

Why Exhibit? vol. 2 — On Curating Photography

Edited by Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger and Iris Stilling

vol. 2

# On Curating Photography



## Introduction

- 7 Anna-Kaisa  
Rastenberger and  
Iris Sikking

## Curating Photography

- |    |   |    |  |
|----|---|----|--|
| 11 | Anna-Kaisa<br>Rastenberger<br><i>Blind Spots: Introduction<br/>to Photo Curation as<br/>Confrontation</i>         | 53 | In Conversation with<br>Kateryna Radchenko<br>on Phone Photography<br>as a Protective Tool in<br>Wartime Ukraine |
| 23 | Iris Sikking<br><i>Directing the Body<br/>and Mind: Cinematic<br/>Narration in a Photo-<br/>graphy Exhibition</i> | 63 | In Conversation with<br>Yining He on Creating<br>Cultural Exchange   |
| 39 | Sergio Valenzuela-<br>Escobedo<br><i>Photography Is Not<br/>Enough!</i>   | 71 | In Conversation with<br>Laura Toots on<br>Curating by Using<br>Gestures of Friendship                            |
|    |   | 77 | In Conversation with<br>Thomas Kuijpers on the<br>Volume of Images   |

## With Whom Are We Curating?

- 87 Eszter Erdosi  
*Whatever We Curate, We Curate Ecology: Multispecies Relationships and Photography in Curatorial Praxis*
- 99 Taru Elfving  
*Curating in a Changing Climate: Situated, Mediated, Dependent*
- 111 Kaija Kaitavuori  
*Homeless Photographs: Approaches in Photographing Participation and Participating in Photography*
- 125 In Conversation with Tanvi Mishra on Collective Gathering
- 135 In Conversation with Salvatore Vitale on a Technologically Mediated Reality

## Who Is Telling the Story?

- 145 Sunil Shah  
*Reinterpreting the Script: Activating Archives, Managing Dissonance*
- 157 In Conversation with Anastasia Mityukova on *Project Iceworm: A Fragile Excavation through Photography*
- 169 In Conversation with Poulomi Basu on a Collision of Truths
- 177 In Conversation with Anna Ehrenstein on Power Structures
- 185 In Conversation with Giya Makondo-Wills on Images without Captions

## Who Are We Speaking With?

- 195 Daria Tuminas  
*com/exhibition-enter, or: Photographic Shows Gone* 🌐
- 211 Lia Carreira  
*The Appropriateness of Images: Exhibiting Image Appropriations after Deepfakes*
- 223 In Conversation with Uwa Iduozee on How To Be Apolitical Is a Privilege
- 233 In Conversation with NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati on Building (Local) Communities
- 241 In Conversation with Tina Farifteh on the Image, Empathy, and Impact
- 250 Contributors and Artists
- 256 Acknowledgements

*Introduction*

In 2018, we launched a publication called *Why Exhibit? Positions on Exhibiting Photographies*. The book included articles and conversations on exhibiting photographs in traditional contexts—such as exhibitions and books—with contributors exploring why it was still meaningful to do so even as technology offered a range of alternatives. We received enthusiastic and positive feedback. It felt as if there had been a need in the photographic community for a book that dealt in a pacy and reasonably practical way with the issues that people involved in the photographic arts face in their work. We decided to begin on a second book that would deal with photography specifically from a curatorial perspective.

Here is the book. A lot has changed in six years, but many questions and issues are the same and have even intensified.

*Why Exhibit? vol. 2* offers an assembly of articles and conversations on questions related to curatorial practices concerning photo-based images: What are the considerations and challenges curators and artists working with photography face today when they work on exhibitions? How do they navigate the constantly changing appearance of the medium? How are issues of representation dealt with? How do they handle the weight of the history of the medium, which is often hidden in power structures and untold narratives? And what kind of mediation is necessary while seeking other forms of authorship and interaction with audiences? At the same time, archival material, online imagery, and images circulating on social media are moved as objects into gallery spaces, thus forming amalgamated works of art for which the traditional roles of artist and curator are challenged, as well as that of the viewer.

This book primarily focuses on practical perspectives intertwining photography and curation. It offers insights into a wide range of experiences, reflections, and views from the perspective of curators, photographers, visual artists, writers, and researchers. We are convinced that these conversations are vital for curating photography today.

There are a few undercurrents in the book that bubble up in many of the texts. Irrespective of the increase in the volume of photographic images and the diversity of actions performed with them, the debate on representation is still

relevant today, and even more pressing in the light of the ongoing and needed processes of decolonization in our societies at large. Contributors discuss ethical dilemmas such as who is looking at whom and who has the right to represent someone else. Also the challenge of the human-centered gaze and representation is identified in relation to the ecological crisis. The focal point is on nurturing transdisciplinary encounters and site-sensitive artistic investigations with a long-term commitment to critical discourses on ecology and social sustainability. Moreover, collectiveness and shared knowledge production is a recurring necessity tackled by many of the contributors. They feel responsible for those they work with, and carefully consider the possible forms of collaboration.

We are incredibly grateful for all the contributors who gave honest insight into their curatorial and artistic practices for this book. Working with all of these individuals taught us a lot about our own practice. In this complex world of “photography,” we all struggle with issues—sometimes similar ones, sometimes very different ones. We also often talk about very different things when we talk about photography. The only way forward is to stay in dialogue with each other.

Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger and Iris Sikking  
Helsinki and Amsterdam  
September 4, 2024

## Curating Photography

*Blind Spots: Introduction to  
Photo Curation as Confrontation*

The work of a photo-curator is a thoroughly intersectional job. Intersectionality as a concept describes how different social categories, such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or class, overlap and interact, leading to synergies that can guide cooperative action. Intersectionality recognizes that different forms of class and inequality are interrelated and cannot be considered in isolation. It sharpens the gaze and highlights the contradictions behind the obvious.

In the work of a photo-curator, a strategy that takes into account the many different sections and their interaction concerns not only people but also the different intersections of photographs. These intersections include the background and motivations of the photographer, the conditions of photo shoots and assignments, the limits and possibilities of technology, image genres, representational models, visual references, and perhaps the expectations of presumptive viewers. These intersections make photography a particular source and object of curatorial activity.

### *Blind Spot(s)*

In this text, I will discuss *Blind Spot(s)*, an exhibition we curated with Uwa Iduozee, a Nigerian-Finnish photographer living in the United States, for the Finnish Museum of Photography, in 2021. The exhibition featured documentary photographs taken by Iduozee during 2020 while working as a photojournalist in the United States.

The year 2020 was marked by the pandemic crisis, on the one hand, and the tensions culminating in the US presidential elections and anti-racist demonstrations fueled by the Black Lives Matter movement, on the other. Photographs of the demonstrations distributed in the media and on the internet generally showed violent conflicts in which anti-racist demonstrators clashed with both the police and the far right. News images highlighted the confrontations and violence, even though they were only a small part of the Black Lives Matter movement that spread across the US and did not represent what the movement was all about. In Finland, too, photojournalistic reports focused on the conflicts and thus emphasized the narrative of division.

Uwa Iduozee, who worked as a photojournalist across the United States, criticized the way the mainstream media and news agencies present the BLM movement largely through

conflict. He also criticized the fact that the political climate in the US in recent years has often been portrayed as a protest by poor whites against the ruling elite and minorities. This narrative has shielded middle- and upper-middle-class people who benefit from racist and unequal structures, but who have the opportunity to distance themselves from the ideology of former president Donald Trump and their own role in maintaining these structures. They are invisible in the journalistic imaginary, even though they are beneficiaries of the system. We therefore decided to highlight this aspect in our selection of images. In relation to the representation of Black bodies, a reverse strategy was chosen. Photographer and writer Teju Cole has written about how photography has been a colonial ally of obsessive display and viewing: the imperialist ruling powers decided that everything had to be seen, recorded, and catalogued. Nothing could be hidden. Photography fitted the purpose perfectly.<sup>1</sup> Iduozee's set of images chose a strategy of resistance to the invasive colonialist fixation Cole describes: all photographs depicting violence against Black bodies were excised from Iduozee's selection.

Through the dialogue with Iduozee, structural racism emerged as the leitmotif of the exhibition. This was a challenging topic, as the main problem of structural racism is precisely its concealment within normalized practices. How can the invisible structure that manifests itself in the everyday situations that sustain our society be captured in photographs? How to visualize the historical continuum that still affects Black and Brown people?

### *Specific Articulation, Spread Like a Rash*

The field of photographic art is often criticized for being overly medium-oriented. Photography has its own museums, festivals, competitions, awards, and other practices that define and stabilize the field. "Painting and performance don't have their own media-centric institutions, do they?" is a comment I hear repeatedly. Photographic art, however, slips at the intersection of different needs that slide over each other. On the one hand, it is a focused and circumscribed—and perhaps elitist—part of art and visual culture that is ubiquitous in the world. On the other hand, it is just one medium among many forms of expression in contemporary art. At the same time, it is a medium through which contemporary art and photo-

<sup>1</sup> Teju Cole, "When the Camera Was a Weapon of Imperialism. (And When It Still Is.)," *New York Times* (February 6, 2019), [nytimes.com/2019/02/06/magazine/when-the-camera-was-a-weapon-of-imperialism-and-when-it-still-is.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/magazine/when-the-camera-was-a-weapon-of-imperialism-and-when-it-still-is.html) [all URLs accessed September 4, 2024].

graphic art itself are constantly documented, shared, and made accessible. It is a specific articulation of visual culture, which rampantly spreads everywhere like a rash.

This is also why the photographic medium is a particular source and object of curatorial activity. When exhibiting photographs in artistic contexts is seen as a focused look at different practices of visual culture, exhibitions become an important way of taking a stand on the ever-growing field of visual culture that is changing the world, changing everyday life, affecting everyone—namely, lens-based visual culture.<sup>2</sup> Photography and the presentation of photographs in museum and gallery contexts are a way of trying to make sense of a crazy world, because through them we can address different meanings of vision, patterns in visual culture, the impact of visual representations on the contemporary world, and the burdens and ghosts of visual history or silenced narratives, to name but a few subjects.

Uwa Iduozee's photographs were originally taken for journalistic purposes. The traditional assumption of a journalistic photograph is that it tells the story as truthfully as possible "without adding anything to it, without taking anything away from it." In the gallery space, the context of the photographs is different. In recent years, many thinkers such as Tina Campt, Kerstin Hamilton, Erika Balsom, Max Pinckers, T. J. Demos, and others, have drawn attention to the art context, and to exhibitions as an important space for addressing practices and beliefs related to the documentary and representational dimensions of photography. It has also been encouraged by so-called "post-truth" discourse, based on the manipulative idea that objective facts are of less importance than strongly appealing to people's emotions. As such, the questioning of truth—in politics, the media, and the arts—is nothing new, as the critical tradition of situated knowledge that has become widespread since the 1970s shows. People from different backgrounds understand the world in different ways and therefore definitions of truth may also vary. In recent years, however, attacks on the concept of truth have been driven by purely political and manipulative interests. Technology and the internet also play an important role in the discourse of "alternative facts." Photographs, made faster and more accessible than ever by technological advances, are born and disseminated in such a media environment.

2  
At the turn of the 2010s, there was a lively debate in the photographic community about what future photographic institutions should look like and how they would respond to the changes brought about by information networks.

I had invited Uwa Iduozee to do an exhibition alongside an exhibition of early photographs by the American film director Stanley Kubrick, through which the visitor had to pass en route to Iduozee's exhibition. Kubrick's was a traveling show, the image material for which was collected in the United States. The photographs in the exhibition were originally shot for *Look* magazine and other photojournalistic contexts. They depicted the restructuring of society that was fueled by the rise of consumer culture in 1950s America. Of the 149 photographs in the exhibition, only one depicted a racialized person. He was a trainer of circus elephants.

Kubrick's exhibition was thus one of the contexts in which Iduozee's *Blind Spot(s)* was set. Other intersections of Iduozee's photographs included the following: the photographs were originally taken for the press and were reproduced for the exhibition space; the photographs belonged to the so-called documentary genre, in which the subject matter and representational quality of the photograph is linked to the production of truth; many of the photographs were commissioned by Finnish news agencies and published in major Finnish media; in their original publishing contexts, the photographs were framed with journalistic captions. As a Black Finnish man, Iduozee's perspective as a photographer on structural racism in the United States is different from that of a white photographer, as are his perspectives on structural racism in Finland.

### *Confrontation as an Enabler of Change*

In recent years, curatorial theory has focused on the objectives of curation, which are to take into account multiple elements, to take care of the process in its entirety, and to be responsible. So curating means not only selection and editing of photographs, but the process of social and intellectual care, which connects people and material factors like pictures and/or artworks involved in the process. Curating means to think responsibly about what and how we display or distribute when we present, for example, photography, in whatever form or space.

For a couple of decades, curatorial theory has wrestled with the differences between the concepts of curation and the curatorial.<sup>3</sup> One of the most famous definitions comes from Irit Rogoff and Jean-Paul Martinon in the book *The*

3  
Maria Lind breaks it down as follows: "The curating' would be the technical modality—which we know from art institutions and independent projects alike—and 'the curatorial' a more viral presence consisting of signification processes and relationships between objects, people, places, ideas, and so forth, that strives to create friction and push new ideas—to do something other than 'business as usual' within and beyond contemporary art"; *Performing the Curatorial: Within and Beyond Art*, ed. Maria Lind (London: Sternberg Press, 2012), 20.

*Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, in which they define curating as a practical action: “Curating’ is a range of professional practices that have to do with setting up exhibitions and other modes of display. The ‘curatorial’ operates at a very different level,” which is the “event of knowledge,” i.e. an event committed to a particular moment in time, which the curator can influence but cannot control:

The “curatorial” explores all that takes place on the stage set-up, both intentionally and unintentionally, by the curator, and views it as an event of knowledge. So to drive home a distinction between “curating” and “the curatorial” means to emphasize a shift from the staging of the event to the actual event itself: its enactment, dramatization and performance.<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of whether we talk about curation or curatorial practices, photo curation also refers to events of knowledge production. Although the curator enables the event, they do not control it. Through their work, the curator enables different voices and opinions through their actions and also allows for potential conflict. My thinking has been influenced by the way philosopher Chantal Mouffe writes about the potential of the political and the possibility of change. Mouffe distinguishes between the political and politics:

[...] “the political” refers to this dimension of antagonism which can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations, a dimension that can never be eradicated; “politics” refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflicting because they are affected by the dimension of “the political.”<sup>5</sup>

According to her, the dimension of confrontation is always present in communities and in the production of knowledge.

Exhibitions and art institutions with their public spaces are also political actors and stages of the political. Mouffe proposes an agonistic role for them. Agonism refers to the ancient Greek word *agon*, which means struggle or conflict.

4

Irit Rogoff and Jean-Paul Martinon, preface to *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed. Jean-Paul Martinon (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

5

Chantal Mouffe, “Democratic Politics and Conflict: An Agonistic Approach,” *Política común* 9 (2016).



Uwa Iduozee, *Blind Spot(s)*, 2021. Installation view at K1, The Finnish Museum of Photography (photo: Virve Laustela)

In agonism, the possibility of conflict is accepted, and space is made for its confrontation. An exhibition space can be such an “agonistic public space,” in Mouffe’s words, where the struggle that takes place is between opposing socially constructed ideologies.<sup>6</sup> The goal is not to silence the opinions of others or to achieve consensus, but to continue the debate and struggle. The presence of differing opinions is therefore valuable in itself, as time and again it reorganizes the structures of society and enables change without silencing different voices. By juxtaposing conflicting perspectives and interpretations, museums and art institutions can encourage agonistic forms of participation and imagine and promote radical democratic alternatives to neoliberalism.<sup>7</sup> This Mouffean understanding of the political and agonism extends not only to my thinking about curation, but also to my understanding of how photographs themselves, with their various intersections, are also sites of contested interpretations and confrontations.

*The Idea of the Viewer Is a Prerequisite for Photography*  
Although the photographs in the *Blind Spot(s)* exhibition were taken in the United States, as a Black Finnish photographer, Iduozee wanted to address structural racism in Finland through the exhibition. The method was to turn the gaze from the photographs to the viewer. We shifted our attention from what the photographs represented to the act of looking—here, specifically, to the act of a Finnish audience looking at these photographs.

The underlying idea was that only the privileged can afford to remain apolitical without affecting their daily lives. With Iduozee’s exhibition, we tried to make the audience think that remaining apolitical is itself a political act. If the audience in Helsinki could look at the photographs in the exhibition in a neutral way, they were probably white and privileged.

In his book *How to See the World*, Nicholas Mirzoeff writes, of visual culture:

Visual culture involves the things that we see, the mental model we all have of how to see, and what we can do as a result. [...] A visual culture is the relation between what is visible and the names that we give

6  
Chantal Mouffe,  
“Artistic Activism and  
Agonistic Spaces,”  
*Art & Research*, vol. 1,  
no. 2 (Summer 2007),  
chisineu.files.wordpress.  
com/2012/07/bibli-  
oteca\_mouffe\_artis-  
tic-activism.pdf.

7  
Chantal Mouffe,  
*Agonistics: Thinking the  
World Politically* (London:  
Verso, 2013), 22.

to what is seen. It also involves what is visible or kept out of sight. In short, we don’t simply see what there is to see and call it visual culture. Rather, we assemble a worldview that is consistent with what we know and have already experienced.<sup>8</sup>

Photographs direct the gaze and set the conditions for what the viewer sees. Photographs filter what we see and how we see it. Although the myth of the evidential power of photography has been actively debunked in recent decades, the belief in the connection between what is seen and what is known remains strong. That is why we still see photographic exhibitions featuring images from outside the experience of the supposed audience—often the curator’s own socio-economic reference group—of, for example, sites of conflicts or war victims, marginalized people or the effects of ecological or social inequality, without the curator discussing the mechanisms of conflict or global inequalities in the context of the images, the relationship between photography and conflict, the conditions that enable photography, and the roles of the photograph or the photographer and the viewer in the power structures of photography.

The installation of *Blind Spot(s)* was simple and the hanging traditional. The unframed photographs, hung close together, emphasized the fact that they are in constant interaction. Originally taken for the news media, the photographs were brought into the gallery space unframed without captions or labels. No additional information about the individual photographs and the people in them was provided. The images were therefore presented without their supposed context. A written interview was offered to the public at the entrance to the exhibition, which explored Iduozee’s thoughts on structural racism in both the United States and Finland and how he saw it in relation to photography.

The exhibition demanded a lot from the audience. In the exhibition space, you had to concentrate on reading, looking, and reflecting. The exhibition required the viewer to be able to think about the relationship of the images on display to their own position in the structures of racism.

8  
Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How  
to See the World* (New  
York: Basic Books, 2016),  
10.

Ariella Azoulay has written about photography as an event. Azoulay is not referring to the moment the photo is taken or the clicking of the shutter, but to the fact that every photograph already contains within it a pre-existing continuum of moments and conditions that have made said photograph possible. These aspects may be economic, societal, equipment-related, or political. Included in this continuum, in each photograph, is the inherent concept of the viewer-to-be. Following from Azoulay's idea, all photographs ever taken—and all those yet to be taken—are influenced by the presumed others who will see them. The concept of a viewer as a receiver of the visual input is a precondition for a photograph. Hence, the viewer is never free from responsibility in viewing a photograph. Azoulay calls this the "citizenship" of photography. When practiced with care, photographs remind us of our shared and mutual responsibilities.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Staying with the Trouble*

The exhibition received both praise and criticism. The most important critique was Ndéla Faye's "Privilege Is in the Eye of the Beholder," published in *NO NIIN* magazine.<sup>10</sup> Faye defined herself as a Black woman who has lived in majority-white countries all her life. In her text, she referred to Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, in which Eddo-Lodge writes about how many white people still struggle with the fact that not everyone experiences the world the way they do. Faye wonders whether it is really the photographer's responsibility to educate the viewer or whether the viewer is responsible for their own education. She suggests the latter.

Faye stated that:

It is quite apparent that Iduozee's exhibition is not really meant for me. It is not meant for people like us. It is aimed at the white people who still choose to live in a bubble, and refuse to accept the fact that things like structural racism, anti-blackness and white privilege are real-life things, and that they are complicit in upholding these structures.

9  
Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

10  
Ndéla Faye, "Privilege Is in the Eye of the Beholder," *NO NIIN* 5 (September 2021), [no-niin.com/issue-5/privilege-is-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder/index.html](http://no-niin.com/issue-5/privilege-is-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder/index.html).

She later continued:

Racism is a problem created by white people, and it feels unfair that black and brown people are even having to put in energy into talking about it when it should be white people who are having conversations about it. But, nevertheless, I for one am very thankful that some people, like Uwa Iduozee, still have the strength to gently shake people into action.

Iduozee's exhibition was at the Finnish Museum of Photography, where the vast majority of visitors are white. The description of structural racism showed that while the exhibition sought to promote equality by highlighting the intersections between Iduozee's images and the contradictory ways of looking they produced, white visitors once again benefited from their privilege and the production of knowledge, and minorities—Black and Brown visitors—were at least partially excluded. It was clear that as a white Finn, as a curator and viewer of the images, with my goals and opinions, I was part of the problem in Uwa Iduozee's exhibition. The attempt to turn the gaze from the photographs to the viewers, and their attitudes toward the subjects depicted in the images, failed. Different views collided in the exhibition space and in the photographs in a way that I, as a white curator, did not see. As Ndéla Faye ended her text: "We all have blind spots; things we are unable to see because maybe we are too close to the issue itself."

Although failure was disappointing, it is perhaps sometimes necessary to fail. It is then that the presence of differing opinions and voices becomes visible and hopefully moves the debate forward. The presence of different voices in the same room is essential to change society and to shake up and reorganize its structures, as Chantal Mouffe has written. Photography exhibitions can be places to encourage agonistic participation and thus to imagine and promote a more democratic society.

Changing one's own perceptions is difficult. Still, that discomfort is a prerequisite for many important actions. "Stay with the trouble," as Donna Haraway has reassuringly written.<sup>11</sup> "Staying with the trouble" is a way of taking a stand on the world and knowing that things are imperfect and

11  
Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

difficult. It means to continue working with the people who are affected by my work, knowing that I am imperfect. It means continuing to work in the present moment with all the people and things and photographs affected by the trouble. For me, it means failing and trying again.

Iris Sikking

*Directing the Body and Mind:  
Cinematic Narration in a  
Photography Exhibition*

### Introduction

The impetus for this article is the question of to what extent the staging of a thematic group exhibition could benefit from methods and tools more akin to film editing. In other words, whether the process of staging an exhibition shares similarities with the process of editing a film. When developing a group exhibition and the spatial presentation of the selected works, as a former film editor, I rely mostly on what I learned in that capacity about structuring a story, building scenes, sequencing shots, and, last but not least, the power of additional sound. The fundamental question for me is how to guide the viewer through a story. Telling a story in a film is all about appealing to the senses, stimulating the viewer's intellect, and focusing their attention on specific images or even certain parts of images in movement. In this context, sound is an indispensable tool for drawing attention to something and influencing emotion. I am aware that sound is more often than not present in photography exhibitions, which is why I always look for projects in which sound is incorporated, primarily to use it as a feature in the design of an exhibition.

Working spatially and translating a visual narrative into an exhibition starts by inviting the visitor to follow a certain path through the space. I try to engage and hold the gaze through sightlines, leading the body via strong images, variations in format, and the deployment of different materials. In this way, I hope to direct the path a visitor takes, and by doing so, to create a sequence in which they receive these different elements that add up to a larger narrative in the overall exhibition. However, I am well aware that whereas film has a compelling propulsive movement of its own, an exhibition requires a physical effort from the viewer. Even if the director tells the story with flashbacks, the story is told in one direction, forward; whereas in an exhibition, a visitor explores the narrative by walking through the space, and may be guided and nudged by the way the objects are staged via a pre-formed and even directive path. Mieke Bal argues that individual elements perceived and encountered by the museum visitor may form a meaningful story and evoke an emotional experience in the mind, just like viewing a film, although the viewer experiences the story from a static position: "Putting one thing next to another, in other words,

produced a time-bound relationship between the two, one that moved from the first to the second."<sup>1</sup> This time-bound relationship between two elements in an exhibition potentially holds a narrative meaning. It is with this notion in mind that I will use the remainder of the article to explain the design and staging of the exhibitions I curated for the Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie in Germany, in 2022.

The program of the Biennale was titled *From Where I Stand* and consisted of six exhibitions staged in six different museums in Mannheim, Ludwigshafen, and Heidelberg. In total, thirty-five projects were presented, created by photographers and visual artists. For my reflection, I will look at the use of a visual storyboard, a method I often used during the process of film editing, which proved to be instrumental for maintaining an overarching view and guarding the coherence of the theme. Next, I will discuss specific choices I made for the scenography of the exhibition *Narratives of Resistance*, at the Reiss-Engelhorn Museum of World Cultures in Mannheim. Finally, I will discuss the use of experiential elements in the layout of the exhibition *Shaping Data*, at the Wilhelm-Hack-Museum in Ludwigshafen.

### *Visual Storyboarding as a Thinking Method for Curation*

In preparing the theme and conceptualizing it, I used what is called the technique of visual storyboarding, acquired during my editing activities. By drawing and sketching, I visualised the full program of the Biennale well before the staging of the actual exhibitions. From the preliminary phase, I envisioned the Biennale to be one coherent program: basically a large group exhibition that would stretch across several venues through which I wanted to tell one overarching story. The idea was that visitors would connect the individual exhibitions and see relationships between the perspectives of the makers that I emphasized in each separate exhibition.

Bal suggests that exhibitions that seek to tell a particular story need not have the coherence of traditional art exhibitions held together by presenting art-historical movements or specific artistic developments: "On the contrary, since they activate the viewer, compelling her to create rather than consume the exhibition-as-narrative, such shows can harbor heterogeneous objects that only cohere because the narrative

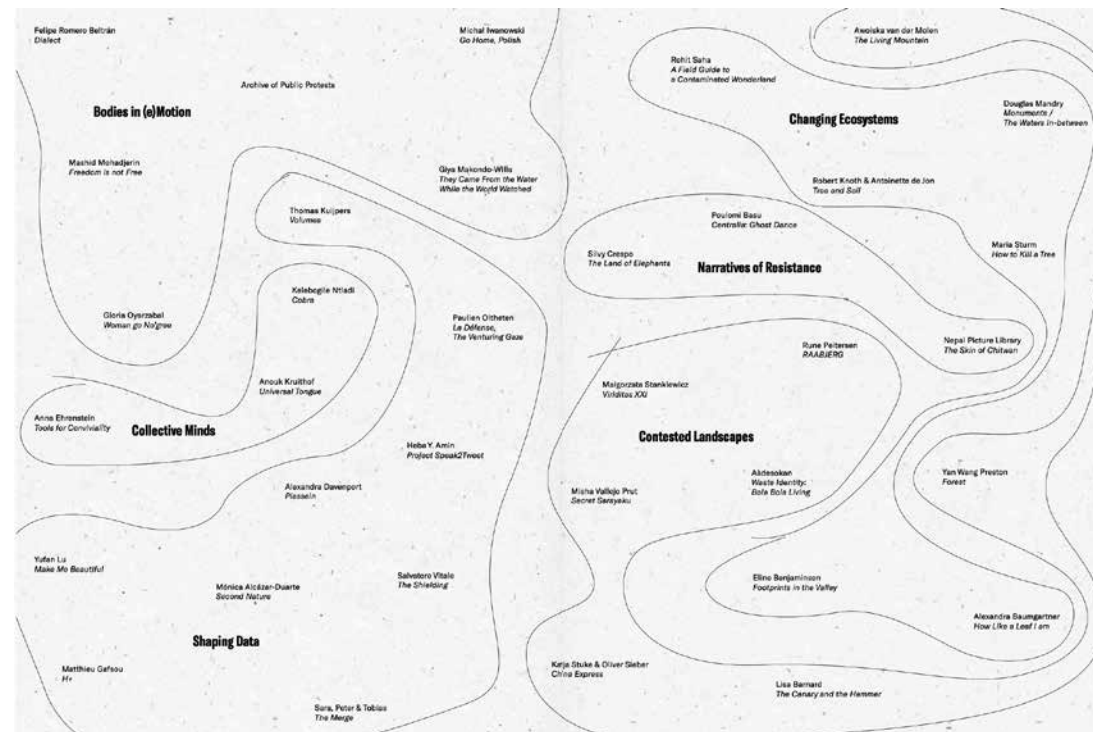
1  
Mieke Bal, "Exhibition as Film," in: *Exhibition Experiments*, eds. Sharon Macdonald and Paul Basu (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 71.

is constantly ‘under construction.’”<sup>2</sup> For the entire duration of the viewing experience, the story is under construction. She therefore proposes to consider a narrative exhibition as a storyboard for a movie: “A narrative exhibition asks of the viewer that she establishes connections as she moves through the exhibition, building up a ‘story,’ which has, as its outcome, or dénouement, an effect.”<sup>3</sup>

The basis of my visual storyboard was formed by the thematic premise: “What if we had the guts to create a gateway to a new world?”, a notion I formulated based on a reflection written by Arundhati Roy, following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, in response to the direct impact of stagnation in Indian society and the world at large.<sup>4</sup> To discursively pursue this theme and find resonance with her plea, I decided to focus on the triangular relationship between nature, technology, and humanity. From there, based also on projects I had on my wishlist, I formulated four clusters that investigated this relationship from different angles: Protesting Bodies, Body Optimization, Exploring Nature, and Manufacturing the Earth. Defining and developing a theme and selecting works always goes hand in hand in the course of my curatorial process. And the development of an exhibition concept is also shaped by the artists and works I consider important to show.

As a next step, I plotted the artistic projects with their key visual images in the clusters I had placed on a graph with x- and y- axes. The x-axis showed a shift from human-centered to nature-centered thinking, and the y-axis from the physical reality in which humans reside to the digital world, which is in fact a human-constructed reality. As an example to understand how this visual storyboarding method worked for me, I introduce three individual projects. I commissioned Dutch photographer Awoiska van der Molen to turn her series *The Living Mountain* into a multimedia installation for the museum space.<sup>5</sup> This work is about the way we are rooted in a particular natural environment. As a video installation composed of moving still images and a sound track presented in a black box, it became an immersive experience. For me, this was the key work for the Exploring Nature cluster, because it dealt with the power of nature and showed that the environment should be treated with respect. Beneath *The Living Mountain*, I placed the project *Tree and Soil* by

2  
Ibid., 75.  
3  
Ibid., 75.  
4  
Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic Is a Portal,” *Financial Times* (April 3, 2020), [ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fc-d274e920ca](https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fc-d274e920ca) [accessed August 21, 2024].  
5  
Awoiska van der Molen originally photographed her series as a visual accompaniment to the concert performances of *The Living Mountain*, a composition by Thomas Larcher.



Spread from *From Where I Stand*, Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie 2022 catalogue (Mannheim/Heidelberg/Ludwigshafen, Germany)

Robert Knoth and Antoinette de Jong, and, slightly lower, *Raabjerg* by Rune Peitersen. *Tree and Soil* continues the story of the indestructible power of nature. But the project also tells of nature's resilience, in this case after the meltdown of the nuclear power plant near Fukushima, Japan, as a result of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Peitersen's work, another assignment for the Biennale, showed that the shaping of the natural environment depends on policy decisions as well as on changing conceptions, which shift over time, about what nature is. He argues this with a narrative video in which he captured the moving dunes on Denmark's northeast coast, recounting the story of this area with archival images while spanning his account over a period of six centuries. The short video questions the concept of the "natural" state of nature and whether it is possible to preserve transition.

Eventually, the storyboard found its way into the catalogue, as an illustration in which the projects were plotted in the four clusters and an illustration representing the entire selection. For the visitor, this storyboard was no longer traceable because I eventually divided the projects into six exhibitions, which is illustrated in the third variant of the storyboard in the catalogue. Bal's suggestion to conceive an exhibition as a storyboard was valuable for determining the artistic and thematic position of each of the projects, and thus bringing focus to the narrative of the whole festival and the six individual shows in particular.

*Construction of a Story through Sequential  
Representation of Elements*

Another interesting point in Bal's writings is the extent to which the cinematic aspect in a thematic exhibition can be achieved by realizing that film emerges from photography. Whereas photography is limited by the frame, a film develops through the sequence of images and the movements in the shots themselves. Film stretches time, as it were, and the viewer experiences it for a longer duration: "Whereas exhibitions, by virtue of the spectator's movement through the space and the temporal sequentiality involved in the visit, are always to some extent narrative, the medium of photography in exhibitions tends to take on cinematic effects."<sup>6</sup> In Bal's view, the cinematic aspect in a photography exhibition allows for the potential to encourage an emotional response upon

experiencing an individual artwork, but also through seeing different works in a specific order.

As a case in point, let me explain why I chose to pull together the works of Silvy Crespo, the Nepal Picture Library, and Poulomi Basu into one exhibition entitled *Narratives of Resistance*.<sup>7</sup> All three projects have been set up in collaboration with minority communities who oppose their government's decisions regarding the exploitation of natural resources on their land. The walk-through for this exhibition began with Silvy Crespo's technically sophisticated black-and-white prints. For *The Land of Elephants*, she portrayed the inhabitants of a small village in northern Portugal who resisted the construction of lithium mines. The portraits were interspersed with fragments of a landscape destroyed by previous mining works. The possible licensing for lithium mining by the Portuguese government further strains the triangular relationship between humans, nature, and technology. After all, lithium is in high demand, as in the case of lithium batteries for electric cars. But such technological advances also come at the expense of lifestyles which nurture the biodiversity of rural areas.

In the center of her room, a print of a devastated landscape lay horizontally on a very low plinth that the visitor looked down on from above. This movement makes the visitor relate to the work differently each time, literally through a changing perspective in the viewing direction. Crespo's series ended with an image depicting the resistance movement itself: stretched between the trees, a canvas reads, "Juntos Venceremos" (Together We Will Win). With this text in mind, visitors continued on to the Nepal Picture Library presentation. Here, a modest number of historical and contemporary photographs formed the prelude to an interactive website that could be viewed via a computer screen built into a table. Using archival photographs and oral history, this audiovisual narrative, titled *The Skin of Chitwan*, recounted the marginalized history of land-grabbing in and around Nepal's Chitwan National Park and its immediate effect on the living conditions of the indigenous Tharu community.

At the end of the space, visitors stepped into the room dedicated to Poulomi Basu's work. An enlarged photo wall-paper of dead bodies drenched in deep red light formed the

background of the presentation. *Centralia* tells the story of the long-standing violent conflict between the Adivasis, an indigenous community living in the heart of India, and the Indian government seeking the region's vast mineral reserves and forest for lumber. The final chord of this presentation, in an adjacent small room, was the post-apocalyptic science fiction film *Ghost Dance*, the sound of which could already be heard as one entered the final section of the space. Revolving around global ecocide, the film speculates on the end of the world as a result of the continued dispossession of indigenous ways of living. And so this third project functioned as a catharsis in this otherwise deliberately modest exhibition.

The exhibition had an emotional impact on the audience. The narrative in the exhibition builds from Crespo's poetic imagery through the voices of the people of the Chitwan region telling their own history, before ending with the loud images of Basu's project. Bal writes, of a potential cinematic experience:

The thrust of the cinematic vision at work in this exhibition is to establish, or at least to encourage, an affective relationship, not only between the art and the viewer but also between the artworks themselves. These relationships between the artworks constitute the exhibition's syntax, which is affective in nature.<sup>8</sup>

Pulled together, these projects showed the complexity of extraction of resources from the perspective of the people who often cared for their lands for generations. And so it relates back to the overall theme of the importance of a valued relationship between humans and nature.

#### *The Immersive Quality of a Possible Narrative*

Upon visiting an exhibition space, I get a feel for the space. I look at the architecture, the surfaces of the walls, the ceiling, the floor, how the light enters, how one would naturally move through the space. I see creating a scenography as a dialogue between me as curator and the space, or perhaps better, as a dialogue between me and the visitor. After all, just like editing a film, I look through the eyes of the viewer. I take the visitor by the hand, telling the story by guiding them through the exhibition. This dialogue largely determines the

format and placement of the work. And after a first visit, I have often already sketched a picture of a potential scenography in my mind. I have marked certain works for specific places and intuitively constructed the story I want to tell by placing the projects in a certain order in the space. Editing a film is all about what you show and at which point; this is how you arrive at an arrangement of scenes and shots that constitute the structure of your story.

The scenography in the Wilhelm-Hack-Museum consisted of different display formats such as audiovisual installations, soundscapes, large prints, and sculptures.<sup>9</sup> *Shaping Data* explores how digital technologies could affect our physical body, frame our opinion, and alter interactions with others. Tom Duncan argues that the immersive quality of a possible narrative in an exhibition takes place largely in the visitor's mind: "With the increasing integration of powerful narrative and experiential elements into the museum, understanding the overall narrative structure of the visitor experience is perhaps more important than it has been before."<sup>10</sup> Although I had to work with the set arrangement of the mobile walls which divided the space into eight areas, I quickly had an idea about the placement of some of the projects. For example, the highly personal photographs would be presented in semi-closed-off spaces to allow the visitor to focus on a moving series like Lu Yufan's *Make Me Beautiful*. Triggered by extensive promotion through social media, she and her peers worry acutely about not getting the right job or life partner because of their looks. Lu made self-portraits with the recommendations ("diagnoses") she received from beauty experts illustrated on top of them. These self-described experts diagnosed her "flaws" and offered her solutions to let her face become a "license to a dream life."

Most importantly for this space was that I worked from an imaginative central project for the space. Initially, I wanted to put Thomas Kuijpers' work at the center of the exhibition space as, in my opinion, this project formed the core of the storyline: how the life of humans is shifting from living in a physical world to functioning almost 24/7 in a digital environment. In *Volumes*, Kuijpers questions the short attention span we have for iconic images of disasters which, despite circulating widely on the internet, fail to spur action because they are overridden by the next round of breaking news. So

<sup>9</sup> See: Virtual exhibitions tour, Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie, 2022. [biennalefotografie.de/en/edition/virtual-exhibitions](https://biennalefotografie.de/en/edition/virtual-exhibitions) [accessed August 21, 2024].

<sup>10</sup> Tom Duncan, "Beyond the Museum: A Comparative Study of Narrative Structures in Films and Museum Design," in: *The Future of Museum and Gallery Design: Purpose, Process, Perception*, eds. Suzanne MacLeod, Tricia Austin, Jonathan Hale, and Oscar Ho Hing-Kay (London: Routledge, 2018), 240.



Matthieu Gafsou, *H+*, 2015–2018, and Alexandra Davenport, *Plassein*, 2022. Installation view at Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie 2022, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen, Germany (photo: Miriam Stanke)

he decided to make a sculpture based on an image of the catastrophic 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the largest in history. Working with a taxidermist, he set up an oil-stained pelican that mimicked the pose in a much-published photograph. I realized that a visitor entering the space by descending a wide staircase would come directly face to face with this dramatically lit pelican. The visitor's confrontation with a non-photographic image was meant to momentarily unsettle them upon entering an exhibition that was supposed to be about the digital and technological world. Unlike a framed photograph displayed in a wall presentation, the sculpture forces the visitor to position themselves in relation to this life-size creature in distress.

However, I found that the project I ended up placing in the middle connected even better with the core of the story. For Heba Y. Amin's video installation *Project Speak2Tweet*, I needed a space which could be darkened and the only possibility was the one right in the middle. Amin's project was presented in a labyrinth-like arrangement for which we used the wooden skeletons of the museum's mobile walls to set up nine different monitors. Amin combined short video clips of Egypt's streetscapes and landscapes in decline, with voices of citizens she collected digitally during the Egyptian revolution, in January 2011. Just days after the start of the citizen revolt, then-president Hosni Mubarak shut down internet access and mobile phone connections across the country. In only a few days, a developer launched a platform called Project Speak2Tweet to circumvent the shutdown. On the platform, voice messages, recorded via specific landlines everyone could call, were transferred as short text messages on Twitter. This technical feature allowed citizens to make their voices heard to anyone outside Egypt. Amin, who was by then living in Berlin, managed to archive the sound recordings. She was emotionally gripped by the voices partly because of the distance she felt from her homeland. Her project was accessible through two doorways closed off with black curtains, and a vista through a third door opening. This almost hidden setup had an immersive effect on the experience of the project. While walking through the other presentations, one could hear the murmur of voices. And upon entering the darkened labyrinth, one experienced a brief

disorientation that left them momentarily isolated from the rest of the exhibition.

An important principle from film editing is the juxtaposition of shots, in which the proximity of two shots placed one after the other determines the meaning of those individual shots. You can do this by deliberately juxtaposing two shots that contrast with each other or, on the contrary, by setting a similar atmosphere in both shots that reinforces an emotion as a result. However, the question is in what order the visitor of an exhibition considers two elements to be "consecutive" or "in close proximity to each other." At this point, I like to return once more to Duncan, who writes:

The museum experience differs, however, in that the spatial qualities are more prominent and the experience itself is dependent on a physical engagement and choices by the visitor. The visitor to a museum moves through spaces with views and axial relationships but also juxtapositions, contrasts and spatial conflicts to confront or to avoid.<sup>11</sup>

I will give an example of how I used these elements in the spatial execution of the remainder of this exhibition.

Next to Lu Yufan and Heba Y. Amin, the project of Matthieu Gafsou focused on the human desire to constantly improve one's mind and body. With a mix of product, staged, and portrait photography, the works in his *H+* series formed a striking and aesthetic display. An eye-catcher on the back wall, in the line of sight from the entrance to his space, was an enlarged and framed photograph of scientists at the bedside of a patient with a spinal cord injury. The peculiar thing about the image is that the scientists are not looking at the patient, but presumably at a screen just outside the frame, as if they have no interest in the body itself. For the display, I used the direction of their gaze to direct the visitor's eye to an enlarged photo wallpaper, of a giant close-up of a finger with an implant of a magnet that the owner says activates a new sense. This forward-looking vision of optimizing the body is also reflected in the photograph that concluded Gafsou's series. In the facility of one of the world's largest cryonics companies, he photographed vessels containing human brains and entire human bodies waiting for the day when science will bring them back to life.

In stark contrast to this series, and in particular to this last image, I placed Alexandra Davenport's video work. Her video work was presented on a monitor on the floor, in the line of sight that connected the Gafsou section to the rest of the exhibition. The heartbeat of Davenport's soundscape accompanied the continuation of this route, so to speak. Her work *Plassein* is a choreography performed by four dancers exploring the brain's ability to constantly form new connections based on experiences and interactions with others and our environment. In a world in which communication happens through screens and other digital devices, the brain can quickly become exhausted. Both works related to the festival theme of the complex relationship between nature, humans, and technology, and how it comes under pressure with the emergence of ever-new technologies.

As a contrast to the overall narrative of the exhibition, the last work I showed was a video by Paulien Oltheten. In *La Défense, The Venturing Gaze*, she takes a critical look at the daily routines of people on the street in Paris' financial district. With a gentle touch, she films her interactions with passers-by as long as they hold her interest. In the voice-over, she comments on these encounters and notes little things she observes in the urban architecture and the way this public space is used. The essence of her work is what remains of a shared physical space, which feels increasingly impersonal and no longer accessible for everyone to walk around freely. With the scenography of this show, I tried to immerse the viewer in the changing environment we live in today, which constantly shifts back and forth between physical and digital realities. As Duncan notes: "The timing, the sequence and the rhythm of the overall experience, although ultimately controlled by the movements of the individual visitor, is a necessary part of the museum planning."<sup>12</sup> By working with challenging sight-lines, contrasts, and the placement of unexpected objects, I hoped to direct the visitor's movements and thus activate their body and mind to get a better understanding of the overall narrative.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, constructing the program for the Biennale was like solving a jigsaw puzzle with an undefined outcome. Although visitors were not aware of this associative construc-

tion work that took place beforehand, I hope they experienced the coherence of the theme in the exhibitions. Through the scenography, I tried to evoke a degree of immersion by using different forms of presentation. During the selection process I was keen on finding different visual approaches, thereby enabling contrasting exhibition formats. A second criteria in the selection was to choose projects that did not overlap in terms of subject matter, and thus to deliver unexpected twists in the stories I wanted to tell. I concur with Duncan's comment: "The visitor to an exhibition, like the listener to a melody, resonates between immediate consciousness and reflective consciousness; being both immersed emotionally and reflecting and communicating on the fragments of narratives, as they are experienced."<sup>13</sup>

Leaning on my experience as a film editor, where the best editing moments are usually created not through reasoning but by intuition and following a gut feeling, and especially by adding sound, I feel comfortable with this method of working. The connections I make between specific works are like intertwining shots and scenes in a film. For me, a thematic exhibition is not about showing projects that fit the theme, but rather about building a story consisting of powerful artistic positions, with a convincing way of presenting them. Working with a visual storyboard proved to be an effective way for me to monitor the concept. The exciting moment is then to leave behind the "reality" outlined on paper and start arranging the works in the physical reality of the exhibition space. By doing this, I direct the body and gaze to create a cinematic narrative in the space.

*Photography Is Not Enough!*<sup>1</sup>

Postcards, faxes, and email printouts lie wanly in a vitrine. A plywood shelving unit holds rows of informational leaflets. One gallery wall is plastered with graphs and charts. Another is covered in hundreds of seemingly identical photographs. On a bank of video monitors, talking heads are explaining something. In a darkened corner, a slide projector clunks slowly through a carousel of images. Nearby, a 16-mm film whirs alongside a soporific voice-over. An illuminated table is covered in papers and newspaper clippings marked up with Post-its. Every object on display is accompanied by a lengthy explanatory caption written by the artist, also available as a pamphlet.<sup>2</sup>

Recent developments in exhibition practices have led to the emergence of a distinctive type of artistic display, characterized by a complex and evolving curatorial process. These exhibitions often feature a wide array of seemingly unrelated content and rely heavily on explanatory texts to help navigate the substantial volume of materials presented. The overall structure is additive rather than cohesive, reflecting a curatorial approach that values accumulation and diversity over simplicity. This more-is-more methodology aligns with the principles of research-based art, where the exhibition itself becomes a dynamic expression of ongoing inquiry. But why have these exhibitions become so complex that they can induce anxiety, as Claire Bishop has suggested?

This article explores the relationship between curatorial practice and artistic research. Drawing on my experiences as both an artist and a researcher<sup>3</sup> working as a curator with a focus on photography, I examine two exhibitions I curated: *Monsanto: A Photographic Investigation* (2017)<sup>4</sup> by Mathieu Asselin and *Forêts Géométriques: Luttes en Territoire Mapuche* (2022)<sup>5</sup> by the collective Ritual Inhabitual. Asselin exposes the links that exist between the agrochemical giant Monsanto and the American government, accusations of pollution, concerns about public health, and the consequences of GMOs, while Ritual Inhabitual's investigation describes the ecological and political consequences of monoculture forestry in southern Chile. Taken together, the projects highlight conflicts between two worldviews: one is based on free-market economics, the other considers the relationship to

<sup>1</sup> This essay has been adapted from its original version, which was published in *MIRÁ*, no. 3 (2023), the annual review of the New National Museum of Monaco (NMNM).

<sup>2</sup> Claire Bishop, "Information Overload: Claire Bishop on the Superabundance of Research-based Art," *Artforum* (April 2023), [artforum.com/features/claire-bishop-on-the-superabundance-of-research-based-art-252571](https://artforum.com/features/claire-bishop-on-the-superabundance-of-research-based-art-252571) [all URLs accessed August 26, 2024].

<sup>3</sup> See: Sergio Valenzuela-Escobedo, *MĀNK'ĀCEN : Mécanique photographique, mysticisme et superstition chez les peuples originaires d'Amérique du Sud*, thesis on the practice and theory of artistic and literary creation specializing in photography, under the supervision of Jean Arnaud and Nicolas Giraud, École nationale supérieure de la photographie (ENSP Arles) and Aix-Marseille University (2021).

<sup>4</sup> See: Mathieu Asselin, *Monsanto: A Photographic Investigation* (Dortmund: Verlag Kettler, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> See: Ritual Inhabitual, *Forêts géométriques. Luttes en territoire Mapuche* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2022).

the environment a spiritual one. The two exhibitions offer an illustration of the evolution of artistic practices that transcend the simple documentation of reality, and which attempt to challenge dominant narratives, denounce injustice, and hold those in power accountable.

### *Artistic Research*

The results of a research-creation<sup>6</sup> process are the outcome of an issue of complexity communicated through an artistic space that takes different forms. Whether this space is an exhibition, a book, or a combination of the two, it is crucial to communicating the results of the research-creation process. Instead of neutralizing one another, the different media are complementary and provide opportunities for exploration and interaction. The exhibition allows visitors to observe, experience, and interpret the works. It creates an immersive environment that involves the senses and encourages dialogue between artists, researchers, curators, and the audience. The book offers a stable space. It allows for further reflection and analysis of the ideas that have emerged from the process of research and creation, but it may also be instrumental in catalyzing the exhibition. The essays, critical analyses, or interviews included in the research provide a theoretical and intellectual context that enhances the viewer's comprehension of the subject. The combination of the exhibition and the book engenders a dialectical dialogue between the artist and the viewer, in which the works and ideas interact, complement, and reveal each other. In so doing, both together (the artistic apparatus) become a place of communication, sharing, and exchange, in which the results of the research and creation take form and can be explored from different perspectives, thereby allowing them to be shared with a wider public.

The methods used in artistic research in photography—such as photographic investigations—will vary in accordance with the objectives and context in which the research occurs. Here are a few examples of methods commonly used by photographers involved in research: documentary research, participatory observation, interviews, the gathering of evidence, documentary photography, AI-generated images, citizen journalism, and others. As a curator in the field of photographic research, I believe it is relevant to explore the similarities and differences between the methods used in

<sup>6</sup> The inclusion of a hyphen between research and creation accentuates the interconnection and interdependence of the two concepts. The hyphen creates a link that reflects a complex approach that combines research and creation in the context of artistic photography. The hyphen exemplifies this hybrid and multidisciplinary approach, which is also unique and complex.

research-creation, and to consider how they overlap because the inherent power difference between the photographer and the photographed in any narrative device is inescapable. Going through the methodologies carefully while studying may enable a better understanding of the core of the project, its political and ethical context, and the place of the photographer-researcher. The methods employed may need to be combined and adapted according to the context of the investigation and its objectives, to explore the possibility of image-making that goes beyond simple extraction.

### *Perspectivism*

What I call “documentary perspectivism” is an approach that recognizes subjectivity and the multiplicity of perspectives in the creation and interpretation of visual documents, particularly in the field of photographic investigation. This notion derives from the thinking of the Brazilian anthropologist Viveiros de Castro.<sup>7</sup> It questions the idea of a single, objective truth by placing the focus on the diversity of experiences, viewpoints, and voices in the representation of reality. Documentary perspectivism is based on the assumption that each visual document is shaped by its creator’s choices, as well as by the interactions between the subject, the photographer, and the viewer. It demonstrates that reality cannot be recorded exhaustively and objectively but is always filtered through subjective and cultural prisms. This approach invites us to think of visual documents as social and discursive constructions that reflect the power relations, ideologies, and values present in society. And it emphasizes the importance of challenging dominant narratives and stereotypical representations, encouraging a plural, transparent, and ethical mode of representation of reality based on a multiplicity of voices and points of view.

In this sense, it is important that the photographer-turned-researcher adopts a reflexive and critical approach throughout the process, which must include reflection on the role and the place played by the photographer-researcher in the investigation, the construction of the visual narrative, and the ethical stance taken in relation to the subjects covered. It is essential that social and ethical responsibility is borne in mind in political engagement through photography, as will be seen later on. However, building a team is equally important, as pointed out by Asselin:

7  
See: Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Métaphysiques cannibales. Lignes d'anthropologie post-structurale* (Paris: PUF, 2009).

Today, in-depth collaborations often play a role in artworks. My own artistic practice has gone from the solitary assumption of every role, to one in which collaborations with people from other fields are central. For me, working with insiders and drawing boundaries for myself is an ethical decision that prevents me from aspiring to know-it-all; active delimitation necessitates attention to the knowledge that one holds and does not hold.<sup>8</sup>

Another tangible example of artistic collaboration is Ritual Inhabitual’s project *Forêts Géométriques*, on which Tito González García and Florencia Grisanti worked with graphic designer Ricardo Báez, ethnobiology professor Serge Bauchet, ethnobotanist Flora Pennec, and myself. They also collaborated with the Mapuche poet Adriana Paredes Pinda, ethnomusicology doctor Jacob Rekedal, environmental science and technology doctor Marien González Hidalgo, and professor of literature Vincent Debaene, all of whom contributed essays. This multidisciplinary collaboration illustrates the importance of pooling different fields of knowledge and perspectives.

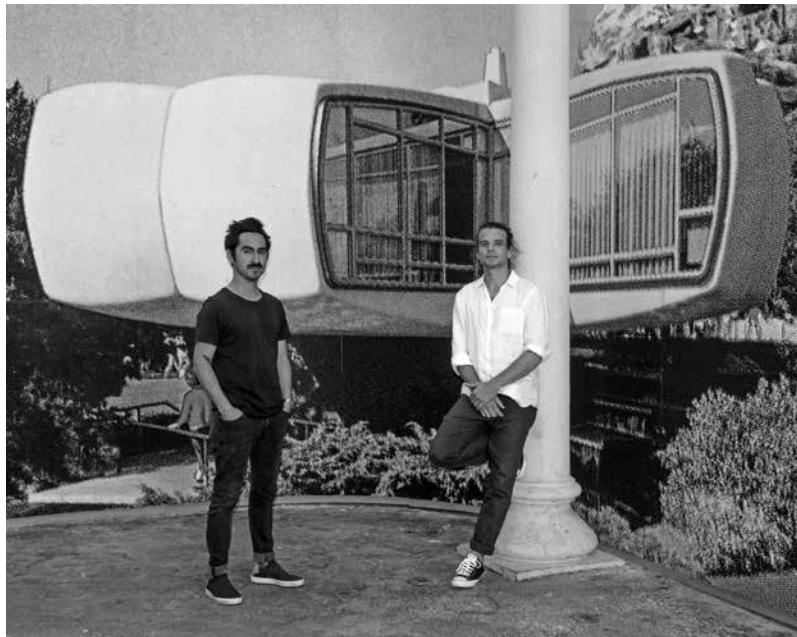
By working together, these artists and experts were able to examine the theme in detail and offer an illuminating experience. This collaborative approach is an instance of the current trend in research-creation that places value on the diversity of the voices represented and on depth and breadth of knowledge. It also encourages the viewer to adopt an active and critical outlook, urging engagement and participation. Documentary perspectivism therefore advocates the creation of a multidisciplinary team. This approach broadens the scope of the research, stimulates the processes of creation and visual interpretation, and facilitates a deeper understanding of complex issues. A diversity of perspectives within a team allows political, social, cultural, and ethical issues to be addressed holistically, while also triggering constructive debate and involving the public in sociopolitical discussions:

You need to back up what you say. Photography needs to be embedded within a bigger movement of scientists, journalists, activists, et cetera. For the type of work I do, working as the lonely documentary photographer,

8  
Mathieu Asselin, “Monsanto Exposed,” in: *Dear Truth: Documentary Strategies in Contemporary Photography*, catalogue, ed. Kerstin Hamilton (Gothenburg: Hasselblad Center, 2021).



The BIC team installing wallpaper at the Electric Shop as part of the *Monsanto: A Photographic Investigation* exhibition, 2017 © Sergio Valenzuela-Escobedo



Sergio Valenzuela-Escobedo (on the left) and Mathieu Asselin (on the right) in front of the *Monsanto House of the Future* at Tomorrowland in Disneyland, California at Electric Shop, Rencontres d'Arles, 2017 © Nicola Noemi Copolla



Lexane Laplace and Marion Abeille hanging the *Herbier* series at the Chapelle Saint-Martin du Méjan as part of the exhibition *Geometric Forests: Struggles on Mapuche Land*, 2022. The herbarium was created in 2016 by Flora Pennec (CNRS), a botanist at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris © Sergio Valenzuela-Escobedo



Cécile Nedelec (exhibition production manager), Olivier Etcheverry (exhibition designer), Amanda Antunes (exhibition designer), Tito González García (director), and Florencia Grisanti (taxidermist) during a working meeting while preparing the *Geometric Forests: Struggles on Mapuche Land* exhibition in Paris © Sergio Valenzuela-Escobedo

trying to fight the world, it's romantic but not very effective. My work is a small contribution to the bigger fight against Monsanto.<sup>9</sup>

### *Reversal of the Apparatus*

Colonization was characterized by the development of narratives and images that perpetuated stereotypes, prejudices, and power relations. These colonial narratives often dehumanized colonized peoples, erased their history and culture, and legitimized oppression and exploitation. Conversely, the camera might also be used to contest and deconstruct those same narratives. Some photographer-researchers challenge stereotypical representations and dominant narratives by giving a voice to marginalized individuals and shining a light on realities that are often obscured. But this is not enough: a stronger political gesture is needed. What is required is a complete reversal of perception of the mechanical device. Metaphorically turning the camera around and pointing it at us and those responsible reflects a critical approach to photography in which the goal is to draw attention to the power structures, injustices, and responsibilities associated with a given subject. This entails shifting away from a perspective that focuses solely on victims or the vulnerable to one that concentrates on the individuals, institutions, or systems that contribute to the problems. It means using photography as a tool for deconstruction and social critique.

Accordingly, the *Forêts Géométriques* and *Monsanto* exhibitions take a subversive and counter-aesthetic approach to photography, challenging the dominant narratives and denouncing injustice. They shift the focus from the victim to those responsible in a tactic that goes beyond the cultural, social, economic, and spiritual aspects. The exhibitions highlight the need for all the sides implicated in this dispute to sit down together around the same table, despite the uncertainty surrounding the discontinuation of the paper industry or the chemical and biotechnology industries in the agricultural sector, respectively. This is made possible by visually recording directors and decision-makers, institutions and industries, to name just a few subjects, in order to reveal the hierarchical structures and draw attention to structural inequalities. However, it must be repeated that this approach requires a comprehensive grasp of the subject, ethical sensi-

9  
Ibid.

tivity, and careful consideration of the potential consequences. The aim of political art is to provoke critical thought and to call into question norms and power systems. For example, *Monsanto: The Stock Market*, Asselin's 2018 exhibition for the Photographers' Gallery in London, was directly linked to a topical issue: Bayer's interest in buying Monsanto. As Asselin explained:

At that time, we were preparing the exhibition for the Deutsche Börse Prize, so we decided to write a new chapter in response. Not only was the space too small to tell the whole story, but we were facing a sponsor, the Deutsche Börse, who by selling Monsanto and Bayer shares, was an active part of my denunciation. It was an act of balance: on one hand, we have the sponsor of the prize actively profiting from the system we are denouncing through the commercialization of Monsanto and Bayer shares. On the other hand, the privilege of being nominated by our peers in the photography world for such an important recognition. Nonetheless, it was also an opportunity we could not pass up. This opened new ways of showing the work, adapting it to current needs.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, the impact of a new chapter was expressed in the introduction of new elements, including a free newspaper printed with the same information as the publication, fine-art prints of Asselin's photographs published in newspapers, and two screens that displayed real-time changes in the values of Monsanto and Bayer shares using a Deutsche Börse tablet app. It should be noted that art's political effectiveness will vary depending on the context, target public, and specific aims of each project. Some photographer-researchers believe that images have the power to shape public opinion. These individuals aim to raise awareness of social and political issues, engaging the audience's consciences and sparking discussion. In contrast, others immerse themselves directly in activism, working to effect change through their action.

The political effectiveness of art could be measured by its concrete impact on public policy, social movements, and changes in perception, but it is above all a question of the awareness of the public. This is a fundamental aspect of

10  
Sunil Shah, "Monsanto Beyond Galleries: An Interview with Mathieu Asselin and Sergio Valenzuela Escobedo," *Spot Magazine* (Spring 2020), Houston Center for Photography, [hcponline.org/spot/monsanto-beyond-galleries](http://hcponline.org/spot/monsanto-beyond-galleries).

Asselin's work, which extends beyond the boundaries of art to play an active part in the sociopolitical sphere. Although his project achieved visibility through art, it also managed to escape the confined space of the gallery and take on a public dimension. A crucial moment occurred when the press used Asselin's images as a stick to fight the use of certain phytosanitary products in agriculture, in the context of a national debate on herbicides in the French parliament. The project challenges conventional boundaries, bridging art and journalism, bringing an artistic approach to visual storytelling. His images were published in various media, alongside such headlines as "Glyphosate: How Monsanto Directs Its Media War" (*Le Monde*, January 31, 2019), "Judges in The Hague Cut Monsanto Down to Size" (*Libération*, April 17, 2017), and "Glyphosate, The Poison Is in the Soil: Revelations on a Health Scandal" (*L'Obs*, October 5, 2017). In the London exhibition, the decision was taken to emphasize that the images shown were not Asselin's original photographs but a selection of cut-outs from different newspapers that cited his work. This mechanism highlighted the new significance of images used as visual evidence in debates and struggles for progress. The artistic approach demonstrated that images can play a crucial role in raising awareness. His project succeeded in crossing the boundaries of art and engaging with important societal debates.

#### *Organic Exhibitions and Ecosystem*

In such presentations, the exhibition itself becomes a living space in which ideas, perspectives, and experiences come together, intersect, and stimulate each other. They allow the viewers to interact with the results and actively participate in the construction of meaning. The exhibition provides an experience that is often immersive, where visitors are invited to explore the many dimensions of the research and creation undertaken, by means of installations, interactive devices, performances, and other forms of artistic expression. Unlike a book—a static, linear medium that gives a considered, analytical view—the temporality of an exhibition allows for a dynamic and evolving experience. The works can be tailored, rearranged, enhanced, or modified for each exhibition context, creating opportunities for renewal and reinterpretation. Such flexibility makes it possible to explore the results

of the research and creation from different angles and to present them in a contextualized and relevant manner. While the artistic expedient is perspectivist in character, its approach places emphasis on the variety of perspectives and viewpoints in the photographic project.

The enriching experience gained by the *Monsanto* project team (Mathieu Asselin, Frederic Davis, Ricardo Baez, and myself) is the solid critical foundation that has enabled us to continue working on new exhibition projects, as well as on more solid platforms.<sup>11</sup> Up to this time, thirty exhibitions have been held, each with its own specific characteristics. This experience has generated the concept of the "organic exhibition," a concept highlighting the fact that each presentation is not simply a stop on a tour of a traveling exhibition, but one that involves a restructuring of the subject and its concerns on the basis of the issues involved at each site. An organic exhibition is characterized by its ability to adapt and contextualize the artistic project, and thus to offer a unique experience at each venue. This allows for the creation of a unique and relevant experience for each exhibition site that takes into account the place's context and characteristics. The second challenge was to continue the creative investigations while the work already done was being exhibited.

As evidenced by recent developments, the role of the curator has transformed from merely managing a collection of artworks or artifacts to becoming a pivotal force in shaping and enriching artistic experiences. It is crucial that the complexity of this role is recognized, that preconceived ideas are dropped, and that recognition is given to the multiple dimensions the curator deals with. Today, the exhibition curator does more than simply select and present works. The etymology of the term curator comes from the Latin *curare*: "to heal." In Spanish, *curador* is a term close to healer. A curator, in my opinion, is someone who takes care of the research, exhibitions, artists, texts, and publications. The etymology underlines the importance of taking the exhibition's every detail into account and of establishing a relationship of trust with the artists. The curator supports and assists them and looks after the exhibition's formal characteristics and accompanying catalogue with the goal of maintaining or improving exchanges.

This involves examining every facet of an exhibition project—what Umberto Eco refers to as “opening the work.”<sup>12</sup> This process includes everything from helping to articulate the research and deciding which project results to display, to selecting the type of paper, determining the size of the frames, and designing the posters and press releases. Overall it requires understanding the exhibition ecosystem, because every aspect of the presentation is significant and each detail can present challenges as it reflects the overall production process. Challenges encountered at one venue may not necessarily affect subsequent locations on the tour. The dynamic nature of an exhibition and its ecosystem—encompassing all the surrounding elements—is of paramount importance. In this respect, an exhibition is always an instrument, a platform for critical discourse for talking about other things through, for example, the press, mediation programs, seminars with curators and specialists, discussions and debates with artists, etc.

Perspectivist exhibitions are distinguished by their organic nature and interconnected basis, which require particular attention from a curator. It is essential to strike a balance between didactic and dialectical aspects to ensure an immersive and educational experience is created. On the one hand, in order to provide information to the exhibition’s visitors, explanatory texts, descriptive panels, and visual and interactive aids can be included to help explain the photographic project and its historical context and meanings, the aim being to provide references and basic information to allow the viewer to fully appreciate the context of the project. Conversely, to foster critical reflection and dialogue, it is crucial to actively engage the viewer, encouraging questions, interpretations, and debates about the themes and photographic works. This approach aims to create a visual polyphony that enriches the overall experience. This could be understood by adopting the idea of “suspended meaning,” as expressed by Roland Barthes.<sup>13</sup> What interests Barthes personally is problematic literature or art. He said: “The best films (for me) are those that best suspend meaning.” Which does not mean nonsense, but, on the contrary, abundance.

12  
Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989).

13  
Roland Barthes, “Le Troisième Sens: Notes de recherche sur quelques photographies de S. M. Eisenstein,” *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 222 (July 1970).

### *Seeking Complexity*

As noted earlier, Claire Bishop, in *Artforum* magazine, highlights the anxiety that may arise when faced with the presentation of research-based art. She proposes an approach to research-creation that incorporates technological developments and emphasizes additive processes, the spatialization of information, and the practice of archiving. However, she also criticizes the fact that many artists do not carry out their own detailed research, but are happy to download, assemble, and re-contextualize existing materials in arbitrary fashion. She underlines the importance of critically and inventively exploring rather than appropriating without critical input. As with any artistic presentation, there are those who disparage or criticize these approaches. The criticism most often expressed concerns these presentations’ ability to connect with a broad public.

Over the last few years, research-creation has become a dominant artistic genre in institutions, to the point of raising doubts about the nature of “investigative aesthetics,” as Ben Davis has pointed out with regard, for example, to Kader Attia, who literally presented the book of a CNRS researcher on a wall,<sup>14</sup> or Sheung Yiu’s review of *Against Abstraction* at Double Dummy,<sup>15</sup> which pointed to the role of censorship and aestheticization. These critical approaches have frequently questioned the conventional dynamics between the artist, their work, and the audience. They aim to actively engage viewers—and, in some cases, the artists themselves, as demonstrated by Ritual Inhabitual—who eschew romantic notions of achieving immediate impact:

There is also a kind of in-built critique present in the blurb of the accompanying book, published with Actes Sud, with a particularly striking section revealing a consciousness and self-awareness. [...] Clearly, in *Forêts Géométriques*, its participants take up the responsibility to call for new socio-environmental-political forms of collaboration. Maybe, via the propositions and practices contained in this exhibition, there is a way forward together, a sustainable means of co-existence.<sup>16</sup>

14  
Ben Davis, “The Investigative Mode of the Berlin Biennale Raises an Uncomfortable Question: Who Is All This Research Really For?,” *Artnet* (2022), news.artnet.com/art-world/berlin-biennale-2022-re-view-2144516.

15  
Sheung Yiu, “Radical Re-imagining of Visual Order Amid the Ongoing Genocide of Palestinians: A Review of ‘Against Abstraction,’” *NO NIIN*, no. 25 (August 2024).

16  
Tim Clark, “Les Rencontres d’Arles 2022: Top Three Festival Highlights,” *1000 Words* (2022), 1000wordsmag.com/les-rencontres-darles-2022.

By exploring new avenues and pushing the boundaries of documentary forms, research-creation cultivates a fertile environment for developing rich and nuanced visual discourse. The critique of photojournalism is obvious here. Producing complex, organic, and multilayered presentations through collaboration necessitates a keen awareness of contemporary developments. This approach encourages viewers to engage with diverse cognitive perspectives, reflecting the varied viewpoints embedded in the work. Duchamp's 1957 statement, "Ce sont les regardeurs qui font les tableaux" ("A work of art is completed by the viewer"),<sup>17</sup> already underscores this idea. Consequently, research-based art not only challenges traditional paradigms of photographic representation, but also provides a more nuanced and inclusive perspective on the complexities of contemporary society.

17  
See: Jean Schuster,  
"Marcel Duchamp,  
vite," in: *Le Surréalisme,  
même*, no. 2 (Spring  
1957).

## In Conversation with Kateryna Radchenko

---

*on Phone Photography as a Protective Tool  
in Wartime Ukraine*

Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger We originally had this conversation two years ago, soon after Russia brutally attacked Ukraine, in February 2022. Unfortunately, my laptop broke and I lost the recording. I'm very glad to have the opportunity to have this conversation again, but very sad that the war still goes on in Ukraine.

You are the founder and director of Odesa Photo Days Festival, which is a photo festival in Ukraine by the Black Sea. Two years ago, you said that since Russia's full-scale invasion, your role as a curator changed rapidly because you focused on supporting contemporary Ukrainian photographers, helping them get assignments from abroad and to show their work in the rest of Europe. What's the situation now? How do you work as a photo curator in the country during wartime?

Kateryna Radchenko

My role as curator has changed again. As you know, curatorial work needs time for analysis and reflection; analysis and reflection need a safe place. During the past two years, there has been no safe place for reflection and rethinking. It has been working nonstop. During the active phase of the war, you don't want to reflect, otherwise your mental health might collapse. If you start to analyze what's going on, you might not be able to handle it. Therefore, since February 2022, my practice has been very busy and very hands-on: I have straightforwardly focused on what's going on in our country during war. This includes supporting photographic artists who are now on the front line to distribute their images and stories; helping the young generation go through their traumatic experience, with photography; and making exhibitions in different cities in Europe in order to create empathy and support for Ukraine. Two years ago, I focused on shedding light on Ukrainian artists and showing what's going on, but now I try to connect Ukrainian artists with other international contexts and photographers around the globe. Through dialogue, I wish to show that what we are going through is connected to the other countries on a global scale.

AKR Would you like to talk a bit about the history of Odesa Photo Days Festival? The festival was founded in 2015. How did it get started and why did you want to create a photo festival in Ukraine?

KR

The start of the festival goes back to 2014, when the war started in Ukraine. In Ukraine it's not possible to get education in photography. When the war started, my question was how can I be useful for Ukraine and what can I do in Ukraine? Things came together. We created the festival as a platform which provided knowledge for Ukrainian photographers, but also educated the wider audience in reading images. That's how the idea of the festival came up. Odesa Photo Days Festival was established in 2015. Already at that time, the city of Odesa was at risk because Russia wanted to occupy the territory from Kharkiv to Odesa. The first three years, we did the festival in two cities: in Odesa and in Batumi, in Georgia. If something would have happened in Odesa, the festival and the team would have moved to Batumi. In the festival program, we wanted to reflect on sociopolitical changes as well as create connections by bringing people together with lectures, talks, and workshops. We tried to educate audiences in reading images and working on different narratives of documentary and conceptual photography.

AKR Educating audiences about the contemporary media landscape has been a big part of your curatorial practice. However, in your festival, you have also paid attention to the history of Ukrainian photography and its connection to contemporary photographic practices. Can you please talk about this?

KR

During the Soviet era, Ukrainian photography was strongly affected by censorship. Only three types of photography were accepted: vernacular imagery like family albums, press photography, and photography which represented a certain idea of beauty. The first main step with the festival was to show that



Olena Morozova, from the *Granny* series, 2022

photography can also be different. The second was to create the community of Ukrainian photographers and to show how to work with photographic images not only when producing the exhibition but talking to the audience through wall texts and guided tours. By bringing in a different kind of photography, we wanted to show that through photography exhibitions one can access alternative information, which was not possible through media, like about the protest movements in Central Asia. In the exhibitions and through artists' stories and artistic approaches, the audience had an alternative way to gain information. And the third step was to research and popularize the history of Ukrainian photography, by working with archives and finding important materials testifying to the uniqueness and specificity of the development of visual language in the period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

AKR When Russia attacked in 2022, it meant that you and all other Ukrainians started living in a war zone. I remember you told me, two years ago, how shocking it was to realize that all of a sudden, all the photographers in Ukraine had turned into war photographers. Everyday photos were photos of life during wartime.

KR Yes, exactly. At the beginning of the war, Ukrainian photographers became the war photographers—not by personal choice. Now many Ukrainian photographers have become soldiers. They have stopped making images. Firstly, it's not possible in that condition. Secondly, they lost their motivation to do it. Another option was that photographers joined the official press. As press officers they can make photos, but in a very limited manner. There are strict rules for what you're allowed to show in the pictures. Showing the limitations of what you can photograph is also part of the propaganda.

And about living during war in general: Firstly, we have adapted. It's two and a half years of adaptation to the active war. We are still alive, but we must live with this, and we must handle it daily. The worst

thing is that we don't know how long the war will stay with us, with our country. Secondly, the value of time has changed radically, because we can be killed at any moment. I don't even think of projects which can happen two years from now, because they might never have the chance. Thirdly, we live in constant tiredness, a state of physical and mental exhaustion. These active two years have brought many of us to the moment where speed is reduced, especially if there is no time for rest.

AKR How have the uses of photography changed during the active war in your opinion? How have you as curator reacted to those changes?

KR One remarkable phenomenon recently has been the importance of vernacular imagery. Soldiers are shooting their daily life with their phones on the front. A huge amount of the selfies circulate, especially from soldiers sending them to their families. But also, it's kind of a process to make yourself alive. A selfie records that you are still alive, that you are yourself. The moment you record yourself, you are still physically present. I have also started taking selfies myself with people whom I know, which I rarely did before. Nowadays when I meet a friend, I want to take a photo, wishing to remember this moment as you don't know if you'll meet again or not.

At the moment, I'm focusing on searching for and collecting vernacular photography. There are lots of stories which are not covered by the professional photographers even if we have thousands of international and Ukrainian professional journalists in the country for the war. Vernacular imagery has become valuable because the majority of this war can be covered only by ordinary people and not by the professional photographers. These pictures offer a completely different view, approach, and evidence as well. Like for example, how people escaped from their homes in Ukrainian cities at the beginning of the war or people's daily life in the occupied territory. The photos from the phones of people are unique material.

In my experience, when you are in danger, you try to protect yourself by keeping distance from the reality through your phone. While recording what's happening you keep yourself and your brain busy. Then you are not accepting the disaster which you are seeing. It is a way of protecting yourself in a certain moment, and to not collapse or be traumatized.

AKR Photography has often been criticized for distancing the photographer from the situation being photographed and for using power to shape the situation according to the photographer's own point of view. When you talk about photographing in the middle of a war, it seems to me that the camera is transformed from an apparatus of power into a protective tool. The distancing character of the camera protects the photographer. Did I understand you correctly?

KR Yes, but for those who have a direct emotional connection with the war. Taking photos at the moment of horrors helps one to maintain one's mental health. When something bad happens, it's important to keep yourself busy. Nowadays, the easiest way to keep yourself occupied is to be with your phone. It's not only to observe, but to react. It is important.

Vernacular photographs are also taken to share context even without sharing the images. If you had a bad experience like explosions next to you, it's important to share the experience with someone. Even if you can't share the images of explosions on social media for safety reasons, you can write one word and share it with your friends, and they know what you are going through and can offer support. Everyone in Ukraine documents like this on their phones, everyone has had the same experiences, and knowing that, you don't feel that you are alone.

AKR You are still making photo exhibitions in the cities that are close to the front line and repeatedly bombed. How is it possible?

Everything is possible, and nothing is possible. It's important to make exhibitions in cities where there are not many cultural activities going on due to the war. Art exhibitions offer a moment to step outside of your daily war reality and not just focus on the news about the current conflict and its terrors.

For example, we opened an exhibition in Kharkiv. We could have easily brought it to Lviv, for example, which is safe enough, but we wanted to take it closer to the front line, in cities such as Kharkiv, Dnipro, and Odesa. They have been under bombing attacks and people have less access to events and art. Fortunately, I've been working in Ukraine for a long time, and I have good institutional contacts. We proposed to certain art places, galleries and museums, if they wanted to host an exhibition, and they were happy to do it. During the touring World Press Photo exhibition in Ukraine, my team did the installation, and the partner institutions hosted the exhibitions and spread information for the locals. During the installation in Kharkiv, there was a rocket attack on the city center and some people were killed. Luckily my team was not hurt but still, it's dangerous. In this city, for example, it's the explosion which usually precedes the air-defense sirens, not the other way around, because the distance from Russia is too small for the air-defense sirens to react to the rockets in time. But in Kharkiv, the exhibition space was underground as kind of a big shelter. It was beautiful to bring people to this safe place to see the exhibition. The audience could be there all day if they wanted to.

AKR Your curatorial practice is already very diverse, including education, knowledge production, coordination, research, among other things, and, in my opinion, curation and activism are fully intertwined in your endeavors. How do you see it?

KR During my life, there have been three revolutions and ten years of war. Curatorial work is a way for me to talk about activism and how I can really materialize my action. The curatorial work has become a tool for my

activism. I've always worked on sociopolitical topics. Through art, by art, by exhibitions, I wanted to bring in conversations and critical thoughts and to make changes. This has been my interest and my focus, what I really want to talk about. That's what my work is about.

In the beginning, it was all about action, and now I try to focus more on research. There have been a lot of changes, a lot of material, and the changes come so fast with photography. I think that it's important to catch these changes we've talked about, to collect them while they still exist. No one knows about next year.

AKR What do you think of the future at the moment? What will happen when the war will be over? Can you imagine what kind of new role you will have then?

KR Well, it's absolutely impossible to answer because it's a question of when and how it will be over. But I have a wish. When the war will be over, I want to invite everyone to Odesa. I will invite everyone who I know from the professional field and there won't be exhibitions, but just people sharing the moment on the beach with conversations, wine, food, and dancing. It's my dream.

Also, I have decided that Odesa Photo Days Festival will stay in Odesa. The festival was made for Odesa. It was made during the war because of resurrection. And it will stay in Odesa. About the future of my curatorial practice: I want to gain new knowledge. Or maybe in a few months, I'll be working not as a curator, but navigating drones...

AKR ... which is still connected to images.

This conversation took place on July 1, 2024.

In Conversation with  
Yining He

*on Creating Cultural Exchange*

Iris Sikking A few years ago, we met at Fotomuseum Winterthur, where we were to visit the annual Plat(t)form event for young photographers. Since then, I have been following your curatorial work and was lucky enough to visit your group exhibition at BredaPhoto (NL). I'm curious about your curatorial process and the choices you make along the way. How do you start with your research for an exhibition?

Yining He

Basically, I have different ways to curate because there are different circumstances in which I work. There are institutions or organizations that want to have what I call an “academic” show here in China. These exhibitions stem from my research practices. I start to collect artists through portfolio reviews and exhibition visits, from photography practitioners all over the world. Then I will look for the trends, what photographers have been doing over the last few years. This could lead to something interesting to bring to Chinese audiences while meanwhile providing a platform for Chinese photographers to get informed about trends in photography.

And the second one is, for example, BredaPhoto, where I was commissioned to create a show. The institution itself was looking for contemporary Chinese photography. My co-curator, Ruben Lundgren, and I focused on photographers from different generations. And we tried to give the audience a sense of the tensions and contradictions between the reality, the image, and the scene in China in a group show called *China Imagined*. These choices were based on our daily experience while both living in this vast country.

IS You seem to be quite aware of the context in which an exhibition will be shown. Can you explain with an example and indicate where you encountered tough issues during your curatorial process?

YH

After I'd been to Winterthur, where we met, at the invitation of Pro Helvetia, I started to get the idea for the group exhibition *Between Mountains, Hills and Lakes*. I chose to use the landscape as a metaphor because mountains, hills, and lakes are something that you could bring to the Chinese audience, to give them a sense of what modern Swiss life looks like. The selected artists grew up in the 1980s and graduated from different art schools in Switzerland. Back in China, I started to list organizations to work with. There are so many different types of organizations, privately owned, state-owned institutions, among which is the biggest, Design Society in Shenzhen, which is internationally oriented, and to which people have free access. The other participating institutions were Modern Art Base in Shanghai and Three Shadows Photography Art Center in Beijing, which is mainly open to photographers, artists, and amateurs. So, this one is specific to the photographic medium. We can't ask the nine selected photographers to make three installations for three different spaces, therefore we developed one installation concept. And I had to adjust it to these three very different locations.

In the case of this exhibition, most of the artists were well established and I could trust them in making a layout for their work. I am functioning like an interpreter between the institutions and the audiences, who is kind of putting everything nicely together. In this process, I provide the maximum opportunity and freedom to the artist and their ideas about how to present them.

During the first month after the opening, we got more than 10,000 people visiting the Design Society, coming from completely different backgrounds, elderly people and children. On the one hand, we had to think about these three different venues and as a consequence who I had to keep in mind. For example, I rewrote the artist statements because some of the artists had been using an academic way to write their statements. These are things I have to really think about—how to, during this exhibition, meet all the needs of the photographers and the visitors.

IS Interesting to hear how aware you are of the many different roles you take on as an exhibition curator. Let's continue with BredaPhoto as an example of how to work remotely on a spatial set-up, and because I think it was a challenge to exhibit in a church. Despite the overwhelming presence of the architecture, the ornaments, and the natural light, I think you did a great job. I'm curious how you structured this work process.

YH Ruben and I were very lucky to meet the Breda team back in, I think, after Paris Photo in 2019. We had one day to visit the church altogether. As we had already selected the artists and we were quite familiar with their works, we could immediately visualize the individual works but also how the exhibition as a whole would work. We started to envision this in dialogue with the designer of the festival. And basically, on that day, we had made most of our decisions of whose work should be positioned where. Ruben and I started working with each of the artists to draft their installations—back and forth, many times, after each meeting. But for some of the artists, we decided how to present them. So, it became group decision-making. For this kind of biennial or festival, you need someone with a good sense and knowledge of the space, and how it might work for the theme of the exhibition, who can guide the curator.

IS The catalogue of the exhibition is very different from what we normally see. Not only were you able to create a book specifically for this exhibition, published by Eriskay Connection, but in addition, the catalogue contains the installation shots of the exhibition. Can you talk more about this process?

YH For BredaPhoto, Ruben was really fighting for a separate book. I feel very glad to work with him and he fought for the installation pictures in the catalogue, other than just having the images with the artist statements. I think we were in a really good conversation

with BredaPhoto, especially during these times of the lockdown in our respective countries. When Ruben and I, and the artists, couldn't travel to Breda, everyone was happy with the catalogue set up this way. It was a good experiment in making an exhibition catalogue. And it was ready within one week of the opening party. The whole printing and binding process was scheduled in anticipation of the installation pictures being inserted.

IS *Between Mountains, Hills and Lakes* also took place during the early pandemic period. You organized lectures with the Swiss artists and invited guests for online meetups. What kind of audience did you reach out to?

YH It's a bit complicated because after the Covid-19 outbreak, we created this crazy line-up of online lectures. On the one hand, I think it was a good opportunity for amateurs and art lovers in general. However, it was quite limited to a certain social network, which is getting smaller and smaller. Before, people posted their news on a website, but now everything is posted on WeChat. WeChat is basically our only Chinese social media platform. It includes similar features to Facebook and Twitter. Everything you can imagine is combined into this platform and all information is quickly updated on WeChat in Chinese. Channels like Facebook can't be used to disseminate information. So, you have to know Chinese and follow a specific institution or organization. Some of my friends who live in London at the moment told me that they completely lost contact with what is happening in the Chinese scene, because they got lost on WeChat.

IS This does not sound like what you are looking for as a curator to make connections and open up opportunities for exchange between different parts of the world. You studied in the United Kingdom. You have gone back to be in China where you have established yourself as a curator and writer, you translate books on photography into Chinese, and you are trying to actively



*Between Mountains, Hills and Lakes*. Installation view at Design Society Shenzhen, China, 2020

initiate these exchanges. Now you are telling me the opposite about sharing information. How do you deal with this changing reality?

YH

I'll briefly tell you a bit about my background: My generation grew up with Disney and MTV channels, with American culture. Whenever I switched on the TV in China, this American culture popped up. I feel like I am the first generation that experienced the freedom to talk about everything. We learned English at a young age. I mean, this is a very open generation, and we wanted to go outside, to explore different cultures. And then things changed from 1989, when the United States started to boycott China. The Chinese government wants to encourage the national industry now. The young generation who grew up after 1995 have been watching Chinese cartoons, Chinese movies, Chinese idols. In comparison to my generation, we have these encounters with different cultures, and we think we have this responsibility at least to encourage the conversation rather than to stop it. We want to bring new ideas to China, either by publishing or curating, to create cultural exchange. We feel this responsibility to move forward.

In a broader context, China's intellectuals have been engaged in a continual struggle. They persistently seek to understand their role within a rapidly evolving society. This understanding has been enriched by both historical insights and lessons from my family. Traditionally, belonging to the intellectual class was in alignment with enjoying a robust welfare system. My parents are a case in point: they benefit from a lifetime of substantial salaries and comprehensive medical reimbursements. Yet, for my generation, the circumstances have shifted profoundly. I am now tasked with navigating my own path and continuously reevaluating my place within this intricate cultural landscape.

This conversation took place on April 21, 2021.

## In Conversation with Laura Toots

---

*on Curating by Using Gestures of Friendship*

Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger Your background is in photography, and you originally trained as a photographic artist. At some point, you shifted your practice into curation and education. In past years, you worked as an artistic director of the Tallinn Photomonth contemporary art biennial, and as curator and project manager at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM), alongside many diverse curatorial projects including publications, exhibitions, common gardens, and art biennials. What is your path to curation?

Laura Toots

Curating entered my life when I was working as an artist and I wanted to know how it felt to sit on the other side of the table, so to speak. I wanted to develop my knowledge on how art is made public and how it is handled, collected, presented, and mediated. I also wanted to know more about how exhibitions are curated. How do all these different processes come together and take the form of an exhibition? How do curators work in an institutional context? What are the different elements in this collective effort?

Because of this, I applied for an internship at WIELS Contemporary Art Center in Brussels, to assist the senior curator Elena Filipovic for eight months, in 2013. I worked alongside her for two exhibitions—one group show and one solo exhibition. It was the best school for me. I was a spongy intern absorbing all the expertise. The knowledge, experiences, and contacts I got then are still in use today.

AKR What observations did you make during the internship?

LT Firstly, I learned about the importance of having a partner—a co-runner and co-curator. I feel there should always be someone to lean on and someone that can lean on you. During this internship, I trained myself to be the curator's eyes and ears, because she was working from multiple locations and not always present at the art center. Being fortunate to have this responsibility

and trust in the working relationship meant that I was very hands-on and dedicated. I felt my work mattered and it made the two beautiful projects come to life.

Secondly, I can't be stuck in what is written in my contract. There is plenty to do all the time, big and small practical things. So, in addition to being a curator, I'm also a driver, a cleaner, a person in between, you know, all these different roles. I think the diverse curator labor creates trustworthiness and it happens when I'm interested in people and all the duties involved in the process. The exhibition team does not consist only of artists, curators, and other art workers but also a big bunch of people from other fields. And you work with this group of extended colleagues to make something very delicate come to life.

AKR What is your curatorial method? What do you do when you curate?

LT

When I curate, I talk with people. I feel this tickle of being interested in people and wanting to learn more from them. I hope that the working relationship can become a residency; a platform that accommodates the developing relationship, with the possibility of becoming a friendship, though not necessarily. I feel the best part of making an exhibition, a publication, or an event is when the relationships grow in different directions with conversations. The best discussions usually take place while eating, going for hikes and swims, organizing movie nights, having sleepovers, and visiting exhibitions.

I've stayed very close to the meaning of the Latin word *cura*, meaning care. But I focus on taking care of the relationships just a tiny bit more than the artworks and exhibitions. In my past, curiosity, trust, and fun allowed me to make bold discoveries. I'm happy to have witnessed artists experimenting with new materials and media when we prepare for an exhibition. And I was there to provide that encouragement!

AKR In a conversation with artist Céline Condorelli, sociologist Avery F. Gordon notes that for most people, friendship means what work does not. Friendship traditionally means something that happens outside of work. Friendship as a working method brings out the fact that often in the art field, work is not a separate area from the rest of life, which can be an advantage or a burden. Having mutual trust, as with your friends, is sometimes missing in the traditional way of thinking of the relationship between curator and artist. Can friendship be considered as a value-based curation strategy?

LT When I was studying at the Estonian Academy of Arts, from 2005 to 2011, I saw many beautiful things come to life in Tallinn: many project spaces, a lovely publishing initiative, and a self-initiated contemporary art museum. I witnessed how these pioneering ventures began from close collegial relationships and friendships and provided possibilities for finding your people in the process. The social school outside the classroom had a big impact on me and my way of thinking. For me, then, friendship traditionally means something that can be very closely linked to work as we grew up together while caring for those projects.

Friendships have been part of my formative years in the academy, sure, and have continued into life after that. I've also been curious about the relationships within and outside of work. I attended a panel two years ago where we discussed the dangers of becoming friends or working with friends. I understand it and to a certain extent I agree, too. Maybe it's better to say that I use the gestures of friendship.

AKR It's true that friendship as a working method should be discussed critically. Friendship is not democratic and it's often not inclusive. Friendship involves difficult questions about favoring, power play, exclusion, and bias. It can be, and is also, misused. It can lead to blindness to critical thoughts, bubbling, and consensus-seeking.

Sometimes it's said that intertwining friendship and work means capitalizing something which should not be related at all to our capitalistic working life.

But I think we can look at the question from another angle, which is rooted in responsibility. In friendship you are responsible for your friends because you want to be, not because you have to be. If you extend this willingness to be kind and responsible to your colleagues, it may affect the whole working culture. I think it's telling that many curators are distancing themselves from objects and turning toward social relations.

LT Yes. I also think that a big part of my curatorial practice is curating relationships. When I worked as an artistic director of the Tallinn Photomonth contemporary art biennial, I curated the logistics in terms of what happens where and when and with whom. Together with my co-director, Kadri Laas-Lepasepp, we were the duo of Cupids pairing artists and curators and venues. It was great to follow the gut feeling that some people are good together and their professional qualities go well together. In some cases it worked wonderfully and was very rewarding.

I have been lucky to have enthusiastic and demanding people on my side. Next to them, indeed, I want to be responsible and reliable. They have inspired me to be the best version of myself. Doing things together with them made me think, okay, we can do this. With the biennial, I remember that even the most boring administrative stuff was fun together. Although there was a lot of it, I never remember work being painful, because of the strong extracurricular relationships with the core team.

This conversation took place on August 31, 2021.

In Conversation with  
Thomas Kuijpers

---

*on the Volume of Images*

Iris Sikking At the core of your practice is the collection of large quantities of existing images from online and offline sources, which you cut, paste, and rearrange in a specific linear or spatial order that allows the audience to look at them with fresh eyes. In short, as a visual artist you curate found images.

Your latest book, *Hoarder Order* (2020), is an assemblage of various collections that you have accumulated over the past two decades. Your extensive collection of objects and materials depicting the Twin Towers in New York,<sup>1</sup> which continues to grow, is interspersed with shorter sequences in which you question the meaning and power of familiar and less familiar images. Can you briefly explain how the book *Hoarder Order* came about?

Thomas Kuijpers

Collecting images from the internet, newspapers, and magazines is a very important way for me to express how I view society. I consider collecting a form of art and a working method. Once I work on the design of a book or create a spatial installation, it is like editing a film. Although the book doesn't really have a main story, it is structured in an associative way. In the aftermath of 9/11, I began collecting objects depicting the Twin Towers in a variety of formats, from bedsheets to album covers, tea mugs, and T-shirts. This collection continued to grow and became the backbone of the book. *Hoarder Order* also became a collection of the other image series, all of which relate in some way to 9/11 and to the role that images play in world politics and the relationship that politics and politicians have with the media. In this sense, the book as a whole looks back on the past twenty years, beginning with the attack on the World Trade Center, to tell the story of the far-reaching blending of media and politics.

15 In the early 2020s, when the lockdown was instituted in the Netherlands, you were stuck in your studio. The feeling of being more disconnected than ever from the big world issues became the

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Kuijpers, *When the Twins Were Still Beautiful*, collection and spatial installation, 2014–ongoing, see: [thomk.nl/When-The-Twins-Were-Still-Beautiful](http://thomk.nl/When-The-Twins-Were-Still-Beautiful).

beginning of a new project called *Volumes* (2021). Like the *Hoarder Order* book, as an exhibition *Volumes* is an invitation to revisit images before they sink deep into the great black hole of the internet and mass media. However, this time you have added your own photography and even created a sculptural work. Can you explain the title *Volumes* and how this work connects to your practice of collecting and curating existing images?

TK

I have a lot of boxes with different subjects where I keep everything, like newspaper clippings next to leaflets and posters that I find, and sometimes I add my own photos to these boxes. But I never really went out with the goal of photographing for a project. At that specific moment in time, it felt surreal to be so engaged with the outside world while I was locked away, in the middle of nowhere on a farm where I was staying, far away from any kind of vibrant life. I have a few different newspaper subscriptions and during that period I put them all in boxes, unread. I deleted all my news apps from my phone. It forced me to re-evaluate what is really important to me as a person, and in relation to that, for being an artist.

A volume is a quantity of something, a liquid in a can or a presence in a space. It can also refer to the volume of a sound. If it gets louder, it has more presence. I think this relates directly to what I am trying to do with the body of work *Volumes*. I want to question the presence of something, what attention it demands, what space it occupies, and show different attempts at landing something of importance in one's mind. The project began by questioning the potential impact of a single photograph. Volume emphasizes the abundance of images we have around us all the time, the volume and repetition of images we see every day. It also refers to the information that clogs our minds without the ability to realize the impact of certain events. And that's really what connects what I am doing now to what I have done before. I have always liked larger image volumes, lots of visual matter like my Twin Towers installation experiments.



Thomas Kuijpers, *Volumes*, 2021. Installation view at Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie 2022, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen, Germany (photo: Miriam Stanke)

The pressing demand for change in a wide variety of countries in relation to different issues, in 2020, the year of lockdowns due to Covid-19 in many countries, was very interesting to me. The number of demonstrations that took place worldwide, even in the year of the pandemic, and the number of people taking part in them, was massive. It rarely happens that a change directly follows a protest or a call for justice. It is a process that, on the contrary, goes rather slowly and is barely visible. It's a bit like art: you hope you're doing something right and you hope you're changing something, but you cannot really measure it and you just have to believe in it.

That is the reason that I wanted to photograph in the streets with a high-speed camera, to capture scenes of protests that show only a little movement, in such a slow way that you don't really see the change. If you look at the images in the work *Burst (Continuous Light)* (2021), the first image is quite different from the last one I made, but the changes from one to another are barely noticeable. I thought it was interesting that in Poland, where this footage was shot, there was this massive protest movement against the anti-abortion law. I think this idea, the concept of being in control of your own body, draws a parallel with the idea of going into the streets during a pandemic with thousands of people, using your body to make the statement to demand the right to be boss over your own body.

IS It is interesting to hear that this forced stillness made you reflect on what you did before. The shift back and forth between the world we encounter via our screens and flat media like newspapers and the real world is still at the core of your artistic position. Is that the reason you have added the sculpture *Deepwater Horizon* (2021) to your installation as you felt the urge to bring back the physical and material properties of what is depicted on a flat image?

TK For me, making sculptures has to do with the idea that something that happened in the past should not

be forgotten. For example, the largest oil spill in the history of offshore oil drilling occurred in 2010, when BP's Deepwater Horizon drilling rig exploded and sank in the Gulf of Mexico. This event, which of course made headlines at the time, nevertheless had such little impact, and to this day the environment has not been cured of it. And yet we have forgotten this event. To revive this idea, I thought it would be interesting to create a form of confrontation that would bring this catastrophic event back into our memory physically, as it were, instead of using the image of a bird in distress over and over again, which doesn't seem to affect us anymore. I took the iconic photo of a pelican covered in oil and turned it into a sculpture. After a long search, I found a taxidermy pelican, which had died in a zoo, and set it up in the same pose as in the iconic photo and topped it with oil. In addition to this sculpture, I show a copper plate with etchings that displays all the Google results when you search for this particular news image. What I like about the copper plate is that it is a symbol of how the reproduction of images was done in the past. A process that was used to make something last forever, as in letterpress printing.

IS One sole image is able to create the momentum for change; but I agree with you that its impact fades away after some time and no matter how many images we see from a specific event we tend to move on to the next thing that grabs our attention. Unlike images shown in a wall presentation, the sculpture of the pelican demands that the viewer position themselves while facing this impressive life-size creature.

TK Absolutely. I think because the flow of images is so constant and so overwhelming, it has become difficult to dwell on any event for more than a few days. Many events don't deserve to be dwelled on. We don't need it, we get them. I think it is within our power to find the right way to respond to those events that do deserve our immediate attention. Therefore, I think it should almost be a copy of an image we already know, which

then confronts us with the image we already have on our minds and then creates a shortcut or feedback loop by being physically present next to us.

The duality of an experience is a very important thing. You have the sequence of images in *Burst*, the work that I described, but I also added the film footage that I made while I was making those images. You have these different works that were created at one point, but they all represent the situation as I found it; or rather, they represent that situation from a different perspective. That's also what the pelican does. The image and the sculpture provide two different sensory experiences. How can they hold or even change our view of an event? It is important to realize that these are relevant questions that we need to ask ourselves as artists using and curating photographic images.

This conversation took place on April 16, 2021.

With Whom Are We Curating?

*Whatever We Curate, We Curate Ecology:  
Multispecies Relationships and Photography  
in Curatorial Praxis*

When I first started thinking about which aspects of ecological curation I would be interested in writing about, my research almost immediately led me to Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez's article, titled "For Slow Institutions," and Megan Arney Johnston's notion of "slow curation." Megan Arney Johnston coined the term "slow curating" in 2009, defining it as a "working framework that embraces methods to facilitate deep connections to community, locality, and reciprocal relationships (between people and between art/objects and audience) and evolves over time. It is a practice that enables, explores, and expands museum and exhibition experiences for more relevant audience engagement."<sup>1</sup> As she explained at a panel organized by the Association for Art History, in early 2021, "Slow is not about time, per se, it is about connection."<sup>2</sup> Accentuating the qualitative side of the curatorial praxis, and foregrounding relationships between all involved, instead of focusing merely on production, seems to be at the heart of Arney Johnston's concept of slowness, a sentiment that is echoed in Petrešin-Bachelez's article, with a deep focus on the socio-political embeddedness of the "slow institution." Petrešin-Bachelez characterizes slowness as an institutional framework that keeps sustainability at the forefront on all operational levels, thus paralleling the ideologies represented by the exhibitions in the ways of institutional functioning.<sup>3</sup>

The above-mentioned concepts of slowness in institutional and exhibition contexts led me to reflect upon the role of different temporalities, be they fast or slow, in the establishment and the reframing of interspecies connections within photographic frameworks. This text focuses on how temporalities of photography can enhance our understanding of curating as an ecologically embedded practice, with a particular concern for the representation of the other-than-human animal. My purpose is to demonstrate through the analysis of two case studies how the photographic medium can underpin the ecological embeddedness of the curatorial praxis, through different approaches to temporality and interspecies connections. Firstly, drawing upon recent literature in art historical and curatorial studies, I will briefly discuss why it is of pivotal importance to regard curatorial practice as ecological by definition. Secondly, I will analyze Johanna Karjalainen's *Nothing but Disappointing* project (2020), a work whose conception sheds light on the possibilities within the

1  
Megan Arney Johnston, "Slow Curating," *slow-curating.com* [accessed May 1, 2021].

2  
Megan Arney Johnston, "Curating Fast and Slow: Changing Times, Changing Tempos," online lecture, April 7, 2021.

3  
Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, "For Slow Institutions," *e-flux* 85 (October 2017), [e-flux.com/journal/85/155520/for-slow-institutions/](http://e-flux.com/journal/85/155520/for-slow-institutions/) [accessed May 5, 2020].

photographic medium to emphasize the ecological embeddedness of curating. Thirdly, I will look at Klara Hobza's project entitled *Animaloculomat*, an artistic intervention curated by Bergit Arends at the Natural History Museum in Berlin, in 2017, and consider how multispecies hierarchies are disrupted through urgencies of time.

### *Whatever We Curate, We Curate Ecology*

The forced distinction between nature and culture has been engrained in Western thinking since the Enlightenment, implying a certain hierarchy between man and nature. Striving to dismantle the nature/culture dichotomy in a curatorial context ultimately implies that any curatorial practice is part of what Donna Haraway describes as *natureculture*, meaning that it is firmly embedded in social and ecological systems.<sup>4</sup> When it comes to the visual arts, Andrew Patrizio's 2018 book *The Ecological Eye* emphasizes the potential of art history as a discipline to consider any art practice through an ecocritical lens, a perspective which can considerably expand the horizons of the discipline in the age of ecological crisis, truly allowing one to see art history as part of the wider ecological realm.<sup>5</sup>

Considering any curatorial practice through a similar perspective means reckoning with the fact that curating is firmly embedded in socio-political environments that are part of a wider ecological context, and thus, that curatorial practice is, by definition, ecological.<sup>6</sup> Similar arguments were already put forward in the 2016 publication *Ecologising Museums*, edited by Sarah Werkmeister and Petrešin-Bachelez. The volume is a collection of writing on the art institution's relationship to its wider ecological context, and to the ecological crisis in particular. As the book's introduction reads:

It is up to museums to face the [ecological] issue not only head-on, but from all angles—to deviate from the straight line dividing nature and culture, while remaining responsible for the collections they house, the constituencies they collaborate with and those they represent, and the physical environment within and around them. We can, at the very least, begin by re-evaluating the role of art, exhibition making and

4  
Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

5  
Andrew Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2018).

6  
Also see Bruno Latour, as referenced in Fiona R. Cameron, "Theorising More-Than-Human Collectives for Climate Change Action in Museums," [internationaleonline.org/research/politics\\_of\\_life\\_and\\_death/48\\_theorising\\_more\\_than\\_human\\_collectives\\_for\\_climate\\_change\\_action\\_in\\_museums/](http://internationaleonline.org/research/politics_of_life_and_death/48_theorising_more_than_human_collectives_for_climate_change_action_in_museums/) [accessed December 20, 2020].

cultural dissemination within the museum, in relation to a more informed ecological awareness.<sup>7</sup>

What may differ from one curatorial practice to another is the degree to which they acknowledge their ecological embeddedness, as well as the modalities of acknowledgment. As will be shown through my case studies, engaging with different temporalities of photographic practices may constitute one such way in which the environmental self-reflection of the curatorial may materialize.

This idea can be linked to iLiana Fokianaki's observation in regard to the ways in which curators have discussed the "dichotomy between individualism and community."<sup>8</sup> As she notes, female curators Galit Eilat and Petrešin-Bachelez,

aim to undermine the illusion of the independent curator, since it is interdependency that defines their livelihoods.

They present themselves as interdependent curators rather than independent ones. This choice of words calls attention to the larger structures that force dependency, but also expresses a desire to position oneself as part of a group, especially given the extensive unpaid care labor that female freelance curators are often expected to provide.<sup>9</sup>

In line with Fokianaki's emphasis on interdependency, and foregrounding tactics that foster "sustainability, value and social investment" in curating, Helena Reckitt also notes:

Rejecting the neo-liberal pressure to solve problems individually, such tactics would occur as part of a collective process of caretaking. A change in orientation is certainly overdue, given how the art system generates vast amounts of capital on the one hand—be it through the art market, or from the economic benefits of cultural activity and regeneration—while making it difficult for many in the sector to support themselves.<sup>10</sup>

The argument about the social interdependence of curating that is woven into Fokianaki's observation may also be applied to the ecological embeddedness of the curatorial. No matter where we live, what we do, and how we lead our lives, we are dependent upon the environment that sustains us. This environment, of course, includes maintenance work and care labor, as laid out by Fokianaki, but also the wider envi-

7  
"Introduction" to *Ecologising Museums*, eds. Sarah Werkmeister and Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez (L'Internationale, online publication, 2016), available at: [monoskop.org/images/3/36/L\\_Internationale\\_Werkmeister\\_Sarah\\_eds\\_Ecologising\\_Museums.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/3/36/L_Internationale_Werkmeister_Sarah_eds_Ecologising_Museums.pdf), 7.

8  
iLiana Fokianaki, "A Bureau for Self-Care: Interdependence Versus Individualism," *e-flux* 119 (June 2021), [e-flux.com/journal/119/402021/a-bureau-for-self-care-in-interdependence-versus-individualism/](https://e-flux.com/journal/119/402021/a-bureau-for-self-care-in-interdependence-versus-individualism/) [accessed June 23, 2021].

9  
Ibid.

10  
Helena Reckitt, "Support Acts: Curating, Caring and Social Reproduction," *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (February 2016), n.p.

ronmental systems that underpin anthropogenic activities.<sup>11</sup> This renewed focus on collectivity could bring with itself an acceptance of vulnerability, and a re-examination of our conditioning to accept anthropocentric biases. Furthermore, considering collectivity a more-than-human endeavor could also open possibilities to rethink human/other-than-human connections, raise questions regarding opportunities to adequately engage with and incorporate other-than-human perspectives into exhibition spaces, and establish new modalities of relationships between displays, society, and their wider ecological realm.<sup>12</sup>

### *Slowing Down to See:*

#### *Johanna Karjalainen's Nothing but Disappointing*

In 2020, I was lucky enough to work with UGM Maribor on an (eventually) online exhibition, within the framework of the Parallel – European Photo Based Platform. The exhibition, titled *To see our common/place*, examined how everyday banalities and personal experiences can connect us to the wider socio-political structures that underpin the ecological crisis. One of the projects included in the exhibition was *Nothing but Disappointing* by Finnish artist Johanna Karjalainen. Karjalainen's piece consisted of archival Super-8 footage, taken by the artist's father in zoos in the 1980s, as well as a series of photographs, shot by a trail camera that had been set up on a trail in Finland by the artist at the beginning of 2020. At its core, the project examined other-than-human agency, focusing on the animal gaze.<sup>13</sup> While animals are, generally speaking, robbed of agency and gaze in the zoo, both were reclaimed in the trail-camera images, owing to the possibility for the animals to engage freely with their environment, and experience unrestricted movement in space.<sup>14</sup>

The archival footage features animals aimlessly wandering around in their cages, seemingly unaware of the presence of zoogoers, thus echoing John Berger's claim in "Why Look at Animals?," whereby he notes the paradox at the heart of the institution: "The zoo to which people go to meet animals, to observe them, to see them, is, in fact, a monument to the impossibility of such encounters."<sup>15</sup> The Super-8 footage shatters the anthropocentric idea of the zoo as a place where so-called wild animals can be seen to act as they normally would in their original habitat; conversely, the footage

11  
My thinking process here has been heavily influenced by the conversations that I have had with my fellow members of the Ecologies of Curating Working Group, which has been convened by Elke Krasny and Urska Jurman.

12  
In a similar vein, Fiona R. Cameron writes about the idea of more-than-human collectives in museums:

"[E]cologising museum concepts and practices can break the stranglehold of modern and critical humanisms. This approach acts as a lever to consider how we might connect entities in collectives; formulate inter-relationships between human and human and non-humans; found new formulations of history and change; propose new concepts for objects and collections including those defined as virtual and how multiple world views might exist and interact. My objective is to set up new forms of more-than-human civic life that have the potential to be made manifest in museum practices and narratives that invite non-human others into social collectives, acknowledges, and is more respectful of, the diversity of forms and modes of thought and ontological categories"; Fiona R. Cameron, op. cit.

13  
Eszter Erdosi, "To see our common/place: Essay," [toseeourcommonplace.parallelplatform.org/essay/](https://toseeourcommonplace.parallelplatform.org/essay/) [accessed September 20, 2024].

14  
On the lack of the zoo captive's gaze, see John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 16.

15  
Ibid., 13.

conveys to the viewer that no matter how joyful and colorful the artificial decorations may be in the zoo, the zoo captive's behavior fails to mirror this joyful attitude. As a counterpoint, the black-and-white trail-camera images in the series paint a remarkably different picture of the so-called "wilderness." The trail-camera images are not particularly interesting visually: they are black and white, sometimes blurred, and the animals pictured are often barely recognizable. They contradict our social conditioning of how animals in the "wild" should behave according to anthropocentric expectations, and they lack the flamboyant, artificial, and exoticized characteristics that are often promoted by zoos. Karjalainen's piece suggests that normative framings of zoo captives build up our expectations, only to be a reason for disappointment when zoogoers meet the animals in the space of the zoo.<sup>16</sup> In fact, many of the animals who are visible in the pictures are not even "wild" animals, but domesticated pets, mainly cats. Thus, the series is also a reflection on what kind of hierarchies animal taxonomy has attempted to project onto other-than-human animals.<sup>17</sup> The illusory separation of nature and culture becomes obsolete, and the viewer is confronted with the fact that if there exists a certain kind of wildness, it is only an imaginary projection of anthropocentric culture.

Karjalainen's project emphasizes the need to consider the ecological embeddedness of photography. It must be acknowledged that the photographic medium has often been linked to capitalism and ideas of productivism. For example, Coleman and James consider Justin McBrien's idea to name our geological epoch the "Necrocene," a term that would connect capitalist histories to the concept of extinction, characteristic of the present.<sup>18</sup> They draw parallels between capitalism and photography, by highlighting their mutual power to turn living things into dead, into "fossils," thus venturing into analogies of deep time.<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that these arguments are also integrated into a wider scope of scholarship, exposing the links between capitalism, its extractivist and exploitative forces, and the ecological crisis.<sup>20</sup> Reclaiming photography as a means that furthers multispecies relationships moves it away from this parallel, and earns its place in eco-social frameworks of thinking about art and curatorial practice.

16 This reading, as well as the title of Karjalainen's piece, echoes Berger's claim about the zoo as a source of disappointment in regard to human's expectations of animals; *ibid.*, 16.

17 Eszter Erdosi, op. cit.

18 Kevin Coleman and Daniel James, "Capitalism and the Limits of Photography," *Photography & Culture*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2020), 153.

19 *Ibid.*

20 See, Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014) and Jason W. Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44 (2017).

On the one hand, photography was once rightfully seen as an ally of industrialism, modernism, and capitalism, and a medium that was linked to productivist approaches, producing quick results. These have only been accelerated by digital development and, more recently, by social media. On the other hand, the medium's contribution to science and social causes is equally undeniable, and Karjalainen's work demonstrates that photography's existence is not antithetical to slow temporalities and ecologically engaged attitudes, nor to the exploration of more ethical multispecies horizons. *Nothing but Disappointing* calls for acknowledgment of the other-than-human gaze, but when it comes to the medium itself, it is also about the relinquishment of human control, and its retribution against the environment. If anything had had control over the actual images, it was the camera itself; however, while it was a human-made object, its functioning was no longer in the hands of the artist—she left it in Kainuu for months, in the forest. While it may be argued that a total abandonment of anthropogenic control is not entirely possible if one takes as its subject the animal photographed by a human-made object, human control and anthropocentrism are nonetheless destabilized in *Nothing but Disappointing*.

During the curatorial process, it was essential to trust the image-making process, and to accept in advance what the end result was going to be. The trail camera only took pictures when there was movement happening in front of it, so in part, it was already conditioned by the very environment in which it was placed. Furthermore, the process was heavily influenced by lighting conditions in Finland. During my early conversations with Karjalainen, we frequently discussed how the images would possibly look, and how they would eventually be exhibited in the (first physical, then online) space. What was missing from our discussions at the beginning was the support of the actual photographic *material*. The reason for this was that up until about March, there was not enough light for the camera to take images, and it was only with spring's arrival that the animals began to appear in front of the lens. Thus, the working process of Karjalainen was in tune with the seasons and the ecology of the space, and the process of how these images came into being during the curatorial process reflected the need to consider how different temporalities can reflect ecological embeddedness in a curato-

rial context. Karjalainen's work made me embrace chance and contingency as a curator, and made me reflect upon the reformulation of the photographic medium that has the potential to take on new meanings by fully embracing its ecological situatedness. The displacement of agency which characterized the image-making process by relinquishing control over the camera was paralleled in the ways in which my curatorial practice was unfolding during the development of the project.

*Shifting Perceptions in the Blink of an Eye:  
Klara Hobza's Animaloculomat in the Natural  
History Museum, Berlin*

In 2017, the Natural History Museum in Berlin presented an exhibition titled *Kunst/Nature*, which included interventions by contemporary artists into the fabric of the museum's collection. One of the pieces, curated by Bergit Arends, was *Animaloculomat* by Czech visual artist Klara Hobza. Hobza's project took the form of a photo booth, in which visitors could sit, with the camera inside the booth taking their picture as an animal would potentially see them. As the press release at the time of the show read: "There is very little known about how we are seen by animals or how they perceive us using other senses. With the *Animaloculomat*, Hobza works in the tradition of scientific and technological images. Her artistic interpretation offers quirky, yet plausible speculation."<sup>21</sup> Hobza's "artistic visualization" offers a solution for a situation in which scientific research might not be easily grasped by the human mind, and "she asks us to explore different ways of seeing that go beyond anthropocentric blindness."<sup>22</sup> As such, *Animaloculomat* provides a space where scientific data and creative, speculative imagination join forces to help the spectator rethink the subject of sight itself, and look at themselves with fresh eyes (almost literally).<sup>23</sup> While in a conventional photo booth, the picture that is produced by the machine is usually anything but interesting, suitable for use on official documents, on CVs, and in other contexts where one is expected to look "professional," Hobza's work turns this concept on its head and becomes a mockery of such a framework. In the case of the conventional photo booth, one usually knows how they will look and thus, the result is calculable. The pictures are simple and unusual. In contrast, *Animaloculomat* turns the preconceived idea of

21  
"Art/Nature III – Artistic Interventions in the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin," press release (April 21, 2017), [muse-umfuernaturkunde.berlin/en/press/press-releases/art/nature-iii-artistic-interventions-museum-fur-naturkunde-berlin](https://muse-umfuernaturkunde.berlin/en/press/press-releases/art/nature-iii-artistic-interventions-museum-fur-naturkunde-berlin) [accessed May 17, 2023].

22  
"Klara Hobza: Animaloculomataurus," [soycapitan.de/exhibitions/klara-hobza-animaloculomataurus-02-02-07-04-2018/](https://soycapitan.de/exhibitions/klara-hobza-animaloculomataurus-02-02-07-04-2018/) [accessed May 17, 2023].

23  
Ibid.

how one imagines themselves into a vulnerable subject. Our anthropogenic ideas of ourselves, as well as that of our vision and sight, are unsettled in the space of the photo booth.<sup>24</sup>

In *Animaloculomat*, shifts of perception happen in the blink of an eye, and the photo booth makes something that is normally difficult to imagine and out of our conventional conception of sight into a visual artistic product that is tangible for humans, too.<sup>25</sup> The conventional temporalities of the photographic medium become a means to underpin the urgency to rethink and reformulate human/other-than-human relationships.

The attempt to capture the environment as an animal would perceive it has been a recurring concept in photographic projects. *Animaloculomat* echoes Tuula Närhinen's 2002 series entitled *Animal Cameras*, in which the artist, experimenting with simple pinhole cameras, sought to record a habitat by taking into account how different animal species would see it with their own eyes. As the artist explained:

Using these animalcams has been a journey of discovery for me—a rare chance to take an eye I have built, put it in a place where people normally cannot go and then look at the images that emerge. In addition to photographing the surroundings, I have also used my own cameras to photograph myself, the photographer who intrudes on the domestic peace of these animals, and in the animalcam images I come across as a strange apparition indeed. In doing so, I comment on nature photographers' gadget-fixation and their sometimes voyeuristic approach to animal behavior.<sup>26</sup>

What is evident from Närhinen's words is that the urge to mock the obsession to observe and objectify other-than-human life and turn it upside down is already present in *Animal Cameras*, a sentiment that is echoed in Hobza's *Animaloculomat*. The drive to look at the world with an other-than-human eye exists in both projects, but Hobza takes this idea to another level by incorporating the role of temporality into the process, thus emphasizing multispecies urgencies. These temporal considerations took place in a specific curatorial context that emphasized the possibility to engage with the photographic medium itself in a playful way.

24  
Ibid.  
25  
Bergit Arends and Klara Hobza, "A Report Prepared in 2118," in: *Art/Nature: Artistic Interventions at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin*, ed. Anita Hermannstädter (Berlin: Braus, 2019), 110.  
26  
Tuula Närhinen, "Animal Cameras," [tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/animcams.htm](https://tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/animcams.htm) [accessed July 18, 2021].

By its contextualization in the Natural History Museum, Hobza's work, and, by extension, photography, became a tool to disrupt the conventional hierarchies often present in natural history museums. As Fiona R. Cameron notes, the foundation of institutions such as the British Museum and the Natural History Museum in London, coincided with the endeavor to separate nature and culture into two separate fields: "The modern humanist human subject/object distinction and a reliance on vision set up new relations with the world."<sup>27</sup> Situating Hobza's work in the context of Berlin's Natural History Museum mocks this distinction, by confusing the positions of the object and the subject in a playful, exploratory way. As Cameron later adds:

Ecologising experimentations on natural history collections and exhibition narratives have the potential most broadly to re-work human-focused and hubristic perceptions of the world; build new social collectives that can acknowledge and work with the inter-and complementary relations between humans and non-humans; and promote concepts of social inclusiveness and an ethics of care for *beyond the human world* as a new position from which interspecies transactions can be made.<sup>28</sup>

Through Hobza's project and its curation by Bergit Arends, the institution, which normally provides a space to observe, objectify, and look at the "natural world," became a space wherein the human gaze was subverted.<sup>29</sup> All of a sudden, it was the human animal who was being looked at. As a result, interspecies hierarchies of gaze and anthropocentric value systems were disrupted.<sup>30</sup> Human certainty became unsettled, and a certain vulnerability could filter into the visitor's point of view. The normative, anthropogenic concept of vision and ideas of self-perception were substituted by animal perceptions of the self.

Whether using and conceptualizing photography's ability to capture a moment and thus destabilize anthropocentric hierarchies in the blink of an eye, or considering the possibility to slow down the photographic process itself and the curatorial practice in which it is embedded, curating photography with its wider ecological context in mind can

27  
Fiona R. Cameron, op. cit., 107.  
28  
Ibid.  
29  
Bergit Arends and Klara Hobza, op. cit., 107.  
30  
About subverting normative perceptions of vision, one visitor said: "I thought it was really cool. That's a way of seeing that you really don't think about. [...] It's just a lot of fun and very entertaining. But still, it's connected to a certain amount of information. Since we humans are programmed in such a way, we take our way of thinking to be the gold standard. But here, it's exactly the other way round"; quoted in *ibid.*, 108.

open up new ways to rethink multispecies relationships. Looking simultaneously at the specific temporalities of curatorial practice and photographic works may play a key role in approaching questions of ecology, while in the process foregrounding a certain vulnerability related to the destabilization of anthropogenic hierarchies. While this may require an openness to self-assessment and to a relinquishment of control and biases, as can be seen in the examples of both Karjalainen's and Hobza's work, agential shifts in photography may be embraced as part of a playful and exploratory approach to the medium. Considering ecologies of photography helps us acknowledge other-than-human points of view, as well as the need to look at our environment as a space that is shared and co-constituted by both humans and other-than-humans.

*Curating in a Changing Climate:  
Situated, Mediated, Dependent*

During what felt like the endless dark pandemic months of the autumn and winter of 2020–2021, I found myself often peering into a beaver lodge through a live webcam provided by Finland’s national broadcasting company, Yle. Located in a national park, the webcam also offers views of the lodge’s surroundings, which could allow the viewer to follow the ecological reconstruction work carried out by beavers during warmer months. However, the webcam was only active during the winter, when the beavers were mainly snuggled inside their den, unaware of the presence of the gaze of the camera and its numerous online viewers, who were also mostly nestled indoors. The view of these charismatic creatures close up undoubtedly nurtured a sense of care in some; yet without further contextualization, it did little to inform viewers of beavers’ invaluable role in the ecosystems they inhabit and transform.<sup>1</sup>

As a beaver momentarily appeared to stare back at the camera or scratched itself as if caught unawares, questions arose about privacy and consent—or in this case, the lack of. What is the basis for this presumption of access to intimate spaces and moments that are deliberately hidden from view by the animals themselves? In this case, the underlying assumption is based upon notions of the public good, with the webcam seen as a harmless and even beneficial tool in the service of nature conservation and the goal of raising ecological awareness. The trespass of the boundary of visibility is nevertheless inherently violent. It participates in the accelerated attention economy and its consumerist logic online, while also being complicit in the extractivist elevation of those entitled to grant consent or deny it at the expense of those who are there simply to be accessed.

This has made me pay closer attention to the webcam at an osprey nest on the Finnish island of Seili, in the Archipelago Sea, where for a number of years I have been working with artists and scientists. The endangered birds migrate south for the winter, beyond the reach of my gaze, but return as a sure sign of spring to the artificial nest perched atop an illuminated beacon that marks the shipping route through the archipelago. As with the beavers, I have begun to wonder about what can be seen and what is hidden from view here. The cameras allow the human gaze entry into spaces and perspectives of other species—deep into

1  
There was no explanation on Yle’s website about the rationale for the webcam, only a questions page where viewers could get brief answers to their queries concerning beavers, their habitats, and the webcam. The feed, which is no longer active, was available at: yle.fi/aihe/artikkeli/2020/11/27/majavalive-seuraa-majavaperheen-puuhastelua-talvisella-lammella [all URLs accessed April 28, 2021].

burrows, underwater, or high above in the treetops. At the same time, human presence, when mediated through technological intervention, is considered conspicuously absent by the same media. This hardly fosters a sense of relationality between viewers and the viewed.

Such notions of privacy or consent may seem anthropomorphizing here. Yet this does not have to be based on identification that reduces all alterity to binary terms. If an animal, or any being, is approached as a subject and an agent rather than an object that is acted upon, the encounter between the observer and the observed appears in another light. It becomes an interaction that demands recognition of the active input of all the participants in the consequent production of knowledge, images, and narratives.<sup>2</sup> The desire for technically mediated simultaneity and immediacy runs the risk of erasing a plurality of radically different yet interdependent perspectives, temporalities, and modes of existence. Likewise, transparency often operates in unidirectional rather than reciprocal terms. The ease of peeping into diverse detached lifeworlds at leisure differs significantly from the hard labor of attentive listening and observation at the heart of committed long-term relationship-building. How then to begin to relate to these more-than-human communities in ways that respect our intimate interdependency?

“Response and respect are possible only in those knots, with actual animals and people looking back at each other, sticky with all their muddled histories,” Donna Haraway writes.<sup>3</sup> Caught up in these knots, my curatorial practice has focused in recent years on the potentiality of art, images, and image-making in response to urgent ecological crises. In this essay, I examine some of the key questions guiding my ongoing enquiry, navigating the bounds of visibility and knowledge, and the terms of access and circulation. What does interdependency mean for and within curatorial practices? Which records and testimonies are acknowledged? Whose perspective is centered? Who can opt for opacity or choose to withdraw from visibility? How to draw into visibility, but without leaning upon prevailing structures of value production?

Images can make visible and bear witness, while nurturing awareness of the complex interrelations between representations, image-makers, and viewers. However, they depend on

2  
See, e.g., Kimmerer and Povinelli, who write about indigenous cultures and languages that refer to all beings and places as persons, challenging Western binary distinctions between life and non-life: Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed, 2020); Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).  
3  
Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 42.

contextualizations and interpretations to do so. For example, what has been called “shifting baseline syndrome” reminds us of how in nature conservation, alongside scientific knowledge, historical perspectives—composites forged of images, memories, and stories—on what are recognized as non-degraded environments direct determinations of what is worth protecting.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore critical to seek out that which is disregarded by the dominant gaze and its narratives, so as to counteract the erasure and ignorance underpinning colonialist *terra nullius* logic and the extractivist violence it has sanctioned; and to be attentive to the backgrounds and edges of visibility, which can indicate the limits and biases of technologies and systems of knowledge. Someone deemed irrelevant may well look back at us from these shadows and voids of anthropocentric, heteropatriarchal, and racialist techno-capitalist modernity.

### *Mediating*

It was one of those miraculous moments when something emerges out of nothing. A sample of seawater, no more than a teaspoonful, seems clear apart from a few green specks just barely visible to the human eye. Under the microscope, however, a rich community of diverse life forms appears. Transparency turns thick with liveliness. A void is revealed as being home to a multitude of beings. And not only is the water transformed before my eyes: the microscopic lens makes tangible my interdependent co-existence with plankton, which produce more than half the oxygen in the Earth’s atmosphere. When withdrawing from the lure of the microscope, they disappear from my field of vision, but not without leaving a trace. A newly discovered sense of responsibility lingers as the sample of water is returned to the sea.

The unexpectedly acquired yet acutely felt awareness of the necessity of reciprocal care with these microscopic life forms brings with it a plethora of questions. How can sense of care be nurtured toward something that does not register in our field of vision, and that seems to escape the reach of human senses in general? Moreover, what is required for care to grow beyond the imperative of co-dependent survival? What kind of visibility, attention, or knowledge might foster reciprocity that is not solely a calculated exchange?

How are we to picture the embodied inter- and intra-

4

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Heather Anne Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, “Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene,” *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, eds. Tsing, Swanson, Gan, and Bubandt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), G6.

dependencies of human life with other beings and the planetary forces that are present, quite literally, in every breath taken? This question directs our focus to the boundary-defying connecting tissues—such as water and air—that must be actively ignored for the illusion of separation to persist. As Luce Irigaray has argued, in Western thought, air has been forgotten as the invisible dwelling of humans and as a medium necessary for the reception and passing on of all sensory messages.<sup>5</sup> A breath taken is always a breath shared.

The microscopic view can grant visibility to life forms otherwise hiding in plain sight in what appears to the naked eye as a lacuna. It can further knowledge of interdependent relations, as if adding depth to the air and water in and around us. But can it guide us on how to honor this newly discovered relationship? What can be learned from the simultaneous sense of intimacy and detachment the lens of the microscope lends the viewer? The medium always appears to escape from view, after all, into the ever narrowing gaps between things drawn to visibility. Clarity of view does not seem to allow for a multisensory experience such as that of darkness, in which there appears to be no empty space anywhere.

An illusion of transparency erases interconnecting matter, making not only the material media but the technologies in question invisible and intangible. In order to even begin to make sense of the complexity and dynamics of ecological entanglements, the lenses we use to approach and address them must themselves be reckoned with. Whether blinded by light or wandering in the dark, guidance matters. My encounter with the plankton would have remained meaningless were it not for the marine biologists who shared with me not only their research but also their sense of care and curiosity rooted in years of embedded fieldwork. Furthermore, their openness about the impact of their work on the life and death of the studied creatures mapped out the path of enquiry in my curatorial work that informs this essay.<sup>6</sup> Our dialogue has also drawn into focus the necessity to situate my practice with mindful attentiveness.

### *Situating*

On the island of Seili, in the Archipelago Sea off the southwest coast of Finland, the land gradually rises, as it has done

5

Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 28–29.

6

Foundational for my curatorial research and this essay has been my collaboration with scientists at the University of Turku’s Archipelago Research Institute, on the island of Seili—in particular, with professors Ilppo Vuorinen and Jari Hänninen, and researchers Jasmin Inkinen and Katja Mäkinen. For more information on the Institute, see: [sites.utu.fi/seili/en/title](https://sites.utu.fi/seili/en/title).

since the end of the last ice age, approximately 10,000 years ago. It is yet to be seen whether the global sea level rise will catch up with the glacial rebound here. As the shorelines slowly shift, the surrounding marine life struggles to adapt to rapid transformations set in motion by climate change. With a microscope I have zoomed in to meet the lively community of plankton. Zooming out, the Baltic Sea appears as a large estuary of rivers that carry agricultural and industrial run-off, microplastics, and more from across a vast area of Northern Europe. These waters flow on toward the Arctic. Planetary circulations between water bodies big and small connect us all as the lungs and arteries of life on Earth.

Zooming in and out, time and again, from this particular place, has provided me and the artists with insights into the ecological changes and interdependencies specific to this environment. With a range of lenses, the island has also offered us a prism through which to examine both the dangerous fallacy of containment and the myriad flows ceaselessly weaving fates together across vast stretches of time and space. The island reminds us that in order to address prevailing ecological crises, connections need to be traced across different scales, while our practices are continuously and critically situated on these uncertain grounds.

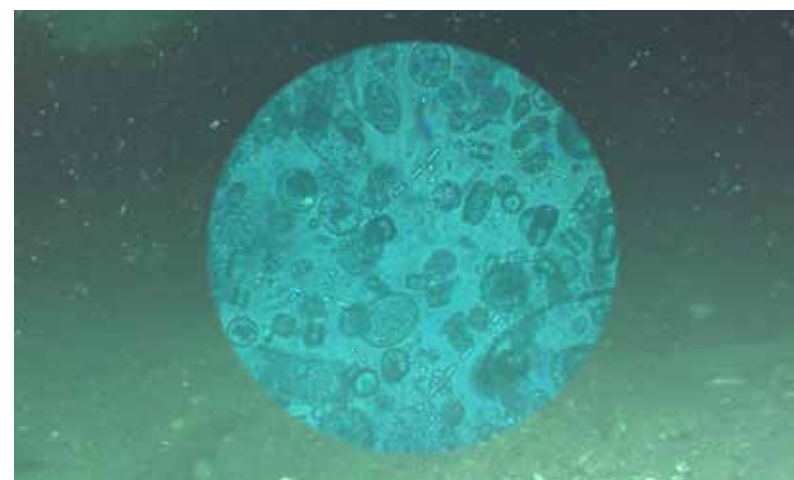
Seili today houses an environmental research institute, but for centuries it served as a site of exclusion and control—first of leprosy patients, later of women considered mentally ill. The premise for my curatorial research on the island has been to reflect on ecological transformations against this history of institutions of knowledge, biopolitics, and othering. With the intersectional lenses the site provides, I have gathered there with artists and scientists to think *with* the island's ecology and *about* the entanglement of our own practices in the unsustainable order of things the island continues to bear witness to. It is not only species that are becoming extinct, but also words and gestures of solidarity, as Félix Guattari wrote. Environmental, social, and mental ecologies must all be approached as distinct but interconnected registers.<sup>7</sup>

Ecological crises have far-reaching and unequally distributed effects that our practices in the arts and sciences are thoroughly implicated in. While microplastics have reached the highest mountaintops as well as the deepest seabeds, some societies have more resources than others to shield

7  
Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*,  
trans. Ian Pindar and  
Paul Sutton (London:  
Continuum, 2000).



Matterlurgy, *Water Is Not Water*, video still, 2023



Kati Roover, *Scent of the Changing Sea*, video still, 2020



Kati Roover, *Scent of the Changing Sea*, video still, 2020

With Whom Are We Curating?

Taru Elfvig

Curating in a Changing Climate: Situated, Mediated, Dependent

themselves, at least for a time, from the uncontrollable spread of toxins in water and air. As Astrida Neimanis writes: “Colonialism is carried by currents in a weather-and-water world of planetary circulation, where we cannot calculate a politics of location according to stable cartographies or geometries.”<sup>8</sup> How do these circulations affect visual and narrative practices?

### *Retreating*

How to arrive somewhere so rich in entangled histories of arrivals as the island of Seili, where all landings—intentional, accidental, enforced—participate in ecological transformations that have been perpetually unfolding for some time now? Seili may be approached as a microcosm of exclusion, enclosure, and experimentation. Yet here it also becomes tangibly evident how an island is connected through myriad flows with others, and with continents far beyond its immediate surroundings. What do we bring with us, take away, and leave behind? How have our practices already left their mark, and in what ways do they continue to impact the island?

These questions have guided my work with artists in dialogue with the scientific fieldwork that, since the 1960s, has been carried out here to monitor long-term ecological changes. The island’s history as a site of institutions stands as a constant reminder of the violence inherent in both naming and framing, whether in the service of knowledge production or care. The perspectives of the incarcerated women are invisible in the old hospital archives.<sup>9</sup> Yet awareness of their haunting of the island can be approached as a transformative way of knowing, echoing Avery Gordon’s writing about ghosts as social phenomena.<sup>10</sup> The haunting, inaudible voices, like those of numerous more-than-human others, signal the limits of the prevailing systems of knowledge and the underlying structures of power.<sup>11</sup> They also caution against presumptions of access.

In the absence of protocols on how to request permission for access, I argue for momentarily withholding the urge to name, in order to first critically situate our knowledge and practices. Following Donna Haraway’s seminal feminist critique of an assumed detached objectivity and universalism in Western science, it is necessary to recognize that perspec-

8

Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 36.

9

My curatorial work has been deeply informed by a long-term collaboration with filmmaker Lotta Petronella, who researched the hospital archives of Seili for her film *Själö: Island of Souls* (2020).

10

Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

11

See, too, Tsing et al., *op. cit.*

tives are always partial.<sup>12</sup> This partiality does not imply relativism, but rather lays the foundations for relationality. Critically situated practices can converse with a multitude of diverse voices and views. Yet this also demands openness to experimentation with modes of collective gathering around shared matters of concern extending across disciplinary (and other) boundaries. As Isabelle Stengers writes on the ecology of practices, this calls for a shift of focus from what practices *are* to what they may *become*.<sup>13</sup>

In Seili, I have proposed retreats as methodological temporary withdrawals from the state of emergency, in order to take time to collectively reflect on the urgent ecological dilemmas we are faced with. As a momentary pause in habitual patterns and processes of practice, the aim of the retreats is to activate other sensibilities in relation to the specific ecosystem and history of Seili. This also implies a retreat from the conventions of erecting boundaries between disciplines and epistemologies. Retreats have emphasized embodied and embedded observations: looking through, at, and with a range of lenses. We have tested and thought about how the microscope, not unlike the camera—or bat detector or underwater hydrophone—can expand the range of human senses. The diverse modes and tools of observation have become points of contact and mediums of dialogue between scientific and artistic practices, encouraging all those involved to think together about fieldwork, in the field.

### *Scaling*

The scenes offered by webcams—on the threshold between water and land, inside a beaver lodge or from a bird’s-eye view—suggest a plurality of perspectives on transformation. Turning back to the microscopic view of plankton, the zooplankton also hide from the view of predators, retreating deeper down the water column during daylight hours. The daily vertical mass migration and overall life cycles of plankton play a crucial role in the circulation of nutrients, oxygen, and carbon in bodies of water and the atmosphere. Plankton is a planetary force. How to convey or capture this through telling or picturing?

Concerns about the ethics of access entwine here with questions about scale. How to work with the views afforded by lens-based media so that they can challenge the dominant

12

Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988), 575–599.

13

Isabelle Stengers, “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices,” *Cultural Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (January 2005), 186.

narratives of human exceptionalism and its extractivist and predatory logic? As T. J. Demos has argued, the landscape image from high above creates spectacles of the environmental destruction caused by mining, oil fields, and industrial agriculture.<sup>14</sup> The abuse and erasure of lives on the ground is made to vanish from view. Only by grounding perspectives and viewing practices can the specificities of places, and the fates of the human and more-than-human communities inhabiting them, be attended to. Yet how to make comprehensible the interconnections between these places and planetary processes?

Writing from the perspective of postcolonial islands, Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey argues for the need to mediate between vastly different yet intricately interwoven scales. She calls for a “multiscalar method of telescoping between space (planet) and place (island) in a dialectic or ‘tidalectic’ way to see how they mutually inform each other.”<sup>15</sup> Zooming into divergent temporal rhythms and situated knowledges challenges the universalizing point of view that would ignore many of them as irrelevant or incompatible. Crucially, this method recognizes the non-scalability of perspectives and practices.<sup>16</sup> Approaches cannot simply be transposed from one place to another or from microscopic to macroscopic scale.

Situated knowledges are similarly irreducible—rather than competing, they can complement each other. The multiscalar method resonates with the indigenous Zapatistas’ demand for “a world in which many worlds fit,” referenced by Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena in their call for a “pluriverse.”<sup>17</sup> In curatorial work this could imply active listening attentive to resonances and divergences across multiple temporal and spatial scales, as well as across different practices of sensing and sense-making.

Today, at a time of the accelerated circulation of images, what kind of attention spans and multi-sensorial approaches are required to fathom what the diverse life forms found, for example, on the shores of the Baltic Sea have to tell? Technologically mediated visibility of underwater ecosystems is undoubtedly significant when raising awareness of the complex co-dependency of humans and the marine environment. Yet whose perspectives and senses of the ecosystems are prioritized? How does herring, monitored for decades at the Seili research institute, sense ongoing transformations in the

14  
T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017).

15  
Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 2.

16  
Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 38.

17  
Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena, “Introduction: Pluriverse: Proposals for a World of Many Worlds,” *A World of Many Worlds*, eds. Blaser and De La Cadena (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 1–19.

Archipelago Sea?<sup>18</sup> As Kati Roover asks in her video work *Scent of the Changing Sea* (2020): “Whose are those eyes, ears, and noses that recognize the dilution of salt in the water? They have their part in this palpable awareness of our pending extinction.”

### *Cultivating*

How are curatorial, artistic, and exhibition practices aligned with the extractivist order of things? What is the potential built into our practices to commit to different temporalities and continuities, while being firmly grounded in specific communities and ecosystems?

Methods, materials, and technologies carry their own inheritances with them, bringing weight of meaning to all practices. But are their previous lifeworlds—whether minerals removed from ecosystems or chemicals with toxic legacies—sufficiently acknowledged in artistic and curatorial work? Beyond ecological impacts, materials and technologies raise questions about production processes, supply chains, and attendant global inequalities.<sup>19</sup> It is urgent to pay closer attention to the social, material, and ecological circulations that make the circulation of images possible. Taking on the difficult task of tracing the complex production lines and feedback loops may be imperative in order to grasp the interdependencies of the technologies of imaging—and to honor the labour of all of those who make our work, and lives, possible.

“There cannot be such a thing as an irrelevant background in an ecological worldview,” Maria Puig de la Bellacasa argues.<sup>20</sup> Situating practices challenges us to reconsider the standards of contemporary art and lens-based media from the ground up. Critical evaluation of the production, circulation, and presentation of images may also open up vistas to alternative, more reciprocal modes of connections and continuities. Here, writes Puig de la Bellacasa, it may be useful to think of the role of observation in permaculture as a path to in-depth understanding of the diverse interdependent rhythms in heterogeneous communities, which compose different ecosystems and their essential circulations.<sup>21</sup> This method of cultivating care and collectivity, rooted in attending to a place, fosters awareness of the reciprocity and caring knowledge that is vital for caring well.<sup>22</sup> The observer themselves thus becomes embedded as part and parcel of the community and ecosystem in question.

18  
The herring must adapt their bodies to the fluctuations in salinity and temperature of the sea due to global warming. In the otoliths (ear bones) of fish, scientists can find records of their lives in a changing world. See, e.g., Gisli Pálsson and Heather Anne Swanson, “Down to Earth: Geosocialities and Geopolitics,” *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2016), 161–163.

19  
Operational detachments in contemporary exhibition practices can also be considered here, as continuations of the accelerated circulation of objects detached from the natural cultural processes and contexts of their production, which has its colonial origins in the museum institutions established in nineteenth-century industrializing Europe.

20  
Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, “Ecological Thinking, Material Spirituality, and the Poetics of Infrastructure,” *Boundary Objects and Beyond: Working with Leigh Star*, eds. Geoffrey C. Bowker, Stefan Timmermans, Adele E. Clarke, and Ellen Balka (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 47–68.

21  
Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

22  
See, Kimmerer on the practice of asking permission, as a way of showing respect for the personhood of other species and a place, as well as gauging the health of the population and its habitat. Robin Wall Kimmerer, op. cit., 178.

Based on my curatorial fieldwork on the island of Seili, haunted by its myriad specters of care and consent, I would argue that such situated caring knowledge in curatorial practice calls for zooming in and out of the place, as well as focusing in and out on lens-based media. Like water and air as media, these technologies shape both conceptions of relationality and the actual relations of humans with and within a more-than-human reality, while mediating our senses of the world and of ourselves in the present. For my work, Seili has been a spectral prism and at times an unforgiving mirror, allowing me to notice that which haunts the periphery of vision, just beyond the edge of the frame, or blurs into the background.

An urgent challenge for curatorial practices today is to take and allow time for perceiving the interdependencies that condition visibility, and to cultivate reciprocal care. Otherwise we risk being unable to, in the words of Silvia Federici, “overcome the state of irresponsibility concerning the consequences of our actions,” at which point “the production of our life inevitably becomes a production of death for others.”<sup>23</sup>

23  
Silvia Federici,  
*Re-enchanting the  
World: Feminism and  
the Politics of the  
Commons* (Oakland: PM  
Press, 2019), 109.

Kaija Kaitavuori

---

*Homeless Photographs:  
Approaches in Photographing Participation  
and Participating in Photography*

Participatory art entails a new kind of arrangement of tasks and responsibilities in art production. The artist is no longer solely responsible for the form, nor even for the content, of the work of art. The artist has been joined by the participant, who, within the limits set by the artist, influences the shape the work takes. In addition, there is the viewer, the witness of the work, who may even sometimes step in and become a participant in the work. The relationship between these three actors—artist, participant, spectator—is structured by the many elements of the work: the spatial and temporal arrangements, the materials, objects, and processes of the work—including photography.

This chapter sets out to investigate the different roles photography and the camera have in connection with art that in various ways invites participation, and how photographic practices affect the roles and relationships between the actors in art projects.

As with all process-based and ephemeral art, the photograph serves as a means by which participatory art projects are communicated to non-participants: the public. On the other hand, the photograph can also be part of the work itself and its content. I will first consider photography as a means of generating content for participatory projects and then as a means of communicating about participatory projects—at least to the extent that their function can be so distinguished.

### *Participants Photographing*

Artist and photographer Anthony Luvera has worked with homeless people, since 2001, in various locations in Britain. The participants in his projects learn about photography and, with the assistance of the artist, make “assisted self-portraits.”<sup>1</sup> The pictures mostly follow the same format: the 3/4-portrait of a person facing the camera and standing in the foreground, in the middle of the frame, against a slightly flattened background. The static allure of the images arises from photographic process and technique. Luvera uses bulky photographic equipment with large-scale negatives. The model’s hand holding the shutter release is a sign of consent and active participation in the process. They choose the background, the pose, and the moment of the picture.

Luvera identifies as a socially engaged artist. His aim is to enable the participants to represent themselves on a more

<sup>1</sup> See: Anthony Luvera, *Residency: Assisted Self-portraits*, Belfast Exposed Photography, 2011; “Speaking Nearby: Anthony Luvera in Conversation with Chris Wright,” *Anthropology and Art Practice*, eds. Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 45–51; Ben Burbridge and Anthony Luvera, “What We Don’t Talk About When We Talk About Photography and Participation,” *Photography and Culture* 12, no. 3 (August 2019), 351–363.

equal platform than is customary, for example, in the media. He spends time with his collaborators getting to know them and building mutual trust. Over the years, Luvera has gathered a large collection of images created by homeless people and other material connected to them, such as hand-drawn maps and audio recordings of conversations. Parts of the collection have been shown in several exhibitions. In some cases, the selection of the images and planning of the display has been done together with the participants in the pictures.

Luvera’s work could also be inscribed in the continuum of participatory or collaborative photography, practiced by photographers such as Wendy Ewald, since the 1970s, or Jim Hubbard in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> In these projects, cameras are handed over to the participants or to “communities” to help them represent themselves. The participants are instructed not only in the use of photographic equipment but, more importantly, in how to make choices and communicate through images. They are then encouraged to create pictures of themselves and their environment.

Rather than being the object of photography, the participants assume the role of the active subject. Collectively constructed, Luvera’s work questions the conventions of artistic representation and opts for self-presentation, hence bringing portrait and self-portrait closer to each other. Relationships between the artist and the participants are built on dialogue. As with participatory art in general, his approach destabilizes the position of the artist and opens the creative process up for others. Even though the participants usually appear with their names, the artist as the initiator and facilitator remains as the contact to the art world.

The collective approach underlines photography as a social process. Participatory photography is indeed frequently employed in educational and social art projects that aim at the empowerment of the participants. It is also used as a research method and as a means of collaborative knowledge production, not surprisingly, among others, with the homeless.<sup>3</sup> The boundaries of the fields of activity are not always clear. Here, however, the focus is on projects with pronounced artistic intent.

<sup>2</sup> The different lineages of (participatory) photography in journalism, documentary, and the visual arts are separate from the scope of this essay.

<sup>3</sup> See: e.g., the photovoice method. Liisa Söderlund’s dissertation thesis applies Paulo Freire’s pedagogical theory of oppression in her research project with homeless people. Participants photographed their own lives and environments in the dialogical process. The exhibitions aimed to raise people’s awareness of the homeless.

### *Participants Photographed*

At the opposite end of the participatory scale are projects in which the agency of the participants is deliberately limited. The form and content of their contribution is defined and programmed in advance by the artist, and the participants mainly fulfill the tasks set by the artist. In this mode of participatory art, the participants voluntarily cede part of their power of decision and control to the artist; they lend their body, their time and presence, or their labor for the artist to construct a work of art. Participants are used, with their consent, as the subject and the material of the work or as a workforce in a production. Artists working in ways of exposing people to the camera and the gaze of spectators are e.g. Vanessa Beecroft, who finds her collaborators for her photo shoots among both models and amateurs, or Spencer Tunick, who composes images of hundreds and thousands of naked people.

One of the artists working in this way is Santiago Sierra. His *Person in a Ditch* (2001) included a homeless person sitting in a hole dug in the ground, paid fifty Finnish markka per hour. The work was created as a part of a group exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, in Helsinki.

Like Luvera, Sierra worked with homeless people, but the artists' approaches could not be further apart. Presenting live people as part of the artwork, Sierra seeks "agonistic" situations that expose both subjects and viewers to social inequalities.<sup>4</sup> He employs people in precarious situations, such as drug addicts, homeless people, prostitutes, or illegal immigrants. He places them in awkward or even humiliating situations and compensates them with what is usually comparable to a minimum salary, or some other sum that has a meaning in the life of the participant, such as the price of drugs.

The visitors encounter the exhibited persons in live public events in a gallery or other exhibition space, and later in the form of photographs. In the case of *Person in a Ditch*, the work was in operation for three weeks during which it was documented by the museum. The images that remain of the project serve both as documentation and, in addition, were used to create authorized photographic artworks: the artist chose two still images from the documentary video shot by the museum, had them enlarged and printed in black and

4  
Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

white, and authorized an edition of five prints as his artwork. As art objects, the prints are sold by Sierra's gallerist. One was bought by Kiasma, the museum that produced the work and documented it, and it is now in the museum's collection. The photographs became the tangible afterlife of the process, to be subsequently shown in exhibitions and introduced into the realm of collecting and the art market.

Reducing the original color video to low-definition black-and-white images follows Sierra's practice of recording and cataloguing his works, irrespective of what the original material was. This gives the photos an air of authenticity, as documentary snapshots of an event without any posing, as if the subject were caught unawares and in action. The participant, in this case the homeless person, is yet again exposed as the object of an outside gaze while simultaneously protected by the blurriness of the image.

### *Photographing Participants*

When the engagement of the participants is not built around photography, the medium has a more ambivalent role. A photograph can serve as a record, a means of communication, or it can replace a work of art in an exhibition. As audience, the way we encounter participatory projects is mainly through images. Boris Groys notes how in the past couple of decades, documentation has replaced art, and instead of encountering art we are now to an increasing degree confronted with documentation of it. According to him, life itself cannot be shown but only narrated or documented. Therefore art that takes the form of life cannot be presented in the exhibition context, only re-presented or referred to, and so artwork becomes mere documentation of this life form.<sup>5</sup> This applies particularly to art, such as participatory art, that is conceived as projects, exists for a certain period of time, and does not produce a result in object form.

A common strand of participatory art is characterized by processes in which an artist or a group of artists work with people invited either from a predetermined community or through an open call to create a project with the artist(s). The emphasis in these usually long-duration, collective projects is on the process, and there is frequent debate as to what role the "outcomes" play, and how they should be shared with secondary audiences or whether they should be

5  
Boris Groys, "Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation," *Documenta 11* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002). For Groys, however, documentation does not only mean photography. It can take the same forms and media as art: pictures, drawings, photographs, videos, texts, and installations.



Thomas Hirschhorn "Gramsci Monument" in ...  
mousse magazine.it



Thomas Hirschhorn "Gramsci Monum...  
mousse magazine.it



Gramsci Monument ...  
artcritical.com



Thomas Hirschhorn "Gramsci Monum...  
mousse magazine.it



Thomas Hirschhorn | a f a s i a  
afasiaarchzine.com



Thomas Hirschhorn: Gramsci Monume...  
artandeducation.net



Thomas Hirschhorn "Gramsci Monume...  
mousse magazine.it



Thomas Hirschhorn "Gramsci Monu...  
mousse magazine.it



Gramsci-Monument", Forest Houses, ...  
thomashirschhorn.com



Thomas Hirschhorn "Gramsci Monum...  
mousse magazine.it



Gramsci-Monument", Forest House...  
thomashirschhorn.com



Thomas Hirschhorn "Gramsci Monument" in ...  
mousse magazine.it

A collage of screenshots of Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument*, New York City, 2015.  
Screenshots taken in March 2023

exhibited at all. In contrast to the works described above, in which the photographic medium is included in the process from the start, in these community-oriented projects the use of cameras is seldom built in as a constitutive element, instead seeming to come in at a relatively late point to address a need for press photos or documentation of the fleeting events.

In her study of groundbreaking (American) collaborative art projects in the late 1980s, Adair Rounthwaite has pondered at length the role of photography in documenting collaborative artworks.<sup>6</sup> Her principal case study regarding documentation is Martha Rosler's well-known project *If you lived here...* (1989), consisting of three separate exhibitions and accompanied by public discussion events hosted by the Dia Art Foundation in New York. The section titled *Homeless* was a collaboration between the artist and Homeward Bound Community Services, a self-organized coalition of homeless people. During the exhibition, the organization relocated their office into the exhibition venue and it became one of the exhibits.

Rounthwaite's investigation culminates in the comparison of two types of photography intended as communication about the project: on the one hand, a series of black-and-white documentary pictures of an encampment by the Homeward Bound group in front of City Hall; and, on the other, two shots of the group standing behind an office table in the exhibition venue and posing for the camera. The two types of documentation by two photographers create a different representation of the same group of people. The documentary photos taken by an outside photographer show the participants on the street, occupying the space with their belongings. The photos can be linked with the American documentary tradition—a genre criticized by Rosler, who herself works with the photographic medium.<sup>7</sup> Rosler felt that these images perpetuated the stigmatized understanding of the homeless as objects of action and not as subjects. This compromised the project's underlying ethos of self-representation of the socially oppressed group. The group photo's frontal pose, conversely, conveys a sign of agency, according to Rounthwaite. The participants are seen in a working space, as active campaigners and in charge of their representation.

Visibility was a strategic tool for Homeward Bound in their campaign for the cause of the homeless and the main motivator for their participation in the exhibition.

6  
Adair Rounthwaite, *Asking the Audience: Participatory Art in 1980s New York* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

7  
See: Martha Rosler, "In, Around and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)," in: *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings 1975–2001* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004, with International Center of Photography, New York), 151–206.

Therefore, their representation in the project's publication, in which the photos were going to be used, was not insignificant. Rounthwaite's analysis highlights the importance of photography in the meaning-making and interpretation of participatory art projects, particularly regarding the agency of the participants and, especially, of marginalized groups.

In light of the above, it is surprising how little attention many projects seem to pay to the documentation and publication of their activities, and how limited is the extent to which they actively investigate ways of creating images that foster production of agency. Typical photos of community-art projects include people in groups and gatherings, sitting in a circle or around a table, in workshops or panel events. Remarkably often, people are seen from the back, as if the photographer arrived at a gathering when it had already started. This angle conveys the impression that the event is captured by an outsider—either by a photographer who is called to document the project or by an accidental visitor.

To find such images, try, for example, a Google Image search for *Immigrant Movement International* or *Gramsci Monument* (works by Tania Bruguera and Thomas Hirschhorn, respectively).<sup>8</sup> Also pay attention to the number of white plastic chairs!

In addition to the above-mentioned features, a recurrent situation is people consuming drinks in a bar or a cafe as part of the set-up. An alternative popular set-up is a group striking a pose, possibly holding up banners and posters or just smiling at the camera. The message is more of a victorious collective effort underlining the group or community working together. Durational collaborations tend to be documented as a live event seen by an outsider or as a group photo souvenir of a memorable experience or achievement.<sup>9</sup>

As we have seen, some participatory projects aim from the start at creating a visible outcome, a photo (or a video), whereas other projects are documented as they unfold. In both cases, the actual capturing of the image can be in the hands of the (amateur) participants, or it can be performed by the artist or by a professional photographer. Luvera's projects set out to produce portraits and they are carried out by the participants. In Rosler's work, the focus was on the process, and the images were produced as its record by an outsider photographer. In the case of Sierra, two functions were

8  
Bruguera's *Immigrant Movement International* (2010–2015) was a five-year project in Queens, New York, created in collaboration with Creative Time and the Queens Museum of Art. It was an artist-initiated sociopolitical movement engaging the local community in diverse partnership projects and exploring the political representation and conditions of immigrants. Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument* (2013), commissioned by Dia Art Foundation, was a complex participatory outdoor sculpture located in a New York City Housing Authority development in the Bronx, built and maintained with local residents.

9  
Claire Bishop notes the unsatisfactory nature of such documents and how they yield little information about the actual projects. Her response as a researcher was to visit herself the works she writes about. See: Claire Bishop, op. cit., 5–6. This was also my solution when writing my doctoral dissertation about participatory art: I only included works that I had experienced myself; Kaija Kaitavuori, *The Participant in Contemporary Art: Social Relationships and Artistic Practice* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018).

fulfilled: an image produced for documentary purposes was turned into an autonomous artwork.

According to Groys, documentation grants art projects a place in the present. But documentation also signifies that live art is turned into a document, something bloodless and dead; it is no longer life itself but secondhand representation about life. He even warns artists against becoming agents of death.<sup>10</sup>

Ariella Azoulay has a more positive view of the role of the viewer of photographs. Whereas for Groys, if we follow his argument to a logical conclusion, the spectator is interacting with zombies, Azoulay sees the creative (or should we say: resuscitating?) power of the viewer. Photography does not only concern the act of photographing and the resulting images but, importantly, also the distribution: the showing, viewing, sharing, storing, and archiving of them. By this definition, images need viewers, and their necessary engagement brings multiple ways of seeing into the encounter. Photography is made up of the practices involved in looking at photographs as much as of the act of taking them.<sup>11</sup>

In a parallel way, participatory projects, already including people as elements in the work, also depend on spectators: without us, the spectators, they are not completed. We bring our presence and our narratives into the encounter and form relationships with the people in the work—whether sitting in the ditch, as part of a panel discussion, or presenting themselves to us in a self-portrait.<sup>12</sup> The photography is, as also argued by Azoulay, a site of action; so are participatory projects which, in a structural analogy, are played out as a site of action. They create a (set of) relationship(s). The participating and/or photographed people play their part in the constellation of which the spectator is also a part. The spectator is more than a witness of the event: they are implicated, even complicit, in the image or project.

### *Spectators Becoming Participants*

The line between participants and viewers does not need to be solid. A form of participatory art that creates platforms for exhibition viewers to step in and become part of the work, deliberately allows alternation between the roles of the spectator and participant. This type of participatory art offers immersive or interactive installations in which the

10

Boris Groys, "The Loneliness of the Project," *New York Magazine of Contemporary Art and Theory* 1 (Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp, 2002).

11

Ariella Azoulay, "Photography Consists of Collaboration: Susan Meiselas, Wendy Ewald, and Ariella Azoulay," *Camera Obscura* 31, no. 1 (May 2016), 187–201. Groys also has a more cheerful interpretation of documents: he rehabilitates the concept of aura to explain how a document turns into a work of art as part of an installation; Groys, "Art in the Age of Biopolitics," op. cit.

12

With regard to theater and performance, Rancière similarly sees the spectator as being equally active as the performer. See: Jacques Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," *Artforum* (March 2007), [artforum.com/print/200703/the-emancipated-spectator-12847](http://artforum.com/print/200703/the-emancipated-spectator-12847) [all URLs accessed August 23, 2022].

visitor is invited to do something, interact with the materials or other people, or simply to be, to spend time. Exhibition visitors make decisions on the spot as to whether they want to become participants by engaging in the activity or remain spectators of the participating visitors. Examples of such projects include, among thousands of others, the candy pieces of Félix González-Torres; experiential installations, e.g. slides by Carsten Höller; and *One Minute Sculptures* by Erwin Wurm, who gives instructions to visitors to act as a human sculpture.

To take part in these projects, one usually needs to be a relatively experienced exhibition visitor. However open the platforms seem to be for participation, the venues are governed by (unwritten) rules and generally not used by marginalized groups of people, for example, the homeless. This is a critique often presented against the alleged democracy of participatory art. For example, Rirkrit Tiravanija's project *Tomorrow Is Another Day* (1996), at the Kunstverein in Cologne, was open, in principle, to anyone twenty-four hours a day. The exhibit consisted of a fully functional replica of the artist's apartment, including a kitchen, a bathroom, and a bedroom, that people were invited to use. At the time of the exhibition, a nearby settlement of homeless people—who might have found the offer useful but were unlikely to gain access—was being dismantled and driven out of the city center by the police. Local artists and activists reacted to the obvious mismatch of the gestures.<sup>13</sup> Kester does not blame Tiravanija for the actions of the police but points out the incompatibility in the coexistence of these two realities.

In the era of camera phones, an important part of the art experience is to document it by taking photos and selfies. Photography is integrated to the maximum degree as the participants, turning the camera toward themselves, are at the same time self-objectifying as well as empowering themselves as actors. The use of photography turns the exhibition into a performance, emphasizing the act of watching people and being watched. The camera functions as a pictorial framing device in the same way as the stage or the pedestal denotes the status of an object as artwork: visitors are conscious of being in an artwork and being observed; they are making decisions about their behavior and negotiating their relationship with the space and other visitors.

13

See, Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013), 104–105; and Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Autumn 2004), 51–79.

In 2002, years before the time of ubiquitous camera phones and selfies, participants at Erwin Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures* at Kiasma<sup>14</sup> were provided a possibility to get a Polaroid image of their creation. In addition, the guards offered to take a picture of visitors' sculptures with a camera phone provided by the museum—a novelty in 2002—and the resulting images were projected on the wall in the entrance hall.

The penchant for constant self-documentation has quickly been capitalized on by art institutions. Only a few years ago, museums and exhibition venues still strictly prohibited photography by the public. Bans were first lifted in 2014<sup>15</sup> and very quickly everything changed. Now exhibition visitors are encouraged to take photos of themselves and their companions and to post them on social media. Exhibition makers are also consciously building in photo opportunities and encouraging instant participation, even at the expense of other qualities, as in the case of curators adjusting lights in favor of IG optics rather than those of IRL.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Where Are We Now?*

Participatory projects are structured as negotiations over agency between the artist, the participant, and the spectator. Photography adds another layer in the collective network. It would be too easy to think that a photograph simply arrives on the scene and captures moments of participation, as if they were already there. Rather, the presence of the camera constitutes and shapes participation and its meanings. In a way, recording and content production, or documenting and creating, converge. As Rounthwaite argues, documentary photos are part of the construction of the agency of the participants.<sup>17</sup> The use of photography can contribute to or, conversely, compromise the ethos of the project. The documentation of Rosler's project is an example of tensions between the aim and the outcome of a project, and of how images can empower or stigmatize. Luvera's and Sierra's projects are also collaborations and negotiations of agency, but ones in which the parties have very different positions, a fact further accentuated by the nature of the resulting photos. As important as the actual creation of the image is the choice of which images are distributed and the platform on which they are presented.

14

See: Erwin Wurm : *Nolo veistos = Erwin Wurm, sculptures with embarrassment*, exhibition catalogue (Helsinki: Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, 2002); also see: Perttu Rastas, *Erwin Wurm at Kiasma*, youtube.com/watch?v=7RgLe-9jWQBc.

15

Jia Jia Fei, "Art in the Age of Instagram," TEDx talk, March 2, 2016, youtube.com/watch?v=8DLNFD-Qt8Pc.

16

Arielle Pardes, "Selfie Factories: The Rise of the Made-for-Instagram Museum," *Wired* (September 27, 2017), wired.com/story/selfie-factories-instagram-museum.

17

Adair Rounthwaite, op. cit., 113–114.

The ubiquity of photography and the ethos of participation contribute to the fact that "ordinary people" are increasingly in charge of the production of visual culture. A great bulk of the visual imagery that surrounds us is produced by non-professional photographers. In art as well, to a degree, the act of documenting has been increasingly entrusted to amateur participants as they record what they see and experience as visitors. Paraphrasing participatory art as "delegated performance," as Claire Bishop terms it, we can observe the rise of "delegated documentation" or even "delegated marketing."

In Conversation with  
Tanvi Mishra

*on Collective Gathering*

Iris Sikking How do you see your role as curator? As a curator based in South Asia, you are being invited in various capacities to Europe over the last few years. How do you situate yourself within such collaborations? And how do you navigate the expectations of the artists and mostly institutional circumstances?

Tanvi Mishra

As someone that has grown in the field in South Asia and transitioned to working repeatedly in Europe in the last few years, I can definitely see a domino effect. Once you've worked in an ecosystem, then it is almost as if you have been vetted within its networks to be invited further. It raises questions around access, opportunity, and representation that I often think about.

Curating is a broad term. I do see my work akin to that of a translator, in how they serve as custodians of literary work. Translation is a delicate craft—it is not just about technique but requires skill as well as a sensibility. I see the work of a curator as being quite similar: the care that you offer is not just to the artist, but also to the artwork itself. However, I often feel that “care” should also extend to the collaborators that we have on the other side, the individuals that are working in the institutions that we are collaborating with. And collaboration itself is a complex term. What does it really mean? Where does the power lie? Who has the ability to negotiate and how much?

I also see my work as that of a civic actor. Recently, I came across a quote by Sajan Mani, an artist/curator based in Berlin, where he said that, “We are not gatekeepers, rather we are gate openers.” I really liked this proposition. As someone from an oppressed caste community, Mani is possibly referencing this in opposition to the discriminatory Indian caste system, and the hierarchies it imposes. On the other hand, as a dominant caste individual myself, I must constantly acknowledge my own position, and ask, “What is my responsibility?” It is the dominant castes that have kept the gate closed for the oppressed caste people. And so, for me, being a gate opener is a lifelong aspiration rooted in a reparative logic. To be committed to understanding who are the

communities or individuals that continuously find access and opportunity difficult to attain? It is crucial to keep doing these self-check-ins, to take stock and assess when and where we are continuing to fail.

Another definition I would identify with is that of an interlocutor. I develop a collaboration with an individual, and an institution, to keep the door open for others that someone opened for me. And I must consistently do the labor to continue to expand the community beyond my immediate vicinity. What does opening the gate mean and who do we want to open it for? What do we do when we get a seat at the table? Do we push for radical shifts, or do we continue to tread the same paths that built these tables in the first place? Are there ways to build structural changes so these so-called points of access and entry become more fluid and permeable? Is there a need to abolish these “tables” and “doors” altogether? These are all questions that motivate my thinking as a curator.

IS What is the main difference between working in South Asia or in a European context?

TM

I think the basic difference is the nature of relationships. There is a benefit of building on relationships over a period of time. There is a certain kind of trust that develops, which I think allows us to be more courageous, more risk-taking. In old relationships there is the possibility of more complex conversations. We may not always be in perfect alignment, but I believe that the divergences that emerge are healthy and help us grow. Every time you work together, you're already starting at a point from which you can develop nuance.

Whereas with Western collaborations, sometimes I feel that the conversations start at a much more basic level on issues we deal with on a relatively complex manner back home. For example, say caste oppression or colonization in Kashmir: both are issues that I'm quite invested in, given my position as not just a dominant caste individual but also as an Indian where it is our general mainstream population that has contributed to the rhetoric of Kashmir as either a coveted paradise



Exhibition view of *Moving Definitions: An Invitation to Re-View*, curated by Tanvi Mishra for the Louis Roederer Discovery Award 2023 at Rencontres d'Arles

or a place needing protection from terrorism. I see my role as one that attempts to disrupt these logics. Now when we take these conversations to the West, we have to start at a relatively basic level. When I presented the work of a Kashmiri photographer at BredaPhoto, someone asked if Kashmir was colonized by Nepal. The comment might appear innocuous, humorous even. However, I read this as a feature of the historical, and continuing, imperial world order. This came up during the cancellation of the Mannheim Biennale as well—that we are more aware of the history of Europe than Europeans are about ours. In schools, we learn about the World Wars, the Holocaust, Western imperialism, all of this in reference to Europe. But how many Europeans study the impact of colonization on our lands and the resulting famines, death, and plunder?

However, I like to believe in the potential of transnational solidarity, to see it as a kind of reparative work, especially while working in Western institutions. Why is there an unequal distribution of resources for culture in our worlds? I link this to the historical imperial regimes, that plundered and looted their colonies, leading to a skewed distribution of resources in society. The traces of this continue to be felt today. Therefore, by bringing artists—and their narratives—from either South Asia or the Global South, who don't have access to the resources that exist in Europe, there can be small steps toward some redistribution. But these are small measures. I don't think this is in any sense comparable to the kind of reparation work imperial nation-states need to do. I am interested, however, in getting these conversations inserted in culture and in using our creative practice as a portal for this kind of public dialogue.

15 I remember that when you became curator for the Louis Roederer Discovery Award, at Rencontres d'Arles in 2023, you were committed from the outset to making the conditions favorable for the selected artists and their work. What did you encounter during this process?

TM

This show had a unique mandate—that the production of the artworks was to be primarily funded by an institution that accompanies the artist, like a gallery, foundation, or even collective. There was a lot of learning for me over the year, as the curatorial process also entailed extensive negotiation work. The institution gave full autonomy regarding the selection of the artists, resulting in a list that had a dominant Global South representation. This led the way to broader conversations about what it really means to diversify a program.

I often see myself being hired as a diversity candidate. An institution can invite a person like me, expecting me to bring my network along. But then, is the invitation enough, or is it that it must be accompanied with resources of various kinds: finances, labor, time, and other informal support that artists may need? In the case of awards, who comprises the jury that decides the winner from a set of artists that primarily identify or emerge from the Global South? Will the institutions that accompany these artists have resources that are equivalent to Western institutions that accompany artists from the Global North? Eventually, I raised some money for a certain number of artists who were accompanied by smaller artist-run institutions that had no funds. I was dedicated to producing a show on par with others in the festival, and not to invite any sympathy or commiserations toward a lower production quality because of resource or budget restrictions in the Global South. I think all these things play into a certain kind of optics, and it is important for me to address these issues along with curating the artistic content.

15 What did the institution learn from working with you? Do you feel that you have left a mark, so that in the future the next curator can highlight and possibly change other things?

TM

I'm interested in the traces we leave behind as cultural workers. The UK-based curator Taous Dahmani, who did this exhibition project a year before me, stressed the importance of allocating an artistic fee, which was realized the following year. In 2023, I advocated for

each artist to have a comfortable production budget to maintain basic equity across the show, a demand that was fulfilled in the following year. I believe it is our collective responsibility to carry this kind of cultural work forward, in addition to our artistic ambitions.

For me, the most fulfilling part was for all eleven artists to be present during the opening week of the festival. I was witness to how their physical presence enabled a different connection with the audience, one which was distinct from when I was speaking on their behalf. It was also their presence with each other, creating a sense of comfort in a space that could otherwise feel quite isolating. The audience, as well as the list of participating artists, was disproportionately white, and perhaps if they would have been there as individuals or solo artists, maybe they would not have felt that same level of safety and comfort. In fact, one of the artists suffered a racist attack in the streets. It was a disturbing moment, and some of the artists in the group navigated it together, sparking conversations around othering and representation and its fault lines.

So much of cultural work is about the communities, and kinships, that are built with/through the process of exhibition making. I see it as a kind of world-building where we can meet each other outside of our born identities, which may limit us by definitions of nationality, gender, caste, class, age, to name a few. However, I don't associate with the term Indian curator because I don't ascribe to the philosophy of a nation-state. I want to be identified neither as a woman curator nor as an Indian curator. Then, can art-making enable a praxis where we are able to shed the identities that separate us? Can it instead help us find new ways of coming together by nurturing novel ways of connecting that are grounded in imagined futures?

15 Then you were invited as curatorial advisor for the Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie in Germany, scheduled for Spring 2024. What could you strive for in such a role, as you're not steering the wheel yourself. Lamentably, the festival was canceled only a few months before the opening, in reaction

to pro-Palestinian content posted by Shahidul Alam, one of the curators, on his social media, in response to the Hamas attack on Israel, on October 7, and the subsequent genocide in Gaza.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, you yourself issued a statement about the cancellation in your role as advisor.<sup>2</sup>

TM

I was really pleased to be invited as a curatorial advisor by Tanzim Wahab, Munem Wasif, and Shahidul because it offered an opportunity to build on old relationships from the region I am based in. I had first given a talk, about our South-Asia-spanning project *PIX*, at the Chobi Mela festival in Dhaka, way back in 2015. Since then, we have continued to collaborate in many ways, a process I now see as us thinking and growing together. What is crucial is that we connect as friends and identify as individuals who are politically invested, not just in cultural work, but also in civil society and in the socio-political changes taking place in our part of the world.

I felt that the collaboration for the Mannheim Biennale was an opportunity to be able to build on conversations that we were already having informally and translate them into some kind of concrete outcome. It was also a moment to experiment with different modalities. For example, we wanted to expand the biennale beyond the exhibitions and were imagining the possibility for the catalogue to hold some of the digressions that punctuated our conversations but that we couldn't find room for in the main program. The theme of the biennale was "Listening to Disquiet" and we wished to produce creative "citations" that embodied these dissonances as sources of knowledge. We envisioned the catalogue as a reader, as being an addition that was more than just a document of the moment of the biennale.

Of course, the Biennale organizers' behavior toward the curators was extremely disappointing. However, what happened after the cancellation was that it brought us closer together. We realized that this trust we had built, and the investment we had done over the

<sup>1</sup> See: "Cancellation of the Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie 2024," press release, [biennalefotografie.de/en/biennial/](https://biennalefotografie.de/en/biennial/) press [both URLs accessed September 4, 2024].

<sup>2</sup> See: "Curators Respond to German Photo Biennale Cancellation," [artasiapacific.com/news/curators-respond-to-german-photo-biennale-cancellation](https://artasiapacific.com/news/curators-respond-to-german-photo-biennale-cancellation).

years, went beyond making work together. It was a moment of reckoning: Who is going to remain by our side when one of us is in trouble, and what does solidarity really mean? It became clear that there was a cost associated with choosing to place our voices in public. For me, in real solidarity work, those who are allying with communities or causes that are unfavorable in public discourse should also bear a cost. This becomes a kind of testing ground for intention, and commitment, and paves the way for evaluating future collaborations.

Another outcome of the cancellation of this biennale, which was already brewing in the works, was the realization that it was time to strengthen South-South solidarity and place emphasis on the need to foster stronger dialogues between our own systems. For example, this year during the opening week at the Rencontres d'Arles, we set up a fringe event which took place at the Double Dummy (DD) Studio. This collaboration began when Sergio and Matthieu (the founders of DD) approached me to think together about the possibilities of using their space in Arles to focus on Israel's genocide in Gaza. I suggested inviting Maen Hammad, a Palestinian photographer with whom I have had an ongoing dialogue since BredaPhoto 2022. In turn, Hammad brought three more Palestinian artists into the project. At the end, while the event at DD has concluded, our creative dialogue continues. I do believe that for collaborations of this nature, intentionality needs to be driven from a self-motivated perspective. And that is perhaps the biggest reward: to work toward outcomes that resonate deeply with who we are—as artists but also as citizens in this world (order)—and use that to build kinships that outlast one cause, season, or event.

## In Conversation with Salvatore Vitale

---

*on a Technologically Mediated Reality*

This conversation took place, via Zoom, on August 9, 2024.

At the time of this conversation, Salvatore Vitale was developing his project *The Shielding* for an exhibition in the Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen, Germany, within the framework of the program I curated for the Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie in 2022. We spoke about the working method behind the project, for which he curated more than 800 hours of video footage using AI to create new narratives, resulting in a five-channel audiovisual installation.

Iris Sicking Salvatore, could you explain what your starting points were for *The Shielding* and why you focused on China?

Salvatore Vitale

The initial question that led me to embark on *The Shielding* project was sparked by a broader curiosity about the essence of humanity in a technologically oversaturated world. Undoubtedly, technology is shaping our experiences, perceptions, and the very fabric of reality around us. I view this project as a journey, allowing me to expand my narrative and document something profoundly real or factual while envisioning possibilities that may not yet exist. To achieve this, I adopt a research-based approach to gather information.

For instance, you mentioned the data set I've been compiling. It struck me as intriguing to utilize artificial intelligence for processing vast amounts of data to speculate on what could be termed "computational propaganda." This data set encompasses various sources such as news footage, social media content, public domain and promotional videos, as well as advertisements from tech companies and user-generated content. This collection represents a spectrum of voices, including those that challenge the narratives propagated by major tech corporations and governments. Gathering these materials involved a team effort spanning both China and Europe, resulting in a meticulously curated dataset comprising 800 hours of video. Consequently, this already introduces an element of provocation, as the materials utilized are inherently site-specific and influenced by my initial research inquiries.

Defining the role of AI in my project was paramount. While it may seem trivial, I perceive AI as a mere tool—a means to process the vast array of data at hand. Conceptually, AI is not central to the project; rather, it serves as the mechanism through which I navigate and analyze the collected data. I chose to focus on China due to its unique perspective on technological advancement. While progress has undeniably been rapid, it is also shaped by centuries of philosophical, social, and cultural development that differ markedly from Western trajectories.

is Would you be able to reflect on the presentation format of the project, although it is in the making? Let us imagine the exhibition is staged, and the visitors enter. What will they encounter and what do you hope they will experience?

sv

Indeed, picture yourself entering the space and encountering a multi-channel video installation accompanied by audio—it's an intensely physical experience. Within this environment, you observe elements that resonate with your own life. Many visitors might connect with the advertisements promoting Huawei phones, discussions on smart cities and their future appearance, and the ubiquitous promotion of facial recognition technology—tools that have seamlessly integrated into our daily existence.

Visitors are plunged into a philosophical and speculative experience, akin to science fiction, which may initially seem distant but is, in fact, intertwined with their everyday reality. Thus, my primary aim is to provoke and activate the audience's capacity to relate their experiences, prompting them to ponder their own answers to the questions: How do we construct reality today and what does it mean to be human today?

The non-linear narrative of the installation within the space, complemented by a surround audio piece generated in real-time by an AI responsive to the imagery displayed on the five screens, seeks to create a cinematic environment. This setup mirrors the process of assimilating scattered information to construct and derive meaning.

To provide insight into the creation of the work, I incorporate textile artworks alongside the installation. These pieces offer clues as to the methodology employed. For example, I showcase segments of the text extraction data set itself. By revealing the images comprising the data set, viewers gain insight into how the sequences are generated and a deeper understanding of what lies beyond.

is *The Shielding* comments on the state of our digital environment and how that affects our reality by using image technologies compiled of content that is about the state of technology. Is it possible for the viewer to deconstruct the creation process? How could someone access your journey, and do you find that important?

sv That's why I characterize it as speculative work—it encourages exploration beyond predefined frameworks of perception and thought. While I aim to move away from rigid categorization, I initially assigned specific keywords or tags to analyze the data set. My intention is to foster a more or less unrestricted narrative emerging from the amalgamation of videos, which are based on my input, ultimately generating new stories. Essentially, the outcome comprises a series of sequences. Naturally, I establish certain parameters as well. For example, I determine the length to be extracted from each video and the final sequence's duration. This involves a significant amount of decision-making, some of which is artistic in nature. I relish the idea that the results are often surprising. Given that AI systems remain somewhat opaque, we're not privy to the exact processes they employ. Thus, the resulting sequences offer more than just my perspective on the material. My objective is to create entirely fresh video sequences, ultimately providing insight into the workings of our technological systems.

is Let's just go back one step, because you said that an AI is looking at the stories told. What do you mean by this exactly?

sv

Over the past two years, significant advancements have been made in AI capable of managing text-based narratives, a process commonly referred to as "generative storytelling." I've developed an AI system that thoroughly analyzes the entirety of text within the video, encompassing both spoken and written content. It extracts subtitles and any textual elements appearing within the imagery, alongside transcribing all spoken words by the speakers. Subsequently, this aggregated text content is condensed and reworked into a new narrative that retains coherence.

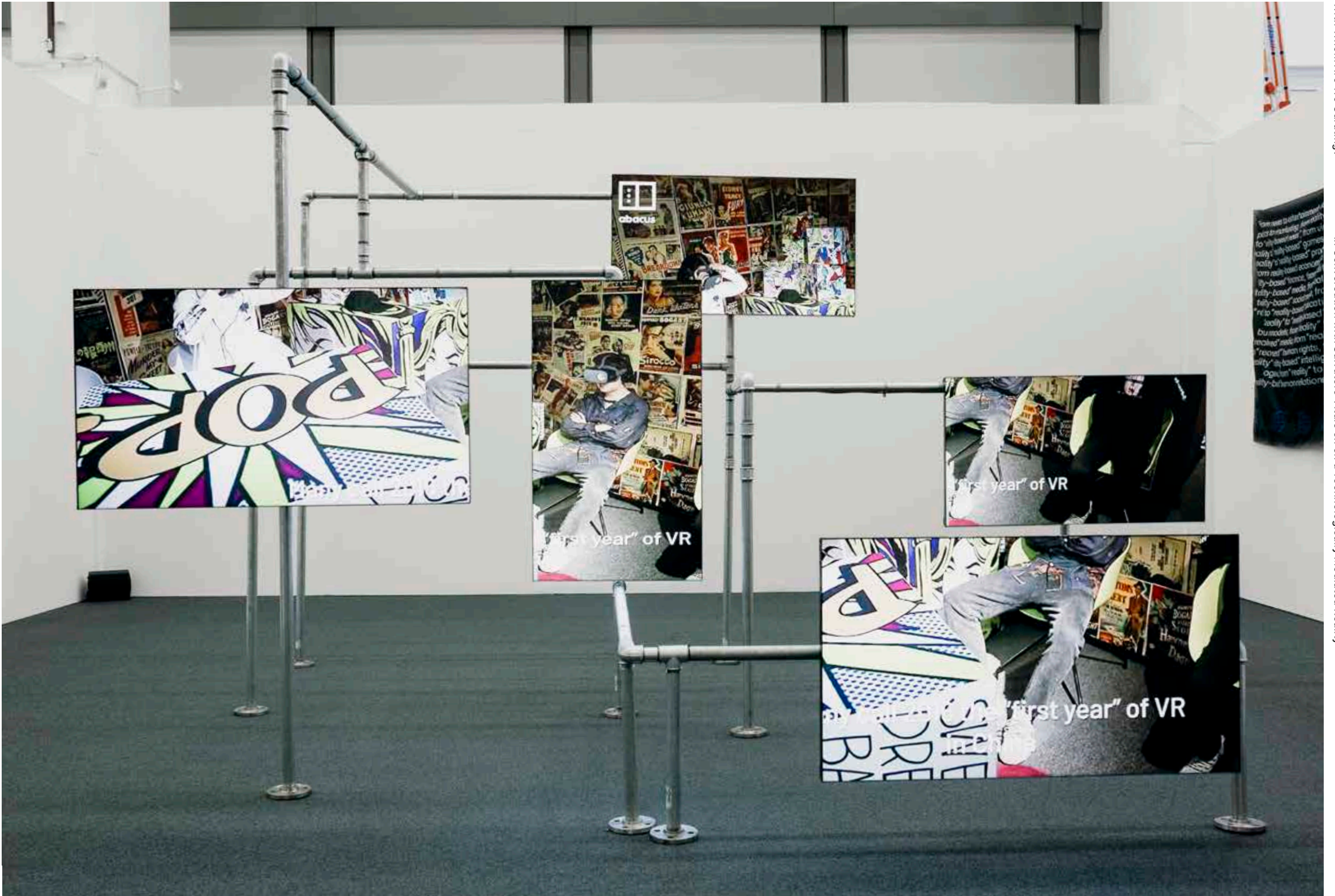
From my experimentation, the resulting narration closely resembles that of a documentary, as if a human editor has curated a story from the images that correspond to the provided script conditions. However, I aimed for the process to be entirely autonomous, hence I refrain from any manual editing.

is That said, if the story is fully generated, how do you make your argument? At what point do you interfere? Because you've handed over the decision-making process to the AI, albeit under the conditions you've set, your own control over the material seems constrained.

sv

In a way, by configuring the AI to operate within personal parameters, I inevitably influence its functioning. This interference disrupts the narrative, resulting in a blend of summarization from the text and my own written input. The AI responds not only to the text from another AI but also to my personal writing, crafted to enhance audience connection to the work. My poetic inserts serve to imbue the narrative with deeper meaning and sensory richness. It's intriguing to observe how the AI visually reacts to my personal text, often yielding more abstract sequences compared to content-based texts. This mix generates a compelling narrative that prompts reflection on the extensive integration of technology into our daily lives.

This conversation took place on April 9, 2021.



Salvatore Vitale, *The Shielding*, 2021–ongoing. Installation view at Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie 2022, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen, Germany (photo: Miriam Stanke)

Who Is Telling the Story?

*Reinterpreting the Script:  
Activating Archives, Managing Dissonance*

The question of who art is for continues to hound all of us who find ourselves in between its production and reception. Those that act as cultural brokers, but more accurately as purveyors, administrators, and presenters, are somewhat professionally separated from audiences because of their work function and expertise. The public can then all too easily be perceived as an anonymous mass of passive consumers, receivers of art doled out only by those deemed legitimately qualified to do so based on aesthetic trends or the current sociopolitical agenda. Today's art administrators are accountable to donors, trustees, and public funding bodies with tightening budgets that need to meet the needs of a diverse public. In the United Kingdom, diversity emerged as a neo-liberal shift in concern over the state's cultural policymaking strategies for distribution of cultural spending. Initiatives pursued in the late 1990s attempted to address the imbalance between where culture was thriving and where it was significantly lacking, a disparity that turned out to be largely correlative to economic standing, i.e. class and ethnicity. The response to this was demographic analyses, diversity policies, and metrics to ensure all groups in society had equal access to the arts.<sup>1</sup>

In my work as an artist and as an independent curator, audiences have always been a concern of mine. I have often thought of the arts as solely the purview of the middle and upper classes—an elite culture serving educated, culturally aware, privileged members of society. As an Indian refugee immigrant from Uganda, coming of age amongst the working classes of English council estates in the rural shire counties of the English Midlands, I have always felt at odds with the arts. Growing up, I was fortunate to be on the ascending side of social mobility out of my family's near destitute initial predicament. Owing to the work ethic of industrious and enterprising parents, and bolstered later in life by a once-accessible education system and academic dedication, I eventually found my place in the arts as one of the "under-represented." I was sustained by a degree of stubbornness and persistence in staking my claim and my right to a voice. Nevertheless, along with facing a certain amount of incomprehension from my family and community regarding my interest in the arts, I am chronically plagued by imposter syndrome and the feeling of not belonging in this environment. This emerges alongside the backdrop of an arts

1  
See, Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 13–14.

landscape largely dominated by institutions and organizations that are run by individuals of a White, Western European heritage while appearing to cater to audiences of a White, Western European heritage.

As an arts practitioner, I have undoubtedly benefitted from diversity policy-based inclusion. I am certain I have been awarded residencies and awards on this basis—most explicitly and directly through the International Curators Forum (ICF) "Beyond the Frame" emerging curators initiative to support under-represented curators, and perhaps elsewhere unbeknownst to me when decisions in which my inclusion, my award, or my selection on any number of applications may have been influenced by my ethnicity. Or perhaps not? It is difficult to know this without tracking back several applications and requesting more information. In any case, once provided an opportunity, there is a feeling that in order to succeed and continue to succeed, one must play the "game," not rock the boat, and conform to the whims of those who provide the platform. In my childhood and youth, I often heard the phrase "play the White man": a firm exhortation to follow the rules and etiquette of the White British majority. If I was to *be* "one of them," I would have to *become* one of them. I evoke this here as a clear reference to compelled assimilation which is particularly handy for a career in the arts, as it possibly is for any career in which one is a perceived minority. We often see this in the form of successful Black and Brown faces in the arts who are employed as an acceptable "somatic norm" serving to represent a superficial diversity to satisfy a secretly conservative hiring policy geared toward ensuring that if colored faces are hired for the job, they can articulate and present themselves in "acceptable" ways that do not stray from the classist, ideological, and aesthetic modus operandi of those who put them there.<sup>2</sup> We only have to look at the ethnic spread of Boris Johnson's cabinet and the recent UK government-commissioned enquiry into institutional racism to see how this works.<sup>3</sup>

The art world sustains a landscape dominated by institutions, spectacle, celebrity, and corporate sponsorship creating a divide between the producers and the receivers of arts and culture. So in response to the rhetorical question, "Who is art for?", my thoughts turn to the necessity for art to offer a way *in* for the public beyond spectatorship; not to merely operate

2  
See, Jemma Desai, "This Work Isn't for Us," available at: [sourceful.us/doc/337/this-work-isnt-for-us--by-jemma-desai](https://sourceful.us/doc/337/this-work-isnt-for-us--by-jemma-desai) [all URLs accessed July 6, 2021].

3  
In 2020, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson commissioned an enquiry into institutional racism after widespread Black Lives Matter protests in the UK in response to the police killing of George Floyd in the United States. The report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, published in March 2021, was met with widespread condemnation for appearing to minimize the significance of systemic and structural racism despite committee membership representative of both Black and Brown communities.

as observational entertainment and cultural grandiose for the selected few, but to allow for co-participation—the opportunity to be a part of art. If it is to appeal to a wider audience and move toward pedagogy, alternative epistemologies, social transformation, and the building of creative communities, art, as *both* spectacle *and* practice, must become a valuable space of transformation accessible to everyone. For that to be realized, there need to be entry points that allow for an audience to genuinely engage with it. It must operate in ways that do not instrumentalize its participants merely to satisfy the agenda of maintaining diversity policies, sustaining institutions, careers, and the whims of artists. These may seem like paradoxical, even excessive claims, but when the arts so vociferously stand for liberal values and altruism through agenda and programming, then to be operating as a guarded space of privilege would be glaringly disingenuous and, quite frankly, an outrage.

In this essay, I would like to provide an example of a social engagement project I was lead artist on as a context through which to navigate some of the points I raise above. At the time of the project, I found myself questioning my role as a practitioner trying to maintain a degree of integrity while working upon what I perceived as problematic terrain. I wanted to address some of these issues whilst attempting to bridge the divide between high-profile, international art in a contemporary art gallery space and its public audience. I write this to express the dissonance I feel as belonging to an ethnic group while not wishing to be defined by it, negotiating inner conflict between acting on behalf of the institution *and* representing a missing or excluded public. With this case study, I do not profess to an originality or uniqueness of approach, but I seek to demonstrate means for responding to the need to democratize the arts through public engagement and by creating room for participant visibility, both within and beyond the limits of institutional space. It is a reflection on how artists need to find a balance between succeeding with a paid opportunity and maintaining an ethical responsibility to audiences and those less privileged in society who find themselves participating. To do this, I have drawn upon the thoughts of a few others that occupy and are occupied by the same considerations. It is important to note that although some reference is made to academic thinkers, I have resisted

grounding this paper in a theoretical framework; instead, I reflect upon this case study through experience as a decolonizing strategy.<sup>4</sup>

*Activating Our Archives* was a project I conceived and led as a commissioned artist for Modern Art Oxford, in Spring 2019. It was in response to, and coincided with, Akram Zaatari's exhibition *The Script*, a solo exhibition of the Lebanese artist featuring past works and a new film work commissioned by New Art Exchange, in Nottingham, and Modern Art Oxford. I will show how and why such an initiative was able to work within and around not only my concerns as highlighted above, but also the constraints of public programming; and how the project brought the gallery's centerpiece exhibition and its artist's subject matter to a public which was invited to participate in a series of workshops and then given space to respond in the gallery and online.

### *The Script*

Modern Art Oxford is a contemporary art gallery situated in the heart of Oxford, England. It was established, in 1965, as the Museum of Modern Art. Since 2002, when it was renamed Modern Art Oxford, the gallery's focus has been on staging temporary exhibitions of contemporary art as opposed to being a museum primarily intent on accumulating a permanent collection of artworks. A precursory look at its previous exhibitions over the past five decades reflects a canonist adherence with strong programming throughout.<sup>5</sup> A social engagement function currently known as Creative Learning was integrated after a sustained period of educational programming dating to the 1970s. This department has recently expanded toward autonomous projects independent in their own right, though at times also tied into overarching themes emerging from the curatorial programming and artist works.<sup>6</sup>

Internationally acclaimed artist Akram Zaatari's *The Script* was scheduled to occupy the gallery's main exhibition space from March to May, 2019.<sup>7</sup> I was invited as a commissioned artist to develop a concept and run a public participatory project during the exhibition's run. The gallery had recognized affinities between my work and Zaatari's—we both work with visual archives—and I was also local to Oxford and therefore would be well-placed to identify with its public.

4  
I consider an experiential assessment of this project more relevant as much of it is based on my experience as an artist and not grounded in or informed by an academic methodology. I do not believe decolonizing approaches need seek legitimacy through state or institutional bodies. I should note that I am conscious of the contradiction of presenting this essay here.

5  
For a history of Modern Art Oxford, see: [modernartoxford.org.uk/history/timeline](http://modernartoxford.org.uk/history/timeline).

6  
Correspondence by email with Paul Hobson, Director of Modern Art Oxford, January 2021.

7  
Akram Zaatari is a filmmaker, photographer, archival artist, and curator based in Lebanon. He is also co-founder of the Arab Image Foundation (AIF), an initiative to collect, study, and archive photography from the Arab World. In the commissioned work *The Script* (2018), Zaatari addresses faith and fatherhood through the domestic, daily ritual of the *Salah*, the set of prayers performed by practicing Muslims. It is a work that emerges out of the artist's wider interest in the nature of self-representation, which is particularly photographic but has more recently been addressed through online platforms such as YouTube. *The Script* and another recent work shown in the exhibition, *Dance to the End of Love* (2011), were both informed by Zaatari's research into Arabic-language content uploaded by men onto YouTube, and the visual tropes associated with the use of modern tools such as smartphone cameras and lo-fi video recording and sharing.

What followed was an open call for participants; a series of workshops inviting attendees to work on their own archival projects; the formation of a collective dynamic; and a one-day exhibition to showcase our combined efforts.

### *Diversity Politics*

The first consideration in this essay is to discuss my role as an artist within the project just described. When the exhibition was presented at the New Art Exchange, a similar initiative was incorporated into their public program. Abbas Zahedi, a London-based Iranian artist, was commissioned to work with local groups in Nottingham. As Akram Zaatari's work emerges out of a focus on Middle Eastern male culture, an associated conversation naturally lends itself to the formation of local identifications with the contexts and sites of its subject matter. New Art Exchange is situated in Nottingham's Hyson Green, a low-income, working-class area with a predominantly Muslim population. Zahedi was encouraged to work with Hyson Green locals, interactions which then informed his work in the gallery as collaboration.<sup>8</sup> In Oxford, the male Muslim community is not insignificant. The hope was that I might be able to similarly work with local groups to bridge the exhibition content with the public and help form new audience and participatory relationships for the gallery.

One of the roles of a commissioned social-engagement artist is to work with the public and, in particular, to act as a representative of "art" generally. In many ways, to forge entry points into the aesthetic and discursive experiences of what art can hope to bring into the lives of those who open their minds to it. The desire to attract new audiences has the homogenizing tendency of making any artist a kind of public-relations representative for the arts. Although my ethnicity may lead one to believe I have access to certain disparate communities in the public realm, in my case, I have found that attracting British Asian audiences toward my art tends to be a harder sell than drawing in those that share a common interest in photography, art, and archives to begin with. In Oxford, I am as much an outsider to the Islamic community as would be any artist who doesn't already know that community, either through being a part of it themselves or through having a relationship of some form already in place.

8  
For more on Abbas Zahedi's project for New Art Exchange, see: [nae.org.uk/event/abbas-zahedi-live-archival/635](http://nae.org.uk/event/abbas-zahedi-live-archival/635).

Kobena Mercer describes a "burden of representation" that is placed on Black and Brown artists who feel a sense of responsibility and accountability in such cases, with the expectation that they must become representative of ethnic groups and speak as the artistic voice for a specific community.<sup>9</sup> Mercer argues this creates a situation in which one has to decide how to negotiate such expectations. Does one ignore this suggestion, at the risk of not meeting the explicit or implicit demand placed on the Black or Brown artist to provide access to ethnic communities, or does one accede and accept the role? There are countless examples of when the Black or Brown artist succumbs to the request and creates an artistic product, or initiates engagement, that is more in the service of White audiences than the minority community he or she interacts with, satisfying what Morgan Quaintance calls "cosmetic diversity."<sup>10</sup> The obvious risk is the act of stepping in to represent a community can end up further marginalizing that community when the community's access is secondary to the artist's role as a proxy for the White audience the artist now serves.

For this reason, although the opportunity to engage with outlying communities in Oxford was available, I chose to detach myself from any responsibility to my ethnicity or gender, preferring instead to open myself to as wide an audience as possible regardless of demographic characteristics. It is important to emphasize that serving in a representative role was not stipulated either as a contractual or casual requirement by my terms with the gallery, which was in fact receptive to my critical stance. However, an implicit coding of desires and expectations does exist, initially emerging structurally and statistically, driven by a lack of engagement from ethnic communities, in particular men, who are infrequent gallery visitors and participants in socially engaged programming.

### *Artistic Proximities*

Moving on to another aspect of the relationship between art and its audiences brings us to the issue of accessibility. Throughout the modern era, the art world has sustained a separation between high and low forms of culture. An element of this dichotomy has been to elevate the status of the artist and artistic genius. When it comes to participatory

9  
Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 233–258.  
10  
Morgan Quaintance, "Looking Back in Anger: Ten Years On," *Art Monthly* 442 (December 2020–January 2021).



*Activating our Archives—Protest and Play*, a group research project led by Sunil Shah for Modern Art Oxford and Fusion Arts, Oxford, 2021

art or art that is made by groups and individuals who lack formal art education, the art is reduced to a peripheral and supplementary element. Engagement itself is highlighted as the source of value, not the art object or the authorship that created it. In practice this means that art produced through social engagement is often marginalized, displayed in corridors, stairwells, and a gallery's non-spaces, as if to separate it from the *true art*, the value and status of which must be insulated.

With *Activating Our Archives*, there was the strong potential to bridge this division between what is put on the pedestal of "high" art in the galleries and what is possible through a participatory project. Given how Akram Zaatari's work emerges from publicly available content, produced by individuals in the public realm and freely accessible online, there was scope for the participants to develop a similar relationship to images. We might then consider the internet as a vast archive, as well as any personal collections of images the participants had access to, which could be used as raw "archival" material to initiate their engagement with the project.

What occurs to me about archival art practice is that it is open to everybody in some form. This is not to say it is easy to do well, but very few people find themselves unable to relate to old or new photographs or moving images. In addition to this, there are very few people who don't own a smartphone and who are not engaged daily in some form of image-making or viewing online. Photography is known to be a democratic medium, with its accessibility making it an extremely "participatory friendly" format. Like Zaatari and I, participants could search for their own archival raw material or seek it elsewhere. The material could be physical or digital. Participants could work individually or in groups, thinking about the meaning of the content they discovered. They could challenge it, tell new stories with it, tell different stories with it, look for patterns, both formal or based on content features. They could express themselves, learning and growing through the process. Not only would this align with the nature of art practice, as made visible in the exhibition spaces of the gallery through Zaatari's work, but it would link directly to the everyday lives of those who collaborated, showing how art and life are closely entwined, and that art is, indeed, available to everyone.

### Community Dialogues

One of the practical constraints of any socially engaged project is time—at least in the sense that such projects tend to be bookended and temporal in nature not only in terms of the application of resources, which also tend to be finite, but in terms of how much time the participants are prepared or able to devote to the project. In addition to budget, galleries have limits when it comes to the availability of space and staff. For *Activating Our Archives*, we were very much limited when it came to workshop space but also areas in which we could display our material. As with the sacred walls of the gallery, most institutions tightly manage their own digital spaces. Instagram “takeovers” tend to be content supplied by the artist or participant that is first subjected to internal editing and formatting before being made publicly accessible. In this respect, they represent an extension of the control of space, with oversight for representational space ultimately being maintained by in-house staff.

These inherent limits cannot be argued against too boldly. In many ways, the responsibility the institution has to its audience, the mediation of an organizational ethos, the re-presentation of art and culture, and the display and delivery of programmed content are paramount to the institution conducting “business as usual.” However, when it comes to socially engaged projects there are processes, ideas, dialogues, and creativity that emerge naturally from the relational aspects of collective endeavor. We might apply Nicolas Bourriaud’s term “relational aesthetics” to the creation of a social environment in which artistic value emerges, instead of the emphasis being on the production of a tangible set of outcomes and artworks.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of *Activating Our Archives*, this space- and time-constrained project ultimately found itself online. A finite series of workshops allowed for a set of questions to be raised amongst group participants. Questions about photography, archives, visual culture, the role of the photographer and image maker, digital space, social media, identity politics, and storytelling could all be shared in a common space and then explored further online across social media platforms as a way of extending time and space. Conversations could be held online, through comments and posts accessible not only to the participants via Google’s

11  
Nicolas Bourriaud,  
*Relational Aesthetics*  
(Dijon: Les presses du  
réel, 1998).

Padlet application but also through the use of an Instagram hashtag (#activatingourarchives, which has been added to more than 2,300 posts as of this writing), and all of it supplemented with external contributions as the project grew in the public realm. We can think of this space as one where Jürgen Habermas’ “communicative action” takes place; where the strategic imperatives of institutional processes and procedures, and the concerns and language of hegemonic interests, are replaced by a commitment to openness and cultural enrichment on a democratic scale.<sup>12</sup> We might think of the formation of a new community, initially through on-site workshops but then extending into the virtual spaces where new dialogues are forged. The relationship between project participants and myself as project leader have been maintained ever since—ongoing cooperation and interaction taking the form of subsequent projects, conversations, image sharing, the giving of feedback, and brainstorming about future editions of the project. In the process, the relations between all of us involved in the formation of a wider community were leveled. The effect on the participants has been a sense of belonging and a common interest in expanding their knowledge around photography and archives while finding new ways to tell stories and express themselves.

### Conclusion

This essay is only a brief discussion, using one specific case study, on managing the dissonance I feel when grappling with the structural problems inherent in the arts and the conflicts that emerge from the position of a commissioned artist. It is a perspective on how ethnicity shapes and displaces itself as a potential strategy toward critical engagement, and how issues of accessibility might be broached within the context of a public project. *Activating Our Archives* shows how diversity politics, artistic proximities, and community dialogues can play out in the course of social practice in art; and how concepts of space and time might be expanded by embracing online platforms.

In its resistance to the targeting of specific community and demographic groups—targeting which has the effect of further siloing—*Activating Our Archives* can be understood as embracing inclusiveness. It is when we envisage participatory groups as reflective of society as a whole that we naturally

12  
Jürgen Habermas,  
*The Theory of  
Communicative  
Action*, trans. Thomas  
McCarthy (Cambridge:  
Polity Press, 1984).

attract individuals from all spheres of life and promote greater cross-cultural engagement. The breadth of the participant group, which even now continues to expand, encompasses generations, genders, and nationalities. Now in its third year, *Activating Our Archives* is a real-world example of an approach that could easily be adopted by other organizations, based on the formation of diverse communities creatively working on images and archives together online. To pose again the question of who art is for, within this project we see that art is, quite simply, for anyone who wants to participate. What it mustn't be is limited to whichever demographic group is missing from diversity statistics. That particular approach fulfills the institutional agenda but not the needs of all members of the public who wish to join in.

As a British person of Indian ethnic origin, I choose, at times, not to call upon my ethnicity. For me, this ethnicity is a complex, personal experience shaped by living in the United Kingdom. I am British and English as much as I am Indian and from Africa, and this manifests in an entangled system of identities that merge, switch, and revert as needed. They are not, however, labels or categories that can be invoked to meet the on-demand needs of individuals, organizations, or institutions. Such tactics can only have the effect of objectification, entrenching difference in society and perpetually distancing us from what might be considered (White) normativity. I would like to therefore propose that the effects of institutional diversity are cosmetic, perpetuating difference, exclusivity, and isolation in ways that are antithetical to an institution's purported objectives on social inclusion.

When we examine any system which is concerned about lack of ethnic representation, we would do well to remind ourselves that perhaps this is why those from marginalized groups are rarely present: because they still feel like they don't belong. In *Activating Our Archives*, we counteracted this issue in a way that might attract greater diversity by, paradoxically, not grounding it in inclusion. What we did was possible only through critical questioning at every stage of the engagement and by embracing an openness to response. Once we were able to move beyond such issues, the drive to activate archives breached systemic boundaries, with the project then giving way to what Jacques Derrida called "archive fever," its influence extending far and wide, spreading to an online visual community, and infecting the imagination of all involved.<sup>13</sup>

13  
Thank you to Modern Art Oxford, in particular Sara Lowes and Najia Bagi, for their generous support and assistance on the *Activating Our Archives* project.

## Annet Dekker in Conversation with Anastasia Mityukova

---

*on Project Iceworm:  
A Fragile Excavation through Photography*

Nobody thought [the base] would surface [...] but the world changed.

—William Colgan, glaciologist, York University in Canada

In 1951, Denmark and the United States of America signed the so-called Greenland Defense Agreement. As colonizer of Greenland, Denmark would be assisted by the US in the necessary defense of Greenland. In 1959, in northwest Greenland, at the time of the Cold War, the US built Camp Century, a large enclave situated approximately 200 kilometers east of Thule, where the main US airbase in Greenland was positioned. Under the pretext of building an Arctic research laboratory, large tunnels were dug to house laboratories, a hospital, a cinema, and a church—all powered by first-generation portable nuclear reactors. A few years later, Project Iceworm started as a network of tunnels to store approximately 6,000 missiles. When the work began, the engineers realized that the ice supporting the tunnels was moving and the constructions under the permafrost were slowly collapsing. In 1967, the project was completely abandoned and the nuclear reactors were removed, but the nuclear waste, PCBs, and other organic waste remained. In the earlier Agreement, no mention was made of the possible presence of nuclear reactors, let alone nuclear missiles. After the release of previously classified information, ordered by the Danish Parliament, an investigation followed which, to the country's embarrassment, revealed a full report contradicting previous assertions by the government.

The diplomatic dispute between the two countries has faded, but the environmental consequences of the project are more pressing than ever, resulting in new political tensions. Swiss and Danish researchers have reported the presence of 200,000 liters of fuel oil and some 240,000 liters of wastewater, not to mention the nuclear waste under the ice, on the former Camp Century site. The main question is who will pay for this major clean-up operation, which will be exorbitantly expensive, given the remote location of the waste and the extreme weather conditions in this part of Greenland.

In 2017, photographer Anastasia Mityukova learned about the story through a friend. Reading through his RSS newsfeed, Mityukova's curiosity was triggered by a report of

glaciologists from the University of Freiburg and University of Copenhagen who had analyzed ice cores taken from the site of a former secret military base, code name "Project Iceworm," or Camp Century. Determined to find out more about the tumultuous history of the contested town of Thule in Greenland, she embarked on a journey. Via infiltrations in Facebook groups, interviews with Inuit individuals, archival excavations, personal memories, and fabulation, *Project Iceworm* was visualized for the first time.

I met Mityukova at Fotodok in Utrecht where *Project Iceworm* was part of the exhibition *Joint Memory: Photographic Fragments*. Next to the urgency of revealing Camp Century, its history, and current and potential future influence on the environment, I was intrigued by the way Mityukova positioned herself as a storyteller who uses archival material to refigure the past into the present. Not only did she show how collective memories of historical events are formed through photography, she also presented a more layered approach to what archiving could mean. In what follows, I try to unravel how a project that for many years was concealed and hardly talked about, is turned into an open-ended process characterized by transformation, collaboration, and sharing; and how this method can inform an archival practice by accounting for absences, gaps, and losses.

Annet Dekker You decided to depict Project Iceworm in images. While this is not surprising since you are a photographer, officially no visual documentation exists, nor is it even permitted to take images of Project Iceworm. How did you get your hands on all the visual material?

Anastasia Mityukova

The United States has not declassified all the experiments and stories that took place in the 1960s in Thule. To understand what happened, I started to collect everything I could find. My collection grew from screenshots from propaganda videos to photographs in public archives that were sent to international newspapers by the US Navy. I also discovered online blogs and forums of former American and Danish soldiers who served on the base. As most of these groups were closed, at times I had to "prove"



Anastasia Mityukova, *Project Iceworm*, 2019. Installation view at Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany (photo: Jens Nober)

that I had served as well. So I invented an identity as a Danish cook to be able to infiltrate the networks. After six months, I gathered around a thousand images; at the moment I have over 6,000. The photos show the construction of the military base, the underground galleries under the ice, the abandonment of the experiments, and the decay of the installations. Through all these images, I had become the explorer of Project Iceworm. I felt I was wandering around the place, and I started to visualize various stories based on the images and my own imagination.

AD You choose to mediate the story in different ways, as a book and an installation. Can you tell us something about your choice for these different forms and how you think they influenced the experience of the story?

AM I wanted the audience to have a similar experience as I had, but to appropriate my experience in their own way. For this, the book was an ideal medium: I could print all the images, arrange them, recreate visual narratives for someone who had never heard of this story. The aim was to provide information and clarification, while emphasizing the subjectivity of the story.

Because the Thule Air Base and Camp Century are classified as “Secret Defense” and the military is not allowed to share their service photographs online, I anonymized the people in the images and their photographers. I also leveled the images and printed them full page on electric-yellow paper. When opening the book, the idea is that the viewer is irradiated by this yellow color. This glow is a marker of danger—one cannot look at these images without being physically contaminated in some way. This danger is latent when you close the book, when you put it back in your library. It remains a sort of problem waiting to be dealt with.

In the installations, I wanted to evoke a similar feeling of immersion. This time the photos were printed larger than life. Sometimes they would overlap and by using the same yellow colors for the prints and presenting them in yellow tube lights, the audience literally

walks through a “contaminated” environment. Also, in Fotodok in Utrecht, I had the opportunity to use the old-fashioned stairway, so now the audience physically moved through the story. They became submerged in this yellow “underworld,” while encountering new images at every turn, hopefully leaving them disoriented and engrossed in this peculiar world and piece of (future) history.

AD You mention that you want the viewer to share your initial experience of surprise, by providing them only with visual fragments of your stories to trigger their imagination. How do you see the role of photography as a documentary medium?

AM Photography is strongly linked to the imaginary of the Arctic. The aim was not to recognize the location of the place (like the North Pole), but to construct a representation of humans in an extreme situation, and a photograph was the ultimate proof. Due to its symbolic value the photograph became a visual currency.

You could say that the explorers did not just travel to the Arctic regions, they also worked on the archive of the future. They were concerned about the visual reproduction of what they experienced, but also about the expectation of the public and what they would (want to) see. They were aware of the rapid distribution of press images and the fact that their images would be distributed around the world much faster than they themselves could travel. In this sense, the context of the Arctic image also follows the technological development of photography. Kodak made it easier to transport its equipment by inventing film, and printing techniques from the 1920s onwards also made it possible to add images to books, which offered the possibility of visual integration of photographs, maps/text/graphics, etc. This eventually contributed greatly to the development of the Arctic image, as well as to the collective imagination of what the Far North is.

For most people it is impossible to discover these lands by direct evidence, or by objective visual documentation, so their experience happens through the

reproduction of photographic material in newspapers, *National Geographic*, travel books, on postage stamps, etc., in which the photographs are retouched, reframed, selected, annotated, captioned, commented on, etc. Moreover, images are often used in contexts that were not originally the purpose of the images, so each reproduction and each retouching adds or takes something away from an image.

AD I am intrigued by how you describe the methods of photographic reproduction, as adding and taking away information, which relates to the notion of fragmentary memory that is often a result of trauma. Yet, your treatment of the images as elements, or nodes, through which various stories can be constructed also strongly connects to storytelling, particularly to oral cultures and Aboriginal songlines. What attracts you to storytelling in the sense of how collective memories are created, or triggered? And how does it relate to your practice as a photographer, or in this case, an artist-researcher?

AM Most of my work is very subjective. I don't try to present a logically constructed story; rather, I try to embrace incompleteness and the fragmentary to shake up history. [My research] started with an abandoned base under the ice. Then I found out that it was a nuclear missile storage site, and how the other air base 200 kilometers away was built without the agreement of the Inuit who lived in the area, whose presence disturbed the military, and who were moved against their will farther north to the village of Qaanaaq, while their dwellings in Thule were razed. I also discovered that in 1950, the number of US military service members was equivalent to one third of the entire population of Greenland, and that one of the largest anti-missile radars, the BMEWS, was also built there. And that in 1968, a B-52 carrying four nuclear bombs crashed not far from the air base, three of the bombs exploded, and the toxic remains of one of them was never found and is still in the ocean. Even after the Crested Ice operation,

which cleaned the remains of the crash, animals with deformed DNA continue to be found in the area. Also, both the military members and the Inuit who worked on the cleaning mission are suffering from health problems and even today, in 2020, there is crowdfunding to pay for the lawsuits against the US Army, and it goes on.

I see memory also as a patchwork of fragments in which stories are connected through certain links, or as a series of mementos that trigger different stories. At the same time, the notion of memory is strongly connected to the polar regions. The Arctic can be seen as a natural archive. Ice is a medium of memory, preserving information about the world for tens of thousands of years. It is in the ice cores extracted from the Arctic permafrost that you can find information not only about the geology and the environmental changes of the planet, but also about historical facts that were once encased in ice. However, ice is unreliable, it is unstable and has a fragile "memory" that depends on particular weather conditions. In this sense, natural archives are similar to human archives. They preserve traces of life forms and time periods in spite of others, all in a systematic and reconstructable way, but they are also selective. The creation of this archive is an attempt to reactivate the collective memory of a fact from the past that also impacts the future.

AD Archivist Brien Brothman mentioned that "memory is not a place; it is a process of knowledge construction, which tells far more about the present than the past: memory is not simply about storing and keeping. It involves on-going construction of the present."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, archives are also seen as constructions showing merely a reflection of reality, or as argued by another archivist, Verne Harris, "a sliver of a sliver of a sliver [that] is seldom more than partially described."<sup>2</sup> You seem to address archives in a similar way.

<sup>1</sup> Brien Brothman, "The Past That Archives Keep: Memory, History, and the Preservation of Archival Records," *Archivaria* 51 (May 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Verne Harris, "The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa," *Archives and Museum Informatics* 2 (2002).

AM Indeed, despite the multitude of archival images with their implicit claim to truth and factual records, *Project Iceworm* doesn't form a coherent whole of the military base as it existed. Rather than creating a documentary to uncover a Cold War story, I wanted to present the unvarnished version of the history to make way for alternative realities. This is not to say that I'm merely speculating or creating fiction. Storytelling doesn't merely equal fantasy. By talking about a history that is unknown to the public, I try to highlight issues related to global warming and colonialist attitudes—both of the past and the present. I also want to add nuance to concepts that are often very polarized, since it is impossible to have all the information. By using fragments and making a collage, I am much closer to the way we approach the world in everyday life.

AD At the moment there is an increasing interest in using digital tools for activating and making sense of archival records, images, and data more generally. What is your view as to the ethics of these practices?

AM I think that artists are trying to slow down the flow of digitalized information that keeps circulating. There is a need to develop alternative methods for the use of this data, but also to give a little more value to the content that is sinking faster and faster into an abysmal flow of information.

My work is a form of commitment to a cause, which could be seen as militant. By using imagination, poetry, and installation I want to open up the debate and propose a form that allows the public to take hold of the issue in a unique way, without imposing a single point of view. By working on a local subject, I bring nuance to sometimes very polarized themes. Even if my action is limited, I still feel I have a role to play in the political issues my work raises, even if it's merely being part of a much larger network of glaciologists, historians, politicians, and lawyers. Sometimes, something happens, like recently I heard from a student in Bern who saw my installation in Paris, in 2019, and wrote an article

on environmental issues related to Camp Century for an academic journal in Mexico. So, the project and its issues continue and hopefully they will uncover other stories.

\*

Much of our collective memory is formed through images, most of which can be found in archival collections in which they are classified, categorized, and provided with metadata to be accessible for others to explore. Similar to the framing of an image, little in the record-keeping process is neutral and many gaps and absences exist. Due to its close connection to interpretation, storytelling as a way to fill the empty spaces is often regarded with suspicion. Anastasia Mityukova shows how storytelling can be made productive and how it allows us to make sense of what may have happened—not to merely expose and discredit the past but to open up hidden or neglected stories in the present from which to build a better future. *Project Iceworm* demonstrates how an archive is constantly performed, disfigured, and reinterpreted, and how each record gets new relevance and value each time it is reused and retold.

This conversation took place in July 2021.

In Conversation with  
Poulomi Basu

---

*on a Collision of Truths*

Iris Sikking In the presentation of your long-term project *Centralia*, you want to open up and activate all our senses to a story of an ongoing conflict taking place deep in the forests of the central and eastern regions of India. Your visual approach is not only to document the marginalized (his)story of the Adivasi people, who face eviction from their forest lands, you want to create impact with your images. For that reason, you used different media and strategies to bring the story across and reach out to a diverse audience. Could you tell me how *Centralia* came about and what the role of the photographic image is in your work?

Poulomi Basu

*Centralia* came out of a long-term engagement and time spent in the Indian heartland, which is home to India's largest and oldest indigenous population, and a region where the most valuable minerals are mined. For decades, tribal peoples have been displaced to clear the densely forested area. A civil war and resistance movement has been ongoing there for fifty years. Since 2010, it has become a full-blown insurgency.

What I wanted to bring out in the world was to combine multiple disciplines together into one project. I am a person who likes mediums to collide with each other, and to explore how to present a narration of a specific, and in this case ongoing, event. I like to see how facts are fabricated or where they are twisted, and how a pattern as such can be included within the work. This is in a nutshell how I embarked upon *Centralia*, and how the project became a collision of truths and multiple perspectives, because one of the things I really hate about traditional photojournalism is the lack of agency for the people involved. Also, this whole Western idea of thinking that the people who are represented in your work have no agency or control over their own narratives and lives, which is something I have never encountered myself. I have seen women in communities being mobilizers and I have seen a lot of grass-roots phenomena happening. In *Centralia*, it was really important for me to let go of the notion of me being this moral authority. I wanted to let go of control

of my own voice in the work and to invite the other voices—those of Indigenous activists, Maoists, guerrilla soldiers, and journalists—and present these different perspectives, giving all a chance to tell their own story without casting judgment from the get-go.

I had all these different narratives flowing throughout the photobook, each with a different design to tell you they were different. We used different types of images, texts, and designs to differentiate visually between the voices. It doesn't matter who's doing the telling and what the dominant narrative is. To experience the collision of these narratives is what the audience can absorb and use to make their own judgments or decisions about what to take away from the story. I don't pass judgment in the book; I show the atrocity. The people in the book are trapped. That's why speaking to Teun [Van der Heijden, designer of the publication] was important, because we were sequencing together, and discussing how we wanted to present the different voices. And we were both very careful about protecting them—for example, the voices of the women guerrillas—and how to reflect them in the book. There were lots of discussions about language, as texts were written in English by, for example, the Maoists. I didn't want to change their way of writing; instead, I chose to keep the idiom they used, and the style took on its own rhythm (in English), one of the people of the land. In my opinion, that needs to be respected even if it doesn't conform to the general Western English-language standard. I liked that the project was disorienting.

- is If we keep the writings of Fred Ritchin in mind, photography today allows for a more multifaceted approach because an image functions as an interpretation of what is happening rather than just capturing something. What for you is the importance of constructing an image and textual narrative based on your own findings? And then who owns the narrative, whose voice is represented?



Poulomi Basu, *Centralia: Ghost Dance*, 2021. Installation views at ZEPHYR – Raum für Fotografie in den Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen, Mannheim, Germany (photo: Miriam Stanke)

PB When I came into this field, photojournalism was already being declared dead, but actually it was reinventing itself. Photography has expanded itself and, at this moment in time, is finally liberating itself from the constraints and boundaries it has been locked into for so long. I belong to that group of practitioners who found themselves in that time of flux when there was no industry, and hence no money. I think I spend a lot of my time in the wrong industry because, you know, when you are based in India, people just want a brown girl living in India to give assignments to because it's fashionable to hire people of color from the communities they belong. Which is great—but it's also important to give people like me international assignments so we can travel and also do those. But that doesn't really happen in photojournalism. It's very rare.

What really opened my eyes was that soon enough I figured out that photography for me was not an end, but a means to an end. I think the future of storytelling lies in the hands of those who can operate within multiple mediums, who can move between mediums, and who can use and take advantage of photography as an elastic, expandable medium. Fred said that himself: innovate or die. That's what *Centralia* is. It isn't a straightforward documentary; it is a twisted spin on a straightforward documentary.

is If we are talking about a documentary attitude, which is maybe a better wording than documentary image-making, I agree with you that it is important to embrace (digital) technologies and to insert them in your toolbox of storytelling techniques. And for that reason, a transmedial strategy seems to be key to your practice. Could you give an example of one of your projects?

PB Most of my work is transmedia, because I have always questioned who is going to be the audience. I am also an activist and I feel that a real change in society comes from responsibility; you have to put yourself in that position of responsibility and do something with the work that you are making. Also, talking about present-

ing *Centralia* to an audience, I don't want to underestimate the audience but rather let it decide and come to a form of conclusion rather than me providing some so-called "truth." I don't like projects which have an end. I like the idea of always having the possibility to create a sequel or something which can add a layer in another form.

My most successful transmedia project is *Blood Speaks*, which ended up changing the law in Nepal, in 2018. It started as just a few photographic explorations while I was in the mountains of Nepal. It is where I encountered women being exiled during their menstruation period. At first, I got involved in a big campaign, including guerrilla and poster campaigns, and with WaterAid we raised £2 million to build toilets and provide sanitary conditions for kids. But I was frustrated because I thought it would still be perceived as other people's problems. I therefore decided to create three stories about three women. Through VR, the audience would be given this sense of presence and the feeling of isolation when a woman is in exile. Using VR was the perfect marriage between the technology and the story and created this sensorial experience of something that feels so disconnected from you as an outsider. Combined with the efforts of people who were on the ground, the practice of exiling women from their homes was criminalized and forbidden by law. It was fantastic to see the project have real impact.

The question for me is always, how can one make a change? And since almost all my work is impact driven, I feel like I can't do this just sticking to the photography world. My work is all about reaching out. It is an extension of my personal life and my experiences in the world and how I navigate those.

is Is that the reason you created *Ghost Dance*, in collaboration with CJ Clarke, a post-apocalyptic science fiction video work which speculates on the end of the world? The video is edited from archival footage of the Adivasi people, news footage sourced from the internet, and your own photographs and film clips.

What is addressed in *Centralia* is a global thing, so it goes beyond the story of the people and their homeland, and even more so with the current right-wing government in India. The work was created to highlight the rights of Indigenous and Adivasi women in relation to climate justice. War crimes, injustice, environmental degradation in relation to women's rights, and the future of terrorism are so intertwined that you can only change something by changing one of the intersections. And you can already see the disaster that is happening. It is a huge warning sign for where we are heading, a future which is going to be a deadly place to live in. In a sense, the issue in Nepal was very concentrated. It was easier to do because it was one thing we were talking about. However, what and who is going to change or stop an environmental disaster? For that reason, I am currently working on a feature film. I have a start-up grant for that. I would like to create a more mainstream fiction film to open up a universe of possibilities that non-fiction cannot. Just the possibility of your imagination and your mind and what you can do with it. It is another very powerful tool for telling this important story.

This conversation took place on May 19, 2021.

## In Conversation with Anna Ehrenstein

---

*on Power Structures*

Iris Sikking As a multimedia artist, making photographic images is no longer the most important aspect of your practice. For your projects, you collaborate intensively with your protagonists, you perform online performances and enjoy working with tools such as VR cameras, you use sound recordings, and finally, for your presentation, you create 3D sculptures from e.g. fabrics and you print on cheap materials such as plastics. After you studied photography, you went on to study media art and took curatorial courses to develop yourself as an artist. Does the photographic image still play a role given your interdisciplinary way of working?

Anna Ehrenstein

Since I am a digital native, I did have a computer as a teenager, and digital photography and Photoshop was something I had a big thing for as a teen. However, as I was interested in different manifestations of art, it was a coincidence that I ended up studying photography because back then I already printed on different materials and applied for fine arts and for visual communication as well. Although the curriculum was quite broad, the study came with a classic and narrow understanding of the medium. I was introduced to the existing power structures related to image making. To finance my studies, I gave photography workshops. I was only nineteen and working in this youth center, where the children and I were actually in a very similar position in society due to our racialized ethnic and class backgrounds. There I learned that I could change this so-called hierarchy between photographer and subject.

In the final years of my study, and after producing my first big project, *Tales of Lipstick and Virtue* (2017), I was shaken up. Who was I as a photographer and what is the power of the camera? I didn't want to be part of a photographic field that is so limited. I reckoned that curation would be an idea. I am interested in mediating ideas through arts and working with people. I favored a horizontal way of working with others and to complicate this process it would be interesting to work in a context that isn't my context. I had previously been working in Georgia—which has quite a lot of simi-

larities with Albania, where I come from—but when I started working in Senegal it was so different and I realized that I could not work in the way I had worked before and simply apply the same methods.

is Indeed, in your latest project *Tools for Conviviality* (2020), you travelled to Senegal to dive into the lives and works of Saliou Ba, Donkafele, Nyamwathi Gichau, Lydia Likibi, and Awa Seck. Can you talk about the concept and your motivation for this project, which you describe as a collection of visual ephemera about the usage of tools for various modes of human togetherness?

AE

My take on the project is that it was the most fun one I have done and pretty easy. Interestingly, however, in bringing the project back to Europe, it became the most challenging project, because of the many historical narratives and power relations intertwined. Since I have been living in Germany for most of my life, I profit from the neocolonial system that we are living in right now. The initial idea was to collaborate with migrants with a creative profession living in Dakar because I was annoyed by these unwavering views on migration, about people always coming to Western Europe. For example, ninety percent of migration on the African continent takes place within the African continent.

I didn't come up with a fully fledged plan for the project and the city, but I spent lots of time meeting up with creatives. As I could not remunerate people with money, it was therefore central to bring the cultural capital that I had accumulated over the last few years and combine it with the cultural capital of these people who were doing such great things and have been very open to working with me.

While doing my research, the work of Paul Gilroy resonated with me. He says the difference between a convivial culture and a multicultural environment is that a convivial culture has horizontal lines of interdependence where all the cultures are changed, while a multicultural culture is still based on a dominant, supposedly mature culture—and one that the other



Anna Ehrenstein, *Tools for Conviviality*, 2018. Installation view at Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie 2022, Port25 – Raum für Gegenwartskunst, Mannheim, Germany (photo: Miriam Stanke)

cultures have to adapt to. This drew a line to my own experiences and life as a migrant in Germany and I was interested in having conversations about this.

Through Gilroy I learned about Ivan Illich, who wrote the book *Tools for Conviviality* in 1973, in which he expresses his worries about how technology intersects with our interdependence on others. And now, a year after the pandemic, we see those utopian hopes about how we could use the pandemic to restructure our society, but also realize how those who own our digitized world have hugely benefited off this situation.

I think while going through this collaboration, there are, of course, all of these political imbalances that we find ourselves in. I acknowledged a certain hierarchy between me and my collaborators, but I tried to be very attentive and careful to not reinforce this power imbalance. At one point I was in a situation where someone wanted me to bring an African wax fabric into the project, which comes with all these historical legacies. Because of its ethnic connotation and colonial history where Europe was very involved, there was no way to use this fabric, from my position, as a central “decoration.” And moreover, I wanted to speak about digitization, about migration, about the tools that we have at our disposal to reshape the way we live together. Obviously, I didn’t want to ignore race and colonialism because they are so profound as they structure our complete existence. I think trying to find this balance was a challenging process.

is In one of your talks, you mentioned the concept of “situated knowledge” coined by Donna Haraway, a notion to make us aware of the relation between object and subject and from which perspective we are actually looking and approaching people and situations around us. What does the term mean for your practice?

AE Coming from two very distinct societies while growing up, I had to balance two very opposing opinions, life views, and realities. As a young woman showing her work for the first time, people really don’t take you

seriously. You get weird, often racialized and awkward comments—from being excited that you can technically take a good picture to people asking if you are influenced by a rapper. Is it because usually the people you see on the walls look like “me” but not the people who are producing the projects? Therefore, in my performances or lectures, I use these little micro aggressions that have been put upon me, to make these power structures visible. It is a way to keep sanity, and to open up conversations. With a sense of humor and without complete victimization, I am doing a sort of assertive aesthetic, while overdoing those structures which are rather toxic.

And going back to the notion of situated knowledge, I like that Donna Haraway brought up the situated knowledge alongside privilege. There is always relative privilege; for example, it is a massive privilege for me to access free and good education and to live in the Global North and have gotten a citizenship that allows me to move around freely. Nevertheless, I always critically look at what my position is. So, for example, when I presented *Tools for Conviviality*, someone told me I should be careful because I was working with these big plastic bags, so-called refugee bags. That’s how the far right in Germany termed them. And I was like, oh, well, that’s okay, because I come from a family of refugees, we’ve been using these bags ourselves a lot. But then at the same time, in the West African context, these bags have been called “Ghana Must Go” bags because when Nigeria had an oil crisis, the then-prime minister of Nigeria told people to go back to Ghana, which was, of course, xenophobic in that context. And another example: there was a text written about the work where my practice was compared to white artists that have been working with poor people on the African continent. It didn’t make sense because the people I’ve been working with are successful entrepreneurs. Making this comparison implies that the whole continent is synonymous with poverty, which is complete bullshit.

I think this idea of situated knowledge brings in, again, like this is what I know and what I can bring to

## In Conversation with Giya Makondo-Wills

---

the table. I have tons of biases in this regard. I mean, I still know nothing about Senegalese history. I don't even speak the two local languages nor the colonial language. There are so many barriers in this process. But at the same time, while opening up these barriers, we can at least acknowledge that they exist.

IS For my final question, I'd like to return to the position of the photographic image in your work. The underlying theme of many of your projects is the digitization of our lives, for good and for bad. Could you elaborate on the translation of your theme into the physical space?

AE I came of age in a time when the borders between physical and virtual spaces are much more fluid. I aim to create exhibition environments that make these circulations visible and that you can feel them. And they kind of stick to the objects like our emotions stick to something when we come into the room, or when we see something, or when you experience the manifestation of these types of glitches that are part of our online world.

Hito Steyerl's theory on the poor image, from fifteen years ago, was quite influential in talking about how copying and pasting creates "bad" data and a hierarchy of images. Translating these images into physical spaces, and translating these glitches in how the media actually produces us, is really important for me. Do we produce the media or does the media produce us? That's why the photographic is always central in my work because it is the one tool that deals with representation not only of people, but of the physical world as well, and how this representation then in itself produces a physical world. I try to make this tangible in my exhibitions.

*on Images without Captions*

This conversation took place on May 21, 2021.

Iris Sikking In your project *They Came From the Water While the World Watched*, you depicted stories and rituals of and about ancestral beliefs and Christianity in South Africa today. And you relate those religious practices to missionary activities and the consequences, which are still visible and experienced, of European colonization. What was the starting point of your project?

Giya Makondo-Wills

My family is originally from the north of the country. It's very beautiful countryside, where the landscape is barren, harsh, especially in the heat. It's one of the parts of the country which was, to my understanding, one of the last to be colonized or one of the last to have a big European presence.

The ancestral practice is still very strong in those rural parts, like it is in many parts of the world where traditions and cultures tend to have a stronghold in isolated areas. I grew up understanding ancestral practice and with the belief that your ancestors are watching you and to be grateful to them. The project started while I was making a work about my two grandmothers. While I was in university, I was photographing my grandmother in the UK and my other grandmother in South Africa. When I went to South Africa alone for the first time and for the first time as a trained image maker, she was praying to God and the Gods, so she was praying to the Christian God and the ancestors, and something clicked for me.

Instead of trying to discuss South Africa's political system as someone who didn't grow up there, I wanted to talk about the source of the problem, and that's where religion and colonialism come into play. The biggest shock for me was how missionaries were so intentional with their relationship with the colonial agenda and how institutional religion and Christianity were used as a weapon. I always knew that it was bad, but when I started looking into archives and looking at the historical accounts, it was worse than I ever could have imagined.

is Before we move on to the historical part of your project, let's talk a little bit about the making of the portrait images of your family and the people in the area in South Africa. How did those experiences shape your own stance and the choices in how to present the project?

GMW

My interaction with my family and, for example, people like Prophet Solomon, is actually one and the same. Both myself and my family are in the work, but you don't know who and where. It's more observational, so you can't tell if someone's a member of my family or not.

My work is not about me. I am leading it, but ultimately it's about the conversation. I have always known how lucky I am, having grown up in the UK and going back and forth to South Africa, because life in townships and rural parts of the north is not an easy life—it's a hard life and it's the reality for many many black South Africans. But having the tools as a photographer really allowed me to ask wider questions. Especially questions in relation to South Africa and my family being black South Africans. My dad left during apartheid and all of my African family lived under apartheid, which ultimately was the tipping point from colonialism.

So then with Prophet Solomon, it was on my first trip there and I was staying at my uncle's in the north in Limpopo, the village that my dad grew up in. I explained to him my project and my wish to be with pastors and traditional healers. My uncle is the chief of the village, so he can meet and talk to people and that's how I met Prophet Solomon. When I arrived, he was in his normal clothes, and I asked him if I could take his picture. Coming from this traditional education of documentary photography, I want to have integrity in my images, not falsifying anything, you know, raw, real as it is. And he was like, no, I'm getting changed. And he went and put on his Sunday best, his preaching clothes, beautiful white robe. He was standing up tall, ready to go. I realized that he should be depicted how he wants to be depicted, and that for me is very much like a baseline now: allow it to be a collaborative process and relinquish control, because otherwise, why am I

there? Especially when you look at the role of photography in relation to colonialism, and the knock-on effects that exploitation of the image of the black body has had globally, this way of working has become really important to me.

is In the exhibition presentation you add an impressive list of missionary stations that you put together. Could you tell me more about the data and the format in which you present it?

GMW

Through visiting archives like the University of Johannesburg Special Collections and Archives, or meeting with researchers at the University of Pretoria, mission stations kept coming up. It was an integral part of how the colonizers operated and how they permeated so much of the country, because these mission stations were built at a rapid pace and this was not accidental, but intentional. The list I compiled is from an online African archive which actually depicts the whole of southern Africa. It is still an incomplete overview as these were only the ones which have been recorded.

My reason for doing it and presenting it like this visually is because there is no official death toll for the amount of people who died as a result of the colonization of South Africa from the first European colonizers through to apartheid. Think of all of those years with no official death toll of who died, of how many people died as a result of it. And that is not necessarily just in wars, but also starvation, forced removal from their land, police brutality, illnesses, or deaths in the mines. And that's what I wanted to show in the way I visually created it—that it's so dense that you cannot read the individual places because I wanted to show the scale.

is Another element of your project that I would like to highlight is your photographs of the objects that were hidden away deep in the British Empire & Commonwealth Collection. What were you looking for?



Giya Makondo-Wills, *They Came from the Water While the World Watched*, 2016–2019. Installation view at Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie 2022, Kunstverein Ludwigshafen, Germany (photo: Lys Y. Seng)

GMW

I was specifically looking for items which related to ancestral practice in the collection. And coincidentally, they were also sold to the museum by a missionary called Sister Christian, in 1890, which I thought was very fitting. These items were toured around the country and used to raise funds for the colonial cause, to prove the need to colonize and the need for civilization and then, you know, obviously, the need for religion. Postcards were made of these items and afterwards they were stored in a box in a basement and were hardly touched or displayed to the public. And for them to just sit in the UK in a basement waiting for someone like me to come along... it's very disheartening and it made me really angry. If those items were in South Africa, they would have a much, much bigger impact and a strong cultural significance for a lot of people.

is You use hardly any text in the book and in the exhibition. Why that decision?

GMW

The lack of captions and explanations in the work is because of a wider relationship of text and photography and my personal relationship to photography, especially photography in relation to photographing South Africa, the black body, black experience, and so on. So when you look at archives and archival material, you have this for real, especially in Victorian, colonial archives like the British Empire Collection I was working with. There is this rigid and really thorough documentation of other cultures. Everything is documented and explained. People would use photographs of people in their normal day-to-day lives and be like, "That tribesman practices like this." And it was the objectification of people and their practices as something which was alien. We don't realize how photography played such an instrumental role in the world that we have today. It is at the conception of racism and the system which so many people are still being oppressed by. And we don't talk about it, but we should be really conscious of the future archive that we're building.

My work was never meant to be a guidebook for people to understand South Africa. And I've noticed it

myself when I've spoken with some of my non-white photography students, they are so used to functioning within a space where they have to explain everything as I did myself in the past. I felt like I was separating myself from the work and having to frame it in a prism which was palatable for people in the West. And I felt like I was objectifying my own culture through trying to even think of captions and stuff like that. I guess that's why there's no text in the book, just out of a tiredness.

is How do you position yourself as an image-maker. Do you see yourself as an activist?

GMW

I do see myself as a photographer. I like the fact that photography is a trade and it's a skill that you have to learn. The question of activism is interesting, because I think when your existence is inherently political, you have no choice but to be an activist in how you work. I have never actively called myself an activist. I know that I am one, I'm sure, to a lot of people. I think everyone should be an activist in their own way. A lot of my activism is through my education and through how I teach. The biggest impact I can have on future image-makers is to be an activist in how I teach and how I disseminate my own work, how accessible my work is, to make it more inclusive, creating an open space for people to make work and talk freely, and a space where non-white students can feel like they are represented in some way.

This conversation took place on May 31, 2021.

Who Are We Speaking With?

*com/exhibition-enter, or:  
Photographic Shows Gone 🌐*

## SHIFT

The shift in curatorial practices from an object- and material-oriented paradigm to a process- and immaterial-oriented one began some time ago. Starting in the 1960s, an exhibition, formerly a core means for the mediation of art, freed the (physical and conceptual) space for the curatorial<sup>1</sup> to express itself through communicative situations. The arts' educational turn in the 1990s sharpened the articulation of new curatorial values, namely: the interest in knowledge production within temporary and discursive modes of be-coming-together<sup>2</sup>; and the ephemeral, non-hierarchical, and participatory nature of such events. Paul O'Neill suggested the metaphor of a constellation to describe this state: the discursive aspects of curatorial work are equal to the event of staging exhibitions. The latter does not get excluded from the curatorial praxis but is simply one of its many productive forms.<sup>3</sup> The author defines the constellation of such forms as an "ever-shifting and dynamic cluster of changing elements."<sup>4</sup> By the time the COVID-19 pandemic exploded in 2020, such curatorial acts had established themselves as fragmented eventualized particles.<sup>5</sup> Amongst them, digital expressions had gradually emerged, and the future of artistic mediation was eventually seen as hybrid, where the physical and digital curatorial segments would constitute a unified experience and be equally relevant.<sup>6</sup>

1

The "curatorial" is a term in its own right. Curatorial is as connected with "curating" as it is opposed to it. While curating means professional practices and skills that have to do with setting up exhibitions and other modes of display, the curatorial marks the events of knowledge and reflective processes that explore what happens with curating. See: Jean-Paul Martinon and Irit Rogoff, "Preface," *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed. Jean-Paul Martinon (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). The goal of curating is to define. The goal of the curatorial is to redefine and disrupt existing narratives. Curating accentuates the final product whereas the curatorial focuses on process. See: Beatrice von Bismarck and Irit Rogoff, "Curating/Curatorial," *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski (Sternberg Press, 2014). Throughout this chapter, I consistently use the word "curatorial," which for me translates as: the field of diverse forms of thought productions, (micro)practices, and events that make the curator, as well

as participating artists and the audience, understand what is represented at the level of "curating."

2

The idea of "be-coming-together" through curatorial events is borrowed from Dimitrina Sevova and Alan Roth, "The Artist as The Curator as The Artist (The Art of Curating or How about a Paracuratorial Turn?)," materials.corner-college.com/2016/pdf/the-artist-as-the-curator-concept.pdf [all URLs accessed January 16, 2022].

3

O'Neill proposed the concept of a "constellation" as an alternative to "paracuratorial," which had been actively discussed in the 2010s. Paracuratorial was meant to describe an "intertwining net of activities as well as diverse modes of operation and conversation based on more occasional, temporary alliances of artists, curators, and the public," which has gradually moved to the forefront to become counterpart to an exhibition (Livia Páldi, "Notes on the Paracuratorial," *The Exhibitionist* 4 [2011], 71–72). While the intention of the term was to establish the equivalence of

such activities to shows, the prefix "para-" implied their auxiliary nature and sustained the dualism of the center (exhibition) and periphery, reinforcing the disregarded borders (to paraphrase Emily Pethick, "The Dog that Barked at the Elephant in the Room," *ibid.*, 77–82).

4

Paul O'Neill, "The Curatorial Constellation and the Paracuratorial Paradox," *The Exhibitionist* 6 (2012), 57.

5

Those curatorial practices can take various shapes: study rooms, screening lounges, research stations, archives' interventions, residencies, performances, salons, symposia, radio and TV shows, podcasts, interview marathons, readings, roundtable discussions, working in the public space, slow forms of collective production, dinners, drive-through or walk-through experiences, printed matter, editions, zines, (printable) PDFs, online (interactive) events, behind-the-scenes digital studio visits, long-form editorial content, gaming and AR experiences, contributions to digital heritage, online engagement campaigns, etc.

Pandemic regulations and lockdown regimens<sup>7</sup> made physical public events unrealizable in the countries with stricter regulations,<sup>8</sup> instantly shifting the dynamics within curatorial practice. The curatorial body was abruptly deprived of the physical exhibition—one of its grandest gestures, even if equal amongst others.

The general balance of curatorial manifestations has been disrupted as well. There used to be a choice where to land an event: in a physical, digital, or hybrid combined space. Depending on the nature of a project, it would gravitate toward one of those options. The digital space was used for either digital-born projects or for curation-related and communication-related activities. The majority of other forms, while having the choice, more often than not continued to opt for the physical option. However, the pandemic reality forced nearly all curatorial expressions to transfer to the digital. Even those that could potentially stay in the physical, like printed matter or outdoor events, became limited in their possibilities: book fairs had to go online; and events or installations in the open would not automatically be permitted by the authorities.<sup>9</sup> The digital was no longer merely a curatorial foothold. It became the main road.<sup>10</sup>

6

Cf. the concepts of a "distributed museum" (Nancy Proctor, "The Museum as Distributed Network," 2010) and a "multi-platform museum" or "museum ecosystem" (Kajsa Hartig, "Stepping Out of the Comfort Zone to Re-imagine the Museum Experience," 2012).

7

This text was written in the Netherlands during one of the lockdown periods that began on December 15, 2020 and continued until July 5, 2021, when museums could once again open their doors.

8

How global or local the changes within the system of curatorial practices are, and how jurisdictional official pandemic regulations, are questions that require further research. This chapter does not intend to make universal conclusions. It is rooted in the observations of, primarily, Western European cultural institutions—those of the area where I am based and where I work. Participants of the events organized by those institutions are, however, often international.

9

At least this was the case in Utrecht, where FOTODOK submitted a request for a permit for an installation, *When Summer Became Winter* by Yara Jimmink, in Domplein, the city's central square. We were informed that no permits for events or objects containing information were being granted until further governmental notice. The request for the permit was pending from October 19, 2020 through to the submission of this text at the end of June 2021. Eventually we had to change the plan, as there was no clear resolution in sight.

10

One might ask if the concept of the constellation, with its egalitarian foundation, would still work in the case of such a radical change. I would claim that it would. This shift will allow new forms of the curatorial to appear. On the one hand, web-related practices will develop at high speed, and on the other, physical events will be reevaluated and turned into more exclusive, intimate, and perhaps more prized experiences. The multiplicity of curatorial expressions would still be there,

but with new elements entering the field, some leaving it, and the overall power dynamics shifting within existing ones.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC FIELD

How have the transformations described above affected the curatorial within photography? And more specifically, within the realm of exhibition suddenly attempting to translate itself to the digital. What are some examples of this transition? And what kind of curatorial dilemmas have they presented?

Beginning in March 2020 and through until the writing of this text more than a year later, there has been a boom in discursive events in the photographic world. Some of us might even already be experiencing fatigue with the overwhelming tide of online talks streaming from all around the world. It is a different story when it comes to “digital exhibitions,” of which there have been far fewer, especially if one focuses solely on projects that call themselves or are communicated as “exhibitions,” and excludes platforms that, while they might come to mind during discussions on digital exhibitions, do not announce themselves as such (e.g. individual artists’ experimental websites and web documentaries). I analyzed more than fifty digital photographic exhibitions created between 2020 and the first part of 2021. The rather limited number of digital exhibition productions I came across, as compared to the abundance of conversational online forms, became immediately apparent.

The approaches to such exhibitions are also not as diverse as the (illusory) free and borderless online universe might suggest the potential for. They can be summarized as: 360° (photo)graphic representations of real/imaginary spaces; websites with editorial content; or a combination of the two.

Digital exhibitions either mirror existing physical shows or introduce unique digital-only experiences. In the latter case, with a couple of exceptions,<sup>11</sup> those experiences remain tethered to tangible representations, replacing shows that, if not for the pandemic, would have taken place in physical venues (e.g. MoMA’s *Companion Pieces: New Photography 2020*<sup>12</sup> or the FORMAT International Photography Festival’s *FORMAT21* portal<sup>13</sup>). Out of all the presentations I looked into, only one proposed an alternative relation between the physical and the digital: *The Things I Tell You Will Not Be Wrong*, by the Scope Hannover — Biennale für Fotografie & Medienkunst, a year-long online exhibition of the work of nine artists on a rotating basis,<sup>14</sup> and a prelude to an exhibition that opened on July 15, 2021.

While I expected to discover tours that would mirror passages through physical spaces, with the experience expanded by supplemental materials, to my surprise this was not a common strategy, with one of the very few exceptions being *Susan Meiselas: Through a Woman’s Lens*, at the Milwaukee Art Museum,<sup>15</sup> which included interviews, ephemera, and historical films. In other cases, introductions and auxiliary pieces were instead shared through social media or on a web page announcing a tour.

There is a correlation between technical approaches and exhibition “types.” 360° tours are largely used for solo (Michał Iwanowski, *Go Home Polish*<sup>16</sup>) or thematic shows (tours of Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie 2020<sup>17</sup>; *L—A City Through Its People*, at Open Eye Gallery<sup>18</sup>); editorial websites for representational group shows featuring talents, artists of a certain generation or region, or artists selected through open calls (*Foam Talent | Digital* by Foam<sup>19</sup>); and a combined approach for art-historical or graduation shows (*Edith Tudor-Hart*, FOTOHOF<sup>20</sup>; *Hole Punch*, University of South Wales<sup>21</sup>).

The vocabulary for (self-)defining the variety of these displays is being developed as we watch them appear. “Online exhibition” (or “expo,” in one case) is primarily applied to websites with editorial content, “virtual exhibition” to either virtual tours or a combination of the two. “Online gallery” and “online viewing room” exist in the language of

11

One example being *The Other Side*, PHmuseum, February 2–April 26, 2021, phmuseum.com/exhibition/the-other-side.

12

*Companion Pieces: New Photography 2020*, The Museum of Modern Art (New York), September 28–November 16, 2020, moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5243.

13

“Information Centre,” *FORMAT21*, FORMAT International Photography Festival, March 12–April 11, 2021, format.newart.city/show/room-0.

14

*The Things I Tell You Will Not Be Wrong*, Scope Hannover — Biennale für Fotografie & Medienkunst, July 15–September 5, 2021, thething-sitellyou.com.

15

*Susan Meiselas: Through a Woman’s Lens*, Milwaukee Art Museum, December 4, 2020–April 11, 2021, mam.org/exhibitions/details/susan-meiselas.php.

16

Michał Iwanowski, *Go Home Polish*, CULTVR Lab, as part of *Complex States: Art in the Years of Brexit*, October 28, 2020–March 31, 2021, cultvr.cymru/go-home-polish-michal-iwanowski.

17

Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie, 2020, biennalefotografie.de.

18

*L—A City Through Its People*, Open Eye Gallery, November 5, 2020–March 7, 2021, my.matterport.com/show/?m=dxVTbS8mx4j.

19

*Foam Talent | Digital*, Foam, November 19, 2020–June 2, 2021, talent.foam.org.

20

*Edith Tudor-Hart*, FOTOHOF, April 9–December 23, 2020, fotohof.net/content.php?id=134&newsdetail=579.

21

*Hole Punch*, University of South Wales, photography graduate show, 2020, uswbaphotography.com.

commercial galleries, but in essence they represent the same approaches. “Virtual tour” is often used instead of “virtual exhibition” in cases when an institution emphasizes that the production has a status of the documentation or representation of an exhibition (FOTODOK’s *Pass It On. Private Stories, Public Histories*<sup>22</sup>). “Digital exhibition” appears once, in the press release for *Foam Talent | Digital*, outside of the platform itself. The Futures Digital Festival’s *RESET* edition<sup>23</sup> announced itself as an “online exhibition” in communication materials only.

### NAME/NO NAME

Leaving self-identification outside of the platform’s “frame” speaks, first of all, to the fusing of the exhibition and communication surrounding it. The exhibition’s URL has to be introduced and mediated through the organization’s website and social media channels. This poses certain questions: Where do communication materials stop and an exhibition begin? Can a digital exhibition be self-sufficient in the way it appears to the world? Is this a symptom of the ongoing annexation of the curatorial by marketing?

Secondly, the absence of self-identification of digital platforms signals that newly emerging formats resist direct association with the notion of an “exhibition.” The word, with all its connotations, might limit the freedom to experiment. While an event’s branding demands definitiveness and a connection with the audience’s existing knowledge, the curatorial demands the opposite: the refusal to adhere to old labels, the need to unlearn what we have learned so far, and to be open to new developments and, thus, a new lexicon.

The continued attachment of the majority of online presentations to the word “exhibition” can, however, be explained not just by perceived communication requirements. To label a digital platform an “exhibition” means to follow the logic of seeing this platform as a “replacement” for a show that would otherwise have taken place in a physical space or with access limited by pandemic regulations. So far, photographic digital exhibitions have predominantly fallen under one of these categories. With the possible further appearance of independent online-specific curatorial presentations, the word “exhibition” might gradually feel more and more atavistic.

Kajsa Hartig brought up another important point in “Museums in the Digital Space — Some Reflections on Online Exhibitions,” in which she quotes Aron Ambrosiani: “[...] we ended up with ‘digital exhibitions’ because on our physical sites, the exhibitions are at the core, surrounded by supporting areas like entrances, shops, restaurants etc. So we mean ‘core content’ rather than their physical manifestation.”<sup>24</sup> To call something an “exhibition” then is to elevate what is being shown and to attempt to endow it with an essential value.

### ART/CONTEXT

A photographic digital exhibition thus wants to manifest itself as the “core content” space, in opposition to the contextualized route via which a viewer enters and sees it, and, additionally, to other online photography presentations. There is a dissonance between its intention and its nature. The very content that is supposed to be emphasized as artworks is indistinguishable from the context in which it is embedded. Both are introduced through the same means of the screen, and often share the same window or page. Online exhibitions, similar to long-form editorial sites, locate on the same plane the artworks, captions, blurbs, introductory audio or video, and external links. Even with the most creative interfaces, one does not differentiate between art and information about it. The virtual exhibitions (tours) mimic a physical space, within which a visitor typically experiences artworks first in terms of their scale and location in the space, as compared to the scale and location of contextualizing materials. Tours twist that hierarchy, with hotspots or “teleportation” icons being as present as works, at a minimum, and even sometimes dominating the site. The merging of art,

<sup>22</sup>  
*Pass It On. Private Stories, Public Histories*, FOTODOK, November 27, 2020–February 28, 2021, [fotodok.org/en/virtual-presence](http://fotodok.org/en/virtual-presence).

<sup>23</sup>  
*RESET*, Futures Digital Festival, October 8–31, 2020, [reset.futures-photography.com](http://reset.futures-photography.com).

<sup>24</sup>  
Aron Ambrosiani quoted in: Kajsa Hartig “Museums in the Digital Space — Some Reflections on Online Exhibitions,” *Medium* (June 3, 2019), [ajshartig.medium.com/museums-in-the-digital-space-some-reflections-on-online-exhibitions-758a24ca50c4](https://ajshartig.medium.com/museums-in-the-digital-space-some-reflections-on-online-exhibitions-758a24ca50c4).



X



com/exhibition-enter

metadata, and navigation tools impacts perception: instead of emotionally and intellectually experiencing works, a viewer is merely finding out about their existence. A transformative encounter with an artwork is displaced by an event of discovering projects, that is supposed to in turn trigger clicking on associated links, relocating a user to the next information piece: “more here.” As Olia Lialina once pointed out, online galleries and exhibitions—collections of links, as she calls them—“only store facts and demonstrate that a phenomenon exists.”<sup>25</sup> In a broader sense, as noted by Boris Groys, “The Internet [is] a medium of information—but information is always information about something.”<sup>26</sup> What phenomenon does a photographic digital exhibition demonstrate the existence of? What exactly does it provide information about?

Supporting materials (texts, links, audio and video introductions, etc.) lead to the figure of an artist and the idea that somewhere beyond the resource there is a “project”—a larger corpus of pictures. Photographic images, on the other hand, cannot refer to something external. Photography is in constant flux, floating between a negative, a print, an object, a slide projection, a TIFF in an archive, a JPEG online, and dozens of other forms, none of which can necessarily be called an “original.” It adapts to every new context. Presented at a digital exhibition, a photograph loops back only to itself, ontologically speaking; and more specifically, to its own visual plane, alienated from everything else that might constitute it as an artwork. Data and mechanisms behind the image’s digitality are hidden from a viewer’s eye. A “visitor” is left to consume a “story” radiating through the picture plane, made transparent by the interface. They are deprived of an entry point for understanding the functioning of this story’s carrier. Their view is instantly directed toward the representation.

To encounter photographic images at a digital exhibition as artworks, and not as visual anecdotes afloat in zero gravity, equivalent in their nature to all other screen images, the curatorial practice must shift toward exposing the limits of representation, revealing the apparatus of the images it displays. Even so, that will not be the full solution for photographic digital exhibitions to be considered as presenting “core content,” for the question will remain: How can the dilemma of the merger between works and context be approached?

### HESITATION/USER FRIENDLINESS

Concealing the presentation’s conditions goes hand in hand with an expectation of “user friendliness” that the audience has from visiting a (photographic) digital exhibition. At a physical site, a set of spoken and unspoken rules applies, and individuals act according to the established *habitus*: following or not following prescribed routes, crossing or not crossing lines, touching or not touching objects, reducing the voice’s volume, etc. On an online site, “visitors” are, in fact, “users” that operate on the basis of behaviors ingrained by online interactions. In the case of the photographic medium, it comes from, on the one hand, the everyday life experience of creating, viewing, and sharing an endless stream of networked images; and on the other, from interacting with interfaces consciously designed to be “user friendly.” Acquired behavioral habits include surface attention to the flow of images and expectations of quick access to further information and the ability to move intuitively through a “clean” environment that requires minimal usage explanation.

The absurdity of the focus on user friendliness in relation to art is best summarized by Steve Dietz in “Interfacing the Digital”: “Try telling Matthew Barney, he should be more user friendly.”<sup>27</sup> Artworks, including photographic ones, generally resist being framed as clear, straightforward messages, as they suppose multiple layers of meaning that one needs to interpret in an act of highly individualized speculative reading. The goal of the curatorial is to carefully stage the space of deep attention, hesitation, doubt, complexity, and even uncomfortableness. The curatorial (ex)poses questions about the works of art, about the space where these works are displayed, and about the curatorial approach itself. Can a digital exhibition in this case be an exhibition, or even a form of curatorial expression at all?

<sup>25</sup>  
Olia Lialina, “CHEAP.ART,” *subsol.c3.hu/subsol\_2/contributors3/lialinatext.html*; originally posted January 19, 1998, [nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-I-9801/msg00037.html](http://nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-I-9801/msg00037.html).

<sup>26</sup>  
Boris Groys, “Art on the Internet,” *In the Flow* (London: Verso, 2016), 173.

<sup>27</sup>  
Steve Dietz, “Interfacing the Digital,” *Museums and the Web 2003* (March 2004), [archimuse.com/mw2003/papers/dietz/dietz.html](http://archimuse.com/mw2003/papers/dietz/dietz.html).

Physical exhibitions have a number of strategies for being self-reflective regarding the spaces they occupy. They initiate site-specific projects, introduce a critical take on the past of historical buildings, show works that disturb and challenge the “neutrality” of white cubes, and so on. Online exhibitions often present themselves as if they were outside of the category of spatiality. They pop up on an abstract background, perhaps in an attempt to skirt the discourse about the digital as a space with its own problematic history, economy, ecology, gender and racial biases, and the actual physical spaces looming behind it. Be they bright monochromatic colors or non-concrete landscape views, the worlds where photographic online exhibitions are built function as blinds covering the void of understanding what a photographic digital exhibition space is, and how to problematize it within itself. The basis for developing such an understanding could be, in the words of Andrew Dewdney, introducing “interfaces which make their own logic visible and networks of circulation which reveal the agency of networks.”<sup>28</sup>

In his essay “Curating in the Post-Internet Age,” Boris Groys proposed distinguishing between exhibitions and presentations:

[Exhibitions] reveal their *Gestell*—the way in which their framings operate. This is where the exhibition begins to be understood not as a pure act of presenting, but as the presentation of presenting, a revelation of its own strategy of framing. In other words, the exhibition does not only present certain images to our gaze, but also demonstrates the technology of presenting, the apparatus and structure of framing, and the mode in which our gaze is determined, oriented, and manipulated by this technology. When we visit an exhibition, we do not only look at the exhibited images and objects, but also reflect on the spatial and temporal relationships between them—the hierarchies, curatorial choices, and strategies that produced the exhibition, and so forth. The exhibition exhibits itself before it exhibits anything else. It exhibits its own technology and its own ideology.<sup>29</sup>

In this sense, photographic digital exhibitions can at this point be considered pure acts of presenting rather than curatorial gestures of exhibiting. To change that, we can ask ourselves: How can we address and reveal the space of the digital and the technology of presenting within such projects? Can we change our acquired online behaviors in relation to our interaction with digital shows? And can those habits otherwise be the foundation for advancing curatorial practices—an arena for hesitation and meta reflection—instead of forms of curation like filtering or the production of cultural context?

### INTERACTIVE/STATIC

The heart of the digital exhibition is interactivity. At photographic digital exhibitions this manifests through: clicking on an object or an image for information (encountered nine times in my research); leaving feedback in guestbooks (four times); downloading files, educational kits, or printable posters (three times); donating (two times); voting (one time). A user is familiar with a much broader scope of interactive possibilities through daily encounters with social networks, many-to-many transmission of information of all sorts, discussion zones (forums, chats), community-building experiences, gaming, VR and AR, NFTs, and the ability to contribute to or impact a presentation, alter the characteristics of objects, hold or own them, etc. Photographic digital exhibitions have a rich palette to explore.

In “What Can Curators Learn From Coders?,” Aron Ambrosiani compares curators, who are accustomed to building something behind the scenes prior to launching it, to coders, who launch, build, and repeat, which means that their process is in the open, affording audiences the opportunity to see and test unfinished projects. The web pages require continuous attention, while the web exhibitions that Ambrosiani examines are “static products, permanent presentations” that often happen to be “the exhibition catalogue, with added multimedia.” He sees a solution in “revising ‘finished’ exhibitions, to continue to edit them, let visitor

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Dewdney, “Zombie Photography: Or, The Long Afterlife of the Analogue Image,” conference keynote presentation (May 2014), [openresearch.lsbu.ac.uk/download/145dc25a686a1dd8a16f121fb867214e2244329417e3831ea3e09795271c08a8/149648/Zombie%20Photography.pdf](https://openresearch.lsbu.ac.uk/download/145dc25a686a1dd8a16f121fb867214e2244329417e3831ea3e09795271c08a8/149648/Zombie%20Photography.pdf), 11.

<sup>29</sup> Boris Groys, “Curating in the Post-Internet Age,” *e-flux* 94 (October 2018), [e-flux.com/journal/94/219462/curating-in-the-post-internet-age](https://e-flux.com/journal/94/219462/curating-in-the-post-internet-age).

interactions become part of the exhibition,” and to shift from broadcasting to dialogue.<sup>30</sup> The curatorial in this case can be intertwined with collective knowledge production and the conscious display of incompleteness. While this might be a way to go, it could still be a long way. As much as photographic digital exhibitions are uncertain about their spatiality (or lack of), they are equally about time, and, connected to this, the notion of exposing the processual. Although they typically have a specific launch moment, their development over time and their eventual ending are neither announced nor, in all likelihood, even conceptualized. Are these exhibitions permanent or temporary? What expectations are there for their duration? What is the plan for archiving them? Is there a connection to a physical show which the digital coincides with, follows up on, or precludes? And, in the first place and behind all these possibilities: “Why?”

To create interactive platforms en masse would be possible only with different economical structures in place. Design, programming, production and editing of materials, communication with users, and technical support are costly even for a one-time digital event. If we try to reach the ever-changing state of a digital exhibition (one that supposes continuity and a delaying of its finale), budgets promptly burst. The funding system upon which the majority of photographic events rely operates on the basis of allocating resources to projects that have a specific duration with a finite ending. The step into the digital future of the curatorial thus largely depends on new financial models being established, and for existing models to be adjusted so that digital shows are seen as equally worthwhile as physical ones. The curatorial dilemma then becomes: How to produce digital exhibitions in a way that they make sense *as digital* (being interactive and processual by nature) while the financial structures to support them still lag behind?

### ENTER

The introduced dilemmas of distinguishing art from context, creating interactive spaces of hesitation rather than spaces of static user friendliness, and questioning lexicons, are just a few matters to consider when building a photographic online space.<sup>31</sup> Whether or not there is a “return to normal” in life in general and the cultural sector in particular, the curatorial toolkit is being updated. As we “enter” the epoch of the development of digital photographic exhibitions, I hope that the professional community will also enter into an ongoing dialogue about them, step by step defining their potential.

30

Aron Ambrosiani, “What Can Curators Learn From Coders?” (May 6, 2012), aron.ambrosiani.se/2012/05/06/what-can-curators-learn-from-coders.

31

Jamila Prowse, for example, has addressed the necessity of constructing digital exhibitions so that they are accessible to disabled communities and not only to able-bodied and neurotypical viewers. To achieve this, audio versions of written texts, sign language interpreters for talks, subtitling, and more can be incorporated into the creation of inclusive digital spaces. Jamila Prowse, “The Future of Art Spaces: How Accessible Is the Virtual Space?”, *British Journal of Photography* (June 17, 2021), 1854.photography/2021/06/the-future-of-art-spaces-how-accessible-is-the-virtual-space.

*The Appropriateness of Images:  
Exhibiting Image Appropriations after Deepfakes*

### Picture This

In 2014, Richard Prince debuted his *New Portraits* series at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, presenting thirty-eight blown-up printed cut-outs of Instagram images taken from existing profiles, the majority originally posted by women. The artworks later sold for as much as \$100,000 at that year's Frieze Art Fair, rekindling a long-running debate on value and authorship in the arts. The exhibition, set amid a hyped selfie-based culture fueled by a relatively new Instagram frenzy, provoked a series of conflicting remarks: from Prince's series being pure genius to it representing a superficial male-gazed criticality of contemporary image culture.

Prince is well known for his photographic appropriations, and in particular for his 1989 *Untitled (Cowboy)* series in which he rephotographed images from Marlboro cigarette advertisements of the late 1970s. The 1970s and 1980s were emblematic in terms of image appropriation, with artists such as Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, and Louise Lawler turning toward the reuse of photographic images as a means for commenting on contemporary culture and values. It was a time when questions related to authorship and representation were at the focal point of debates within the Western art world. Curators and art historians such as Douglas Crimp addressed how images and appropriation had become central elements in the art-making of the time. Crimp's 1979 exhibition *Pictures*, at Artists Space in New York, helped delineate the appropriation art of the period, later categorized as the "Picture Generation."<sup>1</sup>

The Picture Generation would reverberate further in serving as key references in a continuous dialogue with the appropriationists who followed. Sherrie Levine's 1979 rephotographs of Walker Evans' iconic Farm Security Administration (FSA) images from the 1930s, for example, have been recurrently re-appropriated themselves. While Levine's approach questioned ideals of originality and power relations in the arts, more recent appropriations by artists such as Michael Mandiberg (2001) and Hermann Zschiegner (2011) expanded the debate toward the challenges of digital image production and distribution at the turn of the twenty-first century. By digitally scanning Levine's and Evans' work and making it available as downloadable content signed as "digital originals" (Mandiberg), or by exhibiting printed

1

A category of artists including: John Baldessari, Ericka Beckman, Dara Birnbaum, Barbara Bloom, Eric Bogosian, Glenn Branca, Troy Brauntuch, James Casebere, Sarah Charlesworth, Rhys Chatham, Charles Clough, Nancy Dwyer, Jack Goldstein, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Thomas Lawson, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Allan McCollum, Paul McMahon, MICA-TV (Carole Ann Klonarides and Michael Owen), Matt Mullican, Richard Prince, David Salle, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Michael Smith, James Welling, and Michael Zwack, as later grouped by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York for its 2009 survey exhibition *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984*.

image reproductions of Google search results for "walker evans" and "sherrie levine" (Zschiegner), these appropriations became less about authorship, copyrights, and originality (although such considerations are still very much present), and more about the ubiquity of the digital image in contemporary society and how it became largely interchangeable, malleable, and accessible online.

Richard Prince's *New Portraits*—which resurfaced, in June 2020, at the Gagosian, albeit to less critical acclaim—followed this discursive shift in image appropriation, now centered on user-generated photographic content circulating on social media platforms. However, by exhibiting those Instagram photos and their user profiles, Prince set another precedent which entered into the general discussion. On the occasion of the 2014 Gagosian exhibition, Selena Mooney, the founder of SuicideGirls, an adult-content website branded under the premise of being curated by women, counterattacked by rephotographing Prince's pieces of her own images and putting them on the market for 99.9% off Prince's selling price, thereby taking a stand against the appropriation and monetization of "[...] self-portraits, of young women in various states of undress" by an "older white male."<sup>2</sup>

The issue was not about appropriation as an affront to authorship, originality, or copyright. Mooney and others were rather more concerned about the use and exposure of their bodies and their personal profiles in a different context from what they initially intended and without their consent. "SuicideGirls is about [...] how she [the model] wants to be presented to the world and how she curates her own image, so to have a guy [Prince] grab the images and claim them as his own [...] is such a violation."<sup>3</sup> In this sense, Prince's exhibition failed as a critical pursuit toward cultural archetypes à la Marlboro Man, but succeeded in unraveling an underlying concern toward image production and exhibition embodied within social media platforms, where a profile and its pictures are not merely copyrighted content but, arguably, the extension of one's self in its digital form.<sup>4</sup>

2

Hannah Jane Parkinson, "Instagram, An Artist and the \$100,000 Selfies – Appropriation in the Digital Age," *The Guardian* (July 18, 2015), [theguardian.com/technology/2015/jul/18/instagram-artist-richard-prince-selfies](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jul/18/instagram-artist-richard-prince-selfies) [all URLs accessed January 7, 2022].

3

Ibid.

4

Suvi Lehtinen has highlighted this intricate relationship between image appropriation at the turn of the twenty-first century, selfie culture as a form of "identity formation through snapshots," and artists questioning identity matters within Instagram. See: Suvi Lehtinen, "From Pro Surfer to #usermilitia," in *Why Exhibit? Positions on Exhibiting Photographies*, eds. Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger and Iris Sikking (Amsterdam: Fw:Books, 2018), 57–66.

*Appropriation, Image Data, and Deepfakes*

The critical discourse around the use of the images of others—especially in terms of exposure of human bodies and identities—has become ever more pressing today as we find ourselves in the aftermath of a series of world-impact events and technological developments including: the use of automated image capture by initiatives such as Google Street View, as well as machine vision and data analysis scandals related to mass surveillance and data privacy abuses, such as those exposed, in 2013, by the NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, and the years-spanning Facebook–Cambridge Analytica case. These events gained widespread public attention, sparking concerns regarding the relationship between governmental tactics, large profitable enterprises, and technological research and development that rely on methods such as human body-scanning and facial recognition. The growing popularization of these technologies raised further questions about their access and use beyond regulated governmental, corporate, and research initiatives.

Deepfakes are perhaps most emblematic of this current critical context, both as a technique representative of such advancements and accessibility and as a practice that is largely fed by our photo-based, network-sharing culture. Despite longstanding developments related to deep learning and machine vision within the realm of computational sciences, deepfakes have gained notoriety in the form of fake videos in which the face of an individual is “swapped” with that of another. Deepfakes are commonly associated with cases of ersatz celebrity pornographic videos and so-called revenge porn.

One of the major issues associated with deepfakes is the use of individual personal data (i.e. any information by which an individual can be identified) for the creation of digital contents without their knowledge or consent, which has also brought up discussions regarding the potential use of deepfakes for child pornography, as well as for the generation of disinformation (fake news) and political hoaxes. This general concern regarding identity rights and data privacy were heightened, in 2017, with the release of more accessible software that made it relatively easier for users to produce their own deepfakes—a development which led to a ban on deepfakes on various social media platforms the follow-



suicidegirls

20h



👤 Based on people you follow

❤️ 24991 likes

**bigtimo123** I like her tounge

**kashimmi** @kalypsoskitz basically 😏 she's obviously my purrfect sister from another mister! 🐾👍

**richardprince1234** Private Lives, mind if I sneeze on  
**suicidegirls** true art

A screenshot of Selena Mooney's image from the SuicideGirls Instagram account

ing year. Notably, Reddit has taken a firmer stance against what it terms “impersonation” by adopting a ban on content that “impersonates individuals or entities in a misleading or deceptive manner.”<sup>5</sup> Other platforms have followed suit. Thus, the appropriation and circulation of personal data, especially image-based data, have not only become major societal concerns but, as a result, have had a significant impact on the policymaking around digital content creation.

The debate on identity rights and data privacy goes beyond deepfakes and extends toward the generalized use of image-based, user-generated, and crowdsourced content as data for machine learning (ML) training. The issue here lies in not always knowing or having explicitly stated the source and liabilities related to such training data. Facial-recognition software, for example, relies on existing human portraits for data-training models, which are often acquired through third-party data-service providers. The data collected can be crowdsourced or even retrieved from social media contents via API access. Once obtained, the initial providers of such portraits have no further control over the use and applications of their facial-image data. In this context, the digital representations of human bodies are then fragmented into bits and pieces to be scrutinized by an algorithm—a process with historical parallels ranging from Alphonse Bertillon’s archival system for criminal identification to Francis Galton’s composite portraiture in the late nineteenth century.

However, today’s facial recognition mechanisms go beyond standard mass surveillance and identification software. Facial recognition through machine learning is also embedded in the face-altering filters of common apps for image manipulation and sharing. Here, the digital body is once again scanned and fragmented into algorithmically identifiable parts which, when turned into data, can be altered and reshaped. The overwhelming quantity of the images of others, rapidly circulating and widely accessible, not only serves as training data for such applications but is an important by-product. Present-day image appropriation is less about the gesture of an artist as an authoritative figure who seizes existing images and re-contextualizes them; instead, image appropriation has turned its frame toward those fragmented digital bodies, transforming them into data to be analyzed, reconfigured, and exported again. It has shifted beyond the gesture of an artist to become an everyday practice.

<sup>5</sup> Reddit, “Do Not Impersonate an Individual or Entity,” Reddit “Rules & Reporting” (2021), [reddithelp.com/hc/en-us/articles/360043075032](https://reddithelp.com/hc/en-us/articles/360043075032).

In this sense, Richard Prince’s Instagram appropriations could not have been exhibited during a more turbulent period. And having been presented in this context, community backlash against the series was justified given how it failed to attune itself to current concerns in image politics and ethics. The current context, in contrast, has shifted image appropriation toward a more critical tone within exhibition spaces—a tone which questions the indiscriminate use of individual personal data, largely by third-party, profit-driven enterprises. Exhibitions such as Ars Electronica’s *AI: The Other I* (2017) and *The Glass Room* (2016–2020) by Tactical Tech, among others, have questioned the ethics and permissibility of such practices. Artworks such as *MegaPixels* (2017) and *Exposing.ai* (2021) by Adam Harvey and Jules LaPlace have also attempted to expose how training datasets used for biometric data-analysis applications make use of appropriated user-generated images, especially ones taken from social media platforms.

Although these artworks and exhibitions bring to public attention the pervasiveness of machine learning, automated vision, and data analysis while addressing matters of image appropriation in our current data-driven world, they face the conundrum of making use of, and explicitly showing, the very images exploited by the practice they set out to denounce. Beyond the allure of the potential for society and the arts of new technological applications, artists, curators, and art institutions are now drawn to reconsider the appropriateness of the content they exhibit. And while appropriation art has always been a provocative and unapologetic gesture of seizure (which may lead to legal disputes over copyright and authorship, though artists like Prince have prevailed under fair use doctrine), artists are now confronted with heightened societal concerns and shifts in legislation. For example, the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), adopted in 2016, has served worldwide as a model for setting standards for consent when it comes to the processing of personal data. Among other provisions, the regulation provides safeguards for collected user content, and requires declarations of purpose of use from the data controller, including the disclosure of third-party access. Use of collected content is thereafter bound to the initial declared purpose—a stipulation that limits subsequent re-appropriations in a way



A tableau by Adam Harvey and Jules LaPlace for *Exposing.ai* (2021) composed of 408 of 4,753,520 images taken from the face recognition training and benchmarking dataset MegaFace. The faces were blurred out by the artists to protect privacy. Visualization by Adam Harvey, available at: [exposing.ai/megaface](https://exposing.ai/megaface); *Exposing.ai* is licensed under CC-BY-NC with original images licensed and attributed under Creative Commons CC-BY

that has significant ramifications for both those developing the tools and those repurposing the data. Such shifts in societal discourse, along with the implementation of legislative measures, presents a new set of challenges to artists, curators, and art institutions, and raises a host of questions including: How is one to expose the exposed? And should the images of others ever be exhibited at all?

### *Exhibiting (Digital) Human Remains*

There are interesting parallels between this question of the appropriateness of exhibiting the images of others, especially in regards to the exposure of human bodies and identities, and previous debates about museum ethics. The issues that arise with the fragmented-image-turned-data—initially collected and scrutinized by algorithms and later exhibited for public viewing—echo some of the ethical concerns earlier weighed by museum curators, anthropologists, and ethnographers regarding the use and exhibition of human remains. A comparison between these two scenarios, even if they concern intrinsically different material (the material remains of the dead as opposed to digital remains, i.e. dispersed and traceable data of human bodies and identities) can provide digital artists, curators, and art institutions valuable points to consider when exhibiting artworks or making use of tools which require the exposure of individual personal data.

Previous discussions in museum ethics intensified in the late twentieth century as museums and curators reassessed the ethical implications of their collections amid heated debates on repatriation, reburial, and restitution of unprovenanced or looted assets. Opinions are divided. As Alberti et al. have neatly delineated,<sup>6</sup> the use and exhibition of human remains in the arts is justified, on the one hand, by their educational purpose and importance to the development of science. The remains are seen as vital sources of information and, as such, the study, preservation, and accessibility of such material is therefore fundamental to society. In addition, the exposure of the bodies of others has further sociocultural significance, allowing visitors to experience a unique encounter with the dead and with the fragmented body. The visitor is then provided with the otherwise unattainable knowledge provided by access to the historical, scientific, and cultural richness embodied in human matter. On the other hand, human

6

Samuel Alberti, Piotr Bienkowski, Malcolm J. Chapman, and Rose Drew, "Should We Display the Dead?", *Museum and Society* 7.3 (2009), 133–149.

remains have been treated as objects for public contemplation and entertainment, with the personal and the private being subverted to the need for collective experience and knowledge. The experience gained from the encounter with the dead and the fragmented body may be unique, but the modes in which it is presented, and the claims for the necessity of its exposure, can be questioned, especially when there are more considerate approaches.

Similarly, in the case of digital human remains, the use of image-based individual personal data can often be seen as an inherent digital practice and a necessary means for enhancing public knowledge and awareness. The exhibition of this material can be defended as a way to promote the need for further research and development of new methods and technologies for art and science. The field may then align its practices with other fields to promote and develop new practices and technologies.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, artistic experiments that make use of such material can expand the applicability of new technologies and methods in art and society in general. However, these artistic experiments and scientific developments come with a cost: the use and exposure of the bodies and identities of others. Public exhibition of such material for knowledge, entertainment, or any other motive is achieved in a way that conflicts with, or is detrimental to, matters of privacy and identity. And while some may justify the appropriation of such contents by artists, curators, and art institutions as a reflection of the present paradigm of "equal participants,"<sup>8</sup> that does not relieve us of the need for accountability. The conundrum we face is precisely the fact that we are as much a part of the problem as we are critical of it.

Dissonances notwithstanding, there is a general consensus regarding the use and exhibition of human remains which we can here extend to their digital equivalent. For art institutions specifically, there is a need for consistency in approaches, adhering to guidelines, institutional policies, and codes of ethics. Principles of good practices include the need to consider: the interests and beliefs of the community from which the material is retrieved; by extension, the source of the material exposed, including critical analysis of materials of suspect origin or lacking provenance; forms of exhibiting sensitive content in a conscious and respectful manner, taking into account the public's best interest; and the accuracy and

7

As in the case of the ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe's *Open Codes* exhibition project (2017–2019), for which ZKM partnered with programmers, local universities, and other researchers. This strategy goes hand in hand with past and recent waves of collaborative and experimental practices between art and science, including the development of labs and art-tech for fostering partnerships.

8

Suvi Lehtinen, op. cit.

transparency of the information and materials presented.<sup>9</sup> We should also consider the need to constantly keep abreast of developments in governmental policymaking and legislation, and the inherently shifting nature of ethics and the societal values and discourses they are based on.

However, these general principles, when set within the context of the appropriation of individual personal data, raise and present further questions and challenges to curatorial and museum practice: Can the public and the parties involved be fully aware of the implications of these practices if legislation and institutional policies fail to follow the rapid pace of technological developments? Does data anonymization contribute to the acceptance of such appropriations within the arts? Does prior consent of use overrule the gesture of the explicit exposure of sensitive data? And moreover, what does the exhibition of such material in spite of its problematic nature say about our desire to publicly expose the bodies and identities of others?

As challenging as these questions may seem at the moment, there are significant steps the field must take in order to tackle these issues as they arise. Taking into account the aforementioned guidelines, museum practices could benefit enormously from institutions continually establishing collaborative practices not only with related fields (inserting an “A” into “STEM”), but also with local community-built endeavors such as hackerspaces and citizen-led labs where much experimentation takes place on the outskirts of governmental, corporate, and research facilities. They could also benefit from expanding their parallel activities and mediation strategies to strengthen community dialogue by, for example, implementing educational programs that focus on bringing concerns with data privacy and data sharing into public debate. And lastly, through these collaborative and community-driven practices, institutions could become more directly involved in advocacy and the shaping of policy, as many online sharing platforms have done by, for example, taking a stand in regards to deepfakes. While there are no doubt myriad questions and uncertainties yet to arise, opening up the discussion and embracing collective action can pave the way to future consensus solutions.

9  
Andromache Gazi,  
“Exhibition Ethics:  
An Overview of Major  
Issues,” *Journal of  
Conservation and  
Museum Studies* 12.1  
(2014), 1–10.

## In Conversation with Uwa Iduozee

---

*on How To Be Apolitical Is a Privilege*

Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger Your exhibition *Blind Spot(s)*, at the Finnish Museum of Photography in Helsinki,<sup>1</sup> dealt with structural racism. The photos were taken in 2020 in different parts of the United States. 2020 was an unusual year, which was recorded in history by the mainstream media not only due to the global pandemic but, in the United States in particular, also due to the presidential election, and the Black Lives Matter movement. How did your thoughts on structural racism influence your choice of photographs?

Uwa Iduozee

With the photographs I had chosen for the exhibition, I wanted to emphasize the penetrating existence of racist structures at the core of North American society. However, the collection did not rely on the way in which the media often presents the racism debate and the themes raised by the Black Lives Matter movement. I wanted to shift the focus from conflict imagery and the narrative of division to avoid the risk of simplifying structural racism. The protests led to important discussions being held, but they were only part of the change that is being sought. If the protest imagery is considered a comprehensive catalogue of the societal change we are aiming for, a false impression is created that things will immediately improve if police brutality is successfully addressed, even though it represents only the first step on a very long path.

The way in which the protests were covered by the media was also problematic. Despite the fact that an overwhelming majority of the protests were peaceful, the media was dominated by clashes with the police and the burning of cars and buildings, particularly in the summer. This further distorts the image of what the movement is aiming for, and has contributed to the movement having less support than it did in the early days of the protests. We cannot settle into the thought that things can be changed by protesting without a genuine commitment to anti-racist work. We must ask difficult questions: Which factors have led to a situation in which the police feel like they can murder Black people without consequences? What does this

<sup>1</sup>  
Uwa Iduozee, *Blind Spot(s)*, Finnish Museum of Photography, Helsinki, Finland, April 30–August 29, 2021.

mean in a wider context? Why is violence toward Black people the norm, but the first response to conflicts with white people is to resolve them peacefully? Why does it require a viral video of a Black person being murdered to give their life meaning and to bring attention to problems? In what other ways do the structures that have led to this situation affect the everyday lives of Black people?

The fact that answers to these questions are not obvious to all shows that the machinery is so well oiled that we do not even notice how fundamental the influence of structural racism is in everything that surrounds us. Visual portrayals related to the elusive forces of structural racism are linked to the viewers, with each viewer bringing their own experiences and prejudices into the exhibition space. There is no need to find signs of racist structures in each individual photograph; it is about the overall effect created by the interaction of the mundane and less mundane situations in the photographs. The combination aimed to make visible the fact that racism defines North American society at every level. My own relationship with the people in the photographs was also present, in a society in which the body and presence of a Black man is loaded with different meanings.

AKR Structural racism refers to racism as an extensive societal issue which manifests itself in discrimination in education, working life, or housing, and denies certain groups of people equal opportunities based on their skin color or other attributes that differ from the majority of the population. Structural racism is difficult to detect, however, as it hides behind seemingly neutral practices. The purpose of these practices is to maintain the prevailing power structures that exclude individuals who do not belong to the white majority. Structural racism is discrimination that is hidden in society, laws, and institutions and which produces, almost imperceptibly, racial inequality. It is often unconscious and its existence is denied because it is formed when society's norms, prejudices, and stereotypes feed off each other. How can something so prevalent yet invisible be photographed?



Uwa Iduozee, *Blind Spot(s)*, 2021. Installation view at K1, The Finnish Museum of Photography (photo: Virve Laustela)

Despite the abundance of information available on the subject, for some inexplicable reason, structural racism seems to be difficult to comprehend for many who do not have to face its consequences in everyday life. Police brutality and far-right supporters carrying torches and swastika flags are some of the ways in which it manifests, of course, but they are merely the tip of the iceberg of the effects that structures built on white supremacist ideology have on society.

In the media, they are often used to depict racism because they are easily visualized, and accepting them does not force the viewer to reflect on their own role. In the Black Lives Matter protests, police brutality was understandably the prime focus. Trauma, destruction of communities, and the atmosphere of fear caused by institutionalized violence is commonplace in many Black communities, but sadly only one dimension in a multidimensional issue. The police brutality targeted at Black people in the United States is the result of the way the police force was formed and how these same structures of the white supremacist myth have taught us to dismiss the value of a Black life. When we deal with structural racism only in the context of police brutality, we are discussing its consequences, not its reasons. Racist structures exist in all facets of society from education, healthcare, and the justice system to housing and the labor market, and the effects accumulate.

Our internalized racial prejudices against non-white bodies are some of the most multifaceted consequences of structural racism. Centuries-old images and stories, in which whiteness is centered while the bodies of Black and Brown people are dehumanized and their accomplishments and culture belittled, have become rooted in our ways of making sense of the world. They affect our world view and also distort our way of interpreting visual media.

AKR To me, it was an eye-opening observation that often only the privileged have the option to be apolitical. If a person can look at the photographs in this exhibition in a neutral manner, they are most likely one of the privileged. What, in your

opinion, can the understanding of the racist history of the United States, and witnessing and recording its current state, teach us about structural racism in Northern Europe, particularly in Finland?

UI

Structural racism is present in both societies, even if it manifests in different ways. It is misguided and dangerous to think that because police brutality is not as much of a problem in Finland as it is in the United States, the same thought patterns and structures would not be present in Finnish society. Societal problems may present themselves in different ways but white supremacist ideology has a strong presence in Finland, too. It manifests itself in the way people encounter non-white people in their daily lives; in who is prioritized in recruitment and in which career paths young people with an immigrant background are directed at school; in which cultures' features are desirable and which are undesirable; in the way Finnish ethnic minorities or the Sámi people have been and continue to be treated; in the way certain groups of people are referred to in public debate and how hate speech is constantly normalized, among other things. Many discussions involving structural racism have only just begun, and it often feels like most Finns do not want to own up to their role as supporters of these structures. It is easier to look outwards than to look inwards. As a non-white person, my experience of racism in Finland is very strong and its psychological effects are constantly present in my day-to-day life. This is why I want to stress the fact that the ideology behind these structures is also present in Finland. Finns must not forget their own position when looking at these photographs.

AKR You are a photographer, documentarist, and filmmaker. Each of these roles is connected to technology. The history of photography and lens-based media is also part of the history of racism. There are at least two perspectives to this: On the one hand, there is photographic technology where racism is invisible to the naked eye but

has had an effect on the ways in which the technology was developed and used and is still used. Throughout the history of photography, we have witnessed cases where racial prejudices have been built into the supposedly neutral technology of photography. Artist Minna L. Henriksson, for example, has raised an example of this built-in racism in photographic technology and materials. She used a Polaroid 20x24 camera with Polacolor P3 film to photograph a Black model. She set the camera and the lens to the “ideal” settings for photographing a model in a studio environment. Despite these recommended settings, the portrait came out too dark. The so-called ideal setting for the Polacolor P3 film had been defined with white skin in mind, and black skin proved problematic for it. Furthermore, this issue is not limited to analogue photographic and film material; digital technology perpetuates these attitudes. For example, in 2009, a new Nikon Coolpix S630 camera, bought by a Taiwanese-American family, refused to take a photograph when the family had arranged themselves for a group photo. The camera kept giving a blink warning even though everyone’s eyes were open. It turned out that the Coolpix had been programmed using photographs of white people. After measuring the distance between the upper and lower eyelids of an Asian person, the program determined that their eyes were closed. The portrait setting in the camera was coded in a way that an Asian person’s face simply did not comply with the portrait algorithm.

On the other hand, there are discussions about people in photographs and the ways in which they have been photographed and portrayed, or what photographs portray and represent and how they do it. For decades, there has been an ongoing debate about who has the right and the power to portray other people and what photographs are used for. Photographs have been used both as a means of marginalizing and suppressing certain

groups and as a means of liberating and strengthening identity politics. The forms of documentary photography, which often aims to portray reality in a neutral manner, are also concentrations of various power structures.

UI

Photographing people—marginalized people, in particular—in a photojournalistic and documentarist context is nearly always linked to some degree of exploitation. When photographs are displayed in a gallery space for an exhibition bearing my name, they benefit me. Therefore, questions of power and exploitation are present between me and the people I have photographed. Even though I have tried to photograph people in the most respectful way possible, I inevitably interpret their reality through my own values and experiences. In the end, it is I who defines how the people in the photographs are portrayed. Photojournalism has a very problematic history, and my photographs will become part of this tradition, whether I want them to or not. I cannot ignore the problematic nature of my own position or deny the fact that I use power in photographic situations. My good intentions, or the fact that I have to face the consequences of racist structures in my day-to-day life, do not make me any less responsible. Anyone who says otherwise has not honestly considered their role in the power relationship between subject and photographer.

The photographs live their own life outside my goals and I cannot fully control the interpretations and discussions they provoke. As a photographer, however, I can aim to offer frames of reference for the reception of the photographs and the discussions that I hope they will spark, and I can take responsibility for my own role.

AKR

When making this exhibition, I wondered how photographs originally taken for newspapers and news media could be brought to a gallery space without being mystified as “photographic objects,” and also in a way that you can delve deep into them, think about them and be influenced

by them. I think the way in which your photographs are showcased in the gallery attempts, in a way, to reveal the structures and their tendency to normalize issues. Unframed photographs, hung close together, emphasize the fact that they are in continuous interaction. The images stay in your mind and affect other images taken in different situations and viewed at different times. Sometimes the link between the photographs is the motif, sometimes the form. Often it depends on the viewer's own history and approach as to which photographs seem significant and "narrative" and which provide the background for another photograph. As you said earlier, the visitors will interpret the photographs through their own experiences, attitudes, and prejudices.

UI

In this context, it will be interesting to examine how the way the photographs are exhibited changes the way they are interpreted. Most of the photographs have been published with captions in newspaper articles, linking them to a specific context. Portraying them in a gallery guides the experience in a very different manner. It forces the viewer to delve into the photographs in a different way and to notice things that would be ignored in a newspaper image. At the same time, it introduces in the gallery a built-in hierarchy linked to an enormous amount of elitist structures: Who are the presumed audiences in these spaces, what is their relationship with the realities and people portrayed in these photographs, and which photographs are worth showcasing in a gallery?

This conversation took place in April 2021.

## In Conversation with NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati

---

*on Building (Local) Communities*

Iris Sikking Could you describe your journey into photography? And how and when did you decide to start photo.circle, a foundation branching out into the annual Photo Kathmandu photography festival, which is firmly positioned in South Asia, and the Nepal Picture Library, which aims to visually archive Nepal's diverse histories?

NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati I did not formally study photography in college but took a photo course after graduating with a major in International Relations, both in the US. This was in 2005, when Nepal was at the brink of what eventually became a transition from a 240-year-old monarchy to a federal democratic republic. There was a great political sea change brewing at home and as soon as I finished the course, I was itching to get back. The second People's Movement in Nepal eventually toppled the monarchy, in 2006. I was running around with my newly acquired photography skills, as a photojournalist, trying to report and document what was happening. There were very few outlets I could sell my work to. But there was a fair bit of international press interest, and I was getting more local fixer and translator jobs than photo jobs. I did many things for these journalists, giving them a lot of context, providing them with research I did myself, translating for them, driving them around. Basically, pretty much ensuring access and shaping their stories. But this type of work does not get credited and does not get paid in ways that the journalists themselves get paid.

These experiences and insight very much shaped the setting up of photo.circle, in terms of our thinking about who is doing the storytelling, who we are telling our stories to, and how that impacts the storyline. As a young woman, I felt an acute lack of a support system then. This was the impetus to set up a community support structure and a resource for photographers like me.

It has taken all these years for local photographers here to get international assignments and not just get the fixing gigs for international media. Uma Bista is one such photographer. It's taken her over ten years to

gain a certain kind of visibility in the Western media industry that claims to be "global," but she's still a stringer, not a staff photographer.

IS I understand your urge to create a place to come together and teach one another. Is that what photo.circle became? If I look at the organization from a distance, you are so active in the field and so diverse in terms of mentorship, exhibitions, collecting, and functioning as a photography hub in South Asia, while finding ways to connect with the global photography world.

NTGK

We started as a collective of practitioners because there was a lack of infrastructure to study or think critically about photography. We gathered every month with an audience of sometimes fifty, sometimes 150 people. We would project our work on a wall, and sit and discuss it. This forced photographers to practice how to stand up and talk about his or her work and defend it and listen to feedback. Our first exhibition was in fact an exhibition protesting police violence that happened during the People's Movement. It took place at a venue where a blood donation drive was being carried out, for victims of police violence. Although at that time many local media outlets really played a fourth pillar role in Nepal, actively pushing for accountability and running stories that were grounded and engaged, many important stories didn't make it onto the front pages. And there was a sense of, well, we must find other ways to get our stories out.

Much later, in 2015, we were planning Photo Kathmandu, and a massive earthquake happened in April. More than 9,000 people died, so we thought we had to postpone the festival. It felt impossible to fund-raise for a photography festival in the immediate aftermath of an earthquake, because most funding bodies were doing relief work and long-term reconstruction work, which was of course crucial at the time. However, it felt like the power of the image in that moment was something we could wield to support the recovery process by speaking about Nepal to a global audience,

and putting out images from Nepal that were not only about total destruction, as presented in the international media outlets. This we hoped would contribute to recovery for the tourism industry, which creates many jobs here in Nepal.

Most importantly, though, the festival was a way to speak to each other, and a local public here, about our collective resilience across the past decades, through a ten-year civil war and many other difficult periods. It became a way to platform those stories to say, we will get through this difficult moment, too. A few international journalists who I met and worked with in 2005 came back to Nepal in 2015, because it was a big news moment again. For us, the festival was also an occasion to invite practitioners from across South Asia. Nepal is a good place for South Asians to gather given visa difficulties for Indians, Bangladeshis, and Pakistanis especially. I think Photo Kathmandu has given our work more visibility, internationally as well as locally. That has come with its benefits and also its distractions.

- is photo.circle seems to have grown from a start-up into a valuable and trusted partner for many. How do you find a balance between being an organization with a responsibility for the community while at the same time maintaining flexibility? And one of the important branches is the Nepal Picture Library, a digital photo archive via which you aim to tell a broad and inclusive visual story about Nepal's social and cultural history.

NTGK

We still function like a collective with a minimal organizational structure. We try to be mindful about the pressure to institutionalize: how can we retain the small, fluid, and responsive structure that we have had until now? We work as a collective, but we're not an artist collective in the traditional sense. We make books, but we're not publishers. We run workshops and other learning activities but we are not a school. We make exhibitions but we're not a gallery. We're not any of these things in their sort of prescribed sense. We function in all of these ways to support local prac-

tioners and are constantly trying to respond to the world around us; for example, now with the genocide in Palestine, we feel it is important to act in solidarity. But also locally, here in Kathmandu and in the region, we find many of the questions and conversations to be very important, and closely tied to our own concerns about land, territory, and self-determination. How do we understand what is happening around the world and how do we relate that to our own colonial histories and our own daily struggles as we negotiate our aspirations for "development" in this neo-liberal capitalist economic landscape?

Nepal Picture Library is indeed an important part of our work. Unlike perhaps more traditional archival institutions, we are creating archives through different processes, with research, publications, and exhibition projects, always working with specific themes. We are, in a sense, generating archives in addition to only preserving collections that come to us. NPL is meant to be a repository for marginalized histories, and focuses on the local. We actively go out and look for material that individuals, groups, and institutions might have, country-wide. This year and next year, we are trying to focus our time and energy on annotation work for some key collections.

- is One of the ongoing recent projects is *The Public Life of Women: A Feminist Memory Project*, launched in 2023. It is a book and an exhibition and functions as an open collection of feminist stories in Nepal. It was exhibited at BredaPhoto, the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in India, and the Istanbul Biennial. And it was supposed to be part of the Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie in March 2024. Unfortunately, the festival was canceled, only a few months before its planned opening, by the festival board and authorities from the German cities of Mannheim, Ludwigshafen, and Heidelberg, who took issue with one of the curators, Shahidul Alam, posting pro-Palestinian content on his social media channels in the aftermath of the Hamas terror attacks, on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent genocide in Gaza.



A group of women from Khokana visit *The Sovereign Forest* by Amar Kanwar in collaboration with Sudhir Pattanaik/Samadrusti and Sherna Dastur. The exhibition was hosted in Kathmandu by photo.circle, Dec 9, 2023–March 31, 2024

NTGK

We are a fairly small team and every time there's such an invitation, we have to all get involved and sometimes it takes us away from the other things that we are doing. Actually, when that invitation came for the Biennale '24, we were in doubt as to whether or not to participate. I mean the program that was compiled by the curators, Shahidul Alam, Tanzim Wahab, and Munem Wasif, was very good, but we were asking ourselves where we wanted to put our time and energy, and what our priorities were.

I think that experience was a real turning point for us to think about why we respond to these international invitations. We said yes because the curators are friends and close colleagues as organizers of the Chobi Mela Photography Festival in Bangladesh. We are very close to the Bangladeshi photo community, and have received a lot of support from them over the years. And Shahidul has been a mentor to us for many years. We wanted to support their initiatives also. We proposed

to them that we wanted to be in conversation with the Arab Image Foundation, which is based in Beirut. We said, we do not really want to mount a physical exhibition. The Biennale said they could pay for one research trip, but they didn't have the funds to actually invite us to be physically present during the Biennale. So, we were going to set up exchanges with AIF via Zoom anyway. And then the whole thing got canceled in the preposterous way that it did. Germany is doomed, honestly. We went ahead with our exchanges with the Arab Image Foundation because in truth we did not need the Biennale to do this anyway, and it has been such an enriching exchange.

This very frustrating experience with the German Biennale has reminded us that we actually really want to focus more locally. That experience has made me really rethink this whole landscape of seeking Western validation and what we think that allows for, and what doors it opens. It has really made me want to seek more Global South collaborations with people and groups whose context and politics are more relevant to our own realities, and, honestly, who are doing more interesting work. The world is actually a big place and maybe we forget that sometimes. Why do we keep speaking only to the West? It has made me seriously think about why we do what we do, toward what end, and how to think about our work in the arts and culture as beyond just serving traditional power structures. This year, we are traveling with *The Public Life of Women* to various locations in Nepal, working with local partners in each place. The book has had a really amazing response and we might print a second edition and find a local publisher to circulate it wider in Nepal. We want to continue talking to the Arab Image Foundation.

is What are the challenges for your platform today?  
How do you see its future?

NTGK

At this point, seventeen years since we first set up, the core team has several generations on board. That keeps things exciting but also brings intergenerational challenges sometimes. I have personally been thinking a

## In Conversation with Tina Farifteh

---

lot about how this work can be continued by a younger generation and starting to work toward that. We were lucky that just before Covid, we received a generous and flexible grant from a feminist funding organization. It's the only reason why we survived the pandemic as an institution, and now that grant will continue for two more years. Funding, of course, is always a challenge. Along with being a non-profit, photo.circle also exists as a for-profit company which allows us to sell services. In the early years, we did a lot of commissioned projects through the for-profit company which helped us pay the rent and keep other projects going. Over time, we have managed to sort of mold the commercial projects we get to our interests, so now we are able to take only the projects that we want to take, if they align with our interests and politics.

Especially after everything that has happened in the last three years since the pandemic, we have found more clarity about who we wish to speak with: our interest is to primarily engage with local audiences. The festival continues to be a regional and global gathering where we try to sustain international engagements. However, as I was mentioning earlier, the whole thing around visibility and validation is an ongoing conversation for us with photographers and researchers. What kind of visibility are we seeking and using as fuel that drives us? These go alongside conversations about the role of the image maker and the researcher in society. What is our role supposed to be? For me personally, I think I increasingly identify as being part of a public, as a civic actor who uses the visual to create dialogue and create engagements to learn, to document, to ask questions.

*on the Image, Empathy, and Impact*

This conversation took place, via Zoom, on May 10, 2024.

Iris Sikking Your practice is characterized by a critical attitude to images and words we are exposed to via the media on a daily basis. In *The Flood* (2021), your graduation project from the Royal Academy of Art (KABK), you confront the viewer with Europe's inhumane asylum policy, a subject you made tangible through an immersive video installation that threw the visitor off guard. You combined images of the sea, filmed from a small boat, with a computerized voice record of the death toll among the refugees, and interspersed soundbites of politicians speaking in water metaphors about immigrants entering Europe. How did the form of this work come about?

Tina Farifteh

This installation came about organically, which is actually the case with most of the works I create. I start with a subject about which I have a feeling that something is not right or is lacking. Something that fascinates me or frustrates me and that I can't get a grip on. In this case, I wondered why so many people are dying on Europe's borders, and why we see almost nothing in the news about this? Or doesn't it affect us anymore? By listening to speeches on migration from politicians who talk in terms of a "tsunami" of people coming here, I became aware how often water pops up as a metaphor. I came to the Netherlands when I was thirteen and all I knew was that it was below sea level, so it puzzled me why metaphors with water were used to incite fear in people's minds. For this project, I started to explore the water borders of the Netherlands, to see if we are really being inundated by something or someone.

IS Did you start shooting material on the coastline at first?

TF I photographed a lot indeed, but there was something missing for me. Because it's actually about a feeling, about something coming at you, and that's very difficult to capture with photography. So I began filming for the first time and I think that is also typical of how I make images. I think in images, what do I see and what

does it do to me and what does it tell me, and how do those voices of politicians affect me? What I decided to make is a kind of symphony of competing narratives with, on the one hand, that we should be afraid of these people "flooding" our country and, on the other, the voice of empathy in our hearts telling us that it's not okay that these people drown because of our policies, because of how we look away. You don't hear the voices of those people, because many bodies disappear into the sea, hence the empathic voice is stifled. The records of drownings and deaths at sea are not really well kept anywhere. I came in contact with a small NGO, in fact almost a single person who keeps these records. And for me this is a form of resistance, because he goes against the grain. We would rather forget that there are people suffering, each and every day. I think that's important to me: resistance to things we'd rather not look at or forget, and then bringing them up as an artist in such a way that one can't shy away from these facts.

IS The visitor to your graduation exhibition had to move in between the three large projection walls with images of a sometimes calm and then turbulent sea. I got quite cramped looking at the waves and the endless water surface while listening to the soundtrack. Was it your intention to make the visitor feel disoriented?

TF

I think you felt that way because in the footage there was no horizon visible. I wondered what it is like when you are at sea for days, and although I can never have that same experience as those people floating in a boat, I tried to come as close as possible. Therefore, the last footage I filmed on the North Sea was during a storm. I asked the captain to turn off the engine to see what it is like when you are at the mercy of the waves. I was puking. And filming. The force of the massive body of water coming at you like a wall invokes a universal mortal fear of water. So it is no coincidence that these water-related metaphors are used, because it is a genuine fear, and it physically does affect you hugely. But how it is used in the discussion about refugees is as an

unreal fear being instilled in us by using a primal fear that is present in all of us. Certain formulations and such metaphors are very dangerous and have a huge effect on the way we decide about other people's lives.

IS Although you graduated from a photography academy, you avail yourself of other disciplines, and for each project you try to find an appropriate form. You use text and work with moving images. How do you see the relationship between text and image?

TF For me, those metaphors about water are also images. They are the carriers of images. We all think in words and images and those are the building blocks for how we perceive, experience, feel, and act in the world. And the question for me is: Are those words and images neutral? If they are not neutral, we should ask ourselves, why aren't they, and how can I invite you to reflect on them?

IS It is often said that certain strong pictures don't need words and could potentially trigger change. Ideally, they could impact public opinion and eventually political decisions. One such moment in terms of the theme of *The Flood*, was the picture of three-year-old Alan Kurdi from Syria, who drowned during his family's attempted journey from Bodrum, Turkey to the Greek island of Kos, in 2015. This photograph shocked many of us. What is your take on this image?

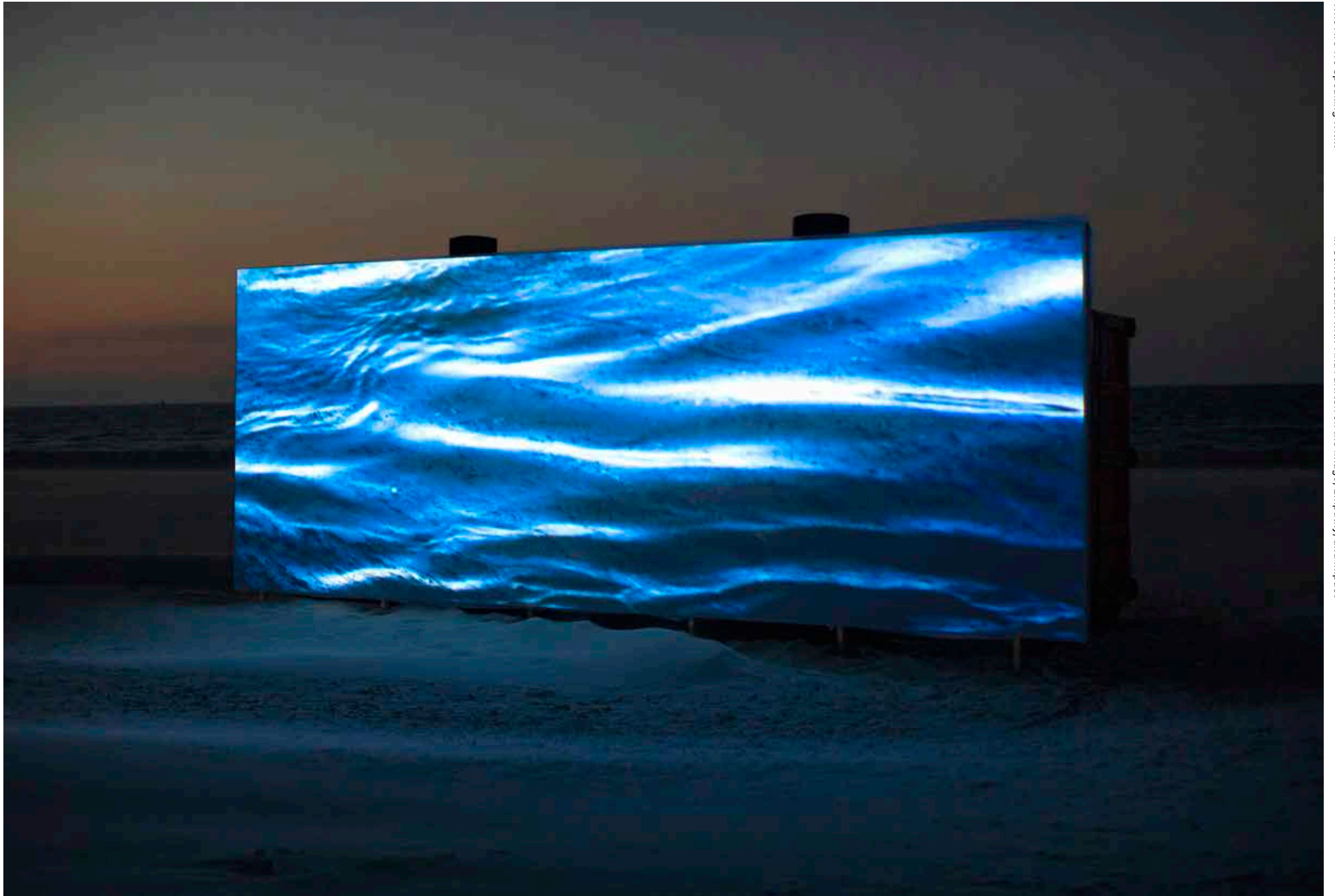
TF I find it interesting that you say the photo had such an impact. First of all, what is "impact"? Is it the emotional reaction people have when they see an image? Or is it the actual change of a situation following this encounter?  
My film *Kitten or Refugee?* (2023) consisted of a compilation of research I did on the possible impact of images. For this reason, I showed my protagonists this specific photograph. This picture ticks all the "empathy boxes," but that is mainly emotional empathy, which is a starting point but not the end.

If this emotional reaction is not accompanied by the recognition of consequences and a profound understanding of the situation, and the will to change it, then nothing happens. So the question is how did this little boy end up in that situation and what are the underlying structures of his death and the suffering of many others? Do we really want to prevent this from happening? Why do we fail to act?

You can say that the emotional reaction to that photo was huge, but the real impact was not. Because since then the situation has only gotten worse. And in fact, the current policy is now focused on ensuring that the suffering of these people is outsourced—the torture, the inhumane experiences that people on the run go through—that those are no longer visible so that it is happening even farther away from us. In that respect, I am afraid that the photo didn't have a positive impact on the situation of people on the move.

IS As a last topic, I would like to bring up the group exhibition *Qoqnoos ققنوس - You can't burn women made of fire* (2023), which you curated for Melkweg Expo in Amsterdam. You were invited to compile a group exhibition in the context of International Women's Day. You decided to focus on resistance by women in Iran. Why did you say yes to this opportunity, and how did you see your role as curator?

TF I think for me it's about what story I want to tell and then I choose the best form or medium. This exhibition opened on International Women's Day in 2023. So the process of making the show took place in the heat of the moment of the Iranian protests in 2022 and 2023. I thought that was a meaningful and important moment to give context to what was happening in Iran from a female perspective—context that can help to understand the information and images which were widely shared on social media and in news media, especially because a lot of people don't know much about the topic, about its history, and the different generations and different forms of the resistance in Iran.



Tina Farifteh, *The Flood* (single screen). Installation view at Into the Great Wide Open 2024 festival, Vlieland, The Netherlands, 2024

For that reason, it was my main goal to give context and to add several layers to the conversation. So at that point, I could add more value as a curator, telling the story with existing works and including different perspectives and different generations, than by making work about it myself. In this way I could show that female resistance in Iran is a long-standing practice and has taken various shapes and forms, and that this is the shape of today, right now, via social media and demonstrations in the streets. And I could show that these women stand on the shoulders of their mothers, sisters, aunts, and grandmothers, and that for as long as I can remember, women always resisted against any form of suppression of their minds and their bodies.

is At such a moment, then, do you see yourself as an activist? Is your artishood a form of activism or do they blend together fluidly?

TF For me, it's very much about how I can use my time, knowledge, and talent to research questions that I'm fascinated or frustrated by and feel the urgency to figure out. For example, I have done a lot of research on empathy and images, and then something happens like the double standards concerning the treatment of refugees, and it's important for me to use this knowledge to bring the conversation on this topic further or to highlight a different direction.

I am a maker. A visual artist working on research-based and reflective long-term projects. But when I feel the urgency, I will use those tools to react directly to a situation, and I create a particular work as an intervention. This is not necessarily activism; it is part of being human. I see activism as something really positive and crucial for creating a more just world. Almost all the rights we currently have and take for granted have been fought for by activists. Despite that, I wouldn't call myself an activist because what I do is more open. I ask you to think and feel but I don't dictate a specific act or behavior. I create and question images, I poke, try to open up something, I seduce, I make unexpected connections, I try to create something that touches

you or that makes you feel uncomfortable. You have your own thoughts and feelings, your own associations, context, and history. I do want something to happen to you, but what that is, is open, and you are just as responsible for that. I very much respect the autonomy and responsibility of others. Ultimately, for me it's about finding the truth, and speaking out against power and for the collective good. Solidarity is definitely a part of that, and photography, and related media, is my vehicle.

This conversation took place on May 10, 2024.

Poulomi Basu is a neurodiverse artist known for her exploration of the interrelationship between systems of power and bodies through work that exists at the limits of art, technology, and activism. With roots in photography, her practice demonstrates fidelity to no single artistic modality or creative process, but rather to interdisciplinary pursuits that are in constant, active flux. Her evolving, embodied approach to art-making is emblematic of the plurality of experiences and the myriad ways in which identity is constructed in contemporary culture. Her artworks, film, and book are in permanent collections including the V&A, Harvard Art Museums, MoMA (Special Collections Library), the Olympic Museum, and Autograph ABP. Basu's cinematic works have been nominated within competitions including the 2024 Cannes Film Festival, Tribeca Film Festival (Special Jury Prize), and the BFI/Chanel Filmmaker Awards. Basu formed coalitions with WaterAid, in 2014 and 2022, and launched the campaigns "To Be a Girl (Blood Speaks)" and "Thirst for Knowledge (Sisters of Moon)," which raised £2 million and £5 million, to activate facilitations for women in South Asia with infrastructure for sanitation, menstrual hygiene, education, and climate change. Basu's work *Blood Speaks* contributed to a shift in policy in Nepal, in 2019, with the criminalization of "Chhaupadi" menstrual exile for women. Her works have been exhibited in institutions including the V&A, Autograph, The Photographers' Gallery, DB Prize, and the United Nations in New York. She divides her time between London and Kolkata. Besides her art practice, Basu organizes rescue work for Indian street dogs and organizes their adoptions in India, Europe, and the UK.

Lia Carreira is a Brazilian-born researcher, media artist, and curator based in Lisbon. She is currently a postgraduate researcher (PhD in Art) at the Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton (UK), where she is finishing her investigation on the "Exhibition Space as a Laboratory." She has a Master's in Media Studies (Media Technologies and Aesthetics) from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (ECO/UFRJ), where she developed a thesis on digital art and image appropriation; and a Master's in Media Arts

Cultures from Danube University (Austria), Aalborg University (Denmark), and the City University of Hong Kong, for which she developed the thesis "Experimental Curating in Times of the Perpetual Beta," in partnership with the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Germany. She has worked at ZKM as a researcher on the topic of online exhibitions and on artificial intelligence in the arts, and is currently a curator at the Palácio das Belas Artes Lisboa.

Annet Dekker is a curator and researcher. Currently she is Associate Professor of Archival and Information Studies and Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam, and Visiting Professor and co-director of the Centre for the Study of the Networked Image at London South Bank University. She has published numerous essays and edited several volumes, including *Documentation as Art* (co-edited with Gabriella Giannachi, Routledge, 2022) and *Curating Digital Art: From Presenting and Collecting Digital Art to Networked Co-Curation* (Valiz, 2021), among others. Her monograph, *Collecting and Conserving Net Art* (Routledge, 2018), is a seminal work in the field of digital art conservation.

Anna Ehrenstein is an Albanian-German artist exploring forms of knowledge and their construction. Her post-photographic sculptures, virtual installations, moving image and textile works, as well as her social interactions, challenge networked objects, images, ideas, and epistemologies in a post-digital, neocolonial, interconnected, and hybridized world. Through extensive research and collaboration, redistribution of Global North resources, and subversion of the hierarchies of authorship, her artistic practice examines how technology and digital-material culture reshape power relations—a methodology she calls "precarious assemblage." Raised between Germany and Albania, Ehrenstein studied photography and media art in Germany and attended curatorial courses in Valletta, Malta and Lagos, Nigeria. She was a guest professor, from 2023 to 2024, in the interdisciplinary MA program "New Practice in Art and Technology," at TU and UdK Berlin, and currently holds a professorship at HGB Leipzig.

Taru Elfving is a curator and writer focused on nurturing undisciplined and site-sensitive enquiries at the intersections of ecological, feminist, and decolonial practices. As artistic director of CAA Contemporary Art Archipelago, she currently leads a research residency program on the island of Seili in the Baltic Sea. Her curatorial projects include *Research Pavilion* (Uniarts, Helsinki, 2023), *Hours, Years, Aeons* (Finnish Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2015), *Frontiers in Retreat* (HIAP, Helsinki, 2013–2018), and *Towards a Future Present* (LIAF, Lofoten, 2008). She has co-edited publications including *Contemporary Artist Residencies* (Valiz, 2019) and *Altern Ecologies* (Frame, 2016).

Eszter Erdosi is a PhD candidate in History of Art at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests lie at the intersection of animal studies and art history, with a focus on the representation of politicized relationships of interspecies care in contemporary art, particularly as they are present in structural-systemic settings. She is an active member and former postgraduate convener of the cross-disciplinary Edinburgh Environmental Humanities Research Network, and is also involved with the Ecologies of Care Working Group, an international network of curators, art historians, and art workers, supported by the Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory. When not reading or writing, she can be found running someplace hilly.

Tina Farifteh is a visual artist whose work is poised at the intersection of art, politics, and philosophy. She holds a Bachelor's degree from the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague and a Master's from Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her interest, in particular, lies in what makes us human and how human life can become a plaything for politics. Farifteh reflects on the impact of power structures on the lives of ordinary people. She seeks to tempt us into looking at topics that we would rather avoid because they are complicated or uncomfortable. In her audiovisual installation *The Flood* (2021–ongoing), she dissects right-wing, populist rhetoric and how refugees are dehumanized and framed as a "natural disaster." In her short documentary *Kitten or Refugee?* (Prospektor / VPRO, 2023), she investigates our human capacity for

empathy—and its limits. In tandem with these projects, she is developing *Tina in Sexbierum*, a transmedia project on displacement, detachment, assimilation, loss, and longing for a home. *The Flood* won several prizes, including the Royal Academy Bachelor Award and Meestervertellers 2023. *Kitten or Refugee?* was selected for the Debut Competition of the Dutch Film Festival and won the first prize for Storytelling at De Zilveren Camera.

Yining He is a curator, writer, and researcher based in the UK and China. She has curated more than fifty themed exhibitions for museums, art institutions, and photography festivals across Eurasia, including: *Photographic Geomancy*, *Imaging the Future*, *China Imagined*, *Between Mountains, Hills and Lakes*, *The Adobe of Anamnesis*, and *Ports and Images*. Her work has been widely published, in Chinese and English, in journals, book chapters, and exhibition publications. She is also the founder of *Floating Island: Journal of Photography and Visual Culture Studies*.

Uwa Iduozee is a Finnish-Nigerian photographer, filmmaker, and documentary cinematographer based in Brooklyn and Helsinki. His practice examines narratives that reframe visual representations of both personal and communal identities, exploring the ways in which they are influenced by, and interact with, their environments. Everyday life and personal narratives are the core subjects in Iduozee's work, opening up into broader discourses around marginalized communities and acceptance within societal and cultural superstructures. The history of Afro-Finnishness and Black identities in contemporary Finland are recurrent topics in his work. Iduozee's projects have been exhibited at the Helsinki Biennial, the Finnish Museum of Photography, the Porto Photography Biennial, and PHotoESPAÑA, as well as at numerous film festivals and in newspapers, online publications, and broadcast television.

Kaija Kaitavuori is an art historian, working as lecturer at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts and visiting lecturer and docent at the University of Helsinki. She received her PhD, in 2015, from the Courtauld Institute

of Art in London. Her theses, supervised by Julian Stallabrass (Courtauld) and Nathalie Heinich (CNRS, Paris), investigated participation in contemporary art. The research is published in the book *The Participant in Contemporary Art: Social Relationships and Artistic Practice* (I.B. Tauris, 2018). The scope of her research spans contemporary art, cultural policy, and sociology. She has previously held senior roles at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki and the Finnish National Gallery, working in museum education and institutional development.

NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati lives and works in Kathmandu, Nepal. She is the co-founder and artistic director of photo.circle, Nepal Picture Library, and PhotoKTM—platforms and initiatives that nourish image-making, history-telling, and dialogic engagements with diverse publics. As a cultural organizer and curator, NayanTara enjoys working collaboratively with photographers, filmmakers, researchers, writers, translators, educators, designers, organizers, and other professionals from various fields, to develop multidisciplinary exhibitions, publications, commissions, public programs, workshops, and other co-productions and cultural tools. NayanTara is committed to creating possibilities for people who think, make, speak, and organize in different ways to come together in “imperfect solidarity” to learn, question, disrupt, and resist, all while working toward repair.

Thomas Kuijpers mostly stopped photographing after getting his MFA in photography. Collecting became his main focus after that, in an attempt to grasp the effects of the echoes of images that surround our daily existence. Each event is copied and pasted indefinitely through an endless media landscape, and it is these copies—images, articles, conversations, videos, memorabilia, quotations—that Kuijpers habitually collects over years, forming archives of competing realities. Kuijpers completed his MFA in Photography, in 2011, at AKV St. Joost (Breda, The Netherlands). He has been exhibited at institutions, fairs, and galleries internationally, including: the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Biennale Für Aktuelle Fotografie, Mannheim; Foam, Amsterdam;

Krakow Photomonth; Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt; and MASP, São Paulo. In 2017, he was nominated as a Foam Talent. His book *Hoarder Order* (Fw:Books, 2020) was shortlisted for the Paris Photo–Aperture Foundation Photobook Awards 2020 and the Rencontres d’Arles Author Book Award 2021.

Giya Makondo-Wills is a British–South African photographer, visual artist, educator, and talk show host based in the Netherlands. Her work focuses on identity, the Western gaze, and systems of power, and aims to challenge visual culture and the history of the camera. Decolonial thinking and collaboration in image-making are central to her practice, as are preserving the stories of marginalized communities. In 2021, she became a lecturer in the BA Photography program at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague. She also runs guest workshops internationally and co-hosts the live talk show “Fotodok Book Talks” at Tivoli Vredenburg. Since 2017, she has collaborated on a range of projects internationally, participating in decolonial exchanges with practitioners from various fields, and served on juries and steering groups developing arts education and opportunities for marginalized artists. She has been commended for her endeavors and, since 2017, has regularly exhibited and published her work internationally.

Tanvi Mishra works with images as a photo editor, curator, writer, and educator. Among her interests are rights and representation in image-making, research strategies in visual culture, and the notion of truth/fiction in photography, particularly in the current political landscape. She has served as the Creative Director of *The Caravan*, a journal of politics and culture. She is part of the photo-editorial team of *PIX*, a South Asian publication and display practice. She has curated multiple exhibitions across South Asia, including in India, Iran, Pakistan, and Nepal. She was invited to curate the Louis Roederer Discovery Award for the 2023 edition of Rencontres d’Arles. She has also been a part of the curatorial teams of Delhi Photo Festival, Photo Kathmandu, and Breda-Photo. Mishra has taught with photo.circle, Pathshala South Asian Media Institute,

and the VII Academy, served on various juries, including for World Press Photo and the CatchLight Global Fellowship, and is currently part of the International Advisory Committee of World Press Photo. Her practice across publishing, curating, and writing is premised at the intersection of politics, culture, and social justice. Her working method foregrounds building kinship and solidarity as tools to collectively imagine alternate, reparative futures.

Anastasia Mityukova is a contemporary photographer based in Geneva, known for her conceptual and experimental approach to imagery. Through her work, she explores themes such as identity, memory, and the boundaries between reality and fiction. Mityukova uses a variety of media and techniques, including photography, video, and installations, to create complex and introspective visual narratives. Her projects are characterized by a deep reflection on the perception and interpretation of images, often playing with notions of truth and manipulation. For instance, in some of her series, she reworks existing photographs or archives to question the authenticity and subjectivity of photographic imagery. Mityukova has exhibited her works in numerous international exhibitions, including at Museum Folkwang, Centre de la photographie Genève, Beijing International Art Biennale, and Villa Merkel. Since 2019, she has served as the director of Photobooks Switzerland in Geneva, an international photography book fair with over forty publishers, collectives, and independent photographers.

Kateryna Radchenko is a curator, artist, and photography researcher based in Ukraine. She is the director of the International Festival Odesa Photo Days, which she founded, in 2015. In 2024, she curated the *Beyond the Silence* project, organized by Magnum Photos. In 2023, she was a World Press Photo Contest jury member (Europe jury chair). Radchenko has curated exhibitions in Ukraine, South Korea, Sweden, Georgia, France, Canada, Latvia, Poland, The Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Slovenia, Italy, Hungary, and the UK. As an author, she has published articles in several international magazines and online platforms, including *Fotograf*, *Magenta*, *EIKON*, *British Journal*

*of Photography*, *Foam Magazine*, *Over*, and *Trigger*. In collaboration with the Finnish Museum of Photography, she wrote the book *Images Tells Stories*. In 2022, together with Christopher Nunn and Donald Weber, she published three volumes of *The Information Front*.

Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger, PhD, works as the museum director at the Finnish Museum of Photography, in Helsinki. From 2016 to 2022, Rastenberger worked as Professor of Exhibition Studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki, where she was responsible for the MA program for curatorial and exhibition studies. She is also the artistic director and co-founder of the Festival of Political Photography, founded in 2014. Rastenberger has extensive experience in exhibition projects and curatorial practices in lens-based art, having worked both as a freelance curator and for institutions. She has published widely on contemporary photography. Her special interests are exhibition as critical practice, feminist curation, and running.

Sunil Shah is an artist and writer. He is a PhD candidate at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London (UAL), affiliated with Afterall Research. He is currently researching art and exhibition histories, with a particular focus on Okwui Enwezor’s Documenta11 (2002). His work centers on the visual document, photography, and the archives, with an interest in analyzing their role in relation to postcolonial theory, social and political history, and Black studies. He is an Associate Lecturer at UAL and a freelance writer, with contributions for *American Suburb X*, *Foam Magazine*, *FOMU Extra*, and several other titles and commissions.

Iris Sikking is Curator of Photography at Fotomuseum and Kunstmuseum Den Haag. She is educated as a film editor and a photo historian. After her graduation from the Master Photographic Studies at Leiden University, she worked as independent curator for organizations such as the Nederlands Fotomuseum Rotterdam, Unseen Amsterdam, and FOMU Antwerp. For five years, she was a board member at Paradox, an organization for the promotion of documentary photography in the

Netherlands. Alongside her curation of the annual Krakow Photomonth, in 2018, she co-edited the volume *Why Exhibit? Positions on Exhibiting Photographies* (Fw:Books). In 2022, she was appointed guest curator for the Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie, for which she compiled the program *From Where I Stand*, with a selection of forty artists who were exhibited in six art museums in Mannheim, Ludwigshafen, and Heidelberg, Germany. She is regularly invited for portfolio reviews, lectures, and juries in the Netherlands and abroad. Over the years, she has worked with artists such as Lisa Barnard, Boris Mikhailov, Thomas Kuijpers, Awoiska van der Molen, Robert Knoth and Antoinette de Jong, Rune Peitersen, Susan Schuppli, and Jules Spinatsch.

Laura Toots is a curator and educator based in Tallinn. Toots studied at the Estonian Academy of Arts, from which she earned her MA, in 2011; the Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture, in Finland; and the Bergen National Academy of the Arts, in Norway. Previously, Toots was a Lecturer and Associate Professor at the Estonian Academy of Arts, Artistic Director of the Tallinn Photomonth contemporary art biennial, Curator and Project Manager at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM), and Advisor to the Deputy Mayor of Culture for the Tallinn City Government. Currently she works as a Community Development Officer at Tallinn Pelgulinna State Secondary School (PERG). In her various roles, Toots has been interested in different collective working practices and experiences. She has organized projects large and small—from publications to art biennials—aiming to bring together different professionals for a wider exchange of ideas.

Daria Tuminas is an independent curator. Since 2019, she has been curating for Fotodok, Utrecht. Recent shows that she has worked on include: *Grounding – Stories of Migration* at BredaPhoto 2024; *Haufi nyana? I've come to take you home*, by Lebohang Kganye, at Foam Amsterdam in 2023; and *HERE NEAR* at Rencontres d'Arles 2023. Between 2017 and 2019, she headed the Unseen Book Market at Unseen Amsterdam. Tuminas has contributed several photobook-related reflec-

tions as a writer, editor, and curator. She co-curated the symposium "The Moving Page" for Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum (2017); wrote a chapter for *How We See: Photobooks by Women* (10×10 Photobooks, 2018); guest-edited *The PhotoBook Review* no. 12 (Aperture, 2017); and curated a number of exhibitions connected to printed matter. In 2022, Tuminas co-founded Growing Pains, a foundation that publishes photobooks and supports women and non-binary artists.

Sergio Valenzuela-Escobedo is an artist and researcher with a diverse career spanning curation and editorial work. Notable exhibitions he has curated, since 2016, include *Mapuche* at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris; *Monsanto: A Photographic Investigation*, which, under his guidance, embarked on a European tour; *Geometric Forests* at Rencontres d'Arles 2022; and the trilogy *Mama Coca*, *Ipáamamu – Stories of Wawaim*, and *Oro Verde*. He holds a PhD in Photography from the École nationale supérieure de la photographie (ENSP, Arles) and serves as a bridge between research, education, and curatorial practice, effectively linking two continents, the Americas and Europe. Valenzuela-Escobedo is an artistic director and co-founder of Double Dummy Studio, a platform that provides a space for creating and exhibiting critical reflections on documentary photography. Additionally, he is a member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA). Valenzuela-Escobedo's critical perspectives are articulated in specialized publications such as *Inframince*, *1000 Words*, and *Mirà*, to which he regularly contributes texts.

Salvatore Vitale is a Swiss-based artist, editor, and educator. In his multilayered artistic practice and research, Vitale's work focuses on the development and complexity of modern societies, exploring power structures, political cosmologies, and technological mediation while using expanded documentary analysis, including elements of fiction, speculative storytelling, and the use of multiple visual forms. His work has been awarded internationally and has been exhibited widely in museums and at photo festivals, including: *Fondazione Modena Arti Visive* (2022), *Musée des beaux-arts du Locle* (2022),

*Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie* (2022), *Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation* (2021), *Camera – Centro Italiano per la Fotografia* (2021), *OGR* (2021), *MASI Lugano* (2021), *Fotomuseum Winterthur* (2020), *Foam Photography Museum Amsterdam* (2019), the *Swiss Foundation for Photography Winterthur* (2018), *MOCAK Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow* (2018), *Photoforum Pasquart, Biel/Bienne* (2017 and 2023), and *OCAT Shanghai* (2017). Vitale is a Professor at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. He is also the Artistic Director of *FUTURES European Photography Platform* and the *EXPOSED Torino Foto Festival*. He is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of *YET* magazine. Vitale has contributed to and edited several publications, including *HYBRIDS: Forging New Realities as Counter-Narratives* and *RESET: Questioning the Image, the Market and the Role of Representation* (*Futures Photography*, 2020 and 2021).

To our writers and interviewees, we wish to extend a heartfelt thank you for your support and confidence in our project.

We greatly appreciate the inexhaustible cooperation and talents of Joanna Osiewicz-Lorenzutti, who arranged all practical matters, and Stefan Lorenzutti, who forged our different ways of talking and writing into an understandable whole. We value the commitment of Hans Gremmen, who designed a beautiful textbook and will release it through Fw:Books. Without the unwavering patience and belief of the three of you, we could never have completed the task. Warmest thanks.

We wish to thank our generous supporters: the Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki in Finland; the Mondriaan Fund in the Netherlands; the Finnish Museum of Photography; and the Fotomuseum Den Haag. We would also like to thank Michaela Bränn, Eefje Ludwig, Trine Stephensen, and Stijn Terpstra. Last but not least, thanks to our dear families for bearing with us.

After our first book, *Why Exhibit? vol.1* (as we now call it), saw the light of day, we began to miss our conversations and each other's drive to make things happen. It was therefore a pleasure to step aboard this venture. To meet the launch date, we created a "We Can Do It" group chat to keep us going. Once again, we can highly recommend this collaborative way of working!

Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger and Iris Sikking

*Why Exhibit? vol. 2*  
*On Curating Photography*

Editors:  
Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger,  
Iris Sikking

Managing editor:  
Joanna Osiewicz-Lorenzutti

Editorial assistance:  
Stefan Lorenzutti

Graphic design:  
Hans Gremmen

Typeset in:  
Caslon + SF Pro

Printed on:  
Holmen TRND  
70 gsm

Printing and binding:  
Wilco Art Books

Cover photo:  
Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger,  
2023

Publisher:  
Fw:Books, Amsterdam

Co-publisher: The Academy  
of Fine Arts, University of the  
Arts Helsinki  
ISBN 978-952-353-476-6  
ISBN (digital version)  
978-952-353-477-3i

**UNIARTS  
HELSINKI**

**X ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS**

Partner:  
The Finnish Museum of  
Photography, Helsinki;  
Fotomuseum The Hague,  
Netherlands

T H E  
F I N N I S H  
M U S E U M  
O F  
P H O T O  
G R A P H Y

fotomuseum  
den haag

Distribution:  
Idea Books, Amsterdam  
[www.ideabooks.nl](http://www.ideabooks.nl)

ISBN: 978-90-834510-4-6

© the authors and  
the publishers, 2024

All rights reserved

The book was published  
with the financial support of  
the Mondriaan Fund and the  
Academy of Fine Arts,  
University of the Arts Helsinki,  
and the Erik Bos Fonds.

**M**  
mondriaan  
fund

ERIK BOS FONDS

Poulomi Basu  
 Lia Carreira  
 Annet Dekker  
 Anna Ehrenstein  
 Taru Elfving  
 Eszter Erdosi  
 Tina Farifteh  
 Yining He  
 Uwa Iduozee  
 Kaija Kaitavuori  
 NayanTara Gurung  
     Kakshapati  
 Thomas Kuijpers  
 Giya Makondo-  
     Wills  
 Tanvi Mishra  
 Anastasia  
     Mityukova  
 Kateryna  
     Radchenko  
 Anna-Kaisa  
     Rastenberger  
 Sunil Shah  
 Iris Sikking  
 Laura Toots  
 Daria Tuminas  
 Sergio Valenzuela-  
     Escobedo  
 Salvatore Vitale

*Why Exhibit? vol. 2* combines articles and conversations on curatorial practices concerning photo-based images. Discussion centers on challenges curators and artists working with photography face today. How do they navigate its constantly changing appearance? How are issues of representation dealt with? How do they handle the weight of the history of the medium, which is often hidden in power structures and silenced narratives? And what kind of mediation is necessary while seeking new forms of authorship and interaction with audiences?

This book primarily focuses on practical perspectives intertwining photography and curation. It offers insights into a wide range of experiences, reflections, and views from the perspective of curators, photographers, visual artists, writers, and researchers. These conversations are vital for curating photography in light of pressing issues surrounding the medium.

