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Absent Bodies: Memory, Photography, and the Disappearance of Presence

In an age defined by the constant production and circulation of images, photography remains paradoxically associated with absence, loss, and uncertainty of memory.

First, this exhibition explores how photographic practices do not simply preserve moments but instead reveal the fragility of presence through traces of what has already disappeared. As Roland Barthes suggests, the photograph is always a record of “that-has-been,” connecting it to ideas of death and temporality (Barthes, 1980, p. 76-77). Building on this, the exhibition explores how memory is built through images, using Okwui Enwezor’s view of the archive as a place of both remembrance and loss (Enwezor, 2008, p. 11-12), as well as Hal Foster’s notion of the “archival impulse” in contemporary art (Foster, 2004, p. 4). This show features works by Francesca Woodman, Sophie Calle, Christian Boltanski, Hiroshi Sugimoto, and Nan Goldin. Together, these works create a narrative where presence and absence are always in conversation, through a range of photographic practices. It encourages viewers to reflect on the fragility of memory, revealing how images shape, preserve, and sometimes obscure our understanding of the past.

Context

Photography has long been closely tied to memory, time, and absence, functioning not only as a record of what has been, but as a reminder of what is no longer present. As noted earlier, Roland Barthes argues that the photograph inherently signifies a past moment, embedding within it what he describes as the “that-has-been,” and therefore carrying an association with loss and death (Barthes, 1980, p. 76-77). Furthermore, within this exhibition, absence is not simply missing, but is a functioning part of the image, shaping how memory is constructed and experienced.

In addition, this idea becomes especially important in a contemporary context where images are endlessly produced and shared. While photography appears to preserve moments, it

simultaneously breaks and reconstructs them. As Okwui Enwezor suggests, the archive is not neutral. As memory is formed through what is chosen to be remembered and what is left out, (Enwezor, 2008, p. 11-12). What is remembered is therefore always incomplete, and what is absent becomes equally meaningful. This is extended through Hal Foster's concept of the "archival impulse," in which artists engage with fragments of images and histories to reconstruct or reimagine the past (Foster, 2004, p. 4). These schemes underpin the curatorial structure of the exhibition.

This instability of memory is made more complex by the emotional impact of viewing photography. Barthes distinguishes between the "studium," or the general cultural meaning of an image, and the "punctum," a detail that pierces the viewer on a personal level (Barthes, 1980, p. 26-28). This highlights how photographs do not function uniformly but instead produce subjective and often unpredictable responses. In this context, the photographic image operates not only as a document of the past but as a trigger for emotional recall, where absence is felt as much as it is seen.

These conceptual models inform both the selection of artworks and the spatial layout of the exhibition, which moves from intimate presence towards collective and universal absence.

Artists and Artworks

The exhibition begins in the main gallery space with the work of Nan Goldin, specifically *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1985–86). Presented as a series of intimate photographic images, the work documents moments of everyday life, relationships and personal experience. Formally, Goldin's use of snapshot view and direct flash creates a sense of immediacy, positioning the viewer within the scene. However, as Barthes' theory suggests (Barthes, 1980, p. 76-77), these images are already situated in the past, transforming lived experience into memory. Positioned at the entrance, this work creates a sense of presence, while softly introducing the idea that what is seen is already lost. For that reason, I have chosen the following photographs for this section:



Fig. 1. Goldin, *Nan and Brian in Bed, New York City, 1983*.



Fig. 2. Goldin, *Nan One Month After Being Battered, 1984*.



Fig. 3. Goldin, *Greer and Robert on the in a taxi, NYC, 1991*.

Moving further into the space, the viewer encounters Sophie Calle's *Suite Vénitienne* (1980), installed along the side walls of the main room. Combining photography with text, the work documents Calle's act of following a stranger through Venice, constructing a narrative through fragmented observations. Formally, the relationship between image and written documentation emphasises the instability of truth, as the subject is never fully revealed. This is consistent with Enwezor's understanding of the archive as a constructed narrative, where meaning is shaped through fragments rather than complete knowledge (Enwezor, 2008, p. 11-

12). Here, memory becomes investigative and incomplete, strengthening the exhibition's exploration of absence.



Fig. 6. Calle, Suite *Vénitienne*, 1980.



Fig. 7. Calle, Suite *Vénitienne*, 1980.



Fig. 5. Calle, Suite *Vénitienne*, 1980.

Moving across the room creates a shift in tone, introducing a deeper introspective engagement with the body and its disappearance. Within this threshold space, Francesca Woodman's *Untitled, Providence* series (1975–78) is presented. These black-and-white photographs depict the artist's body blurred, partially obscured, or merging with her surroundings. Formally, long exposure and movement create a sense of instability, as the figure appears to fade into the environment. Woodman's work visualises absence within the body itself, aligning with Barthes' idea (Barthes, 1980, p. 76-77) of the photograph as both presence and disappearance.



Fig. 8. Woodman, *Space²*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976.



Fig. 10. Woodman, *Untitled*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976.

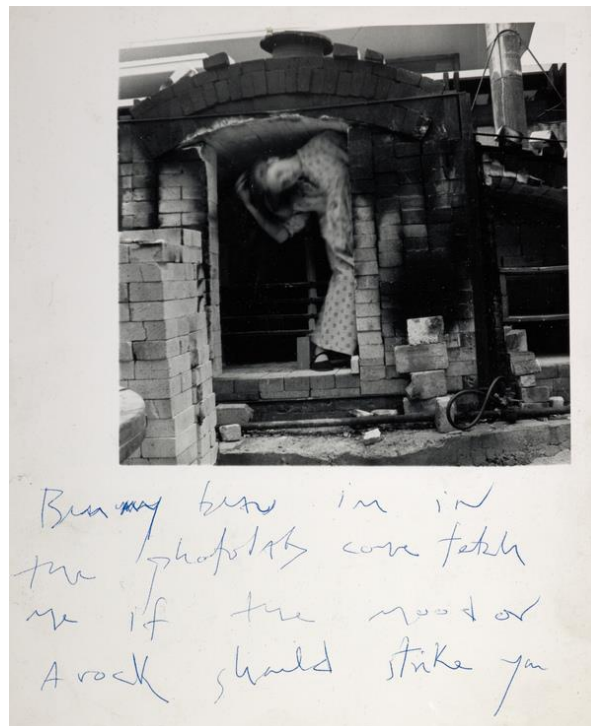


Fig. 9. Woodman, *Untitled*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975-78.

Walking towards the central archway, facing the viewer is Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Seascapes* (1980–ongoing). These large-scale black-and-white photographs depict the horizon line between sea and sky, devoid of human presence. Formally minimal, the images appear timeless and unchanging yet are deeply connected to time and perception. In relation to Foster's archival impulse (Foster, 2004, p. 4), Sugimoto's work can be understood as reconstructing a universal

memory past individual experience. Positioned at the entrance of the archway, these works create a sense of stillness and resolution, where absence is no longer tied solely to loss, but to a broader understanding of time and continuity. Sugimoto's work can also be understood as challenging photography's role as to document a specific moment. In contrast to traditional photographic practices that record a single instant, the long exposure used in the *Seascapes* series compresses time, recording an extended duration within a single image. This complicates Barthes' notion of the photograph as a fixed trace of "that-has-been" (Barthes, 1980, p. 76-77), implying instead a more fluid and continuous understanding of time. In this sense, the images do not represent a singular memory, but a collective and almost timeless experience. This reinforces the exhibition's progression towards a more abstract and universal interpretation of memory.



Fig. 11. Sugimoto, *Caribbean Sea, Jamaica*, 1980. Fig. 12. Sugimoto, *North Atlantic Ocean, Cliffs of Moher I*, 1989.

The transition through the central archway creates a shift, beyond this threshold, the exhibition opens into the elongated curved space, where absence becomes more pronounced and collective. Christian Boltanski's *Reserve: The Dead Swiss* (1990) occupies the central area. Composed of archival photographs of anonymous individuals, in dim lighting, the installation evokes both memorial and archive. Formally, the repetition of faces without identity emphasises loss, transforming individual lives into collective memory. This reflects Enwezor's discussion of the archive as a site of both remembrance and erasure, where preservation highlights absence. While archives are often perceived as authoritative, his work exposes their limitations, as the identities and stories behind these individuals remain unknown. This reflects Enwezor's argument that the archive is shaped as much by what is excluded as what is preserved (Enwezor, 2008, p. 11-12). The repetition of faces within the installation creates a feeling of collective memory, yet simultaneously erases individuality, reinforcing the tension

between remembrance and loss. In this way, Boltanski transforms the archive into a space of uncertainty, where absence becomes central to the meaning of the work.



Fig. 13. Boltanski, *Reserve: The Dead Swiss*, 1990.

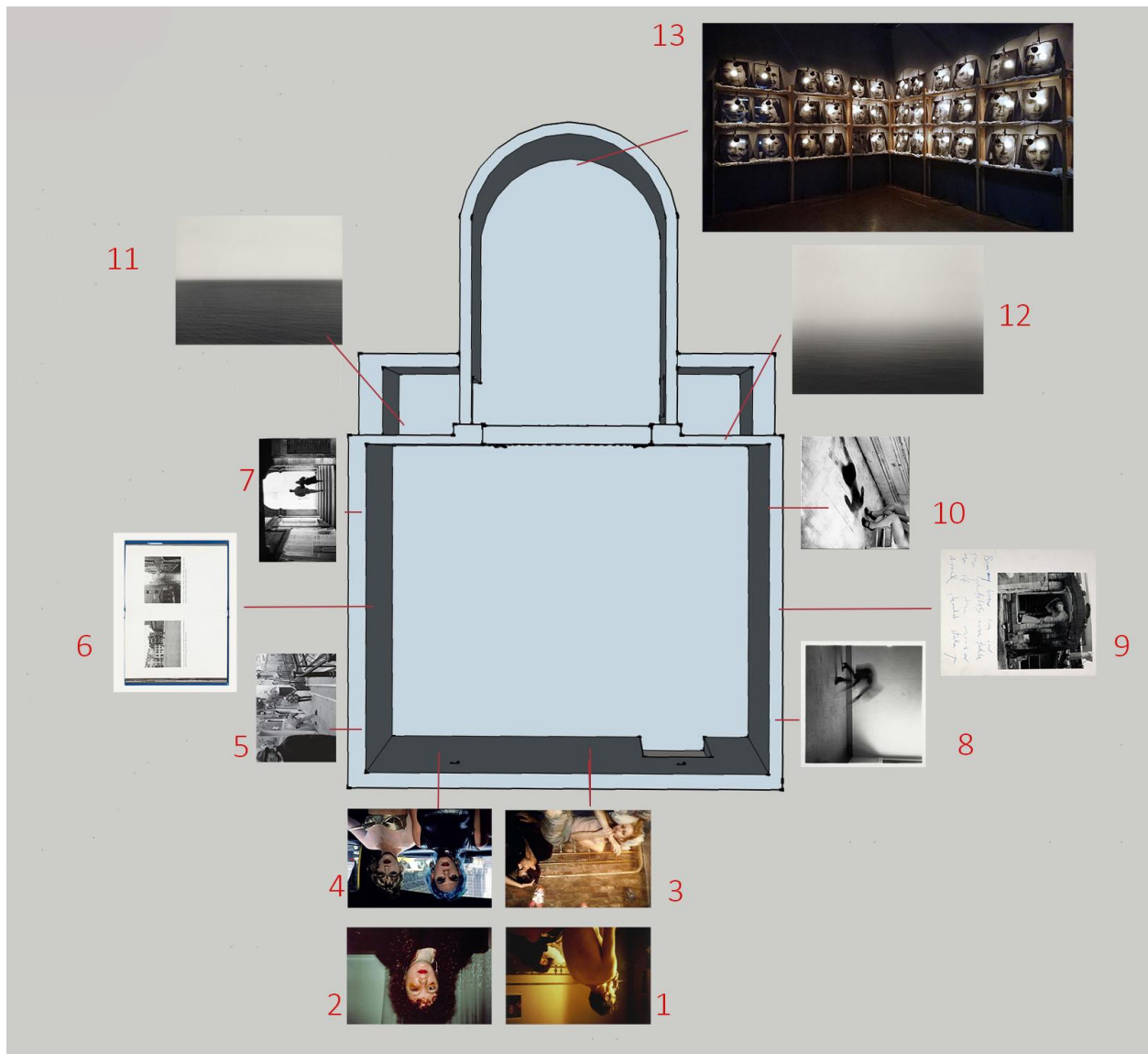
Through this spatial progression, the exhibition guides the viewer from intimate presence to collective and universal absence, reinforcing how photography both constructs and destabilises our understanding of memory. Through this spatial and conceptual progression, the exhibition guides the viewer from intimate presence to collective and universal absence. By combining photographic practices with theories of memory, archive, and temporality, it reveals how images do not simply document the past but actively influence and destabilise our understanding of it. The layout of the exhibition plays an essential role in reinforcing its conceptual framework. The progression from the main gallery space into the more enclosed curved room mirrors the shift from presence to absence, guiding the viewer through increasingly introspective encounters with the works. The central archway functions as a transitional threshold, setting a movement from personal and intimate memory towards collective and abstract forms of absence. This curatorial structure allows the viewer to experience the exhibition not only visually but physically, as a journey through different states of memory and loss.

Conclusion

This exhibition has explored how photography operates not simply as a means of preserving memory, but as a medium that continually reveals the instability of presence through absence. Drawing on the theories of Roland Barthes, Okwui Enwezor and Hal Foster, it has demonstrated how images function as traces of what has been, while simultaneously constructing fragmented and incomplete narratives of the past. Through the works of Francesca Woodman, Sophie Calle, Christian Boltanski, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Nan Goldin, the exhibition has illustrated a progression from intimate, personal memory to wider reflections on collective and universal time.

By structuring the exhibition spatially, the viewer is guided through a shift from presence to disappearance, supporting the idea that absence is not simply a void, but an active condition within photographic representation. Ultimately, the exhibition urges the viewer to think on their own relationship with memory, recognising how images shape, preserve and at times distort our interpretation of what remains.

Mission Gallery Layout



Reference list

Barthes, R. (1980) *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. London: Vintage.

Enwezor, O. (2008) *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*. New York: International Center of Photography.

Foster, H. (2004) 'An Archival Impulse', *October*, 110, pp. 3–22.

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