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UCLA Historical Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3d3298xh>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 29(1)

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Publication Date

2018

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The Joy of the Find: A Review of *Form and Landscape*

Joshua McGuffie

Can digital humanities open up the joy of the archive to anyone with access to the internet? In the archive, scholars become searchers longing to discover just the right photograph, that one letter where some historical actor bears her soul, that long-lost report tying together seemingly unrelated clues. The joy of the find enlivens the search. Of course, this find, this encounter, dwells in location. The researcher goes to a collection, housed in a discrete building, curated by a particular staff, organized in boxes and folders. The find is tactile. The found object often is made of paper. Sometimes glossy photographic paper, other times crumbly onion-skin paper. Often musty. Eye, nose, and hand all take part in the find. The joy of the find only sinks in once the senses engage with the object. The joy of the tactile encounter encourages serious scholarship. Indeed, it drives scholars to search through poorly ventilated basements all over the world. This joy also lightens the burdens of past's worst excesses. The possibility of new knowledge, perspective, and perhaps even new justice softens the sorrows of history's darkest corners. The joy of the archive, the possibility that the past may have a good and meaningful life now, makes history a discipline worth doing, worth sharing. Can anybody who peers into her computer screen to encounter digital humanities experience this joy?

Form and Landscape, a project directed by William Deverell and Greg Hise, makes a good case that it can be so.¹ The 70,000 plus images of the photographic collection of Southern California Edison, the region's major electric utility, provide *Form and Landscape's* content. Housed at the Huntington Library, the collection documents nearly 100 years of Southern California's urban development. Deverell and Hise first explored these photos as part of larger project

funded by another of Los Angeles's premier cultural institutions, The Getty. *Pacific Standard Time Presents: Modern Architecture in L.A.* comprised a number of live exhibitions and programs dedicated to Los Angeles's "lasting impact on modern architecture."² *Form and Landscape* thus began its life as a hybrid. Deverell and Hise invited curators to compile thematic digital exhibitions of Edison photographs, which were posted online with English and Spanish text. These they shared over the course of three public lectures in Pasadena and Los Angeles in 2013. Most recently, the project has taken shape as a book.³

What about *Form and Landscape's* 18 pictorial exhibitions engenders the joy of the archive? Surely the striking photographs and the clean presentation of the website intrigue the senses. A click on the "Exhibitions" link brings the searcher to a grid of cover photographs, all but one of which are crisply black and white. The title of each exhibition overlays its image in a bold, sans serif text. Light and darkness play across the page. Some cover photos foreground the electric light of Southern California Edison. The cover photo for "Fabrication" shows a nighttime shot of the El Segundo Steam Station adorned in Christmas lights in 1968. A woman, shrouded in darkness, peering at the electric light bulb she holds introduces the "Archive" exhibition. Other cover photos rely on natural light. "Landscape" and "Scale" depict sunny southern California days. Desert sagebrush and manicured park lawns invite the searcher to revel in all the expectations bursting out of Los Angeles's warm climate. A third light beams out of the pictures, not natural, but not electric either. This is the oppressive light of 1950s whiteness, of tidy homes, modern appliances, and crushing capitalist conformity. The cover photos for "Consumption" and "Domesticity" exude this. Still other cover photos rely on darkness. "Undocumented," in particular, uses the absence of light to draw the viewer in. Taken together, the aesthetics of the cover photos invite and excite. 18 new, or rather old, worlds wait to be found.

A mouse-click transports the searcher inside the chosen exhibition. She encounters a thumbnail gallery of 20 to 40 images selected by the curator. Scrolling down, text and large-scale copies of the photographs greet her. Here she encounters the joy of the archive through the originality of the curator. Hise and Deverell selected the curators based on their scholarly interests and gave them free creative reign. Some curators chose a theme and sought images in the collection. Others waded through the photographs and let them suggest a topic. Creativity abounds. In "Undocumented," Hillary Jenks largely considers race. But a 1920 photograph of white men, presumably Edison employees, taking a group picture all dressed in drag allows her to consider how queer sexualities have an undocumented history in Los Angeles. Deverell develops "Collisions" as a theme. He shows a literal wreck in a series of photographs of a car run off the road into the boulder-strewn riverbed of the Santa Ana River. More than just a car crash, these photos show the built environment colliding with the environment of the mountains and the arroyo. Chrome crashes into granite. In these pictures, the joy of the find resides in the layers of meaning captured in each image.

Having worked through a selected exhibition, the searcher encounters again the grid of cover photos at the bottom of the web page. This invites further searching and implies that exhibitions can be put in conversation with each other in a multitude of combinations. Perhaps “Technology” and “Fabrication” belong next to each other. Or maybe “Labor” and “Recreation.” The viewer chooses what he will find next. Here the searcher experiences the joy of the archive in light of his or her own freedom. The paper archive encourages linearity, one box or one folder after another. The archive as curated in *Form and Landscape* allows connections across time and space that might not have otherwise presented themselves. These connections exist between and within exhibitions. In “Noir,” that quintessentially L.A. theme, D.J. Waldie chooses a photo of a plush, bright, powder room in private home in 1935 as well as a photograph of three sterile hospital beds from 1959. Though taken by different Edison photographers, both imply intimacy: sleeping, dressing, grooming. Both also capture the feeling that a young Jack Nicholson wearing a fedora could walk in to them at any moment. The images let the mind run wild with possibility.

Form and Landscape allows the viewer to experience the joy of the archive in the raw, if digitized, encounter with the photograph. Still, the project relies on text to expose the viewer to critical interpretation. Hise and Deverell explain that their critical engagement began with considering Edison as a corporate actor. “What did Edison promote as its achievements? ... [H]ow did Edison tell the Edison story photographically?”⁴ Each exhibition offers answers to these questions. Taken together, they betray the contemporary concerns of historians serious about the many meanings of any given archive or archival object. The project considers histories of race, gender, labor, technology, the environment, transportation, and the built environment, among others. This multiplicity of concerns allows the Edison photographs in *Form and Landscape* to speak with so many more voices than they perhaps were meant to. Greg Hise reminds the searcher that this archive was, in its current form, unintended.⁵ In the texts of the curators, this lack of intention becomes critically interesting.

So, can digital humanities open up the joy of the archive to anyone with access to the internet? Yes. At its best, digital humanities mediates this joy to publics who may never descend the staircase to a physical archive. Joy in searching, joy in finding, joy in learning, joy in interpreting. Digitization does sanitize the find. Gone are the mustiness and the texture of the paper. But digitization democratizes. *Form and Landscape* brings photos that once belonged to a private utility into the public domain. In the project’s enduring digital incarnation, its curators continue to initiate critical conversation with anybody who chooses to gaze upon on the photographs or read the text. Unbound by time or place, the screen brings lost pasts to life. In this dwells the promise of digital humanities, of projects like *Form and Landscape*, to make the joy of the archive universally accessible.

NOTES

¹ “Form and Landscape,” <http://pstp-edison.com/>.

² “Pacific Standard Time Presents: Modern Architecture in L.A.,” <http://pacificstandardtimepresents.org/>.

³ For the book, visit: <https://dornsife.usc.edu/icw/western-histories/>.

⁴ “Form and Landscape, About the Project,” <http://pstp-edison.com/about.html>.

⁵ “Form and Landscape, Scale,” <http://pstp-edison.com/hise.html>.