

# MOP

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Gallery 2

*Law of the series* | **Sara Oscar**

In his design classic *Vision in Motion*, Moholy-Nagy argued that the language of the future would consist of photographs arranged in series. Akin to the utopian and egalitarian project of Malraux's *Museum without Walls*, Moholy-Nagy thought the truth brought by photography would eliminate false aesthetic differences, reveal genuine affinities, and bring us a step closer to the truth of our moment in history.

Two decades later, Harun Farocki released a film—*Nicht Lösbares Feuer* ('Inextinguishable Fire' 1969)—about an impossibility connected with depicting suffering with photography. Wearing a suit, and seated at a table, he reads the testimony of a Vietnamese villager caught in a napalm attack. He could show photographs, but does not. Instead, looking into the camera, he stubs out a lit cigarette on the skin of his arm. As he explains his case to the viewer: "If we show you pictures of napalm burns, you'll close your eyes. First you'll close your eyes to the pictures. Then you'll close your eyes to the memory. Then you'll close your eyes to the facts. Then you'll close your eyes to the entire context." The problem is usually taken to be one of empathy—if we hurt your feelings, it will be as if we have used napalm against you—but isn't there another way of reading this prohibition against the depicting of suffering?

Against the position of Moholy-Nagy, and in sympathy with Farocki, Bertolt Brecht in a much repeated anecdote once noted that a simple *reproduction of reality* does not tell us anything about reality. A photograph of the gates of a Krupp factory says next to nothing about the social relations that determine existence within it. It is not only that suffering cannot be depicted, but rather that photography is unable to represent causal relationships at all.

Photography, fully saturated with the realism of an instant, also inevitably (as a side effect) cuts relations with the moment before and the moment after. In this, in all its sensuous effect, photography presents a reality (*a that which was*) that is also wholly underdetermined: a series of isolated moments, accidents, incidents, and collisions, but as Brecht argued, a progression of images is not the same as an understanding of progress.

This suspicion regarding the capacity of photography to capture history also applies reflexively to the history of photography. If history cannot be photographed, is it not also true that the history of photography evades being presented with photographs?

Sara Oscar's sequence plays (teases, gnaws) upon this problem. The first image is a photograph (a representation) of a non-photographic image, a pencil drawing from James Nasmyth's book on the moon, a volcano from the Canary Islands that he relocated to the surface of the moon. The second image is an overdimensional haystack (presented in small format) that relates directly back to the first book of photographic images ever published, Talbot's Pencil of Nature (1844).

The monkeys (or more properly, our common ancestors) are contemporaneous with the first decades of the invention of photography (Darwin's Origin of Species was published in 1859). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century imagination, the controversial theory of evolution and the evidence presented by photography were all part of the same broader social movement: an explosion of scientific theory accompanied by an explosion of scientific evidence, but at the same time, as ancestors to humans, *precede* the invention of photography. They have been retrospectively placed into taxonomies, much like the photographs themselves, and yet symptoms of evolution, they (perhaps like photographs) are excluded from the flow of evolution itself.

What is problematic with this prohibition is that while historical proof is not amenable to photography, photography has an almost preternatural fertility for the fabrication of memories, of personal histories and subjective historical inferences. Every image carries within it a clue, the trace of another image. The tension in Sara Oscar's work is between the images wishing to exist within a sequence, as well as their desire to be idiosyncratic, as unrelated to each other as possible.

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