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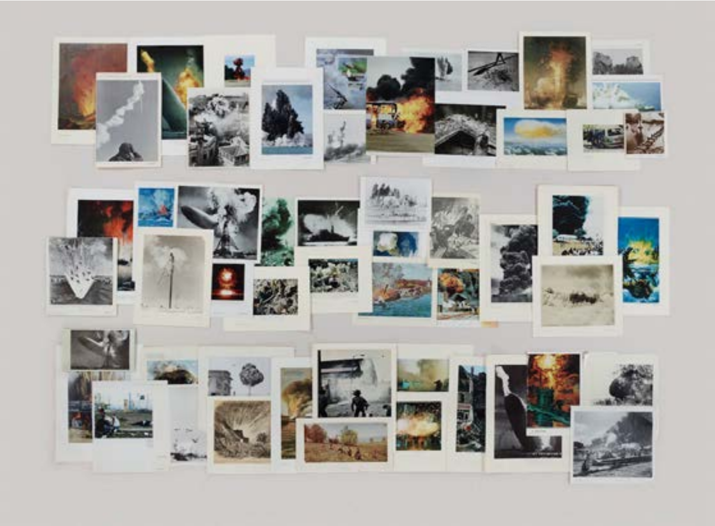
Total Recall

Diana Kamin on the New York Public Library's Picture Collection

Diana Kamin



Taryn Simon, Folder: Explosions, *2012, archival pigment print, 47 1/4 x 62 1/2".*

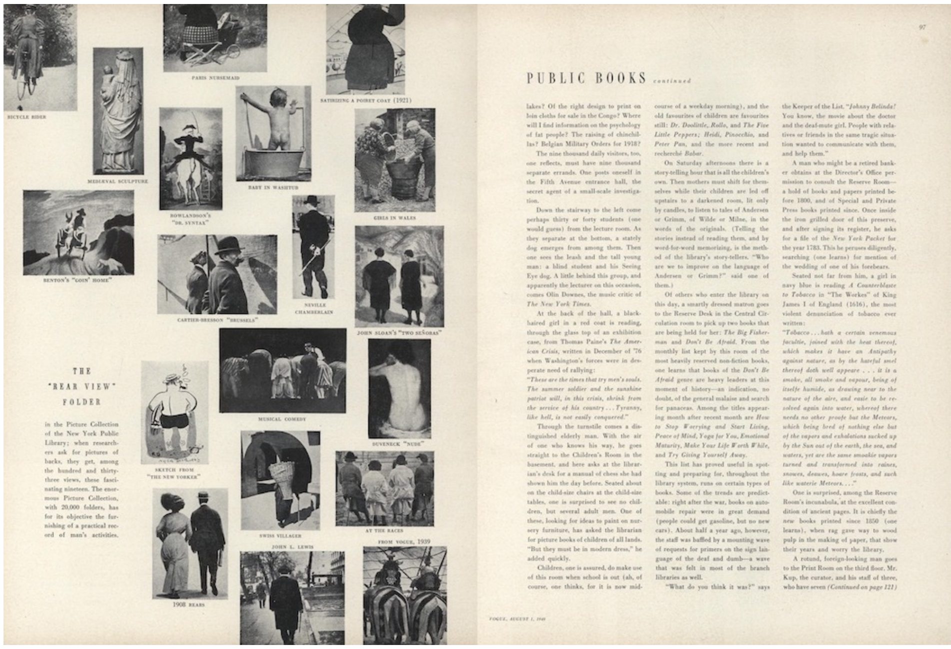
"IT'S LIKE GOOGLE IMAGES, but in paper and folders." This has been the simplest way for me to describe the New York Public Library's Picture Collection to friends, family, and students unfamiliar with one of New York City's great underknown treasures. The analogy captures the important features of the Picture Collection—its scale, its indexing, and its promise of democratized access. Here, more than a million clipped photographs, prints, maps, illustrations, and sundry other material are organized under thousands of subject headings—from "Apparitions" to "Scorpions" to "Trade Unions"—are browsable by hand. Instead of being downloaded to a hard drive, everything can be taken home with a library card. "Analog Google Images" is thus an easy shorthand, yet the comparison carries an implicit threat: What role does this circulating collection, which has been tended to by overlapping communities of users and librarians since 1915, still have to play amid the ubiquity of digital image searching? Why maintain a collection at the library when a similar resource is available remotely on any internet-enabled device?

At the beginning of this month, this threat came to fruition: Arthur Lubow of the *New York Times* reported that after 107 years, library administration is planning to remove the collection from circulation and ship it to storage, precluding future additions and making its holdings available by appointment only. In Lubow's framing, in a "battle" between accessibility and conservation, "the conservators have prevailed." Indeed, William P. Kelly, director of research libraries, asserts, "Either it is ephemera and doesn't belong in a research library, or else it is an archive that should be preserved." This representation of conservation as inherently at odds with accessibility captures the classic materialist epistemology of the museum and library conservator, for whom objects communicate meaning only insofar as their original physical integrity is maintained. Yet throughout its history, the Picture Collection has provided an alternative model of preservation and even of meaning-making, one that directly challenges the reigning discourse of the archive and the museum and offers a more generous, community-based approach to collections, creative production, and knowledge preservation.

In 1915, the Library's fine-print collection, which could only be consulted on-site, was overwhelmed by requests from a new class of modern workers seeking images for visual reference or inspiration in growing industries such as publishing, theater, clothing manufacture, design, and cinema. Using a picture-library model by John Cotton Dana, a pioneer of accessible library practices such as open stacks and a proponent of envisioning both libraries and museums as essential networked community hubs, librarians clipped thousands of pictures from discarded books and magazines and organized them by subject (as opposed to the artist-indexed print collection). The Picture Collection opened to the public that year with little publicity, but news spread quickly by word of mouth among designers, educators, and artists. From the very beginning, the collection grew through public input, as unfilled requests were carefully tracked and librarians, and sometimes users, endeavored to fill the recorded gaps through acquisitions and donations.

Browsing the Picture Collection at the New York Public Library's Stephen A. Schwarzman Building.

The feedback loop between public and collection was present in the Picture Collection's origin, but it was Romana Javitz, superintendent from 1929 to 1968, who oversaw its expansion (to more than six million images at its height) and articulated the role that this type of resource could play in organizing visual media for the public good. Javitz, who was not a trained librarian but rather had studied painting at the Art Students League, championed accessibility above all, introducing open shelving for browsing and revising the collection's subject indexing to downplay hierarchies and better reflect the language of the public and introducing open shelving for browsing. Outside of the Picture Collection, Javitz was central to New Deal investment in the documentation of national history and current events. She conceived and helped implement the American Index of Design (1935–42), an archive of eighteen thousand watercolor renderings of American decorative-arts objects produced by Works Progress Administration artists. She also surreptitiously preserved photographs created for the famed Farm Security Administration when Roy Stryker (head of the information division) sent copy prints to Javitz for use in the Picture Collection for fear that they would be otherwise discarded. In the 1930s, she assisted Arturo Alfonso Schomburg in building out the Library’s Division of Negro History, Literature and Prints (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture) in part by encouraging FSA documentation of Black community life and then by funneling FSA prints to Schomburg. Javitz railed against the supremacy of the written word in library administration, arguing that by ignoring the role of pictures in producing knowledge, libraries had created a vacuum that would be filled by commercial enterprise, an argument that has proved prescient as proprietary platforms, including Google Images, increasingly structure our visual public sphere.


BICYCLE RIDER
PARIS NURSEMAID
SATIRIZING A POIRET COAT (1921)
MEDIÆVAL SCULPTURE
BABY IN WASHTUB
ROWLANDSON'S "DR. SYNTAX"
GIRLS IN WALES
BENTON'S "GOIN' HOME"
CARTIER-BRESSON "BRUSSELS"
NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN
JOHN SLOAN'S "TWO SEÑORAS"
MUSICAL COMEDY
DUVENECK "NUDE"
SKETCH FROM "THE NEW YORKER"
SWISS VILLAGER
AT THE RACES
FROM VOGUE, 1939
JOHN L. LEWIS
1908 REARS

THE "REAR VIEW" FOLDER

in the Picture Collection of the New York Public Library; when researchers ask for pictures of backs, they get, among the hundred and thirty-three views, these fascinating nineteen. The enormous Picture Collection, with 20,000 folders, has for its objective the furnishing of a practical record of man's activities.

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PUBLIC BOOKS *continued*

lakes? Of the right design to print on loin cloths for sale in the Congo? Where will I find information on the psychology of fat people? The raising of chinchillas? Belgian Military Orders for 1918?

The nine thousand daily visitors, too, one reflects, must have nine thousand separate errands. One posts oneself in the Fifth Avenue entrance hall, the secret agent of a small-scale investigation.

Down the stairway to the left come perhaps thirty or forty students (one would guess) from the lecture room. As they separate at the bottom, a stately dog emerges from among them. Then one sees the leash and the tall young man: a blind student and his Seeing Eye dog. A little behind this group, and apparently the lecturer on this occasion, comes Olin Downes, the music critic of *The New York Times*.

At the back of the hall, a black-haired girl in a red coat is reading, through the glass top of an exhibition case, from Thomas Paine's *The American Crisis*, written in December of '76 when Washington's forces were in desperate need of rallying:

"These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country . . . Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered."

Through the turnstile comes a distinguished elderly man. With the air of one who knows his way, he goes straight to the Children's Room in the basement, and here asks at the librarian's desk for a manual of chess she had shown him the day before. Seated about on the child-size chairs at the child-size tables, one is surprised to see no children, but several adult men. One of these, looking for ideas to paint on nursery furniture, has asked the librarian for picture books of children of all lands. "But they must be in modern dress," he added quickly.

Children, one is assured, do make use of this room when school is out (ah, of course, one thinks, for it is now mid-course of a weekday morning), and the old favourites of children are favourites still: *Dr. Doolittle*, *Rollo*, and *The Five Little Peppers; Heidi, Pinocchio*, and *Peter Pan*, and the more recent and recherché *Babar*.

On Saturday afternoons there is a story-telling hour that is all the children's own. Then mothers must shift for themselves while their children are led off upstairs to a darkened room, lit only by candles, to listen to tales of Andersen or Grimm, of Wilde or Milne, in the words of the originals. (Telling the stories instead of reading them, and by word-for-word memorizing, is the method of the library's story-tellers. "Who are we to improve on the language of Andersen or Grimm?" said one of them.)

Of others who enter the library on this day, a smartly dressed matron goes to the Reserve Desk in the Central Circulation room to pick up two books that are being held for her: *The Big Fisherman* and *Don't Be Afraid*. From the monthly list kept by this room of the most heavily reserved non-fiction books, one learns that books of the *Don't Be Afraid* genre are heavy leaders at this moment of history—an indication, no doubt, of the general malaise and search for panaceas. Among the titles appearing month after recent month are *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living, Peace of Mind, Yoga for You, Emotional Maturity, Make Your Life Worth While*, and *Try Giving Yourself Away*.

This list has proved useful in spotting and preparing for, throughout the library system, runs on certain types of books. Some of the trends are predictable: right after the war, books on automobile repair were in great demand (people could get gasoline, but no new cars). About half a year ago, however, the staff was baffled by a mounting wave of requests for primers on the sign language of the deaf and dumb—a wave that was felt in most of the branch libraries as well.

"What do you think it was?" says the Keeper of the List. "*Johnny Belinda!* You know, the movie about the doctor and the deaf-mute girl. People with relatives or friends in the same tragic situation wanted to communicate with them, and help them."

A man who might be a retired banker obtains at the Director's Office permission to consult the Reserve Room—a hold of books and papers printed before 1800, and of Special and Private Press books printed since. Once inside the iron grilled door of this preserve, and after signing its register, he asks for a file of the *New York Packet* for the year 1783. This he peruses diligently, searching (one learns) for mention of the wedding of one of his forebears.

Seated not far from him, a girl in navy blue is reading *A Counterblaste to Tobacco* in "The Workes" of King James I of England (1616), the most violent denunciation of tobacco ever written:

"Tobacco . . . hath a certain venemous facultie, joined with the heat thereof, which makes it have an Antipathy against nature, as by the hateful smel thereof doth well appeare . . . it is a smoke, all smoke and vapour, being of itselfe humide, as drawing near to the nature of the aire, and easie to be resolved again into water, whereof there needs no other proofe but the Meteors, which being bred of nothing else but of the vapors and exhalations sucked up by the Sun out of the earth, the sea, and waters, yet are the same smoakie vapors turned and transformed into raines, snowes, deawes, hoare frosts, and such like waterie Meteors. . . ."

One is surprised, among the Reserve Room's incunabula, at the excellent condition of ancient pages. It is chiefly the new books printed since 1850 (one learns), when rag gave way to wood pulp in the making of paper, that show their years and worry the library.

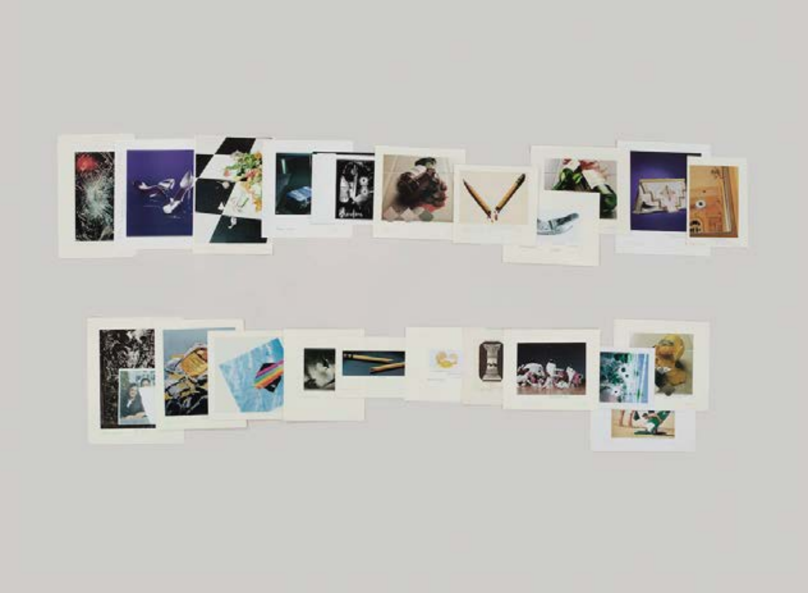
A rotund, foreign-looking man goes to the Print Room on the third floor. Mr. Kup, the curator, and his staff of three, who have seven *(Continued on page 121)*

VOGUE, AUGUST 1, 1949

A 1949 feature on the New York Public Library in Vogue magazine featured images, selected by Walker Evans, from the Picture Collection’s “Rear View” folder. Photo: Condé Nast.

Javitz openly contrasted the library’s approach to pictures with the aesthetic approach of the museum, which she saw as narrow and elitist. “Museums and art collections maintain collections of pictures selected as ends in themselves,” she wrote in a 1935 annual report. “It is only in a public library that pictures are organized as documents, not as good or bad art. Here the public come to make their own selection and find inspiration, stimulation, factual data, and opportunity for comparisons.” The shift from understanding pictures as “ends in themselves” — with corresponding imperatives for preservation and display — to understanding them as documents to be used by the public has profound conceptual implications. It shifts a philosophy of the image from an ontological plane that declares what images are to a pragmatist mode that seeks to understand how they *operate*. The conflict she identifies also anticipates arguments around the aestheticization of photography in the 1960s and 1970s lamented by theorists like Douglas Crimp, who argued that photography’s rediscovery as “an autonomous art” suppressed its origins and multiple functions. Crimp’s 1981 “The Museum’s Old, The Library’s New Subject” explicitly identifies the NYPL as an avatar of the epistemological shift of the 1970s, arguing that the 1980 founding of its photographic-collections department heralds a time when “books about Egypt will literally be torn apart” to extract their newly valuable tipped-in plates, and photographs formerly looked at for “information” will now be assessed for “style of expression.” Javitz not only named this discursive clash decades earlier but suggested an antidote to the “consolidation” of photography that Crimp feared: cultivating a community of users who are invited to define the image holdings as a collective ongoing project. In the 1935 quote, Javitz emphasizes the role of the public in making selections, as opposed to the author or expert, and highlights the multiplicity of meanings contained within a picture by listing the various uses to which a picture can be put. “In our collection every subject developed only because somebody asked for it,” Javitz reminded her staff in 1954. “We have grown only because the public has wanted us to grow and has needed us.”

Javitz’s philosophy of the image, realized in her institutional writing (newly compiled in an invaluable volume edited by Anthony T. Troncale), her personal correspondence, and the organization of the Picture Collection itself, is one that artists have intuitively understood and responded to. Dorothea Lange once said that it was the only place where she could see the inside of her head. According to Javitz, Diego Rivera told her that “the form of his conceptions was often fixed by the accident of material available in [the Picture Collection’s] files.” Andy Warhol, superlative observer of image circulation and proliferation in the twentieth century, was a longtime user; unreturned clippings with the telltale “Picture Collection” stamp are strewn throughout his time capsules. Walker Evans, often associated with a cold and clinical documentary style, betrays his irreverent side in a spread for a 1949 Vogue feature on the NYPL for which he included a full-page selection of various backsides from the Picture Collection’s “Rear View” category. Joseph Cornell and Javitz forged a friendship, exchanging letters, small gifts, and marveling observations of the everyday. He sent florid picture requests, often by mail, to what he once addressed as the “Needle-in-the-Haystack Dept.” for specific 1920s movie stills, nineteenth-century mailboats in Maine, and unusual portraits of Edgar Allen Poe.



Taryn Simon, Folder: Broken Objects, 2012, archival inkjet print, 47 × 62".

Most recently, Taryn Simon has explored the Picture Collection in a yearslong project, “The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection,” 2013–20. The series began with photographed collages of the contents of select subject folders, such as “Accidents” or “Broken Objects,” which seemed to register the excess of meaning that troubles ordering systems and the limits of classification, a theme in line with those of her previous projects, such as the “Image Atlas” (2012, with Aaron Swartz) and “An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar” (2007). As she continued to work on the Picture Collection series, however, the archival research itself appears to have taken on equal significance to her own prints. Her current New York exhibition at Gagosian and the elegant accompanying volume published by Cahiers d’Art foreground Javitz’s correspondence, clippings, and writings, capturing the institutional life of the collection and its intersections with artists, photographers, and government agencies. In vitrines, facsimiles of correspondence and prints by the likes of Lange and Evans that once circulated through the Picture Collection compete with Simon’s framed, wall-hung photographs, in which Picture Collection items seem to be oddly pinned under glass. Simon, along with other passionate artist-users of the collection, is now campaigning for the library to reconsider its archiving plan, championing the spontaneity and discovery that searching in person affords. Their efforts mirror an earlier campaign by artists to “save” the Picture Collection; in 1941, when the collection was under threat of closure because of budget cuts, a group called “Friends of the Picture Collection” noisily advocated in the press for its importance. Now, armed with digital tools, perhaps the collection’s devotees will prevail once again.

The decision to archive the Picture Collection is based on an implicit assumption that the printed picture has been superseded by the digital image. This assumption confers new value onto the material itself — select printed pictures, deemed historical for their technological outmodedness, must be preserved by the museum or archive. In an essay for Simon’s book, Joshua Chuang — the NYPL’s Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Associate Director for Art, Prints, and Photographs — invokes, via Rosalind Krauss and Walter Benjamin, Hegel’s famous metaphor of the owl of Minerva, suggesting that only at the moment of a given technology’s obsolescence can its impact be understood. Yet this metaphor, like the “analog Google Images” comparison that opened this essay, places too much emphasis on the technological medium, a pitfall of both tech solutionism and tech skepticism alike. Rather, I believe Javitz would argue that the technological form of a collection, and in turn the approach to the conservation of that collection, matters only as much as the forms of social life it encourages. Instead of preserving the images themselves, by maintaining the Picture Collection as a circulating, browsable, growing collection, the NYPL could instead preserve a philosophy of the image — a philosophy that is embodied and realized within the set of social relationships enacted spatially and temporally among the stacks.