

Managing Photography: Curatorial Practices, Narrative Frameworks, and Critical Perspectives

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Abstract

Initially emerging as a documentary tool, photography has evolved into a significant artistic medium that conveys aesthetic, cultural, and political meanings. This study examines the transformation of photography into an art object, with a particular focus on curatorial practices and art management frameworks. It explores how meaning is constructed through modes of exhibition, thematic organization, spatial design, and viewer interaction. Within this process, curators are considered not merely as technical arrangers but as intellectual agents shaping visual narratives. While Barthes' concepts of *studium* and *punctum* reveal the individual and cultural layers of viewer experience, the theoretical approaches of Foucault's mechanisms of surveillance, Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Baudrillard's notion of simulation provide a critical basis for understanding photography's relationship with ideology and social structures. Case studies including Ara Güler's exhibition *Two Archives, One Selection* and Henri Cartier-Bresson's *Le Grand Jeu* illustrate how curatorial strategies can profoundly influence photographic meaning. These examples demonstrate that photography's exhibition is not merely a matter of aesthetic presentation but functions as an apparatus for constructing visual culture, reshaping collective memory, and fostering critical reflection.

1. Introduction

Throughout its historical journey, which began in the 19th century with its function as a means of documentation, photography has transcended its role as a mere technical recording device and has gradually become one of the most important forms of artistic expression. Initially used to reflect reality in an objective manner, this medium has gained a unique place in the

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visual arts with technological developments and transformations in aesthetic approaches. This transformation has elevated photography from a mere visual document to a tool that produces intellectual and cultural meanings.

The process of photography's evolution into an art object is directly related to changes in both production and presentation forms. Artists began to use photography not merely as a tool for recording what is visible, but as a means of expression to convey their intellectual worlds, emotions, and critical perspectives. Thus, photography has been repositioned within an aesthetic discourse and has become an active component of artistic creation. With the rise of conceptual art, the function of photography has gone beyond its documentary nature; the meaning of the image has begun to be understood as a reality that is constantly reconstructed within its context.

Especially since the mid-20th century, the experimental aspect of photography has become more pronounced; artists have seen photography as an effective tool for addressing social, political, and cultural issues. Within this framework, photography has gained a narrative form that not only shows what is but also questions and transforms it. These developments have enabled photography to go beyond its function of merely reflecting reality, allowing it to present the viewer with a reality that is interpreted and reimaged. Photography has thus become a field of production open to interdisciplinary approaches that carry critical thinking within modern and contemporary art.

Today, photography is recognized as one of the leading forms of visual art; it has found a wide place for itself in exhibitions shaped by curatorial strategies, especially in the context of contemporary art. This transformation also brings with it a redefinition of the relationship established with the viewer. The transformation of photography into a work of art requires a redefinition of the relationship it establishes with the viewer and the role of the viewer in the process of meaning production (Barrett, 2020). In this context, the viewer ceases to be a passive consumer of images and becomes one of the constituent elements of the narrative. In this transformation, art management and curatorial practices are accepted as fundamental tools that shape the meaning of photography and present it as a form of cultural expression (Crary, 1990). Curators and art managers play a decisive role in determining how photography will be exhibited, what themes it will be associated with, and in what contextual framework it will be presented to the viewer. These decisions reflect not only aesthetic or technical preferences but also artistic and cultural perspectives. Within the scope of this study, the forementioned transformation will be examined in terms of its conceptual

and practical aspects; the functioning of art management and curatorial processes within the framework of photography exhibition practices, their effects on meaning, and the ways in which they are presented to the audience will be investigated.

2. The Transformation of Photography into An Art Object

When photography was invented in the 19th century, it was primarily used as a means of documentation. Believed to reflect reality directly and objectively, photography gradually evolved from a mere recording technique into an aesthetic, conceptual, and cultural art form. Especially since the early 20th century, artists have begun to use photography not only to record what is visible, but also as a tool for intellectual and emotional expression (Berger, 1972) . This transformation has redefined photography's place in art and positioned it as a unique language of expression. Thus, photography has become a multi-layered communication tool that not only reflects reality but also mirrors the artist's worldview, social critiques, and personal expressions. The emergence of photography as an art object has led to profound changes in the art world, not only in production practices but also in exhibition methods. Art photography has gained aesthetic value through original compositions, experimental techniques, and conceptual frameworks, and has thus begun to be perceived as a work of art (Cotton, 2020) . In this process, the meanings conveyed by photography in terms of both content and form have diversified, shaping it into a form of communication that encourages the viewer to go beyond simply looking at an image and instead analyze and interpret it. This new role of photography has enabled it to interact with different disciplines of art and expand boundaries. In this context, curatorial strategies also play a critical role in presenting photography as an art object and in the relationship, it establishes with the viewer (Groys, 2008) . Curators act as mediators who reveal the meaning of the work by deciding in which context, with what narrative, and around which themes to exhibit the photograph. Thus, the exhibition space and presentation form directly influence the meaning production process of the photograph while also strengthening the viewer's interaction with it.

Elements such as the selection of photographs, the form of exhibition, the design of the exhibition space, and the creation of contextual frameworks deepen the layers of meaning in photography. Contemporary photography exhibitions, in particular, reveal how photography is structured as a narrative medium and how it is presented to the viewer (Obrist, 2008) . The role played by curators and art managers in this structuring process is not merely technical or logistical, but also interpretive and directive. Exhibition strategies

guide the viewer's perception, highlighting the photograph's open-ended nature. Thus, photography has become not only an aesthetic object, but also a vehicle for social, cultural, and political narratives. One of the most important examples of this transformation can be seen in the work of Cindy Sherman. Sherman, particularly in her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1980) series, created staged scenes that question issues of identity, gender, and representation, using photography not merely as a recording device but as a performative form of expression. The performative aspect seen in Sherman's works removes the viewer from the role of a passive observer and places them in the position of an active interpreter of the visual narrative. Similarly, Andreas Gursky's large-scale photographs offer a critical perspective on globalization, consumer culture, and the concept of space, combining technical mastery with aesthetic and conceptual depth. Gursky's works reflect the transformative power of contemporary photography by using it not only as a representation but also as a tool for questioning and exposing. Bernd and Hilla Becher, on the other hand, have systematically documented industrial structures through their typological photography, transforming an objective and analytical approach into an aesthetic form and revealing the artistic potential of photography. Their works have been influential in the development of the Düsseldorf School and have proven that photography can carry both documentary and artistic value. This approach highlights the blurred boundaries between photography's documentary function and its aesthetic presentation. Important exhibitions in the field of contemporary art have also made visible the transformation of photography into an art object. For example, the exhibition *Cruel and Tender: The Real in the Twentieth-Century Photograph*, which opened at Tate Modern in 2003, emphasized both photography's relationship with reality and its aesthetic and conceptual narrative power. Such exhibitions do not merely confront the viewer with an image; they also engage them in a process of critical thinking, questioning, and discovery of multiple layers of meaning. Structured through curatorial strategies, this experience reveals the expressive power of photography while also establishing its place within contemporary art practice on a more solid ground.

3. Curatorial Practices and the Presentation of Photography

Curatorial practices are strategic interventions that go beyond presenting photography as merely an aesthetic object, reinterpreting it within specific conceptual, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts (Akengin, 2014). These interventions are based on the idea that exhibition designs are not just presentations but also create a conceptual framework. Within this framework, photography becomes a tool that poses questions and

opens areas for discussion rather than directly presenting information to the viewer. In this context, art management processes transform the ways in which photographs are perceived and interpreted through multi-layered dynamics such as spatial organization, thematic structuring, and contextual placement, which determine the relationship between photographs and viewers (Paul, 2012) . These multifaceted dynamics are not limited to the visual arrangements of photographs; they also consist of a series of curatorial elements such as spatial design, use of light, movement routes, thematic divisions, and textual contexts that guide the viewer's relationship with the exhibition space. From the moment the viewer enters the exhibition, these elements shape not only visual perception but also intellectual and emotional interaction. In this context, curatorial strategies present photography not merely as an object to be viewed but as an experiential narrative containing guiding structures (Bruce W. Ferguson, 1996) . The viewer is no longer merely a passive observer consuming images throughout the exhibition; instead, they become an active subject who constructs meaning through constructed contexts, conceptual frameworks, and spatial directions. Thus, the ways in which photographs are perceived are reconstructed not only at the level of content but also through the form of presentation. This deepens and directs the meaning-making processes that the viewer develops through their visual experience.

The way a photograph is displayed directly influences how it is perceived by the viewer. This perception process is not limited to a visual experience; it also creates a multi-layered field of interpretation that encompasses historical, cultural, and individual layers. As Roland Barthes noted in his work *Camera Lucida* (1980), photography addresses both cultural codes and individual emotional responses through the concepts of *studium* and *punctum* (Barthes, 1980) . *Studium* enables the viewer to interpret the photograph in a cultural, sociological, or historical context, while *punctum* refers to an inexplicable emotional contact that suddenly affects the viewer on a personal level. In this context, the way the photograph is exhibited becomes one of the fundamental factors that activate Barthes' two levels. Curatorial presentations are designed to direct the impact of photography on these two levels; factors such as the architectural structure of the exhibition space, the physical scale of the photograph, the viewing distance, and the order of presentation strategically influence the dual perception defined by Barthes. For example, presenting a large black-and-white photograph alone in a spacious and empty exhibition hall intensifies the viewer's experience of the *punctum* effect, while in a narrow and crowded exhibition space, groups of photographs arranged in chronological or thematic order may initiate a more analytical reading process on the *studium* plane. Presenting a

single photograph as an independent work of art emphasizes its individual meaning, while photographic series construct more comprehensive narratives by establishing relational connections between images. In this context, when the viewer focuses on a single frame, the emotional or aesthetic elements it contains are directly perceived, while comparisons between images within a series can highlight the multifaceted and layered structure of the narrative. On the other hand, Susan Sontag, in her work *On Photography* (1973), questions the representational capacity of photography in relation to reality and points out how the forms of exhibition transform the meaning of photography (Sontag, 1973). According to Sontag, presenting photographs in a specific order directs the viewer's perception of reality and sometimes manipulates the visual experience. This statement reveals that curators' exhibition choices are not only aesthetic but also ethical and political. For example, presenting war photographs in a gallery setting as decorative objects may cause the viewer to perceive the violence or suffering contained in the images from an aesthetic distance. Conversely, placing these images in a disturbing manner close to the viewer or presenting them sequentially at eye level may aim to emotionally unsettle the viewer. In this context, curatorial strategies can be interpreted not only as aesthetic preferences but also as conscious mechanisms of construction that produce ideological effects on the viewer. Exhibition practices expand, limit, or completely reconstruct the meaning of a photograph because they create a space where the viewer not only sees but also thinks, questions, and feels. In addition, spatial arrangements and thematic frameworks can influence the emotional and intellectual responses that photographs evoke in viewers. Elements such as how the exhibition route guides the viewer, where the lighting is concentrated, or which photographs are placed next to each other can consciously direct the viewer's perception. As Rosalind Krauss argues in *The Optical Unconscious* (1993), with the transition from modernist to postmodernist approaches to photography, the direct representational power of photography has been replaced by conceptual and contextual readings (Krauss, 1994). Krauss argues that the emphasis on formal purity in modernist aesthetics excludes unconscious visual codes. According to her, this "optical unconscious" does not appear on the surface of representation but in its structural cracks and distortions. In this context, photography is no longer merely a documentation of a moment but also raises questions about how that moment is perceived, what it serves, and the context in which it is presented. In postmodernist approaches, photography is not treated as a representation of reality but as a text through which reality is constructed, and both the production process and the form of exhibition are evaluated within a critical framework. This transition can also be clearly observed in curatorial presentations, as photography is now used as a tool

that involves the viewer in a thought process, rather than simply presenting them with a visual object. Curatorial arrangements can be designed to reveal the historical, psychoanalytic, or ideological layers that are not immediately apparent on the surface of the photograph, as Krauss emphasizes. The exhibition space is not only intended to display photographs but also to provoke thought, thereby transforming the viewer from a consumer into an active subject participating in the process of meaning production. In this context, the curatorial language of photography exhibitions redefines not only the aesthetic boundaries of art but also the relationship it establishes with the viewer.

4. Photography in The Context of Critical Perspectives

Although photography initially emerged as a mere documentation tool, it has evolved over time into an important art form with social, cultural, and ideological dimensions. This transformation has been further deepened by its association with critical theories, and the role of art management has been vital in this transformation. The meaning of photography is shaped not only by visual elements but also by the influence of art management and curatorial strategies (Soutter, 2018). In this context, Michel Foucault's concepts of "visual control" and "power based on observation" offer a critical perspective on how photography has become a means of control in a social context and how it is incorporated into art management processes (Foucault, 1975). Foucault's concepts of power relations and observation reveal how a control mechanism is established in the processes of exhibiting and presenting photographs to the audience, thereby demonstrating how the meaning of photographs is directed. Photographs are not merely art objects, but also tools that reveal social structures. On the other hand, Jean Baudrillard, in his work *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), emphasizes that photography has the function of reproducing and simulating reality beyond its function of "representing reality" (Baudrillard, 1981). When the presentation and exhibition of photography in art management are evaluated in light of this theoretical approach, the viewer's perception of reality is reconstructed in the environment where the photograph is presented. Photography does not merely reflect what is visible; it also manipulates the viewer's perceptions of reality, which is directly related to the curatorial strategies of art managers (Sassoon, 2007). For example, in a photography exhibition, how photographs are placed, what lighting is used, and what theme is used to create a context determine how the viewer perceives the meaning of the photograph. In this context, the meaning of the photograph is shaped not only by visual elements but also by the organization of the space and thematic frameworks.

Relating photography to critical theories plays an important role in understanding how art management and curatorial practices use photography as an ideological tool. Judith Butler's theories of gender can be used in the context of art management to understand the role of photography in the construction of social identity (Butler, 1990). Butler's concept of "gender performance" allows us to examine how photography represents social categories such as gender, race, and class, and how these representations create ideological effects on the viewer. The exhibition of photography in the context of art management enables the reinforcement or questioning of these performative representations. For example, a photograph can reinforce stereotypical representations of a gender or race, or it can subvert these representations. In other words, it reveals that photography is not only a visual but also an ideological form of expression. These critical perspectives demonstrate how art management can transform the meaning of photography as a tool and offer the viewer different perspectives.

The presentation of photography is not merely an aesthetic choice, but also an important element in understanding social structures and ideologies. These presentation forms play an active role in directing visual culture by determining how a work of art will be perceived, in what context it will be evaluated, and what impact it will have on the viewer. Curatorial strategies in the exhibition of photography and art shape the meaning of photography in a multi-layered way and deepen the viewer's visual experience (Manovich, 2002). As Manovich emphasizes, with the digitization of visual media, the viewer's experience is now linked not only to physical space but also to conceptual frameworks and technological interfaces, thereby increasing the impact of curatorial decisions. For this reason, the management of photography enables art managers to develop exhibition practices by understanding social and cultural power relations. Art management ensures that photography is used not only as an aesthetic but also as a cultural and social means of expression. Art managers not only introduce works of art but also have the power to shape the viewer's perception of the work by positioning it within a specific discourse. In this context, art management can be regarded not only as an organizational process but also as a form of political and cultural intervention. The themes used in exhibiting photographs, the spatial arrangements, and the interaction established with the audience reconstruct the meaning of the photograph. When these elements come together, the audience is not only presented with a visual experience; a narrative is also created that directs them toward certain intellectual positions. Critical theories provide a fundamental framework for understanding how these meaning changes within the context of art

management and how the viewer relates to this meaning. In particular, structuralist and post-structuralist approaches highlight the ideological dimension of curatorial decisions by revealing that the meaning of an artwork is not fixed but rather constantly re-produced according to context, the viewer, and the form of exhibition.

5. Exhibition Examples and Analysis

Contemporary photography exhibitions reveal how curatorial approaches transform the meaning of photography and redefine its relationship with the viewer. In this context, exhibitions selected from both Turkey and Western Europe demonstrate how curators construct unique narratives through aesthetic, conceptual, and spatial strategies. Exhibition practices emerge as important tools that not only shape the way photography is displayed but also influence the viewer's perception processes.

The exhibition *Two Archives, One Selection: Istanbul in the Footsteps of Ara Güler* (Modern, 2019) held at Istanbul Modern in 2019 not only made the master photographer's rich archive visible but also created new layers of meaning through the way this archive was constructed within the exhibition space (Image 1).

Image 1 View from the exhibition "Two Archives, One Selection" (Two Archives, One Selection: In the Footsteps of Ara Güler, Istanbul, 2019)



The exhibition structure, divided into thematic sections, facilitates the viewer's connection with Istanbul's past on both a personal and collective level (Image 2, Image 3). The harmony between the exhibition texts, the spatial design, and the visual selections ensures that viewers are not merely presented with a retrospective but are also included in a narrative that can

be experienced temporally and spatially. This approach reveals the active role that the curators played in shaping the narrative and how photography transcends its documentary nature to become a form of evocative expression.

Image 2 A Street Wedding in Istanbul in the Late 1950s (Two Archives, One Selection: Following Ara Güler in Istanbul, 2019)

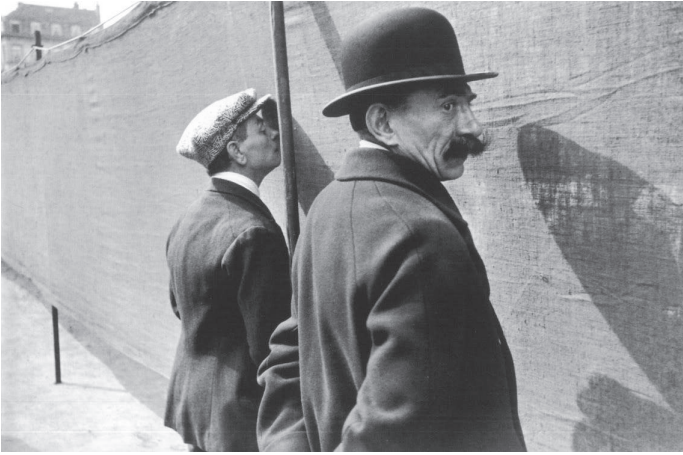


Image 3 A Sip of Time (Two Archives, One Selection: In the Footsteps of Ara Güler, Istanbul, 2019)



An important example of an approach to reinterpreting photographs in a curatorial context is the exhibition “Henri Cartier-Bresson: Le Grand Jeu,” organized in Paris in 2020 by the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Cartier-Bresson, 2020).

Image 4 A Scene from Street Life (Le Grand Jeu, 2020)



In this exhibition, Cartier-Bresson's 385 photographs, referred to as the "Master Collection," were restructured through the selections of five different curators. Drawing from the same visual pool, the curators constructed their own narratives, demonstrating to the audience the multiple interpretive possibilities of photography. This multi-layered structure clearly shows that the curator is not only a selector but also a writer who constructs the narrative. The exhibition highlights the decisive power of curatorial decisions, from visual selection to sequencing, thematic headings, and explanatory texts, on the viewer's experience (Image 4, Image 5).

Image 5 Childhood in Ruins (Le Grund Jeu, 2020)



These examples show that the decisions made by curators - such as which photographs to select, how to sequence them, under which themes to present them, and with which explanatory texts to support them - directly influence how viewers perceive the photographs and what meanings they derive from the exhibition. This situation reveals that the curatorial process is not merely a technical arrangement, but also a creative intervention that determines how photographs are positioned in social, political, and aesthetic contexts. From the perspective of art management, these processes highlight the importance of managerial and conceptual strategies in the construction of visual narratives. In conclusion, it can be said that curatorial approaches in photography exhibitions not only shape the viewer's experience but also function as a powerful tool contributing to the transformation of visual culture.

6. Conclusion

Photography has transcended its role as a mere documentary tool to become an active component of contemporary art; this transformation has acquired a multi-layered structure under the influence of art management and curatorial practices. In this study, the evolution of visual material into an art object has been examined within a historical and theoretical framework, with particular emphasis on the decisive influence of exhibition formats on meaning construction. Curators are positioned not only as selective agents but also as subjective actors who construct narratives, indicating that the relationship between the viewer and the artwork is being redefined. The placement of photographs in space and their contextual presentation point to aesthetic, ideological, and intellectual preferences that directly guide the reception process. The approaches of thinkers such as Barthes, Sontag, Foucault, Butler, and Baudrillard have revealed the role of photography beyond visual representation in reproducing social structures and developing critical discourses. From this perspective, curatorial interventions are not merely presentation techniques but also expressions of specific cultural and critical positions. As can be seen in the exhibitions of Ara Güler and Henri Cartier-Bresson, presenting the same images in different contexts allows for the emergence of distinct narratives, demonstrating that the meaning of photography is not fixed but rather a constantly reconstituted structure. Therefore, in today's art environment, the management of photography is not merely the display of an object; it has become an active field of intervention that contributes to the transformation of visual culture, the shaping of collective memory, and the development of critical thinking. The conscious choices of actors such as artists, curators, and managers who guide

the production and exhibition processes determine the dynamic nature of this field. In this process, the viewer moves from a passive position to take on an interpretive and meaning-making role; thus, the arrangement of the photography becomes not only an aesthetic but also a construction of political and cultural discourse.

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Extended Abstract

The position of photography within the field of art has undergone a significant transformation throughout history. Once regarded merely as a tool for documentation, photography has evolved into one of the critical and conceptual modes of expression in contemporary art. This study aims to explore the theoretical foundations and contemporary implications of photography's evolution into an art object, focusing on the perspectives of art management and curatorial practices. As context, modes of presentation, and the relationship with the viewer have become central to meaning-making in photography, curators and art managers are no longer mere technical executors but are positioned as intellectual agents who produce cultural narratives. Within this framework, the study provides a multilayered analysis at both theoretical and practical levels. Drawing on the conceptual frameworks of thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, and Judith Butler, the study emphasizes that photography is not merely a visual object, but a form of representation shaped by ideological, cultural, and social contexts. Photography has shifted from being a record of objective reality to a medium through which the perception, representation, and reconstruction of reality are critically examined. In line with this approach, the study contextualizes the role of photography in the production of meaning through contemporary exhibition examples. Two exhibitions are examined as key examples to understand the curatorial reflections of this transformation: *"Two Archives, One Selection: Tracing Istanbul through Ara Güler,"* held at Istanbul Modern in 2019, and *"Henri Cartier-Bresson: Le Grand Jeu,"* exhibited in Paris in 2020. In the Ara Güler exhibition, the relationship between photography and collective memory, along with themes of nostalgia and place-based narratives, are brought to the forefront. The spatial segmentation of the exhibition offered viewers a temporally and emotionally immersive experience. Conversely, in the Cartier-Bresson exhibition, the reinterpretation of the same visual archive by five different curators through distinct contextual narratives revealed the inherently polysemic nature of photography. These examples illustrate that curatorial choices are not solely aesthetic interventions but also intellectual, ethical, and ideological acts.

The viewer's engagement with photography lies at the heart of this transformation. Barthes' concepts of *studium* and *punctum* elucidate how viewer experience is shaped through both in, cultural codes and personal affect. Exhibition design plays a crucial role in guiding this experience: a large-scale photograph displayed in silence can draw viewers into a deeply personal emotional space, while thematically arranged series accompanied

by textual content facilitate more social and intellectual readings. Foucault's analysis of surveillance and the gaze uncovers photography's ties to power structures, while Baudrillard's theory of simulacra shifts the focus from representation to the reproduction of reality. In Butler's framework of gender theory, photography is understood not only to represent objects but also to construct and perform identities and social roles. Accordingly, the narratives constructed by curators are shaped in ways that invite a rethinking of societal structures such as gender, class, and ethnicity.

The modes of presentation and exhibition of photography play a critical role not only in aesthetic arrangement but also in the construction of collective memory, the production of cultural representations, and the transmission of political narratives. In this regard, the decisions of curators and art managers should be considered as cultural interventions that entail not only visual and technical judgments but also ethical, ideological, and intellectual responsibilities. Elements such as the physical configuration of the exhibition space, the scale of photographs, the viewing distance, and the accompanying textual language all form a complex whole that influences and even directs the viewer experience. The management of photography thus becomes a process that shapes not only the formal but also the content-based and contextual dimensions of meaning-making. Although this study comprehensively addresses the transformation of photography into an art object both theoretically and practically, certain limitations remain. The theoretical framework is largely Western-centric, and the case studies are limited in terms of geographic representation, which has resulted in the exclusion of more diverse cultural practices. Curatorial approaches emerging in non-Western art scenes present a valuable potential for expanding this perspective. Additionally, digital curatorial practices are addressed only in general terms, without an in-depth analysis of online exhibition practices or virtual viewer experiences.

In conclusion, photography today constitutes not only a mode of visual representation but also a cultural, political, and ideological discourse. Through their curatorial decisions, art managers and curators reconstruct visual culture, while viewers emerge not as passive recipients but as active agents in the production of meaning. Therefore, the management of photography should be viewed not merely as a technical task but as a dynamic field wherein critical thought is encouraged, collective memory is shaped, and cultural narratives are produced.