

'You spend your time annoying people who have not done you no harm and whose only fault is that they are well known. You persecute them, you're ruthless with them, you won't leave them in peace. You're incapable of love yourself and you spy on the love of those who do love, you have no real life of your own and you try to portray the live of those who do have real lives... I'm fed up, I'm fed up. Fed up with your photographs that nobody buys, fed up with hearing you talk about your contemptible exploits, fed up with hoping for better days. You would photograph anything in the world if it could be useful to you.'

So reads a passage of Alberto Moravia's 1964 short story *The Swollen Face*, wherein the nameless wife of the photographer Livio Millefiorini lambasts her husband's choice of profession while she endures yet another stake out of a film star's home. As Kate Flint is quick to point out in *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* (2009), photographers, as depicted in contemporary literature, tend to come off very badly. They are often painted as needy, insecure, anxiety-ridden creatures who emerge at the right time in the right place to capture 'a decision moment', yet are ultimately voyeuristic, or, worse still, predatory and exploitative, with little recourse to concern for their subjects. Furthermore, it is routinely left to their companions to highlight their emotional inadequacies. And, without fail, they focus on the practical idea of representing the material world or reporting objectively in favour of harnessing imagination or stylistic imprint.

This may serve as a useful coda for approaching *Mutable, Multiple*, a group exhibition composed around a series of photographic works that challenge prevalent modes of documentary and storytelling. Each offer insights into the nature and appeal of photographs as 'portals to the imagination and vessels of empty truths', to quote Hanno Hardt's apt description from his introduction to *Constructing Photography: Fiction as Cultural Evidence* (2007). Fiction, in the sense of liberation, the extent to which artists are able to depict reality in a myriad of different ways and in response to themes of irreducible complexity rather than rationalistic reduction; fiction, as a means of undermining of photography's truth claims that are often given precedence over the social and psychic formations of the spectator or subjects in the production of meaning.

The six artists featured – Max Pinckers, Edgar Martins, Stefanie Moshammer, Amani Willett, Anne Golaz and Virginie Rebetz – all make use of the narrative potential of photography to engage with their subjects, yet without adopting straightforward strategies. They are at a crucial distance from their subjects and autonomous from such realities in order to divert or modify them through artistic investigation (after all, subjects are not fixed entities but versions of subjects, seen as photographed appearances). They pose questions about how narrative, history, memory and myth can be recalibrated as a way of coming to terms with complex and changing realities. Further, with a combination of exactitude and evasion, they seem to acknowledge, what Hardt further elucidates in his study as, 'the documentary character of photographs only as a conventional idea, or a point of departure for an argument that insists categorically on the ambiguity of photographic evidence and embraces the creative challenge of variable truths.'

Brought together in the context of *Mutable, Multiple* the projects thus collectively occupy a hybrid documentary space between image and information, fiction and fact, where juxtapositions of interviews, literature, press material, news footage, archival interventions and staged photography are the new norm – a story of stories. With no neat and tidy definitions, instead their mode could perhaps better be understood as ‘literary’; one or a number of attributes that Terry Eagleton outlines in *The Event of Literature* (2012) either as ‘fictional, or which yields significant insight into human experience as opposed to reporting empirical truths, or which uses language in a peculiarly heightened, figurative or self-conscious way, or which is not practical in the sense that shopping lists are, of which is highly valued as a piece of writing.’ These words can just as easily be applied to photography and the declaration of photography, with its limitations and opportunities that are variously resisted, confronted or challenged in *Mutable, Multiple*.

Through their accounts, and by creating such degrees of freedom within their multi-layered and subjective approaches or ‘attitudes’, the artists in *Mutable, Multiple* become wholly immersed in process, all the while examining the limits of representation and inserting self-reflection actively within their work. Uttered in the photographs then is a performance, a sort of dramatology, where the creation of an image points only to other images, stating its allegiances to both the cumulative effect of a series and a systematic deception that arises from a consciousness about its ability to mislead or misdirect our looking.

We look at photographs to experience, and sometimes, as is the case in *Mutable, Multiple* to be reminded of the diversity of strange and vivid lives seemingly more peculiar or extreme than our own, and at the same time, of human experience, thoughts and feelings whose vivid presence can be conjured up through images so as not to abandon humanity to the vicissitudes of capitalism. In this vein *Mutable, Multiple* shines a spotlight on imaginary or hidden worlds, and, in the process, brings to bear issues of entrapment and disappearance, fantasy and escape, exile and longing. The various ways in which each project deals with a fractured, disharmonious lives that are constantly in a state of becoming are made apparent – by turns marginal, isolated, concealed, regulated – allowing the viewer to meditate on the situations in which such individuals achieve visibility and, some cases, invisibility, in the world. It could be posited that artistic freedom or, more specifically, the freedom of fiction might be an antidote to the unfreedom of these lives, or as an opportunity for reinvention of the individual.

### **Max Pinckers – *Margins of Excess* (2018)**

In *Margins of Excess* Max Pinckers narrates the cases of six individuals who momentarily achieved nationwide notoriety in the United States press due to their attempts to realise a dream or ambition, but only to be presented as frauds or charlatans. Combining reality and fiction, *Margins of Excess* questions and explores highly-idiosyncratic versions of reality during the current ‘post truth’ era, in the process squaring up to documentary’s truth-claims by inserting self-reflection actively within the work.

**Edgar Martins – *What Photography has in Common with an Empty Vase* (2018-19)**

*What Photography has in Common with an Empty Vase* is developed in collaboration with Grain Projects and HM Prison Birmingham (the largest category prison in the West Midlands), its inmates, their families and other local organisations. It reflects on the uncertainty of dealing with the absence of a loved one, brought on by enforced separation, while addressing ontological questions of the status of the photograph when questions of visibility, ethics, aesthetics and documentation intersect.

**Stefanie Moshammer – *I Can Be Her* (2014-18)**

Receiving an unsolicited letter from a stranger serves as the starting point for Stefanie Moshammer's exploration of love and delusion in *I Can Be Her*. The letter provokes an onslaught of fantasy and paranoia as the artist seeks out evidence and traces of the man by way or reproducing images inspired by her suitor's words in an attempt to conjure up his presence through subjectivity, illusion and speculation – blurred frames of realism.

**Amani Willett – *The Disappearance of Joseph Plummer* (2017)**

*The Disappearance of Joseph Plummer* explores the human desire to escape and find peaceful solitude, away from the pressures and constraints of modern existence. Inspired by the tale of a mysterious hermit, who lived in the woods of New Hampshire in the late 1700s, Amani Willett somnambulates this distant past to discover the legend still lurking in the wilderness. Moving beyond the document and record, *The Disappearance of Joseph Plummer* is an atmospheric and impressionistic echo of this story examining notions of history, family, folklore and geography that operates at the limits of representation.

**Virginie Rebetez – *Out of the Blue* (2016)**

*Out of the Blue* focuses on the unsolved disappearance of Suzanne Gloria Lyall who went missing on March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1998, aged 19. Combining material from different sources, including family archives, age-processed composites, police reports and psychics' drawings, as well as photographs by Virginie Rebetez of the teenager's belongings and clothing *Out of the Blue* is a multi-layered narrative collage that opens up an immersive space for new links and enquiry into a subject that now eludes visualisation – an image ultimately beyond the frame.

**Anne Golaz – *Corbeau Vol 2: Finir comme prévu (to end as expected)* (2018)**

*Corbeau Vol 2: Finir comme prévu (to end as expected)* is an epilogue to the main body of work published in 2017, a complex construction made of diverse visual materials and texts resulting from the collaboration with author and screenwriter Antoine Jaccoud. Comprising a video piece and an experimental, unbound book, the work documents the drama and demise of the farm where

the Swiss artist Anne Golaz grew up, evoking themes of time, life, decay, fate and death as depicted through the machinations of memory and tableau.