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CELEBRATING PHOTOGRAPHY – BICENTENNIAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY 1826/1827 - 2026/2027

Paris, 5th November 2024

**First manifesto compiled by the academic panel
Eléonore Challine, Dominique de Font-Réaulx, Alexia Fabre, Michel Poivert, Pierre
Singaravélou and Antonio Somaini**

Nearly two hundred years ago, in his Burgundy home, Nicéphore Niépce created a new kind of image: the first ever photograph, 'View from the Window at Le Gras', now conserved at the University of Texas, Austin. A man of many talents, inquisitive and possessed of a fertile imagination, Niépce had found a way to reproduce the view from his window on a tin plate using a *camera obscura*. The *camera obscura* was not a recent invention. Developed in the late 1400s, it uses lenses and mirrors to focus and reflect sunlight, briefly capturing an object or landscape on a sheet of paper. What made Niépce's work innovative was that he was able to permanently fix the fleeting image produced by the device. This idea, which he transformed into reality in France, was very much of its time. During the early 1800s, a period of scientific wonder and rational thought, efforts to permanently capture an image of reality—or what was perceived as captured reality—emerged not only in France, but also in England, Scotland, the United States, and Brazil.

This invention, combining exploration with the magic of light, revolutionized our world, profoundly altering our representation of it, in essence and nature, and forging a new connection with reality. Photography sprang from a utopian dream: the belief that it was possible to narrow the gap between reality and its reproduction, as if an object and its photograph were one and the same thing. Although never realized, this ideal of photographic objectivity—central to the invention of photography—proved powerfully seductive, fostering the common perception of photographs as purely objective records. This perception endures, even in the face of today's AI-generated imagery. This constant interplay between the utopian ideal of objective representation and the prevailing assumption of its achievement quickly fostered a unique creative approach in photography, enabling its practitioners to explore the tension between capturing reality and distorting it. By the mid-19th century, Niépce's invention had opened up a vast field of aesthetic possibilities. Across two centuries and every continent, photography's artistic, scientific, social, political, and educational applications have been continually recreated, redeveloped, reshaped, and reinvented. Photographic images now serve as essential tools for disseminating knowledge and information through books, newspapers, and all forms of media.

Given its now ubiquitous and seemingly inevitable nature, a practice made commonplace over the decades, and repetitive, almost obsessive by mobile phone photography, why celebrate photography at all? Honoring Niépce's initial photograph is not simply about showcasing his work and that of his contemporaries; it is a remarkable opportunity to foster a broad, collective celebration of photography and its myriad contributions. Photography has evolved into a highly accessible art form. This bicentennial is a chance to celebrate photography, retrace the key steps in its development, from Niépce's heliography to digital images, honor its creators from 1826 to the present day, and share the personal and universal images it has allowed us to capture and enjoy with our families, friends, classmates, work colleagues, or on vacation. Photography has been documenting this shared history for two centuries.

This bicentennial provides a remarkable platform to combine public enthusiasm, professional expertise, and a wide array of photographic endeavors. Across metropolitan France and its overseas territories, a large and dynamic community is engaged in the design, promotion, preservation, and sharing of photography. The Rencontres internationales de la photographie d'Arles, which was founded over fifty years ago, is one of its most popular cultural festivals, attracting several hundred thousand visitors every year. France's historical photographic collections rank among the most

extensive and varied in the world; its libraries, museums, and archives hold remarkable collections documenting artistic creation, scientific endeavors, global exploration—above, on and below the Earth—and the lives of people everywhere, past and present. Numerous institutions, art centers, FRACs, cultural centers, and non-profit venues across France are dedicated to fostering contemporary photographic creation, supporting photographers, and exhibiting their work. By celebrating photography's birth, we aim to develop, support and promote exhibitions and meet-ups nationwide, in urban and rural areas, by awarding labels to selected projects. These events will be featured on an interactive, vibrant map, allowing the public to discover and appreciate photographic masterpieces spanning from the 19th century to the present.

Photography, as a practice and a subject of study, is actively supported, developed, and brought to the fore by art schools, architecture schools, and universities nationwide. Engaging young artists and researchers will be key to the success of these events, helping forge relationships with institutions, promote residencies and generate commissions.

The call for projects—which also invites creators to reinvent photography, under the leadership of the Centre national des arts plastiques—will provide several photographers with financial support to create new works, pursue photographic concepts, and showcase their talent. It will establish a framework for examining contemporary practices, emerging technical and artistic possibilities, the dangers of their misuse, and the challenges posed by artificial imagery, which is now viewed as both an advancement and a threat to human roles.

This celebration of photography will serve as a pivotal moment to enhance and expand existing successful initiatives in visual education, image interpretation, the understanding of photographic creation, new modes of perception and appreciation, and the importance of preservation and transmission. In partnership with French heritage institutions, which provide access to national collection images, such as the Grand Palais Rmn photo agency, educational support materials will be made available to teachers across all grade levels, facilitating the integration of photography, its diverse viewpoints and applications, and interpretive techniques into classroom settings, empowering children and adolescents to actively participate in the comprehension and contextualization of images. Meet-ups will be held across France's vast national book and media library network, bringing together local and national photography actors to showcase projects, skills and different approaches. With the support of local authorities, this will provide a chance to forge and reinforce existing ties between regional stakeholders—museums, art centers, libraries, archives, art schools, and media libraries—ultimately fostering increased public awareness of both public and private photographic archives and collections.

These projects will be grounded in a fresh approach to thinking about and studying photography, bringing together the expertise of researchers, curators, universities and artists who have dedicated their research to the history of photography, its creative processes, and its social uses, from Niépce's invention to today's technological and virtual images. This project will also include the publication of a book of essays, perspectives, and critical analyses, tracing pivotal points in photographic history as they relate to the present, with a focus on the interaction between visuals and written content. This intellectually rigorous work will be accessible to all, both in content and price. The bicentennial will also be used to reissue out-of-print photography titles, with the invaluable support of the Centre national du Livre. A symposium and a series of lectures made available and accessible online will drive the momentum for meet-ups held throughout the bicentennial. These events will be shared across social media, including through short videos on selected photographs and points in photographic history, from its invention in 1826-1827 to today.

France is, thanks to the inventive spirit of Nicéphore Niépce, and to the political and scientific work of François Arago in 1839, the cradle of photography, where the perfect confluence of factors facilitated its inception and progress. As early as the 1830s, other inventors and nations joined in this remarkable photographic adventure. Consequently, this major celebration of photography would be incomplete without the involvement of the countries that fostered photography's conception and practical development. This international dimension will be a key factor in the success and growth of the event.

We are extremely proud to be part of it.

Members of the academic panel:

President:

Dominique de Font-Réaulx, art historian specializing in the 19th century and photography, chief curator at the Louvre Museum, President of the Point du Jour photography center in Cherbourg-en-Cotentin, member of the Réseau Diagonal, editor-in-chief of the journal 'Histoire de l'art'.

Members of the panel:

Eléonore Challine, senior lecturer at the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, specialist in the social and cultural history of photographers, junior member of the Institut Universitaire de France, treasurer of the Société Française de Photographie and editor-in-chief of the journal 'Photographica'

Alexia Fabre, director of the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts de Paris and current curator of the 17th Lyon Biennale of Contemporary Art, former director of MAC VAL - Museum of Contemporary Art of Val-de-Marne

Michel Poivert, photography historian, Professor at the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, exhibition curator, president of the preparatory project for the Collège International de la Photographie in Bry-sur-Marne and author of numerous publications, notably '*50 ans de photographie française*' (Ed.). Textuel, 2019)

Pierre Singaravélou, professor at Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne and exhibition curator, historian specializing in the history of 19th- and 20th-century colonization and globalization, author of numerous works including 'Les mondes d'Orsay' (Seuil/Musée d'Orsay, 2021) and 'Fantômes du Louvre' (Hazan/éditions du Louvre, 2023).

Antonio Somaini, professor of film, media, and visual culture theory at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, senior member of the Institut Universitaire de France. His research examines the impact of artificial intelligence on images, photography, cinema, visual culture, and contemporary artistic practices. He is also the chief curator of the exhibition 'Le monde selon l'IA' (Jeu de Paume, April 11th - September 21st, 2025).