

Ross Sawyers: Welcome to the third and final installment of the lectures and photography series for the spring semester. My name is Ross Sawyers and I'm the Chair of the Photography Department at Columbia College Chicago. The lectures and photography series is a collaboration between the Museum of Contemporary Photography and the Photography Department at Columbia College Chicago. I want to take a brief moment to thank the museum- particularly Kristin Taylor; Curator of Academic Programs and Collections, Stephanie Conaway; Director of Operations, Karen Irvine; Chief Curator and Deputy Director, and Natasha Egan; Executive Director. Since this pandemic began the team at the museum have done an amazing job of creating brilliant online programming and facilitating events such as this one tonight. I speak for all of the faculty and staff and students of the photography department at Columbia College, when I say we could not ask for a better collaborator and resource than the MoCP. Please visit their website at mocp.org to find out more about their programming.

Ross Sawyers: I also want to thank Kelli Connell; the Photography Department Graduate Program Director for arranging tonight's lecture and subsequent graduate student reviews later in the week. This would not have been possible without you.

Ross Sawyers: Just a quick note for those of you watching this lecture. If you have questions for our speaker please write them in the QNA section of zoom. And finally, please join me in welcoming tonight's speaker, a self-described erstwhile photographer, admirer of old authentic and curious things. And of course, Curator of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, Sarah Meister.

Sarah Meister: Hi, Ross. Thanks so much. I'm really thrilled to be here. So, should we just dive right in? Okay, now you're already muted. So, I guess...

Ross Sawyers: Absolutely, take it away.

Sarah Meister: We're gonna dive right in. No one at MoMA trusts me to do this, but I appreciate your all confidence. I'm going to share my screen and then I'm going to go here... I'm going to share... and then I'm going to present. Okay. Well, that wasn't so bad. So good evening, thank you all for making the effort to join us during these incredibly challenging times.

Sarah Meister: Personally, I'm surprised by the way in which these virtual gatherings have helped to sort of orient and ground me.

Sarah Meister: I had a conversation with Sally Mann a few weeks ago as part of the "Dorothea Lange: Words and Pictures," virtual view and we've been

doing weekly gatherings with my "Seeing Through Photographs," community of learners and each one of them I find incredibly inspiring and somehow helps me get through the day. So, I hope the same is true for many of you, um, I also want to thank Dawoud Bey, who was the one who proposed me for to speak at the series. I'm really touched and honored. So, thank you Dawoud Bey.

Sarah Meister: Thank you to Natasha and Karen who have been wonderful colleagues for many, many years. And tonight, to Ross and to Kristin Taylor for their just visible and invisible help in many ways. So, um, thanks for having me. So, I am going to be speaking about a subject I should know pretty well: photography at MoMA.

Sarah Meister: I've been working at the museum for more than 20 years. I've been a curator since 2009 and my plan is to sketch a little bit of the history of the medium at the museum and then to speak about a few projects that I've been working on recently. And then to conclude with plenty of time for your questions at the end, as Ross mentioned. This should give you a good sense of what it's like to be- and to have been- a curator at MoMA.

Sarah Meister: I originally prepared this lecture for when I spoke in Buenos Aires last summer, and I've sort of adapted it for our current moment. Um, it's just amazing to think how much has changed at the museum since then. Certainly, with the reopening in October, but especially in the world around us in the last two months. So, but what's interesting is that diving into the history never really seems to get old, so we are temporarily closed again as we were last July, when I spoke, and while I look forward to the day when we can invite you all to join us on 53rd street for tonight we will settle for digital images and virtual experiences.

Sarah Meister: I was going to begin. Oh, sorry.

Sarah Meister: I was beginning with this image that John Schakowsky made in Chicago in 1954, where I was supposed to have been tonight. And I really, I thank the whole team at the Museum of Contemporary Photography and at Columbia College Chicago for their willingness to figure out a way to adapt this into a virtual format.

Sarah Meister: John Schakowsky made this just a few years before he moved to New York to become the director of the Department of Photography at MoMA, and he gave up photography- for making his own photographs- for more than three decades, actually.

Sarah Meister: So here is the staff of the Museum of Modern Art in 1937.

Sarah Meister: I mean yes in 1937. In 1929, so eight years before this. When

the museum had been founded, its founding director Alfred Bar had had a plan to quote "expand beyond the narrow limits of painting and sculpture."

Sarah Meister: This enthusiasm was not exactly matched by the founders and trustees of the museum. So, he was very clever, and he hired Bars, is the man's name. There, second from the right with the glasses. And when he had the opportunity to hire a librarian, he hired the young man on the far right named Beaumont Newhall; a young scholar who he knew had an interest in photography.

Sarah Meister: So, this was made as it says here, just before the museum moved to temporary headquarters in Rockefeller Center, only to reopen on 53rd street in 1939. In the building that you still walk into today.

Sarah Meister: So as a librarian Newhall was able to collect a few photographs, but he is better known today for his landmark exhibition "Photography 1839 to 1937," which is one of the earliest attempts to sketch a history of the medium that was then not quite 100 years old.

Sarah Meister: This is the entrance to the exhibition which declared just how much the medium had changed since its inception. From the bulky camera obscura to the handheld Leica and at the same time if you walked just a few steps further forward... You saw this. This installation view acknowledges the mediums capacity to deceive.

Sarah Meister: It included over 800 works and its catalog would be the basis for a book called "The History of Photography," which was so influential that its fifth edition was still used as the textbook when I studied photography as an undergraduate.

Sarah Meister: The exhibition was exceptional for many reasons, but the presence of photography at MoMA was not one of them. Photography had played a small but important role in two major exhibitions that Bar had organized the previous year, "Cubism and Abstract Art" here.

Sarah Meister: And in "Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism" where a photogram by Man Ray was actually on the cover of the original exhibition catalog.

Sarah Meister: As most of you are aware, in October 2019 we re-opened after a major expansion- another one- and a reimagining of how we were going to use the collection in our displays, including integrating media. So, I hope some of you asked me more about that later. But I share this is a reminder that many of these strategies are anchored in the earliest years of the museum's history.

Sarah Meister: So... Walker Evan's, "American photographs," was heralded as the first one-person photography show at the Museum of Modern Art, but- and according to the 1938 press release it also says it there. But that's not exactly true.

Sarah Meister: He had another one-person exhibition of American vernacular architecture in 1933 that helped develop his eye as well as his pictorial vocabulary. His attention to these under song elements of American culture, architectural and others would find their purest form in American photographs; but remember all of this would happen before the Department of Photography was officially established. Which wouldn't happen until late 1940 when Beaumont Newhall left his position as librarian and became the first Curator of Photography.

Sarah Meister: To mark the occasion Newhall, assisted by Ansel Adams, organized "Sixty Photographs: A Survey of Camera Esthetics"

Sarah Meister: It was the inaugural exhibition of the Department of Photography. It opened on the last day of 1940 and it signaled a new focus on the singular aesthetic characteristics associated with the medium.

Sarah Meister: With very few exceptions, Newhall was drawing from the museum's fledgling collection using mostly vintage prints and we shall see how all of this changed with each person who was subsequently in charge of the Department.

Sarah Meister: The story of MoMA's installation photographs is almost I would say a visual table of contents of sort for my talk.

Sarah Meister: And if you follow me on Instagram. You saw this today so apologies for the repetition, but I adore this view, in part because they captured it in two ways. Once with the two benches there and then look closely, again, with one of the benches removed and replaced with a plant.

Sarah Meister: It should be, it would be a wonderful story to tell the history of installation views.

Sarah Meister: Even before he was named curator, Newhall was actively pursuing very important photographs for the museum collection.

Sarah Meister: And one of the first major acquisitions was a gift of more than 100 photographs by Man Ray from the collector James Thrall Soby. These two were both on view in Newhall's inaugural exhibition.

Sarah Meister: He understood that his responsibility was not simply to organize exhibitions; but also to build and to care for a collection of photographs. The presence of which is what distinguishes MoMA and other museums from Art spaces or Kunsthalle.

Sarah Meister: These days it is frighteningly fashionable to apply the word curator to anyone who happens to be making a selection of anything.

Sarah Meister: So, we find self-appointed curators selecting vendors for a food court or curating their closets or their playlists.

Sarah Meister: But I'll just use this as an opportunity to remind everyone that the root of the word curator is "curare" which- pretentiously I'll admit- in Latin means "to care for" (Peter Galossy taught me that).

Sarah Meister: And I would argue that without a collection to care for the word really loses its meaning.

Sarah Meister: But anyway... I digress. To underscore what a radical proposition it was to collect photographs at that time, I'd like to point to a small exhibition that opened in December 1941- a few days before Pearl Harbor.

Sarah Meister: The press release explained quote "The Museum's Department of Photography announces an experimental project. The sale of fine photographs at \$10. The framed prints will be exhibited at the at the museum, which will take orders for the duplicate prints."

Sarah Meister: The list of participating artists is literally a who's who of 20th century photography at the time- Berenice Abbott, Ansel Adams, Walker Evans, Helen Levitt, László Moholy-Nagy, Arnold Newman, Charles Schiller, Edward Weston, and Brett Weston. All of the proceeds were intended to go to the photographers, although the immaturity of the market meant that these were... we can say a little scarce.

Sarah Meister: There is a wonderful letter in the museum archives from Beaumont Newhall to László Moholy-Nagy, in which he reported that only one print of this iconic "From the Radio Tower, Berlin" had sold

Concluding quote, "perhaps we shall have better luck next time." But there wouldn't be a next time for Newhall.

Sarah Meister: The attacks on Pearl Harbor which precipitated the United States entry into World War II occurred while this was on view, as I

mentioned, and Newhall would leave the museum soon thereafter to serve. By the time the war ended, the museum was looking to have somebody with more popular taste lead the department moving away from Newhall's extensively elitist aesthetics.

Sarah Meister: They found this in Edward Steichen, whose astoundingly multifaceted career would lead him from the rarefied air of Alfred Stieglitz's little galleries of the photo session, to the utilitarian barracks of the US Air Force and World War I, to the glamorous studios of Conde Nast magazines and beyond.

Sarah Meister: During World War II, Steichen was a guest curator at MoMA for two wildly popular exhibitions, "The Road to victory" and "Power in the Pacific" and their success made his appointment in 1947 seemed almost inevitable.

Sarah Meister: Steichen's inaugural exhibition as director of the Department of Photography has often been overshadowed by those two wartime exhibitions and of course by "The Family of Man", which would open in 1955.

Sarah Meister: But "In and Out of Focus: A Survey of Today's Photography," is a very helpful lens through which to approach his era. The exhibition design was the work of Herbert Matter.

Sarah Meister: A dramatic departure from the restraint of Newhall's inaugural exhibition. Where all of the prints were matted and framed hanging along a single central line.

Sarah Meister: Many of the prints this exhibition, and in fact, in most of Steichen's exhibitions at MoMA, were new. Made according to the demands of the exhibition design without consulting the photographers.

Sarah Meister: And today, this disregard for the materiality or scale that a photographer would prefer is almost- was actually inconceivable.

Sarah Meister: Several of the works that were in "In and Out of Focus," including this one by Irving Penn, are now established highlights of the museum collection.

Sarah Meister: But it's worth remembering that Pen's photograph of the principal dancers for the American Ballet Theatre- which he made for Vogue magazine- was created only the previous year.

Sarah Meister: And I find this an inspiring expression of Steichen's

attentiveness to contemporary practices, as well as the very expansiveness of the medium. The porous boundaries of the many traditions that comprise the history they remain a central enlivening principle.

Sarah Meister: John Schakowsky, like Steichen, had been a photographer before he became a curator and when he assumed the role of director of the Department of Photography in 1962 he organized his first exhibition that he would call "Five Unrelated Photographers." This is a not so subtle rebuke to Steichen whose exhibitions betrayed a true affinity for thematic groupings. Most notably, of course, in "The Family of Man."

Sarah Meister: By contrast, Schakowsky pointedly remarked of this first exhibition, and I quote, "The exhibition does not include their work, it is of it. No attempt is made to link them together with a central theme or idea."

Sarah Meister: But I would like to point out a similarity with Steichen's installation practices. Note that the prints are unmatted, unframed, and rather rhythmically placed along the wall.

Sarah Meister: Schakowsky is better known for "New Documents," an exhibition that he would open four years later without a catalog and about which we published this book on its 50th anniversary.

Sarah Meister: I find it fascinating that while Newhall was actively pursuing acquisitions of historical and contemporary work for the museum, neither Steichen nor Schakowsky prioritized acquisitions with the same fervor- with one notable exception that I'll mention in a moment.

Sarah Meister: So, for instance, the museum has not one print from "The Family of Man" and Schakowsky collected only a modest number of prints by Arbus Freeland and Winogrand.

Sarah Meister: I suspect this has to do with the fundamental reproducibility of the medium, because both Steichen and Schakowsky would regularly make prints for the exhibition which is really at odds with the veneration of photographer's original prints that Newhall had encouraged.

Sarah Meister: But I think it was also likely related to the general immaturity of the market.

Sarah Meister: None of these prints were really worth anything at the time, although perhaps the museum's practices may have had something to do with that.

Sarah Meister: For Schakowsky close relationships with these photographers also might have diminished any sense of urgency, at least until Arbus's suicide in 1971.

Sarah Meister: The one major, major exception was Schakowsky's acquisition of the Abbott-Levy collection of work by Eugène Atget. Comprised of nearly 5,000 prints by this incredible French photographer. These were the contents of Atget's Paris studio at the time of his death in 1927.

Sarah Meister: This was a central priority for Schakowsky from the moment he came to the museum and it took him more than five years to make it happen.

Sarah Meister: This prescient acquisition has been the background of numerous subsequent publications and exhibitions and it is central as well to our ability to explore the crossroads of photography as an art with photography as documentation.

Sarah Meister: This is a uniquely fertile territory for photography, and this democratic utilitarian possibilities of the medium which are so exquisitely expressed in Atget's work they remain as urgent and inspiring today as ever.

Sarah Meister: Jumping forward a bit, after Schakowsky's retirement Peter Galossy had become chief curator of the Department of photography in 1991.

Sarah Meister: His inaugural exhibition which he called "More Than One Photography," argued for another aspect of the porosity of the medium.

Sarah Meister: Photography played a central role in the practices of many artists who would never consider themselves photographers.

Sarah Meister: Galossy was committed to putting these different worlds in dialogue with one another. The art world represented here by artists such as Felix Gonzalez Torres or Christian Boltanski.

Sarah Meister: And the photography world, meaning artists like Mikael Schmidt in the middle, whose work drew from specifically photographic- often more descriptive traditions. I would argue that it's a signal of Galossy's success that these distinctions no longer seen as necessary.

Sarah Meister: The market for photographs began to emerge in the 1970's. And by the 1990's there was widespread awareness that collecting photographs would be an increasingly expensive endeavor and that the opportunities for

acquiring rare or even unique prints would be increasingly scarce. We began to develop strategic acquisition priorities.

Sarah Meister: The most important of these for Galosy was the Thomas Walter collection, including this work by Edmund Kesting which addressed a surprising weakness of the museum collection- Modernist photography made between the two world wars.

Sarah Meister: As I am a keen to spend time to talk about our current moment, I will only mention that the Walter acquisition is significant, not only for its quality and its breath; but also for the way in which it promoted a major research initiative, the results of which are mainly online.

Sarah Meister: If you search for "MoMA object photo," you'll find them. But this attentiveness to photography's material history to the consideration of photographs as objects rather than images, is refreshingly widespread in our digital era and is greatly enhanced by that object photo project.

Sarah Meister: So perhaps this is as good a moment as any to mention "Seeing Through Photographs," which is- as I mentioned before- an online course that I developed in collaboration with my colleagues in education and digital media at the museum.

Sarah Meister: It's available for free on the platform Coursera and I am completely humbled by the more than 330,000 students who have enrolled in this course.

Sarah Meister: Including more than 100,000 during this pandemic, all of whom seem as keen as I am to use photographs from the museum's collection to introduce a diversity of ideas, approaches, and technologies that all inform their making. I believe we have a few "Seeing Through Photographs" learners with us tonight so... hi.

Sarah Meister: And they cumulatively represent a singular bright spot for me these days. So, my work from life home wouldn't be the same without you.

Sarah Meister: Carrying on, in 2013, in January, Quentin Bajac became the chief curator of the Department of Photography.

Sarah Meister: And although he left the museum last year to become the director of the Jeu de Paume in Paris, in the first six years he was at the museum he left an indelible mark.

Sarah Meister: His first exhibition, "A World of Its Own: Photographic

Practices in the Studio," underscored the fact that for him, MoMA's historic embrace of street photography- exemplified by the practices of Diane Arbus, Leaf Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand- was only half the story.

Sarah Meister: Quentin was also deeply committed to an active publications program, the most ambitious expression of which are these three volumes of photography at MoMA, co-edited by Quentin, Yours Truly, and our colleagues- Lucy Gallon and Roxana Marcoci- this opportunity to reflect on the way we use the collection to tell stories that comprise the very many histories of photography was so valuable, on the eve of the museum's expansion. So, when we reopened in October, one of the most significant changes was this expanded emphasis on the collection.

Sarah Meister: We now enjoy a more integrated display and one that will rotate regularly, which allows us to dramatically expand and enrich the ways we share our collection with the public.

Sarah Meister: COVID-19 will inevitably have a depressive effect on the rate of change, but we remain as committed to the principles of this as ever and determined to make it happen.

Sarah Meister: When anyone asks what it is that I do as a curator at MoMA, the basic three elements are: acquisitions, publications, and exhibitions.

Sarah Meister: As I briefly mentioned, we're very intentional with our acquisitions. We only acquire photographs- whether they be purchases or gifts- that we think will have an active life at the museum.

Sarah Meister: Even before this pandemic, we had been having sustained conversations about what it means to do less and this dramatically constrained environment will certainly have an impact on all aspects of our program- including acquisitions. We can talk more about that later if anyone wants.

Sarah Meister: But one recent publication from last year that probably wouldn't be feasible today- I'm so happy it happened- is this book about Francis Benjamin Johnston's Hampton Album.

Sarah Meister: Now Johnston, and made a group of photographs at a school for African Americans and Native Americans in Hampton Virginia in December of 1899 and January of 1900.

Sarah Meister: The photographs were widely heralded at the 1900 Paris Exposition as part of a display meant to demonstrate progress since the abolition of slavery, but soon thereafter this album was forgotten.

Sarah Meister: It was re-discovered in a bookstore in Washington DC during World War II by a man named Lincoln Kirstein who eventually gave the album- without knowing who made the photographs in it- to the museum in 1965.

Sarah Meister: Then and now we grapple with thorny questions of race and representation and bias.

Sarah Meister: Bias embedded in models of education using this treasured object from the museum collection. So, we published this both as a deluxe edition on the left and a trade edition on the right.

Sarah Meister: Both of those include all 159 photographs in the original album. I wrote one contextual essay in it and LaToya Ruby Frazier generously contributed another which really expanded the possibilities for approaching this important- complex- body of work.

Sarah Meister: Here is a selection of four prints from this album, made when the museum reopened in October. All of the curators at MoMA now dedicate a substantial amount of our time to these collection displays, whether they be medium specific rooms, such as this one.

Sarah Meister: Organized by my colleague Phil Taylor, which takes his point of departure various what he calls "Avatars of the Modern." So, he takes machines, mannequins, and monsters and it is a wonderful point of departure for thinking about photography in the 1920's.

Sarah Meister: Or some of the galleries, take a particular moment and place in time. So, this one "Paris in the 1920's," has some photographs mixed in there as well.

Sarah Meister: And then there are other galleries that challenge traditional approaches, even to a particular movement, such as Surrealism. This one is told, sort of, through the surrealist object.

Sarah Meister: We had planned to rotate out one third of these galleries every six months- and the first of these was meant to happen last month but we are now- all of these are hanging in darkened galleries and we hope that when we return these will remain on view for a short bit longer and then come October/November, we will begin a slightly slower pace of rotations of the things we were planning on putting on this spring.

Sarah Meister: Our goal isn't simply to present the various media that had been displayed in siloed spaces as part of this single integrated display of the collection.

Sarah Meister: But we are equally keen to use these integrated spaces and these frequent rotations to present *more complex, more international, more diverse, less familiar stories.*

Sarah Meister: And at the heart of this is a research initiative at the museum called C-MAP that's now 11 years old.

Sarah Meister: C-MAP stands for contemporary and modern art perspectives and it's an internal cross departmental research initiative that has as its goal of nourishing a more nuanced understanding of the history and legacies of modernism, with a focus on regions that had been historically overlooked by North American and Western European museums and scholars. So, although the goal of C-MAP is neither acquisitions, nor exhibitions, when you encourage a group of curators to dive into unfamiliar artistic practices, it would be surprising if those things didn't occur.

Sarah Meister: A handful of the photographs on view in this gallery that considers post war abstraction organized by Quentin before he left.

Sarah Meister: Are a direct outgrowth of my travels to Brazil with C-MAP. And these are a little amuse bouche of an exhibition I'm organizing for spring 2021 that considers the activities of a Sao Paulo based amateur photography club called "Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante." Stay tuned for more about that. But I'll simply dangle the possibility that works like this... or like this... Or like this... have the potential to change the way we tell the history of photography.

Sarah Meister: Several of these photographs, including the ones by Gertrudes Altschul, made their debut at MoMA in 2017 in an exhibition I organized with my colleague, Starr Figura, called "Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction."

Sarah Meister: We presented the stunning achievements of women artists made between the end of world war II and the start of the feminist movement when societal shifts made it possible for larger numbers of women to work professionally as artists.

Sarah Meister: Yet their work was often dismissed in the male dominated art world and very few support networks existed for them.

Sarah Meister: Abstraction really dominated the artistic practice as many of these artists saw a language that might transcend national boundaries. But also- and regional narratives- but also for women artists those relating to gender.

Sarah Meister: So, the achievements of women from South America were particularly notable here on the left you see Altschul and in the center Lygia Clark.

Sarah Meister: But I loved the impact that these women had on how we see the work of more familiar North American artists such as Louise Nevelson there on the right.

Sarah Meister: This idea of expanding the ways in which we approach the art we *think* we know is perhaps nowhere more present for me than with a research initiative, inspired by the 2015 acquisition of the German photographer-August Sander's magnum opus, which he called "People of the 20th Century." This was comprised of more than 600 photographs and this landmark body of work was structured by Sander in the mid 1920's to encompass nearly 50 portfolios arranged into seven groups.

Sarah Meister: In 2016, Noam Elcott an art history professor at Columbia University and I launched the "August Sander Project," which was a five year research initiative that invites brilliant people across a range of disciplines- artists, poets, writers, curators, critical thinkers, historians- to each pick one of Sander's portfolios and to present it according to their own expertise and insight.

Sarah Meister: Almost none of the presenters are Sander experts. The point is to ask people whose interests are only tangentially related to Sander to look carefully and think closely about the ways, new ways of approaching his work and understanding its relevance in the 21st century.

Sarah Meister: The photographer Tina Barney presented at our first gathering and she was so transformed and inspired by what she learned that day that she returned the following year to make her own portraits inspired by Sander.

Sarah Meister: Here's my favorite of those that she made of all of my colleagues then, in the Department of Photography.

Sarah Meister: Now, much of what I've discussed this evening is anchored in histories that were once current news and works that were contemporary when they were acquired but are now definitely historical achievements.

Sarah Meister: And as much as I am committed to bringing these past achievements into dialogue with our current moment, I also want to emphasize that I am just as deeply committed to artists working today- and this is something I share of course with my colleagues across the institution.

Sarah Meister: So, I mentioned earlier how LaToya Ruby Frazier had worked with me on the Francis Benjamin Johnston publication and she will be presenting at the fifth and final gathering of the August Sander project, which is now postponed until September of 2021.

Sarah Meister: Even in our constrained environment we are pursuing a limited number of important contemporary acquisitions and I encourage you to look at "Magazine"- which is MoMA's online content platform- for two projects that we did last summer with Sarah Cwynar and Rosalind Solomon while the museum was closed for construction.

Sarah Meister: Artists are truly at the core of all that we do- and the work that they do- is why we work.

Sarah Meister: My job at the museum is to care for MoMA's collection of course and to provide new ways of understanding the past through it, but it is also to provide a platform for artists living and working today so that we can dream together about the future.

Sarah Meister: I want to be sure to leave time for your questions. So I'll conclude briefly with a mention of my most recent exhibition, "Dorothea Lange: Words and Pictures," now hanging patiently in the dark on 53rd Street- and also existing as a virtual view on MoMA's website if you want to check that out. But it was inspired by Lange's landmark photograph- the pictures of which you see there on the right- and American exodus that so deftly weave together words and images as well as Lange's observation that quote "all photographs can be fortified by words."

Sarah Meister: As with so much of what we do, this project- and particularly it's catalog that you see there on the little tables that we placed it throughout the gallery- has been immeasurably enhanced by contributions from an incredible range of artists, writers and thinkers. From Wendy Red Star to Rebecca Solnit from Julie Ault to Sally Mann- Tess Taylor, Sam Contis, and many more. And all of their words, give us new ways to understand Lange and her relevance today.

Sarah Meister: So, I look forward to your questions and thank you for listening tonight and being with us. And hopefully before too long we will all be able to gather with a little social distance.

Sarah Meister: See, I'm going to say-

Ross Sawyers: Thanks Sarah. That was, that was really great- one of the weirdest things about these online lectures is you can't hear the applause to know that it's time to ask questions, So-

Sarah Meister: It's not for the applause-

Ross Sawyers: So, all of you out there who are watching, again, please take advantage of the QNA feature to ask your questions. There's a couple of really great questions that have already come in. So, Sarah, I'll start with those and then hopefully, we'll see some more questions coming in.

Sarah Meister: Sorry, the alarm is my mother burning something in the kitchen. Sorry.

Ross Sawyers: So, I'm going to start with a question. I don't know the first name of the person who asked us, they only provided an initial; but they talk about- the question is- "photo history often talks about Eggleston as being the first color photography exhibition at MoMA, but this doesn't consider the solo exhibitions of Elliot Porter or Marie Cosindas; also both at MoMA. What do you make of this narrative?"

Sarah Meister: Um, I will say it is one of the many inaccuracies about the museum's history.

Sarah Meister: Even when I started and I said that in the press release for Walker Evans American photographs in 1938, MoMA itself wrote: this is the first one person exhibition of a photographer at the museum. But actually in 1933 we had a one person exhibition of that same photographers work. It was called "19th century Victorian Houses" and several of those actually were featured in both.

Sarah Meister: The point being, the narratives that get handed down are often over simplified. I would say I think about this a lot when I've been thinking about the Brazilian modernist project, for instance, it's like, how is it that these extraordinary photographers whose work I literally just can't wait to share- How is it that I had never heard of any of them? And it speaks to geographic biases and all other kinds of biases that we that we really work very hard now to try to correct.

Sarah Meister: And that's a huge part, you know- when we are able to travel again- that is why we travel.

Sarah Meister: It is why I'm grateful for online platforms because I do think you can learn about practices that you might not otherwise, you know, they're just- they're more ways and it used to be that for a photographer to come on the radar of a MoMA curator you had to send in your portfolio physically to 53rd Street. And I remember even when I started at the museum every Thursday morning the whole curatorial staff sat around and physically passed these intensely heavy portfolios around the table. And.. in part, I think it was a

signal of the, you know, there weren't as many galleries, there weren't as many ways that photographers making their achievements known-

Sarah Meister: Sorry, but I'm digressing- to go back to the question of Eggleston, Cosindas, and Elliot Porter.

Sarah Meister: I would say that was probably written by somebody who was less of a fan of Cosindas and Porter. In their scale- out of fairness I'll say- those were smaller scaled, they didn't have a catalog, and frankly they didn't have the same impact.

Sarah Meister: And you know, those are all also factors that lend to these over- lend themselves to oversimplification in time. But it's a good question. I'm glad someone else is paying attention.

Ross Sawyers: Yeah, no, it's a great question and I you know as an educator- I Oftentimes, like sort of cringe when I hear the term, "*The History of Photography*" because usually, it's just "A History of Photography" and there's lots of history.

Sarah Meister: I agree 100%. In 2010 my colleagues, Eva Respini, Roxana Marcoci, and I organized a show called "Pictures by Women: A History of Modern photography," and it was basically, what would the history of photography look like if there- if we didn't have any men? Just only work by women. And it's a good exercise to do- to remind yourself that no matter what you're doing you're only telling a history of photography, not *the* history.

Ross Sawyers: Absolutely. That's great. So, the next question comes in and I apologize to this person for butchering their name. I believe it's Maya Crozech, and they are asking: "how does the idea or concept that a certain exhibition will have come about? Having so many storytelling options as well as montage options when thinking about an exhibition."

Sarah Meister: Well, that's- I mean, I can't say it's a mystery to me since technically, that's what I do all day- Um, I would say exhibitions emerge out of a variety of sources. Mostly- or I should say one of the things I enjoy most about working at MoMA- is that every exhibition that's on view originates with a curator who has an idea for something that interests them deeply and that they are then able to persuade their fellow curators is worthy of doing. And the degree to which that is seen as a wonderful, very honest, exchange of curatorial minds across media is central to the programming that you find at MoMA.

Sarah Meister: So, it's one of the best things about becoming a full curator, is that you finally get to go to those exhibition committee meetings every month.

Sarah Meister: So, the ideas really originate from, you know, from a photography curator or design curator or painting curator.

Sarah Meister: But in terms of where we get the ideas- we also have for instance- curatorial working groups where we think across media, we travel together, we talk a lot. And we *look* constantly and question: what kinds of stories have we told? What kinds of stories should we be telling?

Sarah Meister: So, it's a pretty dynamic- there's no sort of prescription for how they come about.

Sarah Meister: But it's, yeah, it's a big- obviously exhibitions- I mean, I love that, you know, the three most fun parts of being a curator are exhibitions, acquisitions, and publications and sometimes all three of those things come together.

Sarah Meister: And you know, it's, I mean, then there's a lot of work as know. But, um, but the coming up with ideas for exhibitions, it's you know, it's a- it requires a lot of listening, a lot, you know, the Brazilian Modernist exhibition, for instance, I never- that is not... it's not conceivable that that exhibition could have been mine alone. The number of people, mainly in Brazil; but also, outside of Brazil, who transformed my awareness and my thinking- I almost couldn't count. And so, each one of them contributed to something that then is going to end up in something very special.

Ross Sawyers: So that's actually a really great segway into a question asked by Kiera Voneckle, who's asking if you could talk a little bit more about your explorations of Brazilian photographers.

Sarah Meister: Sure. So, it started in 2012. We went with a group of MoMA curators on our first C-MAP trip to Brazil- that research initiative I mentioned. And I remember at the time I was looking at work by Geraldo de Barros, who was the only name that had- a photographer who had been- in the collection at the time.

Sarah Meister: And it was super interesting. And I thought to myself: wow, I'd like to know more about this. Then I learned of two other photographers associated with this Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante, this amateur photo club. And I started thinking, huh you know, this is really-three of them all associated with the club- and then I learned about Gertrudes Altschul also on a subsequent trip.

Sarah Meister: And I was like, wait, there were women who were members to? And they were this good? And they were on the cover of the bulletin?

Sarah Meister: And it kind of exploded from there. There's some incredible private collectors of this work in Brazil. There's some very important institutional collections and actually the Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante is open now- you can go- I've made several trips to their archives, looking through all of the old applications and membership cards and things like that.

Sarah Meister: And certainly, their bulletin is an incredible way of learning about what mattered to them. So, one of the things that as a curator- you really challenges like- How do I make a judgment about something that I don't know anything about, if I want to avoid superficial parallels. Because it's no good, saying, Oh, that looks like this or that looks like that. If the circumstances behind why it was made are completely unrelated. You have to really do your homework. So even the first time before we went to Brazil as a group, our very first C-MAP session was that we had a historian come and give us all an afternoon lecture.

Sarah Meister: For I don't know, three or four hours about, you know, what were the major political, you know, when was slavery abolished? When- what were the big coups and dictatorships?

Sarah Meister: Because without that framework, how can you possibly pretend to begin to understand what the artists were responding to? And so... with this Brazilian modernist group. One of the things I find so fascinating is that some of the work is incredible. I mean, so inventive so imaginative so authorial where you really get a sense of an individual vision and it really is sustained practice. Some of it is also incredible, but a little more imitative where it's like, maybe they pick up on aspects of the style, but they- it's not fueled by the same sense of curiosity.

Sarah Meister: And then frankly, there are a handful of- maybe more than a handful- there are photographs made in conjunction with that club that are kitschy, and you know kittens, and little girls with bows in their hair, and soft focus nudes, and foggy landscapes that I would say- and I would venture that they're just- not good... not as good. Um, and then the thing is, well, who am I to say that? You know, on what basis is my judgment? How do I anchor that judgment?

Sarah Meister: And so, I say... this bulletin that you can find in the club and that we're working on really researching in depth.

Sarah Meister: It tells me what they thought was important and why. And then, you know, you learn this, you read that, you really try to build a framework for understanding. Okay, I can make this judgment. I have to make this judgment. That's my job as a curator, but I have to make it with the humility and awareness of the limitations of what I know and with a keen attention to

what those photographers then- were saying and thinking about one another. And so, it's been a... it's been rewarding because of course...

Sarah Meister: You know- can I tell.. I digress- Well, yeah. Anyway, so that's basically it. The Brazilian... I'm excited to share that more. And in fact, there's still so much that I don't know that, figuring out how we're going to answer some of these questions before we make a book is an open question.

Ross Sawyers: Well, just as an observer, I'm super interested in whatever the digression you were about to make.

Sarah Meister: I just think in general... you know taste is a funny thing. And it's like, there's part of me that likes things that are unfashionable.

Sarah Meister: And yet, you know, trying to get out of your own head and realize like- what do you like? And why do you like it? Is a central challenge of being a curator because I don't make art- you know, I mean back, way back in the day, until I realized I was such a bad artist- um, I, so you... I really think about why, and how do I approach work? And what you know, what interests me and why? And that you know... some soul searching is involved with that.

Ross Sawyers: That's great.

Ross Sawyers: I'm going to take a little bit of a left turn with this next question, and I just want to really quickly for everybody who's still listening- we're not gonna have time to get off- to all of these questions. So, I'm doing my best to ask the questions that seem most relevant to a larger audience. So, if I don't ask your question it is not personal. I'm just trying to get to the ones that seem the most relevant. So, this question comes from Christopher Schneider and he, as a gallery director, is interested in the way photographs are installed in your galleries. And he references Steichen, as a very dynamic curator with his displays, which went against Newhall's symmetry and he's wondering what form... if there is one... that you prefer when you're curating an exhibition.

Sarah Meister: Well, I would say, um, I try to- I would say at heart, I am more closely aligned with Newhall's approach to photographic prints than with Steichen's, or even Schakowsky's at the beginning of his tenure.

Sarah Meister: If I had had an extra hour I might have gone into the interesting transformation when you look at John Schakowsky's career from the way that the photographers eye, or five unrelated photographers, or you know- how some of those exhibitions were installed with a lot of enlargements and contemporary prints framed, not necessarily with matts.

Sarah Meister: But then I might argue- and you know unfortunately I can't ask John If this is true- I might argue that it was the Abbott-Levy acquisition that happened in late 1968 and that the presence of that *huge* volume of incredibly important vintage prints reignited, or reestablished, or just foregrounded his impulse to show... whenever possible... works at the scale and with the material characteristics that the maker intended.

Sarah Meister: And even when John Schakowsky made prints through the Chicago albumen works in fact- and Richard Benton- modern prints from Atget's negative, they have many of the same physical characteristics in common.

Sarah Meister: And you see more, and you know, the move away from what I most associate with Steichen though, of taking it... you know, borrowing a photographer's negative... making a print of whatever scale suited your exhibition design.

Sarah Meister: That seems like anathema to me. I can't imagine... I can't imagine completely ignoring the choices that a photographer made in terms of what scale or on what kind of paper they printed because they made- now, even when those choices were dictated by economic concerns and you know, there were a whole host of reasons why pictures looked the way they did or were made the way, you know, and I'm sure certain photographers might have liked to have made them one way, but they needed to make them another.

Sarah Meister: But in my mind, that's kind of part of the interesting history. So... it out of respect for that history, I would say, I'm more aligned with Newhall. But when Quentin Bajac and I organized an exhibition of the Thomas Walter collection at MoMA- at the same time as the launch of that object photo book and online project- we made a conscious decision to frame as many of the objects as possible without an over matt. To simply hinge them so that their borders could be seen and sort of underscore their material qualities and that's something- when I think- when you walk through the galleries now, or even when you look through photography at MoMA, you'll see a little more of that.

Sarah Meister: A little more sort of what's rough around the edges around them, because it tells you about how they circulated or the intentions of their maker or the, you know, all sorts of things. So more- I'm a little more like pull back the curtain than I think Newhall might have been.

Ross Sawyers: That's great. And I think that actually kind of leads us into the next question a little bit. This question comes from actually one of my favorite photographers: Melissa Penny.

Sarah Meister: Oh, Hi.

Ross Sawyers: She's asking if Nancy Newhall worked with her husband at MoMA, as she did on the history of photography book.

Sarah Meister: Thank you. Thank you. For asking this question. The answer is an emphatic yes! And we... Nancy Newhall's role in the history of photography, you know, she organized a very important Edward Weston show, she organized a very important Cartier-Bresson show, she really held the department together during World War II.

Sarah Meister: So, her contributions are under heralded and so I'm grateful for this chance to say, you make an excellent point. And even though her formal title wasn't one that puts her on that arc of people that I described- her role and her influence is important.

Sarah Meister: We're actually... we have a few things up our sleeves at MoMA, of trying to think of ways to bring that more forward and sort of write it more into the record, but it's a great point. Thank you for saying that.

Sarah Meister: I will say that in that Weston show, though, there was a sign at the entrance to the exhibition that said- it was like a little placard- and it said, "many of the photographs on view in this exhibition are available for \$25 please inquire at the front desk."

Sarah Meister: Can you imagine now, if people came to me and were like, oh, if you like what you see, just go to the front desk and ask, you know, those were the days.

Ross Sawyers: That's great. Thank you so much. So, Robert Mason asks a question, in which he says, "looking ahead as the technology of photography continues to evolve, how do you see your role, Curator of Photography change? How do we distinguish between photography and other graphic arts and documents?"

Sarah Meister: Well, I would say at heart it connects with this idea of porosity. In other words, not worrying so much about what- why a photograph was made. So, was it made by an artist? Was it made by a scientist? Was it made by someone on an exploration, you know, a geologist?

Sarah Meister: And was it made by a commercial practitioner? Was it you know, made by an amateur making a snapshot? And I think when you train yourself not to be... photography is a good medium for training yourself not to become too dogmatic about anything because it keeps changing. I mean you know the history of painting hasn't changed that much in the last, oh say 300 years, but photography every couple of decades something comes along- it says my internet connection is unstable is it okay from your perspective?

Ross Sawyers: Your video is a little choppy, but your audio is perfect. So just keep it...

Sarah Meister: So then if it's just the video, who cares. Okay, so the that history that destabilizes all the time is really interesting. And the digital era is one more expression of that. So, photography is no longer exclusively the domain of an image captured by a light sensitive, you know, substrate that- and that's okay. One of the things that I really love about working at MoMA, is that we sort of have a both and attitude. We both understand that photography curators and conservators have a capacity and a responsibility to attend to a particular material history, to physical characteristics, but we are also interested in what falls between and among those things.

Sarah Meister: So, when a filmmaker makes photographs that a colleague was just sharing with me today, or designer- you know, it's just- the less we wring our hands about what falls within the boundaries.

Sarah Meister: I think the more generative our conversations can be about why these funny things matter and managed to connect with so many people in so many ways which is deeply interesting to me.

Ross Sawyers: Yeah, that's, that's great. So, to respect your time and everyone else. I think we might have time for a couple more questions I lined up.

Ross Sawyers: I will say that there are a number of questions, sort of related to recommendations for books and online resources during the time of pandemic and for all of those-

Sarah Meister: I get to give a plug, just an unedited plug, for everything I like?

Ross Sawyers: I think you do and- why you know, there's a number of questions, so I'm gonna...

Sarah Meister: Oh my gosh. Thank you! I mean, thank you, whoever it- it wasn't my mother who asked that question right?

Ross Sawyers: No, not that I know off. It could have been but not that I know off.

Sarah Meister: Okay, so, um, thanks for asking. There are a lot of people doing creative, important things to try to find means of connecting during

this pandemic and I would say this lecture series... you know, your initiative to make it a digital one is one of that. So, thank you, for that.

Sarah Meister: At MoMA, I have been involved with two things primarily. One was taking the Lange exhibition and reimagining it as what we called a virtual view. So if you go on the Lange exhibition page- Dorothea Lange Words and Pictures @moma.org- you will see at the bottom, there's like an incredible intro video, there are all of these fantastic articles- new articles that we developed- that provide people with different means of accessing the ideas of the exhibition, without pretending that those are a substitute for the exhibition itself. And we did this for Lange, we did it for other exhibitions as well- just that Lange is the one photography exhibition on view now.

Sarah Meister: So moma.org- a couple of those articles exist on a platform called magazine that I mentioned before that I would say, we are all for as much as we used to spend our time thinking exclusively about (or a lot about) the collection galleries, we are *all* now thinking of ways of animating the collection, foregrounding artists, writing news stories- so magazine has things added to it all the time. Um, oh sorry, am I... I do have my "Dorothea Lange: Words and Pictures" catalogue.

Ross Sawyers: Just happen to have that, right?

Sarah Meister: I just happen to have that. I can't even believe it.

Sarah Meister: But if I will say, even in the exhibition- the reason we had the catalog in the exhibition, is that all the contributions by those people we decided instead of like distilling them, and writing a little excerpt on the wall- we would just leave the catalog in the galleries and encourage people: pick it up and read a book. Oh my god. Yes, you can do that. Um, and then I guess my last plug. But really, thanks for this question. And the last plug is this, "Seeing Through Photographs," that I mentioned.

Sarah Meister: We developed it a couple of years ago. But it became clear, you know- within days after we were all locked at home- that this would be an incredible way to help us connect. Connect people with one another, connect us with people, to bring forward ideas and so we're doing weekly... we're weekly adding to the class, I host weekly office hours. We do weekly study sessions- or bi-weekly but alternating- anyway.

Sarah Meister: Study Center sessions with my colleague Tasha. And all of these things are really meant to say... what can we do to share the museum's collection while we're all, you know, sheltering from home? And so, thanks for asking.

Ross Sawyers: Yeah, it's- that's great. And it's really, this is really kind of heartbreaking for me because there's so many good questions and we're just not gonna have time to get to them all.

Sarah Meister: I- it's okay my mom's keeping my dinner warm so it's good...

Ross Sawyers: Oh good. But I think, I think a great question to kind of close on, is something that you've been kind of dancing around all night. And I think all of us are dancing around in our own ways, and a number of people have asked this question-

Ross Sawyers: I'm going to read the question- the version of the question posted by my colleague Greg Foster-Rice; and he's asking "As a teacher, I've had to pivot significantly during COVID-19. Abandoning many of the strategies I thought worked as a teacher and embracing whole new ways of thinking about photography given its complex relationship to situations like this pandemic. How was MoMA's photo department pivoting?"

Ross Sawyers: What strategies are you considering under the current circumstances?" And then to add to that question to reflect somebody- a few other questions: what strategies do you think will stick? What moves do you think are going to actually sustain over once this pandemic ends?

Sarah Meister: Yeah.

Sarah Meister: It is, it's really hard for curators to be separated from collections- I have to- I mean, I know I went on my little tirade earlier about people who aren't curators when they're organizing their sock drawer, or their playlist, but...

Sarah Meister: It's hard to underestimate how much I miss going to the museum every day. Like I missed my colleagues, I miss the collection, I miss the public... it's... I mean- and I know, of course, I'm so lucky to, you know in other words, there's so many people who are suffering in so many greater ways and making *huge* sacrifices, you know... and anyway. So, if this whole moment is really... it is a pivot point.

Sarah Meister: I think anyone- there's no one who hasn't been touched by this. And I feel as if, as a curator- and shared by my colleagues, who at least I can connect with virtually most of the time- we really think a lot about why is it that we do what we do? You know, in other words what opportunities do we offer that are unique? And... where is the hope in art? And we are deeply committed to this, we believe in it.

Sarah Meister: It's why we will open with a fraction, you know, with a cap- that's a fraction of our former visitation so that even... so that many fewer people- but still some people- can come in and enjoy the art that we love. We you know, we believe in this opportunity and- I think we had a management meeting today- and I think Glenn used the word "we have like a moral and ethical obligation to reopen as soon as it's possible to do so safely and responsibly."

Sarah Meister: And I think for all of us- like even if we can only come back some of us at a time, and have 100 people at the galleries in a day, or whatever it is- the reminder that... at the heart of all that we do is providing ways of helping people connect with works of art is the pivot. And so now while we're locked at home, this looks virtual. This- and as I, as I opened with- it's surprising that this is satisfying at all, but actually you know, there is a satisfaction in it.

Sarah Meister: If you had told me three months ago... I mean that I would be doing any of this- I would have been like Pasha, you know... No.

Sarah Meister: But we're even having Study Center sessions where we're getting at questions of materiality, and scale, and things, that you wouldn't normally think are possible. We're doing tomorrow- we're doing portfolio reviews with your MFA students where it's like- we are determined to get at what is unique and important about what they are doing even, you know, blocked in the way that we are.

Sarah Meister: So, I think... yes, it's a huge pivot. I mean, you know, none of us will ever be the same after this. Even those of us who are- like myself- very fortunate to be healthy, with the family and everything like that.

Sarah Meister: And then, but in terms of what we carry forward. I think even when we reopen... we as an institution will be very committed to thinking about online platforms going forward. We're not going to abandon "Seeing Through Photographs," just because the museum's reopen because of course, you know, hundreds of thousands of- don't even live in the US and who's going to get on a plane, anyway?

Sarah Meister: So, um, I think a lot of the, you know, let's hope that this reminder of what's important stays with us.

Sarah Meister: Let's hope that the commitment to the digital and virtual stays with us and I think we're learning. So, I mean today, for instance, I put my own PowerPoint up... I shared a screen for the first time. So, there's always that-

Ross Sawyers: Yeah, no, that's, that's fantastic. And on that note, you know, I was looking through the chat.

Ross Sawyers: You know, at the beginning of this... and so many people were chatting saying hello from Chile, hello from Argentina, hello from London, hello from, you know, Indiana, and it was really, really amazing to see the reach. And I do think that this might probably- probably not might- but probably very much is our best attended lecture in photography ever.

Sarah Meister: By the way, part: "Seeing Through Photographs"

Ross Sawyers: Really there are some positive things that will come and-

Sarah Meister: I hope they come back and learn more from you all too because you host a lot of great things, you know, I think even the "Seeing Through Photographs,"- for instance, last week I shouted out Yale University Art Gallery- put up Richard Benson's lectures that he had done in 2008. And it's like these are extraordinary resources that people are putting online and it's so great. And then they're out there.

Ross Sawyers: Yep. Well, again, I just want to say to all of those of you who asked questions that I didn't get to... It's not personal there's just too many of them to get to them and they're all great questions. Sarah, this has been amazing.

Sarah Meister: Thank you Ross

Ross Sawyers: Thank you very much. What a pleasure to spend the last hour and 15 minutes listening to you talk about photography.

Well, my pleasure.

Ross Sawyers: Thank you. Thank all of you who are out there across the world watching right now.

Ross Sawyers: And yeah, I'm not exactly sure how to end a virtual lecture. So... thank you very much.

Sarah Meister: Thank you all.

Ross Sawyers: You know, we'll, we'll talk again.

Sarah Meister: All right, thanks a lot. Bye, Ross. Thank you.