

Sam Contis
Phases

Arts and Letters
September 27, 2025–February 8, 2026

Every twenty-nine days, the moon disappears from the sky when it slips into shadows. Wait a few days and a small sliver of its form will return, appearing above us as a slender crescent. Or wait fourteen and see the moon shine full and luminous, its surface reflecting the light of the sun. As the moon makes its steady, elliptic orbit around Earth, it appears and disappears in a repeating pattern. We call this cycle the moon's phases. For at least thirty thousand years, humans have followed these phases to track the passage of time. It is why the words for moon and month are identical in many languages, even if they are only distant cousins in English. But what led humans to look up into the sky and decide that they'd like to measure time with it? Asking that question is like asking why we tell stories. You can't answer one without answering the other.

Sam Contis's *Phases* lives with these questions. Her answer begins with a series of photographs that gives the exhibition its name. A line of twenty-four black-and-white photographs stretches across two galleries. Each intimate portrait pictures a teenage runner as she approaches or crosses the finish line of a cross-country race. Walk by them and you will see that the girls' heads turn slowly to make a complete revolution, like a diagram of the moon's monthly cycle.

Phases recalls Eadweard Muybridge's locomotion studies, which developed out of his obsession with capturing the moment-to-moment movement of animals and people. He even called a photographic sequence of a cantering horse a "series of phases," like those of the solar eclipse he documented just a year later. What the use of the word "phases" suggests, for both Muybridge and Contis, is that a study of motion should be interpreted as a quest to understand time. This resolute occupation with time led Hollis Frampton to dub Muybridge "the inventor of photographic cinema." It is no accident that a revitalized interest in Muybridge's time-movement sequences coincided with the emergence of conceptual art and structural film in the 1960s and 70s. Those artists and filmmakers were interested in how structure—be it time, movement, or language—could be marshaled to challenge the idea that reality could be accurately represented. That is, they used the document to unravel the very thing most assumed it ought to do. As Frampton noted, this tension was already visible in Muybridge's sequences; one cannot help but sense "that the bodies of Muybridge's actors are somehow strangely unlike our own."¹

Contis achieves something similar with her studies of runners' movement. There is a strangeness in viewing the girls' faces, some contorted and others lax with rest. It is as if we are witnessing private moments of ecstasy, with all the accompanying pain and release. Each portrait becomes like the marble form of Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, which depicts the instant a moan escaped the saint's mouth after an angel appeared and plunged a spear into her heart. A moralizing unease around this sort of ecstatic display, even when its sexual symbolism is blanketed with godly affection, endures today. We still live in the aftermath of the nineteenth century, when ecstasy became a pathologized state closely linked with the feminine madness of hysteria. Of course, the Greek root of the word, *ekstasis*, wasn't far off from a description of insanity, quite literally meaning "to stand outside oneself." The desire for that bewildering experience of displacement might be one reason to run. Or to have sex. Or to jump off a building. It is why Contis's *Phases* is impossible to look away from.

Contis determined some of *Phases*'s form through references to the history of photography and film. Each photograph is printed the size of a daguerreotype, an early photographic process that popularized the portrait. And the sequence contains twenty-four photographs, reiterating the work's relation to cinema. When sound entered the picture, a film reel was standardized to twenty-four frames per second. The number was less a deliberate choice than an economy of means: Twenty-four was the fewest number of frames that could produce a match between sound and motion and thus resemble lived experience. You don't need to know this information—or the fact that Contis produced these photographs over a span of seven years—to identify her interest in investigating space and time through the movement of the body. But sometimes it's helpful to pull back the curtain to see the structure that lies behind it.

The discomfort and intimacy of the photographic series can also be found in a three-channel film in the adjacent gallery. For it is in *Five Kilometers*'s three extended portraits that Contis developed her understanding of running as ecstatic movement and performance. The film begins at the starting line: A girl lifts each knee high toward her chest until a gunshot fires. She sets off, sprinting through a field that looks cold and wet in the light of dusk. Another sways side to side in morning sun in an effort to settle her nerves. A pistol sounds and she runs. The third appears languid in her first movements, impatient rather than anxious. When the final shot goes off, she runs, her complexion serene in even midday light.

In the twenty-five minutes that follow that first gunshot, each girl runs a 5K cross-country race. Through the duration of the film, the camera stays close to her face, continuous with the runner's movement through the rural Appalachian landscape. They pass through woodland that abuts farmland, their feet falling on grass, pavement, and earth. And all through the ups and downs of their pace, the runners are surrounded by the color the earth wears, what Rudolf Steiner lovingly called "its permanent green."² Steiner's phrase is a reminder that permanence is not that which is everlasting but rather that which is omnipresent in its recurrence. Contis's preoccupation with the way bodies and landscape converge is one way she gives definition to the boundlessness of that recurrence. Indeed, in *Five Kilometers*, one witnesses the way bodies moving through time become, for Contis, a way of *telling* time, their motion determining the shape and structure of her work.

There is a moment in the film when the three girls meet. Not in time or space, but in the rhythm of their pace. They mirror one another: Strides match and hair sweeps side to side. It doesn't last long. They break away, and the loneliness of their endeavor settles in as their movements diverge. In cross-country, every run is a race against your last best time. It is a team sport, but the locus of the competition is internal. "It is really just you and the landscape," Contis says, recalling her time as a cross-country runner. Enduring that battle reframes the body. One ceases to be conscious of anything else. And if running is a lesson in how units of pain can become components of joy, it may also be a way of learning that being alone can sometimes bring one close to others. It's a lesson that can also be found in the gallery. Each runner occupies a separate time—morning, midday, evening—but we encounter them in unison, the sound of their breathing and footfalls filling the space.

When the runners' rhythmic breathing rises to a crescendo—full of droning moans, gasps, the holding in of a cough—each girl begins to look like her will is running ahead of the body that carries her forward. And then the sound cuts out and they continue to run. Their pace intensifies. In the relief of that silence, we experience ourselves watching the runners perform an incredibly intimate feat of endurance. Their effort, and the amount of time that has passed since the starting shot, is newly visible: Sweat is pushed back, cheeks flush red, grimaces appear. The audience becomes voyeur to the ecstasy of their labor. The moment their pace reaches its peak, a low, sustained drone made from the instrumentation of the runners' voices swells in; the suspended sound is an ominous anachronism. We watch their faces as they finally cross the finish line and continue to watch until, one by one, the screens cut to black. Wait a few minutes for the film to replay and the girls appear again, back at the starting line. You can leave them there, knowing their race will continue, just as the moon keeps roving round and round.

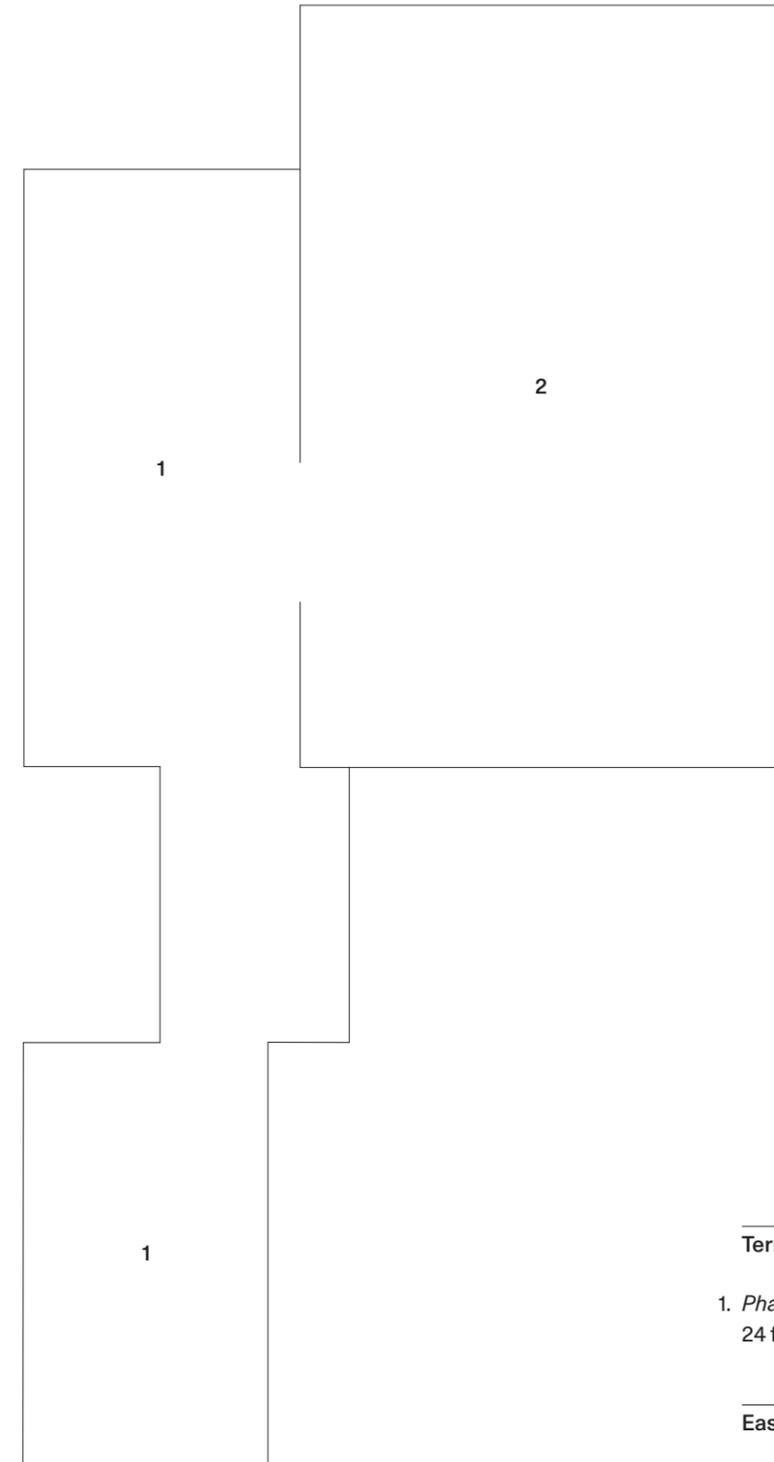
Contis says that this series may have originated, perhaps subconsciously, from her interest in an age when nothing is fixed. This is one of the other meanings of "phases." We often speak of the whole difficult period of being a teenager as "a phase." It is, in other words, a passing state on the route toward something else. Even though the teenage experience commands so much cultural attention, it is rarely presented in a form that takes on its indefinite position. With *Phases* and *Five Kilometers*, Contis does this. She tells stories in the form of an ellipsis, stopping only to start again.

Noa Wesley

1. Hollis Frampton, "Eadweard Muybridge: Fragments of a Tesseract," *Artforum* 11, no. 7 (March 1973): 43–48.
2. Rudolf Steiner, "The Phenomenon of Colour in Material Nature," transcript of lecture delivered in Dornach, Switzerland, May 8, 1921, <https://rsarchive.org/Lectures/Colour/19210508p01.html>.

Credits

Director: Sam Contis
Sound Designer: Danielle Dupre
Cinematographer: Trevor Tweeten
Colorist: Sofie Friis Borup
Editor: Matthew Hannam
Composer: Murat Çolak
Production: Ecstatic Static
Executive Producers: Myriam Schroeter, Jason Evans
Producers: Sophie Luo, Lara Gallagher
Post Producer: Sam Contis
1st Assistant Camera: Rob Agulo
Camera Vehicle Driver: Jim Mundell
Location Sound Recording: Guido Schierano
Driving and Key Production Assistants: Aubrey Resto, Alberto Yapur
Locations and Basecamp Production Assistant: Cameron Hightower
Locations and Lead Car Production Assistant: Nick Haskins
Set Production Assistants: Francesca Arcuri, Jackson Moyes
Photographers: Morgan Levy, Macie Naberezny



Thanks to Karis, Anna, Amy, Brooke, Ashly, Mikayla, Paige, Lilli, Alyssa, Felicity, Jodi, Alex, Maia, and every runner who helped make this work possible.

Five Kilometers is made possible through the generous support of Thomas and Susan Dunn, Foundation for Contemporary Arts, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and Skywalker Sound. Special thanks to Nina Day, Catie Grant, Lara Gallagher, Susan Marshall, and Tim Clarke.

Terrace Galleries I and II

1. *Phases*, 2025
24 framed gelatin silver prints

East Gallery

2. *Five Kilometers*, 2025
Three-channel video, color,
5.1 sound; 26 minutes

The film begins every half hour
on the hour

Sam Contis (b. 1982; Pittsburgh, PA) first started making photographs as a teenager, around the time that she joined her high school cross-country team in rural Pennsylvania. Some of her earliest photographs were of her teammates at practice. She was fascinated by how the camera gave her a way of picturing the world through an iterative, continuous process of looking. In the photographs, films, and books Contis went on to create, she has explored seeing itself as its own kind of movement. Many of her works investigate the movement of bodies through the landscape, including in California's high desert (*Deep Springs*, 2017) and along the pathways of the English countryside (*Overpass*, 2022). Other works have considered the repeated glance and the kind of slow seeing that a return can offer, such as her book of images drawn from Dorothea Lange's photographic archive (*Day Sleeper*, 2020) and her first major film, presenting three portraits of teenage runners, at Arts and Letters (*Five Kilometers*, 2025).

Phases is organized by Jenny Jaskey, Chief Curator, and Noa Wesley, Assistant Curator. Support for the exhibition is provided by Thomas and Susan Dunn, the Hillman Foundation, Christine Bernstein, and members of Arts and Letters. Thanks to the Aperture Foundation, Danielle Dupre, Kristina Kite Gallery, Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, Meyer Sound, and Sony Pro Audio for additional support.

Arts and Letters Exhibitions Committee: Mel Chin, Charles Gaines, Ann Hamilton, Joan Jonas, and Amy Sillman

Film Installation: Ashley Systems and C.A.V.E.

Exhibition Production: Nick Fernandez, Exhibitions Production Manager; Cody Boyce, Davis Campbell, Juan Hernández, Alex Kluchman, Jade Palmiotti, and Thiago Szmrecsanyi, Preparators

Additional Production Support: Jackson Beyda

Visitor Services: Kasie Kirkland, Visitor Services and Events Manager; Chris Cortez, Max Gaan, Malchijah Hoskins, Carl Lewandowski, Rachel Pearson, Julia Pippenger, Eloise Seda, Roman Wallfisch, and Jordan White, Gallery Attendants

Edited by Elizabeth Gumpport and Julia Powers,
Publications Coordinator
Designed by Studio Mathias Clottu

American Academy of Arts and Letters
633 West 155 Street
New York, NY 10032
www.artsandletters.org