museum and plans for the new National Military Museum. The final section addresses “Digital Environments and Photograph Collections” with a review of the ways digital tools and approaches have influenced management and use of photographic collections in Swedish settings (Hartig) and a sharply observed account of digital photographic dissemination projects at the Pitt Rivers Museum in the past ten years (Morton).

Better proofreading should have eliminated the distraction of many sentences with typos, extra words, missing words, and errors in subject-verb number agreement, but Edwards and Lien have compiled a volume that makes significant contributions to museum studies, visual studies, anthropology, and history. By bringing together these thorough, thoughtful case studies and focusing attention on the pervasive presence and use of photography in museum ecosystems, *Uncertain Images* offers new insight on modes of museum knowledge production and the histories of practices related to collection and display.

## **Notes**

1. Roughly half the contributors were involved in the project as leaders, researchers, and/or event participants.

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