

Exhibition Reviews



Arthur S. Goss: Works and Days. UNIVERSITY GALLERY, RYERSON IMAGE CENTRE. Curated by BLAKE FITZPATRICK and JOHN BENTLEY MAYS. Mounted at Ryerson University, Toronto, 1 May–2 June and 19 June–25 August 2013. Publication: *Arthur S. Goss: Works and Days* (Toronto: Ryerson Image Centre, 2013), 47 pp.

The selected Arthur S. Goss images on display this past year at the University Gallery of the Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto, ambitiously tackled the idea of representing the quotidian in the archival document and raised the problem of how to interpret meaningfully the context of a large volume of material in the selection of a representative sample. Broken into eleven sequential slice-of-life units of four to nine images each, the *Works and Days* exhibition represented Goss's thirty-seven-year career as Toronto's official photographer, featuring a selection of daily tasks emphasizing the "serial, rational-procedural character"¹ of Goss's image-making activities as "a photographer embedded in, and beholden to, an early twentieth-century urban bureaucracy."² Goss, who started his civic career as an office boy and worked his way up to clerk and draftsman, was appointed the City's head of photography and blueprinting in 1911 and went on to create more than 35,000 documentary images of Toronto before his death in 1940. Some of these images, including Goss's iconic photographs of slum dwellings in the Toronto Centre Ward, have been more widely exhibited than others, leading to Goss's "haloed ... reputation [as] a social reformer," a representation that curators Blake Fitzpatrick and John Bentley Mays sought to refute with their selections for this new exhibition.³

- 1 Blake Fitzpatrick and John Bentley Mays, "Arthur S. Goss: Works and Days," in *Arthur S. Goss: Works and Days* [exhibition book] (Toronto: Ryerson Image Centre, 2013), 38.
- 2 Blake Fitzpatrick and John Bentley Mays, "Arthur S. Goss: Works and Days," in *Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival* [program] (Toronto: Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival, 2013), 88.
- 3 Fitzpatrick and Mays, *Arthur S. Goss*, 37.

In the exhibition, the idea of work orders fulfilled within a bureaucratic office was conveyed through short, directive-like wall texts, which grouped the chronologically arranged images into units: Tracks, Telegraph Poles, Concrete Piles, Weighing Machines, and so on. In this manner, the curators hoped to present a new angle on Goss's body of work: "Our familiarity with the typologies of Bernd and Hilla Becher and the importance of the inventory to the methodological practices of their work prepared us to discover in Goss's daily assignments a correspondence to the deadpan, deflationary aesthetic of many contemporary artists."⁴

The Goss photographs, however, do not easily lend themselves to the contemporary or postmodern perspective that typifies the reception of the Becher photographs, which are much more formally composed in their aesthetic consideration and documentation of the industrialized world and its architecture. For one thing, the Becher photographs of giant factories and industrial buildings, taken starting in the late 1950s, were deliberately retrospective, examining an architecture already in decline when the pictures were taken. In contrast, Goss's photographs are of an industrial transformation that is very much current with his activities as a photographer.

A number of tensions arise as a result of this reappraisal of Goss's work. Inevitably there is a dehumanizing element present in the selection process, a kind of razoring of time and scale that is hard to fathom when the images are removed from the archive and presented in the quiet, darkened gallery space. Why these eleven days? Why these particular images out of the tens of thousands created during Goss's tenure? There is an elevation of the quotidian object to objet d'art that cannot quite be reconciled with the routine, impersonal interpretation of the images that the curators hoped to elicit from the viewer. While examining the unit on Defective Pavement, for example, one is inevitably drawn to the background, in which two young girls in light summer dresses flit in and out of the frame. Goss probably did not discourage the girls from being in the photograph, but because they appear blurry and out of focus it is also evident that he was not posing them. They are incidental to his operational directive to take pictures of cracked pavement. The background is arguably more interesting than the foreground, but the utility of the photograph is in its foreground.

This disorienting effect is not out of keeping with the idea of reappraisal. The images ask to be viewed in multiple contexts: as historical evidence, as snapshots of a city undergoing rapid transformation, as surveillance documents for an administration with a vested interest in promoting its own development, or as potential advertisements for an emerging world-class metropolis. The

4 Ibid., 38. The work of photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher is characterized by its industrial subject matter and the methodical classification of the represented structures according to type or form; for an overview of their work, see, for example, Susanne Lange, *Bernd & Hilla Becher: Life and Work* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

exhibition was therefore successful in raising questions about the nature of evidence posed by archival photographs. The curators were also keenly aware that not all of these questions can be answered even by examining the entirety of the archive. The issue of missing information within the archival record was raised in the accompanying exhibition book and forms what the curators addressed as “the paradoxical pleasure of the archive. Aligned with fact and knowledge, we expect the archive to be a source of truth, but in actual practice we are so often overwhelmed by an abundance of fragmentary evidence that the experience is actually closer to one of astonishment.”⁵

I found myself experiencing a René Magritte moment. Confronting the well-known surrealist painting *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, the viewer is asked to come to his or her own conclusion about the veracity of what he/she sees. Likewise, I wondered what sense to make of photographs of cracked pavement or concrete piles. How literally are we meant to interpret what we see?



Arthur S. Goss: *Works and Days* (installation view), 2013 © Eugen Sakhnenko, Ryerson Image Centre.

With little in the way of textual support on the walls of the gallery space, the gravest weakness of the exhibition was the sense that one needed to look elsewhere for the necessary information to fill in the context of the displayed images. Merely presenting a new arrangement of Goss photographs does not assist the

5 Ibid., 42.

viewer in uncovering the framework of their function as bureaucratic documents, but rather glosses over the missing elements of the archival record that might help us form an understanding of their use within that historical context. In particular, because of the emphasis on the quotidian subject matter, there was a pervasive unevenness in the quality of the images selected for the distinct units of the exhibition. The creation of enlarged digital prints made from original scratched, overexposed, blurry, and sometimes damaged glass negatives artificially homogenized the look of the prints and prevented us from knowing how the distinct images were originally used, reproduced, and ultimately stored and archived. This decision raises the issue of authenticity when reproducing archival images. It might have been helpful to provide wall text or an information section on the process of creating these reproductions from archival negatives, along with the reasons for including images with obvious flaws in a gallery showing, with all the cultural elevation of the quotidian image that such a space implies.

Sarah Bassnett's article "Arthur S. Goss: Photography and the Modernization of Toronto," included in the exhibition book, explores more fully the historical context of Goss's extensive photographic catalogue, placing Goss in the context of a city undergoing massive geopolitical transformation. In this light, the banality of concrete piles underpinning the city's harbour foreshadows the industrial transformation of Toronto, a city that proclaims its greatness with the world's fifth- or sixth-largest freestanding concrete pile as its towering architectural centrepiece. Bassnett also places the images in the context of the "regulation of the city's streetscape as at once a commercial and a sociopolitical space."⁶

In *Archivaria* 54, Anastasia Rodgers tackled this historical context regarding the building of the Bloor Street Viaduct in Toronto, underpinning the importance of photography:

This civic agenda was best achieved using the medium of photography, for no other medium could so systematically represent the progress of the project and its majestic completion. Furthermore, the photographic style of Arthur Goss was particularly useful in achieving these dual aims: Goss was not only a meticulous documentarian, but also he had an artistic sensibility that imbued the construction photographs with an air of beauty.⁷

Given the evidence on display in the *Works and Days* exhibition, it is probably fair to qualify Rodgers' claim with the stipulation that, among the tens of thousands of photographs taken by Goss during his tenure, some were less beautiful than others. Certainly, some were fairly perfunctory.

6 Sarah Bassnett, "Arthur S. Goss: Photography and the Modernization of Toronto," in *Arthur S. Goss: Works and Days* (Toronto: Ryerson Image Centre, 2013), 23.

7 Anastasia Rodgers, "Constructing Beauty: The Photographs Documenting the Construction of the Bloor Viaduct," *Archivaria* 54 (Fall 2002), 73.

Rodgers noted how Goss meticulously documented his professional work: “He maintained intellectual control ... by assigning the developed negatives to a category and by numbering, dating, and titling each one by writing backwards across the bottom of the negative with India ink.”⁸ This practice seems like an important aspect of Goss’s process, perhaps as important as the images themselves. When the evidence of an arrangement principle is written backwards by hand on the bottom of the negative, it is probably worth noting in the presentation of a thematic arrangement of prints made from those negatives. Some additional context may have opened up a more reflective contemplation of the images chosen for the *Works and Days* exhibition. Given the concision of the presentation, it seems that the curators expected the images would speak for themselves. Unfortunately, that resulted in the chosen units looking more like a random selection than exemplars of a bureaucratic process.

The Ryerson Image Centre has emerged as a new collecting institution in Toronto with a focus on documentary photography, bolstered by the anonymous 2005 donation of 292,000 images in the Black Star Collection. While this collection remains the cornerstone of the centre’s holdings, the *Works and Days* exhibition was just one of several recent exhibitions featuring images curated from other repositories, including the National Gallery of Canada. The centre has also acquired a number of smaller personal archival collections, a list of which can be accessed on its website, via the home page menu.⁹ No finding aids or catalogues of the holdings are yet available online, but research requests can be submitted directly to the centre’s staff by email. The gallery is free to the general public.

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Life on the Grid: 100 Years of Street Photography in Toronto. CITY OF TORONTO ARCHIVES. Curated by PATRICK CUMMINS. Mounted at the City of Toronto Archives, Toronto, 27 June 2013–May 2014.

We have long been fascinated with the evolution of our built environment; photographs of a streetscape from a century ago capture our attention as we attempt to trace change and relate to the past. Often this interaction can be very personal: we may forge surprisingly strong relationships with our physical surroundings by looking back and noting how these spaces have changed. The City of Toronto Archives’ current exhibition, *Life on the Grid: 100 Years*

⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁹ Ryerson Image Centre, Research & Collections, “Collections,” accessed 30 September 2013, <http://www.ryerson.ca/ric/research/collections.html>.