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Picture-Work: How Libraries, Museums, and Stock Agencies Launched a New Image Economy, by Diana Kamin

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Book Review: *Picture-Work: How Libraries, Museums, and Stock Agencies Launched a New Image Economy*

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Diana Kamin's *Picture-Work* begins by defining the title term as the labour behind image collections. Kamin extends her definition of picture-workers beyond librarians to curators, catalogers, editors, and even researchers, and her book explores the picture-problems faced by all as they interact with the material and organizational practices of storage and circulation that shape image collections. A senior lecturer in Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University, this is Kamin's first book. It draws on previous research on image organization and classification, community engaged learning, and media policy. The book constructs a media history from the view of the collection workers themselves and illuminates the social practices in three circulating image collections: the Picture Collection at the New York Public Library (NYPL); the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA); and the stock photography agency H. Armstrong Roberts. Kamin begins with a physical collection that eventually faces digitization and asks what mechanical and philosophical problems the circulation of images pose in each case.

The first section on NYPL's Picture Collection introduces several of the topics and themes repeated throughout the book, with a focus on the user-first organizational structure of the collection and the inherent mobility of images. Throughout each collection Kamin centres not only on the labour behind the collection but biographies of the labourers, such as NYPL's Ramona Javitz, superintendent of the Picture Collection from 1929 to 1968, who viewed the library as "a living collection actively produced by social encounters" (68). This idea tracks throughout the subsequent collection examples, which also employ democratic conceptions of non-expert user browsing. Overall, the section on NYPL makes the strongest connection to Kamin's main argument that there is a relationship between picture-worker's labour practices

and user's epistemological practices, creating large scale collections that are open to diverse uses and interpretations. The practices described here may also be most familiar and compelling for library workers.

The Museum of Modern Art and H. Armstrong Roberts stock photo agency examples also explore a time when picture-workers are still deciding what photography is and how it can function as a research resource, work of art, or commodity. At the same time, the challenges surrounding photography here could stand-in for any new media, as Kamin elucidates the essential role collections play in "creating discursive structures to interpret new media" (108). For the MoMA collection, users were consuming reproductions of photographs in the museum library as researchers, as well as high quality prints exhibited and sold as more accessible fine art for consumers. For H. Armstrong Roberts, accessibility determined the value of images in the most literal sense, as the organizational system had to scale ever upward to accommodate more and more photographs that could be quickly and easily perused and purchased by consumers.

In addition to exploring the personal stories of picture-workers and the tools and taxonomies required to order and circulate images, Kamin incorporates the lens of Walter Benjamin's theories of art and technology, as well as image, history, and culture. For example, Benjaminian allegorical expression, transforming things into signs freed from set meanings or linear time, lends itself to stock photography, in which images get used and reused commercially to be or sell anything over time. Readers looking for more to sink their teeth into beyond a history of picture-work and the new image economy will enjoy the more theoretical explorations of value and meaning-making for photography via Benjamin, while others will still find it is not overly indulgent or obtuse throughout Kamin's text.

The last section of the book springs into the modern era, moving to digital forms of storage, organization, and distribution in the 21st century. Kamin argues that this phase of the image economy treats pictures as assets and the public as passive consumers rather than knowledge seekers engaging in a discussion with picture-workers. While acknowledging that universal collections do expand access and as such should create new opportunities for ontological engagement even between images across collections, for Kamin this lacks the organizational and social component that is central to her thesis and becomes an indeterminate flood of search results and metadata. This argument seems at odds with the conclusions drawn from accounts of the digitization process for NYPL, in which librarians discuss developing two sets of metadata, one to be integrated with other online collections and one still informed by users, or even the original account of H. Armstrong Roberts stock photography business as dependent on systems, albeit analog rather than digital. There may be some inconsistent ideas here, but Kamin cannot be faulted for sticking

to her scope: she is exploring and advocating for the importance of foundational systems, labour, and relationships, and subsequently how they have changed in ways that may not reflect original intent or maintain long-term preservation of physical collections.

It is also worth noting that while interviews for this book took place in 2015-17, Kamin brings in the question of artificial intelligence (AI) and image generation where she can, acknowledging its existence at the time of publication. During interviews, AI was a possibility rather than an everyday occurrence for workers at H. Armstrong Roberts, for example, speculating about the changing importance of photographers in stock. Other historical figures like NYPL's Javitz can only have previous philosophies speak for them, recounted from a time when digitization and AI image-making did not exist. Nonetheless, Kamin makes effective use of first-person accounts where she can, to reflect on the future of images as media collections always in flux alongside the technology that enables their creation and circulation, and to question the future of physical preservation alongside digital priorities.

These questions are of interest to modern-day picture-workers, especially within libraries: anyone whose work includes image, photography, or other media collections; digitization; copyright; and even reference services would enjoy the book. There is particular value for those accustomed to interacting with and supporting users in unique collections that are at odds with information systems so often conceived of and created for text rather than multimedia documents. The translation of documents across mediums and creation of knowledge across time is always the central challenge of this work, past and future, and the essential question for its workers. Even as a history constructed through the routine labour practices of picture-workers, highlighting the humanity of the people making organizational decisions that shape interactions with users and collections, this book tells compelling stories about people and their ideas.