

# FOAM TALENT | FRANKFURT

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ARTISTS TEXTS

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SUSHANT CHHABRIA

*In Loving Memory Of* (2015)

In 2014, Sushant Chhabria (b. 1987, IN) began cutting out and collecting pictures of the deceased from obituaries that he found in the newspaper. Using digital editing, he then helped to give them a new life. He combined the passport picture sized portraits into new, color images of people who could live anywhere in the world and could exist in any time or place. He digitally manipulated the characteristics of the existing faces to transform them into new physiognomies that are quite strange and often comic-like.

During the editing process, Chhabria established a parallel concept to reincarnation. Whereas reincarnation transfers a soul to a new body, his process involves recycling the body's outer appearance. Based on this insight, Chhabria calls the people in his series *In Loving Memory Of* "travelers." His own likeness is to be found under these travelers (Nr. 9), representing his own conceptual reincarnation in the body of his work.

DAVID DE BEYTER

*Big Bangers* (2014–17)

For this longterm project David De Beyter (b. 1985, FR) immersed himself in the Big Bangers subculture. It addresses the spectacle of annihilation, laid out as a comprehensive installation that includes photography, film, and sculpture.

Big Bangers is a community of people that celebrate the destruction of cars through violent accidents, primarily meeting in Northern France, Belgium, and Great Britain. The wreckage that results from the crash is not so much a trophy as it is more specifically a testament to the beauty that lies in the act of brutal destruction. The members of this lifestyle community rather playfully call the wreckage – a compressed pile of scrap metal – "auto-sculpture."

The installation *Big Bangers* is a gesamtkunstwerk that transcends the borders of any individual medium in its fullness of form and content. The goal of the installation is to involve the viewer completely. In the presentation of this destructive practice, the project attempts to reflect on obsolescence and dematerialization. Because De Beyter takes an anthropological approach, the visitor becomes the counterpart to a brutal and chaotic culture that holds up a destroyed car as a trophy. In the photographic and filmic documentation, the object is always positioned in the foreground and only rarely the protagonists themselves. De Beyter thus pursues his interest in the object and its connection to the social ritual that determines it.

## **MARK DORF**

### *Transposition (2017)*

In his artistic practice Mark Dorf (b. 1988, US) explores how digital technologies and science influence human perception of the world and our interaction with nature. In the sculptural arrangements of objects in *Transpositions*, the artist combines digital photo collages with sculptural elements such as chipboard, artificial grass, plexiglas, neon tubes, or houseplants, and thus attempts to achieve a synthesis of natural, constructed, and virtual landscapes.

With this in mind, the conspicuous framing of his works refers to man's inherent urge to divide the perceived environment into manageable, easy to understand units. The potted plant in particular can be understood as representative of the aspects of nature which humans have objectified and domesticated. The installations expose the ambivalent nature of the landscaped garden, which is an attempt to reconcile calculated, aestheticized artificiality with the unpredictability of botanic nature.

For Dorf, however, nature and technology are not antagonistic, separate fields, but rather a holistic whole, which he tries to depict in *Transpositions*. The eponymous notion of transposition is used in music, among other fields, to describe the shifting of sound sequences to another pitch. In his series of works dealing with the concept of landscape photography, Dorf does the same by freeing the term from its conventional understanding and applying it to the man-made composition of digital, constructed, and natural elements.

## **ALINKA ECHEVERRÍA**

### *Fieldnotes for Nicephora (2015)*

Fieldnotes for Nicephora is the result of an investigation that Alinka Echeverría (b. 1981, MX) conducted during a residence at the Musée Nicephore Niépce in France. Named after the inventor of photography, Nicephore Niépce, the museum's archive contains a history of photography that was dominated by men in its early stages.

In her research, the artist encountered postcards showing images of Algerian prostitutes. She found the postcards' fetishized depiction of the women as objects of male desire both fascinating and repulsive. In her collages, which she collected into a folding booklet, she poses these depictions next to other forms of feminine representation as well as images of Greek amphorae – a vessel that has feminine connotations. She also took inspiration from the Mexican mythologies of the Mayans and Aztecs.

Echeverría completed degrees in social anthropology as well as in photography. With this background, her research investigates the ways that the male and colonial gaze are relayed through media and photographic techniques and have thus deeply infiltrated the contemporary collective consciousness. Lastly, she adds the letter "a" to Nicéphore Niépce's name and explicitly contextualizes the legacy of this white, male pioneer of photographic history from a feminist, post-colonial perspective.

## **WERONIKA GĘSICKA**

### *Traces (2015–17)*

Photographs from United States image databases of the 1950s and 1960s form the basis of Weronika Gęsicka's (b. 1984, PL) artistic production. The images do not reveal whether they were staged images intended for commercial use or candid photographs from private family albums. At first glance, these family photos, vacation images, and everyday scenes seem familiar. But this familiarity is quickly disrupted as one starts to notice strange interventions.

Weronika Gęsicka's images initially lead the viewer through a humorous and picturesque retro-world, in which the traditionally dominant position of men is reinforced, while women submit without resistance. Using digital editing techniques, the artist deforms and distorts

the bodies and faces of the people depicted, thus visualizing and emphasizing their classic, clichéd roles. In a beach scene, men's heads disappear in the wombs of the women they carry on their shoulders. Elsewhere, Gęsicka alters the body size of dancing couples so that the men's faces are to be found resting in their partners' sumptuous cleavage.

Gęsicka's retouching alters the visual relationship between the sexes and questions the conservative depiction of women in the twentieth century. At the same time, the artist creates a new visual history by changing small details, which undermines the veracity of the photographic image and prompts a critical questioning of the relationship between time and visual testimony.

## **WANG JUYAN**

### ***Project 2085 (2015–17)***

Over the course of two years, Wang Juyan (b. 1993, CN) took aerial photographs of Chinese mountain ranges on flights between London and Peking. He then digitally edited these images to create fictitious landscapes with steep mountains, valleys, and rivers. The landscape images are a contemporary form reminiscent of classical landscape painting, which holds great importance in China.

*Project 2085* was given its name after the novel 1984 by George Orwell, to which the artist added 101 years. At the heart of the novel are the protagonists' fears about constant government surveillance. Wang's work moreover refers to the construction of a second subway line in Beijing, which opened in the same year and an impressively large mural at the Xizhimen-Station. The mural, which depicts the Yangtze River snaking through an idealized landscape, strongly influenced *Project 2085* both conceptually and compositionally.

Wang attempts to address issues of power and control with his large format photographs, which are divided into either two or four panels. The goal is not so much to illustrate a real landscape as it is to translate issues surrounding control into a visual language.

## **THOMAS KUIJPERS**

### ***Bad Trip (2017)***

Thomas Kuijpers (b. 1985, NL) explores the effects of an economy of fear. He examines how image and text are used today to create one single, true event from entire narratives. For this purpose, he collects online articles, photos, newspaper articles, and headlines as well as taking his own photographs of found objects, which he has assembled together in this installation.

During his research for *Bad Trip*, the artist spent a lot of time in right wing and Islamist online forums, which seemingly changed his reality. The consumption of populist content over a longer period of time affected Kuijper's perception of his social environment and caused paranoid thoughts. For the artist, various situations became triggers for the fear of terrorism: a car loaded with fuel tanks; a crowded party, which could be a possible target of terrorist attacks; a group of people on a walk, who could turn out to be threatening thugs. The assemblages presented in the exhibition function as archives of the representation of fear and its visual rhetoric. The combination of found material and self-produced photographs shows how photographic images not only reveal prejudices, but can also at the same time reproduce them and transmit them to viewers. Social suspicion fueled by populist rhetoric is ultimately also carried over into the photographic gaze – each photograph is a product of perception that has been made selective by the influence of certain media.

For Kuijpers, *Bad Trip* is not about exploring or verifying the truthfulness of images. Instead, he inquires into fear's modes of action, how it arises, and how it is intensified by the media. By manipulating and recontextualizing existing materials and emphasizing specific details, Kuijpers reveals the difficulties that arise in attempting to find the truth.

## QUENTIN LACOMBE

### *Event Horizon (2015–17)*

Quentin Lacombe (b. 1990, FR) borrowed the title of his work *Event Horizon* from astronomy. The term defines the boundaries of a black hole, beyond which anything that happens can no longer be observed from the outside. Objects that reach this point seem to float, detached from time and space.

The visual material that Lacombe incorporates into his work comes in part from observatories and other important astronomical sites in France and India. Using a pinhole camera positioned in the wild, Lacombe also records the daily course of the sun over a period of six months, defying the time constraints of the photographic medium. He combines the collected images with each other and complements them with studio shots, photograms and other photographs, such as of a reconstructed dinosaur in a theme park. Animals, organic forms, plants, technological artefacts and architectural structures are assembled along an endless timeline.

Lacombe's work creates a very personal photographic cosmos. Individual photographs, which usually bear witness to a specific moment, are then superimposed onto a single, over-all picture which embraces time and space. Only humans remain absent in this compilation. In this classic all-over presentation there is no beginning or end. The work, like the universe itself, seems to stretch to infinity.

## CLÉMENT LAMBELET

### *Collateral Visions | Happiness is the Only True Emotion (2016–17)*

Advances in image analysis technology are leading to increasingly automated forms of imaging. Clément Lambelet (b. 1991, CH) analyses the human image in the age of machine vision. The installation *Collateral Visions* brings together visual material that leaves the question of authorship open: found material from the Internet and transmissions from drone attacks are juxtaposed with full-body portraits taken with a body scanner and evocative of Dürer's portrayal of Adam and Eve.

The artist uses them to critically examine the representation of the human figure in the age of surveillance and image recognition systems. Photographs created using an image recognition algorithm are presented next to a video showing indefinable plumes of smoke billowing up from an explosion. The installation also contains the publication *Happiness is the Only True Emotion*, which is split up here to form a large-scale wall piece and examines the weaknesses of facial emotion recognition algorithms. A collection of explanatory documents and texts on the topic are gathered in a vitrine as an atlas.

In *Collateral Visions*, Lambelet explores the gaps in a rapidly evolving algorithmic ecosystem. He focuses primarily on the genre of operational images, a term coined and defined by filmmaker Harun Farocki as "images without social intent. Not for edification, not for reflection."

## NAMSA LEUBA

### *NGL (2015)*

Namsa Leuba (b. 1982, CH/GN) describes herself as a nomad. Because of her bicultural origin (Swiss and Guinean), she travels between Switzerland and Africa. In her photography series, she investigates the representation of African identity within Western imaginations. Her method involves documentary, fashion, and performance photography. She combines an anthropological interest in traditional clothing with an aesthetic that borrows from the fashion and design worlds.

For *NGL* (Next Generation Lagos) she addresses the youth culture in the Nigerian capital city of Lagos, whose energy and pulsing urban life inspired her to do the project. Leuba worked in

collaboration with local fashion designers like T'Zar, Tokyo James, ReBahia, I am Isigo, and others. She invited amateur models and people she met directly on the street to pose in front of the camera. The vividly colorful images were taken in a studio with self-made sets and a colorful mix of clothes, props, and accessories.

The cultural interplay between Western and African youth culture is reinforced by the media and is in a constant process of change. It forms the basis for Leuba's visual investigation.

## **ERIK MADIGAN HECK**

### ***Kawakubo: Interpreter of Dreams (2017)***

The unconventional and fanciful designs by Japanese fashion designer Rei Kawakubo inspired Erik Madigan Heck (b. 1983, US) to produce the photographic series *Kawakubo: Interpreter of Dreams*, which was published in the New York Times Magazine in April 2017. Heck's photographs follow from Kawakubo's aesthetic and show the then current collection of the fashion label Comme des Garçons.

The minimalist use of color, composition, and texture are reminiscent of Kawakubo's fashion design, whose sketches themselves become art objects. The model Saskia de Brauw translates the voluminous silhouettes into strangely roomfilling and poetically twisted postures. Heck's photographs are timeless and futuristic all at once; elegant and exceptionally aesthetic, they convey a touch of the uncanny. The artificiality of the representation raises doubts about the authenticity of what is being shown. The human figure almost entirely disappears under the oversized, baggy clothing. It looks remote with its distorted dimensions and, precisely for that reason, sculptural.

Heck's creative practice brings together product-oriented, commercial fashion photography with a unique artistic approach. His style is characterized by minimalist compositions and decisive color contrasts; his photographic work often reflects the essence of traditional portraiture. In other work series as well, references to materials and techniques of the fine arts are recognizable.

## **ALIX MARIE**

### ***Bleu (2013–17)***

Alix Marie (b. 1989, FR/UK) works with extreme close-ups of human skin. She photographs fragments of the body and digitally edits them, enlarging and multiplying individual elements, or develops the photographs in order to rephotograph them and subject them to the process of manipulation.

*Bleu* displays the surfaces of bodies without insisting on common formulas of representation. The images reveal imprints made by applying force, wrinkles, or non-locatable openings in the skin's structure. The close-up view often reveals overlooked details, which are inseparable from the body – pores, wrinkles, hair, and moles guide the gaze over the equally attractive and repulsive surfaces. The body in its entire form, with its social and political inscriptions, fades into the background, while the artist redirects aesthetically motivated ways of seeing towards the strange, the undefined.

Marie then prints the massively enlarged images onto PVC film. She implies a metaphorical equivalence between photographic and bodily surfaces by layering the prints like peeled skin on metal poles, adding sculptural and installational elements to the photographic image. While the extreme detail of the photographs negates the human body's sculptural form, the skin regains its enveloping function via its room-filling positioning.

## MARTIN ERRICHELLO & FILIPPO MENICHETTI

### *In Fourth Person (2015–17)*

*In Fourth Person* is a complex multimedia research project that the artist duo Martin Errichiello (b. 1987, IT) and Filippo Menichetti (b. 1986, IT) pursued over the course of two years. They brought together numerous approaches and strategies, operating not only as documentary photographers and artists, but also as archeologists, geographers, historians, and researchers.

The project addresses moments of political and historical upheaval in Italy that continue to have an impact on the country today. Numerous infrastructure projects commenced in the years of the economic upturn, which have political-economic entanglements that still remain opaque today. Out of a faith in progress and modernity, substantial, stated alterations were made to entire landscapes and cultural regions.

For *In Fourth Person*, the artists travelled from Salerno in the Calabria region along the A3 highway. This highway is an important transportation axis in the south of the country and a part of the Autostrada del Sole, which serves as a common thread throughout the multi-layered project. The installation in the exhibition combines found photographs, film recordings, and objects – collected traces and fragments of a long abandoned utopian vision. The controlled demolition of the derelict Viadotto Italia highway is at once a symbol of economic development and a sign of political failure. This image serves as the motif of the entire exhibition.

## WANG NAN

### *Fluorite (2014–17)*

Fluorite (fluorspar) is an element that crystallizes during magma's cooling process. It possesses the quality of glowing luminously in the dark. The photographer Wang Nan (b. 1982, CN) makes a comparison between images of the remarkably luminous rock and Chinese elementary students, in reference to their capacity to call forth hidden talents from within. Elementary education in China concentrates on academic performance and demands obedience. The photographs in the series *Fluorite* focus on the children who are neglected and often marginalized by the high performance pressure in the current Chinese education system. In his role as a photographer, Wang Nan tries to access the inner worlds of these children and reveal their feelings and fantasies. The result is a visualization of their inner life, in which Wang finds incredible potential for energy and power, whereas their schools ignore their ideas and behaviors.

In a traditional manner, Wang portrays the children individually and in pairs with simple lighting, often standing in rigid, unusual positions before the camera. Each portrait is complemented by another photograph, showing homemade objects, rocks, or landscapes, among other things. Wang's combination of traditional photographic methods and peculiar themes discloses his interest in the films of David Lynch, most notably his early short films *The Grandmother* (1970) and *Eraserhead* (1977). The inclination toward surrealism that appears in his photographs generates, however, an interesting tension that leaves the viewer with a sense of disorientation and curiosity.

## KAI OH

### *It Changes (2017)*

Kai Oh (b. 1992, KR) experienced veritable culture shock when she moved from her home city of Seoul to the Bavarian city of Nuremberg. She found inner tranquility through her extended walks in the isolation and harmony of the surrounding forests and natural landscapes. Even though she does not come from a rural area, she was reminded of the rivers and mountains that surround Seoul. In her forays through Bavarian nature – always accompanied by her camera – she tracked the constant changes of the landscape with the cycle of the seasons.

She noticed a parallel between the changes in the landscape and changes in people over time: their outward appearance, their speech, their concerns and ideas. Inspired by this, she prepared collages in which she used the digital equivalent of a scalpel and a glue stick to place snapshot style photographs of her friends and family into the landscape shots, ultimately creating a very personal album. *It Changes* is a nostalgic and vivid reminder that everything changes and nothing ever remains the same.

## **VIACHESLAV POLIAKOV**

### *Lviv – God’s Will (2017)*

In his work *Lviv – God’s Will*, Viacheslav Poliakov (b. 1986, PL) searches for the traces left by the numerous political upheavals after the fall of the Soviet Union in Ukraine. Lviv - Bozha Volya (“God’s will”) refers to the bus route that connects the city of Lviv with the village of Bozha Volya, which is located right on the European border.

Like an ethnographer, Poliakov collects evidence of customs of a particular – often bygone – culture, but with the difference that in this case he has decided to examine his own perspective. This difference is emphasized by the composition of the images, where the object is released from its context and presented as an isolated artifact against a colorful background. Poliakov portrays people and everyday objects, the public and the private, objects that represent the inhabitants’ improvised or self-made solutions to their everyday problems. They are small items, often overlooked in everyday life, that show his view of today’s Ukraine.

Poliakov’s documentary approach reflects his desire to be involved in the realities of Ukrainian life and find a language for them. What is crucial for him is the fact that Ukrainian culture is characterized by the absence of one specific author. The fall of the Soviet Union resulted in the loss of all security and a controlling force, leaving people on their own. Everyone was suddenly responsible for themselves. Instead of summarizing the various attempts to solve this problem with conventional photographs, Poliakov studied what he himself calls a “unique visual culture.”

## **BEN SCHONBERGER**

### *Beautiful Pig (2013–17)*

Ben Schonberger (b. 1987, US) acquired retired Detroit police officer Marty Gaynor’s collection of photographs and subsequently interviewed him weekly over a period of two years. Many of the over one thousand photographs were taken by Gaynor himself while he was working as a police officer, and they show the everyday activities of his job. Some of these photographs are official. Many are very personal.

Schonberger catalogued, sorted and arranged the images into grids, which he then let Gaynor annotate with personal commentary. The result of this collaboration is a documentary archive consisting of a combination of Gaynor’s and Schonberger’s photographs, which were taken during the interview sessions. The multidimensionality of the archived materials shows the complexity of identity in the context of violence and leads to larger questions of the utmost importance. The many polaroids depicting black men that Gaynor annotated with handwritten, largely stereotypical notes and observations are particularly striking. Beyond merely setting the scene of the everyday work environment of a police officer, these images also consistently and linearly depict black criminality. *Beautiful Pig* is not only the story of police work in Detroit, but also of policing worldwide.

## SADEGH SOURI

### *Fuel Smuggling (2017)*

Six million liters of diesel and kerosine fuel are smuggled from Iran to Pakistan everyday and roughly two billion liters per year. Unemployment, drought, and the low cost of fuel in Iran relative to Pakistan have led to this fuel smuggling situation. For most young people in the Sistan and Baluchistan provinces, it is indeed profitable, but also extremely dangerous. In the attempt to prevent smuggling and border crossing by unauthorized vehicles, police will go so far as to employ the use of firearms. To avoid the severe border enforcement, drivers dangerously accelerate their vehicles, frequently leading to serious accidents and fires. Each month, between ten and twenty people are killed or injured by guns or transportation accidents.

In his work *Fuel Smuggling*, Sadegh Sourı (b. 1985, IR) documents these dramatic collisions amidst the mountain landscape at the Iranian-Pakistani border. Sourı's photojournalist style images testify to his close and trusting relationship to the people he documents as well as a deep understanding of their complex living conditions. His style is informed by his formal education in film and photography. Sourı comes from the region around Sistan and Baluchistan himself and began the series in 2013, after US sanctions led to an extreme increase in fuel smuggling. His four-year investigation was complicated by police checks, which often led to the erasure of his photographs. The photographs that remain show staggering documentation of criminal activities in his home country and the legal proceedings that follow them.

## HARIT SRIKHAO

### *Mt Meru (2017)*

According to Hindu cosmology, Mount Meru is positioned at the center of the universe. Its peak is the dwelling place of the most important gods. In the eponymous series of works, photographer Harit Srikhao (b. 1995, TH) cites passages from Hindu scripture and illustrates the mystical place as a nightmarish setting of cruel rituals and cannibalistic and masochistic scenes. In conjunction with theatrical scenes and stately robes, the artist deliberately draws parallels to representations of monarchy, which are attributed particular significance in his home country of Thailand.

In Thailand, it is customary to place a photograph of the king in a very visible, elevated position in one's home to create a sense of common identity across the country's population, strengthening national pride and patriotic values. Srikhao is fascinated by the power of propagandistic images to constitute reality and seeks to rethink their often unreflective social acceptance.

Srikhao's series *Mt Meru* is at once a brave commentary on the idol-like worship of Thai monarchs and an analogy between spiritual reincarnation and the crowning of the new king as a "revived corpse of the monarchy." What's more, his photographs condemn the *lèse majesté*, a Thai law that makes expression that is defamatory, slanderous, or threatening to the royal family punishable by incarceration. With his visual narratives, the artist reveals the absurdity of the operative hierarchy and, in a gesture that is not lacking in risk, dares to criticize the political situation of his home country.

## VASANTHA YOGANANTHAN

### *A Myth of Two Souls (2013, ongoing)*

*A Myth of Two Souls* tells the story of the Indian epic of Ramayana. The artist Vasantha Yoganathan (b. 1985, FR) followed traces of the Hindu deity Rama on a five-year journey through India and Nepal. Written in 300 B.C. by the Sanskrit poet Valmiki, the Ramayana continues to be rewritten and newly interpreted over time. The epic tells the tale of Prince Rama, his brother Lakshmana, and his wife Sita's exile from their kingdom in the Indian forest. His



wife is held captive on the Lanka Island by the cunning demon Ravana until Rama frees her. Yoganathan encountered the story of Ramayana in numerous everyday scenes that he observed during his travels. His photographs and portraits portray the myth in an unusual and contemporary way, painting the picture of a varied Indian society.

In accordance with the seven chapters of Ramayana, Yoganathan structured his ongoing photographic series into seven books, published between 2016 and 2020. Based on contemporary adaptations of an ancient mythology, *A Myth of Two Souls* likewise contrasts many different genres and techniques: landscape photographs, hand colored portraits, and illustrated black-and-white photographs. The artist entrusted the painter Jaykumar Shankar with the production of work that employed the nineteenth century technique of hand coloring.

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