

CSSSC GOLDEN JUBILEE ARCHIVES ROUNDTABLE SERIES

Panel discussion at the Jadunath Bhavan Museum and Resource Centre
Tuesday, 19th December 2023

PHOTOGRAPHY IN/AS THE ARCHIVE: PASSAGES FROM PRIVATE TO INSTITUTIONAL SITES

Thinking out of the photographic collections in the visual archives of the CSSSC, this panel will discuss more broadly *the importance of photography as an archival practice*. The connections between photography and archives can be pushed in two directions. The invitation is to explore the different terms on which (i) photography enters the worlds of collecting, preserving and archiving, while (ii) photography (a single image, an album or a curated cluster) serves as an archive in itself. What constitutes the older and newer archival functions of photographs as they move from domestic to public domains? Who determines questions of access, ownership and circulation of the travelling image? What may be the afterlife of orphaned photographs that may cease to belong anywhere? How can photographs be made to fill in the absences and erasures of history and recreate forgotten pasts? The speakers are invited to use specific case studies from family and institutional repositories to reflect on some of these themes.

Introduced and moderated by

Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Honorary Professor, CSSSC

Speakers:

Ranu Roychoudhuri, Assistant Professor, Ahmedabad University

Hardik Brata Biswas, Independent researcher

Soumya Sankar Bose, Artist and photographer

Presentation titles and abstracts:

Ranu Roychoudhuri, “Layered Lives of Archival Photographs”

Chitrabani, a Jesuit organization in Calcutta, worked with a group of Leftist photographers to create an archive of 12000 photographs from the late 1970s through the early 1990s, documenting everyday in the city and its vicinities. During the period, the photographs were displayed in community exhibitions and occasionally in niche art galleries, only to remain subsequently locked away for years in Chitrabani’s own archive away from the public gaze. Approximately 750 silver gelatin copies from this body of work eventually found their way into the CSSSC’s visual archive, paving the way for their public display and scholarly studies beginning in the 2000s, while also attracting controversy regarding their copyright and ownership. This is one of the many examples of such ownership controversies and the logistical blockades these create in obtaining permission for reproduction, and display. Thinking through CSSSC's Chitrabani collection, this presentation will foreground the multilayered lives of archival photographs in their historically contingent travails and travels across institutional spaces generating multiplicity of meaning and negotiating competing claims of ownership, copyright, and right to display. Simultaneously, it will underscore the multivalent nature of the photographic image and its fluidity as and in the archive.

Hardik Brata Biswas, “Rethinking the archive as *radically lost*”

The CSSSC’s digitized photographic archive is a distinct space-place for visual documents of a specific region, historically grounding cultural histories of representations. Within a context of the interplay of image, history and memory, with regard to family photographs, researchers struggle with the possible traces of the continuity of the family and its individuals in these images, as well as with the limits of the data it produces. In the possibilities of opening up the archive both as a recording of the past and carrying a promise of the future lies the ‘unknowable weight’ of repression and suppression. While the process of archiving involves the loss of elements that will never appear in the archive as evident and displayable, it problematizes the archive but does not do away with the notion of it. The archive, with its irreplaceable singularity of the document which it aims to interpret each time in its original uniqueness, should be available idiomatically, at once offered and unavailable for translation. The archive, via this radical loss, complicates any easy reception of the photographic image, especially of those photographs which were originally meant for private circulation or photographs that have a private history but are now in the public domain of research, seminars, reproductions, exhibitions, catalogues, digitalization, and dissemination.

Soumya Sankar Bose, “Photography as an alternative archive”

When we don't have an existing archive of an incident or a segment of the past, do these cease to exist? Or will a new alternative recovered or recreated archive of photographs find a voice through future generations? This presentation will explore this theme of absence and erasure, remembrance and remaking of both personal and public histories through the speaker's own artistic, archival and documentary practice of photography in the present.

On the speakers:

Dr. Ranu Roychoudhuri is Assistant Professor in Performing and Visual Arts in the School of Arts and Sciences at Ahmedabad University. She works on modern and contemporary art in South Asia with an emphasis on photography, intellectual histories of art, and art historiography. Her research has been supported by the Photography Network, the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art (FICA), and the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. She has published across peer-reviewed journals, edited volumes, and art magazines, and her co-edited volume titled *Documenting Industry: Photography, Aesthetics, and Labor in India* is forthcoming in 2024 with Routledge. She has curated shows for private and public institutions and taught in the US and Indian higher education institutions.

Dr. Hardik Brata Biswas has been a long-time researcher and archivist in the field of family photography, gender studies and women's histories. He has held research positions and fellowships at the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University and the CSSSC, and is currently teaching at the Department of Mass Communication and Videography at St. Xavier's College, Kolkata.

Soumya Sankar Bose is an artist based in Kolkata, India. He reconstructs archival materials and oral history histories into photography photographs, films, alternative archives and artist books. Bose’s His hybrid mode of practice interweaving long-term research and engagement with local communities including his own family history accentuates certain subaltern experiences of the marginalized yet resilient in post-Partition Bengal. Enmeshing fiction and reality, Bose’s work opens up daring realms of memory, desire, vulnerability and identity. Bose was awarded Magnum Foundation’s Social Justice Fellowship for 'Full Moon on a Dark Night' in 2017 and received the Louis Roederer Discovery Public Award at Rencontres, Arles for 'A Discreet Exit through Darkness' in 2023.