

INTO THE UNSEEN

THE WALTHER COLLECTION

The exhibition was curated by
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&
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in close dialogue with
Artur Walther, founder of The Walther Collection.

We thank The Metropolitan Museum of Art for their collaboration on this exhibition.

THE
WALTHER COLLECTION

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INTRODUCTION
POETICS OF THE UNSEEN

Tina Marie Campt
Nadine Isabelle Henrich

Showcasing work that activates photography's multiple sensory registers, INTO THE UNSEEN invites us to embrace the audible, tactile, and affective dimensions of photographs. It asks us to consider what it means to understand photography beyond seeing and challenges us to explore how the medium stimulates the full array of our senses – from the haptic (touch) to the sonic (sound) to the olfactory (smell) and the gustatory (taste).

Instead of understanding photography as a tool of categorization, a modality for capturing the real or the true, the works featured in the exhibition trouble the lines between the seen and the unseen, what appears and what disappears, as well as what constitutes the spiritual and the corporeal, the silent and the audible, the remembered and the forgotten, the imagined and the repressed.

At the heart of the exhibition is an understanding of the 'unseen' as inextricably intertwined with seeing itself in a dynamic interaction shaped by processes of social, cultural, technological, and political interpretation. The unseen is a site of latency and possibility, resistance and refusal as it eludes exposure and visibility. Its temporality is that of potentiality, as it locates us both in the present and a moment still to come, perceptible only in shadows.

"As photography shows us more, it also shows us how much we don't see, how much of ordinary seeing is blind. The optical unconscious introduced by photography is a deeply uncanny sensibility, then – it is the revelation and recognition that we inhabit a world unseen."

– Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*

CHAPTER I
FREQUENCIES OF DARKNESS

How do we engage photographs
beyond the act of looking?

How do darkness
and opacity shape our experience
of photography?

And what does it mean
to listen to images?

Photography ("writing with light") is structured by the calibration of light. 'Exposure' and 'capture' are key terms in the photographic vocabulary which express the founding aspiration of the medium: to create a tangible record of what we see and know about the world around us. Yet since its inception, photography has always concealed as much as it reveals. As Shawn Michelle Smith emphasizes, what lies at the heart of photography is "both an intense desire, and a failure, to see."

Taking a similar approach, the artists featured in this section engage photography from the perspective of darkness, opacity and obscurity, rather than transparency and visibility. This first room invites you to tune in to the dense frequential resonances we encounter through these artists' deft manipulation of darkness, absence, blur, and negative space. Their work activates what remains stubbornly invisible or unseen within the image, using photography to release that which rumbles in the shadows of our imagination and consciousness: the elusive spiritual presences, erased histories, repressed fears, and unacknowledged forces that shape us in profound ways.

When we attune our senses to these richly layered works, we hear the murmurs of spiritual awakenings that nurtured Black resistance struggles. We confront the lingering traumas of Apartheid that haunt South Africa's striking landscapes. We are touched by the soft, blurry focus of a toy camera that transports affective registers instead of visual information. And we are moved by intimate and ritualistic images of queer bodies that refuse to conform to expectations of social propriety or norm.

SANTU MOFOKENG

1.1

Santu Mofokeng's powerful photographic essays examine the interplay between individuals and society, history and landscape, the living and their ancestors. In the mid-1980s, at the height of the anti-Apartheid struggle, he pursued long-term photographic studies exploring unseen aspects of everyday life. His slow, intimate approach offers a compelling counter narrative to dominant representations of Black South Africans in the global image economy. Intentional choices like a lack of sharpness, multiple exposures, opaque shadows, layered compositions and purposeful blurring highlight the otherworldliness of what is depicted. Mofokeng's images diverge from realism, introducing discursive and poetic strategies to explore spirituality, practices and unseen spaces of resistance and healing.

1956 in Soweto, Johannesburg, South Africa
2020 in Johannesburg, South Africa

1.1.1 CHASING SHADOWS

Santu Mofokeng
Eyes-wide-shut, Motouleng Cave, Clarens, 2004
Gelatin silver print

Santu Mofokeng
Sangoma Sisters Gladys and Cynthia Leading Initiates in the Afternoon "Ingoma", Clarens, 1996
Gelatin silver print

Santu Mofokeng
Inside Motouleng Cave, Clarens, 1996
Gelatin silver print

Santu Mofokeng
Christmas Church Service, Mautse Cave, c. 2000
Gelatin silver print

Santu Mofokeng
Buddhist Retreat, near Pietermaritzburg, 2003
Gelatin silver print

Santu Mofokeng
Sacral Animals, Motouleng Cave, Clarens, 2004
Gelatin silver print

Santu Mofokeng
Prayer Service at the Altar on the Easter Weekend at Motouleng Cave – Free State, 2006
Gelatin silver print

Promised Gifts of the Walther Family Foundation to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Works are listed from left to right.

Santu Mofokeng
Church of God, Motouleng, 1996
Gelatin silver print

Santu Mofokeng
Christmas Church Service, Mautse Cave, c. 2000
Gelatin silver print

Courtesy Artur Walther, New York

ABOUT THE SERIES

Chasing Shadows (1996–2014) captures Black South African religious life at Motouleng Caves, a place of pilgrimage where many seek healing, advice, and spiritual guidance. While the images show salvation rituals, altars, and sacral animals reflecting indigenous belief systems, they also depict daily life in the caves.

Eyes-wide-shut (2004) shows Mofokeng's older HIV-positive brother Ishmael on a final journey of redemption. In *Buddhist Retreat, near Pietermaritzburg* (2003) a seemingly headless white horse suggests both an allusion to death's horseman and a fugitive freed spirit. Mofokeng's evocative work opens up a liminal space of transition between dream and reality, life and death, documentation and the imaginary.

1.1.2 TRAIN CHURCH

Santu Mofokeng
The Drumming, Johannesburg Soweto Line,
from the series *Train Church,* 1986
Gelatin silver print
Promised Gift of the Walther Family Foundation to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE SERIES

Train Church (1986) documents spontaneous religious services on a railway commute between Johannesburg and the township of Soweto, highlighting how public spaces can be transformed by spiritual expression. Many South Africans embrace both Christian and African beliefs as a hybrid spirituality central to Black South African identity. The drumming on train walls transforms this transitory space into a sonically resonant chamber of spiritual experience.

1.1.3 BLOEMHOF

Santu Mofokeng
Afoor Family Bedroom, Vaalrand,
from the series *Bloemhof,* 1988
Gelatin silver print
Promised Gift of the Walther Family Foundation to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE SERIES

Rumours: The Bloemhof Portfolio (1988-1994) reflects Mofokeng's nuanced approach to documenting township life, emphasizing the connections between people, land, and home. In Bloemhof, North West Province, he accompanied the struggles and joys of a community of tenant laborers. The series challenges prevailing representations of Black South Africans by focusing on overlooked aspects of the quotidian and elevating them through opaque shadow plays and metaphoric scenes. The tactility and traces that cover the uneven walls and clay floors, become a metaphor for the indexical and perceptive photographic surface of the image.

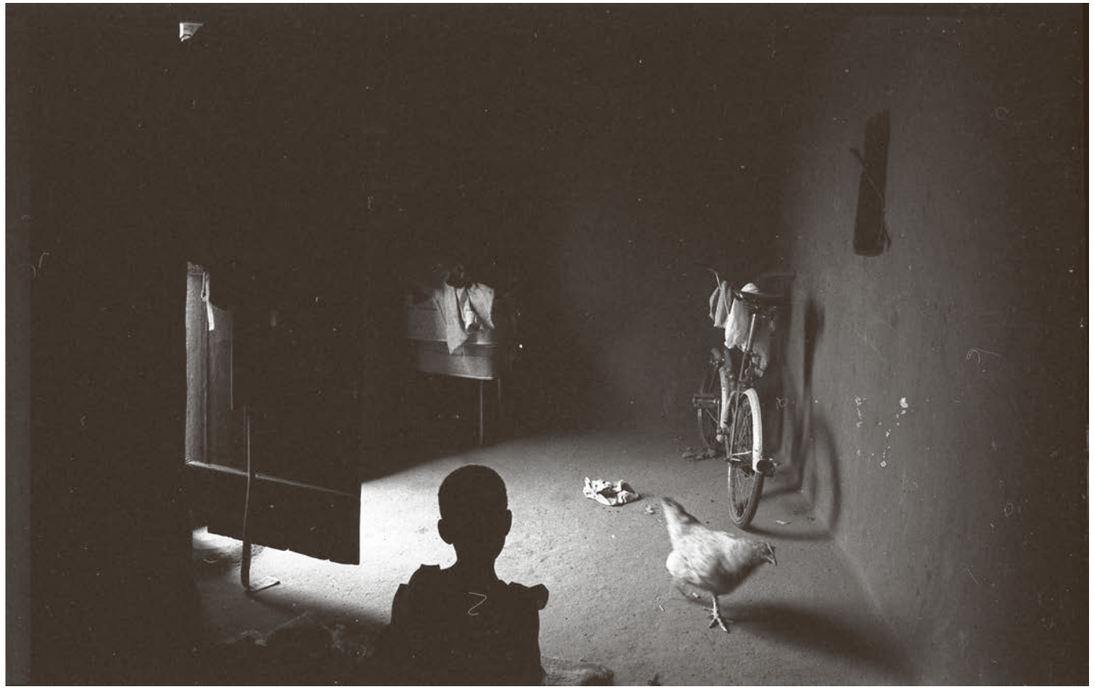


Fig. 2: Santu Mofokeng, *Afoor Family Bedroom, Vaalrand,* from the series *Bloemhof,* 1988
© Santu Mofokeng Foundation. Courtesy Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg
Promised Gift of Artur Walther to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

ROTIMI FANI-KAYODE

Rotimi Fani-Kayode's work drew inspiration from his spiritual roots in indigenous Yoruba traditions of West Africa, his family's cultural ties to the Nigerian political elite, and as an African exile in Europe. The artist understood himself as "an outsider" due to his sexuality, geographical and cultural dislocation, and family expectations. In elaborate photographic performances, he staged sensual compositions with Black bodies, layered with rich iconographic references – from Catholic imagery to queer performance and Yoruba cosmology. Fani-Kayode's aesthetic practice opened a space of semiotic play that transcends binaries and highlights in-between, hidden worlds. In the late 1980s, when facing his own mortality as he began to succumb to AIDS, his images became increasingly spiritual, vivid, and allegorical.

1955 in Lagos, Nigeria
1989 in London, UK

1.2

HALF OPENED EYES TWINS

Rotimi Fani-Kayode
Half Opened Eyes Twins, 1989
Gelatin silver print
Courtesy Artur Walther, New York

ABOUT THE WORK

The double portrait *Half Opened Eyes Twins* (1989) was created in the year of Fani-Kayode's death. In depicting twins, he revives a popular subject in art history that illustrates two parts of a whole – the relationship between death and life, consciousness and the unconscious, reality and imagination. At the same time, looking at something with only one eye shifts one's spatial perception in ways that highlight the neurological dimensions of perceiving the unseen: While only a fraction of our field of vision can be perceived in detail, the brain interprets the missing parts based on experience, memories, and relations. Monocular vision also eliminates depth of field and, as a result, the distance between the observing subject and their surroundings becomes subject to interpretation.

MATERNAL MILK

Rotimi Fani-Kayode
Maternal Milk, 1983
Gelatin silver print
Courtesy Artur Walther, New York

ABOUT THE WORK

Maternal Milk (1983) shows an elongated nude Black male body with milk – a symbol of nutrition and growth – streaming down his back. Yet, in his bowed position, the protagonist is unable to imbibe this elixir of life. Fani-Kayode's sculptural black-and-white composition creates an intimate, emotional scene, inviting viewers to confront the male body as a site of internal struggle.

JO RACTLIFFE

Jo Ractliffe started making photographs in the 1980s and developed her own style by experimenting with a range of photographic approaches. Her work frequently depicts locations from which people – and notably, their physical traces – are absent, creating layers of meaning that suggest interpretations beyond mere presence. The quiet poetics of her visual language offer subtle articulations of how histories of violence are inscribed into the literal and figurative landscape of post-Apartheid South Africa. Ractliffe consistently questions photographic representation and accuracy, highlighting how photography must be seen as just contingent as the historical narratives it seeks to convey.

1961 in Cape Town, South Africa
lives and works in Cape Town, South Africa

1.3

DIANA ARCHIVE

Jo Ractliffe
Microlite, 2004
Quadtone pigment print

Jo Ractliffe
Birthday Cake, 2004
Quadtone pigment print

Jo Ractliffe
Black Sea, 2004
Quadtone pigment print

From the series *Diana Archive*.
Promised Gift of Artur Walther to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Works are listed from left to right.

ABOUT THE SERIES

After losing all her photographic equipment in a burglary, Ractliffe started working with toy cameras in 1990, using Holgas, Dianas, and other 120 mm plastic toy cameras. *Diana Archive* contains multiple images of seemingly mundane objects such as dolls' heads, birthday cakes, empty yards, street signs, and scenes at ocean arrivals. Characterized by light leaks, vignetting, and an out-of-focus snapshot-like quality, the series challenges conventional expectations of photography as a precise document.

CHAPTER II
HOLDING EVERYDAY LIFE

How does the surface
of a family portrait feel in your hand?

When you hold a photo album,
what does it smell like,
and what does that smell
trigger in you?

What do we see
in the albums of others?

How do we decide what to include
and what to leave out?

Photo albums and personal archives of inherited family portraits are quintessentially haptic objects. The order and sequence of their pages builds a history, tells a story, maps relationships, and traces lives. Born from vernacular practices of collection, assembly and display, they are created to be touched, held, embraced, and passed on as deeply affecting repositories of feeling. But the making of photo albums was adopted not only by amateur and professional photographers. As the enduring legacy of Alphonse Bertillon's crime scene albums and his infamous system of bertillonage make clear, it is a practice used by scientists and law enforcement officials to track and identify so-called deviants and criminal 'types'. Here, the album's hold on the popular imagination derives from its ability to define the identity of those catalogued in its pages.

The albums displayed in this section encourage us to linger in the tactile experience of the photographic archive. They feature vernacular images that challenge us to confront the histories of unnamed photographic subjects – histories that exceed the labels and stereotypes ascribed to them. They urge us to attend to the alternative stories that become audible when we embrace them as sensorially expressive, haptic images. Contemporary artists like Santu Mofokeng have consistently countered the power of categories of photographic capture by opening a space for new narratives of anonymous or orphaned images to emerge. In *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950*, he transforms the album into a site of discursive inquiry and takes us on a journey into previously unseen archives of studio portraits commissioned by the Black South African middle class.

UNIDENTIFIED COMPILER

OHIO STATE ALBUM

2.1

Unidentified compiler (American)
"Ohio State School for the Blind album," ca. 1952–64
Photo album with gelatin silver prints, paper ephemera
and handwritten annotations in white chalk
Courtesy the Walther Family Foundation, New York

The "Ohio State School for the Blind album" is is a collection of photographs and handwritten notes documenting life at the first public school for the visually impaired in the United States. Photo albums weave together fragments of memory into a visual narrative, offering a popular format for archiving social and individual identity. These autobiographical stories reflect a reimagining of the self through vernacular imagery, while also inviting critical engagement with the histories of the anonymous photographic subjects.

ALPHONSE BERTILLON

Alphonse Bertillon, the chief of criminal identification for the Paris police department, developed photographic procedures used to register recidivist criminals and analyze crime scenes. In 1879, the criminologist devised a method for organizing the identity records of prisoners through anthropometry, the science of bodily measurements, and a rigorously standardized card-filing system to track records of prisoners' statistics. He also developed a new approach to photographing crime scenes, employing a camera mounted on a high tripod to survey and document the scene before it was disturbed by investigators. Many of Bertillon's documentary and categorical methods continue to shape investigative and law enforcement practices around the world today.

1853 in Paris, France
1914 in Paris, France

2.2

IDENTIFICATION ANTHROPOMÉTRIQUE

Alphonse Bertillon
Identification anthropométrique, instructions signalétiques (Signaletic Instructions, Including the Theory and Practice of Anthropometrical Identification), 1885
Book with photogravure plates and illustrations.
Promised Gift of the Walther Family Foundation to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE WORK

Published in 1885, *Identification anthropométrique: instructions signalétiques* served as a detailed manual complete with diagrams and sample photographs for identifying prisoners. It standardized the use of mug shots – full face and profile – as well as close-up photographs of the ears, which Bertillon believed to be a key marker of identity – among other body parts. This forensic method, dubbed Bertillonage, was designed to identify repeat offenders, but it also marked one of the first systematic uses of photography to categorize and measure the human body. By reinforcing associations between physical features and character traits, Bertillon's system helped entrench stereotypes that continue to inform discriminatory practices today.

SANTU MOFOKENG

THE BLACK PHOTO ALBUM

2.3

Santu Mofokeng
The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950, 1997
Slide projection (80 black-and-white slides)
Promised Gift of Artur Walther to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE ALBUM

For *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890-1950* (1997), a slideshow of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century studio portraits, Mofokeng collected and scanned group portraits while working as a researcher at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Originally commissioned by urban Black working- and middle-class families, the portraits include performative elements like backgrounds, props, or Victorian dress that indicate some of the choices made by sitters and their agency in shaping their own photographic depiction. They offer a powerful counter narrative to visual tropes that homogenize Black South African life.

Mofokeng converted the images into slides, adding biographical details and commentary on the gaze shaping our view of these images: "Are these images evidence of mental colonization or did they serve to challenge prevailing images of 'the African' in the Western world?" In doing so, he recomposes and destabilizes the grammar of the archive, posing ever new questions. What are the shadow archives of the present? What contradictions are embedded within the images we observe? And what subtle, almost imperceptible frequencies ripple through them?

Fig. 3 and 4: Santu Mofokeng, *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950*, 1997
© Santu Mofokeng Foundation. Courtesy Lunetta Bartz, Maker, Johannesburg
Promised Gift of Artur Walther to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Joel and Jane Maloyi, c. 1900s, Photographer: Unknown, 1890s.



This couple is unidentified, Albumen print.

CHAPTER III
LISTENING TO THE LAND

How does photography allow us to experience our relationship to landscape differently?

What do photographs allow us to see
and not see,
and what resonant tonalities do they express?

How can photography be a tool to perceive transformation and disappearance?

The works in this section turn toward the surfaces of the ground, the body, and the natural world. They focus on what remains unseen in the landscape – events and memories inscribed into its earth, dust, and coal. Through performance, sound, and photography, the artists foster a close connection to the land.

Floods, fire, and storms disperse or destroy homes and family archives. And as climate change advances, visual representations of its impact often focus on spectacular instances of urban disaster, amplifying a sense of fear and helplessness. But catastrophes unfold both suddenly and slowly. Amitav Ghosh observed that our collective imagination struggles to comprehend the scale of environmental destruction and its longer-term impact and effect, which prompted him to describe the climate crisis as "also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination."

The works included in this section highlight practices of slow exposure that register traces of loss and displacement, while at the same time enacting processes of healing and transformation. Conceptual documentary projects by artists such as Santu Mofokeng, David Goldblatt, and Dawit L. Petros cultivate relationships with injured landscapes, entwining mourning with transformation. The subtle and evocative photographic practices gathered here are acutely attuned to interconnection, drawing attention to our embeddedness in ongoing climate, geographical, and demographic change. These works challenge visitors to listen to the land and tune in to its subtle frequencies and gradual transformations.

BERNI SEARLE

Transformation, process, and contact are core strategies in Berni Searle's performative and lens-based practice. Using natural materials such as spices, ground seeds, and earth pigments, she stains and marks the body to evoke indices of violation – staining, bruising, and the lingering traces of contact. In these works, the body becomes 'colored' with the dust of the natural world, a response to the racial, political, and phenomenological conditions of humanity in South Africa. By making the sensitive surfaces of her skin and body a site of inscription, Searle challenges the identification practices imposed by political and bureaucratic regimes and creates a space for the reinvention of identity.

1964 in Cape Town, South Africa
lives and works in Cape Town, South Africa

3.1

3.1.1 DISCOLOURED

Berni Searle
Lifeline, from the series *Discoloured*, 1999
24 digital prints, archival pigment ink print
Promised Gift of Artur Walther to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE SERIES

Lifeline (1999) features an enlarged close-up of the artist's outstretched palm, stained with henna and fragmented into twenty-four identically sized prints. The cropped edges of its multiple components fracture the lifelines of this vital body part, making personal and collective trauma visible in the intimate physiognomy of Searle's own hands. Here, the personal and biological lifespan of a body are inscribed with memory and trauma in a dark color reminiscent of a bruise – traces on the subjugated, gendered body that Searle reclaims and transforms.

3.1.2 SNOW WHITE

Berni Searle
Snow White, 2001
2 DVD projections, 9 mins., ed. 2/3
Loan from The Mercedes-Benz Art Collection

ABOUT THE PROJECTION

The double projection *Snow White* (2001) shows the artist from two different angles – head-on and vertically from above. Water and flour are trickling over her naked body, mingling on her skin to form a pale layer that masks yet does not fully conceal her form. She then begins kneading the mixture of flour and water into dough. In the frontal view, with her gestures possess an archaic, sculptural physicality, while the overhead projection transforms her body into a painterly, almost two-dimensional composition.

EM'KAL EYONGAKPA

3.2

Originally trained as a botanist and ecologist, Em'kal Eyongakpa is an intermedia artist who works with photography, video, sculpture, sound, and text. Central to his practice is an insistence on the confluence of the 'life' sciences, art, 'juju', and technology, rendered through interwoven installations, performances, and soundscapes that not only blur the boundaries between the media he employs but also alter perceptions of the real and the imagined, the natural and the metaphysical. He approaches ideas of the experienced, the unknown, and the collective through the ritual use of repetition and transformation. Using his own, obscured body as a fulcrum, the artist allows us to weave narratives together for ourselves, locating and destabilizing our own ideas of truth in the process. His use of poetic, symbolic, and evocative imagery demonstrates a deep sensitivity to the land and the memories, stories, and imaginaries that inhabit it.

1981 in Mamfe, Cameroon
lives and works in Cameroon and Amsterdam, Netherlands

KETOYA SPEAKS

Em'kal Eyongakpa
Untitled CCXI (Takamanda), 2016, Wallpaper installation

Em'kal Eyongakpa
Untitled IX (Baso, Eshobi road), 2016, Inkjet print

Em'kal Eyongakpa
Untitled XIV (Ketoya), 2016, Inkjet print

Em'kal Eyongakpa
Untitled XI (Nsanakang), 2016, Inkjet print

Em'kal Eyongakpa
Untitled XII (Baso, Eshobi road), 2016, Inkjet print

Em'kal Eyongakpa
Untitled VII (Nsanakang), 2016, Inkjet print

Em'kal Eyongakpa
Untitled III (Ketoya), 2016, Inkjet print

Em'kal Eyongakpa
Untitled V (Ketoya), 2016, Inkjet print

Em'kal Eyongakpa
Untitled XVI (Ketoya), 2016, Inkjet print

Em'kal Eyongakpa
Untitled V (Baso, Eshobi road), 2016, Inkjet print

Em'kal Eyongakpa
Untitled IV (Akwa), 2016, Inkjet print

Em'kal Eyongakpa
Untitled XXV (Ketoya), 2016, Inkjet print

Em'kal Eyongakpa
Untitled IX (Ketoya), 2016, Inkjet print

Em'kal Eyongakpa
Untitled XIX (Ketoya), 2016, Inkjet print

This work includes a newly produced sound installation.
Promised Gifts of the Walther Family Foundation to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Works are listed from left to right.

ABOUT THE SERIES

Rife with blurred shadows and mercurial forms, the commemorative images in *Ketoya Speaks* (2016) attest to the artist's belief in the existence of spiritual realms and strong energies. The matte, dark, and deeply saturated prints picture historically and culturally charged sites within Ketoya, an enclave in the Manyu division of southwest Cameroon. Ketoya was a key region of resistance during German colonial rule in "Kamerun" – specifically the Mpawmanku Wars from 1904 to 1906. The work traces signs of a bygone system of injustice and at the same time invokes the struggle for liberation. By abstracting his body in time and space, Em'kal Eyongakpa creates a mosaic of separate narratives and ascending, hazy figures that circulate through and around the history of Ketoya.

DAVID GOLDBLATT

Born in a small mining town outside of Johannesburg, David Goldblatt chronicled the structures, people, and landscapes of South Africa from 1948 until his death in 2018. His iconic documentary work explored both public and private life during the Apartheid regime, and he extensively photographed colonial-era monuments and buildings with the idea that the architecture reveals something about the people who built them.

Equal parts artist and documentarian, Goldblatt was known for his practice of attaching extensive captions to his photographs, providing precise context to identify the subject, place, and time of each image, while also dignifying the people he portrayed. These titles play a vital role in exposing the visible and invisible forces through which the country's policies of racism and segregation shaped the dynamics of life, particularly along axes of gender, labor, identity, and freedom of movement. In his own distinctive way, David Goldblatt scans the world's surfaces for 'telling' details, collecting visual evidence that fosters a deeper understanding of the essence of South African society.

1930 in Randfontein, South Africa
2018 in Johannesburg, South Africa

3.3

3.3.1 ANNA BOOIS, NAMAQUALAND

David Goldblatt
Anna Boois, Namaqualand, Northern Cape. 20 September 2003, 2003
Archival pigment print
Promised Gift of the Walther Family Foundation to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE WORK

Anna Boois, a goat farmer, is pictured with her birthday cake and vegetable garden on her farm Klein Karoo in the Kamiesberge of the Northern Cape. She was one of 14 people – all women – who had been given land in this area under a government scheme. About a year after this photograph was taken, her source of water dried up and she was forced to abandon her farm and live in Garies, the nearest village.

3.3.2 BLUE ASBESTOS FIBRES

David Goldblatt
Blue Asbestos Fibres, Owendale Mine, Northern Cape. 26 October 2002, 2002
Archival pigment print
Promised Gift of the Walther Family Foundation to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE WORK

Goldblatt's photographic scan of the surface of the Owendale Mine subtly captures its invisible toxicities – societal, economic, ecological or historic – and in doing so, renders them sublimely perceptible. South Africa was both a major producer and consumer of asbestos, and although its use has been banned, the country still lives with the toxic legacy of the residual asbestos that endures in its environment.

3.3.3 REMAINS OF HOUSEHOLDS IN A CHILDREN'S GAME

David Goldblatt
Remains of Households in a Children's Game Called Nopopi, and the Shells of Incomplete Houses in a Housing Scheme That Stalled. Kwezinaledi, Lady Grey, Eastern Cape. 5 August 2006, 2006
Archival pigment print
Promised Gift of the Walther Family Foundation to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE WORK

Delicate, looping paths of small round stones – traces of a game – line up in the foreground, engaging in a visual dialogue with the sharp geometric shapes of abandoned, unfinished houses in the background. Optically folding multiple layers of space into a single plane, the empty home appear miniature, while at the same time evoking reflections on how the past of the country lingers on its future generations.

SANTU MOFOKENG

CLIMATE CHANGE SERIES

3.4

Santu Mofokeng
Dust Storms at Noon on the R34 between Welkom and Hennenman, 2007
Gelatin silver print

Santu Mofokeng
Replacing of Sand Washed Away During the Floods and Wave Action, South Beach, Durban, 2007
Gelatin silver print

Santu Mofokeng
Undersized, Stunted-in-Growth and Rotting Melons Dumped in the Veld Outside Kroonstad, Free State, 2007
Gelatin silver print

Promised Gifts of the Walther Family Foundation to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Works are listed from left to right.

ABOUT THE SERIES

Mofokeng's late series confronts social disquiet and ecological uncertainty with sobriety and empathy – an approach that challenged the artist to consider photography as a practice of care. Caring for the land requires attuning to what is unseen and opening oneself to the subtle frequencies of a land marked by political and ecological tension. The landscape photographs Mofokeng created as part of his *Climate Change Series* capture the open, changing, and scarred surfaces of South African geography. With their intricate textures and clear compositions, these images merge the poetic and the documentary, inscribing the contradictions of life and death, love and pain, and future possibilities alongside charged fragments of memory.

DAWIT L. PETROS

Dawit L. Petros works at the intersection of visual art, research and education, drawing on studies of global modernisms, theories of diaspora, and postcolonial scholarship. These concerns derive from his own lived experiences as an Eritrean emigrant who spent formative years in Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Kenya, before settling in central Canada. The overlapping cultures, voices, and tenets of this constellation produced a dispersed consciousness, global and transnational in stance and outlook.

His work engages in an introspective and textured analysis of the historical factors that produced these migratory conditions. Over the past decade, Petros has focused on a critical re-reading of the entanglements between colonialism and modernity, particularly in relation to the Horn of Africa.

1972 in Asmara, Eritrea
lives and works in Montreal, Canada, and Chicago, IL, USA

3.5

THE STRANGER'S NOTEBOOK

Dawit L. Petros
Untitled (Distance), Cap Spartel, Morocco, 2016
Archival color pigment prints

Dawit L. Petros
Untitled (Overlapping and Intertwined Territories That Fall from View I), Catania, Italy, 2016
Archival color pigment prints

From the series *The Stranger's Notebook.*
Promised Gift of the Walther Family Foundation to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE SERIES

Petros's photographs depict sites of special geographical and historical significance – straits and harbors, beaches and cities. *The Stranger's Notebook* is the product of a thirteen-month field trip Petros began in 2014, during which he traversed borders from Nigeria to Senegal, Mauritania to Spain, and finally, from France to Italy to chart the present-day experience of moving between certain regions. This journey provided him with a unique perspective for examining the disjunction between lived experiences of mobility and migration and the prevalent narratives surrounding them. Throughout his travels, Petros observed a widespread lack of awareness regarding north-south flows of movement, as well as movements within, across, and throughout the African continent.

YTO BARRADA

French-Moroccan artist Yto Barrada's work is characterized by a distinctive sensibility of place, focusing on subtle layers of histories and present politics. Barrada studied history and political science at the Sorbonne in Paris and later photography in New York. Her work in photography, film, sculpture, and installations began by exploring the liminal realities of her family's hometown, Tangier. Engaging with the fraught dynamics of identity and migration that shape daily life in the city, her hauntingly still photographs and videos capture the everyday scenes of Tangier, poised on the western edge of the Strait of Gibraltar.

1971 in Paris, France
lives and works in New York, NY, USA

3.6

SLEEPERS

Yto Barrada
Sleepers, Fig. 2, Tangier,
from the series *Sleepers*, 2006
Chromogenic print
Promised Gift of Artur Walther to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE SERIES

Barrada's series *Sleepers* depicts people resting in public parks, their heads shrouded by clothing that offers fragile protection from the outside world. Far from leisurely repose, they appear exhausted, embodying the 'burners' of Tangier who destroy ID papers to seek new lives across the Strait. As the artist explains:
"I try to expose the metonymic character of the Strait through a series of images that reveal the tension – which restlessly animates the streets of my hometown – between its allegorical nature and immediate, harsh reality."
Both concealed and exposed, these figures occupy a liminal state between presence and absence, identity and nation, emerging as cocoons of transformation that symbolize transitory existence.

CHAPTER IV
TRACING SEDIMENTS

How do migration and
diasporic movement
shape and
transform
photography?

What does it mean to hold on
to an image of a home
that has been transformed
or destroyed?

How does
photography allow
artists and communities
to think through presence...

...and absence?

The works gathered in this section invite us to participate in a practice of careful listening that shifts from mere seeing to sensing and feeling. They confront us with a transforming and unstable world, challenging us to consider what this instability means and how to reassemble and make sense of its fragments. They are photographs that ask us to engage in dialogue with the afterlives of images and their sedimented traces.

The images in this section have been lost and found: some were flooded and scorched, others thrown away and later retrieved, discarded and recovered. The photographs themselves have become sediments, with their surfaces functioning as sensitive sites of inscription, where individual loss and collective trauma leave their mark.

On March 11, 2011, a devastating earthquake and tsunami swept over Japan's west coast. In response to the vast destruction left in its wake, volunteers launched the initiative Memory Salvage which sought to digitize and restore lost family photos. More than a thousand volunteers recovered 750,000 photographs, approximately 400,000 of which were returned to their respective owners, while many others were too severely damaged to be salvaged. The artist Munemasa Takahashi established the *Lost & Found Project* as a collective visual repository of these photographic traces. In dialogue with works by Kay Hassan, Allan deSouza and Martina Bacigalupo, over 1,500 images are installed here for the first time in a free-floating, organic arrangement that evokes the long journey and transformation of these photographs.

ALLAN DESOUZA

Allan deSouza's photographs interrogate the limits of the medium as a tool of evidentiary representation. By subverting expectations of authenticity, they underscore the inherent fallibility of documentary and historical narratives. Central to deSouza's practice are the cognitive processes of forgetting and remembering, loss and retrieval. Fading and mutating memories of their early life in Nairobi, where they lived until the age of seven, are revisited, as they expose their private archive to the conditions of daily life rituals, transforming the images into an elusive palimpsest haunted by the ghosts of the past that linger beneath their surfaces.

1958 in Nairobi, Kenya
lives and works in Bay Area, CA, USA

4.1

THE LOST PICTURES

Allan deSouza
Fountain, from the series *The Lost Pictures*, 2004
Digital chromogenic print
Promised Gift of Artur Walther to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE SERIES

In the 2004 series *The Lost Pictures*, deSouza created prints of a set of 1962 childhood slides taken by their father in Nairobi. Shortly after their mother's death, deSouza placed the prints around their house – in the kitchen, the shower, and the bathroom. Dust and other residue registered the passage of time, abrading and obscuring the original images almost beyond recognition. Simulating the fog of memory, the photographs suspend our reading in a state of perpetual indeterminacy, revealing a memory-image and effacing it at the same time. Yet even when faded to the point of near inscrutability, the series casts doubt on photography's function as a mnemonic device.

LOST & FOUND PROJECT

LOST & FOUND PROJECT

Munemasa Takahashi, compiler
Lost & Found Project, compiled in 2011
Approximately 2,500 salvaged snapshots and family photographs affected by water damage
Courtesy the Walther Family Foundation, New York

ABOUT THE PROJECT

For this exhibition, over 1500, vernacular photographs from *Lost & Found Project* have been carefully installed as a floating cloud, allowing the images to exist three-dimensionally in space.

While the image surfaces hold little complete or representational visual information, they remain intimate and affecting indexical records of a traumatic event. On March 11, 2011, a devastating earthquake and tsunami swept over Japan's west coast. In response to the enormous destruction left in its wake, volunteers launched the initiative Memory Salvage, an ongoing community project in Miyagi Prefecture aimed at digitizing and restoring lost family photos. More than one thousand volunteers retrieved 750,000 photographs, of which approximately 400,000 were returned to their respective owners.

4.2

Of the 750,000 photographs recovered by the Memory Salvage initiative in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami which devastated western Japan in 2011, many of the images were too severely damaged to be salvaged.
In response, the artist Munemasa Takahashi established the *Lost & Found Project* as a collective visual repository. These photographs bear a visceral trace of the lives of the people depicted, while also highlighting the care and compassion of the volunteers. They demonstrate photography's dual power: as a tool for preservation and as a means to commemorate those no longer with us.

Presence and absence manifest in stirring ways, as the processes of collecting, organizing, washing, and drying literally inscribe the touch of the volunteers into the photographic surface. This collective body of images forms a record that is both ephemeral and archival, rendering the departed visible and allowing us to connect with the unseen presences that linger in these reclaimed images.

1980 in Tokyo, Japan
lives and works in Tokyo, Japan

KAY HASSAN

South African artist Kay Hassan frequently draws upon found materials, combining aspects of mechanical reproduction and personal intervention. His large-scale "paper constructions" are made from salvaged posters, such as Black Label and Coca-Cola, which the artist develops into new works.

These material transformations speak to the daily struggles of residents of inner-city Johannesburg. Hassan creates imposing portraits by shredding billboard paper and reassembling tattered scraps of commercial advertisements. He explains that these portraits and their techniques are inspired by the people of Johannesburg, who have lived a world in which "our lives have always been torn and put together – people have always been pushed around. You see it in the streets, ... those eyes, the way they look at you." In these works, Hassan weaves together multiple trajectories of displacement, reconnecting them using motifs and materials reclaimed from the social fabric of migratory experiences.

1956 in Johannesburg, South Africa
lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa

4.3

NEGATIVES

Kay Hassan
Negatives 1–6, 2006
Installation, piece #3
Polaroid negatives
Promised Gift of Artur Walther to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE INSTALLATION

In this installation, Hassan creates a layered field of leftovers from Polaroid backings and negatives, that reference photographic passbooks.

These standardized identification photographs once regulated the status, movements, and racial classification of the South African population under Apartheid. Many are over- or under-exposed, with faces further occluded by Hassan's intricate assemblages. The work builds a layered space that echoes the accumulation of vernacular images we encounter in everyday live. Discarded outside government office buildings – where itinerant photographers produced the quick identification photos required for official documents – these remnants form a collection of "haunted" source materials.

MARTINA BACIGALUPO

Martina Bacigalupo is an Italian photojournalist whose work investigates the visual dynamics between the African Continent and Europe. After studying philosophy and literature in Genoa, she moved to Burundi, East Africa, where she spent ten years working as a freelance photographer, collaborating with magazines, foundations, and international organisations.

1978 in Genoa, Italy
lives and works in Paris, France

4.4

GULU REAL ART STUDIO

Martina Bacigalupo
Gulu Real Art Studio, 2011–12
52 chromogenic prints with rectangular cut-outs
Promised Gift of the Walther Family Foundation to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE WORK

Identity photos are a crucial element in the daily lives of the citizens of Gulu, Uganda, where more than half of the population has been displaced by on-going conflict and civil war. At Gulu Real Art Studio, photographer Obal Denis produced the standardized ID pictures required for job and pass-port applications by cutting the clients' faces out of conventional full-length portraits and discarding the rest of the print.

In 2011, while working for an NGO in East Africa, Bacigalupo began collecting Denis's discarded photo fragments. The cutout faces in the images accentuated the sitters, poses, gestures and dress in ways that contradicted the function of the identification photos from which they originated. Without the faces that anchored them, these passport-sized images demand a different mode of interaction. They ask us to fabulate and reimagine the lives, relations, motivations, and aspirations of the individuals who once sat for them. This imaginative vernacular archive, born from bureaucratic practices of identification, contains multiple layers of subtle and latent information. Yet to access these deeper layers we must look beyond what is immediately visible and "listen" closely to the other stories these images tell.

CHAPTER V
TASTING, TOUCHING, FEELING

What do we find
when we feel,
listen,
smell,
touch, and
taste photography?

How do photographs awaken
or stimulate our senses?

Our access to the world is mediated by our senses. While sight may seem to give us privileged access to the world around us, our knowledge of it is influenced by smell, touch, hearing, and taste, as well as by the many other responses and relations that define how we inhabit our surroundings. These myriad forms of sensory contact form the conceptual core of the artworks featured in this section.

Following a period of introspection, artist Cang Xin chose to focus on taste as a source of connection. His *Communication Series* (1996–2006) focuses on the tongue as a sensitive contact point with a world, reflecting the importance of taste in Chinese culture. In Felipe Romero Beltrán's sound installation *A Body That Speaks As a Bird* (2025) we hear intimate conversations about the censorship of natural sounds in everyday vocabulary— sounds that, in urban Colombia, were labeled 'uncivilized' as part of efforts to 're-educate' Indigenous and migrant communities.

Diving deep into research and taking case studies from historic archives as reference points, Ana María Gómez López deploys her body as a site of experiment, exploration, and multisensorial comprehension. Continuously negotiating and pushing the lines of physical limitation, she renders her body into a landscape of the unseen. Like Gómez López and Cang, Song Dong and RongRong all test the limits of sensorial comprehension, as they renegotiate the boundaries of what is perceptible, what is known, and where pain begins. They excavate the unseen that resides in the body, using the camera as a portal into their journeys and reflections.

BEIJING EAST VILLAGE COLLECTIVE / CANG XIN

The Beijing East Village collective emerged in the wake of the Tiananmen protests, settling in a poor district in East Beijing. Centered on performance art, the group used collective action and the ephemeral nature of performance as both a shield against political repression and a relatively secure outlet for dissident expression.

Their practice blurred the boundaries between art and life, documentary and ephemeral processes, appearance and disappearance. Photography and video were integral to their work, helping to establish these mediums as central to Chinese contemporary art after 1990. The movement ended in 1994, following a police raid and evictions.

Key members included Cang Xin, Yingmei Duan, Gao Yang, Li Guomin, Ma Liuming, Ma Zongyin, RongRong, Tan Yeguang, Wang Shihua, Xu Shan, Zhang Binbin, Zhang Huan, Zhu Ming, and Zuoxiao Zuzhou.

1967 in Baotou, China
lives and works in Beijing, China

5.1

TO ADD ONE METER TO AN ANONYMOUS MOUNTAIN

Cang Xin
To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain, 1995
Chromogenic print
Promised Gift of Artur Walther to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE

A canonical work of the 1990s Beijing East Village collective, *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995) documents a collective performance organized by Zhang Huan and the writer Kong Bu.

Carried out by ten artists – including Cang Xin, Ma Liuming, Zhang Huan, and Zhu Ming – the video recording of the event shows the artists arriving on an empty hilltop on Mount Miaofeng, which lies just west of the old city center of Dong Sanhuan, Beijing. They remove their clothes and then step one by one onto a pair of scales. Their individual weights determine their place in the human pyramid they are about to form, with the heaviest artists positioned at the bottom. The resulting stack of naked, unidentifiable bodies appears at once enigmatic and elemental, harmonizing with, and blending into, the undulating contours of the mountain landscape.

SONG DONG

Working with everyday materials and ephemera, Song Dong explores themes of memory, self-expression, impermanence, and the fleeting nature of human endeavor. Introduced to painting and calligraphy at a young age, he later studied fine arts at Capital Normal University in Beijing (1985–89). His practice is grounded in processes of destabilization and transformation, both personal and collective.

Song's investigations into impermanence led to performances that he continues to revisit in new iterations. In *Water Diary* (1995–), for example, he records his daily reflections by writing with water on stone – expressions that vanish as the liquid evaporates.

Since the late 1990s, Song's conceptual rigor has established him as a key figure in Beijing's contemporary art scene, where his work reflects on the dynamism of China's rapidly changing cultural landscape. His performances and iterative processes are documented in serial, frontal photographs that underscore the cyclical – and potentially endless – nature of his actions. While the gestures themselves are ephemeral, their traces endure in memory and image, transforming momentary acts into ritual.

1966 in Beijing, China
lives and works in Beijing, China

5.2

STAMPING THE WATER

Song Dong
Stamping the Water
(Performance in the Lhasa River, Tibet), 1996
36 chromogenic prints
Courtesy Artur Walther, New York

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE

Stamping the Water (1996) documents a site-specific performance in the Lhasa River in Tibet. Standing in the river for an hour, Song Dong repeatedly stamped its moving surface with an archaic seal bearing the Chinese character for "water".

The act, of course, left no mark on the water, but the futile gesture was recorded on thirty-six exposures of a single roll of color film, which determined the duration of the piece and defined the cinematic sequence of the presentation. The syncopated movements of the artist as he sits waist-deep in the river, together with the conceptual act of impressing the seal onto the flowing surface, evoke the spirituality, permanence, and fixity of the sacred river.

EADWEARD MUYBRIDGE

Born in Kingston upon Thames, England, Muybridge moved to San Francisco in 1852 and began his career in landscape photography. He later turned to motion studies, using multiple cameras to capture movement. In 1878, his groundbreaking photographs proved that a galloping horse lifts all four hooves off the ground. A year later, he invented the zoopraxiscope, an early projector that brought sequential images to life.

Muybridge's innovations in shutter design and film development laid the foundations for modern cinema. He developed innovative shutter techniques and experimented with film-developing chemicals, lectured widely, and continued to study movement until his death in England in 1904.

1830 in Kingston upon Thames, UK
1904 in Kingston upon Thames, UK

5.3

ANIMAL LOCOMOTION

Eadweard Muybridge
Movements. Female. Plate 188. Dancing (fancy), from the series Animal Locomotion, 1887
Photogravure
Courtesy Artur Walther, New York

ABOUT THE SERIES

Beginning in 1872, Eadweard Muybridge conducted bold experiments with time-lapse imagery and photographic studies of motion. By designing camera shutters that would freeze movement in a single plate he was able to capture sequential photographs of animals and humans in motion, establishing himself as an early pioneer of motion-picture projection. Muybridge's principal purpose in compiling this encyclopedia of poses was to provide models for painters and sculptors, depicting detailed animal and human forms, naked and clothed, engaged in a wide range of dynamic activities. While he was determined to isolate or freeze the succession of movements, the most spectacular outcome of Muybridge's studies was to make innovative sequential still images appear to move, paving the way for the development of motion pictures.



Fig. 5:
Unidentified photographer (German), "Solar and lunar eclipse sequences", 1912–64.
Courtesy the Walther Family Foundation, New York

UNIDENTIFIED PHOTOGRAPHER
(German)

SOLAR AND LUNAR ECLIPSE SEQUENCE

5.4

Unidentified photographer (German)
"Solar and lunar eclipse sequences", 1912–64
Gelatin silver prints with date stamps and handwritten annotations
Courtesy the Walther Family Foundation, New York

ABOUT THE WORK

Solar eclipse is a celestial event that fundamentally transforms our perception. When the moon aligns with the Earth and sun, it casts a vast shadow on our planet. Temporarily obscuring our source of light and interrupting the usual rhythm of day and night, solar eclipses make us aware that our perception of reality results from and depends on a celestial constellation that produces the specific conditions of seeing. This small archive of photographs was apparently compiled by a German scientist studying solar and lunar eclipses. It records three different solar eclipses (seven photos taken in Bückeburg, Germany, on April 17, 1912, fourteen taken in the Canary Islands, Spain, on October 2, 1959, and four taken at Monte Senario near Florence, Italy, on February 15, 1961) and two lunar eclipses (six images taken July 6–7, 1963, and seven taken on June 25, 1964). In dialogue with the experimental practice of Colombian artist Ana María Gómez López, the solar and lunar eclipse sequences manifest and symbolize photography's negotiation of the unseen, pushing its physical, scientific, and celestial limitations.

JULES BERNARD LUYS

During his early career in medicine, Jules Bernard Luys was regarded as a brilliant anatomist, noted for his careful studies of the brain and the central nervous system. He was one of the first to identify specific regions of the brain and their functions, and to apply this knowledge to neuropsychiatry. As Luys's research turned to mental illness, he was highly influenced by pseudoscientific theories of hysteria and its treatment by hypnotism. The role of vision as a supposedly superior sense played a key role in his experiments.

Luys held public demonstrations of such experiments in an attempt to prove his theory that hypnotized subjects could be cured by merely being shown various medicines – what he called "the action of medicine at a distance." This spurious idea was later proven to be an outright fraud, with the subjects deliberately miming fantastic poses, and Luys was widely discredited by the scientific community in the last decade of his life.

1828 in Paris, France
1897 in Divonne-les-Bains, France

5.5

EMOTIONS IN HYPNOTIZED SUBJECTS

Jules Bernard Luys
Les émotions chez les sujets en état d'hypnotisme
(Emotions in Hypnotized Subjects), 1887
Book
Courtesy Artur Walther, New York

ABOUT THE BOOK

The conflicted histories of "Hypnosis" and "Hysteria" of female patients invite us to reflect on how photographic evidence has served as a tool in the pseudoscientific and staged production of illnesses and healing processes, reinforcing gendered roles and hierarchies.

In his 1887 report *Les émotions chez les sujets en état d'hypnotisme*, the famous anatomist Jules Bernard Luys used photographic portraits of female patients diagnosed with 'hysteria' to illustrate ecstatic emotions and demonstrate the potential of hypnosis as treatment. Convinced that hypnotized subjects could be cured by merely being shown various medicines, Luys orchestrated sessions in which his patients performed exaggerated and eccentric poses for the camera. Exposed as fabrications, these images eventually discredited him as a charlatan.

The album underscores how vision has been fictionalized as a 'superior' sense, staged, and constructed as a mechanism of control deeply entwined with the history of photography.

HARDIN J. CALLITHAN

FUKUOKA ALBUM

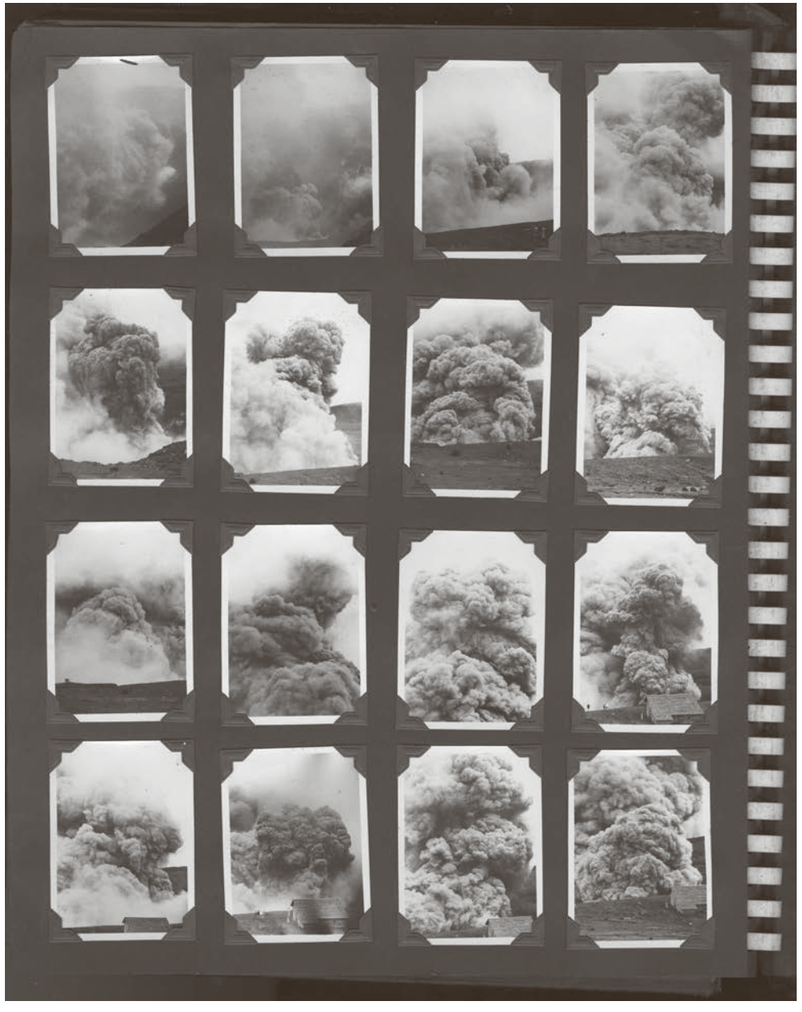
Hardin J. Callithan (American, 1908–2001), compiler
"Fukuoka Album", 1947
Homemade photograph album with gelatin silver prints
Courtesy the Walther Family Foundation, New York

5.6

ABOUT THE ALBUM

This 1947 photo album composed of over 450 images documents an American serviceman's postwar experiences in Fukuoka, a southern Japanese city devastated by World War II firebombing two years earlier. The small snapshots show everyday street scenes, labor demonstrations, dance performances, and sporting events. These two pages record an excursion to the Mount Aso volcano, which erupted in May 1947 and remained active through September of the same year. The sequence of images depicts the changing shapes of volcanic clouds, hinting at the unseen inner activities of the mountain. These images invite us to engage with a hidden sphere of transformative processes, inaccessible to the human eye.

Fig. 6:
Hardin J. Callithan (American, 1908–2001), compiler, "Fukuoka Album", 1947. Courtesy The Walther Family Foundation, New York.



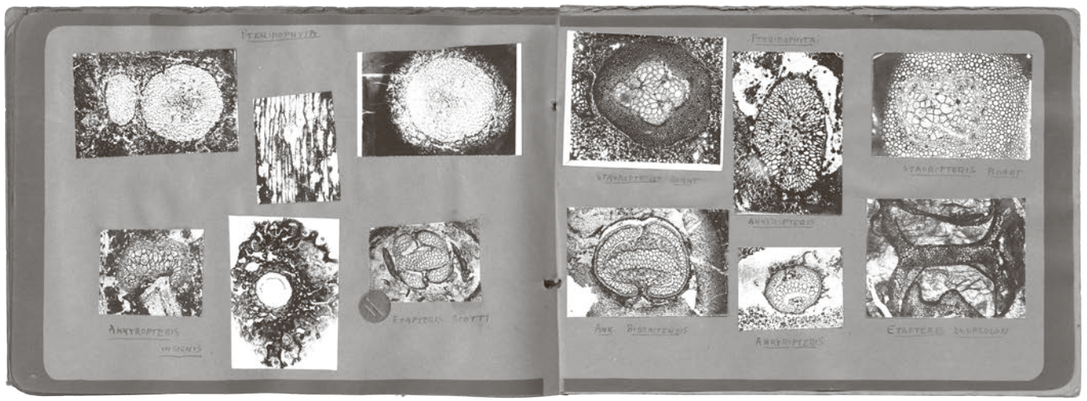


Fig. 7:
William T. Gordon, attr., “Paleo Botany: Photo-Microphotographs”, c. 1912. Courtesy The Walther Family Foundation, New York.

WILLIAM T. GORDON

PALEO BOTANY

5.7

William T. Gordon, attr.
“Paleo Botany: Photo-Microphotographs”, c. 1912
Album with gelatin silver prints and handwritten annotations
Courtesy the Walther Family Foundation, New York

ABOUT THE ALBUM

William Thomas Gordon was Professor Emeritus of Geology at King‘s College in the University of London. Much of his research and nearly all his writings were on palaeontological subjects, but he had a considerable knowledge of mineralogy and was a dedicated compiler of both minerals and photography. Paleobotany conducts research focused on various aspects of plants in the geologic past—their global diversity, evolution, geography, structure, morphology, and ecology, as well as the stewardship of the collections for future generations. This collection of microphotographs pictures different species of plants, preserved across time as they remained hidden in between layers of stone. The indexical nature and image-like quality of these organic traces seems to reflect the nature of photography, as the abstract patterns and shapes resonate with the appearance of chemical processes of analogue photographic prints, such as the surfacing of silver salts.

1884 in Glasgow, Scotland
1950 in London, England

ANA MARÍA GÓMEZ LÓPEZ

Ana María Gómez López's artistic practice centers on the creation of durational works and images employing corporeal and lens-based media. Through self-experimentation, she creates alternative anatomical configurations, broadening the concepts of physical selfhood, bio-political autonomy, and ecological thinking. Her practice centers on definitions of biological life, legacies of utopian thought, and archival research in the history of science.

In her practice, Gómez López revisits cases from medical and scientific history and appropriates the practices of nineteenth-century science experiments. Diving deep into research and using case studies from historic archives as reference points, the artist employs her own body as a site of experiment, exploration, and multisensorial comprehension. Continuously negotiating and pushing the lines of physical limitation, she renders her body into a landscape of the unseen.

1981 in Cali, Colombia
lives and works in Amsterdam, Netherlands

5.8

INOCULATE

Ana María Gómez López
Inoculate, 2025
Pigment prints, archival glass negative plates, ocular germination kit
Courtesy the artist and Herbarium Hamburgense

ABOUT THE WORK

For *Inoculate* (2025), Gómez López introduced a ~~begonia~~ seed within her tear duct using an ophthalmological plug designed for collecting lachrymal fluid: a device often prescribed for individuals with dry eyes. After approximately two weeks, a miniscule seedling emerged. The artist titled this process Inoculate, a term that is now used in the context of medical immunization, but which originally described the horticultural process of grafting a bud or shoot of one plant into another, deriving from the Latin root in oculus—in the eye.

A photograph of the ocular germination is presented alongside all the materials required to create this image, from ~~begonia~~ seed specimens and a glass ampoule filled with the artist's tears to a kit containing all the medical instruments and dispositifs for this project. An instruction manual on how to carry out this self-experiment is also presented and available as a mail-art project. This how-to guide is available in Esperanto–the most wide-spread artificial language, created by a 19th c. Polish ophthalmologist–as well as Aymara, Dutch, English, French, German, Guarani, Kreyòl, Nahuatl, Portuguese, Runasimi (Quechua) and Spanish.

Archival glass negative plates of ~~begonia~~ specimens from the Herbarium Hamburguense are also shown as part of Gómez López's broader research into the history of ~~Begonia~~ciae, from its collection by Prussian scientists going all the way back to pre-Columbian knowledge of this plant species (including its therapeutic properties for treating ocular afflictions). By crossing out this word, Gómez López underscores the contradiction of its ancestral knowledge by Nahuatl-speaking civilizations and its 17th c. taxonomic naming by French monk and botanist Charles Plumier in honor of Michel Bégon, former colonial official of Saint-Domingue, now present-day Haiti.

RONGRONG

In 1993, RongRong moved to Dashanzhuang, later known as Beijing's East Village. Shortly after his arrival, he met many of the artists and musicians who were to become his primary subjects in a signature series of works.

He told his sister in 1994: *"Now I use Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming and other East Village residents as my models. I am not only recording their performances. I also have my own ideas and opinions. I think that holding a camera in my hand enables me to move away from reality."*
Over the next five years – continuing even after he had moved out of the East Village – RongRong became the preeminent documentarian and trusted collaborator of the neighborhood's resident performance artists.

1968 Zhangzhou, Fujian Province, China
lives and works in Beijing, China

5.9

EAST VILLAGE PORTFOLIO

RongRong
1997 No. 16 (Zhang Huan, "To Raise the Water Level in a Fish Pond"), 1997
Gelatin silver print

RongRong
1994 No. 2.1 (Zhang Huan, "12 Square Meters"), 1994
Gelatin silver print

RongRong
1995 No. 65 (Zhang Huan), 1995
Gelatin silver print

RongRong
1998 No. 6 (Zhu Ming, "Performances No. 6 and 7"), 1998
Gelatin silver print

RongRong
1994 No. 81 (Zhu Ming), 1994
Gelatin silver print

RongRong
1994 No. 83 (Zhu Ming), 1994
Gelatin silver print

RongRong
1996 No. 21 (Ma Liuming, "Fish Child"), 1996
Gelatin silver print

From the series *East Village Portfolio* (1993–98).
Courtesy Artur Walther, New York

Works are listed from left to right.

ABOUT THE SERIES

RongRong's *East Village Portfolio* (1993–98) carefully documents the physical intensity and deliberate transgression of societal norms in Beijing's performance art of the late 1990s. In *1995 No. 65 (Zhang Huan)*, we see the artist Zhang Huan make contact with the city's surfaces, pressing forehead and penis against a wall and casting a slim shadow on the sunlit walls of a narrow street.

To Raise the Water Level in a Fish Pond, a photograph taken two years later, shows a group of artists and young men standing in water, using their bodies' presence to collectively elevate the water's surface. This work exemplifies how presence, feeling, contact, and collaboration became central strategies for artists such as Zhang Huan, Zhu Ming, and Ma Liuming, whose practices changed the trajectory of Chinese contemporary art.

CANG XIN

Cang Xin studied at the Tianjin Academy of Music and took up painting in 1991. In 1993 he moved to Beijing's East Village and became active in the performance activities that flourished there. He subsequently incorporated shamanism and Daoist philosophy into his performances and photographs. This approach is evident in his *Communication Series* (1996–2006), in which he is shown touching a variety of objects with his tongue in the hopes of making contact with the spirits that he believes inhabit all inanimate forms.

1967 in Suihua, China
lives and works in Chengdu, China

5.10

5.10 COMMUNICATION SERIES

Cang Xin
Communication Series No. 2, 1999
11 chromogenic prints
Courtesy Artur Walther, New York
Promised Gift of Artur Walther to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE SERIES

After the dissolution of the Beijing East Village group, Cang Xin withdrew for a year, leading a solitary, depression-filled existence. He began the *Communication Series* (1996–2006) to reestablish a sense of connection to his surroundings and chose taste as his way to reconnect to the world. Devising what he regarded as a shamanistic ritual, Cang used his tongue to touch numerous objects around him, hoping to discover their spiritual essence.

His attention gradually turned to items with a direct relation to Chinese traditional culture: an ancient compass used in fengshui rituals or a sheet of calligraphy-covered paper. As the project broadened, Cang began to visit historical Chinese sites such as the Great Wall, the Temple of Heaven, and Tiananmen Square. In each location, he lay down and touched the ground with his tongue, seeking direct communion with the spirit of place.

Reflecting on the work, the artist explains:
"I think it's very precious, this desire to lick and experience things with the mouth. It begins as an impulse that is instinctual, but it's gradually closed off by society as one grows up. My work tries to rediscover that kind of pure experience."

FELIPE ROMERO BELTRÁN

Photographer Felipe Romero Beltrán works between Madrid, Paris, and Bogotá and has for years collaborated closely with young migrant men to create highly choreographed images reminiscent of Old Master paintings. Capturing these individuals in carefully composed poses, his works explore gestures, touches, and configurations that convey both intimacy and tension, vulnerability and strength, dependence and self-determination.

Beltrán bridges individual experiences with structural questions through a communal process of portraiture photography. Moving away from stereotypical representations of young refugees, he focuses on personal relationships and interactions and the subtle negotiation of social codes. At the same time, he renders visible the slow time of bureaucratic processes – time that drags, lingers and is measured in the rhythm of push-ups. Through photography, film, and sound works, Beltrán expresses the complexities of experiencing displacement over time.

1992 in Bogotá, Colombia
Lives and works in Paris, France

5.11

5.11 A BODY THAT SPEAKS AS A BIRD

A Body That Speaks As a Bird, 2025
Sound installation, manuscripts
New commission for the exhibition

ABOUT THE INSTALLATION

A Body That Speaks As a Bird (2025) explores Colombia's twentieth-century shift from rural to urban life, when over 70% of the rural population moved to major cities and manuals on how to behave were produced to facilitate their integration and enforced assimilation into their new communities. Alongside economic push factors, armed conflicts and violence were among the forces that drove indigenous and rural populations to urban spaces.

This violent confluence of influence – exacerbated by colonization – caused the loss of many indigenous languages, reducing the rich multilingualism of Colombia. *A Body That Speaks As a Bird* evokes the erased vocabularies of indigenous languages, some of which included sounds from the natural world. Through a sound piece featuring conversations in rural accents about these behavioral guides, Beltrán reveals tensions between rural and urban identities and the loss of traditional voices and sounds in the city. Referencing Manuel Antonio Carreño's *Manual of Civility and Good Manners*, the work questions what defines 'civility' in urban culture by contrasting displaced natural sounds and rural voices referencing the city's cultural norms.

CHAPTER VI
SENSING TIME

What does time feel like?

Do humans share a sense of time
with other species?

What does it feel like to see
the world through
the senses of other
species?

Marking the passage of time is often understood as a rational capacity unique to humanity. Indeed, calculating duration and change over time is a hallmark of what it means to be human. Yet our perception and control of time have had dire effects on other species, as a consequence of capital accumulation, urbanization, (de-)industrialization, and natural resource extraction. The result is an intensifying threat to the fragile ecosystems we share with countless other inhabitants of the planet. What does this look and feel like to those other species? How do they experience this ever-accelerating and simultaneously ever-collapsing sense of time?

This final chapter of the exhibition asks us to see, think, and feel from the perspective of our companion species, inviting us to live in 'dog time'. Yang Fudong's *East of Que Village* (2007) shows us the world from the perspective of canines forced to reckon with the consequences of human sprawl and depopulation. The immersive installation confronts us with an alternative temporality – one that requires us to slow down amidst rapid change and to think beyond the needs of our own species toward a deeper understanding of trans-species interdependence.

YANG FUDONG

A self-taught photographer and video artist, Yang Fudong emerged in the 1990s as a visionary practitioner of the moving image.

With his background in Chinese oil painting, his videos and films exploring modern and traditional representations of China are characterized by a visual language of overlapping narratives that deliberately disrupt time in ways that create dream-like mysteries. His work reflects his passion for cinematography and often plays with Film Noir aesthetics, which he uses to address socio-cultural anxieties that emerge in a society dramatically recalibrating its material values and adjusting to rapid change.

1971 Beijing, China
lives and works in Shanghai, China

6.1

EAST OF QUE VILLAGE

Yang Fudong
East of Que Village, 2007
6-channel video installation (black and white), 20'50"
Promised Gift of the Walther Family Foundation to
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ABOUT THE FILM

One of Yang Fudong's most dystopian films to date, *East of Que Village* (2007) channels a growing feeling of isolation in contemporary China as communities are scattered, rural villages dissolved, and individuals grapple with the consequences as an existential threat to their survival.

Between panoramas and close-up shots, the viewer follows a pack of untamed and untethered dogs through a hostile, ghostly landscape left behind by its former inhabitants. The film depicts a desperate struggle for survival that questions the impact of human systems and their rapid transformation from a trans-species perspective.

The sequences of villages and landscapes emphasise key themes in the artist's cinematic work, such as the tension between the past and the future, and the transitions between presence and absence, indifference and engagement, and remembrance and forgetting.

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INTO THE UNSEEN – THE WALTHER COLLECTION
Hall for Contemporary Art, Deichtorhallen Hamburg
24 October 2025 — 26 April 2026

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Fig. 1 (Cover):
Jo Ractliffe, *Microlite,* from the series *reShooting Diana,* 1990-1995 © Jo Ractliffe. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Amsterdam
Promised Gift of Artur Walther to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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