

Extended Abstract for Helsinki Photomedia Conference 2026

Theme: Placeholders

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Re-Placeholders

Photographic Evidence, Archival Practice, and Artistic Inquiry

Artistic Research Between Archive and Imagination

My artistic practice investigates the function of placeholders within archival systems and within the self-constructed archival infrastructures that my projects generate. Many of my processes begin in institutional collections, where I search for objects and photographs that produce unexpected insights or reveal overlooked connections between historical narratives.

I treat these finds as “artistic resources,” translating them into new constellations that intertwine theoretical and aesthetic perspectives. This work unfolds at the intersections of forensics, historiography, archival studies, and documentary–artistic strategies. It resonates with Allan Sekula’s description of archives as “territories of images,” in which photography serves both evidentiary and imaginative functions. For me, interdisciplinarity is not an external framework but the internal condition through which the work becomes legible. It shapes the ways audiences encounter the narratives that emerge within my installations, artist books, and archival constellations.

Placeholders as Indicators of Absence and Presence

Placeholders mark information, objects, or sites that are only partially accessible or fundamentally unrepresentable. They function as provisional stand-ins that compensate for gaps, signal lost or inaccessible material, and open interpretive spaces. In my research, placeholders operate as indicators that simultaneously point toward something and attest to its existence. They therefore occupy an evidentiary status—one that is always tied to context, perspective, and narrative regimes. A digital catalogue image is a useful example: it reproduces an object while confirming its presence in the collection. Such mediated stand-ins form the conceptual basis for my term *Re-Placeholders*, which names the artistic and photographic transformations that extend, reinterpret, or re-situate archival traces.

Methodology: Between Real and Fictional Evidence

My methodology is grounded in the generative tension between real and fictional evidence. I work deliberately with both: the placeholder as archival trace, and the Re-Placeholder as its artistic rearticulation. The most productive moments arise where these categories intersect, forming an expanded narrative field. This constellation echoes Sekula’s insistence that archives do not merely reproduce meaning but unsettle, challenge, and mobilize it.

The Re-Placeholder introduces a speculative dimension into documentation practices. It does not replace the archival object but creates additional layers of meaning that question the stability of the photographic act itself.

Case Study I: Svalbard Museum – Time, Materiality, and Geopolitical Resonances

In the context of my current project *After Us*, I conducted research in the Svalbard Museum archive in Longyearbyen. Before my arrival, I encountered an improvised calendar made of threaded plastic bottle caps in the museum's online catalogue. Its function was unclear, yet the associated keywords—mining, Barentsburg, iceberg—opened a dense field of associations.

Seeing the object in person revealed aspects impossible to discern from digital reproduction: material wear, scale, technical improvisation, and possible provenance. My photographs of the calendar became Re-Placeholders, reframing the object and charging it with new relevance in relation to my research questions.

My engagement with the object moved beyond its origins in the Russian mining settlement of Barentsburg. It intersected with present geopolitical tensions, including Russia's position in the Arctic and in current global conflicts. Additionally, the calendar raised questions about how time is structured in an environment where natural cycles are disrupted by months of darkness. In such contexts, timekeeping becomes a navigational tool that counters sensory instability. The calendar's improvised form thus becomes a material negotiation of orientation, survival, and perception at the margins of habitability.

Case Study II: Canterbury Museum – Photography as Trace and Inquiry

Further research took place at the Canterbury Museum in Christchurch, New Zealand, where I studied artefacts from early Antarctic expeditions. Among these were fragile photographic negatives from Captain Scott's Terra Nova Hut as well as materials related to broader histories of polar exploration. These negatives bear traces of their historical circumstances and of the conservation processes that ensured their survival.

Photographing these negatives myself sharpened questions about photographic evidence. Each image referenced the Antarctic find site—preserved by the Antarctic Heritage Trust—while simultaneously foregrounding the instability of photographic truth today. The material raised urgent questions: What is the evidentiary status of photography in an age defined by artificial intelligence? How do images operate within contemporary truth discourses? And how might photography continue to function as a research instrument for both scientific and artistic forms of knowledge?

The project will culminate in a mixed-media installation and an artist book integrating research notes, textual fragments, and interviews with individuals who supported the research, including Adele Jackson, Artist and Curator of Human History at the Canterbury Museum, and Trygve Sikveland Røysland, writer and archaeologist at the Svalbard Museum.

Long-term Project *Falscher Hase*: The Archive as Artistic Form

Since 2020, my long-term project *Falscher Hase* has approached the archive itself as an artistic medium. The resulting online archive (<http://falscherhase.jana-mueller.de>) is a continuously expanding system whose point of departure is the recollections of my father, a former detective in the GDR. His memories expose a state-orchestrated production of visibility and invisibility. The unspoken, the withheld, and the institutionally erased become foundational components of this archive.

Through photographic investigation, I follow traces embedded in objects, locations, documents, and personal belongings such as Stasi-issued document bags. Their transformation through photography turns them into indices of a narrative mesh that gestures toward a past without reconstructing it. The resulting narrative emerges between trace, interpretation, and fiction, operating in the space where uncertainty and historical opacity intertwine.

On the Limits of Visibility

The research addresses phenomena that remain in the shadows: personal memories marked by trauma, inaccessible or sealed state archives, and contexts shaped by political precarity. Marking these limits of visibility makes it possible to reflect on how cultures negotiate gaps, opacity, and silence—and how narratives take shape precisely within these spaces.

In exhibitions and artist books, the archive appears as an aesthetic and spatial structure, taking the form of montages, installations, or narrative environments. Its order remains intentionally unstable, fragmentary, and open, functioning as an archive that processes rather than preserves. My artist book *Falscher Hase / Mock Rabbit*, published by Monroe Books in 2024, brings together interviews with my father, memories from my own childhood, and documentation of my investigative process.

Photography as Forensic and Speculative Medium: The Role of Re-Placeholders

Photography plays a dual role in my methodology: it functions as a tool of artistic forensic investigation and as a medium of speculation. It records, interprets, interrogates, and overwrites. The camera becomes both a scientific instrument and an artistic device. In this dual function, my photographs become Re-Placeholders — evidentiary objects within a process of tracing that simultaneously reflect on their own conditions of evidence.

Keywords

- Photography of absence
- Invisible traces
- Forensics and evidentiary practices
- (State) Archives
- Artistic research