

Exhibition Review



Sara Angelucci: Provenance Unknown. ART GALLERY OF YORK UNIVERSITY, TORONTO. Mounted at the Art Gallery of York University, 10 April–16 June 2013.

Both the use of archival material and the exploration of archival themes abound in contemporary art making today. Contemporary artists are increasingly incorporating archival records into their work, causing the viewer to look at and think about this material in new and challenging ways. Looking at exhibitions of this kind of art through an archival lens provides archivists with an opportunity to pause and reflect on some of the core concepts that underlie our work, such as memory, the politics of history, and the archival value of records. Such exhibitions also highlight the imaginative uses to which archival materials can be put in the hands of the artist. In *Sara Angelucci: Provenance Unknown* at the Art Gallery of York University, curator Emelie Chhangur brought together two new bodies of work by the artist that poignantly touched on issues around the value of anonymous photographs as well as on broader existential themes. The exhibition was one of the primary sites of the Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival, a month-long festival held throughout the Greater Toronto Area each May.

Sara Angelucci is a Toronto-based visual artist and educator who works in photography, video, and audio. In much of her work, she uses archival images as a starting point and explores “the cultural role vernacular images play in framing particular stories, creating histories, and memorialization.”¹ Her usual focus is the exploration of her own family history, using photographs sourced from family albums and home movies. Interestingly, in *Provenance Unknown*, she strays from this concentration on the familiar and focuses instead on

1 “Biography,” on Sara Angelucci’s website, accessed 12 July 2013, <http://www.sara-angelucci.ca/bio.htm>.

exploring the history of others. Her raw material is a number of anonymous nineteenth-century photographs purchased on eBay.

Upon entering the gallery, the viewer encountered an elaborate bird vitrine from the late nineteenth century, on loan from the Royal Ontario Museum. Bird sounds were audible in the background. Also on display was a Victorian parlour, complete with settee and an open photo album placed next to it on a side table. The album included four vintage nineteenth-century cartes-de-visite and one cabinet card. Hanging on the wall were several photographs of individuals and a family grouping with no identifying information provided. This room set the stage for the rest of the exhibition, where the bird theme and source images were used to new and imaginative ends.

The next room included thirteen cartes-de-visite and cabinet card photographic portraits of unidentified individuals that were enlarged and manipulated by the artist in a work she calls *Aviary* (see Figure 1). Using Photoshop, the artist had overlaid onto the photographic portraits images of extinct or endangered North American birds preserved in the Royal Ontario Museum's ornithology collection.² The resulting birdlike faces are visually fascinating and mysterious. Angelucci explains that she was inspired by "spirit photography" of the Victorian era, "a period when curious belief in otherworldly manifestations and ghostly apparitions held sway."³ The photographs "portray creatures about to become ghosts."⁴ Through her artistic intervention and use of new technologies overtop old photographic formats, Angelucci is saving these unnamed individuals from obscurity by giving them a new life and turning them into something else. By drawing a parallel between the extinct birds and the extinct individuals, the artist is also drawing out existential themes of being and loss, memory, and the fragility of human life.

2 "Sara Angelucci: Provenance Unknown" in "Spring 2013 Newsletter: Out There: Free as a Bird," Art Gallery of York University, accessed 10 August 2013, <http://theagyuisoutthere.org/everywhere/?p=4207>.

3 "Aviary – Project Statement," on Sara Angelucci's website, accessed 22 May 2013, <http://www.sara-angelucci.ca/aviary.htm>.

4 Ibid.



Figure 1. *Aviary (Red-Headed Woodpecker/threatened)* by Sara Angelucci. Inkjet, 2013. Photo: Cheryl O'Brien. Courtesy of Art Gallery of York University.



Figure 2. Installation view of *Anonymous Chorus* by Sara Angelucci from *Provenance Unknown*, Art Gallery of York University (10 April–16 June 2013), curated by Emelie Chhangur. Photo: Cheryl O’Brien. Courtesy of Art Gallery of York University.

The second work in the exhibition, *The Anonymous Chorus*, consisted of a ten-minute, large-scale video projection of the same family photograph seen in the first gallery of the exhibition (see Figure 2). In a darkened room, the viewer was invited to sit and watch this video, which was accompanied by haunting choral music by the American composer Charles Ives and performed by the Oakham House Choir of Ryerson University, Toronto, and the Toronto Angel Choir, with whom the artist had collaborated.⁵ Other sounds were present as well, including wind, birds, and a passing train, evoking the atmosphere of the photo. One segment of the video showed water running over the photograph, possibly a reference to the darkroom developing process used in the pre-digital days of photography. Spotlights slowly appeared and focused on different faces in the photograph, highlighting individuals that the viewer may not have noticed on first glance. The viewer was left wondering about the identities and lives of these individuals and the occasion that gave rise to the taking of this photograph. As in *Aviary*, Angelucci has given the subjects in the photograph a

5 “Sara Angelucci: *Provenance Unknown*,” Art Gallery of York University exhibit pamphlet, 2013.

new life. As she writes: “*The Anonymous Chorus* refuses the image’s anonymous status, reaching out through sound to invoke the living presence of those depicted.”⁶ Though the identities of the sitters are unknown, Angelucci’s work tells us that the experiences and lives of human beings – identified or unidentified – are precious and worth remembering.

As the title of the exhibition indicates, the archival photographs used by Angelucci have no known provenance. *Provenance* is a term used in both the archival and art fields but with different meanings. While archivists refer to provenance as the organization or individual who created, accumulated, and/or used the records in the conduct of personal or business life, art historians define the term as the history of ownership of a work of art.⁷ In the case of Angelucci’s work, not only do we not know the provenance according to either meaning of the word, we also do not know the names of the subjects depicted in the photos or any other information about them. While this lack of descriptive context is of less concern in an art gallery setting, in which these images are being used for creative ends, looking at these images from an archival perspective brings to mind issues around the many unidentified photographs held by archival repositories, their value as archival records, and how we provide access to them. Rodney Carter has explored this topic in depth in his master of information studies thesis, “The Other Archives: The Archival Value of Photographs of Anonymous People.”⁸ While he acknowledges the difficult decisions that need to be made in this age of scarce financial and human resources, he argues that anonymous photographs do have archival value and that “if identification plays a key role in the decision of whether or not to keep a photograph, there is a real danger that photographic archives will become archives of the ‘Great Men of History,’ at the expense of the unnamed individuals, who often did not recognize the potential value of their photographs to others over time.”⁹ He makes a case for the greater use of subject terms to describe photographs and cites others who have found that “users are typically not seeking images through their creators.”¹⁰ As he writes: “Once a photograph, or any other document, is identified as fulfilling functions in society that are important and is then made available for use, researchers are

6 “The Anonymous Chorus, 2013,” on Sara Angelucci’s website, accessed 28 May 2013, http://www.sara-angelucci.ca/the_anonymous_choir.htm.

7 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, “Appendix D: Glossary,” in *Rules for Archival Description*, rev. ed. (Ottawa, 2008), D-7, http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/RAD/RAD_Glossary_July2008.pdf (accessed 22 May 2013); International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR), “Provenance Guide,” http://www.ifar.org/provenance_guide.php (accessed 22 May 2013).

8 Rodney George Simpson Carter, “The Other Archives: The Archival Value of Photographs of Anonymous People” (master’s thesis, Faculty of Information Studies, University of Toronto, 2005).

9 *Ibid.*, 52.

10 *Ibid.*, 84.

only limited in finding uses for the photographs by their own imagination.”¹¹ Angelucci’s work reminds us that though removed from their provenance, photographs of anonymous people still have a lot to tell us as objects, in and of themselves, about the time period in which they were created and about the act and purpose of taking individual and group portraits.

Provenance Unknown demonstrates that in the hands of an artist, anonymity and the absence of provenance can actually become powerful attributes of a photographic image.

Elana Sadinsky
Archives of Ontario

11 Ibid., 56.