Adelma Benavente Garcia

The year-long lecture series, Women Art Technology, brought nine internationally and nationally renowned women artists and scholars to the University of North Texas. During the spring semester 2008, it was supported by a Hispanic and Global Initiative Funds award, which funded the visit of Adelma Benavente Garcia.

Garcia is co-founder of the Photographic Archive Project in Peru and Bolivia. In 1999, the Photographic Archive Project began a three-year investigation of Peruvian and Bolivian photographic history. Their pioneering research project, Portrait of the Andes, brought together specialists in photography history, photography, anthropology and Andean studies. The experts were assisted by volunteers from the Earthwatch Institute for Field Research, who traveled to Peru and Bolivia to clean, catalog and digitize nearly 15,000 negatives from a dozen public and private collections in Arequipa, Cusco and La Paz.

Garcia visited the University of North Texas March 25 – 28, 2008. She presented a workshop on women, art and culture in the Andes and a public lecture entitled the Photographic Archive Project. On March 25 she was interviewed by Lisa Nersesova, a graduate art history student assisting on the Women Art Technology project. Jairo Salazar, a graduate art history student, translated English into Spanish and Spanish into English, the latter on behalf of Garcia. Also present were project directors Dornith Doherty, Professor of Photography, and Jennifer Way, Associate Professor of Art History. The interview was transcribed by Allison Kidd and Sarah Westrup, both University of North Texas Emerald Eagle Scholars working on the Women Art Technology project. Their transcription removes crutch words and some false starts from the transcript. Unless otherwise indicated, all statements attributed to Adelma Benavente Garcia indicated by the initials “ABG” were translated during the interview process and spoken by Salazar. Statements that Salazar made when he was speaking for himself are signified by “JS.”

Lisa Nersesova: First question, can you explain your thoughts about the Photography Archive Project?

Adelma Benavente Garcia: About the project or about the work [I] am doing?

Jennifer Way: Both.

ADG: [I] am going to explain how [I] created or how to create the archive project.

ADG: In the Andes and Caribbean Mountains there are a lot of weather problems. So, that's the first reason why [I] got interested in the project. Especially in Arequipa, which is a city in Peru, there are a lot of earthquakes and that sort of natural accidents. In 1990 they presented an exhibition about Peruvian Photography between 1900 and 1930. While doing the project [we] realized there were a lot of archives and a lot of information about Peruvian photography [we] realized it was almost impossible to deal manually with all that information. So, [we] went to Houston and went to a work show about conservation and preservation of archives and those were all the first experiences on digital photographic media and that sort of
new devices. And they understood the importance of keeping all the initial archives because they were losing or they were missing too many memories about experiences about images from the Peruvian Andes. And they understood the importance of that because it kept a memory, an oral memory that has been grown since like earlier times, with ancestors giving stories to them. In order to get support and you know like money, [we] did not have to knock on too many doors because unfortunately in our countries and I include myself, we don't get that support to that sort of cultural and artistic projects so they had to ask for grants and that sort of help. So, therefore the help they received was from American institutions like the Getty and the Ford Foundation. Like the funds they received was from such institutions. There are somethings [I] am going to address tomorrow in [my] lecture how the project was supported or how the project was done by some photographs that got real engaged with archives of the Peruvian Andes and the case of the people who went there with people who had the background and they knew about the country and they got interested in the country and therefore people like Chambi and other people-- because of Chambi who went to Machu Picchu -

Dornith Doherty: No, it was Edward Ranney.

ADG: Oh, Edward Ranney went to Machu Picchu and took some photographs of the place and then at those times there were huge devices and he did not know how to handle that but-

DD: No, no he did.

Jairo Salazar: Oh sorry, okay.

DD: So he, Edward Ranney was on a train going to Machu Picchu with a large format camera to photograph the monuments and while he was on the train he looked up and he saw this large format photograph by Chambi-

JS: Oh, okay.

DD: …and it had this HUGE impact on him, okay.

JS: Sorry. [laughter]

JS: It’s just I couldn't go to the show, so I’m trying to catch up.

ADG: The Chambi project and everything that we discussed was like the first approach to these images this approach photo taken... and in that enterprise there were two Americans who again began getting involved in the Peruvian Culture and got interested in that and they went to Peru to take photographs of those projects... and they were visiting they looked for some archives of Peru out of Peru in the United States and they got their information in the United Stated and they allowed them to go to Peru afterwards and start the photo take archive on Peruvian images. So one of the important things was Edward Ranney was working alone, like isolated. He did not get involved with more people or more personal from the place or from the... but he made all the work on himself like on his own, he was the only person working on
it at the beginning of the project.

DD: But, he didn't really connect with the Peruvian Culture.

JS: Exactly.

ADG: In the case of photographers they did include some professional people-

DD: Peruvian.

ADG: Peruvian People and that was the reason the project started going on and continue growing up because they already had that interaction with that people. [He] was interested in the process because the Americans they discovered obviously since they were in a different culture they were trying to see things differently and sometimes...the images and the culture and they had to say no, no, no wait that's not like that this is like not the reality of things. So, there were these conversations where one group of people was looking for some particular image where as the Peruvian people were trying to create an image as accurate as possible. So, there was a contrast there for the things that Edward Ranney was doing because that sort of different approaches to the image.

DD: Because he was just interested in the photograph itself.

SJ: Exactly. Because he was just interes- yeah.

ADG: Edward Ranney saw that problem because he realized Chambi's images weren't used as accurate as they had to be.

SJ: Right?

DD: Well it was- I think the point she is making is without the historical content that the other project had, Edward Ranney realized later that he had kind of made a myth out of the Chambi persona as this isolated artistic genius that just lived in isolation that made this great work. Right? Because he did not have the historic content. So, it was not really telling the story about how Chambi functioned. Yes?

ADG: Yes.

SJ: Now she is going to tell you about the third experience as the whole image as a sequence. It was 1992. They were 500 years of America of discovering the continent. She already mentioned she went to the workshop. Where you realized to copy files totaling up to...

ADG: At that time there were already between 15 and 20 digital Peruvian archives of the Andes. And this opportunity since the first time they just had worked in Cusco. This time they were in Arequipa, which is also in Peru and near La Paz in Bolivia. In Arequipa they worked with the Chambi brothers’ archive and they found about 15,000 archives, photographs, negatives.
DD: Classified negatives.

ADG: Yes.

JW: Wow.

ADG: Of different sizes 18 X 24 cm. It is a very important archive. Between a ... of 1912 and 1958. Personally [I] think the golden age of Peruvian photograph was not until 1930 after my dad lost his sense-

SJ: Exactly. And he was more concerned with portraits and that sort of things. And he lost some of the reality of- yeah.

ADG: The first year of work for them was very contributive because it was the first they were working with digital devices like computers and ... that sort of things that was something very helpful and interesting for them because they did not have that opportunity to have such devices because it was a new thing. There was that technology so there was no people who knew how to use it. And Peter Yenne was the only person who knew how to deal with that element. The poor guy almost had to deal with all the work.

[laughter]

AB: I believe that in the first years of the project was very rich for us because it was the first years … computers and digital scanners-

JS: The first years for them-

AB: Because of this we needed to learn because in Peru there weren’t similar experiences.

JS: Right, she’s saying that in the first year of work for them was very contributive because it was the first year they were working with digital devices, like computers and digital photography that was something that was very helpful and very interesting for them because they didn’t have the opportunity to have such devices and it was such a new thing.

AB: …and not solely that because simply there wasn’t the technology there-

JS: …because there wasn’t the technology-

AB: My partner Peter Yenne.

JS: Your what?

AB: My work partner Peter Yenne had to take all the material of the United States.
JS: So since there wasn’t that technology, there weren’t people who know who to use it and Peter Yenne was the only person who knew how to work with that and the poor guy had to almost do all the work.

AB: Yes, we told him that he came all the Keko, the Keconista-

Everyone: Ha ha.

JS: She’s making a joke the he was like a Keco, a Keco is like a show

AB: Tomorrow you will see the show-

JS: Right, tomorrow you will see that, it’s like this guy that is charging all these huge amounts of material, like the guys who travel to Alaska, no, not Alaska, in Asia, like these mountains.

AB: The photographic archive project was very particular because this project was sponsored…

JS: …and the project was sponsored by Earth Watch Institute, those people are interested in helping with research over seas and they pay for doing it, they pay for them to do it?

AB: They pay-

JS: They pay for the work.

AB: Yes, for only…

JS: She making this joke that for the first time in her life she was controlling Americans.

L: Ha ha..

DD: They were slaves.

AB: We had them work 15 days.

JS: So she made them work 15 days straight.

AB: Only two days vacation.

L: Ha ha.

DD: Ha ha.

AB: And anyways, it is also special because they were North American of the…
JS: Anyways, it was interesting because they were elderly Americans

DD: Retirees-

JS: Retirees

AB: Retirees and when they started working we need to learn, but also teach them, because they did not manage technology.

JS: When they began to work, they had to learn and also to teach them to use the technology, because they didn’t know how to use the technology either.

AB: Of course together with these retired Americans their grandchildren and their children also participated and they managed the computers better than us, and supported us in the project and helped a lot, but with this type of documents they held a minimal part.

JS: And their sons and grandsons used those devices even better than obviously their grandparents and there for, how can I translate the last past?

DD: Just there were very few of them it mostly retirees, that even thought that the grandchildren and children would sometimes come along.

JS: Ok-

DD: They were great, but there were just so few of them that would come.

JS: Thank you.

AB: Yes, and well in the first project that happened in 1999, of the 15,000 negatives that…

JS: Before the first project that was in 1999 they had to take all the negatives and clean it up, the 15,000 negatives and they selected from those just 6,000 of those photographs and then they created JPGS of those images and they saved it. The images that they thought were more interesting, more accurate perhaps, I don’t know, am I missing some points?

DD: They made JPGS of 6,000, they selected 3,000-

JS: Ok.

DD: To make TFS of.

JS: Ok.

ABG: And to read that what…
JS: She’s saying that the Vargas’ archive was to so interesting and at the same time so difficult to work with, because such a photographer’s indifference to a photographer like, Chami, the difference to Chami, they were so detailed and paid particular attention to little details, like the name of the people who were photographed and even their portraits had, like, signatures at the bottom and they even kept records of the magazines of the time, like 1920’s to 1930’s and that’s when she points out this that she was saying about those 1920’s and 1930’s images and that tomorrow when we all assist to the lecture we will see how those images, like what impressive images they are because the work was so well done, that for them

DD: It influenced their work as well.

JS: Right, influenced their work and at the same time it was so difficult to select form those 15,000 because it was such a good quality work that-

DD: But I think, one little correction, the register was of the people they photographed. Not the magazines that they were looking at.

JS: Right.

ADG: Of the people, but also books and magazines of the …

JS: Well something contextual about the images and the photographs is that by the time they got really well paid for those photographs and that was a work worthy of effort, you know because there were people able to pay for those photographs and people could afford that and also because there was a very good economical condition in Peru in the 1920’s, 1930’s.

DD: From the whole industry.

JS: Right, so they, it was a very good job and they could make a life out of it. So

DD: And then there were actual accounting books-

JS: mhm-

ABD: mhm-

DD: There were actual accounting books were there, where they could read and see what they were charging.

ABG: Yes,…

JS: She will show us some slides-

ABG: So you can see

JS: She will show us some power point slides of the archive she is talking about.
JW: Will you shut the computer off?

JS: They had 12 assistants at the time the Vargas brothers

JS: By the time they were in art galleries -

ABG: Yes.

JS: Because of that, because of the work of the Vargas brothers the art galleries … they had this huge amount of images that they created this space for people to go and see them.

ABG: Ok this is the studio.

JS: That’s the study.

DD: That’s where they took the pictures

DD: Oh, that’s fantastic.

ABG: Yes

JS: Wow

ABG: Impressive.

JS: I agree with you were saying-

ABG: That -

JS: … they are incredibly detailed.

DD: That is because they were using really large negatives.

JS: Yes

ABG: And the treatment of the light they used was very impressive.

ABG: Yes, and they loved the women, they were incredible photographers. I think their passion was to take portraits of women.

JS: And that they were obviously interested in take portraits of women. So that was the main interest of them, of those guys.
DD: The majority of …

ABG: That’s why I am going to present 2 experiences. This is a … and the other that is more India…

JS: She’s saying that now we realize that many of the facial characteristics of the people that appear there were more accidental then anything else so tomorrow she will display two different approaches, like 1 more accidental and the other more related to the Indians Peruvians people and traditional, not necessarily traditional peoples, natives.

JW: Will you show some of these tomorrow?

ABG: Yes, as the result.

DD: As the result.

ABG: So after the work …

JS: So after all the work that has been done this are the results of them.

ABG: Because this material, for example, the plates were scratched and with the digital technology…

JS: Because thanks to the digital technology they have been able to clean up scratches and effects made by time on the original negative and that way we can see and appreciate those photographs as they are right now.

ABG: …, but I think the most artistic of the Hermanos Vargas were their night shots

JS: That one of the main contributions of them was the night photography, because at that time there wasn’t electricity so they used-

DD: Bonfires.

JS: What?

DD: Bonfires or torches.

JS: Torches, how do you say…

DD: Torches.

JS: No, but like when you are at home and the

DD: That’s a fire.
JS: A fire, so they made fires and that sort of things.

DD: But a bonfire is like a big

JS: Exactly.

DD: Right.

JS: Yeah, and that way they illuminated the place when it was dark and they created these night portraits.

ABG: But … those photographs were taken for nothing more for the new art, because they were … a group of vanguardista, ha ha.

DD: Of the night?

ABG: Yes, of the night.

DD: The night photographs were primarily made just for art, but they were part of the vanguard art.

JS: Made fore art’s sake.

DD: Yeah

DD: It wasn’t commissioned work.

LN: Should I ask the next question while we are looking at these?

DD: Yeah

JW: We have to stop by 12 o’clock

LN: Maybe just the third question, what was your own training? Were you ever enrolled in art school or program? If so, how did that air your development?

JS: [Translates question]

ABG: Non.

LN: Ha ha.

JS: She didn’t study art.

ABG: I didn’t study
JS: What was your-?

ABG: I … my background is in anthropology

JS: Her background is in anthropology

ABG: And I … to work in the archival photography because they ordered me.

JS: She started working in the photographic archives because she was asked, she was sort of obligated to.

ABG: The day they did, it gave me depression.

JS: And the day that they decided to- the day they made the decision that you were to work.

ABG: With photography, it gave me depression, because I didn’t know anything of photography.

JS: The day that they decided that she had to work with photography, she got depressed because she had no idea how to deal with that.

LN: Ha ha.

DD: Ha ha, you got mad.

ABG: Yes, I got mad.

JS: She got made.

ABG: It angered me much, ha, for me it was a punishment.

ABG: Because the director of the institution where I worked, he thought that we could at least recuperate the photographic archives… the confidence of the public.

JS: Because the director of the project or the director of the-

ABG: Of the place I worked…

JS: The director of the center she worked at thought that.

DD: She would be able to work with the archives better because she knew the people. She would gain interest better because

JS: There you go.
DD: She’d be able to talk people into participating more.

ABG: And well they told me I needed to work with the archives because my father was, in my family very well known in the area, he would have access to the smaller family quick.

JS: Since her family was well known in the place were at, she will have to work with the archives to let people know

DD: She’d have better access because her family was so-

JS: She’s have better access, right, because her family was so well known.

DD: Right

ABG: Because when I worked …

JS: Because there was this interesting struggle when foreign people went to Peru and went to places to work with the archives, like people, um.

DD: They were suspicious.

JS: Native people were suspicious and were asking why do they want this for and why are they interested in this and you know, they got this fear having someone from another place working in something that was so intimate to them.

ABG: Well then I… time only temporary because there … were in the United States and we needed to have the … the work… the technical possibility to continue do the things that the first place in Peru there wasn’t experience on how to organize photographic archives. There wasn’t a manual. There was absolutely nothing. Well then we needed to adapt to our … that we found in other experiences in other place and if you wanted to read something in Castillano one of the experiences… photographic archives or work was in Cuba.

JS: Ok.

JS: So she, at the beginning she was saying that 2 of the people who were involved in the project didn’t stay that much there and they left they, did not have the challenge of continuing working with such difficulties and things they didn’t have at that time, like technology and knowledge about how to archive. There was no idea in photographic archive so they had to ask some people about hoe to do that.

JS: … and you had to ask how to archive those types of things?

ABG: Yes, and we applied and adapted the material and did thing like adaptations of the libraries, like photography materials.

DD: You were… how to do an archive.
JS: So they had to ask for help, like in different way and what they did was go to libraries and that sort of places and the tried to sort of relate how the archival process was with the photographic archive.

DD: They adapted the method.

JS: They adapted the methodology of the places like that.

ABG: And well then we had to work and had to learn and have to like it. Ha ha.

JS: So she had to learn and had to adapt that and she had to is use that in order to make people like that.

ABG: And it started like, it bothered me …. But then it became to fascinate me.

JS: Like also the things in life, at the beginning she was afraid of the things weren’t going well or that probably thing weren’t going to be well, but at the end she loved that work. Like at the beginning she was afraid and she was sort of disliking it, but at the end she was like ‘Oh, this is great’.

ABG: Because the… the opportunities that came with the …

JS: And since she got the experience of working and talking with all these people about all the experiences at the very end like all her friends were retirees, I don’t know if I translated that well.

DD: I mean just that at the end, all her friends became these old photographers, right? Because it was so fascinating to hear them and listen to their testimonials about what it’s like at that point that those became her friends.

JS: Ok, I have to go.

EVERYONE: Thank you
Suggested reading


Part of a special section on photography in Latin America. Early photography in 19th-century Bolivia is discussed.


Part of a special section on photography in Latin America. Early photography in Bolivia is discussed.


Part of a special section on travel photography. The writer recounts her experience of photographing the Aymara people in Bolivia. She lived in an Aymara community at 12,000 feet above sea level on the Bolivian Altiplano for four months. She discusses the difficulties involved in photographing people of a culture quite different from her own.


Ferreira and Dargent, native Peruvians, illustrate how the diverse geography of the country—the Andes, coast, and jungle—shaped cultural and social expression, from history to art.


The 55 Series represents the work of many of photography’s most important figures. Each book contains 55 of the photographer’s key works presented chronologically and through them tells the photographer’s own story.


Part of a special section on photography in Latin America. A reconsideration of Martin Chambi’s photographic work.


A report on a study of the complex history of photography in the southern Andes. The writer traces the history of photography in the region and discusses earlier investigations of its photographic heritage.


Part of a special section on photography in Latin America. The writer offers an overview of research in Peruvian photography history from 1977 to 1998, focusing on the southern Andean regions of Cusco and Arequipa.