and experience of the world has changed and grown since *One Wall a Web* and in particular, due to recent events, how does your work seem to you now and where is it headed?

SWW I'm keenly aware of the extent to which the broader contemporary art conversation is utterly untethered from any nuanced grasp of photographic history, must less contemporary practice. That's easily evidenced by the frequency with which, as a photographer, one has to keep having the 'how is photography an art?' conversation, or the 'where is the craft in pressing a button?' conversation. At the same time, photographic education (and practice) has often sequestered itself away from the other arts, and it tends very often to emerge in photography-specific/photography-only spaces. For the most part, in the contemporary realm, the disconnect with contemporary practice is a function of art writers and curators only looking at the photography that makes it onto the walls of the major institutions, and rarely at that. They don't buy the photobooks at all, and I think you can tell that that's true of a few museum photography departments too.

The spectre of reproducibility plays a role here, because our art objects are not singular, so there's a big value differential, and that affects not only the commercial life of art photography, but the scale of its museological footprint, and the breadth and depth of critical and scholarly attention that the art receives, whether in the mainstream press, the trade publications or the academic end of things. The money is mostly elsewhere, and so is the attention. The collectors who invest in photography are often substantively different from those buying the other more profitable art forms, and the objects we make seem flimsy, or vulnerable in some strange ways: think of someone selling framed or 'unframed' sculptures or paintings, vs selling framed or unframed prints..!

There's an interesting connection between the different-ness of photography to other arts, and your question about re-staging the work in the book as well. The fact that I can re-scale and re-sequence images from distinct bodies of work into one sequence in a magazine, as I have here, or in an exhibition probably seems a bit too much like cheating to other artists, whose works impose a certain fixity on their conditions of appearance. David Campany has pointed to this often in his writing: that, as photographers, we can make an image without knowing its physical size, which is something a painter working a canvas or a sculptor working an object often wouldn't be able to take advantage of.

The scalability of the photograph, and the adaptability of it to changes in resonance and inflection through changes in sequence and position are things that I deeply love about photography. We have to keep re-considering these objects; we have the open-ended option to continue to come back to these images. When we do, they shift, they slide, they reorient, they seem to change while remaining stubbornly identical to their former selves. That mutability gives us a distinctive way of occupying the present—one that reckons with its continuities with the past, and with the proleptic powers of past imaginings of the future. All these temporalities elide in photography—they collapse into this strange 'instant' of exposure, which is at once *past*, *present* and in perpetual passage toward an unsee-able future, so it makes tremendous sense to keep things fluid to me. I relish the opportunity to reimagine the work I've made, here in the magazine and also in exhibition form.

I also love being in dialogue with the work of other artists, and Chris Gianunzio very generously gave me such a chance in 2017, when he curated a two artist, two picture show at Vox Populi, in Philadelphia. He staged one of the appropriated images from *All My Gone Life,* of a distressed, middle-aged black woman, who is laying on the floor of a bank that had been robbed at gunpoint staring contemptuously at the camera, alongside an image by Dru Donovan of a young black girl being carefully pulled underneath a fence by two women, as the group fled police violence in the wake of protests against the police murder of Philando Castile. It was incredibly powerful to look at those two pictures together, and to look at these Black women across time, in two images that strangely echoed each other compositionally and politically, across a gulf of nearly seventy years. Those kinds of interactions seem meaningful to me, and they require a willingness to surrender the kind of autonomy that privileges individual genius—and the singularity of the art object—over the adaptable, catalytic and choral powers of photographs, which always approximate many voices speaking in relation to one another in a strange kind of simultaneity. Photography is that chorus, and that's where I want to be. ●

July 2020.
The previous discussion between Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa and Sunil Shah for the Atelier Nōua and Double Dummy online education programme on 3 June 2020 can be accessed here: https://www.noua.no/

STANLEY WOLUKAU-WANAMBWA is a photographer, writer, and former editor of the contemporary photography website The Great Leap Sideways (2011–2017). He has contributed essays to catalogues and monographs by Vanessa Winship, George Georgiou, Rosalind Fox Solomon, Marton Perlaki and Paul Graham, been an artist-in-residence at Light Work, guest edited the Aperture Photobook Review, and written for Aperture, Foam Magazine, Rutgers University Press, the Barbican and The Photographer's Gallery. He has lectured at Yale, Cornell, New York University and The New School, and is the Graduate Director of the Photography course at the Rhode Island School of Design.

SUNIL SHAH is an artist, curator and writer based in Oxford, UK. His critical interests span exhibition histories and the sites and structures of artistic production and presentation. Current specific areas of focus are global art, postcolonialism, photography and archives. He is Associate Editor of American Suburb X online photography and visual culture platform.

NATURE'S LIMBO

ESSAY BY KIM KNOPPERS



Ana Mendieta, *Imágen de Yágul* (Image from Yagul), 1973. Color photograph. 19 × 12 1/2 inches (48.3 × 31.8 cm) © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

‘One must keep one’s eyes and ears open, one must know how to match up the facts, see similarity where others see total difference, remember that certain events occur at various levels or, to put it another way, many incidents are aspects of the same, single occurrence. And that the world is a great big net, it is a whole, where no single thing exists separately; every scrap of the world, every last tiny piece, is bound up with the rest by a complex Cosmos of correspondences, hard for the ordinary mind to penetrate. That is how it works. Like a Japanese car.’

— Janina Duszejko, protagonist of the novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* by Olga Tokarczuk

1.

When in mid-March my colleagues and I were sent home from the museum in the late afternoon, it marked the start of a period of uncertainty and conflicting emotions. The intelligent lockdown, as Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte arrogantly named his strategy for combatting the Covid-19 pandemic, had begun. With the security of a regular income, without an essential job in the caring professions and with a small but comfortable apartment of my own, I was far from the eye of the storm. Traffic on the motorway past my house minimised, air quality improved and there were no planes coming in to land at the airport a stone’s throw away. Birds took over the airspace. I had no health problems. I suffered no hidden poverty, unlike many of my neighbours. I put money into various charities and registered as a volunteer. Nevertheless, in these privileged circumstances, I felt confused.

How did we all end up here? The growing world population, the mounting food and water crises, catastrophic environmental breakdown, the privatisation of the public sector, the gaping economic gulf between the privileged and the rest, race and gender division: the infection has made clear how everything in our world is inextricably interconnected. Was this not all the product of a rampant desire in the privileged part of the world for more, more, more, and the destruction of the earth it entailed?

As Italian writer Paulo Giordano aptly wrote in his essay *Nel contagio* (*How Contagion Works*), ‘We think we have explored all of it, but there are still microbial universes about which we know nothing, interactions between species that we haven’t even begun to imagine. Our aggressive behaviour towards the environment increases the likelihood of coming into contact with these new pathogens, which until now were happily confined to their natural niches. Deforestation brings us closer to habitats that never considered our presence; our unstoppable urbanisation does the same. The accelerated extinction of various animal species is forcing several bacteria that lived inside their guts to move elsewhere. Intensive farming creates involuntary cultures where literally anything proliferates.’

Giordano believes that infection is a symptom whose cause can be found in ecology. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic prompts us to think about the fact that humans are the dominant species in a fragile but holistic ecosystem of which bacteria, insects, animals, plants and trees are also part.

Although work and life carried on, I had the sense of finding myself in a void, on a pause setting. Like others who had the luxury of not needing to fight for their physical survival, I tried to determine how I could relate to all this. Would the old ways soon return? Or was this a moment when change could be implemented? Where in

this time of crisis were the openings? Where was hope? And what was the role of the discipline to which I was so attached but which, now and then, I sincerely hated: photography.

I kept feeling that the beginnings of an answer lay in the ideas of British writer Paul Kingsnorth. He says we lack the insight that stories are important if we want to fathom what is really going on. The appealing, dominant narrative in which many of us have passionately believed for the past fifty years is a story of expansionary, colonising, progress-oriented humans. We have come to think we are unrelated to the nature we plunder for our own gain. This myth of progress has largely determined our reality and is badly in need of replacement.

The disenchanted, secular, rational world has little room for magic or for sensitivity to flora and fauna for their own sake. Everything natural must be of use, production must be perpetually increased and neatly fit the explanations provided by science and technology. How can we reconnect with the great conversation between humans and the rest of nature? How can we live in the right way as part of nature, understand and respect it, comprehend our place in the whole and experience nature as part of ourselves? Can writers and visual artists contribute to the creation of a different story? Here I will pick out two strategies by which image-makers (both historical and contemporary) deploy the camera for that purpose.

2.

In the West, the human species has historically been allocated prime position. The marginalisation of non-human elements has produced an alienated and detached relationship with other life forms. A number of artists visualise a physical, almost intuitive, spiritual experience of nature, using the camera as an aid to its interpretation.

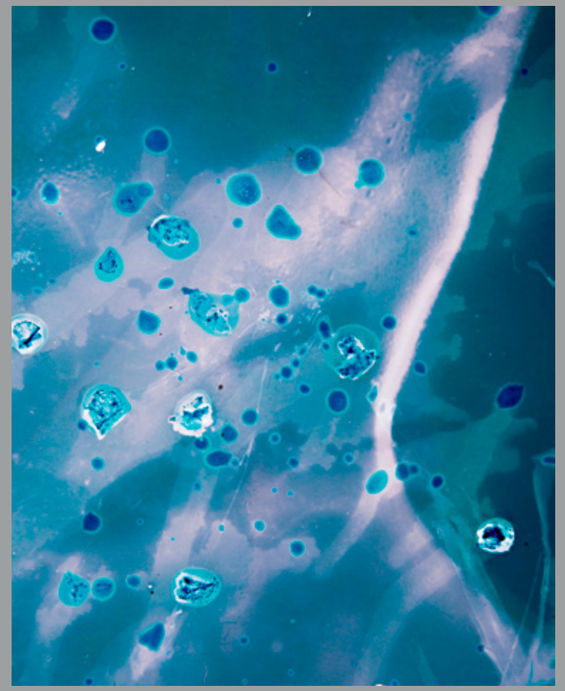
The work of Ana Mendieta (CUB,1948 – US, 1985) is essentially about the fundamental connection between human beings and the earth. As a child she moved from Cuba to the United States, where she used the earth as a site for addressing issues of displacement, impressing her body in various outdoor locations and documenting its imprint in photographs and videos. In her *Earth-Body* performances she connected her own body with the earth in a ritualistic manner, inspired by the magic that is bound up with the rituals and religious beliefs of the Afro-Cuban Santería and Catholic communities of her native country. In the *Silueta* series (1973–77) the outlines of her body merge with rocks, branches, blood, sand, water and flowers. Sometimes she holds her arms above her head to stress the bond between earth and air. Sometimes she lies on the ground in shallow water to make visible the connection between land and sea. All this makes her one with nature and connects the transience of life with the earth's eternity.

For her series *Rupestrian Sculptures*, Mendieta returned to Cuba in 1981. In the naturally formed limestone caves of a nature reserve, on land belonging to an indigenous people of the Taíno and Ciboney cultures, she carved and painted rudimentary figures. She named them after the gods and goddesses of those ancient cultures. Mendieta's intention was that the figures would be discovered by future visitors to the nature reserve, but because of erosion the photos of her work are the most important remaining artefacts of her spiritual quest for 'one universal energy which runs through everything: from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant, from plant to galaxy'.

Although the work of Melanie Bonajo (b. NL, 1978) is more multi-layered, more critical and not without humour, her work can be seen as distantly indebted to that of Mendieta. *Modern Life of the Soul* (2007), which Bonajo made along with Kinga Kiełczyńska (b. PL, 1972), is also about the mystical symbiosis of humanity and nature. It is a performative story captured by means of photography, about a fictional society somewhere in the primeval forests of Poland. Here live creatures that are half-human, half-plant. The project is a foretaste of the roles Bonajo would later adopt. 'Digital eco-feminist, hyper elf, witch or devil, Melanie Bonajo challenges the traditional divisions between men and women, nature and technology,' as the website of her gallery Akinci puts it. Kiełczyńska's work likewise revolves around humans, nature and technology, somewhere between practical activism and radical utopianism.

In his video series *Pteridophilia 1-4* (derived from the Greek *pterid-*, 'fern' and *–philia*, 'love') Zheng Bo (b. CHN, 1974) films naked young men having intimate physical contact with various species of fern in a

How can we reconnect with the great conversation between humans and the rest of nature?



Monuments / Aletsch #08, 2018 © Douglas Mandry, courtesy of the artist

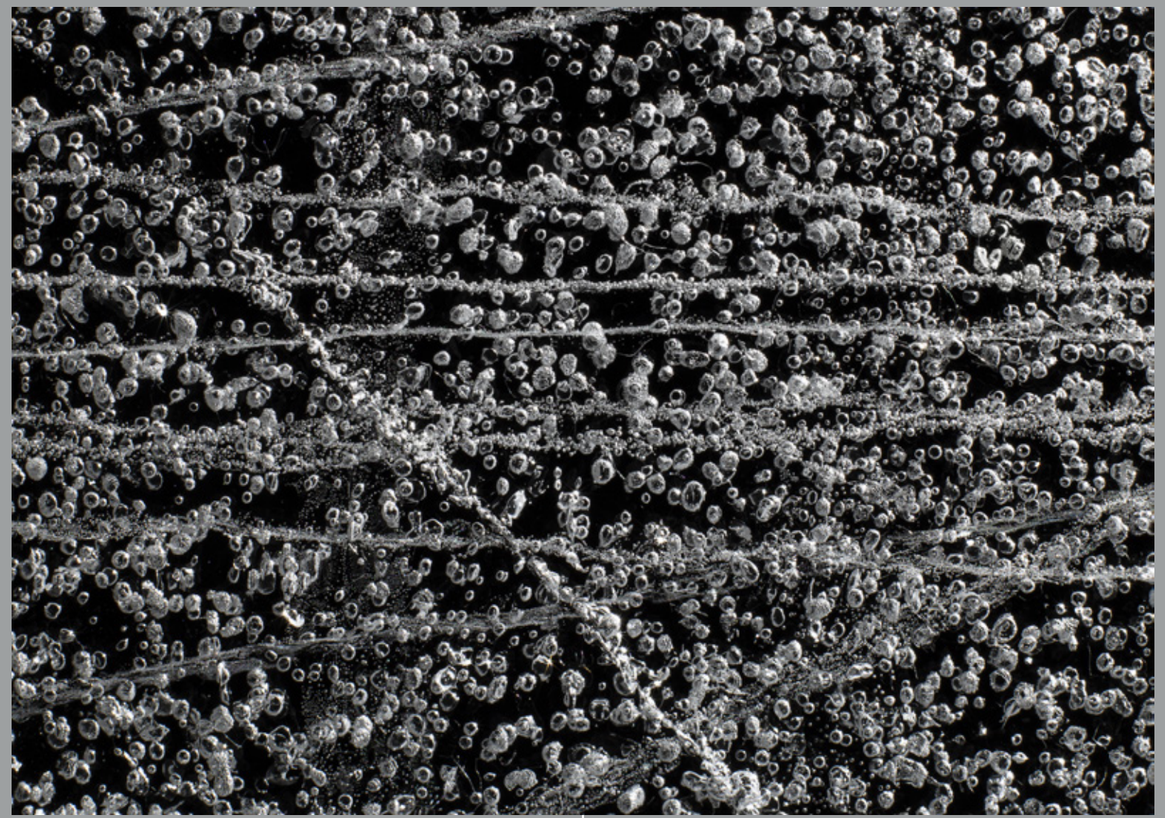
Taiwanese forest. They lick, rub, stroke, bite, taste and ultimately have sex with the plants. They display a sometimes uncomfortable variety of forms of contact between human and plant, beyond the usual looking, smelling and watering. With his occasionally almost pornographic images, Zheng interrogates our morality. 'Where does human exploitation of plants start and where does it end? Why is it "natural" to eat plants but "unnatural" to make love to them?' The ferns also represent the marginalised and the queer in standardised culture. Zheng draws our attention to the urgent need to broaden our ideas about interspecies relations and communities.

Instead of explicitly situating nature as the diametric opposite of increasingly technological globalisation, Ana Mendieta, Melanie Bonajo, Kinga Kiełczyńska and Zheng Bo use the landscape to reconnect themselves physically and spiritually with the land, the elements and marginalised groups in society. They leave the hyper-technologised and capitalist world and use the camera to create an animated language of images that escapes the usual narrative of time without lapsing into nostalgia. It is a language that attempts to engage our entire being, not just reason and the intellect but the emotional, ethical, physical and spiritual parts of ourselves. It can open us up and inspire us to change our mentality.

A second way in which photographers can help us to intensify our bond with nature is by directly imprinting natural phenomena on photographic paper, in a long tradition that begins with the work of Anna Atkins (UK, 1799–1871).

In the summer of 1853, Anna Atkins completed her famous book *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*, regarded as the first photo book in the history of photography. She then began work on *Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Ferns*, along with her friend Anne Dixon. She did not use a camera. Instead she laid the dried ferns on paper that had been made light-sensitive with iron salts. The sun did the rest, making prints of the ferns on the paper. Each fern is arranged against a simple background, so that the stems and leaves are shown optimally and with great precision. Eva-Fiore Kovacovsky (b. CHE, 1980) emulated Atkins with direct prints of plants in the form of photograms. 'In my work, I collect and utilise plants found in the wild as my working material. How plants have been depicted, studied and used over the course of history is a big inspiration for me. By editing, arranging and reproducing my own collection of specimens I construct renderings of my imagination. I am interested in the appearance of the plant specimens, their diversity of growth and development as well as the impact of their surrounding environment on their appearance.' (*Lenscratch*, 2015).

Artist duo Arja Hop (b. NL, 1968) and Peter Svenson (b. NZ, 1956) investigate in their work how plants react to their immediate surroundings. Environmental issues are highly pertinent. In their florachromes they derive



natural dyes from plants and apply them directly to analogue film, from which they make prints. The residues that Hop and Svenson extracted from the mangroves along the banks of the Tamaki in Australia produced completely different colours from those from the verges of Amsterdam. The combination of photography and botanical alchemy makes the viewer aware of the colours of a plant that cannot be seen with the naked eye. The colours are influenced by the conditions in which the plant grows. Environmental issues have an impact, such as the degree of acidity of the rain, or the prevalence of particulate matter.

Douglas Mandry (b. CHE, 1989) makes colour photographs of parts of a melting glacier. After visiting the glacier he took bits of broken-off ice with him in a cool box to his home in Zurich. There, in the darkroom, he put the ice under a magnifier. In the place where you would normally put a negative, light now flowed through the ice onto light-sensitive paper. While the ice melted and dripped onto the photographic paper, the physical form of part of the glacier slowly disappeared for ever. The many-coloured aura of the glacier replaced it, appearing on the paper. Mandry presented the photograms along with old photographs of tourists in the mountains, printed on geotextile designed to protect glaciers from the melting caused by the warming of the earth.

In her series *Climate Archive*, Suzette Bousema (b. NL, 1995) makes the memory of ice visible in the form of tiny bubbles from hundreds of thousands of years ago. Ice samples from Greenland and Antarctica serve as scientific instruments for observing the effects of climate change. They expand our understanding of slow but observable developments like the warming of the earth. Each bubble of air is a museum in its own right. It forms a miraculous and poetic archive of the atmosphere from the deep time in which the ice was formed.

Making visible what the naked eye can barely perceive, if at all, calls attention to extraordinary details and to the mechanisms of the natural world. New life was breathed into this older function of the camera by Eva-Fiore Kovacovsky, by Arja Hop and Peter Svenson, by Douglas Mandry and by Suzette Bousema. They connect themselves with specific local, ecological circumstances. By

portraying the beauty and astonishing wisdom of nature as a direct physical trace (although in Bousema's case there is no direct copy) they call upon our engagement through our senses and our poetic sensibility.

3.

While the Covid-19 crisis raged on, another major crisis became visible to the entire world with the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. In combination with the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans in the US, it threw light on the racism that is embedded not just in American society but in European society too.

Racism is one of the building blocks of European colonialism and the capitalism to which it gave rise. The conquering of huge overseas areas by European powers that started in the sixteenth century seemed to have come to an end by 1750. But from 1880 onwards the European urge to expand revived and grew rampant. Within a very short time, Europeans subjugated around 500 million non-Europeans (half the people outside Europe in those days), in Africa and Asia. Since the eighteenth century, racism had been institutionalised by the West as an aid to the development of nation states. This made it convenient to depict native peoples as wild creatures without any history, as closer to animals than to Europeans. Supposedly objective theories, models, classifications and typologies were deployed to order and control the world. The relatively new technology of the camera was of great benefit in this connection.

This complex entanglement of past and present and the intersectional roots of the current crisis are made visible in *Growing Concerns* by Almudena Romero (b. ESP, 1976). Romero uses plants from former British colonies as the basis for pictures that have to do with the trade in plants, colonialism and migration flows, and the traces they have left in contemporary Britain. The series shows how the trade in coffee, tea, sugar, cotton and other plants set migrant flows in motion, or in a more general sense how the global circulation of goods and capital is accompanied by increased restrictions on human migration. Romero made her photographic prints according to the photogram principle used by Anna Atkins, except that here the sun bleaches the chlorophyll pigment of the leaves.

Racism permeated everything, even matters of the environment and climate change. Both historical and contemporary inequalities have exposed people of colour to far greater environmental health hazards than white people. The extraction of fossil fuels in the colonies or former colonies produced inequality over centuries. If you want to get oil out of the ground, it helps if you can see the people who live on that ground as inferior. Forest



↗ *Antarctica 2.1*, from the series *Climate Archive*
© Suzette Bousema, courtesy of the artist
↓ image from the series *Growing Concerns*
© Almudena Romero, courtesy of the artist

fires in Australia dominated the news for weeks; floods in East Africa did not. If we were witnessing increases in heat and drought in Europe comparable to those of Africa, would climate change be higher up the agenda? Racism and the climate crisis are intimately linked, as are the Covid-19 pandemic and institutional racism.

4.

From the beginnings of photography and its first practical applications, the camera has been connected with a small, largely Western European male segment of the population that, economically, culturally and ethically, acquired a dominant role on the world stage. The interweaving of technology, science and capitalism led to what Max Weber in 1919 called the disenchantment of the world, meaning that everyday problems are no longer solved by magic and faith but by technology and reason. From the start, photography has been bound up with a component of a capitalism that eventually ran amok, and with processes of colonisation of which the crises of the present day are the extreme results. From that perspective we might claim that the camera shares part of the blame for those crises.

The start of the healing process in the present day may lie in the repair of the connection with nature as a counterweight to the dominant position of the human species and its habit of mass consumption. Image-makers can now fill the vacuum created by the collapse of long-established convictions — as a result of Covid-19 and the worldwide Black Lives Matter protests — with a resilient, holistic story they can use to create a new reality, a narrative that expresses the natural flow of life and death, and the importance of fragility in the cycle of life, with an emphasis on wholeness. The epidemics of our time prompt us to see ourselves as belonging to a collective. We are an organism that is more than merely a member of our own species. The above examples offer hope and show that the camera gives us the opportunity to re-enchant the disenchanted world, without falling back on nostalgia for a past that may in truth never have existed. ●

KIM KNOPPERS is an art historian graduated from University of Amsterdam, and curator at Foam. Since 2011, she has worked on group and solo exhibitions, most recently *Lorenzo Vitturi's Materia Impura*, *Morpher III by Kévin Bray* and *Extendable Ears by Sheng-Wen Lo*. She has contributed to various magazines including Foam Magazine, Unseen and Aperture and has written catalogue texts for Jaya Pelupessy and Sylvain Couzinet-Jacques, amongst others. She is also a lecturer on the MA Photography at ECAL in Lausanne where she initiated and developed the course *Do Not Disturb—Curating in Progress*.