TEMPORARY EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

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PRESENCE of the PAST

A European Album

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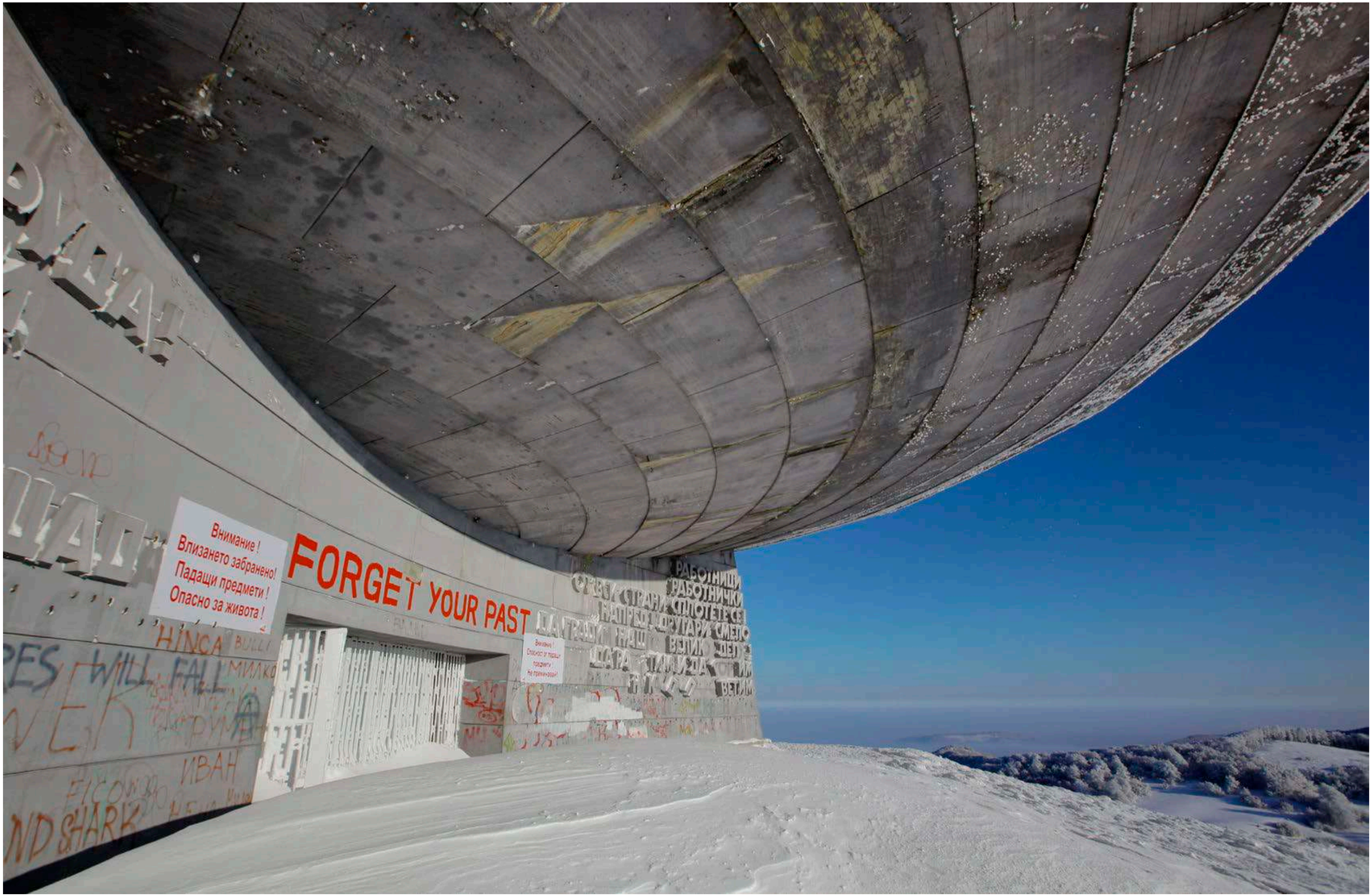
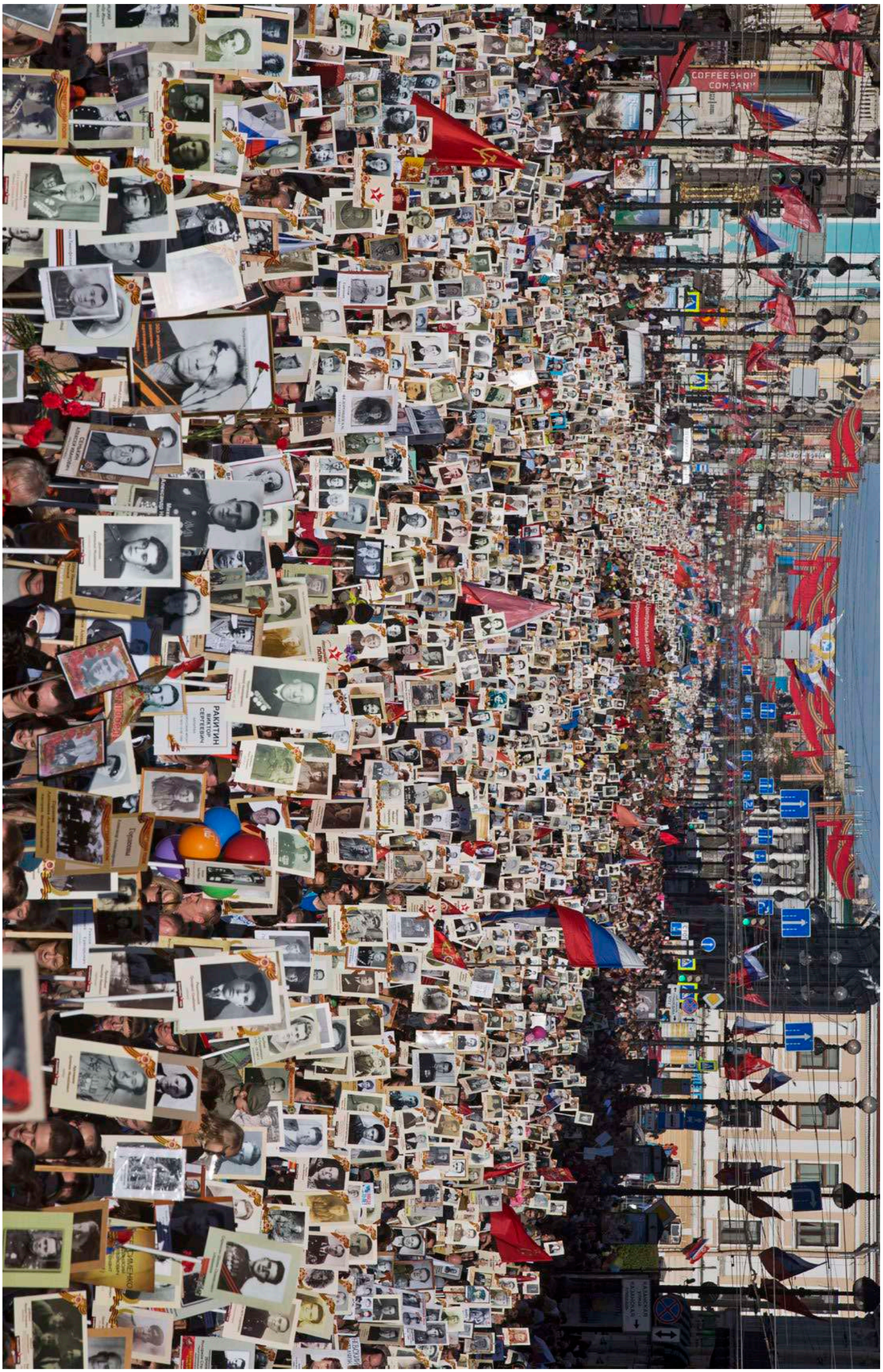
A EUROPEAN ALBUM

HOUSE OF EUROPEAN HISTORY



Timothy Allen, *Mount Buzludzha Monument House of the Bulgarian Communist Party*, Bulgaria, 2012

Dmitry Lovetzky, *Immortal Regiment march in Saint Petersburg*, Russia, 9 May 2015



Véronique Ellena, *Sant' Agostino church, Genoa*, Italy, 2011

Nick Hannes, *Tourists to ancient Hierapolis, a UNESCO World Heritage Site*, Türkiye, 2012

Niels Ackermann, *A room in the Museum of Useless Things*, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2016

Marc Wilson, *Løkken, Nordjylland*, Denmark, 2014

Piotr Małecki, *A statue of Pope John Paul II secretly built by villagers in 1985 and bravely raised in 1987 during the Pope's visit to communist Poland*, Miechowice Wielkie, Poland, 2011

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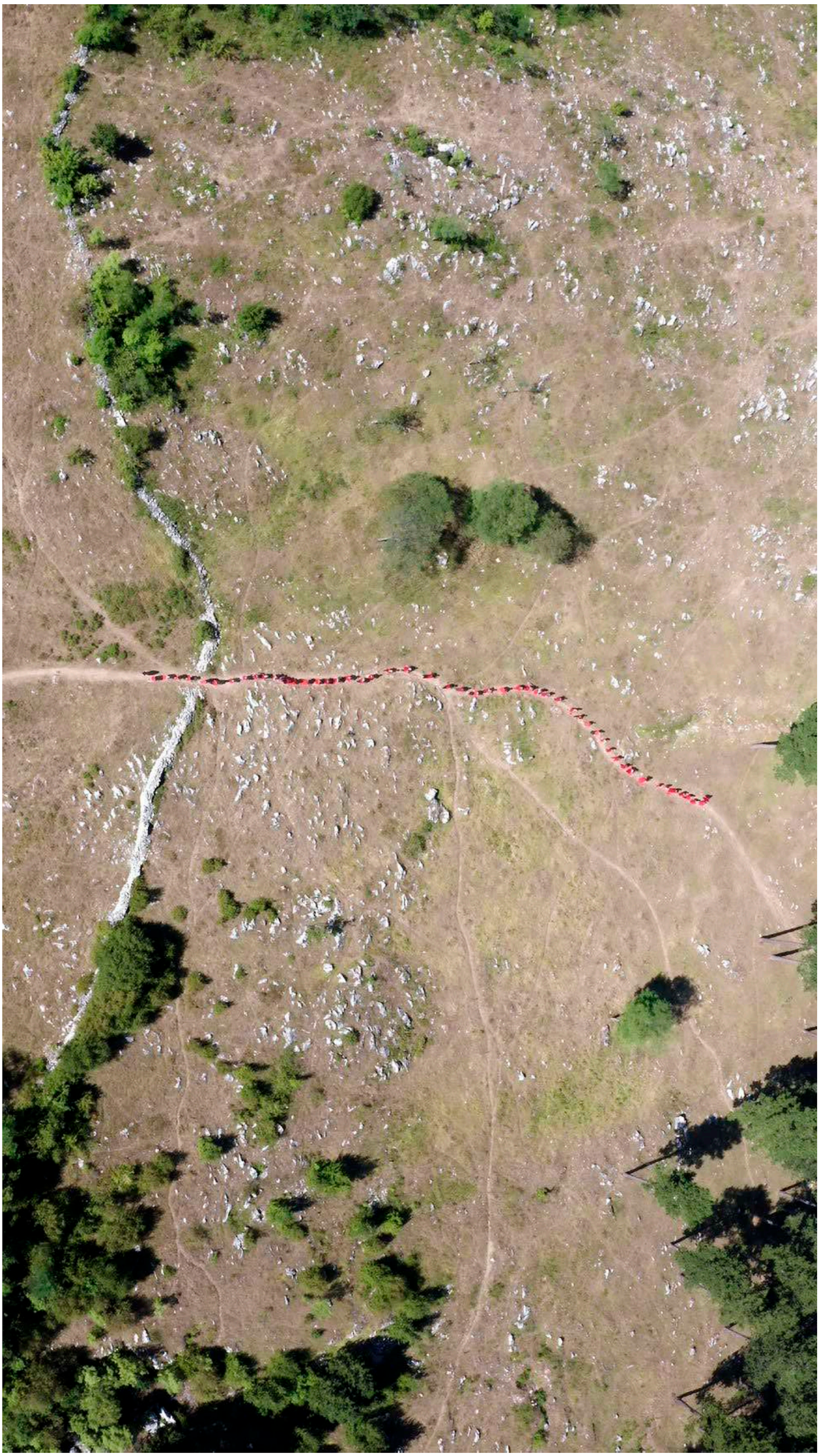

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PRESENCE OF THE PAST

A EUROPEAN ALBUM

Edited by Simina Bădică and Stéphanie Gonçalves
Exhibition catalogue

HOUSE OF EUROPEAN HISTORY

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FOREWORD

Hans-Gert Pöttering

Chair, Board of Trustees, House of European History; former President, European Parliament

Diana Wallis

Vice-Chair, Board of Trustees, House of European History; former Vice-President, European Parliament

Photographs, and photography in general, have captured our imagination since French inventor Joseph Nicéphore Niépce took the first still picture in 1822.

Of course, much has changed since then. The most notable change is probably technological. Today every smartphone owner is a potential photographer. Almost anyone can take, and has taken, a snapshot.

But photography is much more than the mechanical capture of an image. For many it is an art form because it captures the essence of our world. It encapsulates beauty and emotion. American photographer Aaron Siskind described photography as 'a way of feeling, of touching, of loving.'

Others are quick to note how much information a good photograph can convey. This is why the adage 'a picture is worth a thousand words' was coined and is so often used when speaking about photography.

It is this broader framework that sets apart the House of European History's temporary exhibition *Presence of the Past. A European Album*. While this is the museum's seventh temporary exhibition since its opening in 2017, it is its first photographic one.

Furthermore, *Presence of the Past* is important because it sheds light on how Europeans engage today with their past and their history. Its photographs – over 100 of them – spread out into seven sections, each exploring different types of engagement with the past. People or human activities are at the core of these photos.

Another important element of the exhibition is its link to the local community. A partnership has been set up with the *La Cambre Photography School* in Brussels and students have worked on the exhibition's topics. They have produced their own material, which is exhibited in *Presence of the Past*.

The photographs in this exhibition demonstrate the diverse ways in which Europeans deal with the past and, by looking at the stories they engage with, we can learn something about our present.

In short, this exhibition offers its visitor a unique insight into elements of what it is to be European. We hope that our fellow Europeans will embrace it.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE PAST

Constanze Itzel
Museum Director,
House of European History

How present is the past? There is a wide spectrum of answers to this question from a vast diversity of people, from William Faulkner's 'The past is never dead. It is not even past' to Mario Puzo's 'The past is past. Never go back'. From scarred individuals who must come to grips with a traumatic past experience to an entire society undergoing collective processes of memorialising or forgetting, there are numerous different actors and ways of dealing with the past.

In today's societies, who determines collective memory? Who decides what is remembered and what is forgotten? Reinhart Koselleck once spoke of the 'seven P's', who according to him determined public discourse and collective memory: Professors, Politicians, Priests, Pedagogues, Poets, Publicists and PR-Specialists.

The *Presence of the Past* exhibition adds two important P's to this array: People and Photographers. The exhibition offers a prism of multiple viewpoints: The visitors gaze on the curators' selection of the photographers' views on people's perspectives on the past, complemented by photography students' comments on the exhibition topics. A multi-layered journey of seeing the past through the eyes of the other.

The exhibition explores some very different ways in which people appropriate the past – the past of their families, of their communities, of their countries. From very private and personal to public uses of history, oscillating between heroization, re-appropriation and commemoration of victims.

Psychologists claim that our memories of the past can depend on the mood in which we are in the present, but that we can also consciously influence what we choose to remember. It is a special way of framing: Our perspective in the present frames what we see from the past. And what could illustrate this process better than the frame of a photograph, the visual expression of the framing process by a photographer who chooses what to include in the frame and what to leave out, just like the photographed people choose some aspects from history and discard other?

This process of selection can also be projected on the House of European History, or on Europe's past. In their work on the permanent and temporary exhibitions, the curators of this museum focussed their creative efforts on unearthing the transnational processes shared by people on this continent. Similarly, Europeans today make choices in the way

they frame the past through their gaze: The focus can be on historical processes that have divided people and populations and turned them into enemies; this dividing gaze can be perpetuated or revived, and this is done by many actors among the '7 P's'. On the contrary, looking back can also mean discovering how many experiences are shared, similar, or perceived in different ways. Adopting the gaze of another on the past or uncovering similar perspectives can be a framing that helps understand and eventually overcome differences in the present.

The past as a prison or the past as a prism? This exhibition opts for the latter. To shine a light on the multifaceted presence of the past.

WHY DO WE DEAL WITH HISTORY?

Andrea Mork
Head Curator,
House of European History

It is a fallacy that what persists is truer than what perishes.
(Theodor W. Adorno)

The exhibition *Presence of the Past* provides an insight into the heterogeneous structure of remembrance culture, its various intentions, forms and practices. In keeping with the character of this extraordinarily dynamic phenomenon and its vast ramifications, we have chosen photographic documentation to approach the subject. Starkly different in their specific form and design, causes and context, the displayed case studies illustrate mechanisms by which the relationship between present and past is forged. What these examples have in common is that they all show public places. Even if this focus excludes other widespread forms of engagement with history (films, books, games...), these case studies offer an overview, *mutatis mutandis*, of the different meanings history can have for people. Hence, the exhibition holds up a mirror to its audience, thanks to which visitors can reflect on themselves and their specific relationship to history.

'History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it' (Barthes, 1981, 65). It is no coincidence that Roland Barthes noted this observation in his famous book *Reflections on Photography*. The nonsensical chaos of sheer happenings he described calls for media that structure the past retrospectively, identifying patterns and revealing an explanatory model of history based on its surviving traces, remains and fragments.

Siegfried Kracauer already pointed to significant analogies between historiography and photography, as far as both are 'passive and active, a recorder and a creator' (Kracauer, 1995, 47). Photographers need to make deliberate choices to structure and organise the 'visual raw material' by selecting 'motif, frame, lens, filter, emulsion, and grain according to their sensibilities' (Kracauer, 1995, 52). Like the photographer, the historian, in his inquiry of the past, reveals connections and relationships in this opaque, nearly impenetrable mass of facts. Photography stands as a model for history, which is understood as constructed and dependent on time and location and the perspective from which it is observed. 'The thing that matters in both photography and history', Kracauer determined,

‘is obviously the ‘right’ balance between the realistic and formative tendencies’ (Kracauer, 1995, 56).

Modern societies are truly immersed in remembrance culture, with archives, museums, universities, memorials, commemorative days, or even historical fairs and re-enactments of historical events. Issues of collective memory have become part of public discourse, something rarely achieved by professional historiography alone. Remembrance culture is based on a dense network of state projects, civil society initiatives and commercial interests that influence each other.

We seem to be starved for history. Quite evidently, information society has not been gifted with added enlightenment or rationality, but rather accompanied by an increasing sense of disorientation. It is a paradox: we are drowning in a sea of information and living in a desert of arbitrariness.

The societal interest in history is a ‘compensation’ for what Hermann Lübbe called a ‘loss of familiarity’, just as it characterises modernity as an era of atomisation, fragmentation and the disintegration of contexts of life and meaning (Lübbe, 2005, 24). No doubt, the turn to history has to do with uncertainty, which is the result of the progressive acceleration of social change and the entropy of stable and lasting life experience. To the extent that modernisation has been shaking the traditionally shaped network of behavioural patterns, values, and certainties of experience, the boom of memory reflects ‘mental homelessness’ and takes on the task of anchoring ourselves into an overarching context and clarifying our social self-understanding.

This does not mean that history necessarily amounts to a relapse into dusty traditionalism and the nostalgic cultivation of the old-fashioned. In contrast to more affirmative or resigned tendencies, a critical awareness of history is explicitly linked to the hope of emancipatory effects. It is guided by the idea of shedding light on the mechanisms of social domination in order to remove the appearance of a quasi-natural inevitability and lack of alternatives and thus make the potential for change conceivable. The productivity of historically guided self-reflection lies in the critical questioning of the contingency and conditions of the here and now. In an emphatic sense, engagement in history is about the acknowledgment of self-determination coupled with an awareness of its limitations.

History promises orientation and a feeling of belonging to a bigger context, giving broader insights into the nature of human affairs beyond current day-to-day business, instructing the presence for the benefit of future developments. However, the culture of history itself is constantly

changing. It is a hotly contested field on what Saul Friedländer called the ‘constant seesaw between learning and forgetting’ (Friedländer, 1993, 8).

Already 140 years ago in his essay *The Benefits and Disadvantages of History for Life* Friedrich Nietzsche pointed out that ‘we are all suffering from a consuming historical fever…’ (Nietzsche, 1982, 4). He distinguished between three types of perspectives on history, namely the ‘monumentalist’ way that values history as a ‘role model, teacher, comforter’ using past greatness as guide for the presence; the ‘antiquarian’ way that tries to overcome the arbitrariness and randomness of life through the veneration of the old and a sense of tradition; and, finally, the ‘critical’ way that denounces untenable injustices and identifies what needs to be changed. Certainly, as the political and social conditions in which one speaks about history change, so do the motives and interests of the observers. Consider a few of the salient phenomena.

Auschwitz

History is the place where the relationship between the presence and the past is negotiated. It is therefore not surprising that the Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau attracts an audience of millions every year. Auschwitz has become the ‘signature of an entire age’, as Jürgen Habermas pointed out. ‘A bond of naivety was torn apart at that time – a naivety from which unquestioned traditions drew their authority, from which historical continuities had been nourished… and not only in Germany’ (Habermas, 1987, 163).

How can we deal with a disaster of this magnitude? The Shoah survivors Primo Levi (*If This Is a Man*) and Imre Kertesz (*Fatelessness*) are the most perceptive writers on this subject, giving readers access to their experiences in Auschwitz, the horror of human degradation and heinous crimes of the Nazis. The concrete encounter of the authentic topography of terror may have a similar impact. What is it that visitors feel as they walk through this memorial site, where the monstrosity of the crimes of genocide must become clearer with every step, from the barracks to the execution sites, gas chambers and crematory? Horror and despair? Grief and indignation? Guilt and shame? Insight into the fragility of humanity and civilisation? Warning and obligation that something like this must never happen again?

Whoever has seen these places of human degradation and systematic murder will hardly forget them. The suffering that people have gone through and the extent of the crimes committed are beyond our

Roger Cremers, *Teenagers at the monument between Birkenau crematoria II and III*, Poland, 2008

imagination. 'But in order to burn a memory into the heart at all, to which the memorials, stumbling blocks and commemorative rituals refer, it will become even more important for future generations to see with their own eyes the places where Germany crushed human dignity…', Navid Kermani summarized after visiting Auschwitz. 'Just as', he explained, 'it depends on the concreteness that is assigned to literature, art and, of course, historical research' (Kermani, 2024, 164). In other words, it is the specific event and the tangible story that enable us to gain an understanding of the past.

The question raised by the photographs taken at the Auschwitz Memorial is how visitors deal with this shocking experience. General knowledge of human nature teaches us that people mobilise all kinds of strategies of defence and distancing when confronted with shock. This is what is nevertheless irritating to see when groups of visitors at Auschwitz are seemingly routinely taking group photos.

Re-enactment

The opposite to this kind of critical and self-reflective culture of remembrance are very popular re-enactments that aim at identification through the simulation of past reality. Costumed amateur actors re-enact exotic rituals, traditional ways of life or important battles. Every requisite and the place of the action should be true to the original, genuine and authentic. Relying on the feeling of authenticity and mimetic credibility, re-enactments promise, 'that the immersive experience is tantamount to what was actually lived and felt in the past' (Agnew and Tomann, 2020, 23). It is as if history had been revived and participants were part of it for a moment. The aim is not to understand history cognitively and intellectually, but to get into immediate connection with the past by powerful emotions, physically and sensually. Actors and spectators are supposed to experience intuitively, with dreamlike certainty, what really happened historically.

The fascination of the Dacian cult in Romania is based on the promise to revive a connection with an ancient population considered to be the ancestors of today's Romanians. What seems to be a romantic escape from modern life is fuelled by the desire to feel as descendants of powerful origins and to experience community based on century-old kinship. The motivation behind such an engagement in history is all too understandable. Individuals, families, groups, and nations … who does not know the desire to locate oneself in a long, impressive continuity despite all the contingency of the flow of history? However, it should be borne in mind

Roger Cremers, *Preparing for a Second World War re-enactment event in Ursel,* Belgium, 2011

that this suggested harmony of past and present tends to block the understanding of history rather than deepen it. Notwithstanding its capacity to stimulate people's emotions, such nostalgic contacts with the past must fear any critical and enlightening effect of historiography. By immersing in cults and battles, one is closer and further away from historical events than ever before.

Despite all the 'magic of authenticity', assertions of verisimilitude and fidelity to past modes of dress, speech, and behaviour, the re-enactment of First or Second World War battles also omits what the uninvolved observer always thought were the decisive aspect of war: the inevitable threat of death. More generally: Whatever we do, history is always a recourse from the presence to the past. We can only see history through a contemporary lens. Regarding the completely different circumstances and background of experience of those acting today doubt is cast whether re-enactment can capture the feeling that determined those involved in the war at the time. Apart from that, the discrepancy between a historical event and the artificial structure of its subsequent reconstruction can never be overcome. One might assume that the intimate encounter with shining heroes, the revival of traditional gender roles and the experience of community orchestrated by reenactments tell more about the needs of the presence than about the historical events to which they pretend to yield higher insights. The fact that reenactment is a successful business model should only be mentioned in passing.

Monuments

'The past is absolutely past, irrevocable – and at the same time not: the past is present and contains future. It limits coming opportunities and releases others, it is present in our language, it shapes our consciousness as well as our subconscious, our behaviour, our institutions and their critique' (Koselleck, 2010, 46). Our life is cluttered with inherited thinking habits and long standing themes, which have become a second nature. Yet, historical awareness is anything but natural. Cultural memory needs rituals, memorials, anniversaries, recurring images and linguistic phrases to be created, preserved and developed. Ceremonial remembrance tends to be repetitive and formulaic.

The worship of two very different European figureheads, who left significant traces in the 20th century, may exemplify the attempt to reassure society on its shared values and the desire to reaffirm a communal sense of history that is perceived by those involved.

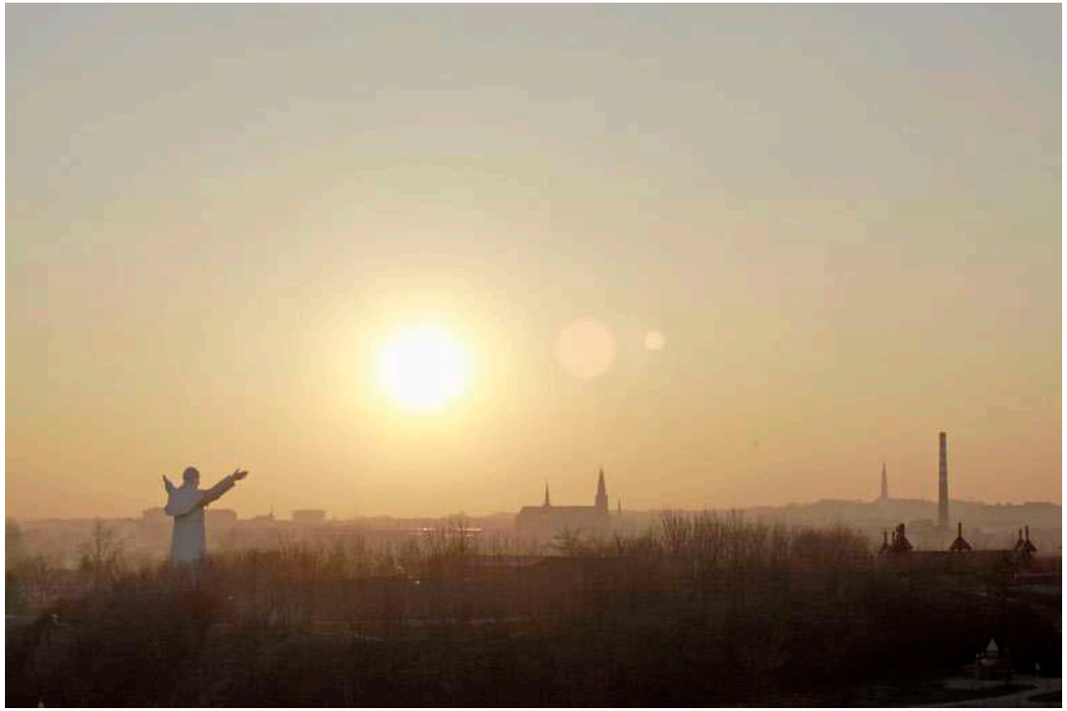
The high fame John Paul II attained on a global scale indicates that his theological convictions and philosophical ideas impressed numerous people, not to mention his impact on political history, significantly encouraging the Polish resistance against communism. The mass production of John Paul II sculptures and their widespread visibility in Poland illustrates a culture of remembrance that creates spiritual orientation and unifying moments in a fragmented modern society.

Every historical statement, however, is time-bound, thus, every historical appreciation is an attribution subject to revocation. What is more, remembrance culture is usually multi-layered and can change its social function or political thrust.

Throughout Turkey, Kemal Atatürk is omnipresent, with statues, busts, and other images displayed in public spaces, schools, offices and shops. His positive remembrance is even protected by law. For a long time, the homage to the founding father of the Republic of Turkey was linked to the orientation towards a secular understanding of politics and a Western lifestyle. However, this consensus-oriented tradition of commemoration is now being challenged by the 'back-to-roots' or Islamization movement, and Atatürk's image has become a symbol of criticism against this development. In a time when political opposition faces strict state control, the public veneration of this canonised figure is being used to express displeasure with the current government, making it almost impossible to be legally prosecuted.

A critical examination of the past seeks orientation for the here and now. It is based on the trust of a better understanding of the presence in the mirror of the past. The 'crux' of the matter is that historians often think to know best in retrospect. Julian Barnes gently mocks the associated dogmatism of those born after the event: '...what a curious vanity it is of the present to expect the past to suck up to it. The present looks back at some great figure of an earlier century and wonders, Was he on our side? Was he a goodie? What a lack of self-confidence this implies: the present wants both to patronise the past by adjudicating on its political acceptability, and also to be flattered by it, to be patted on the back and told to keep up the good work' (Barnes, 1990, 148).

We are always smarter afterwards than we were before. This banal truth causes regularly conflicts in remembrance politics. Historical controversies are debates about social and political self-understanding. Such social learning processes can be perfectly studied in the often dramatic careers of monuments that are leading cultural icons par excellence. They seem to be firmly established as part of the public sphere for a long time



Piotr Małecki, *The world's tallest statue of Pope John Paul II, measuring 13.8 metres, near the city of Częstochowa, the religious centre of Poland*, Poland, 2014

until the sometimes sudden moment when they become a bone of contention and catalyst for historical-cultural change. The fact, for instance, that European colonial powers erected monuments to their protagonists during the 19th century, can be criticized with good reason as an unbearable imposition today. Such monuments are not toppled because they have fallen out of time, but because our political self-understanding is being redefined. Exemplarily, the post-colonial debate displays some responsibility towards the past by putting its finger in the wound: history should reflect on misery and generate forces in the service of change.

Future of the Past

Exploring the public sphere throughout *Presence of the Past*, a broad spectrum of motivations and expectations opens up that constitute our relationship to history: Education and understanding, orientation and societal self-reflection, criticism, affirmation, community building, pastime, the overcoming of contingency, admonition and, last but not least, mourning for a suffering that no time can heal – or a combination thereof.

Time does not stand still. History itself is historical and only provides provisional insights. Thus, the past harbours a huge arsenal of yet undiscovered meanings. New topics can arise at any time, emphasising aspects up to now not yet included in the canon of historical dignity, while abandoning thinking habits and themes derived from long-standing preoccupations, which had previously kept us under their spell. Historical awareness sharpens our sense of possibility, helps to understand present-day problems and generate forces for change: Can we do things differently? Which parts of our legacy do we want to continue and which parts can we no longer accept as a condition or orientation for our actions? Only time will show, which history will occupy us. That is why the past is no less easy to predict than the future.

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CURATING THE EXHIBITION

Petruț Călinescu, *Dacian re-enactors set up the camp before the show at Cucuteni archaeological site*, Romania, 2019

CURATORS' INTRODUCTION

Simina Bădică, Stéphanie Gonçalves

The idea behind this exhibition is both straightforward and nuanced: a photographic exhibition about Europeans' engagement with their past and a questioning of the myriad ways in which we invite the past into the present. The idea came from our community, with proposals to host photographic exhibitions. The suggested photographic projects were highly interesting, visually recording the presence of the past in everyday life or landscapes, in different corners of Europe. Individually they were not sufficiently transnational for a museum of European history. Yet brought together, these photographic projects hinted to a lively conversation about the past that was going on outside museum walls. Our initial research showed we are not the only ones observing this. Theoreticians of history are currently describing the same phenomenon:

> 'So here we are, in the midst of contradictory tendencies: on the one hand, we experience a severe crisis of historical understanding on countless fronts; on the other, we face an abundance of history, an overwhelming sense of historicity, and a large variety of historical projects, the character of which often times we cannot even fathom.' (Simon, 2022, 2)

This sentence has accompanied our first conceptual attempts for this exhibition. We aimed to find and exhibit such 'large variety of historical projects' and we believed photography would be able to show this character 'which often times we cannot even fathom.'

"'Presence' is arguably the most discussed notion in contemporary philosophy of history. Through this notion philosophers have attempted to understand the ways in which the past is literally part of our present." (Ahlskog, 2017, 289) Discussions on the changing nature of society's historical understanding have long accompanied the historical profession. When the curators of this exhibition trained as historians, in the 2000s, François Hartog's 'regimes of historicity' convincingly explained that the relationship between past, present and future had been differently understood throughout history. A premodern regime of historicity looked at the past as a point of orientation ('*historia magistra vitae*') while the modern regime used history for the purposes of building the desired future (Hartog, 2015). Our own post-1989 'presentist' regime of historicity, with its invention of and insistence on 'memory' and 'heritage' is still very much discussed among theoreticians of history. Yet the 'presence' in the title of this exhibition is not necessarily a reference to Hartog's presentism. The acceleration of history, decried by many others

before Hartog, also accounts for the simultaneous existence of different historicities, different relationships to the past. Could it be that in the exhibition that we were planning, one might observe all three regimes of historicity described by Hartog?

Refreshingly enough, current theoretical debates are also concerned with whatever is going on outside the historical profession, to the point of acknowledging that 'what seems to effectively transform historical understanding today is less the practice of intellectual critique and more the recent blossoming of a plurality of 'new historical practices' in human endeavours.' (Simon, 2022, 5)

The European Union's public policies about the past are also at a turning point, requiring a critical assessment on the impact and real outcomes of the last two decades of fostering a 'European culture of remembering' through targeted programs. The European Parliament resolution of 17 January 2024 on European historical consciousness stresses 'the need for an honest assessment of the EU's 'politics of the past', through which it has striven to add legitimacy to the European project, strengthen a European sense of belonging and foster the peaceful coexistence of the continent's peoples, by equally acknowledging achievements and existing shortcomings, and by scrutinising the ways in which citizens have been encouraged to engage with the past.' This 'honest assessment' is only just beginning and Sarah Gensburger's article in this catalogue takes stock of where we are in the process. One of her conclusions is that 'a European culture of remembrance – understood as a commitment to remembering the past in order to build a better future – has thus truly taken shape amongst the European youth'. Yet, the exact content of this culture is highly diverse throughout Europe and often highly conflicting and divisive.

The same 2024 resolution of the European Parliament points to a very interesting solution to the shortcomings of EU's memory politics so far. It suggests, 'moving away from a European 'remembrance culture' that is predominantly top-down and concerned with defining what Europeans should remember towards a bottom-up and citizens-driven 'culture of remembering'.' This exhibition could also be seen as a visual mapping of this 'bottom-up and citizens-driven 'culture of remembering'.'

As museum professionals, we have the privilege of observing the impact of our history-making on our visitors. Yet our observations are restricted to the artificial medium of the museum space. For this exhibition we directed our curiosity towards what our (potential) visitors are doing with the history offered to them outside museum walls (and by 'museum walls' we understand any institutional form of history-making like schools, official celebrations and academia). As such, we are asking a question that is both simple and complex. The simple question is: What do people do with the past? More than 100 photographs show diverse ways of engaging with the past. Close observation is no small endeavour. The more complicated question is 'why'? Do we face 'an abundance of history, an overwhelming sense of historicity', are there new historical practices that challenge the relationship between past, present and future? What is the role of the historian and museums in this new panorama? What is our responsibility for versions of history that we have endorsed then discarded and that we now see revived in powerful performances?

How to curate an exhibition around these questions without overwhelming the visitor? How to exhibit theoretical debates on the nature of history and of our relationship to the past? The following pages give a glimpse into the curatorial thinking behind the creation of this exhibition and the solutions we found to open up this conversation with our visitors.

Why a photographic exhibition?

Presence of the Past is the first collective photographic exhibition of the House of European History. Built in 1934 and inaugurated in 1935, the building in which the House of European History is located has an intrinsic link to photography: it was primarily the charitable dental institute G. Eastman. Georges Eastman (1854–1932) was an American industrialist and inventor, co-founder of Kodak, the photography company. He decided to bequeath part of his fortune to build dental institutes for underprivileged children in Europe (Paris, London, Brussels, Rome and Stockholm) and in the United States. The building in Brussels was designed by the architect Michel Polak (1885–1948), who also signed the Residence Palace and the Villa Empain in the city. Eastman was a pioneer in photography, he first created a new process with dry photographic plaques then introduced the roll film: what we call now the 'modern photography' was born.

We serve a diverse, European audience but we also have multiple identities, as a history museum, a Brussels museum and a European museum. Each of these complementary identities shaped our exhibition.

As a history museum, we want to look at the contemporary practices of Europeans when it comes to the past through the medium of photography. Starting from the admittedly banal observation that photography is omnipresent in our lives and just a click away on our smartphones, we want to develop the visitor's critical sense around a topic that the House is very familiar with: the relationship with the past and history. Most of the photographic projects have been chosen for their documentary dimension. Like researchers, documentary photographers spend time in the field, sometimes several years, meeting and interviewing their subjects while also taking pictures. They document, they chronicle, and they look closely. They are privileged observers of current events, often discreet enough to capture images without disturbing the actors. That is what the visitors will see in *Presence of the Past*'s images.

As a Brussels museum, we felt it was essential to give a voice, or rather a space, to young photographers training at the photography department of the *École nationale supérieure des arts visuels de La Cambre*. We met professors Hervé Charles and Olivier Thieffry end of 2023. They both accompanied six students and recent alumni for a few months in 2024–2025. The current vision of the students provides a counterpoint to the other projects in six sections out of seven, underlining the themes or engaging in dialogue with the projects we chose as curators. They challenge the exhibition's narrative, giving a more contemporary touch to the rather classical exhibition we present. Although we have visually slightly highlighted them in the exhibition through the presentation text, we wanted to give them the same place as the other photographers: they are embedded in the exhibition and not in a separate space.

As a European museum, it is important for us to highlight artists from all over Europe as well as phenomena. In *Presence of the Past,* visitors can discover works from the Netherlands

to Romania, from Scotland to Turkey, the whole European continent living the diversity of contemporary engagement with history.

Curating multiple voices

The curators' voice is strong in all exhibitions. We write the texts, put brighter light on certain objects and place them in the centre or, on the contrary, hide them behind a corner. The curator is the main storyteller. This exhibition hosts multiple storytellers and we have consciously attempted to silence our own voices from time in time, in order for other voices to be clearly heard.

Documentary photographers are excellent storytellers and keen observers of human behaviour. Their patience, empathy and precision to capture the 'decisive moment' (Cartier-Bresson) makes their images the witnesses upon which this exhibition bases its narrative. The exhibition narrative offers context for each image and a classification of the heterogeneous phenomena the photographers documented. But the depth and nuances of each individual's very personal relationship with history are still to be found in contemplating the images and connecting with fellow Europeans through extraordinary images.

The voices in the exhibition, besides the curatorial voice of the section texts and labels, belong to people commenting on their relationship with the past. The photographers collected the quotes during their documentation. None of the authors are historians, professors, museum professionals nor politicians. One can read testimonies such as:

'I like immersive re-enactment: sleeping like them, eating like them, being in the trenches – it brings me closer to what they experienced.' (First World War re-enactor, France, 2018)

'We should remember our past, especially if it is traumatic or difficult.' (Dora Ivanova, founder of the Buzludzha Project Foundation, Bulgaria, 2015)

'I was named after the boat that took my great-grandparents to the Netherlands.' (Alèssyo Letemahulu, 2021).

One title. Four languages

The title of the exhibition *Presence of the Past* is expressed differently in the four languages in use in our temporary exhibitions: English, French, German and Dutch. We made this choice to highlight the nuances and specificities of each language. In English, *Presence of the Past*, and German, *Gegenwart der Vergangenheit*, the transparent title immediately evokes the role of the past in our daily lives. In French, *Passé composé*, not only refers to the conjugation of a past tense that underlines the consequence of an action, but also to the composition each of us makes with the past. The term also refers to the photographic composition and the act of arranging visual elements in a frame: here, we are emphasising the work of the photographers as well as the constantly renewed effort of our memory to (re)compose a relationship with the past. Finally, in Dutch, *Onvoltooid verleden*, also refers to the conjugation of a verb in the past tense that is not yet finished, that is still being pursued. In this

Mine Dal, *A portrait of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk hanging in a bakery*, Moda, Istanbul, Türkiye, 2016

case, visitors can understand the title as an invitation to look at the past as something that is always in progress, with an iterative dimension. The title might also ring a bell among readers of the Belgian Flemish-speaking writer Hugo Claus who wrote a book with the same title in 1997. The subtitle, *a European Album*, is similar in all languages, referring to both photographic vocabulary and family memories, and emphasising the diversity of the proposals from all over Europe gathered in one place.

Defining the key messages of the exhibition

From the storm of big and small questions mentioned at the beginning of this text, the exhibition team spend long hours to transform them into clear questions and messages around which scenography, interactivity, activities and events can be built. These are the key messages around which we then built the exhibition brief:

Michael Pappas, *A man wearing the local costume of Missolonghi,* Greece, 2022

1. There is great diversity in how Europeans deal with the past.

Europeans are engaged in a wide variety of grass roots historical projects, based on different motivations. By looking at the histories Europeans engage with, we can learn something about our present. Personal engagement with history (outside the institutional settings of museums, schools and official celebrations) is based on various needs and motivations, such as: search for orientation, identity, connection, community, awareness, education, escapism, entertainment, justice, healing, recognition, reconciliation.

2. The concepts of 'Past' and 'History' are different. Historical narratives are constructs meant to make sense of the past.

The past is everything that happened before the present moment, an undifferentiated accumulation of events. History however, is a narrative constructed out of selected events from the past, connected by causality and infused with meaning. Different histories can be told about the same past.

3. A picture is worth a thousand words – or not?

In our image-based contemporary culture, documentary photography is one of the trustworthy witnesses of our times. On average, a person sees thousands of images in one day. Which ones do we choose to trust? No image speaks for itself without context, source, intention of the image-maker. The skill of image analysis has become crucial. Documentary photography stands out as a trustworthy form of visual documentation, due to its long-term projects, ethical codes, extended research and interaction with the subjects of the images.

Delivering the exhibition messages in the scenography

An exhibition is a story told in space. The visitor literally walks into the story we want to tell. With the first photographic exhibition in our museum, we faced different challenges: how to visually reflect the individual approaches of the photographers in a collective scenography? How can the visitor immediately perceive the singularity of the projects? How to create harmony between such diverse projects? We chose the designer – Marie Douel Studio – because we were convinced by their approach fully linked to history. Marie Douel Studio proposed to embed historical stones from different places in Belgium, like the Park Leopold where the museum sits, or remains from buildings bombed during the Second World War. The common thread running through all sections are the stones rented from Architecturaal Antiek Delaere in Kuurne. History is built with pieces of the past and the scenography makes this visible to the visitors. Not all remnants of the past are kept in museums or history books, most are discarded or re-used in other projects. The exhibition speaks of these processes to the visitors not only through texts and images but also through the scenography.

Temporary exhibitions have been increasingly raising sustainability issues in museums. From scenography props, walls and building materials to printed material, so much gets discarded after a temporary exhibition. The request of the museum to Marie Douel Studio was to use as much material from former temporary

exhibitions as possible and any new elements should be added with sustainability in mind. The rented antique stones thus provided an excellent solution to both the sustainability of the exhibition and the delivery of the exhibition's messages through scenography.

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Elizar Veerman, *Young men belonging to the third generation of the Moluccan community in the Netherlands*, Breukelen, Netherlands, 2021

Petruț Călinescu, *Dacian re-enactor visits the Bucegi plateau, considered holy, in the Carpathian mountains*, Romania, 2019

EXHIBITION NARRATIVE

Stéphanie Gonçalves, Simina Bădică

What is behind our need for and use of history? Universities and museums do not have a monopoly on history; in fact, history plays a significant role in our lives. Europeans engage with the past in highly diverse ways, from commemorating historical events to participating in re-enactments, from taking tourist selfies to destroying monuments, from digging up forgotten pasts to keeping private collections. What are we searching for when we connect with history? Are we seeking an identity that goes beyond our own lives? Are we longing for social connection or political community? Are we trying to process grief and reconcile with past tragedies? Or are we looking to be entertained and escape from the banality of everyday life?

The exhibition is divided into seven sections exploring different types of engagement with the past and the different needs and motivations behind them:

1. Destination history
2. Post-heroic commemorations
3. Reenactments
4. Hero-making
5. De-commemoration
6. The past as landscape
7. Everyday historians

Each of the seven sections is composed of three to four photographic projects, illuminating a different aspect of the theme of the section. Each photographic project sheds light on a specific memorial phenomenon that is community-initiated and performed. One case study is contrasted with another one, sharing similar motivations deployed in strikingly different manners or similar phenomena coming from very different motivations. *Non idem est si duo dicunt idem*.

The collaboration with the photographers of La Cambre Art School, as explained in Hervé Charles' article in this catalogue, was in full development when this article was being written. Some projects were not finalized and thus not included in this overview of the exhibition narrative. You can find them all in the *Photographers' stories* section in this volume.

The portraits' gallery

While carrying out research for this exhibition, which entailed examining hundreds of photographic and documentary projects, our hearts would sometime skip a beat when encountering the direct gaze of one of the people portrayed. We do not often stare into somebody's face, looking for clues as to their thoughts and intentions; we are taught it is impolite. Portrait photography

allows us to do just that. From our fascination with some of the portraits we were contemplating, the idea appeared to start the exhibition and spark the curiosity of the visitors with: a gallery of portraits.

A beautiful red-haired girl, wearing a fox skin with its head on her shoulders, a Dacian *Gioconda,* is our vanishing point, drawing visitors into the exhibition. Walking towards her, one notices two senior Moluccan brothers in Dutch army uniforms and two young men in French First World War uniforms. A woman is standing on a chair wearing an exquisite Greek folk costume, towering over the portraits of her grandparents. In front of her, a man and a woman are holding the portrait of a grandfather they never met as he was killed during the Spanish civil war. They are still on a quest to find his remains. Everyone in this gallery of portraits seems to be searching for something in the past. But what exactly is it? A connection with their ancestors, real or imagined, pride in their achievements or freedom from their mistakes and wrongdoings?

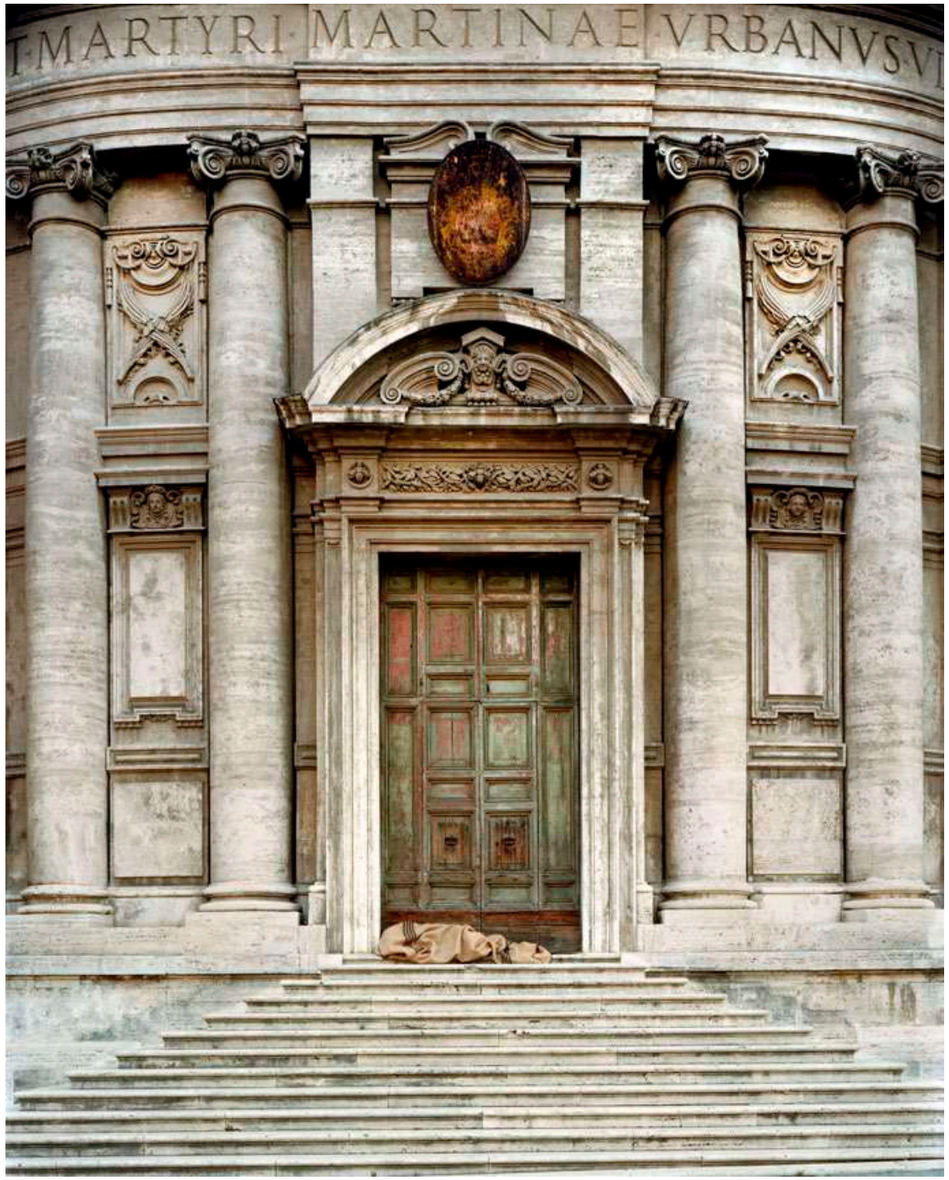
The portraits' gallery does not reveal much of the stories behind the portraits, to be discovered later in the exhibition space, but sets the mood for a show that is primarily about people, and their personal engagement with history. The exhibition investigates the motives of such personal engagement and doing so becomes an inventory of the many ways history touches us, young and old, from all walks of life throughout Europe.

Chapter 1
Destination history

History, even traumatic history, can become a touristic destination. 'Heritage turns the past into something visitable,' Sharon Macdonald wrote (2013, 18). We photograph historical sites for our social media accounts or our family photo albums, yet sometimes we are searching for more: pride in the achievements of our ancestors, admiration for human creativity, or redemption for humanity's crimes. We were taught how to behave in museums and around heritage sites: the past should not be touched but protected with display cases. Yet, when heritage is not signalled with stanchions and museum labels, do we still pay attention to it?

Contemporary tourism has its roots in the Grand Tour of the 17th to 19th centuries. Young male upper-class Europeans travelled across Europe, and especially to Italy, to complete their education by witnessing in person the legacy of classical antiquity. Ever since, the choice of pasts that became worthy of visiting has steadily increased. As Sharon Macdonald explains, 'one of the most important accomplishments of heritage is to turn the past from something that is simply there, or has merely happened, into an arena from which selections can be made and values derived. We might even put this as heritage turning the past into The Past.' (2013, 18)

The exhibition starts with one of the most common forms of engagement with the past: tourism. Many of the visitors are probably themselves on a tourist trip when visiting the House of European History. It may at first seem easy to identify with the people in the photographs, taking photographs or being photographed, but up to which point? Is touristic behaviour always



Véronique Ellena, *Santi Luca e Martina church,*
Rome, Italy, 2011

appropriate no matter the site? How should we view 'dark tourism'?

'Photography develops in tandem with one of the most characteristic of modern activities: tourism,' wrote Susan Sontag (2005, 6) while she also connected photography to a severed relationship from one's past. 'People robbed of their past seem to make the most fervent picture takers, at home and abroad. Everyone who lives in an industrialized society is obliged gradually to give up the past.' Photography, she continues, 'has become one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation' (Sontag, 2005, 7). This may be especially true when the experience offered to the tourist comes with a heavy moral burden, as is the case of visits to former places of mass atrocities.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum is one of Poland's biggest tourist attractions, with more than two million visiting in 2016. (Reynolds, 2018, 1) Some of these people experience their visit as a pilgrimage to what is considered the world's biggest graveyard. Roger Cremers (b. 1972) began photographing the European culture of remembrance of the Second World War in 2008. At Auschwitz-Birkenau, he captured tourists' behaviour, a project for which he won the first prize at the World Press Photo awards in 2009. Although never intended to host crowds of tourists, the former concentration and death camp, as seen in Roger Cremers' images, provides the most striking background on which questions about tourism, photography, 'memory duty' and the educational effect of visiting former sites of atrocities can be asked. The article of Libera Picchianti and Simina Bădică in this catalogue considers these questions in a diachronic manner. How has visiting Auschwitz changed over time since its transformation into a memorial-museum in the post-war years?

Next to them, the images of Nick Hannes (b. 1974) portray a strikingly different approach to tourism. On summer holiday, in bathing suits, tourists in the ancient city and spa Hierapolis, in contemporary Turkey, photograph themselves against the ancient ruins. They bathe in Cleopatra's pool among submerged ancient stone remains of a temple of Apollo.

The photograph of the suitcase of Sofia Yala's grandfather, in front of the Monument of the Discoveries (*Padrão dos Descobrimentos)* in Lisbon, enriches and expands the narrative with another meaning: travel is not just synonymous with entertainment, but is sometimes a forced exile. Sofia Yala (b. 1994), an Angolan-Portuguese artist, superimposes the migration of her grandfather who fled colonial violence, the journey of the colonists whose aim was conquest and, finally, the tourists in Lisbon today, strolling past this symbolic, contested yet still venerated monument. These layers of the past coexist in the present.

While contemplating the peculiarities and pitfalls of contemporary tourism to historical sites, visitors are confronted with the first visual counterpoint stemming from the collaboration with the La Cambre Photography School. *The Invisibles* by Véronique Ellena (b. 1966), who was a student of La Cambre at the beginning of the 1990s, lends visibility to those who live with historical monuments but are invisible to us most of the time. She created this project when she was a fellow at the French Villa Medici in Rome. The photographs show bodies draped like ancient statues and subtle hints of a human presence, such as a blanket or a sheet of cardboard. Where we see historical monuments that are usually touristic attractions, houseless people seek refuge and protection from the violence of the contemporary world.

The first section of the exhibition is already an opportunity to encourage the visitors to engage with the exhibition's questions. 'Do historical sites belong to the living or the dead?' The visitors are invited to answer in the first mechanical interactive display of the exhibition.

Chapter 2
Post-heroic commemorations

To whom will we pay homage in the 21st century? War heroes and army leaders have been taken off their pedestals. Since the immense human tragedy of the First World War, war is commemorated rather than celebrated. Individual soldiers and civilian victims are named and remembered. Communities call for healing ceremonies. States no longer have a monopoly on memorial practices, and a multitude of grassroots commemorations are organised from within the affected communities. Dissatisfaction with the form and content of official cultures of remembrance led civil society to organise grassroots commemorations. War commemorations in particular have changed from glorifying monarchs and military leaders to commemorating each individual soldier or war victim. In this section designed as a public space with a fountain at its centre, we display three different grass-roots projects: one originally from Russia, another from Sarajevo and the last one now transnational.

An incredible crowd of people are walking towards us from the photograph. They are each holding a black and white portrait, a different portrait. The Immortal Regiment is a grassroots commemorative movement initiated in 2012 in Tomsk, Russia, by three journalists, now spread across the country and abroad. On 9 May, Victory Day, the day Russia commemorates the victory over Nazi Germany, people join in a procession bearing photographs of members of their families who participated in the Second World War.

The Immortal Regiment movement quickly spread outside Russia. By 2015, processions were organised in at least 15 countries, including Israel, Germany, and Norway. The organisers stated they were frustrated with the political, commercial, and militaristic overtones of the official parades and wanted to focus the commemoration on the people who actually fought the war (Gabowittsch, 2018, 307). 'We wanted to return the celebration to the main hero, to the person who experienced the war.' wrote Sergei Lapenkov, one of the initiators of the Immortal Regiment commemoration. Owing to its immense success, the movement was taken over by the Russian government, with Vladimir Putin joining the procession in Moscow with a portrait of his father, veteran of the war. In 2022, one million people in Moscow took part in the procession of the Immortal Regiment, but the memory of those who fought against fascism is also politically used to unite people in support of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Nevertheless, in the context of the war in Ukraine, the Immortal Regiment march was forbidden throughout Russia both in 2023 and 2024.

Another innovative form of commemoration, a performance called *Our Family Garden*, was created by the artist Smirna Kulenović (b. 1994). She was born during the war in Bosnia. The siege of Sarajevo (1992–1996) was the longest siege of a capital city in modern European history. Sarajevo's landscape and people still bear the scars of that war. In 2021, Smirna Kulenović and a group of 100 women planted 1 000 calendula

Bas van Setten, *Artist Gunter Demnig installing 24 new Stolpersteine in Utrecht*, Netherlands, 2018

plants in the former war trenches on Zlatište hill. In doing so, they created a living monument, hoping to start a process of social and ecological healing. The women, survivors of the siege, reject constant victimization and instead choose peace and solidarity with all kinds of life in the traumatized ecosystem. Kulenović explains: 'The hate speech of our country's politicians is reflected in official monuments, which are often subject to the manipulation of history. An organic monument is necessary to access this political agenda without using harmful words, but communicating through a healing ecosystem [instead].' (quoted in Egger, 2022). Sarajevans took over the artistic project and continue to perform the planting ritual every year on 6 April, the Day of Sarajevo.

Probably the most renowned transnational memorial project in this section is the Stolpersteine project. Created by the German artist Gunter Demnig (b. 1947) in 1992, the project honours the victims of Nazism by placing golden paving stones in front of the house where they used to live. These paving stones are the largest decentralised memorial project in the world. More than 100 000 stones have been installed, on the initiative of local people, in at least 1 200 places in Europe. 'One stone, one name, one person', that is how Gunther Demnig sums up his project. The Stolpersteine project has not been received without controversy: some criticize the 'undignified' way that people can walk on the name of a Shoah victim. Some municipalities do not want to place them arguing they do not correctly represent the reality of the Jews that survived. On the other side of the spectrum of reception, some 'fake' stolpersteine appeared in Brussels, among other places, showing that this way of remembering is now becoming vernacular, appropriated and copied.

The golden *pavés* are now well known for many Europeans, and certainly well known in Brussels particularly, as they are quite numerous in the streets. In this section, we are exhibiting one stolpersteine that has been crafted for Max Fuchs (1901–1945), a German-speaking Polish Jew born in 1901 in Przemyśl, at that time in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, today in Poland. He left his hometown in 1921 for Berlin, from where he probably fled to Belgium in 1938 or 1939 due to the persecution of Jews in Germany. In late 1943 he went into hiding in Brussels but he was caught, sent to transit camp Mechelen and then deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in April 1944. He survived in Auschwitz for nine months and, as the Red Army was approaching, was sent on one of the death marches to the camps of Mauthausen and then Neuengamme. Research about his fate from February 1945 is still ongoing. A box containing some of his documents and personal items was only found in 2015 in the attic of his last hiding place and donated to the House of European History. One stolpersteine will be placed for him, in front of this house on Rue du Moulin 81, during the lifespan of the *Presence of the Past* exhibition (March 2025–January 2026).

Chapter 3
Re-enactments

How would you feel about dressing up as Napoleon or crawling through trenches in your free time? Some Europeans have been doing just that for decades, and their number is growing. These are people interested in all periods of history, from prehistoric times to the Viking age, from medieval battles to the wars of the 20th century. For some scholars, re-enactments are a 'nostalgic escapism from modernity' (Brædder, 183). Events that are more contemporary are also recreated, such as artist Jeremy Deller re-enacting in 2001 the *Battle of Orgreave*, a 1984 strike of British miners met with force under the Thatcher government. Re-enactments are reconstructions of historical events, with concern for authenticity in every detail. The appropriation of the past through one's body makes re-enactment events especially powerful for the re-enactors. Karin Reichenbach's article in this catalogue goes deeper into the motivations of the re-enactors but also warns that 'Misappropriation for ideological ends and the desire to revive 'history as it was' limit its potential and the value that historical re-enactment as such can have in and for itself.'

This section displays four projects. The first one takes place in Romania, where a growing community is claiming a connection to the Dacians, the indigenous population conquered by the Roman Empire in second century CE. They re-enact the Dacians' most famous battles and religious rituals, recreate Dacian costumes and give their children Dacian names. This focus on the 'brave, freedom-loving Dacians' as the 'true' ancestors of modern Romanians first emerged in the 19th century and is now in full resurgence.

One of the re-enacting groups documented by photographer Petruț Călinescu (b. 1976) are the Geto-Dacians of Moldavia Cultural Association. On their social media, they describe themselves as 'ordinary people who took on the mantle of our ancestors and thus became legendary heroes, gods before you!' What they aim to offer to the public is 'a perfect show and a living history lesson that will not be forgotten too soon.'

The second installation concerns a period of history that is closer to the present day and much loved by re-enactors: the First World War. For his project *Nostalgie de la boue* (*Nostalgia for Mud*), Hugo Passarello Luna (b. 1981) followed several groups of French re-enactors who recreate First World War battles on real battlegrounds and photographed them using a Kodak Vest Pocket camera. We are exhibiting the camera. This model was produced from 1912 to 1926 and was known as 'the soldiers' Kodak'. 'Make your own picture record of the War' was the slogan of the time. With the fortune made from the Kodak company, George Eastman opened five dental clinics for children in need in Europe, one of which is the building housing our museum. The visitors can also discover quotes from the re-enactors themselves, printed on the seats made of sandbags (similar to the ones used during war to protect heritage sites). Some are humoristic, other much more dramatic: 'I have been killed a dozen times since I started doing this. I have experienced some very beautiful deaths.' says one re-enactor while another gets involved in re-enactments 'to remember that yesterday was worse than today.'

The re-enactors of the Second World War are photographed by Roger Cremers, the same photographer who captured tourist behaviour in Auschwitz-Birkenau in the first section of the exhibition. Since 2008, Roger Cremers has photographed the European culture of remembrance of the Second World War, from the beaches of Normandy to Russia. He believes that the Second World War has become part of our popular culture and that this is one of the reasons it has not been forgotten. For his project *World War Two Today*, he photographed historical sites, commemorative events, archaeological digs, re-enactments, and history lessons by re-enactors. Some images are striking for the spectator, often with a contemporary twist which slightly shifts the gaze, surprises the viewer or raises a smile. We have chosen images that show the re-enactors in action, preforming their role but also during the breaks when the border between past and present becomes visible and striking in Cremers' images.

The last project of the section is set in a special room that seeks to develop intimacy with the visitor. It shows a less common type of re-enactment particularly connected to the question of exile and migration. Romane Iskaria (b. 1997) recently graduated La Cambre Art School and presents here her project *Jaré*. In Assyrian language, and especially for the Malkie community (North East Syria), the word 'jaré' means a memory that triggers intense emotions. Romane Iskaria has re-enacted with young people an Assyrian summer ritual of families sleeping outside, on the roof of their houses, during the hot summer nights. For Assyrians in the diaspora, the memory of this summer ritual is 'jaré'. The artist questions the consequences of exile and the attachments to an idealised past and origins. The Assyrians do not have a national state, they are a minority in Syria, Iran, Turkey and form substantial diaspora in Europe. The photography of young people sleeping on a reconstructed bed is accompanied by a sculpture of textile, carpets and cushions, and a video of the re-enactment.

Hugo Passarello Luna, *First World War re-enactment scene*, France, 2018

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman recently described retrotopia as imagining an ideal society (utopia) to exist not in the future, but in the past. 'True to the utopian spirit, retrotopia derives its stimulus from the urge to rectify the failings of the present human condition – though now by resurrecting the failed and forgotten potentials of the past. Imagined aspects of the past, genuine or putative, serve as the main landmarks today in drawing the road-map to a better world.' (Bauman, 2017, 6) Could re-enactments be a form of what Bauman describes as our 'retrotopian romance with the past' (2017, 7)?

Chapter 4
Hero-making

What is it to endure historical greatness? Many dictators like Napoleon, Stalin or Tito built a cult of personality around themselves while they were in power. Most of them were only venerated for as long as the system they installed was in place. So how does one explain the continued reverence towards a strong historical figure such as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), the founder of modern Turkey? What mechanism is at work in the current heroisation of Pope John Paul II in Poland? Are these personalities also just temporary icons of collective worship? Will later

Piotr Małecki, *An elderly woman looks up at a statue of Pope John Paul II*, Żdanów, Poland, 2011

generations maybe reconsider the more controversial parts of their biographies?

In 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded the Turkish state on the ashes of the collapsed Ottoman Empire. New Turkey was a secular republic based on the separation of the powers of state and religion. One century later, the veneration of Atatürk (literally, Father of the Turks) is growing and his image has become ubiquitous. Today, displaying Atatürk is also a hidden political criticism, one of the few possible forms of protest against the current government and its political values. Mine Dal (b. 1960) has been visually collecting appearances of Atatürk in the public and private sphere since 2013. In a series of three images shown in the exhibition, we see the same spot, the wall of a mosque in 2013, 2017 and 2019 with the same poster of Atatürk while all the rest around it changed. 'In Turkey, everything changes but Atatürk' concludes the photographer.

After Pope John Paul II's death in 2005, one new monument to him was unveiled every six days, on average, in Poland. Piotr Małecki (b. 1967) travelled across Poland to bear witness to the incredible vitality of the cult of John Paul II, who is revered not only as the only Polish Pope, but also for his role in ending communism in the country. Although the pace of statue-raising has slowed since 2011, John Paul II has become

omnipresent in Poland as both a religious and a secular icon: 'Everyone in my generation remembers what they were doing the day John Paul II died.' (Aleksandra, 29 years old, Poland, 2024) His memory is not without controversy, even more as one leaves the borders of Poland. His position on birth control and child sexual abuses inside the Catholic Church are now also part of his legacy.

European public opinion is divided with regards to past heroes. According to the European Social Survey (2023) 53% of Europeans think we should honour the heroes of the past, even if their views or actions do not reflect present societal values. 47% of Europeans think that we should consider present societal values when deciding which past heroes should still be honoured. More insight into this recent survey and the conclusions that can be drawn from it can be read in Sarah Gensburger's article in this catalogue. In continuing this reflection, visitors are invited to write on the exhibition walls to whom or to what they would raise a monument today.

Chapter 5
De-commemoration

Do troubling past events disappear if we remove the monuments that were dedicated to them? Colonial and slavery-related monuments have recently been the subject of much discussion worldwide, but this is not necessarily new. In 1990s Eastern Europe, the fate of communist monuments was fiercely debated. Should all communist statues be taken down, as symbols of a cruel dictatorship? Or should some be kept, so that the past is not completely erased? 'There is nothing more invisible than a monument,' wrote Austrian writer Robert Musil in 1936. We seem to start seeing monuments again when they offend us. Could their offensiveness provide an opening to start long-silenced conversations about the past?

The title of this section comes from the 2024 edited volume *De-Commemoration: Removing Statues and Renaming Places* in which de-commemoration is defined as 'processes in which material and public representations of the past are taken away, destroyed, or fundamentally altered' (Gensburger, 2024, 1). The editors of the volume also interestingly highlight how commemoration and de-commemoration are two faces of the same coin, similar to how they are shown in the exhibition, in two consecutive sections. 'From a conceptual perspective, the choice of using the prefix 'de' and the hyphen signifies that de-commemoration is in fact a form of commemoration. And reciprocally, any commemoration is always in itself a form of de-commemoration.' (Gensburger, 2024, 3)

From an East European perspective, the removal of communist-era symbols has been an ongoing process since the 1990s, not without its struggles, mixed feelings and different outcomes depending on the regional context. In Bulgaria, Ukraine and former Yugoslavia, the exhibition focuses on citizen's involvement and reaction to post-communist de-commemoration.

The striking image of the Mount Buzludzha Monument House of the Bulgarian Communist Party on which someone graphitised 'Forget your past' functions as a key-image for this section. The monument house on Mount Buzludzha was built by the Bulgarian communist government and was inaugurated in 1981. Every citizen was required to make a small donation for the building, designed by architect Georgi Stoilov and built by 6 000 workers over a period of seven years. After 1989, the monument fell

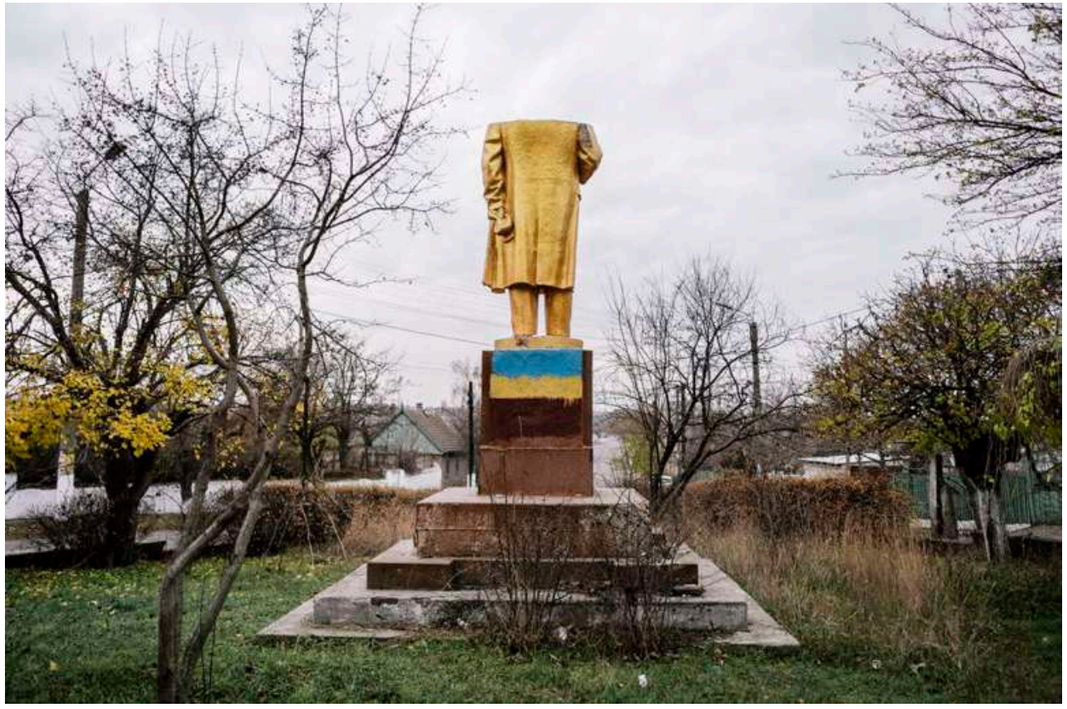
into near-ruin owing to a lack of maintenance. However, in 2015, a movement working for the monument's preservation was formed, and the graffiti inscription 'Forget your past' was at some point transformed into 'Never forget your past'. The reasoning behind this movement is explained by Dora Ivanova, founder of the Buzludzha Project Foundation, quoted in the exhibition: 'We should remember our past, especially if it is traumatic or difficult.'

Photographer Niels Ackermann (b. 1987) and writer Sébastien Gobert (b. 1985) documented an apparently similar process in Ukraine. Ukraine declared its independence from the Soviet Union on 24 August 1991. Following the 2014 Revolution of Dignity and Russia's initial aggression in Crimea and Donbas, Ukraine banned communist symbols in 2015. Ackermann and Gobert documented the fate of the outdoor depictions of Lenin, and Ukrainians' strong feelings about this process. Some statues were taken down and destroyed, while others were hidden or even repurposed. Throughout their extensive travels they recorded the voices of those involved or bystanders, not shying away from highlighting completely opposite views and feelings. From Ukrainians decrying that their 'history will disappear, sold for a few dollars...' to others saying 'It's scary to think that some people miss the [Lenin] statue.'

The fate of communist-era monuments in former Yugoslavia is yet another different process heavily influenced by the tragic war of Yugoslav Succession (1991–2001). Spomenik means 'monument' in Serbo-Croat-Bosnian. After the Second World War, hundreds of monuments to the anti-fascist fight were raised in Yugoslavia, one of the few countries that liberated itself from Nazi occupation. The anti-fascist struggle provided strong legitimation for Tito's communist dictatorship. During the war in the 1990s, some of these monuments were destroyed and vandalised. Many of them have been left to decay. Their contemporary fate has more to do with the political landscape over the last decades of the country in which they remained, after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and less with their initial purpose as anti-fascist monuments. In Croatia, one of the long-term consequences of the war was 'the demonization of the antifascist struggle and the rehabilitation of Nazi-fascist collaborators, which was played out across the country's memoryscape: thousands of Partisan memorials have been damaged or completely destroyed since 1991.' (Pavlaković, 2017, 267).

The exhibition shows a selection of six photographs from Jan Kempenaers' (b. 1968) long term project searching for and photographing hundreds of such monuments spread all over former Yugoslavia. His project sparked a worldwide interest which resulted in both research, such as the production of an online and printed spomenik database (Niebyl, 2018) but also criticism for the exotisation of these memorials: 'Yugoslav war memorials can now be seen in print publications, in music videos, and even in sci-fi movies, as well as endlessly circulating within social networks. The phenomenon contradicts the previous negative stereotypes of socialist architecture introducing the formerly adventurous structures of the 1970s and 1980s as objects of genuine fascination.' (Kulić, 2018, 1) Yet, the architectural historian decries their continuous use 'with the same anonymous detachment that ignores both their original meaning and their artistic merit.' (Kulić, 2018, 3).

The section closes with Ria Pacquée's (b. 1954) video *Washing Away the Past* (2022) in a space designed to encourage reflection



Niels Ackermann, *A headless Lenin sculpture*, Shabo, Ukraine 2015

and debate about the topics raised. The video shows the 1931 Leopold II monument in Ostend, Belgium being cleaned by authorities after activists doused it with red paint in 2022. Leopold II, King of the Belgians (1865–1909), colonised and privately owned the Congo Free State from 1885 to 1908. The ruthless colonial regime of terror and economic exploitation killed millions. To this day, the Belgian public space is filled with statues, major boulevards and parks bearing his name. The House of European History also sits in such an ambiguous location, the park Leopold. Created in 1880, during Leopold II's reign, is the name a reference to his father, the first Leopold (1831–1865) or to Leopold II? No demand for a renaming of the park has so far been put forward. The benches in this section, surrounding Pacquée's video, sit on stones dismantled from the Leopold Park in the 1970s. One of the buildings currently housing the Natural History Museum had been initially built as a monastery. The eclectic decorations of the monastery facades were taken down in the 1970s and stored ever since by Architecturaal Antiek Delaere in Kuurne, Belgium, a family business that carefully dismantles castles and residencies for further re-use. Sitting on actual remnants of the Leopold Park, what kind of de-commemoration would our visitor envisage for the strong presence of the colonial past in Belgium today?

Chapter 6
The past as landscape

This section is the only one that does not focus on people. But human history has deeply shaped European landscapes, from the slag heaps of Charleroi to the vast plains of Ukraine, from the Greek islands to the Atlantic coast. If they are not repurposed or preserved as historical landmarks, the physical remains of the past slowly fall into ruin and gradually blend into the landscape. Not everything is meant to be commemorated and enshrined as heritage. Forgetting is natural; repression calls for questioning. In this chapter, we want the visitor to think on how nature regains its place where a tragic story unfolded, on how nature digests and integrates human history, how nature is a revelation of what humankind has experienced.

In his project *The Last Stand*, Marc Wilson (b. 1968) documents some of the physical remnants of the Second World War on the coastlines of the British Isles and Northern Europe. His photographs focus on the military defence structures that remain and their place in the shifting landscape that surrounds them. Over the four years of the project, Wilson travelled 37 000 kilometres to 143 locations, giving visibility to the concrete traces of war in nature. His aesthetically beautiful, but untouched images with an evanescent atmosphere are the witnesses of how impressive former military structures are still visible in our European landscapes.

From a very different point of view, in the series *Nomads, Place with no Name*, Valérie Leray (b. 1975) photographs camps and places where Roma were interned during the Second World War, such as Rivesaltes and Mulsanne in France. Drawing on her family history – her grandfather, Jean-Pierre Leray, was imprisoned in a camp near Orléans as a child – the project casts a light on the invisible history of the internment of thousands of Roma in France. We are presenting three images of her project, among which two have been acquired for the House of European History's collection. Valérie Leray is pursuing her work today in Eastern Europe.

In this section, the counterpoint from La Cambre comes from the visual work of Julien Sales (b. 1990) on and with glaciers. Formed over 7000 years ago, glaciers are a physical heritage of the past even before what historians usually call 'history'. In *Last Image*, Julien Sales shaped the transparent ice to make ephemeral lenses for his homemade unique camera. The photographs taken are then a testimony of the geological history, Julien Sales thus making what he calls an 'archaeology of light'. We decided to exhibit the camera-glacier that he especially crafted for his project: this is a crucial object for the scenography, as we chose to have very few objects exhibited. Here, the camera-glacier resonates with the other exhibited camera, the 'Kodak vest' in Hugo Passarello Luna's installation. Two cameras on two different floors, one century of difference between them, they are the mirror of two different technologies and even philosophies. The Kodak is symbolic of the mass development of personal photography around the First World War while the camera-glacier is a singular technological prototype of a handmade camera. The contrast between these two cameras is striking while it makes the visitor think how technology is not a calamity always moving forward: in the age of phones and cameras becoming synonymous, the photographer is still the one who creates the image and sometimes, if necessary, even the camera, to create the image he imagined.

Valérie Leray, *Paintball field, military camp, clandestine detention centres, field of ruins, Rivesaltes, 2008 / Internment camp for Roma, Rivesaltes, 1939–1942*, France, 2008

Elizar Veerman, *Janysso, Alèssyo and Yaèzara Letemahulu, Moluccan children belonging to the fourth generation of the Moluccan community in the Netherlands,* Netherlands, 2021

Chapter 7
Everyday historians

Have you ever hunted for old objects in flea markets or in your grandparents' attic? Do you want to trace your family tree? Then you may be an everyday historian. In the last section of the exhibition, we explain some of the many daily life activities of Europeans in which they interact with the past. This trend is widespread today as seen on popular TV shows about history or objects such as *Bares für Rares* in Germany or *Affaire Conclue* in France, where people are auctioning some of their old objects. The popularity of these shows lies not only in the financial gain that is made by the seller but also in the history of the object that is sometimes unveiled by the auctioneer.

The speed of modern life has made our traditional ways of connecting to the past more fragile. The faster the present moves, the greater our need for anchors in the past. Collecting, preserving, archiving, exhibiting, and even excavating are how historians go about creating new stories from the past. Europeans from all walks of life are now using these methods to document the wonders and horrors of the past.

Since 2019, Michael Pappas (b. 1980) has been photographing Greek communities keeping their traditions alive in two projects: *Ethos, Another side of Greece* and *Mitos, The Thread of Greece*. From village folk festivals to bridal costumes still worn today, Pappas sheds light on the materiality and beauty of family and community history passed on from one generation to the other. The pictures we chose, all with a red touch, show the diversity and magnificence of costumes in private houses or in the public space, especially for rituals such as festivals or weddings. These Greek stories can resonate with what other Europeans also do in many different countries: keeping in their cupboards memories from their family and reactivating the old souvenirs in contemporary ceremonies.

This exhibition also allows us to shed light on stories that are less well known, if not unknown, to the general European public: this is the case of the Moluccans in the Netherlands. In 1951, some 12 500 people were brought to the Netherlands from the Maluku Islands, Indonesia. The men had fought in the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army during the Indonesian War of Independence and were not accepted in the newly independent Indonesian state. Their temporary stay in the Netherlands became permanent. In 2021, the Moluccan community in the Netherlands, which now numbers around 95 000 people, started crowdfunding for a monument dedicated to their arrival. Crowdfunding, which is generally used to finance new and innovative products or support cultural initiatives, is being used here to fund a project to commemorate and affirm the community in the public arena. Moluccan-Dutch photographer Elizar Veerman (b. 1994) supported the building of the monument through the photographic project we are exhibiting, which captures four generations of Moluccans in their current homes.

The past still haunts some citizens today, especially in Spain which was the theatre of a tragic Civil War (1936–1939). Pedro Almodóvar recently addressed this topical issue in his film *Madres Paralelas* in 2021. Two decades before, in October 2000, journalist Emilio Silva had finally succeeded in locating and unearthing the remains of his grandfather, who had been killed in 1936 during the civil war. This led to the formation of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (Itturiaga, 2022), which exhumes mass graves of victims of the civil

war and of Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975). Samuel Aranda (b. 1979) photographed the organisation's volunteers as they dug, identified victims' remains with DNA tests and collected oral and written testimonies from victims' families.

The question of how to document war atrocities has become a daily reality for many people in Ukraine. 'This is going to be in history books – and it happened right inside my house! I am going to keep this piece of shrapnel and show to my grandchildren when they return from evacuation.' (Hanna Ivanivna, Ukrainian civilian, 2022). Since 2014, photographer Anastasia Taylor-Lind (b. 1981) and Donetsk-born journalist Alisa Sopova (b. 1988) have been reporting on Ukrainian families coping with the war in Ukraine. They documented the practice of collecting shrapnel, small fragments from artillery shells. Taylor-Lind cast some of these shrapnel shards in the silver extracted from the chemical photographic development process, thus reconstructing them using the remnants of actual photographs. This *mise en abîme* – the chemical materiality of the photograph covering the debris of weapons of war – is very powerful. The historical tradition of collecting war debris is thus connected to the museum tradition of transforming deadly materials into artefacts.

The exhibition ends not with a final statement but with an invitation to co-create. The visitors are invited to temporarily become archivists and join the museum professionals in turning the past into history. By selecting, categorising and describing old photographs, provided to them in disorganised but diverse forms from glass positives to polaroids to diapositives, the visitors leave their mark in the exhibition.

'LET'S MAKE HISTORY! Making history is about creating a documented narrative about the past. This starts by choosing what to keep from the vastness of the past. The person in charge needs to make choices, categorize and organize the items. Step into the shoes of an ARCHIVIST and try to classify the pictures below. Make up your own categories, or continue the work of previous visitor-archivists. Based on your selection, history is created!' (*Presence of the Past* exhibition, last exhibition text, 2024)

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HISTORY IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER?

Pieterjan Van Langenhove

> 'A single look at one image often contributes more to the memory than a long reading of many pages' (Samuel Quiccheberg, *Inscriptiones*, 1565)

Of course, Samuel Quiccheberg could only dream about the technological developments that would occur after his passing. But the quote already shows the premises of quite an interesting discussion that would eventually lead to the adage 'a picture is worth a thousand words'. The House of European History hosts its first photographic temporary exhibition and more precisely documentary photography. Although photographs are used extensively within its permanent collection, it is the first time that the House focuses on the medium. By doing so it creates narratives about what the past might have looked like and thus about making history. It leaves us with yet another question, is history in the eye of the beholder?

A picture is in itself a representation, so already subject to certain compositional rules. First, there are technical aspects to recreating or imagining something and putting it into two dimensions for this a practice rarely seen in nature (Hockney, Gayford, 2016, 8). The process of making such an image is also not automated: somebody must set up the right conditions and most importantly select a point of view, choose a perspective and a lens (Hockney, Gayford, 2016, 20). Metaphors are also used in describing our gaze on history. All pictures, with maybe the exception perhaps of the work of the mad or the reclusive, are made for an audience. And this leads the way to two fundamental art historical questions: why was it made and what does it mean? (Hockney, Gayford, 2016, 27).

Pictures are all around us. And since the revolutionary Daguerreotype process was described in 1839, before a joint session of the *Académie des Sciences* and the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, the interest and popularity of this new medium for making pictures has only grown (Daniel, 2004). Photography and its ubiquity have had a vast impact on our daily life. We are surrounded by so many photographs and imagery that it is quite hard to imagine that this medium is relatively young and what the world must have looked like before its invention (Wells, 2015, 14).

Thanks to this new technology, humanity is able to trace directly what has happened. Susan Sontag emphasised the idea of a photograph as a means of freezing a moment in time (Wells, 2015, 36). No painting or drawing, however naturalist, *belongs* to its subject in the way that a photograph does (Berger, 2013, 51), since there is a direct connection with the observable reality. Central to the exploration of Roland Barthes is the contention that, unlike any other medium, in

photography the referent uniquely sticks to the image (Wells, 2015, 41–42). A photograph preserves a moment of time and prevents it being erased by the supersession of further moments (Berger, 2013, 65). Each picture reveals something from the living reality that is in some way no longer accessible.

John Berger compares photographs to images stored in one's memory and he argues that there is one fundamental difference: 'whereas remembered images are the residue of a continuous experience, a photograph isolates the appearance of a disconnected instance' (Berger, 2013, 64). Thus photographs belong to the past since the trace or stencil of the original no longer exists in time.

Dissecting pictures not only ichnographically, but also investigating these questions, might actually reveal a lot about the past. Indeed, there is also in photography, an intention (an author) in using a medium (a camera) from a certain angle and trying to communicate an idea to a certain audience. Therefore, every picture is ambiguous, which is another reason to investigate pictures in the context of a history museum. Paradoxically, we want to believe what we see although we know that it is ambiguous. This explains why the new technological developments in artificial intelligence and photography are both startling and disturbing, especially given the omnipresence of photography in our present society.

This leads us to a new decisive factor: you, the interpreter, the visitor, the beholder of the picture. Except if you are the specific intended audience, you see the picture through your own eyes, with your memories, biases, interests and passions. Although we might look at the same object, we might not make the same connections, have a different reference framework and it might trigger different reactions. The picture comes to life through our agency, because we look at it. And we are looking at it in a certain context that is linked to a time and a place and surrounding factors. Sharing this context and learning from the gaze of other visitors can bring us closer to understanding what is in front of us.

Although photographs are commonly used as evidence to investigate the past (Wells, 2015, 69), we can see that there are many factors to consider to avoid a narrow one-sided interpretation. As a history museum, we are committed to bring these connections and contexts to light and compare and discuss them with our visitors. We do this by separating the past and history. The focus of the exhibition is on the vast range of ways in which Europeans deal with the past. We try to stimulate new discussions by showing photography that comes from the realm of documentary photography, and the supposed quality that come with this photographic field.

By focusing exclusively on documentary photography, some might think that we have by-passed all the caveats cited above. However, documentary photography is not exempt from any of these variables, although it might, more than all other forms of photography give the impression to document the 'truth'. It is a powerful medium for historians to investigate the past, because the intention to stage the setting is less prominent. However it still raises many questions about the choices that were made in the photograph. Since the 1970s the paradigm has shifted and it is agreed that recording processes can never be neutral, disinterested or innocent (Wells, 2015, 138).

This underlines the importance of raising fundamental questions about documentary photography on the way it is recording and cataloguing human experience in a variety of circumstances. Who is behind the camera? What are they trying to document, from which position or for which institution?

Grasping the past by questioning what we see

... by making thinking visible

The House of European History strives to be a place where discussions about European history and heritage are kept alive and connected to daily life. We do this by presenting and questioning historical narratives in a transnational manner, through objects or images. This current temporary exhibition, focussing primarily on documentary photography, offers a visual richness to its visitor and the learning programming developed around this exhibition departs from that richness.

Since pictures are ubiquitous and are often competing for our attention we invite the visitor to block out the noise, slow down and really take the time to look at what is in front of them. By doing so they will unlock a trove of information, the kind of data we can learn from. The art of learning through observation is called *slow looking* (Bown, 2020). Although it is practised and encouraged in museums and heritage institutions, it can be practised literally anywhere with any object. It can be practiced both alone and in group and although many museums are offering slow looking sessions that are linked to mediations or mindfulness, it is however not obligatory to include a mindfulness or well-being element, this is only one possible facet. 'Looking closely and carefully helps to unravel complexity, build connections and see things from multiple perspectives.' (Bown, 2020)

In the learning programmes at the House of European History, *Slow Looking* is key in the learning process. It is often the starting point of a visible thinking routine – an offspring of the Visible Thinking Project. 'Visible Thinking is a flexible and systematic research-based conceptual framework, which aims to integrate the development of participants thinking with content learning across subject matters' (Harvard). Using various routines that follow a certain sequence or a set of questions, participants are guided in making their thinking visible. The main goal of the Visible Thinking project is to foster learning by cultivating the dispositions of the participants toward thinking. A disposition captures one's personal patterns of interaction with the world and thus a part of our character (Ritchhart, Church, 2020, 17–18).

The Visible Thinking Method lends itself quite naturally for a very visible exhibition of photography. By inviting the visitors to carefully observe and question how this is connected to them and how they explain the world, this approach becomes quite personal. One of the outcomes of this method is to cultivate engaged participants with others, with ideas and activities (Ritchhart, Church, 2020, 8). One of the routines we are using in one of our guided tours is called the 3 Y's. We invite our visitors to have a close look at the object, going beyond a snap judgement and engaging more intensely. After that, we are questioning why this object matters to them? Why this object matters to their community? And why this object matters to the world? By raising those simple question we invite our visitor to contextualize the object within a larger historical and global frame, but also connecting it to themselves and their reality. The connection with the object they were asked to look at, is established by the relevance of today

and the connection to the personal sphere of each visitor. By departing from the personal sphere, we allow our discussion to focus on the stories of our visitors and their connections. By allowing them to share their thoughts, feelings, ideas with the group and facilitating that process, we unsure not to have the monopoly on the objects story and how it is relevant, but the multiple stories of our visitors and what they would like to share.

Another outcome is fostering deep learning which emerges at the intersection of the opportunity to develop understanding, identity and creativity (Mehta, Fine, 2019). 'These opportunities are infused with critical thinking, grappling with complexity, challenging assumptions, questioning authority, and embracing curiosity – all core elements of what it means to learn deeply' (Ritchhart, Church, 2020, 8). By actively stepping away from a top-down approach amongst traditional guides and history teaching, visitors are invited to connect to their personal narratives and the ones that are present in the museum. Accommodating an atmosphere of multiperspectivity, in a safe and learned space.

By engaging actively in the process of Visible Thinking routines in the development of the guided tour and slow looking programme of the museum, the House of European History contributes in unravelling the past through the eye of the beholders, in this case, the visitors. We invite the spectators to actively participate: sharing their connection and with the group, and constructing a multitude of perspectives.

The slow looking programme will be launched on a day when there are fewer people in the museum, it will be limited to a small group and will so allow for a maximum of perception, sharing and reflecting. The public programme around this exhibition will also create events that invite our visitors, to stand still, look deeply, connect and share. By doing so grasping the past by making history.

... by experiencing the exhibition

In the exhibition itself, visitors are encouraged to challenge their preconceptions, to think critically about what they see and engage with wider issues at hand. In three distinct areas of the exhibition, we ask a fundamental question to give an idea of the complex questions that historians and heritage workers often deal with. Do historical sites belong to the living or the dead? Do re-enactments help understand the past? Would you rather forget everything or remember everything? The photos surrounding those questions might guide the opinion of visitors as they are invited to leave a trace by indicating on the wall where they stand making use of a 'gradometer'.

In the section on hero-making we ask our visitors for whom they would erect a monument today and carve it literally in the walls of the exhibition, making it part of the contemporary discussion on monuments, the people we like to put on a pedestal today and to reflect on how they will be regarded by the generations of tomorrow. This way, visitors and their ideas for monuments will become part of the exhibition.

Michael Pappas, *Purpuris, a local end-of-year tradition in the village of Isaakion*, Thrace, Greece, 2016

Making sense of the past

As observed by E. H. Car history is a construct consequent upon the questions asked by the historian (Carr, 1964). History tells us a great deal about the historians that write about it. These constructed narratives use elements of the past, that are researched, investigated and categorized. They often make use of the work of others who have already collected and categorized certain data. Most current example are archives, where objects that have a relation with 'the past' are stored and categorized. Since we cannot preserve everything, choices are made in what to preserve but also how it can be retrieved.

This experience is made tangible in the exhibition *Presence of the Past* by proposing to our visitors to create a story, a narrative from 'multiple pasts' in the last section. By browsing the pictures of the flea market we see the discontinued elements of the people's pasts in the pictures. By categorizing them, we actively create stories and can provide arguments about certain practices, based on the historical evidence. By participating in this tangible activity, the selection practices of people in charge (in this case the visitor) and how they might influence the stories we tell is highlighted. It activates

visibly how narratives around us are constructed, dissect the process of how this came to be and the conclusions that are extracted from it.

By looking into the past and constructing informed narratives about it we can learn something about the world we live in today. After all, the witnesses of the past and the heritage that we are encountering today, tell a great deal about the present and how we try to make sense of it.

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Mine Dal, *A portrait of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk displayed in a phone case*, Türkiye, 2019

DESIGNING (WITH) THE PAST: TRANSLATING THE NOTION OF TIME INTO A SCENOGRAPHIC SPACE

Marie Douel

The *Presence of the Past* exhibition is a tapestry of intricate narrative strands that interweave past and present events. It was designed in such a way to translate the notion of time in a scenography.

The cornerstone of our exhibition is architecture – specifically, that of public spaces, which are visible markers of the passage of time for all. These areas are the meeting place of the past and the present. They are places of expression and assembly that, having seen people yesterday and today gather to revolt, celebrate or converse, stand as witnesses to history.

The shape of these spaces influences the type and quality of human interactions: a building's steps serve as a visual landmark and a meeting spot, circular plazas pave the way for groups to gather, and broad avenues provide wide areas for crowds to stroll.

The photography exhibition is divided into seven sections, opening up a broad spectrum of interactions between Europeans and their past. We have defined seven types of spaces to give our visitors a different experience for each photographic subject.

To bring these spaces into being, we turned our attention to repurposing stones. Not only does this leverage the direct link between architecture and its history, but using pre-existing materials also reduces the environmental impact of an exhibition. Our desire to work with repurposed materials took us on a search for companies in Belgium who take this approach.

Enter Architecturaal Antiek Delaere, a family business established in 1965. For two generations, this company has been collecting, selecting and reselling architectural antiques from demolished castles and stately homes. Our meeting with the owner, Frank Delaere, was a key point in setting the stage for the exhibition.

When you discover his warehouse in Flanders, western Belgium, you step into a world where time stands still. A landscape of stones, ancient trees and columns, dotted about with wild plants, extends over a hundred hectares. On the hunt for pieces of marble and Belgian bluestone, we brushed aside curtains of tall grasses and stepped over brambles and ferns.

In the book *Esthétique des ruines* (*The Aesthetic of Ruins*), Agnès Lontrade quotes Georg Simmel: 'it is the fascination of the ruin that here the work of man appears to us entirely as a product of nature.' In Frank's warehouse, continuously evolving natural elements are juxtaposed with static fragments of materials, giving rise to a new awareness of time.

As an integral part of this organic landscape, Frank knows his collection by heart and has organised his pieces by their date of construction, provenance and past. Every time we visited, he would tell us the next chapter in the life of his pieces. Some were saved from the Second

World War or survived a demolition; others are waiting to be shipped and installed somewhere in Europe.

These assorted shapes with their varied histories became our playground, our ideal building blocks. ‘Today is a transition from yesterday. In the great pit of forms lie broken fragments to some of which we still cling. They provide abstraction with its material.’ This extract from one of Paul Klee’s diaries illustrates our ensuing working methodology.

We saw the opportunity to assemble these elements and give life to our own spaces, basing our creative method on the capriccio painting style, which emerged in the 18th century. Paintings in this genre piece together different elements of architecture to conjure an architectural fantasy, combining buildings and archaeological ruins into imaginary and often fantastic landscapes.

By integrating the repurposed stones with existing elements at the museum, we hope to create a welcoming backdrop for the exhibits, a fictitious landscape that shows off the photography projects and the stories they tell.

That is why, at the House of European History, we have combined the museum’s picture rails with bluestone column capitals and pieces of marble fireplaces. This anachronistic collection accommodates a selection of images, showcased by the white walls of the museum and the materiality of the stone. In addition, it provides a neutral aesthetic and allows the audience to imagine their own temporal markers.

Contemporary and historical elements are further entwined through the exhibition’s graphic design made by Laure Giletti and Gregory Dapra. Two typefaces go hand in hand; each evokes a different time period. The running text is written in Jungmyung Lee’s Jungka, which has the quality of a classically crafted sans-serif letterform with accented circular curves, giving it a friendly and rhythmical atmosphere. It is coupled with Mercure, used for the headings. Designed by Charles Mazé and distributed by the Abyme type foundry, Mercure is the result of an inquiry into Latin epigraphy (the study of inscriptions engraved in hard materials such as stone, clay or wood) and the typographic forms associated with that discipline. Mercure includes fragmented and broken letters, which dovetail with the fragments of broken and reassembled stones displayed in the space.

After the exhibition, all of the stone elements will be returned to Frank Delaere’s warehouse so they can go on to the next stage in their lives. The freedom offered by this blended and repurposed approach is a direct reference to the wheels of reinvention that are present in the creative process and that parallel history. This scenography unveils a European history that is in continuous transformation, forming and reforming itself throughout the centuries.

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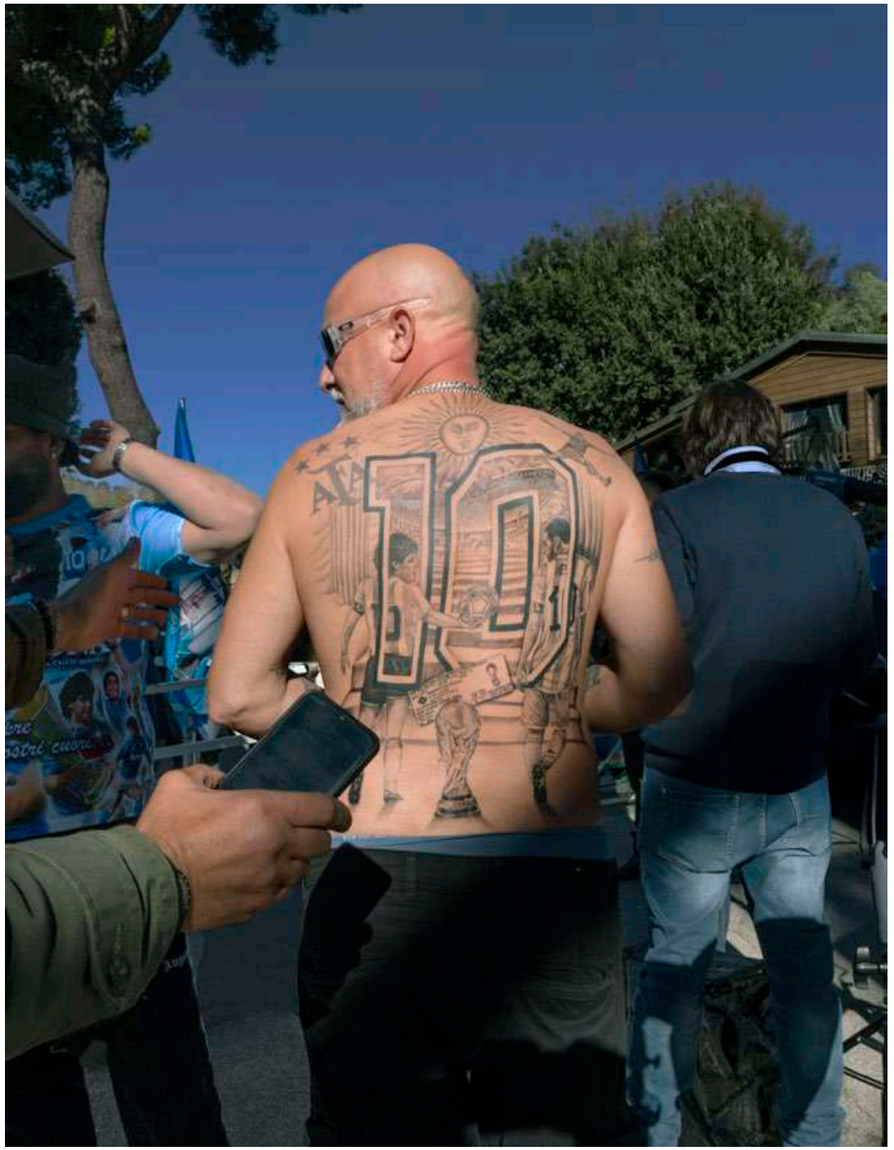
Photos: Visiting Architecturaal Antiek Delaere, Kuurne
Credits: Marie Douel, Laure Giletti, Lolà Mancini



Michaela Cane, *Chi Ama Non Dimentica*,
Italy, 2024

A LIMITLESS GAZE

Hervé Charles

Artist and Head of the Photography Department
at La Cambre

Every photograph is a small monument, a testimony to the past. Each image is an act of remembrance.

This invitation from the *House of European History (HEH)* to take part in an ambitious exhibition on memory and documentary photography fits in perfectly with our institution's educational aims. It is an exciting challenge for our school and the students involved. *History* is a key time marker to understanding the world, while *Europe* is not only where our students study and reside but often where they come from too. As for *documentary photography*, it is a field full of ambiguities and debates about truth and the subjectivity of images.

It is vital for an art school – and even more so for a photography school – to interact with the world and its history. Rooted in the real world, the rhizomic web of influences from which creators can draw inspiration is infinite. In this sense, collaborating with key players in the social or cultural sphere, outside the school, is an indispensable training opportunity for our students. Our teaching approach is to help young artists develop a critical eye and learn to define their intentions as authors but also as actors in the world in which they operate. To this end, they need to integrate certain notions beyond their own existence (sociological, political, meta-artistic) and learn to transform their know-how, i.e. their practical skills, into knowledge, that is to say, develop an acute sense of the connection between thought processes and the outside world.

It is a unique privilege to be able to bring our artistic vision to an event dedicated to documentary photography and we would like to express our sincere gratitude to the House of European History and its curatorial team for this invitation. Supporting subjectiveness in a predominantly documentary exhibition is a challenge not only for the current and former students but also for the curators, especially as some of the works are new or recent and were conceived and produced specifically for this exhibition. This fearless collection allows the public to discover first-hand how these images were created – without historical hindsight. The exhibition features works by Michela Cane, Romane Iskaria, Fañch Le Bos, Luca Nuvolone, Julien Sales, Anna Safiatou Touré on behalf of La Cambre.

Referent and Symbol

From the moment we first met the exhibition's curatorial team, we seized the opportunity to participate by asserting a subjective vision of the real world. Photography is not defined by a technique but as a visual

practice with a powerful relationship with the referent that goes far beyond a mimetic trace of reality.

This relationship with the referent – the object, person or thing being photographed – is at the heart of photography, as it is the ontological foundation and cannot be dissociated from its representation. The referent is inherently what distinguishes photography from other forms of art. Every day, we see dozens – if not hundreds – of images (in the news, adverts, our own albums, etc.). By default, we accept the 'veracity' of these images because of the fact or objects they represent.

Nevertheless, a photograph cannot be considered a faithful record of reality. It is a testimony, a point of view, a sign, a symbol; it is an interpretation, created by the author, i.e. the operator or photographer. Magritte's famous painting 'This is not a pipe' remind us not to confuse the object with its visual representation.

Photography is indicative,
social, emotional,
operational

There is a great deal of theoretical research on the referent and the mimetic representation of reality. Four authors in particular have approached the matter in complementary ways.

Starting with the definition of the term 'photography' (writing with light) and its process, Henri Van Lier, in Philosophy of Photography (1983), identifies a unique relationship between the photographic image and its referent. The photonic nature of photography, based on the direct capture of photons from an object, distinguishes it from other visual arts: it literally captures and transcribes light particles from the real world. Photography is thus inherently documentary in nature due to its direct connection with reality, but it is also indicative, like a clue in a police investigation. Van Lier highlighted this photographic paradox whereby photographs are both objective (a direct imprint of reality) and subjective (an imprint of the photographer's interpretation).

In *Photography and Society* (1974), Gisèle Freund explains that photography functions both as a record of reality and as a *tool for social interpretation*. In the book, she examines the technical and sociological aspects of photography, highlighting its documentary role while warning against its potential to be manipulated to convey subjective even ideological points of view. She sees photography as a medium whose apparent truthfulness invites a credible interpretation, even if photographs may sometimes deviate from their referent.

In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980), Roland Barthes wrote the following words about a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother 'I see the eyes that saw the Emperor'. Here begins his analysis, which led him to the concept of *'ça-a-été' (that which was)*, underlining the emotional power photographs when linked to the past existence of what is photographed. For him, the referent is not just the object or person photographed; it is a tangible trace of a *past presence*, creating an experience of both intimacy and bereavement, as the image becomes a testimony of a bygone time. He takes as an example a photo of his mother as a child, rediscovered after her death. The image reminds us not only that the subject once existed, but also that it is now absent or gone.

Finally, in *L'Acte photographique* (1983), Philippe Dubois offers the most comprehensive analysis of the photographic process. Photography is not just a technique of visual capture but a *complex act of creation* influenced by choices, intentions and interactions between the author and what he/she photographs. The photographic gaze is always singular and depends on the context, intentions and vision of the photographer. Moreover, photography is not limited to the connection between the photographer and the photographed object: it also involves a game of reception and interpretation by the viewer.

Photography is thus technical, indicative, social, emotional and operational. This non-exhaustive list brings us to the question: *when exactly is an image documentary or not?*

Documentary photography and
photographic parameters

Every image is essentially documentary because it draws its representation from reality. Nevertheless, the shooting process, and all the related parameters, enable the photographer to make a series of choices that allow him or her to influence the image. The act of taking a photograph is the result of a series of progressive, intentional and subjective steps: the photographic parameters. The viewer needs to be aware of this active process, which means that the image is never neutral. As an operator, as a photographer, one needs to know and master the arsenal at one's disposal, while recognising its infinite nature.

The photographic parameters are technical (the choice of camera, frame, focal length, shooting distance, blur, depth of field, etc.), organic (the photographer and their physical and psychological state, etc.), cultural (the photographer's knowledge of and level of sensitivity to the world, etc.) and contextual (shooting conditions, the weather, the location, the surroundings, etc.).

All these variables make the representation of the referent subjective and unique. The future of the image and the photographer's intended meaning are then confronted with other obstacles that can undermine or exaggerate the subtlety of the choices made. As time goes on, the photographer loses control of the parameters of distribution and display.

The way the image is presented (format, medium, networks, exhibition, exhibition venue, scenography, etc.) adds to the subjectivisation of the viewer's gaze. In our case, the very history of this building, its role and purpose influence the perception of what is presented there; the confrontation with the permanent exhibition, the location in the European Quarter, the historical rigour shown by the curatorial team and, of course, the space and its architectural features are not neutral.

The audience itself has its own variables: each viewer has a different gaze from the person standing next to them, a perception shaped by their own history, experience, culture, attachment to the subject of the photograph, and so on. Ultimately, this all influences the narratives they will create on the basis of what they see.

All of the above transforms the referent, which dissolves in the process of its representation, overwhelmed by it and all the choices made.

A workshop-school

That is why we aim to encourage and nurture creative and unique approaches to photography, making the best possible use of the medium's specific characteristics, without neglecting its ability to convey a message and the potential of its reception. Conscious of this infinite perspective, students will assume the role of ambassadors of creativity in an increasingly globalised, regulated and standardised society.

In conclusion, can an artistic perspective capture the state of the world more accurately than a strictly documentary approach?

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NEW RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

Jan Kempenaers, *Spomenik #18, erected in 1952, commemorates the 1941 Battle of Kadinjača, which was fought in defence of the first liberated territory within Axis-occupied Europe*, Serbia, 2009

THE VALUE OF MEMORY A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

Sarah Gensburger

The *Presence of the Past. A European Album* exhibition takes place at a turning point for the European Union (EU), the European continent and the world. Over the past decades, European institutions, governments, non-governmental organisations, cultural institutions and some citizens have turned to the evocation of the past and the transmission of memory as a major tool in the democratisation and pacification of societies, hoping to promote tolerance, inclusion and equality. Taking stock of this development, on 19 September 2019, the European Parliament adopted a resolution affirming this 'importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe'.

However, in recent years, the rise of populism, right-wing parties and hate crimes has led to a reconsideration of the assumed civic effect of memory, and a new approach has been called for. This critical perspective was first developed in academic works that include *Can we really learn from the past?* (Gensburger and Lefranc, 2020) and *The past can't heal us* (David, 2020). Governments and public institutions have also started to reflect on this issue. For example, on 17 January 2024, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on 'European historical consciousness'. While reaffirming 'the ideal of a 'culture of remembering and historical consciousness based on shared European values and practices', it stressed 'the need for an honest assessment of the EU's 'politics of the past', through which it has striven to add legitimacy to the European project, strengthen a European sense of belonging and foster the peaceful coexistence of the continent's peoples, by equally acknowledging achievements and existing shortcomings, and by scrutinising the ways in which citizens have been encouraged to engage with the past'.

Indeed, too few studies have engaged critically on European citizens' relationship to the past and to this 'culture of remembrance'. Yet, even the limited scholarship invites us to think differently about these issues and to question the central assumption regarding the link between values and memory. What do European citizens think of the European 'culture of remembrance'? How do they position themselves in relation to public policies on this matter? How can we take stock of this European promotion of values through memory? This chapter aims to understand how contemporary societies contend with the presence of the past in their midst.

Remembrance as a core European value

Since the 2000s, the EU's democratic deficit and the public's distrust of EU institutions have become major concerns. To remedy this, European public policies have

mobilised memory and the transmission of the past, foremost that of mass violence, as a tool of action. After the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force in 2009, the European Commission launched the Europe for Citizens programme to raise 'awareness of remembrance, the common history and values of the Union' and 'encourage democratic and civic participation of citizens at Union level'. To do so, the EU funded more than 2 500 initiatives between 2014 and 2020, spending EUR 170 million and involving 34 countries and 1 500 partners. 'The projects fostered intercultural dialogue and solidarity, promoted cultural heritage and diversity and reflected on European history, drawing lessons for today' (Report of the European Commission, *Europe for Citizens in numbers. Europe for Citizens Programme: 7 years of support*).

The programme was divided into two parts. The first was entitled 'European remembrance – the EU as a peace project'. It was designed to support discussion of 'why and how the totalitarian regimes that blighted Europe's modern history came into power' and consideration of 'the EU's other defining moments and reference points' and 'different historical perspectives'.

The new version of this programme, the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme, running until 2027, continues to dedicate one of its four pillars to encourage Europeans to 'remember, research and educate about defining events in recent European history, including the causes and consequences of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes' and to raise awareness among European citizens about 'their common history, culture, cultural heritage and values, thereby enhancing their understanding of the Union, its origins, purpose and diversity' (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values). This short public policy description illustrates the constitution of memory as a core European value and as part of the civic identity that European citizens are thought to share. Its exponential growth begs the question: do citizens share this European culture of remembrance and this belief in the importance of memory?

To answer this question from a social sciences perspective, several sets of data can be used. The first is a survey carried out in the summer of 2014 by Ipsos on the initiative of two French foundations, *Fondation pour l'innovation politique* and *Fondation pour la mémoire de la Shoah*. This questionnaire survey was carried out among a representative sample of 1 000 individuals, aged between 16 and 29, per country. It involved 31 172 young people from 31 countries, including 20 countries in Europe. Its aim was to understand young people's relationships with memory. Although the results are from 2014, they are very rich and are still relevant to the current reflection. They are particularly interesting because they enable us to compare the positions of young Europeans with those of people living on other continents.

The respondents were first asked to pick what they considered to be the most significant event from a list of 17 events that had taken place around the world since 1989. The responses showed that some events were more meaningful to Europeans than to others. For example, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was cited by 43 % of the respondents from European countries, compared with 21 % of the respondents from 10 non-European countries, including China, the United States of America, India, Türkiye and Israel. Conversely, only 12 % of European respondents cited the war in Iraq, compared with 24 % of respondents from elsewhere in the world. This showed that the historical events that are meaningful to Europeans are different from those that are meaningful to the rest of the world. Events are made memorable through their territoriality and their political importance for the continent's history.

However, this initial observation should not lead us to deduce that young Europeans share a common, shared narrative of the past. The case of the memory of terrorist attacks is particularly relevant in this respect. Every year since 2005, on 11 March, the EU has celebrated European Remembrance Day for Victims of Terrorism, in reference to the Madrid bombings in March 2004. However, the presence of the terrorist past differed greatly among the young Europeans surveyed. Several terrorist attacks featured among the events listed in the questionnaire: the attacks of 11 September 2001, the Madrid bombings of 2004 and the London bombings of 2005. The 9/11 attacks were the most frequently chosen of the 17 proposed events. They were cited by 47 % of respondents, regardless of their place of residence. For non-European respondents, the average was 50 %, with highs of 70 % for Israelis and 67 % for Americans. For EU nationals, the average was lower, at only 41 %. However, this European average hides large disparities, from highs of 64 % in France and 60 % in the UK to a low figure of 22 % in Finland. The responses received for the European attacks, in London and Madrid, were more diverse still. The London attacks were almost never mentioned – by an average of just 4 % across the whole panel. Only the UK and two Commonwealth countries that lost nationals in the bombings mentioned them in any notable way, with proportions of 27 %, 13 % and 11 % for the UK, Australia and India respectively. Similarly, the Madrid bombings, which at the time of the survey had inspired 10 years of annual commemoration of terrorism victims by the EU, were cited by just 3 % of respondents on average, with only 25 % of Spanish respondents choosing the event. These few pieces of data highlight both the limits of a European narrative of the past and the limits of the impact of commemorations and public policy in the field of memory.

But – and this is what makes that survey so interesting – the European culture of remembrance is not only apparent in the choice of events that seem to be more (or less) meaningful to Europeans than to others. It is also obvious in the very strong adherence of young Europeans to the importance of remembrance. The European culture of remembrance gives a central place to the memory of the Second World War and, in particular, that of the genocide of Jews and European Roma. The following question was asked in all 31 countries: 'In your opinion, should what remains of the extermination camps be preserved to enable the public to visit them?' All respondents, whether from Europe or elsewhere, answered overwhelmingly in the affirmative. However, this support was even more pronounced among young people from EU countries, with 86 % of respondents answering positively, compared with 79 % for the rest of the world. Respondents were then asked: 'What is the main reason for preserving the extermination camps?' Four answers were suggested. The responses, for all 31 countries, were 33 % for 'to learn more about the history of the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime', 14 % for 'to help build Europe by understanding the mistakes of the past', 19 % for 'to honour the memory of the victims', and 34 % for 'to prevent it from happening again'.

We can put the European responses into perspective by comparing them with those of the three countries outside Europe that are most similar to the EU, namely Canada, Australia and the United States. In fact, these three countries had very similar results: 41 % saw knowledge

as the main reason for preserving the extermination camps; 5 % considered preservation a means of helping to build Europe by understanding the mistakes of the past; 26 % saw it as honouring the memory of the victims; and 26 % responded that it prevented such atrocities from happening again. However, these figures differ markedly when we consider European respondents only; the respective proportions were 31 %; 15 %; 19 % and 31 %. Thus, Europeans, on average, made a stronger link between the preservation of traces of the past, in this case the preservation of extermination camps, and the fact of learning from the past and from past mistakes. It is not just a question of knowing and honouring, but of learning from the past and passing on the lessons to the present.

However, the conclusion is quite different, and the European responses are sometimes closer to those from other countries, when it is no longer a question of affirming the principle of the lessons of the past, but of qualifying those lessons in terms of value. Another question asked of young people was: 'In your opinion, does knowing the history of the Second World War help us learn to respect those who are different from us?' 84 % of respondents from EU countries answered positively, although this was a smaller proportion than in the group from Canada, Australia and the US, where 91 % said they strongly or somewhat agreed with this proposition. At the same time, 93 % of the respondents from Canada, Australia and the US felt that knowing the history of the Second World War helped them to 'understand the history of [their] country', while this response was 90 % for the EU countries.

A European culture of remembrance – understood as a commitment to remembering the past in order to build a better future – has thus truly taken shape amongst the European youth. However, it is also marked by a wide diversity of shared historical narratives and of values on which to build this future. If memory has become a policy tool in Europe, the political values it is thought to convey are likely to diverge.

In 2006, sociologists Howard Schuman and Amy D. Corning carried out a detailed, questionnaire-based study in the US, comparing Iraq War to the Vietnam War. They showed that the analogy between the two conflicts was clear and almost obvious to a very large proportion of the American population. However, not everyone drew the same lessons from this common reference to the past. In similar proportions, some respondents felt that the Vietnamese precedent should, above all, lead their country to refrain from going to war in Iraq, while others felt that this history left them no choice but to send soldiers overseas. Numerous factors are likely to explain these differences in the values given to the past, and the lessons to be learnt from it to act in the present; they range from level of education to political position, income level, ethnic identification and place of residence. In this respect, studies of European memory have hitherto paid attention almost exclusively to differences between countries, to the detriment of other variables, notably socio-economic ones, which the current rise of populism invites us to consider more fully.

The social frameworks of the European culture of remembrance

In 2018, Catherine de Vries and Isabell Hoffmann conducted a survey, for eupinions, of 10 885 individuals, aged 18 and over, from the then 28 countries of the EU. The study is entitled *The power of the past. How nostalgia shapes European public opinion*. Their findings 'show that a majority of the European public can be classified as nostalgic [...] A majority of those over 35 years of age think the world used to be a better place'; the average was 67 %, with a high of 77 % among Italian respondents and a low of 59 % among Polish respondents. In this study, the presence of the past is strong but it is not associated with values of tolerance, coexistence or the fight against racism. As the authors summarise:

- The majority of those (53 %) who feel nostalgic place themselves on the right of the political spectrum, while those who do not feel nostalgia (58 %) place themselves more on the left.
- 78 % of those who feel nostalgic think that recent immigrants do not want to fit into society, while 63 % of those who do not feel nostalgic think the same.
- 53 % of those who feel nostalgic think that immigrants take away the jobs of natives, while only 30 % of those who do not feel nostalgic think the same.
- Those who feel nostalgic do not differ much from their non-nostalgic counterparts when it comes to their views on Europe – with one exception. While a large majority of those who are not nostalgic want to remain in the EU (82 %), a lesser share of those who feel nostalgic do (67 %).
- Fighting terrorism is the biggest priority for those who feel nostalgic (60 %), followed by managing migration (51 %). Only 47 % of those who are not nostalgic think that terrorism should be the top political priority in the future, followed by 43 % who say that migration should be.

Here again, the difference between countries appears to be less important than the socio-economic differences in terms of gender, employment and social integration. The study 'suggests that those most likely to harbour feelings of nostalgia are men, the unemployed, those who feel most economically anxious, and those who feel that they belong to the working class'.

So far, the concept of 'collective memory', originally forged by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1930s, has been central to the study of memory. However, it seems important to pay equal attention to another concept he suggested, that of 'social frameworks of memory', which describes the social organisation and the mental categorisation that structure the way people not only remember but make sense of remembrance and narratives of the past.

Indeed, behind the shared belief that memory is an important dimension of European culture lies a wide diversity of associated values. A recent survey enables us to take this analysis a step further. With European colleagues, including Margaux Aupoil (CNRS, France), Valérie Rosoux (Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium), Benoît Tudoux (CNRS, France) and Jenny Wüstenberg (Nottingham Trent, UK), we designed a panel entitled 'Public attitudes toward memory policies' as part of the European Social Survey (ESS) CRONOS panel. Referred to as the ESS memory module, this was an online survey system to complement the ESS. The system offered research teams the opportunity to interview over 6 000 people aged 18 and over, living in 12 European countries: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Finland, France, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and the UK. The data was collected in 2023, and the survey is one of the very first large-scale surveys providing reliable quantitative data to study the relationship between memory and values. In the study, people were not asked about narratives

Roger Cremers, *Re-enactors wearing Soviet uniforms in Beers,* Netherlands, 2010

of the past or about their relationship with the past (as in the study of nostalgia), but about the very principle of memory policies and commemorations – in short, about their relationship with the culture of remembrance which is at the core of European identity today.

The insertion of our memory module into the ESS was intended to enable us to answer key questions such as: Who cares about the past? Who experiences these memory policies and the instruments that governments and organisations use to implement them? To what extent does engaging with these memory policies coincide with specific attitudes, values and social characteristics, and with specific relationships to the institutions? How do people talk about memory and what do they think of the way it is promoted? Answering these questions constitutes a first step toward understanding why memory policies in Europe do not work fully as expected.

The survey contained 12 questions. Its analysis leads to a clear conclusion: Europeans, here restricted to people from the 12 countries included in the study, share a culture of remembrance. In terms of methodology, the participants were presented with two statements and asked to pick the one closest to their view. Three-quarters of the respondents chose 'It's important that we spend time remembering, commemorating and learning from historical events' while the remaining quarter, a small minority, agreed with the following: 'We spend too much time being concerned about what happened in the past. We should focus on the present'.

When asked about the reasons for erecting monuments or memorials, or about who monuments and memorials should be mostly aimed at, only very few people (7 %) replied that they thought there should be no new monuments. The call for monuments appears to be driven by universalism and inclusivity. People were asked who monuments and memorials in their country should be mostly aimed at. An average of 50 % of respondents from all the countries, and shares of between 40 % and 60 % depending on the country, answered 'No specific group should be aimed at: everyone should be aimed at' while all other answers had low scores: 18 % for 'people interested in history'; 15 % for 'those who experienced the events'; 14 % for 'tourists and visitors'; 13 % for 'younger people'; and only 2 % for 'immigrants'.

When asked about the number of commemorations, at the national, regional or local level in their country, almost 80 % of the respondents agreed that 'there are the right number of commemorations', and they expressed their clear support for the culture of remembrance. Finally, in answer to the question, 'Thinking generally, how important are monuments and memorials in your country to you?', 56 % of the respondents said that they were rather important, compared with 27 % who deemed them to be rather unimportant, while the rest (17 %) had no opinion. Commemorations, monuments and memorials are the main public policy tools for the implementation of a culture of remembrance in Europe. The ESS memory module makes it clear that they do make sense for European citizens in a framework where 'remembering, commemorating and learning from historical events' is a core value for most of them.

Of course, there are differences across countries and socio-economic situations, in particular in relation to age, level of education, income and political orientation. Although the ESS memory module did not include explicit questions regarding partisanship, some data about positions on immigration or gender equality or regarding the degree of religiosity could be

used as indicators of partisanship. In any case, even if some differences exist, they are quite limited when we focus only on the extent to which Europeans believe in the value of the European culture of remembrance. Moreover, some key variables that are usually used to gain an understanding of contemporary societies, such as gender, seem to have no effect on this shared belief. Beyond their diversity, Europeans are clear believers in the importance of the 'presence of the past' for the future of society.

However, the conclusion is quite different when we move beyond the study of the prevalence of the culture of remembrance to try to grasp what kind of values people associate with it in European societies. For example, we included in the list of items some questions to enable us to understand people's views on controversial issues such de-commemoration, defined as 'processes in which material and public representations of the past are taken away, destroyed or fundamentally altered'. We studied this in depth with Jenny Wüstenberg and colleagues (*De-Commemoration. Removing statues and renaming streets*, 2023). To grasp people's positions on de-commemoration, we asked the participants to choose one of the following two statements: 'We should consider present social values when deciding which heroes of the past should still be honoured' and 'We should honour the heroes of the past, even if their views of actions do not reflect present societal values'. The answers to this question revealed two groups of people, of almost the same size, 47 % and 53 %. This distribution shows that there are irreconcilable opinions about the lessons to be learnt from the past in terms of values for the present. The discrepancy between countries was also very large. While 60 %, 53 % and 55 % of the respondents from Austria, Belgium and Sweden respectively agreed with the first option, the second option was chosen by 77 %, 62 %, 61 % and 56 % of respondents from Hungary, Slovenia, Czechia and the UK. These views regarding de-commemoration highlight the contradiction in moral and political values derived from the past which can go hand in hand with a shared European culture of remembrance.

In response to the question, 'What should be the primary purpose of creating monuments or memorials?', five options were offered: 'To honour our heroes'; 'To honour the victims'; 'To repair historical injustices'; 'To make us proud of our country'; and 'To promote tolerance and peace'. Respondents could choose two of these options, and their responses once again showed wide variation between European countries.

52 % of the Hungarian and British respondents mainly subscribed to the principle of honouring 'our heroes'. By contrast, 48 % of the Austrian respondents said it was a question of honouring 'the victims', while, at the other end of the spectrum, only 23 % of the Portuguese respondents agreed with this perspective. And yet, contrary to an often standardising reading of the European culture of remembrance as a supposedly victim-repentant model, few Europeans as a whole (never more than 17 %, and on average around 10 %) considered that monuments and memorials had the function of repairing historical injustices. The second least frequently selected option (26 %) was 'to make us proud of our country', and there was some consensus on the function of promoting tolerance and peace, which was chosen by 38 % of respondents, despite variations between countries.

Variation in opinions within countries were also observed. Taking the French respondents as an example, 48 % considered that it was a question of paying tribute to the victims, 41 % of promoting tolerance and peace, 31 % of honouring their heroes, 14 % of making them proud of their country and 12 % of repairing historical injustices. Thus, behind the importance given to monuments and memorials by most Europeans lies a wide variety of moral and political values associated with them, both between and within EU countries.

If we shift the focus away from people's adherence to a European culture of remembrance to examine what they expect of it in terms of the lessons to be learnt, we find that, there too, the construction of a common frame of reference is by no means obvious. Using statistical methods, we looked at the relations between the different answers to the questions. We were able to identify a typology of five attitudes held by Europeans concerning the values associated with remembrance. These reflect very different expectations regarding the lessons to be learnt from the past. Four of the five attitudes are outlined below. This analytical model highlights the social frameworks that structure the moral and political values assigned to memory. In this analysis, gender is seen as a structuring factor in the relationship between values and memory.

The 'heroic' group, in which men are over-represented, is characterised by the belief that commemoration is important, that it should concern both successes and failures, that there is no need to apologise for past crimes, and that heroes should continue to be honoured even when their actions contradict present-day values.

The second group, in which nearly 8 out of 10 people are women, is the 'exemplary' group. They shared the heroic group's adherence to the first two principles, but believed that the present should be taken into account in honouring the heroes of the past, and that apologies should be made for past crimes.

The third group, the 'presentists', are all about the present, honouring heroes, but not if their actions do not conform to the values of the present, while considering that there is no need to apologise for the past. In fact, they do not think it is all that important to commemorate, but rather they want to focus on the present.

Finally, the 'illegitimate' group stands out for its total lack of interest in these issues, thus challenging the notion that all citizens are passionate about remembrance. These attitudes to commemoration are also linked to a number of other variables, including gender, age, level of education and political position.

This analysis, linking values and memory, revealed three main attitudes within the 12 European countries. The 'exemplary' conception of the culture of remembrance was heavily represented in a set of countries comprising Austria, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. The 'heroic' vision of the role of the presence of the past dominated in a second set made up of Hungary, Czechia, the UK and Slovenia. Finally, an intermediate position was held by Italy, Portugal, France and Belgium, the third set. Thus, the data from the ESS memory module highlight the diversity of values that accompany the shared European culture of memory, depending on national belonging, gender, age, level of education or partisanship. This conclusion invites us to reflexively reconsider the use of memory as a tool by European, national and local institutions and governments to build democratic consensus and foster institutional legitimacy.

On this last matter, there seems to be consensus on one aspect of European citizens' attitudes toward memory, namely the identity of who should drive commemoration and make decisions about public narratives of the past. Respondents were asked which two groups of people should have the power to decide which events should be commemorated by

public authorities. By far the most common responses were, ‘historians’ (45 %) and ‘people directly involved in the events or their families’ (52 %). Only 23 % chose ‘governments and politicians’. Here again, some huge differences existed. 21 % of French respondents considered that the choice should be left to governments and politicians, compared with 9.1 % in Hungary (the smallest proportion) and 42 % in Portugal and Sweden (the largest). Similarly, while 62 % of the Austrian respondents chose ‘people directly involved in the events or their families’, only 29 % of the Portuguese respondents did so. There was a little more agreement on the choice of ‘historians’, ranging from 30 % in Sweden to 62 % in Czechia.

Finally, cross-referencing data on respondents and the answers they gave indicated that, among individuals with the lowest levels of education and income, support for the very principle of commemoration was strong, but at the same time, contestation of the measures taken to implement it – whatever they may be – was high. While European remembrance policy has been forged to help Europe to gain democratic legitimacy, it may also become a space for contestation of the EU. Thus, the relationship between memory and values appears to be simultaneously a core strength and a vital challenge for the EU.

More studies and data collection would be needed for memory to become a genuine tool that would ‘add legitimacy to the European project, strengthen a European sense of belonging and foster the peaceful coexistence of the continent’s peoples’.

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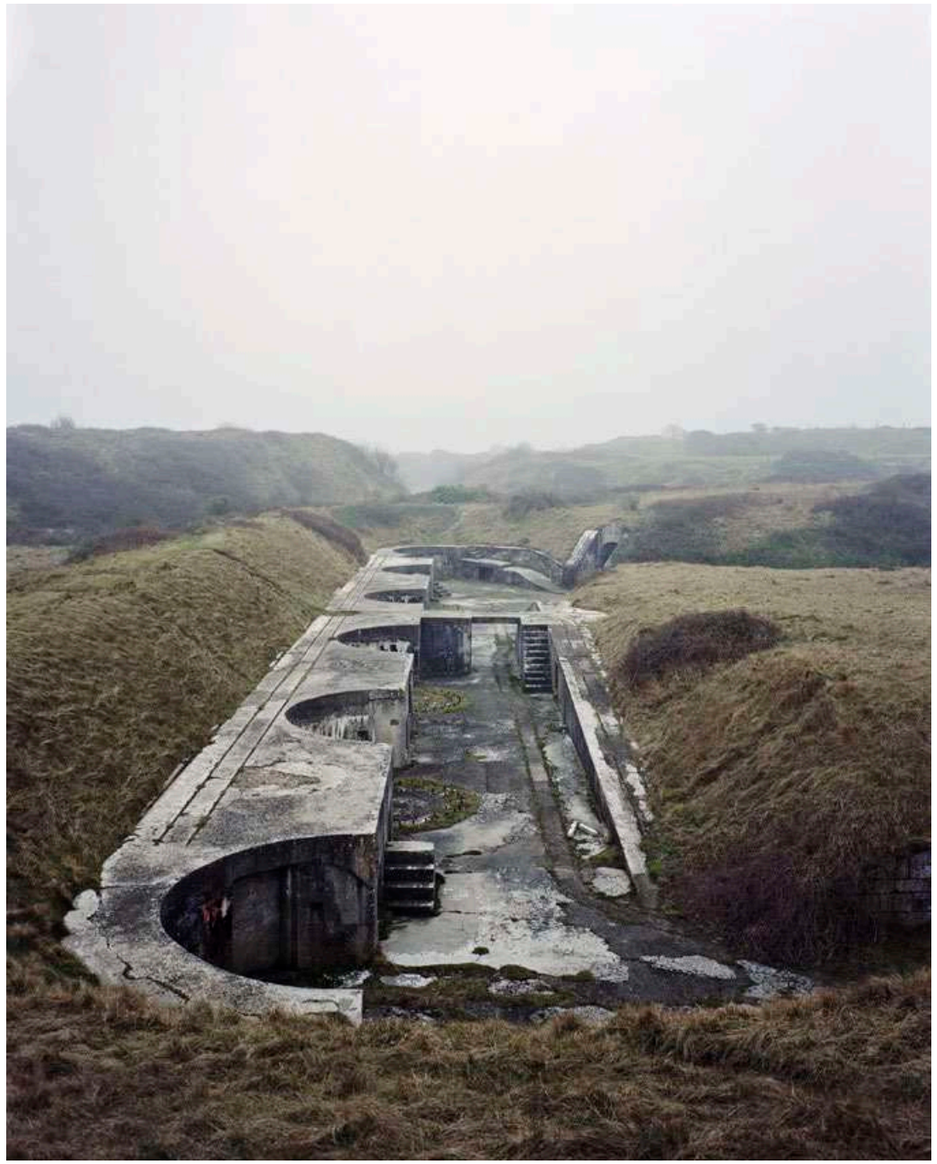
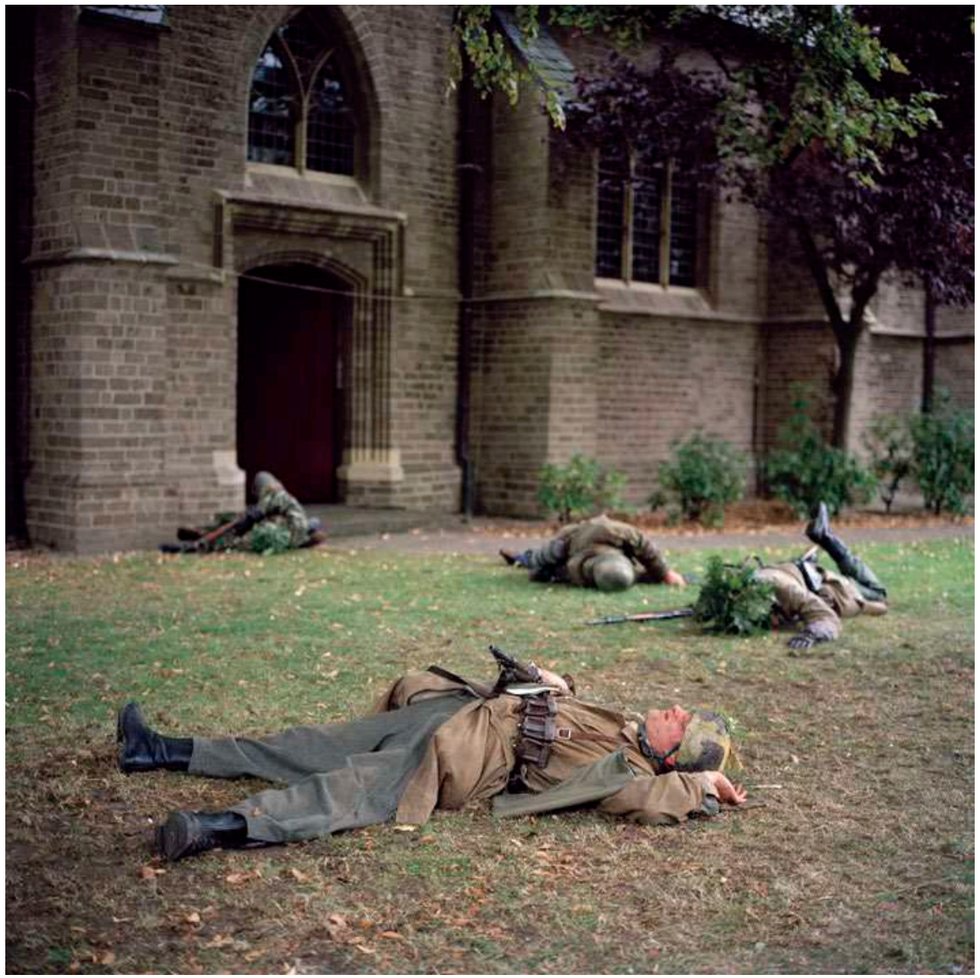


Marc Wilson, *Portland, Dorset, England*, United Kingdom, 2011



Roger Cremers, *A re-enactment of a Second World War battle in Noville*, Belgium, 2011

DOING HISTORY MEETS VIKING CRAZE: HISTORICAL RE-ENACTMENT AS A POSTMODERN PASTIME IN EUROPE

Karin Reichenbach

It is a hot summer's day at the Oder estuary in north-western Poland. Many young people, but also families with children, meander between wooden huts and stalls selling medieval-style arts and crafts. They are interspersed with actors in historic dress and vendors clad in linen, many with extravagant tattoos and copious amounts of jewellery, their necks adorned with Thor's hammer or small replicas of religious idols, but also the occasional stylised swastika.

A small crowd gathers in the open space between the huts. Three men in long white garments with lavishly embroidered red borders and belts stand in front of a sanctuary built with sculpted and painted wooden posts. Decorated with red cloth it encases a wooden stele with a four-faced head. They hold long staffs with ornate carvings and listen to the rising and falling trance-like music made up of chants and drums with solemn expressions. They are pagan priests, who are about to hold a ritual.

Later in the afternoon, in the large square in front of the gates to the open-air museum, spectators and warriors prepare for the highlight of the day: the great battle. Hundreds of fighters with gleaming helmets, some in chain mail or leather armour, advance solemnly. They are accompanied by women in long dresses carrying colourful pennants with the emblem of their group. The beating of the drums mixes once again with the actors' cries, but this is soon drowned out by the sound of metal on wood, as the two armies come into conflict. Swords clash together, spears jab at shields, those who are hit sink to the ground.

In this or a similar way you can experience a day at one of Europe's biggest Viking Age historical re-enactment festivals. Every year in early August, the Slavs and Vikings festival in Wolin attracts thousands of re-enactors and tens of thousands of visitors. It is an expression of a fascination for the Middle Ages and the enthusiasm for experiencing it through tangible history.

What is Re-enactment?

Historical re-enactment is a popular way of engaging with history. The aim is not only to imagine, but also experience past worlds. The past is supposedly brought back to life, tangibly reproduced and physically experienced through active immersion. Re-enactment is the act of physically portraying a historical event or situation, carried out by a group of historical enthusiasts, lay or citizen historians.

Re-enactment can be described as a form of Living History, as an affective, physically experiential approach to making sense of the past and conveying historical knowledge. Originally, 're-enactment' referred to acting out specific

historical events, especially battles at their original locations. Nowadays, however, re-enactment often refers more broadly to activities in which different aspects of life in the past are portrayed by people in historical clothing and with period objects. For early medieval re-enactments, a distinction is usually made between 'living history' events staged by museums for educational purposes and festival re-enactment, which usually has a strong focus on depicting warriors and combat.

In this form of 'doing history' the emphasis is on reliving history in a physical and sensory way, in connection with emotional and mental experiences. By reconstructing a bygone era with specific period objects, clothing and practices, possibly even at a site of historical significance, one might simulate past realities. For re-enactors, this form of historical appropriation is a way of coming into direct contact with history – a history you can touch. They experience and see re-enactment as a form of time travel, in which they can cross epochal thresholds, in body and soul, with senses and emotions, where they are able to not only explore the visual worlds they have imagined in three dimensions, but also play an active role in shaping them.

When re-enactors experience this kind of 'period rush', as they call it, they forget the act and their imagination of the past becomes their reality. For many, this experience is exactly what draws them to re-enactment and is even more important than the aim of bringing history to life for an audience – that is to say, for others.

Over the last two to three decades, historical re-enactment has become a popular pastime in many European and Anglo-American countries and for some it has even become a livelihood. In addition to re-enactments of more recent events and epochs, especially memorable civil wars and the two World Wars, there has also grown a strong fascination about the Middle Ages, which coincides with the ongoing craze for the period in popular culture. The Vikings, often imagined as heroic, wild and yet also noble warriors (and sometimes, very rarely, warrioresses), are enjoying a particular surge in popularity.

From early attempts to a thriving field: the development of historical re-enactment

Modern historical re-enactment is considered to have its origins in the re-enactment of battles in commemoration of the American civil war. After parts of the battle of Gettysburg were recreated as early as 1913, in the early 1960s the 100-year anniversary of the battle was marked with the re-enactment of large-scale battles with thousands of participants in front of mass audiences.

In Europe too, national commemorative events, but also religious festivities were precursors of re-enactments of historical events with actors in period clothing and with reconstructed objects: From medieval Catholic passion plays to early forms of historical theatre and again the staging of famous battles such as Waterloo. The early Middle Ages became later part of a celebratory processions, so in 1937 to mark the 'Day of German Art', where 'Vikings' led a golden replica of the Oseberg ship – a sensational Norwegian archaeological discovery – pulled by horses through Munich city centre. During the millennium celebrations of the Polish State, which culminated in the mid-1960s, too, actors dressed up as medieval soldiers and nobility to accompany the parades on foot and on horseback.

However, open-air archaeological museums and medieval villages also played a particular role in the emergence of early medieval re-enactment. Though it primarily focussed on ethnographic, folkloristic displays, the first of its kind was the Stockholm open-air museum Skansen, which opened in 1891. Its significance as an archetype is still visible in some languages, which have adopted 'skansen' as a term for museums that show living history through reconstructed buildings, crafts, traditional culture and costume-clad staff.

The 20th century saw the emergence of various open-air museums showcasing the Middle Ages or even earlier periods. Since the turn of the millennium, such museums have rapidly multiplied in number. This development is often associated with a wave of commercialisation and event culture in historical education. It reflects the changes in museum pedagogy and the growing popularity of role-playing games, historical re-enactments, medieval markets and historical television programmes. These trends are often explained with general developments in post-modern society, like democratisation and pluralisation, a raised interest in history, the current demand for educational and historical entertainment and the greater use of events as educational formats on history.

What is more, structural change, especially in post-socialist countries following the abolition of central planning and financing models, forced local authorities and museums to commercialise monuments and collections and market them as local tourist attractions. In Western Europe too, the history boom gave rise to the development of a cultural heritage industry at genuine historical sites or places designed to have historical appeal. The incorporation of re-enactment performances or videos led to an increase in visitor numbers. Nowadays, it would be difficult to imagine a prehistoric or early medieval museum without this kind of displays. In the face of initial scepticism and despite the fact that some groups in the Viking re-enactment community have been linked to extremist right-wing political movements, historical re-enactment is regarded as an attractive medium for teaching history and a popular addition to museum exhibitions.

However, re-enactment groups are increasingly active in contexts beyond cooperation with national museums and cultural institutions. In many places, Germanic, Slavic or Viking villages have been created by clubs whose members often carry out re-enactments independently. Many new archaeological sites and theme parks have thus been set up at the initiative of or with help from re-enactment groups, who use these sites as a backdrop for their performances and to host festivals.

The growing popularity is reflected in the immense proliferation and sheer number of such medieval events, as well as in the numbers of spectators and participants, which, in Wolin, have increased at least sixfold in the last eight years alone. Furthermore, festivals are also an expression of an increasing internationalisation of the scene thanks to the internet and online interest groups. For many early medieval and Viking enthusiasts, the regular events in York in the UK, German Hedeby, Trondheim in Norway, or also Rogar, Czechia, are not to be missed.

This is how global re-enactment communities for specific historical periods developed. They meet regularly at increasingly international events, be it at the well-established re-enactments of the American civil war throughout the USA, the Battle of Leipzig or the Slav and Viking festival in Wolin. Here, the 'Jomsvikings', an international Viking re-enactment organisation, are an important part of the festival. Drawing members from many

different continents, the organisation forms a kind of elite society, stunt team and brotherhood all in one. Its international subdivisions are called 'storms', which are in turn divided into local 'lags'. The organisation aims to bring the Viking way of life into the present day.

Why Vikings? Evoking 21st century Viking worlds

The present-day Viking revival – or the Viking craze – of the 21st century represents just another wave of storming fascination for the old Norse world, which has produced countless examples of Viking representations in the media and popular culture over the last two and a half centuries. The media has created medieval and Viking worlds quite detached from the former reality described by archaeologists and historians with reference to historic sources: a reality of piracy, expeditions and maritime trade, carried out by certain groups of Scandinavian origin, some of which led to raids, conquests and economic and cultural exchanges, particularly in and around the North and Baltic Seas.

By way of contrast, pop-culture Vikings lead lives of their own free from historical limitations refusing to be tamed by scholarly categories. Time and again they reinvent themselves, their image continually being reimagined and revised, whether it is in texts, music, and above all in the recursive infinity of the many visual mirages. Norse mythology and culture thus permeates Wagnerian operas and black-metal concerts alike. Their imagery has found its way into medievalised fantasy stories from Tolkien's Lord of the Rings to the Thorgal graphic novels, and into moving pictures from 'The Viking' of the age of silent films to the 'Vikings' of today's streaming media era. Every version adds to the kaleidoscope that makes Vikings such dazzling pop-culture icons. The crowdsourcing project World Tree Project offers an insight into this immense diversity of Viking representation in the public domain. The project brings together objects and resources from the varied realms of Viking public history and makes these available online.

These many modern Viking images are exactly what has captured the imagination of re-enactors and catalysed their interest in history. Perhaps re-enactment has become so much more significant owing to the fact that images have an increasing influence on the present day as a result of these new media reproductions. There are countless Viking images, and each is unique. Of the fifty plus shades of Viking, there is something for (almost) everyone: every stereotype. The images offer a basis for identification, projection and imagination. And is not re-enactment also first and foremost, a reproduction or realisation of images and imagined worlds?

Motivation: What makes them go medieval?

However, there is more to the Viking craze and the enthusiasm for performed history than just the pop-cultural afterlife of the northern European early Middle Ages. What draws the people of today to the re-enactment of Viking and other past societies, such as the Slavic, Germanic or Celtic people? The few studies that have looked at the motivation behind this means of experiencing history ascribe it, of course, primarily to historical interest. In the same breath, a desire to convey history – as a self-imposed educational mission – is also often mentioned, but here perhaps many respondents merely wish to comply with public expectations or counter academic presumptions.

Presumably, as studies have suggested, it is the immersive experience, the magic of diving into a distant historical period that incites the greatest thrill. There is a moment when the line between 'here and now' and 'then and there' becomes blurred and past and present come together as one.

Proponents of re-enactment and living history are looking for a historical experience that is not limited to telling stories, illustrating ideas or exhibiting artefacts. They aim to make the past come to life through direct, physical experience. They often consider that these experiences offer a completely different approach to the kind of history found in science or museums. Some are even convinced that the supposed direct, unfiltered perception of past worlds affords them a better and more accurate understanding of 'what it was like'. Stepping back in time and effectively being able to have interactions in the past makes re-enactors feel like eye-witnesses with first-hand experience.

At the same time – and this is also a commonly cited motive – many people believe that participating in re-enactment events is a means of escaping everyday life and modernity to experience a simpler, closer-to-nature form of living, maybe also an opportunity to 'return to one's roots'. These roots may be ethnic, societal or religious, or often even all of these combined. The medieval world offers re-enactors an escape and feels like a hiatus from the extensive complexity of contemporary life. This appeal is explained not only by the naturalness and simplicity attributed to a pre-modern lifestyle, but also by the projection of a clear social order in terms of gender, age, group hierarchies and loyalties.

In interviews, re-enactors have also said that the social experience of being part of a community was a particularly attractive factor. Re-enactment members enjoy connection and camaraderie, thanks primarily to the experience of playing a part in a movement or major event. In particular, local groups, whose members frequently also get their partners and children involved, can in turn create stable friendship circles akin to extended families.

Identification with the Vikings or other early medieval societies can also convey a sense of community. Their glorification creates space for aspirations of national greatness, the reflection of which meant to shine on the descendants. It is therefore not surprising that patriotism is another factor motivating re-enactors. The early medieval scene is also characterised by a strong emphasis on pre-Christian pagan religiousness and identity. Many re-enactors are also practising modern pagans, which means that their reconstruction of the past and performance of spiritual rituals are merging into one another.

Identification with heroicised and idealised communities, together with the projection of seemingly 'natural' and 'untainted' lifestyles and social order, can be an expression of ethno-nationalist and anti-modernistic attitudes, which can easily be conflated with right-wing and even extremist political agendas.

Living in a material world: The trouble with authenticity

Most forms of historical re-enactment pursue the highest level of authenticity, meaning a very accurate, 'realistic' representation of the past. Both within the community itself and for outside observers, the pursuit of authenticity is a defining feature of living history activities. It is a kind of currency vied for among re-enactors, which can be exchanged in for credibility with the audience and the institutions by which they are hired to perform.

While this pursuit of authenticity varies between individual groups and members, they all agree that authenticity is assessed on the basis of clothing, jewellery, weapons and other objects, as well as how these objects are employed in actions, techniques and processes. Therefore, re-enactors aspire to replicate historical paraphernalia and imitate specific activities as accurately as possible in order to create an irreproachable simulation of the past. They start from the premise that this simulation can bridge or even completely eradicate the temporal gap between past and present. Authenticity is thus understood as the closest possible approximation to a historical reality. Actors usually have a very good knowledge of the objects that are documented for 'their' respective epoch and are often able to reference historical or archaeological evidence. Some re-enactment groups even lay down guidelines with a view to achieving their aspiration for authenticity through informed, well-researched performances.

This material authenticity also has a bearing on the intensity of the re-enactor's personal experience. The immersive, physical experience of historical reconstruction that gives the impression of a realistic historical experience is another key reason why authenticity is valued. The idea that wearing period clothing and carrying out era-specific activities, perhaps even in historical places, allows you to feel exactly as if you were in the Middle Ages is not only highly alluring – for many people, experiencing history first-hand is more convincing, more 'authentic' even, than other ways of engaging with the Middle Ages. This fails to consider the fact that the experiences of present-day people with present-day bodies and present-day minds taking part in such historical simulations can only ever differ to the experiences of those in the past. Not least because not all facets of early medieval life can actually be recreated. This is particularly true of the difficult aspects, the dark sides of the often idealised societal systems, such as the consequences of violence and inequality – which are given little or no consideration at all – and the ultimate consequences thereof, serious injury and death, also cannot be 'acted out'.

Re-enactment therefore focuses almost exclusively on the material dimension of historical reconstructions. Consistency with archaeological findings, contemporary textual or image sources are used as the primary measures of 'authenticity'. Some scholars, especially archaeologists themselves, consider that the quality of a given re-enactment can primarily be assessed on the basis of its physical reconstructions. This material aspect is often very closely based on current research findings, such as objects found in burial sites. Naturally, items documented in image sources or found in excavations are much easier to recreate: which is why hundreds of re-enactors wear identical Viking helmets; there is also a disproportionately large number of heavily armoured warriors and opulently adorned noblewomen at festivals. As elite members of society are often much more prominently reflected in archaeological and historical sources, they are represented in much higher numbers than other social groups amongst the re-enactors. Evidently, this does not reflect the reality of early medieval populations. Besides, other aspects of life in the past that are less exciting or harder to re-enact are also forgone. Nevertheless, the performative medium gives the impression of a complete picture of history and a complete historical experience, depicting a captivating and unambiguous image of the past, an *image d'Epinal* so to speak, which fails to highlight that history is always created by its storytellers, performers and reconstructors in their present day.

It may be, however, that historical re-enactment only works, or at least works best, by creating physical representations of imagined worlds in which the material aspect is fetishised by means of historically accurate techniques, materials and practices. However, the resulting realistic aesthetic, which suggests that this process can bring the past back to life, also presents challenges for teaching and understanding history.

Petruț Călinescu, *Dacian re-enactor from the Geto-Dacians of Moldavia Cultural Association*, Romania, 2018

Petruț Călinescu, *Dacian re-enactment at Cucuteni archaeological site*, Romania, 2019

In search of the lost past

An approach to history that focuses on the practical and physical understanding of historical actions and events perceives the past as something that is unalterably inscribed in things. It is assumed that the reconstruction and reappropriation of objects can produce the exact same reactions and insights today.

However, the main problem with any historical appropriation is simply that the past is first and foremost one thing: past. As the Chilean writer Pablo Neruda once put it: 'Hoy es hoy y ayer se fue, no hay duda'. (Today is today and yesterday is gone. There is no doubt). The past can no longer be perceived or empirically known. Contrary to the reenactors' intense impressions, not even the use of replicas can break down the barriers of time. Although the remains of the past, be they archaeological findings or historical observations, may well seem to provide a direct link to the past – and they ultimately form the basis for how we imagine past events – they no longer belong to the past, given that we are now observing them in the present. Despite the fact that objects, whether original artefacts or replicas, can be seen and touched in the here and now, we cannot see and touch the past itself. Even if archaeological findings are described in the greatest detail and their manufacturing techniques and sometimes even their uses reconstructed, this only gives us a vague idea of 'how things might have been'. In fact, the presence itself of archaeologists on sites can cause some confusion in stratigraphy: the so-called 'layer of the archaeologist' is a layer created by the dirt brough by the archaeologists' own shoes on the excavation. The function of objects and, in particular, their social and cultural significance cannot be ascertained from physical characteristics alone. They are shaped by the perspectives of the people who interpret these findings. And even in evidence from written sources – where the reported observation matters much more than the materiality of the source itself – all we have is the chronicler's individual perspective, who may be given to exaggerate, embellish or omit elements.

For re-enactors, as lay historians as well as for qualified historians to support the notion that history can be conjured into the present on the sole grounds that it has happened once before, is thus essentially a fallacy. This is why our ideas of the past must always be read as part of the present, which reflect the cognitive and social conditions of their time. However, the fact that different versions of history or images of the past co-exist should not be viewed as something arbitrary, but rather that each portrayal of history is the result of a specific context, a particular perspective and an ongoing discursive process.

The fixation on accurately portraying one true historical reality and the personal, physical-emotional experience of this promised material authenticity obscure the multi-layered interpretative historical process. The created image, which can only ever be an incomplete and selective conceptualisation, gives the impression of being comprehensive and real. This could be an image that trivialises, romanticises or idealises historical deeds, communities and their social relations and orders. It often recognises something in history that represents in fact a present-day need.

National Romantic essentialisms: Old figures in the latest fashions

The emphasis on the material aspect also leads to a very one-sided application of current research findings. While re-enactors are eager to incorporate recent findings and discoveries into the material dimension of their performances, their representations of medieval people and communities seem to be wedded to outdated beliefs and stereotypes. This results in antiquated characters that are nonetheless dressed, armed and equipped in line with cutting-edge archaeological fashion reconstructions.

In popular portrayals of history – and thus in re-enactment too – early medieval societies are often depicted as clearly definable, ethnically homogeneous groups with a corresponding self-image that has remained constant over long periods of time and across great distances. The idea of nation states seems to be projected into this distant past, which is misleading, especially in relation to the Vikings, who were not an ethnic group. Rather, the term *víking* described the activity of seafaring, for which individuals or groups from different Scandinavian regions came together. All too often, modern-day 'Vikings' – as well as re-enactors playing early Slavs, Magyars etc. – identify as being descendants of these groups. History is thus being construed as a continuous, unbroken development of distinct ethnic groups, stretching from pre-history to the present.

This belief reveals essentialist notions, whereby tribes or peoples are understood to be communities of common descent, language and culture with an inherent, unalterable essence that directly connects earlier communities with those of today. This view is closer to the historical theories of the 19th and early 20th century and perpetuates national romantic ideas or even nationalist paradigms. In contrast to the material dimension, when it comes to ethnicity, there is much less reference to current scientific discourse – which, in relation to the early Middle Ages, does not assume the existence of uniform communities with a sense of identity that permeates all sections of the population, but rather of multi-ethnic melting-pots.

Moreover, re-enactment groups often stage idealistic visions of society, where medieval social orders are romanticised or even glorified. They place an emphasis on war and camaraderie, paganism and heroism, traditional gender roles and violence as an effective means of resolving conflict or asserting interests. Viking re-enactments primarily portray elite male warriors and focus on weapons, outfits and the scenic performance of combat. As these social roles and virtues are set in the distant medieval past, they are therefore often presented as a primal and thus ultimately a natural way of being. This idea is sometimes even accompanied by a yearning or call to revert to that status *quo ante*.

The fact that certain aspects, such as gender hierarchies, are archaicised and treated as natural and sometimes also sacred is not only reflected in the distribution of roles in re-enactment, but is also occasionally explicitly emphasised by performers. Although some female members can now be found fighting in battles or leading pagan rituals, male actors dominate these 'active' areas, while women tend to play more passive roles. Not only do they believe that reversing this arrangement would be ahistorical, for many, returning to the early Middle Ages and to traditional gender roles constitutes an escape to a place where men can be 'real men' and women are allowed to live out 'their natural destinies'.

Hence, most groups uphold traditional – male-centric – views of the Middle Ages, although feminist and queer archaeology have at least helped to refute the notion that there is a universal, supertemporal binary system of gender and sexuality. However, what is more problematic is that historical roles relating to gender and other characteristics are accepted as primordial and natural, even though they are just as much the result of historical developments as our current social order. They are, therefore, by no means natural: the so-called *masculine* or *feminine* have always been a product of social and cultural processes.

The anti-modernistic tendencies revealed therein, together with the ethno-essentialist historical narratives and representations, lead to nationalist and anti-pluralist attitudes typical amongst the ultra-conservatives or even right-wing extremist worldviews. As a hobby primarily enjoyed by white middle class Europeans, the re-enactment community is not characterised by diversity, although some groups do explicitly state that they are open to any faith, ethnicity and gender.

The essentialisation of ethnic communities sometimes encompasses an exclusion, an evocation of purity, and the supposedly clear and simple social order may be seen as an alternative to the complexity of the modern era, when the past is seen as containing answers to the problems and needs of the present. It is therefore not surprising that such a simplistic and glorified view of the past can be used as a stepping stone by certain political ideologies. Nationalist and radical right-wing movements in particular make use of such historical fantasies and link them with ideas of former national greatness and virtues that they believe should be reinstated. Extreme right-wing circles have a long-standing tradition of Viking adoration and political appropriation, and their use of Norse terms and symbols remains prevalent today. Extreme right-wing tendencies are therefore regularly observed in early medieval re-enactments and represent an ongoing challenge for the community of living historians.

With body or mind – feeling versus knowing history? Re-enactment and academic scholarship

Can re-enactment generate new knowledge about subjects such as the Vikings? And can it be used as a medium for teaching history and popularise scientific knowledge of the Middle Ages? Re-enactors and scientists have often been wary of each other – and many still are. As a form of public history – a term used to describe all sorts of historical knowledge present in public spaces – re-enactment raises fundamental issues on education, credibility and interpretative authority. As a bottom-up approach to history with the impossible aspiration for a hyper-realistic reconstruction of the past, it seems to be competing with science and assert its right to historical interpretation. Who does the past belong to? Does it belong to anyone at all? As an epistemological project, after all, that counts on the body and physicality as a means of proof, feeling is used to argue against facts; feeling and personal experience is deemed to be the better form of knowledge.

Some academics argue that the experiences of re-enactors reveal very little about how the past really was. Instead, they tell us much more about the re-enactors themselves and provide an insight into the current societal and political significance of history. With their historical realism that fixates on and fetishises material

aspects, they may well only confirm what is already known anyway. Their belief that the effect of physical objects is always the same and cannot be distorted by subjective interpretation actually obscures rather than sheds light on the past, because it merely confirms the beliefs of re-enactors and their audiences.

Regarding the potential role of re-enactment in the dissemination of knowledge and teaching history, the problem is that there is no clearly identifiable boundary between information and imagination. Today, most archaeological museums in Europe consider that performative practices have become a very important tool for teaching history. Open-air museums in particular regularly work with 'living history' programmes and many exhibition openings make use of performances to stage impressive events. Television productions and other media with shows on early history also regularly feature re-enactments and thus contribute to the popularisation of historical content. Despite the fact that re-enactment is reaching a wider audience, relatively little effort is made to present these performative portrayals of history through a critical lens to assess their suitability as a means of appropriating and teaching history. Often, a critical approach is only employed where there are clear indications of extremist beliefs, for example, as was the case when a German re-enactor revealed a tattoo of an illegal Nazi phrase in front of an audience at a museum event, sparking a debate about the ideological entanglements of the re-enactment scene.

Misappropriation for ideological ends and the desire to revive 'history as it was' limit its potential and the value of historical re-enactment. Without endeavouring to measure oneself against (or compete with) reflective academic history, re-enactment has no need to standards. Historical re-enactment could not only play to its undisputed strengths as a practitioner of history and test theories about potential uses, artisanal production techniques etc., but its creative appeal could lie precisely in the unconventional. By telling and performing history counterfactually, so to speak, it could question truths and debunk stereotypes. It could play around with different and unexpected perspectives to challenge the traditional views of history that still prevail in the public at large, especially about the medieval period. The Viking world could become richer and more colourful, male and female Vikings could turn cherished Viking social orders upside down and fancifully make their way off the beaten track into the undergrowth of unimagined possibilities. Playing around with speculation in this way, could offer far more insights than could be attained by fixating on an ideal of authenticity. It would also highlight the ludic character often attributed to re-enactment, but which in practice usually gives way to a forced seriousness. To consciously embrace the presence of the past in this manner would perhaps unleash historical re-enactment's greatest potential.

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Roger Cremers, *Photographing barbed wire at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum*, Poland, 2008

VISITING AUSCHWITZ SINCE 1946. A DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE

Libera Picchianti, Simina Bădică

'You don't go to Auschwitz as on a Sunday trip: you go in silence, possibly not in a fur coat and without having had breakfast in the morning [...], you go there as to a sanctuary, but secularly, head-on, trying to memorize.' (Liliana Segre, Auschwitz survivor and Italian Senator, who has chosen never to return to the former extermination camp, 2023)

'People have always taken pictures, to remember where they have been and what they have seen, and, to show them – once back home – to others with whom they want to share their experience. This has always been the case. This does not scandalize me. Not at all: that people go to Auschwitz and decide to immortalize that moment applying the same means and the same rules to which they are accustomed.' (Tatiana Bucci, Auschwitz survivor, who regularly visits the memorial site, 2024)

Tatiana Bucci was deported as a child to Auschwitz-Birkenau and for the last 20 years has been giving testimony of her experience in all possible ways, including accompanying dozens of school students' groups during their visit to the former extermination camp. In the decades between her surviving Auschwitz and her first return to the camp in 1996, to film a documentary, the camp had radically changed. What do the visitors see when they visit Auschwitz in the 21st century? Are they really visiting the concentration camp or a sanitized version of a place that was never built to be visited? What kind of experience are they looking for and what kind of photographs are they aiming to produce? Are they aware of the multiple layers of change and meaning that have transformed the camp in the decades of memorialisation since Tatiana survived it?

Reconstruction, conservation and musealisation, but also Cold War politics and the European culture of remembrance, among others, have affected the site visitors enter today. The behaviour and profile of the visitors has also changed and in turn they are changing the site. Museum historian Tony Bennett writes that visitors have always been part of the museum. Quoting a text at the entrance of the 1901 Pan-American Exposition, 'Please remember when you get inside the gates you are part of the show,' he argues that the visitor has been embedded into the museum institution ever since its creation. Visitors are welcomed into the museum not only to see, to be educated, to be moulded but also to be seen, as museums are 'making the crowd itself the ultimate spectacle.' (Bennett, 1995, 68) So what is the role of visitors in the

Auschwitz-Birkenau 'exhibitionary complex', as Bennett calls museums?

This essay will highlight and question the relationship between the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial site and its visitors. The long history of the memorial-museum allows for a diachronic perspective. Not only that the Auschwitz we visit in the 21st century is substantially different from the functioning concentration camp. It is also substantially different from the 1950s Auschwitz or the 1980s Auschwitz. The 21st century Auschwitz has been described as 'mass tourism meets mass murder'. Can this be argued in all good faith, is 'dark tourism' the ultimate menace for the memorial? Or has the memorial always been shaped by the expectations and projections of its visitors?

The first Auschwitz after Auschwitz

The first account of an actual visit to Auschwitz, three days after its liberation in January 1945, probably comes from Tadeusz Chowaniec, a physician from the town of Oświęcim: 'Humanity must see this scene, for in a few years, one will no longer believe what we witness here today. The sharpness of today's image will be blurred.' (quoted in Huener, 2003, xiii). While writing the history of the camp's transformation into a memorial, historian Jonathan Huener argues that the image of the recently liberated camp was indeed blurred in the following decades, 'blurred by the diverse and often competing narratives of post-war histories of the camp complex, blurred and even distorted by the cultural imperatives and political exigencies of postwar Polish society and politics.' (Huener, 2003, xiii)

The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum was founded in April 1946 by the initiative of a group of former prisoners and under the direction of Poland's Ministry of Culture and Art. Under Soviet control and the ideology of class struggle, commemoration focused mainly on anti-fascism – the ethnical distinction of the victims, and thus the memory of the Shoah was neglected. As Auschwitz quickly became the main memorial site in Poland dedicated to the suffering and resistance of Poles under German occupation, it subsumed the diverse identities of the camp's victims as well as their different reasons of persecution into a Polish Catholic perspective of 'martyrdom'.

In its early years as a memorial site, mainly survivors' organisations, historians, and some journalists visited the former Nazi concentration and extermination camp. It received regular visits by state and other official delegations that celebrated formal commemoration ceremonies. Polish school groups were also brought in great numbers, as part of the mandatory curriculum, from the early days of the opening of the museum. (Reynolds, 2018, 43)

It can be said that initially the visits to Auschwitz were experiences mainly comparable to pilgrimages, even if not necessarily of religious nature, and often rather of political kind. This 'Socialist pilgrim' would experience the site during a collective visit, carefully guided in both their movements and lessons derived (Bădică, 2013, 165–177). The spirit of those visits and the attitude of those visitors are easily imaginable as neatly organized, and disciplined, adopting a sincerely felt or imposed posture of respect and sober remembrance. In that climate of solemnity, silence prevailed, unless otherwise requested by the ceremonial script. Spontaneous expressions of thoughts were considered inappropriate. What kind of impressions and intimate reflections those visitors actually took away from those experiences on a personal level and on a long term, was not investigated nor debated.

The 'Socialist pilgrims' welcomed by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum would also sometimes come from neighbouring Socialist states, looking for inspiration in developing their own memorial sites. A Romanian delegation of the Association of Former Antifascist Political Prisoners thus reported on their 1949 visit: 'What can be seen there exceeds all human imagination. [...] It was a terrible day when we saw those places. [...] This place constitutes a museum to show what fascism is. This is something we have not yet achieved, to show where our comrades stayed. We have to work towards the creation of a museum to educate, to show where they suffered.' (quoted in Bădică, 2013, 85)

These first visitors were contemporaries of the events memorialised in the Auschwitz museum. Although the SS had dismantled the extermination facilities before leaving, the traces of the functioning camp were certainly more vivid in those early years of the memorial than they are today. Except the content of the exhibition panels, that reflected, as will be detailed below, the political approach and the state of knowledge of the respective time, the structures and objects that a visitor would see in the former main camp of Auschwitz I, where the museum was established, were virtually the same we can see nowadays. The infamous gate with the 'Arbeit macht frei' inscription, the barbed wire fences, the aligned red brick prisoners' blocks, the (reconstructed) crematorium with its gas chamber, the gallows, the courtyard with the execution wall, those huge showcases containing piles of personal items from suitcases to spectacles, from prosthesis to human hair braids. Besides these, they would also see piles of common objects, as pots, brushes and even shoes, not so different from those that visitors themselves were wearing or had at home. Their experience was hardly mediated, not by time on the one hand, nor by images of the place, seen elsewhere for years, to be matched with what was in front of them.

For decades, Birkenau, the second camp of Auschwitz, and the actual site of industrial killing in gas chambers was hardly visited. Birkenau stood three kilometres away from the museum organised in Auschwitz I, the only option for the early visitor was to walk and visit independently, as it was not part of the standard visit. Most of the objects described above and showed in the museum's showcases were actually brought from Birkenau. The extermination system in Birkenau was explained in the museum halls of Auschwitz I.

The conundrum of musealising a site that was not built to last, and the inherent tension between conservation and authenticity had seized the attention of critics, as rare as they were allowed in Stalinist Poland. A 1948 article by Polish journalist Kazimierz Kozniewski could just as well be written today: 'The 'Auschwitz Museum' does not offer even an approximate truth about the Auschwitz camp. It depends on a paradoxical situation: either one wishes to maintain the external arrangement of the camp – then it is necessary to conserve it and ultimately eliminate its horror – or... the horror in the blocks not restored will last a year or two, but will in the end diminish due to the effects of time.' (quoted in Huener, 2003, 113)

Auschwitz behind the Iron Curtain

> 'Victims are remembered according to the experience and identity of the rememberers.' (Young, 55)

When Auschwitz was created as a memorial site, Europe was divided by the Iron Curtain. The memory of the Second World War, later to become the memory of the Holocaust, was also divided along the lines of the Iron Curtain. Every nation on both sides of the Cold War built up their own narratives, in which incriminating evidence was denied as much as possible. Satellite states of the Soviet Union did not acknowledge Fascism and the Holocaust as part of their history. Communist states and party leaders saw themselves as fighters against Fascism. All socialist states, including Poland, followed the official Soviet line that all camp inmates had suffered equally (House of European History, 2023, 97).

Recognizing that the memory of the Holocaust is itself an unfolding historical process, the House of European History dedicates an entire room of its permanent exhibition in Brussels to illustrate six national examples of repressing the theme of the Shoah. The exhibition shows, for example, how East German governments used abandoned concentration camps to commemorate what they regarded as their 'real' history – anti-fascist resistance and the suffering of the working class. The East German self-image did not recognise Nazism as part of its make-up, but saw it rather as a characteristic of West Germany.

In addition to this repression, the definition of fascism on the Eastern Side of the Iron Curtain was different from our contemporary understanding. Socialist states used the definition formulated by future Communist president of Bulgaria, Georgi Dimitrov in 1935: 'Fascism is the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital.' As fascism was defined in terms of class and capital, its victims could not be defined by race or ethnicity, but by their position in the class struggle. This is one of the reasons why Jews were not initially mentioned as a distinct group of inmates, while the focus of the memorialisation was kept on political prisoners.

The content of former concentration camp memorials was Soviet in the first decades after the war. And so was the form. The practice of Soviet museology was imposed on USSR's satellite states just as powerfully as other ideological impositions. According to Soviet museology, 'the museum is a sector of ideological work. Museum propaganda cannot be abstract, it must set as its final goal the formation of high moral and spiritual qualities in Soviet men [...] The visit has the goal of not only enriching the visitors with new scientific knowledge, but of helping to form their political consciousness.' (Galkina, 245)

Starting in the late 1950s, as a result of de-Stalinisation and the establishment of some regular exchange channels between East and West, the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum began to be supported but also challenged internationally. In the early 1960s, some of the camps' brick buildings started to be dedicated to national exhibitions, showing the persecution and deportation in and from different countries. The cooperation on content and design with experts from the respective nations started with Socialist states, like Czechoslovakia and Hungary, but continued with Western countries like Belgium and Denmark. Simultaneously, Eichmann's trial in 1961 provided a detailed and public reconstruction of the systematically organized extermination of the Jews in Europe. This accelerated the demand and urgency of acknowledging and highlighting that the vast majority of people deported to Auschwitz were immediately killed there for no other reason than being Jewish, disregarding age, political engagement, or citizenship.

In 1967 a monument was erected next to the ruins of the crematoria in Birkenau. Despite the absence of any explicit mention of the Jewish victims, nor of the Sinti and Roma, it marks the spot where their industrialised physical annihilation actually took place. Thus it contributed to slowly opening the way to an extension of the visitors' path to include this hitherto neglected part of the Auschwitz camp system. In 1968 a section, comparable to the national exhibitions but explicitly dedicated to the 'struggle and martyrdom' of the Jews opened in the main camp. The following year, for the first time a Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Meir, visited Auschwitz.

The gradual internationalisation and recognition of the symbolic place of Auschwitz in the history of Holocaust led to a rising interest for the site at global level but also awareness of the necessity to preserve it at highest possible standards. In 1979 Auschwitz-Birkenau was listed as UNESCO World Heritage. That year the visibility of the former camp reached its peak thanks to another event. Pope John Paul II celebrated a mass in Auschwitz, calling for forgiveness and reconciliation. The media coverage of that event, followed all over the world, spread some iconic images of the former camp.

Since 1988, a large group of people of all ages and with many different passports meet yearly in Auschwitz to walk all together the three kilometres way to Birkenau. This 'March of the Living' takes place in spring, on Yom HaShoah, the Shoah Remembrance Day, on the 27th of Nisan according to the Jewish Calendar. It has mainly a commemorative character, although the programme includes also lectures and discussions before and after, as well as – in its extended version – further visits to other places in Poland and eventually a gathering in Israel, from where it is organised and sponsored. The number of participants has grown from roughly 1 000 back in 1988 up to 15 000 in the most successful recent years.

Some attribute the dramatic rise of Auschwitz-Birkenau visitors' numbers to the launch of its website in 1999 (Reynolds, 2018, 1). It is undeniable that a site's online presence helps to plan a physical journey to the site, increases viewers' interest and up-to-date information is easily obtained. However, the institution behind the website can also be viewed as a *pars pro toto* of all the measures set up by the museum to better manage the already impressive increase in visitors' numbers in previous years. Following the fall of the Iron Curtain, a growing number of curious travellers but also motivated schoolteachers and facilitators of (incentivized) exchanges took the chance to organize visits to Auschwitz. It is difficult to say how many decided to come after having seen *Schindler's list* (released in 1993), and how many watched it to better prepare for their trip. In both cases, for sure, they ended up looking for the coloured, real and peacetime doubles of the black and white fictional dramatic images that the movie had engraved in their minds.

In 2005 a UN resolution designated January 27th, anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau by the Soviet Army, as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The resolution calls on member states to develop educational programs and remembrance activities about the Shoah, as well as initiatives for fighting antisemitism and other forms of discrimination. The

innumerable events that take place throughout the world on or around that date result in an unprecedented spread of information, reflections and images of the camp, even if these reflections are not accompanied by an actual visit of the physical site.

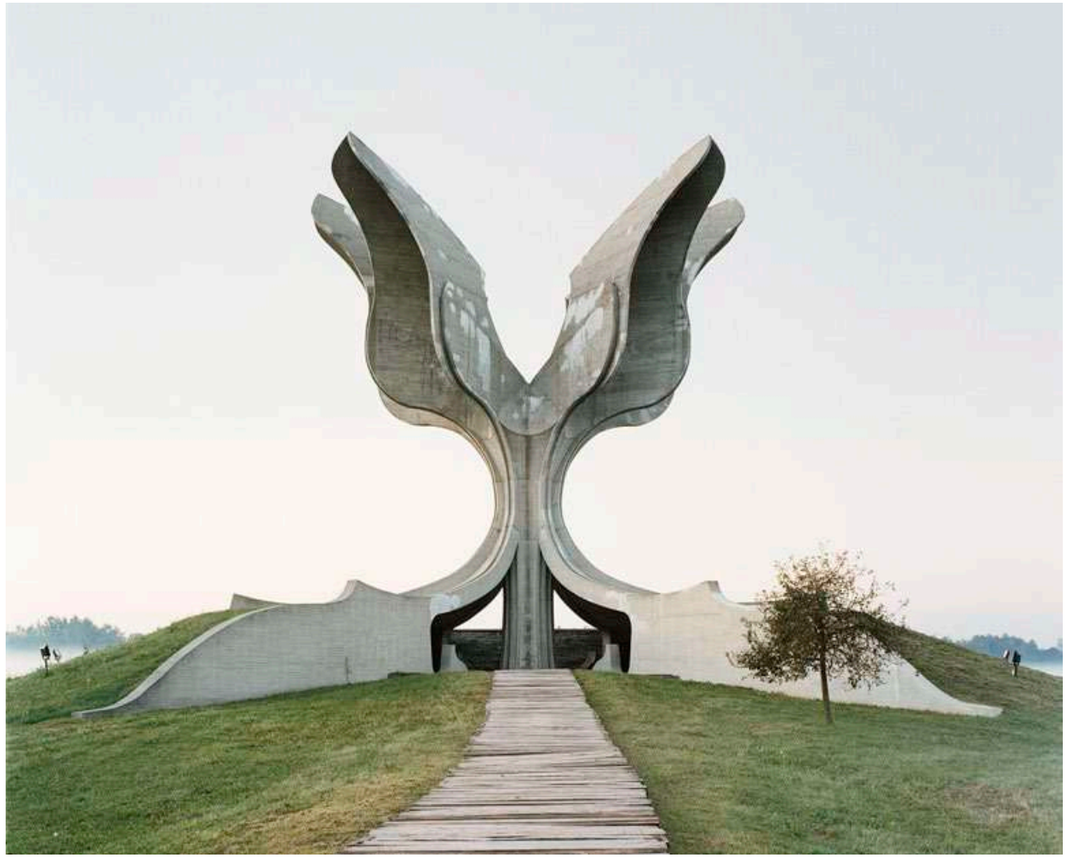
'Seeing' Auschwitz in the 21st century

The story of the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum could also be told as a story of the gradual transformation from a local to a global tourist destination. As Reynolds observes: 'The dramatic transformations that have taken place at the Auschwitz memorial site are a powerful reminder that tourism cannot be reduced to the passive consumption of displays decided by others. Rather, tourism both responds to and helps influence policies that govern the memorial sites.' (Reynolds, 2018, 43)

Beginning in the 21st century, Auschwitz emerged as tourist attraction with visitors' numbers exploding and steadily increasing until the Covid pandemic. With 2.3 million visitors recorded in 2019, the former Nazi concentration and extermination camp, has been ranked 18th among the 20 most visited museums in Europe. This has entailed the so-called commercialization of the site: from the ways in which it is advertised and physically reached to the ways by which the actual visit within the memorial is organized and carried out, leave alone the armature that has grown in its surroundings. Several studies have been published describing Auschwitz as the ultimate 'dark tourism' destination, focusing both on the visitors' motivations but also on the 'suppliers'' behavior: travel agencies offering bus tours to Auschwitz, restaurants, hotels and TripAdvisor reviews.

However, provided that no one dares to select who would be allowed to enter and visit Auschwitz or not, this huge increase in visitor numbers had first to be managed, to safeguard the integrity of the historical site. Does the congestion of the site, the building of infrastructures, the standardization of guided tours, the lack of silence, some evident signs of misbehavior reduce the impact that the visit to such a site can have on the 21st century visitor? Would a student, a survivor's grandchild, a scholar, a journalist, an activist nowadays still be able to process and learn something from visiting the memorial? One must consider that the typology of the visitors today is very different from the early visitors. They are several generations removed from the events that the site is commemorating. It is less and less likely that today's visitors have the chance to talk to someone who has witnessed not only the Shoah but in general the times of the Second World War. Nor do they possess remnants of those times around them, objects at home or original traces in their surroundings. Compared to early visitors, and with some exception of victims' or perpetrators' descendants, in most cases their personal link to those events is far weaker than the knowledge or mere impression they have gained through other media.

All of us Europeans – whether by birth or adoption – have *all*, at a certain point of our life, been confronted with images about the Holocaust. It is, something most of us all have unavoidably in common. Depending on the age, country of residence and media consumption habits there might be differences with regard to the context in which we were exposed or had access to them, as well as regarding the type and quantity of Holocaust related images we have seen. But in a way or another they reached us and became part of our collective visual archive.



Jan Kempenaers, *Spomenik #09*, erected in 1966 at the former concentration camp in Jasenovac, where the Ustaša (Croatian fascist) regime killed around 100 000 Serbs, Jews and Roma, Croatia, 2007

Valérie Leray, *Paintball field, military camp, clandestine detention centres, field of ruins, Rivesaltes, 2008 / Internment camp for Roma, Rivesaltes, 1940–1942*, France, 2008

It happened at school or in some other educational context, where someone showed them accompanied by some explanation, that might have been historical but also rather ethical, civic or even religious. More voluntarily, we chose to watch films and series, go to the theatre and read books. Even without looking for it specifically, the Holocaust, ranging from being the main subject to being only quoted in a flashback or used as metaphorical scenario, is a recurring topic in blockbuster films and in graphic novels. We are also faced with Holocaust images by pure chance while watching TV or scrolling the phone.

The quantity of images shown and produced about the Shoah after it happened is impressive, but necessary. The fact is that we can associate images with the Shoah, and the Shoah with certain images, without being experts. Even if very few actual images of the genocide have survived, we have a visual memory of the Shoah based mainly on after-images (Zelizer, 1998). It might be that the first impulse when going to Auschwitz is looking for something that we can recognize. We search for something that matches the images we have in our minds.

Observing visitors taking pictures of the gate or of the barbed wire, the rails or barracks, the endless expanse strewn with chimneys or of themselves with any of these backgrounds, one can hardly distinguish who came here conscientiously and well-prepared from whom got here more casually. They all – or, let's be honest – *we* all, look the same: clumsily trying to grab what we can of something that we travelled to see first-hand, with our own eyes, something that we know happened there, where we stand now, but that, once on site, we struggle to imagine as real.

Post scriptum. The presence of the past in former concentration camps

Roger Cremers' photographs of tourists at Auschwitz-Birkenau are not the only photographs of former concentration camps that visitors can see in the exhibition. Curating a show about the presence of the past in Europe today necessarily means encountering former concentration camps in a variety of projects and representations. Contemporary photography makes visible the biography of these sites as multiple layers of time, meaning and memorial struggles that have left their mark.

The Jasenovac museum and memorial, with its concrete 'Flower' designed by Bogdan Bogdanović, was devastated and looted during the 1991–1995 war in Croatia. It would have been a second destruction of Jasenovac after the first one in 1945. There are no original structures remaining of the original Second World War camp where the Ustaša (Croatian fascist) regime killed around 100 000 Serbs, Jews and Roma. (Pavlaković, 2017, 277) Bogdan Bogdanović's monument was inaugurated in 1966 and the museum in 1968. As in the Auschwitz museum at the same time, the narrative was that of an anti-fascism resistance unrelated to ethnicity and organised school groups were regularly visiting the site. After the 1991–1995 war the site has never regained its prominence. Political struggles made it so that on the 2016 official commemoration of the site, on 22 April, neither the Croatian president nor the Jewish and anti-fascist veteran organisations attended the ceremony. To this day, the Jasenovac memorial is very far from attracting the kind of crowds described above in this article.

An even more contrasting example present in the exhibition is the site of Rivesaltes in France, a former internment camp between 1939 and 1942. Valérie Leray has visually documented several sites in France where Roma were interned during the Second World War, capturing the emptiness, lack of memorialisation and the different uses that the former camp has been witness to since. Her haunting images are named with long titles that record the contrasting uses of the sites: 'Paintball field, military camp, clandestine detention centres, field of ruins, Rivesaltes, 2008 / Internment camp for Roma, Rivesaltes, 1939–1942.'

But many more histories are layered in this site. It initially received in 1939 Spanish refugees from the civil war in their country, to whom the Vichy regime added foreign Jews and French Roma. After the war, suspects of collaboration with the Germans were interned in Rivesaltes. In the 1960s, Algerians who had fought on the French side during Algeria's war of independence, were accommodated here as a first step before their difficult integration into a highly prejudiced French society. The site was deserted for decades interrupted only by occasional memorialisation initiatives, including Valérie Leray's photographs from 2008. At the end of the 1990s, part of the archives of the Second World War internment camp appeared in a paper recycling facility in Perpignan. This triggered the beginning of a memorialisation process that led to the opening of the Memorial of Rivesaltes in 2015.

The camps are no more. What is left for us to see today are the traces of different waves of memorialisation, silence and destruction, impacting these sites in waves as powerful as the societal and political changes triggering them. Visiting Auschwitz might be a very different experience today from visiting Jasenovac or Rivesaltes, yet it still testifies to a desire of becoming aware and connected to the past tragedies that have shaped the European continent.

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Hugo Passarello Luna, *Nostalgia for Mud*, France, 2018

THE WILL TO SEE
THE DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHER AS A MEDIATOR AND THE ISSUE OF TRUST

Amanda Bernal

Photo 1
We see two people standing, dressed in red tracksuits with black backpacks and cameras in hand. They are taking photos at a significant historical place.
The individuals are facing the road between two well-aligned red brick buildings. In the distance, we can see some trees whose leaves go beyond the top edge of the photo. The road is covered with uniform grass. The atmosphere of the place is sober and silent and contrasts with the two individuals in red.

This description of one of the exhibition's photographs is written in a similar way to that chosen by Lucy Lippard (2016) to describe pictures that may or may not exist. I invite you to ask yourself: What mental picture did you conjure up when you read it? Has it reminded you of other images? Have you questioned any of its elements because they seemed strange or at odds with the whole scene? Were you convinced by it? Do you trust it?

What has just occurred in your mind is a mental image, an act of imagination. A 'mental image' is not always tied to past personal physical experiences because the mind can create new objects by mixing known ones or produce new ones that only exist in the mind, by using 'the mind's eye', as it is termed in neuroscience. Neuroscience plays a crucial role in understanding mental imagery, describing it as a process akin to a physical experience, capable of evoking the emotions and sensations of real experiences. Some brain areas involved in imagination also process physical experiences (Farah, 2000, 257–258). Photography is a visual art form and it consists in observing, understanding, and mentally analysing a situation before capturing it (Favero in Visual Trust, 2023). Belting (2012, 267) tells us that photography can even reproduce what we cannot express and only imagine. In other words, before taking a photograph, we need to imagine it. We must also surrender to the established process between the image, thought, and creation to guide us. Therefore, it would be a great mistake to consider that imagination is a simple exercise in *derealisation*. Imagination has a great power of realism and may not be linked to fantasy or frivolity (Didi-Huberman *et al.* 2018, 25). Tarkovski (1996, 38–57) warns that discovering the shortest path between what we want to say – what we imagine – and what a photograph can express in its finitude is one of the most demanding tasks.

When photographers can imprint their experiences and wills on an image, we can detect the 'authenticity' of the image as viewers. The authenticity refers to the photographer's personal intentionality and not as a synonym of

'truth' in the realistic sense of the term. It points to the singularity of the mediator's gaze, which takes place in a particular historical setting and within the context of an interaction with the subjects appearing in the picture. This authenticity – from now on, *the authentic purpose* – triggers complex feelings in the viewer, as intricate as the image itself. These feelings may even appear contradictory or opposite, even excluding each other (Tarkovski, 1996, 132). To capture this authentic purpose, the image should not be dissected into parts (Tarkovski, 1996, 132). The ensemble of its parts, as envisioned by its creator, activates its potential and meaning. In this respect, we, as observers, can detect hidden connections between an image's parts and invisible links between different images. These bindings are elements or pieces that create the sensation of reality or falsehood and shape our perception and evaluation of the image. Thus, we can coherently photograph our multi-faceted, polyhedral reality despite its contradictions and diverse outlooks. It is important to note that the viewer's interpretation plays a significant role in this process, as it influences the perception of authenticity. The authentic purpose does not intend to be the final word on the interpretation of images. The authentic purpose refers to the photographer's intention and commitment. Walter Benjamin also reminds us that an image 'can imaginatively release temporal harmonics, unconscious structures' (cited by Didi-Huberman, 2020). When a pianist hits a key, other notes are activated by empathy. Similarly, while the photographer has a primary intention, the image activates other images and ideas that resonate with it, in unison or disharmony. The audience feels and connects with these harmonics to complete or modulate the image's meaning.

In photography and the narration of historical events, there is a conflict of historicity. This concept refers to the tensions and disputes that arise when different perspectives and interpretations of historical events come into conflict. Creativity allows us to deal with this conflict, giving us alternative ways of approaching historical events and stripping us of what we have been told about *how things are*. The actor John Cleese said that creativity is not a talent but a way of operating in the world. The photographer is capable of doing this exercise, given that he or she has the ability to contemplate the world before judging it. He or she can also interpret his or her visual experience differently and choose the best technique to describe it. Therefore, imagination and creativity interact with history inevitably.

Imagining History

This exhibition asks the following question: what is behind our need and do we use history? This question takes us to other questions: How to build *in present*? What kind of knowledge can the image give rise to, and what type of contribution to historical knowledge can it provide? (Santamaría, 2018, 16; Didi-Huberman *et al*, 2018, 29). Finally, 'Why does photojournalism matter?' and 'How does the visual affect our sense of reality?' (Newton, 2001, 12–13).

As a guest columnist for this catalogue, I have strived to develop ideas that might offer satisfactory answers to the questions raised previously. I also delved into the main issues of documentary photography presented by this fantastic exhibition and its curators. The exhibition proposes a curated visual inventory of historical consciousness in Europe today and how individuals establish grassroots engagement with their pasts (HEH, 2024). The exhibition features a hundred photographs from 25 photographic projects. These projects, authored by individuals with significant experience and a strong presence in the current panorama of documentary photography, take us to new ways of imagining the world, documenting re-enactments, tourist behaviour, and private museums.

The superb composition and aesthetic beauty of these images reveal creative and alternative ways of finding one's place in the world and rediscovering one's relationship with history. They also hold within them the contradictions of our cultures and our *modus operandi*. In this regard, during your visit of the exhibition or while reading this catalogue, you may discover how our mind can prioritise the sublime but produce eery images just as well. Some show us potential ways of recovering values that we once lost. Meanwhile, through the characters appearing in those scenes, pictures reproduce systems and past civilisations as a way of understanding the world or paying tribute to these societies. Others do what photography does best, which is to pause. Pause in the liminal spaces, the presumably banal, the interstices between the *main actions*, what comes before and what would come after, the beautiful within the ugly, and the exceptional within the decadent. Also, whilst topography is how we orient ourselves on the planet, the tactile aspect of photography arouses our senses.

Trust And Truth In Photography

Documentary photographers and photojournalists, often considered to be the world's gaze, play a crucial role in making the invisible visible. Their dilemma is that they have frequently been expected to 'bring back the truth' – about social and political events – and the concept of trust in their images (Newton, 2001, 71). In this sense, we can see how humans constantly fall back into the frustrated experience of finding 'an inexhaustible image of the truth of human life' (Tarkovski, 1996, 128). But how do these two concepts – truth and trust – interact? Truth, meaning 'the quality of being true', is often associated with 'veracity' or 'fidelity'. Trust, conversely, is about 'believing that someone is good and honest and will not harm you, or that something is safe and reliable' (Ramela *et al.,* 2022, 76), with related concepts such as belief, hope or legal arrangement. Trust is a 'relational concept' that describes a bond and an agreement between subjects, reality and its derived images. As societies, we have established a series of conventions to confirm the trustworthiness of images, known as the *regimes of truth*, which are always tied to power structures (Foucault, 1972, 131; Fontcuberta, 2016, 104). Our relationship of trust with the image does not depend on it since we trust the images, even if we cannot confirm their regime of truth (Canals in Visual Trust, 2023).

The curators of this exhibition allude to the vast number of images we see every day and ask themselves: Which ones do we choose to trust? Images do not exist in isolation; they are interconnected in a network, they influence each other. In a conversation with curator Gaëlle Morel (2022), she told me: 'Images do not live in a vacuum' but in a network.

According to the artist and researcher Leandro Allochis (2024), 'We want to believe in images despite what we have seen in them and their lies'. In other words, we know that images (mainly photographic ones) may be deceptive, but we are compelled to trust them. Yet why do we want to continue believing in them? Because a good visual report remains one of

the only reliable sources of reasonable truths (Newton, 2001, 29). In my focus group workshops at different secondary schools with teenagers to test and upgrade their visual literacy, I have seen that even the new Gen Z – people born between 1993 and 2001 – continue to trust in the image's truth-telling capacity despite the fact they were born in digitality and the proliferation of Fake News. The photograph remains a reliable device, a selfie for example, to become visible to the world. Concerning body image, Leandro Allochis speaks to us of 'the images that culture demands from the body.' Just as we demand images of the world, 'visual culture' – in its narrow sense of a globalised market of pictures aimed at consumption – *demands* images from us. This way, our perception of the world alters the photograph and vice versa. Regarding the lie in the image, Didi-Huberman warns:

> 'Never has it shown so many raw truths; never, however, has it lied to us so much by soliciting our credulity: never has it proliferated so much and never has it suffered so much censorship and destruction (...) the image has suffered so many tears, so many contradictory claims and so many crossed rejections, immoral manipulations and moralising execrations.' (Didi-Huberman *et al.,* 2018, 28–29)

When documentary photographers endeavour to uncover the truth, they often find themselves subject to public criticism regarding the acceptability of their practice. The public's expectation of photojournalism is to 'capture life with absolute, unfailing accuracy. Without distortions. And without losing the drama' (Newton 2001, 68). While these expectations uphold high standards and good practices, they also impose a significant burden of unreality and romanticisation on the medium and the profession. Our traditional documentary approach has fostered an early and widespread belief in the objective truth of photographic images. This idealism of positivism, which assumes that all observed objects can be captured objectively, underpins the documentary conception. Historically, photographers have been viewed more as documentarians of reality than as storytellers or journalists (Newton, 2001, 70–74). However, the undeniable truth is that photographers have evolved into 'visual interpreters' of the scene through their cameras, marking a significant shift in the profession.

The Photographer As A Mediator

The documentary photographer assumes the role of a covert artist deeply engaged with society, striving to amplify the voices of the silenced and bring to light the paradoxes within our seemingly logical culture. The essence of visual reportage, a term used to describe the practice of documenting real-life events and situations through visual media, is to encapsulate reality, not to fabricate art. However, art often blossoms as a consequence (Weber, 1974 in Newton, 2001, 66). Documentary photographers hunt for moments that unveil a 'deeper purpose' (Mayo, 1989 in Newton, 2001, 67). Some have delivered iconic images from this urge, igniting a collective visual consciousness that aids audiences in deciphering political discourses (Dahmen S. *et al.*, 2019, 18). For instance, migration or war are no longer faceless concepts but tangible realities that can be understood and, hopefully, transformed. The audience plays a crucial role in this transformation, actively engaging with and interpreting these images.

Samuel Aranda, *Archaeologists slowly unearth the remains of a person buried in a mass grave in Malaga's San Rafael cemetery,* Spain , 2008

The interpretive facet of the photographer has been central to the last lines of this text. Likewise, the photographer is also reality's mediator. In addition to satisfying a need for communication, the mediator adapts to the environment and strives to develop the viewer's skills, improve their autonomy and ensure that they are responsible for their own decisions (Mayor García, 2016, 587). Therefore, as a mediator, the photographer ensures their audience's ideological and interpretative independence. This independence is not just a result but also a process that requires an active audience who will, in turn, co-create the meaning of the image, thereby becoming an integral part of the photographic process (Good and Lowe, 2020, 4).

The photographer always offers a concrete representation rather than a portrait of the whole reality, dismantling the debate about *how to express that reality best*. Photographers are professional observers and present us with a possible story about the world. Only by relativising the importance of the individual perspective on information and valuing the contribution of the image as 'the best information available' (Newton, 2001, 71) – and not as an absolute truth – will we be able to activate the transformative potential of the image.

The Image As A Labyrinth

The labyrinth is a figure that I have been working on for some time, for its aptitude to produce a sense of intrigue and its fascinating faculty of both showing and hiding, just like photography and off-screen (Bernal, 2023), the space that is not visible in the frame at a given moment. The invisible surrounds the visible. The images of the series *Nostalgia for Mud* by Hugo Passarello Luna (2018) exemplify this dialectic between showing and concealing. Who are they shooting at, or where are those men going? Does that image affect us less because we know it is a re-enactment? The image can be understood as a labyrinth presented by the photographer to the viewer. Yet it is most of the time a covered labyrinth, which conceals its complexity under apparent simplicity. Deciphering it will take time in order to resolve an acceptable and enlightening truth. This exercise is based on our judgment, intuition, visual literacy, and experiences... as well as our willingness to explore possible realities and *to move from where we are located*. 'The truth is made, it is not photographed. Only images are photographed' (Ezquenazi on www.gaede.cat, 2008). Truth is a process of discovery and requires efforts. The labyrinth is a relevant object in the current era of ambiguity – like fake news – as it insightfully describes the innerworkings of the context of current news. It also reproduces the way we follow a trail to reach *our own truth*. Understanding and engaging with this concept can significantly advance documentary and visual journalism.

The image is a medium that questions and deconstructs knowledge. The uses, functions and meanings of images go beyond the semiotic theory of referentiality (Favero, 2018 in Canals, 2020). They transcend the culturally established correspondence between symbols or ideas and the objects they refer to. Therefore, images must be understood not only as *signs* or *representations* but as *social agents* or *living signs* (Mitchell, 2005, 30). Images are permeable and mutable, and their interpretation depends on the contexts through which they move. These contexts, or 'iconic paths' as Canals (2020, 9; 2023, 61) terms them, are the various settings, mediums, and audiences an image encounters in its journey. In each of these contexts, the image experiences an intensification; that is, its impact and public presence are promoted, and it becomes a medium of significant influence. When the photographer has created and mediated the image, it already has its own future, and the photographer will not always be able to manage its uses. Therefore, trusting the image and trusting the photographer can sometimes be altogether different processes and will depend on their contexts and uses.

Additionally, artificial intelligence mechanisms, particularly algorithms, affect the image's reliability. This introduces unpredictable trajectories for images (Favero, 2014 in Canals, 2020), potentially leading them to be perceived as counterfeit. The resulting lack of trust contributes to the post-truth discourse, where images are deemed incapable of presenting anything dependable. Didi-Huberman (2008, 59) encapsulated this idea with the phrase: 'The image is a butterfly', capable of mirroring reality, albeit fleetingly. This is made possible by its fluidity and impermanence, but at the same time, it raises doubts about its credibility. For an image to mediate between us and reality, our faith in it must be called into question. With regard to the authentic purpose of images, Benjamin called it the image's 'aura', for it is steeped in ritual, that is, the place of its original use value (Benjamin, 1978, 222–223).

Images' Transformative Power In History

Returning to the question of historicity – and alluding to the title of this exhibition – the image is never in the present since it is the trace of something that has already happened. However, the image is the product of past temporal relations that give rise to the present and are capable of 'making visible the most complex time relations that concern the *memory of history*' (Didi-Huberman, 2018, 38). The magnitude of history cannot be reduced to the present moment. Still, with its unique power, the image can make it visible, fascinating us with its ability to unravel complex time relations. Therefore, images are essential as active agents to construct and make us understand historical memory and truth. Images have the potential to shape future political scenarios. They are agents of political imagination, enabling us to envision and consider potential political futures.

Mounting an exhibition is a transformative way of going beyond the limitations and contradictions of each object it contains or the sociocultural events it carries within it. This transformative power allows the exhibition to show us the complexity and tensions of different historical periods, inspiring a new understanding of history and culture as a process of returns and shortcuts rather than a linear progression. In this regard, the exhibition project 'Dacian Reenactment' (2018) by the author Petrut Călinescu, with its modern colour photographs depicting wars fought in the 1st century BC, where traditional costumes are mixed with mobile phones, transforms our perception of the legacy of the Dacians in Romanian history and their role in shaping national identity. The documentary photographer and his images carry cultural and emotional memory, and their analysis can reveal the undercurrents of human history (Warburg in Didi-Huberman *et al.*, 2018), enlightening us with new insights. In contrast, the exhibition's 'Student in Hotoyskaya Secondary School testing vintage weapon after history lesson by reenactment group' (2013) by Roger Cremers is a clear example of Walter Benjamin's dialectical image (2005, 27, 928–929). It encapsulates problematic encounters and contradictions that, in turn, reveal profound truths about culture and society, permitting us to think of its transformative power.

The photographic archive is a fundamental part of protecting and reviving our cultures. This exhibition is also an archive of contemporary pieces. Archives reveal the actions and vestiges of the world. An exciting approach to the archive is its treatment as a 'lagoon' and its 'perforated nature' because of its isolation and the lack of some elements that break its continuity (Didi-Huberman *et al.*, 2018, 32). It should be noted that gaps are often the result of censorship and destruction, such as iconoclasm. We could say that re-enactment, a process of recreating past events or experiences, is the opposite of iconoclasm regarding the treatment of history and culture. In a symbolic sense, re-enactment 'celebrates' and reproduces while iconoclasm rejects and destroys. Just as iconoclasm attempts to erase the traces of our experience and culture, re-enactment remembers and revives. In the same way, we could understand the photographer as a re-creator of reality by encapsulating unrepeatable times.

'What do images speak of when they speak? What do images touch when they touch?' (Santamaría, 2018, 14). There is a connection between the image's fidelity to reality and its ability to evoke a tactile experience. Margaret

Roger Cremers, *A student in Khotivs'kyy Secondary School poses with a vintage rifle after a history lesson by a re-enactment group,* Ukraine, 2013

Atwood wrote, 'Touch comes before sight, before speech. It is the first language and the last, and it always tells the truth' (Atwood, 2001, 496). From the moment we are born, we learn to recognise and *see without seeing* through touch. This tactile experience allows us to find a safe place to take refuge, map our comfort zone, and explore new spaces and textures. Through his or her tactile experience of the landscape, the photographer captures and conveys this experience to us through their image. In the image 'Archaeologists slowly unearth the remains of a person buried in a mass grave in Malaga's San Rafael Cemetery' (2008) by Samuel Aranda, the author can converge distant time relationships – mass graves – with the present moment – those who watch over historical memory. This convergence of past and present through the image allows us to experience history tactilely as if we were touching the past. The photographer thus generates a new temporality that encapsulates the different moments of history. This image also provokes, through vision, the sense of touch, which we will never be able to achieve since this image is already part of the past. Nevertheless, our instinct to 'touch' reality remains latent, and we perfect techniques and technologies to get closer to the facts.

The Photographer as a Light's Catalyst

Although Agnès Varda (Varda and JR, 2017) comments in one of her films that Henri Cartier-Bresson was against using his quote, *the precise moment* remains an unavoidable concept when discussing images. This expression emphasizes the need for photographers to capture the unique, fleeting moment that defines the significance and impact of a scene. This is also the highest point of trust when connecting with an image because it is the original idea and allows us to engage with it. The precise moment refers to when the image 'ignites' (Didi-Huberman *et al.*, 2018, 27). At that moment, predicting the past becomes an exercise of finding in the image the decisive moment incandescence (Santamaría, 2018, 14). 'The image burns in its contact with reality. It ignites, it consumes us' (Didi-Huberman *et al.,* 2018, 27). 'Burning' can represent a paradox for the image, as a 'dysfunction or a chronic disease, a malaise of visual culture, and a poetics capable of including its own symptomatology' (Didi-Huberman *et al.,* 2018, 27). Photographers can show us the incandescence in each scene, which provokes us the most as an audience. At the same time, the photographer's mediation is not always freely performed. The impact of societal dynamics on their work, whether consciously or unconsciously, is profound. This realisation can enlighten the audience about the complexities of the art form. Also, we could say that our will and need for hyperreality – which is none other than our need to control nature and the world in general – is what consumes us. Hyperreality, the creation of images that, due to their detail and vividness, appear more 'real', 'perfect', or 'intense' than reality itself, sometimes involve manipulation or production in AI. Some viewers reject hyperreality due to visual overstimulation while others appreciate a more compelling or desirable image than what actually exists. Sometimes, this leads consumers of such images to disconnect perception and reality since they begin to accept these simulations as a basis for their visual consumption. Our trust depends increasingly on our need to control nature, trying to recover the perfect image of an object to trust it. When the photographer crosses the barrier between *mise en*

scène and the purely observational, it is also a reliable way of giving us his vision and freeing the image from what is traditionally understood as reportage. The image is released from the traditional mandates that see it as a reality scanner and the photographer as a mere recorder.

The image, an uncontrollable object, repeatedly demonstrates its capacity to transmute reality. It changes communication codes, impacts the reality it describes, and serves surprising purposes. It can shake, mobilise, and change our life experiences and how we understand and act in the world. The truth appears 'where the form reaches its most significant degree of light' or as we could see with the Benjamin term, 'aura', it allows truth to emerge in new ways of representation (Benjamin in Didi-Huberman, 2018, 26; Benjamin, 2008, 222–223). What is the relationship between darkness and trust in the image and the photographer? The intervals between pictures in an exhibition are spaces of emptiness and darkness. When we blink, the dark interval separates different visual experiences we could understand as recorded images. In the novel *Ode to Darkness* by Sigri Sandberg (2022), she explains the paradox of fearing a significant amount of light just like a tremendous amount of darkness. 'I wanted to see something in full sunlight during the day; I was fed up with the charm and comfort of the twilight', wrote Maurice Blanchot (Blanchot in Didi-Huberman *et al.,* 2018, 26). As in Plato's cave, the prisoner who escapes and sees beyond appearances is later discredited and rejected by those still chained inside. Not looking – *refusing to see* – is a decision, like trusting or distrusting an image. Audiences are active in their trust and distrust of images (although they are not always self-conscious about their decisions, mostly taken through cognitive habits). It is far more comfortable and convenient to remain in the darkness. The photographer acts as a *lantern*, a catalyst between light and darkness, and that is why he arouses contradictory feelings, from disapproval to adulation. He illuminates the darkness of those from whom the light has been taken away; he sees what no one wants or has time to look at. His mental, physical, and emotional resistance imprints on his or her images the reality we long for. This is not a romanticised reality but a reality of his or her own experience, and there is nothing more real and reliable.

Photography is a form of ethical and political mediation. The photographer, together with the photographed subject and the viewer, participates in a social contract that mediates the image and its meanings (Azoulay, 2012). As a mediator, the photographer has the power to decide which aspects of reality become a photograph and which do not, reflecting his or her ideological and aesthetic choices (Barthes, 1990; Berger, 2016). He or she then stands as a constructor of meanings where each photograph is a mediated piece of reality (Burgin, 1982; Sekula, 1982). The image is presented as a labyrinth to be solved, a complex puzzle that invites us to navigate the intricate web of multiple narratives and involves the complexity of positioning oneself (Deleuze, 2005). The content and reality do not change, but the status of the narrative and its social network do (Deleuze, 2005). An abstract idea 'woven' is a system called 'ideology' (Maillard, 2006), so we can understand that an image is a system of ideas woven by the photographer and later altered by those who will take part in its iconic path (Canals, 2020). We cannot go beyond our eyes but overcome our preconceptions and assumptions. When we transcend our mentality, the documentary image allows us to reach its *authentic purpose* and calls us an active audience. Through acts of visual trust, we can *activate* the image and its potential, and then the image becomes a transformation tool. The metamorphosis that the image can originate develops around conflict and dissensus – as opposed to consensus – (Rancière, 1996, 8–12), which is essential for democratising and redistributing power around the image and what it represents. Photographs cannot erect morality by themselves and cannot be the banner of an ideology. However, embedded in a polyhedral reality, they have the power to consolidate it and even collaborate in its birth, warns Sontag (1980, 23–25). This reflection invites us to explore the thin line between opinion and trust. Photography, in its essence, is a representation, a trace of what was, but never the pure transparency of the facts, which does not make it any less valid. It is an act of mediation, where the photographer selects, frames and aestheticises reality, transforming the living into a visual object, weaving his or her own version of the world.

For all this, it is necessary to trust in the photographer's mediating capacity and in his or her ability to awaken *the authentic purpose* latent in each image, activating its potential for reality. Reality, like a tangible whisper, comes to life when we learn to contemplate it and connect with its potential and essence.

'Would you like to write an article for this exhibition?' Simina Bădică kindly suggested. 'Of course' – I replied without hesitation – 'it will be a real opportunity to delve into important questions about memory, evidence, trust and imagination'. With its unique ability to delve into the question of historicity through documentary photography, this exhibition offers an intriguing and inspiring perspective. It is as if it would already answer the questions mentioned at the beginning of this text through its approach to the subject. This exhibition aims to understand that the documentary photographer is not a mere 'mirror' of a context but the critical piece that involves the observation, interpretation, capture and communication of the subjects and places he or she photographs. While this text ends, this exhibition begins. It does so with a series of portraits that look out at us and challenge us, inviting us to be part of their narrative. The people in these images seek reciprocity, that is, an exchange. For the relationship between the portrayed and the audience to be balanced, the photographer must be a mediator. Narrativity puts an end to the involvement of the spectator. May these images touch the minds and hearts of all visitors and thus continue to make photography an object of social transformation, of (re)imagining our past and projecting and writing our future. May this exhibition increase our will to see and enable us to leave the comfort of darkness.

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Michael Pappas, *Three men wearing ritual costumes during Carnival in Naousa*, Central Macedonia, Greece, 2019

CAMERA LUCIDA

PHOTOGRAPHERS' STORIES

ROGER CREMERS
Two Hungarian sportsmen from Komárom visit Auschwitz,
Poland, 2008

Both my grandfathers worked in the coal industry in the south of the Netherlands. In the 1970s, around the time I was born, the mines in the Netherlands closed down, which had a disastrous impact on the community. Listening to music about that period, made me want to know more about my roots. In 2001 and 2002, I took several trips to southern Poland to photograph the lives of coal miners.

During that time, I also visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. It made such an impression on me that I continued to visit it regularly. I wanted to explore this in greater depth for personal and professional reasons. I covered the 60th anniversary of the camp's liberation for the *NRC Handelsblad* newspaper.

In 2002, on one of my visits, I saw a group of American tourists taking a guided tour. As they stood in front of the crematoria entrance at Auschwitz I, I photographed a man wearing a T-shirt that read 'Laugh, it's an order!' This struck me as odd. Why did this man have to wear precisely this shirt on this particular day?

In late 2007, I came across this photograph again and found the image alienating and striking at the same time. It raised a lot of questions for me. What was happening there? Had the former concentration camp become a tourist attraction? In May 2008, I decided to investigate whether some people used the dark places of European history as casual day-trip destinations. I decided to spend a longer period at the former concentration camp.

In addition to the many visitors commemorating the victims and trying to understand something of our history, I saw many tourists, people having a day out. Large numbers of tourists were taken by tour buses from Kraków to Oświęcim. When it got too crowded at Auschwitz I, packed buses took people to Birkenau. Visitors photographed barbed wire and barracks, but mostly themselves and each other. As I photographed, I looked for the tourists. Eventually, I turned away from the crowds and tried to capture some serenity in these images.

One morning, whilst the site was teeming with visitors as it often is, I noticed a group of Hungarian handball players in their tracksuits. I followed them in search of a good vantage point. For a split second, the crowd opened up and I was facing two of the handball players as they took a picture of the barracks.

A photograph that for me tells the story.

NICK HANNES

Tourists bathe in 'Cleopatra's pool' among submerged ancient stone remains of the Apollo temple at Hierapolis, Turkey*,* 2012

This photo is part of the project *Mediterranean. The Continuity of Man*, which was published as a book in 2014. The series is a critical reflection on contemporary social themes in the Mediterranean region, such as urbanization, migration, mass tourism, crisis, conflict. The title refers, not without irony, to the successive civilizations that emerged throughout history along the Mediterranean coast, mutually influencing and enriching each other. To represent this historical stratification, I photographed many archaeological sites in Italy, Croatia, Lebanon, Tunisia and Libya, among others. Most of those sites are Roman; At the height of the Roman Empire, Emperor Augustus controlled the entire coastline of the *Mare Nostrum*.

Besides being centers for scientific and historical research, archaeological sites are also a source of income for the national treasury. A delicate balance must be maintained between preserving and commercializing valuable historical sites. Supervisors and pictograms usually remind tourists the basic rules of conduct during a visit. But this does not work everywhere.

The Greco-Roman thermal city of Hierapolis, located in Pamukkale, Turkey, is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Along with the adjacent white travertine terraces, the site attracts more than a million tourists annually, who are free to wander the vast area, featuring temple ruins, a necropolis and a well-preserved amphitheater. Those who buy an extra ticket get to paddle in the therapeutic hot waters of the *Antique Pool*, in which, according to tourist brochures, Cleopatra once bathed. There are changing rooms with lockers to safely leave one's belongings. Steps with steel handrails and ropes keep visitors from slipping over the submerged debris of the temple of Apollo that once stood there. Despite the pool's maximum capacity, UNESCO warns of biological pollution and erosion from the massive number of swimmers.

My visit to Hierapolis dates from the summer of 2012, just before the big influencer boom. Today, 'hot' destinations are chosen via Instagram and TikTok posts. And, in the battle for the most likes, travel becomes an instant backdrop for personal branding: social media has turned holiday-making into a self-promoting exercise. While the historical site takes on the allure of an amusement park, our cultural-historical consciousness gradually gives way to entertainment and consumerism.

SOFIA YALA
Grandfather's suitcase at the Monument of the Discoveries in Lisbon, Portugal, 2018

It was a bright, shiny day in Lisbon's suburbs, an ideal opportunity for a photoshoot with my friends and family. We brought a few meaningful objects from home – my grandfather's luggage and a selection of Angolan masks. These items, deeply rooted in history and layered with stories, served as metaphors for a timeless journey.

Our first destination was the colonial botanical gardens, which are characterised by intricately carved busts scattered throughout the gardens and marble busts depicting nameless, dark-skinned figures.

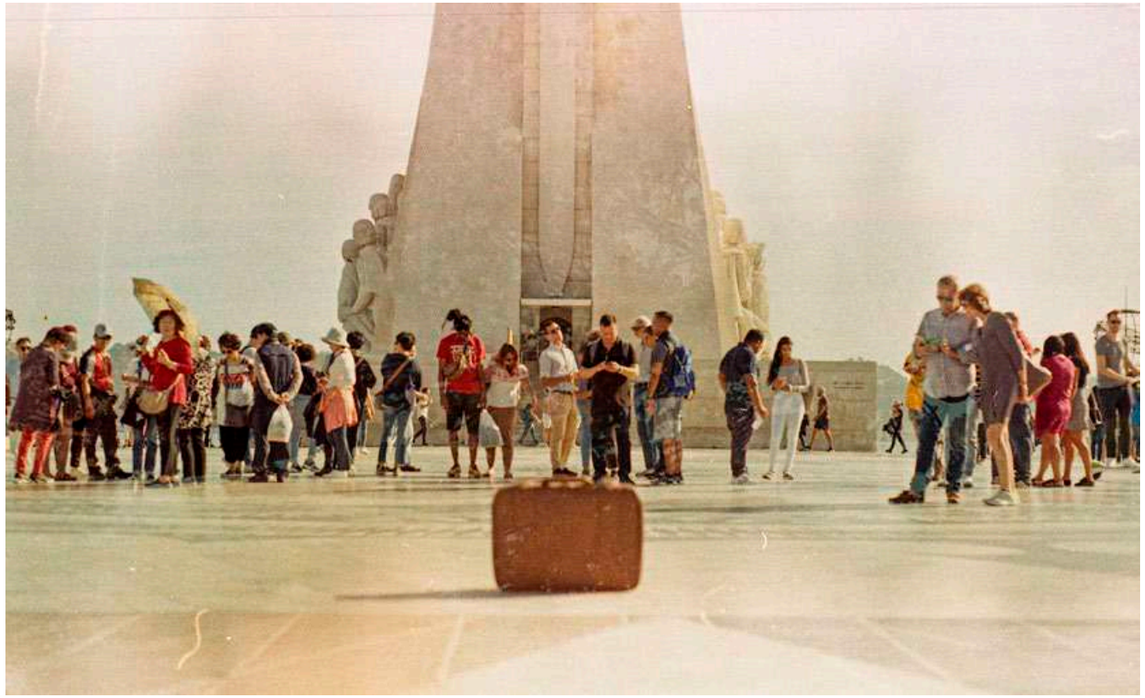
In this setting, I photographed my close friends and relatives alongside the piece of luggage, which contains in itself a history of travel across space and time. By photographing my kin amongst plants from around the globe, I wanted to create a contrast with the statues disseminated throughout the gardens.

The latter seemed to have been stripped of any agency, as if they were distancing themselves from the narratives they were meant to embody. Here, we paused to explore the questions this space provoked through visual experimentation.

Eventually, our journey led us to the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* ('Monument to the Discoveries'). The area was swarming with visitors, walking across the wavy floor and pausing to examine the shaped tiles on the ground. Many stopped to observe the compass rose and world map etched into the stone, which seemed to prompt quiet moments of reflection.

Absorbed in their movements and gestures, I could visualise this almost timeless choreography, illuminated by the golden light of a late summer afternoon. I placed the luggage alongside the monument and captured the scene in a single shot using my 35mm Minolta.

Through this image, I highlight what is conspicuously absent from these public spaces – by using personal and collective memories I evoke elements that can frame parallels. The postures and expressions of the visitors suggest a subtle questioning of these touristically sanitised monuments. However, my series aim to push the boundaries further, hoping for a truly decolonial cartographic process. This process reclaims public spaces by challenging their silences, interrogating their omissions, and inviting a sense of accountability.



VÉRONIQUE ELLENA
Les Invisibles : Santi Luca e Martina,
Rome, Italy, 2011

In the spring of 2008, when I was a resident at the Villa Medici, I went out at dawn to take photographs for my *Roma Alba* series. In front of the Church of San Luca and Martina, I saw the shape of someone lying at the foot of the huge, closed door. It was a man, asleep, rolled up in a blanket of the same colour as the stone on which he lay. The juxtaposition of beauty and tragedy struck me. It became the first photograph in my *Les Invisibles* series.

I feel real empathy for those who live on the fringe of society, are different or are alone. Although I am not in that situation, I have a deep compassion towards them. I think it is important to talk about homelessness – it is essential, not only on a political and artistic level but also from a social and human perspective.

This project is about looking at what we shy away from, often considered intolerable, and observing without pity or morbid fascination.

In terms of technique, I still use a 4×5 large-format analogue camera.

And I use very long exposures. The suspended time creates the image.

It allows for something special to happen. The subject takes centre stage in a photograph that is not documentary but artistic.

I shoot at dawn. It is a magical time of day, both for the physical quality of the light and for what it evokes symbolically.

Everything is clear, calm and fresh at dawn, revealing that which is usually hidden. For the homeless, it is when the dangers of the night come to an end, a time to dream and rest. Rolled up in a blanket, the slumbering body of a homeless person, vulnerable and abandoned, evokes the Shroud of Turin or a draped statue from antiquity.

When people first look at the images they see the buildings. The idea is for them to think they are looking at architectural photography, only to discover on second glance a sleeping homeless person. So I look for places of sublime beauty (often churches) that are in reality the places these people call home. The images contain many details that echo the individual's decline: closed doors, flaking walls, and so on. The subjects themselves, lying there, resemble statues that have toppled from their pedestal. The images show how little they mean to society.

It was a very rewarding project. I was surprised by and learnt a lot from people living on the streets. Working together, we had to overcome our preconceived ideas and push back our fear of 'the other'. I found beauty and elegance where I least expected it. I encountered free-spirited, unbreakable people, who showed great humanity.

Text from an interview at Villa Medici with art historian Mickaël Szanto.

SMIRNA KULENOVIĆ
Our Family Garden,
Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2023

Standing atop Zlatište on a bright August morning in 2021, I watched 100 women, clad in red, approach through the golden grass. This moment was surreal, almost mythological, and yet deeply personal – a culmination of a journey that began long before that day.

Zlatište is a hill overlooking Sarajevo; a wound carved into my family's history. My childhood home is just a five-minute walk from the trenches where my grandfather fought during the war, defending our city and family. This was also the first place my grandmother brought me to for a picnic, a brief oasis in a childhood overshadowed by the violence of war. Yet, as the years passed, Zlatište turned into a ghost town – an abandoned place, filled with landmines, and avoided, crushed by the trauma of war and death. For decades, no one from my family or community dared to return.

I needed to bring this land out of its silence. In 2021, I returned to Zlatište, inviting my mother and grandmother. Together, we prepared the soil to plant calendula seedlings – flowers my grandmother once used to heal my grandfather's war wounds when there was no medicine.

I took a photograph of the three of us to remember this moment, and this photo became an invitation. We called on other women to join us, women who had their own ghosts to confront. To my astonishment, over 600 women reached out, sharing their stories of loss, hope, and healing. We could only welcome 100, as the ritual was completely self-produced and done without any funding.

The performance was marked by silence – an unspoken sacredness that enveloped us. As we planted 1000 calendula seedlings into the soil that once absorbed so much suffering, the air felt charged, as though the earth itself welcomed our gesture. Women who had lost family in these very trenches were entering them for the first time, transforming the space from a grave into a garden. It felt like a choreography of care and reciprocity between us and a patch of earth we once called home, healing a scarred land. *'They tried to bury us, they didn't know we were seeds,'* my grandmother whispered to me during the performance, reciting an ancient poem whose roots stretch as mysteriously and deeply as the land itself – across all the Mediterranean soils that hold the weight of both violence and hope.

And the land answered our silent gesture, reminding me that even in a world on fire, resilience takes root and quietly begins to grow.

FAÑCH LE BOS
Self-storage,
Brussels, 2024

My art is primarily concerned with the relationship between physicality and technology. In an increasingly digitalised world, where making even the slightest effort is shunned, how can our physical body develop? Is it still essential?

I present here an image from my *Dé-corps* series.

'Dé-corps' – literally 'de-body' but pronounced the same way as 'décor' in French – is a play on words borrowed from the science-fiction writer Alain Damasio to allude to the fact that humans today are less and less invested in their bodies.

We live in a world where the combination of an obsession with comfort and the omnipresence of technology is drowning our bodies in a kind of emptiness and uselessness. We are forgetting how to use our instincts; we are losing our intuitive, primal ways of interacting. In other words, we are intent on our own obliteration.

In this piece, I pay tribute to the disinvested body, which is abandoned and stored away, should we ever need to reinvest it one day. In a way, I am archiving the body.

Each of my images starts with a place, a setting. I must find the right space to experiment in before I start. I am always on the lookout for strange, tidy, almost sanitised spaces (like a museum storeroom?) to disrupt. I am often alone, with my camera on a tripod and remote control in hand, looking for the right contortion, the right movement.

A staged performance, improvised and aimed at creating a tense atmosphere. In search of absurdity, I let my own body express itself against the grain of its environment.

HUGO PASSARELLO LUNA
Nostalgia for Mud,
France, 2018

In July 2017 in Iraq, during the last days of the Battle of Mosul, I saw a young man carrying two large, black plastic bags, helped by some other people. He had just crossed the front line. The sounds of air strikes and fighting blared all around us, unrelenting. I went towards him, in the rubble of what was once one of the oldest cities in the Middle East. The putrid smell coming from the plastic bags was enough to guess what he was carrying. 'It's my mum and dad', he said, pointing to the bags. 'An air strike killed them two days ago.' In the stifling heat, the bodies had rapidly decomposed.

Before I could say anything else, he asked me, 'Where are you from?' His face lit up when I answered Argentina, and he said, smiling, 'Batistuta!', referring to Gabriel Batistuta, a famous Argentinian football player from the 90s. Unfortunately for him, he had come upon one of the only Argentinians who was not obsessed with football.

When I tried to ask more questions about life under ISIS and the war, he interrupted again, 'Ortega! Also very good,' this time speaking about Ariel Ortega, another Argentinian football star from my childhood. The young man, whose name I would never know, clearly did not want to talk about the battle, ISIS or the death of his parents. He preferred talking football.

A few hours later, I took the plane home to Paris. As a correspondent in France, I was also working on stories surrounding the 100th anniversary of the First World War. Between 2016 and 2018, I observed re-enactors across France keeping that war's memory alive while simultaneously reporting on an active war. What were the French – or at least some of them – doing to remember a war that had affected their great-grandparents? How in the future would Iraqis remember ISIS's war against them?

For this project, I chose to work with a device used during the First World War: the Kodak Vest Pocket, known also as the 'soldiers' Kodak' because of its popularity among the troops. Re-enacting historical events teaches us much more about the present than the past. Re-enactments are a reflection of our current doubts, desires, fears and frustrations.

Faced with an unclear future and a disorienting present, we can sometimes take refuge in, and draw renewed energy from, the certainties of the past. Playing the role of a historical hero can give meaning to our daily lives.

Our collective memory is constantly being re-written. In a century's time, who knows what will be re-enacted?

PETRUȚ CĂLINESCU
A girl attends a Dacian re-enactment event,
Romania, 2018

In 2018, after concluding a photography project focused on Bucharest's chaotic expansion, I found myself seeking to escape the daily grind of traffic jams. I needed a new narrative, one that took me far from the capital's suffocating strangeness, into nature, yet still resonating with the story's human touch.

An idea began to take shape, rooted in older concepts I had toyed with but never fully developed. I decided to explore Romania's foundational myth – the national narrative that tells of the Romans' conquest of the Dacians after a protracted war. According to widely accepted historical accounts, the mingling of Roman colonists and local tribes gave birth to our nation. Yet, there remains a shroud of mystery around the Dacians, who left little behind in the way of written records, as they did not have a written language. Our knowledge comes mainly from Roman sources, where they are depicted as a defeated people, the vanquished.

Enter the reenactors – passionate individuals who bring history to life, recreating and performing the stories of old for a modern audience. This phenomenon, though relatively obscure in Romania, took root over a decade ago, imported from the West, where the demand for authentic barbarian performers found fertile ground.

Documentary photography became my passport to this world. I dove into the reenactment scene with little foreknowledge, discovering a community where passions run deep. The transformation of these individuals begins long before the public performances and lingers until they return to their modern lives. For them, as for me, reenactment is an escape – a chance to trade the city for a weekend in nature, to sleep in tents under a clear sky, and to slowly roast a barbecue. It is not a bad life, being a barbarian for a few days. In fact, the nearby Roman camp often looks on with a hint of envy at the revelry on the Dacian side.

Yet, it is not all fun and games. The reenactors approach their roles with a seriousness that borders on reverence. The Romans, ever disciplined, maintain a strict, professional demeanor, must stay organized and even do push-ups while the Dacians laugh and crack open cans of beer, carefully disguised and poured into animal horns – a staple for nearly every Dacian. The reenactment extends beyond the battlefield, with entire families joining in. Women and children play their parts, though they often take a backseat to the simulated battles that captivate the audience. For many of them, war reenactment seems to be, as it is for me, a way to desert for a while their crowded cities and daily routine.

ROMANE ISKARIA
Jaré, Brussels,
Belgium, 2022

I take it all in.
The words and colours, voices and echoes,
fabrics and materials, the arid air,
eyes bright, brimming with emotion, laughter and jokes,
the smells of the city.
As Ghazel recounts
this precious memory
of them sleeping huddled together on a rooftop on the hottest nights.
I find it incredibly moving.
This recollection from Malkie in Syria.
I decide to recreate it.
In a black box. A staging.
I position the camera above them.
Carpets unrolled with fingertips,
like precious offerings.
Sheets unfolded with four hands.
A mosquito net forming a transparent veil.
Each gesture telling part of their story.
My friend and her family's hometown.
Four of her cousins agreed without hesitation to take part in the shoot:
Natali, Gianna, Jerjis and Gabriel.
To recreate a simple moment from everyday life as a dance
I choreograph.
It all starts taking shape.
They take me there with their stories.
Through their memories, I explore their city:
I pass a street corner, an electric cable… enveloped by a fragrant air.
Creating a symbolic pile from all these sensations.
There was always a heap of fabrics in a corner of the house.
We repeat this ritual over and over until we get it right.
Everything flows perfectly – I barely have to direct them.
After two intense days of filming, we are done.
23 minutes on film. Relief.
I turn off the camera.
Our bodies are weary,
we lie down on this makeshift bed.
And burst out laughing.
Here, in Brussels, Belgium.

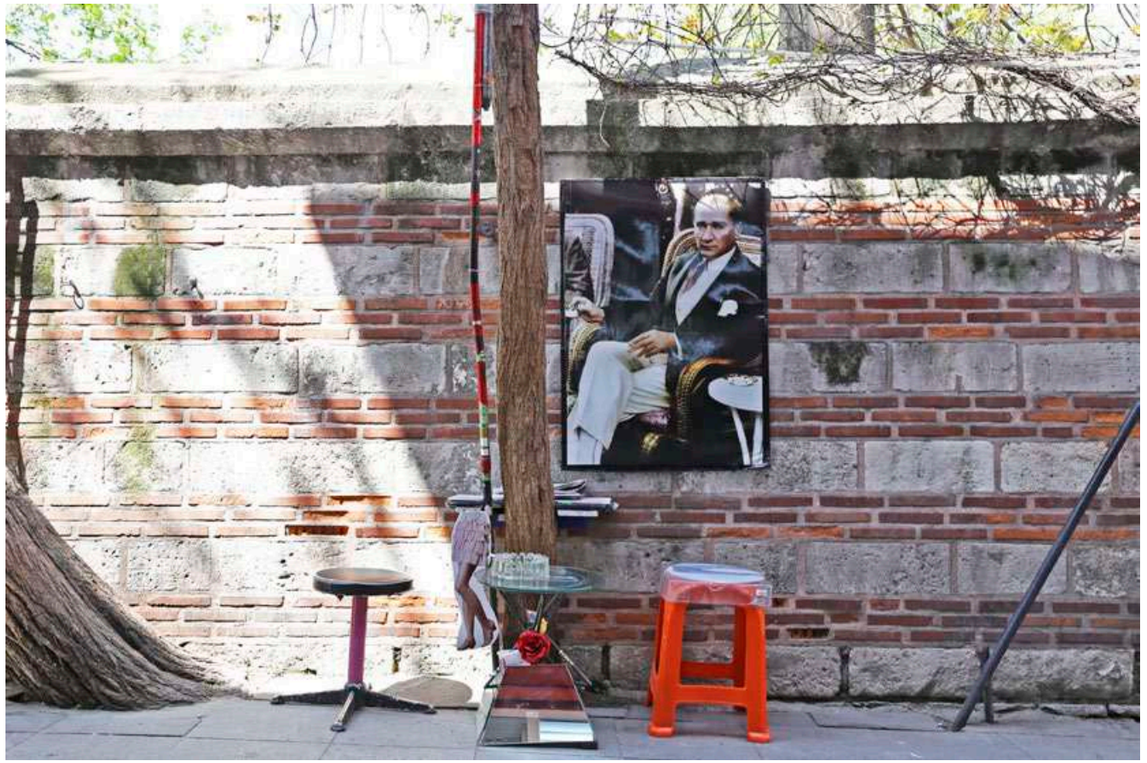
MINE DAL
A portrait of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk hanging on a mosque wall in Kadiköy, Everybody's Atatürk, Istanbul, Turkey, 2013

Photography projects usually emerge from specific ideas, beliefs or goals. Then the search for a suitable topic begins. My work for this book followed a very different process. I would never have expected that it would become a long-term project spanning seven years.

In 2013, I chanced upon a striking street scene in Istanbul, my hometown. It resembled a theatre set: several stools and a small table were propped against the wall of a mosque, and a famous picture of Atatürk was hanging on the wall. I could not walk past without capturing this scene with my camera. In an instant, the way I looked at the city was altered. From that moment on, everywhere I went, my eyes were searching for Atatürk in everyday life. No sooner would I set foot in a bakery, restaurant or greengrocers than I would be on the lookout for Atatürk. Scouring out this unique phenomenon gripped me to such an extent that I soon decided to expand my search to every region of Turkey – from Anatolian villages to coastal or mountain regions and major cities. During my travels across the country, I focused on the presence of Atatürk in everyday life. I made a conscious decision not to include official institutions or buildings, given that his image can often be found in these places, mainly due to government requirements. But a hairdresser, a butcher or a tailor displaying such a picture represents a voluntary act borne out of respect or even adoration.

Over the years, I have come across scenes similar to the one that inspired this project back in 2013. In 2017 and 2019, I passed by this exact spot again. What was surprising was that every time I visited, all the 'props' changed. Different chairs were lined up against the mosque wall; clearly a different seller had moved in. But one element remained consistent and unaffected by change, the image of Atatürk, which still hung on the wall.

The founder of modern Turkey, who transformed the country into a republic and set it on a path towards parliamentary democracy, died in 1938. But almost a century later, it seems he has in no way been forgotten – as Atatürk's image is found almost everywhere. His image has lost none of its potency and his memory clearly lives on. When people have his signature tattooed on their chest or arm, it is a sign, now more than ever, not only of veneration, but also of protest – a symbol of a modern democratic Turkey open to the world. After seven years, I had collected sufficient documentary evidence to show this strong belief in Atatürk amongst the majority of the Turkish population.



PIOTR MAŁECKI
Workers at the GZUT bronze foundry assemble a statue of Pope John Paul II, Gliwice, Poland, 2011

The process of making the big, heavy figure of Pope John Paul II amazes me the most.

Out of nothing, the individual body parts of the saint's icon emerge, minted in fresh bronze that looks like gold.

Here comes a leg. A second leg, a hand, a second hand, a torso. Finally – a head.

Suddenly, he stands, slightly bent with age. Huge and imposing.

I am looking at this figure, just assembled at the GZUT factory in Upper Silesia. Me – small, him – big.

I cannot help asking myself – Was he a good man? Was he an honest man? I certainly thought so when he was alive and visiting Poland on his pilgrimages. I was also mesmerised by the power he had over the people.

Now I am confused, not sure any more. He was a very controversial man, loved by many, hated by many.

While making this picture story, I witnessed the production of John Paul II figures time and again.

Small popes, made of clay or plastic in little workshops, to be sold at tourist stalls near churches. (A pretty good business, I was told.)

Midsize popes, sold as stand-alone figures that some religious people like to put in their gardens.

Larger-than-life pope figures, made to impress the faithful in front of churches and in Poland's squares.

Today the employees of the GZUT factory have finished their bronze pope. The next orders on the production line are parts of ships and mining pumps, valve bodies and various machine components.

MICHELA CANE
Chi Ama Non Dimentica,
Belgium, 2024

On the night of 25 November 2020, the Maradona mural in Via de Deo at the heart of Naple's Spanish Quarter became a scene of collective mourning. The mural, which dominates a small square once plague by drug trafficking, spontaneaously drew Neapolitans together to mourn the Argentinian hero, 'Pibe de Oro' or *Golden Boy*. Not only did Diego Armando Maradona lead Naples to victory in two football championships, he also restored pride and dignity to a city often mocked and discriminated against.

Naples' inhabitants identified and revered Maradona as a mystical figure. An idol but also one of their own, someone who was cunning but showed great solidarity, someone who, like them, had had to fend for himself. They saw in him a kind of redemption, of freedom, something about him just worked, when everything else around him seemed to have stalled. Even in his failings – his grey areas – there was a greatness with which they could identify. This image, oscillating between saint and rebel, became sacred , precisely for his humanity. And the mural in Via de Deo really is his tomb; it is where Diego's spirit lives on forever.

My photographs explore human relationships and social perceptions, from both a personal and universal perspective. In approaching the Neapolitan community, I aimed to reveal his deep and sacred bond with a people marked by inequality but who have rediscovered hope and desire. Maradona's hand is perceived as the hand of God, not only for the famous goal of 1986 but also because it is the hand that revealed an entire city to Europe and the world. Neapolitans cherish his memory and preserve it as a collective memory. It is this memory I sought out: the symbol of a rebellion and resilience born in 1984, the year he arrived in Naples, which has remained alive in the generations that witnessed it and has been perpetuated amongst the younger generations.

JAN KEMPENAERS
Spomenik #17 (Kolašin),
Montenegro, 2009

After the Bosnian war in 1995, I travelled to Sarajevo to take panoramic photographs of the stricken city. At the main library, I photocopied various pages of an art encyclopaedia that listed monuments honouring the fallen of World War II (*Spomenici*). On my return home, I archived the article pages and only 'rediscovered' them in the early 2000's.

I got back in touch with my friend Zlatko, who lived in Zagreb. There, at the local library, we searched for information about *Spomenici*. We found a map from 1975 with small drawings of the monuments. Using this as a basis, our search began.

One of the tiny drawings of the town of Kolašin showed a monument with turrets that looked very much like open bird beaks. Upon arrival, it turned out to be not only a sculpture but also a cultural centre. I immediately took a photo and wondered what was behind the bird beaks. Zlatko asked an employee from the centre about this. It was meant to be a theatre room, but the entrance door had been locked up for years and the key was nowhere to be found. The employee suggested that we return later in the day. Eventually, he found the key and opened the door for us.

The room was still in its original condition, but just as neglected as the outside. The musty smell was unbearable and bushes were growing out of the chairs.

I returned to Kolašin in early 2024. As for the building, time seemed to have stood still. It was still in the same ruined state. Only the entrance door had been replaced with one that did not match the building style. There are plans to renovate the building and turn it into a contemporary art museum. I close my eyes and try to imagine it, but I would rather keep them open and take pictures.

NIELS ACKERMANN, SÉBASTIEN GOBERT
The Last Lenin monument in Kyiv region,
Horbani, Ukraine, 2016

In our quest for toppled statues of Lenin, we heard of the village of Horbani in the Poltava oblast. The head of the village council was willing to meet us and to tell us the story of their Lenin statue. More than 2,500 statues of Lenin were toppled in Ukraine from late 2013 to 2015. Yet it took rather determined detective work to locate these monuments and – most importantly –some tenacity to encourage people to talk and to express their feelings about the decommunisation process.
And so off we went on yet another car trip across Ukraine to meet this time the head of the Horbani village council, Vassily Vovtchanivsky. He was very welcoming and explained to us that he had taken good care of the statue while it had stood in the centre of the village.

Along with several residents, he was shocked that 'some rowdy youths' had damaged it. Also, instead of beheading Lenin, they had beheaded the Young Pioneers that stood next to him as part of the monument. Why the kids and not the old man?

Due to the May 2015 decommunisation laws, Vassily Vovtchanivsky was required to remove the statue from the public space. Instead of storing it in a municipal warehouse or simply destroying it, a few local residents hid it somewhere in the forest. Vassily Vovtchanivsky was not officially involved in this move, although he knew about it, he said. He brought us to the location.

The monument was placed under the trees, next to a table and some improvised chairs. The Bolshevik leader stood in a teaching attitude next to the beheaded Young Pioneers. The metal-coloured paint on the statue had worn off. The set-up was pleasant enough for the place to become the local hangout spot. According to our village council guide, locals and young people from neighbouring villages come and chill out, play cards and have drinks by the statue. Somehow the statue had retained its central position in the life of the local community. Vassily Vovtchanivsky did not display any affection towards Lenin as a historical figure. Yet he turned a blind eye to this 'little secret' of living with a hidden Lenin-in-the-woods, but he had his reasons. 'I tolerate it because it's like a safeguard', he told us. 'You know how things are in Ukraine. Over in Kyiv, governments come and go. Maybe the next lot will want to put Lenin back. So we're keeping it'.

In fact, we encountered the very same statue in the summer of 2023 in a makeshift open-air museum in Kyiv. Vassily Vovtchanivsky seemed to have gained some trust in the stability of the Ukrainian state institutions – against all odds.

RIA PACQUÉE
Washing Away the Past,
Ostend, Belgium, 2022

There is the sun.
There is a broken light.
There is me going blind, looking into the sun.
There is an exhibition to be made.
There is a statue of the past.
There is a history that is bad.
There is sand and dust.
There is the circle and there is the line.
There is the wind that freezes my hands.
There is a flood.
There is the sound of the ocean.
There is the smell of sea in the air.
There is the ebb and flow.
There is a sleepless night.
There is the noise on television of bullets and bombs.
There is blood on the pavement.
There is the shaking of the earth
There is a blackout.
There is a riot.
There is the pixel.
There is death.
There is text.
There is where people rest.
There is the west and there is the east.
There is me walking in between.

ANNA SAFIATOU TOURÉ
Herbarium of the Congolese department of the Royal Greenhouses of Laeken, Bruxelles, 2020

Born in Bamako, I left Mali for France at such a young age that my memories are not very clear. This frustration fuelled my desire to understand migration, the relationship between two lands, two cultures, and between the colonised and the colonisers, past and present. It has also enabled me to perceive and decode the *exoticism* that sub-Saharan Africa continues to evoke in our collective imagination.

The Herbarium of the Congolese department of the Royal Greenhouses of Laeken is a fictitious reconstruction of what the herbarium of the Congo greenhouse in Laeken might look like. This project is primarily a reaction to the fact that the site is inaccessible throughout most of the year. These greenhouses, considered to be among the most beautiful and important in the world, are only open to the public for three weeks each year due to their proximity to the royal residence. My repeated requests to visit them as part of my project were all refused, and my letter to the King of the Belgians naturally went unanswered.

Imagining a herbarium to replace the one that might already exists becomes a politicised act. It expresses an urgent need to consider the greenhouse as an educational space, and the plants as living, exiled witnesses of a dark chapter in history. Making up such a plant collection is both an act of satire and a tribute. The plants are named in Lingala, a Bantu language mainly spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and in the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville). The plants are photographs of artificial plants, which have then been cut up and reassembled. The descriptions, inspired from authentic documents, have also been invented. Only the names of the botanists mentioned are real, anchoring the work in a liminal space, between documentary and fiction.

The *Caldarium* video, shown alongside the herbarium, offers an immersion into the heart of some of the Greenhouses of Laeken (The Pier, The Congo Greenhouse and The Winter Garden). This iconic building of Belgian heritage was created in 1873 by Alphonse Balat for King Leopold II. The aim is not to highlight the exceptional nature of this building, but rather to question its political status throughout history, as well as the one it still enjoys today.

MARC WILSON
The Last Stand – Cramond Island, Firth of Forth,
Scotland, 2012

Photographed between 2010 and 2014, 'The Last Stand' series is made up of 86 images and it documents some of the physical remnants of the Second World War on the coastlines of the British Isles and Northern Europe.

The work I make is bound up in the subjects of memory and history. A way to talk about the present by sharing stories from the past. The locations in these landscapes, although quiet and subdued contain the memories and stories of events full of tragedy and trauma. My long term bodies of work have looked at subjects from the second world war in 'The Last Stand' and the first world war in 'Remnants', to the Holocaust in 'A Wounded Landscape – bearing witness to the Holocaust' and the current invasion of Ukraine in 'The Land is Yellow, the Sky is Blue'.

For me, the purpose of photography is to promote discussion, to tell stories. To shout without screaming, to share without forcing an opinion, but to be honest and not shy from the truth and the horrors of both history and the present day, both on a country wide and individual level.

My family story, both in the past and the present is bound up in these events so I feel a duty to talk about them, and as a photographer to find a visual language to discuss these events that engages the audience and promotes thought and discussion within themselves. To show the humanity of the people whose lives I am sharing.

On the east coast of Scotland, near the capital city of Edinburgh, an anti-submarine barrier, known as 'the dragon's teeth', was built during the Second World War along the causeway between the village of Cramond and Cramond Island. Its purpose was to support the defences of Rosyth, in particular against midget submarines and E-boats, the fast attack torpedo boats of the *Kriegsmarine*.

Arranged in a long row, these pyramid-shaped concrete pylons – up to 3 metres high and spaced at 1.5-metre intervals – have vertical grooves in their sides into which were slotted reinforced concrete panels. On top of the pyramids were fixing rings for large-diameter steel wire and anti-submarine nets.

This is one of the 143 locations and 37 000 km I traveled in making this work, researching each location for light and tide times, accessibility and composition. Then I photographed alone, often with just one or two sheets of large format film, almost always at first light, under subdued skies. I felt no need to add drama and contrast to these locations that were already brimming with history and memory, bound up in the tragedy of war.

VALÉRIE LERAY

Lieux sans Nom, Places with no Name: Mulsanne Golf Course, 2006 / Internment Camp for Roma 1940–1942, France, 2006

Mulsanne's '24-hour' golf course lies in the department of the Sarthe, the gateway to western France. It is close to the Le Mans' motor racing circuit where the famous 24-hour race is held. It was here, on the site of the golf course, that one of the largest concentration/internment camps was built during the Second World War to house Romani People and 'travellers' and later Jews. Historians researching the subject recorded its location on maps. For decades, however, those maps were ignored by the French Government, which has yet to fully accept responsibility for what happened to the Roma and traveller community.

The golf course is located halfway along the route I took during the summer of 2006 to visit the sites of former camps to see how they had changed and the contrast between then and now. My journey began in the department of Loiret, at the former site of the Jargeau camp, where my grandfather was interned as a child, which is now the grounds of a secondary school. Like most survivors, my grandfather did not talk about the camp. It was not that they wanted people to forget, rather it was because no-one wanted to listen; their tongues were tied by a sense of shame due to a deep-seated trauma, added to a visceral fear of reprisals or of history repeating itself.

I visited the department's archives to examine documents and photographs collected by historians. These maps of 'silenced territories', as I call them, are the main sources for my photographs, making my project an act both of recollection and of civic duty. In this sense too, my photography is not merely a simple recording of what exists.

What can be shown of these places that might document the history of invisible ruins void of any traces? How can these traces represent something? What should be my approach as a photographer?

I wandered on that golf course for a long while. I spend a lot of time walking around these sites before taking photographs. I build up a mental image. I look for the right angle. At Mulsanne, I decided to take the photograph from the terrace of a building. Like all the other photographs in the *Lieux sans nom* [*Place with no Name*] series, there are no people in it. The images take stock of a situation and are not intended to provoke an emotion. I want these photographic compositions to celebrate absence through the tranquillity of the sites, to become a distinct concept, to become monuments, a reference to the work of artists Esther and Jochen Gerz. Only the caption tells us that there were internment camps for Nomads there during the Second World War. The horror is revealed in the accompanying text, making people look twice at the photographs: first at what is there, and a second time to search for what is hidden.

JULIEN SALES
Glacier, The Last Image,
2019–2021

The mountains are no place to go in autumn; after the summer heat, just before the first snow, they crumble. The big freeze creeps over the landscape like a sly, slow-moving predator. With every passing year the heatwave pushes it further up the mountain. The cold rock warms up.

On this day, I head down to the very end of the glacier. I do not expect to see anything, for the valley is a dead end and void of light. I had set out with the intention simply of enjoying the mountain, without overthinking it; I had no smartphone or artistic plans in mind. Yet, there I am, on the lookout for different perspectives, shapes, light and atmosphere, constantly being drawn off the trail. I move slowly and carefully, giving myself the time to switch off the small voice in my head and damp down my climber's ego. Strapped across my back I carry a small box containing a sample of ice I collected during the night. At last I reach the valley floor; I am surrounded by rock faces. From below they are all the more impressive. I feel like an explorer, going where no one else dares. This place bears traces of when the Earth began and everything was first created. It is still yet constantly moving, almost as if it were on a different time-scale to our own. Negotiating the crevasses and scree, I am aware that all it takes is one false step and down I would fall. This is where I decide to take the photo.

Time passes as quickly as the ice melts. I take out the moulds for the lens and the camping stove. From the large block of ice, I carve out a thin and delicately fragile piece. I slide it onto my camera as it continues to melt. Then I get to work in this place of creation. I press the shutter again and again. Time passes and I find myself, here in the middle of nowhere with a lens that has almost completely melted, producing nothing but whiteout images.

buried under thin layers of glacial flour,
the earth gives way to ice
a small stream of meltwater escapes and meanders down like a snake
ahead, layers of rock and ice
piled up in an unstable structure
form the entrance to a kind of maze
welcoming those looking to lose themselves
a block suddenly breaks free, shattering the deafening silence
the sun pierces through the sole cloud forming a white stain in
the vast blue sky
13deg3700m

MICHAEL PAPPAS

A woman in a local wedding dress from Amfissa in her family's restaurant, with portraits of her grandparents, Mitos, The Thread of Greece, 2022

In this photograph I knew that the young woman would be wearing her grandmother's wedding dress and that I wanted her to be photographed in her grandparents' restaurant (*taverna*).

Although it was already a striking combination, I knew it would take more than a costume to create a powerful photograph.

The minute I saw the space I knew that she had to stand on the table, in her traditional wedding attire, to give her an appropriate air of splendour and to honour the space she was in.

On the restaurant walls there were two framed pictures with old portraits of her grandparents, and I decided to include them in my composition.

I think this was necessary to bridge time and connect with the family ancestry and create a visual link between the bride and her grandparents. At the same time, it would help foster ideas and interpretations.

I took two chairs and placed them side by side, in front of the table, at my model's feet. I positioned the framed portraits so that they were facing the camera, as I would have positioned the grandparents themselves had they been there in the flesh.

Now, the picture was complete. The young woman is shown standing in the centre of the room, as if on the stage of an ancient theatre, and right beneath her are her ancestors. While the latter are closer to the ground, the woman is towering above, still a long way off from one day returning to the dust.

At the time, I remember that I simply wanted the young woman, dressed in her grandmother's wedding dress, to be higher up than her grandparents and right in the middle of the room.

I did not want to add or remove anything else because I wanted to create an image that was open to interpretation rather than an image that gave clear-cut answers.

ELIZAR VEERMAN
Simon and Frits Nussy, members of the first generation of the Moluccan community in the Netherlands, 2021

On 15 April 2021, I took the portrait of Simon and Frits Nussy, one of the key images of the *Moluccan Legacies* series, a series that captures four generations of the Moluccan community in the Netherlands. Simon and Frits Nussy arrived on different ships at the port of Rotterdam. Although we took their portrait there, they had not returned to the docks in over 70 years. To visually commemorate this silenced part of Dutch colonial history – the first generation's arrival in Rotterdam – and the personal stories of Simon and Frits Nussy, it was essential to have the brothers wear their Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL) uniforms on the docks. We chose to take the photograph specifically on the Lloydkade in the port of Rotterdam, because it was on those docks that around 12 500 Moluccan people arrived in 1951 after the decolonisation of Indonesia. A monument is to be built at that location, to commemorate our grandparents' migration stories.

On the day of the shoot, it was quite cold and stormy, so we only had one chance to take the portrait of the men together. As a documentary photographer, I work with a heavy analogue medium format camera, which means that I am always photographing from a lower perspective because of the camera's weight and the fact that I have to look into the camera's viewfinder from above to decide on the composition. This results in a photographic perspective that makes my subjects proud and powerful as they gaze back into the lens, seeking eye contact with its viewers.

As a Moluccan-Dutch photographer and third-generation Moluccan myself, I am very thankful, to this day, that I was able to take the portrait of the two brothers from the first generation of the Moluccan community in the Netherlands. Today there are very few people still alive from that first generation and, unfortunately, both Simon and Frits Nussy have passed away since we took the portrait in 2021. It reminds me, as a photographer, that visual documentation is essential for preserving and archiving stories that remain untold in mainstream narratives. By exhibiting the portrait of Simon and Frits Nussy in the House of European History, together with other works from the *Moluccan Legacies* series, I hope to visually represent some of the stories and moments that are vital to the Moluccan community – stories and moments of a silenced history and a warm, close-knit community of which I am myself a product and the participant-observer.

ANASTASIA TAYLOR-LIND
A house on Tatiana's street, a few kilometres from the front line,
Donbas, Ukraine, 2018

A piece of shrapnel from an artillery shell is an uncanny object. It looks almost innocent. Shrapnel often resembles a piece of tree bark or a stone – an unremarkable, peaceful natural object. But if you touch it, you can feel how sharp its edges are. These pieces are designed to tear human bodies apart in the most terrifying ways. The sight of shrapnel wounds, human flesh blown inside out, presents a stark contrast to the nondescript appearance of the culprit.

For years prior to the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022, artillery launchers by the name *Grad* (*Hail*) have been a weapon of choice in the war in the east of Ukraine. In violation of the Geneva Conventions, they were often used in densely populated urban areas. Being a short-range weapon, they did not leave their victims time for an air raid siren, to take shelter or deploy other civilian protection measures. Shelling could start anywhere and anytime. The shells broke apart into thousands of sharp fragments, mowing down people and animals, cutting branches off trees, denting walls to such an extent it was as if houses in the war zone were sick with smallpox.

Over the years, people in eastern Ukraine have developed a complex, intimate relationship with shrapnel, the lasting embodiment of the constant threat they have learned to live with. After the episodes of shelling, residents often collected shrapnel pieces in their streets, gardens, and even inside their houses, stored them along with family memorabilia, exhibited them in living rooms, and showed them to guests. The replica exhibited here is a silver cast of one such piece of shrapnel kindly gifted to us by Tatiana, a woman who has been living in the frontline area in Donbas, from her collection. During that reporting trip, Anastasia also photographed a house on Tatiana's street that had typical shrapnel damage on its walls.

Together with Anastasia Taylor-Lind we were drawn to this practice for different reasons. I am a native of eastern Ukraine and found that the paradoxical nature of these objects resonated with my own experience of a familiar, safe environment suddenly turning violent and deadly. Anastasia, a war photographer who had covered many of the recent conflicts, found the material form of shrapnel conducive to expressing her concerns with the ethics of her profession. She came up with an idea to cast the pieces of shrapnel in used photographic silver, bringing the two materials together as a metaphor for photojournalism's complicity in producing sensationalist portrayals of war that distort the true experiences of its survivors and harm them.

Text by Alisa Sopova

SAMUEL ARANDA

Pepe Dorado Cubero at the site of a mass grave in Malaga's San Rafael cemetery, where his father was executed on 17 March 1937, Spain, 2008

Both of my grandparents were injured during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). I remember distinctly the scar on my grandfather's ankle, but we never talked about it. I think I was twenty years old when I started being interested in the issue. I asked my family for photos and to know what happened to us during the war and the dictatorship. The answer was sharp: 'Forget about this, we don't want to talk about it'.

Later, in 2008, having become a professional photographer, I started a long-term project to document the work on the mass graves of Andalusia, where my family is from. I remember doing portraits of relatives, and one of their testimonies affected me greatly and made me understand how deep the issue ran. Let us call her Antonia. I was photographing her because she was searching for the body of her brother that was executed by the Spanish military police, *Guardia Civil*, for being a leftist.

But she wanted to talk more, took my hand and brought me to a separate room, where she asked me to take her portrait. She explained that during the dictatorship, and after her brother was killed, she was raped by a member of the *Guardia Civil* because her family was accused of being 'red'. Her rapist is her neighbour, who still lives just across the street from her house.

The Spanish civil war (1936–1939) and the following dictatorship is still a taboo in Spanish society. Families were often divided, with members fighting on both sides. Different from other fascist dictatorships around Europe, Spain transitioned to a democracy in 1975, but nobody was judged for the almost 40 years of dictatorship. One of the big and little discussed issues are the mass graves, where hundreds of thousands were buried. To this day, families still wait to find their loved ones that were either killed during the civil war, or executed during the dictatorship.

LUCA NUVOLONE
Contatto,
Belgium, 2025

In this documentary exploration, I call on three singular perspectives to decipher the enigma of my unknown and mysterious grandfather: a medium, his son and artificial intelligence. This unusual triangulation illustrates how each individual, with their different tools and sensitivity, can be the archaeologist of their family memory.

Looking at a collection of archival photographs, these three radically different approaches create a fragmented portrait, between documentary reality and fantasy. The medium scrutinises invisible energies and traces, seeking to establish a dialogue with the beyond. My father, looking at the same images, is confronted to a past he chose to forget, where each photograph reflects a memory he has tried to avoid. Artificial intelligence, for its part, analyses coldly all the listed details, patterns and emotions, offering a reading devoid of emotional bias but no less revealing.

This video questions not only the way in which we construct family memories, but also how each of us, in their own way, becomes the guardian and interpreter of a part of our collective history. This project invites us to reflect on the way we give life to the traces left by our predecessors, through algorithms, blood links and extrasensory perceptions.

Photographs, although frozen in time, become portals to different dimensions of reality. Each interpretation opens up a new perspective, creating a fresco where the rational and the irrational coexist, where past present intertwine in a fascinating dance. Images are no longer mere historical traces, but catalysts for emotions, memories and projection.

This exploration along the frontiers of reality, where each glimpse of these photographic archives reveals as much about the observer as about the subject being observed, creates an unexpected dialogue between past and present, between science and mystery. It raises questions about our relationship with memory, our family heritage, and the way in which the narratives we create around images on a daily basis shape our understanding of the world and ourselves.

CONTRIBUTORS

NIELS ACKERMANN is a Swiss documentary photographer known for award-winning work in Ukraine, where he lived from 2015–2019. His books, including *L'Ange Blanc*, *Looking For Lenin*, and *New York, Ukraine*, explore post-Chernobyl youth, Soviet legacy, and resilience near the front line. Ackermann's work seeks nuance, challenging binary views of complex issues. A political science graduate, he now focuses on Swiss politics and co-founded the Geneva-based photography collective, Lundi13.

SAMUEL ARANDA is a visual artist using mainly photography and video based between Paris and Barcelona. He has been photographing people in places such as Yemen, Syria, Pakistan or Brazil, where he received editorial assignments for different clients like *National Geographic*, *Le Monde*, *Spiegel* or *The New York Times*. He received different awards including 2012 World Press Photo of the Year, and 2016 Ortega y Gasset, among others.

SIMINA BĂDICĂ is curator for the House of European History in Brussels, where she curated the *Fake for Real. A history of forgery and falsification* exhibition (Brussels 2021, touring 2024–2026) and the Virtual Tour of the permanent exhibition. Between 2006 and 2017 she was curator, researcher and Head of Ethnological Archives at the Romanian Peasant Museum in Bucharest. She holds a PhD in History from the Central European University on curating Communism in post-war and post-communist museums.

AMANDA BERNAL is an anthropologist, photographer, visual facilitator and cultural manager. As a part of the European ERC-Visual Trust. Reliability, accountability, and forgery in scientific, religious, and social images 2021–2026 (grant agreement No 101002897 – www.visualtrust.ub.edu) program at the University of Barcelona, she is researching how different audiences generate trust processes in photography and documentary film. Currently, she is documenting the work processes of various photojournalists and conducting focus groups in secondary schools.

PETRUȚ CĂLINESCU is a documentary photographer and videographer based in Bucharest, Romania, represented worldwide by Panos Pictures. He is a co-founder of the Romanian Documentary Photography Center. He is working on long term personal documentary projects, such as 'Pride and Concrete' where he explores the changes in the traditional village landscape, triggered by the workers migrating abroad. In the ongoing 'The Black Sea', he focuses on the dual nature of a paradisiac cold war zone.

MICHELA CANE, from Aosta, Italy, is a photography student at ENSAV La Cambre, where she is currently pursuing a Master's degree. Living in Brussels, Michela develops documentary projects around human relationships, personal narratives and social perceptions. She has explored a range of themes, from Muslim and Italian communities in Belgium to the world of hunting. Her plastic approach to photography also incorporates video, sound and scientific techniques.

HERVÉ CHARLES is a visual artist who works mainly with photography and video on landscape in transformation. He also has a number of other artistic activities: head of the Photography Department at La Cambre, exhibition curator, art advisor and currently a member of the Vocatio Foundation and the Board of Directors of the Kanal-Centre Pompidou Foundation (Brussels).

ROGER CREMERS is a World Press Photo award winning photographer from the Netherlands, whose work has been published for more than two decades in leading Dutch newspapers and magazines. His work has a strong historical and social focus, emphasizing the tension between the dark chapters of the past and the way they are remembered or relived in the present. In April 2016 his first book *World War Two Today* on the memorial culture all across Europe was published.

MINE DAL is a Turkish-Swiss photographer. She has been based in Zurich since 1999. She was named Turkey's photographer of the year by the Federation of Turkish Photographers in 2020 for her photography book *Everybody's Atatürk*. With this publication Mine Dal has been nominated for the Arles Book Award in 2021.

MARIE DOUEL STUDIO specializes in exhibition design and scenographic interventions. Through a multi-disciplinary vision, it aims to retranscribe curatorial subjects into a readable narrative. The studio has two main ambitions: to make culture accessible to a broader public by exploring the boundaries of the museum context, and to minimize the environmental impact of its designs.

VÉRONIQUE ELLENA is a visual artist and photographer, trained in La Cambre, Brussels, in the photography studio of Gilbert Fastenaekens. She was resident at the Villa Médicis and winner of the Prix de Rome (2007). She realized several public commissions (Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Musée André Malraux au Havre, Millenium stained glass window for Strasbourg Cathedral). Her work addresses the place of humankind in society, the environment and its symbolism, the relationship between art and spirituality. She is attentive to everything that makes everyday life poetic and profound.

ALEXANDRE G. MITCHELL (D.Phil. Oxon.) is a classical archaeologist, fiction writer and artist. He is the author of *Greek Vase-Painting and the Origins of Visual Humour* (Cambridge 2009), created the *Cities of Lost Memory* art project (www.lostmemory.art), and is the head of Expressum (www.expressum.eu), a scientific translation agency based in Brussels.

SARAH GENSBURGER is a Professor in Political Science at the CNRS and Sciences Po. A former president of the Memory Studies Association, she has been studying the social impact of public memory policies. She published twelve books among which, in 2023, *Qui pose les questions mémorielles?* (CNRS Editions) and *De-Commemoration. Removing statues and renaming streets* (with J. Wüstenberg (ed.), Berghahn Books).

SÉBASTIEN GOBERT is a French journalist, communications expert and author. He is Ukraine-based since 2011 and focuses most particularly on this country, as well as on the wider Black sea region. He published four books on Ukraine, including *Looking for Lenin* (2017, Noir sur Blanc, Switzerland), which he co-authored with Niels Ackermann. His most recent publication is *L'Ukraine, la République et les oligarques* (2023, Tallandier, France).

STÉPHANIE GONÇALVES is an assistant curator at the House of European History since 2021. She is in charge of the publications of the museum. She holds a PhD in contemporary history from the Université libre de Bruxelles, on the cultural diplomacy of ballet during the Cold War (*Danser pendant la guerre froide, 1945–1968*, 2018). She is a specialist of the connections between dance and politics in the 20th century.

NICK HANNES is a Belgian documentary photographer and a teacher at the Royal Academy for Fine Arts in Ghent (BE). His photography reflects on major contemporary topics such as migration, globalization, urbanization and crisis. He published 5 books and received a World Press Award (2023), the Zeiss Photography Award (2018) and the Magnum Photography Award (2017). He is represented by Panos Pictures London.

ROMANE ISKARIA is a French photographer and artist working in Brussels. She graduated with a Master's degree in photography from La Cambre (2022) and a National Diploma in Plastic Arts from INSEAAM Beaux Arts in Marseille (2018). Her work highlights the injustices and inequalities of invisible communities with a documentary and fictional approach. Her images, specific of the 'care' notion, allow her subjects to become aware of their painful histories. Romane was a laureate of the TIFF 2024 Emerging Belgian Photography, by the FOMU Fotomuseum Antwerp.

JAN KEMPENAERS lives and works in Antwerp. He studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent and at the Jan Van Eyck Academy in Maastricht. Since the mid-eighties, Kempenaers has been photographing urban & natural landscapes, architectures, as well as monuments. His most recent book *Belgian Colonial Monuments 2* is published by Roma Publications.

SMIRNA KULENOVIĆ is a Bosnian transdisciplinary artist, director, researcher, filmmaker, lecturer, and a PhD candidate at the University of Arts Berlin. Her work spans contemporary performance, theatre, and dance, with notable contributions that explore the intersection of art, ecology, and embodied memory. Her artistic versatility extends to documentary film, with both *Our Family Garden* (2021) and *The Test of Maturity* (2012) winning awards in European and American film festivals.

FAÑCH LE BOS is a French photographer and video artist based in Belgium. After three years at the Beaux-Arts in Brittany, he is now doing a master's degree at the 'Atelier photographique' in La Cambre, Brussels. Immersed in theatre from a very early age, Fañch gradually turned to video performances. He felt the need to put himself on stage and use his body as an instrument of experimentation, a practice he is now developing in photography.

VALÉRIE LERAY is a visual artist/ photographer and member of the artist collective *la mire*. She began her career focusing on socially marginalised individuals, then examined her own discipline through documentary and conceptual photography,

from the prism of history. Her series have been exhibited in several countries, most recently at the 58th Venice Biennale of Contemporary Art in the official FUTUROMA exhibition. Her photographs are included in the collections of the MUCEM, the Kai Dikhas Foundation in Berlin and the House of European History.

PIOTR MAŁECKI is a Warsaw based press photographer and documentary filmmaker represented by Panos Pictures agency. The recipient of Pictures of the Year International (POYi) award and other international awards both in the fields of photography and film. For many years he's been working on assignments, photo stories and documentaries for international media, focusing on social, economic and political issues.

ANDREA MORK is the Head Curator at the House of European History. She studied History and Social Sciences, and has a PhD in History and Political Science from the University of Aachen. She has curated numerous exhibitions. She is the author and editor of several books and writes frequently on historical matters.

LUCA NUVOLONE is a Swiss photographer and video artist. He lives and works between Brussels and Geneva. He graduated from HEAD – Geneva in 2023, and is currently studying for a Master's degree in Photography at La Cambre in Brussels. His work focuses on encounters and interactions with atypical communities, highlighting potentially invisible social mechanisms.

RIA PACQUÉE lives and works in Antwerp. She had her international breakthrough in the 1980s with a performance series featuring the self conceived characters Madame and It. By infiltrating reality as these two personae, she carried out an artistic investigation on the thin line between fiction and documentary. In more recent work she focuses on photographic and video productions, but her experiences as a performance artist still play an important role in the process.

MICHAEL PAPPAS is a Greek photographer who explores traditional and contemporary women's costumes in Greece through his *Mitos* Project. Named a Spotlight Photographer by VOGUE in 2022, his work has been exhibited at the Benaki Museum, the Fragonard Museum in France, and is published internationally, including in *The New York Times* and *National Geographic*.

HUGO PASSARELLO LUNA, photographer and journalist, is from Argentina. He is a professor of photojournalism at Sciences Po Paris. His work has been published by *The New York Times, Libération, La Croix, La Vanguardia,* among others. His photo series on Cortázar (2015) was acquired by the Quai d'Orsay for its permanent collection. His series *Nostalgie de la boue* was exhibited at the Centre Pompidou.

LIBERA PICCHIANTI is an assistant curator at the House of European History, where she works on the first touring exhibition of the museum and on the evaluation of the permanent exhibition. She also co-developed a thematic guided tour on the Memory of the Shoah in European History. Previously she worked for the Shoah Museum Foundation in Rome, from where she designed, accompanied and analysed students' trips to Auschwitz. She studied Political Science and Economy in Freiburg and later obtained a second master in Holocaust Studies in Rome.

KARIN REICHENBACH is an archaeologist and historian. She received her PhD from the University of Leipzig in 2020 with a thesis on archaeology and politics in 20th century Silesia. Since 2021, she holds a postdoctoral position at the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe and is conducting research on 'Performances of the Pagan Past. Popular History Practices as Identity Politics in Poland and Beyond'. Her main areas of expertise are the history of Archaeology and the humanities in general, public history, right-wing Extremism in popular history and Political Medievalism.

ANNA SAFIATOU TOURÉ is a multidisciplinary Franco-Malian artist based in Brussels. A graduate of the Beaux-Arts de Nantes Saint-Nazaire and the ENSAV La Cambre in photography, she is the winner of the Prix Médiatine 2022 and the Roger de Conynck Fund 2023. Her work invests the space that unites or separates the two sides of any migratory story.

JULIEN SALES has always been passionate about understanding how things work. He sees his artistic work as scientific research, an exploration of the medium and its limits. He is a former teacher and graduate of ENSAV in La Cambre, now working between photographic and movie sets. He is currently finalising a long-term project, using an hybrid analog and a digital camera.

ALISA SOPOVA has been working on the war in Ukraine since it began in 2014, first as a journalist and, later, from an anthropological perspective. She sought to investigate the specifics of everyday life in the environment of military conflict in the Donbas region. Following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Alisa has continued to work in the region, focusing on war as a context for daily life and the entanglement between military violence and the ordinary.

ANASTASIA TAYLOR-LIND is a British/Swedish photojournalist and a poet. In 2023, she received the Canon Female Photojournalist Award for her long-term reporting on eastern Ukraine, and over 100,000 people visited her exhibition 'Ukraine: Photographs from the Frontline' at the Imperial War Museum. Anastasia is a National Geographic Society Explorer, TED Fellow, and 2016 Nieman Fellow at Harvard university. Her first book Maidan – Portraits from the Black Square, about the 2014 revolution in Ukraine, was published the same year.

PIETERJAN VAN LANGENHOVE is project manager for the Public Programming and educator at the House of European History. His responsibilities include the public program, various activities and events organized aimed at engaging and educating different audiences (including family audiences). He studied Art History and Archaeology and has a degree in Tourism and Recreation Management. He specialized in the 'Multivocality' of heritage sites.

ELIZAR VEERMAN is a Moluccan-Dutch photographic artist based in Amsterdam. In 2022 he received a BA in Documentary photography from the Royal Academy of Arts (KABK). His photographic practice is particularly concerned with the effects of migration. Focusing on peripheral communities and diasporas, he portrays representations of street culture, post-colonial identity and acts of (self-) reclamation. His debut series 'You Huddle To Keep Warm' received multiple nominations including DuPho SO Award, Rabo Portrait Prize and Fashion 100 by PhotoVogue.

MARC WILSON documents the memories, histories and stories that are set in the landscapes that surround us. His projects includes *The Last Stand* (2010–2014), *A Wounded Landscape – bearing witness to the Holocaust* (2015–2021) and *The Land is Yellow, the Sky is Blue*'(2021–2023). Solo exhibitions include those at Impressions Gallery, Bradford, Side Gallery, Newcastle and Spazio Klien in Italy. His work has been published in journals and magazines ranging from National Geographic, FT Weekend and The British Journal of Photography.

SOFIA YALA is an Angolan/Portuguese photographer. She holds a MA in Anthropology & Visual Cultures and another one in Film and Photography. Her artwork explores archival material and unexpected encounters in life, conveying storytelling through different times, textures, and layers. Her work reflects on intersectional ecosystems in our vast and intricate world. in our vast and intricate world. While photography is central to their artistic process, she also enjoys experimenting with other formats and compositions.

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Exhibition Design: Marie Douel Studio (Bavo Gladiné, Lolà Mancini, Marie Douel)
Production: Meyvaert (Cosmin Tudose, Dan Lupașcu, Adrian Bira)
Graphic Design: Laure Giletti, Gregory Dapra
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Print of the graphics: Bulle Color
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Press: BeCulture

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PRESENCE OF THE PAST. A EUROPEAN ALBUM

The first photographic exhibition organised by the House of European History reveals how Europeans engage with the past in their everyday lives today: from commemorating historical events to participating in re-enactments, from taking tourist selfies to destroying monuments, from digging up forgotten pasts to creating private collections. 24 photographic projects, from all over Europe, question the myriad ways in which we invite the past into the present.

'The Presence of the Past exhibition takes place at a turning point for the European Union, the European continent and the world.'
— Sarah Gensburger, Professor of sociology and political science at Sciences Po-Paris

'The past as a prison or the past as a prism? This exhibition opts for the latter. A prism on the multifaceted presence of the past.'
— Constanze Itzel, Museum director, House of European History

'Which parts of our legacy do we want to continue and which parts can we no longer accept? The past is no less easy to predict than the future.'
— Andrea Mork, Head Curator, House of European History

'Every photograph is a small monument, a testimony to the past. Each image is an act of remembrance.'
— Hervé Charles, Artist and Head of the Photography Department at La Cambre

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