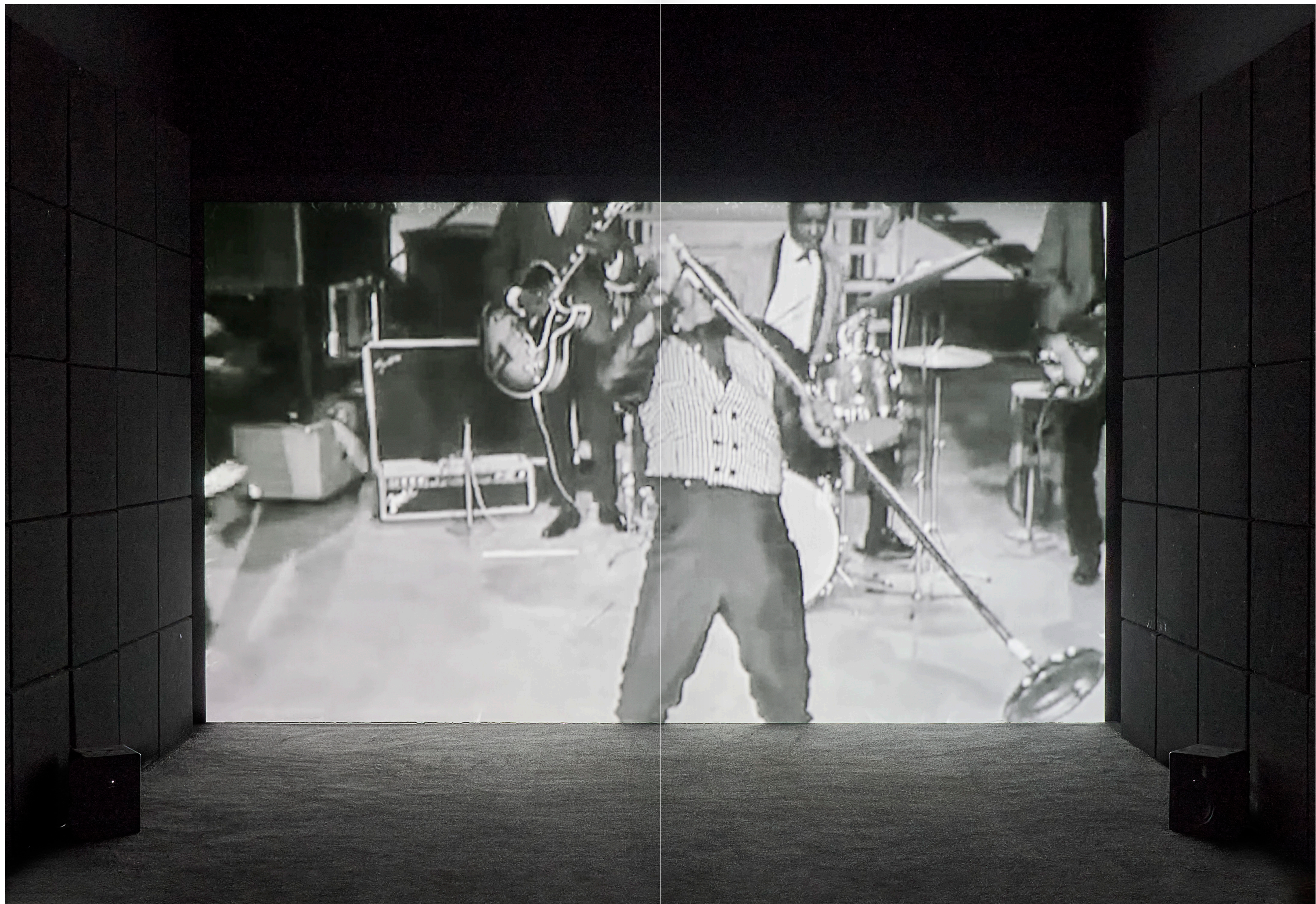


# Deep Water







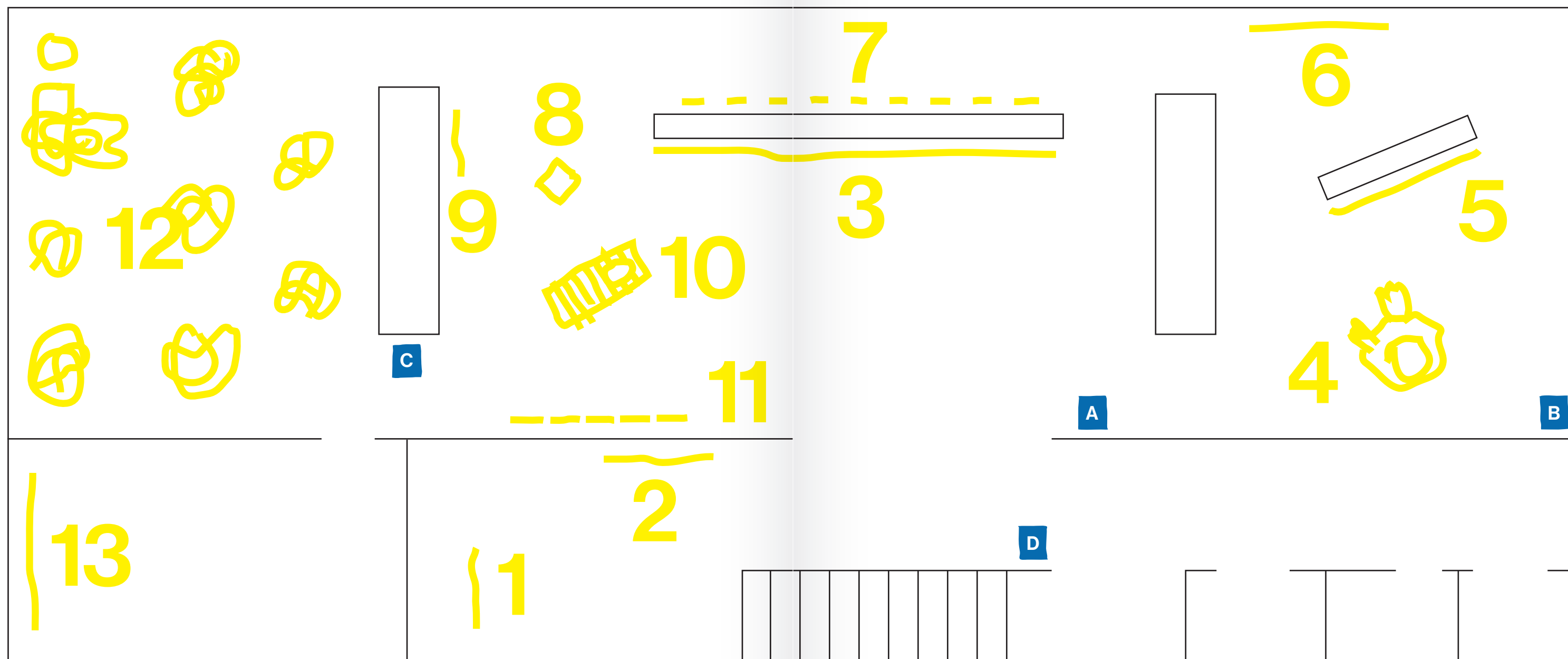




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- D** Koos Dalstra and Marion van Wijk [eds.] (2017), *Bas Jan Ader: Discovery File 143/76*, New Documents.





## *The poet is the guide*

Adel Abdessemed (A.A.) joins Josh Ginsburg (J.G.) and Sara de Beer (S.d.B.) in conversation towards the exhibition *Deep Water* at A4 Arts Foundation, Wednesday 19 November 2025. Translation support from Lisa Rey-Galiay and Anna Otz.

A.A. They say – even today, they continue to say – that invasion by immigrants is the problem. For me, the title *Deep Water* evokes that there is no problem with the sea, with the wave nor the storm. Europe itself is at fault – the failure of the Enlightenment, the corruption of its ideas. Western Europe has gone from humanism to cowardice; it is one of my biggest angers. We have a problem with humanity. Yet, when words like ‘shame’ are used, these are applied linearly, to the life ‘before’ emigration: yet we know people are escaping from one death to another death, arriving from one hell to work for a slave wage, living to be burned and exploited. This creates the conditions for recruitment but this is not the story that is told. Instead, the narrative is that we have an immigration problem. This is a tragedy – the tragedy of unhumanity, revealed worldwide for instance with the young boy Alan Kurdi, found dead on a Turkish beach in 2015.

The artist is the witness of the tragedies. As an artist I do not want to hide the fire, I want to be close to it, to touch it. The artist shows what is happening, with lucidity and poetry.

J.G. This was the first artwork I imagined for *Deep Water*, the anchor work. Firstly, it commands our attention to the fact that we are in crisis. And then, it demands we look at the role of the artist. You are present in this work – standing at the bow, making a case for the role of an artist in the face of tragedy. Is that right?

A.A. *Jam Proximus Ardet, la dernière vidéo* is inspired by Murnau filming *Tabou* in 1931 with his antique camera, and Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1964). In my photograph *Je Suis Innocent*, I am standing on my street downstairs covered in fire, I am ablaze. In *Jam Proximus Ardet*, the fire is behind. The artist, untouched by the fire, is a guide. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante chose Virgil, a poet, to be his guide for the Underworld.

J.G. What changes for you in the intervening decade, from the artist being alight in *Je Suis Innocent* in 2012 to the artist being in front of the fire in *Jam Proximus Ardet, la dernière vidéo* in 2021? What is the shift?

A.A. Let me see, how do I say this? *La première, j'ai compris la donne, et la deuxième, je continue*. First, I understand the deal, the information. Second, I continue.

J.G. The first is to become, and then the second, to use this knowledge in some way. You absorbed and acted. Can you think of an artwork in your earlier life that made you believe the artist could do this work? Do you believe the artist has a role to play in genuinely shifting consciousness in the face of these shames?

A.A. Perhaps an artist is his own enemy. When creativity becomes our conscience, artists become messengers, at the minimum. We won't see an art piece taking over a government, but an



artist can be a revolutionary, brilliant, through his medium becoming a witness of the time. Now, it is about being a responsible artist, understanding your time. The artist can take risks and challenge himself every day, non-stop. I think, if I have anything to say at all then this is it: we have to take risks.

S.d.B. Did you feel afraid making this work? It tells us how really dangerous the situation is, just by looking at it.

A.A. I need the experience. This is important for me. Thinking without knowledge is nothing. You need both. Without this, there is no philosophy. The seed coat must rot and die to allow the germination to happen and the plant to grow. Jam Proximus Ardet, the line in the title of this work, inspired by Virgil's poem Aeneid, signifies that the true danger has really hit home, it is right here. For an elder's house to burn, a father's house, this is as if one's own house is burning.

S.d.B. This is ever more valuable as we live with less truth, more fakes and simulations, where lies and tricks are acceptable forms of exchange and social currency.

A.A. Listening to a symphony will change your ears. Rimbaud's poem, *The Drunken Boat* (1871), can change your heart. You commit to the journey. If we don't know art, how can we change? In 2006, when I was working with a lion in the streets of Paris for my photograph

*Séparation*, I got too close to the lion. I wanted to experience truth, the distance between being human and being a wild animal.

S.d.B. The title for the exhibition, *Deep Water*, is borrowed from a 2006 documentary about Donald Crowhurst, a Sunday sailor seeking fame and fortune who decided he had what it took to circumnavigate the globe without stopping, which hadn't yet been achieved in 1968 when the *Sunday Times* held the Golden Globe Race. Setting sail from the UK, Crowhurst immediately fell into trouble. Unable to continue to sail, he began to keep a ledger of lies, falsifying his position to appear as if he was still in the race. He was cheating, communicating these lies as official coordinates. Josh was struck by the shame Crowhurst was experiencing: shame as fuel to keep the lie alive until the lie is everything and there's no way back. His and my interpretations of Crowhurst's motivations differ somewhat...

What I see are parallel trajectories in this room, the one of the committed cheater who is doomed, and that of the artist – the storyteller who punctures lies by offering the truth through story.

A.A. The lie is when you take something simple and you make it very complex. This is very easy to do. What is most difficult, even in art, is to take complex things and make them simple.

J.G. The gesture you offer through this work is a story that is very easy

to understand. It is compelling because it is so distilled, presented so clearly as to need no interpreter. The communication is one-to-one between the viewer and the work.

S.d.B. Compare the scale of this encounter to the screen size of a phone in your hand. Here, we are immersed, with no room at the sidelines for interference from false witnesses, for being swayed.

J.G. Could we make a case here for poetry being the truest of all communications?

A.A. Poetry is the modelling clay of the imagination. The story has always, through the ages, been the medium through which truth has been communicated. In Borges we can read about fiction being the vehicle for truth. Kafka tells us we need go nowhere but to the end of our toes to feel the ecstasy underfoot, all the world is just there. But you know, there's a line that is said to be the greatest in all poetry. *You need to change your life*. Just that. Nothing more. When you have a true encounter with a work of art, it is the message you receive. *You need to change your life!*

J.G. If your neighbour's house is burning, and yours is likely to burn, do you think that we are burning?

A.A. Humans are part of nature but they are the most fierce animals.

S.d.B. Your expression on the boat,

arms crossed, remains determined, stoic, also calm.

A.A. The artist is the captain of his destiny. The poem by Donne would work very well here, *Pour qui sonne le glas*, I am unsure of the English translation...

S.d.B. *For whom the bell tolls*. It can serve as the epilogue to this conversation...

*No man is an island,  
Entire of itself.  
Each is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thine own  
Or of thine friend's were.  
Each man's death diminishes me,  
For I am involved in mankind.  
Therefore, send not to know  
For whom the bell tolls,  
It tolls for thee.  
(John Donne, 1624)*







# Marcel Broodthaers

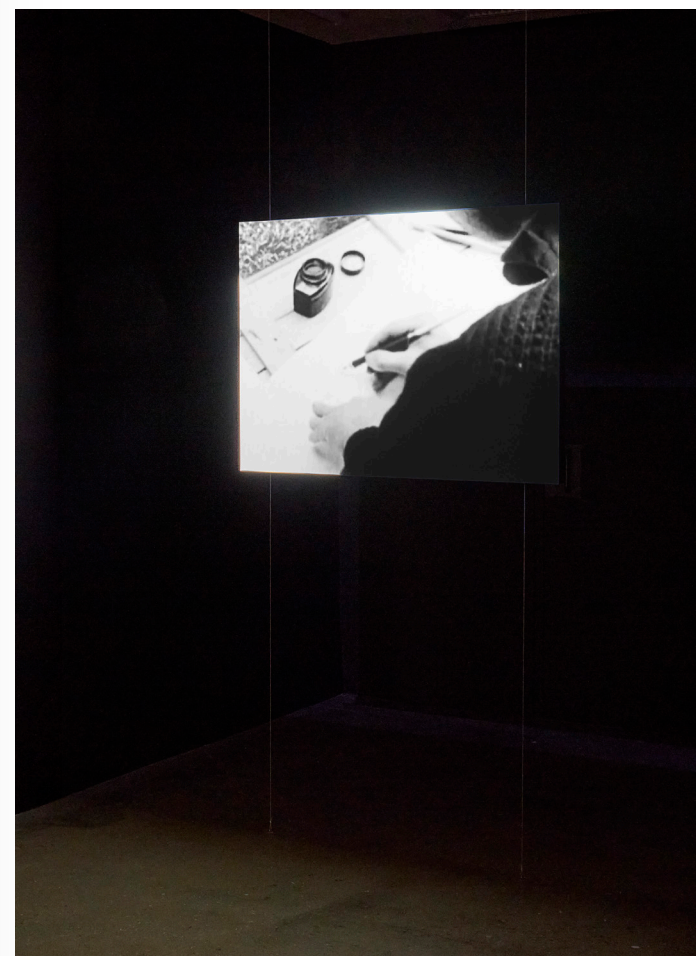
b.1924, Brussels, Belgium; d.1976, Cologne, Germany

## ***La Pluie (projet pour un texte)*, 1969** **Single-channel video transferred from** **16 mm film (black-and-white, silent)** **2 min**

The following text lies inside the cover of Marcel Broodthaers' *A Voyage in the North Sea* (1973–1974).

*Before cutting the pages the reader had better beware of the knife he will be wielding for the purpose. Sooner than make such a gesture I would prefer him to hold back that weapon, dagger, piece of office equipment which, swift as lighting, might turn into an indefinite sky. It is up to the attentive reader to find out what devilish motive inspired this book's publication. To that end he may make use, if need be, of select readings from today's prolific output...*

After evoking the spectre of the knife (a letter opener in the event that the pages stick together? The taunting critic who lies within each reader?) and tooting his horn as a maker (the droll *prolific output*) Broodthaers announces: "These pages must not be cut," frustrating any ambitions to commit book violence that he may just have incited in his reader. Broodthaers was a poet first, an artist only later. His final collection of poems, *Pense-bête* was published in 1964. Ceasing to be a poet, he could act out the role of poet (writer, artist, filmmaker, curator) consumed by lofty intentions and frustrated by the uselessness of his endeavours. This plays out in such works as *La Pluie (projet pour un texte)* / *The Rain (project for a text)* (1969) a film emblematic of Broodthaers' engagement with the futility of linguistic meaning-making. As an additive layer of complexity, the film is part of Broodthaers' *Musée d'Art Moderne (Museum of Modern Art)* (1968–1972) cycle of works, in which he takes up the mantle of a museum curator of his fictionalised 'Département des Aigles' (Department of Eagles). Mercurial meaning, the legibility of language, its necessary opacities and imprecisions – those things proper to a poet's vocation – remained abiding through-lines in his conceptual practice, as did the mutual dependency between text and image. Many of his works perform the redaction or concealment of the written word, any sentences



differently obscured or made wholly inaccessible.

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"I hate the movement that shifts the lines," reads a note by Broodthaers' for *The Rain* (project for text) published in the Museum of Modern Art New York's 2016 exhibition catalogue. What then, to make of this filmic conceit of the downpour? The storm upon the artist's head establishes movement as a fact; the ink is fated to 'run'. He continues: "Unless I don't make a film and at the same time accept the value of blank film, the filmmaker's white page, and pray that others will make it." The rain is within and the rain is without. Broodthaers' does not

leave the film blank, nor rely on someone else to do the work but persists to doggedly write with ink-dipped pen into his notebook, awash with falling water, the black pigment lifting from and pooling across the page. It comes to him that a love story, while appealing, would run the risk of advertising the wrong sorts of films – those pornographic, propaganda. This is not a love letter then, to filmmaking. As for conceptual filmmaking, well, he might consider it were it not for the likely outcome: that the film would play the "banal intermediary" subservient to the grand idea. Conceptual art has this effect, one imagines him thinking: the transmission will be flat, the subject diminished, presented as a shadow, the documentary of an idea rather than a thing in and of itself. He ends, "And here I am, cruelly torn between something immobile that has already been written and the comic movement that animates at 24 images per second." It is perhaps incredible that Broodthaers (standing in here for all writers perhaps, all poets, artists, filmmakers – those poor souls working tirelessly to resolve the resolute gap between word and image) persists in his endeavours. His institutional critique professes to be cynical. Shortcomings, vanities, downright hopelessness, common silliness – the art world is all of these things. And yet, there he remains at his makeshift writing desk, still working.

– Translated quotations extracted from the exhibition catalogue, *Marcel Broodthaers* (2016). The Museum of Modern Art: New York.



# Pieter Hugo

b.1976, Johannesburg, South Africa; works in Cape Town, South Africa

## ***Burning bush, Oaxaca de Juárez, 2018*** **Perspex print, lightbox** **138 x 183 x 9 cm**

“My eye is drawn,” the photographer Pieter Hugo writes, “to the peripheral, particularly in Africa, and I negotiate contexts where the cultural nuances of our time are amplified.” Mediating the representation of marginalised people – on the continent and elsewhere – Hugo is attuned to the voyeurism of photography and its claims to realism. “I am of a generation that approaches photography,” he says, “with a keen awareness of the problems inherent in pointing a camera at anything.” In all his photographs, his subjects participate in making their image. Hugo more often works with a large-format camera, which requires a *setting up* of the image, a conversation with his subject, necessitates time spent. As such, his photographs are never covert, seldom spontaneous, but made with the deliberate care the medium demands.

Hugo’s photographic essays have included such various subjects as Liberian boy scouts, people with albinism, Nollywood actors, and Mexican muxe.

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“Mexico has a particular ethos and aesthetic; there is an acceptance that life has no glorious victory, no happy ending,” Hugo writes of *La Cucaracha* (2020), the series from which this photograph is taken. “Humour, ritual, a strong sense of community and an embrace of the inevitable make it possible to live with tragic and often unacceptable situations.” He continues: “Alongside the flamboyance and high-pitched register of this series, there is the

ordinariness of the everyday. I am drawn to the fabulousness of the banal and the banality of the exotic.” Made over the course of two years and four trips to Mexico, the collected photographs record the outsider’s encounter with the country’s cultural landscape, blending photojournalism and magical realism in saturated, sharp-edged compositions. Garish and gritty, Hugo’s series asks after ritual and rites of passage, sex and spirituality, the ambient threat of cartel violence and the performed violence of Catholic pageantry. The body is a recurring feature in many of these photographs – costumed, undressed, at labour, at rest – complemented by interior studies and still lifes, among them this incandescent cactus, rendered literally luminescent in this exhibition as a large-scale lightbox. In image and title, *Burning bush, Oaxaca de Juárez* invokes the story of Moses in the Old Testament, the roadside fire refigured as a divine sign:

*And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. [...] God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. [...] Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.*





# Adel Abdessemed

b.1971 in Constantine, Algeria; works in Paris, France

## *Jam Proximus Ardet, la dernière vidéo*, 2021 Video projection (colour, sound) 1 min 40 sec

“Up and at ‘em – that’s how you attack an unopened fruit...” Adel Abdessemed practices art as the undertaking of radical and truthful acts. This commitment involves risk. Abdessemed has stoked public ire as well as invited institutional banning. The artist’s exhibition was closed early in San Francisco (2008), a work withdrawn in Lyon (2018). In October 2017, the Guggenheim in New York pulled three of his works from the exhibition *Art and China after 1989: Theatre of the World* before its opening. Few artists risk separation from both pillars, audience and patron, in the performance of their duty to hold a mirror to society. Abdessemed refuses to look away, however grotesque the reflection. He went into exile from Algeria in 1994 during the Civil War after the progressive director of his alma mater was murdered by militants on the art school’s steps. Relocating from Lyon to New York to Paris, Abdessemed became an international wanderer, curated prolifically onto the Biennale circuit across multiple iterations in São Paulo, Havana, Venice, Lyon and Gwangju, among others. Often, he recycled materials from the immediate vicinity in which he found himself. Aluminium cans were used to make works like the boat *Queen Mary II* (2007) and his *Mappemonde* series (2010–2014), the latter which removes the differences indicated by national flags and flattens hierarchies between territories by presenting all in the same colours. Abdessemed believes the artist acts as a witness first, without comment, leading beyond the miasma of fear created by media, politicians, working as much with the intimate as with the very large. Nothing less is possible when living in what he terms the age of *un grand cri*, “the great scream”.

*Jam Proximus Ardet, la dernière vidéo* (2021) follows on from Abdessemed appearing to set himself alight in the street below his Paris studio in *Je Suis Innocent* (2012). He refers to himself as “an artist who gets fired up all the time. It’s my drive, really. It is a hot, burning fire. Just like the current world news.” The film witnesses a burning boat at sea. The artist comes into view standing stoically at the bow, arms crossed, gaze fixed,



his posture imperturbable considering the blaze at his back. The title is taken from a line in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (29–19 BC) warning that the house of Ucalegon, an elder of Troy, is on fire. The alert that the neighbour’s house is already alight implies that if they burn, we burn along with them. “Dante chose Virgil, a poet, as the guide into the Underworld,” he says of the philosopher’s decision when writing his *Divine Comedy* between 1308–1320, to place the ancient Roman poet in Limbo, and have him called on to guide the author through Hell. Abdessemed again calls on Virgil in this title as witness to the hell inflicted on migrants. “When I say crossing I also mean beyond. Going towards something unknown. The boat is really about crossing, not from one horizon to another but from one beyond to another.” Whether the poet in this work brings the fiery reckoning or simply warns us of its coming remains ambiguous.



# Noria Mabasa

(attributed to)  
b.1938 Xigalo, Limpopo; works in Tshino Village, Limpopo

## **Moses, n.d. Carved wood on a wooden base 97 x 62 x 44 cm**

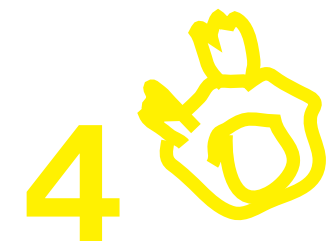
“I dreamt of a wooden log floating on the water and after waking up, went to find the log and started carving it.” The anticipation of a piece of driftwood in Noria Mabasa’s dream changed the trajectory of the Venda sculptural tradition. Before Mabasa’s compulsion to follow a divine prompt, Venda women did not carve in wood. This artistic pursuit was reserved for men, while women worked in clay pottery. As she picked up lost, floating, and discarded pieces of wood, Mabasa began to heal from a many-years-long illness that had rendered the artist almost paralysed. She never again sealed the boundary between sleep and consciousness, trusting the messages and visions of the dream state to guide her waking life, sculpting and carving narratives of the Venda people’s origins, notably those of the Singo,

together with women’s stories. Her sculptures archive the cultural memory of a predominantly oral storytelling tradition while broadening thematics and concerns to include contemporary anxieties and historical injustices. A child of a rural village, as a young girl Mabasa finished only one year of school before being withdrawn and tasked with completing chores for her family at home. The artist would perhaps decry being called ‘self-taught’, the phrase seeming to exclude the spiritual authorship of divine interveners who guide her life and practice. (In preparation for her exhibition *Shaping Dreams* at the Nirox Sculpture Park in 2022, Mabasa is reported to have responded “but it’s not me,”



when praised for her work, referencing herself as co-creator rather than single authorial voice.) While achieving significant renown and with no formal training, Mabasa has taken it upon herself to serve as an educator and mentor. Her homestead is a hub for artistic pedagogy, where wood carving, pottery, and sculpture are taught to younger artists and community members. In 2002, the South African government awarded Mabasa the Silver Order of the Baobab for “exceptional achievements in unique forms of fine arts under trying circumstances.” In April 2023, the University of Johannesburg conferred an honorary doctorate in Art and Design on Mabasa in recognition of her decades of practice, cultural contribution and role in nurturing new artists.

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*Moses* appears to be carved from what remains of a hollowed trunk (from its patina, possibly recovered as driftwood). A smooth, almost Buddha-like head and two hands extend as if sleepwalking. The centre of the piece is a cavern, enclosing an absence. This isn’t the only mystery or missing piece to this work. Having received it listed as ‘n.d.’, no date, the A4 team sought to contact Noria Mabasa to ask if she might recall when it was made. Her son did not recognise the work. While it bears Mabasa’s signature, *Moses*’ origins are, for the time being, muddled. We have selected, due to the presence of Mabasa’s signature, to refer to *Moses* as ‘attributed to Noria Mabasa’. Work to unearth its origin story continues.





# Lin Yilin

b.1964, Guangzhou, China; works in New York, USA, and Beijing, China

## ***Safely Maneuvering Across Lin He Road, 1995*** **Single-channel video (colour, sound)** **34 min 30 sec**

In urban interventions of futile endurance, Lin Yilin tests the constraints of social regulation and the politics of public space. The labouring body is central to these efforts, in which a seemingly benign action is repeated with perverse determination, becoming increasingly absurd and serious in its implications. Some invite participants to join the artist in staging prescribed gestures, others are acts of solitary stamina; most play out on the street before an incidental audience. In correspondence with A4 in anticipation of *Deep Water*, Lin offered the following:

*Before each performance, since there is no rehearsal at all, I have to consider whether I am capable of completing the performance. I begin by selecting a meaningful location and defining two points within it. I then imagine moving from one point to the other through simple, repetitive motions. Sometimes the process is reversed, starting instead from the imagined simple actions. Each time, I rely solely on intuition to estimate whether my physical strength can sustain the entire process.*

In his 'self-rotation' works, Lin traverses a given setting by rolling along the ground – over the Golden Gate Bridge, through a small Swiss town, down a hillside in San Francisco, and up the spiral walkway of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's rotunda. In two further performances, *One Day* (2006) and *Triumph* (2009), he navigates through a city district on foot, with one wrist handcuffed to its corresponding ankle. Lin makes no grand claims, certain not to confuse these durational actions with physical feats: "Strictly speaking, the movements used in my performances are simple, and anyone could perform similar actions." On vulnerability and suffering, he offers: "In all my performances, I have experienced only one instance of a superficial bruise on my chest...the injury was accidental and unforeseen, and the sensation of pain has nothing to do with my work." The artist stresses ordinariness: "My body is naturally sluggish, and I usually lack exercise, yet in the moment of creating a piece, my physical energy bursts to its

limits... Still, these limits are only those of an ordinary person – most people simply would not choose to undertake actions that offer no reward." Lin's interventions are arresting precisely for this tension: the clarity of a single verb – *to roll, to stoop* – made strange in its relentless repetition, like the same word spoken time and again.

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The premise is straightforward enough: to move a wall across a road, one brick at a time. The context, however, is somewhat more complex – and the doing demanding, even dangerous (the word 'safely' in the title suggests the perils of the task). Lin He Road was, at the time of this intervention, a major thoroughfare connecting the nearby train station to Guangzhou's newly conceived commercial district, then under construction. The building site, visible on the far side of the road where Lin staged his performance, was intended to be the tallest skyscraper in Asia, a testament to China's economic optimism in the early 1990s, which saw rapid urbanisation across its southern cities. Against this vertical symbol of fast-paced change, the artist's slow horizontal progression plays.

One by one, Lin moves each of the 48 bricks in repeated sequence, travelling his wall along the demarcated pedestrian crossing. He works with quick efficiency, does not pause for or apologise to the passing traffic, appears insensible to any inconvenience caused. The ambient sounds of the setting accompany the scene, punctuated by the hoots of passing buses, cars, and motorbikes. Nearby construction workers look on with mild bemusement; drivers slow to stare; a modest crowd of friends meets the moment with studied seriousness. No one otherwise interrupts the artist at his labour (Lin purposefully staged the intervention at lunchtime, when there would be fewer police and traffic officers about to frustrate his ambitions). The effort of the exercise, which took an hour and a half to complete, crossing four lanes from one pavement to the other, is summarised in this 30-minute film.

In addition to discrete performances such as this one, Lin was a founding member of The Big Tail Elephants Working Group in 1990, a Guangzhou-based collective that held public happenings and exhibitions in response to the city's accelerating urban development, drawing parallels between spatial planning and the social construction of meaning. *Safely Maneuvering Across Lin He Road* dovetailed with these enquiries, citing the ubiquity of building materials in the commercial district. In 2001, when the artist emigrated to the United States, his preoccupations broadened to include migrancy, globalisation, and geopolitics as reflected in diverse civic landscapes. Bricks and walls, first introduced in this work, remain primary motifs in his practice.







# Santu Mofokeng

b.1956, Soweto, South Africa; d.2020, Johannesburg, South Africa

## ***Eyes Wide Shut, Motouleng Cave, Clarens, Free State, 2004*** **Photographic print on archival paper 123 x 181 x 5 cm (framed)**

“I am interested in the ambiguity of things,” the late photographer Santu Mofokeng wrote. “This comes not from a position of power, but of helplessness.” In many of his pictures, this ambiguity appears as a spreading opacity, a diaphanous pall of rising smoke, mist or dust. Mofokeng grew up, he wrote in his photo-essay *Chasing Shadows* (1996–2006), “on the threshing floor of faith...and while I feel reluctant to partake in this gossamer world, I can identify with it.” An agnostic observer attuned to the spiritual lives of others, the pervasive haze that softens so many of his pictures more often takes on a poetic significance. There is to all Mofokeng’s works a distinct quietude – the artist looking not to political drama but to life’s minutiae, those “things I ordinarily do or see.” The tumult of the times, Mofokeng believed, need not be made explicit in photographs. Rather, he suggested, “the violence is in the knowing,” latent in the very places and people he pictured. “His voice, his awareness of where he was in space and history, his ability to think around what he was doing,” Joshua Chuang said of the artist in conversation with Sean O’Toole at A4, “wasn’t predictable but open and raw and simultaneously hidden.”

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Of the series of photographs to which this work belongs, Mofokeng wrote in 1997:

*They are strewn like litter across the floor in my office. Others are kept in cabinets, and a few are in frames. Whatever lies, deceptions or promises brought them into being, I wonder. I am referring to the products of my gaze, refracted and reflecting, somewhat muted, not unlike light dancing on the surface of the dirty puddle that is my memory: Images of people in moments of contemplation, performance, confrontation and perhaps celebration. My exploration and participation in the fictions we call relationship and community. And of environments, real and imagined. Insignificant experiences, selected and isolated from*



*tedium, moments reduced to mere appearances, simply as surfaces reflecting light, arrested and stored in the long memory of film. A brooding corpus of so many episodes remembered and forgotten.*

These ‘products of his gaze’ would only multiply across

the coming decade, Mofokeng returning time and again to Motouleng Cave in the Free State, a site significant to the syncretic spirituality in which he was raised, a union of traditional customs and Christianity. The resulting photo-essay, *Chasing Shadows*, details the photographer’s often-fraught engagement with the faith he inherited. “I still try to avoid being trapped in its hypnotic embrace, which seems to mock my carefully cultivated indifference and self-confidence. I feel ambivalent about my ambivalence, embarrassed at my embarrassment.”

Mofokeng’s uneasy preoccupation with the invisible realm is perhaps most eloquently distilled in this portrait of his brother, Ishmael, who returns the camera’s gaze with unseeing eyes. Behind him in the darkness of the cave, figures are reduced to painterly blurs and brushes of light, made insubstantial and otherworldly. A traditional healer, Ishmael believed he suffered not from the virus to which he would succumb but a curse against which he was ultimately protected. He avoided naming the illness that ravaged his body, refusing all conventional treatment. By the time he sought healing at the cave, any denial was undermined by an acute secondary infection. As Sean O’Toole recounts of the brothers’ pilgrimage in 2004 when this portrait was taken, Ishmael, unable to walk up to the cave, was pushed in a wheelbarrow by Mofokeng. There, the dying man “was fortified by the immensity of his encounter with tradition.” Ishmael made the return journey on foot, momentarily restored. Mofokeng, perhaps resenting his brother’s blinkered denial of his disease, wrote in the days preceding his death: “Now I am carrying an emaciated Ishmael to hospital. I know this is the last time I will see him alive... Hospitals are properly places of deliverance.” Ishmael never admitted, not even to Mofokeng, that he had HIV/AIDS.



# Margaret Bourke-White

b.1904, New York, USA; d.1971, Stamford, USA

## ***Parachute jumper, testing equipment for the Irving Air Chute Co., NY, 1937*** **Perspex prints, lightboxes** **29 x 32.5 x 5 cm each**

Margaret Bourke-White's career was one of *firsts*. Widely credited with pioneering the photo-essay as a journalistic form, she was the first staff photographer for *Fortune* in 1929, producing the lead story for its debut issue, and the first foreign photojournalist permitted to document Soviet industry while on assignment for the magazine the following year. In 1936, she was one of the first four photographers hired at *LIFE*, again producing the debut issue's cover image. During the Second World War, Bourke-White was the first accredited woman photographer, the first authorised to fly on combat missions, and the only Western photojournalist to document the German invasion of Moscow in 1941. She was also among the first to picture the Buchenwald death camp shortly after its liberation in 1945. She would go on to document some of the most seismic events of the 20th century, including the partition of India and Pakistan (she was the last to photograph Gandhi, some six hours before his assassination), the Korean War, and the institution of apartheid in South Africa.

Though Bourke-White's earliest subjects were architecture and modern machinery, photographed with a starkly graphic style, social-issue commissions refocused her lens on human experience. Yet she maintained a distinct sensibility that set her images apart from straight reportage, the clarity of her compositions lending them their iconographic weight. Indeed, many of the photographs she made have come to stand as the defining image of the historical events and people pictured.

The series of photographs from which these nine exposures are taken was originally commissioned for a *LIFE* magazine feature on Irving Air Chute Co.'s parachutes. Aside from drily describing the patented design and listing sales and profit numbers, the article – which reads like a long-form advertisement for the company's silk products – makes no mention of why the American-made parachute was in such high demand globally.

The year is 1937: Europe is beginning to rearm, the Soviet Union is militarising, wide-scale conflict on the continent seems imminent, the Second Sino-Japanese War is three months away, and the Spanish Civil War continues. The United States, having recently passed the Neutrality Act, remains officially isolationist, however watchful of the world's shifting alliances. This perhaps accounts for the article's pointed silence on the subject.

Only two of the photographs made at the testing site in Buffalo, New York, appeared alongside the magazine copy; a third was reproduced on the issue's cover. A larger set was later published posthumously as a slim photobook titled *Twenty Parachutes* (2002). Seen together and separated from the article, the photographs assume the quality of a surreal epic, playing out against an all but featureless landscape. In them, men struggle against the invisible wind, their parachutes billowing in the stiff breeze. A test-dummy torso adds to the dreamlike feeling of the pictured scene, the truncated figure a discomfiting non-sequitur in the photographs' otherwise striking formalism. Seen from a historical vantage, the images appear to anticipate the coming storm.

The photographs are presented here as nine discrete lightboxes, recalling the original exposures' celluloid transparency.





# Thiago Rocha Pitta

b.1980, Tiradentes, Brazil; works in Petrópolis, Brazil

## *Herança* (trans. *Heritage*), 2007 Single-channel video transferred from 16 mm film (colour, sound) 11 min

In the Atlantic Forest bordered by the Serra do Mar (trans. Mountains of the Sea), sculptures grow among trees in Thiago Rocha Pitta's garden. A boat – body of a previous work – becomes nutritional compost when buried. Others stand petrified, cast or planted. “We can appreciate the slow decay of things – the disappearing. We grow old and we lose our families and we forget our thoughts and why not? We have got to think about the side of life that is the dying. Art might be longer than life, but it will be brief.” Rocha Pitta's work invites contemplation of the relationships between humans, their tools, and the environment, deferring attention from bourgeois potency in the urban context towards the world beyond that border. He often subverts the idea of a right way up, offering experience in the round – as above, so below. In *Atlas* (2014) a small, overturned boat adrift on the ocean becomes the container for carrying the weight of a wet world. A mirrored platform Rocha Pitta built at the cliff's edge features in a collaborative sound and video work made with Paulo Dantas at dawn. Daybreak materialises in the mirror that performs as shard of sky and pool of water. The viewer is in darkness for the first three minutes of the film, light travelling at its pace towards a clarified sunrise. Rocha Pitta offers: “The sound of sunrise is also a picture. The audio is also an image. The sounds reach across the darkness. Giving yourself time, three minutes, is not doing nothing. It is allowing yourself to do less. Contemplation requires this.”

A caretaker of the forest, Rocha Pitta reshapes it, introducing local species, cutting back and removing invasive vegetation, making a case for human occupation that enriches the environment. (A residency in the Amazon provoked the artist's interest in theorists from the 1970s who proposed that the forest may have been far more widely inhabited – up to 80 percent occupied in some estimations – travelling essential seeds like cacao from Central America and improving the forest's biodiversity.) “As humans, we are bioselective. We take the environment and we choose from it what interests us and thereby reduce the biological diversity. The Amazon

case makes me think that we can be more like bees in the sense that we can pollinate and transform the environment.”

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The title, *Herança* (trans. *Heritage*) from 2007 is named for the artist's father. Rocha Pitta came of age in his father's studio, where he worked as an assistant. In 2002, Rocha Pitta painted a small jangada boat (of the kind often used in Yemanjá ceremonies) and set it on fire. He titled the work *Homage to JMW Turner* referencing the obituary by the painter to death at sea. Seeing the work, his father had an idea: Rocha Pitta would pick up a boat and a tree; his father and friends would film it. Despite their intentions, the project remained unrealised. After his father's death, Rocha Pitta came upon sketches towards the work. Instead of the single intended tree, he planted two. What he (somewhat humorously) refers to as a “horror movie for trees, surrounded by salt water” performs the final collaboration, meditating on togetherness even while cast adrift. Rocha Pitta did not leave the trees to a shipwrecked fate. The boat would have been salvaged by local fishermen, the trees thrown overboard. Instead, Rocha Pitta cast the boat, petrified the sail, set this sculpture in his forest-garden, buried the boat to nourish the soil and planted the trees. Speaking of Rocha Pitta's practice, Josh Ginsburg said, “He creates a visual tension, bringing things that don't belong together into proximity or juxtaposition. Salt water and trees. A tree root floating, upended in the sky. These elements seem to have no place being together. Where they touch could be dangerous, critical even, and yet the rubbing leaves a poetic trace where they intersect. One is arrested by the possibility that this

might be a survival story of star-crossed lovers, an impossible romance instead of a tragedy. We intuitively know that these things cannot be while remaining invested in their relationship.”





# Penny Siopis

b.1953, Vryburg, South Africa; works in Cape Town, South Africa

## Love, 2007 Oil and glue on canvas 89 x 74 cm

In describing Penny Siopis' practice, a necessary caveat: it is too slippery in form, too wide-ranging in ambition, to be distilled to pithy statement. Hers is an "aesthetic of accumulation," a logic of excess, a hoarding of signs. Edges, boundary lines, beginnings and endings, states of change – these are among the subjects that inform her enquiries. As to a single preoccupation, the artist offers *residue*. A 'historical materialist', Siopis looks to the traces of past action, asks after the vibrancy of artefacts made and found, what they might recall of their provenance. She moves between modes with limber agility, playing the roles of both artist and archivist. While predominantly a painter, Siopis' practice extends to include found film and objects in a sustained meditation on trauma as it appears, the artist writes, "in material amalgam." From her early 'history' paintings to *Will*, a growing collection of objects and their anecdotes to be bequeathed to friends and family at the artist's death, loss (past, forthcoming) is a constant undertone. Pursuing a "poetics of vulnerability", Siopis transcribes, however obliquely, shared and individual griefs – punctuated by small moments of tactile transcendence – in the inherited images and historical flotsam, in the residue, with which she works.



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"We live in turbulent times. The integrity of our bodies and souls seems challenged at every turn. We are prey to violence, disease, global conflicts. We are so thin-skinned," writes Siopis. In the face of such vulnerability, we reach for comfort, sympathy and connection.

Yearning for this safety, *Love* describes an absence of touch – the loss of intimacy through which loneliness seeps in. Two frigid figures lie side by side, estranged even in their nearness. One partner has turned away, withdrawn and detached, while the other lies awake, adrift in thought. Siopis reflects, "What we don't experience directly, we imagine. And imagination has its own way with horror, filling our minds with images that get under the skin of our most intimate relationships." As her head droops with heaviness, the painted figure drifts to the place where imagination and experience converge, reflecting on the vicissitudes of love grown bitter. Glazed in glue, the bed feels cold and the bodies distant. Only her hands, holding each other, glow warmly. The gesture is enigmatic, as is the red pigment that reveals her form beneath the sheets. "Shame floods, colouring the outer surface of the body with its visible sign: blushing," Griselda Pollock writes in her response to Siopis's exhibition *Three Essays on Shame* (2005). "But it can also be the hidden shame that no one knows. It is other. The other that can heat and colour my body and silence my tongue." In concealing her genitalia with this embrace, the figure invokes the weight of shame – that of desire and womanhood – a theme that Siopis so often speaks to in her works. Yet there remains a sense of ambiguity within this act: is it blushing, or warming with the possibility of change?

*Love* is part of a body of work first exhibited under the title *Lasso* – a word the artist describes as double-edged. It implies the risk of being subject to others' violence, or an understanding and acceptance that suffering is an integral part of the world. Siopis uses this tension to explore both vulnerability's ache and its potential for transformation. Gerrit Olivier suggests that even when Siopis's work "deals with instability or despair, it is never despairing; instead, it is affirming and exhilarating, alert to the aliveness we can discover in the world and in ourselves."



# Diana Vives

b.1967, São Paulo, Brazil; works in Cape Town, South Africa

## ***The Dream of Mnemosyne, 2023*** **Pin-oak structure, 160 porcelain panels, glass vessel, and ink** **178 x 48 x 26 cm**

Drawing inspiration from experimental uses of materials pioneered by Arte Povera in Italy and Mono-ha in Japan during the late 1960s to the 1970s, Diana Vives' sculptural practice explores a complex cultural heritage shot through with displacement and exploitation spanning over two centuries. Raised between Brazil and Switzerland, Vives traces her Greek, Spanish and Scottish heritage through a myriad of conflicts from Ottoman-ruled Alexandria in the early 1800s to the Spanish Civil War and fascism in the 20th century. With a background in political science, her turn to the visual arts afforded her the opportunity to wrestle with how these fraught histories inform her subjective experiences. Assessing a world increasingly marked by environmental decline, her nuanced engagement with post-humanist thought and new materialist philosophy finds its expression in storytelling and mythmaking. Walter Benjamin's pronouncement that "there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" echoes in a pointed quote Vives offers from William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow* (1980):

*Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of the storyteller to rearrange things so that they conform to this end. In any case, in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw.*

A photograph of her young daughter's hand resting protectively on her deceased grandmother's beautifully aged ones prompts Vives' reflections on the body's relationship with memory and space. Dream visitations from her grandmother soon follow, where trees feature prominently to mark uncertainty about the boundedness of the home. Metabolised through the language of classical myth, the work, for the artist, "asserts a space where recollection, projection, and imagination converge." In Vives' telling, her grandmother Zoe Trapidis Grover (1914–2014) was an accomplished child



the Greek goddess of memory and mother of the arts, confronts the tree as a conduit of Promethean fire and creativity with all the potential destruction it implies.

Scaled to the dimensions of her grandmother's body, *The Dream of Mnemosyne's* bookshelf structure invites associations with both intellectual pursuits and the home. The space it delineates suggestively reverses the figure of Louise Bourgeois' *Femme Maison* (trans. *Woman House*) that caricatures the strictures of domestic duty women are expected to bear without compensation. Vives' gesture of remembrance hinges on the way she unconsciously assumes embodied ways of inhabiting space from her female forebears: "the attempt to retrieve a touch, a voice, or a trace is always just out of reach." Enmeshed with peripatetic lived experiences, her recollections are inscribed in the pliable medium of unfired porcelain through touch as she traces the bark of a felled centenary pin oak. Vives observes, "remembering a life always involves mapping one form of memory onto another, and such mapping is never seamless." Fired, the porcelain panels form a collection of 128 smaller, detailed plates and 32 larger and more dramatic "storybooks" that contrast with ink – manufactured from the remnants of books Vives salvaged from the Jagger's former special collections – housed in a blown-glass vessel that crowns the artwork. If personal and collective memory for Vives intersect "not through resemblance but through shared material processes," memory nonetheless finally becomes coextensive with writing through the dreamlike medium of seawater.



# Frédéric Bruly Bouabré

(Cheik Nadro)  
b.1923, Zéprégühé, Côte d'Ivoire; d.2014, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

## ***Je suis la Statue de la Vraie Misère: Toute misère est de Nature Coupable ou Innocente, n.d.*** **Mixed media on card** **14.7 x 11 cm each**

Frédéric Bruly Bouabré's initial and abiding subject was the Bété. An artist of encyclopaedic inclinations, in 1948 he was divinely compelled by a celestial vision to document, compile and codify his people's material culture and customs, assuming the name Cheik Nadro, 'the revealer'. Alongside this role was the artist's pursuit to document a knowledge or essence that might be considered universal, practised in parallel to his employment as a researcher for colonial French ethnographers and anthropologists in West Africa. Where his early work took the form of intricately detailed, illuminated manuscripts on wide-ranging topics – including the pictorial writing system he invented for the Bété language – from the late 1970s onwards, he began producing the postcard-sized drawings in ballpoint pen and coloured pencil for which he is best known. Included among the many discrete series that comprise his oeuvre are a nearly 450-part Bété syllabary; *Stars from my Dreams*; an inventory of animal-shaped clouds; episodic retellings of Ivoirian myths; a *Museum of African Faces*; and a directory of scarification designs from the region. As he wrote to curator André Magnin in 1988:

*For us, art is know-how. Art is searching, re-searching, and discovering sublime innocence. Art is professing the frank language that enlightens, rules, explains, and orders the eternal laws of well-meaning reason, that fraternises all the members of 'great humanity' in order to alleviate the 'too many sufferings' of the individual during his passage on 'Earth' en route to a sacred pilgrimage leading him to 'God', his creator. Art is 'knowing how to copy' the existing realities of nature. Art is knowing how to 'bring to life' the good of this world, for reproduction and eternal preservation.*

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This cycle of twenty drawings on card offers a catalogue of human tragedy, monumentalised as figurative 'statues'. Each is symbolic

of a different country, yet none defines the particular misery to which they refer. All are differently dismembered or defaced, shown naked and wholly vulnerable. Some figures are seen with mouths open in a soundless O; many with eyes closed. The populations of Algeria, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, China, Comoros, the Congo, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Finland, Iran, Liberia, Morocco, Sudan, South Africa, Switzerland, and Tanzania are personified in this sequence. Seen together, one's attention is drawn to repetition and difference across Bouabré's rendering of each nation's suffering. "All misery is either guilty or innocent by nature," the drawings' shared subtitle reads.

The cards follow the artist's established compositional formula: a central image with a pronounced border around which he inscribed the caption in his distinctive, rhythmic script. This pairing of image and writing was central to Bouabré's taxonomy of knowledge. The text was instructive in intent, a means "to explain what I've drawn," as the artist said. "Writing is what immortalises. Writing fights against forgetting." The spangling of stars and the spider-like suns seen throughout *Je suis la Statue de la Vraie Misère* are among the enigmatic motifs of singular significance to the artist, appearing across the thousands of drawings he produced over four decades.





# Nicholas Hlobo

b.1975, Cape Town, South Africa; works in Johannesburg, South Africa

## *Izithunzi*, 2009

Rubber inner tube, ribbon, organza, lace, steel, and found objects  
Dimensions variable

Nicholas Hlobo is an artist of rare dexterity. In turn monumental and intimate, heavy and weightless, his works evade the themes ascribed to them, resisting facile explanation. Their titles only augment their uncertainty. Some read as unclear warnings – *Zophalala futhi* (trans. *They will fall apart again*), *Unojubalala* (trans. *She is pale*) – others incline towards the metaphysical; *Izithunzi* (trans. *The Shadows*), *Isisindo samadlozi* (trans. *The weight of the ancestors*), *Uvuko* (trans. *Resurrection*). Hlobo moves fluently between performance, installation and painting (the imperfect word he uses for his hybrid works on canvas). In each, there is a tactile engagement with material – be it rubber, leather, copper wire or ribbon. For the artist, these constituent parts are metaphorically charged, extending beyond their physical bounds. Assembled together, they become anthropomorphic abstractions; no longer threads and substrate but veins and skin. “In truth,” Hlobo says, “we’re all cords, plugs and connecting points; some split, some broken. Yet the body mends itself, the body continually grows. It’s a never-ending process, it’s a progression – and the mind does the same.”

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“There are still so many truths about myself that I don’t know,” Hlobo confides in an interview with Sean O’Toole. Growing up in an Anglican household in the Eastern Cape, Hlobo longed for the traditional Xhosa rituals from which he was barred. Stories told about these ceremonies foreshadowed the mystical scenes and diverse worlds in his artworks – the artist enacting those cultural passages to which he felt drawn.

*Izithunzi* (trans. *The Shadows*), the artwork that earned Hlobo the 2009 Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Visual Art, stages eight amorphous figures performing a theatrical reimagining of *umtshotsho*, a traditional Xhosa coming-of-age party that allows for youthful curiosities about adulthood to be explored. Hlobo weaves desire, transformation, and sexuality into this moment of suspended performance: bodily innuendos frozen in



gesture and the music stilled. Satin ribbons sewn into the dark exoskeletons of these ‘shadows’ are allusive of queer adornment. Using these ribbons to stitch together rubber sheaths, Hlobo seeks to reconcile his cultural belonging with his sexual identity. The seam becomes both a bridge and a border – simultaneously the site of separation and connection. The phallic, bulbous figures masquerade through the party, feigning knowledge while still trying to learn. A mask that clings to the couch alongside a slouched figure has its eyeholes sewn shut – a reminder that the performance of confidence, the pretence of knowing, can be blinding. “I am looking for the source of the shadow,” Hlobo says, “but it keeps moving. The thing is moving away and I am chasing it.” These words echo through *Izithunzi*, as the work lingers in the pursuit of the shifting edges of self.



# Arthur Jafa

b.1960, Tupelo, USA; works in Los Angeles, USA

## ***Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, 2016** **Video (colour, sound)** **7 min 25 sec**

Claiming found and documentary footage for his work, Arthur Jafa reveals that any 'official' record of black life – those of the police, the courts, the schools, the reports – must be reviewed, refitted. Like correcting a false start sets the conditions for an honest game, these enriched historical documents impact the trajectory of the future. The resulting composite, gathered associatively, incorporates material culture, style, sensibility, rhythm, lyric, language and tempo. Jafa is a master of the pause, the unexpected juxtaposition. The artist repositions the African American experience by architecting the trajectory from the inside out, insouciantly asserting the collective right to the ownership of the residue used to construct history. Bringing to light historically contingent forms of subjectivity, rather than simply identities, he responds to the legacies of racial prejudice, drawing an analogy between the failure of humanity to recognise the impact of our actions on the environment and the colonial slave trade's disregard for human life. The 'sublime' Jafa offers is transcendence from the destructive powers of racially motivated violence. Instead of reducing race to a timeless abstract category, the artist convenes a provisional and open-ended collectivity through his use of diverse modes of aesthetic address.

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Arthur Jafa's *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* enabled lightning-speed institutional collaboration at an unprecedented scale. In solidarity with Black Lives Matter, fifteen prominent art institutions (in the USA and abroad) collaborated to make the video work freely available to stream for 48 hours, between Friday 26 June and Sunday 28 June 2020. Sourced primarily from social media websites, Jafa selects material that either positively or negatively elicits extreme emotional responses or is in danger of being erased. The resulting idiosyncratic selection of found footage dating from late-19th- to early-21st-century America is irrevocably mediated by the internet as a cultural phenomenon. Or, glossed more lyrically in Kanye West's gospel hip-hop track *Ultralight Beam* (2016) that overlays the video work: "Let's make it so free, and the bars so hard. There ain't one gosh darn

part you can't tweet." Jafa's stated ambition is to create a Black Visual Intonation, approximating irregular uses of musical tone from jazz in film, by either replicating or subtracting video frames to make the action it depicts unfold at irregular tempos in turn. To the extent that *Love is the Message* elevates its content into a rhythmically stylised continuity, it can do so only because the formal elements Jafa uses to structure the work overall were already latent in the more celebratory source material to begin with.

Jafa's noted ambivalence about the work's reception – where the emotional intensity of the film sometimes exceeds the viewer's capacity to 'listen in' on the self as one 'listens in' on the footage – should give anyone pause in reading the work as straightforwardly celebratory or cynical. Part of its challenge, in other words, is to resist forms of online culture that respond to ambiguity through an overly simplistic lexicon of likes and dislikes, and have little time for what is alien or strange within either the self or the others encountered there. As the alien protagonist from *Love Is the Plan, the Plan Is Death* (1973), a science fiction short story by James Tiptree Jr. that inspired Jafa, cautions:

*He accepted all, perhaps he even felt a strange joy, as I feel it now.  
In the Plan is joy. But if the plan is wrong?*

Opening up a space to live alongside both historical and ongoing forms of trauma, *Love is the Message* refuses to be wholly defined by them.



Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, 2016 © Arthur Jafa.  
Courtesy of the artist, Gladstone Gallery, Sprüth Magers, and Sadie Coles HQ, London.



















*Deep Water* is curated by Josh Ginsburg

Installation and fabrication: Kyle Morland  
Production: János Cserhádi

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*Deep Water – Wayfinder*

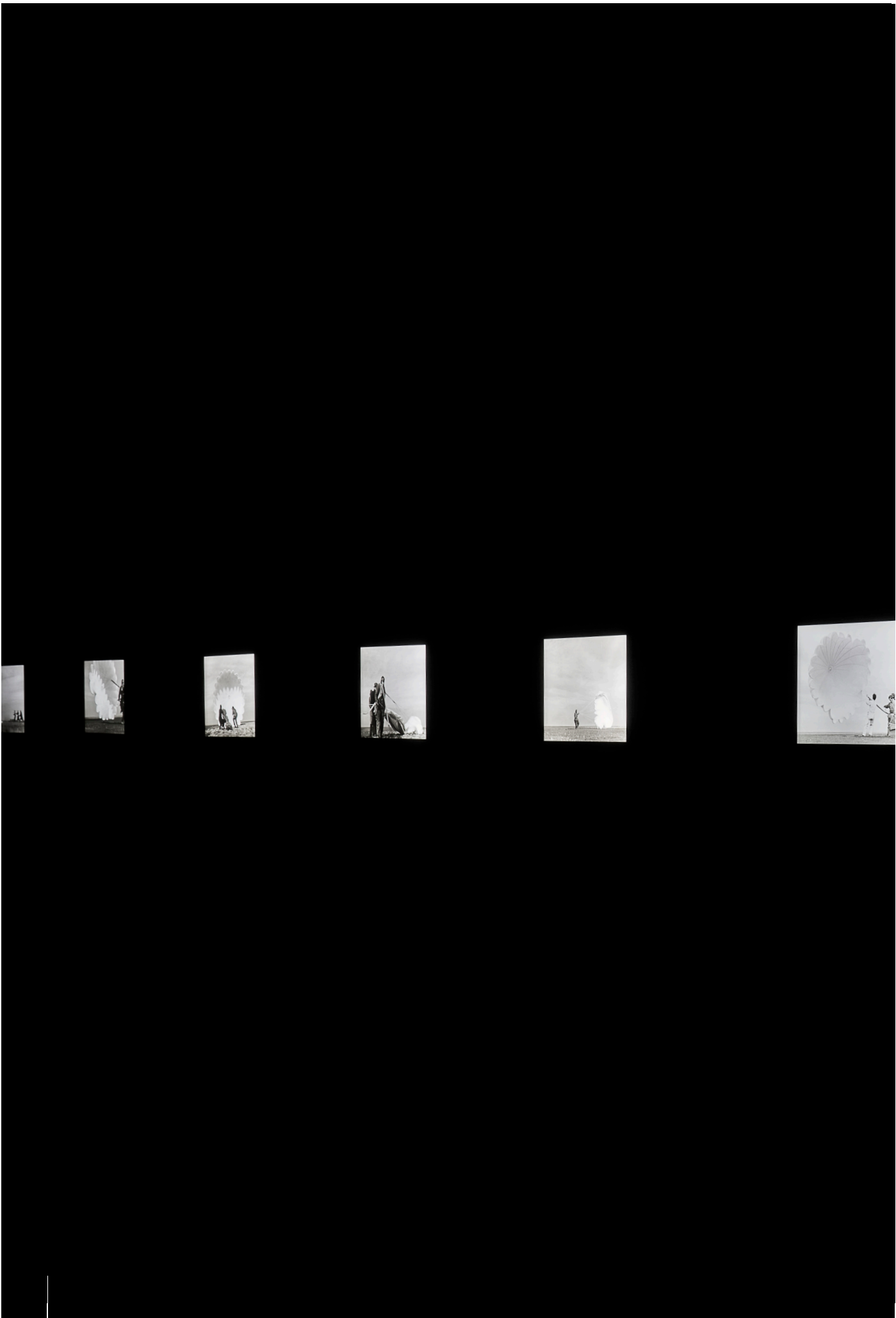
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